

Kevin

By Sarah Ormond

I found myself on a bus to Baños in the summer of 2012 by chance, having done my usual, the Geographical Cure, where one relocates to heal from internal ailments. I had ejected myself from London, leaving both jobs, my partner, and all responsibilities, and highjacked my best friend's backpacking trip to South America. A gluten-free meal on the twelve-hour flight to Lima of two apples and two oranges would foreshadow the weeks of culinary, and emotional, scarcity that would await me.

Kitty, a platinum blonde for life, whose in-turned gait belies her sophistication, has always been a beat ahead of the trend. We had crossed paths for years, but as with most people I grow to love, an ample dose of resistance had persisted between us. It was only when an external party forced our union that we realised we were kin. She, regrettably for my finances, had given me an introduction to the good life. My education had begun with how to appreciate sparkling water and the Americana of banana splits, and escalated to New York pilgrimages for the ultimate slice, lunches at L'Ecrivain and ras' Stoli and soda, all before I rang in twenty-one.

This was Kitty's trip – a woman who screened every menu in advance, long before the internet arrived, and whose father sends meal-time spreadsheets for Christmas week – and I would not be interjecting or querying her itinerary.

Three weeks in, as we departed Peru, in lieu of plentiful fresh ceviche that I had envisaged, I had eaten jaded rotisserie chicken, rice and chips, save for a few raw carrots to stave off the scurvy. Every. Day. It had transpired that were traipsing the same path as every other traveller, even encountering the same faces, which we longed to forget, and experiencing nothing true to these lands. Was this how backpacking worked? As the days passed, my enthusiasm dwindled. On a three-day city break, abandoning all thoughts of your reality is quite straightforward; sustaining that level of escapism over a two-month period is a challenge. When I travel, I distract myself from my overwrought mind by voraciously consuming local delicacies, but with the paucity of local food that I was encountering, reality was starting to bite. Stripped of those edible consolations it became clear that neither of us was calibrated for the budgeting necessary for South America on a Shoestring, and we felt lost. Better here than home though, right?

We had been advised to bypass Ecuador completely and make our way directly to Colombia, but you unlock a new level of delirium when you reach the twenty-four-hour mark on a bus trip, so we concurred to risk our fate and make an overnight stop. Ecuadorian buses cost a cool dollar per hour of travel and though they precariously climbed to our destination altitude of 1800m, steered by drivers who made multiple pitstops for daybreak coffees with shots of aguardiente, they presented a new dining opportunity. Street vendors, our culinary saviours on this trip, would jump aboard at every stop hawking their wares, and we would hastily attempt to identify the offerings either by our novice Spanish or our noses. On that bus there was a momentous occurrence, the cry of a word we understood clearly. “Helado! Helado! Helado!” But this was no workaday ice-cream, it was the greatest coalescence of frozen condensed milk and coconut one could imagine. This gratifying layered cone of Christmas tree-shaped beauty had a name. It was called Kevin, and it refreshed and cleansed every woe, re-instilling in our bones a childlike optimism.

Kevin proved a good omen. Despite the treacherous commute, Ecuador welcomed us with abundance. It was as though someone had conjured, for this sun-holiday-hating Aquarian, in a valley at the base of a volcano, a town that amalgamated my love of fairgrounds and alpine resorts. A freshness in the air signalled a change of pace, and wardrobe, as this sub-tropical climate permitted me to wear a jumper AND a coat, whilst savouring beloved banana splits. An overnight turned into a week. Baños was richly populated by indigenous people dressed immaculately; trilbies and leather brogues paired with neon woven textiles. Things were on the up; not a backpacker, a Pinkberry, or a Hooters in sight.

An abundant lunchtime market inspired the single meal we cooked that summer and street corners enticed with bags of quail's eggs and piquant celery salt and maduros con queso; the irresistible appeal of that chargrilled cheese overrode my loathing of ripe bananas. Flaming shots, stacked blue, yellow and red, with unidentifiable liqueurs to represent the national flag, were proffered at Goodbar, Good Fuckin' Music (their words, not mine). Tensions unravelled, and in Baños we realigned. The chintzy atmosphere with public baths, frozen treats and festoon lights likely appealed to us as we both derive from seaside towns, hers the polite Northern Protestant version, mine the dilapidated one of former glory. In slowing down my sense of unease had dissipated, and in relishing the trappings of home in an exotic location, it became apparent that I'd been running from myself. Ever united by our cynicism, Kitty and I had decided, given that we ruminated on every wrong turn in our lives, that the motto for the trip was "no regrets." Except we had one. Despite our best efforts, many shoddy impersonators and catching sight of a monument dedicated to him in a faraway town, we never found Kevin again.