

# A Folder's Escapades in South America

by Jeremy Shafer

Last November found me flying around having the time of my life yet again. This time I trekked for a month and ten days by plane and bus through Colombia, Ecuador and Cuba. My main excuse for the trip was, as usual, origami (why else would anyone travel?), in particular to attend for the second time the Origami Colombia Convention held in Cali.

The convention itself was fantastic, but the one unfortunate occurrence that put a damper on my experience was having all my baggage lost by the airlines during my change of planes in Mexico City. So, I arrived in Cali the night before the convention with no unicycle, no torches and fireballs, and, last but definitely not least, no clothes except those that I had on. Anyone whose been to an origami convention knows that there's hardly time to eat or sleep -- much less go clothes shopping! Besides, I kept on expecting my baggage to arrive at any time, which it never did. Fortunately, Jose Arley Moreno, with whom I stayed, lent me some clothes, and I eventually replaced the essentials at the local department store. On my final trip home I got my unicycle back (I guess that was easy to spot), but even to this day my other bag remains lost. It was a sobering unsought lesson on letting go of possessions and traveling lighter.

Nonetheless, the convention itself was a blast, an unbelievable feat of organization filled with enough activities to make OrigamiUSA blush, and enough local enthusiasm and support to raise the question of whether origami actually originated in Colombia.

The convention took place at Stella Maria, a primary school that was quite homelike in it's architecture and feeling. I found it odd that there was a jacuzzi right outside the office, which they told me was for



**Origami Colombia 1999 Convention - Cali  
67 attendees!**

student use. Perhaps they also used it to soothe disgruntled parents or relax the kids before exams. Another unusual installation was a long slide next to an ordinary staircase, apparently to give students the choice to either walk or slide to class. Of course, I always chose to slide.

In order to make myself most useful and also to practice my Spanish, I chose to teach during every possible class. By the end of the convention, the language portion of my brain was well cooked if not fried; my last couple classes were taught with lots of pantomime.

Every night of the convention, I presented some sort of performance, a self-assigned task that was more challenging than it would have been if my bags hadn't been lost.

Luckily, I happened to have had all my origami in my carry-on bag, so at least in that sense I was in good shape. I performed the Spanish versions of my origami stories, "Mr. Smiley and the Space Monster", and "The Two Magic Snakes." In addition, I had with me all my bean bags... so I was not completely juggless. Finally, I still had my hands for handwhistling (pretty hard to lose them). But I never did get to perform my full fire act, which I'm sure the school officials present weren't too let down about

One big highlight was the origami piñata breaking which took place Sunday at noon in the school gymnasium. The two piñatas -- 24-piece modular models -- were hung from a basketball hoop. There were strings attached that when pulled would break



**Yapping, Clapping, Tapping,  
Flapping T-rex Class**



**Dog-pile of kids collecting Pinata droppings**



**Caught sneaking into the kids' dog pile**



**Teaching the Baby Bird to a random group of kids in the town square -- Tulcan, Ecuador.**

open the piñata releasing about 50 marble-sized white plastic balls. For the first piñata, all the children lined up behind the half court line, and when the strings were pulled, there was a mad stampede dashing to pick up the plastic balls which they could then exchange for packages of paper. I mischievously snuck into the kids' stampede and managed to pick up three balls, but I was quickly discovered and just before my bounty was confiscated I flung it out causing another minor stampede. In the adult stampede I fared far less well, picking up not a single ball -- poetic justice!

My sole convention complaint, which I voiced loud and frequently, was that there was not enough salsa dancing. "What is this, an origami convention!?" Cali is known throughout the world as "La capital de Salsa", and yet here I was in Cali unable to find anyone to go out salsa dancing. Unlike in the United States and Europe, in Latin American discos you pretty much only dance with the people you came in with, so I couldn't just go alone (not to mention safety risks). Finally, at the end of the convention, after missing two nights of potential salsa dancing, I cleverly put on a final juggling show to salsa music, which was really just to give myself a chance to finally get to dance. Over the course of about three songs, I managed to pull up at least five different women (not at the same time, mind you) to dance with me, and that for me was the highlight of the convention. Later that week, and certainly many more times throughout my trip, I found folks to go out salsa dancing with, but during the Origami Colombia 1999 Convention, those folders were definitely there to fold!

After my stay in Cali, I flew to Tulcan, Ecuador, where I visited some friends whom I met on my previous trip to Ecuador two years ago. Then I headed down to Riobamba to visit Fernando Proaño, whom I had just met at the convention in Cali. One big highlight of my stay in Riobamba was performing juggling and origami at the elementary school where Fernando's son, Martín, goes.



**Riobamba -- a visit to Martín's school**

Due to the current economic crisis in Ecuador, the Riobamba origami/modeling convention, which I had been hoping to attend, was postponed. But I did get to attend a weekly meeting of the origami/modeling club, which was quite fun.

From Riobamba, I set off for Guayaquil in quite adventurous fashion -- on the roof of a freight train packed with tourists. The \$15 train ride (\$1 for locals), which started at 6am, ended up lasting over nine hours instead of four. This was because the train derailed five times. Each time, the crew had to set the train back on the track wheel by wheel, using such high-tech equipment as a metal ramp and grass from the pasture.

To make matters worse, it started pouring and everyone on the roof got soaked. By the time the train reached it's final destination, Zibambe, it was too late for me to catch a bus directly to my next town, Bucay. So instead, I took an evening bus back to Riobamba where I caught another bus to Bucay and still arrived that same night. In Bucay, I visited relatives of one of Fernando's co-workers and stayed in an upscale hotel (\$2/night), called El Rey (The King).

The next morning I caught a bus directly to Guayaquil and arrived at the airport that evening. My flight to Cuba didn't leave until early the next morning, so I decided to spend the whole night in the airport. At around 3am I was sitting up in the cafeteria proofing my book, when all of a sudden they started playing salsa music. Then suddenly appeared before me like magic 5 teenage girls, who were all thrilled to dance with me, and for about an hour the airport cafeteria was transformed into the discoteca of my dreams.



**Weekly meeting of the origami and modeling club, Riobamba, Ecuador**



**Riding atop a freight train from Riobamba to Zibambe**



**Guayaquil Airport Cafeteria at 3am**



**The train derailed for the fourth time**

My final ten days were spent in Cuba, where I went around with Patch Adams and Global Exchange, visiting and donating supplies to schools and hospitals and performing every chance I got. I saw firsthand the impact of the sickening 40-year US embargo of Cuba -- which has resulted in such scarcities as books, medicine, household goods, and even doctors and scientists because many have since the fall of the Soviet bloc fled their jobs to become tour guides and taxi drivers, where they can earn a ten-times larger salary.

Particularly impacting was our visit to the school of Elian Gonzalez, the shipwreck survivor being held captive in Miami. I met his father Juan Gonzalez and visited Elian's classroom where his vacant desk is kept untouched exactly as he left it, a shrine to remember him by. The fervor with which his classmates bellowed out chants calling for his return was both awe-inspiring and heart-rending. Since returning home I have joined the movement to send Elian home to his father in Cuba. I was even one of ten arrested at a demonstration in front of the INS office in San Francisco.

On this, my second trip to South America I felt my identity become less gringo and more latino. I was accepted as family and touched by kindness and sensitivity everywhere I went. I was once again inspired by the beauty of the culture, yet saddened by economic plight of the people. I was especially touched by all the sweet hospitality I received. Thank you! In all, it was a wonderful trip and I look forward to going back there again, perhaps even to live.



**Rally for the return of Elian Gonzalez at Elian's school in Cardenas, Cuba**



**Elian's schoolmates show their patriotism**



**Patch Adams with Elian's father, Juan Miguel Gonzalez.**



**The Sun sets on my last day in Cuba**