

## **Andreas Rundbrief at the end of 2015.**

**Yet another life period.** My contribution to the Rundbrief 2013 began with the subheading *Winding Down*. In fact I should have retired at the end of this March after *turning 65* on January 26. However there is now another rotation in my life-cycle, a new career in what is called in Spanish *tercera edad*, the third life period. This means the best of all age worlds: significant reductions of prices and taxes ( up to 50% on flights from Ecuador), a German (Beamten)pension, and a competitive salary at my new job as dean at Yachaytech University. Since Elisabeth also earns a good salary here teaching English, we have promised ourselves to donate some of this completely unexpected additional income to a charitable cause in the third world. Of course, that means we do have to work rather than cultivating some hobbies or doting on the currently six grand children, but neither of us seems to have problems with that, quite the opposite.

**How it happened.** In the fall of 2014 my colleague Mike Giles of Oxford asked me whether I had heard from a London head hunting firm about a professorial position at a new university in South America. No I had not, and the firm later claimed that their efforts to contact me failed for some nonspecific reason. They tried again (possibly because they had not found anybody else) and I went through a couple of skype conversations with the firm and the chancellor Dan Larson. He had just moved from Penn State to Yachaytech, located near Ibarra some 2 hours north of Quito, the capital of Ecuador. During a longer visit at Argonne near Chicago in March 2015 I took the opportunity to fly to Pasadena California for an interview with the Board of Trustees and then directly to Yachay to look at the place and talk to Dan directly. Everything went amazingly smoothly and a little later I was offered the position of dean of mathematical sciences and information technology.



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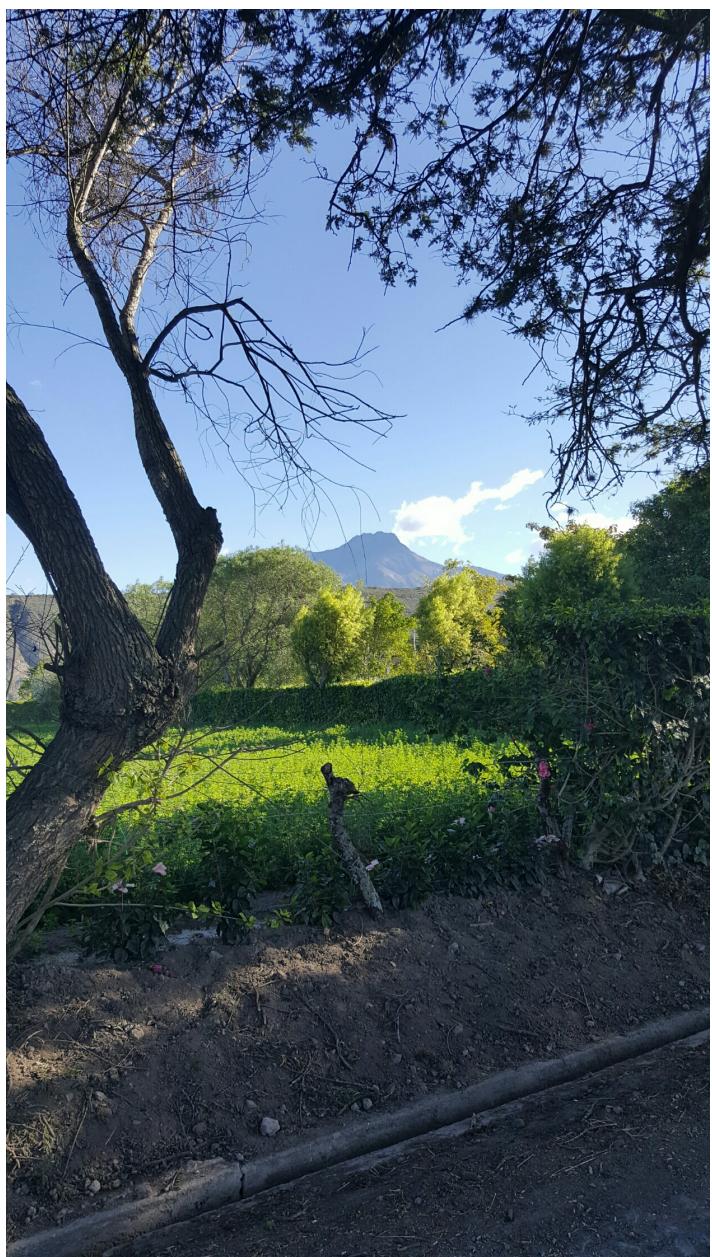
**My new job.** I am now in charge of building up one of the six schools, which will consist of a department of mathematics and one of computer science and engineering. In the long run there might be some 40 faculty positions, about half in math and half in comp sci. Beginning with two heads for these departments the main job is to find suitable candidates and to convince them to move to Ecuador for at least a few years. The attached photograph shows the upper half of an advertisement that has appeared in Nature. All the curricula and university regulations also need to be developed, so there is lots of non-research work to do. With regards to the employment structure and in many other ways the university is developed along US lines, sometimes mimicking the northamerican model too slavishly for my taste. After all, US undergraduate education is generally not that successful and in many celebrated universities rather separated from the graduate schools, which are populated to a large extent by imports from outside the country or not so well respected state schools. Try to tell that to my colleagues Catherine and Paul from Duke, which pops up in the top 30 in just about any global university ranking. Not that I wish to push a German model, least of all the charades that were gone through at Humboldt and elsewhere under the heading *Excellence Initiative* in recent years.

**About the students.** There are no tuition fees at all and the students are accommodated on campus in communal apartments for some 60 Dollars a month. Some 40% get scholarships at the level the countrywide minimum wage of 366 Dollars. Of the rest, half are said to have a reasonably well-off family background, whereas the others are struggling. Admission is right now on the basis of an aptitude test irrespective of the rather uneven level of preparation by the secondary school system in Ecuador. The current president has also made significant efforts to improve teacher selection and training, but naturally we will have to wait a few years before the results can be noticeable. The students are under a lot of pressure and loose their scholarship as soon as they get a grade below 80% in any one of the courses. There are also family expectations and many are far from home for the first time in their life. Traveling home on weekends takes too much time and money for most of them. From the fifth semester on all classes will be taught in English, a situation that arises for the first time in the (Northern) fall of next year.

**How to live here.** Really no problem, especially as Elisabeth has once more mobilized her amazing networking and organizing talents. A few times she was in despair about the deficiencies of the house that we rent from Carlos Mettler, a farmer-entrepreneur of Swiss German descent. We had seen his house in May when we visited together before I signed up mentally (Formally that never really happened, and I still do not have a long term contract.) While most houses and apartments in Ibarra (and even more so in Quito) are surrounded by walls topped with glass splinters, barbed wire and even electrical fencing, 'our' house lies completely open in the midth of fields that are cultivated by groups of peasants using medieval techniques, including horse drawn wooden plows. We have an alarm system, but no direct connection to a security service or the police. The neighbors are few and far between, though one gets to know them better than in Berlin; if only because it takes a two kilometer walk (see the picture) from us to the next bus stop and one tends to give people a ride when passing by in a car. As part of the gringo leadership at Yachay I am sort of a public figure and was mentioned with annual income in a rather critical news paper article on the project. Yesterday, we went to the local Xmas Eve service in the next town Imbayá. The priest greeted us as he walked by, but it felt a little awkward to tower over the mostly Indio parish population.

**How to die here.** We have not heard much about guns but one can buy a machete for some 5 Dollars at any hardware store; and it does not even come with warning stickers (this gardening devise should not be used in pub brawls, break ins, or ...). When I asked neighbors about its usage as a weapon, they conceded: yes that does happen (with terrible resulting injuries), but mostly on the coast and not in the highlands where we live. That is a bit more plausible than the exclamation 'But that was three blocks down' (as though we were talking about another part of the milky way) of a neighbor in Joliet when I asked him about a drug stake out on 'our' Buell Avenue years ago. The highland notion of the coast is that of a metereological and sociological jungle, though the Costeneas are supposed to be prettier than then Serranas. While Ecuador has a higher murder rate than the US and even Mexico, by far the

best chance of getting killed is certainly in traffic accidents. Ecuador chalks up quite a few more traffic fatalities than Germany with less than a fifth of the population. While there is a country-wide speed limit of 90 km/h (just looked it up, empirical observation would rather suggest some 120 km/h) people drive still quite fast, despite increasingly strict enforcement. From the bus stop mentioned above to the university there is a windy but smooth and very well marked 10 km stretch of mountain road. To the chagrin of Elisabeth I also like to go with the flow, which involves routinely overtaking despite double center lines, even just before and in curves. Just recently, I had to break hard and veer to the side (there is typically no shoulder but a deep ditch) to avoid an oncoming bus, which was overtaking a car or truck in a rather narrow curve. Unfortunately, upon loosing control one may not wind up in a field but is more likely to plunge into one of the steep and deep quebradas (sort of mini canyons). Correspondingly, some highways are lined with white crosses in their mountainous sections.



**Going cross country.** Another aspect of driving here is that there are still lots of very rough roads between smaller towns and villages. Since taking only (more or less) smooth roads may triple the distance and double the driving time one has a good excuse to buy a four wheel drive with plenty of ground clearance. We bought the Renault Duster of Rumanian Dacia lineage, which the German automotive press likes to trash as a poor mans *ersatz*-vehicle to the *premium* X-country products of Mercedes, BMW, Porsche, Volkswagen and Skoda. I originally fancied the Yeti, but the Skoda dealership in Ibarra had just closed down and the Yeti would have cost 55 000 Dollars rather than the 35 000 we paid for the Duster. The reason for the steep prices are high import tariffs on all *high-end* consumer goods, partly to support local assembly plants. They produce amongst others the very popular Suzuki/GM Vitara, which is comparable to the Duster in design and price, but supposedly more economical as far as spare parts are concerned. Fortunately we have not gotten to that stage yet and I am rumored to always go for something a little bit different. Like the unreliable Zafira LPG version that Klaus now has to keep on the road. Due to the much lower velocity, driving on the rough roads seems to mainly carry the danger of getting stuck, running over an animal (there are lots of stray dogs), or doing a fender bender with another vehicle. While admiring the breathtaking views from some country roads Elisabeth often pleads mercy for her stomach when I try to put the Duster through its six gears.

**Ecuadorian economics.** By the way, the car gets perfectly cleaned inside and outside by hand for exactly 3 Dollar. Like in restaurants the service providers simply refuse if you try to round up the official price, which seems based on the minimum wage of about 20 Dollars per working day. The minimum wage is one of the many positive changes that the current president Correa introduced in his by now 8 years in office, although it seems doubtful that even all adult members of the families working the fields around us actually get 366 Dollars per month. Correa also started a huge infra structure program for roads, schools and hospitals. The stock criticism of the left 'caudillos' Gaddafi, Chavez, Lula and also Correa is that they use the windfall from high oil prices to placate the people and buy popular support with social handouts. These critics in the conservative Western press never discuss what our *moderate* friends and allies, e.g. in Nigeria, Indonesia and the gulf monarchies do with the extra millions when oil prices are high. Line feudal pockets, buy Maseratis and finance Sunni expansionism? There is also a case, Angola, where a supposedly left government is mired in corruption and completely misses the chance to convert the resource wealth into sustainable development. In contrast there has been a very credible effort to that effect in Ecuador, which was and still is one of the poorest countries in South America. Being an economics professor by training Correa has tried a different track between private market development and public regulation/investment. Despite similarities in their rhetoric he is no Chavez and especially his educational policies are completely different as demonstrated for example by Yachay.

**Freedom of expression.** A Northamerican colleague with hispanic connections has criticized me for my involvement in Yachay as a pet project of the *Caudillo* Correa. Supposedly some German colleagues were also very critical, though I have heard nothing like that directly. I replied to him that so far I felt better as a minion of Correa than I would have as an underling of GWB at Argonne National Laboratory, a fate that I just missed by leaving for Germany in 1993. My Spanish allows me to roughly follow the Ecuadorian press and the presidents weekly three-hour Sabatinas. Still, I miss the subtleties and will hopefully be able to figure out the context better in half a year or so. Recently the Telegrafo, which is supposed to be the (only) mouth-piece of the government amongst the four major papers, carried a rather leftist criticism of Yachay and especially its northamerican leadership. Four *quality* papers for a population of 15 million, including many illiterates, is better than the situation in Austria, which is about the same size and completely dominated by the Kronenzeitung in terms of print media. I view the German press as run by anti-Russian atlanticists, certainly do not like the Murdoch domination of the media in England and Australia, and consider even the New York Times not much of a saving grace for the more and more trashy US newspaper scene. In Ecuador many roads, bridges and public buildings are adorned with (by now rather faded) signs stating: "Esta obra fue pagado por la revolucion ciudadana (comrade Correa's ideological construct)". When I had not been paid for more than two months I jokingly added to my signature the line "Esta persona todavia no fue pagado por la revolucion ciudadana" ("This person still has not been paid by the citizens revolution"). Most Ecuadorians seemed to consider that a rather dangerous prank, which might get me into serious trouble with the powers that be. I was paid shortly after, so things were not put to a serious test.

**The way from here.** It is now certain that Correa will not be the next president and it is not at all clear whether his successor will show a similar commitment to Yachay during the campaign for the election in 2017 and in his or her period in office (which might be cut short by Correa pulling the so called muerto cruzada, a mechanism for an early reelection and in any case he can do a Putin to come back in 2021). I fear that his successor could try to put some distance between themselves and Correa by downgrading what might be seen as one of the more extravagant projects of the big guy, namely Yachay. Our public image is quite ambivalent and properly positioning Yachay in the political landscape over the next two years will be a difficult challenge, which I am not sure we are up to. Never mind, just this afternoon on Xmas day, Elisabeth and I drove spontaneously about half an hour from our house and then went on a two hour hike at about 2700 meters in the gorgeous mountains just west of Cotacachi. So do not expect us back in Europe any time soon, even if the oil price goes negative or my role at Yachay comes apart prematurely. Elisabeth keeps complaining of short breath in the thin air and has occasionally a stiff back, but otherwise the tercera edad does not seem to slow us down at all.