

Chapter 8 - Vilcabamba: Sacred Valley of Longevity

[Question: Who invented the myth of the Fountain of Youth?](#)

http://www.answers.com/Q/Who_invented_the_myth_of_the_Fountain_of_Youth

Answer:

The fountain of youth is not a myth but a legend. The legend is of a fountain that flows with curative waters that regenerate those who drink it or bathe in it, restoring lost youth. The legend goes, at least, as far back as the Alexander Romance (any of the several collections of stories that chronicle the mythic adventures of Alexander the Great), starting in the 3rd Century.

In mythology there are many mythic figures who quest for eternal youth, and if not in the fountain of youth, then the philosopher's stone, or the elixir of life. But the mythology is not about fountains of youth or elixirs of life; they are about the people who quest for them and how this instructs us all.

The fountain of youth cemented its allure as a legend in 1513 when Ponce De Leon discovered Florida. The Legend of Ponce De Leon and the Fountain of Youth is apocryphal in nature and De Leon's name was not associated with the fountain of youth legend until after his death. As the legend goes, Ponce De Leon, dissatisfied with his wealth and bored with his life, launched an expedition to find the fountain.

The morning bus from Cuenca to Loja was taking us to our last destination in Ecuador – Vilcabamba, the Sacred Valley of Longevity. At Loja, after a scenic drive of 126 kilometers (78 miles) on the well-maintained Pan American highway, we transferred onto a smaller bus that would take us the remaining 42 kilometers (26 miles) to the end of the Gringo Trail in Ecuador. We didn't know if we would find the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the rainbow there, or the acclaimed fountain of youth. But we did know that there was something alluring about the tiny village that scientists and researchers had nicknamed the "Valley of the Immortals" back in the mystical hippie days of the 1960s.

I checked the picture that I had quickly taken at the bus station. Two large advertisements came into view on the small screen of the digital camera. I zoomed in to see that the left billboard-type ad was of "Loja: Jardin Botanico del Ecuador," featuring the famous botanical garden of Reynaldo Espinoza in Loja. The other ad was for the Podocarpus National Park, "Paraiso Biologico," a biological paradise that had several sponsors listed on the bottom: (1) Fundacion Ecologica Arcoiris, a non-government organization (NGO) that was interested in conserving the biodiversity of the park; (2) The Nature Conservancy that was interested in protecting nature and

preserving the life of the park; and (3) INEFAN, an acronym for Instituto Ecuatoriano y de Areas Naturales. I loved national parks, and I secretly wished to see the national park. The place Susie and I saw in the guidebook seemed to be close to the park, and we figured we might find a guide to take us into the park. Little did we know at the time that Mother Nature (Pachamama) had other plans for us.



“You guys look like Europeans,” said a tall American who sat across the aisle from us and had been eyeing us from the time we had boarded the bus. He wanted to start a conversation with us, and I obliged him.

“You must have detected my Russian-Ukrainian accent,” I responded. “However, we are Americans like you are. My daughter was born in the USA, and I came to America with my parents when I was six years old.”

“Are you going to Vilcabamba to look for land and a place to live, like we are?” asked the tall American’s traveling buddy, who was short and stocky.

“No, we’re just tourists,” said Susie with an amiable laugh. “My Dad wants to find out how to live forever from the old-timers in Vilcabamba.”

We all laughed at the humorous remark that rang with a hint of truth in it.

“And where do you live in America?” I asked.

“Actually, we’re expatriates living in Costa Rica,” replied the stocky fellow with eyeglasses. “We wanted to see if Ecuador was a place worth moving to.”

“That is a great place,” I said. “My wife and I visited Costa Rica when our daughter was going to school there. I would move there if I could.”

“And what do you do for a living?” asked the tall American.

“I’m a retired teacher,” I said. “I taught elementary and middle school children in Oregon. And what do you do for a living?”

“I’m a hit man,” said the tall American with a matter-of-fact look on his face. I guessed that he wanted to see how we would respond to such a profession.

Susie and I almost wanted to laugh at such a candid declaration, but we held our emotions to ourselves.

“Really?” said Susie, not sure what to make of his admission. I, on the other hand, wanted to live a long life and reasoned that staying out of the hit man’s way would be the wisest course of action.

The conversation changed to small chit-chat about the stocky guy’s restaurant business. After we arrived at the bus station in Vilcabamba, we didn’t see the two expatriate Americans from Costa Rica anymore.

We hired a taxi driver to take us to Rumi Wilco, a 40 hectares (98 acres) nature reserve that was recommended in the Footprint guide book. He drove down Eterna Juventud (Eternal Youth) Avenue, and then he turned on Diego Vaca de Vega and drove past the small plaza with a small church on the south side. Within a couple of minutes, we were outside the small town. We crossed Rio Chamba. Further downstream, the Chamba river would merge with Rio Uchima, and the two rivers would become the Vilcabamba River.

About a kilometer up the road the driver turned left into a narrow road that descended to the ecolodge and nature reserve of Rumi Wilco. The owner must have heard the taxi pull up at the ecolodge, because within minutes he came down a trail to greet us.

“Hello, my name is Orlando, and I’m the owner here,” said the owner in a very friendly voice. He didn’t extend his dirty hand for a handshake. He must have been working with the soil around his domain.

“Hi, my name is Paul and this is my daughter, Susie,” I replied. “We’d like to stay at your nature reserve for a night. We’re traveling through Vilcabamba on our way down to Peru.”

“You’re welcome to stay here as long as you like,” said Orlando, whose English had a slight Spanish accent. His lean body showed that he was a hard worker. And his gray hair and gray-white beard revealed his age, which was probably close to mine.

“What does the name Rumi Wilco mean?” I asked. I was always curious to know what unfamiliar words or names meant.

“Rumi is a Quechua word meaning rock, and it’s because of the rocky soil in the area, and Wilco means the Wilco tree, which is scientifically named *Anadenanthera colunbrina*,” explained Orlando. He saw that I was a curious old man, and he proceeded to tell me more. “The Wilco tree used to be a major species in the valley, and it was sacred to the Incas because it has medicinal, as well as hallucinogenic, properties. Now there are very few of the sacred Wilco trees left, mostly on my nature reserve. We cultivate them to make sure they don’t die out.”

“You mean the Wilco tree was used by the Inca shamans as a hallucinogen?” I asked, seeking to verify its sacred value.

“Yes, the shamans would use the black seeds from the bean pods, and they would grind them into a powder,” explained Orlando. “They would use the Wilco for their ceremonial trances and spirit trips.”

I didn’t want to ask Orlando if he used the Wilco for shamanic purposes, thinking it might embarrass him or make him think I was an investigative reporter.

“There is reason to believe that the name Vilcabamba means the Valley of the Sacred Wilco (or Vilca) tree,” added Orlando.

“How about the claim that this valley is the place where a person’s age is prolonged?” I asked, trying not to sound like a gerontologist. “Did you come here for that reason?”

“No, that’s not why I came here,” laughed Orlando. He had heard that question many times before, and he was always amazed at the gullibility of foreigners. “I came from Argentina and settled down here with my wife and three children because it was a great place to study nature, with its great variety of plants, birds, animals, and geological aspects. As far as longevity is concerned, I as a naturalist agree that the air, water, food and climate here is better than in crowded cities or in polluted areas. But that doesn’t mean a person is going to live longer here than in another similar ecological area with good air, water, and food. This is not a pristine valley anymore.” Orlando stopped talking and went to get the key to the river cabin we would be staying at. He explained what was in the cabin, and he explained the check-out process in the morning whenever we were ready to leave.

“Just leave the money and the key in the cabin when you leave, and I’ll pick it up when I have time,” concluded Orlando.

He directed us to follow the main trail (or river trail) for about half a kilometer, where we would see a river cabin surrounded by a camping area. It would be a little ways past a cabin on stilts right on the banks of the river, where a solitary man was staying for a month. We followed Orlando's directions, and we saw the solitary man peek his head out of the open window when he heard us pass by. We found our river cabin, which was actually located on a rise of the floodplain (about 30 meters from the river).

"Wow, what a cabin!" I said when I first saw the solidly built cabin on log stilts, with a porch overlooking the beauty of nature all around. It looked like the cabin was elevated at least eight feet above the ground. We climbed the ten steps to the porch, and I opened the door lock with the key. Susie's eyes were riveted on the hammock that was tied to the round wooden beams. That was the first place she crawled into with her fleece blanket as soon as she dropped off her backpack in the large cabin room.



I decided to relax indoors. There was a small gas stove in the mini-kitchen area. A cup of tea would be relaxing, I thought. Running water, a sink, cups, utensils, a small table with two benches, two beds, and a small library of books and magazines – that was suitable for a relaxing stay in the valley of longevity. In fact, I could stay here for a lot longer if I had a chance.

I picked up a magazine and a booklet to browse through, and I sat down with a cup of tea at the table. I looked at the magazine first. It was titled Vilcabamba Saludable (Healthy Vilcabamba). The colorful green front and back covers spoke of an earthly paradise, an enchantment of nature, "the place where human existence is prolonged, and where heart sicknesses are healed." Inside the magazine was some inspirational poetry, which glorified the "paradise that guards secrets" (of longevity), "a garden of eternal youth," and a sacred valley which was an "eternal source of life and health." The page about the Mandango ridge was filled with esoteric knowledge of the sacred sculpture of nature: Mandango signifies God sleeping, imposing, and strong; Mother Nature (Pachamama) sculpted it in the strong likeness of a male or female Indian face; the mountain has geomagnetic powers that repel negative energy; and it was considered

the spiritual guardian of the valley. The idea of climbing the ancient chapel of the Incas to energize the body like other tourists sounded great – if we had an extra day or two in Vilcabamba. Mount Mandango (God lying down), with its “polychrome landscape,” was the Apu (spirit of the mountain) of the Valley of the Immortals (ancestors), where mankind could “enjoy an eternal romance with nature.”



Before I turned to the Natural Vilcabamba booklet, I went to get another cup of tea. I took a look at Susie taking a nap in the hammock. That’s when I noticed a light rain starting to come down softly. Susie heard me open the door, and she opened her eyes.

“Guess what?” I said. “It’s starting to rain. That means we won’t be able to go on a hike around the nature reserve.”

“I guess we’ll just hang out and enjoy the change of pace for a while,” said Susie, who got up to go to the outdoor bathroom some ten meters away from the cabin.



I watched as a couple of volunteers arrived to do some work in the garden next to the cabin. They were pulling weeds as part of the chores that were assigned to them for several hours a day. The young ladies, who were probably in their early twenties, contributed to the conservation efforts at the nature reserve. Volunteer work was Orlando’s way of providing for research opportunities to college students and professionals.

Susie spent some time talking with the volunteers. She had volunteered before, and she understood the value of unpaid work as a way of giving back to the community, and a way of supporting projects that were helping indigenous people or projects that were beneficial to the environment. It was the new generation's way of providing selfless service for worthy causes.

When the rain started coming down harder, Susie came into the cabin to warm up with a cup of tea. The ladies covered their heads with the hoods of their rain jackets and continued picking weeds.

“There's some good reading material in the back of the cabin,” I said. “There's even a great map of the trail system of the entire Rumi Wilco nature reserve. You might want to study it before we go on our hike.”

“I don't know, Dad,” replied Susie. “This rain doesn't look like it's going to stop. We might have to postpone our hike until tomorrow morning. Our bus back to Loja doesn't leave until late in the morning, and Orlando said we can check out any time.”

I resigned myself to the fact that we weren't going anywhere until the rain stopped, and I realized Susie had already figured out all the logistics of our trip to and from Vilcabamba. I picked up the booklet featuring the valley's natural environment, and I saw that it had the Rumi Wilco logo on the back. The acknowledgements from the researchers and preparers of the nature guide gave most of the credit for the information to Orlando and Alicia Falco of the Rumi Wilco Nature Reserve. Susie took a quick look at the map of the trail system and then went back to reading her own Spanish book that she was engrossed in. I would study the map later to see where the different trails were, like the GT (Gully Trail), RT (Ridge Trail), ST (Slope Trail), and other markings that Orlando had carefully outlined to provide the tourist with a well-designed map of the entire Rumi Wilco nature reserve.



The Natural Vilcabamba booklet, printed in April 2005 by a university in Loja, was divided into three color-coded sections for easy reference: (1) blue for Section 1,

Natural Foundations of Vilcabamba's Environment; (2) green for Section 2, Human Influences; and (3) orange for Section 3, Plant Systems and Species.

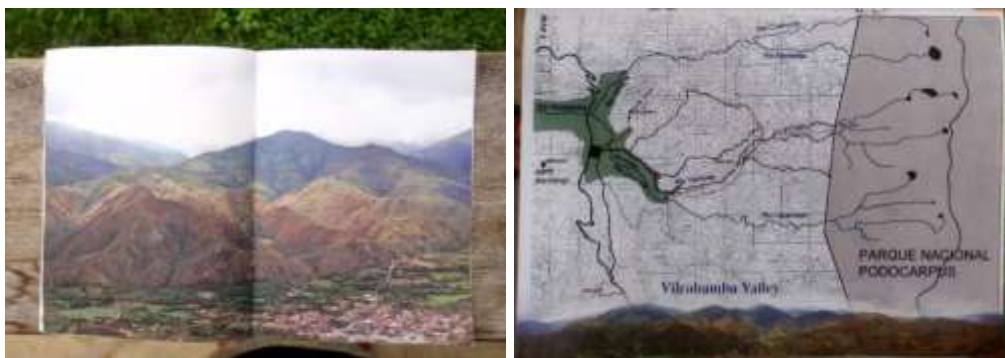
The first section introduced the “naturally curious” reader to the valley floor and its surrounding hillsides, an area of about 15 sq.km (6 sq. miles): “The valley floor is a patchwork of sugarcane and corn fields, mixed orchards and gardens, and small groves of bamboo and trees.” At the center of this valley was the town, which stood at an elevation of 1560 meters (almost a mile high). To the southeast rose the mountains within Podocarpus National Park, the watershed for the valley. The geology and soils of the environment is nicely layered into three groups of rocks and time periods: (1) very old metamorphic rock from the Paleozoic era (700 million years ago), which was still visible at the highest elevations; (2) igneous rock from the Cretaceous period (about 100 million years ago), which was a recent result of mountain building and volcanic activity in the Andes; and (3) sedimentary rock from the Tertiary period (about 10 million years ago), where weathering and erosion produced the horizontal layering of the iron-rich cliffs behind Rumi Wilco and the erosion-resistant Mandango ridge. The “perpetual spring” climate is discussed with emphasis on the three climate shapers: (1) Coastal influences, like the Humboldt and the El Nino currents; (2) Peru's arid air; and (3) Amazonia's moist air. The wet (November – April) and dry (May – October) seasons are the general divisions of the year. The rivers and hydrology subsection is divided into three examples of river shapers: (1) the slope, with steep slopes producing straight channels, and the mild slopes producing meandering courses; (2) erosion and sedimentation, where the exposed soil from deforestation causes more soil and sediment to be washed into watercourses; and (3) water surges and flash floods, where heavy grazing and burning cause faster run-off, which results in new channels or erosion of the shoreline. A short, but revealing, paragraph on water answers the question: “Waters of Longevity?” I would say yes because of the sponge-like vegetation in the higher elevations that filters the headwaters and brings mineral-enriched water with chelating (neutralizing) qualities, allowing toxic metals to be flushed from the body.

Section two of the booklet described the historical influences of the Paltas confederation of tribes, the Incas, and the Spaniards on the valley. Recent changes, especially with the building of the road between Loja and Vilcabamba, brought new colonists and further deforestation and agriculture. With the recent trend in tourism, there has been an increase in the cost of the land. The environmental impacts on the land are described as costly when there is extensive burning, causing loss of native species and increase of carbon in the atmosphere.

Section three (Plant Systems and Species) is by far the most interesting of the three sections, for it gives colorful pictures of plants in the Huertos (poly-culture gardens), and other landscape systems, such as the cropland, gullies, wooded slopes, arid uplands, riversides, and roadsides. A new landscape system that was unfamiliar to

me was the “living fences” – porotillo trees, agave, angel’s trumpets, etc. There were descriptive paragraphs with pictures of many prominent trees and plants, including: the Huilco or Wilco tree, the Kapoc or Ceibo tree, custard apple (cherimoya), acacia, guayabilla, hobush (chamana), croton (mosquera), cactus, guaba (Inga bean) tree, loquat (nispero), rose-apple (pomarrosa), palton tree, fig tree, and a medicinal plant named Mother of thousands.

A beautiful picture of the town and the Rumi Wilco area, and the mountains in the background, graced the center of the booklet. A map of the Vilcabamba valley allowed me to see the watershed in the national park and the various rivers that descended from the mountains to the valley below.



“Look, Dad, it stopped raining,” said Susie as she looked out the window to check on the volunteers in the garden. They had gone back to the adobe cabins where they were residing during their stay at Rumi Wilco.

“Yes, let’s get out here and enjoy the great outdoors,” I said exuberantly.

“How about going into town and getting a bite to eat,” said Susie. “I’m hungry.”

“Sounds good to me,” I responded, putting on my shoes and jacket. A very fine drizzle still managed to gently fall on our covered heads as we walked beside the rushing waters of the river. Along the trail we encountered one of Orlando’s tree markers on the self-guided nature trail system. It said the tree was called Solanaceae (genus Brugmansia), also known as Angel’s Trumpet.

The walk from the nature reserve to the town was only a kilometer, but it involved a treacherous crossing over a leaning cement footbridge that had been destroyed in a flood years ago. It was slippery because of the rain, and Susie thought she was going to slip and slide into the churning waters of the Rio Chamba below. Thank goodness there was a solid bamboo handrail to hold on to.

“I’m not crossing this footbridge anymore,” said Susie when she reached the other shore safely.



We came out on Agua de Hierro (Iron Water) street, which made me think of the essential quality of the water in the Valle Sagrado (Sacred Valley). We headed to the town center, hoping to find a place to eat at one of the many restaurants that were established there for tourists. I couldn’t resist taking a look at the large fountain in the center of the plaza. I thought it was built to represent the legendary fountain of youth, but alas, the octagonal floral-shaped fountain was no longer active.



Across the street from the plaza, on the south side across the street that was named for the Spanish founder of the small town – Luis Fernando de Vega – in 1756, was the small church. The church had a sign above a central five-pointed star in a circle that said: “Cristo Luz del Mundo” (Christ the Light of the World). It looked like the letters lit up at night. Above the door was an equal-armed cross in a circle, with a square in the center; the square looked like the center of a chakana cross that had a hole in the center of a square. A blue neon-lighted cross could be seen through the open door.

I stepped through the threshold of the church – past two pillars at the entrance – to see a large painting of a celestial Mother Mary and Divine Child with an array of heavenly deities of the Christian religion: St. Mark with the lion (Leo) and St. Peter with a key on the left, and on the right St. Luke with the bull (Taurus) and Santiago (St. James) the patron saint of the conquistadors with a sword. There were other deities

(saints), but I wasn't sure who they were. At the bottom of the painting were the souls in the underworld (or purgatory) who were engulfed in flames and were looking up with uplifted hands, pleading for the merciful Mother to deliver them from perdition.



“Dad, let's go find some food to eat,” said Susie impatiently.

We walked around the town square (plaza) and found a place called Layseca's Bakery, where they made whole wheat bread and good coffee. Susie was ready for a good cup of coffee.

A large picture of the valley and Mount Mandango on the wall caught my attention. I sat down at a nearby table to get a better look at the picture that had been enlarged on wallpaper to fit a large section of the restaurant. The words “Vilcabamba, Valley of Longevity”, were added to the top left corner, and a horse was superimposed on the bottom left side. No matter how many times I looked at that sacred mountain, it seemed to take on different aspects and manifest itself in various meaningful ways. This time I perceived it as a woman with flowing hair, as if it was Pachamama (Mother Earth) herself in a supine position, and she was waiting for Pachacamac (Father Sky) to embrace her and shower his solar rays on her.



“Is there a vegetarian restaurant here?” Susie asked the proprietor of the bakery.

“Yes, there’s a Restaurante Vegetariano two blocks east on Valle Sagrado street,” was the advice we received. That’s where we headed after Susie finished her cup of coffee.

After a filling meal, Susie wanted to look at some of the shops in the town. We happened to run into the Rumi Wilco craft and tours shop. We chatted for a while with Alicia, Orlando’s wife, and we told her we were staying at their place. I mentioned our walk across the leaning bridge, and she told us they had tried for years to get the town to fix that bridge, but it was all to no avail.

At the southwestern corner of the town square, Susie found her favorite Hindu deity, Lord Ganesha the elephant-headed god, the remover of obstacles, in a shop called Mundo Ganesha. Susie had worn her turquoise Ganesha t-shirt several times during the trip, and it seemed to have produced good results in paving the way for new adventures, both in the inner spiritual world and in the outer physical world. Today would be another one of those days.

When we walked out of the shop, the sun was starting to set, and I still had not seen or met a centenarian. Where were all those 100-year-old people that were supposed to be in Vilcabamba? We had seen lots of expatriates and former hippies hanging out at the shops and restaurants, but no centenarians.

I had Susie ask a taxi driver at the plaza if he knew where we could see a centenarian. He told us he could drive us to the home of one of the more famous centenarians if we gave him a tip, and also a tip to the lady he would take us to. I agreed to the amount the taxi driver asked for.

We rode past the Rumi Wilco exit, up a hill for about a kilometer. When we arrived at the house where the centenarian lived, the taxi driver took us up the stairs to a porch and introduced us to the daughter of the centenarian. He told us he would wait for us in his car.

“Mi madre saldria en un momentico (My mother will be right out),” said the daughter, who was cleaning vegetables in a corner of the porch, which faced the road. She had already called her mother the minute the taxi driver pulled up at the house. She was used to the flow of tourists that the taxi driver brought to her front steps. She knew it was a way to please the foreigners’ curiosity and to make some money for the household.

“Aca esta, mi mama Lucila (Here she is, my mother Lucila),” said the daughter as the little old lady hobbled out to meet us. She was holding on to a wooden crutch as she walked. She was wearing a fashionable Panama hat with a striped band. A dark blue sweater hung loosely on her frail body. The landscape of wrinkles on her face resembled the brown terrain of the hills around Vilcabamba, revealing a longevity that indeed belonged to a centenarian.

Lucila accepted our extended hands, giving us a bony handshake before sitting down slowly in the white plastic patio chair.

“He tenido problemas con mi cadera desde que cai en ella hace varios años (I have problems with my hip ever since I fell on it several years ago),” said Lucila, explaining her use of a crutch to get around. I noticed a black metal walker in the back near a brick partition wall. Lucila (from Spanish luz, “light”) had a bright smile as she talked. Her brown eyes sparkled with a gentle soul quality as she looked at us through her narrow pink glasses. Her salt-and-pepper hair covered the upper part of her large ears. Her narrow pink lips were hardly perceptible when her mouth was closed.



“Would you mind if we asked you some questions?” I asked. Susie interpreted for me. (Le molestaría unas preguntas?)

“Me perdones, no puedo escuchar muy bien (I’m sorry, I can’t hear so well),” replied Lucila. Her daughter spoke loudly to her mother. She knew the exact volume and tone to use.

“Por supuesto, puede preguntarme cualquier cosa (Of course, you can ask me anything),” said Lucila after she had her daughter repeat the question. We realized we would have to speak up to be heard.

“First of all, what do you think helped you live so long (Para comenzar, que piensas que te ayudaba vivir tanto tiempo)?” I asked. “Was it the water or the air or something else (Fue debido al agua o el aire o otra cosa)?”

“Fue todo eso (Oh, it was all of that),” she answered, this time without having her daughter repeat the question. “Tenemos agua y aire limpio, comida sana, y trabajamos muy duro. Menos los últimos años, no he podido caminar mucho o trabajar como antes por mi cadera herida (We have good water, good air, good food, and we work real hard. Except the last several years, I haven’t been able to walk much or work like I used to because of my bad hip).”

“How old are you (Cuantos años tiene)?” I asked.

Lucila looked to her daughter for an answer. She was starting to forget certain facts of her life.

“Tiene 104 años (She’s 104-years-old),” chimed in the daughter, who continued working, listening, and helping her mother whenever needed.

“Can you tell me some of the most important events in your life (Me puede contar algunos de los eventos más importantes de su vida)?” I asked. Her daughter had to explain what I was asking.

“Recuerdo mucho mi querido esposo que murió hace muchos años (I remember fondly my dear husband who passed away years ago),” said Lucila with a sadness that showed in her thoughtful eyes. “También recuerdo caminando hasta Perú (I also remember walking to Perú).”

“Antes trabajaba como zastre (She used to work as a seamstress),” added her daughter.

“Do you mind if I took a picture of you (Te importa si le saco un foto)?” I asked.

“No me importa (I don’t mind at all),” said Lucila, who sat up straight to prepare herself for a lady-like pose. She looked regal, even in her old age.

Lucila allowed us to take pictures with her, also. The picture of the youthful face of Susie’s and the ancient face of Lucila’s was a contrast in the stages of a woman’s existence on earth. To me, it was a contrast of the manifestation of Pachamama (the Mother of us all) in her youthful and in her ancient appearances.



“Amo cuando la gente viene a visitarme (I love having people come and visit me),” said Lucila. “Me hace feliz saber que la gente quieren ver una anciana como yo (It makes me happy to know that people want to see an old woman like me).”

“People are curious about the centenarians who live here (Las personas son curiosas sobre los centenaries que viven aca),” I said. “Now we have proof that there are centenarians in the sacred valley of longevity (Ahora tenemos una muestra que haya centenaries en la valle sagrada de longevidad).”

“Tu eres tan vibrante y viva (And you are still so vibrant and lively),” added Susie. “Tan llena de vida (So full of life).”

“Gracias, querida (Thank you, my dear),” said Lucila, her eyes beaming back at Susie.

“Mi madre va a ser presentado en la celebración mañana del año 149 de Vilcabamba (My mother is going to be featured in tomorrow’s 149 year celebration of Vilcabamba),” said Lucila’s daughter. “Debe venire a la celebracion (You should come to the celebration).”

She gave us a brochure, which advertised “Vilcabamba, 149 Anos de Parroquializacion, del 21 al 30 de Mayo de 2010.” Inside the brochure was a picture of Lucila Guerrero, and the honorary title “Madre Centenaria 2010.” Lucila was the “Centennial Mother.” What an honor!



“A que hora comienza la celebracion (What time does the celebration begin)?” asked Susie.

“Al medio dia (Around noon),” answered Lucila’s daughter.

“Tenemos que tomar un bus para Peru antes de eso (We have to leave on the late morning bus for Peru),” said Susie sadly. “Lo siento, no vamos a poder celebrar contigo, pero siempre le recordamos en nuestras corazones y mentes (Sorry, but we won’t be able to join you in the celebration. But we will always remember you in our hearts and minds).”

I handed Lucila a tip for her cordial acceptance of us as foreigners, and for the wonderful time we had spent together. We touched her folded hands with respect and love. For a brief moment in time, I saw the frail body of my mother transfigured on Lucila’s body – my mother had passed away at the age of 93. It was a tender moment of the heart, and I cherished the vision as I looked one last time into Lucila’s eyes and saw a very loving person.

I also gave the taxi driver a tip after he drove us to Rumi Wilco. I thanked him for making my day.

We bought a fresh loaf of homemade bread from a lady that lived next door to Rumi Wilco. That bread would be our breakfast.

The following morning I was up at daybreak and ready to take a hike. Susie wanted to sleep another hour. I decided to take a short hike up a gully trail to get a good view of the valley, the town, and Mandango. After consulting the map, I set out by myself to explore Orlando's land.

Wisps of fog still lingered in the morning air as I looked from the top of a trail at the tranquil landscape before me. It was an idyllic picture of Shangri-La, a valley isolated from the outside world by mountains and ridges. I imagined how this earthly paradise would have looked like before the coming of man. I looked at Mandango, and this time I saw it as a sleeping giant, something similar to what I had seen of a similar landform on the island of Kauai in Hawaii. I remembered climbing the sleeping giant with my wife several years ago. I wished I could have climbed Mandango and seen the sleeping god up close. I thought of the Hindu concept of God dreaming the cosmic dream of the universe, and it appeared that Mandango was doing just that.



When I returned to the river cabin, Susie was already up and enjoying a cup of tea with jam and bread. I joined her for a light breakfast of fresh homemade bread with a cup of tea.



Now we were nourished and energized by local food, local air, and local water – all from the sacred valley. And we were ready to go on our morning hike on Orlando's trails.

The trail was a little muddy after the rain from the previous day, but that didn't stop us. The sun was shining, creating an atmosphere of vibrant energy for life in the nature reserve. The air was invigorating, and each breath brought oxygenated blood to the brain and the entire body. I felt the cleansing effect of prana (the life force) coursing through my being, making the vibrations of the electro-magnetic currents of my etheric body resonate in tune with the sacred valley. I looked up at the iron-rich red cliffs above the nature reserve. The colorful cliffs, with their layers of sedimentary rock, resisted erosion and reminded the visitor of earth's antiquity.

The Chamba River felt refreshing just by standing next to it and breathing in the spray of water that wafted in the air. What a way to cleanse the lungs of toxins and open up the cells in the bronchioles to their full capacity! I felt the river of life coursing through the central nervous system in my spine, allowing me to feel one with nature. Pachamama – the living vibrant energy of Mother Earth – coursing through my body, mind, and soul.



We came upon the first sign of many on Orlando's trails. The wooden brown sign had white cursive lettering in English. The informative sign talked of "A Restless Earth":

Pleistocene glaciations (ice ages) implied the existence of ice at the top of Podocarpus National Park's highest mountains. During warming trends leading to interglacial periods (such as now), glaciers melted progressively, magnifying seasonal water surges into massive flash floods – up to 30 meters high – which blanketed valley bottoms with bouldery outwash deposits, hundreds of feet thick. We can see the coarse beds left behind by those events here, in these impressive cliffs of transported sedimentary material, eroded during the last several millennia.



“Do you want to go up one of the gully trails?” I asked. “They’re kind of steep and slippery.”

“I’ll give it a try,” replied Susie. She didn’t say anything about the little toe that still nagged her at times. I had completely forgotten about it.

We slowly ascended a gully that had parts of the trail washed away. The effects of erosion were clearly visible on the gully trail. When we achieved a height where we could see the valley, we stopped and enjoyed the view for a while. Then we descended slowly down the same trail, watching each step carefully.



We continued exploring the nature reserve by walking on the easy main trail. The exotic trees and plants competed for attention with the life on the ground. A Century plant (flor de novia) with its spiky-leaved clump on top, of course, was more visible and grander than the pretty little snail that crawled on the ground.



There were plants that seemed to come from some primeval forest. The competition of plants for light and space by the riverside and the slopes was interesting to see; the plants seemed to intertwine around each other and use each other for support. Intertwined within the plants I spotted a thin tube-like cactus that was known as aquacolla, or the San Pedro cactus, whose hallucinogenic drug has been a lure of shamans and hippies alike.

The next sign we saw talked about the concept that the “River Carves, Landscapes Repair”:

When rains are intense and prolonged, a tug-of-war may happen. The swelled waters violently scrape riverbanks and floodplain, carrying away plants, rocks and land towards the Pacific Ocean. The gully, on the other hand, activates with heavy rain cascading mudded water, rocks and vegetation, thus developing a colluvial fan which effectively refills what flash floods damaged. In this way, a dynamic equilibrium is established.



We didn't expect to come across a coffee plant along the trail. I remembered reading in the Rumi Wilco booklet, however, that certain plants – like the coffee plant or tree – were planted alongside other species to make it more “ecologically

sustainable” for the trees. Susie loved coffee, so I took a picture of her holding the mature red berries on a tree with thick glossy leaves.

The third, and last, sign that we came across on the main trail explained “El Nina’s Effect”:

A consequence of torrential rains pounding the Rio Chamba basin in 1999 was the great flash flood of February 28th, which altered the course of the stream here. Before, an eastward meander-contoured by this trail – described a ½ km semicircle. After the flood, lasting a mere three hours, a new section of the flood plain was breached, defining a changed river course.

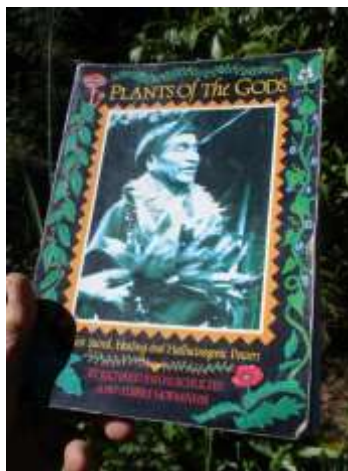
El Nino and La Nina are major climate events with occasional worldwide implications. They may bring about greatly increased rains and droughts – mosaic fashion – in much of the planet.



Throughout the hike I kept looking for the Wilco tree, but I couldn’t find one. I was able to identify a fig or strangler fig tree. I thought I saw a Wilco tree along one of the gullies, where the rocky soil was a suitable habitat for the sacred tree of the Incas. I took a picture of what I thought was the Wilco tree towering above the surrounding smaller trees in order to try and identify it later. I wished Orland was around to teach me the names of the various trees and plants. Instead, I had to be satisfied with the pleasure of walking through his nature reserve and enjoying the sight and scent of the trees and plants without knowing their names.



When we returned to the river cabin, it was time for us to prepare for our walk to the entrance, where we would catch a taxi back to Vilcabamba. I took a final glance at the books in the small library while I waited for Susie to finish packing. I picked up a book titled Plants of the Gods by Richard Evans Schultes and Albert Hofmann. The subtitle was: “Their Sacred, Healing, and Hallucinogenic Powers.” I turned to a page that was titled, “Beans of the Hekula Spirt” (the Yopo Bean, *Anadenanthera peregrine*). I read: *“In the beginning, the Sun created various beings to serve as intermediaries between Him and earth. He created hallucinogenic snuff powder so that man could contact supernatural beings. The Sun had kept this powder in his navel, but the Daughter of the Sun found it. Thus it became available to man – a vegetal product acquired directly from the gods.”* (p. 116) The Yopo was closely related to the Wilco tree, with similar hallucinogenic qualities. I read some more: *“It is more commonly employed by payes (“medicine men” or shamans) to induce trances and visions and communicate with the hekula spirits; to prophesy or divine; to protect the tribe against epidemics of sickness; to make hunters and even their dogs more alert.”* (p. 117)



“I’m ready, Dad,” said Susie, putting her backpack on her back and starting to head for the door. I put the book down, reminding myself to make a note of it, and maybe even ordering it for further research into the sacred plants of the gods and the shamans. I left the key and the money on top of the table, just like Orlando told us.

Orlando happened to be at his house when we walked by. We stopped to chat with him:

“Hi, Orlando,” I said. “We left the key and the money on the table in the cabin, like you told us.”

“Thank you, I’ll go there later,” said Orlando. “How did you enjoy your stay?”

“I wish I could have stayed here at least a week,” I responded. “You have a natural wonderland here.”

“I loved that river cabin on stilts,” said Susie. “And that hammock was heavenly.”

“We had a chance to hike on your trails earlier this morning,” I added. “You created a fantastic trail system, and the signs were very informative.”

“I’m glad you had a chance to walk on the trails,” said Orlando. “We spent a lot of time creating those trails.”

“I hope to come back here some day and stay longer, like that solitary man we saw in the cabin on the river’s edge,” I remarked.

“We hope you come back,” said Orlando. “Tell your friends about this place.”

“May I have my daughter take a picture of me and you together?” I asked, pulling out my digital camera.

“As long as you don’t post the picture on Facebook, like everyone is doing nowadays,” replied Orlando. “I don’t like my picture posted all over the place, like some people do.”

“Agreed,” I said. “I won’t post it on Facebook.”

Susie took two pictures of Orlando and me together. One of the pictures looked like we were made of light particles and were about to dematerialize. The sacred valley was truly ethereal.



The town square was alive with activity as we passed by. I reminisced about Lucila, “the Centennial Mother,” who would be in a procession to celebrate the 149th anniversary of Vilcabamba. I was glad I had met her. Susie was right – Lucila would always be remembered in our hearts and minds.

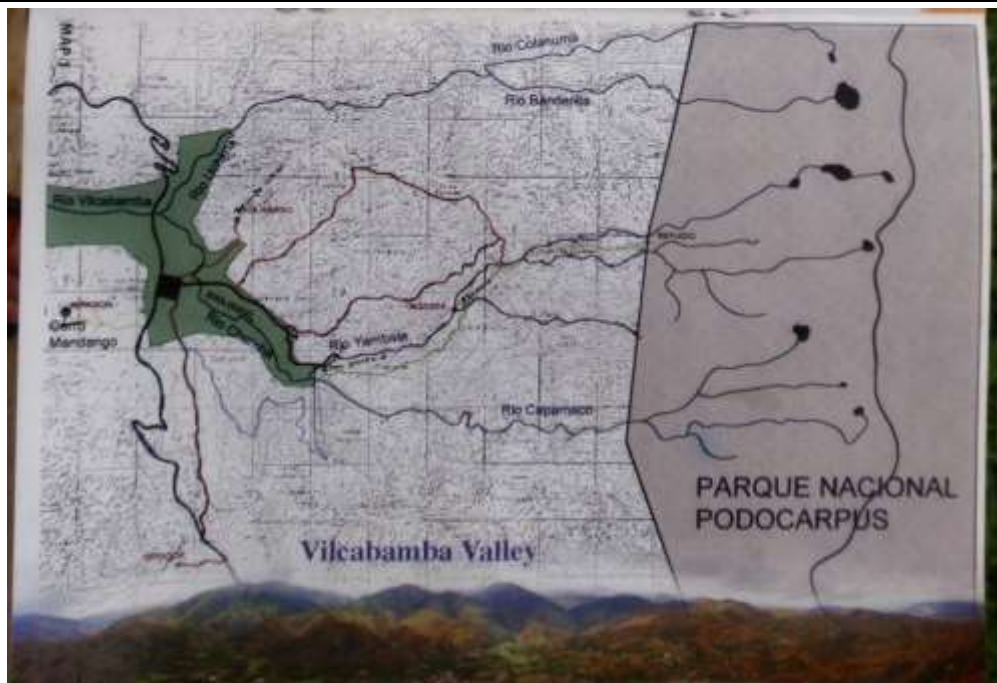
I took one last picture of Vilcabamba, the sacred valley, and Mandango, the sleeping god, as the bus arrived to take us back to Loja, where we would transfer onto a bus that would take us to Peru.



At the Loja bus station, I noticed something I had not noticed the first time we came through. It was a shrine set up to honor Reina del Cisne, Guia de Los Choferes (Queen of Cisne, guide of the chauffeurs or drivers). I thought that was a great concept – a protector of the bus drivers, the taxi drivers, and other drivers who drove people around. There was another shrine to the Santisima Virgen de “El Cisne” in another part of the bus station. I found out later that the Virgin of the town of El Cisne was very famous in this part of Ecuador, and there was a special procession for the famous sculpture of the Virgin Mary. It was a 43 mile three day pilgrimage every August 15th (day of the Assumption of Mary into heaven) from El Cisne to Loja, where the Virgin Mary stayed for a while before being carried back to the impressive Basilica del Cisne.



I hoped and prayed that our trip to Peru would be safe, and I thought of the propitious Virgin of El Cisne as the bus drove through the scenic Andes to Piura, via the border crossing at Macara.



Links:

[Rumi Wilco Ecolodge, Vilcabamba](#)

<http://www.rumiwilco.com/>