

**Weddings and New Years:
Ecuadorian Customs Lend a Hand
By Kenneth D. MacHarg**

We were invited to the wedding for perhaps three reasons. First, Jeaneth, the sister of the bride, is a good friend who enjoys associating with "gringo" foreigners. Second, we own a car which meant that we could provide transportation. Third, we own a VCR recorder.

With the wedding scheduled for 7:30, we were asked if we could arrive at the house around 7:15 to provide transportation to the church. That sounded like a very tight schedule to us, so being good foreigners not totally adapted yet to the Latin American time mentality, we were quite a bit earlier. Just as well, it took some time to fit the 9 people into our four Passenger Fiat Uno. The rest of the party made their way to the service in a borrowed school bus.

Our arrival at the church was memorable in that it was late and somewhat spectacular. Late because the trip from house to church would take at least 15 minutes at 4 a.m. with no traffic on the streets. But 7:30 at night, on a Friday, in the narrow, crowded streets of Quito is no time to be in a hurry--no one else is.

Spectacular because of the stir it caused. Due to the shortage of Latin American priests, many of the larger churches are combining weddings--at this one three couples were being united in the eyes of God at the same time, in the same service. The other two couples had arrived early, or at least on time. Our party was ten to fifteen minutes late, but for the benefit of our VCR recorder decided to stage a processional anyhow.

Bride Sonja, beautiful in her dress, with long flowing dark hair and glowing face took the arm of her father, and with bridesmaids bringing up her gown, slowly, gracefully processed to her place beside her intended at the front of the church.

Opening remarks had already been offered by the priest, and scripture was being read as the family found their places on the hard pews. Nephew Andres, Jeaneth's son, found it all interesting and alternated between sitting with his mother and going to stand beside his Aunt.

Soon I sensed Jeaneth beside me--would I go up behind the priest to tape the ceremony? Being a clergy person myself who abhors such disruptions in a church marriage service, I cringed. But a quick glance assured me that such a move would hardly be noticed--there were already a half dozen photographers placed strategically around the chancel area ready to flash bulbs at crucial moments.

It was a typically beautiful service, tears flowed from the eyes of mothers and grandmothers, while sincerity dominated in the pledges of longevity and faithfulness on the part of all the partners.

If the nuptials were beautiful, the party was festive. The family had saved for some time to throw an event which would long be remembered: decorations, modest but attractive, a buffet which would rival that of most restaurants, and gifts for every woman in attendance, a moment which would remind all that this was a marriage blessed from above.

The music began with a classical Strauss waltz, offering father and daughter, mother and son, then husband and wife the opportunity to dance together. Those were just the formalities, from there on it was music with a Latin beat until around 4 a.m.

It was obvious that the two families came from slightly different socioeconomic class backgrounds. In a very class conscious society this can be a crucial factor in the success or failure of a marriage. The groom was from a professional level while Sonja's family represent more the clerical or laboring professions.

But those differences seemed to be put aside for the evening and the best of the newly married, happy couple who danced the night away.

The wedding was in October. On New Year's eve we joined the family to see out the old and welcome in the new. In Ecuador it is a tradition to build "old men" of straw which are set up on street corners then set afire at midnight.

With the blaze, the problems of the old year go up in smoke, opening up different possibilities for the new.

Sonja was at the party, looking far older than she had three months previous. She and her husband had separated in November.

Now as the Old Man was dragged out into the street, gasoline poured over it, and it was ignited, she took a broom and beat it.

I had not seen such fury or intensity in a long time. Certainly much of the pain of the past three months was worked out in the incineration of that Old Man.

Perhaps for her the new year will be better. We hope so.

Weddings and New Years: Ecuadorian Customs Lend a Hand, 1995