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Amenities Migration: A Case Study on the Retired Expatriate Community in Cuenca, Azuay, Ecuador

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**AMENITIES MIGRATION: A CASE STUDY ON THE RETIRED EXPATRIATE
COMMUNITY IN CUENCA, AZUAY, ECUADOR**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS IN ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS**

**PROFESSOR RITA CANO ALCALA
PROFESSOR CHAR MILLER**

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ABSTRACT

Immigration is not new to Ecuador. Beginning in the early 2000s, the amenities migration phenomenon gained popularity in Ecuador, especially in the UNESCO World Heritage Trust Site of Cuenca, located about five and a half hours south of Quito and four hours east of Guayaquil in the Andes Mountains. This study combines literary research on retirement migration and a case study on the retired expatriate community in Cuenca, Azuay, Ecuador. The limited case study includes twelve in-depth interviews with retired expatriates living in Cuenca and nine interviews with Cuencanos that interact with retired expatriates daily. According to the expatriates, the advantages of living in Cuenca include the cheaper lifestyle, year-round spring-like weather, and a slower pace of life. The disadvantages consist of the concept of “Ecuadorian time” and the indirectness of Cuencanos. Data suggest that Cuencanos value the presence of retired expatriates because they help stimulate the economy, but they resent the impenetrable language barrier and their cultural disengagement. The Cuencanos’ responses also indicate that a deeper understanding of the country and culture is necessary on behalf of the retired expatriates to facilitate their integration into the existing culture rather than trying to create an exclusive subculture within Cuenca.

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INTRODUCTION

Migration issues affect everyone; even “people who do not decide to migrate have effectively made a migration decision— one *not* to move” (Moss, 2005, p. 55). The pursuit of natural amenities has long played a major role in shaping the geographic distribution of people. Amenities migration, or the movement of people based on the draw of natural or cultural goods or services, is gaining significant scholarly attention as the baby-boomer generation enters retirement age and begins to decide its future plans. This relatively new migration pattern involves retired individuals “whose relocation motivations include lifestyle change, [a] slower pace of life, cheaper real estate, and proximity to natural landscapes and recreation opportunities” (Pera, 2008, p. 1).

The amenities migration phenomenon, particularly retirement migration, was not studied in the United States until the 1950s when Edward Ullman (1954) noticed what he called a “migration reversal” as the older population made its way from densely populated urban areas to rural areas with milder climates in the American West. According to Ullman, “for the first time in the world’s history[,] pleasant living conditions— amenities— instead of more narrowly defined economic advantages [were] becoming the sparks that generate significant population increases, particularly in the United States” (p. 119). Amenities can be defined as “non-marketed qualities of a locality that make it an attractive place to live and work” (Green, 2001, p. 61). These amenities are associated with specific places and can be categorized as environmental or cultural. Examples of amenities include biodiversity, natural landscapes, climate, historic sites, cultural traditions, and language (Clark and Kahn, 1988, p. 363). It is important to note that the valorization of amenities is very subjective. User value is a common reason why individuals

appreciate certain amenities, but sometimes people value their existence with the intention of preserving them for future generations, a concept known as intergenerational equity.

Amenities have several important traits. First, they are limited and unique to certain regions. Amenities are also characterized by irreversibility and non-substitutability. The value of a wilderness area, for example, cannot be restored once it has been damaged and even if the damage is mitigated, it is impossible to completely reverse or replace what was once there. The third characteristic of amenities is their correlation with income, that is, high amenity areas are associated with a high cost of living (Green, 2001, p. 62). Additionally, an individual's enjoyment of a certain amenity is not universal. For example, access to technology can be an amenity for individuals who wish to maintain a connection to their families while abroad. Similarly, the inaccessibility of these technologies can be an amenity for migrants who desire an escape from those affiliations.

REGIONAL LITERATURE

In the United States, scholars did not analyze amenity migration until the 1970s when David Bell (1973) observed the importance of natural amenities and Sofranko and Williams (1979) investigated the drivers of migration. The number and scope of research efforts on amenity migration and other related trends has increased since the 1970s, however, the scattered nature of the literature makes it challenging to form a comprehensive review. From the 1970s to the present, the American West has been the prime example of a region experiencing population growth driven by amenity migration. This can be attributed to the "commodification of landscapes and lifestyle amenities" (Gosnell and Abrams, 2011, p. 307) which motivates individuals to reap the most benefits from their limited retirement income.

Despite the prevalence of retired expatriates, their presence in developing countries has received little scholarly attention. There is limited literature about Americans choosing to relocate abroad and “it is difficult to get an accurate estimate of U.S. Americans residing in [Latin American] countries, especially since the majority of growth has been since 2000” (Pera, 2008, p. 4). Furthermore, most migration literature focuses on the movement of people from poorer places to richer ones, negating a view from the other perspective. The United States, in particular, “has yet to examine the movement of U.S. citizens to developing countries” (Pera, 2008, p. 5). Researchers have focused on retired expatriates moving to Mexico, Costa Rica, and Panama, but not much is known about the number of U.S. citizens permanently residing in Ecuador, where my study was conducted. Part of this difficulty of tracking the presence of expats abroad can be attributed to gaps in census years and delays in visa and citizenship processing.

This phenomenon is further complicated by the lack of comparative and collaborative literature on amenity migration specifically among retired populations. Migration “by the economically privileged from the Global North to the Global South is predicted to increase, [yet] little is known about this type of migration on a global scale or about its impact on [receiving] communities” (Pera, 2008, p. 4). Furthermore, the lack of global comparisons in the existent literature makes it difficult to culturally, socially, and politically contextualize the impact of amenity migration. The limited case studies that *have* been conducted mainly focus on internal migration to the western United States. What about retirees who are looking to settle abroad? Where are they settling and how are they affecting their new communities? More importantly, why has this type of migration by the economically privileged not gained as much scholarly attention as migration by the economically disadvantaged? I intend to explore these questions through a case study on the community of foreign retirees living in Cuenca, Azuay, Ecuador.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF ECUADORIAN HISTORY

Ecuador experienced its most significant economic recession in the late 1990s. The economy faced its steepest decline in 1999 and in 2000, inflation reached its peak due to the collapse of the Ecuadorian banking system and the devaluation of the Sucre. The country evaded its external debt and “16 banks— representing 40 percent of the deposit base— had either failed or gone under public stewardship” (Bertoli and Moraga, 2010, p. 4). This financial crisis triggered a loss of confidence in the banking system and the domestic currency. In an attempt to counter the devastating effects of hyperinflation, the Ecuadorian government adopted the U.S dollar in January 2000.

The financial crisis took a profound economic toll on Ecuadorians who had to deal with “the rapid depreciation of the Sucre, the acceleration of inflation, the widespread freeze of bank deposits and the traumatic closure of financial institutions” (Jácome, 2004, p. 5). It took years for some people to retrieve their frozen bank deposits, and in many cases, individuals never recovered the entire amount. The catastrophic changes caused by the bank failures increased unemployment levels and resulted in the largest surge of emigration in Ecuador’s history (Jácome, 2004, p. 5).

ECUADORIAN MIGRATION AFTER THE CRISIS

This past decade has become known as the decade of emigration in Ecuador (Borrero, 2009, p. 16). The financial crisis of the late 1990s resulted in a wave of Ecuadorian emigration to the U.S. and Spain in search of economic opportunities (Figure 1).

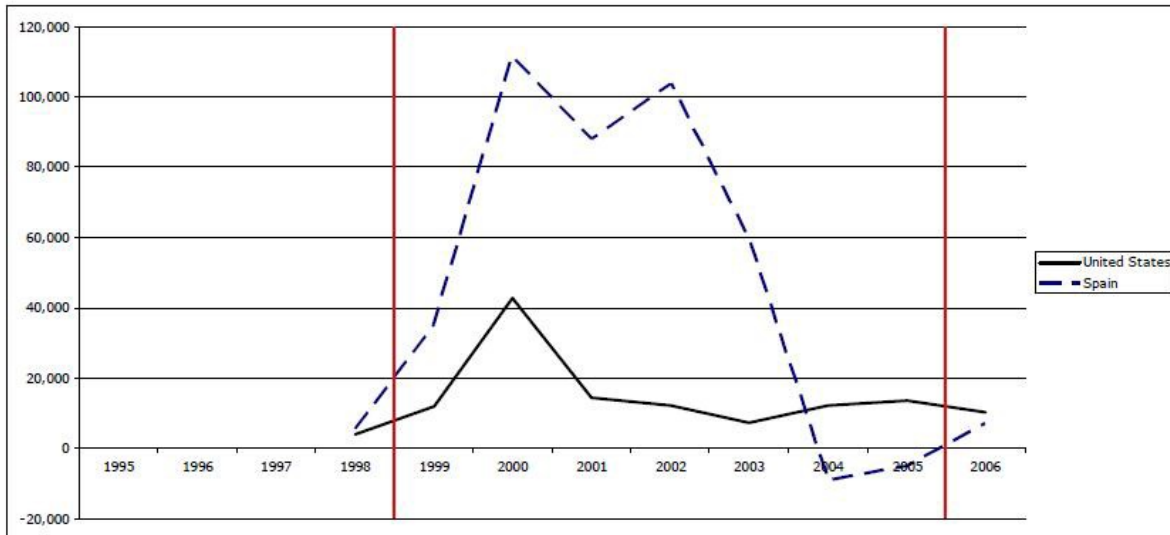


Figure 1. Net migration flows to Spain and the United States 1998-2006 (Bertoli and Moraga, 2010, p. 22).

Between 1999 and 2005, Ecuadorian migration to the U.S. and Spain totaled 137,148 and 318,243 individuals respectively (Bertoli and Moraga, 2010, p. 6). The increase in the flow of Ecuadorian migrants to the U.S. and Spain after the 2000 crisis suggests that this recent migration trend can be attributed to push factors such as limited employment opportunities, discrimination, and the desire for social advancement. As a result of this massive exodus of people, it is estimated that today, Ecuador, with a population of 15,007,343 individuals, has about four million expatriated citizens living in the U.S., Spain, Italy, and other countries (Borrero, 2009 p. 17).

I find it interesting that retired expatriates are still attracted to Ecuador despite the recent spike in emigration rates. One would probably be inclined to assume that the high emigration rates indicate a warning to potential expatriates; however, they continue migrating to Ecuador for various reasons which I will explain in more detail later.

RETIREMENT INDUSTRY

The rise of retirement migration has opened opportunities for businesses to provide services for this demand. Websites and blogs such as International Living and Cuenca High Life cater to the desires of retirees seeking to stretch their retirement dollars. These websites advertise popular destinations for foreign retirees which include places like San Miguel de Allende and Rosarito in Mexico and Santiago in Chile and Cuenca in Ecuador.

The favorable climate, calm city streets, and easy access to internet in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico appeals to many potential expatriates. Similarly, Rosarito gives expatriates the option of living comfortably abroad, while remaining a mere two hour drive from San Diego, CA. This proximity to the familiarity of the U.S. becomes the selling point for border towns that appeal to the needs of potential expatriates who are not yet comfortable with the idea of living abroad. The other selling point rests in the affordability of real estate in these cities; in San Miguel de Allende, a two bedroom condominium can cost as little as \$150,000 (“Live and Invest in Ecuador,” n.d). Another pull factor for potential expatriates in places like San Miguel de Allende and Rosarito is that most people in those communities speak or, at the very least, understand English. Chile and Ecuador are also gaining popularity as retiree hotspot destinations especially among U.S. citizens. What makes these countries appealing to retired expatriates is the political stability which guarantees their safety while living abroad (“Chile país receptor de jubilados extranjeros, 2011).

House Hunters International, an American reality series that airs on HGTV, follows individuals as they search for homes abroad. One episode in particular follows a retired couple from Chicago, Illinois, looking to relocate in Ecuador after their son has gone off to college. From the beginning of the episode it is evident that the cost of their new home is not an issue

long as they are not being blatantly exploited by their realtor. The couple's main criteria for their new home or condominium were central air (which is not common in Ecuador), a spacious balcony, and a clear view of the ocean. Their financial stability not only allows for this selectivity, it also puts them at an advantage over their not-so-wealthy counterparts. The comfort of financial security places this couple, and other wealthy expatriates, at the top of the hierarchy of their new communities. Conversely, traditional immigrants do not have the luxury of being discerning when choosing their new homes because often times they are forced to relocate to the nearest place that offers better opportunities.

EXPATRIATE V. IMMIGRANT

The agency that expatriates exercise over their migration choices clearly identifies the socioeconomic superiority associated with amenity migration. The key players in this migration trend, often labeled amenity migrants, are known as expatriates, which, by definition, refers to individuals that are no longer residents in their native country. Although the term "expatriate" is essentially synonymous with "immigrant," certain characteristics come to mind with each word. Upon hearing the term "immigrant," one does not immediately think of retirees seeking to make the most of their limited retirement fund. What comes to mind is a stark juxtaposition to that image of a smooth transition from one context to another with little to no repercussions aside from tedious paperwork and delays in visa and passport processing. Similarly, a quick Google or library search for "immigrant" does not bring up information on these privileged migrants. Instead, the most popular search results summon information about statewide protests against Mexican immigration in Alabama, Georgia immigration laws, justice for immigrants in the U.S., and a webpage from the Department of State describing the petition process to legally enter the U.S. Thus, the term "expatriate" implies economic advantage because these migrants are

generally wealthy professionals. Unlike traditional immigrants that often times must abandon their native countries to escape unemployment and subpar living conditions, expatriates have the luxury of *choosing* where they want to relocate. Expatriates are also presented with more opportunities because they are viewed as contributors to society. Moreover, they often enter their new host countries with legal status because they have the economic means to do so, and are thus granted higher social standing. Though seemingly harmless at first glance, these loaded terms breed negative attitudes towards immigrants who are often scrutinized as the takers of resources in society. Because it is so difficult for immigrants from, say, Latin American countries to obtain legal entry to the U.S. and other developed countries, they are often left with no choice other than entering illegally. Consequently, they enter at a disadvantage and must work their way up from the bottom of the societal hierarchy due to the unequal accessibility of resources.

HOW DO RETIRED EXPATRIATES FIND OUT ABOUT CUENCA?

Cuenca attracts such a high volume of retired expatriates for multiple reasons. As I mentioned before, the surge in popularity can be attributed to media coverage. The twelve expatriates I interviewed mentioned hearing about Cuenca via webpages such as International Living, Live and Invest Overseas, and Cuenca High Life. These sites employ a similar marketing strategy used when advertising Ecuador and other top retirement destinations. The sites provide viewers with beautiful snapshots of Cuenca, El Cajas National Park (located right outside the city), and describe the city as the “Spain of Latin America” due to its aesthetically pleasing colonial architecture.

I also came across a forty-five second survey that helps individuals find the perfect place to live abroad after retirement. The flashing link advertised that it only takes forty-five seconds (perhaps the creators understand that the lives of foreigners, particularly U.S. citizens are

governed by the clock), so I participated. The quiz asked about my ideal environment, my monthly budget, and whether being located near a major hospital was an important factor for me. At the end of precisely forty-five seconds, I was congratulated and presented with my ideal retirement destination— Mexico. I still wonder how many people actually take the results of this quiz seriously.

Another section on the International Living lists the reasons why people should consider the possibility of spending their retirement years abroad. The descriptions of popular retirement destinations paint serene pictures of tranquil coastal waters and magnificent mountain views. They also advertise that beachfront property costs about 50-70% less than what it would cost in the U.S., an attractive incentive for individuals living on a fixed social security income. At the end of the testimonial, there is a list of questions that aim to help potential expatriates decide if retiring abroad is the right option for them. The questions include:

- Do you thrive on change?
- Are you comfortable in new situations and with making new friends?
- Are you okay with not living close to family (although many countries you might consider are only a two-to-four-hour plane ride away)?
- Can you speak (or learn) a new language?
- Are you intrigued by foreign cultures and customs?
- Are you single, or if not, is your spouse or partner amenable to moving overseas?
- Are you looking for a way to improve your quality of life while spending less money than you currently do?

The list of questions is followed by “If you have responded yes to the majority of the questions above, then retiring abroad may be the perfect option for you!”

Live and Invest Overseas also highlights various positive aspects of the lives of retirees in Cuenca. The site claims that Cuenca is the best place to live in Ecuador because it is easy to build a sense of community in a city with a population of 505,585 inhabitants. They publicize

this as a perfect-sized town because it is large enough to have various fine restaurants, municipal offices, museums, and theatres, yet small enough to assure that individuals will always see a familiar face. Live and Invest Overseas also mentions up-to-date taxi fares and assures people that owning a car is an unnecessary expense because the public transportation system is easily navigable. Similar to International Living, Live and Invest Overseas only markets the positive aspects of Cuenca and fails to mention the challenges associated with living abroad. This strategy appeals to potential expatriates with the promise of a beautiful, affordable city without mentioning the crime rates. At the end of the page, there is a brief explanation describing how the destinations are classified. The criteria take the following into account: real estate prices, entertainment, the cost of living, climate, and infrastructure. Statistics on safety are taken from the Department of State, the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), as well as accounts from residential expatriates.

Another site that caters to individuals interested in learning more about living in Cuenca is Cuenca High Life, a blog with a collection of articles written by the expatriates living in the city. The topics include arts, dining, culture, entertainment, news, opinions, people, and travel, and the articles vary from the best places to eat in town to precautionary actions people should take to avoid being victims of a crime. Unlike the sites that were previously mentioned, Cuenca High Life provides a more holistic perspective on life abroad as a retiree. Cuenca High Life offers a wide collection of diverse opinions because virtually anyone can contribute an article to the blog.

Ashley Armstrong, a postgraduate Archaeology student from the University of California Berkeley wrote an article on her opinion of expatriates in Cuenca and she concluded that “many

of them come up short” (“A Twenty-Something Year Old Sizes Up Cuenca’s Expats and Decides That Many of Them Come Up Short,” 2010). She mentions that locals appreciate the foreign presence in Cuenca because expatriates bring with them higher standards and expectations, however, they do not “make much effort to speak Spanish.” Armstrong calls this the “gringo bubble,” meaning that these individuals express a sense of entitlement and assume that they deserve special treatment solely because they are American, British, Australian, etc.

The article titled “New Expats: While You Enjoy Your Ecuadorian Adventure Consider What You Can Offer Your New Country,” written by Anne Carr educates readers about how the expatriates living in Cuenca are the fortunate immigrants because they chose to migrate there. Carr also suggests what these expats can offer the country while they are residing here. Her article serves as a friendly reminder that the expatriate community should be conscious of their actions and how they impact the locals. Both articles offer advice on how not to fall under the arrogant “Ugly American” mindset and be more respectful, unlike the posts on International Living and Live and Invest Overseas, which solely focus on the exploitable characteristics of these destinations. Cuenca High Life presents an intimate glimpse of what life is like abroad for retired expats; much of what is read there cannot be found on government sites, Live and Invest Overseas, or International Living because they are real stories from people who have experienced life as expatriates, not realtors trying to lure people in to make a profit.

SETTING AND SCOPE

One of the major cities in Ecuador that is gaining popularity among retired expatriates is Cuenca. The absence of any case studies on the social impact of retirement migration in Cuenca, Azuay, Ecuador is the point of departure for the present study. The focus is Santa Ana de los Cuatro Ríos de Cuenca, better known as Cuenca, the third largest city in Ecuador with a population of 505,585 individuals (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos, 2010). Cuenca is the capital of the Azuay province and is located in the southern Andes Mountains, five and a half hours south of Quito and four hours east of Guayaquil.

image available at
www.movingtoecuador.net/images/pics/ecuador_map_cuenca.jpg

I intend to contribute the existing literature on amenity migration through a case study on the retired expatriate community residing in Cuenca, Azuay, Ecuador. The purpose of this research is to learn about retirement migration and its impact on local communities via qualitative interviews with retired expatriates. In these semi-formal interviews, participants reflect on their drivers for migration, their coping strategies for adjusting to their new environments, and identity issues they have had to confront as foreigners. For the purpose of this study, I will alternate between amenity migrants, foreign retirees, and retired expatriates to refer to individuals that choose to leave their permanent homes in developed countries for more affordable, luxurious lifestyles in developing countries.

METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS

Twelve retired U.S expatriates over the age of sixty who had been living in Cuenca, Azuay, Ecuador for more than six months were selected to participate in this study. Eleven out of twelve participants were recruited from Carolina Bookstore, a North American style bookstore located in downtown Cuenca, where their writers club meets each week. I was introduced to these individuals by a British professor at the University of Azuay who regularly attends the writers club. The other participant was recruited at his home; he visited one of my interviewees while the interview was taking place, inquired about what we were doing, and instantaneously volunteered to participate in my study. All twelve participants had a basic understanding of the Spanish language, but only three out of twelve spoke the language fluently.

Nine Cuencanos (residents of Cuenca) were randomly selected for interviews gauge how they perceive the presence of retired expatriates in Cuenca. Out of the nine Cuencanos interviewees, five were teachers or professors, two were University students, one was an ex-real estate agent, and one was the owner of Zoe's Restaurant. Despite the random selection of local interviewees, each participant had a basic understanding of English and interacted with retired expats daily either at school, work, or *el mercado* (the market place).

PROCEDURES

Prior to conducting the in-depth interviews, I visited a few places that are frequented by retired expatriates. I spent time at Carolina Book Store, DiBacco's Italian Restaurant, Zoe's Restaurant, and the Inca Bar, where I mingled with expatriates and observed their behavior. When I visited Carolina Book Store I felt as if I had traveled back to the U.S.; nearly every book was written in English, and I was surrounded by older people conversing in English. The place

felt more like a café than a book store because everyone there was absorbed in their conversations and many people left without making purchases. I attended “gringo night” at DiBaccio’s, Zoe’s, and the Inca Bar. “Gringo night” in Cuenca is where expatriates meet to “hang out, have a drink or two, meet new arrivals and visitors, and catch up with other gringos living in Cuenca” (“Gringo Night in Cuenca: Catch up With Other Expats on Tuesdays or Fridays,” n.d.). Although gringo nights are not explicitly exclusive to English-speaking expatriates or English-speakers in general, they are not necessarily inviting to the locals.

In the present study, twelve individual in-depth, open-ended interviews were conducted to determine the expatriates’ motivation for migration and how they have adapted to their new environments. Nine similar interviews were carried out with Cuencanos to evoke their sentiments towards retirement migration. The interviews were conducted and recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis. The duration of each interview ranged between forty-five minutes to one hour and a half. I recruited participants by speaking about my project at one of their writers meetings and passing out a sign-up sheet for those who were interested in participating in my study. I contacted them via email with a description of my project.

I asked the following questions to the retired expatriates that participated in my study:

1. Plans to migrate to Ecuador:
 - … Why and when? What amenities drew you there?
 - … Organizing your departure
 - … Practicalities/ sensitivities:
 - … Medical care/ cost and quality? Monthly spending?
 - … How is medical care?
2. Can you describe some of your adaptation and coping strategies in response to:
 - … Your new social environment? Other retirees?
 - §• Pros and cons about Cuenca
 - … Your new institutional environment?
 - … How often do you visit your native country?
3. Have you experienced any daily practices of immigration policy that directly affected you?

4. Have you experienced any institutional and/or private attitudes of discrimination?
5. How would you describe your reactions to any limitations and/ or oppositions you may have encountered?
6. Have you experienced identity issues in your new country? Can you be the same person here as you were in your country of origin? In what ways have you made changes?
Example.

The following questions were used to guide the interviews with local cuencanos to examine their perceptions of retired expatriates and how this type of migration influences their daily life.

1. Name, sex, age
2. Do you know any foreign retirees here? Do they interact with the community? How? Where do you see them?
3. How do you feel about their presence here? Are they considerate of cultural differences?
4. Does it matter if they speak Spanish? How do you feel about gringos that speak very little Spanish and are living in Cuenca?
5. What are some positive and negative aspects of the gringo presence in Cuenca? Any discrimination?

RETIRED EXPATRIATE PROFILE (generalization based on common responses)

- .. Age: between 60 and 72 years old
- .. Native country: United States of America
- .. Reasons for leaving native country:
 - §• Financial reasons (It is difficult, if not impossible, to live comfortably in the U.S. solely on Social Security income because it does not cover all the costs)
 - §• Political dissatisfaction
 - §• Tax increases
 - §• To escape the U.S. mentality
- .. Pros of Cuenca:
 - §• Mild, spring-like climate year round
 - §• Affordable lifestyle
 - §• Slower pace of life
 - §• Friendly environment (It is easy to build a sense of community)
 - §• Free and easy access to cultural programs (Art, concerts, theatre performances)
- .. Cons of Cuenca:
 - §• Ecuadorian time
 - §• Indirectness (Ecuadorians often tell white lies to avoid offending people)
 - §• Long and confusing immigration process

§• Intolerable noise levels at all hours of the night

The recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed. Most interviews were conducted at Carolina Bookstore, but I met a couple of interviewees at cafes or in their homes. The number of questions asked during each interview varied from participant to participant. For the most part, each participant answered the interview questions while recalling their experiences as retired expatriates without being asked. I separated my results according to common themes that arose within each individual's experience.

RETIRED EXPATRIATE EXPERIENCES IN CUENCA

DRIVERS FOR MIGRATION

In total, I interviewed twelve expatriates between the ages of 60 and 72. When I inquired about their drivers for migration, the response was unanimous— in Cuenca they can live better for less. Although many of the retirees I interviewed have savings and investments, they all want to be assured that they can cover their costs with their social security income in case of an emergency. Two married couples I interviewed, Jim and Deb and Maggie and Daniel, mentioned how this is the first time that they have been able to live on a fixed budget and it is a relief to know exactly how much they are going to spend each month.

Most of my interviewees were comfortable discussing their monthly expenditures, except for one individual who responded that this is a private matter between him and his landlord (After visiting his pent house suite, I understood why he wanted to keep this matter private). The remaining expatriates admitted to paying between \$300 and \$500 a month for their condominiums, where the higher prices include furniture, utilities, and sometimes even internet services. Individuals with rent prices that do not include utilities and internet services pay an additional \$50 and \$100 per month. In the U.S. the cable bill alone costs at least \$50 a month, or more depending on which package one chooses. Thus, the cost of living is more affordable in Cuenca, and these savings are only the beginning.

Only two out of twelve expatriates own their condominiums while the eight others rent their apartments. The remaining two expatriates, Edd and Jim, explained that it is easier and more convenient to rent even though it is more expensive in the long run because it takes time to pay off an entire mortgage, and time is what this aging population lacks. Edd went on to explain that he is in the latter half of his life and does not want to buy property that will one day become

a burden for his children living in the U.S. “It’s that U.S. mentality, you know, that need to hold on to something,” he said, “what does forever mean anyway?”

The affordability of Cuenca also applies to the medical costs that expatriates incur in Ecuador. All twelve retirees agreed that medical care in Cuenca is excellent and accessible at a reasonable price. However, only two of the retirees have needed extensive medical care while abroad. Jim, who suffers from diabetes recounted,

“The medical care here is excellent. I am a diabetic and I have been hospitalized twice here. I stayed in the hospital for three days with a team of seven doctors and it cost me somewhere around three hundred dollars. Something like that would have cost me about a grand back in the U.S. I also like how the doctors work in teams because I feel safer that way. I recently had gastric bypass surgery and now I want to remove the excessive skin from my arms. Because it is considered cosmetic surgery, I would easily pay \$20,000 for that in the U.S., but here that would cost me \$1,000 to \$2,000 *without* medical insurance. This price is a marvelous benefit because it is economical quality care.”

An article on medical tourism in Cuenca indicates that medical procedures cost 7-10% less in Ecuador than in other medical tourism destinations. Medical tourism refers to the act of traveling to a foreign country to undergo surgery or another form of medical care (“Medical Tourism Industry Sees Ecuador and Cuenca as a Hot Market,” n.d.). According to this article, many Ecuadorians that live in the U.S. return to their native country to access these affordable services. The testimonials of medical tourism facilitators claim that individuals can travel to Ecuador, pay for the cost of the necessary medical procedure, and recover in a luxurious hotel for less than what they would have paid for the surgery alone in the U.S. Another advantage of medical tourism is that individuals do not have to wait years for these procedures; the process is more or less immediate. Jim’s anecdote proves how medical care in Cuenca truly is more affordable than in the U.S.

Climate accounts for the second most popular driver for migration among the retired expatriates that participated in my study. Many of the expatriate interviewees come from places

with short summers and long, cold winters. Amongst retired populations climate is considered one of the most significant regional amenities, mainly due to its effect on individuals' health (Ullman, 1954, p. 123). For these retirees, the "eternal spring-like" climate of Cuenca seems ideal because it is neither too hot nor too cold. I asked Edd, who is from Las Vegas, NV, how he felt about *abril aguas mil* (which roughly translates to April showers), and he replied, "Sometimes I get tired of the rain, but I prefer that over snow any day. Next year I might just move to the coast for all of April to avoid the rain!"

Participants also mentioned that Cuenca was at the top of their list because it is one of the relatively safest cities in Latin America. Ecuador as a whole has a homicid rate of about 18.2% compared to 66% in El Salvador, 33.4% in Colombia, and 22.7% in Brazil (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime). Other drivers for migration include the "embarrassing political decisions of former President George W. Bush, divorce, and the fact that by living in Ecuador expats do not have to pay U.S. taxes due to their low wages (This also depends on individual annual incomes).

DIFFICULTIES AS NEW CUENCANOS

Out of twelve expatriates that participated in my study, only Lee spoke fluent Spanish. Lee had been involved with Latin America since the 1960s, so he was already familiar with the language and different cultures. The other expatriates, however, only had a basic understanding of the Spanish language. A few individuals had lived in Ecuador and other Spanish-speaking countries for about three years, yet they still had not grasped the language. It seemed as though some individuals were slightly embarrassed to admit that they had not yet learned the language. Edd mentioned that he regrets not having paid more attention in his high school Spanish classes because it is very difficult to communicate with the locals. He said,

“Oh, Denise... you have no idea what I have had to act out and gesture. Charades and hangman have come in quite handy! A positive attitude is also important because there are many challenges and obstacles. Shit happens but you have to learn how to laugh and keep on going. Besides, the time has come when we both realized that we need to learn [Spanish]. We’re tired of that stupid myth— ‘oh, if you’re immersed in the culture, you’ll learn the language fast. We want to know what people are saying!”

Jim, Deb, Maggie, and Daniel also regret not learning more Spanish before moving to

Cuenca. Both couples understand more Spanish than they actually speak. One husband mentioned,

“It is very difficult because the language barrier causes a lot of frustration for us and the people we are trying to communicate with. Some Cuencanos have actually told me to learn Spanish and I completely agree with them. I think our difficulties are presenting the Ugly American image, but I’m telling you, we do try to integrate ourselves into the Cuencano community. It’s just very difficult sometimes.”

Their responses demonstrate that they recognize the importance of speaking Spanish to facilitate their integration into the culture. While none of the participants outright said, “I don’t want to learn Spanish because I can get by without it,” two expats revealed that they should probably speak more Spanish, but “it is not a current priority.”

Noise levels are another common theme amongst the responses. Everyone seems amazed at the noise levels that are acceptable at certain hours of the day. Five expatriates declared their frustration with car alarms that blare at all hours of the day. One individual claimed that she and her husband have grown accustomed to the noise. “We just roll over in bed and go back to sleep,” she said, “If we let that bother us *every* night, we would never sleep.”

It has also been a challenge for the expats to become accustomed to the indirectness of Cuencanos. Unlike Cuencanos, Americans (here I am referring specifically to U.S. citizens) tend to be very direct in their thoughts and speak up when they are unsatisfied with something. This attitude can be perceived as rude, but it is the norm in the U.S. Nine retirees commented that they still do not understand why Cuencanos lie. They do not lie with bad intentions, but it is known that they sometimes lie to avoid confrontation. Lee, the owner of Carolina Book Store alluded to

his frustration with their indirectness, but he also remarked that “they [Cuencanos] want to be friendly so they tell you something that might not be true but it’ll make you happy, at least in that moment.”

COPING STRATEGIES

The retired expatriates have some interesting strategies to cope with the changes they have experienced since arriving in Cuenca. Edd and his wife practice Taoism and both agree that the expats in Cuenca need to learn how to not take themselves so seriously. According to him, the expatriates that bring their U.S. expectations to Cuenca can “swim against the Tomebamba current all they want, but in the end the river will always win and leave them bruised. They have to learn how to go with the flow and enjoy the ride. That’s what we have done and it’s amazing!” Other expatriates said that laughter helps every situation. “There are days when everything goes wrong and all I want to do is wrap myself in bed and that’s okay because everyday isn’t going to be perfect,” remarked Maureen. “The important thing is to maintain a positive attitude because tomorrow will be better.” Overall, all the expatriates I interviewed seemed satisfied with their decision to live in Cuenca because, despite the challenges they have had to encounter, they are all here to stay.

CUENCANOS' PERCEPTIONS OF RETIRED EXPATRIATES**NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF THE RETIRED EXPATRIATE PRESENCE IN CUENCA**

Nine Cuencanos between the ages of twenty and fifty-eight participated in my study. They all interacted with retired expatriates frequently either at work, school, or in the market places. The participants included five professors/ teachers, two university students, one restaurant owner, and one former real estate agent. The two university students work for the owner of Carolina Book Store and the restaurant owner runs Zoe's, where gringo nights are held on Fridays.

Seven out of the nine Cuencano interviewees believe that the language barrier is problematic. José, a high school English teacher, believes that “the main problem of expatriates is that they do not want to learn Spanish. If you go to a foreign country the most important thing is to learn the language to be able to communicate.” The language barrier also bothers Maria and Gabriela, two university students who work at Carolina Book Store. They state,

“It is a problem because English is not the official language in any part of Ecuador and the expatriates are conscious of this before arriving, yet they still expect us [Cuencanos] to converse in English. They come to Cuenca with their U.S. mentality, but we are in our country. If they do not like our traditions they should go back to their own countries.” Maria and Gabriela's sentiments reflect the “natural ambivalence towards expatriates— the hosts both admire and desire to emulate them, while at the same time resenting them for their superiority and exclusiveness” (Cohen, 1977, p. 81). They have every right to feel this resentment towards expatriates who are guests in their country. Additionally, the expatriates actively *chose* to leave their old lives behind and move to Cuenca. One of the retirees, Lee commented on the exclusivity of some expats— “Why move so far away to be a hermit in your fancy condo when you can do that back in the States and save a bunch on airfare? It's ridiculous!”

Jennifer, the former real estate agent, and Paola, the owner of Zoe's Restaurant, mentioned that it does not bother them when expatriates do not make the effort to learn Spanish. This shared sentiment can be credited to the fact that both Cuencanas have lived in English-speaking countries before and can speak the language fluently. Although the other Cuencano interviewees speak and understand English, they are not very fluent. Paola admitted that sometimes the language barrier can be a problem because it generates confusion when the expats try to communicate with the locals.

“At least they are trying in a way,” she says. “When I lived the U.S., I barely spoke a word of English. I worked for lawyers and I had to learn everything very quickly. I spent my days looking up words in the dictionary and my coworkers helped me out a lot. They never treated me bad for not speaking the language and my bosses were always very patient with me.”

Paola understands how difficult the transition can be and her personal encounter with the linguistic barrier has helped her understand how demanding it can be to learn another language, especially at an older age when individuals' memories are no longer what they used to be. Paola extends the monolingual expatriates the benefit of the doubt and helps them in any way she can because she always remembers what it felt like to be in their position.

In addition to the language barrier, other negative aspects associated with the presence of expatriates in Cuenca include increases in the cost of living and their arrogant attitudes. The presence of an expatriate community in Cuenca contributes to a rise in costs because their incomes are higher than that of the locals and they are willing to pay these high prices. Jennifer, the former real estate agent, mentioned that many landlords prefer renting their property out to foreigners because they pay more money, they are punctual with their payments, and they take better care of property than the locals. Sara, a professor at the University of Azuay, has a friend who is the only Cuencana in her apartment building. Each month, her landlord pressures her to sell her apartment because he is aware that he can make a larger profit by leasing it to a foreigner

at a steeper price. “Sometimes I feel like the foreign presence is creating divisions among Cuencanos,” noted Sara with a lamentable look.

The sense of entitlement displayed by some expatriates also creates a sense of resentment among Cuencanos. The expatriates leave the U.S. and inadvertently bring their U.S. expectations abroad, which can be problematic. When they experience delays in their visa paperwork, the expatriates become aggressive and, according to Gabriela, “they should not act this way. The new gringos are more aggressive and it is a terrible attitude because if they provoke us, we are going to react badly and think that they all behave this way.”

Their arrogant mindset can also be a product of the unconscious use of the term “American.” José loathes when the expatriates call themselves Americans.

“We [Cuencanos], too are Americans. I think they should use the term *estadounidense* because America is an entire continent, not just a single country, and they should be more specific. The term ‘North American’ is not specific enough either. This upsets me because it implies that they are superior to us.”
I think many U. S. citizens forget that America refers to two entire continents, and this offends Cuencanos as well as other people around the world. I do not believe this is their intention; it could very well be that referring to themselves as citizens of the United States of America is too much of a mouthful and shortening it to “American” is more convenient. Furthermore, there is no English equivalent to *estadounidense*, which literally translates to “United States-ian.”

Another interesting comment I heard from an expatriate, is that many of the retired expats arrive in Cuenca, buy or rent their luxurious skyscraper apartments and... stay there. “It’s as if they are watching life happen on their big screen TV and they do this without even realizing it,” mentioned Edd.

POSTIVE ASPECTS ABOUT THE FOREIGN PRESENCE

Although the language barrier, rise in prices, and arrogant attitudes represent negative aspects about the foreign presence in Cuenca, the interviewees in my study agree that this migration trend has its benefits. The presence of expatriates exposes Cuencanos to other cultures and different ideologies. Some individuals are offended by the criticism of “Ecuadorian time,” while others agree with the expatriates’ frustration. Martha, a university professor, believes that “things would be more efficient if we [Cuencanos] were more punctual like the gringos.”

Gabriela added that expatriates in Cuenca can be a good thing as long as they find a way to give back to the city, either economically or in some other way. Her coworker, Maria, revealed that an expat named Bush volunteers in the community and pays the tuition fees and English lessons for his housekeeper’s children. This proves that not all expatriates possess arrogant attitudes; there are still some individuals who genuinely want to contribute to the community in a significant way.

CONCLUSION

Prior to conducting this study I automatically associated immigration and immigrants with the movement of individuals from poorer to richer areas. The interviews with the retired expatriate community in Cuenca, Azuay, Ecuador have contributed to the construction of an alternative narrative of migration. This project increased my awareness of the diverse circumstances that lead individuals to make the decision to migrate.

Through these qualitative interviews, I learned each individual's narrative of what drove them to leave everything behind in search of a new life thousands of miles away from home. At first glance I thought all expatriates were simply seeking another way to exploit these countries, but after getting to know each interviewee, I recognized that there was more to each story. For most, it was a matter of financial security. They had savings and investments, but they had no real guarantee that these funds would last them for the rest of their lifetime; the last thing they wanted to do is become a financial burden on their children. Retiring abroad not only became a cost-effective decision for the expats I interviewed, it became an escape from imposing themselves on their children and their families. For others, retiring abroad was their only alternative to being placed in a convalescent home, so migrating allowed them to retain their independence.

Overall, their motives for migrating corresponded with the reasons outlined in the literature on amenities migration. I also noticed a general increase in expatriate involvement with their community over time. Many admitted to being disconnected from their community when they first arrived, but have now become integrated due to their desire to build a sense of community in Cuenca.

Further research should focus on the tangible economic impact of retired expatriates in Cuenca and the rest of Ecuador. It is also essential to perform comparative studies in different countries to identify any common trends. Another beneficial aspect is to investigate the relationship between the age of expats and their level of engagement with the community. These suggestions will contribute to the limited literature that exists on amenities migration and our understanding of the expatriate experience abroad.

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