

Textile Travels: Part II

Ecuador

GWEN BLAKLEY KINSLER

In this second installment of a series, the author describes her stay in Ecuador. In Part I (also available on our website), Gwen tells how she began her textile collection with two treasures that she bought in Honduras and Guatemala. Stay tuned for future installments. All of the countries visited in the series continue to draw textile lovers.



The market at
“Poncho Plaza” in
Otavalo, Ecuador.
All photographs cour-
tesy of the author.



Miguel Andrango weaving on a backstrap loom.

QUITO, ECUADOR, was my home from 1988 to 1990. My husband was working there, and I came along with our two daughters for what turned out to be the experience of a lifetime. In this country rich in folk tradition and textiles, my textile collection grew exponentially. Because I speak Spanish fluently, I was able to meet and communicate with artisans in places that not many tourists get to see. The poverty of some of these places saddened me, and I naturally wanted to help if I could. Buying textiles seemed like the obvious way to start.

In Ecuador, fibers from the succulent cabuya (*Furcraea* sp., a plant similar to an agave) are much used in hand-work. Wool is washed in the rivers with cabuya juice serving as a detergent. This treatment, together with exposure to intense equatorial sunlight, strengthens the wool fibers and makes them both moth resistant and ready to accept dyes. Cabuya's strong fibers are used to make a variety of products from *shigras* (needle-woven bags) to hats.

It is said that there were master weavers in Otavalo, in the northern highlands, long before the Spanish or even the Incas arrived in Ecuador. Today, Otavalo's colorful native market in "Poncho Plaza" is in full swing by 7:00 A.M. on Saturdays. I became acquainted with master weaver

Miguel Andrango at this market and later visited him at his weaving cooperative, Tahuantinsuyo Weaving Workshop, located high above Otavalo in Agato.

The Quichua, the indigenous group to which Miguel belongs, traditionally are farmers, and so I was not surprised to see small plots of corn or potatoes growing next to the homes of Miguel and his neighbors. Miguel's backstrap loom is just a few sticks and string heddles, attached at one end to a post; a strap made of animal skin wrapped around his back secures the other end. He creates brilliant woven tapestries filled with symbols in the tradition of generations past.

In the village of Quinchuqui, northeast of Otavalo, Carlos Tambango sits on a crudely woven mat on the



Carlos Tambango weaving baskets.

ground outside his stucco-covered house, using both hands and feet as he turns out a nest of tiny baskets ranging from ½ inch (1.3 cm) to 4 inches (10.2 cm) in diameter. Saying little as he concentrates on his work, his smile is welcoming and his pride, evident.

In Carabuela, a small village on the outskirts of Otavalo, each family specializes in a different aspect of wool preparation—cleaning, carding, spinning, dyeing—and in weaving or knitting the yarn. Traditionally, women prepare the yarn while the men weave or knit. Boys begin to learn knitting and weaving at age five; the village champion knitter when I was there was eight years old.

As my family's stay in Ecuador was ending, I invited Miguel Andrango to join me in 1990 in Washington, D. C., at Convergence, the biennial conference of the Handweavers Guild of America. I arranged for us to exhibit in the marketplace where Miguel demonstrated weaving on his backstrap loom while I sold his tapestries. It was thrilling to share Miguel's pride and joy in his creative works with others while watching the expressions of wonder as visitors watched him producing his exquisite designs.

Once, while visiting my home in suburban Chicago, Miguel, dressed in his traditional garb, hooked up his backstrap loom to a tree in my front yard and started weaving, startling a number of people whizzing by in their cars. There were slow-downs, but no complaints!

If you have the opportunity to visit Ecuador, I highly recommend it. The country's textile artists are outstanding, and they will welcome you warmly.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR. Gwen Blakley Kinsler, founder of the Crochet Guild of America, is an author, teacher, and designer. She lives in Rolling Meadows, Illinois. Visit her website at www.crochetqueen.com.

FURTHER READING

Miller, Laura M. "Leaf Fibers in Highland Ecuador." *The Textile Museum Journal* 42 and 43, 2003–2004.
Musch, Cheryl. "Miguel Andrango." *Handwoven*. September/October 1997.

For More Information

If you are planning a trip to Ecuador, visit Ecuador's Tourist Board at www.ecuadortouristboard.com or call (800) 328-2367. The board offers information on things to see and do and provides links to tour companies. To purchase Ecuadorian products online, visit <http://andesgifts.com>. To view Miguel Andrango weaving on his backstrap loom, visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=knE_RVUDL4o.