

Ecuador's Soul Searchers

BY KIRK NOONAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY GAYLON WAMPLER



Missionary Joel Marbut visits with a local pastor in a tiny village deep in Ecuador's jungles.

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A Shuar Indian prepares nets for fishing.

For hundreds of years
Shuar Indians were
among the most feared
warriors in South America —
and for good reason.

They gained notoriety for mutilating their enemies after battle by shrinking their heads. Doing so, they believed, brought them good fortune and trapped the dead man's spirit inside his head, prohibiting it from seeking revenge.

Though Shuar no longer shrink heads, the tribe is steeped in ancient customs such as shamanism, male chauvinism, ritual dancing and getting drunk on chi-cha (similar to beer). For some Shuar, shunning outsiders and their influence is a cherished way of life.

None of that has bothered missionaries Joil and Leah Marbut. Though the Marbuts live an adventurous life — in comparison to standards set in suburbs across the United States — they say they are exactly where God wants them. For more than eight years they have traversed Ecuador's Amazon basin to share their faith with Shuar Indians.

"We were looking for a place to lay our desires and comforts down," says Joil. "God has given us that."

Indeed.

Getting to Shuar villages is an arduous task. Small planes, canoes and boots are the transportation of choice. The dense rain forest is brimming with hungry insects, anacondas, poisonous snakes, monkeys, unforgiving mountains, ever-changing weather and thousands of Shuar Indians — most friendly, some not.

Recently, I joined the Marbuts as they ministered in some of the area's most remote villages. Following is my account of what happened over the course of five days.



Lowland jungle

Sounding like an overgrown mosquito, the Cessna 206 buzzes loudly as it ascends. We're headed south from Shell, a small town, to the tiny village of Jempentsa. Below us, brown rivers snake through the broccoli-green landscape dotted by lonely homesteads and remote villages.

Within minutes, the plane's altimeter reads 7,500 feet, a comfortable cruising altitude for our 45-minute flight. In Jempentsa we'll board motorized canoes and head up the Morona River to Libertad, one of 35 villages where the Marbuts and their team have established thriving churches.

But 30 minutes into the flight our pilot is radioed and diverted directly to Libertad. The men hired to ferry us there by canoe got bored and left Jempentsa.

"There's a rhythm to life out in the jungle," Joil Marbut had told me the day before. "To get into that rhythm you have to leave your American mind-set in the United States. Nothing here is convenient, clean or as nice as you're accustomed to. Challenges are a way of life."

Fifteen minutes later our mechanized mosquito circles Libertad. Doing so gives the pilot a view of the tight airstrip and serves as an announcement of our impending arrival. From the air, children and adults can be seen dashing toward the airstrip.

The plane swoops down for a bumpy landing. The villagers applaud.

"We're the first people to land on this airstrip," says Joil. "They just completed it a couple months ago."

After quickly greeting local officials and some of the children, we are led down a narrow, muddy trail flanked by waist-high grass. At a termite-infested building, we drop our packs.

Immediately, Joil is summoned to a hut. At 6 feet 4 inches tall, he has to stoop to enter the humble home made of pamvil wood, tree branches and palms. A thin layer of smoke from a breakfast fire hangs in the front room.

Joil steps into the home's sleeping quarters, which contains three wooden beds without mattresses. On a rough-hewn shelf sit a pair of shoes, a dusty teddy bear, a trophy, a few bottles of half-used medicines and a Bible. In one of the beds a 20-year-old man resembles a bundle of bones wrapped in skin. His calculated moves seek a measure of comfort, but his grimaces expose his pain.

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Malnutrition, parasites and malaria are constant threats to Shuar Indians. Here believers pray for a sick young man in the village of Libertad.



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Music is an integral part of Shuar culture.



“He’s had diarrhea and has been vomiting for three weeks,” says his concerned father. “He also has fever.”

Joil leans low and looks into the man’s sunken eyes. Gently, he places his hand on the man’s arm, prays, and then administers medicine.

“He’s severely dehydrated,” Joil tells the father. “This medicine will take care of the parasites, but he needs to go back to Shell for treatment.”

Several men from the village carry the man to the plane. Six months ago, a flight out of Libertad would have been impossible. But with Joil’s encouragement and help, the Shuar built the airstrip.

Today, it will help save a life.

Death and rejection

Minutes after the plane leaves, a wailing woman stumbles into the village’s common area.

“Last year my son was bitten by a snake,” she cries to no one in particular. “If the airstrip would have been here last year, he’d still be alive.”

Joil nods understandingly and lets the woman talk through her grief. After she tells her story, he prays with her.

The combination of sun and humidity is ruthless. We set out on a trail to Paniemeza, a neighboring village only a mile away. There, Joil will try to establish dialogue with the village chief. So far he has not made much headway.

On the trail, inch-long, stinging black ants scurry to and fro. Watching each step and not grabbing any branches is wise, says one guide, since an insect or snakebite can be deadly or at least cause sickness.

At the edge of the village we pass a sign reading, “Campo Santo” (Holy Field). I learn that the site is a cemetery.

“We’ve seen too many kids die,” says Joil as he eyes several markers. “Ten kids have been buried here in the last five years.”

Parasites and malnutrition are the main culprits. But one child buried here is the son of the woman Joil just consoled.

There is not much Joil can do about snakes. But to help lengthen the Shuars’ lives, he and Leah have established Fundación Vida (Life Foundation). The foundation provides yearly medical checkups, medicine, food and microbusiness opportunities to Shuar villages.

As we descend an embankment, the trail ends at a stretch of light brown, stagnant water. In single file we walk across a log that crisscrosses another log



Joil and Leah Marbut have embraced an adventurous life with their sons Drew, 3, and Will, 1.



originating from the opposite bank. Halfway across the water, the logs sink.

“This is why you can count on each mile of hiking in the jungle to take at least an hour,” says Joil with a chuckle.

In Shuar culture, visitors seek out the local chief and ask for permission to enter a village. If all goes well, they will be offered a cup of diluted chi-cha. If permission is not granted, chi-cha will not be offered.

“If you try to force a relationship with the Shuar you will fail,” Joil says, noting that during their history Shuar people have successfully rejected the advances of the Spanish conquistadors, Inca Indians and Ecuadoreans. “They have never been defeated, so the more you push, the more they resist.”

On the outskirts of Paniemeza, Joil sends a man from Libertad to request a meeting with the chief. He returns nearly 45 minutes later with no offer of chi-cha.

“We’re outsiders,” says Joil. “Now we have to leave.”

River walk

Rather than hiking back to Libertad, we travel back by way of the Morona River in canoes carved from cinnamon trees. The brown Morona is home to crocodiles and anacondas, and the canoes wobble as we step into them. Though the Shuar only use sticks for paddles, they guide the canoes with ease. As we head upriver, Joil gets the guys from Libertad to tell fishing and hunting tales.

“One of the best things I can do as a missionary is to get to know people and their way of life,” he says. “Knowing what makes them laugh, how they think and what they do for entertainment is the best way to build a relationship with them.”

Sometimes that happens while hunting, fishing or simply canoeing on a blistering hot day.

“I’ll do anything to get to know them,” he adds. “Relationships are everything out here.”

Gilbert Yuma, a Bible school student, is a product of one of those relationships. He admits he once was a womanizer and drank heavily. But, he says, as he and Joil became friends he became curious about Jesus. When tragedy struck his family, his curiosity turned to serious introspection.

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The Marbuts spend much time traversing the jungle by foot.



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Joil frequently relies on canoes to get from one village to the next. Here, he travels the serpentine Morona River.

“God got my attention when four of my children died one right after the other,” he says. “I knew the only way I’d ever see those children again was to accept Christ as Savior. Until I made that decision, I had no hope.”

Cultured times

In Libertad, the sun sets quickly, revealing a star-studded sky. As the Shuar gather around their dinner tables, a chorus of insects and birds sing from their crags and perches in the jungle. Suddenly, the village grows small as the shadows of the rain forest close in on us.

We sit at the table of Angel Pitiur, pastor of the village church. A small dinner fire warms the hut with an orange and yellow backdrop punctuated by our black shadows. We eat rice and chicken and talk about the Shuar.

“The biggest things in our culture are to get drunk, be a polygamist and perform witchcraft,” says Pitiur. “People here have four and five wives.”

Because the gospel teaches against such things, he adds, opposition is expected.

Efrén Chivanda, a discipleship pastor mentored by Joil, knows how difficult it can be for a Shuar to embrace Christianity and a new way of thinking and behaving. But like his mentor, he is determined to share the gospel.

“I’m successful when people hear the Word of God,” Chivanda says matter-of-factly. “I want to see my people with open minds so they can live better and know there is a hope and a future.”

Part of that future involves Shuar men treating women with respect. Pitiur says his relationship with Christ, along with studying the Bible, transformed the way he viewed women.

“I prayed that God would change my attitude, and almost overnight He did,” he says. “Now I

Missionary associates profile

THE CHURCH AND THE CALL

While attending Crossroads Family Worship Church in Callahan, Florida, Everett and Marcy Conaway volunteered in various positions and went on missions trips. A growing burden for missions prompted them to leave their normal lives for the jungles of Ecuador.

“Right now this place, these people, are the spiritual love of my life,” Everett says. “Church is where I received my first lessons in missions and where God called us to the mission field.”

Now church is the place where the Conaways serve full time as missionary associates so others might know Jesus as Savior.



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Shuar children cool off in a ditch of rainwater.

For the Marbut, ministry is all about relationships.



know and understand what it means to be a godly man. I help and respect my wife and I am involved in my kids' lives."

As part of his duties as pastor, he challenges men to do the same. But not every man is receptive, he says. "We have pressure from other villages," Pitiur says. "They spread lies and rumors about us. The gossip starts making circles, and sometimes we are beaten and attacked."

Such rumors sometimes arrive at villages before Joil does. When they do, it is difficult, if not impossible, to get an introduction to the chief. "If we show up in a village and they don't want to meet with us, we leave, because there are many villages that want us," says Joil.

Waiting game

Obnoxious roosters wake us early in the morning. During the night insects feasted on our bodies. Though merely an annoyance, the itchy bumps they leave are a reminder of what the Marbut put up with every time they are in the jungle.

As we pack our sleeping gear and supplies, a Shuar approaches Joil and proudly presents a handful of gigantic larvae pulled from a palm tree. Joil bites into one of the larvae and smiles appreciatively as he swallows half of it.

As much as eating larvae is part of being a missionary in the jungle, so is waiting. The plane scheduled to pick us up yesterday morning never came. Not unusual, says Joil, as inclement weather causes delays and emergency flights have priority.

"I always focus on the larger picture, which isn't my convenience," he says. "It's leading people into the Kingdom."

After breakfast we hear our plane's unmistakable buzz. A few minutes later the pilot circles the village, announcing his arrival. The children bolt for the airstrip once again — this time we're close behind.

Into thin air

For a Shuar, the journey from Libertad to Sucúa requires a four-hour hike to a bus stop, followed by a 12-hour bus ride through the mountains. Our flight takes only 45 minutes.

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Large larvae from the palm trees are a delicacy here.



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Jairo Tunki, 27, used to be a witchdoctor; now he is a pastor in a small mountain village.



As the plane approaches the Kutuku Mountains, large storm clouds await us. The pilot flies along the face of the range, looking for an opening in the clouds. Not finding any, he banks hard left and ascends to 9,000 feet. Well above the mountains he dodges clouds and looks for gaps between them. My knuckles whiten. But in an instant the clouds spit us out into the blue skies over Sucúa where the Marbutus live.

Two hours after landing we are hiking on a steep, rocky trail that leads to a mountain village. We plan to visit a former witchdoctor who was recently baptized in the Holy Spirit.

The temperature is in the upper 90s. Sweat pours from our faces, and all of us take quick breaks to catch our breath and drink water.

An hour after starting our hike, the trail plateaus and we pass hardscrabble houses. Some villagers sit outside and watch us pass; others work on their huts and never look up.

We step onto the small covered deck of a humble home owned by Jairo Tunki. He greets us warmly. Of slight build, with a broad smile and warm brown eyes, it is hard to believe he was a feared witchdoctor.

"I could heal people," he tells us as he recounts his life's story.

At the height of his career he met an attractive young Christian woman who invited him to church. He went, though he admits he was more interested in her than in religion. But something unexpected happened.

"I gave my life to the Lord," he says. "I left all the witchcraft behind."

Doing so was not easy. Tunki was so steeped in witchcraft that nightmares and depression plagued him. Yet after being filled with the Holy Spirit, the nightmares and depression subsided.

The experience transformed him and he enrolled in Bible school. Now he is quick to share his faith with his neighbors, family and friends. But in Untunkus Sur, the village where he lives, only 12 out of 200 people are Christians. Tunki views that as an extraordinary opportunity.

Missionary associates profile

LOOKS ARE DECEIVING

Ricky Hendon looks like a throwback-era linebacker. Built like a small tank, he wears a crew cut and has gigantic hands that clamp down like vise grips.

Looks are deceiving.

Hendon is soft-spoken and can get weepy talking about the children of Ecuador and their need for a Savior. "We believe in training the children so they can change their world," he says.

To do that Hendon and his wife, Carol, serve as missionary associates in Ecuador. The focus of their ministry is children, training children's ministries leaders and providing safe drinking water by installing biofilters in villages.

"I knew if I prepared myself for missions, God would do the rest," says the former fire truck salesman. "I had a great job, a house, 40 acres of land and all the toys I could use. But something was always calling me. To be here fulfilling that calling — well, there is nothing like it."



Ron Marcotte, a missionary associate and optometrist, completes an eye exam in the village of Cumbataza.



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Marcotte uses a portable refractor to check people's eyes.

“God told me to pray for all the pastors, villages and churches in Ecuador and to evangelize because He is coming soon,” Tunki says.

Health fair

The next morning we take the Marbut's Land Rover, purchased by Speed the Light, onto a rutted, jungle road. Steep cliffs, no guardrails, the possibility of landslides and knee-deep ruts make this a true off-road expedition. Behind us are several more four-wheel-drive vehicles driven by members of the Marbut's team.

In Cumbataza, a large Shuar village with 600 residents, the caravan stops at the Assemblies of God church the Marbut's planted.

The missionary associates who work with the Marbut's have their own specialties. One leads worship while another works with children and is heading an ambitious effort to outfit villages with biofilters to provide clean water.

Inside the church Ron Marcotte, an optometrist who left his practice in Atlanta, Georgia, to become a missionary associate, carefully arranges his equipment and sets out boxes of glasses.

At the door to the church, a long line forms. Members of the team get basic information from each person. Another worker leads people to an eye chart on the wall and asks them to say the letters or shapes they see.

Marcotte holds a portable electronic refractor up to each patient's eyes. Almost immediately he can tell what type of glasses will meet their needs.

“I am having problems seeing,” says an elderly woman. “My eyes get red and itchy.”

As Marcotte searches for the right glasses for the woman, he shakes his head in frustration. “As with many people here, she has a pterygium, a wedge-shaped growth that covers the cornea,” he explains. “This happens because of overexposure to the sun. The only way to fix it is through surgery. For now, though, I will give her prescription glasses so she can see better.”

He fits her with reading glasses and hands her a Bible. He will do the same with at least 40 more patients this day.

“Can you see the words better?” he asks the elderly woman in Spanish.

“Si,” she says with a smile.

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Donated glasses allow many Shuar to read the Bible.



One by one, patients receive help. Some smile with excitement; others seem to expect more. No one feels this more than Marcotte. He can see and evaluate their problems, but because of the remote location and limited funds he cannot always provide the proper treatment.

“We can only do what we can with what we have,” he says. “In an ideal situation we’d be able to do more. But we’re giving them the ability to live their lives a little better.”

More than work

A few hours later the supplies are packed and the caravan is back on the road. So far the Marbutis and their teams have planted 35 churches. Their goal is to plant 30 more churches in the next five years. This year, they are on track to plant 10 churches.

Back in Sucúa we visit the Bible school the Marbutis founded for the Shuar. It’s a simple place where future preachers are equipped to share their faith in their own villages and in ones not yet reached with the gospel message.

The Marbutis’ philosophy of missions boils down to evangelizing, equipping, empowering and then encouraging the Shuar people. There remain many distant jungle villages where the gospel has not been taken. This fact energizes Joil and Leah.

“We need more harvesters,” Joil says. “These people are open to the gospel. We need to get it to them.”

Angel Pitiur, the AG pastor in Libertad, would agree.

He has experienced firsthand how Christ can change a person’s life. Now he wants the people in his village, and especially his children, to know Jesus as Savior.

“I pray my children will dedicate their lives to the Lord and know more about the Word of God than I know,” he told me one night. “That way when I die I will know they are greater men than I was.”

And even more important, another generation of Shuar will know Jesus Christ as their Savior. **tpe**

KIRK NOONAN (below, right) is managing editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*.

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

For the Marbutis it's a family affair as Leah's mother, Connie McDonald — an AG missionary in Ecuador with husband Bill — assists at the clinic.

Kirk Noonan stands in front of the Assemblies of God church in Cumbataza where a medical clinic was held.

