

On the 29th of November 1990, thousands of Afro-Caribbean nationals disembarked in Guayas, starting an outrageous task that brought death to a lot of them and stamped a seal on the history of Ecuador. A large number of them departed, leaving their imprint on “the middle of the world,” and a significant number of them founded their homes along the coast of Ecuador once they concluded the astonishing project of railroad engineering, The Devil's Nose. Why is it called the Nariz del Diablo? The mountain has the form of a big nose coming up, and as so many died in the construction people thought the project was cursed.



The Devil’s Nose train trip route is impressive and unforgettable. This section of Ecuador's railway is a hair-raising trip down the rocky slopes of the Andes. It departs from the town of Alausí, where I stayed for one night. From there it goes to the town of Simbambe, down to the coastal region. But I chose to stay in the mountains, so I spent the night in Alausí. The train Station is one hour away from Riobamba City in Chimborazo Province. Alausi is located at an average altitude of 2,340 meters (7,677 feet) above sea level.



The journey is felt as an adventure, and the adrenaline goes up or down when you do the same along the hills in a rhythmic compass, while the hydraulic system of the wagons guarantees a displacement without sudden assaults. The Railroad Enterprise of Ecuador (EFE) initiated its courses with three panoramic wagons at the beginning of 2012. I thought that the objective of attracting tourists and generating income for the inhabitants of the places through which the train goes over, is undoubtedly being fulfilled. Today it attracts many visitors from Ecuador and the rest of the world, bringing prosperity to Alausí for the third time, because “La Nariz del Diablo” stopped for quite a few years since I made the trip to Ecuador in 2013. It just reopened earlier in 2023.





There is plenty of history in the construction of this train! In their undertaking, more than 2.500 workers died and it was said that the mountain was damned: “They are men of action. Men of endurance, good-humored, optimistic, and hard workers. Their fortitude is evident not being affected by nervous disorders and they know how to deal with loneliness,” wrote the Ecuadorian writer Luz Argentina Chiriboga in her novel *The Nose of the Devil* in referring to the workers. The novel starts in Jamaica, where the contractor James MacDonald is looking forward to recruiting a big number of workers to construct a railroad in an unknown country. The fact is that the British colony already had a railroad, and lots of the strong and resistant Afro-Caribbeans had already contributed in the construction of the Panamanian railroad, and because of that they were considered experts in the usage of dynamite. Therefore, thousands of them embarked to go to this land, with the hope of making a fortune, something common in the immigrants of that time. The explosions of dynamite, malaria, the bite of snakes, and other accidents were regular things that happened and the cause of death of many workers.





The terminal is attractive and clean. I pay my fare for the Alausí-Simbambe-Alausí round trip half an hour before the departure of the first train. There are three trains during the day. The first leaves at eight in the morning, but it depends on the weather if the last train departs or not. It's time for departing to Sibambe! The train descended zigzagging. The landscape combinations between mountains, vegetation, and the central Andes valley keep me looking out all the time. Santiago, the guide, is explaining the history of the construction of the train during the course that takes less than an hour. The faces of the passengers reflect their happiness and I look at their delighted gestures while observing the beautiful landscapes. I had paid ten dollars extra to be in a special compartment, quite useful for taking photos. I'm happy with my armchair in U form that can be used by groups of friends or families. I buy hot tea with the cafeteria service as well.







The adrenaline goes up or down when you do the same along the hills in a rhythmic compass, while the hydraulic system of the wagons guarantees a displacement without sudden assaults. The ride tackles near-perpendicular walls and gives views of the Chanchan River. The locomotive is impelled with electricity and diesel, and in Sibambe is the dining room cafeteria “Cóndor Puñuna.” I learned that the administration was in the hands of an association of workers integrated by around twenty of the chiefs of local indigenous families. Visitors could visit the museum as it is included in the price paid for the ticket. They could ride a horse, paying an extra amount of five dollars (which I did, but then I was terrified of the face of the horse, he wasn’t enjoying having me on top). There was also folkloric music and dance, so I took the opportunity to learn their dance. The artisan market at Sibambe Train Station also had beautiful handicrafts. Back in the station I could not resist buying the book *The Nose of the Devil and the Black Monster*, by Karl Dieter Gartelmann, luxury bound, and a small red cap and a scarf of the same color.







The sun goes down in Alausí. I'm astonished seeing the landscape from the Hostel La Quinta, where I arrived the afternoon before from Quito. In the middle of so much peacefulness it is difficult to imagine big machines perforating the rocks, and loads of dynamite deafening those who devoted themselves to the gods before making them explode. It reminds me that somewhere along the way the railway wagons of that deafening locomotive that vomited steam from within her fire entrails were placed by those black men from the Caribbean that I love. It is also noticeable alongside the wooden sleepers of the old train, which are now being used by inhabitants of the region to build their houses. The confluence of the river Guasuntos and the Chanchán stands up the motive of concerns for thousands of people then and now. Earlier this year there was a landslide. Caused by months of heavy rainfall in the area, the mud slid down a hillside of 490 ft wide and nearly half a mile long.



I'm thinking again of the innumerable obstacles in the perforation of that gigantic rock. Its name, The Nose of the Devil seems to be a good fit.









A sumptuous breakfast and the kind attention of the owner prepared me to go back to Quito. I really hope there is a revival of Alausí, as in all those years of president Eloy Alfaro, “the Old Combatant”, leader of the liberal revolution, who determinedly looked for the foreign capital needed for the starting of the most ambitious project of all times, the Trans-Andean Railroad. The dream was initiated by his predecessor, president Gabriel Garcia Moreno, and preceded in time by the visionary Ecuadorian colonel Victor Proano, of whom it was said that “dreamed with his eyes opened” and who was considered to be irrational by many.

I talk about the railroad and the Caribbean men who went there to help in the construction with Angel Zurita, who was one of the deputies of the local government when he was young and now has a little food store in the heart of Alausí. “We were all very happy with the Caribbean people that arrived here, Trinidadians, Barbadians, Jamaicans... they were always happy, cooking out jerk chicken and preparing roti (a Trinidadian dish). And they loved to play soccer. The problem for us is that they always won!” he laughs.







If you go to Ecuador in the future I recommend that you stay out of the big cities and book ahead for a ride on the Devil's Nose train. The round trip to The Devil's Nose lasts a total 2.5 hours, cost is \$25 and includes a light lunch/snack at the train station located at the base of Devil's Nose Mountain. Chimborazo peak is 51 miles by car from Alausí, two hours by car.

This is the current US Advisory for Ecuador:

<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/ecuador-travel-advisory.html#:~:text=Exercise%20increased%20caution%20in%20Ecuador,Some%20areas%20have%20increased%20risk>.

Photo Credit: Bill Milligan

