

**Recorded in Waita Lodge, July of 2023.**

**Bianca**

So, please tell me your full name and a little about your life. Where were you born, your parents, and how did you start in tourism as well?

**Carlos**

Well, my name is Carlos Díaz and I am from the province of Tungurahua and I was born in the Patate canton. I spent my childhood in the countryside, in the Patate canton, and for my secondary studies, I went to a little bigger city that is named Baños, the city of Baños is like a hotspot for tourism in Ecuador.

At my beginnings, the computer boom recently arrived in Ecuador and I imagine that it was the careers, the specialties that were fashionable in the years that I studied. So my intention to move from one city to another was to study something different and do different careers, and computing was in fashion.

So I thought of getting there, but since I was a child I always had the intention, I always had that desire to be a guide, to walk, to learn languages, to travel, to climb mountains, to get to know other countries. But perhaps the economic possibilities were a bit complicated to reach that level of that "other world", to be able to travel. So when I arrived at the school there to study, my thinking automatically changed and in this school, well, the school that I was studying had a tourism degree, which was a technical degree.

So it was like, "No more decisions, you don't have to think about anything, you have to study". And that was a bit of an expensive degree, but I think it was worth it and after finishing the degree (the degree was a technical degree), I started working. But my beginnings in work were not 100% purely in tourism, as a guide, rather it was in the hotel industry. After studying I spent about a year in the hotel industry, but it was not something I liked and I am a person who does not want or cannot be within four walls. I always had the spirit to go out, I was always with the group and everything, even when I simply wanted to join an agency to do an internship, to volunteer at no cost. So there I spent about two years learning, doing things, minimal things, traveling to places, learning, and gaining experience. Finally, after four or five years of being in the world (of tourism) as a practice, acquiring a naturalist guide license, then I worked as a naturalist guide.

I worked maybe ten years or almost 15 years as a naturalist guide, but Ecuador's tourism laws changed. So the naturalist guides that could work at the national level were no longer possible. So we need another level of study and we need another type of license as an obligation. I shouldn't call it an obligation, since we should prepare and study. Then I traveled to the city of Quito and finished my third-level studies, my title is National Guide of Ecuador.

Well, that's how I got involved in tourism, and I've been practicing bird-watching for 12 years.

**Bianca**

So what do you like best are birds?

**Carlos**

My passion is birds, but the fact that I like birds is not as close as just birds and nothing else. For me, birds are super important but more as a way to attract people to the conservation of the forest. Studying birds is not only knowing the name of the species, but it is also learning a little about their behavior, habitats, and their diet.

So in this way we know that certain species of trees must be preserved or protected, certain species of birds... I think that to complement that part within the conservation or protection of birds or the study of birds and the conservation of the environment is water and water is life. So for me birds are not just seeing birds and learning their names, for me it is something global.

**Bianca**

Do you believe that ecotourism helps conservation?

**Carlos**

Well, you have to be aware, we cannot say 100% that ecotourism is the best we can have. The very fact of doing tourism, there are impacts, so we must be aware that there are also impacts and in every sense. It can be visual, ecological, or cultural. The good thing about ecotourism is that it reduces the impact unlike other companies, such as large industries, for example. And the impact is minimal and conscious.

**Bianca**

It's better than an oil palm plantation.

**Carlos**

It can be better than an oil palm plantation, it can be better than an oil company or a mining company. And the pollution will be much less. The economic benefits may be less, but the cost of contamination is minimal. Unlike big companies and big industries.

**Bianca**

So we are going to change the subject a little, talk a little about plants. We are asking the people here to show us the medicinal plants they use, do you use medicinal plants a lot?

## **Carlos**

From the plants of the subtropical forests, I could say maybe 30%, or 20%. Working with local people you learn the uses and everything. In general 80 to 90% of the medicine I use comes from plants.

## **Carlos**

I am one of the people who do not like to use medicine. I use it when there is pressure for taking a vaccine or something like that. In general, I am one of the people who takes more medicinal plants. I try to prevent disease, not cure, because I'm not sick.

So I try to prevent disease using medicinal plants and since I come from the Andes, I use the plants from there. I was lucky with my grandmother, she was a healer in the mountains, so I learned something about medicinal plants. It is something that makes me very sad to see that technology has changed the mentality of people a lot. The new generation now is quite unaware of the things we have.

Nature, the forest, is an immense pharmacy that can give us many things, many benefits, and not only keep a disease calm but also cure it. Medicine generally relieves pain, and keeps you calm, but doesn't cure you. Plants are the best medicine, the best we can have, and without causing other effects to the body.

But not going very far, we have, for example, the people, the Shamans, either in the Amazon or in the Andes. I believe the preparation of the plants, the preparation of infusions with different characteristics, I believe that this does alter the mental part a bit. I think that if there is a plant that can help you simply at the moment of preparation or at the moment of ingesting or having the drink, we are not psychologically prepared for that benefit, but it is like, I don't know, I want a plant, I want a San Pedro, I want an Ayahuasca, a Yagé for, I don't know, to enjoy a trip.

I think that there are plants (to cure mental diseases) but there is no study of what plants they can be.

## **Bianca**

And what are the most common medicinal plants here?

## **Carlos**

I think that the most common plants here are the plants that are used for smudging, which are plants that have quite strong odors that I think are like the first therapy that people give you here. When you arrive anywhere, you are sick or you are a little tired, the first thing they do is a cleanse and I think that this is the step, the step for a ritual.

If you have a disease, the first thing they are going to do is cleanse your body, cleanse your soul, and then continue with the therapy, with the treatment you have to do. So I think that one of the first things that local people do is cleanse it, cleanse it with plants and the body, and from there it depends on what kind of disease you have and they come with plant-based medicine based on the bark of the trees, based on plant roots, depending on the type of disease you have.

**Bianca**

Are you Christian? What do you believe?

**Carlos**

I believe that like all people we believe in something or someone, but I can't say that I am 100% Christian or Catholic, because there is much, much divergence in all of this. I am very aware of why they brought religion to South America, how Christianity was inculcated here and how they control us through religion.

I'm very aware of that, but I respect every creed and I hope you respect what I believe. Within my family we have theologians, they are almost Priests and I am always fighting with them. Because I am in the biological/ecological area it is something that doesn't make me believe so much in creation, but more in evolution, which for many effects or defects of nature, the changes in the species are adapting to certain characteristics. I am more close (to believe) in evolution than in creation.

**Bianca**

Are traditional religions also part of your beliefs?

**Carlos**

Of course, as I tell you, I respect a lot of what people do, what they think, or how they do it, but everything people do is because they believe in a religion. Ecuador is a pluricultural country and each culture has a belief and each belief, I believe, must be respected.

**Bianca**

Do you believe that here there is a mix of Christianity and religion, traditional religions like those of indigenous peoples with Christianity?

**Carlos**

No, I think that well, maybe in the last 50 years Catholicism has been separating now. Maybe if there are more religions or more different sects, but maybe 50 years ago, I could say that 90% of

the population was Catholic. Now, I believe that the new generations don't even believe in themselves. It is very different, but I believe that Catholicism is still present in the country.

**Bianca**

So. And what do you think of the people here? Do they have an idea of conservation or they don't care much about it?

**Carlos**

Environmental conservation. It is somewhat difficult to say is 100% and we want to change that part. Usually, whenever we try to do something, what we see is the problem, but we never give solutions. From my point of view, I don't think that whoever protects it is 100%. Tourism is something that developed a short time ago, but people lived here for thousands of years and their daily life was hunting, fishing, fruit gathering, etc... Then, let's say, I come to do tourism here and I want to stop them fishing or hunting, no. But if the impacts are reduced, the activities, so instead of hunting animals, we work here or learn something more about the species that must be conserved, and that is my point of view. I am not 100% convinced that ecotourism or tourism preserves the forest or the environment 100%.

**Bianca**

You think it would be best to leave it alone?

**Carlos**

Just let people do what they want? Neither, because people also need education and preparation, without losing their culture or their convivial part, simply that they are a little more aware of things. That is not saying that it is right for them to hunt animals, but I am not saying that it is wrong either, simply the amount with which they are going to hunt, or the use that they are going to give it.

**Bianca**

Yes, consciously.

**Carlos**

With a conscience. If I have a herd, for example, of 50 peccaries, if they go and kill one to eat, that is ok. And after a month, two months come back. Maybe it's okay, but if they come back in 50 people and kill 15 or 20 (peccaries), that's already very different. I believe that raising awareness and educating people through these activities, from this coexistence. I think that older people learn more from this coexistence than from the talks that can be given.

I think it's the best way, for people to come, share, learn and see and feel. And why are you here? Why does tourism come here? Why are foreigners here? because they look at the plant, they look at the birds, they look at the monkeys that are here, so I allow it because they come here.

That's exactly what some people said, you can come here and you can't change people's mentality and it's okay, you say it and you left your country and went to America and you realized that the forest is made of concrete. You have buildings. Well, Brazil also has some big buildings. Yes, but if you go to the United States, it's a different world.

So? So, of course, the one who comes out of there and comes here and looks at a plant sees something different like: "WOW!", that here, but the one who comes out of here, the one who comes out of the forest, the one who comes out of this too will be surprised, from the buildings or the elevator. I think they are different worlds but with awareness, I believe that a balance can be reached between the two parts.

### **Bianca**

Have you found something fantastic, like a jaguar or an anaconda?

### **Carlos**

Well, they are animals, species that live here, but they are not species that are so easy to see, I saw two jaguars in my life, as close as six meters.

### **Bianca**

It is very difficult.

### **Carlos**

But that's what's nice. And that is perhaps what is interesting about tourism, making people suddenly live with that, with that concern, with that curiosity, that I am going to the Amazon because I want to see that. And if I arrived in a country and I didn't find it, well, I try elsewhere to get it. Because if you get here and see it, tourism is over. Logically once I get to the zoo I won't come back here.

There are people, many people from Europe or America who come to look for the Jaguar in South America. And if they don't go to Brazil or suddenly, well, Brazil is almost certainly in the Pantanal area, if they don't find it there they continue going up to South America to look for a species.

I think you can't understand much of that part because your country is too big. If your country is too big you need maybe a lot of time or maybe money to travel and understand. These countries of Central America, Ecuador, Costa Rica, etc are small and when you see them arriving you suddenly understand as tourism arrives late.

Brazil also has millions of tourists, simply because they are distributed in places. Yes, but when you're not in that market, you don't understand the dynamics of tourism. But hey, it's good that now you are in tourism and you are inside this and you understand better and you understand that in your country they also disembark.

### **Bianca**

I have to research it because I also had no idea about all that. Do you know any legend that people here tell about animals or things like that? Like, for example, in Brazil, we have a dolphin legend, that dolphins transform into men to meet girls, and it makes them pregnant, is there something like that here?

### **Carlos**

It's the same, the same story here. Well, here I believe that each town, each culture, has many legends, but I think that the one that has the greatest impact here is the legend of the macaws. The macaws are a couple of brothers that at some point in their lives were in a place that flooded, and they had to escape to avoid drowning.

And they are the only ones who climbed to the top of a mountain to take refuge there so that the rising water does not reach them. These two children stayed together and were able to take refuge in a cave in the highest part of the mountain. And well, I think that the water was reaching everything and there was no other way to survive, the water was arriving and they were going to die.

At some point they were very conscious, perhaps asking the gods or for the spirit to save them. And when the water came, they turned into birds and they started to fly and they were kind of free. They did not die and they live flying. And it is something between true and legend that in real life macaws are always two, they are always in a pair, and they always fly together.

So it's something that goes with the legend. At the moment they were going to die, the two of them began to fly together out of nowhere and it grew wings and they began to fly and that is something that always strikes me because I am also very, very close to the part of the birds. Well, it is something that catches my attention, that they are always a couple.

### **Bianca**

It's true, are they the only one in a couple?

### **Carlos**

And well, there are other birds that are monogamous too, but it is the most visible part, in macaws.

**Bianca**

And which bird do you like the most?

**Carlos**

Of all the birds I like the hummingbird the most. The hummingbird, for many reasons, is one of the birds that, being so small, has so much energy and supports the diversity of climates that we have had for so long, is a bird that will never be calm at a time, it is a very active bird, is so small but so active.

I don't know, unlike the jaguar, for example, which is a giant animal with a lot of power, but ate and stay calm for a week. The hummingbird is a bird that needs to keep eating.

**Bianca**

Here people believe that the hummingbird brings luck.

**Carlos**

Yes, yes, they see it that way.

**Bianca**

Yes, we were coming here from Quito and we passed through many feeders with many hummingbirds. Many times we were wondering why people here love hummingbirds so much.

**Carlos**

Does it depend on the point of view, if you are a person that likes birds, or if you are a person that likes to do business, you have to see, it depends on the point of view, right? I have a garden in my house because I love hummingbirds, but if I have an abundance and I can make money, then I put the feeders for people.

It may also be that you like it, but it is also a way to make money, it has not been proven or anything, but I am one of the people who do not agree with feeding the species, so I prefer to do it naturally.

**Bianca**

Do you think it's not good to do that?

**Carlos**



I can't tell you for sure that it's okay to feed or if it's wrong. I simply think that we are educating the animal or the species differently and it will not respond with the same need in nature. It's like "I don't want to fly all day 20 kilometers in the forest if I can stand in the feeders and eat from here"

If that's my point of view, I'm not saying it's wrong, maybe in the future it could have an effect, right? And also with the issue of feeders, there will be people who are aware and clean it as it should be and people who are not, so it is not that an accounting of the species is kept to know if it is alive or not.

It is a countless species that comes to you at a time that you do not know if it is always the same.

### **Bianca**

Well, I think it's fine. Thank you so much.