

# Another Adventure

Fernando Guarderas

**A**fter an entire month of backpacking with 250 condoms around Peru and Ecuador, I was finally going to use them. I wasn't going to talk myself out of it again even though I was as nervous as a high schooler on his first date. I had to stop using the excuse of too old or too young; everyone has sex. And what better place to start than a rickety old public bus filled with guys? With fifteen minutes left and my pupils dilated, I asked the driver to turn down the music.

My fifteen minute speech about sexual health carried a simple message tailored to my catholic crowd with the aim to educate but not offend. I would say, "Listen to me for just a moment and at the end I will give you 3 free condoms. You should not have premarital relations, BUT if you do, you should use a condom." It will protect you from some of those awful diseases you hear about like 'SIDA' (AIDS). It will protect you from becoming pregnant young and unprepared, only to be forced into shotgun wedding with a high risk of divorce and suffering. You do not have to have ten children, because public health has made it so that most of your children will survive. Also, over 35 years of age, it becomes much riskier to have children because of genetic problems like Downs. If you are finished having children, modern inexpensive surgical treatments can allow you to enjoy sex without fear of conception. My last major point was to tell them to talk to their children about sex as even our own patients and parents back in the USA need to be told.

After a moment, the teenage driver's response, "God, I just ran out of those!" broke the silence. All of a sudden, conversation and laughter filled the bus. The passengers cracked jokes at the expense of the driver; poking fun at his dance moves and his status as the resident ladies' man. The dam construction worker next to me lamented his solitary state and then brightened up at the prospect of what he'd do the next month when he finally got to see his wife again. Later in the day, the driver saw me in the central plaza and introduced me to some of his girl friends. I'm pretty sure he was using me to look cool.

My favorite part of sex education on public buses? Handing out the condoms. The younger, traditionally clad women

would not meet my eyes, but their open palms belied their downcast gazes. I felt as though they wished they had been masked for this opportunity. Others looked up, beckoning me down the aisle with a knowing smile on their faces. The less traditional young adults had a proud glint on their face on account of what I was doing. They also thought that sexual conversation did not have to be so taboo. Very few downright did not take the condoms. Best of all was the old woman who blurted out, "Now I only need a man!"

As the ride continued, people would come up to meet the condom-bearing foreigner and I'd get to hear a little about their lives. A nurse, commenting on a reference I had made about Lina Medina, talked about how she often saw children give birth to children in her practice. Lina Medina is the youngest documented mother in the world, having given birth at just 5 years and 7 months of age. In fact, two of the top ten youngest mothers are Peruvian. On the other end of the spectrum, I saw several women over 55 with their infants on their laps. These women represent one of the many realities that helped me decide to do this project despite all the warnings that it would

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be badly received by the people and thus should not have been done. It is ignorant of us to think that people do not want to talk about sex. In actuality it is something that most people want to talk about but which common practice prevents. In the absence of informed conversation, we are left to learn from our amateur friends or the movies – suspect sources at best.

I wasn't with an organization. I didn't write a grant, or apply to an international aid program. In the end I was just a backpacker rolling the dice to see what good he could do while getting to know the locals better. Maybe I did some good, maybe I didn't. But hopefully one old lady got lucky, and decided to use a condom.

■ **Fernando Guarderas** is a third year medical student who hopes to become either an ophthalmologist or infectious disease doctor.