

Building our house in Ecuador for \$15,000 or less

Part 2 ([Part 1 here](#))

By Pierre Wauter

www.seekvilcabamba.com

A few months later (August 2010) ...

...Progress, progress! We now have windows and doors on both buildings



The main building with kitchen, lounge and bathroom (50 sqm)



The bedroom (20 sqm)

... kitchen bench and sink all hooked up to cold water supply and drains (no hot water yet),



... bathroom with toilet and a lovely bath and shower combined



floor made with hexagonal bricks which we intend to polish and wax



We still don't have power to the property but we have already had the electricians in to put up all the wiring, power points and light fittings.



Photo tour

We have uploaded **many more photos**. If you read this document on the seekvilcabamba.com web site, select the "Photo Tour" tab above. Otherwise the link below will redirect you to the photo album (if the link does not work you may have to copy and paste it into the browser).

<http://picasaweb.google.com/pierre.volter/CutanapambaAdobeHouseVilcabambaLojaEcuador?authkey=Gv1sRgCPn4-sXOwI7TdQ&feat=directlink>

Conclusion of phase one of the construction

All in all, it went well. It took about twice the time that I thought it would take when we started but I believe that this is pretty much the rule of thumb in Ecuador.

Count twice the time you think you need and you should be sweet

Budget-wise, we have added a number of features to the original design and, as expected, the price has escalated from the original 8,000 to approximately 15,000. As I explained in [part 1](#) of this article, this is what I expected and considering the living space that we get (70 sqm total) it is not too bad.

The features that we have added are the following:

- ✚ A mezzanine floor covering the bathroom, part of the living room and the pantry. This cost us a few hundred extra for the timber but the result is a lot of extra space for storage and a better look, a well closed off bathroom
- ✚ Power: of course that was a must and I was pleasantly surprised that significant work can be done in this country for \$500. Make sure that you get a **qualified** electrician though because many people claim that they can do electrical work for you but in reality they have no idea.
- ✚ Kitchen bench: another must. Depending on requirements and tastes you can get the cement and tile work done for between \$500 and \$1000. Any woodwork, cabinets etc... is extra.
- ✚ Some extra windows as the original design was a bit too dark. The quality of the woodwork was very good, in fact better than expected.

Count twice the budget they give you and you'll get something really finished

The concept of a “**finished**” product, like a finished house, is highly subjective and cultural. Look around at the houses in Ecuador and this will give you an idea of what most people would consider liveable and finished. The question is: would you?

We expats are generally more demanding than the average Ecuadorian family and when we enter a contractual agreement with an Ecuadorian builder, it really pays to spell out exactly what we mean by such terms as “all included” (todo incluido) and “finished” (terminado).

For example, the house that I ordered has doors. It happened that when the doors came they had no handles or locks. This was not specified in the contract. We quickly and amicably resolved this small issue but I want to mention it as an example of what small surprises we encountered along the way. Of course my doors should have handles you want to say. But then the question is “which type of handle do you want?” Ah, you think, good question! Then a trip to Loja later you realise that you can buy an \$8.50 door handle made in China with a key that is going to break after a month or you can spend \$30 for a good one (see photo below taken in a hardware shop in Loja). Which one was included in the contract then?



The way I found to handle this situation is to obtain from the builder a price including everything reasonably expected and spell out what that is, e.g. door handles, showerhead ... But then, instead of the builder buying these items, you buy them yourself and agree with him that whatever difference between the “normal” price that he would have paid (e.g. 8.50 for a door handle) and the price of the one you want to buy, that difference has to come on top of the agreed contract. This works really well. It gives you the time to choose things like you hand basin or your door handles.

Other examples:

Are the window frames varnished or just bare wood? Is the timber for the structure treated for termites or not? If yes, with what exactly? Are the walls sanded? Does the shower have a showerhead and a mixer or is it just the cubicle with floor and tiles? Does the electrical work include a proper earth? Does it have separate circuits for light bulbs and power points? Is it just 110V or can it be upgraded to 220V later?

We wanted 220V and 110V so we agreed to pay directly to the electrician the cost of the few extras that are required to give us the 220V in addition to the 110V.

At the end of the day, as I may have already emphasised in part 1, what is really required to get a project like this running smoothly is time, patience and a “can do” attitude.

Time: Ecuadorians have time. That is what I like about them. They never seem to be stressed out. Alfonso does not have a car and the walk from his house (or from the village) to our building site is a one hour walk. Despite of that, he will tell me with a smile at 11 AM that he is off to get some more supplies in Vilcabamba and will be back in the afternoon. Things seem to turn up, not always the day they are supposed to and not always in quantities they are supposed to but in the end, the job gets done. It just takes twice as long.

Patience: goes with time you might say but not necessarily. Some people have a lot of time but no patience. Ever seen an elderly (who for sure does not have a lot to do in a day) jump the queue at the post office? Ecuadorians in general have patience. This is because from birth they are accustomed to unexpected delays. It is a way of life here, from the queues at the bank, hospital and municipality to the frequent power cuts and the unforeseen 3 meter drop on a segment of the only road to Loja (2 winters ago) cutting Vilcabamba off the rest of the world for many days.

Can do: that is a topic in its own right, these people are truly resourceful having learnt how to do things with limited means. In New Zealand, my electrician was always wearing a belt full of screwdrivers and all sorts of tools. Here my electrician was most of the time as shown below, only carrying something to cut, something to squeeze and of course the widespread “zero-credit left on it” cellular phone:



I think that it is because of Ecuador that Philips made sure that the Philips screws (if not too tight) can be done and undone with a regular screw driver. They are hard to do and undo with a coin though.

Once, I found my builder hammering a screw in because he did not have a screw driver. That bit I am not sure that I liked. I quickly went to get my screwdriver in the car and lent it to him. I told him to buy a toolbox. He agreed.

This is the end of part 2 of construction stage 1.

We have now started stage 2 of the construction (we want more space) and this will be covered in a next article on this site.