

The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD

By Janet Mendelsohn
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

SALACHE, Ecuador — On rose farms high in the Andes, at 9,000 feet, the clock is ticking toward Valentine's Day. We are on the equator, in the central highlands near Cotopaxi, an active volcano, where growing conditions are perfect. Ash from past eruptions has created rich volcanic soil. There are no seasons to contend with. The temperature stays evenly warm. The sun shines overhead 12 hours a day, 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., all year. Roses grow straight and tall.

Across the valley and up steep mountainsides, giant hoop houses look like big Slinkys covered in white plastic. In one of those greenhouses, at Naranjo Roses, Maria Licto is giving us a tour. Naranjo's manager of post-production is all business, not revealing her warm smile until the end. Ecuador's economy is suffering as oil prices decline but in this deeply religious country with traditional values, women are finding opportunity in the burgeoning rose industry. Her company is one of the largest and 80 percent of its 300 employees are women, says Licto, who oversees everything between harvesting and shipping to markets worldwide.

In Europe, especially the Netherlands, growers focus on genetically developing new rose varieties every year. But here it is all about mass production for export, she explains. That gorgeous bouquet for your sweetheart or mom? It probably came from a farm like this in Ecuador, or from Colombia (the world's top exporter of flowers) or Kenya, their two biggest competitors.

"We are cutting 80,000 to 100,000 roses a day in high season," Licto says in Spanish that's translated for us by Marco Castro, from Quito, our guide for the week. Castro says high season means Valentine's Day in the United States, but also in Ecuador, where it has taken root over the past 20 years. Of Naranjo's annual production, 30 percent is for Feb. 14. Then there's International Women's Day (March 8), Mother's Day in the United States and Russia (May 4), and in January, the Pasadena Rose Parade.

In the greenhouse, everything is orderly. Even the dirt looks just swept. Six-foot-tall plants branch left and right from the center aisle in military-perfect lines.

These roses were selected for their global popularity and durability. Licto explains how hybridization produces multiple levels of flowers nonstop. Hardy root stock is planted in beds of 50; each bed is maintained by one person who prunes, checks for pests, and harvests. Crouching in the dirt, she shows us where on a stalk, about 10 centimeters up, a knife was used to slice and insert a cutting of the desired variety. Grafts are wrapped until they take hold. As the plant grows, the process is repeated every 20 centimeters above that.

"Why doesn't it smell like roses?" someone asks. The greenhouse has a pleasant earthy scent because hybrids have no fragrance.

Walking along, we dodge bundles of fresh-cut roses suspended from an overhead cable as workers rapidly shuttle them from greenhouses to a post-production warehouse. Each bunch of

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Where the roses grow



A worker sorting flowers at the Naranjo Roses plant in Ecuador.

JANET MENDELSON

24 is identical in color, swaddled in plastic mesh. Gorgeous bouquets of red or yellow, purple or white.

Licto cites more numbers. On 27 hectares (66.7 acres), her employer produces 47 varieties for export to its major markets: China, Spain, Russia, Bulgaria, Canada, Germany, the United States, and beyond. Ecuador produces some 500 varieties in all.

Naranjo's agricultural system was adapted from banana farms on the coast, says our host. She crouches again to indicate slim pipes in the soil. A drip irrigation system prevents water spots from forming on leaves. It's computerized, as are liquid organic fertilization and humidity. If the greenhouse gets too hot, above 68 degrees, plastic windows are opened to let in a breeze. Mites, a common problem, are controlled by releasing different, biologically beneficial mites. Pesticide is sprayed minimally to kill fungus.

"Fifty percent of our production is red roses. They are the most popular everywhere," says Licto. But every color can be altered. Petals contain melanin, she explains. By playing with the amount of sunlight and UV filters in the plastic overhead, the farm can produce different shades dictated by the latest trends. For China, where white is the color of funerals, harvested white roses are tinted vivid multi-colored hues by splitting the stem ends in thirds. Each part is dipped in a mixture of dye and light chlorine that is absorbed within hours, edging a single bud's petals bright blue, purple, yellow, and hot pink.

The moving bundles are washed in a long tank before entering the airy warehouse where Licto is in charge. Picture an airplane hangar with a corrugated roof and a Latin radio station booming. Most workers wear bright yellow heavy rubber aprons, boots, and gloves over mauve and orange track suits.

It's hard not to be impressed by such a highly efficient operation. When I ask to take a picture, sorters pause to smile but immediately resume their tasks. They take rose after rose from its bundle, measure each against a yardstick, use a hand tool to remove lower leaves and thorns, and shelve flowers by color, shade, and stem length. All in 10 seconds. Tops. Others package flowers by the dozen for market and send them by conveyor belt to two women who slice stem ends uniformly with power saws.

In a cooling room, packaged roses are chilled to 38 degrees. Until delivery, they'll stay that way in refrigerated trucks and cargo planes departing daily from the new Latacunga-Cotopaxi International Airport that Castro says was built almost exclusively to export fruit and flowers.

It takes 45 days to grow roses, says Licto. Two weeks before a shipping deadline, cutting and packaging begins. Shipments arrive in one to three days, depending on destination. In a vase, if the water is changed and stems are angle cut daily, they'll last 15 days, she says.

So, how much for a bouquet? Right now in Ecuador, they cost \$9 a dozen, or 75 cents a stem, double the low season price. In Boston? Much more.

Janet Mendelsohn can be reached at janetmendelsohn75@yahoo.com.

HERE

LEAP INTO LOVE PACKAGES

Feeling lucky in love? Inspired by an old Irish legend about Leap Day — allowing women to propose to their sweethearts on Feb. 29 — three distinctive hotels are inviting guests to Leap Into Love in the Berkshires. Choose from an array of proposal experiences, coordinated by Bonita Wilson, Main Street's "proposal concierge," while enjoying special romance packages at the Red Lion Inn (Snuggles Up, through May 26, from \$345); Hotel on North (Date Night on North, through March 31, from \$380); and The Porches (Date Night, through May 19, from \$305). To arrange a bespoke proposal — and keep the surprise secret — make your plans via direct e-mail: romance@mshgmail.com. 413-298-1610, www.mainstreethospitalitygroup.com/

OLD-TIME WINTER FUN

Get out your hat and mittens and head to Vermont for the 60th Brattleboro Winter Carnival (Feb. 12-21). The schedule is packed with indoor and outdoor events for all ages at reasonable — sometimes free — rates. Enjoy sleigh/hay rides, skating, skiing, ice fishing derby, children's concerts, puppet and variety shows, Junior Olympic events, sugar-on-snow, pancake breakfast, chili cook-off, and more. You'll need reservations for "Murder at the Luau!" (Feb. 20), a sunset luau and beach party-themed mystery dinner theater extravaganza (\$35, www.brownpaper tickets.com). Check website for schedule and updates. www.brattleborowintercarnival.org/



THERE

ART DECO REDUX

Art Deco hotels are beautiful to behold but sometimes accommodations are less than fabulous. The boutique Marlin Hotel in South Beach, designed by L. Murray Dixon in the 1930s, shows it's possible to upgrade a historic property and get things right. In early 2015, MRK Collection purchased the property from Chris Blackwell — he of Island Records fame who recorded Aerosmith, Jay-Z, Pharrell Williams, and more in his onsite studios — and recently completed the first phase of a multimillion-dollar renovation. All 14 spacious new guestrooms and suites have been redesigned in contemporary style with custom furnishings and décor, spa-like bathroom with a rainfall shower, and state-of-the-art amenities including a 55-inch LED TV with surround sound, SFERRA luxury linens, and blackout drapes with re-

mote control. A custom-designed modern chandelier highlights the lobby lounge, which leads to the not-to-be-missed restaurant, Bazi, an Asian-inspired concept by chef Michael Pirolo. Rates from \$259 (Sunday through Thursday); \$349 (weekends), excluding holidays. 305-695 3000, www.themarlinhotel.com

ADVENTURE BIKE TREK IN SRI LANKA

Calling all adventurous cyclists: Geringer Global Travel is debuting Cycle Sri Lanka, a custom 14-day hybrid bicycle tour. Travel through jungles, beaches, small villages, and tea plantations in this lush, mountainous island in the Indian Ocean. Includes visits to an elephant orphanage and sanctuary, Dambulla Rock Temple (with 150 statues of Buddha), Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic, the Matala Spice garden, and more. Cyclists of different skill sets are welcome. Not only will a guide lead cyclists through difficult terrain, but a micro van

with driver is available at all times for those who wish to rest. Includes all accommodations, daily breakfast, hybrid bicycles and microvans, English-speaking guides, all transfers, monument entrance fees, and assorted activities. From \$3,895 per person, double occupancy. Price applicable through March 31. Book by March 1 and save \$200 per person. Ideal travel months: September through March. 877-255-7438, geringerglobaltravel.com/cycle-sri-lanka-tour

EVERYWHERE

KEYLESS LUGGAGE PADLOCK

Travelers who tend to lose luggage padlock keys or forget the combination — and you know who you are — will be happy to learn about LockSmart Travel, a TSA-approved, keyless, Bluetooth-connected lock controlled by an iOS or Android app. Designed by Dog & Bone, a mobile device technology company, LockSmart Travel provides users with a trackable and secure solution for locking and opening a padlock without using physical keys. The app can manage one or several padlocks, and share lock access to others while tracking all activity such as username, date, and time of use. Unlocking options include using Touch ID, tapping the icon, entering a passcode, or the push-to-unlock feature. Recharge via micro USB hid-



den in a weatherproof seal. \$89.95 [www.dogandbonecases.com/products/locksmart/lock-smart-keyless-bluetooth-padlock](http://www.dogandbonecases.com/products/locksmart/locksmart/lock-smart-keyless-bluetooth-padlock)

DURABLE SUNGLASSES FOR BABIES AND CHILDREN

When heading to the beach or ski slopes

for vacation week, protect your little tyke's eyes from damaging UV rays with Italian-made baby and children sunglasses by family owned roshambo baby. Designed specifically for youngsters — who love to put things in their mouths — these sunglasses have been laboratory certified as BPA- and phthalate-free, and are so durable they can be bent, stretched, pulled, and stepped on and will still bounce back to shape. Blocks 100 percent of UVA/B rays. Baby shades (0-2 years) and junior shades (3-12 years) come in a wide variety of stylish colors. \$20/\$25. www.roshambo baby.com/

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