

A Dream of Accessible and Sustainable Tourism in Ecuador

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The city of Baños in the Tungurahua province of Ecuador has been declared the country's most accessible city and is promoted as an international tourist destination for tourists with disabilities. Alfonso Eliécer Morales is one of the people who have helped to make this possible.

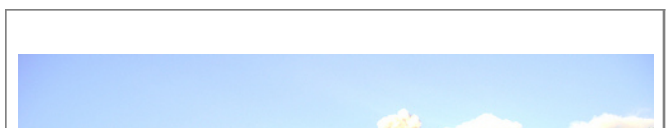
Morales is an inspiring example of someone who has turned adversity into opportunity. Despite an accident that left him unable to walk since his youth, Morales has excelled as an athlete. He was on Ecuador's National Wheelchair Basketball Team in the 1989 Special Pan American Games and the National Team of Disabled Athletes in the 1996 Paralympic Games in Atlanta. In 1995, he created and participated in the first tour of Ecuador in a wheelchair.

This fighter has lectured at nearly a dozen national and international events about disability and accessibility, particularly in the tourism industry. From 2005 to 2009, he served as a councilman for his community, during which he sought to promote sustainable rural tourism that is accessible to persons with disabilities. To this end, he opened **Hostal Familiar Las Granadillas**, a sustainable Rainforest Alliance Verified lodge that provides facilities for disabled tourists who enjoy adventure travel.

In this interview, Alfonso tells his story and the great work being done to promote the right of access and sustainable tourism.

Question: How did your accident occur?

Morales:



I had an accident on the job 25 years ago, when I was almost 20 years old and working for a small construction company. I was driving a tractor when a nearby mountain collapsed and trapped me, fracturing a spinal vertebra.

Q: When did you decide to become an athlete?

M:

During my childhood, I loved climbing trees, hiking to discover nature, and helping with daily tasks; I especially enjoyed being in the water and I excelled in swimming at my school. In 1990, three years after the accident and a painful rehabilitation process, I had finally gotten used to the wheelchair. So, I took part in and ended up winning the "Quito Latest News" track meet. This motivated me to participate in other national and international events. Sports helped me join in and overcome the constraints of my new lifestyle.

Q: Why did you decide to become a tourism entrepreneur?

M:

Three years after the accident, I was feeling more independent in my daily life. I returned to my hometown of Iluchi, in Baños de Agua Santa, which has always been a popular tourist destination. My grandmother gave me a very nice, strategically located, and scenic piece of land in the community, and a few months later, a highway was built nearby. At that point I said, "This is where I will make my home and my lodge."

Q: How did you get the idea to build a hostel that is friendly for disabled people?

M:

Here it is very hard to find lodging accessible to travelers with disabilities like mine--and those that do exist are four or five star hotels that are too costly for most of us. This motivated me to offer an alternative.

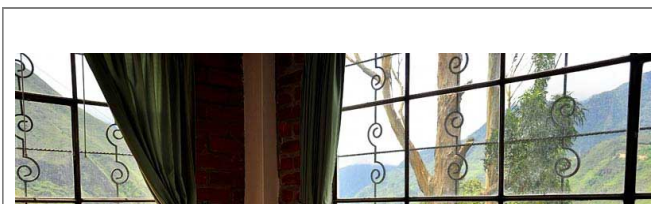
Q: How did your family and the community react to your plans?

M:

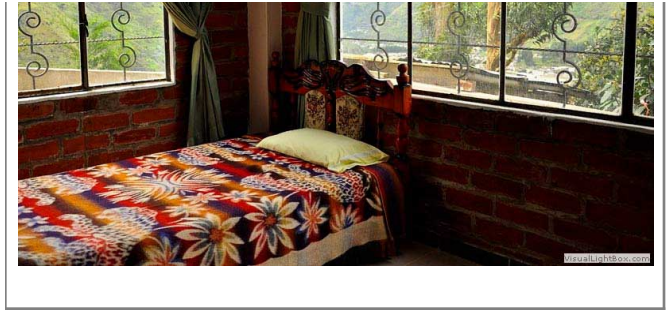
Initially, they doubted that I could build this dream, mainly because of the financial investment that would be required. However, they knew it would be a success because of the setting, the landscape, and the location. We are in the countryside, but with only 20 minutes of walking we can get to and from the city. In the end, everyone helped me somehow.

Q: As a tourism entrepreneur pioneering this style of tourist lodging, what has your adventure been like?

M:



It hasn't been easy. It was challenging to make contacts and publicize the community as a tourist destination - even though we are a tourist town, not all of its attractions have been well promoted. Gradually people have gotten to know us, and my own satisfied customers spread news about the project by word of mouth. It was also difficult to apply for one bank loan after another to complete the hostel. Fortunately, the project is seen as interesting and unique, and one with potential.



Q: What makes **Hostal Familiar Las Granadillas special for the average tourist?**

M:

Our location is advantageous--we are in a rural area but very close to the city and surrounded by three tourist trails: Puente de San Francisco - Illuchi Alto - Las Antenas, Río Guambo - El Tablón - Montañita, and Illuchi Bajo - Puente de Sauces. We also have an exceptional view of the southern part of the city, Santa Rosa de Runtun mountain, the La Virgen waterfalls, the Mintza mountains, Tungurahua volcano with its occasional eruptions of ash or water vapor, the Pastaza River, the Callejón Andino Oriental (East Andes Alley), the mountains of Sauces, and the mountains of Pucara, among others.

In addition, our facilities are spacious; we have gardens, aquariums, and a small collection of antiques. But what makes us stand out is the personal attention we give our visitors, whom we see as members of our family.

Q: What are the main attractions of the Iluchi community?

M:

Besides all the natural attractions that I mentioned, this community is very safe and the people are very friendly and unique in their traditions and solidarity. Illuchi is also a leader in organic farming and it is very close to the city. It has all the basic services thanks to the hard work of our community leaders, and the access road is well maintained.

Q: Why did you decide to adopt sustainable tourism practices and what are your main efforts in this area?

M:

I grew up in the countryside, so I identify with tranquility and the natural environment, and I am aware that I must be part of its conservation and cause minimal impact with my business. The training and ongoing support of Rainforest Alliance encouraged me to become aware and to make more of a commitment.

For example, the tables, furnishings, and planters are made of wood that was left over from the building of our house. The wood used in our fireplace is a (non-traditional) eucalyptus species, or wood recycled from the greenhouses or the river. We use energy-saving light bulbs and fill the aquariums with rainwater. We light fireplaces with grease and oils recycled from the cafeteria. We recycle organic waste, plastic, and glass and use recycled pots as lamps, vases and flowerpots. We deliver recyclables to underprivileged people in the community so they can sell them and in return, they

help us for half a day doing gardening.

We also hire local staff and buy food produced in the area. Our successful incentive plan called "Sweets or Fruits for Bottles" invites children of the community to bring in plastic bottles and empty glass jars, and in return, we give them a fruit or candy. Students from the community are allowed to use our wireless internet connection free of charge. Finally, we provide free lodging to people who provide training to our community.

Q: What message do you convey to people with disabilities and their families through your lectures and projects?

M:

I try to convey my experiences very humbly so that people going through a similar situation know that nothing is impossible despite the difficulties; anything is possible if we know how to dream and work with faith and love for ourselves and others. Family is very important in this process, but mostly it has to do with willpower.

As part of this work, I developed a recreational tourism and independent life training plan for people with disabilities and their families. The program lasts from one week to three months and consists of activities related to creating an independent life and a little training in sustainability. The goal is to create citizens who are free, capable, aware, and interactive.

Q: What future plans do you have for your company?

M:

We have many plans, particularly for expanding our space, providing better service every day and improving our processes for sustainability and the quality of life of my staff and customers.

