

## The Hat Man

17 October, 2008

The old man motioned from the dark opening. Come in, he prompted, come here.

Steph called over her shoulder as she crossed the street, "Doug, come on, let's check it out."

We were in the hat district of Cuenca, Ecuador, where hat shops line the streets.



## The Hat Man

Many of the shops specialized in hats for the local women, the largest market.





## The Hat Man

We were interested in visiting a hat shop and seeing how the hats were made.

The old man beckoning to Steph stood in the entrance to a hat shop.

His smile was soft, his gesture gentle and his eyes twinkled a greeting, as if emitting the sparkling light of a joyous secret.

He looked genuine. He passed the gut test. I waited for a break in traffic and followed Steph across the street.

The old man's hat shop was like a magic cave, with hats disappearing into the depths in all directions, even up.



## The Hat Man

Once inside, we learned some of the process of making the hats.

For the woven hats, each is hand shaped.



## The Hat Man

If the final color is white, they are bleached.

Then the bands are applied.

First the outside band is installed, then the inside is glued...



Photo by Stephanie Hackney



## The Hat Man

... and the liner band placed.



Photo by Stephanie Hackney

## The Hat Man

The felt hats are also formed, and then ironed into shape.





## The Hat Man

Each hat is hand made.

Each hat is the same.

And yet, each hat is a one-of-a-kind combination of the materials, circumstances and the hat maker's skills.





## The Hat Man

Consequently, each hat is as unique as the owner, for whom each hat is individually made.



## The Hat Man

After learning about how the hats were made, we asked about buying one for me. We learned that the hats in the shop were common, everyday hats. The old hat maker informed us that the best hats were upstairs, in a different place.

We glanced at each other, running the gut test on following someone we didn't know down a dark passageway in a strange, new city.

Again, he passed the gut test. We followed him down the dark passageway and up the creaky stairs.

Up in the different place, we passed into a new world.

It was also lined with hats in all directions, disappearing into the distance, even up.



Photo by Stephanie Hackney



## The Hat Man


But these hats were not common, everyday hats.

These were the best hats of their type in the world.

**...the best Panama Hat**  
**of the world**

PARIS SANTIAGO CHICAGO PRAGA BONN

**in the head of everybody**



**"man who works is happy"**  
**"el hombre que trabaja es feliz"**  
**Alberto Pulla**

**Tarqui 6-91 • 593 7 829399 • Cuenca Ecuador S.A.**

Photo by Stephanie Hackney

## The Hat Man

And it wasn't just an empty marketing claim.

The old hat man was featured as the world's best Panama hat maker by magazines from all over the world.



Photo by Stephanie Hackney



## The Hat Man

Even America.



Photo by Stephanie Hackney

We learned how to make, select and wear a Panama hat from the best Panama hat maker in the entire world.

But the most remarkable thing we learned is that we could gain all that knowledge from a man who was mute. The hat man, the best Panama hat maker in the entire world, speaks not a word.

And it all began with a beckoning gesture, two twinkling eyes, and listening to our guts.

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## The Hat Man

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The best Panama hat maker in the world is Don Alberto Pulla, who believes that “The man who works is happy.” His hat shop is located in Cuenca, Ecuador.

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The world's Panama hats are not made in Panama, they are made in Ecuador. They are so named because they were sold to Gold Rush miners traveling to California passing through Panama and workers on the Panama Canal. They were named for the location of purchase, Panama, rather than the location of creation, Ecuador.

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The toquilla (*carludovica palmata*) plants used to create Panama hats are grown in the low hills north and west of Guayaquil, Ecuador. The very finest fronds of the plant are boiled and sun dried before being shipped to a weaving town, either Jipijapa, Azogues, Biblián, Sigsig, or the source of the finest weaving, Montecristi. For the finest quality, each hat requires months to weave. The best hats are so tightly woven that when inverted they hold water like a bowl.

The final step is a hat factory for low-quality, volume production; or a hat shop for premier, hand-made quality; either of which are mostly located in Cuenca, Ecuador. There, the loose ends of the weaving are trimmed, the hat bleached, the brim ironed into shape and softened with a mallet. The bands are installed and glued in place. The hat is then ready for wholesale distribution or retail sale.

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The quality of a Panama hat is determined first by its weave density. The finest Panama hats are created with the greatest quantity of the tiniest strands of woven toquilla fiber. The test is to roll the hat for storage. The best quality Panama hats, tightly rolled, pass through a wedding ring.



Photo by Stephanie Hackney



## The Hat Man

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The Gut Test is:

If you feel anything in your gut, or anyone you are traveling with feels anything in their gut, and I mean anything, even the slightest little tingle, you all turn around and leave.

There is no board meeting, no conference calls, no Roberts Rules of Order, no proxy vehicle for unresolved relationship issues, and—most importantly—no debate.

One tingle—everybody bails. Now.

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Sources: Panama hat history, production materials, process and locations – Don Alberto Pulla and Footprint Ecuador & Galápagos, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition

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Unless otherwise credited, all photos by Douglas Hackney

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Photo by Jorge Valdes

Douglas and Stephanie Hackney, along with one of the best Panama hats in the entire world, are on a two to three year global overland expedition.

You can learn more about their travels at: <http://www.hackneys.com/travel>