

## INDIGENOUS CONNECTIONS: Life in San Bernardo, Ecuador

PHOTOGRAPHS BY STACEY IRVIN



Stacey Irvin traveled to the indigenous village of San Bernardo in the central highlands of Ecuador in 2008. Irvin's approach to photography partnered with the fact that her brother John had been living in the village for the past two years as a Peace Corps volunteer, allowed her intimate access to this community. The majority of people in the valley are subsistence farmers, dependent on small plots of land for their livelihood. Life is difficult and homes, livestock and crops literally cling to the steep green slopes of the surrounding mountains. In spite of these hardships, Irvin was inspired by the joyful spirit of this community - a spirit that is fed by a deep devotion to family, faith and an intimate connection to the land.

Curated by Andee Rudloff

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**Gloria**  
archival pigment ink print  
18.75" x 12.5"

Gloria did a few summersaults down a steep hill and picked some dandelions to blow my way before beginning her daily chore of milking the family cow. After she milks the cow, Gloria carries a large jug back up the hill and down the road to a small cheese-making facility in the village.



**Good Friday**  
archival pigment ink print  
18.75" x 12.5"

Villagers gather for baptisms on Good Friday in the community of Sasapud. The neighboring village of Sasapud is a short walk up the road from San Bernardo. Many people in San Bernardo have relatives in Sasapud.

Although the majority of Ecuador is Roman Catholic, Protestantism has spread rapidly over the past several decades in remote indigenous communities like San Bernardo. Here, all of the communities in the valley are Evangelical and Pentecostal.



**Storm on the Paja**  
archival pigment ink print  
18.75" x 12.5"

Exhausted from the steep climb, I crouch in the paja (tall dry grass) and watch as a storm approaches high above San Bernardo (at approximately 12,500 feet). On a clear day you can see Ecuador's famous volcanoes: El Altar, Chimborazo, and Tungurahua from this point.



**Chimborazo**  
archival pigment ink print  
18.75" x 12.5"

Located in the Andean Range, Chimborazo is Ecuador's highest peak (20,565 feet). This inactive volcano towers above indigenous communities near the city of Riobamba. Due to the earth's bulge at the equator, Chimborazo's summit is the furthest point from the center of the earth.

Clouds usually obscure the behemoth volcano, but on this day we were able to pull over on the Pan-American Highway to take in the view from the south. The drive to Riobamba from the village of San Bernardo usually takes about one and a half hours. San Bernardo is located in a small valley, roughly 10,500 feet above sea level.



**Nativity Moss**  
archival pigment ink print  
18.75" x 12.5"

Every Christmas children scramble up a very steep trail to pick moss from a specific area of rocks that cling to the hillside. Gloria held a sample of moss and explained that it is used in the nativity scene at the church. There is stiff competition to collect the most moss. Some of the bigger kids even take moss from the younger children!



**Burro**  
archival pigment ink print  
18.75" x 12.5"

There are no fences in the mountainous rangeland above the villages. Sheep, cows, bulls and burros are tethered to small areas. Their keepers, in the villages below, must hike up two times a day, lead the animals to water and return them to new spots for fresh grazing.





**Belly Laugh**  
archival pigment ink print  
12.5" x 18.75"



**Gato**  
archival pigment ink print  
12.5" x 18.75"



**Manuel**  
archival pigment ink print  
18.75" x 12.5"

Manuel is in charge of purchasing food and keeping inventory for the kitchen at El Proyecto Inti Ñan in San Bernardo. Each day, after regular school, children in the village come to El Proyecto Inti Ñan for lunch and supplemental education and activities. El Proyecto Inti Ñan is supported by Kindernothilfe, one of the largest aid organizations in Europe. Many of the children in the village would suffer from malnutrition without lunchtime support from Kindernothilfe.

Manuel was proud to show me the way he organizes the meat and produce for the lunch program. El Proyecto Inti Ñan has a refrigerator for storing meat, one of very few in the village. Manuel purchases meat and produce from some farmers in town and in larger regional markets. Most of the residents in San Bernardo are subsistence farmers and do not produce much, if any, surplus.



**Segundo Jose**  
archival pigment ink print  
18.75" x 12.5"

I was immediately captured by Segundo Jose's brilliant smile and warm personality. I first met him on the bus that runs up the valley to San Bernardo. When we arrived in the village, he quickly pulled himself hands first, down the steep steps and across the dusty cobbled road. I had not realized that, disabled from birth, Segundo Jose is unable to walk. Later, I stopped and spent some time with him and his neighbor on one of my walks around town. He works a loom (making ponchos) and, on Thursdays, shines shoes in Guamote market.



**Hula Babe**  
archival pigment ink print  
18.75" x 12.5"

This young girl's extended family owns several small adjoining plots of land on the upper road in San Bernardo. The minute I arrived, I was promptly given a full tour of their sheep, chicken, and rabbit pens, cuy (guinea pig) shed, and a view of the future site of a new house (see pile of bricks in background). "Hula Babe" (see shirt) walked along side me eating grapes as we toured.



**Homespun**  
archival pigment ink print  
18.75" x 12.5"

A very friendly grandmother stepped outside her front door to show me her wool hand-spinning talents. With little effort she spun yarn while laughing with her children and grandchildren about this gringa's curiosity!



### Laundry Chores

archival pigment ink print  
18.75" x 12.5"

Kids pitch in and help with the laundry. Conditions become quite muddy during the rainy season. Shoes are washed frequently to keep them in good shape.



### King of the Playground

archival pigment ink print  
18.75" x 12.5"



### Salsa de Mani

archival pigment ink print  
18.75" x 12.5"

Salsa de Mani is a traditional peanut sauce served with cuy (guinea pig) and papas (potatoes). The sauce is made from finely crushed peanuts. A young boy helps by literally blowing the skins off of the roasted peanuts. I enjoyed watching the process and the resulting meal was very tasty!

While it is difficult for many North Americans to reconcile eating guinea pig with the idea of the furry animal as a pet, I quickly learned how important cuy are as a traditional food source in Andean culture. Most families in San Bernardo raise cuy. This meal is prepared and served on special occasions, birthdays, weddings, celebrations, and, in this case, a going away party for my brother John. John's work in San Bernardo as a Peace Corps Volunteer was coming to an end and the staff at El Proyecto Inti Ñan honored his service to the community with this special meal.



### Magdalena

archival pigment ink print  
12.5" x 18.75"

Magdalena works extremely hard for her family and community. She is a mother of four (including Gloria), a farmer and the only employed cook at El Proyecto Inti Ñan. Parent volunteers (similar to a PTA) assist Magdalena in the preparation of lunch each day.

Here Magdalena drains boiled potatoes at home for my brother John's despedida (going away party). This despedida was hosted by Magdalena's brother-in-law, Jose. Jose was my brother's counterpart in the village.



### Too Cute

archival pigment ink print  
12.5" x 18.75"



### Waiting

archival pigment ink print  
12.5" x 18.75"

After helping remove the skins from roasted peanuts, this young boy idly plays with the leftovers in a large bowl. Not in a particularly cheerful mood, he patiently waits outside while his mother finishes with meal preparation in the kitchen at El Proyecto Inti Ñan.





**Little Pig**  
archival pigment ink print  
18.75" x 12.5"



**Family**  
archival pigment ink print  
18.75" x 12.5"



**John with Bike**  
archival pigment ink print  
18.75" x 12.5"

John is the youngest of five siblings (the only boy). When I told him I would make a family portrait, he jumped up from the kitchen table, dunked his head in some water to slick it back and put on a nice shirt! After photographing the whole family, I caught John as he set out on his bike. John enjoys riding his bike up and down the road between his house and El Proyecto Inti Ñan. Quite fond of my brother, he would often yell up to my brother's house from the road to say "hello"!



**Through the Valley**  
archival pigment ink print  
12.5" x 18.75"

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## ABOUT

Stacey Irvin is an award-winning photographer living in Nashville, Tennessee. She has traveled and photographed extensively in Asia, North America, and in parts of Africa and South America to explore and document indigenous communities, rural life, and our shared humanity. Irvin graduated in 1999 with a B.A. in Philosophy from Vanderbilt University. Recent exhibitions include: The Parthenon Museum, Nashville, TN; The Nashville International Airport; Metropolitan Nashville Arts Commission Gallery, Nashville, TN; Tennessee Arts Commission Gallery, Nashville, TN.

Framed image dimensions: 23" x 29.5" x .75"

Images are for sale. Please inquire for more information.

A portion of proceeds from exhibit sales will be donated to [El Proyecto Inti Ñan](#), a non-profit that provides lunch and supplemental educational activities to children in San Bernardo. El Proyecto Inti Ñan is supported by [Kindernothilfe](#), one of the largest children's aid organizations based in Europe.

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