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‘Expats in Ecuador’: Motives of migration decision-making and the meaning of privileged mobilities in transnational lifestyle migration to Vilcabamba, Ecuador

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1. INTRODUCTION

> It is late in the afternoon when I decide to get a piece of cake at UFO, United Falafel Organization, a Turkish-owned place right next to the church. I quickly settle on a piece of carrot cake to go and, upon being asked by the owner, agree to take the one and a half pieces that are left, because he wouldn't be able to sell the half a piece of cake that would be left over. The total is 5,75 dollars, which is a lot to pay for dessert, even in 'gringo-priced' areas like Vilcabamba. When I hand over my five-dollar bill, I am surprised: my bill is rejected. The owner asks me to pay with a different bill, because mine is slightly ripped in one of the corners and, according to him, banks would not accept bills like that. Briefly, I find myself to be actually dumbfounded, as I have payed with bills looking much worse than this one and never had a single problem paying with them throughout my time in Ecuador. The owner, again, insists I pay with a different bill. As I don't have any other bills with me and barely four dollars in coins, I tell him I'd only take one piece of cake instead of the one and a half pieces, since he refuses to accept my five-dollar bill and hence I can't afford more than one piece (which is 3,75 dollars). He seems fairly unhappy about that, but eventually I get my piece of cake and leave the restaurant (Field diary entry, Vilcabamba, 31/03/22).

I remember that after this little incident, on my way home, I kept thinking about how, after nearly nine weeks in Ecuador, this expat-owned restaurant had been the first one to reject a dollar bill because it did not look immaculate – and therefore making less money than it could have – and I could not help but think about the fact that an Ecuadorian-owned place could, economically, never afford such behavior. It is a silent privilege that seems to be exclusively reserved for expat-owned businesses, because in an expat-crowded place like Vilcabamba the next customer is just around the corner.

I spent my five dollars buying water in a small *tienda* the next day, where the shopkeeper took my bill without batting an eye and disappeared to the back to get my change – proving my point exactly.

1.1. Research Question and Subject of Interest

The incident as described above took place in late March 2022, already towards the end of my two-months stay in the village of Vilcabamba, situated in a remote area in the southern Ecuadorian Andes. The population is around 4000 people, a number

based on a census from 2010, but is estimated to be higher in 2022.[1] Situated in a valley surrounded by mountain formations and hilltops in every direction, the area got nicknamed 'the valley of longevity' in the 1970s and rose to fame based on presumed scientific discoveries by a British physician named David Davies: surprised by the inhabitants' old age and good state of health, Davies concluded the village and its surrounding nature had to have something special, something beneficial to the people's health and he started to praise the water, the air, the mountainous terrain requesting people's physical activity to get from one point to another, to be the overall reasons for the remarkable longevity (see Davies 1975). From that on out, Vilcabamba started to become more and more famous among foreigners. First for tourists, mostly young backpackers, travelling the West coast countries of Latin America and using Vilcabamba as a welcome place to stay for a few days, rest and explore the nature, before heading on to the Peruvian border. Secondly, and most relevant, Vilcabamba had started to attract people who were willing to stay long term or even make the village their new permanent place of residence (Hayes 2015a; Kordel/Pohle 2018).

The newborn international interest has given way to a migration dynamic that several migration researchers and scholars have titled 'lifestyle migration'. Since the turn of the millennium, especially North American-based immigration to Vilcabamba specifically and to Ecuador in general has increased rapidly (Emard/Nelson 2021). For the purpose of this thesis and the underlying research, I locate the term 'lifestyle migration' within the broader theoretical spectrum of global (lifestyle) mobilities. Since many of the lifestyle migrants in Vilcabamba I encountered for this research identify or self-designate as 'expatriates', or 'expats' for short, rather than migrants, I will use both terms accordingly. To clarify: lifestyle migration (this includes 'lifestyle migrant' as well) describes the scholarly approach to this specific form of migration, while 'expat', in this case, is as much the self-designation of choice as it is a narrower definition of a fluid group of people within the broader scholarly field of lifestyle migration. Since the lifestyle migration in this setting, with migrants from North America and Europe – i.e., the Global North, moving to a country in the Global South – concurrently constitutes

[1]The census is supposed to be conducted every ten years but has been postponed repeatedly since 2020 due to the CoViD-19 pandemic. It also only counts the population according to the number of people that are officially registered as Ecuadorian residents, omitting the possibility that a fair number of people live there (especially in Vilcabamba) in some state of long-term tourists.

the migratory pattern of transnational north-south migration, I will also use the term 'north-south migration' occasionally throughout the course of this thesis.

In this thesis I aim to answer the following questions: What are the exact reasons, motivations, and circumstances of North American and European migrants in their migration decision-making that made them settle on Vilcabamba as their new place of residence? What are the potential challenges they face through the course of their relocation? And how do they perceive themselves – as foreign outsiders coming into a small-town community – among the local community and what are the emerging challenges?
Along with these three main questions, I aim to shine a light on the global (power) structures, that provide and benefit from this sort of north-south migration, relating to the theoretical approach of global mobilities mentioned above. The purpose here is to situate the specific case of North American and European (lifestyle) migrants in the broader spectrum of global mobility and migration dynamics: Who can move how and where in the world and what are the consequences emerging from that?

1.2. Methodology

To provide answers to these questions, I stayed in Vilcabamba during the months of February, March, and early April 2022, conducting narrative interviews with immigrants from three continents and six different countries of the Global North, as well as making observations and taking field notes. In total I spoke to 17 people[2], among them three married couples, the overall ages ranging from 29 to 73 years old. However, most of the participants were in their fifties and sixties. 12 of them claimed to be or have been US-American citizens and lived in the United States before relocating to Ecuador, while four interviewees came from European countries and one from South Korea. Eight of the total number of informants were women. As much as the age span, the duration of their respective residence in Vilcabamba varied greatly. While some lived there for almost 50 years already, others had only moved the end of the previous year. Most research participants I initially contacted through direct messages via different social media platforms

[2] Of the 17 research participants, due to the limited extent of this master's thesis and lack of information provided in few interviews, only 15 are mentioned and discussed through the course of this thesis.

such as Facebook and Instagram, after coming across their social media profiles in a Facebook expat group and the use of the location tag 'Vilcabamba' on Instagram. Other participants I had met through Ecuadorians who I came to know on-site and who offered to connect me to acquaintances.

The majority of the interviews lasted for about 40 to 50 minutes, with some being up to two hours long, and most of them were conducted face-to-face, either in public places like cafés or at the respective interviewees' home, with only two interviews being carried out via FaceTime due to circumstances of either time-sensitivity and distance as well as sticking to precautions due to the CoViD-19 pandemic. The interviews were almost exclusively conducted in English, except for two cases where the interviewees preferred to speak Spanish, as well as another interview that was conducted in German. All respondents have verbally agreed to the use of their real first names for this thesis and therefore are not anonymized.

I settled on conducting narrative interviews (instead of other forms of interviews, like semi-structured interviews), because a) I intended to create a conversational space as open as professionally possible and aimed for the interviewees to open as much as they felt comfortable with while at the same time collecting all the information that was necessary for my research purpose, and b) because I felt that this biographical interview approach could lead to an outcome or information which I would have restricted myself from getting in a semi-structured interview. Additionally, the narrative interview, in this regard, stands out as a research tool to collect information about action processes in which the interviewees have participated themselves. Even further, the interview, tailored to focus entirely on the respondents' narration and their perception of preceding action processes, aims to minimize the interviewers' impact through the course of the interview (Küsters 2014: 575), therefore revealing information that otherwise might be withheld from the interviewer.

This rather open interview approach turned out to be incredibly valuable, as many of my informants shared some biographical details with me that ultimately have proven to be extremely relevant for their decision to migrate. My personal experience with narrative interviews coincides with what Flick (2018) describes as the "constraint of detailing" which "is the reason why the narrative provides background details and relationships necessary for understanding the story" (ibid.:

281). Like every other interview form, the narrative interview can constrain the interviewee's narration in one way or another but can do so to the researcher's advantage (as in this case). As Flick continues, "this constraint makes the narrator tell as many details as seems necessary to give the listener the chance to fully understand the story. Thus[,] details about personal motives, about features of other persons involved, and so on are provided" (ibid.).

To accompany my research, whose focus is on the interviews, I conducted participant observation along restaurants, streets, and public spaces in Vilcabamba and recorded my observations in a field diary. I updated the diary regularly during the first month of my stay, but after that I came to find that happenings around the village became repetitive and did not necessarily provide any new information for me and my research purpose. Consequently, throughout March and April I took notes rather irregularly and only to record occasional occurrences and observations I had not witnessed before (see for example the entry at the beginning of this introduction).

For the interpretation of the collected interview material, I transcribed all interviews and, following Schütze (1983), meticulously analyzed them regarding reoccurring themes and motives as mentioned by the interviewees and focused on those which came up regularly in several interviews and hence provided a space for interpretation.

As for my own position as a researcher in this setting, I considered myself as less than an expatriate and, concurrently, more than a tourist or a traveler. To an outsider on the street, I likely looked like any other tourist who visited Vilcabamba and came to stay an unusually long period of time. Naturally, I shared the purpose of my stay and my project transparently with the people affected by it, like my host Yeleny, her friends, with the acquaintances I made during my stay, and, of course, with all the interviewees. Nevertheless, when out in public by myself and not accidentally crossing paths with one of my research participants, I likely looked like any other white woman traveling. Most importantly, through being a white woman from a European country, my background (that includes my nationality and citizenship) constituted a similar global origin as my research subjects, providing me with the same privileges in lifestyle choice and mobility: the privileges that enable lifestyle migrants (as well as tourists and travelers) from the Global North to move as they

do are the same that allowed me to conduct my research in its setting in the Global South in the first place.

1.3. Structure

In terms of structure, following the introduction, I start this thesis with a chapter on the complexity of global movement to map out the circumstances and structures in which lifestyle migrants move themselves around and which, simultaneously, allow them to do so. This includes common definitions of the term lifestyle migration as well as similarly used terminology, followed by a look at the broader spectrum of mobility studies and the location of lifestyle migration studies within this field of research.

The following chapter 3 focuses on the village of Vilcabamba as this thesis' place of research. It includes generic information about Vilcabamba, a brief historical overview of cause and effects of the myth of longevity, and how this contributed to shaping contemporary Vilcabamba. Chapter 4 presents the analysis of this thesis, where I take up the main motives for migration as stated by the interviewees, which I split up in three subchapters: Chapter 4.1. is about the meaning of stress, boredom, and financial (in)security as defining markers for lifestyle migrants' decision-making, while chapter 4.2. considers a combination of a personal spiritual orientation as well as a focus on nature and sustainability, and chapter 4.3. includes the urge of belonging and strive for community as expressed by the research participants. Finally, chapter 4.4. concludes the analyzing part with an assessment of the challenges that emerge from this north-south lifestyle migration – for the migrants as well as for the local Ecuadorians.

In chapter 5 I take up for discussion the pending problems and challenges contemporary Vilcabamba faces. Subsequently, I conclude this thesis in chapter 6 with a brief summary of the acquired knowledge and a perspective for prospective (and/or related) research on this topic.

2. THE COMPLEXITY OF MOVEMENT: MIGRATION AND MOBILITY IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

> "For a rich person from a rich country, a person who tends towards the cosmopolitan (and whose passport increasingly signifies not just mere national belonging, protection and a right of citizenship, but a surplus of rights – in particular a world right to circulate unhindered), the border has become an embarkation formality, a point of symbolic acknowledgement of his social status, to be passed at a jog-trot. For a poor person from a poor country, however, the border tends to be something quite different: not only is it an obstacle which is very difficult to surmount, but it is a place he runs up against repeatedly…" (Balibar 2002, as cited in Croucher 2012: 1).

The term 'migration' is, in most contexts, connected to narratives of escape and forceful displacement as immediate consequences of war, violence and/or poverty and economic struggles. Migration, in this sense, is oftentimes the last remedy to save an individuals' life – a condition that has proven to be impossible to achieve in the migrants' country of origin for the aforementioned reasons.

Opposite that exist migratory processes in which individuals migrate of their own free will and with less significant forms of external force involved, aiming for the realization of their own definition of a better way of life. What distinguishes this form of migration from the other, often more violent form, is exactly what is one of the key characteristics of lifestyle-based migration: privilege and the performance of it. In the following chapter I will outline the factors that constitute this privilege, how it is connected to unequally spread global mobilities, and the influence that globality and a progressing capitalized and neoliberal world economy have on lifestyle-led mobility patterns. The connection between lifestyle-led north-south migration and the question of privileged mobility, or mobility in general, is something that I would like to further develop with this thesis – or at least contribute to the debate.

2.1. Migration, Inequalities, and the Privilege of Lifestyle

Roughly after the turn of the millennium a, for scholars, comparably new migratory phenomenon started to prove itself an interesting field of research. Situated on the intersection of geography, sociology, anthropology, global and migration studies as well as mobility studies, this field of academic interest is commonly studied using the term 'lifestyle migration'. Heavily relied on by scholars Michaela Benson and Karen O'Reilly, but not unquestioned by fellow researchers, the umbrella term lifestyle migration is widely used as an all-encompassing theoretical approach to a

very real social phenomenon. As Benson and O'Reilly state, the use of the term lifestyle in connection to migration has a very central meaning here:

> "The use of the concept of lifestyle here is intended to indicate how the apparent 'free choice' to pursue a particular way of living through migration identified these migrations as central to identity-making projects, the migrants themselves distinct in their structural positioning as people who can approach migration as a form of consumption in contrast to the production orientation attributed to most other migration flows" (Benson/O'Reilly 2016: 21).

Lifestyle migrants, or people migrating for lifestyle-related reasons, are mostly relatively affluent individuals – not necessarily by standards of their respective country of origin, but in comparison to the average income in the receiving countries – who relocate either part- or full-time to a country of their choice, generally to improve their overall quality of life (Benson/O'Reilly 2009). This migration process can take place within the same country, with individuals moving for example from urban areas to the countryside (see Halfacree 2004, 2012, 2014) – the meaning of rurality in this context is especially important regarding Vilcabamba and therefore a topic I will come back to following the course of this chapter – or be transnational, with migrants crossing international borders and even continents to relocate, for example British citizens moving to rural France (see Benson 2012), North Americans relocating to Panama (see Spalding 2013; Benson 2015), Costa Rica (see van Noorloos/Steel 2016; Emard/Nelson 2021) and southern Ecuador (see Hayes 2015a, 2015b, 2017 [with Pérez-Gañán], 2017 [with Carlson], 2018; Kordel/Pohle 2018) or Swedish citizens temporarily migrating to Malta (see Åkerlund/Sandberg 2015). The reasons for such a relocation are highly individual and versatile. However, they are all connected to some form of personal privilege, for example by citizenships of 'globally respected' countries (i.e., most countries of the Global North), which makes international border-crossing extremely easy (compared to citizenships of 'less prestigious' nations, i.e., most countries of the Global South) or by the aforementioned relative personal affluence.

However, as already mentioned above, these migrants do not need to be particularly economically wealthy, but are rather able to "mobilise capital, assets and resources in ways that make their aspirations for a better way of life possible within the destination, […] in other words, the capitals they possess has an enhanced currency when they move" (Benson/O'Reilly 2016: 29). Furthermore, Benson and O'Reilly call attention to the connection of the migrants' economic and global privilege:

> "Relative dimensions thus draw attention to the fact that what enables the migration, structurally, is the position the migrants hold historically in global and historical relations of power, shaped by colonialism, tourism development and other major shifts. This moves beyond the mere

> recognition of contemporaneous structures that enable migration, to the importance of recognising the systemic privilege and inequalities that underpin lifestyle migration, and are reproduced and resisted through these phenomena" (ibid.).

Their characteristic privileged status enables lifestyle migrants to prioritize a consumption-led interpretation of the good life, or more so a life of even better quality that is to be obtained via the process of relocation, equally powered by their personal assets and a systemic privilege that is historically rooted in the structures and dynamics of global inequalities. This is further underlined, among others, by Sarah Kunz: "'Western' migrants still profit from the global power relations established during the European Empire and colonialism and often harbour attitudes that regard free international mobility as an unquestioned right of Europeans and their descendants" (2016: 91).

The question of privilege is of particular importance when discussing any type of migration and mobility process between the Global North and the Global South. In the case of Europeans and North Americans moving to Ecuador as investigated for this thesis, they are, theoretically speaking, as much international lifestyle migrants as they are north-south migrants, and their entire way of life is made possible by a great deal of privilege – especially in comparison to the conditions of global south-north migration and the almost impossible standards migrants have to meet in order to stand a chance at (legal) border-crossing. Citizens of the Global North moving south are

> "equipped with a particular surplus of right, e.g., membership of powerful nation states or individual affluence, people from the Global North and elites in the Global South move in order to fulfil their quest for a better way of life, whilst others are excluded" (Kordel/Pohle 2018: 129).

Nevertheless, and equally important in the discussion, not all migrants whose decision for relocation is driven by lifestyle-related motivations, hold some sort of assets or possess other forms of economic or cultural capital. Still, it is sufficient to allow a rather convenient relocation, but Benson and O'Reilly point out that "relative privilege may coexist with precarity and vulnerability in ways that *absolute* understandings of wealth, privilege and affluence might render invisible" (ibid: 30, italics by the authors). In that sense, most migrants who move from a country of the Global North to one in the Global South, are in no respect *absolutely* affluent.

The strategic movement of accumulated assets and capital by citizens of the Global North, or further developed countries, to less developed countries of the Global South, namely countries with lower daily expenses and lower cost of living in

general, is something Matthew Hayes has titled ‘geographic arbitrage’ (2014) in reference to Forbes Magazine, meaning that “people sell their labour power in high-cost labour countries, and then buy labour power, goods and services in low-cost labour countries” (Hayes 2014: 1954). Hayes gained his insight from conducting research among North American retirement migrants in the city of Cuenca, Ecuador. He argues that “the idea of geographic arbitrage helps to constitute a new form of transnational agency that is shaped by historical context, as well as powerful social actors” (ibid.). Regarding the circumstances of low social security standards for retirees in the United States and the simultaneously high costs of living and health care, Hayes argues, the act of moving to a country where living comfortably on social security payments is possible, is “a safe second bet for many, yet one that further consolidates ideas of individual responsibility for retirement” (ibid.), meaning that in the absence of a universal collective advocating for realistic social security standards and affordable health care, people focus on their own well-being, and therefore emphasizing the concept of transnational lifestyle migration as a highly individual endeavor even more.

In the case of Hayes’ research participants, the main reason for moving to Cuenca was their economic situation and the fact that they would not have been able to maintain their respective living standards in the United States while entering full retirement (meaning not to have to work additional jobs to make enough money to sustain themselves) and relying on social security payments – and sometimes savings – only (Hayes 2014: 1963-1964). But besides economic restructuring, Hayes emphasizes the importance of “marketing specialists in international lifestyles”, that “[emerge as] powerful players[,] shaping the field of transnational mobility” (ibid.: 1964). I will come back to the meaning of the marketing industry in reference to lifestyle migration in Ecuador in chapter 3.2.

Following the position of scholars like Mimi Sheller and Tara Zhara, I argue that it is necessary to speak of and analyze regimes of mobility and the (in)equalities that come with it, rather than just migration(s), because not only is mobility an all-encompassing term to describe any form of movement that takes place in whatever way around the globe, but also flows of migration are inevitably a part of it. I partially agree here with Zhara, who claims: “While we must be careful not to obscure the relations of power, inequality and violence that often structure movement, ‘mobility’ captures a broader range of migration histories and can call

into question the assumptions that surround the term 'migrant'" (2022: 144). Unlike her though, I don't see the danger of concealing the global inequality of movement by using the term 'mobility'. Focusing on mobilities as an all-encompassing concept seems to be rather a chance to broaden the spectrum and to further enhance understanding of the correlations between mobility, movement and migration and the unequal structures and possibilities accompanying them.

Processes of globalization contain, amongst others, constant patterns of mobility, fluidity, and interconnectedness on a global level:

> "Mobilities are of course the *sine qua non* of globalization; without extensive systems of mobility – and globalist, or neoliberal, claims for opening markets and states to external flows – social processes could not take place at a global scale or be imagined as such" (Sheller 2014: 794).

I argue that the kind of migration American and European expats are performing in southern Ecuador specifically and all over the world in general would not be possible without the processes of globalization and that the north-south migration they perform is, in fact, an integral part of the many processes of globalization in the modern world – just as mobility itself is both symptom and cause of globalization.

A consisting critique on the global politics of mobility and movement is posed by Doreen Massey. She argues that who can move and who cannot is based on 'power geometries':

> "Different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway-differentiated mobility: some are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement; others don't; some are more on the receiving end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it" (Massey 2018 [1993]: 151).

While some groups of people are more mobile than others, they also have the power and control over the range of mobility of 'the other'; with 'the others' being mostly citizens from countries of the Global South and of what used to be the target regions of European imperialism. The right to move is severely unequally distributed and tied to global power relations (Skeggs 2004).

Postcolonial research has shown that a broad range of interconnected routes and relations continue to rely on the global advantage of the West that was formed and influenced by the colonial European enterprise, which categorized the world into "the West and the rest". The continuation of this categorization is actively reinforced by "the active reconstruction of the categories of West and rest" via "the active performance of routine, rhythm and repetition" (Lester 2012: 1; see also Hall

2002 [1996]). Hence, it is not some passive, linear continuation of colonial practices that create this state of the global, but the colonial continuity is actively enhanced and reproduced by a variety of Western patterns that are taken out into the world. It emphasizes the agency that Westerners have in their actions and the ways they decide to move around.

For the course of this thesis, I use the term lifestyle migration when regarding to the more open framework of lifestyle-related migration, just as I will use north-south migration as a narrower and more concise concept that considers the history and the meaning of global inequality and the imminent consequences. I argue that the term lifestyle migration, of course, perfectly underlines the lifestyle-related aspects of this highly individually characterized endeavor, while simultaneously hiding the system of global inequality in movement and migration and hence the extreme forms of power and privilege that migrants from the Global North are inevitably part of. These exact structures of human-made inequality that dates to the beginning of colonization and eurocentrism, are what allows for lifestyle migrants to relocate to countries of the Global South as comparably easily as they currently can, while concurrently being reproduced by the exact same migrants at their place of relocation. In comparison, the term north-south migration, simply by referring to global spheres, already considers the inequal power structures of global range hidden behind – and at the same time enabling – the migratory process.

Following Finnish researcher Päivi Kannisto, I will avoid the use of the terms 'push and pull factors', as so widely used in general migration studies and research, in the course of this thesis. While push factors are commonly defined as negative factors that drive people away from their country, such as poverty, violence, and discrimination etc., pull factors "initiate and influence the decision to migrate by attracting [people] to another country" (European Commission, Migration and Home Affairs 2022).

Kannisto describes the underlying problem of the push and pull model regarding lifestyle migration as follows:

> "The problem of push and pull factors is that their focus is often on a national and economic level and, as a result, migrants are perceived to be passive, merely reacting to external stimuli. […] For lifestyle migrants, leaving is usually a choice, or at least it is represented that way, and thus their lifestyle *pays attention to agency*. They leave their countries of origin behind in order to construct their own space, communities, and identities. Many of them dislike being recognized by their pasts, because the past was imposed on them rather than chosen" (Kannisto 2014: 28, italics by me).

The specific terminology on the phenomenon of lifestyle migration or transnational north-south migration in academic works varies greatly, depending on the scholar and their respective focus of research, and can be divided into sub-categories such as 'retirement migration' (see van Noorloos/Steel 2016), regarding only to relocating retirees, and 'residential tourism' (ibid.), in case of those who only move part-time and frequently switch between at least two places. Another almost simultaneously used term for lifestyle migration is 'amenity migration' (see Gosnell/Abrams 2011; Rainer 2019).

Swedish researcher Catrin Lundström shifts the attention from a narrow focus on terminology for the same phenomenon to an important aspect almost entirely overlooked and introduces the term – and the approach – 'white migration' to the debate. She outlines a simple, but not less shocking state: a migrant, by definition, is not supposed to be white. Hence, white people are rarely read as migrants, but rather expatriates or travelers.[3] Lundström continues:

> "Conceptually, the term *migrant* tends to be used as a marker for people excluded from the "white" social category and non-Western-ness, indirectly linked to experiences of discrimination. Subsequently, racialized bodies not qualified for whiteness, are often conflated with being migrants, despite their citizenship. Migrants seen as white tend, on the contrary, to be excluded from the category of migrants […]" (2013: 192).

In this sense, all the migration processes discussed above *could* count as white migrations – at the very least, they are interwoven with the concept of race and hence the allocation of privileges.

Lundström outlines the necessity of discussing this concept, so as not to continue to connect the concept of migration exclusively with the notion of less-privileged individuals from the Global South moving north (ibid.: 193). It hinders the comprehension of the vast extent that the concept of migration actually includes and further encourages disparities and biases towards migrants from the Global South, who are basically automatically put on a level with refugees – a word of even more negative connotation in a global context. Additionally, "the notion of the 'migrant' [imagined as the embodiment of suffering] is also a result of the recurrent focus on *in*-migration rather than *out*-migration in Europe and the US" (Lundström 2014: 1, italics by the author). And, just as I have discussed above, Lundström continues arguing that while those non-Western, non-white bodies migrating are often connected to 'being illegal' or framed as crossing borders without a state's

[3] See chapter 2.3.2. for a more detailed draft on the concept of the expatriate.

permission, ‘white migrants’ are allowed to move around the world on their own agency, in whatever role they choose to be in, without being lastingly hindered by border patrol or at passport controls. This condition is closely entangled with global politics of mobility, as well as the restrictions and possibilities that come with it. Just as ‘typical’ – read: non-Western – migrants need to redefine themselves during and after the migration process[4], privileged (white) migrants need to “reinstall themselves” as well, pointing to the “instalment of bodies in new asymmetric power relations and structures through migration” (ibid.: 2). This applies to ‘white’ and ‘non-white’ migrants alike, with the difference of ‘white’ migrants usually being the ones exercising the power, almost regardless of their circumstances, while ‘non-white’ migrants are mainly subjected to power. Likewise, as much as ‘non-white’ migrants experience these power asymmetries and the restrictions imposed upon them in their everyday lives, the privileges of ‘white’ migrants remain invisible to those who profit from them (Lundström 2013: 194). The argumentation of who is seen as a migrant and why, and who is not, will prove important regarding to the people I define as lifestyle migrants who were interviewed for this thesis and who gave significant insight and information about their self-designation and the way they locate themselves in their Ecuadorian environment (see chapter 4).

The problem Lundström describes, which happens to often be overlooked in academic approaches on unequal global mobilities, is one that sociologists Manuela Boatcă and Fabio Santos, among others, point out as well: “[…] they [hyper-mobile individuals from the Global North] are hardly ever targeted as subjects of integration policies or threats to national cohesion – not least because they are not defined or do not identify as migrants in the first place” (2023: 133). While ‘white’ migrants from the Global North have access to the majority of countries around the world and, once there, are free to do as they please, simply due to their geographical origin and the national citizenship related to it, ‘non-white’ migrants from most countries of the Global South are confronted with

[4] I argue that, as an outsider, it is rather difficult and problematic to speak about migration as a finished process, rather than an ongoing one that, once started, rarely ever ends, especially in the context of ‘non-white’ migrants relocating to countries of the Global North. The never-ending migration process, in countries of the European Union as much as the United States, is fueled by strict immigration laws and systemic inequality, and often racism, creating an ever-so-strong climate of rejection.
Hence, I refer here to a very subjective point of view of a migrants’ life, where they would claim for themselves to have settled in their new environment so far as to define their migration process as ‘finished’.

mechanically being pushed into a life of restrictions and illegality. In this context it is important to refer to the entanglements of citizenship, mobility, and global inequality. Even though this topic is not the main element of this thesis, it cannot be overlooked when discussing global (lifestyle) mobility patterns – proving even more the highly intersectional character of lifestyle migration. As I will outline in chapters 3 and 4, (second) citizenship is relatively easy to achieve for lifestyle migrants from the Global North moving south – it is merely a question of time, patience, and money. Consequently, for individuals randomly born on the 'lucky' side of global hemispheres (ergo the Global North), opportunities (not only of movement, but generally) are plenty and chances of being criminalized in a foreign country simply because of the act of moving around are low – just as it is the exact other way round with people from the Global South trying to make use of their historically enforced limited mobility (see Shachar 2009).

The influence something as little as a passport and the emblem printed on it has on the opportunities of its respective holder seems almost obscenely preposterous, given the fact that it is directly – but not solely – connected to the chances people have in their lives (for further analysis on nationality, (post)coloniality, and inequality see Korzeniewicz/Moran 2009; Boatcă/Roth 2016).

2.2. Escaping the Urban: The Meaning of Rurality in Migration

As mentioned in the beginning of chapter 2.1., the inclusion of rural-oriented lifestyle migration processes is of severe importance in respect of this thesis' field of research, which is the remote village of Vilcabamba in the southern Ecuadorian Andes. One of the research questions to answer with this thesis is why exactly the migrants settled on Vilcabamba of all places, when, in comparison, the city of Cuenca, also a hotspot among international lifestyle migrants, seems to offer more security and amenities in everyday life through being generally bigger, easier accessible by transportation and offering higher standards in cultural entertainment, food supply and health care. Interestingly, as I will elaborate further in chapter 4 when diving deeper into everyone's reasons for choosing Vilcabamba, it is for precisely the factors just mentioned that migrants decide against Cuenca and deliberately settle for Vilcabamba as their new place of residence.

Geographer Keith Halfacree and sociologist María Jesús Rivera argue that migration towards the countryside is an act of significant representational meaning, "even more so as it is often underpinned by positively valued sociocultural constructions of rurality" (2012: 93). Hence, the act of moving to rural areas is strongly connected to sociocultural imaginaries of what rurality represents and what can be achieved by the individual once it has moved there. Mostly, the imaginaries of what rurality stands for connect with the main goal for lifestyle migrants, as we have explored in chapter 2.1.: a better quality of life; not to say those notions are inevitably a part of that exact quest (Benson/Osbaldiston 2014: 9).

The countryside represents what could be called an almost antiquated way of life from a modernist and postmodernist point of view: tranquility, simplicity, a slower pace of living and an overall tidiness that can only be dreamed of in most urban areas. It also reflects the need to live a less materialistic, less wasteful life, with a focus on environmental sustainability, in places that are perceived as nearly untouched by the impacts of postmodernity (Kordel/Pohle 2018: 127). The rural is even pictured as a "response to the rise of urban civilization" (Bunce 2003: 15). Even Georg Simmel argued already in favor of the supposedly tranquil, peaceful rural and its calming effects on people's minds as opposed to the sensory overload provided by urban areas, which was especially driven by the invention of clock-time and the implementation of the money economy. According to Simmel, both increased the stress level of city inhabitants significantly and the rural represented an escape route from the hamster wheel that constituted urban life (1950 [1903]).

In addition, Benson and O'Reilly state that "rural locations are imagined to offer lifestyle migrants a sense of stepping back in time, getting back to the land, the simple or good life, as well as a sense of community spirit" (2009: 612). The "rural idyll" has become a narrative that represents the opposite of the day-to-day life most people are living in a highly globalized (thus hyper-mobile), capitalized, maximized world, which puts them under an enormous amount of stress. Halfacree names the rural narrative, based on his research, to be "an alternative universe to that of our postmodern capitalist world" (2004: 249). Marc Mormont explains that as follows:

> "Rurality is claimed not only as a space to be appropriated for a particular form of leisure or for conservation but as a way of life, or a model of an alternative society inspiring a social project that challenges contemporary social and economic ill […] the present difficulties of industrialized regions are seen to prove the failure of a development model which relies on industry, size, technology and bureaucratic management" (1987: 18).

So, ultimately, rurality in this form represents an exaggerated imagination of an almost paradisiac utopian escape from the strain of postmodernist, capitalist society. Mormont continues:

> "Peasant autarky, village community and ancient techniques are no longer relics, but images which legitimize this social project of a society which would be ruralized, so to speak, or in which rurality would be revalued. The aim is not to recreate a past way of life but to develop forms of social and economic life different from those prevailing at present […]" (ibid.).

Migration, then, serves as the ultimate attempt at gaining access to this alternative lifestyle (Halfacree 2004: 250, italics by me). Moving to the countryside, in this sense, stands for a form of escape from the demands of capitalized societies in mostly industrialized countries which create an ongoing atmosphere of strain, burden and pressure at the expense of the people living in them.

Rurality itself remains, by all means, a social construct – but one that allows for people to realistically try and improve their lives, 'simply' by alternating their place of living.

2.3. Mobile Lifestyles, Lifestyle Mobility: Moving as an Ongoing Lifestyle Choice

However categorized or named, transnational north-south migration (and its sub-divisions) is a part of the broader category of 'privileged mobility'. The terminology used on this subject can be quite confusing. Scholars write of migrants, expats, global (neo-)nomads, cosmopolitans and the list goes on, all trying to figure out a way of defining razor-thin differences in the individual meaning of each of these concepts, while at the same time they all somehow overlap – and, as I will show, the transitions are fluid.

In addition to the notions of nomads, expatriates and cosmopolitans, there are, of course, other categorizations in the scholarly debate, such as the tourist or the vagabond. Since with this subchapter I aim at providing a mere synopsis of the terms that are mentioned the most in relation to the description and classification of lifestyle migrants and hence are important to distinguish, not all the other possible concepts and approaches find room in this overview.

2.3.1. Nomadism

Anthony D'Andrea has introduced the term global nomads or expressive expatriates in relation to certain individuals who perform an expressive lifestyle of

hypermobility (2006: 97), meaning people who, by making use of their privileged mobility, "embrace the global as a new home and reference" (ibid.). Those individuals are mostly Europeans or North Americans, "white young adults" as D'Andrea describes them, who express rather ambivalent emotions towards their respective home countries and work mostly in informal occupations, while travelling regularly between their home country and, in this case study, the island of Ibiza, Spain, and the city of Goa, India (ibid.: 96). The global nomads fully meet the privileged mobility standards as I have elaborated above, but their motivation is fueled by cultural motivations rather than economic considerations. D'Andrea explains further: "Many of them have abandoned urban hubs where they enjoyed a favorable material status (income, stability, prestige), and migrated to semi-peripheral locations with a pleasant climate, in order to dedicate themselves to the shaping of an alternative lifestyle" (ibid.: 98). The term 'alternative' is important here; the nomads are looking for a culturally distinct lifestyle from what they've known and lived before, leaning away from consumerism and strongly towards spirituality and counter culturalism. They are designated as hippies, bohemians, ravers or New Agers (ibid.).

Päivi Kannisto sums up the figure of the global nomad as follows:

> "Global nomads are full-time travellers who wander the world of their own accord without a fixed abode, place of employment, or localized circle of friends. […] They live in the margins of sedentary societies […], [they] are homeless, or – depending on your point of view – at home wherever they happen to be" (2014: 2).

In stark contrast to the popular sedentary societies that always include continuity and stability in the forms of a steady income and a state of 'at-home-ness', global nomads are permanently moving, rejecting the very same sense of location-dependence and work ethic. For Kannisto, they represent the growing "restlessness of Western societies" (ibid.: 2-3).

In a sense, this often-romanticized notion of the footloose individual who is home nowhere and everywhere at the same time, moving along with any ideas and emotions that lead them somewhere new, maybe even somewhere more exciting than the place before, tends to represent the narrative of a social drop-out that goes against the metaphorical current. What is hidden beneath the surface though is the privilege that enables such nomadic mobility. The concept of the social drop-out is by no means a new phenomenon, but it is connected to disproportionate amounts of glorification and condemnation in popular culture: in an article published 1993, US-

American journalist Jon Krakauer raised attention first all over the United States and later, after publishing a book based on the same article, almost all over the rest of the world.[5] It is about Christopher Johnson McCandless, born into a wealthy white family from Virginia, who, after finishing his university degree in 1990, abandoned almost all his possessions, cut all ties to his family, destroyed his credit cards, burned his remaining cash and left with only his car to live a life on the road, unbothered and freed from the pressure, expectations and capitalist lifestyle of both his parents and modern society alike. His story gained even more attention after being turned into a movie in 2007. McCandless' story, as depicted especially in the movie, reveals a certain amount of childhood trauma, and gave viewers more than enough cause for speculation regarding his motivations of cutting all ties to his family and living a nomadic life. In this case, nomadism could just be another frame for 'voluntarily homeless'. Also, Christopher McCandless was by no means a global nomad, but rather a national nomad since he never left his home country. Nevertheless, he surely did not live a sedentary life and many of the aspects of (global) nomads that I have mentioned above do apply to him as well.

This story is just one example about how modern nomadic stories gain attention and can spread unhindered, all while being overly romanticized. I, for one, was substantially impressed when first being confronted with the movie in my high school English class, after which my teacher asked how us students would categorize the protagonist: a hero, who dared to break out and pursue his dreams, or rather an ignorant greenhorn, who was blind to the dangers of his undertake and the devastating effects it would have on his family?

My own fascination did not fade but even increased after reading the book; myself a teenager feeling trapped in a boring yet relatively privileged small-town life I could strangely relate to whatever reasons drove McCandless to pursue this lifestyle. The reason why this story gained so much attention and was even turned into first an article in an outdoor magazine and later a book, was not necessarily the way he lived his life though, but the way it ended: he died alone in an abandoned bus in the Alaskan wilderness, most likely by a combination of food poisoning and

[5] See "Into The Wild", 1996, and "Death of an Innocent: How Christopher McCandless lost his way in the wilds", 1993. It is also necessary to mention that in the book, Krakauer focuses not only on McCandless' story but on the general interest and seemingly irrational fascination of human beings to move to the remote edges of the world (in this case mostly cold, mountainous regions) and live a self-sufficient life.

starvation, found only weeks after his death, at the age of 24 (Krakauer 2007 [1996]).

It is tempting to think about how McCandless' story would be received (and likely repeated) in today's social media era – even though he himself would probably have avoided social media platforms at all costs.[6]

Surely, this example of an uncompromising 20th-century nomad, who, at some point, must have lost track of his human limitations, is an extreme one and it is not necessarily representative. But it confirms the point of modern nomadism often being constituted as or at least being connected to an ascetic anti-capitalist, anti-materialist, anti-everything way of life and the popular glorification that followed. One could even designate nomadism in this sense, global or not, as a form of protest against 'our' (meaning: citizens of mostly industrialized countries of the Global North) modern, sedentary way of life and the expectations and limitations that come with it. Christopher McCandless' story of roaming around on his own, with no attachments whatsoever, and the cultural and social enthusiasm following it, is an exquisite example of how this peculiar choice of lifestyle, when pursued by a white, (upper) middle-class young man from North America, is presented as an odd, yet marketable story of interest for the public eye. In contrast, looking at people in both parts of the global hemisphere, who are not voluntarily without a home and steady income, but brutally forced into homelessness without any sort of social security net – who is telling their story?[7]

2.3.2. Expatriates

Generally, and very simply, an expatriate is perceived as someone who lives abroad, "in a country that is not their own" (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries 2023). Even though 'the expatriate' did not become much of a subject of research before the beginning of the 21st-century, and much less a topic of interest, social anthropologist Erik Cohen already researched and published about 'expatriate communities' in 1977. He describes expatriates as "a neo-colonial or imperialist phenomenon", representing economic interests not on a personal but on an

[6] On the influence this story had in popular culture and the criticism on it, see Diana Saverins article: "The Chris McCandless Obsession Problem", in *Outside Magazine*, 2013.

[7] For publications on more precarious social types of nomads see for example Jessica Bruder "Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century", 2017; and the appendant movie "Nomadland", 2020, by director Chloé Zhao.

industrial level, and "hence often symbolize and help to perpetuate a relationship of dependency between the developing and the major developed countries" (1977: 5). Cohen continues describing expatriates as hard to define inside the research current of migration studies, but he classifies them into four groups of migration motivation: business (i.e. employees of "foreign and multinational firms, representatives, managers"), mission (military personnel, diplomats, development and aid workers), teaching and research (academics and scientists), and, lastly, leisure ("the wealthy, the retired living abroad, bohemians and drop-outs") (ibid.: 6). He also specifies expatriates as "mostly from affluent countries". So, to broaden the concise definition of the expatriate given at the beginning of this subchapter, they not only live in a country that is not their own, but do so voluntarily and rather temporarily than permanently, and they bring with them a certain wealth and are driven by one of the purposes mentioned above. In addition to Cohen, Alan Lester also draws a connection between the early stages of colonialism and modern expatriates, stating expatriates to come from a motivation that could be named "imperial careerism". He argues for them to "occupy a particular position in relation to other kinds of 'Westerners' who have and do inhabit or travel through 'non-Western' spaces" (Lester 2012: 2). As neither settlers nor travelers or explorers, expatriates by that definition take on a social position that is deeply rooted in colonial structures and at the same time is enhanced through the modern expatriates' repetition of movement and behavioral patterns (ibid.: 3).

Another protruding characteristic of expatriatism is the privilege that constitutes it. Sarah Kunz, for example, argues expatriates to be part of flows of privileged migration that emanate in the Global North, immanently associated with questions of power relations (2016: 89-90). It is important to stress the meaning of the category 'expatriate' as substantial to "many migrants' own discourses on identity" (ibid.), which relates strongly to the approach of white migration as elaborated in chapter 2.1. Because the term migrant, and the attributions associated with it, do not appeal for most of the (relatively) affluent – and mostly white – 'migrants' from the Global North, other categories of identity and self-description come into play. As Kunz states further on: "Expatriate migrant identities are certainly constructed against and in relation to 'Others'" (ibid.: 91). This is a subject that I will further develop in the analytical part of this thesis, regarding the descriptions my

interviewees used for themselves and taking into consideration the history and the postcolonial context of Ecuador in which these migrations take place.

Just as ‘migrant’ is a word solely used on ‘less-privileged’ people from the Global South moving north, the ‘expatriate’ is a Western concept that similarly applies almost exclusively to individuals with citizenships from countries of the Global North. Inadvertently or not, they try to differentiate their own relocation from the migratory process of ‘less-privileged’ migrants, this way enhancing their position in being part of so-called “cosmopolitan elites”[8] (ibid.). In addition to their relative freedom of self-designation and identification in their new life abroad, the extent to which expat migrants choose to integrate and participate in their receiving or host communities is up to their liking – unlike migrants from the Global South, who, once they have managed to cross the border against all odds, are mostly forced into place by the regulations the respective nation-state imposes on them and have little to no choice in their actions (ibid.: 94-95).

2.3.3. Cosmopolitanism

Coming back to the introduction of this subchapter, expats and global nomads are at the same time cosmopolitans, at least to some extent, while global nomads are simultaneously expatriates. However, not all expats live a lifestyle that could define them as nomads. The term cosmopolitan, in a very general way, refers to anyone moving around in the world, whereby some people act presumably more cosmopolitan than others (Hannerz 1990: 238). The definition of the cosmopolitan is closely linked to cultural terms: cosmopolitans are supposed to create and maintain relations with different and distinct cultures, therefore creating a plurality of diversity of their own experience, and to acknowledge the coexistence of cultures in the world and their individual perception. It is a “willingness to engage with the Other”, to surrender to foreign cultures and engage with them on an intense, interior level with the aim to achieve some sort of competence and understanding (ibid.: 239-240). While cosmopolitanism can be a long-term experience, the commitment is limited in time.

[8] The term ‘cosmopolitan elites‘, in this sense, is not to be confused with the frequent use of the same term in conspiracy theory, there regarding the antisemitic narrative of Jews posing a global or cosmopolitan power elite (see Anti-Defamation League: Antisemitism uncovered, 2023).

According to Hannerz' argumentation, the most concurring form of cosmopolitanism is met in the concept of the expatriate, because the expat meets with the exact conditions named above. Nevertheless, he points out that "not [that] all expatriates are living models of cosmopolitanism; colonialists were also expatriates, and mostly they abhorred 'going native'" (ibid.: 243). Further on, cosmopolitanism is often connected to the educated European middle-class and since has a somewhat elitist hint. Hannerz himself argues in the beginning of his essay on cosmopolitanism that Nigerian citizens traveling frequently between the cities of London and Lagos are, in fact, not to be defined as cosmopolitans by his interpretation of the term (ibid.: 238), whereas, in a reversed imagination of the same illustration, namely German, British or Dutch citizens traveling transcontinental to that extent, would be praised for making use of their possibilities of roaming a – for them – nearly limitless world.

Although it is not my position here to insinuate any form of malicious intent, this position does speak of some unquestioned white, European habitus[9].

Scholar Walter Mignolo explains cosmopolitanism as a condition that is opposed to globalization, meaning that instead of further consolidating neoliberal standards as they are inherent to processes of globalization, cosmopolitanism "is a set of projects that work toward planetary conviviality", following the Andean indigenous notion of the *vivir bien*: living according to and respecting nature. The foci of capitalist societies – competition and personal success on several levels – stand against that direction. According to Mignolo, modernity itself, just as much as coloniality, is a cosmopolitan project; hence any form of global endeavor is a cosmopolitan project in one way or another – and linked to coloniality and "a renewed Westernization". In that sense, "cosmopolitanism is a Western project" and strengthens global power geometries in favor of the West (Mignolo 2011: 255-258).

[9] White or Western habitus is described by Lundström as a component of the intersectional approach of 'white capital', following Pierre Bourdieus elaborations on different forms of capital, depicting here a type of cultural capital. Herself following scholar Sara Ahmed (2007), Lundström considers whiteness "as a form of *habit*, as second nature, that defines what bodies do, how they are repeated, and also shapes what bodies *can do*, and, […] what they *choose* to do" (2013: 194, italics by the author). Hence, white capital, including white habitus, is inextricably linked to systemic white privilege and the performance of it, or, depending on the point of view, even representing the privilege itself.

At the same time fluid and yet differentiated, the distinctions or rather the difficulty of distinction between these three concepts highlights one very important factor: the reality of people living according to these lifestyles and their self-designation do not necessarily need to match the definitions described by academic scholarship and are likely to intertwine. Generally, defining categories such as expatriates, nomads and cosmopolitans, and distinguishing them from others, is an intersectional endeavor, which is densely connected to other fields of interest such as race, class, gender and nationality (Kunz 2016: 90).

3. CONTEXTUALIZING VILCABAMBA AS A TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION DESTINATION

In this chapter I will elaborate on the general reasons that have turned Ecuador in general and Vilcabamba specifically into a popular destination of growing interest for international (lifestyle) migrants. Therefore, I will rely on reporting and documentation of the history of the village of Vilcabamba and other sources whose authors themselves tackled the challenge of locating and capturing the uncommonly high curiosity on the village, as much as my own knowledge and the insights gained during my stay there. Subsequently, I will give a brief overview of the ongoing 'commercial exploitation' of Vilcabamba by the real estate industry and the consequences linked to that marketing.

3.1. A Shangri-La in Ecuador? Vilcabamba as a Place of Longing

> "Oh, Vilcabamba: where mountains soar alluringly above town, where the balmy air is synonymous with longevity, […] where those who encounter it simply get waylaid – sometimes for months, sometimes years… The area's beautiful scenery, mild weather and laid-back vibe attract waves of visitors: backpackers as well as North American and European retirees. The hills are dotted with big new houses, and the town plaza with expat-owned businesses. Gringo-ization has created tension about the cost of land and living, but the flip side is that jobs in tourism and construction are more plentiful than ever, and Vilcabamba is the rare Ecuadorian *pueblo* where young people have little ambition to leave for the big city" (Yanagihara 2018: 200, italics by the author).

The summary quoted above is how Vilcabamba is presented as a destination of interest in the global travel guide series Lonely Planet. What the author and the editors did not grant more than half a column of space in the book, I will illustrate in more detail in the following: the recent history of Vilcabamba and the factors that contributed to its fame. For this purpose, I will start with some general information about Vilcabamba, moving on to the myth of the 'valley of longevity' and ending with an insight as to how this myth, while already having been falsified sufficiently, still contributes to the growing interest in contemporary Vilcabamba and continues to shape and change the area.

3.1.1. General facts: Location, population, climate, and surroundings

The village is situated in the southern Ecuadorian province of Loja in the Andes mountains, on an altitude of 1700 meters above sea level. It has roughly 5000 inhabitants, according to the last census from 2010 (Gobierno de Loja 2023), but

the number only accounts for people registered as either Ecuadorian citizens or immigrants with a permanent residence visa and hence does not consider the people who come to live there whose lifestyle could be described as some sort of long-term tourists or the ones living with a temporary visa waiting for permanent residency – let alone the migrants who, for financial reasons or their own creed, do not register with the authorities at all. They have the possibility to enter the country with a passport that enables them to stay in the country for up to 90 days on a tourist visa, with the option of extending their stay legally to 180 days, so they do not have to apply for some form of residence visa. After expiry of the tourist visa, they stay put where they are – technically making them 'illegal' immigrants. However, information about lifestyle migrants or long-term tourists staying illegally were mostly hearsay; to my knowledge almost all my research participants held some sort of visa they had officially applied to.

The name Vilcabamba originates from Quechua 'Huillopamba', which translates to Sacred Valley (Gobierno de Loja 2023). The village is indeed, just as the Lonely Planet segment at the beginning of this subchapter advertises, surrounded by mountains of up to 2500 meters, with the *parque nacional Podocarpus*, which is known for its high amount of biological diversity, in direct proximity. The city of Loja, the capital of the province of the same name, is situated around 40 kilometers north of Vilcabamba.

Vilcabamba itself consists of a town center with the six *barrios urbanos* of San Francisco, Las Palmas, Barrio Central, Los Huilcos, Santo Domingo and Eterna Juventud, as well as several surrounding neighborhoods (*barrios rurales*) such as San José, Yamburara Bajo, Yamburara Alto, Izhcayluma Bajo and Izhcayluma Alto, to only name a few. Additionally, there is also the *barrio* of Mollepamba, which, unlike the neighborhoods named before (which have proven to be of high interest to lifestyle migrants), is a *barrio* that is almost exclusively inhabited by indigenous and mestizo/a Ecuadorians and, during my stay in the area, did not seem of any interest to neither tourists nor aspiring expats. Other villages and small towns close to Vilcabamba that lifestyle migrants in the area are interested to live in are Malacatos and San Pedro de Vilcabamba to the north and Quinara and Yangana south of Vilcabamba.

The area is attractive for tourists, who can explore the adjacent mountains through hiking to one of the many waterfalls, walk up the valley's most popular mountain, the *Cerro Mandango* – which is said to look like the profile of a sleeping Inka man – or go for a swim in one of the two rivers whose waters come down from the national park. Especially for backpackers, who come from the coast or central Ecuador and plan on crossing the southern border to Peru, with the closest border checkpoint being located around four to five hours from Vilcabamba, the village is of use as a welcome stopover.[10]

The climate is mostly perceived as comfortable, with year-round temperatures of 18 to 24 degrees Celsius, even though rainy season can last between three to six months between the months of October and April, with occasional intermissions.[11]

3.1.2. *"Donde el tiempo se detiene y la vida se alarga"*: The myth of longevity

One of the biggest and most widespread mysteries regarding Vilcabamba is the narrative of presumed longevity, giving the valley its nickname: *valle de longevidad*, or, in English, 'valley of longevity'. It originates from investigations made in the early 1970s by British medical researcher David Davies, who claimed that a substantial number of inhabitants were above the age of 90, with a few even reaching up to 110 years or more while still being in formidable health (Davies 1975). His propositions were promptly dismissed as "systematic age exaggeration" when fellow researchers published a paper in 1979 which debunked Davies' 'discovery' and questioned the accuracy of his research methods (cf. Mazess/Forman 1979). Richard Mazess and Sylvia Forman found out that a large number of baptismal records of Vilcabamba's elderly citizens had been destroyed in a church fire years before, in addition to several elderly inhabitants having used birth records and identification cards of much younger family members to prove

[10] Due to the outbreak of the CoViD-19 pandemic in early spring 2020 and the containment policies following it, the number of tourists coming through Vilcabamba on their way to the Peruvian border had decreased remarkably. The nearest border crossing point remained closed until mid-February 2022. During my stay in Vilcabamba between February and April, two full years after the beginning of the pandemic, the flows of travelers slowly started to go back to normal.

[11] During the time of my stay the rainy season was perceived to be unusually intense, with heavy rainfalls that lasted for hours and frequently caused landslides along several sections of the main road that connects Vilcabamba to the cities of Loja and, subsequently, Cuenca; sometimes blocking the road for days. The rains also caused inundations that damaged water pipes, leading to the whole village being cut off water supply for days.

their allegedly old ages, which had been facilitated by the frequent doubling of names and surnames in the area. They also connected the exaggerated age presentations with the high number of illiteracies in the area, concluding that most of the elderly presumably had not been able to read any birth records at all and therefore, when speaking to Davies about their age, simply guessed their approximate age and overstated in the process (ibid.: 94-95). Conducting a census in Vilcabamba themselves, Mazess and Forman concluded that there had been extreme exaggerations of age in cases of citizens above 70 years, with the example of some 'centenarians' whose ages had been stated as 100 and 130 years old, respectively, estimated as actually being 84 and 95 years of age. However, they continued that the elderly population they had investigated, did, in fact, have tremendous physical health for their age, compared to their peers in other parts of the world (ibid.: 96-98).

The generally good state of health of the elderly population, centenarians or not, remains a point of interest to this day, one that is even picked up by the province administration to advertise on their website's section about Vilcabamba. As contributing factors to that health are named: the clean, unpolluted air of the valley, the clear waters of the *rio Chamba* and the *rio Uchima* which are said to be rich in iron, the people's diets, which are said to be mainly based on the health-beneficial, low-in-fat crops such as corn, beans, potatoes and several kinds of fruits and vegetables that grow year-round – a condition that some people, Ecuadorians and immigrants alike, take for reason to compare the valley to the literal Garden of Eden. Finally, it is the mountainous terrain and the required physical activity that complement the factors that contribute to what the province administration even titled *el secreto de Vilcabamba* (Gobierno de Loja 2023).

The census study by Mazess and Forman was further developed – and confirmed with the results from the 1979 paper – by Mazess and Mathisen (1982), who concluded that there was no unusual longevity evident in the Vilcabamba population. Nevertheless, the myth of longevity and 'eternal youth' continues to be firmly linked to the area and poses a common theme: there is a street named *Avenida Eterna Juventud*, a hostel *Eterna Juventud*, a general store of the same name, and another street titled *Agua de hierro* in relation to the mineral-rich water of the two rivers, not to mention the town motto displayed in large letters aside the *parque* in the main square: 'Vilcabamba – donde el tiempo se detiene y la vida se alarga'.

3.1.3. Contemporary Vilcabamba

The myth that had formed around Vilcabamba was further developed when, also during the early 1970s, a former US-American who had named himself Johnny Lovewisdom settled down in the neighborhood of Yamburara Alto. Before coming to Vilcabamba, he lived as a hermit near Quilotoa, a crater lake in the northern Andes of Ecuador. He is said to essentially have been the first expat who settled in the area and the first one to establish the lifestyle of strict frutarianism, because of the rich produce the valley offered year-round. Additionally, his main aim was to go back to the roots of a biblical paradise and to live accordingly, to live in as much harmony with nature as possible (Kulvinskas 1975). On that basis he soon started forming what can be described as a cult, promoting a spiritual, holistic way of life. Up until his death near Quito in 1998 he had published several books on spirituality, esoteric ways of life, natural diets and, also, on unverified pseudo-sciences he believed in. The exact date or year of Lovewisdom's arrival in the Vilcabamba area is contested and not verified, but he imprinted himself in the memory of those how had met him and still live in the village today. Just as much controversial is the question whether he came to Vilcabamba because he was attracted to the idea of longevity or if he had already moved there before the narrative even came up. Two of my informants, Joy and Curtis, who moved to the valley in 1980, even debated this among themselves, with Joy, whose mother had been a part of the group of people living with Lovewisdom, being sure it did not have anything to do with the fame of longevity, whereas her husband disagreed: "Pero Johnny Lovewisdom vino primero y creo que fue por la fama también de la longevidad. ¿O por qué vino Johnny Lovewisdom? ¿Fue por el clima?" (Interview with Curtis, San Pedro de Vilcabamba, 19/02/2022).

Generally, Joy articulated the growing interest in Vilcabamba had, in her opinion, more to do with the original article on longevity published by David Davies than with an ongoing fascination in and New Age followers of Johnny Lovewisdom:

"Pero el artículo de Dr. Davis también tiene mucho que ver con como Vilcabamba sale. Sea de qualquier razón, pero salió sin tomar en cuenta gringos ni Johnny ni nada" (Interview with Joy, San Pedro de Vilcabamba, 19/02/2022).

Glenn, another interviewee who, like Curtis and Joy, had already come to the valley in the 1970s and never left since, voiced a less benevolent opinion about Johnny Lovewisdom and his influence in the valley:

> "He's not really important, because he was a bitter old man. They came here and he was influential and brought several people that still live here. But at the same time he was actually a real cast. And when he moved out of the valley it was actually kind of a relief. But what I can say is, you know, this is not really a valley for fanatics. Fanatics have always come here, I used to ask a friend of mine who knew a lot about Ecuador, why do so many crazy people come to Vilcabamba and he says 'everybody thinks they should like it here, but when they get here and they realize they don't like it, they wanna make sure that nobody else likes it either'" (Interview with Glenn, Yamburara Alto, 20/02/2022).

The sentence "this is not a place for fanatics" gains extra importance regarding the number of politically frustrated expatriates and their personal views on the world that I came across during the research for this thesis. I will come back to this in more detail in chapters 4.4 and 5.

Coming back to the introductory paragraph quoted from Lonely Planet, the town plaza in the center of Vilcabamba is, indeed, surrounded by a substantial number of expat-owned businesses, but not only there. Expat-owned shops, bakeries and restaurants are spread throughout the village and the adjacent *barrios*. To only name a few, there is a Belgian-owned French bakery, situated right at the main street (the *Avenida Eterna Juventud*), an American burger place a few blocks down from the main plaza, a German-owned organic café at the other end of the village, another American restaurant in the neighborhood of Yamburara Bajo, and a Turkish-owned falafel and kebap restaurant right next to the church. According to Joy, the establishment of these restaurants, and their comparably large number for a village the size of Vilcabamba, is based on the demands and expectations arriving expats bring with them – especially when compared to the situation in the decades before:

> "Cuando antes, antes nos vivimos aquí, no hubo tampones ni este pan sin gluten ni un cornflake ni un soy sauce ni nada de esas cosas del exterior que no hubo, no existieron. No se entendía, no se conocieron. Y eso vino con la población poco a poco. La demanda y viene para acá".

For the expat community it allows for enjoying a life with what can best be described as 'the best of both worlds': the village provides many amenities like they are used to from their countries of origin, but overall living is (or used to be, see chapter 4.4) much more affordable, and the weather is perceived as much better as well.

On the other side of the church is situated one of several real estate offices of the village, interestingly named *Shangri-La Real Estate*.
In a magazine article from 1973 David Davies described Vilcabamba as a "Shangri-La in Ecuador", regarding its remote location and therefore peaceful tranquility. He

thereby compared the area to the fictional valley of Shangri-La, a place in the Himalayas that represented peace and eternal youth, remote and hidden from civilization. The valley is first mentioned in the novel 'Last Horizon' by James Hilton in 1933. It is defined as "a remote or imaginary utopia" and "a faraway haven or hideaway of idyllic beauty and tranquility" (Collins English Dictionary 2023). Thus, considering the recent history of Vilcabamba, the comparison between the two valleys, fictional or not, offers a glimpse into the expectations, imaginations and narratives that are attributed to Vilcabamba from the outside. Together with the myth of longevity, these ascriptions create a nearly paradisiac place, untouched by civilization and secure from the turmoil of the rest of the world. US-author and journalist Grace Halsell, who visited Vilcabamba frequently and published a book on the medical interest in and the mystery of the presumable centenarians, also draws a comparison to Shangri-La:

> "The village, nestling at 4,500 feet among mountains covered with lush tropical foliage, was untouched by neons, mercantile bustle and those smoking portents of a polluted environment. It reminded one at a glance of the mythical "Shangri-La" of James Hilton's *Last Horizon*" (Halsell 1976: 62).

Among all these comparisons, what catches the eye is the sheer innocence, the unspoiled state, and the resistance against the otherwise all-encompassing global grasps of modernity and progress that are displayed when characterizing Vilcabamba.

Charlie, one of the first people I interviewed during my stay, a 70-year-old restaurant owner originally from Virginia, summarized Vilcabamba in a very similar and common way:

> "So, Vilcabamba had a reputation as backpacker heaven, hippie heaven, a type of Shangri-La, a getaway and as sufficiently different from the pressure of urban living, the pace of urban living around the world and it was just the sort of thing a lot of people were looking for in order to rest, and to deconstruct their sense of tension in their body, in their mind and the stress in their lives" (Interview with Charlie, Vilcabamba, 10/02/2022).

Charlie's comment refers to the time when he first became interested in relocating to Vilcabamba in 2001, but the reputation as he describes it has not changed since. As I will illustrate in more detail in chapter 4, much of what constituted the myths and legends surrounding Vilcabamba still endures in the present.

3.2. Selling Lifestyle: The Commercialization of Vilcabamba and the Influence of (Social) Media

Matthew Hayes and Rocío Pérez-Gañán (2017) point out two main factors that they ascribe the migration of North Americans to Ecuador to: state factors (regarding to the relatively easy way for foreigners to get first a prolonged visa and later apply for residency) and the transnationalization of real estate markets, the last one posing a key factor when discussing the process of commercialization of Vilcabamba (and, in general, Ecuador). Internationally operating real estate companies promote Ecuador as a "lifestyle destination", while profiting from rather lax real estate regulatories issued by the Ecuadorian state and a land law from 1994 which facilitated the sales of private land to foreigners. The relatively easy internationalization of the real estate market both simplifies and reinforces the promotion of several Ecuadorian cities and villages as "inexpensive lifestyle and retirement destinations" by travel magazines, blogs and, increasingly, on social media platforms like Facebook and Youtube (ibid.: 119). The interaction of these processes is a main factor in enabling and sustaining lifestyle migration in Ecuador.

The speed of marketization has picked up even more with the advance of modern technologies such as the internet and its several social media platforms. The strategies used to promote migration to Ecuador influence the potential lifestyle migrants' options and decisions; despite their own agency their choices of where to move are not entirely based on personal interest and research. This process is also a political one, including a growing "entanglement between state governance and market logic" (Pallares/Rollins-Castillo 2019: 172-173), meaning the state is very much facilitating and encouraging the interference of international market operators such as real estate companies through governance regulations – the outcome being a win-win situation for both actors (ibid.).

The media company 'International Living', which focuses primarily on the recommendation of sunny and affordable places to retire to, also started to advertise Ecuador as a unique retirement and resettlement destination as part of their global country index ranking. The ranking is based on each country's performance in categories like cost of living, state benefits for retirees, visa requirements, real estate and so on, and Ecuador has been among the top three countries since 2007 (ibid.: 176). Over the years, International Living has gained a certain credibility and strong

reputation among its target group, creating a snowball effect of sorts when it comes to the level of influence they have on the global lifestyle migration market.

Vilcabamba itself is being promoted by International Living with many of the common (and debunked) narratives as a place of longevity and inevitable health, while simultaneously causing rather low expenses of living in combination with an overall improved quality of life. Like author Grace Halsell and the Lonely Planet segment, International Living also makes use of a very illustrative, dreamy language to describe the landscape surrounding Vilcabamba, and, simultaneously, to sell it to its readers:

> "Vilcabamba is clean, small, and friendly. Its dreamy, well-maintained town square is one of our favorites in Ecuador. With their jagged peaks rising on all sides, the surrounding mountains are breathtaking. Crystal-clear streams splash down from the nearby cloud forest, providing the area with clean water. Its climate is one of the best in Ecuador. At a perfect altitude of about 5,000 feet, Vilcabamba enjoys glorious weather all year with temperatures in the 70s and 80s and moderate rainfall" (International Living 2023).

At the same time the website makes very clear that, despite its remote location, peaceful surroundings, and overall tranquility, Vilcabamba does not lack of adequate standards of internet connections to keep in touch with friends and relatives:

> "Of course you'll have many of the modern conveniences of back home. Cable television and cell phones are widespread. High-speed internet means many people who are not yet retired can work from home. It also allows for streaming TV shows and live sporting events from North America, and keeping in regular touch with friends and loved ones back home" (ibid.)

What the website promotes is essentially that regardless of their location, the prospective expatriates will have full access to digital amenities as they have in their home countries, which allows for them to continue a very similar way of life without needing to adapt too much. This development is a fact that Joy and Curtis, who moved to the valley in the 1970s and live there since, have witnessed themselves:

> "Aquí, lo que se ve, lo que hemos sido testigos es que vienen buses, buses de personas organizadas en tours de "turismo", eso entre comillas, porque lo van encontrando con otros extranjeros para entrevistarlos y hasta conecer terrenos de venta. Organizados por real estate, por personas comerciantes, que van a beneficiar de construcción, que se formen un grupo y tienen eses buses, la gente anda, y es así en Costa Rica, en Belize, en México, en todos los partes, pero especialmente aquí. Porque hay ya los gringos aquí […] Es una economía que ayuda á ese boom, no tiene nada que ver con la energía del lugar".

Being able to watch their surroundings change over time, they witnessed not just the modernization of Vilcabamba in terms of the establishment of electricity, internet access and paved roads, but the growing marketization and the economy behind the migratory boom.

The overall importance as well as the influence the internet in general and several social media platforms in particular have on lifestyle-led migratory movements from the global North to the South cannot be stressed enough. There are real estate operators such as 'Abundant Living Ecuador', focusing entirely on promoting the valley of Vilcabamba as a new living destination via their own website, but also widespread across other platforms on YouTube, Facebook and Instagram, who offer "an unparalleled, full service, real estate, and relocation experience" to their clients (Abundant Living Ecuador 2023). Their YouTube channel contains short videos promoting offers on land and houses available in the area as well as videos showing insights into house building processes of other clients and question-and-answer videos with the operators themselves providing advice and answers on basically everything related to the relocation process.

Additionally, there are digital content creators with steadily growing influence on YouTube and Instagram, like the channel 'Amelia and JP'[12], a middle-aged US-American couple documenting their life in Ecuador since moving there in 2017, and Andrew Henderson, a former US-American with his company Nomad Capitalist who does not focus solely on Ecuador as a relocation destination but places all over the world that facilitate personal wealth accumulation, tax benefits, and second citizenships (2023). Among my informants in Vilcabamba, Eric and Reid were especially influenced by these social media channels when they came across them during their online research, with Reid describing it as follows:

> "And I'm in crypto and so in some of my chat groups people talking about like plan Bs and like second citizenships and retirement and how do you retire. So, someone posted a video about Ecuador, JP and Amelia, they have a Youtube channel. So, I watched all their videos and was very intrigued and I also watched some other guys, Nomad Capitalist, he renounced his US citizenship and like completely moved out of the country and lives all over the place, you know, he's got a bunch of money so it's easy to do. But he's got different places, so he had mentioned Ecuador as well, and so then JP and Amelia had one on visa and citizenship and so they had some lawyers on gringo visas and because I knew costs, like I wanted a second citizenship, but I didn't wanna pay like 150.000 dollars for an investment visa and so Ecuador was very economical, their investment visa is actually one of the cheapest in the world" (Interview with Reid, Vilcabamba, 18/02/2022).

Eric, on the other hand, stated that in his decision-making and research process he had mainly been influenced by Abundant Living Ecuador:

> "I heard of Ecuador and there is also these two guys, I can't think of the name of their business, Carl and Jesse [Abundant Living Ecuador], they got a place down here. They were doing these videos like every week or two online, about Vilcabamba and all the different aspects, whether it's education or building or buying land or, you know. I just kept watching those guys going 'damn that sounds like the place to go'. Because I want to live around other foreigners, but I also

[12] See https://www.youtube.com/@AmeliaAndJP/featured.

> want to immerse myself in the culture, you know, I don't wanna be the gringo who never learns a word of Spanish and only talks to his American friends. You know, you wanna become a part of this if you live here" (Interview with Eric, Vilcabamba, 04/04/2022).

For Eric, watching the videos about how to get to live in Vilcabamba had proven to be very valuable because it also showed him the kind of people society there consisted of and only strengthened his opinion on moving.

In addition to marketing operators and individuals sharing the steps of their relocation process online, aspiring expatriates can also connect with each other and gather information in Facebook groups, asking questions regarding nearly anything that needs to be considered during the process of relocation and get advice from those who have already gone through the process of moving continents and applying for a visa. Even there, though, quality of advice and information provided vary greatly, depending on everyone's individual experiences and the specific place they moved to.[13]

[13] The first part of this thesis's title is following the name of a Facebook group I gained information from and through which I encountered some of my research participants: 'Ecuador Expats'.

4. "THERE IS SOMETHING SPECIAL HERE": LIFESTYLE MIGRANTS' DRIVE TO VILCABAMBA

> "I can't really place it, but there is something special. You do feel different here and, you know, when you go out there's a point that you pass on the road and they say that's the vortex, that's, you know, that's where it starts and sometimes, I tell people to close their eyes and tell me when they feel it and they feel it. So, there is something. There is something special here. I don't know what, I don't know" (Interview with Peter, Vilcabamba, 10/02/2022).

The following chapter constitutes the analyzing part of this thesis. In going through the interview transcripts, I have come across four main motives that constitute people's decision-making on relocating to Vilcabamba. I start with the meaning of stress, a factor, that plays an important part in why future expats even start thinking about migration in the first place, accompanied by the financial aspects and indisputable affordability of lifestyle in Vilcabamba which appeals to many lifestyle migrants. This is followed by a subchapter about the meaning of nature, climate, spirituality, and sustainability, while chapter 4.3. considers the importance of community and belonging throughout the migration process as well as a factor of decision-making. The concluding subchapter tends to the emerging challenges as well as chances posed by this lifestyle-led north-south migration, with their different levels of influence on the expats on one side and the local community on the other.

Some of the characters who are mentioned in the following subchapters are central to different topics and motives and therefore will come up in several chapters. Since, at times, the respective context of the chapters does not allow for an equally detailed description of each interviewee's personal characteristics and current living situation, a summary table of all the participants mentioned in this thesis is included in the appendix.

4.1. The Great Escape? The Meaning of Stress, Boredom, and Financial Security in Migration Decision-Making

> "Lifestyle migration is a comparative project that involves a *narrative of escape*, in which life before migration is described in negative terms and the post-migration life in positive ones" (Korpela 2020: 3355, italics by me).

> "[…] just the last two years it started weighing on me, like I don't wanna do this anymore, like what am I doing, what is the purpose? Ok I have a house and a mortgage and like cars and things, but I'm not happy, like I'm not. Like work another 20 years, well, 23 years left on the

mortgage, so it's gonna take me another 23 years, so I'd be 73 and then I'd have my house paid off, like the American dream. But then what? Like, what?" (Reid).

Reid

The second quote above originates from the interview with Reid, a 50-year-old US-American, who was born in California but from the age of six lived in Washington State in the Pacific Northwest up until the day he decided to finally move. Reid and I only met in person the day of the interview after I had come across his Facebook profile while browsing an 'Ecuador Expats' group on Facebook that I had gained access to and simply messaged him there, explaining why I was in Vilcabamba and what I wanted from him, similarly to my in-person introductions. He responded rapidly, willingly agreeing to meet with me for an interview and we met the next day in a small backyard café.

His main reason for deciding to leave the United States became clear very quickly as he described the tediousness his job he once used to love created in his life; the clockwork and money-oriented day-to-day life that, no matter the amount of work that had been done a certain day, never seemed to suffice. In chapter 3.2. I already referred to the online influences and insights Reid gained through several social media accounts that further intrigued him to do his own research on early retirement and relocating himself, including the consideration of Vilcabamba early in the process:

"So, the reason why I'm actually in Vilcabamba, is AB Ecuador. Abundant Living Ecuador, they are a real estate company, and so they post vlogs, and I watched all their real estate videos just to get an idea of cost and pricing. But then I would kind of just have one on one, the three of them would sit, talk about Vilcabamba and climate and people and, you know, just the cool things about Vilcabamba".

After liquidating his own construction company and selling his house and most of his personal belongings, Reid left for Ecuador and, after visiting Quito and Cuenca, rather spontaneously rented an apartment in Vilcabamba. He is now an early retiree, just as he had planned to be, and lives off his savings – or, rather, the interest on his savings, as he explains in the following:

"Another reason of Ecuador is interest rates are crazy here. So, eight and a half percent interest on a cash deposit. In the States a cash deposit is like maybe one percent. So, it's eight times more here for a deposit. I basically am living for free with my money sitting in an Ecuadorian bank".

Making the move to Vilcabamba allowed for Reid to gain access to a world beyond work: he now has time for hobbies and pastimes like pottery classes, painting classes and weight training for the first time in his adult life and he can afford them

easily. What comes to light even further is a certain level of disillusion with US-American work ethic and the notion of the 'American Dream', as so widely promoted throughout capitalist society – and not only in the United States. After years of surrendering almost exclusively to work and having almost no spare time for leisure, Reid settled on a, for him, radical change of environment and lifestyle which, ultimately, he was able to do because of the financial capital and the assets he had accumulated over his years of work.

Katja

Like Reid, my informant Katja described a huge amount of stress in her life prior to migration. She is 50 years old and came to live in Vilcabamba temporarily with her Ecuadorian husband, both yearning for a quiet place to live. Although living across the Atlantic in Norway at that time, she described similar feelings regarding her work:

> "I'm a teacher and I have worked with all the ages, going from small children up to Highschool and I've also been a principal in Highschool and yeah. I have always experienced it as very stressful to work in the school. And so, I tried different things and then also I had all these troubles in the marriage, and you know, three kids growing up and all this stuff, it's been very stressful those years especially. Well, I was starting to think 'what can I do to make some changes in my life'" (Interview with Katja, Vilcabamba, 14/02/2022).

Of course, as Katja elaborated further in the interview, the amount of stress she experienced was not only due to the job but also connected to her failing first marriage, with both factors coming together and creating a nearly suffocating atmosphere in her life at that time. After finally divorcing her first husband, switching jobs, and getting together with her current husband, an Ecuadorian from Guayaquil, her life circumstances, and stress levels improved noticeably, because being in the new marriage allowed for her to take a step back from working and travel more. After living separately on two continents, partly by force due to pandemic travel restrictions in both countries, Norway and Ecuador, and some back and forth traveling when it was possible again, Katja decided to temporarily move to Ecuador – even though she described feeling torn about her decision, since she had to live in Guayaquil:

> "I realized I cannot live here. Because I feel that when we are in Guayaquil, so much traffic, there's security issues, you have to be careful all the time and I cannot do anything without him, I feel. Of course, I have to learn Spanish, it's not something I knew from before, so it's just, it's so much stress, if you want to walk you have to walk in the traffic, you have to walk on the sidewalk and I was just no, I don't want that".

The stress she describes to have felt while living in Guayaquil, a city of roughly 2.6 million inhabitants, is largely reasoned by the hectic, noisy, and at times insecure urban environment of the city, leading Katja and her husband to agree on moving somewhere more peaceful, and, after a friend's recommendation, to Vilcabamba. After a two-week visit they decided to stay and rent an apartment, enjoying the simplicity combined with the nearly international atmosphere due to the large expat community, and the security life in Vilcabamba has offered them so far:

> "So, we like going for walks in the forest or to the mountain and just walk around in town, sit down. We don't use the car so much. When we are in Guayaquil we use the car all the time, driving from one side of the city to the other and here it's so simple, you know, if you want to cook something I feel like I just go to the garden to harvest vegetables, just to go to the *tienda* and get what you need for the day and cook it and then. Yeah, we just really like the simplicity, we like the climate, the nature, and also that there is so many foreigners here […] it gives us peace which we have been longing for, you know, through all this".

So, for Katja and her husband, life post-migration to Vilcabamba has changed (and improved) significantly in terms of de-stressing and the inclusion of tranquility compared with a feeling of overall security in their day-to-day life.

Tammy and Mitch

Following the example of Katja and Reid, I will explore how Tammy and Mitch, one of the couples among my research participants, have begun their quest of relocation based on the amount of stress in their lives. Now 57 and 61 years old, respectively, they moved to the San José neighborhood of Vilcabamba in 2017. I had come across Tammy's social media profiles on both Instagram and Facebook and messaged her there – due to both platforms' privacy regulations it took her some time to finally read and answer my message, since neither of the platforms displayed it for her directly in her inbox as a new message. We finally spoke at the end of March, already towards the end of my stay in Vilcabamba, via FaceTime. On Tammy's suggestion (and my approval), her husband Mitch joined the interview.

Originally from Florida, both discussed leaving the United States early on, once they would have entered retirement, first taking into consideration countries like Costa Rica, Panama, and Cuba before – solely coincidental – coming across Ecuador as another possible option. They did not wait until retirement though but made the final decision to move in 2015, fostered by work-related stress and beginning financial trouble:

> "My business, I had a tree planting business, and it had already pretty much died off after 2009, with the financial problems of the States. So, by 2015 it wasn't coming back, and it was either escape and go live while we can or get another job and start over somewhere else. And I kinda wanted the years, I felt the years that I earned were mine now and I could live them now or I could go back and start a new career at 53 years old. And I just didn't wanna do that" (Mitch, Interview with Tammy and Mitch, Vilcabamba/San José, 09/03/2022).

> "And I retired, because at the same time he was feeling that way, I was feeling really burned out after being a classroom teacher for like 28 years, and so I said to him 'I think I'm about ready to retire', so I retired a little bit early, about five years early" (Tammy).

What stands out from both Mitch's and Tammy's statements are their joint feelings of exhaustion and boredom after being in the same routine for several decades of their lives, accompanied by the urge to experience something new and to change their way of life. They explained to me that they had chosen Ecuador, or this particular region of Ecuador, because it was much more affordable for them, living off their pensioners checks (with deductions on Tammy's side because she officially retired 'too early' to qualify for the full amount) and savings, actually having had spent most of their savings on the move from Florida to Vilcabamba. Other countries they had considered possible options for relocation earlier in the process turned out to be much more expensive in the long run, in comparison to Ecuador, with another advantage there being the US dollar as currency. It allows for them to have exact knowledge of the monthly amount of disposable income, unlike in other places, as Mitch describes:

> "[…] the fact that they use American currency here. That was a big plus right off the bat, none of that exchange rate or fluctuation, because we know people who retired in Mexico and one month they are getting their normal retirement of x amount and it translates over to so much spending power and two months later it's half that spending power. So same amount of money, but only half the spending power. And we never thought about that until we spoke to our friends and they told us. So that was a big plus here, because if you're paying your rent on a fixed income and suddenly the currency of your income becomes worth half of what it actually is, it starts making your rent double of what it is and it starts really beginning to eat into your life, I guess you could say. So having the American currency here made it really convenient".

Also, instead of investing their remaining savings into buying a house, they decided to rent one, and, like Reid, use the Ecuadorian eight percent interest rate and the overall affordability of land and houses in Ecuador to their advantage, while at the same time not having to worry about maintenance on the house.

Five years after moving to Vilcabamba, Tammy and Mitch spoke enthusiastically about their relocation and the influences this decision still has on their lives, simply by having changed their daily routine that had basically followed the same structure for several decades, combined with a feeling of work taking over their life to the point where it became overwhelming – similar to what Reid experienced as well:

the realization that dedicating one's life almost entirely to wage labor is a dead end. The combination of (early) retirement and migration allowed for them to, as Mitch described it, "feel born again".

Eric

I met Eric in early April during my last week in Vilcabamba, after he finally came across the message I had sent him on Facebook some weeks before. He invited me over to his apartment which was part of the enclosed complex *El Atillo* with several apartments of different sizes to rent, basically making it a gated community. He had moved there in September 2021, and of all my research participants was the only one living in a gated community. Located just up the street (and hill) from where I was staying, Eric met me at the front gate, and we sat down on his balcony.

At 67, Eric had retired some years earlier, but was very clear about not having been able to stay and live in the United States on his social security pension – making this fact his most relevant reason for migration. After entering retirement – and before the start of the CoViD-19 pandemic and its global travel restrictions – he backpacked around Asia for almost two years, after selling most of his belongings back home, only to be forced to "[sit] still for more than a year" after the pandemic hit. After briefly considering Turkey as his new place of residence, due to personal connections he had to the country from previous travels and work-related stays, he settled on Ecuador because of its affordability. Besides the financial aspect though, Eric expressed a notorious sense of boredom in his life in the United States, similar to what Tammy and Mitch as well as Reid described regarding their lives before migration: "You know, America may be similar to Germany, you go to work, you come home, you have dinner, people watch TV, they don't interact, they go to bed, they get up and they do the same thing the next day". For Eric, it was not so much a certain level of stress that led him to change his environment but rather the need for a fundamental change accompanied by financial need. It is likely that Eric would have left the United States either way at some point – regardless of his financial circumstances. His previous travels provided him with an insight into other cultures and the organization of social lives within and hence strengthened his desire to permanently live in a cultural environment different from his American experience:

> "These other cultures where I've lived, Turkey and Thailand, and all these other places, people are in the streets, they are in cafes and there's more of this social feeling and not everybody is just inside with a little blue light in their windows from their TVs. And that, I like that. I like the

> diversity, I mean I lived in America for 45 years at least, 50 years, and I've had enough. I want something different".

Eric continued telling me that having no financial worries at all had greatly contributed to improve his quality of life, also stating that the use of US-American dollars as Ecuadorian currency made the comparison of his expenses as easy as it made it rewarding. Moving to Vilcabamba allowed for him to live on his terms only, to create the lifestyle he wanted – because "money is not an issue".

Charlie

Charlie and I met purely coincidentally on a Thursday night during my first week in Vilcabamba, after Peter, who had been my first interviewee that night, convinced me to go get some dessert with him. After what he considered "all the good places" had already closed for the night, we came across Charlie's restaurant which was still open – and served American pie. After being introduced by Peter, Charlie spontaneously agreed for an interview and started talking long before I was able to properly start my recording device.

At 70 years old, Charlie was one of the oldest expats I spoke to during my research, and, since he came to Vilcabamba in 2001, one of the ones living there the longest as well. Originally from Virginia in the United States, he now lives near the center of Vilcabamba and owns a burger restaurant called 'Charlitos' – unlike others, he did not retire before or after his move to Ecuador. In fact, as he explained himself, his level of stress increased significantly *after* migration, due to his job, leading to him working even more than he did in the United States, even though this was mostly due to what he called a "different mentality" regarding work in Ecuador that migrants like himself would either adapt to or they would not. By that he referred to a slower pace of working and a slower pace of life in general, compared to what he called "major countries". For Charlie, being in a state of mind where everything had to happen fast and controlled, this led to an increase in stress while trying to adapt to this different pace of life. However, he simultaneously named this a strong contributing factor to the circumstance that most non-working migrants experience much lower levels of stress in their lives once they arrive in Vilcabamba, and they take personal value from the different, mostly slower pace of everyday life in Ecuador which is unlike most of the realities in their respective countries of origin. On top of running a restaurant, at the time of the interview Charlie was also in the process of building a house, which he described as "extraordinarily stressful" as

well, mostly due to the construction workers working much slower than he was used to from the United States and because he felt he had to stay on top of the whole process himself at all times to make it work. Even though he already lived in Vilcabamba for 20 years, the attitude towards life many Ecuadorians had did not fit with his expectations.

Despite the stress he experienced post-migration, prior to his relocation Charlie had also been driven by a certain restlessness and the desire to somehow change his life, making him feel like a runaway:

> "[…] it felt in some respect like I was running away. Like I was just saying, like a child running away from home. Saying I'm just dropping all this and going to go have a different live. The last thing I thought I'd be doing would be working six days a week, twelve hours a day. But that's what lines up. That's what happened".

Prior to migration, Charlie had been running a house painting company and occasionally made some extra money with playing in a band. Unlike some other expats, he did not take up any hobbies and pastimes in Vilcabamba, but actually had to quit making music due to his demanding job in the restaurant. While he did not go into detail of how he imagined his life after moving, he made it clear that his reality now is not what he would have expected – this includes his stressful job just as much as his new life alongside his Ecuadorian wife and two stepdaughters.

4.2. Back to the roots? The influence of nature, spirituality, and sustainability

> "And then, as time goes by, of course I get older and there's more ages added to my physical being, and I was thinking about myself like a salmon. They leave where they are born, they go out into the world, and then when they give birth, and that's the time they die as well, they come back to where they were born. So, for me it was like being in the nature was like going back to my roots again. And then also I started realizing, life in a big city is not sustainable. And I wanted to make my life a little bit more sustainable. My life up to that point was like a feeling of always running around, but after I got to my forties, I started to feel that I can't run all my live. I'd like to walk from now on. And then later I'd like to walk slow. And then this urge came into me, wanting to live close to the nature. Because I was born in a natural environment, very close to the nature, close to the mountains. So that was my urge, wanting to go back to that kind of a life environment" (Interview with Maya, San Pedro de Vilcabamba, 27/02/2022).

Maya

It took me a while to finally get to meet Maya, who was among the first people I contacted online. I had come across her Airbnb profile where she offered for people to stay in one of the small houses on her remote property. From the beginning she was very open to the idea of meeting me and invited me to visit her at her house,

but due to several complications we had to postpone our meeting a couple times. Finally, the weekend of *carnaval*, with the both of us trying to avoid the hustle and the noise of the festivities at all costs, I took a taxi up to Maya's house on the mountain. I remember that I recognized the first part of the car ride, going from Vilcabamba to San Pedro de Vilcabamba, until leaving the paved road and taking a steep dirt road winding its way up the mountain. During the drive, which took about 40 minutes, I understood why Maya had cancelled our meeting the day before because of the heavy rainfalls during the weekend: the road was still wet and muddy and provided a real challenge to pass with a car, even with a four-wheeler. The view was breathtaking though, Maya told me later the altitude was just a little under 2000 meters but subjectively it felt much higher. After picking me up at the gate that separated her property from the narrow dirt road, Maya invited me to sit down with her at the fire she had lit in the oven of her open kitchen where she was already brewing green tea and baking sweet potatoes in the fire.

Of all my research participants, Maya is the only one being neither European nor North American, but South Korean. She left Korea for the first time in her early thirties to live in New York City, expressing to me that (in relation to what I discussed in chapter 4.1) she basically escaped South Korea's strict social structure, which is even tighter on Korean women. After living in New York City for eleven years, Maya described entering a state of mind where she could not bear to live in a large city any longer – due to its lack of natural environment, its urban constriction, and its overall lack of sustainable living options (see introductory quote of this subchapter). To immerse herself in a natural environment and break out of the restraints and stresses of the city, and to be able to finally slow her life down were what she was aiming for when she started thinking about leaving New York City – a process that for Maya is strongly related to her getting older and shaped how she was rethinking the way she wanted to live her life:

> "I mean, also that comes with you getting older in a way. You don't have that much energy, once you're over 40. You don't have as much energy as you had in your twenties or thirties. You know, living in a city takes a lot of energy. So, gradually, I just started thinking about it. And, also, that's the age that you start to think about 'what is really life'. Who am I? What am I doing here? Those questions normally don't come up when you're young, you're just living, you're just having fun, do this, do that. So, for my case, those questions started to arise when I was like late thirties. And once you start having that kind of thought, it's difficult to live in the city and it's difficult to keep up that same lifestyle. Because you don't find the answer in there. I mean, even here you have like daily chores and everything, but not with this feeling of being pushed by something. It is just like more you're own decision. And then, because I was born and raised in a countryside and the nature was always there, I started longing for those things and I started to feel not being able to breathe properly in the concrete jungle. So, I just need to have some trees, something alive, something like that. So, I used to go to Central Park. All the time, all the time. I felt like

> that's where I could breathe properly. Under the trees, among the trees, in the trees. And that's how I ended up here".

Consequently, she decided to leave the city and to travel around Central and South America "to see where [she] would fit in". In addition, around that time, she also started to relate more and more to her Korean roots, which connected her a lot to natural environments:

> "At the end I found this place here in Vilcabamba, in Ecuador and then I felt very close to it. I think because I was resonating the time in my youth in Korea. That little village was just like a little village of my own back then in Korea, about twenty years ago. So resonated with me a lot and that actually gives me a lot of comfort. And the nature is just all around you".

As a practicing Buddhist, Maya needed the change to quieter surroundings and the connection to nature desperately, and after living in the center of Vilcabamba for some years, she described that even living in the village at some point became too noisy for her. Driven by her spiritual and religious belief and based on the lack of almost any form of materialistic distraction in the village (additionally, she separated from her husband at the time who had accompanied her to Vilcabamba), Maya decided to focus more on herself and her holistic wellbeing – leading her to move out of the village and up the remote mountain top she still lives on now. Since the place is still located *very* remotely nowadays, at the time Maya was quite literally moving into the middle of nowhere, with nothing on that mountain top but the piece of land that she had purchased:

> "There was nothing here but an eucalyptus tree and then from scratch I started to build a small little hut all by myself and while doing all this by myself I went through a lot of confrontation and then overcoming that confrontation and then facing the raw elements, like thundering, pouring rains and wind. Those things can be very harsh and they can scare you off, really. But after going through all this time I had a significant insight of the mountain. That was my process".

The process Maya went through in building her home on the mountain almost comes across as a cleansing; surrendering herself to the harsh climatic conditions of the highlands, braving the elements on her own, and, in the end, being able to build a house from scratch. Even further, what Maya describes allows, once again, for a connection to the preceding subchapter and underlines that Maya's quest, too, is underlined by the theme of escape: first, in 'escaping' the metropolis, and later, after even the village becomes too stressful, in her move to the mountain.

At the time of the interview Maya already lived on the mountain for almost nine years and, considering the time she lived in the village before, making it 12 years in total in the area of Vilcabamba. At 56 years old, she sustains herself through teaching several art classes as well as qigong a few times a week in San Pedro de

Vilcabamba (the pottery class Reid added to his pastimes is taught by Maya), and renting two of the three small houses on her mountain property on Airbnb, which mostly attracts other artists, writers or generally people looking for quietness and tranquility to focus on their respective (material or immaterial) projects; in Maya's words people looking for a "more inward lifestyle". One thing she was very clear – and passionate – about is the lack of distractions in her home and her life in accordance with nature:

> "Once you start living in a place like this you don't really need to listen to a lot of music. You don't really need to see a lot of exhibitions or things like that, because if you're sitting on this mountain all day long, when the sun rises over there, it creates a beautiful, beautiful scenery over here. When the sun goes down to the West, as well, it creates beautiful, beautiful sunset paintings over there. So, you don't really need to look at someone else's painting, it changes every moment by moment and you never get tired of those things. And you hear the sounds of the birds, you hear the sounds of the wind, blowing the leaves of the trees. All these sounds are more beautiful than some music, at least to me".

Of all the good that has come to her through moving to Vilcabamba and up the mountain, the tranquility and her own peace of mind, Maya is already aware that she might not keep on living there forever: being away from her home country for so long, she states she still feels Korean nevertheless, maybe even more so *because* she has lived away for almost two and a half decades and – even though she still feels at home in Ecuador – the distance contributes to her feeling more connected to her roots the older she gets. Ideally, she would split her time between South Korea and Ecuador, living half a year in one place and the rest in the other.
Although she already lived in Vilcabamba for twelve years, she expressed that she still perceives herself as a foreigner, stating that because of her different cultural background which to her is very distinct from Ecuadorian culture, she could of course adapt to it but never really call herself an Ecuadorian or Latin American.

Bethany

Like Peter and Charlie, I met Bethany during my first week in Vilcabamba, but not by coincidence – or at least not exclusively coincidental – but through our mutual friend Yeleny. Throughout my time there I stayed with Yeleny at the tiny hostel she was running and, after hearing about my research project, she rapidly started to connect me to friends and acquaintances of hers and invited Bethany over to stay for a weekend. On a Sunday morning Bethany and I sat down for the interview.
At 32 years old, Bethany was one of the youngest participants in my research, and at the time of the interview she already lived in the area for almost seven years.

After being born and raised in Glastonbury, England (a place rich in connections to hippie culture and spirituality) Bethany started traveling as a young adult – and, in the sense of a global nomad, has never really stopped since. She described herself as being driven away from everything she knew in England due to the disastrous and traumatizing relationship with her partner at the time and how traveling allowed for her to get into different cultures and their respective beliefs, marking the beginning of her own spiritual lifestyle. Coming to Vilcabamba merely on a friend's recommendation, Bethany quickly felt connected to the place: "I just turned around the corner when I got here and I remember feeling this really strong thing like I know this kind of place, you know, it's like similar to where I grew up, but in Latin America" (Interview with Bethany, Vilcabamba, 13/02/2022). Despite being annoyed by spirituality when she was growing up, as an adult she now deeply identifies with spiritual beliefs. For Bethany, these beliefs are based on a profoundly felt connection to nature, to the protection of nature and, as a human being, to live in as much unity as possible with nature and with everything it has to offer. Living in Vilcabamba enables her to live her life accordingly and to create a way of life that meets her needs. Along this line she dedicates a lot of her time to what she called "the purification of [her] body", taking full advantage of the benefits that are attributed to Vilcabamba, and stressing how important this is to her overall wellbeing:

> "My body is my temple and after being through all these things knowing how important it is that I worship myself first so I can serve the world, here's like pure air, pure water, pure foods. Vilcabamba has hands down the best food in the whole of Ecuador and in many, many countries in the world because there's an actual organic market. So, the quality of the food and water here and the air is like amazing".

Living around Vilcabamba and savoring the possibilities that come with it both favored and facilitated her stay and heightened her awareness of how Bethany wanted to live her life, after having been restless for so many years.[14] Her focus shifted to taking the best care of herself she could, an effort which is greatly facilitated by a living environment that offers fresh and local produce all year round.

[14] Bethany also shared with me that although she was traveling and living her life freely in the broadest sense, she rarely ever felt happy in the places she visited. She described it as more of a feeling of forcefully pretending or telling herself to be happy because societal standards implied she had to. Bethany's example makes one thing very clear: privilege does not induce happiness – nevertheless, it contributes to changes in lifestyle and therefore enables individuals for different attempts on happiness – whatever one's personal definition of happiness might be.

For Bethany, this availability created one of the main reasons she decided to stay in the area:

> "These things [purity of food and water] started to become really important to me and that's one of the reasons I stayed because I just loved that. I loved that, I can go to restaurants and eat so healthy and the food that I eat when I'm out in the *campo*, in the countryside, I'd literally say it's like 90 percent organic, like literally it's like the best fricking food. I eat so purely, and it brings me so much joy and to buy from producers who are so dedicated to the quality of their products".

According to her, Vilcabamba is attractive for spiritual people for all the reasons discussed above, but also attracts people who are not on a spiritual path (yet) but who need to live a free, less constricted life:

> "[…] you're living in societies that are so constricted people can't breathe, they have to pay for every single fricking thing they do and really what they have to pay with is their time. And their essential life worth. They have to dedicate it to things that are absolutely bullshit, that has depressed them and then they need to find escapes. Because it's too much. And this is what people are really looking for, is coming back to tribal living, that's what I think, and I think that's how a lot of people have ended up in Vilcabamba. And it's like a conscious community, but it's not as if you come to it and there's all these rules, there's all different people with all different spiritual beings. But that is really freeing, and it's actually definitely stimulated the Latino population as well and their beliefs".

Interestingly, in her statement Bethany already sort of interprets the effect the international community presumably has on the local community; even going so far as to make assumptions about their spiritual or religious beliefs – assumptions that I cannot confirm nor contradict at this point. But what she describes before is a fact that allows a connection to chapter 4.1: 'conventional' life as mentally and physically stressful and constraining to the point where people no longer feel fulfilled with what they are doing in life, and Vilcabamba and its nearly untouched natural environment (or, I would argue, any form of escape towards a remote location) as a place of refuge and to come home to – Bethany phrased it as "coming home to something sacred".

At the time of the interview Bethany was involved in constructing her first own house on a piece of land she bought near Quinara, an even more remote (and smaller) village located approximately thirty car ride minutes from the center of Vilcabamba, something she claimed she would have never been able to do in England:

> "I live like such a blessed existence here that I couldn't live in Europe. I'm like 32 and I'm building my first home and it's small but it's really beautiful and it's a cabin and it's gonna have a big garden, it's gonna have an outside hot tub. I mean, could I do that in England? No, no".

Interestingly, she explains the turnaround in her life and her being able to live in Vilcabamba with some divine 'other' whose intervention "blessed" her life (a point of view undoubtedly driven by her spiritual beliefs), rather than considering her

position as a privileged citizen from the Global North and the possibilities it brought her. Rather than divine intention, Bethany's way of life is based on and facilitated by systemic inequality – which she is not to blame for but, nevertheless, seems to be unaware of.

At 32 years old Bethany can afford and live a lifestyle that most likely would not have been possible in the same form in her home country, ever. However, she did not completely preclude the possibility of obtaining her way of life in any other place similar to Vilcabamba, regarding food availability, climate, and nature.

Martha (and Glenn)

I came to know Martha and Glenn through Yeleny, just like Bethany. But even before, other expats had told me to go and talk to Martha, as in the eyes of a lot of them she was the one US-American living there the longest. Yeleny contacted Martha on my behalf and one Sunday afternoon drove the both of us up to Martha's and Glenn's house. They live remotely and frugal in a self-constructed, round little house, further up in the woods from the road that leads to Yamburara Alto. Martha is 71 years old and Glenn 73, and they already live in Vilcabamba for 48 years. I started the interview with Martha and later came to talk to Glenn as well.

Both came to the village by coincidence after travelling through parts of Central and South America by themselves before crossing paths for the first time in Colombia. After losing their passports and having trouble to obtain new papers in Colombia, they decided to move across the border to Ecuador, hoping to get new papers there more easily. They were able to solve their passport issues in Quito and decided to travel around the country when they "met someone who said, 'go to Vilcabamba, it's easier to rent a house there and the sun shines every day'. In Colombia it rained every day, so we came to Vilcabamba" (Martha, Interview with Martha and Glenn, Vilcabamba, 20/02/2022). Even though this occurred over 40 years ago, it shows once again the privilege with which Martha and Glenn as citizens of the Global North were able to move around and travel unhindered – even with no or incomplete papers. It is the same privilege which finally enabled them to solve their passport issues without further troubles while being in a – for them – foreign country.

Pushed by the daily hustle and bustle they experienced in Colombia and allured by the sunny climate as promised in Vilcabamba, Martha and Glenn arrived in the village in 1975 and haven't left since.

What became clear rapidly was Martha's interest in and knowledge about natural medicine and different ways to use herbs:

> "I learned so much about herbs, you know. Each family had different herbs they would favor for different uses, so from each family you'd learn a little bit more about different herbs and nobody ever needed to use pills. Except, now there are painkillers made of willow bark, they have in the pharmacies here. Willow bark is what people used to take when they had fevers or aches or pain, cause it has a chemical like the one in Aspirin. So they have that here now. I used mostly herbs with my kids growing up and stuff, they never really had any health problems".

She explained her interest in everything related to natural and herbal medicine and how easy it was to get access to the knowledge and the herbs in Vilcabamba – because of the relative 'wilderness' in the valley and the surrounding hills and mountains, the herbal diversity is immense. For Martha (and her family), living in Vilcabamba offered her the possibility to live as close to and with nature as possible, according to her own interests and priorities. In addition to herbal medicine, this includes the cultivation of fruits and vegetables in an organic way, avoiding the use of pesticides at all costs. In Martha's opinion, this is where the expat community (around people who share her interests) has had a huge influence on local farmers and their habits of cultivation:

> "There's a lot more organic agriculture going on here than before. Which is good, most of my neighbors they would spray their beans at some point, but now they don't anymore. When they had a big field they would spray it, cause that's what they were told to do, but now they are realizing you don't have to spray. You can plant in the right time of the year and you can use compost, so that's been good, more people doing organic gardening".

Martha herself didn't really see one big factor that made her and Glenn decide to stay and build a life in Vilcabamba, but rather a composition of several aspects that were important to them personally: nature, climate, and the small town community.

Max

At 29 years old, Max is the youngest participant of this research and one of the few Europeans. Originally from Germany, he left with his parents and brother when he was only four years old, following his parents' decision to move to Namibia. After living near Windhoek for several years, the family left in a motivation to find a new place to live, mainly one that provided the opportunity to live a self-sufficient and hence more sustainable life. After travelling across southern Europe in a camper, Max's parents decided to continue their search in Latin America. After first

considering and then dismissing Argentina, Paraguay, and parts of Chile as possible places for relocation, they settled on 'scouting' countries closer to the equator that provided a different climate with warmer and more reliable temperatures, beneficial to their intent of living self-sufficient, meaning the family would depend less on the groceries provided by supermarkets and grow and produce their aliments themselves. Driving up from Peru, Max and his family decided to visit Vilcabamba after reading about it online. His parents quickly settled on buying land to build their own farm. As Max remembers it, the climate and the terrain they found were the most crucial factors:

> "Aber am Ende, als wir nach Vilcabamba kamen, war es irgendwie ziemlich stimmig. Im Großen und Ganzen halt die Bedingungen vom Klima, vom Wetter. Was natürlich nicht ganz so leicht war hier war's mit Land, ein ebenes Stück Land zu finden wo man dann auch anbauen kann, Gemüse und so weiter, was man als Selbstversorger eben so will. Aber ansonsten hat's hier von Anfang an gut gepasst, also vor allem meinen Eltern".
>
> "*In the end, when we came to Vilcabamba, it somehow felt quite coherent. By and large just the conditions, with the climate and the weather. What wasn't easy, of course, was finding a flat piece of land to cultivate vegetables and so on, whatever you'd like to cultivate as a self-supporter. Besides, it all fit really well from the beginning, especially for my parents"* (Interview with Max, Vilcabamba/Yangana, 14/03/2022).

They moved to the farm in Yangana ten years ago, about 30 minutes by car from the center of Vilcabamba, and run a small café in Vilcabamba, selling different sorts of matured cheese, homemade granola, honey, yogurt, and jars with pickled vegetables. The product range caters immensely to the needs of expats, with Max even expressing it as his family depending on foreigners to buy their products, because the interest from Ecuadorians, even though growing, was not as high. During my stay I regularly re-encountered several of my interviewees at *Café Edén* but rarely any Ecuadorians – except for the ones working at the counter.[15] The café's slogan 'de la finca a la mesa' ('from farm to table') refers to its products' organic origin.

4.3. "Birds of a feather flock together": Community and the urge of belonging

Eric and Reid

[15] Apart from the specific product range, the café's prices also are above average compared to Ecuadorian-owned cafés and restaurants, while still perceived as cheap by most of its (western) clientele.

At this point I come back to Eric and Reid, among others who I have introduced already in chapter 4.1, for their migration motivations were manifold. Apart from the financial benefits and change of environment, Eric expressed the already established presence of other expats like him as a reason to come to Vilcabamba specifically:

> "So, the reason why Vilcabamba is that like Cotacachi, there's like a thousand expats here. Except here, I think, there's a younger crowd, you know, than in Cotacachi. There's supposedly people here from 70 different countries. So, the diversity is kinda like living in New York or something, while living in Ecuador".

Previously, Eric had told me that before coming to Vilcabamba he had tried living in Cotacachi, a village in the northern Ecuadorian Andes, but had to give up on that idea quickly because of the toll the altitude (Cotacachi is located at about 2400 meters above sea level) took on his body. Like Vilcabamba, Cotacachi is a popular destination among lifestyle migrants from North America (and possibly Europe), but, in comparison to Vilcabamba, more challenging to live in due to its altitude and colder temperatures. While Eric explained the wish of being able to reach out to other expats, he emphasized on the importance of learning Spanish as well, so as not to surround himself with other foreigners exclusively and to be able to actively participate in and communicate with the local Ecuadorian community:

> "Because I want to live around other foreigners, but I also want to emerge myself in the culture, you know, I don't wanna be the gringo who never learns a word of Spanish and only talks to his American friends. You know, you wanna become a part of this if you live here".

For Reid, the experience was a similar one: he had already known about the extensive expat community in Vilcabamba due to his online research and quickly encountered other expats after his arrival. Through Airbnb, he came to know Maya who, in turn, invited him to participate in her pottery classes which then again allowed for Reid to meet fellow expats. He described it like a snowball principle, coming to know more and more people who appealed to him and, along with other aspects (see chapter 4.1), convinced him to stay permanently. The way Reid expressed himself, a branched-out friends' group was not something he enjoyed or had the time to care for in the United States:

> "I've met more people in the last two months than I did in twenty years where I was in the States. I had my core group of friends, but I didn't really branch out. I didn't branch out. So, it just feels Vilcabamba, well, it's small enough that there's community, like more community and then walking around town, I know so many people".

However, Reid did not go into detail on how close-knit or superficial his new friendships and acquaintances really are.

So, moving to Vilcabamba enabled Eric and Reid to choose interaction with different cultural circles: the one they are more familiar to in language and culture because they know it from their country of origin, and the 'other', unfamiliar one, whose setting they decided to move into.

Tammy and Mitch

Opposed to, for example, Reid and Eric, Tammy and Mitch explicitly mentioned the friendly welcome they received from their Ecuadorian neighbors and the overall cordiality and trust they experienced when first visiting the area that settled their decision to stay in Vilcabamba:

> "We ran into some people when we first got here and were looking for a place to stay and they rented us an apartment above where they live. And they were so nice the first day we were here, they said 'you don't have a car, so we'll let you borrow our car if you put gas in it and we'll let our daughters get in the car with you and show you where the waterfall and the bridge and stuff is'. So, they put their fourteen-year-old and fifteen-year-old daughter in the car with us and we took off for the afternoon, exploring. And they didn't know us from anybody, and to me that was just amazing. Like, I'm from a place where everything is guarded, lock everything up, go get a deposit, get a receipt, get something for everything of every minute of every day and for somebody to trust me off the bat like that, I just thought 'wow, that's great'" (Mitch).

Interestingly, their experience is fueled not only by their host's cordiality but also the experienced lack of it back in Tammy's and Mitch's home in the United States. Generally, both made a strong point about befriending Ecuadorians and about complying with frequent cultural difficulties such as learning Spanish in the first place to be able to communicate decently. Because of their openness towards Ecuadorian people and culture, and some expats' rather peculiar mindsets towards pandemic regulations and an overall interest in so-called conspiracy theories, which both Tammy and Mitch feel reluctant towards, they surround themselves more with Ecuadorian friends and acquaintances than with fellow expats.

> "We have discussed when we first came here where we were gonna live, because we had seen all off the gated communities over in Malacatos, where everybody is isolated from the population completely, they go to Supermaxi to buy their groceries, they come back to the gated community, they don't even know what's downtown in the town they live in. And we had decided we didn't want that. We wanted to be more a part of the local community. Because I just think that's what helps you grow, so to speak. Learn their culture, learn their language" (Mitch).

Not only did Mitch and Tammy invest time into thinking how they wanted to contribute to and participate in the local culture and community beforehand, but they also voiced criticism towards migrants living exclusively in what could be called an 'expat bubble'. Tammy continued this point as follows, emphasizing the value of learning and knowing Spanish:

> "And it's their country, so we feel we should be speaking Spanish, not be a little group of people getting to know each other and speaking English, because, you know, it's just not really nice. And the people are so great here, too, because you'll be speaking in decent Spanish and they try so hard to talk to you in what little English they know, just to be friendly and accommodating and everything".

Shutting oneself away in the 'expat bubble' and/or gated communities is something Tammy and Mitch evaluate as rather impolite and unnecessary, while they simultaneously describe unexpected personal advantages through their engagement with Ecuadorian friends – like, for example, the mental challenge of actively learning a new language.

Joy and Curtis

I have already mentioned Joy and Curtis briefly in chapter 3. At 67 and 69 years old, respectively, they already live in the area since the late 1970s and have witnessed the changes throughout the decades. I came to meet them, again, through Yeleny, who had contacted Curtis about me and my thesis' purpose and who one Saturday afternoon drove us both to Joy's and Curtis' family home in San Pedro de Vilcabamba. Because they already live in the area for so long, they don't even consider themselves to be part of the contemporary group of expats since they came long before everyone else did. Curtis officially obtained Ecuadorian citizenship, even though they both still maintain their ties to the United States – for example, all their four children, though born in Vilcabamba, have received higher education through attending US-American colleges.

For Curtis, it was hard to pinpoint why him and Joy had decided to stay when they first came to visit. Eventually though, he narrowed it down to the remoteness of the place, the climate and, very strongly, the community or the sense of community they came to experience:

> "La comunidad es muy importante para mi, me encanta inmenso la comunidad y San Pedro, como digo, son unos ocho famílias y son todos muy buenos. Lo que tiene, creo que ahora lo que atrae los extranjeros más que nada, es que tiene extranjeros. Los extranjeros también buscan comunidad, buscan personas similares a ellos"

His explanation for the growing phenomenon of migration in Vilcabamba is as interesting as it is simple and relatable: the foreigners moving into the village are all looking for community in one way or another, for people 'like themselves'. The easiest way to get in touch with others then is with those who share their language, their cultural background, and the experience of the process of migration.

Joy and Curtis, for they have been able to observe this developing phenomenon, provide their own conclusions:

> "Qiero citar algo en inglés: *Birds of a feather flock together*. Pájaros del mismo plumo forman una manada. No es que un pájaro del mar va a venir con un picaflor. Y es algo que tiene que ver con esto. Muchos vienen y hacen amigos con confianza, con otro gringo y ya. Mucho es eso, esa parte social, no tiene nada que ver con Vilcabamba […] lo bueno, y no es único para Vilcabamba, pero lo bueno de todo pueblo pequeño es que se vigila entre vecinos como família. La gente sabe todo de los vecinos y los cuidan. Eso no es único para Vilcabamba pero es fuerte para Vilcabamba" (Joy).

According to Joy, the interest in Vilcabamba as a place of relocation is mainly related to the many expats already living there who then attract even more to come. Curtis then again insisted on his thought of Johnny Lovewisdom as being the 'first expat' who started the interest. Themselves, Joy and Curtis came during a time where they had had no choice but to emerge themselves in the culture and community as it was present, with only few foreigners or expats around and almost no electronical resources to keep in contact with the outside world (meaning, for example, that they had to learn Spanish quickly to adjust). The type of tight-knit community they were looking for (and found in San Pedro de Vilcabamba) is, I argue, one that can likely be found in other small villages or towns in the countryside. Like Joy said herself, the closeness of the community they are part of is not entirely unique for Vilcabamba but strong, nevertheless. What stands out in the end is that, interestingly, even though the personal quest for a better way of life characterizes lifestyle migration as a highly individual endeavor, the ones pursuing it are looking for a reliable community, nonetheless.

External factors like the remoteness of a place contribute to the sense of community inhabitants create for themselves in a place, even though the level of acceptance and openness towards 'foreigners' or 'strangers' entering the community might differ. These differences occur between the local community and foreigners as well as between each other within the group of migrants, which are, by no means, a homogenous group. I will further elaborate this in the following chapters 4.4 and 5.

4.4. "If you accept reality then everything is fine": Emerging Challenges

In relation to chapter 4.3, summarizing the sense of community in Vilcabamba is a lot more challenging than some expats experience themselves. Opinions and

perceptions on social conviviality with each other as well as with the local Ecuadorian community vary greatly among lifestyle migrants, as does the influence the influx of foreigners has in both the social and the economic domain. Through the course of my research, these areas of conflict have proven to create unforeseen issues at times.

Some of the migrants, like Reid, Eric, and Charlie, experienced some difficulties, either by own experience or by hearsay, but did not seem to be bothered too much as long as they got along with the people they wanted to with. Whereas others, like Max, Maya, Glenn and Martha, Tammy and Mitch, and Joy and Curtis have shown to be aware of and more sensitive to differences in social behavior, culture, background, wealth, that (can) lead to clashes and conflicts. However, an understanding of community that all of them cherished was the sense of community that enacts people to look after and out for each other (again, an aspect I would argue is rather common in rural and remote communities). Despite all differences, the community aspect is ever-present:

> " […] es gibt da einfach auch hier in Ecuador 'nen großen Unterschied zwischen der Sierra und der Küste, da sind die Leute viel offener, viel direkter und hier einfach zurückhaltender. Und dafür sagen die Leute, es ist *tranquilo*, das heißt da ist auch 'ne gewisse Art von Community Sinn da, dass nicht einfach wer reinkommt und was stiehlt, die Leute schauen mehr auf sich gegenseitig, dieser Sinn von Community. Und ja, das einfach so herauszufinden, diese verschiedenen Nuancen in der Kultur und im Zusammenleben, ist einfach ein Prozess, der seine Zeit braucht und wahrscheinlich auch das Leben lang irgendwie so weiter geht".

> *„[…] besides, in Ecuador there is a huge difference between the* sierra *and the coast, people are much more open, more direct, and here they are more reserved. Hence, people call it* 'tranquilo', *meaning that there is a certain form of sense of community, people looking after each other, making sure that nobody is just entering a home, stealing something, this idea of community. And yeah, to get used to this, these different shades of culture and cohabitation, that is a process that needs time and probably goes on for a lifetime"* (Max).

Just because the urge of community and belonging is shared by almost everybody, does not mean it is as simple to attain:

> "Das ist hier nicht ein Ort für jeden, das ist ein Ort des Aussortierens. Wo man viel auch auf sich gestellt ist und nachdenkt und ja, Sinn des Lebens und so, auf dieser Suche ist. Im Großen und Ganzen, jeder sucht irgendwie nach Community und auch diese Gedanken, wer teilt diese Community Gedanken, aber am Ende ist hier eigentlich jeder als Individuum".

> *„This is not a place for just anybody, it's a place of rejection. Where you're on your own a lot and that makes you think, about the meaning of life and all, where you're looking for this. Generally speaking, everybody is looking for community in one way or the other and for others who share this idea of community, but in the end, everybody is here as an individual"* (Max).

Max continued his statement with explaining to me that, for him, the amount of freedom he had in Vilcabamba was among the most challenging aspects for him, in the sense that he felt there were less regulations and fewer expectations present in

the society around him that he could use as guidance. Generally, he imagined that for other expats this level of personal freedom could be even more challenging and, at some point, strenuous.

Like Max, Martha also refers to differences in social behavior that, in her opinion, migrants should pay attention to:

> "Well, you just have to be careful about offending Ecuadorians. I don't mind that, you can say something you feel but if it offends them, you know, sometimes they get a bit insecure, you know, the *campesinos*. So, you learn to be very careful about that".

She argues that, if migrants do not pay attention to what they say in front of some Ecuadorians, they might offend them involuntarily.

Along the lines of Max's point of view, Maya continued to describe "modern people" as "pretty weak [mentally]", meaning that many foreigners in Vilcabamba follow their dreams which constitute of a more or less certain picture they have of the place and brush away the difficulties that come with living remotely and with a less luxurious, often simpler living standard in comparison to their countries of origin. For Maya, the simplicity of life in Vilcabamba met exactly her needs in terms of quietness and few distractions from her spiritual work (see chapter 4.2.), but she voiced her concern about a number of people who she described as "getting lost" because they suffered from the lack of distractions, for example: even though there are the occasional festivities around carnaval and in the summer, the nightlife in Vilcabamba is very limited and mainly takes place in the one bar of the village that is situated on the street leading up to the Yamburara neighborhoods. Additionally, there are basically no options for shopping anything other than groceries. Of course, there is a fair range of activities people can pick up as a pastime (see Reid in chapter 4.1. who keeps himself busy this way), but there definitely are limits as to what a person can do in their spare time in Vilcabamba, especially since all the migrants' personal interests vary greatly. As far as my research goes though, none of the interviewees claimed to be bored since living in Vilcabamba.

According to Maya, and similar to what Max stated above, this situation poses a challenge for many migrants, as they get bored throughout their time, get confronted with personal problems and maybe even traumas they did not realize they had back in their place of origin, and, as a consequence, turn to alcohol, drugs and, at times, the misuse of sacred hallucinogenic plants like the San Pedro cactus and the frequent attendance in ayahuasca ceremonies – all of that used as an escape

from the personal problems migrants can get confronted with.[16] The often unquestioned (mis)use of sacred plants by expatriates seemed to upset Maya deeply, and it raises issues in terms of the overall approach citizens from the Global North (not only migrants but also tourists) have towards the use and the appreciation of sacred, indigenous practices and ceremonies in the Global South.

What Maya describes further is a 'cliché' expatriate who voluntarily comes to a new place and then complains about the way different aspects of daily life are handled and even attempts to change them towards his or her favor:

> "And I noticed many foreign people, Western people, even to me who is from Asia, we really have a different way of approaching things. I found that people from the West they come and try to change a culture when they come across something they are unhappy about".

It is a phenomenon which Glenn, too, has witnessed over the years and formed his own opinion on:

> "I have a philosophy about immigration, which is the most important one, especially if you wanna live in a place like Vilcabamba. You really have to like the place, okay? This is not a place for expatriates. Expatriates are always complaining about where they came from, rather than being more concerned about where they are and not necessarily changing where they are to the way they wanna see it be, but getting used to it. There's a Spanish verb, much used in Ecuador for the last 40, 50 years, at least I used it, *aguantar,* it means get used to it. Because if you can't get used to it, then you're really just torturing yourself to stay here. So, there's a lot of people who do like to torture themselves, so therefore we have a mixed immigration crowd here".

Apart from being the only one of the interviewees who actively used the term '(im)migration' when talking about the foreigners coming to Vilcabamba, Glenn very openly condemns the motivations and ideas by which most expatriates are coming to the valley. For him, there are three groups of migrants in this regard: those who manage to *aguantar* and learn to live with circumstances that might not be as they expected it to be, those who do not get used to it but try to conceal that fact by attempting to change the circumstances as they are, and, lastly, the ones who admit to the struggles, do not manage to stay permanently and leave. Like Joy and Curtis, due to his long-term stay Glenn has gained some knowledge and insight into the changes and challenges that lifestyle migration brings upon Vilcabamba – significantly easy for him, since he does not include himself in said group of migrants as he arrived long before everyone else did. The overall attractiveness that distinguishes Vilcabamba for lifestyle migrants and future expats is so tempting in

[16] Among the group of interviewees, only Bethany and Reid openly stated to have taken part in different ceremonies to consume sacred plants before. While in the beginning Bethany had used them before she even had moved to Vilcabamba permanently as a form of escape from her mental state, she claimed partaking in those ceremonies had helped her restructure her life, referring to it as "the medicine".

the beginning that, on the long run, it can be hard to admit that one does not, in fact, enjoy life there as much as imagined beforehand as Glenn sums up strikingly:

> "But just because it has a wonderful climate and just because it is so far away from everything else, doesn't necessarily make it a place that is conducive for people being able to reach their full quota of whatever they were planning to do with their lives".

What he describes are migrants who continue to chase after an imagination of how they thought beforehand how their life would be or what it would look like, rather than accepting the fact that reality is, oftentimes, simply different from one's imagination – a condition that applies to almost all spheres of life and not exclusively to the migration discourse. Glenn shared a state of mind that Eric agrees with, too:

> "I mean if you accept reality then everything is fine. If the road is all shitty, like it is out here, then you go the longer way, if, like yesterday, my phone didn't work for an hour because they applied my money three months in a row to the wrong account, you know. The thing is, I don't care. I can stand in line, I'm retired, all I have is time and if I'm not a patient person, then I haven't learned anything yet. But for a lot of people, I think it's like 'what the fuck, in America, we don't do it this way', you know. Who cares what you do in America, shut up. Because you came here, you didn't come to America. So, I think for a lot of people, these crazy things like the roads or paying your bill or whatever it is, may frustrate them. But they need to chill out or go home because it ain't gonna change".

Like Maya, Glenn, and, somehow, Max, Eric distances himself from said 'cliché' expatriates, who are seen to be mostly (North) American and hold everyone and everything around them to higher standards than themselves. The maxim is to either adapt and get used to approaches different from one's personal background – to *aguantar* – or to return to one's country of origin.

Other issues occur frequently because of an imbalance between a lifestyle migrant's expectations and reality. For Charlie, it was the general ethic of Ecuadorian workers on working speed which he experienced in his restaurant as well as on the construction site of his new house: "If you watch how construction works here, tomorrow is good enough. It's much slower. This restaurant that I'm running, and other restaurants are far slower than they would be in major countries". Besides the different pace of living, a similar challenge that Tammy and Mitch named as a habit that took them some time to get used to is the, in their eyes, relative unreliability when it comes to punctuality and time-sensitive appointments:

> "Appointments not being met, you know, I want to make an appointment for 11 o'clock and it's like 'oh no, we'll see you tomorrow at 10' and I get there at 10 and nobody's there. That was very hard" (Tammy).

> "Or like a doctor tells you 'I'm open between 10 and 4, just walk in'. There isn't an appointment system like we're used to in the US. Here it's kind of like 'if he shows up today, he shows up today' and that did take a little while to get used to. But there's no reason to get mad, because the only person you're hurting is you, you're the one that's mad" (Mitch).

Tammy and Mitch were both able to take their confrontation with differences in the Ecuadorian way of life and their expectations with a sense of humor, laughing about themselves when they told me they had had a container shipped from Florida to Ecuador, full of belongings they thought were necessary but ultimately proved to be pointless in Vilcabamba:

> "[…] we brought a container, a full shipping container, down, full of stuff, and now we wish we'd brought two suitcases and just got rid of everything there. Because not everything does work here that we wanted to bring and it just doesn't fit with the style of living here, if that makes any sense, so a lot of the things we brought with us are almost useless because of the way the society works here. We had can openers, but nothing is sold in cans!" (Mitch)
>
> "And if they do sell something in cans, like the tuna, it's got a self-opening!" (Tammy)

Coming back to the 'cliché' expatriate as already described by Glenn and Maya, Tammy summarizes the situation like this: "A lot of Americans and Canadians are like that, you know. It's like 'we want this, and we don't understand why we can't get it'. It's just like... it's different. You need to adapt".

As I mentioned before, the group of lifestyle migrants in Vilcabamba cannot be seen and interpreted as a homogenous group of people who share the same motivations and interests, which can cause trouble within the group that, from the outside, are generally perceived as 'foreigners'. As I have illustrated so far, many of the migrants' discussed motives for migration decision-making overlap with each other, while simultaneously being slightly different enough to cause for personal arrangements of and expectations in their new lifestyle in Vilcabamba to differ – see for example the migrants' respective explanations of what 'community' means to them. This is a point that caused my informant Raffaella, who came to the village first in the 1980s, to frequently switch between living in Vilcabamba and her other home in Tumbaco, near Quito. Raffaella, who is 65 years old and originally from Italy, after deciding on living in the mountains around Vilcabamba together with her German husband (whom she had met while travelling in Mexico), quickly settled for a life in Tumbaco again – mostly because she found the community in Vilcabamba did not meet her needs, especially regarding her children's education:

> "Fuimos a vivir en Tumbaco, porque allí había una gran comunidad de Europeos. Aquí [in Vilcabamba] eran más de Estados Unidos, allá había Europeos y todos con una história de escuela alternativa. Aquí, los que vivían aquí no les importaba nada. […] Aquí era otra cosa. Yo con Martha, y ellos, sí, había Curtis y la Joy en San Pedro, el Jaime, pero no te veías mucho, no, tenías que ir por allá, porque ellos nunca te venían a visitar porque tenían sus trabajos y el campo y todo. Además, nosotros eramos Europeos. Entonces, eramos diferentes, al fin y al cabo. No

> eramos del grupo que... no sé. Era también la lengua, porque el Jens y yo hablabamos español, porque cuando nos conocíamos en México era nuestra lengua común. […] Sí claro, la Martha también hablaba muy bien español, todos los que estaban aquí, al inicio todos hablaban español. Pero... no sé, era un poco diferente. Los norteamericanos tienen una idea y nosotros teníamos... sí, otra" (Interview with Raffaella, Yamburara Alto, 21/02/2022).

What Raffaella describes are not differences between migrants and Ecuadorians – even though she has a strong opinion on that, too – but in the social focus and values of North Americans and Europeans, where she experienced the former to be much less interested in areas in which Raffaella herself (and, as she described, other Europeans as well) had high expectations and standards in. She came to the conclusion that, at least for the time her children were attending school, her place to be was not in Vilcabamba. The alternative school she wished for decades ago has been constructed in the meantime: The *Escuela Alternativa "La Calandria"*, which was founded by a Swiss-Ecuadorian friend of Raffaella.

Even among each other, lifestyle migrants who share the same country of origin differ in opinions and attitudes, of course. Martha, for example, stated that she did not like "all the Trumpeteers in Vilcabamba, you know, the Trump people, right wing people", because she does not share their ideology – and yet she has to grapple with them. However, she concluded shrugging "it's just people", referring to her keeping mostly to her business and not letting herself be bothered too much.

Next to the cultural and social differences, what poses another ongoing challenge for the population in Vilcabamba is of economic character: the inflation caused by migration.[17] While lifestyle migrants take profit from the comparably low prices for land and housing, the simple capitalist logic of supply and demand applies here. The growing demand accompanied by the financial assets migrants bring along causes prices for land and housing to increase drastically, with consequences even for the migrants themselves: while during their research and elaboration on the idea of moving prices might still be below average from what they are used to in North America or Europe, prices may have multiplied by the time the respective migrant gets there. Worse, even, is the effect this surge in housing prices has on the local population – Ecuadorians with an Ecuadorian income. Most of my interviewees were aware of the situation and even mentioned the inflation of their own accord,

[17] These are by no means unique developments affecting only Vilcabamba. Research by Ana Spalding in the Bocas del Toro archipelago in Panama (2013) and Michaela Benson in Boquete, Panama (2015), among others, has shown that economic changes such as inflation as well as socio-cultural challenges in the receiving communities seem to go hand in hand with privileged migration to the Global South.

though not without referring to the alleged advantages for the Ecuadorian population:

> "The bad part is we have caused inflation and the good part is any local person that wants to sell their land can get twenty times what they could have probably ten years ago, because everybody is paying foreign prices for everything. I mean, the price around here for land is insane" (Eric).

Eric is right insofar as that Ecuadorian landowners are, of course, able to sell their land for much higher prices than before and take profit from this, but he overlooks the fact that sellers might not be able to buy land again that easily, because of the high prices – let alone, sell their land to an Ecuadorian, because rarely anyone else than foreigners can afford to pay the amount of money demanded. This causes a housing crisis for the Ecuadorian population in Vilcabamba and at the same time upsets both contemporary lifestyle migrants and future ones interested in moving to the area, because they know that for Ecuadorian standards the cost of living in Vilcabamba has risen extremely. Interestingly, the amount of money for housing migrants from the Global North most likely would have to pay either way in their respective home countries, they disagree with in Ecuador:

> "I don't like the price of real estate, it's very expensive. Like, it's comparable to where I come from per acre, cost wise, like almost the same per acre price. So, cost of living or cost of real estate is really high here" (Reid).

To put it sharply, migrants voice their displeasure about the fact that cost of living in the 'poor' Global South is not as low as expected – while at the same time they continue to fuel the problem through further migration towards an already 'gringo-priced' region, subsequently turning the area in and around Vilcabamba into contested spaces about the fundamental question of who can afford to live there and who cannot.

At one point I spoke to Yeleny about this whole situation, about the inflation, the immigration and what it was like for her, who was born and raised in Vilcabamba and continued to live there. I already knew from previous talks that she did not experience the Europeans as insufferable as she describes the *gringos/as* (the North Americans, especially referring to US-citizens), as most of the people that come from Europe tend to have a more relaxed attitude towards almost all things regarding life and adjustment in Vilcabamba. There are two sides, of course, she told me. The good thing is, they create a lot of jobs. The economy is fragile, so having foreigners come in and open restaurants or bars or cafés where they need to hire people to work is a helpful thing, just as when they decide to build their own homes instead of buying one, they need contractors and other people to help

building the house. Yeleny also told me that many of the expats (herself calling them *extranjeros*) hire locals to either work in their homes and estates, to run daily errands for them or to work as private drivers. But on the other side, having them there makes everything more expensive. On average the *gringos/as* have more money than Ecuadorians do, so of course they can spend much more, making everything more expensive, especially land and houses, but also rent and groceries. Yeleny herself works two jobs to sustain herself and to be able to keep living in Vilcabamba; the 500 dollars a month she makes working in administration of the *centro de salud* (heath center) in nearby Malacatos barely cover her expenses – hence she also runs the small hostel (this information is taken from a field diary entry, Vilcabamba, 05/03/2022).

Ultimately, what can be documented after evaluating the consisting challenges which emerged from lifestyle migration into the alleged 'valley of longevity', is that lifestyle migrants seem to be more aware of acute socio-economic problems and challenges around them the longer they live in the area – regardless of their country of origin.

5. DISCUSSION: GOOD EUROPEAN, OBNOXIOUS AMERICAN?

The title of this chapter is inspired by the title of an article published by Matthew Hayes and Jesse Carlson, which is named "Good guests and obnoxious gringos: Cosmopolitan ideals among North American migrants to Cuenca, Ecuador" (2017). Whereas Hayes and Carlson in their research paper refer exclusively to North Americans in Cuenca and their subjective valuation and assessment of their cohabitation, expectations, and respective adjustment, in this thesis I consider North Americans' points of view as much as Europeans' as equally valuable for this specific research purpose in Vilcabamba.

Though the aim of this thesis neither was, nor is, to compare North American migrants with Europeans or to distinguish them from one another, during the time of my stay, one condition became clear rapidly: European and North American migrants are appraised differently – by Ecuadorians as well as among each other, as Raffaella has illustrated in the previous chapter. What I gained from my friend Yeleny and her friends' (among them several who work in the hospitality sector as well) opinions is that North Americans (mainly from the United States) are significantly less valued as new inhabitants of Vilcabamba as, in comparison, people from European countries. The attitude towards North Americans can partially, but not exclusively (at least with the insights gained during my stay) be explained with a certain attitude many of them displayed or voiced in public, especially regarding governmental measures taken to reduce the spread of CoViD-19. On my first day in Vilcabamba I already noticed the Spanish-speaking people on the streets to still stick to the nationwide rule of mandatory masks, even outside. The people I could objectively identify as *gringo*, however, did not wear masks, and if they did, they were sometimes ridiculed by those who refused to follow that rule. During dinner on my first day, I spoke to a man who told me he had moved to Yamburara Bajo after leaving the United States because he was a conspiracy theorist and felt he was fooled by nearly every institution and every person there. This man broke into snorting laughter when seeing a blond-haired family crossing the street in front of the restaurant, all of them wearing masks. He called them "sheeps following their master".

In the weeks following this first encounter with a North American 'lifestyle migrant' I was relieved to realize that not everyone shared conspirational thoughts

and theories this explicitly. None of the people I spoke to revealed such a deep level of hatred towards governmental institutions (among others) and disbelief in proven historical events. Nevertheless, a remarkable amount of people still expressed doubts in regulations and measurements regarding the pandemic as so frequently installed in countries around the world, such as the security and/or efficacy of vaccinations, and the usefulness of wearing a medical face mask. Their views clashed with, in my experience, those of most Ecuadorians in Vilcabamba and their attitude towards the containment of CoViD-19. However, at this point it is necessary to stress that the vast majority of North Americans in Vilcabamba did not come to the village because of their disagreement with and disbelief in pandemic-related measures, but already lived there before. Some of them share another common idea which mostly goes hand in hand with the rejection of measures as mentioned above: political frustration.

This collective sense of political frustration is not a main motive for emigration from the United States per se, which is why I chose not to elaborate on this topic in chapter 4, but it came up regularly during the interviews and continued to deepen the metaphorical trench between Europeans and North Americans, not only within the broader group of migrants but as perceived by Ecuadorians as well.

"I hate politics. I don't wanna hear about it, I don't wanna read it, I don't wanna talk to stupid Americans that pick sides and think that their side is right, cause they're both wrong" (Reid). Reid added later that "as far as CoViD goes, like this is the most relaxed place so far and I think masks are fucking stupid, personally. They don't do anything and it's more about a mechanism of control than safety". In his position towards CoViD and politics he is joined by Charlie:

> "[…] there's a great division amongst people, here as it is anywhere else. People like me, who see it as a scam to make trillions, not billions, but trillions of dollars for the world pharmaceutical industry and those who take it very seriously and think that the vaccines are necessary and think that you'll die if you don't get them. Whereas people like me think you'll probably die if you do get them, because they're ever, ever more becoming documented as highly dangerous".

Another interviewee who expressed a certain amount of disbelief in political institutions is Eric:

> "[…] what I found from all my travels, I've been to like 26 countries now, is that everybody's the same. Everybody is nice, everybody loves, everybody cares and all the governments suck. That's about it in a nutshell, right? You know, people say 'I like Americans, but I don't like your government' and I'm like 'yeah, me too'. I mean, cause most of us, a lot of us won't agree with our government no matter what party is in power".

For the local Ecuadorian community, like Yeleny and her friends, these attitudes are confronting, because – in regard to a global pandemic – in the worst case, it endangers the life of people who try to protect themselves and others from becoming gravely ill. It also introduces a level of strong individualism to a society that – as in other remote or rural areas around the world – is largely based on conviviality and solidarity, or at least imagined as such (see chapter 2.2.).

Another point of confrontation among especially North Americans and Ecuadorians are cultural differences and, for the most part, the ignorance of them (see also chapter 4.4). Based on my observations as well as my talks with Yeleny I claim that some US-Americans have a rather demanding way of approaching Ecuadorians about basically anything, in shops, on the street or as guests in hotels and hostels. Especially in comparison to some of the Europeans I interviewed; it turns out that North Americans seem to be less sensitive when it comes to cultural differences. For example, both Bethany and Max, originally from England and Germany, respectively, mentioned the differences in attitude of Ecuadorians in the Andes towards foreigners and that it took some time and patience to approach them 'correctly', get to know them and create a bond.

There is, of course, a language barrier as well between North Americans and Ecuadorians (though this applies to most Europeans as well), especially in some places in the countryside where less Ecuadorians speak English than in urban areas. But since Vilcabamba is a touristically rather developed area, despite its remote location, a small number of Ecuadorians, especially in the hospitality sector, speak English – which is something some visitors and residents from the United States expect and demand. Still, a large amount of my research participants (regardless of nationality) already claimed to speak Spanish more or less fluently or were in the process of learning it, with the aim to be able to sustain a conversation (and maybe relationship) with someone outside the 'expat bubble'.

Interestingly, I experienced the line that is drawn in Vilcabamba between Europeans and North Americans myself: for the first time, local people, after getting to know them a bit, did not continue to refer to me as *gringa* – a term that initially was meant to describe people from the United States but in most Latin American countries is used for nearly every foreigner racially seen as white, regardless their country of origin. I had experienced the *gringa* on several travels

to other destinations around Latin America and never felt bothered, but this change in verbal approach in Vilcabamba surprised me: *gringa* or *gringo* is nearly exclusively used for North Americans.

To come back to the, admittedly, provocative title of North Americans vs. Europeans and the initial paragraph of this chapter, the behavior patterns mentioned contribute gravely to the image of the 'obnoxious (North) American' whereas Europeans in this context are, so to speak, less negatively noticeable in their habits to the outside. This is, of course, not applicable to each person individually, and cannot be generalized. Not all these observations do apply to everyone, but it shows a striking pattern. Yeleny and her friends, for their part, took to generally referring to North Americans as *locos* ('crazy people') in their conversations.

Even though expats in Vilcabamba come through and with a lot of privilege(s) inherited through their origin in the Global North, intercultural capital and understanding, and cultural sensitivity are not automatically part of it – thus creating a constant and multilayered field of tension. The individual circumstances lifestyle migrants come from and the problems they try to leave behind through migration seem to overshadow nearly any form of awareness lifestyle migrants could attain about the socio-economic structures they migrate into in Vilcabamba – North Americans and Europeans alike. Additionally, the circumstances and motives contributing to migration decision-making conceal the advantages that migrants from the Global North to the Global South hold, which provide unhindered mobility and free choice of lifestyle and ultimately enable lifestyle migrants to economically overpower their receiving community.

6. RÉSUMÉ

With this thesis I aimed at providing answers to several questions regarding migrants from the Global North on their personal quest for a better way of life in the village of Vilcabamba, Ecuador, while taking into consideration the context of global power asymmetries and systemic inequality in global mobility within which lifestyle migrants move to fulfill their quest. What came to light through the course of my research is that the reasons why lifestyle migrants from Europe and North America choose Vilcabamba as their new place of residence are at the same time individual and versatile as they are, interestingly, similar. I was able to classify three main categories of migration decision-making: first, a complex interaction of financial insecurity, stress and boredom experienced in everyday life, leading to an aspiration of change in lifestyle; second, a desire to live self-sufficiently in a nearly untouched natural environment with a moderate, warm climate, sometimes accompanied by spiritual beliefs strengthening this wish, with the urge to live as sustainable for climate and nature as possible and not cause any damage; and, lastly, I illustrated that it is the urge of belonging and the search for community in like-minded people that drives lifestyle migrants to Vilcabamba, especially. What has stuck out as an especially prominent feature of this lifestyle-based migration flow is the ongoing narrative of escape, in which migrants seem to actively push themselves away from the circumstances that cause problems and make their life less comfortable. The 'escape' marks the starting point of lifestyle migrants setting off on their quest for a better way of life and it sticks to them through the course of their pursuit via a strict differentiation in the description of life before migration (mostly negative) versus life after migration (almost exclusively positive).

Following the exposition of motives and circumstances leading to migration, I have examined the challenges emerging from this imbalanced north-south migration as perceived by the migrants, for them personally as well as emerging from the impact they have on the small-town community they migrate into. For the most part, migrants are aware of conflicts and problems immigration to Vilcabamba causes on a larger scale, but do not necessarily feel personally involved or responsible for these issues that consist of socio-economic challenges such as inflation causing prices for housing and land and the overall cost of living to rise, and social conflicts within the multi-national, multilingual, ever-changing community of inhabitants of Vilcabamba, where expectations and demands from the broader, in itself

heterogenous group of lifestyle migrants, or expatriates, clash with the reality of life as it is structured in rural Ecuador and lived by the local community of Ecuadorians. Additionally, cultural differences in areas such as work ethic and punctuality or sense of time, and the operating speed in public institutions cause frustration and complaints among some lifestyle migrants (especially among those who only moved recently), even though many get used to the different pace of life over time. This allows for the conclusion that what seems to be overlooked by prospective lifestyle migrants when researching a place to relocate to, is the fact that any location in the Global South, even in a different country in the Global North, will be somehow different in culture and way of life from what they are used to in their country of origin. Just because a place has a lot of presumably like-minded people who share a language and a similar cultural background, and it is possible there to pay in a common currency, does not automatically make it a 'home plus quality of life'. As my research participants have experienced themselves, migration and assimilation in this context are much more complicated and profound.

I have analyzed these circumstances against the background of the broader spectrum of global mobilities and the global privileges that come with citizenship located in the Global North as well as the disparity these benefits create for citizens from the Global South. I have argued before and would like to stress again at this point that the individual endeavor of migration for a better way of life, however specified, does not consider the global inequality in movement and migration, thus ignoring the extreme forms of power and privilege that migrants from the Global North are inevitably a part of. It is for these structures of inequality that enable lifestyle migrants to pursue their aspirations and to relocate unhindered to countries of the Global South. Simultaneously, these migrants indirectly contribute to the reproduction of said imbalance of rights at their destination and, as I have shown throughout this thesis, do not necessarily see themselves as being 'part of the problem'. Besides, the combination of stress, financial insecurity, and insufficient work-life balance which I have presented impacted the lifestyle migrants in their decision-making, is a frequent symptom of the effects the structures of capitalism-oriented societies have on human well-being. Some interviewees described that these structures made it hard for them to continue living in their country of origin, to continue with the same strive for work and lack of time for leisure, which

ultimately pushed their decision to change their lifestyle. However, the impacts of the structures that drive them away originate from the same pattern of global capitalism that enable lifestyle migrants to be as mobile as they are and to create the kind of new life they have been longing for: the structures that make them leave in the first place are the same structures that allow for them to do so.

To be able to fully grasp the scope of all the entanglements connected to lifestyle migration, or, rather, the broader scholarly field of privileged mobilities, further research is necessary – possibly focusing distinctly on the self-awareness of north-south lifestyle migrants in the global context they move within. This means an investigation through a historical postcolonial lens, emphasizing the postcolonial context of Ecuador in particular, and Latin America and the Global South in general. A research approach of this sort could be especially valuable regarding the intertwined histories of the United States of America and the Global South and the United States' reiterated political involvement in conflicts on Latin American (and Asian) soil – without disregarding the historical role of Europeans claiming the world for themselves. Furthermore, a research focus on the question of community building, exclusion/inclusion, and the question of social status among expatriate groups in the Global South, possibly along with the aforementioned approach of a historical/postcolonial position, would be especially interesting and is also deeply linked to issues posed in this thesis. Generally, further research on privileged mobilities should take into account the question of race regarding global privilege and lifestyle migration: event though lifestyle-related north-south migration is mostly claimed as a white endeavor, it is not always exclusively white or western – one example for that is my Korean research participant Maya.

To conclude, the field as analyzed in this thesis as well as the overall approach of privileged mobilities prove themselves as highly interesting to conduct further studies on the topic, keeping in mind the possible postcolonial continuities hidden behind the quest for a better way of life.

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APPENDIX

List of research participants in alphabetical order:

Name, age, country of origin	**Date and place of the interview**	**Time of living in Vilcabamba**	**Occupation/Living situation**
Bethany, 32, Great Britain	13/02/2022, Vilcabamba	Seven years	Lifestyle teacher/advisor, holistic wellness coach, nutritionist on raw foods and cleansing programs
Charlie, 70, USA	10/02/2022, Vilcabamba	20 years	Restaurant owner, cook
Curtis, 69 & Joy, 67, USA	19/02/2022, San Pedro de Vilcabamba	42 years	Craft beer company owners
Eric, 67, USA	04/04/2022, Vilcabamba	Six months	Retiree
Katja, 50, Norway	14/02/2022, Vilcabamba	Five months	Health care administrator (in Norway)
Martha, 71 & Glenn, 73, USA	20/02/2022, Yamburara Alto	47 years	Gardeners, vendors, expert on use of herbal medicine (Martha)
Max, 29, Germany	14/03/2022, Vilcabamba/Yangana (via FaceTime)	Ten years	Farm worker, family business owner
Maya, 56, South Korea	27/02/2022, San Pedro de Vilcabamba	12 years	Artist, cook, restaurant owner

Peter, 62, USA/Ecuador	10/02/2022, Vilcabamba	Lived there from 2011-2018 and was in his process of moving back again	Realtor
Raffaella, 65, Italy	21/02/2022, Yamburara Alto	15 years	Artist
Reid, 50, USA	18/02/2022, Vilcabamba	Four months	Retiree
Tammy, 57 & Mitch, 61, USA	09/03/2022, Vilcabamba (via FaceTime)	Five years	Retirees