Hardy travelling companions and trendy fashion accessories, Panama hats please everyone — except the people in Ecuador who make them

Putting on the Style

by Christopher P. Baker

In the language of fashion, Panama hats convey confidence, taste, and achievement. Discerning socialites appreciate their elegance, resilient suppleness, and near weightlessness. Tom Wolfe, sartorial author of *The Right Stuff* and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, would not be seen dead without a double-breasted hound's-tooth-check suit, high-collared shirt and Panama hat.

In the northern hemisphere, a Panama hat has been the mark of the debonair ever since U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt was photographed wearing a hat in the "Optimo" style, while operating a steam shovel on the Panama Canal, in 1906. Panama hats have covered the heads of Napoleon III of France, and Edward VII and George V of England. Sir Winston Churchill wore one; so did Franklin D. Roosevelt; Harry Truman, too. It magnified their personalities.

After World War II came the decline. President John F. Kennedy's stylized hatlessness influenced a whole nation. By the 1960s, the Panama hat was in the doldrums. Finally, after a three-decade hiatus, the luxurious hat of humble straw is back in fashion.

"A good corn crop in the Andes can cause a ripple in the straw-hat trade; a Hollywood movie can create a tidal wave," says Tom Miller, author of the hugely enjoyable *The Panama Hat Trail*. Since the 1960s, Panama hats had been dead as a fashion item. Then the movie *Urban Cowboy*, released in 1990, injected life into a dying industry. "We couldn't sell them fast enough," says Synde Parten, of the Montecristi Custom Hat Works in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Colombia, Peru, Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico
From Frank Sinatra’s jaunty number to Winston Churchill’s stolid classic, a Panama hat was once the ultimate mark of the debonair. In its heyday it was favoured by world leaders as well as singers and stars of the silver screen.
all produce what are known as “Panama” hats, but there is
one place you will not see them woven, and that is Panama
itself. Because Panama hats don’t come from the country of
Panama; the overwhelming majority are made next door but
one, in Ecuador.

Alas, in its place of origin, no self-respecting man of good
taste would be seen dead in a sombrero de paja toquilla — a
locally made hat of native straw. Here, the hat labels you as
one of the poorer classes: the Indian and non-Indian peasants,
the chullos, who by tradition weave straw hats on overcast
days or by the light of the silvery moon.

In the Andean villages of Azogues, Bibian and Cuenca,
everyone from toddler to grandparent wears a Panama hat.
Boys and girls begin wearing them as soon as they can
can walk. Every day for the rest of their lives they will wear one,
from the moment they tumble out of bed in the morning until
they crawl back under their blankets at night. Most people
own two or three hats. One is always in the restoration shop
being cleaned and, if necessary, pressed back into shape.

The very best Panamas — ones so supple and finely made
they may be rolled into a cone, passed through a napkin ring,
and snapped back into shape — come from Montecristi, a ram-
shackle town on Ecuador’s coastal plain that looks as if it
has been pulled struggling into the 20th century. Montecristi is
to the Panama hat as Havana is to the cigar.

Once, virtually every household in Montecristi produced
extra-finos — the tightest, most finely woven of hats made from
the thinnest, lightest straw. Alas, the number of weavers has slowly diminished. Although
hats exported from Montecristi sell for hundreds of dollars in
the United States, weavers are paid only a fraction of their
worth. Weaving is a cottage industry in a society that is rapidly
becoming industrialized. Thus, the youth have lost interest,
and since the 1970s the government has promoted the
weaving of smaller items — baskets, Christmas tree orna-
ments, dolls, handbags, placemats, plant holders — that
generate a higher income.

The few weavers remaining today can weave only low-
grade regular hats, not the finos and extra-finos. “As the master
weavers are passing into old age, and practically no one is
learning the skill necessary to supplant them, this ultimate
grade of Panama bodies is in danger of becoming extinct,”
laments Sydney Parten.

One day last year, a taxi driver deposited me beside
Montecristi’s main plaza, where lovers congregated in the cool
shade of casuarinas. Erstwhile president Eloy Alfaro — the
“Father of Ecuadorian Liberalism,” — looked on passively
from his pedestal fronting a spire-topped Catholic church of
apparent Moorish influence, with wooden columns and walls
of faux painted marble. Immediately, I was accosted by young
boys crying “Mister! Panama hats!” One took my hand and
led me down Calle Chimborro to a tiny house with a clapboard sign reading “Sombreros Finos Montecristi”.

“The finest extra-fino must be flawless, of consistent colour
and weave; and the enijiras should be so finely woven they are
barely noticeable,” Flordia Pachay, a hat maker for the past 50
years, told me. (Enijiras are the row after row of concentric
rings that radiate from the rosia, or crown; the number of
enijiras is one of the definitive marks of how fine the hat is.)
Such hats weigh barely more than an ounce, and are so tightly
woven they can carry water without losing a drop. They are
now extremely rare — no more than a dozen are produced in
Ecuador each day — and practically priceless.

(As early as 1930, the six finest Panamas made that year,
as selected by the Ecuadorian government, were sold at Dobb’s
Store in New York for US$1,000 apiece; the best fur-felt hat
at Dobb’s sold for US$36.)

According to Pachay, there are only three master weavers
left in Montecristi that can make such exemplary hats,
with a similar number living in the wooded countryside
outside town. Pachay, 64, works for a few hours in the early
morning, and again late at night. The rest of the day the
he hat earned its misnomer during
the 1849 California gold rush when
prospectors travelling via Panama
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were perfect protection against the sun

sweat builds up on her fingers, and atmospheric conditions
are too variable for the absolute continuity necessary in a
fino. (Direct sunlight isn’t good for the straw either; it gets
too brittle.) The very best high-fashion numbers can take
many months to make. For such a hat, Pachay might receive
up to US$100.

“How long did it take you to make this Panama hat?” I
asked, holding aloft one of her magnificent, light-as-lace
marvels. It was translucent when held up to the sunlight. “Es
un sombrero de paja — de Ecuador!” she replied dismally, “It’s
a straw hat — from Ecuador!” Ecuadorians resent the benefits
Panama has reaped from the goodwill the hats generate. Early
this century, Ecuadorian consuls were even instructed to
attach stickers to their correspondence: "PANAMA HATS
ARE MADE IN ECUADOR."

The Panama hat earned its misnomer during the 1849
California gold rush when prospectors from the eastern U.S.
travelled west via the Isthmus of Panama, and discovered that
straw hats imported from Ecuador were perfect protection
against the blazing sun. In 1850, at the height of the gold rush,
Ecuador exported more than 220,000 hats. Thus, the hat was
The Panama Hat

The finest Panama hats, known as Extra-fino, are made from the finest, lightest, most tightly woven straw and come from Montecristi in Ecuador.

On an Extra-fino the Enjirias - rows of concentric rings which radiate from the crown - are so finely woven as to be scarcely noticeable.

The very best Panamas are so supple they may be rolled into a cane and passed through a napkin ring without losing their shape.

Top quality Panamas weigh barely more than an ounce.

The traditional roll-up version comes with its own travelling case.

A good Extra-fino is so tightly woven it not only keeps your head dry, at a pinch it can even be used for carrying water.

The finest are flawless, with consistent colour and weave.

The Panama hat
named for its point of purchase rather than place of origin. Immediately, it became a mark of success: a famous daguerreotype from 1850 shows seven wizened goldminers just returned from California sitting outside the Philadelphia mint, each clutching a bag bulging with gold dust, and each wearing a Panama hat.

The Panama’s popularity continued for over a century. The U.S. government even ordered 50,000 Ecuadorian-made hats for soldiers headed for Cuba during the Spanish-American War. In Europe, the style gained in popularity after examples were taken to Paris for the 1855 World Exposition, and one was vainly displayed by Napoleon III. By the turn of the century, it had become a racetrack necessity in England. Even its adoption by Chicago mobsters in the 1920s and ’30s didn’t dampen its image (hat exporters in Ecuador still call the style with the widest brim the Capone). By World War II, 10,000 hats a week were being sold in the United States (in 1944, Ecuador exported 4.3 million hats) generating US$5 million for the tiny Andean nation — an incredible 20 percent of its foreign income. Then came the 1960s and a hatless John F. Kennedy. Fashion had changed. Overseas sales of Panama hats suddenly plummeted... and the art of fine hat-weaving went into decline.

“What we call finos today were only good enough to be called regulars 15 years ago,” says Milton Johnson, owner of Santa Fe’s Montecristi Custom Hat Works. And today’s select extra-finos are “three times removed” from the filament-fine hat he considers the world’s finest, a level of weaving that will most likely never be duplicated. Johnson (the exclusive representative in the United States for the remaining master weavers) values his own prize possession at US$25,000. “Even in Ecuador, one cannot find, in any one place, a collection of Panamas comparable to the ‘on hand’ inventory we maintain.” claims Johnson.

South Africa and Germany continue to buy Panama hats in quantity for school uniforms (these hats come from Cuenca, which produces for “industry consumption”). And Ecuadorians pride themselves that Panamas were seen around the world on the heads of officials at the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles... unaware that the hats were actually cheap fakes, called shantungs, from Asia.

In recent years, inexpensive imitations — often stamped “Genuine Panama” — have made significant inroads into the market. Shantungs generally have a more even weave and consistent color. They don’t breathe as well, however, and usually wear out after a couple of years. By contrast, a genuine Panama can last for decades. “The uneducated shopper, however, can’t tell the difference between a natural straw Ecuadorian hat and a machine-made paper or petroleum-based synthetic from Taiwan or China,” says Johnson.

In Montecristi, I watched 56-year-old Alvaro Franco sitting in the shade, conjuring a hat body so sleek and supple it was virtually a silken treasure. He was bent low over a stool, threading and weaving the fine strands with the delicate, intricate concentration of a Persian miniaturist. Every so often he dipped his fingers into a bowl of water at his feet and moistened the threads, which he combed with a corncob. His fingers moved over, under and around each other, circling the hat one way, then the other.

Franco’s father had woven hats, and his father before him, and his before him. “In 20 years the weaving of Montecristi finos may be all over,” he suggested sadly. His store — Artesania Franco — was brimming of hats stacked neatly on shelves and in cupboards. Every conceivable style was displayed. I was surprised to see cowboy-style hats with wide brims. There were women’s hats, too, in bright Day-Glo colours: pinks, greens and oranges. An American tourist in a dazzling Hawaiian shirt was browsing among the more colourful hats.

Franco’s hat had hundreds of loose needle-thin straw strands hanging from the edge. Comisionistas — middlemen — buy the hats that way, he told me. They employ finishers to snip off the excess and tie the loose ends together. I tracked down one such comisionista. Pushing open a thick wooden door that seemed to ache with penury, I entered the bodega (storage room) of Manufacturas Jochafran and found a mountain of untrimmed hats rising from the straw-littered floor. Men and women sat in the gloom, giving freshly woven hats a haircut: they trimmed the hats’ fingers to about half a centimetre which others then wove into a smooth, tight edge.

I perused dozens of hats. They were all lacklustre. Finally, I parted with US$20 for a “regular select” that I liked, then my hat was folded in half with a flourish, rolled tightly into a cone, and ceremoniously placed in a balsawood box with an Ecuadorian flag and the words Sombrero Fino Montecristi stencilled on top. Exporters buy these trimmed hats from the comisionistas; what they export are unblocked hat bodies, not completed hats.

Before being exported it is snipped, sunned, soaked, steamed and stretched. The Panama hat is a hardy object. It suffers many indignities, including being bleached with sodium sulphite or peroxide and beaten with a mallet until it looks like creamy linen. Great care must be taken, as straw is...
alive and will bruise easily. Importers then manufacture the blocks into hats... after giving the Panama another beating. They bleach each hat again in an acid bath, stiffen it in a solution, steam mould it into the desired shape, welt it, and press it in a heated mould to curl the outer brims. Finally, the hat is lacquered, spun dry, then a fine split leather sweat band is sewn inside and a silk band is added to the outside in one of a variety of colours.

The lacquer is a bane to discriminating hat-lovers, who like to have their hats remade every few years. Major hat manufacturers such as Resistol, a division of Levi Strauss, prefer customers to buy a new hat every so often. Since lacquer or “plasticized resin” cannot be broken down, mass-manufactured Panamas cannot be cleaned or remoulded. Complete renovation is a strong selling point for custom hat shops whose hats are generally not soaked in resin. Hats worn in humid regions such as Hong Kong need to be remade more often (the climate is good for the straw but hats lose their shape; in dry climates, the atmosphere draws the life from the straw, but the hats keep their shape).

Like wines, Panama hats have their good years and bad, depending on the weather; in dry years, for example, the straw lacks the resiliency of moister years. The quality of the straw is critical. On Thursdays, weavers gather at the special market — the feria de paja — in Cuenca to buy straw for the week. They puruse the paja with the discriminating eyes of gem dealers, looking for coarseness, coloration and blemishes. They gently tug at the strands, testing for strength, then deftly arc the wire-thin straw to gauge pliability.

Panama hats are woven from the tender juvenile stalks of a tropical herb, Carludovica palmata, known colloquially as paja toquilla, that grows wild in the northwest lowlands of Ecuador. When the conquistador Francisco Pizarro arrived in 1526 he found Indians wearing woven headaddresses made of straw; the early Spaniards called them toquillas, from the Spanish word toca, or headdress. Within 100 years the craft of making hats to suit current European fashions had developed. Ecuadorians have been weaving hats from toquilla straw ever since.

Though Montecristi produces the Rolls-Royce of Panama hats, the vast majority of hats — relatively coarse, inexpensive weaves — are made in Cuenca and nearby villages tucked in the cool heights of the Andes. Even the children weave. (In his novel, Los Hijos, Alfonso Cuesta y Cuesta tells of a little girl whose fate at birth is forecast by her nickname — la tejedora, little weaver: “Baby girls are born with toquilla straw in their hands,” says a neighbour. “With the hat already begun” adds another.) Almost all the weavers are women. Their more nimble fingers are better for weaving.

Hat weaving in the Andes dates back to 1844, when the Cuenca Municipal Council passed an ordinance establishing a school to teach straw hat weaving: the council supplied the building, bought the straw and hired the first director, who split the profit from sales with the students. Bartolome Serrano, the local magistrate, was authorized “to punish the vagabonds who did not want to look for work or learn to weave.” Comisionistas, who dominated the trade on the coast, didn’t care for Serrano muscling in on their action; they sent an assassin (who failed) to kill him.

Comisionistas still exploit the illiterate Andean weavers and profiteer from their exquisite handicraft. The weavers are too scattered and disorganized, “lost in the Andean brambles.” In The Panama Hat Trail, Tom Miller records that tejedores in the Andes are paid, on average, about US$0.60 for hats that take several days to make and that will later be sold wholesale abroad for US$20.

“Improved pay will take time,” says Johnson, “but it is imperative for rebuilding the legend of Panama hats.” As proud as he is of his own Number One Panama, Johnson would be prouder still if one day a weaver could create one even finer.

Christopher P. Baker is a British travel writer who is now cutting something of a dash around his adopted home in Oakland, California.