

Scams in existence in Ecuador

There are individuals and organisations in every country that will try to deceive others for personal gain. This document will outline some of the more common methods of deception that have been witnessed by those in Ecuador and will try to give some pointers so as not to fall foul of the scammers' efforts. It will also give some further information regarding what to do if you find yourself the victim of a scam.

Distance (Internet etc.)

Lottery Scams

Lottery scams involve a notice of a non-existent lottery win. The victim is then often requested to send sensitive information to a web-based e-mail account. The victim is then told that receiving the funds won in the fake lottery will require the payment of an advance transaction fee (this could be for shipping, exchange or tax etc.). If the "winner" sends this fee, the scammer will simply ask for more and more charges to be paid before the money can be released, which, of course, it never will since it does not exist.

There is also an evolved variant of the lottery scam that is concerned with fake or stolen cheques being sent to the 'winner' of the lottery, amounting to a small percentage of the total prize. The rationale behind sending small amounts of false or stolen funds is that it inspires confidence in the victim to send the advance fee. At the point of discovery by the bank, the false or stolen cheques are flagged and the funds are debited back out of the victim's account.

Fake Job Offers

Fake job offers have become increasingly common over recent months. These highly detailed scams involve the supposed recruitment of foreign nationals to come and work in the UK, often targeting individuals who have worked in the oil and mining sector with the promise of jobs at big companies like Shell or Caltex. These scams are elaborate in that the level of detail involved is high, with comprehensive contracts with company logos and official-looking forms used.

Once communication has begun with the employer, details will be exchanged before the employer asks for a fee to pay for visa services and processing. Upon payment of this, it is likely that the scammers will then ask for further payment for insurance, flights or other services.

These scams are successful as they target specific individuals within a sector and promise high wages and benefits in the UK. The documents are also well created with company logos and are hard to distinguish from the real thing, especially for a non-native speaker. Furthermore, the scam involves communication back and forth with the scammer who answers questions or guides the individual through the process.

"419" Scams

Named after the appropriate fraud section of the Nigerian penal code (from which the majority of these scams originate), these scams can vary in their exact implementation but they share a common theme. This is the need to transfer a large

amount of money (usually many millions) from one country to another. Owing to logistical difficulties, of which the excuse may vary, the help of the victim is required in order to “get the money out”. The victim is offered a percentage of the fortune in exchange (usually between 25% and 40%). Naturally, the overwhelming majority of people do not respond to such emails. However, the scammers play a simple numbers game and send many millions of emails out in the hope of eliciting a few responses.

Once the scammer has attracted a victim, he/she begins to sell the story and build a relationship of confidence. The scammer then explains that a large (although tiny in comparison with the millions to be received) sum of money is required in order to cover transaction costs, bribes, fees etc. The victim is constantly reminded that it is a small investment to make for such large returns. He/she can also be told that he/she needs to have a local bank account with \$x in it in order to authorise the transaction. The scammers, of course, provide the account.

Personal

Fake Police

This scam involves individuals posing as policemen approaching you under the guise of asking you some questions or asking to see identification. This technique involves the invention of an offence that you have supposedly committed with a view to procuring a bribe or fine. In a few cases, it has also been used to get inside a house. If you are in any doubt whatsoever as to the identity of the “police”, ask to see their identification and examine it closely or call the police yourself to confirm the identities. Be particularly wary if they are not in uniform or not driving an official police car.

Fake Utility Men

This scam involves individuals disguised as utility men who wish to gain access to a house. They may ask to read the meter or wish to perform checks or routine repairs. Be sure to check identification very carefully or call the utility to confirm and, if there is any doubt whatsoever, do not allow anyone to enter your house.

Fake Kidnap

Cases are fairly rare but they do occur. One such case occurred where a teen had his mobile phone pick-pocketed upon entering a busy nightclub. The thieves then used the phone to call home and said that they had kidnapped him, demanding a small ransom of within the hour. The boy then returned home hours later, oblivious to the incident, thinking only that he had had his phone stolen.

Money Exchange

It is important to remain vigilant against being short-changed when changing money and, if possible, to do so only at banks or recognised bureau de changes. Try to have an idea of how much you expect to receive in foreign currency before undertaking any transaction. It is not unheard of for moneychangers to allow you to make the calculation yourself on a calculator, though on one programmed to misrepresent by some percentage.

Counterfeit Money / Cheques

There is a great deal of counterfeit money in Latin America, and Ecuador is no exception. Try to keep smaller bills (and indeed larger bills are difficult to change) so that, in the event of discovering a counterfeit bill, the detriment will be reduced. Also, familiarise yourself with the money and its security features and stay particularly vigilant in poorly lit areas or at times when money changes hands hurriedly, such as at markets.

SMS Announcements

There have been a few cases of bogus competition announcements being sent out by SMS. These might say that you have won a prize (usually around \$1000), requiring you to send the code for a top-up voucher. These codes are then put onto mobile phones in order that third parties pay to use the credit.

General Advice

- If something sounds too good to be true, it most likely is.
- Think logically about whether all or any aspects of a communication could indicate a scam.
- If you are unsure, ask for a second opinion.
- If you are taken in by a scam, do not fall deeper into it. Contact the authorities or the British Embassy who will be able to point you towards some advice.

Useful Resources

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Advance_fee_fraud

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lottery_scam

http://www.419baiter.com/_scam_emails/job_scams/shell-petroleum-development-company-of-canada-job-scam.html

<http://www.fco.gov.uk>

<http://ukinecuador.fco.gov.uk>

REMEMBER!!!

If you are unsure as to the legitimacy of any one of the above scenarios, it is best to err on the side of caution and refuse. If something sounds too good to be true, generally that is the case. If you are in any doubt whatsoever, DO NOT SEND ANY MONEY.