



Ecuador

The charms of Ecuador are often overlooked by those heading straight for the Galapagos. Straddling the Equator, from which it derives its name, this is one of the smallest and most accessible South American countries, with well-preserved colonial cities, beautiful haciendas, and a range of scenery from towering volcanoes to steamy jungle. The highlands are formed by two distinct cordilleras, with a fertile valley between them, which Alexander von Humboldt aptly named the 'Avenue of the Volcanoes'.

With enough time it makes good sense to combine a visit to Ecuador with Peru, for the Inca ruins, or Venezuela, for the Caribbean coast and the contrasting wildlife of the Llanos.

Climate and when to go

Daytime temperatures in the highlands vary according to altitude and time of day, and range between 6 and 23°C. The coast has a hot rainy season from January to May. The northern highlands have a wet season during the same period, although with less rainfall, and it is wet from June to August around Baños. The wettest months in the Amazon are from April to September.



Cotopaxi



Morpho butterfly in the Amazon



Sally Vergette, owner of Ride Andes



Quito

Overshadowed by Pichincha volcano, **Quito** is an amalgamation of colonial and Indian influences. With an altitude of over 9,000 feet, the thin Andean air and strong Equatorial sun result in a capital city that moves at its own, rather sedate, pace and is a pleasant place to recover from a long flight and acclimatise to the mountains. The cobblestone streets, parks, plazas and wonderful old colonial architecture of Old Quito have been sympathetically restored. 2 hours north-west of Quito there are several simple lodges for birdwatchers in the cloud forest surrounding **Mindo**.



Colonial Quito

Otavalo and the Northern Sierra

About 100km from Quito, in lovely countryside near San Pablo lake, is the market town of **Otavalo**. On the way one passes the snow-covered Cayambe volcano, the highest point on the Equator. The famous market (biggest on Saturdays) is a major attraction with a vast array of produce and handicrafts on show. Near Otavalo are several small artisan towns, such as Cotacachi, where leather goods are made and sold. Most visitors stay in one of the historic haciendas in the area.



Otavalo market



San Pablo valley

HACIENDA CUSIN



Outside Otavalo, 2 hours north of Quito. Dating from 1602, with a cobbled courtyard, antique furniture, wonderful gardens and full of history. Most of the individually furnished rooms have fireplaces. Separate 'Monasterio' building with newer rooms. Walking, riding, mountain bikes.

LA MIRAGE



A Relais & Châteaux hotel near Cotacachi, less than 2 hours north of Quito. Beautiful gardens surround the hotel, all rooms have fireplaces. Indoor pool and spa for pampering. The Cuicocha crater lake and Otavalo market are nearby.



SAN AGUSTÍN DE CALLO



 A colonial hacienda 77km south of Quito, on the site of an important Inca palace, with views of Cotopaxi and Chimborazo. Most rooms are around the central courtyard, the rest in a separate annexe, all beautifully decorated. The chapel has probably the best example of Inca stonework in Ecuador. Walking, riding, mountain bikes.

HACIENDA EL PORVENIR

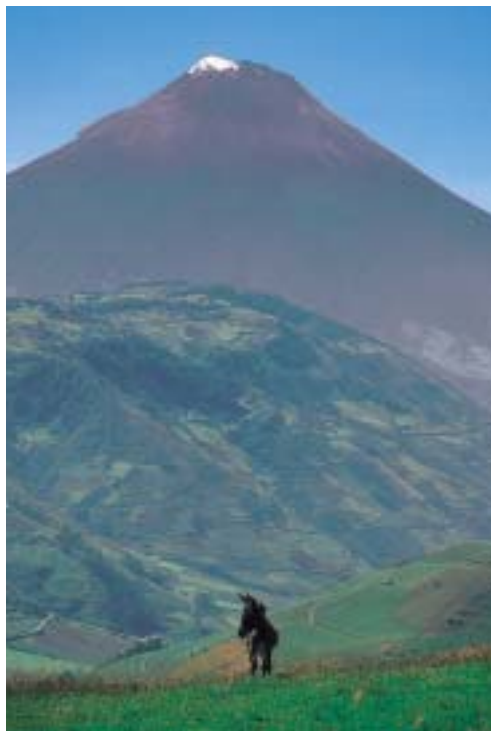


50km south of Quito in the foothills of Rumiñahui volcano and 4km from Cotopaxi National Park. Traditional 4,500 hectare family-run hacienda, built with traditional methods of adobe and thatch. Lovely sitting room with a roaring fire and good views. Cubicles or conventional rooms. Mainly for riders, also walking, biking and bird watching.

The Southern Sierra: Cotopaxi, Baños and Riobamba

About an hour south of Quito is the **Cotopaxi National Park**, which surrounds the world's highest active volcano. Near the eastern flank of the park are some large haciendas whose annual round-ups are an attraction for intrepid riders. There are also several important markets, such as Saquisilí, Pujilí and Zumbahua.

On the northern edge of the Sangay National Park and at the base of Tungurahua volcano is the scruffy pilgrimage town of **Baños**, popular as a tourist destination for its natural hot springs. The train ride from **Riobamba** is stunning, and passes the famous 'Devil's Nose' switchback below Alausí village.



Tungurahua on a quiet day



Baños



Riobamba train above Alausí



Cuenca and Ingapirca

Retaining its old colonial atmosphere **Cuenca** is one of the most attractive cities in Ecuador, with the historic centre containing churches dating from the 16th and 17th centuries. A couple of hours north are the **Ingapirca** ruins, Ecuador's most important Inca site. West from Cuenca is the Cajas National Park, full of glacial lakes set amongst breathtaking scenery at 10,000 feet, an excellent area for walking and birdwatching.



Panama hats in Cuenca



Cajas National Park

Guayaquil and the Coast

Guayaquil is Ecuador's largest city and the commercial hub of the country. Much improved after recent restoration work, areas such as the old district of Las Peñas and the Malecón 2000 (promenade) now add to the character of the city. While there are several resorts along Ecuador's Pacific coast, unreliable weather and lack of infrastructure mean that there is currently little to appeal to the international traveller.



Guayaquil

MANSIÓN ALCÁZAR



In Cuenca, 4 blocks from the main square. Beautiful and peaceful colonial house with a small private garden. All rooms are tastefully and uniquely decorated. Lovely drawing room and library.



Ingapirca



NAPO WILDLIFE CENTRE



In Yasuní National Park, 3½ hours by boat from Coca. The only lodge on the relatively undisturbed south bank of the Rio Napo, in an 82 square mile nature reserve. Spacious netted bungalows with verandas overlooking a lake. Based on a conservation partnership with the local community. Pirana fishing, wildlife tours, parrot clay licks.

LA SELVA



2 hours downstream of Coca on the north side of the Rio Napo, overlooking a lake in a mixture of primary and secondary forest. Simple thatched cabins (mosquito nets) connected by walkways. Limited hot water and electricity. Wildlife tours, night walks, bird tower and canoeing.

The Amazon

Stretching from the eastern Andes to the Peruvian border, the *oriente* is a vast area of lush tropical jungle covering part of the upper Amazon basin, still populated almost exclusively by indigenous communities. For wildlife enthusiasts there are several excellent jungle lodges, and access to almost all involves a short flight into the jungle and a river transfer. Several communities are leading the way in showing how involvement with tourism projects can benefit them and help safeguard both the future of the rainforest and their way of life.



The Amazon



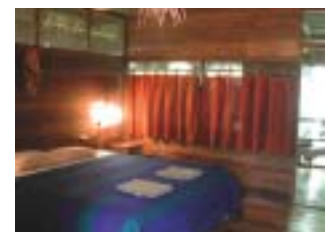
The river Napo near Yachana

KAPAWI ECOLOGE & RESERVE



Close to the Peruvian border, on the Pastaza river; with 3 possible access routes depending on conditions (a buffer night on departure is essential). Pretty thatched cabins on stilts, laid out in a curve on the edge of a small lagoon. No fans, but large netted windows allow a good flow of air and it usually cools down at night. Sun-heated water; solar panels. Wildlife treks, river trips, community visits - all with an Achuar and bilingual guide.

SACHA LODGE



On the Napo river about 2 hours downstream of Coca. Built on swamp forest, wide boardwalks (some covered) leading to comfortable cabins with fans, electricity and hot water. Dining room and bar with upstairs observation platform. Mainly secondary forest. Popular with groups. Canoeing, guided jungle treks with both native and professional guides.



Ecuador Itineraries

VALLEY OF THE VOLCANOES AND THE AMAZON



From the colonial cities of the south to the volcanoes of the north, ending with a stay in the Amazon.

Guayaquil

Day 1: Spend the first night at the deluxe Hilton Colón, with an airy atrium and large pool, close to the airport.

Cuenca

Days 2-3: After a short flight to Cuenca you stay 2 nights at the charming Mansión Alcázar (see page 41). Visit this historical colonial city, and take a walk in the Cajas National Park.

Otavalo and the northern Sierra

Days 4-5: Fly to Quito and drive (2 hours) north for 2 nights at the elegant property of La Mirage (see page 39). Visit the Otavalo market and nearby Cuicocha crater lake.

Cotopaxi and the southern Sierra

Days 6-8: Either drive or take a scenic charter flight south, through the Valley of the Volcanoes, to Latacunga, from where a short drive takes you to the beautiful Hacienda San Agustín de Callo (see page 40). During your 3 night stay you will visit the Cotopaxi National Park and local markets such as Pujilí or Saquisilí.

Quito

Day 9: Return to Quito for a night at the Hotel Marriott, a first class modern hotel with large rooms, quite close to the airport and within walking distance of the main shopping district.

The Amazon

Days 10-13: Early morning drive back to Quito and fly east to the Amazon. Boat transfer downriver for 3 nights at a jungle lodge such as the Napo Wildlife Centre (see page 42) to experience the sights and sounds of the rainforest. Return to Quito for onward connections.



Cajas National Park



Otavalo



The Amazon

QUITO, CUENCA, COTOPAXI AND DEVIL'S NOSE TRAIN



A sweep from north to south taking in colonial cities, National Parks and Inca ruins, with an emphasis on good value accommodation.

Quito

Days 1-2: Two nights at La Posada de la Abuela, a small, friendly hotel with plenty of character in the heart of Quito.

Otavalo and the northern Sierra

Days 3-4: Driven north (about 2 hours) through the Andes for a 2 night stay at the simple Las Palmeras Inn, a short walk from the famous market town of Otavalo. The pretty white garden cottages are furnished with local handicrafts and have lots of character. Walking, riding and visits to local villages can be organised locally.

Days 5-6: Head south, through spectacular and contrasting scenery, for 2 nights at the Termas de Papallacta, set in a high pass that eventually leads down to the Amazon. Pleasant thatched rooms, and 3 natural hot pools.

Cotopaxi and the Southern Sierra

Days 7-10: Continue south, avoiding Quito, for a 3 night stay at Hacienda El Porvenir (see page 40), 4km from the Cotopaxi National Park, with good riding and walking. Drive south to Riobamba, where you spend a night at the Hostería La Andaluz, a converted colonial hacienda with views to Chimborazo volcano.

Cuenca and Ingapirca

Day 11: Take the Devil's Nose train, a spectacular journey through the Andes with a renowned series of switchbacks - most tourists choose to ride on the roof! Met at Alausí and drive (2 hours) to the simple Posada Ingapirca, the only hotel right next to Ecuador's finest Inca ruins.

Days 12-14: Driven to Cuenca for 2 nights at the Hotel Santa Lucia, a restored 1859 colonial house one block from the main square. Fly to Guayaquil for onward connections.



Las Palmeras, near Otavalo



Tilipulo



Santa Lucia, Cuenca

See pages 49 and 60 for more Ecuador itineraries