

Destination Ecuador & the Galápagos Islands

This small Andean nation towers above most other countries when it comes to natural and cultural wonders. Amazonian rainforest, Andean peaks, premontane cloud forests and the Galápagos Islands set the stage for Ecuador's spectacular biodiversity. Wildlife-watching is just one way to enjoy its riches, with dozens of animal and plant species found nowhere else on earth. On even a short Ecuadorian adventure, it's possible to photograph monkeys from jungle canopy towers, swim with sea lions in the Pacific and admire dozens of Ecuador's 1600 bird species in misty forests.

FAST FACTS

Population: 14 million

GDP per capita: \$7700

GDP growth rate: 3.4%

Minimum wage: \$200
per month

Inflation rate: 8.6%

Unemployment rate:
8.7%

Number of internet users:
1.5 million

Adult literacy rate: 91%

Percent of forest loss
since 1950: 54%

Origin of the panama hat:
Ecuador

Ecuador's blend of lush forested landscapes and volcanic scenery also provides a spectacular backdrop to adrenaline-charged adventures – from white-water rafting on Class V rivers to climbing 5000m-high volcanoes. There's magnificent hiking along old Inca trails, surfing on tight breaks off the west coast and diving amid dramatic underwater scenery.

The incredibly varied geography of Ecuador is matched only by its cultural diversity. Over a dozen indigenous peoples live here, each contributing to the rich and complicated notion of Ecuadorian identity. There are highland villages renowned for their colorful textiles, coastal Afro-Ecuadorian towns where days end with meals of fresh seafood enjoyed with memorable sunsets, and remote settlements in the Amazon where shamans still harvest the traditional rainforest medicines of their ancestors.

Ecuadorian cities march to equally alluring rhythms. By day, gorgeous colonial towns such as Quito and Cuenca teem with life, as street vendors, politicians and workers from all parts of the country mingle on the cobblestone streets beneath misty Andean skies. At night, the cafés and restaurants fill with locals and expats alike dining on regional delicacies before venturing into salsa-filled bars and nightclubs scattered about town.

Ecuador has many riches, extending well beyond its cities, people and greenery. These include the country's agricultural abundance, fishing stocks and substantial mineral and oil reserves. Until recently, the interests of big business almost always trumped the voices of indigenous people and environmentalists, who sought to preserve the land rather than mine it for wealth. Sadly, pristine swaths of the Amazon were polluted following the discovery of oil in the 1960s. Mining for gold, copper and silver deposits has also left huge scars on the countryside, with more projects on the horizon. And small family-run farms of the lowlands have entirely disappeared since the rise of large-scale plantations owned by multinational corporations.

The movement to preserve the land, however, has been gaining momentum in recent years, spurred in part by the increasing earnings from ecotourism. Ecuador's newest president, Rafael Correa, has set some ambitious goals for protecting the environment and the indigenous groups that live on lands threatened by industrial development. In 2008, Ecuadorian voters for the first time in history approved a constitution that extends 'inalienable rights to nature.' The ground-breaking document

took a pronounced shift to the left on other issues as well, expanding indigenous rights and social-welfare policies and allowing civil unions for gay couples.

At the time of research, Correa enjoyed very high approval ratings. Meanwhile, he's earned critics on both sides of politics. Those on the right say the economic losses will be too high if Correa attempts to implement his socially progressive agenda, while those on the left feel his radical discourse is mere window dressing. The next few years will be pivotal to the young president – and for the many millions of Ecuadorians whose future is at stake.

Getting Started

Ecuador's great strengths are its astounding natural and cultural diversity coupled with its relatively small size. Although Ecuador is largely an uncomplicated country to travel around without a lot of planning, some places will require a bit of pre-trip legwork. This is particularly true of excursions to the Galápagos Islands, which you can arrange in your home country (the priciest option) or with tour companies in Quito (better value, but may require a few days or longer to schedule). You'll also want to book in advance for a jungle lodge if you're planning to include this in your itinerary, and you'll want to inquire with guides if you have any particular ambitions – climbing Cotopaxi or rafting the Upper Napo, for instance.

Travel in Ecuador accommodates a range of budgets. Those willing to rough it a bit will have the entire country open to them, with dizzying bus rides, hard-to-reach jungle destinations, long canoe rides and mystery market food all part of the equatorial experience. Those looking for high-end comfort will find it in heritage towns like Quito and Cuenca, the better haciendas in the highlands, some Amazon lodges and aboard the luxury boats cruising the Galápagos.

Travelers seeking a bit of balance between the two worlds – with a fair dose of adventure, good restaurants and memorable overnights, all at excellent prices – will find it all in Ecuador.

WHEN TO GO

Ecuador is a year-round destination. Each region – the Andes, the Pacific coast, the Oriente and the Galápagos – has its optimal visiting season (details are given in respective chapters). In terms of weather there are only two real seasons, the rainy season and the dry season, but there are significant variations between the geographical regions, and temperature is often a factor of altitude. Even during the rainy season, most days are sunny until the afternoon.

The highland dry season is June to the end of September. In the Oriente it rains during most months but August and December through March are usually the driest. Both seasons have advantages and disadvantages (see p231).

In the Galápagos, wildlife can be viewed year-round. If you're at all prone to sea sickness, avoid the rough seas from July to October. The dry season (June to December) is also cool and often misty. Also, see p349.

On the coast, the wet season (roughly January to May) sees sunny days with daily afternoon downpours, but it's the best beach weather. The dry season (roughly June to December) is cooler and usually overcast.

Tourist high seasons throughout Ecuador coincide with European, North American and Ecuadorian vacation periods, roughly mid-December through January and June through August. During this time accommodation rates are highest, and reservations at more popular lodging options are advised.

Accommodations can be hard to find during local festivals, so reserve in advance if you plan to arrive during a town celebration. Dates for these are provided in respective destination sections.

COSTS & MONEY

Costs in Ecuador have risen since the official currency was changed to the US dollar (see p33), but it's still affordable. Budget travelers can get by on \$20 per day, staying in the cheapest hotels, eating *almuerzos* (set lunches), cooking their own food and taking buses rather than taxis. Raise the ante to around \$40 per day, and you can stay in modest but comfortable hotels, take cab rides when you're feeling lazy, eat in better restaurants, visit museums, go out at night and

For more details on the weather, see Climate Charts (p380) in the Directory.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- A waterproof, windproof jacket – it will rain and the wind will blow (especially in the highlands)
- Ear plugs – often essential for sleeping
- A universal sink plug – a must for hand-washing clothes
- The proper vaccinations (see p402)
- Travel insurance (see p383)
- Dental floss – sews your clothes, laces your shoes and more!
- Duct tape (make your own mini-roll around a pencil stub or a lighter)
- A hat, sunglasses and sunscreen
- A pocket flashlight (torch)
- A travel alarm clock
- A Swiss Army-style pocket knife (but don't forget to pack it in your checked baggage)
- Ziplock bags
- A few meters of cord (makes great clothesline)
- Insect repellent (containing 30% DEET)
- Photocopies of your passport and essential travel documents
- A good novel for those long bus rides (p397)

cover the occasional \$10 national park fee. Spending \$50 to \$70 per day will allow you to sleep and eat in style, plus partake in plenty of nightlife.

Things get expensive when you start adding tours (climbing, mountain-biking, bird-watching and other tours cost \$35 to \$80 per day), staying at jungle lodges or haciendas and – priciest of all – visiting the Galápagos Islands.

TRAVELING RESPONSIBLY

Tourist numbers have increased significantly in recent years, and tourism is the country's fourth-largest source of revenue. Undeniably, visitors have an impact on the country, which can be positive or negative depending on a number of factors. The best way to make sure your money goes to the right people is to support local businesses, such as small family-run restaurants and guesthouses rather than foreign-owned places. If you plan to study Spanish in Ecuador (and it's a great place to learn), try to choose a school that invests a portion of its profits in the community. And consider living with a local family.

Just by staying in a lodge in the Amazon, you can help to preserve the rainforest. In the face of increasing deforestation, more and more lodges are creating their own reserves simply to ensure their guests will have some wildlife to observe during their visit. Be sure to ask what the lodge is doing for the environment before booking a reservation.

Support local artisans by buying locally made handicrafts and artwork, and try to buy at the source. Keep an eye out for illegal artifacts such as pre-Columbian pieces, mounted insects, items made from endangered animals, or jewelry made from sea turtle or black coral, and avoid buying them.

What you eat also affects the environment. Shrimp farms, in particular, have caused widespread destruction of mangroves and coastal ecosystems. Try to limit your intake when in Ecuador.

What you leave behind is also something to consider. Take home your plastics and batteries when you leave, as Ecuador has no means of processing these things.

HOW MUCH?

Bus travel per hour

about \$1

Set lunch \$2-3.50

Short cab ride in Quito \$2

Private language class

per hour \$5-7

One-way mainland flight

\$60-90

When signing up for a package tour or expedition, whether it's a Galápagos tour or a rafting or climbing trip, be sure to ask lots of questions before committing. In order to minimize the impact of your visit, you'll want to choose an outfit that's sensitive to the local ecology and its resident communities. Guides shouldn't hunt, cut trees for bonfires, harass wildlife, or litter, and they should support in some way the communities they visit. Try to find out if outfits use indigenous or local guides.

TOP PICKS

OUTDOOR ADVENTURES

Ecuador's combination of tropical rainforest, snow-covered peaks and wild coastline makes for some superb adventures. For more on the array of adrenaline-fueled activities see p61.

- Snorkeling with marine life, followed by wildlife-watching in the Galápagos (p342)
- White-water rafting the Upper Napo river (p250) amid the rainforests
- Bird-watching in the cloud forests around Mindo (p147)
- Hiking the spectacular multiday Quilotoa loop (p161), stopping at Andean villages en route
- Scaling the 6300m-high Volcán Chimborazo (p184), Ecuador's highest peak
- Mountain biking the 61km 'ruta de las cascadas' (the highway of the waterfalls) from Baños to Puyo (p179)
- Surfing great breaks off Montañita (p311) and Mompiche (p289)
- Whale-watching on a cruise from Puerto López (p307)
- Exploring the Amazonian rainforest with naturalist guides at one of the lower Río Napo's jungle lodges (p244)

TRADITIONAL MARKETS

Ecuador's traditional markets are surely one of the country's highlights, and offer the chance to experience Ecuador's unique indigenous culture up close. Plus, you never know what treasures you might find.

- Otavalo on Saturday (p122)
- Riobamba on Saturday (p187)
- Latacunga on Tuesday and Saturday (p158)
- Guamote on Thursday (p192)
- Ambato on Monday (p167)
- Saquisilí on Thursday (p166)
- Gualaceo and Chordeleg on Sunday (p212)
- Saraguro on Sunday (p214)
- Zumbahua on Saturday (p163)

PARKS & RESERVES

For nature lovers, Ecuador is a paradise. Each and every one of the country's protected areas offers something different, but the following are the pick of the lot.

- Galápagos Islands (p342)
- Parque Nacional Yasuní (p248)
- Reserva Producción Faunística Cuyabeno (p240)
- Parque Nacional Podocarpus (p219)
- Parque Nacional Cotopaxi (p155)
- Parque Nacional Machalilla (p303)
- Parque Nacional Cajas (p211)
- Reserva Ecológica de Manglares Cayapas Mataje (p277)
- Reserva Ecológica Cotacachi-Cayapas (p277)
- Volcán Chimborazo (p184)

There are many ways for visitors to play a positive role in Ecuador, not least of which is volunteering. See p389 for a few ideas on how to get involved.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

If there's one book that nails Ecuadorian culture on the head, it's the eloquent and humorous *Living Poor*, written by Moritz Thomsen as a 48-year-old Peace Corps volunteer on the Ecuadorian coast during the 1960s.

Joe Kane's *Savages* (1995) is a compelling account of life on the *other* side of the Andes, an eye-opening (and sometimes hilarious) look at how the oil industry affects the indigenous Huaorani and the rainforest.

More recently, Judy Blakenship's *Cañar: A Year in the Highlands of Ecuador* (2005) gives an in-depth portrait of life in an Andean village, complete with processions, traditional weddings, healing ceremonies and harvests. Blakenship's photographs accompany the text.

As for the Galápagos, no list of books is complete without Kurt Vonnegut's whimsical 1985 novel *Galápagos*, in which vacationers are stranded on the islands and become the progenitors for a strange new twist in human evolution.

The Panama Hat Trail (1986), by Tom Miller, is a fascinating book about the author's search for that most quintessential and misnamed of Ecuadorian products, the panama hat.

Robert Whitaker's *The Mapmaker's Wife: A True Tale of Love, Murder and Survival in the Amazon* (2004) is a gripping reconstruction of Isabela Godin's horrific 18th-century journey from the Andes to the Amazon. Godin was the wife of a scientist on La Condamine's equatorial mission.

In *Floreana* (1961), Margaret Wittmer tells her bizarre (and true) story of living off the land in the Galápagos with her eccentric husband. Murder, struggle and vegetarianism all come into play.

Finally, British climber Edward Whymper's *Travels Amongst the Great Andes of the Equator* is a climbing classic. Although published in 1892, it reads as beautifully today as any in the genre.

INTERNET RESOURCES

For websites on volunteering, Ecuadorian newspapers and embassies and consulates, see the Directory chapter. Websites for specific towns and regional attractions are given throughout this book.

The Best of Ecuador (www.thebestofecuador.com) Packed with information on just about everything you can think of.

Ecuador (www.ecuador.com) Overview site giving a condensed portrait of the country.

Ecuador Explorer (www.ecuadorexplorer.com) General travel and tour information and good classifieds.

Ecuaworld (www.ecuaworld.com) General information site jam-packed with everything from volcano elevations to hacienda reviews.

Latin American Network Information Center (<http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/ecuador>) Scores of useful links about everything Ecuadorian.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Find succinct summaries on traveling to most places on earth; postcards from other travelers; and the Thorn Tree bulletin board, where you can ask questions before you go or dispense advice when you get back.

Events Calendar

Ecuador's festivals, especially indigenous fiestas in the highlands, are worth planning a trip around. Each city, town and village has its local celebrations, which feature a generous dose of fireworks, alcohol, music and dancing. Many outwardly Catholic fiestas are indigenous celebrations at their core.

For national public holidays, see p383.

JANUARY

NAPO RIVER FESTIVAL mid-Jan
Organized by the Fundacion Río Napo, this event (p250) features aquatic antics like a kayak rodeo, a dugout canoe race, arts and crafts events, and indigenous music and dancing. It's held in Tena and Puerto Misahualli.

FEBRUARY–APRIL

CARNAVAL Feb/Mar
Held during the last few days before Lent, Carnival is celebrated with water fights – sometimes dousing passersby with all manner of suspect liquids. Guaranda is famous for its Carnaval (p182), with dances and parades.

FRUIT & FLOWER FESTIVAL late Feb-early Mar
Held in Ambato (p168), the Fiesta de Frutas y Flores features fruit and flower shows, bullfights, parades and late-night dancing in the streets.

SEMANA SANTA Mar/Apr
Beginning the week before Easter Sunday, Semana Santa (Holy Week) is celebrated with religious processions throughout Ecuador. The Good Friday procession in Quito (p97), with its purple-robed penitents, is particularly colorful.

FOUNDING DAY, CUENCA Apr 12
The anniversary of Cuenca's founding is one of the city's biggest events, which locals celebrate by staging parades and lighting up elaborate fireworks-laced floats, which crackle and pop all day and night (p205).

INDEPENDENCE BATTLE OF TAPI Apr 21
Riobamba's biggest night out revolves around the historic 1822 battle. Expect an agricultural fair, with the usual highland events: street parades, dancing and plenty of traditional food and drink (p189).

MAY–JUNE

CHONTA FESTIVAL last week of May
In Macas (p263) the Chonta Festival is the most important Shuar celebration of the year. It culminates in a dance to help ferment the *chicha* (a corn drink).

CORPUS CHRISTI 9th Thurs after Easter
This religious feast day combines with a traditional harvest fiesta in many highland towns, and features processions and street dancing. Particularly good fests are in Cuenca (p205) and Salasaca (p171).

INTI RAYMI Jun 21-29
This millennia-old indigenous celebration of the summer solstice and harvest is celebrated throughout the northern highlands, including Otavalo (p125), where it is combined with celebrations of St John the Baptist (June 24) and Sts Peter & Paul (June 29).

JULY

CANTON FOUNDING DAY, SANTO DOMINGO 1st week of Jul
Santo Domingo de los Colorados (p273) becomes the center for country fairs and agricultural fests in the surrounding countryside.

FOUNDING OF GUAYAQUIL Jul 24-25
Make your way to Guayaquil for this wild celebration (p327) on the nights leading up to the anniversary of the city's founding (July 25). Combining this with the national holiday of July 24, the city closes down and parties hard.

AUGUST–SEPTEMBER

LA VIRGEN DEL CISNE Aug 15
In the southern highlands, thousands of pilgrims take part each year in the extraordinary 70km procession to Loja carrying the Virgen del Cisne (Virgin of the Swan) to Loja (p227).

FIESTA DEL YAMOR Sep 1-15
Imbabura province's biggest festival (p125) celebrates the fall equinox and Colla Raimi (festival of the moon) with bullfights, dancing, cockfights, partying, feasts and lots of *yamor* (a nonalcoholic corn drink made with seven types of corn).

FEIRA MUNDIAL DEL BANANO 3rd week of Sept

Machala celebrates its favorite yellow fruit (p335) with the usual revelry. One of the biggest events is a beauty pageant to select the Reina del Banano (the Banana Queen).

FIESTA DE LA MAMÁ NEGRA Sep 23-24

Latacunga hosts one of the highland's most famous celebrations (p158), in honor of the La Virgen de las Mercedes. La Mamá Negra, played by a man dressed as a black woman, pays tribute to the 19th-century liberation of African slaves.

OCTOBER–NOVEMBER**INDEPENDENCE DAY & DÍA DE LA RAZA** Oct 9 & 12

These two big fests in Guayaquil (p327) combine to create a long holiday full of cultural events, parades and bigger-than-usual crowds on the Malecón.

INDEPENDENCE OF LOJA Nov 18

Locals let their hair down in the week surrounding Loja's Independence Day (p216). Revelry fills

the streets for up to a week of big parades and cultural events.

DECEMBER**FOUNDING OF QUITO** 1st week of Dec

Quito's biggest bash is a much-anticipated event, with bullfights, parades and street dances throughout the first week of December (p97).

CANTON FOUNDING DAY, BAÑOS Dec 16

The annual Baños festival (p176) features processions, fireworks, music and a great deal of street dancing and drinking.

PASE DEL NIÑO Dec 24

Cuenca hosts one of Ecuador's most spectacular parades, which lasts from morning until the afternoon of Christmas Eve (p205).

END-OF-YEAR CELEBRATIONS Dec 28-31

Parades and dances starting on December 28 culminate in the burning of life-size effigies in the streets on New Year's Eve, plus fireworks. It's biggest in Guayaquil and Quito.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

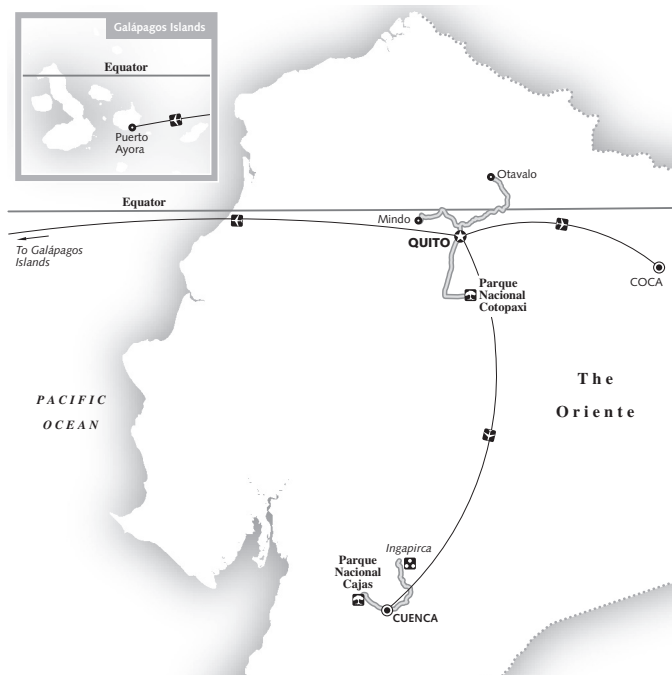
BEST OF ECUADOR

Three Weeks / Andes, Galápagos & Amazon

Colonial treasures, volcanic peaks, cloud forests, rainforests and astounding wildlife are all on the menu of this action-packed journey around Ecuador. Begin the trip in **Quito's old town** (p79), spending a few days soaking up this magnificent World Heritage site. Fly to the **Galápagos** (p342) to enjoy a six-day cruise around the islands. Head back to Quito, change planes and journey to the **Oriente** (p230) to get a taste of the Amazon. Return to Quito and head north to **Otavalo** (p122) for the Saturday market, which is one of South America's biggest. Return to Quito and head west to the cloud forests around **Mindo** (p146), one of Ecuador's best destinations for bird-watching.

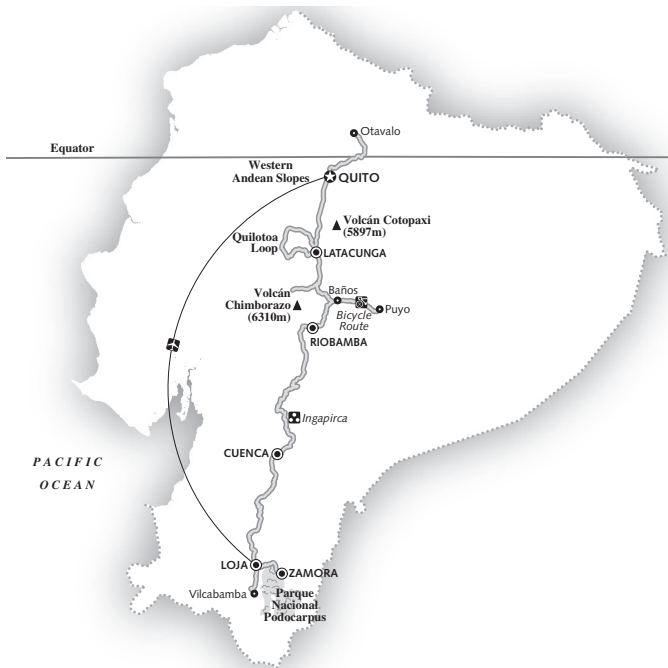
Head south for a stay in one of the splendid haciendas around **Parque Nacional Cotopaxi** (p155), which are great bases for hiking, horseback riding and summit attempts of the volcano. Return to Quito for a round-trip flight to **Cuenca** (p199), the colonial gem of the south. If time allows take day trips to stunning **Parque Nacional Cajas** (p211) and the fascinating Inca site of **Ingapirca** (p196).

This itinerary will take you from the historic streets of Ecuador's capital to the wildlife-watching paradise of the Galápagos, then to the rain-forest and back into the Andean highlands, all in about three weeks.



EXPLORING THE ANDES **Two to Three Weeks / Otavalo to Vilcabamba**

Begin with a few days in **Quito** (p75), where you can acclimatize to the altitude while exploring one of South America's most fascinating capitals. Head south for a night or two in a historic hacienda on the flanks of **Volcán Cotopaxi** (p156), where you can horseback ride, hike and climb to your heart's content. Travel south to **Latacunga** (p157) and journey into the mountainous landscape of the **Quilotoa Loop** (p161) for two to four days. There you can explore indigenous villages and market towns amid striking Andean scenery. Head south to the delightful subtropical town of **Baños** (p172), where you can soak in the thermal baths and take a fabulous downhill bike ride to **Puyo** (p179) in the Oriente. After Baños, move on to **Riobamba** (p186) and do some high-adrenaline mountain biking or hiking around **Volcán Chimborazo** (p184). Continue south to the marvelous colonial city of **Cuenca** (p199), either via the famous **Nariz del Diablo** (p193) train ride or the **Inca trail to Ingapirca** (p196). After exploring Cuenca for a couple of days, wind your way south to **Loja** (p214) and the laid-back village of **Vilcabamba** (p223), where you could easily spend a few days hiking and relaxing. Be sure to take at least a one-day hike in **Parque Nacional Podocarpus** (p219) before flying from Loja back to Quito. Then treat yourself to a few relaxing days hiking and bird-watching in the cloud forests of the **western Andean slopes** (p145). Because you were thinking smart, you saved the **Otavalo market** (p122) for last, so the only place you have to lug all those beautiful ponchos and weavings is to Quito and onto the airplane.



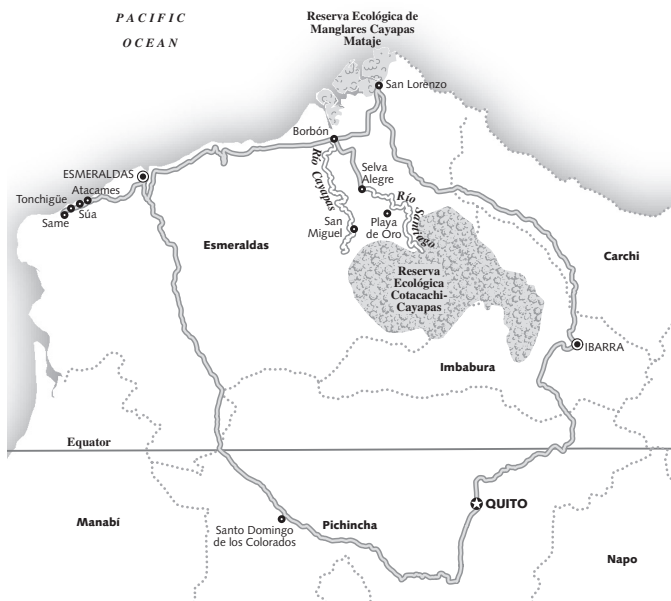
You'll traverse some 1050km of hair-raising, roller-coaster roads on a journey from Quito through the central highlands toward Vilcabamba, just north of the Peruvian border. You'll see Ecuador's astounding peaks, scenic roads and fascinating indigenous markets.

ROADS LESS TRAVELED

MARIMBAS & MANGROVES Two to Three Weeks / The Northern Coast

Ecuador's northernmost coastal region is a land of giant mangroves, Afro-Ecuadorian culture, incredible biodiversity, extreme poverty and serious off-the-beaten-track travel. The rewards are great for those adventurous enough to undertake the journey. From **Quito** (p75), travel north to **Ibarra** (p135), and then northwest along the windy road to **San Lorenzo** (p275). From there, explore the rarely visited mangroves and forested islands of **Reserva Ecológica de Manglares Cayapas Mataje** (p277), home to some of the world's tallest mangroves. Head back to San Lorenzo, then make your way to **Borbón** (p278) for a fascinating journey up the jungle-lined Río Cayapas. Spend the night in **San Miguel** (p279) and return to Borbón. From there continue on to Selva Alegre for another boat ride, this time along the Río Santiago to the wildlife reserve of **Playa de Oro** (p279). This must-see jungle lodge is beautifully set among the western reaches of **Reserva Ecológica Cotacachi-Cayapas** (p279), well worth a couple of days' exploration. After the jungle trip, head to **Esmeraldas** (p281), and change buses for the short trip along the coast to **Same** (p287), a tranquil spot overlooking a beautiful beach. While in the area, check out the fishing village of **Tonchigüe** (p287), pretty **Súa** (p286) and nightlife-loving beach town of **Atacames** (p284). Return to Quito, stopping en route at **Santo Domingo de los Colorados** (p272) for a visit to the indigenous **Tsáchilas** community (p273).

The largely Afro-Ecuadorian north coast has a magic all of its own. Traveling some 1100km by bus, boat and pickup truck, you will experience a side of Ecuador few tourists see – a world of giant mangroves, hidden fishing villages and hard-to-reach jungle reserves.



SOUTHERN ECUADOR**Two to Three Weeks / Guaranda to Puyango**

Start off in **Guaranda** (p182), where you can catch a ride up to **Salinas** (p184), a charming country village famed for its cheeses, woolly sweaters and other goods. Stay overnight in the village before heading to **Riobamba** (p186) and continuing on to the fascinating Thursday market at **Guamote** (p192). Veer east into **Parque Nacional Sangay** (p180), a setting of magnificent volcanoes and diverse flora and fauna. Stop in Atillo for a couple of days of spectacular hiking around the crystalline **Lagunas de Atillo** (p182). From Atillo continue downhill to **Macas** (p263), a friendly town bathed in the siesta-inducing tropical humidity of the southern Oriente. In Macas hire a guide for a cultural tour to an indigenous Shuar community, or walk (without a guide) to the village of **Sevilla** (p266). You can also hire a guide in Macas to take you down the Río Santiago to the **Cueva de los Tayos** (p266), the cave home of Ecuador's mysterious oil birds. After a few days in Macas, travel south through **Sucúa** (p267), and the wee town of **Limón** (p267) and stop in whatever jungle village piques your interest. After a day in **Gualaquiza** (p267), continue south through the rainforest to **Zamora** (p221), where you can explore **Parque Nacional Podocarpus** (p219). After a day or two climb back into the Andes to **Loja** (p214), where you'll rejoin the tourist trail. Take a breather (and treat yourself to a massage) in laid-back **Vilcabamba** (p223), and then work your way down the western side of the Andes to **Catacocha** (p227). Spend a day here then make your way to **Puyango** (p338) to visit one of South America's largest petrified forests, before winding your way back to Cuenca.



This 800km journey takes you through the southern reaches of Parque Nacional Sangay and into the little-visited reaches of the southern Oriente. You'll pass through tiny jungle towns and plenty of Andean scenery.

TAILORED TRIPS

SURF & SUN

Ecuador's charming coastal villages and attractive beaches draw a wide mix of travelers. The best spots on the north coast are **Mompiche** (p289), with its reliably good surf, and laid-back **Canoa** (p290), whose pretty beach is backed by forested cliffs. Travelers wanting to get off the beaten path might head for **Muisne** (p288) and its long comely stretch of palm-lined beach.

Next up, check out the **Ruta del Sol** (Route of the Sun; p303), the length of beautiful Ecuadorian coastline stretching from Parque Nacional Machalilla in the north down to Ballenita in the south. Spectacular **Los Frailes Beach** (p305), protected inside **Parque Nacional Machalilla** (p303), is a paradise. The bayside village of **Puerto López** (p307) is the perfect base for exploring the park. Divers should stop at **Salango** (p310) for some underwater adventures. South of here it's beach after beach, with the best lodging to be found at **Ayampe** (p311).

At last you arrive **Montañita** (p311) – its surf and laid-back vibe have made it famous. For the classic upperclass Ecuadorian experience, visit **Salinas** (p184), the country's most famous resort.



PEAK EXPERIENCE

Ten peaks in Ecuador top 5000m, and whether you climb them, hike around them or marvel at them from the window of a hacienda, they're some of Ecuador's most memorable sights. The views from the top are outrageous.

Volcán Chimborazo (p184) is Ecuador's highest mountain and, thanks to the equatorial bulge, the closest point to the sun. Beginners with a guide can climb **Volcán Cotopaxi** (p155), the country's second-highest peak and one of the world's highest active volcanoes. It's tough to find a finer sight than **Volcán Cayambe** (p121) towering majestically in the distance behind Otavalo's Saturday morning animal market. The view of **Antisana** from the thermal baths at **Papallacta** (p233), however, is definitely more luxurious. Only the headstrong attempt to climb **Volcán Sangay** (p181), the world's most constantly active volcano. **Volcán El Altar** (p181) is also rarely climbed but, for many mountaineers, its nine challenging peaks ringing a gorgeous crater lake make it the most beautiful of the big 10. **Iliniza Norte** (p154) and **Iliniza Sur** (p154) are majestic backdrops for hiking and climbing near the capital. Standing adjacent to Chimborazo, **Volcán Carihuairazo** (p184) is the country's ninth-highest peak and technically more challenging than its domineering neighbor. Near Baños, the sight of **Volcán Tungurahua** (p181) spewing smoke and steam is unforgettable.



AMAZONIAN ADVENTURE

The Amazon is one of the world's most biologically diverse regions. For adventurers and wildlife lovers, there's much to discover in Amazonian Ecuador, from indigenous reserves to jungle lodges with an incredible array of plant and animal life. Meet indigenous Achuar at the **Kapawi Ecologde** (p265), a culturally and ecologically sensitive reserve in a remote part of the Amazon. The **Reserva Producción Faunística Cuyabeno** (p240) is a unique flooded forest, home to astounding bird and aquatic life – including pink river dolphins. In **Coca** (p241) you can hire local guides to take you into indigenous Huaorani territory. The jungle lodges along the **lower Río Napo** (p244) offer superb wildlife-watching on hikes, canoe rides or climbs to the top of the jungle canopy. One of the Oriente's gems is the **Parque Nacional Yasuní** (p248), a Unesco-declared biosphere reserve with 500 bird species and vast stretches of wetlands, swamps, lakes, rivers and tropical rainforest. For a piranha feast, head to **Laguna Pañacocha** (p247), a picturesque black-water lake backed by cloud and dry forests. A tough trip into remote jungle is found inside the **Parque Nacional Sumaco-Galeras** (p249). Here you can walk (hire a guide in Huamani) the tortuous route up 3732m-high Volcán Sumaco. For less strain, journey to the end of the road in **Misahuallí** (p254), a good place to take in Oriente village life.



CULINARY HIGHWAY

Ecuador's culinary wonders are little known outside the country's borders, but an endless bounty of satisfying meals awaits the curious and hungry explorer. The coast is justly famous for its seafood, with the *encocados* (coconut and seafood stews) of **Esmeraldas** (p281) among Ecuador's top dishes. The province of Manabí is also famed for fresh seafood, including great ceviches; fishing capital **Manta** (p296) is a good place to look. **Latacunga** (p157) serves delightful *chugchucara*, a pork lover's dream. The southern highlands have some decadent recipes, and they are many (p217). **Loja** (p214) is a good place to try *cuy* (roast guinea pig), *humitas* (corn dumplings), tamales and other regional specialties. Guayas province offers a good culinary mix. For delicious cheeses, dried mushrooms and artisanal chocolate visit **Salinas** (p184), where village-run co-ops produce the town's famous products. Head to **Playas** (p316) for its celebrated fresh-cooked crab, and don't neglect **Guayaquil** (p318) for its *seco de chiva* (goat stew) and *encebollado* (seafood, yuca and onion soup). Tasty bites from the Oriente include *ayampacos* (chicken, beef or fish steamed in *bijao* leaves), served in **Macas** (p263). If you're around during Semana Santa (Holy Week), don't miss Ecuador's famous *fanesca* soup. **Cuenca** (p199) serves some of the country's best. Other festival dishes include *yamor* (a complex corn drink) served appropriately at Otavalo's **Fiesta de Yamor** (p125) and Macas' **Chonta festival** (p263), where you can sample authentically made *chicha* (saliva-fermented corn beverage).



The Authors



REGIS ST LOUIS **Coordinating Author, Quito, North Coast & Lowlands**

After Regis' first journey to the Andes in 1999, he returned home, sold all his belongings and set off on a classic journey across South America. Since then he's returned numerous times to travel the continent, logging thousands of miles on dodgy jungle and mountain roads, and he's learned to speak Spanish and Portuguese. Ecuador never fails to captivate Regis, and he spent his most recent trip exploring the rarely visited jungle towns of the north coast. Regis is the coordinating author of *South America on a Shoestring*, and he has contributed to more than a dozen Lonely Planet guides. His work has appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times*, among other publications. He lives in New York City.



LUCY BURNINGHAM **Northern Highlands, The Oriente**

Lucy first explored Ecuador in 2004 between magazine-editor jobs – the trip that inspired her freelance career. She gladly returned for Lonely Planet, an opportunity to befriend a pair of rubber boots and eat copious quantities of highland fruits. As an independent journalist with a master's degree in nonfiction writing, she has written for a variety of publications, including the *New York Times*, *Imbibe* and *Men's Journal*. When she's not pursuing stories at home or abroad, Lucy enjoys wearing out running shoes and sampling the beers of Portland, Oregon, where she lives with her husband and their fleet of bicycles.



AIMÉE DOWL **Central Highlands, Southern Highlands**

By canoe, plane, bicycle, horse, 4WD or her own two feet, Aimée Dowl has set down in every one of Ecuador's 24 provinces. These journeys have taken her along the Inca Trail, into tiny indigenous communities, up glaciated Andean volcanoes, over precarious avalanches, and into the wettest jungles on earth. From her high-altitude home in Quito, Aimée works as a freelance travel and culture writer, and her articles have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Viajes*, *Ms.* magazine and *BBC History*.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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MICHAEL GROSBERG

South Coast, Galápagos Islands

After a childhood spent stateside in the Washington, DC area and with a valuable philosophy degree in hand, Michael has had many careers, from business on a small Pacific island to journalism and NGO work in South Africa. He returned to New York City (NYC) for graduate school in comparative literature focusing on Latin America, and spent a summer teaching in Quito and traveling through much of Ecuador. After a few years of teaching literature and writing in several NYC colleges he's since been back to Ecuador and other countries in the region for pleasure and for other Lonely Planet assignments.

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