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15 INDULGENT GETAWAYS

Spring 2008

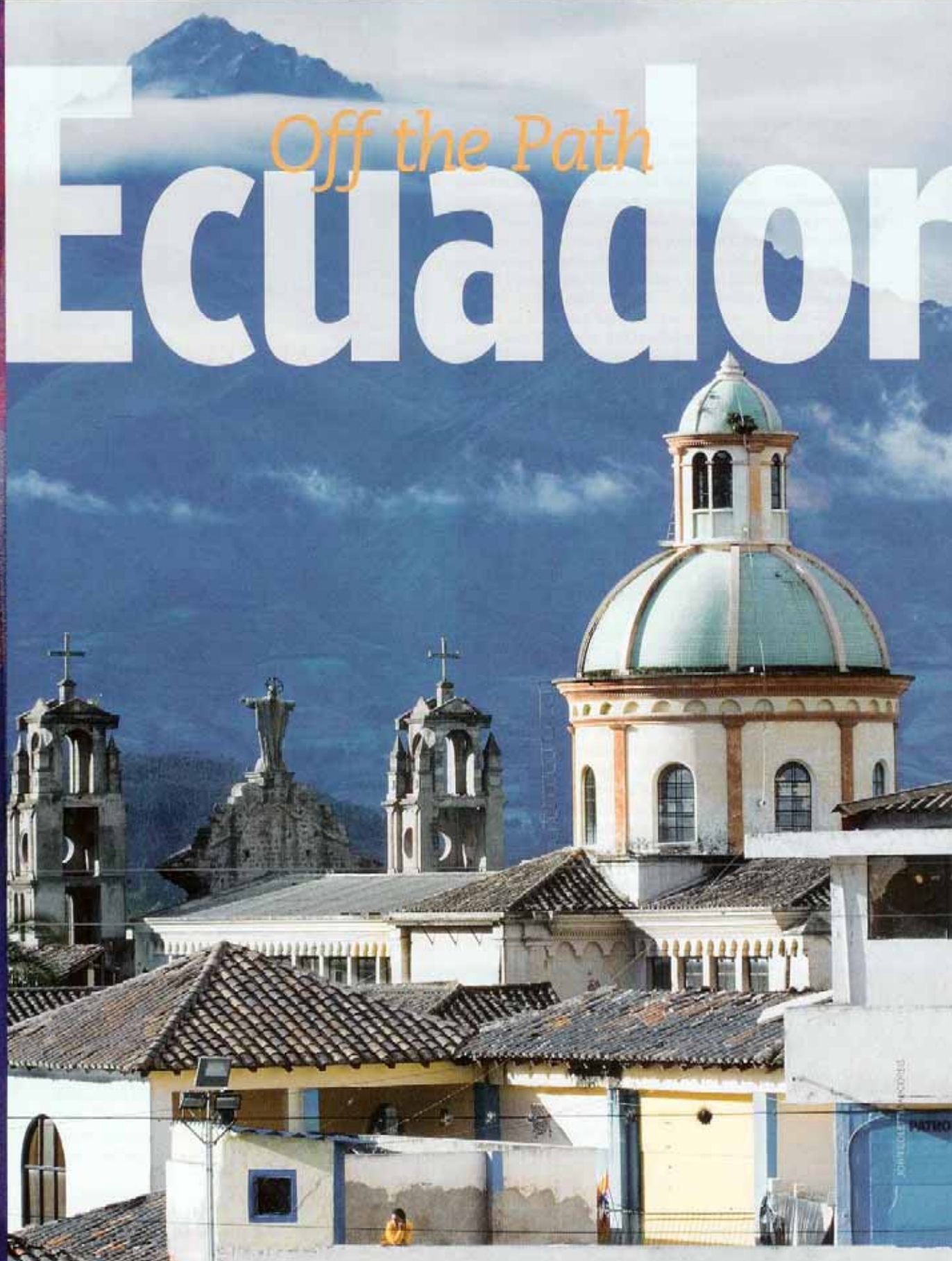
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FROM THE TRAVEL EXPERTS  
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*Off the Path*

# Ecuador


JOHN COOPER PHOTOGRAPHY

PATRO



*Ecuador has been under the radar for many years, but with a revitalized colonial capital and distinctive retreats in the Amazon and the Andes, not to mention an embarrassment of indigenous handicrafts, it promises not to stay that way for long.*

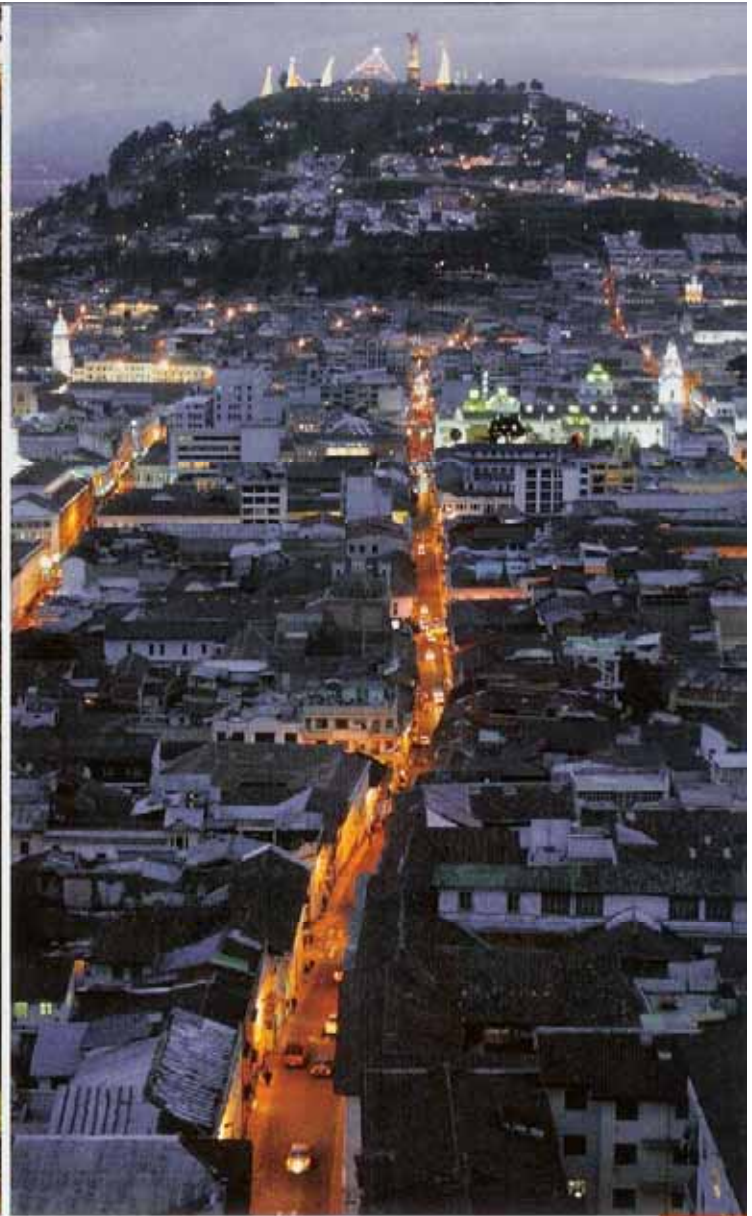
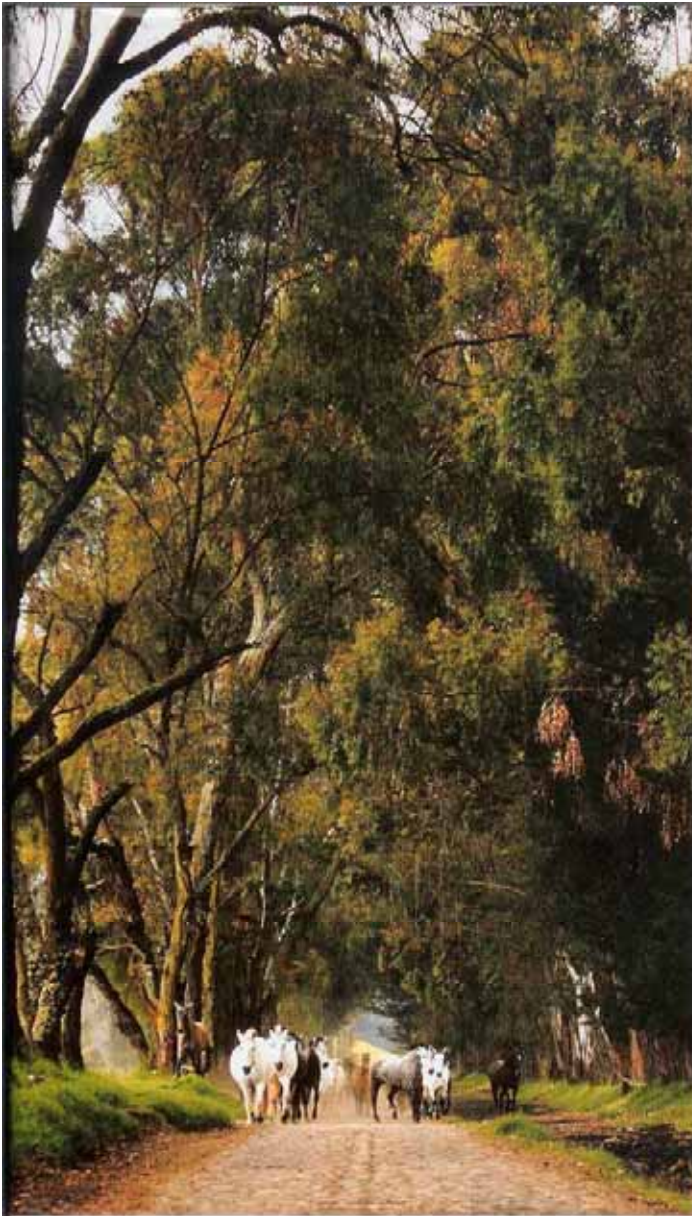
*By Victoria De Silverio*



**Take the best of South America,** then shrink it to about Nevada's size, and you have Ecuador. Wedged between Colombia and Peru and abutting the Pacific Ocean, Ecuador is one of the most geographically and culturally diverse countries on the planet. The lofty Andes form a rocky spine of snowcapped volcanoes from north to south. To the east is the Amazon basin, with tribes that have only recently been exposed to modern life. To the west are the subtropical coastal plains, with miles of pristine beaches. Locals are fond of boasting that within hours, you can zigzag through crisp mountain highlands; stroll on roads lined with opulent churches built by conquistadors in Quito; and swim with pink dolphins in the Amazon rain forest.

Ecuador's fascinating interior has long been overshadowed by the Galápagos Islands, its attention-hogging archipelago. While package tours there threaten Darwin's muses, the mystical

La Virgen de Quito statue overlooks Quito. Opposite: Horses at Hacienda Zuleta near Otavalo; a sunset over Quito. Previous spread, from left: A church in Otavalo; colonial architecture in the highlands



PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF FRANCISCA CAJETA; JCS/SHANEZAMORIN/CORBIS OUTLINE

mainland (only a four-hour flight from Miami and Houston) has been humbly readying itself for the ball. In recent years, Quito, the splendid colonial capital, has undergone an extensive restoration. The ancient city's cobblestones, plazas, and churches have all been scrubbed clean, and storied landmarks house new restaurants and shops. In the Andean highlands, historic haciendas—former estates of the Spanish aristocracy—have been converted into inns with authentic period details, offering visitors a unique glimpse into Ecuador's past. Indeed, it can be said that Ecuador is finally having its Cinderella moment.

Ecuador's history is as varied as its geography. Pre-Columbian agricultural cultures existed for

about 15,000 years before the Inca folded the land and its inhabitants into their empire at the end of the 15th century. Quechua, the language of the Incas, is still widely spoken among the indigenous peoples. In 1532, Francisco Pizarro led the campaign to defeat the powerful Inca, and in 1822, Simón Bolívar liberated Ecuador from Spanish reign. In more recent history, Ecuador has experienced great instability. Following an oil boom in the 1970s, rampant corruption threw the economy into chaos, leading to the last-resort effort in 2000 to stabilize the country by dollarizing its currency. In the last decade, the country has elected seven presidents, several of whom were removed from office amid scandal. The current president, Rafael

Correa, recently made international headlines by aligning himself with Hugo Chávez, a move that instilled fear in wealthy Ecuadorians and hope in the lower classes. The government is just starting to realize that tourism (an estimated 940,000 people visited in 2007) needs to be a priority. Luckily for Americans, even the seriously weak dollar will go a long way here, so living like a king isn't difficult.

Ecuador's small size makes it easy to spend time in the Andes, the Amazon, and Quito on a 10- to 14-day trip. The best way to organize your time is to fly into Quito and spend two or three nights there, then travel by car (your hotel can easily arrange for a car and driver for just \$150 a day, a worthwhile expense on Ecuador's



twisty roads) to Otavalo to explore the region and its markets for two nights. After a stop back in Quito, venture south to the mountains near Patate for two nights before flying to the remote Amazon village of Kapawi for four nights. The rainy season varies according to region, making May through October the best time to visit.

## QUITO

### *A colonial city enjoying a moment of dynamic reinvention*

Descending into Quito is an unforgettable thrill. After a low-flying maneuver, the plane makes a spiral plunge before landing, whereupon the Ecuadorians onboard burst into grateful applause. Perched at about 9,100 feet on the eastern slopes of Volcán Pichincha, an active volcano, Quito is the third highest capital in the world, a fact you'll notice immediately as you gasp for air. The city, spread out over a narrow valley bounded by lush green hills and snowcapped peaks, lies just 15 miles from the equator (in Quechua, Quito means "middle of the Earth").

Quito feels quaint and friendly in comparison to the more sprawling, cosmopolitan capitals of Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, and Santiago, due in large part to the presence of the thriving indigenous populations (you'll notice the Quichua, the largest group, dressed in bright ponchos, smart fedoras, and golden beads) who live and work among the modern city dwellers.

The city is divided roughly into two sections, Old Town and New Town. The largest and best-preserved historical center in Latin America, the Old Town is home to stunning Spanish colonial architecture, ecclesiastical treasures,

narrow cobblestone streets, and broad plazas. But despite being named the world's first UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1978, it wasn't until a few years ago, when \$200 million from public funds and private investors were spent for a complete overhaul, that it became a vibrant, tourist-friendly attraction. Close to 25 glorious churches and convents have been painstakingly restored, glowing under new lampposts that make it possible to meander at night, a joy unthinkable a couple of years ago. New, fashionable restaurants stay open until 10pm instead of 7pm, while fresh coats of pastel paint cover the facades of buildings whose ground floors are now filled with charming cafés and handcraft boutiques. The street scene is a swarm of activity and sounds: car horns beeping, church bells clanging, and schoolchildren arm in arm in their bright-red sweaters.

Get your bearings in the center of Old Town at Plaza de la Independencia (also known as Plaza Grande), where you'll find many important religious and civic buildings. Lined with palm trees, the square is flanked by Palacio del Gobierno, the white presidential palace where Ecuadorians traditionally—and frequently—gather to protest the latest scandal, and the Cathedral, a repository of art from the gore-loving Quiteña school (a style developed by the Spanish-taught indigenous artists after the colonization). Also on the plaza is the former home of Juan Díaz de Hidalgo (one of the Spanish conquerors who founded Quito). It's been restored into the opulent boutique hotel Plaza Grande, where rooms with French doors overlook the square.

Walk west along Calle García Moreno to La Compañía de Jesús, Quito's most over-the-top

house of worship. Don't be fooled by the subdued facade of volcanic rock, because a reputed seven tons of gold leaf covers the interior. Venture a block west to the Iglesia y Monasterio de San Francisco (Quito's oldest colonial church) on the Plaza de San Francisco, regarded as the city's most beautiful square. The church houses a museum with masterworks of the Quiteña school, including macabre paintings depicting the seven deadly sins. Take a breather at the outdoor café *Tiarquez* (593/2-257-0233), a trendy newcomer that serves tasty pastries and fair-trade lattes.

Ten blocks east is the magnificent *Teatro Nacional Sucre*, a stunning symbol of Quito's makeover. Fashioned after European opera houses, the colonial theater's once-crumbling Corinthian columns and bas-reliefs have been returned to their former glory. Upstairs, indulge at the elegant *Theatrum Restaurant & Wine Bar*, which serves modern Mediterranean food.

Art in Ecuador is abundant, with more than 40 museums in Quito alone. Don't miss the enormous *Museo Nacional del Banco Central*, which covers art from prehistoric times through to the present. Then visit the *Fundación Guayasamín*, three buildings filled with the personal art collection of Oswaldo Guayasamín (1919-1999), Ecuador's most beloved artist. Homespun replicas of his protest art—such as mountains aflame and haunting skeletal figures—pop up in shops and markets throughout the country.

For a bird's-eye view of Old Town, climb the spires of the *Basílica del Voto Nacional*, a church tricked out with monkey-shaped gargoyles perched on a hill northeast of Plaza de la Independencia. Or take a taxi to the top of a hill

TOP PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES; MIDDLE PHOTO: JEFFREY MERRICK/GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM PHOTO: JEFFREY MERRICK/GETTY IMAGES



**EXPANDED ITINERARY**  
**THE VALLEY OF LONGEVITY**

Ask any Ecuadorian about **Vilcabamba**, a sleepy town in the southern Loja province, and they will tell you about old people. Really old people. The **Valley of Longevity**, as the area is known, is famous for its high population of healthy centenarians. Locals chalk up their impressive durability to the idyllic climate, a simple yet hardworking way of life, and the unique mineral content of the water.

Groovy expats from America and Europe started migrating to this Ecuadorian Shangri-la in the 1960s, and many became entranced. "I came three years ago and I never left," says Dr. Carol Rusin, who co-owns the mountainside **Madre Tierra Hotel Spa** with her husband. "We went to 120 countries and we found paradise here." Hemmed by green mountains and crisscrossed by two rivers, the valley—home to more than 500 bird species and 3,000 plant varieties—is in a state of perpetual spring, with temperatures averaging a balmy 74°F.

The lure of Vilcabamba is its utter tranquility, a feeling encapsulated at **Madre Tierra's** spa. Your day there starts with "baños de cajón," a treatment in which you sit in a wooden steam box with a hole for your head while herbal-infused vapors cleanse your pores. Then lie down for a rosewater facial, followed by an invigorating sea-salt body scrub and either a volcanic clay bath or a deep-tissue hot-oil massage. The women of the spa, who are shamanic healers, will make sure that you drink plenty of *horchata*, a delicious herbal honey elixir made fresh throughout the day. Top it off with a horseback ride led by the handsome caballero Diego. *Rusin from \$55; madretierra.com*

This page, clockwise from top left: Gliding along the Amazon River in a dugout canoe; a view near Vilcabamba in southern Ecuador; Elena Pastillo, a staff member at Hacienda Zuleta, near Otavalo; horses drinking at Hacienda Pinsaqui, near Otavalo; a corridor at Hacienda Pinsaqui. Opposite page: A group of women and children enjoy lunch during the festival of St. John the Baptist.



## 4 SMART SPLURGES

**Follow in Darwin's Footsteps** Take a seven-night cruise around the Galapagos Islands on the intimate yet luxurious 210-foot *Eclipse*, which holds only 48 guests. Packages include daily excursions with naturalist guides to the islands, where you can snorkel with sea lions and mingle with blue-footed boobies and giant tortoises. From \$3,400; [eclipse.com.ec](http://eclipse.com.ec)

**Pamper at a Spa Retreat** La Miraje Garden Hotel & Spa, a 200-year-old hacienda in the leather-making town of Cotacachi, is Ecuador's sole Rocco & Chateaux hotel. The Queen of Spain reportedly gets her knots worked out at the decadently decorated spa. Have a milk-and-rose bath in the Cleopatra room, or choose from a host of other amenities, including an indoor swimming pool, tennis court, and sauna. Rooms from \$350/night; [miraje.com.ec](http://miraje.com.ec)

**Scale a Volcano and Recover in Style** Climb to the icy summit of Cotopaxi, the world's highest active volcano, and recuperate in luxury at the Hacienda San Agustín de Callo, a sumptuous 15th-century hacienda in the Cotopaxi foothills. One of the most experienced excursion outfitters is Ramiro Donoso's Ecuadorian Alpine Institute (\$220 per person; [volcanoclimbing.com](http://volcanoclimbing.com)). At the hacienda, you can relax your muscles in front of the fireplace with a bowl of *locro de papa* (cheese-and-potato soup) as llamas graze outside your window. From \$198/night; [lincahacienda.com](http://lincahacienda.com)

**Ride Zuleteño Horses** The Hacienda Zuleta in Otavalo is known for its thoroughbred Zuleteños, a gentle hybrid perfect for trail riding. Special packages include a room on the gorgeous estate, homemade meals and wine, and a daily excursion with incredible views of the snowcapped volcano Cayambe. Customized four-day package including all activities starts at \$1,200; [zuleta.com](http://zuleta.com)

This page: Ruins of an Incan structure in southern Ecuador. Opposite: Cotapaxi Volcano, near Quito



called El Panecillo, where the magnificent La Virgen de Quito statue stands sentinel. Afterward, go south on Juan José Flores and visit the Monasterio de Santa Catalina, a cloister where the nuns sell wonderful handmade cosmetic potions, health elixirs, and sweets. At the Hotel Patio Andalúz, a grand mansion turned elegant boutique hotel east of Plaza de la Independencia, Folklore Olga Fisch sells a carefully curated assortment of folkloric textiles and ceramics.

For a change of pace, have a drink at El Mirador de Guápulo (593/2-256-0361), which has a terrific view of Guápulo, an ancient walled neighborhood reminiscent of an Italian village. It's virtually hidden from the rest of the city, and in recent years it's become a boho-chic artists' enclave. Take in the unforgettable sunset view of Old Town from Café Mosaico, a Greek Ecuadorian bistro set in an old house on a hill. Order the yummy, warm *canelazo*, a traditional drink made with sugarcane.

Touristy must-dos include visiting the Mitad del Mundo, a monument about 12 miles north of Quito that marks the equatorial line, and the gimmicky but amusing Teleférico Qo, a tram that takes you to the top of Volcán Pichincha. The volcano has been quiet since 1999, when it covered the city with ash and caused the Quito airport to close.

Hotels in Quito range from upscale chains in modern high-rises to mansions converted into boutique hotels. If you want to sink into Ecuadorian life seamlessly, rest your altitude-weary head at Café Cultura, a 200-year-old mansion cozily reincarnated as a 26-room hotel in the lively La Mariscal, a neighborhood dense with nightclubs, hotels, and restaurants. The relaxed ambiance there is as comforting as its heavenly

beds. Ask the concierge to make reservations for you at the city's best restaurants: Chez Jérôme for French-Ecuadorian fusion, Ristorante Carmine for classic Italian, and Sake for pricey-but-worth-it sushi. Or just walk over to Mama Clorinda, a simple establishment that serves traditional recipes from the highlands. If you're going to dig into Ecuador's native dish—roasted or deep-fried guinea pig, aka *cuy*—try it here.

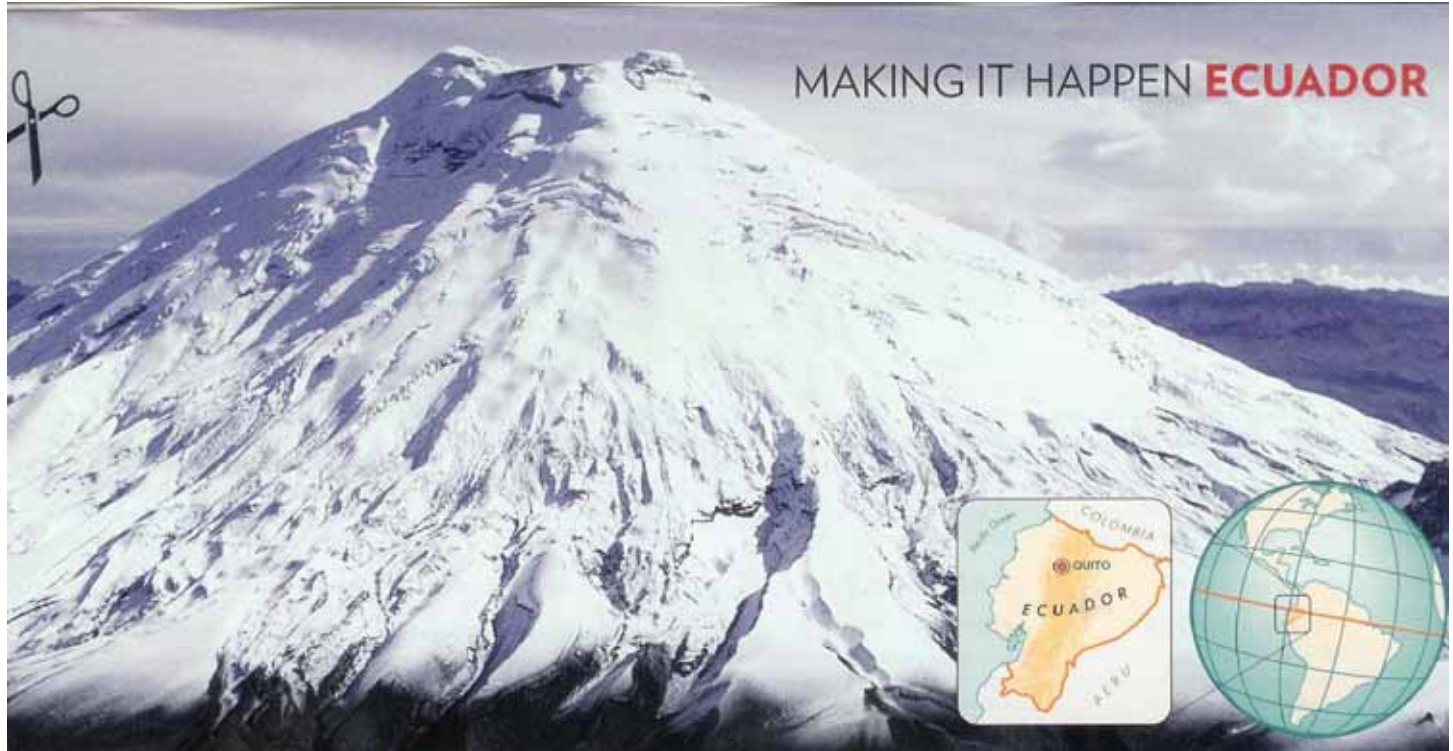
### OTAVALO

**A richly historic market town known for its indigenous crafts**

South America's oldest and most important Indian market is in Otavalo, a lovely two-hour drive north from Quito. Indigenous craftspeople from nearby villages have converged here for more than 4,000 years, selling their handwork, produce, and even live animals. It has always been the social and economic center of the northern highlands, and now it is a principal stop on the tourist trail. Although the market has some vendors on weekdays, get there at dawn on a busy Saturday so you don't miss the weekly livestock swap.

The market's labyrinthine passageways are reminiscent of a Moroccan medina. Dazzling colors and the smell of sizzling pork rinds compete for attention with the dogs, chickens, and young children that scamper underfoot. Everything from jewelry and carved wooden instruments to alpaca rugs and wonderfully woven blankets and scarves are on offer. Though prices are low, bargaining is expected, and if you make a big purchase don't be afraid to ask for "una yapa," which means "a little something extra." After surveying the crafts, walk over to the food bazaar, where a platter of the pork scratchings

# MAKING IT HAPPEN **ECUADOR**



## Sherman's Picks:

★=Smart Splurge ✓=Great Value

Prices quoted are reliable for 2008. High season tends to be from June to August and mid-December through New Year's Day. Rate quotes below do not include the 22 percent tax and service charge unless noted. Some rates include breakfast. Please note: Some Ecuadorian websites do not work without the "www" prefix inserted.

## QUITO

### GETTING THERE

Quito's Mariscal Sucre International Airport (UIO) is the gateway to Ecuador. Flights on American Airlines and Continental are frequent and often inexpensive (as low as \$350 in low season) and connect via Houston or Miami. Colombia's national airline, Avianca, flies from New York to Quito through Bogotá. The airport is a short taxi ride to the northern end of town, a trip that costs about \$5. Most area hotels will arrange complimentary transfers.

### WHERE TO STAY

✓ **Café Cultura** A cozy boho 26-room hotel with blazing fireplaces, comfy leather couches, and Tuscan-style murals. 593/2-222-4271; rooms from \$79; [cafecultura.com](http://cafecultura.com)

**Hotel Patio Andaluz** Suites in this grand mansion are bilevel—one for the bedroom, the other for the living room. 593/2-228-0830; rooms from \$200; [hotelpatioandaluz.com](http://hotelpatioandaluz.com)

★ **Plaza Grande** All-suite hotel in Old Town featuring a small spa, three restaurants, and 24-hour room service. 593/2-251-0777; rooms from \$500; [plazagrandequito.com](http://plazagrandequito.com)

### WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

**Chez Jérôme** The Basque expat owner combines fine French gastronomy with delicious rustic Ecuadorian cuisine in a house that's a National Cultural Heritage Site. 593/2-225-4067; [chezjeromequito.com](http://chezjeromequito.com)

**Ristorante Carmine** On a small plaza, this classic Italian restaurant is overseen by its jovial namesake. 593/2-222-5531; [carmineristorante.com](http://carmineristorante.com)

**Café Mosaico** Go to this Greek bistro for the panoramic view of Old Town and sunset drinks, but eat dinner somewhere else. 593/2-254-2871

**Sake** This trendy Japanese restaurant serves excellent sushi in a modern environment. 593/2-252-4818; [sakerestaurants.com](http://sakerestaurants.com)

**Mama Clorinda** At this laid-back eatery popular with locals, traditional Ecuadorian fare is first-rate, and cheap to boot. 593/2-254-4362

**Theatrum Restaurant & Wine Bar** Mediterranean dishes with modern flare and a wine list with 150 different labels are available at the dining room inside the opulent National Theater. 593/2-257-1011; [theatrum.com.ec](http://theatrum.com.ec)

### WHAT TO DO

**La Compañía de Jesús** A baroque masterpiece of a church that took more than 160 years to

complete and supposedly used seven tons of gold. 593/2-258-1895; [fjcj.org.ec](http://fjcj.org.ec)  
**Iglesia y Monasterio de San Francisco** Quito's oldest building is in the middle of its most beautiful square. 593/2-228-1124

**Teatro Nacional Sucre** This colonial theater modeled after a European opera house has been magnificently restored. 593/2-228-2136; [teatrosucre.com](http://teatrosucre.com)

**Museo Nacional del Banco Central** An enormous museum covering art from prehistoric times to the present. Don't miss the Sala de Arqueología, an exhibit with pieces dating back to 11,000 BC, and pottery reproductions of shrunken heads. 593/2-222-3259

**Fundación Guayasamín** The works and art collection of Ecuador's most famous and beloved artist, Oswaldo Guayasamín, are displayed here. 593/2-246-5265

**Basílica del Voto Nacional** Take in the city panorama from the 380-foot spires of this church, modeled after Notre-Dame. 593/2-228-9428

**La Virgen de Quito** This enormous (148-foot) winged steel statue sits on top of El Panecillo hill, which overlooks Quito.

**Monasterio de Santa Catalina** The cloistered nuns here sell amazing potions and elixirs. 593/3-295-9632

**Mitad del Mundo** Equatorial monument where you can have your photo taken with one foot in the Southern Hemisphere and one in the North. (Never mind that that's not quite true.)

**TeleferiQo** Sky tram that takes you



up to the top of the Pichincha volcano. [teleferiqa.com](http://teleferiqa.com)

### WHERE TO SHOP

In Quito, shopping consists mainly of local handicrafts (alpaca sweaters, tapestries, figurines, pottery, hats, and jewelry) made by indigenous artists. You can find the best products two hours away at the markets of Otavalo. **Folklore Olga Fisch** The Hungarian artist who owns this shop works with indigenous artisans to bridge folk art with traditional fine art. Check out the hand-woven rugs, tapestries, and clothing; pottery; and the charming garden restaurant, perfect for sipping a hot tea. 593/2-254-1315; [olgafisch.com](http://olgafisch.com)

# MAKING IT HAPPEN **ECUADOR**

## OTAVALO

### WHERE TO STAY

#### ✓ **Hosteria Hacienda Pintaqui**

The hacienda, almost three centuries old, used to be known for its textile production. Now it's a lovely 20-room hotel with riding stables.

593/6-294-6116; rooms from \$85

(includes tax); haciendapintaqui.com

#### ★ **Hacienda Zuleta**

One of Ecuador's most famous haciendas is also a working farm. On the vast property are an embroidery workshop, a condor rehabilitation project, a cheese factory, and stable full of Zuleteño horses.

593/6-266-2182; rooms from \$250

(includes tax); zuleta.com

### WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

The restaurants at the haciendas are generally excellent.

### WHAT TO DO

**Tours on horseback** Both haciendas can organize customized tours.

**Shaman cleansing in Illuman** This tiny village near Pintaqui is known for its shaman population. Hacienda Pintaqui can arrange one of these surreal experiences for you.

### WHERE TO SHOP

**Otavalo Market** The indigenous crafts market here is one of the most well known in the Andes, if not all of South America. Bring small bills.

## COST CALENDAR

High Low

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

**WHEN TO GO** Temperatures are usually mild year-round, but the dry season lasts from June through September, while October through May gets warmer and more humid. Prices peak from mid-June to early September and from late December through early January.

**Crafts villages** A cluster of small villages is just outside Otavalo. Buy beautiful textiles in Poguche, Agáto, Illuman, San Roque, and Carabuela; wood carvings in San Antonio; and leather in Cotacachi.

## BAÑOS & PATATE

### GETTING THERE

An unforgettable three-and-a-half hour drive south from Quito along the volcano-lined Pan American Highway.

### WHERE TO STAY

✓ **Hacienda Manteles** Lovingly restored and passed down through many generations, this wonderful home in the valley of Manteles is a universe unto itself. Forests full of waterfalls and orchids are nearby to explore on foot or on horseback. 593/2-223-3484; rooms from \$69; haciendasmanteles.com

✓ **Samari Spa Resort** No expense has been spared at this new resort, tucked in the midst of simply outrageous natural beauty. Swim in the glass-encased pool and indulge in clay treatments that use

local volcanic mud. 593/3-274-1855; rooms from \$99; samarispaspa.com

### WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

**Café Marlene** True Provençal cuisine in a rustic, unassuming setting. No phone; at the intersection of *Halfants* and *Roca fuerte*.

#### **Regine's Café Restaurant Aleman**

This eccentric German eatery is at the foot of the Cascada Chamana waterfall. 593/3-274-2671; chamanapamba.com

### WHAT TO DO

**Volcano watching** Hacienda Manteles will arrange a trip to nearby observation station Las Antenas.

**Mirador el Panecillo** Climb to the top of this hill near Baños for sweeping views of the town.

**Soak in natural hot springs** La Piscina de la Virgen has two very hot pools and ice-cold water that flows directly from the mountain. 593/3-274-0462

**Jungle bike ride** Have your hotel arrange this ride, from Baños to Puyo, passing waterfalls on the way.

**El Pañón del Diablo** The largest waterfall in the area, whose name means the Devil's Cauldron.

## KAPAWI

### GETTING THERE

The standard route is to take a flight from Quito that connects in either Shell or Coca via puddle jumper to the dirt airstrip in Kapawi. If already in the south, you can bypass Quito by flying from Nueva Loja to Shell or Coca. Upon arrival at the Achuar community's airstrip, staff from the lodge greets guests and leads them to a canoe for a 15-minute ride up the Capahuarí river. The lodge makes all of the travel arrangements for you.

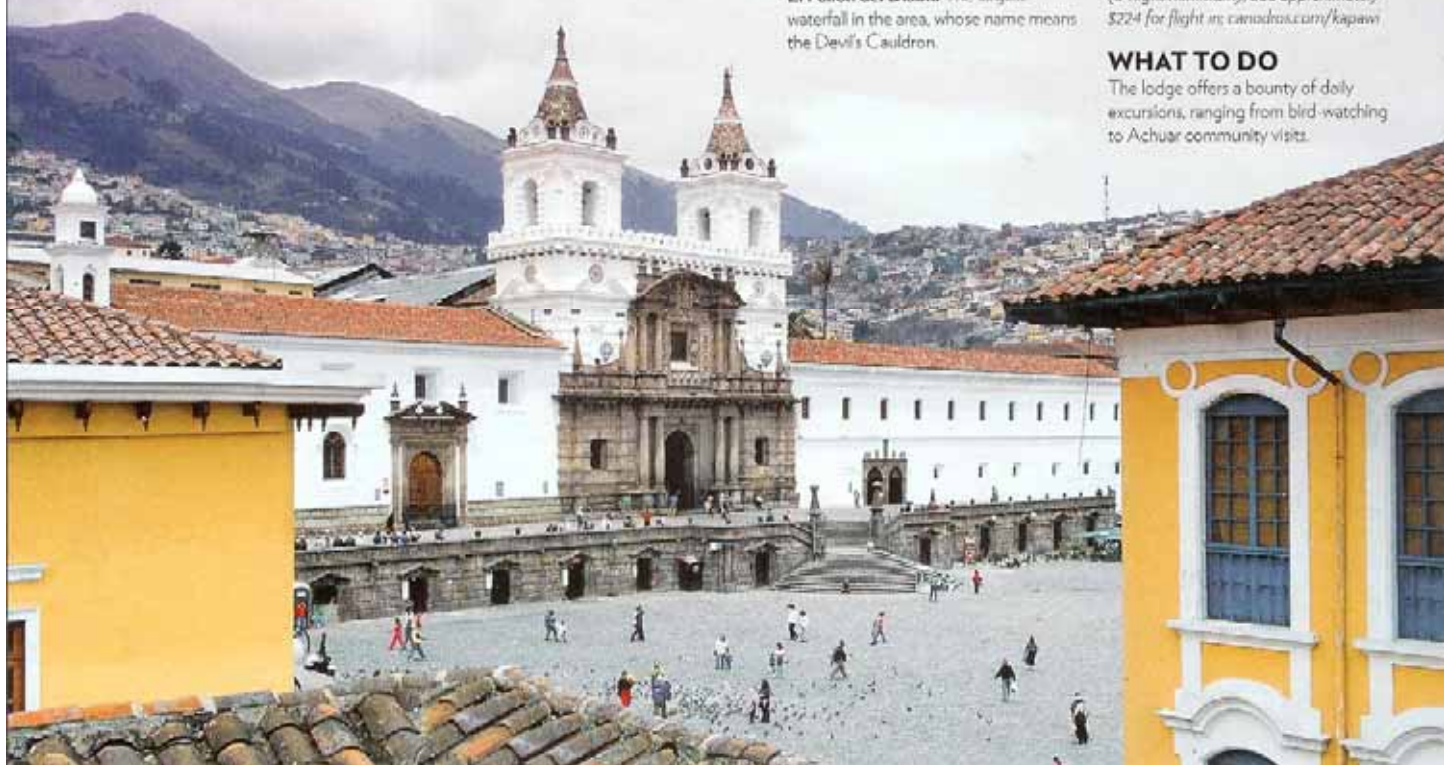
### WHERE TO STAY

#### ✓ **Kapawi Ecolodge & Reserve**

Located 150 miles southeast of Quito in a remote part of the Ecuadorian Amazon, the Kapawi Ecolodge and Reserve offers a unique way to get to know both the Amazon and the Achuar people who run the solar-powered lodge, where 20 thatched-roof cabanas are perched above the Kapawi Lagoon. Rates include all activities and meals. 593/4-228-5711; doubles from \$670/night (3-night minimum); add approximately \$224 for flight in; canadas.com/kapawi

### WHAT TO DO

The lodge offers a bounty of doly excursions, ranging from bird-watching to Achuar community visits.





From left: Owners in their panama hat shop (most panama hats are made in Ecuador); on a ride to San Marcos Lagoon from Hacienda Zuleta. Opposite: Plaza San Francisco in Quito

with rice and vegetables will run you \$2.

One of the finest historical haciendas now open to the public in the area is **Hosteria Hacienda Pínsaqüi**, an 18th-century colonial hotel run by the same family for generations. Antique crystal chandeliers, brocade chaises, and pretty Otavaleño girls in white embroidered shirts sweeping through candlelit hallways set the old-world stage. A black-and-white photo of Modesto Larrea Jijón (the great-grandfather of owner Pedro Freile Guarderas) next to his rumored paramour Frida Kahlo hangs unceremoniously on a wall. Legend has it that Simón Bolívar would rendezvous in Room No. 1 with his mistress, the beautiful revolutionary Manuela Sáenz.

The hacienda can arrange horseback rides through the Andean terrain, with stops at Incan ruins and at the emerald-hued crater lake Laguna Cuicocha. Dine at the hacienda's restaurant, which serves hearty regional dishes like *llapingachos*, a beef-and-potato specialty. If you'd like to venture out to eat, visit the gorgeous **Hacienda Zuleta** a short ride away. Since it's a working farm, the kitchen delivers fresh cheeses and milk. Zuleta's not shabby as a place to stay, either: It's owned by the descendants of former president Galo Plaza Lasso and has 11 rooms lavishly decorated with hand-embroidered Zuleteño linens.

Just up the hill from Pínsaqüi is a tiny village called **Illuman**, which is famous for its shaman population. If you'd like an authentic evil-spirit cleansing, ask Lucita at Pínsaqüi to arrange a visit with a shaman for you. There's a tiny old lady who is said to be particularly powerful (never mind that, if visiting her on a Sunday, you might have to wait for her to return from

Mass). Other neighboring towns also have unique claims to fame: Calderón is known for *masapán* dolls, brightly colored bread-dough figurines; Cayambe is famous for *bizcochos*, biscuits served with cheese and caramelized milk; and Cotacachi is the leather-making capital, with exquisite products at the best prices.

## PATATE & BAÑOS

South of Quito, a world of volcanic wonder

The drive south from Quito, along the Pan American Highway, is easily one of the most spectacular journeys in the world. Dubbed the Avenue of the Volcanoes by the celebrated 19th-century explorer Alexander von Humboldt, the passage plows through a valley lined with eight of the country's highest volcanic peaks. After about three and a half hours, you'll reach Patate, a farming village known for producing some of the best *aguardiente*, a potent sugarcane liquor. Up a gravelly road is the elegant **Hacienda Manteles**. Lovingly restored and passed down through generations, this is an excellent base from which to explore the area, especially given its fortuitous protection from Tungurahua, a volcano that is currently living up to its nickname of Mother Throat Fire. At press time, the behemoth was spewing steam and ash onto the nearby town of Baños, warranting a yellow alert (alert colors are white, yellow, orange, and red). Consult the latest activity reports before venturing to the region ([volcano.si.edu](http://volcano.si.edu)).

Manteles is perfectly perched to see the awesome sight of lava sparks, a typical occurrence even in times of low activity, yet is situated so as to be out of danger. Get a (*Continued on p.94*)

## LOCAL SLANT

**Hungarian-born László Károlyi is an unlikely cheerleader for Ecuador, but his consortium of hotels and haciendas sets the standard for luxury there.**

Hotelier László Károlyi is not your typical luxury purveyor. He claims Transylvanian vampires as relatives and has lived with an indigenous tribe. During his stint with the fierce and naked Huaorani people, they tried in vain to teach him how to hunt monkeys with a giant poison blowgun, run in the forest without detection, and climb massive trees. "I was unable to perform any tasks," he says. "They thought I was useless. To them, I was neither man nor woman."

In his current mission, offering visitors to Ecuador the VIP treatment, Károlyi is highly competent. His grandfather moved to Ecuador from Hungary, and Károlyi considers the "criminally undiscovered" country his true home. He is also one of its most forceful boosters. In 1993, he transformed a 100-year-old mansion into Quito's first boutique hotel, the charming *Café Cultura*. In 2004, he created *Exclusive Hotels and Haciendas of Ecuador*, a consortium of hotels and restaurants that Károlyi invited to join based on their exceptional location, service, history, ambiance, and character.

Headquartered in Quito, the group is a one-stop concierge service that provides customized countryside itineraries, private tours by car or helicopter, and tables at the best restaurants. (Giant blowguns by request.) *Exclusive Hotels and Haciendas of Ecuador*, 593/2-254-4719, [ehhec.com](http://ehhec.com)