



# The Oriente

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## Best Places to Stay

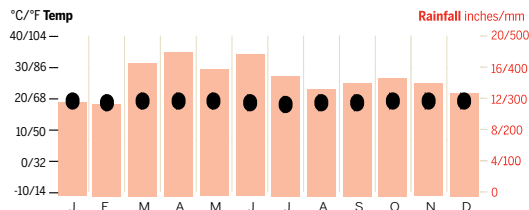
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## Why Go?

This vast landmass holds more drama than a rip-roaring flood or crackling lightning storm. Rivers churn from the snow-capped Andes into the dense, sweltering rainforest on course to the Amazon Basin. Along the way, ancient indigenous tribes call the riverbanks home and astounding wildlife can be spotted. Those lucky enough to reach the remoter jungle lodges will be able to fish for piranhas on silent blackwater lakes, hear the menacing screech of howler monkeys, spot the shining eyes of caiman at nighttime, see colorful parrots feasting at the famous clay licks, and – perhaps – catch sight of one of those elusive bigger mammals such as a tapir or jaguar.

Exploring the Oriente gives you the unforgettable experience of seeing the natural world up close and personal: you can become immersed in it here in a way not even possible on the Galápagos. But this region is not just jungle. Ecuador's best thermal spa, its most spectacular waterfall, its most active volcanoes and its most formidable white-water rapids also await.

## When to Go The Oriente



**Dec–Mar** The driest time of year when some rivers become impassable due to low water levels.

**Apr–Jul** The wettest time of year – more than ever make sure you've got a good raincoat!

**Oct–Nov** The best time of year – the rivers are all passable, it's not too wet and wildlife is easy to spot.

## THE NORTHERN ORIENTE

The Northern Oriente is the most accessible part of the Ecuadorian jungle, served by good road and air connections to Quito, and with developed tourism infrastructure. On the down side, this development and the omnipresence of the oil industry makes it somewhat harder to get into the remoter reaches of the rainforest, but making the effort to do so is definitely worthwhile. The biodiversity remains amazingly impressive in places, and while indigenous peoples are accustomed to outsiders jockeying for their land and resources, they still proudly share this unique region with the respectful visitor.

A paved road from Quito splits at Baeza; the northern fork makes its way to Lago Agrio, while the southern fork heads toward Tena. The other main road zips from highland Baños to Puyo in under two hours. In the rainiest months (June to August), roads can wash out and airports can close. If you have important air connections from Quito, allow an extra day or two in between.

## From Quito to Lago Agrio

## Papallacta

POP 920 / ELEV 3300M

Slip into this tiny village's steamy, therapeutic waters to soothe sore muscles or combat the high-altitude chill. At Termas de Papallacta, more than three dozen sparkling pools offer the country's most luxurious thermal baths experience. The main spa complex is 3km above the village of Papallacta and is a good day trip from Quito, 67km (two hours) away. Be prepared for cold nights and intense sun.




## Activities

## Spa & Thermal Pools

The Termas de Papallacta is the main event here, but (in order up from the Quito-Baeza road junction in Papallacta village) La Chozas de Don Wilson, Hostería Pampallacta Thermas and Hostal Antisana also have thermal pools.

## Termas de Papallacta

## THERMAL BATHS

([www.papallacta.com.ec](http://www.papallacta.com.ec); admission from \$8)  The setting of Termas de Papallacta, 3km above the pretty (and pretty dinky) village of Papallacta, is grand: on a clear day you can see the snowcapped **Volcán Antisana**

(5753m), 15km south, beyond the lush sheep- and cow-dotted hillsides. Unfortunately the hot springs are a poorly kept secret; opt for a weekday visit if possible or, for a truly wonderful experience, come after dark, when it's particularly magical and far less crowded.

There are two sets of pools: in the **Balneario** (admission \$8; ☀ 6am-10:30pm, last entry 9pm) and in the **Spa** (admission \$21; ☀ 6am-9pm). Together they number over a dozen pools with temperatures varying from cool to 40°C, all surrounded by plush grass, red-orange blossoms, quaint interconnecting bridges, and beyond, mountains laced by tempestuous clouds. Towels and lockers (\$5 deposit) are available for a small fee.

There's little reason to visit the Spa pools, although they are less crowded, smaller and filled with jets. An indoor sauna can loosen you up for a spa treatment (the sauna is free at the Spa). Treatments (ranging from \$10 to \$55) include hydrothermal massages, reflexology, body wraps with Andean mud, Turkish baths, body lymphatic drainage and body exfoliation. Pool waters are changed in the late afternoon daily.

## Hiking

Few spa-goers explore this option, but right by the gates of the Balneario is a back entrance to the 400,000-hectare **Reserva Ecológica Cayambe-Coca**. The spa has been acclaimed over the years for its approach to conservation, and owns a 250-hectare protected swath of land at the park entrance known locally as the **Rancho del Cañón**. There is an interpretation center in the spa complex and guided hikes into this terrain of Andean meadows and lonely lakes (making this perhaps the best starting point for exploring the reserve). Ask about the challenging two-day **hike** through to the village of Oyacachi (more thermal springs await).






## Sleeping & Eating

## Hostería Pampallacta

## Termales

**GUESTHOUSE \$\$**

(☎ 06-289-5014; [www.pampallactatermales.com](http://www.pampallactatermales.com); r incl breakfast \$55-151;   ) This is the best midrange option in Papallacta. Warm (all rooms have fireplaces) and charming (all rooms have huge stone bathtubs you can fill with thermal spring water). Management is friendly and there are a number of small thermal pools in which to relax, if you don't fancy walking the 1km uphill to the Termas de Papallacta.