



Cuenca & the Southern Highlands

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Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Moliendo Café (p179)
- ➔ Salvia (p180)
- ➔ Raymipampa (p180)
- ➔ Zarza Brewing Company (p194)
- ➔ Shanta's Bar (p201)

Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Mansión Alcázar (p179)
- ➔ Hostal Achik Wasi (p189)
- ➔ Grand Victoria Boutique Hotel (p192)
- ➔ Copalinga (p197)
- ➔ Hostería y Restaurante Izhcayluma (p200)

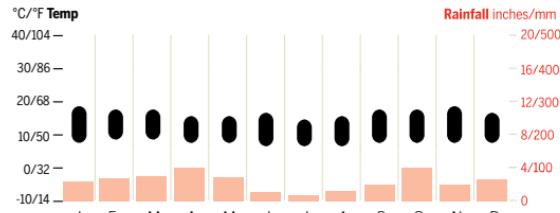
Why Go?

Still mountainous, but also more benign, traveling the southern spine of the Ecuadorian Andes ushers intrepid travelers down through lush valleys that secrete some real treats: pastille-hued colonial towns and cities and remote villages where indigenous culture thrives. And – with the exception of the famous regional capital Cuenca – the highways and byways are way less traipsed.

Most adventures begin in Cuenca: a classic South American traveler hub with one of the continent's best-preserved colonial centers and a thriving dining, arts and entertainment scene. From there, it's a choose-your-own-adventure romp through seldom-visited ancient settlements and untrammeled wild areas toward the vibrant city of Loja and balmy new-age Vilcabamba – from where forays start up into stark ochre hills, along to verdant lower slopes coated by the plantations rearing Ecuador's best coffee and down into sticky semi-tropical forest.

When to Go

Cuenca



Year-round
South of Cuenca, especially around Loja and Vilcabamba, it's spring year-round.

Oct–May The rainy season is colder, wetter and greener; morning sun and showers later.

May & Aug Festivals celebrating the Virgen del Cisne bring devotees from around Ecuador.

Southern Highlands Highlights

- ① Wander the cobblestone streets of colonial **Cuenca** (p172), a Unesco World Heritage Site.
- ② Grab your boots for a hike in the eerie moors of **Parque Nacional Cañas** (p184).
- ③ Ponder the engineering mysteries of lofty **Ingapirca** (p186), Ecuador's most important Inca ruins.
- ④ Lose the gringo trail in a blink with a **DIY adventure** (p186) through the region's seldom-visited indigenous communities; unique markets, stunning churches and wildernesses where you'll roam alone.
- ⑤ Head out for a day of crafts shopping at the

