

Welcome to Ecuador

Picturesque colonial centers, Kichwa villages, Amazonian rainforest and the breathtaking heights of the Andes – Ecuador may be small, but it has a dazzling array of wonders.

Cultural Splendor

The historic centers of Quito and Cuenca are lined with photogenic plazas, 17th-century churches and monasteries, and beautifully restored mansions. Wandering the cobblestone streets amid architectural treasures from Spanish colonial days is a fine way to delve into the past. Beyond the cities, there are Andean villages renowned for their colorful textiles and sprawling markets, Afro-Ecuadorian towns where days end with meals of fresh seafood and memorable sunsets, and remote settlements in the Amazon where shamans still harvest the traditional rainforest medicines of their ancestors.

Andean Adventure

Setting off on a trek into the Andes can seem like stepping into a fairy tale: there's the patchwork of small villages, gurgling brooks and rolling fields, and a condor slowly wheeling overhead. Although the view from the top is sublime, you don't have to scale a mountain to enjoy the Andes. These verdant landscapes make a fine backdrop for mountain biking, horse riding or hiking from village to village, overnighting at local guesthouses along the way. Ecuador's other landscapes offer equally alluring adventures, from surfing breaks off the Pacific coast to white-water rafting Class V rivers in the Oriente.

Wildlife-Watching

The famed Galápagos Islands, with their volcanic, otherworldly landscapes, are a magnet for wildlife lovers. Here, you can get up close and personal with massive lumbering tortoises, scurrying marine iguanas (the world's only seagoing lizard), doe-eyed sea lions, prancing blue-footed boobies and a host of other unusual species both on land and sea. The Amazon rainforest offers a vastly different wildlife-watching experience. Set out on the rivers and forested trails in search of monkeys, sloths, toucans and river dolphins.

Sublime Scenery

After days of Ecuadorian adventures, there are many appealing places where you can go to relax amid awe-inspiring scenery. Head to the mountainous highlands to recharge at a historic hacienda, or find Zen-like beauty amid a cloud-forest lodge near Mindo. Peaceful, timeless mountain villages like Vilcabamba and picturesque former gold-mining towns such as Zaruma offer a perfect antidote to the vertiginous rush of modern-day life. And for a coastal getaway, there's tiny end-of-the-road settlements like Ayampe and Olón to charming towns on the Galápagos, with great beaches and magnificent sunsets right outside your door.



Why I Love Ecuador

By Regis St Louis, Author

Whenever people tell me they want to visit South America, but don't know where to begin, I recommend Ecuador. This is a country that seems to have it all: Andean peaks, Amazon rainforest, indigenous markets, colonial towns, sun-drenched beaches – not to mention a rather famous chain of volcanic islands full of fascinating wildlife. Adding to the appeal is Ecuador's (relatively) small size and its ease of travel (good roads and an easy-to-remember currency). But best of all are the Ecuadorians themselves: kind-hearted, generous and proud of the great strides they've made in the last decade, they are in fact the nation's greatest treasure.

For more about our authors, see page 416