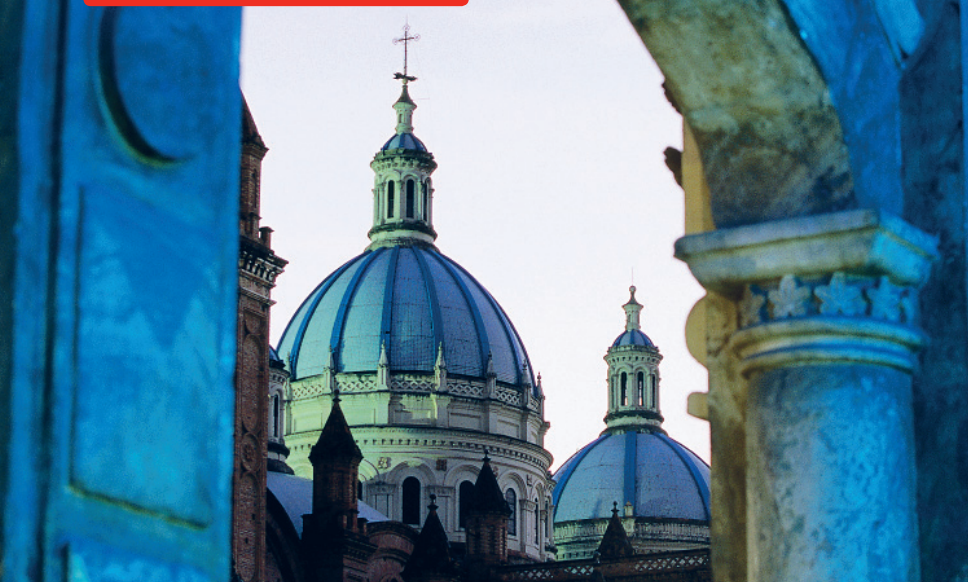


# welcome to Ecuador



## Cultural Splendor

The historic centers of Quito and Cuenca – both Unesco World Heritage Sites – 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. You can travel further back by contemplating great pre-Columbian artworks at museums across the country.

Beyond the cities, the Ecuadorian landscape unfolds in all its startling variety. 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, with a slowly wheeling condor overhead. Then the mists clear, a view of those towering snow-covered peaks comes into view, and the adventure begins – the challenging climb to the summit of a 5000m-high volcano.

Although the view from the top is sublime, you don't have to scale a mountain to



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*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.*

(left) Cuenca's Catedral de la Inmaculada Concepción (p168)  
(below) Flower sellers at the Otavalo market (p93)

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enjoy the Andes. These verdant landscapes make a fine backdrop for mountain-biking, horseback-riding or hiking from village to village, overnighting at local guesthouses along the way. Ecuador's other landscapes offer equally alluring adventures, from surfing tight breaks off the Pacific coast to white-water rafting Class V rivers along the jungle-clad banks of 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. From a remote lodge tucked away in the jungle, you set out on the rivers and trails snaking through the undergrowth in search of monkeys, sloths, toucans, river dolphins, anacondas and other creatures. Some lodges also have canopy towers offering magnificent views (and a better chance to see birdlife).

Speaking of birds, premontane cloud forest is yet another biologically rich area, and home to a fantastic array of avian life. Indeed the Mindo area, with more than 350 recorded bird species, is one of the best bird-watching sites in all of South America.