

# Ecuador

## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Quito** (p601) Delve into the picturesque streets of the Old Town, its cobblestones crisscrossing one of Latin America's finest colonial centers.
- **The Oriente** (p643) Stay in a jungle lodge, raft on tropical rivers and spot caimans, howler monkeys and two-toed sloths in Ecuador's slice of the Amazon Basin.
- **Galápagos Islands** (p667) Snorkel with penguins, stare down meter-long iguanas, stand face to face with gigantic tortoises and scuba dive with monstrous manta rays.
- **Otavaló** (p618) Haggle over handmade treasures at one of South America's biggest open-air markets.
- **The Quilotoa Loop** (p625) Hike your way around this spectacular Andean destination, overnighting in peaceful villages along the way.
- **Off the Beaten Track** (p652) Journey up the Río Santiago to Playa de Oro, where jungle cats still roam the dense tropical forest.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area:** 283,560 sq km (roughly the size of New Zealand or the US state of Nevada)
- **Budget:** US\$20 to US\$25 a day
- **Capital:** Quito
- **Costs:** budget hotel room in Quito US\$6, bottle of beer US\$1, four-hour bus ride US\$4
- **Country Code:** ☎ 593
- **Languages:** Spanish, Quichua
- **Money:** US\$
- **Population:** 15 million
- **Seasons:** high (June to August, December to January), low (September to November, February to May)
- **Time:** GMT minus five hours



## TRAVEL HINTS

Pack lightly and you can carry your backpack inside the bus. Save money by ordering the *almuerzo* (set lunch) and shopping in the markets.

## OVERLAND ROUTES

Major border crossings are at Ipiales (Colombia); at Tumbes/Aguas Verdes, Macará and La Balsa (Peru); and via Nuevo Rocafuerte/IQUITOS (Peru by river).

Ecuador may be small, but this Andean nation towers above most other South American countries when it comes to natural and cultural wonders. Amazonian rainforest, Andean peaks, premontane cloud forests and the Galápagos Islands set the stage for the country's spectacular biodiversity. Wildlife-watching is just one way to enjoy Ecuador's riches, with dozens of animal and plant species found nowhere else on earth. On even a short Ecuadorian adventure, it's possible to photograph monkeys from jungle canopy towers, swim with sea lions in the Pacific and admire dozens of Ecuador's 1600 bird species in misty forests.

The blend of lush and volcanic scenery also provides the backdrop for adrenaline-charged adventures, from whitewater rafting on class-five rivers to climbing 5000m-high volcanoes. You can take dramatic treks through the *páramo* (high-altitude grassland), surf tight breaks off the west coast, and hike, mountain bike, mountaineer or simply unwind amid some of the continent's most dramatic scenery.

Ecuador harbors a rich indigenous heritage, where traditional costumes and highland markets are just a few pieces of the varied life of this country in the heart of the Andes.

## CURRENT EVENTS

In recent years, Ecuador has taken a left-leaning turn on the political stage. President Rafael Correa, who describes himself as a humanist, a fervent Catholic of the left and a proponent of 21st-century socialism, has focused on social welfare since first taking the reins in 2007. In a nationwide referendum held in September 2008, voters approved a new constitution, which prohibits discrimination, increases spending on education and health care, allows civil unions for gay couples and gives more rights to indigenous groups. The 444-page document also gave rights to the environment, requiring the government to avoid actions that would destroy ecosystems or drive species to extinction – the first measure of its kind according to Ecuadorian officials.

In 2009 another ambitious plan showed the first signs of success. Two years earlier, Correa floated a controversial idea before the world community: pay us (in lost revenues) not to tap the estimated 900-million-barrel oil reserve inside the Parque Nacional Yasuní, one of South America's most biodiverse regions. The crude oil in the Yasuní region would then be incorporated into the carbon-dioxide trading system currently discussed in the EU, which would be a global benefit, keeping half a billion tons of carbon dioxide sequestered in the earth.

Petroleum, not surprisingly, is a hot topic in a country that relies on oil profits for 40% of its GDP. One of the world's biggest environmental lawsuits was still in limbo at the time of writing – namely the US\$27 billion class-action lawsuit brought by 30,000 Ecuadorians against Chevron-Texaco for dumping 18 billion gallons of toxic waste in the Amazon and abandoning 900 waste pits (see also Environment, p596).

Other top stories include the rising tension with Colombia over their cross-border raid on FARC guerrillas (killing FARC's second in command) in 2008. Because of the violation of Ecuador's sovereignty, Correa withdrew his ambassador from Bogotá, and an Ecuadorian judge even ordered the arrest of a Colombian official involved with planning the raid. Colombian President Alvaro Uribe later responded by saying 'We cannot allow judicial or political terrorism to deprive Colombians of our right to recover our security.'

In the raid a laptop was captured which, according to a Wall Street Journal reporter, provides proof of a 'cozy relationship' between FARC and both Correa and Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. Correa denied the allegations and threatened to sue the newspaper 'for their lies.' His government also pointed out the largely overlooked humanitarian crisis generated by the estimated 135,000 Colombian refugees living in Ecuador, for which Colombia should be shouldering more responsibility.

Despite the allegations, Correa remains popular, and he easily won re-election in 2009 with 51% of the vote in a field of eight candidates – the first time in 30 years a president was elected without a runoff. At the time of writing, his popularity was on the descent owing to a shrinking economy (in part due to lower oil prices), and allegations of corruption (Correa's brother, it was revealed, has received more than US\$80 million worth of lucrative government contracts).

## HISTORY

The land of fire and ice has certainly had a tumultuous history. Since becoming an independent nation in 1830, Ecuador has gone