

# Quito



High in the Andes, amid dramatic, mist-covered peaks, Quito is a beautifully located city packed with historical monuments and architectural treasures. It's Ecuador's most dynamic city, with a vibrant civic scene and a fascinating collection of neighborhoods. Dining, drinking and merrymaking are all part of the equatorial experience in the world's second-highest capital.

Quito's jewel is its historic center, or 'old town' as it's often called. A Unesco World Heritage site, this handsomely restored neighborhood blooms with 17th-century facades, picturesque plazas and magnificent churches that blend Spanish, Moorish and indigenous elements. It's also home to the presidential palace, which presides over the animated streets full of people from all walks of society mingling throughout the day.

Just north of the old town lies the aptly named 'new town,' a modern and bustling collection of neighborhoods, intersected by noisy avenues and sprinkled with high-rises. The magnet for travelers is the Mariscal Sucre, a condensed area of guesthouses, travel agencies, diverse eateries and a pulsing nightlife scene. This is indeed 'gringolandia' as some locals describe the area, though plenty of *quiteños* (Quito residents) frequent the bars and restaurants here.

Quito is an alluring city for wanderers, where a day's saunter can lead past little-explored cobblestone lanes through lively markets and shops, and on up into hilly neighborhoods where breathtaking views lurk around every corner. Not surprisingly, the capital is a popular place to enroll in a Spanish school and stay for a while – perhaps far longer than planned, as more than a few captivated expats can attest. For many – foreigners and locals alike – Quito is the heart and soul of Ecuador.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Explore the picturesque streets of **old town** (p79), its cobblestones crisscrossing one of Latin America's finest colonial centers.
- Pay homage to Guayasamín, one of Ecuador's greatest painters, at the fascinating **Capilla del Hombre** (p92).
- Discover the vastness of Ecuador's cultural treasures at the **Museo del Banco Central** (p87), housing the country's finest collection of pre-Colombian and colonial art.
- Journey north to learn about the thousand-year-old civilization well acquainted with the true equator at the **Museo de la Cultura Solar** (p115).
- Join the revelry in the animated bar scene of the **Mariscal** (p108).



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 02

■ POPULATION: 1.5 MILLION

■ AREA: 324 SQ KM

## HISTORY

The site of the capital city dates from pre-Hispanic times. The early inhabitants of the area were the peaceful Quito people, who gave their name to the city. The Quitus integrated with the coastal Caras, giving rise to the indigenous group known as the Shyris. Around AD 1300, the Shyris joined with the Puruhás through marriage, and their descendants fought against the Incas in the late 15th century.

By the time the Spanish arrived in Ecuador in 1526, Quito was a major Inca city. Rather than allowing it to fall into the hands of the Spanish conquerors, Rumiñahui, a general of Atahualpa, razed the city shortly before their arrival. There are no Inca remains. The present capital was founded atop the ruins by Spanish lieutenant Sebastián de Benalcázar on December 6, 1534. Many colonial-era buildings survive in the old town.

## CLIMATE

High in the mountains but near the equator, Quito enjoys mild days and cool nights most of the year. Evening temperatures of 7°C and daytime temperatures of 25°C are common. Seasonal variations are slight, with a rainy season running from October to May (April is often the wettest month) and drier, slightly warmer months running from June to September.

## ORIENTATION

Ecuador's second-largest city after Guayaquil, Quito spreads along the floor of a high Andean valley in a roughly north-south direction. The Centro Histórico (historical center) holds nearly all of Quito's famous colonial architecture; locals call it El Centro, and English-speakers the 'old town.'

The north is modern Quito – the 'new town' – with all major businesses and services. Most hotels and restaurants are found here, especially in the travelers' ghetto of the Mariscal Sucre (aka the Mariscal), where many foreigners eat, sleep and drink. The northern end of the city contains the airport and the middle- and upper-class residential areas. Avenida Amazonas is the best-known street, although Avenida 10 de Agosto and Avenida 6 de Diciembre are the most-important thoroughfares.

The far south of Quito consists mainly of working-class residential areas. Few travelers venture here – it's unsafe and there are few sights.

The surrounding hills and peaks make orienting yourself easy: Cruz Loma and the flanks of Volcán Pichincha are the massive mountains to the west of the city. If you stand facing them, north will be to your right; to the south looms the giant hilltop statue of La Virgen de Quito.

The bus terminal is directly south of the old town, about a 10-minute walk from the Plaza Grande. The best way into town from the airport is by taxi (see p113).

Quito's streets are usually one-way: Calles Guayaquil and Venezuela head into the old town, and Calles García Moreno and Flores head out.

## Maps

The tourist office distributes free, useful maps with scenic highlights. For something more in-depth, you can purchase the indexed *Quito Distrito Metropolitano* (\$6) published by Prodoguias. It's sold at the main tourist office and in some pharmacies.

Excellent topographical maps (\$2 each) and various tourist-highlight maps are available in the map-sales room at the **Instituto Geográfico Militar** (IGM; Map pp88-9; ☎ 254-5090; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Thu, 7am-12:30pm Fri), located on top of a hill southeast of Parque El Ejido. There are no buses, so you have to either walk or take a taxi, and you'll need to leave your passport at the gate. Aside from the giant map of Quito for sale, city maps are limited.

## ADDRESSES IN QUITO

A few years ago, Quito changed to a new address system based on 'N,' 'S,' 'W' and 'E' quadrants. An old address might be Avenida Amazonas 433, while the new one would be Avenida Amazonas N22-62; the numbers bear no relation to each other. Most buildings now display the new address, but some show the old address, and some have both. In other words, it can be extremely confusing. Both are used in this chapter, depending on the information received from each business. Taxi drivers find places based on cross streets.