

# Exquisite ECUADOR

This beautiful country is crammed with things to do and see, as *Nick Elvin* discovers. Pictures: *Plinthpics* and *Corporación Metropolitana de Turismo*.

or





*Plaza San Francisco, Old Town, Quito, by night*

**The** Andes and the Amazon rainforest are two of South America's greatest attractions. But there are few places where you can savour some of their best parts within a small area like you can in Ecuador.

It is a country where you can fill every day with experiences that are as varied as they are unforgettable, as I discovered on a 10-day tour.

One such experience took place at a roadside food stall on the Panamerican Highway, somewhere south of the capital Quito – and in Ecuador, roadside food stalls are places to try unusual things.

This time it was roast guinea pig. The woman at the stall laughed, for she knew that in my country such creatures are seen as fluffy pets, as opposed to these fur-stripped rodents stretched out on spits.

But there's no time for sentiment, or squeamishness, when you're hungry, and this South American delicacy went down a treat. It was something of a delicious, if fatty, cross between rabbit and chicken, cooked with plenty of garlic.

Hunger was understandable. We'd been up on the cold, misty plateau around Cotopaxi which, snowcapped and almost 6km in height, is one of the world's great volcanoes. Yet in Ecuador there's always another volcano around the corner. Later on we passed Chimborazo, the country's highest mountain, whose summit is the furthest point from the centre of the earth, due to the planet's equatorial bulge.

With so many volcanoes to choose from, it's no surprise that an increasing number of spas are opening throughout Ecuador, thanks to a ready supply of naturally hot water

Nestling on the slopes of Tungurahua above the town of Baños is Luna Runtun. My room had a five-star view straight over the edge of a 400-metre precipice to the town below.

Up in the Andes the nights are cold, so I headed straight

for the delicious hot pools, from where I had an equally fine view over the city, and up at the stars. Next morning, as if I wasn't sufficiently stress-free, I had a full-body massage, which was halfway between torture and pleasure, but very relaxing.

Down in the lowlands of eastern Ecuador, following a journey along some boneshaking roads that undid all of my masseuse's good work, we stayed at Cotococha Amazon Lodge. It's located by the Rio Napo, one of the main tributaries of the Amazon. Guests can take Wellington-booted jungle walks through the muddy forest, where the air is hot and sticky, the damp smells intoxicating and distant calls hint at toucans and parakeets hidden high in the canopy.

Per square kilometre, Ecuador is one of the world's most biodiverse countries, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the Amazon basin.

You enter the forest thinking everything will eat you – for instance bullet ants, whose bite is said to be as painful as being shot, and tarantulas, which live in holes in the ground. Yet you leave knowing some of the things you can eat. Among the foods our guides showed us was a species of ant that tasted like lemon – hardly filling, but surprisingly good.

To cool off, we swam under a secluded waterfall, then later made our way back to the lodge by drifting on rubber tubes along the wide Napo, which we were reassured would not result in us being bitten on the backside by piranhas.

Near the Equator the sun sets quickly, and the forest along the banks of the river became a mysterious place in the gloaming. At Cotococha there's no electricity in the huts, so kerosene lamps are provided, while candles burn on the pathways outside, creating an unforgettable atmosphere.

Of course, there are urban attractions in Ecuador too. The capital Quito is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and at its heart is the Spanish colonial grandeur of the Old Town.

It's an area packed full of churches, monasteries, museums and plazas, and a recent, extensive restoration project means that the Old Town's new coat of paint reflects the bright equatorial light beautifully. I visited the 17th century Carmen Alto Convent, where hidden nuns sell communion wine and sweets through a wooden turnstile.

For a different perspective, I took the cable car up the volcano Pichincha, which overlooks Quito. Pichincha's summit is 4,000 metres above sea level, where the air is thin – but that's not all that took my breath away. Quito is a city of about two million inhabitants, which sprawls spectacularly along a narrow valley.

On a clear day, with the city spread out more than a kilometre below, and magnificent volcanoes such as Cotopaxi, Antisana and Cayambe stretching away into the distance, there can be few finer views on earth.

But the journey north from Quito, crossing the equator line as you go, is not exactly ugly. On the road to Otavalo we skirted canyons and valleys whose sides are made up of rocks contorted by the geological forces that created the Andes.

Otavalo is a town famous for its markets. The food market is a great place to stroll and you'll see fruit and vegetables of incredible sizes and varieties. The more tourist-oriented craft market sells scarves, ponchos, belts, jewellery, hats, ornaments, panpipes and much more. Haggling is expected.

We spent the night at the 17th Century Hacienda Cusin, a peaceful estate outside Otavalo, before next morning travelling to Ibarra, the "White City". It was given that name because, after a severe earthquake in 1868, the city was rebuilt and painted white. It was thought the angels would therefore protect Ibarra in the future.

Here we climbed aboard the Chaski Antawa, a recently revived train service. Few railways operate in Ecuador, and it is hoped the tourism revenue from this service will bring regeneration to this semi-arid region.

Leaving Ibarra, we entered an agave-speckled landscape of mountains, gorges and farms. Workers in the fields downed tools and waved. A group of children left a football match they were watching to wave us by.

We made our way via switchbacks, tunnels and bridges, passing small hydro electric plants and the occasional abandoned station, all against the backdrop of the Andes.

From Ibarra to Salinas, where our journey ended, we had travelled 26 kilometres in two hours. It takes just 20 minutes by road. The trip also involves a descent of 700 metres, which means you are more aware of the fierce equatorial sun here, and it came as little surprise that this town was near-deserted.

Salinas is an Afro-Ecuadorian community, the residents' ancestors having been brought here as slaves to work on nearby sugar plantations. The town has a fledgling tourist industry, and it is hoped the Chaski Antawa, and the rebuilt railway station, will help this to grow.

We headed for the shade of a new restaurant next to the Panamerican Highway. The restaurant is another project aimed at bringing tourism to the area, and if they keep serving up hearty quinoa and potato soup as good as what we had for lunch, they should do all right.

After our meal it was time to head back by road to Quito and the end of my tour of Ecuador. There was enough crammed into 10 days to fill a trip twice as long – and I'd only scratched the surface of this beautiful country.

■ **Tourist information:**

Quito Visitors' Bureau, [www.quito.com.ec](http://www.quito.com.ec).

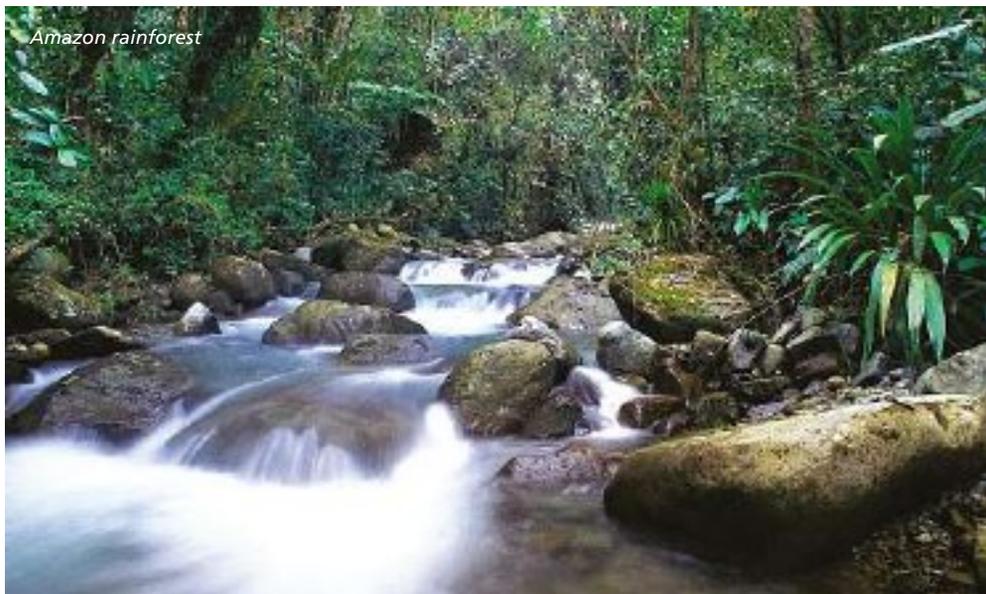
Ecuador Ministry of Tourism, [www.vivecuador.com](http://www.vivecuador.com).

Tour companies: Andean Travel Company (Amazon, Luna Runtun and Cotopaxi), [www.andeantc.com](http://www.andeantc.com) Klein Tours (Otavalo and Chaski Antawa), [www.kleintours.com](http://www.kleintours.com)

*Magnificent Cotopaxi volcano*



*Amazon rainforest*



*The Chaski Antawa railway*

