

ECUADOR

Andean Explorer

11 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Quito

Arrive in Quito and transfer to our hotel. Welcome to Ecuador!

Quito (2788 m/9,200 feet) is Ecuador's lovely capital city, nestled against Pichincha Volcano high in the Andes.

Overnight in Quito.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Quito: City Tour

Today we tour old Spanish Colonial Quito, preserved by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

As we enter the streets of Old Quito we step into the past, surrounded by centuries-old architecture. We stop at the commanding Legislative Palace, whose murals record Ecuador's history. We will see Quito's most beautiful religious buildings, including the cathedral, the Independence Plaza, San Francisco Church, and visit one of Quito's most impressive religious buildings, La Compania church, whose ornate facade and solid gold altars make it one of the most famous of South American churches. We visit the famous Panecillo Hill with its towering winged statue of the Virgin of the Apocalypse with views of north and south of Quito and the surrounding mountains.

This afternoon we travel 22 km (14 miles) north of Quito to the Equator line monument, known as the "middle of the world," where you can stand with one foot in the Northern and the other in the Southern Hemisphere. We also visit the excellent on-site ethnographic museum with exhibits pertaining to the many indigenous peoples of Ecuador.

Overnight in Quito.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Quito - Otavalo Valley - Ibarra

Today we journey north to the Otavalo Valley region.

In early years the Otavalo Valley was filled with farmers who raised crops in fertile lands where they lived. In the 14th century the Inca expansion reached north into the Otavalo area. The Caraquis who inhabited the area resisted the invaders. For 17 long years fierce fighting continued as the defiant Caraquis refused to be subjugated by the Incas. The Spanish arrived a few years after the Incas. They established a Hacienda system of workshops where Otavalenos were forced to work 15 hour days weaving fabrics.

Today this weaving tradition forms the basis of a lucrative industry that has allowed the Otavaleno indigenous peoples to join the world economy while retaining their traditional values and skills. During our time in the valley we will have a chance to visit with the local Otavalenos and see them working their craft. We visit a traditional home with adobe walls and visit with the owners who raise guinea pigs, a local delicacy. In Otavalo city, we'll have a chance to wander through the colourful handicraft stalls.

Our hosteria is located nearby the colonial town of Ibarra (2121 m/7,000 feet), known as the "White City" since many of its houses are colonial style, red-tiled and whitewashed.

Overnight in Ibarra.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Ibarra - Avenue of Volcanoes - La Cienega

We depart Otavalo to follow in the footsteps of the German scientist, Alexander von Humboldt, and rediscover what in 1802 he called the "Avenue of Volcanoes," a 325 km (202 mi) long valley between the major cordillera ranges. Massive and standing alone, the volcanoes provide brooding, snow-covered contrast to the green equatorial lushness. We see snow-capped summits, mystical brooks and rivers, terraced farmlands, small villages and fascinating cultures.

We'll take the Pan-American Highway southwards and take a side road to discover the impressive volcanism, flora, and bird-life that this national park protects. A visit to the Interpretation Center and the Limpiopungo Lake as well as a short easy hike will let us enjoy this natural wonder.

The area is also home to a number of exceptional haciendas, some of which date back to the 16th century. La Cienega Hacienda is located near the village of Lasso near the foot of Cotopaxi and has been witness to centuries of important events in the history of Ecuador.

Overnight at Hosteria La Cienega (Lasso area).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 La Cienega - Cotopaxi - Pillaro - Banos

Today we continue our journey to Banos. En route we will visit Cotopaxi volcano, where we can have an interesting walk in the Paramo (moorlands), enjoy beautiful views, and learn more about the flora and fauna of the area.

We continue our journey, stopping in Pillaro where we will visit a traditional workshop of masks that are used in the Pillaro Devil parade, an important cultural expression of the local indigenous people.

We arrive in Banos, a small town whose elevation gives it an extremely agreeable climate and the surrounding mountainsides are brilliant green against the white summit of the Volcano Tungurahua. The word Banos means "baths" and, as the name indicates, the highlight is the numerous hot spring baths in the area. Today we have opportunity to visit the hot springs as well as wander the streets and market of this picturesque town. You can also hike into the nearby hillsides, along farmers' donkey trails through fields of corn, passion-fruit, and various other local products. A must-see is the Basilica dedicated to the Virgin of the Holy Water, credited with performing many miracles in the Banos area.

Overnight in Banos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Banos - Devil's Bowl - Riobamba

Before departing Banos, we'll have a short walk to view one of the most impressive waterfalls in South America, the Devil's Bowl. At El Manto de la Novia we can experience a cable car ride over the Pastaza River Canyon.

After lunch we'll travel through open farmland flowing over the high ridges of the Western Andes to Riobamba (2750m/9,035 ft).

Riobamba is a small, charming Andean city with colonial architecture, cobble-stone streets, impressive plazas, and a fascinating market. The Monasterio de las Conceptas, Parq The very heart of Riobamba has a small-town feel, and the feeling is even intensified by a large number of indigenous people strolling around Riobamba dressed in their traditional clothes.

Overnight in Riobamba.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Riobamba - Ingapirca - Cuenca

Today our journey continues by road to Cuenca, detouring to visit the Archaeological Complex of Ingapirca, the best-preserved and most important Inca site in Ecuador. Though not on the same scale as, say, Machu Picchu, the ruins include a large oval construction once used for ritual and astronomical purposes. Just outside the ruins, the Museo Sitio de Ingapirca displays a skeleton, tools, and other artifacts recovered from the area. We'll also visit a local market, see the first church established in Ecuador, tour the historic town of Alausi, and enjoy views of Devils Nose Mountain.

Once the site of an Inca settlement, Cuenca today is considered Ecuador's most beautiful city. Its historical connection with Spain is marked by narrow cobblestone streets, quaint parks, and romantic plazas. Charming adobe houses, wrought iron balconies, and religious art treasures capture the spirit of centuries long past. Cuenca, almost hidden away in a southern valley, was isolated until recent times; it wasn't until 1960 that paved roads were built to Quito and Guayaquil. Today's Cuenca is surrounded by small villages whose citizens create intricately detailed jewelry, beautiful ceramics, and masterfully-designed hand-woven shawls.

You'll have time to wander the quaint streets in the compact centre of this charming town before reconvening for our evening meal.

Overnight in Cuenca.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Cuenca: Walking Tour & Museo del Banco Central

This morning we have a leisurely walking tour of Cuenca along the main plaza, Parque Calderon, and enter the old Cathedral, renovated for the visit of Pope John Paul in 1985. We also see the Monastery of El Carmen and visit La Inmaculada Concepcion while strolling the cobbled streets.

This afternoon we visit the Museo del Banco Central, which contains a permanent collection of black and white photos of 19th and early 20th century Cuenca, as well as displays of art and archaeological pieces, and ethnographic dioramas.

□□ We also visit a Panama hat factory. In 1835 Manuel Alfaro, a Spanish entrepreneur, arrived in the port of Guayaquil in the province of Guayas. He settled in nearby Montecristi and quickly realized the economic potential of the toquilla hat, setting up his own chain of production from the straw plantations to circuits of weavers. His hats were soon being exported from the ports of Guayaquil and Manta to Panama, which was quickly becoming an important centre and staging post for international trade and travel. Here Alfaro opened a commercial centre selling his hats, cacao and pearls, thus beginning the association of the Ecuadorian toquilla hat with Panama.

Overnight in Cuenca.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Cuenca: At Leisure

Today is yours to explore and experience this charming town on your own.

□ This city, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, has once been named the best city in which to retire by Travel and Leisure magazine; indeed, these days more than 8,000 US and Canadian citizens make Cuenca their home.

□ Overnight in Cuenca (due to the informal nature of the day, and for a break from the group meal dynamic, we don't include your evening meal today).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast

Day 10 Cuenca - Cajas National Park - Guayaquil

Today we travel by road to Guayaquil via Cajas National Park.

The park contains hundreds of clear, cold lakes, streams, and rivers. Weather-permitting (which can be highly changeable at this altitude), the park can provide an excellent opportunity for us to hike the grassland of Paramo Region or visit a forest of polelipsis trees, the highest altitude tree in the world. Recently the park's management introduced llamas and alpacas as part of a breeding program to re-introduce these animals to the southern highlands. Keep your eyes peeled for the many bird species that make the park their home, especially for the silhouette of a soaring (and extremely rare) Andean Condor, which can sometimes be spotted here riding the thermal up-drafts.

□ We continue to the coast with a stop at a cocoa plantation to learn about its cultivation and the production of Ecuadorian chocolate.

□ Our destination is the main port city of Ecuador, known as a gateway to Pacific beaches and the Galapagos Islands. Stretching along the Guayas River is the waterfront Simón Bolívar promenade, home to La Rotonda monument.

□ Overnight in Guayaquil.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Departure

Departure from Guayaquil.

BUEN VIAJE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast