Tour Code
EC12

ADVENTURESABROAD

ECUADOR

Andean Explorer

11 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Quito

Welcome to Ecuador, where the equatorial sun bathes ancient volcanic peaks and the spirit of adventure beckons from every cobblestone street. We arrive in Quito, Ecuador's captivating capital, perched dramatically at 2,788m (9,200 ft) against the imposing backdrop of Pichincha Volcano.

This evening, as we settle into our hotel and gather with fellow travellers for our first meal together, we're embracing a city that has stood sentinel over the Andes for centuries. Quito's name derives from the Quitu people, who first established settlements here long before the Inca empire extended its reach northward.

Overnight in Quito

Included Meal(s): Dinner

Day 2 Quito: City Tour

We step into the cobblestone streets of Old Quito this morning, entering a UNESCO World Heritage Site where Spanish colonial ambition created one of South America's most magnificent architectural treasures. Founded in 1534 on the ruins of an important Inca city, Quito became the artistic heart of the Spanish empire in the New World.

At the commanding Legislative Palace, elaborate murals chronicle Ecuador's tumultuous journey from indigenous kingdoms through colonial rule to independence. We discover the cathedral where Ecuador's founding fathers planned revolution, and stand in Independence Plaza where liberty was first declared in 1809—ten years before the rest of South America followed.

San Francisco Church astounds us with its massive scale and intricate stonework, but La Compania church truly takes our breath away. Here, Jesuit architects created what many consider the most ornate religious building in the Americas, with every surface covered in gold leaf that required seven tons of precious metal. The baroque facade alone took 160 years to complete, representing the accumulated wealth of an entire continent flowing through colonial Quito.

We then ascend Panecillo Hill, where the towering Virgin of the Apocalypse spreads her wings 45m (148 ft) above the city. From this vantage point, Quito spreads below us like a living map, with the snow-capped peaks of the Andes forming a magnificent amphitheatre around this remarkable capital.

This afternoon, we journey 22km (14 mi) north to the Equator line monument, where we stand with one foot in each hemisphere. The on-site ethnographic museum reveals Ecuador's incredible diversity—a country where 14 distinct indigenous nations maintain their unique languages, traditions, and worldviews.

Overnight in Quito

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Quito - Otavalo Valley - Ibarra

We journey north today into the Otavalo Valley, where the threads of history weave together indigenous resistance, Spanish colonialism, and modern economic success into a story unlike anywhere else in South America.

In the 14th century, when Inca expansion reached northward, the fierce Caraquis people inhabited these fertile valleys. For 17 years, these defiant warriors resisted Inca subjugation in battles that became legendary throughout the empire. The Spanish arrival brought different chains—a hacienda system forcing Otavalenos into 15-hour weaving shifts that nearly destroyed their culture.

But the Otavalenos transformed oppression into opportunity. Today, their weaving tradition forms the foundation of a lucrative industry that

has allowed indigenous peoples to join the global economy while proudly maintaining their traditional values, language, and distinctive dress. We visit a traditional adobe home where guinea pigs—considered a delicacy for over 5,000 years—still scurry around the kitchen, representing one of the Andes' original sources of protein.

In Otavalo city, we wander through some of South America's most vibrant handicraft markets, where textiles in brilliant colours display techniques perfected over centuries. The quality and artistry evident in every weaving, carving, and piece of jewellery reflects a culture that refused to disappear.

Our hosteria near colonial Ibarra provides views of this "White City," so named for its red-tiled, whitewashed houses that climb the hillsides at 2,121m (7,000 ft). Founded in 1606, Ibarra has survived earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and revolutions while maintaining its dignified colonial character.

Overnight in Ibarra

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Ibarra - Avenue of Volcanoes & Cotopaxi - La Cienega

Today we 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 the Cotopaxi national park protects. Whilst in the national park, we will visit to the Interpretation Center and the Limpiopungo Lake and also complete a short hike that 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 - Pillaro - Banos

Today we continue our journey to Banos. We will make a stop 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 witness one of South America's most impressive waterfalls—the Devil's Bowl, where the Pastaza River plunges

through a narrow gorge with thunderous power. The waterfall's name reflects indigenous beliefs that such dramatic natural features serve as portals between the physical and spiritual worlds.

At El Manto de la Novia (Bridal Veil Falls), we experience a cable car ride over the Pastaza River Canyon, suspended above roaring rapids that have carved their path through solid rock for millennia. The sensation of flying through this dramatic landscape provides perspective on the incredible forces that continue shaping the Andes.

After lunch, we travel through rolling farmland that flows over the high ridges of the Western Andes toward Riobamba, situated at 2,750m (9,035 ft). This charming Andean city, with its colonial architecture and cobblestone streets, serves as the gateway to Ecuador's highest peaks, including Chimborazo—the point on Earth's surface closest to the sun due to our planet's equatorial bulge.

Riobamba's impressive plazas and fascinating markets buzz with activity from indigenous people dressed in traditional clothing, creating a living museum where ancient customs continue alongside modern life. The Monasterio de las Conceptas and other colonial buildings reflect the city's importance during Spanish rule, when it served as a crucial stop on the royal road connecting Quito with Peru.

The city's small-town atmosphere intensifies as evening approaches, with the surrounding peaks creating a natural amphitheatre that makes Riobamba feel both protected and dramatically exposed to the raw power of the Andes.

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

We begin our leisurely walking tour at Parque Calderon, Cuenca's main plaza, where the rhythms of daily life unfold as they have for centuries. The old Cathedral, renovated for Pope John Paul II's 1985 visit, showcases the religious art that made colonial Cuenca famous throughout the Spanish empire.

We explore the Monastery of El Carmen and visit La Inmaculada Concepcion while strolling cobbled streets that echo with centuries of footsteps. Every corner reveals architectural details that reflect the wealth flowing through colonial trade routes—carved stone facades, intricate ironwork balconies, and courtyards designed around Spanish ideals of beauty and status.

This afternoon, we visit the Museo del Banco Central, where black and white photographs capture 19th and early 20th-century Cuenca in remarkable detail. The archaeological pieces and ethnographic dioramas reveal layers of history, from pre-Columbian indigenous cultures through Spanish colonisation to modern Ecuador.

We also visit a Panama hat factory, discovering the fascinating story behind these world-famous hats that actually originated in Ecuador. In

1835, Spanish entrepreneur Manuel Alfaro arrived in Guayaquil and recognised the economic potential of toquilla straw hats. He established production chains from straw plantations to weaver networks, exporting his hats through Panama—which was becoming an important centre for international trade.

Overnight in Cuenca

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Cuenca: At Leisure

Today belongs entirely to you in this enchanting UNESCO World Heritage city that Travel and Leisure magazine once named the best place in the world to retire. More than 8,000 US and Canadian citizens have made Cuenca their home, drawn by its perfect climate, low cost of living, and the timeless beauty of its colonial architecture.

Cuenca's compact historic centre invites wandering, with each street revealing new architectural treasures and hidden courtyards. The city's four rivers—the Tomebamba, Yanuncay, Tarqui, and Machangara—create natural boundaries that frame different neighbourhoods, each with its own character and history.

You might visit additional museums, explore local markets where vendors still speak Kichwa alongside Spanish, or simply find a plaza café where you can watch daily life unfold at its unhurried pace. The surrounding mountains create microclimates that keep temperatures comfortable year-round, making every day perfect for exploration.
Many travellers use this free time to purchase local crafts directly from artisans, understanding that every purchase supports traditional skills passed down through generations.

This is your day to absorb the rhythms of a city that has successfully balanced preservation with progress, creating a living museum where past and present coexist in remarkable harmony.

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 polelypsis 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 our descent toward the coast, stopping at a cocoa plantation to learn about cultivation and production of Ecuadorian chocolate, considered among the world's finest due to unique soil conditions and traditional fermentation techniques.

Our destination is Guayaquil, Ecuador's main port city and gateway to both Pacific beaches and the Galapagos Islands. Stretching along the Guayas River, the waterfront Simon Bolivar promenade showcases La Rotonda monument, celebrating the historic meeting between South America's great liberators.

Overnight in Guayaquil.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Departure

Departure from Guayaquil.

Our remarkable journey through Ecuador's most treasured landscapes concludes today as we depart from Guayaquil, carrying with us memories of snow-capped volcanoes, pristine rainforests, and colonial cities where time moves at its own pace. From the biodiversity of the Amazon basin to the dramatic peaks of the Avenue of Volcanoes, from indigenous communities maintaining ancient traditions to colonial cities preserving Spanish architectural treasures, Ecuador has revealed itself as one of South America's most extraordinary destinations.

BUEN VIAJE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast