Tour Code
GAL1

ADVENTURESABROAD

THREE ECUADORS

Galapagos, Cloud Forest & Andean Highlands

12 days

Created on: 19 Nov, 2026

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. You'll transfer to our hotel in Quito, Ecuador's captivating capital, perched dramatically at 2788m (9,200 ft) against the imposing backdrop of Pichincha Volcano.

This evening, as you settle in 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, creating one of the most strategically important cities in pre-Columbian South America.

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 Compañía 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.

This afternoon we embark on an exploration of Quito's vibrant markets, culminating in a hands-on cooking class at our guide, Maria's, welcoming home. We stroll through bustling local market stalls where Maria introduces us to vendors and guides us through the colourful array of fresh produce and spices that form the heart of Ecuadorian cuisine.

At Maria's home, we learn to prepare traditional dishes such as locro de papa (potato soup), empanadas, or ceviche using our fresh market ingredients. As we cook, Maria shares stories and techniques passed down through generations, creating an intimate cultural exchange. We conclude by sharing the delicious meal we've prepared together, experiencing authentic Ecuadorian hospitality in a relaxed, friendly atmosphere.

Overnight in Quito.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Quito Airport - Fly to San Cristobal, Galapagos Islands

Early this morning we transfer to Quito Airport for our flight to the Galapagos Islands, possibly via Guayaquil. After arriving on San Cristobal Island, we're greeted and head to our hotel for lunch and a quick introduction to island life.

We begin our Galapagos journey at the Interpretation Centre, where we learn about the unique wildlife, geology, history, and social dynamics that make these islands Darwin's living laboratory. The centre reveals how volcanic forces, ocean currents, and millions of years of isolation created this extraordinary ecosystem where fearless animals evolved without natural predators.

We then hike to Tijeretas along naturally formed trails of lava rocks, surrounded by native plants like Galapagos cotton, palo santo, acacia, and cacti. Our guide helps us spot and identify blue-footed boobies, frigate birds, pelicans, herons, gulls, warblers, mockingbirds, and finches in the vegetation and sea cliffs, interpreting this amazing flora and fauna in the context of the island's natural history.

We cool off from our hike with a refreshing snorkelling session at postcard-worthy Carola Beach, surrounded by sea turtles, sea lions, and marine iguanas as we bask in the setting sun. After dinner, we explore the friendly, laid-back beach town and stroll down the boardwalk to visit the neighbouring colony of Galapagos sea lions.

Overnight on San Cristobal Island.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 4 San Cristobal: Northern Coast

Today we explore the northern coast by boat, visiting either Leon Dormido (Kicker Rock), Punta Pitt or Cerro Brujo depending on weekday and Galapagos National Park regulations. These dramatic volcanic formations rise from the deep Pacific like ancient sentinels, their sheer cliffs providing nesting sites for thousands of seabirds.

On our exploration trip we search the nearby coves and cliffs for sea turtles, sea lions, frigate birds, blue-footed boobies, and Nazca boobies. Here we have the chance to get up close and personal with sea lions in their favourite playground. If you choose to snorkel, we might see eagle rays, golden rays, Galápagos sharks, starfish, clams, and thousands of tropical fish. If we're lucky, we may even encounter hammerhead sharks cruising these nutrient-rich waters.

Our hosts on board prepare a delicious ceviche, a typical Ecuadorian lunch showcasing the Pacific's bounty with lime-cured fish, onions, and cilantro. This culinary tradition dates back to pre-Columbian times when indigenous peoples used chicha de jora instead of lime to "cook" their fish.

After a full day spent exploring the seas, we head back to the hotel for dinner and a well-earned rest, our minds filled with the extraordinary wildlife encounters that make the Galápagos unlike anywhere else on Earth.

Overnight on San Cristóbal

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 5 San Cristobal - Fly to Isabela

After breakfast, we say goodbye to San Cristobal with a quick small plane ride to Isabela Island, carrying only our essentials due to the strict 12kg (25 lb) checked luggage limit—excess luggage can be securely stored in Quito.

Isabela is the largest island in the Galapagos and still being formed by six active shield volcanoes, making it one of the most volcanically active spots on the planet. These massive volcanic domes—Alcedo, Cerro Azul, Darwin, Ecuador, Sierra Negra, and Wolf—continue shaping the landscape just as they have for millions of years.

Upon arrival, we take a short boat ride from town to Tintoreras, where we'll walk and have a chance to snorkel. These calm waters are home to sea lions, sea turtles, marine iguanas, rays and penguins. Tintoreras offers a high concentration of wildlife that will amaze us, including white-tip reef sharks resting in the shallow channels that give this site its name.

After exploring the boat and walking on Tintoreras itself, we can snorkel for a chance to see marine life abundant in this bay. We then set out on one of the most scenic walks in the Galápagos, taking us along immaculate beaches, into an alluring poison apple forest and a lava tube cave, and through brooding mangroves and brackish lagoons.

Overnight on Isabela

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 6 Isabela: Concha Perla & Flamingo Lagoon

This morning we visit Concha Perla in Puerto Villamil, only metres from El Embarcadero Port. A natural rock wall forms a circular concave bay-like structure that fills with ocean water according to the tides, creating a beautiful sheltered cove of crystalline waters perfect for snorkelling. We dive in and explore these gorgeous waters while swimming with a variety of fish, sea turtles, penguins, and more.

The name "Concha Perla" means "Pearl Shell," reflecting the site's pristine beauty and the mother-of-pearl quality of its protected waters. This natural aquarium demonstrates how volcanic activity and ocean currents collaborate to create perfect marine habitats.

Our guide then takes us to visit the Flamingos' Lagoon along an approximately 2km (1.2 mi) trail where we learn about the vegetation and geology of young Isabela Island. Arriving at the lagoon, we might see flamingos feeding in this artificial lake created by excavation for construction and filled by rainwater.

These elegant birds represent one of the Galapagos' most surprising residents—American flamingos that somehow made the 965km (600 mi) journey from the South American mainland. Their presence here demonstrates the remarkable dispersal abilities that allowed life to colonize these remote volcanic islands. The flamingos filter-feed on brine shrimp and algae, their curved beaks perfectly adapted for this specialized diet.

Overnight on Isabela

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 7 Isabela: The Tunnels & Tortoise Breeding Centre

After breakfast, we visit a unique place in the islands called "Los Tuneles." Our journey starts aboard our speedboat for a 45-minute trip, where our experienced captain securely leads us across waves that normally hide this geological treasure.

The tunnels formed millions of years ago when rivers of liquid lava ran across the island reaching the coastline. The cold Pacific water froze their superficial layer, isolating the interior while liquid lava kept flowing into the sea. When the eruption finished, a hollow structure remained, and its walls later broke, allowing seawater to flood inside and creating underwater tunnels.

Our guide joins us through hundreds of tunnels while we snorkel and discover marine life including sharks, lobsters, penguins, sea lions, boobies, and marine turtles among other endemic species. A snack is served aboard our boat, and if we're fortunate, we'll witness giant manta rays feeding in open waters—an unforgettable encounter with these gentle giants of the sea.

Returning to shore, we visit the Tortoise Breeding Centre along a path through manzanillo forest surrounded by wetlands, home to the famous giant pink flamingos. After lunch made with local and organic products, we head to Concha y Perla for a fantastic swim and optional snorkel at one of the locals' favourite hangouts.

Overnight on Isabela.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 8 Isabela - Boat to Santa Cruz

We wake with the sea breeze as we travel by speedboat to Santa Cruz Island, the archipelago's population centre and conservation headquarters. After checking into our hotel, we head to El Chato in the Santa Cruz highlands to find the famous giant tortoises in their natural habitat.

It's truly an honour to walk in the stately presence of these gentle giants, who can live more than 175 years and weigh up to 250kg (550 lbs). These magnificent creatures are living links to the age of dinosaurs, their ancestors having arrived on floating vegetation millions of years ago. We also spot pintail ducks, Darwin's finches, frigate birds, egrets, and the vermillion flycatcher.

This afternoon we visit the Charles Darwin Research Station, the scientific heart of Galápagos conservation since 1964. Here, researchers and park staff work to protect the archipelago's extraordinary biodiversity through breeding programmes, habitat restoration, and the eradication of invasive species. We learn how the station's giant tortoise breeding programme has returned thousands of hatchlings to

islands where their ancestors once roamed, and stand before the legacy of Lonesome George — the last Pinta Island tortoise, whose death in 2012 marked the end of a subspecies but galvanised global conservation efforts.

Overnight on Santa Cruz.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 9 Galapagos - Fly to Quito - Otavalo Market - Transfer to Hacienda

We transfer to Baltra Island for our return flight to the mainland, bidding a fond farewell to the Galapagos as we ascend above these extraordinary volcanic islands scattered across the endless Pacific.* Nine days ago we arrived in Ecuador at 2788 m/9,150 ft on a highland plateau rimmed by volcanoes; the Galápagos took us to sea level and stripped away everything familiar about the natural world.

Landing in Quito, we head directly north into the Andes rather than into the city. Our first stop is Otavalo, home to South America's most celebrated indigenous market. Saturday is market day at its fullest — the plaza and surrounding streets fill with vendors selling textiles, leather, jewellery, and produce, much of it woven using techniques unchanged for generations. We wander at our own pace, a vivid reintroduction to mainland Ecuador after a week of volcanic isolation.

From Otavalo we continue to our highland hacienda, arriving in the late afternoon with two nights ahead of us to properly settle in. Depending on group size and availability, we'll be accommodated at either Hacienda Zuleta or Hacienda La Mirage, both offering exceptional highland experiences at the same standard of quality and character. Hacienda Zuleta is an impressive 4,000-hectare colonial working farm belonging to the family of former Ecuadorian president Galo Plaza Lasso for over a century, with resident horses and llamas and Andean condors nesting nearby as part of the estate's conservation programme. Hacienda La Mirage perches dramatically on a hillside, its stunning gardens and mountain views capturing the very essence of highland Ecuador.

* As flights from the Galapagos can be delayed by weather, we will take the earliest possible departure.

Overnight at Hacienda.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Andean Hacienda

This morning we tour our hotel property and learn about its history and the flora and fauna of the region. After this informative orientation, the day is yours with an array of possibilities and optional activities — or simply relaxing and soaking in the atmosphere.

Hikers and walkers may choose to explore a variety of routes through idyllic pastures, aromatic woods, and winding mountain trails, where soaring condors and Andean bears make their home and volcanoes rise on every side.

Fully-outfitted horseback riding is also an option, as is a carriage ride, bird watching, cycling, or simply exploring the grounds with their attractive gardens and observing the daily activities of a colonial-era working farm.

As you might expect, the hacienda also offers a unique gastronomical experience, with mouth-watering, authentic Ecuadorean cuisine sourced from the farm and made from family recipes. Specially prepared three-course meals draw mainly from the hacienda itself: freshly caught rainbow trout, melt-in-your-mouth cheese, and organic produce from the gardens (vegetarian, vegan, gluten free, and lactose intolerant menu options are also offered).

Overnight at Hacienda.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 11 Hacienda - Transfer to Mindo Cloud Forest

Leaving the hacienda's highland pastures behind, we descend off the Andean escarpment toward Ecuador's western slopes. Within two hours

the dry highland air thickens and warms, the roadside vegetation deepening from scrub to forest as we drop into the valley of Mindo — one of the great birding destinations on Earth, where over 500 species have been recorded within a few kilometres.

Mindo sits at the convergence of three distinct life zones — subtropical forest, cloud mountain forest, and high páramo — producing a staggering concentration of species found nowhere else. Hummingbird feeders draw jewel-like visitors in rapid succession, while the forest resonates with tanagers, toucans, and antbirds calling through the epiphyte-draped canopy.

We spend the afternoon exploring the trails, our guide helping us interpret the layered complexity of this living laboratory. We pause at a hummingbird garden where dozens of species — some found nowhere else on Earth — hover and dart in perpetual motion, a vivid final contrast to the volcanic stillness of the Galápagos and the pastoral calm of the highlands.

Before dinner we visit Quetzal Chocolate, where cacao grown in this valley is transformed into some of Ecuador's finest artisan chocolate, learning the journey from pod to bar.

Overnight in Mindo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Mindo - Transfer to Quito Airport - Depart

After a leisurely morning, we return to Quito in time to connect with homeward flights, most of which depart Quito in the evening. If your flights require an extra overnight in Quito, this can be booked for an additional cost.

Departure from Quito. BUEN VIAJE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast