

Eccuador, a tiny country by comparison to its neighbours, sits along the equator stuck between Peru and Colombia. It is a land of staggering contrasts – from snow-capped Andean peaks to remote Amazon rainforests, from chains of volcanoes to Pacific beaches. However, tiny Ecuador is home to more species of bird than the entire North American continent

Located in a high-level valley, Quito is Ecuador's enchanting colonial capital with several snow-capped peaks surrounding the city. From here you can access most of the country's highest mountains, visit several fascinating Indian market towns and be in cloud forest within a couple of hours drive.

To the south, the corridor of high-altitude volcanoes makes for one of the most dramatic journeys anywhere in South America and at the same time divides the tropical Amazon rainforest to the east with the hot Pacific coast to the west.

And about 1000 km off the coast of Ecuador lie the Galapagos Islands, the most astonishing wildlife rich islands that paved the way for one of science's most important theories. The Enchanted Isles are one of the most spectacular wildlife arenas left in the world and attracts thousands of visitors every year.

Electricity: 120V, 60Hz

Time Zone: GMT/UTC -5

Dialling Code: 593

Climate

The highlands' dry season (the best time for hiking and climbing) is June to August, which coincides with the wettest months in the Oriente or Amazon region. Trekking in the Oriente is best done in the dry season, from late August through February.

Festival Calendar

March -April - Holy Week and Carnival – Again celebrated with water fights. Ambato also has a fruit and flower festival at the same time

May 1st - Labour Day - A day of workers' parades

May 24th - National holiday celebrating independence from the Spanish in 1822

June 24th - Corpus Christi - most of the celebrations take place in highland towns, featuring processions and street dancing

June 24th to 29th - Saint John the Baptist, Saint Peter and Saint Paul - fiestas in Otavalo only

July 24th - Simon Bolivar's Birthday

August 10th - Quito's Independence Day

October 12th - Columbus Day

September 1st to 15th - Fiesta del Yamor - grand festival that takes place in Otavalo only

November 1st and 2nd - All Saints and All Souls Day

December 6th - Fiesta commemorating the founding of Quito. Celebrations include bullfights, street dancing and parades

Visas

At present, most nationalities do not require a visa for entry into Ecuador for stays no longer than 90 days. Please check your local embassy for updated information.

Currency

Ecuador can be an economical country to travel through in South America. The Sucre, the local monetary unit, was devalued and was finally replaced with the US dollar in 2001.

Visa, MasterCard and Diners Club are the most recognized credit cards in Ecuador. American Express has only recently found its way onto the scene. Be careful when using them, as merchants will often charge you a transaction fee in order to cover their costs. For this reason alone, we strongly suggest that you only use credit cards in Ecuador in cases of emergency.

Casas de Cambio are open from 9am to 6pm, Monday to Friday and until noon on Saturdays. Banks are open from 9am to 1:30pm Monday to Friday and only sometimes on Saturdays.

Health

Vaccinations

Recommended though not compulsory are for dengue fever, hepatitis, malaria, typhoid, rabies, diphtheria, and cholera (There is a minor risk of cholera).

Best time to go

There are really only two seasons in Ecuador, wet and dry, and they vary depending on the region you are travelling in. The Galapagos and coastal regions are mainly influenced by the ocean currents. The hot and rainy season runs from January until April. With not too much rain you must expect some torrential downpours at times. From May until December it can be rather cooler but you can experience more overcast days. High seasons in the Galapagos are June through to August, and December to January. If you are heading into the Amazon, you must bring rainproof gear. We would suggest rubber boots and even though most lodges do provide these. Please note, that extra large sizes are rare! In the Amazon, August through to February are the driest seasons with April to June being the wettest. In the highlands, the dry season is from June to September as well as December. Nevertheless, Ecuador's weather is unpredictable. When packing, ensure to bring something for every weather condition.

Upon arrival

Once you've reclaimed your baggage and cleared customs, our friendly staff will warmly welcome you to Ecuador, assist you with your luggage and take you to your hotel by private air-conditioned minivan/bus. Please do not leave the airport terminal building unless you have made contact with Amazing Peru staff.

Food and drink

Drink only bottled water. Pasteurised milk is widely available. Avoid dairy products that are likely to have been made from unboiled milk. Avoid street food vendors and the cheaper restaurants.

What to eat

To try some typical foods, here is a selection of what we recommend.

Cuy - Guinea pig!

Llapingachos - Fried mashed potato and cheese pancakes

Ceviche - seafood marinated in lemon, onion and spices although not as good as in Peru.

Toffee - a local favourite in Baños. You can watch it being freshly made on almost every street corner

Empanadas de verde - A ground plaintain shell filled with cheese, meat or shrimp

Humitas - Tender ground corn steamed in corn or banana leaves, available in both sweet and savoury varieties

What to drink

Morocho - made from mote, milk, sugar, and cinnamon

Pilsener and Club - The local beers

Highlights

Quito

Divided into two sections, old and new. The old town is culturally more interesting and was declared a world heritage site by UNESCO in 1978. The new town is where to go for the best restaurants and nightlife.

The Old Town

Plaza de la Independencia - The true heart of the city. The President still conducts business here, so access to the inside may be limited. It is the home of the tomb of Sucre and also houses interesting 17th and 18th century paintings.

Parque Alameda - Houses the oldest astronomical observatory in South America, as well as an impressive monument of Simon Bolivar

Plaza de San Francisco - Constructed by the Spanish in 1553, this church has a high altar made of gold and beautifully carved ceilings.

La Compañía - The finest of all Jesuit churches. Damaged through the years by fire and earthquakes, it has since been restored and has a richly sculptured facade and interior.

Plaza de Santo Domingo - Known for the Chapel of the Rosary found to the right of the main altar, this church and monastery pays homage to Sucre and his battle against the Royalists.

Markets - The Indian market at Avenida de 24 de Mayo at the base of El Panecillo and the Ipiales market. Best visited on Wednesdays or Saturdays, the main market days, but any day offers a visitor some interesting sites.

The Virgen de Quito - Summit El Panecillo to see Quito's dominant landmark.

Casa de Sucre - At Venezuela 573 and Sucre, you will find this museum dedicated to Antonio Jose de Sucre, the hero of Ecuadorian independence. Hours are from 8am to noon and 1:30pm to 4pm, Tues to Fri and 8am to 1pm on Sat and Mon.

Teatro Nacional Sucre - Home to the National Symphonic Orchestra, and one of Quito's oldest and most charming cultural enclaves.

The New Town

Museo del Banco Central - The best archeological museum in Quito. You can see displays of colonial furniture, skeletons showing early surgical methods, pottery, gold relics, religious art and carvings

Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana - A great museum for music lovers. The museum features musical instruments not only from Ecuador but also from abroad. It also has a large art collection. The museum is located at Avenidas Patria and 12 de Octubre

Museo de Ciencias Naturales - A good place to stop and acquaint yourself with Ecuador's flora and fauna before heading to the Galapagos or the Amazon. It's the best natural history museum in Ecuador. Hours are from 8:30am to 1pm and 1:30pm to 4:30pm, Mon to Fri and 9am to 1pm on Saturday.

Metropolitan Touring presents a Ballet Folklorico called Jacchigua at the San Gabriel cinema at 7:30 p.m. on Wed and Fri.

Around Quito

La Mitad del Mundo - Ecuador's 30m high monument commemorating the nation's name.

Museo Etnografico - Inside the base of the monument, this museum features exhibits on the many different Indian tribes that have existed in Ecuador. Both the museum and the monument are open from 10am to 4pm, Tues to Fri and 10am to 5pm, Sat and Sun.

Planetarium - Also located on the grounds the Mitad del Mundo. Shows are from 11am to 3pm, Tues to Fri and 11am to 4pm on Sat and Sun

Otavalo - A tiny village 2 to 3 hours north of Quito. Otavalo has probably the best market in all of South America and so should not be missed. Saturday is the busiest day, Wednesday is a close second and during the peak visitor season, June to August, it is open every day.

Avenue of Volcanoes

The long valley south of Quito, leading to Cuenca, is flanked by two parallel mountain ranges containing some of the country's wildest scenery and nine of its 10 highest peaks. Half of Ecuador's population lives in this valley. The area is peppered with isolated Indian villages, where lifestyles seem to have changed little over the centuries, and each community displays distinct styles of traditional dress.

Larger towns - such as Saquisilí, Pujillí, Zumbagua, Sigchos and San Miguel de Salcedo - swell with villagers on market days. The peaceful community of Salinas is known for its homemade dairy products, salamis and woollen handicrafts. Many of these villages are only accessible on foot. The Panamerican Highway, which runs the length of the valley, provides spectacular views along the way.

Cuenca

Founded by the Spanish in 1557, Cuenca is the third-largest city in Ecuador and the finest. The old centre has many churches and homes dating from the 16th and 17th centuries lining its cobblestoned streets. The majority of the hotels are found near the old centre, which makes Cuenca a great place to spend a few days relaxing in the colonial atmosphere. Note that Cuencans are more conservative than even the people of Quito - you'll find you attract attention if you don't dress and act accordingly. The Inca fortress of Ingapirca, Ecuador's best preserved pre-colonial ruin is close by.

Oriente Province

This large region in the lowlands of the Amazon Basin has huge areas of rainforest and lures visitors interested in natural history, ecology, tropical habitats, indigenous tribes, birdwatching and jungle treks. The main service towns in this region are Macas, Puyo, Tena, Coca and Lago Agrio. The Oriente is divided into northern and southern halves by the Río Pastaza.

Almost all roads in the southern Oriente are unpaved and subject to landslides and other delays during the rainy season - June to August are the worst months. The northern Oriente's road system and its connections to the capital are much more user friendly.

Galapagos Islands

The Galapagos archipelago is renowned for its unique and fearless wildlife and has become a mecca for natural-history enthusiasts. Here, you can swim with sea lions, float eye-to-eye with penguins and stand beside a blue-footed booby as it feeds its young. The archipelago spreads out over 50,000 sq km (19,500 sq mi) of the Pacific Ocean some 1000km (620mi) west of Ecuador and is comprised of 13 main islands and six smaller ones. The landscape is barren and volcanic but has a unique haunting beauty. The highest point in the chain is the 1707m (5600ft) Volcan Wolf on Isla Isabela. The islands' renowned bird and marine life includes albatross, penguins, boobies, turtles, giant tortoises, iguanas, sea lions, whales and dolphins.

Ecuador claimed the Galapagos Islands in 1832, just three years before their most famous visitor, Charles Darwin, arrived on the *Beagle*. For the next century, the islands were inhabited by a few settlers and were used as a penal colony, the last of which was closed in 1959. The archipelago became a national park in 1959. The islands currently receive an average of 60,000 visitors per year.

Ibarra-San Lorenzo Railway

For an unforgettable trip, take a ride on the Ibarra-San Lorenzo railway. The views are especially good from the rooftop!

Parque Nacional Sangay

Stretching about 70km southeast of Baños, Parque Nacional Sangay encompasses 272,000ha (671,840ac) of the country's most remote and inaccessible wilderness and protects an incredible abundance of rare animals.

Hotels

All the hotels we recommend are clean, well located and comfortable hotels varying in services as according to their category. We rarely use hostels as the price difference is negligible between a good hostel and a hotel. In places Ambato and Cotopaxi, we do work with some very good hosterias. It is important to remember that in Ecuador a three star hotel will not necessarily be the same as a three star hotel in Europe or the US. We do endeavour to choose the best hotels in line with your budget. There are five star deluxe hotels we offer that are among the best in South America. We will always quote you with good hotels on all our programmes but upgrades or downgrades will be available as per your request. However, as the price will decrease with downgrades, this will ultimately reflect in the services and standards of the hotel.

Flights

Unless otherwise stated, we provide all internal flights in your programme, excluding the airport taxes. We also provide international flights around South America and can quote, upon request, your international flight to Ecuador. We work directly with the best airlines in South America but are not responsible for any changes in flight schedules or cancellations made by the airlines. This is the responsibility of the airline in question. We will always endeavour to minimise any delays or changes but cannot guarantee a successful outcome.

Insurance

It is a mandatory requirement that all our customers take out adequate travel insurance cover. Once you have obtained your insurance, it is company practice to check the validity and cover of your insurance policy and we hold the right to refuse travel to anyone whose insurance does not satisfy Amazing Peru's stringent criteria. These include cancellation and curtailment, death or injury, medical insurance, emergency repatriation, delayed baggage, loss and theft etc.