



Equatorial Mini

By Dominic Hamilton



TOP: An Indian woman is on her way to the Saturday morning market in Otavalo, north of Quito. ABOVE: This parrot in the rain forest represents just one of the more than 1,500 bird species in Ecuador. RIGHT: Quilotoa, a dormant volcano, last erupted about 800 years ago.

It may pale in size next to neighboring Colombia and Peru, but **Ecuador** packs a true tourism wallop — from the magnificent beaches of its Pacific coast to the ecological bounty and charming towns of its interior.



Dominic Hamilton

originally came to Ecuador in 2001. I had been asked to update a guidebook on the country, and I accepted the job with equal parts enthusiasm and ignorance. I knew little about the country — only that it is small, sat plumb on the Equator (hence its name), and has rain forests (I had seen a documentary about it).

On my second day in the capital, Quito, I visited the clubhouse of the South American Explorers, a remarkable institution set up by a maverick explorer in the 1970s to improve the knowledge of travelers heading to the continent and provide them with a base once they got there.

Of course, I had done some reading about Ecuador (on the plane), and I'd made some advance contacts before arrival (my neighbor on the plane). But as I walked chirpily into the clubhouse, introduced myself, and commenced my research, I remember experiencing the sinking feeling of a man who has suddenly become burdened with the weight of the world on his shoulders.

The manager presented me with binders full of reports by members from every corner of the country. There were at least a dozen of them, all three inches thick. She showed me the library of anthropological, historical, political, and economic books written about the country, then she pointed out the wall where tour operators and agencies advertised their activities and destinations — it was 15 feet long and plastered ceiling to floor with fliers. I'd planned to be in Ecuador from February to the end of May. At this rate, I'd be lucky to be home by Christmas.

ECOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

The reason for Ecuador's depth of attractions is actually its altitude. The world's longest mountain range, the Andes, runs longitudinally through the country, rising along its length like the fossilized spine of

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a dinosaur, to peaks of nearly 21,000 feet. This spine has two flanks, which define the eastern, Amazonian side and the western, Pacific side. The gap between these two is delineated by each vertebra in a series of peaks and troughs. The troughs are the populated valleys, nearly all marking a province with its capital and surrounding villages. The spine divides mainland Ecuador into three distinct regions: the coast, the Sierra (the Andes area), and the Oriente (the Amazon rain forest). There's also the Galápagos archipelago, 540 miles off the coast. Place the spine on the Equator, in the heart of the Tropics, with prodigious quantities of sunlight and rainfall, and you get what biologists call a biodiversity hotspot. Travelers, especially those of us with a nature and people bent, call it a great vacation.

Put it this way: Ecuador harbors more than 1,500 bird species. Europe and North America combined can't equal that figure. On the botanical end of the spectrum, the country is home to some 3,787 orchid species (the highest number recorded in the world). And if former French President Charles de Gaulle complained that it was impossible to govern a nation with 246 varieties of cheese, imagine how Ecuador's President Alfredo Palacio must feel. This country, roughly the size of Colorado, is home to people of a dozen ethnicities who speak more than a half-dozen languages. Of course, Spanish is the national tongue and Catholicism the official religion, but for millions of highland and Amazonian Indians, Spanish is their second language (after Quichua, the language of the Incas) and natural forces their deities.

GOING COASTAL

After two weeks of regular clubhouse visits, and with a stack of photocopies under my arm, I finally left Quito behind. I



ABOVE: Guayaquil, the largest city in Ecuador, is also its main seaport. **FACING PAGE:** The Rio Napo is in the heart of the Amazon rain forest.

decided to begin my journey on the coast, since I'd soon realized that the man who'd written the first edition of the guidebook had, to put it diplomatically, been in a rush when he'd done his coastal research. Trundling northwest from the capital in my four-wheel-drive vehicle, I came to the lush, forested, and aptly named "emeralds" province of Esmeraldas. From there, I turned north by car and then by boat along the coast.

The population here is dominated by Afro-Ecuadorians — descendants of slaves who spoke a Spanish I could barely decipher and lived in villages with names of African origin. Well, most, anyway: During a Saturday in the town of San Lorenzo, which doesn't sound African at all, I was lucky enough to witness some locals playing the drums and marimba — a percussive instrument brought to South

America from Africa 500 years ago. The jamming spilled over into the wee hours of Sunday morning.

Esmeraldas province is followed to the south by Manabí, and then by Guayas, where long expanses of unspoiled white-sand beaches are interspersed with rocky peninsulas and dotted with humble fishing villages. This coast was home to some of the earliest civilizations on the continent. While breakfasting on the exquisite national dish of *ceviche* (fish and prawns marinated in lemon and herbs with onions), I watched the fishermen bring in their catch in the early morning and wondered how long men have braved the seas here.

Near Pedernales, I drove for a good half an hour at full speed along the beach at high tide, then, at Machalilla National Park, Ecuador's only coastal national



Darius Koehli/age fotostock; Dominic Hamilton

park, I parked my ride and wandered down to several secluded, idyllic bays hemmed by verdant tropical vegetation and ochre-brown cliffs.

In Montañita, I perfected my surfing skills — that is, I managed to stand up — and hung out with the dudes, when not running about the town researching. In the town of Santa Elena, I stood in silent contemplation at the small local museum that is home to the Lovers of Sumpa, two human skeletons embracing tenderly, who died some 3,000 years ago.

Then it was off to Salinas, on Ecuador's southwesterly tip, where I entered a world a million miles from the percussionists of San Lorenzo, and gaped at the beautiful

and moneyed from the country's nearby powerhouse city of Guayaquil, who had come to spend their vacations in upscale resorts, boutiques, and casinos. I chatted to old ladies who remembered how things were back in the day, to tour operators about sea-kayaking, horseback riding, kite-surfing, windsurfing, and fishing and whale-watching trips, to travelers about their experiences and recommendations, and all the while, I cursed my lack of time.

TO THE INTERIOR

Beached out, I headed inland to the Sierra region, the temperature dropping with every stretch of road up the mountainsides. I reached Loja, a town where they

speak a Spanish that sounds almost Spanish, then descended to Vilcabamba — known as the Valley of Longevity for its benign climate and inhabitants who live to see their great-great grandchildren — before turning back north to the country's third-largest city, Cuenca. The Inca Emperor Wayna Capac established a settlement here as his empire expanded. He chose wisely — the city is crossed by four rivers and cupped by rolling mountains. Today, the city's historic heart of cobbled streets, elegant mansions, and deft craftspeople is a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Bumping up and down the Andes' spine, I came to Riobamba, an attractive and friendly provincial capital close to the hulk of the snow-capped Chimborazo volcano, the country's highest. From here, at dawn, I climbed aboard one of Ecuador's rickety old trains. In fact, I climbed onto the roof. From there, accompanied by a gaggle of other travelers from all corners of the globe, I enjoyed unbeatable views of the rolling countryside before the train began its descent, hugging the cliffs, to a steep section known as Devil's Nose.

North of Riobamba is Ambato, one of the country's main flower and agricultural centers. From there, I cut east toward the Amazon. About halfway down lies the town of Baños, once known for its curative hot springs (*baños* means baths), but today more feted as the country's outdoor and adventure capital. The town enjoys an impressive location, with the Río Pastaza, a tributary of the Amazon, to one side, and the smoking Tungurahua volcano on the other. The volcano is active, and poses a potential threat to the town; for now, it's a tourist attraction. Local operators will take you to an elevated observation area to see Tungurahua's imposing, smoking cone from a safe distance.

On my first day in Baños, I went horseback riding through the hills with a friendly chap named Anibal, who also made great pizzas in the evening at his restaurant in town. On my second day, I

went white-water rafting on the roiling Pastaza with a group as inexperienced as I was with a paddle, lifejacket, crash helmet, and the inflated rubber tube that acted as a buffer between us and the hereafter. On my third day, I took to two wheels and mountain-biked for 40 miles downhill to the Amazon town of Puyo, putting the bike on the roof of a bus for the drive back up to town. On my fourth day, I went for a trek in the hills, into the wondrous cloud forests of the Llanaganates National Park. And on the fifth day, I rested, taking to the baths. And then I cursed my lack of time again: I still wanted to spend another day in the cloud forests and rappel down a waterfall, too.

CAPITAL GAINS

I returned to Quito, passing the beautiful snowy cone of the Cotopaxi volcano, a rival to Mount Fuji for serene majesty. Getting lost at dusk on my way through the city's maze of streets, which aren't signposted with hapless foreigners in mind, I ended up in Plaza Grande, the capital's main square. I did a double-take as I realized that all the grand buildings that flank its four sides had been floodlit in my absence. The effect was stunning.

The next day, I went back to the South American Explorers clubhouse. I thanked the manager for all her help. She gave me a funny look.



Quito's Old Town sits at the foothills of the Andes, as this southern view attests.

"You sound like you've already finished," she said. "But you've still got the northern Sierra and all the Amazon to finish yet."

I looked around, at all the shelves and volumes and fliers, and got that sinking feeling all over again.

EPILOGUE

Now, five years on, and all the important streets in Quito's historic center have been lit at night and made safer by day than when I first arrived. The city's municipality, recognizing the value of its city — the first to be named a UNESCO World Heritage

site — has gone to great lengths to make its citizens proud and responsible for its colonial wonders, while making it enjoyable and intriguing to explore for its visitors.

As for me, I'm no longer a visitor. An adopted son of the city — I've lived here since 2003 — I'm continually impressed by the improvements that are made to Quito all the time, and by what awaits me during every visit to the Old Town. And I never curse my lack of time. ■

Dominic Hamilton is a British-born photographer and the author of several South American guides. He lives in Quito.

FASTFACTS

RESORT DIRECTORY: IntervalWorld.com or pages 339 to 340

CLIMATE: The Sierra region is driest May to September. High temperatures average between 60°F and 70°F. The Guayas coast is also driest from May to September, but actually clearer and more pleasant from November to March. High temperatures top 80°F throughout the year.

DON'T MISS: A city tour of Quito's sights, by day and night, with Sangay Touring.

CURRENCY: U.S. dollar

SALES TAX: A 12% value added tax (V.A.T.) is added to most goods and services. At restaurants, a 10% surcharge is added to the bill.

TIPPING: Up to 10% over the surcharge for good service at a high-end restaurant.

INTERVAL TRAVEL ARRANGEMENTS:

IntervalWorld.com or 800.235.4000

RENTAL CAR: Recommended if you want to see the country at your own pace. Private transport can easily be arranged.

CONTACT: South American Explorers, samexplo.org; Sangay Touring, sangay.com

VISITOR INFORMATION:

Ecuador Ministry of Tourism

vivecuador.com

593.2.2507.559

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