

A student at work in the carpentry workshop of the Escuela Taller Quito, which was established in 1992 to teach traditional construction techniques to underprivileged youngsters

HEART AND SOUL

Quito's World Heritage-listed colonial centre is the largest in the Americas. And thanks to municipal intervention and the efforts of a school for disadvantaged children, the Ecuadorian capital's historic heart is being revitalised.

Dominic Hamilton reports

From the outside, the Escuela Taller Quito (Quito Workshop School) is deceiving. A two-storey mansion set on one of the narrow streets in the Ecuadorian capital's historic centre, it looks like a family home. Pass through its ornately carved doorway, however, and it's another story. Pupils in blue overalls hurry between classrooms, criss-crossing the elegant patio in gaggles of three or four. A bell rings and a hush returns, although this, too, is deceptive. Enter one of the classrooms that ring the patio and you're confronted with a hive of activity.

The first, adjacent to the entrance, is dedicated to carpentry. Inside, pupils are hard at work around half a dozen workbenches. Sketches and examples of completed works in marquetry and inlay decorate the walls. Sculptures at various stages of completion are scattered across the worktops, alongside tools of every size and function. There is a constant hum of knocking, carving, chipping, scraping and banging. The class is led by Maestro Carlos Vinicio Pazmiño, a tall, energetic man in his early 40s who passes from table to table surveying his pupils' work.

A room off to the right is quieter, bathed in studious silence. Here, Maestro Carlos advises a pupil on how to apply a wafer-thin sliver of gold leaf to a carved statue. Perhaps it's the leaf's value that makes everyone reverential, or perhaps it's the image of the Virgin, pained by the loss of her son, that's responsible.



The Jesuits' church, La Compañía de Jesús, in Quito's centre. Under construction for more than 160 years, it's laden with gold leaf

María González is 18 and in her second year at the school. Despite the male bias in her class, she seems completely at ease as she delicately transfers another leaf to her statue on the tip of a paintbrush. 'I wasn't doing very well at my last school and a friend told me about the Taller,' she says. 'Once I visited, and saw how nice a place it was and all the things I could learn here, I applied at once.'

The Escuela Taller takes in 60 students aged 16–22 from disadvantaged backgrounds every year. It teaches a wide range of skills, from carpentry, stonework, painting, gold leaf, metalwork and electrics to basic maths and language. The pupils receive work clothes as a uniform and get two meals a day.

The school's aim is to train artisans in traditional construction techniques, to promote the restoration, rehabilitation and conservation of Quito's heritage, and to integrate young people into the labour market. It runs an agency to help its graduates find jobs that enjoys a 97 per cent success rate.

This success is due in part to the school's excellent training, but also to the fact there is such a lot of work to be done. Quito's historic centre is the largest in the Americas. It spans no less than 320 hectares, set between rolling hills and green-sloped 3,000-metre Andean volcanoes. In 1978, the city became the first to be named a World Heritage site by UNESCO, along with Krakow in Poland.

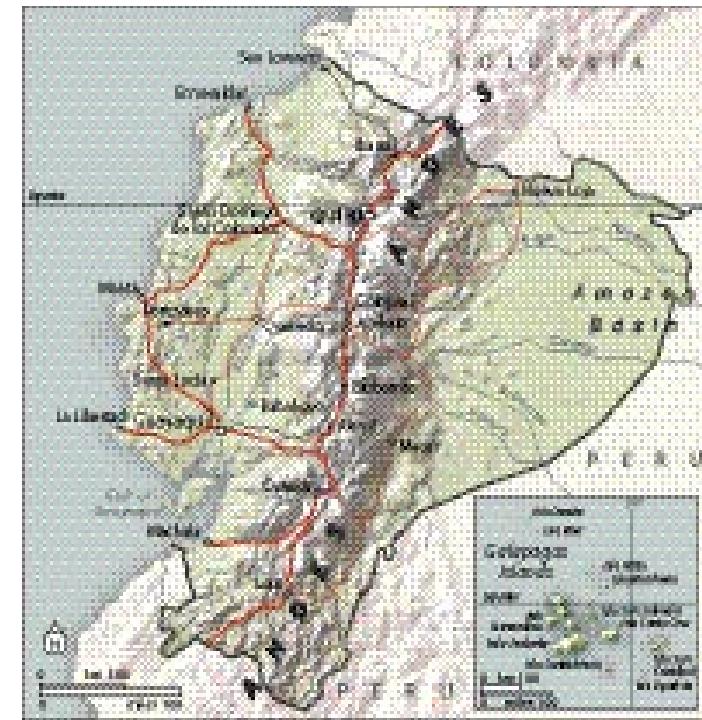
Street life

Quito's historic centre is laid out on a tight grid pattern, similar to that imposed by the Spanish in cities across the Americas, from Mexico to Tierra del Fuego. Its network of streets is home to 40 churches and chapels, 16 convents and monasteries with their respective cloisters, 17 plazas, 12 chapter rooms and refectories, and countless courtyards.

The great liberator of northern South America, Simón Bolívar, called Quito 'a monastery' when he first entered with his triumphant troops. And Bolívar would recognise much of this 'Florence

of the New World' today, since few modern buildings blight the skyline of spires and church towers.

Until recently, Bolívar would have felt at home in the streets of the capital; they felt more 18th than 21st century. The Saturday street market teemed like an ant nest. Stalls clogged either side of the chessboard-grid of thoroughfares. Their blue awnings webbed the narrow streets, knitted with strings and ropes that connived to either trip you up or garrotte you. In some areas, movement



was all but impossible. And the noise – everyone shouting their wares: 'everything must go', 'sale now on', 'un dólar, un dólar', 'cómprame aquí'. There were as many people selling as shopping.

No more. A combination of municipal agencies, funded by local taxes and loans from foreign donors (the largest from the Inter-American Development Bank), have transformed the Old Town. The street stalls have been dismantled, the vendors moved on, the cobbles scrubbed and swept. The city built various indoor markets and relocated most of the 10,000 *comerciantes* there. Although there was resistance and scepticism, the move was carried out by consensus and without violence – which isn't as uncommon as one might think in Latin America.

'Through a combination of factors, Quito's Old Town, despite its past grandeur and present heritage, had become unworkable and unliveable,'

says the city's mayor, Paco Moncayo. From the 1960s onwards, the smart money began to leave the restrictive grid of streets and the centre began a slow decline. Mansions were split again and again into smaller and cheaper units.

'The streets were impassable, health and hygiene impossible,' Moncayo continues. 'People were banging nails into church columns to hang their awnings from. It was terrible to watch. So something had to be done.'

Today, just 20 years since the establishment of the FONSAL (Cultural Heritage Preservation Fund) and 13 since the ECH (Historic Centre Development Corporation) was formed, the historical heart of Quito is virtually unrecognisable. Churches have been rescued and restored. Streets have been reorganised with new lamp-posts and traffic-calming measures; others have been pedestrianised. Steel signposts point to nearby tourist attractions.

The old bylaw by which all houses had to be whitewashed and their balconies painted blue has also been relaxed. Within months, façades had turned peppermint green and powder pink. Even shop signs have come under

control. Out went neon set at right-angles to the houses and precarious plastic bolted to balconies; in came sober metal lettering anchored to the shop's front. It's far more aesthetically pleasing, but not particularly helpful when you're looking for an ATM.

Mansions have been restored and cultural spaces opened up. The former Naval Archives, redolent with musty files rotting contentedly, was transformed into the elegant Centro Cultural Metropolitano, which includes a public library. The Hospital of San Juan became the excellent City Museum. The Neo-Classical Teatro Sucre has been restored to its former glory, along with its nearby cousin, the Variety Theatre. Part of the Archbishop's Palace, on one side of the handsome Plaza de la Independencia, now boasts a posh restaurant, called, with a side-order of irony, Mea Culpa. Inside two of the palace's patios are internet cafés, fast-food and modest



Looking south over Plaza Grande (also known as Plaza de la Independencia), with the presidential palace to the right and the main cathedral ahead. Built immediately after the founding of Quito, the plaza remains the city's spiritual heart

restaurants, shops and public toilets. Dance and music groups perform in the spaces on Friday nights.

With the streets navigable once more, indeed, with pavements superior to those in the wealthier parts of the city of 1.8 million, the next step has been to persuade *Quiteños* to return to the centre to live and encourage businesses to invest. The ECH has launched more than two dozen housing projects in the centre, ranging from modest yet modern family flats in small-scale blocks to larger properties for high-end housing. So far, the take-up rate has been very positive.

Safety has been, and continues to be, key. There is a strong municipal police presence throughout the Old Town and CCTV cameras peer down from various intersections. The whole area was once effectively off-limits at night, but now there is a sense of security that was unthinkable only a few years ago. Churches and squares are bathed in spotlights; restaurants and cafés are open until 10pm, rather than 7pm; and it's even possible to take romantic horse-drawn carriage rides around the cobbles.

'Cultural tourism in Quito is the city's greatest economic hope,' claims Cristina de Miranda of the Corporación

Metropolitana de Turismo de Quito, one of a number of corporations set up by Mayor Moncayo. 'Due to the city's geography in the Andes, we're never going to develop heavy industry or even a great amount of manufacturing. By taking advantage of the incredible heritage that we do have, and the ingenuity and diversity of the people who make up our city and our region, we can hope to create jobs and long-term development.'

The steady growth in tourism numbers reflects this optimism. Although the Galápagos Islands are Ecuador's main draw, both tour companies and tourists are now treating Quito as more than just a stop-off on their trip to the archipelago.

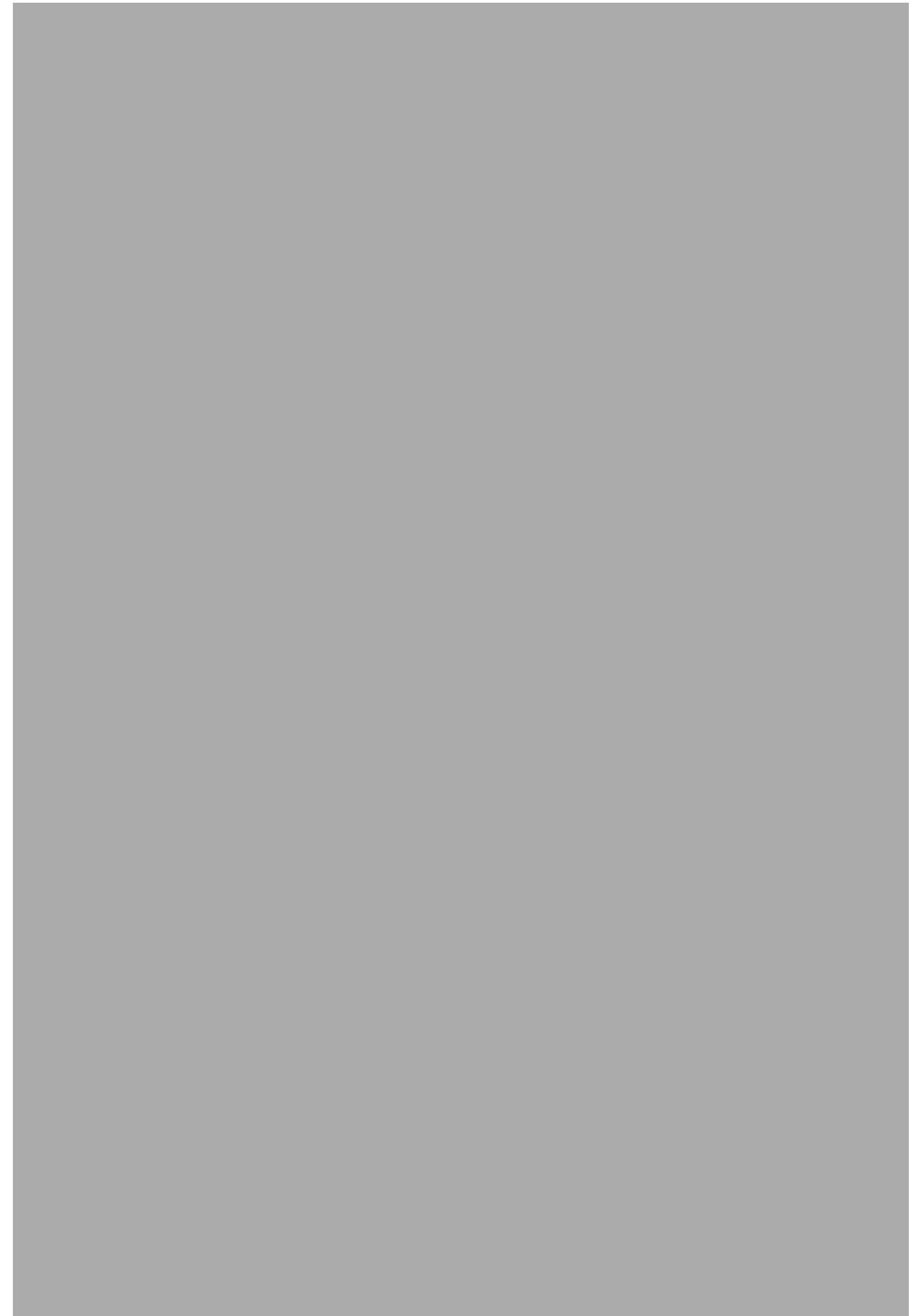
Hijacked heritage

This new era in Quito's history isn't without its dissenters. At a recent conference at the Ecuadorian branch of the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO), the academic Mireya Salgado questioned the top-down approach to the 'rescuing' of Quito's historic centre. 'The redevelopment of the Old Town is for the benefit of a few and not the many,' she said. 'The

concept of heritage has been hijacked, whereby the very inhabitants of the centre are pushed out and the so-called culture of the city is projected in a way that doesn't challenge the status quo.'

This critique of the city's rebirth is understandable given its history. Soon after the founding of the city as San Francisco de Quito in 1534, the Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians and Carmelites moved in quickly to fill their churches with imagery that would convey Christianity to the idolatrous masses. Inside their complexes, they taught practical crafts alongside the catechism. Although at first most art was imported from Spain, such was the need to fill the churches and minds that home-grown production soon became more important. By the mid-17th century, the mix of indigenous and Spanish styles had developed into the so-called Quito School. Art historians emphasise the school's bold colours and exuberant decoration, but to my mind, its greatest impact, and legacy, is gore.

In Quito's best colonial art collections you'll encounter row after row of crucified Christs. Without detracting from all the Virgins, gold leaf, polychromatic statuary and suffering





The changing of the guard at the presidential palace. Located on the Plaza de la Independencia, the palace has a chapel that is connected to the catacombs beneath the city, providing a potential escape route for the president

saints, it's these crucifixions that open a window across the centuries to colonial Quito. I've never seen such blood-congealed depictions of Christ. The artists of the Quito School slashed Him with knives, drew pools of blood from His pores and gouged His body with weeping wounds.

Their intention was to bring fear to the hearts and minds of the Indians, but also, I believe, to make the link in the indigenous peoples' minds between Christ and themselves. Christ suffered for you, say the Catholics in Europe. But in the New World, they said that Christ suffered like you: whipped and beaten and treated like a dog. But He was saved. Just as you will be – just as soon as we've worked you to death.

Like all of the great colonial cities in the Americas, Quito's legacy is palpable. The great doors of the twin-towered Franciscan church are propped open by the disfigured and the deformed, all Indian. In the squares, it's the boys of Indian descent, with burnished cheeks and filthy clothes, who run up and offer to clean your shoes. And it's the Indian men who struggle through the streets under burdens that would have toppled Sisyphus. This is the conquistadors' bequest to the ages; these are Atahualpa's proud children.

Part of the Old Town's charm and interest is that it's still very much alive. Every ground floor locale is taken up with some sort of commerce, whether it's restaurants serving three-course lunches for US\$2, haberdashers piled high with cloth, cobblers, ironmongers, keycutters or vendors

of the latest imports from Taiwan. It's busy, cluttered, colourful.

Although there is a risk inherent in prettifying the historical centre for the sake of appearance, of creating some improbable Andean Disneyland that only benefits corporations, ask the average *Quiteño* about the changes in the Old Town and you'll almost invariably be told that they are for the best.

With the city approaching the 30th anniversary of its inscription on the World Heritage list, it would seem an apt time to look back on the progress

made and decide on the road ahead. The agencies created and financed since the 1980s have dealt primarily with the area's physical-spatial problems: buttressing churches on the point of collapse, giving old buildings new leases of life, or bringing some order to the unhygienic chaos.

With these great works, the city has reignited the pride of its citizens. And with growing pride has come increasing interest and involvement. The great challenge now is to direct that involvement to create an inclusive and progressive centre in this great capital. **G**



When to go

Lying just south of the Equator, Quito's temperature is the same year-round (average daily maximum of 19°C) – there are no seasons as such, but you can experience all four seasons in one day due to its altitude of 2,800 metres. The driest time of year is June–September.

Getting there

There are no direct flights between the UK and Ecuador, with most flights routed via Madrid, Amsterdam or the USA. The flight time is typically around 15–17 hours.



Co-ordinates

ECUADOR

Further information

UK citizens don't need a visa to enter Ecuador as long as they are staying for less than 90 days.

The Quito Visitors' Bureau (www.experiencequito.com) has offices at the international arrivals at the airport, in the Mindalae Museum and on the Plaza Grande in the Old Town.