



Welcome to Ecuador

"I will never forget how Kumala the monkey disappeared into the treetops when we released him in the glorious Amazon, and I know he will always remember how I nursed him back to health: these memories will stay with me for life."

Ecuador is one of the most bio-diverse locations on the planet with nearly 40% of the country forested. Soak in the culture of this South American wonder which is a patchwork of indigenous cultures and European influences as you explore the diverse landscapes Ecuador has to offer. From the snow-capped Andes mountains which run down the centre of Ecuador, through the enchanting cloud forests down to the largely unexplored Amazon rainforest. Ecuador hosts a magnificent range of climates and natural formations, with more diversity than many countries twice its size. Explore the tropical mangrove-lined beaches, discover the legendary Galapagos Islands which inspired Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection, or trek the steamy Amazon jungle. Whatever you decide to do, you will find Ecuador is a country to explore and savour, full of vibrant colours and friendly people, exhilarating landscapes and intriguing cultures.

Know your History

Ecuador has been subject to a tumultuous political history chronologically comprising of the legendary Inca Empire, colonisation by the Spanish, subsequent struggles for independence, as well as a recurring border dispute with Peru over land in the Amazon basin. Only recently, since the appointment of current leftist president Raphael Correa, has Ecuador surfaced from its turbulent history, and with promises from Correa to create jobs and fight the corruption of the past, Ecuador now looks set for a brighter future.

Pre-colonial history

Ecuador's history is best known from the Inca period onwards, however many cultures are known to have thrived in Ecuador before this time. It is believed that Asian nomads reached the South American continent as early as 12000 B.C., however the first recorded culture dates back to 3500 B.C. when the Valdivian people thrived in Ecuador, producing advanced pottery and stone work. In the 15th Century, Ecuador joined the hugely successful Inca Empire when, despite fierce resistance by several Ecuadorian native tribes, the Inca warrior Pachacuti, along with his son Tupac Yupanqui, and grandson Huayna Capac, conquered all of Ecuador, as well as large parts of western South America.

The Spanish conquest

Upon the death of Huayna Capac, his empire was divided between his two sons, Atahualpa, based

in Quito in the north, and Huascar, who inherited Cusco, Peru, in the south. A civil war soon broke out, with Atahualpa achieving victory with hopes to reign over a re-unified Incan Empire. Barely a week later, Francisco Pizarro arrived with the Spanish conquistadors from Panama in 1531, and took advantage of the divided empire, proclaiming Catholicism as the new authority.

Promptly after Atahualpa refused to submit to Catholicism and the Spanish king, Spanish soldiers and mercenaries slaughtered thousands of the Inca defenders in the Battle of Cajamarca, taking Atahualpa prisoner and holding him ransom. Although the Incas offered three rooms filled with gold and silver to ensure his release, the Spanish dismissed their side of the deal and executed Atahualpa regardless, signalling the end of the Inca Empire. Today, only one intact Inca site remains in Ecuador; Ingapirca, to the north of Cuenca.

Spanish rule

Life for the indigenous population was abysmal under Spanish rule; the Spanish colonists became the new elite, centring their power in the Viceroyalties of Peru and Nueva Granada, forcing the indigenous Ecuadorians into the encomienda labour system for Spanish landlords, and weakening the native population with disease. However, with the weakening of the Spanish colonial economy, and ideas of the "Enlightenment" of Europe reaching the cultural isolation of Ecuador, ideals of nationalism and concepts of equality and freedom eventually reached Quito, setting the stage for Ecuador's independence.

Independence

Led by the criollos (Ecuadorians of Spanish descent), and fuelled by their resentment of the privileges afforded to the people of Spain, several attempts to liberate Ecuador sparked a movement of independence throughout Spanish America, and in 1809, after nearly three hundred years of Spanish rule, a junta was set up, seizing power from Napoleon's brother who had usurped the Spanish throne. By 1820, Guayaquil, closely followed by the rest of Ecuador, announced its independence, and the forces of independence were continental in scope, stretching into armies in the north supported by Argentina, and in the south supported by Venezuela. A string of victories culminated in the decisive Battle of Pichincha on outskirts of Quito in 1822, when Ecuador became part of Simón Bolívar's Republic of Gran (Great) Colombia.

Quito was the first successful attempt at an independent and local government – albeit for two months – and sparked repercussions and inspiration for emancipation across the rest of Spanish America. This earned it the nickname, Luz de América ("Light of America"). Quito is also called La Cara de Dios ("The Face of God") for the beauty of its colonial-period religious art and architecture, set in the against the incredible backdrop of the equatorial Andes landscape.

Ecuador found itself on the front line of wars of independence during its time in the Gran Colombia, and during these years the population was divided between those supporting union with Peru and those advocating autonomous independence. These growing separatist tendencies led to Venezuela's withdrawal from Gran Colombia, and soon after Ecuador followed suit, drawing up a constitution for an independent "State of Ecuador", named after its geographic proximity to the equator.

The Catholic church

Since Ecuador's independence in 1830, the country's internal history has been marked by fierce rivalry between the church-backed conservatives based in Quito, and the liberals and socialists of Guayaquil. In the 19th Century, conservative Gabriel Moreno gave the Catholic church more power

than any other country, while the rise of Eloy Alfaro and his Radical Liberal Party (PLR) in 1895 reversed the hold of the Catholic church, reducing the power of the clergy and conservative land owners, and completed many important public projects, such as the Quito-Guayaquil rail.

1900s

A coup d'état in 1925 marked the end of liberal rule, and Ecuador entered a severe economic depression leading to instability and populist politicians such as five-time president José María Velasco Ibarra. Despite internal rivalry, border conflicts with Peru, and six Presidents in less than six years, life in Ecuador remained relatively peaceful up until the end of the millennium. By the late 1990s, the Ecuadorian people, having faced chronic economic crisis, political, and a war with Peru, called for a National Assembly to reform the constitution and the political structure.

In 1998, Ecuador's new constitution came into effect and Quito mayor, Jamil Mahuad of the DP won the presidential election to take office. On 26th October 1998, Mahuad concluded a long awaited peace with Peru, however following his dollarisation of the local currency, and the struggle to adapt which faced the lower classes; Mahuad's popularity disintegrated and was met by demonstrations by indigenous groups in Quito. The indigenous population have recently emerged as an active constituency, motivated by government failures to deliver, and by historical exploitation by the land-holding elite.

Correa

After more broken promises from subsequent presidents, current president Rafael Correa, who has been described as a humanist and a Christian of the left, has given indigenous and poor communities a long awaited hope to end the political corruption that has plagued Ecuador's recent history. Correa, who can speak the indigenous Quechua language, and is a known ally of Hugo Chávez (president of Venezuela), has pledged to build low-cost homes, double the bonus which over a million poor Ecuadorians receive, and bring Ecuador's oil wealth back to the people. Correa is seen as a fresh face in a country which has had eight presidents in the past decade and looks set to lead Ecuador for the remainder of his four-year term.

Money Talks

Ecuador is the world's biggest exporter of bananas, but also heavily relies on its production of oil, shrimp and the increasing demand for more unusual exports – flowers and canned fish. In 2000 the US dollar was adopted as the national currency, as a response to the 1999 financial crisis caused by drops in oil prices and the 1997 El Niño weather phenomenon (a climate pattern of changing surface water temperatures in the Pacific, and is often associated with floods or droughts). Despite the president's removal from office in response to protests against this decision, Ecuador has since enjoyed increased oil prices and a growing, stabilising economy.

Money

The currency of Ecuador is the US Dollar, replacing the Ecuadorian Sucre in the early 2000s. Credit cards can be used to get cash out of ATMs but are rarely accepted in shops. Traveller's cheques should not be relied upon.

Get Culture Savvy

Valdivia

Several cultures thrived in Ecuador before the arrival of the Incas in the 15th Century; among them the advanced culture of the Valdivia, which flourished on the Santa Elena peninsula in the Pacific coast region of Ecuador near the modern-day town of Valdivia. The Valdivia culture was one of the oldest settled civilisations yet recorded in the Americas, having existed between 3500 B.C. and 1800 B.C. The Valdivia people lived in communities with houses built around a central plaza, living off farming and fishing, and cultivating crops such as maize, kidney beans, squash, cassava, hot peppers, and cotton plants which were used to make clothing. Valdivian pottery and stone works were highly advanced showing a progression from simple and practical works, to much more delicate and complicated pieces over time. Typically grey or dark red, the trademark Valdivia piece is a feminine ceramic figure; each "Venus" is unique and individual, thought to have represented actual people.

Based on a comparison of archaeological remains and pottery styles, the Valdivia culture has inspired a revolutionary theory, suggesting a link with the ancient Jomon culture on the island of Kyushu, Japan. No evidence of contact between these two populations had previously been established, and part of this groundbreaking theory suggests that the Japanese had conducted trans-Pacific trade in ancient times.

Stone Age

In addition, many Stone Age objects have been found in Ecuador, in particular a stone star with a hole through the centre which has been found everywhere between Ibarra in the north, and the southern city of Riobamba. It is thought the larger of these stars were placed on wooden sticks and used as weapons, while the smaller ones, too small for this purpose, are thought to have been symbols of a luminary which was worshipped by some cultures and have been found upon the chests of corpses in Peru. After the Valdivians, several other cultures, including the Quituscaras and the Cañaris emerged in other parts of Ecuador. The Cañaris had a legendary and mythological past which made them descendants of guacamayas and snakes, animals which recur in their legends and archaeological remains.

Inca

Ecuador was also influenced culturally by the Incas, who ruled the Ecuadorian kingdoms until the arrival of the Spanish in the 16th Century. Strengthened by strong leadership and policies of intermarriage, the Incas used conquests and peaceful assimilation to create the largest empire in pre-Colombian America which included parts of Peru, Argentina and Chile as well as Ecuador. Architecture was by far the most important of the Inca arts, with pottery and textiles reflecting motifs that were at their height in architecture. The classic architectural style of ashlar, in which blocks of stone were cut to fit together tightly without mortar, made these constructions extraordinarily stable in the frequent earthquakes that hit the area.

The Inca used quipu, an advanced technology used to record information, using complex assemblages of knotted strings, made many discoveries in medicine, practicing successful skull surgery, and had great farming success due largely to their intricate road system and use of terraces to successfully cultivate a large variety of crops at different altitudes. Although the Inca rulers imposed their own social organisation and cultural practices in their Empire, many of the local Ecuadorian cultures maintained their traditional beliefs and many customs, resulting in a patchwork of languages, cultures and peoples.

Mestizo

Modern day Ecuador is a multicultural society, which, like much of South America, blends the influences of Spanish colonialism with the resilient traditions of indigenous populations. The majority of the population is mestizo which is a mixture of these two cultures, having a mixture of European and Amerindian ancestry. Mainstream culture in Ecuador is defined by this Hispanic mestizo majority. Traditional indigenous customs are generally only practiced in the remote regions, such as the Amazon basin.

Food

The food in Ecuador is very diverse, owing as much to the varying altitudes as to the many cultural influences. Costeños (people from the coast) enjoy fish, beans and plantains, while serranos, those from the mountainous regions, prefer meat (including cuy, or guinea pig), rice and potatoes. In the rainforest, a dietary staple is yuca – known elsewhere as cassava. Typical Ecuadorian specialities include patacones, unripe plantains fried in oil, mashed up then re-fried and lapingachos, a unique variety of potato tortillas.

Traditional mealtimes are three courses; sopa (soup) to begin with, followed by segundo (second), a dish of rice with a protein such as meat – poultry, pig, or fish. Dessert is normally served with coffee. Dinner is lighter, in some regions simply consisting of coffee or agua de remedio (herbal tea) with bread. Fresh fruit is also popular across Ecuador; bananas, tree grapes and peach palms grow easily in the South American climate.

Religion

While 95% of Ecuadorians are Roman Catholics, these beliefs are mainly infused with ancient indigenous customs, as well as African elements inherited from the ancestors of Africans brought to Ecuador as slaves. A large indigenous culture has survived colonialism, maintaining their own traditions and ways of life. The Amazon region is home to at least 600,000 indigenous inhabitants. The predominant religion is Catholicism but many communities still preserve their ancient beliefs of worship of the earth, the mountains, and the sun.

Holidays

1st January - New Year (Año Nuevo)

February/March - Carnival (Carnaval, just before Lent)

March/April - Easter (Semana Santa, literally "Holy Week")

1st May - Labour Day (Dia del Trabajo)

24th May - Battle of Pichincha (Batalla del Pichincha)

24th July - Birthday of Simón Bolívar (Nacimiento de Bolívar)

10th August - Independence Day (Primer Grito de Independencia)

9th October - Independence of Guayaquil (Independencia de Guayaquil)

2nd November - Day of the Dead/All Souls' Day (Día de los Difuntos)

3rd November - Independence of Cuenca (Independencia de Cuenca)

6th December - Foundation of Quito ("Las fiestas de Quito")

25th December - Christmas Day (Navidad)

31st December - New Years Eve (Nochevieja, "old night", or Fin de Año, "end of year")

Carnaval is marked around February or March time, and is celebrated by people flinging water and/or flour over one another! This includes total strangers and tourists, and even through car windows, so expensive cameras should be kept safe.

Semana Santa, or Easter, is marked with religious ceremonies across Ecuador. One of the more famous celebrations happens in Quito's Old Town, where the parade carries the cross past the old colonial churches, and attracts huge crowds.

Independencia de Guayaquil is only celebrated as a public holiday in Guayaquil itself, with a parade through the city.

Día de los Difuntos is a popular holiday throughout Latin America (Mexico's celebrations during All Souls' Day are world famous). In Ecuador, families traditionally visit the graves of deceased relatives and leave offerings of bread figurines. Traditional food and drink at this time is "bread babies" (guaguas de pan) and a purple drink called colada morada.

Las Fiesta de Quito is generally only celebrated in Quito. Parades, parties and bullfights go on across the capital. This festival marks the beginning of Christmas for most Quiteños, many of whom put up Christmas trees as well as the Quito flag.

Navidad (Christmas Day) in Ecuador is in fact celebrated at midnight on the 24th December, with the traditional present-giving and dinner and this is known as the "noche Buena", or "good night". The 25th December is a day of recovering!

New Years Eve is celebrated universally with fireworks, but in Ecuador, it is also celebrated by burning symbolic figures of the old year, signifying a fresh start to the new year.

Learn the Lingo

Ecuador's official language is Spanish, however many indigenous languages have survived and are still widely spoken. In particular, Kichwa, the Ecuadorian dialect of the Quechua language of the Incas, which is spoken by over two million people, including Ecuador's current president Raphael Correa. Other indigenous languages include Awapit, A'ingae, Shuar Chicham, Achuar-Shiwiar, Cha'palaachi, Tsa'fiki, Paicoca, and Wao Tededo, which are widely spoken in areas with high indigenous populations.

There are several idiosyncrasies that feature in Ecuadorian Spanish, and differ in the coastal regions and on the highlands. Costeños tend to speak quickly and loudly, with intricate language jokes which can be difficult for those from other regions to understand. An endearing term often used by Costeños is mijo a portmanteau which comes from mi hijo (my son).

Serranos are traditionally seen as more conservative, with a softer and gentler pattern of speech. Many Kichwa terms are incorporated into everyday speech which can be puzzling to other regions, for example, güagüa, meaning child, is often used by Serranos.

Remember:

The letters **LL** together are pronounced as **Y**

The letter **J** is always pronounced as **H**

The letter **V** is soft, so pronounce it as **B**

ENGLISH	SPANISH	ENGLISH	SPANISH
Greetings		Numbers	
Hi	Hola	1	Uno
Goodbye	Adios	2	Dos
Pleased to meet you!	Mucho gusto!	3	Très
How are you?	Como estas?	4	Cuatro

Good morning	Buenos días	5	Cinco
Good afternoon	Buenas tardes	6	Seis
Good evening/night	Buenas noches	7	Siete
8	Ocho		
About Yourself		9	Nueve
My name is...	Me llamo...	10	Diez
I am from England	Soy de Inglaterra	11	Once
I don't speak Spanish	No hablo Español	12	Doce
I don't understand	No entiendo	13	Trece
What's your name?	¿Cómo se llama usted?	14	Catorce
15	Quince		
In the Shop		16	Dieciséis
I would like.../I want...	Quiero	17	Diecisiete
How much does it cost?	Cuánto vale?	18	Dieciocho
Please	Por favour	19	Diecinueve
Thank you (very much)	(Muchas) gracias	20	Veinte
Yes	Sí	100	Cien
No	No	500	Quinientos
1000	Mil		
In the Restaurant			
Chicken	Pollo		
Vegetables	Vegetales		
Beef	Res		
Meat	Carne		
Cheese	Queso		
Fish	Pescado		
Tomato sauce	Salsa de tomate		
Beer	Cerveza		
I am a vegetarian	Soy vegetariano		

Lay of the Land

Bounded by Colombia on the north, Peru on the south and east, and the Pacific ocean on the west, Ecuador straddles the equator in western South America, has an area of around 280,000 square kilometres, including the Galapagos Islands (Archipiélago de Colón) about 600 miles west of the mainland in the Pacific. Although the country is one of the smallest in South America, Ecuador encompasses a wide range of natural formations and climates; from the desert like plains of the Amazon River basin, to the snow capped peaks of the Andes Mountains, and the rich diversity of the Amazon rainforest.

Ecuador is divided into four regions, each with a unique character and climate:

La Costa

The coast comprises the low lying littoral in the western part of the country including the Pacific coastline and Ecuador's largest city, Guayaquil, on the southern part of the coast. Characterised by its highly fertile land which is used for agriculture, La Costa is well known for its beautiful beaches. Mangroves line the coast, protecting it from erosion and storm surge, however many of these resilient trees and shrubs have come under threat from shrimp farming.

La Sierra

The highlands are the high altitude central belt of Ecuador, running down the country from north to south, including the snow-capped Andes Mountains. The mountainous terrain uniquely sports year round snow on the equator with volcanoes and magnificent mountains. Quito, Ecuador's capital city, is located high in a mountain valley on the foothills of the Pichincha volcano, and Mount Chimborazo, at 6,310 m, is considered by some to be the most distant point from the centre of the earth. This area is home to cloud forests at certain altitudes, although many areas have been deforested by agriculture.

El Oriente

The east contains almost half of the country's total surface area, though populated by fewer than 5% of the population, and is home to the Amazon rainforest. Much of El Oriente is tropical moist broadleaf forest which lies on the eastern slopes of the Andes Mountains. The upland forest with its steep, rugged ridges and cascading streams becomes strikingly different as it descends into the lowland rainforest of the Amazon basin. El Oriente is home to a large number of Ecuador's indigenous groups, notably the lowland Quechua, Siona, Secoya, Huaoraru, and Cofán, and is one of the most bio-diverse locations on the planet. However, much of the rainforest has been seriously damaged around Lago Agrio in the Amazon basin, where oil fields have been established, causing catastrophic oil pollution in some areas and severe environmental degradation.

Region Insular

The insular region is the region comprising the Galapagos Islands, some 1,000 km west of the mainland in the Pacific Ocean. The term "Galapagos" refers to the Spanish name given to the Giant Land Tortoises known to inhabit the islands, which form an archipelago made up of thirteen main volcanic islands, six smaller islands and one hundred and seven rocks and islets. The oldest island is thought to have formed between five and ten million years ago, a result of tectonic activity. Famous for their vast number of endemic species, studies of the islands by Charles Darwin led to his theory of natural selection. As a result of this important heritage, the Charles Darwin Foundation was founded in 1959 to ensure the conservation of unique Galapagos ecosystems and promote the scientific studies necessary to fulfil its conservation functions. In the same year, an impressive 97.5% of the archipelago's land was declared a national park.

What's the Weather like?

Due to the geographical diversity of Ecuador, there are a number of different climates and microclimates in the country regions. Temperatures vary according to elevation and location of the cities and towns. Generally Ecuador has two seasons, wet and dry, even during the rainy season; most days are sunny until the afternoon.

Coastal Ecuador is cloudy most of the time but enjoys daily highs averaging around 30°C year-round, and a short but quite damp wet season between January and April. The highland dry season is between June and the end of September. In the Oriente, it rains most months – August and December to March are usually the driest. The official dry season, between June and December, is also cool and often misty.

Biodiversity

Ecuador is listed as one of the world's very few mega-diverse countries. Blessed with a tropical equatorial location, the Andes mountain range and two major ocean currents (the cold Humboldt and the warm El Niño) running along its coast, Ecuador also lays claim to the remote and biologically unique Galapagos Islands – the origin of Darwin's evolutionary theory.

The tropical region that sits on the equator has been known to be a safe haven for plants and animals alike throughout history – even from the Ice Ages. Both the Ecuadorian Amazon and the coastal regions are considered part of these tropics. The Andes, reaching up to 6,000 m, hosts the capital Quito at 2,800 m, and a variety of habitats that are home to tapirs, llama, spectacled bears, anteaters, jaguars, and hummingbirds. The Andes also create a geographical barrier between coastal tropics and subtropics in the west and the Amazonian eastern areas, creating many isolated spots perfect for unique floral and faunal evolution and creation of endemic species. Species such as these are particularly evident on the Galapagos – including the famous Galapagos tortoise, the Blue-footed Booby, and the flightless cormorant.

Of the huge number of species of flora and fauna to be found in Ecuador, there are; some 25,000 species of plants in Ecuador alone (compared to 17,000 species in the whole of North America), 1,600 birds found in the country (over half of the 3,000 species found in the whole of South America and double the species seen in Europe), 369 known species of mammals (which gives Ecuador the most number of mammals per square metre in the world), 350 species of reptiles (over 200 species of snakes alone and many endemic species on the Galapagos Islands, such as the marine iguana), and around 400 amphibians (with the widest range of species of frogs in the world). It is estimated that there are 800 species of fish in the Amazon waters and 450 different fish in the Pacific Ocean surrounding Ecuador. As yet, the number of invertebrates is unknown – it is believed that the number of insect species reach into the hundreds of thousands.

Good Books

Guidebooks

- Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands. Danny Palmerlee, Michael Grosberg & Carolyn McCarthy. Lonely Planet Publications, 7th edition, 2006. ISBN 9781741042955
- The Rough Guide to Ecuador. Harry Ades & Melissa Graham. Rough Guides. 3rd edition, 2007. ISBN 9781843536949
- Ecuador (Bradt Travel Guide Climbing & Hiking in Ecuador). Rob Rachowiecki & Mark Thurber. Bradt Travel Guides, 5th edition, 2004. ISBN 9781841620756
- Ecuador and Galapagos Insight Flexi Map. (Map) Insight Guides, 2005, ISBN 9789812582720
- Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands (Travellers' Wildlife Guide). David Pearson & Les Beletsky. Arris Books, 2004. ISBN 9781844370313

Fiction/Travel Writing

- End of the Spear. Steve Saint. Tyndale House, 2006. ISBN 9780842364393
- Climbing the Equator, Running the Jungle: Adventures in the Jungles and Mountains of Ecuador. Neville Shulman. Summersdale Publishers, 2005. ISBN 9781840244502
- Valverde's Gold: In Search of the Last Great Inca Treasure. Mark Honigsbaum. Farrar Straus Giroux, 2004. ISBN 9780374191702
- Call of My Heart: The Journey to Ecuador and Beyond. Nancy Conley Burke. Helm Publishing, 2006. ISBN 9780976919384
- The World Is as You Dream It: Shamanic Teachings from the Amazon. John Perkins. Inner Traditions Bear and Company, 1994. ISBN 9780892814596

Teaching Guides

- Essential Grammar in Use with Answers: A Self-study Reference and Practice Book for Elementary Students of English 2nd Edition. Raymond Murphy. Cambridge University Press, 2002. ISBN 9780521529327
- Essential Grammar in Use with Answers: A Self-study Reference and Practice Book for Intermediate Students of English 3rd Edition. Raymond Murphy. Cambridge University Press, 2004. ISBN 9780521532891
- Lessons from Nothing: Activities for Language Teaching with Limited Time and Resources (Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers). Bruce Marsland. Cambridge University Press, 1998. ISBN 9780521627658
- Games for Children (Resource Books for Teachers). Gordon Lewis & Gunther Benson. Oxford University Press, 1999. ISBN 9780194372244
- Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching 2nd Edition. Diane Larsen-Freeman. Oxford University Press, 2000. ISBN 9780194355742

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INTO THE WILD
THE GAP YEAR BLOG FROM
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