



ECUADOR: HIKES AMONG THE VOLCANOES



This information should answer some of your questions about the trip and give you a better idea of what we do day-to-day. It doesn't hope to answer everything. If you have any questions please get in touch.



Chimborazo. Photo Peter Bennett

- **A rollercoaster of great walks along the 'Avenue of Volcanoes'**
- **See the finest colonial architecture in 'Old' Quito and Cuenca**
- **Traditional markets and boisterous Baños interludes**
- **Three nights camping only**
- **Consider staying on for a 5, 7 or 8 day Galapagos cruise**

Ecuador

Ecuador, similar in area to the UK or New Zealand and with a population of only 13 million is tiny by Latin American standards. Conversely it has an incredible biodiversity. Year round 12 hour daylight, virtually no seasons and a 6000m+ elevation difference in so small an area account for the great variety and richness in flora and fauna. In addition it is definitely one of the friendliest of the Andean countries.

Geographically it is diverse too with the most distinctive feature, its great volcanoes, located along the spine of the Andean chain, running from north to south through the heart of the country - Chimborazo, Cotopaxi, Cayambe, Antisana and many others. They rise dramatically on either side

of a high central valley ('The avenue of volcanoes') in which the capital city of Quito is found. Around the volcanoes are the wide open rolling grasslands of the high paramo or altiplano, once covered with rich cloud forest which now remains only in pockets. To the east is the rainforest of the Amazon Basin, extending into Peru and Brazil. To the west is the flat populated land where Ecuador's bananas grow, running down to the Pacific coast. The Galapagos Islands lie 600 miles into the Pacific, and are different to anywhere!

High Places in Ecuador

Our trips here date back many years to when High Places first started. Since then we have always worked closely with a small Quito based company run by our good friend Oswaldo Leiva, fluent in English, and a nationally respected mountaineer and guide. He continues to lead the majority of our trips.

'Hiking among the Volcanoes' trip

This is our freewheelin' Ecuador walking holiday, never difficult (graded 'Steady') and continually active although walking at altitude will be demanding. The itinerary, which continually surprises, avoids much of the 'whistle stop' tourist circuit and provides colourful and rewarding experiences of both the landscape and the people - volcanoes, the high paramo, colonial Quito and Cuenca, village life and markets, and for those who take the extension – the Galapagos Islands!!

We travel down the 'Avenue of Volcanoes' in a natural 'A' to 'B' journey. The walking, 5-6 hours most days, varies hugely; - farmland to high altitude grassland (paramo) around Cotopaxi; a volcanic crater lake circuit; hikes on the slopes of the mighty Chimborazo; sub-tropical Baños; and finally mountain trails in Ecuador's 'lake district' at Las Cajas near Cuenca.

Acclimatisation, (much of the walking is around 3500m) is an important part of the trip. Over the first 3-4 days the walks are easier and shorter, we increase our water intake and adjust naturally to the height. We puff and pant more than usual but it is rarely any problem.

There are only three nights camping - in the Cotopaxi National Park. Natural but sheltered sites with flush loos and wash basins.

Climate

Quiteños (people living in Quito) proudly tell you that they live in one of the few cities in the world that requires neither heating or air conditioning in their homes. It's altitude, 2852m, largely cancels out the fact that the city is practically on the equator and as we drive down the 'Avenue of Volcanoes' we meet with a pleasant, temperate summer climate – all the year round! In Quito, and the other towns it can be hot in the sun but you will find a sweater or fleece useful for evenings and less sunny days. Rain is possible anytime although there is a marked drier season around the volcanoes from June to Sept. Walking above 3500m however can be cold and windy. If you are going to the Galapagos Islands they are affected by the migratory warm El Niño ocean current. January-April is warmer with average daily temperatures reaching 30°C and a marked increase in sea temperature. Afternoon rain is more likely. For the rest of the year it is cooler and drier but with more chance of cloud and mist. Most times the climate is pleasant and exhilarating.

Accommodation

In the main towns we stay in mid-range hotels or attractive hosterias, often traditional style and usually with en-suite facilities. On trek we use roomy two person lightweight tents and eat in a mess tent or a camp dining area. At Quilatoa and the jungle we stay in local community built lodges which are clean but quite basic.

Food

While hiking we provide all meals and are happy to cater for vegetarians. In the main towns we provide breakfast only. This gives you the chance to try out a variety of local restaurants. Ecuador is a fun place to eat out and we will often eat together and advise on the best places. A meal in a cheapish restaurant cost about US\$10 or less and a better restaurant in town charges in the region

of US\$16. On the driving days we sometimes buy our own al fresco lunch wherever we stop. For more details check the day by day itinerary (B,L,D) ie. Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner.

Transport

We use private transport - buses and occasionally jeeps.

Health and hygiene

"Boil it, peel it, cook it or forget it!" is an easily remembered maxim to adopt to avoid picking up travel bugs - initial contact with salads and street vended food should be resisted. Water should always be regarded with caution and treated (with iodine) if considered necessary. On trek we boil all drinking water and provide facilities for hand washing before all meals.

Altitude

Above 3000m, the air is thinner, the pressure is lower and there is less oxygen available in the atmosphere. Acclimatisation is the process by which the body adapts to these conditions. The key to acclimatisation is a good itinerary with a gradual initial height gain, walking at a slow and steady pace, and increasing fluid intake – drinking at least 4 litres a day is advisable above 3000m.

Many people have some minor side effects from altitude, such as headache, nausea or general lassitude. The optional use of 'Diamox' has proved useful for some people, as this drug can reduce these symptoms. You will be given more information on 'Diamox' with your Final Information, between 8 and 10 weeks before departure.

Safety

Ecuador generally feels safe and friendly. Care must be taken in the streets and shops of 'old' Quito. Away from the capital things are more relaxed, but be careful. Be discreet carrying valuable items and in how you use your camera. Think how you can look less like a tourist!

Baggage

While trekking/hiking, you will only need to carry what you might use that day - usually rain gear, spare sweater, camera, water. The rest of your kit will be carried by vehicles. A flexible trek bag is best particularly while camping. At other times you can leave some baggage back in your room in town. A lockable bag is recommended. Valuables are best carried or left in a safe in the hotel.

Language and people

A few words of Spanish, enough to say hello, count and tell the time will make your visit more rewarding as everyone appreciates the effort made in trying to speak their language. Apart from our colleagues in Ecuador, you will not come across many people who speak English.



At the market. Photo Antje Henning

DAY BY DAY ITINERARY

This itinerary is flexible and should be seen as a guide only. Local conditions, weather or fitness could lead to changes in our daily plans. All times and distances are approximate. 'B,L,D' refers to meals included in the trip cost, i.e. Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner.

This trip is 18 days ex QUITO. The first and last days refer to the days of arrival in and departure from QUITO and may not be the days you depart from or arrive back home.

DAY 1 Join Quito. You will notice the altitude straightaway, as Quito is at almost 3000m. We usually stay in the new part of the city and it is interesting to wander around and have a first taste of Latin America. Hotel (B)

DAY 2 **Quito**
The old town with its well preserved colonial architecture, has been protected as a world cultural heritage site since 1978 and its colourful squares, monasteries, civic buildings and narrow busy passages with a backdrop of hills and distant volcanoes all make for dazzling sightseeing. A pleasant morning is spent on a guided walking tour around some of the landmarks in the old city. In the afternoon a cable car up the volcano Pichincha which overlooks the city is an exciting option (US\$6) for those with clear heads. (B,)

DAY 3 **Pasachoa-Cotopaxi acclimatisation trek:** An interesting drive (barely 2 hours) out of the Quito conurbation and through small towns to rural Ecuador. We start easily and not too high at around 3000m walking pleasantly following a farm track up a wooded valley towards the higher paramo (grassland). We camp (3400m) in the foothills of the Pasachoa volcano. A short walk a little higher will reveal Cotopaxi not very far away. 3 hours (B,L,D)

DAY 4 Today we emerge onto the high paramo and great wide grassland plains and exhilarating walking. There are good views of the volcanoes, Cotopaxi, Ruminahui and Sincholagua. 5 hours. Camp at 3600m. (B,L,D)

DAY 5 A short but energetic hike above the camp reaches a small ridge and great viewpoint. (less than 1 hour). Ahead Cotopaxi dramatically fills the camera lens. Now for the mountain itself! Our bus grinds up to a car park at 4450m. Only 350m up to the Refuge at around 4800m. Volcanic cinder and a steepish path will be challenging and it will always be optional. Can we do it...grunt, grunt!? You probably will and what an incredible experience! It is also a good acclimatisation exercise to go high and then descend. We return to Camp. 5 hours total. (B,L,D)

DAYS 6-7 **Quilotoa:** A longish drive (6-7 hours with a lunch stop) but always interesting along rural roads and through small villages.

Laguna Quilotoa is absolutely breathtaking - a dramatic beautiful, deep green-blue crater lake nearly 4 km across. Perched on the rim of the crater is the village of the same name. It is a hard life at nearly 4000m as weatherbeaten faces testify but much of the indigenous culture remains intact and we will see (and



Quilotoa Crater

can buy) fine examples of the renowned Tigua art, colourful everyday scenes painted on sheepskin. We may also catch a music performance. Recently the village has begun a project to encourage visitors and provide simple lodge accommodation which works very well. We can drop down into the crater on arrival but the 6-7 hour circuit of the crater rim must wait for the following day. It is a great walk! Village lodges. (B,L)

DAYS 8-9

Chimborazo

The mighty Chimborazo at 6310m is Ecuador's highest volcano and a towering spectacle. We spend a day hiking steadily on a good trail up its flank almost to snow level – a great walk with a chance of seeing wild vicuñas and alpacas - condors are always a possibility here too.

The Whymper Refuge on Chimborazo at almost 5000m has to be an objective before we leave. The high car park leaves little more than 200m to climb at an easier angle than Cotopaxi but still hard work at the altitude. An optional short excursion further on from the refuge should acquire the magic 5000. Some satisfaction (hopefully) to feel well acclimatised by now! Back now to the main valley and the attractive town of Riobamba, capital of Chimborazo Province. Hotel (B,L,D)



Chimborazo 5000!

DAY 10-11

Baños

After our efforts to reach the Refuge on Chimborazo we continue to Baños (1800m) - a traditional holiday spa-town for Ecuadoreans. With its mountain setting, many interesting shops and restaurants, its street music and its public bathing pools, it is a great place to relax. There is some fine hiking – in clear weather to a vantage point overlooking the active volcano Tungurahua, or when cloudy along semi tropical river gorges to see some huge waterfalls. Hotel or hosteria. (B,L,D)

DAY 12

Cuenca and Las Cajas National Reserve

An early start down the Pan American Highway to arrive in Cuenca around midday with plenty of time to sightsee. The city is delightfully provincial and traditional with old colonial style architecture, cobbled streets, shady plazas, markets, museums and churches. The immense sky blue domes of its Cathedral dominate the town centre and beneath its walls a flower market completes a picture of timelessness. Cuenca has justifiably been a World Cultural Heritage Site since 1996. Hotel. (B)

DAY 13-14

Las Cajas hikes

The Las Cajas National Reserve lies at the end of the Western Cordillera and is only 35kms from Cuenca. This compact massif of high altitude rolling hills and sparkling lakes is rarely visited – 237 lakes! Towards the western boundary is almost impenetrable cloud forest. A good trail traverses much of the higher part of the Reserve and well acclimatised now it should be a great farewell to the Ecuadorean landscape and an ideal finale to the trip. 6-7 hours. Hotel (B,L,D)

DAY 15 Flight from Cuenca to Quito and then the 2 hour drive to Otavalo and our comfortable, traditional style hotel in the centre of town. A chance for an evening stroll and a meal in a good local restaurant. (B.)

DAY 16 The famous Otavalo Saturday market, without which no visit to Ecuador is complete. Otavalo and the surrounding villages are populated by mainly by Indians. They are renowned for the quality of their weaving and you will see plenty of examples of their craft in the shops and on the stalls. Those who don't mind getting up early (5am!) can visit the animal market where the locals bring their livestock to trade. Afternoon drive back to Quito and the opportunity for a farewell meal. (B.)

DAY 17 Depart Quito or continue with your own arrangements. (B)



Las Cajas

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