



Expedition

PEAKS OF ECUADOR



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

- **Ambitious but sensible - two big summits only**
- **Cotopaxi (5897m) and Chimborazo (6310m –20,561ft)**
- **Spare 'bad weather' day for Cotopaxi**
- **Good acclimatisation build-up – hikes and 'training' climb**
- **Relaxation time in Baños and Otavalo**

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 possibly the greatest biodiversity on earth. 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 reputedly 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 hills of the high paramo, 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.

The 'Peaks' trip

The attempts on Cotopaxi and Chimborazo form the most important part of the trip. They are good peaks on which to develop high altitude experience and given reasonable conditions they are very attainable. Both volcanoes are snowcapped above approx 4700m and with a very early alpine start the snowfields which are crevassed in places, offer firm conditions for climbing.

On both peaks we will move together, roped in groups of three or four usually under the leadership of experienced Ecuadorean mountain guides.

Neither of the peaks are soft options and require a sound level of fitness and determination, combined with good acclimatisation and competence of movement on snow. Although not technically difficult, ice axe and crampons are required and previous experience of using them is considered necessary.

The Cotopaxi ascent will normally take from 8-10 hours for the round trip. The longer ascent on Chimborazo, approx 12 hours, can be especially demanding.

Our acclimatisation hikes on the high paramo close to the volcanic massif of Antisana (5752m) rewarding in its own right, will be a crucial part of the preparation. It will consolidate our two outings to altitude early in the trip, Imbabura (4690m), Pichincha (4700m) and Illiniza Norte (5116m)



On top of Cotopaxi

Prior to our ascent on Cotopaxi we have a session to practice crampon, axe and rope techniques. We hope this will be on a lower glacier or snowfield but this is always weather dependent. If that is not possible we will programme it at one of the camps.

The trekking/climbing day

The amount of walking varies from day to day, averaging 5-7 hours. On camp we are supported by a cook team and helpers. We have cook/kitchen tents and a mess tent for eating and relaxing in the evening. At camp, breakfast is usually at 7am and walking begins towards 9am. Most days there is time to relax, read or spend time with binoculars or camera. Dinner is around nightfall, soon after 6pm. 'Trekking bedtime' is seldom later than 9pm.

The climbing day is somewhat different. We generally leave camp or hut around midnight to benefit from the firm snow and ice conditions. Reliable head torches and cold weather gear will be needed. Being familiar with fitting and using crampons and ice axe in the dark and cold is essential. We aim to be safely down before the afternoon sun weakens snow bridges and opens crevasses.

Climate

As Ecuador straddles the equator the weather is much the same throughout the year and it is difficult to separate any kind of weather patterns or seasons. We read that January to May and October/ November are reckoned to be wetter with a dry window in December but this is far from conclusive. In Quito it can be hot in the sun but you will find a sweater or fleece useful for evenings and less sunny days. At 4000m it can be cold at night, with temperatures frequently dropping below zero but during the day it is ideal for walking. Rain or snow can fall at any time of year. On the peaks at 2 o'clock in the morning a typical temperature is -10°C , but it can be colder than this, especially in windy conditions.

Accommodation

In main towns we stay in mid-range hotels or hosterias often built in traditional style. All accommodation is on a twin share basis. At Cotopaxi we camp because the overcrowding has made the hut virtually untenable. On Chimborazo the refugio is well maintained with matted beds, and outside toilet. On camp we use modern two person lightweight tents.

Transport

During the trip we travel in our own private bus or minibus or 4x4 vehicles.



Whympet Hut, Chimborazo

Food

Whilst in the mountains we provide all meals and will take as much fresh meat and vegetables as we can and we are happy to cater for vegetarians. In 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 in practice, we will often eat together and advise on the best places. A meal in a cheapish restaurant should cost about US\$7-8 and in the best restaurant in town, around US\$15. On the driving days you will buy your own al fresco lunch wherever we stop.

Health and hygiene

Being ill in Ecuador can be avoided. "Boil it, peel it, cook it or forget it!" is an easily remembered maxim to adopt. 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. In camp we use a toilet tent.

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, progressive 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.

Baggage

While trekking, you will only need to carry what you might use that day (usually rain gear, spare sweater, camera, water etc). The rest of your kit will usually be carried by vehicles so your trek bag needs to be easily portable and durable. On Chimborazo you will need to carry your own things for a short distance to the hut (30mins – 200m) so please make sure that your rucksack/pack is big enough for this. You can leave gear in hotels in the towns and if you want to leave valuable equipment, a lockable kit bag is recommended.

Safety

Care must be taken in the streets and shops of Quito, especially the old town. Away from Quito things are more relaxed, but be careful. It is always a good idea to be discreet carrying valuable items and in how you use your camera. Think how you can look less like a tourist!

Language and people

A few words of Spanish, enough to say hello, count and tell the time, will make your visit more rewarding. People are usually pleased that you are making an effort to speak the language - even if it doesn't always come out right. There are few English speakers in Ecuador.



Otavalo Market

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. If changes do occur there will always be good reasons of which you will be made fully aware. 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 and departure to/ from QUITO and may not be the days you depart from or arrive back home.

- DAY 1 Join Quito. We'll notice the altitude straightaway, as the city is at almost 3000m. Hotel. (B)
- DAY 2 There should be time to see something of Quito and have a first taste of Latin America and a morning walking tour will do just that. The old town with its well-preserved colonial architecture, has been protected as a world cultural heritage site since 1978. Its colourful squares, cathedral and monasteries, civic buildings and narrow busy passages with a backcloth of hills and distant volcanoes all make for dazzling sightseeing. In the afternoon – a real volcano! Just outside the city, the volcano Pichincha offers an opportunity to get a first taste of altitude especially as we can either drive or take the Teleferico almost to the crater rim at 4700m! Pichincha erupted violently in October 1999 and continues to simmer gently – an exciting trip. Hotel. (B)
- DAY 3 An early start to leave the city. We drive south of Quito in the direction of the Coptopaxi National Park for approx 1½ hours. Pasachoa is an old volcano on the edge of the Park, its crater now a pocket of cloud forest. We hike through the forest to above the tree line and onto to the grassy altiplano to follow the crater rim towards the rocky summit. We don't quite get to the top but can reach 4200m and enjoy great views and valuable altitude!. We drive to the nearby town of Machachi. 4-5 hours. Hotel. (B,L,D)
- DAY 4 **ANTISANA Acclimatisation 1:** Antisana is the fourth highest Volcano in Ecuador (5758m) but there is little evidence now of its volcanic origins. Surrounding it is a fine high altitude landscape, of undulating altiplano grasslands, rocky outcrops and shallow lakes fed by the glaciers – the Antisana Ecological Reserve. From a base camp at 4200m. we spend 3 nights hiking to high points and acclimatising. We reach base camp for lunch. In the afternoon we hike to a high point, Pico Negro at 4460m for panoramic views. 3 hours. Camp. (B,L,D)
- DAY 5 **ANTISANA Glaciers Acclimatisation 2:** From camp, we hike along the valley onto the wide expanse of the high paramo and if the weather is clear, dramatic views of Antisana (5752m) are revealed. We hike up towards Antisana's four summits to reach a jagged rocky lava field leading up to the glaciers at over 4700m. From here we hope to have first views of Cotopaxi away in the distance. It is a really good acclimatisation day which follows the altitude maxim - 'climb high sleep low'. Return to camp. 4-5 hours. (B,L,D)
- DAY 6 **ANTISANA Acclimatisation 3:** On our final day we strike camp and hike westward to reach an easy ridge with sudden views of two volcanoes rearing up in isolated splendour from the altiplano – Cotopaxi to the south and in the distance to the north, Cayambe. On the way we will reach two summits over 4600m. A 6 hour hike will take us to the point still in the reserve Antisana, where we meet our transport and drive to OTAVALO. Hotel. (B,L)
- DAY 7 **Imbabura.** The volcano Imbabura (4690m) towers over Otavalo and San Pablo Lake and is too good an exercise to miss. Although not quite alpine proportions it is a fine uphill training and acclimatisation opportunity. We drive to just beyond the

neighbouring town of Ibarra and pick up the ascent trail leading to a scramble up to the summit. There are great views especially of the big volcanoes, Antisana and Cayambe. Return to Otavalo. 7-8 hours. (B,L)

DAY 8 **Otavalo:** The famous Otavalo Saturday market, without which no visit to Ecuador is complete. As well as a great tourist attraction, it remains a working market serving the surrounding rural communities who descend in droves on Saturday market day, all in traditional attire, to buy and sell just about everything! Its vegetable market is in full swing soon after dawn. Those who don't mind getting up early (5am) can visit the animal market where the locals bring their livestock to trade – it's well worth it. Back to the hotel for breakfast before taking on the crafts and woollens maze of stalls in the streets and nearby squares, it makes for a really exciting and still authentic spectacle. Hotel. (B)

DAY 9 **Illiniza Norte.** We drive north up the Panamericana to the Illinizas. 4 hours. Our campsite at 4100m is in a beautiful forest of native Polylepis trees where a variety of birds including humming-birds should be in residence and we can have a short hike around on arrival. There are fine views of the surrounding mountains, of the Illinizas and of Cotopaxi volcano. Time to gear up for an early start on Illiniza Norte. (B,L,D)

DAY 10 Illiniza Norte (5116m) and its sister peak Illiniza Sur (5263m) are the rocky remains of an immense volcanic crater. Illiniza Norte is an easier summit and is reached by a scramble up a rocky ridge. It is a good exercise in moving roped together alpine style. A short section near the summit may be pitched. 1200m of ascent from camp. 7 hours. (B,L,D)



Cotopaxi from Illiniza

DAY 11 **To Cotopaxi National Park.** The first big ascent approaches and we drive into the Park and set up our base camp at the foot of the mountain. In the afternoon we can drive up most of the way to the refuge and another hour's hard work on the loose volcanic cinder reaches the snow. It will be hard work but great acclimatisation and a good measure of how you well you are going. Return to camp. (B,L,D)

DAY 12/13 **Cotopaxi climb**
As we will leave soon after midnight it is important to get some rest and relaxation during the day. There is time also to check our gear, rest and read (in the sunshine?), enjoy the food, free time and impressive views of Cotopaxi, towering above us. A late evening departure to drive again almost to the Refuge and the beginning of the normal route, which climbs quite steeply up the strength-sapping cinder to the glacier tongue where we put on crampons by torchlight. The first part of the trail weaves its way through spectacularly large crevasses that are easy to avoid but quite exciting so early in the climb. The route continues upwards at a sustained angle. It will be a good test – fitness, acclimatisation, developing good rhythm with crampons and rope, balancing clothing layers, staying warm and eating and drinking in good measure. Add a 20kph wind and the ascent will be

doubly demanding. Finally a steeper snowslope and the summit is reached after 6-7 hours. The huge volcanic crater (600m across) spreads before us and with the cloud welling up from the Amazon basin to the east and boundless views, this is a great moment!

The descent is usually made at a good pace down and down on softening snow to the cinder. (B,L,D)

DAY 14

We are giving ourselves the option of two attempts at climbing Cotopaxi. If the conditions are right and we reach the summit on day 13 we can recover at camp ready to drive to Baños in the morning. If not we can have a second summit attempt the following day. If we need the extra day we will face the impossible challenge of staying awake in a soft seat on the bus as we drive to Baños in the afternoon straight after our climb. (B)



Cotopaxi summit crater

DAY 15

Rest day in Baños. This is the time to take a complete break and recharge the batteries. Baños, as well as being the traditional holiday spa-town for Ecuadorians is also a mecca for the independent traveller/tourist. With its mountain setting, many shops and restaurants, its street music and its public bathing pool, Baños is a good place to relax. The town is dominated by the recently active and still grumbling volcano of Tungurahua. Hotel. (B,L,D)

DAY 16

We should now be ready for the great Chimborazo, which Edward Whymper first climbed in 1880. We drive the three hours from Baños to the lower Refuge (4800m). An easier hut walk than Cotopaxi takes us to higher Refuge, the Edward Whymper hut at 5000m, where we spend the night. (B,L,D)

DAYS 17

Chimborazo climb

From the refuge we climb the southwest slopes of Chimborazo, climbing a safer variation to the original Whymper route, which will take us to the Veintimilla summit, 6280m and an hour later to the highest point at 6310m. The climb requires good acclimatisation and snow conditions. Most people are happy to reach the Veintimilla summit but if the legs, lungs, weather and snow conditions allow, then we try for Whymper's high point. (10 –12 hours return). It will be time to return to Quito and a celebratory last night. (B)

DAY 18

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

BL 2/10