

CLOUDS DRIFT AROUND VULCAN
COTOPAXI, ONE OF THE HIGHEST ACTIVE
VOLCANOES IN THE WORLD.



Equatorial Adventures

Story and photos by Rob Dunton

With one foot firmly planted in the northern hemisphere and one in the south, I smile for the camera while eyeing the red demarcation line depicting Ecuador's namesake (Ecuador means "equator" in Spanish). ■ Taking my picture at Mitad del Mundo (Middle of the World) is Jenni, my globe-trotting travel partner from Northern California. Upon hearing my adventuresome plans for this small

South American country, she wrapped up a business trip in Southeast Asia and flew down to join me. From the top of the 30-meter-tall equatorial monument, we take in the surroundings. Below are symbols denoting the cardinal points of the compass, and in the distance is Quito, the capital. Far beyond the city, a snowcapped volcano turns lilac with the setting sun.

"How about heading there tomorrow?" I ask, pointing to the distant volcano. "It looks amazing," Jenni agrees, and we set our sights on the Avenue of the Volcanoes, where more than a half-dozen conical peaks rise up on either side of the Pan-American Highway between Quito and Cuenca, Ecuador's third-largest city. Among these mountains are Vulcan Chim-

borazo, Ecuador's highest peak (20,560 feet), and Vulcan Cotopaxi (19,347 feet), one of the tallest active volcanoes in the world and home to one of the planet's few equatorial glaciers.

Spectacular volcanoes are only a part of Ecuador's appeal. Once part of the Inca empire, this small country on South America's Pacific coast came under European influence when Spanish conquistadors arrived in 1531. For centuries Ecuador was an integral part of Spain's colonial ambitions, until achieving independence in 1830.

From our vantage, Ecuador spreads out around us. Six hundred miles to the west lie

the renowned Galápagos Islands, home to blue-footed boobies, giant tortoises, penguins and unique marine iguanas. To the east (known as *El Oriente*) are some of the most pristine and primitive sections of the Amazon River delta. In the cool of the Andes are colorful indigenous markets, and to the south, remnants of the Inca empire. Interspersed are remnants of the Spanish colonial era, dense rain forests and alpine lakes, and everywhere there are kindly people—all in a country the size of Nevada.

The next morning we head to Quito's central bus depot, choosing public transportation instead of a private cab, to experience travel as the locals do. For an hour, our bus crisscrosses the *barrios* of greater Quito as locals hop on and off, selling fried banana chips and warm soda. Finally we reach the open Pan-American Highway, surrounded by a glorious patchwork of green and brown hills that rise from the valley floor.

During a brief stop at Cotopaxi National Park, where we see a professional-looking group of ice climbers prepare for a trip to the cloud-cloaked summit, we scour through Moon Handbooks' *Ecuador* for ideas on activities in the area.

"How does lunch at a 17th century hacienda sound, followed by horseback riding through the countryside?" I ask Jenni. No contest. With that, we head back toward the Pan-American Highway.

A \$5 ride brings us to Hostería La Ciénega, a historic hacienda that has hosted five of Ecuador's presidents, along with scientific luminaries such as Charles-Marie La Condamine (famous for his 1730s equatorial expedition) and Alexander von Humboldt (a 19th century naturalist and explorer). En route, we pass miles of greenhouses, home to some of the world's most productive flower plantations, which export roses, chrysanthemums and tulips to destinations as far away as Hong Kong and Russia. Passing beneath a wrought-iron entrance, we follow a long gravel lane through a tunnel of towering eucalyptus

trees. The Spanish-style hacienda sits centered at the end of the lane, behind a fountain and a circular drive. We pass through a hardwood door and meter-thick walls into a large stone entranceway. A beautiful antique vase that holds what must be more than 150 red roses stands next to the reception desk. Enraptured by the serene, timeless elegance of this out-of-the-way residence, we immediately decide to stay the night.

By this point we're famished, so after checking in, we sit down to lunch. Ecuador does not have the culinary identity of, say, Mexico or Thailand, and the typical meal is better described as hearty rather than succulent. A typical Ecuadorian meal might include meat (beef, chicken, pork, goat or *cuy*—guinea pig), ceviche, rice, lentils, a firm cheese and fried plantains. At the hacienda's restaurant we're happy to find a more adventurous menu, and we share our servings of chicken crepes, hearts-of-palm ceviche with lemon, prawn risotto and a soup made with quinoa, a grain similar to corn that was a staple food for the Inca.

After exploring the grounds, we rent two horses from the hacienda's stable, and a guide gives us a tour of the surrounding



A SUNNY DAY INVITES A VISIT TO THE PLAZA DE LA INDEPENDENCIA, IN QUITO.

QUITO

In 1978, Quito became one of the first cities in the world to be named a [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#). Historic Quito's colonial heart, **OLD TOWN**, has been exquisitely refurbished, with much of the work finished recently. Buildings are freshly whitewashed; stone streets are clean; and architectural lighting illuminates the classic features of the magnificent structures and churches. Situated at 9,350 feet, Quito is South America's second-highest capital, after La Paz, so you will probably notice the altitude as you climb the city's hills, but in return you get a near-perfect climate year-round.

Block after block of impeccable Neoclassical and Colonial buildings, situated around broad plazas, now house museums, galleries and superb restaurants. Outside its elegant, historic center, Quito sprawls with a seemingly endless mix of shops, industrial areas and residences built of cinderblock. The highlight of the city is **LA COMPAÑIA**, said to be the most beautiful church in the Americas. Built between 1605 and 1765, the church has an interior worthy of the term "breathtaking." Seven tons of gold illuminate and accentuate the walls, ceiling and altars.

Other noteworthy destinations include the **FRANCISCAN MUSEUM**, **IGLESIA SANTA DOMINGO** and **IGLESIA SAN FRANCISCO**. If you've had your fill

ECUADOR



AUTHOR ROB DUNTON DESCENDS A WATERFALL NEAR BAÑOS.



countryside.

The valley is tranquil; there are few cars and few people. Jenni and I ride on empty roads lined with makeshift walls formed by mounds of rose stems discarded over the years. We traverse trails cut through farmland, push through a migrating herd of cattle, ride along railroad tracks and make an unplanned stop at a warehouse where women in yellow aprons and thick rubber gloves process flowers. Roses in batches of two dozen, cut within the hour, are trimmed, coifed and bundled in protective wrapping for export.

After two hours of riding, we near the hacienda again and a young foal runs up to join us—our guide apparently is riding the foal's mother. The surrounding flower

fields start closing for the day, and the local laborers stream back to their towns and villages. We turn into the gates amid the aroma of eucalyptus, and dismount at the fountain. I am saddlesore but content, and imagine the Marquis de Maenza returning to the warm hearth at this estate back in the 17th century.

Thursday is market day in nearby Saquisilí, and its unique animal market starts early. We arrive at 7 A.M. at the edge of a large dirt lot already overflowing with trucks, people and animals. The air is cool and crisp, and a light morning mist keeps the dust down. We wander past the menagerie, a mixture of somber donkeys, waist-high pigs, woolly sheep and bony

of sumptuous museums and churches, lounge around **PLAZA GRANDE** with the locals while crowds of uniformed school children discover the history of their city, old men feed pigeons from park benches and families enjoy a sunny afternoon. As dusk approaches, get a balcony table at the posh Teatrum, overlooking **PLAZA DEL TEATRO**, and watch the street performers below while enjoying an excellent meal.

LODGING

IN QUITO

HOTEL PATIO ANDALUZ (García Moreno N6-52; 593-2-228-0830; www.hotelpatio-andaluz.com) is perfectly situated in a colonial mansion in the heart of historic Quito. Doubles start at \$150.

CAFE CULTURA (Robles 513 y Reina Victoria; 593-2-256-4956; www.cafecultura.com) is an inspiring, artistic gem. Doubles start at \$89.

NEAR COTOPAXI & SAQUISILÍ

HOSTERÍA LA CIÉNEGA (Cordero 1442 y Amazonas; 593-2-254-9126 or 254-1337; www.hosterialacienega.com). Doubles start at \$70. **HORSEBACK TOURS** are \$8 per hour, including guide.

BAÑOS

LUNA RUNTUN (Caserío Runtun Km. 6; 593-3-274-0882; www.lunaruntun.com) is a Swiss-managed adventure spa outside the city, overlooking Baños.

ACTIVITIES

GEOTOURS

593-3-274-1344; www.geotoursecuador.com.

cattle. Doe-eyed llamas turn their long necks as they look above the fray. All are tethered to their respective owners by handwoven multicolored ropes.

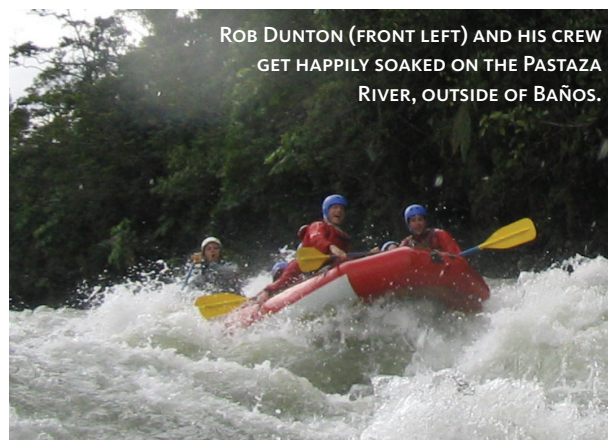
“Cuánto para cada vaca? (How much for each cow?)” I ask a woman who is holding on to a pair of cattle. (They’re priced at \$180 each.) Sturdy women in colorful shawls wear fedoras adorned with small feathers. Vendors serve steaming plates of food to the traders, while others make new

ropes with colored strands of plastic twine. As Jenni and I move with the flow toward the central marketplace, we pass flatbed trucks stacked with bananas, and a woman selling large white rabbits out of a sack. One plaza is dedicated to food, with piles of beans, rice, fruits and vegetables. Another area specializes in finished goods: woven blankets, clothing, shoes, arts and crafts. By 10 A.M., the markets are in full swing and the town's streets are abuzz with people coming and going, trucks loading and unloading, villagers and town folk catching up and sharing local news. When we hear that Vulcan Tungurahua, overlooking Ecuador's premier adventure town of Baños, has grown active with lava shows at night, we know where our next destination will be.

By the afternoon, we've made our way to Baños, but Tungurahua is hidden in a blanket of clouds—maybe this is the norm for Ecuador's volcanoes. The rest of the deep valley is shimmering with sunlight. Descending into Baños along a lush green mountain, we have the sense of discover-

ing Shangri-la. We stroll Ambato, the best street in town for finding adventure sports purveyors and Internet cafes, and book a half-day of canyoneering with a recommended outfitter, GeoTours. With our activities booked, we head to Mariane Cafe-Restaurant and indulge in Provençal cuisine with a local touch: fresh trout, steak with a pepper-cream sauce, and caprese salad.

That evening, stars are overhead—a sign that good volcano viewing may finally have arrived. We hop on a *chiva*, an open-sided truck with bench seats, reminiscent of a Universal Studios tram but with four-wheel drive. The *chiva* takes sightseers up a long, rough road to Mirador Bellavista on a ridge overlooking Baños. We walk to the rim to view the volcano—which is hidden by clouds. Who would have guessed? We



ROB DUNTON (FRONT LEFT) AND HIS CREW
GET HAPPILY SOAKED ON THE PASTAZA
RIVER, OUTSIDE OF BAÑOS.

enjoy hot chocolate and dance to the music from a transistor radio, but stop when we hear and feel an earth-shaking rumbling. Accustomed to the volcano's disappearing act, the food vendors and *chiva* drivers have prearranged an alternative show: A pair of talented jugglers performs for an hour with flaming batons and acrobatics, while Tungurahua thunders in the darkness for dramatic effect.

Bright and early the next morning, Jenni and I are fitted for helmets, wet suits

and canvas sneakers with especially grippy soles, and head out of town to Chamana, a ravine with three waterfalls cutting through it. Paolo, our expert guide (who turns out to have been the beguiling flame-tosser from the night before), goes through an extensive safety checklist, then rigs the safety top ropes above the first 40-foot waterfall. One at a time, we climb up a dry rock ledge to the right of the falls, hook into a safety line at the top, then step into the flowing water. Jenni, a seasoned rock-climber, goes first. The water is brisk, sloshing past her shins. She leans back, and slowly rappels down the face of the waterfall like Batman descending a skyscraper during a monsoon. Ten feet from the pool that is waiting at the bottom is a small ledge. Paolo instructs her to give a firm push and to let go of the rope. As instructed, and against her climber's instincts, Jenni launches backward, the rope zipping freely through the carabiner, and she lands with a splash!

The second waterfall is smaller but more powerful, and the trek between the falls is lush and green. The third and final waterfall is more than 130 feet high, and has a unique layout. Instead of a sheer wall of water, this waterfall has only 10 feet of rock face for a climber to descend before pushing clear of an overhang and swinging beneath the plume.

I go first. The water is spraying me like a hose. The configuration has been explained, but I can't see it. I am on the edge of the overhang, but what is below is hidden behind the rushing flow of water. I know I must push out, then drop far enough to clear the edge so I don't swing back and get a face full of granite. On the count of three, I am supposed to lean back, bend my knees, then push while releasing enough rope between my hands to sink out of the danger zone. One. Two. Three! The rope holds firm and I swing under the ledge and stare down at a pile of drenched boulders 120 feet below. The falls are now pouring over my head, clearing me altogether as they make their way to the bottom. I slowly lower myself down the line, unhook, and give a tug letting Paolo know I am free and clear. Jenni comes down next,

and I watch her silhouette in the midday sun as sparkling drops of water fly above her. She is exhilarated.

“Shall we look for more invisible volcanoes tomorrow,” I ask Jenni, “or do more of this?” Her smile says it all. On our return to GeoTour’s office, we commit to a full day of canyoneering the following day, when we’ll tackle a dozen waterfalls—but not before signing up for an afternoon of white-water rafting that leaves in less than an hour.

The tour office gives us sandwiches as we dry in the sun, then Jenni and I board a pickup loaded with other adventurers and drive 40 minutes along the Route of Waterfalls to launch at the Pastaza River. It is the dry season, so the river’s flow is relatively tame. We aim for each patch of white water to maximize the thrill, and take in the view of the Andes around us. A safety kayaker practices spins and rolls in the flat sections. After an hour we approach a sizable, churning wave—a lone spot of big water. “Paddle!” our guide yells out as we dig in, speeding directly toward the serpentine hump. The raft’s nose dives, then rebounds as the boat spins and flips.

As I spill over the edge I hear the guide yelping like a cowboy. Jenni and the rest of the crew are in the river with me, bobbing and laughing as our safety kayaker collects people and paddles. “What else do you do for fun when the waters are tame?” I ask myself as I wait to get pulled back into the raft. Look for the next thrilling adventure, I suppose. With its romantic haciendas, vibrant markets, white-water rapids plus waterfalls waiting to be scaled, thrilling is exactly what Ecuador has turned out to be. ▲

Rob Dunton lives in San Diego.

GETTING THERE



Use Mileage Plan miles to visit Ecuador via partner airlines American Airlines, Continental Airlines, Delta Air Lines and LAN. For information or to enroll in Mileage Plan, go to alaskaair.com or call 800-654-5669.