

# Ecuador

## Worth knowing from A - Z

### Baños

The little town of Baños is three hours south east of Quito and is famous for its warm springs. The town is a good starting point for trips to the Amazon Basin and there is a great choice of excursions and trips - river rafting, horse riding, mountain biking and longer tours in the jungle.

### Cost of living

Ecuador is one of Latin America's cheapest countries in which to live and travel. A night at a modest hotel will cost less than 6 US dollars- which is also about the amount you would pay for a journey from Quito to the Coast - or to the Jungle. The traditional Indian markets in Otavalo and Saquisilí are famous for their richly coloured textiles as well as arts and crafts. Cotacachi, three hours drive north of Quito, is known for its cheap leather goods.

Remember always to bargain about the prices when you buy textiles, traditional arts and crafts and other goods that are often priced higher for tourists and other travellers. It is expected at most of the outdoor markets and you'll also have the opportunity to practise your aptitude and ability to speak Spanish!

### Crime

There are many poor people in Ecuador where it is regarded as the country in South America with the greatest economic disparity. The result of this is that some areas have a relative high crime-rate. The large coastal towns, especially Guayaquil and Esmeraldas are known for their pickpockets and other petty criminals. The problem is not as great in Quito and can often be avoided by taking care and being sensible. One has to be extra vigilant whilst travelling on public transport or strolling around in the Old Town.

### Economy

In recent years the Ecuadorian economic situation has been very turbulent - to say the least - with high rates of inflation and frequent devaluation. This means on the one hand, that you will get more for your European money or Dollars but, for a family living on a monthly income of, say, 25 dollars or a teacher whose salary has not increased in 5 years - this can be a catastrophe. The drastic economic cures, that the Government, against strong protests,

often introduce means that there have been price increases for both energy and transport which directly affects the poorer section of the population. At the beginning of the year 2000 it was announced that the American Dollar would be the only currency in circulation. This rule has been installed in 2001.

### Electricity

110V, 60Hz AC. In other words you cannot use electronic devices bought in Europe unless you bring a transformer with you.

### El Niño

El Niño is the name of a climate-phenomenon that occurs irregularly every 3 – 8 years in the eastern regions of the Pacific Ocean. It hit Ecuador and the population of the Pacific coastal region hard in 1997/98 when terrific floods ruined fishing possibilities and destroyed villages and fields. The natural catastrophe made things even worse in generally low priority coastal area where poverty can be great. Coast towns such as Esmeraldas or Babahoyo are still slowly being re-built and cannot be recommended as a travel destination.

### Equipment

Nearly all types of camping equipment and clothing can be bought in Quito at prices comparable with those in Europe. However, it is advisable that if you plan a tour of the Andes regions or intend climbing one of the volcanoes a good sleeping bag would prove to be a good article to bring with you. Finally, good walking/hiking shoes are essential items of useful equipment you should bring with you from home. As a matter of interest, shoes of a larger size than 43 are virtually unobtainable in Ecuador. Use your rucksack so that it hangs in front of you instead of on your back. In this manner you will be able to keep a constant eye on your belongings.

At all times avoid displaying expensive watches, jewellery or large quantities of money in the poor parts of town. It is possible to keep valuables in safe-keepings at the School. The school is helpful in giving tips and good advice so that you can avoid any aggravating experiences.

### Food and drink

Quito and Guayaquil have everything to offer from traditional Ecuadorian food, to American fast food, Chinese food, Sushi and Argentinean beef. Outside the larger cities the menu is often more humble but

one can always get a tasty meal at an extremely reasonable price. Typical dishes include chicken and rice and sweet, grilled bananas or a portion of fresh fish fried in coconut oil served with rice and salad. Soft drinks can be bought everywhere and the big hit is freshly pressed fruit juice.

You can swill a dusty bus ride down with freshly pressed pineapple, papaya, mango, chirimoya (custard apple), "tomate de arbol" (literally translated as "tomato from tree"), and many other exotic fruits and vegetables. Most places display notices warning people against drinking tap water - so it is advisable to have a bottle of mineral water at hand at all times.

The Ecuadorians are typically drinkers of beer and rum. Most prices are reasonable, but be very careful with the local "aguardiente" - sugar-cane rum, that, especially in coastal areas, can be bought freshly tapped for the equivalent of less than five kroner per litre, which is considered by many a very small amount of money to pay for a long-lasting, mother-and-father of all headaches!!!

## Galápagos-Islands

The volcanic islands out on the Ecuadorian coast, which gave Charles Darwin inspiration for his theory on "Evolution by natural selection" has a unique flora and fauna which cannot be found anywhere else in the World. Unless your budget is extremely tight it is absolutely a must to visit Galápagos whilst you are already in Ecuador. Each island has its own peculiarity and the highlights on Galapagos involve diving with sea-lions and turtles, hikes on the volcanic islands surrounded by iguanas, giant tortoises and thousands of birds. It is expensive to visit the Galápagos-Islands as the Government is trying to limit the number of visitors in an effort to protect this unique organic laboratory.

The School arranges boat trips to the island on "The Beagle" and the many tour operators in Quito often have special offers on trips.

## Illiteracy

Officially over 85% of Ecuador's adult population can read and write but there are many people in the poor ethnic communities who are completely illiterate. This applies especially amongst the older generation in the country areas and the indigenous population. One cannot, in other words, expect an older Indian woman to be able to read or understand a map or a written address.

## Languages

Ecuador has two official languages: Spanish and Quechua - the old language from Inca times which is invariably spoken by the Indians living in the

highlands. You are reminded that not all ethnic minorities speak fluent Spanish. In Ecuador Latin American Spanish is spoken i.e., the difficult "th"-sound in Castillian is replaced by an "s", and some words have a different meaning. A Spanish car, "coche", is "carro" and to drive one is "manejar" and not "conducir" etc.

## Money

It is recommended that you take cash, (US Dollars) and an international credit card with you.

A credit card can be used in most of the better stores and better class restaurants in the larger cities as well as in designated tourist areas. However, we feel that you should be forewarned that in some cases an additional charge of 5-8% is made for this facility.

The Government has now adopted the US dollar as their currency in order to promote a better economic stability. It is only necessary to have larger amounts in your possession if, by chance you will know that you will be "off the beaten track."

## National Parks

Since the Galapagos Islands were declared Ecuador's first National Park in 1959 a number of other designated such as the Cotopazi Volcano - two hours journey from Quito. Today all the larger ecological regions have within them one, or more, protected areas as well as private Nature Reserves. Of these, the SierraAzul Reserve is called a "Cloud Forest" and lies at the foot of the Antisana-Mountain. From Quito it is accessible by road after three hours drive.

The school is able to arrange all types of classes and guided tours within the reservation.

## Otavaló

Second only to the Galapagos Islands, Otavaló comes next in the order of preference for most visitors to Ecuador as one of the places to see and to appreciate. It is situated close to a very beautiful lake north of Quito and can be reached in about two hours drive along the Panamerican Highway. Every Saturday in Otavaló is market day. The villagers come down from their surrounding mountain villages bringing with them fresh vegetables, livestock and textiles of their own making - all to be sold at the huge market in the town centre.

Otavaló Indians are regarded as the most well-organised in Ecuador and attach great importance to their traditional national costumes and social Etiquette. In order that visitors do not miss the opportunity of visiting the livestock market, it is advisable that they rise very early in the morning to be at the market at sunrise when trading

commences in cattle, grunting pigs, hens and llamas while the Indians women light fires to roast pork and the great local delicacy, cuy - barbecued Guinea Pig! The School can arrange visits to Otavalo.

## Places of interest

Apart from taking part in a language course at one of the best Language Schools in Latin America, Ecuador has much more to offer the visiting student. We mentioned earlier that there are many areas in Ecuador in which each has its own special natural attractions. For example, in the Highlands there is the Quito's colonial centre as well as the Cathedrals and Churches - some dating back in time to when the Spanish first set foot in Ecuador. There are native Indian markets in Otavalo and Saquisilí, warm springs in Baños and Papallacta, the Cotopaxi and Chimborazo volcanoes, the beautiful town of Cuenca in the South as well as many Nature Reserves.

Living in Europe it is difficult to imagine anything more spectacular than to ride on a bicycle from Baños down the Andean route to Puyo - the natural entrance to the vast jungle area. Another suggested alternative is a train journey from Ibarra, three hours north of Quito, to San Lorenzo on the Pacific coast. A trip to Guayaquil, Ecuador's principal port is well worth it. To this can be added visits to Manta and Atacames with their sandy beaches and small fishing communities.

From the month of June to the month of October, Isla de la Plata is renowned for its coral reefs, colonies of exotic birds and schools of Dolphins and Whales.

In the Amazon Basin - el Oriente - one is in a completely different world where access to the many small communities is made only by small river boats. On the river Napo and its extensive net of small tributaries settlements have been established by members of the Cofan, Shuar and Huaorani tribes and the recommended townships from which jungle trips can be arranged are Baños, Tena, Coca and Misahuallí.

## Politics

Politics in Ecuador are not so radically different from the other South American countries: Military Dictatorships in the 70's, emerging democracies in the 80's and democratic turbulence in the 90's. Compared to its neighbours of Peru and Colombia, Ecuador has avoided a destructive Civil War and terrorism. As in the case with many other Latin American countries big landowner and representatives from the traditional well-to-do have a great deal of power in the country.

Democracy is frequently overshadowed by political scandals, corruption at the highest level and a depressing lack of civil virtues among the leading

political and economic classes. In 1998 Ecuador got a new constitution and a new President.

## Population

One of the most fascinating aspects about Ecuador is the unique ethnic diversity. The ethnic minorities, especially the Indians from the Highlands, are extremely well organised and often put forward territorial demands, and the like, to the Central Government. Consequently this has resulted in a gradual handing-over of country areas to Indian communities in the Amazon area and Highlands.

The traditional political, judicial and religious systems in these communities are, in the main, accepted by the Government. An example can be mentioned - nature worship and shamanism are widespread amongst the often isolated Indian tribes in the Amazon area and the Highland Indians have their own land policies based to a certain degree on communal joint property.

The great social, economic and cultural barriers in Ecuador occur between the Mestizos (people of mixed race) and the white people, and the other ethnic communities. Young people from the middle or upper class in Quito or Guayaquil will often enjoy a life-style that is similar to that of young people in both Europe and Northern America. Well-to-do families invariably send their children to private schools and to American schools, and other places of learning. At this level of society it is not uncommon to do one's shopping in Miami rather than at the local Indian Market.

Among the poorer parts of the population standards are completely different and depend a great deal to which ethnic group one belongs to and its political affiliations.

## Religion

Predominantly Roman Catholic with a smaller Protestant community. In the indigenous population the Catholic faith is often mixed with traditional religions or the two religious persuasions working side by side.

## Social Conventions

Ecuadorians are a friendly and obliging people. Always remember that social conventions in Ecuador are more formal and less direct than they are in Europe. Should you ever find yourself irritated by petty bureaucracy or, in any way subjected to situations very much different to those you would experience at home, it is important to remember not to get involved. Keep a cool head and not show any irritation as it might create a situation far worse than was originally intended.

## Transport

In general Ecuador, and especially Quito, has a well-developed infrastructure when one takes the country's geographic characteristics into consideration. On a long day-trip by bus you will be able to travel from the Pacific to the Amazon Basin. Ecuador's main artery is the Panamerican Highway the old Inca Royal Road - which stretches from the north to the south of the country.

In principle you can travel from the south of Chile to Mexico in the North. On shorter trips it is a very pleasant experience to travel by bus whereas the longer journeys to places such as the Amazon Jungle and Galapagos Islands can be made by Domestic airlines at a reasonable cost. Most places in the country can be reached within a half-hour to an hour by plane whereas the Galapagos Islands, being more distant, take a flight of over two hours.

In Quito the preferred means of transport is either by bus or by taxi. The School is situated a few minutes walk from six main bus-lines. Bus tickets cost the equivalent of 0,10 US Dollars depending on whether you travel on the cheap or the expensive types of bus. You buy your tickets as you board the bus and it is a good idea to have the correct amount ready. A taxi ride will cost around \$1,00 to \$1,50 for shorter distances within the town perimeter. If the taxi does not have a meter or if it is out of order make sure you agree on a price before you set off (Ecuadorian taxi-drivers are no different from any others in the same business in other parts of the world!).

## Vaccination

On entry into Ecuador there are no requirements about vaccinations but it would be advisable to get in touch with your own doctor or assurance company for advice and information as to which vaccines one should have. If you wish to travel to the Coast or into the Jungle in Ecuador or visit other Latin-American countries extra vaccinations may be necessary - for example some countries insist on vaccinations against yellow fever. Remember that some vaccinations have to be given at least 3 weeks before the date of your departure.

## Visa

Upon entry in Ecuador you will receive a 90-day Tourist Visa. Should you require an extension to your Visa the School will assist you in obtaining it.

Please note that on entry into Ecuador you are obliged to have a valid return ticket from either Ecuador or another country - this is something you have to be aware of when ordering your flight ticket. The above rules apply to whichever programme in which you are involved at the school. If you wish to work on a voluntary basis it is not necessary to apply for a work-permit as your labour is unpaid and regarded a "cultural exchange."

## Weather

Ecuador lies on the Equator but the weather you experience depends in which region or in what altitude you happen to be. It is a good idea to remember when packing your suitcase to keep in mind whether you wish to laze about on a tropical beach or climb one of the snow-clad volcanoes and pack accordingly.

Even though the weather varies from region to region there are two seasons in Ecuador. The rainy season ("winter") from December until May and the dry season ("summer") from June until November. It is typical during the rainy season for heavy downpours in the late afternoons after which the sun reappears.

On the coast and in the Amazon regions it is hot all the year round - very hot. The temperatures can easily reach 30° C in the shade which, combined with a high humidity can make life a bit uncomfortable! It can be cold in the Andes and rainy at high altitudes whilst the climate is comfortably subtropical in the valleys where the majority of people live.

Galápagos again is different - it has a temperate and dry climate all the year round. The weather in Quito is known for its unpredictability. On one and the same day it can be cloudy followed by sunshine and, again after a short but very heavy downpour sunshine will reappear. Short downpours are common in the afternoons in the rainy seasons. Generally, though, the weather in Quito is particularly pleasant with sunshine and daytime temperatures reaching 18 – 25° C. It is advisable to bring a thick sweater and sensible footwear with you to cover all possible weather variations.

Very few will have the experience being in Ecuador without travelling through several climate-zones and noticing that the nights in Quito are chilly.

For a daily weather forecast see:

<http://weather.noaa.gov/weather/current/SEQU.html>

All suggestions to improve and give advice when considered relevant to this document are very welcome. We are well aware of the limited content and kindly ask you to participate in improving it. Send us an e-mail with your suggestions to: [info@global-volunteers.de](mailto:info@global-volunteers.de)