



The World's Undiscovered **Gastronomic Treasure**

Ecuador's cuisine embodies four regions and multiple cultures, from the ancestral to the colonial and landing in the contemporary.

The Galápagos Islands will enchant you with unique seafood like its lobsters [1] and scorpion fish [2], known locally as

In our Andean Highlands, you'll taste countless vegetables and fruit with fried pork called fritada [3] and locro [4], a thick hearty stew.

While in our South Pacific coast, you'll be amazed by our seafood! You'll fall in love with Ecuadorian ceviche [5] and fried plantain balls called bolon [6].

Travel into the Amazon and discover ancestral food: maito (7) - fish or chicken cooked in a leaf or cassava with fiddlehead fern, known there as 'garabato yuyo' [8].

EATING IN The coastal city of Guayaquil

ON THE TRAIL Arts and crafts around

The history and flavours of

the province of Imbabura

SNAPSHOT

in Napo Province

Old Town at dusk

A portrait of rural life

BIG PICTURE

TRY IT NOW

Ecuadorian chocolate

WHAT THEY'RE

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Ecuador's festivals, from Carnival to Day of the Dead

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A bird's-eye view of Quito's Cheers to the country's booming craft beer scene

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the storied city of Cuenca

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Sebastián Pérez

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Wildlife encounters are par for the course in the archipelago

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the Andean grasslands Image: Ecuador Travel

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Editor's letter



Angela Locatelli, Assistant Editor

f y □ NATGEOTRAVELUK

Ecuador has long been synonymous with striking wildlife and otherworldly landscapes. Its ecological diversity and compact size — at least by South American standards — mean big-hitter destinations such as the Galápagos Islands (p.22), Amazon rainforest (p.44) and volcano-studded Andes (p.48) are all relatively close to each other, making this a paradise for outdoor enthusiasts.

But a culinary renaissance is also in progress across the country, led by a celebration of homegrown food. We look at how Ecuadorians have fallen back in love with cacao (p.8) and meet a chef who's championing local ingredients (p.18). To wash it all down, we quiz a local brewer on Ecuador's budding craft beer scene (p.14).

All this comes together in our main story (p.26), which puts the spotlight on initiatives looking to preserve the country's heritage — be it nature, food or community ties — and the people behind them. There are more traditions to be seen around the Andean region of Imbabura (p.10) and at local festivals (p.13), while the capital, Quito (p.16) and southern city of Cuenca (p.40) offer up some of the country's cosmopolitan charms.

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Editorial T: 020 7253 9906. editorial@natgeotraveller.co.uk Photography T: 020 7253 9906. photography@natgeotraveller.co.uk Sales/Admin T: 020 7253 9909. F: 020 7253 9907. sales@natgeotraveller.co.uk Subscriptions T: 01858 438787. natgeotraveller@subscription.co.uk

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Headquarters

1145 17th St. NW, Washington, DC 20036-4688, USA

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FOUR TO TRY

Ecuadorian chocolate

KNOWN AS THE MOTHERLAND OF CHOCOLATE, ECUADOR IS HOME TO ONE OF THE MOST PRESTIGIOUS VARIETIES OF CACAO BEAN

Ecuador's relationship with cacao goes back millennia. The country was hailed as the cradle of chocolate in 2018, when archaeological research rerouted the origins of the delicacy from Central America to the Ecuadorian Amazon. Traces of cacao were found on ancient pottery utilised by the Indigenous Mayo-Chinchipe civilisation, indicating it was being grown for food, drink or medicine over 5,300 years ago — some 1,500 years earlier than previously believed.

But Ecuadorian chocolate had a strong reputation even before this discovery. The country is the birthplace of nacional, the world's rarest bean variety. Considered virtually extinct for a century following an outbreak of disease in the plant, old-growth nacional trees were rediscovered around 15 years ago in Piedra de Plata, in the Arriba cacao-growing region. With complex aromas and flavours — think smoke and spice with notes of jasmine — and little to no bitterness, it's often viewed as the best cacao out there.

This allows Ecuador's production to punch well above its weight. Once the leading exporter of cacao beans, today the country grows less than 10% of the world's cacao. Yet, that amount alone accounts for around 65% of the highest-quality chocolate sold globally.

Invigorated by recent developments, Ecuadorian farmers, chocolatiers and chefs are getting creative — with a host of chocolate shops, tours and experiences across the country to show for it.

CARDENAS CHOCOLATE

For a sense of Ecuadorian cocoa's appeal, this chocolate company is a good starting point. Based in the province of Manabí, Cardenas works with local producers to create awardwinning bars of single-origin Arriba nacional chocolate. cardenaschocolate.com

EL QUETZAL DE MINDO

This company offers cacao-themed tours high in an Andean village. Observe the chocolate-making process and take part in guided tastings; for a more hands-on experience, learn how to roast and grind cocoa beans to make the ancient xocolatl beverage. elquetzaldemindo.com

CHOKOLAT

Local cocoa is celebrated in all its forms at this shop, with six locations in and around the city of Guayaquil. There are cakes, muffins, truffles and tasting boxes, plus hot chocolate kits should you wish to recreate the experience at home. chokolat.com.ec

TO'AK CHOCOLATE

A Quito-based purveyor of tree-tobar chocolate, To'ak sources pods from heirloom nacional trees. Its Chocolate & Art Experience includes a private tour of the former residence of artist Oswaldo Guayasamín, followed by tastings of the brand's high-end bars. toakchocolate.com

ON THE TRAIL

IMBABURA

DISCOVER ECUADOR'S ARTS AND CRAFTS ON A ROAD TRIP THROUGH THIS ANDEAN PROVINCE, WHERE EVERY VILLAGE CHAMPIONS A DIFFERENT TRADE

WORDS: SARAH GILLESPIE. ILLUSTRATION: MARTIN HAAKE

Starting from Quito, drive north up the Pan-American Highway. Keep an eye out for the plantations of the Pichincha province: Ecuador is one of the world's biggest producers of roses, said to bloom larger than average under the equatorial sun. Your first stop is San Pablo Del Lago, on the shores of the namesake lake. This tranquil village is known for totora, a reed that grows in the lagoon, and all around its streets, you'll see stalls selling mats, baskets and even kayaks made of it. Book a local guide for a behind-the-scenes visit to the home of an artisan weaver.

The paintings, weavings and carvings of the province find their way to the town of **Otavalo** for market day. The Indigenous Otavaleño people are famous for their textile weaving skills, a tradition that predates the Incas. But in the local market, one of the largest of its kind in South America, Imbabura's riches converge: alpaca ponchos, handcrafted jewellery and rugs bearing a menagerie of Ecuadorian fauna fight for attention in the open-air stalls. Open every day, the market is at its busiest on Saturdays.

Just a 10-minute drive away, pretty, peaceful **Peguche** is a welcome respite after a day's hard bargaining. Located next to the Peguche Waterfall, it's another village celebrated for its weavings, and at Artesanía El Gran Condór, proprietor Luzmila Arias Gramal demonstrates the traditional pedal loom weaving technique. Before getting back on the road, look out for a mural of Dolores Cacuango on the corner of Los Corazas and Peguche street. In the early 20th century, the activist campaigned to dismantle the *huasipungo* system, which saw Indigenous people work under debt bondage to hacienda owners. artesaniaelgrancondor.com

If you're on the market for a new accessory, head to **Ilumán** next. Ecuador may be the home of the world-famous Panama hat, traditionally made in Manabí province, but pressed felt is the speciality here, sold in a vast range of colours. Take a break at Hacienda Pinsaqui, a former textile workshop that now offers rooms and two restaurants. Political leader Simón Bolívar frequently stayed here while campaigning to liberate several South American colonies from Spain. haciendapinsaqui.com

Head west on the Vía a Cotacachi for a pitstop at **Cotacachi**. A town ringed by dairy farms, this is Ecuador's leather capital. Browse handmade boots, jackets and bags at more than 50 leather shops, most of them on Avenida 10 de Agosto, known locally as Leather Street. If you have time, drive 20 minutes west to Laguna de Cuicocha: the four-hour hike on the rim of this volcanic crater lake is well worth the detour.

Rejoin the Pan-American Highway for the last leg of the itinerary. San Antonio de Ibarra is famed for its woodworking, and Avenida 27 de Noviembre is home to most of this village's ateliers — you could walk away with anything from religious bas-reliefs to full dining suites. Walk east along Luis Enrique Cevallos to find the gallery of Luis Potosí, one of Ecuador's bestloved contemporary woodcarvers. You may even meet Potosí himself, who's often here and will show you around his workshop if asked.

HOW TO DO IT

This trip is best tackled over two days, with a stay at a local hacienda. Hiring a guide is recommended: English is little-spoken, and some activities — such as visiting families — are impossible without one. Ocean Pacific Travel organises bespoke tours. opt.viajes

Luzmila Arias Gramal

At her family-run business Artesanía El Gran Condór, Luzmilla works to preserve ancient weaving techniques

HOW DO YOU SOURCE WOOL?

Our wool comes from local farmers.

Once bought, it needs to be washed, carded and wound onto a bobbin

– a process that can take hours.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO WEAVE USING A PEDAL LOOM?

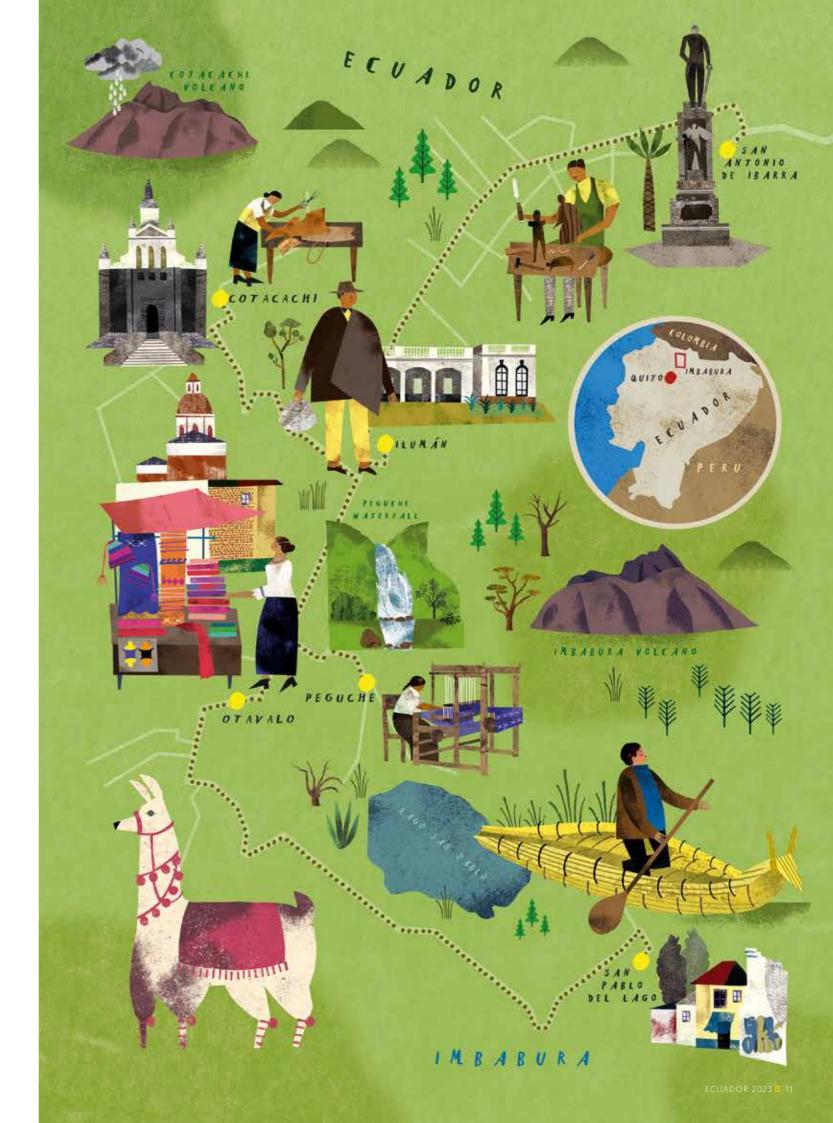
It takes 15 days to make one scarf, working around five hours a day. The loom requires considerable strength to use. Something bigger, like a throw, can take over two months.

HOW DO YOU DYE GARMENTS?

We use natural materials: achiote seeds for orange, walnut skins for brown, chilca plants for green and cochineal insects for red.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO KEEP THIS TRADITION ALIVE?

It's been passed down through my family for generations. I learned from my grandfather — I used to jump in and use the loom when he got tired — who, in turn, learned from his own grandfather. My son and son-in-law know how to do it, and I'm now teaching local people. Little by little, I hope more people will come to learn.





La Central

Yuca soufflé

Five years ago, this corner deli reinvented Guayaquil's downtown food scene when it became the city's first trendy brunch spot. Today, La Central's menu features everything from classic green plantain plates to fierce sandwiches like kimchi grilled cheese. But there's one dish that's stood out since the beginning — a custardy vuca (cassava) soufflé. served with homemade rose honey syrup or cream cheese and pork rinds. It pairs perfectly with an iced rose latte or a bloody tomatillo drink, sipped while peoplewatching in the lively setting of Panamá Street. lacentraldelishop.com

Juliana

Pan de yuca sour

Some locals only visit plantain chips this bar, on the third Guayaquil's perennial sun floor of Guayaquil's and mild temperatures Cacao Museum, to call for fresh, citrusy take photographs of its ceviche, the much-loved collection of antiques. cold fish soup topped with But savvy patrons sit in red onion and coriander. the outdoor terrace and La Cevichévere offers order pan de yuca sour, a tropical twist on this an original creation that South American classic, earned Juliana the title with mango and a touch of World's Best Cocktail of yellow pepper for a Menu 2022, along with tangier flavour; to enjoy it other drinks celebrating like locals do, try it with ingredients from plantain chips and a cold Ecuador's four regions. beer. Other specialities This particular silky include Mexican blend, inspired by local aguachiles (a spicy ceviche snack pan de yuca (cassava made with shrimp) and bread) and yogurt, encebollado fish stew, includes white rum, caña, while an open kitchen tropical guava fruit, counter and salsa music green cardamom and a make for a communal whey made from clarified atmosphere. instagram. yogurt. julianabar.com com/lacevichevere

La Cevichévere

Tropical ceviche with

empanadas This restaurant is located inside the beautiful Hotel del Parque, which is set within the Parque Histórico Guayaquil and overlooks the Daule River. The menu is as exciting as the setting, and it's the reason why Casa Julián features in Latin America's 50 Best Restaurants 2022 list. Its version of sweet and savoury empanadas (Ecuadorian dough pockets), filled with blue cheese and figs and sprinkled with cinnamon sugar, encapsulates the ethos of the restaurant, celebrating local ingredients with a refined, modern approach. hoteldelparquehistorico. com

Casa Julián

Blue cheese and figs

Mikka

Seafood on fire

All eyes are on the kitchen door when Mikka's signature appetiser is served. Seafood on fire delivers on its promise, a feast of seashells filled with mixed sautéed seafood, spicy butter and traditional Nikkei condiments - all set alight over a bed of salt. Also featured in Latin America's 50 Best Restaurants 2022 roundup, this city-centre spot leans into the trusty fusion formula with a food and drinks menu mixing Peruvian and Japanese flavours, from sushi rolls made with quinoa to salmon ceviche in a curry sauce, mikkarestaurante. MARIA SILVA AGUIRRE

Cultural festivals

BORN OF A BLEND OF ANDEAN TRADITIONS. CHRISTIAN CELEBRATIONS AND AFRICAN SPIRITUALISM, ECUADOR'S FESTIVALS ARE AS UNIQUE AS THE NATION ITSELF

International Festival of Performing Arts

Every November, the southern city of Loja becomes Ecuador's cultural epicentre. For over 10 days, artists, dancers and masked performers from around the world descend on its cobbled streets in a whirl of neon and traditional skirts to showcase their work in local theatres, squares and public spaces. In 2022, the festival brought together almost 16,000 participants in more than 100 performances. festivaldeloja.com

↑ Inti Raymi

Head to the hills in late June to witness Indigenous solstice celebrations — one of Ecuador's most sacred festivals, observed since pre-Incan times. Andean cities including Otavalo, Ingapirca and Cotacachi host traditional tributes to Pachamama (Mother Earth) to give thanks at the end of the agricultural cycle. Get involved by participating in sacred baths, ancestral rituals, public dances and ceremonial meals.

 ${\color{red}{\bf 3}}^{\textbf{Carnival}}_{\textbf{Flotillas flanked by costumed dancers and pounding}}$ drummers travel through South America during carnival season. It's uninhibited - the music loud, the outfits bright and fervour palpable. A precursor to the solemnity of Lent, Carnival is Ecuador's way of letting loose before 40 days and nights of abstinence. Dance in the crowds in Quito or join in smaller festivities in cities including Guaranda, Ambato, Cuenca or El Chota.

4 Day of the Dead In the Incan era, mummification was a practice reserved for the month of November. During Ava Marcay Quilla — the month of carrying the dead — celebrants would bring mummified friends and family along for the party, singing, dancing, praying and eating together. Macabre as it may now seem, the tradition kept the deceased alive in the memories of the living and preceded the contemporary Día de los Difuntos (Day of the Dead), observed in early November.

Devil of Pillaro

The devil dances in Santiago de Pillaro, in the province of Tungurahua, for six days at the start of each new year. An Intangible Cultural Heritage of Ecuador, this festival originated as a protest against colonialism and Catholicism. Centuries later, locals still dress as demonic characters bearing horns, fangs and elaborate headpieces to parade and dance around the streets, accompanied by a band of musicians. SJ ARMSTRONG

From top: The International Festival of Performing Arts in Loia: a scene from a Carnival held in the city of Guaranda; locals dress up as demonic characters during the Devil of Pillaro festival







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Raise a glass

PEDRO NAVARRO, CO-FOUNDER AND CO-OWNER OF SANTANA BREWING COMPANY IN QUITO, TALKS ABOUT THE COUNTRY'S GROWING CRAFT BREWERY SCENE

When did beer brewing begin in Ecuador?

Something that's not widely known is that Ecuador had the first brewery in all the Americas. It was built in Ouito's Convent of San Francisco, the oldest religious monument in the country, by a Flemish monk who arrived in the capital in the 16th century, bringing brewing grains along with him. That brewery stayed in operation for around 500 years, until the 1970s, mostly for the benefit of its beerloving monks. It's been restored and is now open to travellers. It's worth a visit!

What inspired you to set up a craft brewery?

Around 15 years ago, some Ecuadorians experimented with craft brewing, but it wasn't easy. Industrial products like Miller and Heineken were what the locals knew. But with time, people started to travel and see what was happening in other countries, mostly in the US, where the craft brewery movement had already begun. That was when it started to take off here, too. We wanted to show people there were other types of beer they should try. I founded Santana Brewing in 2012 with my three siblings, and four or five other craft breweries started in Quito around that time.

How has Ecuador's beer scene changed?

Over the last 10 years, Ecuador's craft brewing industry has grown exponentially. We formed the Association of Craft Brewers of Ecuador, which has around 100 associates — quite a lot for a country like ours. We know there are over 100 other unaffiliated breweries, too. We've started a culture and, year after year, we make better beers. It's a great community; when you're small, there's friendship. We help each other, make beers together and collaborate.

Where's Santana Brewery located?

We started the brewery in the old hacienda where we grew up. It's around 200 years old and has belonged to our family for six or seven generations. What's more, it's located along the equator; the land where the Mitad del Mundo (Middle of the World) monument stands was donated to the government by my family. The farm's called Santa Ana, but in Spanish we pronounce it 'Santana': this is where the name of the brewery comes from.

What can people expect when visiting?

We have five traditional beer styles we produce vear-round: stout, Irish red, amber, pale ale and chulla chela, a Belgian-Ecuadorian blend — plus seasonal IPAs and porters. Then, there's our restaurant. Typically, breweries serve burgers, pizzas, wings, but we decided to offer local specialities. My brother Sebastian, the master brewer, is also a chef, so he works on the menu. Diners can visit the brewery, and when we're there, we're happy to give tours.

What's special about your products?

Around a year ago, we started to only use rainwater to make our beers. Water's important in the brewing process; its flavour. minerals, smell, everything goes into the final product. Tap water comes with a degree of variability, while rainwater is stable, and that's what you want when brewing. It's improved our beers, and it helps the environment, too.

Have you taken other initiatives?

We're working to become Ecuador's first brewery with zero carbon emissions in 2023 - as far I know, no other company is doing this. Our family also has a pocket of land in the northeast of Ouito - a section of the Chocó-Darién Forest, which stretches from Ecuador to Panama — and a lot of it is primary rainforest. We've been looking after it for over 20 years, working with Fundación Futuro to protect it and with Quito's Universidad San Francisco to get a better idea of the species living there.

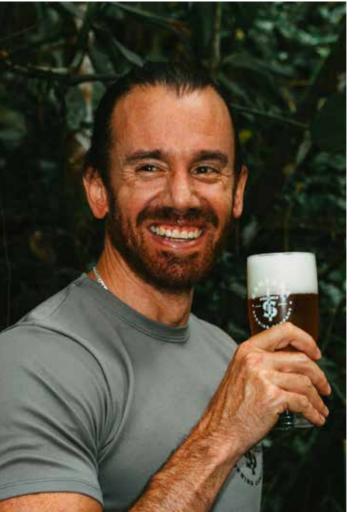
Do you export beers abroad?

Not yet, but I think we have a product that could be very exportable — a brand called chicha madre. Chicha is an Indigenous beer, which can be made with different ingredients. We use vuca (cassava), mix it with barley and follow the beer-making process to get yuca beer. By using local ingredients, we can give some personality to the product, and help local farmers. We call it chicha madre (mother chicha) because we see it as the mother of fermented drinks. It think it could be interesting, giving the world something local.

Santana Brewing Company is based in Quito and open Wednesday to Sunday, santanabrewing.com







THREE TO TRY **ECUADORIAN DRINKS**

Chicha This is Latin America's

indigenous beer, made with local ingredients long before barley was introduced from Europe. Originating from the Andes and Amazonia regions, it's most often made with corn or cassava, though there are several local variations. It was traditionally made by women, who would chew the ingredients, spit them out and leave them to ferment with their saliva. While most recipes now use other fermentation agents, chicha remains a popular drink in small towns across the county.

Canelazo Hailing from the South American highlands, this hot punch will keep you warm on chilly Andean nights. Sweet and spiced, it's made with canela (cinnamon), panela (unrefined cane sugar) and aguardiente (sugar cane alcohol), with naranjillo or passion fruit juice often added for a zingy edge. The country's comfort drink of choice, it's a favourite during the Christmas season, when street vendors around Quito pour it out of cauldrons into steaming cups.

3 Colada morada A non-alcoholic option, this

all-Ecuadorian drink has been a staple since pre-Hispanic times. Its dark colour comes from purple corn flour – which also gives it a thick, smoothielike consistency - mixed with local fruits and spices. It's traditionally sipped at cemeteries in early November to celebrate the Día de los Difuntos (Day of the Dead), along with t'anta wawa (dollshaped sweetbread) - though it can also be found during the wider autumnal season.

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INSIDE GUIDE

CUENCA

RENOVATIONS, NEW OPENINGS AND ROOFTOP LOUNGES ARE GIVING THIS SOUTHERN, STORIED CITY A CONTEMPORARY EDGE

To walk around Cuenca is to visit an open-air museum. Time seems to have stood still in this pretty, UNESCO World Heritage Site city, where cobblestone streets and brick buildings paint a picture of 16th-century life. At its centre, the light-blue domes of the New Cathedral of Cuenca dominate the city skyline, while Calderón Park, the central square, is still the main stage where daily life plays out. Despite being Ecuador's third-largest city, Cuenca has managed to maintain a relaxed feel, which only adds to its old-world charm. Yet, look closely and you'll see this is a city that knows how to reinvent itself.

In the El Vado neighbourhood, **Hotel Cruz del Vado** opened in 2019 in a mansion complete with marble walls — the former newsroom of *El Mercurio*, Cuenca's oldest newspaper. It pays tribute to local heritage with handcrafted furniture and works by local artists, while its rooftop restaurant, Cúpulas Azules, cooks up Andean dishes like *locro* (thick Ecuadorian soup) and pickled pork loin. Similarly, in the city centre, **ITZA Hotel Boutique Internacional** moved into a 20th-century building that was formerly home to the International Hotel, a 1950s grand dame. In 2022, it was restored by artisans into a boutique property with neoclassical flair, and its three on-site dining options include the elegant Zaza 360 rooftop lounge. hotelcruzdelvado.com itzaboutiquehotel.com

Rooftops like these have become a trend in the city
— spaces to hang out while sipping fiery *canelazos* (hot
and spiced tipples). With fifth-storey views over the centre,

Cantina La Única restaurant and bar serves tacos and
flavoured margaritas. Make sure to book in advance at

Negroni bar, located in the French-inspired Jerves Calero
mansion, just around the corner. It's a prime spot to get
bird's-eye views of the New Cathedral and its domes, which
light up at night. Meanwhile, Rooftop Cuenca, another
restaurant and bar, is a welcome pit stop on the ascent to

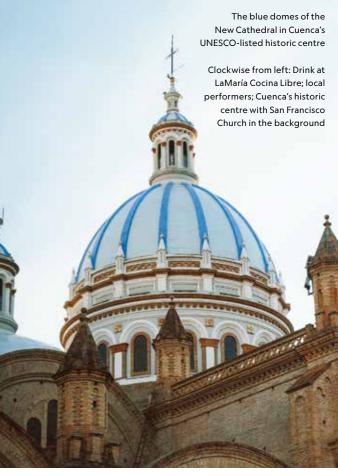
hilltop **Mirador de Turi**, the city's most famous viewpoint. sociedadgourmet.ec instagram.com/rooftopcuenca

Still hungry? Head to the Sebastián neighbourhood, where Cafe San Sebas serves classic US diner-style breakfasts of bottomless coffee and pancakes stacked high on the plate, while closer to the centre, LaMaría Cocina Libre has an ever-changing lunch menu. Set inside the recently restored 19th-century Casa del Parque, the English-style Mansión Matilde tea house is almost worth visiting just to admire the building's frescoed walls and ceilings. Dos Sucres, meanwhile, serves Ecuadorian specialities made with organic ingredients sourced from local producers, including corn gnocchi and briskets over sweet potato puree. It's located on the other side of the Tomebamba River, with a great promenade for walking off the meal. sansebascuenca.com facebook. com/lamariacuenca facebook.com/mansionmatilde dossucrescuenca.com

Another lovely spot for a walk is the **Cuenca Botanic Garden**, which opened in the La Isla neighbourhood in 2021. It's home to over 8,000 plant species from eight Ecuadorian ecosystems. Scattered around it are 73 music-playing tubes, part of *Corre por la Musica*, an acoustic installation by Argentinian artist Leandro Erlich. facebook.com/jardinbotanicodecuenca

For a fuller immersion in nature without sacrificing comfort, **Nómada Glamping** offers tents and cabins a 20-minute drive from the city. There are barbecue spaces, campfires and scenic views of the Andes, plus stargazing opportunities at night. From here, trails lead to mountainous **Cajas National Park**, dotted with lakes, moors and cloud forest. Draws include signposted trails, Andean condors and alpacas, plus camping for more intrepid travellers. instagram.com/nomadaglamping593 MARÍA SILVIA AGUIRRE









Diego Mejia's top comfort eats

Diego is the owner of Sinfonía, a roastery and coffee shop. sinfoniacafe.com



TA'LICO CUISINE

Located a 10-minute drive from the historic centre, Cuenca's premier Chinese restaurant whips up classics including wonton (dumpling) soup, kung pao (stir-fry) chicken and spicy mapu tofu.

LA CHICHERÍA

This restaurant serves food inspired by the Andes region, from *llapingachos*, (potato patties) to classic *chicha* (Ecuadorian beer) flavoured with seasonal ingredients. facebook.com/lachicheriacuenca

BISTRO YAKU This is where French

cuisine meets local ingredients – think filet mignon and patisserie-styled desserts, but with a local twist. Come for the food, stay for the live music. facebook. com/bistroyaku

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Juan Sebastián Pérez's signature dish is a sliver of meat sliced at right angles, coated with a gelatinous gleam and topped with broccolini and a diaphanous amaranth cookie. It dissolves in the mouth like slow-cooked duck, while its translucent skin shatters like pork crackling; even the most worldly diner is unlikely to guess this is, in fact, guinea pig. It's a world away from the skewered and butterflied cuy (the Spanish word for guinea pig) on Quito's streets, a dish that's often described as dry and tough, even by its biggest fans. But at Quitu, his restaurant in the capital, Pérez has created a true high-end experience — and has done it all using local ingredients sourced personally by him.

Born in Quito into a family of hospitality professionals, Pérez says the passion for cooking runs in his DNA. As a teenager, he took odd jobs flipping burgers before travelling to Mexico City to study at Le Cordon Bleu, the top-of-the-range international network of haute cuisine schools, where he was introduced to fine-dining techniques. Four years later, back at home, he founded Urko, a restaurant that would grow into a Quito institution. "We used local ingredients, but there was no real identity," says Pérez.

Quitu is the distilled form of what Pérez started with Urko, which he's now left. In 2014, while looking for inspiration, he came across a newspaper report on a *pampamesa* harvest celebration in the rural area of Tarqui. He took an 11-hour overnight bus to be there the next day. "I saw all these fresh ingredients, which locals cooked directly on fire — there was no comparison," he says.

From that point on, he became obsessed with origin. For him, it's not enough to speak to vendors at the market; he pursues ingredients to their source, cultivating relationships with farmers and helping them realise the value in what they grow. "The producers are the ones with the knowledge—that's what inspires me," Pérez says. "I eat these ingredients with them, and in turn, they come here and try my recipes. They feel very proud of their work—it's emotional."

Pérez opened Quitu in 2015 with 10 seats. It's moved and grown; the current 20-seat restaurant in the capital's trendy La Floresta neighbourhood is its fourth location. Designed by the studio of Barbara Bermejo, Pérez's wife, the space has dark-wood ceilings styled after a 1950s Quito home, with pre-Incan ceramics that belonged to Pérez's mother.





The kitchen is a more experimental affair, where high-tech gadgets from Pérez's Cordon Bleu days alternate with ancestral techniques learned by sharing food with families in the countryside. "We cure fish by wrapping it in leaves, so we can make the umami explode," he says. "We use the charcoal grill, but we also do sous vide. We see it as a food think-tank."

An Andean staple, guinea pig presented a unique challenge: its meat is rich in collagen, which is lost through the traditional high-heat recipes of deep frying or fire roasting. At Quitu, it's cooked for 72 hours at low temperatures, then roasted. "The idea is to understand what you're preparing," he says. "This is how tradition meets haute cuisine."

A question of provenance

Of course, Pérez knows exactly where the guinea pigs come from — he even knows what they eat. They're part of a community-based project that sells young guinea pigs to Indigenous women, teaches them how to raise the animals, then buys them back as adults. Pérez has arranged for the guinea pigs to be fed medicinal herbs such as lavender leaves and Andean mint, working with a Quito-based company that sources herbal teas from Indigenous producers. And when it's time, the animals are killed using an ancestral technique that minimises both suffering and toxin release.

To Pérez, Quitu's *cuy* represents the coming together of those three elements. "It's become our signature dish for two reasons," he says. "The pride we feel when we serve it, and the creativity that goes into it."

The menu at the restaurant changes daily, with a bigger, structural change occurring every month, but certain ingredients crop up regularly. One of these is a purple Andean potato called tushpa and nicknamed puca shungo (red heart). Pérez discovered it at a pambamesa event, which led him to the single family in the area that was growing it commercially and selling it to the community; the popularity of disease-resistant monocrops had led this fragrant tuber to near-extinction. Pérez asked them to send him a sack of potatoes, on which he started to experiment. "Some of them had already sprouted, which means the starch had become sugar, so they had a deeper flavour," he says. "I started to cook them and, little by little, understand them." Today, puca shungo is served at Quitu three ways on one plate — queso fresco cheesestuffed spheres, 40-day-fermented tortilla cubes and 72-hour lactofermented cylinders. "Now, the family I work with have two acres of land," Pérez continues. "They're not only selling to me, they're selling to the industry."

However, it's perhaps ceviche — a dish just as Ecuadorian as it is Peruvian — that best typifies Pérez's approach.

Quitu's version features Galápagos grouper, and instead of peanuts, it's topped with seeds of Amazonian macambo, a close cousin of cacao with all the creaminess of white chocolate but none of the cloying sweetness.

Although common around the Galápagos Islands, the grouper's limited range makes it vulnerable to overfishing. To minimise impact, it's fished one by one, and even a single spoiled fish is a significant waste. In 2013, Pérez spent two weeks living in the village of Puerto Lopez with a family of fishermen, observing how they worked — a knowledge he then applied to source the grouper. To streamline the process, he collaborated with ShellCatch Ecuador, which develops apps that connect restaurants directly with fishermen. "That came four hours ago," he says, pointing to a chopped fillet in the process of being plated. "All the fishermen we work with have GPS, so we can see on our phones where they are. As soon as they catch something, I click 'order'."

Eventually, Pérez plans to relocate Quitu to farmland just outside Quito, so the restaurant can grow some of its own ingredients. "I see the city as a culinary destination," he says. "We need to work a lot, to improve. We need to be responsible for our sourcing, encourage producers to become more responsible and show travellers all the delicious food we have in the country — all in one place." quitu.ec



FIVE MORE SIGNATURE INGREDIENTS

Amaranth

Similar to quinoa, this pseudo-grain features in colada moradas, ceremonial drinks consumed during the Andean Day of the Dead. It was at the brink of extinction in Ecuador, where the Spanish banned production in the 16th century, fearing its spiritual connotations would inhibit the adoption of Catholicism.

Mashua

Rich in vitamin C and carotene, this peppery orange tuber is used as a natural medicine in Andean communities. It had fallen out of favour with younger generations, but more recently, it's found a new audience among the health conscious.

Speciality coffee beans

The coffee served at Quitu comes from the Finca Soledad farm in the Intag Valley, in Imbabura province. Owner José Pepe Jijón plants his coffee seeds in the wild, without disrupting the ecosystem. The flavour profile of each batch is developed by roasting and fermenting according to harvest conditions.

Amazonian vanilla beans

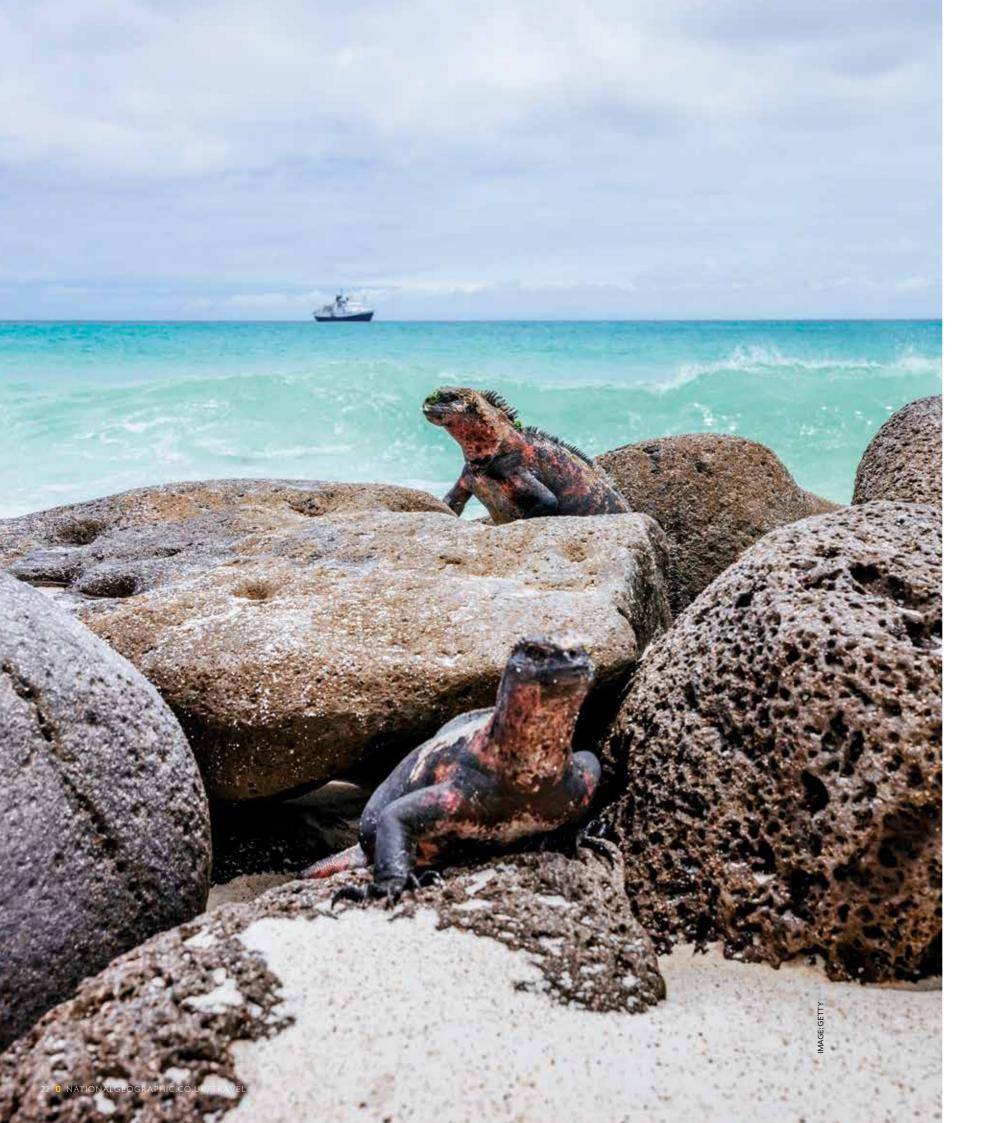
Quitu's vanilla grows on small plantations run by Indigenous families in the Ecuadorian Amazon. It's distinct from Madagascan vanilla in its fruity, floral notes, as well as hints of cinnamon, molasses and cacao.

Fien-aroma cacao

Fien-flavour cacao varieties are relatively rare, making up only 10% of global cacao production. The cacao used and served at Quitu comes from a 200-tree plantation in the Intag Valley; it's mixed with mineral water from the Cotopaxi volcano and injected with air to lighten the texture.

MAGES: GETTY; BEN P

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WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

The wildlife of Ecuador's Galápagos archipelago is the stuff of legends, providing travellers with an endless showreel of bold, unique species in and out of the water. Now, thanks to the expansion of the Galápagos Marine Reserve in 2022, there's even more space for these animals to thrive

WORDS: JAMES LITSTON

Flightless and famously clumsy on land, penguins are lovable at the best of times — but to see them underwater is an absolute revelation. A pair are swimming below me, nimbly dashing around as they twist, turn and pirouette in pursuit of silvery fish.

Between bursts of activity, they pop back to the surface. Through my mask, I watch their webbed feet paddle away, as, faces immersed, they look out for their next snack.

Taking to the water in the Galápagos feels like stumbling into a wildlife documentary. I'm on an expedition cruise of this Ecuadorian archipelago with local company Metropolitan Touring, exploring the recently expanded Galápagos Marine Reserve. Last year, the area under protection in these islands increased by almost 50% to nearly 77,200sq miles of precious ocean — that's 23,170sq miles of extra roaming space for the species living here.

Here on the uninhabited island of Bartolomé, it's the bold and playful Galápagos penguins that have stolen my heart. Our guides have gone to great lengths to remind us not to approach the archipelago's wildlife — one of the guidelines all visitors to the Galápagos National Park, which was established in 1959 and covers 97% of the archipelago, must adhere to. Yet, nobody seems to have alerted the animals, which don't seem to fear humans here. One of penguins heads straight towards me before diving down, leaving a trail of tiny bubbles in its wake.

They aren't the only wildlife we spot on this beach. Blue-footed boobies rain down, arrow-straight, to dive after fish, as a pelican on a rock lazily looks on. Before diving in, I had to tiptoe around sea lions sleeping on the steps where our dinghy pulled up on the shore. And now, in the water, I watch a sinuous specimen search for breakfast beneath rocky overhangs. Beaten by the chill ocean currents sweeping from Antarctica, I swim back to shore to join the iguanas basking in the sun.

Famously, it's this unique assemblage of wildlife — polar species, such as penguins, sea lions and fur seals, living

alongside sea turtles, iguanas and other species more typical of warmer climes — that makes the Galápagos unique. Dotting the Pacific Ocean around 600 miles from the Ecuadorian mainland, these volcanic islands of lava fields, scrub and forest have been isolated for millions of years. As a result, many species here, like the Galápagos penguins, are endemic to the archipelago.

To protect this delicate ecosystem, cruise ship schedules are managed by the Galápagos National Park to ensures no site receives more than 100 visitors at a time. The La Pinta expedition yacht I'm sailing on is a mid-sized vessel that can accommodate a maximum of 48 guests, which means that, during our four-night northern Galápagos tour, only once do we share a stop with another boat. And the experience of sailing across the archipelago is even more blissful for the fact we barely see another ship throughout our entire voyage. Out here on our own, nature feels raw and Edenic. On Bartolomé, the jagged lava fields look so prehistoric that the frigatebirds soaring overhead could almost be pterodactyls.

Island-hopping

Our Galápagos adventure begins on Baltra, one of the smaller islands, defined by basalt rock and sparse vegetation — a visible legacy of underlying volcanic activity — and home to one of the archipelago's two airports. Within minutes of touchdown, we meet our first endemics: a couple of chocolate-coloured land iguanas with cinnamon-speckled heads, basking on the tarmac. Wildlife always has the right of way on these roads, so our transfer to the pier is delayed as we wait for the two sunbathers to move sluggishly out of our way.

Each of the islands is as distinct as the wildlife it's home to. We see this difference for ourselves as a ferry hop brings us to Santa Cruz, a much larger island covered in tropical woodland. Here, we watch the scrubby, dry coastal forest become ever greener as we gain elevation, travelling to its uplands.

Eventually, we bump down a dirt track to reach Rancho El Manzanillo, a working farm where cattle, along with coffee and other crops, share the land with wild, giant Galápagos tortoises.

From left: Spotting Galápagos penguins is one of the highlights of Bartolomé Island; scuba divers preparing for a dive; the beautiful scenery of Bartolomé Island

Previous pages: Marine iguanas in Gardner Bay, on Española Island



"Each island has its own distinct species of tortoise," our guide Pancho Dousdebés explains, as we set off down a woodland trail in search of these Galápagos icons. "Some were wiped out soon after the islands were discovered in the 16th century. But here on Santa Cruz, they're thriving, with around 5,000 individuals."

As we walk, Pancho identifies a flock of small, dark birds as Darwin's finches, one of 17 species named after the 19th-century naturalist whose visit here inspired the then groundbreaking theory of natural selection. We watch them forage for grass seeds until Pancho draws our attention to what look like a boulder — before it stands up and walks a few steps on huge, muscular legs.

"See those lichens on the tortoise's carapace?" Pancho asks. "That's a sign of age. He could easily be 110 years old." We follow the tortoise as he joins a gathering of others in a muddy pool, settling together like a series of stepping stones.

But as memorable as these land experiences may be, it's the marine encounters I have on the cruise that most fill me with joy. La Pinta provides its guests with standup paddleboards and kayaks, and it also offers guided safaris in rigid inflatable boats, but I take every

opportunity to immerse myself in the water. After Bartolomé, we sail on to Genovesa Island and drop anchor beneath the cliffs of a flooded caldera. Strolling along the beach, we watch sea lion pups learn to swim in the shallows. Seabirds nest alongside the path, while marine iguanas bask on the rocks. Slipping into the waters once more, I soon spot fish whose bright yellow lips and eye patches make them look as though they've applied makeup in the dark. There are green turtles, and, coasting below them, several hammerhead sharks — just one of many migratory marine species that will benefit from the Galápagos Marine Reserve's recent expansion. Bobbing here in the water, I can't help but feel elated for my bold fishy friends.



Windows on the Wild can package the entire journey from Quito to the Galápagos, including an overnight in Guayaquil; three nights' B&B at Finch Bay Galápagos Hotel, on Santa Cruz Island; and a four-night cruise (full board). From £6,925 per person.

windowsonthewild.com

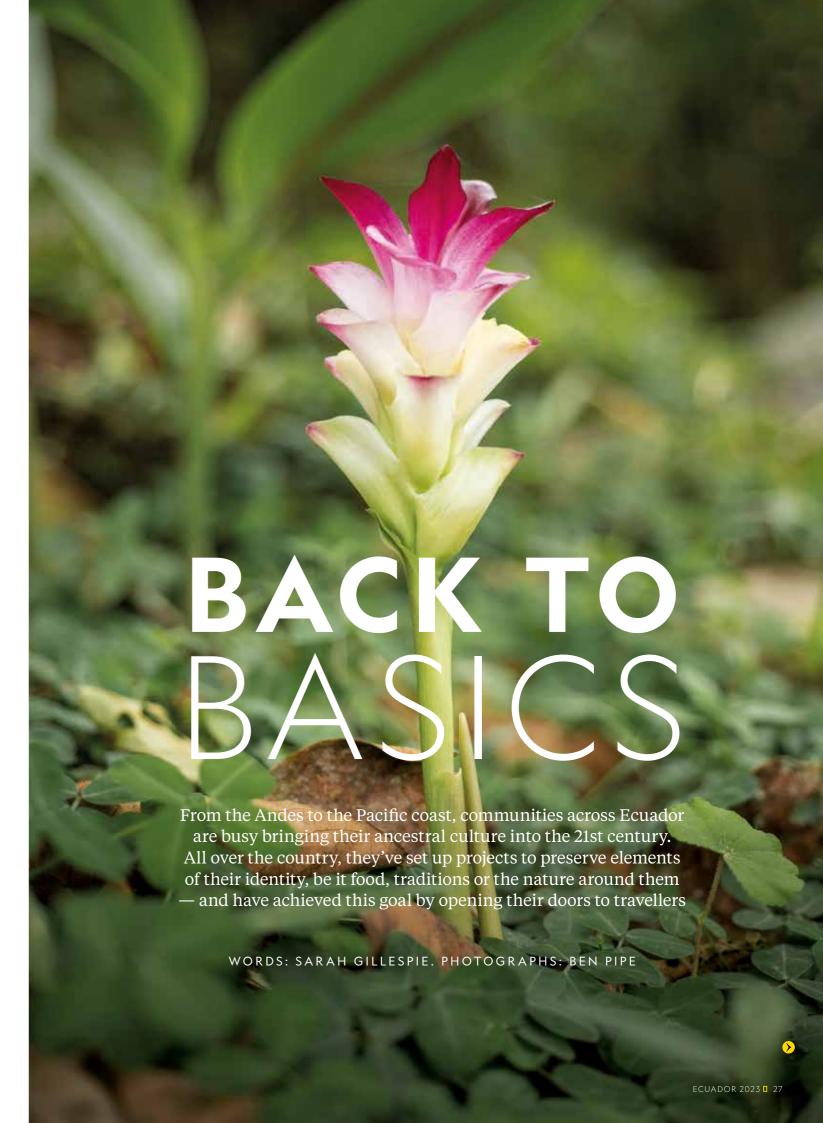
Metropolitan Touring claims to have set up its operation with the aim of being carbon neutral. Its offsetting project endeavours to protect 34,600 acres of rainforest. metropolitan-touring.com

















CUISINE

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

In the Manabí province on the country's Pacific coast, ICHE, a food school and restaurant, is passing down ancient culinary traditions to a new generation of Ecuadorian chefs and curious diners

Valentina Alvarez is a woman in constant motion. "Here — try it. Taste it; it's sweet." She presses a sticky, powdery clump into my hand, and I do as requested. It tastes fruity, salty and earthy all at the same time. I'm chewing on plantain dipped in salprieta, a condiment of ground annatto seeds with chillies, peanuts and corn — three of the four culinary pillars of Manabí, a province on Ecuador's Pacific coast.

Valentina is now busy squashing the fourth one, cassava, into balls of dough. A firm, stubby root vegetable, it comes in endless permutations in Ecuador; here at ICHE, a restaurant, culinary school and food development lab just north of the town of San Vicente, it will become pan de yuca, marble-sized bread rolls. She bakes them in a manabita oven, a hemispherical clay pit topped by a removable grill, and throws in dried yellow corn, where it jumps and sputters. When the oven grill's removed, it can be used like a tandoor; with it, it's a stove. Valentina claims it has more than 14 other uses. including smoking, slow-cooking, dehydrating and fermenting — as well as drying clothes.

The use of this ancestral type of oven from Manabí province is just one of many culinary traditions that ICHE aims to both preserve and build on, teaching the students of its on-site culinary school age-old techniques while redefining what's possible with homegrown food. All ingredients come from within a 20-mile radius of the property - many from its own herb garden.

On first impression, it might seem that Manabí cuisine needs no preserving. Ecuador's original Manabí civilisation was destroyed by conquistadors in the 16th century — the name is now a geographic rather than ethnic label — but its culinary traditions seem alive and well. From Quito to the Amazon, Ecuadorians speak of Manabí food with hushed reverence. Walk around Playita Mia fish market in Manta — a port city that's the province's main hub — and you'll see hundreds of diners tucking into traditional dishes such as estofado de murico, a stew of peanuts and native murico fish, and encebollado, a type of tuna soup.

But it's a new generation of Ecuadorians that Orazio Bellettini, a Manabí native who founded ICHE in 2021, is hoping to reach. "Young people have lost interested in using this," he says, pointing to the manabita oven. "It looks like something from the past." Orazio was executive director of Quito-

based Grupo FARO, a think tank conducting research on how to build a more inclusive society, when, in 2016, an earthquake hit Manabí, levelling 35,000 homes. "The economy was destroyed, people were left without hope," he says. "I felt the duty of coming back and doing something." Orazio and his wife, Adriana Arellano, ploughed all their savings into a Manabí cuisine onestop shop. "Food can be a powerful tool: to reactivate the economy, to increase people's self-esteem, to unleash hopes and creativity."

TOP FIVE INDIGENOUS PRODUCTS

A food development lab, Canopy Bridge helps Amazonian communities produce and market food products to shops and restaurants, including ICHE. Co-founder Marta Echevarria picks five signature ones

■ Macambo Closely related to cacao, macambo seeds can replace nuts in any recipe. Canopy Bridge uses them in a range of salted and chocolate-coated snacks.

Neapia Marta describes this smoky black chilli paste, made by the Indigenous Siekopai people, as the 'miso of the jungle'. It's longlasting, too - Marta claims to have kept a jar for five years.

3 Chicha de chonta This is a contemporary take on chicha, an Indigenous fermented drink often compared to beer, made using chonta (peach palm) fruits. It tastes like a summer IPA: tart and light with a fruity nose.

4 Cassava 'yogurt' with araza compote

This cassava-based yogurt alternative is a great option for people who are lactose intolerant, with a high level of probiotics.

5 Morete ice cream
Supporting species such as the tapir and peccary, the morete plant is excellent for regenerating forests. Its sweet fruit can be used to make a dairy-free ice cream: its fattiness means no milk is needed.

Tours of Canopy Bridge, in the town of Archidona, cost £8-40 and must be arranged in advance. canopybridge.com

Clockwise from top left: Los Frailes, a beach in Manabí; a passion colada cocktail served at ICHE restaurant; Marta Echevarria, cofounder of Canopy Bridge

Previous pages from left: Portrait of a local at Hacienda Zuleta, Imbabura; a flower at Mashpi Lodge, Pichincha

The resulting stilted, wood-and-glass complex is a modern take on a traditional Manabí home. Here at ICHE, a trio of chefs — Valentina, who I've met, plus Angel de Sousa and executive chef Philip Salas — teach Manabí cuisine to 20 students; those from Manabí receive grants, funded by fees paid by students from other parts of the country. In the morning, they study; in the afternoon, they work in ICHE's restaurant and bar.

It's where I'm now sitting, ready to try some creations. Compared with the Ecuadorian food served by Valentina at the demo station, the restaurant's repertoire is more akin to the international culinary scene I'm familiar with: 'carpaccio', 'quenelle' and 'confit' are all terms that feature on the menu. What's unfamiliar are the ingredients, which are unapologetically Manabí.

Today, I'm served *chicharrón*, a dish of deep-fried sea bass skins and strips of palm heart — "parts that normally go unused," Angel tells me. It's garnished with carrots soaked in plantain vinegar and chicory from the restaurant's herb garden. The *chicharrón* shatters in my mouth, with the fruity tang of vinegar cutting through the fattiness.

Our barman today is Fernando Dueñas, who recently graduated from the ICHE school programme. "Even though the idea of the project is to rescue Manabita cuisine, we're also adding in European techniques," he says, mixing *currincho* (Manabí sugarcane liquor) with clarified coconut milk and passionfruit. "That way, we can keep reinventing the cuisine here in Ecuador." Fernando's ultimate goal is to formalise *currincho* distillation

— currently a process that mostly takes place in backyard barrels — then start exporting it around the world. "I believe it could become a signature product," he says, popping a straw made from papaya wood into my drink.

Then, Angel places a steaming bowl before me. It's *colada morada*, an Ecuadorian drink that's purple, spiced and traditionally consumed on the Day of the Dead. It has numerous ingredients, chiefly pineapple peel, acidic *mortiño* blueberries, papaya-like *babaco* fruit and cinnamon. "Two pages of ingredients go into this," says Adriana, laughing.

Meanwhile, Valentina has finished baking the *pan de yuca* she's been working on. She tops it with butter, which has the texture of clotted cream and melts into oil as it makes contact with the hot bread, then thrusts out a hand. "Here. Try it. Try it!" The bread has a fibrous texture and faint vegetable scent; the butter, sour and sharp, runs down my fingers.

Valentina looks down at a bowl of leftover yellow corn, still hot and crackling. "You have a piece of our ancestors in this dish," she says. She gestures around at the restaurant, its herb garden and manabita ovens. "If this place disappears..." Valentina's voice trails off and she falls silent for a moment. But the pause is short-lived and once again she's on the move. She grabs the bowl of plantain balls and waves it in front of my nose. "Uno mas?"

HOW TO DO IT

A seven-course tasting menu at ICHE costs £42, including wine, and must be booked at least one day in advance. For Manabí cookery demonstrations and lab tours, contact the team. icherestaurante.com

THREE TO TRY RESTAURANTS IN MANTA

The largest coastal hub in Manabí, this port city is a go-to for traditional specialities

Muya

Chef Cecelia Cedeño's restaurant is a homage to her Manabí roots. Food is served in maté-wood bowls, while the counter showcases cooking contraptions passed down from her grandparents. facebook. com/muyacocinagourmet

Iche Cocina Manabita

As well as ceviche, you'll find corviche (deep-fried balls of mashed green plantain, fish and peanuts) and viche (a peanut-heavy seafood soup). The Comadritas de Papel platter, meanwhile, is a culinary tour of Manabí meats and cheeses. iche.com.ec

Casa Rosada

This dining complex has a traditional ground-floor cafe, while the restaurant on the first and second floors is a more formal affair. On the rooftop, a terrace bar has scenic views over the Pacific. facebook.com/restaurante casarosadaecuador

If you're spending the night in Manta, bed down at the five-star Oro Verde Manta. $\underline{\text{oroverdemanta.com}}$

Clockwise from top left:
Fruit being cooked to create
a colada morada drink; the
bartender at ICHE restaurant;
plantain dumpling filled with
pork menestra and topped
with herbs; ICHE restaurant









COMMUNITY

PASSING THE TORCH

Around the grounds of Hacienda Zuleta, the local Andean community works across a range of initiatives to tell the story of their ancestors and celebrate century-old traditions

"Juyayay!" Echoes whip round the volcanobound valley, bouncing from one mountain to another; it's a good 20 seconds before they die away. We're standing on a pyramid built by the Indigenous Caranqui people, ancestors of Amable Chachalo, who's my guide for the day. Amable lowers his hands as he turns to me, then smiles. "This area is magical," he says.

We're on the grounds of Hacienda Zuleta, an estate that sprawls across 5,000 acres of pastureland and forest in Imbabura Province. The Caranquis lived here, high in the northern foothills of the Andes, from around 700-1500, when they were conquered by the Incas — who, in turn, were conquered by the Spanish just one generation later, in 1534.

The story of Hacienda Zuleta would start two centuries later as a Spanish ranch and textile mill. Since 1898, it has belonged to the Plaza-Lasso family, which has given Ecuador two presidents: Leónidas Plaza and his son, Galo Plaza Lasso. Through all this, descendants of the Caranquis have remained here; around 90% of the hacienda staff live in the surrounding communities.

The homestead is still owned by Galo Plaza's children and grandchildren, who run it as a hotel. Yet, they retained its roots as a working farm: there's an organic vegetable garden, a dairy farm with Holsteins cows and a cheese

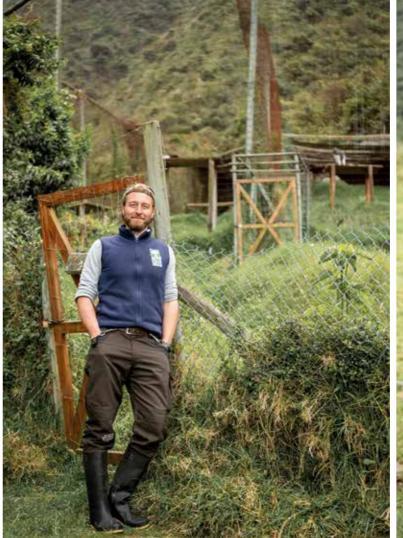
factory producing 14 varieties. Visitors can take part in activities including cycling, horse riding and cooking classes, plus bonfire parties with Andean dancers.

But today, we're visiting Hacienda Zuleta's Condor Huasi, which works to increase the number of Andean condors in the region. We clamber down from the pyramid and walk further along the valley to meet Yann Potaufeu, the main biologist on the project, at the aviary. When we arrive, he's waiting for an egg to hatch. Hardly an easy task: not only are condors monogamous, but they're also notoriously picky. Even when a match is made, each couple lays just one egg at a time; it took 11 years for the first one to hatch at Condor Huasi. "As you can see from my face, I'm pretty tired," Yann says.

And once the birds are outside, it's no easier. Besides having their habitat cleared for farmland, condors are subject to multiple misconceptions, such as the notion that they carry off sheep and children. In Ecuador, there are now only about 150 left in the wild. "Within three years, we lost 15 condors to poisoning and six to hunting," says Yann. "Before we can let them out, we have to fix what's happening." Yann hopes to do this by educating local communities. "We have to fight these stories, but it takes decades."

Clockwise from top: The countryside around Hacienda Zuleta; Zuleteño horses, a local mix of Andalusian, English and quarter breeds; biologist Yann Potaufeu at Condor Huasi







From top: Guide Amable Chachalo in front of Casa Museo Carangue; the interior of Hacienda Zuleta



A question of legacy

Galo Plaza was known for his land reform policies, which returned substantial tracts of land to ancestral communities and paved the way for a resurgence of indigenous culture in Imbabura. In 1995, his family created the non-governmental, non-profit Galo Plaza Lasso Foundation to continue this legacy of cultural preservation. "As a family, we've always been sensitive to community problems," says Margarita Plaza Pallares, Galo Plaza's daughter, cradling a glass of wine next to one of the hacienda's many fireplaces.

As part of the foundation, Margarita's mother Rosario opened a workshop in the Zuleta area to celebrate the pre-Columbian tradition of embroidery. "When women are entrepreneurs, they make a change in society," says Margarita. Here, they give lessons to visitors and create crafts to sell in the hacienda's shop or through their businesses.

We meet them at the Zuleta community centre, where Indigenous people from the local village — who call themselves Zuleteños, settled here since the time of the Caranquis — gather on weekends and public holidays to sell wares. Hand-stitched goods are spread over stalls, the embroidered birds and vines bursting forth from crisp white cotton. "When I got pregnant, the money I earned from embroidery allowed me to finish my studies,"

says Eliana Chicaiza, practically disappearing behind a profusion of embroidered flowers.

The market is a riot of sound and colour. A group from the local Sumak Sisaku dance school flit by in embroidered skirts and blouses, a peacock feather set into each hat, while stallholders hawk knitwear and wood carvings. Amable tells me that rather than buckling during the pandemic, the Zuleta community was reborn. "Many people from Quito came back to start businesses," he says. "They saw more opportunity here."

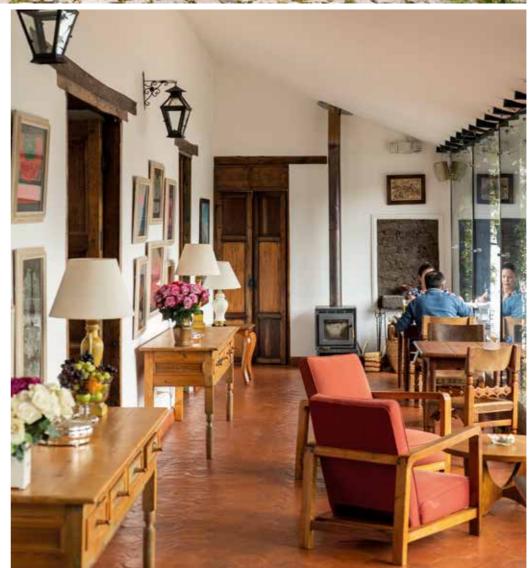
One such entrepreneur is Alexis Rivera, who has collected 35 Ecuadorian herbs into Wasikamak, a spirit he describes as an Andean Jägermeister. "I started this business during the pandemic," he says, handing me a shot of warming liquor. His stall isn't a usual fixture of the market — he's here only for the public holiday — but his drinks are sold in shops around Zuleta. To make Wasikamak, Alexis macerates the herbs in alcohol for six weeks, then ages them for three months in American oak barrels. He claims that one of the ingredients, an Andean herb called *sunfo*, will help with my altitude sickness, but it makes the market blur instead.

To clear my head, we travel further up into the mountains. We pass women in alpaca-wool skirts, tilling fields; Amable knows each one by name. We stop at the Casa Museo Carangue, a museum of Caranqui culture created and maintained by Amable himself, who ushers me into the adobe hut and closes the door. The sound of the wind fades to a murmur as a shaft of light illuminates the bones of a young Caranqui woman in a glass-topped urn. Amable pulls up a log stool and sits on it. "I started with a dream," he says.

His dream was to create a homage to the Caranguis who lived in this area — the "common people", as Amable says. He points at a row of pots that were once his grandmother's. "When plastic arrived in Ecuador, people stopped using these," he says, before describing how they were used to make chicha, a fermented corn drink. "I want people to have *chicha* every day," he says. "I want to rescue these costumes, these traditions." He walks over to the far wall and grabs a red wool poncho that belonged to his grandfather. Amable is — by any measure — a short man. But when he dons his grandfather's poncho, standing in the museum that he created, he appears several inches taller.

ном то DO IT

Double rooms at Hacienda Zuleta start at £296 per night, with discounts available for long stays or large groups. All excursions and activities, including visits to Condor Huasi and the Zuleta community, can be arranged through the hacienda. zuleta.com



THREE MORE CULTURAL EXPERIENCES

All across the country, Ecuadorians are working to preserve traditions

Agua Blanca Community

The Manteño people lived in Manabí from the years 800-1500; now, a group of descendants tell their stories at a settlement in Machalilla National Park. There's an archaeological site, a museum and a market selling souvenirs, plus a modest spa. Visit for a sulphurous full-body wrap using Agua Blanca lagoon mud or a massage with oils from the palo santo 'holy tree', once used during Manteño ceremonial rites. comunidadaguablanca.com

Amupakin Community

The Asociación de Mujeres (Midwives' Association) in Archidona, a town in Napo Province, works to preserve Indigenous Kichwa culture and teach women life skills such as cooking and weaving, as well as providing shelter to victims of domestic violence. You'll have to be an early riser to witness their fireside 'energising' ceremony, where they share guayusa tea and chicha beer. amupakin.org

Otavalo Cemetery

Located in the town of Otavalo in Imbabura province, this hillside cemetery is divided into two parts. There are the sombre, stacked graves of the mestizos and the basic – but more festive – white crosses in the Indigenous burial site. Mondays and Thursdays are the official commemoration days, when Otavaleños gather to share meals and songs with the departed and vendors sell flowers. On the Day of the Dead, these celebrations become a full-on party.

NATURE

THE CALL OF THE FOREST

Sky-high in the Andes, Mashpi Lodge offers intrepid travellers the opportunity to come face to face with the cloud forest's residents

The thing about the cloud forest is that it really is cloudy. It sounds obvious, but you fail to comprehend it until the clouds descend, turning greens to greys, then darker still. Monsters hide in the mist. A vine, thick as a wrist, slaps our windscreen. Leaves like a Pteranodon's head loom, tumescent flowers sneer. Moss-choked trees paw at an ashen sky. It's the forest redesigned by sci-fi artist HR Giger — an Ecuadorian space opera unfolding.

We pull up at Mashpi Lodge and hurry inside; the door seals shut with a satisfying 'shhhp', and not even bugs follow inside. The five-star property was envisioned as a cocoon — a warm nest in the centre of a 2,500-acre swathe of Ecuador's Chocó forest. In reality, it's more like a hermetically sealed IMAX with glass walls that show the forest's screenplay. Every seat is premium; even the guestrooms have floor-to-ceiling windows, with remotecontrolled blinds that lift like a safety curtain to reveal the action.

Despite the dramatic opening sequence, it quickly becomes apparent the reserve is far less menacing than it looks. On our first walk, expedition leader Nestor Paladines warns of vipers with a bite that causes necrosis and eventual death, before reassuring us that no visitor has ever been bitten — and, if they were, an army of doctors would arrive within

minutes with the required antivenom. That evening, we spot an acid-green vine snake, but the colour is just for show: it has only mild venom that causes no real harm to humans.

Still, thrills are available to those who seek them. Vertiginous side trails get us acquainted not just with the many faces of the forest, but with its fingers and toes, too. I slip on mossy copal roots as I walk; up in the clouds, treebound philodendrons lower long tendrils that brush against my shoulders.

This is untouched primary forest, which makes up most of Mashpi. A timber company abandoned the area around 40 years ago, its logging efforts thwarted by the steep terrain. Yet, locals continued to hack away at the edges, selling wood and clearing space for pastures. Drawn by the area's biodiversity, former mayor of Quito Roque Sevilla bought the land in 2001 with the intention of turning it into an attraction. He built the lodge without felling a single additional tree.

The guardians of the forest

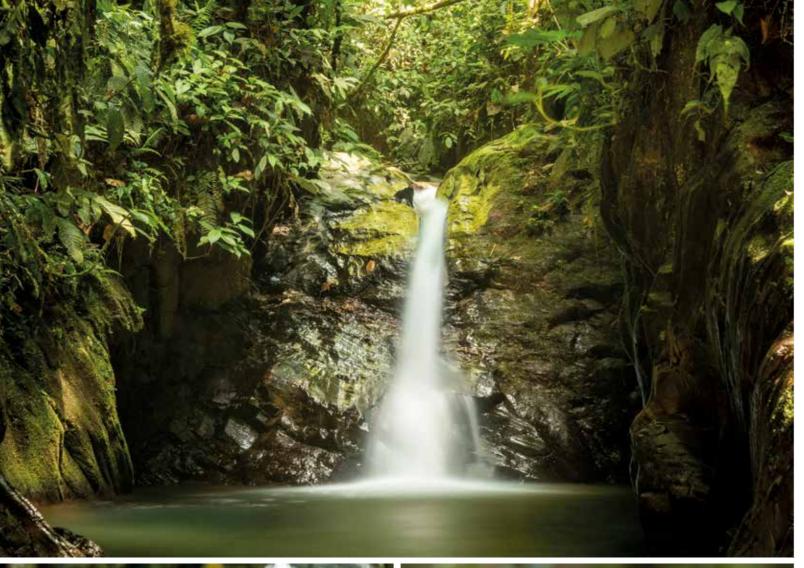
We get a different view of the primary forest from the Dragonfly, a cable-car ride that descends from cloud forest — technically, sections of rainforest found over 3,000ft above sea level — to rainforest. "Man hasn't touched this place; every bit of space is taken up with

Clockwise from right: Guide Estuardo Lima hiking in the cloud forest; hummingbirds at Mashpi Lodge's feeding stations; a meal served at Masphi Lodge













 ${\sf Clockwise}\, from\, top\, left:$ A waterfall at the Masphi reserve; a guide and guest enjoying the view; a birdspotting sheet; Masphi guide Gustavo Valarezo



nature," says guide Gustavo Valarezo. He points to a symbiotic tangle of trees, each host to around 30 other plant species. A bird-sized butterfly flashes blue-white over the canopy.

Profits from the lodge's hefty price tag go into research projects taking place in on-site facilities, most of which are open to visitors. And some task it is: Mashpi is home to 1,700 species, of which 10 are endemic to the area.

I'm handed a fact sheet about these species and start treating it like a bingo card, ticking off as many as I can. It proves difficult; even the Mashpi magnolia — surely a static adversary — shows up only in spoon-shaped petals scattered over our path. We have more luck with the Mashpi frog, while examples of Mashpi's two orchid species are displayed in the Life Centre, Mashpi's main wildlifeviewing spot.

It's Estuardo Lima who takes us there. Like 85% of Mashpi staff, he comes from the area surrounding the lodge, his senses synchronised with the rhythms of the forest. On our way, he spots a spiny dwarf iguana — "he's always here around this time" - and the nest of a slate-throated redstart, a mere two-inch-wide hole in a leaf-covered wall. "I've lived here my whole life," he says, shrugging, when I ask how he found it. From here, it's possible to see tanager birds, agouti (a guinea pig-like rodent) and toucans that hop from one branch to the next.

We duck into the main building to marvel at those orchids and speak to Dario Medina, known here as Mashpi's 'butterfly father'. Formerly a farmer from the nearby village of Pachijal, he now gives talks on the life cycle of these insects. "We used to consider them pests," says Dario, indicating a cabinet of caterpillars in varying stages of pupation. "But then I learned about their behaviour and beauty. I started sharing my knowledge, so that people won't be afraid; instead of killing, they'll protect."

We exit, pursued by butterflies, and scramble up a steep incline to the observation tower — a 162-step climb up 100ft-high, vertigo-inducing scaffolding. Guide Jacqueline Paladines, who also comes from Pachijal, looks serenely over the edge. "It's magical when the clouds move," she says. As my stomach settles, I survey the scene: grey clouds, violet horizon, tendrilous trees lit by a red sliver of sun. I quip that a view like this needs a soundtrack, but there's just the rasp of labiated rain frogs. And yet, how close it all was to being destroyed. This may be the hottest ticket in town — but it's the backstage staff that really make the show.

HOW TO DO IT

Doubles at Mashpi Lodge start from £1,131 per night. The rate includes meals, tours, non-alcoholic drinks and transfers from Quito. mashpilodge.com



QUITO

Old-world charm meets cutting-edge cuisine and bohemian flair in Ecuador's lively capital, rewarding travellers who venture beyond the grand plazas and imposing churches of its UNESCO-awarded core

WORDS: SARAH GILLESPIE

Ecuador's Andean capital sits over 9,000ft above sea level, but it's not just the altitude that takes your breath away. The city appears to be poured into a dramatic valley, encircled by snow-cloaked volcanoes of which Quiteños speak as one would of neighbours or old friends: Cotopaxi, Cayambe, Pichincha, to name a few.

Less ancient, yet old by any human measure, is the 16th-century architecture. Catholic and Jesuit churches pepper the magnificent Old Town of Quito, which was among the first cites to be declared an UNESCO World Heritage Site and is the oldest of all the South American capitals, founded by conquistador Francisco Pizarro in 1534. Adding to the historic ambience are pastel-hued, Spanish-era townhouses; fuchsia geraniums trail from their balconies, giving Quito its nickname, the Pink City.

Outside the historic core, architectural styles get looser and the neighbourhoods cooler. In Mariscal Sucre, local Quiteños and gringos (foreigners) cut loose at packed clubs; in La Carolina, joggers throng its eponymous park. The place to be, though, is La Floresta: a graffiti-scrawled artists' refuge, where every surface is a canvas. Founded in 1917, this bohemian 'hood is home to open-air bars and cafes, as well as high-end Ecuadorian and international restaurants. This marks a change: just a decade ago, cheap almuerzo lunch deals — fruit juice, soup and meat with rice and beans — were the only option around.

While in Quito, be sure to try Ecuadorian coffee and chocolate: despite their quality, these products often don't make it overseas without being blended with lesser goods, so fill up while you can. And why not? After all, it's said you require more calories at altitude.

SEE & DO

Basílica del Voto Nacional: Begun in 1892, this neogothic cathedral proved so lavish and costly it became a trigger point in Ecuador's 1895 Liberal Revolution. It's a wonder to look at, with condor, iguana and tortoise gargoyles, and stained-glass windows displaying some of Ecuador's 1,710 endemic orchid species. Tackle the climb up the towers for one of the best views in town. Iglesia de la Compañía: It took the Jesuits 160 years to finish this Historic Centre church in 1765 — possibly because they were busy coating every surface in gold leaf. The result is a dazzling fusion of baroque and rococo styles. Look out for the impressive trompe-l'œil staircase and columns.

Street art: Most of Quito's murals are in La Floresta, where artists grapple with themes of identity and $\,$ politics. However, one of the most memorable is on Avenida 24 de Mayo, between the Old Town and San Sebastián neighbourhoods. Here, in 2022, the government commissioned Spanish enfant terrible Okuda San Miguel to paint a mural marking 200 years of Ecuadorian independence. This he did — adding a giant Japanese Pikachu character in the centre.

Museo Nacional: One of the country's largest collections of Ecuadorian art includes more than 1,000 ceramic pieces dating as far back as 11,000 BC, as well as a mesmerising collection of pre-Columbian masks in the Sala de Oro (Gold Room). A wander through the Colonial Art gallery is essential to understand the complex power dynamics of that period; harrowing contemporary works by Oswaldo Guayasamı́n offer a modern perspective.

LIKE A LOCAL

Festive decorations: Catch a taxi or local bus to the suburb of Calderón, Ecuador's capital of *mazapán*. These colourful piped dough designs festoon Ecuadorian high days, but can be purchased here year-round in local stores. Before heading back to Quito, stop at Avenida 9 de Agosto, where murals depict Abdón Calderón, the young hero of Ecuadorian independence, after whom the town is named. Ochoymedio: A La Floresta institution since 2001, Quito's only independent cinema hosts regular film festivals and international screenings. If there aren't any Englishlanguage showings, it's still worth settling down with a coffee or glass of wine in the movie-themed Rio Intag cafe. ochovmedio.net Promenade in the plaza: Join colourfully attired Quiteños as they take some air and watch street performers in Plaza de la Independencia. Generally, indigenous women's dress comprises a skirt, blouse, shawl and hat — but subtle differences indicate which community they belong to. You can pick up indigenous textiles and jewellery at the Mercado Artesanal La Mariscal.

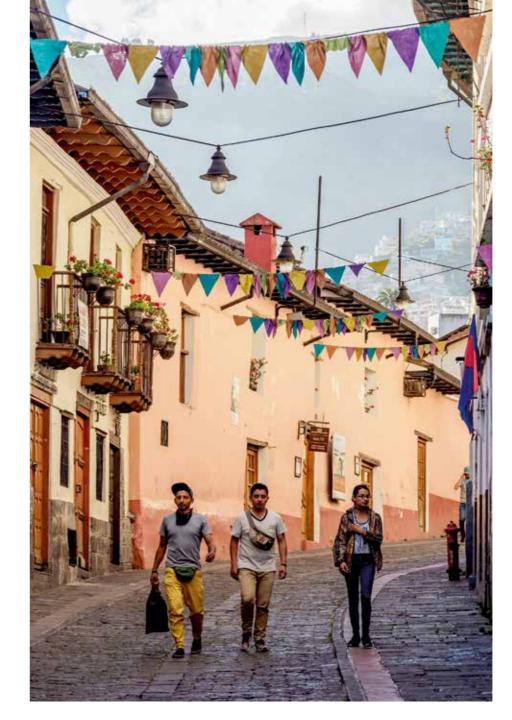
Panama hats: Although the name suggests otherwise, Panama hats are actually made in Ecuador's Manabí province. True Panamas can take months to weave and cost thousands of dollars, so markets in Latin America can be flooded with cheap fakes. You'll find affordable yet genuine articles at Sombreros López, which has sold all manner of smart headgear since 1920. sombreros-humacatama.negocio.site Chocolate: República del Cacao in the Old Town sells single-origin chocolate from small Ecuadorian farms, with products organised by region, from Amazonia to the Galápagos. Pull up a wicker chair in the cafe and feast on red velvet sponges and mirror-like ganache, as well as hot chocolate served in cacao-podshaped cups. republicadelcacao.com Crafts: Handicrafts from all over Ecuador are sold at the Mercado Artesanal La Mariscal, at 611 Jorge Washington in Mariscal Sucre, the northern neighbourhood beloved by backpackers. Browse the 200 stalls that sell

everything from panpipes and jewellery to alpaca-wool blankets and tapestries made by

Indigenous Salasaca people.

this bolthole in Mariscal Sucre is geared towards longer stays. There's a coworking space for nomadic types, plus a busy calendar of social events such as yoga classes, karaoke nights and all-you-can-drink happy hours. Tours include guided hikes to the Pichincha and Cotopaxi volcanoes. selina.com **32** Swissôtel: The hotel chain's Quito outpost in La Floresta has all the luxurious facilities you'd expect, yet the dark-wood interiors look more boutique than branded. As well as high-end Ecuadorian and Japanese restaurants, the hotel provides one of the best breakfast buffets in Quito: churros, Amazonian fruits, ceviche, sliders and buildyour-own omelettes. swissotel.com between Old Town museums, this designforward property takes the promise in its name seriously. You might find yourself churning strawberry sorbet in a bronze pail or painting a watercolour of the Quito skyline, all under the supervision of artisans who are experts in ancestral techniques. illaexperiencehotel.com

6 Selina Quito: More 'poshtel' than hostel,



"Ecuadorians are strange and unique beings: they sleep peacefully amidst rumbling volcanoes, they live poor amidst untold riches, and they delight in sad music." Alexander von Humboldt. German explorer

From left: Indigenous textiles and jewellery, like those found at Mercado Artesanal La Mariscal; souvenirs on sale at Peguche Handicrafts, Old Town; geraniums spill from balconies in La Ronda street, Old Town

Previous pages: Jervis Café in the bohemian neighbourhood of La Floresta

Parque José Navarro: Head to this market in Avenidas Ladrón de Guevara for street food specialities such as tripa mishqui (pork tripe with potatoes), sweet pristiños pastries and a hearty lamb's intestine soup known as yaguarlocro. It runs daily in the afternoons, except on the second Sunday of the month. 36 Jervis Café: When Jervis opened in La Floresta in 2013, it was one of the first cafes in Ouito with outdoor seating. Owner Ruben Benavides makes a serious coffee brew, using full-bodied Arabica beans grown at altitude in the southern Andean province of Loja. jerviscafe.negocio.site

333 Banh Mi: Among the gastronomic gems in Quito's restaurant scene is this pan-Asian option, which opened in 2016. Try fusion dishes like tuna ceviche with sushi nori and coconut milk or phad krapao, which combines wok-charred llama meat with Thai basil. banhmi.ec

AFTER HOURS

Sinners Microcervecería: The quinoa, corn and lemon verbena-based beers at this microbrewery have scooped multiple international awards. The original venue, in the trendy La Pradera neighbourhood, serves up 'dirty' nachos and sticky wings in a muralfilled space. sinnersfloresta.com

Casa Gangotena: A former Colonia-era mansion on Plaza San Francisco, this palazzo hotel was rebuilt with new columns, fountains and murals after a fire in 1914. Cocktails served in the dimly lit bar incorporate Ecuadorian cane liquor. casagangotena.com

Jacchigua Living Museum: The Jacchigua National Folkloric Ballet perform traditional Andean dances every Wednesday in the former Belmonte bullring. You'll also find a programme of ballet, concerts and operas, showcasing acts from Ecuador and beyond, at the Teatro Nacional Sucre, a short walk away. jacchigua.org teatrosucre.com

GETTING THERE & AROUND

There are no direct flights to Quito from the UK. American Airlines, British Airways and Iberia offer routes from Heathrow via Miami, while KLM flies via Amsterdam aa.com ba.com iberia.com klm.com

Average journey time: 17h.

Quito is small and walkable: buses and taxis are inexpensive, but traffic can be an issue in the morning and late afternoon

WHEN TO GO

Ecuador's dry season runs from June to September, with rainfall peaking in April. Temperatures remain constant yearround, averaging 19C during the day and 9C at night. National holidays such as Holy Week (April/May) and Day of the Dead (1-2 November) can be great times to visit.

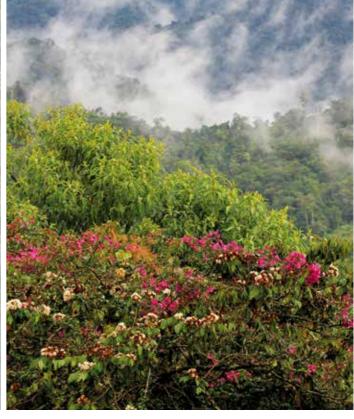
MORE INFORMATION ecuador.travel











Try extreme sports BEST FOR: INTREPID TRAVELLERS

Not all travellers will jump at the opportunity to fling themselves off the edge of an Amazonian waterfall, but those who do should head to Baños. Located on the outskirts of the rainforest, this pretty city is the gateway to the Ruta de las Cascadas (Waterfall Route), which takes in several thundering cascades. Intrepid visitors can join one of the area's popular canyoning tours, navigating the mountain streams that flow through local gorges, accompanied by local guides. Slide along gentle chutes and abseil down higher drops, supported by a rope wrapped around the river-battered rocks, before swimming in the natural pools below. Alternatively, try paragliding or zip-lining at high speed above the Amazonian treeline. Once back in Baños, reward yourself with a dip in one of the town's mineral-rich hot springs.

2 Explore the cloud forests BEST FOR: WILDLIFE SPOTTERS

All around Mindo, in the north of the country, white clouds wrap around a patch of jungle elevated by the Andes. This small town is set high in Ecuador's cloud forest — sections of rainforest found at altitudes above 3,000ft. Mindo's rare vantage point makes it one of the best spots in the rainforest for birdwatching, with the canopy home to species including rare golden-headed quetzals, colourful tanagers and long-billed toucans. Keep an eye out for the striking scarlet mohawks of the cocks-of-the-rock. These birds are famous for more than their distinctive name: with elaborate mating displays and voluminous plumes, they put on one of the Amazon's most compelling shows. The males' dance, designed to demonstrate their masculinity, lasts for around 20 minutes and is most often spotted in the early morning.

3 Discover Huaorani territory BEST FOR: THE CULTURALLY CURIOUS

Learn about one of the oldest surviving Amazonian cultures by heading deep into Huaorani territory, a small stretch of the Ecuadorian rainforest between the Curaray and Napo rivers. The Indigenous Huaorani tribe is one of the world's most isolated, having had virtually no contact with the outside world until recent decades. Accompanied and guided by some of the more modern members of the tribe, travellers can participate in Huaorani customs and daily rituals, including preparing their traditional cuisine. There's even the chance to take a quick course in fashioning sharpened darts dipped in paralysing *curare* poison. The darts are then shot through blowguns, a skill travellers can observe at hunting parties or on outings while tracking monkeys, birds and tapirs.









Clockwise from top left: An outing with the Indigenous Huaorani; a red-bellied titi monkey over the Amazon River; birdwatching on a canoeing tour in Yasuní National Park; cooking palm grubs with the Amazonian Kichwas

4 Explore Yasuní National Park BEST FOR: NATURE ENTHUSIASTS

Over one million acres of largely undisturbed forest sits deep in the east of the country. One of the richest biodiversity areas on Earth, Yasuní National Park is also the largest protected area in mainland Ecuador and an ideal spot in which to truly appreciate the sheer scale of the Amazon. Here, the thunder of colossal waterfalls echoes along the forest floor, permeated only by the shrieks of leaping monkeys. Travellers can navigate past the dense mangroves by canoe, deftly dodging the caimans that linger just under the surface, before taking to land to hike beneath an ancient canopy of entwined trees. Scuttling armadillos, tapirs, capybaras and boa constrictors are among the wildlife species to look out for — and sharp-eyed visitors may even spot the slinking spots of a jaguar.

5 Stay in a jungle lodge BEST FOR: FAMILIES

Located near the town of Archidona, Hakuna Matata Lodge offers a range of activities suitable for all ages. Claiming to be the only Ecuadorian Amazon lodge with onsite stables, it arranges guided horse-riding tours, designed for beginners, on South American criollo horses. There are gentle, family-friendly rafting experiences available on the Anzu river, and the nearby Jumandi cave system is easy to access. For a sweet treat, book a pod-to-bar chocolate workshop to learn how to grind cocoa beans before tasting your own creations. Those looking for extra relaxation can head to the lodge's private beach on the Inchillaqui river. hakunamatata-ecuador.com

6 Unwind with spa treatments BEST FOR: WELLNESS-LOVERS

Coveted therapeutic ingredients grow wild in the Amazon, where a well-placed machete cut can yield a curative sap or alluring fragrance. The rainforest's native ingredients are used in beauty products and spa treatments all over the world — so why not try them at the source? A short drive from the town of Tena, in Ecuador's Amazon rainforest, Arahuana Jungle Resort & Spa is a peaceful enclave, disturbed only by the sounds of chattering birds and distant storms. At its spa and wellness centre, guests can try facials and body treatments, including pinda and hot stone massages, designed to reduce the tiredness that can come with jungle adventures. Those stopping here for a few days should also visit the nearby Laguna Azul to soak in natural pools. arahuana.com

Kayak through mangroves
BEST FOR: FIRST-TIME ADVENTURERS A kayak tour from the town of Tena is the ideal option for those who are feeling adventurous but aren't quite ready to jump off a waterfall or spend a week in the jungle. One of the many Amazon gateway towns scattered across Ecuador, Tena is close enough to the action to let travellers experience some of the rainforest's top highlights on a one-day tour. Kayak under low-hanging trees, with even lower-hanging monkeys watching on, and keep eyes peeled for pink river dolphins. They're playful and curious and, while they shouldn't be disturbed, they'll sometimes come and dive beside the strangers exploring their pristine home.

TRAVEL TALK

ASK THE EXPERTS

NEED ADVICE FOR YOUR NEXT TRIP? ARE YOU AFTER RECOMMENDATIONS, TIPS AND GUIDANCE? OUR EXPERTS HAVE THE ANSWERS...

THE **EXPERTS**



Sorrel Moseley-Williams Food and travel writer



Steph Dyson quidebook author



Project editor, National Geographic Traveller (UK)



Travel writer and photographer

Clockwise from above: Los Frailes beach in Machalilla National Park: Cotopaxi volcano over San Jaloma Church; a blue-footed booby



friendly experiences in Ecuador? Mundo (Middle of the World) park, Quito, Ecuador's capital city, is where the invisible line becomes often the kick-off point for a trip to reality on the ground. You can also the Andean nation. Given that the scale the 100ft-high equatorial city is located over 9,300ft above monument to reach the viewing sea level, take your time here to platform, while a small museum

to latitude 0"00 at Mitad del

Can you recommend some family-

to the altitude.

acclimatise the whole family depicts the lives of Ecuador's various Indigenous people. A vertiginous yet effortless way mitaddelmundo.gob.ec

to understand Quito's geography Meanwhile, for an urban preview is riding the city's teleférico (cableof Ecuadorian biodiversity - the car) to Cruz Loma: the 18-minute country is guardian to more than 6% of the world's animal and plant ride takes you to a breathtaking 13,000ft. On alighting, you can species - take the family to Quito's soak up vistas of the moors dotted Botanical Garden. Besides admiring with volcanic and mountainous beautiful blooms in the orchid peaks, including the impressive and tropical greenhouses, they'll Cotopaxi volcano on a clear day. like the flesh-eating plant garden. teleferico.com.ec iardinbotanicoquito.com

With the country being named If you're on a budget but after after the Equator, the kids will love a taste of the postcard-pretty hopping between the northern Galápagos Islands, Los Frailes and southern hemispheres. Head beach is a fantastic alternative.

It's an unspoiled, almost whitesand beach found in Machalilla National Park, on the Pacific Coast.

Make the cosy, three-star Mantaraya Lodge your base. A short drive from the fishing village of Puerto Lopez, this family-friendly hotel has various family rooms, one of which can accommodate up to six. You might need to hire a car to reach Los Frailes, but the hotel also offers daily tours to Isla de la Palta, a small island that's a refuge for wildlife species including blue-footed boobies and South American sea lions. And for those family members who might still have some energy left to release at the end of the day, the outdoor swimming pool and games room will come in handy. mantarayalodge.com SORREL MOSELEY-WILLIAMS

What do I need to know about Ecuador's new digital nomad visa? Launched in

November 2022, Ecuador's digital nomad visa joins a number of other nations tempting remote workers. Brits, alongside members of other 182 countries, are eligible. To apply, you'll need to prove you earn three times the Ecuadorian 'basic income' - which, in 2023, is £1,090 per month – plus a contract indicating you work remotely. You'll also need a clean police record and health insurance

with coverage in Ecuador. The process begins with an online application followed by a visit to the Ecuadorian embassy in London, costs £365 and can take two to four months. consuladovirtual.gob.ec

A one-bedroom apartment in Quito starts from around £405 a month, while hot desking at a coworking space can cost travellers an additional £95. Slick hostel and coworking chain Selina is a popular alternative with vouthful nomads, promising guests a strong sense of

community. Its four locations, including the party town of Montañita and Amazon gateway of Baños, will set you back around £290 a month for both coworking and accommodation. selina.com

Wi-fi speeds are reliable in major cities but less so in rural areas. However, with this country home to the wildlife bonanza that is the Galápagos Islands, handsome Andean cities and volcano-stippled national parks, you may find yourself working less and travelling more. STEPH DYSON

Which wildlife-watching experience on the Pacific Coast would you recommend?

Ecuador's Pacific Coast is a microcosm of the country's staggering biodiversity – it has thick jungles full of howler monkeys, massive marine creatures passing through its diving hotspots and hundreds of unique bird species to keep an eye out for.

Travellers can spot a variety of them upon arrival in Guayaguil, the Pacific Coast's biggest hub. Surrounded by mangroves, rivers and

estuaries, it's the ideal habitat for Ecuador's endemic and migratory seabirds. There are 14 dedicated birdwatching routes in and around the city: watch herons, stark-white against the dense green mangroves in the El Morro and El Salado reserves, or find colonies of frigates and bluefooted boobies nesting on Manglecito island.

For easy access to the Pacific Coast's other animal sightings, base yourself at Tanusas Hotel in Boca de Cayo. The luxury property sits in the shadow

of the cloud forest mountains of Cantagallo, filled with hollering howler monkeys and prowling pumas. Yet, its access to the Pacific's marine wildlife is even more enticing. The nearby waters are home to species including manta ravs and cruising sea turtles. while humpback whales can be spotted hugging the coastline from June to October. You can organise excursions via Tanusas Hotel, alongside other activities such as surfing or bike riding. From £208, B&B.

forest retreats to national parks, there's a wide choice of day trips that put nature front and centre. If it's breathtaking scenery you're after, the impressively conical Cotopaxi volcano takes some beating. Though reaching its snow-covered summit might be a stretch, that doesn't mean you can't marvel at its lofty grace from ground level. Walk the oneand-a-half-mile-long trail at Lake Limpiopungo in Cotopaxi National Park, gazing up in wonder to tanusas.earth SJ ARMSTRONG search for soaring condors, or get expert knowledge on indigenous wildflowers and fauna. like Andean

> The Quilotoa crater can also be visited in a day, and the journey here along the Avenue of Volcanoes means you can see several highlights for the price of one. Once at the caldera (crater). you could spend a few hours taking in its majesty from lookout points around the tree-lined rim. Alternatively, hike inside the rocky interior down to the jewel-green water's edge

foxes and white-tailed deer, from a guide. national-parks.org

I'd like to go beyond Quito to see

volcanoes and hot springs. Where

do you suggest? Many of Ecuador's

natural highlights are within reach

of the elevated capital. From cloud

Finally, the perfect antidote to long days spent hiking or travelling has to be the Termas de Papallacta. These hot springs are only an hour outside Quito, and so relaxing you might just wish you'd booked an overnight stay. Opt for a massage or spa treatment, or just let yourself drift in and out of the warm water in heavenly surrounds. breathing pure, cool mountain air. termaspapallacta.com NORI JEMIL



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MASHPI NATURAL RESERVE

HOW I GOT THE SHOT







Tell us about this image.

In this shot, a green-crowned brilliant hummingbird pauses for refreshment at Mashpi Lodge. With more than 400 avian species in the surrounding 2,500-acre reserve, this is a hotspot for birdwatching enthusiasts. The lodge has set up a feeding station to give guests a chance to see these incredible birds up close, so I decided to stop by on my last day here. Hummingbirds are very curious, confident creatures, they often come and buzz around visitors — it almost feels like they're coming to meet you.

How did you achieve the shot?

Hummingbirds have a metabolic rate 77 times faster than humans – the highest of any animal – which allows them to process their high-sugar diet. In the forest, they get this from the nectar in flowers, whereas at Mashpi, this is supplemented by the feeders, which contain sugar water. These stations make it possible to capture such fast-moving animals in action. It's not easy, but it can be done: very fast shutter speeds are needed, and with that, ideally a wide aperture lens and high ISO capability. I used a Nikon 80-400mm lens, mounted on a Nikon Z6 II, at F/5.6, with an ISO1600.

What were the challenges at play on this assignment?

I travelled to Ecuador for this editorial guide. The brief asked for a wide range of work — shooting aerial views with a drone, capturing the local cuisine with a macro lens, photographing the architecture of hotels and cathedrals with a 19mm perspective control lens. I took pictures of the people we met and of a fire-lit shamanic ceremony at 3am, plus all the general travel and landscape shots needed to tell the story. In an ideal world, I would have liked to take about 10 lenses, but as often happens, I had to compromise — four, plus a drone and two cameras, is what I could physically carry on my shoulders.

Why should photography enthusiasts visit Ecuador?

The country is such a wonderful destination for a photographer. With so much geodiversity, you can shoot the coast, the high Andes and the rainforest all in a short period of time. Not that I would recommend this approach — give yourself time to get under the skin of the place. On a fast-paced assignment like this one, I had one or two days in any given location to shoot all the requested photography, but somewhere like Mashpi, well, I could have stayed for weeks, learning the rhythms of the cloud forest and the fauna within.













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