



The new face
of ECUADOR

Quito has joined the list of must-visit capital cities. With great architecture, an exciting dining scene and the odd active volcano, gone are the days when it was a quick stopover en route to the ever-alluring Galápagos. By PAUL RICHARDSON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY YOLANDA ESCOBAR

Ecador has a permanent place on most travellers' Latin American bucket lists, and for one overriding reason. The Galápagos Islands, Darwin's evolutionary petri dish and a landscape of planetary uniqueness, were always the jewel in Ecuador's crown, and even today receive the lion's share of visitors to the country. But there's more to this diverse yet compact country than that strange scatter of islands 800 miles out in the Pacific. Moreover, hugely improved infrastructure, new roads and excellent hotels make Ecuador better prepared to receive visitors than at any time in its history.

You might very well begin your journey, as I did, in Quito—a city that, until recently, barely figured on travellers' itineraries as a stop-off en route to the Galápagos. From my second-floor room at Casa Gangotena—a 31-room mansion in the French style on a corner of the old town's finest square, where neo-classical columns were mirrored in the *trompe l'oeil* of a vaporous Art Nouveau mural—the view comprised a cityscape of brick roofs, white houses with stone doorways, flagstoned squares and cobbled streets. Lounging in the bathtub, I could see the whitewashed bell tower of Santa Clara monastery and, crowning a nearby hill, the stooping, winged figure of the Virgin of Panecillo, the city's patroness.

When I took to the streets later that morning I could find little evidence of Quito as the den of iniquity that by all accounts it used to be. Much of the city's colonial heritage has been sensitively restored and the drug trade, which once gave downtown Quito a bad reputation, disman-

tled. Anachronistic 20th-century buildings have been demolished to create public squares, certain streets have been permanently closed to traffic, and a metro system will soon link the old town with the sprawling suburbs. Boutique hotels in historic houses have proliferated.

I spent a day roaming the *centro histórico*, wondering whether my light-headedness was the result of mild altitude sickness (at 2,800m, this is the world's second-highest capital city after La Paz) or of a general sense of exhilaration at discovering a city with the charm and vivacity of this one. Old-town Quito is a collection of colonial cloisters, convents, patios and plazas, domes and towers, with few rivals in the New World. Its tally of historic churches runs to 19 in the central district alone, the grandest of them all being La Compañía, the quintessence of the colonial Baroque, its vaulted interior slathered with gold. Behind the church is a tiny, secret patio with granite columns and a trickling fountain—a simulacrum of southern Spain, like Seville without the heat. From the Plaza de San Francisco I climbed a steep cobbled alley towards a covered market where women in fedora hats and coloured shawls shopped for cow's feet, potatoes of a dozen varieties, and strange Andean fruits such as the tree tomato and golden berry.

Though traditional Ecuadorean food is not among the world's more celebrated cuisines, I found it to be varied, sometimes exotic, always substantial, with an occasional blast of brilliance such as *sal prieta*, a popular condiment from Manabi province combining salt with annatto, crushed peanuts, cumin and black pepper. A bigger surprise was my discovery of a contemporary Ecuadorean cuisine, practised by a handful of mustard-keen young chefs in Quito and beyond. At Casa Gangotena's restaurant, Cedrón, chef Andrés Dávila served me a tasting menu in which every course had something new to say, from the spring rolls stuffed with llama meat

CITY IN THE CLOUDS

A view over Quito. *Opposite:* a young girl mixes old with new in Quito; Urko, a restaurant in the Floresta district; elegant colonial architecture in Quito



(apparently only the legs are edible) to the sauce for chicken, flavoured with dark Ecuadorean chocolate and spices.

When Cedrón opened in 2011, locals were surprised that the new chef wasn't from Peru, since Peruvian food was fashionable at the time and the idea of a genuinely Ecuadorean *haute cuisine* seemed unlikely. Not any more. At Urko, in the trendy La Floresta district, Daniel Maldonado puts a contemporary spin on dishes as central to the local gastronomy as *loco* (potato and cheese soup), *ceviche* and roast suckling piglet. The other key place is Quitu, where twentysomething chef Juan Sebastián Pérez presides over the city's most scintillatingly avant-garde restaurant. "What we do here is take flavours we've known all our lives and present them in another way," Pérez told me. Which was putting it mildly: Pérez's creative deployment of traditional ingredients such as maize, quinoa, cacao, avocado, Amazon fish and tropical fruit is breathtakingly up-to-date. If there's ever to be a Michelin star in Ecuador, I suggest it should fall on Quitu.

The next day, I drove south out of town on the Pan-American Highway through Ecuador's central valley, the snow-capped volcano cones of Pichincha, Rumiñahui, Cotopaxi and Chimborazo rearing up to left and right.

In the shadow of mount Cotopaxi, at 5,897m the world's highest active volcano, stands the Hacienda San Agustín de Callo, founded as an Augustine convent in the 16th century on the site of an Inca fortress. This rambling country estate was bought in 1921 by the Plaza family, an important Ecuadorean dynasty that produced two presidents of the country: Leónidas Plaza and his son Galo Plaza Lasso.

The current châteline of San Agustín de Callo is Mignon Plaza, granddaughter of Leónidas, a woman of winning charm and formidable energy. Wearing fluffy slippers and a woollen coat—it can get chilly at 3,100m above sea level—Mignon showed

me around the *hacienda*. It was a kind of manor arranged around a wide patio in Spanish colonial style, with a columned gallery and a clay-tiled roof. Behind the courtyard, a herd of llamas grazed in a field. In the drawing room, a fire had just been lit, and beyond the window, the clouds had parted to reveal an astonishing sight: the colossal peak of Cotopaxi looming up in the near distance, lit by the golden light of the late afternoon, its slopes as regular as a child's drawing of a volcano.

Night fell promptly at 6.30pm, as it does all year round in the Equatorial Zone. A smell of woodsmoke crept around the house. Ecuadorean country style had certain elements in common with its English equivalent: there were log fires in every room, bathrooms had big white enamelled tubs with claw feet, and hot-water bottles were distributed at sundown. I peered into the family chapel, a windowless room whose massive walls had the smooth, convex forms characteristic of Inca stonemasonry. I felt a shiver of something on the back of my neck, and it wasn't the cool Andean evening drawing in.

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If Ecuador's Andean highlands are a crucible of heritage and history, its islands tell a very different story. The Galápagos have no architectural tradition, no indigenous population, no native cuisine, very little agriculture—only nature in its purest, most primeval form. Twenty years ago, observers fretted that, with 60,000 visitors annually, tourism in the National Park might be reaching saturation point. Today, the islands bring in upwards of 400,000 tourists every year.

As I stepped off the plane from Quito, I asked myself what I knew about my current destination, picturing a remote and windswept landscape, desert-like and unpopulated, with David Attenborough speaking to camera while giant iguanas sunbathed on black volcanic rocks, perhaps keeping a wary eye out for the lurking snakes that, as *Planet Earth II* spectacularly revealed, will ambush newborn members of the species. Certainly my mental



ISLAND LIFE

The unique ecosystem of the Galápagos Islands is still a huge draw. Clockwise from top left: a pelican in Puerto Baquerizo Moreno, the islands' capital; flamingos feeding at Punta Cormorant on Floreana; Kicker Rock or, in direct translation from the Spanish, Sleeping Lion Rock, off San Cristóbal; a blue-footed booby keeps a watchful eye on Pitt Rock. The birds have become emblematic of the Galápagos



image didn't include cocktail bars and Philippe Starck furniture. Contemporary design and luxury, neither of them traditional features of Galápagos tourism, have made a late appearance here in the shape of two new hotels and a boat. One of the hotels, the Golden Bay on San Cristóbal, is a white-on-white hip hotel in the Noughties style, with a seafront cocktail bar within a few steps of a beach where sea lions bark and grunt along to the chill-out music. The other is Pikaia Lodge, an outpost of high-end chic dramatically sited on the rim of a small volcanic crater, with wide-screen views over the untouched northern half of Santa Cruz island. Pikaia is clearly aimed at those Galápagos tourists who like a dose of comfort with their rugged natural beauty. Its designer, Ecuadorean architect Coro Plaza, has gone for a shiny-shiny contemporary look in sharp contrast to the wild and woolly natural surroundings. At Pikaia's restaurant, Evolution, I found another surprising flashpoint of modern Ecuadorean cuisine, brilliantly executed by another talented young Ecuadorean chef.

It would be nature all the way on the final leg of my Ecuador journey, a seven-day cruise on a brand-new 44m superyacht called, appropriately enough, *Origin*.

If I'd found myself on any other Galápagos cruiser, I would have been jealous of this handsome, sleek craft painted deep blue from the waist down. My cabin had a big double bed with cool cotton sheets and a picture window framing huge views of pristine landscapes. (One morning I saw a whale and its baby from the shower.)

Though the cruise felt at first like an upmarket boot camp (think 7am wake-up calls), it soon mellowed into the most relaxing travel experience I'd had for some time. Everything was organized in meticulous detail and pitched at a level of comfort hitherto unknown in these once rough-and-ready islands. There was hot chocolate when you came back from a walk; iced tea and snacks after snorkelling. My fellow travellers were liberal, educated Americans from places like Taos, New Mexico and Portland, Oregon. In the on-board library I was intrigued to read the 23-year-old Charles Darwin's account of his own Galápagos cruise on the "ten-gun brig" *Beagle*, and his youthful astonishment at the "creative force, if such an expression may be used, displayed on these small, barren, and rocky islands".

Every morning and afternoon, along with the rest of *Origin's* 20 passengers, I set off in a Zodiac, accompanied by two naturalist guides, to examine the islands' sometimes bizarre wildlife in the outer reaches of the archipelago, where other tour boats rarely venture. Each day brought fresh new wonders. On the island of Floreana, we picked our way among crowds of dragonish red and green marine iguanas with wide, leering mouths; while on San Cristóbal, blue-footed boobies sat calmly on their nests as we stood within a few feet of them. (The wild things here, as every visitor from Darwin onwards has noted with approval, are frank, fearless and free.) At Pitt Rock, sea lions lazed next to us on a white-sand beach that would knock the socks off most of the Caribbean. And on Española, on the last day of the cruise, we were treated to an up-close audience with a pair of waved albatross as they performed their mating dance—one of the most spectacular of any bird species in the world, an intricate choreography of dipping and swinging heads, honking and clattering beaks. Gloriously diverse, generously flavoured, and easily accessed, the Galápagos seemed of a piece with Ecuador in general. This may be the jewel in the crown, but the crown itself is solid gold. □

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Miraviva offers 14 nights in Ecuador, including a seven-night Galápagos cruise on *Origin*, two nights at Pikaia Lodge, one or two nights in Quito at Casa Gangotena, and all flights, from £11,250 per person, based on two people travelling together. miravivatravel.com

NEXT TIME YOU'RE IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD...

Mashpi Lodge continues to amaze. This impeccable eco-lodge was a game-changer for South America when it opened in 2012. It came into being when Roque Sevilla, a former Quito mayor-turned-conservationist, acquired 2,500 acres of cloud forest northwest of the capital—one of the most biodiverse places on the face of the earth. Later, the government granted protection to an additional 45,000 acres surrounding Mashpi, creating a vast sanctuary. The lodge, designed by Ecuadorean architect Alfredo Ribadeneira, is stealthily luxurious and cleverly contrived in steel and glass to maximize wildlife-spotting opportunities. If you're still feeling restless after birdwatching, forest-trail-walking and waterfall-swimming, traverse the jungle canopy on the Sky Bike—a pedal-powered contraption on a high-wire. mashpilodge.com

The historic railway line that wound its way from Quito through the Andean highlands to Guayaquil on the Pacific coast fell into disrepair during the 20th century and closed down altogether in the early 1980s. Lately, however, it has been comprehensively restored and reopened. The **Tren Crucero**, retro-styled but tricked out with contemporary comforts, takes four days to chug down the mountainsides from Quito to Guayaquil. There's space for only 50 passengers at a time, and you overnight at hotels en route rather than aboard the train itself. But what is missing in terms of old-fashioned sleeper-compartment romance is more than made up for by the astonishing landscapes—a labyrinth of tunnels, viaducts and switchbacks, including the nostril-flaringly dramatic Devil's Nose. trenecuador.com

Follow in the footsteps of Alexander von Humboldt, who travelled through and named the **Avenue of the Volcanoes**, a 200-mile stretch of twin cordilleras in the middle of Ecuador, which between them contain seven peaks of over 5,000m. The sprightly Prussian naturalist and geographer was the first to scale the most impressive of these peaks, Chimborazo, which, at 6,268m, was at that time believed to be the highest mountain in the world. And in a strict sense, it still is. The earth is not quite round. Rather like a middle-aged man's belly, it bulges at the equator. So, although Everest is more than a mile and a half higher than Chimborazo if you're measuring its height above sea level, Chimborazo, which rests on the planet's muffin-top, actually sticks a mile and a third higher into the atmosphere. Go forth and conquer. It's taller than Everest, but a good deal easier and less expensive to climb.