

The Best of Ecuador

Ecuadoreans like to boast that their country is really four distinct destinations: the Galápagos Islands, the Amazon basin, the high Andean sierra, and the Pacific coast. In fact, it's much more. Quito offers up both colonial gems and modern pleasures in a compact urban environment. Cuenca is another colonial treasure, with the Inca ruins of Ingapirca nearby. You can visit not only the rainforests of the Amazon basin, but also the cloud forests of Mindo and Bellavista, the dry forests of the southern Pacific lowlands, and the high-altitude paramo of the Central highlands. Those Central highlands are home to numerous colonial-era haciendas that have been converted into lovely and cozy hotels and inns. Active travelers can ride horses on the Andean plains, or mountain bike down the slopes of active volcanoes. Bird-watchers can add to their list from the more than 1,600 species found here. With so much physical and cultural variety, there are plenty of excellent experiences and adventures for any type of traveler. Below is a selective list of some of the best that Ecuador has to offer.

1 THE BEST PURELY ECUADOREAN TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

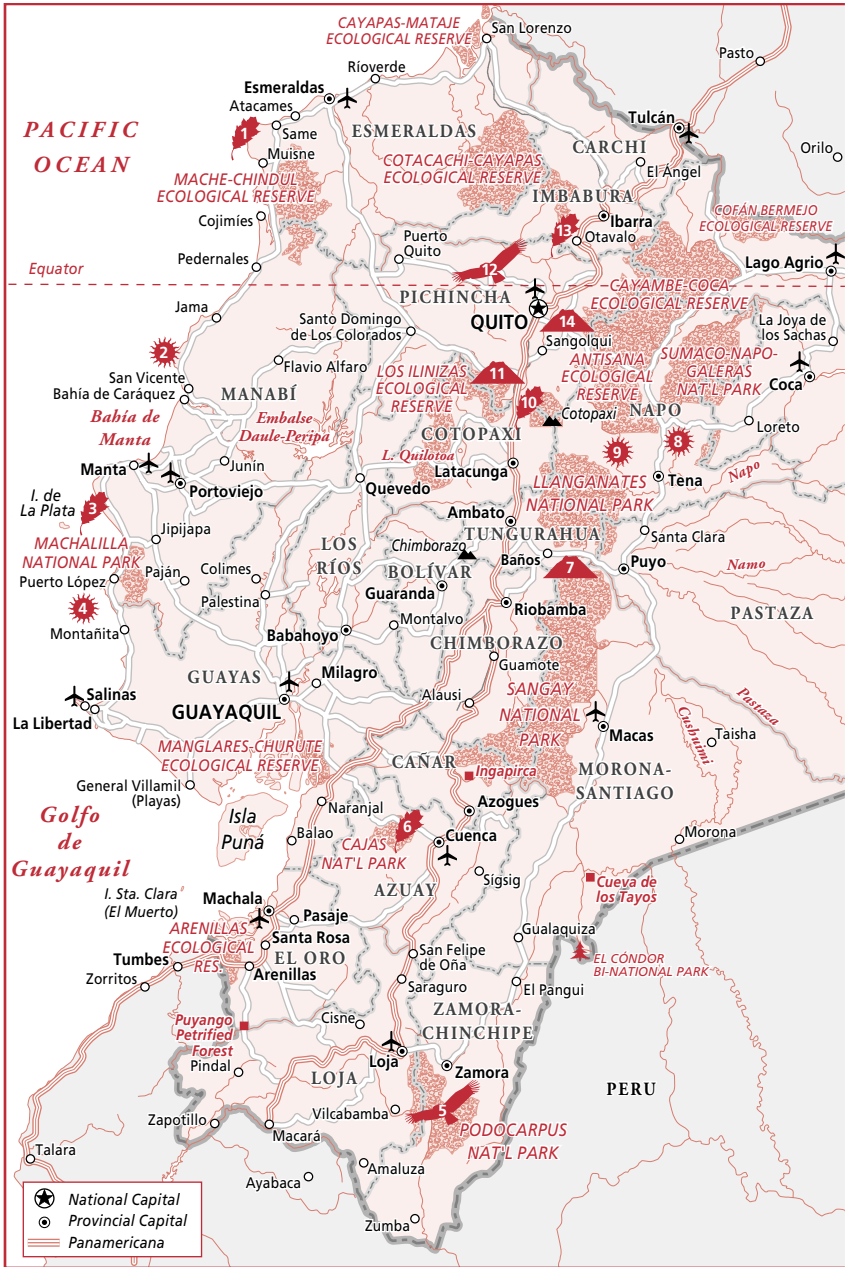
- **Stepping Back in Time in Colonial Quito:** Founded in 1534, Quito was the first city to be declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Its Old Town seems in many ways to have changed little over the centuries. Walk the rough cobblestone streets and visit the numerous, beautifully restored colonial-era churches, monasteries, convents, private mansions, and public plazas—you'll feel as if you've traveled back in time. See chapter 6.
- **Straddling the Equator:** The country isn't called Ecuador for nothing—the Equator passes right through it. Don't miss the chance to have your photo taken with one foot in either hemisphere. There are several popular tourist attractions and marked spots where you can do this. My favorite is **Quitsato Mitad del Mundo Monument** (📍 02/2363-042; www.quitsato.org), located just off the highway from Quito to Otavalo. See p. 137.
- **Eating Cuy:** You'll see them roasting on spits at little stands along the highways, or on sidewalks in cities and towns. You'll also find them on the menus of some of Ecuador's fanciest restaurants. It's guinea pig to you and me. The skin is served crisp and crackling, and you'll have to work to get much meat from *cuy*. But when it's good, it's moist and flavorful. See restaurant reviews throughout the book.
- **Searching for the Fountain of Youth in Vilcabamba:** The small and isolated village of Vilcabamba is said to have a disproportionately high number of centenarians. Most folks credit the clean water, air, and living. While it may not actually add years to your life, this is a great place to come for a quiet getaway with superb scenery. And whether or

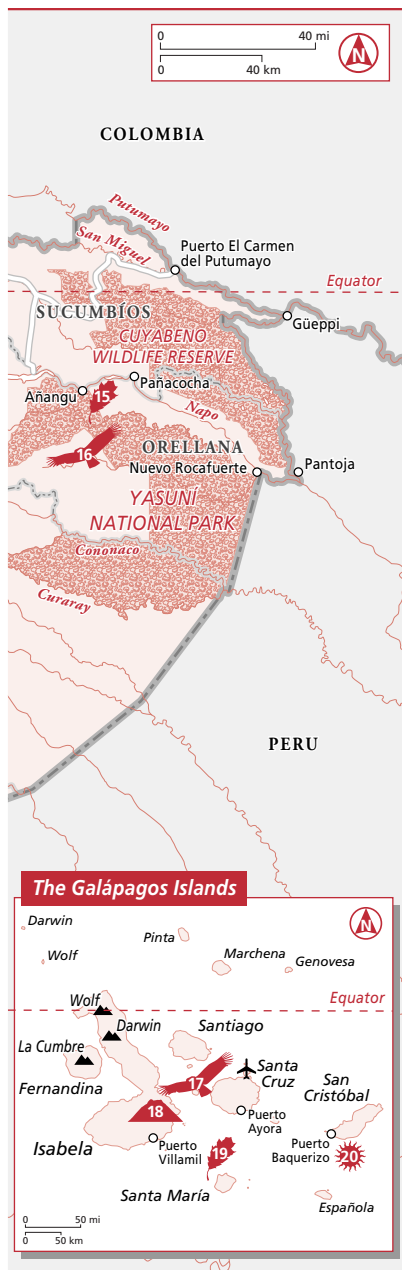
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THE BEST OF ECUADOR

1

THE BEST PURELY ECUADOREAN TRAVEL EXPERIENCES





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not there's any science behind it, a spa treatment or two at **Hostería Izhcayluma** (☎ 07/2640-095; www.izhcayluma.com) will definitely cure whatever's ailing you at the moment. See chapter 9.

- **Starting Off Your Day with a Glass of Tree-Tomato Juice:** Don't be put off by the name, or think that it tastes anything like a traditional tomato. A tree tomato (*tomate de árbol* or *tamarillo*) is a unique fruit served just about every which way in Ecuador. My favorite is the juice, although you'll also find tree tomatoes in salads; cooked into jam; or boiled, peeled, sweetened, and served as dessert.
- **Riding a Train Past the Devil's Nose:** Earthquakes, landslides, and volcanic eruptions have wiped out most of the rail-line that used to connect Quito to Guayaquil. One remaining operational section is also one of the most spectacular, a white-knuckle ride of sharp switchbacks and hairpin turns down the side of a steep rock mountain affectionately known as the Devil's Nose. See p. 203.
- **Buying a Panama Hat:** You shouldn't leave the country without buying one of these stylish straw wonders, which are made in Ecuador, not Panama (for

an explanation, see p. 216). Cuenca is currently the primary center for production of Panama hats; **Homero Ortega P. & Hijos** (☎ 07/2809-000; www.homeroortega.com) is that city's top manufacturer. True aficionados might even head to the small towns of Montecristi or Jipijapa to find their special *superfino* headpiece. See chapter 9.

- **Drinking Chicha:** Homebrewed liquor made from fermenting corn, potatoes, *yuca*, and just about anything else on hand, *chicha* is consumed by indigenous peoples throughout the Andean highlands as well as in the lowland forests of El Oriente. Most *chicha* is relatively mild, but if you drink enough of it you'll definitely feel its effects—especially at high altitudes. See chapters 8 and 12.
- **Visiting the Amazon Basin:** While officially just tributaries of the great river, the lowland rainforest rivers of eastern Ecuador form an important part of the Amazon basin. This area is loaded with impressive wildlife, and it's home to traditional indigenous tribes. You'll get to interact with both on any trip here. See chapter 12.

2 THE BEST OF NATURAL ECUADOR

- **Cuicocha Lake:** Formed thousands of years ago in the extinct crater of a massive volcano, this beautiful, clear, blue lake is a popular destination. You can choose between hiking around the rim of the crater or scrambling down for a boat ride on the waters of the lake. The lake is named after the popular dish *cuy* (guinea pig), because locals thought the islands in its center resembled guinea pigs. See p. 88.
- **Cotopaxi National Park:** With 33,393 hectares (82,516 acres) surrounding the

park's namesake and emblematic volcano, this is Ecuador's most popular national park, after the Galápagos. At 5,897m (19,347 ft.), the snow-covered Cotopaxi is the country's second highest peak, and allegedly the highest active volcano in the world. Tour options here range from leisure hikes at lower elevations to full-on summit climbs, with other options including mountain biking, horseback riding, and camping. The best general tour operators running trips to Cotopaxi are **Metropolitan**

Touring (☎ 02/2988-200; www.metropolitan-touring.com) and **Surtrek** (☎ 02/2231-534; www.surtrek.com). For hard-core climbing and adventures, try **Safari Ecuador** (☎ 02/2552-505; www.safari.com.ec). See chapters 5 and 8.

- **Cajas National Park:** Located just outside Cuenca, this beautiful national park is famous for its 232 high montane lakes and misty cloud forests. It is also an excellent place for hiking and bird-watching. Easily accessible, it's a great change of pace from the cobblestone streets, colonial-era churches, and Panama-hat shops of Cuenca. See p. 87.
- **Isla de la Plata:** The crowning jewel of **Machalilla National Park** is Isla de la Plata, an offshore island often touted as "the poor man's Galápagos." Whether or not that's an appropriate or even worthy moniker, Isla de la Plata offers excellent bird- and wildlife-viewing and snorkeling. What's more, from late June through early October, you have a good chance of seeing humpback whales on the boat ride out to the island. On land, Machalilla has some fabulous trails and beaches. See chapter 10.
- **The Beaches West of Atacames:** In general, Ecuador is not a great beach destination. It certainly can't hold a candle to beaches found in the Caribbean, South Pacific, or even Mexico or Costa Rica. However, the relatively

short section of Pacific coast west of Atacames has several small and beautiful beaches. Sua and Same are my favorites, and Tonsupa, Tonchigue, and Galera are also pretty. For someplace really unique and isolated, you can head to the small island of Muisne. See chapter 11.

- **The Rainforests of Ecuador's El Oriente:** When Amazon rainforests are mentioned, most people think of Brazil. But Ecuador's El Oriente is a vast area of lowland tropical rainforest that is part of the Amazon basin. In fact, Francisco Orellana, who first named and navigated the Amazon River, began his long journey here in Ecuador. Over 500 species of birds and some 15,000 species of flora can be found here, as well as freshwater dolphins, 11 different species of monkeys, anacondas, caimans, and jaguars. See chapter 12.
- **The Galápagos Islands:** Ecuador's prime attraction is a naturalist's paradise. In fact, if we were talking religion, this would be Holy Ground. It was here that Charles Darwin developed many of his ideas that would later emerge as the theory of natural selection and the theory of evolution. Not only are the Galápagos famous for their wildlife—on land, in the sea, and in the air—but this unique and isolated volcanic archipelago is a living geology laboratory. See chapter 13.

3 THE BEST HISTORICAL SITES & MUSEUMS

- **Iglesia de San Francisco** (Old Town; Quito): Quito's first church, San Francisco remains one of its most impressive, especially when you factor in the attached monastery, museum, massive altar, and wide stairway ascending from the plaza. The church and its ornate interior are in the midst of a major restoration, which should only make this

classic, colonial-era church that much more impressive. See p. 121.

- **La Compañía de Jesús** (Old Town; Quito): There's so much gold and gold leaf adorning this unbelievably ornate 17th-century baroque church that I often feel the need for sunglasses. In fact, the Jesuits who built this church incorporated several sun symbols, which

some say was a nod to the Incas who preceded them on this spot. The level of detail and artistry on display here is unparalleled. See p. 122.

- **Museo Nacional del Banco Central del Ecuador** (New Town; Quito): Ecuador's largest museum is also arguably its best. The anthropological and historical displays of the pre-Columbian inhabitants are extensive, interesting, and beautifully displayed. There are also very good collections of colonial-era and religious art, as well as a fine representation of Ecuador's best modern art and artists. See p. 125.
- **Fundación Guayasamín** (Bellavista, Quito): Oswaldo Guayasamín was Ecuador's greatest and most famous modern artist. His striking large paintings, murals, and sculptures had an impact on artists across Latin America and around the world. This extensive museum displays both his own work and pieces from his private collection. Combined with the neighboring **Capilla del Hombre**, this is a must-see for any art lover or Latin American history buff. See p. 126.
- **Catedral Nueva** (Cuenca): This massive cathedral took over 80 years to complete. Its two towering blue domes dominate the skyline of Cuenca, especially when viewed from one of the hillside lookouts outside town. Don't miss a chance to tour its beautiful inside, which has white marble floors, stained-glass windows, and a Renaissance-style main altar. See p. 212.
- **Museo del Banco Central** (Cuenca): This modern museum features an excellent collection of archaeological finds and relics, ethnographic displays, and colonial-era figurative and religious art; it's also built right on top of a major Inca ceremonial site that has been semi-excavated. As if that weren't enough, there are extensive botanical gardens here, a small aviary, and llamas roaming the grounds. See p. 213.
- **Ingapirca** (outside Cuenca): Ingapirca is the greatest surviving Inca ruin in Ecuador. A visit here will allow you to appreciate the famous Inca masonry, with its seemingly impossibly tight joints. Even before the Incas arrived, this spot was inhabited by the Cañari, and some of their original constructions are also on display. The site is believed to have been sacred to both the Cañari and Incas. See p. 224.
- **La Tolita** (North Pacific coast): This unique archaeological site is found on a small island outside San Lorenzo. It is believed that it was inhabited by one of the oldest pre-Columbian cultures, a people skilled at working with gold, silver, and even platinum. One whole beach here contains millions of shards of ancient pottery. See p. 297.
- **Museo Antropológico y de Arte Contemporáneo** (Guayaquil): Large, modern, and well laid out, this is Guayaquil's best museum. There are extensive archaeological collections here from all over Ecuador, as well as a wonderful wing dedicated to contemporary Ecuadorean art. One of the best features of this museum is its prized location at the northern end of Guayaquil's Malecón, allowing easy access to both the popular riverside boardwalk and neighboring Cerro Santa Ana. See p. 246.

4 THE BEST OUTDOOR ADVENTURES

- **Climbing Volcán Cotopaxi**: Although it's actually only the second highest peak in the country, Cotopaxi is Ecuador's most coveted summit. At 5,897m (19,347 ft.), this is no leisurely climb, yet most people in reasonably good condition, with the proper guides and acclimation, can reach the top. The

views on the way up, at the summit, and coming back down are spectacular. **Compañía de Guías de Montaña** (☎ 02/2901-551; www.companiadeguias.com.ec) and **Safari Ecuador** (☎ 02/2552-505; www.safari.com.ec) are two excellent local operators who can get you to the snowcapped summit. See chapters 5 and 8.

- **Playing Cowboy or Cowgirl on the High Mountain Paramo:** In Ecuador, cowboys are called *chagras*, and the *chagra* tradition is alive and well. Whether you sign on for a short ride or actually get to join in a round-up of wild bulls or horses, you'll feel like a *chagra* as you ride your steed over the rugged scrub of the high Andean paramo. **Hacienda La Alegría** (☎ 02/2462-319; www.hacienda-laalegria.com) offers multiday rides. See chapters 5 and 8.
- **Watching Whales Breach & Breed off the Pacific Coast:** From late June to early October, humpback whales congregate in large numbers off Ecuador's Pacific coast. They come to the warmer waters from Antarctica to mate, give birth, feed, and nurse their young. The whales here are very social, and they often give spectacular displays of breaching. Whale-watching tours are offered up and down this coastline, but **Salinas** and **Puerto López** are your best bases for setting out on a whale-watching excursion. See chapter 10.
- **Surfing Lonely Waves Along Ecuador's Pacific Coast:** Surfers love isolated or undiscovered breaks, and Ecuador is loaded with them. In fact, even the most crowded breaks here could be considered deserted by California standards. Beach and point

breaks can be found up and down the Pacific coast. Montañita and Canoa are the country's top surfing destinations, and good bases to use for your search for the perfect wave. See chapters 5, 10, and 11.

- **White-Water Rafting & Kayaking:** With high Andean peaks plunging down to coastal lowlands in two directions, Ecuador is blessed with a host of white-water rivers perfect for rafting and kayaking. The small town of Tena, in El Oriente, is the country's hot spot for these sports, with easy access to everything from Class III to Class V rapids. The most popular rivers are the Upper Napo, or Río Jatunyacu, and the Río Misahuallí. There are also opportunities accessible from Quito and other cities around the country. **Ríos Ecuador** (☎ 06/2886-727; www.riosecuador.com) is an excellent operator with offices in both Tena and Quito. See chapters 5 and 12.
- **Scuba Diving in the Galápagos Islands:** While most visitors spend their time marveling at the turtles, iguanas, boobies, and finches, diving the Galápagos may just provide the archipelago's most rewarding wildlife-viewing opportunities. The rich and protected waters here are home to large quantities of sea life, from schools of hammerhead sharks, to manta rays, to large masses of jacks, barracuda, and other schooling fish. Lucky divers enjoy playful encounters with sea lions and penguins. Your best bet for enjoying the diving is to sign up for a cruise on a dedicated dive boat. You can also book dive trips out of Puerto Ayora or Puerto Baquerizo Moreno. See chapters 5 and 13.

5 THE BEST BIRD-WATCHING

- **Enjoying the Mists and Multitude of Species Found in the Cloud Forests of**

Mindo & Bellavista: Cloud forests are unique ecosystems, renowned for their

biological abundance. Located less than 2 hours north of Quito, the cloud forests of Mindo and Bellavista are rich and rewarding stops for birders and nature lovers of all stripes. Over 400 species of birds have been recorded here, and experts believe the actual count is much higher. **El Monte** (☎ 09/3084-675; www.ecuadorcloudforest.com) and **Bellavista Cloud Forest Reserve** (☎ 02/2116-232; www.bellavistacloudforest.com) are two excellent lodges from which to base your bird-watching expeditions of this area. See p. 139, as well as chapter 5.

- **Spotting Some of the More Than 600 Species in Podocarpus National Park:** This remote national park runs from a high of 3,700m (11,139 ft.) down to some 1,000m (3,281 ft.) above sea level, and contains ecosystems that range from high paramo to cloud forest and rainforest. The most common jumping-off points for visiting here are Loja and Vilcabamba. If you're looking for an excellent personal guide, contact Jorge Luis at **Caminatas Andes Sureños** (☎ 07/2673-147). See p. 231.
- **Catching Sight of Hundreds of Species in El Oriente:** The mid-elevation

and lowland rainforests of Ecuador's El Oriente are prime bird-watching areas. Many lodges in this region have on-site bird-species lists that number 400 or more. Several species of macaws frolic overhead, while the prehistoric hoatzin inhabits the low branches of riverside trees. Just about any of the lodges in El Oriente can be considered top bird-watching destinations, but I recommend the **Napo Wildlife Center** (www.napowildlifecenter.com), which has a couple of parrot licks right on their grounds, where as many as several thousand mixed-flock parrots may gather on any day to extract minerals and nutrients from an exposed clay riverbank. See chapter 12.

- **Seeing Endemic Species on the Galápagos Islands:** What can you say? From the 13 species of Darwin's finches, to the only subtropical penguin, to the unique flightless cormorant, the Galápagos provide the greatest one-stop spot to check off a whole host of once-in-a-lifetime birds from your life's list. In fact, around half of all the bird fauna on the Galápagos is endemic, meaning you can only see them here. See chapter 13.

6 THE BEST DESTINATIONS FOR FAMILIES

- **El Teleférico & Vulcano Park** (Quito; ☎ 02/3250-076): If you spend any time in Quito, and if you have kids in tow, this is a must-stop. The fast and thrilling ride up the mountain in this cable-car gondola is usually enough to put a smile on most kids' faces, and there's also an amusement park (Vulcano Park) at the base of the cable car. See p. 120.
- **Hacienda La Alegría** (Aloag; ☎ 02/2462-319; www.haciendalaalegria.com): This beautiful old hacienda is also a working farm. Kids can watch and even

lend a hand when the cows are milked. Horseback riding is the specialty, and they have particularly good horses, trails, and trainers for introducing young riders to the sport. Their safety concern and record are exemplary. See p. 174.

- **Baños de Agua Santa:** While best known as a backpacker and adventure-travel hot spot, Baños is also great for kids. Vacationing Ecuadorean families come here, and many of the hotels and resorts cater to families. **Sangay**

Spa-Hotel (☎ 03/2740-490; www.sangayspahotel.com) has a ton of excellent facilities and activities geared towards all ages. See chapter 8.

- **The Galápagos Islands:** Many of the Galápagos cruise ships and tour companies offer specific family-oriented tours. There is a ton to see and do, and plenty

of science, nature, and adventure to keep the whole family interested and entertained. **Tauk** (☎ 800/788-7885 in the U.S. and Canada; www.taukbridges.com) is an excellent soft-adventure company with distinctive family package tours to the Galápagos. See chapter 13.

7 THE BEST LUXURY HOTELS

- **JW Marriott Hotel** (Quito; ☎ 800/228-9290 in the U.S. and Canada, or 02/2972-000 in Ecuador; www.marriotthotels.com): With an imposing glass-atrium-covered lobby, gorgeous rooms, attentive service, and good restaurants, this is one of the top business-class hotels in Ecuador. The pool, spa, and recreational facilities are excellent, as are the business services. See p. 105.
- **nü house** (Quito; ☎ 02/2557-845; www.nuhousehotels.com): Hip and contemporary, this new hotel sits right on the popular Plaza Foch, at the center of all the action in New Town. A host of great shops, restaurants, bars, and clubs are just outside its doors. See p. 105.
- **Hotel Patio Andaluz** (Quito; ☎ 02/2280-830; www.hotelpatioandaluz.com): This place just oozes colonial-era charm. The spacious restored old mansion features two large interior courtyards. Accommodations are super comfortable, and the service is excellent. Plus it's located in the heart of Old Town, right off the Plaza de la Independencia (Plaza Grande). See p. 108.
- **Sheraton Quito** (Quito; ☎ 800/325-3535 in the U.S. and Canada, or 02/2970-002 in Ecuador; www.sheraton.com): A massive remodeling, meticulous attention to detail, and fabulous service have made the Sheraton one of my favorite hotels in Quito. The facilities are all top-notch, and the location makes it one of the closest hotel options to the airport. See p. 111.
- **La Mirage Garden Hotel & Spa** (Cotacachi; ☎ 800/327-3573 in the U.S. and Canada, or 06/2915-237 in Ecuador; www.mirage.com.ec): Arguably the most exclusive and opulent boutique hotel in the country, La Mirage offers refined accommodations, fine dining, and a spectacular spa. If that's not enough, a range of excellent hikes and adventure activities is available, and Otavalo is just a few minutes away. See p. 154.
- **Samari Spa Resort** (outside Baños de Agua Santa; ☎ 03/2741-855; www.samarispa.com): This plush and luxurious new hotel and spa sits at the base of Volcán Tungurahua, on the outskirts of Baños. Rooms have all the modern conveniences (a rarity in this area), and there are beautiful design touches throughout. The spa is large and expansive. See p. 195.
- **Hotel Oro Verde Guayaquil** (Guayaquil; ☎ 04/2327-999; www.oroverdehotels.com): Located in the center of the city, close to all the parks, museums, and scenic riverside walkways, this is the top hotel in Guayaquil. Rooms have all been beautifully remodeled, and the service is refined and attentive. See p. 217.
- **Finch Bay Hotel** (Santa Cruz Island, Galápagos; ☎ 02/2988-200 for reservations office in Quito; www.finchbay

hotel.com): The only beachfront hotel on Santa Cruz is also the best. You'll be pampered and well looked after at this posh and secluded resort hotel. You'll

also feel apart from the hustle and bustle that often characterizes tourism in the Galápagos. See p. 351.

8 THE BEST MODERATELY PRICED & BUDGET HOTELS

- **Hotel Vieja Cuba** (Quito; ☎ 02/2906-732; www.hotelviejacuba.com): Beautifully restored and wonderfully located, this Mariscal-district hotel provides great value. Hardwood floors, mosaic-tile bathrooms, a central courtyard fountain, and an excellent restaurant are just some of the perks. See p. 106.
- **Hotel San Francisco de Quito** (Quito; ☎ 02/2287-758; www.sanfranciscodequito.com.ec): Offering tidy and comfortable rooms in a wonderfully preserved 17th-century converted home, this is my favorite budget option in Quito. This hotel is situated in the heart of Old Town. You get colonial charm and a great deal all in one. See p. 110.
- **Hacienda Guachala** (Cangahua, Cayambe; ☎ 02/2363-042; www.guachala.com): Dating back to 1580, this rustic old hacienda provides all the colonial-era vibe and experience offered up by its fancier brethren, at very reasonable prices. The rooms are quite rustic, but you'll have the undeniable feeling of staying at what was once a thriving colonial-era hacienda. A host of tours and activities are available, including a number of horseback-riding adventures. See p. 156.
- **Hostal La Posada del Arte** (Baños de Agua Santa; ☎ 03/2740-083; www.posadadelarte.com): Artistic touches abound in this cozy and friendly *hostal*. The best rooms here have waterfall views from private balconies. See p. 197.
- **Hacienda El Porvenir** (Cotopaxi; ☎ 02/2231-806; www.tierradelvolcan.com): Wonderfully located on the flat paramo just below Volcán Cotopaxi, this humble hostel offers comfortable and inviting rooms from which to explore the surrounding area. See p. 175.
- **Posada del Angel** (Cuenca; ☎ 07/2840-695; www.hostalposadadelangel.com): It's hard to believe you can find such a charming room in such a charming converted old colonial home for such a bargain. The building is over 120 years old, yet the place is lively and cheery. There are a couple of classic interior courtyards and second-floor lounge areas. If you want more privacy, and a bit of a view, ask for a room on the third or fourth floor. See p. 220.
- **Manso Boutique Hostel** (Guayaquil; ☎/fax 09/6034-054; www.manso.com.ec): Located right on Guayaquil's riverfront Malecón Simón Bolívar, this new boutique hotel offers up well-designed and equipped rooms in a remodeled old downtown building. The restaurant here is also excellent. See p. 250.
- **Hostería Alándaluz** (south of Puerto López; ☎ 04/2780-686; www.alandaluzhosteria.com): An environmentally conscious and eclectic collection of rooms and bungalows on a beautiful spot along the Pacific coast, this is one of my favorite beach hotels in all of Ecuador. Rooms come in a wide range of styles and prices, from semi-rustic doubles to almost opulent suites.

Even the least expensive options are quite nice. Heck, you can even camp here. See p. 263.

- **Farallón Dillon** (Ballenita; ☎ 04/2953-611; www.farallondillon.com): Set on a steep hillside above a beautiful stretch of beach, this eclectic and rambling hotel is one of the most unique along the Ecuadorean coast. Antiques and nautical memorabilia abound, the

views are fabulous, and the restaurant is excellent. See p. 259.

- **Hotel Casablanca** (Puerto Barquerizo Moreno, Isla San Cristóbal; ☎/fax 05/2520-392; jacuibaz@yahoo.com): When you can score a bayfront room with a balcony on the Galápagos Islands for under \$100 (£67), you know you've found a good deal. Accommodations here have loads of unique artistic touches. See p. 360.

9 THE BEST ECOLOGES & HACIENDAS

Two distinct, yet in some ways similar, lodging options in Ecuador are small, converted old haciendas and isolated ecolodges. While the haciendas tend to be located on the high Andean plains, the ecolodges are mostly found in the Oriente or the Amazon basin. Both tend to be small and isolated, and nature-viewing and active adventure activities are the order of the day.

- **Hacienda Cusín** (San Pablo del Lago, Otavalo; ☎ 06/2918-013; www.haciendacusin.com): This 17th-century hacienda was sold originally at auction in Spain by King Phillip II. It's located just outside Otavalo, beside the pretty San Pablo Lake. Accommodations, food, and service are all top-draw, and the surrounding gardens and volcano views are delightful. See p. 154.
- **Hacienda Zuleta** (Angochahua, Imbabura; ☎ 06/2662-182; www.zuleta.com): With sprawling grounds; a working cheese, cattle, and horse farm; and the largest original entrance plaza of any hacienda in Ecuador, this place exudes authenticity. Once the home of President Galo Plaza, and still in his family, the hacienda offers wonderful and comfortable rooms, tasty family-style meals, and a host of tour options. Horseback riding is excellent here. They

also have a condor rescue project on their grounds. See p. 158.

- **Black Sheep Inn** (Chugchilán, Cotopaxi; ☎ 03/2814-587; www.blacksheepinn.com): This isolated high-altitude ecolodge is built on a hillside overlooking a beautiful river canyon. Situated about midway along the famed Quilotoa Loop, this is hands-down the best place to stay while taking part in the hiking, biking, trekking, and other adventures available in this pretty and pristine area. See p. 182.
- **Hacienda Leito** (outside Patate, Baños; ☎ 03/2859-329; www.haciendaleito.com): This isolated hacienda provides a fabulous mix of old and new. The original ranch building, with its original cobblestone driveway, central fountain, and antique artworks and furnishings, is a classic example of a colonial-Spanish hacienda. But the extensive spa, up-to-date rooms, and free Wi-Fi let you know you're in the 21st century. See p. 187.
- **Hacienda San Agustín de Callo** (Lasso, Cotopaxi; ☎/fax 02/2906-157; www.inchahacienda.com): My pick for the most unique hacienda in Ecuador, this place is built upon the ruins of both an Inca palace and a colonial-era monastery. Some of the rooms here have walls laid by Inca masons, with their

distinctive stone work. All are stunning and unique, with artistic touches that range from hand-painted murals to working stone fireplaces. See p. 174.

- **Hostería La Andaluza** (Chuquipigyo, Chimborazo; ☎ 03/2949-370): Located on the outskirts of Riobamba, in the shadow of Chimborazo peak, this converted old hacienda is the best hotel for many miles around. A relaxed and cozy vibe and colonial-era authenticity are prevalent. The restaurant here is excellent, and a number of activities are available. See p. 204.
- **Kashama** (outside Santo Domingo de los Colorados; ☎ 02/2773-193; www.kashama.com): This is a beautiful and relaxing jungle lodge and spa set on the shores of the Río Blanco. Creative design elements and arty touches abound. The inviting pool features a tall, sculpted waterfall, and the excellent spa here offers a wide range of treatments and cures. All sorts of tours and adventures are also offered. See p. 305.
- **Napo Wildlife Center** (lower Río Napo; ☎ 866/750-0830 in the U.S.,

or 02/6005-819 reservation office in Quito; www.napowildlifecenter.com): Run as a joint venture with the local Añangu Quichua community, this is one of the top ecolodges in the Amazon basin. The 12 lakefront bungalows are rustically luxurious, and the guides, food, and service are superb. Tours and adventures are offered, including visits to local indigenous communities and tours of the rivers, lagoons, and creeks of this lowland rainforest region. See p. 319.

- **Kapawi Ecolodge & Reserve** (on the Río Pastaza; ☎ 02/6009-333; www.kapawi.com): This pioneering ecolodge is located deep in the Amazon rainforest among the villages of the Achuar tribe. You can only reach Kapawi on a private charter flight, and the isolation is part of the charm. Beautiful cabins (built on stilts over a black-water lagoon), great food, and fantastic guides don't hurt, either. This place provides a top-notch Amazon rainforest experience. See p. 328.

10 THE BEST BED-AND-BREAKFASTS & SMALL INNS

- **Mansión del Angel** (Quito; ☎ 800/327-3573 in the U.S., or 02/2557-721 in Ecuador; www.mansiondelangel.com.ec): With crystal chandeliers, Oriental rugs, and four-poster beds, this boutique hotel, in the heart of Quito's New Town, offers all the elegance and style of a bygone era. Located steps away from the bustle and blur of all the restaurants and clubs of the Mariscal district, this place is a quiet and calm oasis inside. See p. 107.
- **Hotel Café Cultura** (Quito; ☎/fax 02/2224-271; www.cafecultura.com): Hip and European in feel, this cozy Mariscal

hotel features unique, artistically designed and decorated rooms, an excellent restaurant, and super service. Hand-painted murals abound, and many of the bathrooms are works of art in themselves. See p. 106.

- **Hotel Santa Lucía** (Cuenca; ☎ 07/2828-000; www.santaluciahotel.com): Set right in the heart of colonial Cuenca, in a house that dates to 1859, this is one of the best boutique hotels in Ecuador. The colonial vibe is maintained throughout, but the rooms also feature plasma-screen televisions and free Wi-Fi. The central courtyard here is

home to a towering magnolia tree, as well as an excellent restaurant. See p. 219.

- **Mansión Alcázar** (Cuenca; ☎ 800/327-3573 in the U.S. and Canada, or 07/2823-918 in Ecuador; www.mansionalcazar.com): Like the Santa Lucía (above), this charming little hotel is housed in a remarkably well-restored old colonial mansion. The Alcázar has a pretty garden and several sumptuous sitting areas and lounges. See p. 218.
- **Vistamar** (Manta; ☎ 05/2621-671; www.hosteriavistaalmar.com): From the two large jade horses near the entrance to the large Buddha sculpture in the main lounge area, you'll be struck at every turn by the art, sculpture, and

decor here. When that stops piquing your interest, you can marvel at the ocean views from the hillside perch. See p. 281.

- **Red Mangrove Adventure Inn** (Puerto Ayora, Isla Santa Cruz, Galápagos; ☎ 888/254-3190 in the U.S. and Canada, or 05/2526-524 in Ecuador; www.redmangrove.com): Located right on the bay, this hip hotel offers up the best rooms right in Puerto Ayora. A rambling structure filled with nooks and crannies, this hotel boasts tasteful and comfortable rooms and the best restaurant on the island. These folks also run hotels on Isla Floreana and Isla Isabela. See p. 351.

11 THE BEST RESTAURANTS

- **El Atrio** (Quito; ☎ 02/2520-581): With an eclectic menu, elegant ambience, and wonderful setting overlooking the Plaza Foch, this is one of my favorite restaurants in Quito. The menu here is equally rewarding whether you're coming for a snack, light lunch, or full meal. See p. 112.
- **Azuca Latin Bistro** (Quito; ☎ 02/2907-164): Loud and lively most of the time, this new spot serves up excellent *nuevo latino* fare. Mojitos are the specialty drink, and there's quite a variety of them on the menu here. See p. 113.
- **Zazu** (Quito; ☎ 02/2543-559): Brash and bold, Quito's hippest new restaurant is also one of its most satisfying. The Peruvian-born chef uses his native sensibility, fresh local ingredients, and ample imagination to create a consistently successful string of new and exciting dishes. Just about everything on the menu shines, but my favorite way to dine here is to trust the chef and sign on for his nightly tasting menu. See p. 117.
- **Hacienda Rumiloma** (Quito; ☎ 02/2548-206): It's worth the short taxi ride to this elegant and eclectic restaurant on the slopes of Volcán Pichincha. The menu is broad, inventive, and wonderfully executed. And the cozy dining room features an excellent view of the city below. See p. 111.
- **Hotel Ali Shungu** (Otavalo; ☎ 06/2920-750): Housed inside a popular hotel, this is my favorite restaurant in Otavalo. The healthy and creative international cuisine is served in a cozy and inviting ambience. Locally grown organic produce is used wherever possible. This is a welcome treat for breakfast, lunch, or dinner. See p. 152.
- **Café Mariane** (Baños de Agua Santa; ☎ 03/2740-911): I know Baños is a backpacker and budget-hound hangout, but even if that description fits you, be sure to treat yourself to an elegant French-Mediterranean meal at the best little restaurant in town. See p. 198.

- **Villa Rosa** (Cuenca; ☎ 07/2837-944): Excellent Ecuadorean cuisine is matched with an elegant setting and superb service in this Cuenca restaurant. Although traditional Ecuadorean dishes are the mainstay here, they often are given little twists and turns that set them above what you'll find at most other local joints. This place is almost always busy—and it's closed on most weekend evenings—so reservations are essential. See p. 221.
- **Lo Nuestro** (Guayaquil; ☎ 04/2386-398): Elegant and relaxed, this is the best place in Guayaquil to enjoy classic Ecuadorean cooking in a refined setting. The restaurant is located a little outside downtown, but it's definitely worth the ride. See p. 252.
- **Sucre** (Guayaquil; ☎ 04/2838-068): Guayaquil is experiencing a major boom in high-end dining, and this new fusion restaurant is leading the way. The decor is chic and contemporary, the bar is well stocked and beautiful,

and the food hits all the right marks. See p. 252.

- **Martinica** (Manta; ☎ 05/2613-735): Creative and hip, this homey restaurant stands head and shoulders above the rest in Manta. The eclectic fusion menu is bolstered by a wide-ranging wine list. See p. 282.
- **Sea Flower Restaurant** (Same; ☎ 06/2733-369): It's almost worth a trip to Ecuador's Pacific coast just to dine at this delightful spot. Presentations are eye-catching, and the food lives up to the fanfare. Be sure to have a reservation—this place fills up fast. See p. 301.
- **Red Sushi** (Puerto Ayora; ☎ 05/2526-524): With so much fresh seafood available just outside this restaurant's front door and back dock, it's only natural they serve up some excellent sushi. The setting is subdued and romantic, and the rest of the menu—apart from the sushi—is also wonderfully done. See p. 355.

12 THE BEST SHOPPING & MARKETS

- **Olga Fisch Folklore** (Quito; ☎ 02/2541-315; www.olgafisch.com): Olga Fisch was a pioneer in recognizing and promoting the artistry of Ecuador's artisans and craftspeople. She helped them refine and improve some of their designs. Today her shop/gallery remains the top place to go for the best selection of high-end products. You'll find everything here, from clothing to ceramics to paintings. You can get chess sets with pieces carved from *tagua* nuts, or fine original silver and gemstone jewelry. See p. 129.
- **Tianguez** (Quito; ☎ 02/2570-233; www.sinchisacha.org): Housed in a mazelike series of rooms that feel like catacombs under the San Francisco church, this is my favorite place to shop for handicrafts. Just about every corner

and region of the country is represented here, with pieces from the various Amazon basin indigenous tribes, as well as primitive paintings from artisans of the central Sierra. You can buy trinkets for next to nothing, or fine works that will make a dent in your wallet. See p. 129.

- **Otavalo Market** (Otavalo): This is the most famous market in Ecuador, and perhaps in all of South America. Indeed, it's the place to come for all sorts of locally made crafts, including alpaca sweaters, rugs, and wall hangings, as well as a wide range of wood work, primitive paintings, and jewelry. Musicians can pick up some pan pipes or a *charango*. See p. 147.
- **San Antonio de Ibarra**: It seems as if everyone in this little town in Imbabura province is a woodcarver. Many of the

works produced here are religious in theme, and often of monumental proportion. Still, you can get plenty of decorative and functional pieces, and some that are easy enough to carry home with you (the others can be shipped). See p. 161.

- **Cuenca:** From Panama hats to locally produced handicrafts, fine art works to unique jewelry pieces, Cuenca holds its own against Quito and Otavalo as one of the top shopping cities in the country. Of particular interest are visits to

the actual Panama-hat factories and the studio of renowned ceramic artist Eduardo Vega. See chapter 9.

- **Galápagos Jewelry** (Puerto Ayora; ☎ 05/2526-044; www.galapagosjewelry.com): These folks have excellent distinctive pieces, many in the shape and image of local flora and fauna. Cast silver is their strong suit, but they also work with stones and other metals. They also have a couple of outlets in Quito, and in Guayaquil and Cuenca. See p. 350.

13 THE BEST AFTER-DARK FUN

- **Mariscal District** (Quito): The 4- to 5-square-block area known as Mariscal, in the heart of Quito's New Town, is chock-full of bars, clubs, discos, and restaurants. It's busy here every night of the week, but especially Thursday through Saturday. Consider starting off on the Plaza Foch with a pub crawl, but be careful and use common sense, because crime against tourists is not unheard of here. See p. 130.
- **Baños de Agua Santa:** As befits a bustling backpacker and adventure-tourist town, Baños has a rocking nightlife. If the rumblings of Volcán Tungurahua keep you up at night here, stroll down Calle Eloy Alfaro, where you'll find a string of bars, clubs, discos, and *peñas*. See p. 198.
- **Café Eucalyptus** (Cuenca; ☎ 07/2849-157): Great tapas, an excellent wine list, locally produced tap beer, and top-notch call liquors combine with a warm and welcoming ambience to make this

hands-down the top after-dark gathering spot in Cuenca. I like the couch seating near the fireplace, but the bar is also a good place to settle in. Or, if you're looking for a little more privacy, head to the second floor. See p. 222.

- **Montañita** (South Pacific coast): In addition to their prowess on the sea, surfers are legendary for their après-surf sessions. Montañita is the top surfer town in Ecuador, and its raucous nightlife is fed by the flood of local and international surfers. Lately, they've been pulling out all the stops on the weekend closest to a full moon. See p. 262.
- **Puerto Ayora** (Galápagos): Puerto Ayora has a surprisingly lively, albeit limited, nightlife and bar scene. **Bongo Bar** (☎ 05/2526-264) is the most happening place in town at night. It's located on a rooftop and opens at 4pm but usually doesn't get busy until after 8pm. See p. 355.

14 THE BEST WEBSITES ABOUT ECUADOR

- **Latin America Network Information Center** (<http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/ecuador>): This site contains a collection of diverse information about Ecuador.

Hands-down it's the best place for Web browsing, with helpful links to a wide range of tourism and general-information sites.

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- **Hip Ecuador** (www.hipecuador.com): This is a large and comprehensive tourism site in English, with loads of useful information, recommendations, and links.
 - **Metropolitan Tourism Corporation** (www.quito.com.ec): Quito's official tourism bureau maintains an excellent bilingual site, loaded with useful and current information.
 - **Quito Cultura** (www.quitocultura.com): Although this site is in Spanish, it's the place to go to find out what

concerts, art exhibits, and cultural activities and events are happening in Quito.

- **Pure Ecuador** (www.purecuador.com): This is the official website of the Ecuadorean Ministry of Tourism. There's a lot of information here, although much of it is quite basic, and the format can be hard to navigate at times. At press time, it was rumored that they were working on improving a new official site: **www.ecuador.travel**.