

THE BEST OF ECUADOR

1

Ecuadorians 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. With so much physical and cultural variety, there are plenty of excellent experiences and adventures for any type of traveler.

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, Tandayapa, San Isidro, 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.

Below is a selective list of some of the best that Ecuador has to offer.

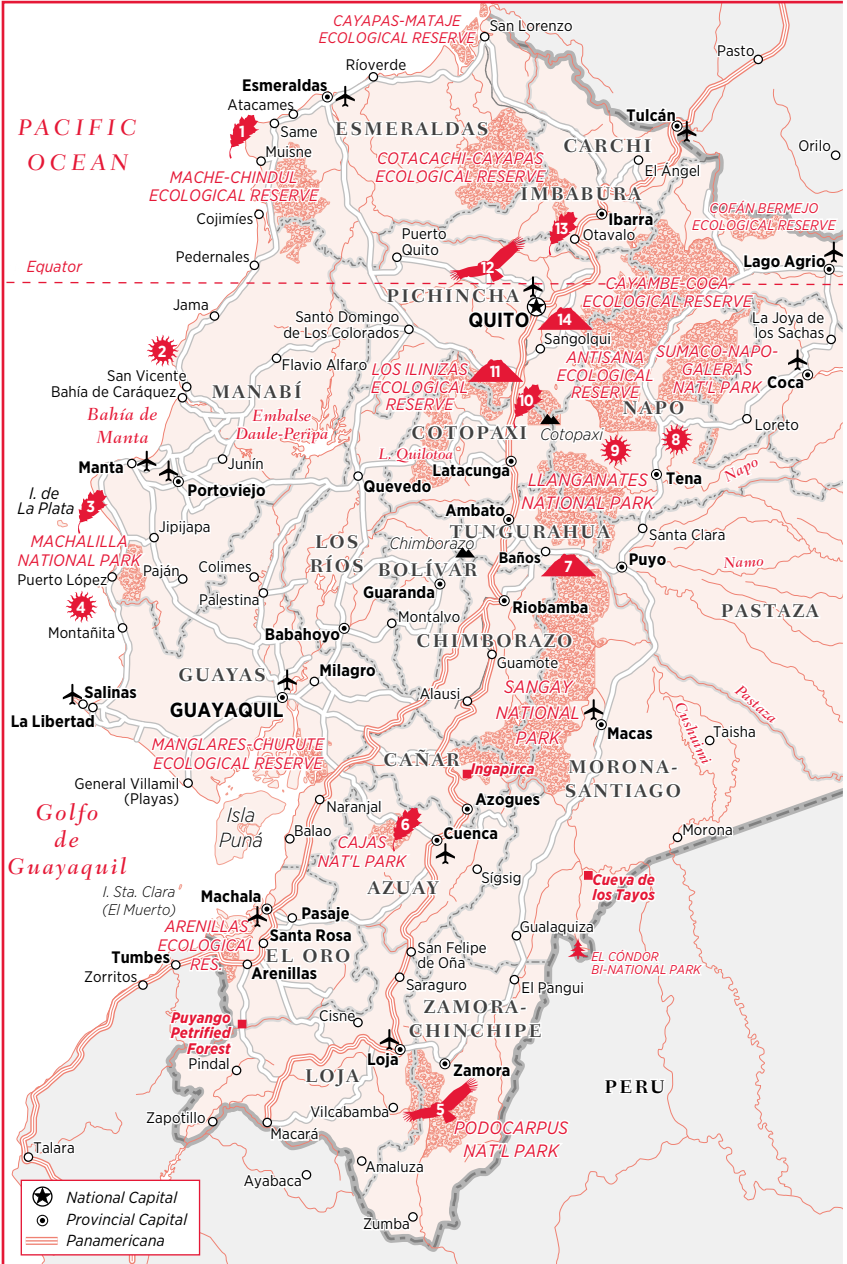
THE best PURELY ECUADOREAN TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

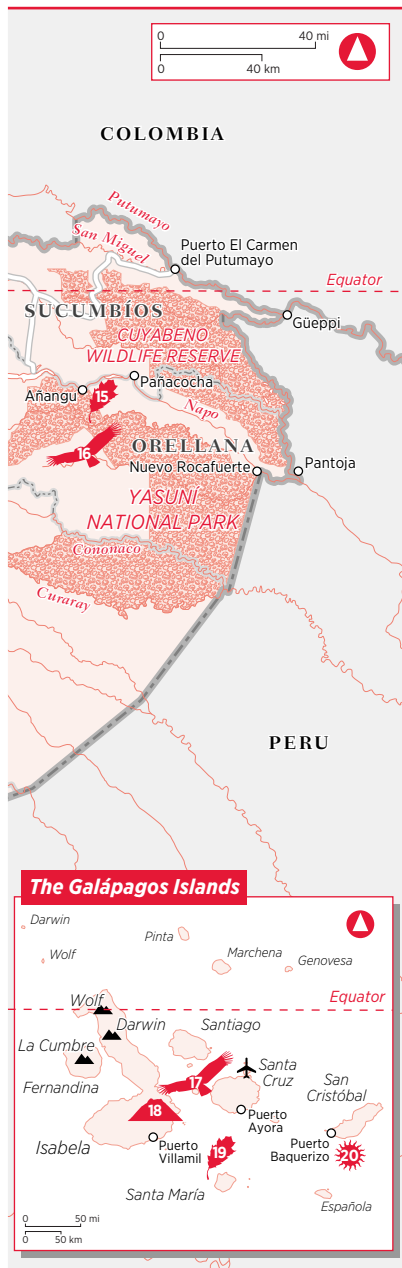
- **Stepping Back in Time in Colonial Quito:** Founded in 1534, Quito was the first city to be declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Its Old Town seems in many ways to have changed little over the centuries. Walk the rough cobblestone streets and visit the numerous beautifully restored colonial-era churches, monasteries, convents, private mansions, and public plazas. You'll feel as if you've traveled back in time. See chapter 5.
- **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** (☎ 09/9701-133; www.quitsato.org), located just off the highway from Quito to Otavalo. See p. 130.

1 The Best of Ecuador

The Best Purely Ecuadorean Travel Experiences

THE BEST OF ECUADOR





THE BEST OF NATURAL ECUADOR

The Beaches West of Atacames **1**

Cajas National Park **6**

Cotopaxi National Park **10**

Cuicocha Lake **13**

The Galápagos Islands **19**

Isla de la Plata **3**

The Rainforests of
Ecuador's El Oriente **15**

THE BEST OUTDOOR ADVENTURES

Climbing Volcán Cotopaxi **9**

Playing Cowboy or Cowgirl
on the High Mountain Paramo **9**

Scuba Diving in the
Galápagos Islands **20**

Surfing Lonely Waves
Along Ecuador's Pacific Coast **2**

Watching Whales Breach &
Breed off the Pacific Coast **4**

White-Water Rafting & Kayaking **8**

THE BEST BIRD-WATCHING

The Cloud Forests of
Mindó and Bellavista **12**

El Oriente **16**

The Galápagos Islands **17**

Podocarpus National Park **5**

THE BEST FAMILY DESTINATIONS

Baños de Agua Santa **7**

El Teleférico & Vulcano Park **14**

The Galápagos Islands **18**

Hacienda La Alegría **11**

- **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 menu 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 not there's any science behind it, a spa treatment or two at **Hostería Izhcayluma** (☎ 07/3025-162; www.izhcayluma.com) will definitely cure whatever's ailing you at the moment. See chapter 8.
- **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. 191.
- **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. 205). 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 (p. 268) or Jipijapa to find their special *superfino* headpiece. See chapter 8.
- **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 chapter 7.
- **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 11.

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.134.
- **Cotopaxi National Park:** With 33,393 hectares (82,481 acres) surrounding the park's namesake and emblematic volcano, this is Ecuador's most popular national

park, after the Galápagos. At 5,897m (19,342 ft.), the snow-covered Cotopaxi is the country's second-highest peak and one of the highest active volcanoes 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** (☎ 866/978-7398 in the U.S. and Canada, or 02/2500-530 in Ecuador; www.surtrek.com). For hard-core climbing and adventures, try **Safari Ecuador** (☎ 02/2552-505; www.safari.com.ec). See chapters 4 and 7.

- **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. 213.
- **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-watching and wildlife viewing and snorkeling. What's more, from late June to 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 9.
- **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 10.
- **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 11.
- **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 also a living geology laboratory. See chapter 12.

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. 107.

- o **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. 109.
- o **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.111.
- o **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. 112.
- o **Museo del Convento de la Concepción (Riobamba):** Housed in the rambling rooms of a colonial-era convent, this museum has an impressive collection of 18th-century religious art and artifacts. Rooms formerly occupied by prospective nuns are now filled with beautiful paintings, sculptures, ceremonial clothing, and jewels. See p. 189.
- o **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. 201.
- o **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 semiexcavated. As if that weren't enough, there are extensive botanical gardens here, a small aviary, and llamas roaming the grounds. See p. 202.
- o **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. 214.
- o **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. 286.
- o **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. 236.

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 (19,342 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. **Adventure Planet Ecuador** (☎ 02/2863-086; www.adventureplanet.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 4 and 7.
- **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 roundup 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.haciendalaalegria.com) offers multiday rides. See chapters 4 and 7.
- **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 9.
- **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 4, 9, and 10.
- **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 in Tena, or 02/2904-054 in Quito; www.riosecuador.com) is an excellent operator with offices in both Tena and Quito. See chapters 4 and 11.
- **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 4 and 12.

THE best BIRD-WATCHING

- Enjoying the Mists and Multitude of Species Found in the Cloud Forests of Mindo, Tandayapa & 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. **Satchitamia Lodge** (☎ 02/3900-907 or 02/2555-144; www.sachatamia.com) and **San Jorge de Tandayapa Lodge** (☎ 877/565-2596 toll-free in the U.S. and Canada, or 02/3390-403 in Ecuador; www.eco-lodgesanjorge.com) are two excellent lodges from which to base your bird-watching expeditions of this area. See p. 125, as well as chapter 4.
- Spotting Some of the More Than 600 Species in Podocarpus National Park:** This remote national park runs from a high of 3,700m (12,136 ft.) down to some 1,000m (3,280 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 Mendieta, at **Caminatas Andes Sureños** (☎ 07/2673-147; www.vilcabamba.org/caminatasandessurenos.html). See p. 221.
- Catching Sight of Hundreds of Species in El Oriente:** The midelevation 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 11.
- 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 see them only here. See chapter 12.

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. 106.

- **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. 162.
- **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 toward all ages. See chapter 7.
- **Hostería Alándaluz** (south of Puerto López; ☎ 04/2780-690; www.alandaluzhosteria.com): An environmentally conscious and eclectic collection of rooms and bungalows on a beautiful spot along the Pacific coast, this place is very popular with Ecuadorean families. In addition to the beach and pools, there's plenty to keep kids and parents alike entertained. See p. 192.
- **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.tauk.com) is an excellent soft-adventure company with distinctive family package tours to the Galápagos. See chapter 12.

THE best LUXURY HOTELS

- **JW Marriott Hotel** (Quito; ☎ 888/236-2427 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. 90.
- **nū house** (Quito; ☎ 02/2557-845; www.nuhousehotels.com): Hip and contemporary, this 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 is just outside its doors. See p. 92.
- **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 supercomfortable, and the service is excellent. Plus, it's located in the heart of Old Town, right off Plaza de la Independencia (Plaza Grande). See p. 95.
- **Sheraton Quito** (Quito; ☎ 800/325-3535 in the U.S. and Canada, or 02/2970-002 in Ecuador; www.sheraton.com): Large and plush rooms, a great spa, 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. 98.
- **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. 140.

- **Samari Spa Resort** (outside Baños de Agua Santa; ☎ 03/2741-855; www.samarispa.com): This plush and luxurious 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. 183.
- **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. 207.
- **Palmazul** (San Clemente, Manabi; ☎ 05/2615-018; www.manabihotel.com): My favorite beach hotel on the mainland, this place has large, light, and airy rooms; a fabulous restaurant; friendly service; and a fantastic location on a quiet stretch of sand. See p. 272.
- **Finch Bay Hotel** (Santa Cruz Island, Galápagos; ☎ 877/534-8584 in the U.S. and Canada, or 02/2988-200 reservations office in Quito; www.finchbayhotel.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. 342.
- **Iguana Crossing** (Isabela Island, Galápagos; ☎ 800/217-9414 in the U.S. and Canada, or 02/6046-800 in Ecuador; www.opuntialgalapagoshotels.com): Set on the remote and lesser-visited Isabela Island, this boutique hotel has beautiful rooms, a host of modern amenities, and a great in-house restaurant. See p. 355.

THE best MODERATELY PRICED & BUDGET HOTELS

- **Hotel Vieja Cuba** (Quito; ☎ 02/2906-729; 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. 94.
- **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. 96.
- **La Posada del Quinde** (Otavalo; ☎ 06/2920-750; www.posadaquinde.com): This laid-back hotel is my favorite haunt in Otavalo. Just a few blocks away from Plaza de los Ponchos, it's a calm oasis in a bustling little town. See p. 138.
- **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 is available, including a number of horseback-riding adventures. See p. 142.
- **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, although all guests get to enjoy the view from the shared rooftop patio. See p. 184.

- **Hacienda El Porvenir** (Cotopaxi; ☎ 02/2041-520; www.tierradelvolcan.com): Wonderfully located on the flat paramo just below Volcán Cotopaxi, this humble hostel and working ranch offers comfortable and inviting rooms from which to explore the surrounding area. See p. 163.
- **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. 209.
- **Manso Boutique Hostal** (Guayaquil; ☎ 04/2526-644; www.manso.com.ec): Located right on Guayaquil's riverfront Malecón Simón Bolívar, this boutique hotel offers up well-designed and -equipped rooms in a remodeled old downtown building. The restaurant here is also excellent. See p. 240.
- **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. 248.
- **Hotel Casablanca** (Puerto Barquerizo Moreno, Isla San Cristóbal; ☎/fax 05/2520-392; jacquibaz@yahoo.com): When you can score a bayfront room with a balcony on the Galápagos Islands for under \$100, you know you've found a good deal. Accommodations here have loads of unique artistic touches. See p. 352.

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.hacienda cusin.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. 141.
- **Hacienda Zuleta** (Angochahua, Imbabura; ☎ 06/2662-182; www.hacienda 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. 144.
- **Black Sheep Inn** (Chugchilán, Cotopaxi; ☎ 03/2708-077; www.blacksheepinn.com): This isolated high-altitude ecolodge is built on a hillside overlooking a beautiful river canyon. Situated about midway along the famed Quiltoa 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. 169.

- **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. 175.
- **Hacienda San Agustín de Callo** (Lasso, Cotopaxi; ☎/fax 02/2906-157; www.inchacienda.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. 161.
- **Albergue Abraspungo** (Km 3.5, Vía Guano, Riobamba; ☎ 03/2364-031; www.abraspungo.com.ec): Located on the outskirts of Riobamba, in the shadow of Chimborazo peak, this place oozes country charm. The restaurant and service here are excellent, and a number of activities are available. See p. 191.
- **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. 294.
- **Napo Wildlife Center** (lower Río Napo; ☎ 866/750-0830 in the U.S., or 02/6005-893 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. 308.
- **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 reach Kapawi only 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. 320.

THE best BED-AND-BREAKFASTS & SMALL INNS

- **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 themselves. See p. 90.
- **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 refined boutique hotel offers all the elegance and style

of a bygone era. Located on a side street about halfway between the Mariscal district and Old Town, this place is a quiet and calm oasis in a busy city. See p. 97.

- **Villa Colonna** (Quito; ☎ 02/2955-805; www.villacolonna.ec): This six-room converted mansion oozes style and class. Rooms are plush, with a sense of Colonial-era splendor, and the hotel's rooftop terrace is a beautiful spot to take in some sweeping views of the Old Town's impressive architecture. See p. 96.
- **Mansión Santa Isabella** (Riobamba; ☎ 03/2962-947; www.mansionsanta.isabella.com): This new boutique hotel offers warm and inviting rooms right in the heart of Riobamba, just blocks away from the city's famous train station. The central interior courtyard is a quiet oasis, and the hotel's wine cellar and bar is arguably Riobamba's best nighttime haunt. See p. 192.
- **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 (below), this charming little hotel is housed in a remarkably well-restored old colonial mansion. The Alcázar has a gorgeous garden with several sumptuous sitting areas and lounges, and one of the best restaurants in Cuenca. See p. 206.
- **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. 207.
- **Mansión del Río** (Guayaquil; ☎ 04/2565-827; www.mansiondelrio-ec.com): This new boutique hotel has an enviable location fronting the river in the heart of Guayaquil's trendy and artistic Las Peñas neighborhood. The rooms and common areas are plush and overflowing with colonial-era charm and sophistication. See p. 239.
- **Vistamar** (Manta; ☎ 05/2621-671; www.hosteriavistamar.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. 270.
- **El Faro Escandinavo** (San Lorenzo, south of Manta; ☎ 09/1122-336; www.elfaro.escandinavo.com): Set on a lovely stretch of nearly deserted beach, the eight individual bungalows here are inviting yet understated. The service and attention are very personalized. See p. 271.
- **Hamadryade Lodge** (south of Tena; ☎ 800/327-3573 in the U.S. and Canada, or 08/5909-992 in Ecuador; www.hamadryade-lodge.com): With just four individual cabins, this new boutique lodge adds a touch of class and style to the generally more rustic offerings found in the Ecuadorean Amazon basin. See p. 314.
- **Red Mangrove Adventura Lodge** (Puerto Ayora, Isla Santa Cruz, Galápagos; ☎ 888/254-3190 in the U.S. and Canada, or 05/2526-564 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, the 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. 343.

1 THE BEST RESTAURANTS

- **Azuca Latin Bistro** (Quito; ☎ 02/2907-164): Loud and lively most of the time, this 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. 99.
- **Theatrum** (Quito; ☎ 02/2571-011; www.theatrum.com.ec): With elegant ambience, an inventive menu, and a wonderful setting overlooking Plaza Sucre, this is one of my favorite restaurants in Quito. If you're lucky, you can combine a meal here with a show or concert at Teatro Sucre. See p. 101.
- **Zazu** (Quito; ☎ 02/2543-559; www.zazuquito.com): Brash and bold, Quito's hippest 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. 103.
- **Hacienda Rumiloma** (Quito; ☎ 02/2548-206): It's definitely 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. 103.
- **Café Pachamama** (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. 143.
- **Café Mariane** (Baños de Agua Santa; ☎ 03/2740-936): I know Baños is a back-packer 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. 185.
- **Casa Alonso** (Cuenca; ☎ 07/2823-918): A young, creative chef has turned the hotel restaurant inside the elegant Mansión Alcázar into one of the best fine-dining experiences to be found in Ecuador. Using local ingredients and tweaking traditional recipes, the menu here is adventurous and extremely pleasing. See p. 210.
- **Tiestos** (Cuenca; ☎ 07/2835-310): Most of the dishes here are cooked in clay pots, or *tiestos*, which are taken from the small open kitchen right to the table in this festive and almost always packed restaurant. The food itself is rich and rewarding. See p. 211.
- **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. 242.
- **Asia de Cuba** (Guayaquil; ☎ 04/2838-068): Guayaquil is experiencing a major boom in high-end dining, and this Latin-Asian fusion spot is a highlight. The decor is chic and contemporary, the bar is well stocked and beautiful, and the food hits all the right marks. See p. 242.
- **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. 271.
- **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. 190.

- **The Marquis Restaurant** (Tena; ☎ 05/06/2886-513): Aside from a few fancy lodges with an imported chef, dining in the Ecuadorean Amazon region is pretty dire. This downtown Tena restaurant is a striking exception to the rule, with home-made pastas, excellent steaks, and a good wine list, to boot. See p. 313.
- **Angermeyer Point Restaurant** (Puerto Ayora; ☎ 05/2527-007): With a wrap-around wooden deck fronting the water on Puerto Ayora's Academy Bay, this restaurant has a spectacular setting. With a wide-ranging menu, the dining here is pretty good, too. See p. 345.

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. 115.
- **Tianguez** (Quito; ☎ 02/2570-240; 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. 115.
- **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. 133.
- **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. 147.
- **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 8.
- **Galería Aymara** (Puerto Ayora; ☎ 05/2526-835; www.galeria-aymara.com): This place has an amazing collection of decorative and functional pieces culled from artists and craftspeople from the Galápagos, mainland Ecuador, and other South American countries. See p. 342.

1 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 Plaza Foch with a pub crawl, but be careful and use common sense, because crime against tourists is not unheard of here. See p. 119.
- **Café Arte** (Ibarra; ☎ 06/2950-806): The otherwise sleepy and mostly forgotten city of Ibarra is home to one of the country's best boho bars and coffeehouses. This place has excellent and widely varied entertainment most weekend nights. See p. 150.
- **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. 185.
- **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. 213.
- **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. 252.
- **Night Tours** (El Oriente): Most neotropical forest dwellers are nocturnal. Animal and insect calls fill the air, and the rustling on the ground all around takes on new meaning. Night tours are offered at most, if not all, of the rainforest nature lodges in the Ecuadorean Amazon basin. Many use high-powered flashlights to catch glimpses of various animals. See chapter 11.
- **Puerto Ayora** (Galápagos Islands): 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. 346.

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.
- **Pure Ecuador** (www.ecuador.travel): 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.
- **Hip Ecuador** (www.hipecuador.com): This is a large and comprehensive tourism site in English, with loads of useful information, recommendations, and links.

- **Quito** (www.quito.com.ec): Quito's official tourism bureau maintains an excellent bilingual site, loaded with useful and current information.
- **U.S. Embassy in Quito** (<http://ecuador.usembassy.gov>): This is the official website of the United States Embassy in Quito. This site has plenty of good information, even for non-U.S. citizens, including regular news updates and travel advisories.