

Ecuador

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Overview and Map

Though relatively small in size, Ecuador is home to arguably the most spectacular array of natural and cultural diversity anywhere. Ecuador is composed of four main geographical regions: the Pacific Coast (La Costa), the Andean Mountain Corridor (La Sierra), the Amazon Basin (El Oriente), and the Galápagos Islands. Each region is geographically and culturally distinct, and offers a wide variety of experiences for travelers.



The Andes region of Ecuador rewards visitors with breathtaking mountains, and cities with amazing cultural histories. The Amazon rainforest highlights the eastern region of Ecuador, El Oriente. Rich in biodiversity, thousands of exotic species of animals and plants await your acquaintance. The coastal region of Ecuador has retained its low-key charm and natural serenity. There you will find ample remote surfing beaches, charming fishing villages and the bustling port city of Guayaquil, all vying for your affection.

Even more impressive than Ecuador's physical beauty are its people. Whether you are relaxing on the coast, trekking in the mountains, or getting to know the beauty of the Amazon region, you will always find someone eager to share their story with you and make sure that you have the most enjoyable time possible.

Headquarters: Cuenca - "Cultural and Colonial Patrimony"



Often referred to as the "Athens of Ecuador", Cuenca is Ecuador's third largest city and a place greatly influenced by its history. Originally a Cañari settlement, the Incas conquered the inhabitants and began to occupy the city. These Incas absorbed the astronomical and agricultural achievements of the Cañari into their own culture. According to legends passed down by word of mouth, this city sported magnificent golden temples and other buildings. However by the time the Spaniards arrived, it had been reduced to little more than ruins. In 1548, a new town was built on the site and the city slowly grew in importance and size. This is the Cuenca we can see and visit today. Because of this well preserved history, Cuenca is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Trust site.

Modern Cuenca is not very modern at all. It is a sort of time bubble where the past is effortlessly preserved in grand fashion. As you explore the cobblestone streets you may find a graceful cathedral towering above you or you will stop to admire the marble buildings and their distinctive colonial air. The people of the city are known for their traditional way of life and unchanged cultural values, which compliment this historical town so well. They continue to display a tradition of intellectual development, evidenced by the many notable writers, poets, artists and philosophers who originated from Cuenca.

Satellite Site: Loja – "The Sentinel of the South"



The city of Loja is one of the oldest cities in Ecuador and was established in its current location December 8, 1548. Today its streets and architecture remind visitors of its 500 year-old past and its history as a pioneering city. Loja was the first city to make use of electricity in Ecuador, which in 1897 was quite an achievement. It went on to grow like any city, but it managed to remain ahead of the times while ensuring the protection of its heritage, culture and natural surroundings.

Loja has an estimated population of approximately 140,000 people. They are proud of their tourist-friendly town which draws many visitors each year. It is also the cultural and musical capital of Ecuador. It is said that the best and most talented musicians originate from Loja. At night, Loja is one of the more lively destinations in Ecuador, with a range of cozy bars, restaurants and thumping dance clubs.

Satellite Site: Zamora – "City of Birds and Waterfalls"



Zamora is located in the foothills of the Andes at 970m above sea level, on the convergence of the Zamora, Bombuscaro and Jamboé rivers. With just 16,000 people living here, this is the least populated area in Ecuador. Zamora is well known for its various types of birds and several waterfalls, which emerge from the streams that surround the city. The entire region is covered with a uniquely mountainous topography, which markedly distinguishes this area from the rest of the Amazon.

Satellite Site: Riobamba – "The Avenue of Volcanoes"



South of Quito, the Panamericana winds past eight of the country's 10 highest peaks, including the snowcapped cone of Volcán Cotopaxi (5897m) and the glaciated behemoth, Volcán Chimborazo (6310m). For trekkers and climbers, the central highlands are a paradise, and even inexperienced (but extremely fit) climbers can have a go at summiting the country's highest peaks. Those who are happier off the hill will find the region just as thrilling. It is home to scores of tiny indigenous villages, some of which are so remote you can only get there on foot, and where people lead lives that have changed little over the centuries. The region is also home to many of the country's most traditional markets. Wandering through these outdoor markets, filled with unimaginable and interesting goods is one of the country's most memorable experiences.

Satellite Site: Pacific Coast - "The Route of the Sun"



West of the principal port city of Guayaquil, the southern Pacific Coast region provides yet another distinct look at Ecuador's cultural and ethnic diversity. The "Ruta del Sol" has it all. Known for its incredible seafood and laid back lifestyle, the coast is a favorite for many visitors. From the resort town of Salinas and ancient Valdivian cultural artifacts in the Santa Elena Peninsula to the fishing village of Palmar and the international surfing hotspot of Montañita, here you will gain a perspective of what coastal life means to Ecuadorians.