

CLOUD CITY

For many visitors to Ecuador, Quito is a mere stopover en route to the Galapagos Islands or the Amazon. But the world's highest capital city is worth a visit, and a tour of this pioneering Unesco World Heritage Site reveals its charms, both bold and hidden.

STORY PAUL KAY

San Francisco Plaza, a 16th century World Heritage site, in Quito's Old Town.

Flying into Quito by day, it's hard not to be a little bit smitten with the Ecuadorian capital before the plane has even reached the tarmac. Nestled in a wide natural river basin in the Andes and watched over by both an active volcano and a giant aluminium statue of a winged Virgin Mary, it's the kind of place that makes you press your nose to the window of the plane as it descends.

At a lofty 2,800 metres, Quito is the highest official capital city in the world, and you can feel it in the crisp, and slightly thin air. It is also the closest capital city to the equator, which lies just 25 kilometres to the north. And by South American standards, it's incredibly safe.

Like me, many visitors stop off in Quito by necessity on the way to visit Ecuador's most famous attraction, the Galapagos Islands, or the amazingly eco-diverse Ecuadorian Amazon – Ecuador is a fascinating place for outdoors enthusiasts and the government has been good about protecting its vaunted biodiversity. But while the city's relatively compact nature makes it ideal for a whistle-stop tour, it has enough charm to hold one's attention much longer.

ARCHITECTURAL GEMS

As a city of 1.6 million people, Quito has all the usual big-name hotels, lively bars and pleasant-enough neighbourhoods ubiquitous in any major metropolis, and those in search of such things will find them easily in the city's northern district. But what makes Quito truly special is its Old Town, just over a square mile of preserved streets and buildings that offers a fascinating glimpse into the past. Replete with architectural gems and cobblestone squares, it's easy to see why Unesco declared Quito its joint-first World Heritage Site in 1978, and why the city is attracting a widening stream of visitors from around the globe. Recent reports in *The New York Times* and *Financial Times* even point to

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a growing number of North American and European buyers of luxury and second homes in Ecuador. The country adopted the US dollar as its currency in 2000, contributing to financial stability.

Extensively restored over the past decade, the Old Town continues to undergo something of a renaissance, and there is arguably nowhere that personifies its new face more than Casa Gangotena. Located on Plaza San Francisco in the heart of the Old Town, this 31-room boutique hotel is in a magnificently refurbished historic mansion house and offers the perfect base from which to explore the city's most storied sights. Many of those sights can be enjoyed without leaving the premises as the hotel's grand rooftop terrace offers panoramic views of the city, including the twin spires of the 16th-century church of San Francisco and the illuminated domes of La Iglesia de la Compañía de Jesús to the north, and the 41-metre sculpture of the Virgin Maria of El Panecillo gazing down benevolently from a hilltop to the south.

01 Unesco has declared that Quito has the "best preserved" historic centre in Latin America, with the houses built in Old Spanish or Moorish style.

02-04 The courtyard and the rooms of the boutique luxury hotel Casa Gangotena

Like the rest of South America, Catholicism has been a defining force in shaping Quito, and the religious landmarks are all sights to be savoured. La Iglesia de la Compañía de Jesús is surely one of the most awe-inspiring church interiors in the world, with gilded plaster and gold-leaf detailing covering almost every inch of the central nave, while the views from atop the 200-metre hill that plays host to the Virgin Maria statue are breathtaking. But many of the city's most intriguing treasures are much less grand or easy to find, making a local guide a worthwhile idea.



PHOTOGRAPHY CORBIS (05.807)

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HIDDEN ATTRACTIONS

With more than 60 years of experience, Metropolitan Touring is the largest tour operator in Ecuador, and its day-long tour of the Old Town is highly recommended. Co-designed by a local, grassroots NGO and conducted by a local resident guide, this tour alternates between adding extra insight to major landmarks such as the churches and museums that delve into the area's long Incan history, and ferreting out the more unusual and hard-to-find of the city's attractions.

It would be easy to miss many of Quito's unusual attractions, which are often found through unassuming doorways or down seemingly unpromising side streets, such as those that snake off from Plaza San Francisco. One such humble Quito institution is Las Colaciones de la Cruz Verde (literally "sweets of the green cross"), where Luis Banda carries on a family tradition that began in 1915. Famous for his peanuts coated in a crunchy sugar crust, Banda spends his days swinging a giant copper pot over open coals to make the confectionaries, a relentless and physically challenging task that seems

jarringly out of place in the 21st century. It saves him from going to the gym, he jokes, but adds that he fears the tradition may die out when he retires.

A different kind of quirky Quito tradition can be found at Restauraciones Carrión, one of several shops in the city that make their living creating and fixing religious statues. Representations of Mary and Jesus adorn not only churches and hilltops here, but also mini-shrines in schools, businesses and people's homes. Typically, these are passed down from generation to generation and seen as irreplaceable, meaning that when the inevitable accident occurs, repair is a serious business. Some jobs, my guide explains, are simple enough, such as touching up the paint on a Virgin's head cloth or gluing a Baby Jesus head back on, but many of the more complicated restorations can take months of painstaking work to complete.

Bizarrely, the shop also does a nice sideline in fixing human scars, and while I sort through a box of disconcertingly lifelike model eyeballs, a regular customer arrives for his treatment. This involves repeatedly applying a special paint that changes the



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05 Interior of La Compañía de Jesús, built by Jesuits between 1605 and 1650

06 The Virgin of Quito by Agustín de la Herran Materras

07 Women pray by the figure of the interred Christ.

08 The Quito Metropolitan Cathedral

colour of scar tissue until it disappears, a process that can take several months.

FLAVOURS AND SOUVENIRS

Stranger still are the herbal medicine shops, where gnarled old women mix strange plants from the Amazon into teas and tinctures, and perform traditional treatments that lie somewhere between medieval and New Age. According to my guide, these remedies can cure practically any ailment, from illness and hangovers to heartbreak and bad luck. Curious, I decide to give it a go and sit down with a medicine woman called Rosita at San Francisco Market for a quick consultation. It involves the rubbing of stinging nettles on my arm, and is followed by rose petals on the stinging area. I pass on the full treatment.



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La Ronda is one of the oldest streets in the city and was once home to Quito's cultural and political intelligentsia. Carefully restored in the past decade, its quaint cobbled laneway now plays host to an array of shops by day and a number of lively cafes and bars featuring live music by night. During the day, you can see – and join in with – children playing traditional games such as *El Sapo*, where the aim is to toss coins into the mouth of a brass toad that sits atop a wooden chest with multiple scoring slots. You can also sample the wonderful chocolates at artisanal shop, Chez Tiff. More than 60 per cent of the world's finest cocoa is produced in Ecuador, and the staff here demonstrate how it is harvested and refined before making fresh chocolates from a bowl of gooey cocoa before your eyes. The store is the creative offspring of a Swiss chocolatier and his Ecuadorian historian wife, and after one bite of the passion fruit truffle chocolates, you'll likely agree that it's a marriage made in heaven.

Next door to Chez Tiff is a small courtyard adorned with a quixotic mural that pays tribute to late Ecuadorian magical realist painter Gonzalo Endara Crow and a small gallery that sells prints of his surreal and vibrant works.

ARTS AND CRAFTS

If you haven't collected enough souvenirs by now, then you certainly will on the last leg of the tour, back towards Plaza San Francisco. Under the church of San Francisco is the Tianguéz Cultural Café and Fair Trade Shop, hands-down the best spot in town for authentic and unique souvenirs. This cave-like store features traditional arts and crafts hand-made by Andean tribes, from ceremonial masks and artefacts to clothes and jewellery, with the guarantee that the tribes-people are paid fairly for their work. The store also sells excellent Ecuadorian chocolate and coffee from the Galapagos – something to entice you out to the islands themselves.

Another Ecuadorian speciality, the Panama hat, can be found across the street at Homero Ortega. Despite the name, Panama hats originated in Ecuador, and they can be bought on almost every corner. However, with its 115 years of history, Homero Ortega is the real deal, with hats priced from US\$25 to several hundred dollars depending on the quality. Less famous but much more intriguing, however, is Sombrerería Benalcázar, a tiny store a couple of blocks away. You won't find Panama hats at this shrine to the art of headwear, but you will see all manner of other designs, from fedoras and bowlers to colourful native headgear worn for festivals and fiestas. All are handmade in a small side-room using traditional tools by the third-generation owner, César Anchala, and cost as little as US\$10 each.



CAREFULLY RESTORED IN THE PAST DECADE, THE QUIANT COBBLED LANEWAY OF LA RONDA NOW PLAYS HOST TO AN ARRAY OF SHOPS BY DAY AND A NUMBER OF LIVELY CAFES AND BARS FEATURING LIVE MUSIC BY NIGHT

A place that is at once grand and intimate, historical and of the moment, Quito handsomely rewards those who take the time to explore it. As darkness falls, and lights illuminate the city's churches and monuments, it seems immeasurably richer than when I first set eyes on it from above. I find myself falling just a little bit more in love with this beguiling city that seems to touch the sky. 🌍

- www.casagangotena.com
- www.metropolitan-touring.com
- www.cheztiff.net
- www.tianguéz.org
- www.homeroortega.com



- 09** Quito's Old Town streets boast well-preserved buildings.
- 10** A vendor mans his grain store near La Ronda.
- 11** Ecuador is the birthplace of the Panama hat.
- 12** Handmade chocolates at Chez Tiff