

Big Five Presents

Ecuador And The Galapagos Islands

Indigenous villages in the highlands, a cloud forest mountain, the backwater streams of the Amazonian Rainforest, the remarkable Galapagos Islands...Ecuador rewards its guests handsomely.

Straddling two hemispheres, Ecuador may be small but it has a dynamic character. It is most identified with its Galapagos Islands archipelago, some 650 miles west of mainland Ecuador in the Pacific Ocean. Nothing quite compares to the thrill of observing wildlife on these natural volcanic islands, where the animals do not run or fly away when humans approach. It was here that Charles Darwin discovered conditions that helped shape his ideas on evolutionary theory. Life evolved on these islands in isolation, separate from the rest of the world. Distinctions exist even from one island to the next. But with a visit to these special islands on the life-list of so many nature travelers, and as a leader in sustainable tourism best practices, Big Five wants to help insure that the Galapagos does not become another "go now before it's too late" travel destination. Big Five has raised the sustainable travel bar higher by linking the Galapagos with exploring the incredible natural and cultural heritage of mainland Ecuador. Traditional markets, Amazon tributaries, Inca ruins, Andean peaks and colonial churches add to the tapestry of Ecuador. Once the Inca Empire's northernmost territory, it boasts important archeological sites as well as pre-Inca fortresses. In the highland valleys, Quechua-speaking communities continue the traditions of weaving and create artwork and handicrafts using much the same techniques as generations past. Indeed, the history of Ecuador's traditional peoples reaches back some 11,000 years. It is estimated that 25 percent of Ecuador's population today is of indigenous heritage. Some of Ecuador's established markets have existed for a millennium. The beautifully preserved cities of Quito and Cuenca are noted for sumptuous 16th-century art and architecture. From the Galapagos to the Andes, from distinctive wildlife to authentic highland cultures, Ecuador is a land of adventures.



Suggested Itinerary

Day 1: Quito, Ecuador

This charming city of baroque splendor is known for its beautifully preserved colonial landmarks.

Day 2: Quito / Antisana

The Antisana Ecological Reserve is habitat for the magnificent Andean condors.

Day 3: Antisana / Baños

The region is home to Indigenous communities such as the traditional Salasaca Community.

Day 4: Baños / Kapawi Ecological Reserve

A remote Amazon eco-lodge is designed to help preserve the vibrant indigenous culture of the Achuar people.

Days 5/6: Kapawi Ecological Reserve

This tranquil and remote private reserve presents a wide range of adventure activities from hikes to piranha fishing.

Day 7: Kapawi Ecological Reserve / Quito

Quito is the main portal to the Galapagos Islands.

Day 8: Quito / Galapagos Islands

The islands sit some 1,046 kilometers / 650 miles west of mainland Ecuador in the Pacific Ocean.

Days 9/11: Galapagos Islands

These fabled islands can be explored on either a land-based adventure or from a cruise ship.

Day 12: Galapagos Islands / Quito

Quito has one of the largest, least-altered and best-preserved historic centers in the Americas.

Day 13: Quito / Depart

Custom Options

Amazon Rainforest (4 days)

This is one of the most biologically diverse regions in the world, and the largest unexplored wilderness on earth.

Avenue Of The Volcanoes (2-4 days)

Dramatic volcanoes and rich biological diversity in the native forests, ravines and lakes.

Cuenca (3 days)

This UNESCO World Heritage Site has a bounty of colonial features, museums and archaeological sites.

Pacific Coast (3 days)

The main port and economic hub of Ecuador, the city weaves old and new, along with miles of coastline.

Indigenous Highlands Markets (2-3 days)

Ecuador's noted native market and traditional communities flourish in the beautiful highlands of the Andes.

Mashpi Private Reserve (2-3 days)

This reserve is encircled by rainforest and cloud forest, with wildlife that includes some 500 species of birds.

Riobamba & Devil's Nose (3 days)

Home of a little-known native market, Riobamba is the place to board the "most difficult train in the world."

About Ecuador

Amazon Rainforest: The largest unexplored wilderness on earth, the Amazon basin encompasses seven million square kilometers / 1.7 billion acres. This region includes territory belonging to nine nations, including Ecuador. The Amazon represents over half of the planet's rainforests. Wildlife activities range from fishing for piranhas, to looking for freshwater pink dolphins, to visiting a local community where people generously

share their traditions and ancestral knowledge of medicinal plants. Excursions include a trip to a salt lick that attracts hundreds of parrots, optional fishing and exploring by dugout canoe.

Antisana Ecological Reserve: This sanctuary for the endangered Andean condor sits amid the magnificent landscapes around snow-covered Antisana Volcano, at 5,758 meters / 18,886 feet. The Andean condor is the national symbol of Ecuador, and conservation efforts are underway to save one of the last populations of the world's largest flying bird. What began as a local movement now has national and international support. The refuge is also home to the black-faced ibis, Andean lapwings and the rare siskin. Glaciers feed the region's lakes and rivers and provide much of Quito's drinking water.

Avenue Of The Volcanoes: "Avenue Of The Volcanoes" is a more than 200-mile-long valley with massive volcanoes that provide snow-covered contrast to the green equatorial highlands and jungle. Ecuador is part of a Pacific Ring of volcanoes named "Ring Of Fire." All of Ecuador's major mountains are volcanic. Cotopaxi and Antisana volcanoes are part of this chain. Cotopaxi in the Andes is one of the highest at 5,896 meters / 19,347 feet. The town of Baños has a beautiful basilica and hot springs.

Cuenca: Archeological discoveries suggest that the first inhabitants may go as far back as 8060 BC. The first settlement was a Cañari settlement believed to have been founded around 500 AD. Nearby are the Ingapirca Ruins, the largest Incan site in Ecuador. The most significant building is the temple of the sun, an elliptical-shaped structure made without mortar and positioned so that sunlight fell through the center of the doorway of the small chamber atop the temple during the solstices.

Galapagos Islands: Composed almost exclusively of volcanic rock, the Galapagos Islands sit west of mainland Ecuador in the Pacific Ocean. The islands can be explored either on a cruise or from one of the island hotels. While a specific itinerary depends on the choice of hotel, ship, length of cruise and seasonal factors, all journeys share common elements. Travelers explore ecosystems that, at first, appear desolate. Yet, these rough isles are home to strange and abundant wildlife. Giant Galapagos tortoises amble through the highlands and prehistoric marine iguanas sun themselves on black lava rocks. Flightless cormorants and tiny penguins dart through the waters. Close-up encounters with wildlife, islands hikes, snorkeling and swimming make for an extraordinary island adventure.



Indigenous Highlands Markets: Indigenous markets where local farmers sell their goods are found throughout the highlands, including in Otavalo, Pujilí, Saquisilí, Latacunga, Zumbahua, Salasacas. Some markets such as Otavalo and Saquisilí are famous for brilliantly colored textiles, handicrafts, pottery, baskets, wooden crafts and exotic fruits. Markets are wonderful places to learn about native foods as well as gain insight into the region's rich culture and traditions. The Otavaleños were textile makers before the Incan invasion in the 15th century. Some villages specialize in a specific craft such as Cotacachi noted for leather and San Antonio for woodcarving.

Kapawi Ecological Private Reserve: This reserve is part of the biologically diverse Amazon. Kapawi is a remote eco-lodge in the land of the Achuar people, a vibrant indigenous culture. The lodge was built using native techniques and materials. It is designed to help support and preserve the Achuar way of life and habitat. Activities are tailored to each guest, and include hikes, canoe trips, piranha fishing and visits to the Achuar village.

Pacific Coast: Ecuador's coast is a composition of lush mangrove forests, jungle, crystal clear waters, stunning white sandy beaches and quaint fishing villages. It is not heavily visited, yet offers good wildlife viewing, whale watching and surfing.

Mashpi Private Reserve: At 900 meters / 3,116 feet above sea level, this lush private reserve is surrounded by lower rainforest and cloud forest with a profusion of plants from ferns to hundreds of orchid species, many newly-discovered. Some 500 species of birds have been identified. Monkeys, peccaries and even pumas live here. One of the highlights is an aerial tram that glides through the forest canopy. An aerial bicycle is an original and exciting way to explore the forest canopy up close.

Quito: Ecuador's scenic capital feels like a city of perpetual spring nestled in a valley amid snow-tipped mountains. It is a charming city of baroque splendor and handsomely preserved colonial landmarks. The genteel heart of the city, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, recalls another era with cobblestone streets, superb churches, open plazas, ornate balconies, tile roofs and central patios. UNESCO lists the 17th-century Church of La Compañía among 100 most important World Heritage Site Monuments.

Riobamba & Devil's Nose Train: This indigenous community has a local handcraft center that has managed to remain unknown to most travelers. Visitors can ride the Devil's Nose Train as it zigzags up a mountainside, across bridges and gorges, and through tunnels.

Best Time To Go

Ecuador is a year-round destination. The Highlands' dry season runs from May to September, while the Amazon Basin's dry season is from October to April. Ecuador's Pacific coast can be hot and humid. The rainy season lasts from December to May, when it is warmer and very humid. May to December is cooler in the Galapagos Islands. March through May, and November and December are ideal. July, August and December are high season.

\$650 - \$900 per person per day
Land only, double occupancy

Consider enhancing your adventure by including one of the following destinations: Panama (p123-126), Peru (p127-130), Colombia (p107-110)



