

Handy Andes

Start your Ecuadorean adventure in Quito, where active volcanoes, rainforests and conquistadors' palaces are all on your doorstep. Just don't forget your pan pipes, says **Stanley Johnson**

Far too many people seem to think that Quito, Ecuador's high Andean capital, is just a pit stop on the way to the Galapagos. At best, they spend a night or two there before flying on. I have been guilty of that myself in the past. But what struck me about my most recent visit is the astonishing transformation of Quito into a destination city in itself.

The seeds of this transformation were sown more than 30 years ago. In 1978, UNESCO proclaimed the city a World Heritage Site (with Krakow in Poland, the first such nomination). At a time when throughout much of South America other architectural gems were being ruthlessly bulldozed to make way for modern city centres, the World Heritage designation had the effect of preserving Quito's centre. Admittedly, much of the area was run-down, even decrepit. But the fact remains that, while business and commerce grew up in new locations outside the historic heart, the essential structures of the old colonial city remained intact and unchanged.

Nowadays, of course, the achievements of the Spanish conquistadors are not necessarily bathed in a golden glow. The ruthlessness with which they overthrew the Inca empire, whose northern capital lay in Quito, is legendary. They captured and executed the last Inca emperor, Atahualpa, despite the fact that his people ransomed him with a room full of gold and silver. Yet though the price was high – certainly for the indigenous peoples of the region – it has to be admitted that nearly 300 years of Spanish rule in Quito left the world with a near-perfect gem of colonial architecture.

In recent years, enlightened civic administrations have come to appreciate the treasure trove that lies on their doorstep. Since the turn of the century, Quito has invested some

\$250 million in the protection of its heritage (the US dollar is the official currency of Ecuador) and the pay-off, by any standard, has proved spectacular.

My wife and I spent a whole day walking through the streets and plazas of the old city, visiting the churches and convents, art galleries and museums. If you are looking for a single superb vantage point, try to persuade the management of the Plaza Grande hotel to let you stand on the balcony of the Presidential Suite looking out on to the Plaza de la Independencia, also known as the Plaza Grande. To the right stands the Presidential Palace, flags fluttering. The Cathedral soars directly in front of you. To your left lie the city's municipal buildings (admittedly modern, but less of an eyesore than might be

In the convent category, the Convento de San Agustin and the Convento de Santo Domingo vied for first place. Wherever we turned in our day's walk through the old town, we found ourselves awed and even overwhelmed by the abundance of sacred images, painted and sculpted. If you had the time, you could spend days, not hours, visiting no fewer than 30 churches, convents and chapels built within Quito's historic centre. There must be, literally, acres of gold leaf here. You could also spend far more time than

we did just wandering through the narrow streets. Some, like Calle La Ronda, have a charm all their own. The potbellied walls of the houses built on the steep slopes of the street provide shelter and music for visitors in search of the region's *empanada de viento* (deep-fried puff pastry stuffed with cheese).

One of the advantages of Quito's geographical location in more or less the centre of Ecuador is that it can serve as the natural hub for an extended Andean holiday. You can spend a few days visiting the

Ecuadorean Amazon, before returning to base camp. Then you can set off again to, say, Cuenca, another colonial gem in the south of the country. You can make a day trip to Cotopaxi, at 19,347ft one of the world's highest active volcanoes, before once again setting off on a longer excursion to enjoy one of the many festivals held in the town of Otavalo in the Northern Highlands. Quito, in a word, has almost everything you could wish for. Galapagos, watch out! *Stanley Johnson's* memoir, *Stanley, I Presume?*, is out now in paperback (*Fourth Estate*, £9.99)



The Cathedral

expected). Lastly, if you crane your neck to the left, you can see the Archbishop's Palace. Cast your eye upwards, above the roof of the Cathedral, and you will see, on historic Panecillo Hill, the great statue of Quito's Virgin (*Virgen de Quito*), a winged Madonna standing on a globe, made of 7,000 pieces of aluminium, placed there in 1976.

In terms of Baroque magnificence, Quito's churches take some beating. We found it hard to decide whether the Jesuits with their magnificent *Iglesia de la Compañía de Jesus* stole the palm from the Franciscans with the equally voluptuous *Iglesia de San Francisco*.





The Cathedral's tiled domes

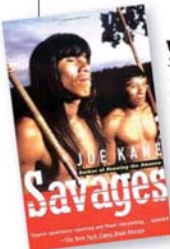


Iglesia de San Francisco

'We found ourselves awed by the abundance of sacred images. There must be literally acres of gold leaf here'

ESCAPE

TICKETS, PASSPORT, MONEY



WHAT TO READ

Savages by Joe Kane is the story of the Huaorani, a tribe living deep in the Ecuadorian Amazon and only recently exposed to the Western world. The book charts their history and their struggles with the oil companies hoping to cash in on the Amazon's untapped reserves.

LAST MINUTE

Visa required No
Currency US dollar (£1 = \$1.54)
Flight time London to Quito via Madrid takes around 18 hours
Time difference -6 hours



MUST VISIT

The San Francisco church and plaza. This is the oldest church in Quito, built between 1536 and 1580. The main altar holds the original masterpiece by Legarda, *La Virgen de Quito*. A stroll through La Ronda is a great way to get a feeling of traditional life in Quito. Within only two blocks you can find artisans working on traditional handicrafts such as candles and embroidery, many *tendas* (small stores), bakeries and restaurants. The Museo de la Ciudad is housed in Quito's first hospital and colourfully depicts the life of the indigenous Indians up to the 19th century. The Mitad del Mundo monument (left) and museum marks the Equator and has an exhibition about past attempts to measure the earth.

WHERE TO EAT

Gourmets flock to the district of La Floresta. Here, along Isabel La Católica, Whymper and Avenida 12 de Octubre, you will find everything from French cuisine and sushi to Swiss fondue and coastal Ecuadorian menus. Don't forget to try the local speciality, ceviche (right) - slices of marinated seafood.



GETTING THERE

Journey Latin America specialises in tailor-made holidays and group tours to all of South America. A 13-day tailor-made trip to Ecuador, visiting Quito, Cotopaxi National Park, Otavalo market, Cuenca and Guayaquil on the Pacific coast, starts from £1,877 per person (020 8747 8315; journeylatinamerica.co.uk). For information on Quito, visit quito.com.ec

WHAT TO BUY

High-quality handicrafts, glassware and ceramics, textiles, including jumpers, scarves and ponchos from Andean alpaca wool; a Panama hat (below), filigree jewellery produced from gold and silver mined around Cuenca.



CHECK IN QUITO

What to take and where to go

WHAT TO WATCH

Ratas, Ratoneros, Rateros (Rats, Big Rats, Petty Thieves) is a celebrated film by the Ecuadorian director Sebastian Cordero about a thief living in Quito. *Proof of Life*, with Meg Ryan and Russell Crowe (left), made good use of the stunning scenery hereabouts.



WHERE TO STAY

The Plaza Grande hotel (right) in the centre of the historic district was once the mansion of Juan Diaz de Hidalgo, one of the Spanish conquerors who founded Quito in the 16th century. Fully renovated in 2007, the hotel is decked out, colonial style, in mahogany and tapestry. The vaulted El Claustro wine cellar has a selection of excellent South American wines and hosts flamenco and rumba evenings (plazagrandequito).



WHAT TO TAKE

The high altitude means that days are generally warm and nights chilly, so bring layers. Don't forget a plastic mackintosh in case of a sudden downpour.

• A slice of Devon...

If New Year in the countryside with roaring fires, sea walks and spectacular scenery appeals, then it's time to get booking. You couldn't ask for a more dreamy spot than Pamflete House on the South Devon coast. The Grade II-listed house sleeps 11, or you can up the numbers by taking the attached six-bed flat as well. Beautifully decorated, with plenty of space inside and out and the sea just a five-minute walk away, it's the perfect spot for some old-fashioned family fun. Seven

CHECK OUT

Edited by Hettie Harvey

nights from £3,500 (flete.co.uk).

• Northern charm...

SAS is offering half-term deals to Copenhagen and Stockholm, with a 24-hour City Card (giving free access to public transport and most attractions) thrown in for free with each ticket. Visit the houses of children's authors Hans Christian Andersen in Copenhagen and Astrid Lindgren in Stockholm, and keep your own Pippi Longstockings entertained at the Copenhagen zoo, or

Stockholm's Gröna Lund amusement park. Single fares from £61 (0871 226 7760; flysas.co.uk).

• **Lighten the load...** Outwit budget airlines' ever-increasing hidden costs with genius new suitcases from FlyLight Luggage. The self-weighting hard cases come with an integral scale so that, once packed, you simply lift your bag for a few seconds and its

weight is shown on an LCD screen. Take that, O'Leary. £79.99 (flylightluggage.co.uk).

• **Underwater safari...** Try a safari with a difference at the reopened Kaya Mawa lodge on Likoma Island on Lake Malawi, which offers waterskiing, fishing, diving and the best snorkelling in Africa. The ten luxury cottages all boast decks with views over the water, and some have private pools. Cazenove-Hoyd is offering a six-night stay, including meals, transfers and flights, from £2,625 per person (020 7384 2332; cazloyd.com).

