Travel Guide

**Fast Facts**

- **Capital City:** Quito
- **Population:** 13.8 million
- **Language:** Spanish
- **Religion:** Roman Catholic (95%) Other (5%)
- **Currency:** U.S.Dollar
- **Dialing code:** 593
- **Electricity:** Standard US style 2- and 3- prong outlets, 110/120 V AC current
- **Airport Codes:** UIO (Quito), GUY (Guayaquil), GPS (Galapagos)

**Lay of the Land**
As its name suggests, this tiny South American country lies atop the equatorial line as a hemispheric crossroads of the world. It is the smallest country in the Andean region and is bordered by Colombia to the north, Peru to the east and south, and the Pacific Ocean to the west. Ecuador is one of the most diverse countries in terms of landforms as well as species. Its four regions are characteristically distinct. The eastern portion of the country, el oriente, is covered by the Amazon Rainforest which is home to thousands of unique animal and plant species, including caiman alligators, thirty foot anacondas, eight pound toads and bird eating spiders! The Rio Napo is one of the main tributaries that flow into the 4,000 mile long Amazon River. The central portion of the country lies in the Andes Mountains and is lined with snow-capped volcanoes, rolling hills, and beautiful cloud forests. Known as la sierra, or highlands, this region attracts the most tourists. From the capital city of Quito to the colonial town of Cuenca, you can always find cultural festivals celebrating Ecuadorian heritage and markets selling typical indigenous crafts. For those adventure travelers, Cotopaxi, the tallest active volcano in the world, finds many brave climbers trying to scale her icy slopes. On the western part of the country you will encounter more tropical weather with a humid climate perfect for growing bananas and coconuts. This region, known as la costa, has beautiful beaches, lots of seasoned surfers and dozens of fresh fruit including naranjilla, mangos, maracuyya, piña, guanabana, tomate de arbol, and much more. Ecuador also boasts home to the protected Galapagos Islands. Located six hundred miles off its coast, these islands are home to hundreds of species, including the famous tortoises and finches. This is history right at your fingertips!

The official language of Ecuador is Spanish, although you will find a large population of indigenous people that have maintained their native languages kept their original dress and artistic expression. There are still many different groups represented including the Colorados, Huaorani, Aschuar, and Saraguros. Quichua (Ecuadorian dialect of Quechua) is the most widely spoken language among the indigenous population, although given society’s modernization, Spanish has become a necessity in order to sell their goods at large city markets and get involved in modern day politics.

Ecuador has many natural resources including petroleum, bananas, and shrimp. It is the world’s largest exporter of bananas and petroleum production accounts for one-third of its annual GDP. However, nearly 40% of the population lives in poverty, a figure that has doubled over the last ten years.

**Best Time to Go and Climate**
The climate in Ecuador is ideal all year round. However, depending upon what you are looking for, there are certain times of the year to watch out for. The high travel season tends to be December-January and June-August where you will find hotels and tour operators charging a bit more due to the influx in
tourists. February is the ideal month to visit the Galapagos with warm waters ready for snorkeling and a humid climate making the beautiful beaches even more refreshing. On the coast, July and August are cooler months but the best for whale watching. Temperatures in the mountain region are always changing and in one day typically range from 45°F-75°F. In the jungle, you should always be prepared for rain and mosquitoes.

There are many different festivals and celebrations in the cities and towns throughout Ecuador during the year. Carnival is celebrated in February marking the beginning of the Lenten Season (Catholic). From water balloon throwing to *chivas* (open bus with traditional band playing on top) to colorful disguises and masks, every Ecuadorian gets in to the game playing spirit. Each major city also has its own Independence Day celebrations, most notably Quito’s on December 10th. During *Semana Santa* (Holy Week-Catholic) in March or April schools are closed and many Ecuadorians travel to the beaches for vacation or back to their home towns for the holiday.

**Passport and Visa**

All U.S. citizens with a passport valid at least 6 months after arrival are able to enter Ecuador on a 90 day tourist visa. Once in the country, you can renew your tourist visa for another 90 days, totaling 180 days, by visiting the *Jefetura Provincial de Migracion* in Quito at least one weekday prior to your initial 90 day expiration. If you are staying longer, you are required to obtain a visa. Please visit [www.ecuador.org](http://www.ecuador.org) for specific details and to locate the consulate in your jurisdiction.

Upon leaving Ecuador, everyone must pay an exit tax of 41USD. Make sure you have cash on hand as they will not accept credit cards or traveler’s checks.

**Health**

In all the major cities, you will find multiple hospitals, clinics, and other medical facilities. While in smaller towns or rural areas, there will be a few clinics nearby with all the basic amenities. Over the last decade, Ecuador has attempted to centralize its health care system by creating regional units in order to improve efficiency. Although a large percentage of the population is covered by the Public Health Ministry, it is often difficult to provide comprehensive services to the rural population as well as the many Ecuadorians who still only speak their native indigenous language. Many marginalized groups who cannot access or afford health care rely on aid from volunteers and smaller NGOs.

It is very easy to access general medicines in the many *farmacias* throughout the country. Many are small businesses and often you have to ask for everything from the pharmacist behind the counter. Most times you will not be given a whole pack but instead will purchase only the amount of pills you want. Costs normally range between 5 and 30 cents per pill.

The number one precaution you can take is watching what you eat and drink while in Ecuador. You should be cautious about
eating food purchased on the street and all food you eat should be fully cooked. Only drink bottled or boiled water; avoid tap water! However, it will not harm you to brush your teeth with a little bit of tap water – though you should steer clear from swallowing big gulps.

It is also a good idea to visit your doctor here in the U.S. before traveling to Ecuador. He or she can advise you on what vaccinations you should get and what medicine to carry with you. Typical vaccine recommendations for Ecuador are Hepatitis A and B, typhoid, yellow fever, and rabies. Depending upon if you plan to visit the Amazon region, it would be a good idea to bring some malaria pills along. Since your body will be adjusting to different food in Ecuador, carrying over the counter anti-diarrheal medicine with you is a great way to be prepared.

For further information about health precautions, visit the CDC’s website at http://wwwn.cdc.gov/travel/destinationEcuador.aspx and consult your physician prior to departure.

Safety
Travel in Ecuador is relatively safe, but petty theft is not uncommon, especially in the large cities. Keep a close eye on your belongings at all times, and be sure to keep your valuables and money close to your body, such as in a money belt. Avoid keeping anything valuable in your purse or backpack. It is always important to be alert and aware of your surroundings, but especially at night in large cities such as Quito or Guayaquil, when it isn’t always safe to walk alone at night. Opting for a taxi is a better idea if you are out alone.

Getting Around
Day to day travel in Ecuador is pretty easy: all you need is a little Spanish and a sense of adventure!

Bus: Buses are the easiest and most abundant form of transportation. If you are traveling within a city or town, a bus pasaje (fare) will cost you a quarter. There are rarely any bus stops that are used, all you have to do is wave your hand when the bus comes barreling down the road, jump on, and give your fare to the money collector. When you want to get off, you can hit the parada (stop) button or just yell “Gracias!” Bus is also the most common way to get from one city or town to the next. These fares will cost you a bit more ($2-$12) and the best advice is to purchase your ticket in advance at the main bus terminal. Occasionally, for these longer journeys you will have an assigned seat. Be careful, and don’t drink too much water before your trip; bathrooms are not always guaranteed!

**You must use caution when traveling on very full buses and on overnight trips. Petty theft is not uncommon. Make sure you secure your belongings under your seat and keep your valuables and money close to your body. It is always important to be alert and aware of your surroundings.

Air: Flying in to Ecuador is very easy with connecting flights usually coming from Miami, Houston, or New York. There are two major international airports for arrival in to Ecuador: Quito’s Mariscal Sucre (UIO) or Guayaquil’s Simon Bolivar (GYE). Intra-
country flights in Ecuador are very reasonably priced, normally ranging from $30-$75 each way. Depending upon the season, it is very easy to book your flight only a few days in advance once you have arrived in Ecuador. You can also visit their main domestic airline’s website, Tame, www.tame.com.ec for further information or to see flight schedules. Flights to the Galapagos from the mainland are much more expensive and typically cost around $400 round trip.

Car: It is possible to rent a car in Ecuador, although it is not recommended. If renting a car, you must carry an internationally recognized credit card, be prepared to put a large deposit down, and know that most other Ecuadorians do not carry insurance. Any accidents could prove to cost you a bundle! Furthermore, all roads outside of big cities are not as smoothly paved.

Taxi: Taxis are also an easy, safe, and affordable way to get around. If it is late at night, you are definitely better off taking a taxi and it should only cost you $3-$8 depending upon how far you have to go. Many taxi drivers do not use a meter but instead negotiate the price before you get in the car. You can ask them to turn on the meter just to make sure they don’t take you for a ride!

Money
Ecuador uses the US Dollar as its currency making it easy and convenient to take out and spend money. There are lots of ATM’s in any major city and you can always find one or two in some smaller towns. If you are traveling to a very rural part of Ecuador, you should plan accordingly by taking out enough money since the nearest ATM may be an hour away. If you can help it, you should always avoid carrying large sums of cash in highly populated areas or on buses. Petty theft does happen and you must take precautions to safeguard your money. Buying a money belt is not a bad idea, especially if you are frequently traveling around the country. Always try to avoid large bills when possible. It is hard to change a $20 bill at small tiendas. Often times you have to go in to the highly commercial malls or super markets in order to make change. Carrying $5 and $1 bills is best.

Major international credit cards are accepted at large commercial shopping centers and restaurants as well as all travel agencies. But if you want to experience local Ecuadorian food at its best, plan to pay $2.50 for a heaping plate of arroz con pollo (chicken and rice) and patacones (fried plantains chips)- no credit cards accepted!

Food
Across the country you can find many different national and regional dishes. Some typical selections include rice, meats, *secos* (stewed meat with rice), *ceviche* (seafood marinated in lemon and onion served with popcorn), *tostado* (toasted corn), *choclo* (extra large corn), *llapingachos* (potato and cheese pancakes), *yuca*, and *batidos* (fruit milkshakes). Every table and home in Ecuador is sure to have their very own version of the famous hot sauce known as *aji*. The country is renowned for its exotic fruits that can be eaten whole or turned into refreshing juices. The national delicacy is *cuy*, or guinea pig. You will find many street vendors roasting guinea pig after night fall to sell to the locals on their way home from work.

When eating new local dishes, remember, give your body some time to adjust. It is best to slowly acclimate yourself to this new cuisine in order to avoid any stomach issues. After a few days of no problems, you can slowly become more adventurous with your culinary palate!

The typical Ecuadorian family will eat a small breakfast of coffee (they love instant coffee!) with a fresh piece of bread from the local *panadería* (bakery) and butter or cheese. Bread here is delectable and costs only a few cents per piece. Some of the favorites include *pan de agua*, *pan de leche*, *pan de yuca*, and *pan ambateño*. Lunch is the main meal of the day and is normally eaten between 1 and 2pm and consists of a small soup with a main dish of meat and rice. In the evening, around 7 or 8pm, families gather together again for a small snack of bread and cheese, fruit, or a small dish of meat. As always tea, coffee, and juice are served.

**Clothing and Modes of Dress**

Everywhere you go in Ecuador you are likely to see a mix of western dress and native styles typical to the indigenous cultures. The most common and often seen in Quito and the highlands are the long blue skirts and ponchos, embroidered shirts, gold beads, and long braided hair of the *Otavaleños*. They are most famous for their skilled weavings that are sold in large markets all around Ecuador.

Depending upon which region of Ecuador you are visiting, the mode of dress will differ. Since the coastal region is extremely warm and humid, it is not uncommon to see most women in sundresses, tank tops, and flip flops while men can be found in shorts and t-shirts. In the highlands, dress is a bit more conservative due to the cultural values as well as weather. It is normal to see men and women covered in pants or skirts as well as long sleeves or sweaters and always in closed-toe shoes. If you wear shorts, you are sure to stick out like a sore thumb! Plus, it gets pretty chilly in the morning and evening. Best advice: Always dress in layers!

**Packing Tips**
- money belt
- camera plus extra batteries and memory cards
- flashlight and batteries
- head lamp
- ATM card
- copy of your passport (to leave at your place of residency)
- small bills for spending (coins, ones, and fives)
- rain jacket
- a sweater and sweatshirt (remember those layers!)
- one pair of flip flops
- bathing suit
- tennis shoes
- hiking boots (optional if you plan to do some trekking, there are fabulous trails!)
- walking stick such as Leki or Blackdiamond
- t-shirts, both short and long sleeve
- jeans
- light weight pants
- ipod or discman -batteries
- alarm clock (you will not need an adapter as outlets are comparable to U.S. standards)
- over the shoulder sturdy purse or backpack
- a few little trinkets to bring to that represent your culture or where you come from
- pictures of your family and friends to share
- bandana or something to cover your head if you travel to the jungle
- insect repellent (a must in the jungle and on the coast)
- sunglasses (it gets really bright in the mountains because you are higher up and closer to the sun!)
- extra pair of glasses
- sun block
- snacks such as power bars
- personal medications and OTC medications: aspirin, sinus, and stomach medications
- books and travel guides

_Keeping in Touch_

While abroad, email is the easiest way to keep in touch with your family and friends back home. In all major cities and some smaller towns you will find an abundance of internet cafes that cost around $0.80-$1.00 per hour to use. If you need to reach home via telephone, the cheapest and most convenient way to do so is by using the _cabinas_, phone booths. There may be _cabinas_ in many of the internet cafes or it may be a storefront on its own. A typical call to the U.S. will cost
you anywhere from $0.08 to $0.25 per minute. Phone cards are another option but make sure you have the international access number for Ecuador before you leave home!

**Helpful websites**
- Exchange rates: [www.xe.com](http://www.xe.com)
- Visa and Passport: [http://www.ecuador.org/visas.htm](http://www.ecuador.org/visas.htm)
- Travel Information/Warnings: [http://travel.state.gov](http://travel.state.gov)
- History and Country Info: [www.ecuadorexplorer.com](http://www.ecuadorexplorer.com)

**References**
- [www.exploringecuador.com](http://www.exploringecuador.com)
- [www.ecuadorexplorer.com](http://www.ecuadorexplorer.com)
- [www.goecuador.com](http://www.goecuador.com)
- [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org)
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