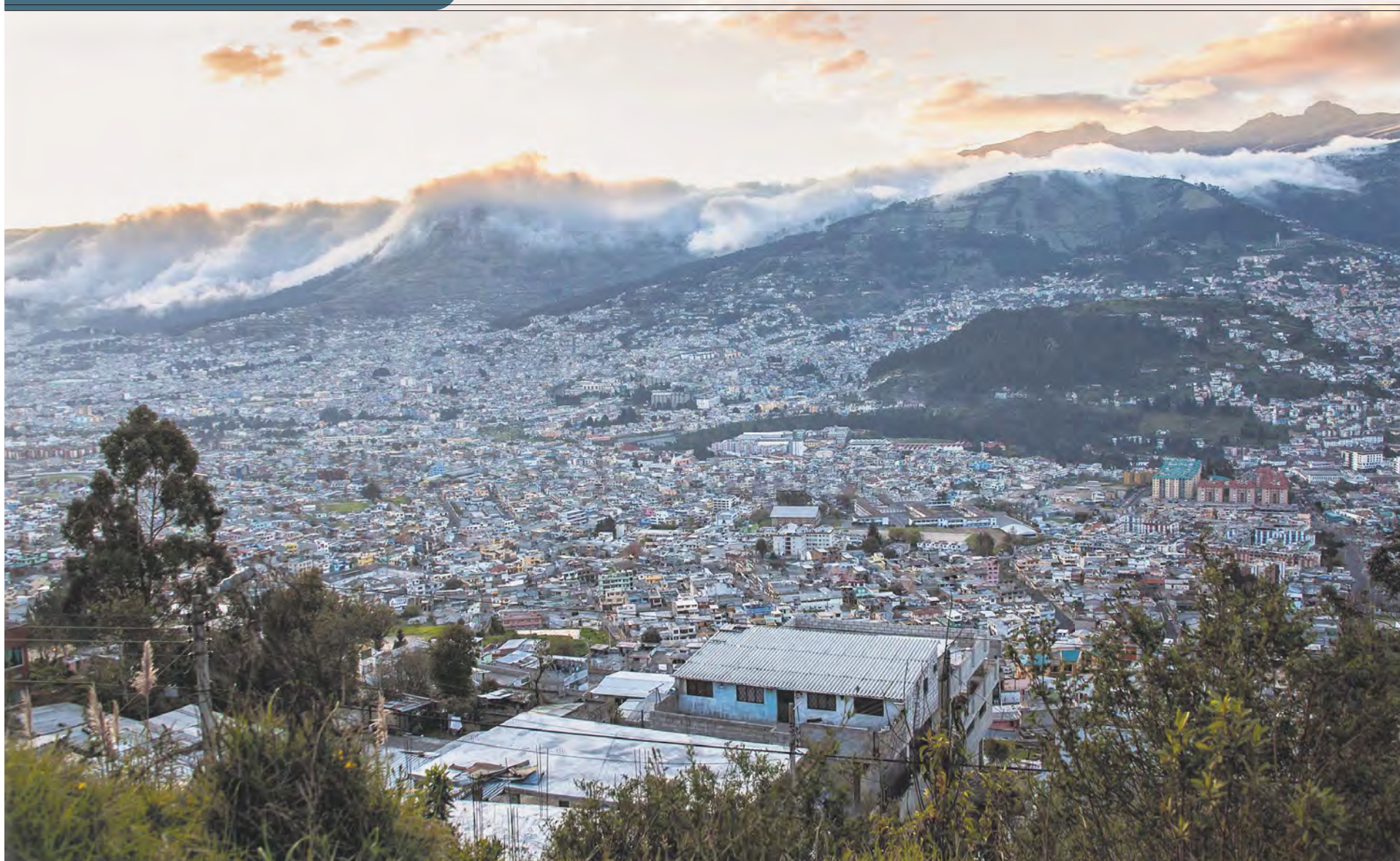


TRAVEL



Photos by STEVE HAGGERTY/MCT

The nearly two million residents of Quito, Ecuador, fill the narrow valley of the city. This city is old, founded in 1534, just 42 years after Columbus first voyage to America.

TALES FROM ECUADOR

A country on the equator is full of living links to the past, volcanoes and vegetables

BY ANNE Z. COOKE
McClatchy News Service

OTAVALO, ECUADOR

A pint-size dish of cevichocho, served on the street in Otavalo, sparked one of those ah-hah moments so unexpected it caught me unawares. By the time we – the three of us – parked near the town's famous craft market, lunchtime had come and gone. Heading down the block we passed a group of teenagers in school uniforms crowding around a food stall, gulping down what looked like fast food. And whatever it was they were eating, it made my mouth water.

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE: Travel times to Quito can run nine to 20 hours depending on the airline, your departure city and layovers. We flew on TACA (a merger of four Central American airlines) from Los Angeles to El Salvador, and after a 40-minute layover flew out from the very same gate. If we'd flown through Santiago, Chile, the layover could have been seven hours long.

DRIVING & GUIDES: Driving on Ecuador's new highways (some still under construction) is an easy way for independent travelers to reach most larger towns and top-10 highlights. The backcountry roads are rarely signed, potholed, often dirt and very slow. But the views are exciting. For this option, get a guide.

TOUR COMPANIES AND GUIDES: EQTouring provided smart, educated, energetic guides who were good, safe drivers and liked showing off Ecuador's best. The company offers standard or custom itineraries and guarantees your trip. Find more at eqtouring.com.

QUITO LODGING: In Quito, we recommend two hotels in the historic center. The hotel La Casona de Ronda is a restored, restructured family residence; the larger Boutique Patio Andaluz is a new property on the footprint of an old family residence. La Casona is smaller and more intimate, with a tiny restaurant and indoor-outdoor strip of garden; the casement windows in our room opened to the outside. The Patio Andaluz has several ground-floor living rooms, second-floor balconies, Internet access stations and a spacious dining room. Both are within walking distance of the historic center's monuments, parks, restaurants and shopping, and within the pedestrian-only area.

HACIENDAS: For more information, go to haciendacusin.com, haciendapinsaqui.com and zuleta.com.

"What is this stuff," I asked Paul Aguilar, our guide, who after four days touring us around Ecuador was now more friend than hired help. Peering over the counter, I looked at the seller in the wrinkled apron and at the bowls of chopped ingredients and for a second, wondered if street food was a good idea. Still, I was curious. And hungry.

"Do you really want to try it?" said Aguilar, raising his eyebrows. A veteran guide, he knew tourists were squeamish about street food. And in Ecuador, cevichocho was the street version of a Big Mac. "If you're sure," he said doubtfully.

Defiantly piling chopped red and yellow tomatoes, toasted popcorn, red onions, white lupine beans and cilantro in the bowl, he filled it full. Then he sprinkled lime over the mix, doused it with extra juice from the tomatoes and topped it with bits of sliced chicken. And handed it over.

I hesitated, took a bite, and it was ... heavenly! No wonder those kids look so healthy, I said to myself. They're snacking on vegetables.

"What did I tell you," said Steve, my husband, snapping a photo. "Ecuador isn't anything like Kansas."

Ask me about the European discovery and settlement of North America and I can quote chapter and verse. But ask about Ecuador's cultural heritage or colonial history and I'm lost. To my shame, I know more about Turkey than Ecuador.

Where then, in this country on the equator, would a traveler find links to the past? Living links, too, not museum exhibits. We started in Quito, the capital – as you will – because this is where most flights arrive. And Quito is old, founded in 1534, just 42 years after Columbus' first voyage to America. Perched at 9,000 feet elevation on a hill between the east and west ranges of the Andes Mountains, it lies at the foot of Guagua Pichincha, 15,820-foot high and one of Ecuador's 30 active volcanoes.

Twenty years ago, when I was

here before, blowing through town on a two-day stopover, the city, tired and dirty, was lingering on life support. Ecuador's currency, the sucre, was nearly worthless. Since then the patient has recovered. A decade ago, on March 13, 2002, Ecuador adopted the U.S. dollar, stabilizing the economy. Today the heart of the old city has been scrubbed and painted, its buildings restored or – comically – hidden behind convincing facades.

As for history, we found it in Independence Square, where old men and visitors sit in the sun at the foot of Liberty besting the snarling Spanish lion. It lives on in Quito's monumental, brilliantly painted, gold bedecked churches and monasteries.

When a friend recommended EQ Touring, a Quito- and Miami-based travel outfit specializing in Ecuador, we asked them to plan a trip through the region around Quito, traveling on scenic country roads and overnighting at haciendas.

Our final itinerary included hacienda reservations, a car and two English-speaking guides, both of whom were superb. It also included a half-day visit to Cotopaxi Volcano national park where a sightseeing road climbs to a parking lot at 15,320 feet (just below a climber's base camp) for a close-up look at Cotopaxi's 19,460-foot, ice-shrouded summit. Our last day was saved for Otavalo.

And were the haciendas historic? Yes, but altered to meet modern times. Both Le Cusin, founded in 1602 by Jesuits, and Hacienda Pinsaqui, founded in 1790 and still owned by the original family, felt and looked like the 18th-century white-walled, red-tiled-roof colonial compounds you see in every former Spanish colony. Surrounded with flowering vines and far from noise and traffic, they remain anchored in the past.

But Le Cusin's present owner is an American who restored the buildings and updated guest



Left: Cevichocho, popular street-food item, evolved when the government banned restaurants from serving raw meat and fish, including ceviche in Ecuador

Below: Felt hats and wool skirts are the traditional clothing found in Otavalo, Ecuador.



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rooms and cottages, preserving the original decor but adding comfort. The wood-paneled lounges, dining hall and delicious meals invite visitors to sit and read, enjoy a wood fire on cool evenings, and to linger over dessert.

Pinsaqui Hacienda, where we stopped for a bowl of locro (cream of potato soup garnished with cheese and avocado slices), is still owned and managed by an eighth-generation family member. Guests enjoy acres of lawns and spectacular views of Imbabura Volcano.

Zuleta Hacienda, also a Jesuit property in the early days, made news in the 20th century when new owners, the Plaza-Lasso family, progenitor of two

presidents of Ecuador, turned the 4,000-acre ranch into a working dairy farm and cheese creamery.

As the ranch prospered, the Plasas built out, adding a high-ceilinged living room with a mezzanine library and a nine guest-room wing at the other end. Today, the hacienda, surrounded by trees, endless green fields, and a stable full of horses, is a testament to modern ranch management. The wonderful horses, network of trails and abundance of nature attract riders and nature lovers.

We spent our last day shopping in Otavalo's craft market, expecting to spend the last 10 minutes sprinting through the produce market. Instead we spent an hour marveling at the many species of vegetables grown at high altitude. And since the farmers grow and sell them locally, "heritage" varieties are present in abundance.

I thought I knew vegetables. But it was humbling to see how few I'd tasted or could even identify. But I did find the star of my new, fast-food addiction. They were the white lupine beans. Take that, fast-food chains!