

ECUADOR



A trip to a country
during the Covid-19
Pandemic

October 2020



Quito during Covid-19 pandemic

We met in the morning of October 3rd at Arlanda, well prepared with our PPE's (Personal Protective Equipment), including face masks and alcoholic gel, to start our journey to Quito via Amsterdam with KLM. Flights at this time were very lightly booked.

There were not many countries open for travel to at this time of the pandemic, but Ecuador was a notable exception, for which we were very grateful. The main requirement for traveling into Ecuador at the moment was to have a negative PCR-covid 19 test taken within 7 days.

There were some health declaration forms to be filled out on both flights to be delivered upon arrival. On arrival in Quito the negative PCR-test was checked and stamped together with a fever check.

We were through immigration very quickly and were picked up by our local organizer (Miguel) and his guide and driver (Javier).

A 40-minute drive took us to the old town and city center where we were checked in to the lovely old ***San Marcos Boutique hotel***. A 19th century old merchant house converted into a 10-room hotel overlooking the Panecillo statue up on the hill. It felt like staying in an antique shop.

Miguel picked us up and we walked together through the winding streets of the old town up to ***Plaza Grande*** where the ***presidential palace and the Cathedral Metropolitana are located***. A few people around, but not many. The old top-rated Plaza Grande Hotel is currently closed due to the Pandemic, so is many of the hotels and restaurants in town. We continued our walk to ***the restaurant Vista Hermosa*** where we took dinner on the top floor with a grand view overlooking the city. The restaurant had its own elevator with a uniformed operator!



Quito

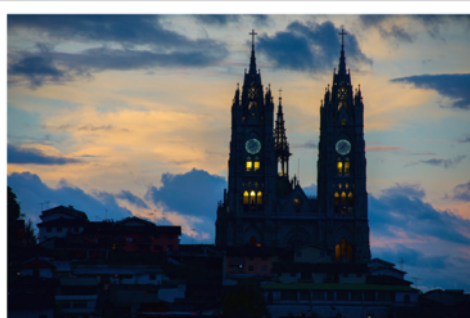


Javier, our guide, picked us up at 08:00 and took us first to the TelefériQo (Cable car). They opened up at 08:30, but we had to queue for about 45 minutes before being able to get a cable car up to the top (4050 meters). We had good weather but could not see as far as the Volcanoes which can be seen on a bright day. These are some 5700- 5800 meters high. We had a lovely view though overlooking the whole of Quito. Quite impressive. We could feel that the air was very thin up here and could not walk any longer distances. We then made a stop at the Panecillo, The Virgin Mary, overlooking the city from a park high up at the site of an old solar temple.

We drove back to the old town and went to have a look at the Church San Fransisco and other sights. We continued back to Plaza Grande to have lunch at a lovely indoor plaza and a restaurant called Hasta La Vuelta Senior. This indoor plaza had 4 floors with an open patio in the center. Javier then picked us up again to take us out to Mitad del Mundo and Museo Intinan or better known as where the equator crosses the country.

This is of course an important location, since on a photo, you can stand with one foot in each hemisphere (in principle – since the real equator is likely to be somewhat broader...) The country is of course also named after this fact.

We thereafter drove back again into the old town to stop at Iglesia de la Compania de Jesus, which at this time of the pandemic, unfortunately was closed. We continued to have a look at the huge Basilica – Basilica del Voto Nacional del Sagrado Corazon de Jesus, the tallest building in Ecuador and the tallest church in Latin America. Trying to make our way back to our hotel seemed almost impossible as most of the streets had been closed off to give bikers an opportunity to roam around the city – biking seems very popular in Ecuador. All the restaurants we then tried to call to see if they were open for dinner were closed due to Sunday or for Pandemic reasons. Only one was open, a sister restaurant of the one we visited last evening – Vista Hermosa. This one was located near the park Ichimbia and had a most amazing view overlooking the city and the hills of Quito. Quite spectacular.





The Hacienda Pinsaqui

The following day we set-off north on the E28B and the Pan-American highway towards Otavalo. We drove through some dramatic landscapes and stopped along the road up in the mountains to view the volcanoes in the distance. We saw the Cotopaxi (5878m) among many volcanoes. The drive up to Otavalo took some 2 hours.

On the road, we passed through one of the largest rose plantation areas in the world. From these farms millions of roses are exported every year to the entire world. Very impressive! Roses were introduced here by the Dutch.

Upon arrival we checked in to our hotel – the Hacienda Pinsaqui. This lovely old private home (estate) (300 years old) has been converted into a lovely boutique hotel in colonial atmosphere. It's a large estate with horses. It is known for the fact that Simón Bolívar had stayed here on this travel up and down the Andes (he was supposed to have stayed there with his girlfriend and in different rooms but we did not really believe that). The internet booking price is 160 USD, but we got our rooms for 60 USD since it was booked through our local guide.





local manufacturing in Otavalo

After check-in we went to explore the area, however most of the sights were closed due to the pandemic. We started out with a stop at the Otavalo city market. Also, this had been drastically reduced. It also had the feeling of mainly catering towards tourists rather than locals. Again, as no tourists visited, very little activities. We took lunch at Taberna restaurant in the center.

Our guide had then been able to arrange for us to go and visit a couple of private homes where they were said to do some manufacturing. First stop to a "home-stay" house where one can stay with a family at their home – now not possible though. Second stop was very interesting as we stopped at a cooperative where they grew medicinal herbs. 2 midwives met us here and explained how they used these herbs also during their practice. Third stop was at a home and women's cooperative, where they produced necklaces and bracelets. They were also very happy to receive their first visitors in 6 months. Last stop was made at home where they manufacture woolen scarfs and ponchos.

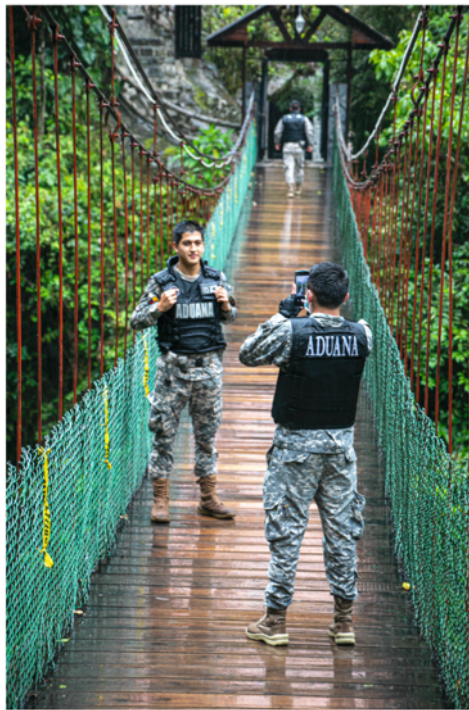




Cascada Pailon de diablo

We left next morning for the National Park and Laguna de Cuicocha. The weather was perfect with an almost clear sky. We drove to the lake and hiked up to get to the viewpoints overlooking the dramatically beautiful lake and the Volcano Cotacachi. After this we set-off south towards Banos with a lunch stop near the Volcano Cotopaxi at the restaurant Rondador. We continued for another 2 hours before we arrived to Banos. We checked in to our hotel La Posada del Arte. A nice very inexpensive boutique style hotel owned by Karl, a British citizen. Again, we got a bargain price of 20 USD / night instead of the 28 USD found on booking.com. It had started to rain a bit and we were a bit hesitant about going on a hike to the waterfall Cascada Pailon de diablo, but decided anyway to have a go. We bought rain ponchos and set-off. A 30-minute hike down and the same up took us to the fall. Impressive and very wet.

Back to the hotel and a beer with the owner of the establishment. We then walked down to the center of the small town of Banos and had dinner at the restaurant Dulce carbon. Quite a good one.

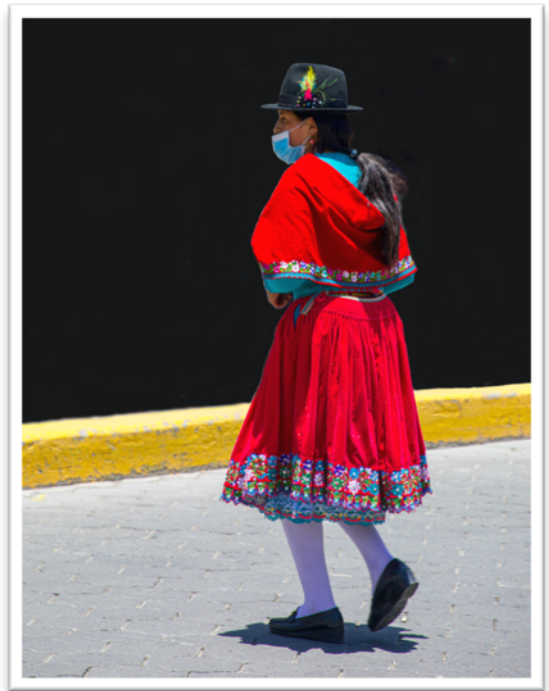


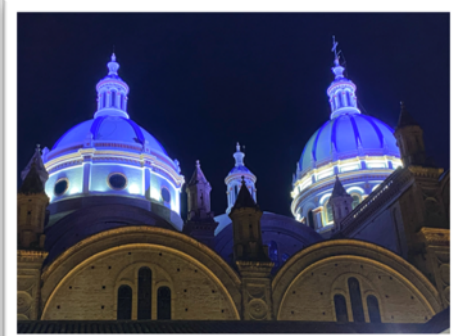


Alausi & Ingapirca

We set-off towards Cuenca in the south with stopovers in a couple of places. Again, we drove through some lovely mountainous and dramatic landscapes lined with volcanoes on serpentine roads. Our first stop was Alausi where the train starts to Devils nose (Nariz del Diablo). This is now temporarily closed unfortunately, so we could not ride the train through the winding hills as was originally planned, but we could visit the train station. We strolled around the city center where colorful indigenous people walked the streets. We then continued to the end-station of the train by car to see the famous Devils nose. A mountain resembling a nose. It is said that over 2000 workers died during the construction of the railway and they had to use dynamite to make way for the tracks.

The trip continued down to Ingapirca, the old Inka ruins. Also, this sight was closed to the public, so we had to see the sight from a distance. We took lunch here at the Posada Ingapirca. They opened up for us since we had made a booking, otherwise this restaurant also seemed to be closed. An old estancia beautifully located on the slopes near the ruins.





Cuenca – the capitol of Azuay province

Our last leg on this day of travelling took us to Cuenca and our charming hotel boutique Santa Lucia in the old part of Cuenca. Only a few guests could be seen at this top-rated boutique hotel in the old town.

A full day in Cuenca was spent by starting out visiting a small family owned weaving factory (Makana's Museum house), where they displayed all the processes of manufacturing scarves and ponchos by hand according to century old techniques developed by the indigenous Canaris. We continued back to Cuenca and stopped at Turi, at the hill overlooking Cuenca. In Cuenca we made several stops at different churches and cathedrals such as Iglesia de San Fransico, Catedral de la Inmaculada, Iglesia Catolica Santo Domingo. Lunch at the best restaurant in town – Le Mercado (superb) Apart from the many impressive churches we also made a stop at the central market, well worth a visit. The Panama Hat museum was also quite nice to visit, and yes, we did purchase Panama hats of course – which actually are not at all from Panama but from Ecuador. The name comes from the fact that these hats were brought to Panama during the construction of the Canal, and then became very famous. Dinner in the evening at Raymipampa at the center of town. Had a very good Ceviche there.





Cajas National Park

On our final day, we set-off towards Guayaquil with a stop at the **Cajas National Park**. The road to Guayaquil goes through the national park and has a couple of scenic view-points where one can stop. The highest stop is at around 4000 m., with the top peaking at around 4700 m. We had some dramatic views over the clouds with the mountains around and a unique cloud forest. We then drove down through a serpentine road and eventually arrived at Guayaquil and a temperature at around 32 degrees as opposed to 5 degrees up in the national park.





Guayaquil

This was supposed to be a big day for Guayaquil celebrating on the 9th of October, its 200 years of independence from Spain. However, with the pandemic, practically all celebrations had been cancelled. Most of the Malecon bordering the river, and part of the down-town area had been closed off for security reasons. We took lunch at a very good seafood restaurant in the city center and then walked across the street to the famous Simón Bolívar park, better known as the Iguana park. The park was virtually covered with almost tame lizards as well as a species of smaller turtles. We decided to take a short walk around the city center but made it rather short as there was not all that much to see as far as architecture and sights are concerned.

We noted however, that the atmosphere in Guayaquil was very different from Quito. This is a very intense tropical metropolis, while Quito felt calmer and also more conservative.

We continued to the airport, which is located close to the city, and took our departure from Guayaquil and Ecuador in the late afternoon.

