

CRUISE EXTRA: BEST VALUES, SHIPS, TRIPS, CABINS

Condé Nast Traveler

PULLOUT
EXTRA
**HOW TO
TIP**
PART 2
A GLOBAL
GUIDE

TRUTH IN TRAVEL

AUGUST 2009

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126 TOP TRAVEL PLANNERS—AND HOW
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IRELAND, AND MORE



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Zeroing in: The road from Quito to the hacienda at Zuleta skirts the Cayambe Volcano. Just below the summit, directly on the equator, is the only spot on earth where a temperature of zero degrees Celsius coincides with latitude zero.

Small Wonder

Take the highest mountains outside of Asia, add English meadows, Alpine cows, and Amazonian rain forest, and mix with the Spanish and Incan cultures, and you get some idea of the extraordinary assets of the tiny country called Ecuador. Which is, says *Ondine Cohane*, one of Latin America's best-kept secrets

Photographs by *Rob Howard*



USED TO RIDE AS A CHILD, AND IT'S ALWAYS a happy moment when I find a well-trained horse instead of a somewhat broken trail animal. Even so, I have asked a lot of my slight gray mare on these high sierras. Her flanks still heave from the effort of climbing to more than twelve thousand feet in the thin, oxygen-depleted air. But now I've dismounted and am sitting in a wildflower-strewn meadow, looking out into a broad valley as she grazes contentedly. Behind me, a tent has been set up for lunch, with chilled wine already on the table. A makeshift grill throws up plumes of smoke. It's a crazy amalgam of a landscape, with the gentle greens of the English countryside, the tall saplings of the Pacific Northwest, the high lush meadows full of Holsteins seemingly plucked from the Alps. But the odd combination of the occasional palm tree and a volcano gives a clue to where we really are. This is Ecuadorian "gaucho" country. Indian children ride bareback in bright ponchos on stocky ponies. For a day or two, I am having my Wild West experience Latin American style.

Ecuador is blessed with one of the most compelling travel destinations—the Galápagos Islands—and with proximity to another, Machu Picchu, in next-door Peru. The presence of such attractions means that while Ecuador receives a huge number of visitors, most come on pre-arranged tours and tend to do little more than stop for the night in Quito, the capital. That's a great pity, because the mainland's draws are considerable, unexpected, and astonishingly diverse. This tiny country about the size of Nevada manages to combine many of Latin America's best aspects—a vibrant colonial capital, a choice of

haciendas in the Andes as retreats, rare biodiversity in the rain forest, and indigenous markets and towns.

The topography never bores. At 9,300 feet, Quito clings to a narrow valley just below Pichincha Volcano. A string of volcanoes—the world's highest mountains, outside of Asia—follows the midline of Ecuador, some snowcapped, others a lush green. A succession of mostly undeveloped beaches runs along the Pacific coast. Sierra highlands home to pastureland and herds of horses and cattle seem to be from another universe entirely. And the Oriente, a swath of Amazonian tropical rain forest, remains little explored and full of rare birds, orchids, and indigenous communities. Ecuador is one of Latin America's best-kept secrets.

MY HUSBAND AND I ARRIVE IN QUITO AT midnight on a Saturday in desperate need of dinner. Our driver recommends Vista Hermosa, which is just around the corner from our hotel, on the top floor of a posh residential building complete with a uniformed elevator man. The restaurant's balcony provides 360-degree views over Quito, and, ghostly white in the distance, I can see the statue of the capital's madonna standing sentry on Panecillo Hill. Inside, couples dance to a spirited mariachi band. We order bowls of one of the country's most popular dishes, *locro* (a hearty potato soup with cheese, corn, and avocado), while next to us a group of thirtysomething locals tuck into heaping plates washed down with tequila shots. After the band finishes to whistles and cheers, our fellow diners play '60s Latin music on the jukebox. We sit there until well past two.

Sunday reveals a different picture—both in the sway of religion and its visual surprises. There are more than thirty churches in the colonial center, and the massive Jesuit, Dominican, and Franciscan monasteries dominate various plazas. Before the Spanish came to Ecuador in the sixteenth century, Quito was the center of the northern part of the Incan kingdom, and sometimes the fusion of the nativist Incan traditions and Catholic iconography has strange results. For example, animals found in the Galápagos, such as giant tortoises, are carved into the Basilica's stone facade, a location usually reserved for patron saints. Many of the country's religious holidays are paired with indigenous ones, like the celebration of Saint John with the solstice. In the Church of La Compañía, an image of the sun, a potent symbol for the Incas, floats above the pulpit. In the same Baroque masterpiece of a church, Jesus is surrounded by a dizzying amount of gold, an almost obscene example of panache and a reminder of the Ecuadorian treasure that brought the Catholic conquerors here in the first place. I prefer the quiet cloister in San Francisco, the

WHY NOW

Ecuador is immune to foreign-currency swings: It deals in U.S. dollars—and deals there are at the haciendas covered here and on competitive air routes, flown by American and Delta.

Workout: At Hacienda Zuleta, a riding horse is trained by skilled hands.



His grandfather
had the vision
to make the
hacienda part
of the community,
not an aristocratic
crash pad



Wake-up call: Breakfast at the colonial San Augustin de Callo inn. Incan ruins on the site were subsumed into the hacienda's foundations.



Catch me: A brilliant blue morpho from the Sacha Lodge's butterfly farm.

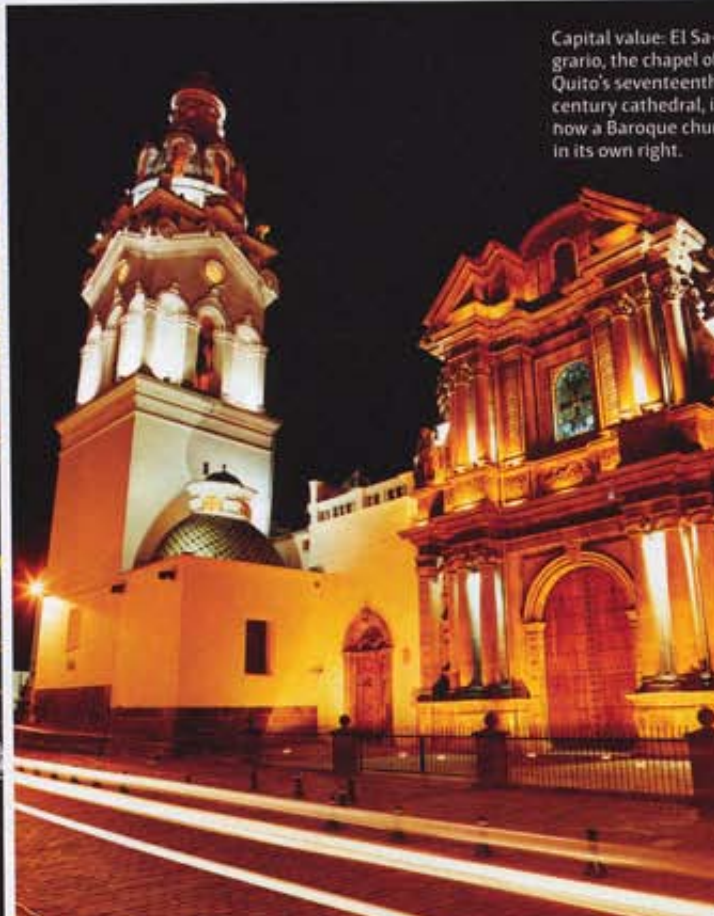


Tallyho: Colonial riding scenes at the San Augustin hacienda.

We have driven in Mexico, Vietnam, and Italy and figure it couldn't be much worse. Wrong. We hadn't counted on the volcanoes. The vertiginous twists of the highway as it snakes around the peaks have a life-clarifying effect



Up the creek: Birders' paradise in the Amazon at Sacha Lodge.



Capital value: El Sagrario, the chapel of Quito's seventeenth-century cathedral, is now a Baroque church in its own right.

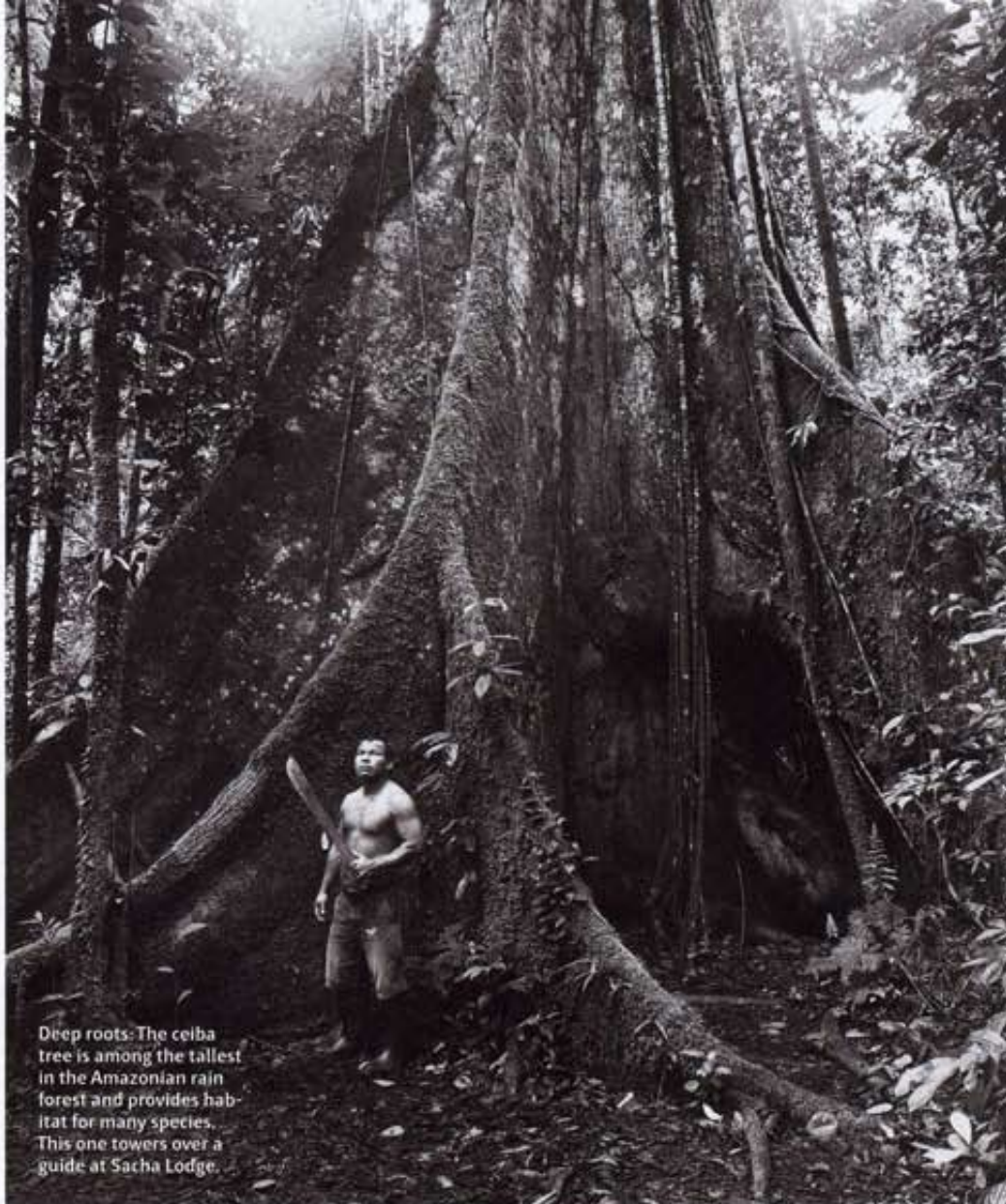
country's oldest church, where paintings show the Archangel Gabriel with the wings of a macaw.

Outside, older couples in their Sunday best stroll arm in arm, the men in suits with freshly ironed handkerchiefs popped into the breast pockets and natty black bowlers. Although the city has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1978, the restoration and revitalization of the historic center has taken place only in the last few years. Now, thanks to a multimillion-dollar face-lift, major businesses and life are returning to their old and in many ways rightful center.

WE HAVE DRIVEN IN MEXICO, Vietnam, and Italy and figure it couldn't be much worse. Wrong. We hadn't counted on the volcanoes. The vertiginous twists of the Pan American Highway as it snakes around the sides of peaks have a life-clarifying effect, especially when combined with truck drivers who think little of taking over the oncoming lane, belching a particularly toxic exhaust. But after a while, we settle into a state of manageable terror. Beyond the town of Ibarra, the modern development and smog disappear, replaced by cobblestoned country lanes lined with stone walls. We pass flocks of sheep overseen by Indians, little schools with soccer pitches, sleepy villages with roosters and dogs out front, and tiny churches. It's raining by the time we pull into Hacienda Zuleta. Built in 1691, and in the same family since 1898, it's been open to visitors (other than the tiny Ecuadorian upper class) only in the last few years. Wearing leather ponchos and Wellington boots provided by the manager, we explore the grounds. A large gray mare and her filly canter by, escorted by a *chagra* (cowboy). It's the sort of pastoral haven that would make romantic poets happy: foals up to their knees in grass,

cows being milked under the willow trees, vast meadows beneath the mountains. Then, a token of two hemispheres colliding: A man carrying a silver pail of milk to the main house is wearing a Yankees sweatshirt along with his bowler hat. The drizzle becomes a torrent, so we shelter under a lean-to with a couple of boys on their way home from school, before hiking back to our room to dry out in front of a fire that simmers weakly in the diminished oxygen at this altitude.

Over a dinner of quinoa, local cheese, freshwater trout, and organic salad from the garden, Fernando Polanco, the grandson of the estate's original owner, tells us that tourism has helped to keep the hacienda a living and working enter-



Deep roots: The celba tree is among the tallest in the Amazonian rain forest and provides habitat for many species. This one towers over a guide at Sacha Lodge.



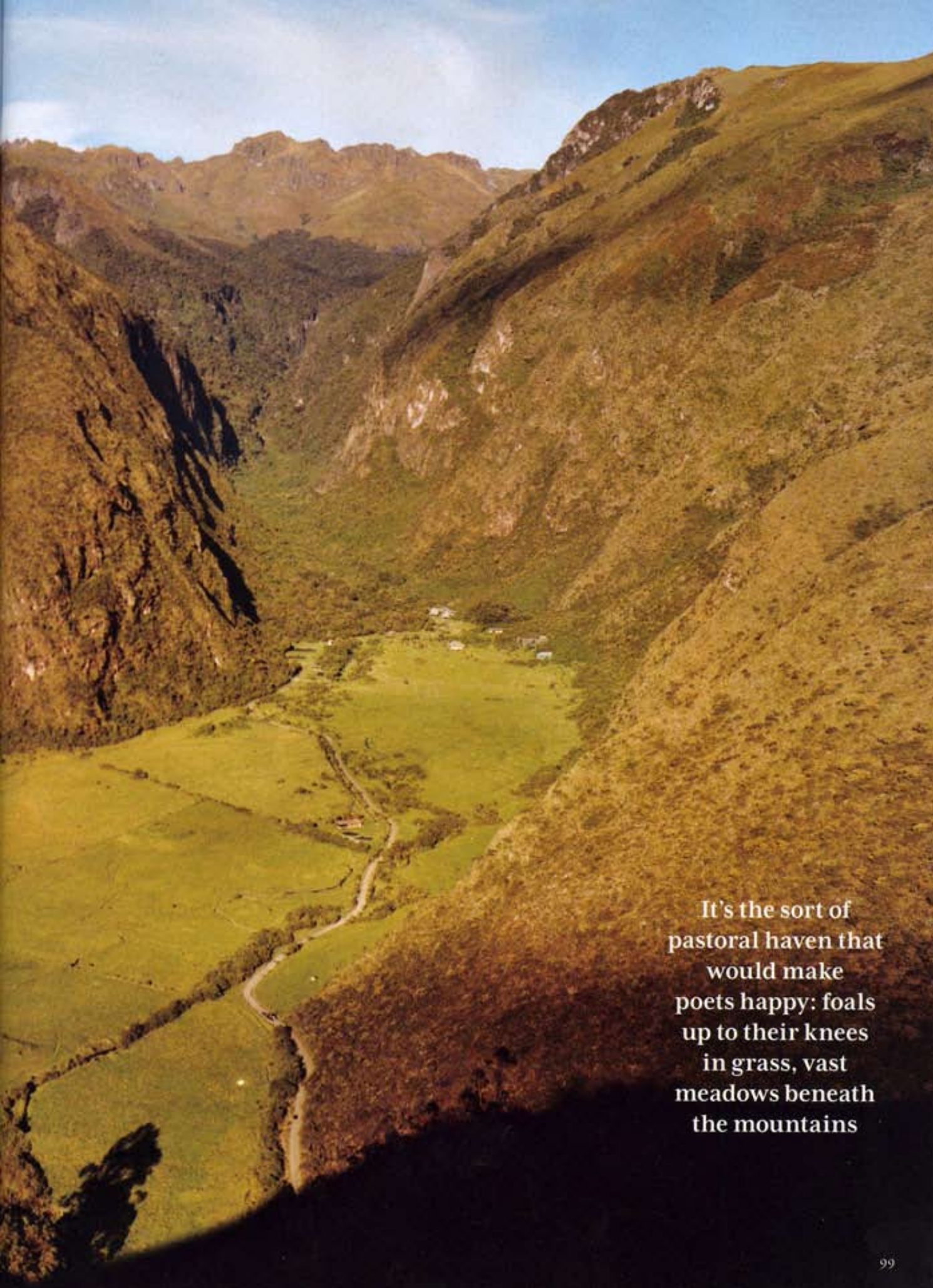
PLACES & PRICES

POCKET PERFECT

You can combine a trip to the Galápagos with one covering the diversity of mainland Ecuador. For help in organizing an itinerary replete with pleasures, see **page 122**.




Ancient sanctuary: In clear relief on the floor of the Valley of the Condors, near Hacienda Zuleta, a ziggurat built by the Caranqui people, forerunners of the Incas.



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Over the top: Seven tons of gold leaf are said to embellish the recently restored interior of Quito's La Compañía, built by the Jesuits between 1605 and 1765.





In this wild countryside, ranches
and little communities are
strung along the valley, and real
life plays out beyond the roads

Saddle up:
Equadorian
chagras (here
at Zuleta) are
part wrangler
and part rid-
ing guide.

Trail tough: Andean horses are small and hardy—bred for altitude, not for beauty.



ander von Humboldt, who visited this area in the 1820s, wrote, "Cotopaxi's shape is the most beautiful and regular of all of the colossal peaks in the high Andes. It is a perfect cone covered by a thick blanket of snow which shines so brilliantly at sunset it seems detached from the azure of the sky."

Part of the hacienda is built above Incan ruins, whose emperors clearly had a fondness for mountain views. The ruins that remain form part of the most beautiful section of the hacienda and display Incan stonework so finely cut that it stayed in place for centuries without any cement. San Agustín is set up in a similar way to Hacienda Zuleta: Even though it is a hotel, it is run more like a home, and the family that owns it is very much a part of its character. Below us, the

landscape is dotted with greenhouses cultivating the roses that are one of Ecuador's main exports and will make their way to Russia and the United States. Saquisilí market, not far from the hacienda, remains one of Ecuador's most important, with thousands of people streaming into town from the surrounding communities. Saquisilí's seven plazas are devoted to different wares: one to livestock such as pigs, cows, llamas, and guinea pigs; another to produce (alfalfa, sacks of grain, wooden crates of okra and radishes); another to yarns for indigenous clothes; and yet an-

other to food stalls where people eat lunch. It provides a snapshot of the communities, and a burst of color in the mostly quiet, stark mountains.

Getting to Sacha Lodge involves a plane ride, a three-hour motorboat ride, a half-hour walk, and then a half-hour paddle in a dugout canoe

huge estate he inherited. Today, Polanco is helping local businesses that include an embroidery collective and an archaeological project at the nearby pre-Incan Caranqui ziggurat.

THE FOLLOWING DAY WE SET OUT TO SEE the valley on horseback. The horses are a mix of Andalusian, Thoroughbred, and quarter horse breeds. In this wild countryside, ranches and little communities are strung along the valley, and real life plays out beyond the reach of roads. Women do a lot of the tasks, taking care of the animals and working in the fields. Brightly dressed grannies haul loads of firewood on their backs up the steep ridges. As we ride higher, our guides invite us to sample the sweet local schnappslike liqueur, which they carry in a hollowed-out cattle horn. The real cowboys look as comfortable as they would sitting in a La-Z-Boy, while my bottom and legs rebel after hours in the saddle.

Our next stop is San Agustín de Callo, a family-owned hacienda to the south of the capital that sits in the shadow of one of Ecuador's most dramatic volcanoes, Cotopaxi. The explorer and scientist Alex-

ander von Humboldt, who visited this area in the 1820s, wrote, "Cotopaxi's shape is the most beautiful and regular of all of the colossal peaks in the high Andes. It is a perfect cone covered by a thick blanket of snow which shines so brilliantly at sunset it seems detached from the azure of the sky."

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See additional images online at cntraveler.com/ecuador.



Journey's end: After a canoe paddle, Sacha Lodge offers generous balm—and its own eight square miles of Amazonian rain forest.