

Condé Nast Traveller

TRUTH IN TRAVEL

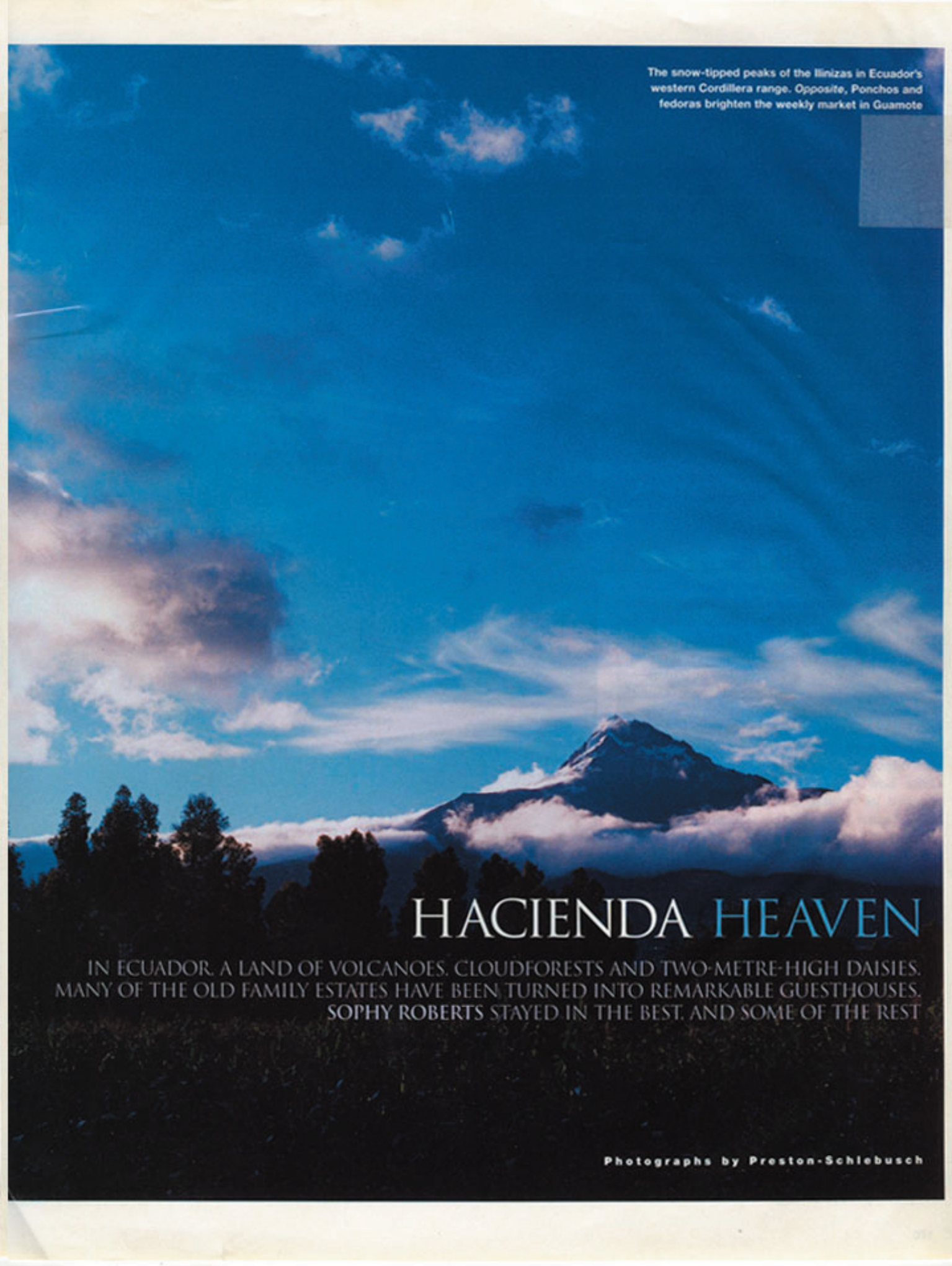
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2001
READERS' TRAVEL AWARDS



The snow-tipped peaks of the Illizas in Ecuador's western Cordillera range. Opposite, Ponchos and fedoras brighten the weekly market in Guamote

HACIENDA HEAVEN

IN ECUADOR, A LAND OF VOLCANOES, CLOUDFORESTS AND TWO-METRE-HIGH DAISIES, MANY OF THE OLD FAMILY ESTATES HAVE BEEN TURNED INTO REMARKABLE GUESTHOUSES. SOPHY ROBERTS STAYED IN THE BEST, AND SOME OF THE REST

Photographs by Preston-Schlebusch

HACIENDA ZULETA SITS in a shadowy copse at the bottom of a remote valley in the Ecuadorian Andes, a felt-green bowl flooded with equatorial sun. Roses cover the pillars that surround its courtyard, winning the battle for space over less robust climbers. As I approach the hacienda's entrance, a butler emerges; but when I ask to be shown around, he refuses. Somewhat bewildered, I insist, and wait outside until a po-faced woman stomps across the cobbles to tell me that Hacienda Zuleta is not receiving visitors.

'I'm sorry, I thought it was possible to stay here,' I explain. 'It is,' the woman snaps, 'but you pay to be the family's guest. You eat with us, and we entertain you. That's as long as you're willing to pay the money we ask for.' 'And how much does it cost?' 'Look, if you want to stay, you need to call the office in Quito.' 'But I'd like to get an idea of what I would be paying for,' I say. 'Not possible. Now here's the number in Quito.' With that, she turns on her heels and walks off.

THE OWNERS OF Hacienda Zuleta are apparently cousins of all the other Ecuadorian families who have opened up their ancestral homes to guests since agricultural reforms dispossessed them of their land in the 1960s. They are an eccentric bunch, not all well-suited to the service industry. I later discovered that my reception at Zuleta was unexceptional. The same hacienda once shut the door on a hiker who asked for a glass of water, and who happened to be a Nobel prizewinner.

It is not hard to find fault with many of Ecuador's haciendas, including some of the most expensive. Quite how the Hacienda Pinsaquí at Otavalo acquired its reputation is a mystery: apart from a spectacular view of the Imbabura volcano, it has little to recommend it. One hacienda gave me food poisoning; another overcharged me; a third was closed when I arrived at 9pm, even though I had confirmed my reservation five hours earlier. But the Hacienda Cusín is in a different league. This impeccably run retreat, converted 12 years ago by an English-born New Yorker, Nicholas Millhouse, might not be familiar to Europeans; but despite not having a pool, a spa, or a television in every room, it has the reputation of being one of the best hotels in South America.

Set on the shore of the San Pablo Lake, 2,590 metres up in the Andes, Cusín is 90 minutes' drive north of Quito, Ecuador's capital city, on the Pan-American Highway. It lies in a region of terraced valleys and flat, sunburnt páramo grasslands between the eastern and western Cordilleras, the volcanic vertebrae running the length of Ecuador, which fall away to the Amazon and the Pacific Ocean respectively. Potato, maize and barley fields are planted back-to-back with small, unfenced

