

QUITO

Built on an Inca city and the highest capital in the world, Ecuador's Quito has a lofty reputation. Delve into its churches, culture and classic cooking, says Gabriel O'Rorke

Why go? Ecuador's capital was founded in the 16th century and built, in irreverent Colonial style, atop the ruins of an ancient Inca city. Today its hilly cobbled streets are lined with beautiful old buildings, whose carved exteriors conceal incredibly ornate interiors. Quito sits at 2,850m above sea level, making it the highest capital city in the world, and it has the best-preserved historic centre in Latin America, according to Unesco.

What to do It's best to explore on foot, so start off with a city-wide panorama from Basilica del Voto Nacional, a giant neo-Gothic basilica that was only built around 30 years ago. Climb up through its entrails, passing through the clock tower to reach a somewhat terrifying height of 117m above ground, then head back down to admire its bright stained-glass windows and bronze doors. Another of the most impressive among the old town's 40-odd churches is La Compañía, a must-see for its dazzling gold-leaf interior. Just off Plaza de San Francisco, Casa del Alabado – the museum of pre-Colombian art – is set in a renovated 17th-century colonial house and has some wonderful exhibits of pottery, figurines and reshaped skulls. Next head to Museo Casa de Sucre, the former home of leader and national liberator General Sucre, for an insight into life in the 19th century, with impressive displays of swords, bayonets and riding saddles. As the sun sets, take time to zig-zag your way down La Ronda, a steep, cobbled street that comes to life after dark and is lined with art galleries, craft shops and restaurants (some of them selling *empanadas* larger than your hand).

Where to stay Overlooking Plaza de San Francisco, Casa Gangotena (00 593 2400 8000, casagangotena.com) is a 1920s family home turned light and fresh boutique hotel where afternoon tea is included in the room rate. For something more colonial, Plaza Grande (00 593 2252 8700, plazagrandequito.com) dates back to the founding of Quito in 1534 and has an impressive guest book that includes former patrons such as Hugo Chávez.

Travel information

Currency is the US dollar. Quito is five hours behind GMT and a 15-hour flight from London.

Getting there

Iberia (iberia.com) flies from London Heathrow to Quito via Madrid.

Delta (delta.com) flies from London Heathrow to Quito with a layover in Atlanta.

AVERAGE DAILY TEMPERATURES AND RAINFALL

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Min °C	10	10	10	10	10	9	9	9	9	9	9	10
Max °C	18	18	18	18	18	19	19	19	20	19	19	18
mm	4	4	5	6	4	1	1	1	2	4	3	3

Clockwise from top left: sunshine over the Plaza de San Francisco; an impromptu piano performance; dinner at Theatrum before a show; La Ronda has its entertainers; the Virgen de Quito watches over the city; *empanadas*; the decorated facade of a monastery; ceviche or palm hearts, a *guanábana*

Where to eat and drink The old-time delicacy *qui* (guinea pig) is still going strong in Quito and locals buy them whole, live and kicking at the farmers' market on Plaza de San Francisco. On the restaurant scene, Peruvian food is *à la mode* and top eatery Zazu (00 593 2254 3559, zazuquito.com), in the north of the city, prides itself on its Peruvian chefs. The cooking here includes the likes of a seven-course taster menu with white tuna sashimi, ceviche and port-glazed pork belly. If pudding is what you're after, head to Theatrum (00 593 2257 1011, theatrum.com.ec) on the second floor of the historic Teatro Nacional Sucre, which comes up trumps with its platter of exotic Ecuadorian fruit – *guanábana*, *babaco*, *guayaba*, *naranjilla* and *cherimoya* – all transformed into sorbets and ice creams. For something more down to earth, head to Panificadora Superior, a bakery set in a 300-year-old building on García Moreno, with mouth-watering trays of chocolate-dipped palmiers in the window. Delicacies include *biscochos* (buttery biscuits eaten with cheese and dulce de leche) and *guagua de pan* (sweet bread filled with jam and shaped like an infant). If you're staying at Casa Gangotena, don't miss the Quiteño Coffee Time (afternoon tea) and the chance to try the signature, thick, dark hot chocolate. There are also cookery classes that start with a trip to the local market to buy fresh produce and meet stallholder and homeopath Señora Rosa Lagla, who sells Andean herbs to make infusions for everything from altitude sickness to low energy.

Time running out? Just ten minutes from the airport is Gianduja chocolate factory (00 593 2245 4502, giandujachocolate.com). If time permits, book a cookery class with chocolatier Jeffrey Stern, otherwise just pick up some goodies to take home. Particularly delicious are the coconut cinnamon caramels and passion fruit truffles with lemongrass.

Trip tip Hire bikes and join the *ciclopaseo* – from 8am to 2pm every Sunday, the cyclist- and pedestrian-only route covers 30km, running from the north to the south of the city.

Resources

The Ministry of Tourism of Ecuador (ecuador.travel) and **Quito Tourism** (quito.com.ec) offer detailed information for planning your stay, including attractions and shopping.

Further reading

The Latin Road Home by Jose Garces (Lake Isle Press, £22) looks at the food traditions of Ecuador and other Latin countries.

