

HIDDEN GEM OF SOUTH AMERICA... ECUADOR

Here's how to condense a trip of a lifetime into a manageable, Ecuador-shaped, chunk

Motorcycling across South America is a bucket list goal for many adventure riders, but while the entire continent is worth exploring, few of us can take off weeks or months to ride. If you only have a week or 10 days to spare for an adventure of a lifetime, Ecuador, a hidden gem of South America, might be your best bet. This small Andean country sandwiched between Colombia and Peru packs a punch: the Pacific Coast, the Andes and the Amazon rainforest are all within reach here, and you can get a real taste of all that South America has to offer in a short amount of time.

Our man in Ecuador

Founder of Ecuador Freedom, Court Rand is a lifelong motorcycle addict, adventure rider and tour designer passionate about showcasing the best that South America has to offer to fellow riders. Usually found on remote backcountry roads scouting new routes, Court knows Ecuador inside and out and can recommend the best places to see.





Starting off in Quito, the country's capital nestled in the heart of the Ecuadorian Andes, you can ride the golden sand beaches and explore small, sleepy fishermen's villages on the coast, loop across the looming Andean range passing active volcanoes and high plateaus, and find yourself in the Amazon basin enjoying natural hot springs and jungle tours before heading back to the capital following the countless twisties with breathtaking views around every corner. Ecuador has a well developed road network offering plenty of thrilling mountain roads with perfect tarmac, as well as countless off-road trails leading to places well off the beaten path. Immersing yourself in the local way of life is an added bonus as you traverse Ecuador on a motorcycle visiting indigenous communities, colourful local markets, and colonial towns brimming with fascinating history and culture.

Ready to ride? Here's what's not to miss on your two-wheeled adventure in Ecuador...

Avenue of the Volcanoes

Ecuador is among the most bio-diverse countries in South America, and its stunning natural beauty is what makes the riding here truly unforgettable. One of the most adventure-filled routes in Ecuador is the Avenue of the Volcanoes, a 200-mile stretch south of Quito connecting Ecuador's seven volcanoes – two of them among the most active in the world – and offering magnificent vistas of snow-capped Andean peaks, unique wildlife roaming free in the mountains, and local lore surrounding the volcanoes.

Riding from Quito to Cuenca along the Pan American Highway, you'll spot the Cayambe, Iliniza, and Cotopaxi volcanoes. A little further south, the towering Chimborazo Volcano slowly reveals its glacier-covered summit shrouded in clouds. This 20,565-foot sleeping giant is the tallest mountain in Ecuador and, owing to the equatorial bulge, is the highest mountain in the world when measured from the centre of the Earth. It's worth taking a day or two to explore the Chimborazo National Reserve, riding the remote off-road trails crisscrossing the region and staying in the small Andean villages to experience the local culture and hospitality.

Further south still, take a detour to Baños de Agua Santa, a town on the Eastern side of the Andes known as the adventure capital of Ecuador. Baños boasts action and adventure sports galore, ranging from zip lining and whitewater rafting to hiking around Tungurahua, one of Ecuador's most active volcanoes, as well as a famous natural hot springs spot ideal for relaxing after a long day's ride.



When to go?

Because of its location right on the equator, Ecuador enjoys mild weather year round. The warmest and driest months in the Andean regions are June through to September. However, Ecuador can be enjoyed at any time of the year. Its capital Quito is often called the City of Eternal Spring as it does not see much of the seasonal changes in its climate.



Insider information

SAFETY

Ecuador is one of the most stable and hospitable countries in South America with a well-developed infrastructure making it safe and easy to travel. The traffic conditions aren't challenging as Ecuadorians are courteous drivers, and motorcycles are an extremely popular means of transport here.

BUDGET

Ecuador's official currency is the US dollar, and the prices here are low compared to the Western world. A basic hotel stay will cost around \$20,

a restaurant meal is between \$6-8, and fuel is around \$1,50 per gallon. Riding two-up or travelling with friends often makes budgeting easier as most hotels and tour operators are happy to offer deals and discounts for groups.

LANGUAGE

Learning a few basic phrases in Spanish goes a long way in Ecuador. However, most locals in the bigger cities and towns speak English, making communication easy, and if it comes to it, the universal language of using your hands and feet works here, too!

The Avenue of the Volcanoes ends in Cuenca, a beautiful colonial town worth spending a day in exploring on foot and enjoying delicious local cuisine or visiting local markets and tasting canelazo, an Andean specialty of hot aguardiente with cane sugar and cinnamon.

Quilotoa Loop

A must-see in Ecuador, Quilotoa crater lake is a sight to behold. Hidden away deep in the Andes, the Quilotoa crater forms a turquoise-blue lake reflecting the skies. It's shrouded in local indigenous legends telling of a love-stricken Quilotoa volcano which erupted as a result of a heartbreak and filled the crater with tears, giving it the bright blue colour. Whether the folktale is true or not, the crater lake offers incredible views as well as plenty of excellent off-road trails surrounding the area and taking you off the beaten path and into the wilderness of the Andes Mountains. There are several mountain lodges to stay near Quilotoa, and it's an easy day's ride from the capital Quito.

Gateway into the Amazon

The Amazon basin in South America is a vast and largely untamed region of impenetrable rainforest, often only accessible by boat. In Ecuador, however, you can ride your motorcycle all the way down to the Napo River and explore Puerto Misahualli, a small Amazonian town offering jungle treks, nature-inspired eco lodges, and delicious local food. Cheeky capuchin monkeys can be seen all over town attempting to extort food tidbits from travellers, and if you're planning a rest day here, take a boat trip down the Napo to visit the indigenous





communities living in the rainforest and learn about the local way of life in the tropics.

The best way to get to Puerto Misahuali from Cuenca is by crossing the Sangay National Park, a spectacular Andean region of emerald green cloud forests and cascading waterfalls carved by twisty mountain roads and byways. From Quito, take Route E20 via Papallacta, another awe-inspiring road descending down the eastern slopes of the Andes.

What's the best way to do it?

Ecuador is a safe and friendly country to travel, and if riding solo is your kind of thing, simply jump on your rental bike and go explore. Self-guided Ecuador tours are designed to give you a taste of adventure while providing you with pre-programmed GPS routes as well as prepaid hotels, informative daily route sheets and back-office monitoring. It's the best way to go if you or a group of friends want the freedom of a rental but don't have the time to do all the research, hotel bookings and route planning. You can opt for the self-guided tour and come out looking like a star planner with several off-the-beaten-path places, activities and hidden gems to explore that no Lonely Planet guide would tell you about.

Fully guided motorcycle tours can be a fantastic option if you prefer to have an experienced local guide and a planned itinerary packed with great riding, exploring the hidden gems of Ecuador, and unique local experiences few tourists ever get to enjoy such as meeting Ecuador's guitar makers, leather artisans and rose farmers, or going on chocolate and cacao tours.

When it comes to bike choices, there is a variety of large adventure motorcycles, off-road capable dual sports, and mid-range bikes available. On or off the road, exploring Ecuador on two wheels is an experience not to be missed while in South America.



Ecuador Freedom

Located in the historic capital city of Quito, Ecuador Freedom Bike Rental is the country's first motorcycle tour operator, founded in 2009. Working with professional local guides, they design and outfit tours for adventure enthusiasts who wish to explore Ecuador's hidden gems. They say they offer South America's largest selection of rental motorcycles, all available with a low-price guarantee. www.freedombikerental.com