

South America

My high-altitude adventure along the Avenue of Volcanoes

From colonial towns to Andean peaks, Tom Chesshyre hits the road in Ecuador

Hail strikes the roof of our Suzuki SUV, sounding like pebbles from above. We're in the middle of a storm in Cotopaxi National Park, about 3,000m up in the Ecuadorian Andes. Great thunderclaps echo as we drive along a bumpy track, with the snowy slopes of the Cotopaxi volcano rising dramatically, the cone concealed by thick white cloud.

We reach a potholed hairpin turn as the hail intensifies, and at this moment — on a completely blind bend in the middle of a hailstorm high in the Andes — a red pickup truck appears out of nowhere and overtakes. Puddles splash. The pick-up almost leaps into the air as it negotiates a mini-crater. And then it is gone, round the corner, speeding along the Avenue of Volcanoes, as the road is known, towards Quito, Ecuador's capital.

Driving in Ecuador can be — how can I put this? — interesting. This moment of madness, on the final day of our 450-mile road journey around the country, did not come as a surprise. By the end of our ten-day driving adventure we had seen it all on the dusty roads of this intriguing South American country.

Even though an Ecuadorian road trip may sound downright daunting, it is a



marvellous way to explore this equatorial nation. Most people only come here for a couple of days in Quito combined with a visit to the Galapagos Islands to witness the biodiversity that so fascinated Charles Darwin in the 1830s.

We begin in the capital, from where we are to drive in a big clockwise circle, stopping at San Isidro, a birdwatching lodge deep in the Andean rainforest. Afterwards we will go to a little boutique hotel by a tributary of the Amazon famed for its whitewater rafting, a spa hotel in the pilgrimage city of Banos, and, finally, a simple lodge overlooking the volcanoes on the edge of Cotopaxi National Park.

It is a good idea to spend a day in Quito acclimatising before hitting the roads. It is the second-highest capital in the world at 2,850m above sea level (the highest is La Paz in Bolivia, at 3,640m), and the best way to get to grips with it is to take a guided tour. This is partly because you'll probably be feeling a bit dizzy and disorientated at such altitude, as my girlfriend and I are. And it is partly because everyone seems to warn you that you may get your pocket picked, so it is handy to be with a street-savvy local. Another factor is that the city is so full of interest that you might miss one of the magnificent churches or lovely squares if you go it alone.

Our guide, the superbly named Mr Chinchin, picks us up from our stylish little hotel, the newly opened Mama Chuchara on Vicente Rocafuerte street, and is soon whisking us along Calle La Ronda, a cobbled alleyway packed with colourful bars and restaurants that lean across, almost touching in places at the top.

In Plaza de Santo Domingo we do what tourists do in Quito: we buy panama hats. Few know that panama hats originated in Ecuador. Ours cost US\$10 each — Ecuador underwent "dollarisation" in 2000 to stabilise its economy.

Wearing our hats, we continue, taking them off as we enter the dazzling golden interiors of the churches of San Francisco and Compania de Jesus, as well as the main cathedral by the presidential palace on Plaza Grande, where Sucre's mausoleum is to be found near a long row of *penitenciaro* (confessional) booths and a painting of the Last Supper that features a guinea pig as the dish of the day. Some Ecuadorians consider the creatures a delicacy.

We visit the towering Basilica of the National Vow (with its fabulous iguana and crocodile-shaped gargoyles) and the even more towering, shiny aluminium statue of the Virgin Mary on El Panecillo hill. We eat fajas on La Ronda and drink a hot liquor named *hervidos de naranjilla* at El Tropical bar, which has an ancient Wurlitzer jukebox and an interior that cannot have changed much in half a



century. Sometimes you can just strike lucky with an excellent guide.

Quito "done", acclimatisation achieved — although we would have enjoyed more time — we are ready for the road. So we pick up the Suzuki at the airport and are soon on our way, quickly being overtaken at immense speed by the revving engines of what appears to be the Quito Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club. This is our baptism of fire on the roads of Ecuador. We learn, quickly, to Be Very Careful Indeed. We roll into the gorgeous emerald Andes and are soon at a pass above 4,000m, where signs say *reduzca la velocidad* (cut your speed), and we do.

Meanwhile, cars, trucks and pick-ups with people hanging out of the back overtake at a *velocidad* that is well above the legal limit. These incidents occur at whichever crazy bend best suits the motorist.

We arrive at the Cabanas San Isidro, up a bumpy lane. We love the ten rooms here, which are in the middle of thick cloud forest. We arrive as hummingbirds are dancing by the sugar-feeders near the deck. The humidity is heavy. The birds buzz, their wings fluttering beautifully.

There are a dozen species of hummingbird at San Isidro, which is in nearly 5,000 acres of grounds and has "a famous owl after dinner". So says Alejandro, the administrator of the cabanas, who is referring to an owl that can only be found in this landscape and attracts birdwatchers from around the globe (we do indeed spot the magnificent owl perching in an enormous cecropia tree after dinner).

Alejandro points out the gorgeted woodstar (a bee-sized hummingbird) and long-tailed sylph hummingbirds. He also tells us that "at least five species of bird are singing right now". After a morning tour of the rainforest and at breakfast meeting Ed and Nancy from Oregon, who are also driving in Ecuador, we take to the bumpy road again. We make an arranged stop at the village of Santa Rita, where we are given a tour and are told all about the cultivation of cocoa for chocolate. We make rudimentary chocolate for the beans.

We drive on, reaching Hamadryade Lodge near the town of Tena at dusk. The



Cotopaxi volcano, south of Quito. Below left: Compania de Jesus church in Quito

lodge comprises five modernist villas, deep in jungle by the Napo River. It is another tranquil spot, but the next morning involves little tranquility, at least at first.

Tena is known for its adventure activities, which include whitewater rafting. We are soon on the Napo River, hurtling through class III rapids. These are considered, in Ecuador, to be fine for beginners such as us. Yet when the river slows, all is calm. Apparently, the guides tell us, at the laziest sections of this river, boa constrictors lurk below. Which is interesting.

After 27km and a full day on the water crashing between boulders, we are, I can safely say, no longer beginners.

The road to our next stop, Banos, is child's play after that, although the drivers are particularly manic in the tunnels on the way into the town. We stay at the Samari, a renowned spa hotel, and take a taxi into the centre to see the famous sculpture of the Virgin Mary in the cathedral, buy a colourful blanket from one of the many stalls and eat the biggest steaks we have laid eyes on (squashed flat as though run over by cars) at a local cantina.

After seeing the thundering Pailon del Diablo (devil's cauldron) waterfall, we hit the long road north to Cotopaxi National Park and our final night, at Chilcabamba lodge, which overlooks several volcanoes and (at 3,500m) is another great place to stay. The drive this day is particularly hair-raising. We witness a lorry carrying gasoline skid to a halt through a junction with a red light on the Pan-American Highway — somehow avoiding Armageddon — before our harrowing hailstorm passage through the park.

All that is left is to watch the smoke rising from the cone of Cotopaxi, to drink coca tea to relieve the pressure of the altitude, get an early night and drive back to Mariscal Sucre airport to drop off the Suzuki, passing along the Avenue of Volcanoes. There is more to Ecuador than the Galapagos and Quito, as exceptional as they may be. Hire an SUV, hold on tight, and find out for yourself.

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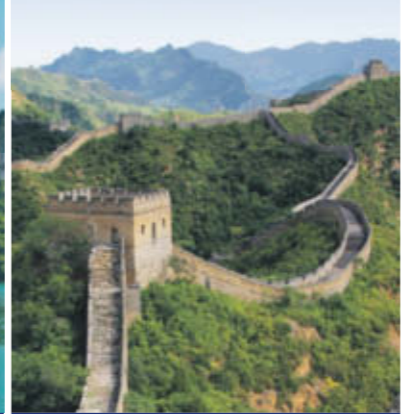
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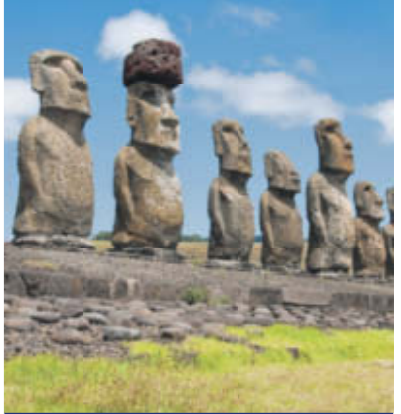
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