

## **Ecuador Factbox**

Ecuador is the smallest country in the Andean Highlands. The Andes runs like a backbone from the North to the South of the country with the humid forests of the Amazonian basin to the east and the plantations of the coastal lowlands to the west.

Quito is the world's second highest capital city with a setting amongst an avenue of volcanoes and it lies just south of the equator.

Visiting the colonial heart of Quito is like stepping back in time amongst the cobbled plazas and markets of the old city.

The old city is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and home to Plaza Independencia with the Cathedral, Municipal Building, the Presidencial and Archbishop's Palaces; Plaza San Francisco with the church of the same name, the Basilica and Panecillo Hill site of the giant winged virgin.

**A highlight of any visit to Quito is the opportunity to visit the Equatorial Monument with the chance to stand in both the Northern and Southern Hemispheres at the same time.**

I also visited Otavalo and its handicrafts market, the largest in South America, where local Indians come to sell everything and anything. Considered of particular quality are the leather crafts, wood carving and weaving.

A little known fact about Ecuador is that the colonial city of Cuenca is where the Panama hat was born.

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Almost 1,000 kilometres from the western coast of Ecuador are the 19 Islands of the Galapagos. This isolation from man has helped make the wildlife more approachable to humankind than anywhere else on earth.

Home to remarkable creatures such as the blue-footed boobies (a bird); the 200kg Galapagos Giant Tortoise and the marine and land iguana the islands are a unique eco-system. The islands are also home to the rare Galapagos Penguin of which only 800 pairs exist.

The islands are actually the tops of a group of massive volcanoes rising from deep on the ocean floor. They vary from stark volcanic islands with immense lava fields to islands rich in vegetation and rimmed by perfect sandy beaches.

When Charles Darwin came to the Galapagos in 1835 he noted that "the natural history of these islands is eminently curious, and well deserves attention". His observations here played a major part in his theory of evolution.

Santa Fè (or Barrington) Island is home to the Land Iguana, the Galapagos Mockingbird, Magnificent Frigate bird, Brown Pelican and several species of Darwin's Finches as well as a forest of impressively tall Opuntia Cacti 'trees'.

Española (or Hood) Island is home to Marine Iguanas with copper red patches, Sea Lions, Lava Lizards, boobies, gulls and finches. It is also the only island where the Waved Albatross can be seen during breeding season. This is the southernmost island in the chain.

Floreana (or Charles) Island is the site of the famous 'post office barrel' which was placed there in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by whalers and it is still in use today. Mariners from around the world used the barrel to drop off and collect letters, without stamps, to be carried to far destinations...an early form of e-mail?

Today visitors follow the tradition, depositing their unstamped letters and cards and delivering, free of charge, any addressed to their home areas.

Pt. Cormorant has a jade green volcanic beach, a lagoon and occasionally shore birds and flamingos.

Santa Cruz (or Indefatigable) Island is the economic centre of the Galapagos and the most populated of the archipelago. A short walk from Puerto Ayora is The Charles Darwin Research Station.

Rabida (or Jervis) Island. This small island's volcanic rock is covered by Opuntia Cacti, Palo Santo trees and low scrubby bushes. Sea lions abound on the dark red beach behind which lies a flamingo lagoon. The shoreline here is a resting site for several species of seabird.

Bartolomé (or Bartholomew) Island is considered a perfect representation of the geological history of the Galapagos. The impressive volcanic scenery can be viewed from the top of Bartolomé (at 374 ft) from where you can view varied lava formations, volcanic peaks and moon-like landscapes.

North Seymour Island is home to an abundance of birdlife at exceptionally close quarters. Here we find the largest colony of Magnificent Frigate birds and nesting Blue-Footed Boobies and Swallow-Tailed Gulls.

San Cristobal (or Chatham) Island is the easternmost island in the archipelago and one of the oldest islands. The principal town here is also the capital of the Galapagos; Puerto Baquerizo Moreno.

In 1954 volcanic activity in the region resulted in giant coral heads being lifted out of the sea. The skeletons of these coral heads can still be seen at Urbina Bay (Isabela Island).