

THREE PERFECT DAYS

QUITO

99

DAY ONE

Visiting three of the city's most glorious churches

102

DAY TWO

Taking in epic murals at Capilla del Hombre

104

DAY THREE

Shopping for Andean crafts in Otavalo

SQUARE ROOTS The historic Plaza de la Independencia, with La Virgen de Quito atop El Panecillo in the distance

A place of deep history, rich culture and staggering views, UNESCO's first World Heritage city has been flying under travelers' radar for a long time. But thanks to a growing economy and a renewed focus on preservation and development, that's about to change.

**STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS
BY SAM POLCER**



WALK THE STREETS

of Quito, and you'll find the least-altered historical center in Latin America, with scores of dazzling churches, colonial mansions and museums that celebrate an indigenous culture going back thousands of years—from Incas to Spanish colonists to the present day. Head north, and you'll discover sleek new development, cosmopolitan restaurants and cutting-edge nightlife. Talk to anyone, and you'll hear a similar refrain, "You should have seen this before," uttered with a hint of wonderment.

Quito is changing. Has changed. Not long ago, the city's treasured colonial district was inundated with street vendors and plagued by poverty, but thanks to Ecuador's vast energy resources and growing economy, as well as an increased investment in its heritage, things have improved dramatically for this city set high in the Andes, ringed by volcanoes and jungle. No longer merely the gateway to the Galápagos or the Amazon, Quito today is safer, cleaner and more vibrant, brimming with cultural riches, a place where history plays out in real time every day.



DAY ONE | When you wake at the **Casa Gangotena**, the first thing you see is a mural depicting a colonial-era hunting scene that stretches around the top of your room. It's just one of the details of this mid-1920s mansion that the owners have done a magnificent job of restoring, along with soaring windows, tin ceilings, antique mirrors and friezes. It's easy to see why, in less than a year of operation, the immaculate hotel has become a symbol of colonial Quito's revitalization.

After a satisfying breakfast of coffee, fresh fruit and tamales generously filled with rice, pork, bananas and eggs, you head to the lobby. A bellhop walks you out into the delightful weather—"It's like this all year," he brags—and waves you off in the direction of the expansive Plaza San Francisco. You follow the sound of church bells to the **Iglesia de San Francisco**, the oldest of Quito's 40 storied colonial churches, on the northwest side of the plaza. Construction on the church began in 1535, a year after the city was founded by the Spanish, and legend has it that the builder, Francisco Cantuña, made a deal with the devil to complete it but was able to save his soul by leaving a single

PAINTING THE TOWN
A mural-wrapped room at the Casa Gangotena; right, empanaditas at Tianguetz Café; opposite, Iglesia de San Francisco



QUITO, BY THE NUMBERS

YEAR FOUNDED 1534	SIZE, in square miles 4,633	MILES FROM EQUATOR 15	SPECIES OF BIRDS, in the metro area 542
POPULATION, in the metro area 2.2 M	ELEVATION, in feet 9,200	VOLCANOES, in the region 12	CHURCHES, in the colonial district 40

stone missing. As you wander around in search of the telltale gap, you keep getting distracted by the ceiling, which is covered with angels' faces. A worshipper informs you that the Spanish used this kind of imagery to entice the indigenous people to convert to Christianity (not that most of them had a choice—the church also is rumored to be built on top of an Incan temple).

You then walk a couple of blocks to the baroque masterpiece **La Iglesia de la Compañía de Jesús**, which is Quito's most iconic church, largely due to its gold-drenched interior. An amalgam of Moorish design, Christian and native imagery and international art styles—even Chinese—covers every inch of the place. The mural in your hotel room looks like an impressionist sketch in comparison with the detail work here.

Close by, perched atop a short but steep, steep hill, is the **Basílica del Voto Nacional**, the largest Gothic cathedral in South America. Though modeled after the cathedral in Bourges, France, it has local flavor: A close look reveals gargoyles in

the shape of armadillos, iguanas and tortoises. From the main tower you spot *La Virgen de Quito*, a winged Madonna standing watch from a distant hilltop, and you can't help thinking that a cable stretched between here and there would make for the mother of all ziplines.

Lunch is, thankfully, downhill. **El Rincón de Cantuña**, like many businesses in this part of the city, occupies the covered yet airy courtyard of a colonial mansion. Following a glass of *guanabana* juice (owing to Ecuador's bounty of fresh fruits and vegetables, juice is offered at the start of almost every meal), you polish off a cast-iron skillet of shrimp, rice and plantains. You're brought back from the brink of siesta by a good, strong cup of Ecuadorian coffee.

After a stroll through the Plaza de la Independencia, the bustling heart of colonial Quito, you head to nearby **Casa del Alabado**. The museum, a stucco-walled 17th-century mansion, houses three families' collections of pre-Columbian artifacts. You're struck by the work of Ecuador's early peoples, for whom it seems a bowl wasn't a bowl unless there was a jaguar or a shaman's face carved into it. Among the highlights is a stone bench called a "seat of power," which once conveyed upon its sitter a higher status compared with tribe members who sat on the ground. You feel ready for your own seat of power or, say, mattress of rejuvenation, so you repair to your hotel for some rest. Quito's altitude is not to be taken lightly.

At dinnertime, you call for a taxi to bring you to **Octava de Corpus**, a restaurant with an assortment of warmly lit rooms filled with proprietor Jaime Burgos' eclectic art collection. Burgos, who circulates among the tables greeting regulars and insisting that newcomers practice their Spanish, recommends the Neapolitan chicken. You give it a try, along with an Argentine malbec. Neither disappoints. The romantic, homey atmosphere in the 150-year-old house makes the evening pass quickly—too quickly. You toast your host one last time, and go.

LIVESTOCK EXCHANGE

The trading floor of the NYSE has nothing on the sensory overload at Otavalo's animal market

If you find yourself on the main highway near Otavalo, a town about 60 miles north of Quito, early on a Saturday morning, follow your ears (and your nose) to the weekly animal market. There, creatures ranging from adorable guinea pigs (don't get too attached—they're a delicacy) to llamas and horses form a snorting, squealing, braying dust cloud of commerce. Listen, too, for the sounds of Quechua, the native tongue of the Otavaleños, as they sell or buy and load the animals onto trucks. Just be careful where you step—that isn't ticker tape on the ground.



GETTING FRESH One of the many juice stalls serving rejuvenating concoctions at Santa Clara Market; opposite, a plate of shrimp, rice and plantains at El Rincón de Cantuña, a restaurant in one of the interior courtyards at the hotel Patio Andaluz

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE THE INSIDE SCOOP FROM THOSE IN THE KNOW ILLUSTRATIONS BY PETER JAMES FIELD



Belén Polanco
RECEPTION MANAGER,
PLAZA GRANDE HOTEL

"There's a new train you can take from the city to some of the villages around here. Go to Machachi, and you'll be back by 4 p.m. People will wait for you at the station—some kids playing music with traditional dances, that kind of thing. It's a nice little city."



David Yunes
NATURALIST GUIDE AND OWNER
OF BEE FARM UGHPAMBA

"Go barhopping in the Mariscal area. We call that area 'Gringoland,' so there are a lot of really good spots. I like Cats, a bar with good old rock 'n' roll. It has a very nice ambience, and great food. I like the shrimp Provençal."



Margara Anhalzer
OWNER AND PRESIDENT,
OLGA FISCH FOLKLORE

"I recommend Petit Pigalle, a quaint French-owned restaurant in Mariscal. It's very small, with very good food. The chef and his wife serve you. Try the duck. Or go to La Gloria, in Floresta. Everything is delicious, but the filet mignon with coffee sauce—mmm."





BROAD STROKES Capilla del Hombre, home to artist Oswaldo Guayasamín's giant murals, with *Toro y Condor* in the background

opposite of the other restaurants you've been to so far. In fact, if it weren't for the floor-to-ceiling windows with a view of Foch Plaza, you'd think you were in Miami at 3 a.m. But it's the afternoon, so, despite the extensive and imaginative cocktail list, you responsibly order "zucchini lamborghini" (sliced zucchini and artichoke dip) and "moussaka kan" (moussaka made with eggplant tempura). Then you order a mojito anyway.

Next, you grab a taxi to **Capilla del Hombre** to take in the powerfully severe work of Ecuadorian artist Oswaldo Guayasamín. A contemporary of Diego Rivera and a keen scholar of South American history, Guayasamín made paintings that were often epic in subject and scale. He was particularly concerned with the plight of the continent's indigenous people, which made him a national hero before he passed away in 1999. You take your time exploring the cavernous space, and are transfixed by *Toro y Condor*, a massive mural depicting a pre-Columbian Peruvian ritual in which a condor was lashed to the back of a bull.

You have reservations at the upscale **Zazu**, which was the first of a veritable invasion of Peruvian-themed restaurants in Quito. You order chef Rafael Pérez's pork confit taquitos, followed by a mammoth seafood plate featuring grilled grouper. You may have skipped the beef dish, but there is something unmistakably condor-like in how you go about attacking the seafood.

Per your waiter's recommendation, you take a quick taxi ride to Guápulo, a hip neighborhood and street-art mecca perched on a hillside on the eastern edge of town. You duck into **Ananké**, a bar and pizzeria with a ramshackle bohemian vibe and oversize, colorful works by local photographers. Couples canoodle in darkened corners; obscure electronic music pipes through

DAY TWO | For breakfast, you walk across the plaza to **Tianguez Café**, a fair-trade crafts store and restaurant tucked into the catacombs beneath the Iglesia de San Francisco, where you explore a labyrinth of narrow hallways lined with handmade masks and figurines. You buy a tiny bird figurine carved out of "vegetable ivory," which is made from the nut of a tagua palm tree, and then settle down for a plate of veggie empanaditas and a mug of coca leaf tea. The latter, a gringo favorite, is known to ward off altitude sickness. While it works its magic, you hail a taxi and venture north.

You let yourself out at the flagship location of **Olga Fisch Folklore**, a shop selling tapestries, sculptures, wall art, clothing and jewelry by local artists. Fisch, a Hungarian who immigrated here in 1939, saw great value in Ecuador's rich heritage of crafts and became the country's first and most influential art promoter. Her granddaughter, Margara Anhalzer, who runs the place, invites you upstairs to check out the private museum, where a small but extensive collection of pre-Columbian artifacts and post-colonial art testifies to Fisch's love for her adopted country.

You wind your way several blocks to **Galeria Ecuador Gourmet** for yet another well-curated collection—this time, of locally produced coffee, chocolate, liquor, sauces and other tempting food items. You pick up some bars of dark chocolate as, er, souvenirs. Just as you start tearing open a wrapper, you realize it's lunchtime.

Luckily, just steps away is the Mediterranean-fusion eatery **La Boca del Lobo**. Filled with chrome and neon and pumping dance music, it's the polar



DAY ONE

Casa Gangotena Bolívar OE6-41 at Cuenca; Tel: 400-8000

Iglesia de San Francisco Cuenca 477 at Sucre; Tel: 228-1124

Iglesia de la Compañía de Jesús García Moreno at Sucre; Tel: 258-1895

Basilica del Voto Nacional Carchi 122 at Venezuela; Tel: 258-3891

El Rincón de Cantuña (Patio Andaluz) García Moreno N6-52 at Olmedo; Tel: 228-0830

Casa del Alabado Cuenca 335 between Bolívar and Rocafuerte; Tel: 228-0940

Octava de Corpus 8 Junín E2-167 Almeida Antonio; Tel: 295-2989

DAY TWO

Tianguez Café Plaza de San Francisco; Tel: 257-0233

Olga Fisch Folklore Av. Colón E10-53 at Caamaño; Tel: 254-1315

Galeria Ecuador Gourmet Reina Victoria N24-263 at Lizardo García; Tel: 255-8440

La Boca del Lobo José Calama E7-07 at Reina Victoria; Tel: 223-4083

Capilla del Hombre Mariano Calvache 2458 at Lorenzo Chávez; Tel: 244-8492

Zazu Mariano Aguilera 331 at La Padera; Tel: 254-3559

Ananké Camino de Orellana 781, Guapulo; Tel: 255-1421

DAY THREE

Santa Clara Market Versalles at Ramírez Dávalos

Otavalo/Peguche 60 miles north of Quito

Hacienda Pinsaqui Kilometer 5, Pan-American Highway North, Otavalo; Tel: (06) 294-6116

Pim's Panecillo Melchor Aymerich, Cima del Panecillo; Tel: 317-0878/317-0162

La Ronda



CULTURAL FABRIC Clockwise from top left, a Corpus Christi garment at Casa del Alabado; old-timers gathering at Plaza de la Independencia; José Luis Pichamba demonstrating one of his pan flutes; pork confit taquitos at Zazu

the speakers. It could pass for a European loft, but as you settle into a table by the window and take in the view of Iglesia de Guápulo, past colonial houses arrayed along narrow cobblestone streets, you realize you couldn't be anywhere but here.

DAY THREE | You're up early, and your new addiction to fresh juice made from fruit you've never heard of lures you to the capacious **Santa Clara Market**, an easy drive in your rental car. Local shoppers are here for meats, produce, flowers and spices, but you make a beeline for a juice stall and order a rejuvenating concoction containing alfalfa, egg and *naranjilla* juice. After downing it where you stand, you join diners huddled over steaming plates of chicken and rice at one of the endless countertop eateries.

While Quito has seen an explosion of high-end brand-name stores, along with curated shops like Tianguex and Olga Fisch, the real deal is a 90-minute drive north up the Pan-American Highway, in a town called **Otavalo**. There, the Otavaleños, an industrious ethnic group known around the world for Andean handicrafts, have created a browser's paradise. At Poncho Plaza, you wind your way through a maze of vendors



hawking bright tapestries, hammock chairs, armadillo-shell guitars and herbal remedies. You come to a stall covered with tiny paintings on drumlike squares of canvas, pick out the brightest one and break for lunch.

Just up the road lies the 300-year-old **Hacienda Pinsaqui**, once the site of a textile manufacturer and now a 30-suite hotel and restaurant. You order potato soup and the regional specialty *carne colorada*: meat (in this case, pork) marinated in a mixture that includes ground *achiote*, giving the dish its red color as well as its name. You wolf it down.

A mile north in the village of **Peguche**, you meet José Catacachi, an Otavaleño who demonstrates a traditional loom-weaving technique and shows you how he makes dye from the blood of a cactus worm. Around the corner, musician and craftsman José Luis Pichamba plays from his collection of handmade Andean musical instruments, and lashes together a pitch-perfect pan flute for you in five minutes. You try to improvise a few quick "melodies"; it doesn't go so well. The look on Pichamba's face confirms this, so you bid him farewell and drive back to Quito.

Dinner tonight is at **Pim's Panecillo**, where the menu is almost as expansive as the restaurant's view of the city from just below *La Virgen de Quito*. You secure a counter seat by the window and opt for shrimp ceviche and *locrito*, a simple Ecuadorian potato-and-cheese soup that goes well with sliced avocado. Both dishes are served in typical

Andean fashion, with popcorn, roasted corn and *aji*, a hot sauce, on the side.

Dropping the car off at the hotel, you stroll to nearby **La Ronda**, a narrow, sloping pedestrian thoroughfare, where the strains of live *corta vena* music (literally, "vein cutting," so named for its melancholy melodies and lyrics) flow from bars and cafés that seem hand-carved into the Spanish architecture. One of colonial Quito's most privileged streets, it became a bohemian center in the 1930s, then hit the skids in the '70s before being reborn in recent years as a nightlife hub.

It's a brisk evening, so you pop into an unassuming spot on the corner and order a mug of *canelazo*, a hot, fruity herbal drink often spiked with *aguardiente*, a sugarcane alcohol. You decide there's probably nothing better in the world for shaking off a chill. As the warmth washes over you, a Quiteña at an adjacent table nods your way. "*Buenas noches*," she says, as revelers stream past on the cobblestone streets. "You have found one of our *huecas*—one of our authentic places."

You want to tell her that you hope it stays this way, that authenticity can be a tricky thing to hold on to in a city changing this quickly. But you simply raise your glass and smile. Quito seems to be on the right track.

From now on, Hemispheres executive editor SAM POLCER is buying only dinnerware with jaguars on it.

THREE PERFECT DAYS

MARY, QUITE CONTRARY

Quito's guardian is a true original

The 148-foot-tall aluminum statue *La Virgen de Quito* has watched over colonial Quito from the top of El Panecillo—a hill that was once an Incan sun-worshipping site—since 1976. Spanish artist Agustín de la Herrán modeled the statue after a much smaller version in Iglesia de San Francisco by 18th-century Ecuadorian sculptor Bernardo de Legarda. Quito's Madonna stands atop a globe and is, like many classic representations of the Madonna, stepping on a snake. Her wings, however, set her apart; it is said that there are no other Madonnas this size anywhere in the world with them. A plaque on the monument explains that she represents the "Woman of the Apocalypse"—Mary as an angel—from the Book of Revelations. Which makes her heavy metal in more ways than one.



BOARDING PASS ➔ Want to explore colonial churches, shop for vibrant Andean handicrafts, enjoy dining on both traditional and progressive South American cuisine and learn about pre-Columbian history through the artifacts at Quito's many fascinating museums? United can take you there. **Go to [united.com](https://www.united.com) to book your flight and get detailed schedule information.**