

Ecuador: Andes & the Galapagos

Tour-Only Itinerary

Two steps down the beach, it's already clear who runs this place. The sea lions! They're everywhere: sprawled on park benches and boats in the harbor; and lined up end-to-end here on the sands of Playa Carola. As you'll quickly discover on this hiking tour, in the Galápagos, humans are just visitors. You'll feel it on your walk through San Cristóbal Island's tortoise preserve, some of whose wizened giants have witnessed nearly 200 years of other species' comings and goings. Ecuador's Andean culture is equally engaging, as you'll discover sharing trailside smiles with high-altitude herders or admiring the work of the accomplished weavers in Otavalo's market. Wherever you go, the common thread is a life lived close to exuberant nature.



Highlights

- Experience two breathtaking worlds of cultural and natural marvels: the Andean Highlands and the Galápagos Islands
- Stroll pristine beaches in search of wild tortoises and sea lions, and hike highland forests on the lookout for exotic birdlife
- Enjoy the privilege of chartered boat excursions as you explore remote coves and beaches teeming with life
- Enrich your adventure with a horseback ride in the Andes and a snorkeling excursion with sea turtles at Kicker Rock, an icon of the Galápagos
- Take a thrilling trek along the rim of the stunning Cuicocha Volcano

- Indulge in the amenities of two deluxe hotels—an historic hacienda and an ocean-front boutique hotel
- Immerse yourself in bustle and bartering at Ecuador's most authentic market at Otavalo

On all Guided Adventures you can count on ...



Expert local guides to introduce you to the best of your destination.



Gracious accommodations that are a clean, comfortable home away from home.



Off-the-beaten-path places you'd never find on your own.



Experts to handle all the details.



A maximum of 18 fun-loving fellow travelers to share the journey.



Flight + Tour Combos include plane tickets, airport car service, and pre- and post-tour accommodations.



Delicious, authentic multi-course meals—virtually all are included.

Activity Level

This tour is one of our Guided Walking Adventures, rated easy to moderate, with an average of 3-5 miles of walking daily with some options. The ascents on this tour are short, with the longest being no more than

30 minutes with a maximum elevation gain and loss of up to 600 feet (one optional moderate walk with an elevation loss of up to 1,800 feet). The walks take you along quiet cobblestone roads, hard packed dirt trails, sandy beaches, and rocky coastline, with some sections on lava rock. Not all trails have level footing, and you may encounter exposed roots and rocks. Walks in the Andes are at altitudes of between 9,300 and 11,000 feet which may make the walks seem more difficult and require a slower pace.

Two days are spent on charter boats with motoring time of 2-4 hours in order to reach remote walks and beaches. We go ashore on small, 8-passenger panga-style boats via wet landings (meaning that you carry your boots and step into knee high water).

DAY 1

Join your Andes & Galápagos Islands tour. Northern Highlands

La Esperanza to Zuleta Hacienda; 3.5-5.5 miles, easy to moderate

Your guides will meet you at 9:00 a.m. in the lobby of the Wyndham Hotel at the Quito Airport. They will be wearing County Walkers shirts. After a brief introduction to the group, your adventure begins with a scenic drive from the dry landscapes of Quito to the lush, rural valleys of the Zuleta region. After a 2.5-hour drive, you arrive at San Pedro Lake, a tranquil little haven tucked in the foothills of the Northern Andes. Here, enjoy a light lunch and orientation meeting as you get to know your travel companions.

Once you lace up your walking shoes at the tiny village of Angla, you will follow quiet cobblestone roads through eucalyptus forests, past cattle farms, and charming rural communities. On a clear day, you take in the epic landscape surrounding you, dominated by the impressive Cayambe Volcano in the Cordillera Central Range. At 19,000 feet, it is Ecuador's third-highest peak and sports a white snow-cap all year long. It is also the world's highest point crossed by the Equator. As you absorb the breathtaking vistas, feel free to stop and chat with locals working in the quinoa fields or herding their cattle. Our route then descends into the Zuleta Valley, where every shade of green drapes the lush hillsides. Shuttle or walk the final few miles into the village of Zuleta, situated in a wide, fertile valley. In this quaint enclave, people are renowned for their hand embroidery, expertly stitching unique designs and colors to create lovely fabrics. Thanks to the revitalization efforts of local craftspeople here, Zuleta is a fantastic place to purchase hand-embroidered products.

Your home for the next three nights is the Hacienda Zuleta, a 4,000-acre diversified working farm with organic vegetable and grain cultivation, a dairy and cheese-making operation, horse stable, tree nursery, and trout hatchery. This 17th-century hacienda, steeped in history and furnished in Spanish colonial style, is owned and operated by the family of former Ecuadorian President Galo Plaza Lasso. The owners are committed to preserving the natural and human culture of this corner of Ecuador, operating an on-site condor rehabilitation project and embroidery workshop.

Here, you enjoy the hospitality of the highlands, delicious Andean food, and deluxe suites with wood-burning stoves to warm you at night. In the evening, you are invited to join your guides in one of the gracious living rooms to learn about and sample the farm's artisanal cheeses such as its renowned queso fresco, a flavorful soft cheese. Dinner will start with a hot soup, perhaps quinoa or avocado made with vegetables from the garden, followed by traditional dishes lovingly prepared by the staff.

Included Meals: Lunch, Dinner

DAY 2

Los Condores. Independent exploration of Zuleta

3.5 miles, easy. La Rinconada Kichwa Village; 2.5 miles; easy with moderate sections. Optional horseback riding.

Explore the lush and beautiful area surrounding the hacienda today. After a breakfast of local fruits, yogurt, breads, meats, and eggs from the farm, you begin with your choice of experiences, each sure to give you a glimpse of life in the Ecuadorian Highlands. You can saddle up for a short ride on a Zuleteño horse to a nearby waterfall, chaps and helmets provided; walk or shuttle into town to visit the weekend market and embroidery shops brimming with locally made goods; or take a walking tour of the hacienda grounds to visit the organic garden, cheese making factory, and historic buildings.

Late this morning, you leave on foot along a cobblestone trail that leads you into the surrounding hills and valleys towards the Condor Project. The Andean Condor is the largest flying land bird in the world and Hacienda Zuleta donates to a special project to conserve and breed these magnificent endangered birds. At the rehabilitation center, you learn about the efforts being made to protect and breed the condors and meet a few who are no longer able to survive in the wild. This area is also home to animals including the

elusive speckled bear. If you're lucky, you may even spot wild condors soaring overhead. After, continue on foot a short distance to a scenic spot for a picnic prepared especially for your group. During or after your delicious respite, learn about the pre-Inca *to/as* you have been dining beside. These grassy mounds are found throughout the property and have attracted many archaeological students intrigued by their mysterious history.

This afternoon provides more options for relaxation or exploration. Join a guide on foot to return to the hacienda for a restful afternoon, or perhaps a horseback ride if you didn't have time for one this morning. Or, continue discovering the hacienda's vast surroundings with a walk to La Rinconada, a local Kichwa community where embroidery, carving, and pottery have been practiced for ages. To get there, you follow cobblestone roads into a pasture, across a river, and up a slight incline to the village. If time permits, you may visit a small museum created by a local family to chronicle the life and traditions of their community. If you're ready for a break and some sustenance, sample a tortilla cooked over an open fire or a traditional beverage made from milk and coconut.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

DAY 3

Cotacachi Cayapas Reserve

Cuicocha Lagoon; 3 miles, easy to moderate, or 5 miles, moderate to challenging with 600-ft. ascent and 1,800-ft. descent. Otavalo Market. Community Project visit

This morning, you drive about 1.5 hours to the Cotacachi Cayapas Ecological Reserve in the Northern Highlands. This breathtakingly scenic spot comprises mostly Andean and subtropical biological zones and is home to some 500 bird species and 2,000 types of plants. You follow a trail through orchids and dense forest above the metallic-blue Cuicocha Lagoon, a stunning crater lake. As you trace the rim of the volcano's crater, take in splendid views of the blue water with its three volcanic domes protruding from below, and the endless vistas of surrounding mountains, volcanoes, and lush countryside. You pause during this magnificent trek to enjoy a packed lunch at one of the many scenic overviews. A shorter, easier option allows time to visit the crater lake's shore below and perhaps enjoy a short boat ride around its waters, but only if this is a day on which the local community is operating the small vessel.

Later, head to the town of Otavalo, home to the oldest, best-known, and most important indigenous market in South America. This is the economic and social heart of the Northern Highlands, where countless weavers from Otavalo and the surrounding areas bring their products to trade. Take your time roaming the market stalls browsing a huge range of items from textiles, scarves, sweaters, ponchos, and blankets to handcrafted jewelry, ceramics, and paintings. Even if you are not interested in shopping, it is a great opportunity to observe the traditional dress and local culture of the charming Otavaleños.

Time permitting, you will also visit one of several different projects dedicated to preserving the indigenous cultures and products of the region. Perhaps visit with a midwife who has delivered dozens of babies in her small house. You can join her on a walk through her gardens to learn how she uses its herbs, fruits, and flowers for traditional healing. Or visit with an elderly couple growing native fruits (such as uvilla and lupine seeds) that are an ingredient in some organic candies and dried fruits popular in Ecuador. Step into their home for a cup of tea and perhaps a sample of their produce.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

DAY 4

Fly to San Cristóbal Island, Galápagos

Cerro Tijeretas to Playa Punta Carola; 4 miles, easy to moderate

Travel early this morning to Quito for your flights to Guayaquil and the Galápagos Islands. Please note that flight schedules may not be determined until one month prior to your departure, be aware the tour departure from the hacienda could be as early as 5:00 a.m. All flights to the Galápagos Islands include a short layover in the city of Guayaquil. (A packed breakfast box will be provided.) The magnificent Galápagos archipelago consists of 13 major volcanic islands and dozens of small islets. It was here that naturalist Charles Darwin first formulated his theory of evolution in the 19th century, noticing that similar creatures developed varying characteristics to adapt to their environments—in this case, to different islands. Over the next several days, his ideas about natural selection and evolution will unfold before your very eyes.

Your destination is San Cristóbal Island, where Darwin first went ashore in 1835. Composed of several large extinct volcanoes, San Cristóbal is home to the oldest permanent settlement in the islands. An incredible diversity of geography unfolds here, playing host to a vast array of wildlife. With its variety of terrain, San Cristóbal provides an opportunity to fully experience the wonders of the Galápagos all in one place.

Upon arrival, you will shuttle just five minutes to the tiny port city of Puerto Baquerizo Moreno. At times the sea lions, who have taken over the beaches and jetty, outnumber the residents in this sleepy island town. They have even been known to lounge on public benches! Our hotel, The Golden Bay Resort, overlooks the Playa de Oro, or Golden Beach, and guests are often welcomed by a chorus of sea lions.

Enjoy some free time for lunch at one of the many seaside cafés before meeting your expert, naturalist Galápagos guide who will accompany you throughout the remainder of your journey.

Well fueled, you leave the hotel on foot for a short visit to the Interpretation Center, perusing a fascinating chronicle of Darwin's findings from his five-week expedition and a history of some of the first settlers. Your visit lays a solid and interesting foundation to complement your coming days of exploration. After, follow a paved trail through a dry forest of cacti and scrub brush to a series of stairs climbing to the top of *Cerro Tijeretas* (Frigate Bird Hill). You are rewarded with sweeping views over Shipwreck Bay to the south and the famous Kicker Rock—tomorrow's destination—to the west. Here you may spot your first frigate birds, also known as the "pirates of the sea" for their tendency to steal food and even nests from unassuming blue-footed, red-footed, and Nazca boobies. You might also see brown pelicans, gulls, herons, mockingbirds, and a variety of finches along this trail. Continue with a descent to Darwin Bay, where Darwin's HMS *Beagle* landed, and Playa Carola (Carola Beach), a favored spot for sea lions to soak in the sun's warmth. As you cross the Beach, be sure to give the sea lions a respectable berth—your guide can fill you in on "animal etiquette" with some tips that will help you throughout your coming explorations. Once off the beach, follow a quiet dirt road back to town.

This evening, enjoy a pre-dinner drink before dining at the hotel or a local restaurant.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Dinner

DAY 5

Boat excursion to Kicker Rock and Manglecito Beach

Optional snorkeling and swimming

This morning, embark a privately chartered boat to one of the best snorkeling and diving spots in the Galápagos Islands – Kicker Rock, also known as *León Dormido*, or Sleeping Lion. An approximately one-hour cruise delivers you to the base of this massive rock formation rising from the ocean. These two vertical monoliths soaring 500 feet above the water were formed as the seas eroded a lava cone after an eruption many millennia ago. Hundreds of seabirds nest along the rock's ledges as countless and colorful schools of fish swim below. If you choose to snorkel, you may spot sea turtles, white-tipped shark, and colorful parrotfish. (Snorkeling equipment and wet suits are provided.) Should you skip snorkeling, bring your binoculars for the endless entertainments and fascinations provided by the birds, including blue-footed boobies and frigate birds, nesting on the steep cliff faces.

After time to explore, you continue to a spectacular white-sand beach only accessible by boat. If we are lucky, we may have the place to ourselves. After a wet landing by zodiac (shoes in hand, you step into knee-high water), you wade to shore. Take time to stroll the beach, go for a dip, and look for the sea turtles that often swim just offshore. The primordial-looking marine iguana can be found here basking in the sun or feeding on algae. This is the only iguana to forage for food in the sea. You indulge in a special lunch while you're here, prepared just for us by Polito, a local fisherman, and his family.

Return to Puerto Baquerizo Moreno mid-to-late afternoon. There'll be time to stroll through town along the waterfront Malecón Charles Darwin or relax pool-side by the hotel. Enjoy dinner tonight at a favorite local restaurant known for its fresh seafood.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

DAY 6

El Junco Lake

1.5 miles, easy to moderate. Finca Walk; 3 miles, easy to moderate. La Galapaguera Tortoise Reserve; .5 miles, easy. Puerto Chino Beach; 1 mile, easy

Explore San Cristóbal today, experiencing the variety of biodiversity zones and witnessing the island's geologic volcanic history up close. As you ascend into the highlands, the landscape transforms from dry forest to lush hillside, thanks to the cooler temperatures. Enjoy sweeping views of the islands and the

Pacific through the trees, arriving at the picturesque El Junco, a crater lake, and the only freshwater lake on all the Galápagos Islands. El Junco's enormous crater was formed with the collapse of a volcano caldera, a seismic event that likely occurred at the end of the last ice age. The only source of freshwater on the island, El Junco supported San Cristóbal's earliest settlements. Walk briefly uphill among the low scrub and sedge to the rim of the crater for breathtaking 360-degree views of the island, including the 2,900-foot peak of Cerro San Joaquin and Punta Pitt, which you will visit tomorrow. Brilliant birdlife takes wing around you, including the frigate birds that come here to drink the freshwater and clean their feathers in the lake. A stroll around the rim affords more inspiring vistas of the lake, the ocean, and the long, gentle expanses of the rolling highlands.

Later, we have secured passage from a generous landowner to walk on his private land, navigating downhill along a farmer's track. You pass through local orchards and fields of papaya, banana, mango, avocado, fig, and orange, taking in splendid views of the Pacific Ocean along the way. This short trek is both a delight and an opportunity to witness up close some of the typical crops grown in the Galápagos.

After lunch, a short drive brings you to La Galapaguera de Cerro Colorado Tortoise Reserve, established to help preserve the population of the islands' famous Galápagos Giant Tortoise. Here, different species of tortoise roam in a semi-wild natural habitat where they can be studied and eventually released back into the wild. A favorite stop along the trail is the breeding center, where you can observe hatchlings and adolescent tortoises. These tiny tortoises, beginning their lives today, can live for up to 200 years.

Finish your day with a visit to Puerto Chino, a beautiful crescent white-sand beach. Take a dip in the turquoise waters, follow a short trail to a scenic overlook, or simply relax and observe the abundant sea lions who make this cove their home.

This evening, you are free to relax back at the hotel or walk to one of the many seaside cafés and restaurants.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch

DAY 7

Boat Excursion to Northern Coast

Galapaguera Natural Hike; 2-3 miles, easy. Punta Pitt; 2.5 miles, moderate

Embark a charter boat today for a full-day exploration to San Cristóbal's northern coast. Enjoy hot coffee and a light breakfast on board as you ply your way along the shore to Galapaguera Natural. This special site is the only place on the island where you can hope to spot San Cristóbal's endemic species of Galápagos tortoises in the wild. The population here is small, but these majestic creatures can sometimes be found near the coast.

A wet landing delivers you to yet another beautiful white-sand beach where you follow a flat trail with little tree coverage through native grasses, over some rocky terrain, and into dry forest—the realm of the tortoise. While the main goal is to spot tortoises, keep your eyes peeled for the tiny lava lizards who also make this dry area their home. As you walk, listen for the call of Galápagos mockingbirds in the bushes. The length of your walk is determined by when the tortoises make an appearance; it can range from two to three miles.

Later, continue by boat around the coastline to Punta Pitt, enjoying a delicious lunch—perhaps of homemade crab cakes or fish ceviche with fresh lime and cilantro. Said to be San Cristóbal's most beautiful cove, Punta Pitt is the easternmost point of the Galápagos. Upon arrival, you set out on a short but moderate hike from the beach to a hilltop lookout. This is the only place in the Galápagos where you can see all three species of boobies—blue-footed, red-footed, and Nazca—as well as two species of frigate birds, all nesting in the same area. A loop trail leads you to beautiful views and the opportunity to watch these playful birds courting, creating their nests, or feeding their young depending on the season. While the red-footed boobies tend to create their nests in the bushes, the blue-footed boobies often nest on the ground just a few feet from the trail. Tread carefully here as you make your way to cliffside overlooks where the Nazca boobies nest in the rocks.

After an invigorating walk, an approximate two-hour return trip allows time for a nap or for enjoying the sun and scenery from the deck. This evening, join your guides and fellow travel companions for a festive farewell dinner.

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

DAY 8

Playa Loberia and Acantilado Las Negritas

1 mile, easy, or 2 miles, moderate with challenging sections. Flight to Quito

Enjoy one last alfresco breakfast on the hotel's terrace before a short excursion to La Loberia Beach. Only minutes from the airport, yet boasting soft, white sand and abundant wildlife, this crescent-shaped beach is the domain of the famed Sally Lightfoot crab, lava iguana, and of course, the boisterous sea lion. Follow a sandy trail along the coastline to the beach, where you can explore tidal pools or walk farther on a rocky trail to Las Negritas cliffs. The path here can be challenging due to the sharp volcanic rock. From the cliffs, you're ideally perched to observe the many species of birds nesting in the nooks and crannies and the incredibly adept pelicans diving for food.

Later, say farewell to your guides and board your late morning or early afternoon flight to the Quito Airport. Your *Ecuador: Andes & Galápagos Islands* tour concludes here.

Included Meals: Breakfast

What's Included

Tour Only

Roundtrip airfare	✓
One extra night in Quito and one day room in Quito	✓
Airport car service for arrival & departure	✓
Pre- and post-tour breakfasts	✓
Business-class upgrades available	✓