

THE BLOG

Ecuador Travel Tips

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I am an Africa specialist but even a committed Africa-phile needs a change of pace once in a while! In the spirit of exploration I spent two weeks visiting the Galapagos and mainland Ecuador, from Quito to the Amazon and had a great time. I came away loving the diversity of the country and with some great travel tips; for anyone interested in traveling to Ecuador and the Galapagos, here are just a few:

If you are flying in Quito spend more than one night on arrival. I would advocate planning at least two nights in Quito as flights are often delayed. The city sits at high elevation (9400 feet above sea level) and rain, fog and low cloud cover are possible year round. All of these can contribute to airport landing issues so with 2 nights if you experience a flight delay it is less likely to disrupt the rest of your trip. And if you land on time it is a great place to be for 2 days!



Explore Quito on your own first and then get a specialty tour that lets you go deeper. If you were last in Quito 10 years ago, you might think I am crazy to suggest that you explore Quito on your own. But I promise you, exploring on your own, on foot, is totally realistic. It is safe, and beautiful, and full of history. I say this to encourage you to do a half day of exploring the standard sites and highlights and then get a specialty tour that can give you a unique, behind the scenes tour. I took a tour with Patricia Rivas Garcia of Quito City Tour and Travel and it was great. It was educational and informative but also aims to show you the city from a new perspective.

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Where to Stay: I stayed at Casa Gangotena which is a beautiful hotel right on San Francisco Plaza. It is definitely one of the top hotels in Quito. My room was spectacular with views of the plaza.

If you are doing a land-based Galapagos experience stay on two islands. If you do a land Galapagos experience (instead of a cruise) I would combine 3 nights on the main island of Santa Cruz with 2 nights on the smaller island of Isabela. That way you will see an "old" and a "new" island and be able to combine all the activities available from Santa Cruz with a more remote experience on the less populated Isabela. On Santa Cruz I stayed at Galapagos Safari Camp and loved it.



Photo from

Galapagos Safari Camp

For a Galapagos boat cruise - How to pick your boat and cabin. If you want to do a cruise of the Galapagos keep the following in mind when choosing your boat: The larger boats are less intimate but more stable and the smaller boats have more personal touches and a convivial environment but rock more. For the cabins, the lower ones are more stable but louder, while those higher up are quieter but move more. You have to pick which is more important, stability or views and light. Remember that the rougher months at sea are usually September and October. The Athala II was one of my favorite boats of those I visited.

Make sure your Galapagos itinerary aligns with your interests. I know that sounds painfully obvious but specific islands are known for certain species and there are different things happening with different animals year round. For example the red-footed booby is found on Genovesa Island. Penguins are mostly on Fernandina and Isabela islands. If you have your heart set on seeing something specific, double check when and where it happens before you book!



If you like diving you should do a specialized diving cruise. The standard Galapagos cruises are not the right choice for travelers looking to do serious diving. If you want a Galapagos experience that emphasizes diving you have to go on a diving cruise. They are 2 weeks long (versus 4-7 days) and explore the areas around Darwin and Wolf Islands. The other option is to stay at a land-based camp and dive from the main island of Santa Cruz.



Make sure you are at the right airport! There are two airports that service the Galapagos, Baltra Airport on Santa Cruz and San Cristóbal Airport on San Cristóbal. Your cruise may arrive at one and depart from the other or your hotel

may be on a totally different island from the one you fly into so double check!

Back on the mainland...

If you don't have time to visit the Ecuadorian Amazon, the Cloud Forest is a good alternative. The Cloud Forest is only an hour and a half from Quito and is a good way to get a taste of one of Ecuador's rainforest ecosystems in just 2-3 nights.



Where to Stay: I stayed at Mashpi Lodge and really enjoyed myself. I had great guides and love all the activities. If you want more detail on what I thought of Mashpi and some recommendations of places to stay if you DO want to visit the Amazon, you can find them [here](#).



Photo from

Mashpi Lodge

On your way out consider staying somewhere outside Quito near Otavalo.

Otavalo is a famous outdoor market north of Quito that many people visit as a day trip. If you stay near or just north of Otavalo it is the same distance from the new Quito airport as downtown Quito. By staying in north of Quito you can avoid traffic, spend night or two in the Andean highlands and see another beautiful corner of the country. If this interests you at all I cannot recommend Hacienda Zuleta highly enough. It is a working farm, with an absolutely stunning setting that is run by an Ecuadorian family steeped in the country's history.



Photo from

Hacienda Zuleta

I loved Ecuador and the Galapagos and felt that it really captured so much of what I love about African safaris, being outside and active, seeing animals in their natural environment and staying at unique properties that help you take full advantage of the destination.

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