

Highlands

The Andean region (also known as the Sierra and the Highlands) is the most visited region in the country. Its cultural and natural diversity spans grassy highlands (páramo), cloudforests, mountain lakes, active volcanoes, thermal baths, Indian markets, colonial towns and haciendas. Running the length of Ecuador and splitting the country into two from north to south the mountains and valleys of the high Andes form the heart of Ecuador. Quito, the capital of the country, is located at 2,900 meters in a valley on the western slopes of Pichincha volcano where you can find countless cities and towns to visit and stay at, as one travels north to south in the highlands.

Not surprisingly, this region possesses Ecuador's most developed tourist industry, providing a wide range of accommodations, culinary options, shopping opportunities and cultural festivals, all easily accessible from the capital of Quito. In addition to Quito, Otavalo and Baños are considered travelers' meccas, boasting an extensive infrastructure supporting tourism. In these towns you can expect a wide selection of restaurants, hotels and activities. Choose a luxurious suite in a 400-year old hacienda, or nestle down in a backpacker's \$3 per night hostel. Dine on veggie pizza one day and barbecued guinea pig the next!

The peaks of the Andes are as distinct as the people. Cotopaxi (5,987 meters) the highest active volcano in the world has an almost perfect cone shape, as does Sangay (5,500 meters), with major volcanic events taking place as frequently as every 15 minutes! In both "cordilleras" you will find remote areas, with excellent opportunities for adventure. Earthquakes are common throughout Ecuador as the land is being formed. The lahars around Cotopaxi look like frozen rivers when seen from the refuge. There are lava flows that flowed out of Antisana that blocked the rivers above Papallacta and caused a large lake to form. Volcanic layers laid down eons ago have been folded back on themselves exactly on the equator visible in cuttings on the road from Guallabamba to Tabacundo. The volcanic landscape has been modified by the action of glaciers. Forming the basins in the inter-Andean valley that are now separate provinces of modern Ecuador. A glacial moraine, where the continental divide crosses from one cordillera to the other, separates each province.