

ECD

Highlands & Darwin's Islands

13 days

Created on: 1 Jul 2025

Day 1 *Arrive in Quito*

Upon your arrival in Quito, you will be met and transferred to our hotel. Quito (2788 m / 9,200 feet) is Ecuador's lovely capital city, nestled against Pichincha Volcano high in the Andes.

Overnight in Quito.

Day 2 *Quito: City Tour*

Today we tour old Spanish Colonial Quito, preserved by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. As we enter the streets of Old Quito we step into the past, surrounded by centuries-old architecture. We stop at the commanding Legislative Palace, whose murals record Ecuador's history. We will see Quito's most beautiful religious buildings, including the cathedral, the Independence Plaza, San Francisco Church, and visit one of Quito's most impressive religious buildings, La Compania church, whose ornate facade and solid gold altars make it one of the most famous of South American churches. We visit the famous Panecillo Hill with its towering winged statue of the Virgin of the Apocalypse with views of north and south of Quito and the surrounding mountains.

This afternoon we travel 22 km (14 miles) north of Quito to the Equator line monument, known as the "middle of the world," where you can stand with one foot in the Northern and the other in the Southern Hemisphere. We also visit the excellent on-site ethnographic museum with exhibits pertaining to the many indigenous peoples of Ecuador. Not far from here are the Rumicucho Pucara ruins built by the Inca in the 15th century. Rumicucho mostly served as a military offensive and defensive guard post for the Inca in their struggle to subjugate the northern tribes of the Cayambe, Cochasqui and Caranquis Indians, who offered them bitter resistance.

Overnight in Quito.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

Day 3 *Quito - Otavalo Valley*

Today we will journey north to the Otavalo Valley region. During our time in the valley we will have a chance to visit with the local Otavalenos and see them working their local crafts. We will visit a traditional home with adobe walls and meet with the owners who raise guinea pigs (a local delicacy).

In early years the Otavalo Valley was filled with farmers who raised crops in fertile lands where they lived. In the 14th century the Inca expansion reached north into the Otavalo area. The Caraquis who inhabited the area resisted the invaders. For 17 long years fierce fighting continued as the defiant Caraquis refused to be subjugated by the Incas. The Spanish arrived a few years after the Incas. They established a Hacienda system of workshops where Otavalenos were forced to work 15-hour days weaving fabrics. Today this weaving tradition forms the basis of a lucrative industry that has allowed the Otavaleno indigenous peoples to join the world economy while retaining their traditional values and skills.

Our simple and clean hotel is located in Otavalo town.

Overnight in Otavalo.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

Day 4 *Otavallo - Papallacta*

This morning we will visit the famous traditional market of Otavallo, centered around 'Poncho Plaza'. All day the tunes of Andean pipe music, and Quechua, the native tongue derived from the Incan language drift across the square. A blinding maze of colored textiles spills from the square across the town.

Later we will visit the town of Cotacachi, famous for its leather craft and the nearby volcanic crater and water filled caldera lake with the same name. We will take a short hike in the area. We then drive for approximately 3 hours to the famous Papallacta hot springs en route to the Amazon rainforest.

We will spend a night here to relax and enjoy the wonders of this natural paradise.

Overnight in Papallacta.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

Day 5 *Papallacta - Cotopaxi Volcano - Lasso*

We depart the Otavallo region to follow in the footsteps of the German scientist, Alexander von Humboldt, and rediscover what in 1802 he called the "Avenue of Volcanoes," a 325 km (202 mi) long valley between the major cordillera ranges. Massive and standing alone, the volcanoes provide brooding, snow-covered contrast to the green equatorial lushness. We see snow-capped summits, mystical brooks and rivers, terraced farmlands, small villages and fascinating cultures.

We first travel to the magnificent viewpoint for a view of the world's highest volcano, Cotopaxi, surrounded by a lunar landscape full of lakes, Inca ruins, and giant boulders spewed from the volcano long ago.

The area is also home to a number of exceptional haciendas, some of which date back to the 16th century. We may stay in a hacienda located near the village of Lasso near the foot of Cotopaxi in an area that has been witness to centuries of important events in the history of Ecuador.

Overnight near Lasso.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

Day 6 *Lasso - Quilotoa Crater Lake - Banos*

The Quilotoa Lake located inside the fallen crater of the volcano has an interesting geological history. Ten thousand years ago the volcano violently erupted, sending an enormous pyroclastic flow down the volcano slopes. The effects of water and wind on the eruption debris created the white walls you can see in the nearby river canyons and mountains.

We will continue our journey to Banos. This small town's moderate elevation gives it an extremely agreeable climate, and the surrounding mountainsides are brilliant green against the white snow clad summit of the Volcano Tungurahua. En route we will take a short walk to view one of the most impressive waterfalls in South America, the Devil's Bowl.

The word Banos means "baths" and, as the name indicates, the highlight here is the numerous hot spring baths in the area. Today we have opportunity to explore this picturesque town. A must-see here is the Basilica dedicated to the Virgin of the Holy Water, credited with performing many miracles in the Banos area.

Overnight in Banos.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

Day 7 Banos - Riobamba - Cuenca

Afterbreakfast in Banos we travel through open farmland flowing over the high ridges of the Western Andes. On arrival in Riobamba we will have a quick walking tour including the cathedral and the restored 1920's era Post Office.

We continue southwards to Cuenca. Once the site of an Inca settlement, Cuenca (2648 m / 8,738 feet) today is considered Ecuador's most beautiful city. Its historical connection with Spain is marked by narrow cobblestone streets, quaint parks and romantic plazas. Charming adobe houses, wrought iron balconies, and religious art treasures capture the spirit of centuries long past. Cuenca, almost hidden away in a southern valley, was isolated until recent times; it wasn't until 1960 that paved roads were built to Quito and Guayaquil. Today Cuenca, Ecuador's third largest city, is surrounded by small villages whose citizens create intricately detailed jewelry, beautiful ceramics, and masterfully designed hand-woven shawls.

We have a leisurely walking tour along the main plaza, Parque Calderon, and enter the old Cathedral, renovated for the visit of Pope John Paul in 1985. We also see the Monastery of El Carmen and visit La Inmaculada Concepcion while strolling the cobbled streets.

Time permitting, either this day or the following morning, we visit the Museo del Banco Central, which contains a permanent collection of black and white photos of 19th and early 20th century Cuenca, as well as displays of art and archaeological pieces, and ethnographic dioramas.

Overnight in Cuenca.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

Day 8 Cuenca - Guayaquil

This morning we travel from Cuenca to Guayaquil over the continental divide and via Cajas National Park. En route we stop at a cocoa plantation and learn about its cultivation and the production of Ecuadorian chocolate. The park contains hundreds of clear, cold lakes, streams and rivers. Weather permitting (which can be highly changeable at this altitude), the park can provide an excellent opportunity for us to hike the grassland of Paramo Region or visit a forest of poleypsis trees, the highest altitude tree in the world. Recently the park's management have brought in llamas and alpacas as part of a breeding program to re-introduce these animals to the southern highlands. Keep your eyes peeled for the many bird species that make the park their home, especially for the silhouette of a soaring (and extremely rare) Andean Condor which can sometimes be spotted here riding the thermal updrafts. Continue to Guayaquil.

Upon arrival at Guayaquil, we have a sightseeing tour of this busy, vibrant port city. Guayaquil is Ecuador's largest city and is the focus of the nation's economy. Its economic power is due in large part to its location at the convergence of the Daule and Babahoyo rivers, just 70 kilometers from the Pacific Ocean. After suffering years of neglect from bureaucrats and corrupt officials, Guayaquil has taken its future into its own hands. Fueled by a newly discovered interest in attracting tourists and a greater commitment to small enterprise and entrepreneurs, Guayaquil is realizing its historically proven potential. Guayaquil renaissance isn't complete but signs of improvement are everywhere.

We visit the downtown of Guayaquil where we will see the Hemiciclo de la Rotonda where a great marble and bronze statue is erected, commemorating the meeting between two great liberators in America: Simon Boliivar and Jose de San Martin. A walk through the historic district of Las Penas gives one a glimpse into Guayaquil's past. We also visit El Malecon, one of the most important civic-touristic-commercial center of South America. We finish with a view of the Guayas River.

Overnight in Guayaquil.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

Day 9 Guayaquil - Galapagos Islands

This morning we will fly from Guayaquil to Baltra Island and board our cruise vessel for our exploration of the unique and beautiful Galapagos Islands. We will be navigating the Galapagos on board a 12-passenger Tourist class vessel. An archipelago of 12 large and several hundred smaller volcanic islands occupying a 4800 sq kms (3,000 sq mile) area about 1000 km (620 miles) west of Ecuador, the Galapagos Islands have become one of the world's premier adventure travel destinations. Over the course of our visit, we will enjoy up-close views of unusual, specially adapted animals, plants and terrains including sea lions, tortoises, iguanas, land and sea birds, volcanic landscapes, unusual cacti and vegetation.

Upon arrival on Baltra Island we will transfer to the boat, have lunch, and then depart immediately for Bartolome Island and a dry landing (passengers step directly from a zodiac onto dry land or a dock). While crossing the Highlands of Santa Cruz we will visit Cerro Chato and also see the famous giant tortoises that gave the name to these islands. Additionally, we can walk in dormant lava tubes. There will be free time on this island.

After landing on a beach next to a sea lion colony on Santa Fe Island, a short walk will bring us to one of the widest Opuntia cactus forest in the Islands. Here we will find cactus plants close to 10 meters in height, and we will also see a different land Iguana species endemic to Santa Fe. We will later return to ship where there will be some free time onboard.

The naturalist guide will provide a briefing on the following day's activities on the boat.

Note: The Galapagos yacht is equipped with a salon that also serves as a dining area. There is also a well-stocked bar on board, ideal to hang out and chat with fellow travellers about the interesting day you had on one of the islands. There is also a covered after-deck where you can sit down, relax, and breathe in the fresh sea breeze. The cook will spoil us with a variety of tasty meals. Food includes local dishes and fresh seafood. Meals are served either in the salon or on the after deck. Amenities on board include hot water and air conditioning.

Note: Galapagos National Park regulations have now put restrictions on the itineraries, times and length of visit to each island. The exact Galapagos Islands part of the itinerary will be given to you at the time of actual booking.

Overnight on board the Yacht Golondrina.

Meal Plan: Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 10 *Galapagos Cruise*

The Galapagos (Espanola) one of the most interesting places, and one of the best in the whole archipelago, is Punta Suarez, where we will be able to see a subspecies of marine iguanas with red and green spots, endemic to Espanola Island. We will also see the bluefooted boobies and the masked boobies, Hood Mockingbirds also endemic to Espanola; swallow tailed gulls, oystercatchers and red-billed tropicbirds. For many the most important attraction is doubtlessly the Waved Albatross Colony, a species also endemic to Espanola. Gardner Bay is one of the most beautiful white sand beaches in the Islands with excellent opportunities of swimming and snorkeling around the nearby small, rocky islands.

Overnight Galapagos Cruise.

Meal Plan: Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 11 *Galapagos Cruise*

The Galapagos (Floreana) - is the smallest island inhabited by humans in the archipelago. A visit to Post Office Bay can be interesting for those who are interested in the human history of the Islands. One of the most interesting places of the island is Punta Cormorant, with its green beach due to olivine crystals. A short walk takes us to a lagoon where we can see flamingos next to a few other wading birds. A spectacular place to snorkel and dive is the Devil's Crown, the top of a partially submerged volcano that resembles a black crown. Over the tops of the rocks that emerge from the sea, red-billed tropicbirds and Audubon Shearwaters are nesting. Under the water we will find thousands of colorful fish, rays and coral formations.

Overnight Galapagos Cruise

Meal Plan: Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 12 ***Galapagos - Quito***

Today we will discover that North Seymour is the perfect place for marine bird watching and seeing species like the blue footed boobies, frigate birds, swallow tailed gulls, all of these nesting in season. The sound, the variety of their activities, the colony sizes are all part of the fascinating experiences in the Galapagos. In the other side of the island we will be able to see sea lions playing in the waves, which crash against the rocks on which marine Iguanas in plenty sun themselves. Immediately after this visit the vessel will navigate to Baltra Island and then we will drive to the airport for our flight back to mainland Ecuador.

We will arrive in Quito early in the afternoon.

Overnight in Quito.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

Day 13 ***departure***

Departure from Quito

Meal Plan: Breakfast