

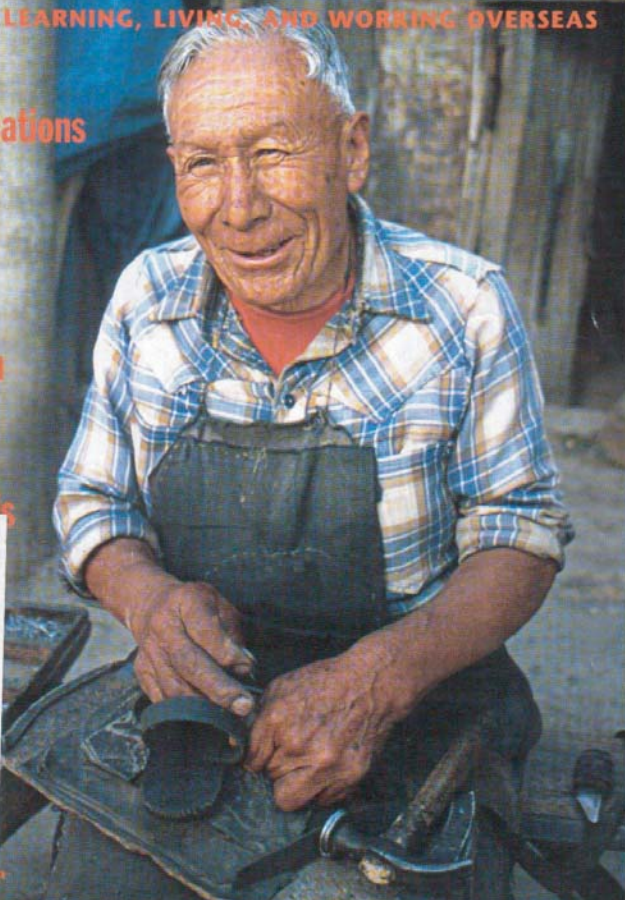
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Volunteering in South America

Top Ecuadorian Eco-Lodges Seek Talented Help

By Nathan Ward

If you want to travel, live out adventures, and work to make a difference in someone's life as well as your own, volunteering in Ecuador is the ticket.

Several excellent eco-lodges recently joined forces to create a group called Ecuador Verde to promote responsible tourism and community development in Ecuador. They are looking for volunteers to work on a number of innovative projects throughout the country—the jungle, the cloud forest, the Andes, and the Pacific Coast.

Ecuador is a great place to learn about South America while gaining valuable international work experience in one of the planet's most biologically diverse countries, polishing Spanish language skills, and gaining academic credit. Ecuador is historically a safe country and there are few countries in the world that offer such diverse opportunities in a small geographical area. Ecuador Verde members represent the best eco-lodges in the country, so they have the resources and infrastructure in place to help you make a real difference.

In addition, Ecuador Verde promotes responsible tourism and works hard to involve and develop the communities where it operates. It is looking for self-motivated professional volunteers who are willing to commit to projects that better the community and make a difference in the daily lives of the Ecuadorian people.

If you are self-motivated and willing to work for what you believe, the opportunities below may lead to the experience of a lifetime. Contact Ecuador Verde directly (see sidebar) for specific volunteer opportunities.

Santa Lucia Cloud Forest Lodge

Perched on a hilltop deep in old-growth cloud forest, the Santa Lucia Lodge in the indigenous-owned protected forest, includes an extensive trail system, organic gardens, a tree nursery, and a few thousand species of plant and animals. The Santa Lucia Cloud Forest is one of the last places you can still see the Andean spectacled bear, if you're lucky.

Santa Lucia caters primarily to volunteers with scientific interests, although they will consider anyone with a skill, including cartographers, artists, birders,

biologists, or manual laborers. They are building an ecological institute by utilizing the abilities and special interests of experts. Volunteers help fund the Santa Lucia project by paying for room and board. The money goes directly to the project. The day rate varies according to one's skills and time commitment. Santa Lucia prefers long-term volunteers who design a project and see it through to completion.

Casa Mojanda Mountainside Inn and Farm

Cascading down the green hillsides outside the artisan village of Otavalo, Casa Mojanda is a beautiful inn that works with local communities under the auspices of the nonprofit Mojanda Foundation. The area around Casa Mojanda in northern Ecuador includes mammoth volcanoes, rolling hills, and high lakes.

The volunteer opportunities involve working in the surrounding communities, not at Casa Mojanda itself. Past volunteers have taught English, supervised construction projects, led environmental education seminars, and worked in the village health clinic. Casa Mojanda can help facilitate almost any type of project in the community.

Sani Lodge

The Quechua-owned Sani Lodge lies in the heart of the Oriente jungle on the western edge of the Amazon basin. The stunning area contains nearly 600 bird species, sloth, caiman, and manatee.

The opportunities for the most dedicated and capable volunteers are long-term and include working directly with the indigenous community. Potential projects include managing the lodge, teaching English in the Sani Isla community, and conducting scientific species counts.

Tierra Volcán

This tour operator runs adventure programs from three haciendas high in the Andes below the Cotopaxi Volcano. Tierra Volcán is at the forefront of the effort to protect the traditional Andean cowboy culture.

The specific volunteer opportunities available depend on the individual's experience and availability. Preference is given to long-term volunteers. Short-term volunteers may work with ongoing community projects or teach English



NATHAN WARD
An Andean cowboy rounds up fighting bulls at the foot of the Cotopaxi Volcano, Ecuador.

and ecology classes. Volunteers pay \$5 a day for materials and food.

Alandaluz

Situated on the beaches of the Pacific Ocean, the award-winning Alandaluz was the first lodge in Ecuador to pursue responsible tourism that incorporated community work. Its extensive list of projects includes bamboo farming and construction, organic gardening, and guide training. After sustaining serious damage from the El Niño several years ago and subsequent drought, there is a lot of work to do and a variety of projects available.

Alandaluz requires volunteers to speak Spanish and have a written plan agreed upon before starting work. Volunteers work with a local mentor and undertake long-term projects. Most volunteers pay \$15 a day for room and board, but this is negotiable depending on skill level.

NATHAN WARD, from Salida, CO, is a photographer and writer specializing in adventure travel. He is a member of the Explorers Club. His latest projects include an attempt to mount a bike down the highest volcano in the world. Visit his web site at www.nathanward.com. Contact him at nathanward@amigo.net.

Contact Information

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Santa Lucia Cloud Forest Lodge. Contact Mary Finn: 011-593-2-290-6021; www.santalucia.org, administrator@santa-lucia.org.

Casa Mojanda. Contact Betti Sachs: 011-593-9-972-0890 (cell) or 011-593-2-246-5745; www.casamojanda.com, mojanda@uiu.tel.com.ec.

Sani Lodge. Contact Tom Quesenberry: 011-593-2-255-8881; www.sanilodge.com, info@sanilodge.com.

Tierra Volcán. Contact Jorge Pérez: www.volcanoland.com, info@volcano.land.com.

Alandaluz. Contact Marcelo Vinuesa: 011-593-2-2440-790; www.alandaluz.com, info@alandaluzhosteria.com.

N.W.