

Most visitors to Ecuador head straight for the Galapagos, but in doing this, they are missing out on some of South America's best-kept secrets

Ecuador on the boil

Marvel at the Avenue of Volcanoes from the air or as part of a tour

REPORT BY TERESA MACHAN

In hazy cloud forest and glacial moraine. Talking of flora and fauna, few people will know of Ecuador's bears. Or its tarantula wasps that lay eggs in giant spiders, its candlelike cacti, toads that grow on



Teresa prepares to ride into the rolling South American landscape

WEARING a poncho and three Afghan hounds' worth of fur strapped to my thighs (known locally as chaps), I was riding a horse called Milky Bar through Ecuador's Cotacapi National Park.

This was no place for prissy English horsemanship nonsense. I sat cowgirl-style, as far back in the saddle as I could, feeling the rhythm through my hips as instructed, and holding the reins loosely in one hand; látigo and cámara in the other.

The scene was classic South America, a chequered green llanuco dotted with wind horses, fighting bulls (in the unlikely event they charge, throw your poncho to distract them) and suspended puddles of cloud clamped in the folds of the Andean slopes.

In the distance, the Cotacapi volcano hovered tantalisingly into and out of view. Its colossal snow-covered cone looked uncannily like one of those squeeze bottles of ice Magic.

My companions had mounts called Mango and Barolo, and completing the party were our local guides: the Amazon Basin's long stretches of virgin coast; 33 natural preserved areas and even a 36-million-year-old island, Isla de la Plata, that shelters nesting blue and red-footed boobies and is dubbed

beans and more than 1,600 species of bird including, bizarrely, one that fishes underwater with its eyes open, open island and comets suicide.

Where else can you balance an egg on a nail on the equator line, book trips with the locals at a top salteaque, cook aguzza from scratch on the side of a volcano, hook a huge trout in a national park, drive agog down the Avenue of Volcanoes and drink popcorn in your soup at a top restaurant without causing offence?

Visitors can stay in luxury jungle lodges, restored Spanish colonial mansions and age-old haciendas, perhaps dining in a former Inca palace or getting married in an Inca chapel.

In the rush to get to the Galapagos, Ecuador's most famous attraction, much of the mainland's beauty is overlooked. The UK is Ecuador's largest European market, with 18,000 people visiting in 2001, but a lack of

identity has seen it lose out to high-profile neighbours Brazil and Peru.

The Ministry of Tourism now hopes to double international arrivals over the next five years.

A much-needed \$10 million injection into tourism coffers has put a number of projects on the drawing board, including a new airport by 2007, and upgrades to the Devil's Nose train ride. From next year, a \$5-million arrivals tax will contribute to infrastructure

sample product

Steppes Latin America features the Avenue of Volcanoes and Cotacapi National Park as part of a six-day trip from Quito, from £775 per person.

"It's going to be a big challenge to turn Ecuador into a major destination"

development.

Tourism minister Doris Carrion said: "It's going to be a big challenge to turn the country into a major destination, but if we want to increase our business, we need to feed the mainland and sell our other product, such as the coast and jungle."

Nine tour operators have visited Ecuador this year, Carrion said. "Am trips have deliberately overlooked the Galapagos so that operators can see for themselves some of Ecuador's less-obvious attractions, including El Cajas National Park, Machallilla National Park and the Volcanso Land Hacienda in Cotacapi



National Park." (See box). Steppes Latin America general manager James Armitage said: "It's a good move by the ministry, and people combine Peru with Ecuador and by the time they've done the Galapagos, there's no time for the mainland. Showing us new attractions such as El Cajas National Park means we can extend length of stay by selling more add-ons."

Back at the Volcanso Land Hacienda after an exhilarating day's riding, we sat around an open fire and dined on the local

concha, an excellent cold dish of prawns in tomato soup served with the obligatory popcorn, and organic veg and chicken - you don't buy organic, it comes organic - followed by an early night under the hacienda's stoping

"By the time they've done the Galapagos, there's no time for the mainland"

straw leaves. We never did get to see the elusive Cotacapi horseback, but caught a glimpse a few days later as we flew over the Avenue of Volcanoes, a trail of volcanic peaks stretching from Quito, south to Rimbura.

Catching sight of their lullu cows poking through the clouds, glistening in the morning sun, is alone worth the internal air fare between Quito and Cuenca and must rank as one of the world's least-known cheap thrills.

Apart from riding out in two kilos of rug, of course.

did you know?

Snapshot Latin America Ecuador contains some of South America's most outstanding attractions: the Andes, the Amazon Basin, the Galapagos Islands, Spanish colonial cities, and centuries-old Indian markets.

Culture cultures Quito, the capital of Ecuador, is a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site and at 9,350 feet is the second highest capital in the world, next to Bolivia's La Paz. Quito was the northern capital of the Inca Empire before the Spanish conquest in 1533. Other UNESCO World Heritage Sites include the Galapagos, Sangay National Park and the city of Cuenca.

Animal magic With only 0.1% of the planet's surface, Ecuador possesses 10% of the world's species of terrestrial vertebrates.

Yankee dollar The Ecuadorian currency, as of September 2000, is the US dollar. It was formerly the sucre.

Head for heights Ecuador's snow-capped Cayambe volcano, 18,997 feet high, is located on the equator. At 15,347 feet, Cotacapi is the highest active volcano in the world, while Chimborazo, at 20,702 feet, is the world's highest volcano.

To market Ecuador has an Indian market for every day of the week. Most are along the Avenue of Volcanoes. The largest Indian market in South America is at Ambato (Mondays). The best-known market for handicrafts is at Otavalo (Saturdays).

5 reasons not to leave the mainland

El Cajas National Park accessed from Cuenca, El Cajas is not unlike the Scottish Highlands. Its 270 interconnected lakes offer excellent trout fishing and it's a great place for walking. Fresh trout can be sampled in one of the local restaurants. Dale's car tailor-make a visit to El Cajas using Quito as a base.

Haciendas many of the former colonial estates still function as working farms but with their main living quarters transformed into intimate hotels. The Volcanso Land Hacienda sits on 10,000 acres of Cotacapi National Park. Machallilla National Park, Machallilla San Augustin de Cullio, 90 minutes from Quito, was built on the site of a former Inca palace. Two of the Inca rooms now serve as chapel and dining room. Steppes Latin America features San Augustin on its Avenue of Volcanoes tour, costing from £375 per person.

Machallilla National Park part of the Pacific coastal lowlands and characterised by empty, white, fisherman's beaches, Machallilla is packed with ecological reserves and a jump-off for Isla de la Plata, dubbed the "poor man's Galapagos," and home to colonies of seabirds including blue- and red-footed boobies, frigatebirds, albatrosses and nesting frigate birds. Sunvil Latin America features the Machallilla Lodge located within the park as part of a 14-day itinerary leading in at £3995 per person.

Andes the mountain range encompasses lakes, volcanoes, indigenous villages and Spanish colonial cities, including the World Heritage city of Quito, and historical Cuenca with its cathedrals, churches and flower-filled squares. Nearby Sillip, Chordies and Gualecay offer visitors a snapshot of village life.

Travel 2 features the Andean villages in its Avenue of Volcanoes tour for £436 per person, 10 days only.

Jungle the hot and humid rainforest of the Amazon is traversed by enormous rivers and is part of the largest rainforest on earth. River rafting, kayaking and canoeing are popular, along with guided walks through primary rainforest. Trips Weridive offers two-week holidays to Ecuador from £2,000 per person including various tours in the Amazonian rainforest.