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Life / Travel

Quito, Ecuador: Of volcanoes, vegetables and haciendas

Local produce especially delicious when combined in simple dishes sold on the streets



STEVE HAGGERTY / MCT

Cevichocho, popular street-food item, evolved when the government banned restaurants from serving raw meat and fish, including ceviche in Ecuador.

By: Anne Cooke McClatchy-Tribune News Service, Published on Fri Apr 25 2014

OTAVALO, ECUADOR—A pint-sized dish of cevichocho, served on the street in Otavalo, sparked one of those ah-hah moments so unexpected it caught me unawares.

There were three of us. By the time we parked near the town's famous craft market, lunch time had come and gone. Heading down the block, we passed a group of teenagers in school uniforms crowded around a food stall, gulping down what looked like fast-food. And whatever it was in those bowls — unidentified juicy bits — it made my mouth water.

"What is this stuff," I asked Paul Aguilar, our guide, who after four days touring us around Ecuador was now more friend than hired help. Peering over the counter, I looked at the seller in the wrinkled apron and at the bowls of chopped ingredients, and, for a second, wondered if street food was a good idea. Still, I was curious. And hungry.

"Do you really want to try it?" said Aguilar, raising his eyebrows. A veteran guide, he knew tourists were about street food. And in Ecuador, cevichocho was the street version of a Big Mac. "If you're sure," he said doubtfully.

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Deftly piling ingredients in the bowl, he filled it full. Then he sprinkled lime over the mix, doused it with extra juice from tomatoes and topped it with bits of sliced chicken. And handed it over.

I hesitated, took a bite, and it was . . . heavenly!

The mix turned out to be chopped red and yellow tomatoes, toasted popcorn, red onions, white lupine beans and cilantro.

“What did I tell you,” said Steve, my husband, grabbing a photo. “Ecuador isn’t anything like Kansas.”

Ask me about the European “discovery” and settlement of North America and I can quote chapter and verse. But ask about Ecuador’s cultural heritage or colonial history and I’m lost. To my shame, I know more about Turkey than Ecuador.

Where then, in this country on the Equator, would a traveller find links to the past? Living links, too, not museum exhibits. We started in Quito, the capital, because this is where most flights arrive.

And Quito is old; it was founded in 1534, just 42 years after Columbus “discovered” America. Perched at 9,000 feet elevation on a hill between the east and west ranges of the Andes Mountains, it lies at the foot of Guagua Pichincha, 15,820-foot high and one of Ecuador’s 30 active volcanoes.

Twenty years ago, when I was here before, blowing through town on a two-day stopover, the city, tired and dirty, was lingering on life support. Ecuador’s currency, the sucre, was nearly worthless. Since then the patient has recovered. On Mar. 13, 2002, Ecuador adopted the U.S. dollar, which stabilized the economy. Today, the heart of the old city has been scrubbed and painted, its buildings restored or, comically, hidden behind convincing facades.

Abundant lighting shines down on the cobblestone streets at night. Trash vanishes in a twinkling. And public squares sport benches, grass and flowers. Purse-snatching in the old quarter disappeared overnight when the streets were converted to pedestrian traffic only, from dusk to dawn. Looking down out of my hotel room after dinner, I could see and hear couples and families walking past.

As for history, we found it in Independence Square, where old men and visitors sit in the sun at the foot of Liberty besting the snarling Spanish lion. It lives in Quito’s monumental, painted, gold-swathed churches and monasteries, where, on the Sunday I was there, the pews were packed and late-comers stood in the side aisles under dark paintings of tortured saints.

Quito was only the beginning. When I first put Ecuador on my wish-list, it was the historic haciendas I wanted to visit. Originally land grants, these vast ranches boast illustrious family pedigrees and long traditions. Surely, I thought, the pioneers who tamed Ecuador’s frontiers faced the same challenges as their North American counterparts, farmers, ranchers and plantation owners, did.

When a friend recommended EQ Touring, a Quito and Miami-based travel outfit specializing in Ecuador, we asked for an individual trip to the haciendas near Quito, travelling on scenic country roads. Curious about Ecuador’s dramatic geography, on the equator but up in the clouds, I wanted to get close to some of those ice-clad volcanoes and 13,000-foot farm fields.

The final itinerary included hacienda reservations, a car and two top-notch guides, Cynthia Cabezas in Quito, and Paul Aguilar, for the rest of the trip. It also included a visit to Cotopaxi Volcano national park where you can drive to the end of the road for a close-up look at Cotopaxi’s icy, 19,460-foot summit. The climbers start here, at 15,320 feet. Our last day was saved for Otavalo.

The haciendas were historic and forward-looking. Both Le Cusin, founded in 1602 by Jesuits, and Hacienda Pinsaqui, founded in 1790 and still owned by the original family, felt and looked like the 18th-Century white-walled, red-tiled-roof colonial compounds typical of Spanish colonies. Surrounded with flowering vines and far from noise and

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traffic, they'll send you back to another century.

Le Cusin's owner is an American who restored the buildings and updated guest rooms and cottages, adding comfort while preserving the colonial feel. The wood-paneled living room and dining hall are reminiscent of a hunting lodge, and, as they serve good food, encourage long evenings. The result is a loyal cadre of guests who enjoy wintering over annually, settling into spacious rooms with fireplaces and staying busy dining on good meals, as well as riding horses, hiking, sketching, studying Spanish and taking day trips to Otavalo.

Pinsaqui Hacienda, where we stopped for a bowl of locro (cream of potato soup garnished with cheese and avocado slices), is still owned and managed by an eighth-generation family member. Could he be the person whose photo, displayed on the wall, shows him posing with his horse inside this elegant old mansion?

Guests enjoying acres of lawns and spectacular views of Imbabura Volcano may find approaching cars a rude intrusion. But the presence of 30 redecorated family-sized suites, fine cuisine and guided horseback riding is the evidence that visitors are welcome.

Zuleta Hacienda, originally a Jesuit property, made news in the 20th Century when new owners, the Plaza-Lasso family, progenitor of two presidents of Ecuador, turned the 4,000-acre ranch into a working dairy farm and cheese creamery.

As the ranch prospered, the Plasas built out, adding a high-ceilinged living room with family bedrooms at one end and a nine guest-room wing at the other. Today, the hacienda, surrounded by trees, vast green fields, and a stable full of horses, is an example of the success of modern ranch management. Guests here are enthusiastic horseback riders, hikers and nature-lovers.

We spent our last day shopping in Otavalo's craft market, saving the last 10 minutes for a sprint through the produce market. Instead, we spent an hour marveling at the kinds of vegetables that local farmers can grow at high altitude. As they sell them locally, they can choose whatever fits their soil, including "heritage" varieties.

My list, hastily jotted down, includes kale, bunches of fresh alfalfa, leafy greens, peas, a half-dozen kinds of beans, red and purple berries, four kinds of citrus, tomatoes, tree tomatoes, tubers, bags of beets, onions, dried spices, 124 varieties of potatoes and 50-pound sacks of quinoa, alfalfa grain and three kinds of corn.

I thought I knew vegetables. It was humbling to see how few I'd tasted or could even identify. I did find those white lupine beans, the star of my new, fast-food addiction: Cevichocho.

Take that, McDonald's!

McClatchy-Tribune News Service

Just the Facts

We flew on TACA, a merger of four central American airlines, from Los Angeles to El Salvador, and after a 40-minute layover flew out from the very same gate. Flying through Santiago, Chile, can push the lay-over to seven hours.

DRIVING, GUIDES: Driving on Ecuador's new highways, some still under construction, is an easy way for independent travellers to reach most larger towns and highlights. Taking rarely-signed, pot-holed, back-country dirt roads slows you down to a snail's pace. If you're on a schedule, think about hiring a guide.

TOUR COMPANIES, GUIDES: Our English-speaking guides, who were smart, educated and upbeat, made our trip. EQTouring, which offers standard or custom itineraries, guarantees all its trip leaders. Find them at eqtouring.com

QUITO LODGING: In Quito, I recommend two hotels in the historic centre: The hotel La Casona de Ronda occupies a restored, completely restructured in-town residence; the larger Boutique Patio Andaluz is a new property on the footprint of a similar

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residence. La Casona is smaller and more intimate, with a tiny restaurant and indoor-outdoor strip of garden; the Patio Andaluz has several ground floor living rooms, second-floor balconies, internet access stations and a spacious dining room. Both are within walking distance of the historic centre's monuments, parks, restaurants and shopping. Both are within the pedestrian-only area.

HACIENDAS: For more on the hacienda's history and lodging, go to haciendacusin.com, haciendapinsaqui.com and zuleta.com

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