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VOLCANOES AND VEGETABLES

By Anne Z. Cooke; Images from ColorWorld/Steve Haggerty

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.

By the time we – the three of us – 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 crowding around a food stall, gulping down what looked like fast-food. And whatever it was they were eating, 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 squeamish about street food. And in Ecuador, cevichocho was the street version of a double cheese burger. “If you’re sure,” he said doubtfully.

Deftly piling chopped red and yellow tomatoes, toasted popcorn, red onions, white lupine beans and cilantro in the bowl, he filled it full. Then he sprinkled lime over the mix, doused it with extra juice from the tomatoes and topped it with bits of sliced chicken. And handed it over.

I hesitated, took a bite, and it was.... heavenly! No wonder those kids look so healthy, I said to myself. They’re snacking on vegetables.

“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 traveler find links to the past? Living links, too, not museum exhibits. We started in Quito, the capital – as you will – because this is where most flights arrive. And Quito is old, 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



The façade of the over-the-moon, gold encrusted Jesuit Church, in Old Town Quito, Ecuador.

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. A decade ago, on March 13, 2002, Ecuador adopted the US dollar, stabilizing 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 illuminates the cobblestone streets at night, trash vanishes in a twinkling and public squares sport benches, grass and flowers. Purse snatching in parts of the old quarter disappeared overnight when the streets were converted to pedestrian-only use from dusk to dawn. After the sun set, I looked down on the street from my hotel room and could watch people walking by, laughing, window shopping and heading to dinner.

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 on in Quito's monumental, brilliantly painted, gold bedecked churches and monasteries, where – on the Sunday I was there – the pews were packed and late comers stood patiently in the side under gloomy oil paintings of tortured saints.

But 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 enormous ranches boast illustrious family pedigrees and long traditions. Surely, I thought, the pioneers who tamed Ecuador's frontiers faced the same challenges as did their North American counterparts – farmers, ranchers and plantation owners.

When a friend recommended EQ Touring, a Quito and Miami-based travel outfit specializing in Ecuador, we asked them to plan a trip through the region around Quito, traveling on scenic country roads and overnighting at haciendas. Curious about Ecuador's dramatic geography – on the equator but up in the clouds – I wanted a good look at the farm fields planted as high as 13,000 feet elevation, and the ice-clad volcanoes that surround them.

Our final itinerary included hacienda reservations, a car and two English-speaking guides (Cynthia Cabezas in Quito and Paul Aguilar for the rest of the trip), both of whom were superb. It also included a half-day visit to Cotopaxi Volcano national park where a sightseeing road climbs to a parking lot at 15,320 feet (just below a climber's base camp) for a close-up look at Cotopaxi's 19,460-foot, ice-shrouded summit. Our last day was saved for Otavalo.

And were the haciendas historic? Yes, but altered to meet modern times. 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 you see in every former Spanish colony. Surrounded with flowering vines and far from noise and traffic, they remain anchored in the past.

But Le Cusin's present owner is an American who restored the buildings and updated guest rooms and cottages, preserving the original décor but adding comfort. The wood-paneled lounges, dining hall and delicious meals invite visitors to sit and read, enjoy a wood fire on cool evenings, and to linger over dessert. The result is a loyal cadre of guests who come often, winter over annually and stay busy 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 8th generation family member. Could he be the



Visitors to Zuleta Hacienda share ex-President Galo Plaza's books and easy chairs. In Imbabura Province, Ecuador.



Daring visitors pay \$.50 for a bag of "catso," toasted, salted Andean beetles. Food Market, Otavalo, Ecuador.



person whose frame 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 agree that horses are fine but noisy cars are a rude intrusion. But the Pinsaqui's 30 redecorated family-sized suites, famously tasty cuisine and guided horseback riding keep this hacienda in business.

These women sellers take a break after a busy morning and a busload of tourists. Otavalo Craft Market, Ecuador

Zuleta Hacienda, also a Jesuit property in the early days, 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 diary farm and cheese creamery.

As the ranch prospered, the Plazas built out, adding a high-ceilinged living room with a mezzanine library (dozens of books bought in the U.S. by the American-educated second president) and a nine guest-room wing at the other end. Today the hacienda, surrounded by trees, endless green fields, and a stable full of horses, is a testament to modern ranch management. The wonderful horses, network of trails and abundance of nature attract riders and nature lovers.



Drawn by jobs and good weather, Quito's 1,800,000 residents have filled the narrow valley. Quito, Ecuador

We spent our last day shopping in Otavalo's craft market, expecting to spend the last 10 minutes sprinting through the produce market. Instead we spent an hour marveling at the many species of vegetables grown at high altitude. And since the farmers grow and sell them locally, "heritage" varieties are present in abundance.

My list, hastily jotted down, includes kale, huge bunches of fresh alfalfa, all kinds of leafy greens, peas, a half-dozen 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. But it was humbling to see how few I'd tasted or could even identify. But I did find the star of my new, fast-food addiction. They were the white lupine beans. Take that, Burger Boy!

TRAVEL TIPS:

Travel times to Quito can run from nine to 20 hours depending on the airline, your departure city and layovers. 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. If we'd flown through Santiago, Chile, the layover could have been seven hours long.

DRIVING & GUIDES: Driving on Ecuador's new highways (some still under construction) is an easy way for independent travelers to reach larger towns and top-ten highlights. The back country roads are rarely-signed, pot-holed, often dirt and very slow. But the views are exciting. For this option, get a guide.

TOUR COMPANIES & GUIDES: EQTouring provided smart, educated, energetic guides who were good, safe drivers and liked showing off Ecuador's best. The company offers standard or custom itineraries and guarantees your trip. Find more at www.eqtouring.com.

QUITO LODGING: In Quito, we recommend two unique hotels in the historic center. . The hotel La Casona de Ronda is a restored, restructured family residence; the larger Boutique Patio Andaluz is a new property on the footprint of an old family residence. La Casona is smaller and more intimate, with a tiny restaurant and indoor-outdoor strip of garden; the casement windows in our room opened to the outside. 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 center's monuments, parks, restaurants and shopping, and within the pedestrian-only area.

HACIENDAS: For more background information, go to www.haciendacusin.com; www.haciendapinsaqui.com and www.zuleta.com

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