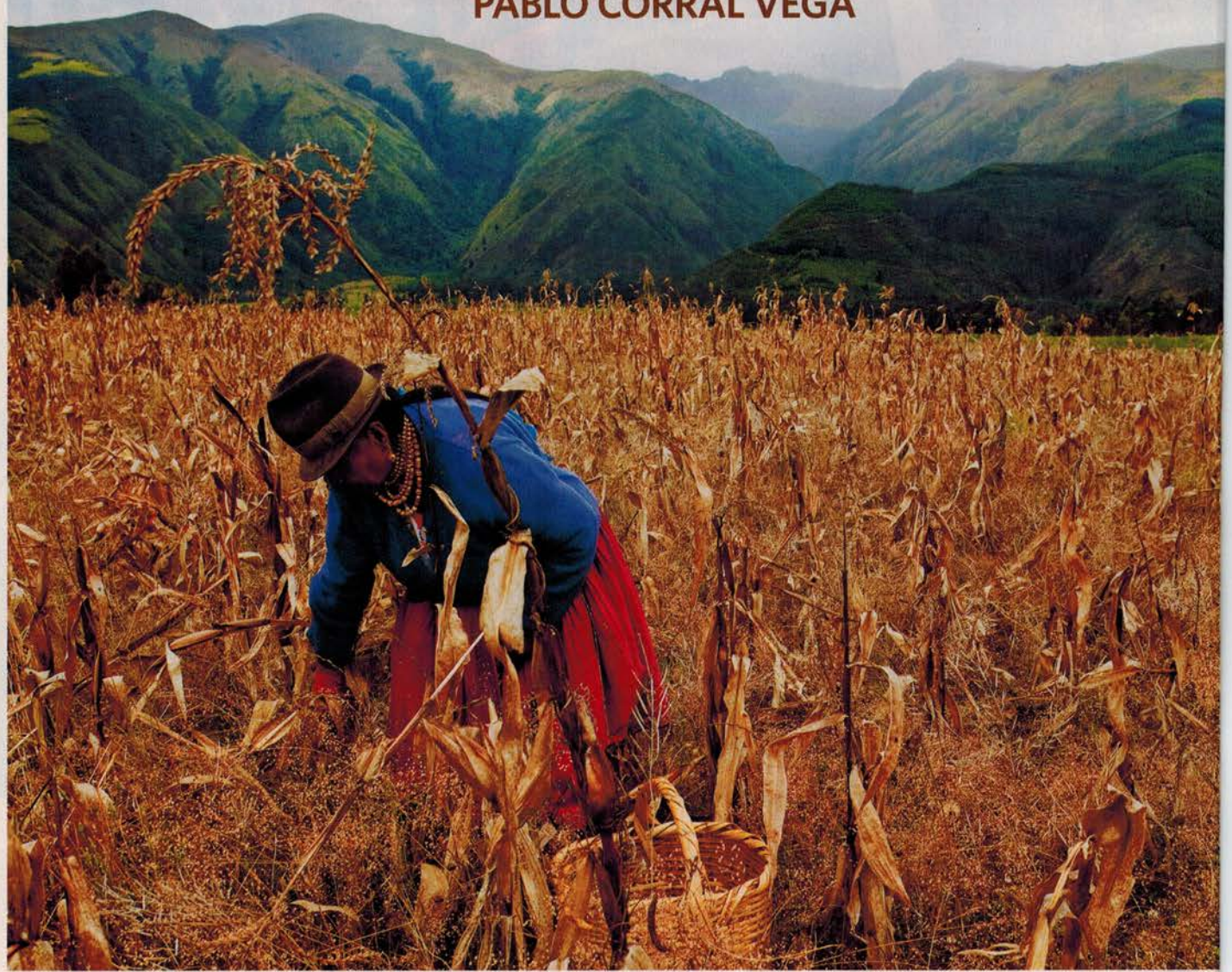
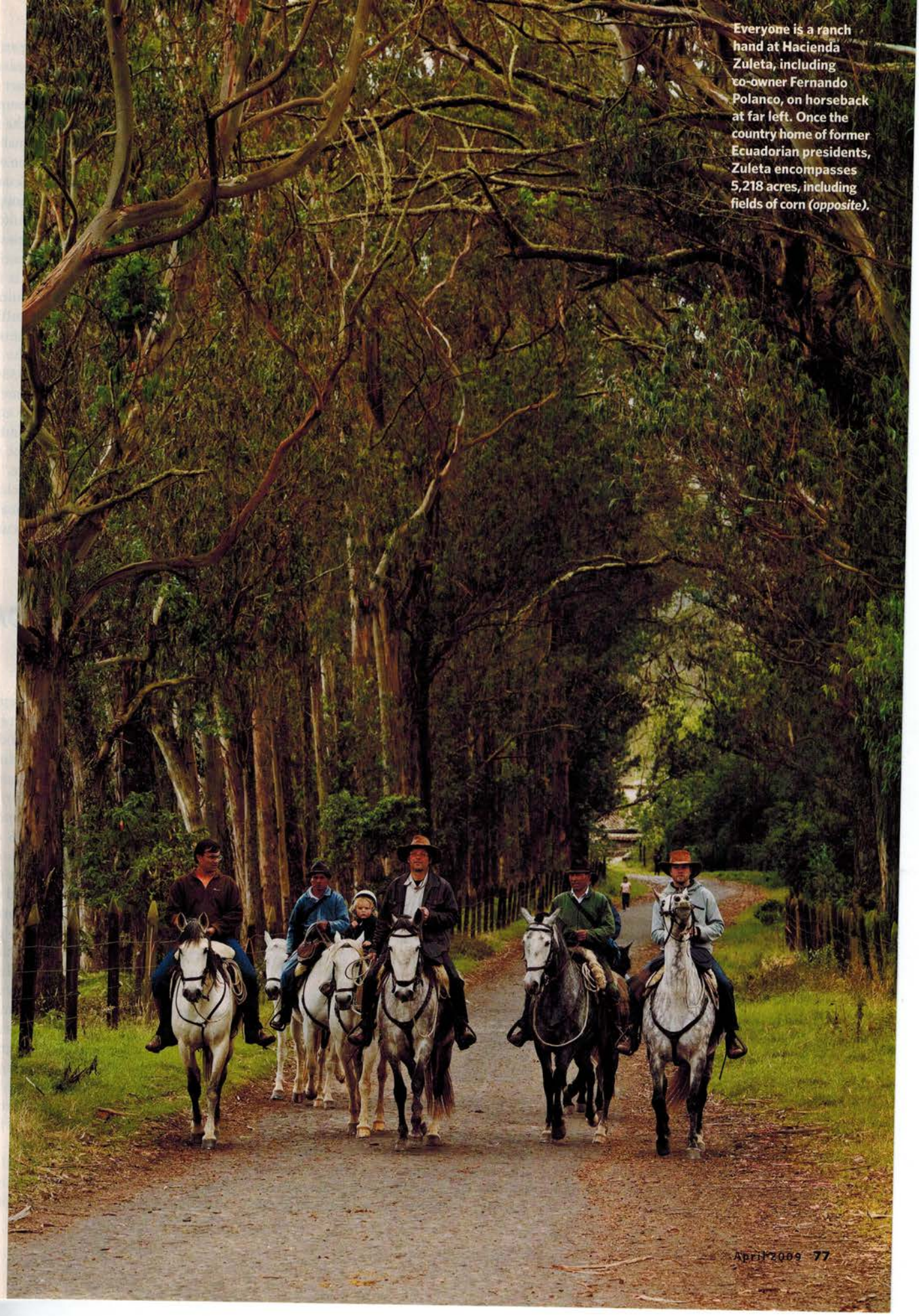
AVENUE OF THE VOLCANOES

A NEW GENERATION OF GUESTS IS DISCOVERING A LEGACY OF SUSTAINABLE LIVING AT THE SCENIC HACIENDAS OF ECUADOR.

By CHARLES KULANDER Photographs by PABLO CORRAL VEGA





Everyone is a ranch hand at Hacienda Zuleta, including co-owner Fernando Polanco, on horseback at far left. Once the country home of former Ecuadorian presidents, Zuleta encompasses 5,218 acres, including fields of corn *(opposite)*.

I CREEP PAST GRAZING llamas in a search for birds with such exotic names as "tufted tit tyrant" and "masked flower piercer," little flashes and bolts of color darting among the bushes. I'm in the northern reaches of Ecuador, high up in the Andes Mountains, the volcano-pocked cordillera that extends the length of South America and boasts the world's longest exposed mountain range. Due to an equatorial bulge in the Earth's surface, Ecuador's Andean region is the highest of them all. In other words, it feels like I'm standing on top of the world.

Suddenly, my guide, Andrés, a naturalist from Quito, says the word I've awaited all week: "Condors!" Spellbound, we watch three Andean condors swoop over the primeval valley, gliding on giant wings.

"Only 65 wild condors remain in Ecuador," Andrés says. "Here at Hacienda Zuleta is the best place to spot them."

Hacienda Zuleta would be my current lodging—and what a lodging it is: a 300-year-old ranch, parked on 5,218 acres between the Pacific coast and the immense Amazon basin, that has been the private home to two presidents of Ecuador, Leónidas Plaza and his son, Galo Plaza Lasso.

Now that I'm here, it strikes me as small wonder that the ancient Inca gravitated to the high mountain valleys that surround me. Or that, after their conquests, Spanish victors built fanciful haciendas—centerpieces of vast ranches, styled after Andalusian residences—that were passed down as a birthright by the landed gentry who have ruled Ecuador for centuries.

I HAD HEARD THAT Ecuador boasted a passel of haciendas that have maintained their vitality and traditions in part by opening their doors to tourists like me. Still owned by Ecuador's former aristocracy and known for their ranch-style hospitality, they offer a glimpse of authentic hacienda life, a lifestyle that includes fine horses, regal accommodations, and bountiful meals. As a connoisseur of lodgings around the world, I jumped at the chance to immerse myself in the rich culture of Ecuador in the most immediate way: by staying in some of these centuries-old, family-owned, and sustainably managed estates.

In fact, the haciendas are so *auténtico* that they lack advertising budgets or big marketing departments. These haciendas don't find you; you have to find them.

Which is what I must do for my initial destination, Hacienda San Agustín de Callo. The first sign I see to the ranch is a rock lettered in yellow along the Pan-American Highway south of Ecuador's capital, Quito.

"If I put up a wood sign, it gets cut down for firewood," says manager Mignon Plaza, shrugging her shoulders. We walk through the courtyard, which is bordered by rough-hewn *portales*, or covered passages. Adobe walls the color of dried orange peel support a roof of lichen-covered tiles, where a forest of chimneys wafts a wood-smoke aroma that settles over the entire hacienda.

We come to a garden facing the snow-clad cone of Cotopaxi, at 19,347 feet one of the world's highest active volcanoes. Dr. David Brown, an archaeologist from the University of Texas at Austin who has been working around here since 1995 and whom I had arranged to meet, greets me.

Helped by two National Geographic grants, Brown has been excavating around San Agustín de Callo for some 15 years. He shows me the hacienda's two intact Inca rooms—one now a formal dining room, the other a chapel—pointing out how the mortarless blocks are still tight as clamshells.

"This hacienda encompasses one of the three most important Inca sites in Ecuador," he says. "Earlier archaeologists thought it was a way station on the road to Quito, but in my opinion, this is a temple for priests, an *adoratorium* to the volcano Cotopaxi." He notes that much of the hacienda is fused upon the foundations of an Inca ruin.

We walk past a colonial-era millrace overgrown with weeds as he explains how prominent the volcano was to the Inca. "When Cotopaxi erupted back in 1534, the priests interpreted it as a bad omen. So the Inca army retired from battle against the Spanish, though it far outnumbered those European invaders. That one event marked the end of the Inca empire."

Now I want a closer look at the volcano—and the entrance to Cotopaxi National Park lies only 20 minutes away by car. Ecuador's most visited park after the Galápagos, it's a surreal high-altitude Andean preserve, home to pumas, Andean foxes, and deer. I don't spot any condors, but I do meet some mountain bikers from Carnegie Mellon business school, here for team-building. They invite me along, and soon we're zooming down the flanks of the volcano, juttering over fluvial chutes and stopping to watch wild horses gallop across the paramo, glacier-sculpted valleys that are similar to Scottish moors with their peat bogs and swaths of purple wildflowers. Shape-shifting clouds hide the volcano, but throw a pleasing mottled light across the tussock. The constantly changing hues and colors make the paramo glow with emotion, like a divine mood ring.

"This was a magical place to grow up in," says Mignon Plaza that evening, as we dine inside the Inca temple with other hacienda guests. It's dark as a cavern as we sip our wine, flickering candles reflecting off the long-stemmed crystal orbs.

"This hacienda was always full of life. Bullfighters, flamenco dancers, intellectuals, poets, political groups conspiring to

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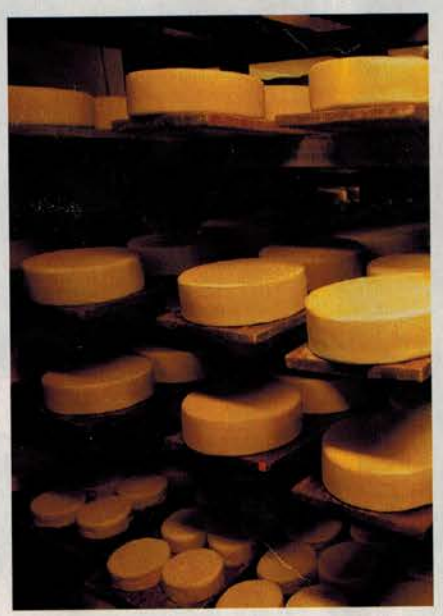
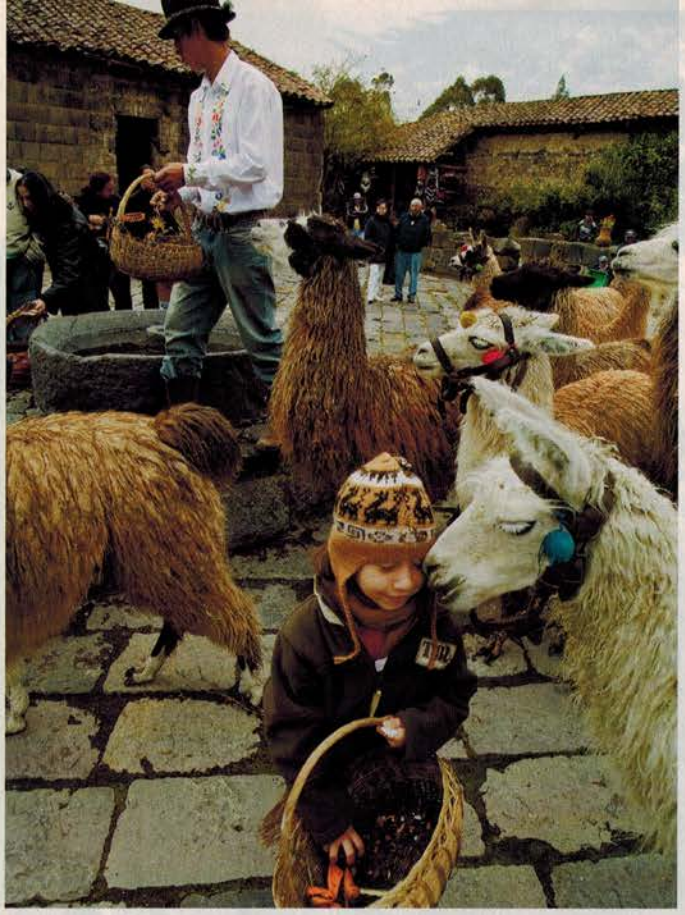
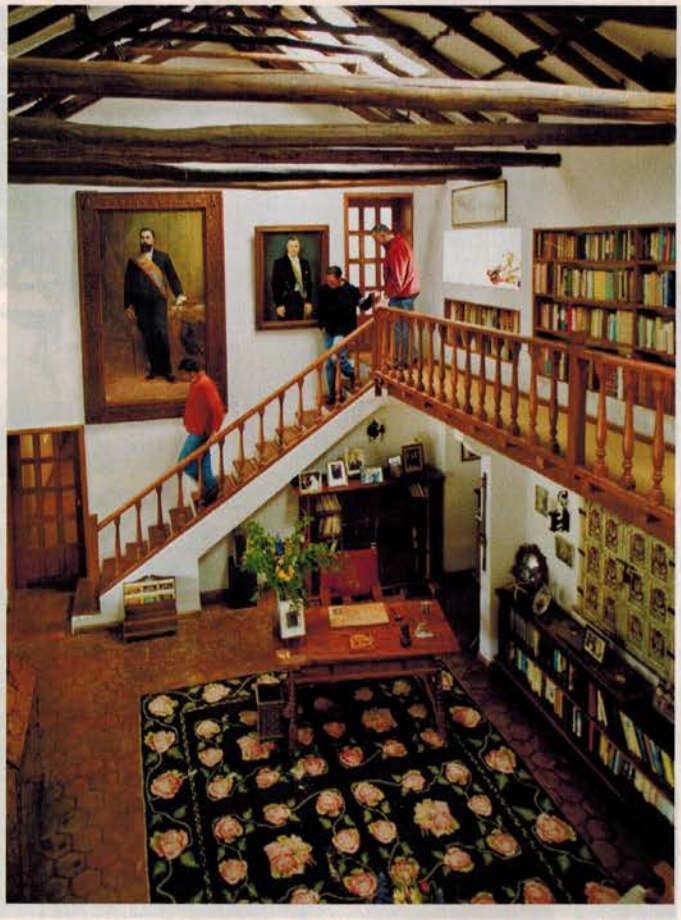


Wheels of fortune: Rounds of rich homemade cheeses ripen in Hacienda Zuleta's dairy factory. Fertile volcanic soil nurtures a wealth of flora at Hacienda San Agustín de Callo *(opposite, top)*, a haunt of the former president of Ecuador Leónidas Plaza. Breakfasts here offer both Andean and continental fare *(opposite, bottom)*.





overthrow dictators. When I was ten, the military came looking for my father, who fought against political injustice, and we had to hide him in the attic. He was a brave bullfighter, but terrified of mice. I was so scared he would see a mouse and scream and go to prison." She laughs. "Oh my God, that a mouse would betray my father!"

Hacendados—hacienda proprietors—invariably speak solid English and traditionally go to college abroad. Mignon traveled across the Atlantic to Europe, a decades-long odyssey that would eventually bring her full circle.

"My father always promised me the hacienda," she says. "After my divorce, I returned here. But things had changed. The fiestas I remembered had turned into fighting and barrels of alcohol."

Mignon resurrected the hacienda traditions of her memories—the fireworks, music, dancers—and invited friends, some of whom were ambassadors in Quito, to join the festivities. As more and more visitors ventured to the hacienda, she rented out rooms she grew up in and renovated others, trying to keep them in tune with her memories of a place warm and full of life.

Entering my suite, I see flames roaring in all three hearths—in the living room, bedroom, and bathroom, where an NBA-size tub awaits. I sink into a chair and leaf through history books that are scattered around, linking names and faces to the family portraits hanging on a wall resting on Inca foundations. There's enough historical wattage around this hacienda to send a few shivers up my spine.

Or maybe it's something else.

As I bid farewell the next day, Mignon says: "If you think we're a little bit mad, it's because we live so close to the stars."

I DRIVE NORTH ON Ecuador's Avenue of the Volcanoes, a toll road that sweeps across valleys bordered by cloud-topped peaks. Skirting Quito, I break north to Otavalo, 90 minutes away. I'm looking for a remote hacienda, off the paved road—which is why I'm momentarily surrounded by the entire police force of San Pablo, a lakeside village nestled against Imbabura volcano. The officers kick the tires of my rental, get down on their knees to inspect its undercarriage. After some discussion, the *capitán* declares, *"El camino a Hacienda Zuleta es muy bueno. No tendrá problemas."* The road to Hacienda Zuleta is fine. You won't have problems.

A two-car police escort—without sirens, thankfully—puts me on a cobblestone road that climbs between Imbabura and Cayambe volcanoes, then winds down into a rolling landscape contoured by ancient fields still plowed by yoked oxen. After ten miles I come to Hacienda Zuleta.

My red car feels like a rude intrusion from the modern world as I pull into the hacienda's courtyard; I should be galloping up on a horse.

"How are your horse-riding skills?" asks Christina Ring, who, with her husband, Thomas, helps manage Hacienda Zuleta's hotel operations (Zuleta is still in the Plaza family). I've already checked out the menu of activities in the hacienda's living room: hiking, mountain biking, visiting a condor preserve, milking cows, touring a cheese factory, exploring an archaeological site.

"Between a confident beginner and an insecure intermediate," I reply.

Twenty minutes later I'm hoisting myself atop Danzarín, a dappled gray gelding bred for the Andes at the hacienda. I settle into a deep-dish Andean saddle that has everything but a seatbelt: a sheepskin to sit on, a large pommel to grasp, saddlebag for my camera. Dressed in half-chaps, poncho, and wide-brimmed hat, I begin to feel like a real vaquero.

As our horses clip-clop through the village, locals banter with Antonio, my guide, and offer a friendly wave to me, his sidekick. We canter across fields whispery with barley, past villagers whacking dry corn stalks with machetes, and ride into a flock of bleating sheep tended by giggly girls. Stopping to watch billowy clouds pour over snowcapped Cayambe volcano, I ask Antonio what it's like to live here.

"Aquí, la vida es muy tranquila; todos son amigos o familia," he tells me while gazing at the volcano's alpenglow. Here life is tranquil; everyone is a friend or family. Sitting quietly in our saddles, I share his contentment in an age-old way of life still held in safekeeping by these remote mountains and their steadfast haciendas.

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Crafting beauty comes naturally at Hacienda Zuleta's embroidery workshop, where centuries-old traditions live on. *Opposite, clockwise from top left:* Llamas join festive doings in the courtyard of San Agustín de Callo. Guests tour Hacienda Zuleta's homey common rooms. Mist lifts from Lake San Pablo, a popular local attraction.

We return to a hearty dinner. "Please eat," says Fernando Polanco, the 45-year-old general manager, who is a grandson of former Ecuador president Galo Plaza Lasso. "Food turns cold at this altitude."

Everything on the table comes from the hacienda and is made to family recipes: *sopa de quinoa*, a traditional Andean grain soup; steelhead fillets from the fishpond; salad from the organic garden; bread made with local wheat; cheese courtesy of the hacienda's Holstein-Frisian cows. Though high, the local climate is tempered by the equatorial sun, which makes it seem a land of eternal spring. "Put anything in the ground and it'll grow," a hacienda worker told me. "The planting season is all year."

As we feast, Fernando holds forth like a true *hacendado*. Whether it's religion, marriage, or work ("I dislike cheese, but love cheese-making"), he has an opinion on everything, sparking animated conversation around the table. He also offers a cavalcade of forward-leaning ideas about


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the hacienda, which has been granted a UNESCO-recognized Smart Voyager certification for a rigorous sustainability program to generate benefits to the local population while minimizing impacts on the environment. He sees the tourism potential of the hacienda in its ability to help fund many community outreach programs, including his favorite program, the condor-rehabilitation project.

"We aren't using the condors for the tourists," he says, laughing. "We're using the tourists for the condors."

Retiring to my room, I see someone has left a fire going in the beehive fireplace. Sliding into bed, there's another surprise—a hot-water bottle in an embroidered Zuletaño sash. All the guest rooms here are named for family members, who keep an eye on you from their portraits hanging on whitewashed walls. Generic hotel rooms put me in an existential funk. A room suffused with character and authenticity has the opposite effect: a sense of belonging. I fall asleep replaying the day's highlights.

Danzarín is more responsive the next morning. Just a nudge of my heels sends her into a canter. Six of us head behind the hacienda into a protected valley that looks like a chunk of Kauai's Na Pali coast, but pushed up to 11,000 feet. We ride on a sea of grass. Soon we pass the remains of a lost civilization, 12 mound pyramids left by the mysterious Caranqui, who predated the Inca. This is one of the largest unexcavated sites in South America.

"They built here because it's a magical place," says Fernando. "The shamans still come here to do ceremonies."

Farther along, we leave the horses amid grazing llamas to visit Condor Huasi, a rehab center and breed-and-release experiment funded by a $5 fee bundled into the lodging rates. Next to an aviary holding eight condors—including two breeding pairs—sits an interpretive center, where local children, and today we, learn about the unique ecosystem here, and such wild native fauna as tapirs and Andean cats.

"My grandfather always said, 'Change starts by planting a little seed,'" explains Fernando. "The idea of preservation has been part of the social responsibility of the hacienda. Condor Huasi is one way we plant that seed in children who live here." As we leave, Andrés, who has watched the steep slopes beyond the aviary, shouts, "Bear!" High above us, a spectacled bear, the only bear species that is native to South America, is chomping on bromeliads. First condors, now a rare bear sighting. I feel like I've just won the Andean wildlife lottery. But maybe it's not only luck. Maybe it has something to do with how this hacienda manages its resources.

"What's the secret of Zuleta's success?" I ask Galo Plaza, the silver-haired patriarch of the hacienda, who tonight sits at the head of the table. Formerly Ecuador's minister of agriculture, he is the son of the late president Galo Plaza Lasso, a Kennedy-esque figure in Ecuadorian politics. Photos of him posing with Cold War warriors of my youth—Nixon, Khrushchev, Kissinger, LBJ—are scattered through the living room and library, making the place feel like a White-House-in-the-Andes.

"My father practiced agrarian reform long before the government did," he says. In Ecuador, the *huasipungo* system—a form of landed slavery—wasn't abolished until the 1964 Agrarian Land Reform, when Ecuador's haciendas lost much of their property. But in Zuleta, Galo Plaza Lasso created an agricultural model he hoped the country would adopt on a larger scale. Besides giving away half the hacienda's land to those who worked it, he built schools and a community center, and started an embroidery workshop.

"Once," says Galo Plaza, "we rushed here after hearing rumors of a land invasion. Upon arrival, we saw the local Indians already guarding the hacienda. When I saw that, I cried." These days, the Galo Plaza Lasso Foundation, funded in large part by the hacienda's tourism business, continues working with the community, organizing projects in education, health care, nature conservancy, recycling, and art. The goal is to sustain this vision of hacienda life into the future while being mindful of the pitfalls. And what are those, I ask?

Galo Plaza, with a wan smile, says, *"El oro le daña todo.* Money ruins everything."

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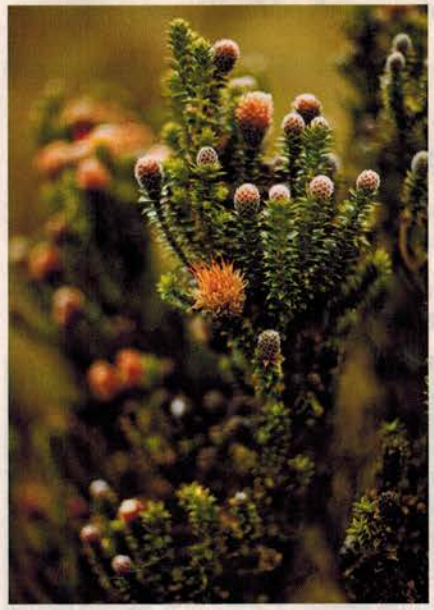

Edelweiss of the Andes, high-altitude *chuquiragua* plants *(above)* bloom in Cotopaxi National Park, where rolling volcanic terrain lends itself to brisk mountain-biking excursions *(opposite, top).* Schoolgirls bearing celebratory lanterns parade to an elementary school near Zuleta to elect the new class queen *(opposite, bottom).*

MY LAST DAY AT Zuleta, and in Ecuador, I spend eight hours on horseback climbing up to the paramo, part of a 10,000-acre expanse of wilderness the hacienda has donated to the community as a natural preserve. The day spools out with adventure after adventure: another bear sighting, condors soaring overhead, and at one point, Danzarín stumbling in a bog, throwing me out of the saddle. We steer clear of the fighting bulls that roam free on the paramo, stopping to eat on a poncho that we spread atop the bunch grass, enveloped by the drizzly rain for which the paramo is known. But it's the end of that day that will stay with me: galloping the seemingly infinite countryside, my poncho flying, before finally reining to a halt in the Zuleta courtyard. The feeling? As though I had ridden right into a fable, to a time-honored hacienda that now seems like home.

Utah-based **Charles Kulander** *writes often about accommodations. He also wrote this issue's Stay List. Photographer and Ecuador native* **Pablo Corral Vega** *has shot for* Smithsonian *and* National Geographic.