

Haciendas of the Andes, Ecuador

Itinerary

Day 1: The meeting point is Quito city or Quito airport.

From Quito, begin the journey north by road (c. 2 hours). There may be time to stop as you cross the equator line.

The following is the proposed itinerary, but please note that changes are possible due to weather and other local conditions. Any changes are made with your best interests in mind.

Meet the horses near the entrance to the Zuleta Valley and set off on an introductory ride. Ride over a ridge affording wide-ranging views of verdant hills. Lunch will be a picnic out on the trail.

Later, descend into the valley below and reach the first overnight stop – a working dairy farm and Andalucian stud.

Once settled, there may be time to view the collection of Inca and pre-Inca ceramics on site.



Riding time: c. 4-5 hours.

Dinner and overnight at Hacienda La Merced, (or similar).

DAY 2: Head out on horseback, passing tiny hamlets of adobe huts. You might see local ladies in their brightly coloured skirts herding sheep and pigs.



Ride through woodlands, and wind your way around patchwork fields of quinoa, potatoes, maize, lupins and tree tomato orchards. There are magnificent views of the jagged Mojanda summit as you cross the slopes of the sacred Imbabura Volcano - the focus of many pre-Inca legends.

Nearing your next overnight stop, pass avocados, papaya and passionfruit growing. Ride into the Hacienda's courtyard to see bougainvillea and the hummingbirds zooming past en route to the agapanthus.

Later, there should be time to visit the famous Otavalo market. As well as local crafts, there are stalls bursting with exotic fruit and vegetables. Local men and women in their traditional dress, come down from their farms in the mountains to sell produce and buy weekly supplies.



Riding time: c. 5-6 hours.

Dinner and overnight at Hacienda Cusin, (or similar).

DAY 3: After a fascinating demonstration by local master weavers and a chance to purchase top quality Andean handicrafts, head out on horseback.

Climb out the valley and onto the plains. There could be the chance to pick up the pace here. Follow agave-lined sandy tracks and ride through picturesque landscapes.



Experience dramatic views of the hanging valleys and rocky ridges as you descend to lush meadows below. Perhaps pass by ladies in traditional dress embroidering intricate blouses, as they watch their flocks.

There could be time to stop to see the pre-Inca earthworks dotted around this valley - one of the first highland areas to be settled. You might be lucky enough to spot a mighty Andean condor soaring overhead.

In the afternoon, it is a journey by road of approximately 2.5 hours to reach your next overnight stop and the second part of the ride.

Riding time: c. 6 hours.

Dinner and overnight at Cotopaxipungo (or similar).

DAY 4: After breakfast, set out on horseback. Ride along lanes between the meadows as you get used to your new horses. Pass by lush vegetation like bamboo, ferns and native trees dripping with orchids and bromeliads. You might spot birdlife such as woodpeckers and hummingbirds.

On leaving the micro-climate of the river valley, extensive views open up before you. Surrounded by four Andean peaks that form part of the Avenue of Volcanoes, ride towards the iconic Cotopaxi Volcano. Riding onto rough grasslands in the Sincholagua foothills, there is a good chance of seeing more Andean condors as well as eagles, hawks, falcons and harriers.

At the northern border of the Cotopaxi National Park arrive at a modern hacienda, often greeted by the resident llamas. This idyllic location has remarkable

views of the Andean landscape which is dominated by the perfectly conical shape of Cotopaxi.

Riding time: c. 6 hours.

Dinner and overnight at Hacienda Los Mortiños, (or similar).



DAY 5: This morning, head into Cotopaxi National Park for a day of riding in incredible, wild, open spaces. There are no signs of habitation and many spectacular views of Cotopaxi volcano to be enjoyed. Perhaps ride close to the wild horses that inhabit the park on your way across the plains.



Part of this ride follows the main Inca highway which linked Quito with Cusco, as well as the Inca route leading to the Amazon.

Pause to visit to remains of an Inca fort, before continuing your ride. The landscape here is characterised by gently undulating grassy hills, drumlins and old lava flows. Later, return to the hacienda by a different route.



Riding time: c. 6 hours.

Dinner and overnight at Hacienda Los Mortiños, (or similar).

DAY 6: Head up the slopes of Rumiñahui Volcano, with an excellent chance of close encounters with the Andean condor, fox and deer.



Pass Polylepis trees ('paperbark trees'), and native shrubs such as chuquiragua and valeriana. Colourful native flowers are often in bloom, hugging the hillsides.



Climb on horseback up to 4,000 metres (13,123 ft) and if conditions allow, experience one of the highest canter in the world. Then ride on into a hidden valley, where you might spot wild horses grazing close to the towering cliffs.



The views are incredible, and the picnic spot today is unforgettable. The trails, marked out by the wild horses, take you back downhill. Then, ride onwards to your next overnight stop- a Jesuit hacienda.

Riding time: c. 6-7 hours.

Dinner and overnight at Hacienda Santa Ana (or similar).

DAY 7: The final ride takes you on an exhilarating canter across the flat expanses of Cotopaxi National Park, where you traverse old lava flows. Veer westwards and start a long ascent with outstanding views.



Ride up through native grasslands and cross over into the Avenue of the Volcanoes, leaving the national park behind.

Here you will often meet local horsemen ('chagras'), checking their cattle. They are quite a sight, with their colourful ponchos, thick goatskin chaps and intricately plaited bridles. Their stirrups are enclosed like clogs, and often carved into the shape of an animal head. Their lassos seem impossibly long to do anything with – but very necessary when working with their feisty bulls.



On emerging from the valley, the views are incredible – ridges and hills as far as the eye can see.

Before long, it is time to say goodbye to the horses and the crew who have helped you along the way.

Transfer by vehicle to Quito, (c. 2 hours).

Riding time: c. 6-7 hours.

Dinner and overnight at Hacienda Su Merced, (or similar).

DAY 8: Following breakfast, return to the airport or continue your onward travel plans.