



# The Adventurers of Ecuador

By Sydney Loney — Photos by Yolanda Escobar Jiménez

Up mountains, down rivers, through jungles and into remote villages: Three Ecuadorians lead the way on an unforgettable journey across one of the most diverse countries in the world.



“Tomorrow, dress like onions,” María Sol Espinosa writes in a WhatsApp message the night we arrive in Quito. Beginning the next morning, she will lead us up into the Andean highlands, then back down into the Amazon jungle, then over to Baños, the “adventure capital,” then back up to Cotopaxi National Park. (By day three of our eight-day adventure in Ecuador, María Sol’s nightly missive shortens to a single word: “Onions.”)

María Sol is our guide from G Adventures, a small-group tour company committed to sustainability and supporting local communities. But she is more than a guide. Born in Quito, Ecuador’s actual capital, she is a passionate ambassador for her country. She’s a historian and a human encyclopedia with endless enthusiasm and empathy for all the people, plants and critters we encounter from Quito to Cotopaxi. (“Remember, this creature could be somebody’s mother,” she reminds us every time she rescues a bug in danger of being swatted or stepped on. And there are quite a few bugs in Ecuador.)

Like all the Ecuadorians we encounter on our journey, María Sol is a reminder that it is the people, not just the place, that make for the most profound travel adventures — and that the best way to experience a country is with those who live there.

#### MARÍA SOL AGUINAGA ESPINOSA, ON THE ROAD FROM QUITO

On that first morning, dressed obediently like onions (the climate in Ecuador changes as swiftly as the scenery, so layers are a must), we listen as María Sol delivers a lively monologue from the front of our little bus. We discover that there are about 90 volcanoes in Ecuador (36 active), 14 Indigenous languages, four distinct regions (the highlands, the Amazon, the Galapagos and the coast), and that the country is known for its hummingbirds, of which there are more than 130 species (we spot several during a cloud-forest hike en route to the Amazon).

Even along the road, there is a lot to take in. The swaying of the bus as it navigates the narrow turns — there are no straight roads in Ecuador, María Sol says — threatens to lull us into a jet-lagged slumber, but it’s impossible with so much happening outside our windows. Avocado, agave and eucalyptus lend textured shades of green to the lush roadside foliage, waterfalls cascade down steep slopes around every bend, and snowcapped mountains poke through the mist in the distance.

Meanwhile, each town we pass through is decked out in signs bearing the name of the singular product it is known for: candy, roses, denim, fireworks. Our bus stops in Cayambe, where all the signs are emblazoned with “Bizcochos” in large letters. Bizcochos are a buttery Ecuadorian take on biscotti that, if you’re lucky, come dipped in dulce de leche and wrapped in a single string of fresh cow’s-milk cheese. The result is richly sweet and salty. “We put cheese on everything, even ice cream,” María Sol says, licking her fingers.

Our next stop is a market that encompasses an entire square in the town of Otavalo — it’s impossible to leave without a colorfully woven bag, belt or poncho — and then lunch with an Indigenous Otavaleños family in a nearby village. While we sip soup made with vegetables from the adjacent plot and topped with kernels of roasted corn, María Sol explains that the “Sol” in her name means “sun,” and her parents gave it to



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT  
Quito’s historic Basilica del Voto Nacional took 30 years to build and houses 24 small chapels, each dedicated to a province of Ecuador; María Sol outside the Carmen Bajo, a convent dating back to 1669; Quito was built on the ruins of an Inca city in the 16th century.

OPENING SPREAD  
Overlooking Cotopaxi National Park, home of the rare Andean spectacled bear.



## The Amazon rainforest is home to more than 3 million species of plants and animals.

her to differentiate her from all the other Marías in the predominantly Catholic country. (One of our lunch hosts is also a María.) During our visit, the family gives us a tour of their garden, a weaving demonstration and a welcome introduction to the friendly hospitality the region is known for.

Moments that give travelers a glimpse of everyday life in Ecuador are among María Sol's favorite as a guide. She initially studied physics and math before combining her two greatest passions — people and nature — into a degree in tourism and ecology, and she has guided guests in Ecuador and elsewhere for more than 20 years. “I know that every country is beautiful,” she says. “When you go somewhere and you see a museum or a church, it’s nice, but it’s not the same as when you go into a community and talk and laugh with the people and learn about their traditions. That is what makes a country come alive.” If she could pick anywhere in Ecuador to show off both its people and its nature, she says it would be the Amazon. “The jungle is my favorite place in the world.”

### HOLGER RAMIRO RETETE CALVA, IN THE AMAZON RAINFOREST

After a few days in the highlands — hot springs, horseback rides, an overnight stay in a historic hacienda where a local band played traditional music in a tack room turned bar — we peel off our layers and prepare to enter the jungle. In the motorized canoe taking us down the Arajuno River, María Sol sits cross-legged on the bow, pointing out toucans in the trees and blue morpho butterflies flitting over the water (they’re among the largest butterflies in the world, with an iridescent blue wingspan of up to eight inches).

As far as wildlife sightings go, this is only the beginning. The Amazon, one of the most biodiverse places on the planet, is home to more than 3 million species of plants and animals, with new species being discovered almost daily. The best way to spot many of them is at night. Wearing headlamps and tall rubber boots, we meet Holger Calva, our Kichwa guide, under the stars. He takes us up a path into the dense foliage that’s barely five feet from the boardwalk that leads to our jungle-lodge rooms, and we discover just how much activity is taking place around us while we sleep. Baby tarantulas, fruit bats, stick bugs, impossibly large crickets, grasshoppers, geckos, salamanders, beetles, a vine snake, all manner of spiders — most of them big — and red poison-dart frogs, deadly but beautiful, glinting like rubies under the light from our torches.

Although Holger was born in the jungle, he’s as excited as we are by each new sighting (his favorite finds are the frogs and salamanders we spy nestled under leaves for the night). Holger says he began guiding to help conserve the forest and protect the Kichwa culture. “I love sharing how wonderful the Amazon forest is, and how we live with the animals, birds, insects and plants,” he says. He explains how pretty much every plant in the jungle serves a special purpose, from the palm leaves used to make roofs that last longer than a decade to the lulu, which can relieve the pain of a bullet-ant encounter (the most painful bite in the jungle).

On the afternoon following our night walk, Holger takes us by canoe to visit his village on the banks of the river. We’re greeted by a group of women in blue embroidered dresses who welcome us around the raised fire in their open kitchen. About 135 people live in the village, where a typical day begins around 4 a.m. with the women making tea



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP  
Holger guides guests of the Amazon's Itamandi Ecolodge down the Arajuno River; harvesting cassava near the Kichwa village of Santa Bárbara; seeds of the achiote fruit are used as a natural red dye.



## Cotopaxi is one of the tallest active volcanoes in the world and last erupted in 2016.

from guayusa leaves while the men fish for breakfast. After that, the kids go to school while the grown-ups take canoes to work in fields cleared in the jungle. Yuca is the main staple, and we get a chance to try it in a feast prepared just for us. In the center of a long table are clay bowls filled with fried and boiled yuca, along with hearts of palm, white beans, plantains, catfish cooked in leaves over the fire, pineapple accompanied by chocolate dipping sauce, and an Amazonian delicacy: palm larvae bigger than your thumb served on skewers (they’re called “jungle marshmallows” and taste like chewy bacon). We also try chicha, a drink made from yuca roots that ferments after three days and becomes “jungle beer.” (“The kids aren’t allowed to drink it after that,” María Sol tells us.) The day ends with a group photo — and a spectacular sunset.

### GLADYS PAULINA IZA TIPAN, IN THE ANDES MOUNTAINS

Our final destination (following a brief pit stop in Baños for some paragliding and whitewater rafting) is Cotopaxi National Park. Cotopaxi is the second-highest peak in the country and one of the tallest active volcanoes in the world (it last erupted in 2016). On the way into the park, we pull over to collect our guide, Paulina Tipan.

When she was a child, Paulina roamed the park with her grandfather, who was a ranger. “I love this place,” Paulina says. “I will never get tired of coming here.” She leads us on a two-mile path that winds around Limpiopungo Lagoon, formed by water from glaciers and offering an unimpeded view of Cotopaxi, its snowy summit making a brief appearance through the clouds. Paulina kneels in the long grass facing the volcano to make an offering of gratitude by sprinkling the ground with perfume made with flowers from the park. She has done the tough, two-day climb up Cotopaxi twice. “My second time there was a spiritual connection with the volcano that I still carry in my heart,” she says. “Every time I look at it, I remember my trip to its summit.”

Although the path we’re on is relatively flat, the altitude makes breathing something you really have to think about. Paulina stops several times, using our recovery breaks to tell us about the many medicinal uses of the plants around us that she learned from her grandmother. One is the orange-flowered chuquiragua shrub that adds bursts of color to the path and, when its leaves are steeped, helps with kidney disease and stomachaches.

On days she’s not guiding visitors in the park, Paulina brings her seven-year-old daughter here. “I teach her everything I learned from my grandparents and my father so that the knowledge will be passed on from generation to generation,” she says. “I tell her the legends of the volcano, about how it is alive and that we need to help take care of it.”

When we reach the end of our hike, María Sol executes a celebratory headstand. Then she drops to the grass, lying on her back. She recommends we do the same, taking a moment to pause and reflect on our time in Ecuador. As we have from day one, we do as she says. Dressed in all our “onion” layers (plus some woolly handwoven hats and mitts we purchased from stalls at the entrance to the park), we starfish on our backs, staring up at the sky. A pair of Andean lapwings fly overhead, their striking black-and-white-patterned wings drawing our gaze. “I love my country,” María Sol tells us. “And I like when people get a chance to see my country through my eyes. And they see how beautiful it is.” ♦



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT  
Chuquiragua, Ecuador’s national flower, is prized for its medicinal properties; Paulina has lived near Cotopaxi volcano her whole life: “Every time I visit, I see it differently,” she says; Cotopaxi emerges from behind the clouds.