

Quito, Ecuador - First Impressions

Written by Kristin Brinner

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Quito, Ecuador often leaves tourists literally breathless. Quito's blustery foggy nights and ring of towering mountains can also almost make you forget that you're only 25 miles from the equator. Going from sea level to Quito (10,000 feet) can make wandering the city a little rough on the lungs. If you take it easy though, there are lots of wonderful sites not-to-miss in this high-altitude capital.

For fantastic views of the city, take the TeleferiQo (gondola lift) up 4000 feet into the mountains surrounding Quito to enjoy spectacular views of the city. After only an hour at that elevation headaches and a chilly breeze may chase you back down into what feels like deliciously rich oxygen in Quito.

It's also quick 30 minute drive out of Quito to celebrate and learn plenty of fun facts and fiction about the equator. There are two rival tourist traps to visit here, each



entertaining for wildly different reasons. 30 years ago *La Mitad del Mundo* (the Middle of the World) park was built on the site where the equator was thought to be. This park commemorates 0,0,0 latitude with a giant obelisk, trinket shops, restaurants, a miniature recreation of Quito, and a surprisingly informative ethnographic museum detailing the many indigenous Ecuadorian peoples. Once GPS technology could exactly identify the location of the equator (about 200 m away from La Mitad del Mundo park), Museo Solar Inti Ñan, a smaller quirky park, sprung up to compete. According to Google Earth however, Inti Ñan is not on the actual equator either. This cactusy park offers a bizarre smorgasbord of information on native peoples, a real shrunken head, giant pythons preserved in glass barrels, and plenty of cleverly faked demonstrations. They 'demonstrate' how the Coriolis effect causes water to drain in different directions on either side of the equator, balance an egg on its end (supposedly only possible directly on the equator), and showed how our muscles were weaker on the equator than off the equator. Impressive, almost certainly faked.

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Take a day to explore Quito's beautiful Old Town as well. It is packed with several churches per block, indigenous folks selling Chiclets and handicrafts, and a couple of lawsuit-worthy opportunities if this were the US. The gothic Basilica del Voto Nacional towers high above Old Town, complete with grimacing gargoyls, giant stained glass windows, and delicate towers. For just \$3/person, you can climb up to the highest points of two of the Basilica's towers. After crossing rickety wooden plank platforms, climbing rusty rebar ladders, and scaling almost vertical stairways, you will be rewarded with great views across Quito, unimpeded by pesky safety barriers or railings.



Around Quito's main plaza are several other old churches, with stunning gold filigree and bloody crucifixes. After the sun sets, Old Town was beautifully lit by streetlights. Check to see if the Foundation of Art and Culture is sponsoring any folkloric events in Quito while you're there as well. The performances can range from ancient fertility dances to more recent Spanish influenced waltzes, accompanied by the bright live music of guitars and flutes and complimented by gorgeous costumes.

Additional information:

TeleferiQo: Takes off at 9,680 ft and reaches 13,284 ft from Cruz Loma, one of the hills on the slopes of the active Pichincha volcano. \$4 roundtrip, takes about 10 minutes one way

Mitad del Mundo: Open 365 days a year, the park complex has restaurants, and interesting Ethnographic museum, restrooms, and ample parking. Located in the Pichinca province north of Quito.

http://www.pichincha.gov.ec/lugarturistico/cgiInfoAtraTuri.asp?txtCodiLugaTuri=1701_093
(site in Spanish)

Museo Solar Inti Nan: Located around the corner from Mitad del Mundo. Open 7 days a week, 9:30 am - 5 pm. info@museointinan.com.ec,

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<http://www.museointinan.com.ec/> (site in Spanish)

Basilica del Voto Nacional: Free access to the sanctuary, addition \$3 to climb the towers. Open 7 days a week 9:30-5:30 pm

Foundation of Art and Culture: <http://www.quitusecuador.com/fundacion/index.php> (site in Spanish). Check for performance schedule.

Where to stay: Splurge at the [Plaza Grande](#), a luxury hotel located on Quito's main square in Old Town. Royal suite for \$550, Presidential suite for \$2000. Spare your checkbook at [Hotel La Cartuja](#), singles for \$37, doubles for \$45.

Where to eat: Splurge at Cucurucho de Santa Cruz in the Old City. Rocafuerte y Benalcazar, 228-5866. Traditional Ecuadorian cuisine (but the gourmet version). \$15-\$50. Eat like a local at any of the many small restaurants with set lunches that are only open from around noon till 3 pm. Look for something clean and busy - a good sign. Set lunch usually includes a filling soup, choice of one entrees (often chicken or fish) accompanied by salad, and a fresh juice for \$2-\$3.

Things to eat and typical prices:

Ceviche: \$4-\$8/dish. Ceviche (uncooked fish that has been cured in lime juice, onions, and spices) in Ecuador is served as a tomato based soup, and is typically served with friend plantains

Hamburger: \$1.50

Pizza: \$5-10 (enough for 2 people)

Tortilla de choclo: \$0.50 each. A delicious local dish, it is a hearty pancake made with whole corn that is grilled and served with a creamy sauce.

Large Pilsener (Ecuadorian Beer): \$1.25 (225 mL)