

Highlands and Laguna Quilotoa

Written by Kristin Brinner

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800 years ago, one of Ecuador's many volcanoes blew its top in a devastating explosion that spewed lava all the way to the Pacific ocean over 100 miles away. It left behind a spectacular crater lake that is now surrounded by small indigenous villages, very high altitude farms, and some of the prettiest countryside in Ecuador.



From Quito it is a 4 hour drive to the tiny town of Chugchilan. This is part of the 'Quilotoa loop,' a wild drive through stark landscapes and small villages. While less than 30 miles off the broad Pan-American highway it's a slow three hour drive on rutted dirt and gravel roads. If you are driving, be prepared to ask for directions whenever possible, as there are no signs marking the route. High rolling hills covered with patchwork yellow and green crops gave way to vertical cliffs, craggy peaks, and impossibly steep farm plots. Llamas, alpacas, and pigs grazed by the roadside and indigenous people's brilliantly colored cloaks accenting the hills as they tended their farms.

It is an hours drive from Chugchilan to reach Laguna Quilotoa, the emerald jewel of these highlands. You can hike around the laguna or down to the laguna's beach, but as there are no signs, a guide can be hired for \$10. While the rim of the crater can be a wind-whipped foggy moonscape in the mornings and afternoons, it is calm and sunnier at the lake at the bottom of the crater. Children herd sheep down to the laguna, making a peaceful scene. While it's a 30 minute walk down to the laguna's beach, it's a steep 1.5 hour hike back up to the crater's rim. The people selling wool sweaters and other trinkets at the top of the laguna are usually accompanied by their alpacas and speak Quechua, and Inca language. It has an unusual shushing sing-song quality



that is soothing and utterly unlike Spanish. Continuing along the 'Quilotoa loop' back to Latacunga and the Pan-American highway, crystalline days and clear air make for some spectacular vistas of snow capped volcanos. This trip is worth the effort, but is easiest if you

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have your own car or arrange a trip through a tour group (often booked through the town of Latacunga), as the buses are rare and sporadic. Lodging and food can also quite rustic, so this is not for the faint-hearted.

Lodging in Chugchilan: [Hostal Cloud Forest](#) : Simple, no heat, breakfast and dinner included, \$10/ person. For a more upscale option, try [The Black Sheep Inn](#) , an eco-resort with all of the amenities, \$65/person with shared bath, \$100/person with private bath.

Lodging in Quilotoa: Options here are much more basic. Several hostels are located at the top of the crater by the parking lot. Princesa Toa is typical, with unheated rooms, very basic furnishings and sporadic hot water for \$10/person (including breakfast and dinner).

Basic meals can be found in any hostel in the towns, typically soup, chicken fillet with french fries, and juice for \$2. There aren't many other options.