

Retiring along the Route of the Sun

Written by Kristin Brinner

Saturday, 15 August 2009 23:08 - Last Updated Tuesday, 04 May 2010 17:40



Driving the Ruta del Sun, or Route of the Sun along the sunny southern coast of Ecuador, it takes a mere 2 hours to drive from Salinas to Montañita. From the 'Miami of South America' to rowdy surf hangouts, we describe the varied towns and landscapes of Ecuador's southern beaches.

Background:



While Ecuador is the second smallest country in South America, it packs in a world of diversity. The country is divided into three distinct geographic zone: the jungle, the highlands, and the coast. The inland jungle borders Colombia and Peru, teems with wildlife, and is steamy hot. You can quickly forget that Ecuador is located on the equator if you spend any time in the highlands, which follow the Andes through the center of the country. Temperatures dip below freezing at night, towering snow-capped volcanoes peak through the clouds in the distance, and the local indigenous population sell beautiful warm wool clothes to help keep you warm. And finally, beautiful sandy beaches stretch the length of Ecuador's Pacific coast. Each environment offers wonderful opportunities for tourists, depending on their interests. Ecuador also boasts two modern cities, Quito in the northern highlands and Guayaquil in southern Ecuador near the coast, that each offer plenty of culture, colonial architecture, fine dining, and shopping.

Ruta del Sol Orientation:

Just 90 minutes west of Guayaquil, the Ruta del Sol heads north along the coast starting in the small city of Salinas. The white sand beaches along this route are naturally surrounded by arid rolling hills largely devoid of much vegetation. Perched on a small peninsula jutting into the Pacific Ocean, Salinas is the favorite choice for Ecuadorians heading to the beach. Heading north along the Ruta del Sol, you quickly will enter largely undeveloped tracks of beach, interrupted occasionally by small and humble towns inhabited almost entirely by Ecuadorians. Two major exceptions are Punta Blanca, about 40 minutes north of Salinas, and Montanita, about 2 hours north of Salinas. Montanita has a booming tourist trade, and Punta Blancas is currently being developed with condos and houses.

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Salinas



Salinas is located on a narrow peninsula that sticks out into the Pacific Ocean, so has both northern and southern facing beaches. On Salinas' northern facing beaches, a lovely malecon (boardwalk) separates the restaurants, hotels, and apartments from the wide white sand beach. This is a sheltered beach with gentler waves as it is protected by a wide shallow bay. Salinas' southern facing beach, called Mar Bravo (fierce ocean) is much less developed, and has stronger currents and waves as it is not protected by a sheltering bay. Salinas' northern facing developed beachfront is divided into three sections running from east to west along the coast: ultra-exclusive San Lorenzo, the hedonistic Malecon area, and quieter Chipipe. Home to politicians, actors, and the extremely wealthy, San Lorenzo boasts beachfront luxury mansions, but has a much narrower beach. Trendy Malecon is known for its discos, restaurants, and bars, and is the center of Salinas' nightlife. At the western end of Salinas Chipipe also boasts a lovely boardwalk, luxurious condominiums, and hotels, but is quieter than its boisterous Malecon neighbor. Condos in Salinas cost around \$700/square meter.

Punta Blanca

Punta Blanca is located 40 minutes north on the Ruta del Sol from Salinas. Located on a sandy bluff on the ocean, Punta Blanca has the signs of a retirement destination in the making. Some lovely beachfront properties have already been developed, with lots more room for building. There isn't (yet) much to offer in the way of restaurants or shopping, but located between hip and booming Montanita and well established Salinas, you are only an hour away to either the north or south from good restaurants and shopping. There are also beachfront seafood restaurants the length of the Ruta del Sol if you're looking for some fresh and simple seafood.

Montanita

Drive 2 hours north of Salinas and you'll arrive in Montanita. As one of the premier surfing locations in Ecuador, Montanita has been 'discovered' for many years by the younger surfing crowd. The small city has the feel of a beachfront college town, with lots of bars and restaurants lining its sandy streets. Vendors ply the wide, long sandy beach with ice cream and beer, and at night the town rocks till the wee hours of the morning as clubs and bars compete to see who has the largest and loudest speakers. You can easily escape the rowdy nights by driving 2 minutes outside of town. A tall cliff divides the beaches of Montanita into two huge sections. This cliff keeps the noise and crowds largely away from the more tranquil beach on the other side of the cliff. Lots for \$1/square meter if within walking distance of the beach,

Weather:

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It is sunny and hot from October until May, and is slightly cooler and cloudier from June to September. December to May is typhoon season, with the occasional more violent rain storm. During the off season from June to September Salinas is very quiet with the slightly deserted feel of any beach town during the winter. While Salinas is home to a smaller population of permanent residents, it can get crowded during Christmas and New Years, its highest season. Up to 500,000 people visit Salinas during this two week period.

Infrastructure:

Salinas has two modern hospitals equipped with excellent emergency facilities, a shopping center, pharmacies and grocery stores, and an airport that may offer international flights starting in June of 2010. Taxis dart around the streets of Salinas, and rides locally cost around \$3. If you need more culture or shopping opportunities, Guayaquil (the largest city in Ecuador at 2 million people) is a quick 90 minute drive on a new four lane highway, and offers beautiful high-end malls just like you would find in the US. And if you don't feel like driving yourself, for \$10/person you can hire a taxi to take you to Guayaquil. Guayaquil's international airport has several nonstop departures to Miami (among other destinations) each day. It is a 4 hour flight from Guayaquil to Miami.