

# Touring at 14,000 feet

Sandwiched between the Andes and the Pacific, Ecuador is anything but flat. **Clive Parker** recounts his 1,000-mile tour



(From top) Locals are friendly but you'll need some knowledge of Spanish. Quito's old colonial centre is great for sightseeing. Mud slides are a face of life in Ecuador. Many towns and cities are high in the mountains – Quito is at 2,800 metres.

The payoff for pushing my bike up the steep dirt road for miles would be a glorious descent. That was what I told myself at the summit. Two miles later, I rounded a bend to find the road obliterated by mud, several feet deep, stretching for at least 40 yards. No wonder I hadn't seen any cars for a while.

The guidebooks had warned about mud slides in Ecuador. And on this on a scenic road from the small town of Baños over the mountains to Patate, I had found one. I started to carry the bike over it. Half way, it became more slippery and I realised I could only carry the weight of my bike if I removed all my bags... I waded through several times, carrying bike, bags and boots. As I was rinsing my wheels on the far side, a small pick-up truck pulled up. The driver took one look at the mud and turned round, wheels skidding. I asked them where they had come from: Patate. I knew I would get through.

## Climbing for 26 miles

Mud slides apart, Ecuador is a good country for cycling. The roads are quiet and Ecuadoreans pass cyclists wide,

even though there are few of them.

Road surfaces vary widely and can dictate your route. Basically there are four types: asphalt, dirt, cobbled stone, and loose stone, in order of acceptability to cycling. Good maps will indicate the road surface but can't be relied up as the roads are steadily deteriorating through lack of maintenance. It's best to ask people, particularly bus and taxi drivers.

I spent a morning in Riobamba bus station interviewing bus drivers about the state of the road to Guaranda. The consensus was that the road was asphalted all the way, it climbed very high, had a lot of potholes but was easily passable by bike. One driver had seen a group of cyclists on it.

The following morning I set off early, aware that I had a long day ahead of me. The road climbs 26





miles to a mountain refuge at about 4,500 metres above sea level, on the flanks of Chimborazo, the highest mountain in Ecuador at 6,310 metres. As I puffed my way up to it, feeling the lack of oxygen, I realised that I was about to cycle at a higher altitude than I had ever been mountaineering!

Each bend always seemed to bring more ascents into view. Finally I saw the mountain refuge hut and knew that was it. It was bitterly cold and I had all my clothes on. The views of snow-clad Chimborazo were worth all the work. It is a massive bulk of a mountain, and it was awe inspiring to sit on my bike at the edge of the road peering up at it. I didn't hang around for long though as thick cloud came down on me.

Then I had a 26-mile descent into Guaranda. The chill factor of doing 26 miles downhill is immense – I was frozen! Needing something to warm my hands I stopped at the first place I saw for a coffee.

### Reaching Quito

I had started my journey in Guayaquil, and from there headed north along the coast. A tarmac road, the Ruta del Sol, stretches up the coast to the Colombian frontier.

It was an ideal beginning to a cycle tour. Passing through mangrove swamps, shrimp farms, and rice fields the road seldom climbed more than a few hundred metres. I left the coast at Pedernales, just after crossing the equator, which

is marked by a sign and a yellow line painted across the road. I headed inland for Santa Domingo, as I wanted the challenge of riding up into the Andes. From Santa Domingo I pedalled uphill for two and a half days, resting in the little town of Mindo.

Mindo is a good place to see a wide variety of hummingbirds and butterflies, and the gently babbling rivers make it a tranquil place to recharge your batteries. From there I continued to Quito, the capital, which nestles 2,800 metres above sea level in two valleys surrounded by impressive volcanoes.

Quito has an attractive colonial centre and is packed full of things to see. I spent nine days there before heading south to the Quilotoa loop. This route of minor, mainly dirt roads threads its way through the mountains west of Latacunga. Highlights have to be the Laguna de Quilotoa, an azure blue lake sitting placidly in the crater of a great volcano, and a visit to the market at Zumbahua.

### Dirt roads and descents

The loop is very hilly, but the dirt roads have smooth surfaces and it can be cycled comfortably in four days,

“I had a long day ahead of me. The road climbed 26 miles to a mountain refuge at 4,500 metres”

with plenty of accommodation en route. The most homely is probably the guesthouse in the mountain village of Isinlivi, which is run by a Dutch lady.

From the Andes it was an exhilarating downhill run all the way back to Guayaquil. The last stretch was scary as the road crosses the estuary by a long bridge, a mile and a half long. Once, I had tried to cycle into Panama City over the Puente de Las Americas but traffic policemen had prevented me from doing so. This time, although there was a traffic cop at the start of the bridge, he ignored me. The bridge has two lanes in each direction, but no shoulder or path. The parapet is only 18 inches high, so I pedalled along peering into the murky waters of the estuary, hoping a bus wouldn't knock me into them...

I made it back into Guayaquil, having covered 1,029 miles and enjoyed the hospitality of a very friendly people. Doing a circular route enabled me to see both cultures – the coast and the mountains. Coastal people are very open and approachable. When you stop for a drink someone will always come and sit with you for a chat. In the mountains, the indigenous people still wear colourful traditional clothing and are more reserved. Hardly anyone speaks English, so knowledge of Spanish is helpful.

Clive's book 'Pedalling to Panama' (ISBN 978-1-4343-5940-7) is available from [www.authorhouse.co.uk](http://www.authorhouse.co.uk) or Amazon, or by order from Waterstones.



## Fact File Ecuador tour

**DISTANCE:** 1,029 miles, 25 days cycling.

**TERRAIN:** the coast is relatively flat, inland the Andes are steep and challenging.

**CLIMATE:** coast is hot and humid, mountains rainy and colder. Good clothing is a must.

**ROADS:** traffic was light except in Quito. Road surfaces were variable.

**ACCOMMODATION:** easy to find rooms between \$10 and \$20. In bigger towns there are more luxurious places.

**MAPS:** Reise Map 'Ecuador and Galapagos' available through Stanfords. Scale is 1:650,000 so it needs supplementing from local sources. It indicates which roads are metalled.

**GETTING THERE/BACK:** LAN Chile direct from Madrid to Guayaquil.

**BIKE USED:** Dawes Horizon.

**FURTHER INFO:** Rough Guide to Ecuador.