

Buses and Taxis in Ecuador

There's no doubt that bus travel in Ecuador and hiring a taxi to drive you around sightseeing are great ways to get around Ecuador. Buses come in all sizes, shapes and conditions in Ecuador. We have city buses, regional buses and inter-provincial buses. Ecuador is like Canada in as much as we have provinces instead of states, although the whole of Ecuador is only about the size of Nevada or Colorado.



Me boarding a Quito city bus some years ago

In a previous newsletter we commented on all the various possibilities for getting around Ecuador by air and I guess whether you choose to travel by air, bus or by taxi depends on whether you are in a hurry to get from one city – regional gateway or you want to take in the spectacular scenery of Ecuador from the roadsides.



Tungarahua shot from the front seat of a bus as I drove into Baños

I often get asked “...where should I go in 12 days to see as much of the country as possible” and in truth while you may just be able to do some justice to Nevada in that time, there is no way you can hope to see all Ecuador has to offer even if you spend 3 weeks in this country. But what you can do is get an idea of the place and maybe a seed will be sewn into your soul that starts to create a bond with you and this land. Don’t be surprised! That has happened to more than a few experienced travelers.

So a short vacation to Ecuador probably calls for mixing up some air travel and overland journeys. If you come on business you probably want to fly as much as possible and then use buses or taxis to make your destinations that aren’t blessed with airports.

For example, if I want to get from Quito to our Ecuador coast real estate project near Salinas I go by plane to Guayaquil, \$65, saving 9 hours the road journey would take me and then I get a bus, \$3.50, or taxi to Salinas. Salinas airport is closed to domestic flights at this time because they are expanding it to be a fully blown international open skies destination – one of the reasons why we have located our Azul Pacifico project here.

If I go visit our real estate project at San Clemente the costs and modes of transport are almost exactly the same except the destination airport is Manta because San Clemente is on the central Ecuadorian coast while Salinas is on the Southern Coast.

Why does it take so long to get places? The simple truth is that it’s a very mountainous country. From Quito to virtually anywhere means coming down the Andes to the flat coastal region or winding your

way through mountainous Andes valleys and passes. Along the coast the situation improves because roads are straighter.

Nevertheless, Ecuador even though it has better roads than many Latin countries still does not have interstate freeways criss-crossing the country so even when there is an A-class road, if it's a 2 lane highway there's always a chance you may get stuck behind a slow moving truck for a while.

Being an inveterate traveler, 46 countries and (still counting) 12 years outside of England, I maintain that the whole point of traveling is to see the country and that's one thing you don't get to do in a plane.



The Illinizas volcanoes shot from bus window on the Pan-American highway south of Quito

Because Ecuador has virtually no railroad lines, Ecuador bus services stretch over the country and connect even the most remote villages with the larger cities. The people's faith in bus services is immense.

I once strode down an Amazonian dirt road with a number of local Amazonian Indians. I asked them where they were going to, "to catch the bus" they cheerily replied and where had they come from I asked, "our village" .. and how long had they been walking in this jungle heat? .. "six hours" they smiled by reply. We strode together another 2 hours and reached the road to civilization. There were maybe 20 locals waiting for the bus. A local pickup from the my tour company picked me up at this pre-arranged meeting point and as we drove back to the jungle town of Tena we saw the bus the Indians were waiting for at the side of the road, it's engine in pieces on the side of the road.

Of course, that was a regional bus and in the remoter provinces the quality of the buses is pretty ropey. In remote locations such as the deep Ecuadorian jungle bus timetables have to be flexible. But the contrasts in Ecuadorian landscapes – making it the most bio-diverse country per square mile in the world – are reflected by the contrasts in bus quality.

An inter-city Ecuador bus journey from say, Quito to Manta or Guayaquil to Cuenca is likely to see you travel on a bus as modern as those in the States. Many, but not all, have fully reclining seats and bathrooms. On the other hand bus stations in the big cities are a mixed bag.



Queen of the Ecuadorian highways.

The newer the bus station the more pleasant place it is likely to be. Quito's 'Terminal Terrestre' is a subterranean labyrinth-like chaos and home to bag snatchers and pick-pockets who work anyone who looks the least unwary – motto; eagle eyes, eagle look and don't travel alone if you can avoid it. Thankfully, Quito will have a new modern bus terminal in the next year or so in Quitumbe, a southern neighborhood of the city.

Guayaquil on the other hand has a brand new terminal which at first inspection doesn't have a bus-terminal 'feel' to it at all. In fact it feels and looks like a cross between a mall and an airport. A super modern mall with cafes and food kiosks on the first and second floors are well patrolled by security guards and the ticket kiosks are around the back of the building. Scoot up the escalators to the third floor to catch your bus after grabbing a cappacino or coconut juice from a kiosk on the first floor.

Most of the big city bus terminals in Ecuador are served by dozens of independent bus companies. Each company has a ticket kiosk in the terminal and a sales guy out in the walkway whose task it is to try and get you to his company's kiosk and not that of the rival bus company. When you don't have any preference for a company and are not in any hurry make sure to check each kiosk and get a direct bus and one that leaves at a time convenient for you – think about the arrival time too. Arriving in a small city at 4AM will probably mean a wait until daylight (as has been my experience in most other countries too) and I don't think you need me to tell you that executive lounges are not yet a key concept in Ecuadorian bus terminals.

Some of the larger companies do have their own terminals. These are a good bet to travel from if you are going to popular destinations. You may pay a dollar or two more for the convenience but likely you'll

have a smoother start to your journey. You can find out where these terminals are by referring to a good guide book such as the Lonely Planet guide.

Bus fares cost \$1 per hour. No, you won't be charged in that way but that's what you can expect to pay give or take a dollar. For example it's about \$9 to Guayaquil from Quito and it takes about 8 hours. It's 2 hours from Quito to Otavalo, near Cotacachi, and it costs 2 dollars. Once I was travelling on a regional bus on the coast with my good friend Ossie. The young conductor probably saw 2 gullible gringos but Ossie had his measure when he tried to charge us \$4 to go about 90 minutes. That alerted me and I asked fellow passengers who told me the correct fare. A very embarrassed conductor learnt a valuable lesson that day.



The Pan American highway north of Quito

Many people travelling on buses in Ecuador and indeed most foreign countries worry if their bags will be safe in the luggage hold. In all my dozens and dozens of journeys on Ecuadorian buses I've never had a problem. I did hear of a problem on a bus coming back from Baños to Quito during 'Carnival' last February but although it's a risk it's a very slight risk. I often travel with my laptop and that always goes on the bus with me and if I sleep on the bus my arm is through one of the carrying straps. These are just obvious experienced traveler precautions. Think about travelers insurance too – it's worth the peace of mind.

Another concern expressed by new visitors to the country is the safety of the buses. I must say that this is a valid concern as there are occasional accidents but it does help to realize the huge number of bus journeys in Ecuador every day. We are talking about thousands and probably tens of thousands of journeys a day so one serious accident every 3 months probably equates to one in every 2/3 million journeys – not bad odds!

City buses go absolutely everywhere to get commuters from the far flung barrios (suburbs) to working districts of the large cities. At rush hour they are packed to the gills. No sooner do you have one foot on the bottom step and a hand on the rail then the driver has his foot to the floor in an effort to stay ahead of the bus behind. If you are a little unsteady of foot then board the bus at a stop light when the light is red. All fares are a standard 25 cents unless you venture outside of the recognized metropolitan area.

The problem is knowing where the bus goes. A very basic communication strategy maybe to write your destination (in Spanish) and show it to the driver before you step on. Otherwise ask somebody else at your stop (parada) – you could try “ a (as in the ‘a’ for apple) and [name of place]” , for example:- “a terminal terrestre” or “a Salinas” – this is not exactly correct Spanish but as guerilla survival Spanish it will serve just fine!

Once on your Ecuador city bus you will be concerned that you are on the right bus and to get off at the right stop. You’ll be looking out of the window anxiously. Now think about this logically. If a helpful fellow passenger sees you doing this then chances are they will ask you where you want to go. You won’t understand. Doesn’t matter! Just tell them the place and they will look out for you and let you know when you arrive. Yes, in Ecuador we are not all speeding through life at 200mph too busy to acknowledge others.

Travelling by taxis in Ecuador is another article but because of the relatively cheap fares they do offer a good alternative. In Quito all yellow taxis have a meter that is switched on from early morning to about 8 or 9PM when fares are negotiated with the driver. I must say that speaking good Spanish will dramatically diminish the number of times a driver tries to rip you off. That’s my impression but maybe the rip-off drivers have just been driven off the roads since I arrived. Expect to pay a \$1 minimum and \$2 for a couple of miles. In other cities there are no meters and all fares should be negotiated before you set off. “Cuanto cuesta a [destination]” will serve to find that out.

Hundreds of people have driven by taxi from Quito to Cotacachi. Costs start at \$45 rising to \$55/60 at night or for early morning airport runs. A larger very comfortable mini-van will charge \$75/80. Everything else is negotiable. I’ve paid between \$33 and \$50 to get from Guayaquil to Salinas. Needless to say I now have the number of the \$33 service in my cell phone address book!

The journey from Quito to Cotacachi is spectacular. I must have driven it 200 times in the last 3 years. Can you believe that I still gaze out of the window to enjoy the constantly changing skies; I’m still fascinated by the people – what they do, how they dress; and I’m still spellbound by a journey that winds over and along the Ecuadorean Andes through patchwork quilt fields.



*Shot from the road after just turning off the Pan American - Cotacachi village in the distance. Our **Jahua Pacha** project is located on the distant hill side just behind and up from the village church ' tha large white building in the center of the photo.*

To all those drivers of Ecuador buses and Ecuador taxis – a big thank you for delivering me safely in your beautiful country. Long may you continue to navigate Ecuador's highways.