

There are a lot of things to do and see around Cotacachi and Quito. I know. I've visited and seen most of these places in my seven years in Ecuador but such is the variety here in Ecuador that there's still quite a few places on my 'to visit' list.

First off, when in Quito you should visit the old colonial town on a Sunday - they pedestrianize it on Sundays or rather ban vehicles from entering. While there, visit the Independence Square, and two or three churches or cathedrals - take your pick from a guidebook - but take my word for it, for sheer, whack-you-in-the face, oh-my-God-this is amazing effect the La Compañía church will take some beating with all its tons of ornate gold leaf decorating a sculptured masterpiece. On the Plaza San Francisco there is a very nice cafe with chairs outside and also a cross between a museum and an arts store - one of my favorite places.



In the modern center of Quito take a ride up the side of Guagua Pichincha volcano to 13000 feet on the French built cable car - on a clear day I've spotted 10 volcanoes - 3 of them snow-capped. And of course Quito far down below strung out in a narrow valley for 20 miles - spectacular! If you are into climbing or hiking then a Swedish friend of mine, Mogge, has a very well established mountaineering and hiking operation see <http://www.moggely.com> - enjoy the photos.

For arguably the best hot springs in Ecuador take a day trip to the east to visit Papallacta high up in the Eastern cordillera - magnificent views - lather on the sunscreen - I got the worse burn in my life there on a cloudy day - but other than that it's truly magnificent.

Just too many wonderful, intriguing places to mention to eat in Quito but El Mosaico is the ultimate cafe with a terrace view. Eat Greek salads and indulge yourself from the extensive cocktail list as you watch the setting sun glint off the domes and spires of colonial Quito far down below. Gradually the city lights flicker on to create the impression of a lit up model village.



North of Quito you have Mitad de Mundo. The Inti Nani equatorial museum is the place to visit there - cross over the roundabout - 2/300 yards around the next bend to the left and it's on your left - \$4 to enter and worth every cent for the tour with English translator. Especially impressive is the leaf in a basin of water swirling first clockwise and then counter clockwise as the basin plug gets pulled and the water empties either side of the equator line.



Two hours north and you pass into Imbabura province set out like an emerald below you - the Ecuadorians call this the province of the lakes. First up is Lake San Pablo - doing a passable impression of a Scottish loch. Fine dining's to be had at the lakeside in a classy restaurant called Puerto Lago.



Five minutes north along the wide Pan American highway you come to Otavalo. Depending on your interest in crafts and the indigenous culture you could easily pass a day here. There's the multi-hued market, a heartbeat of the indigenous culture best enjoyed on a Saturday if you like commotion and energy - or any weekday apart from a Wednesday if you want a quieter scene.

Outside of Otavalo - a two hour walk or 20 minute cab ride away is a Birds of Prey rehabilitation center run by a Dutch fellow who is adding eagles, condors and owls at a rapid rate as they are handed in to him. Handlers fly eagles into the Andean skies and they sometimes disappear out of sight only to dive back to earth and arrive back on the gloved hand 10 minutes later. Never known anyone not to be enthralled with that.



In the other direction up on the Mohanda massif are the Mojanda lakes up at 11000 feet. Take a jacket for the cold but the bumpy trip up there is well rewarded with impressive views and the broody atmosphere surrounding the lakes.



For a gentler stroll try Peguche cascades just 5 minutes outside of Otavalo. Casa de Sol, an adobe hotel built on the side of a steep hill has magnificent views and is as fine a place as anywhere in the Otavalo area for afternoon tea after you've strolled to the waterfall and felt the spray dampen your cheeks.

In Peguche village square about half a mile away from the cascade car park you can visit two stores with weavers - my favorite is the one behind the church where you can find the genial Jose Cotacachi's marvelous wall hangings. His is an example of work that in my opinion won't be around for much longer. I've had many a conversation with him where he laments that his sons will weave for pleasure but not for a career - and it is only by working day in day out that you become a master weaver. Check him out!



Cotacachi? A fair amount to do for sure! On a Sunday visit the fruit and veg market by the bus station. Great photo ops and you really can't believe the prices - I still don't after 3 years living here. On Sunday afternoon the village brass band comes out to the main square in town about 3pm and blast out Ecuadorian standards.

Cuicocha crater lake is about 7 miles west out of town - taxi \$5-6 - and really is a marvel. Is implore too strong a word? I implore you to go up there very early on a sunny morning. The views are majestic. On a clear day you can see Cotopaxi volcano 80 miles to the south, summit glistening under clear blue skies. And as for the Crater Lake - if you want azure check out the colors of the lake - ripples turn the surface waters into a turquoise, violet, azure palette that would have inspired Monet.



The pic is of me on one of the many hikes I've done around the rim of the crater - my best time 3 hours running and laughing for the last bit just so we could say we'd done it in 3 hours. More typical time 4 and a half hours. It's not as easy as it looks but can be done by all who have a reasonable level of fitness. For those of you more inclined to sedate activities motor launches await you at the pier - they'll potter around the lake in about 30 minutes.

Ok - so you couldn't make it to Papallacta? Worry not! Ecuador is awash with volcanic origin hot springs and Chachimbiro is just 1 hour away from Cotacachi. There are actually three places to enjoy. Chachimbiro resort which can be busy with kids as they have slides. Arco Iris (meaning rainbow) which if you go early in the morning you'll likely have to yourself, is my favorite. It has a series of stepped pools set in a narrow mountain ravine and as you look out to the east you can see the Andes stretched out in front of you as if on a canvas - marvelous! I once turned up there with a group of tourists and horror of horrors both places had been invaded by bus loads of screaming school kids on a school outing. A quick poll of all the group clarified that none were keen to enter. Luckily there is the little known (or visited) Hacienda Chachimbiro which is also a delightful place to visit and with spectacular views. Perhaps the water is not quite so hot.

Sunday sees quite a few of the citizens of nearby Ibarra (130,000 pop) head out to the nearby lake of Yahuarcocha - this is where a tremendous last stand kind of battle was fought between the invading Incas and the Caranquis - a fierce pesky pain-in-the-butt tribe for the Incas - nevertheless the Incas prevailed and promptly decapitated their erstwhile enemies and threw their bloodied corpses into the lake. Not surprising then is it to discover that Yahuarcocha means Lake of Blood in the local Quechua language. I

digress. Ibarra's townsfolk are not some strangely morbid bunch and that is not the reason they head out to the lake! Nowadays it's a stunning lake where people jet-ski, fish, picnic and the kids can ride donkeys. Again, stunning views and even a nine hole golf course out there too that is currently for sale.

What else, what else? Oh, how about a trip on a narrow gage railway out of Ibarra over narrow bridges with streams far below, through canyons and long tunnels under mountains to end up some 30 miles and 1000 feet below Ibarra in an area where sugar cane is grown.



Or how about heading out of Cotacachi in a southwesterly direction and over the pass separating the Chota valley in, which Otavalo and Cotacachi sit, and the hidden gem that is the Intag valley. Drive 38 miles in 2 hours over twisting snaky roads down, down, down, passing the cloud forest where there is greater concentration of bio-diversity than anywhere else in the world. And continue down into the sub-tropical valley floor bottom. Stay in coastal forest tree houses, visit where the locally famous Intag coffee is ground and packed, an all organic and all co-operative effort. Do you like the smell of ground coffee? I do! What a delight to walk down the street in Apuela and smell the coffee aroma getting stronger with each step you take closer to the workshop.



Oh yes, I forgot the world famous wood carving village of San Antonio de Ibarra. I forgot about the Swiss dairy farm where they make and sell fantastic gruyeres. And did I forget to mention the organic vineyard, or what about the better-than-5* - Chateau Relais hotel and spa, La Mirage, right here in the center of Cotacachi. And what about the alternative health center in Otavalo where you can visit not a doctor but a shaman who will maybe create a miracle - I know of one client who suddenly started seeing much better after a masterful shoulder massage from the shaman. Horse riding in the Andes, mountain biking, white water rafting, rappelling down waterfalls, paragliding, trout fishing in mountain lakes, yoga classes. Visiting a shaman ceremony! Musical workshops! Ecuadorian style rodeos! Its late, I'm going to bed - I could carry on writing many more paragraphs yet but I have to call it a day somewhere. But you get the idea don't you - there's plenty to do!!!!!!



PS..... this is only a fraction of Ecuador - there are hundreds of things to do in other provinces of the country!

PPS while in Quito always take sensible precautions against pickpockets and bag-snatchers. Take taxis at night.