

SP finds an unparalleled beauty in Ecuador

ONLY IN GUAYAYAS



BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

The air in Guayaquil, Ecuador smells like flowers. It's a very pleasant blend of floral aromas, not as potent as most bottled perfumes. Which is a good thing, because the scent is inescapable. It's also surprising. When I first glimpsed Guayaquil through the airplane window at several thousand feet, the sight was astounding: There appeared to be concrete everywhere, as far as I could see in every direction—even New York City seemed tiny and lush by comparison. I started to fear that I wouldn't see any fauna or flora during my visit, but what I sniffed upon stepping off the plane wasn't the stench of crowded humanity or sun-baked cement or car exhaust, as the view might have suggested. Just a heavenly mix of flowers.

Walking and driving in Guayaquil, which is located in the Guayas province and is Ecuador's most populous city, I discovered more green spaces than the aerial view had revealed: parks, waterways and tropical plants are tucked into the tiniest spaces (even bromeliads growing on electrical wires). In fact, "You can have eco-tours without leaving the city, which makes the

city very unique," says Director of Tourism Joseph Garzozzi B. Guayaquil is surrounded by the Guayas River and the Andes Mountains. Located near the equator, the region enjoys tropical weather year-round.

"Guayas is a best-kept secret," says Prefect Nicolas Lapentti R. "As one package, Ecuador is very attractive: We have beaches, mountains, rainforest and the Galapagos islands." Within 20 minutes, it's possible to jump from one climate to another. What's more, and of special importance during the current economy, Ecuador is a tourism bargain. "It's very cheap," says Lapentti. "We're doing great effort to support tourism. We believe in this country, which is a very poor country: 70 to 80 percent of our people live in poverty. We believe we have a country with a lot of natural resources that should give us a better quality of living. We believe tourism is one field that can make our economy grow, can give employment and income." So choosing Ecuador as a vacation destination means getting quite a lot for comparatively few dollars while also supporting an economy in need.

There is much to see and do in Guayas. Among the highlights:

Stretching alongside the river is **Malecón Simón Bolívar**, a shopping and dining mecca



Ecuador has the Amazon's largest concentrations of parrots. The great green macaw is highly endangered; only 130 remain in the wild. (Photo taken at the Historical Park in Guayas.)

In Ecuador, even the flowers have flowers!

PHOTOS/HOPE S. PHILBRICK

that also features monuments, plazas, intriguing architecture, history and anthropology museums, a playground and exercise area, gardens and fountains.

Climbing the **Santa Ana Hill**, where the city was founded in 1547, is a 444-step staircase alongside which are dozens of restaurants, coffee shops, cyber cafés, art galleries and souvenir shops. There's also a naval museum with fortress ruins circa 1629, a lighthouse and chapel.

The **Historical Park of Guayaquil** boasts a native wildlife zoo, a stage show depicting Ecuador's early customs, and picturesque historic architecture.

Guayaquil's oldest park, **Seminario Park**, is home to more than 700 iguanas, a statue of Simón Bolívar and a wild boar monument.

At **Hacienda San Rafael** our group enjoyed horseback riding, watching (then joining) traditional dancers, and seeing (then tasting) a cocoa demonstration.

Santay Island, in the Guayas river across from Guayaquil, is a natural reserve that's home to more than 100 bird and 60 plant species. Cruising the river aboard the Morgan Pirate Ship is a fun way to view the island—and get a fresh perspective on Guayaquil. **SP**



Farmer's Market in the town of Naranjito, outside of Guayaquil

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE

Fly into the Guayaquil airport, which is a new world-class facility. The easiest way to get around is to take a sightseeing tour: 15 different packages are available through the tourism bureau. Also, take a double-decker city bus tour for \$5 per person—duck when passing under trees if on the top deck! Cab rides cost \$5 to most anywhere within the city.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Spanish is the official language. The currency is the U.S. dollar. Ecuador's rainy season is December through April.

WHAT TO EAT

Seafood reigns supreme, and there's a plethora of fresh produce year-round. Traditional dishes include ceviche, fish cooked on spiced bamboo skewers, fish cooked in banana leaves, and rice and beans prepared a myriad of ways. Crab dominates menus in May and September. Mangos peak in December and January.

WHERE TO STAY

HOTEL ORO VERDE

(593-4) 2327-999

www.lhw.com/oroverde

Located eight minutes from the international airport, this member of the Leading Hotels of the World boasts 230 rooms and suites. It is one of nine five-star properties in the city of Guayaquil.

MORE INFORMATION

GUAYAQUIL CITY TOURISM BUREAU

www.visitaguayaquil.com

ECUADOR TOURISM

www.ecuador.travel