

Where One Andes Ends and Another Begins

As we started our trip from Colombia to Ecuador, we took a short detour at *El Nudo de los Pastos*, the Knot of the Pastos, also known as *El Maciso de Huaca*, to marvel the place where the South American Andes mountain range splits into the three branches of the Colombian Andes – the eastern, central, and western branches.



We had intended to make a quick stop in Ipiales, the last Colombian city, before crossing the border to Ecuador, but, as it often happens while traveling, the quick stop didn't go exactly as planned. The place was packed with people so finding parking was a challenge, and as we were getting out of Taco Libre, an older man came running over asking for a wrench! He assumed that given the size of our car and our setup, we would have tools on hand – and he wasn't wrong!



We helped him out, and then visited *El Santuario de la Lajas*, a basilica that is perched over a deep gorge with a bridge that connects the sanctuary to the road making it seem as it's floating over the river. The history of the sanctuary goes back to the 18th century when locals reported miraculous sightings of the Virgin Mary on a rock wall of the canyon.



We were hoping for a miracle ourselves during our first border crossing: it was a three-day weekend, we were running late, many people cross the Rumichaca Colombia/Ecuador border during the holidays, and Mafe had her “passport issue” on her mind since her Colombian passport had not been stamped upon arrival to the country. In short, we were expecting a chaotic, stressful border crossing and the opposite was (mostly) true. Crossing at

Rumichaca was quick, organized, and completely hassle-free, no long lines, no confusion, and no real issues. Other than, of course, the Colombian immigration agent reminded Mafe that as a Colombian she has to enter the country with the Colombian passport! YES YES YES! She knows that!!! Overall, it was a surprisingly smooth start to our Ecuadorian adventure

Our first stop was Quito, and it completely captivated us! We have visited many small colonial towns and villages across Latin America – during this trip alone, places like Barichara, Mompós, and Cartagena – but we’ve never seen a *capital city* that has managed to preserve its colonial soul the way Quito has. In contrast to the charming colonial towns, Quito isn’t necessarily a tourist destination. It’s a working capital, full of life and energy. Walking through the main plaza, you see normal day-to-day life unfolding all around you, locals hanging out, people going to work, and street vendors selling everything imaginable. At one point, a vendor tried to sell Scott an angle grinder right in the middle of the plaza!



In the heart of Quito, the main plaza, *La Plaza de la Independencia*, or *Plaza Grande*, is striking. The government buildings are all white and elegant against the backdrop of the mountains. At the center stands the presidential palace, guarded by soldiers dressed in traditional uniforms, standing still and formal, much like the guards in London. The entire Centro Histórico stretches for blocks and blocks, with colorful facades, flowered decorated balconies, with several plazas – *Plaza de Santo Domingo*, *Plaza de San Francisco*, *Plaza de San Blas*, *Plaza de La Merced*, just to name a few – each with a beautiful church. The churches are crowned with colorful and unique domes, and intricate wood carvings in the doors.

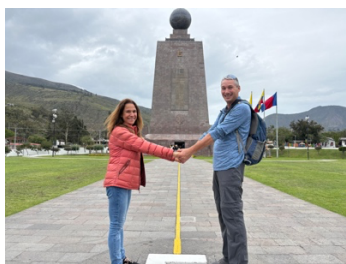


And of course, there is the imposing *Basilica del Voto Nacional*, the largest neo-Gothic basilica in the Americas. It is about 460 feet in length, taking over an entire city block, and 378 feet tall or the equivalent of a 35-story building. It is one of the most iconic structures in the city known for its towering spires, gargoyles shaped like animals, and panoramic views.

And speaking of views, because Quito sits high in the middle of the Andes, every steep hill reveals a colorful street with a background of the magnificent mountains surrounding the city. We turned on one corner and said, “wow! *this is the most beautiful street*” then turned onto another and said the same thing. After hours of walking the *Centro Histórico*, the Historic Center, we realized it wasn’t just a few charming spots, Quito is, without a doubt, the most beautiful Latin American capital city we’ve visited.

During our stay in Quito, we stayed at an Airbnb in a charming colonial building with a view of *El Panecillo* cerro – the hill that divides the *Centro Historico* from the southern part of the city. On it, sits the statue of *La Virgen del Panecillo*, the Panecillo Virgen.

Because the mountains are such a big part of the city, only 20 minutes away from downtown, you can be lost in nature. A short ride up the teleférico to *el paso de la muerte* (the passage of death) located at the Pichincha Summit, and you find yourself surrounded by the silence of nature, and if you're lucky (as one of us was) you might even spot a condor soaring above. Seeing one in this area feels almost mythical, with the big city not far, and in plain view, yet the Andes solemn bird makes his appearance.



While in Quito, we took a day trip to the famous *Mitad del Mundo*, the monument marking latitude 0. Standing there, right on the equator, we couldn't resist standing on each hemisphere, Scott on the northern and Mafe on the southern. It felt symbolic, yes, technically, we are both from the northern hemisphere, as Colombia is north of the Equator, but we always think of ourselves as Scott from the north, Mafe from the south, and here we literally met right in the middle of the world!

After a few unforgettable days in Quito, we began our drive south toward Cuenca, winding through the spine of the Andes. Along the way, we stopped at Cotopaxi, a snow-capped volcano with an almost perfect conical shape, rising to nearly 19,300 feet, making it one of the highest active volcanoes in the world, with small eruptions as recent as 2022. We were lucky to see it in its full glory, as the clouds came and went, wrapping around the peak and revealing it again, adding to the drama of the view.



As we continued driving, the landscape began to change. The mountains grew darker in color, with deep greens, browns and the slopes became steeper. That is the magic about the Andes mountains, they take a life of their own with each turn.

Scattered along these imposing mountains were countless small towns, built on the hillsides. We found ourselves constantly oscillating between 8,000 and 11,000 feet, climbing and descending through the Andes. At times, we were so high that the clouds hovered below us, spread across the valleys like soft wispy cotton strands.

About halfway between Quito and Cuenca, we encountered our first roadblock of the trip. A group of local Indigenous people, wearing masks, which put us on edge, asking for money. They claimed the road was a “private road” and we needed to pay a toll to continue. We were driving on the Panamerican Highway, which is not a “private road,” but within the PanAm there was a small detour due to landslides. This small detour was enough for them to demand a toll! We handed them a dollar, exchanged smiles, and carried on.

So far, Ecuador and its people (despite the roadblock) have captivated us. We are finding ourselves with curiosity and a deep desire to continue to explore this beautiful country. We cannot wait to discover the next spot... Cuenca!

November 15, 2025

