Ecuador's Tren Crucero makes part of the scenic 280-mile journey pulled by six steam engines. Passengers see volcanoes, visit an authentic market and more. Ecuador's Tren Crucero journey begins on the official Tren Ecuador website (ecuadorbytrain.com/trainecuador/crucero) by filling out the contact form.

Venture from mountain capital to coastal city on Ecuador's Tren Crucero

By KAREN CATCHPOLE

Quito, Ecuador — Not long after pulling out of the train station in the high-altitude Andean city of Quito, we rounded a nearly 90-degree curve and entered the cozy confines of a train painted on the concrete wall of a school. The still-nostalgic sound of a train slowly gathering speed, smiling faces appeared around corners, on balconies and at trackside. Children were lifted high in the air, hands waved wildly. The future of Ecuador was passing.

The train route follows Ecuador's snow-capped cones. We rolled past which is home to nine other often so-called Avenue of the Volcanoes, by migrating birds. We looped past a wetland frequent-
ed by landslides. Its business had been destroyed one too many times. By 1980, Ecuador's rails and rolling stock had been abandoned after being destroyed too many times by landslides. Robinson had switched to a growing road network.

Recently, Ecuador increasingly tourism-doomed government saw potential in the crumbling railway infrastructure. Since 2009, nearly $100 million has been invested in refurbishing stations, upgrading track and adding cars and routes.

The flagship service is the Tren Crucero (Train Cruise) route, a one-day, three-night, 280-mile journey from Quito's terminal to Guayaquil in the lowlands on the Pacific coast at sea level (260 feet). The route only opened in 2011, but my journey was filled with travelers from Argentina, the U.S. Germany, southern Peru and Ecuador. Most of them thought the train was going to be too slow. They were wrong. In four custom-designed cars had plush tables and chairs for 36, a bar, open-air observation cars and attentive staff. I soon became aware that the many scheduled side trips, during which we got off the train and hiked waiting throngs, would be the Ecuadorian adventure.

Volcanoes and views

Even before a book, the 26-foot Cotopaxi Volcano, the second highest peak in the country, dominates the landscape as we drove through Cotopaxi National Park on the first hour of our side trips. We spotted wild horses and climbed higher, having wobbly pins bounded and entering the narrow, twisty asphalt tunnels. At 12,200 feet, we reached Lake Laphantango, where we drank hot, slightly better tea to assist in acclimatization before we rolled a 6.5-mile loop trail around a wetland frequented by migrating birds.

The train route follows Robinson's so-called because of the Volcanos, which is home to nine other often snow-capped cones. We rolled past hulking volcanoes and through the serene fields of the highland valleys where Andean woman passed in their fine work to smile at the pass-
ing train. We dropped down through stands of evergreen forest and further still to the dusty, ochre-brown tropical jungle of the lowlands.

I wanted the train to travel even slower than its 12 mph average speed to give me more time to take it all in.

An authentic market

At the Lasso train station, a small troupe of dancers performed in traditional costumes, including huge feathered hats and feathers and bright ribbons. This performance felt like an espe-
cially colorful and confusing school performance. We knew we were nearing the Pacific coast when we arrived at the open-air market in Guayaquil, locals were hag-
ging for the best price on a new ma-
chete or plastic shoes or guinea pigs. The latter were being sold in fluffy, squirming burlap at the bottom of dry coke for about 50 cents until they shrank to large eyes to snack. I heard that they were prepared and served in the train station as an edu-
cational charity called but Coke was not on the menu, but the strips of past-
churros were surprisingly tender.

At 8,800 feet, the highest point on the Tren Crucero route, we pulled into the Illiniza station, where we ate lunch that day was prepared and served in the train station by an edu-
cational charity called Inti Sisa. They're large enough to eat. They're eaten for guinea pigs at the outdoor market in Guamote.

Locals haggle for guinea pigs at the outdoor market in Guamote.

When you go

Wear layers, including a rain jacket. Carry daily essentials in a small pack. Your luggage will not be accessible while you need your hotel. Personal lockers are available onboard the train storage area.

To increase your chances of views of the belt of copper and green of the Pacific on the journey, book passage between June and August, when skies are clearest.

Train cars are equipped with ample electrical outlets for recharging your devices, but be aware that they are 220 volt.

Fifteen dramatic minutes later, we reached the Devil's Nose, a narrow gauge, single track line which is supposed to be navigable on foot, let alone on train. For the train to travel up or down the 75-mile stretch, a route had to be blasted out of the rock. Train cars are equipped with ample electrical outlets for recharging your devices, but be aware that they are 220 volt.

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