



Photos by Eric Mohl/Horizon Writers' Group

Ecuador's **Tren Crucero** makes part of the scenic 280-mile journey pulled by steam engines. Passengers see volcanoes, visit an authentic market and more.

# Cross the Andes in luxury

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

By **KAREN CATCHPOLE**  
Horizon Writers' Group

**Q**UITO, Ecuador — Not long after pulling out of the train station in the high-altitude Andean city of Quito, we passed a nearly life-size mural of a train painted on the concrete wall of a school. Attracted by the still-novel 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.

Ecuador's train network was dreamed up by conservative politician Gabriel García Moreno to unite the country and was completed in 1908 by his liberal rival, Eloy Alfaro. By 1980, Ecuador's rails and rolling stock had been abandoned after being destroyed one too many times by landslides. Its business had switched to a growing road network.

Recently, Ecuador's increasingly tourism-focused government saw potential in the crumbling railway infrastructure. Since 2008, nearly \$300 million has been invested in refurbishing stations, repairing track and adding cars and routes.

The flagship service is the Tren Crucero (Train Cruise) route, a four-day, three-night, 280-mile journey from Quito in the northern central highlands at 9,350 feet, all the way down to Guayaquil in the lowlands on the Pacific coast at sea level (or vice versa).

The route only opened in 2013, but my journey was filled with travelers from Argentina, the U.S., Germany, Switzerland and Ecuador. Most of us thought the train itself was going to be the highlight of our adventure. Its four custom-designed cars had plush tables and chairs for 54, a bar, open-air observation caboose and attentive staff. It soon became apparent that the many scheduled side trips, during which we all got off the train and boarded waiting buses, would be the real Ecuadorean adventure.

## Volcanoes and views

Even cloaked in clouds, the 19,347-foot Cotopaxi Volcano, the second highest peak in the country, dominated the landscape as we drove through Cotopaxi National Park on the first of our side trips. We spotted wild horses and climbed higher, leaving scrubby pines behind and entering the marshy, treeless alpine tundra.

At 12,598 feet, we reached Lake Limpiopungo, where we downed hot, slightly bitter tea to assist in acclimatization before we walked a 1.6-mile loop trail around a wetland frequented by migrating birds.

The train route follows Ecuador's so-called Avenue of the Volcanoes, which is home to nine other often snow-capped cones. We rolled past hulking volcanoes and through the

fertile fields of the highland valleys where Andean women paused in their farm work to smile at the passing train. We dropped down through stands of eucalyptus and farther still to the steamy, orchid-laced tropical jungle of the lowlands.

I wanted the train to travel even slower than its 13 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 headdresses covered in small mirrors, dyed feathers and bright ribbon. This performance felt a bit like an especially colorful and confusing school play, but the performers' passion was real.

When we arrived at the open-air market in Guamote, locals were haggling for the best price on a new machete or plastic shoes or guinea pigs. The latter were being sold in fluffy, squirming heaps at the bottom of deep sacks for about \$5 each. In Spanish, guinea pigs are called *cuy* and raised in many homes until they're large enough to eat.

Lunch that day was prepared and served in the train station by an educational charity called Inti Sisa. *Cuy* was not on the menu, but the strips of pan-seared llama were surprisingly tender.

At 11,800 feet, the highest point on the Tren Crucero route, we pulled into the Urbina station, where we met

the Ice Man. Balthazar Oscar has been hiking up to the ice fields on the flanks of the 20,564-foot Chimborazo Volcano since he was a boy to bring down 40-pound blocks of ice to sell in the market. At 69, Oscar still collects ice twice a week, but these days he only gets \$5 per block. It's a dying trade, he explained.

The Tren Crucero does not have sleeper cars. Instead, passengers disembark each night and travel a short distance by private bus to one of Ecuador's many historic hacienda hotels such as Hacienda La Cienega, which hosted geographer and explorer Sir Alexander von Humboldt in 1802.

## Negotiating the Devil's Nose

Ecuador's original railway system was built by 4,000 laborers brought in from Jamaica and Puerto Rico. Nearly 3,000 of them died; some say as many as 2,000 were killed while constructing one section alone. The Nariz del Diablo (Devil's Nose) was thus named because of its macabre legacy and noselike shape of this imposing, jagged rock.

We reached the Devil's Nose, undoubtedly the engineering highlight of the Tren Crucero adventure, near the end of the journey. As the rock came into view, it did not appear to be navigable on foot, let alone on rails. For the train to travel up or down this 7.5-mile stretch, a route had to be blasted out of the rock. Track was laid in a Z-shape, creating a series of three extreme switchbacks, which the train tackled at low speed and only after its brakes had been thoroughly checked.

At times, the ground below was not visible from onboard, which created an eerie feeling of floating. Fifteen dramatic minutes later, we had descended 1,640 feet, the Devil's Nose was safely behind us and it was smooth running through the flat, hot lowlands to our final destination by the Pacific.



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 until you reach your hotel. Personal lockers onboard the train make storage easy.
- To increase your chances of views of the epic volcanoes that surround you, 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.
- Further track upgrades are underway to allow the heavy Tren Crucero cars to reach the station in Quito. However, lovely but more basic rolling stock is used in and out of Quito, and the deluxe Tren Crucero cars are boarded on the morning of day two. Tren Crucero cars are expected to be used for the full route starting in December.
- Tren Crucero service is offered in January, February, March, June, July, August and December. Reserve passage — \$1,270 per adult, including all ground transportation (train and bus), all meals (excluding alcohol), all excursions and activities and nightly hacienda accommodation — at the Tren Ecuador website ([ecuadorbytrain.com/trainecuador/crucero](http://ecuadorbytrain.com/trainecuador/crucero)) by filling out the contact form.



**Tren Crucero** is a luxury tourist train that takes passengers on a four-day journey from the mountains to the Pacific.



Crew members conduct safety checks before Tren Crucero navigates the notorious Devil's Nose via a series of extreme switchbacks.