



## BACKGROUND

### Land and Climate

Ecuador is just smaller than Nevada, covering 109,483 square miles (283,560 square kilometers). The country is located on, and named after, the equator. Ecuador has four major geographic regions: La Costa (coastal lowlands), which contains rich agricultural land; La Sierra (Andean highlands), with snowcapped mountains; El Oriente (eastern lowlands), beginning at the eastern Andean foothills and containing mostly tropical rain forest; and the Archipiélago de Colón (or Galápagos Islands), a group of islands in the Pacific about 600 miles (966 kilometers) off the coast. Charles Darwin developed his theories of evolution based on his observations of Galápagos wildlife. Ecuador is subject to earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. The country has 31 active volcanoes; many of them are near Quito, which is surrounded by the Avenue of the Volcanoes. The two highest peaks are Chimborazo at 20,561 feet (6,267 meters) and Cotopaxi at 19,347 feet (5,897 meters).

The climate varies with elevation more than with season, but the rainy season is generally from November to May. The driest months are June to September. The coastal lowlands are hot and humid, while the highlands include everything from subtropical valleys to frigid mountains. Quito's temperature averages 71°F (22°C) all year. Temperatures in the Galápagos Islands average 76°F (24°C). The rain forest, part of the upper Amazon Basin, has a tropical climate. Ecuador is located at the center of the El Niño weather pattern, which periodically causes destructive floods and mud slides, and is often

followed by the La Niña weather pattern, which causes drought.

### History

Various groups of indigenous peoples, whose ancestors first inhabited Ecuador, were conquered in the latter 1400s by Incas from the south. The Incan Empire ruled the area until the Spanish conquered it in 1534. The Spanish claimed vast tracts of land and enslaved the local people. Nearly three hundred years later, Antonio José de Sucre, a compatriot of Simón Bolívar, led a military campaign against the Spaniards. Ecuador gained its independence in 1822 and became part of *Gran Colombia*, a federation led by Bolívar that was dissolved a few years later. Ecuador declared itself a republic in 1830.

In 1941, Peru and Ecuador battled over ownership of an area in the southern Amazon region then controlled by Ecuador. A 1942 treaty granted Peru most of the territory, but because the territory in question was largely unmapped and the treaty denied Ecuador access to vital mineral wealth and the Amazon River system, the country later rejected it. The two neighbors continued exchanging hostilities from time to time. A January 1995 clash lasted for several days before international observers helped negotiate a settlement. A final agreement was signed in October 1998, granting Ecuador a small portion of land as well as navigation rights on some rivers in Peru.

Between 1830 and 1948, Ecuador had 62 presidents, dictators, and military leaders. In 1948, Galo Plaza Lasso became the first freely elected president to serve a full term. Civilian governments alternated with military rule until 1979,

when a new constitution allowed for a freely elected president.

The 1996 elections marked Ecuador's fifth consecutive peaceful transition of power. Abdalá Bucaram, nicknamed *El Loco* (the Madman), won the presidency, promising to help Ecuador's poor. But in 1997, Congress voted to remove Bucaram for "mental incapacity" and charged him with corruption. An interim leader, Jamil Mahuad, was elected president in 1998, only to be ousted by a military coup in 2000 and replaced by his vice president, Gustavo Noboa.

In 2002, Lucio Gutierrez was elected president, and he began the difficult task of stabilizing Ecuador's economy and maintaining order in the face of widespread discontent. However, in 2006 Congress voted the unpopular Gutierrez from office for his firing of several Supreme Court judges who didn't support him. Vice President Alfredo Palacio served as interim president until 2006 elections brought left-leaning independent Rafael Correa to power. Correa aims to fight political corruption by rewriting Ecuador's constitution and to improve the lives of Ecuador's poor. In October 2010, a state of emergency was declared when Correa was briefly taken hostage by members of the police force. He was freed by military forces 10 hours later.

## THE PEOPLE

### Population

Ecuador's population of about 14.8 million is growing at roughly 1.5 percent annually. The majority (65 percent) is mestizo (of mixed indigenous and Spanish heritage). Indigenous peoples, whose culture differs from that of mainstream society, comprise about 25 percent of the population. Another 7 percent is of Spanish descent, and 3 percent is black. Quito, the capital, is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the Western Hemisphere and is home to almost 2 million people. But the largest city is Guayaquil, which has more than 2 million residents. Approximately 67 percent of all Ecuadorians live in urban areas.

### Language

Spanish is Ecuador's official language, although Kichwa (also known as Quichua or Quechua) is spoken by highland Indian groups, including the Kichwa, Saraguro, Otavalan, Cañari, and Chimborazo. Kichwa is recognized by the constitution as an important part of Ecuadorian culture, but it is not an official language. Many Kichwa words have been adopted into colloquial language to supplement the Spanish vocabulary. Indigenous groups (Shuar, Auca, Cofan, Cecoya, Cayapa, and Colorado) in other regions speak their own languages. Many people from these groups are bilingual in a native tongue and Spanish. Spanish tends to be spoken faster on the coast than in the highlands. Some consonants are pronounced differently between the two regions.

### Religion

While the constitution guarantees religious freedom, roughly 95 percent of Ecuadorians belong to the Catholic Church.

Many national and local holidays/festivals center on the Catholic faith. Rituals such as baptism, First Communion, and confirmation are celebrated in the community, as well as among family. Many other Christian churches are growing in popularity, and people generally are tolerant of other beliefs.

### General Attitudes

Ecuador encompasses a great diversity of cultures. In addition to ethnic differences, there are regional differences that tend to influence politics and internal relations. *Serranos* (people from highland areas, including Quito) are considered more formal, conservative, and reserved than *Costeños* (coastal inhabitants). *Costeños* are considered cosmopolitan, open, and liberal; they generally are the businesspeople of Ecuador. *Serranos* are associated with government and banks. The two groups, political rivals, distrust each other in many respects but are united in others. A common trait of all Ecuadorians is the value they place on familial relationships and responsibilities. People are warm and hospitable. Relationships generally take precedence over schedules.

A certain sentimentality is evident in popular songs and in the practice of exchanging or giving *recuerdos* (tokens of affection or remembrance). Oratory and leadership skills are admired, as are loyalty and honesty. Occupation, wealth, and family name indicate social status.

Long marginalized, indigenous groups have begun to organize themselves to regain lost rights, press for environmental protection of their lands, and achieve recognition for their language and culture. Today, there is greater contact and cooperation between indigenous peoples and other Ecuadorians than in the past. Still, most indigenous peoples who remain in their home regions (and many who move to urban areas) retain strong, traditional cultural identities.

### Personal Appearance

In urban areas, many Ecuadorians wear standard Western-style clothing. Older women tend to prefer skirts, while younger women often wear pants. Every rural region has its own traditional styles, colors, and fabrics. These clothes are worn by rural and indigenous peoples. Women from these groups usually wear skirts and often wear hats—made of straw in coastal areas and wool or leather in the highlands. Generally, *Costeños* and members of some indigenous groups wear bright colors (white, yellow, and red), while *Serranos* prefer blues, browns, and blacks. Special celebrations call for new clothing, either purchased at a store or, more often, made by local tailors.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

### Greetings

People usually shake hands when first introduced. A handshake is also used in subsequent greetings, along with the exchange of good wishes. In rural areas particularly, one offers the wrist or arm rather than the hand when one's hands are soiled. Close friends greet with what seems like a kiss on the cheek—they actually touch cheeks while "kissing the air."

Men may embrace if well acquainted. It is customary to address a new acquaintance by title (*Señor, Señora, Doctor, Doctora, etc.*). Among friends, the title *Don* or *Doña*, followed by the first name, is a common greeting indicating respect and friendship.

Typical greetings include *Buenos días* (Good day) and *¿Cómo está?* (How are you?). It is courteous to greet people in small stores or restaurants, or when passing on rural roads. Friends commonly greet each other with *Hola* (Hello). After a long absence, one might greet another with *¿Cómo has pasado?* (How have you been?).

### Gestures

Ecuadorians often use gestures to emphasize or replace verbal communication. During conversation, a person might touch another person of the same sex to show friendly concern. Drawing a circle or two in the air with the index finger means “I’ll be back.” To indicate “Sorry, the bus is full” or “Sorry, we’re out of tomatoes” or anything along that line, a person sticks out the hand, as if to shake hands, and twists it almost as if waving. Yawning in public, whistling or yelling to get someone’s attention, and pointing with the index finger are considered impolite. Ecuadorians might point by puckering or pursing the lips. One can also indicate “up the road” by lifting the chin, and “down the road” by lowering the chin.

### Visiting

Relatives and friends usually visit for a meal and conversation. Unannounced visits are common and welcomed. If unexpected guests arrive during mealtime, they will be offered a full meal. Otherwise, they typically are offered something to drink. Refusing a meal, drink, or other refreshments generally is impolite. Hosts often offer departing guests a small gift of fruit, candy, or something else on hand. *Dios le pague* (God will repay you) is a common expression of thanks for a gift or an invitation. When inviting a guest to visit, the host will state the starting time, but specifying an ending time is considered bad taste. Instead, an ending time is generally understood depending on the nature of the visit. Guests are not expected to arrive on time and can be anywhere from 10 minutes to an hour late, depending on the event. This tendency to arrive late is jokingly referred to as *La hora Ecuatoriana* (Ecuadorian time). Dinner guests usually stay for conversation rather than leaving right after the meal.

Evening socials and parties might extend past midnight. They usually involve eating, dancing, and drinking. Furniture is placed near the wall so everyone, including children, can dance in the middle of the main room. The hosts serve refreshments on trays; guests do not serve themselves from a central location. A late meal usually is served, after which some guests may stay for more socializing. At small gatherings, arriving guests greet each person individually. The host introduces people who are not yet acquainted. If guests fail to greet acquaintances, it shows disrespect for the relationship. When leaving, one also says good-bye to each individual. Less formal customs are becoming the norm among the younger generation. For instance, young people often greet a whole group rather than each individual.

### Eating

Food and eating habits play an important part in Ecuadorian culture. Each holiday is associated with a special kind of food and every town has a specialty dish. Mealtime is considered a good time for conversation—catching up, doing business, or socializing. At family meals, the mother generally serves food to the father first, followed by male children and then female children (who help prepare and serve the meal). The mother will eat only after everyone else has been attended to. Guests usually are served first and receive the largest amount and choicest cuts of food. Taking leftovers home is acceptable; leaving food on the plate is not. It is customary to say *Buen provecho* (roughly, *Bon appétit*) before beginning a meal. One should thank the person who prepared the meal before excusing oneself from the table. A host who invites a guest to a restaurant is expected to pay for the meal. Young people often split a bill.

## LIFESTYLE

### Family

Families generally are close-knit. The elderly are respected and treated well, and several generations may live under the same roof. While most families follow traditional roles, urban families are changing since more women now work outside the home and more men share household duties. Still, mothers remain the emotional center of the family, and they are honored for their primary role of raising children. Many songs are devoted to mothers, and cities typically have a park or monument dedicated to motherhood. Instead of living with their parents until they marry, children now commonly leave to get an education or to work. Urban families average two children, while rural families average three children or more.

### Housing

The style and quality of housing in Ecuador varies sharply by region. Housing in La Costa tends to be quite basic and, with the notable exception of Guayaquill, does not boast the lavish Spanish architectural styles that are typical of the housing of the mountainous Sierra region. Coastal houses are typically square, single-storey buildings. Lacking space inside, inhabitants make the most of their roofs, which they often enclose with low walls. They also use the space behind their house for gardening, washing, and other normal household routines. In El Oriente, the area that is mostly tropical rain forest, dwellings often consist simply of woven palm fronds on a wooden frame. Houses like these provide very little privacy and not much protection from the elements.

### Dating and Marriage

Dating usually begins in groups, when young people get together for dances or other activities. As couples begin to pair off, a girl must ask for her parents' approval when invited out. In more conservative regions, the young man must visit with the girl's parents to gain approval.

Women usually marry by age 23 (younger in some rural areas), and men around age 25. Families often emphasize that young people should complete their education before

marrying. Many urban couples do not live together before their church wedding, even if they have already been legally married. Common-law marriage, which is referred to as *estilo manabita*, happens frequently and is accepted as a legal marriage in rural, coastal areas (Manabi is a coastal region). For most of these unions, the ceremony is lacking only because of the expense of a wedding.

### Life Cycle

The most important events in an Ecuadorian's life tend to be centered around Catholic traditions. The first is baptism, which occurs within the first three years of a child's life. A celebration, usually attended by the entire extended family, follows the baptismal ceremony. Confirmation is similarly significant. During the confirmation party, guests congratulate the child and give presents. Sometimes, the guests themselves are given a small gift to commemorate the day.

Like girls in many other Latin American countries, Ecuadorian girls enjoy a big celebration, or *quinceañera* (coming-out party), on their fifteenth birthday. First, a Catholic ceremony officially presents the girl to society. If the family can afford it, a party with food and drink follows. Many girls do not begin dating until after age 15.

### Diet

The main meal is eaten at midday. Serranos favor corn and potatoes, while Costeños favor rice, beans, and several varieties of bananas. Fresh fruits abound. Chicken, beef, and fish (on the coast) are dietary staples. Soup is almost always served at both the midday and evening meals. Hot bread is a popular afternoon snack. Some favorite dishes include *arroz con pollo* (fried chicken with rice), *locro* (soup with potatoes, cheese, and avocados), *llapingachos* (cheese and potato cakes), *ceviche* (raw or cooked seafood marinated in lime and served with onions, tomatoes, and spices). Ecuadorians also enjoy *fritada* (fried pork), *empanadas* (pastries filled with meat or cheese), *arroz con menestra* (rice with spicy beans, barbecued beef, and plantains), *caldo de bola* (plantain-based soup with meat and vegetables), and *cuy* (roast guinea pig).

### Recreation

Nationally, *fútbol* (soccer) is the favorite sport, followed by volleyball and basketball. Others include tennis, running, and boxing. Ecuadorian volleyball (*Ecuavolley*) is played with a heavy ball with three players on each side. Visiting and sightseeing are common leisure activities. People in coastal areas take advantage of nearby beaches. Many Ecuadorians participate in community groups (women's clubs, church groups, or sports clubs) and *mingas* (community improvement projects).

### The Arts

Ecuador's music and dance reflect a mixing of cultures. String and wind instruments such as bamboo flutes and *rondadors* (panpipes) characterize indigenous music. "El Condor Pasa" is a traditional song from the highlands. Other folk music includes the *yumbo*, *pasacalle*, and *pasillo* (which has slow, waltz-like rhythms). The *bomba* is a rhythmic dance with African influences. Teens and young adults often gather at

discos, where salsa music and dancing are particularly popular.

Folk arts are diverse and vary by region. Many people weave items such as carpets, bags, sashes, and Panama hats, which can take months to complete. Some make wood carvings of saints or Christ. Decorative crosses, musical instruments, jewelry, and leather work are other native arts.

### Holidays

Ecuadorians mark the new year by burning images, or effigies, of the old year in the streets on New Year's Eve. These effigies represent problems they do not want to reencounter in the coming year. They celebrate the *Carnaval* season (in February or March) by dousing each other with water. *Carnaval* culminates in a weekend festival of parades, dances, and parties. Easter, Labor Day (1 May), and the Battle of Pichincha (24 May), which marks Ecuador's liberation, are all national holidays.

*Inti Raymi* (Festival of the Sun) occurs in June. Celebrations are held throughout Latin America, and one of the largest takes place at the Incan ruins near Cuenca, Ecuador. It features dancing and draws indigenous groups from throughout Ecuador and other countries. Independence of Quito Day (10 Aug.) celebrates the nation's first efforts (in 1809) to gain independence. Independence of Guayaquil is celebrated 9 October. On All Souls' Day (2 Nov.) people visit cemeteries, eat bread-dough dolls, and drink *colada morada* (a thick drink made with berries, sweet spices, and purple flour). Communities celebrate Christmas and Easter with reenactments of religious events. Each city holds festivities marking the anniversary of its founding.

## SOCIETY

### Government

The executive branch of the Republic of Ecuador consists of a president (Rafael Correa) and vice president (Lenín Moreno). The unicameral legislature has 124 members elected by provinces. Elections are held every four years. All literate citizens ages 18 to 65 are required by law to vote. Voting is optional for other citizens. A number of political parties are active; the largest include the Democratic Left, Popular Democratic, Roldosista, Christian Democratic, and Social Christian parties. A new constitution adopted in 2008 extended presidential powers and granted broader powers to the federal government.

### Economy

Ecuador's economy is slowly pulling itself out of its worst economic crisis in decades. The economy was devastated by natural disasters, low prices for oil and bananas, problems in the banking sector, and huge foreign deficits. However, rising oil prices, dollarization of the monetary system, and increased foreign investment have helped the economy. Nevertheless, unemployment is high and underemployment is extensive. Inflation has lowered but remains high. Foreign investment and trade are growing but are hampered by the uncertain political climate. The unstable economic situation spurred

many Ecuadorians to search for work abroad. The economy relies heavily on remittances from these workers.

Nearly half of the government's budget goes toward servicing debt. More than half of the population lives in poverty. The country's substantial military spending is, therefore, a much-debated issue. The economic crisis has led to a general lack of faith in the government and increased the perception of foreign dependence. In March 2000, the U.S. dollar (USD) became Ecuador's currency, replacing the *sucre* (ECS).

Roughly one-third of the population is employed in agriculture. Ecuador is the world's biggest banana exporter. Petroleum accounts for almost half of the nation's exports, followed by coffee, bananas, cocoa, shrimp, and fish. Fluctuations in global market prices for these products have a major impact on Ecuador's economy.

### Transportation and Communications

In cities, transportation is provided by buses, taxis, and *colectivos* (minibuses that are more comfortable and faster than buses). In rural areas, *colectivos* are known as *busetas*. Roads connecting cities have been improved and about half are paved. Seaports provide shipping access to other nations. Air travel both to and within Ecuador is increasing. Most urban homes and many rural homes include a television and radio. Private telephones are much more common in upper-class and urban homes. Cities and towns generally have a pay-phone center where people can make local or long-distance calls. Newspapers are readily available in towns and cities.

### Education

Beginning at age six, children attend six years of mandatory education. The school day lasts from 7 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. or from 1 to 6 p.m. Students usually wear uniforms. The government controls both public and private educational institutions. The main language of instruction is Spanish. However, in communities with high indigenous populations, schools may use both Spanish and indigenous languages. The education system is comprised of nursery schools, kindergartens, rural and urban primary schools, secondary and vocational schools, special-education schools, and night schools. There are also 21 universities, the largest of which is in Quito and has around 45,000 students. Tuition is waived for various disciplines at state universities. Illiteracy is decreasing slowly as more children enroll in primary schools. Approximately 60 to 70 percent of school-aged children complete their primary education, but this percentage is lower in rural areas. Family economic need, inadequate facilities, and lack of personnel in rural areas contribute to the dropout rate.

### Health

The government provides medical care to all citizens at low (and sometimes no) cost to the patient. However, healthcare professionals, facilities, and equipment are concentrated in urban areas. Those who can afford it might go to a private clinic or doctor. The country still battles diseases such as typhoid, cholera, polio, malaria, and yellow fever. Dengue

fever is carried by mosquitoes in some coastal areas. Only about half of the rural population has access to safe drinking water. With improved medical care, the infant mortality rate has been cut nearly in half over the last decade.

## AT A GLANCE

### Contact Information

Embassy of the Republic of Ecuador, 2535 15th Street NW, Washington, DC 20009; phone (202) 234-7200; web site [www.ecuador.org](http://www.ecuador.org).

### POPULATION & AREA

Population	14,790,608 (rank=65)
Area, sq. mi.	109,483 (rank=74)
Area, sq. km.	283,560

### DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	77 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	86 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$7,600
Adult literacy rate	92% (male); 90% (female)
Infant mortality rate	20 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	73 (male); 79 (female)

\*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

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