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Volcanoes and vegetables: Tales from Equador

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A pint-sized dish of cevichocho, served on the street in Otavalo, sparked one of those ah-hah moments so unexpected it caught me unawares.

By the time we - the three of us - parked near the town's famous craft market, lunch time had come and gone. Heading down the block we passed a group of teenagers in school uniforms crowded around a food stall, gulping down what looked like fast-food. And whatever it was in those bowls - unidentified juicy bits - it made my mouth water.

"What is this stuff," I asked Paul Aguilar, our guide, who after four days touring us around Ecuador was now more friend than hired help. Peering over the counter I looked at the seller in the wrinkled apron and at the bowls of chopped ingredients and for a second, wondered if street food was a good idea. Still, I was curious. And hungry.

"Do you really want to try it?" said Aguilar, raising his eyebrows. A veteran guide, he knew tourists were about street food. And in Ecuador, cevichocho was the street version of a Big Mac. "If you're sure," he said doubtfully.

Deftly piling chopped red and yellow tomatoes, toasted popcorn, red onions, white lupine beans and cilantro in the bowl, he filled it full. Then he sprinkled lime over the mix, doused it with extra juice from the tomatoes and topped it with bits of sliced chicken. And handed it over.

I hesitated, took a bite, and it was.... heavenly! No wonder those kids look so healthy, I said to myself. They're snacking on vegetables.

"What did I tell you," said Steve, my husband, grabbing a photo. "Ecuador isn't anything like Kansas."

Ask me about the European "discovery" and settlement of North America and I can quote chapter and verse. But ask about Ecuador's cultural heritage or colonial history and I'm lost. To my shame, I know more about Turkey than Ecuador.

Where then, in this country on the Equator, would a traveler find links to the past? Living links, too, not museum exhibits. We started in Quito, the capital - as you will - because this is where most flights arrive. And Quito is old, founded in 1534, just 42 years after Columbus "discovered" America. Perched at 9,000 feet elevation on a hill between the east and west ranges of the Andes Mountains, it lies at the foot of Guagua Pichincha, 15,820-foot high and one of Ecuador's 30 active volcanoes.

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Twenty years ago, when I was here before, blowing through town on a two-day stopover, the city, tired and dirty, was lingering on life support. Ecuador's currency, the sucre, was nearly worthless. Since then the patient has recovered. On March 13, 2002, Ecuador adopted the U.S. dollar, stabilizing the economy. Today the heart of the old city has been scrubbed and painted, its buildings restored or - comically - hidden behind convincing facades.

Abundant lighting illuminates the cobblestone streets at night, trash vanishes in a twinkling, and public squares sport benches, grass and flowers. Purse snatching in the old quarter disappeared overnight when the streets were converted to pedestrian traffic only from dusk to dawn. Looking down out of my hotel room after dinner, I could see and hear couples and families walking past.

As for history, we found it in Independence Square, where old men and visitors sit in the sun at the foot of Liberty besting the snarling Spanish lion. It lives in Quito's monumental, painted, gold-swathed churches and monasteries, where - on the Sunday I was there - the pews were packed and late comers stood in the side aisles under dark paintings of tortured saints.

But Quito was only the beginning. When I first put Ecuador on my wish-list, it was the historic haciendas I wanted to visit. Originally land grants, these vast ranches boast illustrious family pedigrees and long traditions. Surely, I thought, the pioneers who tamed Ecuador's frontiers faced the same challenges as their North American counterparts - farmers, ranchers and plantation owners - did.

When a friend recommended EQ Touring, a Quito and Miami-based travel outfit specializing in Ecuador, we asked for an individual trip to the haciendas near Quito, traveling on scenic country roads. Curious about Ecuador's dramatic geography - on the equator but up in the clouds - I wanted to get close to some of those ice-clad volcanoes and 13,000-foot farm fields.

The final itinerary included hacienda reservations, a car and two top-notch guides (Cynthia Cabezas in Quito and Paul Aguilar for the rest of the trip). It also included a visit to Cotopaxi Volcano national park where you can drive to the end of the road (the climbers start here, at 15,320 feet) for a close-up look at Cotopaxi's icy, 19,460-foot summit. Our last day was saved for Otavalo.

And were the haciendas historic? Yes, but forward-looking. Both Le Cusin, founded in 1602 by Jesuits, and Hacienda Pinaqui, founded in 1790 and still owned by the original family, felt and looked like the 18th century white-walled, red-tiled-roof colonial compounds typical of Spanish colonies. Surrounded with flowering vines and far from noise and traffic, they'll send you back to another century.

But Le Cusin's present owner is an American who restored the buildings and updated guest rooms and cottages, adding comfort while preserving the colonial feel. The wood-paneled living room and dining hall are reminiscent of a hunting lodge, and since they serve good food, encourage long evenings. The result is a loyal cadre of guests who wintering over annually, settling into spacious rooms with fireplaces and staying busy dining on good meals, riding horses, hiking, sketching, studying Spanish and taking day trips to Otavalo.

Pinaqui Hacienda, where we stopped for a bowl of locro (cream of potato soup garnished with cheese and avocado slices), is still owned and managed by an 8th generation family member. Could he be the person whose photo, displayed on the wall, shows him posing with his horse inside this elegant old mansion? Guests enjoying acres of lawns and spectacular views of Imbabura Volcano may find approaching cars a rude intrusion. But the presence of 30 redecorated family-sized suites, fine cuisine and guided horseback riding is the evidence that guests are welcome.

Zuleta Hacienda, originally a Jesuit property, made news in the 20th century when new owners, the Plaza-Lasso family, progenitor of two presidents of Ecuador, turned the 4,000-acre ranch into a working dairy farm and cheese creamery.

As the ranch prospered, the Plazas built out, adding a high-ceilinged living room with family bedrooms at one end and a nine guest-room wing at the other. Today the hacienda, surrounded by trees, vast green fields, and a stable full of horses, is an example of the success of modern ranch management. Guests here are enthusiastic horseback riders, hikers and nature lovers.

We spent our last day shopping in Otavalo's craft market, saving the last 10 minutes for a sprint through the produce market. Instead we spent an hour marveling at the kinds of vegetables that local farmers can grow at high altitude. And since they sell them locally, they can choose whatever

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fits their soil, including "heritage" varieties.

My list, hastily jotted down, includes kale, bunches of fresh alfalfa, leafy greens, peas, a half-dozen kinds of beans, red and purple berries, four kinds of citrus, tomatoes, tree tomatoes, tubers, bags of beets, onions, dried spices, 124 varieties of potatoes and 50-pound sacks of quinoa, alfalfa grain and three kinds of corn.

I thought I knew vegetables. But it was humbling to see how few I'd tasted or could even identify. I did find those white lupine beans, though, the star of my new, fast-food addiction. Take that, McDonalds.

IF YOU GO:

Flights to Quito can run from nine to 20 or more, depending on the airline, your departure city and the layover. We flew on TACA (a merger of four central American airlines) from Los Angeles to El Salvador, and after a 40 minute layover flew out from the very same gate. Flying through Santiago, Chile, can push the layer to seven hours.

DRIVING & GUIDES: Driving on Ecuador's new highways (some still under construction) is an easy way for independent travelers to reach most larger towns and top-ten highlights. But taking rarely-signed, pot-holed, back-country dirt roads slows you down to 10 mph. If you're on a schedule, think about hiring a guide.

TOUR COMPANIES & GUIDES: Our English-speaking guides, who were smart, educated and upbeat, made our trip. EQTouring, which offers standard or custom itineraries, guarantees all its trip leaders. Find them at www.eqtouring.com.

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QUITO LODGING: In Quito, we recommend two fine hotels in the historic center. The hotel La Casona de Ronda occupies a restored, completely restructured in-town residence; the larger Boutique Patio Andaluz is a new property on the footprint of a similar residence. La Casona is smaller and more intimate, with a tiny restaurant and indoor-outdoor strip of garden; the Patio Andaluz has several ground floor living rooms, second-floor balconies, internet access stations and a spacious dining room. Both are within walking distance of the historic center's monuments, parks, restaurants and shopping. Both are within the restricted pedestrian-only area.

HACIENDAS: For more on the hacienda's history and lodging, go to www.haciendacusin.com; www.haciendapinsaqui.com; and www.zuleta.com



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