



A mountain adventure

If you love horses, travel and adventure, why not combine all three on a riding holiday of a lifetime to South America. **Meriel Buxton** saddles up to explore Ecuador

The little dun horse, after an initial burst of speed, soon settled back into a steady rhythm. He was clearly enjoying himself just as much as I was as we rode across the plains around Cotopaxi, which is the highest active volcano in the world.

A herd of wild horses stood watching our group of eight riders, not deigning on this occasion to join in, just as our spare horse, allowed to gallop free, chose to stay with us. When the trail horses do approach the wild ones, our ride leader Sally Vergette told us they soon return after a brief conversation. "I think they ask the wild horses about the food and decide they prefer life with me," she laughed.

This was one of the many unforgettable moments I experienced on a seven-day trip in Ecuador, following ancient Inca routes to explore this beautiful South American country on horseback.

Led by a highly experienced tour guide, Sally, who was brought up on a Lincolnshire farm as a member of the Burghley Pony



Meriel and Platanito on the plains below Cotopaxi, the highest active volcano in the world.

Club, we spent up to seven hours a day in the saddle, covering between 150 and 200 miles in a week.

We climbed up steep, narrow tracks with dramatic drops below the path, scrambled

through deep ravines and forded rivers, but the horses (all are between 14.2hh and 15.2hh) inspired total confidence. They were sure-footed, experienced and sensible, as well as forward-going, enjoyable rides. With

Riding in Ecuador gives you a real taste of local life.



such varied riding, it is important that you are fit before you decide to embark upon such a holiday.

Unrivalled beauty

Ecuador is a magnificent country, with high, snow-capped mountains (allowing time to adjust to the altitude is advisable), wide valleys farmed just as they have been for hundreds of years and colourful local people. The women dress in beautifully made traditional costume with black trilby hats, while the men more often benefit from modern western clothes. Pigs, sheep, cattle, llamas and donkeys are led around or individually tethered.

Each night we stayed in a different hacienda, including some of the finest in Ecuador. These are usually historic country houses – many of which date back to the 17th century – which have been turned into hotels, with magnificent baronial rooms and luxuriant grounds: everything grows well so close to the equator. The food is delicious and any deficiencies in the plumbing are atoned for by the pleasure of wood-burning stoves in every bedroom.

One night was spent at a working dairy farm where Sally has a special invitation to take her guests. Our hostess and her family entertained us royally. The farm includes both a horse stud and a famous herd of fighting bulls.

The organisation is excellent. It was a delight each day to leave our bags packed in the room where we had slept and find them awaiting us in our new room in the evening. Guests are not expected to help out with the stable management either, although those wishing to do so are made most welcome.

Lunch was usually a picnic, which emerged fresh and tempting from our saddlebags and was spread on a brightly

coloured tablecloth on some hillside commanding a view well worth crossing the world to see.

We tied our horses to trees nearby, though my dun Platanito ('Little Banana') was not named after a food for nothing and soon untied himself to share the feast.

Unforgettable riding

Our holiday began in the capital, Quito, where we headed north of the city for the first half of our trip. We all rode two or more different horses and I became particularly fond of a liver chestnut called Alvarito.

The horses, which were locally bred Criollo, Andalusian and part-Thoroughbreds, are owned by Sally and many of them have been rescued by her. We rode in ex-US cavalry saddles, which I would describe as halfway between English and Western

Why choose Ecuador?

- The spectacular scenery – you'll ride in the shadow of the Andes mountain range with your route taking you along the famous Avenue of Volcanoes, which has the world's highest volcanic peaks.
- The culture – from the brightly-clothed farmers tending their sheep and llamas in the hills to the traditional marketplaces, you'll experience a real taste of local life.
- The horses – forward-going and well-schooled horses will carry you over varied and challenging terrain.

and they were covered with comfortable sheepskin. However, English tack is available if you request it.

After we had spent a few days exploring the beautiful countryside north of Quito we were then driven south of the city for the remaining days. Here we were teamed with some new mounts, as only two of the horses took part in both sections. Once we were back in the saddle we rode through Cotopaxi National Park, in the shadow of the magnificent volcanic peaks.

The pace varied according to conditions: we walked on wet, steep slippery paths and treacherous mountain country, trotted on dusty roads through towns and villages and enjoyed long canters on woodland tracks and over open plains.

Seeing the sights

Our group was fortuitously small: just three other people beside my travelling companion James and myself. Although ages ranged from 17 to close to 70, we all



Wide valleys are farmed as they have been for hundreds of years.

Photography: Meriel Buxton; Ride World Wide; Horse recommends that you always wear an up-to-standard hat when riding.

The horses are forward-going and the terrain is tough, so you need to be a fit and capable rider.



Llamas seek tidbits from the riders.



enjoyed each other's company and made some good friends.

Most days included an interesting visit without the horses. There was a chance to explore the famous market at Otavalo, while in another village we watched a family – four generations working together – weaving rugs in the traditional way, which is fast being superseded by modern machinery. There was no pressure at all to buy, but their jerseys priced between £20 and £30 proved irresistible.

Another day we lunched at a beautiful old farmhouse as guests of the family who had lived there for generations, waited on by beautifully dressed local girls and then taken to see the family chapel, originally built by the Jesuits.

The house was filled with perhaps 20 of the most incredible rose displays any of us had ever seen, in every colour. After lunch we visited the rose-growing business they

had established, which exports roses all over the world, with straight stems up to 2m in length.

Another visit was to an ancient Inca site, now turned into a beautiful hacienda but retaining the traditional elegant Inca stonework. Here, a herd of llamas was brought into the courtyard to welcome the guests. They swarmed around us, graciously accepting carrots and, when unobserved, stealing flower heads. Then, at a whistle from their keeper, they trooped out again through the archway.

The country offered a profusion of wild flowers and birds. Keen photographers spent hours trying to capture the best impression of a hummingbird and there were many different varieties of raptor. Condors too can often be seen, though here we were unlucky – unlike a previous group who had been lamenting their ill fortune in not seeing one as they came to the end of their holiday.

Dead on cue, a condor soared in front of them while the whole group stared, rapt in admiration. As the magnificent bird of prey vanished from sight, Sally pretended to speak into her radio:

"All right, you can put it back in the box. We've all seen it now."

A perfect finale

We woke on our final morning to discover that snow had fallen much lower down the sides of Cotopaxi during the night. Luckily the weather was just about suitable to allow us to finish our trip by riding over the high pass in the mountains. Even on foot, including trekking in the Himalayas, I do not think I had previously been much higher than 12,000ft. The top of this pass is a vertiginous 14,000ft.

Before starting, we slipped on the warm woollen striped ponchos that we had

stored in our saddlebags. Sally emphasised the need for us all to follow precisely in her footprints because of the treacherous nature of the going and to allow the horses to pace themselves appropriately in the steepest places, remembering the effect of the altitude on them.

Those familiar with the Highlands of Scotland, with its peat hags, boulders, rocks, scree and narrow tracks, will have some idea of the conditions.

Concentration was needed all the time and, as the cloud came down and it started to hail, we dug into our saddlebags for our waterproof ponchos to add on top of the woollen ones.

We were glad of Sally's phenomenal eye for the country and of her indefatigable groom Christian bringing up the rear, with the led horse as well as his own, to ensure none of us got lost in the mist. But when we finally reached the top and came down to yet another exciting picnic spot, I think all six of us – our ages spanning at least half a century – felt that the challenge had provided a fitting climax to what was a truly unforgettable week.

What you need to know



- The riding: With up to seven hours a day over challenging terrain, you need to be fit and a capable rider.
- The accommodation: Meriel stayed in a different hacienda or farmhouse every night, offering comfortable facilities.
- Alternative option: For the more adventurous, a different ride is available, which circumnavigates the Cotopaxi volcano. It takes riders off the beaten track and uses rustic local accommodation.
- Costs and contacts: Meriel booked through Ride World Wide, tel: (01837) 825 44, visit: www.rideworldwide.co.uk. Meriel's colonial hacienda trip costs £1,720 for seven nights, while the Cotopaxi ride costs around £1,240. There are a number of set dates throughout the year.
- How to get there: There are no direct flights to Quito, but you can fly via Madrid with Iberian Airlines or via Amsterdam with KLM. Flights cost around £700.