



I DISCOVERED
SOUTH AMERICA'S BEST PRESERVED
COLONIAL CITY IN
ECUADOR

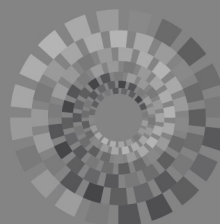
AZUJAY

Subsecretaría de Información y Comunicación Turística

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Cajas National Park

a gallery in the middle
of the paramo

There are some places that look like they were created by some fertile imagination. To the west of the city of Cuenca, covering an area of 28,544 hectares, is the Cajas National Park – one of the most amazing stretches of scenery known to man. The name “Cajas” is said to have come from the Quechua word “caxas,” which means “cold,” although another version of the story says that it comes from the Spanish word “cajas” meaning “boxes,” attributable to the geological formations that look like boxes, where the park’s numerous lakes are located.

There are 235 well-defined lakes in the park and the Tomebamba River originates in its interior. If you adventure through the lake area, you will hear the song of the “curiquingues” (carunculated caracara in English, or *phalcoboenus carunculatus*), watch the elegant flight of Andean gulls (*Chroicocephalus serranus*) and enjoy observing other paramo birds.

A carpet of green becomes the constant companion for the eyes of the fortunate visitor. Although there are similar places in the world, there is no other place that combines such lacustrine variety with so much biodiversity. With a careful eye, you can see rabbits, herds of llamas, ducks and trout. Scientific research has confirmed that there are also spectacled bears, pumas (also called mountain lions or cougars) and paramo deer.



Cajas National Park

a gallery in the middle
of the paramo

To the east, the vegetation is composed of tree and shrub species, along with a broad array of orchids, mosses, and ferns. Some 90.6 per cent of the area belongs to an ecosystem known as herbaceous paramo, except for small, localized areas to the southeast and west. Other flora includes an abundance throughout the area of romerillo, valerian, and “chuquiraguas” (an Andean flowering plant in the Asteraceae family). The Quinoa or polilepis, an autochthonous tree and symbol of the park, characterized by its twisted branches and trunk, make up extensive miniature forests.

This is the perfect place for getting closer to nature, recreation, ecological tourism and research. From the overlook at Avilahuyco, you can see the “boxes” that cover the area, and from Taitachungo Lake, you can take the trails and walk the Ingañán or Inca Trail to the Luspa Cave.

Great hiking, camping, climbing, sport fishing, mountain biking, photography, and bird watching make this National Park a “can’t miss” destination for nature lovers seeking direct contact with natural life.



PUENTE ROTO



BALCONY



HORNADO



BARRANCO



OLD HOTEL PATRIA

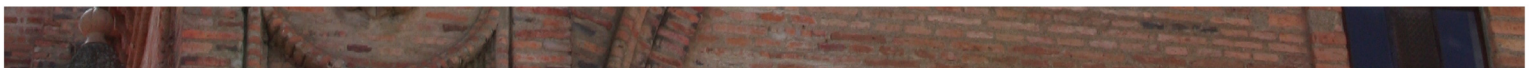


CALDERON PARK



The New Cathedral and the Old Cathedral, the foundations of history

When the plans were first drawn for the city of Cuenca, the streets radiated out from what is now Calderón Park and the city expanded in the traditional grid shape of Spanish towns. Today, right in the surroundings of this park, are two of the greatest treasures of Cuenca identity: the Old Cathedral and the New Cathedral.



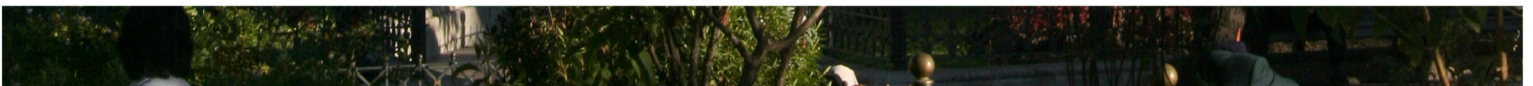


The Old Cathedral

matriarch of Cuenca's identity

Intrinsically bound to the history of the city from its beginnings, the Old Cathedral or Church of El Sagrario dates from 1567 and is the oldest building in Cuenca. Stones crafted by hand, brought from the ruins of the ancient Inca town of Tomebamba, were used in its construction, placed at the bottom of the walls. At first this was a church for the Spaniards, known as the Church of El Rosario, but it started to be called a Cathedral in the early 19th century.

The south tower, built in 1868, is the most well-known part of the building as the French Geodesic Mission used the pinnacle as a survey point for measuring an arc of the land meridian. As one famous person said, "The yardstick was born in Cuenca." This claim to fame led to the famous inscription engraved on the tower: "More celebrated than the pyramids of Egypt."





The Old Cathedral

matriarch of Cuenca's identity

The inside of the Cathedral is opulent in art. There are three inner chapels from the Colonial era, with wooden artesonados (panelled ceilings), paintings and Baroque altarpieces. The church has become a museum conserving objects of incredible artistic value, such as the Baroque-style wooden pulpit, the side altars of Santa Marianita and the Virgen de los Imposibles, paintings of the Stations, and the oldest painting in the city, set in one of the inner walls.

At the end is the Sacristy, while, on the side of Sucre Street, is the choir loft, with the old bellow organ, one of the most important works of religious art in Cuenca.

The Old Cathedral stands as a symbol of the origins of the people of Cuenca and has been one of the mainstays and witnesses of the evolution of their identity, becoming an indelible mark that not only contains the past but also rises before future generations as a reminder of their beginnings.





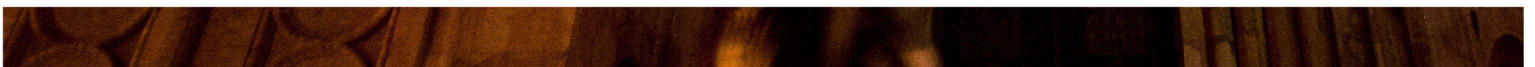
The New Cathedral

surpassing earthly limits

Wherever you look, this is the symbol of Cuenca. It stands for faith, hard work and perseverance, virtues that have made the people of Cuenca what they are.

The Cathedral of the Immaculate is one of the most outstanding works of architecture on the continent; it personifies the faith of the local people and over time it has become one of Ecuador's heritage sites. The construction was started in 1882, based on the design drawn by Juan Bautista Stiehle.

The inside, with its colossal dimensions, abounds with gold leaf and prolifically coloured stained glass windows crafted by the Basque artist Guillermo Larrazábal. The windows, made of old French blown glass in different nuances, were kiln-fired and assembled in lead comes. The marble comes from the Italian town of Carrara. The bold, eclectic structure is a blend of Roman, Gothic and Renaissance styles. In the middle of the church, the magnificent canopy, with its Baroque style and Solomonic pillars, was based on St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican.



The New Cathedral

surpassing earthly limits

It is amazing to think that this imposing building was never finished due to a miscalculation. Two domes in the original plans, which should have been at the front of the church, are missing, their absence telling of the great aspirations of the builders. The three domes, built in the Renaissance style, are lined with glazed tiles from Czechoslovakia.

It took over 100 years to complete the church. When seen from afar, its solemn façade gives the impression of phenomenal solidity, as if nothing could move it. And it is not surprising; the dimensions are astounding. The church can hold 8,000 people. It is 105 metres long by 43.5 metres wide. The central dome, the highest, reaches 53 metres and has a diameter of 12 metres. Moreover, there is a crypt under the building that measures 96 m. Long and 12 m. wide, with a capacity for three thousand people.

In contrast to the Old Cathedral, the new one reveals the emergence of new religious values and their relationship with progress and new techniques. It also reflects the evolution of the people of Cuenca and their view of themselves in the world. This history has been replicated and will continue to be repeated in all civilizations on the planet. On visiting this Cathedral, not only will you witness over 100 years of work, but you will also feel you are part of the history of mankind.

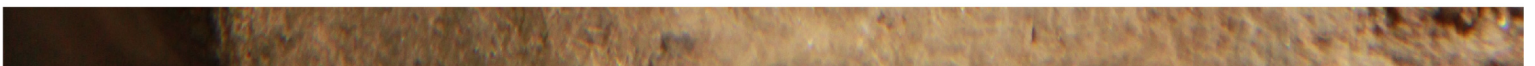




Chordeleg

You cannot walk around Chordeleg without coming across a jewellers or a handicraft shop. Their multicoloured houses always look recently painted and one part of them is usually a workshop or a store. This small canton, southeast of Gualaceo and 40 minutes from the city of Cuenca, was known as Chorro de Oro (Shower of Gold) before the arrival of the Incas. Under the Inca and Cañari rule it was named Chordeleg, the name coming from the native words choch or shor, meaning hole or tomb, and deleg, meaning flat land. It was here that the cemetery of the wealthiest Cañari caciques or chieftains was found, their tombs full of gold and silver.

Maybe because of its sacred origins, Chordeleg seems to have a very special energy. The fame of this land of jewellers, with roughly 85 jewellery stores and almost 50 workshops, has crossed frontiers. Many of the craftsmen and women, such as Clodomiro Castro, have become so skilled that they can make gold bracelets and rings set with jewels in less than eight hours.



Chordeleg

Others, like María José Galarza, a young businesswoman and designer, have specialized in the history and nature of the region. Her jewels contain motifs based on the local flora and fauna and also incorporate traditional Cañari symbols. She is well known for her creations in the line of crowns and necklaces for beauty contests throughout the country.

The cultural tradition is not only one of metalworking. Chordeleg Museum, in the town centre, explains how the pottery industry goes back 5,000 before the discovery of America. Last but not least, the straw hats made of paja toquilla as well as textile products enjoy a high reputation internationally.

In the town of Chordeleg, as in its workshops, the most deep-rooted traditions of the ancestors along with mestizo customs, come together. Some examples of this include major celebrations, as in the Christian festivities for the Señor de los Milagros (Lord of the Miracles) on 21 September, and Inti-Raimi, abounding with traditional indigenous dances.

Enriched by its great cultural wealth, visitors feel that in Chordeleg they have found a gem whose gleam will never leave them.





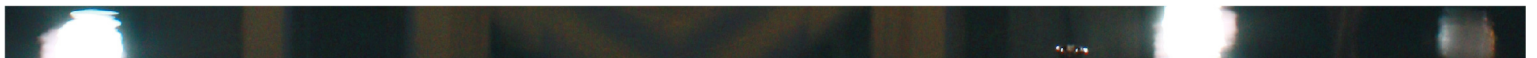
Gualaceo

garden of delights

In these sun-drenched hills, time seems to have stood still. A handful of older homes sprinkled across a fertile valley make up Gualaceo, "The Garden of Azuay," a favourite destination for visitors to these latitudes. Located 35 kilometres from Cuenca, the climate is perfect for growing a multitude of vegetables. In addition to vegetables, just 3 km. from the centre of town, you can find the largest collection of orchids in the province.

All of Gualaceo breathes an air of freshness, which is contagious to locals and visitors alike. As a result, the naturalness of the townspeople seems to never leave their faces. In the market of Gualaceo, the selection of local cuisine includes an endless sampling of the main dishes from the four regions of the country. Its streets are full of pastry shops and sweet shops where they make "rosero," a local fruit-based drink.

Artisan objects are an integral part of the region's cultural life. The textile industry here includes production of "macanas," shawls, jackets, scarves, and knitted wool items with incredibly complex patterns. Workshops that make hats and bags of "paja toquilla" (a special kind of local straw) have cultivated international prestige, because of the attention to detail in their products.





Gualaceo

garden of delights

On the road to Cuenca, 35 km. away, is the village of San Pedro de los Olivos, where there is a macana museum. The macana is a long woven wool shawl used by indigenous women in the Andean Highlands to cover themselves. Traditionally, it was worn during the village festivals, but now it has become a piece of clothing appreciated for its aesthetic value.

The museum belongs to the Ulloa family. It is in a two-storey cabaña that also houses a workshop. Presentations are given for visitors, showing the process of making the fabric with foot pedal looms and waist looms. José Jiménez, along with his spouse Ana Ulloa, created this initiative and, in addition to having passed on the techniques to their children, they have taken responsibility for teaching them to their employees. The result of this painstaking work is seen in the fine quality of the shawls, which have even been ordered by European and American designers.

This special item has been internationalized as a result of foreign visitors to the museum who are seduced by its exquisite design and beautiful colours, showing that in "The Garden of Azuay" tradition and appreciation of beauty are cultivated everywhere.





Pumapungo

vestiges of the sun

In the Historic Centre of Cuenca, beside a building with a tile roof and white walls, you can see a group of rocks that appear to form a small fortress. The contrast it makes with the surrounding landscape reveals that it has been there for centuries, long before the current city. These are the ruins of Pumapungo, located between the regions of Ingapirca, north of Cuenca, in Ecuador, and Machu Picchu in Peru.

Pumapungo means “Door of the Puma” and was established by the Inca leader Túpac Yupanqui as a result of his victory over the battle-hardened Cañari tribe, the ancient inhabitants of the area. Studies corroborate that in the 15th century, this was a sacred place with glorious mansions and temples. Under the government of Huayna-Cápac, the region became a prosperous political, administrative and religious hub of pre-Colombian cultures in Ecuador.

Unfortunately, it was destroyed during the civil war between Huáscar and Atahualpa, sons of Huayna-Cápac, and it almost disappeared when the conquerors arrived. They took some of the enormous carved rocks that still existed and used them to construct the buildings and churches of the newborn city of Cuenca.



Pumapungo

vestiges of the sun

The Banco Central (Central Bank) of Ecuador acquired this land in 1981 and, with the support of UNESCO, began its reconstruction. In 2003, it opened its doors to the public. Since then, the reconstruction efforts have been positive. The Inca gardens have been re-established, where hundreds of species of birds and plants endemic to the region are conserved, looking like it might have looked during the more regal times of Tahuantinsuyo. There are also the canals and bathing areas that were used to purify body and soul before the ceremonies. The vestiges of the Sun Temple are also preserved, and the convent of the Sun Virgins, a religious centre of one of the most magnificent places of the Inca Empire. As in Cuzco, there are terraces planted in honour of the sun and underneath the complex there is a subterranean tunnel almost 30 metres long, symbolic of the underworld.

The museum has a comprehensive collection of ceramic objects, utilitarian objects, coins minted by the Incas and Cañaris, a three-dimensional exhibit of traditional clothing from all the regions, and, above all, a large exhibition of photographs that show the pluricultural nature of the country.





Sigsig

Interwoven identities

Located southwest of the city of Cuenca, Sigsig is nestled in an idyllic valley that connects to the Amazon, and is one of the favourite visitor destinations in southern Ecuador. The area has been proclaimed a Cultural Heritage Site, not only because of its delightful blend of natural beauty and urban environment, but also because the area's identity is delightfully infused with the mixed-race background of its inhabitants. In addition, there is an abundance of cultural expressions that preserve ancient values of indigenous origin.

To get there, there are two access routes: the Cuenca - Gualaceo - Chordeleg - Sigsig route, which is 60 km, or the Cuenca - El Valle - San Bartolomé - La Unión - Sigsig route, which is 48 km. These roads are fully functional and in excellent condition.

When travelling around the narrow streets of Sigsig, one place that is a must for visitors is a place that has made the town famous. Near the renowned river beaches of Zhingate, there is an organization which is the largest women's group in Ecuador. Its fame, however, is not from any type of political action. It is the famous Maria Auxiliadora Association of "Toquilleras" (Straw Weavers).



Sigsig

Interwoven identities

These women dedicate themselves to an ancient and painstaking art. There is a workshop where weaving and producing articles of “paja toquilla” (a special type of local straw) is transformed into an art.

Their designs are not only used in the renowned Panama hats, but have also been extended to artisan objects, purses, and bags with elegant and functional designs. These products exude the ability and skill of the women of Sigsig, who appear to be better at this work than the men, due to some innate ability and coordination. Also of interest, in the interior patio of the workshop is the enormous hat known as the “biggest hat in the world.” The community invested US\$ 11,200 in this hat, which is estimated to have been made from the equivalent of 448 small hats in material.

In addition to being the birthplace of the most famous hats on the planet, Sigsig enjoys an excellent climate due to its geographic location, where the stories of each day are woven around the most deeply-entrenched traditions and the efforts of its people.





Historic Centre

Cuenca's Historic Centre was declared a World Cultural Heritage site on 1 December 1999. Spanning approximately 220 hectares, it contains an amalgamation of styles in which majestic and eclectic urban traits all merge into one.

Since the start of Ecuador's Republican era, with the influence of European culture, the city's architecture has incorporated Gothic, neo-Classical and Modernist styles. In the last few decades, intense work has been done to renovate the centre, with work to restore and conserve buildings and adapt their use. Most of the old houses are no longer residential due to the expansion of the city and growth of suburban districts. Walking along the cobblestone paving of the narrow streets, you get a clear feel of how the original layout gives the centre its particular colonial appearance, even though

only the Old Cathedral and the Convents of the Conceptas and Carmen de la Asunción date from this period. Republican constructions dominate the city centre, accounting for almost all the architecture. The boundaries of the historic part of Cuenca are formed by the following streets: Bolívar, Estévez de Toral, Lamar, Malo, Sangurima, Hermano Miguel, Gran Colombia, Huayna Cápac, Sucre, Vega and La Bajada de Todos los Santos (Calle Larga).

Many of Cuenca's main festivities are celebrated in this part of the town, including Corpus Christi in June and the Pase del Niño in December. Calderón Park, a strategic hub due to its central location and as an emblem of the city, is the favourite point for visitors to start this spectacular tour.



Museo de Las Conceptas (Museum of the nuns of the Immaculate Conception)

The Convent of the sisters of the Immaculate Conception is the oldest religious cloister in the city. Built in 1559, two years after the foundation of Cuenca, it was practically born with the city. The house where the nunnery was set up originally came from a dowry handed over by young aspiring novices as a donation to the religious order. The construction of the church lasted from 1668 to 1729, while later buildings were added from 1800 until the first years of the twentieth century.

The museum was installed with the intervention of the Ecuadorian Central Bank. The whole building was restored over three years, in which original designs were conserved as far as possible and the same construction materials were used.

It was during this time that the documents and pieces to be kept in the museum were chosen. The oldest artifacts are almost four hundred years old. The museum was opened to the public on 3 November 1986 and has 18 permanent exhibition rooms.

On the ground floor, by way of introduction to the public, there is a hall displaying the most important information about the history of the convent and the community. The other rooms focus on daily life in the convent.

Continuing the tour to the upper floor, the works of art include polychrome sculptures dating from the Colonial to the Republican period. The religious theme is expressed in a stunning array of figures of Christ, Mary and saints, and there is also a considerable wealth of altarpieces, art depicting local customs, and miniatures. The colonial paintings were made on a whole range of materials, including cloth, wood, brass and marble. The most outstanding pieces of wooden furniture are from Europe but there are also various chests that were carved in the city. Among its curiosities, the museum has a collection of toys from the Colonial time, which the novice nuns brought with them when they joined the order.



Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception (New Cathedral)

The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception is perhaps the best-known landmark of the city. The plans were made by a German Redemptorist monk, Juan Bautista Stiehle, and the building work started in 1885. The incredibly beautiful inner spaces dazzle visitors with their huge dimensions. The Roman style prevails in the cathedral although there are also Gothic and Renaissance features in the domes.



Church of El Sagrario (Old Cathedral and Museum of Religious Art)

This building dates from 1557. It is the oldest construction in the city and in the past was the largest place of worship. The foundations and lower parts of the walls are made of Inca stones. The church was restored several times from 1568 to 1924. It has three naves, a main bell tower, and the facade with the entrance from Sucre Street.



Abdón Calderón Park

Considered to be the heart of the city, the urban grid was drawn radiating outwards from this hub and has now spread to other neighbourhoods. The park contains the monument to Abdón Calderón, a hero in the Battle of Pichincha when Ecuador won its independence; the monument was inaugurated on 24 May 1931.



Church of Carmen de la Asunción

Built in approximately 1730, this church, built in honour of the Virgen de la Advocación de la Asunción, is one of the oldest in the city and contains a well-preserved sample of colonial religious art in Cuenca. The entrance, carved in marble, is Baroque in style while the exterior structure is Renaissance.



Church of San Alfonso

The design of this church, like that of the New Cathedral, was made by Juan Stiehle. The facade has neo-Gothic features, such as the two vertical, symmetrical towers, reaching a height of 42 m, which cannot leave anyone indifferent.



Cuenca City Hall (Alcaldía)

One of Cuenca's heritage buildings, this was constructed in the neo-Classical style in the early twentieth century. It was home to the Bank of Azuay until 1999, after which the City Council restored it and remodelled it as the City Hall. The ground floor is used for holding fairs and art exhibitions.



Flower Market

This square with its market is located next to the Cathedral and opposite the Church of El Carmen, whose carved stone facade enhances the attractiveness of the area. The market has a great array of flowers, plants and ornaments. This picturesque setting is very popular with visitors who find here a living icon of Cuenca identity.



Church of Las Conceptas

The church and convent form a single urban complex encompassing a whole block. They were built by the order of the Immaculate Conception, the oldest female religious order in the city. The church dates from 1682. The main altarpiece is of the early seventeenth century while the belfry was completed in the early 1900s.



Museum of Las Conceptas

Inside the Convent of the Immaculate Conception, the old infirmary has been turned into a museum. The display rooms reveal the day-to-life of the nuns, as well as works of art including sculptures, paintings, jewels and a toy collection, all dating from the time of the Spanish colony.



Walk: Paseo 3 de noviembre

Stretching from the Centenario Bridge to the Bridge of Todos Santos, and 800 m. long, this fully illuminated path crosses historic neighbourhoods of Cuenca. The constant presence of the River Tomebamba and the hanging houses along its banks provide a wonderful vista of one of the most legendary parts of the city.



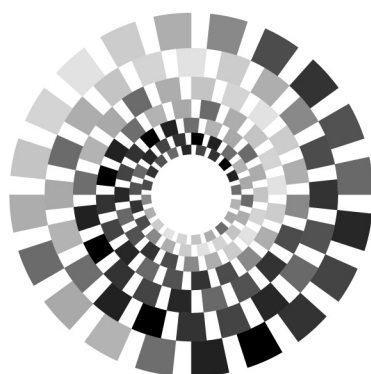
Plazoleta de la Merced

Located in Borrero and Honorato Vázquez streets, this small square is part of the Historic Centre. With its many restaurants and bars, not to mention frequent live music, concerts and impromptu shows, it is a part of town where tourists tend to meet up and go out.



Casa Episcopal

In Simón Bolívar Street, just a few metres from Calderón Park, stands the Episcopal House, also known as the birthplace of St. Hermano Miguel. This historic building, of colonial origin, has been classified as an architectural heritage site. The house has an area of 1,570 m² distributed over two floors and three inner courtyards.



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