

An epic in Ecuador



Lucy Elder goes off grid with the ‘chagras’ among the volcanoes of Ecuador — and finds herself on top of the world and without a passport



Built for trekking, the horses tackle everything, from rivers to rocks, with ease

MY head is spinning with excitement as the plane touches down high between the peaks surrounding Quito airport in Ecuador.

Thousands of questions fill my thoughts, from the relevant (“I wonder what the horses will be like? Am I fit enough to be doing this?”) to the ridiculous (“What if nobody talks to me?”). Even climbing out of the plane, my light head and shortness of breath make me realise how real this altitude is. We are at 2,850m and will climb a further 1,370m over the next 12 days.

As soon as I meet our host and guide, Gabriel Espinosa, my worries subside. His knowledge and passion for his horses and his country is infectious. Likewise, the workers and horsemen at his base are all skilled, friendly and welcoming, and the other guests are brilliant fun. The whole place has an air of happiness — in horses, in people and tourists.

One of the many great things about this adventure is the way it is broken down into chunks, which makes you feel like you are having multiple adventures within one massive journey. There’s a nice balance of travel and stability with the accommodation; and, probably more importantly, it breaks in your body — and bottom — gently to the demands of five to 10 hours in the saddle. We take several unriden horses with us each day, who are either led by our guides, Guido and Gabriel, or run loose alongside us.

We ride in “chagra” (Ecuadorean cowboy) tack — comfy sheepskin-covered saddles and light leather reins, with our ponchos tied in front of us. For our journey to Bomboli, I’m on a fierce, fiery and grumpy little chestnut called Muñeco — puppet. He has a ripped ear, the strength of 10 tigers and an enormous ego. It’s a standing joke that I love grumpy animals and we get along famously. Gabriel misses nothing

On top of the world: the trek takes us high above the clouds to altitudes of 4,200m over 12 days



It's impossible not to be wowed by the staggering views from the vantage point of a horse

thing keeping me from falling off the edge is Muñeco's four little hooves. It's surreal and the combination of fear and altitude takes my breath away — I take a firm hold of the neck strap and tell myself that I'm not afraid. I almost believe it. We descend through the cloud forest, a thick, damp jungle canopy filled with wild orchids. Gabriel rides with a machete and takes passing swings at branches so we can pass safely. Gardening, cowboy style.

Hosts Oswaldo and Mariana Pérez welcome us into their home, complete with a roaring fire, exuberantly friendly dogs and pancakes served with dulce de leche, a deliciously caramelly form of sweetened milk. There's no electricity here and it's been days since I've had Wi-Fi. The feeling of physical tiredness and no ability to know what's happening in the outside world is totally liberating, I can't even remember what day of the week it is and it is wonderful to think that it doesn't matter.

Oswaldo is passionate about conservation

and the following morning takes us on a tour of his forest garden. He speaks no English, but his message is clear — “conservación, educación y amor”. He shows us how to take cuttings of the rare orchids and grafts them into nooks and crannies in the trees, giving each one a kiss before nestling it into its new home.

FOR the first of our truly long days, I am given a coloured pony called Centibito, who has the smallest ears and the kindest nature. We instantly become great friends. Today we really climb, the dormant volcano Rumiñahui looms high in front of us and at one point an eagle swoops into the vast gyre between our trail and the dark ridge. Gabriel asks permission from the mountain for her to let us safely pass.

“She is a living thing, mountains are alive,” he explains.

The whole place feels alive. Wild horses,

and I can't believe he has matched me so well after meeting me less than 24 hours ago.

THE horses are all bred by Gabriel and are a mix of Arab, Argentine polo pony, Criollo, warmblood, Andalusian and thoroughbred, to get a perfect mix of sure-footedness, sanity, endurance, height and blood for trekking.

They are adept at swiping any possible greenery as we ride and we stop to water them at rivers and streams along the route. Muñeco puts his nose right under and I wish my soft horses at home could learn a few things from this tough herd. The horses have absolute respect for Gabriel and I'm made to feel ever more like a passenger each time he whispers “vamos” and the whole string break into canter.

Today is the first time we climb above the clouds — the whole world is below us as we follow a narrow path and I feel as if the only

The horses enjoy a dip in a lake in front of the Cotopaxi crater, which is hidden by cloud





'Multiple adventures within one journey': Guido looks across the valley towards the dormant volcano Rumifiahui as we climb into the Andes

descended from those set loose after the Spanish invasion in the 16th century, graze and scatter as we approach. As we climb up through shifting pumice and over the ridge, we see a storm pass over the mountains behind us — the landscape is so huge that I watch the storm in its entirety shift across the view. We arrive at the cosy Alpine-style lodge in front of the looming face of Cotopaxi, Ecuador's largest active volcano, in near-darkness, to mulled wine, tea and meat — a holy trinity of food.

No matter how far we ride the next day, Cotopaxi never seems to move — the landscape is surreal, filled with strange rainbows, mountain lakes, the strange boggy páramo (mountainous grassland ecosystem) — and

Guido and Gabriel have to dig pathways through steep gorges for us to pass. Darkness starts to fall and there is still at least an hour to go to the campsite. The only thing I can see in front of me is the grey bottom of the horse in front, so I stare hard in case my eyes should lose it as we canter down the mountain road in the pitch black. Ten hours and 45km since breakfast, we arrive at the shack to a roaring fire. The thought of going outside to chilly tents is not appealing, so we roll out our mats on the hut's floor and, exhausted, sleep.

It's amazing what weird tricks your mind plays on you in the dark — the tracks we rode down, which I was certain were on the edge of 1,000m drops the night before, look wide and

welcoming in daylight. About 10 minutes in, Guido signals for me to ride over to him.

"You want to swap horses with Guido?" asks Gabriel. This isn't a question. Muñeco has taken against his herd pals, making it impossible for Guido to ride and lead two others. So I swap, taking Guido's saddle — complete with machete.

A little way on we come to a fast-moving river, sending our horses through loose while we take the bridge. A few troublemakers spot their chance and charge off at high speed. Lightning fast, Guido grabs the halter of a loose horse and vaults on bareback, pursuing the reprobates at flat-out gallop in a remarkable display of horsemanship.

As we gallop behind, buffs pulled across our faces to protect us from the flying dust, I suddenly remember my passport is in one of the loose horses' saddlebags, due to my swap earlier in the day. I fleetingly wonder how I'm going to explain this to my boss when I fail to turn up to work on Monday, but decide it's probably best I focus on staying on. Thankfully, we turn a corner to find Guido has neatly rounded up the naughty trio and we continue along Cotopaxi's emergency eruption escape route to the beautiful Hacienda La Cienega.

STEADIER days and glorious rides through lush farmland follow, with sunrise yoga and a hot jacuzzis at the LluLlu Llama hostel to keep us fit and sound. As we ascend to the Quilotoa crater-lake, we stop for lunch at a saddler's, who makes beautiful chagra tack. From here we ride along a rocky path before arriving at the lake. The steep, angular edges are sinister and it seems strange that something once so full of fire is now filled with water. Gabriel takes us along the steep-sided path and I'm once again relieved to be sitting on something with sturdy feet and a great sense of self-preservation.

Our final night en route is spent in a guesthouse that has a vast hot tub, complete with beers. The booze, the hot water, the aches



A sure-footed horse is a must on the rocky path leading to the steep-sided Quilotoa crater lake

Top tips

- ✓ Invest in padded pants — don't skimp on these to save on baggage. Think *Bridget Jones meets Laura Kenny*.
- ✗ Don't forget the Dioralyte — high altitude and physical exhaustion are demanding; these sachets are a cheap and effective way to help rehydrate.
- ✓ Brush up on your Spanish — Gabriel's English is perfect, but many of the chagras speak only Spanish. Your horse will also speak Spanish.
- ✗ Don't follow loose horses — follow your guide instead.
- ✓ Get fit before you go, particularly if you don't ride frequently.
- ✓ Be prepared to go with the flow — this is South America, not Surrey.

and pains compound into a strange happy-sad feeling at the thought this incredible adventure is coming to an end. I feel stronger and fitter than I have in a long time, but a little emotional at the thought of it being over.

As Gabriel throws sweets to passing children on our final ride, I notice the landscape is looking more familiar and realise we must be close to completing the final loop. Our horses pick up the pace as we gallop up the slope to end our journey, where the driver, Jorge, is waiting to welcome us back with plastic cups of warm fizz — a taste so synonymous with friends, celebration and exhaustion. Whether drunk out of mugs in tackrooms, or slightly flat in lorry parks, or on the edge of a volcano after the most incredible 300km journey, it tastes of pure joy. **H&H**

• *Prices for the Cotopaxi to Quilotoa volcano trail start from €2,870. For information and details on more Ecuador rides, visit equus-journeys.com or call 01905 388977*



Gardening, cowboy style: our guides use machetes to clear a route through the jungle canopy

The accommodation

CULTURA MANOR — a stunning boutique guesthouse in Quito city. Each bedroom is individually designed, filled with roses, and features hand-painted murals on the walls.

HACIENDA LA ALEGRIA — the main base (pictured, right), featuring huge, peaceful rooms with breath-taking views of the mountains and the house's rose gardens.

COTOPAXI REFUGE BOMBOLI — a warm and welcoming home, with delicious home-cooked meals and roaring fires.

TAMBOPAXI LODGE — an Alpine-style mountain hostel, with a buzzing restaurant and cosy rooms, each with their own wood-burning stove.

HACIENDA LA CIENEGA — one of Ecuador's oldest colonial haciendas, the beautiful house, gardens and private chapel are filled with scientific and social history.

LLULLU LLAMA MOUNTAIN LODGE — a vibrant eco-hostel, full of international travellers, who are mostly hiking the Quilotoa Loop. Home to a very welcome hot tub and also featuring an optional sunrise yoga class.

SAMAY KIRUTOA LODGE — a warm and comfortable hostel, close to the Quilotoa crater lake.



HOSTERIA SAN JOSE DE SIGCHOS — part of a working dairy farm, this luxurious guesthouse is a welcome sight on the final night en route. With a gigantic hot tub, cosy rooms and afternoon tea, it is a slice of heaven after hours in the saddle.