

# THE HEART OF THE ANDES

Icy summits and the fiery spirit of a 19th-century  
adventurer inspire a trek to Ecuador's mighty volcanoes

BY CHARLES RUNNETTE

With the Ecuadorian capital of Quito in mist below, a climber stands atop a peak of 15,728-foot Pichincha. In the distance, snow-covered Cayambe is also part of the Andean cordillera Alexander von Humboldt called the Avenue of the Volcanoes.

Galápagos into the world wonder club, Humboldt installed Ecuador on the bucket list with his best-selling books (*Cosmos*, *Cordilleras*) that conjured images of equatorial jungles teeming with jaguars, electric eels, and rare epiphytes and told tales of high-altitude valleys banded by mesmeric, active Andean volcanoes—then thought to be the highest mountains on Earth. Humboldt saw both beauty and threat in this realm where, as he said, “everything is interaction and reciprocal.”

Humboldt’s observations are still supported by modern science. Glaciologists and mountain guides alike have used the detailed measurements from his renowned *Naturgemälde* (a cross-section infographic he created of Chimborazo, the tallest mountain in Ecuador) to gauge changes in glacier mass. The findings are not encouraging. The glaciers of Ecuador’s Andes, which provide some of the water supply for the farmers of the area as well as for the nearby capital, Quito, are receding and, in some cases, disappearing altogether. In the past decade, glaciers along Ecuador’s western cordillera—Cotacachi, Corazón, and

Sincholagua—have vanished, and the glacier atop Cayambe will be gone in the next 20 years.

MY HUMBOLDT-INSPIRED QUEST started out with plenty of promise and crisp Andean weather. In Quito I met up with mountain guide Oswaldo Friere. We took a 20-minute TelefériQo gondola ride up 2,717 feet, from the edge of the city to the base of Pichincha. Friere regaled me with stories of climbing Everest without oxygen.

I told him about my long-held admiration for Humboldt—recently reignited with the 2015 publication of Andrea Wulf’s compelling Humboldt biography, *The Invention of Nature*. And how this motivated me to summit the lower peak (at 15,413 feet) of Pichincha, Quito’s backyard active stratovolcano, on my first day in town. A little short of breath and my head throbbing a bit, I had advanced along the grassy, gradual incline toward the lower peak, motivated by the apparition of a falconlike caracara, reportedly a bird sacred to the Inca. “Altitude sickness is like any

illness; if exposed frequently enough, your body can get used to it,” Friere told me, looking me over for any signs of trouble. He added, “But if your body senses it’s in danger, it will try anything it can to force you to head back down.”

Having proved myself on Pichincha, I traveled with Friere beyond Quito, driving across lush vales, under azure sky and milky white altocumulus clouds, toward the majestic cordilleras that Humboldt called the Avenue of the Volcanoes. Our destination: Cayambe, Ecuador’s third highest peak. Along for the ride (and the climb): Friere’s 13-year-old daughter, Nikita, who was part mountain goat. She demanded that I explain my Humboldt fascination. “What makes him so great?” she asked.

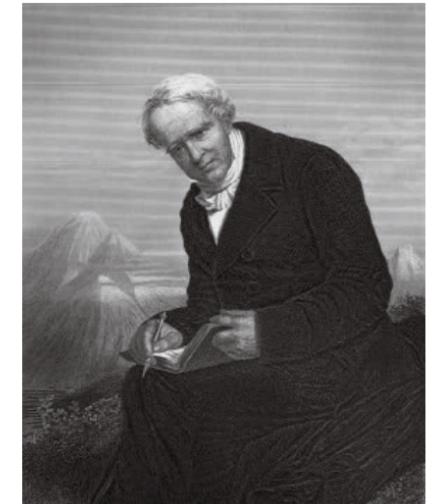
“Father of the modern ecology movement” sounded dull. “A man with many places, plants, and even part of the moon named after him” gave short shrift. I decided to sell her on Humboldt’s impact—the fact that his writings and drawings, particularly on this extraordinary corner of the New World, inspired game-changing accomplishments by scientists,

am wide awake at 2:14 a.m., breathless, anxious, parched in a place of nightmares: the musky bottom bunk of a single-room *refugio* (mountaintop hut), 15,419 feet up Ecuador’s Los Ilinizas volcano. A howling blizzard swirls outside, but somehow 15 other climbers, our local guides, and a couple of stranded refugio staffers snore away on flophouse-style mattresses all around me. Feeling desperate and a little crazed, I contemplate getting up, thinking it may ease my panic, but I quickly realize that would mean tiptoeing over sleeping bodies, boots, and poles, opening the hut to the storm, and pacing close to where the mules sound as if they’re freezing to death. I decide to skip it and focus on powering down my body while dreaming of my bed at home.

Friends warned against my plan to climb so high in less than a week a handful of Ecuadorian volcanoes in the boot-steps of my hero, Prussian adventurer, naturalist, and bon vivant Alexander von Humboldt. But I ignored them all in favor of the allure of names like Pichincha, Cayambe, Cotopaxi, Ilinizas. I ignored them in my own pursuit of Humboldt. Instead of listening to them, I listened to my ego. Look where that got me. It’s now 2:16 a.m.

ECUADOR COULD BE A STAND-IN FOR EDEN. Slightly larger than Colorado, this compact country holds more species for most groups of organisms than all of the United States and Canada combined, and supports a multitude of different microclimates. Ecuador is the smallest of the 17 nations that made Conservation International’s megadiversity list and is home to some 1,600 different birds—just shy of all of those in North America and Europe collectively—along with 435 species of mammals, 500 species of amphibians, and more than 15,000 species of vascular plants.

In the early 19th century, before Charles Darwin thrust the



**Emboldened by Humboldt:** After a trip to Ecuador in the footsteps of the renowned naturalist (above), American artist Frederic Edwin Church painted “Heart of the Andes,” which caused a sensation when it debuted in New York in 1859. Crowds lined up daily to view this 10-foot-wide masterwork. It now resides at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

BEQUEST OF MARGARET E. DOWS, 1909 (LANDSCAPE); FALKENSTEIN/FOTO/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO (PORTRAIT); PREVIOUS PAGES: MAC STONE/TANDEM STOCK (CLIMBER)

Andes anticipation: Climbers make their way up 19,347-foot Cotopaxi, one of Ecuador's most active volcanoes; alpacas (opposite) are just one of the well-adapted animals that roam Antisana Ecological Reserve, in the chilly central highlands.



JASON THOMPSON/TANDEM STOCK (MOUNTAIN), PETE OXFORD (ALPACA)





**For the love of cloud forests:** Visitors at Mashpi Lodge, one of National Geographic's Unique Lodges of the World, can explore the forest via overlook (left), gondola, or even sky bike. Some of the forest's exquisite endemics include the booted racket tail hummingbird (below) and the Andean daisy (right).



PETER BOHLER (OUTLOOK), GLENN BARTLEY (BIRD),  
PETE OXFORD (PLANT)



poets, revolutionaries, and artists. Then I rattled off some big names I thought might impress her: Charles Darwin, Walt Whitman, Simón Bolívar, John Muir, and Frederic Edwin Church.

On my phone I pulled up an image of Church's masterwork, "Heart of the Andes." A New York-based artist, Church painted his 10-foot-wide tour de force after his second South American pilgrimage to view his idol Humboldt's Avenue of the Volcanoes. Nikita took a close look as I told her how, at the painting's 1859 New York unveiling, "Heart of the Andes" became an art world sensation—with more than 12,000 people paying 25 cents each

to gaze at it with opera glasses for a few minutes. Crowds in New York (and on the painting's tour in London) lined up to be transported to this South American arcadia that Church depicted epically with hanging vines, moss, tree ferns, red-breasted crows, passionflowers, budding orchids, flowering philodendrons, a winding river, butterflies, and snowy glaciers.

After Mark Twain saw Church's piece, he gushed to a friend, "You will never get tired of looking at this picture, but your reflections—your efforts to grasp an intelligible Something—you hardly know what—will grow so painful that you will have to go away from the thing, in order to obtain relief."

Standing at the foot of a Cayambe glacier, I could see what Twain meant. The views are still exhaustingly magnificent.

BORN TO A WEALTHY aristocratic Berlin family in 1769, Alexander von Humboldt could easily have stayed put in Prussia, as his mother wished, and enjoyed an extremely agreeable life in a modest mansion on the bucolic Tegeler See, spending time with his brother, Wilhelm, and confidant, Goethe. But Alexander's mother died when he was in his 20s, leaving him and his brother a small fortune—Alexander's portion of which he promptly spent on travel. After a few false starts, on June 5, 1799, just shy of his



PETE OXFORD (COWBOY), ANNE FARRAR (HORSES)



All the pretty horses: Wild steeds graze in Cotopaxi National Park near acclimatization center Tambopaxi Lodge; Manuel Changoluisa (opposite) keeps *chagra* (cowboy) culture alive at his traditional sod-hut home at the base of Cotopaxi.



**Plaza Grande anchors Quito's well-preserved colonial old town, which earned the distinction as the first UNESCO World Heritage-designated capital.**

30th birthday, he set sail on an extraordinary five-year journey to the New World: modern-day Cuba, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, and the United States. He longed to see everything worth seeing, learn everything worth knowing, and meet everyone interesting.

The tales of what he found along the way changed the way Europe saw the Americas and the way the world viewed nature. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said of him and his writings, "Humboldt was one of those great wonders of the world, like Aristotle, like Julius Caesar...who appear from time to time, as if to show us the possibilities of the human mind, the force and range of the faculties—a universal man."

In 1802 Humboldt arrived in Quito overland from Cartagena, a grueling 1,300-mile trip through the jungles of Colombia and the foothills of the Andes. He remained in Quito and the surrounding area for five months, before scaling every mountain in sight with his team: Aimé Bonpland, his French botanist associate; José, his manservant who helped with the scientific measurements; and Carlos Montúfar, a handsome ("Adonis-like," in many accounts) young Ecuadorian aristocrat he befriended in Quito who went on to become his companion for nearly a decade.

TO SUMMIT CAYAMBE, I joined Nikita and her dad's Mountain Madness glacier school for my first real mountaineering test of the trip. At 18,991 feet, Cayambe has the odd distinction of being the tallest point on the Equator and the only spot at 0° with a year-round snowcap. After hours and hours of slowly ice axing our way up the steep glacier with only a few scary missteps along the way, and there we stood atop Cayambe's wall of ice and snow, looking across to the other volcanoes, down to the clouds, and even farther down to the tilled land and communities below—the whole system of life in front of us. I suddenly appreciated Humboldt's desire to admire the world from on high. "There is doubtless something solemn and imposing in the aspect of a boundless horizon," he wrote.

A few days later, near Cotopaxi, the most picturesque of Ecuador's volcanoes, I met up with Jorge Pérez and his anthropologist wife, María José Andrade, who run a tour company and duo of charming haciendas called Tierra del Volcán that promote conservation in the area. They were hosting a group



DC, COLOMBIA (CITY); NG MAPS



According to *Hostería La Ciénega's* (left) history, von Humboldt and his team stayed at this historic hacienda when he carried out his study of Cotopaxi in 1802. The volcano is reflected in a window at nearby Chilcabamba Eco Lodge (below). Just 1.5 hours from Quito, the lodge is a popular stay for travelers hiking Cotopaxi.



from a National Geographic Student Expedition when I sat down with them in their homey, thatched-roof Hacienda El Porvenir for dinner by the fire.

Started in 1999 as a university project by Quito native Pérez, the company aims to preserve the natural resources of the area by creating lucrative jobs for the locals, as well as a market for the agricultural products and crafts produced by those they don't employ—to help them understand that tourism can be a reason to be good stewards of their stunning patrimony.

"We want everyone who lives in this beautiful place to understand there are great benefits to conservation," Pérez said to me. "You don't protect what you don't know and won't miss."

The next day I jumped at the chance to head out on horseback with María José in the grasslands in the shadow of Cotopaxi. Both of us dressed in traditional *chagras* (Ecuadorian cowboy) garb—thick llama chaps and heavy wool ponchos—we chatted away and let our sturdy, powerful horses do the climbing. She told me how the Inca revered the mountains. "These mountains show us how small we are," said María José, a distant relative of Humboldt's longtime companion, Carlos Montúfar. "They're humbling and enlightening, and they're the reason visitors like Humboldt had a legendary journey here."

For a few minutes we sat quietly on a hilltop, watching a pair of Andean condors wheel overhead and feeling the connectedness Humboldt described in his writings. On a still clear day like that one, there seemed no place more silent on the planet.

**BUT THEN BACK TO THE HOWLING STORM.** My passion for the Prussian led me to Los Ilinizas, where I spent the worst night of my life and discovered firsthand what Friere meant about how an unhappy body can turn your brain on you—begging or forcing you to head back down a mountain. I worried about

disappointing my guide by telling him I didn't want to attempt to summit, that I just wanted to get off this mountain. Instead, he was relieved. A mountain is a force of nature; if I had learned anything on my Humboldt quest, it was not to defy nature. The great explorer himself had never reached the summit of Chimborazo. Humbled by Humboldt, I turned back.

One week later, in Manhattan and missing the volcanoes, I trekked uptown to the Metropolitan Museum of Art where Church's "Heart of the Andes" now lives. Sold to New York manufacturer and Met founder William Blodgett for \$10,000—at the time a record sum for the work of a living American artist—the painting changed hands again in 1876 when Blodgett sold it to socialite Margaret Dows, who bequeathed it to the Met upon her death in 1909. It occupies a wall in a massive room on the second floor of the Met's American Wing.

I could feel its pull from rooms away. The visual manifestation of Humboldt's meandering but brilliant multi-volume book of observations about the world, *Cosmos*, the painting shows the same enthusiasm that Humboldt had for uniting and preserving the natural estate. Alone in the gallery, staring at it without opera glasses and a crush of people jostling for a glimpse, I felt transported back to the silence and storminess and wonder of Humboldt's Avenue of the Volcanoes, throwing out its sparks of connection even here, even now.

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## Travel Wise: Ecuador

### HOW TO GO

If you plan to attempt any of Ecuador's volcanoes, U.S.-based outfitter Mountain Madness has longtime expertise operating in the country. Guides have experience on all of Ecuador's peaks, as well as mountains in the Himalaya, Russia, and the Alps. [mountain-madness.com](http://mountain-madness.com)

### WHERE TO STAY

#### Casa Gangotena

Before heading out to the Avenue of the Volcanoes, most travelers spend at least a couple of nights in Quito. Casa Gangotena, in the Old Town, is a 31-room restored mansion with sweeping rooftop views of Quito's colonial center. [casagangotena.com](http://casagangotena.com)

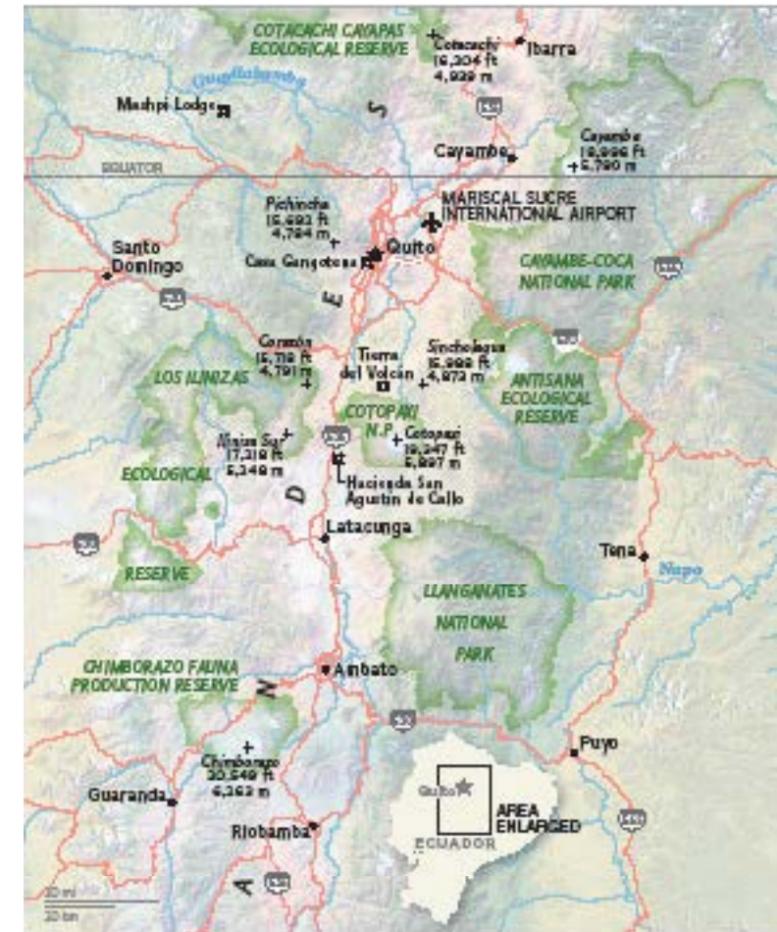
#### Hacienda San Agustín de Callo

This Cusco-style Inca palace cum Augustinian monastery now functions as a small hotel with a

dreamy view of Cotopaxi. Host and owner Mignon Plaza delights visitors in the Inca-walled dining room with tales of her father, a legendary congressman and bullfighter, and her grandfather, General Leónidas Plaza Gutiérrez, the former two-term president of Ecuador. The rooms may or may not have been visited by Humboldt, but members of the French geodesic expedition that measured the roundness of the Earth in the 18th century definitely did. [inchacienda.com](http://inchacienda.com)

#### Mashpi Lodge

Outside Quito, in the opposite direction from the Avenue of the Volcanoes, this National Geographic Unique Lodge of the World is located in a cloud forest and appeals to anyone who loves rare orchids, epiphytes, and amphibians. The open gondola ride through the canopy of the forest is alone worth the three-



hour drive from the capital. And don't miss the nighttime forest safari to see the most spectacular frogs, some of which (such as the Mashpi torrent frog) can be found only here. [mashpilodge.com](http://mashpilodge.com)

#### Hacienda El Porvenir

Right at the foot of Cotopaxi, this thatched-roof lodge enchants. The hosts can plan excursions for you in the area, a horseback ride around the most beautiful mountain Frederic Edwin Church ever painted, or a trip to the Avenue of the Volcanoes. [tierradelvolcan.com](http://tierradelvolcan.com)

### WHERE TO EAT

#### Zazu

Gastronomic treats fill the evening's meal at Zazu, which offers a seven-course tasting menu that highlights Andean grains and native potatoes and *cazuela*-style (clay pot) cooking. [zazuquito.com](http://zazuquito.com)

#### Laboratorio

This may be the coolest restaurant in Quito, where a rotating group of local and international chefs show off their talents with fresh and innovative ideas and an ever-changing menu. [laboratorio.rest](http://laboratorio.rest)

#### Bandito Brewing

This creative-class hangout in Quito's La Tola neighborhood serves up artisanal pizza, local microbrews, and draft kombucha. [bandidobrewing.com](http://bandidobrewing.com)

### GO WITH NAT GEO

Nat Geo Expeditions offers several itineraries in Ecuador, including the nine-day "Amazon, Hot Springs & Volcanoes" tour. Highlights include soaking in the Papallacta hot springs, hiking in the rain forest, mountain biking, and a visit to Cotopaxi National Park. [natgeoexpeditions.com/explore](http://natgeoexpeditions.com/explore); 888-966-8687