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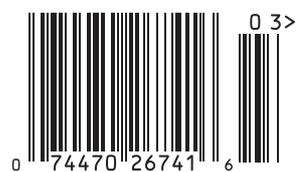
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ESSENCE OF ECUADOR
Lush gardens and verdant botanicals lend a romantic atmosphere to the Highlands.

A Highlands Hacienda Honeymoon

Ecuador's multi-faceted mountainous terrain, from the cloud forests to the Avenue of the Volcanoes, will create a lifetime of memories.

BY GIGI RAGLAND

For couples seeking romance with an adventurous edge, a hacienda-hopping honeymoon exploring Ecuador will satisfy every desire. While Coloradoans are used to an elevated altitude, the city of Quito is a nosebleed higher than Denver, sitting at 9,350 feet. Flanked by a towering volcano and framed by the cloud-topped Andes, the urban center is considered the highest capital city in the world. This shouldn't be a problem for altitude-loving Colorado couples. However, relaxing in Quito for a few days to acclimate offers a chance to meander the cobblestone streets of "Old Quito," the historic centre founded by the Spanish on the ruins of an ancient Inca city, now a UNESCO World Heritage site. Spend a day gazing at the beautifully preserved 16th-century architecture before heading to highland hacienda country.

The biodiversity and micro-climates of the Andes Cordillera Range seduce the senses with the sheer magnitude of the mountain landscape. Part of the "Ring of Fire," Ecuador is home to 30 volcanoes, most within the central highlands. The dramatic vistas of the volcanic peaks provide endless jaw-dropping views. Adventurous honeymooners can see and do as much as possible while hacienda-hopping through the Andean highlands.

Highland Haciendas

The most unique way to experience the Spanish Colonial history of the Andean highlands is with a stay at a historic hacienda. After the Spanish colonized Quito and the surrounding Sierra in the 16th century, the elite were granted land in return for their service to the crown. Skilled craftsmen blended Spanish architectural details with local artwork and designs to produce strikingly beautiful estates.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF HACIENDA CUSIN



THERE'S NOTHING LIKE HORSEBACK RIDING OR MOUNTAIN-BIKING IN THE CLOUDS WITH THE MYSTICAL FOG OF THE ANDES ON OPEN TERRAIN." —María José Andrade

There are a variety of haciendas to choose from that vary in price and amenities. Many have remained in the original family over the years and offer elegant accommodations complete with gourmet dining and inclusive activities. Some haciendas have been converted into luxury boutique hotels accenting the past and current personalities of their proprietors while others impart a more refined rustic appeal that heralds their ranching origins, much like Colorado's guest ranches.

Adventure at El Porvenir

An hour and a half south of Quito, at the highland hacienda of El Porvenir, it's common to see chagras, or cowboys, tending to cattle while, in another direction, glimpsing mountain-bikers tackling a

Honeymooners in search of warm Andean hospitality will love the traditional hacienda comforts of El Porvenir. Embraced by four volcanoes and perched at almost 12,000 feet, the hacienda is crafted in authentic Andean style, with a thatched grass roof, thick adobe walls, large fireplaces and farm-to-table dining. Seven large suites were recently refurbished in traditional hacienda ranch style; each offers view windows, fireplace living areas and big, comfy beds with private bathrooms.

Owners, María José Andrade and husband Jorge Perez have created a custom three-day/two-night honeymoon adventure package which includes transportation to and from Quito. "We tailor the trip to meet guests' expectations depending on what kind of experience they want to have," says Andrade. For example, decked out in typical chagra gear (a wool poncho and fur chaps), honeymooners can horseback ride with a chagra guide along the foothills of a volcano, side by side with herds of wild horses. "There's nothing like horseback riding or mountain-biking in the clouds with the mystical fog of the Andes on open terrain,"

says Andrade. Other activities include hiking Cotopaxi, star-gazing, waterfall and native forest hikes, a ropes course, rappelling, bird-watching and a zip-line course.

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Culture at Hacienda Cusin

Two hours north of Quito, at 8,500 feet, several acres of lush gardens and tree-lined cobblestone paths perfume the mountain air surrounding the 17th-century estate and monastery of Hacienda Cusin. Now restored to a boutique hotel with 25 guest rooms and cottages, the historic details of the property and beautiful serenity of the grounds provide an enchanting atmosphere.

Romance seems to be woven into the very fabric of Cusin, which also hosts weddings and receptions. The inviting living area, library, bar, dining room and every nook and hideaway, especially the Salon Bolivar, are artfully decorated in high hacienda style. Evening walks in the gardens, with private candlelit dinners accompanied by a classical guitarist, as well as other activities, can be arranged for ardent couples.

Many of the markets are close to Cusin, which makes it ideal for visiting nearby craft villages for wood-carvings, weaving and leather goods. There are also ancient sites, archeology and anthropology museums to add to the list. Otavalo market is

perhaps the most famous with the largest market held on Saturdays. Plan a visit to the Condor Reserve on the way to or from this market, as it is only 10 minutes from Cusin. Custom itineraries can be created for guests upon request.

The problem with Cusin is that there's a chance guests may never want to leave the Ecuadoran hacienda paradise. But many return. Owner, Nik Casomolina, says, "We have a very large guest return, in fact, 16 years is the record for one couple." haciendacusin.com



PEAK TO PEAK

Adventurous couples relish the abundance of outdoor activities in such an unrivalled setting.

twisting, single-track trail. The contrast of the two-wheeled, steel steed versus the real deal horse breed is a testament to the variety of activities offered at this working cattle ranch adjacent to Cotopaxi National Park. Topping out at 19,347 feet, snow-capped Cotopaxi is the second highest summit in the country and one of the highest active volcanoes in the world. Don't worry; it hasn't erupted since 1940.

PHOTO COURTESY OF HACIENDA EL PORVENIR