



BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Ecuador is slightly smaller than Italy or the U.S. state of Nevada. The country is located on, and named after, the equator. Ecuador has four major geographic regions: La Costa (coastal lowlands), which contains rich agricultural land; La Sierra (Andean highlands), with snowcapped mountains; El Oriente (eastern lowlands), beginning at the eastern Andean foothills and containing mostly tropical rain forest; and the Archipiélago de Colón (or Galápagos Islands), a group of islands in the Pacific about 600 miles (966 kilometers) off the coast. Charles Darwin developed his theories of evolution based on his observations of Galápagos wildlife. Ecuador is subject to earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.

The country has dozens of active volcanoes; many of them are near Quito, which is surrounded by the Avenue of the Volcanoes. The two highest peaks are Chimborazo, at 20,561 feet (6,267 meters), and Cotopaxi, at 19,347 feet (5,897 meters). At an elevation of 9,350 feet (2,850 meters), the capital of Quito is the second highest capital city in the world (after La Paz, Bolivia). Ecuador's mountains are home to cloud forests—tropical mountain forests permanently covered in clouds and mist.

More than a million species of insects, 1,500 species of birds, and 4,500 species of butterflies live in Ecuador. The Ecuadorian rain forest is home to the world's loudest monkey (the howler monkey) and smallest monkey (the pygmy marmoset). Plants in Ecuador's rain forest are used to make medicines throughout the world to treat malaria, Parkinson's

disease, and multiple sclerosis.

The climate varies by elevation more than it does by season, but the rainy season is generally from October to May. The driest months are June to September. The coastal lowlands are hot and humid, while the highlands include everything from subtropical valleys to frigid mountains. Quito's temperature averages 60°F (16°C) all year. Temperatures in the Galápagos Islands average 74°F (23°C). The rain forest, part of the upper Amazon Basin, has a tropical climate. Ecuador is located at the center of the El Niño weather pattern, which periodically causes destructive floods and mud slides and is often followed by the La Niña weather pattern, which causes drought.

History

Indigenous Peoples and Colonization

Various groups of indigenous peoples, whose ancestors first inhabited Ecuador, were conquered in the latter 1400s by Incas from the south. The Incan Empire ruled the area until the Spanish conquered it in 1534. The Spanish claimed vast tracts of land and enslaved the local people. Nearly three hundred years later, Antonio José de Sucre, a compatriot of Simón Bolívar, led a military campaign against the Spaniards. Ecuador gained its independence in 1822 and became part of Gran Colombia, a federation led by Bolívar that was dissolved a few years later. Ecuador declared itself a republic in 1830.

Conflict with Peru

In 1941, Peru and Ecuador battled over ownership of an area in the southern Amazon region then controlled by Ecuador. A 1942 treaty granted Peru most of the territory, but because the

territory in question was largely unmapped and the treaty denied Ecuador access to vital mineral wealth and the Amazon River system, the country later rejected it. The two neighbors continued exchanging hostilities from time to time. A January 1995 clash lasted for several days before international observers helped negotiate a settlement. A final agreement was signed in October 1998, granting Ecuador a small portion of land as well as navigation rights on some rivers in Peru.

Political Turmoil

Between 1830 and 1948, Ecuador had 62 presidents, dictators, and military leaders. In 1948, Galo Plaza Lasso became the first freely elected president to serve a full term. Civilian governments alternated with military rule until 1979, when a new constitution allowed for a freely elected president.

The 1996 elections marked Ecuador's fifth consecutive peaceful transition of power. Abdalá Bucaram, nicknamed *El Loco* (the Madman), won the presidency, promising to help Ecuador's poor. But in 1997, Congress voted to remove Bucaram for "mental incapacity" and charged him with corruption. An interim leader, Jamil Mahuad, was elected president in 1998, only to be ousted by a military coup in 2000 and replaced by his vice president, Gustavo Noboa.

In 2002, Lucio Gutierrez was elected president, and he began the difficult task of stabilizing Ecuador's economy and maintaining order in the face of widespread discontent. However, in 2006 Congress voted the unpopular Gutierrez from office for his firing of several Supreme Court judges who didn't support him. Vice President Alfredo Palacio served as interim president until 2006 elections brought left-leaning independent Rafael Correa to power.

Correa aimed to fight political corruption by rewriting Ecuador's constitution and to improve the lives of Ecuador's poor. In 2011, voters approved changes to the constitution that would extend the president's power, and Correa was reelected to his third and final term in February 2013. He vowed to tighten control over the media and push forward with reforms such as land redistribution, in addition to passing a new mining law designed to attract foreign investors.

Recent Events and Trends

- **Term-limit change:** In December 2015, Ecuador's National Assembly approved a constitutional amendment that abolished the two-term limit for presidents. Following the announcement of the move, demonstrators clashed with police in Quito. The new rule will not come into effect until 2021.
- **Major earthquake:** April 2016 saw one of Ecuador's largest natural disasters in decades when a 7.8-magnitude earthquake hit the country, killing more than six hundred people and causing major damage to infrastructure. Hundreds of aftershocks followed, with one reaching a 6.8 magnitude. Damages of about 3.3 billion dollars were estimated.
- **Presidential developments:** In February 2018, Ecuadorians voted in a referendum to approve constitutional changes that limit public officials to a single reelection, barring former president Correa from returning to the presidency. When Lenín Moreno, a protégé of Correa, came to office in 2017,

most assumed he would do Correa's bidding. However, President Moreno has proved independent. In addition to launching the referendum, he has initiated a government corruption probe.

THE PEOPLE

Population

The majority (72 percent) of Ecuador's population is mestizo (of mixed indigenous and Spanish heritage). Indigenous peoples, whose culture differs from that of mainstream society, comprise about 7 percent of the population. The Montubio people (7 percent), of mixed-race and indigenous descent, are a coastal ethnic group formally recognized by the government since 2001. Another 4 percent of the population is Afroecuadorian. Quito is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the Western Hemisphere and is home to over 1.7 million people. Quito has some of the best-preserved colonial architecture in South America. Though Quito is the capital, the largest city is Guayaquil, which has more than 2.7 million residents.

Language

Spanish is Ecuador's official language, although Kichwa (also known as Quichua or Quechua) is spoken by highland Indian groups, including the Kichwa, Saraguro, Otavalan, Cañari, and Chimborazo. Kichwa is recognized by the constitution as an important part of Ecuadorian culture, but it is not an official language. Many Kichwa words have been adopted into colloquial language to supplement the Spanish vocabulary. Indigenous groups (Shuar, Auca, Cofan, Cecoya, Cayapa, and Tsachilas) in other regions speak their own languages. Many people from these groups are bilingual in a native tongue and Spanish. Spanish tends to be spoken faster on the coast than in the highlands. Some consonants are pronounced differently between the two regions.

Religion

While the constitution guarantees religious freedom, roughly 74 percent of Ecuadorians belong to the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church has played a major role in Ecuadorian history and influences a variety of cultural aspects in private and public life. The Church's conservative traditions continue to influence political and social matters in Ecuador. Most Ecuadorians actively participate in weekly services. Many national and local holidays and festivals center on the Catholic faith. Rituals such as baptism, First Communion, and confirmation are celebrated in the community, as well as among family, and are considered essential to growing up. Many Protestant faiths are growing in popularity, and people generally are tolerant of other beliefs.

General Attitudes

Ecuador encompasses a great diversity of cultures. In addition to ethnic differences, there are regional differences that tend to influence politics and internal relations. *Serranos* (people from highland areas, including Quito) are considered more formal, conservative, and reserved than *Costeños* (coastal

inhabitants). Costeños are considered cosmopolitan, open, and liberal; they generally are the businesspeople of Ecuador. Serranos are associated with government and banks. The two groups, political rivals, distrust each other in many respects but are united in others. A common trait of most Ecuadorians is the value they place on familial relationships and responsibilities. People tend to be warm and hospitable. Relationships generally take precedence over schedules.

A certain sentimentality is evident in popular songs and in the practice of exchanging or giving *recuerdos* (tokens of affection or remembrance). Oratory and leadership skills are generally admired, as are loyalty and honesty. Occupation, wealth, and family name indicate social status.

Long marginalized, indigenous groups have begun to organize themselves to regain lost rights, press for environmental protection of their lands, and achieve recognition for their language and culture. Today, there is greater contact and cooperation between indigenous peoples and other Ecuadorians than in the past. Still, most indigenous peoples who remain in their home regions (and many who move to urban areas) retain strong, traditional cultural identities.

Personal Appearance

In urban areas, many Ecuadorians wear standard Western-style clothing. Older women tend to prefer skirts, while younger women often wear pants. Every rural region has its own traditional styles, colors, and fabrics. These clothes are worn by rural and indigenous peoples. Women from these groups usually wear skirts and often wear hats—made of straw in coastal areas and wool or leather in the highlands. Generally, Costeños (coastal inhabitants) and members of some indigenous groups wear bright colors (white, yellow, and red), while Serranos (people from highland areas, including Quito) prefer blues, browns, and blacks. Young people from some groups may mix Western styles with their traditional clothing. Special celebrations call for new clothing, either purchased at a store or, for some middle-class and wealthy Ecuadorians, made by local tailors.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

People usually shake hands when first introduced. A handshake is also used in subsequent greetings, along with the exchange of good wishes. In rural areas particularly, one offers the wrist or arm rather than the hand when one's hands are soiled. Close friends greet with what seems like a kiss on the cheek—they actually touch cheeks while “kissing the air.” Men may embrace if well acquainted. It is customary to address a new acquaintance by title (*Señor, Señora, Doctor, Doctora*, etc.). Among friends, the title *Don* or *Doña*, followed by the first name, is a common greeting indicating respect and friendship.

Typical greetings include *Buenos días* (Good day) and *¿Cómo está?* (How are you?). It is courteous to greet people in small stores or restaurants or when passing on rural roads. Friends commonly greet each other with *Hola* (Hello). After a

long absence, one might greet another with *¿Cómo has pasado?* (How have you been?).

Gestures

Ecuadorians often use gestures to emphasize or replace verbal communication. During conversation, a person might touch another person of the same sex to show friendly concern. Drawing a circle or two in the air with the index finger means “I’ll be back.” To indicate “Sorry, the bus is full” or “Sorry, we’re out of tomatoes” or anything along that line, a person sticks out the hand, as if to shake hands, and twists it almost as if waving. Yawning in public, whistling or yelling to get someone's attention, and pointing with the index finger are considered impolite. Ecuadorians might point by puckering or pursing the lips. One can also indicate “up the road” by lifting the chin and “down the road” by lowering the chin.

Visiting

Relatives and friends usually visit for a meal and conversation. Unannounced visits are common and welcomed. If unexpected guests arrive during mealtime, they are offered a full meal. Otherwise, they typically are offered something to drink. Refusing a meal, drink, or other refreshments generally is impolite. Hosts often offer departing guests a small gift of fruit, candy, or something else on hand. *Dios le pague* (God will repay you) is a traditional expression of thanks for a gift or an invitation, but the phrase is most commonly used today by Ecuadorians accepting charity.

When inviting a guest to visit, the host will state the starting time, but specifying an ending time is considered bad taste. Instead, an ending time is generally understood depending on the nature of the visit. Family visits tend to follow more formal codes of conduct than social visits between friends. Guests are not expected to arrive on time and can be anywhere from 10 minutes to an hour late, depending on the event. This tendency to arrive late is jokingly referred to as *la hora Ecuatoriana* (Ecuadorian time). Dinner guests usually stay for conversation rather than leaving right after the meal; this type of conversation is referred to as *sobremesa* (over the table).

Evening socials and parties might extend past midnight. They usually involve eating, dancing, and drinking. Furniture is placed near the wall so everyone, including children, can dance in the middle of the main room. The hosts serve refreshments on trays; guests do not serve themselves from a central location. A late meal is usually served, after which some guests may stay for more socializing.

At small gatherings, arriving guests greet each person individually. The host introduces people who are not yet acquainted. If guests fail to greet acquaintances, it shows disrespect for the relationship. When leaving, one also says good-bye to each individual. Less formal customs are becoming the norm among the younger generation. For instance, young people often greet a whole group rather than each individual.

Eating

Food and eating habits play an important part in Ecuadorian culture. Each holiday is associated with a special kind of food

and every town has a specialty dish. Mealtime is considered a good time for conversation—catching up, doing business, or socializing. At family meals, the mother generally serves food to the father first, followed by male children and then female children (who help prepare and serve the meal). In certain rural areas, the mother eats only after everyone else has been attended to. Guests usually are served first and receive the largest amount and choicest selections of food.

Taking leftovers home is acceptable; leaving food on the plate is not. It is customary to say *Buen provecho* (roughly, *Bon appétit*) before beginning a meal or at the end of a meal. One should thank the person who prepared the meal before excusing oneself from the table.

A host who invites a guest to a restaurant is expected to pay for the meal. Young people often split a bill.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Structure

Families generally are close-knit. Urban families average two children, while rural families average three children or more. The elderly are typically respected and treated well, and many generations may live under the same roof. Grandmothers often take responsibility for housework and raising their grandchildren, especially in single-parent families and homes in which both parents work. In some cases, grandfathers become father figures for their grandchildren.

Parents and Children

Young girls usually help their mothers with domestic tasks and caring for younger siblings. Boys in poorer families are responsible for contributing to their families' incomes; many start working at a young age. While traditionally children lived with their parents until marriage, children now commonly move out to get an education or to work away from their hometown. A large wave of migration has also led many parents to work in Europe or the United States, sending their children to live with their grandparents or aunts and uncles.

Gender Roles

While most families follow traditional roles, in which the mother is responsible for child rearing and housework and the father works outside the home, urban families are changing; more women now work outside the home, and more men share household duties.

Teenage pregnancies and single motherhood are common; in general, the men involved are not typically financially responsible for their children. Women generally end their studies when they become mothers, especially in rural areas; the responsibilities of raising children and working to support children make it difficult to be a student at the same time.

Ecuador's constitution provides for gender equality, equal family responsibilities for both genders, and joint parental authority. However, women are not usually financially independent. Few women own land, and households headed by women have a lower income than households headed by men. Patriarchal societies are more common in the highlands and certain rural areas; attitudes toward women are less

conservative in urban areas. In 2008, Ecuador imposed gender quotas in candidate lists for all public elections; this helped to raise the percentage of women holding positions in the legislature to roughly 40 percent.

Housing

Exteriors

The style and quality of housing in Ecuador varies sharply by region. Housing in La Costa tends to be quite basic and, with the notable exception of Guayaquil, does not boast the lavish Spanish architectural styles that are typical of the housing of the mountainous Sierra region. Coastal houses are typically square, single-storey buildings. Lacking space inside, inhabitants make the most of their roofs, which they often enclose with low walls. They also use the space behind their house for gardening, as well as for washing and other normal household routines. In El Oriente, the area that is mostly tropical rain forest, dwellings often consist simply of woven palm fronds on a wooden frame. Houses like these provide very little privacy and not much protection from the elements.

Interiors

Home interiors tend to have a mixture of several different styles. Bright colors are common. Religious imagery, including crosses, posters, and sculptures, is typical, especially in the coastal and Sierra regions.

Dating and Marriage

Dating and Courtship

Young people get together for dances or other activities. Dating usually begins in groups. Young people enjoy going to the movies, concerts, and outdoor activities. They also socialize in parks or plazas. As couples begin to pair off, which usually happens in high school, a girl may have to ask for her parents' approval when invited out. In rural regions, the young man must visit with the girl's parents to gain their approval.

Marriage in Society

Women usually marry by age 23 (younger in some rural areas), and men around age 25. The legal minimum marriage age is 18, but some girls marry as minors with their parents' permission. Young people are expected to get married by their thirties, though men face less pressure to marry than women do. Couples cohabitating before marriage are more common in urban areas but are not well accepted by society. Families often encourage their children to complete their education before marrying.

Common-law marriage, which is referred to as *estilo manabita*, is common and as well-accepted as traditional marriage throughout the country, especially in rural, coastal areas. Common-law couples refer to each other as husband and wife when speaking to others. For most of these unions, the ceremony is lacking only because of the expense of a wedding. Although same-sex marriage is not legally recognized, civil unions are.

Polygamy is technically illegal but is still practiced in some communities. In the coastal region of Manabi, many men have more than one wife and family; each wife lives in her own house with her children and avoids contact with the other wives.

Weddings

Marriage is considered a large accomplishment, and wedding days are very important to everyone involved. Most weddings are celebrated with Catholic rituals—the bride wears white, and the service is attended by both families and is conducted by a Catholic priest, who talks about the importance of raising a family within the church. These celebrations are not necessarily followed for religious reasons but are traditional.

Following the wedding, a big party with friends and extended family takes place. A small percentage of religious, upper-class couples do not live together before their church wedding, even if they have already been legally married. Religious wedding ceremonies sometimes occur from a week to a month after the civil wedding ceremony.

Weddings in the indigenous highland communities are large celebrations that last several days and take place mostly outdoors. Guests eat, drink, dance, and sleep in community member's houses for the entire time period. It is common to kill a whole cow, a few pigs, and other animals to supply enough food for everyone. The party usually ends when the hosts run out of food.

Divorce

Divorce is increasingly common but is seen as inappropriate by religiously conservative families and older generations. Remarriage after divorce is more difficult for older generations, particularly older women, than for young people.

Life Cycle

Birth

The most important events in an Ecuadorian's life tend to be accompanied by Catholic rituals. The first is baptism, which occurs within the first three years of a child's life. A celebration, usually attended by the entire extended family, follows the baptismal ceremony. In indigenous communities, baptismal celebrations are as important as weddings, and after the ceremony, the family hosts a party where people eat, drink, and dance; it can last for several days. Guests bring gifts for the child as well as food and alcoholic beverages. The child's godparents bring presents for the child and mementos (*recuerdos*) indicating the date and baptism name for all the guests. Godparents in rural areas are chosen as a symbol of the parents' appreciation and could be the wealthiest people in the community or the parents' employers. In urban areas, godparents are usually relatives or close friends of the family.

Milestones

Confirmation, a ceremony in which a bishop draws a cross on a child's forehead with holy oil, takes place around age 14 and is similarly significant. It symbolizes becoming an adult member of the congregation. Those preparing for this rite attend several classes before the ceremony. A party is held after the confirmation; guests congratulate the child and give presents. Sometimes, the guests themselves are given *recuerdos* to commemorate the day.

Like girls in many other Latin American countries, Ecuadorian girls enjoy a big celebration, or *quinceañera* (coming-out party), on their 15th birthday. First, a traditional ceremony, formerly conducted by the church but today only observed as a customary ritual, officially presents the girl to

society. If the family can afford it, a party with food and drink follows. Many girls do not begin dating until after age 15.

Another important celebration of adulthood is graduation from high school. Schools organize large ceremonies, and afterward, families host parties for friends and relatives of the graduates. High school graduation usually occurs at age 18, which is the same time that Ecuadorians legally become adults. Wealthy families often give their children additional graduation presents, like a car or a trip to Europe.

Death

Following the death of a family member, the family holds a wake in their home. Relatives, friends, and even acquaintances bring flowers to pay their respects to the family; guests are offered something to eat and drink. In rural areas, wakes last for several days, and a large amount of food is involved. In cities, wakes may only last one day and night; they are typically held in a funeral home, and the hosts only offer small appetizers and tea or coffee.

After the wake, a religious service is held at either the funeral home or a church. Extended family and friends of the deceased accompany the casket to the cemetery or crematory either by vehicle or on foot; the closest male relatives or friends carry the coffin at least part of the way in this procession. Burial at a cemetery is traditional, but cremation is increasingly common in urban areas.

Diet

Breakfast in urban areas usually consists of coffee, bread, and eggs. At local markets, Ecuadorians may purchase a breakfast of rice with chicken or pork and fresh juice.

The main meal is eaten at midday, though eating habits in some urban areas are changing to favor a later meal. Still, people in almost every type of work have a one-hour break for lunch. Serranos (people from highland areas, including Quito) favor corn and potatoes, while Costeños (coastal inhabitants) favor rice, beans, and several varieties of bananas. Fresh fruits abound. Chicken, beef, and fish (on the coast) are dietary staples. Soup is almost always served at both the midday and evening meals. Hot bread is a popular afternoon snack.

Some favorite dishes include *arroz con pollo* (fried chicken with rice), *locro* (soup with potatoes, cheese, and avocados), *llapingachos* (cheese-and-potato cakes), and *ceviche* (raw or cooked seafood marinated in lime and served with onions, tomatoes, and spices). Ecuadorians also enjoy *fritada* (fried pork), *empanadas* (pastries filled with meat or cheese), *arroz con menestra* (rice with spicy beans, barbecued beef, and plantains), *caldo de bola* (plantain-based soup with meat and vegetables), and *cuy* (roast guinea pig).

Recreation

Sports

Nationally, *fútbol* (soccer) is the favorite sport, followed by volleyball and basketball. Other popular sports include tennis, running, and boxing. Ecuadorian volleyball (*Ecuavolley*) is played by two teams of three, using a heavy ball; it follows the same rules as volleyball.

Pelota nacional, or "national ball," is a traditional sport played with heavy wooden rackets and a small, heavy ball. It

is sometimes compared to tennis. While *pelota nacional* is mainly played by older generations in small villages, there are new efforts to preserve the sport, and official leagues have been established in several provinces.

Cycling has become popular, especially in Quito. Every Sunday, the city of Quito holds a *ciclopaseo* (cycling promenade), during which the main streets are closed to traffic (which is heavy and dangerous to cyclists during the week) in order to be open to cyclists and others.

Leisure

Cuarenta (meaning "forty") is a popular card game played throughout Ecuador; it is a strategy game played with 40 cards (the cards left over after the eights, nines, and tens are discarded from a regular deck). The first player or team to reach 40 points wins.

Children like to play outdoor games such as hopscotch or hide-and-peek. Computer games are becoming more popular. In school, children practice soccer, basketball, and volleyball. Many Ecuadorians participate in community groups (women's clubs, church groups, or sports clubs) and *mingas* (community improvement projects). Teens and young adults often gather at discos, where salsa dancing is particularly popular. In urban areas, people enjoy going to the movies and the mall, spending time at parks, playing sports, riding bicycles, and going to parties. Rural residents also enjoy playing sports and going to parties.

Vacation

Traveling and sightseeing are common leisure activities. On holidays, Ecuadorians travel inside the country: people from the highlands like to go to beaches, while people from smaller villages sometimes travel to the main cities. Others travel to waterfalls, thermal springs, and other touristic sites in the Andes mountains or the rain forest. People in coastal areas take advantage of nearby beaches. Outdoor swimming pools are always popular on weekends and holidays.

The Arts

Music and Dance

Ecuador's music and dance reflect a mixing of cultures. In the province of Esmeraldas, on the northern coast, most of the population is of African descent. Culture in this region shows strong African influences; *marimba*, traditional dancing music, features a bamboo xylophone and percussion. Traditional handicrafts are made of coconut shells and seashells. The Chota Valley, in the Andes mountains, is also populated by Ecuadorians of African descent; culture there combines African and Ecuadorian highland elements. A traditional form of music and dance, the *bomba*, mixes African rhythms with Andean guitar and uses orange leaves, which are wrapped around a comb and blown on, as instruments. Women dance the *bomba* by moving their hips while balancing a bottle on their heads.

String and wind instruments such as bamboo flutes and *rondadors* (panpipes) characterize indigenous music. "El Condor Pasa" is a well-known traditional song from the highlands. Other styles of folk music include the *yumbo*, *pasacalle*, and *pasillo* (a popular type of traditional music with slow, waltz-like rhythms played both on the coast and in the mountains and considered the national music of Ecuador).

Pasillo is played with guitars and *requinto* guitars, which are smaller and higher-pitched than regular guitars. Lyrics of *pasillo* songs are often borrowed from famous poets and writers and tend to be quite dramatic. Julio Jaramillo, a *pasillo* singer in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, is still considered one of Ecuador's most famous people; he died in 1978, but his birthday (1 October) is now celebrated throughout the country as Ecuadorian *Pasillo* Day. While traditional music is still very popular, younger generations also listen to modern urban music such as hip-hop, reggaeton (an urban form of music coming from the Caribbean), and rock.

Folk Arts

Folk arts are diverse and vary by region. Many people weave items such as carpets, bags, sashes, and Panama hats, which can take months to complete. Some make wood carvings of saints or Christ. Decorative crosses, musical instruments, jewelry, and leather work are other native arts. The Otavalo region, in the northern highlands, is famous for its artisans and musicians.

Painting

Painting has been important in Ecuador since the colonial era. The *Escuela Quiteña* (Quito School), an artistic tradition that flourished during the colonial period, produced religious paintings that introduced Andean features, such as indigenous customs, traits, and costumes, as well as local plants, into European styles of art. In the second half of the 20th century, indigenist painters such as Oswaldo Guayasamín, Camilo Egas, Eduardo Kingman, and Oswaldo Viteri became famous.

Holidays

Ecuador's national holidays include New Year's Day (1 January), Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, Labor Day (1 May), the Battle of Pichincha (24 May, which marks Ecuador's liberation from Spain), the birthday of Simón Bolívar (24 July), All Souls' Day (2 November), and Christmas Day (25 December).

New Year's

On New Year's Eve (31 December), Ecuadorians mark the new year by burning models, or effigies, representing the previous year. Each family prepares its own *año viejo* (effigy, literally meaning "old year") by creating papier-mâché figures or stuffing clothes with sawdust or old newspapers. The *año viejo* also wears a mask representing a character or famous personality (often a politician) that symbolizes bad things that happened during the previous year. Families put their *año viejo* at the entrance to their house and walk around to see their neighbors' effigies. One or more men from the family dresses up as a woman to represent the old year's widow; he walks outside and stops people to ask for money. Burning the effigies at midnight is believed to leave behind the negative aspects of the previous year and give the family a fresh start. Superstitious rituals performed at the burning include jumping over the *año viejo* for good luck, eating 12 raisins to ask for 12 wishes for the new year, wearing red underwear for good luck in love, and running around the block with an empty suitcase in hopes of travel opportunities in the new year.

Carnaval and Easter

Ecuadorians celebrate the *Carnaval* season (in February or

March) by dousing each other with water. *Carnaval* culminates in a weekend festival of parades, dances, and parties.

Although the traditional fasting for Lent is no longer practiced by most Ecuadorians, people do not eat meat, take baths, or do anything strenuous on Good Friday. Even non-religious families eat *fanesca*, an elaborate soup made with over 10 different kinds of beans, on Good Friday. Some cities hold a religious parade where penitents or devotees looking for miracles inflict pain on themselves, representative of Jesus Christ's crucifixion.

Inti Raymi

Inti Raymi (the summer solstice) occurs in June. Celebrations are held throughout Latin America, and one of the largest takes place at the Incan ruins near Cuenca, Ecuador. It features music and dancing and draws indigenous groups from throughout Ecuador and other countries. In colonial times, when indigenous peoples were prohibited from practicing their religious rituals, the solstice celebration was banned by the Catholic Church. Today, this festival symbolizes colonial resistance to some indigenous groups.

Independence Celebrations

Independence of Quito Day (10 August) is also celebrated as a national holiday, Ecuador's Independence Day, commemorating the failed rebellion that took place in Quito in 1809; although the rebellion failed, it is still seen as Ecuador's first steps toward independence. Official cultural events take place throughout the country on 10 August. Each city also holds festivities marking the anniversary of its founding. On 24 May, the city of Quito celebrates the Battle of Pichincha to commemorate the war of independence that took place in 1822; students in Quito's public schools practice for weeks or months to perform in a big parade. Independence of Guayaquil is celebrated on 9 October to commemorate the city's independence from Spain, which began in 1820. The city of Guayaquil celebrates this day with a parade and cultural events.

Other Holidays

On All Souls' Day (2 November) people visit cemeteries, eat bread-dough dolls, and drink *colada morada* (a thick drink made with berries, sweet spices, and purple flour). Communities celebrate Christmas and Easter with reenactments of religious events. A traditional Christmas practice is to set up a *pesebre*, or nativity scene, with small ceramic figures on real moss. Most Ecuadorians also decorate a Christmas tree. Families gather for a large meal, commonly including a baked turkey, on Christmas Eve. At midnight, all the family opens their presents. Children usually go to bed very late.

SOCIETY

Government

Structure

The Republic of Ecuador is a presidential republic and is divided into 24 provinces. The president and vice president run together on the same ballot and are elected by popular vote. The president is both head of state and head of

government. The vice president is second in power and may assume political responsibilities in the president's stead. The country's legislature is the unicameral National Assembly, with 137 members elected through proportional representation to serve four-year terms.

Political Landscape

A number of political parties are active; the largest include the ruling left-wing Proud and Sovereign Homeland (PAIS) party and the center-right Creating Opportunities Movement (CREO). Ecuador's opposition parties have little power because groups struggle to form a unified position.

Government and the People

The constitution guarantees and the government generally respects many basic rights, including freedom of expression, assembly, association, and religion. Citizens also have the right to education, health care, and housing. Media freedoms, primarily those of opposition press outlets, are severely limited by the government. The current government aims to improve the lives of the poor through large social spending programs. In recent years, access to education and health care has increased. Past elections have been considered free and fair, despite some voting irregularities. Voting is compulsory for all literate citizens ages 18 to 65. Voting is optional for illiterate adults and seniors over the age of 65.

Economy

Ecuador's economy is largely based on petroleum, which accounts for about half of the nation's exports. Over a quarter of the population is employed in agriculture. Ecuador is one of the world's biggest banana exporters. Other exports include cut flowers, shrimp, cacao, coffee, wood, and fish. Fluctuations in global market prices for these products have a major impact on Ecuador's economy.

For example, a severe economic crisis in 2000 was caused by low prices for oil and bananas, in addition to problems in the banking sector and huge foreign deficits in the 1990s. Rising commodity prices, among other things, spurred strong growth in the years that followed, but in 2015 and 2016, low oil prices forced the government to decrease levels of public spending.

Foreign investment and trade have been hampered by protectionist and isolationist state policies initiated by former president Rafael Correa and an uncertain political climate. In 2008, Ecuador defaulted on its national debt, which President Correa argued had been entered into illegally by previous governments. The next year, the country successfully restructured most of its loans, significantly reducing the amount owed. Roughly a quarter of the population lives in poverty, and the unstable economic situation has spurred many Ecuadorians to search for work abroad. The economy relies heavily on remittances from these workers.

In 2001, the government strengthened the economy by replacing the national currency, the *sucre* (ECS), with the U.S. dollar (USD) to combat high inflation.

Transportation and Communications

In cities, transportation is provided by buses, taxis, and *colectivos* (minibuses that are more comfortable and faster than buses). In rural areas, *colectivos* are known as *busetas*.

Roads connecting cities have been improved, though not all of them are paved. Seaports provide shipping access to other nations. Air travel both to and within Ecuador is increasing. The Mariscal Sucre International Airport opened in 2013, offering a greater capacity for flights and safer environment for landing and takeoff than did the old airport.

Newspapers are readily available in towns and cities, but the most popular form of media is radio. There are hundreds of radio stations, some of which broadcast in indigenous languages. Most urban homes and many rural homes include a television and radio. Former president Rafael Correa significantly curbed freedom of the press during his time in office. Cellular phones are much more common than landlines. Internet access is limited by high costs.

Education

Structure

Beginning at age six, children are required to attend school until the age of fourteen. Optional private preschool education exists for children under five years old. *Educación básica*, or primary school, is compulsory and lasts six years. *Bachillerato*, or secondary school, lasts three years and is the last stage before university; students in *bachillerato* choose to specialize in either sciences or liberal arts.

The majority of students attend public schools. Private schools are more common in large cities than in other areas. Public schools vary in quality; spots at more prestigious schools are hard to come by, and every year, parents wait overnight in the streets outside the most elite public schools to enroll their children there. Students can register at any public school, regardless of proximity to their home. Private schools also vary in quality; religious educational institutions generally have better reputations than other private schools.

Access

Public education is free at all levels. Tuition costs for private schools vary and are not necessary indicative of quality. Families are responsible for providing uniforms, books, and materials in most cases; the government provides these items for free in rural areas and among low-income families in cities.

Literacy is increasing slowly as more children enroll in primary schools. Virtually all school-age children complete their primary education, but this percentage is lower in rural areas than in cities. Family economic needs, inadequate facilities, and lack of teachers in rural areas contribute to the dropout rate.

School Life

The public school day typically lasts from 7 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. or from 1 to 6 p.m. Students usually wear uniforms. Education focuses more on memorization and neat presentation than on research and analytical skills. Cheating and plagiarism are common but can result in severe punishment.

The main language of instruction is Spanish. However, in communities with high indigenous populations, schools may use both Spanish and indigenous languages. Most schools teach English as a foreign language. Urban students in private schools may also study French.

Higher Education

The undergraduate stage of university studies is called *licenciatura* and usually lasts five years; certain careers require longer periods of study. *Doctorado*, or graduate studies, lasts a minimum of two years. There are dozens of universities, the largest of which is in Quito. In recent years, many small, privately owned universities (nicknamed “garage universities”) have opened, offering unregulated programs that are often of low quality.

The government has worked to improve the quality of higher education and increase access for the poor. Since 2008, tuition has been free for all state universities. The government has formally reviewed the country’s universities and closed over a dozen underperforming “garage universities.” Other initiatives have included requiring additional training for university professors and aptitude tests for entrance to state universities. In the past, students were often admitted based on family connections, a process that largely excluded the poor.

Health

The government provides medical care to all citizens at low (and sometimes no) cost to the patient. However, healthcare professionals, facilities, and equipment are concentrated in urban areas. Those who can afford it might go to a private clinic or doctor. Many people do not have access to safe drinking water. With improved medical care, the infant mortality rate was cut nearly in half from 1990 to 2000, but education is a barrier to maternal and infant health. The country still battles diseases such as typhoid, cholera, malaria, and tuberculosis. Dengue fever is carried by mosquitoes in some coastal areas. Obesity-related problems such as heart disease and type 2 diabetes are growing concerns.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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Capital	Quito
Population	16,290,913 (rank=66)
Area (sq. mi.)	109,483 (rank=73)
Area (sq. km.)	283,561
Human Development Index	89 of 188 countries
Gender Inequality Index	88 of 188 countries
GDP (PPP) per capita	\$11,200
Adult Literacy	95% (male); 94% (female)
Infant Mortality	17 per 1,000 births
Life Expectancy	74 (male); 80 (female)
Currency	U.S. dollar

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