

Ecuador Trip Report: Cuenca and Vilcabamba

2013

Cuenca

August 14- August 21, 2013

In a UNESCO World Heritage Site (1999) brimming with old colonial buildings, almost everything interesting occupies an old restored mansion. And there are many interesting private museums to visit.

The vernacular architecture illustrating the techniques and organization of space during the colonial period is principally located in the periphery of the historic centre and in the rural areas. A strong concentration of this type of architecture is located along the River Tomebanba (el Barranco) that defines the boundaries of the historic town on the south side. It is also in this sector that the site of Pumapungo is located (Puma Gate) in the heart of the Inca town of Tomebamba, and that of Todos Santos (All Saints) where the vestiges corresponding to Canari, Inca and Spanish cultures have been unearthed by archaeologists.

Criterion (ii): Cuenca illustrates the perfect implantation of the principles of urban planning of the Renaissance in the Americas.

Criterion (iv): The successful fusion of the different societies and cultures of Latin America is symbolized in a striking manner by the layout and townscape of Cuenca.

Criterion (v): Cuenca is an outstanding example of a planned inland Spanish colonial town.

Confluence of 4 rivers.

Highest per capital income in Ecuador

Orientation: Look for the brochures called Cuenca Guides - one on Gastronomy and another on Artisans

Hotels

Casa Ordoñez

Great location within a few blocks of the main square; nice breakfast

Old home that has been remodeled into a hotel - owned by the Ordoñez family for centuries. Alberto, the son, is supposed to be incredibly gracious and helpful.

Unfortunately, he was a way when we stayed there and his other family (sister Inez) and staff were nice enough but nothing special. It appears this hotel got such a high ranking on Tripadvisor because of Alberto because while nice, we were not overly impressed with this hotel.

Mansion Alcazar

The most luxurious charm and elegance! A lot of true class.

Great location. Sandra, at the reception, was over the top friendly and helpful. She even made reservations for us one night at another restaurant when we arrived there and the Casa Alonzo restaurant was booked.

Calle Bolivar 12-55 y Tarqi
email: info@mansionalcazar.com
website: www.mansionalcazar.com
Phone: 07-2823-918/-889

Rates include breakfast, English tea service, wifi and taxes (22%)

Double - \$213.50

Single - \$128.10

Garden Suite - \$280.60

Casa Alonzo Restaurant

Dinner for me was about \$55 with desert - 3 course meal

Hotel Victoria

Calle Larga 6-93

072827401

i liked the area near a nice plaza with a cafe where we had coffee, overlooking the river, on Calle Larga - an artsy part of town also near many of the museums and very near the archeological ruins.

I took a look at the rooms when we had lunch in their El Jardin restaurant - they looked wonderful with views so the river; staff was very very nice.

DO NOT stay at Hostal Villa de Rosario where some friends who had a disagreement with the owners were physically attacked. Stay away!

Restaurants

Eucalyptos - described as a "hot" bar but not so crowded when we went for dinner. Very nice and comfortable courtyard dining. Good food.

Gran Colombia

Raymipampa - on main square - recommended several times but we didn't go here.

La Fornace - Italian gelateria-cafeteria

Borrero 8-29 y Sucre

Good pizza

Excellent Chocolate ice cream (cone is \$1)

Casa Alonzo Restaurant (in Mansion Alcazar)

Excellent!! need reservations. One of the best meals I have had in South America! The food was outstanding; service impeccable (the chef also came out to greet all the diners); in a wonderfully elegant setting.

Dinner for one - (appetizers and dessert) - \$50.50 - misticanza salad, soup, lamb chops, sliced strawberry dessert.

El Jardin (in Hotel Victoria)

Very lovely - food is very good and the setting is very nice in an elevated "greenhouse" overlooking the garden and river. The beautiful menus were all handpainted (nice touch).

Tours and Guides

Bus City Tour -

www.cotratudossa.com

288-35-64

Sunday, August 18 - steel grey day

Catch it in front of the old cathedral (Catedral del Sagrario, Luis Cordero y Sucre). 2 hour tour.

So much to see that the tour guide couldn't keep up with a bilingual translation and since we were the only gringos on the bus, we told her it wasn't necessary to do the english version so we just relied on our spanish. Bus up to the Mirador was worth the money because it was so far outside the center - if it had only been within the old center, it would not have been. It was a Sunday and there was nothing open, no people around, so this was the best activity for the day. But generally, we find bus tours very unsatisfying except for a general orientation and overview if the locale is large and extends over a large area. The bus interior was very cool - all wood.

Guides

Tour to Gualeceo and Chordelag -

Guide - we went with Miguel Arias - 0995510856

ecuamiguel76@hotmail.com

Highly recommended - good english. Took us to lunch to have hornados at Gualeceo market. he tried to get a social project for the kids in the market to learn english with the gringos but it didn't work out.

Had read about Efrain Arevalo of Mio Tours but he was unavailable; Also read about Jose Morocho 347-441-3955

Crafts

The epicenter for manufacturing Panama Hats!

Panama Hat Museum, Calle Larga 10-41

Tel. 2831569

Barrancos - Barrancospanamahats.com - Paredes Roldan family (60+ years)

or

Homero Ortega (115 years and 5 generations)

www.homeroortega.com

www.genuinepanamahat.com

Museo de las Conceptas

Hermano Miguel 6-33

www.museodelasconceptas.org.ec

Private Museum - Didn't go but looks interesting, mainly religious artifacts

In Gualaceo

(35 km. east of Cuenca)

La Casa de la Makana - Ikat textiles (artisanal workshop)

Sr. Jose Jimenez.

www.tejidosikat.com

Facebook: Ikat Jimenez

tejidosikat@hotmail.com

Located in Gualaceo on the El Descanso-Gualaceo highway

This is the highest quality award-winning ikat textiles to buy - Sr. Jimenez's work has been purchased by the president and can be found in the presidential palace. Visit their family compound to meet his wife and see the looms, weaving technique and dyeing process explained. The large open compound looks like a rustic museum in itself. There is a showroom on the top floor but I poked around in a dark storage area downstairs to find more selections. They take credit cards.

Outside Cuenca

Santuario Hibiscus Guesthouse - looks interesting

www.santuariohibiscus.com

4 rooms

Located in Yunguilla Valley in La Union 1 1/2 hr. from Cuenca

Ecuagenera - Orquideas del Ecuador

orchid nursery

La Floresta

www.ecuagenera.com

2 -2236547

Contact: Ivan Portilla

Major operation.

Nursery, propagation, display, sales with shipping, and accommodations with pool for orchid collecting/viewing excursions in the mountains.

Artists

Cuenca Design - Gallery of Art
Bolivar 13-49 y Juan Motalvo

Nuca Llacta - crafts
Benigno Malo 6-85 y Presidente Cordova

Hernan Illescas - contemporary gallery
Jose Alvear 1-19 y Av. Solano
www.hernanillescas.com

Art Cuenca Tours
<http://www.artcuenca.com>
Sonia Punin
M-Sat. 9:30 - 7
593-72828558

Resources:

<http://www.cuencahighlife.com/default.aspx>

Gualaceo

35 km. east of Cuenca

La Casa de la Makana - \$170 for Ikat textiles

Owned by Jose Jimenez

Cel. 0995699163-0984344333

Tel. 07 - 2171661

www.tejidosikat.com

Sector San Pedro de los Olivos, km. 10 on the El descanso-Gualaceo highway

Workshop, home, and showroom for exquisite Ikat textiles

Prepared, dyed, and woven in the traditional way

Jimenez has earned many awards and their textiles were purchased by the President and are in the Presidential Palace in Quito

August 19 11 a.m.
via Gualaceo

Transportation from Cuenca to Guayquil on Aug. 21

Van operated by Operazuaytour
074-203537
www.operazuaytour.com
\$12 each

Vilcabamba

Hostal Izhcayluma
2 km. from the village
07-3025162
Lovely country hotel with a nice restaurant

From Vilcabamba to Loja - 1 hour \$17 in private taxi to the center of Loja to the Elite
Tours office.
Elite Tour Minivan to Cuenca - 3 hours (instead of 5 hrs. by bus) - \$12.00 each (instead
of \$7/person by bus)