

Sasha Slater

QUITO IS WHERE you go on the way to the Galápagos Islands, which means that a lot of British tourists head there with absolutely no expectations of enjoying themselves when they land. Essentially, they're marking time until they meet their first blue-footed booby.

Of course, marine iguanas and Darwin's finches have their own attractions, but the capital of Ecuador deserves to be far more than just a night's rest on the way to somewhere else. We stayed at Mama Cuchara, which is a Spanish colonial house in the heart of the old town. The name, charmingly, means Mummy Spoon and refers to the shape of the long, ancient street that leads up to the tiny roundabout that Mama Cuchara domi-

Top of the world

Enjoy natural highs in Ecuador's colourful capital

nates. In fact, the whole of Quito, in the foothills of the Andes and nestled on a high plain between giant smoking volcanoes, is very long and thin with the colonial centre somewhere in the middle, so you can wander its ancient Unesco-approved streets with ease.

And what streets they are. The houses are painted a sugared-almond array of mint greens, baby pinks and bright yellows, and many women wear the crimson or emerald pleated skirts, embroidered with gold thread, and bowler hats that are Ecuador's national dress. Thanks to Quito's position slap-bang on the equator, it's perpetual spring, so trees are constantly dripping with blue, magenta and yellow blooms. It's fairly colourful out there.

Which is nothing to what's inside, particularly the churches... the Spanish conquistadors seem to have decided that the best way to convert the Quiteños to Catholicism was with wheelbarrow-loads of local gold. Go into any church, but particularly San Francisco and La Compañía, and while their courtyards are elegant white and grey stone, the interiors are heaving with gold and crimson carvings on every inch of wall and ceiling. It's a dazzling display.

MIRAVIVA

A seven-night package to Ecuador costs from £2,750 per person, based on two people sharing, including three nights at Mama Cuchara in Quito, international flights, private transfers and excursions (miravivatravel.com)



Top The streets of Quito's old town.
Above Andean textiles woven by indigenous women.
Right Mama

Cuchara, a Spanish colonial house turned hotel

Excursions from the town include a visit to the Hacienda de Jesús, which, though resembling *Gone with the Wind's* Tara, is a rose farm (appropriately for a country of such charm, roses are one of Ecuador's most successful exports along with chocolate). Also on the agenda are volcanic lakes where spectacled bears roam, and two competing equator museums – one boasting live alpacas and guinea pigs – which vie for custom with as much vigour as is strictly consistent with good manners.