

Travel

Five-star farmstays in Ecuador

Hacienda hotels offer a short cut to the soul of the country — and an antidote to the fripperies of the hospitality industry



The terrace at Hacienda La Danesa
Paul Richardson NOVEMBER 11, 2016

It may not have a “signature spa”, a rooftop bar, or an infinity pool; but [Hacienda Zuleta](#) does better than that. This rural hotel in the Ecuadorean Andes counts among its assets a cheese dairy, a trout farm, a condor sanctuary, and its own breed of Andalusian horses. Among the excursions it offers its guests is a hike among the five pre-Inca pyramids dotted around the grounds. Forget the bijou herb garden outside the kitchen door: Zuleta grows its own wheat, barley, potatoes, quinoa, and timber on two thousand hectares of sweeping countryside.

There is no official register of Ecuador’s haciendas (the word typically denotes a colonial-era country estate arranged around an expansive farmhouse) but perhaps 30 have been converted into hotels, and a journey taking in three or four of them is a fast-track to the soul of this small but varied country. Many have preserved the same country-house atmosphere for decades, but there’s also growing move towards innovation, as owners strive to bring fresh approaches and activities to their historic properties.

My tour began at [Hacienda La Danesa](#), an hour outside Guayaquil on Ecuador’s Pacific coast, where the day starts early. My wake-up call was a cocktail of tropical birdsong, barking dogs, and the scratch of brooms on hard surfaces. On my morning run along an avenue of teak trees, I was passed by workers cycling to the fields, tools on shoulders, who stopped to wish me good day.

Much about this 500-hectare agricultural estate — including its plantations of teak, cacao and sugar cane, its dairy herd and horses — is typical and traditional. There’s a familiar charm about the hacienda’s tranquil functioning. Two green macaws squawked as I strolled on the neat lawns

surrounding the wood-shuttered main house, which dates from 1870. Meanwhile, a flock of gurgling guineafowl wandered over the patio where previous generations of hacendados dried cacao beans in the equatorial sun.

Yet there's a dynamism beneath La Danesa's somnolent tropical ambience, driven by the youngest generation of the family that owns it. Eighteen months ago, Niels Olsen returned from a course in sustainable tourism in Australia, opened the hacienda's bedrooms to tourists and launched a farm-to-fork restaurant in an open-sided hall with teak beams and a palm-leaf roof. A more recent novelty is the "cacao train" bringing in visitors from Durán for chocolate tastings in the estate's cacao plantations, on a railway line that passes through the estate. Olsen has further big plans: by next year he intends to build guest cottages around the hacienda in what he describes as an "elegantly rustic" style.

One afternoon he took me cycling through a field of pineapples towards the swelling river that traverses the estate. On the riverbank we left the bikes and embarked on to the water on a pair of tractor inner tubes. Gyring in the current, we drifted downstream, watching the birds, passing a cow who lifted her head to watch, still munching. Further on the river narrows; breadfruit and palms grip the bank with their jungly roots. "You could be in the Amazon, right?" called Olsen. Right, except that La Danesa is only 40 miles from downtown Guayaquil, and the same from the foot of the Andes.

The Galápagos Islands, the Amazon, the Pacific coast and the mountains: Ecuador is four big landscapes packed into one small country. After La Danesa, I flew to Quito then drove south from the airport, the air thin and clear, volcanoes gleaming white above forest-clad hills.

Up here the roadside stalls sell, not mangoes and pineapples, but apples and potatoes. At just under 3,000 metres I drove through stark and bare Andean moorland before the road suddenly plunged down into a deep valley lush with pasture, unexpectedly far greener and more fertile than those high, dry peaks.



[Hacienda Manteles](#) — *manteles* means "tablecloths", a name inspired by the patches of cultivated land in various tones of green arranged along the valley walls — is a farm growing maize and vegetables, about 15 miles east of Ambato. But this is one hacienda, explained its owner César Durán, an engineer and academic, that aspires more to the condition of a nature

reserve. Above the main house lies a 200-hectare swath of primary cloud forest, with waterfalls that plummet from the heights. Andean spectacled bears amble down to the garden to nibble the bromeliads. Beyond the windows of the breakfast room, emerald-green hummingbirds buzz like tiny drones among the branches of a monkey-puzzle tree.

As I ate breakfast, the morning mist cleared and the snowy slopes of Chimborazo (a 6,268 metre-high volcano) reared up into view, glittering. My host reeled off the various activities on the menu today: a hike or ride to the waterfalls? Trekking on the lower slopes of the volcano? Durán can arrange excursions with indigenous guide Alonso Pilla, of the Salasaca people, who invites guests to his village house to learn about medicinal plants and poncho weaving.



Horses in Zuleta's sprawling grounds

The aspect of Hacienda Manteles that piqued my curiosity, however, lay closer to hand. Rooms in the oldest part of the hacienda are comfortably wood-lined in the style of a mountain lodge. Further down the valley from the main house stands a group of new pavilions designed by British architect Jaskran Kalirai, son-in-law of Durán and his wife Guadalupe, and opened in 2012. In the conservative world of Ecuador's haciendas these striking structures in brutalist brick, concrete and stone, with plate-glass panels framing massive views, represent a radical departure. Their interiors have a rough-hewn elegance that Frank Lloyd Wright might have admired, the austerity of textured concrete and unrendered Andean stone softened a little by terracotta floor-tiles and vintage wooden furniture.



A guest bedroom at Hacienda Zuleta

By any reckoning Hacienda Zuleta is the genre-definer, the original and perhaps the best. This Andean manor-house and its sprawling estate, occupying a high valley with folds and crests of mountains rising on either side, was founded by Jesuit monks in the late 17th century. The hacienda is a topos of Ecuadorean colonial and republican history, owned for the past 100 years by the Plaza Lasso family whose most brilliant scion, the politician and diplomat Galo Plaza Lasso, was president of Ecuador from 1948 to 1952.

“This is not a hotel, but a house in which you are our guests,” said Margarita, one of Plaza Lasso’s five daughters, showing me round the gold-framed religious paintings that hang on the walls and the great library that was her father’s study.

A sense of settled routine pervades the house and its surroundings, yet the old place cannot be accused of resting on its laurels. Under the management of Fernando Polanco, Margarita’s nephew, the hacienda has continued to evolve. At the time of my visit, part of the colonial patio — a wide stone courtyard in grey volcanic stone with age-encrusted terracotta roof-tiles — was being restored to create a new dining-room. A farm-shop, newly opened, was selling the produce of the hacienda including cured cheeses made from the milk of the estate’s 300 Holstein-Friesian cows.



A condor in flight near Hacienda Zuleta

A morning spent in the company of Yann Potaufeu, the hacienda's full-time biologist, introduced me to what must be Zuleta's most remarkable new development. We drove in a 4x4 on dirt tracks away from the house, past the pyramids, past the trout farm, and into a long valley whose upper slopes are thickly covered with old-growth Andean forest.

Potaufeu scanned the valley walls for spectacled bears, of which the estate has a thriving population, but the main business of the morning was condors. Zuleta opened its Condor Huasi ("house of the condor") Education Centre in April last year as a place for naturalists, local schoolchildren, and guests at the hotel to learn about the hacienda's ambitious conservation projects. Beside the thatched-roof building at the side of the valley stand the giant cages where rescued condors are encouraged to recover and breed. And, says their keeper proudly, the last three examples of this critically endangered species to be hatched in captivity in Ecuador were born here at Zuleta.

The caged birds stretched and flapped their mighty wings as a pair of wild condors appeared in the sky above us. I watched in amazement as they swooped down to investigate, dark dots becoming great black flying carpets, then soared off again towards the towering summits. In the absence of a pop-up restaurant, or a state of the art gym, I supposed, this would have to do.

Details

Paul Richardson was a guest of [Miraviva](#), which offers an eight-night trip, staying at the haciendas mentioned as well as Casa Gangotena in Quito, with transfers, domestic and international flights from London, from £4895 per person

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