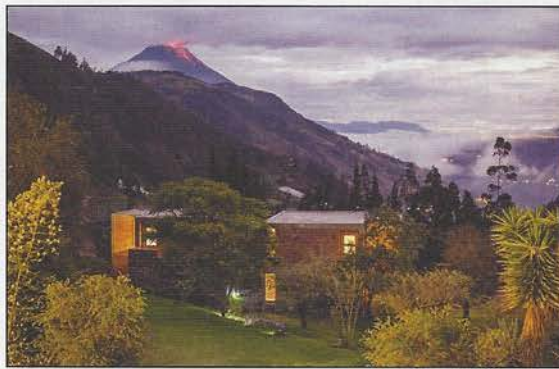


## This week's dream: Ecuador's farmhouse hotels

With the Amazon, its Pacific coastline and the Andes, Ecuador is like three countries in one. And to get a real feel for these wildly contrasting regions, you can't beat a stay at any of its 30 or so hacienda hotels, says Paul Richardson in the FT. These colonial-era estates richly embody different aspects of the country's history, and while many have an atmosphere that is wonderfully timeless, others are innovating – whether by offering specialist activities or adopting ambitious conservation programmes.

An hour outside the city of Guayaquil on the Pacific coast, Hacienda La Danesa is “typical and traditional” – a 19th century farmhouse with wooden shutters, surrounded by neat lawns and plantations of teak and tropical fruit. A flock of guinea fowl and two green macaws live in its gardens, and a train brings visitors from nearby Durán for chocolate tastings in its cacao groves. You can also float in a tractor inner tube down the river that runs through the estate, its banks so thickly jungled that it feels like



The breathtaking views from Hacienda Manteles

the Amazon. For something entirely different, head to the Andes, and Hacienda Manteles, which sits in a deep valley “lush with pasture”, and commands breathtaking views of the snow-capped Chimborazo volcano (6,268 metres). Spectacled bears amble down from the surrounding cloud forest to “nibble bromeliads” in its gardens, and visitors can learn about medicinal plants on hiking trips with indigenous guides.

The “original and perhaps the best” of these haciendas, however, is Zuleta, which was founded in the 17th century and is still owned by the family of Galo Plaza Lasso, president of Ecuador from 1948 to 1952. There are five pre-Inca pyramids in its grounds, high in the Andes, and a full-time biologist on site to show guests around the estate's condor house, where rescued members of this spectacular, critically endangered avian species are encouraged to recover and breed. *Miraviva* (020-7186 1111, [www.miraviva.travel.com](http://www.miraviva.travel.com)) has an eight-night trip from £4,895pp, incl. flights.

## Getting the flavour of...



### Ireland's lighthouses

Ireland's 19th century lighthouses are stark in their beauty – and positioned on some of the country's most spectacular coastline. A new tourism trail, Great Lighthouses of Ireland, includes 12 “exceptional” examples – some of which are now

cosy guest houses, says Jessica Colley Clarke in *The New York Times*. One of the most scenic is Fanad Head, in Donegal's *Gaeltacht*, or Irish-speaking region. Built at the tip of a narrow, wild promontory, it now has three self-catering apartments with peat-burning fires in its former keepers' quarters, and makes a great base for wildlife viewing (orcas sometimes pass close by). Alternatively, head to Clare Island in County Mayo: 20 minutes by ferry from the mainland, its lighthouse (pictured) sits on a 380ft sea cliff, and has superb views towards neighbouring Achill Island. There are wonderful coastal walks, and “seafood feasts”. For more information, visit [www.greatlighthouses.com](http://www.greatlighthouses.com).



### History in Hampi

The vast ruins at Hampi in southern India are among the world's most astonishing historic sites, says Devanshi Mody in *The Times*. It would take weeks to fully explore the 1,600-odd richly sculpted forts, palaces, temples and shrines that were once part

of Vijayanagara – the capital of the eponymous medieval empire, and the second-largest city on Earth at that time, after Beijing. Among the highlights are the Achyutaraya Temple, with its “finely chiselled cameos” (including a “graphic” depiction of a stallion and a woman fornicating); the Vittala Temple, which has columns that emit musical notes when tapped; and the Lotus Mahal (pictured), a miracle of grace best seen in the late-afternoon sun. Stay if you can at the new Orange County hotel, which has villas with long private pools, hot tubs and vast bathrooms. *TransIndus* (0844-879 3960, [www.transindus.co.uk](http://www.transindus.co.uk)) has a 16-day tour of southern India from £2,895pp, incl. flights.

## Four of the best horticultural tours in the winter sun

As wintry dullness grips the UK, garden lovers should head abroad for their fix, says Trisha Andres in *The Sunday Telegraph*

### Santa Barbara

With temperatures around 20°C, southern California is glorious in winter, and in Lotusland, it has one of the world's most eclectic gardens. Located on the edge of Santa Barbara, it was created by the opera singer Ganna Walska in the 1940s. It is made up of contrasting “rooms”, including a “madcap” cactus area, like a more “theatrical” Sissinghurst. The city's botanical gardens are also superb: an array of local species flourish here in a spectacular canyon setting. *Tauck* has a 12-day tour from £3,670 ([www.tauck.co.uk](http://www.tauck.co.uk)).

### Marrakech

If you fancy a long weekend away, try Marrakech. Jardin Majorelle is Morocco's most famous garden, created in the 1920s and bought by the late Yves Saint Laurent and his partner Pierre Bergé in 1980 (Saint Laurent's ashes were scattered there). But the city also has plenty of other lovely gardens, including the Agdal (a sort of orchard laid out 800 years ago), and the cloister-like Riad Enija, in the old Medina. *Brightwater Holidays* has a four-day tour from £1,995, incl. flights ([www.brightwaterholidays.com](http://www.brightwaterholidays.com)).

### Tasmania

It's a long way to fly, but the 22-acre gardens at Inverawe in Tasmania are worth the cost alone, with their superb views and collection of native plants (though there are dubious touches, including gnome-like sculptures). And Tasmania has many other horticultural treats, among them the formal gardens at Epsom House, and the Royal Botanical Gardens, with its unique Subantarctic Plant House. *Botanica World Discoveries* has a seven-day tour from £1,795, incl. flights from Melbourne ([www.botanicatours.com](http://www.botanicatours.com)).

### Singapore

Singapore Botanic Gardens attracts more than four million visitors each year. Set in a landscape that was originally a 19th century ornamental park, it has been transformed by a series of Kew-trained botanists, and last year became the first Asian garden to be named as a Unesco World Heritage Site. Highlights include mighty nibong palms that huddle around the Swan Lake, a fine orchid collection, and a 15-acre patch of tropical rainforest that predates the garden itself. Half-day tours from about £35 ([www.viator.com](http://www.viator.com)).