

EXPEDITIONARY CULTURE **FIELD GUIDE**

Ecuador



U.S. AIR FORCE



About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy or be assigned to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.

The guide consists of two parts:

Part 1 "Culture General" provides the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment with a focus on the Andean Ridge.



Part 2 "Culture Specific" describes unique cultural features of Ecuadorian society. It applies culture-general concepts to help increase your knowledge of your assigned location. This section is designed to complement other pre-deployment/-assignment training.



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PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.



Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and visual symbol of a core American value—freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic because it represents the premium Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.

Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones, where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to focus on developing stable political, social, and economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

Cultural Domains

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to perpetuate that culture into the future.



We can organize behaviors and belief systems into categories – what the Air Force refers to as “cultural domains” – in order to better understand the primary values and characteristics of a society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains—which include kinship, language and communication, social and political systems and others (see chart on next page)—as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the way a culture defines family and kinship, a US military member operating overseas can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

Social Behaviors across Cultures

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even categorize those behaviors differently across cultural boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival, although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.

Conversely, industrialized nations have more sophisticated market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-

based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.

Worldview

One of our most basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different based on our cultural standards. As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Usually, we assume that those in the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.



12 Domains of Culture



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This collective perspective forms our worldview — how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

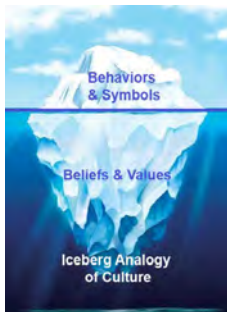
Cultural Belief System

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system assigns meaning, sets its universal standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true, regardless of whether there is evidence to support these ideas. Beliefs are a central aspect of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply-held beliefs we started developing early in life that have helped shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.

Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).



In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in

order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts. The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.

As you travel throughout South America, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common across the region. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.

CULTURAL DOMAINS

1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable or which occurred prior to written language.



The Andean Ridge includes five countries on the South American continent: Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia. Scientists believe the first humans arrived in the region by approximately 11000 BC. Hunter-gatherers congregated in fishing villages along the Pacific coast and developed agriculture in the highlands between 5000 BC and 2500 BC. From 1800-

500 BC, Andean peoples developed more complex societies that eventually shared a culture known as Chavin. They built simple monuments and developed copper and bronze metallurgy.

From approximately 200 BC to 600 AD, smaller regional civilizations rose and fell in the Andes. Among them, the Nazca of southern Peru are known for creating large images in the desert floor ranging in size from 150 to 500 ft crossways. The Tiwanaku and Wari empires rose in the 7th century AD in the mountains and highlands of Peru and Bolivia. While the Tiwanaku developed unique agricultural techniques for extremely high elevations, the Wari built roads and developed terraced agriculture – a technique still common in the Andean Ridge today. Both empires declined due to prolonged drought in the 10th century, giving way to a period of smaller kingdoms that lasted until the 15th century.



The Inca Empire, with its capital city at Cuzco in modern day Peru, expanded rapidly through marriage, military coercion, and conquest in the 15th century. The Incas built roads, irrigation networks, and thousands of warehouses for storing preserved meat and potatoes, as well as valuables. The empire fell into a civil war in 1525 when two brothers competed for the throne. The war ended in 1532, just prior to a Spanish conquest. Of note, scholars refer to the millennia of history in the New World prior to the arrival of Christopher Columbus and other Europeans as the “Pre-Columbian” period.

Columbus touched on the Venezuelan coast in 1498, while other explorers landed on Colombia’s Caribbean coast in 1499. In the 16th century, Spanish explorers conquered much of the Americas, seeking wealth, enhanced social status, and the spread Catholicism. They encountered the Incas in 1532 then conquered the territories of Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia by 1541. In 1543 the Spanish crown officially colonized all the Andean Ridge territories, uniting the entire region as the Viceroyalty of Peru. The Spanish dominated the region for approximately 300 years, importing African slaves to extract resources such as silver and gold to enrich Spain.

Starting in the 18th century, local leaders sought autonomy from the Spanish Crown. While initial revolts were unsuccessful,



revolutionary fervor spread in the colonies. In the early 19th century, Venezuelan aristocrat Simón Bolívar led revolutionary forces that won the independence of the entire Andean Ridge. The territories of modern Colombia, Panama, Venezuela, and Ecuador defeated the Spanish in 1819, forming Gran Colombia. Peru defeated the Spanish Army in 1824, followed closely by Bolivia in 1825. The union of Gran Colombia was not long-lasting:

Venezuela and Ecuador seceded in 1830, becoming independent countries. Although Panama and Colombia remained united for some 70 years, Panama gained independence with the aid of the US in 1903.

Since independence, the Andean Ridge nations have suffered from territorial competition, political upheaval, and poor governance. A series of strongmen ruled Venezuela until a political coalition instituted 2-party rule in 1958. In Colombia a two-party system emerged after 1849 that has endured into the 21st century despite violent civil wars and insurgencies. Ecuador experienced internal instability and military rule before returning to civilian rule in 1979. In the 19th century, Peru and Bolivia vacillated between different forms of government before establishing civilian rule in 1980 and 1982, respectively. Today, facing challenges from left and right extremists, the Andean Ridge nations still struggle to maintain stable governance.

2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all of the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community. The Andean Ridge was home to some of Latin America's first organized societies, such as the coastal fishing villages that formed as early as 5000 BC. Later, with the advent of agriculture, communities developed along river valleys and in the mountains. Stable food sources led to trade and the formation of civilizations.

Spanish conquest and colonialism drastically changed society in the Andean Ridge. Local populations were decimated by conflict, forced labor, and new diseases brought by the Spanish. These included smallpox, measles, typhoid, and influenza. Historians estimate that the indigenous Andean population, roughly 10 million prior to the Spanish conquest, had decreased to just 600,000 by 1620. To replace the diminishing indigenous workforce, the Spanish imported tens of thousands of African slaves to the region.

This colonial history laid the foundations of the region's current-day ethnic and racial compositions. Today, people of *mestizo* (mixed European and Pre-Columbian indigenous ancestry) and *mulatto* (mixed African and European ancestry) heritage are common in the region. Mestizos form majority populations in Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador. The legacy of Spanish colonialism continues to influence social relations in the region, as white and mestizo populations hold most of the wealth and political power. Indigenous, black, and mulatto residents tend to be poorer, although they have become more politically and socially active since the 1980s.



The Andean nations are in various stages of development. Colombia continues its long history of two-party rule and in 2012 entered peace talks with domestic insurgents. In Ecuador, protesters have ousted three of the last five elected Presidents, although former President Correa survived into his 2nd term. Peru has enjoyed relative stability since the 1990s, while Bolivia elected populist Evo Morales President in 2005 and reelected him in 2009, 2014, and 2019. In 2022, Gustavo Francisco Petro Urrego was elected president with a 50.4% vote in a second-round vote.

Venezuela is headed by Nicolas Maduro, successor of the controversial Hugo Chavez: a populist, anti-capitalist, and anti-US President who from 1999 to 2013 nationalized industries and implemented large scale social programs. Under Chavez,

Venezuela sought closer relations with Caribbean nations, particularly Cuba, and supported expansion of a trade alliance among Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Caribbean nations as an alternative to a proposed US regional free trade agreement.

Although relations among the Andean nations are generally friendly, Peru and Ecuador have a longstanding rivalry, as do Venezuela and Colombia. Colombia's conflict with domestic insurgents spread into Venezuela and Ecuador during the early 21st century, temporarily straining relations among those



nations. Illicit cocaine production is a major transnational problem, especially for Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia.

Over the past 2 decades, the Andean nations have increasingly integrated with the South American regional community. For example,

the Andean nations are active members of the Union of South American Nations (*Unión de Naciones Suramericanas*, UNASUR), an organization founded to address common political, economic, social, and security issues. The US has strong economic and security interests in the Andean Ridge, where it provides aid, promotes democracy, and cooperates on counter-narcotics efforts. Likewise, China has developed economic and political links with the region.

3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also create social unity by defining shared identity, offer individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society.

Regional Pre-Columbian populations practiced a variety of ceremonies, beliefs, and practices related to spirits and deities who inhabited the natural environment. When the Spanish conquerors arrived, they encountered the Inca's complex belief system that included worship of several important deities, such as Viracocha, the creator god, and Inti, the sun god.

Christianity arrived in the Andean Ridge with the Spanish, who introduced Catholicism beginning in the 16th century. As Catholicism spread, it eventually became nearly universal in the Spanish colonies. The Catholic Church became entrenched in colonial life, influencing education, social services, and colonial policy. Today, the Catholic Church remains a powerful influence on politics and an important part of community life.

Catholicism remains the dominant religion in the region with 48% or more of Bolivians, Ecuadorians, Colombians, and Venezuelans identifying as Catholic. While most of the remaining population identifies as Christian Protestant, some countries also have small Jewish, Baha'i, and Mormon communities. Of note, indigenous beliefs and practices are still important to many residents of the Andean Ridge today. While some people adhere solely to traditional beliefs and practices, others incorporate them with Christian practices.



4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called “fictive kin”).

Family life and relationships are highly valued throughout the Andean Ridge. While the traditional family unit consists of a husband, wife, and their children, extended kin on both sides of the family are highly influential in family matters. Accordingly, extended family groups often live close together. Children generally live with their parents until they marry and typically have several godparents who provide support and career opportunities later in life. While inheritance traditionally passed from father to son or son-in-law, under modern laws, women may own and inherit property.

While close family ties mean family members have some influence over their children's choice of spouses, men and women generally choose their own partners. Both Spanish traditions and Roman Catholic teachings strongly value marriage as an institution and discourage divorce. Nevertheless,



divorce rates are rising while marriage rates are dropping as women gain social and economic independence.

A growing rural-urban divide in economic and educational opportunities across the Andean Ridge results in notable differences in rural

and urban family life. While the traditional family structure remains common in rural areas, in urban centers family structures have become much more diverse.

5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles.

The Andean Ridge's traditional Spanish and indigenous cultures privilege the male's role as provider and leader. **Machismo**, or masculine behavior and pride, is an important element of male identity in the region. By contrast, these cultures traditionally cast women in subordinate domestic roles. Women have acquired equal rights under the law in such areas as property ownership and suffrage. Nevertheless, social, economic, and political inequalities between genders remain.

Despite most countries' progressive gender equality laws and policies, women face continued challenges to their participation in the workforce. In much of the region, women still assume the traditional roles of wives and mothers, oftentimes facing the challenges of balancing domestic duties with employment in the workforce. Moreover, women often face gender discrimination in hiring and promotion processes. With the exception of Venezuela at 43%, Andean Ridge women who do work typically are paid just 63%-77% as much as men.

Women also face challenges to their participation in the political sector. While Ecuador and Bolivia have established quotas (42% and 25% respectively) for female representation in their national parliaments, women's participation in local politics across the region is much lower. In 2022, women accounted for just 6% of elected mayors in Peru, less than 10% in Ecuador, and 11% in Colombia.



Homosexuality is legal throughout the region. Civil unions between homosexual couples are recognized in Ecuador and Colombia. Every country except Peru has some type of anti-discrimination legislation. Nevertheless, homosexuals still suffer discrimination, stigmatization, and violence in some areas.

6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally.

As a result of Spanish colonialism, Spanish is an official language throughout the Andean Ridge and is spoken by most of the population. Despite the dominance of Spanish, the Andean Ridge is linguistically diverse: 95 languages are spoken in Peru, 89 in Colombia, 44 in Venezuela, 43 in Bolivia, and 24 in Ecuador. While almost all of these languages are indigenous forms, a few are so-called creoles, languages that developed from a combination of English or Spanish with an indigenous variety.

The two most widely spoken indigenous languages in the region are Quechua (the language of the Incas) and Aymara. Peru recognizes these two tongues as official languages, while Bolivia recognizes all indigenous languages as official, including extinct languages. English is taught in most schools and is also popular in the business community.

While some Pre-Columbian civilizations in Mexico and Central America developed written language, those in the Andean Ridge did not. The Incas did develop a complex system of record-keeping, called the **quipu**, which used knots tied in ropes to record numerical quantities.

In their oral communication, Andean people, particularly members of indigenous communities, tend to be reserved and unemotional. They also value respect and modesty in interpersonal relations.

7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) and culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This



knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.

Education in Pre-Columbian societies was primarily informal, as

children learned skills and traditions from their parents and relatives. Scholars believe the Incas employed a more formal education system to instruct male nobles in martial skills, Quechua language, religion, history, and the use of the *quipu*. Women selected to marry nobility also attended formal schools and were taught religion, spinning, weaving, cooking, and brewing.

During the first decades of the colonial period, the Spanish introduced formal education systems that taught indigenous elites Catholic beliefs, Spanish, and “a useful skill” to support the colonists. The Catholic Church was the primary provider of education in the region throughout the colonial period, establishing many schools and universities. By the late 17th century, Spanish interest in educating indigenous students waned, and most schools accepted only Spanish elites.

In the late 19th century, educational opportunities for women and indigenous groups began to expand. Today, education is valued and increasingly accessible throughout the region. Primary education enrollment rates are high, ranging from 93% in Colombia to 99% in Peru. Adult literacy rates are above 94% in all Andean countries. Nevertheless, the Andean Ridge nations still struggle to extend secondary and tertiary education access to all their citizens.

8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In most western cultures, people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management, devoting less effort to relationship-building.

By contrast, in most Andean Ridge cultures, establishing and maintaining relationships with others can take precedence over accomplishing a task in the most efficient manner.

Concepts of personal space differ from those in the US. During conversations, regional residents often stand closer than most Americans do. They also may ask personal questions about family, relationships, and employment as a means of demonstrating polite interest. Men and women may interact differently than Americans are used to. For example, men shake hands both in greeting and parting, while a woman may greet a man with a kiss on one cheek.

Andean Ridge residents also manage time differently. While they may expect foreigners to arrive on time to business meetings, regional residents typically arrive 15-30 minutes late. Similarly, social gatherings generally start half an hour or more after the scheduled time; hosts may even consider on-time arrival rude. While the workday runs on a schedule similar to the US, lunchtime is generally a mid-day break of around 2 hours, during which shops and businesses may close.



The rhythm of daily life typically changes during national holidays and local celebrations. For example, Quito, Ecuador celebrates Founders Day in early December with a week of festivals, parades, and sporting events. Towns and cities throughout the region celebrate Carnival, an annual celebration prior to Christian Lent.

9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill and style. Most of the Andean Ridge's forms of artistic expression – including its art, architecture, dance, music, and theater – reflect a combination of Spanish, indigenous, and African influences.

For example, in Peru, a cathedral features Incan religious symbols; some indigenous dances satirize the Spanish invaders; and both European and indigenous influences inspire Peruvian sculpture and painting. In Colombia, a traditional dance

style mimics the shuffling steps of African slaves in chains.

Dance and music infuse daily living in the Andean Ridge. Many regions lay claim to unique indigenous or *mestizo* musical styles, such as



yaravi from Peru. Ecuadorians have adopted the ***pasillo***, a style of ballad from the north Andes, as their national music. Afro-Caribbean culture has pervaded the Venezuelan and Colombian sea coasts, influencing music and dance in those areas.

Traditional handicrafts such as weaving, sculpture, and ceramics have been revived in recent decades. The region has produced many contemporary novelists and poets who explore their unique cultural heritage. Many have achieved international fame, including Gabriel García Márquez, a Colombian author who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982.

Soccer is unquestionably the most popular sport in the Andean Ridge. Many regional residents avidly follow professional soccer and are amateur players themselves. Bullfighting, an inheritance of Spanish culture, is also popular in most of the region.

10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures, and economics. Theories of disease and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.



Cuisine varies widely in the region depending on local products and tastes. In the highlands, potatoes and grains, along with meat from llamas, guinea pigs,

chicken, and fish are common. Along the coast, fresh seafood, tomatoes, onions, spicy peppers, and rice or cassava (a tuberous starchy root, high in carbohydrates and essential to Caribbean and other tropical diets) are popular. **Ceviche** (raw fish marinated in lemon juice and herbs) is popular in many areas, both along the coast and inland.

Communicable diseases remain a concern in the Andean Ridge. In 2023, the countries reported about 32 cases of malaria per 1,000 people and, in 2023 326 cases of dengue fever (a debilitating disease also spread by mosquitos) per 100,000 were reported with the highest number of cases in Peru followed by Bolivia. In addition, an average of 15% of Andean Ridge rural residents lack access



to clean drinking water, a situation which facilitates widespread outbreaks of diarrhea, parasitic fever, and hepatitis. The prevalence of HIV/AIDS is low with the new infection rate relatively stable over the last decade.

Andean Ridge countries face many challenges in providing healthcare to their populations. Significant disparities in health and access to healthcare exist between urban and rural communities. Some rural communities lack even basic healthcare infrastructure. Similarly, large urban slums, common in major cities, often have no sanitation or health infrastructure.

11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. A number of Pre-Columbian Andean populations lived in hunter/gatherer societies or practiced subsistence agriculture and herding. Larger and wealthier civilizations, particularly the Inca, produced luxury items such as ceramics, art, jewelry, and fine woven goods for local consumption and regional trade.

Spanish colonists developed mineral extraction and refining industries to increase Spain's wealth, doing little to build local industry. For example, colonial governments emphasized exploitation of the region's large silver and lesser gold deposits. They developed agriculture and other local industries primarily



to support the mining industry. Spanish colonists also farmed large estates with forced indigenous or African slave labor, more as a sign of status and privilege as economic pursuit.

After independence, political instability throughout the region hampered economic development. In addition, countries experienced several boom-bust cycles as they exported non-renewable resources and commodities that left them vulnerable to swings in the market. For example, Bolivia transitioned from focusing on silver extraction in the 19th century to tin mining in the 20th, and then natural gas since the 1970s. By contrast, Ecuador experienced

its first boom late in the 19th century, exporting cacao, followed by bananas in the early 20th century, and then oil starting in the 1960s.

Although Venezuela had been the largest economy in the region, turbulent politics and vulnerability to oil market volatility have created economic instability. Colombia's economy, the region's largest, is diversified across the agricultural, industrial, and mining sectors. Peru's economy is also relatively diverse, with gold, zinc, copper, textiles, and fish meal as its major exports. Ecuador has a large agricultural sector and oil industry, while Bolivia, the poorest nation in the region, remains largely dependent on mining and natural gas. A large illicit economy



based on cocaine production also exists in the region, particularly in Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia.

The region's economies were affected by the 2008 global financial crisis to different degrees. The crisis generally reduced demand for Andean Ridge exports and slowed investment in the region. Bolivia experienced few adverse economic effects, while Peru and Colombia underwent relatively minor economic contractions. By contrast, Venezuela's economy contracted for two-years and has been slower to recover.

12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. Since the end of the colonial period, as Andean Ridge economies have developed at different rates, modern technology has spread unevenly through the region.

Roads form the primary transportation infrastructure throughout the region. While Venezuela has one of the best road systems in Latin America, in most of the region, paved roads are restricted to urban areas and select major highways. Mountainous terrain and poor quality roads make road travel slow and dangerous in some areas.

While Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela all have major Caribbean or Pacific sea ports, Bolivia is land-locked. Rail infrastructure is poor and neglected throughout the region.



Information technology is spreading rapidly throughout the Andean Ridge. Between 2017 and 2023, Internet usage grew to an average of 71% across the 5 countries. Mobile phone use grew even more rapidly: while most countries reported subscription rates of around 5 per 100 people in 2000, by 2022, subscriptions had increased to an average of 108 subscriptions per 100 inhabitants.

The Andean Ridge countries have a wealth of energy resources. Hydropower is a major source of electricity due to the many mountain rivers in the region; both Colombia and Peru generate 62% and 50% of their electricity through hydropower, respectively. Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela also have oil and natural gas reserves, which serve as both a domestic energy source and a major export. The US is the main trading partner for most of the region and seeks to develop and expand free trade agreements. Chinese trade relations have grown to become second only to the US in several countries, and China now surpasses the US as a destination for Peruvian



exports. Regional trade is also strong and bolstered by Union of South American Nations' (USAN) trade agreements. Domestic instability, disputes with heavy-handed foreign multinationals, and a history of nationalization of private

industry sometimes hinder the growth of trade.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize Andean Ridge society at large, we will focus on specific features of Ecuadorian society.

PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

1. HISTORY AND MYTH

Overview

Situated on South America's northwestern coast, Ecuador was home to several well-established indigenous cultures and the expansive Inca Empire prior to becoming a colony in Spain's global empire. After gaining independence in 1822, Ecuador joined a short-lived union with Colombia and Venezuela, until it became a unitary state in 1830. Thereafter, political upheaval plagued the country, which became more prosperous after the discovery of oil in 1967, and regular coups toppled governments until 2000. From 2007-17, President Rafael Correa attempted to consolidate executive authority, threatening the state's evolving democratic institutions. In the years since, violent drug gangs

have exercised increasing influence across Ecuador.



Early History

Archeological evidence indicates that humans first inhabited present-day Ecuador around 13,000 years ago, before primitive maize and gourd farming began around 6000 BC.

Inhabitants of Santa Elena on Ecuador's southwestern coast developed permanent settlements by 3500 BC. They began to produce sophisticated ceramic pottery and figurines (belonging to an artistic tradition now known as the Valdivia culture) that came to influence Pre-Columbian cultures from Peru to Mexico.

Beginning around 800 BC, Ecuador's coast became the center of Andean trade in spondylus (spiny oyster) shells, which held cultural and religious significance for people throughout the region, notably the Chavín of Peru. Control of the spondylus trade yielded political and economic influence for early Ecuadorian peoples (see *Economics and Resources*).

Between 700-1500 AD, the Caranqui peoples of Ecuador's northern highlands developed small but complex political organizations that would become the norm across the Northern Andes region. **Llactas** (villages) were loosely confederated into **cacicazgos** (chiefdoms). Chiefs ruled from atop **tolas**, large earthen mounds made as platforms for elite residences. Political authority in Ecuador remained decentralized for centuries as **cacicazgos** warred amongst themselves.

Inca Conquest and Civil War

The Inca Empire (a powerful empire of primarily Quechua-speaking peoples based in present-day Cuzco, Peru) came to dominate Ecuador in the 15th century. Beginning in 1463, Incan King Pachacuti Inca Yupanci conquered chiefdoms in southern Ecuador and introduced Quechua as a *lingua franca* there (see *Language and Communication*). Pachacuti's son and grandson, Topa Yupanci (1471-93) and Huayna Capac (1493-1525), further extended the Empire. Overcoming fierce Caranqui resistance, Huayna Capac subdued what is now Quito before extending the Empire's frontier to the modern Ecuador-Colombia border. In 1525, an epidemic befell Quito (by then an important Incan city). Huayna Capac died from the illness without naming a successor, which incited a civil war. Two principal candidates – Huascar, Huayna's legitimate son, and Atahualpa, his son with a Caranqui princess – vied for the throne. Atahualpa mounted a protracted campaign that defeated Huascar's armies by 1532.



Spanish Conquest

In late 1531, as Atahualpa and Huascar struggled against each other, Spanish **conquistadores** (conquerors) led by Francisco Pizarro set off for Incan lands, driven by stories of vast wealth. They reached Ecuador the following year. Learning of the Incan civil war, the Spaniards met with Atahualpa, took him hostage, forged crucial alliances with indigenous groups opposed to his rule, and later executed him. Incan resistance was largely uncoordinated, and the expeditionary force of Sebastián de

Benalcázar, charged by Pizarro to occupy the Incas' northern territories, advanced swiftly through Ecuador. In 1534, Benalcázar arrived at Quito (which had been razed by retreating Incan forces) and declared it a Spanish city, effectively ending Incan control.



Colonial Tensions

Infighting among the *conquistadores* marked the first decades of Ecuador's colonial period. Rivalries erupted over control of the lucrative **encomienda** (forced indigenous labor) system, resulting in multiple assassinations, notably that of Pizarro in 1541. A divide soon emerged between the Spanish Crown and the *conquistadores* over the conquered territory. The Crown passed laws that centralized political and economic administration, establishing the **Virreinato del Perú** (Viceroyalty of Peru) in 1542 to manage its holdings across South America. The colonists resisted these efforts, raising an Army that initially overcame the royal forces in the area. By 1548, however, Spain had reasserted control of the region.

The Royal Court of Quito

In 1563, the Crown formed the **Real Audiencia de Quito** (Royal Court of Quito) as the region's legal and political administration. Its jurisdiction extended from present-day northern Peru through Ecuador into southern Colombia. Indigenous peoples retained some autonomy under the *Real Audiencia* through **asientos** (Spanish-sanctioned tribunals) that integrated indigenous political institutions into the broader colonial administration.

Colonial Society and Economy: As Spanish agricultural efforts developed, a class-conscious society emerged in Ecuador. Spaniards, called **peninsulares**, wielded most economic, social, and political power. Beneath them were the **criollos** (Spanish people born in the Americas), and then **mestizos** (people of mixed Spanish and indigenous descent). Indigenous Ecuadorians and enslaved Africans occupied the lowest social stations (see *Political and Social Relations*). This structure predominated in Ecuador's **Sierra** (central highlands), where the

Spaniards organized ***haciendas*** or ***latifundios*** (large estates) primarily cultivated by indigenous laborers. Along the coast and eastern interior, however, *peninsulares* wielded less influence. Coastal populations were decimated by Spanish-introduced diseases like smallpox and measles, creating vast areas of vacant lands largely tended by Africans (both enslaved and free) and *mestizos*. Meanwhile, indigenous communities in the Ecuadorian Amazon resisted some Spanish incursions, though the efforts of Jesuit (a religious order) missionaries allowed Christianity to penetrate even these remote reaches.

The 17th century was largely a period of political stability, economic growth, and cultural flourishing. Textile production and shipbuilding emerged as dominant industries, and Catholic influence contributed to an emergent intellectual and aesthetic tradition. Universities opened, Baroque architecture proliferated, and literary output blossomed. Nevertheless, natural disasters and plagues sometimes wreaked havoc. Much of Quito was destroyed when the Pichincha Volcano erupted in 1660.



Colonial Decline: Conditions in the *Real Audiencia* began to deteriorate in the 18th century. Textile prices fell as the Spanish increasingly imported high-quality, price-competitive cloth from Europe. As textile profits declined, output from the *latifundios* became the basis of Quito's economy. Meanwhile, disputes between officials in the *Audiencia* caused the Crown to transfer Quito to the jurisdiction of the newly established ***Virreinato de Nueva Granada*** (Viceroyalty of New Granada, based in present-day Bogotá, Colombia) from 1717-23 and then permanently in 1739. Surging tensions between religious and civil officials further undermined political stability (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Colonial trade reforms enacted in 1756 contributed to a boom in cacao production that created a class of economically influential *criollo* landowners, who came to threaten the Spaniards' control of the economy. Seeking to centralize its control, the *Audiencia*

established a monopoly on alcohol and tobacco in 1764, which triggered a violent revolt of urban merchants that the colonial authorities suppressed. Small indigenous uprisings followed, though the state stifled them all.



Independence

In 1808, French Emperor Napoleon I removed Spanish King Ferdinand VII from the throne and appointed his brother King of Spain. In August 1809, *criollos* in Quito seized the

opportunity to form an administrative council loyal to Ferdinand. Ecuador's national day celebrates this event, which amounted to the first formal repudiation of the *Audiencia* in Ecuador (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*). The *criollo* administration was short-lived, however, as colonial authorities in Lima, Peru and Bogotá dispatched armies to Quito that surrounded the city and forced its dissolution. Another attempt at self-governance led by a *criollo* noble, Carlos Montúfar, was suppressed in 1812, and Spanish authority was restored once again.

In October 1820, military and political figures in the coastal city of Guayaquil declared an end to Spanish dependency and formed the Free Province of Guayaquil. Raising an Army, independent Guayaquil sought to liberate the rest of the *Audiencia*. This force made inroads against royalists before defeats at the battles of Huachi and Tanizagua forced it to retreat. In 1822, the armies of Venezuelan *criollo* General Simón Bolívar, which had recently liberated what is now Venezuela and Colombia, came to the aid of the **Guayaquileños** (people of Guayaquil). Bolívar's forces achieved a decisive victory at Pichincha in May of that year, and Quito fell shortly thereafter, formally ending Spanish rule in Ecuador.

Gran Colombia (Great Colombia)

After its liberation, Ecuador was integrated into the Republic of Colombia (often referred to as *Gran Colombia*), which had been founded three years prior amidst Bolívar's independence campaign. Though Bolívar named himself President of the new

nation, the political situation in *Gran Colombia* quickly deteriorated. As a result of a rivalry between Bolívar, who held conservative support, and liberal leaders, *Gran Colombia* began to dissolve. In May 1830, Ecuador seceded when political organizers in Quito declared it a free and independent state – the ***Estado del Ecuador*** (State of Ecuador, which would become the Republic of Ecuador in 1835).

The Young Nation

In August 1830, Ecuador's first constituent assembly convened in Riobamba in central Ecuador, some 120 mi south of Quito. The body appointed Juan José Flores, who had governed Ecuador under Bolívar, as the nation's first President, and in September, it proclaimed the country's first Constitution. Flores assumed control of a precarious political and social order marked by a deepening rivalry between Quito, the capital, and Guayaquil. Conservative ***latifundistas*** (estate owners) and the clergy dominated in Quito, while wealthy merchants with liberal sympathies controlled the cosmopolitan port city of Guayaquil.



Flores developed his power base among Quito's *latifundistas*. He claimed the Galápagos Islands for Ecuador in 1832 before relinquishing the Presidency in 1835, striking a deal with his rival, Guayaquil-backed liberal Vicente Rocafuerte, who became President. Rocafuerte's tenure, which lasted until 1839, was marked by efforts to improve educational institutions throughout the country (see *Learning and Knowledge*). In 1839, Flores returned to power and began to transform the Republic into a personalist regime, enacting a new Constitution in 1843 that made him a dictator. This act provoked national outrage, and he was removed two years later in a Guayaquil-led uprising.

Dissolution Crisis: Between 1845-60, Ecuadorian politics were volatile as weak leaders jostled for power. The situation became dire in 1859, when President Francisco Robles, under threat of a Peruvian invasion (instigated by an enduring territorial dispute) and facing widespread opposition, moved his government to

Guayaquil. Conservative politicians, such as popular Senator Gabriel García Moreno, formed a provisional government in Quito, while regional **caudillos** (strongmen) formed autonomous governments elsewhere that threatened to dissolve the young country. Guayaquil soon fell under control of Peruvian-backed General Guillermo Franco, who competed with Moreno to reunify and rule Ecuador. Their forces clashed at the Battle of Guayaquil in September 1860. Moreno prevailed, and the government in Quito became the national authority.

The Galápagos Islands

For most of their history, the Galápagos Islands were uninhabited. They served as a temporary residence for European explorers, pirates, and sailors from the 16th-19th centuries before becoming a waypoint for whalers after 1820. In 1835, English naturalist Charles Darwin studied their native flora and fauna, which inspired his theory of evolution by natural selection in his *On the Origin of Species* (1859). In 1978, the Islands were designated a UNESCO World Heritage site. Today, the Galápagos Province of Ecuador is home to a national park, marine reserve, and over 30,000 residents. The Islands also host the Charles Darwin Research Station and are a popular destination for ecotourism.

The Moreno Years

Elected President in 1861, Moreno sought to leverage the Church's influence to unify a deeply divided Ecuadorian society, establishing the **Partido Conservador** (Conservative Party), which advocated for a strong central government with close ties to the Roman Catholic Church (see *Religion and Spirituality*). He delegated important policy matters – especially those related to education and welfare – to the clergy and ruthlessly suppressed religious and political dissent.

Despite Moreno's authoritarian regime, Ecuador developed substantially during its rule. Construction began on a railway between Quito and Guayaquil, and agricultural reforms yielded a major production boom. Cacao exports grew tenfold, exported

primarily through Guayaquil, which gained a growing share of the national economy. Prosperity in Ecuador's cities contributed to a surging sense of national pride. However, Moreno's staunch conservatism and repression fueled discontent throughout the country. Several assassination attempts followed, and liberal conspirators eventually killed Moreno in 1875.



The Guayaquil Elite

Guayaquil's economic influence grew further under Moreno's successor, moderate conservative Antonio Borrero, as cacao production expanded and foreign capital accumulated (see *Economics and Resources*). Liberal banking and merchant families in the port city became wealthier and began to demand a greater role in national politics, placing them at odds with Quito's landowning elite, clergy, and President

Borrero. As tensions between the two cities deepened, the *Guayaquileños* moved to incite a revolt. They backed Ignacio de Veintemilla, a powerful general from Cuenca, who removed the government and installed his own regime in 1876. His government persisted until 1883, when liberal-conservative competition again gripped Ecuador.

Liberal Triumph: In the years that followed, the ***Partido Liberal Radical Ecuatoriano*** (Ecuadorian Radical Liberal Party, or PLRE) and its leader, longstanding opposition figure Eloy Alfaro, gained influence among Ecuadorian liberals. Alfaro launched a coup in 1895, deposing the moderate liberal-Catholic coalition that held the government. He named himself dictator but soon relinquished that title, convening a constituent assembly that appointed him President, and issued a new Constitution.

Alfaro dismantled the remains of the Moreno period, decoupling church and state wherever possible (see *Religion and Spirituality*). He secularized education, instituted civil marriage and burials, and appropriated Church landholdings. National development efforts continued during his tenure, with the Quito-Guayaquil railroad completed in 1908. Despite having yielded the Presidency to PLRE allies between 1901-06, Alfaro sought to transform his legitimate mandate into unmitigated personal

power during his second term, declaring himself dictator again in 1911. In response to his Alfaro's power grab, a coalition comprising traditional conservatives and disaffected liberals removed him from office that year. Alfaro was later executed.

Liberal Plutocracy: The liberals retained power after Alfaro's ouster, and *de facto* authority rested with the Guayaquil elite, whose interests guided national policy. A plutocratic system (rule of the elite) emerged. The Commercial and Agricultural Bank in Guayaquil became Ecuador's most important power broker. Its manager, Francisco Urbina y Jado, personally selected presidential candidates. As elites controlled national politics, Ecuador's developing working class, which had expanded enormously as commerce flourished in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, began to organize.



The Cacao Crisis and the Julian Revolution

Economic crisis struck Ecuador in the early 1920s as plutocratic authority peaked under President José Luis Tamayo. A decline in global commodity prices, competitive African and Caribbean producers, and a blight on Ecuadorian plantations combined to undermine cacao income, which had buoyed Ecuador's export-reliant economy. The sucre, Ecuador's currency, rapidly lost value, and the country could no longer afford the food imports on which it relied. Consequently, the prices of basic goods skyrocketed (see *Economics and Resources*).

Tamayo did little to alleviate the suffering, and many workers in Guayaquil responded by striking and protesting, hoping to force economic reform. When they marched on a heavily militarized police station in November 1922, government troops stationed there fired on the protesters, killing at least 300 people. The violence succeeded in temporarily quieting the labor movement but diminished the country's already shrinking liberal base.

In 1925, the military, backed by socialist and labor elements, removed the liberal government, establishing a new regime in a coup now known as the Julian Revolution. Led by President

Isidro Ayora, it made major reforms, many of which sought to transform the country's financial institutions. In 1926, the Commercial and Agricultural Bank closed, and the Central Bank of Ecuador was established. Political reform occurred as well, and in 1929, the government extended suffrage to women (see *Sex and Gender*).



Ayora resigned from the Presidency in 1931, enabling a peaceful transition of power, but political conditions soon deteriorated. The 1930s were marked by constant power struggles. José María Velasco Ibarra, a powerful jurist, assumed office in 1934. He sought to mold a

base of popular support beyond the liberal-conservative divide of Ecuadorian politics, mobilizing the middle class. After his removal by coup, alternating military and civilian-led dictatorships ruled for the remainder of the decade.

World War II, Peruvian Invasion, and the Banana Boom

Ecuador played a minor role in World War II. Aligned with the Allied Powers, it allowed the US to build military bases in the Galápagos and at Salinas (which were closed immediately after the war). High wartime prices for goods like rice, rubber, wood, and cocoa had a positive effect on the Ecuadorian economy, contributing to prosperity that persisted into the postwar period.

During the war, however, Ecuador's centuries-old dispute with Peru over territory in the Amazon erupted. Until 1941, the area was largely occupied and administered by indigenous groups rather than the government in Quito. After several border incidents, the Peruvian Army invaded Ecuador, occupied El Oro Province, and defeated the poorly equipped Ecuadorian Army. As a result, much of El Oro was destroyed, and thousands of refugees fled. At a peace conference in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1942, Ecuador ceded much of its Amazonian territory to Peru.

Ecuador stabilized during the postwar period and experienced a "banana boom." Banana production became Ecuador's major source of export income and the engine for enduring economic development by engaging laborers and attracting foreign firms

like United Fruit. Meanwhile, Velasco Ibarra returned for a second term as President between 1944-47, but was deposed by the military. After three presidents governed during little more than a year, politics briefly stabilized under President Galo Plaza.

Velasco Ibarra and the Juntas

Nevertheless, Velasco Ibarra dominated Ecuadorian politics for much of the postwar era. He became President three times from 1944-60 but only completed one term (1952-56). After removing Velasco Ibarra from the Presidency in 1961, and then his former Vice President (VP) in 1963, the military installed a junta, supported by Ecuador's political right and center, and began to suppress leftist activity. It governed for three years, abolishing a land tenure arrangement that led to the end of the *hacienda* system's dominance but fell out of favor with the commercial elite when it sought to raise taxes.



A strike organized by the Guayaquil Chamber of Commerce, including student groups and labor unions, eventually forced the junta to step down in 1966. After a brief transition period, during which a provisional government implemented a new Constitution that provided for a two-chamber congress, Velasco Ibarra was again elected President, for a fifth term, in 1968. He quickly dismissed the Congress and Supreme Court, sustaining power through military support while implementing unpopular economic legislation.

Petroleum: After the 1967 discovery of large hydrocarbon deposits in the Amazon, Ecuador began to export oil in 1972. Oil exports and rents became the primary source of government revenue, and the economy expanded significantly through the 1970s (see *Economics and Resources*). In 1972, the military, hoping to capture Ecuador's newfound oil wealth, turned on Velasco Ibarra, ousting him and installing a second junta led by General Guillermo Rodríguez Lara. The regime reformed the oil industry along nationalist lines, founding the **Corporación**

Estatal Petrolera Ecuatoriana (Ecuadorian State Petroleum Corporation), renegotiating concessions made to foreign firms, and joining the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, an influential cartel, in 1973.



Return to Civilian Rule

New military leaders came to power in 1976, seeking to restore civilian rule through a presidential election in 1979. Jaime Roldós Aguilera won the election and was widely popular, especially as nationalism increased during a border skirmish with Peru in 1981. However, successive Presidents after Aguilera dealt with varied economic crises (see *Economics and Resources*).

Efforts to increase economic cooperation with the US, especially under President León Febres Cordero (1984-88), did little to help the economy. Social unrest followed. In the late 80s and early 90s, indigenous groups organized mass protests demanding land and social reform. The government conceded after years of continued demonstrations, acknowledging indigenous communities' legal rights to their ancestral lands (see *Political and Social Relations*).

Efforts to normalize the economy during the Presidency of Sixto Durán Ballén (1992-96) initially succeeded. In 1995, Ecuador initiated a border war with Peru, causing enormous war debt. By the time Ecuador and Peru agreed on a settlement in 1998 (which formalized the modern border), the economy was in crisis. It continued to decline through 1999, when Jamil Mahuad Witt became President. Witt's attempts to control the situation proved unpopular, and when he dollarized the economy in 2000 (see *Economics and Resources*), indigenous organizers and military leaders removed him from office. His VP, Gustavo Noboa Bejerano, replaced him and proceeded with the dollarization plan, which helped stabilize the economy in 2001.

The Correa Years

In 2006, leftist candidate Rafael Correa was elected President on a platform that promised to reform oil policy, decrease the national debt, and distance Ecuador from the US. Aided by high

oil prices, Correa delivered many of his promises during his first term. He increased the state's control of Ecuador's oil endowment, expanded welfare programs, and broke ties with US development organizations.

New Constitution: In 2008, Correa convened a constituent assembly to draft a new Constitution that was sent to referendum. With 60% approval, the Constitution was ratified. It established a new national assembly, made Correa's leftist programs law, and expanded executive powers (see *Political and Social Relations*). It also allowed the President to serve two consecutive 4-year terms, and courts ruled that Correa's prior tenure did not count against the limit.



In 2009, Correa won reelection and began to implement fiscal austerity measures that slashed benefits for public servants. The following year, he leaned on the support of military leadership to survive police protests that nearly resulted in a coup. Afterwards, Correa tightened his control on the Presidency, issuing a national referendum that expanded his powers further in 2011.

In 2013, Correa was elected to a second term under the 2008 Constitution. Environmental issues, primarily related to damage American oil firm Chevron did in the Amazon, predominated at its outset. Correa denounced Chevron for knowingly polluting the Amazon, causing tensions with the US. Meanwhile, Ecuador had become increasingly involved in regional narcotics (narco) activity. Colombia's evolving anti-narcotics strategy and rising global demand for cocaine transformed the port of Guayaquil into a major hub through which narcos exported the drug from South America. In 2014, Correa further distanced Ecuador from the US by halting cooperation with the US Drug Enforcement Administration, undermining the state's anti-narco efforts.

Correa's popularity began to decline in 2015, when he proposed unpopular tax laws and amended the Constitution to remove its term limits and expand state control of the media. Mass protests followed, and his popularity waned further in 2016 as economic conditions declined. Suffering from a massive earthquake and

low oil prices, Ecuador entered a recession that made it difficult for Correa to finance his popular social programs. At the same time, the Colombian Marxist guerilla group that had long monopolized cocaine trafficking in Ecuador demobilized, creating a vacuum that Ecuadorian gangs battled to fill. They formed ties with Mexican, Colombian, Albanian, and other cartels, and violence surged. Correa did not run for reelection in

2017, but instead backed the candidacy of his former VP, Lenín Moreno.



Moreno, Lasso, and Noboa

In a hotly contested election, Moreno was named President and took office despite claims of electoral fraud and protests asserting that his center-right

rival, Guillermo Lasso, was the rightful President. Moreno broke his allegiance to Correa, and his tenure proved tumultuous. In 2019, he accepted a \$4.2 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund, conditional on implementing austerity measures. To that end, he eliminated a longstanding fuel subsidy, which sparked national protests led by indigenous groups and transport workers. Protesters clashed with security forces, and violence followed. Moreno moved his government from Quito, where the clashes were most intense, to Guayaquil. To quell the protests, he reinstated the subsidy and returned to Quito, though the unpopular President did not seek reelection.

Guillermo Lasso prevailed in the 2021 national election but faced immediate difficulties. While he cut security spending to improve the deficit, intensifying narco activity and violence ravaged the country. Gangs like **Los Choneros** (named after Chone, a town in the coastal Manabí Province) and its splinter **Los Lobos** (The Wolves) were committed to violently controlling the cocaine trade, causing kidnapping, extortion, and murder to skyrocket. Formerly one of Latin America's safest countries – with a homicide rate of just 6.7 per 100,000 people in 2019 – Ecuador became one of its deadliest, recording a rate of 45 in 2023.

Lasso's troubles deepened in May 2023, when the National Assembly sought to impeach him on corruption charges. In

response, he invoked a unique constitutional clause known as **muerte cruzada** (mutual death), which allowed him to dissolve the legislature and stage snap general elections. The first round was closely contested and plagued by violence – candidate Fernando Villavicencio was assassinated in August. **Acción Democrática Nacional** (National Democratic Action – see *Political and Social Relations*) candidate Daniel Noboa later won in a runoff. Since his election, President Noboa has vowed to contain drug violence, and in April 2024, Ecuadorians passed a referendum that expanded his ability to combat narco activity.



Myth Overview

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values and often explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths are important because they provide a sense of unique heritage and identity. Contemporary Ecuadorian folklore combines elements of pre-Columbian mythology (see *Religion and Spirituality*) with heroic narratives of resistance to Spanish colonial rule.

Pachamama: Pre-Colombian (early Andean, and later Incan) mythology, to which *Pachamama* traces her origins, venerates her as a primordial earth-mother who presides over the land, determines harvest outcomes, and causes earthquakes when she is crossed. Some Kichwa peoples' traditions fashion her as the mother of the sun and moon deities, thus relating that primary cosmological elements (earth, water, sun, and moon) proceed from her. *Pachamama* remains spiritually and culturally important in modern Ecuador, especially in the *Sierra*, where offerings to her are common. Some Andean residents celebrate *Pachamama* in an annual festival known as **Challa**.

Centuries of syncretic (mixed) religion in Ecuador have yielded an association between *Pachamama* and the Virgin Mary. In Catholic celebrations, *Pachamama* is sometimes invoked through the Virgin Mother (see *Religion and Spirituality*). She is so revered that Ecuador's Constitution refers to "nature or *Pachamama*" as a legal entity with a right to preservation.

2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Official Name

Republic of Ecuador

República del Ecuador

(Spanish)

Political Borders

Colombia: 440 mi

Peru: 950 mi

Coastline: 1,390 mi

Capital

Quito

Demographics

Ecuador's population of around 17.5 million is growing at an annual rate of 0.99%. About 65% of the population lives in urban areas, with the highest density in coastal Guayaquil and the interior capital city of Quito. While nearly half the population lives in the country's interior, many people also concentrate along the coast. Ecuadorians have sparsely settled the rainforests in the East.



Flag

First adopted in 1835, the Ecuadorian flag retains the three horizontal bands of yellow, blue, and red that featured on the flag

of ***Gran Colombia*** (Great Colombia), of which Ecuador was a member until 1830 (see *History and Myth*). The top yellow band symbolizes the land's fertility and gold and is twice the width of the other two. The middle blue band represents the country's



waters and sky, and the bottom red one the blood of those who sacrificed their lives to win independence in 1822. In 1900, Ecuador added its coat of arms to the center of the flag to distinguish it from Colombia's. The coat of arms features a shield with a sun, a river cascading from the extinct Chimborazo

Volcano, and a steamship, flanked by national flags, palm and laurel branches, and a condor (the national bird) perched on top.

Geography

Ecuador is the world's 75th and South America's 9th largest country. Ecuador borders Colombia to the north, Peru to the east and south, and the Pacific Ocean to the west. Ecuador's total land area, including the Galápagos Islands (a volcanic archipelago located in the Pacific about 600 mi to the west of Ecuador), is 106,889 sq mi, slightly smaller than Nevada.

Ecuador straddles the equator, for which it was named, and divides into three main regions. The western **Costa** (Coast) is a belt of tropical coastal lowlands, the **Sierra** ("Mountain Range," or central highlands) feature the Andes Mountains and a plateau that is home to Quito (which is 9,350 ft above sea level), and the **Oriente** (East) mainly consists of jungle lowlands. Located in the Andes, Chimborazo is Ecuador's highest peak at 20,561 ft. The Napo River is the country's longest (702 mi) and runs through Ecuador and Peru before feeding into the Amazon River (the world's second-longest at 3,977 mi).



Climate

Ecuador's coastal and jungle lowlands have a tropical climate that becomes cooler at higher elevations. Due to Ecuador's location on the equator, its average temperatures are similar year-round. The average highs and lows in Quito are 65 °F and 49 °F. Those in much of the coastal and Amazon regions are around 86 °F and 73 °F, while the Galápagos tend to be slightly cooler. The country has wet and dry seasons. The Amazon experiences rain all year, with average annual rainfall of 110-130 in, though April-June are the wettest months. The wet season in the inland valley region is October-May and January-April by the coast. Average annual rainfall in Quito is about 37 in and in Guayaquil is 28 in.

Natural Hazards

Ecuador is located along the Ring of Fire, a belt of active volcanoes and earthquake epicenters bordering the Pacific Ocean, where up to 90% of the world's earthquakes and 75% of

its volcanoes occur. The country is also vulnerable to flooding, landslides, and mild volcanic activity. In 2016, a magnitude 7.8 earthquake impacted Ecuador's coast, killing almost 700 people; leveling homes, schools, and infrastructure; and leaving more than 6,000 people severely injured. It was Ecuador's worst since 1987, when a series of earthquakes with magnitudes ranging from 6-7.1 resulted in around 1,000 deaths.



Environmental Issues

Human practices and related climate change have degraded Ecuador's natural environment. Deforestation from

agricultural expansion, timber harvesting, and oil drilling; soil erosion and degradation; water pollution from a lack of proper sanitation services and waste disposal; and air contamination and toxic waste from oil production (see *Economics and Resources*) cause significant environmental damage. While Ecuador is vulnerable to climate change, it has made efforts to curb environmental harm. The country's National Climate Change Strategy 2012-25 focuses on adaptation and mitigation with objectives like improving water management and promoting sustainable practices that reduce emissions. In a 2024 environmental performance index, Ecuador ranked 56 of 180 countries, higher than Peru (83), but lower than the US (34).

Government

Ecuador is a presidential republic that divides into 24 **provincias** (provinces), which subdivide into **cantones** (cantons) and further into **parroquias** (parishes). Each province has an elected council led by a **prefecto** (prefect) and deputy prefect, while each canton council is led by a mayor. Ecuador's current Constitution, adopted in 2008 and most recently amended in 2021, separates power among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, while outlining the basic rights and freedoms of the Ecuadorian people.

Executive Branch

Executive power is vested in the President, who is head-of-state and government. The President and Vice President (VP) are

elected by absolute majority popular vote on a joint ticket for up to two 4-year terms. If candidates do not receive an outright majority in the initial round of voting, a run-off is held between the two pairs of candidates who received the most votes.

The President is responsible for duties like appointing and removing Ministers of State (cabinet members), approving bills adopted by the National Assembly, acting as supreme authority for the Armed Forces and National Police Force, and convening referenda as needed. Current President Daniel Noboa Azín took office in 2023. Verónica Abad Rojas is the current VP, whose formal role is to succeed the President in the case of death, incapacity, or other reasons to leave office.



Legislative Branch

Legislative power is vested in the single-chamber **Asamblea Nacional** (National Assembly)

located in Quito. As of 2024, the legislature consists of 137 seats, of which 116 are directly elected in single-seat constituencies by simple majority vote, 15 in a single nationwide constituency by open-list proportional representation vote, and 6 by simple majority vote in multi-seat constituencies for Ecuadorians living abroad. **Asambleístas** (assembly members) serve 4-year terms with no term limits.

The *Asamblea Nacional* is responsible for adopting the general budget; creating, amending, and eliminating taxes; adopting or rejecting international treaties; and authorizing the criminal impeachment of the President. Members of the *Asamblea Nacional* elect the body's President, a position currently held by Henry Kronfle, and two Vice Presidents from among their rank for 2-year terms with eligibility for reelection.

Judicial Branch

The judiciary's highest court is the **Corte Nacional de Justicia** (National Court of Justice), which consists of 20 judges plus the Chief Justice, who members select for a 3-year term. The Judiciary Council consists of five delegates with legal backgrounds and elects National Court judges for a single 9-year term in conformity with a procedure entailing a competitive

merit-based examination. The President of the National Court nominates delegates of the Council, who are then approved by the Council for Public Participation and Social Control through a public scrutiny process with citizen oversight. The **Corte Constitucional** (Constitutional Court) is the supreme body for interpreting constitutional matters and consists of nine members who serve 9-year terms with no possibility for immediate reelection. Subordinate courts include provincial courts; fiscal, criminal, and administrative tribunals; election dispute settlement courts; and cantonal courts.



Political Climate

Ecuador's recent political climate has been unstable and deteriorating, largely due to fragile institutions, widespread corruption, violence, financial dependence on commodities,

and disorderly political transitions. Although parties typically claim an ideology, many rely on a single politician and clientelism (the exchange of goods and services for votes) for support. Likewise, many claim to be movements instead of political parties. From 2007-17, President Rafael Correa presided over a leftward shift in politics under the **Alianza PAIS** (PAIS Alliance, or AP). After Correa did not seek reelection due to his unpopularity and rising violence, politics shifted rightward as Lenín Moreno (2017-21), Correa's former VP, took office. Moreno's tenure was tumultuous (see *History and Myth*), and he left office with an approval rating of just 9%. As a result, the AP splintered, and the **Movimiento Revolución Ciudadana** (Citizen Revolution Movement), led by Correa since 2021, became the dominant political movement.

In 2021, Guillermo Lasso Mendoza, founder of the center-right **Movimiento Creando Oportunidades** (Creating Opportunities Movement), became Ecuador's first right-wing President in 18 years and sought to build on the few successes and business-friendly agenda of his predecessor. However, rising violence caused a security crisis that profoundly impacted government functionality and citizens' daily lives (see "Security Issues" below). In early 2023, Lasso was accused of corruption, which

led the National Assembly to seek his impeachment. Lasso avoided this action by invoking the **muerte cruzada** (mutual death) constitutional clause, allowing him to dissolve the Assembly and govern by decree for 6 months. Lasso did not run in the snap (earlier than scheduled) legislative and presidential elections that followed.

Extreme violence characterized Ecuador's 2023 snap electoral cycle. Many candidates campaigned against corruption and condemned criminal organizations, proposing plans to address the surging violence. In August,

presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio, an outspoken anti-corruption nominee of the centrist **Movimiento**

Construye (Build Movement, or MC25) party, was

assassinated upon leaving a rally in Quito. Authorities suspect the **Los Lobos** (The Wolves) gang is responsible for his death. Six more candidates and politicians were murdered before Noboa was elected in a runoff in October.



President Noboa of the big tent (broad spectrum) **Acción Democrática Nacional** (National Democratic Action) is set to serve the remainder of Lasso's term until May 2025. Noboa has pledged to address violence and corruption, as well as improve the economy by creating jobs for young people. However, his coalition has only 14 seats in the *Asamblea Nacional*, compared to 47 for the *Movimiento Revolución Ciudadana* and 19 for MC25, in addition to a handful of other parties and independents, which could make governing difficult. In a 2024 global freedom index that rates people's access to political and civil rights, Ecuador scored 67 of 100 (the same score as North Macedonia and Senegal), a reduction of three points from 2023 and classifying it as a "partly free" country.

In a 2023 corruption perceptions index, Ecuador ranked 115 of 180 countries, slightly better than Peru (121), but worse than Colombia (87) and the US (24). Declining trust in public institutions is an issue in Ecuador. Recently, questionable rulings from judges in favor of criminals suggests the potential

infiltration of organized crime in the judiciary, pointing to serious deficits in transparency and accountability. For example, in 2023, President Lasso reported five judges for intentionally releasing people accused as drug traffickers, murderers, and rapists.



The country has universal and compulsory voting for all citizens aged 18-65. Ecuadorians aged 16-17 and over 65 may also vote if they choose.

Defense

The **Fuerzas Armadas del Ecuador** (Ecuadorian Armed Forces) are a unified military force consisting of ground, maritime, and air branches with a joint strength of about 39,600 active-duty troops and 118,000 reserve personnel. Military operations focus on internal security with significant emphasis on border security and limiting refugee inflows and drug trafficking. The Armed Forces contribute to cooperative efforts like demining operations with Peru and counter-narcotics operations with Colombia. Voluntary conscription for men and women aged 18 and older is for a 12-month service obligation.

Army: Comprising about 24,000 active-duty troops, Ecuador's Army is organized into 4 command division headquarters. The Army comprises the following brigades: 9 maneuver (including mechanized and light), 2 combat support, 1 combat service support, 1 aviation, and 1 special forces, as well as 3 combat support and 9 combat service support companies and 1 air defense group.

Navy: Ecuador's Navy consists of around 9,400 active-duty troops and has Coast Guard, Marines, and Naval Aviation divisions. About 1,950 Marines organize into 1 special forces and 5 amphibious maneuver battalions, and about 380 troops comprise Naval Aviation. The Coast Guard is a joint Navy and Paramilitary force of about 500 active-duty troops.

Air Force: Consisting of about 6,200 active-duty troops, the Air Force has 1 fighter; 1 ground attack; 1 intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; 2 search and rescue/transport helicopter; 3 transport; and 2 training squadrons.

ECUADOR

Air Force Rank Insignia



General



Lieutenant
General



Major
General



Colonel



Lieutenant
Colonel



Major



Captain



Lieutenant



2nd
Lieutenant



Sergeant
Major



Sergeant
Major



Master
Sergeant



Staff
Sergeant



Sergeant



Corporal



Private
1st Class



Private

Security Issues

Narcotics Trafficking and Violence: The escalation of extreme violence in Ecuador stems from the growing dominance of narcotics traffickers competing for control of trafficking routes. Ecuador's geographic location, dollarized economy (see *Economics and Resources*), and high-quality roads (see *Technology and Material*) render it ideal as a transit country for the drug trade. Its location between the world's largest cocaine (a drug refined from coca leaves, which are also used for medicinal and other purposes – see *Sustenance and Health*) producers, Colombia and Peru, also makes it a lucrative location for narcotics traffickers to conduct business. Narcotics from production countries are easily trafficked through land borders into Ecuador and then distributed via maritime routes, mainly to the US and Europe. Since 2020, Albanian, Colombian, Mexican, and Venezuelan criminal groups have used Ecuador as a base for their illicit operations.



While foreign groups have contributed largely to the recent rise in violence, Ecuadorian gangs have also emerged. The two most powerful gangs are **Los Choneros** (named after the town Chone in the central coastal Manabí Province) and **Los Lobos**, a splinter group (see *History and Myth*). Gangs fight for territorial control, known as turf wars, and use extreme violence (decapitation, dismemberment, car bombings, and attacks on judges, prosecutors, journalists, and political candidates) to establish dominance and power. The gangs also contribute to Ecuador's skyrocketing homicide rate, which had reached a historic low of nearly six deaths per 100,000 people in 2016, before surging to around 45 in 2023. Today, Ecuador has the world's fifth highest murder rate.

The epicenter of violence is Guayaquil, Ecuador's largest city and primary port, which has become one of the world's most significant transit points in the global cocaine trade. In 2023, Guayas Province, the capital of which is Guayaquil, accounted

for nearly half the country's total murders. Gangs also have established a presence in prisons across Ecuador, which are subject to systemic corruption that allows gangs to operate within them. In 2022, an estimated 11,000 of the 32,000 people incarcerated were gang members.

The Ecuadorian government's attempt to address the security situation has failed to curtail the violence. In January 2024, following the *Los Choneros* leader's escape from prison and the storming of a news program by armed gang members, President Noboa declared an "internal armed conflict" in Ecuador and announced a state of emergency. He ordered the military to "neutralize" the country's gangs, allowing soldiers to patrol the streets and Ecuador's prisons.



Since Noboa took office, the public generally has approved of his actions. In April 2024, Ecuadorians voted in a referendum to

increase military presence and patrols in public and lengthen prison sentences for offenses linked to organized crime, among other measures.

Emigrants and Refugees: Ecuador counts a notable number of emigrants, who have fled rising violence and insecurity. A record 48,000 Ecuadorians crossed the Darién Gap, a dangerous jungle area between Colombia and Panama, from January-September 2023, a large increase from the 29,000 Ecuadorians who navigated the Gap in all of 2022. Emigrants are subject to dangerous conditions and violence, often by human traffickers, who they use to travel abroad, often to the US.

Ecuador is home to some 550,000 refugees, which is one of the region's largest refugee populations (see "Ethnic Groups" below). These refugees are vulnerable to physical and emotional abuse, trafficking, and limited access to food and healthcare. The country's security situation negatively impacts refugees, who are susceptible to trafficking, extortion, violence, and other crimes. Many refugees face challenges integrating into society and often lack food, shelter, and formal recognition.

Foreign Relations

For much of its history, Ecuador's involvement in global affairs was largely limited to interactions with its immediate neighbors. Today, Ecuador is a member of international organizations like the United Nations (UN), International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization, and World Bank. Since it joined in 1952, Ecuador has mainly contributed to UN efforts through its provision of Military Observers to support the peaceful resolution of conflicts and humanitarian assistance. In 2017, Ecuador joined the European Union's comprehensive trade agreement with Colombia and Peru, which provides benefits like full or partial tariff liberalization.

Regional Relations: Ecuador is a member of political and economic regional organizations, such as the Organization of American States, Inter-American Development Bank, and Alliance for Development in Democracy. Historically, Ecuador has maintained close ties with other Latin American nations, many of which share a common history (see *History and Myth*). Though relations between countries in South America are often complex and fluctuating, they are generally cooperative.



In April 2024, tensions between Mexico and Ecuador increased when Ecuadorian police stormed the Mexican embassy in Quito to seize Jorge Glas, Ecuador's former VP. Although Ecuador's government had convicted Glas on bribery and corruption charges, Mexico's President, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, was sympathetic to Glas's political party and granted him asylum in December 2023. While Ecuador argues that Mexico has misused its diplomatic premises in Quito to shelter a criminal, leaders across Latin America condemned Ecuador's raid as a violation of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations.

Relations with Peru: Ecuador and Peru have a long history of border and territorial disputes (see *History and Myth*). After a series of conflicts and failed treaties during the 20th century, the

two countries finally ended their armed conflict in 1998. Relations have improved since then, resulting in stronger trade ties, improved security and defense, a cultural exchange, and collective efforts to address global challenges like climate change. Together they seek to develop and strengthen communities in both countries. Peru has joined Ecuador in combating cross-border drug crime via national intelligence systems, police, and the armed forces.

Relations with Colombia: Since Ecuador seceded from *Gran Colombia*, it has experienced complex relations with Colombia. In 2008, relations deteriorated after Colombian troops crossed into Ecuadorian territory to attack a Colombian guerrilla group in the dense jungle border area in an event known as the Andean diplomatic crisis. Ecuador severed diplomatic relations with Colombia and demanded international condemnation of the attack, which it denounced as an act of aggression. After Venezuela dispatched troops to its border with Colombia in support of Ecuador, the US expressed support for Colombia before a diplomatic solution ended the conflict.

Today, relations have improved and generally are constructive. Ecuador and Colombia cooperate over border control and have robust economic ties. In 2024, Colombia's armed forces sent some 450 troops to the border to support Ecuador in its defense against violent criminal organizations. Additionally, Colombia is

one of Ecuador's top trading partners.



Relations with the US: In 1822, the US recognized Ecuador's independence from Spain as part of *Gran Colombia*, and in 1832, recognized it as an independent nation. The

countries concluded a Treaty of Peace, Friendship, Navigation, and Commerce in 1839 and have sustained diplomatic relations since, with only minor interruptions.

Today, the countries participate in inter-American institutions and are committed to the promotion of democracy, human rights, inclusive economic development, and combatting transnational

organized crime. US President Joe Biden signed the US-Ecuador Partnership Act of 2022, which includes measures to strengthen democratic governance in Ecuador, bilateral security cooperation, and economic ties. Additionally, the US Agency for International Development launched a 3-year citizen security program in 2023 with an initial planned investment of up to \$17.7 million to counter the rising crime and violence in Ecuador. The countries also work together to address challenges like health security by strengthening Ecuador's emergency preparedness and health systems to prepare for natural disasters (see *Sustenance and Health*).

The US and Ecuador have strong economic ties. The US is Ecuador's top trading partner and receives various imports like crude and refined oil, shrimp, and bananas (see *Economics and Resources*). The Biden Administration welcomed Ecuador's participation in the Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity initiative, an effort to foster regional competitiveness and inclusive growth.



Relations with China: Ecuador and China established official diplomatic relations in 1979. Under President Correa, the countries' ties deepened as he and Chinese President Xi Jinping signed 14 bilateral agreements covering areas like agriculture, infrastructure, and tourism. In 2016, China recognized Ecuador as a comprehensive strategic partner, one of its highest levels of diplomatic recognition. In 2018, Ecuador joined China's Belt and Road Initiative, a global infrastructure development strategy, and today, China is Ecuador's second largest trading partner.

Ethnic Groups

Ecuador is ethnically diverse. According to its 2022 census, Ecuadorians identify as around 78% **mestizo** (people of mixed Spanish and indigenous descent); 8% **montubio** (rural coastal *mestizo* Ecuadorians); 8% indigenous (or Amerindian); 5% Afro-Ecuadorian; 2% white; and less than 1% other ethnicities.

Most Ecuadorians consider themselves *mestizo* and tend to identify with their region of birth. For example, *mestizo* residents of Carchi in the far North and Azuay in the South have developed uniquely different cultural identities. Ecuador's government formally recognized the *montubio* ethnic group in 2001. The *montubio* primarily live along the country's coastal region in rural communities. Their cultural identity is tied to a distinctly agrarian lifestyle, and many work as small farmers.



Some 14 indigenous or Amerindian ethnic groups live in Ecuador, mainly in the rural Andean highlands and Amazon region. The Quechua comprise the

country's largest indigenous group, numbering nearly 800,000 people as of 2022, followed by the Shuar. Most indigenous language speakers live in the *Sierra* and speak a dialect of Quechua (see *Language and Communication*).

Enslaved Africans first arrived in Ecuador in the 16th century, brought by the Spanish to work on plantations and in mines during the colonial era (see *History and Myth*). Today, around 75% of Afro-Ecuadorians reside in urban areas, primarily in the northern and south-central coastal regions.

While refugees and migrants – mainly from Venezuela, Colombia, Haiti, and Peru – comprise a large share of the country's population, Ecuador officially recognized only around 76,000 refugees and 9,400 asylum seekers as of 2023. At nearly 475,000 people, Venezuelans account for the largest number of refugees. While Ecuador documented around 13,000 Chinese nationals entering the country in 2022, that figure increased to more than 45,000 in the first 11 months of 2023. Since Ecuador did not require visas for Chinese passport holders, it became a popular gateway for those escaping China for the US. However, since July 2024, Ecuador has required visas for Chinese visitors.

Social Relations

Ecuadorian society divides along rural-urban, rich-poor, and ethnic group lines. The country inherited hierarchal, racist, and classist values from colonial times, when Spanish conquerors

dominated indigenous people and controlled the country's politics, religion, and economy. During the Spanish occupation, white residents considered their non-white counterparts inferior and unworthy of equal civil liberties, offering them fewer educational and economic opportunities that resulted in enduring consequences. Some remnants of this colonial past are evident today, as clear divisions are present among social classes. Ecuadorian society generally places greater value on people of European descent than those of indigenous or African heritage.



Socioeconomic inequality and the urban-rural divide are substantial in Ecuador. As of 2023, about 27% of residents live in poverty, which is more prominent in rural than urban areas. Some 46% of rural Ecuadorians live in poverty and 23% in extreme poverty, compared to urban rates of 18% and 5%, respectively.

Despite the government's efforts to reduce rural poverty, vulnerable groups like indigenous peoples, Afro-Ecuadorians, women, and children are disproportionately affected (see *Sex and Gender*). In rural areas, these groups often lack access to clean water and sanitation; live in low-quality housing (see *Family and Kinship*); and experience hazardous employment practices (see *Time and Space*), chronic child malnutrition, insufficient social protection (see *Sustenance and Health*), and low-quality education (see *Learning and Knowledge*). Further, the poorest provinces tend to be in the East and Amazon regions.

Despite constitutional protections, indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorians face discrimination, inequality, and various other social challenges. Ongoing discontent with the government over indigenous rights such as community consultation on mining in supposedly protected areas of the Amazon afflicts the country. Protests advocating for greater access to health, education, and employment for indigenous peoples are frequent.

3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Overview

Ecuador's population is predominantly Christian. According to a 2018 survey, some 75% of residents identify as Roman Catholic, 15% evangelical Christian, 7% non-religious (including those who identify as atheist and agnostic), and 3% other religious traditions such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam, among others.

Ecuador's Constitution (see *Political and Social Relations*) declares the country a secular state, guarantees freedom of worship, and prohibits religious discrimination. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church has greatly influenced Ecuadorian culture, attitudes, and history.



Early Religion

Before the arrival of European **conquistadores** (conquerors, see p. 2-3 of *History and Myth*), Ecuador's indigenous peoples (see *Political and Social Relations*) lived rich spiritual lives along the country's coastal lowlands. Scholars believe that by 3500 BC, the Valdivia culture (see *History and Myth*), primarily based in the present-day Manabí and Santa Elena provinces, practiced a shamanistic, matriarchal (meaning women held most power and authority) religion. They recognized several spirits and nature gods such as those controlling the sun, moon, rain, and animals. The Valdivia used clay and stone to make ceramic jars, bowls, and human figurines, which they incorporated in religious rituals. Hundreds of small figurines with female anatomy, large headdresses, long hair, and detailed faces are believed to have been especially important in fertility rituals. The Valdivia also regarded spondylus (spiny oyster) shells as symbols of fertility and abundance due to the correlation of their presence with rainfall and crop growth.

Subsequent cultures such as the Tolita and Bahía held similar religious beliefs and further developed ceramic methods. The

Tolita, who lived in the northern coastal region, molded masks and jewelry that signified social class. One of the most notable Tolita artifacts, the **Sol de Oro** (Golden Sun), is a sun-shaped mask made of gold and platinum featuring a jaguar's mouth, which scholars believe shamans wore to perform harvesting and sowing rituals. Likewise, the Bahía molded small ceramic statues with intricate details and adornments for ceremonial purposes, though not much is known about their religious role. Some Bahía figures are posed holding ceremonial items, which may indicate they are images of shamans, while others have

been found smashed, suggesting their use as sacrificial offerings.



Incan Religion: In the 15th century AD, the Inca Empire began its rapid expansion across western South America by conquering and uniting

various tribes (see *History and Myth*). The Incas practiced a complex religion with numerous deities, spirits, animistic beliefs, and other religious practices drawn from earlier cultures. Some examples of such deities are **Inti**, the sun god and most important deity, who provided warmth and harvest, and **Pachamama**, the embodiment of mother earth (see *History and Myth*). To appease the gods, the Incas held sacrificial rituals at temples and shrines known as **huacas** (holy sites or shrines), which included man-made structures as well as natural features like mountains and rivers.

Arrival of Christianity

Spanish conquerors brought Christianity to Ecuador in the early 16th century. Under the orders of Francisco Pizarro, Sebastián de Benalcázar led an expedition of *conquistadores* to overthrow the Incan city of Quito in 1534 (see *History and Myth*). The Spanish believed in a holy duty to convert indigenous Ecuadorians, which gave them an ideological justification for their conquests. A priest therefore joined Francisco Pizarro on his conquest of the Inca Empire, and subsequent expeditions included other missionaries, who often converted indigenous Ecuadorians by force.

The Spanish banned many Incan religious practices, destroyed their temples and idols, and violently coerced them to adopt Christianity. Under the **encomienda** (forced indigenous labor) system (see *History and Myth*), Spaniards converted enslaved indigenous peoples to Christianity, which quickly became Ecuador's dominant religion. Throughout the country, the Spanish forced the Incas and other groups to build Roman Catholic churches, many on former Incan religious sites such as the Cantuña Chapel in Quito, which previously served as an Incan ruler's palace temple. Nevertheless, some indigenous populations continued to practice traditional beliefs in secret. As a result, Andean Catholicism, a syncretic (mixed) religion, emerged, which is still practiced in some rural areas.

Catholicism During Colonial Rule

During Spanish colonial rule, the Catholic Church was central to Ecuadorian life, particularly in education, politics, and economics. Quito became the seat of an archbishop in 1545, and religious orders such as the Jesuits and Dominicans (see *History and Myth*) founded monasteries and convents across the country. To evangelize indigenous populations, missionaries learned Quechua, an indigenous language spoken throughout the Inca Empire (see *Language and Communication*). The Catholic Church also oversaw the opening of schools, orphanages, and hospitals that provided social services. Roman Catholicism remained Ecuador's primary religion for the entire colonial period (see *History and Myth*).

Religion in the 19th Century

When Ecuador secured its independence from Spain in 1822 (see *History and Myth*), its people recognized the shared Roman Catholic religion as a unifying factor in the new multicultural nation. In 1861, Gabriel García Moreno became President and quickly began promoting nationalism through the Church. Moreno sought to establish close ties between the Church and state through a strong centralized government that prohibited any other religion.



In 1869, the Constitution declared the Catholic Church the official church of Ecuador and required all citizens to be Catholic. Those who practiced other faiths faced persecution and, in some cases, execution.

Despite a rise in nationalism throughout the country, Ecuador fell into a power struggle between liberals and conservatives (see *History and Myth*). The liberals' base was in Guayaquil, a cosmopolitan port city, which exposed them to different religions and cultures and made them critical of Moreno's authoritarian clerical government. After liberals assassinated Moreno in 1875, they gained increasing influence over Ecuadorian politics.

In 1895, Eloy Alfaro became President, establishing a liberal government in Ecuador. The state seized rural Church property, secularized education, instated civil marriage, and legalized divorce. Catholic officials and conservatives, who protested the new government's reforms, faced execution, and many fled the country. The 1896 Constitution encouraged religious freedom and allowed citizens to practice any faith they chose. While Catholicism remained the country's primary religion, by 1905, Protestant missionaries from Britain and Germany had established themselves in Ecuador with full religious freedom.

Religion in the 20th Century

In the early 20th century, Ecuador experienced a period of modernization as technological growth increased trade, and the government sought to make the nation more secular. In 1906, a



new Constitution formally separated church and state, a move that many conservatives condemned as atheism.

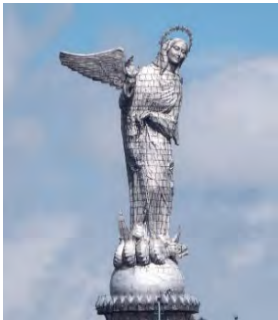
In 1935, Ecuador declared that the Church had no legal rights or representation, which resulted in widespread upheaval. To remedy the struggle between the Church and state, Ecuador reached an agreement with the Holy See (the governing body of the Roman Catholic Church at the Vatican) in 1937. Each party signed a ***modus vivendi*** (official legal

agreement), which initiated a period of more peaceful Church-state relations.

By the mid-20th century, the Church had become increasingly involved with social issues and providing aid. During the 1960s-70s, Catholic bishops began advocating for indigenous rights, notably for their claims to land, some of which had been seized by Peru during World War II (see *History and Myth*). This event began an ongoing trend of the Church working as a mediator between disadvantaged Ecuadorians and the state (see *Political and Social Relations*). Since then, the Catholic Church has re-established itself as a stabilizing force in a country that has endured frequent political and social instability.

Religion Today

While Ecuador's Constitution recognizes the Catholic Church's place in the country's history and culture, it grants Ecuadorians religious freedom, and society is largely tolerant of



other religions. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church and its members retain significant privileges. As part of the 1937 agreement with the Holy See, the Catholic Church receives tax exemptions and grants from the government. Other religious groups must register with the government as legal entities in accordance with a separate 1937 law and 2000 decree on religion to receive similar benefits.

Over 90% of Ecuadorians are Christian. Despite official and societal religious tolerance, many religious minority groups have been outspoken about discrimination. Some critics argue that the Constitution, which has undergone numerous changes since entering into force in 2008, is not permanent, meaning religious freedoms are vulnerable to amendments. In addition, some Jews and Muslims have reported violations of their religious freedom, as Ecuador's customs regulations on imports have hindered these groups' ability to access foreign products used for religious rituals and festivals.

Catholicism: Today, Catholicism is intertwined with the everyday lives of many Ecuadorians and plays a significant role in their culture. Many traditional rituals and ceremonies such as christenings, marriages, and funerals occur in the Church (see *Family and Kinship*). **Semana Santa** (Holy Week) is a week-long celebration that begins after Palm Sunday and concludes on Easter Sunday (see *Time and Space*). On Good Friday, hundreds of thousands of Ecuadorians travel to see parades such as the Jesus of the Great Power procession, which takes place at the Basilica and Convent of San Francisco in Quito. During the procession, penitents dressed in purple pointed



hooded robes carry large crosses through the streets to pay tribute to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

In recent years, Catholic bishops have served as mediators and condemned corruption and violence in Ecuador. In 2022, Catholic

bishops intervened in a national strike on fuel prices, unemployment, and environmental destruction by calling for a truce between the government and protesters, which helped remedy the tensions. Likewise, bishops have condemned gang activity and violence (see *Political and Social Relations*) such as the assassination of presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio in 2023 (see *History and Myth*).

Other Christian Churches: Other Christian groups are active in Ecuador and have experienced significant membership growth in recent years. While Protestant missions have been present in the country since at least the 19th century, few made significant progress converting Ecuadorians until the 1960s-70s. In recent years, some Protestant groups such as Evangelicals and Pentecostals have experienced a surge in membership. Many converts are former Catholics seeking community, a different style of worship, or a more personal connection to God. Some indigenous people, especially in the **Sierra** (central highlands) and **Oriente** (eastern Andean region and lowland Amazon basin areas), have also embraced Protestantism.

According to a 2018 survey, Ecuador is home to some 20,000 Jehovah's Witnesses, many of whom live in coastal regions. This group has been outspoken about religious discrimination throughout the country, recently claiming that the presence of gated communities prevents them from proselytizing. In 2021, Jehovah's Witnesses won a legal victory when the Constitutional Court declared that the indigenous community of San Juan de Ilumán violated Jehovah's Witnesses' freedom to worship by preventing them from building a Kingdom Hall (a place of worship used by Jehovah's Witnesses). Other Christian groups in Ecuador are The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and Orthodox Christians. These groups live throughout Ecuador yet often concentrate in major cities like Quito, Guayaquil, and Cuenca.



Syncretic (Mixed) Religion: While few Ecuadorians practice syncretism as their primary religion, many incorporate syncretic beliefs in their spiritual lives, especially in the country's Andean regions. Since the 16th century, Ecuadorians have combined indigenous and Incan symbols with Catholic ideas, imagery, and practices, which has resulted in forms of folk Catholicism. The Virgin Mary (Mother of Jesus Christ) has been associated with the Incan deity *Pachamama*, and both figures are regarded as symbols of fertility. Many churches also incorporate windows and openings that allow sunlight to fall on statues of the Virgin Mary during solstices and contain images of the sun, practices that are also common in the ancient indigenous ritual of sun worship.

Other Religions: Various non-Christian religious minorities such as Muslims, Jews, Baha'is (who combine aspects of Islam with a belief in the unity of all religions and humanity), believers of Santería (a syncretic Afro-Caribbean religion), and Buddhists (many of whom descend from Chinese and Japanese immigrants – see *Political and Social Relations*) live in Ecuador. Most of these religious minorities reside in large cities like Quito and Guayaquil. In rural areas, some Ecuadorians still practice traditional Incan or indigenous religions.

4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

Overview

The family is the center of Ecuadorian life and provides emotional, economic, and social support. Ecuadorian families are typically close-knit and involved in each other's life decisions. Marrying and starting a family remain a priority for most young adults.

Residence

Ecuador began to urbanize in the 19th century, though rapid movement into cities did not occur until the 1960s. As of 2023, some 65% of the population lives in urban areas. While electricity and indoor plumbing are widely available, many homes lack access to safe sanitation services. Rapid population growth, poor government planning, and inadequate infrastructure have resulted in the lack of clean drinking water in some areas, especially rural.



Urban: Middle- and upper-class urban families tend to reside in high-rise apartments, private homes, or townhouses constructed from concrete, wood, or steel. Many middle- and upper-class apartment buildings feature traditional Ecuadorian architecture with balconies, terraces, and inner courtyards. By contrast, some lower-class families live in makeshift housing. Migration from rural regions to cities has resulted in the development of **barrios periféricos** (peripheral neighborhoods), where some residents build homes from wood, concrete bricks, or other readily available materials. Many residents in *barrios periféricos* lack basic services – particularly running water.

Rural: Countryside residents typically construct dwellings suited to the local climate and use materials such as stone, wood, and **adobe** (clay) brick. *Adobe* can withstand extreme weather and regulate the home's temperature by absorbing and distributing heat, providing warmth in the winter and keeping the house cool

in the summer. In the rainforest and coastal areas, bamboo is used for some dwellings, which typically feature high ceilings that allow airflow to keep them cool. Roofs are often thatch or metal, which protect the home from rainfall and sunlight without trapping in heat. Modern building materials such as concrete are also increasingly common in rural homes.

Family Structure

While Ecuadorian families are increasingly diverse, the father is traditionally the primary breadwinner and head-of-household, while the mother is responsible for domestic tasks and childcare. Nevertheless, traditional attitudes are changing, particularly in urban areas, and more women are working outside the home (see *Sex and Gender*). In some middle- and upper-class urban families, men and women increasingly share domestic tasks. While many traditional households consist of multiple generations, young, urban Ecuadorians more commonly live



with just their nuclear (immediate) family. Generally, Ecuadorians highly regard their elders and tend to be respectful and courteous in their company.

Children

While Ecuadorian families historically had many children, they have fewer today (see *Sex and Gender*). Parents' involvement in their children's lives generally continues into adulthood. Although many middle- and upper-class families have maids or nannies,

lower-class mothers and daughters typically assume childcare responsibilities. In rural areas, boys often start to work at a young age to supplement their family's income, while girls help run the household, prepare meals, and rear children. Many children live at home well into adulthood until they get married or a job that requires relocation.

Birth: While traditions vary by socioeconomic status, family and friends typically hold a party similar to a baby shower in the US, whereby attendees bring gifts, food, and entertainment to celebrate the baby's arrival a few weeks before a woman's due

date. In some rural communities, the father gives his used work shirt to the mother during labor, which some believe gives her strength. Some rural hospitals adhere to indigenous women's cultural beliefs by using traditional birthing techniques such as upright deliveries (see *Political and Social Relations*).

Naming: While naming conventions vary (see *Language and Communication*), many Ecuadorians name their children after Catholic saints or other biblical figures (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Rites of Passage

Many Ecuadorians observe the Roman Catholic rite of passage of baptizing their children within a few months after birth (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Baptism is an important social ritual, with **padrinos** (godparents), family, and friends usually in attendance. Many Ecuadorians also observe other Catholic traditions that mark life's milestones, like first communion and confirmation. Some Ecuadorian 15-year-old girls have a **fiesta de quince** (15th birthday party) to celebrate their transition into adulthood. A large party with friends and family typically includes festivities like a religious ceremony, father-daughter dance, food, and music.

Dating and Courtship: Ecuadorians often begin dating in their late teens, and many ask permission from their parents or siblings before starting a serious relationship. While many residents marry around their mid-20s, the age in rural areas tends to be younger (see *Sex and Gender*). Although some urban couples cohabitate before marriage, society generally does not approve of this practice.



Weddings: Most Ecuadorian marriages consist of both a civil ceremony performed at a municipal office and a religious one at a church, often a week to a month later. *Padrinos* typically give the couple marriage advice and help choose the church for the ceremony. A clergyman typically performs the ceremony, during which he blesses and unites the couple as husband and wife. A reception follows and usually begins with the bride and groom

dancing with their father and mother, respectively, to a waltz. DJs or live bands such as **mariachi** (a Mexican music ensemble) commonly play the music. A wedding feast is an important element of Ecuadorian weddings and usually includes multiple courses, soup, and a **mesa de dulces** (candies table) or local desserts (see *Sustenance and Health*). After the wedding, some couples are blessed together with holy water.

Indigenous wedding traditions vary by region. Brides often wear colorful gowns, while grooms dress in traditional clothing (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*). Large celebrations typically occur outdoors and last several days, during which guests eat, drink, and dance to celebrate the newlyweds. Traditionally, the wedding ends when the party runs out of food.



Divorce

While the divorce rate has increased in recent years, many older, rural, and conservative Ecuadorians continue to view it as inappropriate. As of 2023 the divorce rate in Ecuador is .73 per 1,000 inhabitants, lower than the US (2.5), but higher than neighboring Colombia (0.7) and Peru (0.5).

Death

Ecuadorians typically hold a **velorio** (wake) in the home of the deceased, placing them in an open casket until the time of burial. During this period, friends and relatives visit to pay their respects, often bringing food and flowers like marigolds and lilies. The funeral features a religious mass in a church. Ecuadorians encourage mourners to express their grief as a show of closeness to the deceased, and wailing is common before the casket is closed. After the funeral, a hearse transports the coffin to the burial site, often a cemetery.

Some indigenous Ecuadorians who believe in the cyclical nature of life use the term **ñawparirka** (the one who has gone ahead) to describe a deceased loved one. Tools, food, and drinks are placed in their coffins to ensure the deceased are prepared for the afterlife. Many families gather for multiple days following a death to eat, play games, and remember the deceased.

5. SEX AND GENDER

Overview

Traditionally, the Ecuadorian social system was patriarchal, meaning men held most power and authority. While Ecuador has made progress towards securing women's rights and gender equality, gaps in many areas persist. Women take a more active role in caregiving, and the social system generally favors men. Ecuador ranked 16 of 144 countries in a 2024 gender equality index, higher than neighboring Colombia (75) and Peru (76).

Gender Roles and Work

Domestic Work: Traditionally, women in Ecuadorian society were responsible for household chores and childcare, even if they also worked outside the home. Although many families still follow traditional gender roles today, in some urban families, more women work outside the home and men increasingly share household responsibilities.



Labor Force: In 2024, some 52% of Ecuadorian women worked outside the home, a lower rate than Peru (65%) and the US (57%), but the same as Colombia (52%). Although female participation in the labor force has increased since 1990, women are more likely to occupy informal positions in low-productivity sectors (see *Economics and Resources*). In 2023, women occupied about 42% of senior- and middle-management positions, higher than Peru (39%) but lower than the US (44%) and the same as Colombia (42%). Ecuador's labor market is highly gendered. While men more often work in jobs requiring manual labor, social norms constrain women's job opportunities and prioritize them as caregivers. Consequently, women are more likely to work in fields like agriculture, commerce, healthcare, and other services.

Gender and the Law

Although Ecuador's constitution specifies that gender equality is a right, the legal framework has proven insufficient. In 2022, the government launched the Violet Economy Law, an initiative that

mandates that the government implement policies to develop conditions for economic gender equality in women's careers. Despite these and other laws, discrimination and a gender pay gap persist. In 2024, women's average income was only about 77% that of men's. Differences in profession, sector, and the tendency for women to work part-time to care for their children help explain part of this gap.



The Violet Economy Law has improved parental leave and other benefits. The government guarantees up to 12 weeks of paid maternity and 10 days paid paternity leave, with 75% of maternity pay covered by the Ecuadorian Social Security Institute (see *Sustenance and Health*) and 25% by the woman's employer. As of early 2023, mothers can share up to 75% of their maternity leave entitlement with the father. Parents may receive extra leave under certain conditions such as a premature birth or if the mother must undergo a caesarean section. Generally, social protection benefits do not apply to those in the informal sector, leaving many working Ecuadorians without paid parental leave.

In 2015, the government raised the legal minimum age of marriage from 12 for girls and 14 for boys to 18 for both sexes with no exceptions. As of 2018, about 22% of women ages 20-24 had been married by age 18.

Gender and Politics

In 1929, Ecuador became the first Latin American country to grant women the right to vote, and in 1945, the country elected its first woman legislator. Women's representation continued to improve over the years, and by 2020, Ecuador passed a gender parity law requiring that 50% of candidates must be women by 2025. Despite mandated political parity, women face challenges in politics, as women's peers often do not respect their positions in power. As of early 2024, women hold about 43% of seats in the National Assembly, higher than Peru (39%), Colombia (30%), and the US (28%).

Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

As of 2019, about 57%, 35%, and 33% of women aged 15 and

older indicated that they have suffered psychological, physical, and sexual violence, respectively. GBV tends to occur in intimate relationships, and survivors often face barriers to receiving help like limited access to legal assistance, lack of awareness of their rights, and fear of retribution from their aggressor. About 88% of women who suffer psychological violence never report it to the authorities. Some evidence suggests that during the COVID-19 pandemic (see *Sustenance and Health*), confinement measures increased the risk of violence and made it harder for women to access support services. In 2021, Ecuador had a femicide (murder of a woman based on her gender) rate of 2.5 per 100,000 females, lower than the US (2.9), Colombia (4.1), and the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) regional average (3.6).

Sex and Procreation

Between 1960-2023, Ecuador's birthrate declined from 6.7 births per woman to 1.8, similar to the US (1.6), Colombia (1.6), and Peru (2.0). Teenage pregnancies are common but carry social stigma. Young parenthood often results in girls ending their studies prematurely to take on childcare responsibilities, especially in rural areas. Ecuador's adolescent fertility rate was 56 births per 1,000 girls aged 15-19 in 2023, higher than the LAC average (51) and the US rate (13). Today, the government criminalizes abortion with up to three years in prison with exceptions for cases presenting great risk to the mother's or child's health or pregnancy as a result of sexual violence.

Homosexuality in Ecuador

Ecuador legalized same-sex marriage in 2019, but same-sex adoption is still illegal. Although the constitution prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation, homosexual people still face



harassment, discrimination, and social rejection. Ecuador's recent increase in violence (see *Political and Social Relations*) has exacerbated violence against the homosexual community, which already faced significant violence and discrimination. At this time, the US State Department has a Status of Forces Agreement in place for Ecuador. Service members will be held accountable to the Uniformed Code of Military Justice.

6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Language Overview

Spanish is Ecuador's official and primary language of business, government, education, and entertainment. In addition, the country's constitution recognizes Spanish, Kichwa, and Shuar as "official languages of intercultural relations."

Spanish

As of 2022, about 16.7 million Ecuadorians (93% of the population) speak Spanish, which they often refer to as **castellano** (Castilian) after a region of Spain, instead of **español** (Spanish), the term commonly used in other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Around 98% of residents understand or use Spanish to some extent. Spanish conquerors first brought their language to the region in the early 16th century (see *History and Myth*), and it became a *lingua franca* between the Spaniards and diverse indigenous communities. Spanish and English use the same alphabet, with Spanish having three additional consonants – ch, ll (usually pronounced like "y" as in yam or "j" as in jam), and ñ (pronounced like the "ny" in the word canyon). The similar alphabet, consistent spelling patterns, and Latin base make Spanish rather easy for English speakers to learn.

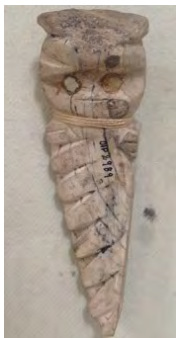


Ecuadorian Spanish has some features, like unique vocabulary and regional differences in the use of formal and informal pronouns (see "Forms of Address" below), that distinguish it from other Spanish dialects. Ecuador is home to three regional Spanish dialects, broadly classified as Amazonic (spoken by inhabitants of the eastern rainforest region), Andean (the most widely spoken variant, common in Ecuador's highland interior and Quito), and Equatorial Coastal (spoken along the Pacific Coast and Guayaquil). While the dialects have distinct slang and pronunciation, they are mutually intelligible. Ecuadorian Spanish also features many unique slang words and phrases such as **bacán** (cool), **chapa** (police officer), **pana** (buddy), and others.

Quechua (Kichwa)

Also known as **Runasimi** (“people’s language”), Quechua is an indigenous language spoken by around 550,000 Ecuadorians (over 3% of the population). Though little is known about Quechua’s origins, indigenous Andean peoples likely have spoken it for over 1,000 years. Quechua was the *lingua franca* of the Inca Empire, which conquered Ecuador in the 15th century (see *History and Myth*). Even after Spanish conquerors arrived in Ecuador, Quechua remained a popular language alongside Spanish and adopted the Latin alphabet.

Today, all nine dialects spoken in Ecuador are part of the Northern branch of the Quechuan language family. Ecuadorians collectively refer to all Quechua languages as Kichwa, though the dialects are mutually unintelligible. Consequently, Kichwa, or **Quichua de la Sierra** (Central Highlands Quechua), named for the region where it is mostly spoken, is also the name of the most common Quechuan dialect in Ecuador. Some schools teach Kichwa as part of the national curriculum (see *Learning and Knowledge*).



Ecuadorians use some unique words and phrases that derive from a history of mixing Spanish and indigenous languages. Common words like **taita** (dad), **locro** (a soup made of potatoes and cheese), and **ñaño/a** (beloved brother/sister) derive from Kichwa.

Shuar

Known as **Shiwar chicham** (“language of humans”), Shuar is the language of the Shuar indigenous group. As of the latest estimate from 2007, around 35,000 Shuar speakers reside in Ecuador, mostly in the southeastern Amazon region. Shuar belongs to the Chicham, or Jivaroan, language family and is also called Jivaro, though many people consider the term derogatory. Many Shuar speakers also speak Spanish as a second language. Today, Shuar uses the Latin alphabet.

Other Languages

Ecuador’s constitution mandates that the government respect and encourage the preservation and use of ancestral languages

of indigenous peoples (see *Political and Social Relations*). Ecuadorians speak over 20 languages from 10 language families, most of which are indigenous. Though increasingly rare, indigenous languages generally are spoken mostly in rural areas. After Kichwa and Shuar, Chachi (5,870 speakers) and Achuar-Shiwiar (3,520) are the country's most spoken indigenous languages. The vast majority (around 84%) of Ecuadorians who speak an indigenous language also speak Spanish, while the rest tend to be monolingual. Some Ecuadorians speak foreign languages such as German, Chinese, and Norwegian, though English is the most common.

English: As of 2023, about 93,200 Ecuadorians (less than 1% of the population) use or understand English to



some extent. Though not widely spoken, English is common in touristic cities like Cuenca and Quito and in some hotels and airports. Many schools teach English as a foreign language. As of 2023, Ecuador ranked 80 of 113 countries in an English proficiency index, much lower than some other LAC countries such as Argentina (28), Honduras (31), and Peru (51).

Communication Overview

Communicating in Ecuador requires both knowledge of Spanish and the ability to interact effectively using language. This notion of competence includes paralanguage (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). These forms of communication help to ensure that statements are interpreted as intended.

Communication Style

Ecuadorians tend to be polite communicators and typically use hand gestures to emphasize or replace some verbal communication. Conversations are often lively and emotional, with few pauses or silence. Many Ecuadorians favor optimism and rarely express criticism or rejection to avoid negatively impacting relationships. They sidestep conflict in conversation

and consider bluntness rude, tending to speak indirectly and imply an intended meaning to shift the conversation towards preferred topics (see “Conversational Topics” below). Rather than saying “no,” they tend to provide an excuse or say what they believe their conversation partner wishes to hear instead.

Nonverbal communication and eye contact are important, the latter of which shows interest and politeness while listening and sincerity while speaking. Many Ecuadorians touch their conversation partner’s hand, wrist, arm, or shoulder while talking to convey reassurance, though they may consider excessive touching as unprofessional in business settings. Ecuadorians also tend to stand close to each other while conversing, as they typically consider maintaining distance from someone as unfriendly or standoffish (see *Time and Space*).

Regional differences also affect Ecuadorians’ communication styles. Generally, Ecuadorians from the faster-paced **Costa** (Coast) region are more direct, louder, and less formal. In the *Sierra* region, people tend to be more formal and value traditional etiquette. In rural, primarily indigenous communities,

it is considered respectful to avoid sustained eye contact.



Greetings

Ecuadorians consider greetings as welcoming and respectful. Standard greetings vary by region

and level of familiarity, though the most common is a firm handshake with eye contact, especially between men, when greeting individuals for the first time, and in formal settings. Men may also embrace and pat each other on the back if well acquainted. In group or social settings, Ecuadorians expect the person arriving to greet all group members individually before engaging in conversation, typically beginning with social superiors and women. Some also consider it polite to greet strangers in stores or when passing on the street. Family and close friends often greet with an **abrazo** (hug) and alternating cheek kisses, though they tend to kiss the air instead of physically touching each other’s cheeks.

The most common greetings are the phrases ***hola*** (“hello”), ***buenos días*** (“good morning/day”), ***buenas tardes*** (“good afternoon”), or ***buenas noches*** (“good evening” or “good night”). Ecuadorians typically ask polite questions such as inquiring about their family and health and asking ***¿cómo estás?*** (“how are you?”) when greeting someone. After a long absence, friends may greet each other with ***¿cómo la has pasado?*** (“how have you been?”).

Names

Ecuadorian names consist of one or two first (given) names and one or more surnames.

Children typically take both their father's and mother's family names. The child's first surname is usually the father's and comes before the mother's family name. Although some Ecuadorians only use their patronymic (indicating the father) surname or reduce the maternal surname to an initial, it remains part of their legal name. After marriage, women often take their husband's surname or keep their paternal last name and follow it with ***de*** (“of”) and their husband's last name.



Forms of Address

Titles depend on age, social status, and relationship but are generally courteous. Ecuadorians customarily address new acquaintances with titles of respect such as ***señor*** (Mr.), ***señora*** (Mrs.) and ***señorita*** (Miss), sometimes with last name. Ecuadorians use the title ***Don*** (for males) or ***Doña*** (for females) along with the first name among friends to indicate respect and friendship. Professional titles like ***Doctor/a*** (doctor) may be used with first or last name(s). Someone of higher authority or social status using another's first name typically indicates trust and respect and may signal that both parties can use their first names. Many Ecuadorians, even strangers, address one another by nicknames or endearing pet names. Men and women may add the diminutive “ito” and “ita” (for males and females, respectively), sometimes with slight modification, to the end of a name to signify affection. For example, Juan becomes Juanito and Carla Carlita.

Spanish has different “you” pronouns and verb conjugations depending on the level of formality and respect. Ecuadorians tend to use the polite **Usted** in formal settings, although some business colleagues prefer the familiar **tú** or **vos**, typically used with friends, family, and younger people. Regional differences also influence pronoun use. For example, in Cuenca, *vos* is acceptable between classmates, whereas in Quito, it implies a

lack of respect. Foreign nationals should use *Usted* with conversation partners unless directed otherwise.



Conversational Topics

Ecuadorians typically converse about the health and wellbeing of each other and their families. New

acquaintances typically share information about their birthplace and culture. Ecuadorian soccer and traditional music (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*) are also usually welcome topics. To avoid offense, foreign nationals should not offer opinions about politics, US influence in Ecuador, social or class issues, drug violence, or relations with Peru and Colombia. Ecuadorians generally appreciate when a foreign national tries to speak Spanish, regardless of proficiency.

Gestures

Ecuadorians often use various gestures in conversation to emphasize discussion points or replace verbal communication. To communicate “I’ll be back,” they draw a circle or two in the air with their index finger. They indicate “sorry, the bus is full” or similar sentiments by sticking out their hand, as if to shake hands, and twisting their wrist back and forth. Ecuadorians generally consider it impolite to yawn, whistle, or yell to get someone’s attention in public. Instead of using their finger to point, Ecuadorians may pucker or purse their lips in the indicated direction.

Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/ and click on “Resources” for access to language training and other resources.

Useful Words and Phrases

English	Spanish
Hello	Hola
How are you?	¿Cómo está Usted? (f) / ¿Cómo estás? (inf)
I am well	Estoy bien
Excuse me	Disculpe / Perdón
Yes / No	Sí / No
Please	Por favor
Thank you	Gracias
You are welcome	De nada
I'm sorry	Lo siento
I don't understand	No entiendo
What is your name?	¿Cómo se llama?
My name is ____	Me llamo ____
Where are you from?	¿De dónde es Usted?
I am from the US	Yo soy de los Estados Unidos
Goodbye	Chao / Adiós
Good morning/day	Buenos días
Good afternoon	Buenas tardes
Good evening/night	Buenas noches
What does ____ mean?	¿Qué significa ____?
What is this?	¿Qué es esto?
I want ____	Quiero ____
How do you say ____?	¿Cómo se dice ____?
Do you speak English?	¿Usted habla inglés?
What time is it?	¿Qué hora es?
Yesterday	Ayer
Today	Hoy
Tomorrow	Mañana
Where is the bathroom?	¿Dónde está el baño?
Who?	¿Quién?
When?	¿Cuándo?
Which?	¿Cuál?
Why?	¿Por qué?
Car	Carro / Auto
Plane	Avión
Bus	Bus / Busetas / Colectivo
Exit	Salida
Cheers!	¡Salud!
Right / Straight / Left	Derecha / Derecho / Izquierda

7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 93.9%
- Male: 94.9%
- Female: 93.1% (2020 estimate)

Early Education

Before Spanish conquerors brought standardized formal education to Ecuador (see *History and Myth*), regional inhabitants transmitted values, skills, beliefs, and historical knowledge to younger generations through stories and myths (see *History and Myth*). Elders also taught children practical skills in crafts and trades such as fishing, hunting, and masonry. Under Incan rule in the 15th century (see *History and Myth*), indigenous Ecuadorians learned the Incas' Quechua language, which served as a *lingua franca* (see *Language and Communication*). Formal education was primarily limited to the Incan nobility at that time.

Spanish Education

During the Spanish colonial era (see of *History and Myth*), the primary focus of education was to impart instruction in Roman Catholicism



(see *Religion and Spirituality*). Various Roman Catholic orders such as the Dominicans, Franciscans, and Jesuits established missions and schools for the sons of local elites and some indigenous groups (see *Religion and Spirituality*), particularly around the capital city of Quito. In 1552, the Franciscans founded the **Colegio de San Andrés** (St. Andrew's College) in Quito to instruct indigenous artists in the religious arts of the Catholic Church. During the 16th-17th centuries, indigenous and **mestizo** (mixed Spanish and indigenous) artists created religious music, sculptures, and art to promote Catholic evangelization. Most poor, indigenous, African, and **mestizo** people remained uneducated and illiterate (see *Political and Social Relations*).

In 1586, Pope Sixtus V (the leader of the Roman Catholic Church) authorized the opening of the first university in Ecuador, the **Universidad de San Fulgencio de Quito** (University of St. Fulgencio of Quito). The university provided some upper-class



boys education in law, philosophy, and theology. In the 17th and 18th centuries, public schools emerged under the guidance and supervision of laymen. While Ecuador had opened about 20 schools by the 19th century, political instability greatly hindered the development of a national curriculum, and educational attainment remained low.

Education After Independence

After Ecuador gained independence from Spain and then the confederation of **Gran Colombia** (Great Colombia) in 1830 (see *History and Myth*), successive governments attempted to expand the school system. Vicente Rocafuerte's government (1834-39, see p. 6 of *History and Myth*) sought to establish education as free, accessible, and nonreligious. In 1835, he established the **Colegio Santa María del Socorro** (Santa Maria of Socorro School), the country's first school for women. The first education law was passed in 1838, establishing three levels of education – primary, secondary, and post-secondary – which were under the supervision of regional agencies. Because the country lacked funding for adequate equipment and teacher training, the development of new schools stagnated.

In 1861, Gabriel García Moreno's conservative government (see *History and Myth*) reestablished the Church's authority over education. Primary education became compulsory starting at age 8, which resulted in improved enrollment rates. In 1869, Moreno opened the **Escuela Politécnica Nacional** (National Polytechnic School) to train teachers to educate the increasing number of students. Since Ecuador was experiencing a period of prosperity at that time (see *Economics and Resources*), increased enrollment in higher education resulted in scientific and technical growth, though primarily for men. Women's education was mostly limited to learning piety, modesty, and the

role of being a wife and mother, while indigenous education centered on morality, religion, math, reading, and writing.

For decades, divisions between the liberals and conservatives hindered educational development. The liberals wanted to secularize education, while the conservatives sought to uphold the Catholic Church's influence in government and education (see *History and Myth*). In 1895, President Eloy Alfaro made education secular across the country.

Education in the 20th Century

In 1904, secondary education reorganized to comprise three years of liberal arts studies followed by three years of specialized education in philosophy, math, and science. In 1945, the constitution mandated that all children between the ages of 6-12 attend primary school. During the 1960s-70s, educational equality expanded, and enrollment in primary, secondary, and post-secondary schools increased. Nevertheless, in rural areas, student enrollment at all levels remained low, largely because resources for quality education remained limited.



In the 1980s, Ecuador began to formally acknowledge the cultural significance of indigenous Ecuadorians (see *Political and Social Relations*) and established a bilingual and bicultural national educational program. During the 1990s, the government updated textbooks across the country to remove ethnic, gender, racial, and class prejudices, replacing them with texts such as ***Escuela Para Todos*** (School for All, 1972). While national efforts to achieve educational equality continued, political instability during the early 1990s and 2000s hindered school funding and construction, especially in rural areas.

Modern Education System

Since the early 2000s, Ecuador has improved educational equality for disadvantaged populations such as indigenous peoples and women. In 2006, the government approved a 10-year plan that sought to improve educational attainment. Adopted in 2008, Ecuador's constitution (see *Political and Social*

Relations) granted all citizens free public education from primary through the post-secondary level, improved teacher training and working conditions, and increased state funding for education. In 2017, the National Development Plan set objectives to guarantee equal educational opportunities to all Ecuadorians by improving access and quality. Despite these improvements, in 2023, Ecuador still only spent about 3.9% of its GDP on education, lower than Peru (4.2%), Colombia (5.3%), and the US (5.4%).



Today, education in Ecuador remains free and compulsory for all citizens, with a mandated minimum of 13 years of schooling starting at age 5. Although most Ecuadorians attend free government-run public schools, other students enroll in private fee-based schools. In 2023, about 19 % of primary school students were enrolled in private schools, less than the same rate as Colombia and higher than US (10%), but lower than Peru (26%).

While all public and many private schools follow the national curriculum, some private schools that cater to wealthier families teach according to the curricula of global educational programs or their home countries. They also offer instruction in foreign languages such as English, French, and German. Generally, the quality of education tends to be much higher at private schools.

The Ministry of Education oversees all school accreditation and is tasked with assuring that educators meet national benchmarks. The federal government manages the funding for public schools and provides support for some independent and religious schools that are registered with the government (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Many rural public schools lack resources such as textbooks and funding, while urban public schools tend to be only slightly better. All public and religious schools require uniforms, though some private institutions do not. In a 2018 assessment of student performance in reading, math, and science, Ecuador ranked below the US, with similar scores to Honduras and Guatemala.

Pre-Primary: Children ages 4-5 typically attend fee-based **educación inicial** (initial education). While *educación inicial* is a common option for children in urban areas, where both parents often work (see *Family and Kinship*), a lack of proximity to childcare in rural areas makes this option less common for rural Ecuadorians. *Educación inicial* prepares students for formal education by developing learning habits and basic skills. Although instruction is primarily in Spanish, the government permits education in native languages such as Quechua, Shuar, Achuar-Shiwiar, or other languages used by local communities (see *Language and Communication*). In 2021, about 55% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in pre-primary school.

Primary: **Educación general básica** (general basic education) divides into four levels beginning at age 5. While **educación preparatoria** (preparatory education) is for 5-year-olds and lasts just 1 year, **básica**



elemental (elementary basic) education is for students ages 6-8 (grades 2-4), **básica media** (middle basic) for students ages 9-11 (grades 5-7), and **básica superior** (upper basic) for students ages 12-14 (grades 8-10). Most schools follow the national curriculum, which covers Spanish, English, arts, social studies, science, and physical education. Students are graded on a scale of 0-10 and must earn a 6 (which equates to a minimum of 60%) on each course to continue on to the next grade. In 2018, about 91% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in primary education.

Secondary Education: After completing *educación general básica*, students must complete **bachillerato general unificado** (unified general baccalaureate), which lasts 3 years and is a continuation of their previous studies. The purpose of this level is to provide students ages 15-17 with general training and interdisciplinary preparation to “integrate into society as responsible and supportive human beings.” Students can take a track that either aligns with academic courses, which prepare them for university, or technical school. Students take the **ser**

bachiller (“be a graduate”) exam at the end of *bachillerato general unificado*, which determines their admission eligibility to institutions of higher education. Upon passing the exam, students are awarded a **título de bachiller** (bachelor’s certificate), similar to a high school diploma in the US. In 2018, about 85% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in secondary education.

Post-Secondary School: Ecuador has a large network of public universities that offer free tuition for Ecuadorians. Generally, the country has two types of post-secondary institutions: technical schools and traditional universities. Technical schools offer specialized training and confer degrees to students who studied in the technical track at the unified general baccalaureate level. While public universities are free, students are required to complete the national higher education exam, which some argue is discriminatory. The exam is administered in the Spanish language, which many indigenous populations do not speak as their mother tongue. Limited access to learning materials in rural areas also hinders some rural students’ abilities to perform well on the exam, particularly in specific areas such as math and technology. In 2022, about 12% of the population held a

licenciatura (bachelor’s degree) or **técnico** (technical degree), awarded after 3-4 years of post-secondary studies.

Many of the country’s top universities such as the **Universidad Central del Ecuador** (Central University of Ecuador), **Universidad**



San Francisco de Quito (San Francisco University of Quito), and the **Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador** (Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador) are in Quito. The **Escuela Superior Politécnica del Litoral** (Littoral Polytechnic Higher School) in Guayaquil is another one of the country’s top universities and offers some 51 graduate degree programs. It also has over 130 agreements with various international institutions to foster global collaboration on research, education, and academic mobility.

8. TIME AND SPACE

Overview

Ecuadorians tend to view interpersonal relationships, reputation, and etiquette as vital to conducting business, though their attitudes are often more relaxed in personal settings. Generally, Ecuadorians' personal space preferences vary by degree of familiarity.

Time and Work

Ecuador's workweek runs from Monday-Friday. Most business occurs between 9am-6pm, with a lunch break around 1pm. Though hours vary widely by store size and location, many shops are open weekdays and Saturday from 9am-1:30pm and 3-7pm, with an optional afternoon **siesta** (extended mid-day break) from 1:30-3pm. Malls typically operate from 10am-8pm during the week and 8am-9pm on Saturdays. Open-air markets are a common fixture in towns across Ecuador and usually occur on a set day of the week. Most banks are open Monday-Friday from 9am-4pm, and post offices operate Monday-Friday from 9am-5pm and Saturday from 9am-1pm. Government offices open between 8-8:30am and close at 5pm.



Working Conditions: Ecuador's **Código del Trabajo** (Labor Code) mandates a 40-hour workweek and extends a range of benefits to Ecuadorian workers in the formal sector. It provides for a monthly minimum wage (\$460 as of 2024), guaranteed paid vacation, and parental leave (see *Sex and Gender*). Nevertheless, labor law enforcement is weak. In a 2024 global rights index, Ecuador ranks as one of the world's 10 worst countries for workers. In recent years, the government has repressed mass labor demonstrations brutally, and members of trade unions have been murdered in targeted, gang-related killings (see *Political and Social Relations*). Despite child labor prohibitions provided in Ecuador's 2008 constitution and its Childhood and Adolescence Code, underage labor is widespread. Most child laborers toil in the agricultural sector.

Time Zone: Mainland Ecuador adheres to Ecuador Time (ECT), which is 5 hours behind Greenwich Mean Time (GMT), and the Galápagos Islands to Galápagos Time (GALT), which is 6 hours behind GMT. ECT is identical to Eastern Standard Time (EST), meaning it is 1 hour behind the US Eastern Daylight Saving Time (EDT), as Ecuador does not observe Daylight Saving Time.

Date Notation: Like the US, Ecuador uses the Western (Gregorian) Calendar. Unlike Americans, Ecuadorians write the day first, followed by the month and year.

National Holidays

- January 1: New Year's Day
- February/March: Carnival Monday
- February/March: Carnival Tuesday
- March/April: Good Friday
- May 1: Labor Day
- May 24: Battle of Pichincha Day (see *History and Myth*)
- August 10: National Independence Day (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*)
- October 11: Guayaquil Independence Day
- November 2: All Souls Day
- November 3: Cuenca Independence Day
- December 25: Christmas

Time and Business

In business contexts, Ecuadorians generally value punctuality and adhere to deadlines, especially when dealing with foreign nationals. They usually arrive to meetings on time and often factor in transport delays (see “Driving” below), though it is not unusual for engagements to begin later than scheduled. Ecuador’s business culture emphasizes personal connections, and Ecuadorians prefer to do business with those they know as **buena gente** (good people). Meetings often begin with polite conversation to establish rapport, and the pace of business accelerates as counterparts become acquainted. Ecuadorian businesses are usually organized in a strict hierarchy, and top-level employees make most decisions. Respect to those in positions of authority is an essential component of business.

Public and Personal Space

As in most societies, personal space in Ecuador depends on the nature of the relationship. Ecuadorians generally stand close to one another during conversation and touch more frequently than Americans when among friends. Some Ecuadorians consider it unsociable to distance oneself during conversation.

Touch: In professional settings, firm handshakes are the norm when greeting and saying goodbye. In rural areas, Ecuadorians sometimes offer a wrist rather than a hand (especially when their hands are soiled). While men often hug their close male friends, exchanging cheek kisses is normal between women and men and among women (see *Language and Communication*).

Eye Contact: Ecuadorians maintain direct eye contact during conversation to demonstrate attentiveness, interest, and respect. They consider avoiding eye contact impolite (see *Language and Communication*).

Photographs

Some government buildings, churches, museums, and military installations limit photography. Foreign nationals should ask permission when photographing Ecuadorians (especially children and indigenous people).

Driving

Although road infrastructure has improved across Ecuador in recent years (and is especially good along major highways), road conditions are generally poor, signposting insufficient, and overhead lighting rare, making driving dangerous, especially at night. Traffic is frequent, especially in major cities, and drivers often disobey traffic laws. Motorcycle and bus drivers have reputations for reckless driving. Police and military traffic stops have become more frequent in recent years – especially in and around Guayaquil – as part of a strategy to control surging gang- and drug-related violence. Like in the US, Ecuadorians drive on the right side of the road. Ecuador's rate of traffic-related deaths in 2022 was 21.8 per 100,000 people, much higher than the US (12.7).



9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

Overview

Ecuadorian clothing, arts, and recreation reflect the country's rich history, cultural diversity, and blend of African, European, and indigenous traditions.

Dress and Appearance

Traditional: Ecuador's conventional dress is most common in rural areas, especially among indigenous peoples (see *Political and Social Relations*), and is often worn on holidays and for special events. Clothing, styles, colors, and patterns typically vary by ethnic group, geographic location, and gender. For example, **Otavaleñas** (women from Otavalo) in the northern region tend to wear long dark skirts, while Quechua women in the **Sierra** (central highlands) often wear brightly colored embroidered skirts. Women's wear typically consists of a white embroidered blouse, **faja** ("belt," often woven in bright colors), skirt, fedora (soft-brimmed felt hat), shawl, and layers of **walkas** (gold or beaded necklaces). The beads represent corn kernels and are important symbols of status in some indigenous communities. Wearing more layers of **walkas** usually represents a woman's higher status or importance in the community.



Men's traditional wear typically consists of a white shirt, knee-length shorts, a fedora, and a poncho, often made of sheep's wool. The men's **shimba** is a long hair braid that usually reaches their waist and serves as an important symbol of indigenous identity. In coastal areas, some men wear a **guayabera** (loose-fitting shirt that originated in Cuba). Some rural men and women in northern regions wear **alpargatas** (colorful shoes made from canvas and rope) and lightweight hats woven from the toquilla palm that help protect against intense sunlight.

Modern: In urban areas, many residents follow the latest Western fashion trends. Men typically wear jeans or pants, shirts, and well-kept shoes. Women often wear jeans or skirts

with a blouse or t-shirt, or dresses. Older people tend to dress more formally. In business settings, Ecuadorians typically prefer formal styles such as dark suits or dresses/pantsuits.

Recreation and Leisure

Ecuadorians often spend their leisure time with family and friends. Typical activities are sharing meals (see *Sustenance and Health*), playing sports and games, and going to bars or **discotecas** (nightclubs) to drink and dance.

Holidays and Festivals: Ecuadorians hold a variety of festivals and community celebrations, many reflecting the country's Catholic roots (see *Religion and Spirituality*), European or indigenous traditions, and historical events. Ecuador hosts a variety of **fiestas** (festivals) annually. Many residents celebrate Carnival in February or March (see *Time and Space*), which coincides with the days before Lent. Carnival celebrations tend to vary by region. In the cities of Ambato and Guaranda, parades and dance competitions attract thousands of visitors. Generally, the festivities include fireworks, music, parades, and processions of dancers in colorful costumes.



Another notable *fiesta* is **La Diablada de Píllaro** (The Devil Dance of Píllaro), held the first week of January in the Píllaro Canton of the central Tungurahua

Province and celebrates the new year. The festival originated in the 16th century during Spanish colonization (see *History and Myth*), when indigenous men wore devil masks as a form of rebellion against the Spaniards and their forced conversion to Catholicism (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Today, the celebrations usually include music, dancing, processions, and performances. Many participants dress as **diablos** (devils) and wear masks made of papier mâché (a material made by bounding pieces of paper together with an adhesive) adorned with animal horns and decorations. Likewise, **bailarines de línea** (line dancers) dress in metal mesh masks painted with blue eyes and red lips that represent Spanish landowners.

Some national holidays commemorate important dates in Ecuadorian history. On August 10, Ecuadorians celebrate the ***Día del Primer Grito de Independencia de Quito*** (Day of Quito's First Cry of Independence), which commemorates the capital city's declaration of independence from Spanish rule in 1809 (see *History and Myth*). Some associated traditions include military reenactments, concerts, and parades held at historic landmarks like Quito's Independence Square.

Sports and Games

Ecuadorians participate in a wide variety of sports such as soccer, basketball, cycling, track and field, and baseball.

Pelota nacional ("national ball," sometimes called ***chaza***), originated in



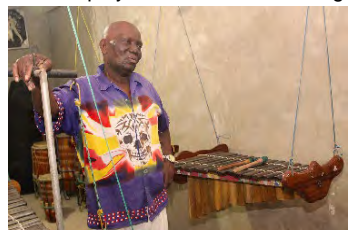
indigenous communities and is similar to tennis. Players divide into teams of two-four and use spiky wooden racquets to hit a ball, traditionally made of leather, back and forth. Many Ecuadorians also play ***ecuavóley***, which is similar to volleyball and widely regarded as the country's national sport. Originally, played by low-income citizens, the game only required a net and soccer ball. Players divide into teams of three, which consist of a ***colocador*** (setter), ***volante*** (flyer), and ***servidor*** (server), who attempt to keep the ball off the ground while hitting it back and forth over a net. Today, the game is played globally, with leagues in Europe and the US.

Ecuador participates in numerous international competitions such as the Summer and Winter Olympics, FIFA World Cup, ***Copa America*** (America Cup), and Pan American Games. Jefferson Pérez, a race walker, became the country's first Olympic medalist, when he won a gold medal at the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta. He later won three World Championships in 2003, 2005, and 2007. Other notable athletes are weightlifter Alexandra Escobar, who won the Pan American Games twice in the 58 kg event in 2007 and 2011 and the Pan American Championships in 2008 and 2010 and sprinter Álex Quiñónez, who won the 200-m race at the Pan American Games

in 2019. In 2021, Quiñónez was fatally shot in Guayaquil, a tragic event that was symbolic of the country's spike in violence in recent years (see *Political and Social Relations*).

Soccer: Fútbol (soccer) is Ecuador's most popular sport, with youth learning through pick-up games at school and amateur leagues. Ecuador's national team, nicknamed **La Tricolor** (The Tricolor) and sometimes called **La Tri**, has qualified for four World Cups. **Fútbol** player Alberto Spencer is one of the country's most celebrated athletes and popularly regarded as the greatest Ecuadorian player of all time. He maintains the record for the most goals (54) scored during Copa Libertadores, South America's premier club tournament, between 1960-72.

Games: One popular game, **cuarenta** (forty), is considered the country's national card game. **Cuarenta** is played with two players or four divided into two teams and a standard 52-card pack with the 8s, 9s, and 10s removed. The object of the game is to collect enough cards so that the sum of their numbers equals 40. Players are dealt five cards, which they discard until another player can collect it through various moves. Once the players run out of cards, they are dealt five more, until one player or team wins.



Music and Dance

Andean melodies, African rhythms, and European harmonies influence traditional

Ecuadorian music. **Marimba** is an Afro-Ecuadorian music style that combines African, Spanish, and indigenous rhythms. The word *marimba* also refers to the type of xylophone that the style's musicians play, along with percussion instruments like drums and **guasás** (seed-filled rattles).

During the 20th century, the government banned many Afro-Ecuadorian dances and music, which resulted in *marimba* becoming a cultural symbol of freedom and resilience. Today, Ecuadorians perform *marimba* at many festivals, often combined with theatrical elements to tell the story of Afro-Ecuadorian history.

Sanjuanito is a popular song and dance often performed during festivals, notably **La Fiesta de San Juan** (“St. John’s Party,” also known as St. John’s Eve). Participants gather in a circle and dance around musicians, who perform upbeat music with lyrics that describe everyday life, indigenous pride, and nationalist sentiments. Traditionally, instruments such as guitars, violins, flutes, and **bombos** (European bass drums) were used to play *sanjuanito*. Modern instruments like electric guitars, bass, and synthesizers are also used today.

Pasillo: In the 19th century, **pasillo** (small step) emerged as a musical and dance genre combining traditional Andean musical styles with lyrics focusing on love, family, and everyday life. *Pasillo* has a slow tempo and melancholic melody, usually played with a variety of string instruments like the **requinto** (high pitched guitar), mandolin, violin, and piano. In the 1950s, Julio Jaramillo popularized the genre and gained global recognition. Some Ecuadorians celebrate his birthday on October 1st as the **Día del Pasillo Ecuatoriano** (Day of the Ecuadorian Small Step) holiday. During this celebration, many Ecuadorians make a pilgrimage to Jaramillo’s grave to acknowledge his contribution to the genre and the country’s musical arts. *Pasillo* is Ecuador’s national genre of music.

Other Musical Genres: Today, Ecuadorians listen to an array of foreign and Ecuadorian musical styles like pop, **cumbia** (a blended style originally from Colombia), **reggaetón** (a Spanish Caribbean-based genre), rock, electronic, jazz, and rap, among others.

Literature

With roots in indigenous oral traditions, Ecuador has a rich literary history. One of the country’s first poets, Jacinto de Evia, wrote **Ramillete de Varias Flores Poéticas** (Bouquet of Various Poetic Flowers, 1675), a collection of poems that explored themes of death, humor, love, religion, and satire.

Following Ecuador’s independence from Spain, Romanticism characterized nationalist movements during political upheavals.



This movement emphasized emotions, nature, and an idyllic retelling of the past. In 1825, José Joaquín Olmedo wrote ***La victoria de Junín: canto a Bolívar*** (The Victory at Junín: A Song to Bolívar), which told the patriotic story of Simón Bolívar's struggle for independence from Spain. In 1865, conservative poet Juan León Mera wrote ***Salve, Oh Patria*** (Hail, Oh Homeland), which became the country's national anthem for its anti-Spanish sentiment and retelling of the Ecuadorian War of Independence. In 1882, Juan Montalvo, a liberal essayist, wrote ***Siete Tratados*** (Seven Treaties) criticizing the clerical government and encouraging rebellion.

In the 20th century, realism emerged, which emphasized class inequality, race relations, and individual experiences. Pablo Palacio's works used irony and mockery to deviate from Romanticism, and his characters were criticized for being dangerous and immoral. In 1927, he published ***Un Hombre Muerto a Puntapiés*** (A Man Kicked to Death) and ***Débora***, both of which follow unconventional characters who live outside the norms of society. In 1950, Nelson Estupiñán Bass wrote ***Cuando Los Guayacanes Florecían*** (When the Guayacanes Were in Bloom), which explored the treatment of Afro-Ecuadorians during the liberals' triumph over their conservative rivals in 1895 (see *History and Myth*). In 1998, Bass was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature for his contributions

to Afro-Hispanic culture and literature.

Folk Arts and Handicrafts

Ecuador has a rich history of woodcarving, painting, leatherwork, weaving, and silverwork. The fabrication of clothing using traditional techniques such as



backstrap weaving, a method of weaving on a loom attached to the waist, is central to some indigenous communities. The Otavalo Market held in Plaza Centenario, known locally as Plaza de Ponchos, attracts thousands of visitors, who purchase textiles, crafts, and figurines made by *Otavaleños*.

10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

Sustenance Overview

Meals are often important social events in Ecuador, with family and friends lingering for conversation. The country's cuisine reflects its geographic diversity, unique traditions, and Spanish and indigenous influences.

Dining Customs

Most Ecuadorians eat three daily meals. Traditionally, they consume **desayuno** (breakfast) before 9am, followed by the main meal of the day, **almuerzo** (lunch), around 12-2pm. Many businesses close for around two hours during lunch to enable people to dine together (see *Time and Space*). **Merienda** (supper) is often lighter than lunch and served in the evening, usually after 6pm. **Cena** (dinner) is generally a larger, more formal meal held on weekends or for special events among friends and family and typically replaces the *merienda*.



When invited to an Ecuadorian home, hosts do not expect gifts, though guests often bring items like candy or wine. Ecuadorians are generally hospitable and welcome unexpected visits. They typically offer guests a meal, or at least a beverage, and may consider it impolite to refuse refreshments. Diners tend to take their time eating and may linger for hours to chat (a custom known as **la sobremesa**), as hosts rarely specify an ending time. Ecuadorians use utensils to consume most foods, the knife remaining in the dominant hand and fork in the non-dominant hand. Hosts often give departing guests gifts like fruit or candy.

Diet

Due to Ecuador's ethnic and geographic diversity (see *Political and Social Relations*), cuisine often varies by region. Many dishes in the **Oriente** (East) maintain indigenous culinary traditions and highlight fresh, local ingredients. In the **Sierra** (central highlands), potatoes, cheese, corn, and avocados are the foundation of many traditional dishes. Fresh seafood and

tropical fruits define the cuisine of the **Costa** (Coast) region. Ecuadorians widely regard **bolón de verde** (fried green plantain fritters filled with cheese and sometimes **chicharrón**, deep-fried pork) as their national dish.



While varying by region and socioeconomic status, meals tend to highlight animal protein, soups, and starches. Chicken, pork, and beef are the most popular meats. Seafood

like fish, prawns, lobster, and shrimp are plentiful on the coast, while freshwater fish is available inland, often near rivers. Starches like rice, potatoes, and corn or yuca tortillas feature prominently in Ecuadorian cuisine and are typically served with every meal. Tropical fruit like **guanábana** (soursop, the national fruit), bananas (one of the country's primary exports, see p. 6 of *Economics and Resources*), mangos, and guavas are popular. Common flavorings are lemon and lime juice, garlic, cumin, pepper, coriander, parsley, and **ají** (a mild pepper sauce).

Meals and Popular Dishes

Breakfast in Ecuador is typically simple and based around eggs, potatoes, or rice. Pancakes, traditionally oilier and crispier than those in the US, are another option. Fruit, toast, corn tortillas, and coffee often accompany the main breakfast foods. Many Ecuadorians eat **encebollado** (a fish-based, usually tuna, stew with tomatoes, peppers, yuca, pickled onions, lemon juice, **ají**, and cumin, typically eaten with plantain chips, popcorn, toasted corn, or rice) or **bolón de verde** with fried eggs for breakfast.

Lunch typically consists of a **caldo** (soup), main course, and a fresh juice. Many Ecuadorians eat soup every day with, or as, a main dish. **Locro** (potato-cheese soup), **aguado** (water-based meat soup), and **caldo de leche** (cream soup with vegetables) are popular variations. Following a soup course, many Ecuadorians consume a protein-based course accompanied by a sauce (often made of brown beans or lentils), fried plantains, and potatoes or rice. A popular meal is **seco** (beef, chicken, or goat stew cooked with tomatoes and onions and flavored with coriander, tamarind, and beer).

Grilled or roasted **cuy** (guinea pig) with potatoes is a popular street food and delicacy in the *Sierra* region. **Ceviche** (fresh, raw fish or seafood, usually shrimp, cured in citrus juices with onion, tomatoes, cilantro, and herbs) is a staple served in establishments ranging from street stands to expensive restaurants. **Hornado** (a whole roasted pig) is a traditional meal that Ecuadorians eat for any occasion but features prominently at celebrations and festivals. The *hornado* typically is carved and served with **llapingachos** (fried potato cakes with a peanut sauce), roasted **mote** (corn), avocado, plantains, and rice.

Supper dishes are similar to lunch but in smaller portions. For special occasions like Lent, Ecuadorians make **fanescas**, a milky broth-based soup with fish, green beans, lima beans, and **chocho** (a bean that grows in the high altitudes of the Andes Mountains). *Hornado*, roasted chicken, or a stuffed turkey are traditional centerpieces for Ecuadorian Christmas Eve feasts, which are accompanied by rice, potatoes, and vegetables.

Suspiros ("sighs," light, sweet, baked meringue made of egg whites, sugar, and lemon juice) are a common dessert. **Espumilla** ("foam") is another creamy meringue dessert, made of egg whites and fruit pulp, sold across Ecuador as street food and often served in ice cream cones. Ecuadorians also eat **torta de tres leches** ("three milks cake," a moist white cake soaked in condensed milk, heavy cream, and evaporated milk).

Beverages

Many residents drink fresh **jugos** (juices) with meals. Some drink **horchata**, a bright red tea brewed with about 30 medicinal herbs and flowers. The drink is consumed hot or iced and often sweetened with raw cane sugar or honey.

Another common drink is **chicha morada** (a beverage made from purple corn, pineapple, cinnamon, and cloves), a recipe originating from the traditional indigenous fermented beverage **chichca** (made from various ingredients like corn, yuca, or fruit). **Cerveza** (beer), wine, rum, and **aguardiente** (Ecuador's most



popular spirit, fermented from sugarcane and often flavored with anise) are popular alcoholic beverages. *Aguardiente* is the primary spirit in many cocktails, like **canelazo** (a hot drink made with citrus juice and water boiled with cinnamon and sugar).

Eating Out

Restaurants in urban centers like Quito and Guayaquil range from upscale establishments specializing in international and local cuisine to inexpensive street food. Many restaurants include a 10% service charge in the bill, though if not included, Ecuadorians may opt to tip this amount or more depending on establishment type.



Health Overview

While the overall health of Ecuadorians has improved in recent decades, they continue to face high rates of non-communicable diseases and other serious health challenges. Between

2000-22, life expectancy at birth increased from about 73 to 78 years, above the average of Latin American and Caribbean countries (LAC) (74), and slightly higher than the US (77). During the same period, infant mortality (the proportion of infants who die before age 1) decreased from about 25 deaths per 1,000 live births to 11, a figure slightly lower than the LAC average (14), but higher than the US rate (5).

Traditional Medicine

This treatment method consists of the knowledge, practices, and skills that are derived from a native population's beliefs, experiences, and theories. Traditional Ecuadorian medicine relies on **Pachamama** (mother nature) and plant products like coca leaves and quinine for medicine, food, rituals, and other uses. Spanish colonists (see *History and Myth*) formally documented ancestral and indigenous medicinal knowledge. Consequently, many modern medications derive from the same plant components and indigenous practices. Many Ecuadorians today use traditional medicinal practices instead of conventional healthcare. Some Ecuadorians visit a **yachaj** (shaman, an unlicensed traditional healer) before going to a conventional

doctor or clinic. Shamans typically use generations of ancestral knowledge to treat patients.

Healthcare System

Ecuador's public healthcare system became operational in 1967 but failed to provide reliable and efficient coverage to the population for many years. In 2008, constitutional amendments declared healthcare access a



fundamental right for all, regardless of immigration status. They made systemic and structural improvements to the national public healthcare system by increasing government spending on medical care and improving the **Ministerio de Salud Pública** (Ministry of Public Health, or MSP), the national health authority, among other advancements.

The MSP manages the publicly funded **Sistema Nacional de Salud** (National Healthcare System), which provides universal healthcare to all citizens, regardless of income. The **Instituto Ecuatoriano de Seguridad Social** (Ecuadorian Institute of Social Security, or IESS) provides healthcare to residents who either make mandatory contributions through an employer or voluntary contributions. Once a resident has contributed to the IESS system, healthcare is available at no additional cost.

Public hospitals and clinics focus on pediatric, gynecological, clinical, and surgical care. Although treatment is free at public hospitals and anyone covered can visit for an exam, the public health system lacks adequate resources to meet the population's healthcare needs. Patients often experience long wait times, especially for specialist care and surgery, largely due to a lack of trained medical professionals.

Ecuador also has a private healthcare system that traditionally caters to wealthy citizens in urban areas and has experienced an increase in new private hospitals in recent years. While more expensive than the public system, private healthcare tends to provide a higher standard of care and wider range of services than public hospitals and clinics. Although public healthcare in

Ecuador continues to evolve and expand access, rural areas tend to be underserved. In response, the government introduced one year of mandatory rural service for all healthcare professionals. As of 2022, Ecuador spent about 8% of GDP on healthcare, the same as the LAC average (8%), and much lower than the US (17%).

Healthcare Challenges

The leading causes of death in Ecuador are non-communicable “lifestyle” diseases, which accounted for some 76% of total deaths in 2019. Of these diseases, the most fatal is heart disease, accounting for around 49 deaths per 100,000 people in 2019, followed by kidney diseases, stroke, and diabetes. Minority groups like women, children, indigenous peoples, Afro-Ecuadorians, disabled persons, and poor communities (see *Political and Social Relations*) are more vulnerable to unequal treatment and limited healthcare access, which aggravates their health issues. Ecuador also has one of Latin America’s highest rates of undernourishment. Ecuadorian children suffer from elevated rates of malnutrition and stunted growth.



In addition, increasing violence and crime have contributed to the surging homicide rate in Ecuador, which reached some 45 deaths per 100,000 people in 2024. Homicide is quickly

becoming a leading cause of death in the country but particularly in and around Guayaquil.

As of 2025, the Ecuadorian government has confirmed over 1 million cases of COVID-19, resulting in over 36,000 deaths. Soon after the pandemic spread to Ecuador in 2020, the country had one of the world’s highest rates of infection and death. COVID-19 was the leading cause of death in Ecuador in 2021 and 2022. Hospitals had neither the resources nor the preparedness to respond to the crisis. Nevertheless, the government set an ambitious target to vaccinate 9 million people in 100 days, and not only met its goal, but in doing so set an example of success for the world. In March 2023, about 79% of Ecuador’s population is fully vaccinated against COVID-19.

11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

Overview

Around 6000 BC, early Ecuadorians settled in subsistence-based agrarian communities for millennia. By about 800 BC, coastal settlements had become the center of extensive trade in spondylus (spiny oyster) shells (see *History and Myth*) that stretched from southern Peru to western Mexico. Infused with religious and cultural significance, spondylus were prized by cultures across pre-Columbian Latin America and proliferated by seaborne exchange. Overland trade routes traversing Ecuador's Andean highlands developed as well, frequented by **Mindaláes** (specialized long-distance traders) who transported valuable goods like beads, cocoa, gold, and feathers on behalf of local rulers. Overall, though, agrarian production remained the core of the early Ecuadorian economy.



After the Incas conquered Ecuador in the 15th century (see *History and Myth*), they obtained tribute from chiefdoms in the form of forced labor, known as **mita**, which they often used to develop roads and other public infrastructure. In the 16th century, Spanish conquest reformed Ecuador's economy (see *History and Myth*). Spanish settlers allocated **haciendas** or **latifundios** (large estates, often comprising land seized from indigenous populations or left vacant due to disease) to certain **peninsulares** (Spaniards). These vast estates would become a dominant rural institution, influencing economic and political affairs for centuries. Unlike colonial Mexico, Colombia, and Peru, Ecuador did not become a major mineral producer. Instead, export-oriented cacao, sugarcane, banana, tobacco, coconut, and cotton plantations were the core of its colonial economy, and forced indigenous labor was the basis for production.

In the 17th century, manufacturing, especially textile production in the central highlands and shipbuilding in Guayaquil, became important components of the economy. However, when in the

18th century *peninsulares* began to import high-quality, price-competitive cloth from Europe, the textile industry collapsed.

Even after Ecuador gained independence in 1822 and separated from Colombia in 1830 (see *History and Myth*), remnants of the exploitative colonial economy dominated rural Ecuador, as **latifundistas** (estate owners) continued to exploit indigenous labor. Cash crops remained Ecuador's primary income source, and its economy was highly exposed to global price fluctuations, which made conditions unstable. In the mid-late-19th century, cacao production expanded significantly, and Ecuador's exports skyrocketed. Foreign currency flooded Ecuador's principal port city, Guayaquil, and its banking and merchant families became



extremely wealthy and influential (see *History and Myth*). During this period, Ecuador also implemented the sucre, which would remain the national currency until 2000.

Growth continued until the 1920s, when cacao income declined, hindered by foreign production and blight. The sucre devalued and the price of goods rose significantly. Institutional reforms in the mid-1920s, like the introduction of a central bank in 1926, yielded some improvements, but income from cacao continued to decline through the 1930s-40s. Replanting efforts helped the situation in the 1950s, but by then, bananas had replaced cacao as Ecuador's main export. A "banana boom" followed, spurring economic growth until the mid-1960s.

In 1967, substantial oil reserves were discovered in the Ecuadorian Amazon, and by 1972, oil exportation had begun via newly created state enterprises. As oil replaced bananas as Ecuador's primary export, the economy's traditional agrarian structure began to erode. In large part due to oil income, GDP expanded by an average of nearly 9%-per-year from 1972-81. The influx of oil wealth also reshaped the state's role in economic management. Government expenditures on the public payroll, imports, infrastructure, and other priorities increased dramatically, outstripping income growth. Throughout the 1970s,

the government ran a constant deficit supported by growing foreign indebtedness.

Declining oil prices, mounting interest rates, and the fallout of Mexico's 1982 debt default nearly caused debt and financial crises in Ecuador in the early 1980s. In response, the government implemented a controversial debt transfer scheme that allowed Ecuador to avoid default. A brief recovery, prompted by restored oil prices and market-oriented reforms, followed.

Oil revenue began to plummet in 1986 as prices dropped, while major earthquakes destroyed the country's only pipeline (see *Political and Social Relations*), halting exports for 6 months. Without its primary source of income, the government defaulted on its debt, and inflation reached 58% in 1988. The government instituted an emergency austerity plan, curtailed trade restrictions, and established a value-added tax to decrease expenditures and increase revenues. The fiscal conditions did not normalize until 1990-91, when the First Gulf War caused oil prices to rise again.

After growth returned to Ecuador in the early 1990s, the outbreak of war with Peru in 1995 forced the government into deficit as it spent heavily on military equipment. In 1997-98, a particularly harsh El Niño climatic phenomenon undermined agricultural production and destroyed infrastructure as oil prices began to fall. These factors caused the deficit to deepen, which, combined with a series of deficiencies in the banking system, sent Ecuador into crisis. The central bank intervened, lending extensively to the financial sector, which faltered. Almost half of Ecuador's banks closed or were nationalized. In 1999, the government declared a yearlong deposit freeze and defaulted on a portion of its restructured foreign debt. GDP declined by 7%, and inflation rose to 67%, creating a serious threat of hyperinflation.



To prevent hyperinflation, Ecuador swapped the sucre for the US dollar in 2000. The government implemented a series of laws to stabilize the new monetary system, and an agreement with

international lenders helped reduce its foreign debt. Dollarization successfully reined in inflation, which plummeted from its peak of 108% to an average of 4% from 2003-06. During the same period, GDP growth was restored, averaging 4.3% per year.

Between 2007-17, historically high oil prices and rising tax revenues substantially increased government income, as growth during this period closely followed oil prices. However, as with the boom of the 1970s, expenditures under President Rafael Correa were greater than national income, and foreign and domestic debt grew three and fourfold, respectively. Ecuador's mounting debt prompted President Lenín Moreno to accept a controversial loan from the International Monetary Fund in 2019 (see *History and Myth*).



Ecuador's economy was hard-hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. GDP per capita growth fell by over 10% in 2020 as domestic demand collapsed. Having recovered from the pandemic, today, Ecuador is Latin America's 8th largest economy, with GDP of \$121.6 billion as of 2024. In the same year, its unemployment rate was around 4.8%, low by global standards. However, its debt-to-GDP ratio is high at 56%, and despite Ecuador's natural resources, poverty and inequality are major issues. About 25% of Ecuadorians lived at or below the national poverty rate as of 2022. Further, most of Ecuador's workforce – over half as of 2024 – labors in the informal sector. In 2023, GDP-per-capita was about \$6,609, lower than neighboring Colombia (\$6,947) and Peru (\$7,906).

Services

Comprising around 60% of GDP and 53% of the labor force in 2024, the services sector is Ecuador's largest. Major subsectors are tourism, transport, and utilities.

Tourism: This subsector is one of Ecuador's most important, accounting for around 5% GDP. In 2023, some 1.5 million tourists visited Ecuador. Varied attractions include the unique ecosystems of the Galápagos Islands, the colonial grandeur of

Quito and Cuenca, high Andean peaks in the **Sierra** (central highlands), Incan ruins, and the Amazon.

Industry

The industrial sector accounts for about 27% of GDP and employs some 18% of residents. Major subsectors include oil, mining, and manufacturing.



Oil: As of 2023, Ecuador held about 0.5% of global oil reserves, totaling some 8.3 billion barrels. Production is centered in the Ecuadorian Amazon's **Oriente** (East) Basin. Petroecuador, the country's largest state-owned petroleum enterprise, is the subsector's dominant actor. Responsible for around 80% of national production, it also controls the country's exploration, refining, and marketing. Despite the firm's continued investment in productive infrastructure, including \$1.9 billion used to construct 117 wells in 2022, Ecuador's total output has declined by 14% since its peak in 2014. This decrease is largely due to mismanagement, aging fields, pipeline disruptions, and environmental concerns.

Mining: Ecuador has extensive mineral endowments, particularly lucrative gold, copper, and silver deposits. Mining exports generated some \$2.8 billion in 2022, representing a 33% increase from 2021 and rendering the subsector Ecuador's fastest growing. Further, forecasts suggest that minerals will become Ecuador's third largest export by 2025. Following indigenous-led protests that targeted the mining subsector in 2022, the government has limited the issuance of new mining concessions without community consultation.

Agriculture

Traditionally Ecuador's dominant sector, agriculture comprises around 8% of GDP and some 30% of the workforce. As of 2021, about 4% of Ecuador's land area is arable. The sector is heavily subsidized, with minimum prices protecting small producers.

Farming: Crops for export grown on Ecuador's coastal plains, like bananas and cacao, have long helped sustain the economy.

Today, Ecuador is the world's leading banana producer. It also remains a dominant cocoa-bean exporter, with its cocoa-export income increasing by 32% between 2022-23 amidst surging global prices. Coffee, palm oil, flowers, and rice are also grown for export. Nevertheless, subsistence farming remains prevalent among rural Ecuadorians, who mostly grow maize (corn), grains, soybeans, and vegetables on small plots of land.

Fish and Shrimp: Ecuador's Exclusive Economic Zone is home to some of the world's richest fishing grounds. The country's tuna purse seiner (a fishing vessel) and artisanal fishing fleets are the largest in the Eastern Pacific. Ecuador is also a world-leader in shrimp farming and ranks as the world's top exporter of white-fleshed shrimp.



Currency

Ecuador uses the US dollar (\$) as its currency, though it does issue Ecuadorian **centavo** (cent) coins. A dollar divides into

100 *centavos*, which are issued in 5 coins (1, 5, 10, 25, and 50) equivalent in value to their US counterparts. Both *centavos* and US-issued cent coins are in circulation.

Foreign Trade

Ecuador's exports, worth some \$36 billion in 2022, consisted of crude petroleum, crustaceans, bananas, refined petroleum, and processed fish, sold to the US (27%), China (17%), Panama (14%), Chile (4%), and Colombia (3%). Imports totaled about \$32 billion and consisted of refined petroleum, coal tar oil, cars, petroleum gas, and soybean meal from the US (26%), China (23%), Colombia (6%), Peru (4%), and Brazil (4%).

Foreign Aid

Ecuador is a net recipient of official development assistance, of which it received about \$376 million in 2022. The US provides Ecuador two main types of aid. The first is food assistance for provinces with large numbers of Venezuelan refugees (see *Political and Social Relations*), and the second is emergency preparedness and recovery support designed to enhance resilience in the event of sudden disasters, like earthquakes, floods, and landslides (see *Political and Social Relations*).

12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

Overview

Ecuador's physical and telecommunications infrastructures have improved in recent years but are underdeveloped in rural areas. Gang violence increasingly threatens the Ecuadorian media.

Transportation

Most Ecuadorians travel by bus in cities and over long distances. Bus fares vary by service type, though local routes are generally inexpensive. Taxis are common in major cities and can be hailed in person or by mobile app (Ecutaxi is the most popular service). Inaugurated in 2023, Quito's single-line metro system comprises 15 stations and 14 mi of track. Its 18 electric-powered trains carry some 400,000 passengers daily. The city of Cuenca has an electric tram system. While relatively few people own POVs like cars and trucks, travel by motorbike, bicycle, and foot is common. In recent years, the government has invested in developing bicycle infrastructure, particularly in Quito.



Roadways: Around 5,500 mi of Ecuador's more than 27,000-mi-long roadway network are paved. The network is densest in the central highlands and coastal regions and becomes sparse in the Amazon. The Ecuadorian portion of **La Carretera Panamericana** (the Pan-American Highway) is the country's primary North-South thoroughfare and is paved throughout. In a 2019 global assessment, Ecuador ranked 100 of 141 countries in road connectivity and 35 in quality of road infrastructure.

Railways: Long-distance passenger rail traffic was suspended in the 1990s after years of decline. In 2008, the government launched an initiative to refurbish sections of the historic Guayaquil-Quito line (first completed in 1908) for touristic use. Intermittent sections of track remained in service until 2020, when the government dissolved the state railway company. As of 2025, Ecuador does not have national rail transport.

Ports and Waterways: Most of Ecuador's more than 900 mi of inland waterways lack the size or volume to support navigation by large craft. However, riverine connections between eastern Ecuador and Brazil – primarily the Napo River, which is a major tributary of the Amazon River – facilitate oil transport by barge. Much of Ecuador's international trade passes through its three major seaports. The Port of Guayaquil is the largest by volume, handling about 90% of national import-export flow, and is Latin America's seventh largest as of 2025.

Airways: Around 104 of Ecuador's 317 airports have paved runways. Quito's Mariscal Sucre International Airport (UIO) is Ecuador's busiest. It handled about 5.3 million passengers in 2024 – some 1.3 million more than José Joaquín de Olmedo International Airport in Guayaquil (GYE). UIO is the primary hub for Ecuador's largest domestic carriers, LATAM Ecuador and Avianca Ecuador (subsidiaries of Santiago, Chile-based LATAM

Airlines Group and Colombia's Avianca S.A., respectively). Prior to its 2020 liquidation, TAME was Ecuador's flag carrier.



Energy

Ecuador has more than eight billion barrels of proven oil reserves, Latin America's third most after

Venezuela, Brazil. However, its oil output consistently falls below potential capacity due to mismanagement, underinvestment, and other issues. In 2024, Ecuador's total petroleum output was some 475,280 barrels per day (b/d), fourth in the region after Argentina. In 2024, petroleum products such as crude oil comprised about 3% of Ecuador's primary energy consumption, followed by hydroelectric power (34%), natural gas (2%), other renewables (0.7%), and coal (0.1%).

Media

Large privately-owned firms command major shares of the television, radio, and press industries. Though former President Lenín Moreno expanded press freedoms during his tenure (2017-21, see *History and Myth*), surging gang and drug-related

violence threatens journalists and other media actors (see *Political and Social Relations*). Journalistic self-censorship is widespread, especially in areas where drug gangs are highly active. Two high-profile episodes – the assassination of former investigative journalist and presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio in 2023 and an armed attack against TC Televisión's (a TV network) headquarters during a live broadcast in 2024 – highlight the dangers that Ecuadorian journalists face. Ecuador ranked 110 of 180 countries in a 2024 world press freedom index.

Print Media: It is a well-developed format in Ecuador. Guayaquil's *El Universo* and Quito-based *El Comercio* are the country's leading newspapers, with daily circulations of over 40,000 copies each. *The Cuenca Dispatch* is Ecuador's primary English-language newspaper.

TV and Radio: As of 2021, Ecuador has about 1,162 FM and 112 AM radio stations. Radio programming coverage in Spanish and indigenous languages (primarily Quechua – see *Language and Communication*) is diverse and includes news, music, and sports. ***La Voz de los Andes*** (The Voice of the Andes) is one of Ecuador's oldest radio transmitters. The television sector is dominated by national commercial actors like Ecuavisa, GamaTV, Teleamazona, and TC Televisión, and local stations are also available in most municipalities.



Telecommunications

In 2023, Ecuador had about 97 mobile subscriptions and 8 landlines per 100 inhabitants. The telecommunications industry is dominated by foreign-owned Claro, Telefónica, and Ecuador's National Telecommunications Corporation. Though coverage is consistent in cities, large gaps exist throughout the country. As of 2025, Ecuador has no roadmap for national 5G deployment.

Internet: About 73% of Ecuador's population were regular Internet users in 2023. Many Ecuadorians access the Internet via mobile phones. Ecuador had only 16 broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants in 2023.



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