Frozen summits and the fiery spirit of a 19th-century adventurer inspire a trek to Ecuador’s epic volcanoes

BY CHARLES RUNNETTE
am wide awake at 2:14 a.m., breathless, anxious, parched in a place of nightmares: the musky bottom bunk of a single-room refugio (montaintop hut), 13,419 feet up Ecuador’s Illiniza Sur volcano. A howling blizzard swits outside, but somehow 15 other climbers, our local guides, and a couple of stranded refugio staff—mine tiptoeing over sleeping bodies, boots, and poles, opening the hut to the storm, and pacing close to where the mules sound (mountain hut), 15,419 feet up Ecuador’s Iliniza Sur.

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**MY HUMBOLDT-INSPIRED QUEST** started out with plenty of promise and crisp Andean weather. In Quito I met up with mountain guide Oswaldo Friere. We took a 20-minute TelefériQo gondola ride up 2,717 feet, from the edge of the city to the base of Pichincha. Friere regaled me with stories of climbing Everest without oxygen.

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Having proved myself on Pichincha, I traveled with Friere beyond Quito, driving across lush vales, under azure sky and milky white altocumulus clouds, toward the dramatic cordilleras that Humboldt called the Avenue of the Volcanoes. Our destination: Cayambe, Ecuador’s third highest peak.

Along for the ride (and the climb): Friere’s 13-year-old daugh- ter, Nikita, who was part mountain goat. She demanded that I explain my Humboldt fascination. “What makes him so great?” she asked.

“Father of the modern ecology movement” sounded dull. “A man with many places, plants, and even part of the moon named after him” gave short shrift. I decided to sell her on Humboldt’s impact—the fact that his writings and drawings, particularly on this extraordinary corner of the New World, inspired game-changing accomplishments by scientists,
Andes anticipation: Climbers make their way up 19,347-foot Cotopaxi, one of Ecuador’s most active volcanoes. Alpacas (opposite) are among the well-adapted animals that roam Antisana Ecological Reserve, in the chilly central highlands.
poets, revolutionaries, and artists. Then I rattled off some big names I thought might impress her: Charles Darwin, Walt Whitman, Simón Bolívar, John Muir, and Frederic Edwin Church. On my phone I pulled up an image of Church’s masterwork, “Heart of the Andes.” A New York-based artist, Church painted his 10-foot-wide tour de force after his second South American pilgrimage to view his idol Humboldt’s Avenue of the Volcanoes. Nikita took a close look as I told her how, at the painting’s 1859 New York unveiling, “Heart of the Andes” became an art world sensation—with more than 12,000 people paying 25 cents each to gaze at it with opera glasses for a few minutes. Crowds in New York (and on the painting’s tour in London) lined up to be transported to this South American arcadia that Church depicted grandly with hanging vines, moss, tree ferns, red-breasted crows, passionflowers, budding orchids, flowering philodendrons, shimmering butterflies, a winding river, and snowy glaciers. After Mark Twain saw Church’s piece, he gushed to a friend, “You will never get tired of looking at this picture, but your reflections—your efforts to grasp an intelligible Something—you hardly know what—will grow so painful that you will have to go away from the thing, in order to obtain relief.”

Standing at the foot of a Cayambe glacier, I could see what Twain meant. The views are still exhaustingly magnificent. Born to a wealthy aristocratic Berlin family in 1769, Alexander von Humboldt could easily have stayed put in Prussia, as his mother wished, and enjoyed an extremely agreeable life in a modest mansion on the bucolic Tegeler See, spending time with his brother, Wilhelm, and confidant, Goethe. But Alexander’s mother died when he was in his 20s, leaving him and his brother a small fortune—Alexander’s portion of which he promptly spent on travel. After a few false starts, on June 5, 1799, just shy of his...
All the pretty horses: Wild steeds graze in Cotopaxi National Park near acclimatization center Hosteria Tambopaxi; Manuel Changoluisa (opposite) keeps chagra (cowboy) culture alive at his sod house at the base of Cotopaxi.
30th birthday, he set sail on an extraordinary five-year jour-
ney to the New World: modern-day Cuba, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, and the United States. He longed to see
everything worth seeing, learn everything worth knowing, and meet everyone interesting.

The tales of what he found along the journey changed the
way Europe saw the Americas and the way the world viewed
nature. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said of him and his writings,
"Humboldt was one of those great wonders of the world, like
Aristotle, like Julius Caesar... who appear from time to time, as
if to show us the possibilities of the human mind, the force and
range of the faculties—a universal man."

In 1802 Humboldt arrived in Quito overland from Cartagena, a
grueling 1,300-mile trip through the jungles of Colombia and the
foothills of the Andes. He remained in Quito and the surrounding
area for five months, before scaling every mountain in sight with
his team: Aimé Bonpland, his French botanist associate; José, his
manservant who helped with the scientific measurements; and
Carlos Montúfar, a handsome (“Adonis-like,” in many accounts)
young Ecuadorian aristocrat he befriended in Quito who went
on to become his companion for nearly a decade.

TO SUMMIT CAYAMBE, I joined Nikita and her dad’s Mountain
Madness glacier school for my first real mountaineering test
of the trip. At 18,996 feet, Cayambe has the odd distinction of
being the tallest point on the Equator and the only spot at 0º
with a year-round snowcap. After hours and hours of slowly
ice-axing up the steep glacier with only a few scary missteps
along the way, we stood atop Cayambe’s wall of ice and snow,
looking across to the other volcanoes, down to the clouds, and
even farther down to the tilled land and communities below—
the whole system of life in front of us. I suddenly appreciated
Humboldt’s desire to admire the world from on high. "There is
doubtless something solemn and imposing in the aspect of a
boundless horizon," he wrote.

A few days later, near Cotopaxi, the most picturesque of
Ecuador’s volcanoes, I met up with Jorge Pérez and his anthro-
pologist wife, María José Andrade, who run a tour company
and duo of charming haciendas called Tierra del Volcán that
promote conservation in the area. They were hosting a group
from a National Geographic Student Expedition when I sat down with them in their home, thatched-roof Hacienda El Porvenir for dinner by the fire.

Started in 1999 as a university project by Quito native Pérez, the company aims to preserve the natural resources of the area by creating lucrative jobs for the locals, as well as a market for the agricultural products and crafts produced by those they don’t employ—to help them understand that tourism can be a reason to be good stewards of their stunning patrimony. “We want everyone who lives in this beautiful place to understand there are great benefits to conservation,” Pérez said to me. “You don’t protect what you don’t know and won’t miss.”

The next day I jumped at the chance to head out on horseback with María José in the grasslands in the shadow of Cotopaxi. Both of us dressed in traditional (Ecuadorian cowboy) chagrás, we set off. People would tell us how the Inca revered the mountains. “These mountains belong to us but our sturdy, powerful horses do the climbing,” she told me. “You don’t protect what you don’t know and won’t miss.”

For a few minutes we sat quietly on a hilltop, watching a pair of Andean condor wheel overhead and feeling the connectedness Humboldt described in his writings. On a still clear day like that one, there seemed to place more silent on the planet. Disappointing my guide by telling him I didn’t want to attempt to summit Cotopaxi, I was reviled. A mountain is a force of nature; if I had learned anything on my Humboldt quest, it was not to defy nature. The great explorer himself had never reached the summit of Chimborazo. Humboldt by Humboldt, I turned back.

One week later, in Manhattan and missing the volcanoes, I trekked uptown to the Metropolitan Museum of Art where I ran into Charles Bunnell (right), founder of MakeMake Films, is currently working on a documentary in Tanzania.

According to Hacienda La Ciénega’s (left) history, Humboldt and his team stayed at this historic lodging when he carried out his study of Cotopaxi in 1802. The volcano is reflected in a window at nearby Chilcabamba Mountain Lodge (below). Just 1.5 hours from Quito, the lodge is a popular stay for travelers hiking Cotopaxi.

New York-based writer and filmmaker CHARLES BUNNETTE (@runnette), founder of MakeMake Films, is currently working on a documentary in Tanzania.

Travel Wise: Ecuador

HOW TO GO

U.S.-based outfitter Mountain Madness, which has longtime expertise operating in the country, leads treks to Ecuador’s volcanoes. Guides have experience on all of Ecuador’s peaks, as well as mountains in the Himalaya, Russia, and the Alps. mountainmadness.com

WHERE TO STAY

Casa Gangotena Before heading out to the Avenue of the Volcanoes, most travelers spend at least a couple of nights in Quito. Casa Gangotena, in the Old Town, is a 31-room restored mansion with sweeping rooftop views of Quito’s colonial center. casagangotena.com

Hacienda San Agustín de Callo This Cusco-style Inca palace, a former two-term president of Ecuador, Humboldt may or may not have visited the rooms here, but members of the French geodesic expedition that measured the roundness of the Earth in the 19th century definitely did. haciendasacallo.com

Masopi Lodge Outside Quito, in the opposite direction from the Avenue of the Volcanoes, this National Geographic Unique Lodge of the World is located in a cloud forest and appeals to anyone who loves rare orchids and amphibians. The open greenhouse ride through the canopy of the forest is alone worth the three-hour drive from the capital. And don’t miss the nighttime forest safari to see the most spectacular frogs, some of which such as the torrent-tailed Masopi frog can be found only here. maspolodge.com

Hacienda El Porvenir Right at the foot of Cotopaxi, this thatched-roof lodge enchants. The house can plan excursions for you in the area, a horseback ride around the most beautiful mountain Frederic Edwin Church ever painted, or a trip to the Avenue of the Volcanoes. haciendaporvenir.com

WHERE TO EAT

Zazu Gastronomic treats fill the evening’s meal at Zazu’s Zazu, which offers a seven-course tasting menu that highlights Andean grains and native potatoes and canoe-style (cay pay) cooking. zazuquito.com

Laboratorio

This may be the the coolest restaurant in Quito, where a rotating mix of local and international chefs show off their talents with fresh and innovative ideas and an ever-changing menu. laboratorio.net

Bandido Brewing

This creative class hangout in Quito’s La Tola neighborhood serves up artisanal pizza, local microbrews, and craft kombucha. bandidobrewing.com

GO WITH NAT GEO

Nat Geo Expeditions offers several itineraries in Ecuador, such as an eighteen-day “Amazon, Hot Springs & Volcanoes” tour. Highlights include soaking in the Papallacta hot springs, hiking in the rain forest, mountain biking, and a visit to Cotopaxi National Park. natgeotravel.com/explore; 888-966-8587

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AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2018

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