

RIDING

Above the Clouds

A close-up view of life at all elevations in the Ecuadorian Andes.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SHAWN HAMILTON

My favorite aspect of a riding vacation is getting a glimpse of the true culture and meeting the everyday people of a place. The Wild Andes Expedition ride with host Gabriel Espinosa of Hacienda La Alegria offered a close-up view of life in the Ecuadorian Andes. From small rides in the fertile Machachi valley to an overnight camp in a cloud forest, sure footed Criollo horses brought us to elevations of up to 14,000 feet and allowed us to see villages not accessible by any roads.



| Day One |

The Hacienda La Alegria, where the ride begins, was built by Gabriel's grandfather in 1911, and the Espinosa family still live there and operate an organic dairy farm. The 334-acre ranch boasts approximately 230 dairy cattle and 65 horses, including the geldings used for the rides and mares used for breeding.

"We start with the Ecuadorian Criollo for character and sure-footedness, then breed in Arabian for endurance, Uruguayan Criollo for strength, and the Andalusian for bigger bone structure," says Gabriel.

Our first warm-up ride is a few hours long, in close proximity to the *hacienda*. I am on Principe, a 6-year-old Paso Caminero, a gaited Criollo.

The morning light glistens through the towering eucalyptus, cypress and cedar trees as we ride along the hacienda's long cobblestone lane-way on our way to a local rodeo and open-air market, where colorful fruits unknown to us line tables. We get our first glimpse of a local delicacy called *cuy asado*, barbecued guinea pig on a stick, which none of us gringos have the courage to try.

Back at the hacienda, we share a delicious meal with Gabriel and Patty. We already feel like family.

| Day Two |

In order to gradually acclimate our bodies to the elevation, our next ride will take us from the hacienda at 9,500 feet up to 13,000 feet, towards the volcano Corazon, before descending into the cloud forest at 9,800 feet to sleep. My mount today is Chugo, a strawberry roan Criollo who is also gaited. We ride through the town of Aloag, about 30 miles south of Ecuador's capital city Quito, and enter the *páramo*, or high-altitude grasslands, beginning around 11,500 feet. Teeming with colorful lupines, bright red wild rose hips and blueberry bushes, it's the perfect place to stop for our picnic lunch.



Above: Colorful produce at the market in Aloag.

The afternoon climb continues until we reach our highest point, 13,000 feet, where we catch sight of our final destination for the day, Bomboli Cloud Forest. Our horses pick their way through the slippery narrow path until it widens to reveal a small, rustic house with orchids growing from the roof.

Ecologist Oswaldo Haro and his wife, Mariana, happily greet us with a warm cup of tea. The couple bought the abandoned house 35 years ago on 500 acres with the intention of preserving the diverse ecosystems. They still remain without electricity, run a small dairy farm and take in tourists interested in learning more about the area.

After a home cooked meal, we retire to our beds, which are thoughtfully equipped with hot water bottles to help soothe aching muscles from the day's ride.

| Day Three |

After a morning walking tour with Oswaldo, in which we learn the names of the surrounding flora and fauna, we say our goodbyes and mount up to head back down to the Machiachi valley. The air is damp and wet with thick fog.

We dismount to take a small hike through the forest to a charming waterfall. Potato fields spot the mountainsides as we descend into the valley and head back to the hacienda to rest up for tomorrow's journey.

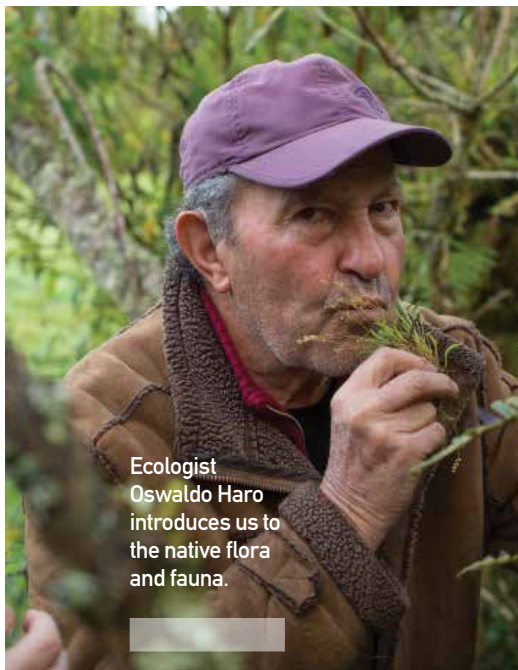




We pass many small farms like this one high up in the Andes.



It was an uphill trek to reach the Bombolí Cloud Forest at 13,000 feet.



Ecologist Oswaldo Haro introduces us to the native flora and fauna.



Riding out of the town of Sigchos.



Jorge welcomes us to Hosteria San Jose.

| Day Four |

On the first morning of our long trek, the rain has started to fall and the trail turns slippery. Rodrigo, the head *chagra* or wrangler, motions to us to dismount, tie the reins to the saddle, and let the horses go first down the ridge. At the bottom of the hill, we take refuge from the rain in a school and eat our lunch at child-sized desks.

After our break, we bask in the sun and take in the view of verdant valleys as we continue our ride above the clouds. Next, we descend into the town of Sigchos to soak in the hot tub and swim in the pool at the Hosteria San Jose. Our horses graze on its lush grass while we recharge.

| Days Five & Six |

The next few days are spent trekking in the high Andes. It appears that the difficulty of the terrain is directly proportional to the awe of the scenery. We traverse a combination of comfortably wide roads and narrow, steep trails that cling to the sides of mountain ridges.

Our treacherous paths reward us with breathtaking sights, such as the Quilotoa volcano and the turquoise waters of its crater lake. Lunches are spent in canyons eating cheese we bought at a local *queseria*.



Above: We set up camp in the high Andes on a farm, where the owner has graciously offered us shelter.



Ride host Gabriel crosses a river on the trek into the high Andes.

We spend one night at the stone-walled farm of Angel Parra, a 72-year-old man who has graciously erected a tarp over a straw floor so we can set up our tents there. We use his utility shed as a kitchen, and listen to him tell stories as we trade moonshine for rum shots. Not your average tourist spot.

On the trails, we pass people farming on steep patches of fertile mountainsides, and are greeted with a wave and smile. In an area inaccessible to cars and unvisited by tourists, we pass houses with straw roofs supported by large bricks of mud, manure and grass.

We climb to reach 14,000 feet and stop to take in the breathtaking 360-degree views, including a valley that goes to the sea, the clouds just starting to blow in below us.

We follow a small canal that carries water from the Chimborazo volcano at 20,000 feet to the towns below. My companion, Ali, gives out stickers to the children.

We end the day in the hot springs at Salado for a warm soak and a steak dinner under the stars thanks to Rodrigo.

| Day Seven |

The morning ride takes us through more dairy farms. The clouds descend over Chimborazo volcano, teasing us with a slight view of its peak as we take long canters down the Rio Colorado, a red dirt trail.



We spot herds of *vicuñas*, a close relative of the llama prized for its wool, and hear their funny high-pitched call. The night is spent in the Posada de la Estacion, a hacienda owned by mountain climber Rodrigo Donoso, facing the Chimborazo canyon.

| Day Eight |

It's our last day. We pass through a town having their Saturday soccer game. A whistle blows, the game stops, and we ride through the middle of their field.

Gone are the clouds and wet air. The sun beats down on us. When we step out of the woods, our driver extraordinaire, Jorge, greets us with champagne.

Our expedition has come to an end. We have traversed narrow roads, slept on dirt floors and seen and experienced more than the average tourist to Ecuador. And while the scenery was breathtaking, our guides and the people we met along the way will be what we remember most fondly. 📷

SHAWN HAMILTON is a writer and photographer based in Canada.


Clockwise from top left:
Riding into the high Andes:

The Rio Colorado trail offers views of the volcano high above:

Shawn and Principe:

A woman gathering grass for her Guinea pigs.



A man wearing a red poncho and a hat is riding a brown and white horse up a grassy trail. In the background, there is a large, calm crater lake surrounded by dark, rocky mountains under a cloudy sky.

Rodrigo, the head *chagra* (wrangler), rides up the trail by the crater lake at Quilotoa volcano.