

# GoodLife



Objects of desire  
Page 64

Travel  
Page 66



A Tren Crucero locomotive at Chimbacalle Station, Ecuador.



DESTINATION

# The holy rail

Running from capital to coast, Ecuador's luxury trains fulfil the dreams of a long-departed president. Words and pictures by **Daniel Allen.**



As the morning rush-hour traffic inches along outside, horns blaring, all is quiet inside the marshalling yard of the Chimbacalle Station, in Quito, Ecuador. Against the buffers in one corner sits an immaculate steam engine, almost toy-like in its black and cherry-red livery.

Closer to the curved platform, pristine carriages are lined up behind a dormant diesel locomotive. The atmosphere is sleepy, belying the fact that this is a terminus of the world's most exciting new rail project.

After a four-year, multimillion-dollar renovation, Ecuador's capital-to-coast railway line reopened this year. Hauled by a mixture of restored steam engines and diesel locomotives, luxury tourist trains (known as Tren Crucero) now run all the way from Quito, high up in the Andes, to lowland Guayaquil, on the Pacific coast. Passengers spend each night in a high-end hacienda, with numerous stops to sample the culture during the 450-kilometre, four-day journey.

An hour after leaving Quito, the Tren Crucero approaches the historic town of

Machachi in sedate fashion. Majestic views of snow-capped Cotopaxi, the first of a succession of towering peaks known as the Avenida de los Volcanes ("avenue of the volcanoes"), can be best appreciated from the observation car at the end of the train, which is furnished with sofas and has a covered viewing platform.

Passing in the shadow of such smouldering giants as Cotopaxi and Chimborazo, and reaching a maximum elevation of 3,600 metres, this is a breathtaking rail journey in more ways than one.

As we pass through towns – frequently down the middle of streets – it seems as though everyone who lives in them is turning out to pay rapturous respects to what has become a source of pride for many Ecuadorians.

"With much of the line out of order for so long, these people haven't seen many trains," explains onboard guide Maria Garces. Constructed in the late 19th century, many sections of the line closed after years of neglect and landslides in the 1990s. "The sight of a locomotive coming down the road here is

as novel for them as it is for you, especially the children."

**SOMETHING IS** clearly afoot as our train slips into the town of Guamote. Groups of people in bright red and midnight blue ponchos hurry down the side of the track, clutching huge sacks of potatoes. A pig is dragged on a rope, squealing in protest. As the carriages come to a halt beside a central plaza, the air is redolent with the smell of food and livestock, and a loudspeaker proclaims cure-alls in chattering Kichwa (the indigenous language of Ecuador).

Thursday is clearly market day in Guamote. Every week, thousands of indigenous *campesinos* (farm workers) pour into town to trade cows, guinea pigs, llamas, vegetables, wool, handicrafts, clothing, tools and produce.

The only option when faced with such a vibrant, colourful and wonderfully chaotic affair is to wade right in. Streets and alleyways radiating from the main square are piled high with produce from the surrounding countryside, and vendors hawk everything from empana-

das and fresh loaves of bread to *hornado* (roasted pork) and piles of beans. Camera memory cards are filled rapidly as locals offer a mixture of shy smiles and toothy grins to the inquisitive gringos.

Many transactions at Guamote market are carried out by barter – very little cash seems to be involved. Hagglng over guinea pigs, swine, cows and sheep is undertaken in a seemingly harmonious manner, with each party walking away from their transaction with a smile and a four-legged acquisition.

The most thrilling part of a Tren Crucero journey undoubtedly comes on the third day out of Quito, when the train tackles a legendary stretch of track known as the Nariz del Diablo ("devil's nose"). Negotiating a dramatic series of switchbacks, the train clings to a vertical mountain face as it drops more than 500 metres in less than 13 kilometres.

This hair-raising section of line is crucial to the Ecuadorian railway system, connecting the coast with the high Andean plateau of the hinterland.

"It was by far the biggest engineering challenge facing those extending the line





from the Pacific,” says Quito-based tour guide Analia Arrata. “The mountain’s shape and the death toll it exacted on the workers are what earned this section of the railway its macabre moniker.”

Alausi town, the upper starting point of the Devil’s Nose, has benefited from the rebirth of the railway. The renovated train station is a hive of activity before each departure and arrival, playing host to dozens of souvenir stalls, while the station cafe does a brisk trade in cappuccinos.

As the train wends its way out of Alausi station – past pastel-painted houses – the sound of its horn reverberates in the crisp morning air and the arms of *brakeros* (brakemen) rise and fall rhythmically as each curve in the track is safely passed; arms up on approach and down again once a derailment black spot has been cleared.

Clatter-clatter go the carriages as the

silvery snake of the Guasuntos river appears below. Passengers rush to the observation car to gawp at the drop. The train rounds a huge bend to reveal the valley of the Chanchan, another of the many rivers that scour their way off the Andean plateau towards the Pacific. Then, suddenly, we’re slowing – brakes squealing – and the train reverses back down the line.

It continues to zigzag its way back and forth until it reaches the valley floor and the station of Sibambe. Here, the vegetation is lush and the temperature several degrees warmer than in Alausi.

By the fourth day, cloud forest has morphed into verdant plantations of banana, sugar cane, cocoa and rice.

A steam locomotive pulls us over the last stretch of track into the Eloy Alfaro Station, in Duran, which serves the city of Guayaquil, Ecuador’s largest and most populous city, and its main port.

Compared to more conservative Quito, Guayaquil has a distinct “Caribbean” soul; foreigners are warmly received, tropical beats rule and the seafood is a must.

And it is in this welcoming city that our journey ends.

**“WE HAVE RECUPERATED** not only the most difficult railway in the world, but also the most beautiful,” said Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa upon arriving at a gleaming Chimbacalle Station in 2010.

Anyone who travels on the route from capital to coast today will surely find it hard to disagree.

Former Ecuadorean president Eloy Alfaro, father of the country’s railway system and the man after whom Duran’s station is named, once wrote: “My dream, my delirium, my sole programme, can all be distilled into one solemn word: Railway.”

Just over a century later, his dream is back on track.

**Getting there:** United Airlines/All Nippon Airways (code-share) fly from Hong Kong to Tokyo, from where United ([www.united.com](http://www.united.com)) flies on to Houston. Daily United flights connect Houston to the Mariscal Sucre International Airport, in Quito.

**Clockwise from top left:** Mount Chimborazo, as seen from the Tren Crucero and across the town of Riobamba; a view of the perilous Devil’s Nose; local children offer a warm welcome; a woman en route to Guamote market; a traditional dancer in costume; the Tren Crucero’s observation car.