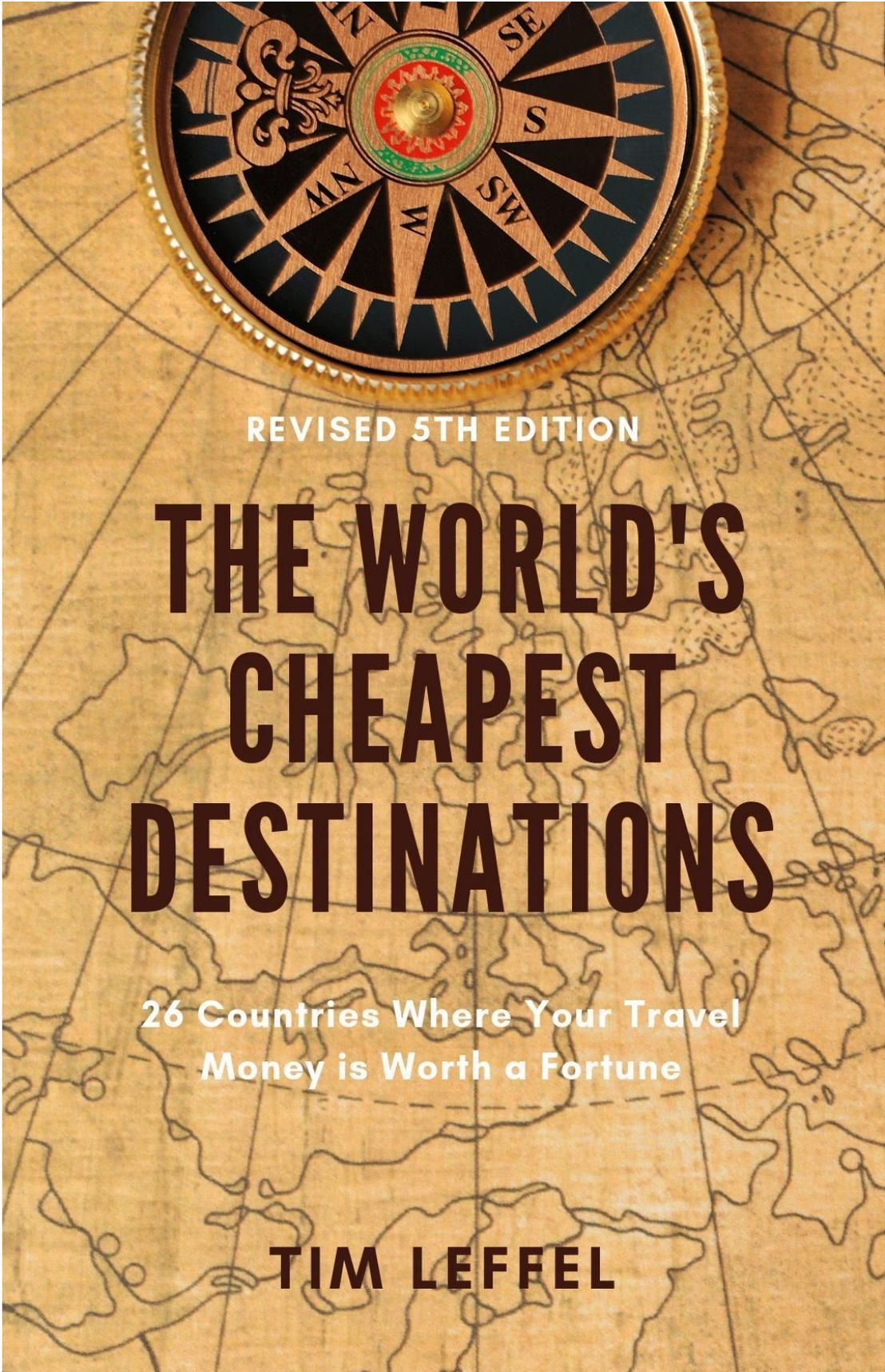


Sample Chapter

The World's Cheapest Destinations – 5th Edition

By Tim Leffel



REVISED 5TH EDITION

THE WORLD'S CHEAPEST DESTINATIONS

26 Countries Where Your Travel
Money is Worth a Fortune

TIM LEFFEL



Ecuador

It won't be a bargain to visit Ecuador's main draw—the Galapagos Islands. They are a fantastic experience you can't get anywhere else, but are a real budget buster, equivalent to months of travel on the mainland even if you go with the cheapest tour company. Save it for when you've got a few thousand dollars tucked away to spend on vacation. The rest of the country, however, is one of the best values in the Americas.

Ecuador is known as a good first stop for people coming to South America. This is partly because it has historically been a calm place to visit (in contrast to intermittent flare-ups in neighboring countries), and also because you can get to anywhere in a day from the capital, Quito. It's also downright cheap. All prices are in U.S. dollars, so there's never any worry about currency fluctuations if you're coming from the U.S. This keeps inflation low and prices stable.

It shares one similarity with many neighbors, however: Ecuador is blessed with an impressive variety of natural attractions. Massive mountains, Amazonian jungle, beaches, and colonial towns are all here. This small country also boasts one of the highest concentrations of volcanoes in the world.

Quito looks a bit better each year and it's worth spending more time here than in La Paz or Lima. Lots of restoration money has poured into Old Town and much of it is gleaming. It's a pleasant and relatively safe area filled with cafés and evocative hotels.

Atacames and other towns along the coast offer a mellow Ecuadorian beach vacation, with the requisite thatched roof beach bars, drinks served in coconuts, and salsa parties at night. You can head out to the fringes of this scene and find quieter and cheaper abodes if you'd like. There are some beautiful secluded beaches tucked along other locations on the coast, especially in the Los Frailes nature reserve, but most take some work to get to. Montañita is a popular surf spot with cheap lodging and food. You can get a two-hour private surfing lesson for \$15 or so.

The next best thing to the Galapagos is to arrange a boat trip out to the protected Isla de la Plata, part of Machalilla National Park. Some agencies in the nearest town, Puerto Lopez, offer packages with snorkeling. This island offers a glimpse at some of the same creatures you'd find in the Galapagos, as well as some great whale watching during a few months of the year.

The market in Otavalo is on the “must see” list for visitors to Ecuador and is often thronged with tour groups. It’s a real market for locals, however, so apart from having a good souvenir selection, it also offers a glimpse at how business is transacted here. If you stick around a while, you’ll see that tradition still rules here and many people wear the outfits of their village, with a unique pattern. Besides, it’s widely known that prices rise as soon as the tour buses pull in, and then fall as they depart. Spend the night here or in nearby Cotacachi to see a different side.

Cuenca is the country’s cultural center and probably has more foreign residents than any city its size in South America. Lots of travelers and expatriates are lured by the weather, the pace, and the beauty. Rents here are easily half or less what you would spend in your home country, so Cuenca pulls in a lot of retirees looking to stretch their funds.

Baños has long been another popular stop, with its hot springs, pleasant cafés, dramatic mountain views, and permanent spring climate. The same for Vilcabamba, which is known as the longevity capital.

Just be advised that this is not a great destination for wild nightlife and home cocktail parties. Ecuador has some of the highest import duties and highest sin taxes of any country in the Americas. Any imported alcohol has such hefty taxes that the price is double or more what you would pay at home. Stick to the local hooch and save your wine cravings for Argentina. This sting is balanced out a little with the subsidized fuel costs: a gallon of gasoline is less than \$2.

A few studies have pegged Quito as one of the most affordable international real estate markets in the world and Cuenca is constantly cited as a great international living value. Spending at least \$25,000 on real estate gets you a residency permit. Getting a maid is so cheap that very few expats clean their own house and some residents report monthly expenses under \$800 a month—total. Medical care is good and affordable.

If you don’t like the weather where you are in Ecuador, just change altitude. You climb higher to cool off or head to the beach or jungle to get warm.

Accommodation:

There are a few dozen hostels scattered around the country, with prices for a bed averaging \$5 to \$9. You can nearly always find a basic hotel room for \$10-\$15 though, even in Quito, so the hostels are not such a find if you’re a couple. In many smaller towns it’s possible to find a double room with a shared bath for under \$10.

Mid-range hotels are generally a good deal in Ecuador. Nice places with a private bath and breakfast start at around \$20 for a double and for \$40 to \$60 you can usually find a beautifully appointed hotel room in an interesting building. You can often get a large family suite for \$50-\$75. Except at the cheap places, you’ll be hit with a service charge and tax, which combined can be as much as 25% of the room charge.

The beaches in Ecuador are a good deal, with rooms on par with the prices in the rest of the country.

Top hotels here are a bargain by international standards. Of the 108 hotels in Baños, only four will top \$100 a night. Only the very best hotel in Cuenca consistently gets more than \$100 a night double.

The price of a jungle tour is in large part dependent on the quality and relative luxury of the lodge(s) you'll be staying in. They range from bamboo huts with a mattress to fancy eco-lodges for several hundred dollars a night per person (full board). Going for the very cheapest option, however, will often end up getting you exactly what you paid for, so do some research and choose well.

Food & Drink:

Ecuador has not really been known historically as a foodie destination, but as in Peru, many travelers are impressed with their meals here and chefs are reconstructing traditional Andean dishes to wow visitors. Some tour companies are even offering gastronomy tours of a week or more. Besides being able to grow nearly anything in this varied climate, the Ecuadorans also make great cheese, have plenty of seafood, and grow some of the world's best coffee and cocoa beans. Be sure to sample some good chocolate, especially the more experimental options coming out of here.

Soups are a specialty in Ecuador. Locro soup, made with cheese, avocado, and potato, is a popular soup, as is one made with fish and vegetables and another with beef rib meat and potatoes or corn.

Aji (hot sauce) is a staple on most tables and many restaurants and families make their own. Without it the food is seldom spicy. Pastries are cheap and plentiful.

Vegetarians will find plenty of choices throughout the country since the locals really eat their veggies here. Where tourists gather, you can find more creative endeavors that don't involve meat. Fish is plentiful on the coast, mostly served as ceviche. Avoiding red meat is no sweat in Ecuador: it's not part of the daily diet outside the big cities.

Excellent fruit juices abound and are usually the best choice to drink—reasonably priced, seasonal, and healthy. Finding good coffee is getting easier each year and on my last trip I rarely got a bad cup. If you drink it black, note that the traditional Andean method is to boil coffee down to almost a syrup and then add lots of milk. So leave room for plenty of hot water otherwise. Beer isn't too expensive if you stick with local brands (\$1.15 in a store for a half liter, \$1.50 to \$2.50 in a basic bar/restaurant) and some local liquor brands are reasonable. Avoid the imports though, which are taxed at more than 100%. Prices are expensive by home standards, even for Chilean wine, so a bottle of duty-free whiskey or wine is a great gift for a local.

A set meal in a local eatery can be as little as \$1.50, including soup, main course, and dessert. You can find street snacks like corn pancakes and grilled corn for a few cents. If you don't mind eating unidentified animal organs, you can get all kinds of street food or market meals for a dollar or less. In restaurants geared to backpacking foreigners, you'll pay \$2.50 to \$7 for a meal, but this is usually several courses.

If you're self-catering, this is where the real bargains are. Excellent fruits and vegetables are in season all year, various breads are inexpensive, and prices are a fraction of what you pay at home for eggs, meat, and cheese.

Transportation:

First, there's the price of gasoline: heavily subsidized from local production and (historically) gifts from Venezuela, it is still less than two dollars a gallon. So transportation is never going to be a big expense.

Buses are cheap, frequent, and ubiquitous. At times it may seem that everyone is on his or her way to somewhere. Local buses in Quito are a mere 25¢ and one out to the suburbs won't top 50¢.

For intercity ones, you can often stumble into a city bus terminal, say a single word (your destination), and be on your way a few minutes later. Some jingling dollar coins will likely cover your fare.

In theory, you can reach anywhere in the country in a day, but this assumes your bus doesn't break down and the mountainous roads don't wash out. For the sake of your long legs and comfort, take a "gringo bus" for long hauls. If a local bus is all that's available, it'll only be about a dollar an hour no matter where you're going. A doubling of that for a better bus is well worth it.

The government spent a fortune on train track repairs as a big infrastructure project, which is admirable, but taking a train is really a novelty trip for the ride's sake more than a means of transportation since the routes are rather limited. They're really tourist excursions rather than transportation. You can now get from Quito almost all the way to Guayaquil though if you're willing to pay an excursion price and the "Devil's Nose" ride is something you won't find anywhere else. The scenery is worth the trip no matter which route you're on.

Plane rides can shave off a lot of time. While you'll pay more than the locals do to get to the Galapagos (budget \$400 or so round trip), prices are equal for all other routes. Flights are short too: Guayaquil from Quito takes less than an hour and is usually under \$100 one-way. To Cuenca is shorter and is \$75 or less.

The roads improved massively over the past decade. Half the reason the longest-term president the country has ever had enjoyed such an unprecedented high approval rating was all the road projects that got finished. Renting a car is still not a great idea, so it's better to hire a car and driver for the day for \$35 to \$70.

A taxi ride in Quito or Guayaquil will seldom top \$5 except from the airport. In smaller towns your tab is likely to be a couple dollars. Local bus rides are almost free and the more comfortable "executive" local bus will frequently be only about 10¢ to 15¢ more than the regular option.

Cuenca may have a city rail line by the time you read this, but the opening has been postponed four times now over many years, even though it's only 11 kilometers long. The fare should be 35¢ when it's finally operational.

What Else?

- Ecuador is not short on heart pumping adventure options. Around the coastal town of Crucita, you can take tandem paragliding or hang-gliding jaunts, or get certified to fly solo with a five-day course. You can also set up a combined rafting/jungle trek adventure in the East Andes or take a mountain biking trip where you only ride downhill!
- In the "I'd be remiss if I didn't mention it" department, some people look up a local shaman, drink a brew made with some (legal) Ayahuasca vine, and are tripping out for a good 12 hours straight. Sometimes the native San Pedro cactus plant is used instead. If this is your scene, bring a friend you trust and head to Vilcabamba. Or ask around elsewhere. It's accepted as a cleansing ritual and is no secret.

- You'll get socked on the airport departure tax here, but it's usually included in your flight ticket now. Most nationalities don't have to pay a visa fee, which is a big advantage over Bolivia.
- Jungle tours are roughly \$40 to \$75 per day each for most companies when it's booked locally, including food and lodging. At the top end, figure on several times that to experience the 5,000 acres of Sacha Lodge, Selva Jungle Lodge, or Napo Wildlife Reserve.
- Staying well-groomed won't cost much: get a haircut and manicure for under \$5 total.
- Bring an unlocked cell phone and get cheap calls. A SIM card is commonly \$3 to \$4 if you spend the equivalent amount in pre-paid minutes. Phone cabins and Internet cafes are dirt-cheap otherwise.
- What to buy: thick woolen sweaters, ponchos, dolls in traditional outfits, leather goods, quality chocolate. Don't be fooled by the name: this is the home of the Panama Hat.
- What you can get for a buck or less: lunch at a market stall, four city bus rides, a bootleg CD or DVD, two ice cream cones or popsicles, 3 to 4 packages of crackers, a box of herbal teabags, a kilo of sugar, a loaf of bread, 10 eggs, a glass of fresh juice, two coffees, admission to some museums, a bouquet of fresh flowers, a half-gallon of diesel fuel, enough bananas to feed your whole guesthouse.