

Metropolitan Touring, Investing in Ecuador's Environment and Communities

Long before the now-familiar phrases “sustainable tourism” and “responsible tourism” entered the travel vocabulary, Metropolitan Touring recognized that investing in its destinations was not only a wise strategy for business success but also the right thing to do. With nearly six decades of operation in its home country of Ecuador and recent expansion to include tours in Columbia, Argentina, Chile and Peru, Metropolitan Touring has placed its environmental and socially responsible policy at the heart of its business.



“We are constantly seeking to have a positive impact in the communities we work with, as well as preserving the integrity of ecosystems,” says Paulina Burbano de Lara, President of Metropolitan Touring (metropolitan-touring.com).

In the 1960s, MT pioneered travel to the Galápagos Islands, an environment that is among the most fragile and unique in the world. Concern for the effects of human activity in the islands led to the creation of the Fundacion Galapagos-Ecuador (fundaciongalapagos.org) whose focus has been on garbage recycling, coastal clean-up and education of the local population in environmentally-friendly practices. To date six other tour companies operating in the Galapagos have joined the effort.

These Galapagos initiatives have offered a huge counter-measure to the potential negative presence of people (an estimated 150,000 visitors annually and 30,000 local inhabitants) in an isolated environment where garbage and other pollutants must be shipped 800 km/500 miles back to the Ecuador mainland for processing. Underscoring the urgency of the Fundacion's commitment, 3.5 tons of garbage were collected in 2012 around the four inhabited islands of the archipelago, and coastal clean-up efforts alone amounted to over 116 kilograms/256 pounds of garbage removed from shorelines. On a more global level, Metropolitan Touring shares with all its guests how their impact is being minimized and enlists their cooperation with such actions as using only one plastic water bottle during their stay, refilling it from a master container.



The company's presence in the second largest nature reserve in the world remains strong with a trio of full-service expedition cruise vessels – the MV Santa Cruz and yachts Isabela II and La Pinta , as well as ownership of the Finch Bay Eco Hotel (finchbayhotel.com) on Santa Cruz Island, only a 15-minute walk from the world-renowned Charles Darwin Scientific Station and 30 minutes by vehicle into the highlands where giant tortoises roam in the wild. Rather than import everything from the mainland, the company grows a diversity of organic fruit, vegetables and herbs in an extensive hotel garden and locally sources as many menu items as are available. Finch Bay is also the only hotel in the archipelago with a biological sewage treatment plant, and won recognition as South America's Leading Green Hotel at the 2012 World Travel Awards.

Back on the Ecuadorian mainland, the two newest members of the Metropolitan Touring family are demonstrating equally deep respect for nature, cultural communities and the country's heritage. Unveiled in 2012, the urban jewel in the family's crown is a 31-room boutique hotel in the historic heart of the nation's capital, Quito, the highest capital city in the world and the first city core to be declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1978.

Reflecting the fascination of the entire historic district which is one of the largest, least-altered and best-preserved in the Americas, the meticulous restoration and antique furnishing of the Spanish colonial private mansion, Casa Gangotena (casagangotena.com) has been a labor of love over several years. In conjunction with a nearby museum, the hotel pays for the daily cleaning of the Plaza San Francisco and the adjacent street. In addition, it is involved in neighborhood projects focusing on the value of heritage and traditions, and developing "life-seeing" walking tour routes (caminosdesanroque.com) for visitors to meet local artisans and merchants and experience their lives and ways.

Also brand new in the portfolio is Mashpi Lodge (mashpilodge.com) 2.5 hours drive east of Quito in a private Andean rainforest reserve brimming with biodiversity. Built and operated to best sustainable practices, the spectacular lodge was assembled as much as possible before being transported to the site in order to reduce the impact on the forest. The project has financed the employment of a resident biologist who, together with his local team, has carried out extensive research in the reserve since 2010, identifying new species and creating lists of birds, insects, mammals and reptiles. A nearby science station, also funded by the Mashpi project, is now offering an international volunteer program.

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A hideaway in the clouds located on a high plateau, the Mashpi Lodge and its projects are a source of

local employment and knowledge transfer for local communities. The lodge intends that 80% of its staff come from the local area after the initial start-up period. Guiding in Mashpi is led by the best naturalist guides in the area who expertly convey the forest's biodiversity and its importance to the world.

Key to Metropolitan Touring mission are five pro-active phrases that clearly speak to investing in each iconic destination where it has a presence in Ecuador: promote a culture of learning and commitment to environmental issues; reduce the use of non-renewable resources, solid waste and pollution; execute programs and projects to support social development and environmental protection; motivate suppliers to develop sustainable practices; and invest in specialized technology assuring the lowest level of environmental impact. It's no wonder that Metropolitan Touring won Conde Nast Traveler's World Savers Award in 2008 and that it remains a model for operators investing in destinations valued by all who experience them.

By Alison Gardner

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