

## **CUENCA, ECUADOR**

The cobblestone streets, marble buildings and towering cathedrals make Cuenca, Ecuador stand out as a “cultural heritage city of humanity.” The center of the city is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Trust site because of its historical buildings

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuenca,\\_Ecuador](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuenca,_Ecuador)). Cuenca is known for beautiful landscapes, delicious food and handicrafts. It’s also known as the “Athens of Ecuador.” Many notable writers, philosophers, artists and poets were born in Cuenca.

Despite being a large and modern city, Cuenca still maintains its old traditions with colonial style buildings, hand-woven Panama hats and numerous quaint markets.



### History

Cuenca, the third largest city in Ecuador is the capital of the province Azuay. It has a population of about 400,000 people. It’s located in the Andes Mountains about 8,200 feet above sea level. It was originally a

Cañari settlement known as Guapondéleg, which means “an area as large as heaven” in the Cañari language. It’s believed that it was founded around 500 AD. The Cañari language is now extinct, but some places in Ecuador have their original Cañari names. Many street and river names come from this language.

Long before the Spanish arrived, the Incas conquered Guapondéleg after a bitter struggle. Shortly after the Incas occupied Guapondéleg, the Inca commander, Tupac Yupanqui, ordered his people to construct a grand city to challenge the Inca capital of Cuzco. They renamed it Tomebamba, which means “River Valley of Knives” because the city is divided by four rivers: Tomebamba, Yanuncay, Tarqui and Machángara. Stories were relayed to the Spanish of golden temples and other wonders, but when the Spaniards finally found the legendary city, only ruins remained.

In 1557, the Spanish founded Cuenca and called it “Santa Ana de los Cuatro Ríos de Cuenca.” Cuenca’s population grew after roads were cut through the Andes. It has modernized a lot, but it still remains a main cultural and economic center of Ecuador.

### Tourism

Cuenca is a perfect place to escape from the hustle and bustle of busy city life. It maintains its cultural pride and heritage while hosting several small and large businesses. It’s a more conservative and tranquil city and is the city of churches and cathedrals. It has 52 churches inside the city limits dating back to the 16th and 17th centuries.



Cuenca is the center of Artesanía in Ecuador. There are many museums, art galleries and markets where you can find high-quality Panama Hats, leather jackets, ceramics, jewelry, embroideries and clothing.

Baños, just 15 minutes from Cuenca is a popular location for swimming in geothermally heated pools. The water might look cloudy but it's because of all the minerals in it!

Inside the city limits, there are a few places to see the preserved ruins from the Incan Empire. However, just 60 miles from Cuenca, are the well-known ruins of Ingapirca (above, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuenca%2C Ecuador](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuenca%2C_Ecuador)) where you can see Incan ruins on top of ancient Cañari ruins. It's the northern most fortress-temple of the Incas and is the most important archeological site in Ecuador. The word "Inca" is a mispronunciation given by the Spanish to the word "Inga" which is what the Incas were originally called.

### Cuenca Festivals

April 10-13 is the celebration of the Founding of Cuenca. There is a parade on Good Friday and every two years they hold an international art competition. The competition lasts for about four months.

November 3rd is Cuenca's Independence Day, their biggest and most important fiesta of the year—the Cuencanos love to celebrate their holidays! During this time, you can see street theaters, art exhibitions, tons of dancing, circuses and many other events.