

The plaza and monastery of San Francisco form the centrepiece of Quito



Living history

Aimée Dowl walks the cobblestone streets of the well-preserved Ecuadorian capital

SPANISH CONQUISTADORS expected a fight when they marched on Quito in 1534. Suited in heavy armor and bearing a giant cross, they had slogged up the great Andes mountains to storm this northern outpost of the Incan empire. When they arrived, all that they found was rubble. Knowing that formidable Spanish forces were on their way, the Incan general Rumiñahui burned the city to the ground instead of letting it fall into the hands of his enemies.

Out of these ashes, a Spanish city was born, high on the slopes of the active volcano, Pichincha. Over the centuries, Franciscans, Jesuits and other orders constructed more than thirty convents, churches, and chapels in a small and

compact area now known as Old Town.

Declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1978, Old Town is considered one of Latin America's best preserved historic centres. But it is also a place of living history, where people pass their time as they have for centuries. Old Town's cobblestone streets still bustle with nuns in pristine white vestments, indigenous women loaded down with fruit and flowers, and vendors selling everything under the equatorial sun.

Old Town's centrepiece is the Church and Monastery of San Francisco, which began construction in 1535 on top of the charred palace of the Incan ruler Huayna-Capac. The church exemplifies the Quito School of art, with a geometrical Moorish ceiling, Spanish Baroque flourishes, and paintings in Italian, Flemish, and indigenous styles.

Some say that Huayna-Capac's ghost roams the monastery, and a Quito legend immortalizes the church's architect, Francisco Cantuña. Fearing that he would never complete the

INFORMATION

Tourist information

www.QUITO.COM.EC

Best times to go

Quito is the "land of eternal spring," so it is good to go year-round

Cost of staying

₵ ₵ ₵ ₵ ₵

Recommended read

Quito, 1599: City and Colony in Transition

by Kris Lane (*University of New Mexico Press, 2002*)

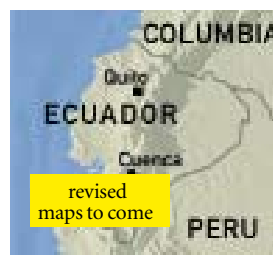
massive temple, Cantuña supposedly sold his soul to Lucifer for help. A thousand demons topped off the job in one night, but at dawn Cantuña got cold feet and pleaded with the Virgin for salvation. When the Devil came for his soul, a single cornerstone was missing and Cantuña was spared.

His saviour, the Virgin of Quito, remains the city's guardian. From a pedestal atop the Panecillo, a hill shaped like a "little breadloaf" on the edge of Old Town, a towering 45-meter statue of a winged Virgin hovers like an angel over the streets below.

Hopefully she is keeping an eye on Plaza Grande. Even though it is hemmed in by the Cathedral of Quito and the Archbishop's palace, said to be another place where the devil has dealings. It was here that President García Moreno was stabbed to death before a crowd in 1875, and where Bishop Checa y Barba drank poisoned wine at Holy Friday mass in

1877. Plaza Grande is seeing calmer days now, and it is mostly a place for Quiteños to gather and get a shoeshine.

Two blocks down, the Santa Catalina Convent has housed cloistered nuns since 1594. For generations, the sisters here -- conquistadors' daughters,





The largely reconstructed Roman theatre at Sabratha

president's widows and heiresses – came only from the most notable families. Nowadays the convent is more diverse, but it is still closed to the public. You can, however, buy ceremonial wine, infusions, and herbs from the nuns through a little revolving door that keeps them hidden.

More convents line Old Town's "Way of the Crosses," as does the seventeenth-century Jesuit church known as La Compañia. It contains seven tons of dazzling gold leaf and more cherubs than heaven itself. The eighteenth-century La Merced church has Quito's highest, although silent, bell tower. Locals say that evil spirits haunt the campanile, which was never consecrated, and only the original bell-ringer, who

You can still buy ceremonial wine, infusions and herbs from the nuns

died in 1810, was strong enough to stand up to them. Ever since, the bells have hung in silence.

But the bells ring day and night at the Basilica del Voto Nacional, a gray neo-Gothic cathedral whose spires compete with the mountains. The Pope blessed this church on his visit to Ecuador in 1985.

Today visitors are allowed to ascend the tower to inspect the great, mechanical clock (but don't be there when the bells clang on the hour!) and Ecuadorian-style gargoyles in the form of monkeys and toucans.

A spiral staircase climbs even higher to tiny windows that offer a dizzying Quasimodo-eye view of the city.

Dozens of steeples and domes rise high over the red-tiled roofs and poke through clouds banking up the volcano. From this quiet perch, Old Town seems to sleep with angels. **H**

Aimée Dowl has contributed to the forthcoming *Lonely Planet* guide to Ecuador



The strategic Tsarevets fortress was at the centre of regional power politics for hundreds of years

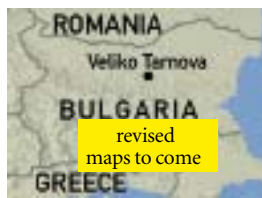
Bulgaria's city of the Tsars

Chris Deliso visits the grand Medieval Veliko Tarnovo

NO PLACE in Bulgaria has the ambiance of Veliko Tarnovo, famed 'City of the Tsars.' The grandest of Bulgaria's Medieval capitals, it has an evocative old quarter, numerous well-frescoed churches, and the enormous Tsarevets Fortress, brought vividly to life at night in the 'Sound and Light Show'.

Encircled by protective hills, Veliko Tarnovo enjoys a spectacular and strategic setting. The Romans built the first substantial fortifications, which Byzantine Emperor Justinian (reigned 527-565) enhanced. However, Bulgarian Slav tribes arrived in the seventh century, and Tarnovgrad (as the city became known) became prominent during the wars between Bulgaria and Byzantium over the next few centuries. It was a hotbed of revolt under brothers Petar and Asen, who established the Second Bulgarian Empire in 1185. Being the capital, Veliko Tarnovo flourished, with Crusaders, Byzantine emperors, and the Khans of the Golden Horde to fight for influence.

Veliko Tarnovo today has a youthful feel, due to its prestigious university. Tourists include backpackers, tour groups and weekend couples. Tarnovo's increasing popularity means a wealth of accommodation



INFORMATION

Tourist information
<http://www.velikoturnovo.info>

Best times to go
May–September

Cost of staying
₺ ₺ ₺ ₺ ₺

Recommended reads
A Concise History of Bulgaria, by RJ Crampton (CUP, 2005)

options, ranging from youth hostels and guest houses to boutique hotels and five-star places. Some enjoy stunning views over the river and fortress.

History is everywhere, as you will see while wandering

Trapezitsa Hill, where archaeologists are excavating ruined churches and royal residences. In town, visit the Church of the Forty Martyrs, Church of Sveti Petar & Pavle, and Church of Sveti Dimitar, all containing mediaeval wall paintings.

Tsarevets Fortress is clearly the main attraction. Its impressive walls contain ruins of dwellings, churches and shops.

For many the most interesting spots are those associated with violent

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legends, such as 'Execution Rock,' from which traitors were hurled into the Yantra. Count Baldwin of Flanders, leader of Fourth Crusade, has lent his name to a Tsarevets tower, where he was allegedly killed in 1205. Having aided the overthrow of Christian Constantinople a year earlier, Baldwin's execution at the hands of the Bulgarians is regarded by some as ironically fitting. **H**



Count Baldwin of Flanders: executed by the Bulgarians at Tsarevets

Chris Deliso is a travel writer who co-authored *Bulgaria* (Lonely Planet, 2008)

TOP 10 historical sites
CYPRUS

By Terry Carter & Lara Dunston, authors of numerous *Lonely Planet* guidebooks

- 1 Kourion**
This huge site, with its breathtaking coastal views, Roman mosaics and a restored Theatre, is Cyprus' most important archaeological site.

- 2 Salamis**
The first city of Roman Cyprus has an outstanding Theatre, mosaics, colonnades and bathhouse.

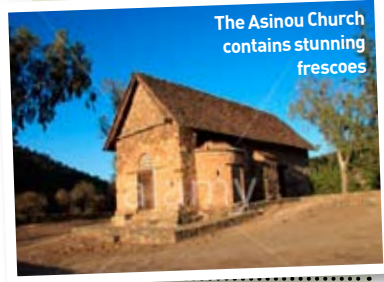
- 3 Pafos Archaeological Park & Tomb of the Kings**
These World Heritage sites boast exquisite Roman mosaics and over 100 tombs in a striking location.

- 4 Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque**
Reflected in the serene waters of a salt lake, this captivating Ottoman mosque is a significant Islamic shrine.

- 5 Famagusta's Walled City**
The exceptional medieval architecture frames the city centre, encompassing a jumble of sandstone castle walls, Gothic churches and mosques.

- 6 Asinou Church, Troodos Mountains**
The unassuming exterior of this World Heritage listed church (1105) belies its wealth of striking frescoes inside.

- 7 Kyrenia Castle**
This handsome harbourside castle is arguably Cyprus' most picturesque heritage sight.



The Asinou Church contains stunning frescoes

- 8 Bellapais Abbey**
This Gothic masterpiece, dating from the 12th century, might be in ruins, but it's location is truly spectacular.

- 9 Selimiye Mosque**
The Ottoman Turks transformed the splendid Cathedral of Santa Sophia (1208) into a striking mosque.

- 10 St Hilarion Castle**
These mesmeric castle ruins occupy one of the highest points of the north coast and have dramatic panoramas.



Each month Lonely Planet's travel editor **Tom Hall** embarks on an eco-friendly heritage trip



Shoppers enjoy the market at Echternach


Luxembourg

Why go there?
The fort that protected the much-attacked Grand Duchy of Luxembourg may be no more, but the city of Luxembourg remains rich in historic interest. Although Luxembourg is famously one of Europe's smallest countries it has plenty

to sustain the visitor in search of evidence of a dramatic past. Luxembourg was established by Count Siegfried of the Ardennes around a tenth century fort which was much envied by successive foreign powers including Burgundy,

Spain, the Hapsburgs and Prussia. To protect itself and its many occupiers great fortifications were built in Luxembourg City, which included a network of casemates (tunnels and passages) carved by Spanish soldiers in the eighteenth century. Upon the Duchy receiving autonomy in 1867 the fort was demolished. Visitors to Luxembourg first need to get their head around the city's chaotic layout, consisting of a dramatic promontory and drops into two gorges. The city's art and history museums mix contemporary art and innovative design while blending elements of the fortifications that protected Luxembourg for centuries, and what remains of the casemates can be visited. The city

is peaceful, prosperous and beautifully situated. Today you can appreciate what made it such a sought after prize for anyone passing through the area for almost a thousand years.

Getting there
You can fly to Luxembourg but there's no need to. Trains from Brussels take around three hours, giving a journey time of under five hours. Eurostar tickets qualify you to travel into any Belgian station at no extra cost; you just need to pay for the last hop into Luxembourg itself. This will cost you £7 one way, £14 return. London to Belgium Eurostar fares cost from £59 return (08705 186186; www.eurostar.com). 



HISTORY TRAVEL NEWS

● A major new exhibition at the Louvre (www.louvre.fr) brings together Egyptian antiquities showcasing both the ethereal and everyday in ancient life. The Gates of Heaven: Visions of the World in Ancient Egypt opens on March 6 and runs until the end of June.



● Archaeologists may have found King Solomon's Mines. The remains of a huge copper mine have been found in Khirbat en-Nahas, located in an arid valley south of the Red Sea in Jordan. Mining has been dated by a team from the University of California, San Diego, to the tenth century BC. The site is big enough to be seen on Google Earth complete with mining trails.

● 2009 marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln. Events are taking place at important Lincoln sites across the US including rededication of statues, lectures and exhibitions, building to a climax on 12th February, the 200th birthday of the sixteenth President of the United States.

