



Cayambe-Cotopaxi Skills Expedition

Quito, Ecuador

PROGRAM ITINERARY

PROGRAM DETAILS: With two days of skills instruction, those with little technical climbing experience have the opportunity to ascend Cayambe (18,997 ft) and Cotopaxi (19,347 ft) by way of classic snow and ice routes.

DIFFICULTY GRADE: Beginner to Moderate

PREREQUISITES:

- Like most all mountaineering trips, a solid level of physical fitness is required to assure an enjoyable time
- Previous experience camping in a backcountry environment and carrying gear, or multi-day backpacking trips or treks
- Previous climbing experience is not required

PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS:

- Long walks of 4 to 10 hours.
- Each climber carries his or her own personal equipment. Staff assistance is provided for group gear.
- Moderate to big gains and drops in altitude (400 to 1,000 m; 1,300 to 3,200 ft).
- Lodging

PROGRAM COST INCLUSIONS & EXCLUSIONS:

Inclusions: Lodging in hotels, haciendas, huts, and tents on a shared basis for the dates of your program (available on a private basis by special arrangement, subject to availability, and at added cost); meals while at huts and while climbing; group cooking equipment; admissions to museums and national parks; group climbing equipment; transportation during trip.

Exclusions: Airfare; personal equipment; rental equipment; meals in cities, hotels, haciendas, and lodges; gratuities to guides; government and airport taxes; inoculations; personal insurance; excess baggage, airport transfers.

ITINERARY

Part One: Cayambe - Cotopaxi Skills Expedition

Day 1: Arrive in Quito

This is the first scheduled day of the program. This day is designated for traveling to Ecuador and becoming situated in the country. You will meet your guide and other members of the expedition at Hotel Reina Isabel for **dinner at 7:00 pm**, for those who arrive early, we will provide you with a variety of sightseeing options.

- **Accommodations:** Hotel Reina Isabel

Day 2: Equipment Check and tour of Quito (2,800 m / 9,148 ft)

After meeting the rest of your group for breakfast at 8:00 am at the hotel, the guide(s) will brief the group on the details of the expedition and conduct an equipment check before embarking on a tour of the city.

Few cities in the world can match the setting of Quito, the second highest capital in Latin America after La Paz in Bolivia, with a height of 2,800 m / 9,148 ft above sea level. The city lies in a narrow plateau running North to South and is wedged between the slopes of the Pichincha Volcano to the West, and a steep canyon to the East formed by the Machangara River and the Inter-Andean Valley. Quito is very much a city of two halves: The Old City is the colonial center, where pastel-colored houses and ornate churches line a warren of steep and narrow streets, and the new town where you will find Quito's main residential and business areas.

In 1978 UNESCO declared Quito a World Heritage Site, making it the first city to acquire this prominent status in the world. Quito's architectural beauty, the fine art collections, numerous museums and unique traditions make it a place where you always want to come back.

- **Accommodations:** Hotel Reina Isabel

- **Meals included:** Breakfast

Day 3: Acclimatization Hike - Cerro Pasochoa (4,199 m / 13,776 ft)

The Pasochoa Wildlife Refuge has been designated as a Protected Forest since 1982, and exists undisturbed largely as it did in pre-Columbian times. In the forest below Cerro Pasochoa, we will hike among stands of pumamaqui, polylepis, podocarpus, and sandalwood trees as we watch for some of the more than one hundred species of native birds.

- **Accommodations:** Hotel Reina Isabel

- **Meals Included:** Breakfast, Lunch

Day 4: Acclimatize Hike - Rucu Pichincha (4,697 m / 15,413 ft)

We head east of Quito to the Pichincha Massif for our final acclimatization hike on Rucu Pichincha. This hike involves first taking a cable car ride above the city, then hiking on a trail through rolling hills with a few rock scrambles, for good measure. The summit, high above Quito, provides excellent views of the city, Ecuador's verdant central valley, and many of the country's highest peaks.

- **Accommodations:** Hotel Reina Isabel

- **Meals Included:** Breakfast, Lunch

Day 5: Travel to Cayambe Refuge (4,600 m / 15,092 ft)

We make our way through the small village of Cayambe to have a closer look at the simple, rural architecture, which typifies villages in the Andean foothills. The road changes as we gain more elevation becoming steeper and rougher. Depending on road conditions, we may hike the last section of road and allow the jeeps to go on ahead with our equipment. When we reach the Cayambe Refuge, we will be treated with breathtaking views of the precipitous Glaciar Hermoso, the “beautiful glacier”, which covers the entire eastern side of the mountain.

In the afternoon, we will take a short hike above camp as far as a good access point to the glacier. This trip may take up to two hours in total. In the evening, if the skies are clear, we will enjoy the alpenglow at sunset showing our route up the southern and western flanks of Cayambe. We will be spending the night at the refuge of Cayambe.

- **Accommodations:** Ruales Berg Orleas refuge
- **Meals Included:** Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 6: Skills Practice on Cayambe’s Glacier Hermoso (4,600 m / 15,092 ft)

Much of this day will be spent discussing and practicing alpine climbing skills to prepare for our summit attempt on Cayambe. The Hermoso Glacier starts just above the hut and provides an excellent classroom for learning and reviewing basic glacier travel skills, ice axe and crampon technique, and self-arrest. After spending the day on the ice, we return to the comfort of our camp and discuss our plan for summit day.

- **Accommodations:** Ruales Berg Orleas refuge
- **Meals Included:** Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 7: Cayambe Summit Attempt (5,790 m / 18,996 ft)

Summit day! Weather permitting, we start our climb in the middle of the night, making use of the firm snow conditions created by the cooler night time temperatures. The route takes us up varied terrain on rock until we reach the best access point for the glacier. Once we are on the glacier, we will then configure our rope teams for glacier travel.

The snow and ice climbing on Cayambe is moderate, and the steepness tops out at a comfortable 35 degrees. Our first major landmark is the Picos Jarrín (5,300 m / 17,390 ft), a big rock outcrop where we have a good opportunity for a break. Above this point, the route becomes a bit steeper and more exposed to weather. As we near the summit, the final obstacle presents itself as a steep face passable with good route finding. We usually do a beautiful traverse around seracs and crevasses in order to reach the summit. The traverse creates an exciting finish to one of the great classics of equatorial climbs.

After we descend, we will leave the Cayambe region and drive two and a half hours to a hacienda in the Cotopaxi region.

- **Accommodations:** Hacienda Los Mortiños or similar
- **Meals Included:** Breakfast, Lunch

Day 8: Rest day at Hacienda (Recovery Day)

Today we will enjoy a day of rest at the base of Cotopaxi enjoying a beautiful mountain lodge. There will be a chance to do an optional two-hour hike to visit the waterfalls of Rio Pita.

- **Accommodations:** Hacienda Los Mortiños or similar
- **Meals Included:** Breakfast

Day 9: Travel to Cotopaxi Refuge (4,800 m / 15,744 ft)

Today we access the national park from the north entrance which is the least visited access to the park. Out of the park gate we will see local people selling souvenirs and local paintings of the region. Once we enter the park we will be at the “altiplano”, a large valley that surrounds the volcano. On the way to refuge, we will be able to observe the remains of some of the ancient eruptions and lava flows of Cotopaxi.

- **Accommodations:** Jose Rivas refuge
- **Meals Included:** Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 10: Climb Cotopaxi (5,897 m / 19,347 ft) - End of Part 1

Summit Day! Weather permitting, we will leave the campsite of Tambopaxi at 23:00 and drive a short distance to the car parking lot, below the refuge of Cotopaxi (4,600m/ 15,088 ft). We first hike about 45 minutes to the refuge and from there climb about another hour on easy, non-glaciated slopes. We reach the glacier, rope up, and then ascend a series of fairly uniform snow and ice ramps of 30 to 35 degrees to reach a glacial platform at 5,181 m/ 17,000 ft, a perfect place for rest and refreshment.

As dawn arrives, we enjoy views of the massive glacial slopes of Antisana which rises to our north. We belay across occasional snow bridges, skirt large crevasses, and ascend moderate terrain towards the huge summit cone.

We reach the base of the 400-foot rock wall called Yanasacha (which means “black wall” in Quechua), and to its side we encounter a bergschrund at the base of the final glacial slopes that we climb to reach the summit. We move onto a steeper ice face, up to about 40 degrees. From there we belay up some of the most enjoyable snow and ice climbing pitches in Ecuador. The gradient eases off as we reach the crater rim and continue along easier slopes to Ecuador’s second highest summit. It is really a perfect and classic finish to a beautiful ascent. From the top we enjoy views of nine major equatorial peaks, the seemingly limitless Amazon Basin to our east, and Cotopaxi’s spectacular 1000-foot deep and active summit crater directly below us.

After enjoying food, drink, and rest on the summit, we make our descent and then drive back down to Tambopaxi Lodge or similar.

Those continuing with our Part 2, the Chimborazo Ascent, spend the night at a local lodge (exact location depends on availability). Those who are not continuing on Part 2 travel back to Quito and prepare for their return home.

- **Accommodations:** Local lodge near Cotopaxi National Park (if continuing on Part 2), or Hotel Reina Isabel (if not continuing to Part 2)
- **Meals Included:** Breakfast, Lunch

Part Two (optional): Chimborazo Ascent

Day 11: Travel to the flank of Chimborazo (3,500 m / 11,480 ft)

After breakfast, we drive south, down the “Valley of Volcanoes” along the Pan-American Highway through the towns of Latacunga and Ambato. We will stop along the way for lunch.

In the afternoon we continue to travel up onto the flanks of Chimborazo, where we spend an evening in a lodge at about 3,500 m / 11,480 feet. The Chimborazo Lodge sits picturesquely on a grassy plain below Chimborazo and allows us to rest and enjoy views of the Ecuadorian Altiplano that surrounds Chimborazo and its neighboring peak Carihuairazo (also known as “Chimborazo’s Wife”).

- **Accommodations:** Chimborazo Lodge or Hacienda Abraspungo
- **Meals Included:** Breakfast

Day 12: Travel to Chimborazo High Camp

We leave the lodge in the morning, pass through the small town of San Juan, and steadily gain altitude as we cross open grasslands on Chimborazo’s lower slopes. We enjoy great views of the Chimborazo massif and the surrounding rolling terrain, and we are likely to have sightings of grazing vicuñas and llamas.

Around noon we reach Chacana Lodge (3,450 m / 11,480 ft), this is our meeting point with the rest of the guides and have lunch there before making a short drive to Plaza Roja and a two-hour hike to our high camp. Climbers carry their own personal gear to camp while porters will have equipped the high camp. Once we get to camp, the tents will already be there.

We have an early dinner this evening, in preparation for our alpine start. We go to bed early anticipating a very beautiful and rewarding ascent and with a plan to start our climb at about midnight to get the best possible climbing conditions on the route.

If conditions on the mountain change from what they have been and a direct route is more favorable, the team may stay in the area of Whympner Hut or Carrel Hut and make the summit attempt from there.

- **Accommodations:** High Camp at 5,400 m / 17,720 ft
- **Meals Included:** Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 13: Chimborazo Summit (6,310 m / 20,703 ft)

From the camp, we follow a beautiful ridge line until it reaches the Castle Saddle (5,500 m / 18,044 ft). By the time we reach the 18,500 ft level (5,640m), we have surmounted most of the technical challenges on the mountain, and on the remainder of our route we ascend compact and moderately angled snow. It will take us approximately six hours of climbing to reach the Whympner Summit (6,310 m / 20,703 ft) from our high camp.

It is truly exciting to reach the 20,703-foot summit, and in good weather, the views are fittingly spectacular. The Whympner summit crater area is a vast one that is normally covered in its entirety either in soft snow or nieve penitentes. Although this is our longest day, it should be a very enjoyable climb because we will be so well acclimatized from all the high-altitude hiking and the two major ascents that we made during Part 1 of our program.

In summary, we will spend eight to ten hours round-trip on route, and during the ascent we will enjoy applying our climbing skills on ice ramps, crossing snow bridges, and working through short sections of seracs. It is a very interesting route on an impressively large mountain! We will descend to the Carrel Hut and then continue in our vehicle to what will feel to us as a very oxygen-rich central valley of Ecuador. Celebratory dinner to follow!

- **Accommodations:** Hotel in Riobamba (or camp depending on how the climb goes)
- **Meals Included:** Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner (if we are still on the mountain)

Day 14: Chimborazo Summit Attempt Contingency Day & Return to Quito – End of Part 2

Should Day 13 be needed to wait out inclement weather, we will make our summit climb on this day. If we climb on Day 14, we will hike out after our ascent and drive to Quito where we will spend the night at Hotel Reina Isabel.

- **Accommodations:** Hotel Reina Isabel
- **Meals Included:** Breakfast, Lunch

COVID-19 NOTES:

The American Alpine Institute has worked hard to find ways in which we can continue to pursue the mountain recreation we love while minimizing the risk of spreading the infection. Like society's larger effort to grapple with the disease, this is a work in progress. By following the latest news and recommendations for best practices from the U. S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other public health authorities, we have continued to adapt our operations to the changing needs of the moment, keeping our participants and employees as safe as possible, arresting avoidable spread of the disease, and continuing to lead trips into the mountains that build climbing skills and rejuvenate the spirit. You can read a detailed summary of our operating plan [here](#).

ECUADOR-SPECIFIC PROTOCOLS:

In addition to following our base-line protocols outlined in the link above, we made changes to the itinerary and to the way in which we operate some aspects of the program. We have also added a vaccination requirement.

Vaccinations: As of October 1, 2021, American Alpine Institute has required that all participants on AAI trips be fully vaccinated. Vaccination has been a condition of employment for all Institute employees since the beginning of the 2021 summer season, including AAI Guides in Ecuador.

Lodges: The observations of our staff in Ecuador indicate that the citizens of the country have achieved a high rate of compliance with requirements for face coverings, social distancing and vaccination.

Because all AAI participants are required to be vaccinated, we have resumed double-occupancy lodging in the lodges and haciendas that we use, and while tenting. If you wish to reserve your own room and/or tent, please let us know. The cost for single accommodations is: \$450 for the Cotopaxi Skills Expedition and an additional \$90 for the Chimborazo climb. There is no charge for a single tent.

Other Fundamental Protocols:

- **Reduced group size** - our maximum group size is now eight (8 climbers and 4 guides);
- **Social distancing** - we maintain at least six feet of distance between climbers and guides in all settings where practical;
- **Face-covering requirement** - staff and climbers are required to wear cloth face coverings at all times when they cannot maintain a six-foot personal distance, e.g., gathering for climbing instruction, or joining other climbers at a belay point.

More [details can be found here](#).

We have regularly reviewed and updated our protocols and will continue to do so based on evolving CDC guidelines and the direct advice of the Institute's three medical advisors, one of whom is an epidemiologist. Please call us if you have any questions.