

Cuenca Quick City Guide

At a Glance

Cuenca is Ecuador's third-largest city, a UNESCO-listed colonial gem at 2,560 m in the southern Andes. Clean, walkable, and cheaper than Quito, it is a long-stay favorite for nomads who want mountain air, colonial architecture, and easy access to Cajas National Park.

- **Language:** Spanish (clear Andean accent; English limited outside tourist core)
- **Currency:** US Dollar
- **Climate:** Spring-like, 10–22°C; rainy season December–May, drier June–November
- **Timezone:** GMT-5 (ECT)
- **Calling code:** +593
- **Power:** 110–120 V, US-style two-flat-pin plugs

First 48 Hours

- **Hour 0–2:** Land at Mariscal Lamar International Airport (CUE). Taxi to Centro Histórico is \$2–3; the Tranvía tram also connects the airport for \$1.
- **Hour 2–6:** Check in near Parque Calderón, walk the riverfront Tomebamba, and have a coca tea. The tap water in Cuenca is generally considered safe to drink.
- **Day 1 evening:** Dinner near Parque Calderón or Calle Larga; try a \$3 almuerzo or local cuy if you are adventurous.
- **Day 2 morning:** Walk the New Cathedral, Parque Calderón, Puma-pungo Archaeological Park, and the flower market.

Where to Stay

Neighborhood	Best For	Nightly USD	The Catch
Centro Histórico	Colonial charm, walking everywhere	\$15–60	Hills and cobblestones; quiet at night
El Ejido / Av. 12 de Abril	Apartments, supermarkets, tram access	\$25–70	Less historic, more traffic
Near Terminal Terrestre	Bus connections, budget stays	\$10–35	Noisier, further from the old town

Picks: Hostal Macondo (budget), Hotel Victoria (mid-range), Mansión Alcázar

(boutique luxury).

Getting Around

- **Tranvía tram:** \$1 per ride; east–west through the city.
- **City buses:** \$0.25 exact change; routes marked, use an SIT card for convenience.
- **Taxi:** \$1.50–3 per trip in town; negotiate before getting in.
- **Walking:** The historic center is compact and often faster than a taxi.
- **Airport:** Taxi \$2–3, tram \$1.

Eat This

- Mercado 10 de Agosto
- Supermaxi Cuenca
- MegaTienda Coral
- Raymipampa
- Tres Estrellas
- La Fornace
- Specialty & Nomad Cafes
- Goza Espresso Bar
- Café Nucallacta
- Moliendo Café

Strategy: Almuerzos run \$2.75–5. Mercado 10 de Agosto has cheap set lunches. Mid-range dinners near Calle Larga or San Sebastián cost \$8–18.

Top 10 Sights

Attraction	Time & Cost	Pro Tip
Centro Histórico / Parque Calderón	Half day, free	Start at the New Cathedral; watch the river flow
Catedral de la Inmaculada Concepción	1 hr, \$1–3 rooftop	Climb for the blue domes and city view
Pumapungo Archaeological Park	2–3 hr, free	Inca ruins, botanical garden, aviary
Mirador de Turi	1–2 hr, taxi \$3–5	Best at sunset; churches glow
El Cajas National Park	Full day, free entry	Hire a guide; weather changes fast
Museo de las Culturas Aborígenes	1–2 hr, \$4	Excellent pre-Columbian pottery

Attraction	Time & Cost	Pro Tip
CIDAP	1–2 hr, free	Interamerican crafts collection
El Sagrario (Old Cathedral)	1 hr, \$2	Original paint and murals now visible
Río Tomebamba walk	1–2 hr, free	Relaxing river path through the old town
Seminario San Luis courtyards	1 hr, free	Quiet café courtyards with cathedral views

Day Trips

- **El Cajas National Park** — high-altitude lakes, hiking, trout; bus from Terminal Terrestre or guided tour.
- **Ingapirca** — largest Inca ruins in Ecuador, ~2¼ hr by bus or tour; \$6 foreigners.
- **Baños de Cuenca** — natural hot springs, 15-min bus from downtown; \$8–20 for pools/spa.
- **Sigsig and Chordeleg** — weaving villages and silverwork, ~1 hr by bus.

Safety & Etiquette

- **Altitude:** Lower than Quito but still 2,560 m; take it easy the first day.
- **Taxis:** Negotiate the fare before entering; meters are not always used.
- **Pickpockets:** Low compared to Quito/Guayaquil, but still lock phones in markets/buses.
- **Dress:** Conservative; cover shoulders/knees when entering churches.
- **Water:** Tap water is considered safe in Cuenca, though sensitive stomachs may prefer filtered.

Budget Snapshot

All figures are in USD for a total 90-day stay.

Item	Lean Nomad	Comfortable Nomad	Premium Nomad
Room	\$600	\$1,200	\$2,100
Food	\$450	\$800	\$1,500
Transport	\$90	\$180	\$300
Coworking	\$120	\$250	\$450
Insurance	\$150	\$200	\$300
Visa	\$0	\$0	\$0
Entertainment	\$200	\$500	\$1,000
Buffer	\$490	\$1,050	\$1,850
TOTAL	\$2,100	\$4,200	\$7,500

Budget Breakdown and Practical Implementation

The figures provided in the table represent a 90-day window, which aligns with the standard tourist entry permit for many nationalities. Because Cuenca is a highland valley city with a moderate climate and a high quality of life, your spending will vary significantly based on your preference for local versus expat-centric services.

Accommodation (Room) The Lean Nomad budget of \$600 (\$20/night) assumes a shared apartment or a modest room in a residential neighborhood outside the immediate Centro Histórico. The Comfortable Nomad (\$1,200) typically rents a private, furnished one-bedroom apartment with reliable Wi-Fi, often located near the river or within walking distance of the city center. The Premium Nomad (\$2,100) likely opts for high-end coliving spaces like Selina Cuenca or a luxury rental in a prime area, providing more amenities and social networking opportunities.

Food and Dining Cuenca offers a massive spectrum of dining options. For those on a Lean budget, the Mercado 10 de Agosto food court is the gold standard, where hearty lunches can be found for around \$3. Shopping for produce at the Mercado 10 de Agosto and buying staples at MegaTienda Coral or Supermaxi Cuenca will keep costs low.

The Comfortable Nomad will mix market finds with mid-range cafes. You might start your morning with specialty coffee and brunch at Café Nucallacta or enjoy crepes and coffee at Moliendo Café in the Centro Histórico. Dinner might consist of Ecuadorian classics at Raymipampa near Parque Calderón or local fare at Tres Estrellas.

Premium Nomads will frequently visit upscale establishments and indulge in specialty delicacies, such as traditional cuy (guinea pig) at Guajibamba Cuyes on the outskirts of the city. This budget also accounts for more frequent dining at the food courts of Mall del Río or Centro Comercial El Vergel.

Transport The Lean budget relies heavily on the Tranvía de Cuenca, the modern tram that serves the east-west corridor, and walking. The Comfortable budget includes frequent taxi rides and occasional trips to the Terminal Terrestre Cuenca for bus travel to Quito or Guayaquil. The Premium budget accounts for private airport transfers to Mariscal Lamar International Airport (CUE) and more frequent use of ride-hailing services.

Coworking and Connectivity For those who cannot work from their room, COWORK Cuenca in the Centro Histórico and Workplace Cuenca (located near the river) offer professional environments with hot desks. Selina Cuenca provides a hybrid coliving and coworking model. A Lean budget assumes a few days of coworking per month or using public cafes, while the Premium budget covers a dedicated private office or a full-time monthly membership.

Health and Insurance While the budget table includes a baseline for insurance, nomads should be aware of the local healthcare landscape. For emergency or low-cost care, Hospital Monte Sinaí and Hospital Universitario del Río are public options, though Monte Sinaí is noted for being Spanish-heavy. Those with private insurance or a higher budget will prefer Hospital del Río on Av. 12 de Abril, which features modern facilities and some English-speaking staff, or Hospital Santa Inés for specialist outpatient care.

Dental care is a common “add-on” expense not included in the daily budget. For those needing work, Dental Cuenca in the Centro Histórico offers implants (\$900–1,600) and crowns (\$350–600). General dentistry, such as cleanings (\$30–60), fillings (\$40–90), or whitening (\$150–300), can be found at Sonrisas Cuenca or Clínica Dental del Valle on Av. Solano.

Entertainment and Buffer Entertainment ranges from free walks along the Tomebamba, Yanuncay, Tarqui, and Machangara rivers to shopping for textiles at the Mercado Artesanal. The Premium budget allows for excursions to the Cajas National Park (Parque Nacional Cajas) and high-end shopping at Mall del Río.

The “Buffer” is critical for unexpected costs, such as the occasional high-cost domestic flight from Mariscal Lamar International Airport or sudden changes in rental deposits. Note that since the drinking water in Cuenca is generally considered safe to consume due to ETAPA’s infrastructure, you will save money and plastic waste compared to other Ecuadorian cities.

Verify all current pricing locally upon arrival, as market rates for short-term rentals and coworking memberships can fluctuate based on seasonal demand.

Daily averages: **Lean ~\$23, Comfortable ~\$47, Premium ~\$83** (USD).

Quick Links

- [Tranvía de Cuenca](#)
- [Mariscal Lamar Airport](#)
- [Ecuador Tourism](#)
- [Cuenca Tourism iTur](#)
- [Ministry of Foreign Affairs — visa info](#)