To market, where the true colour of South America can still be seen

OF ALL THE capital cities in the world Quito must have the best climate. Virtually on the Equator, yet 9000 feet high, every day is like an English summer (including the showers).

Most visitors stay in the new city, modern and international, but the old city has the character: the Indian markets, the old colonial churches white outside and all glittering gilt inside, the flavour of Spanish America. In few other capitals has local costume survived so well, especially among the Indian women.

The best place to see the Indians is at their markets, crowded, colourful affairs that start at dawn and trade in everything. The most famous are the Saturday markets at Otavalo, three hours drive north of Quito, but other towns are often just as fascinating.

I went to Ecuador to walk in the mountains. North and south of Quito stretches the "avenue of the Volcanoes" whose peaks, misty and sometimes snow-covered, attract climbers and hikers from all over the world, not least because many of them can be tackled in one or two strenuous days without the fuss and expense of a major expedition. The most famous, Cotopaxi (19,345 feet), can be climbed in a day, provided one is acclimatised to the altitude and has proper snow equipment and a guide. I shared the cost with two Swiss I met through the tourist office.

● Wool sellers in Otavalo market. Coarse sheep's wool is used in the local textile industry to make fine-quality ponchos, blankets and clothes. Picture: DAVID HORWELL.

To the east, the Oriente, the land drops away in spectacular waterfalls into the upper reaches of the Amazon basin, hot, humid, and heavily forested. It is just a day's journey overland from Quito (or half an hour by air). The forest has been cleared in patches by small farmers and the original Indians have retreated, but there are still no roads and no modern development except oil exploration.

The road from Quito ends at Misahualli where I came across an American and two Italians looking for a fourth person to join them in a three-day guided tour of the forest by foot and canoe. These tours are readily available for groups of four or more and cost about £15 a day, including food and the rubber boots which are essential on the muddy trails. More luxurious tours are available on the specially-designed river boat "Flotel Orellana", costing upwards of £350 for a four-day trip including the flight from Quito.

I enjoyed swimming in the Amazon tributaries, not bothered by piranha fish but wary of crocodiles. Others might prefer the beaches of Ecuador's Pacific coast, but anyone wanting to swim in really unusual surroundings should go to the Galapagos Islands, 600 miles offshore, that unique wild-life sanctuary where fur-seals co-exist with flamingos and penguins swim among mangroves.

Wisely, for the animals are still unafraid of man, the government ensures that most tourists are accommodated afloat on charter yachts or cruise ships, making shore visits with guides to see the great colonies of birds, seals, giant tortoises and strange iguanas. The number of tourists is also limited by price. The return air fare from Quito is $353 U.S. and a five-day cruise around the islands costs at least as much again.

Apart from the Galapagos, it is easy and cheap to travel around Ecuador by bus on the modern roads (the railway is interesting too, but often washed away). Visitors who want greater comfort can hire taxis or self-drive cars for about the same price as in Britain.

Accommodation ranges from budget boarding houses to £30 a night "international" hotels (double these figures in Quito and Guayaquil). I stayed in old Quito in the small new Hotel Real Audencia where a room with bath and TV cost me just under £10 a night.

I made my flight arrangements from London with a specialist travel firm, Journey Latin America, which offers a variety of special fares at upwards of £468 return to Quito, a level that would have been impossible a few years ago. All of which makes Ecuador no more expensive than the West Indies, and a lot more interesting.

Sam Osmond

The inland ocean at the top of the world

Colin Vickers discovers a different kind of island hopping, high up in the Andes

LOOKING OUT on the still water stretching languidly to the horizon, it is hard to believe you are more than 12,000 feet above sea level. Lake Titicaca looks for all the world like some vast ocean, but if you try climbing the steep side of one of its 40-odd islands, your bursting lungs soon tell you it can't be.

The world's highest stretch of navigable water, straddling the border between Peru and Bolivia, nurtures a kind of time-warp. Here, against the dramatic backdrop of the Andean cordillera with its snow-capped peaks, life goes on in much the same way as it has for hundreds of years, with the Indians who live on or around the lake wearing the traditional clothing of their ancestors and using the same old-fashioned cultivation processes.

Its unspoilt beauty and cultural interest more than compensate for its lack of facilities, and visitors prepared to put up with the side-effects of "soroche" (altitude sickness) are richly rewarded.

Over 100 miles long, 50 miles wide in places, and covering an area of some 5,000 square miles, much of Titicaca has remained free from tourist invasion, but boat trips can be made to some of the islands, and there is even a hydrofoil service across the lake.

During a coast-to-coast trip across South America, a group of us arranged to visit two of Titicaca's islands, Taquile, a rock pinnacle covering less than a square mile, and one of the curious floating reed islands inhabited by the Uru Indians.

For under £3 each, we hired a boat in Puno, a scruffy university town on the Peruvian side, most of whose buildings looked only half-finished. Fortunately we had brought plenty of sun screen lotion, for once the white duvet of clouds had rolled back a fierce sun beat down, and its effect at this height can be devastating.

It was late afternoon when, after chugging lethargically across the water for four hours, our boat reached Taquile's tiny harbour. The long climb up the zig-zig path was exhausting, and we were frequently forced to stop and recover, admiring the view, the large colourful butterflies, and the bird-life. Our guides, short, dark, barrel-chested Indians, bounded effortlessly up the path, amused by our pathetic efforts.

On Taquile, we were split into groups of three or four and assigned to families whose houses we were to share for the night. The accommodation was simple and basic, a mud and straw bed which two people had to squash on to, but at 5,000 soles (about £1) it seemed churlish to complain.

As the early evening sun stretched the shadows, we explored the island, passing among the thatched native mud huts and examining the ancient stepped terraces where they cultivate barley, quinoa (a pigweed producing a small grain) and potatoes.

Here and there, ruined temples and stone figures, some of them predating the Christian era, indicated the previous existence of one of the oldest civilisations in the Americas.

That night our guides took us to Taquile's one and only restaurant. We had to stoop to get through the low doorway and the seats were tree stumps. The 20 of us crammed round two small tables, lit by a single hurricane lamp, and admired the decorations—cigarette packets hung from pieces of string, and doilies made from plastic bags. A young girl served us soup on ancient tin plates and a strange-looking fish which we washed down with mugs of mint tea. One table ate each course first, then passed over their cutlery; there was not enough to go round.

From Taquile a two-hour boat trip took us to one of the Uros Islands. The Uru Indians, remnants of an ancient people, are a true anachronism, living on floating mats of dried totova (a reedlike papyrus) just as their ancestors did.

Their homelands are constantly sinking, and fresh reeds are cut from dense brakes in the marshy shallows of the lake to renew the floors. Even so, visiting them can be a precarious business: a foot can easily go through a thin part of the reed mat and into the cold water below.

Although the children look sweet, they have learnt that visitors are vulnerable to exploitation, and as soon as you disembark they swarm around you, tugging at clothing and pleading for money. Boiled sweets are grudgingly accepted as a substitute.

Their mothers sit around in groups, all with similar brown bowler hats and black pig-tails hanging down to their waists, tacitly accepting these invasions by pale-faced gringos.

With more and more travel companies offering package tours around South America, it may be only a matter of time before Titicaca gets taken over by the tourists. But for the time being its secrets and breathtaking beauty are shared by just a lucky few. My nine-week tour was by Encounter Overland, from Lima to Rio (or vice-versa), at £1,350. Air fares (about £600) are extra.

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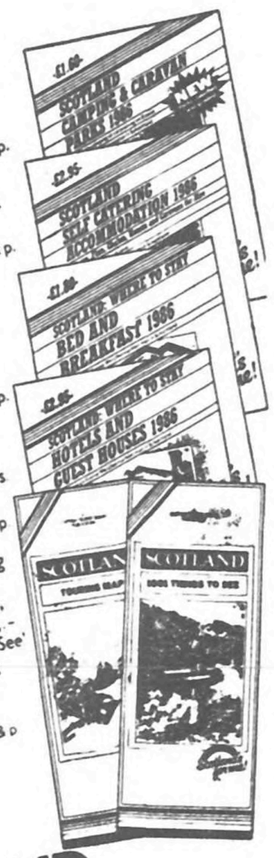

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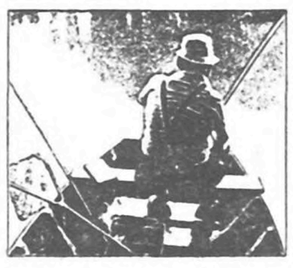

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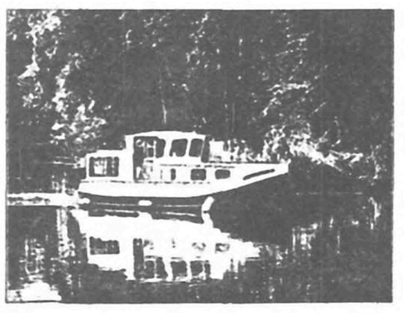

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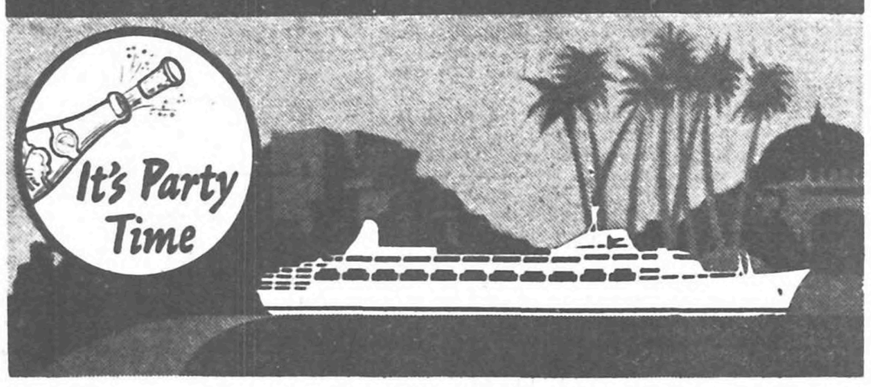

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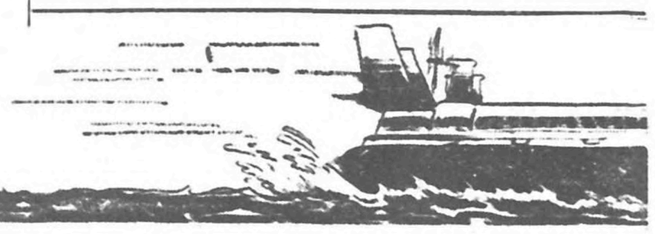

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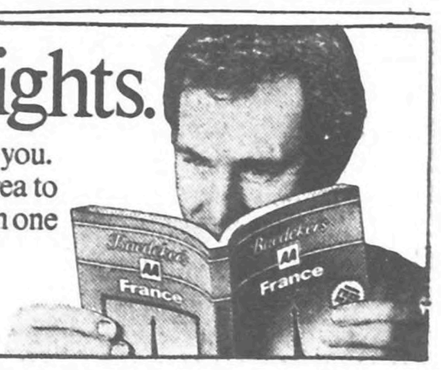

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