



The blue domes of Cuenca's New Cathedral compete for attention with the South American sky.

ECUADOR'S ELUSIVE ANDES

*Traveling down the
Avenue of the Volcanos*

By BRIDGET McQUATE

The volcanos along the Pan American Highway teased us with their massive bases and stroked our curiosity by rising into impenetrable blobs of clouds. The most impressive of the nine Andean snow caps so effectively concealed themselves from us that volcano viewing became our top travel priority.

Along the "Avenue of the Volcanos," elusiveness was the first step on the road to obsession.



The Baños cemetery has the feeling of a miniature city in the valley of the majestic Andes mountains.

I had experienced this principle in relationships: the more unavailable a man became to me, the more I had to have him. My friend and I were on a two-week bus trek through central Ecuador down a 280-mile valley running between two volcanic ranges of the Andes mountains. We flew into Quito on the north end of the route, the second-highest capital city in the world, and would make our way south down the Pan American Highway to the city of Cuenca.

Quito

We caught our first glimpse of a volcano in Quito. A photo in the guidebook promised a snow-capped monstrosity looming colossally over the city. This photo, we discovered, was an example of the wonders of super-zoom-lens photography. But the Cayambe and Cotopaxi volcanos could be seen way off in the distance from El Panecillo (little breadloaf), a landmark hill overlooking Quito.

On the hill stands Ecuador's religious version of the Statue of Liberty: a towering figure of an angel perched on top of a globe. The view from the hill captured the rambling sprawl of Quito straight ahead, the mountain quilts of green farmers' fields on the left, and the distant Avenue of the Volcanos on the right.

Taking in the sights, I remembered the reaction of friends to my latest travel destination: "What's in Ecuador?" and "Why Ecuador?" There on the hill, I answered them all silently: "This is why Ecuador."

My more mundane reasons for choosing the Nevada-sized, South American country had to do with its stability, safety, cheapness and extensive transportation system. Adventure travelers have been joining up with jungle excursions through threatened Ecuadorian rainforests. And serious nature lovers spend the money to take a boat or fly out to the Galapagos Islands, 600 miles off the Ecuadorian coast.

Not many tourists had chosen our route over the Andes and, for that, we were thankful. We hadn't come so far to see tourists.

The whole of Ecuador is bathed in



