

Religious parade in Riobamba, Ecuador

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Several children parade in costume through the streets of Riobamba, Ecuador. The children are most likely participating in a nativity procession, since the girl in the foreground is dressed as the Virgin Mary and is followed by an angel and a king bearing gifts.

Roman Catholicism is the official religion of Ecuador and is practiced by twelve million out of thirteen million inhabitants of Ecuador. The Church was very influential during the colonial period, mostly through its large land holdings. After independence the influence of the Church was curtailed, but the institution remains very popular among Ecuadorians.

Riobamba has a long and storied history. Its convenient location in the highlands between the coast and the jungle has made it an important crossroads in the development of Ecuador. It first was home to several indigenous communities before the arrival of the Inca empire. The town was an important outpost for the empire until the conquest of the Spanish in the sixteenth century. In fact, Riobamba was the first Spanish settlement in Ecuador. In more recent days, Riobamba boasts of one of Ecuador's largest railway junctions and dozens of roads join at the town. Indeed, many residents claim "all roads lead to Riobamba." Because of its close proximity to the volcano of Chimborazo, Ecuador's tallest peak, the town is a popular jumping-off point for ecotourists. It is also an important city for domestic trade, since it is midway between Ecuador's two largest cities: Quito and Quayaquil. For all these reasons, Riobamba is a bustling city with a growing population. Even so, the city has managed to retain its wide streets, colonial architecture, and colorful flora.



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