

Andean Flora of Ecuador

Naturetrek Tour Dossier

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Quito
Day 2/4	Baños
Day 5	Cuenca
Day 6	Loja
Day 7/8	Vilcabamba
Day 9	Catamayo
Day 10/11	Papallacta
Day 12/13	San Isidro
Day 14	Quito
Day 15/16	Fly London



Passiflora mixta by Phil Blanning

Departs

September/October

Focus

Plants, particularly alpine plants and orchids

Grading

Grade A in terms of distance covered. Easy day walks only, although sometimes over steep or slippery terrain and at altitude.

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code ECU01) or brochure

Highlights

- Over 3,700 species of orchid – the largest number of any country!
- Tree-sized flowering mistletoes in temperate forests
- Andean Condor at Papallacta Pass, & Spectacled Bear is a possibility



Phaedranassa dubia by Phil Blanning



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NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction

Ecuador, bisected from north to south by the mighty Andes and from east to west by the equator (after which the country is named), offers wonderful botanising amidst magnificent scenery in one of the smallest yet most diverse countries in South America. Once part of the Inca empire that stretched from Chile to Colombia and later a Spanish colony before it gained its independence during the last century, this small country possesses an extraordinary range of environments. Here in a comparatively limited area one can travel from towering snow-capped volcanoes to oxbow lakes deep in the Amazonian rainforests and from windswept grasslands to temperate cloud forests. Thus it is not surprising that Ecuador has the highest biodiversity for an area of its size in South America. In fact, its orchid diversity is the highest of any country in the world regardless of size, with over 3,700 species.

During our travels we shall visit all of the main montane habitats found in the central spine of the country. We will tiptoe around fragile alpine cushion plants near the snow line, search for orchids and tree-sized flowering mistletoes in cold moss-covered temperate forests, marvel at the lushness of the rich subtropical forests on the lower slopes of the mountains, and touch the edge of Amazonia with a visit to the extremely diverse transition zone between rain forest and cloud forest. The diversity of plants (not to mention the birds!), welcoming people, short travel distances and good accommodation make a natural history holiday here a delight.

Day 1

Quito

We leave London in the morning usually on KLM's service via Amsterdam. Changing planes in Holland, we will arrive in Quito in the evening and transfer to a comfortable hotel in Puembo. Quito is probably the most attractive of all the colonial capitals of South America. The city is located in a hollow at the foot of the volcano Pichincha. On a clear day Andean peaks tower around and the sun is bright and strong. The climate is delightful: the name means "Eternal Spring" in the ancient language of Quechua. Standing at 9000 feet, Quito is the second highest capital in the world. It is a small capital by South American standards and it is relatively easy to wander around the streets of the colonial city without getting hopelessly lost or put off by the distances involved.

Day 2

Banos

After an early breakfast we head south this morning down the "Avenue of the Volcanos", the most important agricultural area of the country, surrounded by national parks, most of which are named after the snow-capped volcanoes they protect. If the weather is clear we will have fantastic views of the highest active volcano in the world, Cotopaxi. After about three hours we will begin our descent to Baños in east-central Ecuador, where we will have views of another active volcano, Tungurahua, and perhaps we will witness one of its frequent small eruptions. Past eruptions have sculpted a violent landscape here, with geologically recent lava flows covered with desert-like vegetation. The most conspicuous element of the alpine flora of the Paramo is the genus *Puya*, an imposing

terrestrial bromeliad. Two rare amaryllis relatives (*Phaedranassa schizantha* var. *ignea* and *P. viridiflora*) can be found here. The lava flows host many orchids, mostly with inconspicuous flowers. If we are lucky, though, we may find a flowering plant of the strange “slipperless” ladyslipper orchid, *Phragmipedium lindenii*, with stringy petals up to a foot long.

We have three nights at a lovely hotel nestled between the majestic Llanagates mountains, called Hacienda Leito, a converted monastery with wonderful views of Volcano Tungurahua.

Day 3

Banos

In contrast to the arid vegetation to the west of Baños, the Andean foothills east of the town are covered with extremely wet cloud forest. Today we will travel down the Andean slope to the lowland tropical rain forest of Puyo on the edge of the Amazon basin. This forest is extremely species-rich in aroids, bromeliads and orchids, and the tree diversity is exceptionally high. This ecological zone is fabulous habitat where our local contact Lou Jost has described over 40 orchid species new to science! The forests here are heavily clad with orchids and bromeliads, and the scenery is spectacular, with waterfalls on all sides. One of the special species we will hope to see is a colony of hundreds of a rare green and white ladyslipper orchid that only grows on rocks along certain rivers, *Phragmipedium pearcei*. Along the road we shall also see an amaryllis relative endemic to Baños, *Phaedranassa tungurahuae*. We return to Baños for a second night.

Day 4

Banos

Chimborazo, a few hours drive from Baños, is the highest point on earth, as measured from the earth’s centre. The broad flat plains below Chimborazo’s snowcap host an amazing variety of alpine plants, including the endemic rosette plant *Viola polycephala* and many species of *Asteraceae* such as *Loricaria* and *chuquiragua*. We shall botanize this plain at our leisure, moving slowly so as not to feel the effects of the high altitude. We will be accompanied by herds of vicuña, a wild relative of the llama, feeding and playing between us and the glaciers. The vastness of the landscape and richness of the flora will make this an unforgettable day. We return to Baños for a third night.

Days 5

Cuenca

We will spend some time botanizing the roadsides at high elevations around Baños, which have a surprisingly high diversity of orchids. Some of these are quite conspicuous while others resemble the typical European orchids. A few actually belong to European genera such as *Habenaria*. Later, we will leave Baños and drive to Cuenca where we will stay at the Hosteria Duran for the night.

Day 6

Loja

Today we drive to Loja in southern Ecuador.

The city of Loja was officially founded on 8th December, 1548 by Spanish Captain Alonso de Mercadillo. Loja is one of the oldest cities in Ecuador, its age evident in the rich colonial architecture and narrow streets. The city is located at 2,100 meters above sea level in the Cuxibamba valley and enjoys a temperate spring-like climate all year long.

Well off the beaten tourist trail of Quito/Galapagos, the province of Loja offers a unique combination of breathtaking vistas, indigenous markets, an amazing ecological diversity, colonial architecture, and unparalleled hospitality.

After quickly checking in to our pleasant hotel, we will drive to a high-elevation cloud forest in Podocarpus National Park. From the bus it is an easy walk to stunning alpine grassland rich in ericads, bromeliads, and orchids. This is a very picturesque environment, where we can be absolutely sure that we will be the only botanists on the mountainside! Tonight, we will stay in the Howard Johnson hotel.

Day 7

Vilcabamba

We will make a full day excursion today to some of the special forests near Loja, famous for their high orchid and bird diversity. We will visit a private reserve, Tapichalaca, purchased by the Jocotoco Foundation to protect a newly discovered bird (the Jocotoco Antpitta). The reserve coincidentally protects many endangered plants in its unique forests. We spend tonight at a pleasant hotel just outside Vilcabamba. We stay here for two nights.

Day 8

Vilcabamba

Ecuador owes its biodiversity to its densely woven patchwork of distinct and often contrasting environments. The dry vegetation we will visit today will be shockingly different from the wet forests we visited yesterday or the frigid grasslands that will be the subject of tomorrow's trip. Instead of broad-leaved, epiphyte-laden mossy forests we will be visiting cactus and desert scrub. After two hours of driving we will come to the highlight of the day, the strange baobab-like "ceibo" trees with their fat green trunks and symmetric crowns. With luck they may be in flower, an unforgettable sight.

Day 9

Catamayo

There is an extraordinary cold, windy and wet paramo near Loja, called Cerro Toledo. We will visit this botanically unique environment, rich in endemic species, though the climate is often so severe that it is unlikely that we will stay at the top for long! Bring warm clothes and good rain gear! Lower down on this mountain we can escape the winds

and study beautiful bromeliad-covered cloud forest. We will stay the night at the Gran Hotel Marcjohn's in Catamayo.

Day 10

Quito - Papallacta

After an early flight north to Quito, we drive up over the eastern ridge of the Andes, a route first used in the 16th century when Francisco de Orellana led his expedition from Quito down into Amazonia. Nowadays the pass provides the only direct road access from the country's capital to the vast eastern lowlands. We drop down to Papallacta which is on the eastern slopes of the Andes not far from the source of the Napo River, Ecuador's largest Amazon tributary. Papallacta is famous in Ecuador for its hot thermal springs and it really is a paradise in the Andes. The road affords splendid views of several snow-capped peaks as it winds its way over the 4,000 metre Papallacta Pass and with good luck we may find an Andean Condor soaring over the crags.

If weather permits (it can snow here!) we will drive up to some communication antenna at 4,500 m and visit the zone of "cushion plants", curious clumps of moss-like dwarf gentians and other plants with strange growth forms, highly specialized for this extreme environment. We will also visit the enchanting *Polylepis* forests with their twisted branches and papery-red bark, growing at the upper elevational limit of woody plants. Lower down we will explore some moss-covered high elevation cloud forests full of yellow *Odontoglossum* orchids and other colorful flowers.

Our accommodation for the night is at the Termas de Papallacta. The accommodation really is delightful with rooms surrounding carefully sculpted pools containing mineral-rich hot water welling up from beneath the Andes. After a delicious dinner we will lie back and relax in the hot water, such a pleasing contrast to the chill mountain air!

Day 11

Papallacta

Today we will visit the chilly but relatively benign high alpine grasslands above Papallacta. If we are lucky we will see an incredible variety of alpine wildflowers, many belonging to familiar European genera but with strange neotropical plants like *Puya* (*Bromeliaceae*) mixed in. We will return for a second night at the hot springs.

Day 12

San Isidro

We head east (and downhill!) today to a well-preserved mid-elevation forest called San Isidro, where we will have the unusual experience of walking in relatively flat undisturbed cloud forest. There is a lovely lodge at San Isidro where we will stay for two nights. Many different species of hummingbirds can be seen and photographed coming to feed on the sugar water at the lodge feeders. The isolated trees in the old pastures near the lodge are exceptionally rich in orchids and other epiphytic vegetation.

Day 13

Guacamayos

We take a day trip to an exceptionally wet cloud forest called the Guacamayos Ridge. This ridge, a short drive from San Isidro, is perched above the Amazon basin and catches the westward-flowing Amazonian clouds. The forest is a classic super-humid cloud forest, with lots of epiphytes and bryophytes, and the plants exhibit many adaptations to handle heavy rain and high humidity. The trail we will take follows an old Spanish trade route from the highlands to the jungle. It will be an unforgettable experience to end the tour.



Meriana bernandoi by Jack Lamb

Day 14

Quito

A leisurely drive back to Quito today, making selected stops, before we arrive back in the capital in time for a city tour or some shopping, followed by a farewell dinner.

Day 15

In Flight

Some free time, or maybe the opportunity for a visit to Yanacocha on the slopes of Pichincha overlooking Quito before we leave in the evening on our flight back to Europe.

Day 16

London

We are due back in London during the late afternoon.

Grading

To enjoy the trip to the full you should be reasonably fit and enjoy walking. The time spent up on the Papallacta pass and Chimborazo will be at over 4,000m in altitude.

Flights

Our planned route is through Amsterdam on KLM. We may occasionally use Iberian through Madrid, American Airlines via Miami or British Airways to Miami and then on with American Airlines.

Clothing

Please inspect the separate clothing list, sent to you on booking, thoroughly.

A plastic cape or "poncho" and especially an umbrella is a good idea.

Food & accommodation included in the price

All accommodation and meals are included, except for dinners in Quito. Allow £50.

Extra expenses

Please note that we do not include the following in the cost of this holiday: all items of a more personal nature such as drinks, laundry, tips and souvenirs.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.