

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	San Isidro
Day 12/13	Papallacta
Day 14	Depart Quito
Day 15	Arrive UK



Departs

September/October

Focus

Plants, particularly alpine plants and orchids

Grading

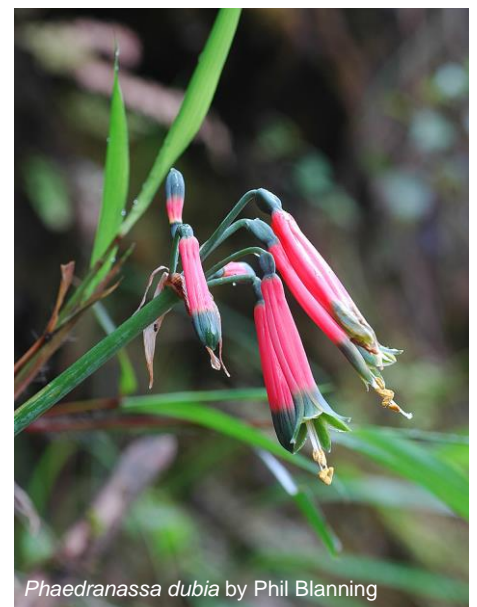
Grade A. Easy day walks only, although sometimes over steep or slippery terrain and at altitude.

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, and Spectacled Bear is a possibility



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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

Fly Quito

We leave the UK 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 Atoac. 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. The city is on a narrow plateau at the foot of the Pichincha Volcano and overflows into two eastern valleys, Los Chillos and Tumbaco. Andean peaks tower around on a clear day, and the sun is bright and strong. The climate is delightful: hence Quito's nickname, the "City of the Eternal Spring". At about 2900m, Quito is the second-highest capital in the world. It is a small city by South American standards, and it is relatively easy to wander around the streets of the colonial downtown without getting hopelessly lost or put off by the distances involved.

Day 2

Baños

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. As we drive through the National Park, we will begin to find alpine

flowers. The most conspicuous element of the alpine flora of the Paramo is the genus *Puya*, an imposing terrestrial bromeliad. *Puya recurvata*, and *P. hamata* will be the highlights of this drive.

After about three hours, we will reach the southern access of the Park and head to Baños in east central Ecuador, where we will have views of another recently active volcano, Tungurahua. Past eruptions have created a violent landscape with geologically recent lava and pyroclastic flows. The Patate Valley on the way to Baños is covered with desert-like vegetation. On the dry slopes of this valley, two rare amaryllis relatives (*Phaedranassa schizantha* var. *ignea* and *P. viridiflora*) can be found. The recent lava flows also host many orchids, mostly with inconspicuous flowers. We may find these plants in flower, including potentially the strange "slipperless" lady's slipper orchid, *Phragmipedium lindenii*, with stringy petals up to a foot long.

Starting tonight, we will have three nights at a lovely hotel, Luna Runtun, a lodge with breathtaking views of Tungurahua Volcano.

Day 3

Baños

In contrast to the arid vegetation west of Baños, the Andean foothills east of town are covered with exceptionally wet cloud forests. Today, we will travel down the Andean slope to the lowland tropical rainforest of Puyo on the edge of the Amazon basin. This forest is rich in aroids, bromeliads, and orchids, and the tree diversity is exceptional.

Our target destination in Puyo is CERFA (Centro de Rescate de la Flora Amazonica). Here, we will enjoy botanizing a sample of the Amazonian forest. It presents a good sample of the plants of Amazonian Ecuador. Some have been brought in as a collection, while others have been allowed to colonize the area and to grow wild. Highlights here are species of plants used by locals: *Mauritia flexuosa*, the buriti, morete or aguaje fruit, is used for food throughout the Amazon; *Geonoma macrostachys* is a source of roofing material in the Amazon; *Carludovica palmata* is the raw material source for weavings such as the Panama Hats. Other notable photographic subjects include colorful bromeliads like *Aechmea penduliflora* and minute orchids in the genus *Lepanthes* and *Ornithocephalus*. After a local lunch experience, we will leisurely drive back to Baños for a second night.

Day 4

Baños

We will spend some time botanizing the roadsides above and below Baños, which have a surprisingly high diversity of range-restricted plant species, including orchids. Some plants hide within vegetation patches within walking distance from the roads. Others are rather conspicuous roadside plants. These latter are sometimes orchids that resemble European species, such as *Habenaria*. Today, we will also interact with local crops, including *Vasconcellea × heilbornii*, a native hybrid, and *Erythrina edulis* and *Tropaeolum tuberosum*, other valuable species often forgotten by our culture.

This vegetation transition zone is a fabulous habitat due to its orchid diversity. 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. Waterfalls appear at every turn of the road. One species we hope to see is *Epipedrum summerhayesii*, a purple and green orchid that only grows on rocks along certain rivers in this area.

Along the roadsides, we shall also look for *Echeverria quitensis*, and an amaryllis relative endemic to Baños, *Phaedranassa tungurahuae*. We return to Baños for a third night.

Days 5

Cuenca

On the road to Cuenca, a few hours from Baños, Chimborazo is our main botanizing stop today. It is the highest point on Earth, as measured from its centre. The broad, flat plains below Chimborazo's snowcap host many alpine plants, including endemic plants such as *Viola polycephala* and *Nototriche hartwegii*. Among the many species of alpinines seen today, there will also be *Valeriana rigida*, *Loricaria ferruginea*, and *Chuquiraga jussieui*. Amidst *Chuquiraga* plants, we may spot a hummingbird endemic to Ecuador, the Chimborazo Hillstar.

Later, we will leave Chimborazo and drive to Cuenca. Along the drive, we will make selected stops to look for species of columnar cacti and *Puya*. In Cuenca, we will stay at the Hosteria Duran for the night.

Day 6

Loja

After a relaxed night and a dip in the thermal springs at our hotel, we drive to Loja in southern Ecuador. At the road's highest elevation, the Paramo's alpine vegetation will offer endemic species in the Gentianaceae family, such as *Gentianella hyssopifolia*, and the Bromeliaceae family, such as *Puya nutans*. One rarity along the way may be an arboreal mistletoe in the genus *Gaiadendron*. In the Río León Valley, we will look for two species, the endemic cactus *Espostoa frutescens* and the bromeliad *Tillandsia tectorum*. These will be, among others, the highlights in this section of our trip.

After making a high-altitude traverse near the village of Saraguro, we will descend to Loja city, 2100m above sea level, in the Cuxibamba Valley. Here, the city enjoys a mild spring-like climate all year. Loja offers breathtaking sunsets, remarkable ecological diversity, and unparalleled hospitality. Tonight, we will stay at the Sonesta Hotel.

Day 7

Vilcabamba

Today, we will make a full-day excursion to some unique forests near Loja on the perimeter of the Podocarpus National Park. This area is famous for its high orchid and bird diversity. One species we expect to find along our drive is a wild individual of *Podocarpus oleifolius*, which gives the name to the Park.

At the distant most point of our drive today, we will visit a private reserve, Tapichalaca. This reserve was purchased by the Jocotoco Foundation during the late 1990s to protect a bird new to science, the Jocotoco Antpitta. The reserve coincidentally also protects many endangered plants in its unique forests. New plant genera to be observed here include *Clusia*, *Schefflera*, and *Weinmannia*.

If the weather allows, we will watch the sunset over the mountains on our way to Vilcabamba. We will spend this night at a pleasant hotel just outside the village. We will stay here for two nights.

Day 8

Vilcabamba

There is an extraordinarily 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! Endemic species we have recorded here in the past include *Halenia pulchella* and *H. longicaulis*, *Fuchsia summa*, *Puya cuevae*, and *Bomarea brachysepala*. Lower down this mountain, we can escape the winds and study the beautiful cloud forest, rich in bromeliads and other epiphytes.

After breathtaking mountain views, colorful birds, and an oversized and unusually colourful buttercup relative, *Ranunculus guzmanii*, we will return to Vilcabamba for the night.

Day 9

Catamayo

After checking out from our pleasant hotel, we will drive to a high-elevation cloud forest in Podocarpus National Park for a picnic breakfast. It is an easy walk from our vehicle to an alpine grassland rich in tropical heathers, bromeliads, and orchids. The drive up to the Refuge in the Park is remote and pristine. It offers opportunities for botanizing as we stroll along a mountain road, where we can be sure that we will be the only botanists on the mountainside.

Ecuador owes its biodiversity to its densely woven patchwork of distinct and often contrasting environments. The dry vegetation we will visit today is strikingly different from the wet forests or the frigid grasslands we have visited. Instead of broadleaved, epiphyte-laden mossy forests, we will visit cactus and desert scrub. After two hours of driving and one or two selected stops, we will come to the highlight of the day: the strange baobab-like "ceibo" trees, *Ceiba trischistandra*, with their fat green trunks and symmetrical crowns. With luck, they may be in flower: an unforgettable sight.

We will spend the night at the Hotel MarcJohn's, close to the airport in Catamayo.

Day 10

Quito - San Isidro

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 by a Spanish conquistador, Francisco de Orellana, to explore the lands east of Quito in search of El Dorado. Instead of El Dorado, Orellana found a passage to the Atlantic through the Amazon forests. Nowadays, this route provides the only direct road access from the country's capital to Ecuador's eastern lowlands.

After cresting the continental divide, we will drop down to the well-preserved, mid-elevation temperate forest called San Isidro. At San Isidro, we will have an unusual walking experience, sauntering through flat,

undisturbed cloud forest. Across the road from the Lodge, we will also have access to a highland wetland. Isolated trees in the old pastures near the Lodge are exceptionally rich in orchids and other epiphytic vegetation. Apart from the epiphytes, at the wetland, *Pitcairnia baezana*, an endemic bromeliad, is also regularly present in flower during our trips. The lovely San Isidro Lodge will be our stay for the next two nights.

Many different species of hummingbirds can also be seen and photographed coming to feed on the sugar water at the lodge feeders and a quick morning walk along the main exit road from the Lodge may produce some additional records of endemic fuchsias, such as *F. orientalis*, and *F. sylvatica*.

Day 11

Guacamayos

Depending on the weather, we may take a day trip to an exceptionally wet cloud forest at the Guacamayos Ridge and beyond. This ridge, a short drive from San Isidro, catches the westward-flowing Amazonian clouds and drains their water to the Amazon basin. The forest at the ridge is a classic super-humid cloud forest with many epiphytes and bryophytes. The plants exhibit many adaptations to handle heavy rain, high humidity, and poor soils. Often, these epiphytic forms take a terrestrial habit at the Ridge due to the poor soils. Two highlights of this section are *Meriania hermandoi* and the carnivore *Utricularia cf uniflora*.



Meriania hermandoi by Jack Lamb

The trail we will explore today follows an old Spanish trade route from the highlands to the jungle. It will be an unforgettable experience to end our stay at San Isidro.

Day 12

Papallacta

First thing in the morning, we leave San Isidro for Papallacta, making a quick stop at Guango Lodge en route. Guango is a sample of a cold cloud forest crossed by rushing white waters. Epiphytic vegetation here takes advantage of the spray of clear mountain water. It is possible to find both *Telipogon* and *Lepanthes* orchids here. After a quick stroll, we will continue on to Papallacta.

Papallacta will be among this trip's most charming overnights, since it is famous for its thermal springs. The area is a small sample of paradise in the Andes. As we get there, the road affords splendid views of a massive snow-capped peak, Antisana, while it winds over the 4,000-metre Papallacta Pass. With good luck, we may find an Andean Condor soaring over the crags.

If weather permits, we will drive up to a complex of communication antennas at 4,500 m and visit a sample of "cushion plants". In these curious solid clumps of vegetation, we will look for the endemic *Xenophyllum*

crissum, dwarf gentians, and other herbs with strange growth forms. These are plants highly adapted to this extreme environment.

We will also spot samples of the enchanting *Polylepis* forests, with their twisted branches and papery-red bark, present above the true tree line, the upper elevational limit for woody plants, where most trees stop growing.

Our accommodation for the night is at the Termas de Papallacta. Around our Lodge, we will explore some moss-covered high-elevation cloud forests along the river, frequently covered with yellow *Odontoglossum* orchids. Besides the unique wilderness, the accommodation 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 relax in the hot water, pleasingly contrasting the chill mountain air!

Day 13

Papallacta

Above Papallacta, high alpine grasslands with patches of elfin forest will be our target today. The vegetation along today's drive offers opportunities to observe an incredible variety of alpine wildflowers. Many belong to familiar European genera like the carnivorous *Pinguicula* or the heather relative *Ceratostema alatum*. Others are strange forms of neotropical plants we have become familiar with along the trip, like the *Puya* relative *Greigia vulcanica*.

A combination of bushes, moss-laden dwarf vegetation, mountain landscapes, and new colorful birds will be the context of our journey today. We will return for a second night at the hot springs for our final night in Ecuador.

Day 14

Quito

This morning, we will drive slowly back to Quito, making selected stops to collect plant sightings we might have missed along the road. We arrive at the airport at lunchtime to check in for flights home.

Day 15

UK

We connect in Amsterdam for onward flights to the UK.

Tour 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 4000m 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.