

Ecuador & the Galapagos Islands – A Deluxe Cruise

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

| | |
|-----------------|---------------------|
| Day 1 | Fly UK to Quito |
| Day 2 | Quito |
| Day 3/16 | Galápagos cruise |
| Day 17 | Quito |
| Day 18 | Antisana or Otavalo |
| Day 19 | Depart Quito |
| Day 20 | Arrive UK |

Extension

| | |
|------------------|---------------------------------|
| Day 18/20 | Sacha Lodge – Rainforest safari |
| Day 21 | Return Quito |
| Day 22 | Antisana/Otavalo & depart |
| Day 23 | Arrive UK |

Departs

January, August, October & November
(see website for specific dates)

Focus

Natural History

Grading

Day walks only. Grade A. Easy and optional, although terrain can be rough underfoot

Dates & Prices

See website (tour code ECU15) or brochure

Highlights

- 28 endemic bird species such as Small Ground Finch
- Led by expert natural history guide, born & raised in Galapagos
- Daily landings at wildlife-rich visitor sites for Giant Tortoise, Blue-footed Boobies & more
- Snorkel in crystal-clear, fish-filled waters with inquisitive young Galapagos Sea Lions



Blue-footed Boobies & Pinnacle Rock on Bartolome



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & 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.

Our exact cruise route around the islands will be confirmed by the National Park shortly before departure, and detailed to you in our final joining instructions.

Day 1

In Flight

We leave the UK in the morning, usually on KLM scheduled services to Quito (via Amsterdam). We will arrive in Quito in the evening and transfer to our comfortable hotel.

* We try to be flexible with flights; if you have a preference for Iberia or KLM, or AA/BA via North America, please let us know upon booking. Regional flights with KLM are also generally available from Bristol, Birmingham, Manchester, Newcastle, Norwich and Southampton. Please state your preference upon booking. It is also possible to fly to Amsterdam and overnight there (at your own cost) to avoid an early departure from the UK. Again, please state your preference upon booking.

We are also able to offer an alternative to the high altitude of Quito by flying to Guayaquil. If this is of interest to you, please tell us when you book.

Day 2

Quito

Today we have free in Quito which 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” or “Place of the Hummingbirds” in the ancient language of Quitus-Caras. Standing at 9,000 feet, Quito is the second highest capital in the world so we would be sensible not to undertake anything too strenuous on our first day. We will have a tour of the main places of interest and the rest of the day will be free for shopping, private exploration of the old city, or birdwatching in the local parks. Quito botanical gardens (10 minute walk from the hotel; small admission fee) and the cable car up to Pichincha are two additional options for free time in the city.

Days 3 – 16

Galapagos Islands

During the morning we transfer to the airport for the flight to Galapagos. For fourteen days we will cruise slowly from island to island in our First Class motor yacht 'Beluga'. We will spend as much time as possible ashore, in order to study the fascinating natural history of these unique islands. As the archipelago is large, and many of the most interesting islands lie on its periphery, we will need to make some fairly long sea voyages. Most of these will be undertaken at night, whilst we are sleeping, but there will also be some daytime sailings, giving you lengthy periods of leisure when you may either relax or watch for seabirds, dolphins and whales.



The Beluga

Our exact itinerary will depend on the program we receive from the National Park Authority. It is important that the scientists carefully monitor the numbers of tourists on each island on any given day. Our itinerary may also depend on weather conditions and group consensus in conjunction with the advice of your leader.

We arrive by plane on Baltra (although the alternative airport on San Cristóbal Island is sometimes used), after a morning flight from Quito via Guayaquil. From here we join Beluga for our first night aboard.



Galapagos Dove

From San Cristóbal we often set off south to ESPAÑOLA (Hood), a spectacular island and the oldest in the archipelago. At Punta Suarez, colonies of Galapagos Sealions line the beach, where we also find large numbers of a particularly colourful form of Marine Iguana. We walk along a cliff-top through colonies of Blue-footed and Masked Boobies, which may have chicks in season and we stand a good chance of seeing a Galapagos Hawk here. Other land birds include three species of Darwin's Finch, Galapagos Dove, Yellow Warbler and the fearless Hood Mockingbird (which is endemic to the island). The latter species is renowned for its close approach, and has even been known to perch on birdwatchers' tripods! During the August cruise, we arrive at a colony of Waved Albatross, which breed nowhere else in the world; they may have young chicks, looking like grey feather dusters! At the far side of the island we reach a cliff, where peculiar Swallow-tailed Gulls nest and we may see Red-billed Tropicbirds and shearwaters. A dramatic blow-hole adds to the interest and charm of one of the most fascinating of the Galapagos Islands.

Famous tales and legends emanate from our next port of call, for FLOREANA was the favourite haunt of pirates! It is the only island to boast a freshwater spring, but its human inhabitants are few. You may like to chance your luck by posting cards and letters in the barrel on Post Office Bay; they should be picked up by a passing ship! At Punta Cormorant we will visit a lagoon inhabited by Greater Flamingoes, which sometimes breed here, and where other coastal birds include White-cheeked Pintail, Black-necked Stilt, Brown Pelican and various waders. Some interesting plants can be found along the shores of the lagoon, including the endemic Cut-leaf Daisy and Scalesia. At the far end



Sally Lightfoot Crab

An inlet called Tagus Cove lies in the north-west of Isabela. It forms a sheltered anchorage and affords splendid views of boobies, Brown Noddies, Galapagos Penguins and the brightly coloured and amusing Sally Lightfoot Crabs. A short but steep walk up the head of the cove is worthwhile for views of Darwin's Crater Lake, where we might see phalaropes, and Volcano Wolf which, at 5,600 feet, is the highest point on the Galapagos Islands. The walk provides good opportunities to see land birds such as warblers, mockingbirds, hawks and

finches including the elusive Woodpecker Finch. We are likely to spend half a day in the area before moving on. Other sites we may visit include Urbina Bay, an area which was suddenly lifted above sea level by volcanic activity in 1954 and has a stranded coral reef. This is a fantastic breeding ground for the Galapagos Flightless Cormorant, and the largest Marine Iguanas in the Galapagos can also be found here. At Elizabeth Bay a mangrove lagoon provides the chance for a peaceful boat ride amongst the eerie creeks, where we may see green turtles, white-tip sharks and rays in the shallow water. There is also a chance of finding the very local and endangered Mangrove Finch here.

of the walk is a fine white sand beach where rays, turtles and sharks are often seen. We may also visit Devil's Crown to snorkel in this shallow flooded crater which has some of the best snorkeling in the archipelago.

ISABELA is the largest of the islands in the archipelago, and in many ways the most fascinating. We will spend three days here, sailing around the back (west) of the island where few tourists ever go. Beautiful deserted coves and occasional pods of whales are our reward.



Sooty-tailed Gull

If possible we will also have the chance to hike to the top of Volcano Sierra Negra surrounded by dramatic volcanic scenery. This involves a bus ride from Puerto Villamil. Up until the mid-noughties an increasing number of feral goats and donkeys had been decimating the natural vegetation of this volcano, causing major problems for the native population of wild tortoises. In 2004 a large scale goat eradication programme was undertaken on Isabella, with dramatically successful results. Lush green vegetation has been re-colonising previously barren slopes which can only be good news for the tortoises. This is the largest and most expensive conservation project yet undertaken in the Galapagos.



Galapagos Hawk

the equator!!

FERNANDINA, the most recently formed of the Galapagos Islands, is a wonderful example of a shield volcano. It has a mangrove-fringed coastline and magnificent lava formations adorned with lava cactus (*Brachycereus*). This is a wonderful island for the naturalist and photographer. There are shallow lagoons where Marine Iguanas and turtles swim; there are nesting Brown Pelicans, Great Blue Herons, Galapagos Hawks and Mangrove Finches, and there is a rocky promontory known as Punta Espinosa where dense colonies of Marine Iguanas, Flightless Cormorants, sealions and Sally Lightfoot Crabs sun themselves! Offshore there is always the chance of seeing Killer Whales, shadowed by large flocks of Audubon's Shearwaters, Noddy Terns and Brown Pelicans and even the endangered Dark-rumped Petrel.

We now sail north around the headland of Cape Berkeley. This is our best chance of seeing whales and dolphins, whilst Galapagos and Madeiran Storm Petrels, tropicbirds and a host of other seabirds are also likely to be seen. We may get a visit from Neptune as we sail over

JAMES (Santiago) Island might be next on our itinerary. Buccaneer Cove is a sheltered bay famed for its association with British pirates and fragments of old pottery can easily be found. The volcanic geology is fascinating here, and the vegetation resembles the thorn scrub of the African Savannah. Darwin's finches, Galapagos Doves, Galapagos Hawks and Painted Locusts are the special attractions. At Puerto Egas we will visit the fur seal "grottos". Galapagos Sealions also occur here, testing your skill at telling these two species apart! Also along the shore we will see Marine Iguanas, crabs and coastal birds such as Whimbrel, Wandering Tattler, American Oystercatcher and Black-bellied Plover.

Espumilla beach, on James Island, has a long, sandy, but wave-swept shore. Behind it is a mangrove thicket and a beautiful lagoon, which sometimes dries out. Flamingoes are sometimes found here, together with White-cheeked Pintail, Black-necked Stilt and numerous migratory waders. Ghost and Fiddler Crabs haunt the muddy shores, whilst Vermillion Flycatchers chase insects amongst the tangle of mangrove trees.



An inquisitive Galapagos Sealion pup

We may have time for a quick look at RABIDA, a small island with a range of land birds. Sealions bask on the red beach and there is some good snorkeling in the clear water.

On BARTOLOME we will ascend a steep slope, aided by a stairway, through an almost lunar landscape to the summit of the island. From this vantage point there is a magnificent view over Pinnacle Rock, often described as the classic Galapagos scene. It is a view that has featured in many books and films. The Gregory Peck film, "The Dove", was located here. As well as being one of the most beautiful and impressive islands, Bartolome is also a paradise for those with a geological interest. Cinder and spatter cones, lava tubes and lava flows comprise this quiet and derelict landscape. There is a sandy beach used by turtles for egg-laying and providing pleasant conditions for swimming and snorkeling around the Pinnacle Rock. It is the only place in the world where it is possible to swim with penguins without the need for a dry suit! We will probably spend half a day on Bartolome before moving on north to Tower.



Magnificent Frigate-bird

It is a very long sea voyage to GENOVESA, back over the equator. Flying fish, dolphins and many seabirds are likely to accompany us. Red-footed and Masked Boobies, Great Frigate-birds and Swallow-tailed Gulls are abundant and breath-takingly confiding. This is an excellent site to find the diminutive Warbler Finch and to study all the birds at a very close range. Photographers will be in their element! We should also see the rare and attractive Lava Gull which also frequents this coast. The colony of storm petrels here is preyed upon by Short-eared Owls.

We sail back down south to NORTH SEYMOUR ISLAND, a small uplifted island with a colony of Blue-footed Boobies and Magnificent Frigatebirds, which can be seen, in season, displaying by inflating their red throat pouches. Galapagos Sealions line the rocky shore and can often be seen "body surfing" the foaming breakers.

Next we sail into Academy Bay to land on Santa Cruz Island at Puerto Ayora, the main town of the Galapagos, with about 6,000 inhabitants. There are a few small hotels and bars but, more importantly, this is where we find the Charles Darwin Research Station with its Giant Tortoise breeding project. The tortoise populations were severely depleted in the past by whalers, pirates and sealers, and in recent times have been further threatened by the introduction of mammals such as dogs, pigs and rats. The project aims to hatch the eggs in captivity and to introduce the tortoises into their natural habitat once they have reached a certain size. Darwin's Finches are common around the tortoise enclosures and some of the more elusive



Short-eared Owl

tree finches may be seen during a trip through the vegetation belts to the highlands. It is often dank and humid up there but, with luck, a wild Giant Tortoise may be found. Other upland birds may well be seen, such as Vermillion Flycatcher, Short-eared Owl and, with luck, the remarkable Woodpecker Finch.

We sail on to SOUTH PLAZAS. Here a jetty ensures a comfortable landing on this small island which has been peculiarly tilted by geological events. Unfortunately we may have to chase some Galapagos Sealions off the jetty as they often find it a perfect spot for basking in the sun. The lower shore holds a dense breeding colony of sealions, which over millennium have worn down the rock to the smooth texture of polished marble. The bare, open ground is dotted with bright red Sesuvium plants and giant cacti. The island supports a dense population of about 300 Galapagos Land Iguanas, which dig burrows in the soft sand and their confiding nature allows them to be easily photographed. At the upper end of the island, sheer cliffs rise above the sea. Along the cliffs cruise Red-billed Tropicbirds, Audubon's Shearwaters and Swallow-tailed Gulls. There is even a colony of bachelor sealions on the cliff top! The breeding ecology of these huge beasts is fascinating: a fully grown sealion will try to secure a harem of females on the island's lower shores, but will soon be ousted by a fresh male. He is then forced to take a rest in the bachelor's colony, which also contains those males too old or young to hold territory.



Giant Tortoises

We may have time for a brief stop - a couple of hours or so – on SANTA FE. This island has a sandy inlet jealously guarded by sealions. We can swim amongst them from our boat. The rocky reef here is a good place to look for the White-tipped Reef Shark! Inland there is an interesting giant Opuntia cactus forest and, if we have time to walk to the island's hilly interior, we may see the endemic Santa Fé Land Iguana or the endemic Galapagos Snake.

Day 17

Puembo

After what promises to be a voyage of a lifetime we sadly leave the Galapagos behind today, boarding the plane for the return flight to Quito. During the flight, if the weather is clear, we will see majestic volcanoes again. In this part of Ecuador they dominate the skyline. After nearly two weeks on the boat, the activities of the afternoon are likely to revolve around a hot soak, a good meal and a comfortable bed. Tonight's accommodation is in a comfortable colonial hacienda a short distance from Quito's new airport.

Day 18

High Altitude birding/Otavalo & Quito

Option 1

Leaving Quito early this morning we drive along the Pan-American Highway, aptly named the "Avenue of Volcanoes", and up to the high slopes of Antisana. Permanently adorned with snow, this is one of the highest active volcanos in the world at just under 20,000 feet. The scenery is most impressive, with Chimborazo, higher but dormant, visible to the south. We will take a few easy walks to look for the varied birdlife (including tanagers, hummingbirds, seedeaters and hopefully one or two Andean Condors) before returning to Quito in the evening. A period of time today will be spent at close to 4,000 metres altitude.



Shining Sunbeam

Option 2

After breakfast in our hotel we head north on the Pan Americana to the market town of Otavalo, 2 ½ hours away. Otavalo has what is considered to be one of the best indigenous markets in South America. The variety and quality of the textiles, not to mention the value-for-money prices, are staggering. We will spend the morning leisurely browsing around the market before taking lunch in one of the nearby haciendas. In the afternoon we will explore the surrounding area, Indian villages and the beautiful lake, Lago de San Pablo, at the foot of the Volcano Imbabura.

Option 1 will appeal to birdwatchers but just a word of warning. It is difficult to predict how you will react to the altitude; some people in the past have struggled due to the thin air. It is an excellent site for many of the high altitude species and the scenery is spectacular on the days that the mountain remains free from cloud.

Option 2 will be more enjoyable for non-birders and general interest people.

Those going to Sacha Lodge fly to the Amazon today.

Day 19

In Flight

More free time this morning before our scheduled flights to Europe depart in the early evening.

Day 20

Arrive UK

We generally arrive in the UK during the late afternoon.

Weather/When to go

The Galapagos Islands can be visited all year round, although the climate can be roughly divided into two seasons: a hot and wet season and a cooler and drier season. The hot season sees sunny days and blue skies interspersed with showers from January to June, the rest of the year is generally cloudier and cooler. Light sea-breezes and the proximity of the cold Humboldt current keep coastal temperatures down to a pleasant 80 deg. F or so. The sea can be quite cool, even cold in some areas, especially in July and August when a “shortie” wetsuit is advisable for prolonged snorkeling sessions. During July and August the winds can be stronger which may pick up the swell, although it is never rough.

The same endemic wildlife will be seen year-round, although the Waved Albatrosses on Española will be absent from approximately January - June. Occasionally a few stragglers are still present on the island in January, but definitely not in February.

Boat

Chartering our own small 16-berth vessel provides a freedom, flexibility and group independence essential to the specialist nature of this holiday. However, to a greater or lesser extent, you will hear the engine on a small vessel. If this will upset you, please take the necessary precautions (ear plugs) or choose to cruise on board a big boat. Note that many people actually find the engine noise and vibration during navigation soporific. Others find that the engine noise disturbs their sleep. The service that we typically receive from the crew on board Beluga is exceptional.



On board Beluga

The deck space and panoramic vistas are excellent, she is air-conditioned throughout and she sits low in the water which helps minimize lateral roll.

The comfortable 8 double cabins are all en suite with lower-berth beds. Some cabins have a double bed and some two singles.





Beluga

I suffer from motion sickness. Will I enjoy a cruise in the Galapagos?

The sea is generally calm around the islands, and the overwhelming majority of clients, whether or not they are previous sufferers of motion sickness, “find their sea legs” after a couple of days on board. If you suffer from sea sickness then we suggest you consider January and particularly February when the sea is at its calmest, rather than August when there is generally more lateral roll.

Is a two-week cruise too long?

Naturetrek is one of only a very few specialist tour companies offering a 2-week cruise around the islands. In two weeks you will have the opportunity to visit all main islands, as well as spending four days around the western side of Isabella and Fernandina, something which is just not possible in one week. Our opinion is that if you’re going to go to the expense of visiting Galapagos, then do it properly and in style! If you’re a wildlife enthusiast or keen photographer, and are sure that Galapagos will be a once-in-a-lifetime trip, then you really must go for two weeks.

Is tourism damaging the islands? Will I see many other boats/tourists?

Tourism is well organised and managed by the park authorities and brings valuable revenue which is used for conservation and research projects by the various authorities who have a say in running the islands. With regard to the fragile ecology of the area there are less than 60 landing sites in the whole National Park, visitor numbers (in total and to each individual site at any one time) are strictly controlled. Your guide and boat crew will ensure that the many park rules and regulations are adhered to. Whilst the fearlessness of the wildlife is renowned, you are not allowed to touch animals or birds in any way, and once on land there are marked trails which must not be deviated from. Naturetrek groups are typically the first to disembark in the mornings at popular landing sites, ensuring that we have the best of the peace and quiet before other groups land. Even at the popular landing sites in the middle of the archipelago, it is unusual to see more than about 10 boats at any given site on any day.

Do I need to be fit?

You need to be mobile but not necessarily fit. There are guides who will assist with embarking and disembarking if you need help, and none of the excursions are strenuous. The longest island walk (apart from the all-day optional hike to Sierra Negra) is about two miles, and this is over the course of three hours or more. Many paths are rocky and

uneven. Some people find walking poles useful. Occasionally we walk on rough lava fields. You should therefore have a good sense of balance and a certain nimbleness; otherwise, during the trickier landings you are free to remain on board the boat to relax.

Can I dive?

The marine ecosystem of the Galapagos is richly diverse and swimming and snorkelling in this environment offers possibilities of seeing turtles, sharks, penguins, many varieties of fish, sea lions and dolphins, to name but a few. Indeed, the snorkelling, which is available on most days during our tour, is one of the highlights of a visit to Galapagos. Diving is highly specialised in Galapagos however and offering one-off dives to keen divers within the party is problematic. Underwater visibility is variable, the water is cold and strong currents and drops offs complicate matters. If you wish to dive therefore and have the relevant experience, you should ideally book on a dedicated diving cruise where dive masters are employed to dedicate the required time to detailed briefs on dive sites and safety, without compromising the time and enjoyment of non-divers in the party.

Clothing

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

Additional expenses

All accommodation and meals are included, except for lunches and dinners in Quito. Allow £50-£60 worth of US Dollars.

Regretfully an increasing and varied number of local taxes are charged to the individual by local Ecuadorian government departments. As these are forever changing, we do not include such taxes in the cost of our Galapagos holidays. All these taxes are charged in US Dollars and are currently as follows:

Tourist tax on entry to the Galapagos is US \$200 per person.

It would also be wise to allow around US \$200 per person for tips to your local guides throughout the tour.

Amazon Extension – Sacha Lodge

Sacha Lodge is one of the best rainforest lodges in the world. It is a wonderful place to stay and experience the Amazon rainforest. The birdwatching is excellent and there is a good chance of seeing some primate and mammal species.

Due to the fact that there are no flights to Coca on Sundays, the post-Galapagos arrangements for those booked on the extension are re-rigged, with the Antisana/Otavalo day occurring after the Amazon.

Day 18

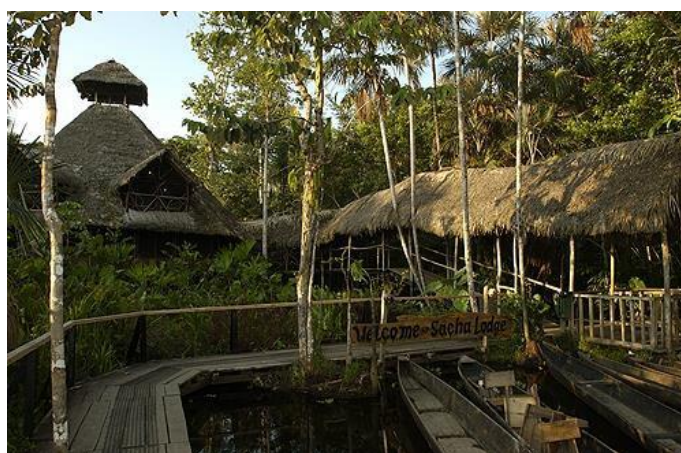
To Sacha

Our flight to the *Oriente* departs from Quito's airport mid-morning. A 35-minute flight takes us over the Andes and down to the port town of Coca, properly named Puerto Francisco de Orellana, after the discoverer of the Ecuadorian

Amazon. The hot, humid jungle air will hit us as we step from the plane. Met by locally-based naturalist guides, we'll be taken to Sacha's private house to use the facilities and grab a quick lunch. From there we will be taken down to the docks where we board a covered motorized canoe for the 2 hour, 50 mile journey downstream to Sacha. The River Napo is Ecuador's principal Amazon tributary and at this point it is about 1/3 of a mile wide. Its waters are sediment-rich and during the dry season huge sandy beaches are exposed. We will look for various birds such as Greater Yellow-headed Vulture, Black and Yellow-headed Caracaras, Cocoli and Capped Herons, Ringed and Amazon Kingfishers and birds of prey as we continue downstream.

Upon arrival at Sacha's 5,000 acre reserve we will take our first walk along a raised boardwalk through dense flooded palm forest where several species of monkey are often seen including Squirrel Monkeys and White-fronted Capuchins.

The path leads to the tranquil blackwater oxbow lake of Pilchicocha where traditional dugout canoes (with paddlers!) await to take us across to the far side of the lake where the lodge lies partially concealed in the rainforest. After a welcome drink we will do some birdwatching around the lodge before sunset. The swampy land around Pilchicocha supports a large group of Hoatzin, that strange Archaeopteryx-like bird, plus Greater and Smooth-billed Anis, Red-capped Cardinal, Black-capped Donacobius, Magpie Tanager, Straight-billed Woodcreeper, Violaceous Jay, Great and Lesser Kiskadees and many more.



Sacha's welcome dock

After our first of Sacha's superb buffet meals we will retire to bed in comfortable cabins with the sounds of the rainforest echoing around us.

Days 19-20

A typical day at Sacha begins at sunrise or earlier with each group deciding on its own wake-up and breakfast times. Morning activities usually finish by about 1130. After a laid-back lunch, a siesta or relaxation time is usually enjoyed during the heat of the day before afternoon activities begin between 3pm and 4pm, unless you've requested a hard-core birding guide, in which case you're likely to be out all day.

The highlights of the lodge are many. An unforgettable morning or afternoon will be spent in Sacha's 43-metre canopy tower. This amazing structure is constructed around a giant kapok tree and affords splendid views of the surrounding rainforest canopy. Toucans, tanagers, flycatchers and raptors abound as well as many highly sought-after canopy-dwelling species such as Plum-throated and Spangled Cotinga, White-browed Purpletuft, Amazonian Umbrellabird and Dugand's Antwren. With some luck, Red Howler Monkeys, Squirrel Monkeys, Pygmy Marmosets and Three-toed



Birding from Sacha's original canopy tower

Sloth may also be seen from the tower. A favourite activity of Sacha's guests is to paddle to or from the tower by dugout canoe along the beautiful tannin-rich blackwater creek called 'orchidia'.

Sacha also has one of the best canopy walkways in western Amazonia, being one of the very few rigid, self-standing suspension walkways in the world. Two of the three towers have observation platforms every 12 metres, making the towers accessible for all. The 900-foot long walkway is suspended at 36 metres above the forest floor and it is designed as a sturdy walkway enabling guests to move along at their own pace while enjoying the spectacular views.



An extensive trail system meandering through both terra-firma and flooded forest provides challenging inner-forest birding for antbirds, foliage gleaners, manakins and woodcreepers. The same trails lead us past many medicinal plants and give opportunities to discuss with our local guides the fascinating ethnobotany and soil ecology of the Amazon basis. Buttress roots, leafcutter ants, a chance encounter with a vine snake, boa, tree frog or an inquisitive family of Dusky Titi or Night Monkeys are all on the menu.

The oxbow lake of Pilchicocha, adjacent to the lodge, offers a wonderful post-walk swim. Piranha fishing (catch and release!), using very basic tackle, is also on offer for those inclined! The lake supports all of the usual Amazonian waterside birds, the star being Hoatzin. A morning or evening dedicated 'Hoatzin paddle' might suit the keener photographers in the party!

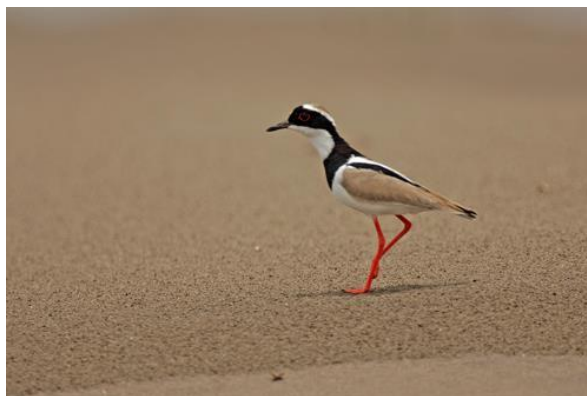


Hoatzin with two chicks

We will also arrange, subject to weather conditions, an early-morning trip to the Yasuni National Park parrot lick, located 30 minutes downstream from Sacha. In ideal conditions (sunny and dry), dozens of parrots and parakeets can be seen eating the exposed clay. Parrots eat a variety of toxic and acidic fruits and the clay acts as an 'antacid' to neutralize these toxins in their bodies. Parrots can be seen gathering around the clay bank between 7am and 8am for a stunning display of sound and colour. We must have dry, sunny conditions though!

On the way back from the parrot lick, keener birders will want to call in on the river islands in the Napo. These ever-changing islands of shifting sand and *caña brava* have their own distinct avifauna with spinetails, flycatchers and, with luck, Castlenau's Antshrike and Grey-breasted Crake.

Another attraction of the lodge is one of Ecuador's largest butterfly farms. The farm exports pupae to butterfly houses and educational centres around the world and we will spend an afternoon in the flying area admiring the butterflies and taking advantage of the photographic opportunities.



Collared Plover on a Napo sand bar

After dark, when the evening frog and insect chorus will be in full swing, a night walk in the forest is a whole new experience again and we shall also take to the waters of Pilchicocha at night to search for the Spectacled Caiman with powerful spotlights. When the sky is clear over Sacha at night, the Milky Way overhead is stunning so some gentle astronomy is on the cards.

In short, there will be plenty to keep us entertained!



Cabin balcony at Sacha Lodge

Please state upon booking whether you'd like a hard core birding guide, or a general naturalist, for your time at Sacha.

Day 21

To Quito

One final walk along the boardwalk through the flooded palm forest will bring us back out to the River Napo for our journey upstream to Coca. Our flight to Quito departs late morning and we should be back in Quito by early afternoon. Time permitting, the rest of the afternoon will be spent at leisure bird watching in a nearby birder's guesthouse, where several interesting species come to the feeders including Scrub Tanager, Giant Hummingbird, Saffron Finch and Black-tailed Trainbearer.

Upon arrival in Quito, anyone opting for Otavalo will be driven north to stay near Otavalo this evening. Everyone else overnights in Quito.

Day 22

Otavalo/Antisana

Option 1

Leaving Quito early this morning we drive to the outskirts of Quito and up to the high slopes of Antisana. Permanently adorned with snow, this is one of the highest active volcanoes in the world at 18,714 feet. The scenery is most impressive, with Chimborazo, higher but dormant, visible to the south. We will take a few easy, short walks to look for the varied birdlife (including tanagers, hummingbirds, ibis and seed-eaters) and a viewing platform provides an excellent opportunity for Andean Condor and possibly Spectacled Bear if we are lucky. A period of time today will be spent at close to 4,000 metres altitude, although we won't be reaching the glaciers and snowline (which provides for stunning scenery if the weather is clear). Lunch is a sit-down affair in a mountain refuge with fantastic panoramic views and a chance again of Andean Condors. We will return to our hotel base in Quito mid-afternoon.



Shining Sunbeam

Option 2

After breakfast we will head north out of Quito towards the market town of Otavalo. Otavalo's indigenous market boasts an impressive array of handcrafted objects (textiles, clothing, artworks, etc.) at bargain prices and makes the perfect place to purchase souvenirs and gifts at the tail-end of your holiday. Bartering is common and so some elementary Spanish is useful although by no means necessary. Located two and a half hours north of Quito, there will be an opportunity to stop en route at a traditional indoor food market, pose for a photo on the equator line with a foot in each hemisphere and enjoy a coffee break with a delicious 'biscocho' (a locally made soft biscuit served with cheese and a *dulce de leche*). Aiming to reach Otavalo before lunch, we will spend about an hour at the market after which we will drive a short distance to the historic Hacienda Pinsaqui where we will enjoy a three-course meal from a menu of traditional Ecuadorian dishes, looking out over the magnificent colonial-style garden. Time permitting, we may also visit a nearby artisan textiles workshop. Alternatively, we can take short walk at Lake Cuicocha (a crater lake at the foot of Cotacachi Volcano) or Peguche Waterfall. We will return to our hotel base in Quito before dinner.

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Option 1 will appeal to birdwatchers but just a word of warning. It is difficult to predict how you will react to the altitude; a small minority of people in the past have struggled due to the thin air. It is an excellent site for many of the high altitude species and the scenery is spectacular on the days that the mountain remains free from cloud.

Option 2 will be more enjoyable for non-birders and general interest people.

Day 23

In Flight

We arrive in the UK during the early evening.

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.