

Venezuela – Oilbirds, Harpy Eagles & Table Mountains

Naturetrek Tour Dossier

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Depart London; arrive Caracas
Day 2	Fly Cumana; Finca Vuelta Larga
Day 3/4	Finca Vuelta Larga
Day 5/6	Caripe
Day 7/9	Imataca Forest Reserve
Day 10/13	La Gran Sabana
Day 14	Puerto Ordaz
Day 15	Fly Caracas
Day 16	Arrive London

Departs

November

Focus

Birds and mammals

Grading

Walking is fairly easy, except for two optional longer hikes up Cerro de Humo and Cerro Negro

Dates and Prices

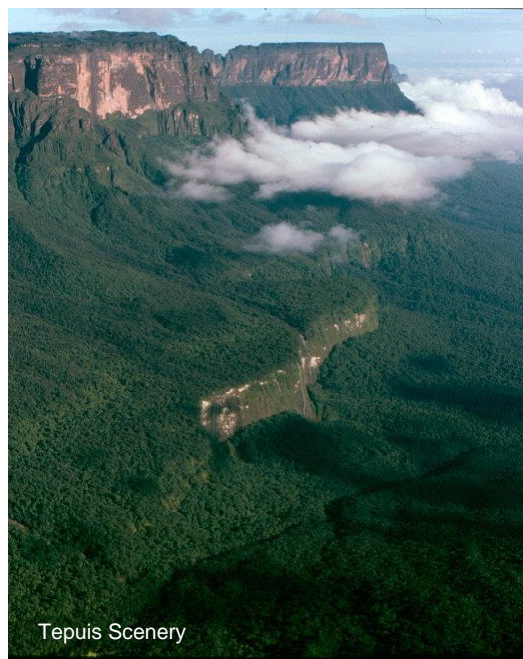
See website (tour code VEN04) or brochure.

Highlights

- Experience unique 'Lost World', Table Mountain scenery
- Visit the world-famous Oilbird cave & search for the mighty Harpy Eagle.



Harpy Eagle



Tepuis Scenery



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

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Chawton

Alton

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NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, changes in local logistics, 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

Venezuela is a classic destination for those interested in the birds of the neo-tropics. The traditional birding circuit in the northwest of the country remains as popular as ever (covered in depth by our bargain tours), but as Venezuela's avifauna runs to nearly 1400 species, many of which cannot be seen in the most frequently visited parts of the country (Henri Pittier National Park, the Llanos and the Andes), this complementary itinerary concentrates on enjoying the many specialties of the eastern half of Venezuela. Arguably the ultimate prize here is the magnificent but rarely seen Harpy Eagle, but the region also features curassows, trumpeters and macaws – indicator species (of virgin habitat) extirpated in many other parts of South America – and a host of Guianan and Table Mountain endemics.

Day 1

Fly Caracas

We depart this morning on a scheduled flight from Heathrow bound for the Venezuelan capital, Caracas, usually via Paris, Lisbon or Madrid, arriving during the early evening. Having collected our luggage we will meet our transport and travel to the outskirts of Caracas, where we will settle in for a welcome dinner and overnight in a coastal inn.

Day 2

Finca Vuelta Larga, Guaraunos

After breakfast we transfer back to the airport for a short flight east to Cumana at the base of the Araya peninsula, a long strip of desert across the Gulf of Cariaco from Cumaná. Araya's industry is salt; people come daily from Cumaná to join the Arayans in salt extraction. The Salinas have been worked since 1499 when they were known as the world's richest and they still produce 500,000 tons a year. Heading east from the airport, we will move through patches of xerophytic vegetation - dry country characterized by candelabra cacti - where Yellow-shouldered Parrot is a target, along with Buffy Hummingbird and Glaucous Tanager as well as the stunning Vermilion Cardinal. This is harsh habitat; there is no shade and full sun protection is called for. In the course of the day we should also see a wide variety of coastal and wetland birds as we make the most of our time in the field with a packed lunch. At the end of the afternoon we'll head to our accommodation in the centre of the peninsula, Finca Vuelta Larga, in time to freshen up before dinner. We spend three nights here at this working Water Buffalo ranch. The Finca functions alongside a comfortable eco-lodge and makes for a fabulous birding base.

Days 3-4

Finca Vuelta Larga, Guaraunos



Masked Trogon

After an early breakfast today we will get straight out birding. The flooded várzea forest nearby holds several local and sought-after species such as the stunning Crimson-hooded Manakin, the smart little Black-dotted Piculet, and the odd Rufous Crab-Hawk. Orange-winged Parrot, Ruby-topaz Hummingbird, Black-throated Mango, White-tailed Goldenthrout, Cream-coloured Woodpecker and Cinnamon Attila are also on the menu. Boat rides through wooded channels will be a feature of our stay here and may provide access to some of the more widespread yet nevertheless spectacular birds like Hoatzin, Scarlet Ibis, and Black-necked Araçari.

We'll also explore the Paria Peninsula, a rocky finger of land jutting out towards the island of Trinidad. The Paria Peninsula National Park covers 375km² of the northern slopes and crest forming the backbone of the peninsula and is best known for its cloud forest. A few fishing hamlets dot the bays at the foot of the coastal range, the highest peak

of which is Cerro de Humo (Smoke Mountain) at 1,356m.

On the Sunday we plan an excursion to Cerro de Humo which harbours the rare endemics Scissor-tailed Hummingbird, White-throated Barbtail and Paria Redstart, as well as White-tailed Sabrewing whose only other home is the island of Tobago. We will leave early on an open-topped truck with staff from the Finca is along a steep unsurfaced road that winds up to the agricultural village of Las Melenas. At the park guard post we will descend and begin our excursion on foot into the cloud forest. There are several trails, some of which undulate, while others ascend steeply. Weather and birding conditions will determine which trails we decide to pursue, but we should be prepared for a full morning's hike on trails which can be steep and muddy. It is unlikely that we will have to walk more than a couple of miles or ascend more than 400m. Having returned to the Finca for a late lunch around 2pm, we'll take stock and possibly plan something more relaxing in the afternoon, targeting our efforts at any species not seen so far.

Day 5

Caripe

After an early breakfast this morning, we depart Vuelta Larga for Caño Ajies. Here we board some small boats in an effort to see the range-restricted Rufous-crab Hawk. During the excursion we'll be looking for a range of other species, including Orange-winged and Yellow-crowned Parrots, Bat Falcon, Rufous and Green Kingfisher, Spotted Tody-flycatcher, Bicolored Conebill, Scrub Greenlet and some antbirds which might include Silver and Black-throated Antbirds together with Black-crested Antshrike.

Next we head south out of Sucre state on a hour two-and-a-half hour drive into Mongas towards Caripe, our base for two nights. The attraction of Caripe is the Parque Nacional El Guacharo, whose Oilbird cave was named Venezuela's first Nature Monument in 1949 and 627 km² were declared a National Park in 1975. The Cueva del Guácharo is named for, and is home to, approximately 18,000 guácharos or Oilbirds. The Spanish name refers to one who sobs or laments – something of an understated description of their extraordinary



Paradise Jacamar

vocalisations! The English name refers to the fact that the young birds were once hunted and rendered for their tremendous fat content – something that continues on a very small scale today where they are not protected. The adult bird weighs about one-third that of the young, the difference being solid fat. The young fatten on oil-rich nuts of palms and wild avocados, and at adulthood purge the oil by eating the fruit of the cobalonga tree. This unique bird, which has a wingspan of a metre, has several features found in no other bird. It is the only bird known to fly in complete darkness, finding its way like a bat by the echo of sounds made by clacking its beak.

Having checked into our accommodation, we'll drive to the cave where we will hopefully witness one of the great spectacles of the

natural world when we see the mass exodus of these amazing creatures as darkness falls. Just after 6pm, the Oilbirds should start to leave the cave in their thousands!

Day 6

Caripe

The slopes of Cerro Peru are the home of the endangered Grey-headed Warbler and we will search the few remaining patches of habitat for this species today. The endemic Venezuelan Sylph should be seen fairly easily. White-throated Barbtail is a possibility here too and other tantalizing birds like Rufous-shafted Woodstar, Guttulated Foliage-Gleaner and White-tipped Quetzal are also present. After an exciting morning's birding we will head back to the oilbird cave.

The guided visit inside the cave is optional, but it's rare that anybody opts to miss out! The oilbird is the only nocturnal bird that is not carnivorous and it eats only on the wing, grabbing food in its beak. There has been much speculation, often conflicting, about the habits of the Oilbird. The birds were once thought to fly as far as Brazil in their nightly search for the 32 kinds of fruit that make up their diet. It is now thought that they fly no more than 50km. Oilbirds live in a number of other caves, 30 to 87 by various counts, and share their home with other cave-adapted creatures, including fearless smooth-furred brown rats. Bats, unable to manage a peaceful coexistence, live in their own section of the cave. This is the Hall of Silence, so named for the abrupt absence of bird sounds. The entrance is a bottleneck through which the birds cannot pass. The cave has been known to Europeans since 1660. In 1799 Alexander von Humboldt, the famous German explorer, visited the cave and eloquently described and named the Oilbirds. His Indian guides would only permit him to go as far as the entrance to the Hall of Silence; to them the entrance to the world of the dead. In 1953 electric lights were installed. The birds abandoned the cave in great numbers, and only returned when the lights were removed.

After a full guided visit, we return to our guest house at Caripe for a second night.

Day 7

Rio Grande, Imataca Forest Reserve

This is a full travel day as we head south, deep into the interior to the great rainforests of Rio Grande, situated in the lower reaches of the Sierra de Imataca. We first drive south towards the River Orinoco, crossing it by the new and impressive Orinoquia Bridge where we will likely stop for a picnic lunch and admire the Orinoco. After that we will pass Puerto Ordaz and head south and east towards the Sierra de Imataca. On arrival in El Palmar we settle into our base for three nights, the Parador Taguapire, a basic inn that is an obligatory stop for visiting birders (do not be fooled by the word Parador!).

Days 8-9

Rio Grande, Imataca Forest Reserve

The rainforests of the Rio Grande region of the Sierra de Imataca (situated in north-eastern Bolivar state) are home to a rich avifauna and in spite of heavy logging, provide some of the best forest birding in Venezuela. Immense, uninhabited rainforests stretch out from El Palmar (where most of the logging is currently taking place) to the Atlantic coast. One of the main attractions here is that most powerful of raptors, the legendary Harpy Eagle. Several regular nests, situated high in the huge ceibo trees, are known from the surrounding area and so we have perhaps the best chance anywhere in the world (providing local contacts have located an active nest) to observe this formidable creature in all its glory. Logging roads and tracks bisecting the forest provide excellent opportunities to look for interesting tree top species such as Dusky, Black-headed and Red Fan Parrot, Green and Black-necked Aracaris, Ferruginous-backed Antbird and the spectacular Pompadour Cotinga. The forest interior will merit plenty of attention too, where army ant swarms are often encountered and we have a good chance of finding White-plumed Antbird with its bizarre facial tufts and a host of other ant-following birds.

Day 10

Las Claritas

Making the best possible use of the key early morning hours, we will aim to sweep up this morning, concentrating on finding any species not seen thus far.

After lunch we'll set off for the La Escalera region. As we approach our destination, the sheer walls of our first Table Mountain – the Sierra de Lema – will loom in the distance. Our base for the next 4 nights is the delightful Barquilla de Fresa <http://www.strawberrybirds.com/> which is one of South America's birding Meccas. Our wonderful hosts, Henry and Magaly, have long catered to birders and Ted Parker was one of their earliest guests. As an ex-miner Henry is always eager to talk about the need to conserve this unique region of the planet and just as keen to recount tales of past celebrity visitors or to point out a new bird on his property.

Days 11-13

Las Claritas

Eastern Venezuela's most spectacular morphological feature are the Tepuis, or Table Mountains; towering sandstone outcrops that stick out of the jungle, topped by extensive plateaus inhabited by a wonderful array of endemic birds and plants, where mighty waterfalls plunge from the table-like summits into green abysses far below. Hearing the first reports from the summits of these mountains by British explorers, Conan Doyle

used this locale as the background for his story 'The Lost World', which depicted explorers discovering dinosaurs on top of these enormous, table-topped mountains.

With three full days in the area we will look to maximize our time to explore the different ecosystems in the vicinity. Three splendid birding areas include the forested slopes of the Tepuis on the road known as La Escalera, the grasslands of La Gran Sabana and the lowland Guianan rainforests of the Las Claritas area. Our exact plans will remain flexible according to weather, bird activity at the time and what we have seen thus far.



Crimson Topaz

A huge rock called La Piedra de la Virgen marks the start of La Escalera, the escarpment leading up onto Gran Sabana. Providing the weather is clear as we ascend the road, we will enjoy superb views of steep-sided, flat-topped Tepuis rising like giants out of the windswept forest and steppe land which stretches to the horizon. Amongst the dense tropical foliage here reside such gems as White and Bearded Bellbirds and Pompadour Cotinga. Another stunning cotinga, Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock, should be seen too along with a variety of Tepui endemics such as Tepui Parrotlet, Fiery-shouldered Parakeet, Blue-cheeked Parrot, Tepui Swift, Rufous-breasted Sabrewing, Copper-tailed Hummingbird, Velvet-browed Brilliant, Peacock Coquette, Tepui Spinetail, White-throated Foliage-gleaner, Roraiman Barbtail, Roraiman Antwren,

Streak-backed Antwren, and Brown-banded Antpitta. Other remarkable fruiteaters are present here too, including Red-banded Fruiteater, Rose-collared Piha and Scarlet-horned Manakin; all sought-after regional endemics. Other Tepui endemics might include Orange-bellied and Olive Manakins, Ruddy Tody-Flycatcher, Chapman's and Black-fronted Tyrannulets, Flutist Wren, Tepui Greenlet, Tepui Redstart, Roraiman Warbler, Olive-backed Tanager, Golden-tufted Grackle, Tepui Brush-Finch and Greater Flowerpiercer. Finally, at the top of the escarpment, the forest gives way to grassland and on La Gran Sabana we will look for Tepui Goldenthrroat and Great Elaenia as well as more widespread open country species.

Our charming lodge has an enviable location and we will search nearby for the bizarre Capuchinbird, whilst the forest edges and feeders at the lodge often produce relaxed sightings of Crimson Topaz, surely one of the world's most stunning hummingbirds. In fact, dozens of typical lowland forest species, from Cotingas to Toucans and Antbirds to Puffbirds can be enjoyed, beer in hand, from the deck of the lodge!

Day 14

Puerto Ordaz

One final morning around Las Claritas to look for species we may have missed, or to re-visit favourite spots, or simply to relax around the hummingbird feeders. After lunch we drive to Puerto Ordaz, and a comfortable international hotel for the night.

Day 15

Puerto Ordaz/Caracas

We transfer to the airport today for a flight back to Caracas in time to connect with our onward flight to Europe.

Day 16

London/Fly Canaima

We will arrive back at Heathrow in the afternoon.

Angel Falls Extension

Contact us for pricing.

Day 15

Puerto Ordaz/Caracas

For extension participants, the tour continues with a flight to Canaima. We will take a scheduled charter flight to the indigenous Pemon village of Canaima. The flight takes about an hour and, weather permitting, we may be able to overfly the Angel Falls en route. On arrival, we will check in and then explore the area around the lodge, beginning with the Canaima Lagoon, before lunch. The afternoon will be spent on a short excursion to Toad Falls on the far side of the Lagoon. **Note – only a small bag/holdall can be taken on the extension. Main baggage will remain in a safe lock up in Puerto Ordaz.**

Day 16

Angel Falls

This morning, we will breakfast early and prepare for a full day excursion to the Angel Falls. We will leave the camp at 5am and board a Pemon *curiara*, which is a type of traditional canoe, but this will be powered by an outboard motor. After travelling up the beautiful river canyon in this way and making the hour's trek to the Falls, we will enjoy a barbecue lunch before returning for a 6pm dinner. The river trip is a good way to appreciate the beauty of the canyon as well as to observe wildlife.

Day 17

Angel Falls

Our final morning at Canaima will be flexible. There will be a chance for early morning birding around the camp (there are areas of forest, scrub, savannah and moriche palm swamp within easy walking distance), or souvenir shopping, or a half-day excursion to a nearby waterfall or even an aerial visit to the Angel Falls (optional). After lunch we will fly back to Puerto Ordaz once more. On arrival, there may be time for a visit to the impressive La Llovizna falls. We will have dinner and spend the night in the Puerto Ordaz Best Western.

Day 18

Canaima/Caracas

After breakfast we will take a one hour commercial flight to Caracas where you will check in for your international flight back to Europe.

Day 19

London

You will arrive back at Heathrow in the afternoon.

Tour Grading

To carry out all the activities in the itinerary, one should be reasonably fit and used to walking distances of two to three miles at least. However, most of the itinerary can be enjoyed by people who are not strong walkers. As in most birding activities, a large part of the day will be spent on foot and there will be early starts.

Weather

The climate in Venezuela varies enormously, depending on the region and the altitude. On this itinerary we can reasonably expect warm to hot weather with high humidity while in the lowlands and warm to cool conditions in the mountains of the Paria Peninsula, Caripe Highlands and Escalera. We will generally not be birding in locations exposed to the sun, except on the Araya Peninsula where shade is scarce. Rain may fall in Eastern Venezuela during any month and even peak dry season tours can be extremely wet. It is therefore important to be prepared for rain at all times. However, with some luck we usually have to contend with just short afternoon showers which can be very productive for birding.

Clothing

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

Food & accommodation included in the price

All accommodation and meals are included. Most accommodation is en suite, although at Finca Vuelta Larga and at Barquilla la Fresa the total number of rooms is limited and we cannot guarantee single occupancy rooms in these locations.

Extra expenses

Please note that we do not include the following in the cost of this holiday: airport taxes (currently approx \$40 to be paid in Bolivars on the international departure from Caracas) and all items of a more personal nature such as drinks, laundry 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.