

**ECUADOR: ANTISANA; GUANGO LODGE &
A WEEK AT SACHA LODGE
NOV 2-13, 2018**

Birding trips to the Amazonian basin were once wretched affairs marked by sub-standard accommodations, lengthy slogs through ankle-deep mud, terrible food hordes of ravenous mosquitoes and a plethora of health risks. However in recent years, in the nation of Ecuador, long a leader in the eco-tourism industry, several comfortable and easily accessible lodges have begun operating. The presence of these lodges and the cushy amenities they offer has removed much of the unpleasant stigma long associated with Amazonian holidays and made visits to the rich biome something even casual travelers can now consider.

Sacha Lodge is perhaps the jewel of these new eco-lodges and offers its guests both luxurious comfort and access to a variety of avian rich Amazonian habitats where some of the region's rarest birds can be found. This tour offers participants an opportunity to stay at Sacha Lodge for 7 nights, plenty of time to explore the diverse ecosystems in the area, which include Yasuni National Park, extensive areas of varzea (seasonally flooded forest), oxbow lakes and Napo River islands. Sacha is also famous for its canopy towers (there are 6 separate towers owned by the lodge), which allow visitors access to a level of the forest inhabited by birds that are almost never seen well from the ground. There are also 2 parrot clay licks accessible from Sacha where observers can get close views up to 8 species of psittacids. Sacha is a treasure trove for birders looking to add rare Amazonian species like Lanceolated Monklet, Chestnut-belted Gnatcatcher, Orange-crested Manakin, Collared Puffbird, Scarlet-shouldered Parrotlet and Rufous-headed Woodpecker to their life lists. The fact that they can now seek such seldom encountered species while sleeping in a comfortable bed and eating delicious meals, makes it an even more inviting venue and a place that should be on every traveling birders bucket list.

Sacha Lodge is located on the north bank of the Napo River, one of Ecuador's largest rivers and a major tributary of the Amazon. Indeed, when one is traveling on the Napo its sheer size and breadth is a bit overwhelming and, at times, gives one the feel of being on a large reservoir or lake due to the distances between its opposite shores. Reaching the lodge is itself an adventure and begins with a 45-minute flight from Quito to the frontier town of Coca. The next transport mode is a large motorized boat, which carries passengers down-river for 2.5 hours to the disembarkation point for Sacha Lodge. After leaving the boat, it is a 30-minute walk along a well-maintained riverbank trail (some of which is an elevated boardwalk) to a narrow blackwater inlet, where we board dugout canoes for the final 20 minutes of the journey, finally arriving at the lodge which is situated on a lovely Amazonian oxbow lake.

Once at the lodge, a network of trails offer easy access to the wealth of Amazonian habitats and to the best complex of canopy towers anywhere in South America which opens an entirely new bird-watching experience to Sacha's guests. Some of the unique habitat systems that are accessible from Sacha's trail system include drier upland

forest (terre firma), seasonally flooded forest (varzea), Mauritia palm swamp, riverbanks, islands and sandbars and blackwater streams and inlets. The latter is accessed by a system of canoe trails that afford visitors the chance to rare species like Zigzag Heron and Dot-backed Antbird while being leisurely paddled down the narrow waterways by native Quechua guides.

The bird list for Sacha Lodge is now in excess of 500 species making it the number one Ebird hotspot in all of Ecuador, quite a credential in a country so rich in avifauna many with so many incredible birding venues. Though it is not possible to list all of the species that are possible for one to see during a visit to Sacha, some of the regularly occurring birds include Marbled Wood-Quail, Slender-billed Kite, Hoatzin, Crested Owl, four species of jacamars, Golden-collared Toucanet, Chestnut-capped and Collared puffbirds, Scarlet-crowned and Lemon-throated barbets, four species of aracarís, Cream-colored Woodpecker, White-bellied Spinetail, Black-tailed Leaf-tosser, Long-billed Woodcreeper, Castelnau's Antshrike, 10+ species of antbirds, White-browed Purple-tuft, Plum-throated and Spangled cotingas, Wire-tailed Manakin, Gray Elaenia, Ringed Antpiper, Cinnamon Attila, Pink-throated and Black-capped Becards, Black-capped Donacobius, Lawrence's and Hauxwell's thrushes, Cacqueta Seed-eater and an overwhelming variety of colorful tanagers, honeycreepers and dacnises....and these are just the expected species! A long list of seldom seen species has also been recorded at Sacha and they include species like Agami Heron, Buckley's Forest-Falcon, Long-tailed Potoo, Undulated Antshrike, White-plumed Antbird, Purple-throated Cotinga, Amazonian Umbrellabird and Yellow-shouldered Grosbeak. Between the expected and the unexpected, you're sure to accumulate a long list of birds during your visit to Sacha!

In addition to 7 nights at Sacha Lodge, this tour also will spend two nights at Guango Lodge, located on the east slope of the Andes where hummingbird feeders attract nearly 20 species including Mountain Velvetbreast, Sword-billed Hummingbird and Tourmaline Sunangel, and Torrent Ducks are commonly seen lounging on rocks in the nearby river. Guango also has a small but productive trail system where birders can find species like Gray-breasted Mountain-Toucan, Grass-green Tanager and Slaty Brush-Finch. Guango also offers easy access to the high Andes at Papallacta Pass where Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe, Ecuadorian Hillstar, Many-striped Canastero and other paramo denizens can be found.

Finally, the tour will also spend a morning at the high-elevation Antisana Reserve east of Quito where Andean Condors and Carunculated Caracara roam the skies and flocks of the rare Black-faced Ibis feed on the grassy paramo expanses.

PHYSICAL REQUIREMENTS & PACE OF THE TOUR

Although I recognize that easy is a relative term, in general this is not an overly difficult trip physically and one that anyone in reasonable good physical condition should be able to negotiate.

Days will have an early start with breakfast served before sunrise, followed by a birding excursion either on foot or by canoe. On most days we will return to the lodge for lunch and for a few hours of rest during the heat of the day, before concluding the daylight hours with either another trail walk or canoe trip. On a couple of days we will carry a box lunch and plan to return to the lodge later (mid-afternoon or so), and we may make a couple of night excursions for owls, nightjars and nocturnal mammals. Since we will be close to the equator, sunset is quite early and as such these evening forays will be done before dinner allowing everyone plenty of time for a good night of sleep.

The terrain around the lodge is mostly flat and level and the trails are very well maintained by Amazonian standards. The most strenuous walking activity will be climbing the stairs to reach the canopy tower platforms, some of which are equivalent to climbing fourteen flights of stairs. However, when we climb a tower we will stay on the platform for several hours in a stationary position, so participants can take as long as they like to make the climb and will have ample time to rest and recover once they reach the top. Most the day hikes will be 2-3 miles in length although we may walk up to 4 miles on the days we stay out longer. Since we will be birding, these walks will be done at a very slow pace with frequent stops.

The weather will be hot and humid if it is sunny; if there is cloud cover it can be surprisingly cool. It will be important to carry water to stay hydrated during hikes, but other than that and your optics, it won't be necessary to carry a lot of additional weight. The trails themselves are almost entirely flat, although the ground is uneven and there are the usual rainforest hazards of roots, fallen logs etc. to watch out for. Since we will be birding, we will often spend several minutes standing in one place looking for or attempting to call in a bird. This will make the overall hike easier, but will also increase the overall length of time that we are on our feet. In fact, this latter fact may be the most difficult aspect of the tour for some people as spending an entire morning standing can become quite tiring.

There is one trail across the Napo River that is a bit higher and involves a few steeper sections of trail and requires a bit more stamina and endurance. This portion of the property has several unique birds not available elsewhere around the lodge, but we will only do this if it is dry and at a very slow pace to accommodate everyone in the group. With 2 guides offering helping hands and moving at a slow pace, this hike should be no problem for most people. However, if anyone decides to opt out for whatever reason, there is a shelter with comfortable seating near the trailhead with a view of an excellent parrot lick that will surely keep you entertained while the group is on the trail. Also, people with questions about their physical ability to participate should remember that Sacha is an extremely comfortable lodge and a great place to rest and relax for anyone who wishes to excuse themselves from a particular excursion or activity. The wooden boat dock at the edge of the water offers an excellent view of the marsh lake margins and there is a small open-air platform above the dining hall with good views of the palm canopy and marsh.

All of the trails around the lodge are quite flat. As mentioned earlier, there are some on the south side of the Napo that have steeper sections. The condition of the trails will depend largely upon recent rainfall amounts, but these are not trails that involve slogging through ankle-deep mud that sucks your boots off. Most of the trails offer firm footing with a few muddy sections if there has been a lot of rain. Some of the trails cross permanently wet areas, and when this is the case there will be narrow bridges with either handrails, or poles driven into the ground on both sides of trail offering handholds. There is also a long boardwalk between the Napo River and the lake near the lodge that we will walk several times to reach the river for boat excursions. Like most boardwalks, this can be slippery if it's wet, but there are handrails along most of its length for support. However, there are some sections that lack handrails, but there is a center strip of plastic mesh that provides surer footing in these places.

For several of our excursions, and for our arrival to and departure from the lodge, we will need to board canoes to cross the lake between the lodge and the boardwalk to the Napo. The boats are stable and made of fiberglass and are boarded from a wooden dock. To get in and out requires a good sense of balance, but again with a helping hand from the guides and the boatmen, it shouldn't pose a problem for most people. The boats themselves are 20+ feet long and have bench seats with cushions making them surprisingly comfortable for sitting. We will use these canoes several times to explore waterways emanating from the lodge. The boat we use to travel on the Napo is much larger and wider with a canopy cover and seats with backs. Boarding and disembarking at Coca is from a permanent concrete dock and is quite easy; at the lodge it will involve either a wet landing in 6-12 inches of water or a dry landing on a sandy bank. This again will require a decent sense of balance, but there will be plenty of people available to offer help to anyone who needs it.

We will spend a couple of mornings and possibly an afternoon birding on the canopy platforms. One platform is 130 feet above ground and constructed among the limbs of a giant rainforest tree. It is reached by a metal, spiral stairway with handrails available during the entire ascent. The platform is large and very sturdy with room for a dozen people as well as several scopes. There is plenty of room to move around and for anyone bothered by heights, is large enough to allow you to stand well away from the railing's edge and still get excellent views of the surrounding treetops. The other three platforms are also built of metal and reached by metal stairways with hand railings. They are connected by canopy walkways that are slightly wobbly when walking upon them, but are two feet wide and have sturdy mesh netting on the sides that make it impossible for anyone to fall out. The only time we will use these walkways would be to move from one platform to another. The great majority of our time on the platforms will be spent standing and looking for canopy species, which are abundant and spectacular. The canopy platform experience is certain to be a highlight of the tour for everyone.

Please feel free to contact me if you have additional questions about these physical requirements or your ability to participate in this tour.

DAILY ITINERARY

Friday November 2, Day 1, Arrival in Quito: Most major airlines offer daily flights to Quito from US cities including Atlanta, Miami and Houston. Most flights arrive in the late evening. Regardless of your arrival time, there will be a driver holding a placard with your name on it in the arrival terminal. After you have cleared customs and immigration and enter the arrivals hall, look for your driver and they will transfer you to the Garden Hotel San Jose about 25 minutes from the airport. Because of the normal late arrival times, dinner is not included for this night, so either plan to eat something on the plane or at the airport when you arrive. Night near the airport.

Saturday November 3, Day 2, Reserva Antisana and to Guango Lodge: After an early breakfast at the hotel, we will board our bus and drive east through the inter-Andean valleys to the high elevation Antisana Reserve. We will probably make a stop or two before reaching the reserve in an attempt to see a few species restricted to the inter-montane areas of Ecuador. These will include Giant Hummingbird, Blue-and-yellow Tanager, Rusty Flowerpiercer and the impressive Black-tailed Trainbearer. The reserve itself is a high plateau vegetated by a mix of shrubby paramo and elfin Polylepis groves. One of our key targets here is the Black-faced Ibis, a high elevation specialist that will be available nowhere else on the trip. Antisana is also a great place for Andean Condor and we will keep our eyes to the sky for this magnificent endangered raptor. Other species at Antisana will be Black-winged Ground-Dove, Carunculated Caracara, Many-striped Canastero, Aplomado Falcon, Paramo Pipit, Andean Lapwing and Cinereous Harrier. After enjoying a box lunch at the edge of a paramo lake where we can see Yellow-billed Pintail, Andean Teal and Silvery Grebe, we will drive over Papallacta Pass and down the east slope to Guango Lodge. The lodge provides cozy accommodations and a large sitting area in the restaurant where a roaring fire takes the edge off of the cool mountain evenings. There is also has an incredible hummingbird feeding station that attracts 20+ species including Sword-Billed Hummingbird, Mountain Avocetbill, Chestnut-breasted Coronet and Collared Inca. Night at Guango Lodge.

Sunday November 4, Day 3, Papallacta Pass and Guango trails: After another early breakfast, we'll drive about 45 minutes to Papallacta Pass where we'll leave the main highway and work our way up a gravel drive eventually to an elevation of over 12,000 feet. The treeless, grassy paramo here hosts a variety of high elevation birds and this will be our only chance to see them. One of our primary targets here, and the species that brings many birders to Papallacta, is the cryptic Rufous-bellied Seedsnipe. The seedsnipe is actually quite attractive, but blends so well with its paramo habitat that it can be virtually invisible even when just a few feet away. Other high elevation birds on our wish list at Papallacta will include Variable Hawk, Ecuadorian Hillstar, Purple-backed Thornbill, White-chinned Thistletail, Andean Tit-Spinetail, Plain-capped Ground-Tyrant and Brown-backed Chat-Tyrant. We'll return to Guango Lodge for lunch and will then spend the afternoon walking the trails, checking the river for Torrent Duck and watching the show at the hummingbird feeders. Some of the birds available on trails at Guango include Buff-breasted Mountain-Tanager, Black-billed Mountain-Toucan, Powerful

Woodpecker, Pearled Treerunner, Turquoise Jay and Chestnut-crowned Antpitta. Night at Guango Lodge.

Monday November 5, Day 4, Guango Lodge and transfer to Garden Hotel San Jose:

After a final morning birding around Guango Lodge, we will transfer back to the Garden Hotel San Jose to reorganize our luggage and prepare for our flight to Coca and our visit to Sacha Lodge. Night in Puenbo.

Tuesday November 6, Day 5, Flight to Coca and travel to Sacha Lodge:

After breakfast we will transfer directly to the domestic terminal at Quito's airport for our short flight to the frontier oil town of Coca on the banks of the Napo River. The flight usually takes about 45 minutes and if the weather is clear provides breathtaking views of some of the snow-capped volcanoes in Ecuador's Andean range. We will wear our birding garb for the trip, including boots, as once we board the boat to Sacha we will begin birding as we head toward the lodge. We may also need boots for a possible wet landing once we reach Sacha and for our walk on the boardwalk to the canoe launching point. Upon landing in Coca we will be transferred by bus to the town dock, which is about a 15-minute drive from the airport. We will have lunch at the dock before boarding the boat and there will be bathrooms available near the restaurant. The boat itself is a covered, motorized vessel with seat with backs, although the comfort level may begin to dwindle near the end of the 2.5 trip to the landing point. After landing we will begin birding in earnest as we walk the boardwalk trail to the canoe launch. Species possible along the trail include Swallow Tanager, Mottle-backed Elaenia, White-eared Jacamar, Spot-breasted Woodpecker and Masked Crimson Tanager. Upon reaching the lodge we'll receive a welcome drink and a short orientation. The lodge has an excellent restaurant, a full-service bar, hot-water showers and private, modern bathrooms. Electricity is provided by a generator, but its distance from the lodge minimizes any noise disturbance and it operates all night, so lights and ceiling fans are available 24 hours a day. The cabanas are nestled into forested niches that are surprisingly free of insects and afford evening choruses of tree frogs, cicadas and Tawny-bellied Screech-Owl. Night at Sacha Lodge.

Wednesday-Sunday November 7-11, Days 6-10, Sacha Lodge:

Per the above information, we will start each morning at Sacha with a pre-dawn breakfast followed by a morning hike or canoe excursion. On most days we will return to the lodge for lunch and to rest for a couple of hours before going on another late afternoon birding foray. Rubber boots or NEOS will be necessary for all of our excursions to protect us against mud, sharp roots, bugs, briars etc. Although the lodge has a variety of boots available for use in various sizes, using them for an entire week is probably not a good plan as there is no guarantee that they will have your size and the support provided is minimal. It is far better to bring your own boots to ensure your comfort and stability on the trail. We will bird a variety of habitats while at Sacha including varzea, terre firma, river islands and sandbars and inland waterways by canoe. We will also visit a clay lick frequented by large numbers of psittacids and spend ample time birding from the canopy platforms. Nights at Sacha Lodge.

Monday November 12, Day 11, Transfer from Sacha back to Quito: After a final breakfast at Sacha Lodge, we will make the return trip back to Coca for a flight back to Quito. Upon arrival we will transfer to the Garden Hotel San Jose to reorganize our luggage, have a final dinner together and prepare for our flights home. Those opting to take late night flights home tonight will have the use of a hotel room for showering and repacking until it is time to transfer to the airport. Night in Puembo near the airport.

Tuesday November 13, Day 12: Flights home for those who spent the night.

TRIP COST: The price of this tour is \$3495 double occupancy from Quito. The quoted price includes all meals beginning with breakfast on November 3 and ending with dinner on November 12, eleven nights of accommodations (three nights in Puembo, two nights at Guango Lodge and six nights at Sacha Lodge), all ground transportation during the tour, airport transfers in Quito and Coca, guide service provided by local guides at Sacha and during the Guango Lodge stay as well as by Jan Hansen, domestic round trip airfare from Quito to Coca and any entrance fees during the tour. It does not include round trip airfare between your originating destination and Quito, optional tips to guides and drivers, laundry service, alcoholic beverages. The single supplement for the tour is \$975. Accommodations at Sacha are limited and we will make every effort to guarantee single accommodations there for those requesting them, but they cannot be guaranteed. If single rooms at Sacha are unavailable for anyone, the single supplement for the remainder of the tour will be \$250.

REGISTRATION: A \$500 deposit and a completed and signed registration form are necessary to register for this tour. If you register by email the deposit and paperwork must be received within 10 days of the email in order to secure a place. Final payment will be due 90 days before departure (August 3 2017). Final invoices will be sent out in July 2017.

TRIP INSURANCE: Trip insurance is strongly suggested in the event that you need to cancel after you have registered. Tour deposits and remittances have to be sent to Sacha well in advance of the tour and any cancellations made within 90 days of departure cannot be refunded in full. The tour registration form details the refund policy, but cancellations within 60 days of the tour will be limited to the amount that can be recouped from the various vendors and cannot be determined until that time. Trip insurance will be your safeguard against such contingencies.

LUGGAGE LIMITATIONS: For the flights between Coca and Quito, you will only be allowed to check one bag weighing no more than 44 pounds. Since we will need warm clothing for the high elevation birding around Quito, we have arranged for participants to store excess baggage at the Garden Hotel San Jose while we are at Sacha Lodge.

YELLOW FEVER: It is recommended that all travelers to Sacha Lodge provide **proof of yellow fever vaccination** upon arrival at the airport at Coca, although this has not

been enforced in recent years. Previously, the vaccine was considered good for ten years. As of July 2016 the vaccine is considered valid for the lifetime of the vaccine according to the CDC. Despite these recent changes, it is uncertain whether all countries will adopt this change. Please consult with your physician about whether it is appropriate for you to receive the vaccine or the 10-year booster (there are contraindications for some individuals). People over 70 years of age are generally not given the Yellow Fever vaccine in the US due to possible severe side effects. If you are in this category, a letter stating such from your doctor will suffice for documentation. Be aware that you are unlikely to need any proof of yellow fever vaccination and that yellow fever is extremely rare anywhere in Ecuador. This is simply a precaution in the event that you requested to show proof of the vaccine.

HEALTH CONCERNS: There are no other vaccines or medications required for travel in this part of Ecuador. Please consult your physician or the CDC website for suggestions about travel-related medications for a trip to this part of Ecuador. It is always a good idea to be current on your tetanus vaccine.

ENTRY INTO ECUADOR: Visas are not required for travel to Ecuador. You will need a valid passport, which has an expiration date six months after your departure date.

INFORMATION: For additional information regarding this tour contact Jan Hansen at 919-259-9423 or at otusasiotours@gmail.com