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Welcome to the Jungle: Exploring the Ecuadorian Amazon

Exceptionally rich in biodiversity, the Ecuadorian Amazon offers unparalleled opportunities to experience the rainforest in its pristine state.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY CATHERINE TORPHY



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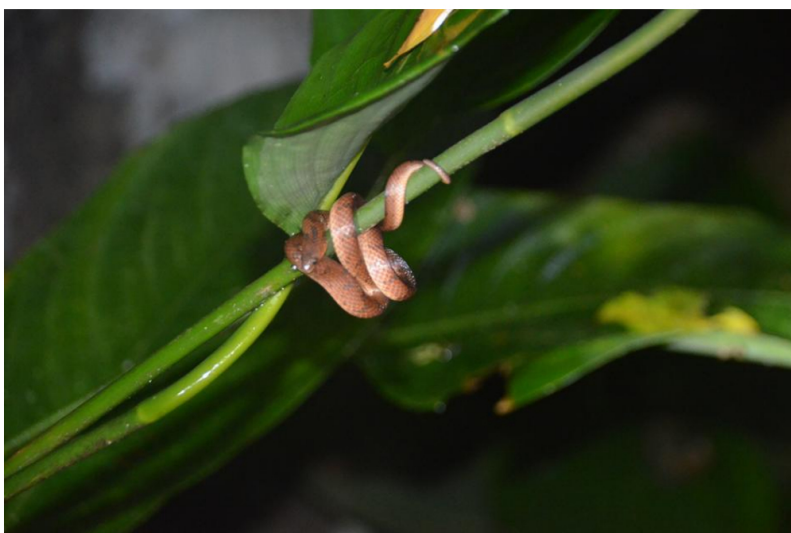
THOUGH TINY IN comparison to continental titans Brazil and Argentina, Ecuador packs a huge punch when it comes to natural wonders. South America's fourth smallest country is home to snowcapped peaks and coastal desert; steaming volcanoes and crater lakes; and of course, the Galápagos Islands. And then there's the Amazon rainforest, over 42,000 square miles of which thrives within the country's borders. This may seem small in comparison to Brazil's million-plus square miles of jungle, but the Ecuadorian Amazon teems with life—and, thanks to its underdevelopment, is an ideal place to experience the jungle in its raw, pristine state. It's also readily accessible, just a few hours' drive—or a very short flight—and a boat ride from the capital city of Quito.

When I traveled to Ecuador with [National Geographic Journeys](#), I was fortunate to spend 48 hours in the Amazon—part of an [action-packed trip](#) that included the Andes mountains, the hot springs of Papallacta, and the adrenaline-charged adventure outpost of Baños. The launching point for our Amazon excursion was Tena, a bustling backpacker town located in the Oriente region, where the eastern slopes of the Ecuadorian Andes tumble into the lowland rainforest of the Amazon basin. On a drizzly afternoon on the outskirts of Tena, our private bus dropped us off at the edge of the Arajuno River, where our small group of 14 travelers embarked motorized canoes and set off to our jungle lodge. Although the cruise downriver lasted less than an hour, it felt

as if we were entering another realm: dense trees blanketed the riverbanks, birds flitted overhead, and there were few dwellings in sight.



Our eco-lodge sat nestled on the riverbank, shrouded in trees and overlooking the Arajuno's gently pulsing waters. A simple yet charming place, the lodge's airy cabanas were designed to blend with its surroundings; only thin screens separated us from the lush greenery beyond. We kicked off that first night with a jungle walk along the trails behind the lodge, our flashlights and headlamps illuminating twisted vines, dewy leaves, and intricate spider webs. As I climbed with my fellow travelers up and down muddy embankments, our local guide, Isaías, helped us spot critters in the eerie glow: wolf spiders and snakes, fist-sized crickets, scorpions, and tarantulas. A salamander snoozed in the hollow of a tree. A molting insect clung to the underside of a leaf. Though we didn't encounter larger species like monkeys or sloths, the atmosphere was exotic all the same. After the hike we made our way back to the lodge, where I promptly fell asleep, serenaded by the trilling hum of the jungle.



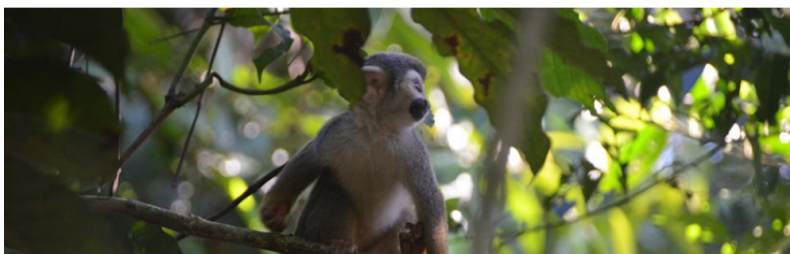
The next morning began with a sunrise visit to a parrot clay lick, located downriver at the top of a steep embankment. Here, parrots and parakeets flocked to a clay wall that had been exposed by erosion, feasting on mineral-rich clay that helps them neutralize the toxins found in some of the fruits and seeds they eat. From our blind at the top of the embankment, the cacophonous flocks were too distant to see clearly, but fortunately Isaías had brought binoculars, allowing us to view the birds more closely as they went about their morning feeding ritual.

After breakfast back at our lodge, we set off again by boat to a rural Amazon community. The Kichwa community of Santa Bárbara occupies a snug position overlooking the riverbank, comprised mainly of yuca and plantain farms, a few rustic homes, and a community center—all inhabited by a handful of families. Guillermina Cerda, who, along with her family, was one of the community's earliest founders more than 45 years ago, led us on a tour of the yuca plantation, where a few travelers in our group tried their hands at harvesting yuca—no easy feat, as the gnarled roots bury themselves deep in the ground.



Next, we went fishing with members of the community, using a system of nets dragged from our boats, as well as baited hooks tossed from the shoreline. Alas, no fish were caught that day, but we had a chance to taste some during a cooking demonstration back at the community center. In addition to grilled fish, the demonstration included traditional foods such as boiled yuca; fried plantains; papaya; and chicha, a fermented yuca drink. The more adventurous members of our group also snacked on roasted palm weevil larvae—a delicacy found throughout the Amazon. Afterward, we visited a bungalow where handmade crafts were on vibrant display: bracelets, necklaces, and earrings, as well as blocks of dark Ecuadorian chocolate.

Later that afternoon, we headed upriver to AmaZOOnico, an animal rescue center. Here, we were able to view local wildlife at close range: tapirs, ocelots, caimans, colorful toucans and macaws, garrulous spider monkeys, and more. The center takes in animals that are victims of illegal trafficking and, when possible, rehabilitates and reintroduces them back into the wild. All of the animals at the center had been brought in by Ecuador's Ministry of the Environment, rescued from people who had kept them as pets or intended to sell or trade them. As we made our way along the center's winding trails, our guide told us stories about the animals we saw: how they were found, where they came from—in some cases, harrowing tales. Like the baby capuchin monkey whose mother was killed in front of it, and the macaws that were rescued with broken wings. The center is mainly run by volunteers, and the ones we met were passionate about their work.





By the end of the tour, the sun had dropped toward the horizon, providing a welcome respite from the heat. Bold strokes of pink and violet painted the sky. Dusk fell over the river as we departed the rescue center and motored back to our lodge. That evening, we dined on stewed beef and fruit-topped custard in the outdoor dining area—the humidity palpable, the jungle buzzing with noise. We would head off the next day, making our way back up the river and on to Baños, Quito, and eventually home. This jungle oasis would become a distant reality, but its charms and mystique would not be soon forgotten.

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