

Lens-Friendly Birding: Ecuador Photo Tour with Naturalist Journeys

March 9 – 23, 2023

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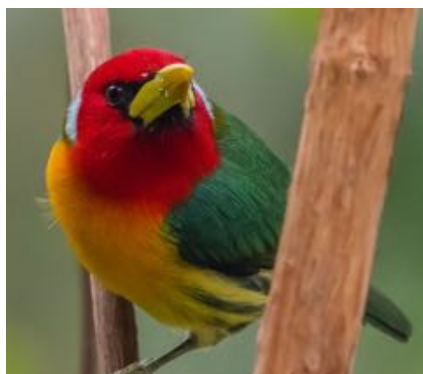
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Naturalist Journeys, LLC



This fun photo tour is to Ecuador, famed for its extraordinary biodiversity. With a superb selection of lodges and reserves, many of them with excellent feeders, it is one of the premier bird photography destinations in South America.

The jewels of the Andes—hummingbirds—feature heavily; fantastic feeder set-ups allow excellent photographic opportunities of these “winged gems.” And while hummingbirds are undoubtedly a front and center feature of this tour, they are also accompanied by many other colorful tropical birds, including an assortment of tanagers, toucans, trogons, woodpeckers, and even the incredible and vivid scarlet Andean Cock-of-the-rock.

This year, we’ve included the stunning Sani Lodge in the Amazon, replete with canopy level observation platforms and excellent photography opportunities.

Please Note: *On some departures of this tour, we run in reverse order. Details are available closer to departure.*

Tour Summary

15-Day / 14-Night Ecuador Photography Tour

\$5290 DBL / \$5890 SGL, from Quito

Airport is Mariscal Sucre International (UIO)

Tour Highlights

- Begin your trip with a visit to the stunning Antisana Volcano; scenery and pentiful Carunculated Carara steal the show
- Shoot images of Sword-billed Hummingbird, Collared Inca, Chestnut-breasted Coronet, and White-bellied Woodstar at Guango Lodge’s feeders
- Spend four days exploring and photographing from Sachatamia Lodge near Mindo
- Work from hides and blinds, taking images of beauties like Masked Trogon and Rufous Motmot
- Practice your macro photography on colorful frogs and lizards, best done at night
- Visit Yanacocha to see Scarlet-bellied and Black-chested Mountain-Tanagers, Shining Sunbeam, Great Sapphirwing, and more
- Experience four full days in the Amazon, based out of the lovely Sani Lodge; explore by boat, on foot, and from their massive observation tower—highly recommended!

Day-to-Day Itinerary

Thurs., Mar. 9 Arrivals in Quito

Welcome to Ecuador! You are met on arrival and transferred to our modern, convenient airport hotel. Those arriving in time can enjoy an informal dinner getting to know your other travelers.

Accommodations at Holiday Inn Quito or similar

Fri., Mar. 10 Antisana to Guango Lodge

This morning is truly spectacular and for good reason—we visit the open grasslands surrounding the enormous Antisana volcano. This is often voted the favorite site of the tour; the spectacular scenery in which we shoot is just stunning. The towering peak of the Antisana Volcano itself is impressive, with a large snow-covered top, and dramatic rocky sides. The páramo (grassland) is interspersed with rocky outcrops and scenic high Andean lakes are dotted with high altitude waterfowl. Indeed the scenery itself may be our biggest photo asset today.

Aside from these breathtaking Andean scenes, the upper páramo is carpeted with Carunculated Caracara, a striking pied raptor that occurs here in impressive numbers. Black-faced Ibis patrol these high plains, as do Andean Lapwing and large flocks of Andean Gull. We also try (hope!) for an encounter with Spectacled Bear and Andean Condor. We have great chances to see and photograph Giant Hummingbird, then enjoy a simple, but delicious lunch at Tambo Condor. We arrive in the late afternoon at Guango Lodge.

Accommodations at Guango Lodge (B,L,D)

Sat., Mar. 11 Guango Lodge

Guango is a small lodge with great hummingbirds; it perfectly complements our later visit to Tandayapa. Guango is a bright and airy little lodge nestled in the forest. It hosts a varied set of feeders that attract dozens of hummingbirds, including such extravagant species as the “cartoonesque” Sword-billed Hummingbird, the dapper black-and-white Collared Inca, aggressive Chestnut-breasted Coronet, tiny White-bellied Woodstar, and sublime Tourmaline Sunangel. The hummer feeders are also a target for other local birds, most notably the indigo blue Masked Flowerpiercer that makes a tempting subject for our cameras.

The temperate forest that overhangs this comfortable Andean lodge also attracts passing flocks of birds, some of which can be remarkably confiding and photogenic, that including the cerulean-blue Turquoise Jay.

We spend our day here working on our photography at the feeders, walking the trails, and simply enjoying the beauty of the lovely grounds.

Accommodations at Guango Lodge (B,L,D)

Sun., Mar. 12 Papallacta & Guango | Quito

After breakfast today, weather permitting, we venture into the páramo grasslands of the high Andes around Papallacta Pass; on clear days we can enjoy spectacular views of several snow-capped volcanoes. The high altitude birds that reside there can be remarkably confiding. Comical cinclodes bound around on the páramo, Tawny Antpitta hop along the roads, and with the use of playback, shier birds like canasteros and tit-spinetails can often be brought in close. The vegetation here is also fascinating, otherworldly perhaps, and offers a different set of photo opportunities for those so inclined.

At lunch time we return to Guango where we have the most of the afternoon to shoot hummingbirds, walk the forest trails behind the lodge, or scan the river for the striking Torrent Duck. Then, mid-afternoon, we say goodbye to our hosts and depart back to Quito for the night.

Accommodations at Mercure Hotel (B,L,D)

Mon., Mar. 13 – Thurs., Mar. 16

Northwest Ecuador from Sachatamia Lodge (Mindó Area)

After leaving Quito, we have four nights based at the lovely and comfortable Sachatamia Lodge, nestled within lush subtropical forest on the western slope of the Andes, an area renowned for its high bird species diversity. This is especially evident in the impressive hummingbird community found right around the lodge where we spend much of our photographic energies. The lodge feeders attract thousands of individual hummingbirds, with 10 – 20 species visiting on most days. The most common is the outrageous Booted Racket-tail, the male of which has a strange long tail with two paddles at the end. Other regular drop-ins are a number of glistening species like the audacious Violet-tailed Sylph, the standout Purple-bibbed Whitetip, and the gem-like Western Emerald; tiny Purple-throated Woodstar and Velvet-purple Coronet normally visit the flowers and feeders around the lodge.

If hummingbird photography is your goal, you are likely to come away with plenty of shots of over ten species of hummingbird, many of which are hard to photograph anywhere else. Fruit feeders at the lodge can also attract technicolor birds like Red-headed Barbet, Blue-winged Mountain-Tanager, and Toucan

Barbet—imagine! Other species often come in to eat insects attracted to lights, such as flycatchers, woodcreepers, and more.

On its own, Sachatamia lodge is a unique spot for bird photography and we spend a good amount of time shooting around the lodge (with chances for multiframe hummingbird photography). However it also serves as an excellent base to explore numerous other private reserves in the region. The exact places that we visit on the tour, and the order, depend on various factors like weather, feeder activity, and most importantly, up-to-date local knowledge on which places have the best activity at the moment. Listed below are some of the options we have available, though we also won't hesitate to do something different if we obtain information on a new site or hot sighting.

Hides & Blinds

Just a two-minute walk from the lodge there is a blind that opens 6:00 AM. We have time to spend quiet moments in this fantastic hide that some exceptional birds visit feast on moths: woodcreepers, Masked Trogon, Rufous-breasted Antrush, Rufous Motmot, Ecuadorian Thrush, Golden-crowned Flycatcher, Gray-breasted Wood-Wren, Russet-crowned Warbler, and many others are often be seen and photographed at this location.

Macro Photography

Most nights we take on the challenge of photographing colorful frogs and lizards. Bring along your macro 100mm lens or similar if this is of interest to you! Our leader helps you to get amazing shots and pictures of these mini creatures of night in the cloud forest. Fun!

Mashpi Amagusa & Oilbirds

This is a long, but extraordinary day trip from Sachatamia to an important conservation area that is home to many birds difficult to find elsewhere in Ecuador. The lush forest-cloaked slopes make a breathtaking backdrop. We visit a small private reserve in the region (Amagusa), where a young couple are not only conserving important bird habitat but have also set up a small but spectacular set of feeders. Some of the species that can visit on any given day rank in two special categories: those that can only be reliably photographed here, and those that are just downright beautiful. Birds like Glistening-green Tanager, Black-chinned Mountain-Tanager, Golden-naped Tanager, Moss-backed Tanager, Flame-faced Tanager, Golden Tanager, and Crimson-rumped Toucanet are all possible among other more common species. Hummingbird feeders offer chances at two of the best hummers around: the glowing Velvet-purple Coronet and the impressive Empress Brilliant. In the afternoon, we visit a spot where an odd nocturnal bird, the Oilbird, can be photographed on its daytime roost. This is one of the best sites to shoot this species in the world—there are caves with greater numbers, but the location of the birds at this site makes them much more photo-friendly.

San Tadeo

A local family has set up fruit feeders in their yard that have become a sensation among bird photographers. Some of our recent trips have spent hours here shooting the constant stream of tanagers and other species that visit. Some of the possibilities include Black-capped Tanager, Blue-gray Tanager, Dusky Bush-Tanager, Ecuadorian Thrush, Black-striped Sparrow, Rufous-collared Sparrow, Golden-naped Tanager, Crimson-rumped Toucanet, Red-headed Barbet, Toucan Barbet, and Lemon-rumped Tanager.

Upper Santa Rosa & Birdwatcher's House

A short drive up the road from Sachatamia Lodge gets us into slightly cooler forest with some different birds. The photography here is not easy, but we sometimes spend a few hours up here trying to get shots of the mindblowing Plate-billed Mountain-Toucan. It's worth it!

Yanacocha

This is a high-elevation site located between Quito and Tandayapa, accessed by a long dirt road. While this is often included in birding itineraries, it has not featured as often in photographic tours, since it is a long walk to get to some of the feeders. However, new feeders are being put in close to the parking area, and depending on how they go, Yanacocha may become a key site. Some possibilities include Scarlet-bellied and Black-chested Mountain-Tanagers, Shining Sunbeam, Great Sapphirewing, Sword-billed Hummingbird, and Yellow-breasted Brush-Finch. Due to its location, we often visit it on Day Five, en route to Tandayapa.

Fri., Mar. 17 Paz de las Aves to Quito

We depart Sachatamia very early this morning and head to one of the most important bird sites in the area, the wonderful Paz de las Aves Refuge. This beautiful reserve is set within subtropical forest where the moist, moss-covered trees are heavily burdened with bright red bromeliads. Our early rise lets us visit an area deep within the forest where a short time after dawn the bright scarlet forms of several displaying Andean Cock-of-the-rock start the day off with a spectacular forest performance. However, what has made this place such a joy for photographers and birders alike is the habituating of several rare and shy species of the forest floor, especially the antpittas. Giant, Moustached, Yellow-breasted, Ochre-breasted, and Chestnut-crowned Antpittas are all possible, with usually at least two of them cooperating on any given visit. Other birds we try to photograph include Dark-backed Wood-Quail, Rufous-breasted Anthrush, and White-capped Dipper. Later in the morning, we may visit one of the other sites mentioned above, or we may return to Tandayapa for a few hours before returning to Quito for the final night of the tour.

Accommodations at Holiday Inn Quito or similar (B,L,D)

Sat., Mar. 18 Quito to Sani Lodge

Wildlife photography in the Amazon is as tough as it gets. We had hesitated to offer a trip until we went to Sani Lodge in early June 2015, and that totally changed our minds. After a few days there, we came back with chips loaded with great photos, and were convinced that this was THE place to do it.

After a short flight to the lowland city of Coca, staff from Sani Lodge meet us and take us to a dock, where we board a large, covered motorized canoe for the 2.5 hour journey down the Napo River. There isn't much in the way of photo opportunities during this transfer, so just sit back and relax. Upon arrival at Sani's dock, you have a chance to unpack your camera and get ready. Here in the virgin Amazon rainforest, you never know when something amazing will pop into view and it pays to be prepared!

The path to Sani goes along a boardwalk through seasonally flooded várzea forest to another dock at the edge of the Challuayacu River, a small channel that winds through beautiful swamp forest to an oxbow lake. Five species of kingfisher occur here along with herons and other water-loving species. Shy species like Cocha Antshrike can sometimes be lured into view, and while the dark rainforest makes the photography challenging, with persistence, the right gear, and a little luck, great shots are possible. We have lunch at Sani and spend the afternoon either on the lake or river, or around the lodge depending on activity. We have four nights total based at Sani Lodge.

Accommodations at Sani Lodge (L,D)

Sun., Mar. 19 – Tues., Mar. 21 Full Days Based out of Sani Lodge

The day-to-day activities here are highly subject to change based on current conditions. Local guides keep up with the current hotspots, and their knowledge is vital in deciding where best to spend our days. Below are some of the most likely areas we visit during our time at Sani Lodge.

The Lodge Clearing

The Sani clearing can be a great place to photograph numerous colorful species, especially if any trees are fruiting. White-chinned Jacamar, Scarlet-crowned Barbet, various toucans and aracaris, Orange-crested Manakin, Gray-fronted Dove, Masked Crimson and Silver-beaked Tanagers, Purple Honeycreeper, and Golden-bellied Euphonia are some of the possibilities. This is a great area to spend time during the heat of the day, which can be slow in other locations.

Oxbow Lake & Challuayacu River

Using canoes or a floating platform/blind suitable for tripods, we work the edge of the oxbow lake, which is great for getting photos of Hoatzin, Black-capped Donacobius, Rufescent Tiger-Heron, Capped Heron, Pale-vented Pigeon, White-winged Swallow, Lesser Kiskadee, and more. There is usually plenty of light to work with and the photography is easier than in the forest. The Challuayacu River is darker but offers the chance for perched hummingbirds, manakins, various antbirds, and even monkeys and sloths.

Observation Tower

Sani's observation tower is built into an enormous kapok tree, and the platform is the largest we've ever seen, allowing for lots of space to set up a tripod or to move around for the perfect angle. Activity can vary, but if a mixed flock comes through, this can be one of the best places in Sani to get great shots, and there is plenty of light. Some birds we have photographed there include Many-banded Aracari, Paradise and Opal-crowned Tanagers, Great Jacamar, Yellow-billed and White-fronted Nunbirds, Gilded and Lemon-throated Barbets, Cinnamon-throated and Buff-throated Woodcreepers, Black-tailed and Green-backed Trogons, and Black-tailed Tityra, Cinnamon Attila, though many more are possible. Near the tower, there is a blind that offers good chances to photograph the dapper Wire-tailed Manakin. More blinds may be installed in the future as well.

Yasuni Parrot Licks

Not far from Sani Lodge are the famous clay licks that on dry days bring in hundreds and hundreds of parrots. Both have blinds and this stop is well worth visiting. **Flash is not allowed here, so a very fast lens and a tripod are recommended.** The first clay lick is active early, and is great for Yellow-crowned, Mealy, and Blue-headed Parrots, as well as Dusky-headed Parakeet. Another lick is a 20 minute walk into the forest and offers a chance at some rare species like Orange-cheeked Parrot, Scarlet-shouldered Parrotlet, and Scarlet Macaw, among the hordes of Cobalt-winged Parakeets.

Napo River Islands

River islands hold a totally different set of birds, and the scrub and young forest makes the lighting easier than inside the rainforest. It can be good to spend a few hours looking for specialties, including Oriole Blackbird, Black-and-white Antbird, Castelnau's Antshrike, and Lesser Wagtail-Tyrant. Occasionally a roosting Striped Owl can be found here.

Roosting Nightbird Stakeouts

Local guides usually know where at least some nightbirds are sleeping during the day, such as Common and Great Potoo, Tropical and Tawny-bellied Screech-owl, and Crested and Mottled Owls. Sometimes they are partly obscured or badly backlit, but other times they show very well, allowing for nice shots. It's always worth checking them out.

Night Photography

Numerous bizarre insects, colorful frogs and reptiles, and other macro targets can be found on a night walk behind the lodge. If you are into macro photography, or want to try it out for the first time, it's a lot of fun. Of course there is also a chance for a nightbird or even a Night Monkey as well.

Wed., Mar. 22 Sani Lodge to Quito

Depending on flight schedules, there may be time for some early morning shooting before we have to travel back up the Napo River to Coca for flights back to Quito, where we spend our final night. Flight schedules are variable—sometimes we are back in Quito by lunch, giving you the afternoon to relax; other times flights don't arrive until late afternoon or evening.

Accommodations at Holiday Inn Quito or similar (B,L,D)

Thurs., Mar. 23 Departures

Depart this morning at your leisure. (B)

Know Before You Go

Pace: Relaxed to moderate. Breakfast times are typically 5:30 – 6:30 AM, with an earlier breakfast required on one day of the main tour and one or two days of the extension. Most days have several hours of downtime to relax or download photos—this is often in the late afternoon when the light may be poor and when it is more likely to rain, or in the middle of the day on the extension when it is hot and slow. A few of the days involve several hours of driving.

Physical Difficulty: Easy to moderate. Much of the main tour is spent near feeders, which are accessed by only a short walk. At Refugio Paz we walk roughly half a mile (about 1 km) on moderately steep and often slippery trails in order to photograph some of the special birds. There are short walks on trails to target a few species at Milpe and Guango. Parts of at least three days are spent at high elevations above 11,500 feet, however little walking is done at these altitudes, and those nights are spent much lower at 8500 feet. On the extension, much more walking is required, up to 3 miles a day, and sometimes on trails that are very muddy (the lodge provides rubber boots), and accessing the observation tower requires climbing up 120 feet via a sturdy and well-made staircase.

Accommodations: Good, all have private, en-suite bathrooms, and full-time hot water. All lodges on the main tour have 24hr electricity. On the extension, electricity is provided by generator that is turned on for limited hours, but it provides sufficient time to charge camera batteries and devices.

Photo Philosophy: To provide our clients unique moments enjoying and having fun with this hobby; through photography we can capture unique moments in contact with wildlife, birds, mammals, and landscapes. Our photos help us to understand biodiversity, bird behavior, and capture moments not available through binoculars. You can capture your own pictures and memories and take them with you to home, but we are also excited to help you develop your skills and your personal relationship with your camera and gear.

Gear: A good 300mm lens (or high-end zoom that covers 300mm) and a full-frame camera are ideal for hummingbirds, but a longer lens is better for most other birds. A 500mm with a 1.4x or 600mm are the best options, but a 300mm with 1.4x and 2x teleconverters usually does a great job, too. A smaller lens can be nice for scenery shots in the high Andes. A flash (where permitted) is also useful since light can be quite low early in the morning and inside forest. A 100-400 lens with an independent body is also important if possible. Weather permitting, there are some opportunities for optional nocturnal macro photography, especially on the extension, where a good macro lens and flash (a ring flash or off-camera flash is best) would be useful. Flash is not permitted at Paz de las Aves or Mashpi Amagusa.

The tour leader may modify the plan on any particular day based on weather, feeder activity, recent sighting information, newly opened sites, and other factors. As most of the tour is based at just a few lodges, there is a certain amount of flexibility built into the itinerary.

Tour Details

Plan Ahead!

Protect yourself with Allianz Travel Insurance. Starting in January 2017, Naturalist Journeys pays 100% of your flight carbon offset.

Cost of the Journey

Cost of the main tour is **\$5290 DBL / \$5890 SGL** per person, based on double occupancy, from Quito.

Cost includes: all accommodations; all meals as stated in the itinerary; group airport transfers; ground transportation within Ecuador; professional guide services; park, preserve, and other activity fees; and miscellaneous program expenses. Tour price does not include: roundtrip airfare to and from Quito or items of a personal nature such as tips, laundry, portage, telephone charges, or alcoholic beverages.

Travel Information

For the main tour, please arrive in Quito at Mariscal Sucre International (UIO) at your leisure on March 9. Please plan flights home at leisure on March 23. Please watch departing flight days and times carefully, as many flights to the USA leave around midnight.

Photo Credits

Plate-billed Mountain Toucan, Xavier Muñoz (XM); Sun Glass Frog, XM; Blue-winged Mountain-Tanager, XM; Booted Rackettail, XM; Red-headed Barbet, XM; Long-wattled Umbrellabird, XM; Swallow Tanager, XM.

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