



White-necked Jacobin



Bay-headed Tanager



Sapphire-vented Puffleg



Golden-headed Quetzal

Ecuador

Ecuador has over 1620 bird species, excluding the Galapagos Islands, in an area that is a sixth the size of Queensland. Mind boggling! Is birding in Ecuador on your bucket list? Well it was certainly a dream destination on mine. I never expected that I would actually go there, and yet I did, last month. Life is full of surprises!

I have never been to South America before! The bird I most wanted to see was a hummingbird. It only took me a day or so to realise that many Ecuadorian bird species and their names are extremely different to ours, and identification was going to be very difficult for a novice. With little time for preplanning, and less than a week for birding, the following is what I managed during my short visit.

I stayed for 5 days at Casa Divina Lodge at Mindo, which I highly recommend. The lodge arranged to pick me up from my hotel in Quito, and dropped me off at the airport for my long journey home.

The lodge is an internationally certified sustainable business, run by Efrain Toapanta and his partner Molly, who promote economically and environmentally progressive tourism across the Mindo region.

The accommodation is up market. My spacious and stylish room, with ensuite, was upstairs in a large cabin, with a private veranda overlooking the rainforest. The bed was very comfy which was perfect after a long day birding.

Excellent meals are provided in a shared dining room overlooking bird feeders in the rainforest, or as hearty packed breakfasts and/or lunches. Which is just as well as we started at 5am most days.

The lodge organises bird guides. To pack in as much birding as I could in my limited time, I chose the Choco Birdwatching Package: 5 days/4 nights of guided birdwatching for dedicated bird watchers. Tour costs included pick up and drop off in Quito, all transport, guide, and the accommodation and meals at Casa Divina (mindocasadivina.com or mindosabinatour.com).

My guide was Alex Luna. He spoke excellent English, certainly knew his birds and could get a telescope onto a bird often faster than I could find it in binoculars. He was also very patient.

On day one, from Quito, we went to Mindo via Yanococha Reserve. At 3700m, the birds here were different to those I would see at lower elevations during the rest of the tour. We were clouded in, so visibility was challenging. Hummingbird feeders were a feature in the main rest areas. I saw my first hummingbirds and tanagers here, as well as other high altitude specialists.

Day two was spent birding around the lodge and the local Mindo area. I saw four different kinds of Toucans (Choco Toucan, Chestnut-billed Toucan, Collared or Pale-mandibled Aracari and Crimson-rumped Toucanette) from the deck above the dining room of the lodge! This deck proved to be a wonderful place to relax and just have the birds come to you, especially to photograph. I saw my first Golden-headed Quetzals here feeding in a giant fruiting rainforest tree with the Toucans. We hiked for most of the morning just along local roads, from 1400m to around 1200m elevation sighting many more species. Had a fantastic view of a Barred Hawk. Spotlighting that night proved challenging, but persistence by Efrain paid off, with one Black and White Owl seen.

On day three we drove to Rio Silanche Reserve, about 90 mins from Mindo. The 40Ha site of remanent rainforest is a private reserve with a canopy tower. The idea is to get there early and watch the bird waves come through, which we did. Chogon Trogon would have to be my bird of the day, though the list of colourful and iridescent tanagers also seen dramatically increased. I swear, in my limited experience, no country does colourful and iridescent birds like Ecuador.

Paz de Las Aves Reserve was the early morning destination on day four, to see a Cock-of-the-Rock lek, as well as Giant, Yellow-breasted, Ochre-breasted, Moustached and Chestnut-crowned Antpittas. After a late brunch watching more hummingbirds of course, we drove to Oilbird Cave to see Oilbirds, which are rather weird looking frogmouth-like, rufous-brown birds, which used to be hunted for their oil.

Finally, day five came too soon. Another very early start to drive to Umbrella Bird Reserve, to see Long Wattled Umbrella Birds-which have the longest wattles I have ever seen, up to 45 cm long. Jaw dropping!

All up, I managed to see 209 new species while on the tour, including 27 species of hummingbirds, 26 species of tanagers, 6 types of woodpeckers, 3 species of guan and so the list goes on. I still cannot believe how many hummingbirds I actually did see.

A short stay in Guayaguil added a further 19 bird species to my Ecuador list. My head still spins with the diversity, the colours and shapes, but mostly from their weird names, from grassquits to saltators and becards to motmots! There are still many more bird species for me to see in the Mindo Ecuadorian Andean Choco Corridor alone, not to mention the rest of Ecuador and beyond. I will have to be content with daydreaming again, until the next opportunity suddenly and unexpectedly presents itself.

Special thanks to Molly, Efrain and Leslie at Casa Divina for their exceptional hospitality and Alex Luna for simply great days out bird watching.

Article and images by Ceri Pearce.



Collared or Pale-mandibled Aracari



Ochre-breasted Antpitta



Giant Antpitta



Oilbird



My suite was upstairs in this cabin at Casa Divina Lodge