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WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE

Magnificent rainforest and an astonishing variety of animals, especially birdlife, awaits visitors to Amazonian Ecuador.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY **IAN CONNELLAN**

IT SEEMED to take an age for the parrots to come down; I had no watch, so I couldn't keep track of time. The birds ranged somewhere, heard but unseen overhead, among and above the rainforest canopy, their screeching calls rolling and receding in Doppler-like waves as they made occasional great sweeping flights.

Our party of eight, led by naturalist and guide Sebastian Vizcarra of the Sacha Jungle Lodge, was quartered in a bird hide on the edge of Yasuni National Park and about 300m from the southern bank of the Napo River. The Napo is the broad, brown, braided serpent of water that flows from the Andes of Ecuador to swell the mighty Amazon. We were here to witness one of the Amazon Basin's most remarkable natural spectacles: massed parrots of many species eating at a clay lick.

There's still some debate among researchers as to why parrots eat clay. It's long been believed that minerals in the clay counteract toxins in the birds' diet of rainforest fruit and seeds. But it's just as likely that they're seeking sodium, which is scarce here, more than 400km from the nearest ocean. That's the Pacific

Ocean, though; the Napo flows east, into the Amazon and on to the Atlantic Ocean, more than 3000km away.

Some of our group dozed on the benches in the hide while waiting. Our main 'bird nerd', London solicitor David Dalgarno, twitched constantly over his spotter scope. I played several immensely disorganised hands of rummy with our indigenous guide Segundo – whose principal language is Quechua and who spoke as much English as I do Spanish, and who'd never played cards in his life.

Twice the parrots settled out of sight, high in the canopy above the clay lick, and twice they were spooked into flight again by a hawk (I speak enough Spanish to know that Sebastian didn't wish the hawk well). But after settling a third time they conjured an unexpectedly magical appearing act: their descent from the canopy towards the lick was like a slow-moving, winged waterfall. At first only one or two birds appeared, twittering and peering upwards as if daring the others to join them. And they did come, their calls increasing in volume the lower the feathered droplets fell. ▶



Forest of life. Sacha Lodge guide Sebastian Vizcarra (opposite) paddles guests Poriya and Moshe Shahaf towards Yasuni National Park, a world centre of biodiversity. Consider plants (above) alone: a 2010 study found that a single hectare in Yasuni contained more tree, shrub and liana (woody vine) species than anywhere else in the world.



“Mostly cobalt-winged parakeets,” whispered Sebastian. “Some orange-cheeked parrots, too.”

This method of descent – a few forward scouts, the massed troops following – continued until the vines and branches directly above the lick drooped under the weight of birds. Finally, fabulously, the birds fluttered by the score down from the vegetation, and the little creek bed and claybank, not 30m from us, were all but obscured by the squawking, squabbling mass. Many clustered in the shallow creek, while others ventured underground (the clay’s been eaten away over time to form a cave). David was in a state of bliss beyond speech. The rest of us sat and watched in growing astonishment that finally blossomed into pure glee. Never, anywhere, have I seen such a thing.

TO TRAVEL into the Amazon aboard a canoe is to enter every adventure story of every explorer that’s ever fallen out of a musty book and into a child’s impressionable mind. Our journey to Sacha Lodge in Amazonian Ecuador – El Oriente



Daily clay. Scores of cobalt-winged parakeets and orange-cheeked parrots (above) descend on a clay lick in Yasuní NP. Sacha Lodge (left) is set on beautiful Pilchicocha lake, a short distance from Yasuní.

– began at the stone steps tumbling down to the Napo in the steamy concrete boom town of Coca. Before even half a kilometre of wide, muddy, roiling river had passed I was practically hyperventilating with excitement.

As the canoe helmsman played with the throttle, a bow spotter calmly pointed to logs, sandbanks and other hazards, which meant the river, staggeringly wide, had to be navigated in a stop-start, zigzag fashion. Giant rainforest trees towered

above the crumbling silty banks. Villages whizzed by; schoolchildren taking a mid-morning break waved. Barges big enough to carry several lorries passed by, their size reduced by the Napo’s immensity. And a fast canoe down river was just the first part of our Sacha Lodge adventure.

Once we’d been deposited at the lodge wharf, there was a 20-minute wander along tracks and boardwalks through flooded forest to reach the jungle boatshed. Here we boarded another canoe ▶



Treetop platform. Sacha's 43m-high kapok tower (left) gets guests into the forest canopy for encounters with species such as the ivory-billed araçari (below), a close relative of toucans.



Expedition details

DISTANCE COVERED

50km on the Napo River, plus short walks/paddles in the forest

DURATION

Guests typically stay 4–5 days

BIRDLIFE

More than 1660 species have been recorded in Ecuador, 600 at Sacha alone (recorded species total for all of Australia is 867)

– this one paddled by guides – to glide up a creek then across Sacha's beautiful blackwater lake, Pilchicocha, to reach the lodge. Largely hidden by forest and linked by elevated pathways, the main building and its surrounding cabins are roughly in the middle of an 1800ha private rain-forest reserve.

We were welcomed by more charmingly insouciant guides, who offered snacks in the oppressive humidity as they set about debunking the “Hollywood defamation” of the native wildlife found in Pilchicocha – the one place where one can swim and get relief from the heat. They told us that the lake's crocodile-like caiman are really quiet and shy, and prefer sleeping to eating; that the electric eels would rather stay on the bottom of the deep lake than interact with thrashing limbs; and that the much misunder-



stood piranhas feed only on carrion, and only at dusk. “So it's probably better if you don't swim late in the day,” said Sebastian, after guests were broken into groups – based on several criteria, including language and interests – and he'd been assigned as our guide. He remained with our group for the next three days.

The Sacha reserve (sacha is the Quechua word for “forest”) is within the

UNESCO-declared Yasuni Biosphere Reserve and a short distance from Yasuni NP. This is one of Earth's most biodiverse regions. The birdlife alone is worth the effort of travel; Ecuador has more than 1660 recorded bird species (close to 600 of which have been recorded at Sacha). All of Australia has fewer than 900. ▶

We regularly encountered birds and several other rainforest creatures just while wandering between the main lodge and our cabins. A resident gang of russet-backed oropendola had built their dangling nests in a palm near the main lodge; smooth-billed anis sailed around the trunks and vines; black agouti – large rodents that unfortunately look like the largest rats you’ve ever seen – snuffled around in the leaf-litter, searching for fallen fruit.

Days at Sacha start early and finish late. The wildlife, especially birdlife, is most active in the cool of the morning and towards sunset, and there’s a lot of nocturnal wildlife – after dark is the best time for tarantula spotting (and an impressive sight they are). The Yasuni clay lick may have been the highlight of our stay, but it had plenty of competition. We spotted birds and monkeys from the lodge’s famous 30m-high, 275m-long canopy walkway. We paddled Lagartococha in search of anaconda – and remain unsure as to whether we’re happy or sad not to have seen one. After a quiet dawn canoe along beautiful Orquidea Creek, we spent a few hours atop the 43m-high kapok tower – a wooden bird-observation platform built around the trunk of a spreading kapok tree. I lost track of the species seen that morning – toucans and tanagers, euphonia, flycatchers, antbirds, woodcreepers, parrots, herons, owls and the wonderful hoatzin. There couldn’t have been a more profound demonstration of the richness of life in this magical part of the world.

The Amazon rainforest has been described as “the lungs of the earth”. The Amazon Basin itself covers more than 7 million square kilometres – which makes it just slightly smaller than Australia – and it contains about one-fifth of the world’s fresh water. You can read these things, but it’s only when you stand beneath the deep green of the rainforest canopy, seeing and hearing and feeling the riot of life there, that you begin to really understand. 

 **SEE** more photos from the Amazon at www.australiangeographic.com.au/journal/103.htm

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