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## TRAVEL

# A Trip Through Ecuador's Forests: From Hot Springs to Hummingbirds

Ecuador's cloud forests—havens for hummingbirds—offer plenty of cushy perches, from lodges to hot springs, where birding buffs and other nature-lovers can happily hover



Birdwatching with Peregrine Adventures in Ecuador. PHOTO: PEREGRINE ADVENTURES

By *Adam H. Graham*

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**AS I STOOD** on a trailhead in northern Ecuador, in the town of Baeza, the sky above me was implausibly blue. My backpack was weighed down by the 3-pound, 970-page “Birds of Ecuador Field Guide,” the beefiest such guide I’d ever seen. Just a few minutes after I entered the Sendero de Las Cascadas trail, its surface turned from a fine Andean dust to squishy and slippery mud, and the sky disappeared behind a canopy thick with gossamer webs and dangling moss. Another 10 minutes and I plunged deeper into the fog soup of a cloud forest—as cool, tropical mountain forests perpetually shrouded in mist are known. Given Ecuador’s reputation as hallowed ground for bird-watching, I assumed the forest would be teeming with tweet, but even after an hour of sloshing around on the muddy trail, I heard nothing but the waterfall at the trail’s end.



A guest room at Bellavista Cloud Forest Reserve & Lodge. PHOTO: BELLAVISTA CLOUD FOREST RESERVE & LODGE

Richly biodiverse, Ecuador is full of hiking trails like this one in Baeza, a ramshackle village-turned-backpacker-town, that lead from high-altitude scrubby grassland to lush cloud forests in the blink of an eye. But the scenery isn’t what drew me to the country. I was hunting for hummingbirds. About the size of Oregon, Ecuador is home to the planet’s highest concentration of *colibríes*, or hummingbirds, representing 130 of the

world's 328 species. Between October and April, most of the diminutive fliers take up residency in the cloud forests that straddle the eastern and western slopes of the Andes, from 4,590 to 11,480 feet above sea level. Adventurous birders enthusiastically trek deep into Ecuadorean forest reserves like Ayampe on the Pacific Coast or Gualaico near Cuenca or, increasingly, to the cloud forest near Baeza, thanks to a new superhighway that links the town to the Ecuadorean capital of Quito. As I learned during my hike in Baeza, trekking down mud-soaked trails in search of tiny moving targets has certain disadvantages, but, fortunately, many of the best hummingbird sightings in the country require minimal effort.



A green-crowned nymph hummingbird. PHOTO: BELLAVISTA CLOUD FOREST RESERVE & LODGE

Over the years, these furious flappers have become such a popular tourism draw that most of Ecuador's eco-lodges—many set in a cloud forest—have built hummingbird

stations to attract them. Other shamelessly easy ogling spots include village gardens and cafes where hummingbird feeders are continuously filled with sugar water, which give the birds a much needed energy boost (they flap their wings 80 times per second). For non-birders who don't thrill at the thought of seeing a few flapping wings in the wild, consider this: Seventeen rather humdrum hummingbird species are known to breed in the U.S., but the jewel-toned, iridescent birds in Ecuador include such varieties as woodnymphs, topazes, sapphires, coronets and emeralds. That iridescence comes not from the bird's color but from its feather structure and is only visible if the light hits the bird at the right angle. In other words, seen from the wrong perspective, even the most enchanting and glitzy hummer can look dull and mousy.



PHOTO: JASON LEE

Any serious colibri fan—or those graciously willing to tag along—should start in Mindo, a charming dirt-road strip of a riverside village northwest of Quito. While some people hire guides, I engaged my old friend Michael who lives in Quito to provide trip-planning tips and companionship. Our two-hour drive from Quito to Mindo plowed up rocky ridges past vistas of the snow-capped Cotopaxi and Pichincha volcanoes before corkscrewing down through fern-draped ravines. For bird nerds like me, Mindo is Mecca. Murals of toucans and

hummingbirds adorn the village walls, the town's palm-frond-thatched cafes offer dawn birder breakfasts and signs everywhere advertise colibri guides. We checked into Sisakuna Lodge, a quiet refuge on the edge of town whose website offers "close and immediate contact" with birds—rarely a selling point outside of Ecuador.

On a morning hike to the town's Santuario de Cascadas waterfall, we brushed past intricately patterned butterflies and wild orchids, and cooled off with a swim in a crystalline pool beneath the falls but spied no hummingbirds. Back in town, we popped

in for lunch at the Dragonfly Inn whose restaurant Beehive offers a riverside terrace strewn with sugar-water feeders. Within five-minutes of sitting down, I spotted two hummingbird species hovering over me: a rufous-tailed hummingbird with its signature coral-red beak and the white-necked Jacobin with its sapphire hood. By the time lunch finished, I'd seen five more species. An afternoon rain shower forced us back to Sisakuna Lodge, where we sat in the garden gazebo with a bottle of wine and watched collared Incas, banaquits and flowerpiercers flutter through the banana trees in the rain. The latter two aren't hummingbirds, but I wasn't complaining. "Could this be any easier?" I thought over my second glass of Cabernet, my binocs still around my neck.

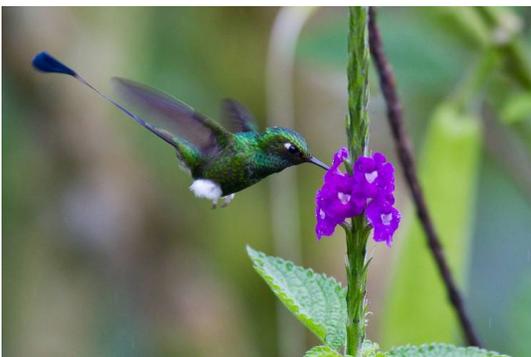
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*'While I simmered in the hot pool, a rainbow-bearded hummingbird zipped through its steam.'*

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About 15 miles north of Mindo, the de facto pioneer of Ecuador's bird tourism, a Brit named Richard Parsons, opened the Bellavista Cloud Forest Reserve and Lodge in 1991. Situated in a 2,000-acre conservation area, the property has a tree-house-like restaurant and observation deck and a dozen-plus feeders in the main garden. I planted myself on a bench opposite the feeders and photographed the colibri rush-hour one late afternoon; I saw no less than a dozen species of hummingbirds including the booted racket-tail with its forked blue tail and white furry legs. The only challenge to watching birds there was to sit quietly and wait.

For my final bird-watching excursion, I headed to the town of Papallacta, about a 90-minute drive from Quito and checked into Termas de Papallacta, a resort and spa with several thermal baths, fed by four natural springs. Hikers and birders who've been on strenuous Andean treks come to the baths for soothing relief. But in my case, they offered an afternoon of unearned pampering. While simmering in the hot pools outside my room, I saw a rainbow-bearded thornbill hummingbird, zipping through the bath's steam.



A male booted racket-tail hummingbird near Bellavista Cloud Forest Reserve & Lodge in Ecuador. PHOTO: BELLAVISTA CLOUD FOREST RESERVE & LODGE

## The Lowdown: Chasing Hummingbirds in Ecuador

**Getting There:** Several airlines fly direct from the U.S. to Quito, including TAME from New York and LAN and American Airlines from Miami.

**Touring There:** Peregrine Travel offers tours of Ecuador's cloud forests (from \$680 per person for four nights, including lodging and most meals; peregrineadventures.com). Ecuador uses U.S. dollars, but bills over \$20 are rare and viewed with suspicion.

**Staying There:** Bellavista Cloud Forest Reserve and Lodge, a 90-minute drive from Quito, offers spacious heated rooms and prime hummingbird-viewing opportunities (from \$150 a night including meals, bellavistacloudforest.com). The town of Mindo has an array of comfortable eco-lodges, but among the nicest is Sisakuna Lodge, where

traditional wooden bungalows and modern orange geodesic domes are surrounded by an organic garden (*from \$50 a night; sisakunalodge.com*) Located just above the cloud forest is Termas de Papallacta, a complex of thermal baths with a full spa featuring excellent massage therapists and Andean-inspired treatments (*from \$129 a night; termaspapallacta.com*).

**Eating There:** For hearty salads and fragrant naranjilla-smothered porkchops, grab a terrace table at Mindo's Beehive inside the Dragonfly Inn, where you can watch hummingbirds while you eat (Chile Oe4-22, Pasaje Arzobispal). Restaurante Paisaje de los Andes, just outside Papallacta Termas' gate, is a no-frills, florescent-lit tavern with mango green walls, a cozy fireplace and big bowls of homemade chicken soup.

For more details on bird-watching in Ecuador, see [wsj.com/travel](http://wsj.com/travel).

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