

TOUR DETAILS

Tour Name

Mashpi 4 days / 3 nights Itinerary

Description

The adventure begins in Ecuador's heritage capital, Quito, at our 8 AM pick-up time for guests staying in Quito's main hotels. Mashpi Lodge is located three hours by car from Quito (110 Km, 70 miles) in the evergreen wilds of the Andes' western slope. The sudden shift in altitude (from 2800 msnm to 1000 msnm) will allow us to discover the spectacular natural diversity of the Andean landscape as we travel through the dry valley of Pomasqui towards the cordillera's western flank, into lush, misty cloud forest, and finally reach Mashpi, a nature sanctuary located in the spectacular Chocó, one of the most celebrated bioregions in the world, known for its record-high endemism, rainfall and altitudinal range. We first stop at Pululahua Crater and its lookout point, where we can marvel at the unique scenic beauty of a collapsed volcano where people live and farm, taking advantage of the fertile volcanic soil. On our way to Mashpi, we visit the archaeological ruins at Tulipe, said to have belonged to the ancient Yumbo civilization of pre-Inca Quito, set in a magical forested location. We'll taste delicious Ecuadorian appetizers and fresh-brewed coffee prepared by members of the local community before our final one-hour descent into Mashpi Reserve.

DAY BY DAY ITINERARY

Day 1 - QUITO

(-/L/D)

After settling into our respective rooms, we are introduced to our naturalist guides who will briefly speak about the cloud forest and its conservation, the activities offered during our stay, and helpful tips about what to wear and bring during excursions. This will take place before lunch at our library and will last around 30 minutes. The trail is named after the "Cucharillo" (*Magnolia dixonii*), which in Spanish means 'little spoon', an Ecuadorian endemic tree common at Mashpi but otherwise threatened throughout the country. The trail requires some physical condition due to its steeper portions, but has been made less demanding thanks to recycled plastic crates that have been used to form steps and make paths firmer. At the end of the trail find a large waterfall and rocky riverbed with beautiful ponds. The excursion takes about two hours to complete. The forest transforms by sunset: the sounds and smells intensify and other senses are awakened. We will discover the evening croaking of nocturnal frogs and incessant buzz of insects. If we turn off our flashlights, we will be able to observe sparkling fireflies and feel bats zipping by. On the ground, we'll discover the faint glow of bioluminescent fungi all around. And as we turn our flashlights on again, we'll quickly notice the reflection of hundreds of tiny insects. As we continue on, owls and other nocturnal birds may call into the night, while the rustling of branches above us may mean that we're in the presence of kinkajous (*Potos flavus*), an arboreal mammal relative to the raccoon, making their way through the trees in search of ripe fruit. The night excursion is optional and begins at 7 PM and takes about 45 min to an hour. We then return to the lodge to enjoy a delicious dinner.

Day 2 - QUITO

(B/L/D)

This activity combines early birding inside forest and the Life Center's butterfly house. Our day begins at 6:30 AM in the hotel lobby, with a cup of coffee or hot chocolate and biscuits. We walk to the Life Center while seeking bird flocks crossing the road, hoping to catch sight of the many colorful tanager species that inhabit these forests. The best way to reach the Life Centre is actually through forest, so we will be hiking what we've come to call the "Howler Monkey's trail". This path crosses primary forest dominated by many ancient trees, being the "copal" (*Dacryodes cupularis*) the most emblematic of them. Early in the morning, the trail is buzzing with activity. We usually get to listen to rare birds (and occasionally may even have the opportunity of spotting them), such as the Rufous-fronted Wood-quail (*Odontophorus erythrops*) or the Rufous-crowned Antpitta (*Pittasoma rufopileatum*). Our guides are keen on noticing every sound and rustle in the

leaves, hoping to reveal colorful birds or elusive howler monkeys, while our naturalist guide explains the habitat's ecology; both will also be glad to share with us their extensive knowledge on forest plants and their medicinal uses. The Life Centre offers a marvelous view of the forest from the comfort of an expansive wooden deck, where wildlife abounds. We will identify the different birds and mammals that visit the fruit feeders and around 8 AM, we will enjoy a picnic breakfast. The centre is conceived as a place for learning and discovery, but also a place where guests can disconnect. We will explore the life of butterflies, the many species found in the Mashpi area and their metamorphosis from egg, larva, caterpillar, and chrysalis to winged wonder. We will also discover various species of host plants that butterflies use to lay their eggs on, such as passion flowers, birds of paradise, milk weeds and other species found in the garden. Not far from the Centre, we have also established a "tropical orchard" where many varieties of fruit trees and plants, including banana, manioc, cacao, hot chili peppers, coffee and wild raspberries, are grown. Around 10:30 AM, we head back to the lodge to rest, or maybe enjoy the Jacuzzi or a relaxing massage at the Wellness Centre, followed by a well-deserved lunch. Approximately 3 PM we gather at the lobby for our afternoon excursion along the Napa Trail. This trail crosses a variety of habitats including secondary and regenerative forests, as well as large patches of primary forest. The walk is thus a great opportunity to learn about the ecological realities at Mashpi and the importance of forest conservation within the Chocó bioregion. This is also a trail of great scenic beauty and an excellent opportunity for bird watching. Towards the end, we will encounter one of Mashpi's most unique attractions: the "iron palm" (*Iriartea deltoidea*). The moderately difficult hike last about two hours to complete. For those interested in learning more about the Ecuadorian cloud forest, we offer a lecture that sums up the different scientific research projects that take place at Mashpi. The talk lasts around 30 minutes, and will include footage from our hidden camera traps, a project developed by our resident biologist, a great display of the astounding diversity that thrives inside the forest.

Day 3 - QUITO

(B/L/D)

The forest always rewards the "early birds", as the dawn light lures a variety of fascinating species in their search for food. A good place to find birds is actually right at the hotel's terrace, with a cup of fresh coffee, tea or hot chocolate in hand, from where we can enjoy not only the beauty of the forest but also the many species that come to feed on insects and fruits at nearby trees. Our guides will help us spot what's around, offering a peek inside their telescope for a close-and-personal view of the incredible bird richness Mashpi possesses. This activity begins at 6:30 AM and lasts about an hour. Enjoy breakfast at our hotel restaurant. We depart approximately at 8:30 AM to the Sky Bike and Observation Tower (a 15-minute walk from the hotel). Looming above the treetops, Mashpi's observation tower allows our guests to enjoy the protected forest in all its glory. At 30 meters (100 feet) above the ground, this is an ideal site for nature lovers, allowing us not only to appreciate the forest's complex structure, but also the incredible species richness that thrives throughout the canopy (70% of the forest's biodiversity is found here). We climb 162 steps to reach the top. The aerial bicycle makes for an original and exciting way to explore the canopy up close. Designed for two people to use at once, one person pedals the bike along a cable stretched between two points, around 200 mt (655 feet) apart, crossing a gorge and river. Silent, easy-to-use and fun, it's an activity that provides guests with yet another vantage point to experience Mashpi's lush natural world. To enjoy the ride, one must be at least one meter tall (3.2 feet) (children must be accompanied by an adult). The bike ride takes no more than 20 minutes. Once completed, you can walk back to the lodge along one of our many trails. One of the trails takes us to San Vicente waterfall, a 45-minutes-to-an-hour steep hike that demands good physical condition. You can also hike the Oxibelis trail that takes us to a small waterfall before taking us back to the lodge. The combination of activities (sky bike, observation tower and hike) can take between 2 to 4 hours, depending on the trail. At the lodge, a refreshing natural juice and fresh towels will be waiting for us; we then will enjoy a varied and delicious lunch at the hotel restaurant. Around 3:30 PM, we head towards the Hummingbird Station. Mashpi boasts a total 32 hummingbird species identified to date, many of which inhabit different altitudinal ranges, with around 19

species considered common at our specially designed feeder station. Not only will we observe hummingbirds of all kinds, but also toucans, tanagers, squirrels, and more. The site is located at a natural viewpoint, which, on clear days, provides breathtaking views of the reserve's forested hills. This is a veritable photographer's paradise, regardless of your level of experience.

Day 4 - QUITO

(B/L/-)

This activity begins at 6:30 AM in the hotel lobby and takes advantage of the many bird species that come to the hotel to feed. After a cup of coffee, we walk down the road seeking mixed-species feeding flocks: these usually feature different insectivorous bird species that move together while foraging. In a single flock, we may see over 20 different species, making these more-or-less common encounters an undeniable treat for bird aficionados. The activity takes one hour; we return to the lodge for breakfast. About at 8:30 AM we leave the hotel and head to Copal Waterfall. This beautiful 2-hour-long hike features a landscape of moss-covered trees, bromelias and orchids at every corner. The trail ends at a spectacular waterfall over 50 m high. We return to the hotel by noon for check out and enjoy our last meal at Mashpi before heading back to Quito at approximately 1:30 PM.

ITINERARY DESCRIPTION

Day 1 - QUITO QUITO

(-/L/D)

Day 2 - QUITO MASHPI RESERVE

(B/L/D)

Day 3 - QUITO MASHPI RESERVE

(B/L/D)

Day 4 - QUITO MASHPI RESERVE

(B/L/-)

Notes

Recommendations

Summary of activities

Trails

As you enter the realm of the rainforests, you will become aware of Life at every step: mushrooms and "fox fire" fungi below, tree trunks festooned with orchids, lichens and mosses, giant ferns reaching up to the light above, coiling vines, swirling mists and clouds of moisture. And then, from nowhere, comes the sound of rushing water, a waterfall amid this glistening, green world, where you can wade through rivers, walk along their banks, revive your senses...

The two main trails are the Howler Monkey and Cucharillo (named after an oak). Both link up with the Tower #5 of the canopy gondola system. Along the trails, guests will learn more from both their Naturalist Guide and Local Guide about the myriad plants, insects and animals that inhabit this biodiverse universe. The guides will enthusiastically share their knowledge of their characteristics, behaviour and uses.

Due to Mashpi's mountainous topography, trails are rarely flat. The Howler Monkey (mainly primary forest) and Cucharillo (mainly secondary), although short – 2 km and 700 m, respectively – are steep. The trails' steepness is an advantage since the hillsides enable more light to penetrate the forest, thereby increasing the diversity of plants and animals that one can observe at each stratum. Both trails have been specially adapted to make walking easier, using embedded recycled plastic crates to create steps and firm paths.

The way back uphill on both these trails can be aboard the gondola, reached by wading through the shallow river in rubber boots, and walking the connecting trail to the Cotinga Tower.

Life Centre

Close to the lodge, the centre is conceived as a place for learning and discovery, but also where guests can disconnect, where they can contemplate the views, sit in comfortable chairs, read a book, enjoy a fresh cane juice.

Guests will learn more about the butterflies that inhabit the region, being shown the process of these creatures from eggs to pupae to chrysalis to winged wonder. Some 200 species of butterfly have been identified to date in the Reserve, with nearly a dozen observable at the Centre. Other points of learning dozens of species of orchids, bromeliads and passion flowers all around the structure.

Close to the Centre, we have established an area for growing medicinal plants (ideal for a reviving herbal infusion) and beyond, many varieties of bushes and fruit trees, including banana and plantain, manioc, cacao, tobacco, coffee, bread fruit and heart of palm. These attract all sorts of wildlife, from birds to rodents to mammals – making for easier observation from the comfort of the Centre's expansive wooden deck. Most of the interpretation at the centre will be imparted by local guides or people involved with the project from local communities. Guests will find ingredients from these gardens in the dishes prepared back at the lodge.

Observation Tower

There are few easier or better ways to appreciate the beauty of the Mashpi Reserve's forest and hills than climbing the Observation Tower. Here, guests are able to enjoy an exciting bird's-eye view and the dramatic panoramas that surround the lodge from the observation tower. This is a metallic structure, with a staircase that climbs to about eight-stories high (26 m or 85 ft.), ideal for wildlife observation, particularly at dawn or dusk. Species that can be spotted here include toucans, woodpeckers, barbets, tanagers and parrots as well as raptors. The tower lies a 10-minute walk from the lodge.

Night walks

The Mashpi forest is transformed at night, with far more activity than during the day. Optional night walks will head out from the hotel after dinner to discover its nocturnal creatures and their behaviours, ranging from moths as big as your hand, to miniature glass and tree frogs, croaking toads, birds, owls, rodents and mammals, and even fox fire, an Avatar-like luminous fungus. It's a magical world, often astounding at the micro level, and seldom explored, ready to be discovered in expert company.

Sky Bike

Located close to the hotel, the sky bike makes for an original and exciting way to explore the forest canopy up close. Designed for two people to use at once, one person pedals the bike along a cable stretched between two points in the forest, around 200 m (655 feet) apart, crossing a gorge above a river flowing between rocks and trees below. Silent, easy-to-use and fun, it's an activity for children over 8 years-old accompanied by an adult, providing guests with another chance to observe the natural world close to the lodge and even spot its denizens.

Hummingbird Viewpoint

The forests of Mashpi boast 22 hummingbird species identified to date, inhabiting different specific altitudes, with around 16 species alone observable by guests. In order to make it easier to see these amazing creatures, a shelter with seating provides the ideal setting, feeders for the birds strung from its roof. The site is located at a natural viewpoint, which, on clear days, provides breathtaking views of the Reserve's forested hills.

Refreshing waterfalls

Water is key to life in Mashpi, and there's nothing like a refreshing dip at the end of a walk. Several rivers cross the Mashpi Reserve close to the hotel, many forming beautiful small waterfalls, cascades and pools. The water temperature is between 18 and 20°C (64 and 68 F).

Included

Not Included