



# The forest in the sky

*In Ecuador's "cloud forest" the landscape is green,  
wet and lush, with an array of surprises to  
discover across the biodiverse yet sacred landscape.*

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There's something wildly romantic about a cloud forest. The words conjure up dreamy scenes of blissfully floating through a sky full of fluffy pillows surrounded by a bed of greenery. However, the reality is quite different. Cloud forests are wet. Not a little bit wet but wetness on a biblical scale. Try six metres of rain every year, trickling, gushing, splashing, gurgling, seeping into one of the most biodiverse places on the planet.

"This isn't rain," says our guide Juan, his eyes dancing with the sheer joy of introducing a group of new guests to his home. "It's *chispear*." That's Spanish for drizzle.

We're getting ready for our first hike at Mashpi Lodge, an eco-tourism hideaway a three-hour drive from Quito, Ecuador's capital. Although it's humid, gumboots, bandanas, a good slosh of insect repellent, a "chispear" jacket and pants are the outdoor essentials for tackling any of the trails that vary in degree of difficulty from (nearly) a walk in the park to fairly hardcore.

## Protecting the cloud forest

Perched just shy of 1000 metres above sea level — close to Ciudad Mitad del Mundo, the point the equator passes through Ecuador — Mashpi is cocooned within a 1300-hectare "middle earth" private reserve. Brainchild of Roque Sevilla, the former mayor of Quito who purchased the land to protect the forest from further

logging, the concept pushes the boundaries of innovation to the max.

The lodge itself is an architectural masterpiece. Steel infrastructure blends with towering glass walls in the 22 guest rooms and communal areas. Swallowed by a dense canopy of jungle swirling in a sea of mist, tangles of twisted vines and mossy carpets stretch over the forest floor and each space blurs the lines of realism.

"Not one tree was cut down when the lodge was built," Juan explains. "Most of it was built in Quito and brought here piece by piece so the forest wasn't touched."

The cloud forest is part of a slither of green that runs from Panama to Peru, known by the Ecuadoreans as Chocó. Cloud forests are just one of approximately 46 ecosystems that make up Ecuador, a tiny country just slightly bigger than the state of Victoria. "Around 98 per cent of the Chocó has been lost to logging, mining and farming. Now we're trying to preserve it."

Although sceptical at first, the people from the surrounding villages have embraced Mashpi. "Around 80 per cent of the staff are from the local community," says Juan, who admits he wondered if Sevilla's plan would work. Because the locals are involved as share and stakeholders, they have an invested interest. The hunters and loggers have become the protectors and the eco-lodge isn't only preserving the forest — it's enhancing lives.

Angelo, a local villager with a beautifully sculptured face and translucent skin, is Juan's spotter, our eyes and ears for each excursion. In his 27 years, he's never seen the sun shine all day or a sky full of stars. However, he can identify the call of 200-plus species of birds, read the tracks of the elusive puma and, with Snake Charmer as his nickname, he's a handy person to have around. "It's a dream come true to work here," says Angelo. "I grew up in the forest making Tarzan swings and playing with my friends. Now I can share nature with people from other countries."

## "Singing" in the rain

As we squelch along the narrow trails, leaves flicker, boughs sway, howls and trills slice the air — the flutter of a blue winged butterfly, a flash of red and yellow toucan feathers, the distant and distinctive cry of a troop of howler monkeys that sounds like a Gregorian chant. And always the drip, drip, drip of water. "Mashpi means friend of water," Juan says. It's the life force that surrounds us with layer upon layer of lime to emerald greens dotted with delicate colour bursts of orchids and other tiny flowers. It's like a secret world, with each experience uncovering a precious gift.

A favourite is the morning we head to "hummingbird central". Around an hour's walk from the lodge, feeders are scattered in the trees for scientists and guests to observe the 100-plus species living in the forest. Just watching them is exhausting. With hearts that can beat up to 1000 times a minute and their delicate frames filled with a kaleidoscope of colour, they dart, hover and fly backwards, their wings moving so fast they're invisible.

Other days we rock hop along river beds to thundering waterfalls, creep through fern passageways and take time to breathe in the pure exquisiteness of the forest.

We also take to the sky.

## A bird's-eye view

The afternoon we ride the sky bike, Juan announces it is officially raining. But even *aguacero* (really heavy rain) can't dampen the prospect of travelling along a 200-metre cable in the tree canopy on an upside-down bike built for two. With raindrops dripping down my face, cruising above the world through smudges of greenery is exhilarating. Our laughter echoes. I feel like I'm a child again. Or an explorer. Or the only person on Earth. Looking down I think of all the creatures large and small we're pedalling above. Tucked up in their forest home. Hidden.

Another aerial activity has us soaring through the canopy on The Dragonfly, an open-air cable car. Two years in construction, \$2.8 million in costs and two kilometres in length, with a toucan's view of the forest, it's as close as it gets to flying. Moving slowly, we spot several birds and marvel at a large magnolia tree dotted with dreamy cream

## Escape routes

### Getting there

Although Ecuador tends to fly under the Aussie tourism radar, it's an easy country to get to, move around and feel safe in. LATAM flies directly from Sydney and Melbourne to Santiago, Chile, with connections to Ecuador's capital, Quito. Mashpi Lodge is accessed only by road. A three-hour journey from Quito with transfers are organised through the lodge. [latam.com/en\\_au](http://latam.com/en_au)

To make things even easier, the South American Travel Centre creates personalised itineraries that include flights, bookings at Mashpi Lodge through Metropolitan Touring and other experiences within Ecuador or other parts of South America. [southamericatravelcentre.com.au](http://southamericatravelcentre.com.au)

### When to go

Two seasons: wet and wetter. The drier time of the year is from May to September. Mornings are often clear with most of the rain falling in the afternoons. Water is a natural part of the Mashpi experience and, with average daytime temperatures around 25–28°C, the rain is refreshing.

### Staying at Mashpi

Mashpi Lodge offers two- and three-night programs with a range of activities for different interests and fitness levels. Kids

are welcome (best 7+) and there's even a Kid's Lab for exploration, enrichment and experimentation. Packages are inclusive of all meals, transfers from Quito, accommodation, guides and activities.

### Good to know

Gumboots, rain ponchos, walking poles and other protective clothing are supplied for the duration of your stay. As with most outdoor adventures, dressing in layers is the key — and remember your bathers for a dip under the waterfalls. There's a super-effective drying room and staff are on hand to help get you kitted out. You may think you'll be more comfortable in your own walking boots; however, think carefully before you lug them all the way there. The lodge's gumboots are tried and tested over the terrain and most boots won't make the grade for water crossings. However, you might like to bring your own inner soles for the gumboots.

Although the trails are potentially slippery, repurposed plastic crates are embedded into many of the trails to help with traction — a nifty recycling trick. Unplugging from the world is what Mashpi's about but it's handy to know there is WiFi throughout the lodge.

Quito sits at 2850m above sea level, which is on the cusp of potential altitude illness. Although Mashpi is far lower, on arrival in the capital it's highly recommended to take it easy while acclimatising.

## While in Ecuador

With mountains, volcanoes, beaches, forests and of course the Galapagos Islands, Ecuador is the world in a nutshell. Combine the sky with the sea and travel from Mashpi to the Galapagos Islands, a 90-minute flight from Quito. Finch Bay Galapagos Hotel on Santa Cruz Island is Mashpi's sister property and has the same eco standards and philosophy. Both Finch Bay Galapagos and Mashpi Lodge are on *National Geographic's* Unique Lodges of the World list.

Quito holds a surprise at every turn. As the world's highest capital city it's the perfect place to spend several days simply wandering. Old Town is a designated UNESCO World Heritage site filled with gobsmacking architectural delights along cobbled streets set against a dramatic backdrop of distant volcanoes. For a great insight into Ecuadorian life, take a NGO-based Live-Quito-Like-a-Local tour ([metropolitan-touring.com/ecuador/quito-tours/live-quito-local](http://metropolitan-touring.com/ecuador/quito-tours/live-quito-local)). For a special treat, spend a night (or two) at the superbly restored Casa Gangotena ([casagangotena.com](http://casagangotena.com)) and don't miss "the best" chocolate in the world at Chez Tiff in La Ronda.

An easy day trip from Quito is the vibrant Otavalo market town: traditional, quirky and (though this isn't widely known) the home of the Panama hat.







**Clockwise from top left** One of the many alluring waterfalls; a bird's-eye view from the sky bike; the dining room with a view at Mashpi Lodge; one of the 100-plus hummingbird species inhabiting the forest.



flowers. So dense is the forest, despite the size of the tree (the only one known of in the area) it was only recently discovered when building The Dragonfly.

I indulge in chocotherapy at the outdoor wellness centre: not exactly eating the finest chocolate in the world but being massaged with it. Pure bliss. Later that day, I taste heavenly Mashpi chocolate mousse.

Each meal, where possible, showcases local produce and the lodge is working with farmers and makers in the area to develop sustainable co-operatives like the one for chocolate as well as cheeses, fruits, vegetables and meats. Served in the cathedral-style dining room, enveloped by the forest pushing up to the glass walls, dishes like seared tuna infused with herbs and lamb with local root vegetables make for a sensory overload. After dinner, as darkness blankets the lodge, the forest enters a different realm.

### Night moves

One night, decked out with head torches, Juan and Angelo take us out for a nocturnal

meander. "We're mainly trying to spot spiders and frogs but you never know what we might find," says Juan. Angelo slinks unnoticed through the forest, silently turning over palm fronds and peering into tiny cracks in the rocks. The atmosphere is thick with anticipation. The previous night, Juan wowed us with pictures of pumas and ocelots (small jaguars) captured on the 43 camera traps scattered throughout the reserve for scientists to study the wildlife. Pumas and ocelots are elusive and extremely hard to spot but Angelo finds us an even more terrifying-looking creature that has my heart racing.

"It's quite harmless," reassures Juan. "Tarantulas live underground and come out at night to hunt." A spider as large as a dinner plate wiggles one of its chunky, black, hairy legs in my direction, as if to say, "C'mon, trust me." It's hard to look but harder to look away.

As we move on, the amphibian orchestra reaches a crescendo. Rrrrdip, rrrdip, rrrdip. Click, click, click. Croak, croak, croak. "The males are singing to attract a female," says Juan. Angelo spots the ultimate in

Mashpi frog watching, a tiny but fascinating specimen. We gather around to examine the rare and strangely elegant glass frog. Tinged with green, the skin of the frog is see-through and with Angelo's magnifying glass we can even look into the chest and see its heart.

Juan explains that the glass frog is what inspired Sevilla's use of glass throughout the lodge. He also mentions that since the lodge was built a new species of frog has been discovered and given the lodge's name. Like the puma, the Mashpi Torrenteer is elusive. Yet, just to know a species was uncovered here adds to the mystique and wonderment of this precious environment. 🌿

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