

54 Travel South America

From left: riding the Dragonfly gondola, an empress brilliant hummingbird and a jaguar



Online See a video of Heather exploring the Mashpi cloud forest



swifts swoop below. As we float into the forest, the first angelic rays of hazy, golden light dart through the branches, eventually breaking above the canopy. Lima, a keen birder, is excited to hear the rasping call of the cock of the rock birds. Guests staying at least three nights can strike out into the forest at 3am to find these birds engaged in their dawn mating dance.

After our Dragonfly flight we call in to the hummingbird garden; more than 30 types of the bird have been recorded

waterfalls, a cool breeze blowing off the tumbling water; and through clear, gurgling rivers (into which I inevitably slip, bottom first). But we are not restricted to ground level.

As dawn breaks, the Dragonfly gondola, an open carriage seating four people, eases out from the cable-car station. It glides through the forest canopy — sometimes 5m above the ground, sometimes 200m. It's about 45 minutes out and back, or you can hop off at a midpoint station for breakfast in the treetops or to continue exploring on foot. Mashpi's weather is typically damp and cloudy, but the morning I try it the sky is clear and cornflower blue. "This is special for me," says Lima, who's from a village just outside the reserve and has been guiding for seven years, since he was 18. "We don't get many days like this."

We soar quietly over a forested valley, bands of silvery mist hovering between the trees. I can hear the white noise of a waterfall. A flock of maroon-tailed parakeets squawks past. White-collared

in Mashpi. I watch a velvet-purple coronet that is ferociously guarding one of the sugar-water feeders, chasing away the other birds. An emerald-chested empress flits past my ear with a low thrum like a little motor. Hummingbird wings flutter between 10 and 200 beats a second; as you might imagine, that requires a lot of energy. "Scientists say if they don't eat every 20 minutes — hasta la vista," Lima says, drawing his hand across his neck.

The Sky Bike is another innovation at Mashpi. It's a two-person contraption suspended from a zip line strung across the canopy that you pedal to move through the trees. We aren't so lucky with the weather and I end up sodden. It doesn't matter: the lodge provides wellies, ponchos and a speedy drying service.

Visiting Mashpi is expensive — but that money is put to good use. And there's so much to gain from being here. Lima summarises the Mashpi experience: "I don't see my job as work. It's more like an opportunity to learn."

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Your essential guide to a Quito mini-break

Casa Gangotena



STAY Casa Gangotena is housed in the former residence of a well-to-do family in the historic San Francisco Plaza, in Quito's Unesco-protected Old Town. The 31-room hotel retains much of the elegance of the former house, with marble bathrooms, high painted ceilings and wood panelling. It is a perfect base in the capital and has a super restaurant (doubles from £345, B&B; casagangotena.com).

EAT Urko is a top choice for modern Ecuadorean food in Quito, and often recommended by Quiteños themselves.

The on-trend restaurant is in the Floresta neighbourhood, where the chef Daniel Maldonado focuses on seasonal produce from the Ecuadorean Andes, the rainforest, the coast and the Galapagos Islands. There's a tasting menu from £58pp (including lamb with yucca, smoked cachama fish, cured pork, llama tartare and, er, deep-fried ants), a four-person chef's table and a more casual restaurant serving streetfood-style dishes (urko.rest).

DO Take a guided walk around a less-visited part

of Quito's Old Town. The Live Quito Like a Local tour calls at the Mercado San Francisco, with its traditional herbal remedies, a traditional flour mill, a spice store and a family-run chocolatier, where you can learn about chocolate making and, of course, sample the goods. The tour usually involves one or two of the neighbourhood's 25 historic churches, as well as the Casa del Alabado Archaeological Museum. Full-day tour from £157pp, including lunch at Casa Gangotena (metropolitan-touring.com).