South America **Travel 53**

Treetop thrills in the Ecuador cloud forest

Heather Richardson gets to play scientist during a stay at a stylish lodge in an eco-reserve teeming with rare wildlife

n the circular gaze of our head torches the rain is transformed into shimmering showers of glitter. Slick vegetation bobs in the downpour and a shallow stream rushes over our welly-clad feet. The forest is a cacophony of noise: full of the squeaks, buzzes and chirps of a million insects and frogs.

"Here," our guide Estuardo Lima calls. I splash over to look at what he's illuminating: a tiny emerald glass frog is camouflaged on a leaf, its long legs concertinaed under its bright green, blackspotted body. Two heavy-lidded, bulbous black eyes shift upwards as we tower over.

This is just one of nine types of glass frog you may find in the forests of Ecuador's Mashpi Reserve. This rich, entangled mêlée supports 400 bird, 69 reptile and 43 amphibian species, as well as howler



monkeys, pumas, ocelots, sloths and much more. Many species are endemic. The the cloud and rain forests meet. It safe-

Choco forest, a bioregion that extends from Panama and Colombia through Ecuador and into Peru.

The reserve was created in 1998, when Roque Sevilla bought the land from a logging company. A former mayor of Quito, Sevilla is the chairman of Metropolitan Touring, a tour operator that owns several boats and a lodge in the Galapagos islands, along with a Quito hotel and Mashpi Lodge, here in the reserve of the same

"The original idea was just conservation," Mateo Roldan, Mashpi's research director, says. We are sitting in the double-storey dining room at the lodge, sharing a lunch of ceviche, salads, seafood stew, sweet potato and fried plantain. The thick, mistladen forest fills the floor-to-ceiling



link it to a neighbouring national park and protected forest to allow species such as the Cotacachi-Cayapas jaguars to move logists", who are from the Mashpi community after which the reserve is named, and five rangers, who keep track of illegal activity such as logging. Many employees, most of whom are local, are former loggers.

know

Heather Richardson was a guest of Mashpi Lodge, which has rooms from £1.005 a night. including activities, meals, guiding and shared transfers from Quito (mashpilodge.com). Jacada Travel offers 11-night trips to Ecuador with stays at Mashni Lodge, in Ouito and on the Galapagos Islands from £5,424pp, including flights and transfers (iacadatravel.com)

Ecotourism supports the reserve's scientific and conservation endeavours, which may help to justify the hefty room rate. Guests can offset the carbon emissions from their time in Ecuador, including domestic flights, by paying a fee towards protecting the reserve and creating conervation alliances with landowners.

More fun are the series of citizenscience initiatives that Roldan is setting up. One of these will involve the establishment of camera traps around the reserve and the regular retrieval of images to be shared with guests during nightly lectures. When I pop into the lab next to the lodge to meet the researchers. Anderson Medina and Sara Guevara, they are going through new footage. Guevara squeals in delight when she finds a photograph of a puma. Lima and I continue to the Life Centre a short walk away. This tented butterfly

enclosure, with an orchid garden and a raised platform overlooking a birdwatching area, was set up by Carlos Morochz, the reserve's first resident biologist. We examine a giant owl-butterfly specimen. Its markings — owl-like eyespots and upper wings that resemble a snake's head — are designed to deter predators. I admire a pretty glass butterfly, named after its transparent wings. Lima picks up a chrysalis that wriggles in defence. Only about 20 per cent survive the meta-

morphosis process in the wild, he says. From the lodge, a network of trails flows out into the reserve. I hike up and down the many narrow, undulating paths, along which plastic crates have been sunk into the muddy ground for grip; past frothing

"I'm one of three girls, and was

Tony. I grew up hunting and fishing.

my father's last chance to have a

boy, so I became the boy of the

family. Hence, 'Toni'," she says. "Every Italian family has to have a

Exploration, it's a big part of me. You don't have to squint to mistake Sanibel Island for paradise.

so it's little wonder that so many

"Migration stories are some of the

most incredible, uplifting stories in

nature," Toni says. "The marathon

journeys some of these birds make

to the refuge leaves without gaining

steal your breath away. No visitor

a new and profound respect for

wildlife, and it stays with them
- we're helping to create a new

generation of conservationists.'

It's easier to ask Toni what she

"There's nowhere more family-

friendly. Families get to do things

and her girls don't do for fun, bu

Toni is happy to outline what

together here, they get to be

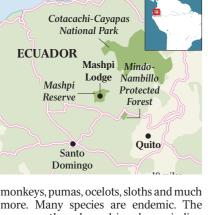
adventurous," she says. "The

beaches are beautiful, but that's

Sanibel offers.

I never wanted to be inside

birds choose to stop here.



reserve, a three-hour drive along winding mountainside roads from Quito, is where guards Ecuador's last 2 per cent of original

PROMOTED CONTENT

before the 24-room lodge opened in

2012. The reserve doubled in size last

year to 25 sq km — and the aim is to dou-

ble it again. Mashpi and its partner NGOs



alking barefoot across the sand, sparkling seawater dances over vour toes... the tantalising scent of sizzling souvlaki is in the air, as glasses clink and the distant hum of music echoes from a taverna... Greece is a way of life.

It certainly is for Sunvil, experts in relaxed, tailor-made holidays to Greece for the last 45 years. The dedicated team has unbeatable knowledge of the country, and the best hotels.

Island hop from super-glossy Mykonos to trendy Sifnos, stay in a stone-built lodge in a traditional Epirot mountain village or in a five-star boutique hotel with every luxury at your fingertips. Whatever your perfect holiday, Sunvil has the

expertise to make it happen. The family-run company had a modest start, with just a handful of self-catering villas in Cyprus. Soon expanding to other islands and the mainland. Sunvil is now

packages and itineraries. one of the most recognised and trusted brands in the region. But growth hasn't affected the quality of service. Still familyrun and in its second generation, it sees 70 per cent client repeat bookings for Greece - so it must be doing something right.

"As passionate travellers, we have chosen to only offer holidays to countries with which we have an affinity and where we've travelled extensively says chairman Noel Josephides, who co-founded the company

in the early 1970s. "These are the otels and apartments we would choose for our family and friends."

Their expert credentials are clear, offering holidays on 57 Greek islands, as well as on the mainland. Clients are spoilt for choice without losing the personal ouch of a small tour operator. The company offers standard, ready-made packages as well as creating more detailed, personal itineraries. And this service won't blow the budget because local contacts and a longstanding reputation also mean great value. Sustainable tourism something Sunvil advocates and the company has made a conscious decision to feature locally owned accommodation and tours, plus you can choose to travel to Greece by train. There's a dedicated team in the UK and more than 30 representatives across Greece, some of whom have been looking after Sunvil guests for 30-plus years.

Searching for a secret beach hidden behind the forest in Halkidiki, or the best olive oil in Paxos? Sunvil reps can lead the way - and don't be surprised if you're the only out-of-towner there. Those who return every vear know there will always be a unique twist, keeping every visit fresh and original.

"Our promise is to take our guests away from the crowds and place them among locals and the most wondrous scenery," says Iosephides. "We want our guests to discover the real country and fall in love with it, and with those who live and work there in much the same way we did



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A NATURAL WONDE



Sanibel Island is home to Florida's most amazing wildlife - as one lucky ranger explains

oni Westland reckons she has the best job in the world. She's the supervisory refuge ranger at the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island, a short drive off the southwest coast of Florida. Named after the conservationist - and political

cartoonist - Jay Norwood "Ding" Darling, the 6,400-acre refuge was created to protect part of the world's largest undeveloped mangrove ecosystem, a job it's been doing phenomenally well since it was established in 1945 Some 270 bird species - including white pelicans, herons and reddish egrets - now depend on its variety of subtropical habitats.

Michigan-born Toni, 44, became a ranger here in 2002, having earned a degree in natural resources from the University





south until she reached The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel. When she first set foot on the refuge, it felt like a homecoming. "I felt I belonged," she says. "That I had found where I was supposed to be."

It's been a pleasure for Toni to raise her two young daughters in such sublime surroundings, to foster in them an appreciation of the outdoor life and a respect for nature. In many ways it has echoed her own upbringing, except in one interesting regard



Wildlife Refuge, Sanibel Island 'Migration stories are some of

A kayak trip through a bayou is a perfect opportunity to spot yellow-crowned night herons; loggerhead turtles can be seen on the beaches of Sanibel Island

> not all they are. They are covered in hundreds of unusual shells. and five different species of turtle nest here. That includes the loggerhead, which can grow to the size of a small car. Visit the USA

"Kayaking is my passion. If you haven't paddled around this part of southwest Florida, you haven't lived. There are nearly 200 miles of clearly marked waterways and trails. You can take a guided tour or explore the islands, rivers, bayous and mangrove forests on your own following the routes of the area's earliest inhabitants, the Calusa Indians. You owe it to yourself

54 Travel South America

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



Online See a video of Heather exploring the Mashpi cloud forest



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◀ 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 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.

the bird have been recorded 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."

Your essential guide to a Quito mini-break



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.

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).

The on-trend restaurant

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 (metropolitantouring.com).