

Journey to Mindo



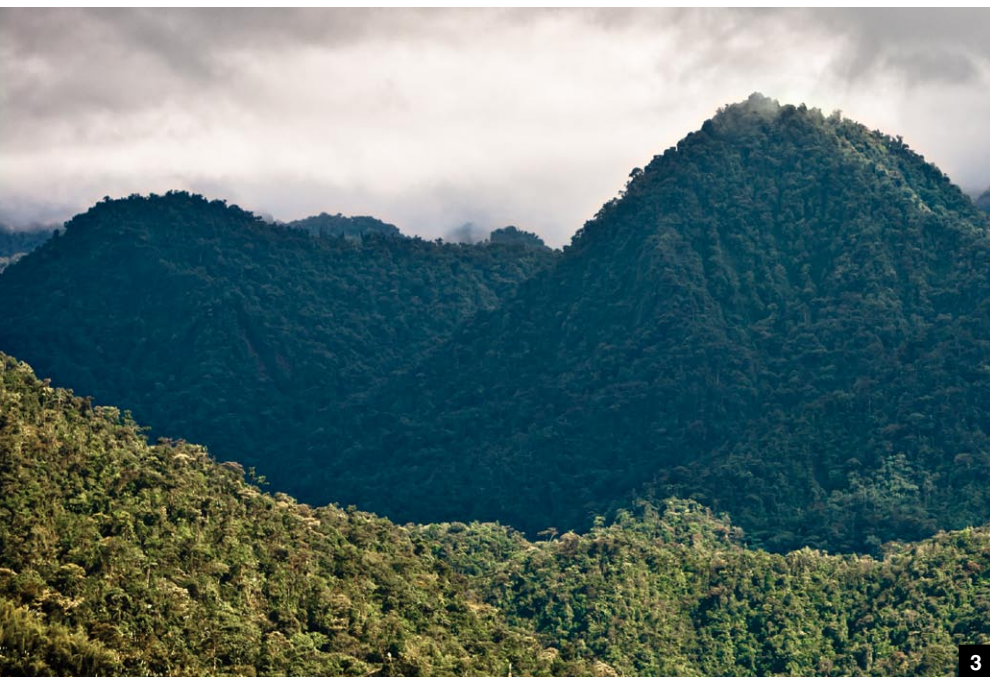
[1] Plants of *Rodriguezia lehmannii* were seen most often on trees planted along the road. As a twig epiphyte, this orchid dwells on the periphery of the tree crowns where the branches are thin and the plants are guaranteed brighter light.

[2] Every lookout point revealed a commanding view as we drove the Ecoruta. Clouds seeping from the mountaintops drenched the forests beneath with needed moisture. These are the forests where epiphytes reign.

Searching for Extraordinary Orchid Riches in Ecuador

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALEXANDER VASILJEV





IN JANUARY 2011 I TRAVELED TO Pichincha Province in Ecuador to photograph orchids and other wildlife on the western slope of the Andes. I began my journey, however, with a nonorchid destination and veered off course to visit “La Mitad del Mundo” or “the middle of the world,” as an affirmation of being in this equatorial country. Three centuries ago, the first French Geodesic Mission was sent here to measure Earth’s circumference at the equator. Today, this location is marked with a monument and museum, and is an educational as well as amusement destination. Nonetheless, being in the middle of the world meant more to me than just an equator line; it signified Ecuador as part of a region containing one of the highest concentrations of terrestrial life forms on the planet.

In Ecuador, the snowcapped Andes reach skyward 20,565 feet (6,270 m) above sea level, crossing the country from north to south. In the west, the mountains taper toward the Pacific Ocean and in the east toward the Amazonian flatland, creating an array of unique microhabitats in which a high level of endemism exists. Ecuador is one of the world’s most significant orchid hot spots. It has been estimated that there are more than 4,000 orchid species native to the wilds of Ecuador, with more than 40 percent found nowhere else. The most orchid-rich flora occurs between 5,000 and 11,000 feet (1,524–3,352 m) above sea level, in the premountain and mountain cloud forests.

I continued my trip westward toward the Yanacocha Reserve on the slope of the Volcano Pichincha with a summit of 15,696 feet (4,784 m). It is famed for its endemic black-breasted puffleg hummingbird and distinctive high-altitude cloud forest known as elfin forest, predominantly comprised here of trees from the genus *Polylepis*.

A brisk walk through the reserve at around 11,500 feet (3,500 m) above the sea level left me short of breath and feeling as if I had just gotten off of a treadmill. At this elevation the air is thinner and I quickly learned to pace myself. In Yanacocha, I found numerous orchids growing as terrestrials or lithophytes along the main trail. I could also see from here my destination: the blue mountain chains of the Mindo-Nambillo Protected Forest, where I was heading to visit the rural community of Mindo.

The remainder of the drive that day offered a great opportunity to see many kinds of orchids. I chose a road named Ecoruta that had little traffic, making it perfect for observing nature. We drove leisurely, making frequent stops to photograph and



[3] The steep hills surrounding the town of Mindo are carpeted with the cloud forest, which is part of the Mindo-Nambillo Protected Forest Reserve.

[4] This *Scaphosepalum beluosum* had a profusion of small but complexly structured flowers. I found close to a dozen different *Scaphosepalum* species in the forest around Mindo.



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to enjoy the scenery, yet pacing ourselves so we arrived at Mindo before dusk.

Mindo is located at an elevation of 5,000 feet (1,524 m). With its main square, church, fountain, school, a few restaurants, hotels and shops, it is typical of many Ecuadorian towns. The attraction for me was its growing reputation among birders and orchid enthusiasts.

The following day was spent visiting a small orchidarium packed with local orchids and then taking an orchid walk on the

town's outskirts. The orchid walk project started several years ago and has become an excellent place to see a noteworthy collection of regional orchids in a natural setting, transplanted here from nearby forests.

After becoming acquainted with orchids in the garden, I was eager to have a look at them in the wild. The following morning after breakfast, I grabbed my backpack and camera and set off to explore the cloud forest. It was a thrill to pass through the countryside and find an abundance of

[5] Carpets of colorful lichens, mosses and heather plants provided a habitat for this blooming *Cyrtorchilum angustatum*. It would have been difficult to spot this orchid with its camouflaged flowers if not for its tall branching spikes towering over the dwarfed vegetation. It was abundant in the Yanacocha Reserve, growing along the trail.



blooming twig epiphytes such as *Comperttia falcata*, *Erycina pumilio*, *Ionopsis satyrioides*, *Oncidium poikilostalix*, and *Rodriguezia lehmannii*.

It is much harder to spot orchids once inside the forest. Most epiphytes tend to concentrate in the canopies of tall trees. Occasionally, as I climbed up the trail I would find myself at eye level with the treetops, allowing me direct views of plants in flower. But I also repeatedly came across epiphytic orchids right at my feet. It is fairly common that numerous canopy orchids fall to the ground, where they are often destined to perish for lack of light and excess moisture. Here in Mindo some of these orchids end up transplanted into display gardens. My local guide, Efrain Toapanta, an environmental enthusiast, was knowledgeable in the regional flora and fauna and knew many orchids by their scientific names. Throughout our hikes I helped him rescue some of these fallen orchids to add them to the orchid walk where many will continue to thrive.

Several cloud-forest sites where Toapanta took me had been spared from logging or cattle ranching by their owners to protect the leks of one remarkable bird—the Andean cock-of-the-rock. Tours to observe

the male birds' eccentric courtship are conducted regularly and the income generated is a motivator to keep these areas protected. It is a great example of animal diplomacy, where an animal revered by humans becomes responsible for saving an entire habitat. It was reassuring to find local people serious about conservation and willing to shift their livelihoods toward ecotourism.

Nearby to the Mindo-Nambillo Protected Forest Reserve, the community of Mindo has begun to cater to local and international ecotourists and is transforming into an international destination with increasing forest sites being preserved.

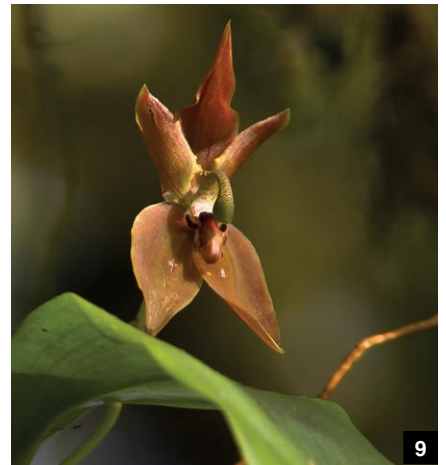
Ecotourism is one of the most direct ways to aid conservation and provide incentives for local communities to create and maintain protected areas. After many visits to Ecuador my curiosity has developed into a long-term commitment to share my adventures with other like-minded people, through organizing, conducting and promoting ecotours and photography workshops.

Every day spent in the forest around Mindo gave me many opportunities to view and photograph exciting orchid species and other wildlife in their unspoiled habitats thanks to the endeavors of local people. Regrettably, as my January trip came to

[6] While exploring the trail in a patch of cloud forest I came across a fallen tree illuminated by the light from a gap in the canopy. I immediately noticed large white flowers on its trunk and could smell their aroma. Typically found high in the trees, making it rare to see close up in the wild, this was *Trichopilia hennisiana* at its best, seen here with the author. A prized find indeed.

an end, I traveled back to Quito for my flight home, feeling an impatient desire to return soon.

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- [7] Clinging to a vertical tree trunk, the bizarre *Dracula lafleuri* had dozens of blooms and created an astonishing spectacle. But I wasn't the only one it attracted. Small flies were spiraling around the flowers, drawn to its characteristic mushroom-shaped lip suffused with pink. I found several blooming *Drac. lafleuri* throughout the orchid walk in Mindo.
- [8] I walked the trails of Mindo's orchid walk examining every tree when I found *Masdevallia peristeria*. It was named after

- the celebrated holy ghost orchid (*Peristeria elata*) with its dovelike flowers.
- [9] Infrequently seen, this *Mormolyca schlimii* was found on a tree at the edge of the forest. Its lip, which resembles an insect, with the column positioned right above it, is an example of the pollination mechanism developed to lure male bees into pseudocopulation with the flower. In addition, the flower emits a fragrance similar to a female bee, creating the perfect trap.

- [10] Everyday fog and frequent rainfall at the Yanacocha Reserve create a favorable environment. The main trail serpentine along the rocky outcrops crowded with epiphytes and lithophytes.
- [11] *Epidendrum gastropodium* was spotted blooming not far from the path at the Yanacocha Reserve. Tangled among vegetation with neon-bright flowers set off by its bright-green succulent stems and leaves, the orchid prominently stood out in this foggy highland environment.