

Jungle Tours in the Oriente of Ecuador

The Amazon rainforest is the largest contiguous area of rain forest on Earth. Although most people associate this huge wilderness with Brazil, the Amazon rain forest is also found within the borders of several other South American countries. In Ecuador, this treasure trove of biodiversity makes up nearly half of its territory.

The part of the Amazon rainforest hosted by Ecuador is also known as the “Napo bioregion” or “Napo endemic area”. Like some other areas in western Amazonia, the extreme biodiversity of the Napo bioregion is thought to be partly explained by the “refugia” hypothesis.

According to this hypothesis, during drier times in the past, the Amazon forest shrunk into separated “islands” of forest habitat that were surrounded by grasslands. These isolated areas of wet forest thus preserved Amazonian biodiversity by acting as refuges for rainforest animals and plants and also allowed several species to evolve in isolation. When the dry periods ended, these islands of forest became reconnected but species that had evolved in isolation were still only found in the areas that had acted as “refugia”.

Types of jungle tours in the Ecuadorian Amazon

Not all jungle tours in eastern Ecuador are the same and travelers to Ecuador should pick the tour that best suits their needs. For example, for travelers who want to focus on seeing as many of the 550 bird species known to occur in the Ecuadorian Amazon as possible should take a jungle birding tour with a knowledgeable birding guide. Likewise, travelers who would like to see more than birds and maybe visit an indigenous community will be pretty bored if they end up taking a birding tour.

The following list provides descriptions of some of the jungle tours offered in the Amazon rainforests of Ecuador:

- The jungle day tour. Although most people opt for trips that last for more than one day, for travelers to Ecuador with less time on their hands, there are one day jungle tours offered from Tena. Participants can't expect to see too much on a day tour but will at least be able to tell their co-workers and neighbors that they visited one of the most biodiverse areas of the Amazon rainforest.
- Four-day and weeklong tours. These are the most common type of jungle tour offered in eastern Ecuador. They are also the best way to experience the Amazon rainforest in Ecuador because a forest as rich in life as the Amazon merits more than just a day trip. This type of tour gives participants the chance to experience the forest at night (they might even be able to go on a night hike), at dawn (when the birds are most active), and allows more time for guided walks and boat trips.

- The boat jungle tour. While most of the eco-lodges in eastern Ecuador are only accessible by boat, they still have boardwalks over swamps or trails for hiking. Jungle tours near Lago Agrio, though, are mostly by boat because the areas they visit are naturally-flooded swamp forests. This type of tour is pretty relaxed and can result in good sightings of wildlife because it's often easier to approach animals with a boat.
- The cultural jungle tour. Many jungle tours (especially the short tours done out of Tena, Ecuador) include a visit to an Indigenous village. Tours out of Lago Agrio may visit the Cofan while those out of Tena may visit villages of Kichwa and other Amazonian peoples. This type of tour typically discusses some aspects of Amazonian natural history but for the most part focuses on local culture. Activities on a cultural tour can vary but participants usually get the chance to learn about how locals use the forest for survival.

What to expect on jungle tours in Ecuador

Travelers who take jungle tours in the Amazon rainforests of eastern Ecuador shouldn't expect to see jaguars, hundreds of monkeys, or rivers filled with Anacondas. Any tour provider or travel agent that says otherwise would be lying and should probably be avoided. These animals are present in the Amazon but they are very difficult to see because most forest wildlife is shy, many species are nocturnal, and the dense vegetation makes wildlife viewing a challenge.

This doesn't mean that animals won't be seen on jungle tours, it just means that people shouldn't expect to see lots of animals even with an excellent guide. Nevertheless, good guides are always on the lookout for wildlife and will show participants things that they wouldn't have otherwise found on their own. A good guide will also talk about the plants, insects, frogs, and other interesting aspects of the Ecuadorian rainforest.

Some of the animals that are easier to see on jungle tours in the Ecuadorian Amazon are various monkeys, and spectacular and exotic birds such as parrots and toucans.

Travelers who take a jungle tour in Ecuador should bring such items as:

- Binoculars. These are invaluable for watching birds, monkeys, and checking out that orchid growing high up in the canopy.
- Raingear. Travelers on jungle tours should always be ready for rain.
- Flashlight or headlamp. A lot of life comes out at night in the Amazon rainforest and night hikes can be fantastic for seeing frogs, reptiles, and a host of bizarre insects.