Ecuador – Tandayapa Valley and area

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My wife Angela and I were just in Ecuador for a short holiday. We learned a few things that might be helpful to others planning a collecting trip or holiday there. We spent our time ~2 hours NW of Quito in the Tandayapa Valley (Figure 1) and adjoining areas.

The most important ‘discovery’ that we made was of a small hotel called Mirador Rio Blanco (Figure 2) in the town of Los Bancos (00°01'21"N, 78°53'28"W; telephone number: 2-770-307). Los Bancos is a bit of an eyesore but the Mirador Rio Blanco is an oasis in the midst of the squalor. The cost was US$25 per night per person including all meals. The food was exceptional and all including drinks was safe to eat, the lodging was clean, the view over the river valley from the little restaurant was wonderful, there were loads of tanagers (11 species) and hummingbirds at the restaurant feeders, there is secure parking, etc. The only negative was that there was a fair bit of truck traffic noise through the night since they are on the main highway – nothing that earplugs couldn’t solve though.

Within 10 minutes by car of Mirador Rio Blanco are the Milpe reserves (on a gravel road that starts near km 91 on the main highway). Of course, permits are needed to collect here, but it is a superb area of mid-elevation forest (1100 m). There are two reserves at Milpe. The first is less than 1 km down the gravel road on the right. Watch for the small sign with MCF and an Umbrellabird on it (MCF stands for Mindo Cloudforest Foundation; http://www.mindocloudforest.org/). This is the only marker indicating that you are at a preserve. The second site is a few hundred meters further along the road and seems equally good (Milpe Gardens – 00°02'07"N, 78°52'15"W). Milpe Gardens has a covered, open sided building with hammocks, cooking facilites, tables, etc. if you are really doing things on the cheap. We also were able to hit Rio Silanche (00°08'42"N, 79°08'29"W; 400 m) from Mirador Rio Blanco. The drive there takes about 1 hour. Exit the main highway onto the gravel road near km 127. Collecting along the gravel access road is excellent. A permit would be required for the Preserve itself. This was a spectacular site with typical lowland forest. The Preserve is about 10 km down the gravel road; watch for the small MCF signs indicating turns that you need to make along this road.
Renting a car in Quito was easy. Just walk out of the airport and there are three or four rental places right there. I booked ahead through Avis but they had no record of my booking and I ended up paying $700 for 8 days when it should have cost about $500 (I learned later). You can easily just get your car when you arrive without booking ahead. They are all open 7 days a week from about 8am to 8pm. Driving was typical of Latin America, easy enough if you are defensive. Signage was non-existent. Try to work out your routes and get maps before going. There were no maps available from the rental car place and getting out of Quito was tricky. We ended up hiring a cab for $10 and following him for 45 minutes until we were out of town. Once out of the city there is only one main road so things were considerably easier. Do not get a vehicle GPS to help you around Quito. It was the reason that we got lost. You are better off without it and it’s preferred routes on goat paths.

Other places that we stayed were excellent but they were on the birding circuit and thus cost a fortune. I would recommend all of them, but not everyone will want to drop that much cash. Bellavista Lodge (http://bellavistacloudforest.com/index.html; 00°00'58"S, 78°40'53"W; 2300 m) costs about US$72 per night per person including all meals. Food and accommodation were good, the forest is excellent and there are lots of trails. This is a good starting point for a trip since they are about the only place in Ecuador that was well signed. They also provide a decent bed and breakfast for $27 per person in Quito for those arriving late in the day. Someone will meet you at the airport and take you there. Bellavista has a research station for $10 per night but it was pretty rough. There were nice new showers, decent accommodation for leaders, foam bunks for students and a pretty rugged kitchen area where you have to make your own meals. I wouldn’t recommend it unless you check it out first.

Tandayapa Lodge (00°00'08"N, 78°40'37"W; 1700 m) costs about $92 per night per person including all meals. It is completely unsigned. Take the first road/driveway on the right after you pass through Tandayapa and it goes up to the lodge. As with Bellavista, food and accommodation were good, the forest is excellent and there are lots of trails. The hummingbird feeders were exceptional with 19 species at them the days we were there. This Lodge is within striking distance of Yanacocha Preserve (Figures 3, 4) (00°06'41.5"S, 78°35'05"W; 3500 m).

This is a superb high elevation site very near Quito and about 1.5 hours from Tandayapa. There are places to stay a bit closer at Nono that should be cheaper but we did not investigate them. Do not expect to find Yanacocha Preserve unless you come prepared with maps from Google Earth or elsewhere. It is
unsigned and there are about four turns needed to get there. I collected at Bellavista, Tandayapa and Yanacocha without any problems. They were totally unconcerned with me carrying my net in full view around the buildings.

A superb experience was visiting La Paz (00°01'12"N, 78°42'26"W; 1900 m). It is about 45 minutes from either Tandayapa or Bellavista. Angel Paz leads birders around his trails here to show them Antpittas and Wood-Quail. The species targeted are amongst the hardest to see in Ecuador and he calls them out and feeds them worms. Quite an amazing experience. He also had no problem with us collecting on his property. The forest is very good with a network of trails. The road to this site also has lots of great collecting potential. The site is signed on the main highway (a small sign just past km 65 marks the road entrance). You would have to arrange access to Angel Paz and his property from one of the lodges. He charges $15 per person for a day but would likely work out a different rate for those interested in collecting over several days.

We saw a couple of other spots that had potential. Mindo Lomo (phone: (593) 094228204; e-mail minfo@mindolomacloudforest.com; $55 per day per person, all meals included) had good trails, was far enough off the main road to be quiet, and gives good access to Bellavista, Mindo, and area.

One other site with potential was the El Pahuma Orchid Preserve (http://www.ceiba.org/elpahuma.htm). It is well signed and less than one hour from Quito on the new highway. Stop at the little restaurant and the owner can show you the ‘lodge’ back in the forest. We did not look inside but it looked OK and cost about $50 per night, I assume including food at the restaurant. This site has nice trails and could offer good access to decent forest closer to Quito (about 2700 m if I remember correctly). Their web site has directions from Quito airport, something that would have been useful to us.

Feel free to contact me if you have any specific questions about visiting this area.

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