

Northern Hidden Jewels

5-day tour



Day 1

Our adventure starts early in the morning, as we board our transport to leave the city of Quito and travel north to our first stop: the Jerusalem Forest. This dry forest, a tropical gem in the middle of the Andes, is one of the very few remnants of this unique ecosystem is also the biggest of its kind in the Andes. Jerusalem will redefine what you know about microclimates and adaptation to unusual weather conditions, with cacti and other of a desert-like species sharing their habitat with Andean trees that require heavy rainfall to survive.

We will take a short hike in the forest paths to absorb the landscapes and the unique flora while keeping a watchful eye for the many bird species that inhabit the forest.

After this visit, we will enjoy this beautiful scenery while eating a box lunch, as there are no suitable restaurant options in the area. We will then continue to the nearby Cochasquí: the largest Pre- Incan archaeological site in all of Ecuador.



The site, with a remarkable view of surrounding volcanoes, is thought to have served military and astrological purposes. The Caranqui culture built this complex consisting of 15 different-sized pyramids, constructed with access ramps, as well as many burial mounds scattered in the area. The material used in the constructions is volcanic soil, known locally as cangahua. Since this material is not as hard as rock or wood, the indigenous builders covered the pyramids with regular soil and plants to avoid erosion of from the wind and rain of these slopes. Another theory states that the pyramids were covered with soil and plants to prevent detection from a distance.

Most of the pyramids remain covered, but the many archeological teams that have worked on this site have uncovered some sections where is possible to see the materials and techniques used in the construction. The teams have also dug up many instruments used by the Caranqui people that are now in the on-site museum, which is also a part of the visit. Investigators have yet to determine these pyramids' exact purpose; however, some of the pyramids still retain their moon and sun calendars, which hints at an astronomical or astrological function.

After this visit, we will continue to Hacienda Cusin, a beautiful 17th-century hacienda with breathtaking gardens and decorated in Andean style, located near the beautiful San Pablo lake, on the foothills of the imposing Imbabura volcano. Here we will enjoy dinner and spend the night.



Day 2

After breakfast, we will head to the nearby Otavalo indigenous market, the biggest and most important of its kind in all of Latin America. The colorful main handicraft and textile market spills into the streets from the central Plaza de Ponchos while the cacophony of the animal market remains on the outskirts of town.

The produce market impresses with the sheer variety and color of the locally-grown fruits and vegetables. The friendly Otavaleños are more than happy to talk about their crafts and traditions and will expect you to haggle a bit on the price.

From the busy market, we will continue to “Parque Cóndor,” a conservation project dedicated to the rescue and reintroduction of birds of prey (condors, vultures, owls) in their natural habitat. The project was funded and supported by many international zoos and organizations, who have also donated birds of different species found in the park. The visit includes a falconry show and a complete explanation of the project’s conservation efforts. Afterwards, we will have lunch at a local restaurant to get a taste for the local flavors, which rely heavily on local produce. After lunch, we will head to Cuicocha, a crater lake at the foothills of the still active Cotacachi volcano. The lake and the two islands found in it form a breathtaking landscape. After this stop, we will continue to the town of Cotacachi for a short stop at the central plaza where you will have some time to browse the shops since Cotacachi is known for their handmade leather handicrafts and clothing.

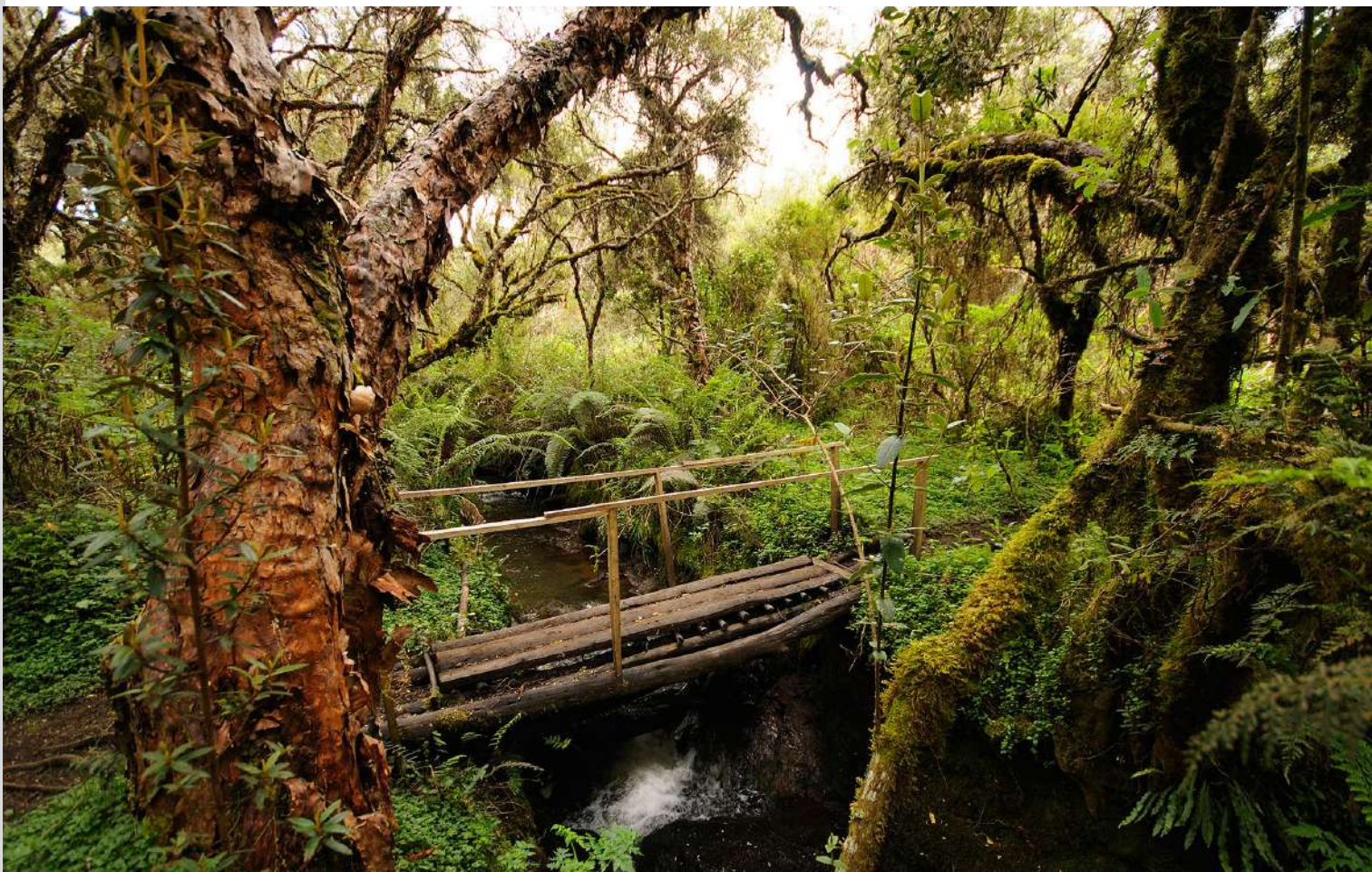
After this, we will return to Hacienda Cusin for a nice dinner and a well-deserved rest.



Day 3

After breakfast at the Hacienda, we will depart for the Highlands of El Angel, a beautiful nature reserve and home to a millenary forest. We will arrive at Polylepis Lodge, located within the Polylepis millenary forest. After checking in our cabins, we will do a beautiful hike into the woods and to the surrounding highlands to appreciate their unique flora and fauna. The walk takes us through a beautiful waterfall and swamp in the middle of the woods, followed by a short climb to the surrounding slope to appreciate the landscape and an incredible view of the Chiles volcano. The length and difficulty level of the hike can be adapted to each guest.

We will have lunch at the Lodge, and then, if the weather is good, we will visit the nearby Morán lookout, for a spectacular view of the Andes descending to the coastal region. The day ends with dinner at the lodge and a short night walk in the forest to hear about its millenary legends.



Day 4

After breakfast at the Lodge, we will depart to the nearby city of Ibarra. We will board La Libertad train for a unique journey on rails to the valley of Salinas de Ibarra. The train takes us to the Afro Ecuadorian community in Salinas, passing through dry Andean forests, overhanging bridges, along with a precipice and through mountainside tunnels. (Please note that the liberty train operates from Wednesday to Sunday and is closed on Mondays and Tuesdays).

The vegetation gives way to vast sugar cane fields and further down to cotton plantations. In Salinas, we will be welcomed by traditional songs and invited to lunch at the community-run Gastronomic Center where we can try delicious dishes made with local produce.

After lunch, we will head to the desert valley of El Chota to take in the amazing landscapes while we take the historic road that connected Ibarra with Tulcán, that is no longer in use due to the new highways. On this path, we will reach Hostería Tunas y Cabras, a beautiful inn that captures the spirit of the valley. Here we will have a leisurely afternoon while enjoying the facilities which include a dehydration room, where local herbs are dried for infusions and other proposes. Then we will have dinner and enjoy a beautiful starry night, as this region is known for its clear skies.



Day 5

After a hearty breakfast at Tunas y Cabras, we will take our transport back to Quito where our program ends.

