



Escape

Ecuador's Mashpi Lodge, set high amid the western slopes of the Andes, has become the ne plus ultra of jungle chic.

Cloud Break

BY PAUL RUBIO

The love match between nature and luxury may not be a new one, but it's making news in Ecuador's super-biodiverse cloud forest.

The recent opening of the superbly designed Mashpi Lodge opens a new chapter in luxe exploration in the tropical Andean highlands—a fascinating world of dramatic waterfalls, rare orchids, 45-foot leafy ferns and otherworldly fauna. The resort's high design, high thread counts, foodie fantasies and stellar service have enticed the full spectrum of jet-setters to immerse themselves in this mystical retreat engulfed in mind-blowing biodiversity and inspiring topography.

Mashpi, which means “friends of the water” in local dialect, rises to glory on a plateau in the center of 3,200 acres of protected forest ranging up to thousands of feet in elevation. The reserve spans myriad ecosystems, including the World Wildlife Fund-designated ecoregion Chocó-Darién Moist Forests. Nearly 500 species of birds merge on this precious tract of Earth, only 68 miles northwest of the country's capital, Quito. These birds also share the land with native oddities like tayras (weasel family), elusive kinkajous, ocelots (daintier cousins of the jaguar) and margays (small, arboreal spotted cats).

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Masphi was conceptualized with two central purposes: to introduce tourists to the natural bounties of Ecuador in a luxurious “eco” setting and to create a working research facility to foster and spearhead regional conservation initiatives. The project represents a sustainable option for the nation’s biological heritage that allows humans and other species to benefit.

The lodge is a true man-made marvel. It is an oblong, triple-story “see-through” building, comprised of oversized glass panes, steel frames and unpolished hardwood slats. This



THE MASHPI LODGE PLACES TRAVELERS IN THE HEART OF ECUADOR’S RAINFOREST—WITH ALL THE CREATURE COMFORTS OF MODERN PAMPERING AND INDULGENCE, INCLUDING LOUNGE AREAS, PLUSH BEDROOMS, GOURMET MEALS AND PLENTY OF CHARDONNAY.



design opus delivers an overwhelming wow factor at first sight. Sliding open the two-story castle-like entrance door reveals an unlikely modernist union of dollhouse and greenhouse. Its 24 units are connected by open staircases (nuts and bolts exposed), separated by thick, avant-garde valentine-red lattices. The steps are interrupted by numerous high-design elements to ponder, including pliable chairs cushioned with wine corks and coffee tables constructed from concentric hollow tree trunks.

Enveloped in glass, both the guest rooms and the public spaces grant endless panoramas of rainforest grandeur. Neither televisions nor artwork are needed to illuminate the minimalist white rooms; the strata of green foliage and vibrant avifauna provide more than ample visuals. While Mashpi’s outward-facing design ensures complete privacy within the rooms, the curtains lower at the touch of a remote, just in case peeping toucans lurk.



WHO NEEDS A HIGH-DEFINITION TV WHEN NATURAL WONDERS ARE RIGHT OUTSIDE YOUR ABODE? THE ECO ENTERTAINMENT IS ALWAYS VISIBLE THROUGH THE FLOOR-TO-CEILING GLASS WINDOWS.



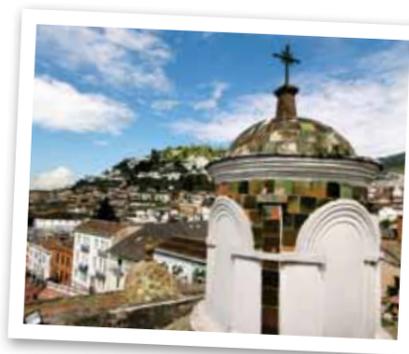
QUITO

Mashpi Lodge is about a three-hour drive from Ecuador’s capital city, Quito. Its airport’s late-arriving inbound and crack-of-dawn outbound flights often require visitors to stay within this burgeoning city—one of two of the world’s first UNESCO World Heritage Sites—before and after a cloud-forest sojourn. Which is great, because it affords an opportunity to explore the charm and grandeur of colonial Old Quito. Plant yourself in the heart of national history at the regal Casa Gangotena, a reinvented mansion overlooking picturesque Plaza San Francisco. The 31-room hotel dazzles with stunning detail, including restored, hand-painted Belgian tin ceilings; earth-toned, three-dimensional carpeting and upholstery; massive bouquets of white roses; and a fairy-tale courtyard and atrium adorned with pieces from Quito’s archaeological museum. (casagangotena.com)



Every day, a new adventure beckons within Mashpi’s cloud forests. By 6:30 a.m., the lodge’s professional naturalists gather on the rooftop with high-tech telescopes adjusted and binoculars in hand to greet early risers, ready to point out a hundred fascinating species of local birds.

After breakfast, the day is split between morning and afternoon forest excursions conducted by a personally assigned naturalist. Guests may choose from guided walks along easy, medium or difficult trails to seek out exotic flora and fauna. Another option is Mashpi’s Life Center, an annex of the lodge that serves as a working research facility, where visitors can learn about current projects on butterfly reproduc-



tion or simply relax on loungers high amid the mountains. It’s possible to spy 18 species of hummingbirds fighting, mating and communing around feeders. You can also feel like E.T., flying high through the forest canopy on an aerial bicycle.

Alternatively, sleep in and bask in the surrounding beauty from within your glass-encased cocoon. Come afternoon, rest by a waterfall with a chilled bottle of Chardonnay and let the winged wonders come to you. Engage in as many or as few activities as you’d like, but in any case, be flexible, as the tempestuous weather of the cloud forest mandates a plan B at all times.

Gourmet meals at the all-inclusive Mashpi Lodge fuel visitors for the twice-daily adventures. Rise and shine to a hearty breakfast spread that includes Western favorites along with fresh exotic fruits like gooseberry, granadilla and dragon fruit (raw or juiced). For lunch, feast on Ecuadorian fish ceviche garnished with corn nuts, popcorn and homemade vegetable chips. Or sample a variety of beautiful salads with sweet and tart fruit dressings, then round out the meal with grilled *choclo* (a sweet, thick corn) and lean meats. Save room for a few trips to the ice cream bar, showcasing six unique flavors daily (from passion fruit to cocoa nib to beer) and a fun toppings counter.

Prepare for even greater dining rapture in the evening with such Ecuadorian dishes as cocoa-crusting tuna and local hearts of palm

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ALTHOUGH A TRIP TO THE RESORT IS DRIVEN BY EXPLORATION ACTIVITIES, MASHPI INVITES GUESTS TO BE AS RELAXED AS POSSIBLE IN COMFORT AND LUXURY.

ceviche. For an after-dinner indulgence, raid your welcome gift—a handsome supply of award-winning, fruit-infused organic Ecuadorian chocolates.

One year since opening, Mashpi is garnering major global attention from a groundswell of rave reviews. The lodge's commercial success and scientific projects have catalyzed official protection of another 16,000 acres of surrounding cloud forest. And it has shown



you need not be a die-hard nature lover to fall under the spell of Ecuador's lush lands. Indeed, Mashpi Lodge has revealed a model for uniting luxury and conservation by keeping scientific research in style while quickly solidifying its status as the pinnacle of deluxe jungle travel. (mashpilodge.com) ◀◀