

Journeying along the Yumbo Trail in Ecuador's Cloud Forests

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When I decided to go trekking in the cloud forests of Ecuador, I never imagined I'd be hiking 8 feet underground. Nor did I think I'd relish the idea of traipsing through earthy tunnels with only occasional glimpses of sky peeking through green leaves above. But once initiated, I found a lot to see in this subterranean world. The passageways were lined with polychromatic mosses and lichens, miniature ferns, deep holes excavated by armadillos, and plants with leaves like those sold at North American nurseries. And, there was lore and legend to keep my mind occupied for days.

I was following a *culunco*, an ancient trail used by Yumbo Indians, the pre-Incan natives of northwestern Ecuador. Many years before the arrival of Spanish colonizers in the 1530s, the Yumbos had developed an active trade route between their home on the slopes of the Andes Mountains to the Pacific coast. They walked down the mountain along the *culuncos*, laden with highland crops such as corn, potatoes and berries, which they exchanged for fish, coca leaves and fruit. Hundreds of years of foot traffic, aided by perpetual rains, eroded the steep slopes, causing the trails to become depressed below ground level.

The subterranean hiking was only one aspect of the three-day hike I organized for myself and my partner for the trail also included broad vistas of green mountains and valleys revealing centuries of human history. Good thing, as I had come to Ecuador intrigued by the idea of walking a trail used 600 years ago by early Andean settlers. I wanted to relive ancient times, learn about current forest conservation initiatives, and support rural community development as an ecotourist.

Our trip began in the village of Yunguillas at 9500 feet elevation, an hour from Ecuador's capital city, Quito. The first day, our guide Jose, a tough-skinned man in his early 50s, told us that for hundreds of years the Yumbos had lived on the western slopes of the Andes in the shadow of Mount Pichincha, the 16,000 foot volcano that occasionally showers ashes over Quito. When the mountain erupted in the 1660s, they fled over the Andes into the Amazon, settling at similar altitudes on the eastern side of the mountains.

It would then take three hundred years for these ancient paths to come alive again. When Jose was a boy, he accompanied his father and a caravan of mules along the *culuncos*, transporting locally-made *trago*, or sugar cane liquor, to market. It was a dangerous business since home brewing was illegal, but the sunken trails provided cover from police stakeouts. "My ancestors called these paths *culuncos* after the echoing sound of the mules' hooves in the tunnels: *cu-lun-co*," he explained.

As I walked, I imagined myself a Yumbo, wearing a poncho of tree bark, toting a handwoven basket laden with corn and *papas*, knobby-looking potatoes originating in the Andes. At night I'd make a shelter out of palm leaves, and huddle with other family members for warmth. Instead, as pampered 21st century visitors, all we needed to carry were clothes, binoculars and

camera. We slept in comfortable ecolodges, ate home-cooked food from nearby organic gardens, and spent our time learning about life in the forest.

Cloud forests are so-named because they are often bathed in clouds. Always humid, they teem with life. Bromeliads, relatives of pineapples, perch in the crooks of tall trees or balance on outstretched branches, calling attention with their red-tipped leaves and bottle-brush-like inflorescences. Bulbous orchids, with delicate flowers smaller than the head of a tack, adorn tree limbs, and drippy mosses drape themselves on every surface. Underfoot, thick leathery leaves of *Clusia* trees lay scattered among their star-shaped fruits sporting bright orange seeds.

Birds are abundant, too. We observed bright-colored tanagers, mountain toucans, and even the rarely seen toucan barbet, locally known as the *yumbo*. While mammals are notoriously difficult to see, we were delighted to see their signs. Palm trees ransacked for their tender hearts and bromeliads with nibbled leaf bases were evidence of spectacled bears, an endangered species unique to the Andes. In the middle of the trail, a pile of vertebrae, a femur bone, and a scattering of boney scales were remnants of an armadillo, recently devoured by a puma. Indeed, in spite of great losses of tropical forests around the world, this cloud forest seemed intact.

There are good reasons that wildlife is making a comeback here. Conservation can be a lucrative business for rural communities living near nature reserves. Yunguillas is a prime example. Six years ago villagers made their living chopping down the forest and to produce charcoal, and raise cattle. They sold raw milk to the local Nestle company, receiving little for their labors. Now, with help from local conservation and development organizations, Yunguillans engage in a variety of small businesses. They grow organic vegetables and fruits on terraces; produce jams, fresh cheeses, bromeliads, and greeting cards from recycled paper; and grow native trees for reforestation. And, the ecotourism lodge that we stayed in on the first night of our walk provides employment for cooks, a maid, guides and trail workers.

The community of the Santa Lucia, where we spent our second night, has a similar history. During the 1970s and 80s farmers cleared forest to create pasture and farm fields, but soon found that their lands lost their fertility when deforested. They search for alternatives resulted in assistance from the Maquipucuna Foundation, a non-profit conservation organization that owns and manages the nearby 13,000-acre Maquipucuna Reserve. Now they are reforesting the pasturelands with native trees and run their own ecotourism business with a magnificent three-story lodge they constructed atop a hill overlooking the valley below.

When we arrived at the Santa Lucia lodge wet and tired after our 7 hour hike through the cloud forest, Eduardo and Rosario, the lodge caretakers, welcomed us with glasses of fresh lemonade, and sent us to warm up with hot showers. Over dinner of chard soup with popcorn; potato, tomato and bean stew; and freshly-baked carrot cake, Eduardo talked of wild animals reappearing in the region after being nearly hunted out.

Aside from bear and puma sightings, he related his encounter with one of the newly reintroduced howler monkeys. "For many years, we never dreamed of seeing monkeys here," Eduardo told us. "Until researchers told us that black howlers were native to these forests, we didn't know the

Yumbos shared the forest with other primates.” Now, the howlers are making a comeback, delighting all in earshot with their raucous calls.

The next day Pancho, our Santa Lucia guide, took us to the tree nursery to explain how the community is reforesting pasturelands. “Thanks to young British volunteers who come each year to work with us, we are converting our community-owned farm back into forest. We have seen that only certain tree species take hold in open pastures, but as they become established, other species come in. Soon it will be difficult to tell that this patch of land once fattened a cow.”

When the sun came out at midday, I relished what became my most memorable view of the trip, quite different from those I had during my close-up inspections inside the *culunco* the day before. From in front of the lodge, I had a 360° view of the mountainous terrain below. The dark green primary forest on the slopes of the Maquipucuna Reserve provided sharp contrast to lighter pasturelands on flat terrain, and as I watched as the migrating clouds produced a movie of changing green and grey hues. I marveled as one minute the sun highlighted a sugar cane field, the next it lit up a densely forested stream valley.

Our final destination, reached later that day after a two hour hike down the mountain, was Maquipucuna’s Umachaca Lodge. It seemed like an overgrown Yumbo house, constructed of wood and huge bamboos, and covered with palm thatch, expertly woven using age-old technique. Within earshot of the river, ancient forest-dwellers would have had no problems meeting their daily needs. There was water for drinking, bathing, and dish washing, and food in the forest. Torrent ducks, which still splash in the river’s riffles, would have been common 600 years ago, and would have amused pre-Incans just as they did us.

But there likenesses to Yumbo domestic life ended. The lodge was fully equipped with modern conveniences: electricity; hot showers; beds with thick, comfortable mattresses; an open dining room overlooking the river; delicious meals served on china; a library stocked with field guides and novels; a bamboo-sided bar; and a shop with local handicrafts. Best of all were the hammocks slung along the edges of the open-sided living room. Properly positioned, I could hold vigil over a parade of fluorescent hummingbirds drawn to the floral plantings and hanging bird-feeders filled with sugar water.

As I lay in bed my last evening, I wondered what tales the Yumbos told of their visits to the lowlands. Arriving home from their trek up the mountain, lugging sacks filled with coastal bounties, they must have been tired but content. They would relax around a fire and recount stories of great ceiba trees near the coast, jaguars silently stalking the forests, and prophecies made by the toucan barbet, their winged namesake. Had the Yumbos predicted that the forest and its creatures would prosper far into the future because of their journeys on the Yumbo trail, it wouldn’t be far from the truth. Today’s ecotourists are helping to ensure a bright future for countless cloud forest inhabitants.