At home in the clouds in Ecuador

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| GLOBE CORRESPONDENT OCTOBER 18, 2014

NECEE REGIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Necee Regis (front) and Jim Gilbert at Mashpi Rainforest Biodiversity Reserve and Lodge.

MASHPI RESERVE, Ecuador — “You want me to do what?”

I’m peering skeptically at a piece of equipment called a Sky Bike, designed to traverse a 600-foot span of cable high above a valley in the Ecuador cloud forest. The two-seat, human-pedaled, aerial gondola sways above the wood platform as I clamber into the front seat and allow our guide to strap me in. Though the day is warm and soggy, mid-70s and overcast with 85 percent humidity, I shiver as my eyes fix on the cable extending to infinity in the dense fog. Did I mention I’m afraid of heights?

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The Sky Bike is one of the experiences offered at the Mashpi Rainforest Biodiversity Reserve and Lodge, a protected 3,212-acre rain forest retreat (with 22-room luxury accommodations) located in a 42,000-acre reserve recently declared a natural protected area by the Municipality of Quito, Ecuador’s capital. Located on the Pacific slopes of the Andes, between altitudes of 1,800 and 4,500 feet, this area in the tropical cloud forest is a hot spot of species found nowhere else in the world.

The Mashpi development is the brainchild — one might say love child — of environmentalist, entrepreneur, and former mayor of Quito Roque Sevilla, who wants not only to conserve the land but also to use it for research and education. To this end, Mashpi employs a full-time resident biologist and a team of naturalists who study the forest and wildlife ecology. Lodge guests are led on hikes accompanied by their own naturalist — a young biologist or scientist — who can speak about the myriad plants, insects, and animals that inhabit the environment, and a native guide from the local community skilled at spotting creatures in the dense vegetation. For a visitor like me, who can’t tell a weed from any other plant, it’s a heady experience.

“Mashpi means ‘friends with water.’ It’s the name of a river, a town, the reserve, and the lodge,” says David Galarza, our easygoing naturalist guide who has degrees in both ecology and tourism.

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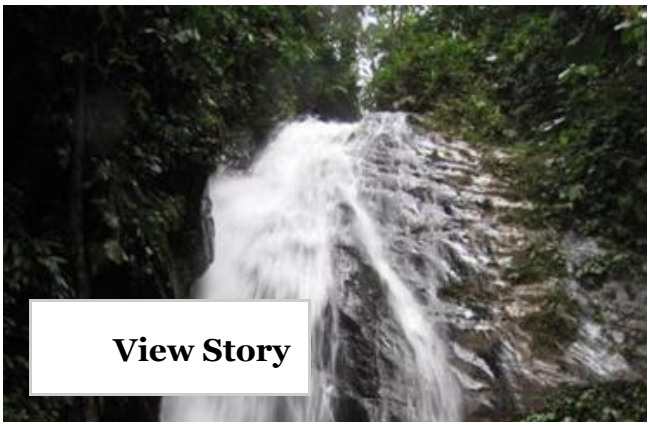

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The Sky Bike is one of the experiences offered at the Mashpi Rainforest Biodiversity Reserve and Lodge.

We are hiking a wide path beneath a towering canopy of trees bedecked with lichens, bromeliads, orchids, coiling vines, and heliconia flowers. I'm with Galarza, my pal Jim Gilbert, and Nestor Paladines, our local guide who carries a portable telescope. We're outfitted in rubber boots — for when the path gets muddy or crosses small streams — and wear bug repellent bracelets, both provided by the lodge. Binoculars dangle from our necks, water bottles from our hips. This city girl is ready to tackle the wilderness.

Everything in this forest, or so it seems, grows to enormous proportions. Steep hillsides are dense with knee-high ferns and table-size elephant ear plants. We stop every 10 feet to look at something I never would have noticed, like leaf cutter ants parading up a muddy hillock.

Monkeys, peccaries, pumas, tayra, and ocelots reside in the reserve, as do hundreds of amphibian and reptile species, thousands of insects and arachnid species, and an estimated 400 to 500 species of birds, including 22 species of hummingbird.

"The moss-backed tanager is one of the rarest birds in the country. Except here at Mashpi. The bird is the symbol of the lodge," says Galarza.

As if on cue, Paladines races forward and sets down his telescope, motioning to come close. And there it is, high in the canopy, a perky little moss-backed tanager. A moment later, it's gone.

Over three days we spot more birds than I can count, including a black-tipped cotinga, tropical kingbird, choco trogon, and all manner of tanagers including palm, lemon-rumped, and glistening-green. In a clearing dotted with feeders, about a 2½-mile hike from the hotel,

hundreds of hummingbirds cause us to duck as they whiz through the air, their small wings buzz-buzzing past in sugared frenzy.

A climb up an eight-story-high metal tower to an observation deck provides a view of the immensity of the forest. Mountain ridges with dense canopies of trees extend toward the coastal flatlands, appearing and disappearing in ever-moving banks of clouds that settle in the valleys like sighs. Nestled in the greenery, the hotel appears as a tiny oasis, its straight lines and right angles the only evidence of human activity in the area.

The 10,000-square-foot hotel is a marvel of its own, a Modernist's dream of interlocking glass, steel and wood, all clean lines and minimalist decor that allows the rain forest to be the star. Our second-floor room had indigenous Ecuadoran seike hardwood furniture, white 600-thread-count sheets, and floor to ceiling windows at monkey-eye level to the tangled foliage. A remote control device raises and lowers a shade for those who want to shut out morning light. Though it is tempting to loll in the room for a day — or linger in the small spa's Jacuzzi — it is impossible to resist the pull of the forest.

On a bright, sunny morning, we hike an easy trail to the Life Centre, a tented facility that is home to 11 species of butterflies, as well as the science lab where the resident biologist and his staff research over 40 species.

"Camouflage is everything here," says Galarza. He points to a series of owl butterflies — palm-sized creatures named for their enormous eyespots resembling owls' eyes — hanging upside down, wings still wet after emerging from a chrysalis. "See how the end of the wing resembles a snake? It keeps predators away."

The tent is aflutter with purple heliconius, glasswings, and other species feeding on red, orange, yellow, and red flowers. Two owl butterflies land on Paladines's outstretched palm, and he offers them to me.

Near the research center, bushes and fruit trees, including banana, plantain, manioc, cacao, coffee, breadfruit, and heart of palm, attract wildlife for observation. The garden's ingredients are also used in changing menus of locally sourced dishes prepared at the lodge.

Hungry hikers are well fed. Meals are served three times a day in the lodge's restaurant, a spectacular space where glass walls soar two stories, creating the illusion of dining outdoors. Our favorite lunch is the daily ceviche served with a small carafe of brightly flavored citrus sauce, good enough to drink, accompanied by house-made plantain and manioc chips.

At dinner, the menu lists five entrees, including two vegetarian dishes. We sample smoked octopus with green tagliatelle, shrimp-and-zucchini-stuffed chicken breasts, and beef

tenderloin with a dark beer sauce. Classic Ecuadoran dishes include empanadas de viento (with scallions and Nanegalito cheese), majado de verde (mashed green plantains with eggs), and locro de papa (potato soup with avocado and fresh cheese).

Two guests arrive from Canada and join our hiking group, and the six of us descend a steep hillside in a light rain. The slope is notched by a series of steps made from recycled beverage crates — some 7,000 are in use on the property — making it easier to trek without slipping. The sounds of a waterfall tease us along, though we're in no hurry as our guides stop to point out lichens, mushrooms, tree bark, spiders, and birds. As we reach the waterfall and its cascading pools, it begins to rain harder and Paladines pulls ponchos out of his pack. I've worked up a sweat on the trail and so, ignoring the rain, I strip to my bathing suit and plunge into the refreshing spray.

At the Sky Bike, I'm remembering the waterfall as we peddle slowly into the smoky-grey mist. I think I hear it thrumming far below, beneath the thick canopy spreading like an undulating sea of greenery that is swallowed by a sky dense with clouds.

"I'm not afraid of heights. I'm not afraid of heights," I say, clutching the steel bar with one hand while snapping photos with the other.

Midway across the chasm, the sky brightens and the mist lifts enough to glimpse the far horizon. It is nearly silent here, suspended above the relentless waterfall, hovering over the wilderness where birds nest, butterflies sip nectar, and resolute leaf cutter ants are on the march. In this hushed aerie something in me relaxes enough to feel part of the forest, not only an observer, but of it, at home — for the briefest moment — in the clouds.

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