

COLOMBIA 2023

WESTERN ANDES FEBRUARY 4TH-12TH



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From left to right: Dave Provencher, Simon Harvey, Frnak Gallo, Julian Hough and Nick Bonomo

Colombia: February 4th–12th 2023

by Julian Hough,

A group of five of us embarked on a quickly arranged trip to the Western Andes of Colombia. Using Pereira as an entry point we hit a few well-known sites centering on the antpitta hotpots. Most of these sites are well-known and covered in detail in other trip reports and as such, the birds at these spots are well-documented in ebird, so most of our info will be links to our checklists. I'll add in trip logistics that I found to be helpful when planning this trip at short notice and refer you to other trip reports, such as those by Ross Gallardy, Ned Brinkley and Alex Berryman for info that is still pertinent today. In 7 days we birded hard and amassed a respectable total of 324 species!

Itinerary:

4th Saturday – Arrive in Pereira, Colombia c. 3:40pm.

5th Sunday – Rio Blanco (2200m– 2500m)

6th Monday – Hacienda El Bosque – all day (2800-3900)

7th Tuesday – Hacienda El Bosque

Los Nevados (3000m – 4300m)

Otun Quimbaya (1900m)

8th Wednesday – Otun-Quimbaya to Pueblo Rico

9th Thursday – Montezuma (1200 m– 2400m) –all day

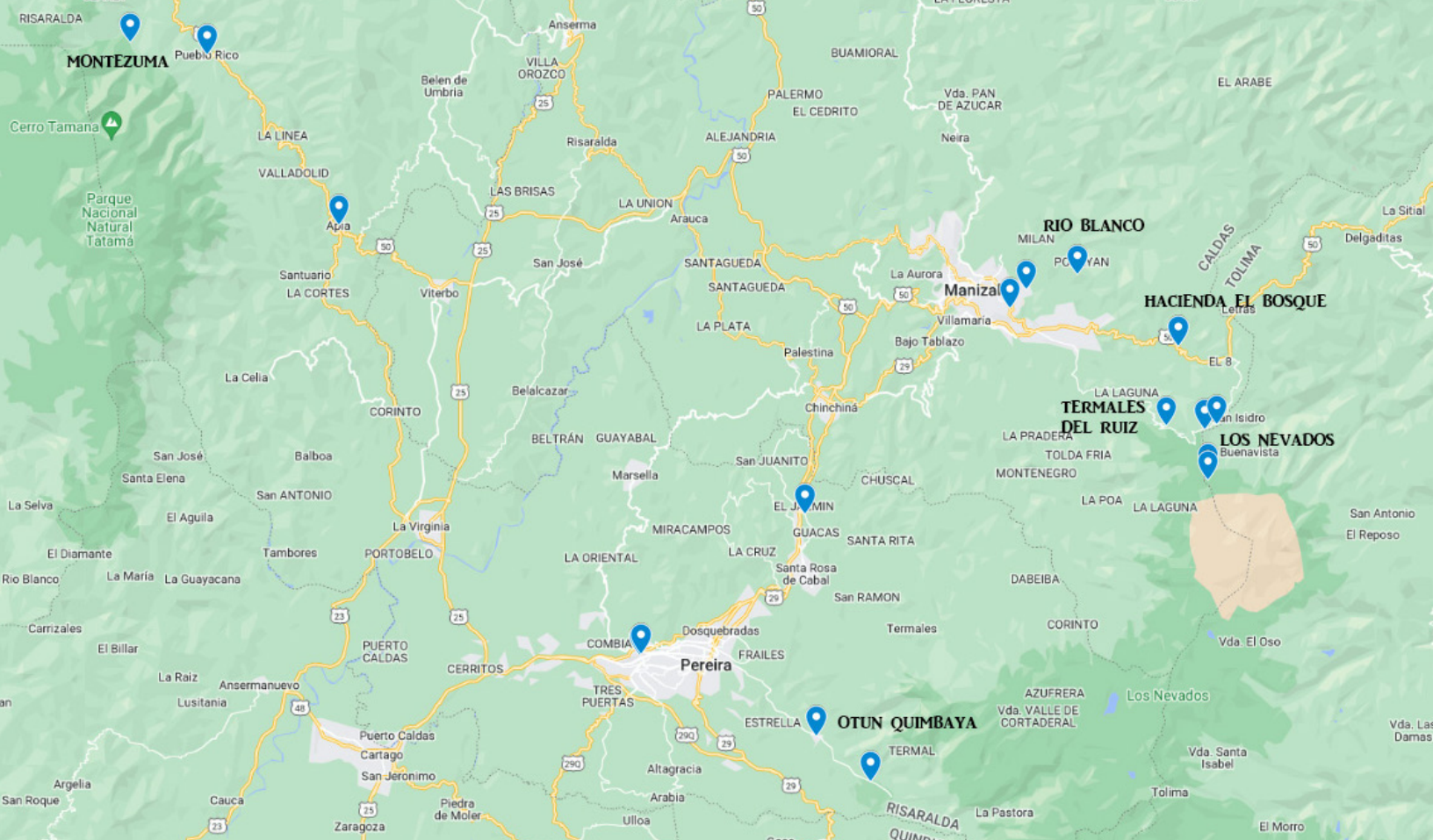
10th Friday – Montezuma – all day

11th Saturday – Montezuma to Pereira

12th Sunday – Pereira.

Crested Caracara (JH)





Main Sites visited

Logistics

The main group flew from JFK to Bogota, then took an internal flight to Pereira with Avianca for \$650 round trip (inc. round trip internal flight). There are direct flights from Miami to Pereira, but the logistics of trying to organize and line up the flights was more difficult, especially when you factor in flights from Miami to Pereira are less frequent.

Car Rental

Localiza was the local company that was recommended, but since there was five of us, finding a suitable vehicle was not easy. We finally found a 7-seater Dodge Journey we rented from Sixt Car Rental for \$1100.

Driving

Most of the roads in Colombia are fine to travel in a sedan. Bear in mind that the mountain roads are often slow going with many trucks and motorcyclists swarming around your car like bees. Expect travel times to be a bit longer than expected, especially since in some spots landslides result in parts of the road being rebuilt. As noted in many reports, Colombian drivers seem to enjoy passing on blind curves, so driving defensively and expecting cars in your lane coming around a bend is more the rule than the exception. We also suggest driving to arrive during the early evening rather than driving at night which is always a bit more stressful!

4x4

Only needed at a couple of spots and this was arranged with the lodges in advance. The road to Otun Quimbaya lodge is fine in a sedan, going slow in some areas. However, the road from the lodge to the well-known Hooded Antpitta site is best traversed with a 4x4. The lodge can arrange a driver to pick you up in a 4x4 for the day. More info is provided under the specific sites below. The road to and from Montezuma lodge in the Tatama mountains is only accessible by a 4x4 and the lodge will pick you up in the nearby town of Pueblo Rico. This is affordable and easy and they are used to doing this for birders. Again, see under that site for more info.

Money

Credit cards are accepted in most of the bigger hotels and gas stations, and places such as Rio Blanco and Hacienda El Bosque will allow you to pay for accommodation prior to leaving with credit card, but Colombian pesos (COP) are good to have, and I suggest one of the group take out an amount at the ATM in the airport and split it between the rest to save on foreign transaction fees. In Feb 2023 it was about 4600-4800 COP = \$1US. On the ground costs are so affordable in Colombia!

Guides

Most of the lodges have mandatory guides that spend the day with you. This is a great way to promote ecotourism and also will net you some good birds since they are familiar with the tough birds and where to stop for playback. Colombia is very affordable and this will work out to your benefit. While payment may be made up front to the lodges from the US, you will be asked to pay the guides in person. Most will accept \$US dollars if needed and I suggest tipping them on top since they truly are hardworking and know their stuff. Colombia is actively promoting ecotourism to fight off the perceptions from westerners that Colombia is still an unsafe place. This is my second trip in two years and I have never felt anything but safe, but around cities, being a savvy and aware traveler, should always be the default M.O.

Sites

Our route took us to Rio Blanco, near Manizales, then east to Hacienda El Bosque, then to the high Paramo around Los Nevados, before heading south to Otun Quinbaya. From here we spent the last three days at Montezuma Lodge in the Tatama mountains, before returning to Pereira for our flight back to Bogota.

Lodging

It is important to know that some places have limited accommodation and may fill up quickly, and that advance reservations are needed at Rio Blanco before arrival. Most communications are done via WhatsApp, and while some people are responsive, some communications may take several days and involve some back and forth, so I urge you to not wait until the last minute to try and nail down lodging info.

Vaccinations and Entry

We arrived in the dry season and took no special vaccinations such as Yellow Fever or malarial meds. If planning to travel to Los Nevados, which is high elevation, those people that may be affected by altitude sickness should bring prescription meds, or plan to acclimatize for a few days prior. There is a Colombian pre-departure check-Mig form that everyone needs to fill in when arriving and departing. Their website is really buggy, but we had no problems.

Fill in form online here between 72 hours and 1 hour before departure:

<https://apps.migracioncolombia.gov.co/pre-registro/public/preregistro.jsf>

MAIN SITES

Rio Blanco

This is the site for antpittas, with four species coming to feeding stations. It is well organized and can be reached from the northern side of Manizales in about 40 minutes. From Pereira, the hour and fifteen minute route takes you into Manizales and routes you to the west and north rather than the south and east to reach the NE side of town. We arrived in the evening and with no lodging available at Rio Blanco, we stayed in Manizales, which is what many people do, since the lodge is easily accessible from Manizales. We stayed at Hotel Portal de Milan <https://hotelporaldemilan.com/> A small hotel on the main drag on the NE side of Manizales. Clean basic rooms with free parking and booked in advance through Booking.com. This was ideally situated for an early start.

Note: there are several sites named "Rio Blanco", so if using google maps, it is important to ensure you have the correct "Rio Blanco".

Use GPS: 5.0744269,-75.4321718

The 6km road from Manizales dead ends at the lodge. 3km along that 6km road is a gate that blocks the road and is open at 6am. You will have registered and paid your admittance fee (c\$20 per person) before leaving home. You will meet your guide here or be directed to carry on up the road to the lodge itself. You will be given breakfast here at 6:30am (additional cost paid to the owner Jasmin) before being taken to the first antpitta spot nearby at 7am. Your guide will then spend time birding with you for the rest of the day, coming back to eat lunch (again at additional cost). Bicolored, Chestnut-crowned, Slate-colored and Brown-banded Antpittas were all seen well at known spots. At the initial entry gate, check the flowers by the building for Green-fronted Lancebill and possibly White-throated Daggerbill.

Access: Bring reservation paperwork to gate

Phone: +57 312 2261116;

Contact: Viviana Muñoz

Email: reservarrioblanco@augasdemanizales.com.co

(Natalia is the contact)

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S128159445>



This immature Chestnut and Black Hawk-Eagle initially provided some identification issues. (JH)



Chestnut-crowned Antpitta (JH)

Hacienda El Bosque

We left Rio Blanco for the hour or so drive east to Hacienda El Bosque, our home for the next two nights and the spot for Crescent-faced Antpitta. This spot is being developed for ecotourism by the owner Juan Martin Perez and consists of pastoral areas with 60% rainforest. The road up to the cabins is a bit rough, but probably doable with a sedan with care.

Juan is an amazing and friendly guy, and a great host and I highly recommend staying here. The rainforest birding is not as easy and accessible as other places, but the feeding stations offer egret opportunities for photography and seeing some god species. He's invested some money into the area, and the cabins and the restaurant on the hill are quite wonderful and offer great views over the surrounding hills. Again, we booked and paid in advance and this was easy and Juan was responsive and easy to work with (\$45 per person per night B&B and guide). You can take lunch and dinner here at an additional cost, but breakfast is included in the cost. The cabins are nice and heated with electric heaters and there is hot water. The food at the restaurant is great but if taking lunch or dinner you'll likely be asked in advance what meal from the menu you'll want so they can ensure they have it prepared. Sitting drinking hot chocolate in the late afternoon surveying the valley is a wonderful treat! Weather was cool evenings and mornings and pleasant afternoons.



After a nail-biting wait, "Lunita", the Crescent-faced Antpitta came in and showed superbly. Then after some good birding, it was time to retire for some of Hacienda's excellent hot chocolate (left:JH, right:SH)

In the morning, Edison, a local guide met us and took us to the first Equatorial Antpitta spot, but frustratingly it failed to come in. We moved on up to the feeding station where "Lunita" the Crescent-faced Antpitta comes in. It took an hour of coaxing, and given our first dip, there was definitely an air of despondency. Then suddenly, BOOM! there she was, in all her glory. Phew!

Expansive volcanic landscape at Los Nevados (JH)



Insomniac Nick got up early the second morning and walking to the valley where the Equatorial Antpitta site, managed to see Rufous-banded Owl and a calling Band-winged Nightjar.

In the afternoon, we decided to spend it at Los Nevados National Park. Knowing that weather could be unpredictable, and only having the next morning as the scheduled time here, we thought it best to try and double up any luck we had. It is only about 35 minutes from Hacienda to hit some paramo, but road work along the gravel, but easily drivable road, slowed us down.

Birding was slow, we tried a marshy spot on the way in for Noble Snipe, but without access to the fenced off private fields, finding them is luck and you have to hope one is visible from the road. We checked Laguna Negra on the way in, a spot for both Andean Teal and Andean Duck, but only the latter was present when we passed. Birds were few, not helped by the fog and mist that rolled in. Other than Stout-billed Cincloides, Tawny Antpitta and Paramo Tapaculo, birding was slow and we headed back to Hacienda El Bosque, failing to encounter any Rufous-fronted Parakeets or Buffy Helmetcrests.

Phone: +57 312 8116189;

Contact: Juan Martin

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S128159442>

Los Nevados

After breakfast, we headed out back to Los Nevados to try the Las Brisas entrance to the park as the stake-out for Buffy Helmetcrest.

Thankfully the weather was great, allowing us great views of the scenery, but the altitude here was no joke, and we all took it easy, nobody suffering any altitude sickness problems. Sweatshirt and a rainjacket/windbreaker are needed here, especially in the early morning or late afternoon. High winds thwarted our attempt to see the Helmetcrest, which was quite a disappointment, but we gave it a good try. Laguna Negra, the small lake en route, should be checked for both Andean Teal and Andean Duck. We continued on down the “old road” back to Manizales, the plan being to stop at the Hotel Termales Del Ruiz on our way to try for several hummingbirds here as well as have lunch.

Termales Del Ruiz

7km from the turn off point in Los Nevados, this touristy hotel has hummingbird feeders and grounds that attract some good birds. As a visitor, you can pay \$10 each to access the feeders and that also gives you access to the thermal pools if you have time (bring your own towel!).



Rainbow-bearded Thornbill (JH)



The food is great and a nice spot to take lunch. For less than a \$1 you can purchase a little feeder that hummingbirds will come and feed out of your hand, a cool experience. Golden-breasted Puffleg, Black-thighed Puffleg, Viridian Metaltail and Great Sapphirewing are easy here, but the main quarry is Rainbow-bearded Thornbill. This bird does not come into the feeders it seems, so it is important you check the hillside around the parking lot, and the flowers along the road just outside the entrance gate. We had great looks at one bird here but failed to see any Purple backed Thornbills.

**Note – in many reports, it is suggested that birding the road further south as you travel back towards Manizales is worthwhile. However, in Feb 2023, this road beyond the hotel is impassable, and we disappointingly had to retrace our steps back to Manizales vis Los Nevados. So, if you plan to do a circuit, do not expect the road to be passable as in previous reports.*

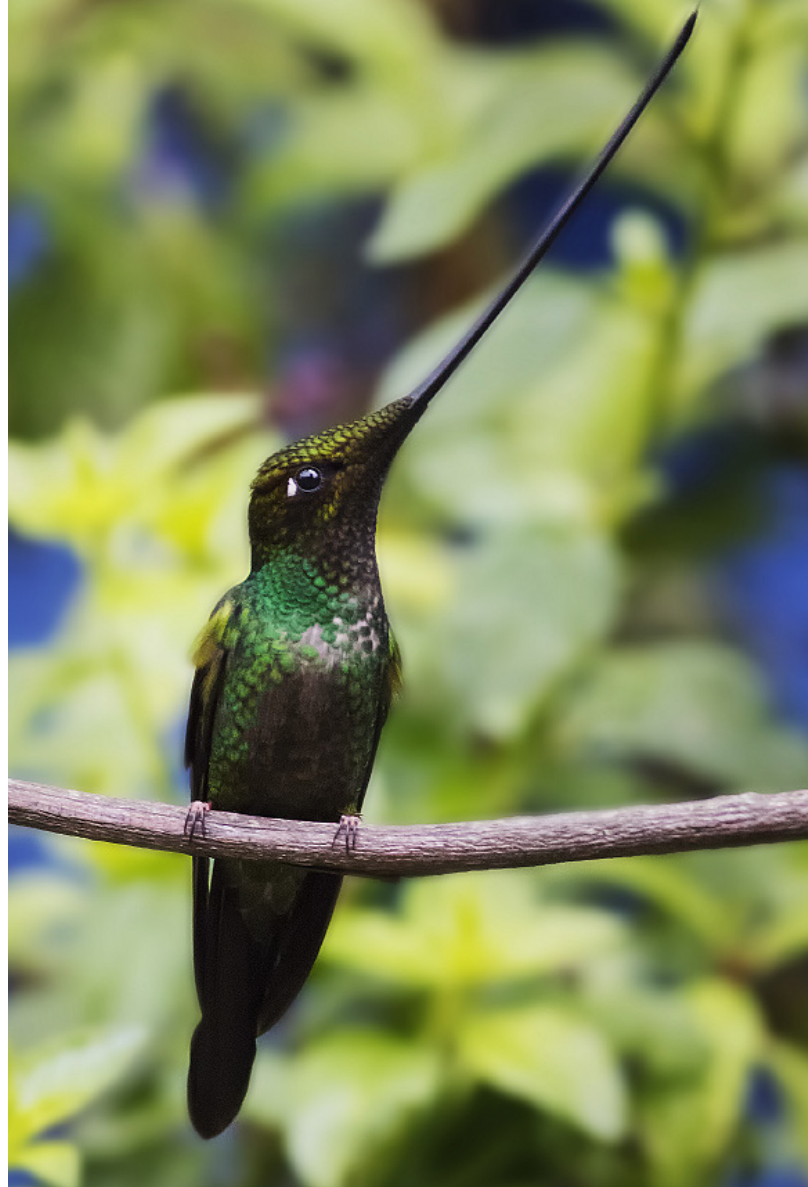
Heading back, we stopped off at Laguna Negra again and were “rewarded” with a distant, sleeping Andean Teal. A “tick and move on bird” if ever there was one!

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S128159429>

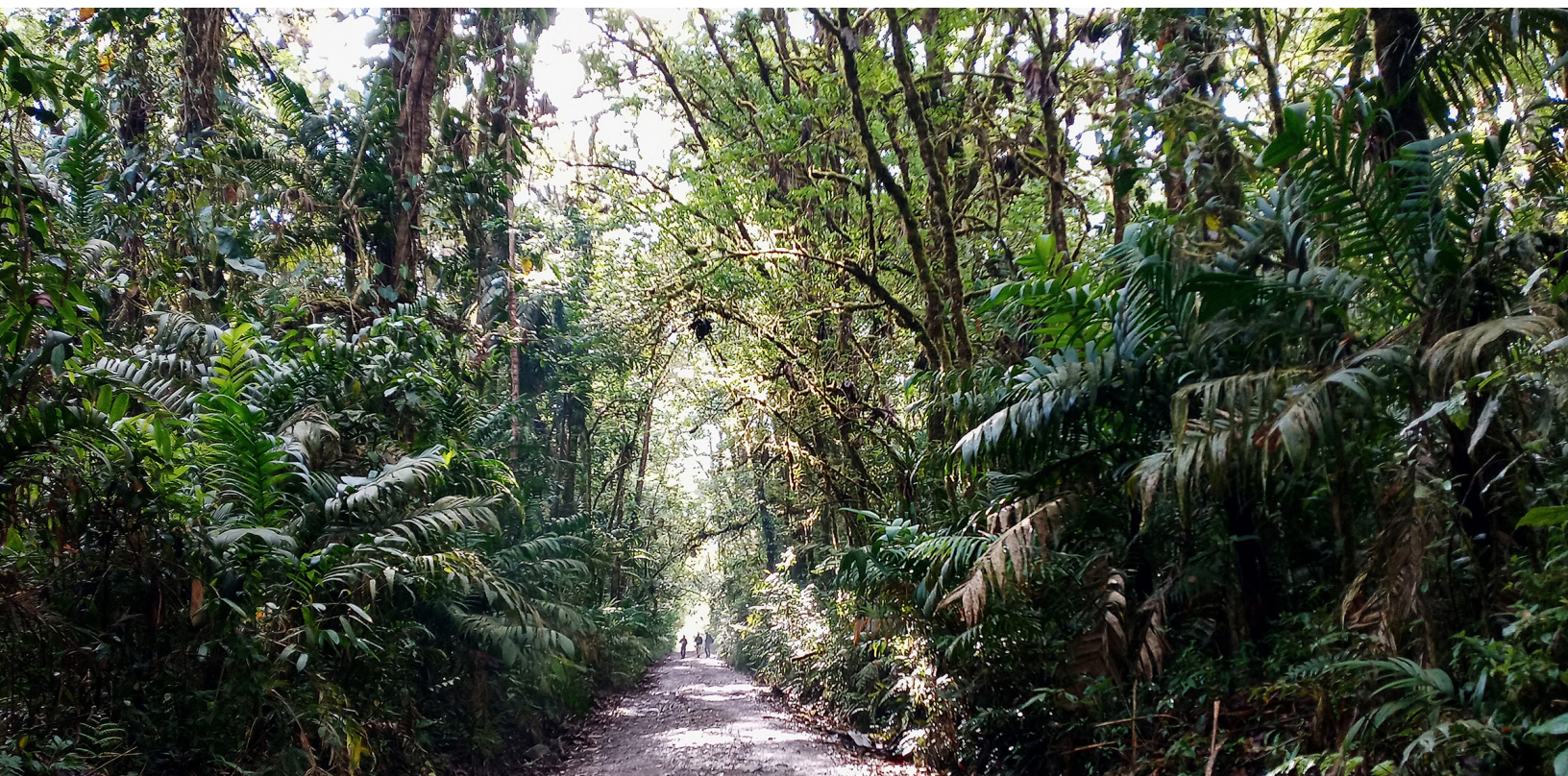
This day would be one of our longer days. We left Hacienda in the morning, birded Los Nevados, with the main aim of arriving at Otun Quimbaya, an hour east of Pereira, at dusk. The drive from Manizales to Pereira was about an hour and change, and the road to Otun was about an hour.

Otun Quimbaya

This is the well-known spot for Hooded Antpitta but the lush forest here is home to a multitude of great birds including the local Cauca Guan, Red-ruffed Fruitcrow and some tanager flocks including Multicolored. The lodge here is within the National Park and the lodge is run by a local community. It had been closed for a while but now seems to be open. We didn't stay long enough to be able to explore the trails around the lodge described in Gallardy's report. There is/was some issue in the past with the NP requiring a guide to



Great looks at a variety of hummingbirds at Hacienda El Bosque, included this amazing Sword-billed Humminbird (JH)





Tropical Screech Owl right outside the room (JH)



Golden-bellied Flycatcher (JH)

accompany you on the trails but they don't arrive until after 8am and scheduling walks then, and at 3pm is not conducive to birding in the most active times. As such, due to our short stay, I cannot speak to the current situation since we didn't explore these trails, but accessing these trails early, before the national Park staff arrive, may still be a possibility. We stayed one night. The rooms are comfy but basic and we had booked a dinner here. Great looks at my nemesis Tropical Screech outside our room before dinner was great!

**Note playback within the reserve/lodge grounds is not permitted.*

Walking down the road in the direction of El Cedral produced a couple of frustratingly close, but unseen, Mottled Owls and a Spectacled Owl. The forest here is thick and hard to see into, and despite comments that Moustached Antpitta is relatively abundant here, not a single bird was heard, let alone seen, so that situation has changed in the past couple of years. We hit several small flocks, but often good stretches were exceedingly quiet, with sparse bird activity. Daisy who runs the lodge is great and accommodating and we had pre-arranged a driver to pick us up in the morning at 5 am in a 4x4 jeep for 90,000 COP each way. The road that runs east from the lodge to El Cedral is narrow and rough in places, so best to arrange a driver since it's cheap. We were packed a basic breakfast of fruit and bread and coffee and our driver arrived on time and we were off. We stopped approx. 3km down the road where we heard a Colombian Screech Owl calling (formerly Rufescent) but the bird failed to come in.

We arrived at the GPS coordinates I had for the Antpitta from December 2022. The key here is to arrive pre-dawn when the bird sings and can be located by its inconspicuous one-note call. Walking a few minutes east of those coordinates brings you to a steep, lush hillside on the south (right) here: 4.70473, -75.53873. We heard a bird calling soon, except on the north (left side) of the road. Nick immediately got on the bird that showed really well briefly close and in the open. That was easy! We birded the road all the way back to the lodge, picking up some good birds for the trip on the way.

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Email: reservas@fsemillasotunquimbaya.com

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S128159423> <https://ebird.org/checklist/S128159420> <https://ebird.org/checklist/S128159435>

We grabbed lunch before heading off back towards Pereira, checking the fast-running river here for Torrent Duck, Torrent Tyrannulet and White-capped Dipper. Only the former vaded our efforts. Checking from the bridges on the way out before La Florida is the best bet.

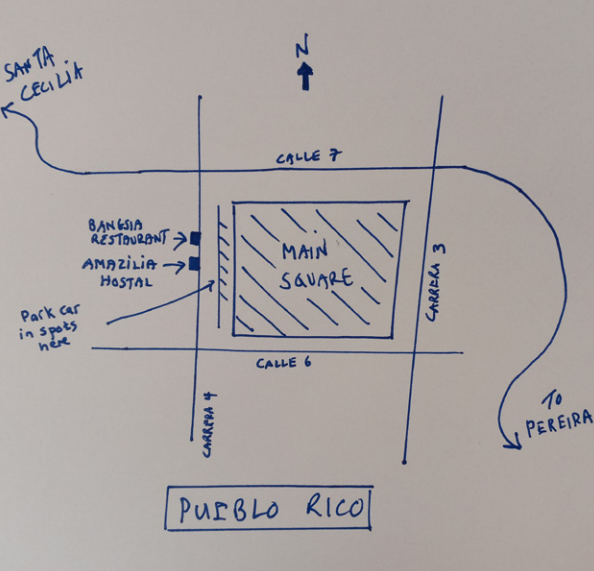
Pueblo Rico

A long afternoon drive ensued, passing through Pereira, then heading northeast up into the foothills of the Tatama mountains to Pueblo Rico. I recommend staying at the Amazilia Hostal, run by a super dude Cesar, and eating in the restaurant next door, called Bangsia. The individual rooms are clean and neat with hot water (\$12 per night) and the drivers from Montezuma know it and will pick you up there at 5:30 am. We left the car opposite the hostel in the square and it was perfectly safe. Google maps/MAPS.ME had a weird time navigating to it, so here is a sketch map of the location

Phone: +57 314 7563800

Contact: Cesar

Email: amaziahostal22@gmail.com



Montezuma Ecolodge

Probably one of the best birding spots in the Western Andes with over 500 species recorded, we had scheduled our last 2-night and three days here. The lodge is family run and reached by a track only navigable by 4x4. As noted previously, I recommend making arrangements in advance to ensure the logistics are understood. It gets busy with tour groups and accommodation is limited. The logistics here is that you leave your vehicle in the town of Pueblo Rico and arrange the lodge to come and pick you up in their 4x4. They will return you back to Pueblo Rico when you leave. \$27 each way (split between you). The driver Sandro is friendly and excellent and the drive takes about 50 minutes from Pueblo Rico to the lodge. Three meals a day, lodging and your assigned guide is \$70 per person.

We opted to start the first day by birding the road north from the lodge to the first river bridge crossing. Viviana our guide was great. Lunch is brought up and dropped off by motorbike which is super handy!

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View from the summit (SH). Endemic Chestnut-bellied Flowerpiercer (JH) and stunning Collard Incas (JH)



The second day we did what most people do to access endemics at higher altitudes by renting the truck for the whole day (\$87) to take us up to the top of the mountain for Munchique Woodwren, Gold-ringed Tanager and Chestnut-bellied Flowerpiercer. Breakfast is packed and you start the day with eggs, fruit and coffee on top of the mountain watching Collared Incas and Chestnut-bellied Flowerpiercer that came into the feeder here. Fantastic views over the surrounding valley. The elevation grade here ensures that there is a feast of species on offer, but the weather can play a part in how good the birding is. Overcast and misty conditions are ideal, thumping rain is not. We had a mix of sunshine to begin with which I think hindered birding since it was slower than expected, but then we had a couple of hours where we sheltered from a deluge, which was a nice break to recharge our batteries. Again, lunch was brought up on motorbike, allowing us to continue birding. Overall, expect some rain here, even in the “dry” season.

The third morning we arranged to bird ourselves before leaving for Pueblo Rico at around noon.

The grounds and hummingbird feeders are incredibly birdy with a good number of species not seen on our forays into the forests and it is nice and relaxing to sit and watch what comes into the feeders. The hummingbirds here are excellent and contain a bevy of new species not seen on our trip previously. We all loved this spot, especially since it was nice to put roots down for a couple of days and everyone was so nice and accommodating. Can't wait to come back here!

We left at noon, and you should factor in some time to bird on the way back in the daylight. There are some good birds on the way down, and we scored with one of my much sought-after birds, an amazing Ornate Hawk Eagle perched by the side of the road. Simply stunning! Great looks at Double-toothed Kite and Swallow-tailed Kite here.



Nick and Dave getting crippling looks at Gold-ringed Tanager (JH)





Much appreciated nemesis Lanceolated Monklet (JH)



Velvet-fronted Coronet (JH)



Great looks at Swallow-tailed Kites (JH)

We picked up the car at Pueblo Rico, grabbed a nice lunch again at Bangsia Restaurant and said hello and goodbye to our host from Amazilia Cesar and we were on our way. The drive back to Pereira was about three hours, and we had to have the car back at Pereira airport by 6pm. We had only one real stop, and that was a roadside stake out for Turquoise Dacnis. However, as we reached the site, there is no pull off on the twisty mountain road, and for safety e had to continue driving, and with no safe pull of, we didn't stop. We picked up a few trip ticks driving through the lowlands here before arriving at 5:45 to drop off the car. We grabbed a taxi and arrived a few minutes later at our hotel.

Day 1 - from the lodge up to the first bridge crossing <https://ebird.org/checklist/S128159419>

Day 2 - full day from the Summit to the lodge <https://ebird.org/checklist/S128159417>

Day 3 - half day up to first bridge and then exit raod back to Pueblo Rico <https://ebird.org/checklist/S128159413>

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S128159415>

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S128159414>

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S128274186>

Hotel Z3 – close to the airport (\$30 per room). Good clean rooms and a nice rooftop restaurant for breakfast in the morning. Highly recommended as a place to stay close to the airport, easily reached by taxi (\$3 one way). <https://www.hotelz3.com/>

A nice relaxing breakfast, ten it was off back to the US. A relatively short, but packed itinerary, it was a successful trip overall seeing many of the target birds and having good weather all around that didn't really mess up our itinerary which didn't have much flexibility for being weathered out.

Some Cost Summaries

Rio Blanco

138,000 COP for guide (or equivalent \$US dollars)

Hacienda El Bosque

Accommodation includes breakfast and guide 211000 COP per person per night. Pay on check-out for any additional lunches and dinners.

Otun Quimbaya

Pay cash 14,500 COP (\$3 each) to Lodge for access to National Park.

Rooms (B&B) are 100,000 COP per person per night. Dinners and lunches are 12,000 COP each.

Preferable to pay in COP, but we arranged to pay in \$US dollars on arrival.

Transport to El Cedral – one way 90,000 COP

Amazilia Hotel, Pueblo Rico

Pay cash for individual rooms 50,000 COP .

Can pay in US\$ but at a lower exchange rate e.g., 4100 COP.

Montezuma

We arranged to pay on arrival in \$US. \$70 per night per person (inc 3 meals and guide)

Transport to and from Pueblo Rico (\$27 each way). Hire Truck for full day (\$87). These costs would be split among you. Affordable!

No bank in Pueblo Rico and ATM there frequently is not working so don't 'bank' on getting cash out here.

Trip Report

The full species list can be found here: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/107948>

Acknowledgements

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