

The Best-Kept Secret of Mindo, Ecuador: The Mindo Nambillo Cloud Forest Reserve

By Marianne Graff

As you step carefully down the slick red earth path, the sound of deep booming drums and crashing cymbals grows louder with each turn, drowning out the chorus of frogs, insects, birds and animals singing all around. Tiny bursts of colour flit across peaceful sunlit spaces between thick mossy trunks, as butterflies as big as your hand and hummingbirds as tiny as your thumb find a flowery meal in the nests of orchids or the trailing blooms in branches overhead.



The dank smell of wet earth fills your nostrils and your skin becomes slick with mist as you go into the dark green light of the forest depths. Down and around a sharp bend, and there it is, the source of the deafening roar: a cascada (waterfall) as high as a skyscraper, pummeling the rocks ahead, icy spray rebounding over you with the impact of a gale force storm.

It's a gasp-worthy sight, and you can't help but feel surprised that such a natural wonder was not advertised. You will find another cascada, equally impressive, about 20 minutes away, with a necklace chain of pools you can swim and dive in at its base.



In a clearing halfway up the mountain is the Rio Bravo hostel, which offers a 180 degree sweeping view of forest canopy cloaking the mountain ridges all around.

Welcome to one of the best-kept secrets in all of Ecuador: the Mindo Nambillo Cloud Forest Reserve. Located 11 km from the town of Mindo, this reserve is at the highest elevation in the area, between 1,180 and 4,780 meters above sea level. Home to over 170 different kinds of hummingbirds and rare birds like the Cock of the Rock,

Golden Headed Quetzal and Toucan-Barbet, this is prime real estate for bird watching. It's also the home of rare orchids and trees that only grow in pristine cloud forest conditions.

Although this reserve is mentioned in guidebooks, you won't find a lot of information about how to get there once you arrive in Mindo. Aside from what you might overhear at the local tourist office, there are no billboards or fliers advertising Rio Bravo or the reserve. With so much polished advertising for other cloud forest resorts and tours, it would be easy to miss out on seeing the heart of the Mindo cloud forest.



Tours of the Mindo Nambillo Cloud Forest Reserve can be booked through Claudia Hass at the El Rocio Hostel in Mindo. You can reach Claudia at (0593)-9-822-7359.

She speaks English very well, and is one of the only tour operators in Mindo sanctioned by the reserve owners to arrange tours into the area.



Claudia also arranges overnight stays at Rio Bravo. Private and dorm-style rooms are available. For only \$65.00 you get transportation to and from town, a room and three meals a day. If you volunteer in Mindo for a month or more, the cost drops to \$15.00 per day, the

same price as a day trip. You will be glad you made the effort to experience this reserve's pristine cloud forest splendour.

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