



At 8,000 feet, the utterly charming colonial city of Cuenca is at the foot of Cajas National Park in an inter-Andean valley. We are looking west here, and Cajas Park is in the mountains in the center. At over 2 million acres, the new biosphere, containing both the park and the city, runs all the way to the coast. The U.N. tells us that it's the only biosphere in the world stretching from salt-water mangroves to mountain paramo at 14,000 feet.



At 11,000 feet in Cajas, Steve and I are still in the cloud forest ecosystem.



One of the more than 200 lagoons in the park, this one at 10,800 feet. The classic "U" shaped valley means it was sculpted by glaciers during the last ice age (and the 22 ice ages that came before it).



Above 12,000 feet, the cloud forest turns to paramo grassland which contains spectacular, but tiny plants that must be seen on all fours. Below the paramo's surface is about 11 feet of organic material, making it a gigantic sponge holding billions of gallons of water.



The paramo plants are hypnotizing for two reasons: the aesthetics of paramo botany are other-worldly, and you are not getting enough oxygen.



Fabián finally had to pull Steve and I off the ground and away from these enchanting worlds in miniature.



The polypsis forests (often called quinoa forests) look like a kind of dry manzanita. But when you crawl into these hammocks (rather tricky), they are some of the moistest places you've ever been. Growing above 13,000 feet, these are the highest forests on planet Earth.



Polyeopsis tree with Andean paramo and another lagoon in the background.

That's it on Cajas. I'll send a few pix from the dry, deciduous forests in a few days. Speaking of which, on this trip I came away with the feeling that the dry forests of Ecuador just may be the most beautiful in the world. Fighting words, I know. ;-)

Ciao for now, Charles



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