

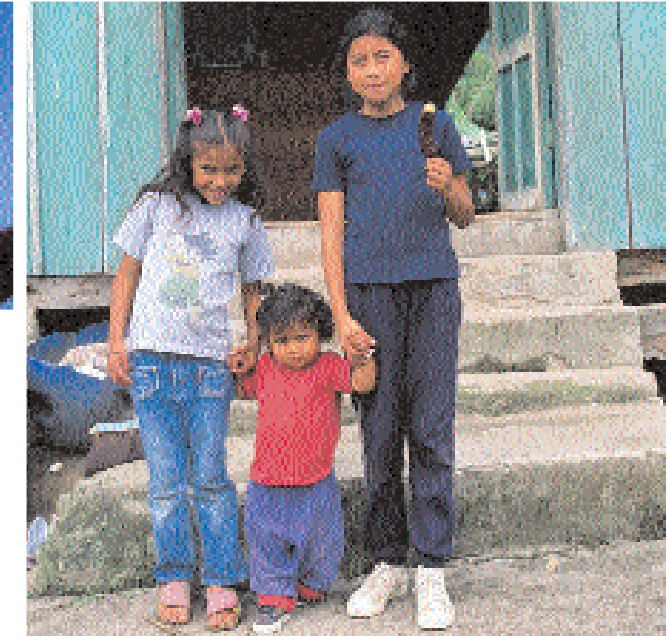
Head in the clouds

The cloudforests of South America are home to many endemic species and plants whose future is in the hands of the local inhabitants. Dominic Hamilton's inspiring journey took him across the continent to the spectacular surroundings of Ecuador



PHOTOS DOMINIC HAMILTON

“The views on clear days never fail to take your breath away”



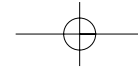
I can remember the day I fell in love with the mountain cloudforests of South America, particularly those in Ecuador. I was 20. My father had recently died. I had run away to the ‘the grandest, richest, most wonderful bit of earth upon this planet’, as Arthur Conan Doyle put it in *The Lost World*. I set off for the region that inspired Conan Doyle’s science-fiction yarn, and came to rest in a hamlet on the Venezuelan-Brazilian border. One day I went for a walk along a river, weaving in and out of the trunks which clad its banks, winding through the trees and undergrowth, side-stepping mosses and weird and wonderful plants, until I came to a series of waterfalls, tumbling their way down staircases of black rocks. A morpho butterfly in electric-blue flitted past. In the eddies, foam patterns metamorphosed into faces and shapes. The sun captured millions of water droplets and cast them into rainbows. I was enchanted. That river changed my course.

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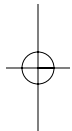
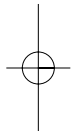
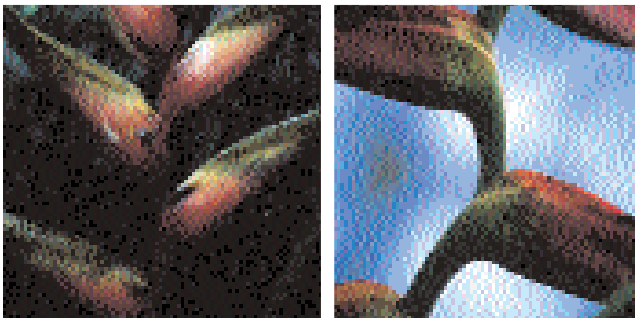
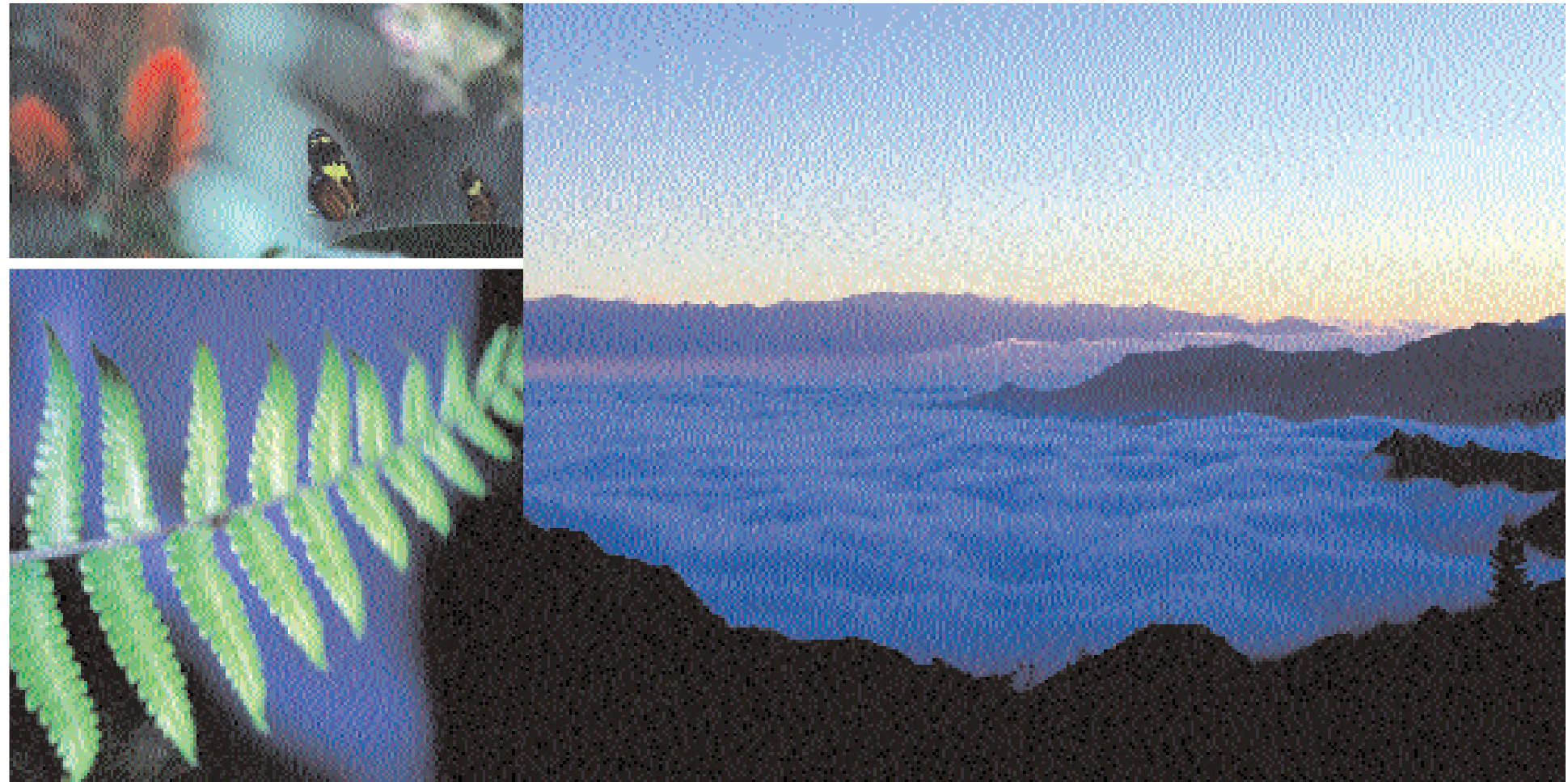
The spell developed over time. I became friends with the people of the hamlet, many of whom were trying to live more harmoniously with nature out in the wilds. I read pamphlets, pored over books, translated environmental campaigns. I became, in the words of a London friend, a tree-hugger.

Captivating drama

It’s the drama of cloudforests that captivates me. Rainforests are flat. There’s little sense of their scale, of their enormity. Cloudforests, on the other hand, cloak the most precipitous gradients imaginable, tumbling hundreds upon hundreds of metres in the space of a few kilometres. The views on clear days never fail to take your breath away. Turning a corner, cascades and waterfalls will unexpectedly thread their mass of leaf, bark and branch, leading to torrents of white water that roar in an electrifying tumult. Mists



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and clouds envelop their flanks, constantly rearranging, transforming, calling one to look again. Observing the clouds magically form and dissipate – where do they come from and where do they go? – is like watching creation at work before one’s very eyes. And then there are the hummingbirds: scores of species of irrepressibly bright, unfailingly busy flying machines who buzz from flower to flower at speeds of up to 70 miles per hour, their wings flapping at speeds of up to 80 beats a second.

Nature haven

The planet’s cloudforests are located at the headwaters of the tropical world’s most important water courses. They are an essential cog in the hydrological cycle of the world’s most precious and valuable ecosystems. Also known as montane forests, cloudforests usually occur at elevations between 1,200m and 3,000m. They

differentiate themselves from their lowland cousins by their height (trees are smaller) and by the number of epiphytes (orchids, ferns and bromeliads) and mosses that smother them. As one gains altitude, every available surface becomes festooned with liverworts, lichens, mosses and filmy ferns, while tree stems become crooked, gnarled and wizened. And amid this glistening, moist, green mass swirl mists and fogs.

Cloudforests receive high levels of rainfall as clouds are propelled up against their mountainsides. They also intercept additional moisture directly from these clouds serving as vast reservoirs, filtering water and allowing the streams to continue to flow in the dry season when rainfall decreases. When forests are cleared for timber or ranching, dry season springs cease to flow, not as much water is captured to begin with, and remaining rainwater sometimes races across the land, eroding valuable topsoil and causing rivers to

alternate between flood and drought. The impact can be severe on human communities, agriculture, industry and the environment, not just nearby but also hundreds of miles away.

It was thought that lowland forests were more biologically diverse than their montane counterparts. However, new studies suggest that total floral diversity may well be on a par with rainforests. Due to their mountainous topography and differences in elevation, the species one encounters in the cloudforests are highly endemic: they are found here, and nowhere else.

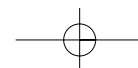
The ultimate biology lesson

My passion developed the more I travelled in South America. I fell under the spell of Chile’s ancient Alerce forests draped in the mists of the Pacific, I succumbed to the power of the mighty buttressed Ceiba trees of the Amazon in Brazil, while in Peru I was entranced

by the ‘eyebrow of the jungle’ beneath its towering 6,000-metre snowy peaks. But it was in Ecuador where I truly lost it.

The citizens of Ecuador’s capital, Quito, enjoy a privileged position. Not only can they travel, on flights of no more than an hour, from some of the highest volcanoes in the world to the sweat of the Amazon jungle or to the balmy coasts of the Pacific, but, in drives of no more than two hours, they can be in the heart of the one of the world’s biodiversity hot spots. The country’s twin chain of Andean peaks, dubbed ‘the Avenue of Volcanoes’ by the indefatigable Prussian explorer Alexander von Humboldt, cuts north to south through the centre of Ecuador like the dislocated spine of a fossilised dinosaur, each vertebra a volcanic peak. Either side of these vertebra lie Ecuador’s cloudforests.

I first encountered them close to the spa town of Baños, a four-hour drive from Quito, then in the



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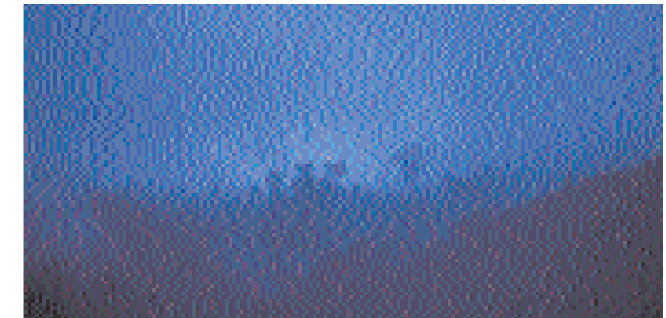
Podocarpus National Park in the south, and then again in the area known as Mindo, a short drive to the north-west from Quito, home of farmer Pancho Molina.

“The cloudforests give life to more life,” Pancho tells me. “Not only are they hugely biodiverse, they clearly show us the interrelatedness of everything in nature. They are the ultimate biology lesson. If you want to understand nature, then come to the cloudforest.”

Pancho is a young, spirited Ecuadorian, born into a farming family in the Mindo area. His family were among half a dozen that formed a farming co-operative in 1976, covering 650 hectares of cloudforest. Like all good farmers, they set to work clearing the woodland to sow fruit trees and make pasture for their livestock. It was only in 1988, when the watershed was declared protected by the government, that they were forced to reappraise the situation. The decision was taken to conserve the land, making it into a reserve called

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Santa Lucía which neighboured the much larger private reserve of Maquipucuna. More than 15 years later, Santa Lucía came runner-up in *Condé Nast Traveler's* 2004 Ecotourism Awards.

“It was only when I took a German tourist through the forest that I began to understand ecotourism,” admits Pancho. “He was taking photographs of everything and telling me there was nothing like this back in Germany. He left me a fat tip at the end of the day, and I thought ‘This is how we save the forest and still feed ourselves.’”

A threatened future?

Today, Santa Lucía is one of the British environmental organisation Rainforest Concern’s flagship projects, its 50 species of mammals (including the endangered spectacled bear and the mountain lion) and around 380 bird species protected.

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The fate of the cloudforests rests largely in the hands of the people who live there, as Santa Lucía demonstrates. Through foreign funding of Ecuadorian initiatives, many communities in the cloudforests north-west of Quito have begun to turn away from destructive practices and adopt more sustainable ones. The community of Yunguilla, not far from Santa Lucía, once lived primarily from lumber extraction and selling charcoal. There are now several community-based projects involving ecotourism and handicrafts made by women's groups. Santa Lucía and other foundations work to communicate their environmental message in numerous local schools, as well as providing expertise and infrastructure for sustainable farming.

In cash-strapped Latin American countries, where vested interests often come before environmental or local concerns, threats to the cloudforest are ever present. It is thought that 90 per cent of Colombia's

cloudforest has been lost. In Ecuador, gold mining has invaded parts of Podocarpus National Park, a copper mine threatens the forests of Intag in the north, plantations for palm oil replace lower-lying forest, and population pressure from communities takes its toll. A race is on to create biological corridors for species through the mountainous cloudforests before they become isolated in protected islands. Revenue from ecotourism, providing local people with income and demonstrating the value of intact forest, is of vital importance. In fact, without it, it's unlikely that much of Ecuador's cloudforest will be saved at all.

As an enthusiastic victim of the charms of cloudforests and as a believer in their importance, I would encourage anyone to don their walking boots, follow Pancho's advice and head off to explore their fragrant, tangled world. The experience may well change your life, as it did mine. €