

# ADVENTURE WITH AN ECHO

Eco-tourism is going strong. Care is taken in the building of hotels as well as in catching the fish; if conscience demands it a few dollars can compensate for exhausts.

STORY AND PHOTOS MARTIN EDSTRÖM



The resort Sani Lodge in Ecuador, however, takes environmental thinking one step further. The whole business is run by a village of indigenous Kichwa, and thanks to visiting tourists the forest can be saved.

The approach is most astounding of all. After flying out over Amazonia we switch the airline seats for wooden benches, and spend several hours on a small riverboat. Down we go, down the broad branch of the Rio Napo – the muddy headwaters flowing down from the Andes and into the Amazon River. For the last bit of the journey we need a smaller canoe, which winds its way up the narrow tributaries. Parrots fly through the trees hanging out overhead. After many twists and turns we emerge into a clearing, and the motor is turned off. Silence. The sound of a paddle is all that's audible, as we slowly glide across the surface towards Sani Lodge. Canoes lie parked at the wharf, huts are visible through the trees - and even as the mist rises, a sense of adventure lies thick in the air.

As we unload our gear and carry it up the wooden jetty, a couple of guests come running. They disappear behind some trees, shouting "Here! Come look!". A young guide, Javier, points at a swampy patch of grass; a large caiman lizard is waddling through the grounds. Two guests from Switzerland stand fascinated, taking photographs, while an older man from France brags about having seen quite a few himself - on his bungalow porch. We have truly arrived in the middle of the jungle, in pure wilderness. Leaf-carrying ants are everywhere, crawling over our cases. With firm strides a man approaches, laughing at the commotion, and gives us a warm welcome. His name is Patricio, and he is the leader of the Sani Isla community - the community running the show at Sani Lodge.

Immediately taking action, he speeds off to show us the grounds, and we hurry along. He proves a treasure trove of knowledge. Management skills and eye for wildlife aside, he has yet another quality - quite an unexpected one. He's a shaman. Inheriting these inner powers from

his father (who got it from his father), Patricio has studied the ways of rainforest medicine since he was a boy.

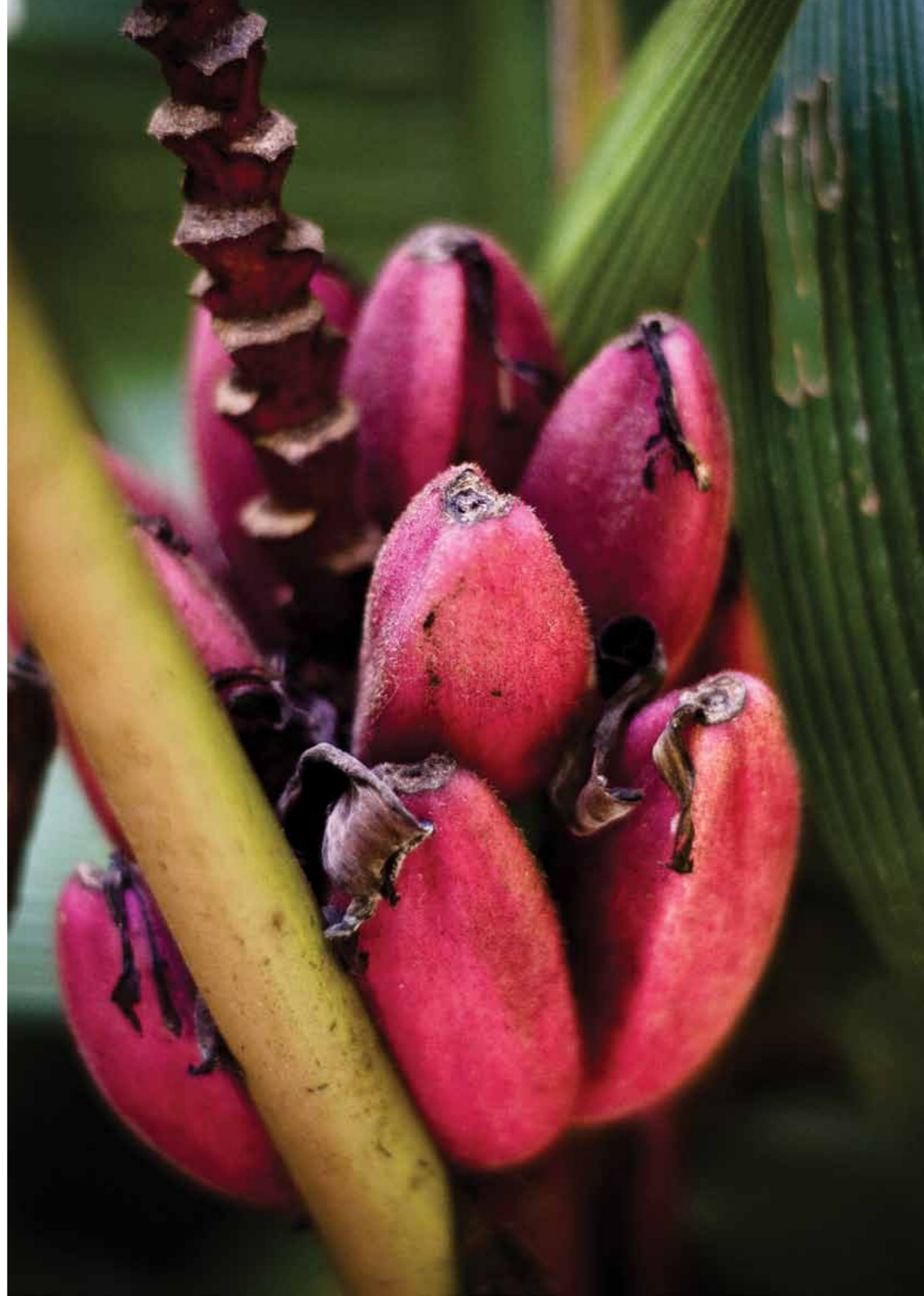
"This cures impotence" he says about a fruit found along the track. He's taken us for a brisk trek through the jungle - his feet knowing the way leaving us behind, panting. The trail is lined with plants that have been traditionally used for centuries upon centuries. Antidotes, fertility enhancers and poisons all look alike to us - but we do recognize the occasional banana. Monkeys, butterflies, frogs - nothing stays hidden as Patricio wanders on, pointing everything out. Anacondas can be found in the area, he tells, and makes a big circle with his arms. "The biggest anaconda I've ever seen, I couldn't even grasp with my arms." He tells further stories of another anaconda, famous for having swallowed a petroleum worker whole. Apparently, that anaconda was from this particular area. We laugh, but Patricio doesn't. And suddenly we feel small, carefully eyeing the path ahead of us.

Our hike with Patricio takes us to the largest tree in the woods, whose base is enormous. Up against the tree a huge metal staircase has just been mounted, and after ascending we climb out onto its crown - 130 feet above ground. The huge tree is one of the largest in the area, and we are high above the canopy. All around us, all the way to the horizon in every direction, we look down onto primary rainforest. It's a truly breathtaking sight, and proves that the wilderness of Amazonia still exists; these trees have never been touched, and hopefully never will be. Patricio squints at the setting sun, overlooking the forest he's always lived and cared for. "A lot have changed since I was a kid", he says, referring to the time before the lodge. Until just a couple of decades ago his people, the Kichwas, lived very isolated. "But now we're not only a little village, we're part of a larger scale. Our ancestors watched over this forest, and now it's our turn to protect it". And with the business at the lodge, they do. Nowadays though, they protect it a little differently.

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Solar cells heat the water, food is ever ecologic. Potatoes are served with everything, a dozen different varieties – every single one from the surrounding region. Chicken comes from downriver, spices from out back. Three times a day the chef chimes his bell for all the guests to gather; serving times are strict to save time and resources. The dining room is a central building – a huge hut resting on poles. Beautiful carvings decorate the interior, and dark wood stands out within this evergreen realm. The tables sport a relaxing view overlooking the lagoon, surpassed only by the view from the bar. Cosy spaces and a vivid atmosphere makes the perfect setting for the lodge, and you're instantly caught within its rhythm.

The lodge began business on a small scale several years back, and now hosts up to 40 guests at any time. Lacking only a beach, Sani Lodge looks like an ordinary bungalow resort, except housing partly hidden in the bush. Everything's a bit rough, but just as clean. Spacious rooms make for pleasurable rest, but the true quality lies in the outdoor ventures. Activities are always running – nights are spent nightwalking to see nocturnal wildlife as frogs, spiders and the typical caimans. Daytime treks go to the

newly built tower, out on the main river and to several first-class birding spots; Sani Isla is a Mecca for ornithologists and amateur birdwatchers alike. Hoatzins and parrots are constantly sitting among the straws on the dining-hut roof, and several species are only found here. As sun sets guests can take a swim in the lagoon, which is appreciated after a day spent in boots.

As we get back from the lookout tower, we hear another canoe coming in. The sun is setting, red behind the curtain of thick forest. As we're spot on the equator, night falls fast. Cicadas hit the strings, and the evening air vibrates from the sounds of the wild. It turns out to be the young guide Javier paddling the canoe, returning with a group of guests from a birding session. Both the Swiss and the English sound pleased, and thank him wholeheartedly. "No problems, you know" Javier says, laughing his words with an American accent. Thanks to the work at the lodge, he's been able to study biology and ecology in the US. Returning home to work as a guide, he's become a favored part of the team; today Javier is Chief Guide at the lodge. "I've lived in the rainforest all my life, you know" he tells as we talk.



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"I love showing it to the people who come here".

Tourism funding Conservation is a slogan used by many eco-destinations. Sani Lodge is one of very few that actually accomplish all that this stands for. "The best part is that we won't need other work in the future", Patricio says about the transformation that's going on for the people of the Sani Isla community. "Before we had only coffee, cacao and woodwork for our income, but now we have the lodge". And this is the very core of their environmental work. For decades the people of Sani Isla had to cut and burn the rainforest to clear space for farming; this being the case for most indigenous people living in the Amazon area. Thanks to the income from the lodge, they can keep the forest. Keep it, and show off with it. Because they are indeed living in the middle of a resource – one people pay to come see. "The more tourists we get, the better – and we've already grown so much in a few years", Patricio tells. The Kichwas of Sani Isla have thereby established an important destination on the eco-map, without profiting anyone but themselves.

Leaving Sani Lodge is about as wonderful as arriving, as the canoe is poled out into the tributary. Sani Lodge is definitively among the best, with a system favouring not only the forest but the people living in it. Yet, there you are – in a canoe, speeding for the airport. In the middle of nowhere, half-way around the world. Your thoughts reach out as always; wouldn't it be better for the environment, to just stay home? Probably. But if you can't, this is where to go. ■

**GETTING HERE**//Flight to Quito, then to Coca (Fransisco de Orellana). From Coca boat to Sani Lodge (included with your stay). Trips are best arranged by the lodge, since they can coordinate flights and boat-transportation.

**ACCOMODATION**//Many alternatives; your own bungalow or a room in one of the huts. Everything is spartan, but clean and safe. Doubles go for \$150/night – with absolutely everything included. Camping is a possibility, for about \$100/night, with the same range of facilities available. All the prices include 3 meals a day, and all the guided tour you want. Rubber boots and misc. equipment is also available. Transfer by boat (roundtrip) to Coca is also included in the price.

**TRAVELLING WITH CHILDREN**//The trip may be long, but the lodge is well equipped for travelling with children. Guided tours can also be adapted. Important to remember is to carefully protect children from mosquitoes and other bugs; full-cover clothing and bug repellent is a must!

**BRING**//Boots or rubber boots. Also available to borrow at the lodge. Bug- and mosquito protection. Fully covering clothing, including a hat. Binoculars. Every last piece of bathroom necessities – nearest drug-store is far away.