This brochure offers a panoramic view of the biological and cultural diversity of Cajas National Park (CNP), as well as practical information for the visitor: a geographic and a tourist map, sites you do not want to miss, outstanding tourist activities, some useful recommendations for your trip, and a directory of services.

2  Map of Ecuador's Natural Heritage Sites (PANE)

4  Cajas National Park
   An isolated massif dotted with lagoons

8  Geographic map of the National Park

10  Faces and traces
    The shortest route between the Andes and the sea

14  Tourist map

16  Not to be missed

20  Things to do

24  Getting there

26  Directory

28  List of outstanding wildlife species
An isolated massif dotted with lagoons

Like the shards of a broken mirror on a green rug, Cajas National Park and its 786 bodies of water are located on a massif of the western Andes in Ecuador’s southern province of Azuay. These lagoons are connected by small streams. Some drain into the Pacific and others into the basin of the Paute River, which drains into the Atlantic by way of the Amazon River.

There are a number of versions about the name of the Park, Cajas. Some say it comes from the Kichwa kahas, which means mountain or cordillera. Others say it refers to the irregular landscape of rocky valleys and lagoons, like pools of water “boxed in by mountains” (caja is Spanish for box). In any event, the author of this peculiar natural scenery is ice. This area of the cordillera was cut by the passage of ancient glaciers, slow but implacable. By the end of the ice age, around ten thousand years ago, the páramo, an ecosystem characteristic of cold tropical highlands, invaded this area, today occupying 90% of the Park’s surface.

When the glaciers retreated, they left deep cuts in the Andean cordillera, forming a massif with the Cajas River to the north and the Jubones to the south, whose peaks are located in the Park. The lack of connection with other highlands ecosystems created an important center for speciation, that is, for the evolution of new species. The Park is located on the edge of what scientists call the “Paute-Girón biogegrapical frontier.” This frontier marks the transition between the Northern Andes and the Central, lower ones. The species south of this line are different from those of the Andes to the north. The páramo, a spongy tapestry covering the Park, includes patches of intricate paper-tree forests, locally known as queñual or quinua (though they have nothing to do with the nutritious grain). The páramos here, in the south of the country, begin at lower altitudes and experience higher precipitation and temperatures, but milder winds. This climate favors the formation of new species.

In this rugged environment, the resistant paper tree creates a microclimate in which unique plant and animal species take refuge, including the so-called quinua bird (Giant Conebill).

In the Llaviucu valley, at a lower altitude and to the east of the Park, there is also one of the few remnants of inter-Andean forest found in the Ecuadorian Andes. In spite of its reduced surface, this exuberant forest is home to an impressive diversity of life.

The strategic combination of location (on the Paute-Girón frontier) and isolation make Cajas a veritable factory of unique species. The Park protects 71 species of plants found only in Ecuador and 16 of which are found only in this protected area. Cajas is also famous among bird lovers because here you

The 786 lagoons in the Park cover 1,199 hectares. Luspa, with a surface area of 77 hectares, is the largest. Cajas provides water to the city of Cuenca, the third-largest in the country, and to the Paute hydroelectric dam.
Due to the abundance of aquatic habitats, the Park is an authentic paradise for amphibians. Fully 88% of those living in the Park are not found elsewhere, including the last highland jambatos, survivors of a group of frogs once very common in the country and now mostly extinct. You can see threatened species, such as the Xenodacnis and the Violet-throated Metaltail, a hummingbird found only in the Park.

These facts demonstrate the Park’s importance as a refuge for unique species threatened with extinction, as well as an incredible water reserve. For this reason, Cajas has been declared a RAMSAR Wetland of International Importance and a BirdLife Important Bird Area (IBA).

Together, these natural elements—water, geography, living beings, and climate—are key to the enchantment that characterizes this nature park in the south of the country.

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### Biodiversity and endemism in CNP*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ecosystems: Páramo, High Andean Forest</th>
<th>Flora</th>
<th>Mammals</th>
<th>Birds</th>
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<td>% of national total</td>
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* These figures are, of necessity, estimates and subject to change. Sources: Arbeláez and Vega, 2008; Jade 2007; Sánchez and Castro, 2005; Tinoco and Astudillo, 2005; Ulloa et al., 2005.
The cold lands of Cajas have been occupied since ancient times. Among the 28 archaeological sites found in the Park, there is evidence of human presence since the year 1800 B.C. It seems that Cajas was always a transit site, a shortcut to the sea. It was probably this condition that inspired travelers to risk the highlands, suffering the cold in exchange for the shorter route.

Between 500 A.D. and the mid-15th century, the Cañari people used this mountain pass to trade products from the Paute Valley to the gulf of Guayaquil. Organized in chiefdoms, the Cañaries farmed the land and exchanged products with Amazon peoples.

When the Incas conquered the area, around 1450, and named Tomebamba (today, Cuenca) as the major city in the north of the empire, the Cañari route through Cajas became even more important. A branch of the Qhapaq Ñan (Inca Trail), visible even today, was built on the trails of the Cañaris. This road begins in Cuenca and, in Cajas, follows the Llaviucu Valley, the Mamámag Lagoon, the Burines Valley, and leaves the Park passing by the Luspa Lagoon in the direction of Paredones de Molleturo, in the west. The trail is two to three meters wide, in the style and with the cobblestone paving characteristic of the Incas.

In the republican period, the route was used again, and named the “García Moreno trail.” Caravans of mules transported all kinds of goods to Cuenca along this route. A parallel trail was used to transport bootleg liquor when the liquor tax came into being. Names, such as “Dead Men’s Faces and traces

The shortest route between the Andes and the sea

As beautiful as they are mysterious, the lagoons of Cajas are featured in countless stories of treasures and enchantments. According to popular wisdom, the mountain is kind or severe, depending on the attitude of the visitor.

One possible explanation for the name Cajas (Spanish for “boxes”) may refer to the many lagoons “boxed in” the Andean nooks.
Communities around the Park have been inhabited by Cañaris, Incas, and mestizo muleteers and traders. This heritage has provided grist for countless tales about the mountain as the source of life but also of suffering. It is believed that those who do not demonstrate reverence and gratitude enrage the divinities who unleash freezing rain.

Famous spirits include Mama Huaca and the Mountain Indian. Both are benign spirits who protect the riches of Cajas. However, they can “enchant” hikers and take them away forever.

Mama Huaca (from waka, family god or goddess) is the owner and protector of all animals and plants that live in these mountains. She is pictured as an old woman with long, shining hair and a humble air that disguises her power. Some hunters have seen her heal animals wounded by their bullets. The spirit known as the Mountain Indian, on the other hand, is the custodian of the lagoons and the gold hidden in their depths.

To the south of the Park, the Soldados sector, through which the river also known as Soldados flows, is associated with the Inca’s troops, and their spirits still wander the páramo, guarding their lord’s treasure.

More recently, at the end of the nineties, Cajas was the site of alleged appearances of the Virgin Mary which attracted huge crowds of the faithful. A sanctuary near the eastern border of the Park continues to be visited by pilgrims.

Today, Cajas National Park is an important space for recreation and nature exploration for residents of Cuenca. The Park administration is decentralized and is a model of good management by a municipal government.
Toreadora - Illincocha sector

The Park’s touristic heart

This is an ideal site for an initial meeting with the Park. The informative visitor’s center provides a useful general overview, before walking the trail around Toreadora Lagoon and returning to the restaurant for a delicious meal of fresh trout. The more adventurous can try climbing the nearby rock walls. This is also one of the best places in the Park for birdwatching. You will find birds typical of the páramo and wetlands, such as the Andean gull. The Illincocha forest is one of the few places in the country where you will see the rare Xenodacnis. The birdwatcher will also see other charismatic species, such as the Great Horned Owl and the Quinoa Bird (Giant Conebill), so named for its association with the quinoa tree. In Toreadora there is a parking lot, an information stand, and a mountain refuge. From here, you can walk to Illincocha in groups of no more than eight people, accompanied by a guide.

Not to be missed

Few places are as ideal as Cajas for understanding the “sponge” function of the páramos. Seen below is Togliacocha Lagoon, near one of the three branches of the Inca Road inside the Park.
Taitachungo Lagoon

Two names, a thousand stories

With so many lagoons in the Park, it seems that there were not enough names to go around, so some were baptized in groups, such as the “Burines” and the “Unidas” Lagoons. On the other hand, one lagoon has two names: Taitachungo and Mamámag. Though access is somewhat difficult, the site is emblematic of the Park in the beauty of the surrounding landscape. You get there from Toreadora, crossing the Burines Valley. This used to be a required passage on the route to the Coast. Nearby are the remains of pre-Inca stairs and foundations that were probably places for resting. From here, you can walk a stretch of the Inca Trail to the Luspa Cave, where there is a camping area for up to 10 people. The cave is an important reference point along the trail.

Paredones de Molleturo

Vestiges of ancient splendor

Beyond the western border of the Park, there is an archaeological complex with the foundations of 400 dwellings, two large buildings, a plaza, a monumental pyramid, and a staircase leading to three lookout points. The remains suggest that this was, initially, a Cañari settlement that grew after the Incas arrived, being a strategic point on the way to the Coast. It is located at the beginning of a steep descent from the cordillera, where the páramo becomes cloud forest. The combination of landscape, Inca structures, and stunning sunsets make this an excellent spot for taking photos. However, access is not easy and it is recommended that visitors join guided excursions.

Llaviucu

The best kept secret

This beautiful valley is characteristically U-shaped, carved by the movement of ancient glaciers. The lagoon at the bottom of the valley, also named Llaviucu, is surrounded by reed beds and forests typical of the high Andes. There are two piers for trout pole-fishing and a camping area. In spite of its small size, the Llaviucu forest is full of life, being one of the most diverse places in the Park. It is an excellent spot for watching forest, meadow, and aquatic birds. There are three easy-access trails: Uku, 2 kilometers long; Zig Zag, 1.3 kilometers, and San Antonio, 2.7 kilometers. The last trail runs through the entire valley.
Walks

The best way to get to know Cajas National Park is on foot. You will enjoy the prodigious landscape of lakes and forest groves. There are eight routes and five trails along which you can combine walking with other activities. It takes from a few minutes to two hours to walk the trails. The routes require a few hours or, if you want to really take your time, a few days. There are camping sites along the way.

An alternative is to combine the different trails of the Park’s central area, such as Toreadora and Illincocha, with the “Nature and Human History” route. This is an easy excursion, near the visitors’ center, which goes by a number of lagoons, lookout points, quinua (paper tree) forests, and the famous García Moreno trail, an emblematic route which, in the 19th century, connected Cuenca and the port of Guayaquil. The more adventurous can combine the Llaviucu trails with the “Inca Trail and Larger Lagoons” route, which begins in the Huagrahuma area in the Park’s western sector. From there, it follows the northern bank of the Luspa Lagoon, going east, and goes through the Burines Valley, descending to the valley of the Taitachugo or Mamámag Lagoon. There you will see Cañari-Inca vestiges and continue along the Inca Trail until you get to the forested area of the Llaviucu sector, where you will come to the San Antonio trail.

» All the Park’s routes and trails are in the northern area and are accessible from the Cuenca-Molleturo highway.
» At the Park entrance you will receive a map of routes and trails.
» Some walks require a nature guide. Consult Park personnel before setting out.
» Always tell someone at a checkpoint the route you intend to take.
» Take a compass (and learn how to use it) or a GPS device.
» Respect the vegetation and do not walk off the trails.
» When walking, take the altitude into account.
» Take food rich in calories and sufficient liquids (avoiding throwaway bottles and packaging).

Cajas National Park: (07) 237 0127
There is no park entry fee. Guided walks cost between US$ 30 and 60 per person.

Rock Climbing

The Park’s bare rock faces were created by glaciers moving through the mountains thousands of years ago. Easy access and the amazing landscape make Cajas an excellent place for this sport. There are a number of options, including 30 equipped routes grouped in seven climbing areas: Cochuma, Chica Toreadora, Cerro San Luis, Toreadora, Godzila, La Proa and Las Virgenes. The degree of difficulty goes from short climbs for beginners to overhangs and boulders requiring a high degree of technical skill. Remember to climb with a qualified guide.

» Most climbing sites are in the northern sector, a short distance from the Cuenca-Molleturo-Naranjal highway. Access to the Chica Toreadora, Cerro San Luis, and Toreadora sites is via the Toreadora trail. You get to Godzila from the highway, southwest of the restaurant at La Toreadora. Access to La Proa is via the route to the Burines Valley. The wall in the Cochuma area is outside the Park and access is on foot (one hour, approximately) from the Tres Cruces sector, near the highway, to the northwest. Access to Las Virgenes is from the Quinuas check point toward the Padre Urcu mountain.
Always go with experienced guides who are familiar with the area. • Take equipment in good repair: helmet, harness, ropes and carabiners. • Use wool fingerless gloves that protect from the cold but leave the fingers bare for better grip and sensation.

Birdwatching

Cajas National Park is a site in southern Ecuador not to be missed by birders, both beginners and experts. It is an important refuge for 150 species, including nine endangered species, one that is found nowhere else in the world (the Violet-throated Metaltaill hummingbird) and five migratory species. Thus, together with the neighboring Mazán Protected Forest, Cajas is part of the “Cajas-Mazán Important Bird Area.” In addition to the eye-catching Violet-throated Metaltaill, there are 23 additional species of hummingbirds. A quinua grove next to Illincocha Lagoon is one of the few places where you can see the rare Tit-like Dacnis. With a little bit of luck, you will also see condors in the Playas Encantadas sector.

➤ The Toreadora Sector is a good place for watching páramo and aquatic birds. Nearby, on the other side of the highway, is the trail to Illincocha, with entry restricted to a maximum of eight people at a time, accompanied by a guide.

➤ Take waterproof binoculars with you. • Walk in small groups and be quiet. • Wear clothing in muted colors so as to be less obvious to the birds.

➤ Cajas National Park: (07) 237 0127

$ Birdwatching excursions leave from Cuenca and Guayaquil and cost between US$ 60 and 100 per person per day.

The rainbow starfrontlet is an endemic hummingbird of southern Ecuador and northern Peru.
Getting there

Transportation

The main entrance to Cajas National Park is along the Cuenca-Molleturo-Naranjal highway, which goes through the northern part of the Park. This road connects Cuenca and Guayaquil. You can enter the Llaviucu Valley via the same highway, turning off at kilometer 17 onto a cobblestone road which you follow for two kilometers until coming to the Surocucho checkpoint. There is no public transportation from this point, but the walk is only about 20 minutes.

Those traveling from Guayaquil by bus can get off at the Cajas National Park entrance, without going to Cuenca (though this is not very practical if you have checked-in luggage).

You can travel by plane from Quito (55 minutes; US$ 102 round trip) or Guayaquil (50 minutes; US$ 150 round trip).

Safety and health

In general, you should take the usual precautions required for high altitude: clothing for the cold, since temperatures can get as low as 5° C during the day and below 0 °C at night. Rain is frequent and unpredictable, so waterproof jacket and pants are needed, as well as plastic bags and covers for clothing and equipment.

To take the routes, which require hours of walking, you must have a guide. This is not necessary for the trails. Maps and a compass or GPS-enabled device are recommended as the terrain is irregular and fog often makes it difficult to determine where you are. It is preferable to walk only until 4:00 to take advantage of better visibility; after that time, the fog becomes heavier. To be safer, you should indicate at one of the checkpoints where you will be visiting.

If you live in low areas, it is recommended that you become gradually acclimated to the higher altitude before visiting the park. Blood pressure sometimes drops at high altitudes and eating something sweet helps to bring it back up. You should also eat well, keep hydrated, and get enough sleep. If, in spite of these precautions you are affected by “soroche” (altitude sickness), take a nap and if that does not help, get to a lower altitude as soon as possible.

When to visit

Any time is a good time to visit, although it rains less between October and January. Because the daily number of visitors is limited, you should call the Park and make a reservation before visiting (07) 237 0127. Office hours are Monday to Friday, 08:00 am to 4:00 pm. Tours can be arranged in Cuenca.

Sustainable tourism tips

- Páramo vegetation is fragile and takes a long time to regenerate. Thus, visitors are required to stay on the trails.
- Taking plants out of the Park and hunting in the Park are prohibited.
- Pets are not allowed in the Park due to the danger they pose for Park species.
- Trout is an introduced species that affects native species, such as toads, aquatic invertebrate and the preñadilla, a native fish species. For that reason, visitors are allowed and encouraged to pole fish for trout in the Park. However, boats and swimming are not allowed.
- The Illincocha trail receives special management because it is the habitat of the Tit-like Dacnis, a bird in danger of extinction. A maximum of eight visitors are permitted at one time and they must be accompanied by a guide.
- Given the danger fires represent, campfires are not allowed. If you plan to camp, take a gas-powered camping stove or something similar.
- You will be given a bag for garbage at the Park entrance which you should leave at one of the control points on your way out; personnel will take care of it in an appropriate fashion. Take special care that paper and plastic items are not swept away by the wind.

Important contact information

- 1 800 TURISMO (1 800 887 476)
- Cajas National Park (ETAPA): (07) 237 0127 / (07) 237 0128
- Ministry of the Environment, Cuenca: (07) 287 1694
- Ministry of Tourism, Cuenca: (07) 286 5642 / (07) 286 2953
- Municipal Government, Cuenca, Tourism Department: (07) 282 1035
- Bus Terminal, Cuenca: (07) 284 2023
- Hospital, Cuenca: (07) 288 5595
- Police, Cuenca: (07) 408 8985

Entrance to all PANE continental protected areas is free for residents and foreigners.
**Directory**

### Tour Operators

|---------------------|------------|-----------------|---------------|------------|-----------------|

**Cuenca**

- **Terradiversa the Travel Center**
  - Address: Cuenca
  - Phone: (07) 282 3782
  - Email: info@terradiversa.com
  - Website: www.terradiversa.com

- **Tinamu Tours**
  - Address: Cuenca
  - Phone: (07) 284 3064 / 098 066 085
  - Email: gerencia@tinamutours.com
  - Website: www.tinamutours.com

- **Ecoandes Travel**
  - Address: Cuenca
  - Phone: (02) 222 0892
  - Email: info@ecoandestravel.com
  - Website: www.ecoandestravel.com

- **Enchanted Expeditions**
  - Address: Cuenca
  - Phone: (02) 292 6598
  - Email: nena@enchantedexpeditions.com
  - Website: www.enchantedexpeditions.com

### Lodging

**Hostal Las Tejas**

- Address: García Moreno w/n
- Phone: (07) 225 0175
- Category: second

**Hostal El Manantial**

- Address: España and Núñez de Bonilla
- Phone: (07) 284 3060
- Category: first

**Hostal El Monasterio**

- Address: Padre Aguirre 7-24 y Sucre
- Phone: (07) 282 4457
- Category: second

**Pensión Andaluz**

- Address: Mariano Cueva 12-21 and Sangurima
- Phone: (07) 282 7292
- Category: third

**Pensión Cortina**

- Address: Presidente Córdova 10-33
- Phone: (07) 283 1251
- Category: first

**Pensión Nuestra Residencia**

- Address: Los Pinos 1-100 and Ordóñez Lasso
- Phone: (07) 283 1702
- Category: first

**Hosteria Hacienda El Nato**

- Address: Panamericana Sur (between Cuenca and Loja) 335 Km 35 Nabón
- Phone: (07) 281 8724
- Category: first

**Hosteria Dos Chorreras**

- Address: Km 22 on the way to Cajas
- Phone: (07) 404 1999
- Category: first

**Apart Hotel Otorongo**

- Address: 12 de Abril and Guayas
- Phone: (07) 281 8205
- Category: first

**Hosteria Cabañas de Narancay**

- Address: Km 22 on the way to Cajas
- Phone: (07) 283 1251
- Category: first

### Prices

Prices are per guest and include taxes but not breakfast, unless otherwise indicated.
Below is a short list of some outstanding wildlife found in Cajas. Given the extraordinary diversity in this area, it is, of necessity, an incomplete list. Enjoy filling it in!

**Mammals**
- Oreomanes fraseri (Giant Conebill)
- Bubo virginianus (Great Horned Owl)
- Metallura baroni (Violet-throated Metaltail*)
- Xenodacnis parina (Tit-like Dacnis)
- Cuniculus taczanowskii (Mountain Paca)
- Coendou quichua (Kichwa porcupine*)
- Puma concolor (Puma)
- Sigmodon inopinatus (Unexpected Cotton Rat*)
- Chibchanomys orcesi (Aquatic Cajas Mouse*)
- Phyllotis haggardi (Haggard’s Leaf-eared mouse*)
- Thomasomys auricularis (Red Andean Mouse*)
- Sylvilagus brasiliensis (Rabbit)
- Cryptotis montivaga (Grey-bellied Shrew Opossum*)
- Mustela frenata (Andean Weasel)
- Chucurí (Lama glama)
- Odocoileus peruvianus (White-tailed Deer)
- Lycalopex culpaeus (Andean Fox or Wolf)

* species endemic to Ecuador

**Birds**
- Hyloxalus vertebralis (Boulenger Rocket Frog*)
- Gastrotheca pseustes (San Lucas Marsupial Frog*)
- Gastrotheca litonedis (Azuay Marsupial Frog*)
- Atelopus nanay (Black Harlequin of Tres Cruces*)
- Atelopus exiguus (Harlequin Frog*)
- Telmatobius niger (Ucug*)
- Leptosittaca branickii (Golden-plumed Parakeet)
- Caenolestes caniventer (Grey-bellied Shrew Opossum*)
- Podiceps occipitalis (Silvery Grebe)
- Andigena hypoglauca (Grey-breasted Mountain-toucan)
- Andean Guan
- Anas andium (Andean Teal)
- Podiceps occipitalis (Silvery Grebe)
- Coeligena iris (Andean Guan)
- Panope montagnii (Grey-breasted Mountain-toucan)
- Andigena hypoglauca (Grey-breasted Mountain-toucan)

**Reptiles and fish**
- Telmatobius niger (Ucug*)
- Leptosittaca branickii (Golden-plumed Parakeet)
- Anisognathus igniventris (Scarlet-bellied Mountain-tanager)
- Chilopthalmus viridissimus (Mountain Crested Snail)
- Planorbarius corneus (Great Ramshorn Snail)
- Platymeris californica (California Kingsnake)
- Stenocercus festae (Mountain-crest Snail)
- Ouroborus taeniurus (Bougainvillea Snake)
- Chironius lineatus (Chironius Lineatus)

**Flora**
- Gentianella hirculus
- Berberis lutea
- Pernettya prostrata
- Chuquiraga jussieui
- Carex toreadora
- etc.

This document may be cited as:
- Ulloa, Carmen; Samara Álvarez, Peter Jørgensen and Danilo Minga, 2005. Guía de 100 Plantas del Parque Nacional Cajas. Etapa, Cuenca

References
- Urrutia, Carmen; Samara Álvarez, Peter Jørgensen and Danilo Minga, 2005. Guía de 100 Plantas del Parque Nacional Cajas. Etapa, Cuenca

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Conscious tourism is a life-transforming experience that leads to personal growth, making us better human beings.

This new concept is based on principles of sustainability and ethics, and promotes peace, friendship, respect, and love for life as the essence of tourism.

It is a pact to live together in a responsible, mutually respectful fashion, in communion with tour agents from sending and receiving communities, the tourist, and the natural and cultural heritage.

Conscious tourism is a living, dynamic concept in constant development. It is an experience in giving and receiving.