

**INÍRIDA:
Colombia's
Amazonian
Gateway**



**249 BIRD SPECIES
OBSERVED**

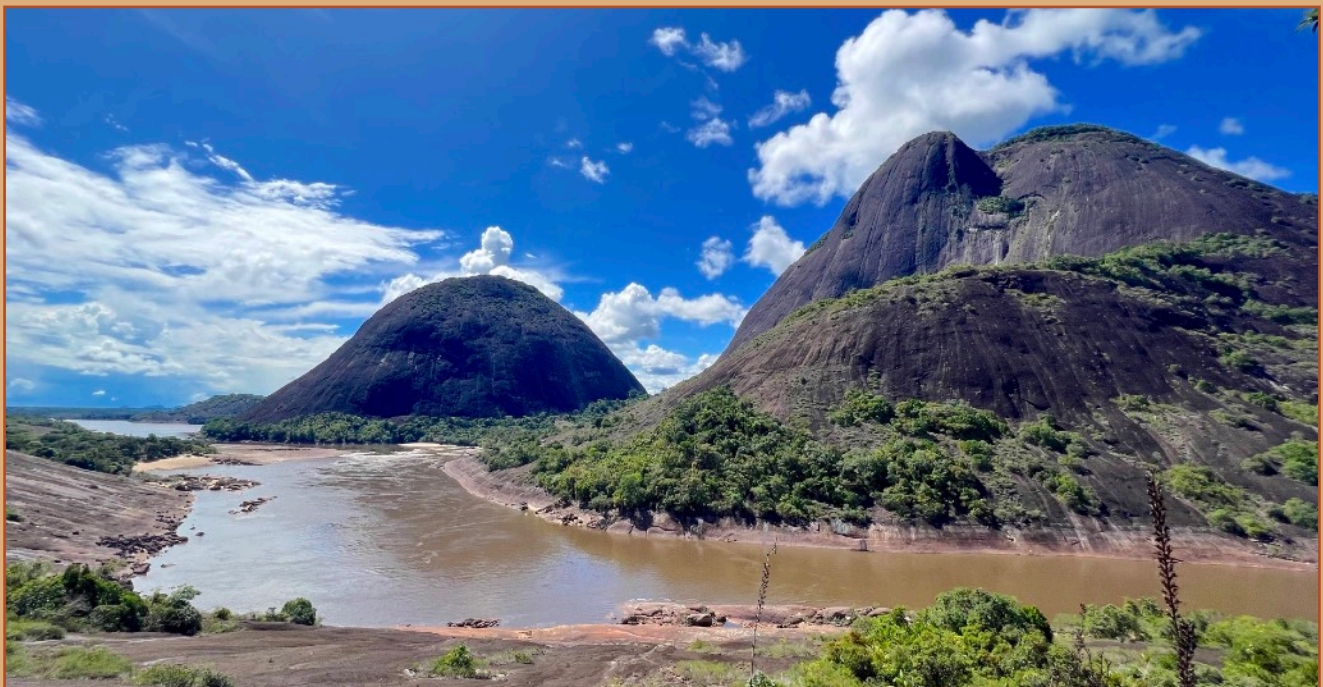


**MANY ENDEMIC!
PLANTS AND BIRDS**



**8 HAPPY GUESTS
3 BIRD GUIDES**

TRAVEL JOURNAL



HARBORING SOME OF COLOMBIA'S BEST KEPT BIRDING SECRETS

Inírida in the far eastern part of the country is relatively unknown to the birding community. That all changed for our eight intrepid tour participants, who eagerly ventured out from points across the U.S.A. to explore this little-known biodiversity hotspot. In the past few years, the secluded Inírida region has welcomed birders and upon our arrival, it quickly became clear to our tour guests that this place is indeed extraordinary for birding! The unique juxtaposition of Guianan, Amazonian and grassland habitats has created a magical and unique diversity of birds like nowhere else in Colombia. The white sand forests and African-like savannahs, intertwining with a network of vigorous tea-colored rivers, are just the places where unusual and range-restricted bird species occur. Additionally, the iconic Cerros de Mavecure — three black monolithic mountains that rise up abruptly from the flat forests below — provide some particularly jaw-dropping scenery.

The Colombian government declared this region as the Ramsar site “Estrella Fluvial de Inírida” – the River Star of Inírida. A Ramsar site is a wetland area designated to be of international importance under the Ramsar Convention, a international treaty on wetlands conservation established in 1971. It provides for national action and international cooperation regarding the conservation of wetlands and sustainable use of their resources. The declared area covers 625,000 acres, and it safeguards a critically important freshwater area on the border with Venezuela, a transition zone between the Orinoco River Basin and the Amazon. Here, three different rivers converge: the Atabapo, Guaviare and Inírida Rivers flow into the mighty Orinoco, the third most important river in the world by its volume of water.



The “Fluvial Star” of Inírida was declared a RAMSAR site (Convention on Wetlands of International Importance) in 2014. It protects an important freshwater area that is a transition zone between the Orinoco and Amazon, conserving the confluence of four different river systems, three (Atabapo, Guaviare and Inírida Rivers) that flow into the Orinoco, the third most important river in the world in terms of water volume. It is a spectacular landscape dotted by tepuis and the varied colors of the different river systems.

TRIP IN REVIEW



DAY 1 | BOGOTA

Eagerly anticipating their first visit to Colombia, eight participants successfully arrived at the Bogotá International Airport for the start of the tour. Three of the guests came all the way from Alaska (!), with others hailing from California, Colorado, Washington state and D.C. Trip leaders, Eliana and Marc Kramer, greeted the guests in signature fashion, waving the giant Colombia flag and giving a warm Birding by Bus welcome starting right from the airport. Covid-19 restrictions were still in place, but we could still see bright smiling faces under all those masks! We'd have 1 night in Bogota to get settled and oriented, starting with a delightful welcoming dinner of typical Colombian cuisine, like the classic comforting Ajiaco Bogotano (Chicken and Potato Soup, Bogota style). Eliana embraced the group with her inspiring words, welcoming them to the "Real Colombia" and telling them that by the end of the trip, they will wish they had "two more days"!



DAY 2 | INÍRIDA TOWN & CAÑO CULEBRA

Off to Inírida! Just a 90 minute flight from Bogota and we were whisked away to the far eastern reaches of the country. From the air, we gawked at the meandering snake-like rivers and vast swaths of green forest below. A tiny dot amidst the boundless natural landscapes, the small town of Inírida and its 30,000 residents grew closer as our plane approached. The community is comprised of mostly indigenous peoples, with Kurripacos, Puinaves, and Piapocos making up the vast majority, but also people that have settled here from other parts of Colombia as well. After arriving at the tiny airport we caravanned in tuk-tuks and vans to our lodge followed by our first plentiful family-style lunch in town. While nibbling on patacones (smashed green plantains) and fresh river fish, it didn't take long to begin seeing birds as a Golden-spangled Piculet crept up the tree right next to our lunch table at close range! Another life bird of the trip seen commonly on the town streets was the Orange-fronted Yellow-Finch.

When the heat of the midday diminished, in the afternoon we set out to our first birding location at the Caño Culebra trail. The trail is a wide track through white sand savannah and white sand forest, all on the characteristic nutrient-poor white sand substrate. The soil here strongly influences the type of vegetation that can grow, which tends to be scrubby and dotted with open sandy patches of savannah, unlike the luxuriant foliage in the Amazon. Caño Culebra can turn up many of the white sand specialties of the region and did not

disappoint. We had our first taste of Swallow-winged Puffbirds, which as the week went on became one of our most common birds. Some really good ones here included a vocalizing Cherrie’s Antwren, Spotted Puffbird, Amazonian Antshrike, Black Manakin, Red-shouldered Tanager, and Slender-footed Tyrannulet. As the sun went down, many Least Nighthawks began foraging for insects with their characteristic erratic flight.



DAY 3 | SABANITAS & CURVA DE LOS PEPES

Yesterday was merely a warm-up, compared to the impressive diversity at Sabanitas! This white sand savannah melding into varzea forest trail courses through an indigenous Curripaco community that welcome birders to their green space. This particular area is renowned for being the only place in Colombia where the bizarre and iconic Capuchinbird can be found — so we were all hopeful for finding this unique member of the Cotinga family. But even without it, many other surprises awaited at Sabanitas which always has the potential for a really big day.

When birding in Inírida, it’s important to get an early start to beat the heat, so we set out at the crack of dawn on the country road that stretches to Sabanitas. Winding through the rural countryside by van and by three-wheeled tuk-tuk, a raucous chorus of deafening squawks in the distance resulted in an instant “STOP the BUS” moment. A brilliant rainbow-colored gathering of Scarlet, Chestnut-fronted, and Blue-and-yellow Macaws had left their roosts and

were in full open view in a cluster of dead trees with some nest cavities. While we all oohed and aahed at the gathering of macaws, we also marveled at a pair of Pearl Kites, a Crested Oropendola, and a Sulphury Flycatcher, among other treats.

Reaching Sabanitas, the dawn chorus was in full swing straight out of the van. Without walking more than a few steps, we had our bins pointed at Green-backed Trogons, more Swallow-winged Puffbirds, Glittering-throated Emeralds, and Gray-rumped and Fork-tailed Palm Swifts. Crossing a wooden bridge over a small creek into the community, we proceeded across a grassy soccer field and into an inviting white sand savannah that resembles an African

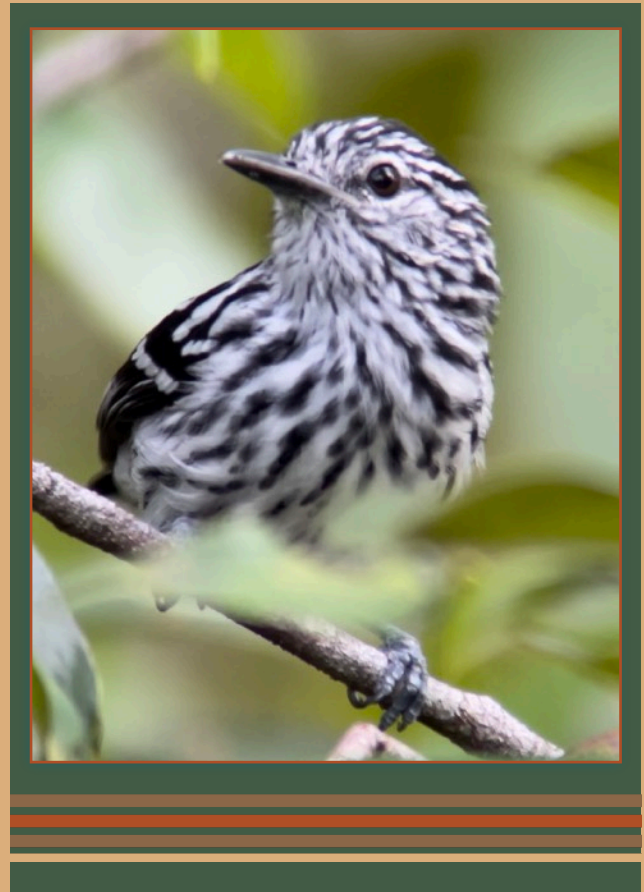


grassland landscape. The open prairie surrounded by forest yielded easy views of a band of Azure-naped Jays, a pair of Capped Herons, White-throated Purpletufts, Green-tailed Goldentthroats, and a female Black Manakin which whet our appetite for more. Progressing from the open savannah into the shady cover of the varzea forest, a kaleidoscope of Heliconia butterflies flitted amongst the young skinny trees while seemingly-invisible Screaming Pihas competed for loudest forest noise with their far-resonating “Piiii-haaaaaa” call. The trail was reasonably dry with few muddy spots and the walking was relatively flat and easy, with a few sections marching single-file on cut tree planks that elevate walkers over flooded areas when the water levels are higher. Varzea forests are seasonally flooded during the wet season, and we could see the deep water lines marked on some of the trees 50 feet up from the ground!

Although the forests here are less dense compared to the forests of deep Amazonia, South American forest birding has its challenges and birds can be tricky to spot — but that’s all part of the fun and makes every sighting even more rewarding. Despite the evasive tactics of skulky species, we did well with Black-crested and Amazonian Antshrike, White-flanked Antwren, Common Scale-backed Antbird, and Plain-brown, Striped and Straight-billed Woodcreepers. A velvety male Pompadour Cotinga put on a purple show for us in the canopy, and we had sweet multicolored views of a trio of Opal-rumped, Opal-crowned, and Paradise Tanagers. Various colorful manakins showed well in their lekking areas, including Yellow-crowned, White-crowned, and Golden-headed.

As for the primary target bird — the mysterious Capuchinbird? Let’s just say that the far-carrying call of the males is absolutely one of the strangest sounds in the bird world. They sound like a distant chainsaw, or a lowing cow. We initially detected one particular bird by its odd and loud vocalization, which got everyone really excited. Even with their booming call, Capuchinbirds can be tough to pinpoint by sight in the forest. After a bit of effort searching the mid to upper levels of the canopy for movement, a flash of burnt orange whooshed above our heads and over the trail. There it was! A big orange bird with a hunchback and a disproportionately small blue and naked head. An unmistakable cotinga, and a fantastic reward for today’s birding.

By midday, the shade of a large palm thatch hut at lunchtime was a welcomed relief from the sun. The fresh river fish served here for lunch was prepared wonderfully and served with a





combination of patacones (smashed green plantain), bitter cassava, white rice, and juicy lime wedges. A little siesta in the hammocks was a relaxing way to wind down after a big morning in the field.



In the afternoon, we birded the road called “Curva de los Pepes”. Several marshy puddles on the roadside were productive for shorebirds, including Pantanal Snipe, Solitary Sandpiper, Wattled Jacana, and Southern Lapwing. A male White-naped Seedeater, a target species restricted to the white sands habitat, showed well and even bursted out into full song! Campina Thrush, Bronzy Jacamar, Coraya Wren, and a Barred Antshrike pair were well relished, a pair of Savanna Hawks gave us good close looks, and a number of tricky flycatchers gave us reason to practice our ID skills on Rusty-margined, Social, and Fork-tailed Flycatcher, Great Kiskadee, and Tropical Kingbird. As the sun went down, we celebrated a great day of lifer birds with the local “Poker” Colombian beers in the field!



DAY 4 | MATRACA & CAÑO CUNUBEN

The next morning, we set off from the Inírida marina by longboat (a very, very long boat where we all sat on chairs in single file) for a twenty minute ride across the Inírida River to the Matraca trail. During the boat rides on the river system here, there are often birds crossing overhead as well as birds foraging over the river for fish — Large-billed Terns with their giant yellow bills are always interesting to gawk at, and Yellow-billed Terns are regular residents here as well.

The Matraca track passes through diverse varzea habitats and leads to the community of Matraca, which like Sabanitas, is another Curripaco indigenous settlement. The birding here rivals yesterday’s session at Sabanitas, because the bird diversity can be quite good with an excellent mix of ant-following species, woodpeckers, parrots, and most importantly the range-restricted specialties that make this area so appealing for birders. Straight off the boat, we were greeted riverside by a pair of curious and playful Giant Otters swimming along the shorelines and checking out the group of binocular-and-camera wielding humans. Walking just 100 feet up from the boat to the start of the trail where there was a small river arm and a cluster of fruiting trees, the bird list started out strong with highlights such as Amazonian Umbrellabird, Black-fronted Nunbird, Many-banded Aracari, Black-tailed and Blue-crowned Trogon, and several other goodies. We worked our way into the forest, with bird calls all

around us that it was difficult to decide what to focus on. Should we go for the Cream-colored Woodpecker creeping up into the canopy? A Green-tailed Jacamar tossing around a butterfly breakfast? Or work the elusive Black-crested and Cinereous Antshrike, White-flanked and White-fringed Antwrens, or maybe the Dusky and Black-chinned Antbirds? With 3 Orinoco Softtails under our belt for the morning, one of the most range-restricted species in Inírida, we were all very happy campers! A single male Rose-breasted Chat was another excellent find, though it was not especially cooperative for photos, preferring to retreat into the dense tangles for cover. Yellow-crowned Elaenia was a rare find here, and we took some time to record audio and capture photos of it.

Following a lunchtime siesta, we headed back out onto the water and birded a small tranquil creek, Caño Cunuben, this time from the comfort of canoes. Slowly drifting down the quiet waters, we were in awe of the elongated basket nests of varying sizes draped over the creek from the overhanging trees — the communal nesting sites of Crested and Olive Oropendola as well as the smaller Red-rumped Cacique. How cool! We were dazzled by the contrasting colors of Red-capped Cardinals, and delighted to find Rusty-backed Spinetails in the understory tangles draped across the creek edge. Other highlights included Little Cuckoo, White-banded and White-winged Swallows, Lesser Kiskadee, Blue-throated Piping-Guan, and a heard Undulated Tinamou. As the sun set, Ladder-tailed Nightjars came to life and flew unpredictably over the water's surface, snatching up their insect prey. We followed them with flashlights, along with various bats, under the cover of darkness as we made our way back to the marina.



DAY 5 | EL PAUJIL & LA ROMPIDA

Another short and interesting boat ride from Inírida, today we returned to the varzea forest habitat, but this time to the indigenous community of El Paujil. Although not as frequented by birders as Sabanitas and Matraca, the diversity here can be equally terrific and would give us additional chances to find more birds of the region. Stepping off the boat onto the shoreline, we didn't have to go more than a hundred feet until we were stopped in our tracks, ogling a multitude of new birds. A Sunbittern foraged below us in a small creek that emptied into the

river and several times stretched its wings, displaying the elaborate and dazzling feather pattern they are famous for. On the river banks, we spotted a Drab Water Tyrant along with more inquisitive Giant Otters, while up in the trees of the semi-open landscape we viewed White-throated Toucan, Scale-breasted Woodpecker, and a familiar wintering migrant: Blackpoll Warbler! The forest trail did not disappoint with diversity and we had nearly as many species here as we did at the other varzea locations. Some new commendable additions included Collared Puffbird, Black-headed Parrot, Black Bushbird, Varzea Schiffornis, Wire-tailed Manakin, Turquoise Tanager, Great and Blackish-gray Antshrike, Amazonian Streaked-Antwren, Dot-backed Antbird, and Curve-billed Scythebill. To recap on yesterday's specialties, we had another Orinoco Softtail and another Rose-breasted Chat, too!

Following the classic lunchtime siesta period back in the town of Inírida, we hopped back on the boat in the afternoon to La Rompida, an important hotspot on the east bank of the Guaviare River. At this location in 2016, an interesting antshrike was found which looked very similar to the Chestnut-backed Antshrike, a species found much further south in Amazonia, but over 600 miles away in Brazil, Peru, and Bolivia without any known populations in between. It was thought to possibly be a new species, and is even described in the new Hilty Colombia field guide as the "Unnamed Antshrike". Not only did we seek and find this species, but also turned up some other goodies including Orange-headed and Hooded Tanager, Black-capped Donacobius, and White-eared Jacamar. The sandy shorelines and river bank habitat were good for finding Collared Plover, Pied Lapwing, Jabiru, and several new migrant and resident shorebirds and waders for the trip. Additionally, the grassier areas on the riverbank were alive with seedeaters and finches, including the richly-colored Amazonian species, Chestnut-bellied Seedeater.



DAY 6 | ORINOCO RIVER ISLAND & CAÑO VITINA



Stretching our wings further east on the "River Star" from our home base of Inírida today, at first light we began a 90 minute boat journey towards the impressive Orinoco River. Massive Ceiba trees dot the landscape along the river, a tree that grows up to 230 feet tall culminating in an enormous canopy and great for birds! We spotted small pods of Inírida River Dolphins and groups of Giant Otters as we shot up the river that forms the international boundary between Colombia and Venezuela. Amongst the boulder-strewn river, Black-collared Swallows made an appearance, a small handsome swallow with a distinctive black-and-white pattern and a long forked tail.

Our river boats pulled up to the shallow shores of a large sandbar island on the west bank of the Orinoco River, a bit north of a small community called Amanaven. This habitat was unlike anything we had experienced earlier in the week — a sandy riverine island with some isolated patches of scrubby vegetation amongst an expanse of white sand. A day at the beach — we could even wear sandals today! We were fortunate to have some cloud cover, because the island has little to no shade and can get very hot on sunny days, but the weather today was in our favor. With the abrupt change in habitat type, several new birds that are not well-documented for this area popped up on our radar, including River Tyrannulet, Riverside Tyrant, Pied Water-Tyrant, and Yellow-hooded Blackbird. We caught a quick glimpse of a Spinetail sp., and as it turns out, a few years ago an exceptionally rare Spinetail, known only from a few locations in Venezuela was documented here: Rio Orinoco Spinetail. Our mystery spinetail disappeared into a dense brushy tangle, so we'll never know exactly what we saw, but our imagination did run wild for a bit! All the while, dozens of Sand-colored Nighthawks were perfectly camouflaged sitting motionlessly on the white sand, but in flight displayed a strikingly attractive broad white wing stripe. Strolling around the island like wandering beachgoers, we also had Ladder-tailed Nightjar, and across from the island in the larger trees on the riverside, we spotted numerous forest birds as well. Eliana made sure we had ice cold watermelon slices to cool down our cores after a long walk on the beach!

In the evening, those who still had the energy to keep birding took a brisk hike on the trail at Caño Vitina. A Crested Eagle chick on a massive nest was an outstanding highlight! Other interesting finds here included Paradise Jacamar, Spot-breasted Woodpecker, and Spangled Cotinga.



DAY 7 | FLOR DE INÍRIDA TRAIL & CERROS DE MAVECURE

The final stretch of our journey through the Amazonian gateway led us to the iconic Cerros de Mavecure — but not before first making a mandatory stop to try for the range-restricted Yapacana Antbird. A grayish skulky antbird with a long bill, pale throat and white spots on its wings, it only occurs across a very restricted range in the understory of stunted campina forests and its name comes from the part of its small range in Yapacana National Park (southwest Venezuela).





A tricky understory specialist, it prefers to hide low in stunted, virtually impenetrable white-sand woodlands, which is exactly what it did for us — fortunately Camilo patiently worked the bird and made sure everyone got on it, even if we had to peer into the forest at tricky angles, or in some cases, bushwhack and crawl! Talk about a rewarding find of a challenging species. Here, we also took the time to admire two different species of the Flor de Inírida, or Inírida Flower, a beautiful endemic plant to the region with a star-like red flower — and also a symbol of Inírida.

From there, we traveled by boat two hours upriver from Inírida, south to the Cerros de Mavecure. This is a very sacred place for the indigenous people and the source of many ancient legends. The cerros are comprised of three black monolithic mountains on the western edge of the Guianan Shield, rising up sharply from the flat forest that surrounds them. Located in an indigenous Puinave reserve, the cerros are amongst the oldest geological formations in all of South America. The tallest of the three cerros, “Pajarito” (little bird) stands over 2,300 feet in height; the smallest, “Mavicure”, which half our group opted to hike up, rises up 550 feet above the forest floor. Half of our group made the ascent to the top of Mavicure, with some steep sections and a few ladder climbs, but were rewarded with epic views from the top! The other part of the group relished some beach-side relaxation time in hammocks and explored around the lower level trails. Cliff Flycatcher was a nice trip add for all, and following another fresh fish lunch, there was a refreshing group swim in the river!

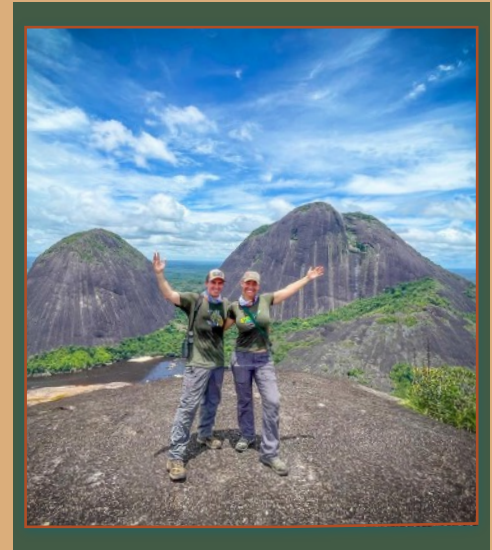
Come evening back at our lodge, it was time for our last dinner in Inírida — which was not without a special surprise! A small group of performers from the indigenous Curripaco tribe enlightened us on the music, dance, and culture of the Amazonian people. Group participation by everyone was inescapable, and we all shared a lot of laughs and smiles!



DAY 8 | INÍRIDA AIRPORT & HUMMINGBIRD OBSERVATORY

Our last morning in Inírida promised an early departure and no birding outings planned — but that did not stop our group from continuing the quest for more birds! Birding right outside the tiny Inírida airport yielded still more new species for our motivated group of birders, including Black-crowned Tityra and a few other bird species, bringing the final total for the Inírida portion to a whopping 249 species!

Since we were back in Bogotá by midday, we seized the opportunity to squeeze in just a little bit of Eastern Andean birding. This made for a nice contrast to the lowland birding of Inírida - both in terms of bird species composition and some milder cooler weather! A trip to the Observatorio de Colibríes (Hummingbird Observatory) outside of Bogotá was spectacular as always, between the incredible hummingbird feeder experience, the amazing homemade lunch, and the chance for one last birding session to wrap up the tour!



DAY 9 | INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS HOME

After a great trip and a tremendous first visit to Colombia for most of the participants, it was time to say goodbyes and head to the Bogota airport for international flights home.

With excellent amenities despite the remote location, our journey to Inírida was comfortable, enlightening, and most definitely rewarding! The birds were phenomenal, the guides extraordinary, and exploring this little-known part of the world where few birders (and tourists in general) have ventured was a bona fide adventure in the tropics.

KNOW

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE A COMPREHENSIVE LIST OF THE BIRDS SEEN DURING THIS TRIP, PLEASE VISIT THE FOLLOWING LINK:

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