

COLOMBIA: MITU



Independent Budget Birding

May 6-16, 2017

Ross & Melissa Gallardy

www.budgetbirders.com

Summary:

Overview: Having visited most of Colombia earlier this year, my wife and I decided to visit Mitu for 10 days to look for the regional endemics and specialties. Although Mitu still remains somewhat of a logistical challenge, I do not think it is nearly as bad as some reports allude to, and I definitely think independent birders should have no problem visiting without the help of bird tour operators or local “tourism” companies. That being said, we did use local “guide” Nacho to coordinate logistics/access, but this was also a bit of a hassle (more on that later). Overall, the trip was a success with 275 species and almost all of our main targets accounted for. Jon Gallagher joined us for the trip, so by splitting costs amongst three people, the overall cost was ~\$500 per person for 10 days of birding.

Weather: May is considered the beginning of the rainy season and we were a bit hesitant about getting rained out despite both Beck and Athanas visiting during the same time of year. The weather forecast looked really bad, but fortunately we lost very little birding time due to rain. Most days we experienced short thunderstorms and a decent amount of rain overnight. We only lost one full afternoon due to rain.

Birding Overview: In total we recorded 275 species including Gray-bellied Antbird, Chestnut-crested Antbird, Orinoco Piculet, Azure-naped Jay, Guanian Cock-of-the-Rock, Tawny-tufted Toucanet, Fiery Topaz, Pompadour Cotinga, Black Manakin, Pavonine Quetzal, Black Bushbird, and 4 species of puffbirds (Spotted, Pied, Brown-banded, and Chestnut-capped). Overall, birding was very difficult at times and being familiar with songs/calls was very important. Birding white sands forests can be quite boring at times and the forest was absolutely dead for long periods of the day. A lot of the better birds were found using playback and trolling was very necessary since I (and Nacho) didn't know exact spots of targets. I never heard a Gray-bellied Antbird sing spontaneously (when they did respond to playback it was almost always with the call and not the song, so learn that). The Chestnut-crested Antbirds were also only found by playback (and not at an ant swarm), and I trolled a ridiculous amount for puffbirds. Although we did quite well with puffbirds, it took 8 days and lots of trolling before I finally found my first Brown-banded Puffbird on Day 8 (and also had a pair spontaneously calling on Day 9, go figure). Black Manakin was also very difficult for some reason. I put in a lot of effort in both Bocatoma and Mitu Cachaveria and didn't see a single one. The only pair seen was at Santa Marta. We also struggled with finding flowering trees. Had Diego not told us about Puente Lata, we would have dipped Fiery Topaz. And this lack of flowers resulted in no Jewelfronts, Woodstars, or Thorntails!

Dips: Biggest dip of the trip was Bar-bellied Woodcreeper. I trolled all day every day for this species, but never got a response. I also tried a good bit for White-naped Seedeater, but this species doesn't seem to be available in Mitu anymore. Other big misses were Ivory-billed Aracari, Black-bellied Throattail (very little flowering trees were found), White-bellied Dacnis, and Purple-breasted Cotinga. Although we heard a number of tinamous, we never heard Gray-legged Tinamou.

Acknowledgments: Thanks to Jon Gallagher for joining on the trip and Diego Calderon for providing very useful information for the Fiery Topaz. Also thanks to the authors of the trip reports listed below for the valuable information.

Resources:

Websites:

As usual, xeno-canto, cloudbirders, and ebird were extremely valuable resources in researching and preparing for the trip. A few trip reports that were referenced (to varying degrees of usefulness) are included below. Also, there is a link to our website, which has blog entries written on our 10 day trip, though overall, for someone looking for information, this report will be more helpful than the blog (but still check out the blog!). Ebird is rapidly becoming an extremely useful tool on seeing recent sightings before leaving on a trip, but sadly, most people remain extremely vague in their checklists. All of my ebird checklists include GPS coordinates or detailed information for target birds and I encourage others visiting these areas to do the same. Even quick notes about where on a trail or a km mark can be extremely helpful for those not familiar with the area.

www.ebird.org: all checklists from the trip including numerous pictures and audio recordings can be searched for on ebird

www.xeno-canto.org: Recordings for the trip were downloaded from here, my recordings will eventually be added

www.cloudbirder.com: Access to dozens of trip reports. Below are a few I took with me.

Books/Reports:

[Mitu](#): Pritam Baruah 2014

[Mitu](#): Athanas, 2011

[Birds of Passage, Mitu](#): Josh Beck & Kathi Borgmann, 2015

www.budgetbirders.com: blog posts from this trip along with my prior travels can be found here

GPS:

For those who don't own a GPS, buy one. The Garmin Etrex 30 is extremely easy to use and I feel is essential to any independently traveling birder. Using a GPS and a set of coordinates helps to eliminate the guess work in directions and really makes it easier for others to find the same location. In this report I try to use GPS coordinates as much as possible and once again, encourage others to do the same. I'm always amazed to pick up a "bird site guide" and find detailed (though usually confusing or inaccurate directions) when all someone needs to do is write a few quick notes and provide a list of GPS way points. It is also very easy to download free open source maps online for use in both car GPSs and handhelds (such as the Garmin Etrex30). I've used these open source maps throughout the world and have found them extremely accurate in most circumstances and they are free!

OSM Map: http://wiki.openstreetmap.org/wiki/OSM_Map_On_Garmin/Download: Download maps from around the world for Garmin

Logistics:

General Info: About a month prior to the trip, I was given the contact info for Zaiza of Etnobirding Vaupes. She originally quoted me a price of 4,000,000 pesos (\$1,400!!!) per person (all inclusive) and then after I said I only wanted a quote for transportation via tuk-tuk, access fees, and guide fees, she came back with a price of 2,100,000 (\$742!) per person. I'm not sure why she tried to charge so much as I know two years prior, a group coordinated logistics through them and the price was much more reasonable. Apparently Mitu is trying to take a page out of ProAves's playbook when it comes to charging outrageous amounts for subpar service. So don't even bother contacting Zaiza or Etnobirding Vaupes unless you enjoy paying 3x the cost. Anyways, after I told her I wasn't interested, I contacted Nacho who is referenced in a few reports. I didn't hear anything back for two weeks and was then sent a fairly well organized pdf and excel sheet discussing prices, itinerary, and additional info. It looked fairly good, so I agreed with Nacho and told him to be there to pick us up when we arrived. Below I will cover more details.

Guiding: Nacho is not a bird guide. Even though in his information he says "expert bird guiding", he is not one. Luckily I didn't really care if I had a guide, but if you aren't knowledgeable on Amazonian birds or want someone who knows locations, make sure you get a different guide. Nacho knew all the trails, but very little else. He is a very nice guy, but also a bit disorganized. In the itinerary he sent us, it said we would be going to Pueblo Nuevo twice, but when we said we wanted to go back, he said we couldn't (unless we paid a lot more money). After a long discussion and threatening to cancel the rest of the trip with him and the driver (it was half way through the trip), he agreed to a second day in the Pueblo Nuevo area. Since he was charging us \$35 to be our "bird guide" I made him carry my scope (to be honest he offered, and since he was bringing nothing else to the table, I didn't feel bad). Oddly, most of the time he lingered 50-100 meters behind us, but when we would be near a clearing, he would help us look for cotingas. The good news is that unlike other reports stating that the guide expects to be fed, Nacho brought his own food and never asked us to feed him. Cost \$35 per day, \$350 in total. Nacho can be reached at nachoperilla@gmail.com

Transportation: I thought we would be getting a tuk-tuk, but when I arrived, Nacho had coordinated for a 4x4 Toyota and driver, Wilson. I was hesitant at first, but since there were three of us and he was only charging \$250 for the 10 days, I agreed. That being said, in no way do you need a 4x4 for the entire time. If you don't want to deal with the hassle, this would be a good option, but the cheapest way would be to take tuk-tuks to all of the locations except for Pueblo Nuevo. For those trips you should be able to hire a vehicle for ~\$100 per day. As stated above, I think our \$250 was supposed to be for only one Pueblo Nuevo trip, but we thought it was for two (since that is what the itinerary said), so I doubt Nacho will ever quote \$250 including two Pueblo trips again. So doing the tuk-tuk option with only the 4x4 for 2-3 trips to Pueblo Nuevo area might be cheaper. Cost \$250 for 10 days.

Boats: Pritam's report mentions a good birding spot down river called Santa Marta (Cajure Trail in his report). We decided to visit and although it took Nacho a long time to coordinate a boat, we finally were able to do so. Personally I don't think it should have been as hard to coordinate a boat as Nacho made it out to be and you shouldn't have much of a problem coordinating one on your own. We were quoted 150,000 pesos for the day which is probably a bit inflated, but wasn't too bad of a price. Our boat driver was Rojas, Tel: 3209336222. Cost 150,000 pesos (~\$50) for day trip to Santa Marta and back.

Access: The biggest issue with Mitu is that you need permission to bird most of the sites. This is why we decided to go through Nacho, but in the end I do not think it would have been too big of a problem to coordinate things on our own. My overall feeling is that if you had money, they were more than willing to take it. Showing up and asking for someone to escort you on the trails shouldn't be hard to coordinate. Also two great birding locations (Bocatoma Trail and Puente Lata Trail) don't require any access fees (or guides), so doing these areas independently would save lots of money.

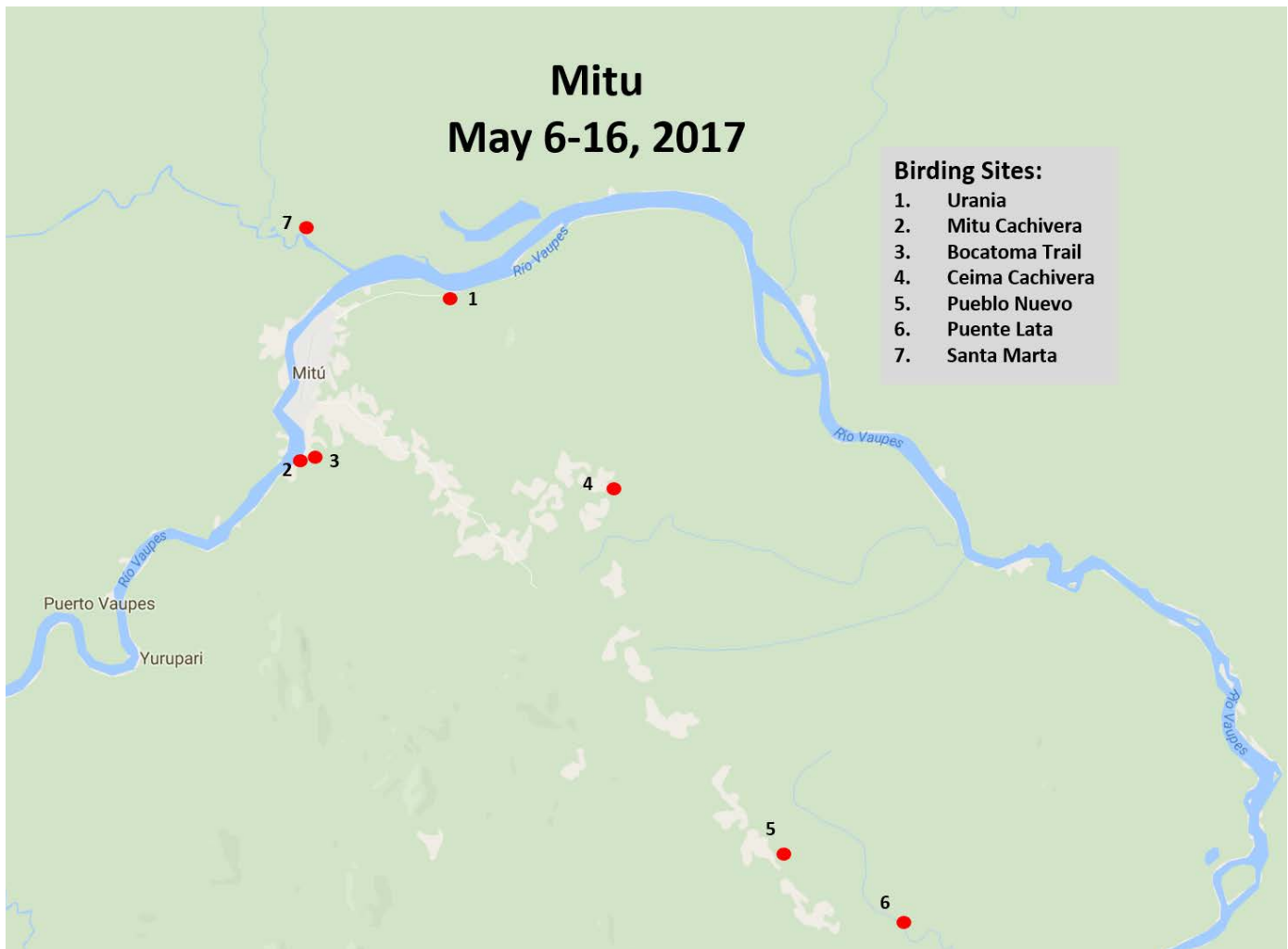
Food: Although some reports allude to Mitu not having many dining options, we found several restaurants more than adequate. There are also a few street vendors that you could eat from. Prices are slightly higher than the rest of Colombia. Most meals cost around \$20,000 pesos. There are a few grocery stores to buy food for breakfast and lunch.

ATM: Since no other reports mentions it, yes, there is a single ATM in town.

Accommodation: There are a few hotel options in town. We ended up staying at Hotel Paisas, but it was only a bit more than some of the others. \$50,000 for a single and \$80,000 for a double (apparently costs are actually \$60,000 and \$90,000, but Nacho had told us the cheaper prices so we only ended up paying that). You can make reservations by emailing hotellospaisas@gmail.com or whatsapp 3103759101

Airlines: The only commercial airline operating flights to Mitu is Satena. Although I was able to search for flights on their website, I was never able to pay. Instead, I booked my flight from BOG to MVP through kiwi.com. Both through the Satena website and Kiwi, it only showed flights on Sundays and Tuesdays, but once we arrived we figured out that there are also flights on Saturdays and Thursdays. Not sure how you'd go about booking those, but it is something to keep in mind.

Data/Wifi: At the moment there isn't any wifi in Mitu. There are a few internet cafes, but we didn't try them at all. We bought SIM cards (Claro) in Bogota, but data service in town was intermittent throughout the day and only worked well at 0400 when no one else was trying to use it.



Itinerary:

Day 1: Arrive Mitu- airport at 1330. Drop off at the hotel 1430. Birding Urania bridge area (1530-1730)

Day 2: Mitu Cachivera-(0500-1400), lunch in Mitu (1400-1500), Bocatoma Trail (1530-1730)

Day 3: Pueblo Nuevo- (depart 0400, birding 0510-1400), heavy rain caused an early departure

Day 4: Ceima Cachivera (depart 0430, birding 0515-1700)

Day 5: Bocatoma Trail (0500-1730)

Day 6: Puente Lata (depart 0400, birding 0520-1400), Nacho insisted we head back early so he could coordinate a boat

Day 7: Bocatoma Trail to Cerro Guacamaya (0400-1730)

Day 8: Santa Marta (0515-1600)

Day 9: Urania (0500-1200) & (1500-1730)

Day 10: Bocatoma Trail (0500-0900), depart 1400

Birding Sites



Urania

Access: Urania is located just north east of Mitu. We visited the bridge area on three afternoons and spent one full day at this location. If you only bird the bridge and the 200-300 meters before the bridge you do not need to pay any fees. When we did visit the actual trails beyond the community, we were charged 30,000 per person plus you need a local guide which for us was Nacho (although arranging one on arrival shouldn't be too difficult)

Birding: The most important birds in this area are actually found outside of the community. The bridge area is the most reliable place in Mitu for Black-chinned Antbird, Amazonian Tyrannulet, and Bronzy Jacamar. We also had a pair of Spotted Puffbirds just after the bridge at 1.270944, -70.201433 and a pair of Pied Puffbirds just before the large clearing when you're walking back towards town. At the second bridge, we had great looks at Blackish-Grey Antshrike (1.270706, -70.200156). This is also a very good spot to see Cherrie's Antwren (a pair was nesting just to the left of the bridge). For the morning that we birded the trails, we spent almost our entire time scanning from the lookout area at 1.270827, -70.193122. Best birds from this location were a pair of Brown-banded Puffbirds, Spangled Cotinga, Amazonian Umbrellabird, Paradise Jacamar, Many-banded Aracaris, and a few roosting Blackish Nightjars. A short walk past the lookout provided good views of a Little Tinamou as well as Western Striped Manakin, a large flock of 20 Azure-naped Jays, and Great Jacamar.

Mitu Cachivera (Sendero Guacamaya) & Bocatoma Trail

Overview: Located south west of Mitu, the Mitu Cachivera area provides the easiest access to white sands forest in the area. We ended up visiting Mitu Cachivera for a morning and the remaining time in the area along the Bocatoma Trail. Both trails pass through the same habitat types including both open dry varillal forests as well as humid chamizal and terra firme. The captain in Mitu Cachivera tried to rip us off by charging 50,000 pesos per person. We refused since the total Nacho originally said it would be was 35,000 pesos. Although many past birding groups have visited this location, if you're trying to do the trip on a budget, I would avoid going here altogether. It is not necessary. Bocatoma provides the same birds and you do not have to pay an entrance fee. I also do not believe that you even need a guide for Bocatoma so you could save even more money by doing the trail yourself.



Mitu Cachivera

Access: We paid 35,000 pesos per person to enter Mitu Cachivera, but they originally wanted 50,000 per person. We refused since Nacho had originally quoted us 35,000. You need a local guide which for us was Nacho. The entrance to the community is at 1.23196, -70.23448. From here you will cross two bridges before cutting across the community and starting down the trail at 1.22711, -70.23750.

Birding: During our single morning here, we birded from the start of the trail up to the only bridge, worked our way back and then took a side trail that was mostly flooded. Highlights included Blackish-Gray Antshrike at the second bridge just before the community, Grey-bellied Antbird (along a side trail at 1.218155, -70.234178), Spangled Cotinga, Cherrie's Antwren (nesting at 1.222818, -70.235311). Spot-backed Antwren (fairly common), Yellow-crowned Manakin (1.217797, -70.234646) and decent mixed flocks. On Day 7, we met up with this trail after taking a side trail from Bocatoma (to avoid paying an entrance fee) and continued until the top of the Cerro. We found Pavonine Quetzal (1.211243, -70.235193), a number of lekking Great-billed Hermits, Saffron-crested Tyrant-Manakin (1.208287, -70.236424) and Cliff Flycatcher at the first lookout of the Cerro. If you decide to climb the Cerro, the first overlook is far enough if you're just scanning for birds. The second portion involves a steep climb (using a rope) and the only good bird we had from the very top was a Bronzy Jacamar.

Bocatoma (Pipeline Trail)

Access: Just before Mitu Cachivera, take a left at 1.233789, -70.234315 and then another left at the T and a right at the next T. From here continue along the dirt road until it ends at 1.230447, -70.230452. This is the start of the Bocatoma Trail. This trail continues for a long ways crossing numerous streams, but only the first stream has a bridge. The others must be crossed along logs. We turned around along the trail at 1.197103, -70.227982, just after the 7th stream crossing. There is no access fee to visit this location which is great for independent birders on a budget. We also do not believe that you need a guide along this trail, but I can't entirely confirm this (worst case, just pay one of the locals to walk with you).

Birding: We spent multiple days along this trail and although it was very quiet at times (as is expected in white sands forest), there are a lot of really good birds to find. The trail passes through a mixture of dry and humid white sand forests before eventually reaching terra firme. From here you cross over the only bridge, a large clearing, and then continue along the trail crossing a number of other streams. We had the most luck birding from the beginning of the trail up to the large clearing. There are also a number of side trails that can be visited (only one shown on map above). Also, on Day 7, we started along Bocatoma, but eventually took a shortcut trail (purple on map) that connects with Sendero Guacamaya. This avoids having to pay the Mitu Cachivera entrance fee and still allows you to bird the trail up to Cerro Guacamaya. The shortcut trail starts at 1.21402, -70.232606 and connects about 200 meters before the bridge on Sendero Gacamaya. Highlights along Bocatoma trail included Grey-bellied Antbirds (along side trail at 1.222754, -70.223359 and a 1.224297, -70.226691), Saffron-crested Tyrant Manakin (along side trail at 1.220228, -70.226279), Pompadour Cotingas (five at a clearing at 1.216659, -70.230305), Scarlet-shouldered Parrotlet (flocks seen twice from the same clearing as the cotingas) Cherrie's Antwren, Spot-backed Antwren (common), Spot-backed Antbird, and Yellow-browed Antbird (both near bridge).



Pueblo Nuevo

Access: This terra firme birding location is the replacement for MCH/Santa Cruz since it is a bit closer. It took us just over an hour to reach this location from Mitu. The owner's house is located along the main road at 1.12942, -70.118095. From here you walk across the clearing at the back of the house and enter the logging road/trail. We were charged 30,000 per person and you need a local guide which for us was Nacho. This is probably the trickiest site to visit independently as I'm not sure how the owner of the house would react to you just showing up. I'm assuming if you paid an extra "guiding fee" you'd be fine though.

Birding: The road/trail at Pueblo Nuevo leads through some decent tracts of terra firme, but you also pass through a number of chagrás (clearings). After ~2.25 km the trail ends at a deep stream crossing. In the dry season you might be able to go further, but for us, this is the furthest we got. It started raining heavily around 1300, so we had a short day at this location. Highlights of the morning included a Tawney-tufted Toucanet at 1.132402, -70.10757 which responded to me trolling for the species and eventually came in for good views and a pair of Chestnut-crested Antbirds which responded well to playback at 1.132831, -70.10231. Pueblo Nuevo is also the only site where we had Yellow-throated Antwren. Other highlights included Long-winged Antwren (near end of trail at stream), Yellow-crowned Manakin (feeding chicks at the stream), Common Scale-backed Antbirds (more common here than other locations), Scarlet Macaw, Great Jacamar (1.131077, -70.110127), and Rufous-capped Anthrush.

Puente Lata/"Puente Lata Trail"

Access: Puente Lata is located 3.3 km past Pueblo Nuevo along the road to MCH at 1.122436, -70.093499. This bridge is a very reliable stakeout for Fiery Topaz. The "Puente Lata Trail" starts just before the bridge at 1.122118, -70.09421. This trail goes through good terra firme before reaching a clearing with a house at 1.114794, -70.089386. Nacho said he was friends with this family and after a short conversation, one of the guys showed us the way to the start of another trail and we followed him along the trails for a few hours. We ended up tipping the guy 30,000 pesos. I don't think there would be any issue showing up here and asking permission to bird the trails (for a small fee of course)

Birding: We arrived at the bridge at dawn and after about 40 minutes, the first topaz showed up. In total we saw two females and one male from the bridge. The white flowers (look like ginger) just past the bridge is apparently where the first record of Fiery-tailed Aowlbill for Colombia was found, but we didn't see any during our visit. Melissa and Jon also saw a single Black-collared Swallow fly upstream while waiting for the topaz.

The "Puente Lata Trail" was great birding. Along the hike in we found a large flock that contained Fulvous-throated Antwren (1.119774, -70.093658). During our time with our local trail guide, we saw White Hawk, Scale-breasted Woodpecker, and Black Bushbird. Unfortunately, we spent A LOT of precious time bushwhacking up a steep hill to a Cock-of-the-Rock breeding area (1.110418, -70.088478). We saw a few empty nests, but no COTRs. At first we didn't realize what we were doing. It would have been better to just stay on the nice trail system on the property. So if you go, make it clear you just want to stay on the nice trails (unless the COTRs are actually nesting, then it would be worthwhile to see). The Black Bushbirds were seen at the edge of the main clearing in secondary growth at 1.113144, -70.088409. On the walk back out to the main road, we ran into another large mixed flock that contained a single Curve-billed Scythebill!

Ceima Cachivera

Access: The turnoff for Ceima Cachivera is located about 6 km along the road to Santa Cruz. At 1.219564, -70.196148 take a left and continue for another 4.5 km until the community. You can drive as far as the bridge, but it is in bad shape, so from there you need to walk. We were charged 35,000 pesos per person plus you need a local guide which for us was Nacho (although I don't think arranging one on arrival would be too difficult).

Birding: We birded two different trails during our day visit. When we arrived it was raining and we headed up the trail to the rocky area where the Cock-of-the-Rocks lek. The trail starts at 1.223351, -70.156134. It was very quiet due to the rain and we didn't see a single COTR. After reaching the large rocks that you walk between, we turned around and headed back down to the main dirt road. From here we headed back towards the village and took a left onto a trail at 1.222638, -70.159572 which leads to the top of the Cerro. This hike leads through open forest and some decent patches of terra firme. We had some nice mixed flocks along this trail as well as Orinoco Piculet (1.221548, -70.157949), Western Striped Manakin, Guanian Cock-of-the Rock (single Male), and Ornate Hawk-Eagle (seen from the top of the Cerro). After returning to the bridge for lunch, we hiked the first trail again in the afternoon. This time we ran into a nice large mixed flock with the highlights being Rufous-tailed Antwren and Olive-backed Foilage-leaner.

Santa Marta (Cajure Trail)

Access: Santa Marta is located along a tributary just downriver from Mitu. Basic directions would be; get in a boat, take the first left (1.27636, -70.22358) and then it's the first community on your right (1.284781,-70.233729). We were charged 25,000 pesos per person plus a local escorted us along with Nacho. I asked the Captain at the end of our visit if more birders could come and he seemed fine with the idea, so showing up unannounced without Nacho shouldn't be a big issue. The boat Nacho arranged for us charged 150,000 pesos for the entire day. I don't think that is a bad deal, but I think you could probably get it a bit cheaper. We departed Mitu at 0515 as the police wouldn't allow the boatman to leave in the dark. It only took about 20 minutes to reach the community.

Birding: I read about this site in Pritam's trip report. It seemed like a pretty interesting area to check out and I'm very glad we visited. The trail starts at the start of the clearing (1.28635, -70.23291) and after about 800 meters crosses a large dilapidated bridge (1.29171, -70.230778). On our walk in we had Black-headed Antbird and Chestnut-capped Puffbird from the bridge. After the bridge we had to cross a small flooded section in a canoe and then we passed through another community before the trail heads into good white sands forest. Unfortunately we only walked another 1-2 kilometers because there were more flooded sections of trail. In the dry season it shouldn't be a problem, but even in the wet season this area is worth a visit. In the flood forest we found a few Silvered Antbirds and in the white sands we had Gray-bellied Antbird (1.304163, -70.22339), Fuscous Flycatcher and Black Manakin (both at 1.302683, -70.224428), and a pair of Golden-crowned Spadebills along a short side trail at 1.306118, -70.221863. In the cleared area near the community we had numerous Amazonian Umbrellabirds as well as Orinoco Piculet and our only Red Fan Parrots of the trip. During the walk back out we stopped again along the dilapidated bridge at the same spot that we had Chestnut-capped Puffbird in the morning and found both Brown-banded Puffbird and Pompadour Continga! Pritam also reported that they had Bar-bellied Woodcreeper here, but unfortunately lots of trolling produced no response.

Budget Breakdown (for 2 people):

- Guiding, Transportation, and Boat Trip were shared among 3 people, costs below are for two people

Mitu (10 days):

"Guiding": \$233
Transportation: \$166
Lodging: \$245
Entrance Fees: \$112
Boat: \$34
Food: \$208
Total: \$998

- Internal Airfare BOG-MVP round trip for two people: \$477.79
- International Airfare PIT-BOG round trip for two people: \$1124.32

