

By botanist and fruit fanatic Rolf Blancke

✘ *As part of his project to publish the most comprehensive book ever produced for general readers on the world's tropical fruits, botanist Rolf Blancke is writing a five-part series for www.freshfruitportal.com on his exotic fruit experiences.*

Research for my book "Tropical Fruits of the World", published by Zona Tropical Publications, has led me to different parts of tropical Asia, Africa and America. For some photos of rare tropical fruits I couldn't find anywhere else, I had planned a visit to Jim West who is a long-time and very committed collector of tropical fruit trees. He and his wife live on their farm Finca Guaycuyacu deep in the rainforest of western Ecuador.

After a short stay in the colonial center of Quito, which is a beautifully restored world heritage site with many old churches and buildings dating back to the 16th century, my wife Juana and I met Jim at a crowded bus station. After a short wait and an interesting conversation about tropical fruit trees we started our trip towards northwestern Ecuador.

Few people are familiar with the rainforests of western Ecuador, since most tourists visit the more famous Amazon lowlands. The region of western Colombia (Choco) and western Ecuador was once covered with thick rainforest characterized by very high rainfalls of more than 3,000mm (118") a year, and a high level of endemism. This is because the Andes mountain range forms a barrier that cuts this region from the Amazon basin.

There is very little rainforest left in the western lowlands but there are some extensive rainforests left in the western foothills of the Andes. Sadly that is also an area where several hydroelectric projects are planned, which will threaten the remaining forests.

Our bus ride in a typical and colorful Ecuadorian bus - transporting everything from people and their belongings to chickens in large baskets and even pigs tied to the roof - led from Quito across cold, dry and windswept mountains towards Cielo Verde on the western slopes of the Andes. After leaving Quito at 2,500m(8,202ft) in altitude and crossing a high pass at about 4,000m (13,123ft), we slowly started our descent into the lowlands, always having to trust the brakes of the old school bus.

It is very impressive to watch how the vegetation gradually changes from high Andean grassland to dense, wet montane forests with tree ferns, *Gunnera* plants and trees loaded with epiphytes like bromeliads and orchids. Along the road there were small dairy farms and scattered agricultural fields.

After the five-hour bus journey and a 30-minute walk we arrived at Jim's 35ha farm consisting mainly of pristine premontane rainforest along the Guaycuyacu river and a very impressive collection of more than 600 species of tropical fruit trees.

Jim and his wife live in a rustic, two-story wooden house and we stayed in a small, equally rustic guest house made from a bamboo-like grass. The open structure, which is nestled into the dense forest, serves as a home and a business for Jim's seed sales. In every corner of the building there are bundles of colorful fruits or bags of seeds ready for mailing. The couple has been living in this very remote location in the middle of the rainforest for over 25 years. Back when they started they had to walk six hours through very dense vegetation to reach a dirt road with a bus service and there was no electricity. For food they mainly had to grow it themselves. To send a letter they had to travel all the way to Quito.

I had about a list of 35, mostly rare, plant species I hoped to find with ripe fruits on them, so I could take photos and finally complete my research after three long years. I wasn't to be disappointed.

Right next to Jim's nursery was a Barbados Gooseberry tree (*Pereskia aculeata*) loaded with fruits, which belong to the cactus family but actually carries leaves. During a tour of the farm Jim showed me many very interesting fruit trees like Red Salak (*Salacca affinis*), Buah Rambai (*Baccaurea dulcis*) from tropical Southeast Asia, Safou (*Dacryodes edulis*) from West Africa and Borojó (*Borojoa patinoi*), a small tree native to Colombia, which is well known for its extremely high content of phosphorous.

The vast collection also contains many rare and very rare plants from the Ecuadorian rainforests like *Matisia soestengii*, a cauliflorous tree with brown, velvety fruits with a bright orange-yellow flesh. For some of the species not even Jim knew the name.

For the next two days I was busy taking hundreds of pictures, often fighting my way through overgrown parts of the farm and asking Jim over and over again for names of these rare species. I had hit a jackpot of rare tropical fruit trees.

The first evening after a delicious vegetarian dinner and a coffee made from *Coffea arabica* plants grown on the farm, Jim and his wife told me about the drastic changes that are about to happen to this beautiful river valley still mostly covered by primary rainforest.

A huge hydroelectric dam called Manduriacu is under construction that will flood the whole valley with its vegetation and animals. The shore of the artificial lake will then be only 10m (10.93yd) away from Jim's house. By law they will have to reconstruct the house further

away from the shore. Some of the precious tree collection will also be destroyed by the rising water level. Now Jim has to collect seeds from his own trees and replant them further upland. The effects of the higher level of ground water on the rest of the collection is unknown.

The next day I finished my work and we spent the rest of the day with a refreshing bath in the nearby river.

Writing a book about tropical fruits is not an easy task, especially not when including rare species. After finally locating a special tree species one way too often finds the tree flowering or with the last fruit just fallen off. At Jim's farm I did find some very interesting and rare fruit trees like the rare Mountain Cacao (*Theobroma gileri*) and Pitón (*Grias peruviana*), which belongs to the Brazil Nut family. Some of them were in full fruit and some sadly didn't have any fruits, which was somewhat disappointing after the long voyage to get here.

After two days of enjoying the beauty of the western Ecuadorian rainforest, we headed back to Quito and equally enjoyed the luxury of a colonial-style hotel in the heart of Quito for a couple more days.

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