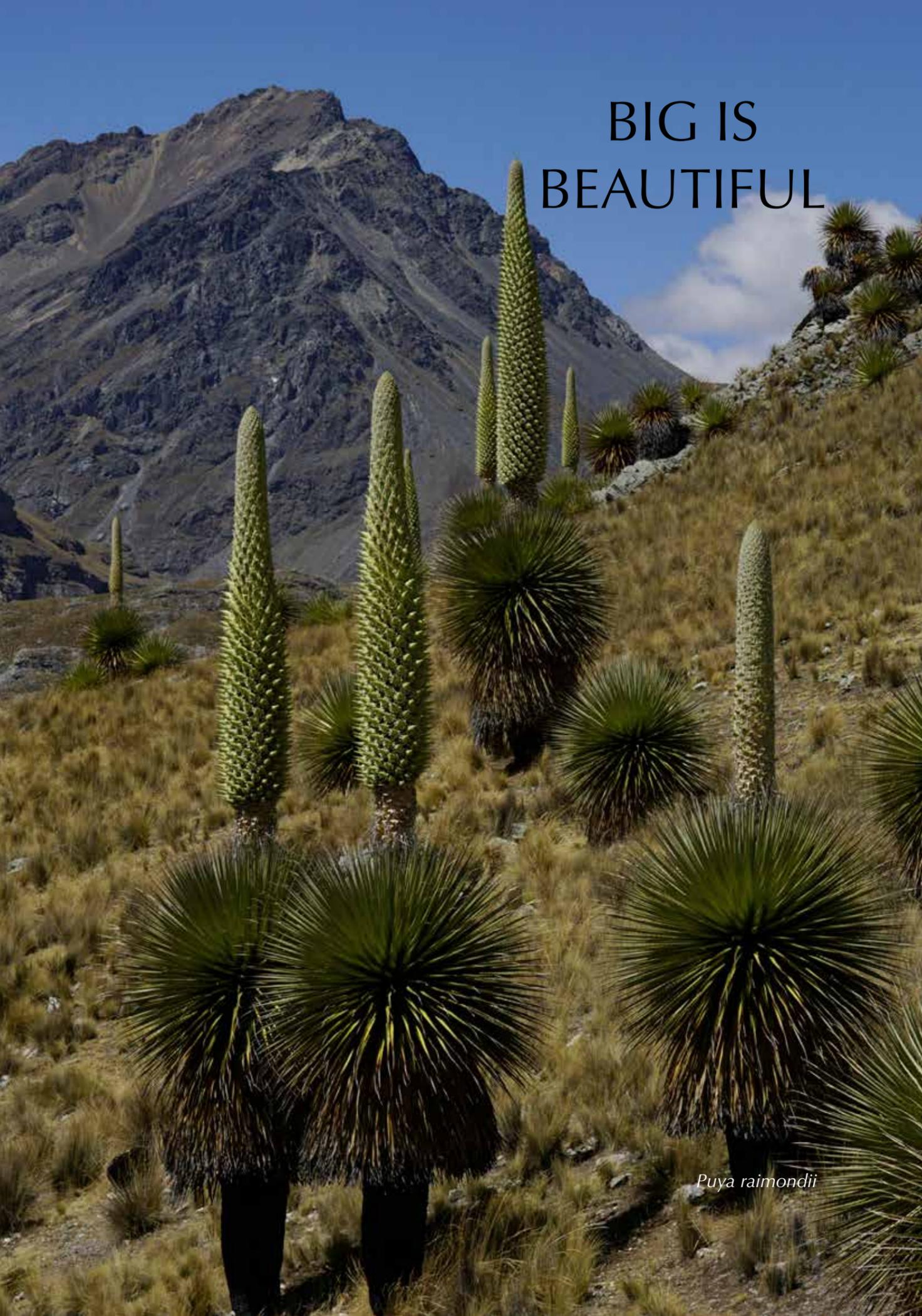


BIG IS BEAUTIFUL



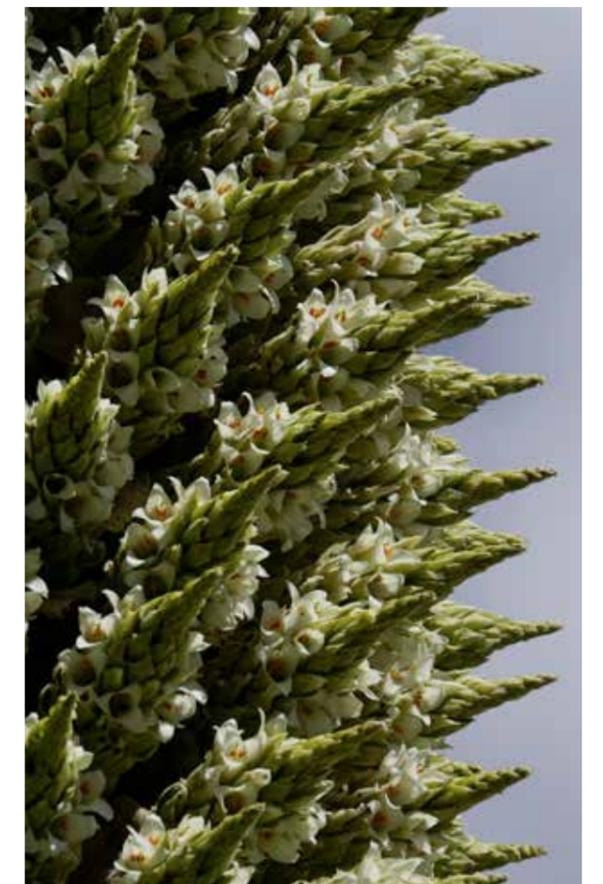
Puya raimondii



Cordillera Blanca

For the next two posts I promise to bring you something completely different. Alpine flora is typically thought of as compact and low-growing. This is certainly true much of the time, but the equatorial highlands truly buck this trend and offer up some of the most extreme flora to be seen anywhere in the world. Some of it requires good timing to see well, some of it requires some serious legwork to reach.

The Cordillera Blanca of Peru is high and wild, with 7000-metre plus peaks encrusted with glaciers. Paramo areas (paramo is defined here as the area above the treeline and below the snowline) at around 4000-metres in a few scattered areas harbour populations of a most striking and unique alpine plant - *Puya raimondii*. It is by far the world's largest bromeliad, the huge 'rosettes' of leaves are five metres across. After many years of gaining strength this amazing plant sends up a colossal flower spike of up to 15 metres tall comprising upwards of 4000 white flowers to tempt the various high altitude hummingbirds into pollinating them. Afterwards, the whole plant withers, collapses and dies. I was incredibly fortunate to be in Peru at the right time two years ago (August) and got wind of a particularly good flowering season. I was not disappointed, chewing on coca-leaf sweets to stave off the altitude I spent



Puya raimondii inflorescence



Puya raimondii



Espletia pycnophylla



Cyrtochilum annulare



Basak in Colombia



Espletia pycnophylla

a memorable few hours up here with these mega-plants. Sadly, this is also an endangered plant, a combination of changing climates and destruction by local farmers who dislike the fierce leaves that catch on the fleece of their sheep.

Other paramo plants are under no such threat and still occur in huge numbers in highland areas. *Espletia* is a genus in the daisy family, which contains a number of remarkable plants that form tall trunks, swathed in old leaves and topped by velvety leaves. The large flowers are typical yellow daisies and are attended by hummingbirds and bees. Apparently, the soft textured leaves are utilised as toilet paper by local shepherds! We've seen a couple of contrasting areas with these plants, one in Colombia involved a horse-trek and overnight in a simple lodge before walking to the heights. We saw some amazing orchids and though quite different at first glance they are in the same genus. *Cyrtochilum ramosissimum* was just below the *Espletia pycnophylla*, where we also saw the very rare Dusky Starfrontlet - a hummingbird and the vivid *Bomarea linifolia*. *Bomarea* are related to *Alstroemeria* and they are very widespread in the neotropics, often much showier than *B. linifolia* (wait for my later post from Costa Rica). Lower down among the cloud forest was the huge *Cyrtochilum annulare*, shown best next to my glamorous young model (Basak in 2010).



Cyrtochilum ramosissimum



Bomarea linifolia



Espletia timotensis below Pan de Azucar



I've seen grassland paramo in Ecuador too but, my introduction to paramo habitat was in Venezuela, way back in 2005, before the political situation imploded. I spent three days hiking through the Sierra Nevada, climbing up to 4000 metres and into a wonderland of *Espletia timotensis*. It was all well and good during the day, the crystal clear light and fabulous Andean scenery. However, it was February and that meant clear skies at night and long, long nights. Benign though it was during the day, the interminable nights had to be endured (in an inadequate sleeping bag) as the temperature dropped from plus 20 to minus 5 overnight freezing all surface water including small waterfalls solid. Dawn was a great relief and the fresh light quickly illuminated the jaw-dropping landscapes.

This all reinforces the toughness of these remarkable plants and hints at why they are so challenging to cultivate. Subjected to intense near-equatorial sun during the day, they then endure subzero temperatures at night. No doubt this extreme world remains more or less intact despite the upheavals in the country - unless of course there has been a serious run on toilet paper - in which the hills will have been stripped bare!

