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Travelers test new Costa Rican bird route

by [Carol Sottili/Washington Post](#)
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Kent

Gilbert/Associated Press Endangered great green macaws are seen in a captive breeding center in Rio Segundo de Alajuela, near San Jose, Costa Rica. The breeding center (www.hatchedtoflyfree.org) is not far from the country's new Costa Rican Bird Route, which links 13 bird-watching sites, including the last remaining habitat of the great green macaw.

I've just plopped my luggage down at the lodge in the Costa Rican rain forest when the first yell of "macaws" goes out. Like a bird-watching rube, I watch as others scurry from their rooms, binoculars at the ready. By the time I stir, the endangered great green macaws have disappeared behind the towering tree line.

The next day, the macaw assembly is repeated as we sit down for an open-air dinner. "Macaws, macaws," yells our guide, Yehudi Hernandez, as he races to a clearing. No longer slow, I nearly trip over a chair in my zeal to get a glimpse. But again, no dice.

By the fourth day, when our two other guides, Holly Robertson, 26, and Raquel Gomez, 30, jump up from a sound sleep to the now unmistakable calls of the raucous birds, I come close to sprinting outside in my underwear, toothbrush in hand. Cooler heads prevail, and my quarry again escapes. Enough already. I am tired of the macaw drill. If those feathered teases ever deign to show their beaks again, I vow success. But with fewer than 35 breeding pairs left in the entire country, victory is not assured.

Our group of 11, from Wisconsin, Minnesota, Oregon and Virginia, hadn't traveled to the central lowlands of northeast Costa Rica just to see the macaws. Willing lab rats, we'd signed up with the nonprofit Rainforest Biodiversity Group to be among the first tourists to explore the newly created Costa Rican Bird Route, set to open officially in February.



Dave Edwards Photography
The sun peeks through the dense rain forest of Bosque Tropical del Toro, a private refuge in northern Costa Rica and one of 12 sites on the new Costa Rican Bird Route.

Created partially with funding from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the route, which covers a dozen sites and has 520 bird species, is modeled on similar trails in the United States that promote conservation through tourism.

We would test an ambitious, weeklong itinerary developed by Robertson, president of the Rainforest Biodiversity Group, and Gomez, the group's Costa Rican coordinator, that would include numerous jungle hikes, hours of travel via small bus on rutted dirt roads and visits with local families. We'd traverse the bird route's 10,500-plus acres in search of such exotic flora and fauna as walking palms, bromeliads, motmots, trogons, toucans, poison dart frogs, sloths and howler monkeys. Some also hoped that our journey might serve a larger purpose: namely, fortifying the gamble taken by the route's private landowners to host tourists instead of hacking down the rain forest for cattle farms or pineapple plantations.

We ease into the trip with an overnight stay at Hotel Bougainvillea, a property just outside the capital city of San Jose that combines conveniences, such as free Internet and a fully stocked bar, with 10 acres of gardens that host hordes of birds, bugs and frogs.

Arriving in late afternoon, I grab my binoculars and head outside, anticipating adding a couple of new names to my not-so-impressive life list of 340 bird species that I've seen over the years. Within moments, I spot an unfamiliar sparrow, a vaguely robinlike bird and a loud, yellow-bellied bird with a black mask. Trouble is, I apparently don't know a motmot from a potoo. Just as I am about to exchange my field glasses for a field guide, I knock into Bob Hunter, one of our group's members, whom I quickly peg as an expert birder. "Rufous-collared sparrow, clay-colored robin, great kiskadee," he rattles off, as I point to my mystery birds. I'll stick close to Bob for the trip's duration. During the night, I keep waking to a high-pitched, repeating whistle. Frog? Human? Bird? At 6 the next morning, we gather with Hernandez, our 29-year-old local birding expert. I get my answer as the mystery whistler (a ferruginous pygmy-owl) lands his 6-inch body in a nearby tree.

We get on the bus, heading over the mountains toward our first stop along the birding route, El Gavilan Lodge. But suddenly Hernandez yells, our driver yanks the bus to the side of the road and we spill out, a routine that we will soon have down pat. With an uncanny ability to spot animals from long distances and in impossible hiding places, Hernandez has found a sloth lounging in a tree. We get clear views of the male brown-throated three-toed sloth, algae on its fur giving it a decidedly green tinge, as Hernandez explains that they leave the trees for the forest floor only once a week to defecate and that several species of moths live within the animal's fur. Who knew?

At Gavilan, we are greeted by a welcoming staff and dozens of colorful tanagers and orioles eating fruit from a wooden platform. Within moments, our first chance of seeing the great green macaws is over, but a short time later we are rewarded when Hernandez points to the sky, saying simply,

"Migration." Tens of thousands of turkey vultures, Swainson's hawks and broadwing hawks pass high overhead in a seemingly unending river. My neck hurts as I strain to keep track of the massive kettle. But Hernandez is already moving us along to hike the adjacent trails, where we are quickly mesmerized by another stream of creatures: leaf-cutting ants that march in a steady line balancing jagged bits of leaves 20 times their weight.

Along the road outside Gavilan, small children play around us, waving and posing happily for pictures. We walk until we come to the start of a banana plantation. Gomez explains the environmental downsides of mono-crop cultivation, including deforestation and pesticide runoff. A crop duster passes low overhead, and Hernandez hustles us back up the road away from the spray. The children continue to play, oblivious to the plane's purpose.

We're off to La Selva Biological Station, run by the Organization for Tropical Studies, a consortium of 63 universities and research institutions from the United States, Latin America and Australia. The site welcomes tourists, but its main purpose is to support scientific research projects that involve everything from carbon cycling to arthropods.

Its 3,988 acres of tropical forests, about 60 percent of it old growth, receive more than 13 feet of rainfall annually. "Our seasons are rainy and rainier," jokes our local guide, Rodolfo Alvarado. He points out a black-faced grosbeak, saying, "You've just seen the most beautiful bird in Costa Rica." With a wink, he adds, "You'll see lots of them today."

The place is sick with birds: Within minutes I see dozens of new species, including a violaceous trogon, green honeycreeper, pied puffbird and a white-collared manakin. Our money bird for the day is a great potoo, disguised to blend almost perfectly with the tree bark. We spot pulsating tree frog eggs, which will hatch prematurely to escape if attacked by a snake, and a giant, blue morpho butterfly, which turns a dull brown as it folds its wings to rest.



Dave Edwards PhotographyBosque Tropical del Toro, a

500-acre site on the Costa Rican Bird Route, is accessible by boat. There's no electricity -- only fantastic wildlife views.

Our fourth day promises challenges. We jump onto a boat to travel to Bosque Tropical del Toro, a 500-acre site with no electricity where we will stay that night. Most of the members of our group are hardy backpackers used to roughing it. For me it will be a stretch.

It's a three-hour journey from the town of Puerto Viejo along the clear Sarapiquí River and the brown, sulfur-rich Sucio River. We get our first look at a family of howler monkeys, the alpha male with an insolent stare hanging from a branch on one long arm. Dozens of new birds, including an Amazon kingfisher and a bare-throated tiger-heron, and some I know well from home, including great blue herons and northern waterthrushes, line the shores.

As we pass a banana plantation built right to the shoreline, a frustrated Robertson says, "They're supposed to be 50 meters from shore." Erosion from banana plantations has many adverse effects; along the coast, for example, the resulting silt blocks sunlight, damaging coral reefs in Costa Rica's Cahuita National Park. I may never enjoy eating bananas again.

Suddenly, an older man in a hand-carved canoe appears and gestures for our boat to follow him down a small tributary. We spook a snowy egret, which swoops across the narrow and dark river, and the air is suddenly cooler, smelling of damp earth. We exit the boat onto a small banana field and are led to a conical roadside hut made from cane grass, where we are greeted with a delicious meal of rice and beans, fruit, meat, fried plantains and tortillas. Our overnight host, Guido Quesada, arrives, acknowledging that he is slightly nervous at the thought of sleeping 13 on his land.

"Tourism here is not there yet," he says. "It's not for everybody." He laughs, adding, "It's very, very exclusive."

We need to cross the river to get to our lodging, and we all opt for transport via a zip-wire basket rather than by boat. By threes, we make the exhilarating ride, then hike to the Crayola-colored huts. My only cranky moment of the trip comes as I search my bag for a head lamp I've left behind, sweating profusely as mosquitoes buzz my ears. But soon, cold beers arrive and Quesada pulls out

a guitar and starts singing traditional Costa Rican love songs. We eat barbecued beef by candlelight, telling stories of our lives.

Later, I climb the ladder to my sleeping loft, which is usually inhabited by an 18-year-old worker named May. I jump under my mosquito netting as the howler monkeys crank up for the night, and am oddly comforted by May's open, well-worn Bible.

The next morning, it's a 4-mile, 45-minute ride, with a couple of birding detours, along the rutted road to the 800-acre Pinca Paniagua, another remote site on the bird route. The working cattle farm is situated amid undisturbed forests, evidenced by the barks of howler monkeys vying with bawling cows. Owner Oscar Paniagua, whose father settled the property 50 years ago, takes us on a long, hot hike across his red-clay land. Like other landowners who have joined the bird route, he has ambitious plans that involve construction of an eco-lodge that would dish up food produced on his farm. After heartfelt goodbyes and good lucks, we are on the road again, headed to Selva Verde Lodge.

By now, our bus smells ripe with sweat and mud- and manure-encrusted boots. Our arrival at the 500-acre resort, with its upscale bungalow accommodations and riverside restaurant, is an almost jarring return to civilization. But as I walk through the grounds, whiptail lizards and geckos scamper at my feet and a family of howler monkeys moves overhead.

On the flight home, I am mulling the 191 species of birds, the red-and-blue poison dart frogs, the peccary, the family of coatis and the myriad other strange creatures I encountered. By afternoon, I am home, walking my dog and searching for the familiar bald eagles that frequent my neighborhood, thinking of how they returned from the brink of extinction to become almost commonplace. If people such as Hernandez, Rothman, Gomez, Robertson, Paniagua and Quesada have anything to say about it, perhaps the great green macaw will enjoy the same fate.

DETAILS

Costa Rican Bird Route

Getting around: It is possible, albeit difficult, to do the bird route without joining a tour. A four-wheel-drive car is essential; a weeklong Toyota RAV4 rental through Thrifty, for example, will run about \$320. A private guide with extensive knowledge of the bird route will make the trip far more enjoyable but will cost upward of \$200 a day. For a list of professional guides or a map of the route (\$12.95, including shipping), go to www.costaricanbirdroute.com.

Tours: A group tour is the easiest way to go. For serious birders, the Costa Rican Bird Route Challenge, Saturday, Feb. 21 to Friday, Feb. 27, is the route's official opening event. Teams of bird-watchers will vie to observe the most species of birds. Cost is \$1,100 per person double, which covers six nights' lodging, all meals, two guides per team and internal transportation; airfare is not included. Each team is also required to raise \$500 in donations.

Raquel Gomez, Costa Rican coordinator for the bird route, can also arrange more-generalized tours. Our trip, for example, cost \$1,145 per person double plus about \$250 tips and included lodging, meals, whitewater rafting, ground transportation, guides and a \$200 donation to the Rainforest Biodiversity Group.

Information: www.costaricanbirdroute.com.

Where to stay: Doing it on your own? Hotel Bougainvillea (www.hb.co.cr) in Santo Domingo de Heredia, about a half-hour drive from San Jose, is a lovely place to start and finish: Rates are about \$103 a night plus 16 percent tax. El Gavilan Lodge (www.gavilanlodge.com), about 90 minutes from San Jose, has numerous hiking trails leading to the Sarapiquí River; cost per night is \$59 per person including meals. Selva Verde Lodge & Rainforest Reserve (www.selvaverde.com), a 500-acre resort in Chilamate, can arrange activities from birding to rafting: Price is \$95 per couple per night, including breakfast. Albergue el Socorro (www.albergueelsocorro.com) is a delightful, out-of-the-way, family-owned ranch near the village of San Miguel; rates start at \$50 per person per day including all meals. Four other sites on the bird route also offer lodging.

When to go: The dry season is December-April, although it can rain at any time. During rainy season, it's not uncommon to have dry mornings, followed by rain in the afternoon and overnight.