



Back to nature in Costa Rica

Howler monkeys and peccaries await at environmentally friendly resorts

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You smell them before you see them, or at least our guide did. "Oh, wow," exclaimed Erick, a young Costa Rican, motioning us to be quiet. As we crouched in a thicket, deep within a rainforest, he pointed toward the riverbed. "Peccaries."

We watched in amazement as eight of the wild boar-like creatures clattered noisily across the rocks of a dry riverbed. The wiliest one knew we were there and came to investigate.

It was only then that Erick told us these animals will eat anything, including humans.

"Do we run or make lots of noise," I whispered, not taking my eyes off the beast. "No, climb a tree," he replied.

"But you said earlier not to touch the trees because there could be snakes in them," I retorted.

"Save your life first, then worry about the snakes."

With that, Erick rose, laughing, and the peccary darted for the undergrowth. We learned that in this area there are two species -- the friendlier collared peccaries that we had just met, and white-lipped peccaries that are much more aggressive.

As we continued our hike to a picturesque waterfall, we were awed by the beauty of the rainforest. Leaves were as big as elephant ears and trees towered 60 metres. Moss and fern grew thick underfoot, adding their hue to the lush green canvas, while brilliant jewel-coloured dragonflies, multicoloured butterflies and a dazzling array of flowers added splashes of vibrancy.

It is horrifying to think that only one-quarter of Costa Rica's original forest cover is still standing, and that, despite the steps the country has taken to conserve nature, about 81 square kilometres are deforested annually.

Our trip took us to two resorts trying to make a difference.

The first was Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge in the Osa Peninsula, an environmentally sensitive resort set on a private preserve in one of the most remote areas of Costa Rica. To get there you must fly from San Jose to Puerto Jimenez, landing at a small, single-runway airport, before boarding a boat for a trip across the Golfo Dulce (sweet gulf).

The resort was built by Michael and Donna Butler, former New Yorkers, who wanted to combine conservation with ecotourism, nature, adventure and sports.

"I backpacked a lot around Central America after college and I was amazed by all the activities in this area and yet it was so primitive," Michael said. "It was like escaping to the middle of nowhere."

The couple's vision included a tree house-style lodge, the use of alternative energy, open-air cabins with private outdoor showers, a limited number of guests (22 is the maximum) and the promotion of sustainability and ecotourism, whereby they conserve the environment and improve the well-being of the local people.

Lodge meals focus on national and regional cuisine, and often feature fish caught that morning by guests.

The Butlers hope that guests will apply some of Playa Nicuesa's conservation methods upon returning home, and strive to educate everyone about the rainforest, as its destruction will result in the extinction of thousands of species.

Costa Rica, a country roughly the size of Nova Scotia, has 5 per cent of the world's flora and fauna, so it has a lot to lose. It is home to more than 9,000 species of plants, 200 mammals (half of which are bats), 160 amphibians, 220 reptiles, 850 birds and numerous insects.

It is a land where you are woken by the loud roars of howler monkeys, surprised by a capuchin peeking in your room and amazed by toucans and scarlet macaws flying free.

Iguanas more than a metre long crash among the treetops, armadillos cross your path and, if you are really lucky, you could spy a puma or jaguar. Or if unlucky, a boa constrictor or viper.

The second resort we visited is a pioneer of the ecotourism movement in Costa Rica. Giovanna Holbrook, matriarch of the family that owns tour operator Holbrook Travel, was visiting the Sarapiquí region in 1984 when she learned of plans to destroy primary rainforest. She impulsively purchased the property to save the forest, and shortly after built Selva Verde Lodge and Rainforest Reserve, which in addition to accommodations, features a nature reserve with hiking trails, a butterfly garden and an education and conservation resource centre for area residents, travellers and volunteers.

Gabriel Gonzalez, the manager, said the resort is part of the Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST) program, which encourages companies to use recycled products, properly dispose and treat waste, install water- and energy-saving devices, conserve and expand Costa Rican forests and implement better information management systems.

Christina Jonas is a Hamilton-based freelance writer whose trip was subsidized by Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge and Selva Verde Lodge.

If You Go

Costa Rica has two seasons -- rainy and dry. During the rainy season, which runs from May until mid-November, it might rain just in the evening or it could rain for an entire week. The country averages 2,000 to 4,000 millimetres (2 to 4 metres) of rainfall per year, depending on the location, meaning even in the dry season it rains almost daily. The average temperature is 29 C.

Rooms at Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge range from \$180 to \$230, per person per night during the dry season, and \$150 to \$205 during the rainy season. Children six to 12 are \$100 per night. Prices include boat pick up and drop off, three meals per day and unlimited self-guided hikes on the preserve and use of kayaks, windsurfers, snorkelling and fishing equipment. Guided tours and adventure activities, such as yoga, a wildlife refuge tour or horseback riding, are available for an additional fee.

A two-night minimum stay is required (four nights during holidays).

www.nicuesalodge.com

At Selva Verde Lodge and Rainforest Reserve, rooms cost \$80 to \$155 per night, depending on how many people are staying in the room, and include breakfast. In the dry season, rooms cost \$95 to \$210. A birdwatching walk is complimentary, as are self-guiding hikes, and the front desk can help you make reservations for area activities, including a wildlife boat ride, zip line canopy tour or whitewater rafting.

Selva Verde has interconnecting covered walkways that keep guests dry as they travel around the complex. They also have a pool.

www.selvaverde.com