

AWARENESS

SO. CALIFORNIA'S PREMIER BI-MONTHLY HOLISTIC MAGAZINE

Eco-Travel in Costa Rica ***Article and Photos by Ann Nelson***

My friend, Sharon and I arrived on the tarmac in San Jose, Costa Rica on a balmy fall day late in the afternoon. We didn't quite know what to expect, but we soon learned that we were in for the treat of a lifetime!

Costa Rica, now a well-known eco-destination, was most recently famous for its tropical exports such as sugarcane, coffee, bananas and pineapples. This country covers only 0.01 per cent of the planet's surface, and holds approximately 6 percent of the world's biodiversity!

There are more than 850 species of birds, 200 different mammals and 250 types of reptiles that live here. Twenty-five national parks and 58 wildlife refuges are protected by law. In addition to cherishing their environment, the people of Costa Rica maintain a peaceful and democratic way of life and have not had a standing army since 1949.

After a scenic two-hour drive from the airport, we arrived at Selva Verde Lodge, located in the lowlands of northeastern Costa Rica in the 500-acre Sarapiquí Rainforest Preserve. The Selva Verde Lodge, known as a pioneer of eco-travel, would be our home for the next five days. Our room, located in the river lodge and tucked away in the rainforest, was simple and unpretentious.

We spent lots of time in the hammock right outside our door, simply observing nature. From our vantage point, we could see tiny little frogs, dozens of birds and insects. We needed to be quiet and still in order to fit in. We wanted to blend in with our natural surroundings, and we did. The sound of silence was intoxicating.

The owner, Mrs. Holbrook, an American citizen, bought this land after she became acutely aware that conservation was her true calling. Before

purchasing the land (and saving it from destruction), she owned a travel agency specializing in European travel.

She soon grew tired of constant demands for more "shopping time" from her clients. She decided to quit the European trips altogether in order to focus on nature, education and saving the rainforests. The development of the Selva Verde Lodge created a haven for nature enthusiasts, hikers and birders.

The non-profit Sarapiquí Conservation Learning Center, located adjacent to the lodge was created and is funded by the Holbrook family. The center offers educational programs geared toward community development and environmental conservation.

Visitors are welcome to drop in and shop at the local artisans' gallery and are welcome to stay and observe programs offered to the local population. Some of the educational programs include Forming Future Environmental Leaders and Planning for Sustainable Local Development.

Getting to remote places is part of the fun, and an integral part of traveling in Costa Rica. We needed to take a small plane and a speedboat to Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge, our final destination. We caught a Nature Air flight from the domestic airport in San Jose, and flew to the little fishing village of Puerto Jimenez in the Osa Peninsula in southwest Costa Rica. Two polite and handsome men met us at the airport and drove us to the dock where we boarded a little boat and headed for the lodge.

When Sharon and I jumped off the boat, a colorfully-dressed young girl holding a tray of tall pina colodas greeted us. Walking through the rainforest to the main lodge with fresh drinks in hand was a treat in itself. A 165-acre private Natural Forest Reserve and the Pacific Ocean surround the lodge on three sides. The lodge is built out of recycled materials and all the electricity is provided by solar energy.

Playa Nicuesa is small and intimate with only five private bungalows and one small lodge house. Each bungalow is privately nestled in the rainforest with wrap-around louvered windows and doors that open completely to the jungle on three sides. The rooms offer the perfect balance between nature and luxury, and feature private terraces, open-air garden showers, and canopied beds.

Fodor's rates Playa Nicuesa as "one of the best ecolodges in Costa Rica."

In all my years of practicing yoga, I have never experienced the magical combination of incorporating yoga poses with the sound of pounding surf, the smell of the rainforest, and the glistening sight of the setting sun in the background. The instructor, Jean Marie, was top-notch. Classes are offered at sunrise and sunset each day.

Nighttime at Playa Nicuesa will always hold precious and magical memories for me. The candle-lit walkway guided us each evening from our bungalow to the main lodge. Enjoying a drink and appetizer in the treetop terrace bar is the perfect way to top off the day. Gourmet Latin-inspired dinners are served with an emphasis on local cuisine, fresh fish, tropical fruits and vegetables.

Both resorts offer miles of trails and guided trips through the rainforest. There is no better way to experience and understand the basic importance of a rainforest than to ask a competent guide to accompany you on these walks.

The guides explain the history of the area, discuss the delicate eco-system, and can spot the smallest creatures even a mile away. After this experience, I truly understand the importance of saving the rainforest in a way I didn't understand before. Hundreds of species depend on one tree for their survival.

Almost anywhere you go in Costa Rica, adventure and nature activities are at your fingertips. My personal favorite moment happened as I was zip lining over the Sarapiquí River and waving to the kayakers below. There is no better feeling than sailing through the treetops and over the rivers and trails far below.

Other activities that you may want to consider are horseback riding, rainforest aerial trams, white-water rafting, kayaking, swimming, snorkeling, fishing and nocturnal adventure walks. A detailed list of activities available through each lodge is posted on their websites.

Many of the most beautiful rivers in the tropics cut through pockets of unexplored wilderness. Sharon and I spent one afternoon quietly kayaking through the Mangrove Swamps, spotting snakes and many types of birds.

It's easy to pack your schedule because there is so much to see and do in Costa Rica. On the other hand it is important to be still and let nature come to you. My friend, Sharon, a cancer survivor, learned this firsthand when she was lounging in the hammock after lunch one afternoon and a white-faced monkey sat next to her on a tree branch happily entertaining himself. She just kept still and observed the simplicity of it all. What a great way to spend a few hours!!

Before leaving Costa Rica, we wanted to explore San Juan. We discovered the perfect home base close to the city and the airport. The Buena Vista Hotel is perched on top of a hill, just behind a huge coffee plantation. The views are great and the rates are reasonable.

The jungles, creatures and people of Costa Rica left an imprint on my heart and soul. In a world that seems to be especially troubled now, visiting Costa Rica is just like taking in a deep breath of fresh air!

IMPORTANT CONTACT INFORMATION:

Selva Verde Lodge and Rainforest Reserve

(800) 451-7111, or
www.selvaverde.com

Room and breakfast rates begin at \$80.00 a night. Lunch and dinner rates are \$12.00 each.

Playa Nicuesa RainforestLodge

(866) 504-8116, or www.nicuesalodge.com

Rates begin at \$180.00 a night, include 3 meals daily, free use of kayaks, windsurfers and snorkeling equipment.

Buena Vista

(800) 506-2304, or www.hotelbuenavistacr.com.

Rates begin at \$100.00 a night.

Nature Air

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Ann Nelson is a freelance writer, presently living in San Diego, California.