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Costa Rica: The Wild Coast

By Bob Friel

During a hotel's welcome spiel, I usually zone out after they've covered meal times and bar hours. At Costa Rica's Tortuga Lodge, however, the briefing keeps my attention the entire time.

We don't recommend swimming in the river because there are bull sharks," says Dionish, the receptionist, with a big smile.

But please enjoy our beautiful new pool ... just first check for snakes because we recently found a fer de lance in there taking a dip.

We'll also want to watch where we walk, she says, because one couple strolling the bank almost stepped on a log before realizing it was a 12-foot saltwater crocodile. Bull sharks and snakes and crocs - oh, my.

I've come to Costa Rica to explore the "soft" adventures available on this Central American country's Caribbean side. Soft adventure in this case means you want to go into the jungle and see its exotic mammals, birds and bugs without having to eat them raw in order to survive. Soft is when the day's dirty adventures end with cocktails, a great meal and a clean, comfy bed. Of course just because you're not roughing it doesn't mean you don't want some sense of being "out there."

In a world where so much of travel has been prepackaged, homogenized, safety-fenced and liability-lawyer-approved, a body needs to find a genuine, non-Disneyfied experience now and again. Knowing that you might inadvertently go croc surfing on the way to the bar adds what I consider just the right amount of reality to a stay at a jungle lodge. I'm traveling with my 72-year-old dad, and he's thrilled with the welcome: sharks and crocs and snakes - oh, yeah! He also seems way too willing to wrestle a jaguar if it comes to that. Apparently once you've lived that long you figure, "what the hell, bring it on."

Costa Rica's jungles, volcanoes, rafting rivers and incredible diversity of wildlife made it the pioneer of modern ecotourism. Today, with 25 percent of its land protected in parks and preserves (and a stable government that still sees no need for an army), the nation remains one of the world's most

popular destinations for outdoor adventures. And while most visitors head west to the Pacific coast, it's actually the Caribbean side of the Continental Divide that has the richest rainforests.

Tortuga Lodge is the premier jungle lodge along the Tortuguero River, main thoroughfare of the national park of the same name here on the northern Caribbean coast. Exotic plants and animals are everywhere on the lodge's 50 acres, most of which are virgin forest scored only by a few hiking paths. For all its immersion into the wild life, Tortuga Lodge is eminently comfortable, its rooms rustic-luxe, its kitchen excellent.

After the trek to get here - a long, scenic drive over the mountains that ended with a kidney-kicking 18 miles of corrugated track and a 90-minute boat ride - sleep comes easy for us. The cacophony of frogs and other night critters blends into a single trilling lullaby, muffled occasionally by the patter of rain on leaves. My last thought is wondering whether we'll be under too deep to hear the little beeps of my alarm. Silly me.

Just before dawn, Dad and I are yanked awake by what sounds like a tyrannosaurus rex with irritable bowel syndrome. It's two hours before the alarm was set to go off, but knowing that the wake-up call piercing the black forest and reaching inside to tickle my spine comes from a spunky 20-pound howler monkey somehow makes it okay. Each shuddering roar makes us laugh uncontrollably, a reaction to our brains sending out a flush of "Run for your lives!" adrenaline. The territorially mouthy male has us wide awake in plenty of time for a nature walk before our traditional Costa Rican breakfast of eggs and gallo pinto (rice and beans fried with spices).

Tortuguero National Park is famed for its turtles (the name means "Region of Turtles"). Dr. Archie Carr, the environmentalist who founded the Caribbean Conservation Corporation, began working here in 1955, focusing on the 22-mile stretch of black-sand beach that's the most important nesting ground of the endangered green turtle.

Carr's actions led directly to the formation of the park in 1970, and along with the turtles, Tortuguero's 52,000 acres of beach, river, lagoon, swamp and rainforest protect a dizzying amount of biodiversity. We've come outside the June-to-October turtle nesting season, when most visitors arrive to take guided night walks on the beach, but as our breakfast is interrupted every few seconds by a sighting of another hummingbird, parrot or river otter, it's obvious that there's plenty to see year-round.

The park is a warren of waterways, best seen aboard an open boat or kayak. We join expert birding guide and biologist Charlie Gomez and driver-spotter extraordinaire Don Hernando in the lodge's tour boat. The population along this part of the coast is primarily a mix of Miskito Indian, along with those of Jamaican descent, like Don, whose ancestors immigrated to Central America to build the railroads. While everyone in the country speaks Spanish, this

coast has a definite Caribbean flavor, with plenty of Jamaican-English patois spoken, and touches like the coconut in my gallo pinto.

We've barely settled into our seats, and the boat is just nosing away from the breakwater when Don points out a flight of Montezuma oropendola with startling yellow tails crossing the river. Then Charlie points to an osprey, then an Amazon kingfisher, then a blue-gray tanager, then a brown-crested flycatcher, then a river otter, then a peregrine falcon. My dad looks like a bobble-head in an earthquake, and I'm a hopeless tangle of binocular, camera, sunglass and hat straps as I rotate between them. After I miss the flyover of a broad-winged hawk because I'm busy changing lenses, I forget about the camera and instead concentrate on just seeing.

And the seeing is spectacular. A cascade of green flows directly into the brown river - the banks aren't visible, just the gleaming emeralds, olives and jades of billions of leaves, from the tops of towering bloodwood and caobilla trees down to the great billowing stands of raphia palms and the thick drapes of vine that spill seamlessly onto floating mats of water hyacinth. The only interruptions in the camouflage are spectacular splashes of red, white, purple, yellow - some are flowers, others birds. Don pauses alongside an island of hyacinth that has a family of Northern jacanas aboard. The comically long-toed birds have evolved to walk atop floating plants, but it still looks like they're trying to play tag on a water bed.

At the junction of two canals, streams of what appear to be Guinness Stout and Baileys Irish Cream flow together. Don steers for the source of the Guinness, and we enter the Cano Negro. The jungle closes in, and the wildlife sightings come fast and furry. First a mantled howler monkey, jet black with dressy crimson guard hairs flowing down his sides.

Then Charlie calls out: "A brown-throated three-toed sloth ... with a baby!" The momma hangs from her hooked claws, her head lolling, and the look on her face is one of pure bliss. The baby clinging to her belly is digging it too; I swear she's smiling. It's as if they feel there's nothing better in the world than to be idling around the lazy river, having soft adventures under this easy sky. And I couldn't agree more.

Below them a spectacled caiman has found a nice spot in the weeds to ambush an unwary fish or water bird. The caiman is a toothy little cousin to the big bad crocs, and another of the more than 100 reptile species that live in Tortuguero alongside 60-some different mammals, nearly that many amphibians and at least 300 species of birds. Don navigates into an even narrower canal, and suddenly we're enveloped by the rainforest. Trees arch overhead, blocking out the sky, and the mad, giggling hehehehehe of a brown-capped tyrannulet fills the moist air. It's in here that Don has seen big cats prowling the swampy shoreline.

The increase in the number of turtles since the creation of the park has not gone unnoticed by the king of the Costa Rican jungle. In 1997, researchers found two freshly chewed turtles on the beach, and since then the number of kills has gone up exponentially each year. Huge paw prints in the sand and damage done to skulls and shells by powerful jaws filled with dagger teeth leave no doubt about the identity of the hunter: the New World's biggest cat, the jaguar. Though today we can't make out any speckled coats or intense eyes in the dim forest light, that doesn't mean they don't see us.

Thirty years ago, before the advent of eco-tourism, Tortuga was a fishing lodge. So when an afternoon shower puts a damper on another wildlife-watching cruise, we decide to try our luck with rod and reel. The waters adjacent to Tortuguero and north into the Barillo Carillo Park are famed for tarpon, an ultimate fighter of a fish that looks like a minnow mated with a nuclear submarine. Aboard his boat Bull Shark, anchored in the swells at the mouth of the Tortuguero River just east of the lodge, fishing guide Eddy Brown tells us that pesticide runoff from the American-owned banana plantations upstream damages the tarpon and snook nurseries here, but that there are still fish around.

When my rod loaded with 20-pound test bends in half and an enormous fish erupts out of the water behind the boat, I believe. Several times the 100-plus-pound tarpon jumps clear of the earthy brown water, trying to shake the hook. And at least 10 times I reel him near the boat, only to have him muscle away and run 30 or 40 or 50 yards down-current. After 45 minutes, I'm finally able to get him close enough so Eddy's brother, Roberto, can reach into a mouth big enough to swallow a football, remove the lure, pat the still-feisty tarpon on its huge, coppery head and release him. Our last look at the great fish is as he's swimming south, which is also where we're headed.

The road to Tortuguero may be beaten up, but the one to Puerto Viejo has apparently been carpet bombed. By the time we arrive at Almonds and Corals Hotel - in the Gandoca Manzanillo Wildlife Refuge just north of the Panamanian border - I'm so used to zigzagging to avoid potholes that I have a tough time staying on the catwalks that connect the lodge and its 24 cabins. Called Almonds and Corals because the property stretches from the rainforest to a beach, staying here is like being on the world's most comfortable camping trip.

Each room is built atop posts under a large tent surrounded by trees loaded with mosses, vines, orchids and other air plants. The 360 degrees of screening allows 100 percent of the jungle atmosphere - including the de rigueur howler monkey wake-up calls - to waft in with the humid air while guests luxuriate in hammocks, canopied queen beds or even in-room Jacuzzis.

This southern part of the Caribbean coast is the beachiest, but the beaches here are - like much of the country - wild, with rainforest often reaching right to the shoreline. Some, like Playa Negra, are hot, black volcanic sand, and others have a warm golden hue. During the Costa Rican dry season (December through April), the sea is clear, blue and often calm, but now, in late November, the water is brown from river runoff. Big waves have the hang-loose set doing the happy dance, so we head back to Puerto Viejo, a reggae-vibed surf town that's Costa Rica's capital of Caribbean cool.

Puerto Viejo is a backpacker's heaven. Along with the surfing, the town is central to several national parks, Indian reservations and activities like canopy tours. Quiet upscale lodges such as Almonds and Corals lie just outside town, but the young and restless gravitate to the village and its funky collection of inexpensive beach hotels and jungle cabins which sit within staggering distance of the town's lively bar scene.

To see Costa Rica's largest swaths of virgin old-growth rainforest, we next head northwest to the Caribbean lowlands known as La Selva, "the jungle." Sueño Azul is a sprawling, horse-happy resort with stables for 100 mounts, including trail-riders for guests and paso finos that star in the weekly rodeo show on barbecue night. It's here that we literally get a bird's-eye view of Selva's rainforest.

As we're standing on a three-story platform about to hook onto a zip line for a high-speed canopy tour that gives my dad flashbacks to his paratrooper days, a fiery-billed aracari, cousin to the toucan, lands a few feet away and begins to feed with his Fruit Loop-colored canoe of a bill.

After zip lining, hiking Sueño's waterfalls and bumping across forest trails in a tank of a Land Cruiser, we collapse for a few minutes on the patio behind our room. A few yards away, a caiman slips into the water beneath a tree being climbed by an iguana that's almost as large as the laughing falcon that's cackling at us from across the pond. Between this and the nonstop sightings at Tortuguero, I realize that Costa Rica's Caribbean side offers some of the world's most laid-back yet rewarding wildlife watching.

That observation is further reinforced at Selva Verde, a nearby jungle lodge born 27 years ago when owner Giovanna Holbrook put herself deep into hock in order to save 500 acres of pristine rainforest on the Sarapiquí River. Talk about soft adventurers: We meet entire flocks of bird watchers who've planted themselves in rockers on the lodge's terrace to studiously tick off species after species while occasionally calling for drinks from the bar. We resist our inner sloths, though, and head across the lodge's swaying suspension bridge, over the Sarapiquí and into the fabulously vibrant jungle. Each step on these trails is a lesson in the magic of the rainforest.

Immense trees stand in meager, soggy soil, supporting themselves only via a wondrous array of buttresses, props and elaborate root systems that vein the

jungle floor like a vast circulatory system. Testament to both Holbrook's conservation and the forest's exuberance is a colossal 180-foot-tall almond tree estimated to be 600 years old. What would have been the logger's grand prize lives on as Selva's ancient celebrity, its bat-adorned hollow - straight out of a dark forest fairytale - large enough to hold six people or 54 gnomes.

A flash of red amongst the mottled brown leaf litter catches my eye. It's a frog the size of my thumbnail, a strawberry poison dart frog. I'd been dying to see this famous Costa Rican amphibian, and it turns out that Selva is silly with them.

We spot a male out in the open and calling for mates during the daytime - suicide for any normal frog in a place with so many snakes and birds.

But these candy-colored critters have no reason to hide since they're one of the most toxic animals on the planet. As soon as our eyes are tuned in to looking for them, we find dozens, some with cobalt blue butts and legs, others electric green and black - and, to give them that extra adventure-travel tingle, all potentially lethal.

Halfway through our hike, Abelardo, our Selva Verde guide, holds up his hand. "You don't want to step there," he says.

"Where?" I ask.

"That snake is a hog-nose viper, deadly poisonous," he says pointing at a log a few feet from my dad's boot.

We stare down and slowly, like a Magic Eye picture, the coiled snake comes into view. Wild. No fences, no lawyers and not a Disney character in sight.

**Courtesy of Caribbean Travel & Life Magazine