

San Marcos DAILY RECORD

March 24, 2009

Costa Rica continues to protect its ecological beauty

Travel column

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I got my first glimpse of ecology-minded Costa Rica as my plane descended toward San Jose International Airport.

The Central American nation, whose name is Spanish for "rich coast," has protected about 27 percent of its territory in the form of 24 national parks or nature reserves. In 2008 it ranked first in the Americas and fifth in the world on the Environmental Performance Index, a gauge for quantifying a nation's environmental policies.

As an ecological tie-in, the purpose of my visit was to explore Selva Verde (Spanish for "green jungle"), one of Costa Rica's first rain forest resorts with an ecology educational component.

After touching down at the airport, I boarded the lodge's van for the 42-mile, two-hour ride over an excellent road that ran through the steep, lush, rain-forested mountains. During that time, I caught a glimpse of sprawling San Jose and an up-close look at Braulio Carrillo National Park to the northeast. Then, after passing through Puerto Viejo, a small town in the Atlantic Coastal lowlands, we turned left for the five-minute drive to Selva Verde.

Although Selva Verde sits on 500 acres of tropical rain forest and is along the new national bird route that begins near Nicaragua to the north and runs through the volcanic area, it also straddles a well-maintained road that runs just past the entrance way and is close to an agricultural area known for growing bananas and pineapples.

The lodge's spacious, airy lobby boasts a wall mural depicting a tropical rain forest, tile floor, potted plants and bamboo chairs and tables which set the tropical mood from the get go. From the reception area, covered walkways protect from sudden downpours the concrete sidewalks that lead to the accommodations, clusters of four rooms on pillars that rise 10 feet or more

above the ground with elevated verandas lined with chairs and hammocks that give great views of the flora and fauna below.

Selva Verde lodgings are comfortable and equipped with ceiling fans, clean bathrooms with hot, running water, safety boxes, hair dryers, skylights, screened windows with shutters for privacy and telephones. Although the rooms are without televisions, the lodge usually schedules evening programs, such as guided night time hikes, cooking classes and ecology-themed videos.

On the other side of the main road, the lodge also maintains four air-conditioned bungalows for those who might want more privacy, such as honeymooners or for those wanting a bit more peace and quiet. The bungalows are tucked away in the forest just beyond the botanical garden and are a 10-minute walk to the reception area.

The lodge sports a well-maintained pool, and meals are taken in a raised, riverside dining room perfect for bird and fauna watching. (A howler monkey gave folks mingling at the patio bar a good bit of entertainment one evening of my visit with his antics scurrying up and down a nearby tree).

The surrounding area is home to more than 300 species of birds, and early morning guided birding hikes are a popular leisure time activity. The lodge maintains a large bird feeding area near the lobby and has seven separate hiking trails on the grounds plus six more in the primal forest, which are accessed via a suspension bridge built over the raging Sarapiquí River. Boots are provided for hikers free of charge and are necessary especially in the rainy season when the trails run through muddy terrain.