

A tropical beach scene with waves crashing onto a sandy shore. In the background, a dense forest of palm trees and other tropical vegetation stretches across the horizon. A person is sitting on the sand in the foreground, looking out at the ocean. Several birds are flying in the sky above the forest.

COSTA RICA's Southern jungle & Caribbean side

Two weeks amongst sloths, palm trees
& screaming howler monkeys.

March 2024, text and photographs Mats Rennstam

Several years ago, just before Covid, my wife and I visited Costa Rica's Northwest. Wide-eyed we took in famous sights such as the Monteverde cloud forest, volcanic Arenal and Pacific ocean beach resorts. Looking at the map back then though we realised we still had vast amounts left to experience of this amazing country. So, we made a promise to return soon and, that we'd go a bit more.. hard-core to experience even more nature and wildlife, as well as take in the chilled Caribbean side (images of swaying to reggae rhythms with a cold Imperial lager in hand came to mind). And last but not least, bring better camera equipment to really capture the beauty of the amazing wildlife. This year, we finally got to do it; did our carbon offsetting, charged the camera batteries, packed our hiking boots and off we went!

After arriving we steered the battered rental car clear of the capital San José, as it doesn't offer much in sights and if I'm honest, recent reports of a surge in gang violence had been discouraging even if it hadn't affected tourists. Instead, a mere three hours later we were walking amongst coatis and showering off the travel dust in the stunning Nauyaca waterfalls. The park entrance ticket seller kindly informed us that there was a second car park halfway saving some walking which we took her up on and thank heavens for that. The shock on new arrivals from a wintry Europe, walking up hill for hours in 32°C and 80% humidity was quite enough for the first day, "hard-core" intentions or not. But, what a waterfall, wow.



The first accommodation of the trip, "Hacienda Baru Lodge", turned out to be a perfect stop en route to our main attraction of this first week, an overnight stay deep in the unique Corcovado jungle. Even the Lodge's lack of hot water in the showers was fine; a welcome relief for our pink sweaty bodies. The large chalets of the lodge were right next to a private part of rainforest, with an easy path past coatis crunching through the undergrowth, peccaries trotting across and little agutis stopping in their tracks to stare at you. The restaurant served up a delicious traditional "Casado" for dinner before it closed at 7.30PM (!) which with a cold beer was a great ending to the first day. Casados are normally made up of white rice, beans, protein of some sort, fried plantains, and a homemade picadillo or sauteed vegetables, all on one plate. This Costa Rican classic make you sleep like a log until the howler monkeys start living up to their name at 5.30AM, just before sunrise. Apart from in larger towns with a younger population, Costa Rica is very much early to bed and early to rise. Which for visitors with a 6-hour time difference the right way round works a treat (until you get home).

When parking up by the Sierpe river ferry to get to Drake Bay, the hub for trips into the Corcovado jungle, there was excitement on the jetty. An enormous crocodile was swimming amongst the motorboats that we were about to embark on. Not finding the boats very interesting though, he soon settled in on the embankment 50 metres away for a mid-morning snooze. Taking a wide berth around the oversized reptile, we set off into the mangrove tree lined river for an hour's lovely breeze in our faces until it was time for the first wet landing of the week. We all hopped down into the warm sea while the boat staff expertly helped everyone with their luggage. We had left most of our luggage in the care of a secure parking at Sierpe, but some people had chosen to bring everything but the kitchen sink! Drake bay's town Agujita is a tiny dusty road place but with the influx of more and more tourist it's starting to gain better restaurants and infrastructure. Most people are here for whale watching and snorkelling, or as in our case, for the 6AM boat transport to Corcovado.

The Corcovado National Park is considered one of the world's most biodiverse regions, its wildlife including macaws, tapirs, jaguars, squirrel monkeys and much much more. Most people do daytrips but only with an overnight stay will you be in the jungle when the wildlife is at its most active. A perfectly logical suggestion by my wife to go for, until it was time to (try to) go to sleep.



The overnight experience at the Sirena Ranger Station will not be for everyone. Food is good but there is nothing to do in the evening and it's lights out at 8PM. Then you need to try to fall asleep to the sounds of the jungle, rain pounding the tin roof, and 50 others in the bunkbeds next to you snoring away. I spent two years in the army doing this without a problem but must admit I seriously wished I had brought A. earplugs, and B. an eye mask (it's torches galore when people go to the bathroom in the middle of the night). Five minutes into the next morning's hike though, all was forgiven and forgotten. We met up with our local guide Donny at 5AM and arrived at the Sirena river at dawn, just in time to see an even larger crocodile swim upstream to bury its sea turtle catch. The turtle's shell and body is too hard to tear apart, so it needs to find a safe place for it to rot before feasting on it.



Then the wildlife just kept coming. Tapirs were snoozing in the bushes, capuchin monkeys swung above us and sloths moved slowly up eucalyptus trees. A crested owl looked quite annoyed that we'd been rude enough to wake him up, and an elusive ant eater climbed next to us just as a colourful pair of macaws flew overhead. This was what we had come for! The sloths were particularly majestic and were kind enough to move around for us. It turns out sloths can actually move quite fast if they need to, they just choose to conserve their energy. Animals after my own heart.

“ Sloths can actually move quite fast if they need to ”



Even after several days of this wildlife extravaganza, we still had not had enough and with only hours left before it was time to head back to the boat, a highlight occurred. A large band of white-nosed coatis, there must have been 25-30 of them, descended from a tree only meters away.

In the last group of them was a youngster who was so scared of the steep descent that his parents had to keep nudging him down the tree. We could have watched them for hours.

With sore feet but happy faces on the boat back, an ambivalent feeling set in over leaving this insane nature experience. Now it was over to the Caribbean side for more of an R&R experience with beaches, rum drinks and reggae music. But, rumour had it they would have their fair share of wildlife experiences there too.



The Caribbean side



After a 5-hour drive, our longest, we were excited to reach the stretch on the east coast where within a 40-minute drive you'll find three quite different towns but all with beautiful beaches and a laidback atmosphere. First off, **Manzanillo** was pretty much a two-street sleepy town but with a lovely Soda (simple local food) in "Soda Wuacho" and barbecues with reggae vibes daily at "Cool & Calm Café". At the end of the beach, you'll find the national park Vida Silvestre Gandoca which has easy walks taking around 1-2 hours, and a couple of nice beaches along the way. Five minutes into the shaded park we had amazingly spotted sloths, falcons and a large troop of howlers.



We tried out eco-glamping for the first time in Manzanillo at female entrepreneur Andrea Sánchez Campos' "Faith Glamping". She set up her business from scratch and has made it into a success story nestled in a private part of rainforest. It had not been an easy ride though she told us, dealing with the Covid years and "machismo" still remaining in the country.

“ It helped making contractors believe they were dealing with a man ”



The geo-domes were kitted out with everything we could possibly need (and bathrooms with hot water!), all with a direct access to the beach. The rainforest "garden" was lovely and one day when going to the communal area for the breakfast it was raining but, we got there completely dry as the canopies cover the paths from the globes to the breakfast area.

The jungle and roaring sea get pretty loud at times, but this is what you come here for, immersion. And immersion we got. When lying in bed one morning watching the howler monkeys through the ceiling windows, one of them dropped an enormous payload of poo landing on the dome with a great big thump! Sorry Andrea, we realise it must be a pain to clean up but for us, it was a highlight.



Cahuita is a larger town than Manzanillo and its national park's hikes are longer and you're likely to see even more animals. But it's otherwise similar in that it has some lovely beaches along the way. You don't need a guide for your visit but if you want to snorkel, it's required (to help preserve the coral reefs). Our guide Rodolfo helped spotting a lot more animals than we could have on our own and indirectly showed us what a friendly place we had arrived at. On our way to the start of the hike he must have said hi to 30 locals, ready with a big smile and a quick chat for all of them.

At the eastern end of town, many hours were spent at the large Playa Negra taking pictures of the surfers from the famous Reggae bar. The "Sobre las Olas" restaurant had excellent sea views, "La Peruanita" great Peruvian food and "Cahuita Inn" a romantic decking by the water. Tourism has definitely arrived in Cahuita, bringing more and better restaurants but it has still managed to keep its laid-back charm.



Driving through **Puerto Viejo** looking for our final hotel, the first thing that struck us was that visitors were much younger, and it had more of a hedonistic vibe with reggaetón pumping out of very busy bars. The occasional wafts of Ganja got more frequent too. But there were also serene beaches and some upmarket restaurants (one with a wine bar!) in addition to its main street full of shops and bars.



It was fun to try all these Caribbean side towns out and compare them to each other, but we feel staying in one for a week would get a bit repetitive. If we were to choose one of them for a longer stay it would be Cahuita; more places to eat and drink at than Manzanillo, less rowdy than Puerto Viejo, and the better national park for longer hikes and more animals. You can still visit the other towns easily by just jumping in a tuk-tuk. While staying at the "Cahuita Inn" a highlight was relaxing in the gardens after breakfast, lying in a hammock and just watching the monkeys bounce around in the trees above, next to six sloths in various trees. Six, just in the hotel garden!

After two weeks and change we were ready to go back home, however the Iberia airplane broke down and we got a couple of days roughing it in San José after all. Three days later the airline managed to get us back via Bogota, Colombia so we also got to see a bit more of Central America than bargained for, and experience rigorous intimate public drug checks. But, that all added to the wilder experience we'd set out in search of.

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FOR THE EDITOR

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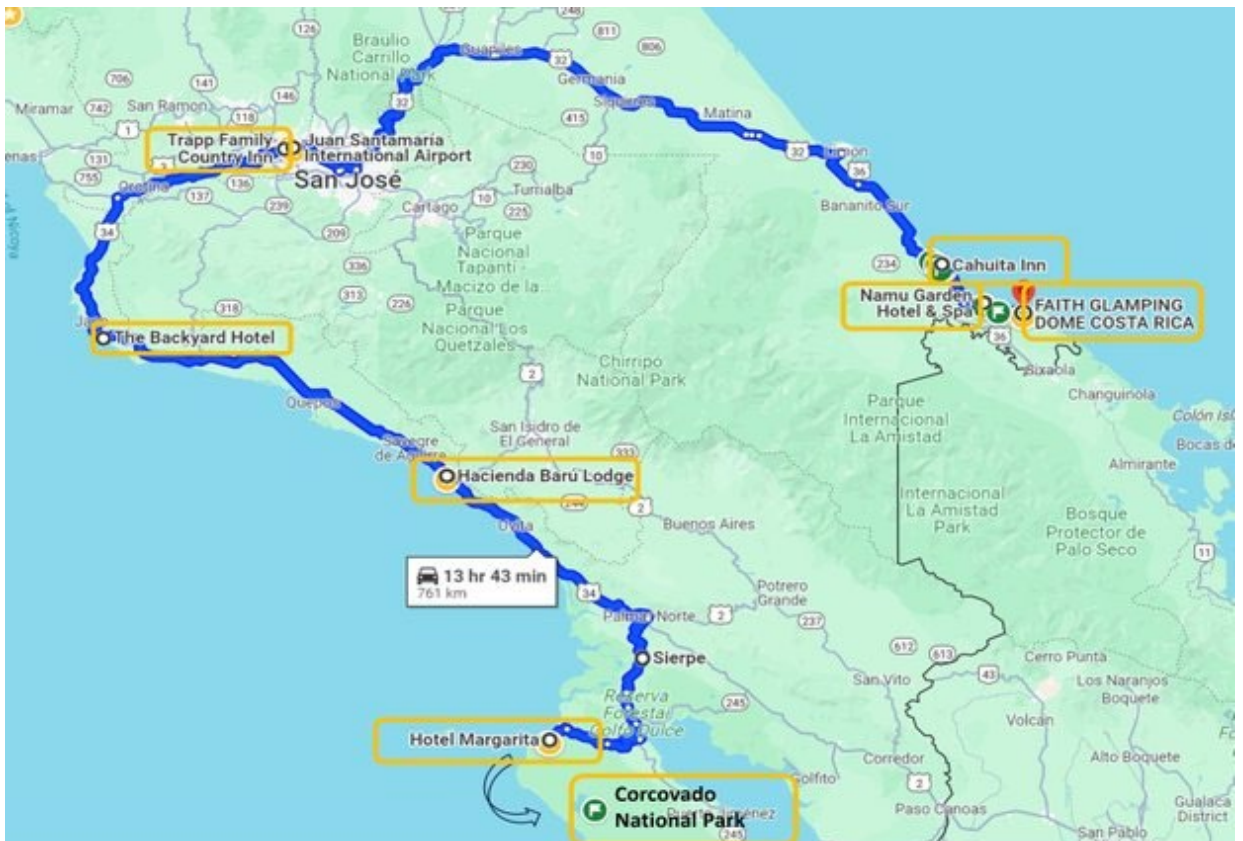




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