

February 2018

Dear All,

This is the story of our short trip to Costa Rica in the winter of 2018. We were having a miserable January with colds and infections when someone asked Sandie where we were going this winter. We weren't going anywhere until April, so we got to talking about it and I suggested Costa Rica: warm, lots of national parks, and no hurricane damage on its Pacific coast. Within an hour we'd found a company that featured Costa Rican nature tours and a day later we were booked into 3 places over 8 nights. We didn't do much research; for a short trip we'd take our chances.



The obvious question is one of safety, but Costa Rica has been surprisingly safe and stable while its neighbours have been embroiled in wars and revolutions. Nicaragua, its western neighbour was embroiled in the war between Sandanistas and Contras, while as recently as 1989 Panama's president General Noriega was toppled by an American invasion. Costa Rica, in contrast, has been democratic for the last seventy years.

Anywhere in Central America is susceptible to earthquakes and eruptions, but interesting geology brings interesting landscapes. Likewise, it has its share of snakes and crocodiles but no worse than Australia.

Our packing was complicated as our trip included an internal flight across Costa Rica and the airline has some stringent weight restrictions, like a 10 pound carry-on limit, difficult if you have heavy cameras and a computer.

Tuesday February 20th

We were on our way on a cold and sunny afternoon. The snow was melting off the roof but promptly refreezing. Our deck and steps and driveway were sheets of ice; a good time to be leaving.

Travel from Vancouver to the capital San José takes at least two flights and 12 hours. Staying overnight in Houston or LA, or flying all day and arriving in the dark weren't acceptable, so we opted to fly overnight and arrive at lunch time. We were flying just before midnight on Aeromexico and changing planes in Mexico City.

Most of the lodges and hotels deal in American dollars but we picked up some Costa Rican currency in case we strayed into normal life. They deal in Colóns, an odd name, until you remember that the first European to lead an expedition to Costa Rica was Columbus or in Spanish Cristóbal Colón. Cristóbal would probably be unhappy to learn that his Colón is now worth about half a US cent.

Wednesday February 21st

We landed at dawn in Mexico City. Mexico and Costa Rica are in the same time zone as Minneapolis so we had only lost a couple of hours.

Aeromexico has a helpful web page describing how passengers transit through Mexico to other countries. It's all wrong! It warned us that our passports would be collected and held by the captain when flying into Mexico.

Luckily that didn't happen. But it also said that passengers transiting through Mexico would not have to go through Immigration, but we certainly did. We filled out cards in duplicate and then joined the long line for foreigners. After having cards and passports stamped we joined the line for Security. The airline collected our duplicate cards and we were on our way again.

In the gate area we noticed a few ladies with hoops, big hula hoops, like in the 1960s. Some had bags with up to a dozen hoops, but there was one who also carried a single silver hoop. She also had rainbow hair and a multicoloured suit that looked like it had been sprayed onto her skin. There is apparently some intersection of hoops and yoga and art in Costa Rica that is waiting to be discovered by the outside world.

It was dry season in Costa Rica and San José had a sunny and humid day in the 80s, similar to a good summer's day in Minnesota. San José is at 10°N, well within the Tropics, so we'd packed for hot weather.

The tour company had arranged for us to be met as soon as we came through the jetway into Cristóbal Colón air terminal and a young lady met us and fast-tracked us through immigration, all to no avail as one of our suitcases, the one with all our clothes, had gone missing. Sandie eventually found it partly undone in a little group of similar strays. We were delivered to our van and driver, and were soon on our way out of the city.

City roads and traffic were similar to southern Europe's but the drivers seemed to be casual about lanes and parking. San José only has about two million people; the whole country about 5 million. The country is about the size of Ireland, with a spine of mountains and volcanoes separating the Caribbean and Pacific coasts. Our three destinations were all on the Pacific side.

We had an hour and a half drive to our first stop, up in the mountains. We passed fields of sugar and bananas and then coffee as we got higher. Sugar was being burned and then harvested with machetes. Houses were decorated with bougainvillea and yellow-flowered corteza trees. With the line of green mountains along the horizon, the countryside looked much like Queensland's.

For a while we were driving on the Pan American Highway, the road that connects the USA with Panama, but we turned off at San Ramon. The town's main street was a chaotic mess of cars, buses, trucks, and bikes, but somehow everything worked out. Costa Rica's favourite saying is "Pura Vida", literally "pure life", but used for everything from "Hello" to "Goodbye" to "No worries".



The road became narrower and occasionally paved with gravel as we climbed. Our surroundings were rural, mostly small farms and cabins. Fields were fenced with tree branches and wire. Almost all the branches had taken root and were growing into spindly trees, so the farmers had to occasionally trim them at head height to keep control. Our driver said that the rich volcanic soils will grow just about anything well, with the notable exceptions of apples, pears, peaches, and grapes. Costa Rica is not noted for its wine.





We climbed up to about 4000 feet and were now in cloud forest, often wet and windy according to our driver but warm and sunny for us. We were staying in El Silencio de Los Angeles Cloud Forest Reserve at the Villa Blanca lodge. The lodge was originally built by President Rodrigo Carazo Odio, but eventually it became an experiment in sustainable eco-tourism. Now the villa houses the office and lounge and restaurant, while guests stay in casitas, cabins with massive oven-like fireplaces and balconies looking out on the forest. The picture of the villa also gives an idea of the garden that surrounds it.

A buffet breakfast was included but we'd have to buy other meals at the restaurant. There was no way

we'd need two large meals a day so we decided we'd skip lunches and survive on granola bars until dinner. This would also maximize our use of daylight; as always in the Tropics, Costa Rica has just 12 hours of daylight regardless of season.

We set out to explore the areas around the villa; extensive gardens, an orchid house, a chapel, and an oxcart. The gardens featured a mix of local and exotic tropical; many of them were familiar from garden shops, but here they had grown to enormous size. Plants grew on each other and vines grew high into the canopy. There were a few birds around; this is a rufous-collared sparrow.



The orchid house could have done with some clean-up, but we found a few interesting plants there. The chapel, built for the president's wife, is now just used for



meetings; it still looks romantic with its garden setting and gorgeous views of the mountains.



These are a few examples of the plants we saw in the gardens and the orchid house. It's just about impossible as a visitor to distinguish between endemic plants and those introduced over the last century. We enjoyed them all and most of our pictures are merged here into one composite.



The oxcart is a Costa Rican cultural icon. They were used to haul goods through the country's rugged terrains and across clayey soils. Often they were highly decorated like this one. Restaurants may have one on show but it's usually just a quarter-sized model.



We were ready for our first jungle trail, a short one as we were tired after being up for about 30 hours. It was labelled Sendero Los Helechos or Fern Trail. The vegetation is fascinating, a riot of growth. The downside was that it's hard to see anything beyond the greenery; we'd hear rustling and see leaves



moving but the animals stayed hidden. We saw few bugs and there didn't seem to be any coming to feed on us.

We came nose-to-nose with a coati as we left the trail; this is a relative of the raccoon with similar habits. The coati had an urgent appointment elsewhere and I was too slow with the camera.

We went back to our casita to rest before our guided night walk. I conked out completely and Sandie had to wake me up; it was a scramble to get us and the cameras ready and over to the villa.



It didn't help that my hands had become itchy and swollen up and it was hard to move my fingers. There are some nasty plants in the forest and we assumed I'd grabbed one of those. Sandie had something similar as her hands were itchy.

We met with four others and Catalina, our guide. She lent each of us a small flashlight and led us to a trail which dropped steeply into the jungle. It was difficult going and my balance is not that good these days but I was lucky and didn't fall on anybody. My camera wasn't much use in the dark but Sandie had her camcorder set to Low Lux and that worked quite well, so I concentrated on lighting up the scene for her.

Catalina found various frogs and lizards, spiders and millipedes and stick insects, but the stars were the red-eyed green frogs, similar to those widely seen in ads for Costa Rica tourism. My favourite though was the transparent glass frog barely visible left of centre.



Dinner was expensive but good and we were certainly hungry enough to do it justice. The white wine was an Argentine Torrontes, a label we'll look for when we get back to Canada.

Outside it was now foggy as well as dark so we wandered a bit on our way back to our casita. It was cool enough to start the fire but we were too tired.

Thursday February 22nd

We had a bird walk in the morning so we had to be out with the birds at dawn, about 6.30 am. It was still cool and misty, with tiny showers drifting through. There were about a half dozen others gathered but one fellow with bad knees backed out when he saw the steepness of the trails. While we were talking I spotted a coati bounding across the garden and I was a little faster with the camera this time; yes, I can certify that this is a coati tail.





Our guide once again was Catalina. She said the plan was to visit certain hotspots around the reserve where birds were known to gather or feed. We already had swallows zooming around the sky scooping up bugs. I commented that we'd seen none the previous afternoon, and Catalina said that was why we were out before breakfast. I was also surprised that they were finding enough bugs, because I hadn't seen any.

This is the birding group at one of the hotspots, the ruins of what may have been their first greenhouse.



Most of the hotspots turned out to be clearings, as those were the only places where we could see any distance. However, although we saw quite a few birds, they were

mostly high in the trees and backlit so we have few pictures. Our first success was this Cherrie's tanager, a relative of the tanagers we'd see in Minnesota summers.



This nondescript bird is a clay thrush, Costa Rica's national bird. Catalina said that it was chosen as it sings a beautiful song during its mating season, a song that the country's farmers use as a signal to plant their crops in time for the rainy season. She contrasted Costa Rica's practical choice with those of its



neighbours: Panama's powerful harpy eagle and Nicaragua's gaudy motmot.

We spotted the thrush under this enormous tree. Like many trees, its branches were covered by ferns and bromeliads and air plants; hundreds of them.

We found hummingbirds in the orchid house; violet sabrewings trapped by the mesh walls.



We took a look around the villa in daylight, finding this sculpture in the garden. There was no explanation but we hope that whatever it represents doesn't happen while we are there.



We stuffed ourselves at breakfast, in my case mainly on fried bananas; we intended skipping lunch. The original plan was to rest until our scheduled nature walk in the afternoon, but it was too nice a day to stay inside, so we set off for a walk around the north end of the property, the Sendero Quebrada or Ravine Trail. It turned out to be a great choice.



We found the villa's hummingbird feeders. It's an artificial way to get hummingbird pictures but they tend to roost in the branches around, giving more natural photos.



There seemed to be three or four species of hummingbird around; these are a blue-tailed and a couple of green-crowned brilliants, I think.

We also found some new plants on the day's walks, more than enough to populate another composite picture below. Some we recognized: heliconias, orchids, poinsettia, even a banana flower over some red bananas, but most we did not.



We came out of the trail at the greenhouse where they grow the veggies for the restaurant. This strange moth was at the lodge.



We were the only people to show up for Esteban’s nature tour. He was very knowledgeable, and was happy to answer our questions. He thought the swelling in my hands might be due to bites from no see ums.

He picked the southern trail system for our walk; good as we hadn’t been there. The trail we took was chained off so we’d have it ourselves. We found a pair of coati on the trail; one of them seemed interested in us so we got a good look and a



few
photos.



We went down into old-growth forest, a treasure for biologists. Massive trees were draped in vines, which grow from the ground up, and lianas which send down roots from a branch and then grow into the canopy. Some of the vines are composed of a single leaf, 50 feet long.



We saw many parades of ants, particularly leafcutter ants which carry leaf fragments back to their nests. The leaf-carrying ants were accompanied by others twice their size, bodyguards perhaps.



There were also tree trunks which sounded hollow, acacias I think, and Esteban showed the hole where the queen had burrowed in and established the colony. The colony would hollow out the trunk and occupy it for a decade or more.

I forget the names of all the plants we saw, but several had leaves that were green above and purple underneath to capture the wavelengths of the dim light reflected from the jungle floor. There are stinging trees too, but they only deliver a sting to our hairy parts; they can be touched by the palm safely. We didn't test this!



Esteban warned us to be cautious when grabbing trees and vines for balance. He had once pulled on a vine to show it to his clients only to realize at the last minute that there was a viper wrapped around the vine. Luckily he let go in time and vine and viper snapped back out of striking range.

The gigantic leaf held by Esteban is a kind of philodendron.

The chains across the trail were also intended to keep cows from invading from the adjacent farms, but cow pats on the trail were evidence that it wasn't working. We had travelled a long way down the hill so it was a stiff climb out and my back was objecting. It was our third hike of the day.

We had a lighter dinner. I tried a Costa Rican curry but it was rather bland; the Costa Ricans generally avoid strong spices.

Friday February 23rd

In the morning it was cold and my hands had come down a little and I could see that I had dozens of swollen bites on my fingers. Sandie had some too. Esteban's guess had been right.

Driver Ebbie picked us up at 10 in his van; he was taking us on a 4-hour trip to the town of Manuel Antonio. He took us back through San Ramon, and then through coffee plantations down to the coast, bypassing the city of San José. We had a short section of motorway toll road, and then we followed the coast on a regular two lane highway, overtaking endless slow trucks. Ebbie was a good driver; some others, less so.



We stopped at the Rio Tarcoles to see the crocodiles. There were a couple of dozen large American crocodiles spread across the river below the bridge. With a crowded narrow walkway, low barriers, and constant traffic, there was a good chance of the crocs being rewarded. Back in 2014 a drunk jumped into the river and was torn apart in seconds.



We passed the resort of Jaco which is famous for its surfing but it looked just like a piece of California with its American hotels. Makes you wonder what the attraction is if it looks just like home. Warmer surfing water, perhaps.

From there on we were traveling mostly between large palm trees, plantations producing palm oil. Ever wonder where the name "Palmolive" came from?



We turned off the main road and headed down a peninsula to Quepos, once the home of the ferocious Quepo tribe who fought with the invading Spaniards, and then to the town of Manuel Antonio. The streets were steep and narrow with barely enough room for traffic to pass.

Entry to our La Mansion hotel was by a very steep driveway. With no room to turn around, after dropping as off, our driver had to back down the driveway and through an archway onto a blind corner. Our room was not ready so we were escorted up to the roof where we were sat by the pool and Jacuzzi and given a drink. To the south we had a view of a large sandy beach and a distant tree-covered

headland. On the other side we could see a smaller sandy beach and more headlands. It appeared that our hotel was sitting on the spine of a headland (the Punta Quepos), high above the sea and beaches. It was a sunny afternoon, well into the 90s.

Our room was large, with a second king-sized bed folded to the wall, a family-sized shower, and a large grassed balcony which we shared with two other rooms. We had chairs and table outside and a large resident iguana, which lay in the tiny strip of shade under the railings. We certainly couldn't complain about the view.





We found out later that the hotel is owned by an American who used to run the Washington press club. The then president invited him to visit Costa Rica. He fell in love with the area



around Manuel Antonio and decided to build his dream hotel there. Even now, after expansion, it only has 25 rooms, and the owner still lives on the premises.



We asked at the desk if we could walk to the beach. They looked surprised but gave us directions “down the hill past two hotels, and walk through the forest”. The road was extremely steep and the track a bit rough but we came out onto a beautiful little beach, the Playa Biezas, with forest giving way to sand and a few big rocks. The beach was out of the wind and swells, perfect for kayaks and paddleboards. Lounge chairs



could be rented by the day for \$10 or for 2000 Colóns, about \$4, a good indication of a two layer economy. We found logs to sit on for the short time we could stay. The locals were already leaving and darkness comes quickly in the Tropics. It was a slow trek back up the hill and we were sweaty wrecks by the time we arrived.

According to our booking, we had breakfast and a “single-course dinner” included, so at dinner we had a smaller menu (with a choice of “only” eight dinners) than most of the other guests. A single course of filet mignon, veg, and potatoes was quite enough for me. One of the odd features of the Costa Rican economy was that even if the meal was included we had to pay taxes on it based on what it should have cost. Just a few dollars, but confusing.

I’d put bug-repellant on my hands which were still itchy, but the bugs had simply moved to my elbows which were now also decorated with bites and bumps.

Saturday February 24th

There were about a dozen breakfasts to choose from. I chose “English” just to see what they did. They did very well and the only thing missing was the grease swimming around on the plate. We went down to take the “free shuttle” to the main beach, but there didn’t seem to be a bus waiting. “Una momento” said the concierge and a taxi came up, collected us and whisked us down to the Playa Espadilla for free. We don’t know if the shuttle bus really existed or if it was always a taxi ride.

The beach was busy on a Saturday morning with hundreds of umbrellas and lounge chairs already out. The dry sand was already too hot to walk on and we stayed on the edge of the sea. The water was as warm as we expected. There were food and chair vendors everywhere and plenty of opportunities go parasailing or riding on a seadoo. This was Brighton Beach but with sand, sunshine, and warm water.



We walked to the south end of the beach and its interesting rocks and cliffs. I thought we might be able to get into the national park that way but the river that separated it from the beach looked to be waist deep and there was a sign saying “Crocodilos”, which may have been true or just a deterrent against free admission.

We walked slowly to the other end of the beach, taking in the view. We never saw any nudity on the beaches but Costa Rican beachwear is minimalist. We could see our hotel perched on the headland, high above us.



There were surprisingly few birds to be seen but we found this tropical kingbird nesting on one of the big rocks.

On our drive down the hill we’d spotted the

El Avion restaurant with the front of an airplane sticking out. We thought it might be an interesting spot for lunch. Unfortunately it was further back up the hill than we remembered, past other restaurants, villas, and zip lines, all in 90+ degrees. It turned out to be at the absolute top on the hill and we were glad that they found us a breezy spot to cool down slowly and eat on the verandah overlooking the beach.



Sandie’s red snapper didn’t look happy but she enjoyed the meal as did I with Something Fajitas. The meals and a few Costa Rican beers cost us about 30000 Colóns or about \$60, reasonable but beyond the budget of most Costa Ricans.

The El Avion restaurant is built around a Fairchild cargo plane, sister to the one that was shot down over Nicaragua precipitating the Iran-Contra Affair, an embarrassing time for Ronald Reagan and Olly North. The surviving plane was bought cheaply in San José, disassembled and brought by freighter along the coast. There's a bar in the fuselage but few were in there on a hot afternoon.



We caught a taxi back to the hotel; none of them seemed to have meters but the cost was rarely more than about \$6. We

had a night walk in the jungle scheduled at the Greentique refuge, across the road from the associated Si Como No hotel. We'd originally been destined for that hotel, but the total cost of the trip had exceeded my stated limit, so we'd been moved to La Mansion; hard to think of it being a downgrade. One of the side effects was that instead of walking across the road we needed yet another taxi to get there.



At Greentique we were quickly separated into fast movers and slow movers. Frank, our guide, warned us slow movers to stay in the centre of the path and not to grab trees or railings without looking first. Sure enough there was a bullet ant on the railing, so called because its sting feels like a bullet wound!



Our flashlights were powerful so my camera worked quite well and I was able to get some pictures. The composite shows various bugs and frogs; top centre between the millipede and the frog with plastic feet is a tarantula making an undignified exit down into its burrow. The bird is a blue-crowned



motmot. The ball of twine is a two-toed sloth seen from below. The red-eyed tree frog with its snazzy flank markings is definitely a cousin of the Costa Rican tourism star.

We were pretty much worn out after two hours in the evening's humidity; sweat was dripping from my fingertips and my waterproof watch had disappeared into a cloudy mess, never to emerge. Frank took us across the road to the Si Como No's bar for a drink and then got us a taxi back to our hotel, just in time for a late dinner. We were hardly presentable for dinner but the waiters must be used to eccentric gringos as they still treated us very well.

Sunday February 25th

Diego collected us in a van at 7.30 am on what turned out to be a private tour. Manuel Antonio is Costa Rica's smallest national park but because of its location next to a vacation town it's also the most visited. It's being milked to fund the rest of the park system,



The entrance is down a side street just off the beach. We queued up with Diego and dozens of others to enter the park. There is a daily entrance limit; most visitors are only interested in its gorgeous beaches. Beyond is a wide gravel path; those interested in the wildlife are going slowly with their guides while the beach people are hurrying along to find a good spot.

Diego, like most of the guides, was carrying a spotting scope. He would see something, stop, and set up the scope so we could see a distant bird/bug/sloth; we'd look through the scope and then try to find the animal by eye or camera. Sandie would find things before me, but people without a guide, even those glancing around for wildlife, would likely see nothing. The only exception would be this white-tailed deer, hard to miss, and reminiscent of Minnesota.



Sandie took this circular picture through the spotting scope. The bird is a motmot, similar to what we'd seen the night before. The only way I could find it with my lens was by the tiny blue patch on its head.



The pictures in this composite show how hard it is to see animals in the jungle, even when a guide is pointing them out. Top right is a view of

another sloth, fast asleep in the treetops during the day. Top left is a rarity according to Diego. It's one of a troop of red-backed squirrel monkeys, only found in a few places. There is a much better picture of a squirrel monkey later in this journal. Most of the rest, like the bird, are difficult to identify.



We came out to the beach, Playa Manuel Antonio, where a porcupine was just visible up in a tree along the shoreline. We were all struggling to get a view of it, even getting caught by an incoming wave, but most of the porcupine (centre bottom) remained hidden. The beach was busy; this is where most of the park's visitors had been headed, so the porcupine wasn't likely to move.

We were supposed to return with Diego to the entrance and be escorted back to our hotel but he gave us the option of staying in the park. There were still trails to explore so we said goodbye and set out on our own.





It was apparent that nature was adapting to profit from the crowds. Raccoons and capuchin monkeys were opening and stealing backpacks, while iguanas were begging for food and cleaning up picnic sites. These southern raccoons looked to be a bit smaller than ours, with less distinct markings. Capuchin monkeys have human-like faces but they are definitely monkeys; I noticed that whenever we passed on the trail, the monkeys would look at my back to see if I had a backpack. When we sat down for a minute this large iguana came



tumbling down the cliff behind us in a shower of rocks, scared that it was late for the picnic.

Trails took us up and around the Punta Catedral, the headland we could see from La Mansion. The trail should have been easy but many of the steps were just a bit too high for smaller people to climb and were jarring on descent. There were viewpoints out over the ocean and beaches, one with this distant view of our hotel.



We watched another iguana chasing a large lizard, just like in a Tom and Jerry cartoon, zigzagging through the leaf litter. The lizard took an arc around me and the

iguana took the direct route launching itself between my legs and it caught the lizard right behind me. Its tail was dangling from the iguana's



mouth. Sandie regrets not capturing my expression.

The sky was busy with pelicans; they were brown pelicans, the ones that dive full-tilt into the sea, but these were just cruising, not fishing.





We found a nice trail back across the swamp towards the exit, quieter as it was too narrow for the spotting scopes. There were hundreds of these colourful honeymoon crabs below the trail. I also got this better shot of a squirrel monkey, though at the time I thought it was another capuchin.

Almost back, we found another even quieter trail, this one leading to “the waterfall”. As it was the dry season I wasn’t too enthusiastic; it looked like a lot of climbing to what might be an Australian-type waterfall where we’d stand underneath it and



look for the damp spot. It turned out to still be trickling, a good place to see birds, but the terrain was mostly jungle, too dark for pictures of moving birds.

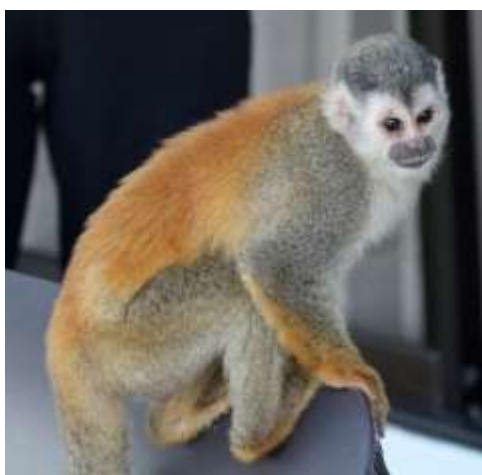
On our way back we met a French family who had just watched a snake catch and begin to swallow a frog. They said it had got stuck and they pointed to where they knew the snake to be but we never saw it.



By this time I could hardly walk and we were hungry and thirsty and dived into the first bar that had a food menu showing. This iguana was there with the same mission, perched on the roof, watching us eat. I forget what we



ate but it went down well and gave me enough strength to stagger around the corner to the beach’s taxi rank.



Back at the hotel our neighbour, a large fat guy from Iowa with a bare chest, came out onto the balcony to feed the iguana, but this time there was one of those rare squirrel monkeys there too. He fed chunks of banana to the monkey which was squealing away in monkey talk “Come on guys, we got a sucker here!” Within a few seconds we had



three monkeys and then ten. Iowa guy tried to feed the newcomers but he was too slow and one of them launched itself onto his bare chest, hanging from his boobs. There was a lot of screaming and dancing; unusual entertainment for the rest of us. No one permanently harmed.

Our first reaction to the monkeys' visit was to doubt their rarity. "They're not rare; they just moved from the jungle to the hotels." Their problem is they are just too cute for their own good. Their pictures even show up in messages from our phone company, especially if they are raising their rates. Seriously though, they have been badly affected by the pet trade. I heard a recent radio programme about the history of comic book advertising; not too long ago, kids could buy a squirrel monkey and have it delivered by mail, always a tragedy for the monkey and often for the kid, who'd open his parcel and meet a thirsty and seriously unhappy monkey.



Monday February 26th

Sandie found that she had a ghastly looking bright red rash around her ankles. It didn't hurt or itch but we had no idea what had caused it. The rash slowly faded over the next few days. Our guess later was that the permethrin spray we'd used for our safari trip was still active in Sandie's trousers and getting them wet with seawater had turned it into something nastier. Permethrin cream is known to cause rashes if left on too long.

We had to pack up for our transfer to the De Osa peninsula, but first we needed breakfast. In the light of the monkey incident we'd been discussing how the

hotel kept wildlife out of the restaurant. As the picture shows, there is only a short glass wall between diners and the outdoors. What stops bugs from visiting the lights or monkeys from joining the diners? We still don't know, but during breakfast a large iguana dropped down from the garden, pooped by our table, next to the railing, and did a round of the tables looking for handouts. A waiter came and cleaned up the mess, but wisely left the iguana alone.

Our driver took us southeast along the coast road, mostly through plantations of royal palms. He pointed out the location of an earthquake about ten years ago. The land between the road and the coast had collapsed, killing lots of people.

The isthmus of Costa Rica and Panama is thought to have formed as a result of plate subduction, with the Cocos Plate sliding under the Caribbean plate and forming a line of volcanoes. South and North America had been separate but on a slow collision course, each with its own zoo of animals. So Costa Rica has interesting geology, but at the cost of eruptions and earthquakes. It also has extreme biological diversity as those two zoos attempt to populate the other continent. It's still going on, of course. We noticed on our Chile trip that South America has no crows; it has caracaras instead and so far the crows have not prevailed and crossed the isthmus.

We turned off the main road at Palmar Norte, past Palmar Sud airstrip where we'd fly out from on Thursday. Nearby was this steam locomotive, built by Baldwin in the USA, and a relic of Costa Rica's railroads, now almost disappeared except for some commuter lines.



The road ended at a dock in Sierpe. We waited there for two other parties, English and American, and then we were off in a boat towards the Aguila de Osa inn. There was a scarlet macaw in a nearby tree, amazingly hard to find, a big red, yellow, and blue bird merging into the green foliage.



Peter, from the San Francisco area, and I shared the seat by the wheel housing as we needed the support; we both had bad backs and we were occasionally pounded by wakes and waves. This picture came from Englishman Andy; that's his wife Gill, next to Sandie.

Although we were speeding along the river, the crew appreciated that we were there to see the nature and they



made stops to see kingfishers and egrets. We also took a narrow channel through the mangrove swamp, not necessary

but an interesting diversion.



When we reached the open sea the crew was steering between rocks and we passed a series of headlands, getting pounded as we crossed the waves.

We slowed into Drake Bay and docked at the Aguila de Osa inn, where the staff gave us a drink and lunch and an explanation of how

the place works and where the walks go. The inn is a few steps up from the dock but the rooms are in buildings perched on the cliff above, over 80 steps up. Our room was dubbed the honeymoon suite; there was



certainly a lot of heavy breathing by the time we'd climbed up there. It was the last room along the walkway and very private. From our chairs and hammock we had a view of Drake Bay far below through a screen of trees and flowers.



We took off on a walk to the two beaches behind the inn but found that we had to drop down to the dock to get to the suspension bridge over the river and then a hundred more steps up to the ridgetop and down again to the beaches. Repeat in reverse if you've forgotten your bucket and spade.





The beaches were nice, a mixture of rocks and sand but I didn't think it likely we'd be trotting over



for an early morning swim. The gravelly areas were a war zone for hermit crabs, battling over shell possession.



The inn had appeared to be on its own in the forest but there is a village just along the coast and about a dozen other lodges scattered around the peninsula, and there's a ridge-top track connecting them. We had capuchin monkeys there too; they seemed to enjoy playing on the bridge's cables.

Sunset was time for drinks and snacks with dinner thereafter. All meals are included, but limited to three choices as there are only 11 rooms. Dinner tables are shared so you get to know your neighbours, in our case our fellow travelers from

the boat. We had Peter and his wife and sister from California; he used to work at Lawrence Livermore. Gill and Andy live at a village near Thame in the UK; he is a geologist and they've lived in a number of places around the world, including Indonesia. They were accompanied by Manfred, their own personal guide for a three week trip. Despite his German name he is a native Costa Rican and a great resource of local information.

This is a great place to see birds. These are some we managed to capture. They are from the left: amazon kingfisher, crested guan, yellow-headed caracara, snowy egret, and black hawk. The guan was in a treetop, falling from branch to branch and then recovering; clumsiest bird ever!



Tuesday February 27th

This was the day for our snorkeling trip at Caño Island. We had a later start so we had time to walk around the gardens and look for the other beach. And find some more birds.



The bird on the rock is a hawk, but whether it was a black or broad-winged wasn't decided. The pair of birds are black vultures, on what seems to be their favourite beach.



When we were shuttled out to the dive boat, we were kitted out with mask, snorkel, fins, and thin inflatable life jacket. When it became apparent that the snorkeling would only be from the boat, Sandie and Gill decided to back out and stay on the island's beach. If you've never snorkeled before it's a lot easier to learn in waist deep water; leaping off a boat into 10 feet of water just isn't a good idea. If we'd realized that before we'd have chosen a different excursion.



Caño Island is about 20 miles offshore so the boat is at full blast nearly all the way. We had life jackets for our ferry trip the previous day but not for this one, which we found a bit odd. Presumably dive boats have different rules but regular life jackets would be a good ideal for the transit to the island.



We paused long enough to pick up a pod of dolphins and then took off again with them playing in our wake, lots of fun for all of us. Amazing how fast they can go.

On reaching the island, Sandie and Gill were dropped off at the beach, literally as there's no dock so it's a wet landing. The rest of us went snorkeling in an area bordered by large rocks, with quite a swell. It was my first time snorkeling in 23 years but that didn't seem to be a problem. Back when I was a kid snorkels had a cage and ping pong ball to keep the water out but that seems to be a lost technology. These open ones must be a problem for beginners.

The novelty for me was that I could see! With short sight I always had to swim within inches to recognize a fish and quite often I would lose track of which beach I was on. Since my cataract operations I can now see well underwater.

I found quite a few fish, some very colourful, and I took lots of pictures. The show there is not as good as the Great Barrier Reef but it's definitely better than Brighton beach!





After an hour in the water I was pretty much worn out and climbing back into the boat was very hard. I had to bend to get my fins off and I think I lost my waterproof camera out of my pocket at that point. Unfortunately I didn't realize until I got my gear off and it was too late to go back down and find it. Of course I lost all that day's pictures so you'll just have to imagine my encounters with the great white shark and giant squid, just like I did.



Those of us that were too tired for the second dive were dropped off at the beach for about a half hour and then we all returned to a sandy beach on the mainland for lunch.



On our way we met this olive ridley turtle, small as sea turtles go. We don't know what the spiky white thing is unless the turtle was carrying a packed lunch, a sea cucumber sandwich perhaps.



After returning to the inn we still had time to go back to the gardens and find our local beach, on the edge of the village. The composite above shows some of the flowers we found in the gardens over the two days. Of course they are just gardens, planted with exotic and colourful species to make the guests happy. In that they succeeded.

Wednesday February 28th



Our last full day was going to be spent in nearby Corcovado national park. At breakfast Manfred asked if we'd felt the earthquake, a four point something he guessed, occurring at about 5 am. We hadn't but have no reason doubt him. The

De Osa area had a 4.9 just before we arrived and another 4.9 the day after we left.

We had the English couple and Manfred, and George and Linda from New York State on the trip; our guide was Toni. Corcovado is only accessible by boat, about a half hour trip around the peninsula. We had another wet landing, this time in medium waves.

We landed at the San Pedrillo ranger station, where we had to sign in with sexes and ages. I looked back in the book and couldn't find any other 70s. Not a good sign!



The first walk was a loop through the forest just behind the beach, looking for birds and bugs and lizards. Toni had his spotting scope along and, like Diego, he found some amazing stuff which we couldn't find without the scope. He found a sloth for us, but admitted it was hard for us to see, just an arm wrapped around a tree trunk with the rest of the sloth hidden behind it.

The trail crossed many streams so we had plenty of mud to negotiate, greasy roots too. Toni did his best to keep us upright. We found dragonflies, bats, spiders and a few birds and the composite below shows the few that we managed to capture with the camera. The bird is a kiskadee. Bottom right is a baby turtle that didn't make it out of the nest.



Bottom left is a sad remnant of a sloth. The sloth lives safely in its tree for about 8 days until it needs to take a dump, when it climbs down, sees to business, digs a hole amongst the tree's roots, and hides it before climbing back up. This sloth was found by a puma, the Costa Rican's name for a cougar, and it got eaten, leaving just the skull and some hair. Either bad luck or the puma had marked its calendar.



The jungle was a wild tangle of green, but there were a few interesting flowers and fruits. These orchids were growing on a tree trunk, high above our heads. The cashews were probably a remnant from the farm that preceded the park. The dangling white flowers are fragrant frangipani and the woolly fruit is kapok, once farmed to provide filling for insulated jackets and since replaced by synthetics.



We returned to the station via the beach and Toni served up a very welcome fruit snack of pineapple and water melon that fortified us for the next hike. The challenges of keeping the station together were apparent: the termite nest in the roof, the shattered rafters above our heads, and the wasp nest just above our picnic table.





Our second trail hugged the riverbank, climbing up root systems to get around trees and down to



planks to cross streams, and ended at a tall waterfall. On our way up we'd spotted this crocodile amongst logs and branches. The other picture shows the terrain; Gill crossing with Toni's help.



Some of us ended the trip with a very refreshing swim below the falls; too far upriver for crocodiles we were told. It was a pretty spot.



On our way back down we saw the croc again, or maybe another in the same area. . Back at the beach we saw this log floating in the shallows. We ate



a great lunch served up by Toni and then we had a short wait for our pickup boat to arrive. We were entertained by this great-tailed grackle, just as noisy and active as its cousins we used to have in our bird house back in Minnesota.

Then we noticed that our log was moving around in the shallows and was now showing its impressive teeth.



Wading out to our pickup boat was a brief affair – no one dallied!

Even after an eight hour trip, it was still only 2.30 pm when we got back to a welcome coffee. Later, Sandie repacked our cases to comply with Sansa Air's carry-on and checked baggage limitations. At dinner though, the inn's manager had a call from our agent to warn us that there was a problem with our flight. It was delayed and Sansa Air couldn't guarantee to get us to San

José in time for our connection. We could take the chance or charter our own flight. Somehow the cost of the charter came down from \$800, which is low for a 120 mile trip anyway, to \$160, so that's what I chose. Missing our other flights would be a lot more expensive. At least we'd have no silly weight restrictions,

Thursday March 1st

We were up well before dawn. We had an early breakfast, settled up with the inn, and said goodbye to our fellow travelers. The boat took us back upriver to Sierpe, with no stops for wildlife or mangroves this time, though Sandie did spot a "large pig with a long nose". Our cameras were packed away but our book says it was a Baird's tapir, a Costa Rican species a little different from the Malaysian tapirs we used to see at the zoo.

We'd been told to ask for Chino and, sure enough, he was there at Sierpe and he drove us to Palmar Sud airstrip. Soon we saw a small plane taxiing down the strip towards us, an Aerobell Charter's Cessna 206, an elderly single prop 4-seater, with plenty of room for luggage.. Surprisingly we had two pilots, with one appearing to be under evaluation. Perhaps we got a cheaper rate because our pilot had L-plates?

We flew along the coast; on our right were jagged hills cloaked with green and backed with high mountains, Costa Rica's spine. It was a calm clear perfect day, hard to be leaving. It was a little bumpy as we crossed the hills into San José. We landed on the main runway just after an airline jet took off but we turned away from the main terminal and parked near the cargo area. A van appeared and took us to Departures. We had plenty of time for our connection.

Tee-shirts and souvenirs seemed expensive, but this was the first time we had been in a Costa Rican shop, so we didn't know if the cost was normal or the usual airport mark-up. The quality wasn't high so we spent little. We flew to Mexico City and went through the same immigration hassle except that the lines were longer. We arrived in Vancouver early but then that time was squandered by the baggage handlers' secretly sending all the baggage to the wrong carousel.

It was dry and above freezing so not a bad night to arrive. Sandie managed to stay awake for the two hour drive home and we rolled into Hope at 1 am PST, just 22 hours after getting up. Next morning Sandie found a tick on her arm, smaller than a wood tick but larger than a deer tick. It came off easily enough but the bite was inflamed. It's since gone down and the doctor says it's a case of wait and see. It had been a great trip; we'll be back.

Love to you all from Pete and Sandie