

The Times-Picayune (New Orleans, LA)

Costa Rica, naturally

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LA CRUZ, COSTA RICA -- The toucan appeared from nowhere, gliding across the long terrace and scarcely missing the heads of our fellow diners before alighting on the door above us. Only at this moment could we discern the long, multi-colored beak that so uniquely identified our guest. Without hesitation, it hopped down to join us, settling on the breakfast table. Taking three long gulps from a glass of just-delivered orange juice, it cleaned its beak on a chair back and stared at us with familiarity.

What more could we ask from a visit to one of Costa Rica's more distant and pleasant nature lodges?

We had arrived several days earlier in the capital of San Jose on a third trip to this narrow, mountainous Central American democracy situated between Nicaragua and Panama. Heading inland and north, rather than to our more usual coastal destinations on the Nicoya Peninsula, we spent a few days in and around the capital city and then took to the Pan American Highway towards Nicaragua.

Scary? Dictatorial? Violent? War-torn? Costa Rica?

No.

Costa Rica has much to recommend it, including incredible biodiversity packed into a country just slightly larger than Switzerland. It has everything from white-sand Pacific beaches to fresh, cool cloud forests, and just about every climate and ecosystem in between. Add to this safe drinking water, the third longest life expectancy in the world, good food, and a friendly, south-Louisiana kind of populace.

The primary dangers we found in this Central American republic are also familiar ones to New Orleanians: pothole-riddled roads, some of which could swallow up a compact car.

After departing the area immediately around San Jose, we headed north from Puntarenas, a Pacific coast town reminiscent of Key West 40 years ago. We had often had a pleasant lunch in this colorful former banana port that runs the length of a narrow peninsula before catching the scenic ferry ride across placid gulf waters to the tip of Nicoya. Today though, mountains and volcanoes lured us away from the coast.

Our destination was Rincon de la Vieja, a stunning isolated volcano rising from the coastal plane along the country's backbone. It last erupted in 1991. The area is still not on most tour company routes or tourist must-see lists, and for this reason we enjoyed spacious roads and spectacular nature all to ourselves. We directed the Toyota along the Pan-American highway north on Costa Rica's Pacific side, enjoying the seemingly endless trail of volcanoes rising outside our windows. As the sight of one mountain ended, a view of another seemed to rise majestically above the equatorial landscape.

Reaching the colonial town of Liberia, we looked around at the low-rise stucco buildings in the traditional Spanish style, and thought Liberia seemed more typical of other Central American centers than the modern San Jose. Then we grabbed a popular country guidebook for exact directions to our hotel, the Rincon de la Vieja Mountain Lodge.

We followed the guidebook directions out of town along a dusty, bumpy road full of washboard erosion and steep dips (but no potholes). It was composed of a hard, grayish volcanic material that eventually changed to more typical clay and soil as we ascended the volcano. We were thankful we had rented a full-sized four-wheel drive vehicle with good clearance.

Getting lost

The problem was not so much the road, but that Lonely Planet Costa Rica, gave us very good and detailed directions . . . to the middle of nowhere.

We climbed the volcano until the road forked, and then headed down, ultimately coming upon a lone ramshackle house where a friendly man told us in Spanish that there was no way to reach the Mountain Lodge this way. "It's funny you should ask," he said as we turned the vehicle around. "A lost woman passed by here yesterday with that same book and asking the same question."

Exasperated after more than one-and-a-half hours of driving, we returned to Liberia along a different . . . equally bumpy road.

By the time we reached the hotel, it was nearly sunset. Beautiful, huge Guanacaste trees with outstretched branches accentuated the surrounding area. The Province of Guanacaste, where we were, is named after these trees that seem to challenge the volcanoes in grandeur and uniqueness.

We slept well in the Mountain Lodge's rustic accommodations, which included local handmade furniture decorated with beautiful carvings. During an outing on Rincon de la Vieja's slopes the next day, we spotted wild vanilla plants winding their way up the trunk of a large oak tree. Vanilla, a vine-like species of orchid, first came from Central America, taken by the Spanish for cultivation in other colonial areas, and then adopted by the French for growing in Madagascar.

But we were generally disappointed with the Mountain Lodge, which charged high prices for a mediocre "eco-lodge" experience and cold showers, more suited to the tastes of the young European budget travelers that we met in the dining room.

Debating where to head next, it was hard to decide between more mountains or the tropical Nicoya Peninsula beaches, both a relatively short drive away. We settled on a place recommended by the friendly and informative man staffing the tourist office: Los Innocentes Lodge, in La Cruz, Guanacaste Province. It's near another volcano, Orosi, and closer yet to the border with Nicaragua.

Eco-perfect

To our delight, the charming lodge and individual cabins truly lived up to the "eco-lodge" appellation in an extremely comfortable and hospitable fashion. Though not luxurious, Los Innocentes presented spacious, clean, and comfortable lodging and good, freshly prepared food. The filet of Tilapia, a locally-farmed fish, was particularly tasty prepared al ajillo (with garlic) style at dinner that evening.

What's more, Los Innocentes boasted some of the best wildlife viewing and nature trails we had found in Costa Rica, including another "Charlie" -- or in this case, Carlos, the dive-bombing, orange-juice gulping Toucan.

Shortly after arriving we took a two-hour horseback tour of the tropical forests at the volcano's base, all on Los Innocentes private preserve. We rode through pastures, high-canopied forests and cool rushing streams in an area once home to cows.

Los Innocentes, which belongs to the family of former Nicaraguan President Violeta Chamorra, was once a large cattle ranching operation. When the Costa Rican government created a national park to protect the nearby volcanic slopes from logging and ranching, Los Innocentes threw their lot in with eco-tourism. Now horses lead guests through the preserve. How much cattle is left? "Five -- no, six" said the guide, indicating a decisive commitment to eco-tourism from the owners. Thanks to this meager number, the former pasture area is being reforested and protected for generations to come. In fact, Costa Rica has protected more than one-third of its land area in parks, refuges and preserves, helping to create a biological corridor between north and south.

On that first outing, we saw howler and white-face monkeys; hundreds of parrots, squawking as they flew from tree to tree; hawks, eagles and a sloth, clinging sleepily high in a tree.

We returned at dusk to a display of raucous birds surrounding the lodge. Among them were the magnificent Montezuma Oropendolas, which build their long, sack-like hanging nests in tree branches and shout a head-turning, other-worldly call. Toucans, toucanets and colorful magpie jays completed the aerial display.

An orchid-hunting trip on foot the next day revealed more of nature's treasures, including butterflies, tropical wasp nests, gigantic old-growth trees and enough flowering native orchid species to satisfy the most fervent orchid enthusiast.

Scientists come here to perform research, using the lodge as a base, investigating the social behavior of spider monkeys, the habitat use of monkeys and small mammals and forest regeneration. From time to time, the lodge arranges lectures for its other guests.

Los Innocentes is the embodiment of what eco-tourism means in Costa Rica, including not just spectacular scenery, but also a commitment to improve and stabilize these rare environments through low-impact tourism. Eliminating the cattle ranch in particular has done much to halt the erosion and degradation of the area, and only through hotel revenues could the owners have afforded to eliminate their ranching.

We headed back towards San Jose, leaving the shadow of Mount Orosi, but sure that we would soon return to Los Innocentes.

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Charles L. Leary and Vaughn J. Perret, formerly owners of Chicory Farm dairy on the North Shore and Chicory Farm Restaurant in New Orleans, now run Trout Point Lodge in Nova Scotia. They plan to open a wilderness lodge in Costa Rica.

IF YOU GO TO COSTA RICA . . .

Country telephone code: 506 (from New Orleans, call 011-506)

Getting there: Grupo Taca (which is both Lacsas and Taca) fly daily from New Orleans to San Jose without a plane change, though they both have one stop. Continental and other airlines connect through other gateway cities. Taxi downtown is about \$10 (in either U.S. dollars or colones). The airport tax is \$17 when you leave Costa Rica.

Making plans: Creative Tours, a wholesale travel agency based in New Orleans, specializes in Costa Rica (and Cancun); company president Raphael Alvarado is a native of Costa Rica. Call a travel agent or 861-2639.

San Jose: A trip to Costa Rica always begins and ends in the capital San Jose, which lacks the architectural history found in some Latin American capitals. However, it's worth seeing the turn-of-the-century buildings, public parks and local restaurants. Visit the Jade Museum, the Gold Museum, Central Market, downtown Serpentarium and National Theater. San Jose is a good base for visiting the Central Valley, then rent a car to explore the rest of Costa Rica.

Where to stay in San Jose:

Marriott Hotel & Resort near the airport has Spanish colonial architecture and its own coffee farm, regular rates are \$199-\$229 for a double (specials make it lower). Good for a day or two, it has a golf course, pool, tennis, shuttle to downtown. Doubles \$199-\$299 (specials make it lower at times). (506) 298-0000 or (800) 228-9290; www.marriott.com/dpp/PropertyPage.asp?MarshaCode=SJO
Britannia Hotel is in a turn-of-the-century restored coffee baron's house; try to book a large, deluxe room. Doubles \$89-\$117. (506) 223-6667 or (800) 263-2618.

Hotel Alokí (formerly l'Ambiance) is a beautiful hotel with period furniture and a good restaurant in a good downtown neighborhood. Doubles \$89-\$100. (506) 222-6702; <http://crtimes.com/hotels/aloki.htm>.
Hotels in the countryside: Try bargaining in low season.

Hotel Capitain Suizo, Tamarindo Beach, Guanacaste Province, is the best place we've found. Swiss owned, it's about five hours by car from San Jose, on a beautiful Pacific beach. Doubles \$100-\$135, bungalows \$140-\$160. (506) 653-0353 fax (506) 653-0292; e-mail capitainsuizo@ticonet.co.cr. Los Innocentes, La Cruz, Guanacaste Province. In a lovely old hacienda that's been remodeled with care. You can hire horses with guides to explore. Doubles \$65-\$85. (506) 265-5484.

Rincon de la Vieja Mountain Lodge, adjacent to the Rincon de la Vieja National Park (turn off about 3 miles north of Liberia, Costa Rica. Apdo. 114-5000 Liberia, Guanacaste). Doubles \$55-\$75, also triples and quads. (506) 256-8206; www.costaricabureau.com/rincon.htm; e-mail rincon@sol.racsa.co.cr. Rental cars: Major chains, plus locally-owned Economy Rent a Car (try bargaining). Outside of Central Valley, rent a four-wheel-drive.

Where to eat in San Jose: Cafe Mundo, Calle 15 (pizzas, pasta in restore house in Barrio Amon); Tin Jo: Calle 11 (Pan Asian, good vegetarian options); Le Bilboquet (elegant new restaurant across from Hotel Britannia); Cafe Parisienne (in Gran Hotel Costa Rica, go for breakfast or coffee to people watch, hangout for expats); Cafe at the Teatro Nacional (good lunches and coffee in a downtown architectural landmark. More information: Costa Rica Tourism, (800) 343-6332; www.tourism-costarica.com; www.costarica.tourism.co.cr.

Correction:

Los Innocentes, an eco-resort in La Cruz in the Guanacaste Province of Costa Rica, is no longer owned by the family of former Nicaraguan President Violeta Chamorra, as reported in Sunday's Travel section. The grandfather of New Orleanian Mayra Viques-Ahrens bought the lodge from the Chamorra family in 1956, said her husband, Ricky Ahrens; Viques-Ahrens' brother, Jaime Viques, is now resident manager.(2/13/01)

The four-wheel drive Toyota seems to be on top of the world instead of on the road to Rincon de la Vieja, a dormant volcano that last erupted in 1991. PHOTO BY **CHARLES LEARY**
A butterfly alights on flowers in Los Innocentes wilderness preserve in Costa Rica. PHOTO BY **CHARLES LEARY**

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