New York Times Travel

Life at the Top in Costa Rica

By FRANCESCA LYMAN

IN the cool dawn light, I was hurriedly packing, tucking mosquito nets and flashlights into our duffel bags. My husband, our 6-year-old son and I had awoken to a rooster crowing outside our hotel on the outskirts of San Jose, Costa Rica's capital, ready to leave room service for the rain forest. Visions of butterflies and jaguars beckoned, as we were whisked through the still deserted streets for our charter plane to Corcovado National Park, one of the largest, least accessible, and most biologically significant of any tropical forest park in Costa Rica and one of the last refuges in the world for such threatened species as the jaguar, the ocelot and the tapir.

An overland trip by bus, car or jeep from San Jose to Corcovado can take as long as nine hours over rough terrain, yet the park, created in 1975 to ward off the threat of increased logging and gold mining to its exotic plants and animals, still attracts a spirited caravan of backpackers and eco-tourists. The 80-minute plane ride we chose instead, part of a four-day expedition package provided by Costa Rica Expeditions, gave us spectacular views of the coast and the lowland rain forest of Corcovado, situated on the Osa Peninsula, which protrudes into the Pacific just north of Panama.

Having booked an eco-tourism package to Costa Rica for the second year in a row, our family -- my husband, Bob Aglow, our son, Devin, and I -- was prepared for the heat and culture shock of remote lowland jungles. The winter before, we had visited a national park on the Caribbean side, Tortuguero, so named for its famous sea turtles (famous with us, since a few late hatchers waited past their season and made their legendary march to the sea before our very eyes). There, in a series of flat-bottomed-boat trips through a maze of mangrove canals, we had seen caimans, flamingos, herons, spider monkeys and Jesus lizards (so named because they seem to walk on water), but both the ocean and channels had been off limits to swimming, in deference to another indigenous species, the bull shark.

Last February at Corcovado, however, we were looking forward to swimming and surfing safely at a beach that conjured up the landfalls of Spanish conquistadors, the likes of Coronado and Cortez. We boarded a single-engine, six-seater Cessna prop plane in which I, seated next to the door, couldn't help nervously watching to make sure the handle stayed locked in the down position.

OUR climb over San Jose took us over shantytowns next to gated estates, then arid valleys etched with the terraced lines of coffee and palm plantations that had once all been rain forest. Between 1950 and 1990, Costa Rica lost almost half its forest cover, giving the country the highest deforestation rate in Latin America, according to David Rains Wallace, author of "The Quetzal and the Macaw: The Story of Costa Rica's National Parks" (Sierra Club Books).

Heading south along the Pacific coast, we passed a spit of land shaped like its name, the Whale's Tail, before flying over the vast pristine Corcovado rain forest, an area, according to historians, that humans never settled in any significant numbers, even during a 1930's gold rush. In fact, until the 1970's, the Osa Peninsula was so unchanged that, according to Wallace, it "probably supported every species that inhabited the area when the conquistadors arrived, from harpy eagles to squirrel monkeys."

On a small airstrip along the beach we were greeted by a parade of pack horses and carts from the lodge, and Lana Wedmore, a transplanted Colorado outdoorswoman, now manager of the lodge, helped put our bags on the carts. The only signs of the late 20th century here were a small stand for fruit drinks and Coke, a hangout for retired gold miners who seemed to long for the days before park authorities chased them off protected land

Walking barefoot, with sneakers in hand, we set off with the horse-drawn carts down a 45-minute stretch of beach to our lodgings, through the lapping waves of low tide. Local children hitchhiked on the horses' backs, letting out wild hoots as they passed one another. Undaunted in his new environment, Devin ran after them.

Behind a row of tall palm trees waving in the breeze stood an encampment of tents, and behind them a group of sturdy, high-peaked thatched-roof huts. The curve of the shore wound around in the distance, toward the national park far ahead, as a couple of scarlet macaws flew by in flawless unity, their brilliant red tails and signature squawks trailing behind them.

Soon after we arrived, staff members motioned us toward the "hammock room," a huge, screened-in thatched hut with beams from which hung rows of swinging hammocks. Here we drank fruit punch before heading off to find our tent assignments. The tents, giant, Tinkertoy-like cubes made of tubular plastic, are set on wooden platforms and undulate in the balmy ocean winds. Not the crawl-in-on-your-knees variety, these 10-by-10-foot "wall tents" hold two twin-size cots. The see-through screen walls dispelled any apprehension our son might have had about sleeping in a separate tent, yet the canvas tarp curtains could be unrolled for privacy.

After unloading our gear, we heard a horn announcing lunch. Our first meal was a rice and bean dish, accompanied by some sort of native fruit juice -- watermelon or cantaloupe. Like other meals cooked here -- hearty, regional dishes of fish, chicken, vegetables and rice -- it was served in the main building, another large thatched-roof, screened-in structure, this one attached to the kitchen.

This hall became a kind of cosmopolitan center where guests -- from Italy, Germany, Britain, and South America -- sat at two long tables and tried to find a lingua franca while passing plates of food. About 30 other tourists, including a group from a Manhattan high school, joined us that week.

The tent camp can accommodate up to about 40 people in its 20 wall tents, all of which overlook a glorious stretch of coastline -- deep-blue waves crashing over dark sand. The tents were perched on an embankment dotted with palm trees. The beach was a short walk down a rough-hewn staircase 20 feet away. I stepped around an assortment of hermit crabs and sand crabs in the sand before floating on my back among the fish in the warm, shallow waters of low tide.