



Sharing the Magic of the Coastal Rainforest

Experience a truly sustainable vacation.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TRAVEL EDITOR JAMES SMEDLEY

Getting There

International flight to San Jose followed by Sanza Regional flight to Puerto Jimenez and a 15-minute boat ride to the lodge.



CONTACT INFO

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From under the boat's canopy, our guide, Tomas, quietly hands off a well-weighted rod to my 12-year-old daughter, Lillian. He recognizes that much of the cruising done through the tranquil waters of Costa Rica's Golfo Dulce is at trolling speed, so he never misses an opportunity to throw out a lure. So far, we've been up close to pods of bottle-nose dolphins, weaved through shimmering schools of airborne tuna, and caught mackerel, jacks, and bonito, but what I'd really like to see is what's at the end of Lillian's line.

"I can't get this one in," she says, looking for assistance.

Doing my fatherly duty, I step up to the plate and, with one foot on the gunwale of the 24-foot panga, a local-style roofed boat, I lean back on the stiff spinning rod. The fish doesn't give an inch. Tomas turns the boat and follows it, while I maintain all the pressure I can muster. When the line goes slack, I almost fall backward.

Tomas examines the line, severed near the lure. "Shark...big snapper," he says.

Just a Boat Ride Away

We're at Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge on the southwestern coast of Costa Rica.

Accessible only by boat, we board a brightly coloured panga at Puerto Jimenez for a 15-minute ride across the gulf. From the water, all we see is a long pier jutting out from a phalanx of palm trees. The 165-acre rainforest preserve is within the 34,600-acre Piedras Blancas National Park, stretched along the perpetually calm turquoise waters of the Osa Peninsula's Golfo Dulce.

The stark, frigid December climate of northern Ontario seems worlds away as we navigate paths under the steamy canopy of the rainforest. The sounds, smells, plants, and animals are all new, yet vaguely familiar.

Through a break in the flowering plants and fruit trees, we approach the main lodge, a sprawling two-story structure of dark, sculpted hardwood – a giant tree fort in a giant forest. It's here we take most of our meals with other guests and watch as white-faced monkeys peer in from the trees, basilisk lizards race deftly over the water of a creek without sinking, and wild pigs patrol the outskirts.

The cornerstone of Playa Nicuesa's philosophy is to never let us forget we're guests of nature. Our cabin is an extension of the philosophy. Crafted from local hardwoods, each room opens to the broad-leafed plants of

the lower canopy. Darkness comes early in the rainforest, and we don't linger long after a dinner of seared tuna with soy, ginger, and garlic before crawling into bed.

The humid night air carries a cacophony of sounds, with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of animals, birds, and insects all vying to have their calls heard. Silence doesn't exist here, but it's a vivacious and soothing symphony that guides our sleep - until first light at around 5:15 am when the forest resonates with piercing screams.

"I'm guessing those are howler monkeys," I say to Francine, my wife. Although alarming at first, the frenzied howling becomes a precursor to morning that we look forward to.

Our first excursion is to the Osa Wildlife Sanctuary (www.osawildlife.org) down the coast a few miles, where Earl Crews appears on the beach accompanied by two monkeys. He explains that Sweetie and Winkie might hold our hands or jump up on us, but warns not to hug or hold them. "The only thing that holds them are things that want to eat them," he says.

Sure enough, Sweetie launches herself up on a delighted Islay's back, as we tour a series of pens and enclosures holding animals, including sloths, ocelots, parrots, white-faced and squirrel monkeys. Winkie takes Lillian's hand, showing her a sore spot where a spider bit him on the leg.

Crews explains that the sanctuary provides care to injured, orphaned, and displaced animals, many of which are casualties of the illegal pet trade.

Check List

- Binoculars.
- Pocket guide to creatures of the rainforest.
- Leave the cotton at home; bring light, quick-dry clothes.
- Blue and silver shallow-diving crankbaits.
- Stout 6- to 9-foot spinning rod with at least 20-pound-test line.

Interaction with the rainforest continues, with a rugged hike up a creek canyon to the base of a 100-foot falls. We kayak through mangrove swamps under the watchful eyes of crocodiles, monkeys, iguanas, and birds of all kinds. We hike rainforest trails by night to see snakes, praying mantis, peccaries, and frogs big enough to eat a chicken.

On to More Fishing

Squeezed between activities and meals, I manage to get down to the pier with Islay and Lillian to cast lures amongst schools of fish cruising the shallows. We also spend some evenings trolling in the panga, catching mackerel, bonito, barracuda, and needlefish.

The sinking tropical sun heralds the release of a rich fragrance wafting from the shoreline. I'm told it's the flower of the ylang ylang tree, an ingredient in Chanel No. 5 perfume.

Toward the end of our stay, I venture out of the calm of Gulfo Dulce with Captain Miguel Duarte Quintero into the open ocean. Trolling topwater and subsurface presentations is soon thwarted by the growing wind, so we head towards the coast where waves wash against a long sand beach erupting into a rocky headland. Miguel finds a shoal and we lower baited hooks to pull up red snapper and, silvery panpama.

Heading back into the gulf, Miguel throttles back over a nondescript patch of flat water. I cast live bait to where he points and immediately there's a huge boil, a sharp pull, then nothing. I rebait, cast, and a second boil is answered with a sharp hook-set and I'm hard into a strong ocean fish. I've been amazed at the power of saltwater fish of even 5 or 6 pounds, and what turns out to be a jack over 20 engages in a serious battle I eventually win. With more than enough in the creel, we take a few photos before releasing the silvery fish.

Homegrown

Recently given a sustainability rating of four out of five by the Ministry of Tourism, Playa Nicuesa is committed to reducing its environmental footprint. In addition to solar power, solar drying, and composting, the resort keeps a

garden and harvests much of its food from within the rainforest.

After angling, I join Francine and the girls for the Wild Edibles Tour, harvesting oregano, cilantro, coriander, hot capsicum peppers, and broad plantain leaves, which I learn are the wax paper of the rainforest. We sample cinnamon bark, germinating coconuts, as well as termites.

"They taste like carrots," says our guide, as she taps on the side of a tree to roust a line of tiny orange insects. Francine passes, but my girls and I agree the crunchy little bugs taste remarkably like fresh baby carrots.

Our last evening corresponds with the arrival of phosphorescence. We creep down to the pier in the darkness and stir the water with a stick. The movement is followed by a starry trail of greenish light.

"What is it, what makes the water sparkle?" asks Lillian, wide-eyed.

I'm about to explain that it has something to do with bioluminescent plankton, but I fall back on a better explanation that captures the perfumed air, flying fish, water-walking lizards, tasty insects, and all the other marvels of the Costa Rican coastal rainforest: "It's simply magic, my dear." ●

Traveller Info

THE TRIP

Lodge-based exploration of the woods and waters of Costa Rica's southwestern coastal rainforest.

TRANSPORTATION

Once at the lodge, we travel on foot, by kayak, or 24-foot panga boats with 115-hp four-stroke outboards.

ACCOMMODATION

Open-concept cabins with louver doors, private verandas, canopied beds, large living area, and open-air garden shower. Bar, dining area, library, and hammock-equipped relaxation zones at the main lodge. Three meals a day included, from \$160 to \$350 per day/per person, depending on cabin and season. Excellent enroute accommodations and meals in San Jose at Pura Vida Hotel 4 km from the airport.