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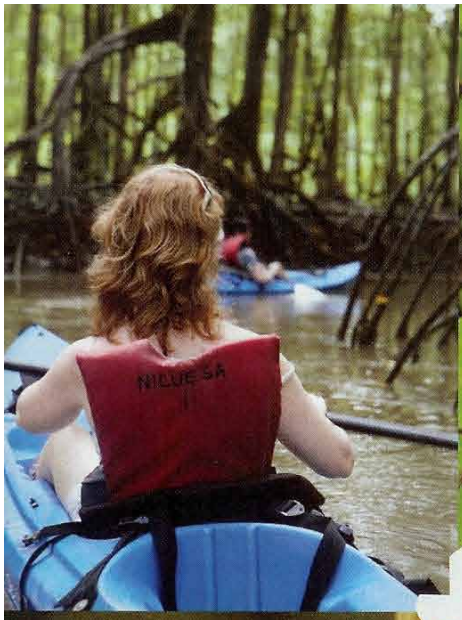
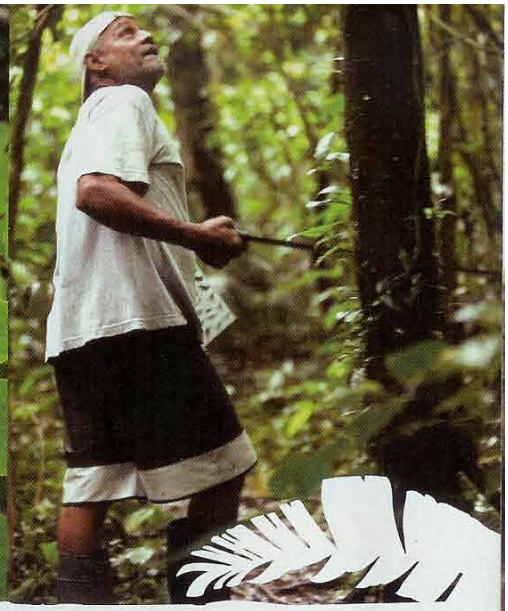
A GREENER SHADE OF MEXICO

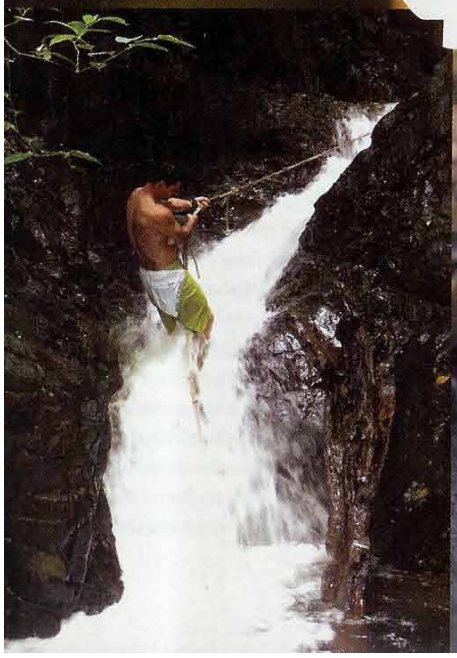


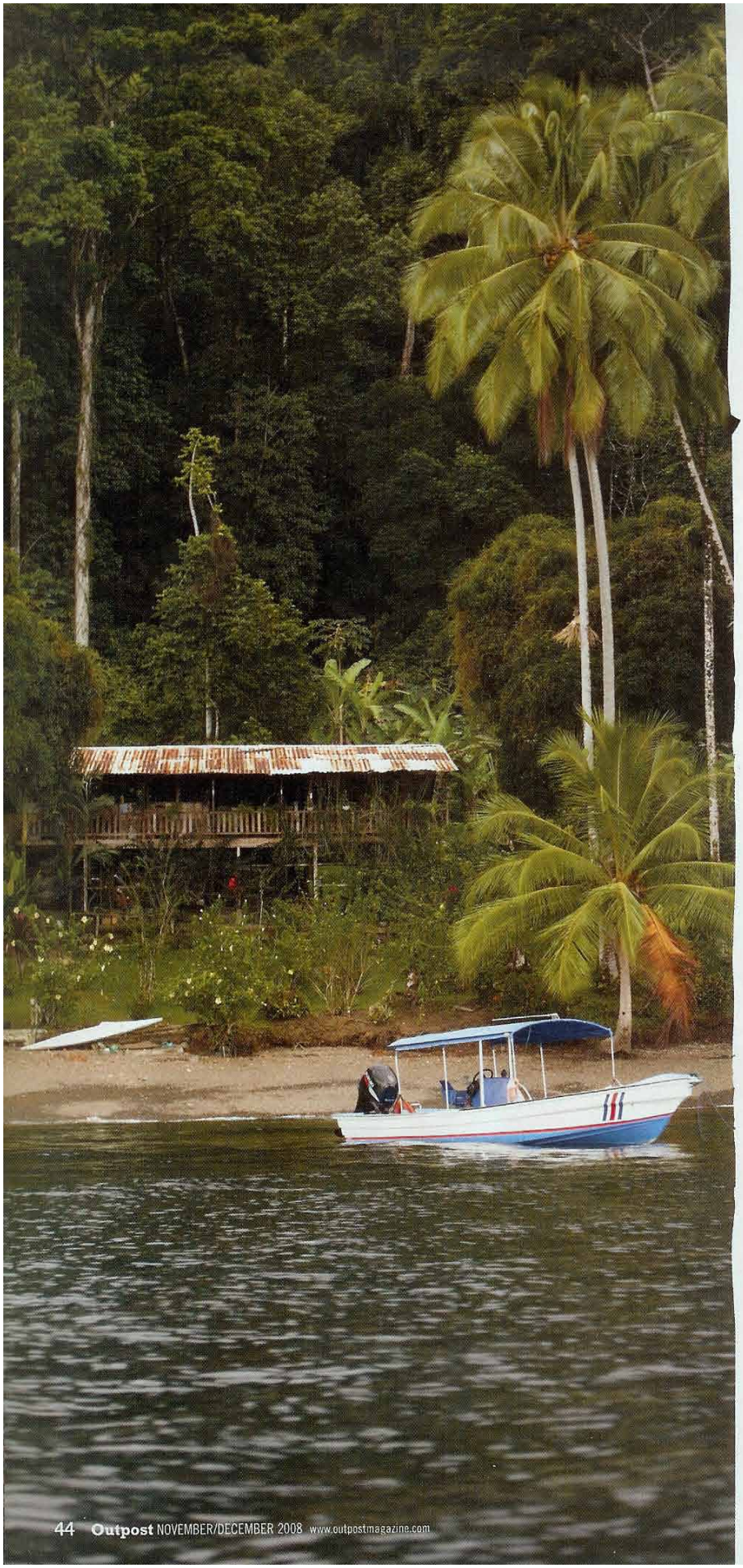


Rainforest Reverie

A REMOTE AREA OF COSTA RICA RICH IN BIODIVERSITY IS A PERFECT PLACE TO LEARN ABOUT LIFE, IN ALL ITS FORMS

STORY BY LIZA FINLAY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NAOMI FINLAY





YOU CAN SMELL THE RAINFOREST BEFORE YOU SEE IT.

The sharp scent of succulence that is slowly succumbing to wet, wafts over jagged mountaintops and falls through forests so thick with green, so heavy with condensation, they appear to be weeping vegetation. The natives say it is the smell of energy, the reek of growth, decay and regrowth. It is a natural life-death rhythm that, in the rainforest, plays at staccato speed. It is the tang of thousands of species of dewy fauna stewing in the hot sun. It is the aroma of Creation at its most brilliant.

As our boat slices through white-capped waters, I drink in the fragrance that has followed us from the single-runway airport and is creeping alongside us up Costa Rica's southwestern coast. We are headed for the Osa, a small jut of land that is Mecca to many eco-travellers. While Costa Rica covers only 0.03 percent of the globe's surface, it plays host to almost four percent of the Earth's total number of living species—and more than half of that biodiversity is concentrated here, in the Osa. In a 2001 government inventory, more than 2,600 varieties of plants were recorded in the region. Nearly 500 species of animals call the area home. If Costa Rica is an environmental treasure, then the Osa is the jewel in its crown.

I want to see it all. So here I am, perched in a speedboat jetting through blue waters that bear the brick-like tint of a receding red tide, headed for total rainforest immersion. Specifically, I'm bound for Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge. Located in the Osa just north of Golfito on the Golfo Dulce (sweet gulf), Playa Nicuesa accommodates guests in cabins built right into the jungle. Better, the lodge is situated at the intersection of three distinct eco-systems, where rainforest, ocean and river meet. Bull's eye.

The jetty angles for land and I scan the shoreline for signs of life. I see none. Miles of black sand and undulating emerald forest disappear into the distance to the north and south and, as far as I can tell, this speck of shore offers nothing more

THIS PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM:
What the natives call a Jesus Christ lizard; Eric, birdwatching; Dense mangrove.
OPPOSITE: A local's rainforest hideaway.

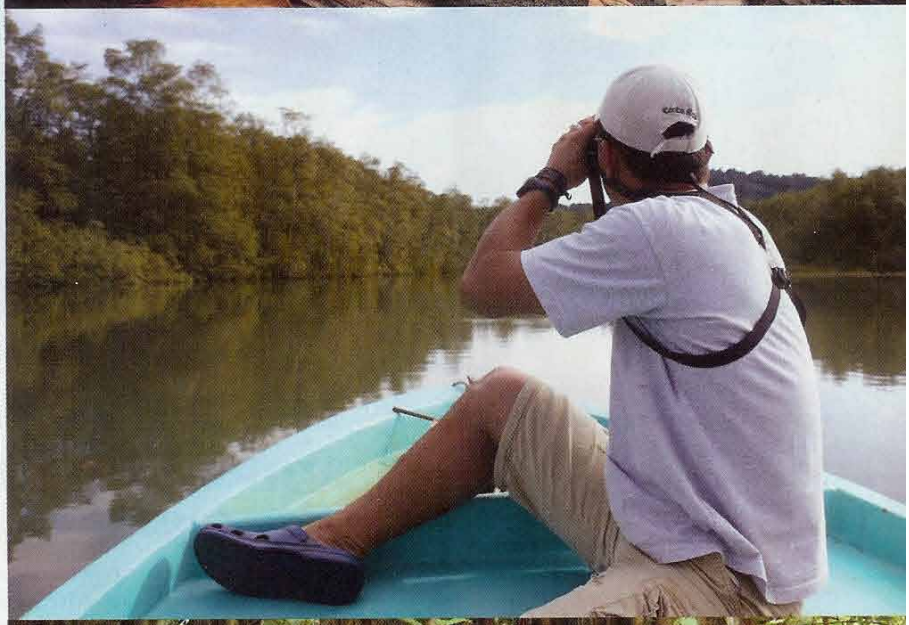
habitable than grey rock. As we inch closer, though, I see we are heading for a lone dock emerging from the depths of that ubiquitous rainforest.

Where is the lodge, I wonder? The people? My travelling companion, photographer Naomi Finlay, and I wanted a truly authentic jungle experience—rainforest, unplugged—but perhaps our hosts have misinterpreted our ability to "rough it" in the rainforest. Could something have been lost in translation, I worry?

As we pile out of the boat, our guide, Eric, points out the varied pleasures of the water—kayaking, snorkelling, swimming. "But look out for the crocodile," he warns. There is collective silence. Finally, timidly, I venture, "How, exactly, do we *look out for* a crocodile?" Eric appears puzzled. "I mean," I continue, "if you're in the water and spot a crocodile, isn't it already too late?" He laughs. I'm not sure how to interpret his sardonic chuckle.

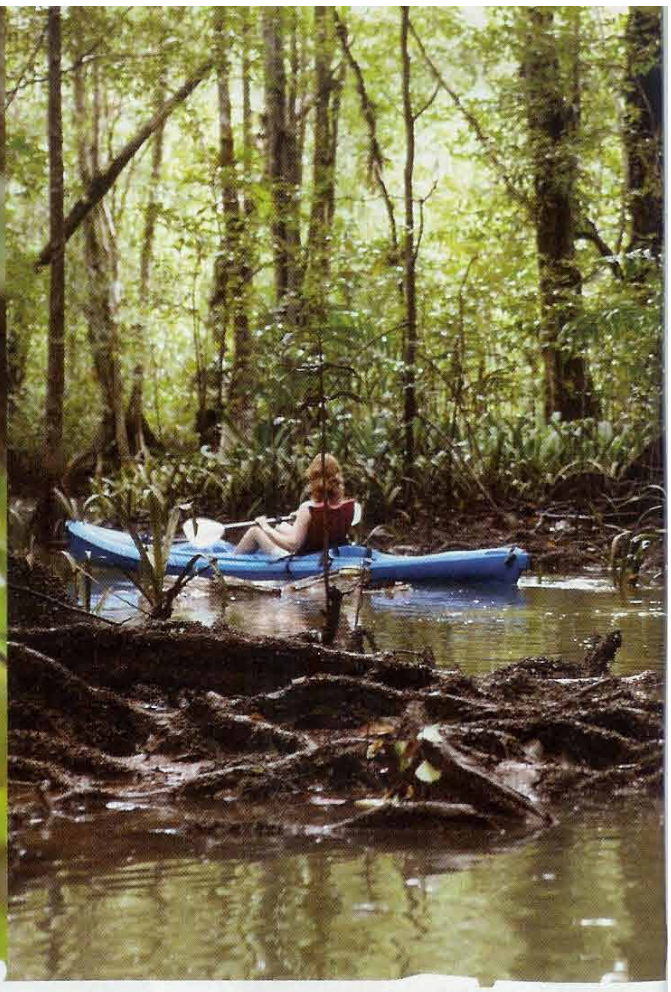
A gravel path snakes its way through the forest and ends, to my relief, at an open-air lodge. Built high up in the canopy surrounded on all sides by towering almond, acacia, sura and palm trees and the shrill squawking of scarlet macaws ("They mate for life," Eric tells us. "No wonder they are always fighting"), the building houses the bar and dining room and is more tree house than hotel.

Tarzan would be right at home here, I muse. And, for the next four days, it will be home to me, too.



MORNING COMES AND I AWAKE TO SHEETS THAT are so heavy with moisture they mould to my frame like wax drippings. I crawl out of bed and reach into my pack for something to wear. Everything is damp. In fact, the air is so heavy with moisture I want to suck it through a straw.

Naomi and I make our way to breakfast, carefully scanning the path for snakes. The coast is clear of reptiles, but zigzagged with troops of leafcutter ants, all



heading for one, unseen destination, their insect intuition more precise than any man-made GPS. Each acre of rainforest contains more than 22 million of these industrious insects and each ant carries leaves up to three times its size. Following their lead, we pick our way to the dining room to find fortification for the five-hour rainforest trek ahead of us.

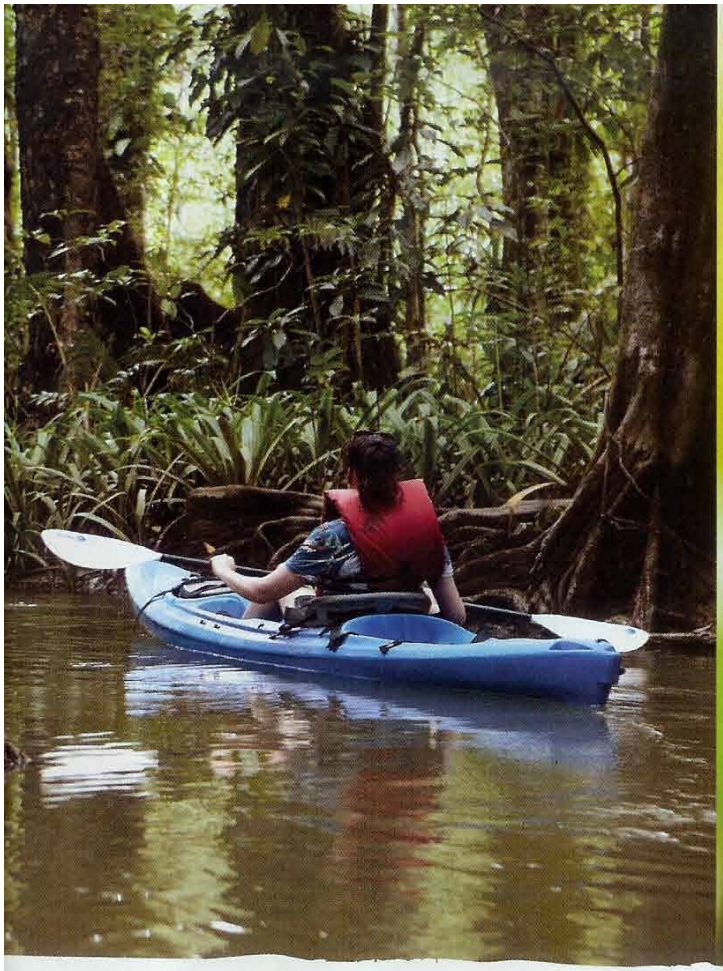
Seated at the dining table is a gangly, barefoot man wearing little but a torn T-shirt and the scruff of yesterday's growth. "Good mornin' and how are y'all?" he drawls before rising to hand each of us a glass of watermelon juice. "Relieved that we didn't encounter any snakes on the way here," I reply with a nervous giggle. Richard, Playa Nicuesa's resident yoga teacher, nods sympathetically and then proceeds to tell us about a recent encounter with a three-metre-long Fer-de-Lance (the most dangerous snake in Central and South America). Seeing my stricken look he says, without a trace of irony, "Darlin', you do know it's a jungle out there, right?" Yes, I know. What I don't know is how to reconcile my curiosity for all the rainforest offers with my phobia of snakes.

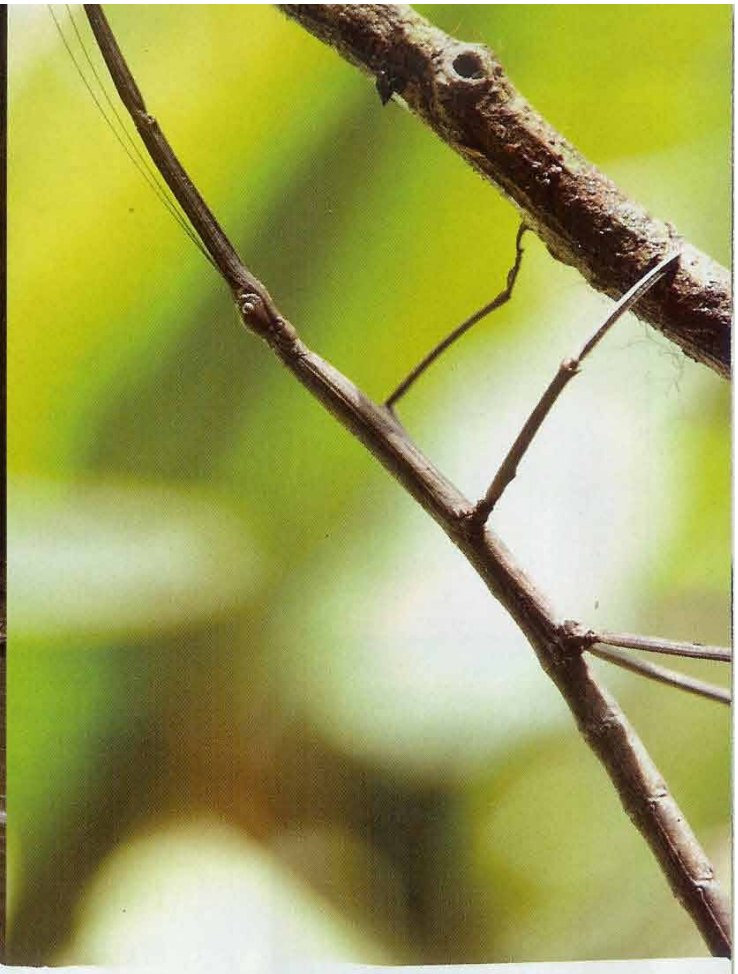
The moist green air settles around branches and leaves like a wet shawl

"Fears are opportunities for bravery," says Richard, holding my gaze with his steely blue eyes. Closing his palms in what could almost be construed as prayer position he continues: "You decide. Do you want to be afraid, or do you want to find inner courage?" I meditate on that, wondering how bad it would look for an investigative travel writer to abandon her story and hightail it for the nearest Four Seasons. Finally, Richard, who has the air of Mahatma Gandhi and the body of a 60-year-old hippy, throws me a lifeline. "Besides, Eric will be your guide. Just walk in his footsteps."

I exhale. It seems that Playa Nicuesa is not only catering to my bodily needs; Richard, a Buddhist-Mormon ex-Marine yogi, has now become my spiritual guide through the rainforest experience.

But, Eric, a strapping young Costa Rican with a degree in environmental studies, awaits, hovering at the edge of the dining room, pack on. We head out, making our way through muddy trails that will, eventually, take us to a dry riverbed and then up to a waterfall that bridges the Playa Nicuesa property and the bordering national park. In fact, about 21 percent of Costa Rica's rainforests are protected within the national park system, making them easily accessible to natives and eco-tourists alike. Combine that ease of admittance with Costa Rica's peace (the





LEFT TO RIGHT: A northern tree boa; Stealing silently upriver in search of crocodiles; A stick insect.

country has no military) and stability (Costa Rica has been a democracy since 1889, with a couple of blips of unrest) and it's easy to see why eco-tourism was hot here long before it took off in other parts of the world.

We don't get far before Eric stops to point out a tree, dripping with philodendron vines that cling to the sturdy trunk as they wind their way up toward the dappled sunlight. "This is an acacia," Eric tells us. "It's a hardwood. The Incas used this tree to poison the tips of their spears." We take a few more paces and then halt again. "This is called a Fer-de-Lance tree," says Eric, pointing to a tree bearing the same colouration as its namesake snake. "It has unique white, red and yellow rings. It is nearing extinction so it is now protected by the government."

And so it goes: every few steps our small group stops to savour another spectacle—a blue butterfly (what Eric refers to as an acalatia luminosa, a rare plant known as *Calathea lutea*, whose leaves have a silvery wax under them that illuminate in the moonlight), a naked Indian (the gumbo limbo tree). This area, Eric boasts, has 700 varieties of trees and, according to the World Resources Institute, the country has 615 species of birds and animals per 10,000 square kilometres—roughly six times that of Canada and the United States. As for insects, well, they may be too numerous to count. As I settle on the edge of a moss-covered log to catch my breath, a gleaming turquoise creature alights on my forearm. Slowly, I gesture to Eric, pointing at the brilliant scarab-like bug. "What is this?" I ask breathlessly. Eric's brow wrinkles. "I don't know," he admits, before gently scooping the tiny treasure into a bag. (Hours later, after consulting a text, he is able to give the insect a name—*avispa rastrera*, more commonly known as the cuckoo wasp. For Eric, who has spent his entire life exploring the rainforest, it is a momentous discovery. The jungle is still revealing its innumerable treasures.)

The journey through the jungle inches on. The sun is now higher in the sky and the moist, green air hangs thickly around branches, settling around leaves like a damp shawl. My legs feel leaden. Eric's energy, though, is endless. Around every corner is another natural marvel—Heliconias (false birds of paradise) that decorate the landscape the way dandelions do at home, owl butterflies and Central American lizards. There's a lot of ground to cover; I can see it's going to be a long hike. But here, in the heart of the jungle, time is a relative concept. It matters little what the creeping hands of a clock dictate. Here, time is measured by the sun, which at its zenith can be scorching, and by the scuttling rain clouds and the torrent they might bring.

Our skies are clear and we press on to the riverbed where Eric points out the

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A millipede; Braiding the aptly named Panama hat palm; The resident scarlet macaw; A male howler monkey; The author perusing sodden pages in the hotel library; Wild torch ginger; A bottlenosed dolphin; Hibiscus grown for medicinal purposes in the hotel garden; The long dock at Playa Nicuesa.

tracks of ocelot and peccary (a medium sized, pig-like creature). There is very little wind in the rainforest so the creation and re-creation of plant life lies with the animals, who spread seeds as they eat, move and then defecate.

We reach the waterfall at midday and take a cooling dip before retracing our steps back down the mountain to the lodge. As we duck under a grove of bitter cane, whose red and orange flowers hang over our path like a rainbow, Eric makes a sudden stop. "Shh," he commands, holding a finger to his lips. There is a rustling in the leaves to our left. I grab for Naomi's arm, almost knocking the camera out of her hands. "Snake?" I whisper. "Peccary," Eric murmurs in reply. And then I hear it—a series of low grunts coming from the undergrowth. Eric takes a stick and disturbs the bamboo. The grunts turn to squeals and three of the porcine creatures take off through the jungle creating such a racket that birds take flight, beating their wings and squawking their disapproval. Overhead, high in the canopy, a troop of white-faced capuchin monkeys join the chorus, howling good-humouredly at the comedy playing out beneath them.

The lodge is almost in sight and my focus is clouded by images of ginger iced tea. Sweat is dripping down between my shoulder blades and after five hours in the jungle the once-sweet smell of rainforest has turned sour. The stench and the steam-filled air are suffocating. I start stumbling on root systems. Suddenly, Tomas—the lodge's oldest guide—strides out of the forest. Tomas was born on the land where the lodge now stands. Once a chocolate farm, his family harvested the cacao pods until, in the late 1970s, a fungus wiped out 95 percent of the Costa Rican chocolate crop. He turned to coconuts. Tomas tells of loading up his boat with coconuts every week and rowing them down the coast to the market. Once, the boat tipped and he had to doggy paddle frantically to collect all of his capsized cargo.

Tomas wears shoes the way other men wear ties—occasionally and with great avoidance. Today, though, he is not only sporting a pair of well-worn black Crocs, but also a long knife. He walks softly through the jungle carrying the big stick. Seemingly at random he hacks at an offending vine or stabs at a tree. Looking over his shoulder periodically to check on my progress, I realize Tomas is clearing a path for me. Or maybe he's not. Maybe he just has the survival instincts of a man born in the wild.

In Costa Rica, being ecological and being patriotic are inextricably intertwined. Love of the land and love of country are inseparable

When the land was bought for the lodge, Tomas was living deep in the forest, hunting to live. Like most Costa Ricans, Tomas is keenly aware of his country's natural gifts. In Costa Rica, being ecological and being patriotic are inextricably intertwined. Love of the land and love of country are inseparable. But, while hunting may have been politically incorrect, for Tomas, and many others, survival trumped politics. After the chocolate blight, the economy was slow to recover; the government had invested in the industry and most labourers had abandoned the banana plantations for the more lucrative chocolate farms. Coffee and palm oil slowly gained ground, but at great expense to the rainforest. Between 1940 and 1990, 54 percent of the rainforest was lost. Eco-

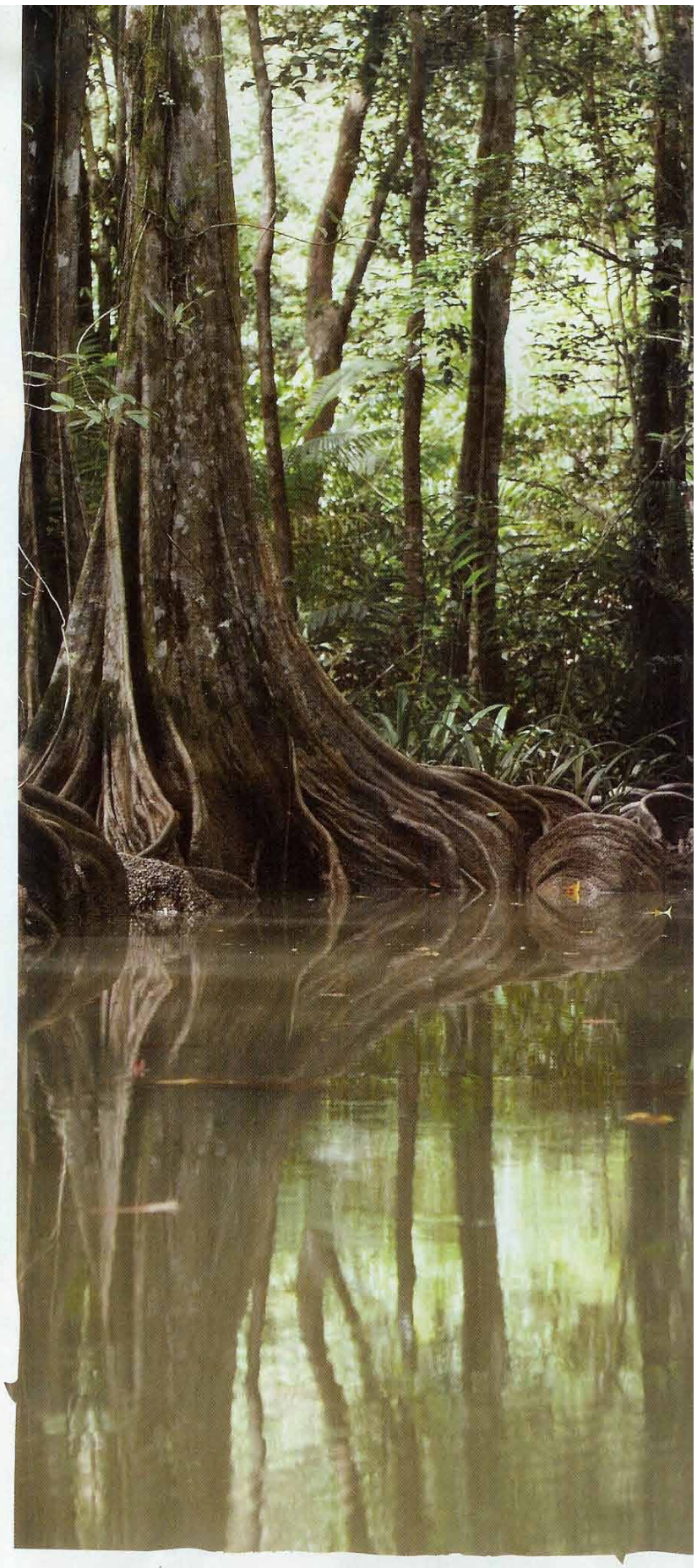
tourism not only buoyed the nation's wealth—it now brings in $1 billion annually—but also saved a natural wonder. Today, there are 24 national parks.

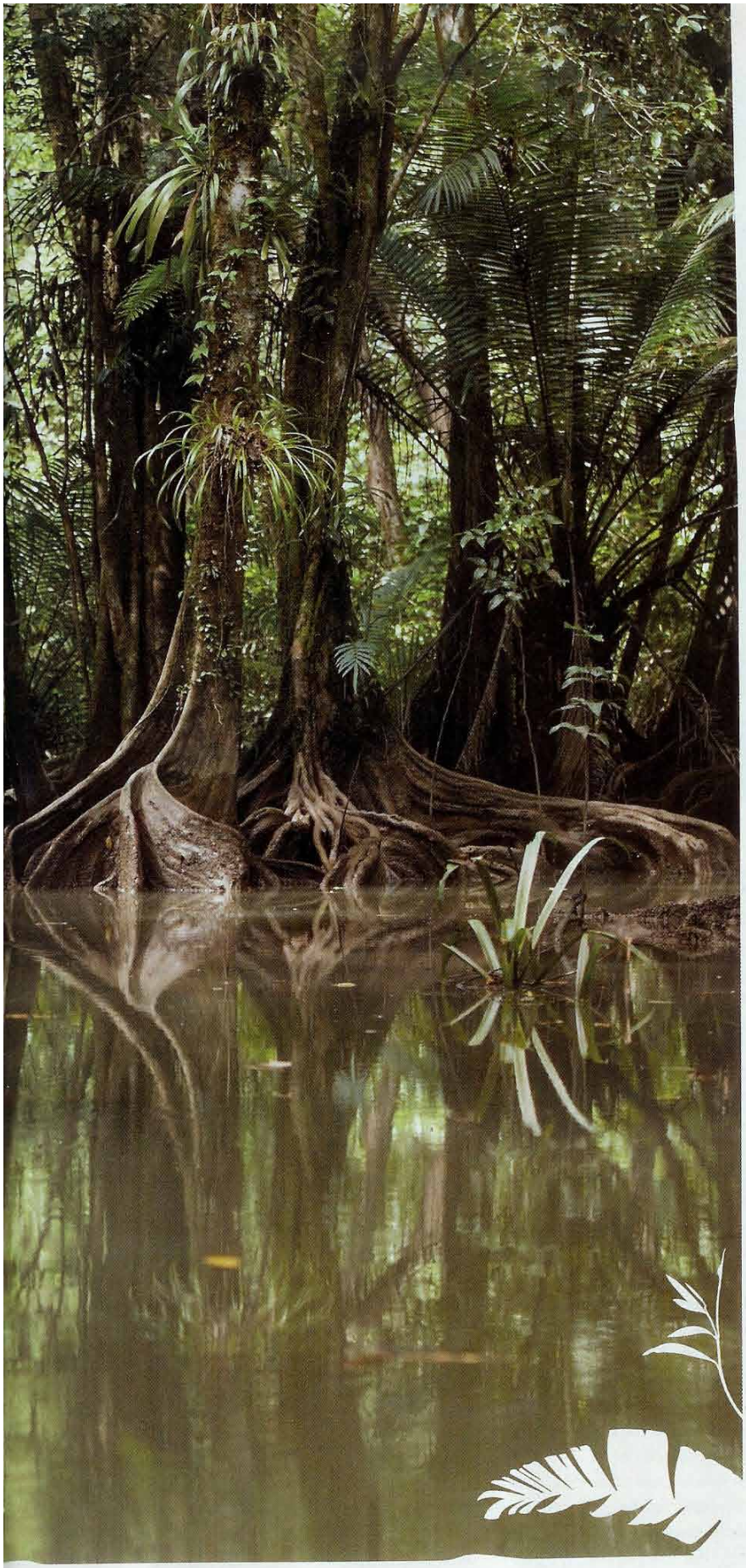
Eco-tourism also provided many Costa Ricans, like Tomas, with employment. So, when Playa Nicuesa's owners bought the overgrown old chocolate farm, they offered Tomas a deal: he stops hunting, they employ him as a guide.

Tomas leads us into the lodge just as the sky turns black and the heavens above begin to open. As the raindrops hit the broad green acacia leaves, the forest echoes like a tympanic symphony. When the tempo slows, the bullfrogs bring in some bass. Cradling my coveted iced tea, I settle into a hammock, close my eyes and savour the concert.

"SO, WHAT ARE Y'ALL UP TO TODAY?" ASKS RICHARD, unfurling from lotus position to intercept Naomi and me as we wind our way down the path to the dock, following the scent of the hot coffee being loaded onto the boat. Today, Eric will guide us through a labyrinth of rivers and tributaries that pulse through the Osa like arteries before emptying into the ocean. The banks of these rivers are thick with mangrove and the twisted trees are home to a whole subset of jungle life.

Boat loaded, we set off, bouncing over the morning chop toward the river mouth. Minutes later our captain, Alejandro, pulls back the throttle. Eric leaps to the bow, pointing to a group of grey fins breaking the surface in front of the boat. A pod of bottlenose dolphins are right in front of us and they aren't shy—breaching in front of the bow, hiding under the hull, racing alongside us like playful pups. And then they disappear. Eric drapes himself over the bow and taps the side of the boat with his fingertips. Nothing. He does it again. Still nothing. We sigh and prepare to pull away when two of the dolphins come to the surface right beside the boat, belly-side up. I just barely resist the temptation to reach over and





LEFT: Stately mangroves reveal a root system that pierces the calm waters.

scratch their smooth, pink stomachs.

Leaving the dolphins behind, we pick up speed and soon pull into the river. The rainforest recedes only to be replaced by the thick thatch of mangrove wood, the trees' sinewy stems lending the riverbank a graceful architecture. But the mangroves aren't only decorous; the root systems that grow in the brackish waters where river meets ocean clean salt and silt, making these waters habitable for a vast number of fish, birds and, yes, snakes. In particular, the northern tree boa, the reptile Eric is intent on delivering to Naomi and me.

The trees stand, Tolkien-esque, while we, Hobbit-like, slide through silently, stealthily, as if afraid that the giant trees might pull up their roots and come striding after us

As we ready our kayaks, we find Eric and Alejandro peering intently up into the overhanging growth. "What are you looking for?" I ask. "The boa," Eric replies. Boas are solitary creatures. They live alone and roam slowly over a very large area for prey. There are more than 30 species in the boidae family of snakes—a family whose members all kill by constriction and includes pythons and anacondas, the granddaddies of the line.

The northern tree boa Eric is scouting has inhabited the mangrove on this riverbank for months. It's about five metres long, Eric tells us, extending his arms wide in demonstration. We slip into kayaks, start paddling downriver and it isn't long before Eric spots his reptilian friend coiled around the branches of a mangrove. Taking a calming breath, I paddle over

LEFT: Tomas holding his Jack fish.
RIGHT: An unfriendly croc.

and peer up into the maze of stems. Eric, we soon realize, has grossly exaggerated the size of his snake. As it begins to unravel and wind its way down the trunk, its yellow scales, barely discernible amidst the mangroves' yellowish leaves, I guesstimate it's about two metres from flicking-forked tongue to tip.

There are around eight types of mangrove in Costa Rica, but only two grow in this region—the red and the black. As we turn the noses of our kayaks up into a narrow tributary, black mangroves instantly surround us, towering overhead, blocking sun and sound. The forked root systems pierce the briny waters of the glade in almost menacing form. The trees stand, Tolkien-esque, while we, Hobbit-like, slide through silently, stealthily, as if afraid that the giant trees might pull up their roots and come striding after us.

The only sounds are the slow slicing of paddles in water and the occasional call of kingfishers as we soak in the eerie silence before heading for the warm sun, and home—where mojitos, made using mint pulled right from the lodge's gardens, await.

NIGHT FALLS FAST IN THE JUNGLE. BY FOUR, THE dense, green growth has blocked the rays of the setting sun, obliterating light long before the orb dips below the horizon. Still, sunset does little to slow the pace of life. Day or night, the rainforest teems with unseen movement, it fairly reverberates with the energy of thousands of species of plants and animals living and breathing. When the sun sets, the night shift starts. The rainforest never sleeps.

And tonight, nor do we. The deafening din of animal and insect life almost drowns out the breaking surf, so, after dinner, Naomi and I follow the paths down to the beach. There, we find Tomas pulling into the pier, giant Jack fish craddled in his large hands. Smiling mischievously he stands at the end of the dock and begins to call, "Cocito, Cocito."

Naomi and I look at each other and shrug in puzzlement.

"He treats that crocodile like a pet," says Richard, surprising us by strolling out of the darkness.

"He's calling the crocodile? No way."

"Cocito, Cocito," Tomas calls again and, troublingly, the massive beast actually comes, gliding out of the dark waters under the dock. I quickly turn to leave. I have learned much from the rainforest—I have learned to appreciate my own insignificance in this, a world so rich in non-human life forms. And, I have learned the significance of courage. But this, this is too much.

As if reading my mind, Richard puts a hand on my shoulder. "The jungle teaches you things," he says, with gentle conviction. "It teaches you to be quiet, to listen, to be aware. The question is, can you take that deep listening and deep awareness back home with you?"

LIZA FINLAY is a Toronto-based freelance writer and is **Outpost**'s deputy editor.

NAOMI FINLAY photographs for a variety of magazines both in Toronto and in her native Australia.

MAP: STEVE WILSON; PHOTO: NAOMI FINLAY

Full name: Republic of Costa Rica
Location: Central America, between Nicaragua and Panama, bordering the North Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea
Capital: San José
Area: Land 50,660 sq. km; water 440 sq. km
Population: 4.2 million
Ethnicity: Mestizo/white, 94%; black, 3%; Amerindian, 1%
Languages: Spanish is the official language; the second language is English
Religion: Roman Catholic, 76.3%; Evangelical, 13.7%; other, 10%
Currency: Costa Rican colon (CRC)
Time zone: UTC/GMT -6
Climate: Costa Rica is a tropical country that experiences little change in temperature throughout the year. While temperatures do drop the higher the altitude, the climate is pleasant through both the dry and rainy seasons
Natural hazards: Flooding during the rainy season; hurricanes, active volcanoes and periodic earthquakes are not uncommon

WHEN TO GO

The dry season, between December and April, and the beginning of the rainy season, between May and July, are the best times to visit. During the rest of the rainy season it can be harder to get around as dirt roads become muddy and flooding and mudslides are known to occur. If you're a surf nut, the Pacific Coast offers superior waves in the rainy season, and on the Caribbean coast, the best swells occur from November to May.

GETTING THERE

The majority of flights arrive at Juan Santamaría International Airport in Alajuela, about 20 minutes from San José. There are direct flights from Canada though most connect through an American city such as Atlanta, Charlotte and Miami. Within Central America, it's easy to reach San José by bus, as a comprehensive bus system links the Central American capitals together.

GETTING AROUND

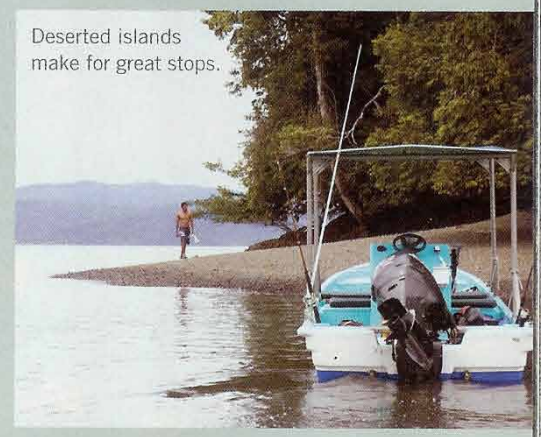
Costa Rica is small, which means flights within the country are short and not too expensive. There are two domestic airlines, Sansa and Nature Air. Nature Air, a recent partner in the UN's World Heritage Alliance for Sustainable Tourism, is the world's only carbon neutral airline (**www.natureair.com**). It compensates 100 percent of its emissions by giving funds to local landowners for the preservation of tropical forests. Travellers can chose among daily flights from San José to 17 destinations in Costa Rica and Panama. Public transportation is easy and affordable. Buses go to almost every city and town in the country, and taxis are easy to find and inexpensive. Driving can be tricky—most roads are muddy, single lanes riddled with potholes that wind around mountains and are prone to flooding and mudslides.

WHAT TO SEE AND DO

Our writer travelled to the Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge (**playanicuesa.com**), an eco-travel destination accessible only by boat. The area contains 2,600 varieties of plants, making it Central America's largest remaining rainforest on the Pacific Coast. The lodge is built from naturally fallen trees and recycled materials, and uses solar power. Visitors can spy on more than 250 bird species, fish for Pacific marlin, play sous chef for a meal and kayak and snorkel in the Golfo Dulce. Packages are for three to seven nights.

For surf fiends, Jacó, pronounced "ha-ko," is one of the best places to surf in the country and, located midway along the Pacific coast, it is the closest surf town from Juan Santamaría International Airport. Surf lessons are available for those wanting to learn, as the beach's mellower sections offer waves that suit even the most timid of beginner.

With the only active volcano in the country, Arenal is one of the most fascinating destinations in Costa Rica. Arenal Volcano has been spewing lava almost every day for about 40 years, and the pyrotechnics are best viewed at night. While the most popular attraction is the view itself, the area also offers volcano hikes, horseback riding, mountain biking and river rafting. Or try a canopy tour—strapped into a harness, you zip along a cable that connects a series of treetop platforms, allowing you to immerse yourself in the rainforest.



Deserted islands make for great stops.