

## **Welcome to the Jungle: Costa Rican eco-tourism puts visitors at one with nature**

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By Phil Greenvall, Register Travel Editor

The eyes of the caiman bounced back the beam of my flashlight and glittered, like two rubies floating in the black night.

It seemed kind of magical – the jewel-like eyes flaring out of the emptiness at exactly the spot I was told the creature would be, where he was almost every night. I was only a few feet from the footbridge that would take me out from under the jungle canopy, over the caiman’s lagoon to the beach and Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge’s pier, another favorite — though less dependable — nightly caiman hangout.

Though there were no more caiman eyes in the waters beneath the long, narrow dock, overhead was an unexpected, even more memorable sight: a clear sky flooded with a brilliant star field, a vast spread of diamonds covering the jet black heavens. The sharp contrast of the pinpricks of light and emptiness was spectacular, and unimaginable in the polluted Connecticut atmosphere.

Of course, the mere fact the sky was clear was a surprise. I was in Costa Rica late in September, the start of the rainy season, which annually causes Playa Nicuesa to close for a couple of months. I was sampling Costa Rican eco-tourism there and at Selva Verde Lodge & Rainforest Preserve. Besides the reliable old caiman and a glorious night sky, I found monkeys galore and fascinating insights into the chocolate and pineapple industries, got up close to strange animals at a remote wildlife rescue refuge, survived white-water rafting and simply marveled at jungle wonders.

Playa Nicuesa and Selva Verde both cater to the eco-tourist trade, but have different appeals.

Playa Nicuesa is surrounded by the mostly uninhabited rainforest of the massive Piedras Blancas National Park in the south. Not far from Panama, it’s on the eastern shore of Golfo Dulce, a Pacific Ocean bay with the Osa Peninsula forming the opposite shore. The only access is by boat.

Selva Verde owns part of a rainforest on the Sarapiquí River, but it’s in a north-central region of agriculture and small towns. A busy two-lane highway runs right by its main gate, and a good number of tour groups arrive at the lodge by bus.

Two factors were constant: It was intensely humid — relegating the heat to a secondary concern — and harassing clouds of mosquitoes, which I had anticipated, never appeared.

## PURA vida

The international airport in Costa Rica is in a suburb of San Jose, the capital. I spent a night at nearby Pura Vida Hotel before catching a domestic flight to Golfito to meet Playa Nicuesa's boat.

Pura Vida originally was part of a coffee farm and consists of the old main house, which has two guest rooms, and four casitas, or small houses, spread around the beautifully landscaped, walled, hillside grounds. The casitas are roomy, stylish and modern, with plenty of original Costa Rican art providing bright accents.

Pura Vida markets itself as a "base camp," from which vacationers can make day trips around the region. It's also noted for its cuisine, but the chef/co-owner was away.

A honeymooning American couple told me they indeed were happy using the "base camp" approach as we enjoyed a complementary full breakfast on the main house's terrace the next morning. They had been rafting through a rainforest the day before, and the bride was the first to assure me my trepidations about mosquitoes were unfounded.

The flight south took only 50 minutes — it's about seven hours by car. I was booked on Nature Air, one of two carriers serving Golfito. "Central America's premier airline for adventure travel" uses small, twin-prop planes seating from seven to 19, and has tight restrictions not only on baggage — one free piece not to exceed 30 pounds when I was there — but also on passengers. Those who bust the 250-pound mark have to buy a second seat. And, they actually have everyone climb on a scale at check-in to make the determination.

Combine the small aircraft with the relatively low altitudes and the flight becomes a sightseeing experience. Golfito provides an exciting finale: The plane sweeps in over the small town's harbor and heads straight toward and into the vast jungle. A narrow airstrip was cut into the lush vegetation, and the stretch of pavement serves both as taxiway and runway.

Giovanni, one of Playa Nicuesa's naturalist-guides, was waiting. He's from the area, but has lived in the United States and has great American English. The husband-wife owners and developers of the resort are from New York, and visitors with no Spanish skills will have no difficulties there.

It was a cooling, 20-minute ride to Playa Nicuesa in one of the lodge's speedy, open-deck boats.

## Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge

The lodge is on 165 waterfront acres, but is surrounded by thousands of acres of the pristine national rainforest preserve. The lodge buildings occupy only 2 percent of the private preserve, the site of a former cacao plantation that has reverted to jungle. The result: Guests experience a vacation far removed from the everyday world, surrounded by a wilderness, yet readily accessible. Playa Nicuesa justifiably boasts that it is, "most importantly, a place that never lets you forget that you are nature's guest."

Known as an eco-resort, it takes its charge seriously. It took the pains to bring in four-stroke outboard engines for its fleet of small boats because they are friendlier to the environment, even though local mechanics didn't know how to work on them. The lodge decided the greener outboards were important enough to send its own people to learn four-stroke engine maintenance.

Construction followed environmental guidelines, using recycled materials and naturally fallen wood pulled from the forest by oxen, for example. Electricity is provided by solar panels; hot water comes from on-demand propane units; no chemicals are used for gardening, but there is plenty of composting. The list of green measures undertaken is long.

For guests, the most noticeable consequence is the premium on electricity. Lighting at night is subdued. Solar units lining paths in the vicinity of the lodge buildings offer dim illumination, so keeping a flashlight handy is highly advisable. Even though I carried one, in the darkness of the rainforest after my rendezvous with the caiman, I had trouble following a path and ended up at the wrong cabin.

The accommodations alone are a huge lure. There are five private cabins, plus a guesthouse with four spacious units. Each structure is off by itself, surrounded by jungle. One, a favorite of honeymooners, has had visits from an ocelot, rarely seen but whose presence was announced when it climbed onto the cabin's small porch and left its territorial marker on shoes the guests had left there.

My cabin was about three feet off the rainforest floor, with a short stairway to it. The floor of the platform was hardwood, and the roof overhung it by a few feet. Most importantly, two walls were louvered panels that could be swung open, in effect expanding the room to include the porch and leaving it without two walls, creating a roofed, hardwood platform open to the jungle. This eliminated privacy — I didn't care, being surrounded by dense rainforest — but it gave a wonderful feeling of living directly with nature.

The bed, against the back wall and under an indispensable overhead fan, was equipped with a canopy of mosquito netting. This practical feature contributed a large dose of romance to the cabin. So did the open-air shower: a huge, tile-floor room, part of which extends beyond the roof, leaving it partially open to the sky — and birds, rainfall and falling leaves. Tropical plants are planted along the outer wall, and the shower head protrudes from one of the others.

I never had an inkling of discomfort because of the proximity of wild animals — nor did other guests express any — even though their presence was readily apparent. At dawn one morning, rustling noises woke me: a family of coatis, a type of raccoon, was busily foraging right below the platform when I walked over to the edge to investigate. Staff members warned that the capuchin monkeys could be nasty, and cautioned about the swarming and ubiquitous army ants. But living so close to the natural world was exhilarating, especially with shelter providing civilized comforts and refuge from some of nature's more unpleasant aspects. During my stay, rain was chief of those.

I arrived midafternoon, and guide-naturalist Eric suggested a quick hike into the rainforest. Almost immediately, he noted a pungent smell and told me it was a sign peccaries, wild pigs, were nearby. While in the rainforests, I ran into the odor often, but never spied one of the animals.

Thunder began about midway through the jungle loop. Soon, it was raining. It gave new insight into the expression "coming down in sheets." And it continued all the way back to the main lodge, and long into the night.

As for as my clothing, I might as well have gone to the beach and jumped into the Pacific. My clothes —and my wallet and everything in it —were saturated.

None of this was terrible. In fact, since the rain was warm, it was almost funny. As the days passed, though, it became clear that my stuff was never going to dry out. With the paucity of electricity, there is no access to a clothes dryer.

I was told if I arranged my damp stuff on the beach on a sunny day, it would promptly dry. Since it rained regularly, this wasn't all that easy. Giovanni graciously offered to scrape down my mud-caked shoes and take them to the "hot box," which turned out to be a huge lean-to, with clotheslines strung beneath, of translucent material in a jungle clearing where the lodge had its gardens of vegetables, herbs and fruit. Those shoes stayed there until my day of departure. My clothes, even when eventually baked on the beach, downright stank. Considering the pluses of Playa Nicuesa, it was a small price, but I was eager to get my laundry done at my next stop, Selva Verde Lodge.

I followed up my first short hike with a long one to a waterfall the next day, a trek most lodge guests make. Giovanni, who showed the way, pointed out and explained all sorts of things I might have missed: spectacularly colored, and very tiny, poisonous frogs; an abandoned mountain farm; cacao trees and the many rotting fruits hanging from them; a band of white-faced monkeys gamboling in the treetops. The cooling dip under the waterfall in a mountain stream was a great reward after the uphill march, partly over a rocky riverbed that was dry despite it being the start of rainy season. Breezes helped make the heat tolerable.

Nicuesa Verde says it's for lovers of adventure sports as well as for ecotourists and nature fans. It offers fishing, kayaking, snorkeling, windsurfing, among other activities, in addition to jungle treks. A yoga instructor is usually in residence.

The main building is among the treetops. A grand staircase leads to the bar, kitchen and dining room/lounge area, which are all open to the forest canopy, offering glimpses of the birds and wildlife living there. Since the capacity of the resort is small, meals are taken at a refectory table.

The food, mostly from local sources, is creative and good. Be sure to have some tres leches cake, and try the blood berry juice, one of the many fruit drinks served.

The most satisfying meal for me, however, consisted of a breakfast burrito that was packed by the staff for a boat ride up the gulf, unsuccessfully trying to spy dolphins. Leaving before

breakfast was served in the dining room, we landed at a small, deserted island to chow down the to-go. It was a small hemispherical island, covered with trees and vegetation and offering a rocky beach where we pulled up. Combined with a glorious morning, wading in the soothing, warm water to pick out interesting shells and rocks was a superb accompaniment to the humble, delicious burrito.

Later in the morning, we hit the beach, wider and more sandy than Playa Nicuesa's, at Santuario Silvestre, a wildlife sanctuary a few miles north of the lodge. Soon, Carol Crews, its director, came out of the jungle. Cavorting around her were two spider monkeys, much friendlier and less common than the capuchins. They enjoyed climbing onto visitors, and even swinging down onto their heads from branches and vines through which they zoomed on long arms.

The sanctuary is a nonprofit outfit, offering care and rehabilitation for "orphaned, injured and displaced" wildlife of the region. Crews, an American, is enthusiastic about her mission, to put it mildly, and wasn't shy about lamenting roadblocks built by the authorities while telling tales about and showing us the creatures in her care. After hearing of the ghastly damage a beautiful toucan can do with its huge bill, we were left to conclude humans should avoid the birds at all costs.

Taking a tour of the sanctuary is the best way to get close looks at wildlife, especially some of the more elusive ones — and mandatory if you want a close encounter with a spider monkey. What you'll see varies based on which animals happen to be in need, but there will be a wide variety and Crews can offer details about any of them.

### Selva Verde Lodge & rainforest preserve

Selva Verde is on the other side of a mountain range from San Jose, and the mountain road is a main route for big trucks. The scenery can be spectacular, as I found out on my return trip, but on the way to the lodge downpours obscured the views and traffic was often slowed to stop-and-go, primarily because the big rigs didn't want to pick up speed on the down slopes. The drive, normally a couple of hours, seemed tedious after my days in the remote rainforest on the Pacific Coast.

At the lodge, it was still raining — but unlike my first day at Playa Nicuesa, I didn't get a drop on me. The small van bringing me drove through the massive gate just off the highway and directly into one end of the giant-scaled reception area. I followed a covered, well-lit concrete walkway to my room.

It was in a hive of buildings — elevated, like my Playa Nicuesa cabin — with rooms opening onto covered porches/walkways. There were no louvered partitions opening to a secluded piece of jungle, but rather a traditional room, with other people, not wild things, sleeping on the other side of the walls. There was no skimping on electricity, though: Ice was readily available and reading in bed wasn't deterred by meager light. And, there was a laundry service for my stinky clothes. As at Playa Nicuesa, howler monkeys — sounding like barking dogs — and exotic bird song could be heard making a ruckus out in the forest, but there also was the crowing of next-door roosters warning of the coming sun.

In the morning, I discovered the covered walkways connected all the buildings on the property, and there were many more buildings here. It has 40 regular rooms, plus five family-size bungalows. The dining hall is much larger, on two levels. Its main level is open to and has a great view of the Sarapiquí River, which sometimes supplies coveted breezes.

While I was there, most meals were buffets: pleasant, but not as innovative as the food at Playa Nicuesa. The bartenders did come up with some interesting offerings. And the gift shop in one corner of the building blew away the meager assortment of souvenirs available at Playa Nicuesa's main desk.

There's a swimming pool, too, where I regularly encountered a bright green lizard, which looked amazingly like a big leaf, still as a statue until some prey came within range. Although I also came across a big iguana feeding at a stand abutting a walkway — the lodge puts feeding stations around the central grounds trying to attract wildlife, mostly with old bananas — the Playa Nicuesa vibe that you might run into an exotic animal around the next bush was missing.

This changed on the other side of the Sarapiquí, the part of the 500-acre property that's still a primary rainforest. The vegetation, whiffs of wary wildlife and intense humidity were similar to that of the Golfo Dulce jungle.

A 195-meter stroll over a suspension bridge gets you over the river, where the rainforest paths are more developed and well marked than in the south. The trails in this rainforest also are very hilly and arduously steep, but Costa Rica's biggest almond tree is here. And, I finally saw some howler monkeys in the treetops after having heard them since my arrival at Playa Nicuesa.

Plenty more showed up in the next few days. They were relatively plentiful along the riverside, both on a white-water rafting adventure and during a languid boat tour.

Like many of the activities offered through Selva Verde, the tours took place elsewhere, a taxi ride away.

I was dropped off conveniently at the lodge's swimming hole near the end of the white-water trip, which started about eight miles upriver. My Dutch raft-mates continued on. We had made it through several rapids with only one man going overboard, and seen lots of wildlife, including howlers and flying toucans. It was fun, once I was past my initial jitters as a weak-swimming first-timer.

The languid cruise left from a pier in Puerto Viejo. The narrow vessel with a canopy seated at least 20, but not one else showed up. Jose, the operator, took me anyway. Besides more howlers, he spotted a sunning caiman — nice to see more than eyes glowing in the night — and a shy sloth. Mostly, though, there was an abundance of birds.

Especially entrancing were the pretty mangrove swallows that gracefully dashed about the river snagging insects. Jose would sometimes cut the engine and let the boat drift, which was amazingly relaxing.

There are plenty of activities offered at Selva Verde, and I enjoyed industrial tours providing insight into chocolate and pineapples.

The chocolate tour takes you across the Sarapiquí and a suspension bridge is again the means, this time at Tirimbina, a nonprofit 853-acre wildlife refuge that carries out research and educational programs. You can hike, on your own or with a guide, and there are bird watching walks, a night walk and a bat program.

The guide leads the group through rainforest on paths above the river to the remains of a cacao plantation. She tells the recent history of the arrival of a fungus that attacks the cacao fruit, decimating the once-thriving Costa Rican chocolate business, as happened at the property that became Playa Nicuesa. A small grove of healthy cacao trees is inspected, and the traditional process of transforming cacao seeds into chocolate is demonstrated, with tastings at every stage of the procedure. It is fascinating.

The visit to a pineapple plantation is more typically industrial, basically offering a tour of the processing plant. Getting there involves driving through beautiful rolling countryside, with mountains on the horizon, and signs for Collins Tree Bakery at every turn, even into the parking lot. But there is no bakery — a Texas company known for shipping holiday fruitcakes simply bought the plantation as an investment.

Entering the huge refrigerated rooms used for temporary storage is a shocker after spending time in the sun watching tractors from the fields dumping fruits onto conveyors belts. The crop is sorted by hand. The percentage rejected as unsuitable to be sold as whole fruit — because it's not symmetrical enough or the right color or for some other reason — is astonishing high.

Most remarkable, though, is when the guide snags a pineapple from the belt and, with quick slashes of his machete, offers samples. That super-fresh fruit is heavenly sweet and juicy, totally unlike any pineapple ever tasted in Connecticut.

He offered a shopping tip, too: the greener, the better.