

## Day 1 – Costa Rica Vacation – January 7<sup>th</sup>

Today is the start of our fifteen day vacation in Costa Rica. Marie, Kal, Marcia and I (Jim) enjoy traveling together. Marie and Marcia are sisters. Marie and Kal live just south of Dayton, Ohio and Marcia and I north of Albany, New York so trips like this are a chance for us to spend time together. In fact, this is the twelfth international vacation we've taken together over the past nine years.

Costa Rica is a small country of 20,000 square miles (about the size of West Virginia) and 4-1/3 million inhabitants. It is located in Central America, bordered by Nicaragua to the north, Panama on the south, the Pacific Ocean to the west and the Caribbean Sea to the east. Costa Rica is only about 10 degrees north of the equator so the climate is tropical year round. The country is said to be an ecological showplace with a wide variety of geography including rain forests, volcanic mountain ranges rising to 12,000 feet, a dry Pacific Coast and an almost "Amazon like" marshy Caribbean Coast. While we are visiting Costa Rica during their dry season we've been told to expect possibilities of showers each day. In addition to a wide variety of plants and trees, Costa Rica is home to 700 types of birds, many amphibians and turtles and more than 100 species of mammals, most notably big cats, tapirs, sloths and monkeys.



We've read that Costa Rica's western discovery was by Christopher Columbus during his final voyage in 1502. Costa Rica means "Rich Coast" in Spanish. Costa Rica gained independence from Spain in the 1820's and is one of the oldest democracies in the Americas. They constitutionally banned their armed forces in 1949 and are considered one of the most advanced countries in Latin America. Compulsory education started in 1869 and today literacy is above 95% with a life expectancy of 79 years.

The impact of indigenous (Indian) peoples in Costa Rican culture has been relatively small compared to other countries in Latin America. The country lacked a large native population to begin with and what existed was quickly absorbed into the Spanish colonial society through intermarriage. Also, the lack of gold and silver or large *haciendas* meant that few slaves were brought in to work the mines or the fields. As a result, today 85% of Costa Rica's population consider themselves descendants of the Spanish settlers and either white or mixed white (*Castizo* or *Mestizo*).

While Costa Rica is considered relatively safe and many vacationers rent cars and independently travel, we've chosen to go on an organized tour, believing that we may see and learn more and receive a better overall value at higher end

accommodations and on meals during the busy season. We have booked Odysseys Unlimited's 15 day "Costa Rica's Natural Heritage" tour. OU is a tour company out of Boston that specializes in small group tours (this tour will have a



maximum of 18 participants) and is known for high quality and centrally located hotels, good meals, excellent local Tour Directors and local guides with most all tips being included in the tour price. The four of us have previously enjoyed tours with Odysseys Unlimited to Northern Italy, China, and most recently to Croatia and the Dalmatia Coast. Our tour, as shown on the map will start in Costa Rica's capital of San Jose then go north to the Arenal volcanic region, west to the Monteverde tropical forest area, then further west to the Pacific Coast at Guanacaste. We will then travel back to San Jose and embark on a three day tour extension to Tortuguero National Park on Coast Rica's Caribbean Coast.

The four of us have made our own flight arrangements for this trip, utilizing Frequent Flyer miles earned on previous flights and securing First Class seats on US Airways. Marcia and I left Albany NY yesterday afternoon and flew to Charlotte NC. We spend the night at a nearby hotel and take their shuttle to the Charlotte airport at 7AM this morning.



Marie and Kal are able to fly out of Dayton OH to Charlotte early this morning. The four of us meet at the Charlotte airport and board our flight for an on time departure at 9:35AM on a four hour and fifteen minute flight to San Jose, Costa Rica. We are very comfortably seated in the first class cabin of a USAirways Boeing 757. Cabin service is excellent. We fly down the East Coast of the USA and then over Cuba, arriving at San Jose a little after 12:50PM. Costa Rica time is one hour behind our EST, the same as the USA's Central Time Zone.

When we left Charlotte the temperature was 28 degrees. Landing in San Jose we are told the temperature is 82 degrees. On this trip we expect temperatures to be in the lower 80s

during the days and lower 60s at night although it should be cooler at higher altitudes.

At the busy San Jose airport we secure a taxi to take the four of us on a 25 minute ride to our hotel, the Bougainvillea. Driving is somewhat chaotic and we are glad we are not in a rental car. We will be staying here initially for two nights then for two separate nights later in the tour.



The hotel, built in 1988, has 82 rooms and sits on a plateau looking out over downtown San Jose.



Our rooms are excellent, each with a large patio looking out at San Jose. The hotel is decorated with painting and sculptures from local artists. We spend a couple of hours walking through the hotel's eight acres of dense, lush tropical gardens containing hundreds of species of trees, plants and flowers. It is most beautiful and relaxing. The gardens also include an outdoor pool, an exercise room and tennis courts. Today has been a great weather day in San Jose.

Dinner is on our own tonight and the four of us meet at 5PM for a light dinner in the dining area of the hotel's nice bar. Then it's back to our rooms to watch Alabama bury Notre Dame in the BCS title game (with Spanish audio).

Tomorrow we will meet our tour group and our Tour Director and officially start our tour.



## Day 2 – Costa Rica Vacation – January 8<sup>th</sup>:

We wake up early after the first night of our initial stay at the excellent Bougainvillea Hotel in the Heredia suburb of San Jose. Because Costa Rica is only ten degrees north of the equator the sun rises and sets right about at 6 o'clock year round, they do not experience the long summer days and short winter days that we see further up in the Northern Hemisphere. Our rooms are most comfortable but we note that not only is there no air conditioning in the rooms, there is also no heat source! I guess there's no need for environmental control when the average high (80 degrees) and low (64 degrees) stays about constant the year around. With a ceiling fan in the room, louvered windows and the ability to keep the door to our outside deck open we have no problem keeping our room most comfortable. We are surprised that we have not seen any flying or crawling insects. I enjoy sitting on our deck and writing yesterday's trip journal while looking at the lights of San Jose and then watching the sun rise.



At 7 AM we gather in the hotel restaurant for breakfast and to meet the rest of our tour group. Our Tour Director greets each of us and we enjoy our buffet breakfast as we get to know our fellow travelers. Our initial impressions of both our Tour Director and our tour group are that we have good ones and we will have a most enjoyable time.

We next move into a nearby meeting room for our tour

orientation meeting. Our Tour Director/Naturalist, Odir Morales, introduces himself. He is 36 years old and a native of Costa Rica with a degree in Ecological Tourism. He has been guiding tours for twelve years and working with Odysseys Unlimited for three years. Odir offers some more information on the tour and some tour etiquette and we then go around the room and introduce ourselves to the rest of the group. He then makes sure that we know the most recognizable phrase attached to Costa Ricans, "*Pura Vida*". It is said to reflect the Costa Rican way of life; it means "pure life" or "good life". A recommended response to "How are you?" would be "*Pura Vida*".

At 8:30 AM we depart our hotel for the day's activities in a medium size 24 seat Chinese made *Hirer* brand motor coach that will be our transportation for most of the tour. Jorge will be our driver. We head north on a two hour drive to Poas Volcano National Park. Our Tour Director spends most of this time giving us some good background information on Costa Rica. We learn that although San Jose is about 4000 feet above sea level, it is surrounded by volcanic mountain ranges so the San Jose area is referred to as the Central Valley. One half of Costa Rica's population of 4-1/3 million lives in the San Jose region. Additionally there are an estimated 800,000 immigrants mainly from Nicaragua, Panama, Haiti and other Latin American countries that have come to Costa Rica to work in the factories and fields. Their backgrounds and cultures are said to have led to a bit of a crime problem in the San Jose area.



We also learn that 27% of Costa Rica's land area is dedicated to National Parks. There are 300 volcanos and seven are active. At 10:30 AM after driving up steep narrow roads for some time we arrive at one of them, Poas Volcano, the only one in Costa Rica with a road to the summit area. We take a short walk to a viewing area above the steaming main crater and then take a little more strenuous trek to a secondary crater called the Botos Lagoon, now filled with water. Odir says that we are lucky that the clouds that frequently descend on this 8000 foot high volcano have receded today and that we can get to actually see into the craters.



After an hour and a half at the volcano we depart for a coffee plantation, stopping on the way for Odir to buy some of the great Costa Rican strawberries and also a local salty snack called *Platanos* which he passes around the motor coach. They are most delicious.

We now arrive at the large Doca Coffee Planation. We have learned that coffee plants were introduced to Costa Rica from Africa in the early 1800's and have been a major export product ever since. We enjoy a nice included buffet lunch in their open air pavilion, walk through the plantation's butterfly garden and then have a very interesting tour where we learn how

coffee beans are grown and processed. We are able to see the coffee plants in various stages of growth and all of the processes used to harvest, process and roast coffee.



We now drive down the mountain back towards San Jose, enjoying the scenic views. We are surprised at how bumpy ALL of the roads we have been on are. I don't think anyone is going to be taking naps on this motor coach! We stop at a supermarket for a few minutes to get personal provisions then return to San Jose. Near the city we experience some pretty bad traffic congestion during rush hour. We are back at our hotel before 5 PM and have time to relax before meeting for our included welcome dinner. It is an excellent three course meal with choice of appetizers, a chicken, fish or beef entre and an excellent desert and beverages. It's great fun talking with our fellow travelers. Tomorrow we head north to the Arenal Volcanic Region.



### Day 3 – Cost Rica Vacation – January 9<sup>th</sup>:

At 8:30 AM we board our motor coach and leave San Jose after a very nice two night stay at the Bougainvillea Hotel. We are bound for the Arenal region of north central Costa Rica.

Our first stop is at the *Sr. & Sry. Ese Wood Factory*. We spend an enjoyable hour and a half touring their factory and spending time in their gift shop. They work exclusively with exotic Costa Rican woods and produce very nice wood jewelry, bowls, boxes and other types of souvenirs. We have heard a lot on our trip about Costa Rica's ecological focus. As shown by a sign on the factory wall that was made from factory wood products, Costa Ricans are very proud of their peaceful, happy country and their focus on nature. We learn, here, that for every tree that is harvested for wood, three



new trees are planted. We find this 115 employee plant very clean and safety conscious. Having worked in the abrasives industry for 39 years I am quickly able to determine that they use *Fandeli* brand sandpaper which does not surprise me as I know this Mexican based sandpaper producer has a strong sales presence in Central America.

Our next stop on the way to Arenal is in La Garita at a *Botanical Orchid Garden*. We have a nice tour of their grounds first stopping in an area with numerous caged exotic birds most of whom are native to the region such as *Parrots* and *Macaws*. We learn that these birds can live 50+ years and most have been given to the Garden by private owners who no longer are able to care for them. These birds are deemed to be too old to safely be introduced to the wild so are kept here and bred. When their offspring are old enough they are collected by a government agency and safely released into the wild.



We next enjoy a guided tour of the gardens and see many varieties of orchids and learn how they are propagated. After a walking tour of exotic plants and trees we relax and enjoy a nice private lunch on their secluded patio.



We are back on the road after lunch and find that the highway north is really more a 1-1/2 lane twisty, bumpy road. There's no chance that anyone on this motor coach will be taking a nap after lunch! Even though this is the main road between San Jose and Arenal the majority of the many bridges are only one lane. When we pass through towns we need to slow for the "speed bumps" that have been installed which really not needed with the bumpy condition of the road! Our motor coach, now additionally loaded with all of our luggage, strains to make it up some of the grades. We cross the mountain range and our Tour Director, Odir, informs us that we have passed from the Pacific to Caribbean side of Costa Rica. The side we are

now on is considered the rainier side. The weather continues to be great...our third day of fine weather...clear and temperatures in the low 80s.

After a refreshment break at a mountain restaurant we descend from 6000 foot high elevation onto a large flat plain lying at 1200 feet. We enjoy the scenery as we pass farms raising cattle and growing a wide variety of foods like corn, sugar cane, coffee and cocoa. We stop at a road side fruit stand and Odir explains to us the types of produce grown and consumed by Costa Ricans.

Shortly after 4 PM we arrive at the remote tourist town of Fortuna. We've learned that Costa Rica receives about 2-1/2 million tourists a year and that 600,000 visit this region, attracted by the *Arenal Volcano*. It is an "active" volcano and the only one in Costa Rica with the classic "cone summit". We drive a little further and arrive at our lodgings for the next two nights, the Hotel Arenal Manoa. It appears to us to be more of a luxury resort! We are quickly and professionally escorted to our rooms which we find to be beautiful. They are quite large with a huge bathroom (with an exotic plant growing in that room) and a patio looking out to the Arenal Volcano. Unfortunately, as we are told is quite common, the upper portion of the volcano is currently obscured by clouds.

We exit our unit and Marcia sees her first hummingbird! We walk down to the hotel restaurant and have refreshments and then a nice dinner with Marie and Kal.

Below are four photos of our room. Then our photo of the cloud obscured volcano summit followed by two photos from the hotel web site that show the volcano on a clear day.



#### Day 4 – Costa Rica Vacation – January 10<sup>th</sup>:

We wake up after the first of our two nights at the Hotel Arenal Manoa. The top of the Arenal Volcano, which our rooms look out on, is still obscured by clouds. Last night we were awakened three times by heavy rain pounding down on the metal roof of our comfortable room. It is now clear.

At 6 AM Marcia joins nine others from our group on an early morning bird watching excursion led by our Tour Director, Odir. After a good breakfast we all board our motor coach at 8:15 AM.



We drive forty five minutes on narrow winding roads up into the mountains. During this time Odir talks more about the ecological focus of Costa Rica. In 2012 laws were passed outlawing all hunting of animals and birds, litter is rarely seen and the government is starting to educate the population towards 100% recycling. Costa Rica generates 90% of its electricity from “green energy”; hydro (70%), geothermal (15%) and wind (5%) and is pledged to be “carbon neutral” by 2021. Costa Rica is ranked fifth in the world and first in the Western Hemisphere in the 2012 Environmental Performance Index. It is also ranked first in the NEF’s “Greenest Country” Index. Al Gore must love this country!

Our first stop of the day will be at a rural elementary school. As background, Odir explains that school is mandatory and free in Costa Rica for grades Kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup>. The school year is 200 days long (vs. 180 in New York State). All students wear uniforms. Schools are currently on their summer break but there will be students for us to have a “cultural exchange” with. Our tour operator, Odysseys Unlimited, donates money for equipment at the schools they visit on many of their international tours.



At 9 AM we arrive at a school in a small mountain town. Most would probably call this area impoverished. Ten children between the ages of five and ten years meet us at the door of our motor coach and with big smiles grab our hands and escort us to seats in the small assembly room of the simple but very clean school. They then shake each of our hands and introduce themselves.



Next we observe the national anthems of Costa Rica and the USA followed by four girls in classic dress performing folk dances. We go to an area of the school yard that contains items and images that represent the history and character of Costa Rica. While the children hold our hands our Tour Director explains to us the meaning of each symbol. We walk through the school rooms including the computer lab where the Odysseys Unlimited donations are targeted. Returning to the assembly room we all join in a circle and do "The Hokey Pokey". The students really get a big kick out of this. Lastly, we all sit down for questions and answers (with our Tour Director as interpreter). The kids start and we all respond to questions like "what is your favorite color?", "what state do you live in?" and "do you like Costa Rica?". Then a precocious five year old asks "how old are you? John, who we believe may be our senior member, responds for us all. Then it's time for us to ask questions and we learn about their pets, what jobs their parents have, their favorite class subject (the majority say English class) and country they would like to visit (USA). An hour and a half after we arrive, they grab our hands and walk us back to our motor coach. This was a truly memorable experience. I laugh when I hear people say "I don't want to go on an organized tour; I want to meet and experience the real people in XYZ country".

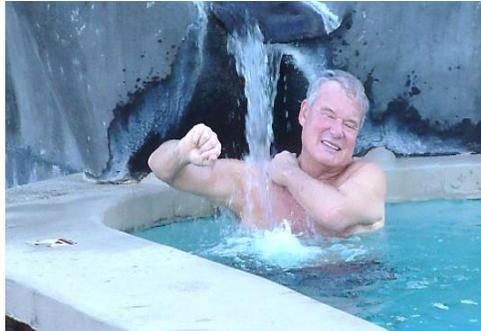


We now drive further up the mountain and arrive at 11 AM at the Finca Luna Nueva private rain forest preserve. We are met by the bearded owner Steven Farrell. We have read that he came to Costa Rica as a "hippy" in 1994 to grow macadamia nuts. This crop failed and he started to grow ginger and turmeric for natural pharmaceuticals. Over time he built the land into an internationally known "lower rain forest preserve" with a wide range of plants and trees and became a self-taught expert on tropical plants. We split into two groups which either go looking for exotic birds or walk with Stephen through the forest as he explains the plant and tree life. Each group spots a three toed sloth in a tree. We lunch on locally grown natural foods at the preserves' dining area while being entertained by a *Keel-Billed Toucan*. After lunch we take another hike; either more birding or a hike with Stephen as he explains the medicinal value of various species of plant life. We watch in amazement as he eats termites (adds to the natural

bacteria in your gut) and stabs his elbow (which soon swells and grows red) with a spiny leaf used as an arthritis remedy in the late 1800s in Europe. This has been quite a unique area and excursion.



We return to our hotel at 4 PM. It has been another great weather day, clear with temperatures in the 80s. The top half of the Arenal volcano, however, is still shrouded in clouds. Marie and Kal take a walk through the beautifully landscaped grounds of this resort while Marcia and I decide to go for a swim. While there is a nice “regular” pool complex near our rooms, we decide to walk to the “hot pool” where we have a unique experience of swimming in a pool with water maintained at 95 degrees. I massage my sore “tennis shoulder” under the waterfall that supplies the pool with 104 degree water. We also make use of the swim-up bar. This is wonderful.



At 7 PM we all take the motor coach into town for a nice included meal at a restaurant.



### **Day 5 – Costa Rica Vacation – September 11<sup>th</sup>:**

We wake up after our second and last night at the beautiful Arenal Manoa Hotel in north central Costa Rica. We see that the top of the Arenal Volcano is still obscured by clouds. After breakfast we board our motor coach at 9 AM for our half day drive over the mountain range that divides the Caribbean side of Costa Rica (where we are now) from the Pacific side. We are bound for the Monteverde area famous for its “Cloud Forest”. As we start to pull out of the resort

our driver notes that a small snail is attached to the exterior of our windshield. He gets out and carefully removes the snail and deposits it in the grass. Our Tour Director reminds us it is illegal to kill anything in Costa Rica. None of us admits to harming any of the small millipedes that we all occasionally found in our rooms at this tropical resort.

We start our drive along the shores of Arenal Lake, the largest lake in Costa Rica. We learn that the lake was created in the late 1970s when a dam was built to initiate a hydroelectric project. Today the lake feeds water through underground pipes to five hydroelectric plants. The lake is also used for recreational fishing and boating and is said to be one of the best places in the world for wind surfing due to the constant winds that blow across the lake from the Caribbean. We are told many German families settled in this area after WWII and we pass houses and small towns that remind us of southern Germany or Switzerland. We stop and observe a family of *Coati*, similar to our raccoons, along the roadside.



Marie, Kal, Marcia and I are sitting today in the rear seat of the motor coach. This gives us a slightly raised seating position and great views of the countryside but an extra-rough ride over the now familiar bumpy paved roads we are encountering everywhere in Costa Rica. Ahead we see that a tourist van is stopped and folks are looking up in the trees. We see that they've spotted a family of *Howler Monkeys* happily eating leaves. We stop and enjoy watching the family which includes a couple of baby monkeys. Our Tour Director, Odir, tells us that American monkeys differ from Asian and African monkeys. They are smaller, stay almost exclusively above ground, and have long "prehensile" tails to facilitate living in trees.



After a couple of hours more drive and a nice rest stop we round the western end of Lake Arenal and head south over

the mountain range. We see dozens of tall “windmills” generating wind power from the constant strong winds that rake these mountains. The paved road grows narrower and bumpy and Odir jokes that it will get worse. He’s not kidding! The road now becomes an unpaved one of dirt and gravel. For the next two hours we slowly bump along this narrow, twisting, climbing “trail”. While the views are great (we see the Arenal Volcano from another side and see many farms that remind us of those in Switzerland) the ride is quite rough. I am surprised our heavily loaded small motor coach can hold together from the pounding.



Shortly after 1 PM we arrive in the small town of Monteverde where we have lunch on our own. The four of us follow Odir’s recommendation and dine at the *Tree House* restaurant which claims to be “One of the 10 Most Bizarre Restaurants in the World”. It may be...the dining area is open air and on the second floor surrounding a huge living tree.

After lunch we drive a few miles to reach our hotel for the next three nights, the El Establo Mountain Hotel. We have learned that this area of Costa Rica was originally developed by several American Quaker families that emigrated from the USA to Costa Rica in the early 1950s. As pacifists they wished to avoid having their sons drafted to fight in the Korean War

and were attracted by Costa Rica’s decision in 1949 to abolish their army. The Quakers developed successful farms but their biggest contribution was their successful efforts to establish much of this area as a protected national preserve. The *Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve* is said to be home to 2000 plant species, 400 types of birds and more than 100 species of mammals.

In the 1980s one of the families partnered with a developer to build the 200 room hotel we are now heading to. The hotel property is said to climb up the side of a mountain and has views of a bay in the Pacific Ocean 22 miles distant.

As is normal on this tour our check in at the hotel is quick and effortless. Odir acquires all of the keys from the front desk and hands them out to us. The motor coach deposits us at the entrance to the building housing our rooms. Our bags are delivered to our rooms within minutes. We find our accommodations to be very large and comfortable with great views. We enjoy a few hours of relaxation before dinner. I walk around the grounds and spot an exotic bird, a Tucanese.



We have enjoyed yet another day of great weather with clear skies and temperatures in the low 80s. The area we are now in seems to be subject to constant winds however. We enjoy watching the sunset. At 7 PM we drive into town for a nice dinner at a local restaurant.



## Day 6 – Costa Rica Vacation – January 12<sup>th</sup>:

We wake up this morning after our first of three nights at the El Establo Mountain Hotel in the Monteverde region of Costa Rica. We enjoy the view of the Pacific Ocean 22 miles away. It's very breezy which is said to be normal in this area. After breakfast we board our motor coach at 8:15 AM and drive for less than half an hour to Montverde's biological preserve. Our TD Odir explains the uniqueness of this "cloud forest" area. We are at 5000 feet on the Pacific side of the central mountain range. The humid breezes from the Caribbean rise over the mountain tops and frequently deposit a warm and humid mist on the cloud forest area resulting in a unique micro-climate and resulting flora.

We head out on a nature hike that will take us through the cloud forest to the Continental Divide, the mountain spine of Costa Rica where water on one side drains to the Pacific and on the other side to the Caribbean. Along the trail our excellent Tour Director stops and gives us information about the unique plants and trees. We are on the lookout for tropical birds. We see another group stopped and peering into the forest. They have spotted a prized sight, the 14" long *Resplendent Quetzal*. The bird is deep in the forest and Odir, who is carrying a telescope on a tripod, sets up his equipment, locates the bird, and we each have a look through the scope.



We continue on to the Continental Divide and enjoy the windy views.





Returning to the base area around noontime we go to the *Hummingbird Gallery* where a dozen feeders are set up and attracting perhaps one hundred Hummingbirds. They fly all around us and we can get very close for great pictures. Marcia is most happy. The group has an excellent included lunch at the Paseo de Stella restaurant.

After lunch we walk next door to the *Monteverde Bat Jungle* where learn about the 65 types in the Monteverde area from a “bat expert” and we then enter the bat cave to observe 72 bats of eight varieties that are kept in a controlled environment. This is most interesting. We then walk a short distance to the *CASEM* where goods from local craftspeople are sold.



We return to our hotel mid-afternoon. Later Marie and Kal hike up the mountain to the restaurant at the top of the resort while Marcia and Jim ride up on one of the resort shuttles. We enjoy some refreshments while watching the sunset.



We then walk down the mountain. Dinner is one our own tonight and we enjoy a good one at a small tapas restaurant across the street from our hotel.

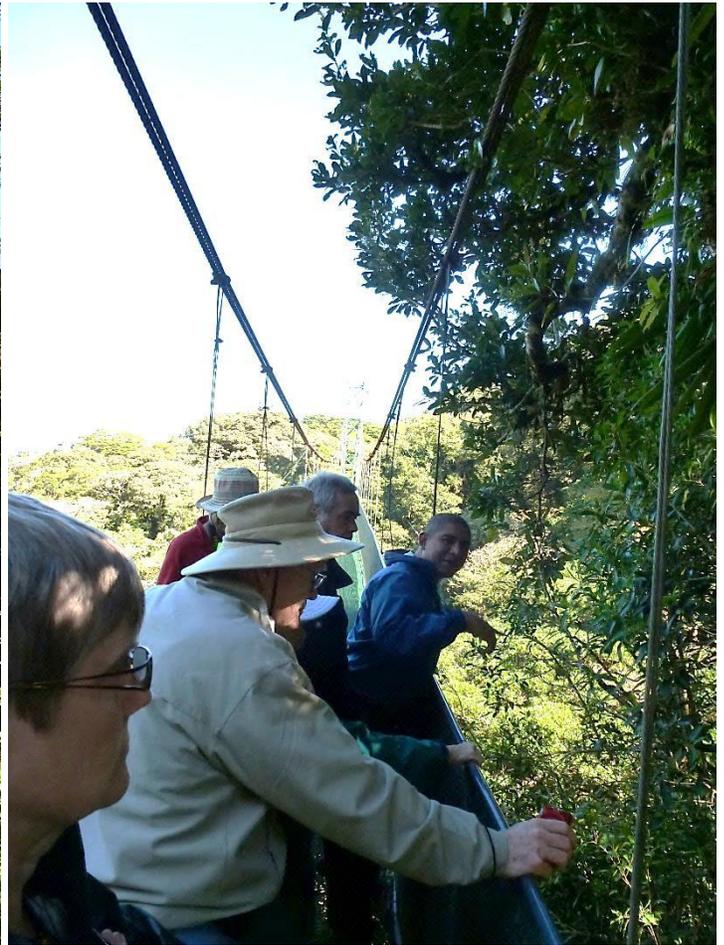


### **Day 7 – Costa Rica Vacation – January 13<sup>th</sup>:**

We wake up after our second of three nights at the El Establo Mountain Hotel in the Monteverde region of northern Costa Rica. It appears that today will be another great weather day with highs in the low 80s, lows in the low 60s, with clear skies and the strong breezes this area is known for. We enjoy the view of the Pacific Ocean 22 miles away.

At 8:30 AM we board our motor coach for a 20 minute ride on the now familiar gravel/dirt roads to the *Monteverde Hanging Bridges Sky Walk*. The hanging bridges are said to give you the opportunity to experience the tropical forest “from the canopy level” high above the rain forest floor.

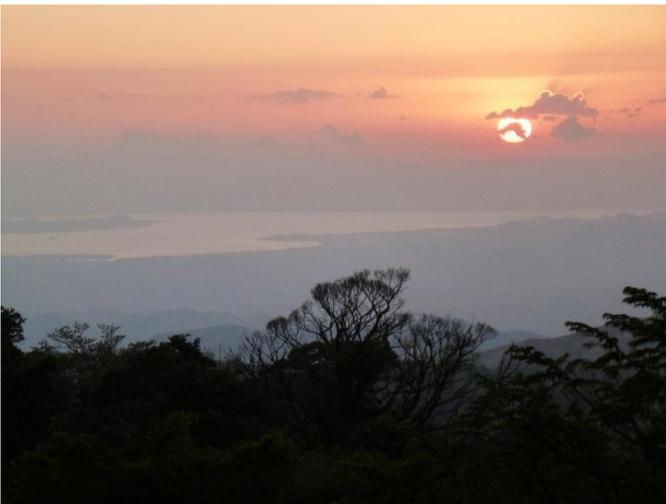
At the sky walk the eighteen of us tour members start down the trail led by our excellent Tour Director Odir. Our outstanding driver, Jorge, as he does on many of our excursions “brings up the rear” to corral any stragglers. We are told that we will be crossing five bridges varying in height from 60 feet to 300 feet above the forest floor. The bridges vary in length from 60 feet to 300 feet long (the length of a football field). The bridges are connected by trails that wind through the forest. We are told that there used to be a sixth bridge but it is not in use anymore; the trail has been extended to start at the second bridge. As we approach the “start” at the second bridge we see the remains of the first bridge on the forest floor. We are told it collapsed within the last month. This does not inspire confidence in some in our group!



Due to weight limitations we cross the hanging bridges ten at a time. Odir leads each group and describes points of interest. At some spots you can reach out and touch the tops of the trees, although Odir cautions us not to because there could be camouflaged snakes in the trees. The bridges are all classic suspension types with steel towers on each side of a canyon anchoring the main cables and a narrow light deck hanging below the main cables. The hanging decks do swing a bit as you walk across the bridges. This is most enjoyable. The trails connecting the bridges are equally interesting as they wind along the floor of the rain forest. Odir points out many interesting things. For example, he shows us areas where a huge “primary tree” has fallen and dragged down additional trees. This opens the area to sunlight and a process known as “natural reiteration” starts where plant species that cannot typically grow on the shaded rain forest floor take root and start growing and then the “pioneer trees” start to grow.

After 2-1/2 hours we return to the base station where we have light refreshments and are entertained by the *Coati*. The Monteverde area, although rather remote, is a major tourist destination in Costa Rica. We see many tourists from the USA but also from Europe. There are also many college age tourists, either on “ecology tours” or traveling independently. Three members of our group, Sally, Pete and Frank elect to stay and sign up for the 15 stage zip line course. The rest of our group decides that enough “height excitement” has been had for the day and we return on the motor coach to the small town of Monteverde for lunch on our own. The four of us lunch again at the very good *Tree House* restaurant.

At 3:45 PM we all meet our Tour Director and are bussed up to the top of the resort complex to a hiking area. We are in search of the elusive bird the *Resplendent Quetzal* and Odir spotted one here yesterday. We soon find the bird and get excellent views before he flies away, too quickly for us to get good photos. We stay for a while longer and spot a *Turkey Vulture* resting in a tree near her nest. There are quite a few avid “birders” on this trip and they give us good information on the birds we see.



We walk down to the main restaurant and enjoy refreshments in their patio bar while the sun sets. Later we all go into town where we enjoy an included group dinner at a local restaurant where we are allowed to order anything off the menu. I sit across from Frank who I’ve learned graduated from my alma mater, RPI, a few years before I did. He was back for his 50 year reunion in October.



## Day 8 – Costa Rica Vacation – January 14<sup>th</sup>:

We finish our three day stay in Monteverde this morning. The accommodations at the El Establo Mountain Hotel were fine. Like the Bougainvillea Hotel in the San Jose suburbs, the El Establo has no heating or cooling system. Our rooms were always comfortable. Walking to board our motor coach at 9 AM Marcia and I spot a *MotMot* and a *Hoffman's Woodpecker* (we only know what kind of birds these are because we show our pictures to the serious “birders” on our tour who quickly identify the species).

Before we leave Monteverde we stop at the *Butterfly Garden*. We split into two groups and our guides lead us through four

screen enclosed structures representing the flora and butterflies of four regions in Costa Rica, the Lowlands, the Midlands, the Under Forest (under the canopy) and the higher altitude habitat like Monteverde's. This is most interesting as we learn about the life of a butterfly and see many species including the stunning *Blue Morpho*. We also see their fascinating *Leaf Cutter Ant Colony* and watch a steady stream of ants cut off small pieces of leaves and carry them over tree limbs to their colony. Next we tour the insect room where the handler shows us a tarantula, scorpions and other weird local crawlers. Last we see the butterfly nursery and watch as butterflies emerge from their larvae. We spend an enjoyable hour and a half here and I think the tour exceeded our expectations.



When we drove and climbed up to Monteverde from the north three days ago we were surprised at the poor condition of the road; gravel and dirt and rough going. Today we are driving about twenty miles “as the crow flies” down the mountain on the main road south to reach the Pan American Highway and then continue on to Gunacaste on the Pacific Coast. Our hopes of having a better road out of Montverde are quickly dashed. We spend two hours driving a 1-1/2 lane wide twisting and turning rough dirt and gravel road. Marcia and I are in the back row of seats where we have a great view but the bumpiest ride. It's hard for us to believe that there are no paved roads offering access to Monteverde, one of Costa Rica's top tourist areas. We do enjoy nice views of the Pacific Ocean and the country side as we descend.

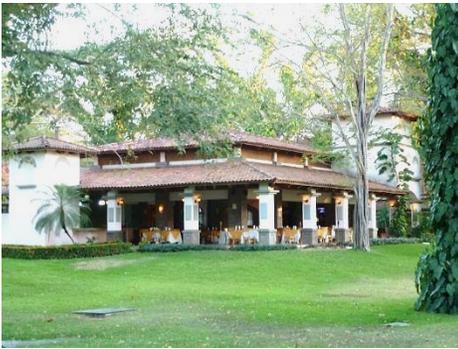


We finally reach the Pan American Highway and start a 90 mile drive to the coast on semi-good pavement. The drive is much faster but this is a two lane highway and we are often delayed when we fall behind slow trucks. Our driver, Jorge, continues to do a masterful job. Tour Director Odir tells us that the Guanacaste region we are entering is the driest region of Costa Rica and famous for their “cowboys” as many cattle are raised. Guanacaste Province is also the top tourist destination in Costa Rica due to the pristine Pacific beaches. We stop in Canas and have a nice included lunch on a restaurants’ outdoor deck looking out over a bend in the river.



We drive through Liberia, Odir’s home town, past Costa Rica’s second international airport. Twenty minutes later we arrive at Playa Panama Beach and pull into our hotel for the next three nights, the Casa Conde del Mar. Our rooms are quite nice and are air conditioned. The hotel only has 28 rooms and is situated right on the beach with a large swimming pool and open air restaurant. We explore the lush tropical grounds and the beach area, see a lot of tropical birds including a pair of green parrots, and watch the sunset. We all meet at 7 PM for a nice group dinner in the open air restaurant.





### Day 9 – Costa Rica Vacation – January 15<sup>th</sup>:



We wake up early after our first night at the Casa Conde del Mar hotel on the Pacific Ocean in Guanacaste Costa Rica. Marie and Marcia are joining the 6 AM bird watching group led by our Tour Director Odir. Unfortunately Marcia fails to apply insect repellent before departing and is stealthily attacked by the “no see ‘ems” and is not happy when she returns. We enjoy a leisurely breakfast in the open air restaurant where we are entertained by a family of *White Chested Blue Magpie Jays* who are on watch just waiting for someone to drop some fruit or for the opportunity to steal a packet of sugar.

This continues to be a fine vacation. The weather has been great, our fellow tour members most enjoyable to be with, an excellent Tour Director and Driver and we are enjoying all of our interactions with the people of Costa Rica.

At 9:45 AM we board our motor coach for a one hour drive to an area abutting *Palo Verde National Park* where we will board a boat for a “float safari” on the Tempisque River. We believe this will be one of the highlights of our tour. We travel past land much different than we experienced in central Costa Rica. Instead of fields of coffee plants we see vast fields of sugar cane. Instead of Tropical Rain Forests we see Tropical Dry Forests. As we are in the middle of the dry season in Guanacaste Province, many of the trees have shed most of their leaves to help cope with this period of very low rainfall. In the distance we see a mountain range defined by three volcanos, one of them active.

We travel for a little over an hour, the last half on dirt/gravel roads, and sometimes stop to view wildlife before we arrive at a restored “cowboy hacienda” at the *El Viejo Wild Refuge*. Here we have some refreshments and enjoy viewing the beautiful landscaping. We see several *Iguanas*.



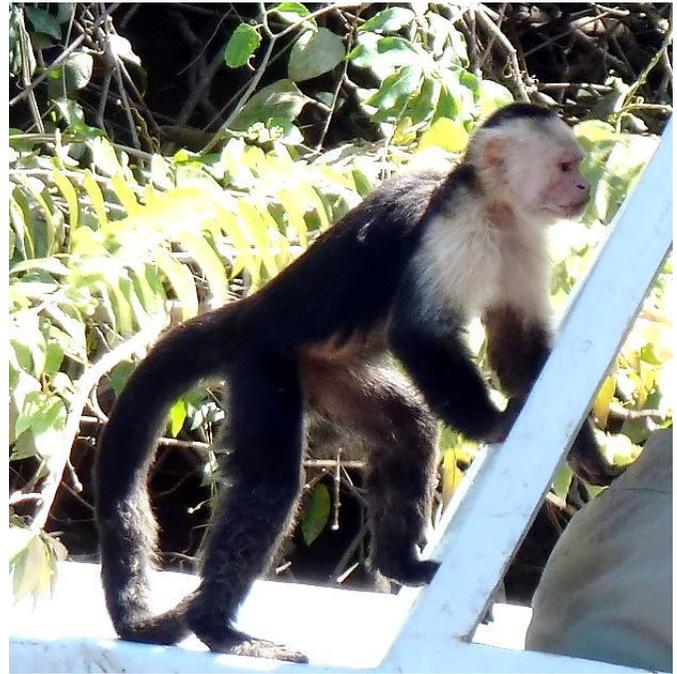
At 11:30 AM we depart the hacienda for our boat ride. We are passing through wetlands and stop several times to view exotic birds including the *Black Billed Whistling Duck*, *Yellow Billed Cockato*, *White Ibis*, *Egrets*, and *Wood Storks*. What the “birders” are really in search of is the 4 foot tall *Jabiru*. This species is high on the endangered list and only 38 pairs are known to exist in this region. There is much excitement when we spot, several hundred feet away, a *Jabiru* in its nest feeding infants. We see her mate fly away to look for more food. This is another great weather day; clear skies and highs in the upper 80s.



Around noontime we arrive at the river and the eighteen of us board a private motor boat for our float safari. Our Captain is Santos. Odir is, of course, on board to help find the wild life and add commentary. The Tempisque River is about 150 wide, 100 feet deep, brown in color with a moderate current. We initially see many *Hérons*, *Cattle Egrets*, and *Iguanas*. Then we spot a family of *Howler Monkeys* sleeping in a tree.



Next we are excited to spot a family of hard to find *White Face Monkeys*.



We continue up river and Santos spots a *Jesus Christ Lizard* on a rock near shore. It looks something like the Gecko Lizard. Odir explains that it is called the “Jesus Christ” lizard because it can walk on water. The boat is maneuvered closer to the rock and we watch in amazement as the lizard runs across the water, vertically and just on its rear feet, to shore!



Sorry...we were not quick enough to get a photograph. We spot a group of *Long Nosed Bats* sleeping on the shady side of a tree trunk and also see a *Falcon*. Along the river we frequently spot *Crocodiles*, some as long as ten feet. Many are “sleeping” in the sun with their mouths open to stay cool. When they spot us they enter the river and disappear.





Along with other birds, we spot an *Anhinga* in a tree. We return to shore after a nearly two hour boat ride. This has been a most excellent experience. We drive back to the *Elviego Wild Refuge* hacienda where we enjoy a nice included lunch. It is after 4 PM when we return to the Casa Conde del Mar hotel. Dinner is on our own tonight and several of our group go into town and have great meals at the Ginger tapas restaurant. The rest of us dine in the hotel restaurant off of their lunch menu due to the late lunch we enjoyed at the hacienda.

**Day 10 – Costa Rica Vacation – January 16<sup>th</sup>:**

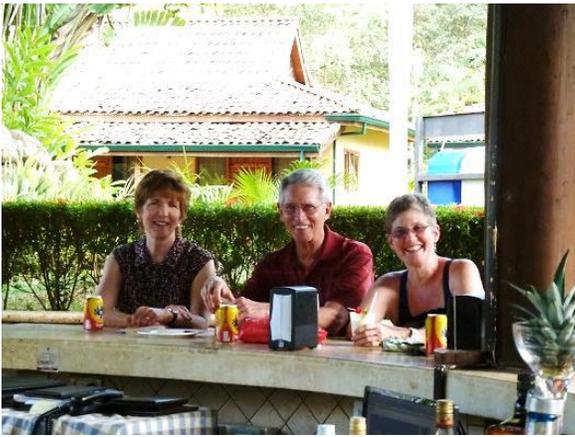
We wake up after our second of three nights at the Casa Conde del Mar resort on Costa Rica’s northwest Pacific Coast. No activities are planned today by our tour folks; today is a “free day to enjoy and explore Guanacaste”.

Marie and Kal have planned a real adventure for today. They are going to do the *Congo Trail Zip Line Canopy Tour*. Zip Lining is something like flying across the sky attached to a steel cable suspended between two towers high above ground. They leave the hotel at 10:30 AM, along with several others in our tour group, and arrive at the Congo Trail at 11 AM. After some brief instructions and safety information they spend the next hour+ flying through the air on eleven different zip lines. In addition to the adrenalin rush and scenic views they also see some interesting birds and animals including a close up view of a mother monkey, on top of the tree canopy, with a young monkey on her back.

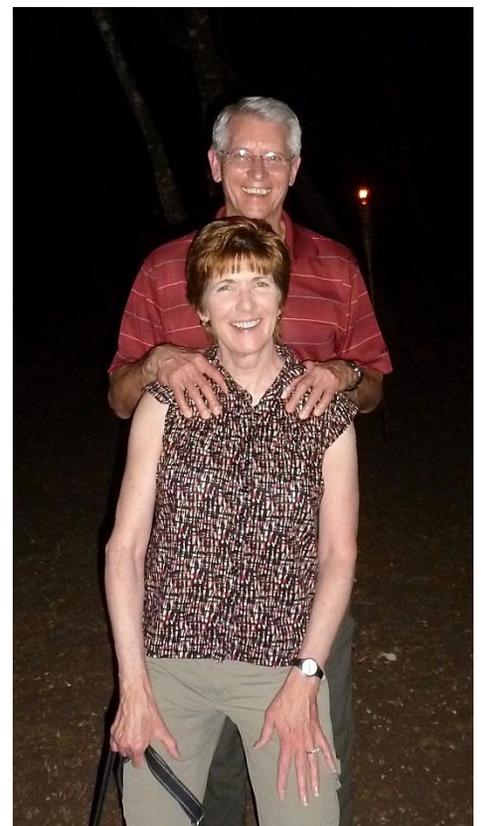


Marcia and I have planned a relaxing day. We spend time at the resort’s pools, watching the birds and Iguanas, walking the beach and swimming in the ocean. With only 28 rooms the large pool is never crowded. As our hotel is the only active one in the area the beach is also quiet. Costa Rica has an “open beach” policy so most of the folks that we do see on the beach are local residents with their children enjoying the pristine beach and the warm waters.





For our last dinner in Guanacaste, Tour Director Odir surprises us with something really special. Instead of having a group dinner in the hotel's nice open air restaurant, he has arranged for us to dine on the beach. We all arrive at the beach at 7 PM to find a nicely prepared banquet table and chairs. After we were seated, a bonfire is lit at the water's edge. A local Marimba Band arrives and plays Costa Rican music for the next two hours. Our dinner is excellent. We have a choice of two appetizers, three entrees, a great desert and wine. After dinner the band encourages folks to get up and dance. Then the band recruits new members from our group and Marcia handles the vibes while I work the drums and Jerry is on the strange "shaky percussion" thing. This was a very memorable experience.



## Day 11 – Costa Rica Vacation – January 17<sup>th</sup>:

Today we leave the Pacific Coast of Costa Rica after a most excellent three night stay at the Casa Conde del Mar Hotel. We will travel back to the Bougainvillea Hotel near San Jose in the central part of the country. Eight members of our Odysseys Unlimited tour group will fly back to the USA tomorrow. The other ten members, including Marie, Kal, Marcia and myself had purchased an extension package that will take us to the Pachira Lodge on Costa Rica's Caribbean Coast.

We depart the Casa Conde del Mar at 9 AM. We pass many fields of sugar cane, the main crop in Guanacaste Province. Odir has told us that sugar cane grows year around here due to the climate. When the sugar canes are about 10 feet tall and have lost their tassels the field is set on fire to burn off the dead cane leaves and drive animals, rodents, snakes and insects from the field. The next day workers with machetes hack down the canes. They are then collected by machines and loaded on trucks to take them to the processing plant. There the juice is squeezed from the cane. The juice is boiled to remove water and brown sugar crystals are formed. Calcium is added to turn the crystals white. The cane's fibrous residue is turned into ethanol or animal feed. The burned field sprouts new cane plants that will grow to maturity in 9 months. After three years the fields are plowed up and either another crop is planted or the field lays fallow. The pictures below show the stages I have described.

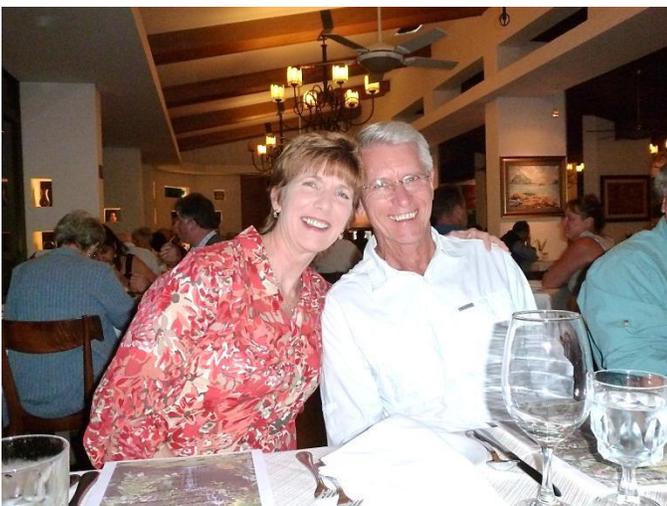


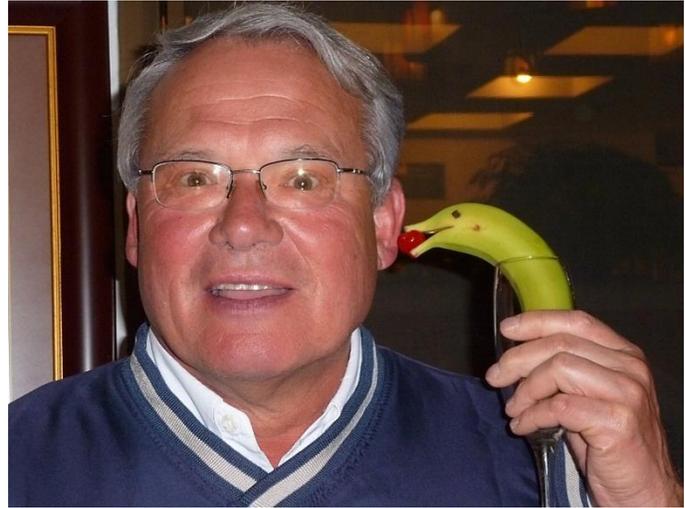
At 11:30 AM we make a rest stop. The major attraction is the wild *Macaws* in the trees and the *monkey with baby* up in another tree.



As promised Odir arranges our lunch stop next to a large souvenir store so we were able to finalize our shopping. We arrive at the wonderful Bougainvillea Hotel where we all stayed on our first two nights in Costa Rica.

At 7 PM we meet in the hotel dining room for our "farewell dinner" as this is the last time all eighteen of us will be together for dinner. We have a fine time. We enjoy the "banana thing" one of our waiters produced.





### Day 12 –Costa Rica Vacation – January 18<sup>th</sup>:

We are up early at the Bougainvillea Hotel in suburban San Jose. Today the ten folks in our tour group who have purchased the optional trip extension will be transported to Tortuguero National Park where we will spend two nights. We are leaving the bulk of our luggage behind at this hotel and traveling “light” to Tortuguero.



At 6:45 AM we say our final goodbyes to the truly exceptional Tour Director Odir Morales and are handed over to Giovanni from the Pachira Lodge who will be our tour guide for the next three days. The ten of us board a rather comfortable Toyota van. Already on board are a couple from Austria and Germany, two young men from Italy and Albert from New York City. We head north up into the 6000 foot high cloud forest covered mountains of Braulio Carrillo National Park. We encounter a misty rain, really the first day with light rain of our vacation, but the weather clears as we descend from the mountain onto the Caribbean plain. We pass a uniquely colored river that’s said to be used in motion pictures, most recently *Congo*.

Giovanni explains that we are now on a flat sedimentary plain different from the other, volcanic formed, areas of Costa Rica. The highway is quite nice and this van rides a little smoother than the Chinese built one we were on for the first eleven days.

At 8:30 AM we stop for a good included breakfast at a restaurant built next to a massive 300 year old tree that reminds us of the movie *Avatar*. The highlight is spotting a mother *Three-toed Sloth* with child. Giovanni takes us on a hunt for

the elusive *Strawberry Tree Frog* and Marcia gets a great photo of the small one inch long creature. Giovanni says her photo should be in National Geographic magazine.



We continue along past farms raising cattle and many banana plantations. We stop and Giovanni explains to us how bananas are grown and harvested.



At 11 AM we get to the end of the paved road. But, we keep on driving for another 45 minutes on a dirt road with exceptionally large potholes. When that road ends...and it really is the end of the road...we board a 48 passenger boat powered by twin 115 horsepower outboards. Giovanni tells us that rainfall in December was only 10% of normal and the rivers are low. Our Captain carefully maneuvers around the fallen trees and the bends in the tributary we are on and then we pick up speed when we reach the wide Tortuguero River. An hour into the 1-1/2 hour boat trip to our lodge it starts raining but it stops when we reach the Pachira Lodge, our home for the next two nights.





The lodge is situated on the bank of the Tortuguero River and was first opened 17 years ago. It is only accessible by boat and consists of a central building containing the restaurant, a swimming pool complex and bar area, 88 rooms and the boat docks. After a nice buffet lunch we are assigned our rooms. The buildings containing the rooms have either four (one level) or eight rooms (two levels) each and are situated away from the river in the rain forest. The rooms are comfortable but Spartan...no air conditioning, TVs, telephones or hair dryers.

At 3 PM we are taken by boat across the river to the town of Tortuguero, population 600. We walk to the Caribbean Sea and Giovanni shows us Tortuguero Beach the most important nesting site of the endangered *Green Sea Turtle*. Nesting season is July to October so there are no turtles to be seen. Our tour guide describes to us their life cycle and how they always return during mating season to the same beach. We then have free time to walk through the town. We return to the lodge at 5 PM. This two hour excursion could have best been done in much less time. We do get a nice photo of the entrance to the Lodge from the river.



We enjoy a nice buffet dinner and head to bed early. We start tomorrow with a boat excursion at 6 AM.

### **Day 13 – Costa Rica Vacation – January 19<sup>th</sup>:**

It rained quite hard overnight in Tortuguero on the northeast Caribbean Coast. We are all up early and meet near the restaurant for coffee at 5:45 AM. Then we walk to the boat docks and the ten Odysseys Unlimited tourers board a small power boat for a two hour nature cruise on the Tortuguero River and the adjoining tributaries. We are joined by a couple from England and our tour guide Giovanni. It is a beautiful morning; already in the 70s with a clear sky and no wind.

Our boat first stops by a large flowering tree right at the shore line. Giovanni tells us that it is the *Pachira Tree* after which our lodge is named. For the next two hours we cruise the shore of the river and several of its tributaries as our sharp eyed Captain and Giovanni point out all kinds of interesting trees, animals, amphibians and birds. Some of the highlights include all three types of *Monkeys* found in the region, *Howler*, *Spider*, and *White Faced Capuchin*, all types and sizes of *Iguanas*, *two-toed* and *three-toed Sloths*, *Herons*, *Ibis*, *Neely Parrots*, *Hawks*, *Woodpeckers*, *Toucans*, and *Hummingbirds*. Two highlights were a *Northern Jacana* that walked on the floating grass right up to our boat and an adult *Anhinga* in its nest feeding 2-1/2 week old babies.



We return to the lodge a little after 8 AM and enjoy our breakfast. At 9:30 AM we join Giovanni for a “jungle walk”. The lodge outfits us all with high rubber boots to survive the mud. For the next two hours we have an enjoyable walk through the lodge’s gardens and then along a 1060 yard long, and quite muddy, jungle trail. We learn about the unique trees and plants of the jungle and also see wildlife like *Sloths*, *Monkeys*, a *Keel Bill Toucan*, and a *Helmut Iguana*.



After the jungle walk we return to our rooms to clean up for lunch. We are late getting to lunch due to all the wildlife right off our balcony and along the trail to the restaurant, *Toucans, Woodpeckers, Iguanas, Monkeys, and Sloths*...we have to stop and take pictures.



At 3 PM we again board a small power boat for a two hour nature cruise. It is most relaxing and enjoyable.



Prior to dinner we meet at the pool bar and converse with Albert from NYC and Gail and Roy, the couple from England that were with us on our boat trips. Roy shows us on his I-Pad a few of the great wildlife photos he took today with his excellent camera. Tomorrow is their 17<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. We learn that they will be at the Arenal Manoa Hotel for the next two days so we fill them in on what to expect at that great resort. Then we are off to a good dinner.



#### **Day 14 – Costa Rica Vacation – January 20<sup>th</sup>:**

Once again it rained quite heavily overnight but the weather has cleared by sunrise. We are all awakened at 5:40 PM by the amazingly loud howl of a *Howler Monkey*. The adult male monkey is up in a tree about twenty yards from our balconies. We've been told that the top male in the area proclaims his dominance this way.

Marie, Kal, Marcia and I decide to skip the 6 AM bird watching session lead by our tour guide, Giovanni, and we proceed to the restaurant for an early breakfast. It appears to us that less than half of the tourists staying at the Lodge are from the USA. The balance seems to be evenly divided between Europeans and Latin Americans. Interestingly, we have seen almost no tourists from Asia (China, Japan and India). This has seemed to be true on all of our travels in Costa Rica. We really enjoyed our stay at the Pachira Lodge in the far northeast of Costa Rica and are glad we purchased this tour extension. We think we saw more wildlife here than we did in all of our other travels around the country. We really felt like we were staying in the jungle.

This will be our last full day in Costa Rica; today we travel back to San Jose. At 9 AM we get into a large boat for the hour+ trip up river to the start of the road back to San Jose. Today they only fill the boats half full as the river is running low due to meager rain over the past two months and the desire to avoid running aground or damaging the props on the dual 115HP outboards. For the first twenty minutes we are on the wide and deep Tortuguero River running at high speed. Then the Captain turns off onto a winding tributary no more than 80 feet wide and carefully winds around bends for the balance of the trip. We occasionally hear the props hit bottom. This reminds me a bit of Humphrey Bogart and Katherine Hepburn in the *African Queen*.



We are surprised when we arrive at the beginning of the road to San Jose after just one hour as the ride to the Pachira Lodge with the current took one and a half hours. All we can speculate is the half loaded boats moved faster. At 11 AM, after a wait for our bus to arrive, we are loaded onto a full size motor coach and start down the gravel/dirt road. We enjoy the views of the banana plantations and the cattle which are primarily *Brahmas*.



While most of the rural homes we see look neat and well-kept and we've been told the vast majority of Costa Ricans own their homes, we do occasionally see some that resemble just shacks and we speculate that they are rentals to immigrants. We have been told that an estimated 20% of Costa Rica's population, or 800,000 people, are immigrants mainly from Nicaragua to the north. We've sensed a slight resentment towards the immigrants. Not because they take jobs away...we hear "Costa Ricans are educated and do not want jobs picking coffee beans." ...the immigrants travel around the country and cut sugar cane, pick coffee beans, and harvest bananas. It seems the resentment comes from the fact that a generous Costa Rica offers free education and free health care to all, including the immigrants. Immigrant children born here are Costa Rica citizens and their parents are allowed to stay. We also occasionally hear comments that crime in an area is "due to immigrants" as is litter or cutting of trees or killing of wildlife, prohibited by Costa Rican law.

We continue on our motor coach ride back to San Jose. We are now on paved roads. We stop for an included buffet lunch at a good restaurant and then ascend into the rainy cloud forest mountains of Braulio Carrillo National Park before descending back down into the sunny central valley. We arrive back in the Heredia suburb of San Jose, at the Bougainvillea hotel, a little after 3 PM. We say goodbye to our excellent tour guide for the last three days, Giovanni. This will be our fourth night at the Bougainvillea. We stayed here our first two nights in Costa Rica and on the night before we started our tour extension to Tortuguero. We really like everything about this hotel. Some of us again enjoy walking through the Hotel's eight acre tropical gardens. The four of us meet for a light dinner at 6 PM.

**Day 15 – Costa Rica Vacation – January 21<sup>st</sup>:**

Today we leave Costa Rica to fly back home and end our vacation. Marie, Kal, Marcia and I meet at 7:30 AM and enjoy breakfast in the Bougainvillea Hotel dining room. A good part of our conversation centers on where we might go for our next major vacation. After breakfast we take another walk through the beautiful eight acre hotel tropical gardens. I pose by a Costa Rica national symbol, a brightly painted ox cart.





At 10:50 AM the four of us take a fast taxi to the San Jose airport. We board the same US Airways Boeing 757 that we flew down on two weeks ago, enjoying the same First Class seats (acquired with Frequent Flyer mileage credits) that we had on the way down. We take off on time at 1:40 PM on our four hour flight to Charlotte. We fly through turbulence for the first 2/3rds of the trip. The flight crew keeps the cabin crew seated so we were 2-1/2 hours into the flight, almost over Miami, before we were served any food (or beverages!).



We land a little early in Charlotte at 6:30PM EST. Marie and Kal have a direct flight from Charlotte to Dayton and get home by 10 PM. Marcia and I first fly to Reagan National Airport (getting nice views of nighttime Washington DC on Inauguration Night) and then take another flight home to Albany, arriving home before midnight. Temperatures are in the single digits when we arrive home and the forecast is for subzero temps.

We really enjoyed this vacation:

### **Highlights**

Our Odysseys Unlimited Tour Director Odir Morales was truly exceptional. He gave us a lot of great information about his country, always in an interesting and understandable form. Odir is a very pleasant person with a great personality. His logistics were great. Easy room check-ins. Rest stops always at nice places. Excellent places picked for the included ex-hotel meals. The banquet on the beach that he arranged on our last night in Guanacaste will never be forgotten. We have had great Tour Directors on all of our 12 international trips. Odir is at the top of the list.

Our driver Jorge was the best. He safely drove the motor coach over windy rough roads. He was always at the steps to help us out of the coach and assisted on the excursions when needed. He was also interesting person to chat with.

Our Hotels were very good. Free internet at all locations! We loved the Bougainvillea Hotel near San Jose where we spent four nights at three separate times. It was always an oasis of relaxation. We really enjoyed all of the other hotels. They were most probably the best in the area and were well matched to the region we were in with nice views and amenities.

Food was just fine. The included meals were very good and we always were either delivered to good places for the few meals we had to purchase on our own or we were given excellent dining recommendations by Odir.

Odysseys Unlimited Tour itinerary and pace was excellent. We liked the 2/2/3/3/1/2/1 (last three with the extensions) nights at a specific hotel. The pace, for us, was perfect. We visited all of the main areas to see in Costa Rica and got a good understanding of the different region. The only region we missed that I know is popular is the central Pacific Coast *National Park Manuel Antonio*. I believe we saw most of that park's main highlights on other parts of our trip.

The Tortuguero extension was excellent and probably unique to what we saw in the rest of the OU tour. Our Pachira Lodge Tour Guide, Giovanni, was outstanding. Very knowledgeable, hardworking and he has a great personality.

While nothing on this tour "blew our socks off", everything was most enjoyable. Probably our favorites were the nature boat rides, one on the Timpisque River in Guanacaste on the Pacific Coast and the two on the Tortuguero River on the Caribbean side.

The wildlife viewed on this trip was exceptional. The variety of birds, monkeys, reptiles, and butterflies was incredible. The plants were also amazing in diversity, beauty, and abundance.

Costa Rica is an amazing country with unique and diverse geography, great flora and fauna and most happy and pleasant people.

The weather could not have been better. The "dry" season is a great time to visit Costa Rica.

Our fellow Tour Members were great. All experienced travelers and most nice to be with.

### **Lowlights**

Nothing too big here - The travel distances between hotels were a little longer than I expected in such a small country but they were not bad. The distances were most probably longer due to the road conditions. The roads are bumpy but I do think that the suspension system on our Chinese made Hirer motor coach did not give us the smoothest ride.

Best, Jim

