



EcoAdventures in Central America

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The water was now pouring in through the windows and doors. That's when the panic set in. "Empuje! Empuje," push, push, shouted the cabbie as we frantically struggled to muscle his 1998 Honda Accord taxi out of the stream turned river.

Hours before, I had arrived in the small town of Puerto Jimenez with the intention of furthering my research on ecotourism in the Costa Rican rainforests. The town sits on the southeastern coast of the Osa Peninsula and is home to circa 1700 "Ticos" -- native Costa Ricans -- and is the main jump off point for many travelers venturing into the crown jewel of the country's national park system, the Corcovado jungle, located about 30 miles west and solely accessible by a single perilous dirt road.

Now on route to the first ecodestination, I found myself vigorously fighting not to be sucked away by the rushing water, which climbed dangerously high above my waist. An orchestra of exotic jungle sounds paired with unpolluted darkness intensified this already frantic situation, but with a bit of luck and four strong arms, we finally managed to muscle the car over

to the un-flooded side of the road. I had heard that the rainy season would make this trek particularly treacherous - but nothing ventured, nothing gained.

After a mile of pushing and scorned attempts to pop the clutch and revive an asphyxiated engine, we arrived at Ojo del Mar, the first stop on the itinerary. I was drenched in both sweat and rainwater and parched with an insatiable thirst. The ecoresort was nothing short of an oasis, or, in its current inundated state, perhaps more appropriately an island sanctuary.

It was nearing midnight and the owners had been asleep for hours by now. I was left to investigate for myself. On what seemed to be the correct path, I wandered through a botanical jungle maze and eventually stumbled upon a king-size bed and drinking water in a lofted cabin. I gulped the water, dropped my pack, plopped on the bed and fell asleep immediately. There was no need to count sheep after a grueling day of travel and turmoil.

The meet-and-greet the next morning was amusing: "When did you arrive, where did you sleep?"

inquired the owner, Nico, in a thick German accent. I ran her through the whole batty story of the night before, which was received with astonishment and disbelief. Nico inquired to the sanity of the cabbie. With the formalities out of the way, there was finally time to relax and enjoy the aesthetics and serenities that this jungle paradise had to offer.

Ecotourism

Ecoresorts like Ojo del Mar riddle the coast of the Osa Peninsula and provide a sustainable alternative to conventional tourism. The purpose of ecotourism is to minimize the environmental impact from tourism while fostering the local culture and benefiting the local economy. Costa Rica is lauded as a model for ecotourism and possesses more eco-destinations per capita than any other country world-wide.



With 2.5% of the world's biodiversity living in the

unscathed jungles of the Osa Peninsula, the ecoresorts that exist there without electricity or fresh water lines have formed a sustainable, symbiotic relationship with their environment. I was drawn to the region to adventure and explore this relationship further.

Ojo Del Mar

Perfectly situated between the sea and what National Geographic has dubbed "The most biodiverse jungle on the planet," Ojo del Mar offers all of the exotic flora and fauna of the Corcovado jungle with the comfort and amenities you'd expect from a high-class spa. Unlike many mainstream health resorts, however, Ojo del Mar skips the flamboyant and superficial, standing as an unassuming, tasteful, eco-friendly establishment. Whether you're enjoying a therapeutic waterfront massage or the warm sea breeze from one of Ojo's many swaying hammocks, the resort will leave you mollified and contented in pleasant tranquility.

Solar panels line the roof of the congregation hut, but electricity is rarely needed when candles can be fashioned from the abundance of coconut shells lining the property. Ojo provides fresh, drinkable water straight from its own well and utilizes an "open septic system" (Click resource) that recycles human

waste as nutrients back into the earth. Both the food and the generously paid employees are locally grown. I was hard-pressed to find any flaws in this exceptionally sustainable ecoresort.

The owners, Nico Fischer, a holistic doctor, and her partner Mark Huebner, an artist/architect who crafted the blueprints for Ojo, left the polluted German slums they once called home with a vision of creating a rejuvenating and refreshing ecoresort. In 2000, they achieved their dream and Ojo del Mar was open for business.

For explorers and thrill-seekers, Ojo offers a slew of exhilarating guided and unguided adventures. You can choose to do anything from surfing and sea kayaking to repelling 100-foot waterfalls and careening through the canopies on a zip-lining tour.

I sprung for a three-mile hike through the jungle where a nearby waterfall offered cliff jumping and natural swimming pools. I quickly discovered that the trail was actually a creek. With my trusty Texas lying forgotten at home, I was forced to forge on with just the bare skin on my feet. The howler monkeys overhead seemed to laugh at me as I cautiously traversed through the downed trees and overgrowth in the streambed, all the while keeping a keen eye out for any of the 17 venomous snakes that

favor the taste of the streamside critters surrounding me. About a mile in, the trail finally took a dry route. My first step on land proved a treacherous one. I looked down to my left to find that just feet away lay an eight-foot Fer-de-lance viper.

Revered for its aggressiveness and reputation for killing more



people than any other snake in Latin America, the Terciopelo, as the locals call it, contains exceedingly efficient venom that can kill a human adult in less than two hours. From this spot, it would have taken at least 30 minutes to hike out to the road, and another hour -- with good road conditions -- to drive to the nearest hospital for the anti-venom. I had come within a foot of an excruciating demise.

Adrenaline was still pumping from my run-in with the reptilian assassin when I finally reached the waterfall. 30-feet overhead, a family of spider monkeys decided to grace me with their presence as I leaped off the cascading top into the murky pool below. They

expressed their disapproval with my aquatic entrance as they swung away, grasping vines and branches and making impossible leaps. I arrived back at the resort and relaxed in my cabina, awaiting the bellowing call from the conch shell that served as an unmistakable signal: dinnertime!

The candlelit dinner table was glowing with colorful conversations. There were about twelve of us in total, hailing from all parts of the world. As we all chowed down on the best eggplant lasagna I've ever eaten, everyone was as excited to tell their own story as they were to hear each other's. Tales on the day's events and people's excursions ranged from successful surf lessons to close encounters with the exotic wildlife, everyone bearing pictures to match their stimulating stories.

The next day, after a delightful stay at Ojo del Mar, it was time to venture on. Five miles deeper into the jungle, the next ecoresort awaited my arrival. I hitched a ride with a friendly Tico in a hefty diesel truck with four-wheel-drive. I wasn't taking any chances this time.

Bosque del Cabo

Encompassing over 750 acres of unspoiled jungles and perched

atop a 500-foot cliff that overlooks the confluence between the mighty Pacific Ocean and The Golfo Dulce, Bosque Del Cabo is nothing short of a 5-star ecoresort. As my ride pulled up to the resort, the friendly bilingual employees greeted me with a smile and a complimentary strawberry daiquiri complete with the colorful little umbrella that denotes paradise.

My cliff-side cabina was breathtaking. There are seven deluxe cabinas on the cliff, a few houses for families to rent, and a handful of cabinas located 100 yards away in an ambrosial pampered garden. As I sat on the king-size bed, the parted mosquito net perfectly framed the awe-inspiring view of Toucans and Scarlet Macaws in the forefront as I gazed upon the faded silhouette of Panama across the Gulf. It came as no surprise that this year Traveler's Choice awarded Bosque as the "Best Hidden Gem" and "Best for Romance." Unfortunately, there was no romance there for this lone traveler.

Tourists seeking adventure, wildlife viewing, relaxation, you name it, flock to Bosque for more than just the enchanting atmosphere. While hiking along any of the eight extensive jungle trails on the property, you are likely to come across many of the nearly 400 different species of birds, 117 species of reptiles, and over 10,000 different species of

insects that occupy the Corcovado jungle.

Sustainability

Conservation is deeply rooted in the principles that define Bosque del Cabo. As active members of various local conservation organizations, the resort's owners, Kim and Phil Spier, make sure to exceed any and all sustainable standards for their ecoresort. Hydroelectric power is generated by utilizing water that flows over the colossal cliffs, and solar panels top the restaurant roof that is made almost entirely from local palm trees. A taste of the local culture is offered during dinnertime when a few female staff members perform a cultural Costa Rican dance, while education is embraced through guest lectures and a remarkably comprehensive 50 page informational packet that sits on the coffee table in each Cabina. Drawn up by Kim herself, the packet contains information about the exotic environment and the history of the region, addresses the need for ecotourism worldwide and offers an exceptionally detailed map of the massive property with all of its amenities.

Bosque del Cabo is full of isolated tropical waterfalls, lagoons and miles of untouched beaches on both the Pacific and the Golfo Dulce. A thrilling swim can be found in any of these spots, or you can simply relax and take a dip near your cabina in

the refreshing pool conveniently located next to the bar and kitchen. Guided tours offer an educational hike and with an on-site, canopy zip-lining operation located no more than 100-yards from the pool, adventure beckons you from your doorstep.

At the end of the day, scattered flashlights riddle the darkness as guests migrate towards a delightful buffet in the solar-powered restaurant. The culinary fare is spectacular. I gave my compliments to the chef as he dished out a second helping of chicken casserole rimmed with delicious fresh, locally grown vegetables.

While everyone else strolled back to their cabinas, the couples walking hand-in-hand lost in honeymooners' romance, I raced back to prepare for a night hike adventure. A lagoon by the garden cabinas teamed with fascinating nocturnal creatures caught in the beam of my headlamp. The poison dart and banana frogs belched out ribbits as I circled the lagoon finding cat-eyed snakes and the famous "Jesus lizards," dubbed for their uncanny ability to run on water, among others.

The most exhilarating part of this hike, however, also happened to be the most blood curdling, even trumping the earlier encounter with the Ferdelance viper. Between my cliff-side cabina and the garden, a 300-foot

suspension walking bridge spans a ravine split by a babbling creek 75-feet below. Before I could step on the bridge to cross to the lagoon, I heard an ear-piercing cry about 20 feet behind me. A jaguar. I stopped and turned slowly, trying to spot the mischievous carnivore with the shaking light mounted to my head. He was gone, but my heart still struggled to climb out of my stomach. I briskly crossed the bridge, marveling at how fortunate I was to have come so close to a Jaguar, an incredibly rare occurrence in the jungle and even more so on Bosque del Cabo's property. The fact that I wasn't served as cat food that night was also a plus.

When engulfed in the reverential feeling of raw nature and tranquility of this remote paradise, thoughts of home and any stress therein are simply, if not literally, set out to sea. Back in my cabina, the warm ocean breeze and rhythms of the pounding surf below lulled me to sleep as I lay in bed smiling, content from my great jungle adventures.