



Rainforest Reunion: Our Classic Family Journey to Costa Rica

By Marion Lardner

What do a flamboyant scarlet macaw, a pair of rambunctious red-backed spider monkeys, and a trail of notorious army ants have to do with family bonding? In our case, the amazing creatures of Costa Rica did more to bridge the proverbial generation gap than an armload of self-help books from Barnes & Noble or a private session with Dr. Phil.

Spurred on by tales of incomparable wildlife viewing, three generations of our family, including six grandchildren ranging in age from nine to 21, signed on with Classic Journeys for an eight-day exploration of Costa Rica's extraordinary ecosystems. While tropical rainforests teeming with exotic flora and fauna were the biggest draw, we also had heard nothing but praise for the Costa Rican people and were eager to experience their famed hospitality firsthand.



From our rendezvous point at the stunning Hotel Bougainvillea on the outskirts of San Jose, we first ventured out for an up-close-and-personal look at *Volcan Poas*, one of the world's largest active volcanoes, known for geyser-like eruptions that rocket up to 800 feet in the air. As we peered down from the rim, the steam rising from the depths of the explosion craters and the bubbling surface of one of the crater lakes were ominous reminders of the restlessness far beneath our feet.

Like all newcomers to Costa Rica, we soon realized that one incredible photo op follows another. A winding trail near La Paz led us to not one, but five, picture-perfect waterfalls. That same afternoon, we paused to marvel at a hummingbird garden as well as revel in the world's largest butterfly observatory. Having shown pictures of the iridescent blue morpho to my kindergarten students back home, it was a treat to actually see them on the wing, including one that landed daintily on my granddaughter's head.

The "wow" factor only increased the next day as we climbed by coach to the Monteverde Cloud Forest, a private wildlife sanctuary that straddles the Continental Divide in the Tilaran Mountains. On the first of two unforgettable aerial adventures, we negotiated a breathtaking network of hanging bridges, constructed—thankfully—with safety mesh and suspension cables made of sturdy galvanized steel.



Looking up or down (or in my case, staring straight ahead at the bobbing pink ribbon on my granddaughter's ponytail), the bird's-eye view was unsurpassed. In what was undoubtedly the highlight of their trip, the true thrill seekers among us opted for an exhilarating ride on zip line cables crisscrossing the treetop canopy. Not surprisingly, after zooming from one strategically placed platform to another, one speed-loving youngster likened himself to George of the Jungle!

With a dazzling array of colors—and seemingly infinite shades of green—Costa Rica's natural wonders are a feast for the eyes. But the sensory impact on the ears is ever-present, too, from the vociferous cries of the black howler monkeys, whose calls can be heard up to two miles away, to the cacophonous squawking, whistling and chattering of more than 800 species of birds. The lush forest surrounding the lovely Hotel Fonda Vela in Monteverde, our base for two nights, was home to three of our favorites: the resplendent quetzal, considered the most beautiful bird in the Western Hemisphere, the blue-crowned motmot, and the emerald toucanet.

Among our binocular-toting group, bird-spotting became almost a competitive sport. At the next two stops on our journey, Carara National Park and Manuel Antonio Park, the most cherished sighting was the magnificent scarlet macaw, with its brilliant red head and chest and wings tipped in royal blue and yellow. Ironically, the guest who was least inclined to become caught up in the quest wound up with the luckiest sighting of all; as he returned from a visit to the town's ATM, there was his scarlet macaw, sitting atop the hotel sign at the entrance to the drive, almost close enough to touch.

At Manuel Antonio's beautiful Tulemar bungalows, we awoke each morning to new adventures. When our groggy teenagers asserted their right to sleep in on holiday, their dad calmly observed, "OK...but the red-backed spider monkeys are on our porch, and one just grabbed another's tail and is yanking it as hard as he can." That was the last of the lie-ins and the first of dozens of wildlife encounters over the next two days, including "breakfasting" with the white-faced capuchin and squirrel monkeys in the hotel's open-air dining room. Like us, enchanted visitors to Manuel Antonio regularly cross paths with raccoons and their cousins, the coatimundis, while kayakers in the mangrove swamps cruise by silky anteaters, ibis, egrets and basiliscus lizards.



The credit for introducing us to this captivating world goes to our personal guide, Jorge, a native Costa Rican who received a degree in International Relations in the U.S. As a naturalist and practicing biologist, his gentle lessons in botany, ecology, and even political science served us well. No guest ever asked a "bad" question. With the patience of a saint, he instinctively knew when the adults needed grown-up time and the kids needed to be kids, leading the grandsons on their own big-muscle walk or delighting us all by dropping to his knees on the trail to better locate the army ants our fourth-grader had studied in school.

For us as grandparents, the true joy of our Classic Journeys trip was watching our children and grandchildren relish each other's company and react with wonder to a totally new environment. Whether gazing upward together, spellbound, at a company of sloths swinging slowly from branch to branch in a graceful treetop ballet, treading cautiously over the rainforest floor on a flashlight safari, detouring from the path for a spontaneous dip in the sea at a perfect crescent beach, or splashing about in a rocky pool under a full moon on our last night, these are the magical family memories we will cherish for a lifetime.

For more information about this Costa Rica Family Journey, please call Classic Journeys at 1-800-200-3887 or visit www.ClassicJourneys.com/costarica

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