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Sunday, January 7, 2018

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By FRANK STEWART

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LOS ANGELES TIMES SUNDAY CROSSWORD

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Arenal Volcano's unexpected 2010 eruption reminded observers that Central Costa Rica's most iconic feature can be unpredictable.

(Steve Haggerty/TNS)

Nature first: A trip through 'Central America's safest'

By Anne Z. Cooke Tribune News Service

TURRIALBA, Costa Rica - It was 6:01 a.m. when we heard them barking, an in-"huh-huh-huh-huh" floating through the rainforest canopy and over Pacuare Lodge.

"Howler monkeys," said Steve, squinting at his watch. Then a toucan weighed in, two long, raspy "screeches" close to our deck, in the Rio Pacuare Forest Reserve, in eastern Costa Rica's Barbilla National

Up in a flash, we grabbed the binoculars and dashed outside, where a chorus of honks, chirps and whistles ushered in the dawn.

"Shhhh!" Steve said, hopefully, peering over the railing into the underbrush. "Listen! Was that a growl?'

Wildlife on parade is a predictable event at most Costa Rican eco-lodges. Coatis, capuchin monkeys, birds and butterflies lead off, followed by sloths, bacillus lizards (Jesus lizards because they "walk" on water) and green frogs, with howler monkeys, tapirs, armadillos and tarantulas at the rear. But big cats, ocelots and pumas? Once in a green moon.

"Jaguars? Maybe, but don't count on it," said travel planner Alison Carey, three months earlier when she called to talk about our trip. A Latin America specialist with Scott Dunn Personal Journeys, Carey and her colleagues research and book custom, personalized adventures for individual

travelers. We'd been to Costa Rica before, but just briefly, on a cruise ship stopover. This time would be different, we agreed. Hence the call to Scott Dunn Personal Journeys, a leader in the growing trend toward custom travel.

"You'll like Pacuare Lodge," said Carey. "It's on the river. an easy, 4-mile raft ride downstream," she said. "It's known for wildlife, and wild cats, too, though they're rarely seen. It's isolated, but that's part of the appeal. You know what they say: Costa Rica is one of Central America's safest countries."

Was it? Sporadic upheavals have plagued Central America for decades, from corrupt governments and armed insurrections to civil wars and more recently, drug trafficking. What makes Costa Rica different?

Then our itinerary arrived in the mail, a spiral-bound notebook listing dates, places and our contacts at each, with blank space for notes. The last three nights would be on our own, joining well-heeled friends for a reunion at Villa Manzu, a palatial mansion on the Papagayo Peninsula.

But the question lingered. "Is it true? Is Costa Rica Central America's safest country?" I asked Abel, the Scott Dunn driver who picked us up at the Juan Santamaria International Airport, in San Jose, the capital.

"We think so," he said, heading for the Finca Rosa Blanca hotel, north of the city. "It's because we have no military," he continued. "The money pays instead for schools, high school and college, and for health care and doctors. And it's all free," he said.

"Of course, there are always people who don't want to In Costa Rica, we learned, education, health and the environment are more than a campaign promise. They are the framework for a peaceful future.



Howler monkeys, kings of the rainforest canopy, are hard to see but easy to identify; listen for their loud throaty howls. Though nine species have been identified, Costa Rica is home to just one, the common mantled howler.

(Steve Haggerty/TNS)

If you go

Scott Dunn Personal Journeys, a leader in the newest trend in travel, researches, plans and books personalized vacations and adventures. www.scottdunn.com. All lodging prices may vary with discounts, dates and availability.

THE LODGES

At Finca Rosa Blanca, double rooms start at \$254 per night; www.fincarosa blanca.com/en

At Pacuare Lodge, rates for two in a bungalow with meals, most recreation and non-alcoholic beverages start at \$766; three nights are recommended. www. pacuarelodge.com At Nayara Springs and Nayara Resort, bungalows for two start at \$351, but vary with discounts and availability, www. nayarasprings.com. At Villa Manzu, the all-inclusive rate for the house is priced per night. Multiple guests, groups and families can share the cost. Call for dates, availability and current prices. www.villamanzu.com.

GETTING THERE

Fly into Juan Santamaria International Airport, in San Jose. For Villa Manzu, in Guanacaste Province, fly into Liberia Airport.

work and are tempted to steal. But most people here have jobs," he added as we reached the hotel, a restored, 14-suite Spanish Colonial house and coffee plantation, with a pool and a popular open-air restaurant.

On time for the day's coffee plantation tour, we thought we'd learn about coffee. But the two-hour uphill walk with naturalist Manolo Munoz was as much about sustainable farming as it was about a good cup of joe.

Guiding us among the coffee trees, planted in volcanic soil between banana and poro trees in a mixed-species forest, Munoz explained that "trees add important minerals" to the soil. "A mix of sun and shade grows better 'cherries' (coffee beans) than the big commercial farms do," he said.

That evening, as the sun slipped between the palm fronds and Miguel, the hotel waiter, came around with menus, I decided to see what he'd say. "Uh, Miguel, why do people say Costa Rica is Central America's safest country?"

"Because we don't have an army," he said. "After the civil war, in 1949, the government decided that paying for education, hospitals, culture and parks was more important than guns and soldiers."

Local police handle regional crime and a national government-supported 70-man team of "commandos," a trained "security and intervention" group, is available for extreme emergencies. But beyond that, no army.

In Costa Rica, we learned, education, health and the environment are more than a campaign promise. They are the framework for a peaceful future.

No wildlife conversation lasted more than 10 minutes before the topic turned to Costa Rica's many species, and how they have adapted to the country's 12 climate zones, each at a different altitude, from sea level to the summit of frosty, 12,533-foot Cerro Chirripo Volcano.

Rafting through the Pacuare River's narrow gorge, to Pacuare Lodge on the river bank, we could see the difference between the trees along the river gorge and those on the mountain side above, where the howler monkeys live.

Alone in the forest, Pacuare Lodge is both self-sustaining (electricity is limited to several hours daily), rustic and luxurious. Candles light the upstairs bar and hall, and the dining room downstairs and adjoining deck, where all meals are served. Most of the bungalows have some screened walls, bringing the outside in. The first group was built along the river; the luxury suites climb the hill, each a five-star treehouse.

Our days in Costa Rica were busy with discovery hikes, wildlife prowls and trips to the nearby indigenous village, with an occasional plunge pool dip and nap in our hammock. Leisurely dinners with like-minded guests made the rainforest silence that much more serene.

A startling contrast, indeed, to our next destination, Nayara Springs Resort, on a highway near Avenal Volcano National Park, in central Costa Rica. Greeted by a uniformed bell boy, we thought we'd made a wrong turn.

But this popular vacation village and honeymoon retreat only masquerades as a hotel. In fact, it offers urban sophistication in a rainforest setting. With its sumptuous suites — and swimming pools, shaded patios, bars and pubs, a spa and gym, restaurants and shops — connected by a maze of heavily landscaped serpentine paths, each is hidden from the next.

Continued next page

Events

Continued from C1

Included in the children's

• In Richmond, Virginia will open the Institute for Contemporary Art in April.

• In Montgomery, Ala-The Legacy Museum: From **Enslavement to Mass Incarcer**ation is a project of the Equal Justice Initiative, a nonprofit wrongly convicted and defen-

• The Glenstone Museum panding, opening a new museum building by the end of

 In St. Louis, the Gateway Arch Grounds and Museum opens July 4 with biking and running trails, space for outdoor concerts and indoor

 In New York City, Spyscape, a museum experience

 The Farm Wisconsin Discovery Center in Manitowoc, shows visitors where food

Big things in Florida

• In addition to the usual ings — including Toy Story **Land** at Disney World — a new





water sports park is expected in Orlando this summer: Nona Adventure Park will feature an course, wakeboarders pulled

along by cables and a 60-foot

climbing tower with a ropes

 A new private train line, Brightline, is expected to launch introductory service between West Palm Beach and Fort Lauderdale the sec-

• Miami is getting its first Italian food hall, La Centrale,

ABOVE: The Tower of Voices, shown in an artist's rendering, is scheduled to open in September at the Flight 93 National Memorial in Stoystown, Pennsylvania. The 93-foot tower will feature 40 chimes, a symbolic representation of the 40 passengers and crew who perished in the 9/11 terror attack.

LEFT: The Space Needle towers over the Chihuly Garden and Glass museum in the Seattle Center. Seattle's most famous landmark will finish its observation deck renovation this spring.

as a TimeOut Market with din-Avenue. The Institute of Contemporary Art just opened in a

Notable in the new year

• The Flight 93 National Memorial in Pennsylvania is scheduled to open the Tower of Voices in September. The structure will be part of the commemoration of the Unit-

Find It All

Online

bendbulletin.com

on Sept. 11, 2001. It will rise chimes, a symbolic represen-

• In Seattle, the Space Needle completes its renovation in the spring. New features include a multi-level, floor-toceiling glass viewing experi-

like they're floating on air. be connected by a steel-andwood staircase with glass ocudeck and lounge will open up a new view looking down.



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From previous page

A five-minute walk beneath the trees — with resident birds and 30-odd sloths overhead was a stroll in the woods.

As our Scott Dunn-planned trip ended, we said goodbye to our driver. Andreas, who delivered us to Villa Manzu. And there was the mansion, overlooking the ocean, a modern, sandy-colored stone building flanked by grassy lawns and trees, pools and patios.

Art and artifacts lined the corridors and walls. The kitchen-plus-barstools adjoined the living and dining rooms; the theater, two bars, party room and eight luxurious bedrooms with bath completed the luxury. A path to the cliff-side barbecue circle faced the sunset.

With a staff of 12, including butler and three chefs, this luxurious hideaway, on 5 acres, guarantees privacy for those who can afford it: celebrities, tech-company millionaires, movie moguls, industry titans and sports greats. For us, being there was dumb luck.

"Make yourself at home," said our hostess, with a warm hug. "Take in the scenery," or join us in the pool; it's heated. "Meet our butler, Luis Morera, who makes the most marvelous cocktails."

Sit at the kitchen counter and "talk ingredients," with the chefs, or "ask about wine pairings." Borrow a kayak or fishing gear and "walk down to the beach." Take a car, to



ABOVE: Keel-billed toucans, bright-colored and slow-flying, are easy to spot in dense rainforests like those in the Pacuare River gorge.

RIGHT: A half-hour's hike from Pacuare Lodge leads to a hidden waterfall.

(Steve Haggerty/TNS photos)

visit the Beach Club or play golf. "Villa Manzu has guest privileges." Arrive by yacht and tie up in the harbor. Or fly: "The driver will meet you at the airport."

The Villa sleeps 20-plus adults and/or children. Because this is your house, everything's included: Meals, wine, cocktails, snacks, sports equipment, fishing gear, a car, guides, and as always, Costa Rican hospitality.





Hike through the grounds at Nayara Springs Resort and get lost in the landscaping, a green with tropical plants and flowers crowding every path, enhancing every pool and flanking every restaurant. The botanical gardens are what make this luxurious, full-service resort so unique.

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