

## A GLIMPSE of... a week in COSTA RICA

January 22-29, 2011

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**Saturday, January 22.** Usually I request an aisle seat assignment on a plane to be in a better position to move my legs. This time, with a relatively short flight I want to sit at a window to see the take-off from San Diego. The tip of my nose is firmly pressed against the window all the way to Phoenix, the layover hub for connection to San Jose, Costa Rica. I'm looking hard, trying to commit the marvelous views to memory.

For a distance the land appears flat, laid out in a grid-like pattern with perfectly straight lines; the rectangles within the boundaries are pretty shades of green, some are striped, and one is turquoise, which I assume from this altitude, may be a body of water. In one section, a wide squiggly, irregularly shaped, many textured line runs diagonally through the geometric shapes creating a rough counterpoint to the otherwise smooth appearing scene. A large dun-colored stretch comes next; probably dunes, but they seem to be moving, which sets me to wondering what that really is. . .

Seeing our group of geriatrics boarding the Phoenix to San Jose leg, the flight attendant looks at me, smiles, and asks with an amused glint in her eye: "Will you be going on the Zip Line?" "Of course, hanging by my toes, camera in hand" I reply. She laughs. I picture the scene in my mind...

The leader of this tour is the owner of the company, a very kind, thoughtful, capable, and caring man. He has arranged for someone to meet us at the air port, and directs us through customs, baggage claim, and to transportation to the hotel. On this bus the driver's area is separated from the passengers by a door to avoid driver distraction. Seems like a good idea.

Weary and hungry on arrival at the Sleep Inn in San Jose, I go in search of something to eat and refreshment before turning in for the night.

The intimidating man in a suit at the entrance says "The restaurant is behind the casino, through that door," pointing the direction. I go as instructed passing through a cavernous, high-ceilinged, deep dark, smoke-filled room, where the noise level is unbearable and my ear can't differentiate the sounds of the loud voices into words. It's the casino filled with people gambling, oblivious to the rest of the world; some are watching a variety of sports on TV monitors mounted on the wall above the bar area. I feel very conspicuous walking through this gloomy, crowded space, an elderly woman alone, obviously a stranger in town. A second man in a suit stands watch here and directs me to another door. Finally I see a room with tables set for a meal, and a few of my travel buddies already seated and waiting. Here the cacophony is also deafening, and I note that there's nothing on the walls in the way of curtains on the windows, or carpeting on the floor to muffle the ambient noise. At last there's hope of sating my growling stomach before going to bed. Happily I take a seat at a table where there are several women. Service this evening appears to be in "park." There are no visible servers. Eventually I have the privilege to order. Lucky for me, the wait for the tortilla soup I receive much later is worthwhile. It's mighty delicious, quickly changing my mood and general outlook for the better.

**Sunday, January 23.** To my delight I am able to access email in the lobby early in the morning. I feel happy, empowered; I've been brave enough to try to do this only once before.

Now I begin to notice and differentiate the people in our predominantly female group. One of the women piques my curiosity more than others. Physically quite unattractive; she could pass for male. She has short, stringy, mannishly cut gray hair, a sallow, flaccid complexion, drooping eyelids, and her posture and demeanor look worn out. She volunteers that she's a former librarian, and "Instead of marrying I spent my time and money traveling." When engaged in conversation, she continues to speak for some time after it's over, seemingly not noticing or perhaps not caring whether anyone is listening....

The drive to Poas, the active volcano near San Jose is long and arduous. The road up to 9000feet is steep, narrow, full of ess curves, and not at all smooth. An uneven, strenuous path leads from the parking lot to a magnificent panoramic view of the caldera. That's what draws the crowds to come. Today the unobstructed view is breathtakingly beautiful; it's the clearest, cloudless blue sky of a sunny day.

Thoughtfully the authorities allow access to a limited number of vehicles at any one time, so should an eruption occur, evacuation would be facilitated.

The uplifting experience of the glorious vista is followed by a buffet lunch in what is billed as a typical restaurant. A special drink made with fresh strawberries is a specially refreshing and welcome part of a very tasty meal, all of it healthy foods.

The repast is followed by a 20-minute officially announced siesta. A capital idea!

Back in town at the Sleep Inn in the afternoon, the leader walks us around the plaza across from the hotel. It's a well laid out park, with tall old shade trees, paved paths, and well placed sculptured busts of noted personages looking down from pedestals, a reminder of better days. Deprived of maintenance it looks seedy and sad.

On one side of the plaza is dominated by the pink façade of a large hotel. We walk through the lobby, - a surreal experience. The bar in the large, high-ceilinged space is filled with tables at which a strictly male clientele is busy swilling beer, talking loudly in Spanish, smoking, and watching several large TV monitors, each devoted to a different sport. The high decibel din here seems to take up all the space. The perimeter is lined with pretty, slender young women in varying states of suggestive attire looking over the crowd, each selecting and appraising her potential target. They are not socializing with one another other, each is focused on searching out her object of personal attention, ready to solicit or be solicited. We are told that this is a place known for its sex business. I try to look unconcerned and confident walking through this sleazy scene. I don't want to betray my discomfort at being there as a spectator, a foreign tourist.

Later, in the early evening the tour manager hosts a get-together at the bar. Everyone shows up promptly. I stand around uneasily with holding a scotch to give me a prop as 'protection' from feeling too awkward. Two elderly men in our group are traveling together; one tall and slender, the other squarely built. I notice and remark on the short one's nametag; a long German name. A conversation starts, and I'm invited to join them at table. They are retired priests from Spokane, Washington. They ask me many questions. I respond enthusiastically. Traveling solo, and having no one to speak to all day, I welcome the opportunity for conversation by the evening. They appear friendly and participate eagerly as move verbally through a number of subject areas before we call it a day.

By 9p.m. I'm turning off the light to make sure to heed the wake-up call I've set for 5am.

**Monday, January 24.** This is the day to travel to the centerpiece of this journey, a very long bus ride to Tortuguero National Park. It's in a region of swamps, rain forest, and beaches with a rainfall of 250 inches a year, and can be reached only by boat or airplane. After a hearty breakfast we stop at a banana plantation for a little guided insight into the industry.

There are bright blue plastic bags hanging on the trees under the leaves, each contains a bunch of bananas, or a hand as it is called. They are for protection of the fruit against diseases and insects, and coincidentally bring added visual interest to an otherwise all green landscape, making the scene much more colorful. The bananas, approximately a dozen bunches at a time, are brought to an open air shed on overhead rails equipped with two dozen hooks on which the blue bags are hung. First they are broken from the tree and hung on a hook on the moving rail. then they are transported to a stopping point by shirtless young men wearing body harnesses, and boots on their feet, running as fast as they can, pulling a set of hooked bunches along. Many of these men are from Nicaragua, here illegally, and said to be causing labor and other problems for Costa Rica. Seeing this primitive assembly line reminded me of pictures I had seen of the laborers used in building of the Egyptian pyramids.

In the next shed men in boots and rubber gloves begin the processing by tossing the fruit into vats of flowing water infused with a dilute chemical solution to kill any bugs. The bananas are separated into those that are perfect for export and others for domestic use.

I ask why mules or donkeys are not used for this difficult job. The answer is they are slower than humans, leave their droppings wherever they go, and can be stubborn. Obviously humans are a better deal.

As the morning continues, the heat and humidity levels increase. We continue on our way toward the boat. The road is very bumpy. Every time a truck passes, and they do quite often, we are enveloped in a cloud of dust. This section of road is kept unpaved, as the heavy truck traffic rips it up too quickly when it is repaired.

At the Caribbean coast we meet the boat that is to carry us to Mawamba Lodge.

We pile into boats for the ride through canals for a bit of sightseeing and a preview of the environment for our next two days and nights. The seats in the motor boat are very close to the water surface; we can trail our fingers in the water and feel how warm it is: quite agreeable. On the way we sight blue and green herons, white egrets, a couple of caimans (small version of crocodile), and spider monkeys in the trees. A staggering number of plants in a variety of shapes, mostly in shades of red and pink grow amid the greenery of the banks. The trip lasts about two hours, with the driver changing speed to allow us to view any special plants or animals. Now and then I feel the pleasant tepid spray of the water meeting my face, and enjoy the velvety air and the slight breeze.

The cabins at the lodge have a rustic, timbered look, with sparsely furnished but completely adequate interiors; they are set into the landscape of a rich variety of palm and other trees. There's a tree with very dark green leaves that has the most beautiful pears I have ever seen. Their exquisite shape and color blends from glowing pink on top to creamy white toward the bottom, totally charming. From the distance they look like flowers.

At lunch in a semi-outdoor setting flies attack in force. They don't respond very well to being shoed away, dragging their legs slowly across my plate. Not nice, but lunch is good.

The sea here is definitely off limits to people. Currents are very strong. The beach is littered with all sorts of debris, interesting to folks like me, who like to collect seeds, and shells, and bits of driftwood. The Lodge property includes a butterfly farm and a small swamp, where the smallest of frogs and other denizens of damp places can be found. I saw a tiny frog with bright blue legs and brilliant red body, and an iridescent green one with a black pattern on its back. Can't wrap my mind around the enormous variety of creatures and their shapes and colors I see here.

After dinner a small group of us walk to the beach to stargaze. What a fantastic moment for me! I wish we could stay longer. The awesome darkness and the clarity of the sky with its gazillions of big and little points of light leave me breathless every time I see it.

It has been a day of new impressions, and I'm glad to go to bed to rest my eyes and mind, and prepare for the morrow.

**Tuesday, January 25.** A water excursion by outboard motor boat is our plan this morning. Along the way spider monkeys look down on us from their perches in the canopy above. A sloth hanging from a branch by its feet scratches its belly; several iguanas are lazing on high branches of other trees. In the water, blue and white herons are hunting, and a caiman risks only his snout above the surface.

We are lucky today; only one cloud burst early in the morning, for which everyone is prepared with a poncho. It's a sample of how it feels to be gliding in an open boat when the sky above opens up and enormous raindrops fall from above. They come slowly here and there, speeding up to become a downpour for a few minutes. Then it's over and the sun appears, the

clouds disperse, and the drops glisten on the plants in the sun for a few moments before they dry off.

We got enough sun and wind today for me to be thoroughly tired. I skip the afternoon boat excursion in favor of a restorative nap and a relaxing dip in the pool. While enjoying the ambience and coolness of the blue water and surrounding plants a toucan flies overhead. That's an exciting first.

Later I rejoin the group for a sunset sail and get-together. It's a congenial affair, although the loud noise that passes for music drives me to put earplugs in and still feel painfully assailed by the intense decibel level of the clashing, crashing, non-melodious sound that our teens adore. Asking around, I find the other women like the "music." Clearly I'm a minority of one.

The sun sinks, obscured from view by the lush greenery bordering the canal, I miss the moment; I must have blinked or looked away. The pastel blue expanse of sky is streaked with shades of pink and grey. In the evening I return to my three-bed cabin glad to be in a quiet place, and wait to hear the promised sounds of nocturnal resident wild life.

**Wednesday, January 26.** The time to start back toward home has come. We trace our way back forty miles from Tortugero through the jungle by water. On the way we get a glimpse of a few sloths hanging by their toes, and snowy white egrets showing their stuff. It's pleasantly overcast this morning, sparing us what could be a very hot, sun-soaked time on the canal.

On terra firma we stop for lunch before boarding the coach for the longer leg of the trip to Montana del Fuego, the next overnight stop in a northerly direction.

This part of the country appears to be economically better off than the areas around San Jose, where barbed wire is everywhere, and the grazing cattle are pitifully thin. In this region the houses look maintained with more care, and the cattle appear to enjoy better conditions.

There's a nice restaurant at the hotel, where I taste some very good Chilean wine, and have a snack. The tour manager celebrates the birthday of a passenger who has taken thirty trips with him. Nice touch. The lady is traveling with her husband who is 93 years old. He participates in everything in silence, and I have been privately wondering how stressful this trip is for him. So far so good; he's still on his feet, and his wife is doing a fine job of making sure he's comfortable and offers her arm when he needs it. Most of the folks on this trip are repeaters and know one another. Two of the women in the group made a bet that I'm Italian. One lost.

After trundling along on the bus for most of the day, stopping in various places, I'm tired. The quarters for the night are at Montana de Fuego, the Mountain of Fire. It's an unusual motel/hotel type of arrangement on a lovely spot overlooking Mt. Arenal, an active volcano. The place looks clean and ultra-modern, but is stuffy inside from having absorbed the day's heat. In spite of searching around I have no clue how to activate the cooling mechanism. I go out to look around and spot a young handyman. I ask him to help. He's friendly and polite. It's such a relief to cool my suite to a comfortable temperature.

Late this evening, I'm sitting on a King-size bed in a large multi-room suite. It's all decked out in white, lots of satiny throw pillows all around me. I feel like I should be some character in an old 1940s movie amid all these pillows. A dark brown wooden cabinet containing a TV set and a desk are across from the bed. Each room has its own AC and temperature control; I concern myself only with the bedroom where I hope to rest for the night.

Lighting of the room is abysmal in spite of an attractive chandelier hanging about 20 feet above me, with a convenient-to-reach -from-the-bed switch. The design of the light bulbs is very pretty too, but at that height very little light filters down to people-level. My usual pre-sleep reading fix is not to be satisfied tonight.

There's a Jacuzzi in the large impressive bathroom, a shower, and dim dreary lighting. The shower doesn't keep the temperature of the water steady for more than 30 seconds, veering from too hot to too cold, making the taking of a shower a major frustration.

Through the floor-to ceiling windows I see large pink trumpet-like flowers on a beautiful little tree against the backdrop of the mountains.

The usefulness of the sleek modern architecture of this place certainly doesn't live up to the standard of its appearance. We had been advised that on occasion the volcano is active, but I see no plume of smoke rising from it tonight.

**Thursday, January 27.** Started out for an early morning explore at 6:15, but scurried back to get a poncho to stay dry. Rain forest is like that.... Now it pours and five minutes later it's dry. Met a friendly couple on vacation from Ohio, where it's two degrees this morning. They're thrilled to be here in their shirtsleeves.

We pull out on our coach at nine this morning for Danaus, a nature preserve. A docent, speaking far better English than our own guide Erik takes us through the paths describing many of the spectacular plants and demonstrating the interaction of birds on a feeder platform that he supplies with several bananas while he speaks.

The birds are fascinating to watch in action. A comparatively large bird with an aggressive beak, deep yellow/brown breast, and a bright turquoise tail seems to be lord of the platform. The smaller birds come to collect their share, but are lucky to snatch a morsel before the larger specimen chases them off. The big bird, perches on a nearby branch watching the activity on the platform and swoops down every time the smaller fellows gather. This goes on for a while before the dominant bird grabs the banana, tries to fly away with it and drops it to the ground. Just like humans and other animals they have a pecking order. Each member seems to know its place.

We continue on from the nature center toward Arenal Volcano to a resort spa.

A sumptuous buffet -style lunch is included in the price of admission, and then the centerpiece of the day for me: we change to swim suits for a dip in the waters flowing down from the mountain into terraced pools; these get cooler as the altitude decreases. These pools meander down the incline of the mountain placed among large, powerful jungle plants, the trail punctuated by little stone bridges and paths leading to each.

The early afternoon sun casts strong shadows and creates fantastic translucent greens where the sun shines through the leaves and deep, rich greens where they overlap. The reds and pinks absolutely glow in this wonderland. I am totally immersed in this wealth of color and beauty. My usual concern with the world and its manifold issues is temporarily non-existent; I'm deliciously afloat in all this unreality.

Later we make a stop at a lovely church in La Fortuna. A life-size statue of the Risen Christ is striding forward on the altar, an unusual representation. Just then I cross paths with the priests. I ask them how they feel about this approach to representing Christ. One of them

responds: "I'd like him to be smiling." A few minutes after that, in another encounter at the church I have a peculiar exchange with two women in the group: I call it an "almost conversation." We're chatting about the Gospels; one of the women is favorably impressed that I have read them, and asks if I'm Catholic. I say "no". We continue, and I mention that it was Paul who originated the name Christos and "Christians" for those who followed Christ on his travels through Greece. I make reference to the fact that the writers were Jews; she cuts off any further verbiage with: "I'm not interested in the Old Testament, that's just history", and she and her friend walk away. I'm hurt to encounter such a closed mind in a widely travelled person. Back to the world of real people, the strangest creatures.

Must remember not to touch on politics or religion, stay with the weather and be "funny."

At the hotel in the evening, I check for computers, and am again able to access my email, clear my mailbox of junk, and write to a friend. Am especially excited to see my email today, because the news is that the proofs of my book in production and the cover are ready to be corrected and approved. Since the lighting in the room is too dim for reading, I settle for a few minutes of TV watching, just to hear voices and see movement before dropping off to sleep.

**Friday, January 28.** Am giving the shower a chance to redeem itself at 5:30 this morning, but hesitate to put shampoo in my hair. Good decision. The flow is quite erratic in temperature and the pressure varies from deluge to full stop.

This morning it's time for the trip across the mountains from Arenal to Sarchi on the Pan-American Highway. The name of this road totally belies the image I had conjured up. Dozens of hairpin curves on a road barely the width of a car that has to be shared and sometimes almost simultaneously negotiated in both directions by enormous trailer trucks and full size tour busses.

The drivers here don't signal their approach automatically like in other countries. This is a real breath-taker, or perhaps cliff-hanger is more apt.

On the way we stop at a giant crafts and souvenir store that displays a beautiful, painted façade of colorful native designs. Inside the hangar-sized building a large selection of very attractive items in a multitude of colors meets the sightseer; coffee liqueurs, mugs, the usual variety of t-shirts, scarves, and toys as well as all sorts of "thingamajigs" is for sale.

On arrival back to our starting point in San Jose we take a quick tour of the National Theater across the street from the hotel. It's an 1890 structure built by coffee money with murals and columns, and a stage that is adapted to performing various technical marvels. I pal up with a tiny Mexican lady named Carmina. She's very well educated, alert, and interested in everything, and travels by herself because her doctor husband doesn't enjoy it. She's delightful to talk to.

**Saturday, January 29.** We start out at 5am. My seat in the last row in the tail of the plane is shaky and bumpy during turbulence, very scary. The good part is that I have an aisle seat for the longer leg of the journey. I spend time reading, standing up for a while, taking a nap. It passes almost quickly. We go through customs in Phoenix, and we're on our way to San Diego.

It's been a most enjoyable trip and I'm glad to be heading home.

I have taken a large number of pictures with my digital camera on this trip. Unfortunately they were lost with a touch of a computer key. One of life's little stumbles.