



# INTO THE CLOUD FORESTS

Adventure aplenty  
in Costa Rica

STELLA MARTIN

**W**e have ventured to Costa Rica for a month without an itinerary or bookings beyond an arranged trip to Corcovado National Park, one of the most biodiverse parts of the planet. We are not disappointed. From four species of monkeys, peccaries and tapirs to anteaters, three-toed sloths, tayra and Mexican porcupine, plus more than 50 species of birds, we are overwhelmed by the variety and abundance of wildlife and the amazing abilities of our sharp-eyed guide, Royer Munoz.

However, with visitors pouring in on treks and by boats on day trips, Corcovado, on southwest Costa Rica's Osa Peninsula, is not exactly off the beaten track. So, when Royer suggests a trip to a remote location next to the Panamanian border we are intrigued. And, with a flexible schedule, we are able to fall in with his plans.

Royer doesn't have a driving licence and hire cars are in short supply so, after some bargaining and family visits, we arrange to rent his father-in-law's 4WD and head for the hills. Our destination is an area known as Las Tablas, high in the cloud forests.

As we lurch from yawning pothole to greasy slope, Royer tells us we are lucky as after rain the road is impassable. Then there is one final hurdle, a wide and fast-flowing river. Having negotiated submerged boulders we emerge from the forest to find, incongruously, a farmhouse amid cow paddocks. And it begins to rain. Steadily.

It is hard to imagine a more remote dwelling. Only two people live in this chilly, rain-swept valley — an 83-year-old farmer and his offside, a Panamanian indigenous Indian who was adopted as a child and, “disliking fiestas”, never leaves. Together they run a cattle farm where leopards regularly snack on the stock. We find the sprightly octogenarian busy at the front of the house chipping and drilling at a piece of rough wood that he later uses to fix a giant waterwheel, the source of his electricity. Upstairs we find bunk beds but have to fossick for the necessary linen and blankets in a room stuffed with discarded knick-knacks. The farm was once home to a large family; half the living room is taken up with a desiccated Christmas tree, surrounded by a vast menagerie of plastic animals from sheep and cows to elephants and lions. I add a clip-on koala but think it is lost in the crowd.

Royer urges us out into the rain, which is drifting horizontally, and down the valley. Umbrellas held as shields, we plod through paddocks, our borrowed rubber boots in danger of being sucked off our feet in the clinging mud. It is bitterly cold. My enthusiasm for bird sightings is dwindling and, as a head cold



Clockwise from main: Corcovado National Park; cabin at Cascata Del Bosco; guide Royer Munoz; the colourful plumage of a resplendent quetzal



DENIS WALLS



STELLA MARTIN

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develops, my nose is drizzling in tune with the weather.

Then, suddenly, the rain eases and a god appears in front of us. We blink but the vision of this denizen of the high cloud forest remains. Quetzalcoatl was worshipped as a force for good by both Mayas and Aztecs. He did have the head of a serpent but otherwise sported the plumes of what must be the most

beautiful bird in the world, the aptly named resplendent quetzal. And a male is sitting on a branch in front of us. For the most part, this ornithological wonder is a shimmering, iridescent green, from spiky crown to the long, trailing streamers that extend resplendently for 70cm beyond the end of the tail. As he flips around to face us we see, below a broad, glowing green collar, a ruby-red breast, fringed by elongated plumes, like green fingers extending forward from the wings.

The bird's mate is perched nearby. She, too, is gorgeous, but lacks the male's extravagant train. Together they flutter from branch to branch, the male's tail threading through the foliage, their iridescent plumage gleaming sometimes turquoise, sometimes almost golden. Then, as our hearts pound, they fly over our heads to continue their flirtation. For about 20 minutes we are graced with their

## IN THE KNOW

Cascata Del Bosco is a 10-minute drive from San Vito, Puntarenas, in southern Costa Rica. Cabins are \$US75 (\$109) a night, including breakfast. Royer Munoz is a guide with Ficus Tours.

■ [cascatadelbosco.com](http://cascatadelbosco.com)  
■ [ficustours.com](http://ficustours.com)  
■ [visitcostarica.com](http://visitcostarica.com)

presence and then they suddenly disappear, the rain resumes and the world again becomes mud-coloured.

Next day we face the return journey to Corcovado with trepidation. The river has risen and even with chains applied to all tyres we slither helplessly on the mud. I yelp with terror and next day my arm muscles ache from hanging on in the convulsing vehicle. Reaching bitumen is a joyous moment as is flopping on to the balcony of our cabin at Cascata Del Bosco, which we discovered on our way to Las Tablas and, knowing we'd need a break, booked for our return.

Set at a very comfortable 1200m, Cascata Del Bosco's four circular cabins are dotted within the property's forest. Perched at the top of a steep slope they overlook an extensive vista of wavering treetops, hence the name, which translates as Cascade of the Forest in Italian and so named for the original Italian immigrants in this so-called upper southern zone of Costa Rica. As we enjoy a cup of tea, a broad-winged hawk lands on the branch in front of us and provides a front-row view as it proceeds to devour its catch (mercifully hidden from sight). Later a brilliantly coloured motmot perches for a while to scrutinise us.

The cabins have kitchenettes but we prefer to eat at the garden restaurant where George, the North American owner, whips up meals on his smoke oven cum barbecue built with bricks from an old pottery kiln. He even bakes a cake for my birthday. This is a convivial place popular with expats from around the nearby town of San Vito who socialise here along with visiting botanists working at the famous Wilson Botanical Gardens, a five-minute walk away. During the days we explore numerous trails through the property's forest or venture to the Botanical Gardens. A fruiting fig tree here is alive with impossibly colourful tanagers and honeycreepers, and a hummingbird garden buzzes with these little gems.

Our adventure to Las Tablas, with its rain-swept cloud forest and shimmering gods, will remain with me as the most memorable part of our Costa Rican trip but Cascata Del Bosco is rather closer to my idea of an earthly paradise.