



by Ir. Chin Mee Poon

Costa Rica's Diverse Wildlife

COSTA Rica is a nature lover's paradise. This small Central American country, measuring 51,100 sq.km., has 35 national parks and numerous other protected areas. Its biodiversity is amazing. It has over 615 species of wildlife per 10,000 sq.km.

My wife and I spent 10 days in Costa Rica during our 4-month travels in Central America and the West Caribbean. Being nature lovers ourselves, we naturally spent most of our time out in the wild. Although we could only visit a few of the national parks and wildlife reserves, the variety of wildlife that we observed during our exploration of those parks and reserves was really amazing. We found that it was really worth having an experienced guide for such an exploration, because the guide, being familiar with the particular park or reserve, knew exactly where to look for the types of wildlife species that could be found there.

I have always wanted to witness a leatherback turtle nesting all my life. Years ago, my wife and I spent a night at the Rantau Abang beach in Terengganu in an attempt to see one. However, there were so many merrymakers on the beach making so much noise, and the beach was so brightly lit, that no leatherback turtle came ashore to nest.

Subsequently, leatherback turtles stopped coming to Malaysian beaches altogether. After so many years, my dream finally came true on the beach at Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Gandaco-Manzanillo. We signed up with an ecotourism outfit in Puerto Viejo de Talamanca to take us there at night. It cost us US\$75 each. As the beach was quite dim and no flash or torchlight was allowed, I could not take any pictures of the nesting turtle.

In the Parque Nacional Cahuita near Puerto Viejo de Talamanca, we met a warden who acted as our guide for US\$5. Within two hours, he showed us five little bats clinging onto a tree trunk in a straight line, several 3-toed sloths and 2-toed sloths, three green iguanas, three eyelash palm pit vipers (male in bright yellow and female in brown), a whip snake, a silver poison frog, a nesting hummingbird, a white-cross spider, several capuchin (white-faced) monkeys, and several mantled howler monkeys.

At Parque Nacional Tortuguero, we had a 3-hour relaxing cruise on the canals and saw two rufescent tiger herons, numerous Montezuma oropendola birds and their pendulum-like nests dangling from tall trees, several emerald basilisk lizards, a juvenile blue heron, several green iguanas basking on tree branches, three caimans, and a group of very noisy great green macaw. There were also several howler monkeys high up on a large tree, howling noisily whenever an aeroplane or a motorboat passed by.

The real treat was of course the resplendent quetzals we saw at the Santa Elena Cloud Forest Reserve. We would not have spotted them had we not engaged the services of a lady guide who happened to be a very keen birder. She was equipped with a telescope on a tripod. The resplendent quetzal is a very magnificent bird with bright green, red and white feathers. It is the national bird of Guatemala.



While in Costa Rica, I also took the opportunity to participate in an activity known as a canopy tour. I paid US\$45 for it. Together with seven others in the group, we zipped from one platform to another, i.e. sliding from one end of a wire-rope to the other while hanging from a steel roller. There were 12 zip lines in the series varying in length from 40m to 1km, and we had to walk a short trail or climb some steps to go from one zip line to the next. After all the zipping, there was a rappel and a tarzan swing. Unfortunately, the weather turned bad and we were eventually caught in the rain.

Costa Rica is not only well known for its wildlife, it is also interesting in other ways. It has no armed forces. The money saved from buying expensive war equipment is mainly used for education. There are more teachers than policemen in this country of 3.8 million people. Primary education is free and compulsory, while secondary and tertiary education is also free. Children from poor families are provided with school uniforms, shoes, bags, textbooks, transport, as well as breakfast and lunch at school. Families who face difficulties in taking care of their children can have them adopted by other families, and the adopting families are given an allowance by the government for doing so. No wonder Costa Rica's literacy rate is 98%! ■