



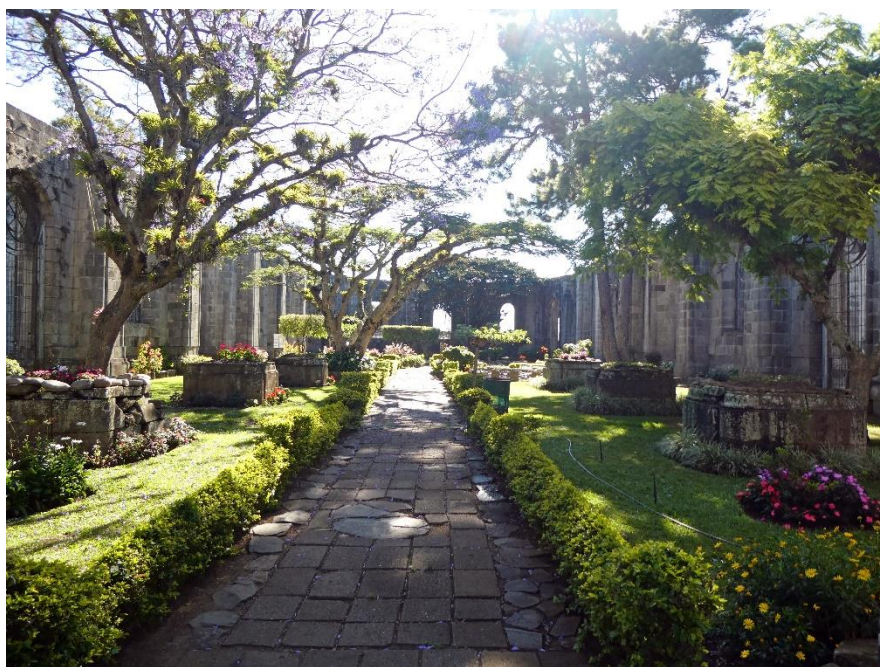
Latin America Trip (L20A-2)

Costa Rica – Day Trips

I headed down to Central America for a 19-day visit to Costa Rica and Panamá.

I had a number of sites outside of Costa Rica's capital, San José, that I wanted to see while I was in the country, so I booked four day trips in advance of my trip. These included visits to national parks on both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts as well as sites in the country's interior. I couldn't find a tour to an archaeological site that I wanted to see, so once I got to San José, I booked a private driver so I could make that trip, too.

My first day trip featured short stops in Cartago and at Irazú Volcano, before going on a wildlife-spotting river tour and farm visit along Río Sarapiquí.



Cartago was founded in 1563, Spain's first successful settlement in what is now Costa Rica. It served as the capital city until 1824. Today it is the country's third largest city. We stopped at the ruins of Santiago Apostle Church – technically not ruins, but an unfinished building. Earlier versions of the church had been destroyed by earthquakes.



Views from a stop on our drive up to Irazú Volcano's crater. Cartago is in the valley towards the left, and San José in the valley towards the right. They're expected to merge into one large metropolitan area in the coming years.



A view into the crater of Irazú Volcano, which rises to 11,260 feet, making it the tallest active volcano in Costa Rica. It last erupted in 1994.



Brochure pictures highlight a crater filled with a turquoise lake on a sunny day. But I visited towards the end of dry season, so there wasn't much left of the lake. Frequently during the rainy season, and often by noon during the dry season, the summit is obscured by clouds.

After heading back through San José and then north towards the wetter Atlantic side of the country, our small group took a boat trip for a few miles along Río Sarapiquí to spot wildlife. We then stopped at a farm for lunch, and to see some of the country's flora – and even a bit more wildlife.



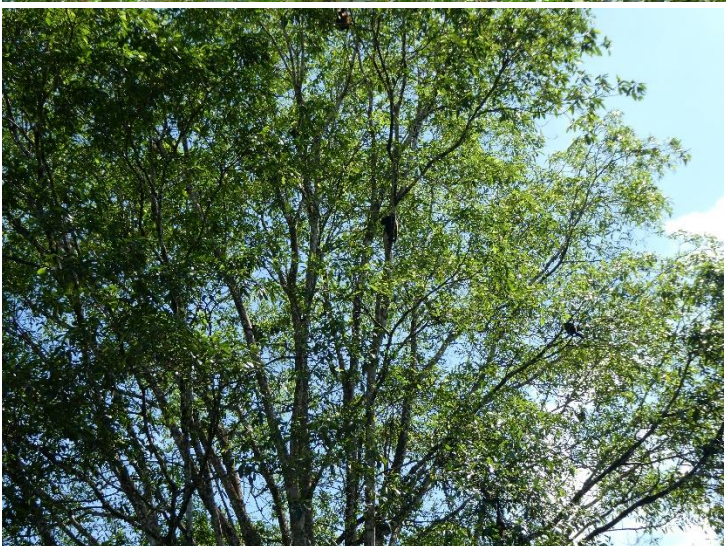
As Seen On The Water! Bats hanging on the side of a tree!



An aninga



My first sloth – like most sloths I saw, it was enjoying a nap high up in a tree.



There are a few spider monkeys in this tree. Cool to see in the wild, of course, but I'd get much better looks at monkeys in the wild a number of times later in the trip.



A crocodile taking advantage of the afternoon sun

We'd see a handful of crocodiles during our tour along the river. We'd also see young kids swimming in the river or playing on the banks with no adults around. A little concerning, I suppose, but probably not unlike you'd find along Louisiana's bayous.



An iguana was hanging from a branch over the river



Our farm stop featured a variety of flowers, other plants and a bit more wildlife, along with a typical Costa Rican lunch.

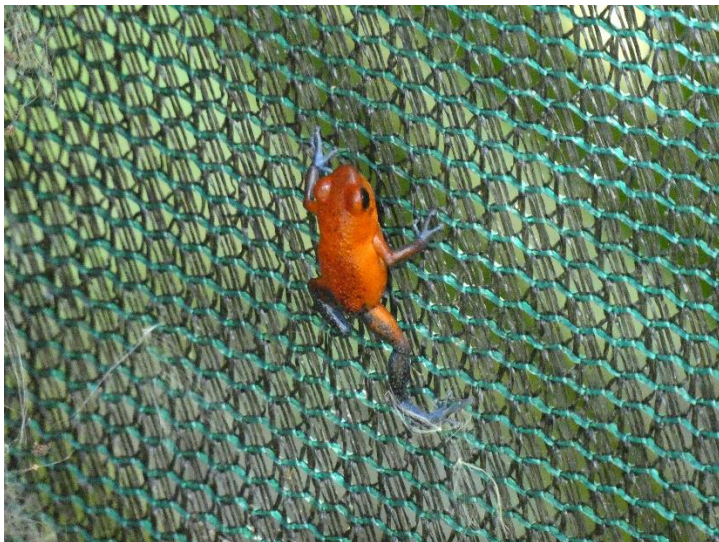


A pair of porcupines have found shelter in one of the farm's sheds.



Alas, not a very good picture of a poison dart frog

Natives used the secretions of these frogs to poison the tips of their arrows.



A better picture of a strawberry poison dart frog

The brightness of a poison dart frog's color provides an indication of its toxicity – the brighter, the more toxic.

The more toxic frogs generally have a diet of ants, termites and mites.



The seed pods of the cacao tree. Each pod contains a number of beans coated in a sweet pulp (mucilage). It was the pulp that natives first ate before the process of extracting cocoa solids and cocoa butter was figured out and put to use in making chocolate. One pod contains about 30-40 beans. It takes about 400 beans to produce just one pound of chocolate.



A pineapple is getting its start.



A maturing pineapple



An achiote pod and its seeds. The ground seeds are used as a natural food coloring and dye. I'd see an example of hand-dyed fiber using achiote later in my trip in Panamá.



For my second day trip, I traveled with a guide to Manuel Antonio National Park on Costa Rica's Pacific Coast. Most tourists use it as a beach-oriented day trip (that's what my guide seemed dressed for), but I'm more of a hiker than a beach person, so instead we hit the trails.

Along the way we stopped at the Tarcoles River to check out its rather large population of crocodiles. Or its population of rather large crocodiles.

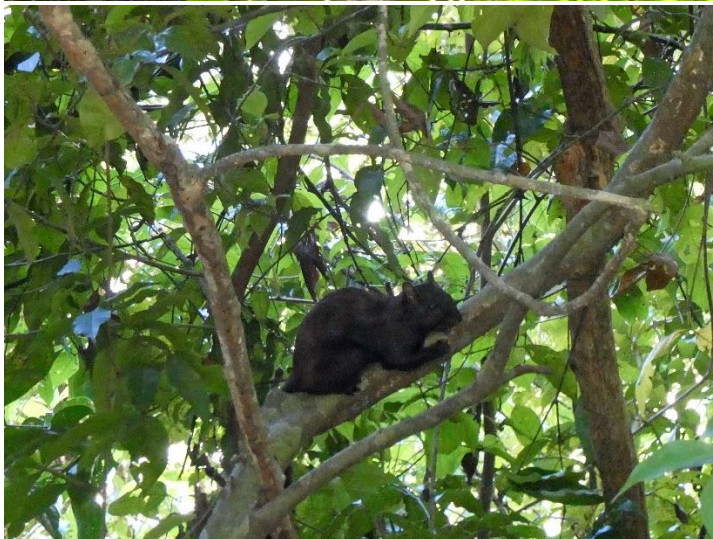


I did make photo stops along a couple of the park's beaches. It was a Tuesday – reportedly the place is packed on weekends.



During the hikes, we kept an eye out for wildlife.

This I believe is a coati.



A black squirrel



A termite nest in a tree. As a novice monkey and sloth spotter, I initially mistook a handful of these for wildlife.



I didn't expect to see a white-tailed deer, but apparently they're fairly common in Costa Rica.



A guatusa



The park generally bans people from bringing in food in order to discourage the accidental or deliberate feeding of the wildlife (I was granted an exception for my sugar pills due to my diabetes, but not for my crackers). But the monkeys hang around by the beach, as they do seem to find enough there to capture their interest.

This capuchin monkey takes a breather on a branch.



The monkey in back seemed to be looking for something under the second monkey's tail.



Another capuchin monkey



It's a little hard to see in the picture, but there's a ridge of piled rocks just off the shore that creates a pool at low tide. This was a fish trap – fish swimming close to shore at high tide would get trapped in the pool when the tide goes out, making them easy to catch.



A selfie of me catching some rays on the beach

People have often told me that I bear some resemblance to a Black Ctenosaurus iguana. Or John Candy. (Although during our discussion of facial recognition technology, one guide in Panamá suggested that I resemble Tom Arnold.)



If you decided to rest in this grove of trees to avoid crocodiles and poison dart frogs, you sure picked the wrong spot. These Manchineel trees are toxic. The sign warns people to not touch them. Manchineel sap contains numerous toxins, and the sap can be found in its bark, leaves and fruit.

For my third day trip, I joined a small group for a drive to Tortuguero National Park on Costa Rica's Atlantic Coast. It's famous for its sea turtle nesting grounds, although not at this time of year.



Another sleeping sloth, spotted on our drive to Tortuguero.



Along the way, we stopped at a Chiquita banana plantation. As the banana trees flower, bags are put over the flowers to prevent pollination – pollinated bananas have lots of seeds in them. The developing bananas are also bagged, this to keep birds and animals from the fruit. Bananas are still green when they're harvested. They're attached to this conveyer, which shuttles harvested bananas from the fields to the warehouse. The red flowers are hibiscus shrubs, and have nothing to do with the bananas.



When we got to Tortuguero National Park, we took another boat tour, this one along Río Suerte, to the village of Tortuguero.

A blue heron took flight just as I was about to take its picture.



An emerald basilisk lizard

These are also known as Jesus Christ lizards because of their ability to run across the surface of water for some distance.



I wonder if it was the tourist in front of me who kept dipping her hand into the river that caught the attention of this crocodile.



Tropical jungle lines the river.



The village of Tortuguero's main street. The village mainly provides tourist services.



Costa Rica's Caribbean Sea/Atlantic Ocean coast at Tortuguero



I was enjoying the ocean view and a nice sea breeze that cut through the humidity when I looked up and realized that sitting underneath a fully loaded coconut tree was probably not one of my better ideas.



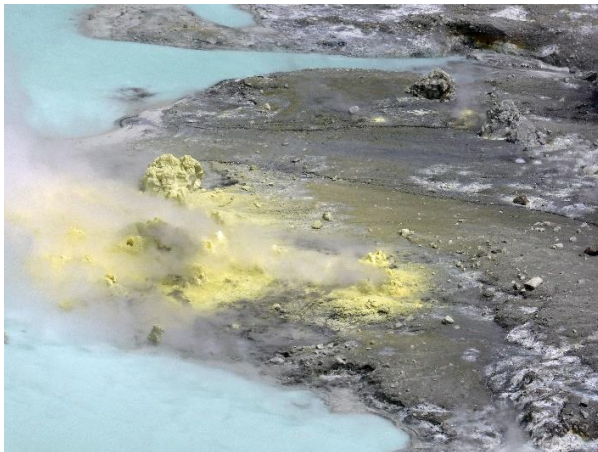
We got back on the boat and headed upstream a bit to the Evergreen Lodge, a resort only accessible by boat, where we had our lunch.

The two tall plants with the spray of leaves that somewhat resemble banana tree leaves are actually giant flowers, according to our guide.

Unfortunately, I don't remember what they're called.



My fourth day trip visited a number of sites in the Costa Rican interior to the west of San José. We started at Poás Volcano, a rather active volcano. Poás is over 8800 feet tall, and it erupted most recently in April 2017 and September 2019. For this reason and because it still gives off sulfur gases, visits to the crater rim are by appointment only, they're limited to just 20 minutes, and visitors must wear hard hats. Laguna Caliente is the highly acidic lake at the bottom of the crater. Its pH is almost 0, and the lake's bottom is covered by a layer of liquid sulfur.



Sulfur is building up near steam vents on the floor of the crater next to Laguna Caliente.



Looking down the path of recent eruption flows. The yellow circles on the visitor viewing deck surround chips in the concrete caused when rocks were thrown from the crater during the 2017 eruption.



Colorful paper-like tree bark

Our next stop was at the Doka Estate Coffee Plantation, where we had lunch followed by a tour of the plantation and its coffee preparation process.



Coffee tree seedlings. The plantation has trees growing at all stages of the tree's life cycle.



Coffee berries on the tree. Because berries on the same tree ripen at different times, the berries are harvested by hand.



After berries are harvested, they're sorted by size. Then the berry flesh is removed, leaving the seeds – what we call the coffee beans. The seeds are fermented (like cocoa beans, to remove the mucilage), and then the seeds are sun-dried. Doka staffers rake the beans continuously for five days to help dry them out.



The coffee beans are then bagged and aged for three years.



Aged beans are roasted. The types of beans, amount of aging and length of roasting bring out different qualities in the coffee. Beans are ground and packaged for sale. Or sold as beans. Or dipped in chocolate and sold as candy.



We made a brief stop in Grecia to see its metal Church of Our Lady of Mercies. It was made by the same Belgian company that manufactured the metal school pictured in my Costa Rica – San José photo set.



Our final destination was nearby Sarchí, which features its own colorful church of more traditional construction.



Sarchí is famous for producing hand-painted colorful oxcarts, the National Labor Symbol of Costa Rica. In modern times, the demand for oxcarts has fallen off, but the city has branched out into handmade furniture and souvenirs.

The world's largest oxcart stands in a park in central Sarchí.

We toured Fábrica de Carretas Eloy Alfaro, famous oxcart maker and now the largest producer of handmade souvenirs in Costa Rica.



A traditional hand-painted wooden oxcart



A traditional oxcart wheel in progress, using traditional manufacturing techniques. Once the wood segments are properly trimmed, an iron rim will be fitted around them. The equipment in the manufacturing shop is still powered by a water wheel.



The oxcarts and souvenirs they make are all hand-painted.



The facility features these very decorative, hand-painted urinal separators, which gave me a new picture for my collection of foreign bathroom photos.

What is now Costa Rica was south of the Mayan Empire and north of the Incan Empire, so although it had several small chiefdoms, it didn't have the grand architecture and subsequent ruins of those more famous cultures. But it does have some archaeological sites, one of which is a Costa Rican national monument open to tourists.

I read about the Guayabo Archaeological Site but couldn't find a tour for it. So, I hired a private driver and created my own day trip tour to go see it. There are a couple trails that lead to various views of the ruins, only about 10% of which have been excavated so far. My driver and I had the place to ourselves until we were about to leave.



A view of some small farms at a stop on our way to Guayabo. The fenceposts are actually small living trees. I saw these in several places during my day trips.

Guayabo was occupied for about 2400 years, starting about 1000 BC. It was abandoned for unknown reasons about a century before the Spanish arrived. Its structures and artifacts found at the site bear some similarities to findings at Chichen Itza (Mayan, Mexico) and Machu Picchu (Incan, Peru), although Guayabo doesn't have the fame or resulting tourist traffic that those sites have.



A crocodile petroglyph/carving found at the Guayabo site



A short hike up to the top of a hill provides this nice view of the site, including its central mound in the center of the picture, and the stone-paved road in the distance.



A view of the central mound. The chief's structure may have been built on that mound.



The stone-paved road leading back towards the central mound is aligned with Turrialba Volcano in the distance.



These large leaves of the *Gunnera Insignis* plant are nicknamed Poor Man's Umbrellas.



A three-toed sloth, napping in a tree just outside the park