Costa Rican Scarlet Macaws (*Ara macao*) squawk and litter the ground beneath the high trees in which they perch with rotting fruit and molted feathers.

TRAVELOGUES

A Costa Rican Adventure

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During winter break 2005/2006, my sister and I traveled to Costa Rica. We were undergraduates in a class intended to experience three ecosystems: dry forest, cloud forest, and rain forest. Our journey into this phenomenally biodiverse country began at the very small airport in Liberia. Open to the elements, humidity covered us like a thick blanket — but I could hear calls of exotic birds in the open rafters of the airport roof, and they reminded me why I was here. The drive to our first destination was bumpy and slow. The driver informed us that some of the locations we would visit had been inaccessible except by horseback or ATV until the last few years. The scenery was spectacular, although patches had obviously been clear-cut; much cultivated land is devoted to tropical plants, especially bromeliads, which are exported to Europe and the U.S.

With a very pro-environmental democratic government, and a highly literate (including computer-literate!) populace, the standard of living in Costa Rica is among the highest in Latin America. Nevertheless, Costa Rica still has a relatively impoverished underclass. I observed houses made of pieces of tin and surrounded by naked children and livestock. Alongside poverty, we also observed some large haciendas, mostly associated with cattle ranches, the primary cause for deforestation in Costa Rica.

We first stayed at the base of the Rincon de la Viejo volcano, and had a terrific view of the crater on one side and unspoiled dry forest on the other. After dark, the croaking serenades of House Geckos (*Hemidactylus frenatus*) and Cane Toads (*Bufo marinus*) were common. These species have adapted well to human-altered environments, and many a hotel pool in Costa Rica hosts toad parties well into the wee hours. A pre-sunrise concert of birds, interrupted periodically by raucous parrots, preceded zip-lining in the canopy. A huge male Black Iguana (*Ctenosaura similis*) basking on a rock made the trip back worthwhile. Black Iguanas, known locally as "Garrobos," also seem surprisingly well adapted to human presence. These animals were abundant in many of the sites that we visited. An afternoon hike along the Pailas Trail was enlivened by Black-handed Spider Monkeys (*Ateles geoffroyi*) and our first close encounter with massive Strangler Figs (*Matapalo ficus*), Coatis (*Nasua narica*), and an Agouti (*Dasyprocta punctata*).

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In areas frequented by ecotourists, wildlife, such as this female White-collared Manakin (*Manacus candei*) lose their fear of humans.

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Anoles (*Anolis* sp.) were ubiquitous along the edges of forests.

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Cattle ranching is the principal cause of deforestation in Costa Rica.

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Green Iguanas (*Iguana iguana*) often bask on branches overhanging forest waterways.

At the Santa Marta Ranger station in Guanacaste National Park, we saw our first snake, a beautiful Green Vine Snake (*Oxybelis fulgidus*) drinking at a rainwater pool.

The next ecosystem we visited was the cloud forest at Monteverde. The hills were green to the very top of the mountains, and you could see all the way to the ocean. Green Iguanas (*Iguana iguana*) were common in roadside trees. When we reached our lodge, the weather was rainy, cool, and windy. Investigating munching noises in a nearby tree, we spotted a Two-toed Sloth (*Choloepus didactylus*) mere meters from our bal-

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Coati Mundis (*Nasua narica*) have become proficient panhandlers.

Zip-lining through the canopy provides a totally different perspective of the forest.

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Insects, such as this katydid, often exhibit remarkable cryptic patterns and colors, in this instance, looking just like a leaf, scars and all.

cony. Our final day in the cloud forest was spent touring a reptile farm, the serpentarium, and the frog house. Of 135 species of snakes found in Costa Rica, 17 are venomous. This information was not entirely academic. A girl on the same trip the year before was bitten by a Fer-de-lance (*Bothrops asper*) and had to spend several weeks in the hospital.

During the rainforest portion of our trip, we saw a Green and Black Dart Frog (*Dendrobates auratus*) and a smaller "Blue Jeans" Dart Frog (*Dendrobates pumillio*). At the La Selva Biological Station, we spotted several species of anoles (*Anolis* spp.), more large Green Iguanas, and, down by the river, American Crocodiles (*Crocodylus acutus*) and Spectacled Caimans (*Caiman crocodilus*). Near the Pacure River, we shared our cabins with many little geckos. Anoles were all over the front porch, Ground Lizards (*Ameiva festiva*) were common on the grounds, and basilisks (*Basiliscus* spp.) basked on rocks along the riverbanks. We did see some individuals running on their hindlimbs but never saw one running on water, a skill for which they received the common name "Jesus Christ Lizard."

Our last stop was in San Jose. Half a day in the large, busy city was quite a culture shock after passing the previous few weeks in the green serenity of the forests. Costa Rica was an experience of a lifetime. Although I had been forewarned, I was amazed to see such biodiversity in such a small geographical area. I recommend a visit to anyone with even a casual interest in nature — but make sure you bring a good camera. PURA VIDA!!!

From Here It's Possible: A Texan Visits the Tropics

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Clinging to the front seat of the "turismo" bus for dear life, I anxiously awaited certain death as the bus squeezed past cars on the winding, narrow road leading to the small town of Atenas near San Jose. I wanted to close my eyes but couldn't sacrifice the view. Within a half hour, the landscape had changed from crowded city to meandering emerald green hills and slopes. Tropical trees draped over the serpentine road, and small houses littered the roadside, their occupants busy in the fields beyond.

We spent some time at the School for Field Studies in Atenas. Drifting through town, I gazed into store windows and savored the sweet aroma of baking breads and empañadas. Uniformed school children sat on the steps of a whitewashed church, and people were quietly strolling and relaxing on benches in a park that seemed to blend naturally into the greenery encompassing the town.

Three days later, we drove through mountain slopes patterned by a mosaic of coffee plantations, arriving at Poás National Park by mid-morning. Fortunately, clouds had not yet risen over the crater, so the chamber was clearly visible. Water gurgled and bubbled while sulphurous gases seeped out of the sides and a biting wind tried to steal my hat. Within minutes, clouds wafted over the crater, covering it like a blanket. While walking up a trail to a crater lake, a Poás Squirrel (*Syntheosciurus poasensis*), endemic to the park, tried to charm us in exchange for food. The lake's deep blue water contrasted sharply with the tangled dark green forest around us.

The next day, during an eight-hour drive over the central mountain range, we pulled off the road. The air was crisp, thin, and chilly. Anxious to stretch our legs, we piled out of the bus and attacked a hill covered with sub-alpine páramo vegetation. Huffing and puffing, I reached the top, almost 11,000 feet high and above the clouds. Below me lay richly verdant mountain slopes and birds soaring in the distance. The view will be a snapshot in my memory forever.

Several hours of pouring rain and narrow, bumpy roads later, we arrived in the swampy town of Sierpe, from were we were to visit the Osa Peninsula and Corcovado National Park, traveling through mangroves and out into the ocean. A three-hour ride, weather permitting, would take us to Sirena Station. Soon, the narrow river view opened to an endless vista of ocean stretching into an azure sky. The water turned from murky brown to a deep, transparent blue. The boat pulled into a cove where a waterfall cascaded into the ocean, and the boulders housed an array of tropical birds. Later, a school of dolphins