

In Search of ‘Wild’ Costa Rica

By AMY HARMON APRIL 10, 2014



Clockwise from top left: Rain forest in Corcovado National Park; a tapir in the park; a cabin at Bosque del Cabo Rainforest Lodge; spying on a toucan at the lodge.

By the end of our fourth day on the Osa Peninsula of Costa Rica, we had seen, according to the tally kept by my 9-year-old, Sasha, dozens of species of animals. We had peered at leafcutter ants, army ants and zombie ants. We had been deafened by howler monkeys, beguiled by squirrel monkeys and strangely stirred by capuchin monkeys, whose feet bear an eerie resemblance to human hands. That afternoon, in the national park that covers a third of the peninsula, we had even spied two tapirs, endangered mammals that look like hornless rhinoceroses with long snouts.

To sample this extravaganza of biodiversity, we had risen early each morning of our vacation. So when our guide informed us that he would be taking us out at 4:30 a.m. to witness the rain forest waking up, I — the motivating force behind, and thus bearer of responsibility for, this trip — glanced apprehensively at my family and swallowed hard. “We’ll be up!” I said brightly.

I had shepherded Sasha and my husband, Scott, to Osa in hopes of a tropical wildlife experience that was, in fact, wild. But as we crawled into our tent that night, the beaten path from which I had so resolutely steered clear was starting to look more inviting.



Nito Paniagua, a guide, finds an anole lizard.

Costa Rica, home to large tracts of untouched yet accessible rain forest, had seemed the obvious place to immerse ourselves in nature for a week in February. On Facebook, people responded with the Costa Rican phrase “pura vida!” (“pure life”) at the mere mention of the country. We had admired photographs of bright-colored birds, frogs and butterflies from the preserves near the capital, San José, which could be reached by direct flight from New York. The ubiquitous “canopy tours” through the treetops seemed a great way to indulge Sasha’s love of zip lining.

But as I researched where to go in the West Virginia-size country, I began to suspect that its popular ecotourist destinations might not quench my yearning for the untamed. On TripAdvisor, phrases like “well-developed” and the less-charitable “Disneyfied” arose in regard to the storied Monteverde Cloud Forest in the central highlands. Manuel Antonio National Park on the central Pacific Coast, widely loved for its beaches and restaurants, was reportedly better for night life than wildlife.

The more people who can enjoy the rain forest without destroying it the better, of course: The 70,000 or so who visit a sliver of Monteverde each year help pay to preserve the rest of it. But the remote Osa Peninsula, which juts into the Pacific Ocean from Costa Rica’s southwestern corner, seemed to hold an increasingly rare chance to observe the rain forest in all its fecund, carbon-storing, oxygen-producing glory, without quite so much human company.

Mostly mentioned in travel guides as an alternative for those who had hit the other highlights, Osa did not rank on Lonely Planet’s list of “Top 10 Costa Rica Spots for First-Timers.” To get there requires a second flight or a seven-hour drive from San José. And while the draw is the 160-square-mile Corcovado National Park, accommodations there are limited to a few dozen bunks and a tent platform at the Sirena Ranger Station.

I mapped a tentative itinerary that would bring us to each of two jumping-off points to the park, Puerto Jiménez to the southeast, and Drake Bay to the northwest, both of which have several excellent lodging options. In between, we would stay one night in the park, perhaps the last refuge in the country, I read, of the sweet-looking Baird’s tapirs Sasha and I had fallen for while searching online for “Costa Rica animals.”

An email from a well-traveled friend sealed the deal: “Costa Rica is very touristy,” he wrote. “Osa is not.”

Our first stop, Bosque del Cabo, was a 40-minute ride by taxi from Puerto Jiménez, the biggest town on the peninsula with a population of 1,780. I had chosen one of the two cabins at Bosque just steps from the rain forest, at the edge of a large clearing planted with native trees and plants. A half-mile away from the main lodge area, these “garden cabins” are reached by a trail through the forest that crosses high above a river over a suspension bridge.



The author and her daughter in a tide pool near Bosque del Cabo Rainforest Lodge.

“We ask that only guests that feel they will be comfortable with the walk and the increased isolation of these accommodations book into them,” the lodge’s website warns.

Any pangs I might have had about passing up the dozen or so bungalows with ocean views disappeared as soon as we found ourselves in the company of spider monkeys, swinging from branch to branch at eye level on our first pass over the bridge. The lodge staff member escorting us waited patiently, albeit with the amusement of a New Yorker watching tourists marvel at pigeons.

“Do you feed them?” I couldn’t help asking. He assured me they did not.

A few steps off the bridge, we stopped short with the odd sensation that the earth was shifting under our feet. The highway of leafcutter ants hauling their leaf-bits toward the entrance to their underground caverns was our first inkling, repeatedly confirmed over the next few days, that they were in charge there. (“Are there more ants in Costa Rica than there are humans in the world?” Sasha would ask. Answer: many more).

Bosque itself sits on 750 acres that encompass some primary-growth rain forest and large swaths of “jungle,” rain forest that has grown back on land that had once been cleared — in Bosque’s case, for cattle grazing. We would have virtually no chance of seeing a tapir on the hotel’s trails, the staff told us candidly (even in Corcovado, we were told, our chances were 50-50). But we spotted poison dart frogs, lizards and monkeys dozing in the sun. A wild pig called a peccary often visited the lodge’s modest pool, where we cooled off and sipped ginger lemonades.

The hotel also offered nature-oriented activities: One morning we rappelled 70 feet down a strangler fig tree, another we hiked down the empty beach to a waterfall, splashing in the tide

pools that form in the reef formations along the way. On an evening wildlife tour, the hotel naturalist taught us the trick of holding our flashlights against our temples, revealing the reflection of thousands of spider eyes shining in the grass.

Dinner, served buffet-style with a bounty of delicious choices (panko-crusted eggplant, roasted hearts of palm, crispy chicken with figs) was eaten at communal tables. And if I needed validation on my destination choice, we found ourselves dining more than once with others who had firsthand knowledge of Costa Rica's well-traveled spots.



Capuchin monkeys near Drake Bay.

“Osa is — crunchier,” said one civil rights lawyer from Washington, D.C., as Sasha and another girl her age excused themselves to look at the bats hanging from the bamboo light fixtures.

His wife, a judge, concurred about their desire for a less-processed experience. “More what we had in mind when we thought about Costa Rica,” she said.

In our cabin, open on three sides, we felt less like observers than residents of the forest, along with monkeys playing in the trees directly above us and the leafcutter ants below. One late afternoon, a rainbow of toucans and scarlet macaws flew by a few feet away, on their way to the fruit trees in the clearing behind us.

Yet knowing that the trees had been planted to attract the birds undercut, just a bit, the pleasure of their proximity. Perhaps it was our own fault, too, for being diverted by rappelling adventures and poolside lemonades. But when we landed the next morning at the ranger station, the headquarters of Corcovado park, it quickly became apparent that there would be no distractions from the natural world. Other than lounging on the shaded porch of the low-slung ranger station, there was really was nothing to do but be in it.

Our guide, Nito Paniagua, who met us in Puerto Jiménez for the 15-minute charter flight, lost no time snagging us a spot on the tent platform at the station and heading out on a trail to the river. The park has just started requiring tourists to be accompanied by a guide, but in any case we would have been lost without Nito's six senses. He caught lizards and hung them from our ears, trained his scope on resplendent birds no one else could see and produced bats from furled-up leaves.



Tent platform at the Sirena Ranger Station in Corcovado National Park.

“Look at the two species playing together,” he said at the trail’s entrance, pointing his viewing scope so we could see the howler and spider monkeys teasing each other in the branches above. “That’s so nice to see.”

Unlike the many hardy backpacker types who had walked 12 miles or more to camp at Sirena, we were not big hikers. But the walk down to the river where we ate lunch was not so much strenuous as it was intense. It took two hours only because we stopped every few steps for a new creature: the bird with the small heart, the carnivorous cricket, bright blue butterflies, the notorious fer-de-lance snake.

And because Nito had quickly divined that we were keen to see tapirs, he brought us to a spot where they are known to nap.

That we were lucky enough to see two of them through the trees from perhaps 50 feet away was one reason for the collective groan that night when Nito announced the 4:30 a.m. wake-up call.

What else, we wondered, did we have to see that couldn’t wait until dawn?

In my grogginess I left the tent without my glasses and had to run back to get them while Scott, Sasha and Nito waited for me on the grass beyond the porch of the ranger station. We stopped to admire a spider web at the start of the dirt trail, then traipsed on toward the beach where Nito wanted us to watch the sky grow light.

That was when the tapir came crashing out of the forest right in front of us. My heart beating hard, I held my breath, wishing I could freeze the moment. Scott and Sasha, too, stood transfixed. For just a split second, the large, strange animal seemed to register our presence. Then the tapir lumbered away from us, down the trail, toward the river as we followed, until it veered off into the darkness.

I didn’t know it until then, but this, more than anything, was what I had hoped we would find on the Osa Peninsula. It wasn’t like seeing an animal lured to a spot by human guile, or to where all the guides know it’s likely to go on its own. If I hadn’t forgotten my glasses, we might well have missed it. It felt wild.

There was no shortage of moments like that in our short time at Sirena. Sasha’s favorite sighting may have been the anteater carrying a baby on her back all the way up to the top of a tree, spied that morning after a breakfast of eggs and ham that was, like our dinner there the night before, plain but tasty. We all oohed over the baby hummingbirds in the nest Nito found, and the baby hawks the ranger showed us through his scope in between his other chores at the understaffed station.

Before we left, we walked one more trail, cooler and less dense than the one we had taken the previous day because the soaring tree canopies blocked the light others might use to grow. The logging and slash-and-burn agriculture that had prompted the formation of the park in 1975, Nito told us, had never reached here. As we stumbled into a clearing where one tree, an espavel, or wild cashew, towered some 150 feet above us, we stood again in silent awe. That tens of thousands of acres of such forest are destroyed each day worldwide seemed inconceivable.

Most life in the rain forest, Nito reminded us, lives in the canopy, and never descends to the forest floor. Speaking of untamed, no one even knows entirely what's up there.

We might have been happy staying longer at Sirena had our tent been pitched on the lawn, rather than the platform, which was hot and crowded at night. (Nito was scheming to go in with other guides on tents with rain flaps that could be used on the lawn.) The ticks, albeit not disease carrying, were also not a plus, especially for Sasha, who pried five off her legs.

As it was, we were happy to get to our final Osa destination, La Paloma Lodge on Drake Bay, after an hourlong boat ride from Corcovado that afternoon. It felt good to take a hot shower and to enjoy the rain forest as a view from the hotel's elegant dining room, set high on a cliff above the Pacific Ocean.

At night, Tracie Stice, a local naturalist universally known as the "bug lady," showed us a scorpion ("Don't sit down," she suggested as we leaned against the stone wall) and gently pried open the well-camouflaged home of a "trap-door" spider so that we could see the creature promptly slam it shut again.

On our last day, we went on a decidedly human-manufactured, 13-zip-line canopy tour arranged for us, a highlight of the trip for Sasha. But when Scott asked her which leg of the trip she would eliminate, if she had to lose one, she couldn't choose. Like her parents, she could have happily lived for decades in our first cabin. She wouldn't give up zip lining.

"And I can't take out Sirena," she said. "Because that's where we saw everything."



Bosque del Cabo

Rainforest Lodge, Osa Peninsula, Costa Rica

Crowning a point 500 feet above where the Golfo Dulce meets the Pacific Ocean, nestled in the unspoiled jungles of Costa Rica's Osa Peninsula is a paradise found. Bosque del Cabo is a premier Costa Rica Eco Lodge offering a romantic rainforest getaway and a naturalist's dream come true. Located in a unique and fortunate position at the very tip of the Osa Peninsula in the southern Pacific region of Costa Rica, this 750+ acre forest reserve features private, spacious bungalows and gorgeous houses perched atop the cliffs of Cabo Matapalo, each with beautiful ocean views, tropical breezes and the rainforest at your doorstep; or choose beautiful and rustic garden view accommodations surrounded by thriving rainforests. Hiking trails lead you through the forest to deserted beaches on both the Golfo Dulce and Pacific Ocean. Bosque del Cabo, which opened its doors as a hotel in 1990, is owner operated and dedicated to forest reservation.



The Osa Peninsula is one of the most biologically diverse places on earth. Boasting over 700 species of trees, 365+ species of birds (with several endemic species), 117 species of reptiles, and almost 10,000 species of insects, the peninsula is home to 100,000-acre Corcovado National Park, known as the crown jewel of the Costa Rican national parks system. Bosque del Cabo Rainforest Lodge offers a rare opportunity to comfortably vacation among all this rugged natural splendor. At the end of our mile long driveway, you're transported to a private Eden joining the raw nature of the rainforest to the tranquil beauty of manicured grounds and breathtaking views. The nature lodge's lush gardens, full of tropical fruits and flowers, attract many of the colorful resident wildlife species. Residents of the area include flocks of macaws, toucans, and parrots. Monkeys, coatis, kinkajous, agoutis, and sloths are daily visitors. Peccaries are often seen, and from time to time even jungle cats (like pumas, jaguarundis, ocelots and jaguars) are spotted on the property.



Trails on the property allow for further exploration into the rainforest, where you can enjoy refreshing natural pools and waterfalls, along with an abundance of Costa Rican wildlife. You can spend your days hiking and exploring the natural beauty of Bosque del Cabo and the surrounding area, whiz through the air on our zipline into the tree platform, take a walk across our suspension bridge to the Tropical Garden, or just relax by the pool or on your deck, sip a tropical drink, and watch the macaws fly by.

Our newly renovated solar-powered restaurant serves delicious meals in a friendly (and eco-friendly!) atmosphere. Breakfast offers a variety of fresh, local fruits and your choice of typical Costa Rican or North American fare. Lunch in house or have it packed to go. Dinners are always a special event; everyone gathers to share stories of the day, while enjoying a plentiful and delicious gourmet meal served by candlelight.



Bosque del Cabo has ten beautifully crafted thatched-roof bungalows; each is privately set among lush gardens; offering stunning ocean views, modern bathrooms with delightful outdoor garden showers, and porches furnished with hammocks and easy chairs. Set high on a cliff overlooking the confluence of the mighty Pacific and the Golfo Dulce, these romantic nature lodge bungalows are stirred by warm tropical breezes that echo with the rhythms of the pounding surf below.

And for the ultimate in jungle living, Bosque del Cabo has two rental houses: Casa Blanca and Casa Miramar. Casa Blanca, a well-appointed 2 bedroom/2 bath house has a fully-equipped kitchen, living room area, large wraparound porch with an amazing view of the Pacific Ocean, and 2 large bedroom suites on either side of the house. Casa Miramar offers a home with an artistic layout of three unique “casitas” featuring three bedrooms, 2 full bathrooms, a fully equipped kitchen, living room area, and many porches and observation decks with amazing sunset views.



Bosque also has a beautiful Tropical Garden that offers garden accommodations (one rental house, Casa Teca, and two cabinas, Cabina La Paz and Cabina Almendra), a wildlife pond and features El Palenque, an open rancho restaurant/bar & bird watching facility. The Tropical Garden may be accessed by crossing over our 300-foot long suspension bridge. The bridge spans a 75-foot deep rainforest gorge that has a lovely creek running along the bottom. And all of our accommodations offer hot water, screening and/or mosquito nets, maid service and solar/hydroelectric power.



Rainforest trails and pristine shores are steps away from your porch; access to a great variety of habitats and activities are nearby, including the wild Pacific coast with tide pools, waterfalls, and calm sandy gulf beaches. At our Costa Rica Eco Lodge, you can also enjoy surfing, kayaking, waterfall rappelling, tree climbing, deep-sea fishing, boat trips, hiking, horseback riding, and our tree platform & zipline!

<http://www.drakebay.com/costarica/tours/corcovado-national-park>

Corcovado National Park Tour

Drake Bay Wilderness Resort tourists and their guides normally leave approx. 7:30 a.m. for the 20 minute boat ride to San Pedrillo Ranger Station in the 108,000 acre Corcovado National Park. After checking in at the Ranger Station, the guide will make a selection from several different hiking trails of an area suitable for the group and their hiking ability. A 3-hour hike is accomplished in the morning to enjoy the diversity of the park with eight different habitats. This is one of the wildest and least traveled areas in Costa Rica.



Hikers will see rich and varied vegetation. There are approximately 500 species of trees in the park such as: the giant mahogany reaching over 80 feet high, strangler fig trees, and the unusual garlie tree. A great variety of birds are seen - there are over 360 types of birds and the park protects the largest population of scarlet macaws in the country. Commonly seen are: toucans, green parrots, hawks, kites, and a large variety of hummingbirds. During the boat ride, the hikers can see all four kinds of monkeys living in Costa Rica. They are Howler monkeys, white-faced monkeys, spider monkeys, and squirrel monkeys. Also many types of small animals are seen such as quatumundies, aguoutis, paca, and sloths. A giant hollow tree is an interesting home to a large number of fruit bats. Many times tourists have been fortunate enough to see a large herd of wild peccaries.

The Sirena Ranger Station is another option for tourists at Drake Bay Wilderness Resort. This tour is for the more adventurous, and physically fit traveler. An early start is necessary for the 1 hour and 15 min. boat ride directly into the heart of the vast Corcovado National Park. After check in at the Sirena Ranger Station, a longer hike begins going deeper into the park, and exploring the shoreline of the Sirena River. More wildlife is seen on this trip such as sharks swimming in the mouth of the river and huge crocodiles. This is one of the easiest spots to see the elusive tapir.



The tapir is an endangered species in Central America. All types of birds are numerous along the banks of the river as well as sea birds, and field birds. There are very few travelers in this part of the National Park. Also, most of the birds, and animals are seen on this trip as mentioned in the San Pedrillo trip. After a jungle lunch, everyone enjoys a cooling swim in a nearby river loggon. Normally there are biologist at the Ranger Station because, this section of the park is designated for scientific study. On the boat ride to the Ranger Station, you will see a beautiful coast line and the world famous Llorana Waterfall that falls directly on the beach. This area was featured in a National Geographic Special: "Wild Coast Lines of the World".

After a delicious picnic lunch, tourists have a choice of roaming the wild beach areas on their own or take the 30 min. hike to the beautiful San Pedrillo waterfall. One of the highlights of the trip is enjoying a cooling swim in the waterfall pool. Then it will be time to return to the resort for a good cup of hot Costa Rican coffee.

<http://www.corcovadoguide.com/>

Corcovado National Park

Osa Peninsula, Costa Rica



Park Description and Access

Corcovado is one of Costa Rica's most remote parks. There is no road access to any portion of the park's perimeter. By foot and horseback the Park can be reached from Drake Bay, Carate, and La Palma. Boat access from

Drake is supported at the San Pedrillo and Sirena ranger stations. The grass air strip at Sirena Ranger station supports [air charter](#) access by light aircraft.

Corcovado National Park is acquainted with a variety of descriptive sobriquets attesting to the splendor of its natural history and resident wildlife. National Geographic famously labeled it "the most biologically intense place on the planet," and this characterization is memorialized in nearly every abbreviated web description of the park in existence. The park contains the largest contiguous expanse of primary tropical rain forest north of the Amazon basin, it is frequently reported, and the park is widely known to contain within its boundaries 2.5% of the biodiversity of the entire planet. While this [biodiversity](#) is partly explained by Corcovado's geographic location along the land bridge connecting the North and South American continents, the diversity of forest types within Corcovado itself is a strong predictor of zoologic diversity as well. At least thirteen distinct vegetation types identified within the park boundaries provide habitat for a mind-numbing list of animal species.

Corcovado National Park is remarkable for a reason completely different from its biodiversity and ecologic splendor as well, one likely to bear on environmental protections in other Latin American nations now and in the near future. Corcovado has been at the crossroads for the past forty years of environmental conservation and resource exploitation. With attractive gold and timber reserves in great abundance, the conservation advocates that succeeded in establishing the park have had to battle a the dramatic apparent economic favor of rapacity over conservation. But timber and gold are short-lived if dramatic economic windfalls, and the protection of Corcovado promises long-term and stable returns. Sustainable development has enabled ecotourism to provide an alternative to subsistence farming, logging, and mining, and the testament to the success is in the evolving public pride in the environmental protection of public lands in this country. But the implications are planetary as most of the world's vital remaining unspoiled habitat is contained by societies struggling with economic issues not unlike those that Costa Rica has and continues to overcome through diligence and national discipline.



History of the area and of the formation of the park

Economics, politics, and natural history have found the Osa Peninsula to be a robust battleground since the recognition of wide-spread and rich alluvial gold deposits first emerged from the jungles and into the imaginations of prospectors and miners in the early thirties. At first restricted to the prodigiously rich gold deposits on the beach sands of Madrigal and offshore Carate, as prospectors and miners struck inland, wealthy and relatively accessible deposits of river-run placer gold turned the Osa Peninsula into a wild-west gold rush during the 1980's. During that time, five short years after the formation of Corcovado National Park by presidential decree and not yet ratified by the legislature, the peninsula swelled by five times to a population of perhaps twenty thousand, and the mountains crawled with a new class of homespun entrepreneur and fortune seeker, often content to be far from the scrutiny of the law, and the societal strata that supported their efforts, the merchants, middle men, drug peddlers, bootleggers, poachers, hired guns, prostitutes, and bar owners. In fact, that's the period of time when I first waded ashore myself.

At the outbreak of World War II, Carate was the site of one of only two offshore gold dredges in the entire world. Gold was re-discovered on the Rio Claro in the 1930's, and nearby Madrigal Beach was so rich it clouds the imagination. By the mid eighties, relatively large placer mining operations were underway in both the Tigre and Carate Rivers, both of which have headwaters within Corcovado National Park.

An extensive network of mountain trails provided passage from Puerto Jimenez and Dos Brazos over steep and muddy mountain trails too steep for horses and across gentle burbling streams that swelled from torrential rains into raging red torrents. As placers were tapped, the unyielding gold pioneers struck after colluvial concentrations still deeply buried by tunneling into the soil in crude passages that claimed many lives through cave-ins. The reward was high with occasional shovels of ore yielding as much as fifty grams and people still do it. The park remains the prime target for big gold.

Before the gold rush, the entire region was poised to be tapped by an international logging consortium. Conservationists poured out of the woodworks and lobbied the government to protect the area, and five years after a landmark 1970 law that set aside national territory for formation of a model national park system, Corcovado National Park was formed by executive decree on October 24, 1975 by then president of the Republic, Daniel Oduber, later awarded the Albert Schweitzer Award from the Animal Welfare Institute for his action on behalf of conservation.

It was not until the mid eighties, however, that the federal government forbade further hand mining within the boundaries of the park and mounted a costly eviction program that engendered years of ill will and conflict between the government and its arguably most vulnerable and indigent group of citizens. Years later, the lawsuits are settled, the protests stilled, the evicted scoring handsome cash settlements. And Corcovado National Park is no longer the firebrand of social unrest that it came to symbolize in the late eighties. As conservationists push to capitalize land buys that will complete a protected corridor to the Talamancas, the ecotourism that has grown has provided economic incentives for preservation.



Zoology of Corcovado National Park

Corcovado's variety of animals derive from three factors that converge uniquely in the Osa Peninsula: 1) it is located along the land bridge separating the North and South American continents; 2) Corcovado comprises a wide range of botanical habitats and life-zones as described in the preceding section; and 3) The region is geographically remote and except for the past stressors of logging, poaching, and mining, has remained relatively intact and protected, particularly since the formation of Corcovado National Park in 1975 and the 1986 criminalization of mining within park boundaries. The table below summarizes estimates for the numbers of animal species the reside within the park's boundaries.

Animal Type	Number of Species
Mammals	140
Birds	>400; 1 endemic specie and 17 endemic subspecies
Freshwater fish	40
Reptiles	71
Amphibians	46
Insects	8000 (est.)

The region's many zoologic superlatives are repeated in so many commercial and research sites and publications on the Internet and in the white and grey academic literature as to appear redundant here, though remarkable nevertheless. Together with portions of the Guatemalan Peten, Corcovado remains one of the last remaining intact habitats of the New World's largest feline, the jaguar. Corcovado is home, in fact, to five species of cats: 1) jaguar; 2) puma; 3) ocelot; 4) jaguarundi; and 5) margay.

Of the four species of monkeys native to Costa Rica, all inhabit the forests of Corcovado. The great variety of bird species includes at least 17 subspecies and one specie not found anywhere else in the world, including the yellow-billed cotinga.

The Osa Peninsula boasts the highest natural population of scarlet macaws remaining in the New World. The nearly mythic harpy eagle, thought to have been driven to local extinction in 1986, was spotted in 2003, indicating that while tenuous and highly threatened, the fearsome raptor still makes his living off poorly positioned sloths and monkeys in the canopy that carpets the land.

Four sea turtles--Pacific hawksbill, Ridley, green, and leatherback turtles--nest along the sweeping beaches that define Corcovado's western boundary from June-November and provide the jaguar with its most important food source during the rainy season.

The threatened Baird's tapir maintains healthy populations in Corcovado, where it is easy to view and study the timid and reclusive nocturnal animal. Two types of peccaries, the large white-lipped peccary and the small, collared peccary roam the park in herds of as many as several hundred of the former to fifteen-thirty of the latter and are the jaguar's main food when not eating turtles.

In addition, both two- and three-toed sloths, silky, tamandua, and great anteaters, nutrias, raccoons, a variety of opossums, and deer also contribute to the mammalian diversity inside Corcovado.

The inland lagoon is home to large crocodiles, and all the river mouths feature both the crocodiles and caymans among their predatory denizens. Bull sharks feed in the mixing zone of the fresh and salt water and hunt upstream at high tide, giving pause to hikers that forget to take the tide schedule into account.

With an insect count thought to number around 6000 species, the insect population of Corcovado has been reported to encompass the entire spectrum of Central American insect types found from southern Mexico to Panama. Caught in a swarm of biting deer flies along the Los Patos trail, it is certainly possible to imagine it's true. An excellent pictorial introduction of many of the species of animals described from Corcovado National Park is provided in Ambicor's extensive pages of online Corcovado [content](#).

Culture and Society of Corcovado National Park

The pre-history of the Osa Peninsula is indistinct and can at best be pieced together however incompletely by the archeological plunder of Amerindian graves and the very few actual archeological sites from the region that have been described from digs. In fact, the native American history of Central America as a whole is not rigorously documented and appears to have been predominated by nomadic tribes with little taste for empire nor ambitions for the trappings of civilization. Whereas the Pitahaya archeological site on the Chiriqui Bay coast of Panama suggests that maize agriculture was central to Amerindian occupation of that part of what is now the nearby Panamanian coast, there is no evidence from the few Golfo Dulce and Osa archeological sites to indicate that agriculture was practiced. It appears that the Osa Amerindians may have subsisted wholly on hunting, gathering, and coastal fisheries.



Nevertheless, pre-historical curiosities from the region include the world-famous Diquis spheres from the Terraba valley that date to as early as the third century AD. These spheres have been found all around the Golfo Dulce and in abundance on Cano Island, which was used exclusively for funerary services by the Amerindians. The wide dissemination of the spheres around the region suggests alliances between the semi-agricultural Diquis, who made the spheres, and more nomadic and smaller tribes of the Osa and Coto areas. The Diquis appear to have been the dominant regional power but to enjoy trade benefits from the coastal tribes that focused on fisheries for protein, likely exchanging this for agricultural products from the Diquis, in addition somehow to the mysterious spheres, the precise significance of which continues to elude archeologists. Nobody knows what they were for, but they are perfectly spherical and carved out of rock and made in sizes from eight centimeters up to two meters in diameter. Besides the unknown technology employed in the fabrication and transport of the spheres, there was also a relatively advanced lost-wax technology for gold casting that was known to the Amerindian people of the Osa and used extensively to create figurines depicting animals and androgynous depictions of human beings.

Ornate gold necklaces, figurines, and plates were widely uncovered in graves. There has been an active trade in these figurines since their first discovery, and it is safe to say on the basis of the importance of gold to the pre-historical society, that gold has played a prominent role in mankind's interaction with the Osa environment since the very earliest times of human occupation.

The first known discovery of the Osa Peninsula by a European is believed to have been made in 1515 by the Spaniards Hernán Ponce and Bartolomé Hurtado. Their report propelled their patron, Gil González Dávila, on an overland mission from Panama upon which he would discover Nicaragua. On the Burica Peninsula Gonzalez established an alliance with a local cacique named Osa, for whom the peninsula across the gulf was later named. Dávila returned alive to the Old World and coined the name Costa Rica.

The other sixteenth century European luminary to have purportedly stirred the waters of the Osa Peninsula's shores was none other than that scourge of the Spanish Main himself, the English privateer and explorer, Sir Francis Drake. He is alleged to have buried a treasure somewhere along the coast in 1569. The tourism Mecca of Drake's Bay to the north of Corcovado National Park bears testimony in its name to the legendary pirate's reputed visit to the area. No one has yet claimed his treasure, nor the three hordes believed to be hidden on Cocos Island 400 kilometers to the west.

In the nineteenth century, the Osa Peninsula was an acknowledged exile for criminal and political refugees fleeing jail terms or other undesirable circumstances from nearby Panama. Popular conception now has it that the Osa was a penal colony in which criminals and other societal misfits were marooned on its shores, but this is not actually the case. Persons that fled justice to its shores were not pursued, and in its earliest days the human populace of the Osa peninsula comprised an isolated outpost of hunter-gatherer half-wild lawless mountain men that subsisted on wild meat, native fruits, seafood, and what limited agricultural products as could be coaxed from the unforgiving forest.

In response to increasing numbers of Panamanian immigrants, the Costa Rican president of the time sent a mission of colonists to compete with the immigrants and empowered them with land grants for cattle production. Generous land grants issued by presidential decree sponsored the first wave of development on the peninsula, which consisted of the razing of tens of thousands of hectares of low-lying tropical rain forest for conversion to pasturage for cattle. In the earliest days, cattle was king on the peninsula, and a few cattle barons provided law and order and the other amenities of government.

The remoteness and environmental difficulty of the region kept the Osa a backwater until the latter end of the 19th century. The town of Santo Domingo shows up in the earliest nautical charts where today's Pueblo Viejo is located, from which mangrove kayak trips launch daily in today's world. Santo Domingo was wiped out in a tsunami in the late nineteenth century, and the town's graveyard has not quite fully disintegrated back into the jungle and can still be visited to this day. Town moved inland to the approximate location of what is today Hotel Choza del Manglar, only to find the higher ground that presently comprises town a few years later. Shaking off a string of bad luck and perhaps embracing the future, the town changed its name in honor of the first president to ever visit. The rest is history.

In the late sixties and early seventies, the wealth in timber was identified by market forces, and the second wave of deforestation followed. Unlike the first pioneer wave, which burned the felled forest to convert to pasturage, the new wave of deforestation fed mills and churned out exotic tropical hardwood for construction. As ambitions turned toward the vast lowland forest tract now preserved in Corcovado, environmental pressures rose up the political food chain, and in 1975, President Daniel Oduber established Corcovado National Park by presidential decree.

The discovery in the early '30's of prodigiously rich gold deposits along the Madrigal beach sands near what is now the Sirena Ranger Station began a social and cultural current that was arguably one of the peninsula's most pronounced 20th century effects. It was reported that the discoverers of gold in the Rio Claro and Madrigal beach could produce an entire kilogram of placer gold from a day of work, a prodigious amount of gold that spawned decades of gold fever among both nationals and expatriates alike and led to a colorful and turbulent society and culture.

By the outbreak of World War II, Carate boasted one of only two offshore gold-dredging operations in the entire world, the second one being off the African coast of Sierra Leone. The mine was American operated and closed at that time to turn US technological attention toward the defeat of the Axis powers. Afterwards, mining companies returned, though the difficulty of access and the challenges of the environment left the Osa Peninsula still in the backwaters. Then, the eighties exploded with a perfect storm of calamities that included the collapse of the banana business in the gulf and widespread unemployment as well as the spillover from the wars of Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, and the contagious narco-militarism of Panama. Once gold peaked in 1980 at atmospheric levels, the gold rush of the eighties was in essence pre-ordained by the constellation of circumstances that would make it inevitable. The Osa Peninsula received a wave of prospectors and hand-miners in its gold rush that boosted the population from perhaps five thousand in 1980 to 25,000 or more during the peak of the gold rush, many of them of questionable character, all trying their hand in a frontier province at gold mining.

In 1978 approximately 300 farmers then dwelling inside what are today's park boundaries were successfully relocated outside the park along with their livestock without an enduring backlash. However, the miners working the rivers inside the park boundaries were a more entrenched and vocal lot and were allowed to pursue their trade inside the park for several years more. Estimated to number as many as three thousand at their period of peak occupancy, not counting family and the businessmen that made livings supplying miners, the pressure on wildlife from poaching grew unsustainable. In light of the threat of illegal logging, the trafficking in live wildlife, all in addition to the environmental degradation from mining drove the government of Costa Rica to the contentious expulsion of all miners from the park boundaries. The eviction of the miners was completed in 1986 but fifteen years later the government was still embroiled in lawsuits and compensation battles for the citizens that were effected by this geographic and socio-economic purge.

During the 1990's the government of Costa Rica largely married its economic future to the relatively new concept of eco-tourism and at the time of this writing in 2008 Costa Rica is one of the world's most prominent examples of sustainable development. The challenge in bringing about protection has been to provide an economic alternative to destructive sources of income (like slash and burn agriculture; logging old growth forest, poaching, mining, etc.) to encourage land-holders to protect their forests and streams and habitat rather than to exploit their lands destructively. The wealth of tourism dollars that flows into the region from environmental tourists has largely achieved this end, with today's peninsular citizens enjoying a high degree of health, educational opportunity, employment options, relative affluence, and general social contentment.

Corcovado National Park has played a large role in the evolution of attitudes among the local populace. Once the site of pitched and fevered rhetoric between gold miners being displaced and armed federales enforcing a hard-hand policy placing the environment over human needs, most of today's Osa residents are reasonably well-informed about their environment and proud of its natural history and environmental heritage. Though a small amount of trade in exotic animals and bush meat still exists, this is being widely supplanted by the popular awareness that such habits are destructive to the country as a whole.

One of my personal examples of this evolution toward higher-minded thinking is revolves around a modest irony that was seeded on my first visit to the country in 1984 but only fully manifested its full irony during ensuing years. Back then it was common practice to sell turtle eggs in bars and in restaurants, where they were touted as an aphrodisiac and were often consumed in bars along with guaro. On that trip, I was served turtle meat at a lodge in Cahuita.

A professor of that generation was at that very meal railing about the Costa Rican public's failure to curb its tendency to litter and maintained it was a challenge only of education to make his fellow countrymen understand the concept of littering. He used his examples of travels in the US to point out that by 1984, Americans for the most part did not litter because of public information campaigns whereas in Costa Rica people still discarded trash from the windows of cars and along bus routes and all the highways were strewn with trash. He gave his own country a tongue-lashing for its environmental backwardness while we dined on sea turtle meat without any notion by anybody that we were doing wrong, somehow, after playing drinking games and eating turtle eggs earlier in the week.

Today, turtle eggs cannot be obtained legally, there is no sea turtle meat, and the highways of the country are litter free, unlike those of some Central American neighbors. Turtle eggs, once a staple among coastal communities, are now barred and people that dig nests now have to live beneath the cloud of disapproval rising from increased public awareness. What a difference a couple decades can make!