

Tuesday, January 1st 2002

Hello all,

After the Corcovado, we deserved a real treat. So immediately after finishing our late lunch in Puerto Jimenez, the town from which we embarked on our 4 day trip to the Corcovado, we got on the car and began a 4.5 hour ride up north, along some of the worst roads ever, with pot holes almost everywhere and narrow and dangerous bridges on troubled waters every 5 minutes. This seems to be part of the package in Costa Rica - challenging roads that necessitate slow, careful and alert driving. This is why 4 by 4 vehicles are a must and every ride takes much more time than the actual distance might indicate. But the reward was worth it. We arrived in Quepos, a very touristic town near the Manuel Antonio national park. That park, situated on the pacific shores, offers beautiful tropical beaches and another beautiful rainforest.

On Christmas day, Monday the 24th, we spent the day on the dreamy beach where the water is exactly at the right temperature and color. What a great way to unwind. Towards sunset we drove up to the very interesting bar, called "El Avion", which is built under the wings of a huge old military airplane (bizzare, but it works - we did stop there because of that airplane). Many people gathered there to have a sunset drink, just as the rain started pouring. It was nice and the "Monkey Juice" that I ordered (some kind of a tropical cocktail with an umbrella) was really good. At night we visited the church for the Xmas mass.

The next day we visited the park. I must admit that this was the weak point of the trip. This park appears in the "must see" list of every guide and tourist web site about Costa Rica. However, it is a touristic Disneyland kind of a rainforest, and after being in the real thing, this rainforest left us a bit indifferent, even though its beauty cannot be denied.

Hence, we decided to change our plans and drove to the northwestern Nicoya peninsula. On the way we had a pleasant intermezzo at the very pleasant town of Canas where we stopped for lunch in a Chinese restaurant that had this huge screen TV. We watched with great interest the live broadcast from the San Jose arena where a bull rodeo competition took place (it is a combination of American rodeo with Spanish bull fight). That show was followed by a stupid show for kids (kind of "channel 6" program) where little tica girls got the direct message that they should be beautiful, wear sexy cloths, sway their bottom and chest, and then everything would work just fine. The presenters in that show were a bunch of aging "tica lindas" (beautiful Costa Rican girls in their late teens or early twenties) that were dressed up as Santa Claus would if "he" were a "she" in a very tropical and hot place.

When we got to the Nicoya peninsula we drove to "playa del coco". There, we went on diving (Rachel) or snorkeling (the rest of us) tours. It was fun and we saw several beautiful fish. Mor and Tonya saw a shark. I wasn't that lucky (or was I?). What I loved the most was the large schools of grey fish that were floating so gracefully just below me, where every few seconds one random fish would tilt to the side and the sun beams lightened its body in a shining silver light. That was so harmonic, so musical.

Next stop - another crown jewel in CR's system of national park - Monte Verde. This is a breathtaking cloud forest. If a rainforest is a forest where it rains a lot, a cloud forest is a forest that is constantly wrapped with a thick blanket of clouds, and the rain does not fall - it is simply there and you walk through it. Everything is so wet and the sight of clouds around, above and under you is very mysterious. Vegetation is lush and extreme in size and water is abundant - all that makes the entire production one big extravaganza! We hiked through the park and got to the continental divide - the limit line that traverses along the Americas and separates rain drops: those that fall east of it will find themselves in the Atlantic Ocean while the others will go to the Pacific. However, the best ways to explore Monte Verde are the non conservative ones. One is called a "Sky Walk", in which you get to walk on a system of suspension bridges that hang in the height of the canopy (the highest part of the forest trees). And that is damn high - definitely not recommended for people who fear heights. This is a fantastic way to explore (as well as to scientifically investigate) the forest and the life in its canopy. For us, the bridges provided an advantage over the monkeys. Until that point we only heard the howler monkeys ("monos condos" in Spanish) that were hard to detect from the ground. Now, we were able to gaze at a family of those monkeys from above. Those creatures know not only how to shout, but also how to fly!

The other way is the "Canopy Tour". We flew through the forest using a system of 12 omegas. The omegas provide a thrilling Tarzan-like experience. Even though the first one was scary, already the second omega was a great fun and we could easily enjoy the views some 100 meters below us! The longest omega ride was about 250 meters, believe it or not! I didn't believe I would do it, but I did, and it was an amazing fun that extracted stupid shouts of joy from all of us. Don't worry - it is very safe and the guides of the company that arranges this were very professional and courteous. I was so sorry when it ended and could easily go back for another ride.

Next, we drove to another "must see" of CR - the famous active volcano Arenal. That volcano is constantly throwing ashes, smoke, house-sized rocks and lava, and in 1968 it destroyed completely two near-by villages. The coolest way to see it is from the near-by Tabacon hot springs resort. The perpetual volcanic activity heats the water of the Tabacon River and sitting under the stream of that river is a pleasure that makes you smile like an idiot. If you are lucky, you can sit at night in the hot water pool, order pina-colada at the bar (located conveniently inside the pool) and watch the lava streaming down from the volcano's crater. I said "if you are lucky". I was there twice - once before my friends arrived and once with them. In none of those times we could even see that there is a mountain out there. We began to suspect that it is a CR hoax, just like the Loch Ness monster in Scotland, the whole purpose of which is to take money out of naive tourists. So the next day we drove to a view point from which we could see the lower third of the mountain, while the rest was covered with heavy clouds. As much as we hoped that "there, there, the clouds are clearing out", the clouds remained there laughing at us and so did the mountain. We could hear its throaty laughter throughout the clouds. Perhaps those were the explosions and the mountain's constant activity? Perhaps. So, somehow, we got convinced that the stories are right. There was a huge volcano in front of us. We had to believe it.

Today is the New Year day - January 1st. Most businesses are closed, internet cafes not included. Tomorrow we leave CR. I will send the last story already from Israel. Until then,

Adios,
Tamir