

Excerpts from a Secret Journal: A Journey to Costa Rica

by Elizabeth Palmieri



I begin my adventure nine months prior to my volunteer trip when I hand in my deposit, with shaky hands, to the staff of International Student Volunteers. This is it – no turning back now. I am officially committed to this trip. The ISV crew had promoted this opportunity at Carleton countless times before, but I never took it seriously until this year. Did I really have the guts to do this? I know have the heart, sure, but do I really have the courage to leave my life behind for a month to travel abroad to a less than fortunate coast all by myself, knowing no one?

I want to travel with a purpose, and volunteering with ISV seems like the best opportunity to satisfy this etching desire. So, I walk out of the ISV sign-up room with not a regret in the world and spend the next nine months anticipating my adventure to the land of Costa Rica.

I land in San José, the capital city of Costa Rica, on June 29th, a little exhausted from my lack of sleep and never-ending flights. As a student on a budget, a cheap flight is the only way to go, and this means a lot of unnecessary connecting flights (Ottawa to New Jersey to Miami to Costa Rica, anyone?)

My fellow volunteers from around the world and I get assigned different project groups – Some get turtle protection, others get community development, and I get wildlife conservation in *Golfo Dulce*, a project working with dolphins and poisonous dart frogs. Score!

Upon our arrival to *Golfo Dulce*, we learn a lot about the culture in Costa Rica. Literally a dirt road with a convenient store and a school, this is where my host family calls home. Everyone here speaks Spanish, and not a word of English. Good thing I brought my handy-dandy Spanish pocket dictionary, I mentally pat myself on the back.



We sleep in cabins that the family owns, as we are a group of thirteen, and I have the pleasure of picking the cabin that inhabits bats. They like to fly around at

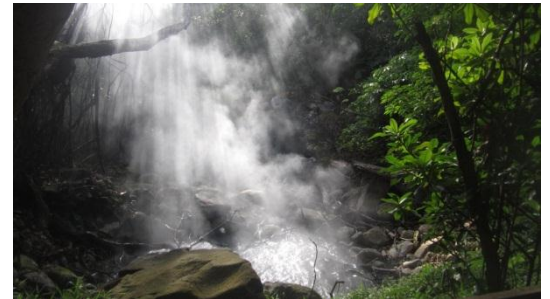
night, so I keep my mosquito net over my face at all times hoping they don't get caught in my hair.

The food is delicious and fresh, I come to realize during our welcoming feast. We are served fresh juice from the Starfruit tree in the family's backyard accompanied with fried plantain and yogurt dip. By the end of our two weeks, I am impressed I had not eaten a single bean (Costa Rica is infamous for their 3 meals a day of solely rice and beans).



We hike in the forest for tiny dart frogs – and I do not mean a gentle, casual stroll in the forest. We are in rubber boots and climbing rocks, branches and logs, sweat pouring down our faces, and the humidity doesn't help our condition. I am hoping to see a sloth – yet instead we find a stray puppy that is covered in ticks and tears. After the unexpected rescue, I am never so happy to bathe in my coconut-headed shower.

The dolphin project is my favourite volunteer activity: six hours on a boat, on the sweet gulf, recording dolphins and their fins to identify them for conservation purposes. I get my tan on, but when the waves get rough, I unfortunately get my sea-sickness on as well. We stop on islands near Panama to bask in the sun and swim in the welcoming ocean. We see swinging white-faced monkeys and long-beaked toucans in the trees.



Nights in *Golfo Dulce* are quite terrifying – I am in the middle of a rainforest, where it gets pitch black at four P.M., and is most likely raining (it *is* the rainy season) and I forgot my flashlight in Canada. If I step on a snake or a giant spider, it's my own fault, I tell myself.

We conclude our two week volunteer trip, and in exchange have another two week planned Adventure Tour around Costa Rica. I cringe with self-pity just thinking about the eight hour public transit to Heredia – but it'll all be worth it. There is no room on this bus – people are packed like sardines, and are forced to stand from our reserved seats. "*Putá!*" yells one of the victims kicked off the bus, as he trudges off down the dirt road, with nowhere else to go. For the duration of the ride, I give up my window seat and have the immense pleasure of having a conversation with a Costa Rican boy, who is eager to learn English.



The Adventure tour begins with a hike near an active Volcano, which also means natural hot springs to swim in later! I milk a cow the next day, and taste its freshly made cheese. I go horseback riding, with no warning of my rogue horse's intentions, and his trotting makes my behind start to bruise. We stop by a secluded river, and jump off cliffs into the ice water. We go single-person tubing through rapids, a great experience for all (except for the

girl who gets a scorpion in her tube).

Samara beach is my favourite place so far in Costa Rica. A small town, with smiling Costa Ricans who actually speak English, located right on the beach. I get my hair braided and treat myself to a massage on the beach. I learn how to surf, and turn out to be a natural. Riding the waves is exhilarating, not to mention makes me look impressive, as I am the only one who is able to stand on the board. We hit the bars at night, and ladies apparently get free drinks - and they aren't watered down, either. A surf instructor from earlier asks me to sleep under the stars with him. I politely turn down his request.

I see my first sloth, hanging from a tree where the public bathrooms are located at our Wildlife Eco-lodge on the Caribbean side. I dance with joy, or maybe it is due to my full bladder, but none the less I get a picture of the sleepy furry thing in the tree. We later go zip-lining through the rainforest, and rappelling down a 160 ft. waterfall. I live vicariously through adrenaline this day.

Our final destination is Pacuare River, where we go for a three day white water rafting adventure. This is the time of my life. I sit in the front of the raft, and as we approach stage four rapids, I fall out. I feel a pull from my life jacket while I am under water, while my experience in Costa Rica is flashing before my eyes, until I am thrown back into the raft by Pablo, our raft leader (clouds part, angels sing).



Great shot of my legs – completely upside down under water

Costa Rica was an eye-opening, life-changing experience. I cherish my life much more – I appreciate the little things we take for granted here in Canada, like being able to flush toilet paper down the toilet. I am grateful of having the opportunity to experience another culture, and to have met amazing people along the way. There's no greater satisfaction than volunteering in the less fortunate areas around the world that need help the most. I miss the exotic animals, smiling communities, white sand beaches and tropical rainforests. This is where my journey ends, for now, and I leave you with this: **PURA VIDA!**

