

PURE LIFE

WORDS LYN HUGHES

Costa Rica's *pura vida* attitude is much more than a slogan — discover it yourself, minus the crowds, during off-season...

The river wild
The rushing waters of the Pacuare River are a highway into Costa Rica's wildlife-packed forests



Caught on camera
Jaguars stalk the forests around Pacuare Lodge (right), with camera traps revealing the hidden lives of these secretive big cats



Ahh! Now it's raining," wailed my walking guide. It was as if a tap had been turned on, as the already heavy rain increased in volume still further, blinding me as I followed the rainforest trail. Thunder reverberated around the river valley and occasional flashes of lightning were the only source of illumination in the gloom. I focused

on my feet as deep puddles formed along the track, and scurried my way back down to Pacuare Lodge as quickly as possible.

It had been a day dominated by water. A three-hour drive from San José had taken me and five other guests of the lodge from Costa Rica's capital to the rushing waters of the Pacuare River. There, several companies were taking their charges through the basics of rafting as we donned our safety gear, jumped into a bright blue raft and headed to the opposite bank for our briefing and tutorial. They soon departed and we had the river to ourselves.

"There has been a lot of rain, so the water is high," said our rafting guide, Olger. "Perfect conditions!" We were all a little nervous as we approached the first rapid. "One-two, one-two," Olger yelled to get us paddling in time: "Left side, back, back, back... and rest." The rapids on this stretch of the Pacuare were Class II or III (novice to intermediate; the scale goes up to VI), but they were adrenaline-boosting enough and we celebrated the successful passage of each with a high five of paddles.

'The rapids on this stretch of the Pacuare are Class II or III, and we celebrated the passage of each with a high five of paddles'

Each side of the river was cloaked in thick green forest, with occasional glimpses of camps. We pulled in at a quiet inlet and took a quick dip in the water before heading off again. Olger pointed out a cable contraption across the river: "That is for local, indigenous people to cross the water. They get into the basket and it takes them and their goods across." Further on was another, similar contraption. "This one is used by the lodge. If someone can't arrive by raft then they are brought by car and are winched across here."

In truth, I had been expecting rain on this trip. I was visiting Costa Rica in late September, supposedly out of season. Numerous websites advised that my intended visit was at the very worst time of year and that I would have unremitting rain. However, when I asked a tour-operator friend for their opinion, she reassured me: "Hey, you're going to the rainforest – there will always be some rain!"

In fact, Costa Rica has a range of weather patterns depending on a number of factors: the Caribbean coast may be dry even when the Pacific coast is wet. For me, this meant a golden opportunity to see the country's wild reaches away from the crowds.

Trails and eco-tales

We arrived all too soon at Pacuare Lodge, exhilarated and wishing we could carry along the river a little longer. But this luxurious eco-lodge offers much more in the way of activities, including a zip-line experience, rainforest hikes, canyoning and visits to indigenous communities. Or, if you need to relax and have a willing partner, the spa also offers, ahem, an organic chocolate massage. ►

Previous spread: Amy This spread: Getty, Pacuare Lodge

Branching out
A kinkajou surveys the forest; (right) experts say hatchlings should be left to make their own way to the ocean, to build up their strength and their homing instincts



◀ The lodge's environmental credentials are pretty impeccable, too. Founded in 1995, it now owns 3.4 sq km of land. Howler monkeys have been reintroduced here and a jaguar research programme has also been started. The buildings are even constructed from naturally fallen wood, while electricity use is kept to a minimum.

Naturalist guide, Luis, was born here. "Thirty years ago, this was grass used for cattle," he said, gesturing to thick native bush bordering the trail we were taking. "My boss bought it and planted trees." I exclaimed surprise at how quickly it had regrown. Luis shrugged philosophically: "We have everything here that the trees need to grow quickly: sun and rain, rain and sun."

Back at the lodge, he showed me camera-trap footage from the jaguar research programme that they support. Three jaguars have been recorded, plus at least two black panthers, the name commonly given to black jaguars. These big cats are so secretive that they're rarely seen in the flesh, although Luis had come face to face with a black panther once. He also revealed that pumas are very common here.

"I see the tracks in the sand along the river, just under the rooms, and out on the trails," he confirmed.

The camera-trap footage had also recorded a whole array of other rainforest creatures: armadillo, tapir, jaguarundi, agouti and ocelot. But my first close encounter with the local wildlife caught me completely by surprise. Supping a glass of wine in the candlelit bar that evening, a movement caught my eye.

'The Ticos, as Costa Ricans call themselves, constantly use the phrase 'pura vida', which translates as 'pure life'

"What's that?" asked a puzzled guest. "Is it a cat?" No, it was a kinkajou, a furry rainforest critter that looks like a cross between a mongoose, a cat and a monkey. It casually sauntered through the bar before heading down the beams and into the restaurant area, leaving me mulling over possible 'A kinkajou walks into a bar...' jokes.

I shouldn't have been too surprised at nature interrupting my evening. Costa Rica has built a reputation for its environmental sustainability, its wildlife experiences and its natural wonders. It has mountains and volcanoes, rainforest and cloud forest,

and is lapped by two different oceans. With a dozen different microclimates and a range of habitats, it is one of the most biodiverse countries on the planet, counting at least 205 species of mammal, around 900 birds and 1,500 butterflies.

Living 'la pura vida

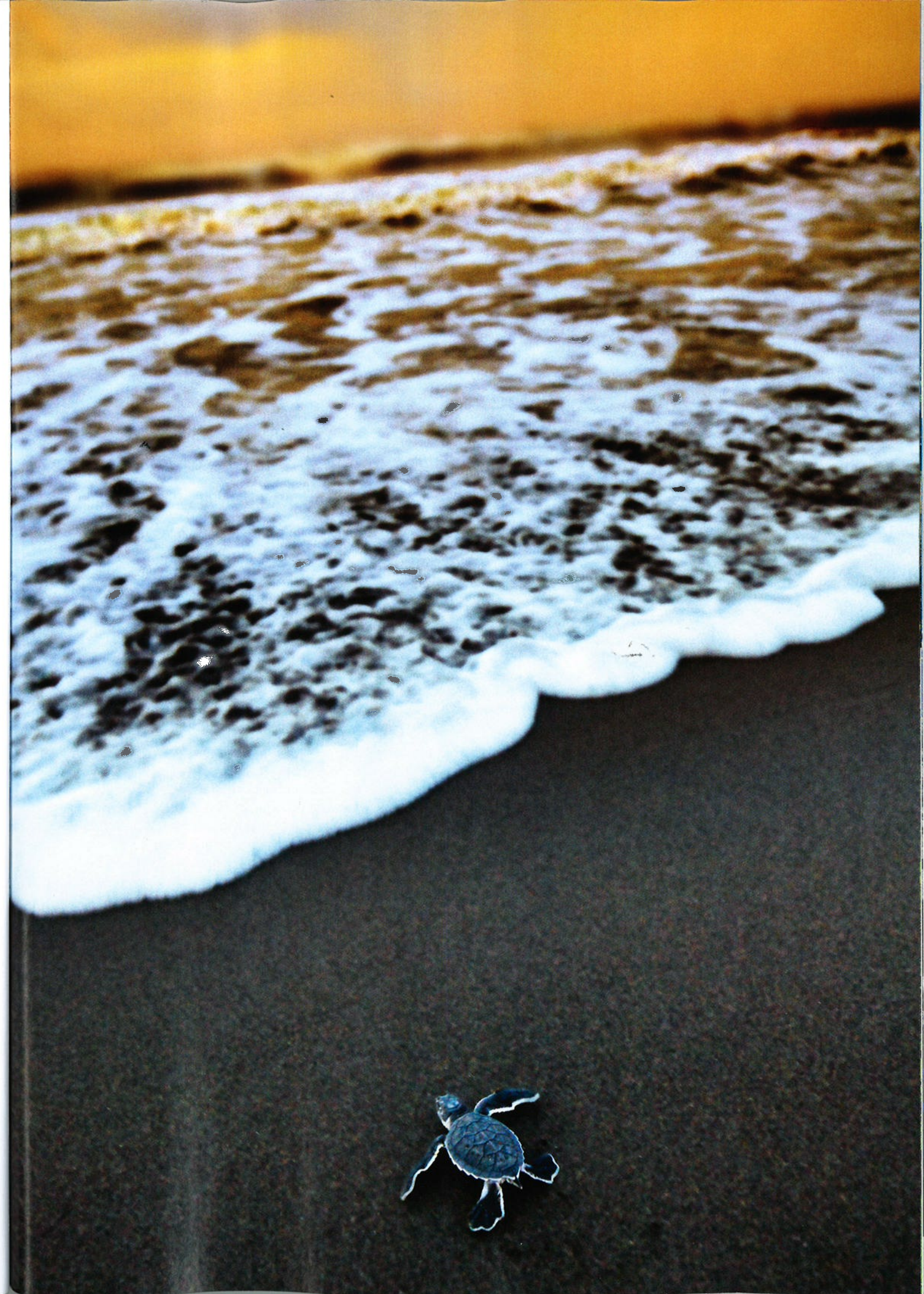
After a couple of nights at Pacuare, my skin was dewy soft and I realised that I felt energised, possibly due to all the

oxygen from the trees. The Ticos, as Costa Ricans call themselves, constantly use the phrase 'pura vida', which literally translates as 'pure life'. It struck me that this was just what I was feeling.

It was all good preparation for my next stop, which promised an even closer brush with nature. Not only was this the driest time of year at Tortuguero – another tick for off-season travel – but the advantage of September was that green turtles would be nesting on its beach.

But first I had to get there. The Pacuare River was running too high and too fast to raft out, so I took the hanging gondola across ►

©Corbis Images, Alamy



Costa Rica

Blast from the past
The smouldering tip
of Turrialba volcano, the
ash from which can find
its way as far as San José





The pure life
(clockwise from this)
Paddling the waters
of Tortuguero NP;
an emerald basilisk
lizard; Costa Rica's
favourite phrase writ
large; zip-lining through
the rainforest; the
colourful village
of Tortuguero



◀ the river, where guide-driver Juve was waiting for me. He filled me in on the volcanic activity that had been taking place in the previous few days. "There's a lot of ash in San José," he said. And some flights have had to be cancelled." I asked which volcano was responsible. "It's from Turrialba, over there." Looking across bucolic rural scenes to the volcano dominating the horizon, it dawned on me that what I had thought was cloud was actually a plume of ash.

Turning off the highway, unpaved roads took us through farmland and crops, and then banana plantations and packing plants. Blue bags covered the bunches of bananas as protection against fertiliser. Instead of a level crossing, we had to pull up at a banana crossing, as a worker pulled a dozen or so of the huge bunches across on a pulley system attached to his belt.

Tortuguero can only be accessed by water, so at the port of Caño Blanco we transferred to a motor launch filled with people wanting to experience one of Costa Rica's most unique national parks.

Situated on the north Caribbean coast, Tortuguero is a watery paradise for nature lovers, with a network of canals bisecting the rainforest here, as well as a river and coastline. Even the area's name means 'Land of the Turtles', and for good reason – three species of turtle nest on its 35km of beach. Indeed, it is the second-largest nesting population of green turtles in the world, and plenty of other wildlife calls the forest, canals and coast home.

Tortuguero village is situated on a car-free sandbar island, and has one narrow main street of shops, cafés and small businesses, mostly connected to tourism. Wandering through on a sultry afternoon,

there was scarcely anyone around to buy the 'pura vida' T-shirts; the only sign of life was the occasional dog snoozing in the shade. However, down on the beach a group of schoolkids of all different ages were beating out popular chart hits on drums.

My first call was to the visitor centre and museum operated by the Sea Turtle Conservancy (STC), an organisation that was founded in 1959 to protect the turtles in Tortuguero, but it has grown considerably since those early days and now works with and advises with international programmes and governments.

Coordinator Mary Duncan put on a 20-minute video for the handful of visitors, and then reappeared to take any questions, of which there were dozens.

"This is one of the most important marine conservation projects in the world. There has been a 500% increase in nests," she stressed. In 2016 there were more than 35,000 turtle nests along the beach. While jaguars took some of the turtles and they and a host of other predators

took eggs and hatchlings, huge numbers will have successfully made it to the sea. Indeed, 80% of the green turtle eggs hatched.

I was surprised to hear that, unlike some places in the world where well-meaning people carry the baby turtles to the sea, here the researchers let the hatchlings make their own way. Mary explained that research has shown that the hatchlings benefit from the exercise before they reach the ocean, and also that the beach is imprinted on the turtles for them to come back to when they are mature. "Of course there are volunteers and researchers on the beach when ►

'In 2016 there were more than 35,000 turtle nests along the beach... and huge numbers will have made it to the sea'

“We had a really exceptional trip. The mix of beautiful scenery and amazing wildlife made it a real adventure and the logistics made it achievable and stress free. Costa Rica has beaches, wildlife and lots of outdoor fun – the ideal holiday for all the family. ”

GP, Warwick



Red-eyed tree frog, Costa Rica

feefo ★★★★★
4.8 / 5 Service Rating

As the UK's No1 specialist in travel to Latin America, we've been creating award-winning holidays to every corner of the region for over 37 years.

Speak to an expert on **020 3553 0261** or start your journey at journeylatinamerica.co.uk

 **JOURNEY**
LATIN AMERICA
THE UK'S No1 SPECIALIST IN TRAVEL TO LATIN AMERICA

EXPERIENCE SOMETHING EXTRAORDINARY



“many of the nests hatch, and so the human presence keeps many of the predators away,” she confirmed.

The exception to giving a helping hand is with any hawksbill turtles that nest here. These critically endangered creatures don't seem to be the smartest, as they often lay their eggs within the high tide area, and so they get washed away. If there is a hawksbill, the researchers stay with it to ensure no predation, and may move the eggs if they feel it absolutely necessary. They are also careful to erase the turtle tracks afterwards, so that humans and animals won't find the nest.

Mary explained that it was approaching the end of the season for the green turtles, but there was still a good chance of seeing them. Visitors are not allowed on the beach at night without a guide, and so I booked a trip through the lodge I was staying in. Sure enough, at 9.15pm Miguel was waiting in a boat for me and another family. A short trip took us across the lagoon to a dark spot on the same island as the village but well away from any lodges or lights.

“The tracker has found some turtles close by... quick!” Miguel hissed quietly but urgently. We crossed a narrow spit of land to the beach, at which point we turned off our flashlights. We hadn't gone far, eyes trying to adjust to the dark, when Miguel paused, pointing out telltale tracks in the sand: “They look like a tractor has driven up, but it's actually a turtle.”

We followed the tracks up the beach, our anticipation rising. As we stopped and quietly crouched, Miguel turned on a 'turtle safe' red light and shone it onto the huge rear end of a green turtle releasing eggs the size and shape of moist ping-pong balls into a deep hole. With an awestruck reverence, we watched quietly for a bit and then moved a few yards to where another turtle was laying her eggs.

Miguel explained that the second one seemed smaller and younger. We then moved back from both for a few minutes before returning to the first to check on her progress. So it went on, with each turtle in turn finishing the laying and then covering the eggs



Not easy being green
An exhausted green turtle returns to the ocean after laying its eggs on the Tortuguero shore