

## Travel Latin America

So is this what you call *pelo de gato*, Eduardo? Cat's hair rain?" I'd read that Costa Rica has a rich vocabulary for precipitation, so when a fine drizzle starts to descend, I'm quick to show off one of the phrases I've learnt. Eduardo, my guide, peers up from beneath his hood: "No. This is what we call monkey urine."

I follow his gaze, hoping it's a colloquialism, but sure enough, a white-faced capuchin is merrily relieving itself on us from the trees above. "*Pura vida*," Eduardo shrugs, and he paddles on.

Translated literally, it means "pure life", but depending on who you ask, *pura vida* is a salutation, a toast, a philosophy and the Costa Rican answer to almost everything. I'm told it means hello, goodbye, *c'est la vie* and live in peace with nature. So I've come to the country's laid-back Caribbean coast to find out more about the famous idiom of the Ticos (inhabitants of Costa Rica). Back in our kayak on the Tortuguero canals, my induction continues.

Every few seconds, it seems, Eduardo points out something amazing. A snooty cormorant eyes us sideways, statue-still, lustrous black wings stretched wide and drying in the sun. A trio of baby bats, glued to a tree, are lined up in order of age. A basilisk – known as the Jesus Christ lizard for its ability to walk on water – basks on a log, then, at our approach, takes off with great comic aplomb, legs

flying across the water, more John Cleese than Jesus Christ.

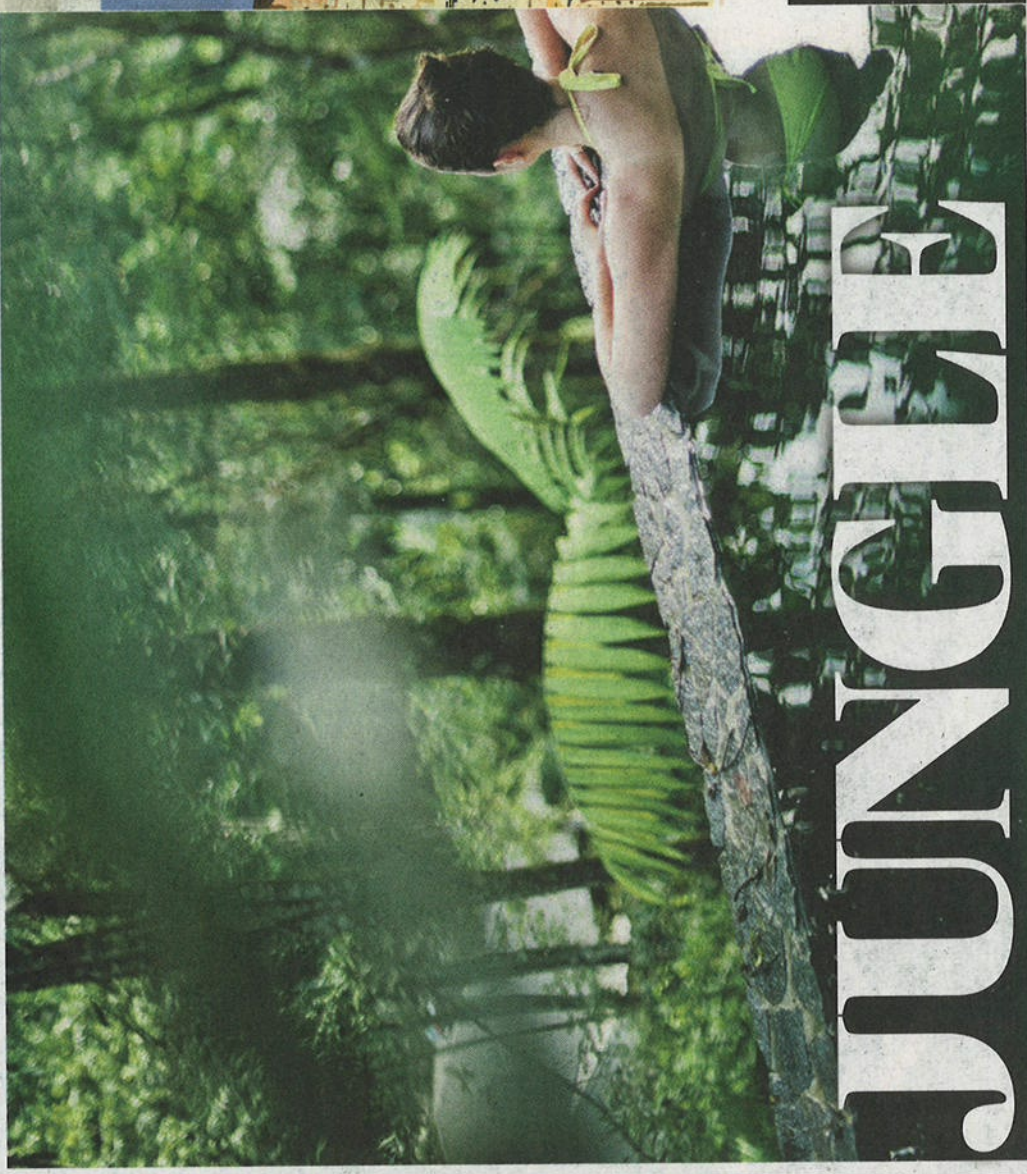
We had arrived in Tortuguero, "the Little Amazon of Costa Rica," after a short internal flight from San Jose, landing on a narrow strip of land next to Caribbean waves. It's more bus stop than airport: a horse grazes indifferently on the runway, a man collects our luggage in a wheelbarrow and deposits it on the river dock. It's a breezy five-minute boat transfer to Mawamba Lodge. (You can't get there by road.) Bull sharks and barracudas make swimming ill-advised, but the sandy beaches are a striking backdrop for a caipirinha or two. Stripy-tailed lizards prowling the grounds like wizened old punks. Their lazier compadres sunbathe in the tree-tops, sentries from another time.

As dusk approaches, a small group of us gather on the dock. We're on our way to one of the turtle nesting grounds in Tortuguero National Park. On arrival, strict instructions are issued: no cameras, no lights, no wandering off. Suddenly a red light pierces the darkness and there are urgent whispers. The guide leads us to a grand old dame stoically dropping her eggs into a deep oval pit.

I am in equal measure uneasy and awestruck. The new mother seems unflappable, but I'm sure she could do without an audience of odd shell-less bipeds. Yet income generated from this programme helps protect the turtles from far more intrusive tourism and poachers. Four of the world's seven sea-turtle species come here to nest, and three of these are in severe danger of extinction. Either way, watching her propel her stately heft down the beach and into the sea is a sight that will never leave me.

The next day, we make the tortuous 4x4 journey on twisted mud tracks to Pacuare Lodge. But the elegant wooden edifice in the emerald Talamanca Mountains proves worth the toil. I take an outdoor shower in the forest gloom as the river bellows below. The ec lodge generates what little electricity it uses, so everything is candlelit.

I spend the next morning daydreaming in my mini infinity pool, lost in a cathedral of green. Due for breakfast on the Nest platform, I clamber into the canopy and am clipped onto a zip wire to swing across to a lofty dining table in the foliage of an ancient ceiba tree. My food is pulleyed up in a basket. Drowsy brown honeybees languish in the guava jam. All around, the rainforest's citizens chatter and trill.



# JUNGLE NATION

Chic ecolodges, astonishing wildlife and a drowsy pace of life: Jenni Doggett goes in search of *pura vida* in Costa Rica

It's starting to seem like the normal order of things to rappel 60ft down a tree to go in search of pygmy kingfishers and long-tailed tyrant birds – I think I may actually be catching *pura vida*.

The following day, I leave the resort with four other guests in the most ecofriendly, and fun, way: by raft. A broad-shouldered chap calmly navigates the Class 4 rapids with our luggage, pivoting his vessel between colossal rocks as ours bounces behind. Between fierce

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TO INFINITY Pacuare Lodge pool, left

bursts of paddling through rapids and idle drifting, we slide out of our rubber raft into the water, floating silently downriver, buoyed by life vests, through idyllic canyons, baptised by the clear green river. Our driver collects Eduardo and me from the riverbank – soggy but exhilarated.

We head south to Puerto Viejo and the Jaguar Rescue Center, a rehabilitation centre for wildlife, where I'm welcomed by its founder, Encar, and an ancient ocelot named Roy, who has a machete wound in his head and cataracts. A cheeky boar called Chachi also trots round adoringly after Encar, while wide-eyed raccoons and anxious owls follow our every move. It's clear that the animals come first here – they're not just props for Instagramming tourists.

So far, so *pura vida*. I wondered if my grasp of the concept would survive the

harsher realities of urban Costa Rica. I'd found the capital, San Jose, daunting when I first arrived, and was eager to escape its deafening trains and perilous, rubble-strewn gutters. A closer inspection reveals markets festooned with delicate wooden hummingbirds, vibrant street art and a man playing trumpet at the traffic lights, bowing between greens.

A visit to the National Museum offers cornflower-blue morpho butterflies drunk on fermenting watermelon – they hang dangerously askew, proboscises buried deep in the rotting fruit. One is flat out on its back, legs waving half-heartedly.

Taking my cue from the inebriated insects, I join a craft-beer walking tour on my last night, and our guide, Sergio, speaks with passion about the neighbourhoods and history of the city. He leads us through cool bars, waxing lyrical about local brews.

As he heads to the sixth bar to fill our glasses, I ask what *pura vida* means to him. "There are countless crappy memes of what it's supposed to signify, but to me it's just about making the best of life. If the winds aren't blowing your way, you can choose to take it laid-back and look for the good in everything. Ticos tend not to worry too much."

I think I'll have what he's having.

*Jenni Doggett was a guest of Visit Costa Rica (visitcostarica.com). Audley Travel has 11-night tailor-made trips from £5,392pp, including flights, some meals and excursions (audleytravel.com/costa-rica). British Airways flies nonstop to San Jose from Gatwick, from £415 return (ba.com)*

## THE TIMES Expert Traveller



### Discover the wonders of Costa Rica

The highlights of this exhilarating small-group tour with Collette include visits to San Jose, the Arenal volcano, Tortuguero National Park, the Sarapiquí rainforest and Manuel Antonio National Park. You'll stay in superb rainforest lodges, and 17 experiences are included in the price, from chocolate tasting

to a crocodile safari. The 12-day trip starts at £2,999pp, departing on April 27, 2019, and including return BA flights from London, private door-to-door airport transfers, breakfasts, four lunches and eight dinners.

**Book on 0808 278 9034, quoting SUT1301; thetimes.co.uk/costarica**

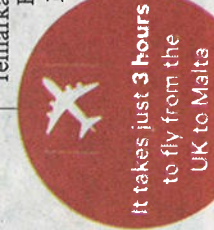
# Unwind on the sunshine isle

If the winter gloom is getting you down, don't despair – escaping to the sun is easier and closer than you may think

There's nothing like a healthy dose of winter sun to sweep away the seasonal blues. The good news is that you don't have to fly across the globe to experience some restorative rays.

Just three hours flying time from the UK, and English speaking, Malta has it all – glorious architecture, great food, welcoming people – and Europe's sunniest capital, Valletta. With winter temperatures rarely falling much below 20C, it's the perfect spot for a cheeky break. The island has something for everyone, whether you like spending warm nights enjoying harbourside dining at top restaurants, such as Panorama or Barracuda, or want to get out and about by hiking around historical sites or learning to dive.

In fact, the diving is some of the best in the world. The water is packed with wrecks, caves and reefs, and the island is renowned for its quality dive schools. Anyone over



ten years old can sign up for Padi training courses and the water is wetsuit warm, even in winter. One of the most popular dive sites is the Blue Hole, where you can spot octopus and lobster in the remarkably clear waters.

Back on land, Valletta is the perfect place to start a tour of Malta. Not only is it breathtakingly beautiful, but the city has just finished a stint as European Capital of Culture 2018, a fitting honour for a spot "built by gentlemen for gentlemen".

Much of the city dates back to the 16th century and was commissioned by the Knights of St John. Today, it is a fascinating Unesco-recognised collection of cobbled streets, fabulous palaces, quirky shops and colourful restaurants, serving classic Maltese dishes and local Cisk beer.



Cuisine in Malta reflects the island's history of occupation, with Arabic, French, Italian and British influences. The island is especially good value if you are travelling with a family as there are affordable options, such as hearty stews, traditional breads and semi-freddo desserts. You can sample mouthwatering seafood at local restaurants and beach cafes, or indulge in a little people watching with a coffee on the waterfront.

When it comes to nightlife, there are many vibrant wine bars in Valletta, and it's only a short taxi ride to lively Paceville, in St Julian's, a nightlife hub designed to keep all ages entertained.

During the day, sightseeing in compact Valletta is easy and the highlight is the stunning St John's Co-Cathedral, one of Europe's most

important baroque buildings. Its interior is ablaze with gold leaf while the oratory is home to two paintings by Caravaggio, including his largest and only signed work *The Beheading of St John the Baptist*.

History fans will enjoy the Grand Master's Palace, the former home of the head of the Knights of St John. There's also the Malta Experience or Malta 5D, both featuring historical films about the island's heritage, and the Lascaris War Rooms, underground tunnels that were dug by hand by Malta's resistance during the Second World War.

You can make getting around Valletta even more fun by booking a Segway tour or, if you want to explore farther afield, hire a bicycle – look out for the new cycle sharing scheme Nextbike Malta, which is spreading across the island.

Going for gold: stroll on Valletta's waterfront or (left) dive a local wreck

PROMOTED CONTENT



To find out more, go to [maltauk.com](http://maltauk.com)

\*T&Cs: this 'starting at' fare is applicable from now until the end of March