

# it's easy being green

A real-life adventure with wild thrills, near-extinct creatures and serene swims — *and it's eco-friendly?*  
**Jenni Doggett** finds purity in the heart of the jungle

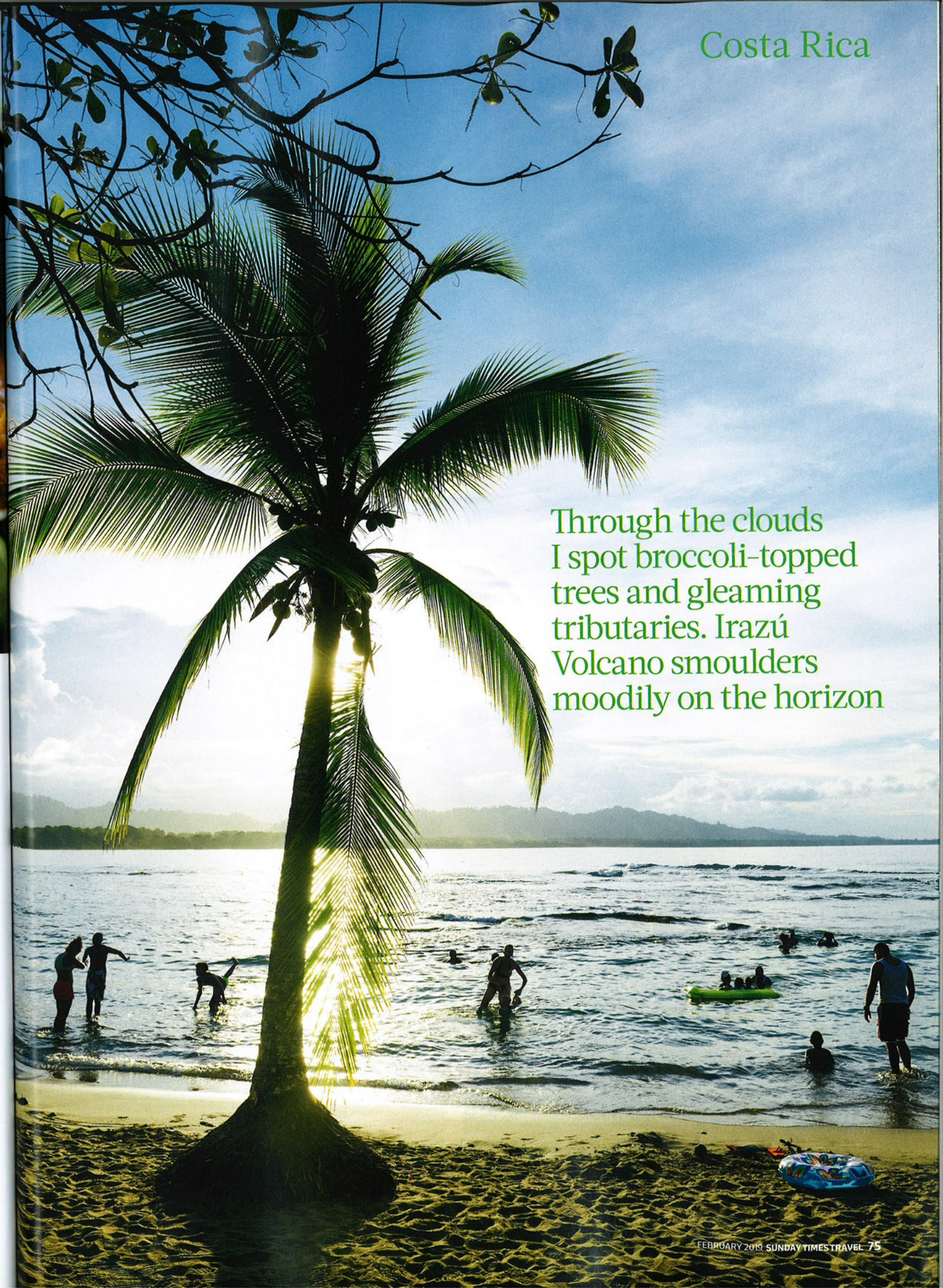
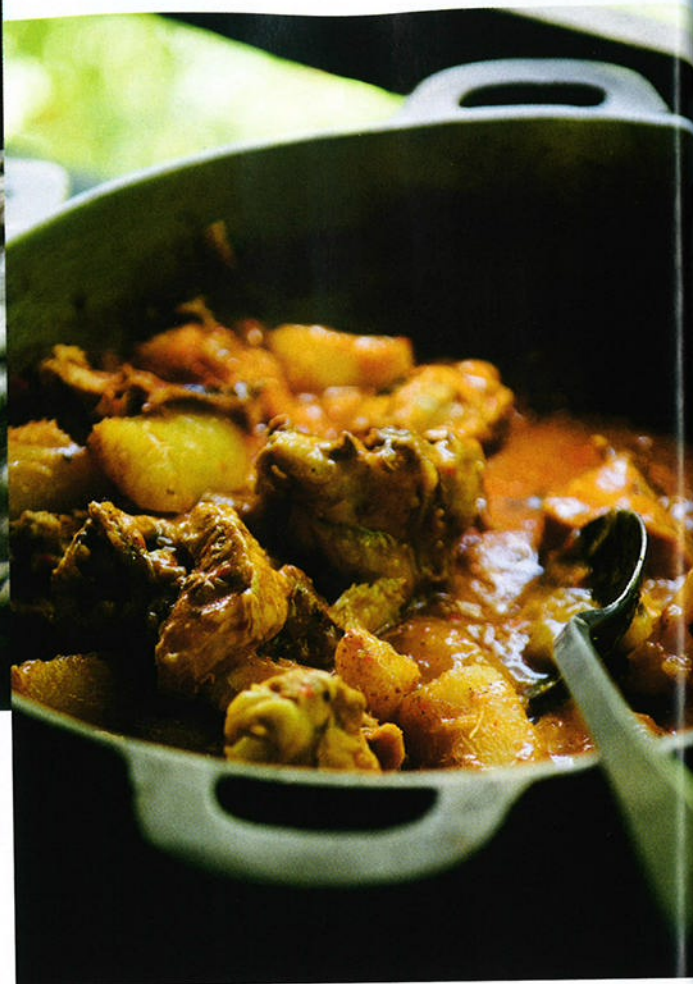
Photography: **Wynn Ruji**



Hanging around:  
basilisk lizard.  
Opposite, a howler  
monkey scrumping  
for seagrapes;  
bananas for sale  
roadside; the  
waterfall at  
Pacuare Lodge;  
red-eyed tree  
frog scurrying  
across a leaf







Through the clouds  
I spot broccoli-topped  
trees and gleaming  
tributaries. Irazú  
Volcano smoulders  
moodily on the horizon

**S**o 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. But Eduardo, my guide, peers up from beneath his hood:

'No. This is what we call monkey urine.'

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

Translated literally, it means simply '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. Various, I'm told it means hello, goodbye, *c'est la vie* and live in peace with nature. So I've come to find out about the Ticos' (inhabitants of Costa Rica) famous idiom for myself. There are plenty of places in Central and South America to see idle sloths and towering rainforests – but *pura vida* is what sets Costa Rica apart, if the brochures are to be believed. Back in our kayak on the Tortuguero Canals (after a short but necessary rinse in the water) 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 hat-trick of baby bats, glued to a tree, is 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.

Eduardo exudes nearly as much glee imparting his knowledge about what we're seeing as I do in learning it: 'These butterflies actually drink crocodiles' tears!' And this is my next lesson in *pura vida*. Every guide I meet (and you really do need guides here, for park permits and

arcane bat trivia) is passionate about their work and environment: they celebrate the life around them. They are professional twitchers, pilots and boat captains who explore this landscape every day, all taking as many pictures as the tourists, delighting in the discovery of a transparent glass frog or demonstrations of the *mimosa pudica*'s bashful leaves closing up at a touch.

Some Ticos complain that *pura vida* is being commercialised as a T-shirt slogan, so I'm searching for its real meaning on the country's laid-back Caribbean Coast, which has more of the small resorts popular with Europeans than the Pacific, which is broadly favoured by Americans and bigger chain hotels. On the short internal flight, I catch glimpses of broccoli-topped trees and gleaming tributaries through the cloud. Irazú Volcano smoulders away moodily on the horizon. We land on a narrow strip of land between Caribbean waves and Tortuguero, 'the Little Amazon of Costa Rica'. 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) and everything seems so easy. We keep our eyes peeled for manatees, but sightings are rare: 'A win on Costa Rica's lottery,' says Eduardo with a smile.

Bull sharks and barracudas make swimming ill-advised, but the sandy beaches are a striking backdrop for a Caipirinha or two. Stripey-tailed lizards prowl the grounds like wizened old punks. Their lazier *compadres* sunbathe in the treetops, sentries from another time. 🌴

#### PACKING LIST TIPS

Take some pocketable binoculars – the wildlife is everywhere, but cunningly camouflaged, so you'll need help distinguishing glass frogs from foliage

On the look out: above, a basilisk peeking over a branch; a feast of olla de carne (Costa Rican beef stew) at a roadside cafe. Opposite, the beach at Puerto Viejo





Natural pose:  
clockwise from top  
left, relaxing in a  
private infinity pool  
at Pacuare Lodge;  
navigating the rapids  
on Pacuare River;  
eye to eye with a  
raccoon at the Jaguar

Rescue Center;  
terrace at Pacuare  
Lodge; having  
a laugh; bird-  
watching. Opposite,  
kayaking downriver;  
volunteer cuddling  
a baby sloth at the  
Rescue Center

As dusk approaches, a small group of us gathers on the dock. We're on our way to one of the abundant turtle nesting grounds in Tortuguero National Park. Strict instructions are issued: no cameras, no lights, no wandering off. A network of spotters and scouts lead us in blackness to a part of the beach where we wait for a huge green turtle to start laying her eggs. It's surreal. We're sightless Beckett characters in waiting. Suddenly a red light and 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 by what we're witnessing. The new mother seems unflappable, but I'm sure she could do without an audience of odd shell-less bipeds. On the other hand, income generated from this programme helps protect the turtles from far more intrusive tourism and poachers. Four out 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 is a sight that will never leave me. A regal breaststroke across the sand, a pause to rest, and then she's tumbling back into the waves, swallowed up by the black sea.

I think my *vida* has got as *pura* as it's going to get, but I have to reassess the next day as we travel to Pacuare Lodge. In rain so heavy it sets off car alarms, we pass stalls displaying mounds of hirsute rambutans and giant green banana hands. The journey is elaborately unpromising: what seems like hours of slow-mo slamming around in a 4WD on twisted mud tracks is followed by a rudimentary funicular, then a golf cart. I wish I had known before that you could arrive by horse.

But Pacuare Lodge is oh-so worth the toil. An elegant wooden edifice in Limón's emerald Talamancan Mountains, it is not the place for evening gowns or good hair. The design is luxurious, but the pleasures simple – a key tenet of the pure life. I take an outdoor shower in the forest gloam as the river bellows a wild lullaby below. There's no electricity (the lodge takes sustainability very seriously), so everything is candlelit, with each villa furnished with an old-fashioned candle-snuffer. Before bed I tiptoe about, extinguishing gluey wicks. Not the classic five-star fantasy, but deeply satisfying nonetheless.

I spend the next morning daydreaming in my mini infinity pool, lost in a cathedral of green. I'm reluctant to leave my sanctuary, but am due for breakfast on the Nest platform. A testing clamber into the canopy, then I'm clipped onto a zipwire to swing across to a lofty dining table in the foliage of a sprawlingly ancient ceiba tree. My food is pulleyed up in a basket. Drowsy brown honey bees languish in the guava jam. All around, the rainforest's citizens chatter and trill.

I learn about the evolution of hummingbird beaks and delight over distant furry grey lumps that may or may not be sloths. It's starting to seem like the normal order of things to rappel 20 metres down a tree to go in search of pygmy kingfishers and long-tailed tyrant birds – I think I may actually be catching *pura vida*.

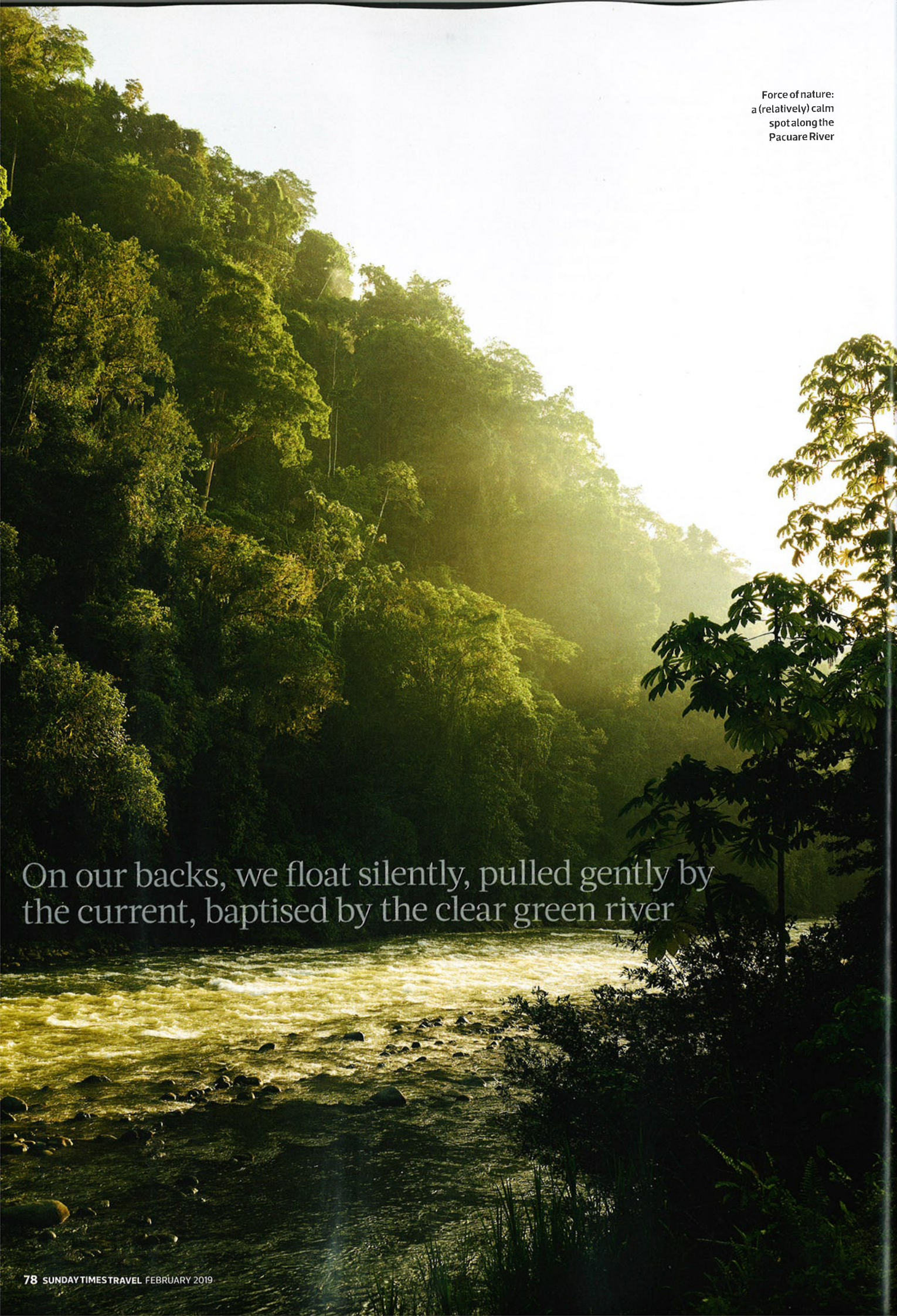
The following day, I'm joined by four other guests for an exit that is as excellent as the arrival was arduous. Using the river's power to propel our rafts is not only the friendliest of eco, it is also the most fun I've had since, well, swinging through the trees for breakfast. A broad-shouldered chap calmly navigates the Class 4 rapids with our luggage. Perched high above the bags, he expertly >

## GOOD FOOD ON THE MOVE

For what locals refer to as *bueno* (good), *bonito* (cheap) and *barato* (fast) food, stop at one of the many roadside sodas for local stew and seafood. Not much is cheap in Costa Rica, but these local stalls are a bargain







Force of nature:  
a (relatively) calm  
spot along the  
Pacuare River

On our backs, we float silently, pulled gently by the current, baptised by the clear green river

pivots his raft between colossal rocks. Our boat bounces behind, the passengers all thrilled and grinning wildly. Between fierce bursts of paddling through rapids and idle drifting, we slide out of our rubber raft into the water. Flat out on our backs we float silently downriver, buoyed up by life vests, pulled gently by the current through idyllic canyons, baptised by the clear green river.

Our driver collects Eduardo and me from the river bank – soggy, exhilarated and nursing the kind of appetite that only a vigorous day outdoors can inspire. We head south for Puerto Viejo and settle into a sleepy seaside cafe to plough through bowl after bowl of citrusy ceviche and local beer. There's an easy Caribbean flavour to the town, and it's tempting to hug the beach for a while, but I'm keen to get to the Jaguar Rescue Center, a respected rehabilitation centre for wildlife.

I'm welcomed by its founder, Encar, and an ancient ocelot named Roy, who has a machete wound in his head and bad cataracts, so is unable to fend for himself. A cheeky boar called Chachi also trots round adoringly after Encar, while wide-eyed raccoons and anxious owls follow our every move. Dozing two-toed sloths smile secretively. They are pretty biddable in this state, but Encar shows us their vampire fangs and explains that many of her injuries have come from rescuing belligerent sloths from power lines.

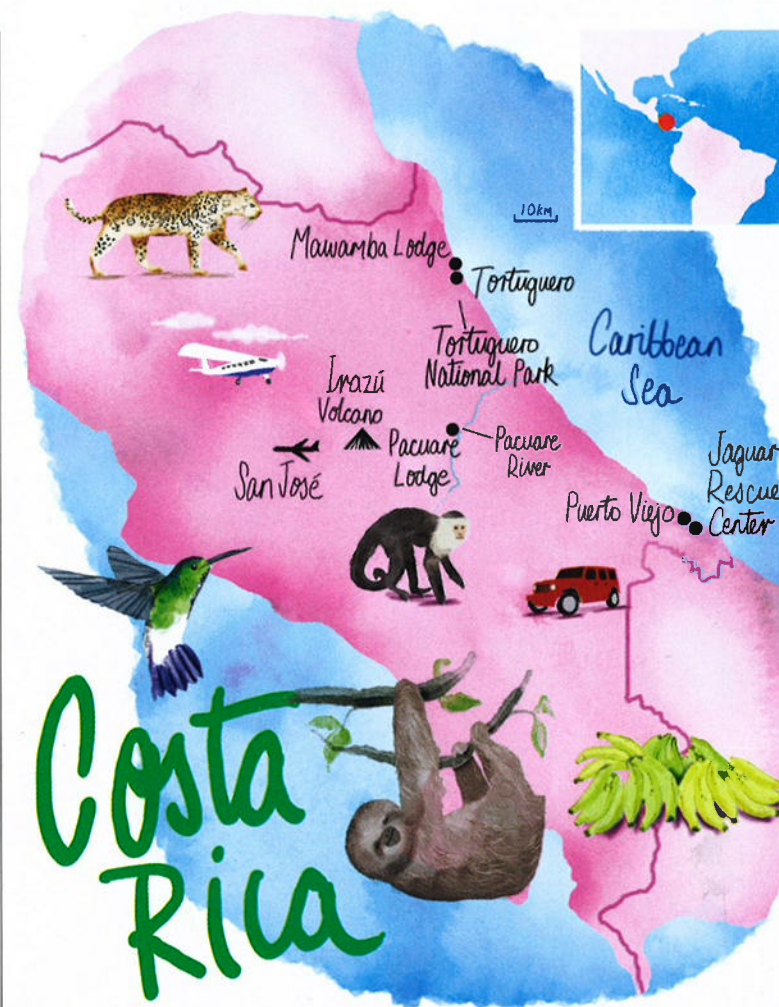
Cheery volunteers pass by and we drop into the serpentarium to visit the yellow eyelash pit viper. The passion displayed by Encar and her team is disarming, and it's very clear that the animals come first here – they're not just props for Instagramming tourists. What's more amazing is that I encounter something of the same wherever I go in Costa Rica: everyone I meet sees themselves as lucky custodians of their environment.

So far, so *pura vida*. Time for one last test. It's easy to philosophise when being pampered in a luxury treehouse, but I wondered would my grasp of *pura vida* survive the harsher realities of urban Costa Rica. I'd found the capital city, San José, daunting when I first arrived, and was eager to escape its deafening trains and perilous, rubble-strewn gutters – but here I was, back for the last few days of the trip. And, not unlike the rainforest, the city rewards patience. A closer inspection revealed undercover 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 was just flat-out drunk, lying 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 a series of cool bars, waxing lyrical about local brews as he goes, and 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. That's what I think it stands for.'

I think I'll have what he's having. 🍹

## Costa Rica



### Get Me There

map: Scott Jessop

#### Go packaged

It's quite possible to travel independently, but packages are worth considering: they often work out cheaper and are the simplest way of getting national park permits. **Audley Travel** ([audleytravel.com/costa-rica](http://audleytravel.com/costa-rica)) tailor-makes itineraries, including an 11-night trip from £5,392pp, with flights, some meals and excursions. Or try **Trailfinders** ([trailfinders.com](http://trailfinders.com)).

gardens ([hotelgranodeoro.com](http://hotelgranodeoro.com); doubles from £294, B&B). Move on to the real thing at **Pacuare Lodge**: hidden in dense rainforest on the banks of the Pacuare River, it's *pura vida* personified ([pacuarelodge.com](http://pacuarelodge.com); doubles from £411, full-board). For a less remote, but still wild experience, **Mawamba Lodge** is the best place to see nesting turtles responsibly ([mawamba.com](http://mawamba.com); doubles from £184, full-board).

#### Go independent

**BA** flies nonstop to San José from Gatwick, from £566 return. Or try **KLM**. The Costa Rica Tourism Board's Sustainability Certification program (CST) distinguishes the most sustainable local companies: check [visitcostarica.com](http://visitcostarica.com) for information on the best car rental, internal flights and guides.

#### Get around

Reserve internal flights early: they get booked up fast in the dry season (mid-December to April). The main airlines are **Nature Air** and **Sansa**. Weather is unpredictable and can ground flights, so allow some buffer time between domestic and international flights. If hiring a car, pay the extra for 4WD as you'll be dealing with potholes and rivers if you go anywhere interesting.

#### Where to stay

Ease into the rainforest gently in San José by staying in one of **Hotel Grano de Oro**'s suites with private tropical

#### Further information

Dry season is the best time to visit, but also the most costly.