

High Tide

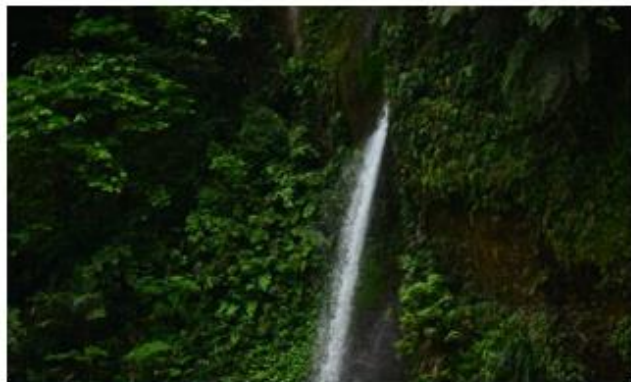
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CANADA

## A PADDLER'S ECO LODGE COMBO IN COSTA RICA'S CARIBBEAN

February 13, 2019 | By [Eugene Buchanan](#)



Even as Costa Rica's oldest-running rafting outfitter, there's still plenty to discover to offer your guests. That's why I'm motor boating around Panama's Bocas del Toro archipelago with Rafael Gallo of Rios Tropicales. We're scouting out a sea kayak itinerary for a new 10-day combo trip he's unveiling: three days paddling his crown jewel Pacuare river and staying at his eco lodge, followed by four days sea kayaking, stand-up paddleboarding and snorkeling out of the Casa Cayuco eco lodge in Bocas' Bastimento National Marine Park.



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**Paddling the Pacuare**

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## Padding the Pacuare

Rescuing a sloth from your kayak is a slow process—not surprising, given the victim.

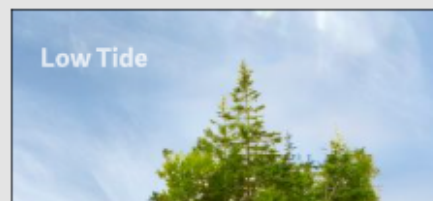
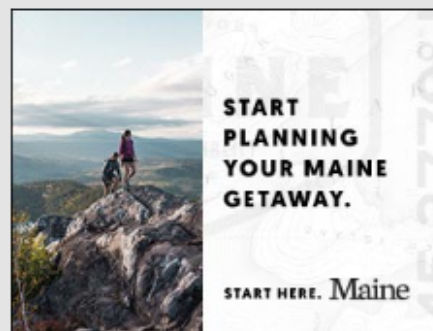
That's what we find on Costa Rica's Pacuare River, paddling up to an obviously stunned *Folivora* at the base of a cliff, clinging to a rock just above a rapid. We extend our paddle, it latches on with all three toes, and then we grab the scruff of its neck like a cat and ferry him over to the other side.

We're lucky we even saw it; most of the time, our eyes are either on the rapids or facing upward toward the countless waterfalls cascading from the sides. Some are massive, like 200-foot Huacas, and some mere trickles, but they're all picturesque ribbons of white threading a backdrop of primordial green.

That, of course, is when you have the time to look at them. The 21-mile stretch drops 1,150 feet to its sea-level takeout in Siquerres, riddling it with Class II-IV rapids. Combine this with its primary rainforest and en route jungle lodge — complete with bar, hammock-lined deck and rooms plumbed via a gravity-fed Pelton wheel — and it's hard to find a better, more accessible jungle rafting trip in the world.

My trip starts with a van ride through Braulio Carrillo National Park and its Turrialba volcano, Costa Rica's most active. The day before, I had mountain biked from 12,600 feet near its summit down to town 11,000 feet below, stopping only for a lunch of veal and a block of the region's famed Turrialba cheese. From there, we descend 1,000 feet into the gorge, passing fence posts sprouting with leaves.

At the bottom is a pool of deep, green water; the river is low and clear, matching the bank's emerald foliage. It also means ample beaches, several of which are littered with cat tracks. It's an oncilla, one of six felines in the region, including jaguars, puma, jaguarundi, margay and ocelot. Adding to the zoo are monkeys,









Rafting up to the Rios Tropicales lodge.

Trailing two rafts in a kayak, I have to keep my eyes on the river. Five miles of rock-dodging rapids brings us to a bend where our lodge straddles a creek — and, yes, waterfall — on the right. To build it, Gallo floated everything from lumber to beds and bar in on rafts, an impressive feat for all its appointments. The rooms, complete with fully plumbed bathrooms, are as romantic as the flower- and waterfall-lined setting, with towels folded into heart shapes atop the beds.

The formula — combining a world-class river trip with eco-conscious lodging — works. Rios has won a host of ecotourism awards, including Trip Advisor's Gold Medal Green Leader Award and National Geographic's Geotourism Award for sustainability. Encouraging guests to plant trees to offset their carbon footprints, to date it's protected 2,000 acres of rainforest while creating the







The next morning, a light rain patters the roof, overriding the sound of toucans. After a breakfast of fresh fruit, banana pancakes and rich Costa Rican coffee, I hop in my kayak and follow guide Diego, clients Curtis and Leeann from Canada, and safety kayaker Walter down the heart of the canyon. The rapids come as quickly as the waterfalls. Wake-up Falls appears around one corner, and 200-foot Huacas the next, both bordered by Class IV rapids.



**On the Pacuare, you can find yourself becoming a Sloth Rescuer.**

Shortly later we rescue the sloth. Safely on the opposite bank, he scrambles — scratch that, ambles — into the jungle. We're now official Sloth Rescuers. We saddle up

