

A Walking Holiday in Costa Rica by Mary Novakovich

It was hard to avoid a slight sense of panic in the arrivals lounge at San Jose airport. Scores of taxi drivers swarmed round us, making it difficult to find our guide who was to look after us during our walking holiday. I know it's a typical scene in many airports, but the lateness of the hour and the unfamiliar warmth of the night were having an unsettling effect.

Finally, I spotted Juan Carlos, who quickly took charge and deposited us in the Hotel Buena Vista in nearby Alajuela. Daniel, the waiter, ignored the late hour and gave us a free fruit drink. "You'll want to drink this while you're in Costa Rica," he said. "We call it Refresco, because it freshens you up." I speak the barest minimum of Spanish, so the addition of "dos Refrescos, por favor" to my limited vocabulary was very useful.

We also learnt the Costa Rican catchphrase "pura vida", meaning pure life. Costa Ricans say pura vida to mean "hello", "cheerio", "that's great" – whatever you like. It's one of the many beguiling things about this small country. Costa Rica is full of bewildering contrasts with some of the most unreasonably beautiful and bizarre scenery I've ever seen.

Alajuela was only a stopover, so we set off the next day to Lake Arenal, home to one of the country's many volcanoes. But we had a few mini-wonders to experience along the way first. There was the small café in Mirador Cinchona, for example, which is a lookout post over a vast garden that resembles a compact rainforest, complete with toucans, hummingbirds and a huge waterfall in the distance. It also had a pet spider, a tarantula, whose six-year-old minder offered us a chance to hold it. I was the only one to take her up on it. It felt deliciously creepy.

Back on the road, Juan Carlos braked abruptly and skidded over to the kerb. "Sloth!" he called out. We scrambled out of the car and looked excitedly up in the trees. Sure enough, a three-toed sloth was making its leisurely way down the tree. What a delight! After another few hours over Costa Rica's potholed roads, we made it to the Arenal Observatory Lodge. Arenal last had a major eruption in July 1968, when 80 people died, and new mountains were created by lava flow. The volcano is still active, and on a clear day you can see steam blowing out of it; on clear nights, a stream of red lava can be seen flowing down. It would have been an astonishing sight had it not rained solidly for the two days we were there.

Our first walk was through cloud forest to the crater of neighbouring volcano Cerro Chato. It's a steep enough climb when the weather is dry, but the relentless rain had turned the terrain into rivers of mud. The forest lushness could not be hidden completely, however, and now and then a flash of vivid orange ginger lilies would appear. The reward for climbing a kilometre to

the top should have been a view of Cerro Chato's lake, but we had to make do with the admittedly rare experience of eating our packed lunch with our heads literally in the clouds.

Juan Carlos had promised us hot springs, a bonus that comes with staying in a volcanic region. The most famous in the area is Tabacon Grand Spa Thermal Resort, which is expensive and usually overcrowded. Instead we soothed our aching muscles in the smaller Eco Termales Hot Springs in La Fortuna, which has four large pools descending into each other. Mercifully, it had stopped raining long enough for us to lie in the steamy water and watch the bats swoop madly as dusk fell. There was a restaurant, too, which served an extremely good version of the Costa Rican national dish casado: rice and spicy refried beans with various extras such as chicken and beef, palm heart salad and fresh fruit juice.

I had thought that Arenal was determined to stay hidden during our stay, but the volcano emerged from the clouds long enough to show off about two-thirds of itself. The views we missed seeing at the lodge were made up for on the road out of Arenal and around its enormous lake. We saw not only the lake itself, but also groups of howler monkeys hanging about in trees and gangs of cuddly coatis venturing out into the road.

Near the Nicaraguan border we were struck by an abrupt change of scenery: the lush rainforest turned into hot, dry savannah with more volcanic mountains in the distance.

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- (a) Why were the writer and her companions visiting Costa Rica? (1)
- (b) What two reasons does the writer give for the sense of panic she refers to in paragraph one? (2)
- (c) Explain in your own words what does the writer mean by 'my limited vocabulary'. (1)
- (d) Pick out the single word which hints that the writer had never previously seen such scenery. (1)
- (e) What do we learn about the writer's feelings towards the spider from the phrase 'deliciously creepy'? (2)
- (f) Which word in paragraph six tells you that the roads in Costa Rica were not in good condition? (1)
- (g) Why was the writer unable to witness the 'astonishing sight' of the volcano? (1)
- (h) Why does the writer use the word 'relentless' in paragraph 6. ? (1)
- (i) 'Our heads literally in the clouds': What is the writer trying to say here? Explain in your own words? (2)
- (j) Give **three** things from paragraph eight which the writer enjoyed about the Eco Termales Hot Springs resort. (3)
- (k) What enabled the writer and her companions to lie in the steamy water long enough? (1)
- (l) The writer thought that Arenal was "determined to stay hidden'. What does the writer mean to say? (2)
- (m) Explain in your own words, how the scenery changed as they approached Nicaragua.(2)
