

# THE SATURDAY PAPER

TRAVEL  
MAY 23, 2015

## Searching for frogs in the Costa Rica jungle

Intrepid frog hunters brave the jungles of Costa Rica in search of herpetological heaven.



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An hourglass tree frog (*Dendropsophus ebraccatus*) in the jungle of Costa Rica.

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It's important, when setting out on a zoological expedition, to be fully prepared. The right equipment, preventive medication, strong local knowledge and appropriate garments are essential. Quality torches, waterproof maps and identification guides, high-energy food and a fair smattering of the local languages are a plus.

At the best of times, my partner and I are hard to beat in the preparation stakes. He's an exemplar of the Last Boy Scout, and I'm... Well, the less mentioned about what I think is essential packing for an adventure, the better. Let's just say that if we're ever marooned, he'll be using his exhaustive arsenal of knots to tie string into a boat and making signal fires with a craftily folded piece of Alfoil he's packed just in case. I, on the other hand, will be ready for an extended game of canasta, complete with customised pens, sunglasses in a range of styles to suit all dress codes and useless conversational facts about nearby fauna and flora: "Did you know Darwin suffered terribly from seasickness and wrote four volumes about barnacles?"

### Ready for adventure

Tonight is not our best of times. The urge to seek frogs is a spur of the moment thing, but, truly, who hasn't been seduced late at night by that particular feeling? When the moon is high, the stars are shimmering and a convivial mood overtakes, the desire to venture out in search of bright-eyed croakers is irresistible. You may think you don't adore amphibians; if so you're forgetting some of your most treasured childhood memories – The Muppets' prime greenie for one, as well as biting the head off your first Freddo. You rooted for them when E.T. drank too much beer and mind-melded with Elliott in biology class. And while you might have liked Rat and Mole in *The Wind in the Willows*, it's Toad – pompous, wistful, venal, acquisitive – who's the most human of them all.

It's fair to say our preparation leaves a little to be desired. For starters, we're in Costa Rica, which we've decided to visit precisely because we know nothing about it, other than that it's smaller than Tasmania but has 5 per cent of the world's biodiversity, that it's well on the way to becoming the world's first carbon neutral country by 2021 and that apparently it has a larger biomass of sloths than humans – a factoid that resists all attempts to confirm or deny. It's also a country brimming with *sapos*: frogs and toads.



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This article was first published in the print edition of *The Saturday Paper* on May 23, 2015 as "Thank you for croaking".

Our language skills are idiosyncratic, with our Spanish a fluffy concoction of secondary-school Latin, three years of roasting coffee with – and being chatted up by – Argentinians, and a rather waterlogged pocket phrasebook that includes “I need some denture paste” and “I’m just not that into you”. In any case, it’s likely that as in every other conversation we’ve had here, the frogs and toads will struggle with our Australian accents.

For equipment, we’ve got Kimberley Safety Boots (more commonly known as thongs), a large bottle of gin and tonic (as malarial prophylactic), a couple of cameras and a tripod, and a tattered plastic supermarket bag as protection against the tropical downpours in which this especially profuse pocket of lowland rainforest seems to specialise.

What we have on our side is volume. Usually, if operating without expert help, searching for vertebrates in the wild can be a disappointing game. In Australia, there are slightly more than 8000 species, of which about 230 are of the froggy persuasion. Costa Rica has roughly half that number. But here’s the thing: with some nifty tessellation you could fit 150 Costa Ricas into one Australia, and this makes everything seem a bit less like needle in a haystack, and a bit more like ¿*Dónde está Wally?* With head torches. In the Central American jungle. In thongs.

## The hunt begins

In our experience, the trick to finding frogs is to bribe an amiable herpetologist (with the promise of rivers of beer) to take you to some secret reliable watercourse at night. Here, you will stay very still and listen carefully. The merest movement will stop all sound. Breathing loudly will stop all sound. Swivelling a head torch in the direction of a sound – in search of what scientists call eyeshine and what I call one of scientists’ little pranks on the sighted public – will stop all sound.

But things work a bit differently in this enclave of privately held rainforest just south of Puerto Viejo. Locating standing water requires merely leaning on the balcony of our rented tree house and choosing in which direction to sally forth. We can barely hear each other over the combined noise of howler monkeys and an orchestra of shrieks that sound to antipodean ears like a mix of reptile, insect and amphibian. Our biggest problem is preventing “safety boots” ending the lives of sweetly chirping golden dink frogs as we simply walk along.

They chime on the path, throats puffing as they tilt heads to one side, and watch us with a jaunty air, unconcerned by *thwap* of the thongs, the clink of the gin, or the expletives required by the complexities of unfolding a tripod while balancing gin and cameras while wearing thongs. They’re happy to sit and bask in our ebullient adoration.

What they’re unwilling to do is get off the path: there are just too many other creatures out there for them

to have room to move. For starters, the hourglass tree frogs have colonised the underside of the leaves. There’s a dainty, violet-eyed juvenile eyelash viper watching proceedings from a heart-leafed high point. A cadre of bugs with antennae the length of my foot peer over a palm.

We traipse, we laugh, we snap photographs; we cannot help but see frogs. A smoky jungle frog the size of a pineapple takes stock of us from a leafy rock. Three jaunty masked tree frogs crack wise atop a floating branch. And tantalisingly, beyond our circle of light, are the clicks and crows and purrs and dinks that make up the onomatopoeia of Costa Rica’s amphibian spectrum. It’s orchestral, magical, a froggy feast of the senses. We are in sapo-induced bliss.

## Raining frogs

In a Dreamtime story that explains the give and take of Australia’s lakes and rivers, the great frog Tiddalik woke up one morning with an unquenchable thirst and slurped up all the liquid in the land. A plan was hatched to make him open his mouth and return the wet. Many tried and failed, until the eel Nabunum’s frenetic dancing created such mirth that Tiddalik laughed, and from him was returned all the wet of the country.

In Costa Rica, Tiddalik has grown wings. We hear the cough of his laugh and then it comes; not rain – a word that suggests drops falling towards the earth – but all the liquid in the world, air replaced by water, wet to the power of infinity; the biggest bucket in the universe tipped on our heads as we open the jungle door.

And when it lands, the frogs bubble from the earth. They seem to grow on leaves as we watch; they blossom in ponds like soap bubbles; they appear on the path like a throw of pebbles. This world has more frogs than leaves. More frogs than stars. They are brown, green, white, dancing, singing. The camera, pressed into its supermarket bag, can’t prove it. You can’t see them. You can only trust us: they were *this* big.

## Conquering heroes

Our conquering amphibian-hero stride remains undeterred the next night, when an ever-helpful and sweetly smiling local shows us red-eyed tree frogs mating on the back of a chair in the meeting hut, and an elegant hourglass tree frog inside a table lampshade, projected Batman-style onto the roof.

It is not diminished by the fluorescent green and black poison dart frog that hops across the leafy path as we walk to our car, in the mid-morning sun in direct contravention of the entire frog book of rules. Even the thought that it might actually be a scientific impossibility to not see a frog in this country of faunal excess fails to rain on our emotionally sunny parade.

We are frog hunters; hear us croak: They who are tired of sapos are tired of life.