

**March 17, 2008**

## **Tortuguero**

Meet Nacho. His real name is Ignazio, but everybody calls him Nacho. He was our guide last year to Tortuguero. Nacho is a tall, slim, handsome thirty-year-old with an open, welcoming personality. He loves to talk and teach, and he has a lot of interesting information to share. He introduced us to Tortuguero. That's why we decided to return this year. Another reason is that we had an \$80. credit at CPI, our language school. They have a tour department that arranges quality tours at reasonable prices.

Last year we invited Nacho over to our house for a Superbowl party. Son Rowan and nephew Finn were there as well as our Costa Rican friends Ernesto and lovely wife, Yayi. We hoped to introduce Nacho. Unfortunately he had a last minute tour come up. So, that was the last we heard from him.

When we arranged this year's tour, we didn't get our first choice of dates. At any rate we arrived at the Hampton Airport Inn at 5:45 AM to meet our bus and guide. The bus arrived and who should descend from it but Nacho! Turns out that he was called at the last minute to substitute for a guide who was ill. Coincidence?

Tortuguero is located in the Northeast of Costa Rica, close to Nicaragua, on the Caribbean coast. It's a four-hour trip from San Jose. The last 1 ½ hours are by boat. You spend the first 1 ½ hours crossing the mountains that separate the Central Valley from the Caribbean coast. It always rains on and off in these mountains – a misty rain the Ticos call *pelo de gato*, “cat hair”. It's cloud forest. The vegetation is very different than what you see around San Jose. Take the “poor man's umbrella”, for instance. Each thick stem supports a single leaf that does indeed run to the size of an umbrella.

From the mountains you descend into relatively flat country – volcanoes off in the distance on your right. Nacho told us about a German group he took on a climbing tour: 14 kilometers from the Irazu volcano to the Turrialba volcano. “I lost four kilos!” Nacho doesn't have four kilos to lose. “Yes, I almost disappeared!”

We passed pineapple plantations and cattle ranches. We passed the extensive grounds of the EARTH Institute. It's an agricultural school where the government attempts to develop pest-resistant crops. Then the pavement ended.

“My friends,” announced Nacho, “for the next hour you will be treated to what I call ‘the massage ride’.” And it is that. The gravel road passes though a banana plantation. Some places the road is better cared for than others. Other places sport potholes that could house a Vietnamese family of five. Nonetheless the sights and Nacho's explanation of how the banana plantation works made the time fly by.

## **Stalking the Wild Banana**

We noted that the “hand”, commonly known as a “bunch”, of bananas is covered in a blue plastic bag, “to protect against birds and insects”, explains Nacho. It doesn't always work. The workers who transport the hands on their shoulders have to watch out for tarantulas and snakes. Nacho: “Normally they get bitten on

the neck.” The top of each bag is tied with a thin colored strip of cloth. The color designates the ripeness of the bananas. It makes the harvest rather simple. The supervisor need only indicate which color should be harvested. We noted that the plants were often supported by a thin rope that was tied to an adjacent tree or stump. When the hands are harvested they are attached to a hook on an overhead wire. The workers then push by hand, at a jogging pace, a whole string of the hands on this overhead track to the central processing plant. It can be a fair distance.

We stopped at the plant to watch the process. The bananas are separated according to size. The standard size for the U.S. market is 8”-10”. The Europeans prefer slightly smaller. The undersized bananas go to the local markets. The other day I bought four bananas for less than \$.10. The bunches are then divided into groups of 12 – 14, and thrown into a coldwater bath. At the other end workers inspect and break down the bunches into smaller clusters according to customer requirements, and place them on trays. The rejects are thrown singly into a separate bath. These are sold to other clients – to Gerber for use as baby food, for example. The trays move by roller conveyor to the boxing area. Here they are placed in boxes by layers that are separated by plastic. We saw boxes labeled Del Monte and Roxy. All in all, the process is highly labor-intensive.

Since the plantation is located in the middle of nowhere, the owners must supply all of the workers’ needs. We noted housing that probably varied according to employee rank: small, squat, uniform two-room cement houses placed cheek by jowl for laborers; larger four-room houses on separate lots for supervisors.

Nacho explained that four things were required for a community: school, church, bar and soccer field. Lacking any one of these, it’s not a community. It’s simply a neighborhood. The plantation met the requirements of a community. It even had an airstrip, which was used by the crop dusters. Life on the plantation appeared to be a peaceful existence. Peaceful and dull.

### **Tortuguero Waterways**

Our bus trip ends at the docks. It reminds me of a truck stop. It’s a busy place with tour buses arriving and leaving; hundreds of tourists milling around; roofed, flat-bottomed boats with outboard motors that carry 20-40 passengers. Boy, can they move! We say goodbye to Danny, our bus driver. Nacho introduces us to Johnny, our skipper. And we’re off.

This is the most interesting part of our trip. Almost immediately we spy egrets, herons – both white and blue – vultures and other assorted birds. We move from a wide river to a narrower one. On the seaward side we pass a 10-foot bank with a flat area that stretches back 30 feet to where the forest begins. Nacho explains that the river used to run up to the edge of the forest, until the earthquake of 1991. The quake caused the coral reef and the surrounding land to rise six feet. The exposed coral is now dead.

Oh yes, earthquakes occur frequently in Costa Rica. This land is still in the process of formation. Thus the chain of volcanoes that runs in an almost straight line through the country from South to North.

But I digress. We turn from the narrow river into what appears to be a canal. It really looks like the Amazon. The water is a dark brown -- almost black – due to

the tannin from the trees. When the water is completely calm, it's difficult to distinguish where the jungle ends and the reflection begins. We pass floating trees and logs. Thankfully Johnny knows where the dangers lie. Occasionally, for seemingly no good reason, Johnny slows the boat way down, and we putter through a stretch. Nacho explains that silt has built up in certain areas, making them shallow. The route is dredged on an almost yearly basis. It needs it.

We pass by the village of Tortuguero, a laid-back collection of wooden shacks with a park that sports a group of large concrete statuary – birds and animals – all painted in primary colors.

About a kilometer later we arrive at the Laguna Lodge. The reception building is impressive – an amorphous concrete and glass structure complete with fins, scales and crustacean appurtenances. It could be a design partnership between Gaudi and Jacques Cousteau. The rooms consist of long wooden houses fronted by a porch with rocking chairs – like a camp for adults. The rooms are comfortable, as are the beds. Bathrooms are spacious and tiled. Food is served buffet style – all three meals. The sand beach fronts a wild Atlantic. Guests are cautioned against swimming because of strong riptides. Although we performed a ritual dip of our feet, we never saw anyone swimming.

A sandy path parallels the beach about 30 feet into the jungle. A 30-45 minute walk will bring you to the Tortuguero village. On the way you might see all sorts of exotic flora and fauna: coconut palms and almond trees grow rampant; orchids, bromeliads and epiphytes abound; lizards and an occasional snake; birds of many shapes, colors and songs. On the jungle edge of the beach we saw evidence of the most recent egg-laying season of the leatherback turtles: sandpits eight feet by twelve feet by six feet deep.

### **Turtle Nesting**

The turtles arrive in June-July. These are not your average snapping turtles. The leatherbacks are big! Their shells may grow to eight feet wide by twelve feet long, and may exceed 1200 pounds. They crawl up the beach, dig their pits, then lay about 50-100 eggs. These are the size of ping-pong balls. The mamas then bury the eggs, and do a fine job of sweeping the surface sand with their flippers to camouflage to nest.

The chances of the baby turtles hatching, making it back to the ocean and surviving infancy are pretty slim. Even before they hatch the eggs are often dug up by natives who consider them a delicacy. They eat them raw or sell them. In Tortuguero it's against the law to remove eggs from the nest. In Quanacaste, on the Pacific coast, a recent compromise allows the removal of not more than 10% of a nest's contents. In return the natives have agreed to self-enforcement. They work together to protect the nests. On the way up to Poas Volcano we stopped at a bar/restaurant that offered turtle eggs on the menu. We declined the opportunity.

When the turtles hatch and the babies move to the ocean, they must crawl through a veritable gauntlet of predators. Seagulls, buzzards and other raptors go into a feeding frenzy. Only their sheer numbers allow for the survival of an adequate number.

Resort development has created another obstacle to turtle survival. When they hatch, the baby turtles move in the direction of the sea because it is the direction

of most light. With the advent of new real estate development and the concomitant artificial light, the newborns are confused and end up heading for the parking lot ... and ultimate death.

Fortunately several environmental groups have developed to save the turtles. Anne's former employer, SFS, runs a turtle program here. Coastal villages whose leaders are aware of the tourist dollars that the turtles generate have instituted their own "Save the Turtles" programs.

### **Stalking the Wild Basilisk**

We meet Nacho dockside at 6:00 AM for a wildlife tour of Tortuguero's canals. For three hours we travel the waterways in an open motorboat spying monkeys, sloths, toucans and assorted other bird species. We spot several iguanas. Moving slowly down a narrow canal so overgrown we had to duck the overgrowth, Nacho points to a tree branch and exclaims, "Basilisk!" We move closer and closer; still we don't see anything. Johnny moves the prow right into the underbrush and right under the subject branch. Nacho points to a series of three leaves that seem to be sprouting from the branch. They appear to flutter in the breeze, as leaves are prone to do. Finally, from four feet away, we note that the "leaves" are attached to the body of a two foot long green lizard – the leaves are, in fact, appendages that give the basilisk perfect camouflage. It's so perfect that the basilisk stays stock still for as long as we are there, so sure is he that we can't see him.

The basilisk is also known as the Jesus Christ lizard for his ability to walk on water. He's able to move at a pace of 40 steps a second, which allows him to cross water without sinking.

We return at 9:00 absolutely starving. The hotel provides a substantial buffet breakfast, after which we retire to our cabinas for a respite.

At 11:00 we meet Nacho dockside. We all don rubber boots for a two-hour walking tour. We see more birds, a snake or two, and flora. Nacho knows his stuff, including the various homeopathic remedies to be derived from the plants, trees and flowers we come upon.

At sunset people gather either at the dockside bar or the poolside bar. It depends upon where the calypso band is playing. The band consists of a singer/guitar player, a marimba player and Tommy, the washtub bass player. The washtub bass consists of a walking stick attached to fishing line attached to an upside-down metal washtub. The player adjusts the tension of the line by moving the stick from a more to a less vertical position, thus creating different bass tones that resonate from the washtub as he strums. Except in this case Tommy has substituted a two-foot square box made out of plywood. He explains that he simply cannot find a metal washtub. The plastic washtub has taken over. Tommy reminded us of our favorite washtub bass player, Larry Doggett. Larry, take note. The plywood box works!

Our trip lasted two nights and three days. They do offer a one night/two day package, but, considering that the journey takes the better part of a day, it hardly seems worth the effort.

On our trip back to San Jose we had a chance to talk more with Nacho. He idolizes his father, who runs a very successful veterinarian school, which he

founded. As we spoke his father was in Cuba working with the government to send Cuban students to his school. Nacho's plans for the future include opening a bar in his hometown of Coronado. The bar will specialize in foreign beers. Currently in Costa Rica it is difficult to buy a beer that isn't made by the local brewer, Cerveceria de Costa Rica. CCR produces Imperial, Pilsen, Bavaria, Rock Ice and even Heineken. Heineken doesn't taste like Heineken. Bavaria, sold at a slight premium, is the best of the bunch, to my taste. At any rate, we wish Nacho all the success, and feel confident that he can succeed at anything he puts his mind to.

Another hint. We've become staunch believers in guided tours. Guides may add considerably to the expense of a tour, but, if they're professional – and all the guides we used in our tours of rain and cloud forests here in C.R. have been – they are well worth the expense. They have the eyes to see. They know where to look. They know of what they speak. Without a guide your walk through the park is exactly that – a nice walk in the park. Probably our worst guide experience occurred in Gambia. We picked up this old man who claimed he was a "guide" as we entered an ocean side jungle park that is noted for its monkeys. During our walk we flushed a great white bird. I pointed to it winging away and inquired, "What's that great white bird?" The old man's stentorian response: "That's a great white bird!"

Hasta la proxima,

**Chuck & Anne**