

Another Costa Rican Adventure?

We took off 7:30 AM Monday. It was a beautiful sunny day in San Roque de Barva, where we live. Our plan was to spend the week in Panama, in a group of islands off the Caribbean coast known as Bocas del Toro. We had heard about this site from several sources, including son Rowan. He and nephew Finn traveled there two years ago to get their passports stamped. Under Costa Rican law non-residents must leave the country every 90 days for 72 hours, get their passports stamped before they return. Rowan says it's like a Garden of Eden. We were looking forward to it, had our reservations made at two hotels on two different islands.

When traveling east in Costa Rica you go through several mini-climates. First are the mountains; it's always rainy and misty. Then you reach the other side, where the sun comes out again --- pineapple and cane fields stretch far in either direction. Finally you reach the port of Limon -- veritable mountains of shipping containers, harbor filled with ships both commercial and cruise. Not a pretty sight. Then you turn south toward Panama. We noticed a lot of water standing alongside the road. Passing the Limon airport we had to slow down to drive through water that covered the road. The ocean to our left looked nasty. Not the Caribbean we all know and love in the Bahamas. The waves were big and brown.

We continued down the coast for two hours. As we approached the border we noted the houses were all built on stilts, and for good reason. The houses were surrounded with water. We saw a young man wading through knee-deep water. The people in the houses were sitting on their second-floor porches watching us watching them. The highway became more dicey as we went along. Several places appeared to have been washed away and then filled with gravel as a temporary fix. 5kms/hr was the max speed through these areas. Bear in mind that we are renting a car from a neighbor at a very good rate. It's a Korean-made Chevy sedan, very comfortable for four people. We didn't want to damage it.

Anzie, our navigator, was clicking off the towns between us and the border. As we reached the final bridge before the border, we noticed a large gathering of people and vehicles. We quickly diagnosed the problem: the bridge was out. The cafe con leche-colored torrent was 75 feet wide. A crowd of people was standing on either side, looking at each other and the fast-moving current.

I got out of the car and began questioning people. The news: the bridge had washed out early that morning. The only way across was by makeshift ferry -- one motorized boat and a few dugout canoes. Cost \$4./person Then a taxi ride a couple of kilometers to the border, walk across the border bridge with customs on each side, followed by a \$40 cab ride to Amirante, where the ferry will take you over to the main island. What to do with our car? Check at the Police Station, which is located about 150 yards back from the bridge. We drove there, and I spoke to a policemen. He said that we couldn't park there because it was only for emergency vehicles. Besides, the water was expected to rise and possibly cover the parking lot up to three feet. It was raining already, a misty drizzle

known as *pelo de gato* or *cat hair*. We found out later that a tropical depression had covered the entire East Coast for the last three days.

We decided to get the hell out of there. But, before we left, we tried to contact our hotel via cell phone. We rented a cell phone for use in C.R. Unfortunately, it doesn't work calling Panama. At this point we've been on the road for over five hours. We figured that we'd head back up north to Puerto Viejo to spend the night. 45 minutes later we're at the bridge into P.V. The entrance to the bridge is washed out. Let's head further north to Cauhita. There's a National Park there. We went snorkeling there last year.

We stopped at the **National Park Hotel** at Cauhita. Great Location: right on a surfing beach, next to the Park entrance, close to restaurants. Our third floor room opened out to a wide terrace that overlooked the ocean. We fell asleep with the sound of crashing waves. The price was right: \$50. We dined at the Hotel restaurant/bar. Our plates were good and plentiful.

Had dinner at the **Coral Reef**. The best dish was the cream of seafood soup. Delicious!

I tossed and turned that night with dreams of being stuck here due to flooded roads. My worst nightmare concerned us making it to Panama just before the bridge was washed out. There's no other way to drive back to Costa Rica besides that road. To our knowledge a car ferry doesn't exist. We would have been stuck in Panama until the flooding receded and a temporary bridge was built. Things take a long time to get done down here.

The next day we decided to head home by a different route -- through **Turrialba**. Turrialba is known for its mozzarella-like cheese and dormant volcano. Until 1991 it was an important hub. The train ran from there to Limon carrying the three most important crops to the port: bananas, coffee and pineapple. A huge earthquake in 1991 destroyed the train tracks. They have never been rebuilt. Also, up until that time, the Turrialba road was the only route from San Jose to the East Coast. In 1992 a new, more direct highway was completed. These two events signaled the death knell for Turrialba's importance as a commercial hub.

The road from Siguirres to Turrialba is scenic. It winds over and through the mountains, offering magnificent vistas at every turn. It's a pastoral setting where coffee is king. Turrialba is not worth a stop. We continued right on through, over more mountains, more beautiful vistas until we almost reached Cartago. During the trip we decided to visit the **Val de Orosi**. From an overlook you can see this fertile valley spread out before you, with lakes and streams running through it. Picture perfect! Our goal was to spend the night at the **Kiri Lodge**, which is located next to the entrance to the **Tapanti National Park**. Kiri is well-known for trout-fishing. Tapanti is known for rain, 330 inches per year on average.

It was pouring as we picked our way over a rutted dirt (mud) road for eight kilometers. We couldn't believe that anyone would build a lodge so far out in this wilderness. Still, there were signs, and we followed them.

We finally arrived to find a tourist bus in the parking lot and a group of Germans in the dining room. Since we had no reservations and the Lodge had only six rooms, we thought we might be out of luck, again. Turns out the Germans were there only for a drink. Lorena showed us to our room, which was a duplex cabin. The room featured a bathroom with rock walls. We got ice and glasses from the kitchen, poured ourselves a stiff drink, and retired under the blankets to warm up. It was cold and damp. We had packed clothes for beach weather.

At about 6:00 we took our drinks and playing cards over to the dining room. Anzie was so cold she wore a blanket to the dining room. There we met Dennis, a Costa Rican naturalist and tour guide. He was on holiday, during which he was hiking through the Tapanti looking for birds. He was pleased that he had found eight new birds that day, which bought his life list of sighted birds to an astounding 500!

We invited him to play cards, Kings in the Corner, until dinnertime. We had trout for dinner. What else?

The next morning we awoke to a sparkingly clear, sunny, warm day. We investigated the grounds and discovered a series of ponds, which were filled with rainbow trout. After a delightful breakfast, we went fishing. Augustine presented us with fishing line and bait, which was a putty-like paste of fish food. We attached a clump of bait, and through the line into the pond. In a period of five minutes we had landed nine fish. Does the phrase "like shooting fish in a barrel" ring a familiar note?

Augustine cleaned and bagged our catch. We paid him \$6. a kilo for three kilos, and went on our merry way home, pleased with the fact that we had finally made lemonade out of this lemon of a trip.

Chuck & Anne