

Cruise holidays



◀ Learning the ropes: Rachel settles into her cruise on Sea Cloud Spirit, below



Next it was on to Quepos, to the wildlife-rich Manuel Antonio National Park; then to Playas del Coco, where we joined a bird-watching riverboat tour – during which I came face-to-face with my nemesis the crocodile, though this time from a more comfortable distance. And between ports of call there were days spent “under sails” – out at sea. This was welcome down time, during which we sunbathed on deck, relaxed in the spa, indulged in the endless parade of excellent food and drink on offer and marvelled at the 14-strong deck crew as they scrambled up and down masts. Our peaceful seabound existence was interrupted only by the occasional echo of a voice over the intercom, alerting us that dolphins had been spotted off the aft deck, or that the captain had decided to anchor for a swimming break. There were even talks by visiting experts – Prof Dr Ludwig Ellenberg and lecturer Stephen Weston – who regaled us with stories of the country’s history, nature and culture. I felt simultaneously immersed, yet utterly unencumbered. All too soon, we found ourselves disembarking at Golfito and waving goodbye to the guests who had chosen to continue on through the Panama Canal. I left Costa Rica with the promise that I’d be back. Would it be by car or boat? I’ll let you be the judge of that.

It was when we found ourselves in a stand-off with a stubborn crocodile that we realised Google Maps might have led us astray. Sunset was approaching on our first day in Costa Rica, and we had driven a few hundred yards down a dirt-track road in pursuit of a small port, planning to catch a riverboat to Tortuguero National Park. The road was turning to bog and the sky was darkening, yet the 4ft-long reptile stood firm in the middle of the path, eyeing us with interest. We turned off our hire-car headlights and waited in tense silence, until – after what felt like hours – it turned and began to crawl up the road. Electing not to continue in pursuit, we reversed to the nearest village – surrendering any hope of making it to our beach-front hotel – and spent the night there.

This was just one of the many unforeseen challenges I encountered some years ago while driving with a friend through Costa Rica, a country with a notoriously tricky road system and territorial (if abundant) wildlife. As it turns out, you are advised to hire a 4x4 for a reason – a detail confirmed by our experience in the bog and again, a few days later, as we sat congratulating ourselves on surviving a series of steep, white-knuckle mountain roads. Not permitted to revel in even this smallest of triumphs, we eventually composed ourselves, continued along our route – and immediately ran out of petrol. It wasn’t a bad trip. The people were friendly and our 10-day journey via waterfalls in La Fortuna, volcanoes in Monteverde and national parks in Quepos was filled with beauty and splendour – but it wasn’t easy, and soon a veil

of stress and traffic and bogs and crocodiles had fallen over my recollections of Costa Rica. So in January I decided to take action, returning in the hope of experiencing the country in a more relaxed manner – this time, from the comfort of a sailing ship – and banishing my lingering scepticism once and for all. Things began to look up from the moment I arrived. At Liberia airport, my friend and I side-stepped a scrum of taxi drivers and boarded an air-conditioned van waiting to whisk us to the port of Puntarenas, where we were introduced to our home for the week – the classic windjammer Sea Cloud Spirit, with her 55ft-high masts and billowing sails. Not driving meant that – in addition to avoiding hairpin bends and bogs – there was no need to unpack and repack luggage every day or so. Better still, we

were free to luxuriate in the superior service and comfort of our floating hotel. The biggest advantage, though, was being able to see a great deal of the country in a short space of time – and it was this that had finally convinced me to opt for sails over steering wheel. Driving had limited us to north and central Costa Rica, but this time we would explore the entire western Pacific Coast. And despite being the newest and largest of the Sea Cloud Cruises fleet, our ship was small and nimble enough to enter ports that large ships could not. Any reservations I had about cruising quickly evaporated. The 130-odd passengers were a diverse bunch, including recent retirees, couples celebrating birthdays and honeymoons, university alumni on a reunion, and passionate sailors. As the only thirty-somethings, we were at first regarded with intrigue

(“are you the daughters of billionaires?”) but were welcomed into the fold (the free-flowing wine may have helped). So on we went to rediscover Costa Rica, departing Puntarenas and sailing south to Herradura, where we disembarked for a hike deep into the lush jungle. We crossed hanging bridges, spotted monkeys playing in the aerial roots, and listened to the call of scarlet macaws as our guides talked us through the country’s 12 ecosystems and its rich biodiversity – greater than that of the United States and Canada combined. Far from muddling through with a guide book and Google Maps, this time I was really learning about the country – and all without the looming pressure of making sure I covered a certain distance or remembered to repack my toothbrush. This time around, I could simply relax and take it all in.

Rachel Ingram was a guest of Sea Cloud Cruises (00 494 030 959 250; seacloud.com), which offers an 11-night voyage from San José in Costa Rica to Panama City from £6,073pp, including food and drink but not excursions

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