

# Costa Rica 2000 January

## A dream comes true! How to mark a 'special occasion'? was the question

With my fiftieth birthday approaching, it was time to put in place arrangements for some form of celebration. I'm not the most socially gifted person you'll meet, and the idea of a party didn't really excite me. I considered that my limited funds should be put to a more productive purpose, and be used to purchase something of more lasting value than a thick head and blurred memories. The best things in life are free of course, so what is of real value, and available for purchase? The answer for me was an increased list. My list gives me enormous pleasure, and brings back all sorts of memories as I review it. Long lasting value would be guaranteed with a longer list, with years of pleasure to come as I looked back over it. Added value could be drawn if I could leapfrog Fatbirder, and temporarily drop him to second place in our two-horse race!

### Background

Where could give me the best chance of building a good list? Ever since I was a lad collecting the 'Flags of all Nations' cards from bubble gum packets, Costa Rica has been the one to get. It has always held an allure for me, and since I started birdwatching, it has been my dream destination. When I proposed Costa Rica as the "birthday treat", Isabel didn't demure for a second. Although not a committed birder, my wife has always enjoyed travelling and has developed a taste for warm climes and exotic landscapes. She was more than happy to tolerate my birding for a chance to escape the dreary British winter. Unfortunately, soon after I started making some initial enquiries, Isabel became ill, and the fiftieth birthday passed, not unacknowledged, but not celebrated in the style we had hoped. Isabel recovered her health during 1999, and our plans were taken off of ice and tentative arrangements were turned into firm plans. We finally arrived in Costa Rica on 20 January 2000. The following report is intended mainly as a personal diary, but may be of interest to anyone who is thinking of making a similar trip.

### Planning

Initial enquiries to the Costa Rican Embassy in London produced a wealth of information, including a list of tour operators in Costa Rica, most of who offered birdwatching tours along with other interests. From such a list it's difficult to recognise which operators are specialised bird guides, and which offer birdwatching as a general interest topic. The embassy also sent accommodation lists, as well as brochures giving mouth-watering descriptions of the National Parks, maps and introductory material describing the country.

We also sent for a number of brochures from U.K. based operators who offered birding tours in Costa Rica, and a net search by Fatbirder on my behalf turned up other interesting offers. Eventually we were attracted to Birdwatch Costa Rica, who offered a series of birdwatching tours based on local guides at each site visited. It was through Birdwatch Costa Rica that we booked our tour.

Birdwatch Costa Rica is operated by [Simon Ellis](#), a British guy who moved to Costa Rica some years ago, apparently to set up as a butterfly breeder. He now specialises in arranging birding tours, drawing most of his business from Britain and the States. He can be contacted at: Birdwatch Costa Rica, Apartado 7911. San Jose, Costa Rica. Tel. 506 228 4768 Fax 506 228 1573 He has a [website](#) and email.

I contacted Simon by fax, and explained who we were, and what we wanted from our tour. The reply was swift, with a suggested itinerary enclosed. We changed the original itinerary very little, adding only three days of guided birding where these were not included in the offer. We finally agreed to the following:

### **Itinerary**

20 Jan. Leave Manchester for San Jose via Newark Night in Ambassador Hotel, San Jose. 21 Jan. Trip to Cerro De La Muerte for a guided walk Return to Ambassador Hotel 22 Jan. Transfer to Tiskita Lodge via Golfito Guided birding in afternoon 23 Jan. Guided birding morning and afternoon 24 Jan. Guided birding morning and afternoon 25 Jan. Guided birding morning and afternoon 26 Jan. Transfer to Hotel Montana, Monteverde Unguided birding around Hotel Montana 27 Jan. Full day guided birding with Ian Watson 28 Jan. Unguided birding around Hotel Montana 29 Jan. Transfer to Selva Verde Lodge Unguided birding around Lodge 30 Jan. Full day guided birding with Pacho Madrigal 31 Jan. Full day guided birding with Pacho Madrigal 01 Feb. Trip to De Selva Biological Station for guided walk with Eric (This trip was added on the day) 02 Feb. Transfer to Laguna Lodge, Tortuguero Short guided walk in afternoon 03 Feb. Full day guided birding with Osvaldo Padilla 04 Feb. Full day guided birding with Osvaldo Padilla and Erasmos 05 Feb. Transfer to Ambassador Hotel, San Jose 06 Feb. Depart San Jose for Manchester via Newark.

One appealing aspect of Birdwatch Costa Rica is that they require only a US\$300 per person deposit to confirm the booking. The balance is payable when you arrive. Payments were made by bankers draft.

Simon's service doesn't include flights to Costa Rica. Once there however, he assumes responsibility for all transfers and internal travel arrangements, from picking you up at the airport, through to checking in for the flight home.

### **Other Details**

I was advised by the South American representative of the company for which I work, to try Trailfinders, of 58, Deansgate, Manchester M3 2FF (tel 0161 839 6969) for the best flight deals to San Jose. They quoted £479 + taxes for each of us. We were unable to find a better offer, and eventually confirmed the booking – Manchester to San Jose with Continental. This involved a three hour wait for a connecting flight at Newark (New York).

In preparation for the trip we contacted MASTA (Medical Advisory Services for Travellers Abroad Ltd) at Keppel Street, London WC1E 7HT, and on their advice arranged for vaccinations against Tetanus, Typhoid, Hepatitis A, and Polio, as well as a course of anti-malaria tablets. We also ensured that we had plenty of insect repellent (we found Deet pretty effective).

We purchased a copy of A guide to the birds of Costa Rica by Stiles, Skutch and Gardner (Helm). The book contains much introductory material on the Natural history of Costa Rica, as well as advice to visitors intending to go into the field. There's a lot of book to get through, and my advice is to buy it early. You should also consider a lightweight shoulder bag of some sort to carry the book whilst birding. It's heavy, but will be needed for reference every few minutes. Take a plastic bag to keep the book dry during periods of rain. (We found the book for sale in Newark airport during our wait, at half the price we paid for it here!)

From lists provided by Simon of 'birds seen' at each of our destinations, I spent some time on the home PC making up tick lists for use in the field. Costa Rican birds seem to be characterised by long names with difficult spellings, and I wanted to make my note taking as simple as possible.

## **Day by Day**

### **Day 1 – 20th Jan**

Uneventful flight to San Jose, with a one hour delay at Newark due to poor weather conditions and the need for the plane to be de-iced before commencing the second flight. Met by Simon and his wife Helen at San Jose airport. After introductions, Simon drove as to the Hotel Ambassador, where we were to spend the next two nights. The Hotel Ambassador isn't situated in the liveliest area of San Jose, and trades to some extent on past glories. Whilst perfectly adequate for our needs, the hotel seemed faded, with the rooms in need of some repair and refurbishment. However, we were comfortable, and the restaurant attached to the hotel was fine. The staff were friendly and helpful, which we gradually learned is the norm in Costa Rica.

### **Day 2 – 21st Jan**

Picked up by Simon and Helen from the hotel for our first field trip – to Cerro De La Muerte, at the Eddie Serrano Obando Farm. This site is south east of San Jose, and is a private rainforest reserve at an altitude of some 8700 feet. We were told that the area was once farmed (for blackberries), but substantial areas of oak forest remain around a pastoral landscape of fields and trout ponds.

Landslides delayed the drive up to the site – a common occurrence during and after prolonged wet weather. We were stopped in a tailback for over an hour, which was frustrating in itself, but made even more frustrating by Simon's reluctance to help identify the birds which we were seeing from the car. I'm still not sure whether Simon had any personal interest in birds. The potential for an introductory session with roadside birds was squandered while I fumbled through the field guide alone.

When we finally arrived at Cerro De La Meurte, we were introduced to our guide, Carlos, over coffee. The weather was fine as we set off for our hike, but wet underfoot – we found walking boots to be ideal footwear throughout most of our trip. Later a misty rain developed. It wasn't cold, but was certainly more comfortable with a jacket than without.

The birds were spectacular. Our first tick was Rufous-collared sparrow, but the real reason for this trip was Resplendent Quetzal. We saw eight birds, males and females,

within a few hundred yards of setting out. Because the guides are continually leading groups or individuals around the area, and therefore tracking the birds, RQ is almost guaranteed here.

Isabel was slightly effected by the high altitude, with a couple of mild giddy spells, but having spent the night in San Jose at 4000 feet, we were pretty much acclimatised. This was our only highland site of the tour, and proved very enjoyable. Recommended.

### **Day 3 – 22nd Jan**

Picked up from the Hotel Ambassador by Simon again, and taken to San Jose for our transfer to Tiskita Lodge. The journey was to involve two flights, first to Golfito by an internal Sansa flight (a fourteen seat Cessna), and then onto Tiskita by a four-seater. There is a 25 pound (Not Kilo)/head luggage restriction on these flights, so we had selected gear for the next three days, and left the balance of our luggage with Simon. As far as I'm concerned, flying is for the birds, and I wasn't relishing this trip – in fact I was terrified.

On the first flight we were accompanied by a group of divers, off to explore the waters of the Golfo Dulce. They, and Isabel, seemed quite unconcerned as we slipped and skidded through the sky trying to clear the mountains which surround San Jose. They had no concept of the dire peril which I could plainly see. We only made it because I clung to the seat so hard and willed the plane over the peaks! The flight quietened as we cleared the Valle Central, but we were soon in trouble again. The plane began to lose height over the forest, and was obviously struggling. We began passing around mountain peaks rather than over them, and at one point we had forested mountain slopes within feet of both wing tips. Suddenly, a grass strip surrounded by rainforest appeared from nowhere, and the plane miraculously put down safely. 45 mins of hell.

Compared to the comfortable warmth of San Jose, Golfito was hot. The airstrip was also alive with birds – cattle egrets on the grass, vultures soaring over the forest, seedeaters and flycatchers everywhere, and the air full of excitingly different calls. We had little chance to enjoy this however as our next flight was waiting for us. The pilot was happy to delay while I grabbed a couple of cigarettes to steady my nerves before steeling myself for the next flight

Tiskita is a ten minute flight south of Golfito, and the flight is over scenery so spectacularly beautiful that fear never had a chance to establish itself. We flew out of Golfito, and followed the coast. The tropical forest extended all the way down from the background mountains to empty beaches. The coastline is a migration route for Brown Pelicans, and we saw dozens of these moving south in their typical long, rippling lines. Frigate birds were active, and the whole scene was straight out of a brochure. Tiskita is served by its own grass airstrip, and it was here we landed to be met by Peter Aspinall, the owner of Tiskita.

### **Tiskita Lodge**

#### **Day 3-7 – 22nd to 26th Jan**

Tiskita is situated on the coast just at the mouth of the Golfo Dulce, where Costa Rica includes a narrow strip of Pacific coast, close to the Panamanian border. The estate is Pacific lowland forest, and includes both primary and secondary growth forest. It was originally developed as a tropical fruit growing area, and still boasts 112 different tropical fruits, but re-forestation has been carried out over much of the cleared land. (Peter has removed all of his humming bird feeders because he found that his trees weren't being pollinated!) Its 550 acres therefore include primary and secondary forest, orchards, and coastline. A small river runs through the property, with pools ideal for bathing and a picturesque waterfall. A small swimming pool has been installed near the lodge.

The domestic arrangements are simple. A central lodge serves as the communal dining area, and has a bar (help yourself, and simply record what you take), and a never ending supply of complimentary coffee and refrigerated fruit juices. Food is taken buffet style, and consisted of mostly local produce – it was delicious. This lodge is a covered but open building of timber (no smoking!) and is the social hub I imagine. The cabins are dotted around the lodge, and ours was approx. a 300 – 400 yard walk from the lodge, one of the closest. Gardened footpaths through the forest connect the cabins and lodge. Torches are available from the lodge to help you avoid snakes on the track as you walk back to your cabin after dinner. The cabins are simple – a bed, shelves and hanging rails, toilet, and shower (no hot water). Windows are simply mesh to reduce ingress of insects. A large covered veranda has a table, chairs and hammocks. There are no locks on the rooms.

If the above description suggests that Tiskita is anything other than exquisite, then it has failed.

When Isabel and I arrived at Tiskita, the only other guests were a party of two couples from the USA. These left the next morning, which left us as the only guests for the next two days. We shared the lodge with Peter, his mother, and his 10year old daughter Biriana (never play poker with this girl unless you're playing for matchsticks!). Unfortunately, because the lodge was quiet, the resident bird guide had been given the week off, which was disappointing. However, Peter, though not a birder, stepped into the breach, and his amazing depth of knowledge about all aspects of the natural history of the area meant that we had a fascinating stay here. He was able to help identify most of the birds we saw. The shorter list here is both a reflection of us becoming familiar with the species we were seeing, and the fact that we were overawed by the whole ambience of the place.

I cannot recommend Tiskita highly enough – it was perfect. The birding highlights were probably King Vulture seen soaring with Black and Turkey Vultures over the ridge left of the lodge, White Hawk, which sat on a gate post as we walked through the gate, and Tanagers. The art of tropical birding is to find a tree with ripe fruit and wait; there was just such a tree opposite the lodge. We also saw three species of monkey, three-toed sloths and tree iguanas displaying right outside our cabin. Peter has plans to re-introduce Scarlet macaw to the area, and the first birds, taken from birds impounded from poachers, were due to be released the week after we left.

## **Day 7**

We left Tiskita early morning, and once again I had to gather my courage. Isabel sat in the co-pilots seat taking photographs, as I sweated it out in the back for the one hour flight back to San Jose, direct this time. We were met again by Simon and Helen, who had bought the balance of our luggage, and were driven to our next site – the Hotel Montana at Monteverde. The approach to Monteverde from the Pan-American highway near Punta Arenas is an unmade road which makes for an exciting drive. The excitement palls after the first hour however, and we were glad to arrive at Monteverde. I'm nearly convinced I saw Tiny Hawk along this road!

### **Monteverde**

Of all the places we stayed during our tour, the Hotel Montana was the least distinctive. The place was fine and comfortable, but apart from the surrounding landscapes, could have been anywhere. The set up was again small rooms situated remotely from a central dining area and bar.

There is a Jacuzzi built onto a hillside balcony, available for the use of guests, and which can be booked for an hour at reception. Book between six and seven and enjoy the superb views as the sun sets across the Golfo De Nicoya.

The hotel has a small area of secondary forest that guests may walk through, and is close to a number of tourist attractions such as treetop walkways and arial rides. The area seems to be developing its tourist industry, but recognises the importance of retaining its natural beauty and wildlife in attracting visitors in the first place. Monteverde is situated in the cloudforest, and apparently straddles the line between 'Pacific slope and 'Caribbean slope'. It was a little chilly early morning, and being cloudforest, rain and mist are the order of the day. The town of Santa Elena and the main strip of hotels lay slightly lower, and enjoyed warmer and dryer weather while we were there.

### **Day 8 – 27th Jan**

Full day guided birding with Ian Watson. Ian had introduced himself to us the previous evening, and we had drawn up a rough schedule for the day. Early morning around the hotel, and then on to a couple of fruiting trees nearby. From there we went to Monteverde reserve via the hummingbird gallery – a series of feeders outside of a souvenir shop, and then across to the Santa Elena reserve.

We had a great day with Ian. The hotel grounds were extremely busy in the early morning with Tanagers, Honeycreepers and Woodpeckers as the main stars. The hummingbird gallery was an ideal place to try and get to grips with hummingbird identification. The birds literally fly around your head, and after half an hour you can start separating out some of the species unaided. Watch for the Violet Sabrewing – a real stunner.

At the Monteverde reserve entrance we stopped for a coffee. A number of birding parties were sitting around and the guides were chatting to each other. The guides were interrupted by someone calling Yellowish Flycatcher from behind the restaurant. Ian called us over, and the next half hour was magical. With five or six bird guides around us, birds were being found thick and fast. Tropical parula, Worm-eating

warbler, Three-striped Warbler, Smokey-brown Woodpecker and Ocraceous Wren, as well as Woodcreepers, Tanagers and a party of three Grey Foxes.

The weather began to close in a bit as we moved out of Monteverde and on to the Santa Elena reserve, and although the birding was still good, views were brief and often murky. We built a list of 85 species on the 27th, probably our highest single day total of the tour. Ian was unavailable for the next day, but gave us advice on how to find Long-tailed Mannikin, Grey-necked Woodrail and Golden-olive woodpecker amongst others. All of these paid off on the next day.

### **Day 9 – 28th Jan**

We spent the 28th fairly gently. Following Ian's advice we visited the 'Ecological Farm' near the hotel, took a treetop cable car ride for an hour, and spent a deal of time watching leaf-cutter ants in the forest next to the hotel. Isabel also found the remains of a Blue-crowned Motmot from which we were able to retrieve the tail rectrices and we now have these mounted at home.

### **Day 10 – 29th Jan**

The transfer from Monteverde to Selva Verde was by a 4x4 supplied by the hotel, and driven by Oscar Solano. Oscar spoke little English, and since neither Isabel nor I speak any Spanish, communication was interesting. Oscar's route took us north from Monteverde along unmade roads – an hour and a half without getting out of second gear! We joined the highway east of Lake Arenal, and drove along the north shore of the lake hoping for a sight of Mount Arenal, an active volcano. Unfortunately the cloud cover was well down, and we never saw the mountain top. With hindsight, I wish we'd taken the time to go up to Mount Arenal for a look. Oscar proved to be an excellent driver, and was happy to stop whenever we saw something interesting. He took great delight in showing us the different species of orchid growing alongside the road, and when he realised we were birdwatching, he called out whenever he spotted something. He also knew where to stop in order to attract large parties of Coati from the forest with biscuits. We arrived at Selva Verde some four hours after setting off.

### **Selva Verde**

This lodge is situated between La Virgen and Puerto Viejo, and is laid out in a bend of the Rio Sarapiquí. The lodge is set in spacious gardened grounds with surrounding secondary forest. A primary Caribbean lowland forest lies across the river, and is accessed from the lodge grounds by a suspension bridge. Rooms are remote from reception and from the dining hall, and are set up in blocks of four. Some of these are built on stilts two or three metres above the ground, and these areas are connected by covered, elevated walkways. Imagine a polished wooden corridor, open to gardens on both sides, with manikins and trogons, euphonias and tanagers all going about their business within a couple of yards, and you'll get the idea. Our first excitement here was provided by a Cayman, lazily drifting through the creek behind reception after we had checked in. Dining is a relaxed buffet for all meals, taken in a spacious hall with views across the river. (No smoking!).

### **Day 11 – 30th Jan**

Although complimentary guiding is included in the package, this consists only of an early morning walk around the grounds. Guides are available for hire, but we had taken

the precaution of booking Pacho Madrigal for a couple of days. Pacho is local to the area, and is very knowledgeable, not just about birds, but the complete natural history of the area, and proved to be an excellent guide.

From the reception area he showed us a colony of Montezuma Oropendola nesting in a bare tree across the road, with Giant Cowbirds waiting for their opportunity to sneak into the nests. (Look for a barrel which has been mounted in the tree in an attempt to encourage Great Green Macaws to nest). Next was a flock of Grey-headed Chachalaca working through the tree tops along the roadside, then a stunning male Violaceous Trogon. So it went on all morning, until we stopped for lunch. Pacho amazed us when he called a Cayman out of the pond above the butterfly garden, simply by calling it by name (Sultan) – a trick he claims to have learned from his father.

A siesta is recommended at midday when things tend to be quieter anyway, but we went out again in the afternoon, looking for Boat-billed Heron. The normal haunt of these birds (known as the Boat-billed heron Pond !) seems to have been completely taken over by egrets, and Boat-bills expelled. They are still seen at Selva Verde, but much less frequently than they used to be. We found none. From this pond we returned to the lodge via the primary forest, and as we were about to cross the suspension bridge, Pacho suddenly froze. Beckoning us forward, he showed us our first ever Sunbittern. It's impossible to describe how we felt. Apart from Resplendent Quetzal, this was the bird I most wanted to see. Having seen it, I can't imagine how I ever made RQ my top target. The books don't do this bird justice – it was so beautiful, and so completely different from any other bird I've seen. The bird was working it's way downstream along a small side channel of the river, picking amongst the large pebbles for food. As we watched the bird, a second came into view, and Pacho assured us we were watching a pair, probably getting ready to breed. We watched the birds for 25mins before they walked out of sight. If we'd seen nothing else this day, I'd have still been content.

Celebrating with a Whisky that evening, we were recommended by other guests to be sure and visit La Selva, a biological research station a short taxi ride up the road towards Puerto Viejo. We suggested this to Pacho who agreed that the birding would be good, and arranged a taxi for the morning.

### **Day 12 – 31st Jan**

Pacho had arranged for us to get an early breakfast before meeting the taxi and setting off for La Selva at first light. It costs US\$20 per head to get into La Selva, but for this price you get a guide. Pacho suggested that we had no need to pay for him and us to enter the station, but that we should bird along the approach road for the couple of hours we had until the taxi returned. We took his advice, and had a superb morning, with highlights being Long-tailed Tyrant, Chestnut-coloured Woodpecker, and remarkably, a hummingbird (White-necked Jacobin) hovering in the midst of a swarm of midge like insects, feeding freely. (And I'd assumed that all hummingbirds were nectar feeders!).

We returned to the lodge late morning, and continued birding around the local area. Pacho showed his tenacity in his search for Boat-billed Heron again (no joy) and Melodious Blackbird. We returned to the lodge exhausted in the evening having added



a clutch of new ticks as well as a Jesus Christ Lizard running across the Boat-billed heron pond! We stayed with Pacho until dusk when we got Short-tailed Nighthawk from the good old suspension bridge.

After dinner, we heard from an American family that they had also been up to La Selva that day, and had found an Umbrella Bird. Our next day took little planning from then on. I asked reception to book us a taxi for 06:00.

### **Day 13 – 1st Feb**

By 06:15 no taxi had arrived. The reception staff were apologetic, but explained that my late request, and the early morning pressure on taxis, meant that they were unable to honour the booking. However, they were determined that our trip shouldn't be spoiled, and we were promptly guided out to a car which would take us to La Selva. The driver spoke no English, and we no Spanish, but we eventually established that he was a gardener at the lodge who was taking us in his own car! We overshot slightly so that he could show us his home town of Puerto Viejo! I can't overstate the friendliness and helpfulness of all the Costa Ricans that we had any contact with.

We arrived at La Selva just as the last guide had left, but the girl at the admission booth legged it after him, and got him to wait. Eric was the guide's name, and this was the very man who had found the Umbrella bird yesterday. La Selva is a research establishment, which seems to be funded largely by universities in the States.

It is huge (3,739 acres, but with an associated National Park of 121,000 acres), and extends over a wide altitude range and hence a wide range of habitats. They have a bird list of 420 species as well as 120 species of mammals, 500 butterflies and 55 snakes. Tours are restricted to guided tours in the morning only, and is well worth a side trip if visiting Selva Verde .

Eric gave us the choice of trying for the Umbrella bird, or looking for a Crested Owl which another guide had located the previous day – we couldn't do both in the time. We elected to go for Umbrella bird, but were doomed to fail here. However, the tour was extraordinary. We watched a film crew filming a column (swathe?) of Army ants, and were also introduced to Bullet ants – about an inch long with a bite and a sting that can lay a man low for two or three days. Eric demonstrated once again just how knowledgeable these guides are, and kept us as fascinated all morning. Although we didn't find Umbrella bird, Eric was able to show us Great Tinamou, Crested Guan, Rufous and Broad-billed Motmot, and both Tityras amongst others. Our gardener turned up to take us back to the lodge, and during the afternoon we finally made into the river for a swim.

### **Day 14 – 2nd Feb**

An early start to make our transfer from Selva Verde to Tortuguero. Once again Simon's arrangements went as smoothly as silk. A taxi to Puerto Viejo, where a boat was waiting to take us by river to Laguna Lodge. The Rio Sarapiquí joins the Rio Colorado, which then flows across the border into Nicaragua for a while before turning south again and feeding the canal network behind the Caribbean coastline at Tortuguero.

Our boat captain was Erasmo who we'd come to know well during the next couple of days. With little spoken language compatibility, we had to make do with sign language again, but we were getting proficient by now! Erasmo thought we had no chance of Muscovy Duck, but that Sungrebe, although unlikely, was possible. In any event, he'd keep an eye open! The trip took about four hours. Normal border controls apply when passing into Nicaragua, (US\$5 tax), but leaving and re-entering Costa Rica seems pretty relaxed. Erasmo pointed out Woodstork early into the trip, and also a couple of large crocodiles which we able to approach fairly closely. The real star of the trip though, was a pair of Great Green Macaws flying south over the Rio Colorado.

We were approached by a dug-out canoe on the Colorado, manned by an old man and a young lad with what seemed to be a fighting cock. A discussion with Erasmo followed, and then Erasmo asked us what we thought! I was pretty sure that I didn't want to buy a fighting cock, which seemed to disappoint both Erasmo and the young lad. Further discussion took place, and it gradually became clear that rather than selling the bird, the young lad was hitching a lift down the river! Since the boat was big enough for at least twenty people, and we had it to ourselves, we were able to oblige.

After dropping off the young lad, and starting to move through the canals, Erasmo took us into a couple of backwaters hoping for a Sungrebe, but to no avail. The trip through the canals was incredible, with tropical rainforest to the water's edge, full of sound and promise. This transfer really added another dimension to our trip, and was a perfect introduction to Tortuguero.. We arrived at Laguna Lodge around lunch time to be greeted by a fruit cocktail – great!

### **Laguna Lodge**

Laguna Lodge is situated on a thin strip of land laying between the Caribbean coastline and a huge freshwater tidal lagoon, immediately north of the Tortuguero National Park. This area of coastal rainforest is patterned by a series of canals, a legacy from the less enlightened times of wholesale logging. Access to the park costs US\$6 / day, or \$10 for a three day pass. It can only really be explored by boat, and Laguna Lodge is one of a series of Lodges established around the northern lagoon, and offering trips into the park. Laguna Lodge has the advantage of being directly on the beach where Atlantic Green turtles come ashore for egg laying during the simmer (June to September). The lodge consists of a central dining hall and bar, around which are small terraces of rooms. There is also a swimming pool and second bar adjacent to the beach. Tortuguero village is a half mile walk south along the beach.

We hadn't pre-booked any guiding at Laguna, since guided birding was offered by the lodge as part of the package. I spoke to Alex, the resident manager, and explained that we were looking for more than casual birdwatching, and asked what arrangements could be made. The birdguide was out with a party of tourists, and Alex promised to introduce us when he returned. An hour or so later we met Osvaldo Padilla to discuss plans. Osvaldo proved to be an extraordinary guide. Like all the guides we met, Osvaldo was familiar with all aspects of the area's natural history, but his first love was birds, and he was genuinely delighted to have birders to take out. He went through our list to date species by species, commenting on what we'd seen, and suggesting which species he could show us. He asked us for our priorities, and gradually developed a plan for the next couple of days.

We were extremely fortunate at Laguna Lodge. The lodge was particularly quiet during the period of our stay, and the few other guests were content to lay around the pool. Not only was Osvaldo available for as long as we wanted, we also had a boat and driver (Erasmus again) at our disposal. Osvaldo and Erasmus like to operate as a team, having a well practised understanding which demonstrated itself time and again in the field. Osvaldo was determined that we'd see those species we had listed as priorities – Sungrebe, Boat-billed Heron and Agami Heron., and we arranged to set out next morning at first light. In the meantime Osvaldo walked us through the adjacent woodland for Prothonotary warbler and Common black-hawk.

### **Day 15 – 3rd Feb**

Cruising along the canals of Tortuguero National Park is almost impossible to describe. We've never seen anything that we could liken it to. It's mysterious, eerie, exhilarating and breathtakingly beautiful, giving a strange feeling of relaxed excitement. Once amongst the canals, there is an immediate impression of utter silence, but gradually this gives way to strange and evocative sounds from the jungle, in particular the Howler monkeys.

There's plenty of movement with Little Blue herons and Snowy egrets on every vantage point, and kingfishers continually darting along the waterways. Each twist and turn offers the chance of spectacular new birds.

The boat was equipped with a powerful outboard engine which allowed fast travel along the lagoon, but also a silent electrically driven prop for negotiating the canals. With almost no draft, the boat was capable of sliding over floating logs, and approaching the forest edge in the most unlikely places. On a few occasions we were laying flat across the bows as Erasmus took the craft under overhanging branches. One of our first sightings was a pair of Great Curassow, which Erasmus spotted through dense cover. He took the boat in close and quiet, and we were treated to excellent views of a pair of birds feeding in a small clear area. The male was aware of us, but didn't seem unduly disturbed. The pair continued feeding for about 15 minutes until we backed out. A few minutes later Osvaldo found a Boat-billed heron, and again this allowed a close approach. Green and Green-and-rufous kingfishers were fairly easily seen, but Sungrebe continued to elude us. Osvaldo twice found Agami heron, one juvenile and one full adult. This is another stunning bird, which really is worth the effort of finding. The book illustration doesn't even come close! Finally, Osvaldo called Sungrebe, not skulking under the foliage at all, but boldly swimming mid-stream.

The day was now perfect, but Osvaldo wasn't finished. He had promised us White-necked Puffbird, and was determined to find it. After lunch, he directed Erasmus to another canal, and soon made his promise good. He also threw in a Rufescent Tiger-heron as a bonus! We then left the National Park and diverted to Osvaldo's parents farm where he knew that a pair of Bat falcons were on territory. A most satisfying day! Our only disappointment was that Osvaldo had to leave next day and return to San Jose.

### **Day 16 – 4th Feb**

In spite of being called home, Osvaldo insisted that we had time this morning to go out before he was due to leave. We had a few species we still needed, including Pygmy

Kingfisher, Limpkin and Green Ibis. We were in the Park again at first light, and quickly found more Sungrebe – the first is always the hardest. Osvaldo's site for Green Ibis paid off handsomely, with a group of three and then a further two birds found in the treetops along the lagoon. Then it was off to find Limpkin and Semi-plumbeous hawk before returning to the lodge for breakfast. The weather was deteriorating, with steady rain setting in, but twenty years in the English lake district toughens a body up! Osvaldo left, having given Erasmo directions on where to take us for Pygmy kingfisher.

We took a trip to Tortuguero village during the morning, but after lunch set off back to the park. We cruised the canals for a couple of hours, finding all the kingfishers except pygmy. As the light began to fail we decided to return to the lodge. We were exhausted but content, and sat back to enjoy the ride. A sudden noise caused us to look up, just in time to see a huge bird disappear over the tree tops. Erasmo yelled, but the bird was gone. Taking the field guide, Erasmo showed us Muscovy duck – a bird we hadn't really expected to see, although they are on the Tortuguero list. I sat down again and wrestled with my conscience – could I count this (would Fatbirder discount it as he had my Tring sighting of the same species?) As I pondered this, a small kingfisher flashed past the boat and went into cover just ahead of us. Erasmo had seen it as well, and slowed the boat to a crawl. As we approached, the bird kept moving just ahead of us. We didn't get good views, but it was undoubtedly a pygmy kingfisher, and it was joined by a second before we lost sight of them. (The agony over Muscovy duck was put to rest next day when we saw at least eight!).

### **Day 17 – 5th Feb**

We left Laguna Lodge early morning, and transferred to Freeman by boat (another good trip, with Muscovy duck, Roseate spoonbill, Royal tern, Tri-coloured heron, etc) and from Freeman to San Jose by a bus laid on by the lodge. The weather was wet during the bus trip, and we suffered some delays on the road – accidents and landslides, but were back in the Ambassador Hotel by early afternoon.

### **Day 18 – 6th Feb**

Simon picked us up from the Hotel, and saw us through to baggage check in at the airport. An uneventful flight home via Newark (though good views of New York at night).

### **Advice**

We were advised to take US\$ for pocket money, in small denomination bills. These proved acceptable wherever we needed to spend cash, or for tipping. Change was normally given in the Costa Rican currency (Colones – approx. 500 to the £).

Isabel and I both use Minolta 10×50 binoculars, and these are not state of the art. We both encountered misting on a couple of occasions after rain, but this quickly cleared when the sun broke through. I also took my scope/tripod, but frankly, there was so little chance to use it that it was almost surplus luggage.

During our visit, dawn was at about 04:30, and it was dark by 18:00. We found ourselves exhausted most evenings, and were seldom out of bed by 20:30. This arrangement was perfect for birding, and easy to implement since no night life as such was available (though we didn't try to find it).

The electricity supply failed once during our visit (at Laguna Lodge). Sods law dictates that this was the only night when we didn't have candles available in the room. It was also the night that I was woken by Isabel to be informed that the room was full of "nibbling creatures" and demanding to know what I intended to do about it! With no power left in our torch, I was reduced to stumbling around the room trying to find matches. Find them I did, but the heads crumbled as I tried to strike them – the high humidity had made keeping matches dry difficult throughout the trip. Eventually I went back to sleep while Isabel cocooned herself in the available bedclothes until daybreak. Have a spare set of batteries for a torch, and smokers, take a lighter.

The arrangements made by Simon Ellis on our behalf were superb. We left all arrangements to Simon, planning the itinerary, booking the accommodation, and arranging the transfers. Everything went exactly as planned, and the way Simon used the transfers to enhance the trip was an unexpected bonus. Simon also made the arrangements with Ian Watson and Pacho Madrigal. Both these guides were excellent.

It was luck that granted us a couple of days with Osvaldo Padilla. I thoroughly recommend Osvaldo, and he can be contacted through Laguna Lodge. I also have an E-mail address where he can be contacted if required.

I'll be happy to discuss any aspect of the trip, or to offer advice based on our experience.

[Andrew Senior](#) Burneside, Cumbria

### **Species Seen**

GREAT TINAMOU  
PIED BILLED GREBE  
BROWN BOOBY  
OLIVACEOUS (NEOTROPIC) CORMORANT  
ANHINGA  
BROWN PELICAN  
MAGNIFICENT FRIGATEBIRD  
TRICOLOURED HERON  
LITTLE BLUE HERON  
SNOWY EGRET  
GREAT BLUE HERON  
GREAT WHITE EGRET  
CATTLE EGRET  
GREEN HERON  
AGAMI HERON  
YELLOW-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON  
BOAT-BILLED HERON  
BARE-THROATED TIGER-HERON

FASCIATED TIGER-HERON  
RUFESCENT TIGER-HERON  
WOOD STORK  
GREEN IBIS  
ROSEATE SPOONBILL  
MUSCOVY DUCK  
AMERICAN BLACK VULTURE  
TURKEY VULTURE  
KING VULTURE  
GREY-HEADED KITE  
AMERICAN SWALLOW TAILED KITE  
DOUBLE-TOOTHED KITE  
SEMIPLUMBEOUS HAWK  
WHITE HAWK  
COMMON BLACK-HAWK  
GREY HAWK  
ROADSIDE HAWK  
BROAD-WINGED HAWK  
WHITE-TAILED HAWK  
ZONE-TAILED HAWK  
OSPREY  
YELLOW-HEADED CARACARA  
LAUGHING FALCON  
COLLARED FOREST-FALCON  
BAT FALCON  
GREY-HEADED CHACHALACA  
CRESTED GUAN  
BLACK GUAN  
GREAT CURASSOW  
WHITE-THROATED CRAKE  
GREY-NECKED WOOD-RAIL  
PURPLE GALLINULE  
SUNGREBE  
SUNBITTERN  
LIMKIN  
NORTHERN JACANA  
BLACK-NECKED STILT  
SEMI-PALMATED PLOVER  
COLLARED PLOVER  
WHIMBREL  
GREATER YELLOWLEGS  
LESSER YELLOWLEGS  
SPOTTED SANDPIPER  
WILLET  
SANDERLING  
ROYAL TERN  
FERAL PIGEON  
PALE-VENTED PIGEON  
RED-BILLED PIGEON  
SHORT-BILLED PIGEON

WHITE-WINGED DOVE  
RUDDY GROUND-DOVE  
WHITE-TIPPED DOVE  
GREY-CHESTED DOVE  
RUDDY QUAIL-DOVE  
GREAT GREEN MACAW  
CRIMSON-FRONTED PARAKEET  
OLIVE-THROATED PARAKEET  
ORANGE-CHINNED PARAKEET  
BROWN-HOODED PARROT  
WHITE-CROWNED PARROT  
WHITE-FRONTED PARROT  
RED-LORED PARROT  
MEALY PARROT  
SQUIRREL CUCKOO  
SMOOTH-BILLED ANI  
GROOVE-BILLED ANI  
MOTTLED OWL  
SHORT-TAILED NIGHTHAWK  
PAURAQUE  
GREY-RUMPED SWIFT  
BRONZY HERMIT  
GREEN HERMIT  
LONG-TAILED HERMIT  
LITTLE HERMIT  
VIOLET SABREWING  
WHITE-NECKED JACOBIN  
GREEN VIOLET-EAR  
GREEN-BREASTED MANGO  
FIERY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD  
BLUE-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD  
STEELY-VENTED HUMMINGBIRD  
RUFIOUS-TAILED HUMMINGBIRD  
STRIPE-TAILED HUMMINGBIRD  
COPPERY-HEADED HUMMINGBIRD  
RED-FOOTED PLUMELETEER  
PURPLE-THROATED MOUNTAIN-GEM  
GREEN-CROWNED BRILLIANT  
PURPLE-CROWNED FAIRY  
MAGENTA-THROATED WOODSTAR  
VOLCANO HUMMINGBIRD  
RESPLENDENT QUETZAL  
SLATY-TAILED TROGON  
BLACK-THROATED TROGON  
VIOLACEOUS TROGON  
BELTED KINGFISHER  
RINGED KINGFISHER  
AMAZON KINGFISHER  
GREEN KINGFISHER  
GREEN-AND-RUFIOUS KINGFISHER

AMERICAN PYGMY KINGFISHER  
BROAD-BILLED MOTMOT  
RUFIOUS MOTMOT  
BLUE-CROWNED MOTMOT  
RUFIOUS-TAILED JACAMAR  
WHITE-NECKED PUFFBIRD  
EMERALD TOUCANET  
COLLARED ARACARI  
FIERY-BILLED ARACARI  
KEEL-BILLED TOUCAN  
CHESTNUT-MANDIBLED TOUCAN  
BLACK-CHEEKED WOODPECKER  
GOLDEN-NAPED WOODPECKER  
RED-CROWNED WOODPECKER  
HOFFMANN'S WOODPECKER  
HAIRY WOODPECKER  
SMOKY-BROWN WOODPECKER  
GOLDEN-OLIVE WOODPECKER  
CHESTNUT-COLOURED WOODPECKER  
LINEATED WOODPECKER  
PALE-BILLED WOODPECKER  
WEDGE-BILLED WOODCREEPER  
BARRED WOODCREEPER  
BLACK-BANDED WOODCREEPER  
BUFF-THROATED WOODCREEPER  
BLACK-STRIPED WOODCREEPER  
STREAK-HEADED WOODCREEPER  
RED-FACED SPINETAIL  
SPOTTED BARBTAIL  
RUDDY TREERUNNER  
BUFFY TUFTEDCHEEK  
LINEATED FOLIAGE-GLEANER  
STREAK-BREASTED TREEHUNTER  
BUFF-THROATED FOLIAGE-GLEANER  
PLAIN XENOPS  
GREAT ANTSHRIKE  
BARRED ANTSHRIKE  
BLACK-HOODED ANTSHRIKE  
SLATY ANTWREN  
DOT-WINGED ANTWREN  
CHESTNUT-BACKED ANTBIRD  
SILVERY-FRONTED TAPACULO  
RUFIOUS PIHA  
SNOWY COTINGA  
PUROLE-THROATED FRUITCROW  
RED-CAPPED MANAKIN  
BLUE-CROWNED MANAKIN  
LONG-TAILED MANAKIN  
WHITE-RUFFED MANAKIN  
WHITE-COLLARED MANAKIN



COMMON TODY-FLYCATCHER  
BLACK-HEADED TODY-FLYCATCHER  
PALTRY TYRANNULET  
YELLOW TYRANNULET  
YELLOW-BELLIED ELAENIA  
LESSER ELAENIA  
MOUNTAIN ELAENIA  
TORRENT TYRANNULET  
BLACK-CAPPED PYGMY-TYRANT  
SULPHUR-RUMPED FLYCATCHER  
TROPICAL PEWEE  
YELLOWISH FLYCATCHER  
BLACK-CAPPED FLYCATCHER  
LONG-TAILED TYRANT  
BRIGHT-RUMPED ATTLA  
RUFIOUS MOURNER  
DUSKY-CAPPED FLYCATCHER  
GREAT CRESTED FLYCATCHER  
TROPICAL KINGBIRD  
WESTERN KINGBIRD  
BOAT-BILLED FLYCATCHER  
WHITE-RINGED FLYCATCHER  
STREAKED FLYCATCHER  
SOCIAL FLYCATCHER  
GREY-CAPPED FLYCATCHER  
GREAT KISKADEE  
BARRED BECARD  
CINNAMON BECARD  
MASKED TITYRA  
BLACK-CROWNED TITYRA  
MANGROVE SWALLOW  
GREY-BREASTED MARTIN  
BLUE-AND-WHITE SWALLOW  
NORTHERN ROUGH-WINGED SWALLOW  
SOUTHERN ROUGH-WINGED SWALLOW  
BLACK-AND-YELLOW SILKY FLYCATCHER  
BAND-BACKED WREN  
RIVERSIDE WREN  
BAY WREN  
STRIPE-BREASTED WREN  
RUFIOUS-AND-WHITE WREN  
PLAIN WREN  
HOUSE WREN  
OCHRACEOUS WREN  
GREY-BREASTED WOOD-WREN  
BLACK-FACED SOLITAIRE  
BLACK-BILLED NIGHTINGALE-THRUSH  
SLATY-BACKED NIGHTINGALE-THRUSH  
BLACK-HEADED NIGHTINGALE-THRUSH  
WOOD THRUSH

SOOTY THRUSH  
MOUNTAIN THRUSH  
CLAY-COLOURED THRUSH  
TROPICAL GNATCATCHER  
BROWN JAY  
HOUSE SPARROW  
YELLOW-WINGED VIREO  
YELLOW-THROATED VIREO  
PHILADELPHIA VIREO  
RED-EYED VIREO  
LESSER GREENLET  
TENNESSEE WARBLER  
TROPICAL PARULA  
FLAME-THROATED WARBLER  
YELLOW WARBLER  
CHESTNUT-SIDED WARBLER  
HERMIT WARBLER  
BLACK-THROATED GREEN WARBLER  
BLACKBURNIAN WARBLER  
BLACK-AND-WHITE WARBLER  
AMERICAN REDSTART  
PROTHONOTARY WARBLER  
WORM-EATING WARBLER  
OVENBIRD  
NORTHERN WATERTHRUSH  
WILSON'S WARBLER  
SLATE-THROATED REDSTART  
COLLARED REDSTART  
BLACK-CHEEKED WARBLER  
THREE-STRIPED WARBLER  
BUFF-RUMPED WARBLER  
BANANAQUIT  
COMMON BUSH-TANAGER  
SOOTY-CAPPED BUSH-TANAGER  
WHITE-LINED TANAGER  
RED-THROATED ANT-TANAGER  
SUMMER TANAGER  
CRIMSON-COLLARED TANAGER  
PASSERINI'S TANAGER  
SCARLET-RUMPED TANAGER  
BLUE-GREY TANAGER  
PALM TANAGER  
YELLOW-CROWNED EUPHONIA  
THICK-BILLED EUPHONIA  
YELLOW-THROATED EUPHONIA  
SPOT-CROWNED EUPHONIA  
OLIVE-BACKED EUPHONIA  
GOLDEN-BROWED CHLOROPHONIA  
PLAIN-COLOURED TANAGER  
SILVER-THROATED TANAGER

BAY-HEADED TANAGER  
GOLDEN-HOODED TANAGER  
SPANGLED CHEEKED TANAGER  
SCARLET-THIGHED DACNIS  
BLUE DACNIS  
GREEN HONEYCREEPER  
SHINING HONEYCREEPER  
RED-LEGGED HONEYCREEPER  
RUFIOUS-COLLARED SPARROW  
WHITE-EARED GROUND-SPARROW  
ORANGE-BILLED SPARROW  
BLACK-STRIPED SPARROW  
CHESTNUT-CAPPED BRUSH-FINCH  
LARGE-FOOTED FINCH  
YELLOW-THIGHED FINCH  
BLUE-BLACK GRASSQUIT  
VARIABLE SEEDEATER  
THICK-BILLED SEED-FINCH  
YELLOW-FACED GRASSQUIT  
SLATY FLOWER-PIERCER  
ROSE-BREASTED GROSBEAK  
BLACK-FACED GROSBEAK  
BLACK-HEADED SALTATOR  
BUFF-THROATED SALTATOR  
BLUE-BLACK GROSBEAK  
CHESTNUT-HEADED OROPENDOLA  
MONTEZUMA OROPENDOLA  
SCARLET-RUMPED CACIQUE  
YELLOW-BILLED CACIQUE  
NORTHERN (BALTIMORE) ORIOLE  
ORCHARD ORIOLE  
BLACK-COWLED ORIOLE  
MELODIOUS BLACKBIRD  
GREAT-TAILED GRACKLE  
GIANT COWBIRD