

The Jungle

*The twin coasts of Costa Rica
provide a paradise for nature lovers
and adventure travelers*

CRUISING ALONG THE SHORES OF THE GULF of Nicoya two years ago, I was enthralled by the rich and redolent world of the mangroves which dominate the length of Central America's Pacific coast. Mosquitoes whined around my head and stabbed my skin, and not even the slightest breeze relieved the heat; the air so humid I was sweating cascades. The tide had just turned, and a whole army of creatures was busy gathering new helpings of food from the buffet the retreating waters had left behind. Small sea snails moved slowly over the mud, grazing on algae; crabs sprinted in search of organic refuse; and hundreds of white ibis and other wading birds speckled the glistening mud, stalking tiny shrimp-like amphipods and a cache of other crustaceans. It was the beginning of my love affair with Costa Rica.

Snails and amphipods are not creatures one embraces with passion. I was fascinated, however, by the astonishing fertility of the mangroves. A look into the water revealed luxuriant life: oysters and sponges had attached themselves to the roots; small stingrays flapped slowly over the ocean bottom; and baby black-

tipped sharks, and other juvenile fish, swam securely, shielded by the root maze that keeps out large

predators. Raccoons, snakes, pumas and other large cats also inhabit the mangroves. There is even a tree crab which feeds off mangrove leaves and is restricted to the very crowns of the trees by the predatory activities of another arboreal crab.

Shaded from the blistering sun, we pattered through the waterways which narrow down to a lurky closeness. Ospreys wheeled and slid overhead. Black frigate birds, with their long sinister wings and forked tails, hung like kites in the wind. Jacanas, ibis, and stilt-legged jabirus patrolled the shoreline, their heads tilted forward, long bills jabbing at the sand and mud flats: *pick, pick, pick*. There were crocodiles, too, lurking in the river shallows, motionless as logs.

I was beginning to see why Costa Rica is the current darling of ecotourists; why travelers, who are tired of just seeing pictures of jaguars, quetzals and three-toed sloths, flock here like migrating macaws.

Despite its size — about the same as the Netherlands or Nova Scotia — Costa Rica is a microcontinent unto itself. The diversity of terrain is remarkable. Anyone who wants to journey from the Amazon to



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The Sea

BY CHRISTOPHER P. BAKER

a Swiss alpine forest, has simply to start at the shoreline and walk uphill. The nation's twelve distinct ecological zones are home to more butterflies than the whole of Africa, as many plant species as Europe, and one-tenth of the world's known bird species. . . in a country occupying less than three ten-thousandths of the world's land area.



JEAN MERCIER

To see it all in one week, I chose

the nation's first ecological cruise ship, the 53-meter *Temptress*. It promised access to exotic locations almost impossible to reach by land or air. Just the printed itinerary seemed to conjure up the roar of jaguars: the Palo Verde, Manuel Antonio, and

Corcovado national parks, Marengo Biological Reserve, plus Drake's Bay and Cano Island, two remote destinations teeming with wildlife and a kind of pre-Columbus intrigue. To be borne on the seas to these pearls could only add to the drama.

Thus, bags bulging with insect repellent and suitably equipped with binoculars and camera gear, I flew down to San José, Costa Rica's capital and thence to Puntarenas, the nation's funky Pacific Coast port.

"Unlike many destinations, where man has driven the animals into backwater seclusion, Costa Rica's wildlife loves to put on a song and dance," we were informed by Margherita Bottazzi, the *Temptress*' effervescent naturalist guide, who was to pluck snakes from the jungle floor without batting an eye. That night, while we cruised to our first destination, she and her sidekick, Federico Grant, the ship's indefatigable tour director, showed slides and videos, and briefed us in the ship's cozy lounge on what to expect on our daytime hikes ashore.

Such colors appeared on the screen! Scarlet

macaws like rainbows; quetzals and hummingbirds like the flash of sunset; red and evil poison-arrow frogs, bright enough to scare off the most dim-witted of predators; and electric-blue morphos, the neon narcissi of the butterfly world, which made the most unmoved of viewers gape wide-mouthed in awe. "The birds are like jewels, the animals like creatures in a Rousseau painting," my friend Lynn Ferrin effused.

"Much of the wildlife is glimpsed only as shadows," warned Margherita. "Some creatures you'll not want to meet, like the dreaded fer-de-lance snake waiting with jaws of death for whatever passes by." Animals that we were *not* likely to see were the cats — jaguars, ocelots and pumas — and tapirs. However, we could expect monkeys galore, iguanas, coatimundis, anteaters, three-toed sloths, and birds by their thousands.



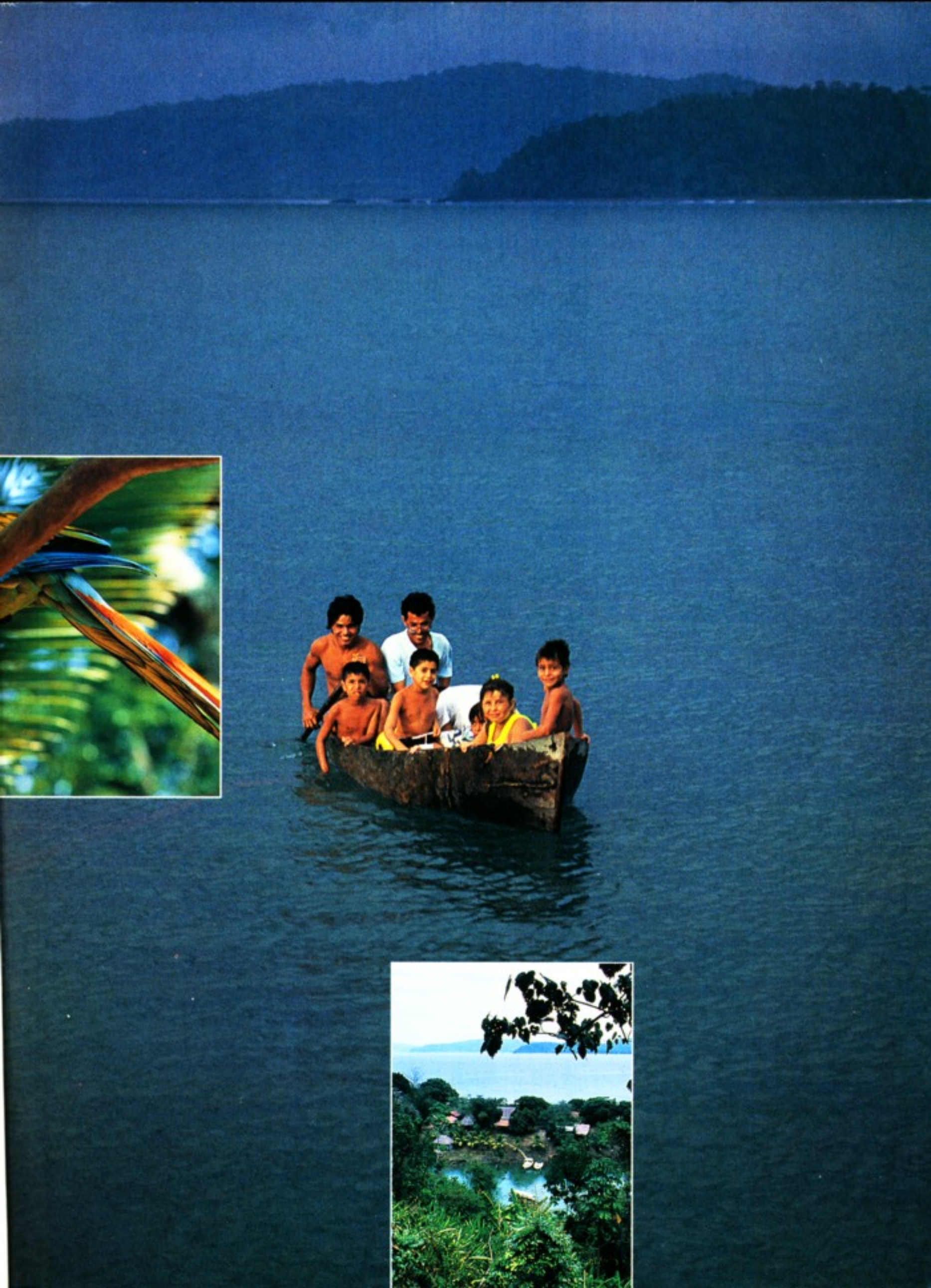
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MAIN PICTURE:
NATIVE INDIANS
ABOARD A DUGOUT
CANOE IN DRAKE'S
BAY. **CLOCKWISE**
FROM ABOVE: THE
DANGEROUS POISON-
ARROW FROG; A
BRILLIANT-GREEN
MACAW; DRAKE'S
BAY FROM THE
JUNGLE; A CROCODILE
LURKING MOTION-
LESS AS A LOG.



JEAN MERCIER

PPG/COLORFILE/BUDDY MAYS JOHN H. ANDERSON



A traveler moving south overland

through Central America gradually has his choice of routes whittled away until he finally reaches the end of the road in the swamps and forests of Darien, in Panama, where the tenuous land bridge separating the two great American continents narrows, and the Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Sea almost meet. Costa Rica lies at the northern point of this apex: a pivotal region separating two great seas and two continents vastly different in character.



GERRY ELLIS



CHRIS BAKER

The region is a crucible. There

are few places in the world where the forces of nature so actively interplay. Distinct climatic patterns clash and merge; the great landmasses and their offshore cousins, the Cocos and Caribbean plates, jostle and shove one another, triggering earthquakes and spawning sometimes cataclysmic volcanic eruptions; and the flora and fauna of both the North and South American

realms, as well as those of the Caribbean and the Pacific, come together and play Russian roulette with the forces of evolution. About three million years ago, the Central American isthmus began to rise from the sea to form the first tentative link between the two Americas. Going from island to island, birds, insects, reptiles and the first mammals began to move back and forth between the continents. In due course, South America connected with North America. Creatures poured across the bridge in both directions.

Opossums used it to invade North America.

Down the corridor came the placental mammals to dispute the possession of South America with the marsupial residents. Rodents reached the southern continent, diversifying into forms more appropriate to the tropics, as did the monkeys, who found the climate to their liking. The isthmus thus served as a "filter bridge" for the intermingling of species, and the evolution of modern

biota. And species which have died out elsewhere can still be found here — just, for deforestation now plagues the isthmus.

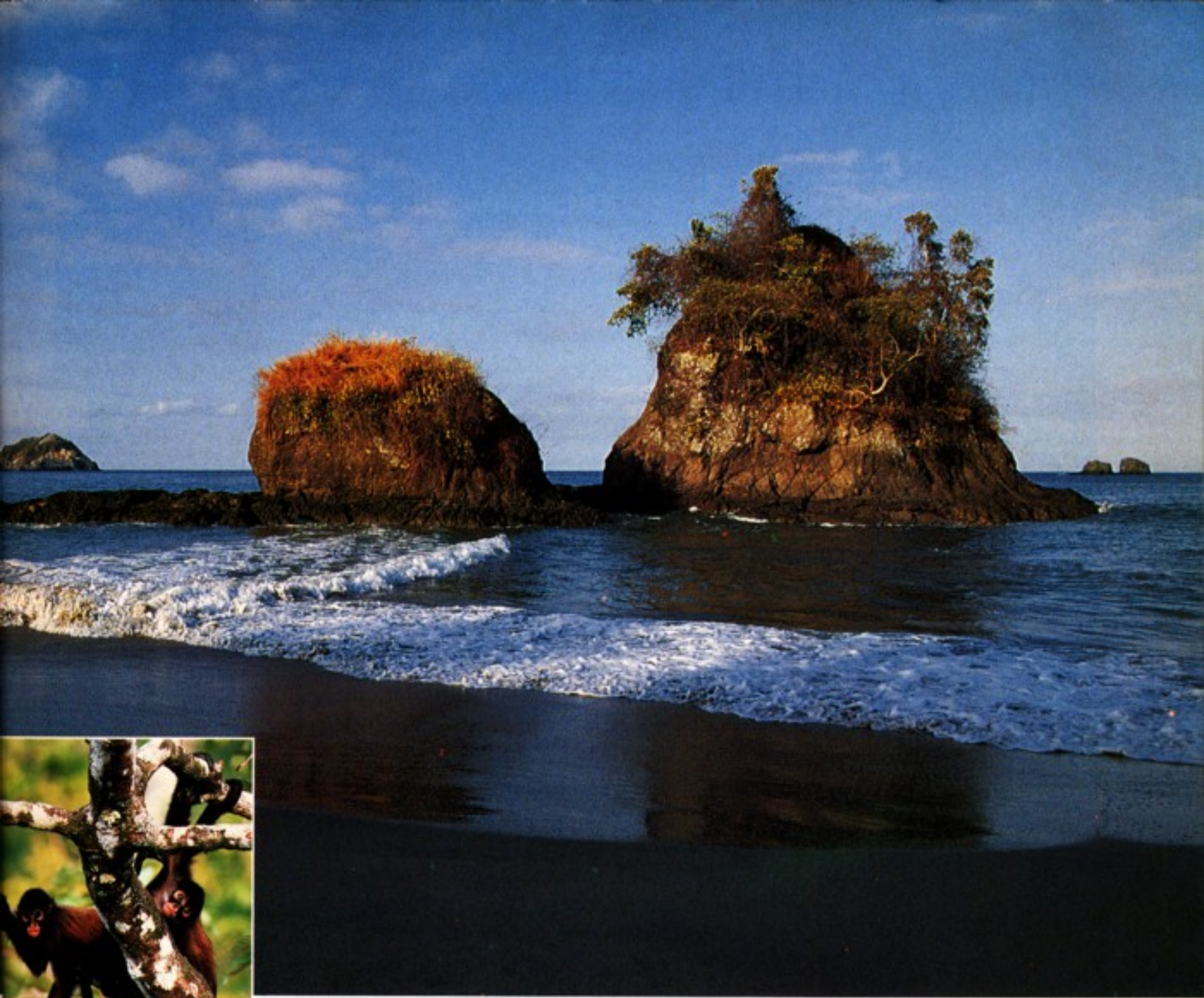
During the past 400 years, logging, ranching and plantation agriculture have transformed much of Central America's wildest terrain. In 1970 came an acknowledgement that something unique and lovely was vanishing, and a systematic effort was made to save what was left of the wilderness. In that year, the Costa Ricans formed a national park system that has



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won worldwide admiration. Costa Rican law declared inviolate 10.27 percent of a land once compared to the Garden of Eden; today, a further 17 percent is legally set aside as forest reserve or wildlife refuge. . . more land in proportion to landmass than any other country in the world. At least some representative facet of all the major habitats and ecosystems is now banked and protected for tomorrow's generations.

Two-thirds of the way down the Pacific coast, in the heart of the remote Osa Peninsula, just north of Panama, is the wildest, wettest, close-canopied rain forest in Costa Rica. This is celebrity rain forest, as impressive as any in the Amazon basin, Malaysia or Indonesia, and as shining, sweet-smelling and innocent as it must have been in the first light of Creation. This mass of throttling greenery is the biggest piece of primeval rain forest left on the Pacific coast of Central America, yet it is a tiny remnant of the original carpet which once covered the isthmus.

MAIN PICTURE: THE BEAUTY OF MANUEL ANTONIO NATIONAL PARK. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: A THREE-TOED SLOTH AT REST; SPIDER MONKEYS AT PLAY; THE COAST OF MANUEL ANTONIO NATIONAL PARK; VAMPIRE BATS DON'T DESERVE THEIR BAD PRESS.

Today, the region is protected as Corcovado

National Park — a haven for endangered species: jaguar, crocodile, tapir, giant harpy eagle, and scarlet macaws. Guided by Margherita and Federico, we stepped onto a coral-sand beach unspoiled by Man Friday footprints and pushed into the tropical forest. I felt like Lucy entering the magical kingdom of Narnia in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*.

Within Corcovado's dense forest, the air was cool and dank, and alive with the sound of birds. Liquid, musical calls; the whistles, sudden squawks and raucous screeches of toucans and parrots squabbling among the high branches. Butterflies floated past like torn sheets of bright tissue. High in the canopy, unseen creatures were on the move. I came across a sloth, feigning death halfway up a tree, in a state just short of complete torpor.



JEAN MERCIER

Fifty meters further on we came across a column

of leafcutter ants — minuscule metronomes on the march — filing ten abreast along a trail worn as smooth and clean as a doorstep by the infinitesimal patter of a million hair-thin legs. Each ant carried upright in its jaws a circular green shard scissored from the leaf of a tree. As I knelt to inspect them more closely, their bellicose brethren — the soldiers — rushed forward with jaws drawn apart, ready to bite. "They don't eat the leaves,"

Federico told me. "Instead, they haul them to their underground chambers and chew them up to form a compost on which they cultivate a nutritional bread-like fungus whose tiny fruiting bodies provide the ants with food." It was like a scene from David Attenborough's *Life on Earth*.

Every few meters seemed to bring something new. Giant iguanas: harmless reptilian nightmares which local gourmands call the "tree chicken"; bright-billed toucans — "flying bananas" — that fell from their perches and flew squalling away; and scarlet macaws, the largest of the Neotropical parrots, dazzlingly colored

in coats of gleaming yellow, blue and scarlet, as arrogant as emperors.

The bird was once abundant on both

coasts of Costa Rica. Today, it is found only in a few parks on the Pacific shore. Its population has declined so dramatically that it is in danger of disappearing completely. There are only three wild populations in Central America with a long-term chance of survival, Corcovado's is one. Macaws are almost always paired male and female — they're monogamous for life — often flying two by two or sitting side by side, grooming and preening each other, conversing in rasping love tones.



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COSTA RICA IS A MICROCONTINENT, BOASTING MORE BUTTERFLIES THAN THE WHOLE OF AFRICA AND AS MANY PLANT SPECIES AS EUROPE. ABOVE: CATTLEYA SKINNERI, THE NATIONAL FLOWER. RIGHT: A GIANT CREAM OWL BUTTERFLY FEEDING ON SAP.

a casket of gems. Naturalists had their own field day. In a tropical climate, water spells life, and Manuel Antonio, mid-way down the Pacific coast, gets plenty — over 150 inches a year. You can almost feel the vegetation growing around you; there is a tangible sense of life. Huge, primeval palms burst upwards like fountains; curtains of ferns grapple their way to the canopy, and gardens of orchids flourish on every branch.

Towering over this lush, shadowed world was

the canopy, the powerhouse of the forest, bathed in greenish sunlight. As figs and fruits rained down upon me, I could only imagine the unseen world high above — an “undiscovered continent” as 19th-century naturalist William Beebe called it — where insectivorous birds watch from their vantage point for any movement that will betray a stick insect to scoop up for lunch, and chunk-headed snakes with catlike eyes feast on frogs and arboreal rodents.

Costa Rica’s tropical rain forests have an allure that abates discomfort. They are places of peace and renewal, like a vast vaulted cathedral, mysterious, strangely silent, and of majestic proportions. As one writer says: “a 14th-century stonemason would have felt at home (in the rain forest), with its buttressed, moss-columned, towering trees and dark recesses.”

Sit still awhile, and the unseen beasts

and birds will get used to your presence and emerge from the shadows. Enormous morpho butterflies float by, flashing like bright neon signs. Is that vine really moving? More likely it’s a brilliantly costumed tree python, so green so as to be almost iridescent, draped in sensuous coils around a branch. Then there are all the creatures that mimic others and are harder to spot — insects that resemble rotting leaves, moths that look like wasps, the giant *caligo memmon* (cream owl) butterfly whose huge open wings resemble the wide-eyed face of an owl, and the mottled, bark-colored *machaca* (lantern fly) which is partly to blame for Costa Rica’s soaring birthrate. According to local folklore, if a girl is stung by a machaca she must go to bed with a man within 24 hours or she will die!

While life-and-death struggles took place over the rail, I reclined on the sun deck, drinking Imperial beer and ruminating on the advantages of nature’s strange ways. ☪

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