

Flights of fancy

Laura French swaps the city for adventure on a tour through Costa Rica

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I'm flying. The wind whips my hair, my skin tingles and my eyes water as I scan my surroundings – a blanket of broccoli-like treetops several hundred feet beneath me and a wiry-looking cable from which I dangle freely, face down, arms outstretched, head first. It's totally peaceful and, bar any panicked thoughts of harness breaking and body tumbling, I'm completely alone.

I haven't gone insane; I'm whizzing superman-style along Latin America's longest zip-line, feeling freer than I ever have. Ten minutes later, I'm jumping off a ledge and freefalling through the sky on a 'Tarzan swing', stomach plunging and heart pounding on what's essentially a mini-bungee. Maybe I have gone a little insane.

It must be the Costa Rican air. There's a spirit of adventure here and it's infectious. By the end of a 16-day trip with G Adventures, I'd abseiled down 200-foot waterfalls, rafted world-class rapids, downed a concoction of plant medicines, eaten a termite and climbed my first tree, all while learning everything there was to know about Tiko culture and local customs from our guide, Ernyk.

ANIMAL KINGDOM

It wasn't all about the adventure, though. Our journey began somewhat more calmly in Manuel Antonio, the country's oldest and most popular national park. Set on the Pacific Coast, it's home to four protected, white-sand beaches alongside verdant,

tropical jungle where more than 100 species of mammals and 350 species of birds reside (the park is an optional extra on the tour, and entry costs \$16).

In just an hour's walk through the forest, I'd ticked off half my bucket list, glimpsing two and three-toed sloths, cute squirrel monkeys and white-faced capuchins, before hearing the comical, elephant-like groans of a howler monkey echo through the jungle. "They're chatting up females," says our guide.

The park is accessible from Quepos, a small, tropically humid town where surfing, fishing and kayaking are among the options available. I chose a sunset sailing trip, cruising along the coast before jumping off the boat for a snorkel, drinking obscene



LEFT:
Manuel Antonio National Park

RIGHT:
White-water rafting

BELOW:
La Fortuna



→ amounts of rum and watching the sun plunge down against a backdrop of fire.

From there, we ventured to the Monteverde Cloud Forest, home to the world's first canopy zip-line (alongside the one I sampled, which costs \$50). Set on Costa Rica's continental divide, the region is a magnet for flora and fauna thanks to high levels of rainfall and a constant veil of mist. Exotic creatures can be spotted everywhere; on a guided walk, we glimpsed everything from toucans to vipers before catching the rare, iridescent feathers of a quetzal.

The Sky Walk is recommended for those wanting to see even more. It's a series of hanging bridges high up in the silent canopies surrounded by dangling vines, swinging spider monkeys,



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twisted trees and bright-blue hummingbirds, and it provides a unique perspective on this extraordinary world. Night walks, horse rides and quad-biking trips are all on offer too, while for clients less sold on adventure, there's a butterfly garden where coatis, white-faced monkeys and shimmering blue morpho butterflies all happily hang out.

▶ **ADVENTURE PARADISE**
For adventurous types though,

look to La Fortuna. Set at the foot of the active Arenal volcano, this lush area offers everything an outdoor-loving, adrenaline-seeking traveller could wish for with hiking, mountain biking, white-water rafting, canyoning and plenty more.

Unmissable is the huge, cascading waterfall that tumbles down the side of the dormant Cerro Chato volcano into a pool, where those brave enough can swim in ice-cold water (I made it in after five attempts). The area is accessible via a hike or taxi, entry costs \$14 and clients need to be fairly fit, as there are 500 steps – but they won't regret it.

I'd also recommend canyoning. A half-day tour involves scrambling down rocks, wading through rushing streams and zipping down sheer-drop waterfalls through dense,

butterfly-filled rainforest, while tackling extras like the 'tsunami'. I won't ruin the surprise, but advise daredevil clients it costs \$89 with local company Desafio, and is worth every penny.

But my personal highlight was rafting. The full-day trip took us to the Sarapiquí River, which is home to some of the best rapids in the country (and suitable for adventurous beginners in the dry season, when it's a class II-IV).

I soon realised what that meant as we began furiously bounding up and down the crashing waters, fistfuls of spray pummelling me in →



→ the face as my screams drowned out the instructions of our guide yelling “paddle, paddle, paddle!”

Despite my look of terror – and the fact I ended up floating down the river like a lemon when I fell in – I had a blast (the full-day tour costs \$80, also with Desafío).

Luckily, I was able to recover in an all-natural hot-spring river that evening – the area is brimming with them – and it didn’t disappoint, with mystical puffs of steam billowing up from the water and bubbling away underfoot beneath a pitch-black, star-covered sky. This wasn’t even part of the itinerary, but, as I soon discovered, G Adventures guides are accustomed to offering insider recommendations and extra activities, which is a good selling point.

▶ CARIBBEAN QUEEN

What most intrigued me about the country, though, was its sheer diversity, which became even more evident as we headed for the Caribbean coast. Our first stop was Tortuguero, known as the ‘Amazon of Costa Rica’, which is built on a series of

canals. Boat taxis shuttle visitors between waterfront hotels and the rustic town, where Caribbean shacks selling coconuts and souvenirs border a long, black-sand beach.

The 19,000-hectare park is a renowned nesting place for green and leatherback turtles from June to October. The best way of exploring it all is from the water. I can vouch for the morning kayaking trip, during which we were surrounded by birds, baby caimans and squirrel monkeys as we glided along the gently rippling water, sun streaming down, blue sky overhead and silence all around bar the serene swishing of our paddles (\$35).

Even more idyllic were the beaches in the Limon region, further south at the point where Christopher Columbus docked in 1502 when he first came to Costa Rica. We explored the area on our final stop, Puerto Viejo de Talamanca, a chilled-out, backpacker-friendly town with a strong Jamaican heritage that dates back to the 19th century, when workers came for the plantations.



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Today, delicious wafts of coconut and Caribbean cuisine – jerk chicken, ginger-infused curries and fragrant seafood – swirl around laid-back beach bars playing reggae, where locals speak patois and indulgent rum cocktails are served with admirable tranquillity. This isn’t the place for impatience, but it is the place to be cool (I’m not sure I succeeded in either).

It’s a hotspot for surfing and a good place for lessons, thanks to a beginners’ beach. Snorkelling excursions to nearby colourful reefs are also available, but hiring a bike and exploring the coast independently is just as worthy a recommendation. We cycled all the way along (it’s a 17-mile round trip), stopping at dream-like beaches and diving into blindingly bright, topaz waters flanked by towering palm trees.

The ultimate highlight here,

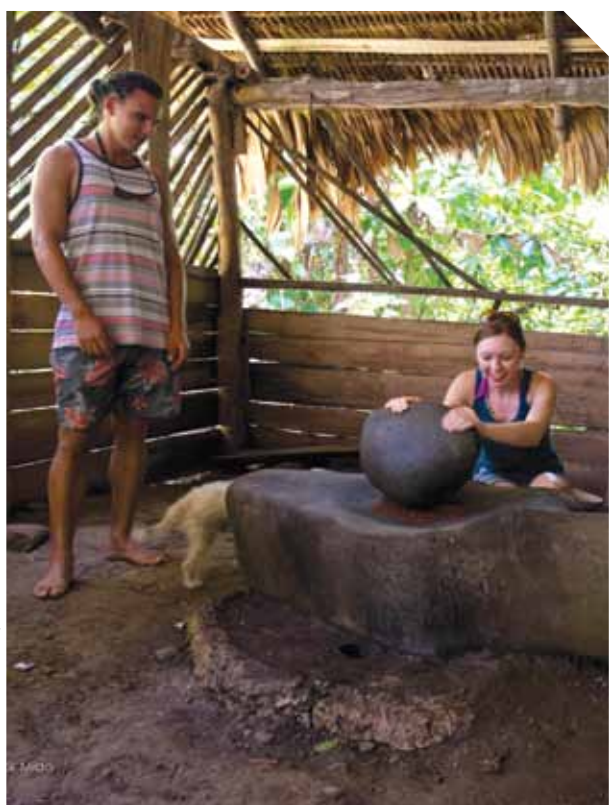
though, was visiting a local Bribri family, part of the largest indigenous community in the country (this wasn’t part of the tour but can easily be arranged from the town). Head of the family Luis told us of their ancient beliefs and natural treatments, before I volunteered to sample a few. The most memorable was noni juice, a ‘wine’ that tasted delicious until a sudden, slightly unexpected, aftertaste of blue cheese kicked in (it’s fermented, and apparently full of flavonoids).

I was feeling all proud of my adventurous tastes, until Luis came out brandishing a shot of something slightly more suspect. “It’s boa constrictor oil – good for the throat, especially when you mix it with this one – shark liver oil,” he said, with a twinkle in his eye.

Costa Rica might have been all about embracing my adventurous side, but we all have our limits – and I’d just found mine.

Book it: G Adventures’ Costa Rica Adventure starts at £1,079 for a 16-day round-trip from San José. The price includes accommodation (13 nights in a hotel, two nights shared in a jungle lodge), transport, a chief experience officer, local guides and some meals.

gadventures.co.uk



ABOVE: Boat taxi at Tortuguero

LEFT: A Bribri family home in Puerto Viejo

PICTURES: PATRICK MIAO; JUDY HENRY