

Viva la vida



Travelling on an escorted solo tour in Central America,
Beverley Watts explores rainforests, volcanoes
and beaches – but it's the wildlife that wows

On the restaurant terrace of the Tilajari Hotel Resort in Muelle de San Carlos, I'm already having a fantastic morning. It's 6am and, along with my 13 companions – who were strangers only a few days ago – I'm utterly entranced. Beside our table, the most amazing and colourful birds are feeding on a breakfast of banana and papaya. Yellow-chested great kiskadees, bright blue red-legged honeycreepers and turquoise-faced Amazonian motmots are among dozens of pairs of fluttering wings.

One of our group, Dave from Cheshire, is a keen twitcher and he's in seventh heaven with so many hummingbirds hovering close by. Our group of 14 solo travellers has all instantly gelled. Aged from 54 to 80 and drawn from all over the UK, there are 10 women and four men, with an average age of 69.

I'm one of four singletons enjoying the company and itinerary on this Just You tour designed for solo

travellers. But our party also includes widows and widowers and those with partners who are too busy, too unwell to travel or who prefer a different kind of trip.

WILD IDEAS

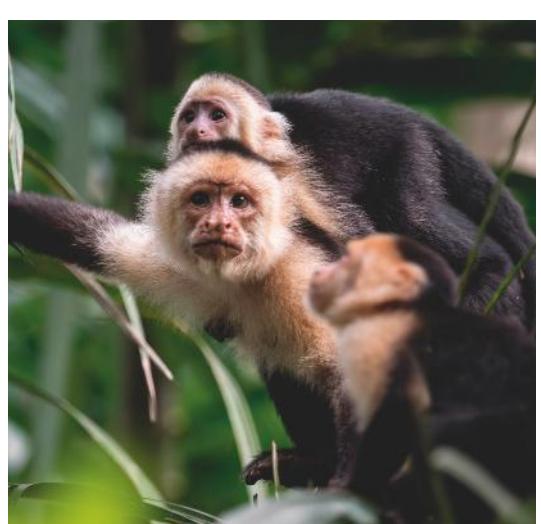
In the BBC's recent series of *Celebrity Race Across the World*, the contestants crossed Costa Rica fruitlessly searching for alligators. This Central American country, sandwiched between Nicaragua and Panama, has a whopping 5% of the world's biodiversity among its half a million species – just no gators. Instead, there are crocodiles, caimans, turtles, toucans, parrots, tree frogs and sloths. I get to see them all.

The Costa Rican government is deeply committed to conservation and ecotourism. Diego, our local expert tour guide, helps us spot and identify every living creature – "Look, there's a white-nosed coati!" – while Mateo, our holiday director, cares for our daily needs. We meet them both when we fly into capital ➤

PHOTOGRAPH: Shutterstock/Alfredo Mohamed

DESTINATIONS

ESCORTED TOURS | COSTA RICA



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Capuchin monkeys; Tortuguero National Park; the group poses for a photo; Mi Cafecito Coffee Tour PICTURES: Shutterstock/ Harry Collins Photography; Beverley Watts



San José from Gatwick and spend a night in the city before driving east to Puerto Viejo de Limón.

In the beachside Cahuita National Park, lush rainforest meets the Caribbean Sea. Here, troops of capuchin monkeys leap from tree to tree. We keep hearing the phrase 'pura vida' – 'pure life' in Spanish – which captures the laid-back culture in Costa Rica.

The next day, we meet people from the Indigenous Bribri community, whose ancestors resisted the arrival of the Spanish in 1502, preserving their own language and customs. The Watsi community in Talamanca prepare a delicious lunch of chicken, rice and beans for us, served in a plantain leaf, before we learn about the importance of cacao in this area. The mood-enhancing joys of chocolate have been known here for centuries.

Each evening, our party meets for drinks in the hotel bar before dinner, and there's a very sociable atmosphere. The national Guaro Sour cocktail offers plenty of refreshment – it's made with

 Our bungalow rooms have no glass in the windows, only insect screens – you can hear every tiny rustle

sugarcane spirit and lime juice, but the tropical fruit mocktails on offer are equally quaffable.

At dawn, we're awoken by an incredible noise: a roar that's almost as loud as a jet engine. Puzzled, we discover it's the territorial call of a howler monkey, amplified to 140 decibels by a resonance chamber in its throat. That's one mighty alarm clock.

NATURE'S CALL

The lodges around Tortuguero National Park are inaccessible by road, so we continue our journey north by boat on the Río Suerte and its adjoining canals. In this ecological haven, our

bungalow rooms have no glass in the windows, only insect screens. You can hear every tiny rustle.

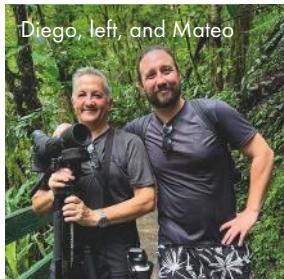
July to October is peak turtle-nesting time and the Sea Turtle Conservancy helps visitors respect the endangered green sea turtles that lay eggs along this 21-mile black-sand beach. On two guided waterway tours, we see zebu cattle wading nonchalantly through the shallows, kingfishers diving and a bare-throated tiger heron cooling itself down. Sloths slumber on high boughs, caimans skulk and jaguars wait in the shadows.

Heading west, we stop off for the Mi Cafecito Coffee Tour to find out about the country's high-quality coffee production. Costa Rica has ideal coffee-growing conditions, with rich volcanic soil and a consistent warm climate (temperatures range from 21C-27C year-round).

SURPRISE SIGHTING

Then it's on to Muelle de San Carlos where, after the pre-breakfast bird display, some of our party ➤

MEET THE experts



Just You holiday director
Mateo Maravic, 39, finds a solo tour is bubblier than standard trips. "The bus is definitely louder, because everyone's enjoying being with like-minded people," he says.

Tour guide Diego Castagne, 65, says the first question travellers usually ask is when they will see a sloth. He says: "The best thing in Costa Rica is, of course, nature, but the people are wonderful too. This is a very friendly country."

WHY GO SOLO?

 Single traveller **Helen Taylor**, 65, from Kent first heard about Just You through her travel agent and has been on 15 tours, confident in the support that she's received.

 **Eileen Sharpe**, 69, from Sussex is married but her husband is unable to travel. Costa Rica was her second Just You trip and she appreciates the expertise of the guides.

 **Dave Hull**, 73, from Macclesfield sadly lost his wife recently and this was his first solo trip. He found out about Just You from his Hays Travel agent and liked the idea of having a guaranteed room of his own.

go for an optional swimming excursion at La Fortuna Waterfall. Instead, I remain on the peaceful hotel terrace. While there, I suddenly see prehistoric-looking iguanas crawling into view, before soaking up the sun on the grassy banks. It's a special moment.

Continuing west to the shore of Lake Arenal, the view of the Arenal Volcano is exceptional. This 1,633-metre-high cone is one of Costa Rica's five active volcanoes, though the lava flows ceased in 2010. Surrounded by

hot springs, it's the perfect place in which to enjoy a thermal bath.

Before our return flight we end on another highlight, taking the humid trail through Mistico Arenal Hanging Bridges Park. The suspended walkways over the rainforest canopy swing disconcertingly as we cross, but it's an otherworldly experience that brings together adventure, nature and wildlife. Trees soar skywards searching for light, while leafcutter ants march past clutching snippets of vegetation for their nests. Yes, this is true *pura vida*. **TW**

BOOK IT

Just You's 12-day Real Costa Rica tour, accompanied by a Just You holiday director and specialist local tour guide, takes in Puerto Viejo de Limon, Tortuguero National Park and Muelle de San Carlos. Prices start from £5,049 from January to November and include return flights from Gatwick to San José, transfers, 10 nights in three or four-star hotels and jungle lodges, a welcome drink and select meals. justyou.co.uk



TOP: Arenal is one of five active volcanoes in Costa Rica BOTTOM: the country is home to exotic wildlife, including iguanas PICTURES: Beverley Watts

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