

TUN SHIN CHANG

A Few Lines

Stealing that precious free moment from my busy daily life and work schedules to stop by here every now and then, hopefully, to drop a few lines. A few lines, formed by a few simple words and those little snapshots that I captured through my lens.

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Puerto Viejo, Costa Rica

Pure Life in Costa Rica : A week's Adventure on the Caribbean Coast

October 21, 2019

I suffered from a serious case of withdrawal symptoms when my week long press trip in Costa Rica concluded. I stayed in bed all day on my return to London nursing my jet lag. The grey sky and the washed-out summer outside my bedroom window didn't help. I missed my gallo pinto breakfast and waking up to the chirping of the birds. I remembered our guide Manrique, a fellow Tico (Costa Rican), said that he felt emotional when bidding us goodbye at the airport. I missed him and his home country too.

Sitting in my flat in London, I browsed through my camera roll and every image is a flash back of my time in Costa Rica. They are a reminder of the happy times spent as well as the relaxation that I had, including a few things that I crossed out from my bucket list.

The mention of Costa Rica conjures up an image of lush green rainforest and a myriad of flora and fauna. It is undeniable that the country is famed for its nature. With a size of 0.03% of the world's landmass, Costa Rica contains a whopping 5% of the world's biodiversity. I was surrounded by lush green forests everywhere I went and spotting wildlife in their natural environment couldn't have been easier, from red-eyed frogs that we see on Costa Rican tourism posters to a mother sloth hung on the tree branch feeding its baby. Those nights when I was lulled to sleep by the creaking of the crickets and woken up by the chattering of the monkeys at dawn were particularly memorable. It's a scene of what I would have described as close to a paradise.





The trip brought me from the capital, San Jose, to Puerto Viejo, a beach town at the southern end of the country's Caribbean coast, through Sarapiquí region, Tortuguero, Limon and Cahuita. It may have just been a week long but I have collected so many good memories from the trip including a few of the highlights below that I would recommend.

1) Rafting on the Sarapiquí River



I am not an adrenaline junkie but I couldn't pass on what I would consider as a 'once in a lifetime' opportunity to try white water rafting, especially when I was in Costa Rica and it is one of the most popular tourist activities here! Like many others who have no prior experience of white water rafting, I did not know what to expect and was dubious if I would enjoy it fully. I was quickly proven wrong as soon as our guide started teaching us some basic but essential paddle strokes and having us practised next to a shallow bank. With his easy-to-follow instructions and his experience and knowledge on the river, I knew that I was in safe hands and my hesitancy and nerves were soon quelled. Without realizing, we were already plunging deep into the water and riding the rapids far and further along the river. The class III river on which we rafted had small waves and drops but was recommended as the entry level for many first timers (with guides). We may have been completely soaked (that's part of the experience!) but it turned out to be satisfyingly fun and exciting. I couldn't have asked for a better way to start our trip and to be honest, I would do it again in a heartbeat!



2) Visit Tirimbina and Walk across the Longest Suspension Bridge in Sarapiquí





While in Sarapiquí, we visited Tirimbina Biological Reserve for a bird watching tour. The Reserve comprises 345 hectares of natural forest and is home to up to 395 species of birds. As soon as we stepped into the forest, a mixture of tweets greeted our ears, at times a harmonious tune orchestrated by our feathered friends and at times a cacophony of jarring voices in disagreement. During the tour, we saw kingfishers, toucans and learnt about their characters and ways of life. I never knew that toucan was actually quite an aggressive bird. Due to their large bill, they are intimidating to small birds. As they are omnivorous, they could sometimes ransack the nests built by smaller species and prey on their chicks.

Apart from guided tours, there are also many trails here in the Reserve that the visitors could go on. The highlight would be to cross one of the longest suspension bridges in the country! With a length of 264m long, the bridge crosses Sarapiquí River which serves as the source of life and as a means of transportation to the locals. Standing at the mid point of the bridge, the view of the fast flowing Sarapiquí and the surrounding forest went as wide as my vision could stretch and is definitely a beautiful sight to behold!

3) Visit to Tortuguero Town



From Sarapiquí, we arrived at Tortuguero, a town named after sea turtle (Tortuga) in Spanish. Every year between July and October, thousands of green turtles will swim ashore and lay their eggs on the black sandy beach here. While it was not egg-laying season when we visited Tortuguero, this place is more than just sea turtles. The village has a population of about 2,000 and is only accessible by plane or boat. We arrived through the latter from La Pavona dock. There is no road and car in this village and life here, surrounded by the greenery and the coastline, is simple and unhurried. Along the main walking path at the heart of the village, souvenir shops, local eateries and art galleries lined both sides. The fruit stalls sell both fresh coconut water and a selection of cocktails. In the evening when the temperature drops, men gathered outdoor for a game of domino the while school boys played football in the field and the girls danced to a Spanish pop song. I like the relaxing atmosphere here and it is certainly a good place for slow travel to take your mind off the hustle and bustle of the city.

4) Kayak on Tortuguero Canal

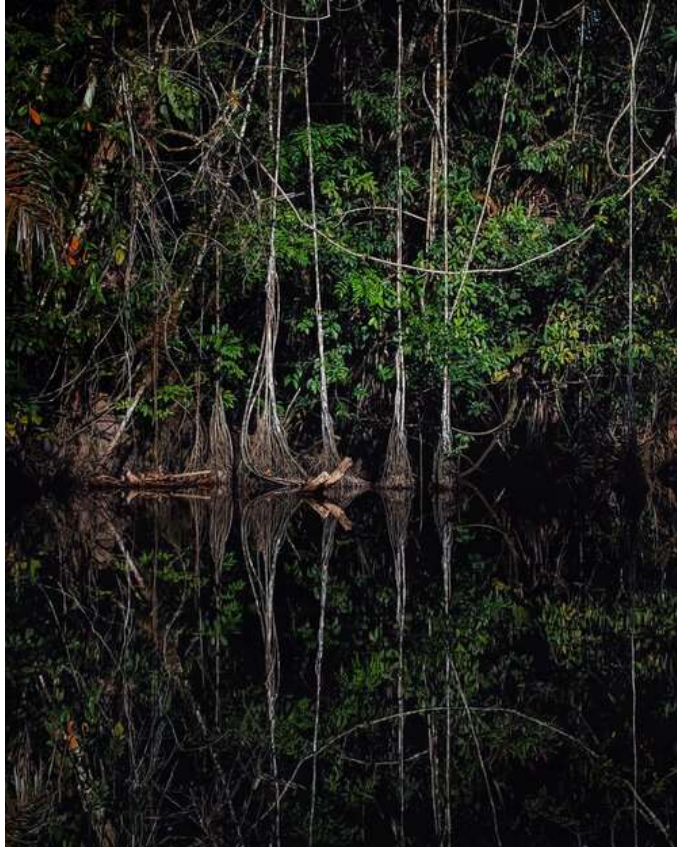




When Manrique asked if any of us would be interested to go on a kayaking trip at 6am in the morning, I was surprised that every single one of us said yes. Even if it meant that we had to sacrifice our sleep and wake up early. Even if it meant that it would be raining the next morning and we could get completely drenched. Nobody complained and we all turned up on time!

We were told that 6am would be the best time to spot the wildlife 'waking up' to the day. While the wet weather did not do us favour, it did however add a sense of mystery and drama to the forest, making it even more luring. At the break of dawn, the forest was eerily quiet except for the pitter-patter of the falling rain. As we paddled along, we saw iguana perching on a fallen tree branch by the bank, camouflaging so well that we almost missed it. From a distance, the tree tops swayed and we caught a glimpse of the spider monkeys swinging from one branch to another. Tiger herons are common inhabitants here and it was not too difficult to spot one standing motionlessly at the river bank trying to get a good catch for breakfast!

5) Canal Boat Tour in Tortuguero





Another experience that I truly enjoyed while on the trip was the boat tour along the canals in Tortuguero. I have seen rain forest many times before on the big screen but to see it in real life on a boat, so close to the water and deep in the forest, is an experience of another level. We were cruising fast on the meandering canal until we reached the smaller and narrower branches where the boatman stopped the engine. Everything suddenly went quiet as we reached the belly of the forest. The surrounding looked so eerie and mystical with the dappling sunlights and moving shadows under the thick canopy. We all went quiet, mesmerized by the scene that lied before our eyes. I closed my eyes and was fully engulfed by a sense of solitude and calmness. All I could hear was the tweets from the birds, the rustles of the foliage and the soft murmurs of the warm breezes. The sound of nature in its purest form. I have never been so close to nature and that feeling was heavenly.

6) Visit Puerto Viejo

The final leg of our trip was to visit the coastal town of Puerto Viejo. I still remember it was dusk when we arrived and the town was basking in golden twilight. As we traveled south here, the landscape of the country changed from one of the verdant countryside with mountains and rivers to that of a vibrant beach town with bars and cafes.

Puerto Viejo is undoubtedly a touristic hub these days. It is increasingly popular for those, particularly the young hip crowd, searching for somewhere to chill, sip a cocktail and dance to the reggae music playing in the background. While you can find specialty coffee and sourdough pizza here, old charms linger on. At the old jetty, locals fished from the sea as the sun was setting. Along the street, fruit stalls and old shops thrive.







But Puerto Viejo is not just about its town, there are many white pristine beaches here for beachgoers to have a dip in the sea or to soak up the sun. Our snorkelling experience, another first for me, off the coast of Cahuita National Park was truly memorable! Floating on the sea surface looking down at the colourful corals of different shapes and patterns through the crystal clear water was definitely another awe-inspiring moment of the trip!

8) Wander the town of Limon





We stopped over in Limon both on our ways to Puerto Viejo and on our return journey back to San Jose. Although they were just flying visits, we did manage to get a glimpse of the local life in this port town where Christopher Columbus first landed and found Central America. On our way to Puerto Viejo, we stopped at Red Snapper Restaurant, a cosy restaurant on the hilltop overlooking the city's coast line and colourful rooftops. We had, as the name of the restaurant suggested, the local red snappers with fried plantain, bean paste and hot sauce, one of the best dishes that I had on the trip! On our way back to San Jose, we stopped again in Limon for a couple of hours. This time we wandered around the waterfront of this port town and paid a visit to a local market in the city centre. The market is the city's hub of activities where the locals brought produces from farm to sell. Herbs and plantains were abundant as well as local fruits such as coconuts and pineapples. We weaved through different sections of the market, saying hello to the barbers and old men sipping coffee at a café! It was the perfect place to meet the locals and wave goodbye to Costa Rica before we boarded a private jet back to San Jose to catch our flight back to London.

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I have never thought that I would enjoyed Costa Rica and a trip surrounding nature so much but I proved myself wrong! Because I did. As much as it is a cliché to say there was so much to do, so much to see and so many lists ticked off in Costa Rica, I ended up enjoying being close to nature, especially those moments when I was deep in and fully engulfed by the jungle, the water and the noise and quietness of nature. Those moments were cleansing to the body, mind and soul. That was when I truly lived the ‘Pura Vida’ moment in my life.

Recommendations

Sarapiquí

- Stay at [La Quinta Lodge](#). My room has a balcony overlooking the Sarapiquí river and I was lulled to slumber by the flowing water and woken up by the howler monkeys in the morning.
- Join the [Chocolate Tour](#) by Costa Rica Best Chocolate to understand the cultivation of cocoas and make your own chocolates!
- Our white water rafting tour was organised by [Aventuras del Sarapiquí](#). The guide we had was experienced and as a first timer, I felt I was in safe hands for a fun and exhilarating experience!
- Walk the longest suspension bridge at [Tirimбина Biological Reserve](#). Check out their website for self guided trails to go on in the forest or book yourself a guided tour!

Tortuguero

- Stay at Mawamba Lodge for a fully relaxing time and spot wildlife such as iguanas and howler monkeys. The hotel also organised walking tour to Tortuguero town, canal boat tour and sunrise kayaking tour!
- Have a wander around Tortuguero town and enjoy the slow pace of life!
- Walk along the sandy beach and and take in the view of the wide expanse of the coastline and the rolling waves. Or come in season and join a sea turtle nesting tour!

Puerto Viejo

- Stay at [Namuwoki Lodge](#). The 13 bungalows are all built in the midst of nature and surrounded by tropical gardens.
- Visit Cahuita National Park. There is a raised wooden walkway, making it more comfortable and easier to meander around while you appreciate the rainforest.
- Snorkel at [Cahuita National Park](#). The water is warm and the sea is clear, perfect for spotting the colourful corals!
- Have a night out in the Puerto Viejo town for dinner and drinks and to soak up the Caribbean vibes!
- Pay a visit to the Sloth Sanctuary to get close to these cute creatures and understand the stories of the Sanctuary and the sloths!

Limon

- Visit the local market and meet the locals.
- Stroll along the waterfront and admire the sea view of this port city.
- Have the [red snapper](#) lunch!

