

EVENT REPORT - COSTA RICA

By Marsha Lutz

Good things are worth waiting for and that was certainly true for SCSC's long-awaited trip to Costa Rica! In one week we experienced a spectacular tropical paradise on the Pacific Coast and jungle adventures near an active volcano. Read on to hear more of the Tale of Two Cities – Quepos and Arenal. But first we have to go from Houston to Miami to San Jose, Costa Rica! Fifteen of us met at the airport at 4:30 *a.m.* for our departure on American. The 16th person (**Mary Ann Harrell**) met us in Costa Rica. She decided at the last minute (read between the lines!) to take the direct Continental flight. As **Mary Ann** said, at least she earned mileage she can actually use and got to fly first class!

We began our vacation with a 3-hour bumpy bus ride to Quepos. It wasn't that bad (if you closed your eyes as we crossed over rivers on one-lane bridges made of very old wood planks). Costa Rica is known for its rough roads, and with all the bumpy rides we had, even in "all-terrain" vehicles, the horseback riding seemed smooth!

Once at the Hotel Parador, we quickly got our bags to the rooms and went to the Welcome Party. Parador is a gorgeous hotel – high on a cliff, overlooking one of the prettiest pools around to the surf of the Pacific Ocean. Each day we had a wonderful breakfast buffet. At first this seemed like a good idea, because you never knew when you might eat lunch or dinner. That turned out to be a non-issue! We were getting 2 breakfasts or 2 dinners a day since the activities included meals, but it wasn't always clear what meal it would be.

Sunday we visited Manuel Antonio National Park where our guide, Willie G., found great pleasure in showing us almost every iguana, sloth and white-faced monkey in the park! And those tiny bats and leaf carvers – ants carrying big pieces of leaves long distances, looking like miniature windsurfers! We looked through binoculars and camera lenses for better views, but for really close-up looks, we peered through Willie's telescope. **Susan Blome** found that you get a terrific picture by placing your camera inside the telescope's lens.

After the park, some of us went on the Canopy Tour – the infamous sliding between trees harnessed to cables over 100 feet above ground. Of course it was raining in the rain forest – so hiking between platforms was slippery. There was also

rappelling – sliding down ropes at varying speeds depending on if you were "a skirt" or not (that was a little misunderstanding due to the guide's translation and accent!). A few people rode double. **Maria Tramontin** especially liked her partner – one of the young, male guides! Many of those that didn't try the canopy tour here decided they didn't want to miss out and did it at Arenal – and **Jing**, did it again –that's how much fun it is!

Monday some of us went on a Mangrove boat tour, while others went biking or relaxed by the pool and checked out the hotel grounds. On the boat tour, **Marsha** and **Adam DeRidder** had fun taking pictures. The monkeys were curious and not afraid of us as they first showed off, then climbed to the ends of tree branches and onto the boat roof looking for handouts. **Barbie Miller** gave a monkey water from the palm of her hand. Speaking of hands – **Marsha** missed her chance to get a photograph in National Geographic. **Adam** held a leaf back so she could get a close-up shot of the boa constrictor three inches from his hand, with its tongue flickering. She didn't realize that "Take it now" means "Take it NOW" and **Adam** had to let go before the strike! But **Adam** did get a great picture the next day of a monkey turning over a table on his patio after it realized **Adam** and **Bill Lodato** forgot to leave treats out.

Meanwhile **Nancy Schultz**, **Dennis Newell**, **Ray Davis** and **Crystal Fryer** were on one of their many side adventures. Today it was bike riding. Remember, Costa Rica has mountains and the roads are bumpy just about everywhere – *i.e.* it was challenging! **Ray** was riding like a pro, jumping his bike in and over puddles and climbing rocky hills like they were flat, while the rest struggled with the hills and heat. The unplanned stop when **Crystal** got a flat tire (actually the whole wheel broke) was a welcomed rest for the group. More on **Crystal's** mishaps later.

Another excellent adventure was whitewater rafting on the Savegre River. **Jing** and **Johanna Kuang** practiced his company policy of splitting family members during risky transportation, but soon they saw they would have been safe together (except **Johanna** can really swing the oar!). The rapids were mostly Class 3, but the guides had a good way of making them feel like a 4 sometimes (Get down! They would yell!)! The safety guide in the kayak got great photos of us. There is one of **Maria Elena**

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Saade looking timidly at something up ahead (this was her first time to raft) and then later he caught her with a big "I did it" grin. In some of the photos we don't know who the people are because the entire raft is underwater. Amazingly only a couple people fell out; usually on purpose. Luckily no one decided to cool off as three rafts unknowingly passed over the 12-foot crocodile that those in the first raft saw go in the water.

Wednesday was the transfer day to Arenal. But not before **Maria** saved Pedro's life! The hotel driveway had a drainage hole that was painted "Pedro's house" (like a mouse hole). Pedro, a lizard, was chilling in the driveway as a bus was pulling in. **Maria** stood in front of the bus to make sure that Pedro did not get run over! The lunch stop was next door to a souvenir shop. We all know about this "tourist trap", so how come so many of us fell into it! Costa Rica has many unusual native woods and the souvenirs made from it include placemats, coasters, belts, purses, puzzles, and more. We made a big dent in the store's inventory, similar to the coffee-buying spree at the grocery store earlier that day. And anywhere **Johanna** was spotted, cash registers were ringing!

Many of us toured a cloud forest via the Arenal Hanging Bridges. The bridges are hung on suspension cables - some over 300 feet above the forest below. The views of the foliage, streams, and Arenal volcano were breathtaking, but you had to wait until no one was walking to get a picture; otherwise the bridge bounced too much to focus! We heard, but didn't see, Howler monkeys - they sound like barking dogs. We smelled, but didn't see, what was described as a "big cat", probably a jaguar.

As we checked into the Tabacon hotel, I was happy to learn that **Maria Elena**, **Mary Ann**, **Bill** and **Adam** did indeed have reservations here instead of at Los Lagos. Unfortunately the tour operator wanted to *confirm* things, so instead of letting them know then, he said he'd call in the morning. Naturally they had unpacked, and were given 10 minutes to get their stuff on the bus, so they could join tours departing for hiking and horseback riding. The thing that made this all worthwhile was that Tabacon is a fabulous hotel with beautiful hot springs rumbling through the grounds, a wonderful spa, and

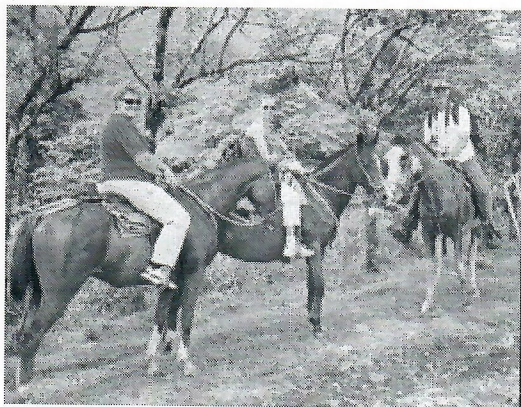
background sounds of regular volcanic eruptions. The volcano wasn't disturbing or frightening at all, but instead exciting to hear, see and know you were so close, yet safe!

Crystal, **Johanna**, **Susan**, and **Marsha** indulged in spa treatments - from facials, reflexology, hot stone massages, to volcanic mud body wraps. Where else do you get to rinse the mud off in a private pool of natural hot springs instead of a sink or shower? The first night we arrived, **Crystal** and **Ray** couldn't wait to try out the springs. Their bruises were proof that you need shoes to keep from falling. Another place you had to be careful not to fall was at La Fortuna waterfall. After a lot of climbing, we reached the waterfall. As some of us played in the water, **Erika** worried about **Adam** when he got behind the waterfall. It is so powerful that it broke someone's neck not long ago. But all was ok with our group.

While we waited for **Adam** to climb back, we laughed at a sign that had a strange combination of rules. It said "Prohibidas las escenas amorosas, no extraer plantas, y no botar basura." I could test your Spanish skills, but I will interpret for you. The sign says - "Love scenes are prohibited, do not take plants and do not throw trash". It was nice to have two people in our group fluent in Spanish - **Maria Elena** and **Mary Ann**. But most of us got along pretty well with the language. Most commonly heard phrases were "Mucho Gusto" - the response to Gracias meaning "my pleasure" - and "20 minutes" which means one hour on American watches!!

Hiking was one of the main events in Arenal - hiking to the waterfall, hiking around the Arenal volcano and a very challenging hike to Cerro Chato volcano. **Ray**, **Mary**, **Roger**, **Nancy** and **Dennis** did the Cerro Chato hike with their guide, Felix, El Gato. While it started gently, it quickly transformed into a steep mountain climb on tree roots. **Mary**, requesting positive feedback from Felix to keep moving up the mountain, quickly tired of the feedback from her fellow hikers. After **Dennis** yelled "Mary you're doing great!" one too many times, she began sharing some of her British insults and humor the rest of the way. It was a great day, but brutally tiring. A trip to the hot springs was just what that group needed after the hike. Horseback riding was popular at both locales and **Mary**, **Roger**,

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Crystal, Barbie, Maria, and Bill did one or more tours. **Barbie** especially liked the one with lunch at the French woman's home.

Friday some of us traveled for hours by van, boat, and two more vans to get to more hanging bridges high in the Monteverde Cloud Forest. The scenery was spectacular, but unfortunately rain kept the colorful birds out of view. That night the TSC clubs celebrated the Fourth of July with a group dinner at the Tabacon. There were no fireworks per se, unless you count Arenal's eruptions – a great substitute!

Saturday morning was free for another hike, shopping, massage or relaxing by the pool, before heading to San Jose where we stayed the night before getting up again at 3:30 am! Oh well, it makes it easier to sleep on the plane – with visions of monkeys iguanas, sloths, volcanoes, hanging bridges, and friendly Costa Ricans in our heads!

I forgot to fill out an injury report (maybe mishap is the better term), so let this be it.

Participant: **Crystal Fryer:**

Incident (s)

1. knocked over and broke Mary Ann's glass of beer
2. had flat tire on mountain bike
3. dropped room key at beach
4. dropped watch at beach
5. lost wallet right outside room
6. almost lost watch when loading bus
7. got big bruise at hot springs
8. her horse had a broken shoe
9. even came to post trip party with sprained ankle!

Seriously, **Crystal** was a real trooper - a new member who survived being the roommate of the trip leader. That should override all of the items above! I really enjoyed being the trip leader for such a nice, fun, easy-going group. Looking at the photos, you will notice a great group of people playing in that tropical paradise and jungle adventure that Costa Rica gave us! Finally, many thanks to new members, **Mary** and **Roger**, for hosting a great post-trip party.

