



# Paradise Found

A group of sea kayakers discovers Costa Rica's natural treasures, despite the threat of sharks, vultures and the dreaded self-rescue.

By Cliff Terry  
Photos by Kathryn Gardner

It had been an uneventful morning as we finished our third hour of sea kayaking along Costa Rica's southern Pacific Coast. The day was sunny and warm, but not scorching — Chamber of Commerce weather — and the ocean itself was smooth and non-threatening.

Now our guide, Doug Tyrrell, instructed us to head for a lunch break at San Josecito, a lovely beach near Corcovado, the country's largest and most remote national park. Between the sea and the sandwiches, however, was a potentially dangerous manoeuvre, especially for novice paddlers. Just offshore was a series of rocks, creating a tricky surf. Only by guiding our boats through a narrow channel of opportunity, Tyrrell told us, would we be able to get onto the beach without mishap. He himself went first, effortlessly, and once on shore, as if lings, life rafts, and a few other things. While just once

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**If You Go**

Water is best to visit Costa Rica, not only because the weather is warm, but because it is also part of the day season — December through April. Five-day and seven-day trips are available. Cost from \$1,200 to \$1,700 includes airfare, meals, the shorter flight and boat transportation between San José and Drake Bay, kayaks and kayaking equipment.

Contact: Gulf Islands Kayaking, 8211 C.E. Gallatin Island, BC V0N 1P0 Tel. (250) 338-2442 Email: kayak@gulfislands.com Website: www.gulfislands.com



— our friends, George and Larry, were total beginners. The four of us had decided to kayak in this small Central American country in February for a reason beyond the obvious one of escaping Chicago's infamous winter. Costa Rica was not only known for its safety and political stability (the military was even abolished in 1948), but for its incredible, enviable record of preserving its unique and diverse ecology — a record certainly unheard of elsewhere in Latin America. In fact, the municipal government in the Osa Peninsula where we were staying had just joined with conservationists in demanding a ban



Columbia, also offered paddling in Costa Rica. We had wanted "adventure travel," but not outrageous adventure. Before deciding again on our B.C. outfitter, we had checked out a Costa Rican company that boasted of opportunities to "zap" into the Tortuga Volcano using ropes and harnesses. Thanks, but no thanks.

Although Costa Rica has become an increasingly popular destination for North Americans, not many folks get beyond the usual: posh resorts, beaches and volcanoes, tennis clubs and golf courses, maybe an easily accessible rainforest. We opted for the path less taken, staying at Drake Bay Wilderness Camp on the Osa Peninsula along the southern Pacific Coast. Compared with the usual gringo venues, it was relatively non-luxurious. Except that this was the first time we'd slept in tents housing actual beds, where the maids came in daily to change the sheets!

After staying Saturday night in San José's small, charming Hotel Grano de Oro, we took a taxi to Hanger Nine at the small Pavas Airport for a 45-minute TaxiAero flight scheduled to leave "somewhere between 8 and 9 a.m." Fat — not exactly a devotee of any kind of flying — distracted herself from the turbulence over the mountains by flipping through her dictionary and learning the Lord's Prayer in Spanish.

It didn't help that the pilot showed up looking quite ruffled, as well as a bit surly, called out of bed at the last minute. During the flight, George, who took the copilot's seat, asked where he would contact the control tower at Drake Bay and was told, "There's only one control tower. It's José."

One afternoon, Tyrrell checked out our kayaking experience or lack thereof, and then on other activities. A couple of days in open-air but, we learned he is based where, when not working as a guide, kayaking, canoeing and other outdoor activities. Tyrrell showed us the self-rescue, and gave us paddling techniques. Sit up, keep your elbows locked — easier to paddle. Kayakers were available in both directions, and we all opted for the forwardly, had vivid memories of arguments about whose

Actually, the sights out the window were spectacular. After crossing the mountains, we headed south down the coast. Until recently, visitors to Drake Bay had flown to a town called Palmar Sur and transferred to boats on the nearby Sierpe River. But treacherous surf prompted a new approach: now the plane flies closer to Drake Bay, touching down on a narrow airstrip. From there, it's about a ten-minute trip by small boat to Drake Bay.

Mid-Sunday morning, we checked into Drake Bay Wilderness Camp, a four-hectare waterfront property owned by Herb Michael, a Wisconsin native, and his wife, Marley, who is a Costa Rican or "tico" as the locals call themselves. We were in for a jolting surprise: they had never heard of us, though we'd reserved the trip two months in advance. Fortunately, with the intercession of Tyrrell, who would be our Gulf Islands Kayaking instructor/guide, accommodations were quickly found.

The kayaking company, a small, 17-year-old outfit based on Galano Island, B.C., has been operating in Costa Rica since 1988. Groups are limited to six people per guide for safety. Unlike our experience in the Gulf Islands, where we paddled from one campsite to another, we used Drake Bay as headquarters for day trips. Overnight camping wasn't possible in the area, we were told, because of the rocky shores and lack of facilities.

As we settled in, all of us admitted later that we were thinking about the neophyte kayaker's worst-case scenario — flipping over without getting trapped underwater — the dreaded "self-rescue" manoeuvre. In the Gulf Islands, Pat and I had encountered unexpected turbulence. Fortunately, our boats hadn't flipped, but as we hesitated to take to the water in Costa Rica, we were always a first time.

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That same day, George and Larry went deep-sea fishing with a local guide. "Fish were jumping into the boat," they told us after bringing back yellow-fin tuna (which the chefs cooked for lunch), bonita and a ferocious-looking, 68-gg dogtooth snapper.

Still another day, all of us climbed into a motorboat for a hike in the 41,064-hectare Corcovado National Park. This amazing park hosts the highest population of scarlet macaws in Central America and is home to almost 400 species of birds, 140 mammals (including jaguars, tapirs, ocelots, peccaries and giant anteaters), 117 species of reptiles and amphibians, 40 kinds of freshwater fish and over 500 species of trees.

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kayak in shallow water. "Some people have trouble balancing," he noted. "And there are a few people who just don't belong in a kayak."

George and Larry chose to stay in the camp's cabins, while Fat and I settled into a roomy tent complete with electric fans, perhaps 15 metres from the sea, where waves pounded against the rocks at high tide. And it was only a short walk

Self practice on Drake Bay. The wilderness camp is built on the Pacific side of Costa Rica, where the waters are warm, but the surf can be tricky. Kayakers practice self-rescue and handling for low and safety.

we hiked to nearby Rio Claro, where we swam and hiked to its waterfall and pool. During our kayaking, on the ocean and the Rio Aguillas, we saw squirrel monkeys and howler monkeys, a huge iguana, and all kinds of birds, although our guide, of course, saw many more. Among those we did spot were the brown booby, great kiskadee, yellow-crowned night heron, neotropic cormorant, scarlet-rumped tanager, black-throated trogon, red-legged honeycreeper, chestnut-backed antbird, great antbird and a magnificent frigatebird (fittingly, the "magnificent" is part of its name).

Those times we weren't paddling were easily filled with other activities. One morning during a hike to a nearby village, my wife and I encountered a local woman who, Fat discovered through practising her Spanish, was an artist. Inviting us to her "finca" to see her work, she sold us a lovely "mala," a colourful textile usually associated with Panama's San Blas Indians. She even trusted us to pay for it later at a resort where she displays her art.

One morning, two of us joined Doug in a very early morning bird walk, where he pointed out — and we actually saw — such beauties as a white-tipped dove, violaceous trogon, chestnut-mantled toucan and lined woodpecker. Best of all was the fascinating orange-collared manakin, which we spotted in a thicker out during the mating courtship, three males do a frenzied little dance, and the female chooses the best dancer.

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Accommodations at the Drake Bay Wilderness Camp are either in cabins or rooms built with the use of palm fronds. Parked on a site overlooking the ocean, the palm and other lush growth helped shade the tent, but an electric fan was an added comfort.

Other non-paddling options (at additional cost) include horseback riding to a nearby butterfly farm and a boat trip to Cabo Island Biological Reserve, 20 km off the coast. The island features five coral reefs with more than 15 species of stony corals, making it an excellent diving and snorkelling location. Originally an offshore burial ground for indigenous peoples, Cabo claims to be the inspiration for Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*.

It was kayaking, though, that always drew us back. Especially Larry, who'd "found his rhythm." One morning, before we knew it, he was so far ahead of us that he couldn't hear Tyrrell yelling. This from a guy who'd initially been quite nervous about tipping and being pursued by sharks.

By the final day of paddling, we were moderately proficient and reasonably confident. Best of all, there hadn't been a single disastrous moment or the need for self-rescue. On that last afternoon, cooled by a light breeze, we watched the impressive flight formation of brown pelicans, known locally as "the Costa Rican air force," followed a while later by a pair of brilliant scarlet macaws, with their distinctive silhouette outlined against the tropical sky. "Just another day in paradise," someone quipped.

No one disagreed.

Cliff Terry, a former staff writer of the *Chicago Tribune*, is a Chicago-based freelance.

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SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 1999

## Paradise Found

A group of sea kayakers discovers Costa Rica's natural treasures, despite the threat of sharks, vultures and the dreaded self-rescue.

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**I**t had been an uneventful morning as we finished our third hour of sea kayaking along Costa Rica's southern Pacific coast. The day was sunny and warm, but not scorching—Chamber of Commerce weather—and the ocean itself was smooth and non-threatening.

Now our Canadian guide, Doug Tyrrell, instructed us to head for a lunch break at San Josecito, a lovely beach near Corcovado, the country's largest and most remote national park. Between the sea and the sandwiches, however, was a potentially dangerous maneuver, especially for novice paddlers. Just off the shore was a series of rocks, creating a tricky surf. Only by guiding our boats through a narrow channel of opportunity, Tyrrell told us, would we be able to get onto the beach without mishap. He himself went first, effortlessly, and once on shore, proceeded to direct us, one by one, as if he were overseeing a quartet of baby ducks. Meanwhile, we were "paddling in place," frantically trying to make sure we didn't crash into the boat ahead of us and/or get sucked into those rocks. Adrenaline fired up, we paddled through the waves, and through our guide's leadership skill and/or our dumb luck, we managed to make it to the welcoming sand and build our rather shaky confidence.

While my wife, Pat, and I had sea kayaked just once—in the Gulf Islands near Vancouver—our friends, George and Larry, were total beginners. The four of us had decided to kayak in this small Central American country in February for a reason beyond the obvious one: escaping Chicago's infamous winter. (Canadians, I suspect, know the feeling.) Costa Rica was not only known for its safety and political stability (the military was even abolished in 1948) but for its incredible, enviable record of preserving its unique and diverse ecology—a record certainly unheard of elsewhere in Latin America. In fact, the municipal government in the Osa Peninsula area where we were staying had just joined conservationists in demanding a ban on logging.

With this enlightened approach to conservation—about 27 percent of the country is protected in one form or another, and over 11 percent lies within the national park system—it has become appropriately known as the "Wildlife Sanctuary of the Americas." This, in turn, leads to ever-increasing opportunities for those seeking ecotourism and diverse outdoor experiences.

Pat and I chose the trip after learning that Gulf Islands Kayaking, our outfitter in British Columbia, also offered paddling in Costa Rica. We had wanted

“adventure travel,” but not outrageous adventure. Before deciding again on Gulf Islands, we had checked out a Costa Rican company that boasted of opportunities to “rappel into the Turrialba Volcano using ropes and harnesses.” Thank you very much.

Although Costa Rica has become an increasingly popular destination for North Americans, not many folks get beyond the usual: posh resorts, beaches and volcanoes, tennis clubs and golf courses, maybe an easily-accessible rainforest. We opted for the path less taken, staying at Drake Bay Wilderness Camp on the Osa peninsula along the southern Pacific coast. Compared with the usual gringo venues, it was relatively non-luxurious. Except that this was the first time we’d slept in tents housing actual beds, where the maids came in daily to change the sheets! (The fact that they didn’t leave mints on the pillows perhaps accounts for the “wilderness” designation.)

After staying Saturday night in San Jose’s small, charming Hotel Grano de Oro, we took a taxi to Hanger Nine at the small Pavas Airport for a 45-minute TaxiAero (spelling is ok) flight scheduled to leave “somewhere between 8 and 9 a.m.” Pat—not exactly a devotee of any kind of flying—distracted herself from the turbulence over the mountains by flipping through her dictionary and learning the Lord’s Prayer in Spanish.

It didn’t help that the pilot showed up looking quite ruffled, as well as a bit surly, called out of bed at the last minute. During the flight, George, who took the co-pilot’s seat,

asked when he would contact the control tower at Drake Bay and was told, “There’s only one control tower (San Jose) in the whole country.”

Actually, the sights out the window were spectacular. After crossing the mountains, we headed south down the coast. Until recently, visitors to Drake Bay had flown to a town called Palmar Sur and transferred into boats on the nearby Sierpe River. But treacherous surf—over the years 15 people had died getting in or out of the boats, we were causally told—prompted a new approach: Now the plane flies closer to Drake Bay, touching down on a narrow airstrip. From there, it’s about a 10-minute trip by small boat to Drake Bay (visited by Sir Francis Drake in 1579 during his circumnavigation of the globe).

Mid-Sunday morning, we checked into Drake Bay Wilderness Camp, a 10-acre waterfront property owned by Herb Michaud, a Wisconsin native, who previously ran a Florida trailer camp, of all things, and his wife, Marleny, who is Costa Rican or “tico” (a local, non-pejorative nickname). We were in for a



Photo by Pat Terry



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jolting surprise: They had never heard of us, though we'd reserved the trip two months before. Fortunately, with the intercession of Tyrrell, who would be our Gulf Islands kayaking instructor/guide, accommodations were quickly found.

The kayaking company, a small, 17-year-old outfit based on Galiano Island, B.C., has been operating in Costa Rica since 1988. Groups are limited to six persons per guide for safety. Unlike our experience in Canada, where we paddled from one campsite to another, we used Drake Bay as headquarters for day trips. Overnight camping wasn't possible in the area, we were told, because of the rocky shores and lack of facilities.

As we settled in, all of us admitted later that we were thinking about the neophyte kayaker's worst-case scenario—flipping over without getting trapped underwater—the dreaded “self-rescue” maneuver. In the Gulf Islands, Pat and I had encountered unexpected turbulence, otherwise known as a tide rip. Fortunately, our boats hadn't

flipped, but as we were about to take to the water in Costa Rica, we knew there was always a first time.

Sunday afternoon, Tyrrell checked out our level of kayaking experience or lack thereof, and filled us in on other activities. A couple of days later, over a few Imperials (the fine local beer) in the camp's open-air bar, we learned he is based in Victoria, where, when not working as a guide, he teaches kayaking, canoeing and other outdoor skills at a private school.

After the requisite safety lecture, he showed us how to perform the self-rescue, as well as giving pointers on proper paddling techniques. (Sit up straight, and keep your elbow locked—easier said than done.) Kayaks were available in both singles and doubles, and we all opted for the former. Pat and I, particularly, had vivid memories of our many canoe-trip arguments about whose fault it was that we'd crashed into the shore.

Tyrrell then took us for a short “shakedown” cruise on the Rio Agujitas, just outside the resort, to get us used to the feel of the kayak before the next day's paddle on open seas. This trip also provided looks at what was the beginning of an impressive variety of birds and animals, as we spotted a bare-throated tiger heron, blue-crowned motmot and a family of howler monkeys. Drake Bay itself is known for its predictably calm seas and light winds. The sun, he said, would be our biggest problem, so we'd be on the water only in the early morning and late afternoons. Oh, yes: There were white-tipped sharks out there, but not to worry.

On our Monday morning maiden voyage, half a dozen black vultures circled ominously overhead, as we paddled out into the ocean. It was bright

and warm, with a welcome but not intrusive breeze. Our half-day trip covered about four miles, as we headed down the coast in the direction of Corcovado National Park. After an hour or so, our initial apprehension started to wane, as we established our individual rhythms. Periodically, Tyrrell would offer tactful but pointed suggestions. (In my case, I was “rolling my wrists,” which apparently is not a good thing.)

On our Vancouver trip, our guide had told us that while rolling was common in river kayaking, where the boats were lighter, he had never seen a double sea kayak capsize. “I had a single do that twice,” he added, “but the occupants were aggressively macho males in their 20s.”

In 10 years of leading sea kayak trips, Tyrrell told us after we arrived safely back at camp, he never needed to execute a rescue on the open water. In fact, he had seen only seven or eight people flip over—all getting in and out of the kayak in shallow water. “Some people have trouble balancing,” he noted. “And there are a few people who just don’t belong in a kayak.” His client list includes a woman who was eight months’ pregnant (he gave her a kayak with an especially wide opening), and a 79-year-old who was along for a day trip. (“If they can get in and out of the boat, it’s fine.”)

George and Larry chose to stay in the camp’s cabins, while Pat and I settled into a roomy tent (complete with electric fan), perhaps 15 yards from the sea, where waves pounded against the rocks at high tide. And it was only a short walk to the modern indoor bathroom facilities that included hot-water showers. Another bonus, some said, was the presence of playful resident squirrel monkeys, who readily greeted, and climbed on, the guests.

“They’re really cute,” a staff member told us, “until they pee on your head.”

Meals were simple and delicious, with fresh tropical fruits, vegetables, homemade breads and desserts, the ubiquitous gallo pinto or “spotted rooster” (a native dish of rice and black beans) and the wonderful, strong Costa Rican coffee. Breakfast offerings included cereal, pancakes and eggs cooked to order. Lunches—sandwiches, fruit—were packed for day excursions, and for dinner there was fresh-caught fish, chicken, vegetables and fruit. Every afternoon at 5:30 (more or less) in the charming, open-air, fully stocked bar, we sampled hors d’oeuvres or “bocas” (which literally means “mouth”), which could be everything from the mundane (pizza, raw veggies) to the exotic (just-caught hunks of barracuda—which led to jokes about its “tasting like chicken.”)

During the week, Tyrrell taught us such skills as how to “brace”—getting into and out of the kayak using your paddle for leverage. One day we took a long paddle, a round trip of perhaps nine miles, stopping for that lunch on the San Josecito beach after battling the surf. Afterwards, we hiked to nearby Rio Claro, where we swam and hiked to its waterfall and pool.

During our kayaking, on the ocean and the Rio Agujitas, we saw squirrel monkeys and howler monkeys, a huge iguana, and all kinds of birds, although our guide, of course, saw many more. (By the time our binoculars located the tree, much less the creature, it was long gone.) Among those we did spot were the brown booby, great kiskadee, yellow-crowned night heron, neotropic cormorant, spotted sandpiper, scarlet-rumped tanager, black-throated trogon, red-legged honeycreeper, chestnut-backed

antbird, great antshrike and a magnificent frigate bird (fittingly, the “magnificent” is part of its name).

Those times we weren't paddling were easily filled with other activities. One morning during a hike to a nearby village, my wife and I encountered a local woman who, Pat found out through practicing her Spanish, was an artist. Inviting us to her “finca” to see her work, she sold us a lovely mola (a colorful textile usually associated with Panama's San Blas Indians). She even trusted us to pay for it later at a resort where she displays her art. Another day we hiked into the jungle where a young American entomologist was building a spectacular house, with materials brought in by ox cart.

Another morning, two of us joined Doug in a very early morning bird walk, where he pointed out—and we actually saw—such beauties as a white-tipped dove, violaceous trogon, chestnut-mandibled toucan and lineated woodpecker. Best of all was the fascinating orange-collared manakin, which we spotted in a thicket our guide called “a “nightclub for manakins.” (During the mating courtship, three males do a frenzied little dance, and the female chooses the best dancer.)

That same day, George and Larry went deep-sea fishing with a local guide. “Fish were jumping into the boat,” they told us after bringing back yellow-fin tuna (which the chefs cooked for lunch) bonita and a ferocious-looking, 150-pound dogtooth snapper.

Still another day, all of us climbed in a motorboat for a hike in the 103,000-acre Corcovado National

Park, which hosts the highest population of scarlet macaws in Central America and is home to almost 400 species of birds, 140 mammals (including jaguars, tapirs, ocelot, peccaries and giant anteaters), 117 species of reptiles and amphibians, 40 kinds of fresh-water fish and over 500 species of trees.

Under the leadership of William, an excellent Costa Rican guide, we saw, among other things, spider monkeys, white-faced Capuchin monkeys (which William once saw kill a boa by ganging up and biting it to death), an agouti (a rabbit-like rodent), the ingenious leaf-cutter ants, the beautiful blue morpho butterfly, an Indian burial ground (3,000 were killed there by gold-seeking Spaniards), and many varieties of trees, including hearts of palm, strangler figs and balsa (used for making everything from masks to pillows).

Other non-paddling options (at additional cost) include horseback riding to a nearby butterfly farm and a boat trip to Caño Island Biological Reserve, 20 km. off the coast. The island features five coral reefs with more than 15 species of stony corals, making it an excellent diving and snorkeling location. Originally an offshore burial ground for indigenous peoples, Caño claims to be the inspiration for Robert Louis Stevenson's “Treasure Island.”

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