



The Costa with coffee and so



Grassroots event rider **LOUISE CLOVER** visits Costa Rica, where she finds herself blown away by the wildlife and having to face her fear of spiders

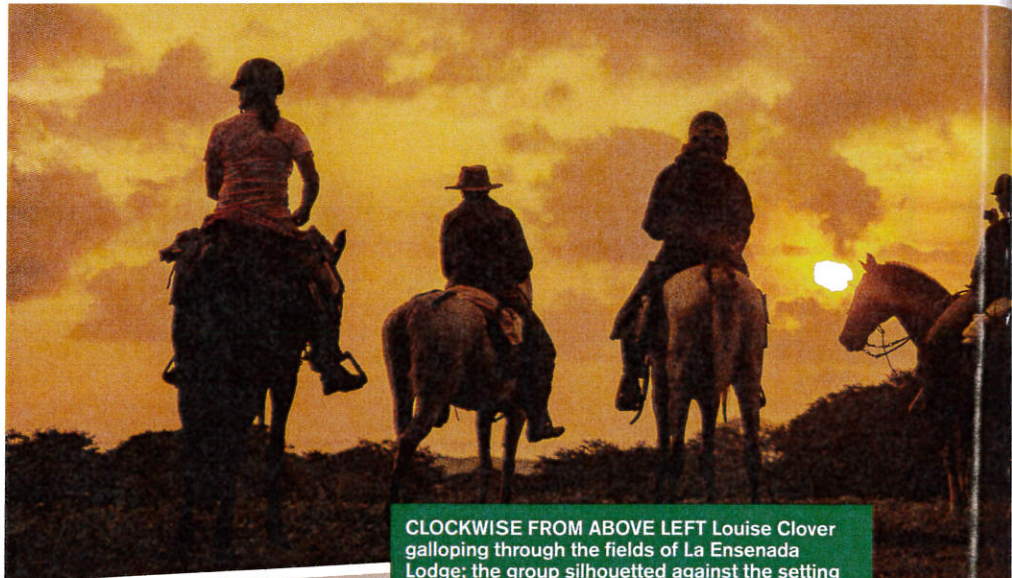
MY husband, Duncan, and I are dangerous sports junkies. Duncan loves single-handed sailing, his last venture taking him across the Atlantic and back in a 30ft boat.

My adrenaline kick is eventing. I breed and ride my own eventers. To fund my expensive passion I work full time for the Harbour Master at Suffolk Yacht Harbour. I have an AI and in the past I evented up to two-star level but I now only tackle grassroots events with my young home-bred horses.

Having taken Duncan on a budget sojourn riding in the Andes in Ecuador that included a trip on a boat to the Galápagos (of course), this time I plump for a solo adventure in Costa Rica.

This relatively small country lies in Central America between Nicaragua and Panama, with less than 50 miles separating its Pacific and Caribbean Sea coastlines. The diverse terrain is rich in flora and fauna and offers active people with a love of the outdoors abundant wildlife, birds and butterflies. Ticos, the local inhabitants, are friendly and welcoming, and with plenty to see and do for all ages a great holiday is guaranteed.

I duly say my goodbyes and leave my horses with my sister and mum and my beloved lurcher with Duncan who offers plenty of advice — he once was, you see, a charter skipper in the Caribbean. After a long flight via the States I arrive at San Jose late in the evening and bump straight into two delightful Canadians, Shawn, a professional photographer and writer, and her friend Ali. With our suitcases bedded down at the super El Rodeo



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT Louise Clover galloping through the fields of La Ensenada Lodge; the group silhouetted against the setting sun from a high vantage point a short ride from Maravilla; on horseback under a colourful sky



are well suited to the terrain we expect to tackle later, including humid jungle, mountainous trails, volcanic beaches and rainforest. Your average competition horse would be made to look like a real wimp.

Imagine, though, my surprise when I am given La Pinta, a 13.2hh coloured pony whose best pace is jogging.

You have to love black beans

So we jog along to Maravilla, our home for three days, through rainforest paths with hardwood and softwood trees, ficus and Guanacaste trees (Costa Rica's national tree), glorious orchids and blossoms — a colourful assault on the senses.

At Maravilla we enjoy wholesome Costa Rican food cooked by Anna three times a day, with traditional black beans and rice accompanying every meal. I hate baked beans but find these edible. The delicious coffee Costa Rica is famous for is drunk ad lib and alcohol of any description just has to be sampled. Hammock life on the verandah is a must but beware as you can find yourself 'butt down' looking up at it.

On the second humid day I change horses to Muneca, a 15.2hh bay mare. We trot down a dusty road

hacienda style hotel, we hit the town, starting as we mean to go on and staying at the beach bar until our eyes are shutting with exhaustion. As we stagger back to our hotel we are heartened to hear that this city is relatively safe and boasts a low crime rate. What a relief.

After a hearty breakfast overlooking the pool, we meet our group — Christoph, Estelle and Mireille from France, Steffy (my room mate) from Luxembourg, Dawn from Ohio and Janie and William from England.

My trepidation and fear of the unknown — especially tropical creepy crawlies — is rapidly dispelled on this first day by our fun-loving guide, Hector.

After a jaunt to stretch our legs around the small town of Orotina, with its fruit and veg markets and old fashioned hardware stores that sell everything, including essential alcohol, we find our horses near some ancient Mayan rock carvings.

Our mounts, who are mostly Quarter Horse cross Criollo and ridden in western tack with mainly bitless bridles, are all sure-footed, have amazing stamina and



Louise and La Pinta lead the group after a gallop on a beach located a day's ride from Maravilla



much more



Dawn from Ohio and Christoph from France watch the stunning sunset over La Ensenada Lodge



Costa Rican locals – Ticos – are always friendly and welcoming to the riders

and come across workers in a melon field who give us their fruit to guzzle — horses and humans. This is true ‘pick your own’ country with papaya, pineapple, guava, bananas and plantains in abundance.

Over the next few days we discover that this lovely country has a simple, laid back way of life, not to mention phenomenon wildlife — crocodiles, showing off their huge pearly whites while sunbathing on the river banks, a Jesus Christ lizard walking on water with a wiggly gait and myriad birds, including the endangered red scarlet macaws. On an early-morning twitching walk our guide, Jean Jacques, calls the birds down with an iPod imitating their calls. This is a new use for technology to me.

Another day brings an exciting gallop along a wide sweeping beach as the tide is out. This is accessed via steep rocky cliffs. The horses are tied to a coconut tree and lunch is served beside a straw-roofed beach hut so that we can soak up the view, eat at our leisure and wash things down with far too much tequila.

On the last day we ride over farmland and wade through streams. We come to a sheer precipice with a fast flowing river below. Everyone teeters on the brink — it is a long way down — but someone braves it and slithers over the edge and is quickly out of sight, followed by me on Muneca. The rest slide along behind. Our reward is a walk through tall grass reeds and a cooling swim in the river. However, the only way out is back up the mountain. Tiring stuff.

Run for your life

We say goodbye to our horses and move on by bus to Arenal via Monteverde cloud forest. We drive over roads with potholes

so big you could get lost in them — thankfully we don’t and we arrive at Montechiari Hotel unscathed. Here we stay in wooden chalets with an overwhelming view of Arenal Volcano. The communal breakfast area is mostly opened sided with a straw roof, the end wall magnificently hand painted with native birds.

The following morning we walk up to Arenal base through the rainforest. Jean Jacques tells us all about the fungus, snakes, turtles, spider monkeys and toucans that we encounter to name but a few. His encyclopedic knowledge is truly impressive.

Hector taps out a poisonous spider — my one fear — so I leg it at this point.

We reach the summit and then head on to Paradise Hot Springs in La Fortuna. Here the water from the volcano is pumped into various hot pools so we soak ourselves and resemble beached whales. This is the ultimate hot tub.



Retail Costa Rican style — or near La Ensenada to be precise

We move on by bus past Arenal lake and on to the Pan American highway which runs through the whole of Costa Rica right up to Alaska. We stop at La Ensenada Lodge, an 800-acre wildlife refuge on the Pacific coast at the Gulf of Nicoya. Cattle are raised here for milk, meat and rodeo riding — something I have always wanted to master.

On my first night here I manage to fall out of bed in surprise when a Howler monkey sitting on our roof lets out a blood-curdling cry in the early hours. Reminder to self — engage brain before legs.

The thatched restaurant with open air sides churns out meals with those obligatory staples, black beans and rice, which are scrumptious and ample for those with a big appetite like me.

This area is very dry and hot, with an abundance of scorpions, enormous cockroaches and spiders if you look hard enough but thankfully I have come here armed with Jungle Formula and After Bite which are enough to send any creepy crawlies running.

On a ride back from the salt pans I break a golden rule. As Hector stops by a local ice cream wheelbarrow and orders homemade lemonade I drink the water. You never should but I’ve lived to tell the tale.

Another day brings a La Ensenada boat trip around the black and white mangroves where we see ospreys hunting, as well as herons, snowy egrets, pelicans and crabs. The skipper gets the boat stuck on the sand bank but with much reviving we make it back to the jetty and don’t have to swim for it.

Pura vida (Spanish for ‘pure life’) sums up this vibrant country which the Ticos generously share. The wonderfully diverse ecosystems and stunning surroundings are clean and free from pollution and make this environmentally friendly adventure perfect for the enterprising rider. I would return at the drop of a hat.

I arrive back in England to find all of my furrries safe and sound. Beautiful Costa Rica has definitely fired me with enthusiasm for the 2014 eventing season.

■ Louise Clover’s holiday in Costa Rica was arranged by In The Saddle (www.inthesaddle.com).