

Driver Guido scales a tree to bring us coconuts



An inquisitive coatimundi — encountered on the road around Lake Arenal

A wealth of wildlife, the best coffee in the world and more than 12 climates in one country, there was no slouching in the saddle for **ABIGAIL BUTCHER** when she visited Costa Rica

Riding high



Heading for the Pacific Coast: this lush, green landscape turns to arid desert during the dry season



A rain frog in the cloud forest at Monteverde

ONE of the joys for me of riding in the British countryside is the wildlife you get to see: robins in hedgerows, rabbits basking on grassy banks in the sunshine, deer standing aloof but still; horses don't alarm them as cars or human voices do. Imagine then, what you get to see in Costa Rica, which has more wildlife per square foot than any other country in the world.

Bordered by Nicaragua to the north and Panama to the south, this Central American country is about the size of Wales. With the Caribbean Sea on one side, the Pacific Ocean on the other, numerous volcanoes, mountains and tropical rain forests, Costa Rica has 12 "life zones" within which there are several types of habitat — each with its own particular animal, bird and plant life. Hopefully, you are beginning to gain some kind of idea of how utterly exhilarating this place is. Holiday destinations rarely come more exotic.

Horses are integral to life in Costa Rica — they are a working beast but also a status symbol. Ride along a roadside and you're more likely to see a horse tied to a tree in the garden than a car parked in the drive.

One of the best ways to see the country is from horseback, and as a consequence of the increasing tourist industry, an abundance of outfitters have sprung up to cope with



My Maravilla mount: Colorado, the Criollo



Jose Romero, guide extraordinaire, with the Costa Rican Paso Fino stallion at Los Inocentes

demand. Some are excellent and other totally unscrupulous with over-worked and underfed horses. Even the *Lonely Planet* guide to Costa Rica warns visitors to choose carefully.

EcoSafari Riding Expeditions, owned and run by Fabio Salas, is the former, and its pièce de résistance is the "Costa Rican Odyssey", which I joined last July.

Lasting for nine days and covering three contrasting regions, the odyssey begins in the Pacific Coastal region on the Salas family's estate. Here, guests stay for four nights at Hacienda La Maravilla. An old family holiday home, totally off the beaten track, it is a stark contrast to the hotels and destinations for the rest of the trip.

Before I left the UK, my boyfriend had urged me to keep a list of the birds I saw because Costa Rica is famed for its bird life. I managed, after a fashion, to keep it up for just a couple of hours.

But having in that short time spied a least pygmy-owl, turquoise-browed motmot, black-headed trogon, white-throated magpie jay, inca doves, black-headed vultures, turkey vultures, white-crested guan, a mangrove hawk (eating a crab), snow egret, crested guan, black-bellied whistling duck, scarlet macaw, brown pelicans, green-backed heron and great kiskadee, white ibis and cattle egret, I found juggling such plentiful data, a bottle of water, a notebook and a sweaty horse impossible.

I tried to keep a list of birds we saw but managed, due to sheer numbers, just a couple of hours

Our guide for the week was Jose Romero. What he doesn't know about Costa Rica isn't worth knowing. Throughout the trip, he points out insects, birds, mammals, plants and flowers that would have gone by unnoticed to our untrained eye; he's passionate.

Jose leads the way and Ademar, a cousin of Fabio's who owns some of the horses we



Geldings are herded to fresh pastures at Los Inocentes —there are 140 horses here in total

are riding, brings up the rear. While Jose is fluent in English (Spanish is spoken here), Ademar is the horseman. Quiet, self-contained and kind; his horses trust him completely.

At Maravilla, we are mostly riding Costa Rican's native Criollo horses. A hardy little animal of 14hh-15hh, the Criollo has developed and adapted over centuries to suit perfectly the demands put upon it. Easy to handle, utterly surefooted, quiet but fearless, it is mainly used for cattle work and now tourism.

My horse, Colorado, was new to Fabio's string. A handsome bay, he walked, trotted, cantered, and galloped and also paced — that wonderful, smooth extension of a trot, perfect for covering the ground.

From Maravilla we rode along the beaches of the Pacific Coast, through mango plantations and across the family's farms — sometimes having to hack our way through undergrowth. We rode for between four and six hours each day, using Western saddles and bitless bridles, taking constant breaks in shady areas.

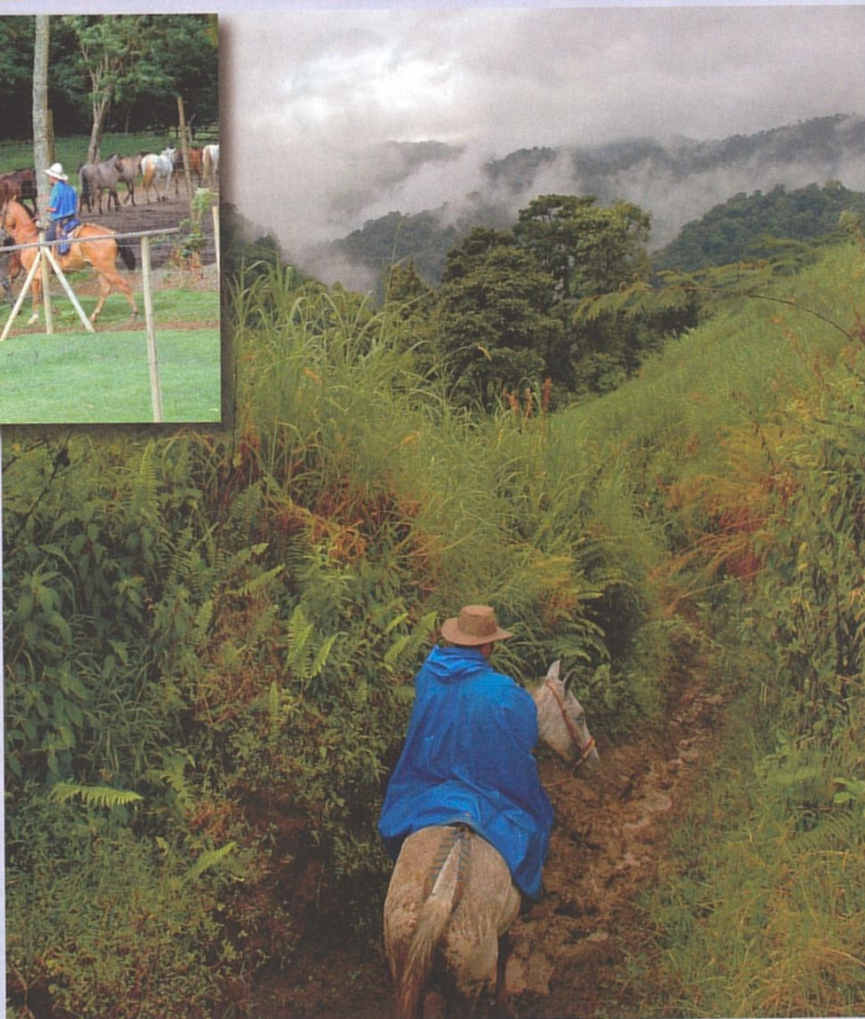
I wrote a comprehensive diary and am sad not to be able to recount it fully — galloping along the volcanic sandy beach (in fact more of a race with Ademar); wading along the river while howler monkeys peed on us from the trees above to warn us from their territory; climbing down a sheer hillside to a lush, hidden valley on Ademar's land; watching insects mimicking thorns on the branch of a tree.

Back at Maravilla at the end of each day, we washed the horses down thoroughly and fed them oats before releasing them in the field. Then it was time for a cold beer, a refreshing shower and loll in the hammock before supper. Bliss.

Mealtimes at Maravilla were a real highlight. Ademar's wife, Nichi, caters for guests at the family lodge and she spoiled us with proper home cooking.

Breakfast was fruit — papaya and banana — with juice, homemade pancakes, ham, eggs and "gallo pinto". Literally translating as "spotted rooster", gallo pinto is practically the Costa Rican staple dish. It is refried rice with beans, spiced and tasty — best eaten with local salsa (a far superior version of our Worcester sauce).

Lunches and dinners were equally sumptuous,



Descending from Monteverde to Arenal: ponchos, tied to every Costa Rican saddle, come in useful

with delicately marinated meat stews, chicken, vegetables, salads, fried plantain, squashes, beans, rice and cheese; all usually rounded off with a type of custard or milk pudding. All meals are washed down with glorious coffee. Until just a few years ago, coffee production was the number one industry in Costa Rica — it has now been overtaken by tourism.

One evening, during one of Jose's post-supper nature lessons, I mentioned my terror of spiders. Bad move. He jumped up and spent an hour searching holes in the garden for tarantulas. Finding one eventually, he beckoned me over, and we sat silently while he taps one side of the hole, very lightly, with a stick, to lure the spider out.

and the horses with whom we had formed a strong bond. But we hopped into the minibus — kept immaculate during the trip by Guido, our driver — and headed for Monteverde in the north-west. As we climbed the mountainside, into the cloud, the temperature dropped. Monteverde, a tourist hotspot, is in the "cloud forest". Encompassing six differing ecological life zones, it is situated where moist air blows in from the warm Pacific coast, and is consequently covered in a perpetual mist.

The hotel we stayed in for the night is very plush, but however welcome this comfort after a long drive, we nevertheless pined for Maravilla. The gallo pinto at breakfast was mass-produced and not a patch on Nichi's.

After an early start, we piled into 4x4s and climbed up rough, steep, unmade roads to meet the horses, but the terrain causes scant concern.

My next horse was a palomino and is imaginatively named Palomino (my last one, Colorado, means red —

they keep names simple out here). These too are Criollo, but more compact and workmanlike. It was raining, so we put on the brightly coloured ponchos that are tied to every Costa Rican saddle and set off down a near-vertical trail. Palomino gallantly ploughed through hock-deep mud, which I hated to begin with but Jose repeated: "Just trust in the horse." As we began to relax, we also realised

☛ Coffee was the number one industry in Costa Rica, but has been overtaken by tourism ☚

Sure enough, the tarantula appears for long enough to allow me to take a

picture, before shooting back to safety. And where did he learn to do this, I asked: "on the BBC" he replied, with hoots of laughter. It was with great sadness that we moved on from Maravilla, leaving behind Ademar, Nichi



The beautiful steeds at Los Inocentes — I fell in love with Ruco (far right)



Black sands of the volcanic Pacific coast: a quiet moment before a wild race along the beach

that although this trip – from Monteverde to the foot of the Arenal volcano – is hard on these horses, they are not unhappy.

We rode through the rainforest, crossing raging rivers and, nearing the valley floor, through fields cleared by deforestation. What I learnt in geography classes is right here before my eyes. Like many other countries of the world, most of Costa Rica's forests have disappeared, so conservation is now a key issue here.

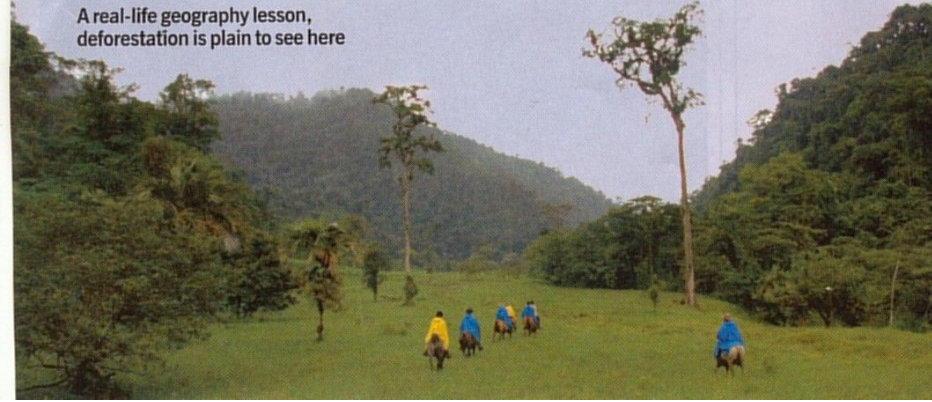
The horses picked up speed as we reached the flat; despite having done the trail twice that day (we later learnt they travelled up at dawn to collect us) they are full of energy and strong – the ride ended with a race round the edge of Laguna de Arenal, a man-made lake.

The night is spent at the simple but clean Arenal Hotel, where there is finally time to relax during the afternoon and take a walk – again to spot wildlife. Here I saw something I have long wanted to – a hummingbird taking nectar from a flower. And as darkness fell I was amazed by the croaks echoing around the mountainsides – Costa Rica is home to an abundance of frogs, one my favourite creatures.

The hotel gives a bird's eye view across the lake to Arenal, one of the world's most active volcanos. Before dinner we sat watching it erupt (an almost daily occurrence) – bright red lava rocks tumbling down through the darkness.

We saw Arenal up close in the morning – after a hike on foot through the national park (horses are not allowed in national parks here) – and it was still erupting. And then, on a visit to nearby volcanic hot springs, we took

A real-life geography lesson, deforestation is plain to see here

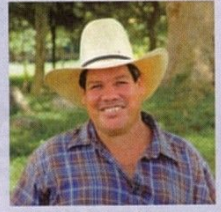


a dip in the warm waters and I treated myself to a traditional hot stone massage. It was heavenly after seven days in the saddle and I fell asleep twice in 45min.

Eating lunch in the restaurant at the hot springs, we watched a family of spider monkeys leap from branch to branch; it was mesmerizing – I found them very endearing despite their name. On the drive to our final destination, we passed a coatimundi (a member of the raccoon family) on the road – it all served as a vibrant reminder of how much there is to see in this world.

The riding odyssey comes to an end at Los Inocentes Hacienda and Wildlife Conservation Centre in the tropical, moist forest life zone, near the Nicaraguan border.

I have mixed feelings: although here I found my favourite horse, it was the slowest riding. Having got used to crossing raging rapids, cutting through undergrowth with machetes, scrabbling up and down sheer rock faces, galloping flat-out at every opportunity, hacking around the orange plantations seemed tame by comparison.



Ademar Salas: horses trust him implicitly

An old family hacienda, Los Inocentes has some 2,600 acres of forest, plantation and grassland, and about 140 horses by which to enjoy it. The place is quite American in its outlook to liability, so we were limited to walking and trotting and asked to sign disclaimers.

This time my horse isn't named after its colour. It's called Ruco, Spanish for "nag". Not that he looks ordinary. Like all the horses at Los Inocentes he is stunning; a cross between Quarter Horse and Criollo with either Thoroughbred or Paso Fino, they are

COSTS AND CONTACTS

■ THE Costa Rica Riding Odyssey costs from £1,995 with In The Saddle (tel: 01299 272997), including all flights, transfers, nine nights' accommodation, all meals, riding and drinks at Maravilla.

■ ALMOST all year round, temperatures range from 15°C in the highlands to 30°C by the coastal areas. Costa Rica is very different, but just as interesting, in the rainy season (when we visited, June-October), to the dry season (November-April), when the countryside is dry and barren.

■ ALTHOUGH the sun may not shine all day, when it does it is very strong – so high-factor sun screen is advised.

■ THE humidity is high, so cotton riding trousers, light cotton shirts and half chaps are ideal. I found linen shirts tied over summer vest tops perfect – it's not always suitable to ride without sleeves in dense undergrowth, surrounded by spiders. Footwear should be light, waterproof and suitable for riding and walking – Ariat's terrain boots are ideal. Take a hard hat – with a round-brimmed cover to shade from the sun – to keep you safe on the gallops and also from trees and branches.

■ ACCOMMODATION varies, but is mainly simple, and always clean. There is a single supplement, and single guests at Maravilla may be required to share.

■ WATER is essential, and I found that a 1litre collapsible bottle, bought in a UK camping shop, was perfect. Water is provided along the route, as are saddlebags and ponchos – even in the rainy season it is not necessary to take waterproof clothing.

much bigger than our previous mounts – between 16hh and 16.3hh.

But there is a reason for the gentle pace. This is a wildlife conservation centre and the rewards for the observant are rich. During my last hour in the saddle I saw toucans (made famous by the Guinness brand), a two-toed sloth, a tammirillo anteater, white-faced Capachin monkeys, howler monkeys and spider monkeys, to name just a few. It was a wildlife feast.

The last night of the trip was spent in a city hotel in San Jose. The impersonal, bustling surroundings seemed worlds away from the past 10 days and the contrast came as a shock. Eating dinner with my fellow riders, we were barely able to make conversation so exhausted were we from what was truly the trip of a lifetime.

A Costa Rican catchphrase is "pura vida", literally translating to "pure life" but meaning "don't worry, be happy". You can see why.

I promised myself at the start of the trip that I wouldn't be one of those bores who begins each sentence with: "When I was in...".

But I have a nasty feeling that, for the foreseeable future at least, my friends and family will all hear quite a bit of: "When I was in Costa Rica..." H&H