

TRAVEL

Family finds adventure in rain forest of Costa Rica

BY ROGER WHEELER
SPECIAL WRITER

"What," begins the proverbial question "did you do over your Christmas vacation?"

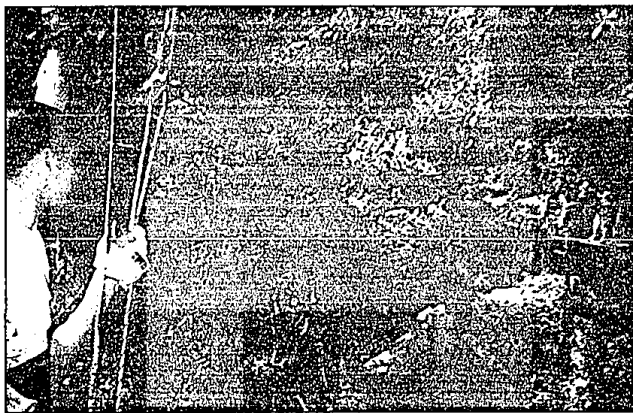
"Well," I reply, in a voice tinged with the sly cleverness of someone about to give a completely unexpected answer, "over Christmas I... rode in an aerial tram through the top of a rain forest looking down on the vast multi-green carpet below; went horseback riding; took a river raft trip; watched beneath a star-filled sky as red-hot molten lava slid down the side of a volcano; strapped myself into a harness and cabled through the forest canopy; ate several delicious meals at a beautiful lodge 5,400 feet up in the mountains; witnessed a huge leatherback sea turtle laying eggs on a moonlit sandy beach; enjoyed a leisurely ride down a wildlife infested river, even seeing a baby monkey swimming for its life."

I went to Costa Rica.

My wife, Sharon, and adult son, Chris, and I were part of a 15-person tour, sponsored by the Detroit Zoological Society, in conjunction with the Park East tour agency, which after a circuitous series of airplane trips enjoyed 10 wonderful days in this sunny, congenial Central American country. Ours was actually one of two Detroit Zoo tours, exploring Costa Rica.

The zoo representative accompanying our group was Andy Snider, curator of herpetology (snakes and reptiles). Our trip was marked by adventure, ecology and pure vide (Costa Rican greeting meaning both hello and good-bye, but literally translated as "pure life"). All etched together by long, bumpy, back bruising bus rides.

On our first day in Costa Rica, we were whisked off, early in the morning, to Braulio Carrillo National Park and its exciting new Rain Forest Aerial Tram, where we were loaded into a five- or six-person cable cars and launched into the vast multi-green. From our gliding perch high above the lush rain forest floor we had an excellent view of the flora and birdlife all around,



Gliding: Roger Wheeler goes for a ride through the rain forest of Costa Rica.

as enthusiastically pointed out by our eager and knowledgeable naturalist guide.

The highlight of the trip was the sighting of a Great Curacao, large multi-colored turkey-sized birds. Our guide was visibly excited as he heard the word of the sighting, ecstatic as he found the Great Curacao and pointed them out to us and still trembling as he recorded the sighting in his bird book.

We first sighted the volcano through the dusty front windshield of our bus in the early evening haze of our first day in Costa Rica. As we bumped along the rough, washed out road, we first saw the volcano as a faint gray outline slowly emerging from the dust on the windshield. Later it came to dominate our forward vision, the air conscious thought: it was an ever-present hulk on our horizon. Volcano Arenal. It was often shrouded in mist.

We at last pulled into Las Cabanitas, past the open-air dining room and on to our rustic cabins amid a refreshing little

rain squall. We ate dinner at 8:30 at a place down the road. Afterwards we went to a lookout point on the side of the road where we watched long, thin strips of molten lava emerge, slide down the silhouetted side of the volcano, separate and then disappear.

Gliding

We read that we might explore the rain forest canopy by gliding through it a hundred feet up using a system of harnesses and cables. Or, we could choose the "skywalk," a series of suspension bridges connecting the beautiful rain forest trails. I wanted to do both; either would be great, but the harness-and-cable option looked like the greater adventure.

We ascended into mountain higher than 5,000 feet. Even as we marveled at foggy-green panoramas, out toward the inky blue Pacific in the distance, I wondered whether we would get to Monteverde in time to register for the canopy glide. We dined on octopus and rice for lunch, went

on afternoon tours and had an elegant dinner of garlic mussels and mushroom bisque with a delightful Chilean cabernet sauvignon.

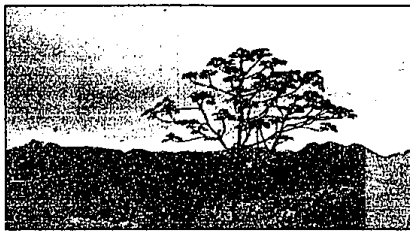
Up the next morning, the eight gliders among us left early, taking our bus into town where we transferred into a faded khaki green Korean-war vintage army truck. At the canopy glide headquarters we were fitted with harnesses, equipped with a pulley and given heavy leather gloves.

We were led anxiously up an incline and along a lovely rain forest trail. We seemed too preoccupied, too tentative, too anxious to actually focus on our guide's descriptions of the flora all around us.

A great ride

At last we passed along a small wooden platform on the forest floor where our guide told us was where we would end up at the completion of our trek, as we "rappelled" down from the canopy above.

We shortly came to a huge



Misty vistas: The low mountains of Costa Rica provide dramatic scenic views.



In wild lands: Chris, Roger and Sharon Wheeler found a different world in Costa Rica.

strangled fig tree, which would be our passage up to the rain forest. The fig tree was hollow, and a rope ladder had been made inside. We climbed it about 80 feet. At the top we crawled out of the tree (still tingling) and onto a platform about the size of a diving board.

Right away we were tethered by a clip on our harnesses to a rope hanging loosely around the fig tree. My son Chris was the first of our group to go. Just one failed to make it, stopping short, dangling momentarily, then being rescued.

I knew I would go. It was my turn and I was on the edge of the platform. My legs shook as I followed the guide's instructions to hold onto the pulley with one hand. Put your hand over the cable I was told, so you can touch the "cable" to "slow down." "Go when you're ready," the voice said.

Then I was gliding off into the lush multi-green. Moving about

10-12 miles an hour, my stomach finally caught up with me.

After that the glide was smooth, even exhilarating. I couldn't wait to do it again. We did two more glides before attaching to the descent rope and rappelling down to the forest floor.

The trip back to our lodge was marked by the familiar sounds of Elvis and the Beatles as we joined in an impromptu sing-along with the bus CD player. Still feeling good when we arrived at the lodge, I had an early brew, played two games of backgammon with our tour guide Omar and ordered sirloin steak Costa Rica style for lunch. We waited for the "skywalkers" to return. They finally arrived at mid-lunch, exploding into the dining room exclaiming: "Boy did we have an adventure!"

Roger Wheeler is a General Motors executive who lives in Troy.

GREAT ESCAPES

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tors Bureau at (800)968-0891 or e-mail to events@grandhavenchamber.org or write to Grand Haven/Spring Lake Area Visitors Bureau, One South Harbor Drive, Grand Haven, MI 49417.

BIKE FAIR

Local bike clubs will provide promotional information at the

REI store, 17559 Haggerty Road, Northville, at Bike Fair 1999, noon to 4 p.m. Saturday, May 8. The program will include a raffle and give-aways. A free bike inspection and mini-tune will be available and a rake tune-up. The fair is free and open to the public.

YOUR STORIES

We want to hear from you! Where have you been, what have you been doing? Have you seen the pyramids of Egypt or the Parthenon in Greece? Have you taken a cruise or snowed out in the frozen north? We want to know, to share your stories and pictures with your neighbors. Call Hugh Gallagher at (734)953-2118 or e-mail to hgallagher@oe.homecomm.net

TRAVEL INFO

The 1999-2000 Visitors Guide to Grand Haven, Mich., is now available. The visitors guide offers information for the consumer in planning a getaway or summer vacation to the West Michigan Inland Sea.

For complete travel information, the brochure features maps, attractions, fishing, boating events and rentals, marinas, area parks, cross-country skiing, campgrounds, shopping, restaurants, hotels and bed and breakfast inns. New features include a complete directory of specialty shops and boutiques, 2000 calendar of events and a new parks section indicating facilities and activities.

Grand Haven is three hours west of Detroit. To receive a copy of the Visitors Guide, call the Grand Haven/Spring Lake Area Visitors Bureau at (800)968-0891 or e-mail to events@grandhavenchamber.org or write to Grand Haven/Spring Lake Area Visitors Bureau, One South Harbor Drive, Grand Haven, MI 49417.

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