

NOBODY KNOWS THIS WORLD BETTER

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# NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELLER

## INDIA

10 THRILLING  
DRIVES  
AROUND  
THE WORLD

JAPAN  
EXPLORING  
BLUE COUNTRY

# Seeking Paradise

JOURNEYS OF AWE, BELONGING, AND TRANSCENDENT PEACE

BOTSWANA LIFE IN THE BUSH | ROMANIA MYTH-FILLED TRANSYLVANIA | ITALY ON LAKE COMO



**INTENSITY** THE ACTIVITIES ARE NOT PHYSICALLY DEMANDING, BUT THE UNTAMED RAINFOREST DEMANDS THAT VISITORS BE PREPARED FOR UNPLEASANT SURPRISES



EASY **MODERATE** DEMANDING

ADVENTURE ▶▶



Kayaking in Golfo Dulce by day is great for spotting marine animals like dolphins, sea turtles, whale sharks, and sea snakes. At night, kayaking through sparkling bioluminescence is a magical experience.

# LIVING DANGEROUSLY

RAPID-FIRE CHALLENGES IN COSTA RICA'S BEAUTIFUL OSA PENINSULA, TEACH THE WRITER TO LAUGH AT HER FEARS | BY TRUPTI DEVDAS NAYAK

**T**hree other hikers and I stood at the edge of the swollen Rio Claro River and watched with trepidation as it swirled turbulently past us. The advisory on Corcovado National Park, warning visitors “Your shoes will get wet” now seemed like the understatement of the century. The river was 10 feet deep in most places and there was no way across except fording it.

Our guide appeared nonplussed. Commanding us to wait, he jumped into the river and disappeared. The river was at least 40 feet wide and we anxiously craned our necks to see if he made it across safely. Our original plan was to arrive before high tide, so that we

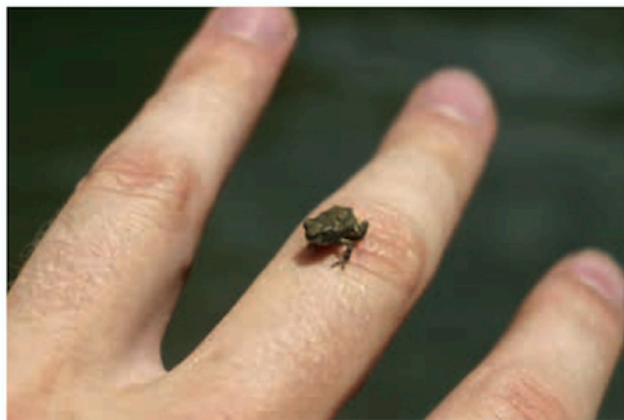
## SWEET SPOT

Golfo Dulce means “Sweet Gulf”, named for its low salinity, attributed to the rich mangrove systems surrounding it.

could wade across in knee-deep water and continue our hike into the depths of the rugged and pristine Corcovado National Park. But this stunning spot in southwestern Costa Rica’s Osa Peninsula demanded frequent stops for wildlife spotting, and we reached the river later than anticipated. Our guide eventually found a shallow enough route through and came back to get us. Balancing my backpack on my head, I waded through water that came up to my neck. We only learnt later that Corcovado’s rivers are home to bull sharks, caimans, and crocodiles. Thankfully we encountered none of them. Though our guide decided not to burden us with this information then, he wasn’t so discreet

MINNEAPOLIS STAR TRIBUNE/ZUMA PRESS/CORBIS/IMAGELIBRARY





Zip lining through the canopy (top left) brings you at eye-level with the rainforest's many arboreal animals and tropical birds; Three-toed sloths (top right), who spend most of their time eating and sleeping, wear a rather peace-loving expression; Tiny harmless frogs no bigger than a thumbnail (bottom left) live alongside enormous crocodiles (bottom right) that lurk in the depths of Corcovado National Park's many rivers.

earlier. During the hike, he'd casually mentioned that a herd of peccaries (a pig-like animal) could fatally injure a human. I'd also read about an American tourist disappearing in Corcovado a month earlier. Consequently, I spent most of the trek scurrying along the trail, spurred by visions of pumas, jaguars, and killer pigs when not watching out for venomous fer de lance snakes and peeking into tarantula nests.

My recent travels in Costa Rica, including Corcovado, led me to the conclusion that Costa Ricans thrive on danger, possibly even laugh in the face of it. The country's Osa Peninsula is blessed with stunning natural beauty and diverse ecosystems. These features, and the fact that it is little visited, make the area an active traveller's dream destination. However, the terrain has a few surprises that can unsettle even the most seasoned outdoor adventurer. At any given time, it is likely that there is something in close proximity that can bite, eat, hurt, or kill you. A group of fellow travellers learned this the hard way when they went snorkelling in Golfo Dulce and got stung by mini jellyfish. Their guide shrugged it off: "Ignore the jellyfish. You're here to snorkel, right? Look at all the other fish".

After hiking in Corcovado, I went kayaking in the

ATLAS

OSA PENINSULA, COSTA RICA



Corcovado National Park has 13 major ecosystems. Over half of Costa Rica's animal species are found in the Osa Peninsula



marine-life rich waters of the adjacent Golfo Dulce. A guide led us through picturesque mangrove-lined lagoons. I must have leaned too far when we stopped to admire a tiny green frog sitting on a mangrove branch because, before I knew it, my kayak had overturned and I was standing in the water. My guide didn't blink. He just helped me drag my kayak to a nearby beach, where we got it upright, and then continued the tour. It was only on a later boating trip, when I spotted tortoises, dolphins, humpback whales and, to my surprise, even sharks and crocodiles, that I realised what a disaster it would have been if I had toppled close to any of these marine creatures.

In Costa Rica, living a little closer to the edge became the new normal for me. Without realising it, I pushed myself far beyond my comfort zone and delighted in every moment. I am afraid of heights and small planes, but I coolly zip lined through a rainforest canopy 800 feet above the ground. I even squealed ecstatically on the last of the five zip lines, which bounces so much that you swing wildly like a monkey on a tree branch. I usually freak out if I spot an insect, but at Sirena Ranger Camp in the heart of Corcovado, I shared a bathroom with noisy cicadas that flew

KERRICK JAMES/CORBIS/IMAGELIBRARY (ZIP LINE); KEVIN SCHAFER/CORBIS/IMAGELIBRARY (SLOTH); JOHN BRECHER/CORBIS/IMAGELIBRARY (FROG ON FINGER); MICHAEL FISCHER/IMAGEBROKER/DINOEDIA (CROCODILE); THOMAS MARENZ/GETTY IMAGES (FROG)



clumsily into me while spiders the size of my palm glared from their webs with beady black eyes.

One of the highlights of my time in Costa Rica was riding shotgun in a six-seater "Aero-Taxi" for a seven-minute flight over mountains draped in thick jungle canopy. The vibrant greenery of Osa was on one side and the serene Pacific Ocean on the other. As the tiny plane noisily made its shaky ascent from a short, grassy runway outside Sirena Ranger Station, I looked out of

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The number of reptile species found in Corcovado National Park

the window, amazed that there was not a shred of fear in my heart. Just before landing, the pilot turned to me, grinned, and handed me his business card while manoeuvring a steep, angled approach towards the narrow runway strip at our destination, Carate. I smiled back at him, realising that I too had learned to laugh in the face of danger. And I also realised that if travel does not change us, then perhaps we need to change the way we travel. ●

## The Vitals

### Hiking

A 3-day guided hiking adventure in Costa Rica's rugged Corcovado National Park is a chance to experience the natural beauty of Osa Peninsula while hiking from Los Patos or Carate to Sirena Ranger Station in the heart of the park. Shorter half- and full-day tours are also available. (+506-2227-1484; [surcostours.com](http://surcostours.com); \$250-350/₹15,840-21,540 per person including guide, permits, meals, and accommodation at Sirena Ranger Station.)

### Kayaking & Snorkelling

Kayaking is a great way to explore the mangroves of the Golfo Dulce, and offers

the chance to spot birds, dolphins, and sea turtles. Those who want to get closer to the marine life can go snorkelling. There are also fishing trips and an outrigger canoe tour. (+506-2735-5195; [www.aventurastropicales.com](http://www.aventurastropicales.com); Prices vary depending on activity. Kayaking and mangrove exploration tours are \$45/₹2,850 per person.)

### Aero-Taxi

Taking an aero-taxi is the most popular way to get around the Osa Peninsula quickly. It's just a 7-min ride from Sirena Ranger Station to Carate in the small Cessna and Azteca planes. There are also flights to Drake Bay and San Jose. (+506-8632-8150; [www.alfaromeoair.com](http://www.alfaromeoair.com);

\$390/₹24,500 per person for a flight from Sirena Ranger Station to Carate. Prices vary depending on the flight.)

### Zip lining

A fun way to explore the forest is to zip line through the canopy on 1,200-m long cable lines. Five lines are strung between wooden platforms built in the tree canopy, with the highest 800 feet above the ground. You are likely to spot sloths, toucans, and other wildlife and birds as you zip line. (+506-2735-5681; [aventuras.pmhclients.com](http://aventuras.pmhclients.com); \$75/₹4,750 per person, including transportation from Puerto Jimenez.)



Although the word shark always rings alarm bells, there are many species of non-aggressive sharks like these white-tipped reef sharks (left) that can be spotted while snorkelling: In the Osa Peninsula (right) visitors get a chance to explore the best of two worlds—biodiverse rainforests and seas rich in marine life.

JAMES R. D. SCOTT/ MOMENT OPEN/GETTY IMAGES (SHARKS); MINT IMAGES-FRANS LANTING/GETTY IMAGES (COAST)