

Trekking  
Special

# Far from the Gringo trail...

Keen to avoid the usual tourist routes intrepid KATE CHAMBRE pulled on her best boots for a four-day expedition through Osa Peninsula Corcovado National Park in Costa Rica



**IT IS PITCH** black and I'm wading through a crocodile and shark-infested river, on a secluded beach on the Costa Rican coast.

My four-day trek through the Osa Peninsula's Corcovado National Park, is becoming more challenging by the minute, as blisters erupt on my feet, my tick bites itch like crazy and my rucksack feels like a tonne of bricks. And now, only 9 km into the last 25.5 kms of the adventure, which includes an 18 km hike along the beach in the dark, the fear of being potentially gobbled up by two of the world's deadliest predators, is, I have to admit, making me panic ever so slightly. Within days of reaching one of the country's most unspoiled regions, my faith has been restored in Costa Rica, which weeks earlier I had abandoned for Nicaragua, wanting to escape the so-called "gringo" (white-persons) tourist trail. The Osa Peninsula, located in south-west Costa Rica, is thankfully still yet to be overly exploited by tourism, and continues to remain a haven for nature-lovers drawn to its pristine rainforests and rugged natural beauty. Once declared "one of the most biologically intense places on earth" by National Geographic Magazine, the Peninsula is today considered the premier eco-tourism destination in Costa Rica. And rightly so. The region is home to many of the country's rare and endangered animal and bird species

including the Baird's Tapir, White-lipped Peccary, Central American Squirrel Monkey, Puma, Jaguar, Harpy Eagle and Scarlet Macaw.

A large chunk of the Peninsula forms Corcovado National Park, which has the single largest expanse of lowland Pacific tropical rainforest in Central America and is one of the tallest rainforests in the world.

The best way to explore the Osa Peninsula is to base oneself in its main hub, the town of Puerto Jimenez, home to biologist Mike Boston, a man who has been dubbed the "crocodile Dundee of the Osa".

Mike, originally from Moy, Co Tyrone, is considered one of the foremost wildlife experts of the Osa, particularly where crocodiles are concerned.

It was through his company Osa Aventura that I was lucky enough to be given the opportunity to explore Corcovado National Park.

Mike had asked if I would like to volunteer on one of his tours by way of helping prepare meals, and slot in wherever necessary to help look after a group of tourists.

Of course, I willingly accepted, wanting to grasp every opportunity to get to know the so-called "crown jewel" of Costa Rica's National Parks, once a hotspot for gold-mining.

The adventure started on a Sunday morning. After collecting three couples from a small village called La Palma, we drove over bumpy terrain alongside the Rio Rincon to Los Patos Station



where we set up camp, and spent our first night. Los Patos, the eastern entry point to Corcovado, is the only inland station currently open to visitors and is set in a picturesque forest clearing. Before darkness fell, we explored the area around it and were led by our guide, Jorge Lagaespada, to a beautiful spot where we swam beneath a waterfall. We were in extremely safe hands as Jorge grew up in the jungle, hunted it, and was a gold miner from the ages of 11 to 22. It was an incredible feeling wandering through tropical rainforest, not quite knowing what wild animal might present itself at any moment and having plants such as the Camphor tree, and "strangler" fig tree, pointed out to us by Jorge. The following morning, after a hearty breakfast, we set off laden with rucksacks, pack lunches, and bottles of water (an absolute necessity) to

Sirena Biological Station located in the south west of the Park, and the focal point for a majority of visitors. The 20 km inland trail to Sirena took us through the heart of the Park, where we meandered through lush rainforest, and across streams, all the while marvelling at our surroundings. Along the way, we encountered a group of screeching spider monkeys who, evidently threatened by our presence, staged a revolt by way of jumping up and down on branches overhead, while attempting to pee on us. The day-long expedition included a number of pit stops to refuel, de-tick ourselves, and rest, and although some of the Park's rarest species remained out of sight, we did see, hear, (smell!) a variety of creatures. These included woodpeckers, white-faced monkeys, a tayra, a Crested Guan, and Great Curassow.

The next day was spent exploring the surrounding area of Sirena Station, where we had spent the previous night camping. In between being offered termites to eat and swimming in a river filled with exotic fish, birds such as a black hawk, female trogon, tinamous, scarlet-rumped cacique, crested guan flittered about before us. Squirrel monkeys and iguanas were other creatures that I also spotted in the vicinity. The highlight of the trip for me was without doubt the final 25.5 kms of our adventure from Sirena to San Pedrillo Station which we set off for at night, after a hearty carb-fuelled dinner of rice and pasta. The first 18 kms of the journey was along a beach, intersected by three tidal estuaries, which could only be crossed at, or near low tide. I was later informed that what is a knee deep 50 meter





crossing at low tide, changes to a 4 meter deep, 150 meter crossing at high tide, home to bull sharks and large crocodiles.

There was no denying that the trek along the beach was hard-work, especially because we were carrying rucksacks (definitely advisable to pack as lightly as possible) and going at some pace, with nothing but the moon, and torches, to guide us. Sadly we did not see much wildlife along the way except for an opossum, and fluorescent creatures which sparkled in the sand as we marched along.

We arrived at our destination Llorona point, a place where Fidel Castro once camped, at around 1.30 a.m. and promptly built a campfire. Our campsite for a few hours was beneath a collection of trees, which we strung our mosquito nets to, and slept beneath.

Waking up at 5am to a stunning sunrise, in one of the most remote and beautiful places imaginable, was like a dream.

As warm red, pink and purple hues gently imploded in the sky, I could hear the waves crashing down on the deserted shoreline that hours earlier we had walked along, completely unaware of its beauty.

Etched into the sand was a fresh trail of Tapir prints, which led up to our camp from a stone archway some distance away. The creature had evidently been wandering between our nets as we slept.

Following a breakfast of rice and beans (gallo pinto), and after our blisters had been tended to, we embarked on the remaining 7.5 kilometers of our trip to San Pedrillo, considered the most

scenically situated station in Corcovado National Park.

Our final hike through “the most majestic area of tropical rainforest in Central America” was absolutely breathtaking, and comprised trees towering some 75 meters (250 feet) in height. When we reached San Pedrillo, I felt a huge sense of achievement. I may have hiked over 55 km in four days whilst acting as sous-chef and chief washer upper, but more importantly I had witnessed nature at its very purest. This to me was an incredibly humbling experience, and one, which will remain ingrained in my memory forever.

#### Fact File

For further information about adventurous treks in the Osa Peninsula visit: [www.osaaventura.com](http://www.osaaventura.com).

For general inquiries: [info@osaaventura.com](mailto:info@osaaventura.com) or [mike@osaaventura.com](mailto:mike@osaaventura.com)

For the best flight packages to Costa Rica visit [www.expedia.com](http://www.expedia.com) or [www.statravel.co.uk](http://www.statravel.co.uk)

While visiting the Osa Peninsula, make sure you visit Osa Wildlife Sanctuary at Caña Blanca, Playa Catiivo.

Osa Wildlife Sanctuary is a non-profit animal rescue shelter run by Earl and Carol Crews and spans 304 hectares.

You're welcomed by howler and spider monkeys (Winky a favourite of mine), Scarlet Macaws flap and squawk in the treetops, and don't be surprised if a baby tamandua climbs up your leg and onto your shoulders.

A full-day advance notice is required; children under five are not permitted.

For further information visit <http://www.osawildlife.org>

Alternatively e-mail [osawildlife@yahoo.com](mailto:osawildlife@yahoo.com) or [info@osawildlife.org](mailto:info@osawildlife.org)



JAWS FOR THOUGHT: Mike Boston (middle), Jorge and a crocodile expert with a captured problem crocodile

