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A Whole New Love of Nature

Last December, the day after Christmas, I woke up super early. I was tired, nervous, and excited. I was going to Costa Rica with 13 other high schoolers and two adults. I had been waiting for over a year for this trip. I had my passport, my luggage, and some money. After a couple of flights and a layover, we were in Costa Rica.

After waiting for our luggage, we finally met our tour guide, Herson and then went to the hotel. Waking up early the next morning, I walked around and saw pretty flowers. There was one flower called the Dutchman's pipe that was as big as my head and smelled like fish. There was also a cacao tree.

After breakfast we went to Poás Volcán. This was a few days after Christmas so there were many people at the volcano. It was a little chilly in the shade but a gorgeous day. I saw a plant with huge leaves that were bigger than a folder, referred to as the poor man's umbrella. After walking for a while, we all arrived at the crater. There was a large open deck area to walk around on. When I looked out at the crater, I saw a lot of smoke, which was actually steam coming from the crater. The wind was blowing the steam from my right to left, and I could see a little bit of the lake down and to the right of all the steam. The lake was bluish green. I actually couldn't see that much of the lake, but I was lucky because only about 10% of people that go to Poás Volcán actually get to see the crater. The crater was surrounded by a lot of rocky terrain that was very colorful, but most of it was reddish or a light tan. After we were done admiring it, we moved to the other side and saw a different crater. It was actually two craters, but the younger crater was eating away at the older one, making one crater. This lake looked very clear but was mostly sulfur so no fish, plants, or any other living organism could live there, in addition to it being very hot.

Then we headed for Selva Verde. All the rooms at Selva Verde were made out of wood and connected to each other by a wood walkway. The rooms were also sitting about 10 feet in the air, which I thought was cool. Throughout the week, we took walks around the resort at different times of the day to see a wide variety of animals. During the day I saw all kinds birds, including motmots, toucans, and hummingbirds. One of the most memorable events on the night walks for me was when we saw a red eyed tree frog lying on a palm leaf. He had his bright feet under his body so he looked like part of the leaf. Once Herson started shining his light on him, he slowly extended his feet back out to ward off any threats. We also got to see several birds just sleeping in a tree. We also found a long stringy snake. At first I didn't think it was a snake because it looked like an overgrown worm. We asked Herson about it and he said it was a vine snake. The snake was just curled up to about the size of my hand but was easily two and half or three feet long. We also saw several dangerous animals such as bullet ants, poison dart frogs, and a venomous snake. When I saw bullet ants, I was thinking that they were much larger than any ants I had ever seen, even though they were about an inch long and jet black all over. It took a little while but we finally found the poison dart frogs. The first one we found was the blue

jeans frog. It had blue arms and a red torso and was just chilling around some leaves. Later on we found the other kind that was black with lime green spots, patches, and curvy, thick lines. I was surprised at the difference in size between the two different frogs. The blue jeans were about the size of a penny, and I thought that they would be a little larger. The green and black ones seemed huge when comparing them to the blue jeans, but they were only about twice the size of the blue jeans frog.

The night before we left Selva Verde, I decided to go join the other guys going swimming. I thought to myself, "I will go swimming because I am in Costa Rica and will only get to do this once. I might as well go." After I got there, we got in the water and tried to stay warm because the water was freezing cold. After we were all there, we found a frog in the pool. We were super excited because we were the only ones here to see this. Then we saw another frog that looked completely different. This frog was in the drain but another guy rescued it. As we were walking around the outside of the pool, we noticed there was another frog just sitting on a chair. We also saw a lizard hanging out near the pool. We were getting tired of the cold, freezing pool so we went to the hot tub nearby, where in the dim pool light we found another four frogs! One of the guys even remarked, "Man, the girls really missed out by staying in their rooms." We all agreed. After a while we had to go to bed. When we were leaving in the morning, we got to tell everyone else about our awesome experience that night and as we were walking out we saw another lizard on the edge of the pool. Herson put it on one of the girl's shoulder and we all took pictures.

Traveling across the country, I got to see some amazing views of the mountains and valleys around San José. The views of the valley were breathtaking. I was awestruck at just how huge the mountains were and how much area San José took up. We also saw several clouds just a little bit above us or almost at our elevation. I even said, "Wait, those are clouds right there?"

The next place we went to was the Trogon Lodge and our main goal was to see a quetzal. Quetzals are the rarest birds in Costa Rica. We were told there had been some trouble spotting them recently. We were looking extremely hard for one when another tour guide at the Trogon Lodge found a quetzal. Taking my first look at the quetzal, I was a little disappointed. I even said to myself, "That's a Quetzal? I thought it would look better." Everyone hyped this bird like it was the prettiest bird on earth with nothing coming close to its beauty. I did think the quetzal was pretty, but I thought the bird looked like an average colorful bird; however, it had a fat body, short neck, and a skinny looking head. The next morning we took a brief walk around the lodge and I saw a massive rock, easily as big as two classrooms stacked on top each other, a beautiful river with several fish in it, and a water fall towards the end.

We had to take a boat down a river and along the coast to get to our next hotel. Once most of our surroundings were water, we were finally in the Pacific Ocean. There was a big wave when we actually entered the ocean. I looked back and I saw big mountains and some clouds. After a while the waves became rhythmic and predictable. When we got there, we had to walk through the ocean to get to the sand and then walk a little bit farther to get to the rocky cement path of our hotel. My room was the second to last group of rooms up all the stairs and slopes. It was hard walking to get there.

The next few days we walked along the beach and then to the nearby town. We got to see even more birds, but my favorite animals were the bats we found near where we ate our meal. The

tree they were sleeping in had a few leaves with bite marks that were bent to suit the bats. You could see at least five bats inside sleeping. They looked about the size of a mouse.

We got up before six o'clock one morning to get a ride to Corcovado National Park. When we first got there, I was fighting to stay awake since the night before was New Year's Eve and I had stayed up past midnight as I traditionally do. I was trying to keep my eyes open and focus on what our tour guides were saying, but it was very hard and I don't remember much from early on. I do remember seeing a bunch of pig like animals called peccaries walking about twenty feet beside the path and eventually they crossed our path ahead of us. We also saw several monkeys. The monkeys moved around a lot and some were eating the fruit off the trees. The monkeys we saw were mostly orange and/or black. Some were within ten feet of us. I also saw several baby "Jesus Christ lizards" or basilisks. Herson found some tapirs. I was the first one to go back and see it. That tapir was massive, easily weighing 500 pounds. It was all black and kind of reminded me of a cow. Later someone saw a male behind it, so I went back to take another look. The male was definitely bigger but the same color and shape.

I had always really liked animals and nature before this trip, but going to Costa Rica gave me a whole new love of nature. I was very surprised by some of the animals, like the red eyed tree frog and tapirs. I now want to go to remote places more often, even if it is only for a day or two, just to get the opportunity to see the beautiful views and amazing animals. I really love Costa Rica and I wish I could go back to see all of the fantastic sights: like the mountains and valleys that surround San José or the poison dart frogs or the beautiful landscape all around the country or the random animals you see in Pacific Ocean. If I ever get the chance to go back to Costa Rica, I will go back in less than the time it takes to blink.