

PANAMA

Testing wings in tropical paradise

Reluctant twitcher SUZANNE MORPHET falls for birds

Sitting on the veranda of our eco-lodge in Panama, we stare into a tangled mass of tropical vegetation. Somewhere in all that greenery, there are birds, and we're trying to spot and identify them as they're drawn to a nearby feeder loaded with ripe bananas.

"Is that a dusky-faced tanager on the banana now," I ask our guide, perhaps a little too confidently.

"No, a clay-coloured thrush," Tino replies. My friend Julie laughs. "It's only our first day, Suzanne."

It is, and besides, we haven't come to Panama to look at birds. Yet, visiting Panama — and El Valle de Anton in particular — and not looking at birds would be like going to Rome and not poking your head inside a few churches. Impossible.

"Look, look at that," says Tino excitedly, shining his little green light into the branches of a tree. "Oh my goodness" exclaims Julie, looking through her binoculars and locating a green honeycreeper. The bird is stunning, with a brilliant green body, jet-black head and yellow beak.

Canopy Lodge and its three

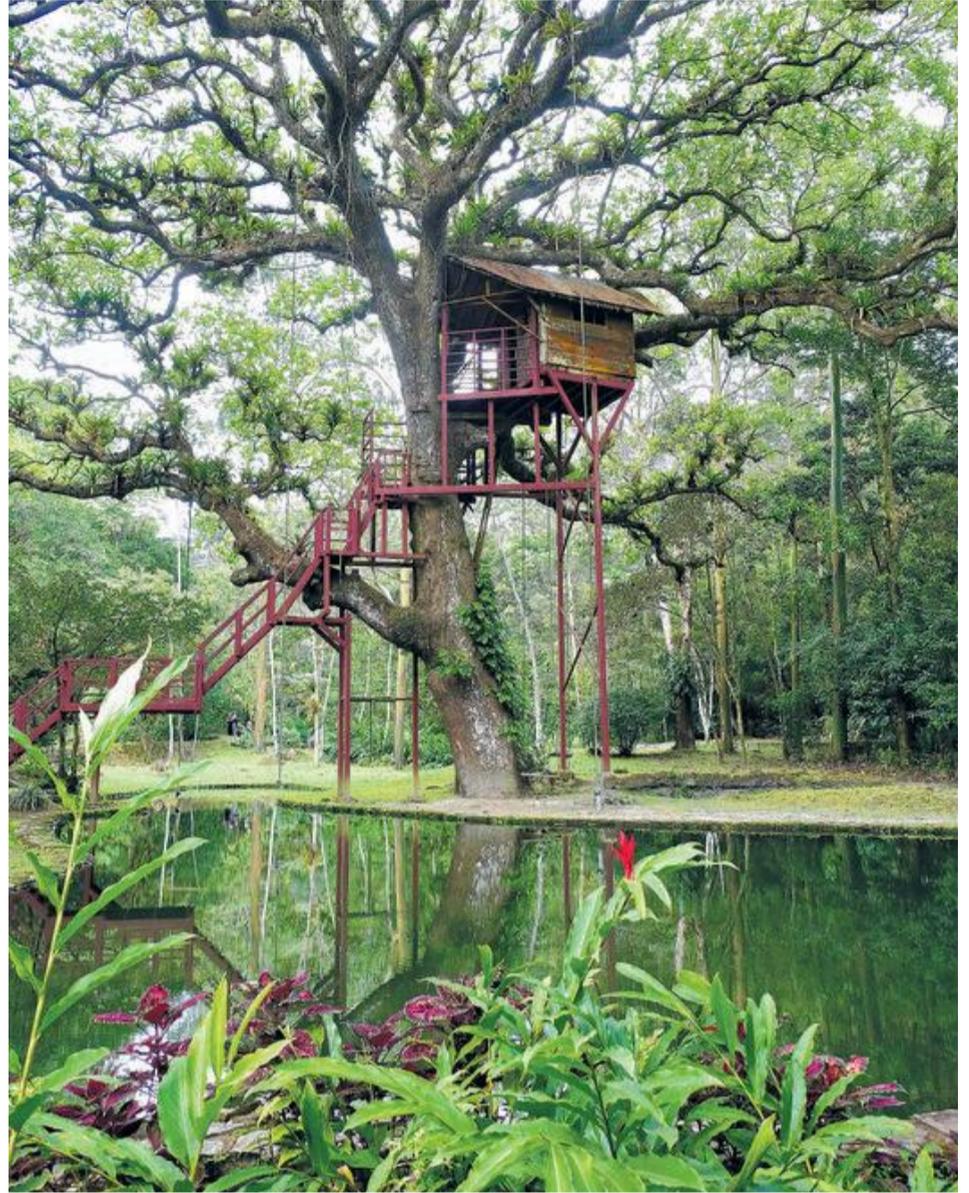
sister lodges in other parts of Panama are renowned amongst "birders" for their prime locations in birding hotspots, and for their guides. Tino, for instance, tells us — with no hint of gloating — that he can mimic the call of 50 or more different birds. Of course, he can also quickly spot them. "Look now," he says, as two collared aracari — a type of toucan with large, bright bills — land nearby, followed by three more. "That's a beautiful bird," he says, zooming in on one with his powerful scope for us to admire better.

The birds are indeed beautiful but the real reason we've come to El Valle is because of its temperate climate, what Panamanians like to call "eternal spring". That, and its unusual location in the crater of an ancient volcano, almost 600m above sea level. El Valle is the second-largest inhabited volcanic crater in the world after Tanzania's Ngorongoro Crater.

And the reason we've chosen to stay at Canopy Lodge is because of its enchanting setting, with a wild jungle at one side and a manicured garden on the other. More to the point, a river runs through it, and water has been diverted from the river to form a natural swimming pool. The truth is, we're bathers, not birders.

The large, free-form pool is better than any hotel pool. An enormous cashew tree towers over it, filtering the tropical sun and supporting a tree house where a porcupine sometimes rests in one of its cupboards. The branches are covered in bromeliads and Tarzan-style ropes hang down, inviting us to play.

On our first afternoon we hurry to the pool like kids going to summer camp. We swing from the ropes, then drop — "like ripe papayas" — to use the



The tree house and natural pool at Canopy Lodge. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet



Collared aracaris gulp bananas at Canopy Lodge.

words of the lodge's fun-loving owner — into the cool, clear water. Perhaps best of all, we have the pool entirely to ourselves. The birders are too busy to bathe — at least in the pool.

When they return at the end of each day they gather in the lounge to check birds off their lists and compare notes before dinner. By 8 or 8.30pm they retire to their rooms and rest up for the next day, which starts as early as 5.30am.

We're busy too, just not birding. One morning we browse the town's colourful handicraft, flower and food market, then head to the community-owned hot springs. Since we're in the caldera of a volcano, it's no surprise that hot water bubbles up from the ground here. But due to some problem — our knowledge of Spanish is on par with our knowledge of birds — the water

isn't flowing today.

A German man is just leaving and he tells us it's still worth the \$US2 (\$2.64) entrance fee to give ourselves a mud facial. He's been in El Valle for a week and happily suggests other places we should also visit. There's the orchid centre, where thousands of orchids are being propagated for replanting in the wild, including the white and rare Holy Ghost orchid, Panama's national flower. It sounds exquisite, with a centre shaped like a dove with purple-spotted wings.

We might also want to visit the zoo, where another endangered species and national symbol — the Panamanian golden frog — is being bred to ensure it survives despite being wiped out in the wild. And have we thought about hiking up to the Sleeping

▶ CONTINUED P20



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