



TRAVEL

# Into the wild



Parks, not ports are the focus of a new cruise from Costa Rica

to Panama.

Photos by Suzanne Morphet

Guests of UnCruise Adventures are not in for the typical water-bound vacation, stopping at no ports and instead coming face-to-face with some of Costa Rica's most untouched flora and fauna

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CURU NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, COSTA RICA

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A soft breeze wafts through the trees as we explore one of the last tropical dry forests in Central America. The air smells woody, a bit like fall in Canada, and the occasional leaf flutters to the ground from an *es para ver* tree, the name Costa Ricans have for one of the tallest trees in the forest. It's enchanting, but it seems awfully quiet and still. Then, something moves on the trail ahead.

It's a frog and he's hopping frantically. A small snake has caught the creature by one of its hind legs. The snake coils around its prey, pulling him in circles like a toy on a string. Occasionally, the frog lets out a pitiful squeal. "Jump, frog, jump!" several people in our small group urge as we watch with a mix of horror and wonder. For a middle-aged American

woman, it's too much. "Why don't they help the frog instead of watching it be murdered?" she mutters.

"I know it's breaking your heart but we can't interfere with nature," consoles Rey, one of our Costa Rican guides.

From somewhere in the forest comes the loud, guttural cry of a howler monkey. This forest in the Curu National Wildlife Refuge on Costa Rica's Nicoya Peninsula suddenly feels spookily alive, even slightly dangerous. We watch the frog struggle in vain for another five or 10 minutes, then leave him to his fate and finish our hike before heading back to our ship.



As its name suggests, UnCruise Adventures focuses mostly on wilderness and wildlife.

Nature is what UnCruise Adventures promises on its new Central American itinerary and nature is what we're getting in all its undeveloped – and sometimes cruel – splendour. Our cruise began on the northwest

coast of Costa Rica and will end a week later on the Caribbean coast of Panama.

Before I left Canada, a friend asked what ports I'd be visiting. She looked a little surprised when I replied, "None." Instead of ports, we'll visit more than half a dozen parks and other protected places, mostly in Costa Rica. For a country smaller than Nova Scotia, it boasts enormous biodiversity, with 5 per cent of the world's species of flora and fauna. Most of the time, we'll see no one but fellow passengers and crew of the Safari Voyager, a 174-foot ship with just 32 guest cabins.

As its name suggests, UnCruise doesn't target typical cruise-goers. Its itineraries focus mostly on wilderness and wildlife. Beginning with one yacht in Alaska 20 years ago, the company now has a fleet of nine small ships running cruises in seven destinations from Hawaii to the Galapagos.

When Sarah, our lead guide, asks on our first evening how many of us have travelled with UnCruise before, almost every hand in the room goes up, including mine. It would be a cliché to say it feels like family, but it does seem like a bit of a homecoming when I see Daniel and Tim, the bartender and hotel manager from my previous cruise, welcoming guests on board the first day.

We all fall quickly into a familiar routine – from yoga at dawn on the top deck for early risers to lectures in the lounge after dinner each evening. In-between, we hike, swim, snorkel, kayak and stand-up paddleboard

with the ship's stash of "toys."



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By midweek, we've been to Manuel Antonio, Costa Rica's smallest and busiest national park and are now approaching Corcovado, the country's largest national park on the remote Osa Peninsula. National Geographic has called the Osa Peninsula "the most biologically intense place on Earth."

"It's not like anything we've seen so far," our chief naturalist tells us the evening before we arrive. He throws out words such as "roots, dense and dark" to describe it, then adds ominously, "The only flat piece of land you'll see tomorrow is the floor of this lounge."

Of course, when you're psyched up for something difficult, how often does it turn out to be not so hard after all? (Or maybe it's because I'm from Vancouver Island, where "roots, dense and dark" perfectly describes our West Coast Trail, one of the toughest trails you'll find anywhere.) What I'll remember most about the Osa Peninsula is not its unforgiving terrain,

but its unforgettable scent. "Chanel No. 5," Rey says with a smile, holding a yellow ylang-ylang blossom under my nose at the start of our hike.

On the other side of the Osa Peninsula, fish are jumping as if to celebrate our arrival in Costa Rica's Golfo Dulce. The "sweet gulf" is one of only three or four tropical fjords in the world and it harbours a rich variety of marine life, thanks in part to its mangrove forest that doubles as a nursery for fish and crocodiles. We time our visit by zodiac to coincide with high tide. "It's easy to get lost in mangroves," Rey says, "then get stranded at low tide and have to wait six hours or walk out." We don't take any chances, staying close to the outer edge of the mangroves where the bird life is remarkable. "Look, right now" our guide says, pointing to a small flock of snowy egrets flying overhead while a troop of white-faced monkeys chides us for coming too close.



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When we go ashore later that day at Saladero Ecolodge in Piedras Blancas National Park, owner Harvey Woodard tells us he's recently caught – on camera – ocelots, puma and jaguar. Do you know what a jaguar sounds like, he asks. "It sounds like he's constipated."

But wild cats are the least of our worries when we head off for a hike. "You're not going to touch anything," Rey instructs us, explaining there are more poisonous snakes per metre here than anywhere else we've been this week. They include the most feared of them all, the fer-de-lance.

Should we be bitten, we have only an hour and 30 minutes to receive medical attention. "If not, you are going to die," Rey says cheerfully. "But," he adds, "you have no reason to die from a snake anywhere in my country because I can put you in a hospital within one hour and 25 minutes. Every single clinic, every single hospital has antidote." Still, we walk slowly and watch where we place every step. A short hike has never felt so long.

After all that excitement we need a day off, and we get it the following morning when we reach Granito de Oro – Grain of Gold – an islet off Coiba Island National Park in Panama. If you imagine your perfect tropical island, it probably looks a lot like Granito de Oro. Black volcanic outcroppings bookend a large, white sand beach. A tiny jungle with half a dozen palm trees provides just enough shade. And surrounding the island, the shallow water is clear and turquoise.



Costa Rica's rich wildlife is a treat for visitors.

Photo by Richard Hall Patterson

Underwater, the coral is mostly beige and boring, but the fish! Bluish-green parrotfish, pointed needlefish, black and white polka-dotted puffers and great schools of black and yellow striped sergeant majors swim around us. It's a feast for the eyes and as I float face down in the warm water, poisonous snakes, feeble frogs and constipated jaguars are the furthest thing from my mind.

## **If you go**

Air Canada Rouge flies non-stop from Toronto to San Jose, and from Panama City to Toronto.

UnCruise Adventures offers seven-, eight- and 15-night cruises in Costa Rica and Panama throughout the year. The seven-night cruise described above

(Uncharted Isthmus! Sloths, Monkeys and Mangroves) starts at \$ 3,745 (U.S.) a person. The trip begins in San Jose, Costa Rica, and ends in Panama City; [uncruise.com](http://uncruise.com).

*The writer was a guest of UnCruise Adventures. It did not review or approve this story.*

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