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Ben Davison's **In
Depth**

The Personal Diving Report . . . for Traveling Divers

Lodged in La Paloma

Diving off the southwest coast of Costa Rica

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Dear Fellow Diver,

Three times I've been to the northwest coast of Costa Rica, where everybody goes to dive. All three times, I've been disappointed. I have yet to see the abundant fish life that other *In Depth* reviewers always seem to find around El Ocotal. Is it the unpredictable nature of the Pacific? Is it overfishing? I don't know, but three times is enough -- this time I headed south.

Costa Rica's wild, remote southwest Pacific coast is home to Corcovado National Park, the largest intact virgin rain forest in Central America and one of the least-visited parks in the country. The remoteness of the Osa Peninsula (and the spartan accommodations) have kept the tourist hordes at bay; even so, in the high season the few small resorts tend to be full of eco-tourists eager to glimpse the prolific bird and animal life.

Fauna in Your Face

Three resorts are clustered around the mouth of a small river on Drake Bay, just a short boat trip away from the park. There are no roads; I reached Drake Bay via a flight in a small plane from the capital, San Jose. The plane landed in a village near the Sierpe River. After a 30-minute taxi ride, a small boat took me down the river to the ocean, then along the Pacific coast to Drake Bay, while I sat back and took in the crocodiles, coatimundis, and hosts of exotic birds en route.

As soon as we stepped off the boat, we were greeted by a welcoming committee representing several of the major animal families. The brains of the group, three hyperactive squirrel monkeys no bigger than dolls, perched on our heads waiting for handouts and taunting the dogs that constituted the ground forces. The air force -- scarlet macaws -- flew overhead as we made the brief hike to the resort, La Paloma Lodge.

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La Paloma, where I stayed, afforded a magnificent view of the Pacific. It did not, however, offer diving. Both of the other resorts, Drake Bay Wilderness Camp and Aguila de Osa Inn, did, so I dived with the accommodating Drake Bay, which even had rental equipment. All the diving takes place off tiny Caño Island, where fishing is prohibited. The 40-minute, nine-mile trip to the island in a covered boat can be rough, but schools of dolphins usually provide entertainment on the way.

Playing Amongst the — Where's the Coral?

There are not a lot of dive sites, but underwater life abounds. At Devil's Shallows we dropped into a swirling school of bigeye trevally, then descended along the pinnacle to 75 feet. Large nurse sharks scattered here and there tolerated

our close approaches well. Whitetips dozed on the bottom while large green morays gaped out of the nooks and crannies of the rocky outcropping. The terrain was only mildly interesting -- rock formations with little coral -- but clouds of fish were the site's forte. Manta rays floating by directly overhead almost went unnoticed, skittish eagle rays appeared briefly out of the hazy, 30-foot visibility, and robust bluefin trevally came in regularly to check us out.

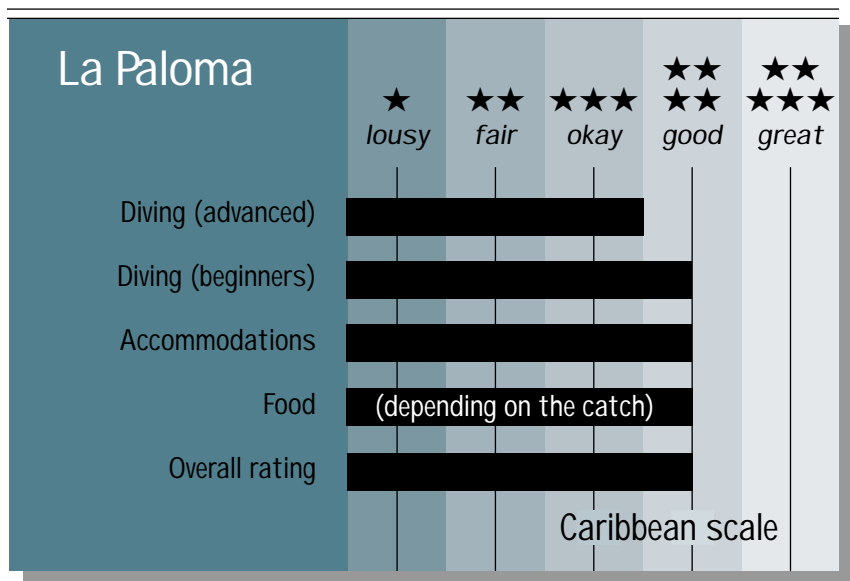
After a couple of hours onshore exploring the uninhabited (except for a ranger's

station) island, we dived Shark Cave, where I found juvenile nurse sharks hiding under just about everything, but not in the small cave. A large green turtle happened by, as did some blacktip trevally. An octopus ventured out of hiding and occasional southern stingrays shot out from under the sand. Again, reef fish were plentiful, and here they actually had some coral to play in. Twenty-five-foot-high tongues of coral reef radiated out from the island, making the shallower inshore sites interesting.

Diving was very pleasant, but there were minor drawbacks. Visibility was 40-50 feet; the water was on the cool side (well under 80°, anyway), and only two dives a day were possible. Night diving is not offered. This may not be a primary dive destination, though it is certainly a worthwhile adjunct to visiting the park.

In the Jungle, the Mighty Jungle

Make no mistake, though -- this is wild country. The resort is rustic, if lovely. We awoke in our grass bungalow each morning to toucans, parrots, and monkeys in the trees, agoutis



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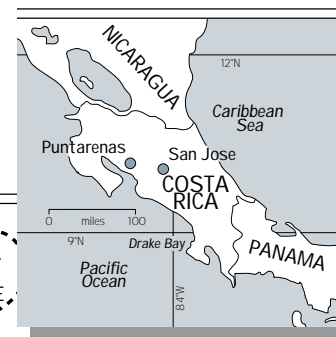
and coatis searching the grounds, and hummingbirds whizzing around. Not all wildlife were as welcome. The charming American manager, Nicole, reluctantly revealed that the huge, ferocious-looking snake pickled in a jar decorating the dining room was a deadly fer-de-lance, killed right next to our cabin. Twice I saw its younger brethren in my path during my five-day stay. A colony of jungle ants took up residence in my BC while it dried on the porch, an event I didn't discover until two days after I'd packed it away in my duffel bag along with my clothes. On the other hand, the resort was mercifully free of biting insects.

The food was excellent. For three days we dined on fresh yellowfin tuna we'd caught ourselves, eating chicken on other days, fresh fruit and vegetables imaginatively served, and an inexpensive but quite palatable Chilean red or white wine to mellow out a day of wildlife viewing.

As for Corcovado Park, I can only say that it is stunning. Huge tropical hardwoods dominate lush a rain forest filled with an amazing array of birds, animals, and plants, all nestled up to magnificent deserted beaches. Don't miss the hike to the waterfall from San Pedrillo ranger station (but bring a raincoat).

Of the three resorts, La Paloma seemed the most serene, Aguila de Osa the most upscale (it was undergoing major renovations in the fall), and Drake Bay perfectly acceptable. There is also a tent camp nearer the park for more adventurous souls. Any of these would be able to provide guides for the park, worthwhile for their uncanny ability to spot and immediately identify the wildlife. Horseback riding along the unpeopled beaches and taking a picnic and skinny-dip break by a rushing stream was great, but hours of riding up into the muddy, treacherously steep hills was frightening for me and cruel to the diminutive horses. You might have better luck in the dry season.

Head to Costa Rica's Drake Bay for superb wildlife viewing in rustic yet comfortable resorts. Don't expect intensive four-tank-a-day diving, but be ready for relaxed, casual excursions of surprisingly good quality. This is the place for world-class wildlife watching in a spectacular jungle setting.



Round trip air was \$594 from Boston. Miami and Los Angeles offer nonstop flights. The land portion was about \$1,100 per person for transfers to and from San Jose (flights, taxi, river trip, etc.), hotel first night in San Jose, five nights at La Paloma with three meals per day, a guided tour of Corcovado Park, a boat trip to explore Caño Island, but not the diving. Say, that was a pretty good deal; I wouldn't mind going back. . . . GEO Expeditions set up the whole deal, and did a superlative job, including giving me contact numbers and a detailed itinerary. (800-351-5041 or 209-532-0152, fax 209-532-1979)

Ditty Bag

M. G.