

Central America

Floating away to the sounds of the jungle

Louise Roddon goes off-radar in the spectacular national parks of Costa Rica before heading down the Panama Canal



Could a day get any better? This is what I am thinking as I travel along Costa Rica's remote southern coastline, where the wildlife is so dazzling, so exciting that I'm fast falling victim to Stendhal syndrome. Rapid heartbeat, ecstasy, neck ache, dizziness — these are the symptoms of the syndrome, which you get when overexposed to immense beauty. And it's what we're all suffering from (in the best possible way) on the Osa Peninsula.

Neck ache I've certainly got because in this vast and humpy green-blue land my

binoculars are trained on trees bristling with exotic birds; relief comes later when I lower my cricked neck to the empty sands of Bahia Drake. This corner of Costa Rica is famed for its biodiversity, yet just as pleasing is the lack of human chatter. It's one of the country's quietest areas; there is only bird noise, monkey shrieks and leaf rustle. Yes, there are a few people, but only the odd earnest hiker or two.

We are travelling on One Ocean Expeditions' (OOE) new Central America cruise, which is almost entirely along the southern Pacific coast. The route is blissfully off-radar and a far cry from Costa Rica's dollar-savvy hotspots — and

frankly I cannot imagine anything to match its loveliness. In truth, there are equally fabulous days to come on our ten-day trip along this coast and into Panama.

OOE is perhaps best known for its expeditions to the Arctic and Antarctica, and this voyage places remote scenery and wildlife as the lodestars for our daily outings. Take now, as our minibus leaves the sleepy town of Puerto Jimenez en route to Osa Peninsula's sprawling Corcovado National Park. Normally this bumpy road trip takes 90 minutes; for us it's a five-hour journey because every five minutes we stop, scramble out of the bus and train our binoculars on the trees.

monkey, just watch for a rustle in the leaves — and if that fails, simply close your eyes and listen to the sounds of the jungle," he says.

And, goodness, he's right. In Manuel Antonio National Park, where, shock horror, we find other tour parties, I close my eyes. Distant howler monkeys are trumpeting their unearthly whoops; water plops as a Jesus lizard trips daintily across its surface; and from somewhere above, a nervous chatter rings out as a troop of white-faced capuchin monkeys skedaddle from one branch to another.

Inevitably, with such early starts, in the afternoon many retire to their cabins. And very lovely they are. Old-fashioned, yes (*Resolute* was launched in 1993), but spacious and comfortable.

The observation lounge has a fine collection of books on birds and wildlife and the pool deck is the focus for evening drinks, heralded by Diane, whose message "Hello, dear guests, it's happy hour, the happiest hour of the day" becomes an affectionate, much-repeated saying among guests.

We dine early, and although the food is a tad Seventies timewarpish, with regulars such as steaks and salmon, spaghetti and meatballs, and puddings with white whippy cream, it is perfectly adequate. Mind you, they are missing a trick by not buying in local fish or fruit.

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double locks. Tug boats through its three side, water rises and falls, and a huge crocodile beats a rapid exit in the opposite direction as if suddenly aware of the barriers ahead.

I love the commentary that accompanies our passage. It tells of how enormous container ships can pay up to \$1 million, depending on their size, to traverse the canal and relates the story of Richard Halliburton, who in 1928 swam its length. His fee? A mere 36 cents.

In Panama City we rock and sway along the narrow streets of its pretty old quarter, our sea legs not quite attuned to the motion. Yet we have grown accustomed to gazing upwards, and what rewards we find here: lacy wrought-iron balconies; bright sparks of bougainvillea; grandiose baroque church towers. Outdoor cafés cry out for a cold beer and a sit down.

So that is what we do. Sit in the sun, swapping stories. A pretty perfect ending to an extraordinary off-radar voyage.

Need to know

Louise Roddon was a guest of One Ocean Expeditions (oneoceanexpeditions.com) whose nine-night Central America Adventure costs from \$4,195pp (£3,300) full board, excluding drinks and flights. Departs on April 24, 2020 (\$750 credit, plus complimentary hotel stay if booked before June 30)

Corcovado National Park on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica



Shoals with cartoon grins hang upside down from thick branches like hopelessly defeated tightrope walkers. Squirrel monkeys clutching babies to their chests leap from one bendy branch to another; russet-red spider monkeys dangle from a neighbour's tail, and two falcons lazily circle a morning sky washed to the palest of blues.

Among the 90-odd passengers (we are divided into small groups) are a clutch of enthusiastic birders, and the rewards for them are immense: scarlet-throated toucans, crested caracaras with skinny orange-socks, broad-chested king vultures — you name it, we see it.

At a roadside lagoon a huge, bare-throated tiger heron wades in the shallows, its guttural growl piercing the silence, then the ripples beneath its webbed feet part to reveal the scaly head of a large caiman, its glinting eyes topping a crooked serration of sharp fangs.

The jungle presses in, occasionally allowing glimpses of searing green fields where brahman cattle graze and egrets perch on their backs. In the distance, mountains are glimpsed through the mist. Eventually we reach Carate, an end-of-the-road settlement with the National Park a little farther west. The heat builds to a frightening intensity and at a makeshift coconut juice bar before tackling the hot sands and forest beyond.

Yet quite the loveliest moment comes on our journey back to Jimenez. In a cluster of porcupine palms scarlet macaws are swooping en masse, pausing occasionally to pick off tightly packed fruit from the trees.

It proves to be one of those breath-holding moments, this mesmerising display of iridescent plumage, the flash of scarlet merging with light blue and purple, and wings spread like elaborate oriental fans. It is a display of show-off brilliance that I will remember all my life.

Our adventure began in San Jose, Costa Rica's capital, where we scooted down to Puerto Caldera to join our ship, the RCGS



See squirrel monkeys in Costa Rica



Kayaking off Coiba Island, Panama



Spot hummingbirds on Coiba Island

Resolute, before travelling along the southern coastline. OCE has a strong relationship with the RCGS (the Royal Canadian Geographical Society), focusing on environmental conservation and research, so it's only fitting that our small floating home specialises in ecological concerns.

There are daily talks from a team of enthusiastic young Canadian naturalists, spanning the importance of maintaining symbiosis within jungle settings and the environmental perils of plastics.

And maybe it is a cynical ploy when later we fetch up, full of excitement, at an idyllic deserted island for an afternoon of watersports, only to discover that the pretty beach is littered with discarded bottles and sandals, barbecue sets and even a television.

The message is clear: Guests and staff set to work, quiet mutterings of disgust filling the air until our bags are stuffed with detritus and the bushes cleared of rubbish. So much careless litter is collected that our haul overfills from two Zodiac inflatable rafts.

Even so, this voyage focuses on pristine spots. A typical day begins early (the best time for wildlife spotting), with a wake-up call at 5am and Zodiac transfers from 6am. At this hour the Pacific carries a milky opacity, with pearlescent pinks and soft blues offsetting the sharper silhouettes of palm-topped deserted islands.

Sometimes the sea turns rough and stepping down into the Zodiacs becomes a game of chance before the waves swallow the ship's metal steps. Yet nobody falls, a pretty mean feat given that plenty of the passengers on board are well beyond retirement age.

On land we have excellent local guides, many of whom carry telescopes and tripods so that we can spot seemingly hidden birds and monkeys more easily. And we are given useful advice by the TV wildlife presenter Nick Baker (a guest on the *Resolute*). "If you can't see that bird or monkey, just watch for a rustle in the leaves — and if that fails, simply close your eyes and listen to the sounds of the jungle," he says.

And, goodness, he's right. In Manuel Antonio National Park, where, shock horror, we find other tour parties, I close my eyes. Distant howler monkeys are trumpeting their unearthly whoops, water plops as a Jesus lizard trips daintily across its surface; and from somewhere above, a nervous chatter rings out as a troop of white-faced capuchin monkeys skedaddle from one branch to another.

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wilderness programme, an excellent on-board massage, fantastic yoga on the top deck and a wonderful team of watersports guides.

We have reached Panama, to be specific, the 500-sq km Coiba Island, considered for its pristine ecosystem to be Panama's answer to the Galapagos. It feels as if we are in the middle of nowhere as our Zodiacs pull up on a tiny crescent of white sand littered with exquisite shells and hermit crabs.

Behind this rises the island, a former penal colony, whose virgin tropical forest provides shelter for endemic species including masked howler monkeys and such birds as Coiba spinetails, lance-tailed mannikins with heads topped by ecclesiastical-looking red caps, and startling emerald hummingbirds.

Our noses prick to mossy smells. Our feet crunch over dried leaves. Above, the forest is laced with liana vines so perfectly tangled that they resemble knots of rope. More joy follows later when we board our Zodiac to whizz over to tiny Granito de Oro Island. Dolphins chase our wake, leaping like mimic synchronised swimmers.

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disappointing, then re-emerging for another arctic display. Granito de Oro seems as if pulled from a dream; a pelican perches on a rocky outcrop and a huge green iguana clambers over my rucksack. Not that I mind. While others snorkel or kayak, I have an hour's blissful paddleboarding over waters that are alternately calm and rough. A green turtle bobs by, its head held aloft with the stately grace of an elderly swimmer wishing to keep her hair dry. I manage not to fall in, even when a pleasure boat zooms off, perilously rocking the waves.

In contrast, the Panama Canal is all busyness and bustle, pleasingly so, for this is somewhere I have longed to visit. We gather on *Resolute*'s top deck to watch the day-long progress through its three double locks. Tug boats are snug at our side, water rises and falls, and a huge crocodile beats a rapid exit in the opposite direction as if suddenly aware of the barriers ahead.

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Cruise special Voyager 9



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