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In Costa Rica, nature comes first

Tribune News Service - By Anne Z. Cooke Tribune News Service January 1, 2018 9:46am



Dec. 25-- TURRIALBA, Costa Rica-It was 6:01 a.m. when we heard them barking, an insistent "huh-huh-huh-huh" floating through the rain forest canopy and over Pacuare Lodge.

"Howler monkeys," said Steve, squinting at his watch. Then a toucan weighed in, two long, raspy "screeches" close to our deck, in the Rio Pacuare Forest Reserve, in eastern Costa Rica's Barbillia National

Park.

Up in a flash, we grabbed the binoculars and dashed outside, where a chorus of honks, chirps and whistles ushered in the dawn.

"Shhhh!" Steve said, hopefully, peering over the railing into the underbrush. "Listen! Was that a growl?"

Wildlife on parade is a predictable event at most Costa Rican eco-lodges. Coatis, capuchin monkeys, birds and butterflies lead off, followed by sloths, bacillus lizards (Jesus lizards because they "walk" on water) and green frogs, with howler monkeys, tapirs, armadillos and tarantulas at the rear. But big cats, ocelots and pumas? Once in a green moon.

"Jaguars? Maybe, but don't count on it," said travel planner Alison Carey, three months earlier when she called to talk about our trip. A Latin America specialist with Scott Dunn Personal Journeys, Carey and her colleagues research and book custom, personalized adventures for individual travelers.

We'd been to Costa Rica before, but just briefly, on a cruise ship stopover. This time would be different, we agreed. Hence the call to Scott Dunn Personal Journeys, a leader in the growing trend toward custom travel.

"You'll like Pacuare Lodge," said Carey. "It's on the river, an easy, four-mile raft ride downstream," she said. "It's known for wildlife, and wild cats, too, though they're rarely seen. It's isolated, but that's part of the appeal. You know what they say: Costa Rica is one of Central America's safest countries."

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