

EL CAMINO DE COSTA RICA

One cold, drab winter day in the UK, a good friend invited me to imagine a 175 mile walk between two seas. We would climb from the Caribbean coast high into a cloud forest and slowly descend back into the heat of the Pacific. I'd just finished a Masters in wildlife conservation and Costa Rica was calling on the edges of consciousness. I'd learned how this small country, embraced by two oceans, held six per cent of global biodiversity. I'd heard how it had become the first country in the world to reverse the deforestation of its land. I discovered that it was ranked as one of the happiest, most environmentally sustainable places on earth.

The *Mar a mar* trail offered an opportunity to meet rural families and Indigenous leaders who were creating a state of wellness in nature. I wanted to go see for myself, to learn from the Costa Ricans, the 'Ticos' – who were restoring a natural harmony of being in their country.

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Day 1: Two months later I touched the warm waters of the Caribbean in the Pacuare nature reserve, together with my friend and seven newly-met travellers. We were surrounded by an extravagant display of wildlife - our first taste of Costa Rica's extraordinary natural richness. We walked in awe through the protected area and were transported by speed boat down an Amazon-like river to spend the night in cabins nestled on the bankside.







Day 2: Next morning, we set out across a hot plain – stopping off en route to speak with young environmental ambassadors at the Fausto Herrera Cordera primary school. The children told me how they are learning to care for their environment and pick up trash in their neighbourhoods. *Mar a Mar* is developing school environmental clubs along the trail, thanks to funding from the American Embassy in Costa Rica. It was heartening how little litter (as it's called in the UK) we saw along El Camino, compared to what it's like back home. We ended our first 24 km hike in a community called Río Hondo, which stretches along a railway, and were lulled to sleep by howler monkeys.





Days 3 & 4: With the calls of the howler monkeys echoing in our ears, we set off early to ascend into the tropical rain forest of the Barbilla National Park. The park is a UNESCO World Heritage site which supports complex ecosystems and provides habitats for endangered animals like jaguars, pumas and ocelots. At the entrance to the park, in front of a verdant backdrop, we met Mayela Obando Sanabria who works as a forest guardian. Mayela belongs to the indigenous Cabécar people who live in the region – a member of the Mountain Goat clan. She has carried her dream of caring for her forest since childhood.

Next day we were invited to a nearby community centre to meet indigenous women from the park's Nairi Awari Indigenous territory. Some had walked for hours to talk to us – to open our hearts and close the space between us. Florita Martinez Jimenez, leader of a women's organisation called Sula Yawala, helped us to understand the difficulties they face and how they're working with *Mar a Mar* to overcome these challenges.

Mar a Mar is planning to build a conservation centre close to the Barbilla park. This bold venture will bring together scientific research and living architecture to develop ecological corridors, deliver community education, and help mitigate climate change. We were fortunate to visit the site and see where the vision will be made real.





Day 5: On the next day, a local guide took us deep into the heart of Nairi Awari. The remote and scattered Cabécar settlements there can only be reached by walking along muddy mountain paths – keeping an eye out for venomous snakes. We were accompanied on the walk by Elizabeth del Valle Quijada - a *Mar a Mar* sponsored consultant, who is helping local communities find new ways of growing food in harmony with the rainforest and secure income from sensitive tourism. In the small settlement of Tsiöbata we met José Morales Sanabria, headteacher of a local primary school. José is committed to teaching children about their Cabécar language and culture. He is helping a new generation to respect and maintain their heritage and navigate their way through a global onslaught of mobile phones and internet.



Day 6: After a night sleeping in tents on a veranda in Tsiöbata's primary school we rose to the drum of forest rain and headed out. Soon we reached Costa Rica's Pacuare river. With no bridge, and the river too deep to forge, the only way ahead was to go into a cage, two-by-two, and get pulled to the

other side. Once across, it was a short walk with soaking footwear out of Nairi Awari and on to the homestead of our tour operator Finca Vialig. After a gastronomic delight of a homemade lunch, we were served artisan coffee in traditional Costa Rican style and taken to visit a butterfly farm. When our boots and socks were dry again, we walked on to our next lodgings for the night and soothed our tired legs with a dip in the Pejibaye river.



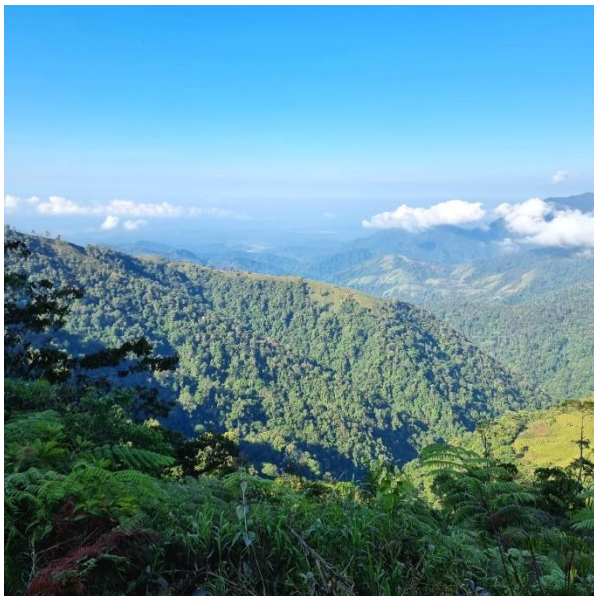
Day 7: The following day, after a week on the road, our now tight-knit group of friends made it to the half way point of El Camino. With only 133 kilometres to the Pacific, we took a short break to savour the moment. Then we went on, passing through spectacular landscapes, and descending into the Rio Macho valley to spend the night at the lodge of don Gerardo. Here we found a welcome opportunity to wash our trail-seeped clothes, enjoy an evening meal, and deepen our friendships by dancing salsa around the dining table. As though we hadn't already clocked up enough steps for the day.



Day 8: Another sleep and time to put our day packs back on again. From the Rio Macho we climbed back into the mountains to see how local Costa Ricans are restoring their valuable forests. We passed a team of scientists surveying birds before visiting the Masis family who own and care for 700 hectares of tropical cloud forest. Nelson Masis, one of two sons, greeted us at the entrance to their land. He told us how his grandfather had stopped ranching 40 years ago to set up a private nature reserve. At that time, Costa Rica had lost nearly all its complex forest ecosystems. Now over 60% of the country is protected forest. Nelson is a 23 year old psychology student and a keen observer and lover of wildlife. He goes into the forest every week - to connect with nature, find space to think, and experience a sense of peace. Nelson took us to meet his family in the wooden eco-home they have built and they kindly invited us to share cake and coffee. The day's trek finished in the luxuriant setting of the Palo Verde wellbeing centre, where we stayed the night.



Days 9 & 10: The next morning, our group decided to walk in silence for the first hour of each day. Inspired by our forest experience, we wanted to devote time to mindful appreciation of the wild beauty around us. We followed the folds of the mountains of central Costa Rica as they rose and fell for two days, nurtured by the rhythms of the trek and the warmth of people met along the route. We passed through the world's premier coffee growing region of Tarrazú, exchanging greetings with migrant coffee-pickers from Panama and Nicaragua. We visited coffee businesses who showed us how they ferment, dry and roast the beans and taught us the skills of gourmet coffee tasting. We passed the high point of our trek at over 7,000 feet and finally we glimpsed the Pacific Ocean, glittering in the distance.



Day 11: But we weren't there yet. Our penultimate day on El Camino took us down from the high mountains to a tropical bird paradise in the Esquipulas rain forest created by wildlife enthusiast Rudy Guzman. After years of working as a tourist guide, Rudy decided to retire with dignity. He bought 100 hectares of cow pasture, let the rainforest recover, and planted a garden full of flowers to attract different birds. Rudy wanted to live at peace with nature, so he sourced all his plants from an organic nursery rather than take them from the forest. Rudy believes there can be no conservation without education. When the birds came, he brought tourists to his garden to teach them about the environment. Rudy's sanctuary now attracts over 300 species of birds and other wildlife. We stayed the night in Rudy's bird paradise glamping inside large metal containers where we slept next to nature, protected from prowling pumas or jaguars.



Day 12: The last leg of the trek and we were on *our* last legs after 244 km of hiking. But we had the smell of the ocean in our nostrils and the promise of sunbathing on the beach with a cold drink to drive us on. What was a short 22 km hike through eerily-quiet palm plantations and along tracks and roads in the searing heat? Before we knew it we had arrived in the tourist resort of Quepos and were awarded our 'I DID IT' t-shirts. We'd joined the magic circle of El Camino hikers and earned two days of rest and relaxation. We could enjoy drinking cocktails in the bar, swimming in the warm sea, and ambling through the Manuel Antonio nature reserve.



El Camino de Costa Rica is more than a trek across a beautiful country. It is a journey of exploration, an expedition that invites you to reimagine your future and your place in the world.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swRRj2Lq7wg>