

# REFLECTIONS ON THE WATER



## Passport DESTINATION

**Kayaking in Costa Rica is safe, serene and a sure winner for your outdoor enthusiasts**

All photos by Francis Figart

**By Frances Figart**

*For travelers who love seeing rare wildlife, want some moderate physical exercise and enjoy being on the water, a lodge-based small-group kayaking tour in the rain forest is the way to experience the wonders of Costa Rica.*

**K**nown as an ecotourism hotspot, Costa Rica has set aside a full fourth of its land mass in national parks, wildlife refuges and other protected areas. One of these is Tortuguero National Park on the Caribbean coast, where Canadian tour operator Seascope Kayak Tours takes groups of four to eight on private, customized paddling trips.

Groups need no prior experience with kayaking. Seascope, which has been operating in Costa Rica during the high season, November to April, for 13 years, emphasizes getting people of all ages and ability levels into

the largest tropical wet forest in Costa Rica for a safe, fun firsthand encounter with nature.

"Paddling in Tortuguero really isn't technical," said Dave Laverty, 33, a firefighter from Kingston, Ontario, who went on a five-day kayak trip to the park in January. "The waters are calm and warm, the pace is enjoyable, and ample time is set aside for relaxation and exploration outside of the confines of the kayak cockpit."

Laverty and his wife, Emilie, also 33, were the youngest of five who went on the trip; the other three were in their 50s. "Touring Tortuguero is perfect for the beginner paddler," said Emilie Laverty. "The waters are not overly challenging, and the experience of seeing the jungle in a kayak is unlike anything you could ever imagine."

### ***Of turtles and tranquility***

The word "tortuguero" has been translated as "turtle catcher," "turtle seller" and "turtle region." Tortuguero, with its 45,000 acres of terrestrial habitat and 21,000 acres of ocean reserve,

**Customized paddling tours by Seascope Kayak Tours provide a personalized way to explore Costa Rica's Tortuguero National Park. No experience is needed for the tour, which can accommodate groups of four to eight.**

natural rivers and man-made canals, is a national treasure. Four species of sea turtles — the small Hawksbill turtle, the green turtle, the loggerhead and the great leatherback — go there to lay their eggs.

Much has been written about how the sea turtle was once used by Caribbeans as a source of food and for its shell. But, thankfully, around the middle of the 20th century, researchers realized that these turtles would soon be extinct if they were not protected, which is why Tortuguero was established as a national park in the 1970s.

Because of the thickness of Tortuguero's vegetation and its complex system of canals — built in the 1960s to link the indigenous communities living along the "ríos" and "lagunas" — the park can be reached only by plane or boat. Most people who visit are taken in by motorboats of

varying sizes and speeds.

Kayak groups enjoy a more tranquil introduction to the area: paddling the three and a half hours into the park to reach their overnight accommodations at Evergreen Adventure Lodge just in time for happy hour and a special welcome cocktail.

### ***Creatures and comfort in the jungle***

"The comfort of Evergreen was really nice after a day of paddling and staying in cabins nestled in the rain forest is such a unique experience," said Emilie Laverty of the lodge, a cozy collection of rustic structures connected by walkways and erected on stilts.

Groups share buffet-style Costa Rican meals in a modern, screened-in cafeteria, where they have easy access to the sights and sounds of resident wildlife.

Like many places in Costa Rica, Tortuguero is a birder's paradise. If





birders hear loud squawking noises outside, they make a mad dash for the door in hopes they'll get a glimpse of the endangered great green macaws, who feed on the "almendro" (almond) trees at the lodge.

Some of the most coveted of the 400 species found there are the slaty-tailed trogon, the Montezuma oropendola, the wattled jacana, the collared aracari, the chestnut-mandibled toucan, the keel-billed toucan, the little blue heron, the tiger heron and the yellow-crowned night-heron.

When dusk descends on Evergreen lodge, the Anurans come out — hundreds of frog species, such as tiny tree frogs; poison darts; bug-eyed gaudy leaf frogs; and giant *Bufo marinus*, or American toads. During the night, they provide a colorful chorus that seems to correspond to every note on a piano, from the highest plink to the lowest plunk. Evergreen's "cabinas" are equipped with tight, tiny screens in their windows, preventing any birds, bugs or *Bufos* from sharing your quarters.

Groups in kayaks see so much of

Tortuguero's amazing marine environment that is easily missed by tourists in bigger, faster, louder boats. Being on tour with a guide who knows the animals' habits is also a plus. For example, you might never notice a dark blob high up in a tree overlooking the canal, but your guide can point out that it's moving very slowly, and with the help of binoculars, you'll realize that you're looking at a three-toed sloth.

#### ***Monkey mom entertains***

"I remember being surrounded by a dozen monkeys jumping through the trees above our kayaks," said Emilie Laverty. "One monkey in particular had a baby on her back, and she was somewhat more hesitant than the others when leaping from tree to tree."

"Time stood still as she was getting up the courage to jump. All I could do was hold my breath and cheer her on, saying in my head, 'Come on! You can do it!' Finally, she sailed through the air and landed effortlessly on the branch above my head, and the baby didn't even flinch."

**Clockwise from upper left: Local guide leads the kayak group on an interpretive hike in Tortuguero National Park; calm rivers and canals make for easy paddling; the Evergreen Adventure Lodge offers a welcome respite after a day of paddling; quiet kayaks allow up-close looks at local wildlife. Inset, a multilingual sign protects sea turtle nests.**

"It was one of those amazing moments that you are so glad to have been privileged to see."

Visitors to Tortuguero are sure to have opportunities to photograph several kinds of monkeys, a variety of fresh-water turtles, the occasional neotropical river otter or a lazy caiman basking in the partial sunlight that makes its way through the canopy.

But many of the animals that exist in and around the park are rarely seen by humans. One canal is off limits to any boat traffic so that its shy inhabitants, the reclusive and endangered manatees, can live in peace. Hidden in the undergrowth, ocelots, jaguars, cougars, peccaries, anteaters and fishing bulldog bats with their large wingspans also grace the rain forests.

Paddling to the Barra del Colorado Wildlife Refuge allows groups an opportunity to look for wildlife on a guided hike near the Caño Palma

## **'A sheltered world'**

**W**riter Yehudi Monestel described Tortuguero as "a sheltered world with warm but not blazing temperatures, watered by refreshing rains. A living, dynamic jungle and an authentic network of rivers, meanders, lakes and canals transform the region into a kind of special Venice; a Venice with no palaces or romantic gondolas, but where the tranquility can be cut in slices like bread, where the air is purer than any other place on earth and where the thickness of the water plants releases a fragrance, which is perfect to unknot nerves and soothe tension away."





Biological Station, a research outpost of the Canadian Organization for Tropical Education and Rainforest Conservation.

There, guests talk with scientists and volunteers who track bird migration, monitor and tag the nesting endangered sea turtles, and try to learn as much as they can about the large mammals in the area. Their latest technological contraption is a jag-cam, a video monitor set up to capture footage of jaguars in the forest.

#### **Making local connections**

From Evergreen Adventure Lodge, it's just a short paddle over to the little town of Tortuguero, a vibrant community with no cars. There, groups can

access the park's hiking trails, shop at tiny grocery stores and souvenir shops, and have some amazing home-cooked food — Caribbean-style. Dave Laverty considers an evening out on this funky little town a must.

"Tortuguero came alive with the energy of friends, and the warmth and hospitality of the local Ticos [Costa Ricans], who shared a beautiful, warm, dry night," he said.

Seascope uses locally owned lodges and employs local people as part of its commitment to sustainable tourism and responsible travel. Having gotten acquainted with naturalists and guides, riverboat captains and drivers who were part of the support team, Dave Laverty came away from the trip

Left, participants in kayak tours stay at the Evergreen Adventure Lodge, a collection of rustic cabins connected by elevated walkways. Center, with more than 400 species of birds, Tortuguero is a bird-watcher's paradise. Right, the native flora and fauna is explored on foot as well as by kayak.

with a greater sense of the "importance of making meaningful connections with local people and sharing as much of the experience as possible with them."

Seascope has been engaged in responsible travel since its inception in 1994 and has received international recognition for its sustainable tourism practices and marine conservation. With the help of his team of local experts, company founder Bruce Smith operates day and multiday expeditions not only on both coasts of Costa Rica, but also in the Bay of Fundy, New Brunswick, and the Bay of Exploits, Newfoundland, both in Canada.

"Bruce pays a great deal of attention to the details of a trip," said Dave

Laverty. "He has a unique way of conjuring the true spirit of a place, bringing local folk and the environment together in an intimate experience that will resonate for a lifetime." ■

#### **Researching your trip**

Seascope trips include airport pickups and dropoffs once groups arrive in Costa Rica; all round-trip land-based transportation; and accommodations, park entrance fees, and kayak and safety equipment. Guides have extensive sea-kayaking experience and advanced wilderness first-aid certification.

[www.seascopekayaktours.com](http://www.seascopekayaktours.com)

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Fresh-water turtles sunning along a narrow canal in Tortuguero National Park.