



Ambassador Diary

What follows was written entirely by the ambassadors themselves – each individual or couple being responsible for a single day. In total we had twenty people from Cornwall and Devon and a separate group of seven from Cleveland. Should anyone require further information please contact Robin and Josie Mather via the Contact Us facility on this website.

Maybe inevitably, such a diary tends to concentrate on the tourism but the hospitality and kindness we received from our hosts of the Friendship Force of West Alajuela during the week of the homestay was really first rate. However it was not only our hosts who gave us such a positive impression of their country but almost everything we saw and everyone we met. We highly recommend a visit to Costa Rica.

Like many Friendship Force exchanges, this one also included a week of tourism in addition to the homestay exchange itself. Anyone reading this who has the job of organising a similar exchange may like to note that, after considerable research, the week of tourism was arranged with Costa Rican Tours. They did a really excellent job with good quality accommodation and excellent guiding and all at a very reasonable cost. The total cost (ca. GBP1600/USD2500 per person door to door for the whole trip) was important as it helped us both to ensure that the maximum number of members could afford to participate and also to fulfil our FF obligation, to use it to attract new members.

There is no entry for the last day. We were transferred to the modern and efficient airport of San José and flew to Miami airport. There we needed only to change planes, but were subjected to very long and unpleasant processes of US immigration – so long that some of us only just managed to make it to the plane in time. The simple recommendation from this is that one visits Costa Rica via anywhere but a US airport!

Robin and Josie Mather

Eckla Andrew – Day 1. Tuesday 21st February

After an uneventful journey to London Heathrow by National Express, we checked in to our hotel, the Premier Inn. By prearrangement of a fleet of taxis, we all went to the William 1V pub restaurant for an evening meal. The owner of the pub came and talked to us and introduced his Thai wife who was also the chef and served us some very good Thai meals.

This was a nice evening, especially as the whole group could get together before departing the next morning.



Irvine Boon – Day 2. Wednesday 22nd February

The day began early with breakfast at 7 00 and taxis at 7 45. Robin counted us out, four by four; we were then whisked off to terminal 3 where the Virgin staff, in elegant red outfits, quickly checked us in.

After a delayed roll out we sat on the edge of the runway for about 30 mins waiting for a takeoff slot. The take off was smooth and we headed westward over Windsor Castle and out into the English Channel flying south of Cornwall and over the Atlantic, the start of our Costa Rican adventure! Who knows what will happen during the next two weeks, will there be a romance, will anybody be ill? Who knows!

Menus were distributed, we had a choice of beef, chicken or pasta, I chose the beef. By airline standards it was very good as was the red wine that was served after the meal!

After lunch we settled down for the long haul over the Atlantic, some read, some watched videos and one started to write his account of the day! After what seemed an age, a Cream Tea was handed out, with a touch of Cornwall. Rodda's clotted cream in a pot. I prefer my cream on first with the jam on top, I'm not sure if that's the Devon or the Cornish way, but that's the way I like it!

The first sign of land were atolls in an aquamarine shallow sea; the Bahamas were a welcome sight after nine hours of a boring flight.

Very soon we were over Miami and had an aerial tour of the city as we waited for a landing slot. The entry through Customs was swift by American standards. We were greeted by Josie and Robin who had flown on ahead by AA. As Robin had counted us out at Heathrow, so he counted us in at Miami.

After some refreshment we flew to Alajuela with AA, an uneventful event, all we wanted to do was sleep.

Our Hosts for the week had been patiently waiting for us at Alajuela. We were warmly greeted, my host said "my Home is your Home", you couldn't find a warmer welcome than that. It was 21 hrs since we had breakfast; most of us were very tired and went straight to bed.

Christine Cartlidge. Day 3 - Thursday 23rd February

Today, our first whole day of the exchange, we visited the University of Peace situated in the hills outside San José. This was established in 1980 by the U N General Secretary. It takes Post Graduate students from all over the world specialising in ecological studies to conserve our future. All lectures are in English. It was a very impressive centre and well worth the visit.

On returning to Alajuela we met at Belarmina's house for our welcome party. She has her own cafe there and provided a welcome feast for us with



Marimba music and local dances to entertain us.

We went back to our hosts for the evening and I am sure everyone had a welcome early night to catch up on our lost sleep.

Sara Collins. Day 4 – Friday 24th February

Arenal Volcano, at 5,437 feet, looms large over the surrounding pasture land. It has been the country's most active volcano for the past 43 years, although its explosions have decreased recently.

After an early start, we travelled by air-conditioned coach with our hosts towards the mountain range, passing fields of sugar cane and coffee plantations. On arriving at La Fortuna, we booked into the Hotel Las Lagos, which was set in beautiful gardens, with thermal pools and marvellous plants. Some members opted to take the minibus further up the mountain to a viewing point, others decided to explore the hotel complex visiting the pools, enjoying a poolside drink at leisure, and five members braved the Zip wire canopy ride which was very enjoyable! Several events such as the white water rafting were only available in the morning, to the disappointment of some members.



A pleasant buffet style dinner was served at 7.30 and then our hosts organised an hour of 'party games' to finish the evening. All in all an interesting day although some of us were still rather tired from the long flight.

Jennie Dyson. Day 5 – Saturday 25th February

After a leisurely swim in the hot thermal pool in the hotel we set out for Arenal Lake. The man-made lake provides hydro power and water for the cities of the Central Valley of Costa Rica. We cruised by boat around the lake surrounded by mountains and cloud topped volcano, spotting birds and enjoying the tranquil atmosphere.



The drive through the mountains was interesting and the terrain quite different and very beautiful, much greener and less tropical, passing small farms with cattle grazing.

The coffee and tortilla (a local delicacy) stop, provided by our hosts, was most welcome.

As dusk was falling we made a stop at a small town with a beautiful church and fascinating garden of fantasy shaped topiary.



Arriving back in San José tired but having enjoyed a wonderful, relaxing day with our kind and fun hosts.

Jackie and Peter Hardacre. Day 6 - Sunday 26th February

Not everything goes to plan on these trips and sometimes, the weather disrupts things, as happened on our visit to the Poas National Volcano Park where the mist and rain shrouded what we understand are spectacular crater views.



This post card shows what we could have seen! The warmth of our Costa Rican hosts was in no way dampened when we all met later at Casa Bavaria, an attractive hotel and restaurant in the Austrian style, where we were able to show our appreciation by hosting lunch, a traditional part of every trip.

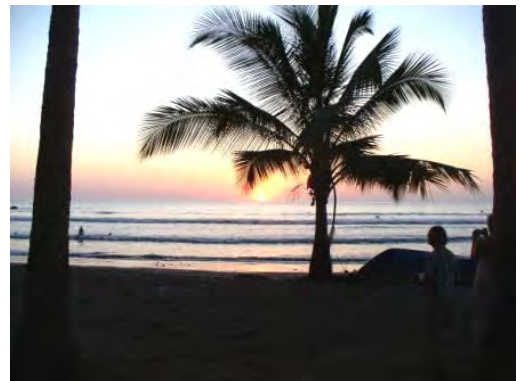
A little free time is also usual and, for us, we spent several enjoyable hours looking around San José centre admiring beautiful old buildings, including the Bank our host works in. One of the buildings we visited was the National Theatre where we bumped into other Friendship Force members having coffee in the lovely restaurant.

Margie Lundie. Day 7 – Monday 27th February

After the dreary drizzle of yesterday when Poas was shrouded in mist, the day dawned bright, clear and sunny – perfect for the planned trip to Jaco Beach. It felt just as if we were off on a Summer Holiday, two small coaches and 40+ chattering, excited passengers. The destination lay about two hours away with the journey taking us through mile after mile of mango orchards, their fruit pendulous and colourful.



The route passed over the Tarcola River, a haven for large crocodiles. We disembarked to walk across the bridge and view the huge creatures below basking in the sunshine. Back on board and we realised that one of us was missing. Had she become prey to one of the hungry crocs? A search found her, unaware that we were meeting the coaches on the other side of the bridge and we set off again. Just a few miles later the traffic ground to a halt and we waited and waited in the heat as we watched the minutes tick by. Was it a crash or just a practice? Our hosts were concerned that others would be waiting for us at the beach and eventually after more than an hour the blockage cleared. What a relief, which was even greater when we were greeted at Carlos and Yolanda Phillip's house with cold beers and the aroma of barbecue. A quick, refreshing dip in the warm waters of the Pacific whetted the appetite for the lashings of beef, pork salads and rice. Just metres from the beach the shady garden was a perfect location and the hospitality superb.



Jaco beach, according to the guide books, has a mixed reputation, but at the southern end where we were it was delightful with the huge breakers roaring over the golden sand. A fine point from which to view the glorious sunset over the Pacific and a fine end to a lovely day.

Carol Mackenley. Day 8 – Tuesday, 28th February

Gerardo and Antoinetta, Molly and I left the house at 08.00 hrs for the Club meeting at the Friendship Park in Alajuela. There were our two EDs, Josie and Liz, plus the two EDs from West Alajuela, Lucia and Belarmina, together with Marco (to act, when necessary, as translator), and just about all of the Cornwall-Cleveland group going to meet the local Mayor, Mr Roberto Thompson. A small commemorative plaque was unveiled alongside others from USA, Canada, Australia, Brazil, New Zealand, Japan, Germany and Peru together with the flags from all these nations, Gifts and letters were also exchanged. This ceremony was then followed by a short concert by 24 schoolchildren with a solo from the oboist. We then went on a guided tour of



Alajuela including the museums with more speeches from the Mayor and the Director of Museums. After some refreshments, the tour finished at the Cathedral which had recently been redecorated and, interestingly, spotted a newly reconstructed, wooden dome!

After the town walk, Molly and I took Gerardo and Antoinetta out to lunch. We drove up into the mountains to a luxurious country Club near their house. The club had excellent facilities with a large pool, gym, tennis courts, mini golf and a very good restaurant and bar, where the staff were particularly attentive and helpful. We had a relaxing and, with Gerardo, chatty lunch, bearing in mind that in the evening there was to be the farewell party with all that went with it!

Back home in Gerardo and Antoinetta's comfortable house, we spent some time smartening ourselves up in order to go to the party in a private room at the Ramada Hotel in Plaza Herradura. The occasion was of some importance and our hosts were very elegantly dressed which is not so easy to achieve with the limitations of our airline baggage allowance! However, we coped!

The evening started with a pina colada cocktail and more of the inevitable speeches from the ED's. Josie did us proud on these occasions, addressing the entire assembly in fluent Spanish. Also, for a couple of months beforehand, Josie gave Spanish lessons to a few of us, which was a great help in our day to day understanding of the world around us. Presents were exchanged and we gave a donation to a local charity.

Each visiting lady was given a rose corsage or button hole, Bill and Margaret Docherty from Cleveland demonstrated a tango after which everyone joined in with the dancing. A delicious meal followed à la Costa Rican.

The evening ended with Auld Lang Syne and a rousing 'Oggy, 'Oggy, 'Oggy from the Cornwall contingent. We made our sad farewells to all the hosts, with many 'Muchas Gracias for the wonderful seven days we had spent with them. For me it was also 'cheerio' to Molly who would not be accompanying the rest of us in the next part of our holiday in which we would spend a week touring Cost Rica by coach. We had passed a very easy and comfortable time with each other despite never having met before.



Ruth Morgan. Day 9 - Wednesday 29th February

It was with deep sadness, but with keen anticipation, that we said 'goodbye' to our dear friends and members of the Friendship Force club of West Alajuela, and began the second week of our visit. This was to be a well organised tour of several, of the many, National Parks to be found in Costa Rica. Our first destination was the Tortuguero rain forest National Park, and Laguna Lodge. We left Alajuela around 6.00 a.m. aboard our private air conditioned tour bus with Antonio, a bilingual naturalist guide, and bus driver, Wally, both of whom would remain with us for the next 7 days. With a brief stop in the capital, San José, to pick up the rest of our party, we began our journey eastward towards the Caribbean coast, driving past endless acres of coffee plantations on the slopes of the Central valley and climbing up to Braulio Carrillo National Park, with beautiful mountain views and abundant vegetation. On the other side of the Cordillera Central, we saw pineapple plantations, and around 8 a.m. we stopped for breakfast at the Río Danta Restaurant. This was a typical, Costa Rican, buffet breakfast with delicious fresh fruit, eggs, sausage, plantain, and the obligatory beans and rice! We had time to visit the Butterfly House behind the restaurant, and then continued on to Cano Blanco dock, turning off the main road onto a very minor dirt-track road. This road, all 20 + miles of it, with the bus travelling at



a greatly reduced speed, took us by mile after mile of banana plantations, and coconut plantations. Part-way along the dirt road we stopped at a banana processing plant. We saw how the workers cut the hands of fruit off each bunch, the soaping and rinsing in large water tanks, and then the packing into boxes. Only hands of the right size and shape, with no bruising are selected. The others are made into juices and baby food. Vendors on the side of the road were selling coconuts prepared for drinking the coconut milk; they had on display live rhino beetles as big as a hand!



At 11a.m., we reached Cano Blanco dock, and boarded the covered boat to the lodge, along the Parismina River and through the Tortuguero canals. This dock is about a Km from the village of Parismina. No roads connect to Tortuguero. You must travel through canals that were dug for transporting logs during the forest harvesting era. Along the way we stopped at an opening to the Caribbean where several crocodiles were basking in the sun, on the sandbanks. Travelling at speed for 90 minutes we arrived at Laguna Lodge just after 1:00 p.m. to be greeted by the Lodge staff offering a refreshing cocktail, while we were assigned our rooms. Once we had settled into our rooms, it was time for lunch. All the meals at the lodge were served buffet style in



a large covered open-air restaurant perched on the edge of the wide rain forest canal.

After an excellent chicken lunch, most of us opted to take the boat trip to Tortuguero village, visiting the Turtle Museum of the C.C.C. (Caribbean Conservation Corporation) and then, via the beach where the green turtles lay their eggs, to the colourful village, with its pretty church, village school, and dirt path through its centre. There were many quaint, brightly coloured stores selling local crafts and, clothes and souvenirs. We returned around 5.30 p.m., giving us enough time for a swim in the pool before getting ready for dinner. After a long day of travelling, most of us retired fairly early, to be refreshed for the next day.

Harry Nicholls. Day 10 – Thursday, 1st March

In open boats on the lakes, wearing ponchos against the sharp showers whilst watching superb wild life. Howler monkeys played in the trees alongside the delightful spider monkeys.



Spectacular birds everywhere - Glossy Ibis, Bare-throated Tiger Heron, Purple Gallinule, Black-collared Hawk, Chestnut-mandibled Toucan, and the Anhinga, not having preen glands so spreading its wings to dry. Iguanas, a national symbol for Costa Rica, and many



types of lizard, some very hard to spot even when in full view.

The race between boats back to the hotel was thrilling, with flat-out engines and huge bow waves. Skies cleared, ponchos away and a short walk through the grounds to the Caribbean coast. (What a country of marvellous varieties!) Then another fascinating boat trip, including part of an old east-west trading route between oceans before the Panama Canal was built.

One unfortunate loss was of Irvine's fine cine camera, last seen sinking to the depths and taking with it part of his holiday record. For me a memorable moment was at 6am, alone, floating quietly in the pool, gazing up at the tropical trees with birds and clouds passing by.

Robin and Rachel Sopp. Day 11 - Friday 2nd March

Awoke at 7.0 am. (to a cacophony of coughing !), ate a delicious breakfast of fruit and omelette, made to order.

Caught launch from hotel landing stage to Caro Blanco. On arrival visited loos and shop and then boarded bus for Sarapiquí. Interesting journey, saw palms, originally grown for palm oil, in 1930's now used for palm hearts. Also large areas of coconut palms, where we were told, the green coconuts are used for coconut milk and the yellow ones for the flesh and oil. We saw Brahmin cattle, bred for meat and acres of bananas being grown, also for export. The blue plastic bags, placed over the fruit to help ripen them, keep them clean and prevent insects from causing damage now, by law have to be recycled. They were apparently getting into the ocean and damaging the wildlife in particular, turtles. Antonio, our excellent guide, told us that the Turkey vultures, that we saw soaring above have an excellent sense of smell and with this can detect prey well. He said that the Black vultures which often fly high above the Turkey vultures take advantage of this skill and will swoop down and get their kill. We stopped at Guadipiles, for another delicious lunch and one more look at the butterflies and then onto Hacienda La Isla.



A beautiful lodge, run by a Belgian architect and his Costa Rican wife. Robin and I were incredibly lucky to be allotted the Chapel Suite, above the entrance gate, very attractive and palatial! We had a refreshing swim and then off to see the bats, at Tirimbina. There was a fascinating lecture and we were able to see a fruit and insect eating bat. As well as being a research project, Tirimbina also aims to educate 10 to 12 year olds, in order to dispel local superstitions about bats and hence prevent them being killed needlessly. One of their interesting research projects was to investigate why tears in bats wings heal so rapidly and its relevance to human wounds.

Another, wonderful day!



Lesley and Adrian Sumner. Day 12 – Saturday, 3rd March

Easy early morning walk around the grounds of Hacienda La Isla, spotting a Chesnut-mandibled Toucan and amazing double spiders' webs. En route to Tirimbina, stopped for a luscious, but unnaturally coloured galleta in Puerto Vieja. On then to Tirimbina. "Tirimbina Rainforest Centre is a national wildlife refuge operated as an education, research, and eco-tourism centre by a private foundation in Milwaukee (Wisconsin). This wildlife refuge protects over 850 acres of mid-elevation tropical rainforest-lowland. 95% percent of the forest is maintained as a reserve and provides home for a remarkable 300 species of birds.

Moreover, ecotourism in the reserve supports an environmental education program for the community of Sarapiquí, where primary school children and high schoolers have the opportunity to learn about the value of conservation. This program reaches 3,000 children in 110 of the region's schools."

Often at tree top height, we crossed long suspension bridges to reach the primary forest proper, quite an entry. The height, girth and density of the trees, some of them walkers themselves, made me glad we were on a well-worn path, but it was quiet and peaceful and we enjoyed the walk. Antonio once again doing his usual knowledgeable thing.

Lunch at the centre then on to the Cocoa talk and demonstration – yum, we tasted every stage of the cocoa bean from its natural state to the finished rich drink.



Once called “the foam of the gods”, its local name was cac, a rough translation for “poo” because it looked like it (seems a bit unfair for such a lovely taste). Coca beans were once so valuable they were used for trading and the afternoon finished with us being able to exchange 15 cocoa beans for a wildlife postcard. Quite a good exchange rate I thought!

Evening meal at the Hacienda – least said about that the better but mine host’s description didn’t match reality. I believe he was indifferent to concerns made directly to him, neither did he acknowledge my emailed suggestion to have some hooks put in the rooms for the convenience of guests! Pity really, it was a nice environment.

Tricia Thompson. Day 13 – Sunday, 4th March

I have so enjoyed this exchange, no responsibility, gently picked up and put down like a parcel.

Shock-horror, I have to write my diary!

Coach back through San José and on to the Pacific Coast. 1st stop a crocodile boat safari on the Rio Grande Tarcoles – a brilliant morning on the river. We saw so many birds and crocs. Lunch on the quayside. On to a walk in the Carara National Park – highlight a macaw. Onward once more to our destination, Villas Lirio, Manuel Antonio on the Pacific coast. Super meal and a lovely room. Squirrel monkeys on a wire fence made our day.



Margaret-Ann Voyce. Day 14 – Monday 5th March

We stayed the night in Villas Lirio at Quepos.

At 10am some of us took the coach a short distance to the beach, where we spent the morning under the sunshades enjoying the relaxed atmosphere. We went swimming in the warm water of the Pacific Ocean watching the balloonists, the water skiers and coping with the numerous beach vendors selling their wares - pots and bird whistles! We returned to the hotel for lunch and some of us had a relaxing afternoon swimming and reading beside the pool. Others left at lunchtime for a most exciting trip snorkelling from a catamaran. Dolphins accompanied the boat for some of the trip. Everyone thoroughly enjoyed this trip.



Others went on a mangrove trip by boat where they met the capuchin monkey pictured.

Eckla braved a Canopy zip wire ride above the rainforest. She ended the 2½ hours with a free fall death drop and a Tarzan swing. We were all full of admiration.



In the evening we had dinner and watched the sunset.

Yvonne Williams. Day 15 - Wednesday, 6th March

This is our last day of our tour. Early rise. After breakfast some of us went to the beach. Lovely weather with hot white sands. The others went on the trail bird watching etc. and then all met up to take our coach back to the hotel. We had time for a shower and to finish packing before leaving for the El Avion restaurant overlooking the sea for lunch and then the journey back to our Best Western Irazu hotel in San José to prepare for the journey home the next day.



This was a very good holiday and an excellent exchange.