

Hiking on the wild side — in search of endangered jaguars on the Osa Peninsula

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I enter the jungles of the southernmost region of Costa Rica, on the Osa Peninsula, to meet my jaguar-experience guide, Ricardo Moreno, a renowned expert on the dwindling, endangered species. A bandana is wrapped around his head like out of Deliverance, he's got a machete at his side which he's not afraid to use to cut our path through the rainforest and his physique ripples with the signs of forging treacherous rivers and mountains. If ever I were stranded in a jungle, this is the warrior I would want by my side.

But then I remember. I'm on the Osa Peninsula to learn about jaguars.

They say that at night, the eyes of the nocturnal jaguars gleam green, the unabsorbed light of their retina reflecting back toward the light source, warning interlopers of jaguar territory. But that territory has been decimated in recent decades, with poachers, farmers and gold miners destroying lives and habitats so that now, one of the world's most spectacular cats — the cat that kills with a single leap — is virtually on the edge of extinction. Some say there are only 50 jaguars left on the Osa Peninsula, one of the last places that previously hosted a relatively healthy population — and home to other endangered species such as the scarlet macaw, ocelot and squirrel monkey.

So I come to the peninsula to learn about the back-breaking jaguar research being conducted under the auspices of Moreno and his partner, Aida Bustamante, their lifelong passion being to protect and prolong this brilliant species of cat.

But for all the allure of the project, Wild Cats Conservation Program, Moreno warns, "It's not glamorous. A lot of people like the cats, but helping the cats ... the work is very hard."

I've just left the cushy eco-resort Lapa Rios and, despite what seemed like 1,000 steps I had to climb there (OK, 182, my daughter Olivia counted), I still imagine a glorious rainforest hike like others offered by the resort.

Machete in hand, Moreno leads my 7-year-old daughter and me on our journey of knowledge. As we quickly veer off the beaten track, we begin to learn the story of the jaguar project.

A team is formed

It was all Bustamante's idea. While studying for her master's degree in Costa Rica, she followed jaguar prints as a hobby and decided to pursue their conservation. But research and protection needed to be infused with new ideas as the jaguar's time was running out, she said. Most researchers like her tend to work within national parks, but Bustamante realized it was the true wild where the help was needed, not in already protected parks.

Moreno, meanwhile, was in neighboring Panama working with the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, where he too eventually got the cat calling. Before long, they were teamed on the Osa Peninsula, setting up cameras hidden in the rainforest to detect the movement and population of jaguars and their prey. From that research, more effective conservation strategies are formulated.

Hidden gem of Costa Rica

The Osa Peninsula is perhaps the hidden gem of Costa Rica, situated along the Pacific Ocean with its vast lowland forests isolated by mountains to the east and dry forest to the north and south. This geographic isolation has created "speciation" — meaning it promulgated endemic plants and animals found almost nowhere else. Together with better known species, the area is a biodiversity dream; 5 percent of the world's biodiversity is represented within Costa Rica, about half of which can be seen on the Osa Peninsula.

My daughter and I fly to the peninsula into Puerto Jimenez on Nature Air, an intra-country airline with tropical-painted planes. Small fishing villages dot the sparse coastal landscape. Pretty coves are laden with dolphins while tumultuous waves crash over jagged outcrops on the ocean side. Bumpy dirt roads lead out of town past farmlands, eventually climbing higher into the tropical rainforest.

This is authentic Costa Rica with nature and wildlife beckoning, not a souvenir shop in sight.

Lapa Rios Resort is the primary tourist destination on the peninsula, created two decades ago by an American couple who fell in love with the wilds and set about creating an environmentally friendly resort. A soaring dining

hall serves as the centerpiece to the sustainable resort, with balconies overlooking the rainforest and ocean below. From there, winding paths lead to an outcrop of 16 bungalows, luxurious in an eco sort of way. Additional paths lead far below to the beach, with nature trails from various points in the resort into the rainforest.

Caught on camera

But back to the jaguars. With Moreno at the helm, my daughter and I eventually make our way to a jungle camera. The rain is now pouring in torrents, and Olivia shields the researcher with an umbrella as he unlocks the secrets to a month's worth of frames. A tapir had wandered by the camera, an odd, long-nosed creature said to be a relative of both horse and rhino. There's a deer caught on camera, a "coati," and though no jaguar is unveiled, on-camera is a magnificent ocelot with a stunning cream-colored coat streaked in black.

Then we're off to find the next camera, each one checked about monthly, but not before Moreno wraps steel lanyard around the first camera shell for fear of it being stolen. Several have disappeared in recent months, a heartbreaking occurrence to researchers, who scrape by on grants and nonprofit donations with no government help.

To prevent such thefts, researchers now spend ample time in communities educating locals about their research, trying to dissuade them from poaching and teaching them that their cameras are intended to capture only animals knee-high, not humans and their possible trespasses. To further encourage cooperation, the Wild Cats program hires locals to help with tracking and research. The hope is that with continued protection and research, a jaguar corridor between Costa Rica and Panama could be further developed to help increase the jaguar population.

In the meantime, however, Olivia's boots have given her a blister, and Moreno and I are taking turns hauling her piggyback through mountain and forest. We are soaked to the skin despite rain jackets, and splattered with mud. One of Moreno's pant legs is torn to shreds at the knee. I look at the researcher who just a few hours ago was the epitome of vigor and now looks like, well, a drenched, muddy rat. I smile. He'd warned me that people thought he and Bustamante were crazy for getting excited over the feces tracks of wild cats. But in my soaked, exhausted delirium, I don't think he's crazy at all. I think my experience, albeit not glamorous, is without question the most memorable hike I've taken in my life.

Let the tracking begin.

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