

OTHER PLACES

EIGHT DEGREES OF SEPARATION

A Polar Bear Ate My Pizote

Antonio Pizote sifts through passion fruit and papaya, cast aside after one or two bites by sated and fickle spider monkeys. Antonio Pizote is, well, a pizote or coatimundi, kind of a Central American raccoon, a lone male searching and scavenging fruits and bugs under the hastening dusk.

He works methodically, groping the fruit, rolling it around in his racoon-like hands. He glances over at us, mildly annoyed that we are sharing this intimate, organic supermarket experience.

It is our first night in Playa Nicuesa, an ecolodge situated on the coast of Golfo Dulce or Costa Rica's 'Sweet Gulf'. Nicuesa is not so much nestled as swallowed up by tropical rainforest, a 165-acre nature preserve which borders Piedras Blancas National Park which borders Corcovado National Park which borders the Pacific.

Two days ago, we (myself and my travel writing partner Carmen) were still in Churchill, Manitoba, and there was no rainforest, actually not much forest at all.

But Costa Rica is not Canada. And Golfito, the nearest town to Playa Nicuesa, is not Churchill. Yet, it still feels strangely familiar. Both towns lie on the edge of great expanses of wilderness, equally exotic - one about to be overwhelmed by surging and chaotic jungle, the other overwhelmed by miles and miles of nothing.

Churchill hangs eight degrees south of the Arctic Circle, a transitional zone between tundra and treeline where boreal and arctic species mix. Bordering Hudson Bay, it has some of the coldest and windiest winters in Canada.

Golfito, for its part, bobs eight degrees



above the equator, awash in humidity and rainfall, one of the hottest places in Costa Rica.

But, as they say, opposites attract and these two communities are no exception. They are both on the edge, moody modern day outposts, inviting and affable, brutal and independent, fatalistic and laced with sadness. I'd expect nothing less from such extreme personalities.

Both host a variety of flora and fauna, both have been abandoned in a sense; Golfito by the banana industry, Churchill by the military. And both are being 'brought back to life' by ecotourism, thankfully a little slowly.

The similarities struck me before we even neared Golfito. As we walked the streets of Costa Rica's capital, San Jose, down to Sansa Airline's one room terminal (they were recommended above competitors because they 'crash less').

Anyway, Sansa reminded me of Churchill and our own Calm Air International. The plane even had the

same colour combination - navy blue and gold - there must be a market research paper out there that says 'navy means confidence, gold - excellence. A must for any emerging airline.'

We take a seat in the one room terminal wondering how far the similarities go. The first flight delay answers my question.

On the flight, we meet an older gentleman, ecstatic about his newly purchased ocean front property, bubbling over with excitement about life on this humid frontier. I think of how wonderful and magical Churchill and the north seemed when I first arrived. Friendly people, exotic landscapes, wildlife. The snowstorms, frostbite, frozen pipes and dead batteries come later. Enjoy it while you can. Frontiers such as this test and break your will repeatedly, only to throw you a bone of beauty just as you're about to give up.

The door opens and humidity washes into the plane. More heat hangs just outside the door, offers a greeting that is languid

and abrupt all at once. Its 'Hola' sounds to me more like 'holy *&\$#, its hot here'. Just beyond this greeting, a wall of jungle towers up the mountains, reminding us that it could just as easily reclaim this runway should it deem necessary.

It is so hot in fact, that our luggage has decided to arrive on the afternoon flight, hiding out in the airconditioned hangar in San Jose. Ah well, all part of travelling in the north, I mean south.

We wish him well as he heads off to close the deal and wonder if he will be chewed up or float along in characteristic American bliss. His southern drawl still hangs in the air as we exchange glances, finish our rum and coke, hiding in the shade of this newfound lounge.

Playa Nicuesa, another beach named for a long absent conquistador, is about twenty minutes outside of Golfito. It is about the same distance that Camp Nanuq, our home, is from Churchill. The primary difference being that those twenty minutes are traversed by boat in Costa Rica and by snowmobile in northern Canada.

As the boat pulls up, the only sign of the lodge is the dock: a skinny finger sticking out of the jungle, poking the sweet gulf, 'yes, we are still here!'

Playa Nicuesa is another of many beautiful places named for people who were never there. By most accounts, Diego de Nicuesa was a pompous tyrant, a ragged, infallible conquistador not just tilting at windmills but conquering and burning them, but he did this on the Atlantic coast, not the Pacific. Such is life. The beauty and peace of this place holds little in common with its namesake, anyway, other than the innate ability to hold reality at arm's length.

Cerro Nicuesa rises like a monstrous chia pet behind the lodge. While not the highest peak in Costa Rica, it still



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dwarfs Churchill's highest peak: Ward Mountain at a staggering 30 metres. Mr. Ward never made it to Canada either.

But we have made it here and walking up the path we are little dazed, baffled by oversized flowers, and a handcrafted lodge that suddenly pops out of the understory. We are warmly greeted, given a tour of the grounds and the lodge,

While Churchill is dry and cold, this is one of the wettest places in Central America. Decaying stumps sport bloated tree rings, a year's worth of growth matches one hundred years of struggle along the coast of Hudson Bay. For trees, location is everything it seems.

The jungle is impressive, its canopy lies 100-140' above the ground, a different world from the tundra. Walking through the jungle, you are immersed in its gurgles and burps and farts, the anonymous clang and rattle of constant growth and decay, so many sounds from the crowded vegetation that they begin to speak with one voice. Hard to fall asleep amidst the din but we do.

The next morning, we awake to monkeys. Perched outside our suite, they are well into their decadent morning routine - break open fruit, take a few bites and cast it aside. Hands, feet and tails work rhythmically and systematically working through branches, leaves and vines. Occasionally, their big brown eyes offer a lingering, voyeuristic stare into our room. Being tailless and relatively hairless, we are easily overshadowed by today's bounty of fruit.

Another morning, the Beast awakens us. An unearthly howl rips through the jungle, tearing the understory, shaking the trees. My grade seven reading of 'Lord of the Pigs' jumps up in my still-waking brain; Coleman notes and all. I look around for Jack and Piggy because the Beast is here, instead I find the alarm clock which itself is still asleep.

The Beast as it turns out are more monkeys, a resident pack of howler monkeys. When we eventually see one in person, it is diminutive, peaceful and unassuming. A little 'man' with a big voice.

In fact, our 'little man' turns out to be a 'little woman' named LuLu. She lives at the Santuario Silvestre Wildlife Sanctuary, a five minute boat trip from Playa Nicuesa. The preserve hosts a variety of rescued animals, ranging from white-faced monkeys to a Crested Guan to an orange-chinned parakeet, rescued from a crack-house in town and still sporting the vocabulary to prove it.

But LuLu is the star. She cuddles and crawls on visitors, taking a liking to my Carmen. Only 30cm in length, twice that including her tail, she navigates heads and shoulders and arms as well as she does branches and vines. Carmen cajoles her back to the front lawn with the promise of dried cranberries; apparently the promise of a 'tip' extends its appeal across species as well as cultures.

It is a rare opportunity to see jungle wildlife up close. As much as animals in the arctic blend into the 'nothing', the animals of the jungle blend into the 'everything'. Both hiding in plain sight, watching you well before you watch them.

We go early morning birdwatching, hike to and up waterfalls, paddle beneath boa constrictors and green herons, relax and read and swim. Each day, a life pair of Scarlet Macaws cruise high over the beach, headed inland for the afternoon. Three hundred mated pairs can be found in this chain of protected areas.

This is where we dip back into eight degrees of separation, the area around Golfo Dulce like Churchill, abounds with wildlife, both adjacent to vast stretches of protected areas.



It was the burst of times... Carmen reveals the truth that trained monkeys produce this newspaper

Piedras Blancas National Park, Golfo Dulce Forest Reserve and Corcovado National Park link together around the parrots and poison dart frogs of Golfo Dulce, Back in Churchill, Wapusk National Park and the Churchill Wildlife Management Area protect polar bears and peatlands. There is even a strange similarity in the names, Wapusk translating to White Bear, Piedras Blancas to white stones.

But then again, if Costa Rica is 'Pura Vida', Churchill could easily be 'Pura Silencia', where Churchill is stark and barren and beautiful, Costa Rica is lush and rolling and loud. And then again, I may have been in the sun too long.

The next morning, the black sand beach, deposits from ancient volcanoes, burns my feet as I wobble my way to the surf. My gaze, drawn to the horizon where sky and sea meet placid and pastel, soon returns to the beach and Poquito, the lodge's resident crocodile. I glance over to make sure that he is still enjoying his afternoon siesta. His crooked profile breaks the surface of his favourite creek,

so, in the opposite direction, I do the same to the surf.

Floating in the Golfo Dulce, the thought cannot help but cross your mind that 'the gods must have peed in these waters'. This inlet of the Pacific stays at 70F, warmer than most summer days in Churchill, too nice to spend time thinking up creative descriptors, so I gladly dip into the 'warm and inviting' cliché.

After lunch, we kayak along the coast, a dolphin breaches once and is gone. The afternoon winds are bringing clouds over the mountain. Heeding the message, we turn and head back to the dock. The Sweet Gulf is calling it a day, it needs some time alone. The clouds finally burst and a warm rain escorts our final surge to the dock. The gods have told us it is time for a margherita.

For more information, visit the Playa Nicuesa Lodge website at www.playanicuesa.com. Tell them you heard about them in Churchill!

- prepared by Kelsey Eliasson



Churchill or Costa Rica... can you tell the difference?