



The Last Frontier of Costa Rica

By Don Mankin



Our author “roughing” it in Ecoburica

I hadn’t been this relaxed in months, maybe years, as I swayed gently in the hammock, cold beer in hand, watching the waves lap on shore just a few yards away.

We were at Ecoburica, a remote, rustic beach camp on the southern most tip of Costa Rica (www.ecoburica.com). Ecoburica is like no other beach “resort” I have ever heard of – no pool, unless you count the freshwater lagoon behind the beach.

No fancy drinks, though the staff does make a mean coconut milk and vodka, no disco and most important, no one else except a few other guests and the staff of four. We are surrounded by some of the most beautiful tropical scenery I have ever seen – wild surf pounding on a deserted black sand beach in front and steep ridges thick with

jungle rising steeply behind.

We had been invited down to spend a few days in January at Ecoburica by the owner, Hilary Amolins, as a kind of “soft opening” for adventure travel professionals to help him prepare for the formal opening in February.

The camp is on the Burica Peninsula, a narrow strip of land hanging like an appendix at the bottom of Costa Rica. No more than six miles at its widest, the peninsula is split between Costa Rica to the west and Panama to the east.

There are no roads, just trails, and no cities, just small indigenous settlements widely dispersed throughout the thick jungle. Most important, except for Ecoburica, there are no tourist facilities and therefore, no tourists. In fact no

other people than the occasional Guaymi, the indigenous people who live nearby. This is truly the last frontier of Costa Rica.

Four Days in Paradise

Ecoburica is a 45 minute flight and two hour boat ride from San Jose, the capital of Costa Rica. The boat -- a small, open, outboard-powered boat called a panga--took us from Golfito, a bustling port town on Costa Rica’s Pacific Coast, across the bay and down the peninsula to the camp.

In a preview of just how untamed the peninsula is, the panga pulled behind the shelter of some off shore rocks and backed up to within a few yards of the beach. From there we jumped out and waded ashore.

We then walked for a kilometer or so along the beach, gawking at the spectacular scenery along the way, until we reached a collection of five guest shelters—large tents on platforms—scattered in a hilly ravine leading off the beach.

There was a small deck in front of each tent with one or two chairs and a small table made out of driftwood. Inside our tent was a queen size air mattress (not the usual camping kind but the kind you keep for house guests) and another table. From the deck, we could look through the palms trees to the beach and surf. A bright yellow hammock hung between two trees in front of each shelter.

About 50 feet up a nearby ridge was the focal point for Ecoburica’s social life, a lodge with a well

stocked bar, eating area and a large deck with lounge chairs overlooking the ocean. Two flush toilets and “cold” water showers (not that cold – after all, it is the tropics!) essentially round out the facilities.

Ecoburica is completely off the grid. There is no Internet and no cell phone service. The generator that chills the beer is tucked away in the jungle so you can barely hear it for the couple of hours it runs each day. Solar panels power the party lights around the bar and deck.

Our four days at Ecoburica were marked by long periods of idleness and serious relaxation occasionally interrupted by activity. There is no agenda or schedule to speak of and not much in the way of planned activities, only a menu of possibilities to be indulged in or not.

When we were able to pry ourselves out of our hammocks, we took walks on the beach or went on hikes through the jungle (horseback riding, kayaking and surf fishing are planned for the future). On one of our walks along the beach, we could see humpback whales leap out of the water a few miles off shore. On another at night, we followed our moon shadows along the sand.

Another hike followed a stream into the heart of the jungle. We kept our eyes open for venomous snakes and howler monkeys--glad that we didn't see the former (they are rarely seen) and disappointed that we didn't see the latter, though we did hear them high in the trees.

But I was content to spend most of the day napping or reading in the hammock, listening to the waves break on the shore and looking up to see the palm trees sway in the breeze. For diversion,



Photos: John Mason of Full On Adventure

I would watch a family of toucans with yellow scimitar beaks and kiwi colored eyes pose in the trees and large electric blue butterflies flutter by.

When I had enough of that, I could take a short walk to the beach for a dip in the ocean or to the stream-fed, freshwater lagoon behind the dunes for a refreshing soak. Floating, I could see the egrets and toucans fly from tree to tree.

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frontier of Costa Rica”*

My days ended in a lounge chair on the deck of the lodge drinking a cold beer and watching the sun set while pelicans and frigate birds flew in tight formation just inches above the cresting waves.

After dinner we usually wan-dered back to the beach for a roaring bonfire, large enough to make a college pep squad envious.

The Bottom Line

Although it was often hot and sticky during the day, there was always the ocean or the lagoon for a refreshing dunk. A soft breeze

cooled us in the evening and we had to sleep with a light blanket at night. There were no mosquitoes when we were there.

It doesn't get more peaceful than this, and you can't beat the surroundings. This is as close to paradise as you can get without paying a ton of money. If you are looking for more than basic amenities and lots of activities to fill up your day, Ecoburica isn't for you.

But if you are looking for a low key, relaxing vacation in an unspoiled tropical environment, an escape far removed from day-to-day life, and you are content spending most of the day reading, napping and gazing, this is it. Just make sure you pack sunglasses, sun block and lots to read...and leave your Blackberry and iPhone behind.

Don Mankin is a travel writer, business author, psychologist, organizational consultant and executive coach. The Wall Street Journal called his latest book, “Riding the Hulahula to the Arctic Ocean: A Guide to 50 Extraordinary Adventures for the Seasoned Traveler” (National Geographic, 2008), one of the best travel books of the year. For more information on Don or Riding the Hulahula, check out his website www.adventuretransformations.com.