

Costa Rica

Combining
horses,
education
and
holiday

A Reader's story
by Helen Adams



Imagine a holiday that is a tropical destination plus horses. Sounds like a dream, but it does exist in COSTA RICA. Where? Central America - that bit that joins the North and South American continents contains a small country called Costa Rica.

I was flicking through Facebook, when up pops a course with Parelli 5 Star Professional David Lichman and world renowned animal behaviourist, Jenifer Zeligs, at Discovery Horse Tours in Costa Rica. What better than to learn about natural animal training in a tropical destination? An educational vacation.

On to the phone with two friends and, in February, onto a plane... the first of three to get to our destination. Discovery Horse Tours is run by British couple, Chris and Andrea Wady, who arrived in Costa Rica 11 years ago with just their rucksacks and some dreams, eventually buying a horse riding business and building it on the principle that puts the welfare of the horse first.

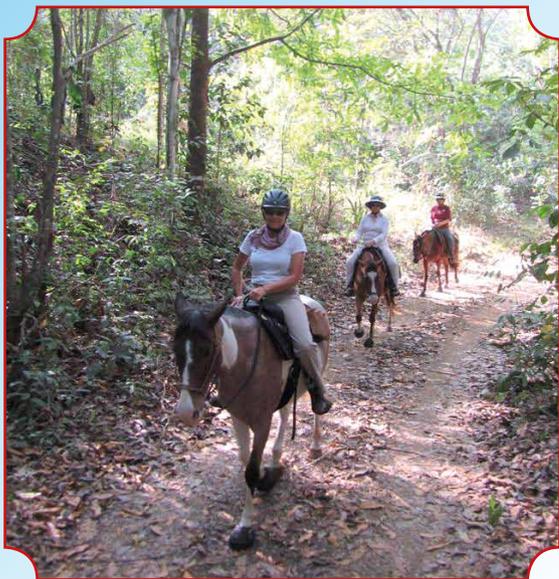
Everything was easy. We were picked up from San Jose international airport and 45 minutes later arrived at the 10 room hotel on the Central Pacific coast. We arrived in the dark and as we waited for our rooms, the sound of the waves on the beach was almost too much to resist.

Early morning walks on the black sand beaches heralded each new day. The small hotel housed all the participants from our course, which made it very special. We all came from different places - although the rest of the group were from US they were from different states. Some had little or no experience of natural horsemanship and some were quite expert; then of course there was the mob (us) from Oz! Everyone seemed to like our accents, so we were quite the novelty, especially when we said it took us 35 hours door-to-door to get there!

Continued



Above:
Horses and riders watching a lesson demonstration.



Left:
The jungle ride was along some tracks, but often along tracks where the horses had to be sure-footed over roots and vines.

Every day we were picked up and taken to the Wady's place in the virgin rainforest on a 1500 acre private estate. There we had the freshest produce for breakfast waiting for us, eaten under the shade of the trees with monkeys swinging from the towering trees, coloured parrots and toucans soaring overhead.

Introduction to Horses

Our introduction to the horses was a bit of an experiment (for David, Andrea and Jenifer's interest), in that we entered the horses' small paddock and meandered around to see which horses would start to hang around us. It felt a bit like being picked (or not) for the team at school! Andrea already had matched us up with the horses from the information we provided earlier so it was interesting that 80% of the matches occurred naturally.

Jenifer was the main instructor on animal training with David providing a horsemanship perspective in discussions. Actual demonstrations by Jenifer with one of the horses was then followed by practice with our own horse. Lunch was provided under the trees and in the afternoon we experienced our first jungle ride.

Most of the horses are rescued and retrained using natural horsemanship and positive reinforcement and were obviously mentally, emotionally and physically happy. All were barefoot (booted on the trails) and bitless and we rode in a combination of treeless and treed saddles, depending on the horse. Andrea and Chris take great care of their horses and these horses were

obedient, willing and responsive to leg and aids and so very sure-footed as they picked their way through the tricky jungle roots. They were the best trail horses that I've ridden. We kept the same horse all week, unless there were any unforeseen issues overnight – horses will be horses after all!

The Jungle Ride

We followed the forest trails, weaving our way around the reserve, deep into the rain forest to a secluded natural spring-fed waterfall. The horses were tied for a rest while we walked further on to the jungle spa, where we stripped to our bathers and enjoyed the waterfall and pool. Such a cool relief from the heat and humidity that was ever-present, even in the shade of the jungle. Also a mud bath in the famous volcanic muds; you would spend hundreds of dollars for this experience anywhere else. A wash and dry off, re-clothed and back on our horses to make it down the mountain to the stable yard.

We bussed back to the hotel, cleaned up and had a dip in the pool. Drinks were enjoyed while looking out over the ocean during sunset, and talking about our day while watching iguanas climbing the palm trees and hummingbird spotting. The five minute walk to many different bars and restaurants, many accessible directly off the beach, made it a very easy holiday indeed.

Every day there was something different; learning in the morning and in the afternoon of the next day, we took in a river tour, watching the abundant birdlife and a frightening feeding of the local crocodiles, which were very, very big!

Horse-Free Shopping Day

We also had a horse free day, allowing us time to visit the local town of Jaco, to shop, eat, drink and then off to a private visit to the incredible conservation project Rain Maker. Six percent of the world's biodiversity is situated in this tiny Central American country and this place is incredible with the natural rainforest trails and suspension bridges through the rainforest canopy. This

visit included a refreshing swim in the waterfalls. There were lots of opportunities for photos of monkeys, sloths, and deadly pit vipers (yes, very very poisonous!), with a whole abundance of other animals and flowers and, at the end of the tour, a chance to sample the wares of their own micro-brewery! Yum, ginger beer champagne!

More instruction each day, more jungle rides with lots of opportunity to canter. Finally, the last day arrived, with a ride along the black sand beaches that included cantering the horses along the firm sand inlets. A dip in the ocean and back again for a meal at the local tavern and then home, tired and happy.

Everyone was given every opportunity to live their dream of riding/cantering along the beach.

We stayed a couple of extra days and there was plenty to do, including ziplining (13 zip lines down the mountain – wheeee!), white water rafting, walking tours, quad bike tours, island cruises, surfing, paddle boarding, you name it.

I can understand why Discovery Horse Tours has been nominated for and won many awards, including the latest, 'Most Unique Experience' in the 2016 Luxury Travel Guides. These guys look after the horses first, which is great to see, and they have extraordinary customer service. You feel like a long lost friend after the first hour. They look after each rider, ensuring their safety and happiness.

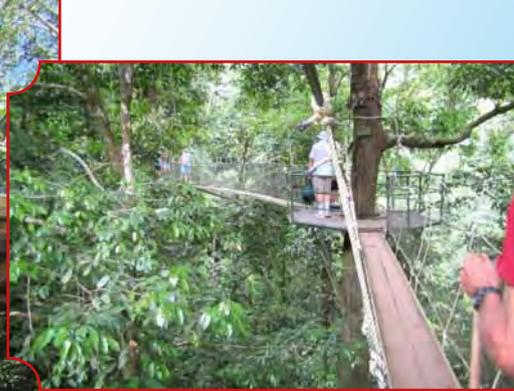


Above: The horses' care comes first and these airy stables give shelter from the sun but allow air flow.

By 2020 Costa Rica will be the first country in the world to be using 100% renewable energy.

Week-long vacations are offered, with either Andrea as your teacher or one the many invited international guest lecturers, such as Emma Massingale, David Lichman, Honza Blaha, Anna Marciniak or you can just go for the riding with no tuition.

Costa Rica is different but familiar; Spanish speaking but the majority of people have a smattering of English, as do of course, all the shopkeepers. The Hermosa beach is host to a leg of the World Surfing Competition and the hotel was right on the beach.



The suspension bridge above was not for the faint-hearted or those with height phobias.



Right: The intrepid travellers with course providers. (Helen is second from left).

Costa Ricans are keen recyclers, and have no defence forces, no welfare, but water and electricity is provided to every residence, regardless of whether they are in town or half way up a mountain.

In all, incredibly relaxing and we had a fabulous, fabulous time. Yes, it's a long way to go from Australia, but it's the best thing I've ever done. 🐾

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