

EXPLORING COSTA RICA

Selva Bananito Lodge Walks the 'Green' Talk

By Steve Mack
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In a country and an age in which claims to being "green" are as common on hotel brochures as telephone numbers, it's nice to know some people really mean it.

According to experts, green or sustainable tourism operations should not only have a low environmental impact, or "footprint," but they should also have a positive impact on the community and respect the local culture, as well as provide guests with an experience that will teach them about the natural and cultural milieu in which they find themselves.

On all of these fronts, Selva Bananito Lodge is well ahead of the pack.

The lodge is located in the foothills of the Talamanca Mountains, a little more than an hour's drive south of the Caribbean port of Limón, capital of the province of the same name. Once past the city, most of the trip is along a bumpy gravel road that winds inland from the coast along the banks of the Río Bananito, a small river rushing down from the hills. On the way, you pass banana plantations, lots of brightly painted wooden houses on stilts, lively clusters of laughing men and entire families on bicycles, all sure signs that you're in Costa Rica's most diverse and interesting province.

Go a little farther and the plantations fall behind, the houses become fewer and farther between, and soon the power and telephone lines have disappeared altogether. The road takes a few more twists and crosses the Río Bananito twice, and you've arrived. (If the river is too high, or fording streams makes you or your car rental company nervous, the lodge will arrange to pick you up in the nearby town of Bananito).

Unplugged

The lodge itself is proof that low environmental impact is not incompatible with enjoyment and comfort. In fact, the natural experience the lodge promises – which in many ways is a throwback to the way residents of the Caribbean coast lived only a few decades ago, before the tide of tourism arrived – is actually greatly enhanced by the simplicity of its surroundings.

Once you adjust to being surrounded by and immersed in nature, with no electricity, Internet, cell phones, TV or even radio, the degree to which your senses relax and open to natural sensations, especially sounds, is in itself a revelation.

Unlike many nature lodges, Selva Bananito is on the fringes of the forest rather than within it. The lodge buildings are located on a working farm, operated for two genera-



Green All Around: Immersed in the wilds of the Limón province, Selva Bananito Lodge offers a true all-natural experience. Below left, getting there is part of the adventure. Top, wood cabins reflect the region's traditional building style. Below, Selva Bananito's Jurgen Stein helps 4-year-old Estela Mack get ready for a ride. Photos by Mónica Jiménez | Tico Times

tions by the Stein family – Ticos of German descent – which owns the lodge and reserve.

The lodge is simple but well designed, comfortable and attractive. Built with wood grown on site, waste wood left by loggers or wood salvaged from trees knocked down by the magnitude 7.6 Limón earthquake of 1991, the bright, airy guest cabins are constructed on stilts with broad, covered porches equipped with hammocks, reflecting the region's traditional building style. The cabins are situated on a low ridge, with each one aligned to afford a beautiful view of either the Río Bananito on one side or the Talamanca Mountains on the other.

Light in the cabins is provided by candles or gas camping lights, and hot water by solar heaters. Each cabin has two full or queen-size beds equipped with mosquito nets.

Meals are served in a group setting in a large, raised hall that also serves as a common area, as well as a great vantage point for bird-watching. Dinner is by candlelight.

Like everything else about Selva Bananito, the hearty meals are simple but well executed, with a mix of Costa Rican and international recipes prepared with local ingredients. The farm's cows provide the fresh milk and cheese.

All the employees we met are from nearby towns, and showed friendliness, competence and solicitude – our 4-year-old daughter made lots of friends – as well as enthusiasm about the lodge and its projects.

Included in the guest packages is a variety of tours and activities, including tree-

climbing using ropes and ascenders, bird-watching, ziplines, natural history tours and horseback rides ranging from a tame tour around the farm or a more adventurous trek.

Guests staying more than two days may choose an all-day trip deep into the reserve, where they can rappel down the face of a remote waterfall.

Selva Bananito offers excellent bird-watching, especially among the fringes of the open fields surrounding the lodge at the base of the reserve. The lodge's knowledgeable guides speak Spanish, English and some German.

The Reserve & Conservation

But what really separates Selva Bananito Lodge from others, and makes it especially worth visiting and supporting, is its high level of commitment to conservation and sustainable development.

This begins with the reserve itself, one

Rates and Information

Daily rates including transfers between Bananito and the lodge, three meals a day and all taxes range from \$115 to \$172 per person, depending on room type and number of people sharing. Four-day, three-night packages including transfers, meals, taxes and varying combinations of activities range from \$420 to \$740 per person.

For detailed directions, information and reservations, visit www.selvabananito.com, call 2253-8118 or e-mail reservas@selvabananito.com.



of the country's larger and more important private conservation areas, encompassing more than 2,500 acres of forest that serve both as a buffer zone for the adjacent La Amistad National Park and as protection for much of the upper watershed of the Río Bananito, which supplies the city of Limón with drinking water.

The conservation work is carried out by the nonprofit Limón Watershed Foundation, started by the Steins and funded in part by 10 percent of the lodge's earnings, according to the foundation's executive director, Sofia Stein. The organization has spent years battling illegal logging in the courts and is now spearheading an effort to consolidate a wildlife corridor linking La Amistad park with lands on the Caribbean coast.

Meanwhile, Sofia's brother, Jurgen, who runs the lodge, has made it his mission to promote the government's efforts to make Costa Rica carbon-neutral by 2021, beginning at home.

With its natural forest reserve and a reforestation project with over 100,000 native trees planted on the one hand, and minimal energy use on the other, the lodge itself runs an enormous carbon surplus. Selva Bananito is going further, however, inviting guests to mitigate the carbon emissions of their travels to the lodge by covering the costs of planting and maintaining trees. According to Jurgen, a small donation sufficient to plant and help protect four native trees for 20 years is enough to mitigate the carbon emissions of a round-trip flight from Germany to Costa Rica. The donations are certified by a specialized agency, and guests receive the certificate.

So, Selva Bananito Lodge guests can sample the far-off carbon-neutral future promised by politicians now. And it's terrific. ■



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