

## **TRAVEL:** Where to go, What to know

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### HONDURAS

## **Ruins, reefs and rain forests: These highlands aren't just for the birds**

Though its a quick hop from South Florida, this Central American region is largely unknown.

**BY MARGIE GOLDSMITH** Special to The Herald

**NORTHERN HONDURAS** -We are driving past lush pineapple, orange and cacao groves on a dirt road in the rain forest, when a man with a machete suddenly blocks the road. He raises the blade, puts a red fruit down on a tree stump, and lops it in half.

"Cacao," he grins, reaching in through the open window of the van and handing me half. It is filled with cacao beans nearly as big as grapes and covered in a milky white substance.

His grin is even bigger as he waves us forward. "Suck the white part which is sweet," says our Honduran driver in accented English. "But don't eat the bean."

We pull up to the Lodge at Pico Bonito Lodge, in the buffer zone of the country's second-largest national park. This full-service luxury eco-lodge --built from timber felled by Hurricane Mitch --is a sprawling cluster of comfortable cabins nestled on a ridge between two raging rivers, and an unobstructed view of 8,000-foot Pico Bonito.

I breathe in the woodsy air of the lush green rain-forest foliage and sprawl into the hammock on the terrace of my luxurious cabin, watching an iridescent blue hummingbird. The cabin is settled on top of a hill;

below, the Rio Coloradito churns like a thunderous waterfall. I'll sleep well tonight, ready for a weekend of adventure in this Northern Honduran paradise.

### **FANTASTIC FALLS**

Most visitors come to Honduras for the three R's: rain forest, ruins and reefs. Honduras has bigger waterfalls, more rain forest and the greatest undeveloped wilderness area in all of Central America. As for ruins, Copan is considered the Athens of ancient Maya civilization, with the longest pre-Columbian hieroglyphic text in the Americas. And reefs: 96 percent of all Caribbean species can be found in the waters of the Bay Islands, which offer some of the best and most inexpensive diving in the hemisphere.

Northern Honduras, less than a 2 ½-hour flight from Miami, is considered the ecotourism capital of the country, yet virtually unknown to tourists. Pico Bonito National Park offers 430 square miles of old growth forest with trees thicker than refrigerators, nine mountains over 6,500 feet high, spectacular waterfalls and such endangered animals as anteaters, tapirs and jaguars.

After a breakfast of huevos rancheros and tortillas, Hermann, one of the lodge's Honduran naturalists, leads a small group on a hike to Rio Zacate in Pico Bonito National Park.

Near the beginning of the trailhead we pass our first waterfall, a pounding rush of water pluming over a series of huge boulders into the river. We start up a steep trail then he points to something, which runs into the bushes.

"Did you see it?" Hermann pokes his foot around the underbrush, and soon a small white-masked face surfaces, then the animal darts away.

"Long-tailed weasel," he says.

As we climb, we leave the primary growth forest behind and approach the rain forest --or cloud forest. The foliage becomes denser and more spectacular, and birds of paradise, wild begonias and bright red flowers of the whistle tree line both sides of the trail. I breathe in the heady fragrance.

A little while later we arrive at a waterfall that thunders 80 feet down the

mountainside and is surrounded by crystal clear natural pools. A couple of people pull off their hiking boots and jump in.

By the time we head back down the trail, I am giddy with the sounds of the birds, and the solitude of the rain forest. We have seen no one the entire time on the trail.

We return for lunch and in the afternoon, join another guided hike, conducted by Honduran naturalist Joel (pronounced Ho-EL), who takes us on the trail to Mermaid Falls, where, if you're lucky, you'll see some of the 300 species of local birds and butterflies.

### **SEEKING COTINGAS**

Joel says that many birders come to Honduras hoping to see the lovely cotinga, a spectacular bright blue canopy dweller that thrives here.

This day, there is no cotinga, but we do see a flock of parakeets, parrots, a black hawk, toucans, a Morpho Cypris butterfly and a black-and-yellow *oropéndola* (oriole), whose stocking-like nest is draped over a branch.

At a fork in the trail, suddenly Joel stops and whispers, "jaguar!" My heart races. This is exactly what I was hoping to see, but now that it's a reality, I'm terrified.

Fortunately, it turns out he's only pointing to the cat's small paw prints. Far below us is the churning river where experienced kayakers run Class V and VI rapids.

Not far away is the Rio Congrejal, a 20-mile roller coaster of white-water rapids, and one of Central America's best white-water rivers. For the truly adventurous, Honduras offers 20 raging rivers to run; but I am content listening to the tumbling rivers from my perch surrounded by a rainbow of birds and butterflies, misting waterfalls and cloud-forested peaks.

We have signed up for a half-day tour of Cuero y Salado Wildlife and Manatee Refuge, where there are no roads. A narrow-gauge railway car brings visitors 2 ½ miles past ramshackle homes with colorful rows of laundry billowing in the slight breeze.

At one point, the train stops because people are on the track pushing a flatbed railroad car filled with potatoes. Our guide, American expat James

Adams, explains that this is the only way to get supplies to the refuge.

Head guide Jorge greets us, piles us into a battered motorized skiff, and from his perch in the stern, leads us down the Salado River. James takes the bow, binoculars at the ready. The twisted roots of red mangroves hang down into the water, beneath which are sea turtles, shrimp and reef fish.

Howler monkeys growl, watching us cautiously from overhead branches. James points to an animal the size of a raccoon, but with a longer snout. "Lesser anteater," he says.

An entire army of Honduran proboscis bats stare down at us from a tree. Jorge pulls out a clay orcarina and says, "The bats don't like music," then plays.

#### **MUSICALLY DISINCLINED**

We think the sound is beautiful, but the bats fly away. It is peaceful and silent except for the water lapping at the hull of the boat, the wind whispering through the trees, and the sound of the Howler monkeys. During our entire time in the mangrove channels, we don't see another human being.

When I mention this to James, he says, ``That's why I love Honduras, because no one's discovered it."

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