

THE EYES HAVE IT

White-faced
capuchin monkey

FACT FILE

CRUISE LINE: UnCruise Adventures
VESSEL: *Safari Voyager*
PASSENGER CAPACITY: 62
TOTAL CREW: 31
PASSENGER DECKS: 4
ENTERED SERVICE: 1982
(refurbished 2016)
LENGTH: 53 metres
FACILITIES: Sun deck, dining room,
bar/lounge, wellness room (one
complimentary massage), reading
nook, kayaks, paddle boards,
inflatable skiffs and snorkelling
gear provided.
BOOKINGS: Eight-night Unveiled
Wonders – Costa Rica & Panama
Canal cruise on *Safari Voyager*,
from US\$4,395 per person, twin-
share, uncruise.com

With a huge diversity of animal and plant life, the steamy jungles of Costa Rica are a must-see for nature lovers – and cruising aboard a boutique ship makes it even more appealing, writes Jocelyn Pride.

Photography Jocelyn Pride

Look! I think I even got the whites of his eyes," I say excitedly to Rey Cascante our expedition guide. It's early morning in Manuel Antonio National Park and we're peering at the "perfect" shot of a howler monkey on the screen of my camera. Between gasps of laughter loud enough to wake a sleeping sloth, Rey manages to give me a lesson in the anatomy of a howler monkey. "He's hanging upside down. They're not his eyes, they're his balls."

Howler monkeys aren't the only creatures living in the rainforests of Costa Rica that go out on a limb to attract a mate. "It's all about sex," Rey says enjoying stopping our small group in its tracks. "When an iguana's head goes blue, he's horny. Frigate birds puff out their red throat pouch and male squirrel monkeys double in size during the mating season."

Even the laziest of lovers get into the action. "Sloths push each other out of trees to win over a female."

Catching glimpses of the quirky animals of Costa Rica is the focus of UnCruise Adventures' new eight-night Unveiled Wonders – Costa Rica & Panama Canal itinerary from San Jose to Panama City.

The cruise line has a loyal following. At the setting-sail welcome drinks, 90 per cent of the ship's 62 guests raised their hands when asked "who's sailed with us before?" >



"We have everything here. You might even walk the same track as a jaguar."

Costa Rica, where five per cent of the world's species of flora and fauna is found in an area smaller than Tasmania, is a must-do for nature lovers. And travelling on UnCruise's latest acquisition, *Safari Voyager* is an ideal way to explore.

The ship underwent a US\$20 million refit in 2016 and offers every comfort. The clever design of my cabin makes it seem bigger than it is. There's a picture window, writing desk, air-conditioning, quality toiletries, bath robes, slippers, Latin American artwork and wooden furnishings. Larger cabins include the coveted Owner's Suite – 24 square metres with floor to ceiling windows.

Every day brings as much diversity as the country itself, from dawn yoga on the top deck to sunset cocktails. In between, it's all about kayaking or stand-up paddle boarding on glassy water framed with palm trees, snorkelling over coral gardens amid schools of brightly coloured fish, exploring caves and rock formations on a skiff tour or hiking and spotting wildlife.

All the necessary gear is provided and with a staff to guest ratio of two to one, the activities cover all levels of experience. "If there isn't an activity that suits you, we'll create one," says Rey. And being compact, *Safari Voyager* can get into places big ships can't.

Early one morning, we drop anchor in a hidden cove in the remote (even by Costa Rica standards) Osa Peninsula. Here Nancy Aitken, a slip of a woman with a huge heart, invites us into the forest home she shares with research students from around the world. Living off grid, surrounded by 54 hectares of primary rainforest, Nancy is committed to keeping the area "looking exactly as does today for future generations".

We hike narrow trails over gnarled roots, shaded by twisted branches and dense green foliage smudged with red tips of ginger lilies and heliconias. Howls and shrill squawks cut through the steamy humidity.

We're surrounded by about 800 species of birds and 250 mammals, but they remain hidden in the dense jungle. "You can't see them, but they're watching you,"

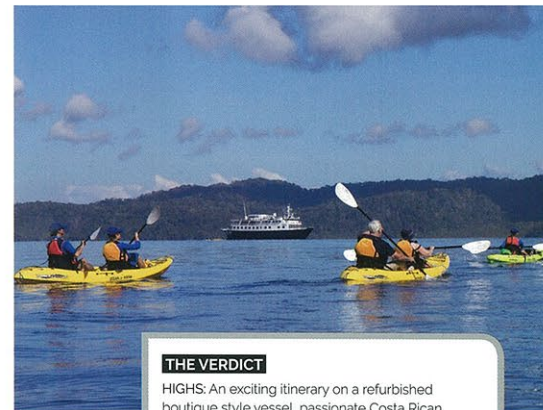
says Nancy. "We have everything here. You might even walk the same track as a jaguar."

Another day, we spot two- and three-toed sloths, iguanas, toucans, hummingbirds, deer, butterflies, white-faced capuchin monkeys, leaf-cutter ants and an agouti (large rodent) in just a few hours. As always, seeing wildlife is the luck of the draw.

After each excursion, the coolness of the ship is a relief from the heat. So too is the open bar which serves drinks (including cocktails) day and night (all alcohol is included). Buffets for breakfast and lunch are in the casual "sit-anywhere" dining room with table service for dinner. We dine on delicacies such as Covina fillet with red onion jam or smoked pork loin with blackberry jus. A vegetarian option is always on offer and the chef caters well for food intolerances.

On our last day, we leave nature's wonders to marvel at one of the world's finest engineering feats, the Panama Canal. It's an extreme juxtaposition; whistles and bells replace bird calls, water gushes into the locks rather than down waterfalls and it's all about ropes and cables rather than entangled vines and howler monkeys. I watch the eight hour transit from the top deck, totally transfixed, as I've been for each waking moment of this cruise.

• The writer was a guest of UnCruise Adventures.



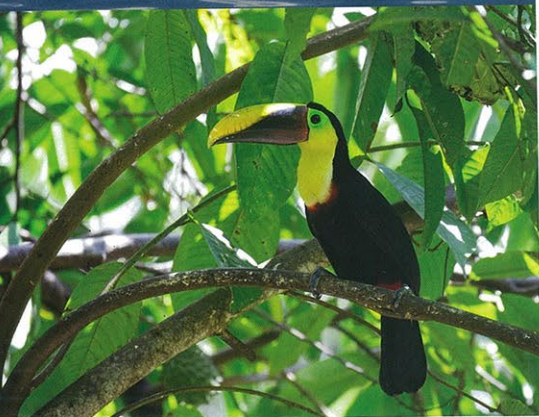
THE VERDICT

HIGHS: An exciting itinerary on a refurbished boutique style vessel, passionate Costa Rican guides, an exceptional range of activities and fresh, healthy food.

LOW: The humidity; drinking plenty of water, sunscreen and a hat are essential for travelling in this part of the world.

BEST SUITED TO: Outdoors, adventurous types of any age with a level of agility for getting on and off the skiffs. All landing are straight onto the beaches.

Clockwise from above: kayaking; keeled-billed toucan; stand-up paddle boarding; island excursion



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