

Bradt travel guides

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Bird in the Hand

He makes his home in the Monteverde cloud forest and today I'm going in search of him. I hurry down to breakfast, imagining a flash of crimson and emerald plumage as I get my first sighting of the rare Resplendent Quetzal. Then I remember.

Officially, it's Costa Rica's dry season but the weather has gone rogue. Days of monsoon rain have turned mountain roads into cataracts and last night our itinerary was hastily re-arranged.

Plan B sees the three of us clambering aboard an inflatable dinghy for a trip along the Peñas Blancas, a liquid chisel gouging a channel through the rainforest. The river is littered with branches; or are they, in fact, caimans? Our guide, the self-proclaimed Crazy Luis would have us believe so. His less-than-Oscar-worthy screams don't scare us but his one-legged balancing act on the dinghy's rim raises our adrenaline levels as high as the swollen waters.

A few hundred yards downstream and we discover Luis' more valuable trick: mimicry. Throwing back his head he utters a series of staccato grunts and shrieks. Immediately, the left bank reverberates with a similar cacophony and then we see them, howler monkeys, loping through the trees. They pause to stare at us, their tails punctuating the foliage like giant commas.

The monkeys sashay out of sight; we float onwards. Suddenly, Luis slews the raft to the shore. 'Uh-oh. Big problem.' A ceiba tree has uprooted and crashed into the river taking a heap of boulders with it. Beyond the slide, the water boils white and fierce. So much for Plan B.

Luis, however, is buoyant. 'You thirsty? I take you to my friend's house for coffee.' A dense verdant tangle, devoid of any sign of human habitation surrounds us. We smile indulgently at his joke, but he's already paddling back upstream and before long, moors in a clearing.

As we scramble up the bank I spot a wooden shack, front elevation open to the elements. An old man, with a crest of silver hair and heron-thin legs, wearing a red *Los Ticos* football shirt totters towards us, arms outstretched in welcome. 'My friend, Don Pedro. He has ninety-two years. He lives here all his life,' explains Luis.

Don Pedro shakes my hand. 'English?'

'Si.'

'Ah. Clement Attlee. Very good man!'

It's not the greeting I was expecting. But then, I've never made pre-drinks small talk under a canopy of banana trees or vermilion angels' trumpets before, either. I nod, searching for a suitable response.

'Winston Churchill?'

'Pah. Winston Churchill,' he echoes with a scowl then spits on the ground.

Our game of Prime Ministers' ping-pong ends abruptly when Don Pedro points a bony finger at the forest floor: a regiment of leaf cutter ants is marching across our path in single file, each soldier bearing his leaf shield aloft. A rhinoceros beetle, invincible in his polished armour, trundles up an artery of buttress roots where two frogs sit, pulsating clones of the brooches we gawped at in the museum of pre-Columbian gold in San José. Our host beams, like a child showing off his toys, and his delight is infectious.

Whilst I have been spellbound by the seething world at my feet there's been activity in the shack. A Señora ushers us inside to the table where a statue of the Virgin Mary and a tin bath filled with onions are pushed aside to make room not only for coffee, but dishes of cassava chips and fried plantains.

I'm bursting with unanswered questions. How does a subsistence farmer, who has barely left this house, except for occasional trips to the nearest market, have an interest in 1940s British politics? Is the battered radio in the corner responsible for his few words of English? The subject of my speculation is now snoring in a rocking chair while Luis and the Señora have wandered outside to inspect the hen run and vegetable patch.

Inspired by the chickens, Crazy Luis squawks and flaps his way back to the boat. It's time to leave. Don Pedro wakes up and insists on walking down to the riverbank to wave goodbye. As we cast off, the sky is brochure-blue. I look back and there, among the greens of the Tilajari rainforest where he makes his home, I catch a last glimpse of red chest and crest of silver.