Headline: Nature steals spotlight on trip to Costa Rica

Deckhead: Guests get up close with species at Corcovado National Park

It’s difficult to question whether Costa Rica takes advantage of every morsel. The Central American country covers only .03% of the Earth’s surface, but it’s home to nearly 6% of the world’s biodiversity.

Located north of Panama, Costa Rica has nearly 900 species of birds. Eastern North America has fewer than 200 species.

Haven’t seen a toucan other than cereal box? Costa Rica can transform your morning breakfast into a unique wildlife experience. Seekers of exotic flora and fauna would have a difficult time finding a better environment in which to encounter.

Costa Rica has a commitment to conservation that dates to the late 1940s. The government abolished its military and redirected funds to education, healthcare and the environment. Locals mutter “There goes the Costa Rican army!” upon sighting a flock of birds. It’s all in jest, of course, but impact has been noticeable. A system of national parks and reserves protects 25% of land from human exploitation.

Corcovado National Park, located on Costa Rica’s Pacific coast, is one of the most biologically diverse parts of the country – if not the world – and worth an extended visit. It’s a 50-minute flight on a small plane from the country’s capital of San Jose to Puerto Jimenez, primary area of the national park.

Corcovado boasts acres of primary rainforest and a growing network of private reserves dedicated to ecotourism. The location is sparsely populated and comprised of lush ridges full of monkeys and scarlet macaws that slope down miles of deserted, wide beaches.

The park’s hiking trails follow coastal and inland routes, and guides are required. They’re excellent navigators, whose trained eyes can spot small birds or sloths high in the canopy or stealthy anteaters at ground level. Many lug lightweight scopes for close-up viewing of amazing creatures some adventurers only have seen in books.

Night hikes also are popular. Headlamps and flashlights are used to spot nocturnal mammals and other critters. Shine a special UV flashlight on a scorpion and it turns electric blue.

Lodging ranges from screened-in tents on platforms to more luxurious lodges, but air conditioning is rare. The setting is a challenge, but it comes with an opportunity to arise to the sight of a troop of capuchin monkeys swinging through the branches outside a window. It’s a memory that will last a lifetime.

Outdoors enthusiasts should plan a trip to Costa Rica – or any natural area where wildlife steals the spotlight – soon, while Toucan Sam and friends remain abundant. A 2019 report by the United Nations concluded that as many as 1 million species of plants and animals risk extinction in the coming decades, thanks to a growing population and activities like logging, farming and mining.

So, here’s to keeping Costa Rica a vibrant ecological kingdom. There’s too much to appreciate to see it all go to waste.

As Joni Mitchell famously sang, “You don’t know what you’ve got, ’til it’s gone.”

Cutline: BIRD FEATHERS – A toucan bird rests on a tree limb in Corcovado National Park in Costa Rica. Image: Andre LABETAA. Adobe Stock.