

Adventure cruise dives into natural world

Uncruise line prefers to explore areas less travelled

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“Do you want to see a snake?” asked Rey, our expedition guide. He had just been notified by walkie-talkie of a snake ahead of us on the trail. We tromped quickly to a scene worth filming by National Geographic.

The snake was biting into a baby bull frog the size of a tennis-ball, strangling the poor thing at the same time. The plaintive squeals from the frog were heartbreaking. “They’re cries for help,” explained Rey, as we watched in pity and horror. “Yes, it’s sad to us, but it’s nature.”

Nature – in all its awe – was being dug up and tossed at us in spades.

We were cruising from Costa Rica to Panama on a small ship, the Safari Voyager. More accurately, we were “uncruising” with UnCruise Adventures.

The cruise line operates eight small adventure vessels (maximum 84 passengers) in Alaska, Hawaii, Central America, Mexico and the Galápagos. You won’t find a casino, jewelry shop or pool onboard. And you won’t spend much time in your cabin, or want to. (Cabins, though comfy with ensuite bathrooms, are much smaller than staterooms on larger, traditional cruise ships). Rather, you’re outside in nature – hiking, kayaking, swimming, snorkelling and spotting wildlife on skiff excursions.

And, sorry, no duty-free shopping! There are few (if any) ports or towns on most itineraries. You visit deserted islands, national parks and remote wilderness areas instead. Take our snake encounter. That was on a hiking foray in the dry forest of the Curu National Wildlife Refuge. The ship anchored off the non-touristy, southeastern tip of Costa Rica’s Nicoya Peninsula; guests were ferried ashore in rigid Zodiac-style inflatables. And like all landings, it was a “wet landing” – where, steadied by crew, we slid off the inflatable into knee-deep water and waded up onto an isolated beach.

More hiking and wildlife highlights followed on our third day when we ventured into the lush rainforest of Costa Rica’s untouched Osa Peninsula. We’d been told three pumas and a jaguar



The newly refitted Safari Voyager sails various Costa Rica and Panama cruises year-round. In all, UnCruise Adventures operates eight small adventure vessels (maximum 84 passengers) in Alaska, Hawaii, Central America, Mexico and the Galápagos. PHOTO SUPPLIED **RICHARD HALL PATTERSON**

roamed the Campanario Biological Station property which we walked in the morning. The sound of cicadas was almost deafening as (mindful of any camouflaged poisonous snakes) we trod carefully over gnarled roots along the leaf-strewn path, our eyes darting from left to right, internal antennae on high alert.

“Chances are you won’t see a puma or cat in the jungle,” said the station director. “But a thousand eyes will be watching you.” No matter that we didn’t see a jungle cat – the exuberant beauty of the giant mahogany and “walking” mangrove trees was reward enough.

That afternoon, we had a tough decision to make. Chillax on the beach? The ship’s crew had set up a “beach club” under the shade of leafy trees, with canvas stools, towels and even a small bar for rum-and-pineapple cocktails. Or join Rey on a long, “guide’s choice,” coastal hike which he promised would bowl us over with its scenic beauty?

The hike won out. And in the excitement of spying not one, but two, neon-yellow toucans soon after setting off, we forgot about the energy-sapping humidity that soon slowed our stride down to a



Zodiacs tethered off Manuel Antonio National Park on Costa Rica’s central Pacific coast. PHOTO SUPPLIED **JANICE MUCALOV**

mere strolling pace.

The toucans were easier to spot than the three-toed sloth we’d seen our first day in Manuel Antonio National Park. Looking like a coconut-sized bump high up in a tree, the sloth – greenish in colour from the algae that flourish in the fur – had blended in perfectly with the forest canopy.

We’d needed our guide’s telescope to make it out. By contrast, these toucans were hard to miss once Rey pointed them out.

Ditto the white-faced capuchin monkeys jumping in the trees. Locals dub them “mafia monkeys,” as these charming thieves steal food and camera lenses from unsuspecting

visitors. “They’re the smartest monkeys of the bunch,” said Rey. “They know how to use tools to cut open coconuts.”

Crossing a sweet beach cove – with grey sand, fine as powder – we met a family group lounging in white plastic chairs at the water’s edge, beers in hand. We wondered how they happened to be

here in this remote piece of wilderness paradise. It turned out they were also Canadians, from Ontario, who had rented a nearby house (invisible from the beach) through VRBO. It was only accessible by boat, and their groceries had been shipped in by water taxi.

A bit further on, we stopped to watch a startling scene. The sea was bubbling and boiling up with fish beneath a cloud of dive-bombing pelicans! And whooping and hollering, two local fishermen raced into the water, tossing their lines in. Within minutes, they reeled in four fat silvery jackfish. Dinner, they proudly explained, was going to be good that night, fried up with oil and garlic.

Just before meeting the boat that would pick us up, we came across a palm-fringed lagoon. It looked very inviting for a dip. “A swim would be great here if it weren’t for the crocodiles,” cautioned Rey. And sure enough, what looked to be an innocuous log on the bank lazily rose up on stubby legs and slid silently into the water.

Hiking is all well and good, but UnCruise also knows of beautiful beaches in this part



On its tours Uncruise Adventures focus on hiking, kayaking, swimming, snorkelling and spotting wildlife on skiff excursions.



Boarding the skiff in Manuel Antonio National Park on Costa Rica's central Pacific coast. PHOTOS SUPPLIED JANICE MUCALOV

Cruise navigates the Panama Canal

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of the world. We were ready for a beach day when we called in at Granito de Oro ("Grain of Gold") the next morning. This tiny uninhabited islet off Coiba National Park in Panama – with clear turquoise water lapping onto a blindingly white sand beach dotted with palm trees – is about as perfect as a tropical island can get. Time for snorkeling! A kaleidoscope of colourful fish scenes unfolded underwater – yellow-and-black striped Sergeant Majors darted about, balled schools of silver jackfish swam by, puffer fish hung effortlessly in the water. Some lucky guests even saw a white-tipped reef shark.

And in a Zen moment, a green loggerhead turtle glided by gracefully just below the surface as we tried our hand at standup paddleboarding.

Come evening, we always looked forward to "happy hour." That's when everyone mingled over drinks, shared the day's experiences and learned about the next day's adventures from the expedition team. Happily, all cocktails and wines are included in the Safari Voyager's rates because we took a particular liking to the "Valencia" – brandy, apricot liqueur, fresh orange juice and sparkling wine – that Daniel, the bartender, shook up. Meals were equally good. Sample dinner: spiced carrot soup, followed by leg of lamb with eggplant and saffron rice (or for seafood lovers, shrimp with chipotle honey sauce). We completed our cruise navigating the 77-kilometre length of the Panama Canal, most of which is a vast man-made lake studded with islands and tropical vegetation. At the canal's entrance,



An endangered white-faced capuchin monkey.

sitting on deck at sunset, we were spellbound by the original locks' operation. Running on steeply rising tracks along both sides of the locks, electric locomotives (called "mules") attached to the ship by cables, seemed to pull the ship along. (In fact, they keep a ship from bumping into the sides of the canal as it passes through the locks). The whole experience was quite surreal – it's impossible not to be amazed by this ingenious lock system, which raises ships 25 metres above sea level at one end of the canal, then lowers them back down again at the other.

As a goodbye to our time in the world of nature, the passage through this man-made marvel was perfect for re-entering the world of civilization.

If you go:

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