

THE OSA PENINSULA EXPEDITION, COSTA RICA 2015

INTERIM REPORT **by John Blashford-Snell**

It is 436 years since the legendary Sir Francis Drake landed on the jungle clad shores of the Osa Peninsula in what is today Costa Rica. Although he came to refit his ship "The Golden Hind", his visit may well have been prompted by the rich, gold filled rivers flowing into the Pacific. Sophisticated, golden artifacts indicate that the Pre-Colombian indigenous people, who lived here for thousands of years, knew all about the treasures hidden in the uninhabited mountains rising behind the ocean beaches. In fact, it was not until 1937, when two Italian scientists came in search of artifacts that gold was rediscovered. They collected pails of sand, but much to their surprise, the gold they found was in the form of nuggets, large enough to be picked out by hand. Word spread and a gold rush ensued. For many decades miners sought their fortunes in the boulder strewn creeks bisecting the emerald green forests of the Peninsula de Osa. For years the precious metal was measured in pounds, not grams and a one and a half pound piece as large as a fist, was found in 1949.

The area became known as the Wild West and a similar code was established. For years, it was a simple way of life for a special breed. Honour and respect were the keys to survival and it is said that one could leave one's gold in your shack and be gone for days without worrying that someone would steal it, but you could be killed in an instant by the slash of a machete if you showed disrespect at the local pulperia or pub. An article published in Argosy magazine in 1965 states that, "Life is rugged, food is scarce, and women are almost non-existent ... but the place does have one thing to recommend it – Gold, lots of it."

Unfortunately, by the late 1960s miners were not the only ones interested in this mountainous region. The rivers that roared from the hills were home to some 20,000 people. Traders, merchants, middle-men, drug peddlers, bootleggers, poachers, hired guns, prostitutes and bar owners sought their fortune or found a place to hide and the old timers no longer left their stash unguarded.

An International logging consortium had eyes on the immense forest of trees, and an International Conservation Foundation realized that this area was the last unspoiled Tropical Rainforest left in Central America. Economics, politics, and natural history clashed and the Osa became a battleground. The environmental interests won and in 1975 the area, now considered one of the most biodiverse places left on the planet, was declared Corcovado National Park.

A history of conflict resulted and when a compromise could not be reached, the miners were forced to leave the designated Park area but some still remain on the banks of the Carate River. Sheets of black plastic provide shelter, rice and beans provide sustenance and their precious

Costa Rican coffee and the throaty calls of the Howler monkeys, wake them at dawn. As in the days of old, even a meager strike can provide liquor for a celebration.

On the Northern side of the park, a totally different community exists. There are the 300 or so Guaymi Indians, an indigenous group, who came here from neighboring Panama in the 1960s, when the Costa Rican government ousted a logging company that was in conflict with local campesino's. In 1985 the Guaymi received 2700 hectares as a tribal reserve where they now struggle to make a living in the humid forest. It was to this diverse region that our Scientific Exploration Society approved expedition came in July 2015, following a suggestion by Lana Wedmore, a former venturer on Operation Raleigh, who has established an incredible eco-friendly lodge in the Jungle. Lana is passionate about the environment and in particular the Osa peninsula rain forest, that she seeks to protect.

Our first task was to aid the Guaymi with medical and dental treatment and reading glasses for those in need. Chief Mariano Marquez Montezuma kindly allowed us to use his spacious lodge as a base and even provided a unique hardwood dental chair carved from a local tree. Using this, RAF Dentist Sqn Ldr Ian McGarty carried out extractions, assisted by Spanish speaking Villa Piche, whilst our medical officer, Dr Jane Orr, treated patients in a store room. Shirley Critchley distributed glasses and school books and the SES Latin American representative, Yolima Cipagauta, lectured the local children on conservation, using woollen puppets of turtles, peccary and jaguar that had been knitted by ladies in England.

Mark Entwistle, a Chartered Surveyor, mapped a number of eco-trails in the dense forest, set up for visitors by Chief Mariano and Laurence Villard prepared a short history of the Guaymi people. Wildlife studies were made by Chris Kershaw and Perry McGee, although it was noted how relatively few animals were seen in the area, possibly because of hunting.

Deep in the forest we came across an extraordinary carving of an Indian face, 15 square feet in size on a cliff face. Who had fashioned this and when? Mariano did not admit it but because it was cut in heavy clay rather than rock, we suspected it was modern. Nevertheless it was a fine piece of art. Lt Col Tom Gallagher and Lt Col Richard Brown, retired Royal Engineers, examined a damaged bridge and went ahead to recce the site for a new footbridge to be built on the main access trail to the Corcovado Park. Richard and Laurence also discussed the marketing of the eco-tourism scheme with Mariano.

When violent thunderstorms struck the area we were grateful for the shelter of the Lodge, but there was almost a serious accident when a tree, weakened by termites in its trunk, crashed down across the area where some of our team had tents.

On 8th July we moved our base to Carate on the coast. Here Lana Wedmore and Costa Rican naturalist, Gary Gomez, had gathered a team of local people to set up shelters beside the community Church, in a grove of tall palms known as Shady Lane. In spite of the presence of a number of snakes and scorpions, this was a splendid camp site. The Church was used as a clinic and a shelter during the worst tropical storms and one Senora Daisy Cubillos became our hard working cook, often aided by Yolima.

Troops of monkeys raced around in the tree tops and at 0500 hrs every day, the roars of the Howlers sounded reveille. Remembering the earlier incident, tents had to be positioned with care to avoid falling branches.

British biologist, Phoebe Edge of the Sea Turtle Conservation Committee of Corcovado who lives in Costa Rica, briefed us on the programme to protect these endangered creatures who nest along the beaches. One of our tasks was to assist in the refurbishment of the hatchery. Whilst at Carate, a baby Hawksbill turtle was discovered and led to the ocean. This was the first sighting of the species in this area.

Our major job was the construction of a footbridge on the La Leona trail that leads into the park. Engineers Tom and Richard, assisted by most of the team and helped by some of the local gold panners, tackled this. Gary Gomez, a man of many skills and enormous physical strength, played a leading role in the project. The original plan was to build a 23m suspension bridge and a professional design was produced by civil engineer, Jim Paterson in UK. Alas, this could not be afforded by the park. However, a 10 metre site was selected by the Park Director, Etilma Morales, who aimed to use stocks of illegally cut timber, that had been confiscated by her staff. The hardwood decking, bank seats and metal fittings arrived, but a problem occurred over the two 12 metre main beams. A landowner had agreed to allow Gary to cut up a fallen tree on his property, but under Costa Rican law, a special permit was required even though the tree was dead. Etilma produced the necessary permit, but the owner claimed he needed another. Three days of negotiation and long phone calls to San Jose produced the additional permit, but then the gentleman decided his lawyer must study all the documents and finally decided he would not provide the tree! Patience and time were running short by now, so to overcome this obstruction, Lana and Etilma obtained two costly 12m alloy girders in nearby Pt Jimenez. These were rushed to Carate and using a friendly villager's welding kit, the girders were cut to size and holes burned for bolts to be placed through them. Poor Gary got very little sleep for several days.

The girders were then hauled aboard a massive ex American Army six wheel truck and carried to the start of the La Leona trail. Regulations do not permit vehicles to travel on the beach, so a horse and cart was found. The girders were then fitted over the axle of the cart and a detached set of wheels fitted to the end of the girders. Thus, whilst the tide was low, this Heath Robinson transport set off for a two mile hike up the beach. Amazingly the rather thin horse made good headway and girders were soon in position with Gary and the engineers assisted by Chris, Mark, Perry and even Ian, the dentist, working flat out in the 30° heat to complete the job before our scheduled departure.

Meanwhile a steady flow of patients came to our clinic where Melissa, a local dentist also helped out. Shirley distributed all her glasses. Yolima gave out hula-hoops, made by a member of the staff at the Hotel Posada Canal Grande, where we had stayed in San Jose. The children loved them and Shirley taught some to play badminton with rackets brought from Britain. Perry, who runs the National Tracking School in Britain, instructed groups of young volunteers, who were assisting the Turtle project.

Our hosts, the Corcovado Social Development Association want to create a sustainable community centre at Shady Lane so Mark surveyed a site, which it is planned will include a primary school, a health post, a small store and a meeting hall, alongside the existing Church. To allow for rising sea levels, thanks to global warming, the buildings will be on stilts.

Guided by Lana's Luna Lodge staff wildlife studies were made in the forest, occasionally involving some challenging marches. Chris was delighted by the diversity of animals and the number of snakes he found. Deer and a tapir came right into our camp. Villa made long lists of the colourful birds, whilst Laurence and Jane helped with the turtle project. Shirley and a group spent some time with the gold panners on the Carate river and even found a gram!

On Friday 17th July the bridge was completed. As Lana arrived in a summer dress, straw hat and bottles of champagne to perform the opening, a water spout came in over the ocean and the rain fell in rods or as Yoli said like "Dogs and Cats". Nevertheless standing in the deluge Tom held the tape for Lana to cut with a Swiss Army knife and we downed the champers. Sheltered by a huge banana leaf, Shirley snapped some photos and we trudged back to camp while the storm raged round us.

We were especially grateful to Markus and Gabriel Wehreister and of course Lana, for their kind hospitality at their lodges.

The expedition ended with our usual Burns supper. The Carate people relished the Stahly's tinned haggis brought specially from Scotland and listened attentively to the odes and traditional speeches given by Tom (in full dress!), Perry and Villa.

On our last day we helped the Carate people to clear the litter from 20 kms of beach... This bi-annual event preserves the beauty of the area and helps protect the turtles. Most of the trash is plastic brought in from the ocean, some of it clearly from Japan. Tons of it was then taken to Pt Jimenez for recycling.

Fortunately the weather stayed dry as we packed up our tents and bid farewell to Shady Lane. Luckily we spent the night at a comfortable hostel in La Palma, for another tremendous storm struck the peninsula. On the coast road back to San Jose we crossed the bridge over the Rio Tarcoles where giant American crocodiles congregate, warming their ugly bodies in the sun, reminding one of Africa rather than Central America. The comfortable Hotel Posada Canal Grande and its swimming pool in San Jose's Santa Ana district, was a welcome sight and for our final dinner at nearby Damarco's fine restaurant we enjoyed a delicious steak. It was a good way to end a challenging but most successful expedition. However, great credit is due to Yoli who spent almost a year setting up the expedition and struggling to extract our funds from Western Union in San Jose. We are especially thankful to Lana, Etilma, Gary and Yoli for all their hard work and support, which ensured we achieved our objectives.

For further details of expeditions please contact Colonel John Blashford-Snell on jbs@ses-explore.com.