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Comfortable Oasis In Honduran Jungle

By STEPHEN KINZER

SURROUNDED by dense foliage in the tropical forest of Central America, I learned something that sounds unlikely: hiking in the pouring rain has its rewards. My two companions and I were climbing through thin clouds and admiring bright-red butterflies flitting in the mist when the downpour began. We briefly considered retreating, but why? We would be soaked anyway.

Instead, we pressed ahead for another hour. The rain cooled what would otherwise have been a stiflingly hot afternoon, and we returned drenched but invigorated.

What made this hike so extraordinary was not just the cleansing rain or the dazzlingly lush forest through which we walked. It was the fact that at the end of our hike, as the sky cleared, we were able to swim in a pool under the rising moon, retire for naps and hot showers in a comfortable cabin, and then convene for dinner on the veranda, followed by Cuban cigars, single-malt scotch and hot chocolate made on the premises from local cocoa beans.

Despite decades of reckless development, there is still a fair amount of unspoiled land in Central America, some of it teeming with spectacular plant and animal life. Dozens of resorts have sprung up in these areas, but relatively few provide both high-quality accommodations and close proximity to pristine nature. The one I visited last March, the Lodge at Pico Bonito near the Caribbean coast of Honduras, is among them.

Opened in 2000, the lodge consists of 21 cabins nestled at the foot of Pico Bonito, an 8,000-foot mountain that, according to the manager of the lodge, Kent Forte, has only been climbed about a dozen times. Mr. Forte is one of those who has made the climb (it took his group eight days in 1992).

The lodge's 200-acre property adjoins the 415-square-mile Pico Bonito National Park, the largest in Honduras (and about the same size as Rocky Mountain National Park), which embraces a thriving tropical environment. A biologist and former Peace Corps volunteer, Mr. Forte often leads guests on early-morning bird walks along the trails that wind uphill from the lodge.

Hikes along these trails can take from half an hour to a whole day, either alone or with a guide. On mine, which took several hours and was unguided, I saw a coati, a porcupine, an opossum and a raccoon, along with various birds, butterflies, lizards and tortoises, as well as a phantasmagoria of orchids and other flowers. Others have seen tapir, peccary and even jaguars.

Like most travelers to this coast, I landed at San Pedro Sula, the commercial capital of Honduras, in the northwest corner of the country. I had declined Mr. Forte's offer to have us picked up there for the 125-mile, two-and-a-half-hour ride to the lodge, and instead rented a car.

The road out of town is lined by maquiladoras, modern-looking factories where clothing and other products are processed and assembled for foreign markets. Later, it passes banana and pineapple plantations, a legacy of the American-owned Standard Fruit Company, which has been a powerful force here for generations. It reaches the Caribbean at Tela, where we stopped for a first meal of seafood at Cesar Mariscos, a locally famous hotel and restaurant that is directly on the beach.

We started with three of the explosively flavorful fruit juices that are a Central American delicacy, in this case pineapple, watermelon and cantaloupe. The fish was as fresh and flavorful as we expected, but the waiter seemed puzzled when I asked what kind it was.

"It's the good kind, very fresh," he told me. And so it was.

The cabins at Pico Bonito are clean and modern, with locally designed wood and rattan furniture and no plastic in sight. Bathrooms are decorated with hand-painted Mexican tiles, and comfortable porches with hammocks are well suited for private meals. That first night, however, we chose to dine in the lodge's stylish restaurant, which overlooks the swimming pool and a meadow where iguanas frolic at dusk.

After two days of hiking the trails above the lodge, made memorable by that afternoon cloudburst, we ventured farther afield, to the Cuero y Salado Wildlife Refuge, where two rivers converge to form a dense mangrove swamp on the Caribbean coast about 15 miles northwest of La Ceiba. From the lodge, we drove along the highway for a while, then turned onto a winding road, and finally boarded a narrow-gauge train for a jostling ride over tracks built nearly a century ago by banana planters. The open train took us through rich fruit plantations and past clusters of homes, some handsome and others very poor.

Once in the reserve, we made our way to a modest dock near a settlement that Standard Fruit built for its American overseers and still uses as a retreat for managers. There, we stepped into a small skiff with our guides, a local boatman and a young environmental scientist from California who was studying tropical wildlife.

The boatman spoke no English, but when he called into the darkness behind the towering mangroves, animals would answer. He also spotted birds, bats and other creatures that we could barely discern in the vines and branches.

Even his powers, however, were not enough to conjure one of the manatees that live in this swamp. They like to float below the surface, and are rarely seen.

We returned late in the afternoon, and that night visited La Ceiba, the banana port that is a short drive along the coastal highway from Pico Bonito. La Ceiba, a city of about 120,000, has a Caribbean feel, with a laid-back atmosphere and sandy-floored bars, restaurants and night clubs. It is far from modern, but has a distinct charm, with faded wooden houses lining streets along the shore.

Like many ports, La Ceiba also has a saloon to which everyone seems to gravitate sooner or later: Expatriates Bar and Grill. The menu is both Honduran and American, and the clientele is also mixed, mostly Honduran but spiced with enough expatriates to justify the name. We met one local celebrity, Tony Stone, who runs the Adelante Foundation, a microcredit agency financed mainly by Americans that is pulling hundreds of local families out of poverty.

The appeal of this region is cultural as well as environmental, and I wanted to make some contact with its remarkable Garífuna people. Most of the Garífuna live in about 60 villages along the Caribbean coast of Honduras; others live in southern Belize, and there is a community of them in the Bronx. Estimates of their total number ranging from 100,000 to 450,000. They are descended from Africans who escaped from slave ships in the 17th century, and some are said to practice customs and hold religious beliefs rooted in Africa.

In one of the principal Garífuna towns, Sambo Creek, east of La Ceiba, I found a tasty piece of evidence to support those reports. It was the fish soup at La Champa Kabasa, a seafood restaurant that is among the best on this coast. I was gazing out over the sea and imagining the Garífuna odyssey when a waitress brought me the soup, its combination of spices tasting distinctly West African.

People I talked to in Sambo Creek told me that the main source of income there is remittances from relatives in the Bronx, and that given the low cost of living and easy availability of fruit and seafood, they saw no reason to work too hard. With a bit of paint and lumber, Sambo Creek could be turned into a lovely looking tourist destination, but the residents seem happy as they are and show no intense desire to remake their town for foreigners.

The next day, we took a white-water rafting trip on the nearby Río Cangrejal, which I would like to try again in winter, when the river is wilder. But with only five days at Pico Bonito, we didn't make it to Roatán or any of the other nearby Bay Islands, which draw anglers, divers and beach lovers. Nor did we have time for Copán, the famous Maya ruin.

On our last day at the lodge, we visited a butterfly reserve and a serpent center on the grounds, hiked to a craggy pool where we could swim under a waterfall, then celebrated with a last dinner at Expatriates.

Our last stop was the lodge's bar, for a farewell round of hot chocolate. Rich and grainy, less sweet and milky than the commercial kind, it is one of the delights of this unspoiled corner of Central America.

Near jungle and sea

How to Get There

There are daily flights to San Pedro Sula on **Continental**, (800) 231-0856, www.continental.com (from Houston); and on **American**, (800) 433-7300, www.aa.com (Miami). **Taca**, (800) 535-8780, www.taca.com, flies there daily from Miami and New Orleans, and four times a week from New York.

Major car rental companies have offices at the airport. The road to Pico Bonito is good but but given the habits of Honduran drivers, it is best used during daylight hours.

The ideal time to visit is between December and March, and the June-to-September period is also quite pleasant. The rainy season is roughly from October to early December.

Where to Stay

The Lodge at Pico Bonito charges \$155 to \$225 a night for a cabin for two. Meal plans and organized trips are extra: hikes, \$25 a person; the boat tour to Cuero y Salado Wildlife Refuge with lunch, \$65; and the whitewater trip with lunch \$75; taxes are also extra. Excursions to the Bay Islands and the ruins at Copán can be arranged. Reservations and information are available at www.picobonito.com, or by calling (888) 428-0221 in the United States and Canada, or (312) 345-3288 elsewhere.

Where to Eat

Along the road, one can have a fine lunch in Tela at **Cesar Mariscos**, facing the beach on the Calle Peatonal Playera and Avenida Uruguay, (504) 448-1934. Very fresh seafood is the specialty, and meals cost \$9 to \$20 a person, at 18.5 lempiras to the dollar.

In La Ceiba, **Expatriates Bar and Grill**, at Calle 12, Barrio El Iman, serves pizza and burgers, grilled chicken, pork chops and fish. Meals are about \$12 a person.

In Sambo Creek, **La Champa Kabasa**, Calle Principal and Avenida Playa, (504) 440-3355, serves great seafood in a relaxed ambience, with warm breezes blowing off the beach below. A meal costs \$10 to \$20, including (as at all these restaurants) local beer.

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