



GREG HONEL



NANCY SIMMONS/ PICO BONITO LODGE (BELOW)

While birding on the lodge grounds at Pico Bonito (above, the author with Honduran guide German Martinez), guests will no doubt see the exquisite lovely cotinga (opposite). Not far from the lodge, the Cuero y Salado Wildlife Refuge (below) offers more of the flora and fauna of the region, including howler and white-faced monkeys.

looks the river, commanding a vista of leafy countryside that stretches down the valley to the narrow coastal plain, with its pineapple and banana plantations, and beyond to the glinting waters of the Caribbean. Our Honduran guide, 46-year-old German Martinez, grew up in nearby La Ceiba. He studied English intensively to qualify for this job and earns far more as a guide than he did as a ranch hand. With great pride, he introduces visitors to the land he loves and wandered as a boy. He can whistle like a spot-breasted wren and is one of the few people to have reached Pico Bonito's summit—more than once.

German directs our attention to a blue blotch gleaming in a tall tree across the rapids. Our first lovely cotinga sits quietly against the emerald backdrop of a mountain slope, allowing German to home in on it with a spotting scope. The scope's 26-power magnification reveals the fine details of the bird's plumage. Its satiny smooth feathers are not uniformly blue. The wings have indistinct dark patches and stripes, and the neck and chest are clothed with purple bib and vest.

Descending the tower, we follow German up a steep trail. During pauses to catch our breath, we hear the sounds of someone chopping through the underbrush with a machete. When we finally pinpoint the source, we can hardly believe what's producing such a racket. German calls the little noise-maker the Michael Jackson bird. With a body black as coal, a startling crimson head, and bright yellow legs, the male red-capped manakin is a memorable sight. When it shows

The Honduran Rainforest Blues

... AND CRIMSON REDS AND MELLOW YELLOWS BY LES CHRISTIE

Bring your binoculars wherever you go while staying at the Lodge at Pico Bonito near the Caribbean coast of Honduras. You will see some of the rarest and most beautiful birds in Central America, including a fabulous, bright blue treetop dweller found here in numbers no other location can match.

Situated between two fast-moving rivers—the Coloradito and the Corinto—the luxury lodge nestles in the lap of Pico Bonito National Park, where 270,000 acres of tropical rainforest rise from near sea level to the 8,000-foot peak that gives the park its name. Much of this land is terra incognita, unexplored and unexploited. Here, the jaguar and mountain lion stalk their prey, deadly fer-de-lances lie in wait, and howler monkeys roar their eponymous cries.

“There’s so much completely untouched country out back, you never know what’s going to come out of it,” says assistant lodge manager and naturalist James Adams. He reports that the bird list for the lodge exceeds 400 species, and guides and guests add more each year.

The headliner is the male lovely cotinga, a robin-size bird with incandescent blue feathers that make it stand out in the

canopy like the only lit bulb on a Christmas tree. Lovely cotingas belong to the diverse New World family that includes umbrella birds and cocks-of-the-rock. Rare across most of their range from southern Mexico through Panama, lovely cotingas are common year-round at Pico Bonito and are especially visible from December through March. That’s when fruiting trees lure them into the lodge’s lovely garden in groups of up to six males, always with a drab female nearby.

“At the lodge, it’s just crazy. I don’t know of anywhere else in the tropics like this. People who never saw a lovely cotinga before see them here,” enthuses Louisiana State University ornithologist David Anderson. He has hoisted his way up more than 50 trees in the park for his dissertation research on canopy birds.

To augment its cotinga habitat, the lodge recently purchased an additional 150 acres, where birders have sighted many lovely cotingas.

On our first day exploring Pico Bonito, my wife and I climb a tall observation tower a short walk from our cabin, which is tucked away in the greenery within earshot of the clamorous Coloradito. The tower’s wide wooden deck over-





DEVON STEPHENS; JOHN RICHARDSON (OPPOSITE)

Time and Place

The Lodge at Pico Bonito (www.picobonito.com; telephone 888-428-0221) is a 20-minute drive from the airport in La Ceiba, the third largest city in Honduras and gateway to the Bay Islands. Americans usually fly into San Pedro Sula International Airport and catch a connecting flight to La Ceiba. The lodge will send a van to pick you up at the airport.

December through April is the best time to visit, after the rainy season ends and before the hotter summer months arrive. Bird-watching is best from February through April and in July and August.

Staffed almost exclusively by Hondurans, the lodge donates a portion of its cabin charges to La Fundación del Parque Nacional Pico Bonito, a non-profit organization that preserves and promotes the park. The lodge has built a working butterfly farm and serpentarium, both open to guests, which teach community members about the diversity of the ecosystem. Through the lodge, you can arrange various day trips.

We didn't have time to visit the Bay Islands, but we did go rafting with Omega Tours on the Río Congrejal, which has some of the finest white-water in Central America. Omega operates a tucked-away jungle lodge run by Silvia and Udo Wittemann (www.omegatours.info; telephone 504-440-0334).

A good way to spend a rainy afternoon is at Robert Lehman's Museum of Butterflies and Insects in La Ceiba. Lehman is an American collector who donated one of his collections to the Smithsonian. He exhibits more than 10,000 insects, mostly local species.

Copán, one of the most glorious ancient Mayan cities, is only a few hours drive from Pico Bonito. We stayed in Copán Ruinas at Casa de Café, a charming bed & breakfast inn run by Howard and Angela Rosenzweig (www.casadefecopan.com). With its year-round moderate temperatures and beautiful colonial buildings, Copán Ruinas is one of the most pleasant towns in all of Honduras. During your stay, be sure to visit Macaw Mountain Bird Park and Nature Reserve (see "Birds of Copán," June 2007).

L. Christie



Exploring the rainforest on the trails that wind uphill from the lodge, guests keep their heads up, looking for unusual birds and colorful butterflies (opposite). Side trips from the lodge may include the archipelago Cayos Cochinos (Hog Cays), declared a marine reserve in 1994, the nearest and least developed of the Bay Islands.

half-hour drive away. This settlement is the embarkation point for the Cuero y Salado Wildlife Refuge, named for the two rivers that come together to form a large estuary on the Caribbean coast. The refuge was created in 1986 to protect an endangered manatee population and coastal wetlands. It harbors jaguars, ocelots, boa constrictors, howler and white-faced monkeys, giant anteaters, alligators, and abundant fish life. We climb aboard a narrow-gauge train that once hauled fruit to the coast. Today, a dozen tourists sit on the wooden benches in two open-sided cars. In one car are actors Michael Douglas, Catherine Zeta-Jones, and their two young children, with nannies. They have been staying at Pico Bonito Lodge for several days.

The train careens past cattle pastures and small, wood-sided houses flanked by kitchen gardens. At times, vaqueros on small, lithe horses gallop alongside us. The local people use the railway to haul goods by hand in pushcarts called *burras*. When a train approaches, they pick the *burras* off the tracks and wait for the tourists to rattle by.

Five miles down the track, we detrain at the visitor's center and meet our guide, Jarold Estrada, who takes us into the refuge by boat.

Impressive mangrove thickets line the calm waters of the lagoon. Primary forest survives in places with thick-boled trees rooted on the banks, their branches hanging gardens of orchids and other epiphytes. Sometimes the lower limbs

reach out over the water, stretching across to meet branches from the opposite shore and forming a bridge for monkeys and iguanas to traverse. The air smells fresh but has a musky overtone, a bluesy aroma redolent of rotting leaves and bird guano.

Around a bend, Jarold's sharp eyes detect two short-nosed bats pressed against a palm trunk. He cuts the motor, and we drift to within a few feet. No more than three inches in length, the tiny bats crane their necks to peer at us from their head-down viewpoint.

Our trip continues deep into the old-growth forest to visit a boat-billed heron rookery. These squat, short-necked birds look like black-crowned night herons except for their dramatically oversize bills. Dozens of them have built shallow, stick nests in the trees, and a boisterous group they are. Youngsters scramble up limbs, chasing after their parents to beg a meal. Hatchlings still in the nest have a dewy, scraggly look. It's bedlam, with loud *quocks* and clacking bills disturbing the peaceful setting.

On our last morning at Pico Bonito, another lodge guest, Jeff, a stock portfolio manager from Boston, volunteers to show us a great potoo, a bewhiskered, nocturnal relative of the whippoorwill. On the way, we stop to chat with the Douglasses. German is their guide, and they are on the trail of the ferruginous pygmy owl that we spent an enjoyable 20 minutes observing the previous day. They have already found the potoo, so we continue down the road. Pottoos have an uncanny ability to blend in with tree bark and barely move during the day. We find this one right where Jeff left it, pressed against a tree trunk 30 feet off the ground. It's the perfect way to end our stay at the lodge.

Les Christie is a financial reporter for CNNMoney.com.