

Friendship Force in Costa Rica - by Sara Cox

Costa Rica lies between Nicaragua and Panama - mid Central America - with the Pacific on one coast and the Atlantic on the other.

It was very hot when we landed at San Jose airport to an equally warm welcome from our hosts.

Each day of our visit was packed with sights, treats and tastings. The hospitality and organisation was wonderful and on many occasions our hosts brought along, or visited, their families on the way. Singing typical Costa Rican songs on the bus and keeping up constant chatter, they smiled and laughed through the whole week.

Four million people live in Costa Rica, a million of these in San Jose which appears reasonably affluent, but less so as you travel away from the capital. I would describe the roads as 'tricky'. There is no army (they are very proud of this). The countryside varies from nine volcanoes (eight of which are active) to verdant plains and arid hillsides. Only high up was it cool, but we were there in their Summer - or dry season - as the rain forests and river beds bore witness to heavy rainfall for a good part of the year.

Much of the country is protected as Nature reserves and we saw a wealth of beautiful birds, trees, animals and fish. We had a memorable morning at Lankester Gardens, home of 1,500 orchids. On another day we visited the rainforest, seeing 'crocodillos', water buffaloes, birds, assorted monkeys, sloths, a turtle beach and, of course, wonderful vegetation and fruit and coffee plantations.

We had a picnic up the Poas volcano - thought to be the largest active crater in the world. The clouds even cleared so we had a spectacular view of the volcano and its nearby aquamarine blue lagoon.

As I look through my photos and diary - feeling rather chilly and listening to steady rain outside, I am so grateful to the Sussex and Cleveland Friendship Forces for allowing me to join them on this trip. It was my first experience of being an ambassador with the Force and I learned so much from the caring and hospitable Costa Ricans and their beautiful country. The trip too made me realise that listening to and absorbing so different a culture was an emotional and serious facet of our aims.

Now I must write my 'thank you' letter (in Spanish) to my new and, I hope, lifelong friends.

Sara Cox

