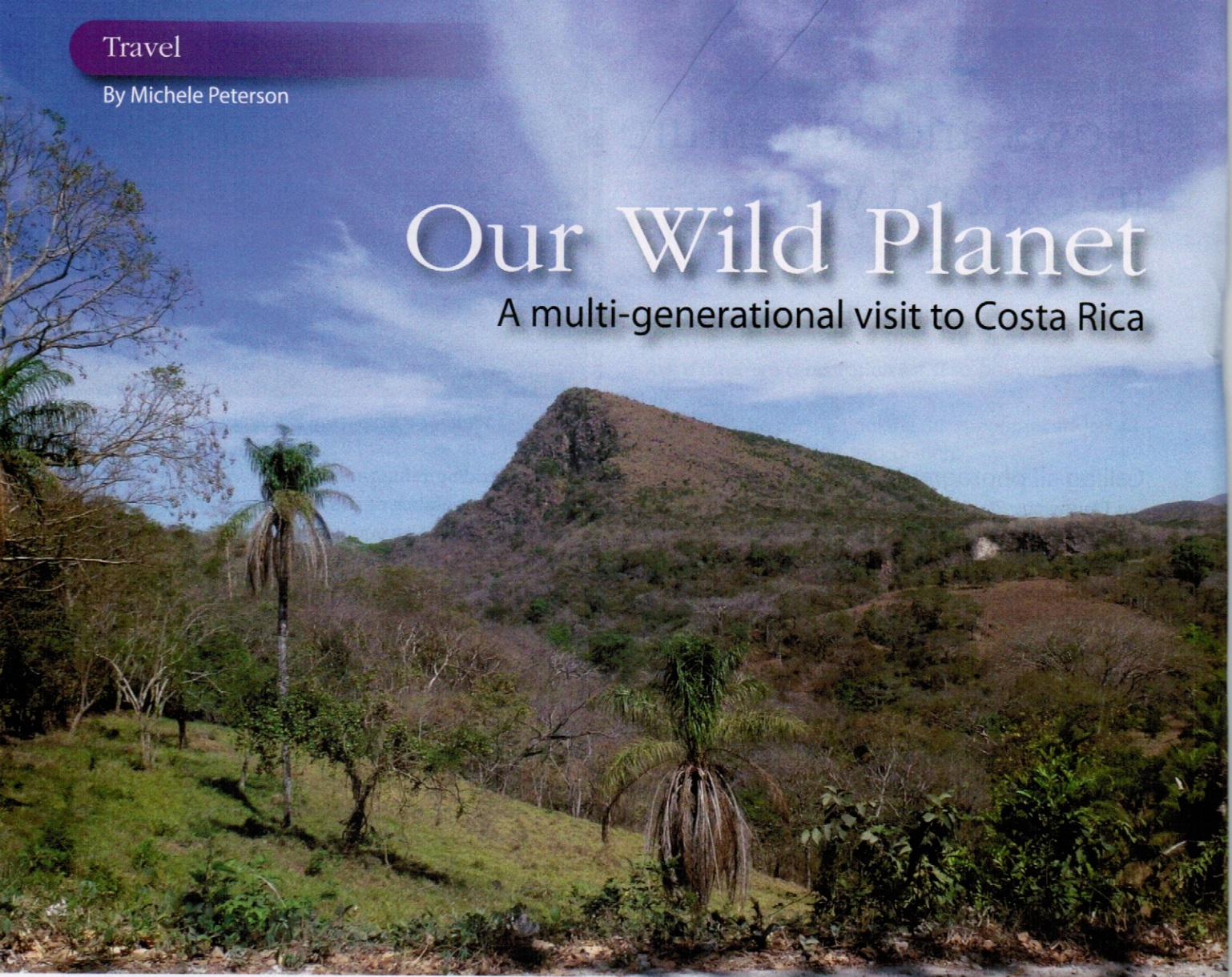


Our Wild Planet

A multi-generational visit to Costa Rica



“Look, three toucans in a tree,” shouts my 10-year-old grandson. I turn for a quick peek but my eyes stay riveted to the vast stretch of treetops ahead. We are on the edge of an active volcano in Rincón de la Vieja National Park in Costa Rica, about to fling ourselves into the jungle canopy on the highest zipline in Guanacaste province.

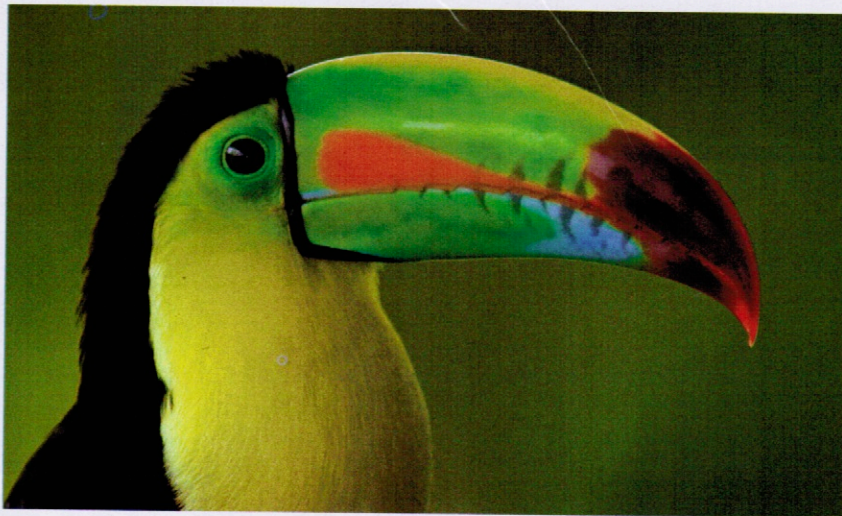
When planning this trip, I’d imagined leisurely gliding through the forest while jotting down wildlife sightings. But now, strapped into a safety harness, outfitted with a steel carabiner, leather gloves, and protective helmet, and peering into a canyon as deep as a 20-storey building, I couldn’t help feeling daunted.

“See you on the next platform,” says my grandson, grabbing the cable and launching into the air without hesitation. The suspension cable hums as it pulls taut, sweeping him away into the jungle canopy.

“You’re next,” says our guide, as he hoists me onto a pulley attached to the cable. “Just remember to keep your eyes open and brake.”

I was tempted to climb back down the ladder. But given my grandson was already out of sight, there was no backing out. I take a deep breath, adjust my glasses and step off into the green abyss.

*Dramatic views of volcanoes
are a highlight of a trip to
Rincón de la Vieja Park.*



Expect to see plenty of toucans when visiting Rincón de la Vieja Park.

PHOTO: COSTA RICA TOURISM BOARD

Intergenerational travel on the rise

With so many baby boomers entering the grand-parenting phase of their lives, multigenerational travel like ours is increasing. Adventure travel companies, hotels and tour operators are responding by tailoring experiences to make travelling with grandchildren easier than it's ever been.

It's tough to beat Costa Rica for multi-generational travel. Just a five-hour flight from Ontario and boasting unspoiled beaches, pristine cloud forests and fiery volcanoes, it's home to 2.5 per cent of the planet's biodiversity and 13 different ecosystems. Offering hands-on interaction with animals and outdoor adventure, it's a magical blend of open-air classroom and playground.

For us, a one-week stay at the new Dreams Las Mareas was an opportunity to get close to nature without roughing it. A member of the AMResorts group, operating 37 luxury beach properties in Mexico and the Caribbean, the 447-suite Dreams Las Mareas offers an all-inclusive unlimited luxury experience that includes eight gourmet restaurants, five bars, 24-hour room service, stocked mini bars, concierge service, an Explorer's Club for kids, and more. Their first resort in Central America, it's located on Costa Rica's northern Pacific Coast, an area known for its golden beaches, sunny dry climate and proximity to Guanacaste National Park, recognized by UNESCO for its biodiversity.

Dreams Las Mareas features the largest swimming pool in Guanacaste.

PHOTO: JADEN GONSALVES



PHOTO: JADEN GONSALVES



PHOTO: JADEN CONSALVES

A morning group hike at El Jobo Beach.

Costa Rica's green commitment

A world leader in sustainable tourism, Costa Rica is committed to preserving its natural resources – 26 per cent of its landmass is protected in a vast network that includes 33 national parks, 61 refuges, eight reserves and 14 wetlands.

This commitment to the environment is an important part of the mandate at Dreams Las Mareas. Constructed to meet LEED certified eco-sustainable standards and operating with green practices such as reduced water consumption and energy efficiency, the resort blends into its natural setting. Low-rise buildings circle a sprawling swimming pool that meanders through a landscape of native species and limestone pathways. The contemporary suites (many with connecting rooms attractive for family travel) feature expansive terraces with Jacuzzis or swim-out pools.

The resort's design includes a family-friendly upper pool zone close to the World Café buffet restaurant with special kids' selections, a giant water slide, a shallow pool for tots and an all-ages infinity pool. The lower pool area offers a livelier vibe with a swim-up bar, an adult-only pool and water sports on El Jobo beach.

El Jobo is a designated Blue Flag beach. Under this ecological program launched in Europe in 1985, Costa Rican beaches are evaluated and monitored according to strict criteria of water quality, waste disposal, sanitary facilities, sig-

nage, tourist safety, environmental education and beach maintenance.

This harmony with the environment means you don't have to go far to experience nature. Our first evening, we watched as a curious white-nosed coati checked out our terrace, and then listened to the roars of howler monkeys.

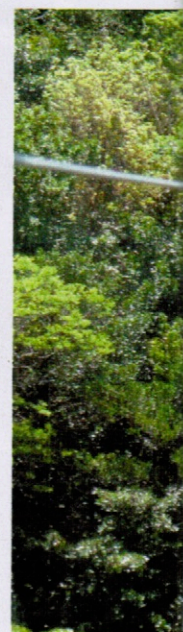
All-ages playground

The next morning, after enjoying a breakfast of fresh waffles and papaya, we opt for some independent exploring.

Flanked by sandy slopes dotted with cactus and dry pacific lowland forest, El Jobo beach is ideal for walking. The wide canopy of the Guanacaste tree offers habitat for many species of birds, insects and butterflies. Along the shoreline, we discover tidal pools serving as natural aquariums for sea cucumbers, hermit red crabs and sea urchins. As the tide retreats, it leaves a school of purple starfish stranded in the hot sand. "I'll relocate them," says my grandson, carefully lifting them to safety in a calm tidal pool.

After hiking to sea caves carved by powerful waves, our wildlife checklist includes a green vine snake, brown pelicans, white-throated magpie-jays, a brilliant emerald mala-

PHOTO: MICHELE PETERSON





Ziplining tours are a thrilling way to experience Costa Rica's rainforest.

chite butterfly, and sand dollars.

Our next few days pass in leisurely bliss. Afternoons are spent enjoying a complimentary in-pool scuba lesson, non-motorized water sports, Latin dance lessons, jungle hikes and other organized activities. Also included in the Dreams' unlimited luxury package is a fully supervised Explorer's Club, providing nature-themed activities for children aged three to 12. Teens enjoy their own Core Zone, complete with



Soaking in a volcanic thermal pool is perfect after ziplining.

video games, a pool table and disco.

It was easy to soak up some of Guanacaste's unique *sabanero* (cowboy) cultural heritage along with our outdoor adventure. One of Costa Rica's first regions to be conquered by the Spaniards, Guanacaste has preserved many colonial traditions, such as rodeos and cattle ranching. Evening entertainment includes dance performances influenced by the Andalusian *zapateado* from Spain, while traditional foods such as tortillas, *gallo pinto* (rice and beans) and artisanal *turrialba* cheese offers an authentic taste of local cuisine.

For us, a highlight was immersing ourselves in the wild of Rincón de la Vieja Park, home to an active volcano, steaming hot springs, hiking trails and diverse wildlife including cougars, jaguars and 300 species of birds.

Our organized tour with Mardigi Tours begins with pick-up at 8 a.m. and includes a full day of ziplining, water tubing, horseback riding, slathering ourselves with bubbling volcanic mud, and floating in thermal hot springs. Along the way, we spot toucans, white-faced capuchin monkeys, crested caracara and towering *matapalo* (strangler fig) trees.

We return to Dreams Las Mareas exhausted but exhilarated. After I indulge in a few hours at the elegant Pevonia Spa, where a hydrating noni fruit therapy and Swedish massage soothes my aching muscles, we relax with room service on the terrace of our suite. As my grandson floats in the swim-out pool, the shriek of a wild parrot cuts through the starry night. "I think that's a mating call," says my grandson.

Luxury, a touch of wilderness and lots of memories – the perfect intergenerational experience. ■

PHOTO: JADEN CONSALVES



PHOTO: COSTA RICA TOURISM BOARD

Monkeys abound in Guanacaste, Costa Rica.

Travel planner

Dreams Las Mareas: Air Canada and WestJet both offer direct five-hour flights from Toronto to Liberia International Airport. All-inclusive Dreams Las Mareas is also part of the Air Canada vacation package. It's worth upgrading to the Preferred Club with privileges such as an upgraded suite, priority check-in and check-out, a private lounge with snacks and bar, concierge service, upgraded mini bar and upgraded bath amenities. Explorer's Club (included) is fully supervised by Red Cross-certified staff. Babysitting services are available for an extra fee. Note that dress codes apply at certain à la carte restaurants, so pack accordingly. Gluten-free, vegetarian and special dietary options are available (advise the hotel prior to arrival). Check out DreamsResorts.com/Las-Mareas.

Tours: AMStar offers several excursions, including a full-day Mega Combo tour to Rincón de la Vieja Park (extra costs apply). We participated in the Rincón de la Vieja Adventure tour led by Mardigi Tours – specialists in small group excursions for seniors. The excursion includes VIP admission to attractions, a buffet lunch, a welcome cocktail at the thermal pools as well as hotel pick up and drop off. Note that minimum age and/or height requirements apply to certain activities. Visit mardigitours.com.

Travel documentation: In addition to passports with more than six months remaining prior to expiration, the Government of Canada recommends that children under the age of majority travelling with only one parent, relatives, or in a group, have a Consent Letter with permission to travel abroad from every parent (or guardian) who is not accompanying them on the trip. The Letter of Consent should be certified by a commissioner of oaths or notary and list the travel dates, passport details, intended address in Costa Rica and parental contact information. A sample Consent Letter is available at travel.gc.ca/travelling/children.

Costa Rica tourism board: Get maps, travel and planning information at visitcostarica.com.

Trip preparation: Be sure to pack insect repellent with DEET, sunblock, sun hats, sturdy shoes for hiking, and water shoes. Binoculars and a camera with good zoom are musts. We used the new FUJI FinePix S1, offering 50X optical zoom in a compact, all-weather resistant Point and Shoot. It's also worthwhile ordering one of the very helpful laminated *Wildlife Guides* produced by Rainforest Publications. Check out rainforestpublications.com.