

COSTA RICA

The Jaguar Rescue Center

by Cyril Brass

Its name caught my attention; The Jaguar Rescue Center. In particular the word Jaguar, the most fierce and dangerous mammal in the forests of Costa Rica. I had never seen one in all my travels throughout Costa Rica. Maybe this was the day.

The Jaguar Rescue Center is located in the wetland rainforests just outside the town of Puerto Viejo along the Caribbean coastline of Costa Rica. The center was established by two devoted naturalists, Encar who is an expert on mammals and her husband Sandro who is an expert on reptiles. The rescue center was created as a result of locals finding injured and mistreated animals and bringing them to the couple's home. One of the first animals brought to the center was a Jaguar. Although this beautiful wild cat did not survive, it did inspire Encar to create the center and its name.

The Jaguar Rescue Center is a rescue facility. It is not a zoo. It is not a wildlife sanctuary. The center's main goals are summed up by 3Rs; rescue, rehabilitate and release. Injured, mistreated and confiscated animals and abandoned babies are accepted at the center. Medical attention is provided to save the animal's life, to restore them to proper health and with full intention of eventual reintroduction back into their natural habitat. This is only a temporary home for the animals unless the animal is injured so severely it would not be able to defend itself or escape from potential predators out in the wild.

Most animals that are brought to the center are the result of human development and related issues affecting the beautiful and fragile ecosystems for these wild creatures. One of the biggest issues facing wild animals is the harm caused by electric power lines running through forests connecting to homes, hotels and restaurants. It is easy for monkeys or sloths to go from a branch to an electrical wire, which is not one hundred percent insulated, resulting in injury or death for the animal.

Another huge problem is domestic dogs. People in the area own big aggressive dogs to protect their homes and property and they allow them to run free in the towns and region. When a dog attacks a monkey or sloth, they have little defense.

Here are a few of the close encounters and incredible experiences I had during my visit at the Jaguar Rescue Center.

SNAKES



The Snake Exhibit displays a variety of snakes of all colors and sizes. The purpose of the snake exhibit at the center is for education and reproduction. Many snakes are killed unnecessarily due to people's lack of knowledge. Locals need to be educated on what, where, and how to deal with snakes. Also public awareness of the ecological impact that snakes have on ecosystems needs to be known. Of the 140 species of snakes living in Costa Rica, 40 are venomous. I was shown several of the poisonous snakes and learned the main characteristics of each; the bushmaster (second largest venomous snake in the world), the fer de lance (most dangerous snake in Costa Rica) and the highly venomous eyelash pit viper.

TREE FROGS

The Frog Pond was created to provide a natural habitat for the reproduction of tree frogs which were becoming extinct in the area. Alongside the pond grow plants where the females would lay their eggs. When the



eggs hatched, the newborn tadpoles would fall into the pond where they continue their next growth phase. This is the only period the tree frog spends in the water. Once reaching maturity, it will spend the rest of its life in the trees. Probably the most stunning tree frogs are the Red Eyed Tree Frogs. Encar, our guide was able to locate several of these colourful frogs on the underside of nearby leaves. When they are sleeping, they become well camouflaged creatures appearing more like a green bump on the leaf unnoticeable to its predators.

Encar picked up one for the group to get a closer look. She allowed us to hold this precious little creature. He became more awake and mobile moving on peoples hands and arms. All the vibrant colors were now visible; the bright orange suction cupped feet, the blue patches along the side of its body and the big deep red eyes. Without notice it took a hop onto a person's shoulder. Then the little frog leapt onto the front of my shirt securely hanging on with those orange suction cupped feet.

HOWLER MONKEYS

At the Jaguar Rescue Center, visitors are allowed to go into the monkey enclosure for ten to fifteen minutes where the group can interact with the 12 young monkeys. It was like a kids play zone. Monkeys swinging on ropes, running on wooden beams, and even climbing on people. One young howler liked to be cuddled in a person's arms just like a baby. Others were full of energy. One hopped onto my backpack which I was wearing at the time. Shortly after, another climbed up and sat on top of my head. It was a thrill spending that short time with the young howlers. I couldn't take my camera into the monkey enclosure but I will always have great memories of this amazing encounter.

Visits with the howlers only occur twice in the morning during the two scheduled tour times. In the afternoons, the monkeys are taken to the nearby forest where they are able to jump, climb and play in their natural habitat. There is an outside troop of howler monkeys who interact with the youngsters. If they are mature enough and are accepted into the outside troop, they are free to go with that troop.

If they are not ready or not accepted, they will return to the center until the day that is right for them.

SLOTHS

Encar led us to an area of the property where the sloths were located. There were the two-toed and three-toed sloths. It was feeding time when we arrived. One of the volunteers was feeding a young two-toed sloth with



chunks of fruits and leaves. Encar picked up a baby three-toed to show us the distinguishing features between the two species of this unusual creature. Baby sloths are brought to the Rescue Center when their mothers have been killed. The center takes care of the babies being a mother figure until they are mature enough to survive on their own in the wild.

This small rescue center is making an enormous impact on the continued existence and survival of many wildlife species in Costa Rica. With their big hearts and limited resources (all through private funding) they are making great accomplishments.

I went into the Jaguar Rescue Center as a wildlife lover and photographer with the intention of having close



encounters and taking close-up photographs of exotic wildlife.

I came out having had an amazing unique experience interacting with some of Costa Rica's wild animals as well as helping a very worthwhile cause. I left feeling inspired and excited knowing that there are special people making a difference and impact for all creatures to share and co-exist in this precious world we all call home. The Jaguar Rescue Center's website is www.jaguarrescue.com **ca**