

Travel with Purpose

Rethinking the Tropics: The Eco-Experience

By Doug Wallace

The road less travelled is usually the most interesting by far. Many tropical destinations have more than a few hidden gems and lush experiences off the beaten rainforest path. Think outside the resort – and take the natural beauty route.



GREAT GREEN MACAW IN COSTA RICA

COOL OFF IN COSTA RICA

With nearly 30 national parks, 58 wildlife refuges and eight biosphere reserves filled with lush, untouched nature, this popular Central American destination is a global ecotourism leader. An astounding 25 per cent of the country is protected parkland. And while many visitors head to the southern park of Manuel Antonio, the northern province of Guanacaste is also a perfect spot, from the barefoot-chic villas near Playa Conchal to the luxury hotels of the Papagayo Peninsula. Wherever you end up, indulge in horseback riding through hacienda pastures, wander around the ponds of a bird sanctuary, and commune with monkeys, coatis, and turtles in the rainforest.

HIDE IN GRENADA

The beaches are lovely, but finding time for the interior of Grenada yields a wealth of gardens, forests, hidden waterfalls, and heritage plantations. A spot of lunch and a tour at Belmont Estate in the northeast bring into focus how the production of spices – nutmeg and mace, turmeric, cinnamon, bay leaves, cloves, and ginger – has long been the island’s source of both wealth and pride. Chocolate too, is now a big draw, both at the factories that produce it and in the markets of the capital St. George’s. A hike up Mount Qua Qua in the Grand Etang National Park & Forest Reserve starts at a unique crater lake located in an extinct volcano. Visitors also keep an eye out for critters, which are plentiful: lizards, armadillos, mona monkeys, and more.

WANDER THROUGH PANAMA

With its famed canal as your go-between on a small-ship cruise, Panama offers ecoadventure-filled environments along both coastlines. Trolling the Pacific coast delivers cliffside birdwatching, rainforest hikes, and visits to Indigenous villages in the Darién Gap. On the Atlantic side, visitors wander the historic remains of UNESCO-designated Spanish colonial ruins and snorkel the coral reefs of the palm-studded Guna Yala Islands. Panama’s mix of ecosystems throughout its parks and sanctuaries nets a surprisingly large range of experiences, taking in rainforest, mountains, mangroves, and beaches. Don’t forget to make a pitstop in Panama City at Biomuseo, a museum spotlighting natural history.

RELAX IN BARBADOS

The eastern shore of Barbados has such a soothing vibe, it’s little wonder everyone heads here on the weekend. The ecotourism aspects of the east coast centre on the island’s unique geology and sugar cane-producing past. Walkers Reserve is a dune restoration project and developing agroforestry area working to reclaim the land from a former sand quarry. Hiking trails, including one along a former heritage railway line, reveal cane fields, tropical forest, rugged coastline, and the odd mongoose. Areas around Bathsheba Beach and Crane Bay sport terrific, eco-conscious inns and guest houses just right for settling into a good book. You’re still only about a 45-minute drive from the thick of the beaches and nightlife on the busier south and west coasts, but far enough away to enjoy some prime privacy and revel in the natural environment.

ESCAPE TO THE SOUTH PACIFIC

The inhabited islands of French Polynesia are dependent on their lagoons because they are the main sources of food. Protecting them is paramount, which has led to the development of natural marine sanctuaries – including the largest shark sanctuary in the world in the Marshall Islands. Accommodations range from quaint eco-friendly guest houses to luxe eco-hotels that win awards for zero emissions. Many of the big hotels have ecological centres, coral restoration programs or natural aquariums that protect marine environments while being both educational and entertaining. Some resorts even experiment with new forms of energy – cool things like solar-powered catamarans, seawater air conditioning, and coconut oil-powered electricity.



HIKING IN GRAND ETANG NATIONAL PARK & FOREST RESERVE IN GRENADA



WALKERS RESERVE, BARBADOS ©DOUG WALLACE

