

TRAVEL



Mangroves along the Pacific coast of Costa Rica were among sights during offshore excursions while on a seven-day cruise aboard the Wind Star. EMILIE C. HARTING

Scaled-back cruising

A voyage aboard a small ship affords close-up views of ports of call.

By Emilie C. Harting
FOR THE INQUIRER

In the past, I'd cringe when I heard the word *cruise*. I had visions of crowds, busyness, lines, brassy nightclub entertainment I dislike, stores, restaurants, and no time to reflect on the surroundings.

I preferred traveling on the glasslike water of canals and rivers.

"You don't have to go on one of those big cruise ships," said my friend Beth. "My ship had 148 passengers, and we were able to do lots of animal watching — just what you loved on your safari trip."

I listened to her glorious tales and then booked the same seven-day trip along the Pacific coast of Costa Rica and through the Panama Canal on the Wind Star, one of two four-masted sailing yachts in the fleet of the six ships of Windstar Cruises.

This cruise was relatively quiet and elegant in a subtle way — not at all what I expected. Yes, there was a big chandelier in the middle of the dining room, but the décor throughout was simple. I did not miss that there were no taffeta drapes or bed pillows.

We dropped anchor in six ports, ending the voyage in Colón, on the Caribbean coast of Panama. There were plenty of offshore trips, via Zodiacs and vans, to view wildlife in national parks, excellent lectures by a naturalist named Eddie, informative films, and superb cuisine.

We sailed from Puerto Caldera, 50 miles west of the capital, San José. On one of our first land excursions, near Quepos (about 70 miles south), we passed fields of banana and coconut trees and entered mangroves, an area of brackish water where the ocean and rivers meet. The lacelike weaving of large tree roots visible above the water's edge provided a haven for fish, amphibians, birds, and mammals.

Larger fish came in from the

ocean to prey on smaller fish. A caiman — whose teeth are longer and narrower than an alligator's — dramatically weaved in and out of the exposed tree roots in search of food.

In an area with mango trees, our guide brought the motorized boat in close so we could see crabs swimming around the roots and bats resting on the limbs. We would stop to look at brown, oval termite nests, some the size of a football.

Various birds stood by, waiting for food opportunities. Ospreys and green and blue herons would swoop down and break the water with their beaks when they saw prey. Multicolor macaws and toucans stood regally in the lush green of the trees.

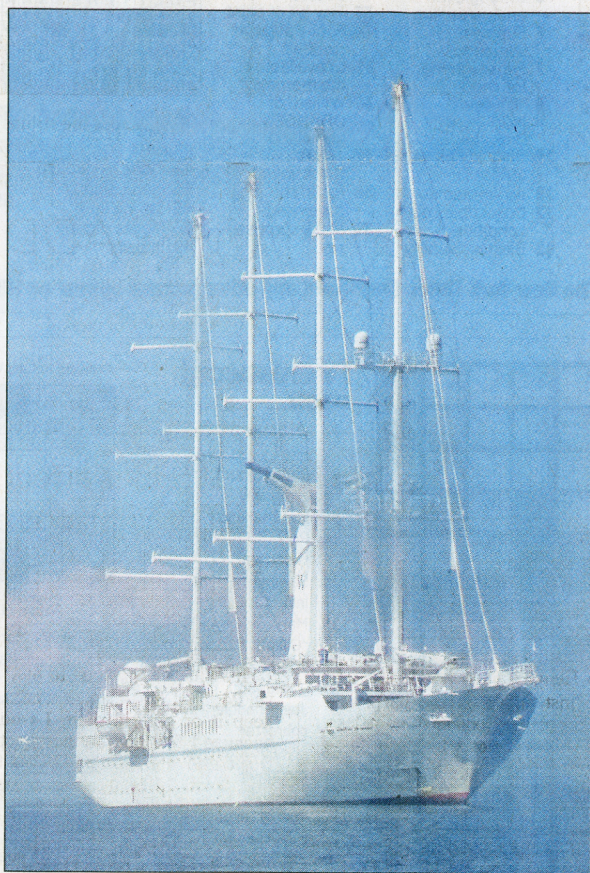
At one point, we saw a capuchin monkey — they're the ones with the white faces — lounging on a branch like a lady of leisure. Spider monkeys — the larger black ones with especially long arms and legs — looked like spinning wheels when they moved from limb to limb.

At Puerto Jiménez, we watched howler monkeys wrestle with each other without losing their grip and falling off branches as they jumped from limb to limb.

"Although they seem endlessly neurotic and immature, they are territorial and warn others of predators," said our guide.

As the days passed, we saw many more plants and wildlife — hairy black sloths hanging on trees while napping and endless numbers of colorful birds.

There were also many activities for those who wanted to stay on the ship: demonstrations by the bartender of how to make a Bloody Mary or margarita, a pamper party for women in the beauty salon, a dance show by local schoolchildren, yoga on the deck at 7 a.m., bridge, late-afternoon swimming and kayaking from the stern, galley tours, and towel-folding lessons. (No, not for the linen closet but for twisting them into



The Wind Star is one of two four-masted yachts in the six-ship fleet of Windstar Cruises. It can carry 148 passengers.

artful animal shapes.)

By evening, most guests were ready to sit in the lounge and listen to Latino music played by resident musicians Diego and Ines. The adjoining small casino was often busy, as was the library next door, which, in addition to ample reading material, had several computers for contacting the outside world.

The ship's naturalist, Eddie, had a deep knowledge of Costa Rican flora and fauna and explained the coupling patterns of various birds and mammals; the country has more than 500,000 species of insects, amphibians, reptiles, mammals, and birds. His lectures were

the best we have heard on expedition ships because of their content and delivery.

Through the week, we had an eclectic mixture of American and foreign dishes cooked to perfection — grilled moon fish with pineapple salsa, Vietnamese beef striploin wraps, tomato and watermelon salad, Tahitian lobster bisque, sky-high lemon meringue pie, French baked custard crepes, a variety of French cheeses.

On the last night, with a sky filled with stars and moonlight, there was a barbecue on the upper deck. Table upon table of special dishes were followed by a series of open charcoal grills

with a whole roasted pig, roast beef, barbecued chicken, and lobster tails.

Throughout the trip, the highly trained Indonesian crew gave excellent, seemingly effortless, service. When we tried to do something as simple as reach for a water pitcher or move a chair from one table to another, a waiter would appear and do it for us.

On the last day, we passed through the locks of the Panama Canal — the 48-mile waterway that connects the Atlantic and Pacific. The journey was magical; our ship was small enough to truly see the activities along the sides and aboard other vessels.

"I can see the face of the guy driving the electric mule. He's smiling like a happy youngster," said one traveler who had previously passed through on a large cruise ship. "You get up close to things in a smaller vessel."

We also learned about how difficult the building of the canal was, with many lives lost to disease, exhaustion, landslides, and bug and snake bites.

After disembarking, most of us backtracked to Panama City, on the Pacific side of the canal, and toured both old and new areas of the capital before our flights home. (And, yes, I called Beth after returning to tell her how right she was.)

I'm not so hesitant about cruises now, so long as they are on a ship with a limited number of passengers and with options for interesting land trips.

"Fifty percent of the passengers are repeat customers," the captain said.

Our trip included people from not just the United States, but also Canada, Britain, Germany, and Australia. The passengers were mostly retirees, but there were also multigenerational family groups, and some used the trip as an opportunity to travel with far-flung relatives.

Other companies that offer small-boat expedition-type cruises to Costa Rica and Panama include Lindblad, in cooperation with National Geographic; Seabourn, which is more formal than Windstar; and UnCruise Adventures.