



# *Jean & Carl's 2016 trip to Costa-Rica*

*by Carl Helmers*

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## *The Trip*

From Wednesday February 3 to Monday, February 8, 2016 Jean and I flew from Rochester Monroe County NY airport (ROC) near where we live, via Atlanta, Georgia to San Jose, Costa Rica. Why? Well Jean is Professor of Pharmacology and Associate Chair of the Department of Pharmacology and Physiology at the University of Rochester. Our trip was so that Jean could represent the U of R Department of Pharmacology and Physiology at *American Medical Schools Pharmacology Chairs* (AMSPC) meeting held this year in the capital of Costa Rica, San Jose. Having never been to Costa Rica or any other Central American country, I could not refuse the opportunity to accompany Jean on her trip. This article is an account of organized afternoon trips that we joined with Jean's professorial colleagues following their morning AMSPC sessions that week.

We left Rochester on the Wednesday, February 3 5:55 AM EST Delta airlines flight to Atlanta, Georgia on a typical midwinter clear day. We had been nervously watching the progress of this year's winter snow storms and lake effect snow. It turns out that we had great luck – great flying weather outbound and on return. After landing two hours or so later in Atlanta, we connected – current passports in hand – with a daily Delta Airlines direct flight 900 from Atlanta, Georgia to San Jose, Costa Rica at 9:50 EST, arriving at 14:07 CST. [San Jose Costa Rica, like Chicago Illinois is one timezone to the west of our normal east coast U.S. time.]

The weather on the next ~4½ hour flight to San Jose CR was uneventful and mostly cloud free. We passed the southern Gulf of Mexico border of the U.S after an hour or so out of Atlanta. From then on, there were occasional broken clouds and lots of Gulf of Mexico water below us for most of the trip. We flew sufficiently high on that mostly clear day that peering from the passenger window of the airplane, I did not pick out any evidence of offshore oil industry activity.

While Jean was attending her **AMSPC Annual Meeting** sessions in the hotel Friday, Saturday, and Sunday mornings, I used my Mac Airbook computer *Hermes* to do my e-mail, write and surf the WWW from the Marriott San Jose Costa Rica lobby. I camped in the lobby for WiFi access since the WiFi did not work well in our hotel room. This is a situation that I have found over the years in many hotels from Silicon Valley through Boston and New York City in the US and around the world. So I always stuff my computer full of files and material to work on independent of digital communications.

## **Costa Rica, Land of Volcanos**

In spite of leaving Atlanta nearly an hour behind schedule, we arrived in San Jose, Costa Rica only a few minutes later than the scheduled 12:52 arrival time on Wednesday February 3. After finding the proper “\$15” taxi to take us to the Marriott San Jose Costa Rica hotel where Jean's meeting was to take place, we settled in for the several day stay. After unpacking and taking the requisite naps to make up for our early travel day, Jean and I had dinner by ourselves in the hotel. As we soon found, San Jose Costa Rica is on a volcanic Central American plateau at a Google elevation of 3845 feet. So naturally one of the exciting optional tours was to a near by recently active volcano – exciting to this fan of the geophysics of plate tectonics. [see my article [A Drive to Mt. St. Helens](#) just updated & reposted.]

### ***Irazu Volcano***

*( February 4, 2016 )*

We would get up early the next morning for the first AMSPC side trip of the week scheduled before Thursday evening's opening reception. Thursday morning February 4 after breakfast, Jean and I took a charter bus (one of two) full of other AMSPC attendees for an hour-long drive to a Costa Rica national park atop the 11,260 foot high [Irazu Volcano](#).

On the way up the Irazu Volcano national park access road, our tour guide had the bus driver take our lead bus on a short unmarked dirt road detour. The dirt road was barely passable for our pair of tour buses. The road ended in a large flat unpaved parking area. Fortunately February was the non-rainy tourist season with perpetually sunny cloudless skies during our entire trip. Our tour guide told us that he had just recently found a good if unofficial [Turrialba Volcano](#) view point on line, mentioning Google as a source.

The guide led his visitors perhaps 100 feet down the side of the mountain on maybe a quarter mile or more rough trail to the unofficial viewpoint. The walk down the unimproved trail at maybe 9000 foot elevation was more suited to hiking boots than the sneakers we all were wearing. Then we got the ultimate view well worth the effort: I captured this cell phone image of the currently venting active Turrialba Volcano on the horizon in the distance:



*Turrialba Volcano in the distance from Irazu Volcano access road, February 4, 2016*

Per Wikipedia, [Turrialba Volcano](#) is 10,958 ft (3,340 m) high. Turrialba last erupted October 2015 just four months prior to our visit, hence the continuing cloud of venting volcanic gases coming from the peak of the distant mountain.

After hiking back up from this viewpoint, we got on our buses. The buses then continued on the twisty curvy [Parque Nacional Volcan Irazu](#) road to the formal parking area at the peak.

## *Parque Nacional Volcan Irazu*

We got off the buses again in the parking lot atop the volcano. After walking across the parking lot and starting on the walkway to the crater, we found this greeting sign with a schematic map of the trails.



*Irazu Volcano tourist walk entrance sign*

Unlike the impromptu viewpoint we had visited on our way up, the Irazu National Park is a well developed tourist friendly site. We were privileged to inspect this crown jewel of Costa Rica in the current decades-long quiescent phase of the Irazu Volcano.

The park's concrete curbed trails looked fresh and only a couple of years old at most. Who knows how jumbled and scrambled the site was after the last previous eruption circa 1994. The Costa Rican government clearly had made parks such as this a tourist attraction priority. At >11,000 feet elevation major investment had to be made to get construction equipment, material and people up the mountain to create this attraction.



We continued walking quite a ways past the sign. The concrete pathway undulated up and down slight elevations. At the top of a final hill we came upon this grand view of Irazu Principal Crater up close.. This is the best shot we could capture with cell phone camera held tightly at arms length from the safety of the path.

Only a couple of feet beyond knee high square wooden “guard” rails were the nearly vertical rock walls of the circular “principal” crater. Researching on the WWW when writing this, I found Irazu's Principal Crater is 300 meters ( 984 feet ) deep and 1050 meters ( 3445 feet ) wide. The [summitpost.org](http://summitpost.org) site circa March 2016 is the source of these figures. Our cell phone image captured on February 4, 2016 has just a jumble of dry dirt and rocks with no water at its bottom.

We captured this image reaching as far as we could toward the crater edge from behind the park's low but massive timber guard rails. The crater is nearly a 1000 foot vertical drop, a roughly cylindrical hole in the peak of the massive Irazu mountain:



*Irazu Volcano Principal Crater from rim walkway.*

The [summitpost.org](http://summitpost.org) site for Volcán Irazu in March 2016 just shows an image of a secondary vent called *Diego de la Haya Crater* with a foul looking green colored lake at the the bottom. We did not visit that one, just the *Principal Crater* at the highest point of Volcan Irazu, shown here with the image that Jean captured that day.

As we walked back to the buses in the parking lot, Jean handed her cell phone briefly to a professorial colleague to capture this image of us:



*A non-selfie cell phone image of us in the Irazu Volcano park's parking lot after our crater gazing walk.*

**CH Note:** I used the GIMP on my current main Linux Mint 17.3 workstation to crop the image. I created this ultimate result by further experimenting with GIMP. I used my mouse to outline (ie "select") a small boundary around a detail to fix.

**The fix:** I filled my region with a selected near by sky background point's color, leaving this result minus the detail I eliminated.

After visiting the Irazu National Park crater our, tour buses descended (slowly) on the mostly two-lane road back down the several thousand feet of vertical elevation we had climbed that morning. Our target after the descent to much more level highways was a lunch stop. The restaurant (name forgotten) was well suited to handle the two buses full of visitors. In fact, ours were hardly the only such buses. We found plenty of seating and wholesome food on offer despite at least one similar size charter bus group and individual customers ahead of us. Lunch was served to us on long picnic tables.

After the lunch stop, we proceeded back onto the buses for our next sight seeing stop:

**The Orchid Pollinaria Collection**  
**At Lankester Botanical Garden,**  
**University of Costa Rica**  
( February 4, 2016 )

In the hour or so spent at the Lankester we toured through exhibits with the orchids as well one or two elaborate rooms with collections of live continuously refreshed butterflies of many species used to pollinate the orchids. There also numerous live tropical birds and monkeys in large room size cages. Cut to the chase, here are some orchid images that Jean captured on her cell phone:







After we left our walk among the orchids and butterflies, I captured this parting image of Jean next to the sign outside the entrance...





## La Paz Waterfall Gardens visit

*( February 5, 2016 )*

On Friday, February 5, the afternoon trip started with a drive to the near by [La Paz Waterfall Gardens](#) attraction. From the WWW site entry page while writing this article in March 2016, I clipped the following summary about this privately owned attraction:

**La Paz Waterfall Gardens is the #1 Most Visited Privately Owned Ecological Attraction in Costa Rica featuring the best hiking near San José, the most famous waterfalls in Costa Rica, rescued wildlife preserve with over 100 species of animals and an environmental education program**

Clearly descriptive marketing copy which certainly describes an afternoon spent at lunch then walking its pathways.

As an attraction, its first stop was a fantastic buffet lunch at the **Colibries Restaurant**. In this efficient and crowded (but not overly so) dining facility our two buses full of visitors were joined by people from several other charter buses full of visitors. When we finished our lunch, our group spent a couple of hours wandering the trails of the La Paz Waterfall Gardens.

As we were walking down the trails to the waterfalls after lunch, Jean captured this head shot of me among the various other attendees on the trail.



These trails were a loop that descended a considerable elevation into a gorge through the jungle, past the 37 meter “Magia Blanca” waterfall then back up. This waterfall, one of many, is probably the tallest in the LaPaz Waterfall Gardens. In its majesty this Magia Blanca waterfall appears across the river on the walk along the gorge. I captured this image with my cell phone:



Here is an image of the sign with details of this fall's name and how far the water drops:



The path through this tropical wonderland passed numerous exhibit cages of live tropical birds, Costa Rican tropical monkeys of various sizes, and through several butterfly room exhibits with live butterflies carefully maintained despite their relatively short evanescent lifetimes. However, since Costa Rica is solidly in the tropics, at  $\sim 10^{\circ}\text{N}$  (well south of the  $23.4^{\circ}\text{N}$  Tropic of Cancer) its climate is constant – so the butterflies and hummingbirds have ideal conditions year round. [According to our guides, “rainy and “less rainy” are the two seasons of Costa Rica with respect to rain in the tropical jungle areas. Those areas are on both Pacific and Caribbean Costa Rican coasts. The capital, San Jose, is definitely in the tropics by latitude. But at its 3700 foot [1200 meter] altitude we typically had clear sunny mild weather the entire February 2016 few days we spent in the San Jose CR area.

The Rio La Paz drains the tropical jungle watershed on the slopes of the Poas Volcano. The [Poas Volcano](#) is active, with continuing minor venting and eruptions. Its last major eruption was in 1910. From my WWW research while writing this account, the Poas Volcano National Park is similar to the Irazu Volcano National Park that we visited on February 4. Irazu Volcano is currently less active and several thousand feet higher than Poas Volcano. Whereas Irazu Volcano has been quiescent for a number of years, Poas Volcano has active current fumarole and minor eruptive activity in its 8,885 foot ( 2708 meter) high summit craters.



## Costa Rican Rain Forest Tour

( February 6, 2016 )

The final uniquely Costa Rican tour that Jean and I took on our visit was on Saturday afternoon, February 6 after Jean and her colleagues had had their morning meeting. Shortly after noon, we all gathered in the hotel's entry area for the trip to the coastal rain forest on the Caribbean side of the country. The goal of this trip was to experience a conserved tropical rain forest up close by walking the pathways with our knowledgeable guide, then ultimately ride the "[Rain Forest Aerial Tram](#)" to conclude the visit. This facility opened in October 1994, with its rain forest walkways, associated exhibits of tropical birds and insects, and educational eco-message about the unique flora and fauna.

After arriving mid-afternoon and getting off the bus, a dozen or so guides grouped us visitors into parties of 6 or so per guide. The guides were all English speaking for our American based tour group. We started by slowly walking the nearby rain forest grounds and buildings as the guide pointed out various caged birds and other formal exhibits of the experience.

For example, here is our guide showing off a butterfly in a live tropical butterfly house exhibit we visited.



Shortly after I captured the picture of our guide showing off a butterfly, Jean just could not resist capturing this image of me when another butterfly landed on my sun hat:



Later while wandering the paths in the tropical rain forest attraction, we spied the resident local tapir, first sleeping near the end of the Rain Forest Aerial Tram ride. Then said tapir decided to wander off near the Aerial Tram as we also were heading there for our ride. As the tapir wandered by, Jean captured this image of it and a professorial colleague in the foreground, with the the Aerial Tram's green steel structure in the right background.





### *Experimenting With GIMP*

While writing this account I again experimented with GIMP to extract the tapir's image from the scene to see if an enlarged image gave any further detail. The result is this somewhat fuzzy highly enlarged circular image of the tapir all by itself. Just goes to show that when you enlarge minimal detail you end up with an enlarged image that still has minimal detail. I can hardly wait for our next generation (Samsung S7?) cell phones with vastly larger pixel array sensors from which it will be possible to extract much better closeup detail sub-scenes like this.



According to our guide on our walk through the Tropical Rain Forest attraction, this privately owned and run facility is proud of its contributions to preserving a sanctuary for a small population of tapir, bribed (tamed) by food regularly refreshed at strategic locations. Our guide also told us that outside the sanctuary's acreage, hunting the endangered tapir is quite illegal in Costa Rica even if such hunting is traditional among local residents.

Then our individual groups of 6 visitors and a guide queued up for the ultimate attraction of the afternoon: the Aerial Tram Ride through the tropical rain forest canopy.

At the end of our Aerial Tram ride, there was fellow with a good digital camera who captured an image of each car as it arrived. Then, as we got off the car, it came to pass that we were offered an image of the car full of folk to be delivered on a USB stick. I traded a \$20 bill for a USB drive with this image of Jean and I and some of her colleagues.



Our local guide to Tropical Rainforest is in the green shirt at the back of the Aerial Tram car. As he had done during an hour or so spent walking around the rainforest paths prior to the tram ride, he continued to give commentary about various sights along the tram's route.

The souvenir image operation was well run and up to date. We waited perhaps 10 minutes after the ride for our personal copy of a USB stick, containing this image. The “well run” part of this operation is the extra souvenirs that came with our particular image on that USB stick we purchased. In addition to our image, there were 204 additional images of various rain forest flora, fauna birds and insects. Perhaps half of these additional image files had names that suggested the species involved.

With no particular selection criterion other than color and variety, here are some of the named images I found on the USB souvenir stick. Google the name texts for more detail on these critters:

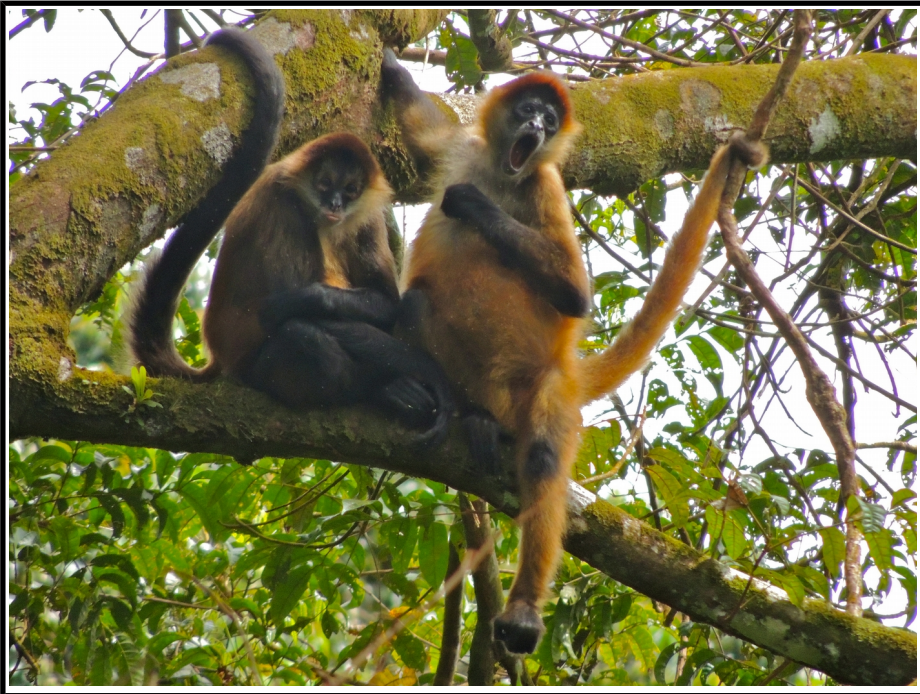


*Agalychnis spurrelli*



Arctiidae





*Ateles geoffroyi*



*Bothriechis schlegelii*





*Campephilus guatemalensis*



*Ciccaba virgata*





*Dasypus novemcinctus*



*Ramphastos ambiguus*





*Tapirus bardi*

[AKA "tapir"]



*Thalurania colombica*

## **An Exotic Superbowl 50**

( February 7, 2016 )

Our final day in Costa Rica was a fluke of scheduling. We could have traveled home on Sunday, February 7 – but had we done so, there is no way we could have watched that annual ritual of Americana, the 50<sup>th</sup> NFL Superbowl game.

We had a late afternoon Sunday dinner in a hotel restaurant. Then we got back up to our room to watch Superbowl 50 on our hotel room television screen. We actually started watching in the middle of the first quarter. But who cares, we got nearly all of the game in real time.

The strangest thing about watching an NFL game in Costa Rica this time is: the Marriott San Jose Costa Rica hotel video feed was a TV station in Miami Florida, so we got a mix of national advertising commercials, and cuts to NFL marketing propaganda in the time slots that would have gone to local Miami advertising were we watching in that town. Strange, but, probably similar to the way any other ex-pat fans would watch a non-U.S. feed of that NFL spectacle from some US city.

When the game was over, we finished packing for our early afternoon return flight from Costa Rica to Atlanta on Monday, February 8. We got back to Rochester circa an hour after midnight (early morning February 9.) Needless to say, we slept quite late after finally getting to bed early Tuesday morning.

## ***A Book End***

See new article with my notes on [Our Banana Source](#) about how we have been using Costa Rican bananas nall along...

### **Hyperlinks Caveat**

At and after the *epoch* of publishing the latest update of this article on my site, to the best of my knowledge all hyperlinks still point to the WWW pages I intend.

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