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UNDISCOVERED ...

discovering
HONDURAS

By Zorianna Kit

Honduras is a place that I've often heard of but this was my first visit and my weeklong stay in the country took me to four different cities, which felt like being in four separate worlds.

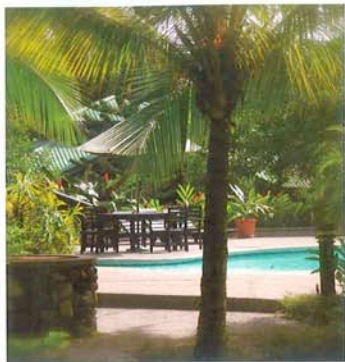
The industrial city of San Pedro Sula, the unexplored rainforests of La Ceiba, the Caribbean island of Roatán and the high mountains of Copán Ruinas with its coffee plantations and ancient Maya Ruins.

From extreme adventures like white-water rafting and zip-lining, to one-on-one interactions with dolphins and monkeys, to relaxing in a pool of hot springs in the rainforest jungles, this Central American country proved

a perfect fit for a physically active, animal lover like me. Honduras is the outdoor traveler's dream.

Flying from Los Angeles, to Honduras' San Pedro Sula, with a quick plane change in-between, I was ready for just about anything. My first destination: the north port city of La Ceiba.

After a 15-minute drive from the airport to The Lodge at Pico Bonito, I found myself in the thick of the national park after which my lodge was named, beautiful peak; verdant and lush with its vast mountain range and numerous waterfalls, I could see why La Ceiba is known as the "Eco-Tourism Capital" of Honduras.



Handed keys to my own little cabin, complete with a private veranda deep in this jungle, I was by myself, surrounded by 265,000 acres of Pico Bonito wilderness with hundreds of species of exotic birds, amphibians and mammals like kinkajous and jaguars. Could I see them? No. Could I hear them? Oh, I heard plenty – enough to know that I'd be sleeping in my cabin bed, rather than the veranda's hammock.

Nestled between two rivers, the lodge offered me a chance to go whitewater rafting down a 20-mile stretch. My time here was limited, so I stayed close to "home" and chose to hike through the jungle, stopping at observation towers that placed me up among the trees to better spot wildlife. Breeds of birds I would consider rare, like an emerald toucanette or a keel-billed motmot, here they are regular residents at The Lodge.

All of this outdoor living and eco-adventure left me ravenous and, in another stroke of fabulous luck, my meals at The Lodge were outstanding. Most of the main ingredients are grown on-property. My pineapple juice was so freshly squeezed that a half-inch of thick foam formed on top of my glass; and let's just talk about my Key Lime Pie! The Lodge should just drop the word "Key" from the name because the limes from the Florida Keys have nothing on the limes of Pico Bonito. It was by far, hands down, the best key lime pie I've ever had in my life. I can say with certainty that I'll never taste anything that good again unless I come back here.

The adventures continued on the island of Roatán. I did pack a lime for the trip, even without the pie, these things are magnificent. So, with a pucker on my lips and my sights set just off the North Coast, to the cluster of islands known as the Bay Islands, I was off.

Honduras' three major Bay Islands are Roatán, Útila and Guanaja. The largest and most developed is Roatán, where I began the second leg of my journey.

Roatán is a magnet for cruise ships and divers. It has the **second-largest barrier reef in the world**, the Belize Barrier Reef, attracting divers from all around the world. This reef is the longest in the Western Hemisphere spanning approximately 200 miles. On that note, for all you would-be divers, Roatán's neighboring island, Útila is the cheapest place in the world to get SCUBA certified.

Though Spanish is the national language of Honduras, most residents on Roatán speak English, as its early settlers were of European British-Caribbean descent. So if you forget your Spanish-English dictionary at home, you'll certainly get by just fine here.

I checked in to the newly opened Infinity Bay Resort on the island's West End. Not only is it visually beautiful,

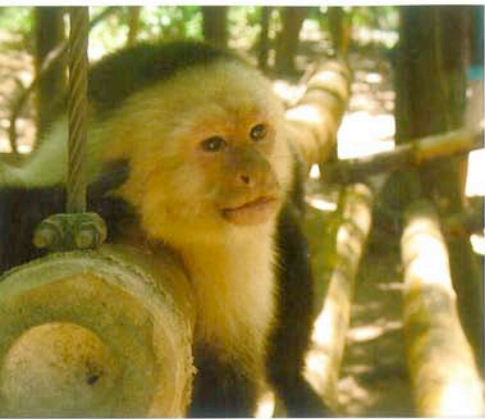
but it also happens to be Roatán's greenest resort. It uses solar water heating and each villa has "smart sensors" to turn off lights and ventilation when the unit is not occupied. Dry wells capture rainwater, which is then made drinkable through a reverse osmosis purification system. Wastewater is also filtered and then used as irrigation for the resort. All of this and more was specifically designed to have zero negative impact on the beach and reef system.

As tempting as it was to just lie around the grounds and do nothing, the activities on the islands were just too inviting. I had to go exploring.

I could have spent all day at Gumbalimba Park, an animal preserve and botanical gardens with plenty of activities such as swimming, horseback riding and zip lining. I knew it was going to be a special place when, upon my arrival, a flock of scarlet macaws flew overhead. Their bright red feathers contrasted beautifully against the blue sky.

Okay, I stand corrected when I said you could get by speaking English in Roatán. The birds here speak only Spanish. Walking through the jungle forests, there was a lot of "¡Hola!" being yelled at me from all directions. It was quite the greeting.





If you walk through the monkey refuge, they will emerge from the treetops and literally plop on your head. Since my two daughters were back home, I found a surrogate child in little Supa, a nine-month-old white-faced capuchin who is currently in training at the park. Brought to Gumbalimba from the mainland when he was just two months old, Supa's mom was killed by hunters and he miraculously survived. Right now he's learning to stay still on people, not to nip and most importantly – not to leave the confines and safety of the park, where he will become vulnerable to predators both animal and human.

The most exhilarating part of Gumbalimba was the zip-lining. A canopy tour took me zip-lining from the top of the park's mountains and, over the course of 13 lines, I zipped through the lush jungles, traversed the treetops like Spider-Man. Down I zipped, past the monkeys, the birds, the turtle-filled lagoon, finishing up right on the beach. A perfect way to end the ride.

I could not leave Roatán without a visit to Anthony's Key Resort where I played with dolphins and joined them on a snorkel swim.

The dolphin assigned to me was a 7-year-old female named Maury. She showed me her jumps and swims, and showered me with kisses. I literally got to hold her – all 350 lbs of her – in the water. Thank goodness for buoyancy!

The most fantastic part was a 30-minute snorkel swim with about a dozen female dolphins. They were all around me, from 3-month-old babies to adults. **I could hear them "talking" underwater.** So even if I couldn't see them, I knew where to swim because of where the sounds were coming from.

At one point I stood up and a huge dolphin came towards me and nipped my arm. It didn't hurt, but it certainly was unexpected. I was told it was the signal for: "Let's play." It was as if this dolphin was saying: "Wait, don't leave yet! Stay and play." How could I refuse such an offer? Back under I went.



This particular dolphin swirled around me, flipped on to her back and offered me her belly. It was gigantic! I'd never seen a dolphin this big. I rubbed her belly and we spent some time flipping around together and swimming in circles. I felt like I was playing with a giant puppy. A trainer watching me said this dolphin was actually pregnant and due any day. Well, that explained the belly rubs. Now I understood that she was showing off her pregnancy and telling me all about it. It's as if she knew I, as a mother, would appreciate it and be happy for her. I certainly was.

After I finished playing with her, another dolphin came up to me and gently bit me. Knowing the signal now, we floated together under water, playfully intertwined. Sometimes she would nip on to my arm, leading me in to deeper waters so we could really tumble around and play. Lucky for her, I was game.

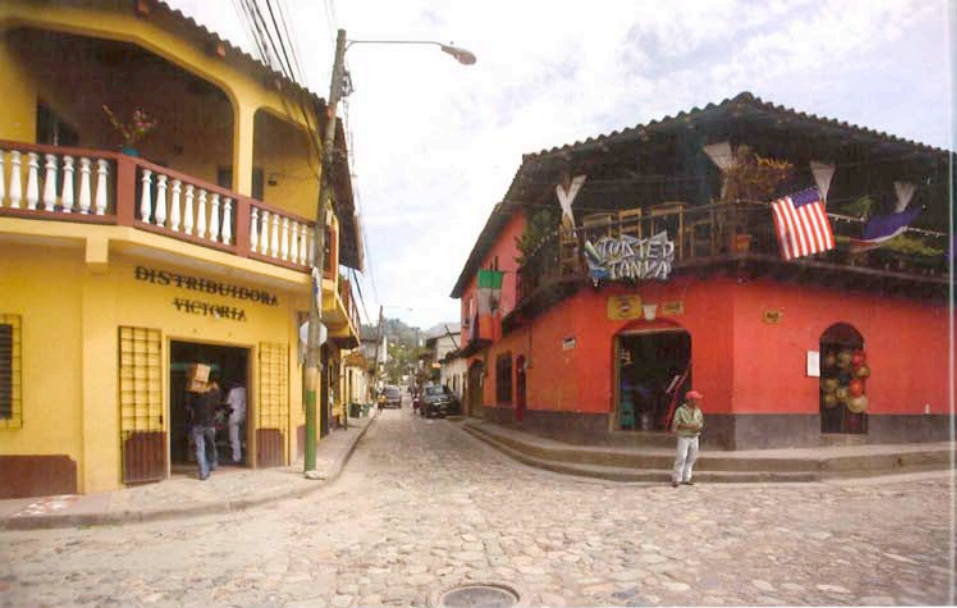
Although I've had other dolphin encounters in my past travels, this was more personal than I've ever experienced. The specific dolphins I interacted with chose me to be their playmate. I was singled out by them and it made me feel special. It felt like an honor to be asked to the dance, so to speak. I hope I proved myself a worthy playmate.



After a few days in Roatán, I flew back to La Ceiba where my plane picked up a few more passengers and continued on to San Pedro Sula, the second largest city in the country. It's also a major portal to the rest of Honduras and it was from here that I'd begin my three-hour drive to the mountains of Copán. Taking a break before the long road ahead, I spent several hours in the city.

I stopped by the famous Guamilito Market, an indoor bazaar that's packed with over a hundred stands selling all sorts of keepsakes, clothes, flowers and food. Bargaining is the way to go here so, if you love the challenge of going back and forth on a price, this place is definitely for you. They'll gladly take U.S. money and I was able to buy a pound of Honduran coffee for \$3! For that price, I ended up coming back to the same stall to buy two more pounds. I didn't care how much it would weigh down my suitcase.

My bus ride from San Pedro Sula westward towards the mountains was very scenic. The roads were windy and bumpy so if you're prone to nausea like I am, some Dramamine will help. Hours later my bus crossed a bridge and it felt as if I was transported in to a different time. The streets were all cobblestone and **little girls of Mayan descent were walking along the sidewalk with their colorful dolls.**



There is not much English spoken in Copán Ruinas, so my choices were to step it up and challenge my own verbal skills, or find someone to help translate. I ended up doing a little of both.

In the middle of the town was my hotel, Hotel Marina Copán, which was once the family home of Marina Welchez. In 1945, she converted it in to a hotel while still remaining on the property to this day.

The Welchez family is one of the most well known families in Copán, if not Honduras. The family's Finca Santa Isabel is the largest coffee plantation in the area at 247 acres, which produces its famous Welchez Coffee.

Copán Ruinas one of the most visited cities in Honduras because of its archaeological sites. The ancient ruins here are some of the most elaborately designed from the Classic period of Mayan culture (250 to 900 AD). Mayan investigators and enthusiasts can get an extensive glimpse of what life was like then by observing over 3,000 structures spanning more than 27 square miles of this magnificent and diverse country. One of the most famous ruins here is the Hieroglyphic

Staircase. In general, most hieroglyphic inscriptions are very brief. Most of them relate to specific rituals or are used as dedications on monuments. The one exception is the Hieroglyphic Staircase, which encompasses 63 steps with over 2000 "glyphs" recounting the Mayan's 500-year dynastic history. This Staircase is the longest pre-Columbian inscription in America.

The other must-see ruin is the Temple Rosalila, a three-story structure completely underground. Instead of being destroyed by the Maya after its use during 6th Century AD, they carefully buried the temple and erected a new structure on top.



When archeologist Ricardo Agurcia Fasquelle discovered it in 1989, it was in such great shape, it is so far considered to be the best-preserved example of Mayan art and architecture of this period.

After walking through a tunneled door in the ruins, I made my way down in to the ground through narrow halls to an amazing temple. Afterwards, I was privileged enough to spend an afternoon with Ricardo himself. He took me to the site's museum and personally walked me around all the treasures – many of which he discovered.

I also checked out Copán's Macaw Mountain, a bird park and nature reserve that sits on 10 forested acres. Macaws, toucans and parrots that have been recovered from captivity reside here and are well taken care of for the rest of their years. Injured birds like owls or hawks also come here to be treated and to recover before being released back in to the wild.

The park has a small coffee plantation that produces its own Coffee Miramundo, which I ended up buying, along with a coffee mug that had a picture of a toucan. Some people collect snow globes from their travels; I collect coffee mugs from the places I visit. Over the course of my seven days in Honduras, I bought three different coffee mugs – a record for me during a single trip.

While in Copán, I spent a day being a rancher. Carlos Castejon, whom I befriended at a dinner party one evening, invited me to his 2000-acre farm Finca El Cisne, a centuries-old ranch owned by his family since 1885.

I hitched a ride on the back of Carlos' truck
up a windy, unpaved road that took me about 45 minutes outside the city. I hung on for dear life (in a fun way, of course) in the back of his pick-up, trying to keep my feet steady, while being bounced around.

That ride alone was a great warm-up for a hard day's work on the ranch. A light early morning rain was already getting me wet in the back of that truck. My sneakers and jeans were muddy within minutes, but it didn't matter. The feel of the wind against my face, my wet hair sticking to my cheeks and the smell of vegetation made me feel alive than ever. My world felt vast and wide, like I had no constraints or boundaries placed on me. I took it all in and let it flow through my veins.

When we arrived at Casa Castejon, Carlos served a breakfast that included tamarind, guanavana and bananas picked from his orchards. I drank fresh coffee grown from the family's plantation and ate flavorful cheese made from the milk of their cows.

After picking a coffee bean pod from a tree and being shown how it transformed to a dried bean that gets shipped out of the country, I learned many important facts about my favorite morning drink. For example, I know that in the future I'll only be buying sun-dried coffee beans. The beans at Finca El Cisne spend 5 days drying in the sun, while mass producers dry it in a machine that does the job in only 36 hours. A quick process like that is very aggressive and harsh on the bean, thus changing its chemical balance too quickly and producing a taste not as superior as sun-dried beans. A few more sips and some deep inhales and it was time for a three-hour horseback ride.



Muñeca and I
were floating across the fields
at the speed of light.



Kudos to Carlos for pairing me with the most perfect horse. The beautiful Muñeca – her name means “doll” in Spanish – was my partner during this journey. Muñeca and I had one thing in common: we both love to eat and we’re both very adept at eating on the run. During our excursion, Muñeca would pass by grass or flowers and, without stopping, grab them and chew. Meanwhile I would pick the star fruit from the trees when Muñeca took me past them. So there we were, horse and human, eating and trotting. As long as we let each other pick our respective foliage and fruits, we were satisfied and co-existed in perfect harmony. We had an unspoken understanding.

When Muñeca and I sped things up to a gallop, that’s when the magic really started to happen. The second she began to run, all sound ceased to exist. I literally could not hear any noise coming from her feet. It felt like Muñeca and I were floating across the fields at the speed of light. I don’t remember ever hitting the saddle because I didn’t have time to touch down during the run.

When we arrived at the dirt road that took us back to the stables, it was time for lunch. Despite our constant grazing, Muñeca and I were ready to indulge in a big meal. I kissed her muzzle, gave her a scratch behind the ears and we parted ways.

I finished the day at the Luna Jaguar Spa Resort where I laid in the open-air hot springs. The place was designed to resemble the Mayan ruins as a way of paying homage to them. Indeed, Luna Jaguar was one of the 16 rulers of the 500-year dynasty. Amid the lush rainforest jungles I had the luxury of choosing between pools of hot and cold water, a footbath, a mud bath or a massage area. Steam was rising all around me. I could smell the sulfur. I eased into a hot pool, closed my eyes and dreamily recapped the day.

I don't know if it's the energy of the stone structure, or just the sheer fact that Copán Ruinas hold memories that date back to a pre-Columbian time, but it is without a doubt a special place. There is a vortex of energy here and, if you allow yourself, you can feel it. It's quite surreal. People and memories that I haven't thought of in ages started coming to mind during my stay there. It was as if this otherworldly city was stirring up my insides. Dormant thoughts and feelings were awakening.

The morning I checked out of Hotel Marina Copán, I asked the attendant at the front desk I could meet the actual Marina Welchez in person. I was curious to meet

the woman who chose to open her property to travelers like myself. I was taken to her suite on the ground floor and walked through the door. There she was, 85 years old, frail, yet looking into my face with bright, kind eyes that waited for me to speak. In my limited Spanish, all I could say was what an honor it was to meet her.

We went into the courtyard and sat together. I wished I could have asked her questions about the life she's lived here in this town. Regrettably, my Spanish was nowhere near that level. Instead, I just held her hand. There was so much more I wanted express to her, but there was no way I could. Still, I knew she felt my gratitude.

A busboy signaled to me that my bus driver was eager to start the three-hour drive back to San Pedro Sula. He was concerned I'd miss my flight. I kissed Marina on the cheek and thanked her for letting me stay at her wonderful place. She smiled and squeezed my hand. At that moment, I knew it was all right for me to finally head home.

Honduras; from peak to shore, island life to jungle abode, **I am forever touched** by you.

● Zorianna Kil

