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*“Not Home for the Holidays” Feature Article*  
*1,086 words*

A few years ago I started a new family holiday tradition: skipping town. How could I deny my three young children Santa and grandparents? Easily.

All I needed was the thought of enduring one more Christmas day of toys broken by evening, forgotten by New Year’s to get the hives hatching. The case was bolstered as visions of the impending sprint of holiday parties, blur of obligatory shopping and daze of mindless overeating danced madly in my head. From this state of pre-holiday agitation it was a mere elf step to take the stand to reclaim my family as well as my sanity from the marketing mania and seasonal frenzy. I threw carols and fruitcake to the wind and booked an adventure trip to Costa Rica for me, my husband and our boys, who were then ages four, five and seven.

Christmas day found us a world away from snow and Santa, in the northern lowlands of Costa Rica at the Tirimbina Rain Forest research center. I pondered what our friends and relatives were doing as we celebrated the holiday by assisting two biologists set up equipment to net bats and collect data for their research. My oldest son and I stayed up into the wee hours of the morning, working side-by-side with the scientists (this was no tourist attraction), catching bats, measuring, inspecting and releasing them. After a few hours, I began to recognize their individual--even endearing--characteristics and to view them as more than flying rats. No Hot Wheels set ever brought me and my son this close.

Yuletide marketers often extol the idea of childlike wonderment around the holiday season. We lived it. As we trekked off with our experienced guide into the rain forest one day, my husband excitedly anticipated encountering some large, exotic and possibly ferocious indigenous animal. So imagine his own wonderment as he witnessed our children completely engrossed in studying the large and ferocious...bullet ant. The boys spent hours tracking the ants, observing how each one had a function in the tribe. I don’t recall a single action figure toy, no matter how coveted, ever holding their attention for such an extended period.

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*Jacobus—“Not Home For the Holidays”—add one*

We witnessed an active volcano in Arenal and dipped into a water park formed from its hot springs. We floated down the Rio Frio through the Cano Negro wildlife refuge on the border of Costa Rica and Nicaragua, spotting caimans, spider and howler monkeys, sloth, iguanas, emerald basilisks (also known as Jesus lizards due to how they “walk” on water), exotic birds and more, all of which kept the rapt attention of both kids and adults alike. To see the excitement in the eyes of our boys at each new experience, big and small, brought both my husband and I back in touch with our own youthful enthusiasm for learning and exploring the world.

The zip line adventure in the Manuel Antonio national park (LOCATION) thrilled us all. Safely harnessed into our equipment, we soared across suspension cables through the jungle from tree to tree like Tarzan, 100 feet above the forest floor. The children each rode tandem with an experienced guide, while my husband and I flew solo. What exhilaration to defy gravity, to look down upon the world as a bird, to see the trees go whirring by! I felt a surge of accomplishment no perfectly roasted turkey or superbly mashed potato has ever evoked.

Like the afterglow of a great holiday meal, when the work is done, appetites are sated and the rush is over, our end-of-trip days ocean-side IN CITY?? were a well-earned time of lounging after all the rain forest adventure. We sipped tropical drinks at the in-pool bar while floating in the exquisite El Parador hotel infinity pool perched on a precipice overlooking the Pacific Ocean. The children were entertained by the local lizards, salamanders and startlingly large iguanas that freely roam the property. The great thing about “toys” like these: the batteries don’t run out.

A New Year’s Eve sunset sail brought an auspicious meeting with dolphins who escorted our boat out to a nearby reef. The children experienced snorkeling for the first time and were just as awed at the world below the water as they’d been at the one above for the past 10 days. I will never forget the muffled voice of my middle son as he gleefully shouted through his snorkel, “Mom! Fish!!” Back topside the children ate fresh-caught fish, communed with the dolphins and other passengers alike and sat still long enough to appreciate a spectacular sunset.

After a brief evening nap, we roused the boys for one last holiday adventure: New Year’s Eve in the coastal town of Quepos at the American ex-pat-owned El Gran Escape restaurant. As with everywhere we went in Costa Rica, we were welcomed like family. Throughout the entire trip there was no place where children were out of place or where we non-Spanish speaking foreigners were regarded as second class. This last night was no exception. We may as well have been in a room full of our closest friends and relatives for how much fun and camaraderie we encountered.

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The piece de la resistance of the evening was the arrival of a full marching band with dancers in regalia that resembled a cross between college cheerleader and indigenous people. The conga line led the party into the streets, where we were greeted with fireworks and a blazing sign heralding the New Year.

Our Costa Rican trip was three years ago and we're still basking in the experience of it, retelling the stories, sharing the photos, keeping in touch with the people we met. And that's about two years and 360 days longer than any other Christmas gift before or after has lasted.

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