

From Canada to Costa Rica and back

BY STACEY RAMELSON

Nine teenage girls from Richmond Hill enjoyed the experience of a lifetime this spring, participating in a Costa Rican adventure through Girl Guides.

The Pathfinders and three leaders — Patty Carlson, Dina Karababas and Bonnie-Lynn Murphy — spent March break learning about different cultures, helping save endangered species, ziplining through the rain forest and learning how to shower with just a bucket of water.

Grade 9 student Robyn Thomson was one of the participants, saying she especially enjoyed helping turtles lay their eggs.

HELPING SEA TURTLE LAY EGGS

“Helping a Leatherback sea turtle lay eggs, feeding manatees and watching them eat and spending time with a native Costa Rican tribe, the Bribri, were just a few of the things that we did that were so fun. Doing all of this with great friends made it even better,” said Robyn.

The girls and leaders started off in Costa Rica, which is similar to Canada in that it has a coast on both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. They quickly found out how different the weather is from Canada — mostly hot and sticky.

Costa Rican guides were provided through tour group Eco Teach — a company specializing in ecological and educational tours.

The tour began in the Veragua Rain Forest National Park where they visited a butterfly conservatory and nocturnal creature exhibit. Staff entomologists explained that bugs are baked in a low heat oven for four days in order to preserve them.

NIGHT BUG HUNT

They went to a night bug hunt with the entomologists, finding spiders, snakes and stick bugs. Some girls were even lucky enough to find spiders crawling on their arms.

They were even fortunate to spot a scorpion. Costa Rican scorpions are not poisonous, but a simple bite would cause a person to get sick.

Next, the group visited a small two-room school and its 16 students put on a show. In return, through their guide who spoke the language, the Pathfinders taught the children about Canada.



Nine Pathfinders from Richmond Hill and their leaders, Dina Karababas (back row, second from left) and beside her, Bonnie-Lynn Murphy, with Patty Carlson (back, far right) ziplined through the Costa Rican rain forest as part of an adventurous educational trip this spring.

Then they headed to Panama to work at the Humedal San San Pond Sak research station.

The group learned how to find and offer food for the manatees who lived there.

They spent hours in the mangrove forest on a makeshift viewing platform to record what they ate, how many times they dived and at what time of day, helping collect scientific data.

“The highlights of my trip would be white water rafting, ziplining, visiting the Bribri tribe and the elementary school, going to the beach and the turtle project.”

Pathfinder Samirah Ajward

The Pathfinders also collected mangrove seeds and then went to a pasture that was in the midst of being replanted and naturalized.

Suddenly leaders learned that

the border would be closing at 8 a.m. the next day due to a work to rule or a general strike. They all got up early to cross the rickety bridge at the border and they made it in time to meet their bus and head on to Cahuita.

They spent the day at the beach and enjoyed a swim in the ocean, then returned to the hotel and swim in the pool.

CROSSING THREE RIVERS

The next adventure was a hike to visit the Bribri tribe.

The teens and leaders crossed three rivers, often up to their knees in water, wearing lifejackets and backpacks. Many got wet because the rocks were slippery and they fell in. One thought kept them going: getting back to the hotel to take hot showers.

Then then ventured further north on the Caribbean coast to see a turtle sanctuary, watching Leatherback sea turtles lay eggs on the beach.

When this happens, the turtle needs to be tagged, or if it is already,

the tag number needs to be recorded, its length and width has to be measured and the distance from the shore to nest and vegetation nest are measured.

The eggs are then collected, the majority fertile and some infertile, brought to the hatchery for protection and monitoring and reburied there. It takes two months for the hatchlings to emerge.

CRITICALLY ENDANGERED

Leatherbacks are critically endangered. Four turtles were recorded that night but the group wasn't as lucky the next night, as no turtles came up the beach.

On one of their last days before their return to Canada, they tried both ziplining and white water rafting.

Pathfinder Samirah Ajward enjoyed both activities. “The highlights of my trip would be white water rafting, ziplining, visiting the Bribri tribe and the elementary school, going to the beach and the turtle project.”

The girls learn many different

things about Costa Rica, its culture and the life of Costa Ricans.

“We learned a lot about bananas, coffee and other plants that grow in Costa Rica, too,” added Robyn.

“We learned so much about protecting wildlife and the environment, even in a different country. And we learned about Costa Rican culture, traditions and communities,” said Robyn.

“I definitely do not take what I have for granted anymore. After staying in buildings with no air conditioning, or windows and doors like we are used to, and even no running water, I am grateful for what I have on a daily basis,” she said.

“Although sleeping under bug nets and taking a shower with a bucket of water was an experience, I'm glad that I don't have to do that every day.”

Stacey Ramelson is a Grade 11 co-op student at Westmount Collegiate Institute volunteering at the Liberal.