

Before You Go

Outline of the BriBri Indigenous Community Project

Reserva Indígena NamuWökir

The light is dim. As your eyes adjust you examine your surroundings. An earth floor worn smooth, the roof disappearing to a point above you, the rings of wood and thatch that surround you, the light streaming in through the only opening. You catch the smell of smoke and wood and hear singing in a strange language.

You had a long trek to get here - through primary rainforest and across fast, cold rivers. Where are you? Where the eight sacred animals built the sacred hut, where Awá turn seeds into stones, where the king of the dead receives the pain of persecuted animals and people, where lush rainforest tumbles down steep-sided slopes. You are in the world of Sibú the Creator and the BriBri people.

The BriBri Indians of the Cordillera de Talamanca are the last remaining indigenous of Costa Rica. Now restricted to this protected area of mountainous rainforest in the very south of the country, the BriBri were once part of many indigenous groups that lived across Costa Rica before the Spanish conquest ravaged their numbers. Desperately clinging onto their land and cultural heritage against the onslaught of westernization, these people practice non-invasive methods of agriculture within the rainforest and survive through subsistence farming. However, the pressures upon them are great and as western influence continues to invade, traditions are forgotten with each successive generation and soon an entire way of life may be lost.

It's like stepping backwards in time. There are no roads to the NamuWökir (the name of the BriBri tribe the EcoTeach student group visits) Indigenous Reserve. Not only is that part of what makes this area so special, so mystical and so verdant, it is part of what has protected these people for the 500 years since the Spanish conquest of Central America. The Cordillera de Talamanca is the most rugged and unpopulated areas in the country. The centerpiece of this mountain range is the great Cerro Chirripó; at 12,530 feet (3,819 m), it is the tallest peak in the country. Indigenous reserves and the Parque Nacional La Amistad stretch from the icy summit of this towering mountain to the balmy Caribbean shores.

The EcoTeach cultural tour is the only group of foreigners invited onto the BriBri indigenous reserve to meet these fascinating people and to gain an insight into their history, culture and environmentally harmonious way of life. This is an extremely special opportunity that we all must be honored with. Cherish and enjoy it.

Background Information on the BriBris

History

Before the arrival of Christopher Columbus to Costa Rica on September 18, 1502, more than 250,000 indigenous people divided into at least eight groups lived throughout the land that is now Costa Rica. Today, less than 2% of Costa Rica's current population - or approximately 35,000 people - is comprised of native people. Unlike in Peru and Mexico, Spanish conquistadors in Costa Rica did not encounter powerful and unified nations but rather scattered and diverse groups of people. The original occupants of this land suffered from war and disease such as smallpox, measles and tuberculosis brought upon them by powerfully armed Spanish colonizers. Local tribes were further weakened and degraded by slavery and relegation to continually smaller and less fertile lands. In 1620, the colonizing party hanged the two leaders (Caciques) of the BriBri people in an attempt to dissolve the resisting community. However, the remaining BriBris clung together and, led by the heads of the civil (Blu) and military (Kabsi) sectors, ravaged the city of San Bartolomé de Duqueiba on the Río Telire in 1662. The indigenous people of Costa Rica eked out a living for the next three centuries, despite continual pressure from the Spanish ruling class. In 1939, the Costa Rican government granted every native family with 365 acres (148 hectares) to be used for sustainable subsistence agriculture. Although the government passed a law in 1977 that prohibited non-indigenous people from buying or renting land within the reserves, illegal logging and mining continue throughout the designated areas.

Culture

The rugged and lush Cordillera de Talamanca afforded the BriBris solace and isolation from the Spanish to allow them to preserve their traditional culture. The 5,200 remaining BriBri people live in small villages in the Talamanca area in far southeast Costa Rica and northern Panamá from sea level up beyond 9,840 ft (3,000 m) in elevation. With about 18 people per square mile (2.6 sq km), this is the least densely populated region in the nation. Although they are poor and isolated from major trading centers, the BriBri continue to sustain themselves through subsistence agriculture. These people cultivate over 120 different types of wild and domestic plants for use as food, medicine, boat and house building material, firewood, crafts, pesticides and bartering objects. Their entire economy, and indeed an important part of their culture and way of life, is dependent upon farming. In addition to a vast array of knowledge of the resources available in the forest, these people also have an understanding of how to safely and continuously provide for themselves without polluting waterways and depleting soils.



Traditional BriBri dance

Because the original Spanish settlement of Cartago was established far from indigenous habitats, the first Europeans did not intermarry to create mestizos (mixed Spanish and indigenous stock) to a large extent like their Central American neighbors. As a result, small, but pure and isolated groups of indigenous people still live according to their traditional ways throughout the land. In addition to their ancient, yet progressive and forward-thinking, system of agriculture, the BriBri community of Talamanca retains fascinating religious beliefs. According to their belief, the supreme god, Sibú, created the universe. Jicaras, carved gourd pitchers, often contain inscriptions depicting characters and stories from their mythology.



Background Information on the BriBris

Community

A typical BriBri community within the Reserva Indígena Talamanca BriBri consists of central communal buildings, such as a meeting house and schoolroom, with families living removed from the central area in more isolated places. People live in small houses and traditionally sleep on the floor in the same room. They use traditional palm thatch for their roofs that only grows in primary rainforest. Unfortunately due to deforestation, people now have to walk for hours to reach areas of forest to collect it. Many houses are very isolated and it is not uncommon for children to walk one or two hours to school.

BriBri are split into clans. Clan names are commonly related to work, such as the Clan of the Sardines and the Clan of the Tubers or to the natural world, such as the Clan of the Setting Sun. Members of different clans can live together within a community.

Creation

According to BriBri legend, Sibú's sister was the Tapir and she had a daughter. Sibú believed that if the Vampire Bat went to below where the sun rises and cut the Tapir's daughter, her blood would form the earth. The Vampire descended and sliced the Tapir's daughter with its fine incisor. Then it returned to where Sibú was resting in his hammock and from its excrement grew the vines and bushes. Sibú saw that this plan was successful and productive and promised to continue it. The Tapir's grandmother was Bikakra, the individual in charge of the chocolate ceremony and distributing this important food. Sibú needed to see the Tapir's grandmother and convince her to bring the Tapir's daughter to him, so that she could change into earth.

Sibú went to the Tapir's grandmother and invited her to celebrate the birth of the clans that would grow like corn seeds from the earth. He convinced her to come by promising that she could preside over the ceremonies of chocolate and corn. Sibú also mentioned that he would return to remind her of the celebration within the next four days. The entire festival was arranged for the express purpose of inaugurating the great conical house (rancho) and the corn seed. Sibú threw a great party and invited all those who worked with him, plus the mother and grandmother of the Tapir.

Sibú believed that they had to dance a special dance called the Sorbón at the party and that they would have to invite the demons because he had already employed them to build his house - the world. However, if the demons knew that the house was intended to create the clans, they would not have constructed it. Represented by the ceremonial rancho, Suláyum is the Bribri center of the world.

Before the sun rose, Sibú prepared the banquet, the tables and the party and called everybody there to dance the Sorbón. When the Sorbón dance began, the Tapir got up to dance while her mother was distributing chocolate. They danced one dance after another. During the fourth dance, the Tapir's daughter fell and her blood spilled across the floor. Everybody dancing the Sorbón began to trample her, until her body melted and completely disappeared, eventually becoming pure earth. After she became earth, the Tapir's mother began to cry and said to Sibú, "You have betrayed me, my brother! If I had known what you were going to do, I would not have come."

Because of this fable, the BriBris consider the tapir to be sacred and never consume its flesh before performing a special ritual.



Background Information on the BriBris

Awá - The Shaman

Each community has an Awá or spiritual leader and healer. The Awá performs many duties, including performing religious ceremonies such as marriage and rite of passage. It is Sibú that decides who will become an Awá - not the members of the community. When the Awá has reached about 40 years of age he takes on an apprentice. To decide if the young student has the power to become a medicine man, the shaman takes the boy upstream to a special river where he must throw corn seeds into the water. If the seeds turn into white rocks, then the boy has shamanic powers. The Awá picks out the white rocks from the river and shines them and the boy keeps the stones and uses them to help other people. Different rocks represent different animals, birds and natural spirits. The shaman communicates with the spirit rocks, which in turn communicate to Sibú. While holding the rocks, shamans get bodily vibrations and go into a trance and continue talking to the stones. The rocks pass the information onto Sibú, who communicates his answers back through the stones. The Awá can live close to the community, but some live very far away in a very isolated place, hours up in the mountains. If someone gets sick, s/he or a relative must make that trek to find the shaman and ask for his healing. In some cases, however, the Awá makes house calls, even to non-indigenous people. When somebody is sick, the shaman can make predictions as to how likely a recovery is. If he does not get the bodily vibrations he knows the sick person will die. Besides administering medicinal treatment and ceremonial rites, the Awá recommends special behavior, like avoiding exposure to the sun, and special diets, like avoiding sweet foods, for a period of time. The community only dances with the Awá and when he visits there are special songs sung during the day and at night that can only be performed by him.

Shamans represent the greatest link between people and the natural world, as they are familiar with native plants and animals and how they may be used to help people. However, just like the native wildlife throughout the area and indeed, throughout the world, indigenous people are lost to the expansion of western people who claim land, mining areas, timber forests and animals. If these gifted leaders die before passing on millennia of acquired knowledge, that knowledge too will be lost. Shamans may possess the knowledge to cure pandemic diseases, but they will be unwilling to share such valuable information with western people unless we make a greater effort to protect them, their people and their culture. Shamans now are imparting much more ancient knowledge of the Indians and their world to communities so it can be written and taught to children so the culture is not lost.



Palm thatch

Oköm - the Undertaker

Aside from the Awá, there exists within the BriBri spiritual circle an undertaker or Oköm. The Oköm is responsible for burying the dead and cleaning and watching over the cemetery. This position is respected to the extent that the duties described to it cannot be performed by other members of the tribe. Before burying a dead person, the Oköm must first bathe in hot water, wash his hands in chocolate and use a mixture of both to rinse his mouth. The Oköm is forbidden from passing over a grave as this is considered an impure act that can result in serious illness.

BriBri Universe

BriBri belief holds that the universe is shaped like a diamond that is divided into different layers. The top three layers belong to Sibú; they are his realm. The fourth layer represents the forest and sky. The fifth layer - in the middle of the diamond - is the earth. The layer below the earth is where the dead are buried. Under that is the realm of Kudo, the King of the Dead, who receives the pain and sickness of people and the souls of endangered animals. In BriBri legend, if too many people are destroying habitats and killing animals, Kudo will talk to animals such as venomous snakes and order them to seek revenge by biting a person in return.

Background Information on the BriBris

El Rancho

This building is the spiritual heart of the community; all meetings, religious activities and social events are held here. It is a large, conical structure made of wood and thatch and held together by vines - not one nail is used in its construction. The circular hut is thatched all the way to the ground and there is only one door and no windows. For this reason the rancho door always faces east. Sibú is light and so by facing east there is always some of Sibú's light entering the hut at any time of the day.



A group outside the Rancho

Legend says that in the beginning, Sibú picked eight animals to help him construct the sacred rancho building. These animals were the naked-tailed armadillo, the nine-banded armadillo, the collared peccary, the white-lipped peccary, the rat, the ant-eater, the rabbit and the paca. The rats were in charge of making holes to put in the posts and so the eight posts in the hut represent each of these animals. These animals have now become sacred to BriBri culture and, if any clans hunt and kill or injure the animals involved in the construction of Sibú's rancho, they have to consult the shaman to purify himself and to seek forgiveness from Sibú.

Economy

The BriBri Indians cultivate cocoa and bananas on small farms for trade or sale in nearby towns. However, there is a limit on what they can sell: only 110 pounds (50 kg) of bananas, 88 pounds (40 kg) of cocoa and 66 pounds (30 kg) of plantains per month. No matter how much they produce, each farm is only allowed to sell this amount, which brings in an average income of just \$50 - 80 per month for families. Bananas fetch less than \$1 per kilo and cocoa about 30¢. This little money is enough to buy sugar, cheap clothes and boots and perhaps some oil. Although bananas and plantains comprise of their primary source of income, individuals from the community must carry huge banana bunches four hours to town to sell them. Indigenous people subsist on rice, beans, cocoa, sugar cane, yucca, pigs and chickens raised on their land plots. BriBris only eat meat about once a month and this must be hunted by arrow or traps or fished in nearby forests and streams. Due to the encroachment of local non-indigenous people wild game (or bushmeat) is increasingly more difficult to find.

In addition to agriculture, the BriBris practice sustainable agroforestry, the extraction and use of small amounts of necessary items from the surrounding forest to be used for food, construction and medicine. Preferred species are planted within a small area of forest so that they may be easily tended to and found. The system of agroforestry is based on the clan division of labor and responsibility. One clan grows rice, another beans, another yucca etc, with no overlap among clans.



Taking bananas to town

The BriBri indigenous community is very advanced in terms of its lifestyle in harmony with nature and with each other. However, because they lack certain advancements that we take for granted such as technological machinery, hospitals and schools, the BriBri are an impoverished and governmentally underrepresented people. Ecoteach is assisting the community by helping to build necessary infrastructure such as a school, bringing in school supplies and purchasing items of convenience such as boat motors.

Threats and Conservation

Today, there is a heightened awareness and drive for preservation of Costa Rica's last indigenous groups in an effort to retain their culture, history and knowledge. As they have lived off the land for at least 20,000 years, indigenous people of the Americas have managed to acquire a huge and vital wealth of knowledge and respect for their local environment. Introduced to us by local indigenous people, about 80% of the diet of the Western world comes from tropical rainforest, including: avocado, banana, black pepper, Brazilian nuts, cayenne pepper, cassava/manioc, cashews, chocolate/cocoa, cinnamon, cloves, coconut, coffee, corn/maize, eggplant, fig, ginger, jalapeño, lemon, mango, orange, papaya, peanut, pineapple, potato, rice, sweet pepper, sugar, tomato and vanilla. However, developed nations use about 200 rainforests plants for food while indigenous tribes use over 2,000. Also, one fourth of Western pharmaceuticals are derived from rainforest plants, yet scientists have studied less than 1% of plant species for their medicinal use. Chemicals used to treat leukemia, Hodgkin's disease and other cancers, heart ailments, hypertension, arthritis and birth control are derived from rainforest plants. Countless other remedies may vanish before we discover their use. People are destroying the rainforests and the local populations that have called them home for the last 20 millennia before we discover the vast potential that they hold for humankind.

The eight remaining native groups of Costa Rica are protected among 22 reserves. Over 60% of indigenous people are protected within the Reserva de La Biosfera La Amistad, a designated world heritage site encompassing about 617,000 acres (250,000 ha) across southeastern Costa Rica and northwestern Panamá. This area of the country is very important because it is part of the Central American Biological Corridor, a proposed strip of continuous protected lands running the length of the isthmus. Such as a protected zone would allow countless animals to drift and migrate freely and safely between their natural habitats. Several indigenous groups have managed to maintain their culture through geographic isolation and government protection including: the BriBri people from the Talamanca area, the Guayami near the border with Panamá, the Borucas in southern Puntarenas province and the Miskitos of mixed African and indigenous blood on the southern Caribbean coast

The Indigenous Bill of 1977 granted the eight native tribes rights to self-government on their lands, but failed to offer them land titles and protection against intrusive and exploitive logging and mining. Currently, a particular threat to the well-being and stability of the BriBri people is the petroleum exploration taking place off the Caribbean shores. Far from offering native people improved education and healthcare as the large multi-national corporations propose, oil exploration threatens to contaminate local water supplies and kill important wild food sources. Native people have been discriminated against since the time of Costa Rica's colonization. Due to the lack of intermarrying with Europeans, the remaining native people retain distinctive features and are still recognizable by their diminutive stature, dark skin, narrow eyes and wide, flat noses. These people only received citizenship in 1992 and the right to vote in 1994 and they have the lowest healthcare and education in the country. With support from non-profit agencies such as CONAI - Comisión Nacional de Asuntos Indígenas (National Commission of Indigenous Affairs), ANAI - Asociación Nacional de Asuntos Indígenas (National Association of Indigenous Affairs) and Sejekto, indigenous people of Costa Rica now have a stronger voice and organized bodies seeking their preservation and economic and political security.

Activities & Special Tips

From Puerto Viejo de Talamanca students cruise about nine miles (12 km) to the small town of BriBri, then another seven miles (10 km) to the entrance to the Reserva Indigena Talamanca BriBri, where they must pass through a checkpoint. At this checkpoint people wishing to pass must show their relevant permits to be allowed to enter. These permits are hard to get, as the community do not allow just anyone to enter, in an effort to retain their cultural heritage. EcoTeach has a unique relationship with the NamuWökir community of the high Talamanca region that allows student groups to enter sacred BriBri lands. Talamanca is divided into low Talamanca and high Talamanca, an area of steep, hilly rainforest slopes. Once inside the reserve, the road winds through secondary forest - the primary forest now is mainly restricted to the upper Talamanca slopes.



The road to the NamuWökir community

The EcoTeach bus passes through several large communities before finally coming to a halt at a large river where students disembark to ferry across to the other side. From here they will take a local community bus further into the reserve to a point where even the bus can go no farther. Then the student group continues on foot along a trail through primary rainforest. The hike lasts 20 to 30 minutes and involves fording several streams and finally a wide river on the other side of which they will be met by members of the NamuWökir community and escorted to the central community area.

The first obvious building is the beautiful, circular cone-shaped thatched rancho or central meeting house of the community. After greeting some of the community members, the group will be taken inside the rancho to sit with the children and be treated to a very special morning. It is a great privilege for non-BriBris to be allowed inside a building as sacred as the rancho. Students will hear some of the BriBri legends and songs sung by the children, learn about life in a typical BriBri community and the problems facing it and have the opportunity to ask questions of their own.



The dining room

After this wonderful experience it's time for lunch. Meals are served in the basic dining room on a traditional BriBri plate, an ingeniously folded banana leaf. In the afternoon there will be an opportunity to play a game of soccer with the younger members of the community, but we suggest a pre-arranged activity you would like to carry out (for example, a painting class). Whatever you do, you will find these people warm, welcoming and kind-spirited.

It's then time to make the journey back into Puerto Viejo, tired but honored to have been invited into this special community and shared a memorable day.

Special Tips / Things You Should Bring

Because you will be wading across rivers to get to the indigenous reserve, it is advisable to wear lightweight, quick-dry pants. This way, your legs will be protected against mosquito bites during the hike through the forest, but you will not wind up with soaking wet pants for the next several days. Although they will get wet, it is recommended to wear sturdy shoes or walking boots (rather than sandals) so that you have a stable foothold on muddy trails and rocky streams.



Heading up to the community

Lesson Plans

Cultural Awareness / Sharing Exercise

These lessons are to be performed within the Bribri village.

A) Prepare and practice one of the following presentations to perform before your BriBri guests:

1. Song

Pick a song to sing. It can be a famous song relating to your country, such as the national anthem, a children's lullaby or a popular rock song.

2. Poem

Write a poem about your school, the place you live, your country or your trip to Costa Rica that you can read and that can be translated into Spanish.

3. Story

Read a short story (either a famous one or one of your own invention) about a significant event in your country's history, a beautiful natural place in your country or about people with whom you share a common interest.

4. Play

Prepare a short play about an event in your country's history - either recent or ancient.

B) Divide the EcoTeach student group into pairs and assign at least one Bribri youth to each pair. Spanish speaking students should be split up so they do not take over conversation. Engage the students in conversations about differences between their home country and the Bribri lifestyle. Propose a series of questions that EcoTeach students may ask the Bribri such as:

- How do you wash your clothes?
- How do you purchase food from the market?
- What are your daily tasks?
- What is your school like?
- What do you do for fun?
- What do you plan to do when you grow up?

The EcoTeach students should then respond with appropriate answers about their way of life. The point of this exercise is not to demonstrate the convenience of the Western lifestyle, but to point out the differences and appreciate each way of life as acceptable and meaningful.



Key Terminology

Spanish

<i>bosque</i> (BOH-skay)	forest
<i>cacique</i> (cah-SEE-kay)	tribal chief
<i>comunidad</i> (coe-MOO-nee-DAHD)	community
<i>cultura</i> (kool-TOO-rah)	culture
<i>danta</i> (DAHN-tah)	tapir
<i>indígena</i> (een-DEE-hay-nah)	indigenous
<i>mestizo</i> (mess-TEE-soh)	mixed Spanish and indigenous decent
<i>río</i> (REE-oh)	river
<i>vampiro</i> (bahm-PEE-roh)	vampire (bat)

English

<i>indigenous</i>	the original inhabitants of an area
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BriBri

<i>amí</i>	mother
<i>Awá</i>	shaman
<i>beshkena</i>	how are you?
<i>Blu</i>	civil leader
<i>buay</i>	good
<i>chamú</i>	banana
<i>croTUR</i>	dance
<i>dí</i>	water
<i>diba</i>	sun
<i>is ashkena</i>	traditional greeting like "good day"
<i>Kabsi</i>	military leader
<i>kali</i>	rain
<i>kuá kuá</i>	butterfly
<i>NamuWökir</i>	tiger head
<i>Oköm</i>	undertaker
<i>Sibú</i>	supreme god
<i>Talamanca</i>	blue mountains
<i>tayerá</i>	child
<i>wamú</i>	jaguar
<i>wéstara</i>	thank you