

monkeys, mangoes, and machetes

A family's tale of high-adventure, low-budget eco-travel to Costa Rica

It had been years since my husband and I fell in love while volunteering in Africa with the Peace Corps. My assignment included growing gardens, raising chickens, and feeding students in six schools, while Mark taught English. Our courtship began three months before our evacuation from Southern Africa; although our village lives were thriving, political warfare forced us out of Lesotho. But wanting further immersion in cultures different from our own, we strapped on our backpacks, bought Around-the-World plane tickets, and sketched out a new plan for the next six months. Our desire to engage with the world was ripe—the more dirt under our fingernails, the better.

Opposite: Julie, Mark, Miles (4½), and Ruby (1½) Lancaster at the entrance to Villas Mastatal

Eleven years and two children later, our colorful encounters had shifted from the likes of Mount Kilimanjaro and safaris to the joys and challenges of parenthood. A four- and a one-year-old now ruled our kingdom, and their curiosities were raw and real. Nightly, snuggled close with Miles and Ruby as we read aloud Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, we hungered to reenter that larger world beyond our neighborhood playground. Dreaming of exotic lands, we longed to devise our own adventures and create our own vibrant stories. But though we yearned to explore the globe as a foursome, we didn't know how. Our prospects seemed dim.

Still, memories of harvesting peanuts in Malawi and



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digging the soil in the Australian out-back came flooding back—many of our youthful days had been spent as Willing Workers on Organic Farms through WWOOF (an acronym that also stands for World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms), an international organization that links farms with travelers. One morning over tea we devised a plan, calling forth every brain cell not already occupied by the grocery list or carpool schedules. As though speaking in slow motion, I asked, “Would it actually be feasible to work on

one of those farms *with* our children?” The possibilities exploded. Perhaps we *could* volunteer-vacation on a farm with our children . . . anywhere in the world.

THE FIRM TERMS

WWOOF farms are ecologically minded; we embraced that. Nature education, green travel, cultural interaction, service learning on a tight budget—we wanted it all. Introducing our children to exquisite natural beauty and rural agricultural living was essential. Exposure to the

barnyard would give Miles and Ruby relationships with the living creatures that provide us with food.

For us, an open-air, local-style house was better than any chocolate-on-pillow hotel. We’d eat what the locals eat and love it. While volunteering, we’d model for our children our own commitment to service. Tight purse strings coupled with the richest experience: Could it work?

We thought it could. But this time around, with young children in the mix, the thrill of hitchhiking on overstuffed

pickups and encounters with overzealous baboons would be replaced by firm priorities: safe drinking water and access to quality medical facilities.

CONCOCTING THE PERFECT FAMILY PLAN

Scrambling to the computer, we reacquainted ourselves with WWOOF via the Internet (www.wwooof.org). Virtually salivating on the keyboard, we roamed nearly 100 WWOOF-affiliated countries. Italy, Hawaii, or Nepal? I felt a desire to rekindle my cloudy Spanish, which had lain dormant for 13 years following a stint at sea-turtle conservation. We zeroed in on Latin America.

Then we jumped to a discount-travel website and plugged in a few different countries to compare airfares. Round-trip flights to Costa Rica cost only \$400 each, and the second and final leg of the journey wouldn't exceed four hours. Hope mounted.

Mark darted to the library to peruse Costa Rica guidebooks, while I dashed off a few e-mails to friends who'd spent time there. We learned that local bus travel was free for children three years and younger. Summer is Costa Rica's low season; traveling then would present us with fewer tourists and more bargains—everyday expenses would cost less. Clean water, excellent medical care, low risk of disease—all met our criteria. As children younger than two years fly free, we were determined to get up and go within the next seven months. We were Costa Rica bound!

FARM FOOTWORK

Without delay, we invested \$16 to join WWOOF and instantly download the list of farms they provided. Detailing what it takes to be a “woofer,” the organization suggests that you have a “genuine interest in learning about organic growing, country living, or ecologically sound lifestyles.” The possibility of authentic cultural interaction is exceptional. Wwoofing is free; wwoofers exchange their labor for room and board. Stays can be a few days or exceed six months, in return for about five hours of work per day. Tingling with excitement, we picked our dates.

There were 45 farms to

choose from, and most had websites. One section of the list was devoted to farms affiliated with WWOOF but that charged minimal fees (WWOOF requires that the exchange be entirely non-cash). We drooled over every fantastic possibility: mountainous meadows, personal interactions, environmental sustainability, remote jungle.

Of the 19 farms we e-mailed, six responded that, yes, they could host us for our selected dates, and yes, children were welcome—the kids could just tag along as we worked. Lustfully, we selected one just a mile from the newly formed La Cangreja National Park. Waterfalls and caves were within walking distance. Chickens, cows, geese, pigs, cats, a horse, and a dog lived there. We grew even more captivated when we learned that they harvested medicinal plants and made cheese. Villas Mastatal would charge the four of us a mere \$18 a day for our lodging—a rustic cabin—and three traditional meals plus snacks.

THE PACKING LIST

As experienced, low-maintenance travelers in warm humid climates, minimalist packing was second nature to us. Four quick-drying outfits per person included shorts and pants, long- and short-sleeved shirts, underwear, and socks. Per person, we brought one of each: sun hat, headlamp, pajamas, bathing suit, raincoat, pair of sandals, tennis shoes, book.

Besides their books, an activity book of mazes and a set of watercolors were the only playful provisions for the kids—once settled at Villas Mastatal, we planned to take advantage of every rock, stick, and stream. For additional entertainment, tic-tac-toe and newly acquired knock-knock jokes would make frequent visits.

For family use, we included one first-aid kit, a bag of toiletries (but no makeup or frills), a camera and charger, a journal full of paper (for artwork and writing), and a sarong (for use as a towel, changing pad, skirt, or blanket). A ziplock bag encased our passports, credit cards, and travel documents, as well as our Costa Rica guidebook and Spanish/English dictionary, which would surely be in constant use.



Right: What the Lancasters took to Costa Rica: three backpacks, an Ergo baby carrier, a stuffable bag, and a guidebook

We topped it all off with disposable diapers, two water bottles, a sippy cup, a baby carrier (www.ergobabycarrier.com), a compactible bag (www.chicobag.com), and one pack of baby wipes.

We donned two 30-pound backpacks, one five-pounder, and we were off!

WORK: A MORNING IN THE LIFE

When we finally arrived, the smiling faces of Raquel and Javier greeted us at the bus stop and warmly welcomed us into their lives. We soon learned that scarlet macaws and tranquil hammocks were part of our package deal. Munching cows and hopping toucans stirred us from slumber just before 6 a.m. After we'd wrestled our way out of the mosquito netting, a race to the composting toilet was followed by a sprint to the beloved bovines. Ruby melted with every moo.

My spotty Spanish propelled us forward. (To quell some of my pre-travel jitters, I'd taken a remedial community-college course.) Seated at the outdoor dining table with our gracious host family, enthusiastic pantomiming accompanied each meal. Raquel and Javier communicated that Costa Ricans can feel full only if the meal includes beans and rice. Beans and rice? The protein combo became our children's new favorite meal. And our taste buds grew especially fond of Raquel's tangy star-fruit juice and clove-scented hot chocolate.

We slathered on sunscreen, strapped one-year-old Ruby to one of us, and were at work by 8 a.m., feeling strong and ready for whatever projects Javier brought our way. The farm had received donations of tree saplings from the neighboring national park, so our first workday involved reforesting the rainforest. No careful basins, layers of mulch, or expedient soakings were necessary to ensure success. Just dig, plant, and go—all so counterintuitive to two people used to Arizona's arid landscape. After we'd taken a shady break to slurp watermelon, Javier instructed us in the art of harvesting bananas. He was a patient teacher who never judged our skill level.

When we saw how easily our children adapted to this new environment, we heaved a sigh of relief. We no longer questioned whether we'd made the right decision to embark on this journey—the kids were thriving. Each morning, Ruby's sweaty, napping torso was pinned to one of us in the Ergo baby carrier. Miles "worked" alongside us, especially elated during those moments we let him use actual tools. Hammers, shov-



els, wheelbarrows, even sandpaper—all were revelations, but none induced as much ecstasy as when he wielded the coveted machete. Of course, close parental supervision and fervent nail-biting ensued. Miles's other duties included constructing roadblocks for leafcutter ants, chasing chickens, and devouring every fallen mango he could lay hands on.

BAMBOO, MILKING, AND MORE

During our two-week stay, Javier taught us how to collect bamboo, and how to build a rudimentary shade structure to protect vegetables from the tropical sun. Just beyond the pineapple patch, we sowed cilantro seeds in the rainforest's red clay. In digging and relocating vibrant tropical flowers to line the dirt road, Javier put us to shame. He could do the same work we did in a quarter of the time, with far more grace and much less sweat.

Above: With Ruby strapped to his back, Mark builds shelves for the volunteers' dormitory; Javier instructs Mark in the art of harvesting bananas; Mark and Miles get a workout lifting wooden dumbbells at the neighboring farm, La Iguana Chocolate.

Because I was a lactating mother, the mama cow and I shared a cosmic connection, bonding soulfully as I extracted milk from her taut udder. Her relief mounted with each spray into the pitcher, and I couldn't help but comfortingly repeat, "I know, I know . . ."

To my husband's delight, we built wooden stools and a few sets of shelves for the three-sided dormitory that housed volunteers without children. To our amazement, Ruby slept through the banging of every nail. Then, awake and liberated from our arms, she toddled straight to Miguel, the farm dog, to share her love.

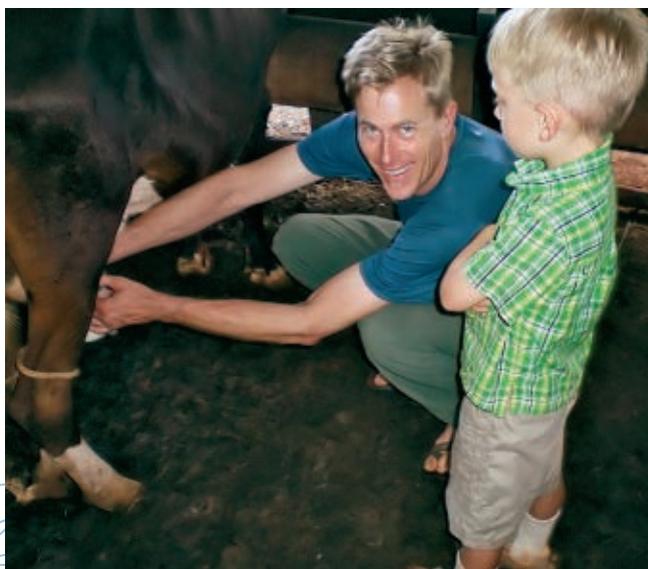
A task as simple as raking was essential to keep the farm grounds safe. We kept pathways free of debris to encourage all surprise visitors—including extremely venomous fer-de-lance snakes and poison-dart frogs—to do their visiting elsewhere. While walking, Mark and I always kept a pace or two ahead of the kids, just in case.

Miles regularly scoured the environs for palm fruits to feed the pigs, and counted the seconds until he was beckoned to scoop cracked corn for the hens. He steered clear of the brazen geese. With the absence of barnyards back home, we wanted our children to gain an understanding of how farm and table connect. Intention met results: "If I drink the cow's milk, what will the *baby cow* drink?" Miles asked. "But how do we get bacon without *killing* the pig?" Feeling as if I was about to out Santa Claus, I swallowed hard and bestowed on him the hard facts.

PLAY TIME!

Lunch and a cool shower marked the end of our day's work. Then, we chose our afternoon adventure—our activities differed greatly from day to day, depending on whether or not it was raining. With a downpour, we chose siestas, painting, reading. The Villas Mastatal dominoes and Chutes and Ladders let the time slip by. Under clearer skies, we quietly followed white-faced monkeys through the lush jungle. We splashed in tropical rivers and painted our faces with mud. We walked to town.

With rowdy gestures and descriptive noises, Doña Lucia, the grandma of our host family, educated us about the pig-methane bio-digester that fueled the cooking stove. She described the sensation of a scorpion sting. It was not only our Spanish vocabulary that was growing, but also our relationships with and under-



standing of the world.

We turned out for community events, such as Bingo.

We toured two other nearby farms. One, La Iguana Chocolate, grows organic cocoa. We delighted in sampling their fresh truffles laced with ginger, cinnamon, vanilla, rum, and mint.

But rain or no rain, we drenched ourselves in every moment.

BRINGING IT HOME

Today, with the two weeks of mountainous magic slipping into memory, hints of our enchanted journey surface. With every opportunity and without an ounce of hesitation, Ruby greets all sidewalk strangers with a self-assured "¡Hola!" and a beaming grin. Absentmindedly, Miles utters a soft "Gracias" to a grocery cashier doling out American flag stickers.

Perhaps, on his first day of kindergarten, Miles will share stories of mosquito-bitten ankles, starry village nights, and toads that live in the shower stall. Perhaps

Above: Early-morning cow milking for afternoon hot chocolate; taking his job very seriously, Miles makes use of the machete; Julie and Ruby hike to a waterfall in La Cangreja National Park.

Opposite: Mark and Miles indulge in a mango snack.



not. Even if he doesn't, even if he remembers only random tidbits about iguanas and giant grasshoppers, we know that this experience has already become a part of his character, a part of each of us, and will remain a part of our family's history that is forever and uniquely ours.

As I sink into my own cozy Arizona bed, I realize that my urge to seek adventure has been quenched—for now. I've returned with a fresh outlook on the proverbial pile of laundry. I greet each morning by giving myself a parental pat on the back: Not only have I given my children a part of the world; that part of the world has been touched by my children. Having together created this family experience, the bond between Mark and me is now rooted even more deeply. I drift to sleep, knowing that the before-children me is rekindled, and is now incorporating herself into the person who, happily, knows too much about Elmo.

♦♦ For advice and reflections on traveling with kids, visit www.mothering.com/links and see the past article "Far-Off Adventures," by Sherri J. Tenpenny, and the Web Exclusives "Into the Blue," by Cullen Curtiss, and "Lessons from the Road," by Lucy McCauley.



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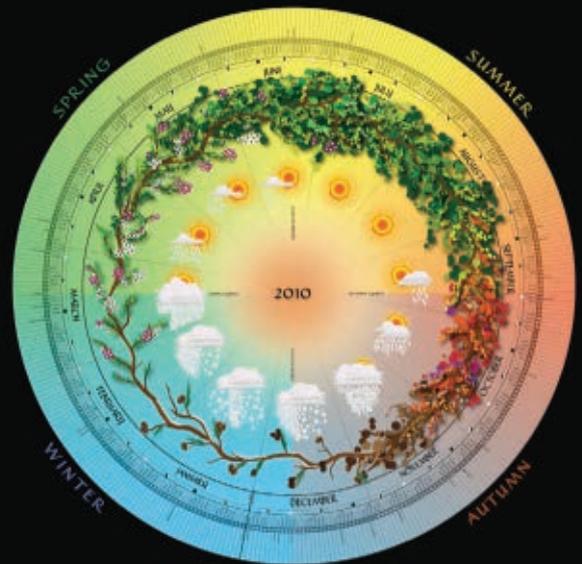
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