

TWEET RETREAT



James Allen



Lodge at Pico Bonito (2)

SWINGERS: There are no TVs in Pico Bonito's rooms; just hammocks and quiet time.

Monkeys, mountains and bird-watching at a Honduran hideaway

By CHRIS BUNTING

NO offense, New Yorkers — but if your idea of “birding” is tripping over rabid pigeons in Central Park, then it’s clearly time to scam out of Dodge and head back to nature. Like, way back to nature — all the way to the neotropical birdvana that is Honduras.

It may be 73 times smaller than the contiguous US, but this verdant nation can claim nearly as many avian species — some 738 at last count.

A fair number of Honduras’ birds inhabit the isolated, rain-forested pocket of the Central

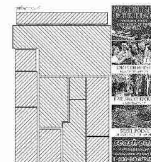
American republic’s Caribbean coastline known as Pico Bonito National Park. Here, amid 265,000 acres of protected beauty lies the eco-chicy Lodge at Pico Bonito near the port town of Le Ceiba. Opened back in 2000, the Lodge has since welcomed the likes of Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta Jones — back in happier days, of course.

Pico Bonito is the name of the 8,000-foot-high peak capping the daunting Nombre de Dios (“Name of God”) mountain range. The steep mountains’ sheer inaccessibility has allowed the Park to remain almost entirely untouched and human-settlement-free. That means critters of all sorts — winged, whiskered, three-toed, vocal-sacked and otherwise — thrive here. Among the most plentiful are those birds — and we don’t mean boring grey pigeons, but true ornithological rock stars: keel-billed toucans, resplendent quetzals, spotted antbirds, rufous-tailed jaca-

mars, black-cheeked woodpeckers, hook-billed kites, sepia-capped flycatchers, broad-billed motmots. *Yes y’all*, broad-billed motmots!

Ready to scratch these beaked wonders off your life list? First things first. San Pedro Sula — the city you’ll be flying into (sample November on Delta, via Atlanta, \$443/RT) — recently cited by CNN as the “murder capital of the world.” Gulpers. The good news is you won’t be sticking around long enough to pad the stats. Instead, you’ll be jumping in a prearranged shuttle or taxi (\$80) and driving 2½ hours to remote, oh-so-safe-and-non-murder-y Lodge at Pico Bonito.

The property is Honduras’ sole ecoluxury hotel and is set on 400 jungled acres. To make the most of its prime location, the Lodge sports three multi-story observation towers along its



private trails to maximize your beak-peeping potential. Pack binoculars, a (real, not iPhone) camera and a decent zoom lens. Some 423 bird species have been spotted at the lodge — and counting.

Of course, there are snakes here, too. The lodge's America-born — but Honduras-souled — chief naturalist and all-around genius, James Adams, loves 'em all, even the poisonous ones. Never mind that he was bitten by a coral snake and fell into a venom-induced coma which nearly left him dead.

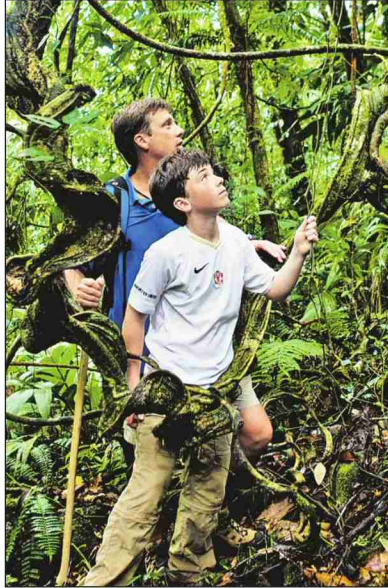
But all's been forgiven, and Adams has even set up a on-site serpentarium where he continues to handle snakes. Needless to say, his head-shaking girlfriend doesn't approve.

But back to those birds. The earlier you wake, the better your chances of spotting them. Indeed, the more piña coladas and Salva Vidas consumed the night before, the likelier you'll find yourself on an afternoon hike long after many prime birds have turned in for the day. I was in a such an afternoon group — led by Elmer, the Honduras-born staffer who can share everything about his country's flora and fauna in both English and Spanish. Or, perhaps, he'll switch between both tongues as he did during our five-hour adventure to the swimmable, immodestly named Unbelievable Falls.

We did manage to hear some motmots, saw plenty of butterflies, snacked on some tree termites — you heard me — and even interrupted the nap of a bush-bunking tinamou (a k a, a "big chicken") not once, but twice (sorry, my dude!). Elmer likes to warn along the way that it really is a jungle out there. Translation: look for lots of things that jump — and jump at you. And it seems only horrible things like to jump — jumping tarantulas, jumping vipers — and never the things you'd want jumping, like wild kittens or Miss Honduras pageant winners.

Later, back at the lodge, you

can rest up after all the feathered madness in one of its 22 heavily native-wood themed cabins — all are TV-less and Wi-Fi-less (do your surfing at the restaurant/bar), but mercifully air-conditioned. With all that birding craziness going down, it might be easy to forget a dip in the pool, or fine dining at the on-site Itzama restaurant, or an in-room massage — do yourself a favor and don't. (From \$215 through Dec. 20, picobonito.com)



BRANCHING OUT: Keep your eyes peeled for Pico Bonito's 423 bird species.