A Costa Rica Adventure

by Christine Hall

From The Braille Monitor, July 2015 issue

From the Editor: Christine Hall is a long-time member of the National Federation of the Blind, who has served as the president of the National Federation of the Blind of New Mexico and as the president of the Seniors Division. But, as you can see from this article, Christine is not all work and no play. Here is her account of a recent vacation taken with her daughter:

Last November my daughter Candy and I went to Costa Rica. Costa Rica has been on my bucket list, one of those places in the world I wanted to visit, so now I can take it off the list. What an adventure it was for both Candy and me. It was a yoga retreat in a beautiful retreat center with the jungle all around us: trees, plants, and all kinds of jungle animals. We spent the first night in a hotel in San José, a three-and-a-half hour ride from the retreat center.

The first morning at the retreat center, some of us went on a walking tour through the Cahuita National Park, a tropical jungle. Usually wild animals can be easily spotted in the middle of the abundant, colorful flora. On that day there did not seem to be too many animals, but our guide was able to point out a few: a couple of viper snakes (very poisonous), a monkey or two, some sloths hanging from the trees, and lots of carpenter ants. Some of the group split off and went snorkeling, where they saw many colorful fish and beautiful coral, which they were careful not to touch. Candy went snorkeling, something she had never done before. I had been snorkeling, both in the Caribbean and in Hawaii, so I chose not to go. When I went snorkeling in the Caribbean, I still had a bit of sight and was able to see some of the colorful fish; what a delight!

When we woke up in the morning at the retreat center, we would hear a noise coming from the jungle that sounded like a mountain lion. We found out much to our surprise that the sound was from howler monkeys doing their mating call. These monkeys are quite small, and it is hard to believe something that loud could come from such a little creature. It was reassuring to know that a mountain lion was not nearby.

Speaking of monkeys and other jungle animals, the highlight of the trip for me was our visit to the Jaguar Rescue Center. Our guide Dexter gave me a hands-on experience with some of the animals—not including the snakes, which was fine with me. As a group we all went into the monkey enclosure. Before going in, I asked Dexter if he thought it would be okay for me to take my white cane, and he said yes since the monkeys would probably love to play with the cane. He was so right. They were climbing on my cane, on my arms, shoulders, and head. It was so much fun feeling them and just being in their presence. They were young monkeys who had lost their mothers and would be rehabilitated and returned to their natural habitat. When I first went into the monkey enclosure, a volunteer immediately put a howler monkey on my lap, and he just lay there and slept. The spider monkey and a white face monkey had fun playing with my cane.

I also got to get hands-on with an anteater. I got to feel her entire body as Dexter held her in his arms. Her hair was very coarse, her nose—as you would expect—very long and pointed, and her tail long and skinny. They have only three claws. The one in the middle is very long to dig out the ant hole. She then puts her long tongue in the hole to retrieve ants. In addition I got to go into another enclosure and sit on the ground with a young ocelot (jungle cat). Dexter made sure I checked out her paws, which were quite large for her size. She was soft and calm, and she did not seem to be aware of me while she was eating a treat from the ground.

Dexter then asked me if I was up for what might be considered a scary experience. I said sure since I have always been a risk-taker. So we went out to an open area, and he put a heavy glove on my hand. He then told me to raise my arm as high as it would go and proceeded to put a live mouse on the tip of the glove. He whistled and a hawk came swooping down and flew off with the mouse. I know it may be sad to hear about the mouse being devoured by the hawk, but that is just nature. I could hear the hawk as it flew off with the mouse.

While most of the women went zip lining, another retreatant (Edie) and I visited a small cacao tourist attraction. The cacao tree is a tree that produces chocolate. Once again we had a great guide who took us through every stage of how the chocolate eventually comes to us. When we got to the tourist site, I asked about mosquitoes, which seemed to be flying all around us. They love me, and I am always protecting myself with insect repellant. Our guide said I would probably love the mosquito by the end of our guided tour since they are the insect that pollinates the flowers on the cacao tree, and, without the mosquito, no chocolate. I would be very sad if I did not have my chocolate. We learned of the history and science of chocolate, the transformation from the raw cacao bean, which we tasted—to the chocolate bar—very yummy. We took our chocolate bar back to the retreat center and shared it with our friends. Generous of us, wouldn't you say? The chocolate is much purer than what we are able to get in the United States. Costa Rican chocolate is exported primarily to European countries such as Switzerland, with a very small percentage going to the United States. If you like dark chocolate, you would love it—much better than what we have in the States.

I will conclude this article saying I had a wonderful experience, and it was an example of our NFB message: "You can live the life you want.”