A vibrant community-led project located in Costa Rica’s finest eco-tourism destination

Drake Beach

A remote and rustic paradise located in an un-spoiled National Wildlife Refuge

Río Oro Beach

Volunteer Orientation Manual
2015/16 Season

Call: (506) 8499 0019 or (506) 2775 0726
Email: robert@corcovadofoundation.org
Like: facebook.com/cfseaturtles
Thank you for your interest in participating in the tenth season of the Corcovado Foundation Sea Turtle Conservation Program.

You have chosen a great time to get involved, since the 2015/16 season will be the most ambitious and exciting in the history of the program! We now offer volunteers the chance to work with sea turtles at two important nesting habitats in the Osa Peninsula: Drake beach and Río Oro beach. As a volunteer you will take part in various conservation activities, including night patrols, working at the hatchery, relocating nests, recording scientific data, releasing baby turtles, exhuming nests, construction, ecotourism activities, and environmental education. You will also meet lots of new people, have time to explore the pristine wilderness of the Osa Peninsula, and have the opportunity to immerse yourself in genuine Costa Rican culture.

This manual is intended to introduce you to the nature of the work at the program and provide you with some practical information that we hope will be of use to you prior to your arrival. To find out more about the program, check out this short video [here](#).

We can’t wait to welcome you to the team!

The program welcomes over 100 volunteers from around the world each year

Did you know?

It is thought that most species of sea turtle come back to the very same beach where they were born to lay their eggs, and some females even come back to nest at exactly the same spot on the beach where they have nested before.
Did you know?

Sea turtles consistently secrete saline mucous from the eye which makes them appear as though they are crying when out of the water. This is actually a mechanism for converting sea water into fresh water that their bodies can process.
Introduction

What do we do?

The Corcovado Foundation Sea Turtle Conservation Program arose from the need to work toward the protection and preservation of sea turtles and their nesting beaches in Drake Bay. The program strategy was built around the creation of a viable socioeconomic alternative to consumption of sea turtles for the local communities, while promoting environmental conservation activities at the same time. The Corcovado Foundation aims to sensitize local communities about the importance of protecting and preserving sea turtles, coupling this protection with the opportunity to increase their incomes directly from contracted work at the conservation project and/or indirectly from the housing of volunteers in homestays, and the development of ecotourism initiatives in the area. In this way, it aims to achieve a reduction of the consumptive use of the sea turtles in Drake Bay and Río Oro through the preservation of this natural resource.

The primary objective of the program is to promote the conservation and sustainable recuperation of the populations of sea turtles that nest in Drake Bay and Río Oro, whilst simultaneously attending to the needs of the local communities with which they interact. The program incorporates the following areas of work to realize this objective:

• A Sea Turtle Conservation Program using standardized scientific methods to promote the long-term survival of the nesting population, by protecting the turtle eggs from illegal poaching and natural predation.

• An Environmental Education Program to increase awareness of the negative impact of the exploitation of natural resources.

• An Economic Development Program led by an association of trained local conservationists, designed to foment sustainable socio-economic alternatives for the community through ecotourism and regular contracted work at the program.

ACOTPRO is the local sea turtle conservation association in Drake Bay
Who are we?

The Corcovado Foundation

The Corcovado Foundation was created by concerned neighbors of Corcovado National Park to lead the fight to stop illegal hunting and logging. We are a hands-on, down-to-earth local leader in conservation, working closely with the National Park Service to protect the wild heritage and the future of protected areas. We advance the cause of environmental education and champion the rights of the local communities, while encouraging responsible tourism as a tool to help protect this incredible gift that we have been left, the Osa Peninsula.

www.corcovadofoundation.org
Telephone: +506 2297 3013 (San José office) Fax: +506 2241 2906
Email: funcorco@racsa.co.cr

Who should you contact?

For all volunteer enquiries and logistical support in Costa Rica, please contact:

Rob James
Telephone: +506 8499 0019 (Puerto Jiménez)
Email: robert@corcovadofoundation.org

Rob is the Director of the sea turtle program and the main point of contact for volunteers. He is responsible for recruiting and directing the Coordinators and Research Assistants, and provides all personnel with training on the biology and conservation of sea turtles. Based in Puerto Jiménez, Rob provides all logistical support for both the Drake Bay and Río Oro conservation sites.

For additional enquiries or logistical support, please contact:

Francisco Delgado
Telephone: +506 2297 3013 (San José office)
Email: francisco@corcovadofoundation.org

Francisco is the Director of Programs at the Foundation and has years of experience of the sea turtle program. Whilst Rob should be your first point of contact at the program, Francisco will always be happy to assist with any enquiries should you be unable to contact Rob.

Who else will be at the program?

The program is managed by several Coordinators and Research Assistants who are responsible for implementing the protocol of investigation and for coordinating most day-to-day operations. These staff supervise the volunteers during work activities and collaborate with the community to coordinate local patrol and hatchery shifts, workshops and training exercises, and also fun activities such as excursions and party nights. Volunteers come from around the world to work at the program, and the number involved at any one time can change: some weeks there may be up to 40 engaged with the program; other weeks there may be as few as five or six.
Where are we based?

The program headquarters are based at Drake Bay Backpackers in the village of El Progreso in Drake Bay, Osa Peninsula. The program protects two nesting sites: Drake beach in Drake Bay, and Río Oro beach near Carate.

The Osa Peninsula

The Osa Peninsula is located in southwestern Costa Rica, in the Puntarenas Province, on the Pacific Ocean. The main feature of the peninsula is the Corcovado National Park, which covers one third of its land mass, an area of 425 km², and protects a number of endemic species. Famously referred to by *National Geographic* as ‘the most biologically intense place on Earth’, the park is home to all four Costa Rican monkey species, jaguars, pumas and ocelots, Baird’s tapir, crocodiles, spectacled caimans, bull sharks, two-toed and three-toed sloths, agoutis, giant anteaters, great curassows, black hawks, spectacled owls, the harpy eagle, hummingbirds, golden orb spiders, otters, raccoons, collared and white-lipped peccary, northern tamandua, silky anteaters, poison dart frogs, several species of snake (including the venomous fer-de-lance and bushmaster), and over 8000 insect species, including at least 220 species of butterflies. Four species of sea turtle (Olive Ridley, Pacific Green, Hawksbill, and Leatherback) also nest on the beaches of the park. The protected region features at least 13 different vegetation types, including montane forest, cloud forest, prairie forest, alluvial plains forest, swamp forest, palm swamp, freshwater herbaceous swamp and mangrove, harboring over 2000 plant species, including over 500 different types of tree.
Why do we need to protect sea turtles?

Until ten years ago, the reality in Drake Bay was not different to hundreds of other beaches in Central America where the sea turtle trade was considered a source of income. In the years prior to the implementation of this conservation program, the harvesting of eggs by local poachers resulted in the loss of over 85% of the nests laid in the area each year. The Olive Ridley population, the main species in this area, declined dramatically in Drake Bay to the point at which it became endangered, and the recuperation of this population became essential due to its biological and ecological value.

Whilst there were once tens of species of sea turtle only seven remain today, and all of them are either threatened or endangered, two of them critically. The family Cheloniidae includes six of the seven species, characterized by the possession of a hard shell (carapace) formed from scutes: the Loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*), Green (*Chelonia mydas*), Hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), Kemp’s Ridley (*Lepidochelys kempii*), Olive Ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) and Flatback (*Natator depressus*) turtles. The family Dermochelyidae includes only one species of sea turtle: the Leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*). Global populations of sea turtles have decreased by around 80% in the last 30 years, and some populations, such as the Kemp’s Ridley and the Pacific Leatherback and Hawksbill, are on the verge of extinction.

The main reason for this dramatic population decline is the incidental capture and suffocation of sea turtles in fishing gear as bycatch from intensive industrial fishing practices, such as the use of long-lines and shrimping nets, and sea turtles die in their 100,000s (perhaps millions) in this way every year. Other dangers include plastic waste in the oceans, in which turtles become tangled or which they mistake for food, and nesting habitat destruction through coastal development, light pollution and oil spills. Irresponsible tourism also takes its toll as sea turtles are frequently killed by collisions with boats, and nests are destroyed by tourists riding horses or quad bikes on beaches. A major threat in Central America, however, remains the poaching of eggs and predation by domestic animals, and the program is designed to protect sea turtles from these threats.

The ecological consequences of the impending extinction of sea turtles could be severe. Sea turtles are keystone species in coastal and oceanic marine ecosystems, and the *natural* predation of their eggs transfers vital nutrients from marine to terrestrial ecosystems. Each species also fulfills a specific ecological role, such as the Atlantic Green turtle for example: it consumes vast quantities of seagrass and keeps it cut short, permitting the continued growth of the grass and the survival of the myriad species of fish, shellfish and crustaceans that call it home. The extinction of sea turtles would also bring about the collapse of the very ecotourism industry intended to facilitate their conservation, resulting in the loss of revenue and jobs within developing communities where they are desperately needed.

The situation is serious and sea turtles need our help right now to save them from extinction. You can help them indirectly by recycling and re-using plastic and by avoiding seafood caught using unsustainable or indiscriminate fishing practices, but most of all you can help directly by donating your time, money and effort to conservation projects around the globe by working as a volunteer.

Working with sea turtles is an unforgettable experience that changes many people’s lives forever. By protecting this endangered animal you help to undo some of the damage done by humans to the planet’s precious ecosystems. Saving the turtles is hard work, and it is simply not possible without the help of volunteers. Your time, effort and generosity are hugely appreciated!
What to bring

1. Footwear: Sandals or flip-flops are ideal for wearing around the camp but a sturdy pair of boots is recommended for going on treks and excursions, and a selection of gum boots is available at the program for volunteers to borrow. We recommend wearing gum boots during night patrols, since these protect you from the elements and from bumping into driftwood on the beach. However, some volunteers find them a bit heavy and prefer to wear sandals or water-shoes, but they do so at their own risk. Whatever you decide to wear be prepared for them to get completely wet through, and as such we don’t recommend wearing your favorite ‘waterproof’ Gortex® walking boots on night patrols – they’ll take forever to dry out!

2. Headlamp: A headlamp is an essential piece of equipment as you will need to wear one at all times when walking around at night. You must bring one with you and don’t forget the batteries. If you are planning to purchase a headlamp prior to your arrival please consider buying one with a red light setting, as you will be able to use this when patrolling on the beach.

3. Poncho: A waterproof jacket or poncho is a must in Costa Rica during the rainy season, and a good quality Gortex® jacket will be great for keeping warm and comfortable during rainy night patrols. There are a limited number of ponchos available for volunteers to borrow during night patrols. Whatever waterproof gear you bring, please note that only dark colors are suitable for use on night patrols, since bright colors reflect light and can disturb nesting turtles.

4. Clothing: You will generally live in shorts and t-shirts in the day as it is so hot, and it is wise to assume that whatever you wear will become pretty dirty and ragged by the end of your stay. Please bring some dark clothing (such as black, blue or grey) to wear during night patrols. Long-sleeved shirts and long pants are great to keep off the insects and to provide a bit of warmth during the cooler nights, but you will really only need one warm sweater or hoodie, and only for some nights in October when it is cooler.

5. Watch: Please bring a watch and/or alarm clock so that you get up for night patrols etc.

6. Insect repellent: You will need it, and you should bring plenty since it is expensive to buy in the village. We recommend Mosi guard® since it is less toxic, but DEET is always reliable.

7. Medicine: If you are taking any specific medication, including those for asthma or allergies, please ensure that you bring enough for the duration of your stay. There is an extensive medical kit available at the program, but you should bring your own personal kit to use too. Please note that there is no malaria in the region, so you do not need to take anti-malarial tablets.

8. Cash: There is no ATM machine in Drake Bay, so please bring enough cash with you for your stay. See the Money matters section on page 14 for more information.

9. Other recommended items: Sun hat, sunscreen, sun glasses, a padlock, a photocopy of your passport, a small backpack for excursions, water bottle, camera, eye mask and ear plugs to sleep during the day, mp3 player, movies (there is a projector at the hostel), Ziplock®-type plastic bags or folding dry bags to protect your gear, and sachets of silica gel to combat the humidity.

Note: you will find it much easier to travel in Costa Rica with a backpack instead of a suitcase!
When to come

The Sea Turtle Conservation Program is open to volunteers from 01 July – 15 December (Drake), and from 01 July – 31 March (Río Oro), and the minimum commitment is two weeks. The work detail changes dramatically as the season progresses, consistent with the changes in the number of nesting turtles and hatchlings, and as such the volunteer experience changes considerably too.

The Olive Ridley turtle nesting season is the rainy season, and broadly speaking the wetter it is the more turtles there are. Heavy rain cannot be ruled out at any time between July and December though, so it is always wise to be prepared to get very wet and for plans to be disrupted without warning. Remember that the Osa Peninsula receives around six meters of rain annually!

Below is a guide to what kind of experience you can expect to have during each month of the season, which we hope you will find helpful.

July and August

July and August are all about constructing the field stations, setting up the beaches and starting night patrols. In July, work is mostly during the day, starting early in the morning when it is cooler. Activities include construction, beach cleaning, placement of reference posts, repairing infrastructure, and organizing the camps. Morning patrols take place every day until nests are registered, after which night patrols begin in mid-July. The weather is hot, humid and sunny with frequent but short downpours. Volunteer numbers are usually very high and the good weather means that planned group excursions often go to plan.

September and October

The peak of the Olive Ridley nesting season and the peak of the rainy season; be prepared for some extreme weather! Working in October is especially challenging as the storms affect everything, but the challenge is all part of the fun. It is not for everyone, and volunteers need to have patience and take the rough with the smooth – Pura Vida! Work is mostly during the night so there is lots of downtime in the day, although morning patrols continue and there is daytime work available. The nights in October can be quite chilly, so it is worth packing a long-sleeved sweater or two. Working at the beach becomes logistically complicated and the roads to and from the conservation sites can become flooded. The weather plays havoc with our plans, and so planned group excursions are often interrupted.

Logistical Information
November and December

As the rainy season passes its peak the weather slowly gets better, but it takes a long time. November can still be pretty wet but by the end of December the days are generally dry and sunny again. December is the peak tourist season in Drake Bay and the annual sea turtle festival normally takes place the first weekend. Afterwards everyone in Drake Bay gets to enjoy some well-deserved downtime: night patrols stop, there are generally more planned group excursions, and work at the site finishes at the end of December. At Río Oro, however, the Olive Ridley season is still going strong and Pacific Green turtles are nesting in greater numbers every day, making it a great time to work at Río Oro!

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<th>What are my chances of seeing a nesting turtle?</th>
<th>What are my chances of seeing a hatchling?</th>
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January through March

Welcome to the summer time! While conservation activities have finished at Drake Bay, volunteers will still be trained at the headquarters at Drake Bay Backpackers, and will have plenty of opportunity to take advantage of the tours and activities offered there. However, all turtle conservation work takes place at the Río Oro site, where a huge number of turtles continue to nest. January through March is the peak for the endangered Pacific Green sea turtle, and so it is a wonderful time to visit the program. Also, the weather changes dramatically: there is rarely any rain at all and sunshine is guaranteed every day. The roads become dusty but are never cut off, and so plans for group excursions are rarely interrupted. The temperatures peak in March – the hottest month of the year for the Pacific coast of Costa Rica.

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Did you know?

The gender of sea turtle hatchlings is dependent upon the temperature of the nest during incubation. For us Olive Ridleys the optimum temperature is 30.5°C, at which a 50:50 mix of male and female babies will be produced. Below this temperature more males will be born; above it more females will be born.

For us Pacific Green turtles the optimum temperature is more like 28.5°C, so it is different for different species. In fact, it is probably different even for populations of the same species nesting in different parts of the world.
Where you will be living and working

Drake Bay

The program headquarters are based at Drake Bay Backpackers, a non-profit hostel created by the Foundation especially to support the program. The hostel is located in the village of El Progreso, Drake Bay. All new volunteers will initially stay at the hostel for 2-3 days while they receive their training and orientation, after which they may choose to work at either (or both) of our two conservation sites: Drake beach and Rio Oro beach.

The Village:

El Progreso is a small village, home to around 150 habitants, but is an important center of community-based tourism in the region. The village contains three grocery stores (pulperías), two small restaurants (sodas), a school, two churches, a bar, a community center and soccer field, and Drake Bay Airport. It is also home to the largest of the beaches in Drake Bay and a river system home to thousands of species of bird, and it is surrounded by mountainous primary rainforest.

While most of the tourists in Drake Bay stay in the town of Agujitas, where there are several larger hotels and tour operators, many backpackers and independent travelers stay at the hostel, and so the village is always buzzing with a young international crowd.

Facilities:

While in Drake Bay volunteers are free to use any of the hostel facilities and can hang out there during their free time. Facilities include: wi-fi internet, free coffee and tea, library, lounge with hammocks and sofa, video projector and cinema screen, sound system, volleyball court, large garden with BBQ and chill-out zones, and a swimmable river and nature trail.

The hostel can organize all tours in the area, including day-trips to the Corcovado National Park, snorkeling or diving at Caño Island, fishing trips, mangrove tours, whale-watching and a host of inexpensive community-based tours. For more information check out the hostel website here.
Accommodation:
Upon arrival, all volunteers will stay in a mixed dorm at the hostel for the first 2-3 days while they receive their training. Afterwards, volunteers staying at the Drake Bay site may choose to remain at the hostel, or move into a private room in one of our tried-and-tested homestay houses in the village. Both accommodation options include three meals per day and bed linen is provided.

For those volunteers staying at the hostel, breakfast, lunch and dinner are served in the communal dining area at 08:00, 12:00 and 18:00, respectively. A rotation system is in place so that all volunteers get a chance to cook, and a similar system is in place for duties such as cleaning and preparing the patrol equipment.

Homestay households serve meals at the same times and are very accustomed to catering for volunteers with special dietary requirements, such as vegetarians, vegans, and for gluten-free and lactose-free diets. They are also very flexible and will happily prepare early or late breakfasts and will prepare food to take away when required according to your work schedule.

Volunteers staying in homestay need only be present in their houses at mealtimes and are free to spend as little or as much time as they wish with their host families. The homestay system offers a wonderful opportunity to interact with local people and experience the life of a family in rural Costa Rica. Beautiful new friendships are often forged and our volunteer feedback tells us that, while the first 24 hours can be a bit nerve-wracking, the experience often ends up being the highlight of their trip. In 2014, for example, only 1 volunteer out of 93 chose to stay at the hostel instead of in a homestay house, so the experience comes highly recommended by volunteers!

Amenities:
El Progreso is a remote place where many of the amenities that you might be used to are not readily available. The homestays are rustic and typical of rural Costa Rica and do not have hot water. Electricity is available in every house though, and all rooms are equipped with locks, fans and/or mosquito nets. It is quite safe to leave valuables in your rooms and to walk in the village at night, and all houses are located within a 5 minute walk from the hostel. It is important to note that the beach is situated 2.5km (1.5 miles) from the village. A limited number of bicycles are available at the hostel, however it will often be necessary to walk the journey to and from the beach.
Río Oro

The program’s brand new site at Río Oro beach offers volunteers the chance to protect one of the most important nesting habitats on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica. The site is, however, very remote and offers a totally different volunteering experience from Drake Bay and is not for the faint-hearted. Those volunteers wishing to work at Río Oro will receive special training and will have the chance to re-pack their bags at Drake Bay and leave unnecessary valuables behind at the hostel before embarking on their expedition to this exciting and rustic wilderness.

The Village:

The Río Oro site is located on the unsealed road between Puerto Jiménez and Carate (the nearest village), where the road terminates just a few kilometers from the La Leona ranger station and southernmost entrance to the Corcovado National Park. Carate itself has a very small local population and only one very basic pulpería (local store), but is home to a number of remote lodges and hotels and another sea turtle project run by COTORCO that protects Carate beach. Volunteers from both projects have the chance to collaborate with conservation activities and spend free time together, and there are often a large number of volunteers working in the area. The wildlife around Río Oro is stunning, with an extensive undeveloped coastline fringed by primary and secondary forests, full of exotic birds, mammals, amphibians and all four of Costa Rica’s monkey species.

Facilities:

The brand new field station at Río Oro is very basic and is comprised of a marquee tent camp with some platforms, a rustic dorm, kitchen and dining area, and rudimentary toilet and cold water shower facilities. The site is ‘off-grid’ and so there is no electricity, no internet and no cell phone reception available in the area. The field station is, however, equipped with solar panels that provide lighting and power a radio for essential communications only. Waste management facilities are very limited and it is required that volunteers take responsibility for their own plastic waste during their stay at the site and must take it back with them in their own luggage when they leave.

Accommodation:

Accommodation is in bunk beds in a mixed dorm and bed linen is provided. Breakfast, lunch and dinner are served at 08:00, 12:00 and 18:00, respectively, and a rotation system is in place so that all volunteers get a chance to cook, clean and prepare the patrol equipment. During the day there is plenty of free time, but there is also lots of opportunity to contribute to the maintenance, organization and development of the new field station.

Amenities:

While Carate does not have much to offer in terms of amenities, volunteers will pass through Puerto Jiménez while transiting between the Drake Bay and Río Oro sites. Volunteers are also free to visit the town on their days off and as part of planned excursions. While still small, Puerto Jiménez is the largest and most developed town in the Osa Peninsula and has banks with ATM machines, supermarkets, bars, restaurants, souvenir shops, a post office, an airport and a number of other amenities. There is a local ‘colectivo’ truck that travels from Puerto Jiménez to Río Oro twice daily and costs around $9 each way (2.5–3 hours). The service leaves from Puerto Jiménez at 06:00 and 13:30, and leaves Carate/Río Oro at 09:00 and 16:30, more or less, ‘Tico time’.
Money matters

The national currency of Costa Rica is the Colón. At the time of writing the exchange rate was $1 = 530 colones, and so no matter where you are from it is generally convenient to ‘think’ in dollars and assume that $1 = 500 colones.

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There is no ATM available in Drake Bay and so it is wise to bring enough money in cash for the duration of your stay at this site. Dollars are accepted everywhere, but you often don’t get a good rate, so it is best to bring your cash in colones. If you run out of cash while you are here there are options, such as getting a cash advance on a credit card at a pulperia (10% charge), or heading on a quick day trip to draw cash from an ATM in Puerto Jiménez on your day off.

You are likely to want to buy the occasional treat or snack, or some beers from time to time, and it is best to pay for community-based tours in cash too. So, we recommend a cash budget of about $10-15 per day, more if you intend to go on lots of community-based tours. All major tours booked through Drake Bay Backpackers, however, can be paid by credit card.

If you wish to extend your volunteering placement at the program (which happens often), or just want to check into the hostel at the end of your stay to kick back and relax for a while, you can also pay by credit card.

Visa and travel insurance

To work as a volunteer at the project, you need only have a tourist visa. Most North American and European nationals automatically receive a 90 day visa upon entering the country and are not required to obtain one in advance. Nationals from several South American countries, however, are required to obtain a tourist visa from the Costa Rican embassy in their country prior to arrival.

Upon entering the country it is likely that immigration officials may ask you to present an exit ticket out of the country, and often your airline will not let you board the flight to Costa Rica without one. Many volunteers who come to the project are on vacation and, as such, are able to produce a return ticket; but many are backpackers entering via land borders and may have no firm plans. We have had varied experiences at land borders, however, officially you must present a print out of a ticket of onward travel within 90 days and a print out of a bank or card statement that shows you have access to at least $500. Bus tickets are accepted and are a cheap option, however, you can also consider buying a flight ticket online with Spirit Airlines, which can be refunded in full within 24 hours.
If you plan to stay in Costa Rica for more than 90 days we recommend that you simply take a short trip to nearby Panama at the end of this period. You need only leave Costa Rica for 1 day (sometimes even just a few hours is sufficient), after which you will be able to come back over the border and obtain another 90-day visa. It is possible to continue doing this indefinitely and all international staff at the program have to go on a ‘visa run’ like this every 90 days.

Individuals who overstay their visas are required to pay an increased exit tax, are subject to restrictions regarding re-entering, and run the risk of being deported if immigration officials choose to detain them at a checkpoint, so don’t do it.

It is mandatory that volunteers who participate in our program have their own travel insurance that provides basic medical assistance throughout the entirety of their stay at the program. Although emergency procedures and evacuation plans are in place, the program cannot be responsible for any costs incurred for medical treatment or emergency evacuation of volunteers.

Traveling to the Program

Travel by bus and boat

The most popular way for volunteers to travel from San José to Drake Bay, this option combines a bus, taxi and an awesome boat ride through the mangroves from Sierpe, and takes approximately 7-8 hours. This option is also useful for volunteers arriving from other destinations too, such as the Nicoya Peninsula, Manuel Antonio, Uvita or the Panama border (Paso Canoas), since all buses traveling North or South on the Pan-americana highway pass through the transport hub, Palmar Norte, next door to Sierpe. Two boats leave daily from Sierpe (near to Palmar Norte) to Agujitas (Drake Bay) at 11:30 and 15:30. From San José there are two options available:

Option 1 (7-8 hours, $40-$50):
Take the 06:30 bus going to Palmar Norte (4.5 hours, $12) departing from the TRACOPA terminal in San José (Address: De licencias del MOPT, 100 Oeste y 75 Sur. Antigua parada de buses de Cartago). At Palmar Norte, take a taxi (20 mins) to Sierpe. A ‘colectivo’ taxi is much cheaper ($4) than a private one (up to $20). For those with more time on their hands, there is a local bus ($1) that theoretically leaves every day from Palmar Norte to Sierpe (40 mins) at 07:00, 09:30, 11:30 and 14:30. The boat journey (1 hour) costs $15 (11:30 service) or $20 (15:30 service). When you arrive in Agujitas (wet landing), you can either take a taxi ($20) or the local bus ($2) to the program in El Progreso (20 mins). Officially, the bus departs the beach in Agujitas at 13:30 Monday to Saturday, however, bear in mind that this service is not always reliable during the rainy season, so please contact us in advance to check that the service is operating.

Option 2 (7-8 hours, $60-$70):
There is now a hassle-free shuttle service available, run by Transportes Alvarez and Morales, which will pick you up from your hotel in San José and take you directly to Sierpe (4.5 hours). The shuttle connects with the first boat leaving Sierpe at 11:30 and costs $40. To make a reservation call 2775 0224 (English) or 8703 2121 (Spanish), or email transportes.aym@hotmail.com. Once at Sierpe, follow the instructions for Option 1.
Travel by plane

If you would like to fly to the program there are two options:

**Option 1 ($50-$140):**
You can buy a full price ticket with Nature Air [www.natureair.com](http://www.natureair.com) or Sansa [www.flysansa.com](http://www.flysansa.com) for about $100-140 one way, and you will have the peace of mind of a reserved seat on the plane. Sometimes in the rainy season these airlines offer very cheap tariffs if you book in advance (as low as $50), so it definitely worth taking a look at their websites.

**Option 2 ($45-$85):**
As a volunteer, we can offer you a special discounted ‘Pura Vida’ pass with Nature Air, which entitles you to the price of $45 one way (plus overweight baggage charges, typically $20-$40). It is important to note, however, that this is a stand-by pass and it is not possible to reserve a seat, but if you are lucky and there is space on the flight you will normally be able to fly. So, this option can be hit-or-miss, but when it works you get quite a big discount on a beautiful flight.

If you wish to try option 2, please contact us at least one week before you intend to fly. We will then authorize a pass for you and check availability. Typically it is best to wait until around 4pm of the day before making a decision about flying with the Pura Vida pass. If there are more than 2 seats available at this time we would normally recommend for you to try to fly; but, there are no guarantees. In the unlikely event that there is no space on the flight in the morning, volunteers may find that they have to stay an additional night in San José and consider flying or traveling by bus and boat the next day.

Please note that the authorization of a ‘Pura Vida’ pass is a privilege and a kind gift from Nature Air. Whatever happens, please always be polite and cordial since Nature Air have gone out of their way to support conservation in the Osa Peninsula for many years.

Travel by bus

By far the most economical option ($20-$30) is to travel using buses only. The route is slow (10-11 hours) but only involves one connection and is straight-forward. However, you must contact us before you leave to check that the local connecting service is operating, and so we can tell the driver to look out for you. This service does not run on Sundays and can be canceled at short notice if the weather becomes stormy, so please only use it if you are confident enough to find yourself some accommodation in La Palma or Puerto Jiménez if the service is canceled.

From San José, take the 08:00 bus to Puerto Jiménez ($14) from Terminal Transportes Blanco (Address: Calle 14, between Avenida 9 and 11). Tell the driver that you wish to get off at La Palma (Osa) (7 hours). A local bus leaves La Palma for Drake Bay at around 16:30 ($6-8, 1 hour). Tell the driver that you wish to get off at Fundación Corcovado in El Progreso. It’s a bumpy ride!
Working conditions

The work at the project can be extremely tough and is not necessarily for everybody. Weather conditions can be extreme, with heavy rainfall and localized flooding often a daily occurrence. The majority of the work is nocturnal and it will be necessary to adjust to sleeping in the daytime, often enduring high temperatures and humidity. It can be very difficult to plan activities too, as priorities can suddenly shift according to what resources are available at the time, and volunteers will often find that the work plan changes with very little notice. The way of life is rustic and more spontaneous that you may be used to, but the people are warm and genuine and the environment is full of jaw-dropping natural beauty and extraordinary biodiversity. You will soon find yourself letting go of your first-world precepts and adjusting to the life of a local – Pura Vida!

While volunteers are really quite spoiled at Drake Bay, with free use of the modern facilities at Drake Bay Backpackers, the lifestyle is much more rustic at the Río Oro site. For many volunteers, this is exactly what they were looking for; for others it can be harder to adapt. But the most important thing is just to be prepared.

As a volunteer, you will be allocated one free day every week, during which you may decide to take advantage of the tours offered by Drake Bay Backpackers, explore the local nature on foot, or simply use the day to relax. In addition, the program makes an effort to organize an inexpensive group excursion or activity once a week, so that everyone gets a chance to spend some free time together; however, these are dependent upon weather and workload. At all other times it is expected that each volunteer will be fully engaged with the work schedule. It is important to note that, in addition to the pre-arranged schedule, other tasks will emerge on a daily basis as we respond to changing conditions, construction projects or activities with the community, and the availability of materials or labor.

Typically, each volunteer will be allocated around five work shifts per week, which might include, for example, three night patrols and two hatchery shifts. At Río Oro, hatchery shifts are shorter and so you may be allocated more than five in total, but in any case the workload will equate to around 4-6 hours of work per day, six days per week. There is, of course, always more work available, so if you are ever bored, just ask a Coordinator or Research Assistant how you can help.
Activities and monitoring

In order to achieve the goals of the research project a number of activities and protocols have been established. Upon arrival at the camp, you will be introduced to the methodologies of the project, and the techniques that you will be required to master, by means of a number of training presentations and workshops on the beach. Once trained, volunteers may participate in the following conservation activities:

**Morning patrol (Censo):**

The purpose of this activity is to record the number and distribution of tracks left on the beach by nesting turtles, and to survey the work of the patrols from the night before in the daylight. New nests are also camouflaged and protected from poaching. The morning patrol is normally conducted by two volunteers and takes around three hours.

**Night patrols:**

Night patrols offer volunteers the chance to meet endangered sea turtles face to face and protect their eggs from being poached. These patrols are led either by local Patrol Leaders, Coordinators or Research Assistants and typically last for four hours. Nesting sea turtles are tagged in order to identify females, monitor hunting and incidental fishing, identify habitats and migration patterns, and determine the longevity and reproductive lifetime of the turtles. Each patrol group consists of at least two people who work a section of the beach, locate nesting turtles and tag them either whilst they are laying eggs or immediately afterwards. Biometric data are collected in order to monitor the distribution and frequency of nests left on the beach, the number of eggs laid in each nest, and the size and condition of each turtle found.

Volunteers have the privilege to work directly with the endangered sea turtles

**Did you know?**

If a female sea turtle comes ashore but cannot find a good spot to lay her eggs, she will often just return to sea and come back ashore at a later time. This is called a false crawl (salida falsa).
Working at the Program

Working at the hatchery:
The hatchery is one of the fundamental elements of the program. While it is preferable to leave nests in situ in the interests of conservation, the threat of poaching on Drake and Río Oro beaches means that the relocation of vulnerable nests to the hatchery is a priority strategy. The hatchery is enclosed by a plastic mesh perimeter fence buried deep into the ground to limit predation, and volunteers working early in the season will be able to help construct the enclosure and the hatchery vigilance building.

The hatchery is looked after 24 hours per day by volunteers and locals. Nests are brought to the hatchery at night by the patrol teams and each one is buried in a hole that mimics the natural shape and depth of the turtle nest. Volunteers will be able to relocate eggs, release baby turtles and exhume the nests in order to determine their reproductive success rate. The temperature of the hatchery is also monitored using automated thermometers (dataloggers) buried in the sand and these data are used to estimate the sex ratio produced throughout the season.

Other work:
Volunteers will also take part in a host of other work activities, ranging from the preparation and cleaning of beaches, construction and organization of field stations, gardening, maintenance of trails, ecotourism development, environmental educations activities, and community work such as painting schools, building recycling stations, and assisting with community events and fundraising activities. We always like to find out if volunteers have any special skills so that we can put them to good use too, so if you are a teacher, carpenter, rocket scientist, juggler or acrobat, let us know!

Did you know?
Pacific Green turtle nests normally contain around 70 eggs, whereas Olive Ridley and Hawksbill nests often contain over 100. Even so, only 1 egg in 1000 is expected to survive until adulthood. It’s a tough life out there in the ocean for us babies!
Context

In the conservation field in general, and especially in developing countries, it is necessary not only to ask what activities should be conducted, but also how they should be conducted. It is often the case that procedures that seem the most rational, from a theoretical and scientific viewpoint, are not the most successful in terms of conservation, due to the specific sociological, economic and political conditions of the local communities. This program has made a long-term commitment to support the communities of Drake Bay and Río Oro, and it has taken a long time to foster trust, respect and understanding with the local residents. The actions and behavior of our staff and volunteers largely determine the way in which the locals view the program, and so it is very important that we treat them with the respect that they deserve at all times.

The Osa Peninsula is one of the most remote places in Costa Rica. The tropical habitat can be extremely tough to work in, and advanced medical treatments are often not locally available. While the program makes every effort to guarantee the safety of volunteers – and has never had to deal with a serious emergency since it began in 2006 – there are inherent risks associated with working in a remote region, and so care should be taken at all times.

Unlike many other volunteer programs around the world, we have tried to avoid a long list of restrictive rules and regulations and instead place trust in the common sense of the individuals participating in the program. While we aim to empower volunteers with the capacity to make independent decisions in this way, it is important to be aware of the below safety considerations:

Health and safety

1. There is an extensive first aid kit at both field stations, however we recommend that you also bring your own. Be prepared to treat general cuts and bruises, but also allergic reactions and sunburn. Consider bringing hydrocortisone cream and/or antihistamines.

2. Always wear sun protection, since the sun is very strong in Costa Rica, and always drink plenty of water. Sun stroke is the most common problem that volunteers encounter.

3. Please notify the personnel at the camp if you suffer from any medical conditions or allergies, if you require any specific medical attention during your stay, or if you are physically incapacitated in any way that may restrict what work you can do.

4. We recommend that you wear appropriate footwear around camp and at the beach. The beach accumulates marine garbage, including driftwood, jelly fish and even sea snakes.

5. Please take care when swimming or wading in rivers and lagoons. Crocodiles and caimans are known to live in the area, although they generally stay away from humans. While it is generally safe to swim in the sea at Drake beach, please bear in mind that it is the Pacific Ocean and that the waves and currents can be dangerous. It is not safe to swim in the sea at Río Oro beach.

6. Do not touch any plants or animals in the jungle that you are not familiar with, and always wear a headlamp when walking around at night so that you don’t step on anything unfriendly.
7. Take care when using tools such as hammers, saws and machetes. Treat construction sites with respect, and always wear appropriate footwear and protective clothing when necessary.

8. At Drake Bay it is necessary to cross a small lagoon (approximately 100m across) using fiberglass canoes in order to reach the southern section of Drake beach. Patrol Leaders are fully trained in how to maneuver them, and volunteers will never be instructed to cross unless it is safe to do so. It is convenient if volunteers also learn how to paddle these boats correctly.

Security and Behavior

1. You are responsible for your own belongings and the program accepts no responsibility for theft or damage of possessions during your stay. The safest place for valuable items is in your room in your homestay house, or in a locker or the bag storage room at the hostel. Please do not take any valuables with you to the beaches or to the Rio Oro field station.

2. The consumption of alcohol before or during work is not permitted. The image and behavior of the volunteers before the community is very important and alcohol is generally not approved of by members of the community. Each volunteer is allocated a free day each week, during which they are free to consume alcohol responsibly and discreetly at the hostel or at the bar. Smoking is not permitted during night patrols. The consumption of drugs of any kind is not permitted under any circumstances.

3. Volunteers are expected to be ready to work by 09:00, unless otherwise instructed. However, those who have worked on the second night patrol are not expected to be ready to work until after lunch the next day. It is important to be punctual, respect the cleaning rota, maintain clean facilities and to use the recycling and composting facilities appropriately.

4. Due to the nature of the work schedule, people may be trying to sleep at any time during the day. Please consider others whilst inside the homestay houses, hostel and field stations.

5. Volunteers are expected to be polite and respect the members of the community, guides, park rangers and tourists with whom they interact. Volunteers must always tell their homestay host families where they are going, especially at night, and members of the opposite sex are not permitted in the bedrooms of homestay houses at any time.

6. Mealtimes are arranged in order to facilitate the smooth running of the work of the program. Please ensure that you arrive punctually for meals at homestays, and be sure to give plenty of notice to your host family if you require a meal to take away or are unable to attend.

7. If at any time you are not 100% comfortable about any aspect of the work, accommodation, members of the community, or other volunteers, please discuss the issue in confidence with a Coordinator as soon as possible. Good communication solves most issues swiftly, so please don’t wait until relationships become strained or tempers fray before addressing a problem.

8. Please remember that the staff at the program are there to collaborate with you and wish you to have the best experience possible. Staff and volunteers all have to work long hours at night in tough conditions and tiredness is common, and so everyone at the program is encouraged to be friendly, patient, and understanding. Please come ready to work.
The Spanish spoken throughout Latin America differs a lot between each country. Costa Rican (Tico) Spanish is particularly distinct, especially in rural areas, and there are a lot of verbs and phrases (or ‘tiquismos’) that are totally unique to Costa Rica. The list below is far from complete, but gives you a few tiquismos to play with. Please note that Ticos do not generally use ‘tu’ and generally refer to everyone as ‘usted’ or ‘ustedes’, although ‘vos’ is sometimes used instead of ‘tu’, as in Argentina. If in doubt, just use the ‘usted’ form for everyone, including kids and pets!

### Expressions:

- ¿Al chile? // Really? Are you kidding?
- Bien por dicha // I’m well thank you
- Buena nota // That’s awesome / Great news
- Como amaneció? // Good morning, how are you?
- Diay // Used loosely like ‘hey’ or ‘you know’
- Mae / Mop // Mate / Dude / Guy
- Con mucho gusto // You’re welcome
- Ojo! // Watch out!
- Pura vida // All good / I’m fine thanks
- Que dicha // That’s great! / What luck!
- Tuans // Cool / Good to meet you
- Upe! // Hello, anyone there?

**Literally**

- ‘I’m well, luckily’
- ‘good note’
- ‘how did the sun rise?’
- ‘with much pleasure’
- ‘pure life’

### Verbs:

- Acostar // To lay down or sleep
- Agüevarse // To bother / To annoy / To bore
- Bretear // To work
- Jalar(se) // To pull / To leave
- Majar // To stamp or stand on
- Ocupar // To need
- Tomar // To take / To drink / To eat

**‘Dormir’ is used too**

**‘Molestar’ is used too**

**‘Trabajar’ is used too**

- It’s best not to use ‘Tirar’
- It’s best not to use ‘Pisar’
- ‘Necesitar’ is used too
- It’s best not to use ‘Coger’

### Nouns:

- Birra // Beer
- Carajillos / Güilas // Kids
- Chapulín // Bad kid or thief
- Chile // Joke
- Chozas / Chante // House or pad
- Chunches // Thing
- Cien (100) metros // A city block
- Goma // Hangover
- Macho/a // Fair skinned or blonde person
- Plata // Money
- Pulpería / Pulpe // Local grocery store
- Roco/a // Old person
- Un Rojo/Una Teja // 1000/100 colones
- Soda // Small typical restaurant
- Torta // Problem or predicament
- Tapis // Alcoholic drink (not beer)
- Zarpe // The last drink

**‘Cerveza is used too**

**‘Niños’ is used too**

**‘Broma’ or ‘chiste’ are used too**

**‘Casa’ is used too**

**‘Cosa’ is used too**

**‘Cuadra’ is used too**

**‘Dinero’ is used too**