

Photographs by
JORG BADURA

Paramedic Pablo Ross
bushwhacks through
the bamboo between
Camps One and
Two on Cerro Kámuk.

Men's Journal
EXPEDITION

TREKKING VIRGIN CLOUD FOREST IN COSTA RICA

If you think all the authentic adventures in Costa Rica have been packaged and polished to death, think again. Welcome to the jungle.

BY MICHAEL BEHAR

"HE'S NOT FAR AHEAD," DECLARES MY TREKKING guide, a lanky, wiry haired 26-year-old Costa Rican named Andrés Vargas, as he plods up a switchback in the jungle.

"Who, exactly, is he?" I ask.

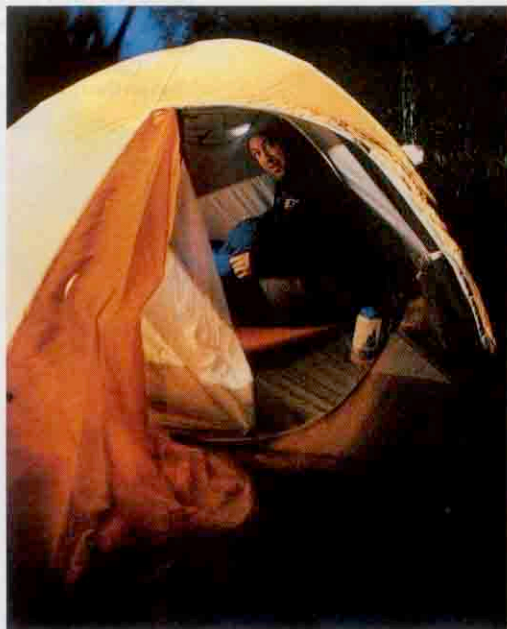
"Look down," says Vargas, pointing to a foot-wide hoofprint in the muddy trail.

"What the hell is that?"

"Fresh tracks, from a tapir," he says.

"A what?" Judging from the colossal print I imagine a wild boar on steroids and wonder if the machete we've packed is within easy reach.

A tapir, Vargas explains, is, in fact, a piglike mammal indigenous to Southeast Asia and Central and South America. It looks almost prehistoric: part anteater, part hippo. A full-grown adult stands three



The author (above) prepares to leave Camp Two at 4:45 AM; guide Luis Hernandez cooks up rice and shrimp.

feet tall at its shoulders, measures six feet long, and can weigh almost 1,000 pounds. They are shy, nocturnal creatures that normally steer clear of humans and other predators, which in Costa Rica include pumas, jaguars, and crocs. But if you startle a tapir — particularly a female with calves — expect a fight, Vargas says. With its powerful snout the beast will slam you onto the ground, then administer a vicious stomping with its massive hooves.

"If it charges," warns Vargas, "drop your pack and climb a tree."

I'd come to Costa Rica with a number of preconceptions. Being pummeled by a tapir wasn't one of them. When Vargas, who co-owns the guiding outfit Euforia Expeditions, which specializes in treks to Costa Rica's most remote wilderness areas, called in February to invite me on what he described as an "expedition-style" adventure, I scoffed at the notion. As far as I knew, the gringo invasion had begun 25 years earlier and had flooded the tiny country with surf punks, spring-breakers, and octogenarian bird-watchers.

"What's left to explore?" I asked.

AS IT TURNS OUT, A HELL OF A LOT. NAMELY, La Amistad National Park, a 1,547-square-mile wildlife reserve — the largest and most isolated park in Costa Rica — straddling the border with Panama. The handful of crude trails are unmarked and often consumed by the highland jungle, a tangled canopy of biodiversity found nowhere else in the world. In addition to the 215 mammals that populate the park, there are 250 reptiles and amphibians, including the green and black high-altitude viper, and 560 species of birds,

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15 of which are endemic to the park. The abundance of extraordinary wildlife is an upshot of Amistad's fiercely rugged topography. During the 16th century, the indigenous population would flee into the mountains here to escape marauding Spanish conquistadors who didn't have the *cojones* to follow. In the five centuries since, humans rarely ventured into the forbidding terrain, leaving the complex rain forest ecosystem virtually undisturbed since the last ice age 25,000 years ago.

Costa Rica's second-highest mountain, 11,644-foot Cerro Kámuk, lies at the heart of Amistad in the Cordillera de Talamanca. "Kámuk is about as far as you can get in Costa Rica from tourists," Vargas told me over the phone. That's partly because the government allows only eight climbers on Kámuk at any given time. And whereas Cerro Chirripó, the tallest mountain in Costa Rica, located in Talamanca's northernmost reaches, is but a day's hike from pavement, Kámuk's trailhead begins 175 miles south of San José at the end of one of the most perilous unpaved roads in the country. Reaching the summit demands at least three days of trekking with a fully loaded pack. The route isn't technical — no ropes are required — but that doesn't mean it's easy. The crushing impact of the Caribbean and Pacific tectonic

plates buckled and folded the landscape surrounding Kámuk into a labyrinth of precipitous slopes and rift valleys. The total elevation gain is 5,400 feet from base camp to summit. But the 45-mile round-trip hiking route, which zigzags over at least 40 different ridges and peaks, is equivalent, in vertical feet, to climbing Kámuk a half-dozen times.

This wild region sounded promising, but I'd need to see it for myself. Vargas offered to take me up Kámuk. Since about half of Amistad remains unexplored, Vargas told me he would plot our route using a compass, a handheld GPS, and the most recent topo map he could get his hands on. Its publication date, 1944, didn't inspire confidence, and the absence of contour lines over large swaths of the park was vexing. "When the pilot flew over to make the map, he couldn't see those sections through the clouds," Vargas explained. "So he left them blank." Costa Rica or not, this would be a true expedition.

VARGAS AND OUR TWO DRIVERS ARRIVE AT my hotel in San José in a pair of Land Rover Defenders. One 4x4 is rigged with a winch; both have Safari Snorkels for fording rivers without drowning the engines, and enough lights — roof-mounted off-road lights,



fog lights, and a 10-million-candlepower spotlight — to blind a combat battalion. After six hours on the paved Pan-American Highway, we veer left onto a rutted dirt road packed with axle-snapping boulders. The SUVs are jacked up nearly high enough to straddle a donkey, and in less than an hour we climb 5,000 feet to reach our base camp in the tiny settlement of Tres Colinas, where the Solano family, which owns a small cattle ranch and farm bordering the national park, has recently built a cozy clapboard cabin for trekkers.

Vargas, I learn at dinner that first night, studied at Jamestown College in North Dakota for two years, then continued his studies at a Costa Rican university. After graduating he got a job with an online gambling firm. "I was doing a lot of drugs and smoking a lot of cigarettes," he says. "I wasn't really into the outdoors." This, despite having grown up in Monteverde, a mountain village at the edge of the country's famed cloud forest, among a Quaker community that was established in the 1950s by Alabama expats who fled the draft. While working in gambling, Vargas met his wife, Susan Mora. Around that time, echoes from Vargas's childhood stirred an instinctive longing for the mountains. "I am not from San José and I get sick of all the traffic and noise," he



Expedition leader Andrés Vargas (above), on the summit of Cerro Kámuk, from which you can see the Pacific Ocean to the west and the Caribbean Sea to the east; hydrating a sick yellow-naped parrot using a CamelBak

says. "So I decided that the best way to get out of the city was to start a business that would do it for me." He and Susan began saving their money and planning their escape. Three years later Euforia was born. The company offers a range of adventures, from mel-low, multiday whitewater rafting trips to adventure racing excursions to ascents of Kámuk. But now Vargas pairs up with local guides who specialize in Costa Rica's pristine wildernesses. For Kámuk, that person is Luis Hernández, 23, who lives near Tres Colinas. He has climbed the mountain several times and will lead our trek with Vargas, who has summited Kámuk once before. Their plan is to make two camps — at mile eight and mile 16 — then attempt the summit on

gallo pinto (Costa Rica's national cumin-and-garlic-spiced dish of rice and black beans), empanadas, and fresh-squeezed blackberry juice.

The hearty meal kick-starts us for the first hour's trudge up a steep, grassy ridge. The blazing sun begins to vaporize the morning dew, creating thick, humid air that silences the symphony of chirps, twitters, and caws. We each carry close to 30 pounds of gear and food in our packs, and our pace is slow: a step, a pause, a breath, then another step. As soon as the trail plunges into the cooler forest, I spot the tapir tracks, nearly stepping in an ankle-deep pile of baseball-size turds. We keep going and the birdsong returns. Hernández rattles off species

The jungle canopy has fallen to within inches of our heads, so for two hours we stumble through a tunnel of snarled bamboo and overhanging tendrils that sting my eyes.

the third day. On day four we'll hike out.

We settle in for the night as an electrical storm rages outside. After dinner Vargas finds me near a window, mesmerized by the brilliant flashes illuminating the Coto Brus valley, a coffee-growing region, far below. "My best friend died two weeks ago, and last week my grandfather died," he says. "So for me this climb will be a spiritual journey." The man-versus-mountain ritual has become a kind of mind-cleansing therapy for Vargas and galvanized his passion for adventure travel.

AT DAWN THE SKY IS CLEAR EXCEPT FOR A girdle of low clouds ringing the foothills. Emerald humps poke through the mist, like the spine of a serpent rising from a medieval loch. For breakfast the Solanos whip up a feast: scrambled eggs, coffee, homemade cheese,

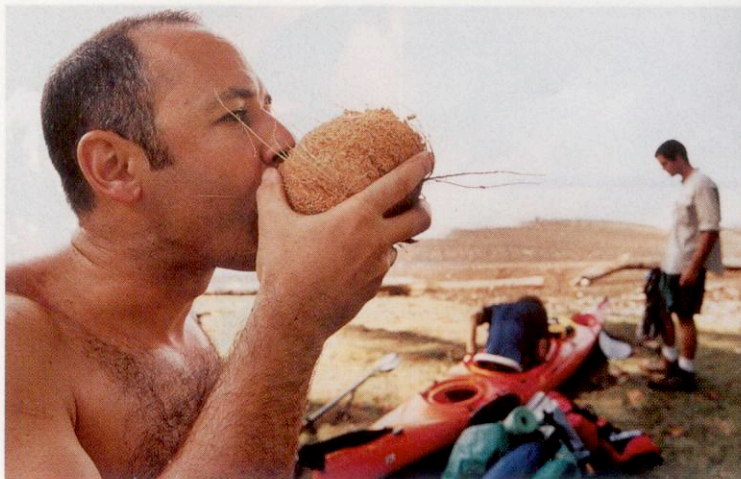
he recognizes: ruddy-capped nightingale-thrush, laughing falcon, crested eagle, vulture, hawk, woodpecker, flycatcher, jay.

The trail is a roller coaster: It takes us up, then down, then up again, then down. My wristwatch altimeter reads 7,427 feet. Camp One is at 8,786 feet, but 20 minutes later we've dropped to 6,900. In another half hour we cross 8,000 feet, only to lose 1,200 feet on the next descent. The jungle canopy has fallen to within inches of our heads, so for two hours we stumble through a tunnel of snarled bamboo and overhanging tendrils that sting my eyes. The trail is barely visible, often submerged beneath a swampy muck.

"You could really get lost in here," says Vargas. "How far to camp?" I inquire, noticing we're back up to 8,255 feet.

"¿Cuánta distancia falta para el campamento?"





The author drinks coconut milk pre-kayak on the beach near Mogos (left); the expedition team searches for the perfect spot for a picnic lunch in Golfo Dulce.

Vargas asks Hernández.

I recall enough high school Spanish to get the gist of his response: Another hour. Three hours later we hobble into camp.

WARM SHAFTS OF SUNLIGHT PIERCE slits in the forest canopy the next morning. Hernández tells us to prepare for a three-hour hike, but I multiply his estimate by three. His wildly skewed sense of time has prompted a nickname: Luis III.

Seven hours and 20 minutes later we reach Camp Two. I'm flummoxed when I glance at my altimeter and see that our altitude, 8,900 feet, is a scant 114 feet higher than at Camp One. I grew up in Seattle and have tackled some of the region's major peaks, including Mount Rainier, Mount Olympus, and Mount Baker. But right now my legs are Jell-O. Kámuk is kicking my ass. "We must have climbed straight up all day," I moan to Vargas.

"Nope. Mostly just up and down," he tells me. "Tomorrow, now that's when we go up."

Studying the map while we eat, I see that he's right. The elevation contours resemble the swirling furrows and ridges of a fingerprint. Thankfully we'll leave most of our gear behind, carrying just enough

water and food for the climb to the summit.

"I try to visualize defeating the mountain," Vargas says to me when I ask how he mentally prepares himself for Kámuk. "It's about going against everything and making it back in one piece." Three CamelBak hydration bags dangle from a makeshift clothesline behind him like IVs in a triage unit awaiting patients.

HOLY SHIT!" SHOUTS VARGAS. "THIS IS THE clearest I've ever seen these mountains." We've been inching up switchbacks for three hours. Vargas is a hundred yards ahead, and it takes me a second to realize he has scaled a talus and is standing on a rocky summit. After two days beneath the canopy, the sudden panorama gives me vertigo. We're on top of 9,842-foot Cerro Dudu, a lesser peak on the route that affords our first unobstructed view of Kámuk. After so many hours of trudging up and down beneath the canopy, seeing our goal before us — Kámuk's looming silhouette punctuating the cerulean sky — is exhilarating. And the scenery, I'm told, will only get better.

We pass 10,000 feet and the landscape goes schizo. The jungle vanishes, replaced by gnarled trees and arid grasslands. This is the *paramo*, Costa

Rica's version of a subalpine steppe. But 10 minutes later, over a hummock, we're bushwhacking again through bamboo forest. Next comes jungle, then paramo, then jungle, more bamboo, and finally a slurping bog that would suck the boots right off my feet if I were to plunge in too deep. The bog ends at the base of a 1,500-foot pinnacle: the last pitch to the summit.

"This is it," I say to no one in particular. "I'm not stopping until we get to the top." I chug half a liter of water, squirt a tube of chocolate energy gel in my mouth, and start climbing. It's vertical now, a hand-over-hand scramble up boulders. My altimeter clicks through 10,200 feet...10,400 feet...11,000 feet...and the thin air chafes my lungs. Luis III is in front, but I've lost sight of him. He must have scaled the 12-foot granite slab that now rises from the trail like a vault door. I wedge my left foot into a crevice and straighten my leg. With my right hand I reach for a knobby outcrop barely at arm's length. Spread-eagled and face pressed against rock, I hurl my left arm onto the upper ledge and hoist myself over. Suddenly, my grip comes loose and I tumble backward ass-first onto the ground.

A bit shaken but miraculously uninjured, I continue, clinging to roots and [continued on page 110]

CERRO KAMUK, COSTA RICA

HOW TO DO IT

> THE GUIDES Euforia Expeditions, based in San José, Costa Rica, leads custom climbing trips to Cerro Kámuk. Euforia cofounder Andrés Vargas will design a trekking itinerary based on your skill and fitness levels.

> THE ITINERARIES Kámuk trips include an optional day of pre-climb whitewater rafting on the Class III-IV Río General, which snakes through the verdant Talamanca foothills. Most climbers will prefer to tackle Kámuk itself in five days; to take in the sunset over the Pacific

Ocean from the 11,644-foot summit, add an extra night at the high camp (\$1,830, including overland transportation, hotels, and meals; euforiaexpeditions.com, 50-62-63-2752). After the descent you can extend your trip with a kayaking excursion to southern Costa Rica's Golfo Dulce, one of the most pristine and biodiverse waterways in the world, where whale sharks and dolphins swim — and where the balmy seas and soothing sun will instantly melt away sore muscles (an additional \$1,040).

> WHEN TO GO Climbs to Kámuk are best done from December through April to avoid the rainy season, which for the rest of the year drenches the Cordillera de Talamanca. Book six months in advance.

> WHAT TO BRING The route to Kámuk ascends 5,400 feet and a half-dozen of Costa Rica's 12 microclimates. Plus, the mountain is situated less than 50 miles from both the Pacific and the Caribbean. This means the weather can go from balmy to just plain freaky in minutes. Expect temps anywhere between 35° F and 85° F and pack accordingly. And if you can't live without PowerBars and beef jerky, bring your stash from the States.

— M.B.



boulders — anything for a handhold. A minute later, at the crest of a barren ridge, the view explodes in all directions. I'm on the Continental Divide. A few more steps over a rocky cornice and I'm at the summit. Vargas had mentioned the view earlier, but I am unprepared for the 360-degree spectacle: To the west is the Pacific Ocean; to the east is the Caribbean. Six miles southeast is Panama. And to the north is the spine of the Talamanca, with Chirripó on the horizon. The air is still, and for a moment I strain my ears, certain that if I listen hard enough I'll hear surf breaking on the dual coasts 11,644 feet below.

Vargas appears, whooping and pumping his fist in the air. We sign our names in the summit register, which someone has wrapped in plastic and tucked beneath a scrap of corrugated tin. Then we scurry off to find a warm nook in the sun for a quick snooze.

What keeps me going on the descent, even as I stagger through the dark after 12 hours of walking, is our post-climb reward: Vargas has arranged a leisurely two-day sea kayaking excursion in the balmy blue Golfo Dulce, a pristine sound encircled by a dozen wildlife refuges near Costa Rica's southern coast.

We leave Camp Two at 6:30 AM the next morning, our bodies filthy and sore. Luis III darts ahead to point out a puma kill: a matted tuft of porcupine quills and shredded hide. We see claw marks on a nearby tree and sun-bleached scat beside the trail. After 10 hours we emerge into a clearing and I spot the Solanos' cabin. It's raining, but the sun breaks through just enough to spawn a double-rainbow over the Coto Brus valley.

WHILE I'M SITTING ON A BEACH IN GOLFO DULCE the next day with one of our drivers, 27-year-old Martin Carazo, a monster thunderstorm rolls in, turning the water to whitecaps. A mile offshore a funnel cloud materializes from the base of the thunderhead and touches down. It's a tornado, or, technically, a waterspout, stretching from sea to sky. A pack of howler monkeys start shrieking nearby and a flock of spotted sandpipers fly loop-the-loops over our heads.

"I feel like I'm going to cry," Carazo says to me. "This scene makes me so emotional. I can't believe this is my country, that it's so beautiful, that I get to live here." It turns out that Carazo's grandfather, Rodrigo Carazo, was president of Costa Rica from 1978 to 1982 and was responsible for creating Amistad while in office. The park — and to a large extent the devotion to environmental conservation that pervades the Costa Rican mind-set — is Carazo's legacy. I'm grateful to him for sharing: We've been traveling for nine days and I haven't encountered a single tourist; I've tracked — and tomorrow will paddle — through a Costa Rica few outsiders ever see.

Vargas joins us on the beach. "This storm is a good omen," he says. I'm reminded of the personal losses he's experienced in the last couple of weeks and his spiritual journey. "Everything happens for a reason," he says, and then walks to the water's edge, slides his kayak into the water, and starts paddling out to greet the storm. ☐

tour. And, obviously, he's another Texan, so he lives fairly close. Comes to Austin a lot and we see each other. Lyle's maybe the sweetest person I know. Never says a cussword. Never says anything bad about anybody. Never has more than one beer.

But he has nothing to do with cycling.

No. Not that I know of. Horses and motorcycles and music.

It would be a little hard to get a helmet on that head of hair, actually.

[Laughs] Never tried. He gets a motorcycle helmet on it.

What about mountain biking with President Bush? Has he gotten in touch with you to ride with him?

I did it in August and, you know, I took him easy.

Ha!

I have to say he tried. He's very competitive, as you know. I actually like him, personally. He's a likable guy. I don't necessarily agree with his politics all the time.

He's a guy's guy.

Man, he was going for it. I mean, he had the bike, the equipment, the heart rate monitor. He was huffing and puffing.

Some people talk about you and Texas politics. Have you thought about that?

Yeah, I think about it all the time. But two things: We have to get on top of the cancer problem. If we can get on top of that, we as a community of cancer fighters, then that opens up my time for other things, which could include politics. The second thing, which is even more serious, is that I'm just not sure I want to expose myself and my family to that. I've seen a level of cynicism and dirty play in sport that I don't ever want to see again, and I think politics is maybe 100 times worse.

A friend of mine said if you want to run for office you've got to be prepared to take a bath, in public, at the busiest intersection, naked, every day, at high noon.

Yeah. See, I can take the bath every once in a while, but not every day. In sports it's about drugs. In politics it's about where your mate's from, who you've slept with, did you inhale.

Are both parties coming after you to appear with their candidates?

I'm up-front with them: I can't make any political statements or affiliations, because as soon as I do, my effectiveness in the fight against cancer is cut in half. I have to be apolitical. Obviously, I have political views, but they're mine and are going to stay mine.

What's going to happen in July, when the Tour de France starts? Will you watch it?

You know, I don't miss it at all. I miss the training. I miss the team atmosphere. I miss my guys. But the last couple of years I would even say I hated racing. The only peaceful times were when I was at training camps, alone or with a few teammates, or at the races, in the hotel room, at the dinner table with my guys. That's the stuff I really love. I won't miss the Tour.

People ask me if I miss the news, and I say I get a rush when there's a big story, but it goes away quickly. When I think about getting on an airplane, having to fly somewhere, living on two hours of sleep a night, it's...

Let me sound on that: The Tour is all I did. It's all I lived for. It's probably not fair to answer that question until we get to July. I mean, in July I may start pulling my hair out, 'cause it's the one race that I lived for. But I suspect not. I know that I can never go back.

How involved will you be with the team?

Um, somewhat involved. Not as much as I'd like to be, because of scheduling. They're in Europe and I'm in the States. I talk to Johan Bruyneel daily, who is the director of the team, but I don't go to training.

Do you worry at all about being perishable as a spokesman now that you're off the Tour, or do you think it'll stick?

What do you mean?

Lance Armstrong, winner of seven Tours, is up here, but now Lance Armstrong doesn't race anymore. He's not in the sports pages every day. Does that affect you?

No. But on a fundraising level, our biggest month has been July. Wristband sales, donations, attention, exposure to the disease: It's July. And that's not going to happen again. But that's the reason I have to try to fix the process, because if we get any big victories... I asked the president for a billion dollars when I was there. And if I had gotten that it would have been game over. That would eclipse any Tour.

I imagine you get swamped with offers for speaking engagements and endorsements and such. How many do you get a week?

Well, the endorsements — those dollars are big, so they don't come along all the time.

But aren't you a little stunned about how big the dollars are sometimes?

Yeah. We just did a new deal, and it was — A lot.

Yeah, and I'm retired.

You know how much Arnold Palmer makes a year?

Twenty?

Twenty-five.

Jesus.

Do you think at all about where you want to be when you're 54?

Ugh. No. Hopefully alive. In 20 years my kids will be out of college. I don't think about those things.

Do you ever imagine going back and doing a triathlon?

Yeah. For sure. I would actually be more inclined to do an Xterra, an off-road triathlon. That's with a mountain-bike course and a trail run.

Are you tempted by the Ironman?

No.

You've been there, done that, and...

No, I mean I'm too busy to train. They asked me, on a competitive level, "Do you want to go back and win the Ironman?" [Laughs] I'm like, "Wait a minute." I mean, people forget that I'm an old guy for these sports. I mean for cycling. Last year I was the oldest guy to win the Tour in more than half a century.

Do you want your kids to be pro athletes?

Uh, well, with two daughters... I mean, they wouldn't talk about being an athlete. But my son now wants to win the Tour de France.

Well, gene pool counts. ☐