



**PROJECT REPORT  
COSTA RICA VOLUNTEER TRIP  
MAY 8 - 16, 2025**



**Executive Summary**

Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) led a volunteer trip to the Pacuare Reserve in Costa Rica in May 2025. The group, consisting of eight individuals, included two trip leaders from ConservationVIP, Jim Upchurch and Frances Lang. Throughout the trip the group was accompanied by Marco Fallas, a local guide from Costa Rica Sun Tours, who shared fascinating and comprehensive information on Costa Rica's history, geography, culture, and wildlife, while also participating in the hands-on volunteer activities. Additionally, Jose Solera, a skilled bus driver, provided safe transport for the group and lent a helping hand throughout much of the journey.

The group volunteer activities focused on the protection of endangered leatherback sea turtles on the beaches of Pacuare Reserve, located on the central Caribbean coast of Costa Rica, the construction of a rest shelter for staff at the Reserve, and conservation efforts for the resplendent quetzal birds in Cerro de la Muerte, located in the cloud forest region. The conservation initiatives were carried out in collaboration with Ecology Project International at the Pacuare Reserve and with the Paraiso Quetzal Lodge and the KABEK Association in Cerro de la Muerte. Wildlife experts from each organization provided educational instruction and guidance to participants throughout the trip.

At the Pacuare Reserve, the leatherback sea turtle nesting season occurs from March to July and typically peaks between April and May. The ConservationVIP trip was planned in mid-May to maximize the group's chances of helping with both nesting sea turtles and newly hatched turtles. The group was fortunate to encounter two nesting leatherback sea turtles on their very first night at the Reserve, which was an extraordinary experience for everyone involved. During the day, volunteers helped construct a large shade structure to provide a safe resting area for the dedicated researchers and volunteers who work at Pacuare throughout the year. At Cerro de la Muerte, ConservationVIP volunteers assisted with trail maintenance, construction of semi-artificial nests for resplendent quetzals, and planting avocado trees, a main food source for the quetzal. Their efforts were instrumental in supporting the preservation and well-being of these magnificent birds.

In total, the ConservationVIP group dedicated an impressive 400 volunteer hours towards various service projects and accomplished the following:

- At the Pacuare Reserve, the group contributed 160 hours to patrolling the beaches for nesting sea turtles, assisting with leatherback turtle data collection and hatchery monitoring, and transferring 170 newly laid eggs to the hatchery. Additionally, the group contributed 144 hours to constructing a new shade structure (nicknamed "Baula's Resting Area") to help protect volunteers and scientists from the intense tropical climate. In addition, the group participated in training and monitoring of sea turtle conservation efforts at the Reserve for a total of 32 hours.
- In the cooler cloud forests of the highlands of Cerro de la Muerte, participants contributed 64 hours of volunteer work on projects benefiting the resplendent quetzal. They helped maintain 5000 feet of trails used for viewing of the quetzals, assisted in building new nest boxes, installed a completed nest within a designated protected area, and planted 25 avocado trees which will eventually produce the favorite food of the quetzal.

The country of Costa Rica is globally recognized as a leader for its efforts to protect and conserve biodiversity. Through their hard work and perseverance, ConservationVIP volunteers made a tangible and lasting impact on the ecosystems and wildlife they encountered in Costa Rica and became part of the worldwide community of people dedicated to safeguarding this unique place. Their efforts contributed to the conservation and restoration of vital habitats, leaving behind a legacy that will benefit both the residents and the remarkable wildlife that call these areas home.



## DETAILED TRIP REPORT and ACCOMPLISHMENTS

### Day 1 – Meet in San José

On the first day, participants met at the hotel for an introductory meeting and orientation to the volunteer projects planned for the days ahead, followed by a group dinner. Marco Fallas, the esteemed and knowledgeable guide from Costa Rica Sun Tours, joined in and shared the itinerary, safety protocols, and outlook on what the group could expect in the coming days.

### Day 2 – Travel to Pacuare Reserve

Early the next morning, the group gathered for breakfast in the hotel before boarding a spacious and comfortable bus to embark on the long drive to Pacuare Reserve, the primary volunteer project site. Along the way, the group learned about some of the history and consequences of large-scale banana, pineapple and palm oil production in Costa Rica. They also stopped for tortillas de queso and coffee, and other breaks to rest, stretch their legs, and learn more about the local landscape.

The bus arrived at Goshen Dock, where the group boarded a small motorized boat for a short ride to Pacuare Reserve, with Marco pointing out various bird species along the way.



A “troop” of howler monkeys appeared to welcome the volunteers as they arrived at Pacuare Reserve, calling out to them with their distinguishable howls as the group marched up the path toward the lodge. The group arrived in time for lunch and had a chance to settle into their rooms before receiving an introductory presentation from a British biologist studying birds, jaguars, and primates at the Reserve.

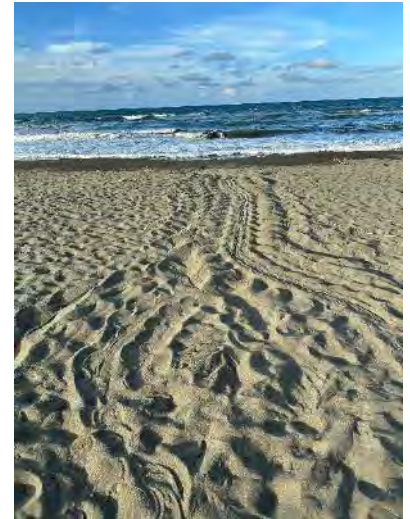
In the afternoon, volunteers practiced sea turtle data collection and conservation techniques on a life-sized turtle made of sand, including measuring the diameter of the turtle’s neck, the length and width of the carapace (top shell), and collecting the eggs.





Following these hands-on experiences, dinner was served in the “comedor”, an open area dining room with long tables where the researchers, workers, volunteers, and tourists gathered together at the end of each day.

That night, ConservationVIP volunteers convened outside the comedor to participate in their first turtle patrol, led by two research assistants from the Reserve. Since sea turtles come ashore to nest and lay their eggs after dark, the group walked along the beach for a four-hour shift looking for nesting leatherback sea turtles. The very first night, the volunteers were fortunate to encounter not one but two beautiful leatherback sea turtles laying eggs on the beach. The group provided support with collecting scientific data and transporting the eggs back to the hatchery. However, strong rain and lightning disrupted the walk back to the main site, which turned the outing into even more of an adventure. The volunteers arrived back at their lodging sopping wet, but safe and exhilarated. They joyfully recounted their amazement at seeing the enormous sea turtles the next day.



### Days 3 - 7 – Sea Turtle and Structure Construction Projects at Pacuare Reserve

Breakfast was generally served at 7:30am in the comedor and consisted of fresh fruit, scrambled eggs, slices of queso blanco, tostadas, and hot coffee. After breakfast and in between rain storms, the volunteers collaborated with workers at the Reserve to construct a shaded covering over a new rest space, nicknamed Baula’s Resting Area (“baula” refers to the leatherback sea turtle). The area was designed to provide comfortable seating and protection from the intense tropical weather for Reserve staff and visitors.



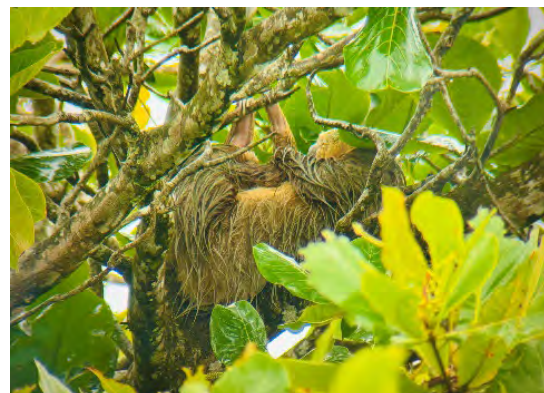




Each afternoon, the volunteers took a break for lunch, which typically consisted of a simple and satisfying dish of rice, beans, stewed meat, and grilled plantains, accompanied by fresh fruit juices. Daytime activities included a hike in the jungle, co-led by Marco and researchers from the Reserve, to observe the elusive agami heron, which nests nearby (one of only eight known nesting sites in the world).

Other remarkable species of wildlife – poison dart frogs, lizards, butterflies, monkeys, sloths, and one river turtle – abounded. The group enjoyed a similarly fascinating experience during a boat ride through the Pacuare river

system, spotting the aninga (or “snake neck” bird), kingfishers, toucans, basilisks, iguanas, and even bats.







Volunteers periodically assisted with monitoring the sea turtle hatchery during the day to determine if a nest had recently hatched or was close to hatching, which can be detected by a small depression in the sand covering the nest. While it appeared that one of the nests might be coming close, volunteers were unfortunately not able to witness the hatching process during their time at the Reserve.

The group continued to patrol the beach each night to look for nesting turtles (with the exception of two nights, due to rainstorms). The group was always accompanied by one or two researchers from the Reserve, and on the last night was joined by the lead sea turtle biologist, Dr. Claudio Quesada. In addition to accompanying the group on the final night patrol, Claudio also provided an in-depth, two-hour lecture covering sea turtle taxonomy, anatomy, biology, and conservation. His passion and enthusiasm for protecting all seven species of sea turtles was palpable.



A special thank you dinner and cooking class was held on the final evening at Julio and Maritza's lodge, located a little way up the river, where a large crocodile quietly rested near the shore. In the kitchen, Maritza taught the volunteers how to prepare a traditional Caribbean Costa Rican meal of coconut rice, beans, vegetables, and fried chicken.



Several members of the team at the Reserve were invited to attend the dinner and were recognized for their hard work with gifts of headlamps and ConservationVIP hats. After dinner, a few intrepid folks ventured onto the dance floor and tested their footwork to marimba music and the “macarena”.

### Day 8 – Travel to Cerro de la Muerte

After an early morning breakfast, the group departed from the Reserve on a covered boat driven by Julio. Upon returning to Goshen Dock, the group boarded the bus to the cloud forest. Along the way, they stopped for bathroom breaks and lunch at a restaurant featuring a breathtaking view of the surrounding landscape. After lunch, the group stopped off at the small, family-owned Café Cristina coffee plantation, where they learned about the coffee bean cultivation and roasting process and purchased coffee, chocolate bars, and vanilla beans as souvenirs.

The group checked into the picturesque Paraiso Quetzal Lodge in Cerro de la Muerte in the late afternoon. The Lodge is located above 8,000 feet of elevation in the highlands of Costa Rica, so the volunteers welcomed the change from the heat and humidity they had experienced at the coast while quickly pulling out warmer clothing. Some gathered near the fireplace in the lodge before dinner while others spent their time watching the many hummingbirds near the back deck of the lodge.



### Day 9 – Resplendent Quetzal Projects at Cerro de la Muerte





Early in the morning, the group was introduced to Jorge Serano, the owner of Paraiso Quetzal Lodge and third-generation quetzal conservationist. Jorge coordinates the various activities of the local KABEK Association, which is dedicated to conservation of the resplendent quetzal, an exquisitely colorful bird that holds significant cultural and ecological importance for Latin American cultures. Jorge explained that KABEK is the name for the quetzal in the local indigenous language, and that members of the Association include private landowners, national parks, and reserves, who coordinate with the Costa Rica Wildlife Foundation on conservation activities for the quetzal.

After providing an introduction to the history of the lodge and planned activities for the day, Jorge led the group on a short hike to observe the birds firsthand, and volunteers were treated to a beautiful display of both the male and female resplendent quetzal tending to their nest.



Since one of the major challenges to the survival of the quetzal is habitat loss, Jorge constructs nests from harvested live trees and erects the nests in areas considered to be good quetzal habitat. The volunteers split into two groups to support quetzal conservation: one group worked with Jorge's father (also named Jorge) to build quetzal nests. The rough outline of a nest had been carved into lengths of trees and scored in checkerboard fashion with a chainsaw. The project consisted of hammering and chiseling out the scored wooden blocks to complete the nest cavities. The other group worked on maintaining and improving a segment of trail used by birdwatchers hoping to view the quetzals.

The two volunteer groups came together later in the morning to erect the completed nest by hoisting it onto a wooden post and adorning it with bromeliad plants.





The final task of the day consisted of planting 25 avocado trees on a sloping hillside below the Paraiso Quetzal Lodge. The avocado tree bears a small fruit that is the preferred food source of the resplendent quetzal. After completing the planting, Marco led the group on a short downhill hike to view the bromelias waterfall. Later in the day, the group seized a second opportunity to view the quetzals before the approaching rain set in, which proved to be an even more spectacular viewing than the first. The male and female quetzal perched majestically right in front of the group and fed their young inside the nest.



The volunteers enjoyed several delicious family-style meals together in the main dining area of Paraiso Quetzal Lodge, where they were able to watch the hummingbirds darting and hovering at the feeding stations outside the window. To close out a wonderful day and trip, the group reflected on their experiences together over a farewell dinner in the lodge, then packed for an early morning departure for the airport in San Jose, where the trip formally concluded.

### Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Costa Rica Sun Tours for orchestrating the intricate logistics of this unforgettable journey. We especially appreciated the support provided by our exceptional guide, Marco, who worked tirelessly to ensure we had a good experience.

Our incredible bus driver, Jose, made sure our transportation was safe and enjoyable, while also laboring with us throughout the projects.

We sincerely appreciate Ecology Project International at Pacuare Reserve for allowing us to participate in a meaningful way in their important sea turtle conservation work. The staff and biologists were remarkable in sharing knowledge and understanding of the work that goes on at the Reserve.

We thank Jorge and Paraiso Quetzal Lodge for including us in their dedication to conservation of the beautiful resplendent quetzal.

Finally, ConservationVIP extends its heartfelt gratitude to all the dedicated volunteers who poured their energy, hearts and souls into ensuring the success of these projects. Through their efforts, the world is a better place.