



**PROJECT REPORT
COSTA RICA VOLUNTEER TRIP
SEPTEMBER 13-21, 2025**



Volunteers after completing projects in Punta Banco.

Executive Summary

Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) led a volunteer trip to Costa Rica in September 2025. The group, consisting of ten individuals, included two trip leaders from ConservationVIP. Throughout the trip the group was accompanied by Marco Fallas, a local guide from Costa Rica Sun Tours, who provided insightful guidance and

participated in the volunteer activities. In addition, Sergio Miranda, the skilled and supportive driver, joined the group and lent a helping hand throughout the entire journey.

The volunteer activities focused on the protection of sea turtles nesting on the beaches of Punta Banco, located on the South Pacific coast of Costa Rica. These conservation initiatives were conducted in collaboration with Proyecto Conservación Tortugas of the Punta Banco Community Association, a local nonprofit organization established in 2004 whose vision is to support the coastal community to live responsibly with its natural and social environment, through sustainable and ecological practices.

Sea turtles nesting in the Punta Banco area typically begin in late June or early July. The peak nesting season activity is in September and October. The turtle incubation period is 45 to 60 days, depending on the temperature and turtle species. This trip was planned to occur at a time when the volunteers could help with the turtle nesting and the volunteers would have the opportunity to witness the newly hatched sea turtles and to participate in their release back to the ocean.

The volunteer group dedicated an impressive total of 268 volunteer hours towards various projects and accomplished the following:

- At Punta Banco the group contributed 220 hours improving and maintaining the turtle hatcheries, patrolling the beaches to identify new turtle nests and assist in collecting the eggs, exhuming turtle nests that had recently hatched to free up room for new eggs being transferred to hatchery, and releasing 568 newly hatched turtles. In addition, the volunteers shored up the siding of one the hatcheries to stabilize it for future use. We also constructed a barrier along the beach to prevent further beach erosion near one of the hatcheries.
- In the cooler cloud forests of the highlands of Cerro de la Muerte, the volunteers contributed 48 hours of volunteer work on projects supporting conservation of the Resplendent Quetzal. They assisted in building new nest boxes for the species, relocated a completed nest within a designated protected area, and planted 30 avocado trees which will eventually produce the favorite food of the Quetzal. The volunteers' efforts in creating a suitable habitat for the Quetzal were instrumental in supporting the preservation and well-being of these magnificent birds.

The country of Costa Rica has a well-deserved reputation for its effort to protect its impressive biodiversity. Through their dedication and hard work, this volunteer group made a tangible and lasting impact on the ecosystems they encountered in Costa Rica and became part of the world-wide community of people contributing to this important task. Their efforts contributed to the conservation and protection of vital habitats, leaving behind a legacy that will benefit both the local communities and the remarkable wildlife that call these areas home.

DETAILED TRIP REPORT and ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Day 1 – meet in San José.

On our first day, September 13, the group met at the hotel for an introductory meeting and orientation to the volunteer projects planned for the days ahead, followed by dinner. Marco Urena, our Costa Rica Sun Tours guide, and group leaders Jim Upchurch and Mark Seifert joined in and shared the itinerary and outlook on what the group could expect in the coming

days.

Day 2 - Travel to Dominical

Early the next morning, the group boarded the bus to embark on a drive to the community of Dominical. Along the way we had several stops including a nature hike in Carara National Park which is primarily known for protection of habitat for the Scarlet Macaws. The group embarked on a hike within the park and observed several species of birds, tree frogs and amphibians. After lunch we found a roadside park that had several pairs of Scarlet Macaws providing a noisy and enjoyable viewing spectacle. We were also fortunate to witness along the way a procession of young school children carrying a torch in relay fashion from the Nicaraguan border to the Panamanian border to commemorate Costa Rica's Independence. When we arrived in Dominical, we checked into the beautifully landscaped grounds of the Hotel Villas Rio Mar.



Day 3 - Travel to Punta Banco



After an early morning breakfast, we again loaded up our bus and made the 5-hour journey to Punta Banco. Along the way we were fortunate again to see a baby sloth nestled on their mother.

After arriving at Casa Marea Alta Lodge and unloading our gear the group attended a lecture by Thomas Koblinger, the Program Manager for the turtle conservation program of the Punta Banco Community

Association. He provided the group with an orientation to Proyecto Conservación Tortugas and outlined the volunteer project priorities for the group.



We learned that the primary risk to the survival of turtle eggs laid in nests on the beach is from poaching by both people and animals. Since it is estimated that only 1 in 1,000 turtles released into the ocean will survive to maturity when they reproduce, protection of the nests is critical to the long-term survival of sea turtles. Thomas explained to the group how they have successfully integrated the local community in the conservation effort by providing financial incentives to participate in turtle conservation. Local community members now earn the equivalent of \$20-21 per nest for participating in nursery preparation, collecting eggs, covering the eggs at the nursery, and releasing eggs when they hatch. In 2015, on average the association protected 300 sea turtle nests per year.

Through increased community involvement, they have helped the community become more economically viable and they now protect 700 – 800 nests per year. Nests have approximately 100 eggs/nest, so that means they protect 70,000 – 80,000 turtle eggs/year. While these numbers seem very high, only 70 – 80 of these turtles are expected to survive and return to nest

in the future.

On our first night in Punta Banco we were fortunate to release a batch of new baby turtles that had hatched just prior to our arrival. We joined locals and others to launch the new turtles on to the beach and watched as they made their way to the ocean.



Days 4-6 - Sea Turtle Projects in Punta Banco

General schedule: Newly hatched turtles are released either early in the day or in the evening just before sundown, the optimal time in terms of temperature and to ensure that neither artificial light nor nocturnal predators will interfere with the turtles' natural instinct to head for the ocean when they are released. However, since no early morning releases were required, the project days at Punta Banco started at 8 a.m., just after breakfast.

The conservancy hatchery has three large turtle nesting boxes, each of which is capable of incubating multiple turtle nests. The nests were in various stages of preparation for hosting turtle egg incubation. Many of the projects during the day revolved around improvement and maintenance of those nesting boxes. The volunteers generally worked till noon, took a break for lunch and rested in the early afternoon during the hottest portion of the day, then returned to the projects till dinner.

Since sea turtles come ashore to nest and lay eggs after dark, the group patrolled the beach area after dinner to look for turtles which were laying eggs on the beach. Wearing dark clothing and red headlamps to avoid disturbing the nesting turtles, members of the local community accompanied them to ensure that they did not interfere with the locals' ability to earn money for conserving turtle nests. If they found a new nest, they helped to relocate the eggs to the hatchery nesting boxes.

On the morning of **September 16th**, the group went to the turtle conservancy staging area and began our work which included excavating nests in the hatchery that had already hatched. We dug out the old sand and replaced it with new sand from the beach. While we were organizing additional work, we noticed that baby turtles emerging from a nest and before long we had almost 50 hatchlings collected to bring down to the beach when high tide occurred. Afterwards we divided into two groups with one group collecting sand on the beach and hauling the sand by buckets and wheelbarrows up to the hatchery area where another group was working on exhumation of the old nests. Data was collected on the survival rate of each nesting site to determine the success of our efforts.



After dinner, the group patrolled the beach and again fortune came our way as we were able to observe adult female nesting turtles laying their eggs on holes they dug in the beach. We observed the entire egg laying process including covering her nest and watching her return to the sea. We also observed an

immature female attempting to dig a nesting hole in the wet sand without much success.



On the morning of **September 17th**, the volunteers again started removing sand from harvested cells to free up room for new nesting sites. Local Conservancy Association members were collecting, on average, eggs from 20-25 new nests each night. Even with three hatcheries they were running out of room to place collected eggs. Volunteers formed a bucket brigade to move sand from the beach to the hatchery. We delivered over 40 wheelbarrow loads of sand to the nearby hatchery to be used to refill sand removed from the exhumed nests. Again, on this day we observed new turtles emerging from their nests and we collected over 100 new turtles to be released.

After lunch we returned to the work site where we replaced bamboo rods that were holding the web fencing around the hatchery. In addition, we dug holes for seven 4x4 posts to shore up the hatchery structure. Once again while we were working, we observed another batch of emerging baby turtles. Thomas, our local biologist, said that these were the most nesting turtles and emerging turtles occurring at the same time that he has ever seen. After finishing our hatchery restoration work we relocated to the beach to release the three hatches that we had collected over the course of the day. After dinner we conducted a night beach patrol in light rain, but no female adult turtles were observed.



On our last full working day at Punta Banco, we constructed a barrier fence below one of the hatcheries to prevent beach erosion encroaching onto the hatchery. This work included finding large wooden logs along the beach and hauling them up to the site where the barrier was being constructed. Approximately 75 feet of new barrier fence was constructed.



During the afternoon, Marco led an optional hike at the nearby Tiskita private reserve to see some of the local wildlife. On the hike, Marco guided us to a spectacular waterfall on a secluded trail and then pointed out a variety of wildlife, including the three types of monkeys indigenous to the area (squirrel monkeys, white-faced monkeys, and howler monkeys) as well as other bird species.

A special thank you dinner for our volunteers and local community members was held that evening at TiTiguana. Several members of the community who attended the dinner were honored for their top contributions in collecting sea turtle eggs over the last year, receiving red headlamps for use in their future nest hunting. After dinner, folks ventured onto the dance floor and tested their footwork with the marimba music provided by the local hosts.



Day 7 - Travel to Cerro de la Muerte - The Highlands:

After an early morning departure and long drive from Punta Banco on **September 19th**, the group arrived at Cerro de La Muerte and checked into the picturesque Paraiso del Quetzal Lodge at about 5 p.m. Along the way we stopped at an interesting archaeological site, Parque Las Esferas, where large round stones had been carved hundreds of years ago for an unknown purpose although there have been several theories put forth. We also stopped at a local family run coffee plantation, Finca Orgánica Granados, where volunteers were able to see how coffee beans were dried and roasted. We were also grateful for our driver, Sergio, whose wonderfully calm and capable driving on the winding mountain roads got us to our destination safely.

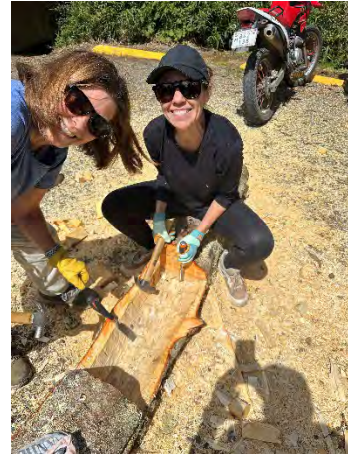
Paraiso del Quetzal Lodge is located at almost 9000 feet of elevation in the highlands of Costa Rica, so the volunteers welcomed the change from the heat and humidity they had experienced at Punta Banco while quickly pulling out warmer clothing. Some gathered near the fireplace in the lodge before dinner while others spent their time watching the many hummingbirds near the back deck of the lodge.

Day 8 – Projects supporting the Resplendent Quetzal

After breakfast, the group was introduced to Jorge Serano, the owner of the Paraiso del Quetzal Lodge who also coordinated the various activities of the local KABEK Association which is dedicated to conservation of the Resplendent Quetzal which prefers this highlands habitat. Jorge explained that KABEK is the name for Quetzal in the local Indigenous language. The members of the Association include private landholders, the national park, a forest reserve and a private reserve, who coordinate with the Costa Rica Wildlife Foundation.

One of the major challenges to Quetzal survival is the dearth of dead trees which Quetzals need for nesting. The Association constructs nests from harvested live trees and erects these nests in areas considered to be good Quetzal habitat. Similar to the approach at Punta Banco, the KABEK Association encourages Quetzal conservation by helping the Association participants to benefit economically as a result of their quetzal support. For example, the Association places Quetzal nests and plants Quetzal's favorite avocado trees to supply them with food on land set aside by private landowners. All the Quetzal sponsors coordinate to report when they have quetzals on their land. The local guides then bring birdwatchers who want to see the quetzals to the places with the best chance of viewing Quetzals and the landowners receive payments for allowing birdwatching.

After receiving an introduction to the KABEK Association and the planned activities for the day, the volunteer group got to work on constructing nest boxes. We 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 chain saw. The project consisted of chiseling out the scored wooden blocks to complete the nest cavities. Though the repetitive hammering of the chisels on the hardwood blocks quickly generated sympathy for woodpeckers' heads, it was rewarding to learn that a Quetzal would require 3 weeks to build a nest, while people could build one in three hours.



After completing one of the nest boxes, we began the arduous task



of transporting the completed nest box along with an accompanying pole to a location where Quetzals were known to inhabit. After digging a hole, the crew hoisted the nest box into position which will hopefully be used by a pair of Quetzals in the coming months.

After lunch we went to an area near the lodge to plant avocado trees which are the Quetzals favorite food. We planted about 30 trees on a steep and slippery slope. Our group then loaded up the bus for a short ride to Williams Farm, a spot known for providing some of the best opportunities to view wild Quetzals in

Costa Rica. Accompanied by Marco and another local guide who specializes in Quetzals, the group was treated to some extraordinary sightings of Quetzals.

To close out a wonderful day, the group enjoyed a delicious farewell dinner, then packed for an early morning departure.

Day 9 – Trip End

Early on September 21st the group boarded the van one final time for the drive to San José airport, where the group said good bye and the trip ended.

Acknowledgements

ConservationVIP® extends its heartfelt gratitude to all the dedicated volunteers who poured their hearts and souls into ensuring the success of the projects we accomplished together on this trip.



Special thanks go out 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 Urena, who worked tirelessly to ensure we had a good experience. Our incredible bus driver, Sergio Miranda, made sure our transportation was safe and enjoyable, all while laboring with us throughout the projects.

We appreciate the Punta Banco Community Association, especially Thomas Kobling, for allowing us to participate in a meaningful way in their important turtle conservation work. Similarly, we extend our gratitude to the KABEK Association for including us in their dedication to conservation of the beautiful Resplendent Quetzal.

PURA VIDA!!