

*Verge8ULE009**Cómo sobrevivir en el bosque*

How to Survive in the Jungle:

A Bilingual Glossary and Guide (Presented in Non-Alphabetical Order)

1. *Tica*. Now that you have arrived in Costa Rica, you are no longer the *gringa* you were. You are not *costarricense*—Costa Rican—either. It is your job to become *tica*, which also means Costa Rican, but in a much deeper, warmer, fried-plantains-and-gallo-pinto-for-breakfast kind of way. (See “*Gallo pinto*.”) The rest of the world calls them *costarricenses*—they call themselves *ticos*.

2. *Gallo pinto*. Beans and rice (see “*Arroz y frijoles*”), fried up together with spices and served every single damn morning. It means “spotted rooster,” and the legend is that an old *campesino* (man from the country) was surprised by a large number of guests one day. Unable to turn them away out of a traditional sense of hospitality, he slaughtered his one remaining rooster, an old speckled thing, to feed the group. His wife, desperate to stretch the poor *gallo*, mixed the meat up with what was on hand—rice and beans—until the people were eating nothing but. Their tico politeness was such, however, that they continued to praise the delicious rooster they’d been served. Your intestines might never forgive you, but you’d better eat up; it will keep you going through hours of cloud forest hikes.

3. *Arroz y frijoles*. Rice and beans. Main tico culinary and cultural staple dating back to Mayan times. When there is a large quantity of anything, *ticos* say it is *como arroz*—“like rice.” For example, after you run into your *padre tico*, Carlos, at the local Supercompro, he will tell Marta, your host mother, “I saw Sarita at the store. She was buying *cervezas como arroz*.”

4. *Capa*. Tico word for raincoat. The Tilarán mountain range, where you will be living, was created by the smashing together of tectonic plates to form the Continental Divide. On one side is the Atlantic Ocean; on the other is the Pacific (you can see the Pacific every day on your hour-long walk to school; look to your right). Monteverde, your tiny new town, is perched right on top of the highest point in the Tilarán, caught between the moisture flowing up from the Atlantic side and the wind currents barreling up from the Pacific. This means that you will go to sleep every night to the (oddly comforting) sound of howling winds battering the thin plywood planks of your host family's house and walk through clouds every morning. It may or may not be technically raining, but you will see ghostlike masses rush up the side of the mountain before feeling a cool veil slide over your face. Your eyelashes will be left beaded with rainbow-studded droplets. In fact, you will see many rainbows, large and small, during what the ticos call "*la época del arcoiris*"—the rainbow season, December through April—but you will be stunned and happy every time nonetheless.

Anyway, don't bother wearing a *capa*. You will be wet all of the time, no matter what you do. And in the winds, a *paraguas* (umbrella) is just a cruel joke. However, *botas* are essential (see "*Botas de goma*").

5. *Botas de goma*. Rainboots of rubber. The gallo pinto of the tico wardrobe. Get yourself to Supercompro as soon as you arrive and buy a pair of tall black boots with tan lug sole. Not only are they necessary for sloshing through piles of wet undergrowth in the cloud forest, avoiding *serpientes* (see "*Serpientes*," number 6), and trudging Monteverde's pothole-riddled dirt roads, they are the most "authentic" souvenir you'll take home with you.

6. *Serpientes*. Snakes. There are 137 species in Costa Rica, but don't worry—only 15 are fatally venomous, and of those 15, only 13 are found in the Monteverde Zone. You can tell a venomous snake by its triangular head, smaller scales on the head than those on the body, and vertical pupils. Many of the more venomous species are quite small, however, so if you spot one or step on one, make sure to get very close so that you can judge its features. If you do get bitten and your careful review of the deed-doer leads you to believe that it may be poisonous, don't panic—there's an institute about eight hours away, down the mountain in the Central Valley that manufactures antidotes. All you have to do is catch the snake that bit you or one of the same species, extract the venom, distill and purify it, and transport it to the Instituto Clodomiro by helicopter (you could take several buses, but since the antidote must be manufactured within three to five hours of your being bitten, a more time-efficient mode of transport is preferable. Of course, the helicopter must first be summoned from San José, the capital, to Monteverde, and there isn't exactly cell phone service in the cloud forest, but if you can get your hands on a CB radio within a few minutes of being bitten you should be fine, unless the weather's bad that day). At the institute, they will inject the extracted venom into a sheep or horse, wait for the animal to produce antibodies, then withdraw some blood from it and separate and concentrate the antibodies. Then, they will inject you with the freshly-made antidote and voila! You're saved!

Oh, it's important to mention that you must under no circumstances panic or become excited when bitten. It will raise your blood pressure and speed the spread of the venom through your system. Remember to remain very, very calm throughout this entire process or you may die within an hour.

7. *Toucan*. The *toucan* is a beautiful and iconic rain forest bird that you will spy a few different times—flashes of red and yellow high in the canopy, the kind of stunning, exotic sight that you

can't believe actually exists outside of picture books, the Discovery Channel, and Froot Loops commercials. It is also featured on the 5.000 *colón* note (worth about ten US dollars) and therefore the tagline of a terrific *chile* (see "*Chile*"). It goes like this: "What is the one animal that can coax a woman to take off her panties?....The toucan."

8. *Chile*. This is a *pachuco* word for joke (see "*Pachuco*," number 9). When you're at home in the evenings, drinking the *juanilama* herb tea that Marta made you to deal with your gallo pinto-induced digestive problems, Carlos will teach you *chile* after *chile*, to your endless delight. Many will be offensive to either *nicas* (people from neighboring and much poorer Nicaragua, who arrive in droves to work in the banana plantations, coffee farms, and service industry) or *gringos* (you and me, my friend). Some are offensive to both, like the one that goes, "There's a tico, a nica, and a gringo in an airplane and they decide to have a contest. The gringo says, 'I'm going to throw out the window that which we have most of in my country,' and he throws a huge pile of money out the window. The nica says, 'I'm going to throw out the window that which we have most of in my country,' and he throws a bunch of weapons out. The tico says, 'I'm going to throw out the window that which we have most of in my country,' and he pushes the nica and the gringo out the window." ¡Ja, ja, ja! Your job is to write them all down and repeat them to the staff at the Monteverde Institute, where you will be studying and working. You will quickly become known for your love of *chiles* and the staff will scramble to present you with new ones, and this is how you will make friends.

9. *Pachuco*. A word for someone who doesn't speak well, who uses a lot of slang—like all of the tico slang you should pester Carlos to teach you. Spanish, like English, differs greatly in vocabulary and usage from region to region, but Costa Rican Spanish is off the charts for number of unique words and phrases. No one knows why this should be so, especially in a country so

small and so close to other Central American countries, but if you want to understand what all the *tapis* (drunk men) in Bar Amigos, the local salsa club, are saying about you (see “*Piropos*”), bone up.

10. *Piropos*. Very broadly, comments directed at women by men. Sometimes translated as “catcalls,” but without the negative connotation—piropos are seen as positive affirmations of every woman’s beauty. Tica ladies love piropos, and tico men love slinging them out. You may grow weary of them, especially when struggling up steep, muddy hills with your book bag falling off your shoulder, sweating and cursing, while being watched and hooted at by a lazy group of ditch-dwellers idling on their *motos* (motorcycles, main method of transportation in Monteverde). You may find yourself shrieking at them one day, “Either *come el culo* or offer me a ride up this *jodido* hill, *playos!*” (You can learn these pachuco words when you get there.)

11. *No sea sapo*. An old tico expression that literally translates to “don’t be a toad,” and means don’t be nosy, don’t be a gossip, stay out of things that aren’t your business (you can use it on the men shouting piropos, but it’s really more for women—tica ladies tend to gossip). It’s a funny reference to the ubiquity of frogs and toads in tropical Costa Rican life—hopping into soup bowls, squishing underfoot—but it has a new, ironic meaning since the cloud forest amphibian decline. In the past twenty years, around half of all of the frog species in Costa Rica have gone suddenly and mysteriously extinct, due to a horrifying fungus that attacks frog populations. *El sapo dorado*, or the golden toad, is the Monteverde poster boy for this phenomenon—once found only in this region, the species completely disappeared within two years about fifteen years ago, and the ticos of Monteverde continue to mourn the loss as they would that of a family member, hanging pictures of the brilliantly orange little toad on walls and cross-stitching his likeness onto pillows. If you want to understand the soul of a Monteverdian, if

you want to match your heartbeat with the heartbeat of the town (and if you want to ingratiate yourself with Mark Wainwright, the dreamy British naturalist who will teach you all about frogs), then start caring about the sapos.

12. *Mae*. This one is *más tico que gallo pinto*, as Carlos would say—more tico than gallo pinto. It means “man, dude, bro, homie,” or whatever American equivalent you are familiar with in your region and social class, and it is how all ticos address one another. You’ll know Eric and Ernesto, the fast-talking, smartmouth tico boys you work with, have finally started to respect you when you overhear them saying to each other, “Listen to her—she’s just like a mae.”

13. *Bocas*. If you make it out to Bar Amigos (remember, the salsa club) or Moon Shiva (your favorite Israeli-owned, drug-addict uncle-and-nephew-run local watering hole), then you are going to be needing *bocas*, or bar snacks, after a *tuanes* (awesome) night of dancing to “Single Ladies” in your rainboots with all your friends. You should head down the hill to La Taberna, the freaky techno club that no one ever goes to, and sit outside in the cool midnight mist to get yourself a plate of *papas fritas*, French fries. There you will likely run into Juan, the cousin of the girl who gave you the tour of the coffee farm; Angie, the hippie girl who used to date Chanco-the-bar-owner; Roberto, your ecology professor’s partner; or any number of Monteverde characters. These will be real *pura vida* moments (see “*Pura vida*”), when you realize that you know people around here, and they know you.

14. *Pura vida*. The most quintessentially tico of all tico expressions and the one that all tourists learn upon touchdown. *You*, however, will really *understand* the term (or so you’ll flatter yourself). You’ll know that it is not only an all-purpose positive response (“How are you?” “*Pura vida*”). It is also a dodgy response to questions that you don’t want to answer (“What time did

you get home last night, Sarita?” “Pura vida, Marta.”), a telephone greeting and farewell, a description for an easygoing, fun friend (“You’ll like Roy, he’s pura vida.”), a description for a great meal or a nice drink, and much more.

More than anything, it’s an expression of deep satisfaction with life just as it is; *pura vida* is not something ticos claim to practice or to have achieved but rather something that is experienced in moments. You’ll understand this when you see a sloth’s clawed arm tumble heavily down out of a tree, and look up the tall trunk into his face; when you see the long emerald tail feathers of a quetzal stream out behind him as he flies; when you stare up into the hollow belly of an enormous, gnarled strangler fig tree that took four hundred years to be created. You’ll know it when you’re making *tortas de yuca*—fried yucca cakes—with Marta, when you’re gossiping with the institute women in the kitchen over tea, and when you’re bumming an illegal ride up the mountain on the back of a campesino’s truck, bouncing around terrifying hairpin turns and watching the forest open up below you as the stars come out above. You’ll find yourself trying to articulate how you feel in these moments, and the only words that will come to your mind will be the only appropriate ones—*pura vida*. Pure life.