

Chapter 1

The Perils of Paradise

January 29, 2019

The hot, steaming jungle is unpredictable, as always. It can be eerily quiet one moment, and next thing you know, the howlers get into a screaming contest with the cicadas as the rain pummels the zinc roofs. The visitors to our lodge this week were, among other colorful characters, a filmmaker, a desperate househusband, a biologist specializing in the egg-laying habits of needlefish, a married couple (just not to each other) and a couple of young computer nerds with undiagnosed personality disorders. I came in search of different species of birds but the human zoo can be just as mesmerizing.

Whenever you set out to explain where Saladero Ecologde is located, people squint their eyes and cock their heads to one side, before venturing a timid "Is that near Golfito?". You have to say, "Yeah, sort of," because there is just no use trying to get people to understand exactly where it is. I suppose you can always look it up on Google Maps, but in case you are still doubting, there's more to a place than GPS coordinates.

Next thing, people want to know which road gets you there.

"No, there is no road."

"What do you mean, no road?" People think that if you cannot drive there, it does not exist. And yet, Saladero exists. In an entirely separate plane of reality, yes, but it exists nonetheless.

To be somewhat more precise, Saladero is located about twenty-five kilometers roughly northwest of Golfito, following the irregular coastline towards the inside of the gulf. There

are just a few other places dotting those twenty-five kilometers of coastline, but Saladero is the northernmost one before you get to the mouth of the Esquinas River. Inland from the coastline you have Piedras Blancas National Park, the park with the lowest number of (recorded) visitors in all of Costa Rica, something like 300 in all of 2018. No roads traverse the park, and the few walking trails happen to be only near the inland entrance, which is near Esquinas Rainforest Lodge, about 15 kilometers inland from Saladero. That's just to show you that although it's on the mainland, there is no land access to Saladero. For all practical purposes, Saladero can be thought of as an island. It's especially helpful to think this way if and when you pack . I'm not saying this so you try to take a whole lot of stuff with you when you go there, because you have a rather small weight limit anyway. It's just for you to be prepared to eventually do without some random item that you are used to thinking as useful, and be surprised to discover that there are other ways to deal with discomforts, large or small, real or imagined.

So how do you get to Saladero? Puerto Jimenez and Golfito are the places where you can catch a boat. Not that there is a regular water taxi service or anything. You have to have made previous arrangements with the lodge. That is, if you write too many emails, or strike the wrong chord, the lodge will inexplicably, immediately, run out of space for you and your party. Forever.

Guests that have successfully passed Harvey's initial investigation can be picked up at either town. If from Golfito, there's a sort of dock, so you can comfortably step onto the boat. If from Puerto Jimenez, you'll have to skip over a ledge of moss-covered stones, luggage in tow, but your feet might stay dry. You could even arrange for pickup at a beach called Playa Blanca, if you don't mind wading your way to the boat. Puerto Jimenez seems to be closer, or at least the sea is smoother (sometimes), so it's about a half hour from there to Saladero. However, travel times can vary wildly. If David (boat captain/cook/gardener/fix-it-all/tour guide/vet) is in charge of the boat and there are no guests, Golfito is a bone-shattering 40 minutes' boat ride away, or a steady 50 minutes with Harvey (owner/bartender/marketer/tour guide/pancake artist).

The boat is banana yellow on the outside and sky blue on the inside, with a little tarp on top that serves no purpose. What can a little tarp do against the mighty Sun, God of the Tropics? The sun will find you, and blast you with its rays, no matter what. Ditto for the other equally powerful elements, Rain and Wind. Try anything against them, and you are bound to fail, in case you were wondering why is it that in such a rainy country, people go everywhere without an umbrella.

In this part of Costa Rica, the land rises out of the ocean and morphs into mountain almost immediately. It is as abrupt as if you were to stand on your feet the second you hear your wake-up alarm, or at least that's how it feels. The sudden, impossible slopes originate from deep under the water, in such a way that the deepest part of the Gulf sits right in front of Saladero. It is over 200 meters deep, and not quite 100 meters away from the shoreline. The result is that you can see the dolphins fishing right from the lobby/restaurant/kitchen, and hear their bellows clearly. On the steep, rocky faces, the jungle is growing just as thick as inland, and the fish, without ever leaving the water, come to rest in the shade of the overhanging trees. They swim up to the surface to peck on the droppings of little birds floating among the branches. Because of the gradient, the beaches in this whole area are few and far between. Saladero is one of those rare beaches. The crumbling seawall claims the only largish piece of gentle sloping land in the whole area, and either side of the beach is guarded by massive, jungle-covered boulders.

If the tide is low, the boat bringing a fresh batch of tourists will stop a couple hundred meters from the lodge. Those visitors that managed to keep their shoes dry when boarding the boat, now realize in shock that they need to take their shoes off and wade their way ashore. If Royser, the gardener, happens to have heard the boat, he'll run down to help the guests with the bags, as David has to moor the ship and Oscar, who is David's double, cannot be bothered. Next, the guests discover that there is no sand. The sharp little rocks that make up the ground seem to have been left lying there, shards remaining from the time when God built this world, which seems to have been not that long ago. Millions of itty bitty crabs dash among the rocks, their oily shine easily mistaken for rivulets of ocean water trickling among the rocks, racing their way back to the ocean, but regular people do not notice the crabs.

If the tide is high, the boat can take you almost to the steps that breach the seawall, so you'll be able to walk right from the boat to the lodge. As you can imagine, such comforts are, like the beaches, few and far between.

Usually Susan (Harvey's wife/head cook/purchasing agent/maker of rules) will take a break from the kitchen and come to the corner of the lobby/restaurant/kitchen nearest to the seawall to greet the guests. Well, actually, it is to prevent them from touching Lulu, her rescue dog, who bites guests who touch her in the wrong spot. So far, no one has been able to determine exactly where that spot is, whether behind an ear or on her forehead, or whatever. It does not matter. Guests are to be warned, upon setting foot on the first clump of itchy grass, that Lulu is not to be touched, no matter how sweet she may seem.

It's always a good idea, Susan explained to me when I first started working in Saladero a couple of months earlier, to let the guests chill for a minute, have the party gather in the shade, and give them something to drink before we go on to further instruct them on the perils of paradise. As soon as possible, but without scaring them, one must warn them of the falling coconuts, before admonishing them to avoid drinking the tap water at all costs. No bare feet anywhere, because of the snakes, except on the lobby/restaurant/kitchen, where it is mandatory, because of Susan. The tiny snakes are more of a problem than the big ones, because you can't see the tiny ones and they have not yet learned to avoid you. But it is best not to talk about the snakes too much, and just say, maybe "ants" or "spiders", which can also hurt you but it's not as scary. Well, that's what Susan said. At this point of guests' arrival routine, with the boat moored up and David gone fishing, it's not like anyone is able to turn back, even if they had asked to. They are stuck in Saladero for a minimum of three long nights and their corresponding internet-free days.

I was lured to Saladero under the title of Hotel Manager or something of equal dignity, but the only thing I ever managed was to remain alive, and I almost screwed that one up too. Mostly I guided tours, and only whenever Harvey was not available, or did not particularly feel like going. I was also available to talk to the guests. This proved to be no mean feat,

given the lack of outside input (no TV, internet, or books - the few available were in Danish, I would figure out later, or German, or they were about the jungle and had to be left alone). The rain would sometimes keep the guests moored at the lobby/restaurant/kitchen for hours, so it fell to me, unbusy as I was, to listen their hours away. I also did stuff in the kitchen, but never won any accolades from Susan. My sworn allegiance to butter and other exotic ingredients, and my use of them in economically unfeasible quantities attempted against the lodge's bottom line and Susan's Spartan view of bodily nourishment.

So how did I end up in Saladero? It all started a few months after turning 50. I assumed everything would be all right, after all, and that 50 was just a number, but one Friday afternoon, the spirit of Gandalf came knocking on my door. I was, in classic Bilbo style, comfortably holed up in my little apartment, going about my normal routine full of nice little things: warm showers, two eggs swimming in butter for breakfast, work at the computer, maybe coffee with one of my friends in the afternoons, and knitting in front of the TV at night.

"You must leave," Gandalf, or whatever it was, demanded.

"Where?!" I wondered. "And why?!"

"It does not matter, as long as you leave at once."

The thought of leaving, and the urgency of it, suddenly took over me. As I paced the apartment, not knowing what to do next, Berni, a friend and at the same time client of my web design business, called. He wasn't the right person to hear that I had suddenly gotten the irrepressible urge to leave (and therefore abandon his website), but he heard me out, suggesting I become a hotel manager, and our conversation ended with him promising to send an email about it to his hotelier friends. Not that I was convinced I should work at a hotel. I never had in the past, unless you consider that, back when I still had a family with me, many of our friends and relatives thought of our home as some kind of all-you-can-eat resort.

After some hours had passed, I gradually became calmer and even sat down to work on the computer. It could have all ended there, except that my friend, being English, actually sent the email.

Immediately.

AND one of his friends - the one living farthest away - answered.

That friend was Harvey. He and Susan hired me. I haven't been able to determine whether it was a mistake or not, either theirs or mine. I guess it does not matter any more. It's all over now. We've all gone our separate ways, like dry leaves that fell from a tree and got dispersed by dry-season winds. But for a while at least, we hung together from the same branch, glued with the same sap, on one heck of a tree.