



Rafters brave Class III rapids through deep rain forests in Honduras.

HONDURAS

The River Wild

This extended float in remote eastern Honduras penetrates the heart of Central America's primal rain forest.

IF COSTA RICA, famous for its cloud forest, seems overrun by ecotourists, then Honduras is its lesser-known cousin. This Central American nation, a mere two-hour flight from Miami, offers rain forest splendor without the crowds—and on a surprisingly grand scale.

To discover the primal core of eastern Honduras's Moskitia—sometimes called the “Little Amazon”—take the “Rafting the Río Plátano” tour (Mesoamerican Ecotourism Alliance, 303-440-3362; www.travelwithmea.org; 14 days; \$2,850). For days on end you'll see wildlife and virgin forest but no other travelers. This was the

hauntingly remote region portrayed in the 1986 Harrison Ford flick *The Mosquito Coast*, an area named for its natives, rather than insects.

From the capital, Tegucigalpa, you're shuttled by four-wheel-drive vehicle northeast to the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve, a 1.3-million-acre rain forest as big as Everglades National Park. After a night in the village of Bonanza, you hike 11 miles (with pack mules) over two days to reach your put-in on the river. En route, you stop to explore, with the help of an archaeologist, the pre-Columbian ruin of Lancetillal, with plazas, altars, and petroglyphs.

On day five you board rafts and begin your eight-day float downstream toward the Caribbean. Expect Class II and III rapids.

Keep an eye open for blue morpho butterflies; hundreds of species of birds, including toucans and macaws; and assorted mammals, including tapirs, peccaries (wild pigs), otters, monkeys, and maybe a jaguar or cougar. You might also get to pick fresh limes and bananas.

“The animals aren't used to seeing people, so you can raft super-close to them and they don't run away,” says Robert Gallardo, a naturalist and guide who lives near the Copán ruins in Honduras

and has been surveying bird species in the reserve.

Gallardo's favorite part of the Río Plátano run is El Subterráneo, a gorge full of house-size boulders where the river plunges out of sight and the group has to schlep the boats along a rocky portage. Downstream await petroglyphs as well as indigenous communities of Pech and Miskito Indians. In the village of Las Marías, you overnight in a thatched bunkhouse before reaching the coast. The finale is a stay at the luxurious Lodge at Pico Bonito.

“Nature tourism is just getting started in Moskitia,” Gallardo says. “This is a huge wilderness that deserves more recognition—and more protection.”