




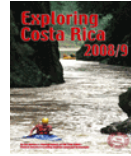
- [Home](#)
- [Top Story](#)
- [Business & Real Estate](#)
- [Arts, Travel & Fishing](#) >
- [The Nica Times](#)
- [Daily News](#) 
- [Letters to the Editor](#)
- [Photo Galleries](#) 
- [Classified Ads](#) 
- [More in the Print Edition](#)

Travel

Heliconias and Birds Abound on River-Isle Botanical Garden

By Ann Antkiw
Special to The Tico Times | editorial@ticotimes.net

A tiny, five-acre isle created by a split in the Puerto Viejo River is home to a virtually undiscovered Garden of Eden. A naturalist's dream and birder's paradise, Heliconia Island is the site of an enchanting botanical garden, 10 minutes' drive from Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí in north-central Costa Rica.



Getting Along Swimmingly: Renate Herberger reads to kids on a visit to Avellanas, on the northern Pacific coast. The swimmer has been making her way up the coast since Feb. 1 to raise ocean awareness. See this Friday's [print or electronic edition](#) of The Tico Times for more on this story

Photo by Emma Roll

Now you can get the complete print edition in digital form.  [CLICK HERE](#)

Previous owner Tim Ryan purchased the property in 1992 and began developing the botanical garden, where more than 70 different species of heliconias now flower throughout the year. Henk and Carolien Peters from Groesbeek, Holland, bought the property while on vacation in Costa Rica. They have been living there for a year with their two German shepherds, Ringo and Costa, brought from Holland, and Doggie, a recent Tico addition to the family.

The couple was totally unprepared for what was in store for them when they fell in love with the property.

"We had visited Costa Rica a few times before we decided on this undertaking and complete change of lifestyle," said the friendly, energetic Carolien, who owned a dog-grooming business back in Holland.

Henk, who worked for Philips for 22 years, also had to adapt, supervising the construction of their home and the lodging, as well as struggling to learn Spanish.

Featured on a Dutch reality TV show, the Peterses faced many challenges during the process of moving and settling in on the island. For example, last April the opening of the floodgates upriver cut the island off completely, stranding the couple.

"It was a very scary experience," Henk said. "We watched the water rising and covering the first three steps of the six that lead up to the porch.

"Since then we have been marooned quite often during the rainy season, but unlike the first time, it only lasts about three hours."

Accessible only by footbridge, the manicured garden with its verdant green lawn, borders, beds and shrubberies is enhanced by a purple ground cover known as cucaracha, Spanish for cockroach. Most of the property's 70 different varieties of heliconias are native to Costa Rica, but some come from other tropical zones around the world and are rarely seen in this country.

The garden and noncultivated areas also feature botanical relatives of the heliconias, colorful gingers, bromeliads, philodendrons, orchids, ferns and ornamental banana trees. Bamboo, native trees and the distinctive, fan-shaped Madagascar traveler's palm all grow together in natural harmony. Two trails lead from the garden to the meandering river, a gentle tributary of the Isla Grande River that flows past the end of the property.

Birdwatchers will have no problem spotting their feathered friends in the early morning, throughout the day and in the evening. Birding expert and naturalist Dan Keller has reported 227 species seen on and



Island in the Stream: A footbridge provides the only access to Heliconia Island.

Vicky Longland | Tico Times



Carolien Peters leads a tour of her garden.

Vicky Longland | Tico Times



One of four guest rooms.

around the island. These include colorful trogons, toucans, Baltimore orioles and a variety of tanagers and flycatchers. Down by the river, herons, kingfishers and sunbitterns can be spotted.

Vicky Longland | Tico Times

Animals also roam the property; fortunate visitors might catch a glimpse of a howler monkey, sloth, armadillo, porcupine or possum.

You can visit Heliconia Island on a day trip, but if you want to stay a while, the Peterses offer accommodation in a new hexagonal construction built on stilts and comprising four attractive rooms with comfortably furnished balconies.

Though small, the rooms have windows on three sides and a large mirror that gives them a spacious, airy feeling. Featuring bamboo furniture made by talented bamboo artist and designer Brian Erickson, they offer simple comfort, air conditioning or ceiling fans, and a choice of king, queen or two single beds. The tiled bathrooms have ample hot water, but getting to the shelves placed behind the door requires some ingenuity.

Though not experienced restaurateurs, the Peterses offer a friendly, homey atmosphere in the open-air balcony restaurant and bar, where breakfast, light lunches and, on request, dinner, are served. This is an ideal, cool place to sit, relax with a cold drink and watch the nonstop activity at the bird table. Day tours available include the Tortuguero canals, rafting on the Sarapiquí River, zipping through the canopy and a visit to the nearby La Selva Biological Station.

Admittance to the gardens with a self-guided tour is \$10 per person; a two-hour guided tour is \$15 per person. Night tours are also available. For guests staying at Heliconia Island, the guided tour is included in the rate. This is highly recommended, as Carolien, who speaks Dutch, English, German and some Spanish, is extremely knowledgeable about what grows in her garden.

"I have been studying nonstop for the past year," she said, displaying a detailed map of the garden with every plant and tree labeled.

Heliconia Island also caters to groups for \$12 per person. Recent visitors have included birders, horticulturists and photographers.

Check out a sampling of *The Tico Times'* ever-popular travel guide, *Exploring Costa Rica*, at http://www.ticotimes.net/guidebook/exploring_costarica.cfm?index=100.

Getting There, Rates, Info

From San José, take the highway to Limón through Braulio Carrillo National Park. After the park, turn left at the intersection for Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí, by Rancho Roberto restaurant. At kilometer 22 there's a small, easy-to-miss wooden sign on the right side of the road; turn left down a dirt road and follow the signs for Heliconia Island. Leave your vehicle in the parking lot at the entrance and walk over the footbridge.

Rates, including breakfast, guided tour and taxes, are \$80 for a double room with air conditioning or \$70 for a double with fan (payment in cash only, colones, euros or U.S. dollars). Dinner costs \$10.

For information and reservations, call 2764-5220, e-mail info@heliconiaisland.com or visit www.heliconiaisland.com.



Roy Arguedas Arias | Tico Times

a

[RETURN TO THE TOP OF PAGE](#)