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Go for the Guaro

***AGUARDIENTE* MEANS "FIREWATER" IN SPANISH.** Shorten that to guaro and you're talking sugarcane spirits. Last February I traveled through Costa Rica for three weeks on the barest of budgets—backpacking in flip-flops, staying in hostels and sleeping like a sloth (sometimes even *surrounded by* sloths) on the beach. The local libation that fit my finances was Cacique Guaro, considered by many to be Costa Rica's national drink.

This 60-proof clear sugarcane spirit, produced by the same company in Costa Rica for more than 150 years, is slightly sweet, with hints of vanilla and honey, but it's straight to the point. Cacique Guaro is probably the harshest spirit I've ever consumed in any significant quantity. Eagerly.

Shortly after arriving in Costa Rica's capital of San Jose, I boarded a bus for Santa Elena, a small northern hilltop town and the gateway to Monteverde Cloud Forest Biological Reserve. Five hours later, after a long and winding bus ride, I was in sleepy Santa Elena eating fried fish, papaya, and black beans and rice in a tiny café. I walked around the small stretch of town, noting the armed guard in front of the breadbox of a national bank (the only bank for miles) and the festive music for a dance getting underway at the nearby community center, until a stray dog led me to La Taverna Bar & Disco, the sleepiest bar in town. There I had my first taste of Cacique Guaro, and the dog got dessert: a belly full of whatever there was a little too much of in the kitchen.

I sat with La Taverna's owner for hours, his only customer, as he poured customary small glasses of Cacique Guaro accompanied with lime wedges and salt. We tipped back the spirit as if it was water collected from the nearby cloud forest and talked, in broken English and even more fractured Spanish, about Santa Elena, his hometown. He asked about the U.S. while I marveled at the flavor—crisp and clean—and soon the feel of Costa Rica's national hooch.

As I walked home a few hours later to the sounds of fruit bats swooping down in search of food, my canine friend barked goodbye while running up a hill—nosing toward a not-so-distant breakfast, hopeful for another idle cook. Two weeks later—after I'd soaked by starlight in sulfurous hot springs at the base of an active volcano, cracked young coconuts on a deserted beach, and hiked under jungle canopy ablaze with scarlet macaws, home to watchful squirrel and spider monkeys—my travels came to an end. And even though I'd spent the latter part of my trip fending off the blazing heat with local lagers, Cacique Guaro was still on my mind.

In San Jose I purchased an armful of mini bottles for friends and a couple big bottles for myself, but I have to admit that I've cracked into the guaro only once since returning. Though I tend to favor local spirits when home, the real reason my bottles remain untapped is that to me, certain drinks seem to taste better when traveling. Like fairway cotton candy tucked in a purse, or saltwater taffy smuggled home from the beach, drinking Cacique Guaro in my kitchen in the Pacific Northwest will never be quite the same as tasting it in that sleepy bar in Santa Elena. But maybe during the holidays this year, when everything is cloaked in the dead of winter chill, a little Costa Rican firewater will be just the thing to warm me and rekindle that night. —**Liz Crain**