

: WENDY PERRIN'S NINTH ANNUAL 128 WORLD'S TOP TRAVEL SPECIALISTS BY WENDY PERRIN

✦ A Tale of Two Trips

by Brook Wilkinson | Published [August 2008](#) | [See more Condé Nast Traveler articles](#) >

Utilizing the latest Internet tools, Brook Wilkinson pits her trip-planning skills against those of a travel specialist

Choice of Destinations

In my very first conversation with Richard Edwards about Costa Rica, I defined my parameters: I could go for eight nights in March; I wanted to spend time in a cloud forest, at a volcano, and at the beach; I just *had* to take a zip-line canopy tour; and my budget was flexible. How he chose to fulfill these requests was his decision. To avoid being influenced by his recommendations, I sketched out my own itinerary before seeing his. Edwards sent me on a wide, clockwise circuit of the country: I would be driven from the airport to two lodges in the cloud forests northwest of San José (El Silencio Lodge & Spa and Villa Blanca); would head from there to Arenal Volcano—where I would defy gravity on a zip-line; would fly to the Osa Peninsula for two nights at the Lapa Rios ecolodge; would hop another flight to Manuel Antonio National Park's beaches and rain forest; and would be dropped off for one last night at the Finca Rosa Blanca Country Inn, outside San José, before my flight home. The itinerary I crafted myself was a smaller loop that could be done entirely by car: from San José to Arenal, then on to the Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve (where I'd booked a zip-line) and finally to Manuel Antonio. These are probably the three best-known destinations in the country, and while I had read in guidebooks and online about plenty of off-the-beaten-path alternatives, in the end I opted for the safe bets.

The most notable omission from Edwards's itinerary was Monteverde. As Edwards explained to me after my trip, he avoids Monteverde due to the long, bumpy approach road and the high-season crowds, instead sending clients to lodges with private cloud-forest reserves. After my own stop at Monteverde, I understood his reasoning, but found his alternatives lacking in a different way: Even though I had my own guide, the lodges required that theirs accompany me on hikes, and in one case charged quite a bit extra for this service. An obvious omission from my self-planned itinerary was a stay at Lapa Rios, the only hotel to ever appear on both *Condé Nast Traveler's* Green and Gold Lists (honoring its social and environmental efforts and its popularity with readers, respectively). While I had considered the hotel, the logistics of returning my rental car to San José and booking flights to Lapa Rios proved too complicated for me, but my efforts would have been worth it: The two days I spent there were the highlight of Edwards's trip.

Cost and Ease of Booking

There's no denying that using a travel specialist is going to cost more than making arrangements on your own—in my case, about thirty percent more. (My self-planned trip cost \$4,500, while the one designed by Edwards was \$6,250—not including international air for either.) Though most travel agents—Edwards included—won't break down each element of a trip's cost, I surmised that the extra charges for his itinerary primarily went to guides and drivers, the two internal flights, and better hotels, as well as to his planning fee. What Edwards undoubtedly did save me is time. I spent a mere 2 hours consulting with him on his proposed itinerary, and more than 23 hours planning and booking mine. What took so long? Apart from my initial research—scouring guidebooks and sites like VirtualTourist.com to decide which areas of the country to visit—the most time-consuming part of the process was booking hotels. For the small, independently owned Costa Rican properties that I chose, the process typically went like this: I'd send an e-mail inquiring about availability, wait a day or two to hear back, return the reservation form by e-mail, and request confirmation—after I'd paid a nonrefundable deposit of anywhere from 30 to 100 percent. Several of the hotels could only fax their forms, so I also had to sign up for a Web-based fax service. In one case, a property promised me a room but then forgot about my reservation and gave it to someone else.

128 WORLD'S TOP TRAVEL SPECIALISTS

[Wendy's Rolodex of Travel Specialists](#) >

[Tips on Hiring a Specialist](#) >

A Tale of Two Trips

[Travel Specialist User Reviews](#) >

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In contrast, Edwards and I had a few initial conversations over the phone, during which he gleaned from me the goals and preferred style of my trip. After that, we corresponded almost entirely via e-mail. Edwards took it in stride when I had to change my dates three times, and happily revised the itinerary when I asked for more local flavor. When I was ready to book, he sent me a single invoice for the entire itinerary.

Timing and Pace

As I was narrowing down my travel dates, Edwards saved me from potential disaster by pointing out that the week before Easter—Semana Santa—is the busiest time to visit, with foreign families on spring break and Ticos (Costa Ricans) heading to the beach. Had I booked the international flights before hearing his warning, it would have been nearly impossible to find available hotel rooms, guides, and activities.

For my self-planned trip, I opted to rent a car and drive myself and my companion around, but I had trouble finding accurate drive times from point to point. Since I didn't want to miss a canopy tour or sea-kayaking trip, I never pre-booked an activity for the same day that I had to travel from one location to the next. And still it didn't all fit: When the drive from San José to Arenal Volcano took longer than I'd expected, I had to cut out the hike I'd hoped to go on that afternoon.

Edwards, on the other hand, was able to time his itinerary practically to the minute. Although he had to pre-book many of my activities since I was traveling during high season, he knew exactly how long to allow for every transfer and event, so that I could fit a zip-line adventure, nature walk, and spa treatment into a single day. The one time I fell behind schedule—wandering through the organic garden with El Silencio Lodge's charismatic chef—my guide deftly rearranged the afternoon's plans. I never felt rushed, and there was ample time for relaxation between the activities.

Accommodations and Guides

A good travel specialist adheres to the same code as this magazine's reporters: Don't endorse a hotel unless you've slept in its beds, eaten at its restaurant, and been in the care of its staff. It's for this reason that Edwards managed to choose better hotels than I did. Take the two properties near Manuel Antonio National Park: Mine, Si Como No, had a somewhat faded mass-market feel, while his pick, **Arenas del Mar**, had bigger, more elegant rooms and its own beach. Another perk: We were upgraded to a suite. Having opened only last October, Arenas was too new to show up on any of the Web sites I trolled for recommendations, let alone in the guidebooks, which are researched months before publication. Edwards also booked us into the new El Silencio Lodge, a chic, earth-friendly place where we had ultra-personal service as two of only three guests that night. The hotels I chose were acceptable and cost a fair amount less than Edwards's, but his offered higher standards of style and service.

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One thing that everyone can agree on is the value of a good guide. After I fruitlessly searched through a variety of Web sites that specialize in booking guides and tours, the guide that I ultimately found—through [Viamigo.com](#)—was the worst of both trips. Viamigo promises to "connect [travelers] with professional guides and local cognoscenti." A search of its Costa Rican experts yielded a curious array of options, such as the "sophisticated and charming gentleman" in San José. (Was he advertising his services as a guide or an escort?) I e-mailed the three most promising candidates and heard back from just one: Pablo Gonsalves of Nature Adventures Tours. Gonsalves agreed to take me on a tour of Manuel Antonio National Park, and then gave me the name of another guide for Monteverde. Things looked promising—until Gonsalves stood me up. When I called him half an hour after our arranged meeting time, he wasn't apologetic and, more bizarre, told me that I'd be happy when I learned why he was late: A romantic tryst had taken him out of town, and he hadn't bothered to look at his appointment book upon his return. Gonsalves's lack of professionalism soured me on the entire experience—and he did not volunteer to refund any of the \$50 fee. To add insult to injury, when my travel companion offered him a novel she'd just finished, Gonsalves admitted that he hadn't read a book since high school. Not exactly the thirst for learning I expect in a guide.

Gonsalves did do one thing right, though: The guide he recommended for Monteverde was terrific. Danilo Brenes, who was waiting for me at the preserve's gates when I arrived 20 minutes early, proved to be friendly, charming, and knowledgeable—in short, a model guide. But what impressed me most was his palpable enthusiasm. It was as if each bird, monkey, and insect were the first he'd ever spotted, and yet he'd been guiding in Monteverde for almost 20 years. Even though Brenes is one of just 23 guides certified by the Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve, he wasn't listed on any of the Web sites that purport to connect travelers with guides. I eventually tracked him down on iViva! Monteverde's site ([monteverde-online.com](#)), which is run by a network of local businesses.

Although Edwards's guides didn't quite match Brenes in terms of passion, they were as knowledgeable about their areas of expertise as Brenes was about his—and they had more impressive résumés: Julio Madriz, who accompanied me for the first three days of my trip, is a university professor and Nature Conservancy researcher when not guiding; José Calvo, my guide in Manuel Antonio, works primarily for Lindblad Expeditions and has lectured to Audubon groups in the United States. In the future, I will never book a guide without a recommendation from someone I trust (like a travel agent or a friend). Credentials are important, but the way a guide interacts with his or her audience is the surest measure of skill.

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Execution of the Itinerary

Travel agents are like soccer goalies: They're all but invisible when they do their job well, and are the first to be blamed when something goes wrong. Edwards tries to avoid the latter by maintaining a network of partners who watch over his clients' trips. What you give up for this careful monitoring is serendipity. I had guides and drivers tending to my needs at almost every moment, even during a 95-minute layover en route to **Lapa Rios**. The upshot is that although no idle question goes unanswered, I felt stifled at times. On the other hand, whereas creating my own itinerary allowed me greater independence, I had no one to turn to when the inevitable snags developed. For example, I had booked a sea-kayaking excursion through the Web site of Si Como No, my Manuel Antonio hotel, and indicated a preference for the 8:10 A.M. trip. The concierge wrote back, "I will make the reservation for you!!!" Yet problems arose when I inquired about the trip at check-in. First I was told that my tour wouldn't start until 11:15 A.M. At the newly appointed hour, I hopped on the tour operator's bus and arrived at . . . a mangrove forest. Unbeknownst to me, my trip had morphed from a high seas adventure into a placid mangrove tour. I explained the mix-up to the guide, but since I had no proof of my original request with me, I gave up and pushed off into the swamp.

Renting a car was also a leap of faith. Most of the roads in Costa Rica are in far better condition than I had expected from the stories I'd heard of huge potholes, but the signage is atrocious. Without the GPS system that I rented, I might *still* be looking for the road to Arenal. While I like having my own set of wheels, others might prefer to sit back and let someone else do the driving.

Local Flavor

Logic dictates that traveling on your own lends itself to local experiences—the chance encounter with a Good Samaritan as you stare at a map or with a man who sells mangoes by the side of the road. But such interactions are curtailed when, like me, you don't speak the local language. So I was thrilled when a guidebook led me to El Establo Mountain Hotel in Monteverde. El Establo offered to arrange a meal with a family, to "share with the culture."

I booked a room at the hotel so that I could take advantage of this opportunity. When I called to confirm the room reservation I had made online, the reservationist didn't know about the family meals, so I asked to speak to the general manager. She told me that they normally arranged meals only for groups of ten or more, but agreed to look into it. I finally got what appeared to be a confirmation in writing, and when I checked in to the hotel, I was assured that everything was set. But on the evening in question, the front desk staff knew nothing of the arrangements, and wouldn't investigate further. Instead of sharing empanadas with a Tico family, I ended up munching pizza in my hotel room.

128 WORLD'S TOP TRAVEL SPECIALISTS

[Wendy's Rolodex of Travel Specialists](#) >

[Tips on Hiring a Specialist](#) >

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When I told Edwards that I wanted to learn more about Costa Rican culture, he called his Tica mother-in-law, who welcomes his clients into her home from time to time. Doña Mara showed us how to make tortillas and *patacones* (fried plantains) and served a delicious lunch. Our guide translated for us, but Mara's big smile said what her words didn't have to. Furthermore, Doña Mara's was far and away the most authentic Tico food I ate during the entire trip. In a country like Costa Rica, where the water can be impure, I stick to restaurants recommended by guidebooks—which are generally reliable if not terribly adventurous. In contrast, Edwards's guides took us to two local *sodas*, a sort of Costa Rican restaurant/deli, where we saw few tourists.

Safety

Travel agents are conservative in their concern for clients' safety, for obvious reasons. Edwards was distressed to hear that I'd stayed at the Tabacón Grand Spa Thermal Resort during my self-planned trip, since it's located in a high-risk zone, in the path of Arenal Volcano's previous eruptions. I'd read as much in guidebooks but had given little thought to the potential danger, since the hotel and its hot springs are widely recommended. It's hard to say if I was less safe at Tabacón than I am in my earthquake-prone San Francisco home, but this much is clear: Edwards's hotel, the Arenal Kioro, had a more serene feel than the Tabacón and an even better view of the cone.

I was willing to err on the side of safety, though, when it came to canopy tours. I sought out a company with a strong safety ethic—not an easy judgment to make, since there is no national certifying organization for Costa Rica's zip-line operators. I settled on the Original Canopy Tour, because, as the name implies, it was the first in the business and consequently should know what it is doing. The equipment seemed well maintained, the staff conscientious, and the ride fun. As for Edwards's choice, Sky Trek, the staff and equipment were up to snuff, but this time the ride was thrilling, with platforms that were an order of magnitude higher, longer, and faster. And as Edwards explained to me after the fact, Sky Trek is one of the few operators (the Original Canopy Tour not among them) that passes muster with the safety engineers hired by his business partners in Costa Rica.

In terms of danger, dangling from 650-foot-high cables probably paled in comparison with my first few hours in Costa Rica during my self-booked trip. By the time I reached the airport car rental counter and filled out the paperwork, it was 11 P.M. I tried to follow the directions to my first hotel, the Trapp Family Country Inn, in the San José suburb of Alajuela, but soon got lost. When I ended up back at the terminal, I threw myself (and five dollars) on the mercy of another driver, who led the way to my hotel. I arrived safely, but vowed next time to hail a taxi and pick up the rental car the following morning.

Despite such kinks, my self-planned trip was far from a disappointment, and offered a bit more independence. But Edwards gave me a smoother journey overall, with better accommodations, good guides, and more local flavor. For travelers working with limited time and a flexible budget, these benefits will likely justify the extra cost.

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[Wendy's Rolodex of Travel Specialists](#) >

[Tips on Hiring a Specialist](#) >

A Tale of Two Trips

[Travel Specialist User Reviews](#) >