

“The tarsier is a friendly animal,” explains Alonso, proudly displaying the wide-eyed creature on his arm to all around, “and that is why it is nearly extinct.” And it *is* a very friendly animal. It's not long before one leaps on to my palm, and disappears just as quickly, almost imperceptibly. There is only one place to see these animals in the wild, and that is on the island of Bohol, in the Philippines. We made the journey to track them down.

This part of the Philippines is deeply religious, and that may explain why a brightly-lit sign reading “JESUS SAVE US” flashes up every time the bus driver steps on the brakes. The driver shouts “Nuts Huts” and so I duly jump down, and wander off towards the ill-defined track that seems to be the only way down to the river, based on half-remembered instructions from a website. I've come from city to rainforest, and am rapidly reminded of this fact as I'm treated to a spectacular downpour, saturating me and my clothes within seconds.

The path turns out to be the right one, not too treacherous in the rain, and leading exactly to where the driver suggested: Nuts Huts, a collection of huts on stilts, in the middle of the Bohol rainforest, alongside the Loboc river. I am welcomed warmly, and more importantly, dryly, by <x> and <y>, a Belgian couple who opened up this rainforest hotel in <year>. It's an impressive location: the main building, housing a café-bar and several hammocks-with-a-view, is perched on the river cliff, with views right down the river, and across to the hopefully tarsier-filled trees on the bank opposite.

I've not been to many places that count as rainforest, but where I have been, I've always been impressed by the sheer volume of life that exists, visibly and invisibly, all around you. I find myself hearing the invisible, watching my steps for what could be in the undergrowth, feeling rain and insects hitting against me. It's fascinating and overwhelming. So, finding huge, intact mosquito nets on the bed in the hut is a huge relief. Actually, finding the bed is a huge relief, it's been a long journey...

...and night falls quickly here. It's twilight when I wake up and getting darker by the second. They've thoughtfully provided you with a torch, and, with a little fumbling around, I find it. At first, it seems silent, but then you realise just how noisy the place is with the chorus of insects that accompanies nightfall. Out on the balcony, a voice gives me a start, but it turns out to be Dan, apparently from Croydon, in the balcony of the hut next to me.

“This is the best part of the evening!” he tells me. I start to think of a way to agree about how relaxing it all is, but then see what he means, as there's a bizarre light show going on in front of us. Initially, it looks a bit like the spots you see when you've left your contact lenses in too long. Quickly, though, it's pitch black, and the fireflies start their dance in earnest, dotting the foreground with lights and weaving trails through the air and trees. It's quite mesmerising. “It's quite mesmerising,” says Dan, in perfect agreement. He's been here a week already, and I can see why.

Hard as it is to tear yourself away from such natural wonders, food beckons, and that means torches and a clamber up to the café. Is this felt treacherous during the day, it was now treacherous and dark. The huts line the river floor, but, and I'm not sure whether to be comfortable about this or not, the main building is far higher up on the river bank. I'm assured it's for the views (which are, or at least were a few hours ago, rather stunning). I suspect more than one visitor, after a few drinks in one of the hammocks up here, has decided it was better and safer to stay in the hammock than to climb back down. I also suspect the mosquitoes thought this was a great idea too. We eat, we drink, we use hammocks, we don't fall asleep, but we do hatch a plan to find the tarsiers, thanks to <belgian>, who knows somebody with a boat who can help us out.

It's bright and early, and yesterday's downpour has satisfied the forest's need for rain for now. The Loboc River is wide, brown and slow-moving where it needs to be, with rapids to liven it up further upstream, adding to the intense background noise as we set off. The boat is basic, but covered and comfortable enough to spend several hours in. A couple of bends in the river, and the huts and rapids are out of sight; there is nothing around except water and trees. The current's doing most of the work for now, as we float downstream, feet up.

And then there's the restaurant boats. We've reached Loboc itself, where the good people of Tagbilaran, the island's capital, spend their Sunday lunchtime (after a visit to the oldest church in the country, splendidly located right on the riverbanks). This section feels altogether different. These boats are fast, garish and blaring out Sunday lunchtime music and chatter. The river is quite an artery for this town, and everything seems to back on to it: shops, houses, workshops. It's great to nose into people's gardens for a while, but then we pull over as we see something else backing on to the river. Something akin to a "pets corner" in a local park.

Dan and I look at each other. Is this what we were coming to see? Tarsiers in cages for tourists to gawp at? No no no no no no, that was not the idea at all. There's something unusual about these cages, though. We're guided in and take a closer look.

The cages are *open*. Does this rather defy the purpose of a cage? Alonso, one of the people who helps run this sanctuary, explains. "It's not a cage to keep tarsiers in. It's a cage to keep everything else out." The cages are left open while they're about, then shut at night. The tarsiers can come and go as they please (and some do), but it's still a safe haven for them, and this method helps keep them at least partially untamed (that is, if they could get much tamer).

The descriptions I'd read of them didn't really do them justice. From a picture, they definitely look monkey-like, but up close, there's something quite rodent-like about them, no doubt helped by their tiny size: they can comfortably sit in your palm (and often do). Their legs, though – the legs that let them do the rapid hopping that is their main defence – are almost frog-like. Their eyes are their oddest attribute, and one of their much-documented evolutionary quirks. Their eyes are bulging, black spheres, with indistinguishable irises and pupils, making it impossible to tell where they're looking, or even giving the impression that they're looking everywhere at once. They're also like cat's eyes: they pick up the slightest bit of reflection.

Most of all, though, there's something really rather charming about them. Perhaps it's their suicidally trusting nature. Perhaps it's their toy-like appearance. Either way,