

# Tropic Ventures

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Rainforest Enrichment & Sustainable Forestry Project, Puerto Rico

## Volunteer Handbook 2013

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*Las Casas de la Selva*

Tropic Ventures

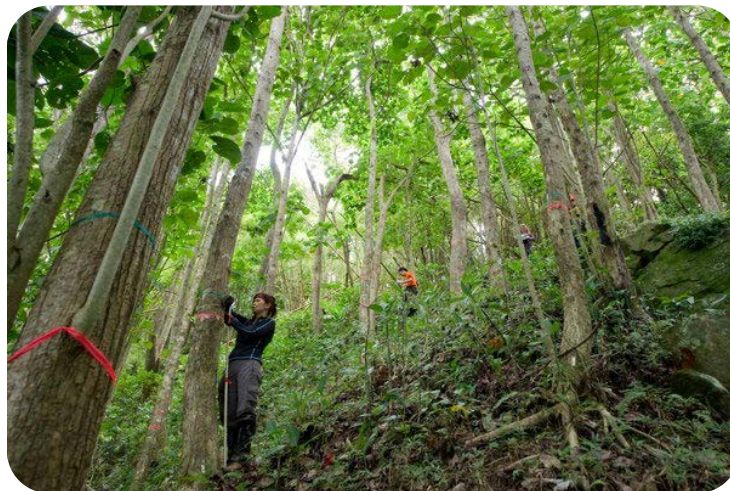
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## INTRODUCTION

Thank you for your interest in volunteering at Las Casas de la Selva, a 1,000 acre sustainable forestry and rain forest enrichment project located in Patillas, Puerto Rico. At Las Casas de la Selva, we are always looking for energetic and enthusiastic volunteers to help us further our goal of demonstrating that tropical forests can be managed in a way that preserves the resource base while supporting an economically viable timber industry. Please read this entire handbook to decide if volunteering at Las Casas de la Selva is right for you. If you have not done so already, please visit our website: [www.eyeontherainforest.org](http://www.eyeontherainforest.org)

## LAS CASAS DE LA SELVA:

**HISTORY:** Established in 1983, the land known as *Las Casas de la Selva* is the home of **Tropic Ventures Sustainable Forestry & Rainforest Enrichment Project**. It is located in the southern mountains of the island, adjacent to the Carité State Forest. The Institute of Ecotechnics initiated this unique project in Patillas, Puerto Rico, pioneering experiments in sustainable rainforest ecology, through line-planting of valuable timber trees. Using this approach, nearly 300 acres of the 1000-acre property have been planted with over 40,000 native and exotic hardwood trees with extremely promising results, working in cooperation with the Puerto Rican Department of Natural Resources, and The International Institute of Tropical Forestry. Las Casas de la Selva recognized as an ‘auxiliary forest’ in the US national park system of classification, and in 2011 the project was certified under The **Forest Stewardship** Program. *Tropic Ventures Research & Education* was incorporated in 1998 as a non-profit in Puerto Rico to support the project’s research and education activities.



## VOLUNTEERING AT LAS CASAS DE LA SELVA

During your stay at Las Casas de la Selva, you will be part of our staff and part of our family. We want you to be able to make the most of your time here. Following is some information you need to know about life at Las Casas de la Selva.

### ❖ ACCOMODATIONS

While volunteering at Las Casas de la Selva, you will be living in a tent under cover and on a platform at the homestead. Depending on space, you may or may not have other volunteers living in the vicinity. All volunteers will have an individual tent.

### ❖ WHEN YOU FIRST ARRIVE

The first few days of your stay will be taken up with orientation and assigned tasks that are intended to familiarize you with the project, daily life, and the homestead. Please note that none of these tasks are “busy work”. Keeping the homestead operational is a task that requires attention from the entire staff.





### ❖ WORK LOAD

Work is strenuous and includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- wood processing
- gardening
- trail blazing and maintenance
- digging and clearing drainage ditches
- planting, pruning, and otherwise caring for trees
- cleaning the living areas
- raking
- compost management
- stone/sand hauling
- construction work (concrete mixing, block building, plastering, etc)
- data entry
- bridge building
- plant and animal collection/identification
- clean-ups

It is essential that incoming volunteers understand that the work here requires a certain level of health/fitness. Oftentimes, work must be done in less-than-ideal conditions (rain, on slippery slopes, etc). Please make sure that if you volunteer at Las Casas de la Selva, you are in healthy enough to engage in strenuous tasks. Also there may be times when you will work on your own, and must have the initiative to complete tasks thoroughly without supervision..



## ❖ DAILY/WEEKLY SCHEDULE

A 9:00am after-breakfast meeting starts the day, when everybody informs the group of what they are working on, requests help/larger crews as necessary, and passes on news of interest. The projects in progress determine your location, be it in the forest or around the homestead. Volunteers are expected to put in 4-5 hours a day on whatever project they are involved with; the rest of the day can be spent on personal enterprise, study, or recreation.

Due to the fact that at present there is only one kitchen and dining area, during the busy youth groups summer season, a staff chef will take care of the kitchen, all food purchases, and cuisine. When there are no groups, there are three formal staff dinners a week. Dinners are usually cooked by one person and the ambience is created by another, the “envirator”.

Tuesday evenings are conversational evenings dedicated to documentary viewing, traveler’s reports, and relevant personal presentations. Thursday dinners are silent dinners of a philosophic bent and a reading and discussion follow after dinner. Sunday dinners are also silent dinners, aside from toasts over the meal and short speeches by each individual after the meal. At Thursday and Sunday dinners, before serving dessert, the chef and envirator perform a short skit. You will be given an orientation to the dinner schedule upon your arrival.

On Saturdays, we have a homestead cleanup at 10:00am for two hours. Everyone is assigned an area and cleans it. This is the only way to ensure that the homestead remains clean and organized. On Saturday afternoon a theater class brings everyone together to participate in advanced theater exercises and facilitate theatrical expressions into shows for the benefit of friends and guests.

There is a 45 minute sitting (meditation) on Tuesday and Friday mornings.



## ❖ FOOD

With the exception of the three weekly dinners, you are responsible for cooking your own breakfast, lunch and dinner, and cleaning up after yourself. Please try to have breakfast finished before 9am morning meeting.

## ❖ ENVIRATOR

Each day, someone is assigned as “envirator” for the day. This means that on the day you are assigned, you make sure everyone cleans up their mess in the kitchen and dining area, and ensure that the kitchen is left clean and tidy at the end of the day. Messy eating/food prep areas attract rats and cockroaches, and in the tropics, poor hygiene can quickly lead to health problems. On days when there is a dinner chef, the envirator also sets the tables, creates an ambience, assists the chef if need be, and performs a skit with the chef, if it is a Thursday or Sunday night dinner.

## COSTS ASSOCIATED WITH VOLUNTEERING

All volunteers, pay their operating expenses, which is \$20.00 per day for the duration of their stay. This daily cost covers a volunteer’s food, water, accommodations, laundry, and electricity/utilities.

The \$20.00 per day cost of operating expenses does not cover transportation. You are responsible for booking and paying for your airfare to and from San Juan airport. If you are over age 25, you are legally allowed to rent a car in Puerto Rico. This will cost you approximately \$350 per week. This gives you the freedom to go off site out of work time.

If you are under 25, or if you cannot afford the cost of renting a car, then you can arrange for a pick-up at the San Juan airport in the project car. The cost of a pickup is \$80.00; the cost of a drop-off on your day of departure is also \$80.00. Any additional transportation in the project car made on your behalf (trips out to town, hospital/doctors visits, etc) will incur a mileage cost of \$0.37 per mile.

As an example, if an individual wants to volunteer at Las Casas de la Selva for 20 days and needs a pickup and drop-off at San Juan airport, the total costs would be as follows:

20 days X \$20.00 per day: \$400.00 (\$100.00 of which must be paid at least two weeks before your arrival date. See the section titled "Payment" below.)

\$80.00 X 2 (1 pick-up, 1 drop-off): \$160.00

Total: \$560.00, plus airfare.



#### ❖ PAYMENT

At least two weeks before your scheduled arrival date, we require a \$100.00 non-refundable booking fee, (in case of cancellation two weeks or less before arrival), and upon your arrival, it will be put towards the total amount you owe for your stay. We will not confirm your arrival until this payment is received.

The remainder of payment is due upon arrival at the project. Payment in full can be made via cash, check, or money order. Payment must be made in US dollars. It is possible to pay via Paypal, but to do so will cost you additional transfer fees. Also, a "bounced"/returned check will incur a fee of \$50.00 which you must pay. If you decide to take days off whilst at the project, the money you paid for your operating costs will not be refunded.

#### ❖ EARLY DEPARTURES

We rely on volunteers to help us accomplish the many ongoing responsibilities it takes to successfully run this project. Also, upon your arrival, the amount you pay for operating costs will go into use immediately for items such as food, utilities, etc. Therefore, we ask that you commit yourself to stay the entirety of the time you stated you would volunteer for. If you decide to leave before your scheduled departure date, you will be refunded the difference of your money, minus 7 days of operating expenses (\$140.00).



If, for example, you arrive stating you will volunteer for 28 days: (\$560.00 for operating costs, paid upon arrival), and you decide on day 14 to leave, you will only be refunded for 7 days, not 14 (new operating costs: \$420.00, with \$140.00 refunded to you).

## BOOKING YOUR TRIP

When planning your volunteer stay at Las Casas de la Selva, please abide by the following guidelines:

- Contact us via email. In the email, please send the items requested in the “Submitting an Application” section below, as well as the dates you would like to volunteer. Also state if you are planning to rent a car, or if you need a pickup/drop-off from the airport.
- We will reply to you via email in regards to availability on your requested dates. If there is no conflict with the dates you requested or any of the information in your application, you may schedule your flight as you wish. Both arrival and departure flights should be scheduled to arrive sometime between 12pm and 7pm. If you want to book a flight (arrival or departure) outside of those times, please let us know to ensure that transportation will be available during those times.
- Once you have your flight booked, email your flight info to us. This includes flight number, times of departure and arrival, airline, and dates. Also, please email a cell phone number that you can be contacted on the day of your arrival.



## SUBMITTING YOUR APPLICATION

- Completed Application- Please fill out the **Volunteer Application Form on the website** and submit it. You will be asked to give the names, addresses and daytime telephone numbers of two people (not friends or relatives) from whom we can seek an opinion of your suitability for voluntary work.
- Send a Current CV/Resumé and a current photo by separate email to: [3t@eyeontherainforest.org](mailto:3t@eyeontherainforest.org)  
Put your name and “volunteer ” on the subject line of the email.

## LAS CASAS DE LA SELVA PACKING LIST

### Required:

- Long-sleeved shirts- For working in the field. We have razor grass and biting midges in the forest. Less cuts or wounds make a better stay!
- Work Trousers- Not shorts. For the same reasons as the long-sleeved shirts.
- Work Gloves- Please bring well-fitting work/gardening gloves that are rubberized, not the large ill-fitting cloth ones sold everywhere!
- Work Boots- This is a forestry project. The roads aren't paved. Going into the forest without proper footwear can lead to injury.
- Light Rain Jacket/Rain Suit- We often work in the rain. This is much more comfortable if you have the proper clothing.
- “Nice” clothes to go out in However, know that clothing is sometimes worn, stained, or torn from working, or just damp conditions, so don't bring something you are overly attached to.

- Spending money in case you go out- The typical volunteer spends approx \$200-400 dollars while they are here on souvenirs, meals out, alcohol, and other non-essential items. It is also good to have extra money with you in the event of an emergency.
- Headlamp- This item is absolutely essential. You can't see around the homestead at night without one. Try to walk around without a headlamp at night, and you'll have lots of scars and possibly a busted-up knee to take back with you as a memento. If you forget your headlamp, we will have a select few to **sell**, not **loan**. You have been warned. Don't forget extra batteries.
- Any medicine you need- There are pharmacies nearby, but it can take time to get a prescription filled. Look at your prescription; if you are going to need to have it refilled during your stay, Puerto Rico has several Wal-Greens and Wal-Marts. Go to your local Wal-Greens/Wal-Mart before you leave and ask them to transfer your prescription to one of the Wal-Greens/Wal-Mart in **Caguas, Puerto Rico. It is your responsibility to do ensure your prescriptions are in order.** If you need to pick up a prescription while you are here and you do not have your own transportation, a Las Casas staff member will take you to get your prescription,.
- Towel, Washcloth, & Toiletries- We encourage you to bring "eco-friendly" soaps and shampoos, as we treat our wastewater on-site, and try to minimize the amount of chemicals that go into the system. You should bring a quick-dry towel and washcloth.
- Cell phone - Please note that cell phone reception is "spotty". As of September 2011, we are no longer able to provide internet access to incoming volunteers, thanks to Hurricane Irene destroying part of our communications infrastructure. Please plan accordingly to ensure that you can communicate with family and friends during your stay.

Please be aware that we do NOT provide wifi or have any facility for internet except for staff research use and for weather and emergency communications. If you do bring your techno with you, the companies that have voice and data coverage here are ATT and Verizon.

### Highly Recommended:

- Light Sleeping bag - We have bedding, but no heavy blankets. People hear the word "tropics" and think it never gets cold at the project. We are 1,850 feet above sea level, so it can get downright chilly at night especially in Nov, Dec, Jan, and Feb.
- Pillow- We provide small camping pillows. If you want a large and fluffy pillow, bring one.
- A good book to read during down time- We don't work 24 hours a day. We have a library you can select from, but if you have a good book you want to read, bring it with you.
- Musical instrument - If you play something, bring it with you.
- Bug repellent- We do have biting midges and mosquitoes.
- Bathing Suit- We have swimming areas on the property. You are advised to bring a suit that can fit under your work clothes, as the best time to swim is when you are already in the forest, finished with your work, and have your suit with you. This goes for guys and girls.
- Camera- and don't forget a good case for storage, batteries, memory cards, chargers, cables etc.
- Battery Powered Alarm Clock- If you are a heavy sleeper, you may want one to make sure you wake up in time for morning meeting.
- Ear Plugs- If you are a light sleeper, you may want to bring these to help keep out the loud sound of the Coqui frogs at night.

### A FEW RULES

Volunteers are expected to abide by the rules of the project, which include these and any others that circumstances dictate:

- When we host groups of volunteers (Earthwatch, Globalworks, Windsor Mountain, Fryeburg Academy, etc), there is to be **NO** fraternizing with members of any group at Las Casas. Failure to comply with this rule will result in immediate dismissal without a refund.
- When you arrive, you will be given an overview of safety concerns. You will be expected to abide by house rules.
- When going off into the forest, take a radio and put your name on the dry erase board along with your expected time of return.
- You will be responsible for keeping your respective living space clean, and for cleaning it before your final departure.



## **DONATIONS**

People who come sometimes wish to donate items that will help us out. The following is a list of things we can always use:

- Books for the library
- DVDs for the DVD library, especially documentaries, natures series, biographies, arts etc.
- Outdoor Christmas Lights (great for illuminating the outdoor dining area at night!), candles.
- Things for our kitchen (utensils, appliances, etc- with so many groups, we go through them a lot!)
- High quality Earl Grey Tea, high quality herbal teas
- High quality dark chocolate
- Airtight containers

## **A FINAL NOTE**

When you leave, please make sure you pack all your belongings. Any and all items that are left behind will be considered a donation. As stated, we are an all volunteer organization, and can't afford to mail you items you forgot. Check and double check your luggage and sleeping area before you leave!

## **CONTACTS**

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us:

3t Vakil  
Forester, Project Director  
[3t@eyeontherainforest.org](mailto:3t@eyeontherainforest.org)

