

Pura VIDA

Nowhere else in the world has quite the same reputation for conservation as Costa Rica. With its dizzying array of national parks and dedication to renewable energy, travel to this nation of just five million people has become synonymous with sustainable lodgings, community-enhancing tours and extravagant biodiversity. Ecosystems ranging from cloud forest to Caribbean coast mean there's much here to protect — and much to experience. You'll hear locals talk about *pura vida* — a short yet nuanced phrase meaning 'pure life' that speaks of humans' true purpose. Visiting Costa Rica, you'll start to understand its meaning.

WORDS JAMIE LAFFERTY

IMAGE: JAVI IMAGES



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A misty morning at the
Selva Bananito Ecological Reserve
PREVIOUS PAGES: Scarlet
macaw in flight



LIMÓN PROVINCE

ON THE *ecotourism* FRONTIER

At the edge of La Amistad International Park, which spills over Costa Rica's southern border into Panama, one man has transformed a logging operation into one of the nation's most authentic ecotourism getaways

"It's been so long since we had any rain," complains Jurgen Stein, standing in what I'm quite certain is precipitation. I turn my palm skywards and let droplets hit my hand.

"Oh, this?" the owner of Selva Bananito Ecolodge — on the Caribbean coast in southern Costa Rica — asks, with what sounds like faint derision. "This isn't real rain. When it rains here, you can't hear each other talk."

Jurgen should know. Born in Colombia to German parents, he's lived in Costa Rica for decades. Although he doesn't use the phrase himself, it's also clear he's something of an eco warrior, entrenched on the front line of a battle for the future of the region.

The country is often marketed as a green utopia, perhaps the one nation in Latin America — if not the entire world — that's taking serious action on the climate crisis. As Jurgen leads me around his property in the foothills of the Talamanca Mountains, he explains that things aren't as simple as that. "We often travel to events like COP26 and say that we're 50% forested," he says. "But not all of that is protected as national parks or conservancies. Half of it is in private hands, so the picture isn't so clear."

For its part, Selva Bananito's approach is regenerative tourism, and rustic in the extreme. There's no meaningful power in the cabins and certainly no air-conditioning. For the duration of my three-day stay, the fragile internet connection doesn't work. Untethered from the rest of the world and growing attuned to the sounds and smells of the jungle, I start to dread the moment reception kicks back in.

The lodge offers plenty of activities, from horse rides around the property to lengthy jungle treks and simply listening to the rhythms of the forest. In the evenings, Jurgen offers lectures on environmentalism. "Recycling is good, but it's like when I hear about the environmental ministry confiscating illegally cut wood," he says one evening. "Wouldn't it be better if the trees were never removed from the forest in the first place?"

The lodge's water is filtered with activated carbon and, by banning any industry on its local rivers, the lodge is, in

turn, helping to keep the water supply to the city of Limón clean. Plastic bottles have been banned for decades — welcome drinks are served in coconuts, the fresh machete strikes still visible near the top. With these measures and more, Jurgen believes his lodge's carbon output is less per year than that of the average US citizen.

There's an important caveat to this remarkable statistic: Jurgen also personally flies guests over the region in a petrol-fuelled gyrocopter. While this offering is technically distinct from Selva Bananito and registered as a separate company, it would certainly skew the figures if counted as one of the lodge's vehicles. Nonetheless, the garrulous owner insists it's for the greater good.

"I took the former environment minister up and we spotted some illegal logging," Jurgen tells me in the lodge's rudimentary bar. "When we got back down, arrests were being made within hours."

The following morning, I join him for a flight: half an hour in the sky that is, by turns, thrilling and educational. Not that I could miss them, but Jurgen points out vast banana plantations: regimented squares of monoculture farming sitting next to the eclectic wilderness.

Jurgen's land, and that stretching south to La Amistad, is chaotic by comparison, but it could easily have been very different. "My father had a logging concession covering 1,730 acres," he says. "In 1985, my sisters and I asked him to think about what he was doing, to stop logging. To protect this land."

Ever since, Jurgen has worked at the lodge. He claims that during that time, its dedication to ecotourism has come at a cost. He's had threats from those who want to exploit his land. Yet, in his own way, Jurgen takes this as a sort of endorsement. "The people doing the logging and poaching don't like what we're doing here, so I think we're on the right track."

HOW TO DO IT: Adventure Life offers its seven-night Turtles & Rainforest itinerary, with three nights at Selva Bananito Lodge, from \$1,996 (£1,474) per person, excluding flights. adventure-life.com

COSTA RICA

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OSA PENINSULA

THE *really* wild SHOW

The jewel in the crown of Costa Rica's lesser-explored south is Corcovado National Park, a wilderness of rainforest and rare species. From capuchins to northern caracaras, peccaries to poison arrow frogs, there's plenty to spot when walking on the country's wild side

My guide hears something. For a heartbeat, he panics. In that electric moment, Jeffrey's all mammal, engaging none of his rational brain. But then he realises there's nothing to worry about; he hasn't been attacked by the pack of coatis surrounding us — his anorak has just fallen from his backpack.

Animal attacks are exceptionally rare in Costa Rica and never likely to happen with coatis — racoon-like animals that shamble through the forest and sometimes out onto the wild beaches of the Corcovado National Park. There are creatures to cause much more concern in these forests.

Of all Costa Rica's wild places, the national park and the wider Osa Peninsula are perhaps the most untamed. Before arriving, each person I spoke to about them used words like 'magical' and 'paradise' when describing this sliver of largely inaccessible land on the country's southwest coast.

I'm staying at Lapa Rios Lodge, one of Costa Rica's pioneering eco-lodges, just outside of the park boundary. It's a hotel with a luxury price tag, but one that animals frequently visit for free. At various times, while walking from the restaurant to my room, I have encounters with pig-like peccaries, yellow-throated toucans, and Golfoducean poison-arrow frogs. There are many birds of prey, too; this is a place where the eagles can leave any time they like, but never check in.

Walking in the park proper — a bumpy, hour-long ride from the lodge — the number and variety of animals has thrillingly increased. When we reach the rangers' station, a troop of white-faced capuchins is going through the meticulous business of selecting ripe coconuts from a tree, then opening them on sharp rocks. A short time later, we watch spider monkeys with fur the colour of ground cinnamon selecting seeds as though shopping at a delicatessen. The orkish calls of howler monkeys frequently swirl around the jungle.

"We've got squirrel monkeys here, too," says Jeffrey, much calmer now. "But they're the smallest of the four species we have in Costa Rica and difficult to spot."

In a bid to get a clearer view of the trees, we break out onto Corcovado's vast, grey-sand beach, which stretches into a mid-morning mist as far as the eye can see. From here, we spot turkey vultures, black hawks and northern caracaras. The primates remain unseen, but compensation comes in the boisterous form of red macaws, which we often glimpse traversing the sky in pairs, their ghastly calls perhaps some kind of curse for being blessed with such extraordinarily beautiful plumage.

"It's a shame they don't sound as pretty as they look," I say to Jeffrey. "In nature, I think you have to choose one or the other," he replies, sounding a little more profound than he perhaps intended.

The beach rolls on, and before long we find its flawless sand interrupted by the tracks of what's obviously a huge animal. "Baird's tapir," says my guide, as though inspecting a crime scene.

The tapir is at the centre of an evolutionary Venn diagram — where the circles represent an elephant, a cow and horse — drawn by a child who's no great artist. They may look fundamentally ridiculous, but they can weigh as much as 880lbs and are occasionally violent when angry or disturbed during the day, when they're often asleep.

"Let's follow it," says Jeffrey.

The tapir's tracks carry on for hundreds of yards, looping around the beach before finally disappearing back into the jungle. We continue tracking, looking for signs of broken twigs and footprints in the mud. The air seems to hold its breath for us. We move through the undergrowth and then hear a rustling. We turn, our senses as heightened now as they were with the coatis.

And there, confused and in no mood to talk to us, is a northern tamandua. This tree-climbing anteater takes one look at us and lollops off into the green of Corcovado, unwilling to give any clues on the whereabouts of the tapir.

HOW TO DO IT: Journey Latin America has nine nights in Costa Rica with four at Lapa Rios Lodge from £4,222 per person. Includes flights, transfers, excursions and accommodation. journeylatinamerica.co.uk



A red-tailed squirrel takes a seat in Corcovado National Park.
CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Deluxe Bungalow, Lapa Rios Lodge; a white-faced capuchin appears astonished by what it's found inside a coconut; a sloth in Manuel Antonio National Park

COSTA RICA



Four more NATIONAL PARKS

1 SAN LUCAS ISLAND

A notorious prison until 1991, San Lucas Island was declared Costa Rica's 30th national park in 2020. Learn about the jail and the stories of some of its most infamous inmates, and peer inside their now bat-filled former cells. Entry \$12 (£9).

2 TORTUGUERO

The Caribbean coast's most spectacular park lies near the Nicaraguan border. There's no shortage of turtles nesting on the beaches — and an equally plentiful number of predators looking to snatch their eggs. Follow the estuary inland to find crocodiles and caimans, plus almost half of Costa Rica's known bird species. Entry \$15 (£11.35).

3 LOS QUETZALES

Set in Costa Rica's misty highlands, this park gets its name from the outrageously gorgeous — and rare — quetzal birds that call it home. Entry \$10 (£7.50).

4 MANUEL ANTONIO

Located just outside the town of Quepos, this is the smallest Costa Rican national park but is remarkably biodiverse. Within its borders visitors can find red-eyed tree frogs, two types of sloth, all four of Costa Rica's monkey species and much more besides. Plus, some of the Pacific coast's best hotels are walking distance away. Entry \$16 (£12).



TOP FIVE

ARENAL *adventures*

Located three hours' drive north west of the capital, San José, the town of La Fortuna offers a springboard to explore the landscape around the inactive Arenal Volcano. The smoke may have stopped a decade ago, but the volcanic energy still inspires adventure here

1 HIKING IN ARENAL NATIONAL PARK

There are dozens of trails in the region but hiking Arenal National Park on the lake side of the volcano offers the chance to lose oneself in nature. There are newly improved steps leading to viewing platforms of the volcano — you're in the right place when you find other people taking photos of the peak and resting on the black lava from the massive and deadly 1968 eruption, the volcano's first in over 400 years. Out on the trail there are scores of bird species to spot. The path is uneven in places, but with trekking up the volcano an impossibility, this makes for a fine alternative. Guided tour and hot-spring visit with Anywhere from \$131 (£97). anywhere.com

IMAGES: JAMIE LAFFERTY

2 WHITEWATER RAFTING

As well as its volcanic centrepiece, the remarkable topography of the Arenal region offers optimal conditions for whitewater rafting. A number of tours are bookable in La Fortuna, the most adventurous of which takes you to nine-mile sections of the Balsa River, where you'll battle Class IV rapids. It's theoretically possible to spot sloths from the water, but good luck having the Zen to pick out those docile tree-dwellers while the river thunders around you. If this sounds a little intimidating, the Sarapiquí River is a much gentler option often used to train first-time rafters, or to give kids an introductory experience. Tours from \$68 (£50). arenalrafting.com



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3 LA FORTUNA WATERFALL

The steep hike down to the base of La Fortuna Waterfall will inspire a sense of foreboding in some travellers. There are about 500 newly refurbished steps, each reinforcing the grim knowledge that they will be much harder on the way back up. The good news is that the sweaty trip offers a 230ft waterfall — one of the most beautiful in the country — as a reward. It's so picture-perfect that locals are often spotted in or around the plunge pool posing for wedding photos. Expect to see toucans and howler monkeys during the hike, too. Entry \$18 (£13).

cataratalafortuna.com

4 WATERSPORTS ON LAKE ARENAL

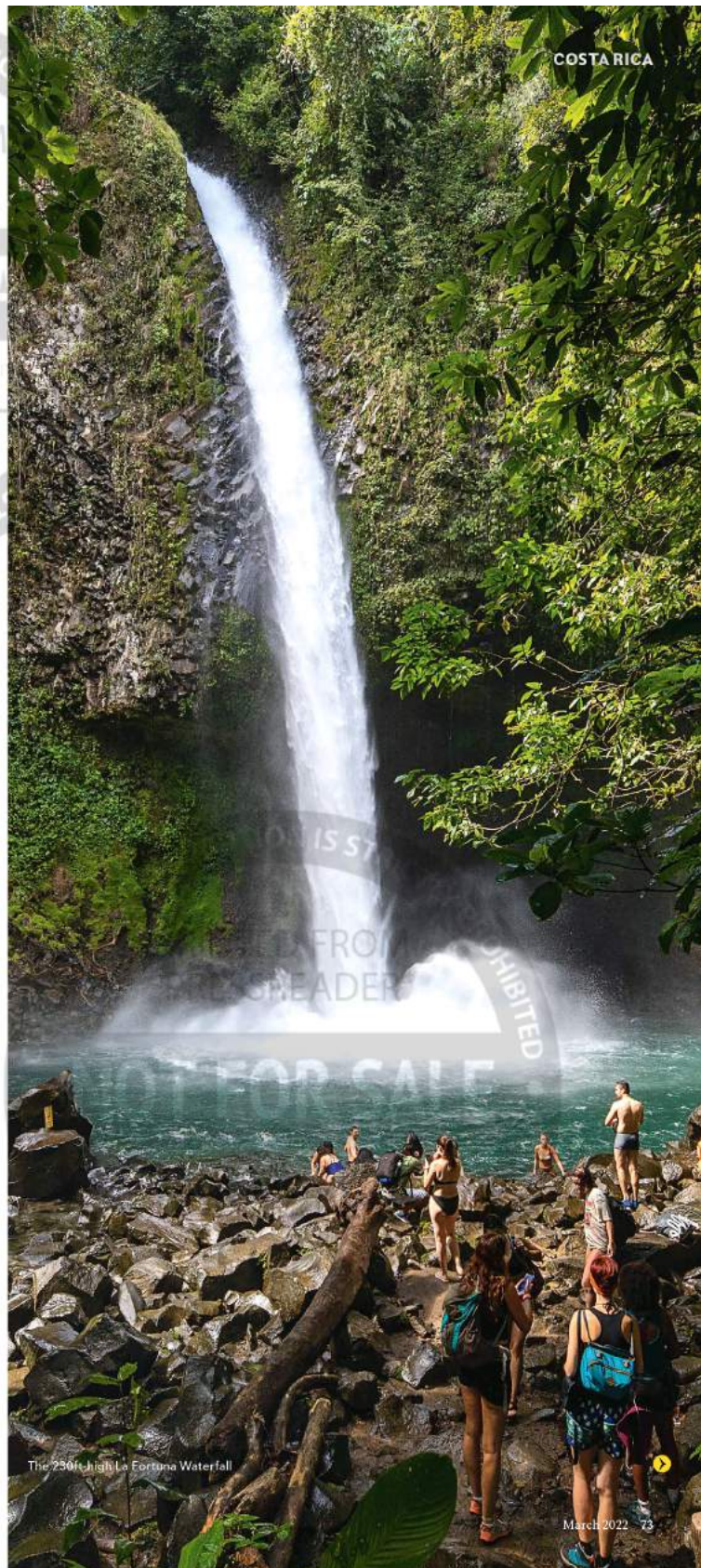
Costa Rica's largest lake is also a vast reservoir, but for most visitors the focus will be on watersports. Paddleboarding is popular in the calmer waters close to the dammed bank, but the altitude and funnelling of wind by the surrounding mountains has made the lake especially popular with windsurfers and kitesurfers. There are much more sedate cruises around the lake, too, with several specialising in birdwatching or simply enjoying the sunset. Private kitesurfing lessons from \$245 (£181).

ticowind.com

5 HANGING BRIDGES OF MISTICO PARK

This cleverly designed forest walk uses a combination of six suspension bridges and hairpin bends to offer continuous surprises and great access to jungle wildlife, including toucans and hummingbirds. Crossing the vertiginous bridges may be a little traumatic for anyone lacking a head for heights (some are nearly 150ft above the forest floor). But looking out rather than down is rarely more rewarding — the park has great views of waterfalls, canyons and the Arenal Volcano. Head out to explore solo or book onto a natural history or nighttime tour. Entry from \$26 (£19). misticopark.com

IMAGE: JAMIE LAFFERTY



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The 230ft-high La Fortuna Waterfall

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MEET THE MAKERS

THE *artisans* OF GUANACASTE

Famous for its cowboy culture and blissful Pacific beaches, the Guanacaste region is home to one of the world's five identified 'blue zones', where residents live longer than average. Meeting the area's artisans reveals age-old traditions — and a philosophy that might hold the key to longevity

By Costa Rican standards, Santa Cruz is a dry town. Not in an alcoholic sense — the city's annual bull-riding bacchanal is notorious — but dry in that it gets little rain compared with so much of the rest of the country. Here you'll find desiccated forests and pastures, dusty cowboys and ears of corn growing high in the sun. You'll also find a lot of locals with specific trades and skills.

Willy Villafuerte is part of this set, a potter with a lifetime of experience. His grandmother taught his father; his father taught him. Like a dozen or so other potters, he lives and works in the village of Guaitil, just east of Santa Cruz. The only time he's taken a break from his trade was during the pandemic when he instead went to pick corn at a local farm. "It was no good," he says in his rudimentary workshop. "It was bad for my hands."

And the worst part of this job? "The oven. You'll see," he says, peeling his T-shirt up and over his belly in preparation for the inferno.

Willy tells me his technique is pre-Columbian. Locally gathered clay is mixed with water and soil, the bowls and cups turned on a hand-spun wheel. The settled shape is then left to dry in the sun for four days before being fired in a savagely hot wood-fuelled kiln. When I watch him finally transfer the finished pieces — glowing with heat — out onto a piece of corrugated iron to cool, I realise I'm holding my breath.

It's altogether more relaxing to spend time with Randy Juárez, the marimba man. Another lifelong aficionado, he makes, plays and teaches marimba, the irresistibly jolly percussion instrument that sounds like rhythmic rain. He refurbishes instruments, too.

But there's one significant hurdle to his business at present: the making of the traditional instrument is banned in Guanacaste because it depends on cedar, which can't be harvested from the wild; currently, no commercial cedar farms exist locally. But to get around this, Randy recently planted all the necessary tree

species for the component parts of the marimba on unused land. "It won't be ready for 20 years," explains the 60-year-old musician with a crooked smile, while a small troop of howler monkeys watches on from the trees. "I hope I'll get to make one with local wood in my life."

Being from Santa Cruz at least gives Randy a better chance of making it to extreme old age. The city and wider Guanacaste region are listed as one of the world's official 'blue zones', where people live to ages far beyond global norms. Randy and others I speak to attribute this to a lack of processed food, as well as good weather, honest work and a general contentment with their lot.

Canano Díaz-Zuñiga attributes it to something else, too: *vino de coyol*, a specific type of natural, lightly fermented booze which he harvests from coyol palm trees on his farm just after the full moon. During the dry season he runs a bar at his property and sells bottles to take away.

He offers three versions of increasing potency, though only the strongest has any real alcohol in it. "I have no idea just how much," he says with a straight face. "But three bottles is the right amount, no more."

Back in the city, there are local creators who take their weights and measures a good deal more seriously. The women of the socially conscious Coopetortilla bake savoury doughnuts called *rosquillas*, as well as provide affordable breakfasts and lunches to the community.

Like all the artisans I meet in Santa Cruz, their humble business has been blighted by the pandemic, but the co-op has been going since 1975 and has a feeling of permanence. The founder, Margarita, worked until she was 100. The current coordinator, Marianela Jiménez Rojas, is a comparative youngster at 65, but she hopes to put in a similarly long shift. "Why not? I'm content," she says, sending another tray of *rosquillas* to the oven.

HOW TO DO IT: Artisan tours with Diria Experience start from \$30 (£22). facebook.com/diriaexperience

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

LEFT: Marianela Jiménez Rojas prepares coffee at the Coopetortilla co-op in Santa Cruz; Willy Villafuerte firing his handmade pottery on the outskirts of Santa Cruz; Randy Juárez takes a break from the marimba to sing and play guitar; a tray of *rosquillas*, fresh from the oven

IMAGES: JAMIE LUFFERTY



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FOOD IN FOCUS

HANDLING THE *heat*

Talkative San José chef José González closed a much-loved restaurant to run an urban farm where he hosts tours for food enthusiasts, shining a light on the country's rich produce and underserved culinary traditions

Part chef, part farmer, wholly dedicated food-lover, José González makes an interviewer's life pretty easy. Meeting at his urban farm on the outskirts of San José, I have a list of prepared questions, but the 38-year-old is so enthusiastic, so intensely loquacious, that I barely get through three before an hour has passed. The former head chef and owner of the celebrated Al Mercat restaurant machine-guns words at a dizzying rate — more a tsunami than a stream of consciousness.

"I call Costa Rica an edible country. Here, try this, bro," he says, picking up a piece of *cas* — Costa Rican guava — from the ground. "You don't mind? That's how we do it here. We're a green and beautiful

country and there's all kinds of stuff that we can take advantage of. Obviously, we have a greenhouse, too, but there's so much just growing around the place. I grew up taking things from trees, enjoying nature and that's what I've wanted to do with my cooking for the past nine years."

José used the pandemic to take a step back from the frontline of the restaurant business, closing Al Mercat in the Costa Rican capital and retreating to his farm. Now, as the tourism industry begins to rebound, he's offering culinary tours of his land along with opinions on anything food-related.

He doesn't lack confidence. He knows firsthand what the standard of produce is like in the average San José restaurant and assesses

FROM LEFT: Chef José González at home on the Al Mercat estate; an ear of purple corn, freshly picked at José's farm on the outskirts of San José; José presents some cacao beans grown on his farm; a plate at fine dining restaurant Silvestre

IMAGES: JAMIE LAFFERTY; TOMAS ESQUIVEL

that much of it is "mediocre, average at best". He aims for much higher standards.

"My restaurant had a lot of success because I was going directly to farmers' markets and choosing the best," he says. "Going there, and using my family farm and other trusted farms around the country, was how I did my homework."

The farm sits on the edge of the city, on a hillside that was once a coffee plantation. José uses the space to make money and conduct his tours, but there's also an element of experimentation, too. He seems to value quirk as much as quality. I follow the chef around his property, occasionally stopping to have fruit and vegetables shoved into my hands or mouth. With Costa Rica's optimal growing conditions, something is sprouting all year round. As we walk, I'm handed cacao, turmeric, impossibly purple corn, citrus I've never heard of, flowers, kaleidoscopic chillies, herbs — José champions them all. He just doesn't understand why more of his countrymen don't take the same approach.

"Nobody showcases this. Too many people just want to go to the volcanoes and the beaches — and they're amazing, obviously

— but nobody wants to show off the cuisine," says José, seemingly without breathing.

"Honestly, most of the time tourists just end up eating a lot of rice and beans. You can't just represent this country with that stuff. We have 200 types of fruit! I want to say: 'Dude, you should be eating this stuff!'"

Surely only boring pragmatists would disagree with José's gleefully nationalistic approach to Costa Rica's larder, and though I spend most of my time nodding along with him, I find it a little hard to believe his claim that he doesn't miss the restaurant business. It seems obvious that a man with this much energy would be best employed in command of a kitchen. "Maybe there will be an offer that interests me in a few years, but right now, bro, I'm happy here."

I want to ask something else, but he's off again, now onto the subject of Costa Rica's reputation for food. Instead of interrupting, I chew on a bit of cacao and just listen to my host. "We're not like Peru — people don't come here to eat," he says. "And they should. Like I said, this is an edible country."

HOW TO DO IT: A farm-to-table tour at the Al Mercat estate starts from \$110 (£81). [wetravel.com/trips](https://www.wetravel.com/trips)



COSTA RICA



José's top three SAN JOSÉ RESTAURANTS

1 SIKWA

"Pablo Bonilla is a good friend of mine and is the chef at this Indigenous food restaurant. Like me, he goes straight to the source for his produce, such as the Indigenous farmers in the Talamanca region. He treats the people and produce with real respect and comes back with all sorts of cool stuff, like purple corn." [sikwacostarica.com](https://www.sikwacostarica.com)

2 CEDRELA

"I work with this restaurant, which is just over an hour away from here, so you know it's good food. It's based on an avocado and coffee farm in a really amazing setting. Over there they have trout and apples and apricots — and lots of things we can't grow so easily here because we don't have the altitude. The food is really simple, honest and tasty. It all comes from up there so you can't go wrong." [cedrela.cr](https://www.cedrela.cr)

3 SILVESTRE

"Santiago Fernández Beneditto is one of this country's most-recognised chefs. He's doing a kind of fine dining take on Costa Rican cuisine. At the beginning I wasn't convinced because I'm not really super into that style of dining, but they've done it in a really cool way. They've got a good budget and what they're doing is really interesting. Santiago is a really talented chef." [restaurantesilvestre.com](https://www.restaurantesilvestre.com)

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Q&A

Indigenous INSIGHTS

Bribri leader, Bernanda Morales, explains how, in her village of Yorkin, just upriver from the Caribbean coast, she's brought back the Bribri language from the brink of extinction, creating a sustainable tourism destination in the process

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN WELCOMING TRAVELLERS TO YORKIN?

It's been 30 years since we started the Yorkin Bribri Cultural Programme, but it's only in the last 20 that we've welcomed visitors. Our three main goals are to protect the forest, to improve the economy of the community and to preserve Bribri culture. It's very satisfying that it's lasted three decades.

WHY WAS THE BRIBRI LANGUAGE THREATENED AND HOW IS IT BEING SAVED?

For a long time, the central government was only sending white, Spanish-speaking teachers here. We weren't allowed to speak Bribri. When I started the project, I couldn't even speak it myself. Now it's very different — there are 48 communities in this region all working together. Every Indigenous school in this territory is teaching and speaking the Bribri language.

WHAT CHALLENGES HAVE YOU FACED AS A COMMUNITY?

It's still a very important crop locally but in the past our economy was based 100% on cacao. But then in 1970 there was a fungus outbreak in the plants and we couldn't export any more. People started leaving to go and find work, many on banana plantations. When they left, we lost even more of our culture. The ones who came back returned with processed foods and a different way of living. We started to have health problems like diabetes here.

Now, with tourists coming here, we have other forms of employment — we need people to drive the boats, work in the kitchens and to be guides in the forest. We still harvest cacao, of course, but it's no longer the only thing here.

WHAT INSPIRED THE SHIFT TOWARDS TOURISM?

In the 1990s, a group of women and I in the village started thinking about what we needed to do. We decided that bringing outsiders in might stop people going away in such big numbers. It would create income within our community. I was only 19 at the time and some of the elders in the village thought I was crazy. They were suspicious of outsiders. It took 10 years to convince them. Machismo was a big problem — the men didn't understand why we wouldn't just stay at the home with the children. Now they understand that we can do any of the jobs here that they can, and that working with foreigners isn't so bad.

HOW HAS COVID-19 IMPACTED THE VILLAGE?

We haven't actually had any here, thank goodness, but we have some natural medicines to treat it if we do. Thankfully, our community is 100% vaccinated, too. We believe our god Sibú left all of his knowledge about health with doctors. We trust him, so we trust them.

HOW TO DO IT: A full day tour of Yorkin village costs \$135 (£100) with transfers and local lunch included. lifeculturetravelcostarica.com

CLOCKWISE FROM

ABOVE: Bernanda Morales; seeds from an achiote or lipstick tree, which are often used to paint the skin; a Bribri man boating along the unseasonably low waters of the Yorkin River; chicken stew and greens being prepared in Yorkin village; preparing a traditional Bribri lunch

IMAGES: JAMIE LUFFERTY





ORIGENS

Best for: REMOTE LUXURY

Due to its location in the far north west of the country, close to the Nicaraguan border, it wouldn't be unreasonable to question whether the remoteness of Origenes makes visiting worthwhile. For anyone willing to make the journey, however, this remarkable lodge offers fabulous views of volcanoes, the jungle and even distant Lake Nicaragua. The raw nature experience has been tamed with more than a little luxury, too: those views can be enjoyed from fire-heated hot tubs, while the food is prepared by French-trained chefs using fresh local ingredients.

From \$952 (£720), B&B. origenslodge.com

HACIENDA ALTAGRACIA

Best for: MOUNTAIN AIR

Reopened in 2021 after a major overhaul, Hacienda AltaGracia is a sprawling estate set amid 180 acres. With sensational views across the surrounding valleys, its two restaurants use almost exclusively Costa Rican produce. While their coffee is currently gathered from nearby *fincas*, 7,000 coffee trees have also been planted around the property with the aim of harvesting by 2025. Each of the 50 villas offers plenty of space and privacy, while vehicle transport is organised by texting the *compás* (a sort of personal butler). From \$1,458 (£1,102), full board. aubergeresorts.com/altagracia

IMAGES: AVABLUR/IAN FORBES



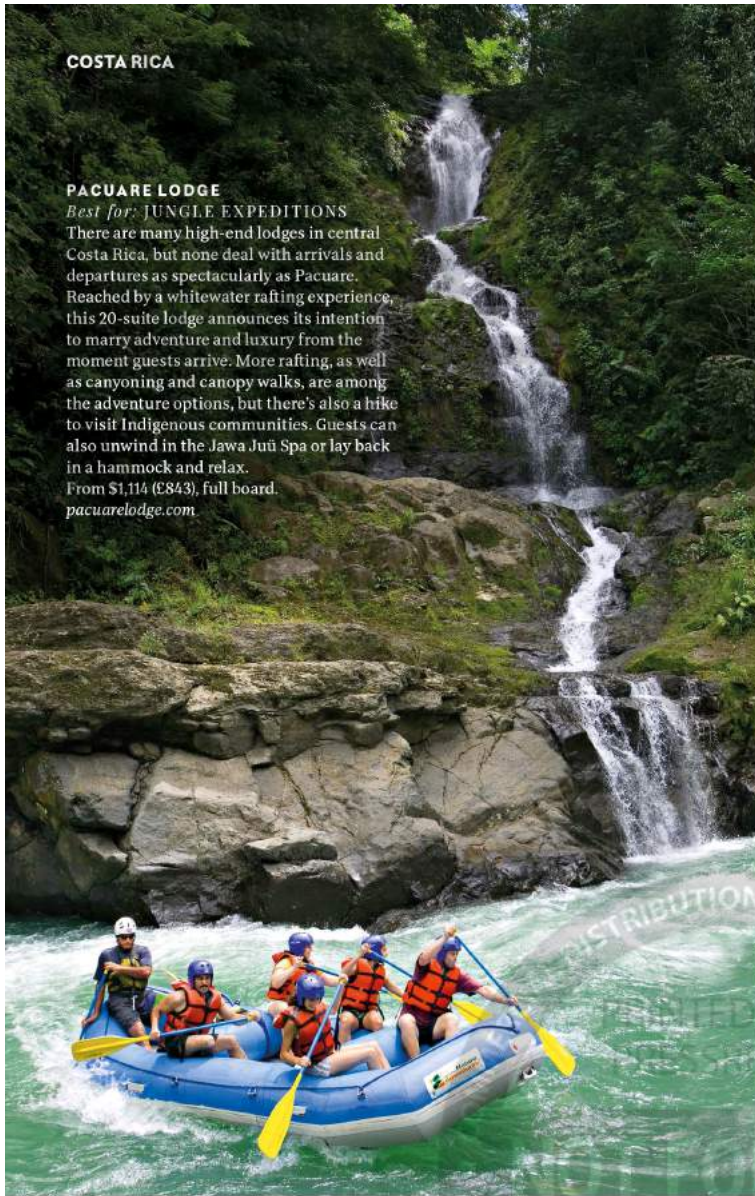
COSTA RICA

PACUARE LODGE

Best for: JUNGLE EXPEDITIONS

There are many high-end lodges in central Costa Rica, but none deal with arrivals and departures as spectacularly as Pacuare. Reached by a whitewater rafting experience, this 20-suite lodge announces its intention to marry adventure and luxury from the moment guests arrive. More rafting, as well as canyoning and canopy walks, are among the adventure options, but there's also a hike to visit Indigenous communities. Guests can also unwind in the Jawa Juú Spa or lay back in a hammock and relax.

From \$1,114 (£843), full board. pacuarelodge.com



CIELO LODGE

Best for: OCEAN ADVENTURES

Looking over the waters of the Golfo Dulce in the country's south, Cielo Lodge opened during one of the pandemic's bleakest periods in early 2021. But husband-and-wife founders Keith and Nicole Goldstein had confidence that their remarkable six-suite property in the middle of 380 acres of forest would prove a winning formula. While the lodge is set back from the coast, many of the activities included in the booking price focus on the wildlife-rich waters of the gulf. They include dolphin- and whale-watching, mangrove tours and trips out to Bird Island. From \$738 (£558), full board. cielolodge.com

TABACÓN THERMAL RESORT & SPA

Best for: VOLCANIC HOT SPRINGS

Like its nearby rivals, Tabacón is partly defined by the mighty Arenal Volcano, an astonishing beacon that draws visitors from around the world. Although the area has a host of volcano-related activities on offer for the enthusiastic traveller, Tabacón isn't short of attractions of its own, including its outstanding spa facility. The highlight for many visitors is the garden, which has been cleverly designed to let naturally heated volcanic water run through it, gathering in discrete meanders and pools, giving bathers plenty of privacy. From \$420 (£318), B&B. tabacon.com

ESSENTIALS



Getting there & around

British Airways and TUI fly to Costa Rica directly from the UK. British Airways flies from Gatwick to San José, Costa Rica's capital, three times a week. TUI flies from Gatwick to Liberia, once a week. ba.com tui.co.uk

Average flying time: 11h30m.

Costa Rica's public bus system is reliable, inexpensive and relatively frequent, even in remote areas.

Privately run shuttle buses offer quicker but pricier transfers. Car rental is also popular and it can be worth spending extra on a four-wheel-drive vehicle to cope with rural roads.

When to go

Temperatures range from 21C to 27C all year round. Costa Rica enjoys 12 different tropical microclimates that remain constant throughout the year. The best time to visit is during the dry season, which runs from mid-November to April, when temperatures reach highs of 28C. May to mid-November is referred to as Costa Rica's 'green season', with the heaviest rain falling in September and October.

More info

visitcostarica.com/uk

How to do it

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC EXPEDITIONS offers an eight-night Natural Highlights tour from £1,399 per person, featuring stays in La Fortuna and Monteverde, international flights not included. nationalgeographicexpeditions.co.uk

JOURNEY LATIN AMERICA offers a 15-day Costa Rica Wildlife Discovery tour that takes in Arenal and the San José region, as well as the Pacific and Caribbean coasts, from £3,700 per person, international flights not included. journeylatinamerica.co.uk

GADVENTURES offers a 13-day Costa Rica Active Adventure tour that includes hiking, trekking, biking, rafting and kayaking in various parts of the country from £1,299 per person, international flights not included. gadventures.com

IMAGE: FERNANDO ACUÑA. ILLUSTRATION: JOHN PLUMER