

**Client:** Costa Rica  
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# Luxury Costa Rica

## Where to see the wildlife and enjoy the high life

This new hacienda offers night safaris and butler service in remote surroundings. By [Jamie Lafferty](#)

**I**t was raining with a vengeance — raining so heavily that my wind-screen wipers' fastest setting couldn't keep up. On both sides of the road trees stampeded over each other as though they wanted to devour the tarmac. The highlands of Costa Rica are often wet and riotously green, but something unexpected happened as I

turned a corner: a branch fell off, hit the road and ran away.

I let the car roll to a halt, and after a few seconds of staring through the driving rain worked out that it was a green iguana racing to another tree, its legs spinning like windmills. It's possible to have oddly private wildlife interactions such as this even in

Costa Rica's populated places, but I was pushing up past the city of San Isidro to a region where few visitors had travelled since the pandemic.

Some life was returning to the country's main tourism hubs. Years of investment —

much of it American — coupled with Costa Rica's reputation as the happiest, safest country in Central America had encouraged handfuls of visitors to come here rather than other Central American destinations such as Nicaragua or Guatemala. Costa Rica's other reputation, as the world's greenest country, where virtually all energy comes from renewable sources, probably helped too.

So, popular spots such as the ever impressive Arenal volcano, northwest of the capital, San Jose, had seen foreigners returning, as had the more accessible of the country's 30 national parks. Two particular groups of tourists had shown up first, as they almost always do after cataclysmic events: the wealthy, and surfers. The latter are after cheap deals and uncrowded beaches. Maybe the rich are, too, but in Costa Rica they have a galaxy of high-end options to pick from.

Into this packed luxury market Hacienda AltaGracia launched in November. This

was my destination on that rainy mountain, as I drove on past farms and quiet villages.

The hotel was not new, but its renovation was so total that it may as well have been. I was soon swapping my car for a golf buggy driven by an earnest "compa", whose role lay somewhere between bellboy and butler and from whom I could order lifts around the property via WhatsApp. Given

that it stretched over 180 acres and my villa, or casita, was one of the furthest from reception, this would be a useful taxi service.

Before I arrived I'd heard tour operators doubt the wisdom of building such an expensive property so far from Costa Rica's classic tourist destinations. There were rumours that the hotel had closed even before the pandemic began. Its general manager, Mark Wright, who moved here with his young family from Bali for the launch, said that in fact the hotel was being overhauled under new ownership.

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“And, well, then 2020 happened,” he said. “The place had obviously been made really well — the nuts and bolts were all here — but the feedback people had left was that there just wasn’t enough to do. We’ve changed that now.”

The property does not claim to have unbeatable eco-credentials, but there are no plastic bottles and the natural toiletries are refilled, rather than replaced. Nor are there coffee pods. Instead, guests are given a packet of coffee from a finca five miles away and a cafetière to prepare their own brew. In a few years the property will produce its own beans: 7,000 coffee trees have been planted on site and should reach maturity in 2025.

The produce used in the two kitchens is as local as possible, with almost every ingredient sourced within Costa Rica. The South African husband-and-wife chef team Arno Janse van Rensburg and Liezl Odendaal spent the long months before opening setting up new supply lines with local farmers and markets, then working on recipes to make the most of their ingredients. The results were incredibly good — in the four weeks that I spent travelling around Latin America I found that

nowhere came close to matching the meals at AltaGracia. There are seven different menus, rotated during the week (dishes include locally caught trout, and fresh Pacific-coast ceviche) and if there was a bad bite, I didn’t find it.

However, good eating does not a destination hotel make, so I signed up for several of its activities. All were outside, most involved finding animals. One night after dinner I was out with a guide and a headlamp spotting minuscule, translucent glass frogs by the streams running through the property. The real prize would have been to see a snake looking to eat them, but luck was on the amphibians’ side, not ours.

Earlier that day I attempted the ficus tree climb, a physical challenge designed to let guests feel their way around nature. I was not one of those children who endlessly climbed trees, and age had not improved my ability, even with equipment and encouragement from my patient guide, Priscilla. After a few incompetent minutes, 15ft off the ground, hot-faced and with arms in spasm, I feebly asked to be lowered back to terra firma.

I felt more comfortable getting up at

5am for a birdwatching trip with Johan. As we trekked through local farmland just outside AltaGracia he spoke at length about the resplendent quetzal, a shimmering green extrovert that is regarded as one of the most beautiful birds in the Americas.

“So do you think we’ll see one today?” I asked between dawn yawns. “Well, if we do, we’ll be the first ones for 30 years around here,” my guide said with cheery honesty. There was at least plenty more compensation, including emerald toucanets, the clay-coloured thrush (Costa Rica’s surprisingly dull national

bird) and electrifying squadrons of hummingbirds, flying with the speed and intensity of hailstones.

Back at my casita, I realised that I too was being watched. Observations I’d made on Instagram about the position of the writing desk in my room had been interpreted as a need for change; when I got back they’d put one on the terrace for me, facing down the valley ahead, giving majestic views of plump clouds trapped between rolling hills. Another throwaway post about the long-term prospects of my much-abused hiking boots led to them being cleaned and left outside my room while I was at dinner.

Some people might not care for this level of social media surveillance, but I think it showed admirable levels of service. The only dip came one day when I messaged for a buggy to bring me to lunch and didn’t get a reply. The ten-minute walk to the restaurants was downhill, but less-mobile guests might have found themselves stuck.

The day before arriving at AltaGracia I had acquired some embarrassingly savage sunburn that left my back a confrontational shade of pink. This was inconvenient in that I wanted to have a massage at the Well, the hotel’s restyled spa facility, the largest in Latin America. So I persevered.

Lying face down on the table, I suddenly felt the full force of having dragged my 30lb camera bag around for almost three weeks. And, like everyone else, I had also been carrying almost two years of pandemic dread. But as the massage progressed all that seemed to pale into insignificance, and even knowing the respite was temporary did little to interrupt the onset of a dream. Everything faded away, I cast adrift from the shore, and set sail for somewhere else.

## Need to know

Jamie Lafferty was a guest of Hacienda AltaGracia (auberge resorts.com). Ten nights’ B&B in Costa Rica, including four at AltaGracia, from £8,100pp, including flights, private transfers and activities (blacktomato.com)

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AUBREKE RESURKIS COLLECTION/ALAMY

A two-bedroom casita



AltaGracia stretches over 180 acres



An emerald toucanet

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The indoor pool at Hacienda AltaGracia