

FOOD & TRAVEL

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COSTA RICA

ANIMAL MAGIC

Costa Rica boasts five per cent of the world's biodiversity. It's a veritable natural kingdom, says **Olivia Palamountain**



AltaGracia is a working hacienda and an equestrian paradise

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The Manuel Antonio nature reserve is home to countless species; Nayara Springs lap pool; a sloth; the pool and lounge at AltaGracia; a keel-billed toucan



When it comes to animals, I play by the rules. I don't feed them, touch them, ride them or eat them unless I know it's safe and polite to do so. But at the KSTR animal sanctuary in Quepos, Costa Rica, nothing could have prepared me for the level of restraint it took not to cuddle a baby sloth. These tiny creatures are the crack of the cute world – which is presumably why we had to observe them behind a screen – with their adorable pink snouts and lazy smiles that broke the internet way before Kim Kardashian got her bum out.

Nearby, in the Manuel Antonio nature reserve there are no glass screens to shield the adult sloths from touchy-feely tourists, but Mother Nature did equip them with razor-sharp claws. Squinting into the canopy I'm thrilled finally to spot one, tightly curled around a tree doing what sloths do best – not much. Without a doubt, sloths are the celebrities of Costa Rica's animal kingdom, but they are far from the only incredible animals found here. Around a quarter of the total landmass is designated as part of a protected reserve, hosting five per cent of the world's biodiversity in just 0.03 per cent of the planet. To put this in perspective, that's as if every species of animal in London Zoo and every type of plant in Kew Gardens were indigenous to the UK, roaming free and growing wild.

Nowhere in Costa Rica encapsulates this better than the stunning 60,000-acre Manuel Antonio national park. Home to bleached

beaches and rich forest, the reserve is alive with the hum and chirp of wildlife, inhabited by everything from iguanas, tarantulas and toucans to lesser-known wildlife such as tanagers, white-nosed coati and potoos (answers on a postcard). Despite my best efforts, the only species I found were the territorial howler monkeys that patrol the beaches – seriously, be warned. Perhaps the rest of the animals were running late. Costa Rica uses its own relaxed clock – Tico time – that runs around 30 minutes later than standard. Meeting a local at 2pm? Don't bother turning up until 2.30pm or prepare to wait. Ticos were named the happiest people in the world last year, so perhaps there's something in it.

The pilot of our private plane to the AltaGracia resort took a more British approach to timing and, after flying over miles of virgin country, we touched down at the private airstrip on the dot. Set 1,200m high in the lush hills of Pérez Zeledón, AltaGracia is a new resort rambling some 865 acres with panoramic views of the magnificent Valle del General. Love them or loathe them, the ubiquitous resort buggy comes into its own on such a vast site, and I'm whisked off to assess my digs by a driver dreaming of F1 glory on a four-stroke engine.

Accommodation has been designed to wow. Despite a lack of local character, I'm suitably blown away – the scale of the villas is immense and all share that view of the valley. The giant palapas include working fireplaces, snugly touches such as cashmere throws and



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private verandahs. Hell, there's even a massive guest bathroom should you fancy hosting a party – and an office space if you feel like working. I certainly did not. An horsey paradise, this is a working hacienda with incredible stables and a parade of beautifully groomed horses dressed in top of the range tack. Thundering skies and rain as heavy as artillery fire (more glamorous than it sounds) rather put me off joining the guided ride and I slunk off for an excellent glass of Chilean red from the well-equipped wine cellar – and the promise of a massage in the spa.

Come rain or shine, Costa Rica really is all about exploring the great outdoors, so if you're here to tan by a hotel pool then you're missing a trick. The abundance of animal life and natural beauty, coupled with an exemplary attitude to welfare and conservation, has made this destination a growing go-to for conscientious travellers looking for something out of the ordinary, and getting here is easier than ever before. British Airways launched the only direct flights to the capital San José last year, avoiding any unnecessary customs fuff in the States – this is big news for tourism in Costa Rica, so act fast before the masses arrive.

The appetite for luxury offerings is also on the rise. One property that is cementing Costa Rica's spot on the international travel radar is Nayara Springs. A new, adults-only boutique hotel, it's situated in the shadow of the famous Arenal volcano, a perfect pyramid that looms at 5,437ft high, guarding the landscape like a smoking deity. Ultra-

exclusive, the resort is accessed via a 250-foot pedestrian bridge high above the rainforest canopy, bounded by a creek and underground mineral thermal springs. Crossing into Nayara Springs is a magical experience, like a symbol of leaving one world and entering another, set to the tune of the rainforest breathing and sighing a welcome song. Shady paths meander all over the resort leading to delights such as the outdoor rainforest spa, infinity pool or one of five distinct restaurants offering an accomplished choice of cuisine, from fine dining at Amor Loco to Peruvian fusion at Asia Luna.

You need never leave – which is precisely the point given that many guests are honeymooners. Action, however, is certainly not limited to the bedroom. Adventure options include kayaking through creepy mangrove swamps, exploring ancient caves, surfing the rapids on a white water raft and whizzing through the forest on a zipline.

High in the canopy, harnessed to a death-defying rope swing, I'm psyching myself up for leap of faith into the jungle. I never managed to touch a sloth, but for a few magic seconds I got to soar like an eagle. ■

BOOK IT: *Doubles at AltaGracia from \$357.50 including tax(altagracia.aubergeresorts.com). A deluxe casita at Nayara from \$430 (arenalnayara.com). For more information on Costa Rica, visit visitcostarica.com. BA flies three times a week for the winter season between Gatwick and San José, Costa Rica. Flights start from £616.10 return (ba.com/costarica).*