

Let Costa Rica's magical wildlife and luxurious natural pools capture your imagination *By ELLEN TOUT*

THIS IS THE PURE LIFE



EVERYWHERE you explore in Costa Rica, you're met by the charming national greeting of 'pura vida': it means 'pure life', or 'simple life'. When you talk to the locals, they proudly explain that this is more than just an expression. 'Pura vida' describes and embodies their culture and attitude of taking things slowly, letting go of stress and focusing on the positive in life.

Perhaps we all have something to learn from this ethos, as Costa Rica has consistently been crowned one of the happiest countries in the world. The Happy Planet Index ranks this tropical Central American country at number one, with people enjoying better wellbeing than the UK and US. It's also a world leader in environmental conservation and famous as the home of one of only five 'Blue Zones' in the world, where people statistically live the longest.

The capital of San José is the cultural hub of the country and rich in architecture, from the beautiful 19th-century National Theatre to the lively central market. Situated just off the main Paseo Colón, Hotel Grano de Oro is a beautifully converted Victorian mansion with art and furnishings handcrafted by Costa Rican artists. The dining room and courtyard are impressive and serve sustainable, signature dishes.

The city's fringes lead into the mountains, and a short journey takes you through the famous lush, green coffee plantations to the small town of La Fortuna, in the foothills of the Arenal Volcano. Rich in nature, this *Continued on page 17*

HOT TICKETS:
The mineral-rich thermal springs of the EcoTermales Fortuna, and the imposing National Theatre in San José, opposite



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is a base from which many explore the rainforest, waterfalls and national park. I choose to sample the natural hot springs at the quiet EcoTermales Fortuna and impressive Tabacon Thermal Resort and Spa.

Heated by the underground magma of the Arenal Volcano and reaching temperatures of 41°C, these pools are nestled in the verdant forest. As you float and unwind in the mineral-rich water and cascading waterfalls, birds chorus and glide above. Visiting at night is beautifully warm and calming, with the stars lighting the secluded pathways.

Having experienced its heat, I'm keen to explore the scenic Arenal Volcano National Park - home to Costa Rica's historically most active volcano. Owing to its dramatic scenery, many movies have been filmed here. The trail leads you through the former lava fields and beneath the canopy of the forest to the viewpoint for the iconic volcano. Towering above the glistening Lake Arenal, it's spectacular. I'm fortunate enough to spot a family of wild boar, as well as many birds, flowers and fauna. Although it accounts for only 0.03 percent of the earth's surface, Costa Rica contains nearly six per cent of the world's biodiversity, and is particularly famous for its sloths. Another lure for nature lovers are Costa Rica's turtles, found on the coast near Nosara in the

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**SPLENDOUR
AND SANDS:**
The Hotel Grano
de Oro
restaurant,
above, offers
a grand dining
experience;
hidden beaches,
right, are
favoured turtle
nesting grounds

'Blue Zone' of the Nicoya Peninsula. I visit the Ostional Wildlife Refuge on a protected stretch of coastline where the Olive Ridley sea turtle nests – one of the most important areas in the world for this.

Staying at the beautiful Harmony Hotel on the peninsula means you're a short drive from the nesting grounds and can also immerse yourself in the other local wildlife, such as hummingbirds and howler monkeys, as well as experiencing restorative yoga classes and unspoiled beaches. Like many of the hotels here, Harmony focuses on sustainability and encourages guests to plant a small tree each before checking in.

To witness the sea turtles, you have to venture out at dusk. The beach is free of light pollution and only the sound of the waves breaks the stillness. We walk for half an hour and I begin to doubt if we will find anything. Then, a researcher whispers over the radio that a large female has been spotted. It's a spectacular privilege to be observing as she carries out her instinctive nesting ritual.

Female sea turtles will come back to the same beach where they themselves hatched to lay their eggs. The volunteers who work to protect them are vital. This is truly one of nature's wonders.



TRANQUIL TIMES: The Nicoya Peninsula offers unspoiled beaches to contemplate, above, as well as a host of local wildlife

Complete your journey by heading to Curú, a private national wildlife refuge, and travel by boat to a secluded bay for sunset. Many species flourish here, including deer, monkeys, raccoons and iguanas. Once the sun sets behind the mangroves, this area becomes magical. As your boat floats you away from the shore, the ocean comes to life with unique bioluminescent algae. The brave can take a dip in the warm water for an unforgettable experience. The algae react to movement and literally dance, like diamonds glittering around you in the water. It's a spectacle that has to be seen to be believed – your own slice of that pura vida feeling. ♡

THE DIVERSE HIGHLIGHTS OF COSTA RICA



- ☉ Absorb the arts of San José with a tour of its historical National Theatre and discover the ornate architecture and lavish auditorium.
- ☉ Reconnect with nature: Costa Rica has the most biodiversity per square mile in the world and is home to 500,000 different species. The Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve is where you can spot the elusive sloth.
- ☉ Witness the leatherback, hawksbill, green and Olive Ridley sea turtles laying their eggs. Visit between September and October for the best chance of spotting the Olive Ridley sea turtles on the shores of the nine mile long Ostional Wildlife Refuge.
- ☉ Food plays a central role in Costa Rican culture. Sample the traditional 'casado' dish of colourful rice, beans, meat, tortilla, plantain and salad and

try an organic 'farm to table' experience at the Educativa Don Juan, where you can taste pineapples fresh from the tree.

- ☉ Unwind with yoga and spa treatments amid the palm trees and warm sands in one of the world's five 'Blue Zones' on the Nicoya Peninsula.

- ☉ Feel the soothing warmth of the Arenal Volcano (left) at one of the natural hot springs: bathe in their restorative, mineral-rich pools, waterfalls and streams.

- ☉ Swim, hire a boat or kayak in the bioluminescent waters of Curú National Wildlife Refuge.

- ☉ Discover the Costa Rican ethos of 'pura vida' and slow down with sustainable hotels, delicious, natural food and luxurious wellness options.

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