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Game Changers



The sun sets over the Pacific off the sandy beach at Las Catalinas.

COSTA RICA LUXE

A breaching whale spotted off the Pacific coast.

ADVENTURE TRAVEL OR RESORT PAMPERING? LAS CATALINAS SETS ITS OWN DEFINITIONS

BY JORDAN RIEFE

Snug against the shore in its own secluded bay along Costa Rica's Pacific coast is the placid resort town of Las Catalinas. Actually, it's not a resort and it's not a town, not in the typical sense. In fact, there are few words to describe Las Catalinas short of splendid tropical serenity. Like a resort, it has a hotel, the newly opened 45-room Santarena Hotel, fine dining options and a beachside cafe. But most resorts don't include a gourmet grocer with a wine cellar and a design center.

Rooms are high-ceilinged schemes by ex-Apple designer Andrina Fonseca, with artisanal fixtures and French doors opening on the courtyard below and the tree-shaded beach beyond. It's a short

flight, but you're hungry anyway, so head downstairs to Ponciana, a Basque-style eatery serving up local cuisine by chef Saul Umaña.

Make it a light meal because across the courtyard is Pura Vida, where you will equip yourself for most outdoor activities including kayaking, paddleboard, surfing (double overhead, depending on conditions), scuba and snorkel. Just off the coast, the waters around the Bat and Catalinas ("Cats") islands are visited by humpback whales, white-tipped sharks, angelfish, orcas, spinner dolphins, sea turtles and, if you're lucky, the giant manta with a wingspan of 20 feet. In fact, the ocean has more rays than the sun in the sky – devil mantas, stingrays, bullseye electric rays, bat rays, spotted eagle rays, mobula rays



Above: Paddle boarders enjoy the mild surf in the mornings.

Below: The picturesque beaches provide a pleasant respite from the island's many outdoor activities. A conveniently placed hammock allows guests to luxuriate on the sand.



Below: An ariel view of the Costa Rican coastline.



and cownose rays (no, really).

If you plan on spending significant time in the water, you might look into joining Connect Ocean, the town's swim school and dive shop. It offers programs acquainting coastal residents with the sea in hopes of preventing drowning (the third-leading cause of unintentional injury worldwide).

Of course, if you would rather kill fish, hey, you can do that, too. Numerous fishing tours chase mahi-mahi, red snapper, yellowfin tuna, rooster, rainbow and sailfish. Bring your catch back to the Limonada beachside cafe and they will be only too happy to turn it into a delicious meal.

No bites? No worries. Lunch with chef Gilberto Briceño, who will take you foraging along a garden path separating the town from the beach, where you'll find edible herbs like verdolaga (purslane), or fruit from the papaturro, noni and mimbro trees, with juanilama tea leaves to help the digestion. Take a table at the Beach Club overlooking the bay and enjoy a cooling glass of freshly squeezed lemonade while Gilberto prepares your meal.

The trails in the hills above the bay offer dazzling coastal views best seen on foot, though you could take a mountain bike. But then you'd probably miss the occasional capuchin monkey, white-tailed deer, puma, ocelot or even a leopard, though the felines tend to be nocturnal.

Back at Las Catalinas, a pre-dinner wine tasting in The Cava is a must. Stop at the cellar of gourmet grocer Copper & Stone, overseen by chef and wine devotee Demian Geneau, who will pour you a glass in a cool, casual atmosphere away from the glaring sunshine. Here are various tasting menus to choose from, but you cannot miss with the bubbly. Sip some Santa Margarita Prosecco, Veuve Clicquot, a Freixenet from Ca'del Bosco or a Freixenet Cava. Something mellower can be had in a white or red, including a rare Tempranillo from Dominio de Pingus for a mere \$1,649 per bottle.

To enter the dining room at the Sentido Norte at nearby Casa Chameleon Hotel is to enter nothing at all. That's because guests are seated outdoors, perched atop a mountain, with naked air separating them from the bay, the beaches and a horizon of crimson and saffron that gobbles up the sun while you dip into an appetizer of tuna sashimi with cilantro, jalapeños and tangerine-lime ponzu.

GREAT ESCAPE

Escalate with a scintillating grilled shrimp salad with rocoto pepper sauce and tico slaw, and finish sloppy with the coconut cajeta made of coconut, mango with strawberry and vanilla gelato.

If you enjoy your stay at Las Catalinas, don't leave. You can rent a condo or house, even purchase one, if you like. It starts with a meeting at D'Aqui Design with house designer Andrina Fonseca, who will help you decide on a floor plan. Custom-built homes use artisanal hand-crafted tiles and fixtures made in a nearby workshop. It's one of the reasons this community doesn't have the cookie-cutter quality so many beachside developments do.

The dirty little secret about Las Catalinas is there's just enough to keep you busy, but who wants to be busy? The best thing to do is nothing. There are no nightclubs, no dancing or bikini contests, just quietude, Edenic vistas, delicious food and friendly passersby. For some, it will soon be time to go home. For others, they're already there. ■



The quaint Santarena Plaza combines colonial architecture with bright blue colors evocative of Costa Rica's coastline.



The rooftop plunge pool at Santarena Hotel at Las Catalinas.