



Three
Perfect
Days

Costa

No matter how many passport stamps you've collected, visiting Costa Rica presents a challenge. What seems so small and straightforward on paper—a traveler-friendly nation that's dwarfed by West Virginia—feels larger than life once you're on the ground. The seas on either side are separated by rugged mountain ranges, complete with fire-spitting volcanoes and mist-shrouded cloud forests. And the country's dozen or so distinct ecological zones—which are heavily protected and together account for 5 percent of the world's biodiversity, including jaguars, sloths, and more than 1,200 species of butterfly—are also home to an abundance of microclimates, each of which has little regard for your plans. It excites the imagination, but also forces hard decisions: Absorb the culture of bustling San José, spy on treetop monkeys on Volcán Arenal, or dive into the cobalt-blue Pacific on Guanacaste's Gold Coast? You'll be in a rush to do it all, but remember to slow down. It's only then that you'll discover the state of being known as *pura vida*—the true source of Costa Rica's wealth.



Rica

By Peter Koch
Photography by Matthew Johnson

► Devouring art and ice cream in San José

Opening spread, from left: the 300-foot-tall Catarata de La Paz; stand-up paddleboarding along the Gold Coast; right: viewing a painting at the Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo; opposite page, from top left: a shrimp dish at 11.47 Aranjuez; the dining room at Sikwa

I awake to the thrum of rush-hour traffic on the avenue below my window at the **Hotel Grano de Oro**. While it's not exactly the wake-up call of birds and howler monkeys I'd envisioned, it's also not entirely surprising. After all, I'm starting out in San José, Costa Rica's lively capital city.

Long treated by travelers as little more than a way station en route to a beach or jungle vacation (something I've been guilty of on previous trips), San José is experiencing a revival and deserves some attention. The morning is overcast, but through the mist I can see the flanks of Irazú, an

11,260-foot-tall volcano, looming over the skyline. San José is perched at 3,845 feet above sea level, in the mountain-fringed Valle Central, where temps hover at a pleasant 70 degrees year-round. The least I can do is get outside and enjoy it.

After chowing down on a plate of perfectly ripe tropical fruits, I head downtown to the **Plaza de la Cultura**. The small, stone-and-shrub square serves as the city's central gathering place, and it whirls with life this morning, as locals unwind on stone benches and street vendors sell tourists corn to feed the aggressive swarms of pigeons. Large-scale abstract bronze and marble sculptures dot the plaza, part of a citywide exhibition by Jorge Jiménez Deredia, a Costa Rican sculptor who's based in Italy, where his works have graced the Coliseum and St. Peter's Basilica.

I wander over to the south side of the plaza and the **Teatro Nacional**, which was built after world-famous soprano Adelina Patti snubbed Costa Rica on her Central American tour in 1890. (Local coffee barons, their pride wounded, agreed to an export tax to pay for the construction of a theater in the style of the opulent Paris opera house.) When it finally opened in 1897, the theater—and, by extension, Costa Rica—confirmed its position in the world by luring a Paris opera company to perform *Faust* at its inauguration. Despite its luxurious appearance, a very earnest docent informs me, the

original intent was to give all Costa Ricans access to high-brow culture; admission was just one colón. Perusing the box office schedule, I'm happy to discover that the egalitarian spirit lives on: a matinee performance by Costa Rican saxophone quintet Sonsax costs a mere 3,390 colones—less than \$6—for a second-row seat. On a whim, I buy a ticket.

With time to kill before the show, I take a short walk to the **Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo**, which is housed in the former national liquor factory, an industrial complex that dates to 1856, making it one of San José's oldest buildings. At the museum, I meet curator Daniel Soto Morúa,

“Whoever decided ‘vanilla’ should be a synonym for ‘plain’ never ate the ice cream at Lolo Mora.”

who agrees to show me around (A+D)*25=Ag, a retrospective that celebrates the museum's first 25 years and the work of Central American contemporary artists, such as the internationally renowned Manuel Zumbado and Priscilla Monge.

“Through its 25 years, MADC has positioned Central America internationally,” Soto says. “[These works]



speak to relevant issues—political and armed conflicts, migration, gender, identity—facing the entire world.”

Much of the work in the Main Hall, including *Adiós Lela*, a diptych by Monge that contains a gun camouflaged in a jaguar pattern, comments on violence in Central America. But it's not all heavy: In the next gallery, a handful of large sitting stones have each been raised to stool-height by a tripod of chair legs, creating a sort of caveman spin on IKEA.

Tour complete, I venture onto the pedestrian-only Avenida Central, where I'm swept into a river of foot traffic flowing toward the **Mercado Central**. I duck into the maze of aisles, picking my way past butchers and fishmongers, traditional clothiers

with embroidered first communion dresses, Technicolor floral displays, and growers of every tropical fruit imaginable. I follow my nose to **Café Central Cafeteria**, where I buy a bag of single-origin Arabica *granos de oro*, and then head to the legendary **La Sorbetera de Lolo Mora**. Open since 1901, the family-owned ice cream counter sells just one flavor—a custard-like vanilla with nutmeg and cinnamon undertones. I order a cup and savor every spoonful; whoever decided “vanilla” should be a synonym for “plain” never ate at Lolo Mora.

Afterward, I hurry back to the theater, as Sonsax is about to take the stage. Four sax players—soprano, alto, tenor, and baritone—and a percussionist play pieces by Cuban-born composer Javier Zalba that range from frenzied and experimental to more traditional Latin. When the curtain falls, I dance my way up the aisle.

My only lunch was that cup of ice cream, so I'm more than ready for a hop through the Barrio Escalante gastronomic district with Adriana H. Font, a former marketing exec and the discerning proprietor of **Foodie Tours Costa Rica**. Our rendezvous point is **Underground Brew Café**, a coffee



shop that's so underground I have trouble finding it. Font is waiting at the wooden bar, and as I enjoy a revelatory cup of coffee, she tells me, “I want people to come to San José, visit these small places, learn about Costa Rica's growing

culture of gastronomy, and realize that we have much more than rice and beans.”

From there, we walk to **11.47 Aranjuez**, a six-table spot attached to Hotel Aranjuez. Each artfully presented contemporary dish is inspired by a different region of Costa Rica. The coconut-breaded, flash-fried tuna with mango chutney is delicious, and local in every sense of the word.

And that's how the rest of the night goes: sipping Costa Rican craft beers at **Agüizotes Gastro Pub**, trying corn-based indigenous dishes at **Sikwa**, and trusting our livers to the country's top bartenders, Isaac Montero and Clark Jiménez, at **Mil948 Cocktail Room**, where every drink is custom-made, based on your choice of liquor and flavor preference. By the time it's over, I've gained a deeper understanding of, and respect for, Costa Rican cuisine.

COFFEE CULTURE

The grano de oro (“golden bean”) was the first major export to bring prominence to Costa Rica, which grows 100 percent Arabica beans across eight distinct regions. Here, three ways to get a local perk.

Traditional

The gloriously simple *chorreador* (“coffee sock”) is the classic Costa Rican coffee preparation. The grounds are spooned into a stand-mounted cotton pouch, hot water is poured over them, and the brew filters into a cup or pitcher below. Try it at **Café Central Cafeteria** in San José's Mercado Central.

Touristy

The Valle Central is home to Costa Rica's oldest coffee plantations, many of which offer tours. At **Doka Estate**, on the slopes of Volcán Poás, the Vargas family has been growing premium beans since 1940. Tours here take visitors into the fields and roasting facilities and end with a sampling of eight roasts. [dokaestate.com](#)

Third Wave

For over a century, Costa Rica's leading coffee farmers exported all of their best beans, but that's changing, as third wave coffee shops have begun sourcing directly from local producers. For a deep dive, do the two-hour private coffee experience (\$35) at San José's **Underground Brew Café**. [undergroundbrewcafe.business.site](#)

DAY

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► Climbing volcanoes and chasing waterfalls

The minute I open my eyes, I know today's a volcano day. Sunshine pours into my room, and not even a lowly Charlie Brown cloud dogs the mountains. This is significant, because I've come to Costa Rica during its euphemistically named "green season," which lasts more than half the year and is responsible for most of the rain that keeps the jungles such a riotous green—and keeps the volcanoes socked in for days. Just 75 minutes north of downtown, 8,871-foot-tall Poás is the most dramatic of the region's volcanoes—and also its most accessible, with a paved road

that delivers visitors deep into the cloud forests of the surrounding national park and within a few hundred yards of the steaming crater.

As I settle up, the front desk clerk warns me that this beautiful weather is temporary; the same powerful Pacific low-pressure system that has pushed all of the clouds out of the Valle Central is expected to inundate the area with torrential rainfall tonight. Also, due to a violent 2017 eruption, visits to Poás have been severely limited; national park guests have to reserve entrance two days in advance. Oops.

Regardless, I cross my fingers and point my rental car toward the volcano. The sinuous road winds higher and higher, through the shiny green corduroy of coffee groves to an elevation of roughly 6,000 feet, where plantations give way to steep pastures dotted with dairy cows. Family-owned farm stands sprout along the

"The crater's mineral-rich walls are streaked with red iron, jet-black basalt, and neon-yellow sulfur."

roadside, selling ripe strawberries with condensed milk.

The unsmiling park ranger at the entrance of **Parque Nacional Volcán Poás** isn't in a negotiating mood. "We don't handle money or bookings here," he says. "You must have a reservation." Normally, that would be discouraging, but roughly 10 minutes back down the road, I saw a small tourism agency advertising park admissions. A quick U-turn and conversation reveals that there's one opening left for the day, and it's in, well, exactly 10 minutes. After a rushed about-face, I gain entrance



This page: service with a smile at **Orgánico Fortuna**; opposite page: hot springs at **Tabacón Thermal Resort & Spa**





From above: tree frogs at the La Paz Waterfall Gardens Nature Park; clouds over Volcán Arenal

and promptly come upon a scene that gives me pause: A crowd of tourists being outfitted with red plastic safety helmets. Between April and

ON THE COVER



Thanks to its abundant volcanic activity, Costa Rica is a perfect place to take a dip in a thermal spring. The Springs Resort & Spa sits just north of Volcán Arenal, and its circuit of pools is fed with mineral-rich water that ranges from 83 to 104 degrees Fahrenheit. Two-day passes for \$68, thespringscostarica.com

June of 2017, a ranger explains, three explosions rocked the volcano's crater, spewing noxious gases and raining down ash and superheated rocks—some as big as six feet wide. As a result, the park was closed through last September, and the viewing platform is all that's been reopened.

It's a five-minute walk to the crater's rim, along a paved trail that's lined with a plant called poor man's umbrella (it has extremely broad leaves) and pockmarked, every few yards, by small craters from falling volcanic rocks. Reflexively, I reach up and tap my thin plastic helmet, doubting it would do me much good, but all of that is forgotten when we reach the rim, where the impressive view and a powerful sulfur odor conspire to take my breath away. The crater is one of the world's largest—roughly 1,000 feet deep and nearly a mile across—and its mineral-rich walls are streaked with red iron, jet-black basalt, and neon-yellow sulfur. I gawk for my allotted 20 minutes, then head back down.

A long, switchbacking road descends between the Poás and Barva volcanoes, alongside the Río Sarapiquí, on the way toward the Northern Lowlands. I pull over at the roadside Catarata de La Paz—a

postcard-worthy, 121-foot-tall waterfall that's famous for the eponymous nature park and animal sanctuary located in the jungles above it. I snap a quick photo, but I'm headed slightly farther off the beaten track, to Bajos del Toro, a cute little mountain town where a handful of electric-blue rivers tumble down the north side of the Cordillera

Central, becoming innumerable waterfalls.

At the entrance to **Catarata del Toro**, a 300-foot-tall waterfall that flows into an extinct volcanic crater, I opt for a more adventurous hike to **Cataratas las Gemelas** (the Twins), a pair of falls that tumble side-by-side as part of the Río Agrio. They're so fantastically turquoise—the

"The falls are so fantastically turquoise, they could've been conjured by Tolkien."

result of the light reflecting off a volcanic material, aluminum silicate, in the water—they could've been conjured by Tolkien.

Wading into the pool beneath the main cascade

Michael Moretti (cover photo); Christine Tran (@tourdelust (cover model))



AD



From above: a private plunge pool at Nayara Springs; hiking in the Lost Canyon, near Volcán Arenal

feels less like swimming than like withstanding a hurricane, but a guide tells me about a deeper, calmer pool that’s just 10 minutes downstream. Located below a few smaller cascades, the water

here is glacier-blue and sends a cold shockwave through my body. If the Gemelas were like a storm, this feels more like a baptism, and for a while I just float on my back. This, I think, must be *pura vida*. As if on cue, a hummingbird—iridescent green with flashes of white and purple—appears above me. We regard each other for what feels like five minutes, but must be only seconds, before it continues on,

humming to itself. With low clouds blowing across the trail and thunder approaching in the distance, I beat a retreat to the car, humming to *myself* the entire way.

Ninety minutes later, when I roll into the town of La Fortuna de San Carlos, fat raindrops are pattering against the windshield and Volcán Arenal is shrouded in clouds. I stop into the family-owned **Orgánico Fortuna** for

a late lunch of falafel, hummus, salad, and yucca “magic” chips. Parking myself on the leafy covered patio to eat, I watch the clouds drift across Arenal and hope for a little magic to turn this weather.

La Fortuna is the adventure capital of Costa Rica, where dozens of companies take thrill-seekers zip-lining through the rainforest canopy and rappeling off 200-foot cliffs. Today, I’m more interested in communing with this natural paradise, so I head to the base of the volcano for a soak in **Tabacón Thermal Resort & Spa**’s mineral-rich natural hot springs.

After nightfall, I drive 10 minutes up the road and check in to **Nayara Springs**, a luxury property that blends seamlessly into the rainforest. My 1,500-square-foot villa is so outrageously over-the-top—private garden, king-size four-poster bed, indoor *and* outdoor showers, hot springs-fed plunge pool, a hammock—that I decide to stay in and order room service (sea bass ceviche). Cracking an IPA, I slide into my private plunge pool, close my eyes, and listen to the chorus of chirping frogs as it fills the surrounding jungle.

AD

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Grano de Oro

San José’s original boutique luxury hotel is cobbled together from a trio of elegant Victorian buildings. Lushly planted patios and fountain-studded corridors link 40 guest rooms, each of which is appointed with wrought-iron beds and plush fabrics. The on-site restaurant’s French-leaning meals (served at locals-friendly prices) have made it one of the city’s top dining destinations. *From \$170, [hotelgranodeoro.com](#)*

El Mangroove, an Autograph Collection Hotel

Although its clean, geometric lines and boho decor project a detached cool, this Guanacaste hotel is all about connection. It offers the same luxuries as more secluded Gold Coast hideaways—indoor/outdoor suites, full-service spa, poolside cabanas—with a more down-to-earth vibe. Don’t miss Michelin-starred chef Sebastián La Rocca’s Makoko restaurant. *From \$224, [marriott.com](#)*

Nayara Springs

Set in the lush Costa Rican jungle at the foot of Volcán Arenal, adults-only Nayara Springs teems with tropical biodiversity. While the teak-and-stone villas offer luxe indoor amenities like high ceilings and dual rain showers, the outdoors are where they really shine: Each one has a private terrace with a hot spring-fed plunge pool and an alfresco breakfast spot. *From \$750, [nayarasprings.com](#)*



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► Stand-up paddleboarding with sea turtles and snorkeling with eels

This page, from top: a toucan at the La Paz Waterfall Gardens Nature Park; sunset on the beach at El Mangroove hotel; opposite page, from top: Mistico Arenal Hanging Bridges Park; paddleboarders returning to shore

I'm hoping for a glimpse of Arenal's conical summit when I sit down to an open-air breakfast at Nayara's rooftop **Mis Amores** bistro, but the downpour that began in the middle of the night isn't letting up. I've booked a guide for an early-morning hike among the cloud forests of **Místico Arenal Hanging Bridges Park**—a 600-plus-acre private tropical rainforest reserve where lowland and highland flora meet, providing rich habitat for more than 700 species of animal, including jaguars, tapirs, sloths, and monkeys—but I'm



told that lightning has shut down the bridges.

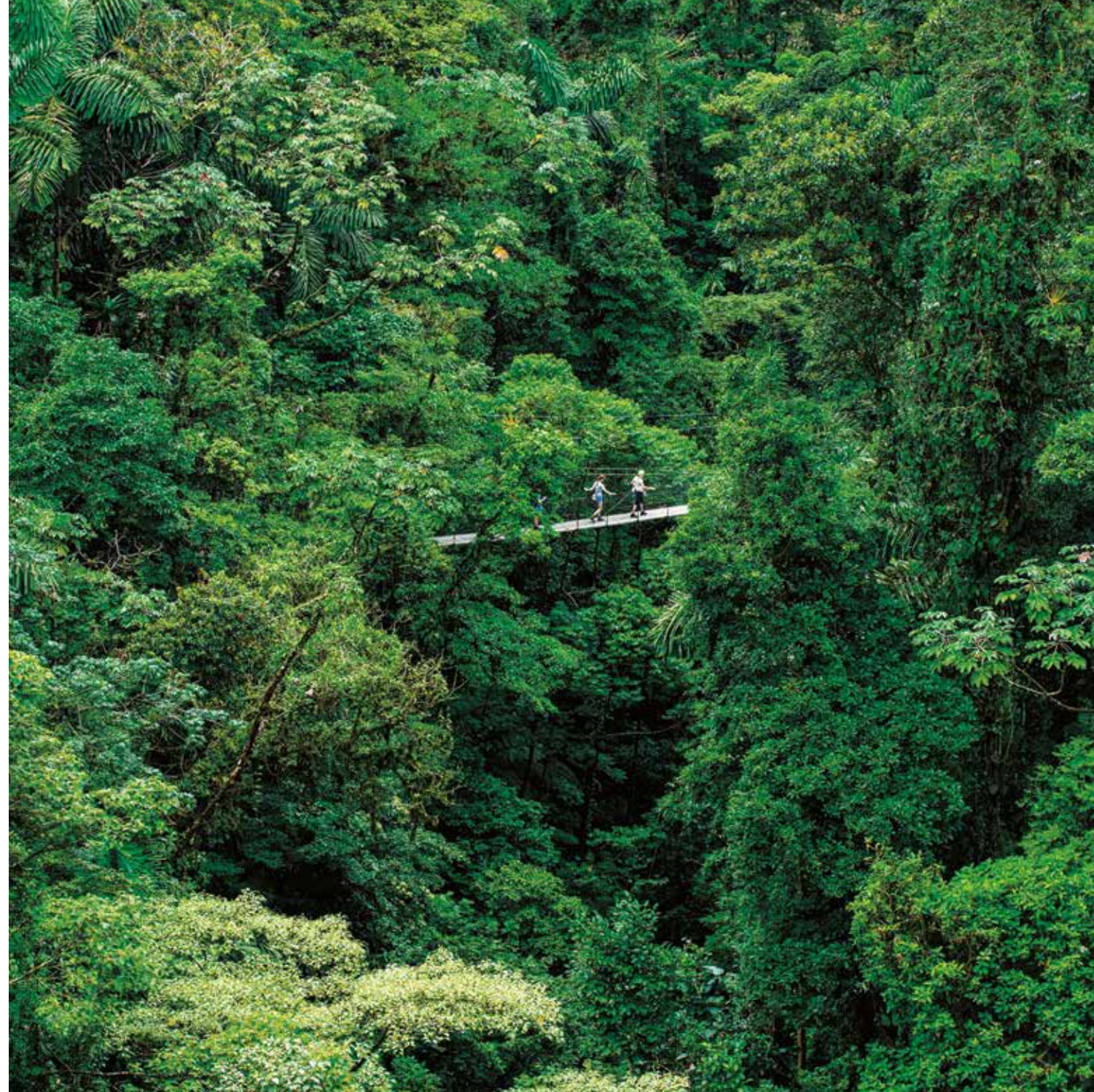
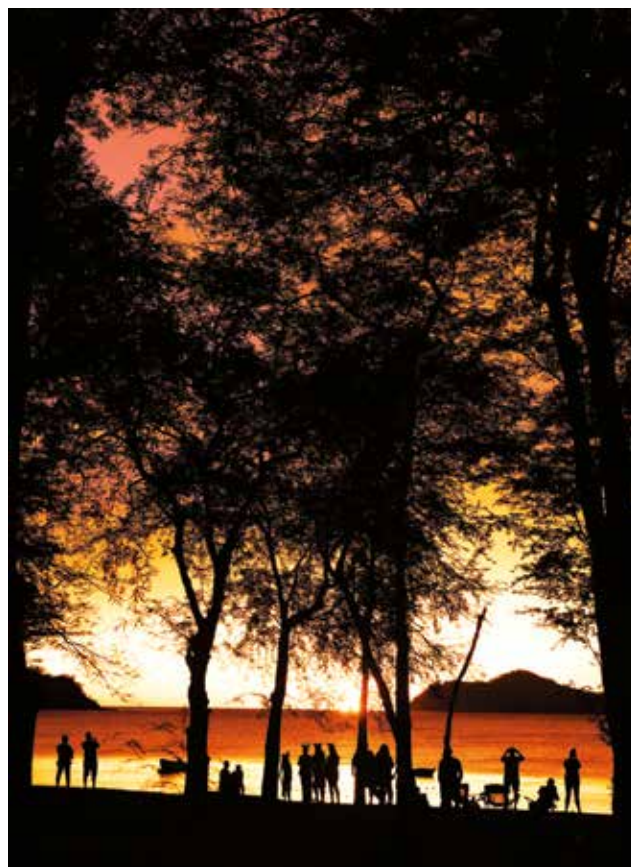
"Pura vida!" says my server, delivering a bowl of poached eggs in a spicy green chile *caldillo* stew. Those words are so customary here that they're reflexive, but in the moment they feel like a divine message telling me to seize the day and find my own satisfaction.

I resolve to beeline it for Guanacaste's "Gold Coast," taking the nausea-inducing road that hugs the contours of Lago Arenal, the country's

largest lake. By the time I reach the little town of Nuevo Arenal, two-thirds of the way down the lake's 25-mile-long shore, the rain has stopped and blue sky peeks through the clouds. Past Tilarán, the road descends steeply from

"After fording a puddle that I briefly mistake for a river, I climb incredibly steep grades that offer unbroken views of the jade sea."

the Cordillera de Tilarán to the broad plains of Guanacaste's Northern Lowlands. In the whitewashed adobe outskirts of Liberia, the state capital, I turn toward the sun-soaked Pacific beaches.



While I've booked a stay for tonight at **El Mangroove**, a bohemian-chic beachfront hotel on Playa Panama, right now I'm eager to get my sea legs under me—literally, on a stand-up paddleboard. Nearing the ocean, I'm shocked at how rugged the so-called Gold Coast is. After fording a road-spanning puddle that I briefly mistake for a river, I

climb incredibly steep grades that offer unbroken views of the jade sea, before at last descending to the resort town of Las Catalinas. Founded in 2006 by Atlanta-based tech millionaire Charles Brewer, the 1,200-acre townsite is being privately developed based on New Urbanism principles of human-scaled city design—compact, mixed-use



Clockwise from above: Mediterranean-inspired Las Catalinas; a mother and baby sloth; breakfast at Surf Box; the restaurant exterior

neighborhoods with walkable streets and accessible public spaces—taken from Old World Europe. In fact, the car-free cobblestone streets remind me of a small town on the Mediterranean as I wander to **Pura Vida Ride**, a sports shop that offers paddleboarding tours along the wildlife-rich coast.

My toes in the powder-soft black sand of Playa Danta, I meet Braulio Zuñiga, a gregarious 24-year-old guide who, after a few quick tips, leads me out onto the bay. There's almost no wind this morning and, because of the way the bay is situated, very little chop. Just a minute past the surf break, Zuñiga points out a dawdling olive ridley sea turtle that lets us get almost within touching distance before lazily diving away. We paddle around Islas Pitahaya, the two small islands at the bay's mouth, where I'm



briefly caught off guard by the sloshing of waves bouncing off the rocks. The sea calms down in the neighboring bay, and we can see the bottom clearly. "I wish I'd brought a snorkel and mask," Zuñiga says, but even without them, I can easily spot a massive manta ray fluttering gracefully beneath our boards.

Back on shore, I bid Braulio *adiós* and head to **Surf Box**, a tiny whitewashed roadside restaurant in Playa Flamingo. Owned by an expat couple, it's

focused on healthy meals that take advantage of the nation's year-round bounty of fresh ingredients. I sip a creamy Mavericks smoothie (banana, peanut butter, cacao, milk, and coconut), and peruse the café's small lending library while the rest of my order is readied. The ricotta pancakes are served with maple syrup, just like at home, and balanced out by an uber-healthy acai bowl, with hemp, granola, chia, coconut, bananas, and strawberries.

Belly full, I'm ready to head back out on the water. I go north along the coast to Playas del Coco, a lively beach town that's popular for its deep-sea fishing and scuba diving charters. I opt for a sunset sail and snorkel aboard the 66-foot custom-built catamaran **Marlin del Rey**. At first it feels as if too many

tourists are crowding the decks, but as I explore the boat—and the open bar, where I order an Imperial, Costa Rica's ubiquitous lager—I discover a few quiet spots to scan the water for marine life.

afterglow seems to settle over the entire boat. I take up position on the port-side prow, my legs dangling over the water, a beer in my hand. We happen upon several groups of spotted dolphin swimming near the



Sailing north along the coast, we spot sea turtles and wide-winged frigatebirds riding thermals near the tip of Peninsula Papagayo. Rounding the peninsula, we anchor in a secluded cove, and snorkels are handed out. Among the

"I watch, mesmerized, as the dolphins twist and swim playfully ahead of the prow."

near-shore rocks, I commune with blue tangs, sergeant major fish, schools of barracuda, butterflyfish, porcupinefish and puffers, moray eels, and countless urchins.

On the return journey to Coco, the wind calms, turning the ocean's surface into quicksilver. I can't tell if it's the golden light from the setting sun or if I've just caught a buzz, but a warm sort of

mouth of Coco Bay, and, when the captain changes course to intercept them, they indulge our curiosity by repeatedly surfing the boat's bow wave. I watch, mesmerized, as they twist and swim playfully just ahead of the prow and below the surface, occasionally tossing in an acrobatic leap for show. Just when I think it can't get any better, a mother and her curious calf take a short turn in our wake.

Standing on the boat and soaking in the simple, profound beauty of the dolphins, who are perfectly at home in their bountiful, protected Costa Rican ecosystem, I'm overcome by a sense of peace and well-being. *That*, my friends, is the definition of *pura vida*.

Explore the riches within: United offers nonstop flights to both Liberia and San José, Costa Rica, from its hubs in New York/New Jersey and Houston. Visit [united.com](https://www.united.com) or download the United mobile app for schedule and details.

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