



Days of Green

Costa Rica's family-friendly eco-resorts open visitors up to whole new ways of living.

by CHRISTIAN MILLMAN

IT'S UNUSUAL TO COME BACK FROM A MAGICAL TRIP

to a tropical paradise feeling regretful. But that's exactly how I returned from Costa Rica. I regret that I went alone. I regret that I didn't see my wife's jaw drop at the breathtaking sights. I regret that my sons didn't learn the things I did about treading lightly on this planet while still being very much a part of it. But at least I can tell them. And you.

Costa Rica was once little more than a large plantation for various corporate interests. These days, the country is busily remaking itself into a model of how we can undo things of the past and restore the natural beauty that once surrounded us.

I arrive in San Jose, its capital (which is a direct flight from most major American airports), and transfer to one of the in-country airlines that connect to remote areas. An hour later, I land in the Pacific coastal village of Golfito.

A boat meets me at the town wharf, ready to transport me across the Golfo Dulce to the Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge, one of the nation's many eco-lodges and my home for the next few days. The lodge and its surrounding cabins are woven into 165 acres of rainforest that have been reclaimed from their former history as a cocoa plantation. It uses solar panels for most of its electrical needs, recycles and composts almost everything, and uses local, organic food supplies whenever possible.

Playa Nicuesa is also backed by a protected national park of almost 35,000 acres. The Osa Peninsula, upon which both lodge and park rest, holds the largest remaining Pacific Coast rainforest.

The lodge's clientele is diverse—honeymooners looking for a private cabin in pristine surroundings; nature lovers who come to hike, ocean kayak, and study yoga on a deck built under beachfront palms; and families coming to spend time together.

As I settle into a cabin made from sustainably harvested exotic woods, I'm torn between the desire to sit in the porch hammock and read to the background sounds of howler monkeys and tree frogs, or dive headfirst into the forest and ocean. Fortunately, I have time for it all. The coming days are full of astonishments—a family of monkeys in the trees overhead, dolphins accompanying our boat, and plants and animals straight from the pages of *National Geographic*.

Back at the lodge, the atmosphere is one of grace and simplicity. The Latin-inspired food is served fresh from the ocean and gardens. Meals are eaten at a long table, quickly taking on the air of family reunions.

When it comes time to leave, it's suddenly hard to get on the boat. I know what I'm giving up—peace and beauty and wonderful companionship—and what I'm going back to—work stress and traffic and concrete. But then I do what many have done in similar situations—start planning a return trip. ☺

RESOURCES

Costa Rica Tourism Board, visitcostarica.com
Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge, nicuesalodge.com, 866/594-8116
Sustainable Travel International, sustainabletravelinternational.org

PHOTO COURTESY OF PLAYA NICUESA RAINFOREST LODGE