

Costa Rica Is 'Pure Life'

Guanacaste offers deep-sea fishing for marlin, hot-air ballooning over coffee fields, and relaxing to the calls of howler monkeys.

BY ARI KAPLAN

Pura vida" is the catch-all Spanish phrase in Costa Rica that characterizes the nature of its people and the majesty of its landscape.

If "pure life" — as the term is translated — is your pursuit, then this safe, inviting Central American nation couched between Nicaragua and Panama should be your destination this winter.

Of the country's three principal tourist regions — Caribbean, Central and Pacific — the latter offers the best year-round weather. The dry season runs from January through May and boasts 80-degree average temperatures.

Within the Pacific region, Guanacaste, the largest and northwestern-most province, is an ideal place for relaxing on black-sand beaches, listening to howler monkeys call from the mangroves lining the shore, and watching iguanas scurry through the bushes. Look up and you may even glimpse one of Costa Rica's 800-plus species of birds flying overhead.

Adventure Activities

Liberia, the Pacific area's capital city, is less about relaxing and more about experiencing Costa Rica's world-renowned adventure activities. Arranging tours and activities before arriving in the country can save time and guarantee reservations on preferred dates. Also, keep in mind that a full-day expedition can cost up to \$125 a person.

Consider an excursion to the **COTER RAIN FOREST RESERVE** for a hike through ancient jungles once populated by the country's indigenous people, the Malekus.

If hiking is not your forte, perhaps flying — through the trees — is. Costa Rica is famous for its Canopy Tours, initially used to study the elevated ecosystem of the rain forest. Today, the activity offers a heart-pounding adrenaline rush that comes with strapping on a mountain-climbing harness and speeding along suspended cables hundreds of feet above the forest floor. The cables connect a series of small, wooden platforms built atop centigenerian trees.

Next, take a trip to the **ARENAL VOLCANO**, the nation's most active. It offers incredible views of molten lava spewing from its lip, day and night.

This extraordinary sight is best appreciated while soaking in the natural hot springs at the **TABACON RESORT**, a luxurious spa at the base of the volcano. A



Arenal is Costa Rica's most active volcano.

room for two runs about \$150 a night, including breakfast, unlimited access to the springs, and the awe-inspiring beauty of a panoramic view filled with La Guardia Moradas, Costa Rica's national orchid. For a real treat, try the 100-plus-degree lava rock pools or a skin-cleansing sulfur mud treatment.

Sound too tame? Then take a 200-foot bungee jump off **VIEJO PUENTE SOBRE EL RIO COLORADO**, an old bridge west of San Jose, the nation's capital. And while in the area, brave a hot-air balloon ride over the central territory's coffee fields and river valleys.

Water Sports

Those who prefer the sea to the air can snorkel and scuba dive in the **GULF OF PAPAGAYO** or off the Catalina Islands. Keep your eyes peeled for the manta rays, angel fish, puffer fish, and sea fans, as well as dolphins, sharks and whales.

Thrill-seeking night divers will be warmed by extraordinary sunsets and guided by the light of the phosphorous waters.

Winter travelers looking to spend time above the open seas should check out **FLAMINGO BEACH**, a major fishing area in Guanacaste. Charter boats are available at **COCO AND TAMARINDO** beaches. Be sure to eat your Wheaties before leaving port, though. The huge marlin, sailfish, tuna and rooster fish found in these waters will test your endurance. Die-hards can book multi-day or weeklong packages.

Other water adventures include sea kayaking, from which flying fish, sea turtles and pelicans can easily be spotted. You may even get a chance to explore an uninhabited, offshore island. Sea kayaking tours originate in **BAHIA CULEBRA**, near **HERMOSA BEACH**.

Eco-Lodge or Resort

The country is famed for two kinds of

getaways — ecotourism and traditional resort vacations.

Both can be planned on the Internet at www.applevacations.com and www.travelzoo.com.

While an eco-lodge may be less expensive than an all-inclusive stay at one of Guanacaste's four-star resorts, it is sure to be more remote, provide fewer amenities and offer less access to the beach. Oh, and by the way, there won't be much room for the golf clubs, either — a tough sacrifice in a country with a number of world-class luxury courses.

Resorts, on the other hand, offer all the remarkable climate has to offer through pre-packaged excursions — although the authenticity of the experience may be compromised.

All-inclusive packages at four-star properties, with airfare, are available online for under \$1,000. And with the **FOUR SEASONS** building a new resort in Guanacaste and other luxury hotels following suit, more incredible golf and luxury amenities keep popping up.

Although neither eco-lodges nor resorts offer the kind of gourmet-dining extravaganzas associated with more popular destinations, whichever vacation you choose, the country's traditional daily fare of rice and beans, tortillas and beef will be on the menu.

And, souvenirs such as traditional pottery and Costa Rica's legendary coffee are sure to make the return trip home.

So, the only remaining question is: Should you go to Costa Rica? Pura Vida. •

OTHER HELPFUL WEB SITES:

- **Tabacon Resort**
www.tabacon.com
- **Paradisus Playa Conchal**
www.solmeilia.com
- **Allegro Papagayo**
www.allegropapagayo.com
- **Lake Coter Eco Lodge**
ecolodge@sol.racsa.co.cr
- **Costa Rican Golf Association**
www.costaricagolfassociation.com
- **Costa Rican Tourism Board**
www.visitcostarica.com
- **Costa Rica's Swiss Travel Service**
www.swisstravelcr.com

Ari Kaplan is an attorney and freelance writer in Manhattan.