

Travel

In Costa Rica you'll have just enough comfort - but no end of creatures

BY [JIM FARBER](#)

DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER



Kevin Schafer/Kevin Schafer

A couple takes a stroll across a hanging bridge suspended over the rainforest in Costa Rica

Who knew the green movement could actually save you some green? Those who travel to [Costa Rica](#), yearning to get back in touch with nature and revel in everything sustainable, have great deals awaiting them.

I booked a nonstop roundtrip to [San Jose](#) in high season for just \$370 (including taxes) and stayed at places for as low as \$81 a night — including three full meals.

Of course, in order to appreciate this kind of trip, you have to be the type who enjoys a, shall we say, porous wall between you and the beasts, insects and birds of this wicked world. I happen to be as artificial as they come. And yet even I found my recent Costa Rican jaunt a blast — if only for the bracing contrast to my normal, cossetted life.

The first surprise: Nature is LOUD. My typical morning at the plush Playa Nicuesa Lodge, down south on the Osa Peninsula, began at 4 a.m with the hard clicking of the cicadas and the wild hissing of the beetles. As if on cue, such shrieks were soon joined by the brusque toots of the toucans and the manic hoots of the white doves. Next arrived the guttural yowls of the howler monkeys and the nutty crack of the woodpecker, all punctuated by a steady, slamming beat of rain.

It's either a symphony or a racket, depending on your point of view, and here in the Costa Rican rainforest, point-of-view is everything. This place isn't for the squeamish. My room's panels leave what would've been windows or doors perpetually ajar. The shower has no solid closure, allowing ample room for small, gnarly crabs to do their sideways shuffle across the shower floor, and a nervous hummingbird to hover nimbly in the air above the sink. A net did hover over my bed to catch all the flying life, but that didn't stop something unknown from scurrying across my face at 3 a.m. one night.

Welcome to the delights of ecotourism (or "eeek-o-tourism"), a phenomenon that, in the last 10 years, has ballooned into the largest industry in Costa Rica out -side of agriculture.

And no wonder. It's both a privilege, and a potential horror, to cavort with so many creatures in their natural habitat. During my time in Costa Rica, I stayed in two such eco-lodges: the first a more enclosed spread up north ([Selva Verde](#)), the other the aforementioned Playa Nicuesa located south, in a quirky nook of the other the aforementioned Playa Nicuesa located south, in a quirky nook of the Golfo Dulce (Sweet Gulf). The latter boasts no roads in or out. You arrive by boat 20 minutes across the gulf.

They're both amazing places, defined as much by atmosphere as wildlife. The former hits you the second you leave the San Jose Airport in the form of humidity, making the air so thick, you'd think you could pour it. Selva Verde lies two hours north on a drive that snakes through several national parks.

(Page 2 of 2)

A key draw at this 20-year-old lodge is the raging [Sarapiquí River](#), which divides the secondary rainforest (where you can do self-guided hikes) from the primary one (where you'll need a guide, lest you lose yourself forever in its sprawl).

Connecting the two forests is a swinging suspension bridge, which allows you to hover and bounce over the rushing river and take in the broadest views. As you squish through the muddy paths of the tour, you'll see everything from the gross (tarantula holes) to the elegant (egrets, with necks as graceful as [Audrey Hepburn's](#)). The most common sight are black and green

poison dart frogs, which boast the comical coloring of a masked Mexican wrestler.

There's a cool night hike you can take, too, during which our guide thoughtfully pointed out the most poisonous snake in Costa Rica. "He stings and 45 minutes later you die," he said.

Good to know.

Off the property, you can engage in activities like white-water rafting and zip lining, which suspends you on a thin line hundreds of feet above forest and river, shooting you in thrilling bursts over waves and foliage.

The accommodation at Playa Nicuesa proved far more luxe (and more expensive), though that buys you superb food, an elegantly laid-out property and the intimate care afforded by a maximum capacity of 22.

Like [Boy Scout](#) troop leaders out to spook their charges, the guides here take a winking thrill in reporting their most hair-raising adventures — like, say, the night an anteater dropped unannounced from the ceiling in one of the bungalows. During my stay, one guest got bit by a needlefish, leaving a 2-inch piece of something inside her, requiring a hospital visit. The next day we dined on needlefish ceviche. ("Revenge," the lodge manager said.)

But there's enough beauty here to make up for any beastly invasion. A dolphin-spotting ride by boat brought out dozens, from two species. Later, we stopped on a tiny island for a fruit break only to be greeted by a perfect arc of birds perched on a tree, including gray pelicans, grand frigates and a looming black vulture. Nearby, we eyed an iguana. Not far away lay a hissing boa constrictor in a tree. "Let's get closer," said my guide.

"Let's not," I said.

To make the most of the days, you should mimic the movement of the sun. Rise at 5 a.m. Go to sleep by 10 p.m. After all, by 3 p.m. the rains come, often furiously. Following this schedule will put you right in the rhythm of nature.

It's the ideal frame of mind to soak up all its sights and sounds while remembering you're a creature too, as wondrous and scary as the multitudes that, in this place, uniquely surround you.