



Going Places

THE MAGAZINE FOR TODAY'S TRAVELER

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COSTA RICA

Nature's Handiwork

By Tom Wuckovich



There seemed no end to it.

This vast green abyss—one of many rainforests

in Costa Rica—was thick and lush and drowned the mountains in an emerald tapestry before it descended to kiss

the rolling surf of the Pacific coast.

It was as intimidating as it was alluring. What

secrets it held, what mysteries it hid, what dangers it offered darted through my mind

as I prepared to venture into its green maw—anxious, yet undaunted.

I was going into the bosom of this rainforest on horseback with several other riders, bent on catching a glimpse of the vast indigenous inhabitants of Hacienda Baru, a biologically



Zip lining through the jungle takes a little nerve.



Horses rest before going to the waterfall.



The ruins of a former house are located in the Central Valley area.



Mountain streams create numerous waterfalls.

diverse private reserve of nearly 1,000 acres near Playa Dominical, set aside to protect the varied species of birds, mammals, trees and insects. Our final destination was the Nauyaca Waterfalls, a torrent of cascading water from the River Baru, which winds its way down the mountains and through the heart of the forest before emptying into the sea.

This would be no easy trek. The horses, though seemingly surefooted, would be tested on this day, due to the steady drizzle that turned the crude trail into a quagmire of mud and slippery stones. It was, at times, treacherous, but never more so than the final descent from the trail down along a footpath barely wide enough for man and beast, and beset with cavities of grasping muck and slick, table-sized volcanic rock.

Barely a word was spoken, as we all concentrated on negotiating this last bit of wilderness before emerging into a small clearing, where we heard the distinct roar of the nearby waterfalls. We all dismounted with a collective sigh of relief, and at last had the opportunity to really concentrate on our primitive surroundings.

The wind, heavy with the hot breath of summer, still felt cool on our wet skin. In quick succession, the two guides pointed out one three-toed sloth lounging in a tree, several toucans, a scarlet macaw and one poison dart frog. We scrambled to reach under our ponchos and retrieve cameras to record the native creatures. After a few minutes of shut-

ters clicking, it was time to hike to the waterfalls and perhaps take a refreshing swim in the wading pools formed beneath them.

The jaunt was worth the effort. The water—thousands of gallons a minute—gushed over the precipice and crashed onto the immense slate-colored boulders below, just yards from where we stood. This was nature's stage, and it was a spectacle this audience appreciated. Several in the group had brought bathing suits and walked further away from the powerful falls to take advantage of the opportunity to cool off in the glistening pools. Two brave souls climbed up and around the rocks to a makeshift platform where they dove headfirst into the water to the cheers of onlookers.

The obstacles we overcame to get here were all but forgotten in the giddiness of the moment—but there was still the ride back. Fortunately, the return, though still per-



Mc Cann/CT

ilous, also was without incident.

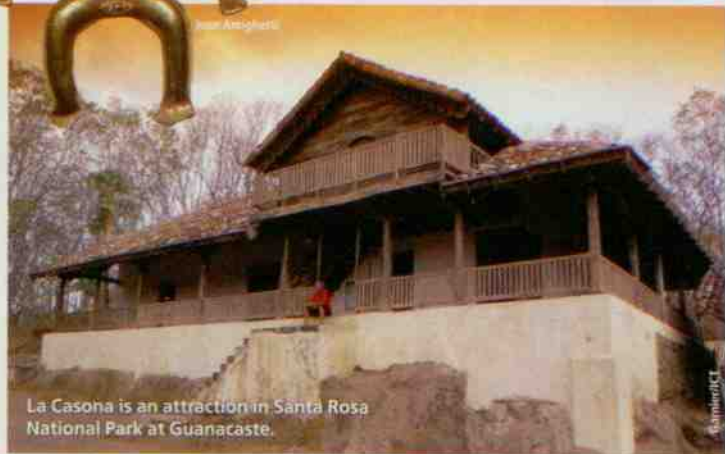
It was an auspicious beginning to my first trip to Costa Rica's burgeoning west coast, but it would not be my last foray into the Hacienda Baru. One other activity awaited me—a zip line

ride through another part of the dense forest. Zip lining affords you the chance to literally zip through the rainforest while dangling from a harness with a carabiner attached to a steel wire. But before that undertaking, I was ready to return to Kiana Resort, a new development in Playa Dominical that prides itself on its "light footprint" approach to construction projects. Simply put, the resort is small and compact with much of the land set aside as ecological reserve. This commitment to being non-intrusive translates into a secluded hideaway that offers a wealth of amenities but allows for plenty of space between humans, flora and fauna.

Using Kiana Resort as my base, I could savor all of what Playa Dominical offers. The waves are revered among the windsurfing set, and there are windsurfing competitions held throughout the year. Other water sports include snorkeling and diving, ocean kayaking or river rafting, whale watching and sports fishing. If land-based adventures are your first choice, then horseback riding, mountain biking, hiking and bird watching all can



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La Casona is an attraction in Santa Rosa National Park at Guanacaste.

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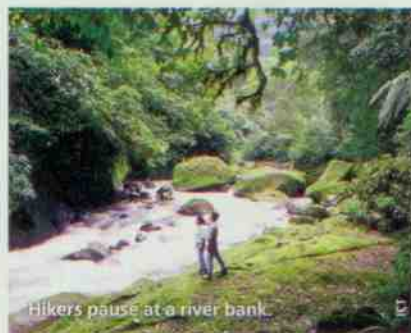


Inside and outside, Kiana Resort is a comfortable place to relax.

be booked through Kiana, as well as zip lining.

The rush of adrenalin that zip lining gives you as you step off the platform and glide through the openings in the trees is indescribable. Baru contains nine lines that crisscross through the jungle in varying lengths. Two guides always accompany you. One goes first to catch you and bring you onto the platform, and one helps you to prepare for being cast off.

If all of these adventures are a bit taxing, you can enjoy the customary resort offerings, such as spending time at the pool or Jacuzzi, walking the beach or enjoying



Hikers pause at a river bank.

Manual Antonio National Park is one of the better-known national parks.

fine dining at the restaurant. Kiana also gives you the opportunity to have a private chef cater your meal in your room. Not only will you get VIP treatment, you'll have the opportunity—if you'd like—to take a cooking lesson from the chef and his staff during the affair.

If you don't mind driving, though many of the roads are still barely passable, there are other sights to see both north and south of Playa Dominical. Corcovado National Park is south and is the country's largest tract of virgin forest. Wildlife in the park includes jaguars, pumas, tapirs and

monkeys. Manual Antonio National Park to the north is one of the better-known national parks and features nearly 200 species of birds and all three species of monkeys found in Costa Rica. Just north of the park is Los Suenos Marriott Ocean & Golf Resort, with an 18-hole, par-72 championship course designed by architect Ted Robinson Jr. It's worth taking the unfinished road to play this scenic layout.

If time permits, spend at least one day in San Jose, the capital of Costa Rica. This culture-rich metropolis has a number of interesting venues for the traveler, including a fantastic gold museum, national theater and many buildings with

historical or architectural value. If you have only a short time here, hire an experienced guide. I was fortunate to have the services of Juan Ignacio Solom Macaya of Urbanaddicts, who met me at the Hotel Grano de Oro, a small, but luxurious boutique hotel near the center of town. The walking tour he provided presented a unique perspective of the city and its history. I capped off the evening with a superb dinner at the Grano de Oro restaurant, which resembles a stately mansion more than a hotel restaurant.

As impressive and rewarding as that first day and night were in San Jose, what came later at Playa Dominical whetted my appetite for more. Costa Rica has not seen the last of me. **GP**

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Keyword:
Going Places

Costa Rica Beaches: A thumbnail sketch of the country's vast Pacific beaches.