

TRAVEL

BY RON DONOHO

# Zippering into Costa Rica

A popular Central American destination is enlivened by rain-forest adventures and some enlightened, eco-friendly developments



BILL FINK



**A**FTER HURLING from exotic tree to exotic tree on a zip-line trail inside the lush Hacienda Baru rain forest, there's time to rest and wipe away the sweat. It's then I experience a head-shaking flashback: *Hey, I just ate a termite. Intentionally.*

Hacienda Baru is a Costa Rican public/private wildlife reserve adjacent to the town of Dominical (south of the acclaimed Manuel Antonio National Park). Before the start of my platform-to-platform zip tour, a guide had stopped us at a tree bearing a dark, hive-shaped blob. It's a busy termite nest—and a snack. For premium effect, dab one on the tip of your tongue and bite it with your front teeth. Tastes like tiny edamame. Local restaurants grind termites into a protein-boosting powder.

Any sort of boost is helpful during a day of zip-lining, which entails strapping on a harness and locking it onto wires suspended in the forest. You slide down the zip wire on a pulley. Our two guides go first and last, sandwiching the group in relative safety. Though our guides gain our trust, the fact remains—each is missing half a finger.

Guide Juan is pressed to explain his missing digit. Finally, he utters the only English he will deliver on the day: "Lorena Bobbitt." His jocular rebuff exemplifies the Costa Rican ethos—machismo blended with friendly accommodation. Stories abound of tourists who've run out of gas or encountered ATM problems, only to discover locals—called Ticos or Ticas—believe a guest's problem is their problem, too.

Top: Getting zip-line instruction in Hacienda Baru.

Bottom: Café Solo Bueno.



A Hacienda Baru zip line isn't exactly an ecotourism extreme sport—but neither is it for the faint of heart. Especially if you fixate on the biodiversity you're flinging past. Juan brings a high-powered telescope attached to a tripod. Every look through his scope shows a new indigenous species of fauna. Juan reveals: Several multihued toucans. A cute (but dangerous) green-and-black poison-dart frog. Three kinds of monkeys, including a mama spider monkey playing with a baby. A pair of dangling bats. And several three-toed sloths. I'm slightly taken aback to learn these hairy behemoths are above and aplenty. Not to worry, though; sloths warily descend from the treetops just once a week—to poop, and then hustle (as fast as a sloth can) back up.

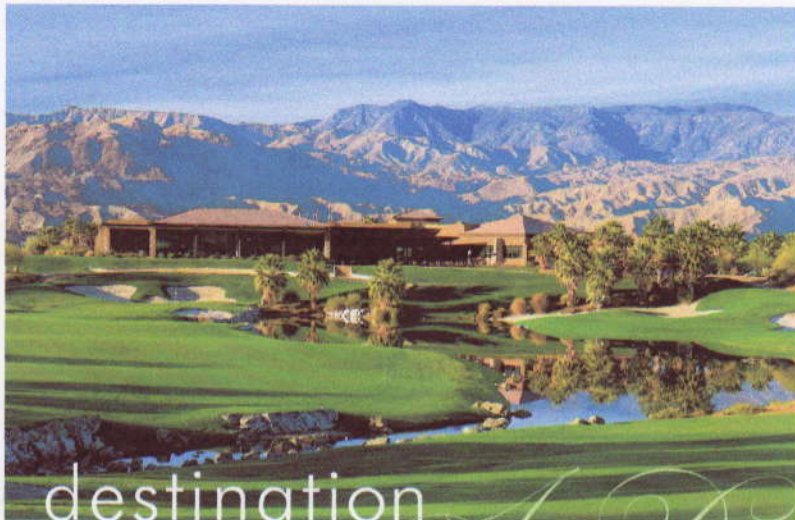
Juan can't find—or opts not to show our group—any snakes. The story comes up of a bushmaster that bit a local woman. One hundred meters later, the snake's poisonous venom did her in. This brings up some rain-forest gallows humor: The good news if you're bitten by a bushmaster is you have four hours to live. The bad news—the hospital's five hours away.

**GETTING TO HACIENDA BARU** is not nearly as adrenaline-inducing as zip-lining. But it's half an adventure nonetheless. I fly from Houston to Costa Rica's busy capital city, San José. From there, it's a Sansa Airlines puddle-jumper to Dominical, a small, coastal area on the Pacific Ocean side of this peaceful, democratic Central American country (with no national army). The airport serving Dominical is Aerodromo Palmar Sur. Loosely translated, Aerodromo Palmar Sur means: airport with no tower, runway in middle of palm grove, and corrugated-tin shack "terminal" staffed by four 12-year-old boys.

It's worth noting the Costanera Highway—the main road from the airport that runs along the Pacific coast—is paved. Once a car arrives at the new development of Punta Dominical, the driving is

Top left: A sloth. Top right: A poison-dart frog. Middle: Las Olas residence. Bottom: The "terminal" at Aerodromo Palmar Sur.





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done at a 45-degree angle and from one dirt-road pot hole to the next. Likewise, all side roads off the highway.

Accommodations in Punta Dominical are plush—I stay in a three-bedroom private residence in an eco-sensitive development called Las Olas. I can sit in a backyard pool and watch rainstorms saunter in along 30 miles of coastline. Punta Dominical is a project encompassing 2,000 acres and two other “light footprint” build-ups. Canto del Mar is a 38-villa, hillside community. Detached, two-story residences have panoramic views of the coastline and the tropical jungle. Kiana Resorts has a 26-unit cluster on the Playa Dominical shoreline. These villas are condo-hotels. Owners get 90-days-per-year occupancy and share rental revenue.

The developments are a harmonious anomaly in the unspoiled sprawls of Dominical, where even “downtown” is a radar-blip of mishmashed commerce: Hearty *jamon* (ham) sandwiches in Café Solo Bueno are just \$3. Tortilla Flats—a bar/restaurant with a bathroom door that won't shut properly (a trait shared by several Dominical eateries) is a surfer hangout. American expatriates are a significant part of the populace. Dogs wander freely (and will nap under your table during lunch). Seafood is good nearly everywhere. And fear not: Termite ingestion is usually voluntary. ■

**If You Go**

American carriers that fly to San José, Costa Rica, include Continental, American, United and Delta Airlines; a round trip ranges near \$600 ... For more information on Punta Dominical developments, call 800-503-5374 or go to [puntadominical.com](http://puntadominical.com) ... For overviews on Costa Rica, check out [costaricabureau.com](http://costaricabureau.com) ... Hacienda Baru ([haciendabaru.com](http://haciendabaru.com)) zip-line tours are \$35 ... In Dominical, these restaurants are highly recommended: La Parcela (try the tuna tartare), [laparcela.net](http://laparcela.net); and Manglarsur (a floating French eatery), [manglarsur.com](http://manglarsur.com).