



A biodiverse nature travel destination committed to sustainability, Costa Rica boasts unspoiled lakes, rivers and lush jungles teeming with exotic flora and fauna. Photo: courtesy of Peninsula Papagayo



# INTO THE WILD

*Costa Rica is famed for its breathtaking natural beauty — and the extraordinary measures it takes to protect that. By Wing Sze Tang*

**T**ravellers perennially seek the roads less taken, but rare is the “best-kept secret” destination that remains hush-hush for long. With tourist attention comes the risk of overdevelopment, especially in fragile ecosystems. So, it’s particularly impressive that Costa Rica has set itself apart as a world-inspiring model of sustainability, and I’ve come to the coastal haven of Peninsula Papagayo to find out how.

Despite the compact size of this Central American country — it’s smaller than Nova Scotia — Costa Rica ranks as one of the most biodiverse places on earth. After the military was abolished

here in 1948, funding once earmarked for defense was invested into health care, education and the environment — long before saving the planet became a matter of global emergency. Today, 25 percent of the national territory is protected as parks, wildlife refuges and reserves.

Peninsula Papagayo, which juts into the Pacific Ocean, in the northwestern province of Guanacaste, is even greener. Before this swanky residential and resort community was developed, it was all jungle. Now, in an agreement with the Costa Rican government, 70 percent of the 1,400-acre private peninsula is conserved as open space, which you can explore by car, golf



ABOVE: An airy living room at Exclusive Resorts offers serene views of the outdoors. Photo: courtesy of Exclusive Resorts. OPPOSITE: At Kiwanda Maji, a working farm and nature reserve, the restaurant serves *chifrijolo*, a Costa Rican specialty featuring rice, beans and pork cracklings, topped with tomato, avocado and tortilla chips. A lovely lagoon at Kiwanda Maji owes its dreamy colour to the volcanic waters fed by Rio Azul (Blue River). Photos: Wing Sze Tang

cart or GPS-enabled all-electric bike (the newly launched bike-share system is complimentary). The expanse is home to only a smattering of five-star hotels and properties, including Poro Poro, the flagship resort built from the ground up by Exclusive Resorts, a posh members-only vacation club. As we motor through the lush terrain — one of the last tropical dry forests anywhere — I'm struck by the sense of quietude. This is escapism for the well-travelled.

When we arrive at our villa — a sleek contemporary-style hideaway designed in muted earth tones to discreetly blend into the canopied cliffside — our genial concierge, Victor, begins

our tour with an unusual house rule. “The monkeys know how to open doors. That’s why we use double locks,” he says with a laugh. The 4,000-square-foot lodging, one of 17 Exclusive Resorts residences in Papagayo, offers every modern comfort: four airy bedrooms, a chef’s kitchen, an outdoor terrace fit for lounging or dinner partying, and an infinity pool with no-filter-needed views of Culebra Bay. All the artworks on-site are by artisans from the area, and building materials were sourced locally whenever possible, such as the reeds that line the soaring armadillo-style domed ceiling.

Sure enough, before long, I spot a white-faced capuchin scampering across my balcony, and howler monkeys become my morning wakeup call. These are not the only unexpected guests we’ll meet. A scorpion that has snuck indoors prompts a late-night SOS to Victor, who dispatches security. “Remember,” he says, reassuringly, “you are in their environment.”

Indeed, I’ve never felt quite this close to nature. For those who just want to log off and chill out, the peninsula feels liberatingly remote. But resort perks aren’t far — the sand, surf and cocktail-sipping at Prieta Beach Club are a five-

minute ride away, as is haute sea-to-table dining at the Four Seasons Resort Costa Rica. For eco adventures further afield, you can go kayaking in canyon rapids, croc-watching in Palo Verde National Park or caving near the northern beaches off the peninsula (your concierge can book any of these outings).

To explore the flora and fauna, we set out for a trail hike in Kiwanda Maji, a family farm-turned-reserve in the rainforest (Google Maps address: “Unnamed Road”), near Rincón de la Vieja Volcano. Through the drizzle (the green, or rainy, season in Costa Rica is May to November, though it’s warm-to-hot year-round), our guide, Minor, steers us there through a mountainous route. “This is what we call a Costa Rican traffic jam,” he quips as we pass a herd of cows, the only crowd we ever meet. There’s misty countryside as far as the eye can see, and something unexpected, too — wind farms.

Remarkably, Costa Rica derives 99 percent of its electricity from renewable energy sources, including hydroelectricity, geothermal and wind power, and it is intent on becoming the first carbon-neutral country by 2021. As the rest of the world debates whether we can live more sustainably,

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Beyond the accommodations, each Exclusive Resorts stay comes with all the amenities you could need. You'll arrive to a kitchen stocked just as you wish, or your concierge can also make reservations, even send an in-home chef to whip up breakfast, lunch or dinner. Prefer to have a pro plan your itinerary? Every member has a dedicated vacation ambassador who keeps meticulous tabs on guests' travel likes and dislikes and can recommend activities to suit their every whim. [exclusiveresorts.com](http://exclusiveresorts.com)

Costa Rica's example is a resounding yes.

At Kiwanda Maji, we wander past waterfalls and tropical fruit trees, pausing to pluck juicy rambutan. The plan is to take a dip in the natural springs pool, fed by the volcanic waters flowing through Rio Azul. It's the colour of pastel sky, and our own little blue lagoon is, improbably, free of people. I find myself wondering, does anyone know it's here?

On our last evening in Papagayo, we hop onto a small private yacht for a leisurely cruise along the peninsula. There are 18 kilometres of rugged coastline here, hiding beaches reachable only by boat, ensuring blissful seclusion. As the setting sun glows orange on the horizon, we scout for the pods of dolphins around us, peering for telltale fins slicing through the ripples.

Adrift in the Pacific without distractions, I contemplate how many natural wonders I haven't yet seen, and our increasingly urgent collective need to protect them for future generations. Costa Rica seems to have figured out how to balance sustainability and travel, with the sort of quiet success I hope remains quiet. Shh, don't tell anyone or, better yet, tell everyone — it's possible. □

