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LONG STAY

Katie Bridges heads to the Papagayo Peninsula in northwestern Costa Rica for luxury stays and some of the world's most untouched natural beauty.

[PAPAGAYO PENINSULA, COSTA RICA]



WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE

The Papagayo Peninsula in Costa Rica is about as close as you can get to being “one” with nature. Located in the densely rainforested Guanacaste province, it’s an eco-tourism wonderland with blue waters, white sand beaches and several environmentally sensitive five-star lodgings. Because 70 per cent of the area is mandated to remain undeveloped, it’s now a haven for wildlife like monkeys, mapaches, macaw parrots and more. And, if it’s good enough for Kim Kardashian (who stayed with her family at Villa Manzu in 2017), it’s good enough for us. Keep reading for the best experiences in the Papagayo Peninsula and the surrounding area.

STAY

PENINSULA PAPAGAYO

If vacations are your religion, why not join the elite with a serious commitment to R&R? Exclusive Resorts — a super luxe travel club with a pricey membership — gives you access to some of the most jaw-dropping private residences around the world. One of its most popular vacation properties is Peninsula Papagayo, nestled in the lush Costa Rican jungle. The residences are staggered across the hillside, giving you a slice of heaven all to yourself. Each villa comes equipped with an infinity plunge pool so you can submerge yourself in dreamy, pinch-me moments during your stay. Luxuriate under cloud-soft comforters and star in your own daily shampoo commercials with a scrub in the outdoor shower. My only critique is that my stay has spoiled all subsequent coffee mornings, which I shared here with the howler monkeys on the flawless terrace (remember to lock your doors, though — they have been known to pilfer belongings). In addition to the Poro Poro Beach Club and add-ons like chef dinners at the villa, you can enjoy the Latin-inspired restaurants and other amenities available at The Clubhouse at Prieta Beach, located inside the nearby Four Seasons. exclusiveresorts.com

DO

HACIENDA AROMAL

Take a leaf out of the bountiful Costa Rican monkeys’ book and swing through the trees. Get your blood pumping across five zipline courses, led by seasoned guides, with Hacienda Aromal. This 400-year-old ranch also offers a variety of cultural experiences once you’re back on the ground. Juice sugarcane using a traditional ox-operated sugar mill, grind corn tortillas by hand and cook other Costa Rican delicacies in an original clay wood oven. Cowboys can also take you out on horse riding trails with spectacular views of volcanoes and the Santa Rosa National Park.

TENORIO VOLCANO NATIONAL PARK

You could relax in the jungle by the pool most days, but if you’re looking for a more scheduled day off the resort, beauty abounds in the Guanacaste region. Tenorio Volcano — home to Celeste River, a stunning natural phenomenon with mind-bogglingly turquoise waters — is a 2.5-hour drive from Peninsula Papagayo, but plenty of operators offer half or full-day tours led by expert local guides who will take you to other wonders in the area. Swim under the Llanos de Cortez Waterfall, hike rugged trails through stunning scenery and maybe even make a pitstop to sleuth for sleepy sloths in the trees along the way.

SANTA ROSA NATIONAL PARK

The image of Costa Rica, to many, will bring to mind cute sea turtles scampering across the sand. Santa Rosa National Park is home to one of only two beaches in Costa Rica where Olive Ridley Sea Turtles come ashore each year in large groups to lay their eggs. If you’re not able to book a tour to spot the adorable little reptiles, Naranjo Beach is famous for surfing, plus there are hiking trails, mangroves and lots of wildlife to spy, naturally. Santa Rosa National Park is about an hour away, so you’ll need a car or a private tour company to shuttle you there.

(Left) Shutterstock.com/Cl-Medien, (Right) Shutterstock.com/Valerija Polakovska, Shutterstock.com/Alexey Stipo, Shutterstock.com/EOky



THE CHEF MAKES HIS WAY AROUND THE TABLES TO WALK DINERS THROUGH DISHES THAT SKEW ARGENTINIAN, PERUVIAN AND COSTA RICAN

EAT

BAHIA AT FOUR SEASONS

This upscale restaurant on the shore puts the crunchy beachside sandwiches of our childhood to shame. By day, this eatery at the Four Seasons hotel doles out casual snacks, but evenings are when the vibes shine as brightly as the twinkling stars overhead (easily visible due to the lack of light pollution). The chef makes his way around the tables to walk diners through dishes that skew Argentinian, Peruvian and Costa Rican (ceviche, tenderloin, casado). Don’t skip cocktails — which come in glassware as extroverted as any you’d see at Cocktail Emporium — or the desserts, which I “couldn’t possibly fit” until suddenly I was licking the chocolate bowl clean.

RIGHT: After dinner at the Four Seasons Peninsula Papagayo resort, stroll down to the beach for a walk under the stars



DIVE BAR

You don’t have to own a yacht to feel like a celebrity. Dive Bar, overlooking the marina and Culebra Bay, gives you a primo view of the fancy vessels that you can enjoy with a cocktail in hand. Try local tipples like the Bahía Culebra, which uses a traditional Costa Rican sugarcane spirit you’ll often see on drink menus. Things are a little more casual here, so you can knock back bocas (light snacks) and fresh fish with abandon.