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Exclusive In Papagayo

A deluxe experience in northern Costa Rica reveals Pacific vistas, detailed hospitality and wide-open wilderness

By Doug Wallace

There's a coconut on the dining room table with a straw in it – and my name burnt into it, like pyrography. Valentina, the Exclusive Resorts concierge, is showing us around the villa that will be our home for the week, while a welcoming team offers a rum punch and a bowl of heavenly ceviche. The fridge is full of precisely everything I had requested in advance – check and check. A valet lurks in the hallway, ready to ferry our bags to whichever room we select. *This is how Posh and Becks live*, I think.

We're on the tip of Peninsula Papagayo in Guanacaste, the northern province of Costa Rica, high on a hill overlooking Culebra Bay. I've been here before and couldn't wait to return. There's just something about the black-sand beach, the red gumbo-limbo trees and the unfamiliar calls of exotic birds that makes me feel like I've stepped into an episode of *Wild Kingdom*.

Turns out I'm not that attuned to the critters. When the welcoming committee departs, the first thing I do is scare away a little capuchin monkey – just as my partner is about to snap his picture. Oops. The wee white-faced guy has leapt onto the balcony to check us out, a little too quickly for my liking, so I panic and clap my hands. I'm remembering Valentina's tip that the capuchins have figured out how to get into the condo through the outdoor shower doors – which, thankfully, lock.

As the monkey retreats, we see a raccoon-like coati poking about the base of the villa. He's a big one, with a giant ass and a shiny coat, looking for tasty tree litter, maybe a rodent or a lizard or two. This

woody welcome is all part of the experience in Papagayo, one of Costa Rica's top luxury hot spots, a wonderland of seven beaches, tropical dry forest and private villas. The nearby Liberia airport sees regular traffic from Hollywood celebrities, who sequester in the nearby Four Seasons or the Andaz, play golf at an Arnold Palmer course or hop on a yacht in the Papagayo Marina, the largest in the country.

Yet despite the grandeur, wilderness prevails. Peninsula Papagayo's 20 kilometres of nature trails reveal a land of diversity – open mesas, old-growth mangrove preserves, coral reefs – plus the aforementioned 240 different mammals, 850 species of birds (including toucans and the protected and highly intelligent scarlet macaw), plus 1,500 kinds of orchids.

Tapping into nature is easy: it completely surrounds me. Government rules dictate that 70 per cent of the peninsula must remain natural. A 40-kilometre-per-hour speed limit slows everyone down, so you're not running over monkeys, and roadside reflectors sub in for streetlights, in accordance with light-pollution laws. It's like we've come upon our own little private forest, albeit one peppered with beach clubs.

Trend alert: Privacy is the new luxury, unsurprisingly, given the last couple of sequestered years. The aptly named Exclusive Resorts operates like a private travel club, where members pay a fee for access to a portfolio of 350 private residences in more than 75 countries. The "exclusive" part comes in the form of exemplary service. At Exclusive Papagayo, Valentina has not only filled the fridge, but she has also



Howler Monkeys (Photo courtesy of Costa Rica Tourism)

booked us an in-villa dinner with a private chef, made a reservation for us down the road at Poro Poro Restaurant – for sushi night! – imparted directions on the hiking trails and arranged for a mixologist to pop in one cocktail hour to teach us how to shake up some drinks. Five, in fact. Dinner’s gonna be late.

Nice as it is, we actually leave the compound

Home to everything from sandy beaches to dry forests to protected wetlands, the northwestern Guanacaste region plays an excellent host. Finding a natural balance between sitting on our asses and unbridled activity is the plan. With the variety of sporty things to do in Guanacaste, thanks to the diverse terrain, you can easily come home slimmer than when you arrived.

You don’t have to drive far to experience canyoning, zip lining, mountain biking, rock climbing or horseback riding. The list of watersports is almost as long, and includes the full paddling pastimes, snorkelling and diving, plus waterfall rappelling and river tubing. On the other side of our bay, the Pacific coastline stretching south is dotted with beach towns – some super-quiet, others party-central, teeming with surfboards, beach bars and condo rentals.

On the peninsula, the hiking and biking trails weave around parts of the golf course, all the way to the marina. We bust our calves one morning, not on a path, but on a stairway trail that is strewn along the hillside between two beaches. We stop at the Four Seasons beach for a swim and a chat with some of the guests out walking on the sand. All beaches are public in Costa Rica, the neutral space reaching inland 50 metres from high tide, so access trails are all well-marked.

We manage to celebrate the fact that we’ve taken some exercise at Prieta Beach Club, to which we have access as Exclusive guests, sitting down for a well-deserved lunch, before repairing to a beach cabana. We daydream for a while, watching a quartet of buff guys boogie board the waves for a while, their hair-tossing skills on par with the top fitness models. *I’m never leaving*, I think.

Back at the villa, my calves find some relief in the jets of the hot tub. It threatens rain, and the howler monkeys are perturbed. Their growling tapers off as they retreat for shelter. I wonder where my white-faced monkey ended up. He never came back – unless he made his way in through the shower and is hiding somewhere.



Papagayo (Photo courtesy of Costa Rica Tourism)