



The chapel (clockwise) at Villablanca, Villablanca's main lodge and out on the train at Villablanca

By Carla Hunt

Choosing a vacation spot that provides opportunities to explore pristine natural wonders, with the confidence those wonders are being protected, is a high priority for me. For my husband, well, he enjoys his comforts. The answer: Costa Rica.

In Costa Rica the skies are blue, the macaws are scarlet and the country is committed to staying green. Eco-resorts and luxury wilderness lodges are nestled into rainforests and cloud forests on both of the country's Pacific and Atlantic coasts.

Shortly after touching down at San Jose's international airport, we were off on the road to the Villa Blanca Cloud Forest Hotel & Spa. Just 90 minutes later, we were perched amid foothills of the 2,000-acre Los Angeles Cloud Forest Reserve, chilling out on our secluded garden terrace with views of forest and dairy farms in the valley below.

Our "casita," one of 35 at the hotel, was perfectly charming, with an open-beam ceiling, living room with sofa and fireplace and a huge whirlpool tub with its own window into this misty, cloud forest world.

Former Costa Rican President Don Rodrigo Carazo (1978-82) owned the original hilltop farmhouse, now called Hacienda House, where guests gather in a lovely plant-filled lounge. They savor fresh baked breads and pastries at El Café del Bosque and enjoy the nouvelle Latin American fare served up in the gourmet El Sendero restaurant.

Staying Green

COSTA RICA: TWO LUXURY LODGES LET NATURE LEAD

After dinner, guests can adjourn to the comfy surround-sound theater for a movie, or play chess and billiards in the second-floor game room.

Of course by day, the cloud forest calls. Binocular-bearing guests head out with a naturalist guide (or on their own) along the lodge's well-marked trails leading into the reserve.

You will hear and see several birds, such as the colorful trogons and toucans that make themselves at home in the canopy. We found zip-lining between seven platforms offers the perfect bird's-eye view of life in the treetops. A daybreak tour in a private farm nearby was just

as exciting. This is habitat for the elusive quetzal, which nests here between February and June.

Kicking back in this corner of Costa Rica's cloud forest also means taking time out for a soothing treatment or two in the lodge's Serenity Spa. Also, don't miss the lodge's Mariana Chapel. Vaulted ceilings are covered with beautiful hand-painted tiles, depicting religious and folkloric figures, as well as tropical flora and fauna.

Any member of the Green Hotels of Costa Rica is going to have its own greenhouses: one for organic fruits and vegetables, two others for orchids and bromeliads. Villa Blanca is a delicious place to be.

Our second destination required a return to San Jose airport, where we flew off over miles and miles of emerald forest to Golfito, one of two little airports serving the pristine Osa Peninsula, Costa Rica's southwestern-most region. We are met and taken on a short boat ride to Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge, hidden away its own 165-acre preserve next to the Piedras Blancas National Park on Golfo Dulce.

Going green and staying green is the philosophy of owner-hosts Michael and Donna Butler, who welcome you into their lovely, environmentally savvy lodge, crafted entirely of multi-hued hardwoods, and fitted throughout with 24-hour-a-day solar energy. Accommodation comes in the form of one- or two-bedroom bungalows tucked into the rainforest. These shelters offer canopied beds, private open-air garden bathrooms and private wraparound verandas.

There are four spacious rooms in the central Mango guesthouse, but I recommend you book a bungalow. The open-air, two-story main lodge is a veritable tree house, soaring into the forest canopy with an airy, open design that brings the outdoors inside. The candlelit bar serves sundowners and appetizers, while the restaurant is witness to a steady procession of savory tropical-Latino meals, included in the room rate.

Beyond its front yard beach is Golfo Dulce, where last August and September humpback whales were spotted swimming in from the Pacific Ocean. The lodge's back yard is pristine rainforest, laced with trails and



home to a bevy of critters, from white-faced and howler monkeys to sloths, anteaters and armadillos, as well as some 250 species of birds.

Get some exercise by horseback riding and mountain biking, or wandering through Casa Orquidias, a vast botanical garden.

The best way to spend time is relaxing with yoga and a massage, or simply swinging in a hammock, serenaded by a chorus of birds and monkeys. ■

