



The CALL

Left: Swinging from a bridge over the Pacuare River. Opposite: Sunrise over Nayara Tented Camp and Arenal Volcano.

of the WILD

After being grounded for months, *John Bowe* heads to the pristine natural wonderland of Costa Rica for a much-needed refresher on living the *pura vida*.

Photographs by Collin Hughes



I was standing on a wooden platform 200 feet high in the Costa Rica jungle,

watching a pair of iridescent blue butterflies with hand-sized wings chase themselves in fluttery orbits around an enormous, vine-covered ceiba tree. Suddenly the cry came: “¡Jalelo!” Pull it! Watching from a creek bed below, my guide, Olger Leiva, yanked on a rope, signaling to me (and my two other guides) that it was time to jump off the platform.

I had been strapped, harnessed, and tied for safety—I was rappelling, not merely leaping at random—but it still seemed like a profoundly reckless idea. I ignored my trepidation and let go anyway, tumbling backward into space. I dangled at first, going nowhere, then remembered to lean back as I’d been coached, and in an exhilarating rush, I whizzed down the rope, which made a sound like a happy buzz saw. The ground rushed up until I stopped face-to-face with Leiva.

“¡Pura vida!” he grinned. The expression, which means “pure life,” is oft-invoked in Costa Rica. It can signify many things—all positive—from “hello” to “you’re welcome” and “no problem.” At the moment, I interpreted it to mean, “Isn’t it great to be outdoors, having new experiences, instead of sitting at home watching Netflix?” There was only one appropriate response: a COVID-era elbow bump and a happy rejoinder. “¡Pura vida!”

Travelers have long loved Costa Rica for precisely this mix of nature and adventure (plus surf, spas, and great hotels). Given the restrictions of the pandemic, a visit to this tried-and-true destination felt especially like a no-brainer when, a few months earlier, back home in New York City, my fear of leaving home had begun to diminish. Assuaged by reports suggesting that, with the proper precautions, flying might not be as risky as I’d feared, I’d gingerly begun to consider what I’d need to feel safe enough to travel: No crowds. No bustling common spaces. No elevators or cities. Flights would have to be nonstop, relatively quick, and destined only for one of the handful of countries that had competently managed the virus. Costa Rica it was. To plan the trip, a friend and I turned to Black Tomato, an outfitter known for luxury adventure travel that was offering refundable itineraries and the very opposite of lockdown. It promised a full-sensory tour from rain forest to sunny beach, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, that would have us solidly out and about and never, not once, in a room full of people.

Our first destination, Pacuare Lodge, was a homey luxury eco-resort located 2½ hours from the capital, San José, and 20 miles from the Caribbean coast. The 20-suite property is nestled along the banks of the Pacuare River, which roars through the 25,000-acre Pacuare River Forest Reserve. It is a world-class whitewater-rafting destination.

The lodge began as little more than a campground, founded in 1995 by a pair of guides who’d led groups to the area for years. From this unpretentious, un-corporate start, it has grown to become a unicorn of effortless, low-footprint glamour. Our

Canopy suite had three spacious rooms, indoor and outdoor showers, a private infinity pool and deck, and a hanging bridge that led to a treetop tea table. But despite the grand setup, the constant soundtrack of the roaring river made it clear that nature was the true star of the show.

Our first hike, billed in advance as “challenging,” took us deep into the Nairi Awari Indigenous Reserve, at the northern edge of the Talamanca Mountains. The path—arduous, muddy, and steep—



was refreshingly undisturbed by the presence of stairs, ropes, ramps, or signs.

Our guide, Luis Picado, an Indigenous Cabécar who was born only a few miles away, has served as the lodge's naturalist for 15 years. His personal, cultural relationship with the forest made our tour come alive. As we passed a tree whose bark was studded with intimidating one-inch thorns, he said, "My ancestors used to wrap this around their huts to keep the jaguars from breaking in—you know, to eat the babies."



Above: Salmon with vegetables from the gardens at Origins Lodge. Right: Chef Manuel Marroquín sorts the fresh produce in the lodge's garden.



El Salto restaurant at Origins Lodge.



Above and right: The Prieta Bay residences at the Four Seasons Resort Costa Rica. Far right: Sunrise over Lake Arenal.



Costa Rica is renowned for its supersized flora. My awe doubled, then redoubled, as I noted how a 16-inch fern I might know from the Berkshires was reborn as a woolly, dazzling tree reminiscent of *Where the Wild Things Are*. A three-inch stick bug I might spot in northern Minnesota became a ten-inch behemoth, nearly impossible to spot among actual sticks and tree trunks. Over the din of droning cicadas, Picado pointed out brown-hooded parrots, a black-mandibled toucan, a scarlet macaw, and a rare, endangered green macaw. In passing we learned that Costa Rica is home to 54 different species of hummingbird, 140 species of snake, more than 1,400 different kinds of orchids, and ten percent of the world's butterfly population. I found myself happily speechless, overdosing on fecundity and beauty.

The following day, we set out in a 14-foot inflatable raft to brave our way down the wild Pacuare. In the next two hours, we'd cover 12 miles and thrash our way through half a dozen Class 3 and 4 rapids. Within minutes, we were soaking wet, laughing, shouting, high-fiving with our paddles. During quieter moments, as we floated around shallow, hairpin bends and through steep-walled canyons, our guide Ricardo Palacios pointed out multiple species of kingfishers, vultures, cormorants, and egrets, as well as a dozen species of trees we'd missed the day before—most notably, the gumbo-limbo, aka the naked Indian tree, which is a copper-colored beauty reminiscent of a writhing, dancing body. At a point where a rocky tributary joined

the river, Palacios mentioned that, even today, it's common for Cabécar women to come alone, unattended, to give birth by the water's edge.

I'd heard repeatedly that Costa Rica's status as a nature destination owed hugely to the fact that it had not been blessed with exploitable resources like oil or ore (25 percent of the terrain is designated protected habitat). But I'd realized by now that the enthusiasm and knowledge possessed by Ticos, as Costa Ricans are known, are equally valuable resources. All of the people I met seemed incredibly gifted at their jobs and, moreover, thrilled to be back at work. As my rappelling guide, Ricardo Palacio, had said the day before, "After being inside for eight months, with no tourists and nothing to do, this feels like my first time guiding 14 years ago! It's all new again."

If there's an archetypal image of Arenal, it's the view of the volcano seen through the picture windows of the rooms at Nayara Tented Camp. I'd arrived after dark the night before, unaware of my surroundings, but when I awoke at dawn, there it



Costa Rica Essentials

Black Tomato (blacktomato.com) organizes trips throughout the country, with rates starting at around \$8,900 per person (excluding airfare). The outfitter has recently partnered with **OpenClear** (openclear.nyc), an in-home COVID-19 screening service that can turn results around in as little as 12 hours.

LODGES

At the 20-suite **Pacuare Lodge**, most guests arrive by whitewater raft. The property's resident guides and naturalists are among Costa Rica's best and most enthusiastic, sharing intimate access to thousands of acres of protected jungle. *Suites from \$540; [pacuare lodge.com](http://pacuarelodge.com).*

With its spring-fed thermal pools, enthusiastic staff, and stunning views of Arenal Volcano, the extravagant accommodations at **Nayara Tented Camp** feel more glam than camping. Each tent has an enormous deck with an outdoor daybed and a large private pool heated by the nearby natural springs. 🏠 *Tents from \$900; [nayara tentedcamp.com](http://nayaratentedcamp.com).*

Origins Lodge provides stunning ambiance, seclusion, culture, and wildlife with six round, green-roofed villas (each with its own heated pool and indoor and outdoor showers) and high-concept, sustainable cuisine made with ingredients grown on the premises. *Rooms from \$650; originslodge.com.*

Tucked away like gems across the sprawling hills of the Papagayo Peninsula, the **Four Seasons Resort Costa Rica's Residences at Prieta Bay** offer space, views, and self-contained luxury with on-demand chefs, butlers, yoga instructors, and even your own mixologist. *Residences from \$1,630; fourseasons.com.*

was, verdant green at the base, slate gray at the peak, shrouded in mist and emitting great puffs of steam. When I sent a picture with my feet in the foreground and the mountain behind to a friend at home, he fired back in seconds: "Where. Is. That?"

Nayara, a four-hour drive northwest from Pacuare Lodge, is in the 30,000-acre Arenal Volcano National Park. And like almost everywhere else in Costa Rica, popular activities in the area include hiking, nature walks, mountain biking, and birding. After a hike to the lava fields and a fabulous lunch and tour at Don Juan's Organic Farm, we returned to the hotel for a nighttime frog tour.

Before we'd even left the reception area, one of Nayara's resident naturalists, Yahaira Sibaja Arroyo, pointed out a Mexican anteater, a howler monkey, and a black-and-white owl hiding in the trees. As rain began to fall (for the fourth time that day) she led us through the hotel walkways and into a reserve called the Armadillo Sanctuary. Prowling the night like a frog-whisperer, she located with uncanny speed half a dozen species: hourglass frogs, dink frogs, red-eyed



A red-eyed tree frog near Nayara Tented Camp.



tree frogs, masked tree frogs, glass frogs, and Central American bullfrogs as big as a Shake Shack cheeseburger.

How did she manage to find them so fast in the dark? “You hear them first,” she said. “Listen.” The bullfrog’s call was easy: “Yoot! Yoot!” Big and raunchy. The violet frog’s chirp was more of a “Pip! Pip!” The red-eyed tree frog’s call was pretty and musical. “See?” she asked with a grin. “When they’re scared, of course, or when they’re mating, they make different sounds. But that’s how you find them.”

Every time my friend or I strayed from the walking path, Arroyo was quick to shine her light in front of us. “Be careful of the leaf litter,” she cautioned. She wasn’t as worried about the tiny coral-colored amphibian we had seen earlier and identified as a strawberry poison-dart frog as she was about the snakes. The two most dangerous contenders, she explained, were the bushmaster and the fer-de-lance, both ranked among the top ten most venomous snakes in the world. “The bushmaster,” she said, “is gonna kill you in minutes. The fer-de-lance—you’ve got a couple hours, maybe four. But you’re pretty much gonna lose part of your arm or leg.”

Back at Pacuare, we’d been warned about a 1¼-inch-long insect called the bullet ant. Entomologist Justin O. Schmidt, originator of the Schmidt Pain Index, a spirited ranking of the world’s most agonizing insect bites, places the bullet ant’s bite at a victorious No. 1, describing the pain it causes as “walking over flaming charcoal with a three-inch nail embedded in your heel.”

Ants. Frogs. Snakes. Bees. The irony of escaping the virus to pay top dollar to pursue activities undoubtedly as lethal as mingling with crowds back home was hardly lost on me. What was worth the trip—in spades—was to feel the reawakening of my senses. I was outside, having fun. I was using my eyes and ears and cutting through the cognitive fog of the last near-year of total numbness.

Costa Rica isn’t really known as a culinary hot spot, but at Origins Lodge, in the Miravalles Volcano Region, no subject came up more often than food. The resort—founded by French real estate and restaurant impresario Thierry le Goasoz, with a menu by chef Jean-Luc L’Hourre (a veteran of several Michelin-starred restaurants in Paris)—brought a level of art to the jungle we hadn’t yet encountered. With six round sod-roofed villas and one presidential suite sprinkled across 111 acres, the property felt more nuanced and imaginative than anything we’d seen so far. Each of the accommodations had a small, heated, private infinity pool, which overlooked the forest valley and fog-covered pastures down below.

Manager Claudia Silva explained to me that every aspect of Origins was geared toward well-being. “What you eat is going to be seriously good for you, but it’s also going to be unforgettable and deeply yummy,” she promised. The cuisine is an application of French sophistication to local offerings, namely, the herbs, seeds, fruits, and plants historically grown by the Indigenous Maleku people.

Managing chef Manuel Marroquín walked me through the organic garden, and as we passed an orangery brimming with citrus trees, he explained how he and his team had cultivated different grades of soil to expand the number of crops they could grow. Arranged in a circular mandala was a mind-blowing variety of crops: parsley, beets, onions, edible flowers, mustard seed, taro, yuca, coriander, peji-baye (peach palm), bok choy, arugula, and



Clockwise from far left:
A sculpture at the Four
Seasons Resort Costa
Rica; the night sky at
Pacuare Lodge; the view
from one of Pacuare's
Canopy suites.

chilies. My companion later aptly observed, “Whoever’s tending that garden is in love with it.”

Mornings began with a breakfast of half a dozen house-made breads (including decadent madeleines) and an array of jams, marmalades, and compotes made with chia, pineapple, honey, and azara fruit, all harvested on-site. Cocktails and smoothies were made with ingredients like turmeric, *katuk* (the sweet

leaves of an Asian bush), aloe vera, and tamarind extract. Our dinner of filet mignon was the standout meal, though, cooked at the table on heated blocks of salt and served with the best chimichurri sauce I’ve ever had.

But in the end, the defining moment of my stay was not a meal, but a yoga class led by Manuel Guevara. We met at the yoga pavilion, a wooden structure with a high conical roof and an open-air view of the jungle. The class began with typical soothing New Age quasi-Indian music—accompanied by the sounds of toucans, howler monkeys, frogs, and cicadas.

Lying on my back in the Viparita Karani pose, looking up at the roof supports, I found myself edging toward a feeling of euphoria. Maybe it was just the endorphins, but it seemed like two butterflies were traipsing along in tandem, punctuating the notes of the music. I’d always snickered at people who worked horrible, stressful jobs so they could afford expensive wellness excursions to the jungle to cleanse their souls, but in that moment, I understood.

Our final stop was arguably the most glamorous—a private villa in the new Prieta Bay enclave at the Four Seasons Resort Costa Rica at Peninsula Papagayo. Located in the country’s northwest, the property is a mix of sculpted landscapes, mangrove swamps, and nature preserves spread over some 1,400 acres.

After days in the jungle, it felt shocking to see a golf course and a billionaire’s yacht docked at the marina. But after being rained on a dozen times throughout the trip, it also felt wonderful to enjoy steady sun, golden light, and unthreatening clear skies (the region is the driest and hottest in Costa Rica). Lightly sprinkled across the hillside, rather than blasted into the bedrock, Prieta Bay’s residences—64 villas in all—have raised the already high bar established by Four Seasons. All of them have private pools, full kitchens, and up to six bedrooms—perfect for a family looking for safety, seclusion, and perhaps a butler or chef.

Despite the property’s regal appointments, Costa Rica’s wildlife remained as exuberant as anywhere else we’d been. COVID-19 had been a boon for local critters (during the summer a guest had called to complain about a puma swimming in her pool). But even under normal circumstances, the waters around the peninsula hum with whales, spinner dolphins, golden cow-nosed rays (which jump in the air and do backflips to clean themselves), and bioluminescent phytoplankton.

After a mangrove tour with Miguel Sánchez, manager of Papagayo Explorers, a local outfitter that partners with the Four Seasons, we tried our luck at fishing. Sánchez had tempered my expectations, but on my very first cast, at the edge of the mangrove swamp, I caught a small bigeye jack called a *colinda*. Twenty minutes later, in open water, I snagged a

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(CONTINUED FROM P. 61) roosterfish, possibly the most prized fish you can find between Baja and Peru. It lived up to its reputation, taking 20 minutes to bring aboard. Sánchez marveled at the 23-pounder, with its extravagant blue dorsal fin splayed out like a pompadour—and then we set it free.

On our final morning, we were treated to a guided meditation led by health and wellness ambassador Beto Oses. Oses arrived at our villa with a steamer trunk full of bells, xylophones, wind chimes, and Tibetan singing bowls. He instructed us to lay face up on our yoga mats, with our heads toward him, two feet away.

After a few minutes of producing a steady, serene hum with the bowls, he moved on to the other instruments. Meditation, for me, had always meant breathing and clearing my mind. It was something that came with effort. As Oses continued with the music, I began to wonder if this was merely a musical performance, having nothing to do with consciousness.

Oses rose and walked in circles around us, coming nearer, then moving farther away, varying the volume and oscillations of his instruments. The more attuned my ear became to the vibrations he made, the more I began to notice the sounds around us: the ocean; the gentle waves of Prieta Bay laying themselves out against the black sand; the parakeets and parrots and mourning doves.

Having left behind the notion that I was supposed to be doing anything at all, I began to ride through the air, as if on an imaginary magic carpet. I flashed back to the night before, touring the peninsula at sunset under a cluster of giant pink cumulus clouds. Suddenly, I was among them, flying in the sky. ☮

“HIT THE SLOPS”
JUMP

“THE CALL OF MERIDA”
JUMP

INDICIA