

# Natural therapy

Learning to surf – and slow down – on a wellness escape to Costa Rica offers the perfect antidote to an empty nest, finds **Jo Fernández**

**m**ichelle Obama famously likes to go high when others go low – in more ways than one. Speaking on Jay Shetty's *On Purpose* podcast in April, she shared how she has turned to therapy to help her transition into being an empty-nester.

I can relate. My daughter, Maya, left home to study French at the University of Manchester two years ago then moved even further away – to Paris for her year abroad. Rather than take to a therapist's couch, I chose a different approach, opting for a return to Costa Rica where, fittingly, I spent my university year abroad.

Revisiting a place where I was blissfully free of responsibility and mid-life money worries was therapy enough. It's a beachy and biodiverse country where hiking, yoga, surfing – I had a fantasy of learning to surf in my 50s – and fam-to-fork food wrap you up in a wellness embrace. With so much to offer, it's small wonder the peaceful nation is many travellers' first option for a Central American adventure.

## GOING GREEN

After a direct flight to San José, the compact capital city in the Central Valley, and a one-night reunion with a 'Tica' friend (as Costa Ricans call themselves) ➤

PICTURE: JOHN VERRILLI



# DESTINATIONS

## LATIN AMERICA | COSTA RICA



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Beachfront villas, Hotel Nantipa; visiting a hillside farm; thermal river at Rio Perdido resort; Tabacón Thermal Resort & Spa; Manzú restaurant, Nantipa **PICTURE:** Jean Paul Montanaro

over a couple of bottles of local Imperial lager, it was a short hop on a small Cessna plane to the Pacific coast where I'd spent so much time more than 30 years ago.

Flying over the lush landscapes below to Tamarindo on the Nicoya Peninsula – preferable to the alternative of a five-hour drive and ferry crossing – gives a bird's-eye view of the scale of Costa Rica's lush green landscapes, an ideal introduction for first-time visitors.

Surf haven Santa Teresa sits on the tip of the peninsula and is home to boutique Hotel Nantipa, which blends barefoot luxury with a strong sustainability ethos. Low-lit palm-lined paths snake around the gardens, leading to beach-chic bungalows and villas with leafy patios and plunge pools. Locally made furniture, energy sensors and solar-powered water heaters combine with Costa Rican ingredients such as papaya and

herbs that are used everywhere, from the restaurants to the alfresco spa. The team is mainly local and tell me that just six trees were felled for use in the hotel's construction. Guests are invited to embrace the eco-friendly vibe – they can grab a bucket for short beach clean-ups and are rewarded with a healthy smoothie.

All-day dining at thatched-roof Manzú restaurant suits the fuss-free vibe perfectly. Facing the white-sand beach, friendly staff served ceviche and *patacones* – golden fried plantain – accompanied by creamy refried beans and spicy margaritas. Dips in Nantipa's freshwater pool, which is surrounded by tropical foliage, were a highlight of each day, as was yoga after dark when the sounds of nature added to the calming feel.

### SURF'S UP

My surfing goal led me to Playa Santa Teresa for a lesson arranged

by the hotel, where the warm, gentle waves of the Pacific Ocean are pleasingly beginner-friendly. First, we practised the 'chicken-leg' stance that ultimately helped us to jump up, balance on the board and ride the waves.

That was the theory – though as with any lesson, the young pros make it look so simple and the reality is a few ego-blasting falls in the water and wipeouts under the waves.

Then it happened. I rode my board to the shore and the sound of whooping from the beach became the soundtrack to this memorable afternoon. I celebrated in true Costa Rican fashion – sipping the water from a freshly sliced green coconut.

Another healthy highlight was a morning trip to a local hillside farm, also arranged via the hotel, where my arrival was greeted with a clucking crowd of hens and geese. I watched cheese churned by hand, learnt how to milk a ➤

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### COSTA RICA HOT SPRINGS

Thanks to Arenal Volcano's geothermal activity, the region is rich in hot springs. Here is a selection of foliage-fringed retreats where clients can mix wellness with wilderness.



#### Rio Perdido Hotel & Thermal River

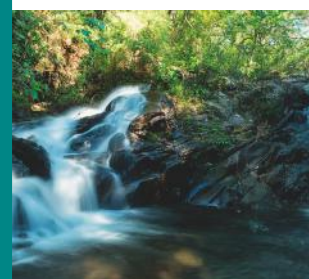
Enjoy riverbank yoga and dips in the mineral-rich geothermal Rio Perdido (Lost River) at this Guanacaste wellness wonder in the heart of the rainforest. [rioperdido.com](http://rioperdido.com)

#### The Springs Resort & Spa

With hot and cold springs, this riverside resort set next to Arenal Volcano includes forest trails and spring-fed pools. [thespringscostarica.com](http://thespringscostarica.com)

#### Rio Negro Hot Springs

Located in Rincón de la Vieja National Park near Liberia, 10 hot springs, reached by hanging bridges, are naturally heated by the Rincón de la Vieja Volcano. [rincondelaviejapark.com](http://rincondelaviejapark.com)



**PICTURE:** Amendo Del Vecchio; Carlos Charpentier Live Images Ltd



## DESTINATIONS

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ABOVE: The near-perfect cone of Arenal Volcano, surrounded by hiking trails and natural hot springs PICTURE: Tabacón Thermal Resort & Spa

cow, tried lassoing with the farmer's son, Freddie, and was taught the art of sugar cane extraction using centuries-old methods. It culminated in a home-cooked family breakfast of *gallo pinto*, Costa Rica's national rice-and-bean dish served with ripe plantain, sour cream, tortilla, white cheese and egg.

The farm family epitomised why this region is a designated Blue Zone – one of just five in the world – where the average life expectancy is 80 years, thanks to a high-protein and mainly plant-based diet, plus daily sunshine, close connection with nature and hardworking but low-stress lifestyles.

#### NATURAL HIGHS

The laid-back coast isn't the only spot to find stress relief – the dense rainforests of the interior offer clients the best of both worlds, so I headed inland to Arenal in the country's northern region.

Tabacón Thermal Resort & Spa is the country's largest thermal springs experience and sits in a 900-acre rainforest reserve, which ticks the

“The suite also had a thermal-water-fed plunge pool, beyond which lay dense foliage filled with myriad wildlife

boxes for both adventure and wellness travel. The view from my suite introduced me to the key draw: Arenal Volcano rising symmetrically against the skyline over Lake Arenal. Not only this, but the wood-lined suite also had a patio with a daybed and thermal-water-fed plunge pool, beyond which lay dense foliage filled with myriad wildlife. The effect was almost dreamlike; I was surrounded by so much natural beauty and birdsong.

A 10-minute walk from the main rustic-luxe resort are natural thermal pools, part of the underground river that flows through the tropical grounds, which have been cleverly fashioned into balmy bathing areas

backed by tumbling waterfalls. Luxe touches include swim-up bars and cabanas for sipping cocktails.

Then there's the spa area, where I joined small-group yoga classes, soothed by the sound of running water, and practised my Spanish during a nourishing facial in an outside bungalow, before zesty ceviche and a punchy cocktail in the Tucanes restaurant.

A guided hike took me along a new trail forged through the forested grounds, accompanied by the sounds of howler monkeys

and big-beaked toucans. Emerging from the natural rainforest canopy revealed the volcano and its near-perfect cone shape, a faint wisp of smoke appearing to float from the crater. Fear not, Costa Rica's most active volcano is now in a resting phase.

All too soon, my life-affirming wellness week was over but as I packed up to leave, I spotted a sloth – Costa Rica's cuddly-looking unofficial mascot – hanging happily in a tree. Like me and Michelle Obama, it was going high. **TW**

#### BOOK IT

**Abercrombie & Kent** offers a tailor-made six-night Costa Rica trip including three nights at Tabacón Thermal Resort & Spa and three nights at Hotel Nantipa, both with breakfast, from £4,130 per person based on two sharing, with flights from the UK, private transfers and guiding. [abercrombiekent.com](http://abercrombiekent.com)

**Latin Routes'** 14-night Ultimate Costa Rica Adventure starts from £5,399 per person, based on two sharing, with flights, private transfers and experiences including surfing lessons in the Nicoya Peninsula, kayaking on Lake Arenal, white-water rafting on the Pacuare River, ziplining and a Rio Perdido Canyon adventure. [latinroutes.co.uk](http://latinroutes.co.uk)