

"There are only two mistakes one can make along the road to truth; not going all the way, and not starting."
— Buddha



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A Stranger in Paradise: Costa Rica! By BARBARA BARTON SLOANE

✍️ HEZI ARIS / 📅 10:30PM • OCTOBER 8, 2016 /

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Yonkers Tribune's Fashion and Travel Editor Barbara Barton Sloane.

There's a famous quote that says: "Paradise is not a place, it is a state of mind." *Wrong*. Paradise is, very much, a *place*. Once at this "place," your state of mind kicks in and then, *voila*: Paradise! This was my profoundly pleasurable experience recently on my first visit to **Costa Rica**

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The country calls itself by the bright name “Happiest Country on Earth!” It is a small nation located in Central America bordering Nicaragua to the north, Panama to the south, the Caribbean Sea ([http://maps.google.com/maps?ll=15.0,-75.0&spn=0.1,0.1&q=15.0,-75.0\(Caribbean%20Sea\)&t=h](http://maps.google.com/maps?ll=15.0,-75.0&spn=0.1,0.1&q=15.0,-75.0(Caribbean%20Sea)&t=h)) to the east and the Pacific Ocean ([http://maps.google.com/maps?ll=0.0,-160.0&spn=0.1,0.1&q=0.0,-160.0\(Pacific%20Ocean\)&t=h](http://maps.google.com/maps?ll=0.0,-160.0&spn=0.1,0.1&q=0.0,-160.0(Pacific%20Ocean)&t=h)) to the west. Costa Rica is known worldwide as a peaceful nation that has one of the oldest and best democratic systems, as well as for abolishing its army in 1949 to create better education and health care for the country.

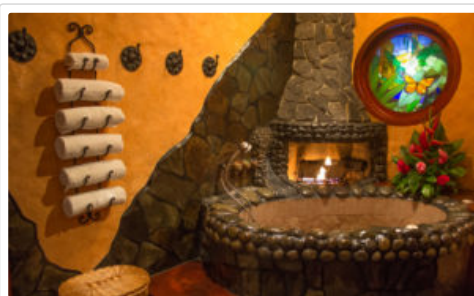
Small Distinctive Hotels of Costa Rica is an internationally recognized hotel collection since 1997. It represents a group of luxury boutique hotels located throughout some of the most diverse and beautiful areas of the country and whose properties are committed to excellence in service, amenities and sustainability. I was fortunate enough to visit a few of those properties and experience, first hand, the very best of Costa Rica – one of the rarest and most exceptional locales in the world.

Head in the Clouds



Alma del Pacifico Hotel bedroom.

Located less than an hour from the San Jose Airport in the central Pacific area, the **Peace Lodge** was a fine place to capture the essence of Costa Rica and begin my adventure. The Lodge is in a cloud forest on the grounds of the La



Paz Waterfall Gardens Nature Park. I like the sound of those words *cloud forest*. Doesn't it conjure up images of being in an amorphous white mist, a mystical place, somewhat like a dream wonderland? Well, that's how I pictured it



Resident toucans at Peace Lodge

nominated by the nation's largest newspaper as one of the 'Seven Natural Wonders of Costa Rica.' In *Condé Nast Traveler Magazine* (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cond%C3%A9_Nast_Traveler), the Lodge is in its Best Resort category and the *Travel Channel* ([http://maps.google.com/maps?](http://maps.google.com/maps?ll=38.9624166667,-77.0852222222&spn=0.01,0.01&q=38.9624166667,-77.0852222222)

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Peace Lodge "cats", the largest carnivore in Central America, the Jaguar (*Panthera Onca*).

Honeymoon Hotspots calls it one of the most romantic destinations in the world!

Though not on a honeymoon, I can certainly attest to Peace Lodge's romanticism from the moment I stepped inside my terra cotta-colored room. I had a Jacuzzi on my private terrace and a humongous river-rock fireplace that was ideal for cozing up to on cool evenings. My shower was dark and cave-like with the delightful option of – instead of a mere boring shower – turning a knob and having a waterfall cascading on my head! More river-rock encompassed my tub and sink, and whatever wasn't covered in rock was designed in undulating scallops– the entire décor setting a Gaudi-like mood.

The property offers a host of activities from horseback riding to climbing to the top of the active [Poas Volcano](http://maps.google.com/maps?ll=10.2,-84.2&spn=0.1,0.1&q=10.2,-84.2) ([http://maps.google.com/maps?ll=10.2,-84.2](http://maps.google.com/maps?ll=10.2,-84.2&spn=0.1,0.1&q=10.2,-84.2) (Po%C3%A1s%20Volcano)&t=h) whose summit is at 8,000 feet. I went to the edge of a deep crater looking down on active geyser and lava eruptions. I was told that the last major eruption was in the mid-50s and that its Botos crater, a shimmering cold green lake, had not erupted for over 7000 years so I felt pretty safe. Climbing the volcano is one of the most popular tourist activities in the country – not to be missed.

My favorite experience at Peace Lodge was visiting the private wildlife refuge within the Nature Park with Michael, my very knowledgeable and informative guide. The exhibits include jungle cats, exotic frogs, butterflies, hummingbirds, reptiles, and an aviary. I told Michael that I'd like to skip the reptiles and upon learning that some of the frogs were not enclosed but hopping all over their enclosure, I opted to skip that one, too. However, I *did* hold a humming-bird feeder and allow tiny, furiously-flying creatures to flock around me and sup. In the aviary, though I didn't encourage any brightly-billed toucans to land on my head, I got some amazing photos. What a lark!

Monkey Mischief



Florblanca Resort

An hour-long ferry ride took me across the Gulf of Nicoya to my next stop, the **Florblanca Resort** located in the Santa Teresa Pacific Coast area with just ten villas on seven acres of white sand beach. Traversing a winding jungle path, replete with howler monkey cries and a flock of scarlet macaws flying low overhead, I was shown to my villa. My host threw open the door and I was taken aback, confused, and bewildered. In fact I was standing in a grand “room” with three walls, the fourth open to the flora and fauna beyond and kitted out with a large hammock. Crystal chandeliers hung from the towering ceiling, in one corner rested a pretty glass dining table and chairs, and on the far wall, a comfy sofa adorned with fluffy pillows. My living room! Somewhat more daunting was being shown down a long hallway to my bathroom. Though encircled by a six-foot high enclosure, the bathroom was *open to the jungle*. No, I’m serious. Private, yes, pretty, of course, but surrounded by a tropical rain forest! Needless to say, (for me, the gal who refused the reptile/frog exhibits yesterday), middle of the night forays to this part of the villa were done warily, but I hasten to add, *safely*. My wild and crazy bathroom was an utterly unique experience that I won’t soon forget.



Florblanca living room.

Another intriguing Florblanca episode: lying in bed one night and hearing rain on the roof, but not your typical ‘rain on the roof.’ No, this was a hard rain a-falling. For about 3 hours it rained so hard, so dense, so profound that I truly feared the roof would cave in. And once the rain let up, a loud crash resonated from my open-air living room. Too tired to check it out, I waited till morning when I was astonished to find two heavy plates from last night’s meal lying broken on the ceramic tile floor, and remnants of my ravioli dinner gone – the plate licked clean! Remarking to a staff member about the rain and my late night visitor, she took it all in stride. “Oh, we have rains like that nightly,” she said, and to my query about some possible monkey-business, she agreed that sure, it could have been a visitor of the simian variety flinging plates Greek-style, just to keep everything animated and fun!

Romance is in the Air



Villa Caletas Fountain

Villa Caletas is located on a rainforest hilltop on the Central Pacific Coast of Puntarenas and combines the unique pairing of a mountain and seaside resort. From my room in Zephyr Palace, in a separate section of the hotel's grounds, I had heart-stopping views of a tropical rainforest with an emerald green ocean beyond. Dinner that evening at the Amphitheatre Restaurant, gazing at a perfect sunset and enjoying an inspired repast was a sublime way to kick off my Villa Caletas rendezvous.





Villa Caletas Amphitheatre.

This property is truly one-of-a-kind with an imposing history. Frenchman Denis Roy designed and built it – and it all began with a dream. Monsieur Roy dreamed of a place where one could breathe the scent of the ocean and be near the warmth of the sun. He discovered it at the foot of a mountain covered by the jungle and rising 1150 feet from Caletas beach – all the way up into the clouds. He moved to Costa Rica and began the outrageously ambitious project of constructing Villa Caletas. Four hundred men worked – first just to build a road that stretches for 1.5 miles from the highway to the property.

There were obstacles aplenty including no water for months and no telephone lines for years. Somehow, somehow, Roy's dream was realized – resulting in a 5-star luxury boutique hotel, inspired by Victorian architecture with a Neo-Classical influence – the extraordinary Villa Caletas! I enjoyed 360-degree panoramic views overlooking tropical gardens, an infinity swimming pool, and the Serenity Spa offering couples' packages with names such as Passion, Romance and Sensual. Weddings and honeymoons were made to be celebrated here – at the private beach, at the Amphitheatre, or in magical Zephyr Palace. One thing's for certain: a wedding here is romance personified.

The newest member of Small Distinctive Hotels is **Alma del Pacifico Beach Hotel & Spa** where I lunched with Director Fernando Alfaro. This colorful, happy property, located on a beach along Playa Esterillos Este, in the country's Central Pacific region, is the perfect seaside escape. There are charming walking paths that lead through ornamental, herb and vegetable gardens and the wildlife is filled with endangered scarlet macaws and butterflies. From the dramatic ocean waves crashing on the beach to the backdrop of a fiery sun dipping below the horizon, it is most fitting that the property is named *Alma del Pacifico* (Soul of the Pacific).

The word *romance*, according to the dictionary, means excitement, adventure, and something extremely real. Seems like Webster has just defined Costa Rica. Come see for yourself!

If You Go:

Small Distinctive Hotels

www.distinctivehotels.com (<http://www.distinctivehotels.com>)

Peace Lodge



www.waterfallgardens.com (<http://www.waterfallgardens.com>)

Florblanca Resort

www.florblanca.com (<http://www.florblanca.com>)

Villa Caletas


www.hotelvillacaletas.com (<http://www.hotelvillacaletas.com>)

Alma del Pacifico Beach Hotel & Spa

www.almadelpacifico.com (<http://www.almadelpacifico.com>)



Barbara Barton Sloane, *Yonkers Tribune* Travel Editor, is constantly globe-hopping to share her unique experiences, from the exotic to the sublime, with our readers. She keeps us informed, as well, on the capricious and engaging fashion and beauty scene.

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