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Peace, waterfalls and trout in Costa Rica's Cloud Forest

THURSDAY, 13 OCTOBER 2016 | MARC D'ENTREMONT



Looking down on the Central Valley with San Jose in the distance

Leaving the sprawling modern city of Costa Rica's capital, San Jose, Maurice Aymerich, director Small Distinctive Hotels and my guide throughout my stay in Costa Rica, deftly maneuvered the Toyota Rav4 on the winding roads as we ascended into the Cloud Forest. I was pleased I didn't have to drive or else my field of vision would have been narrowed concentrating on the well paved but narrow mountain roads on our way to La Paz Waterfall Gardens. Instead I could marvel at the panorama of the receding Central Valley as we entered the lush landscape for which this bio-diverse Central American nation is justifiably famous.

Costa Rica is a landmass equal to 0.03% of the Earth, about 20,000 square miles – the size of Vermont – but accounts for over 6% of the globe's biodiversity. Just one hour from San Jose the emerald green mountain slopes are thick with coffee plants. Costa Rica leads world coffee production per acre because two trees are planted together.



a Cloud Forest flower

Herds of cows and goats graze wrapped in swirls of misty clouds. Vendors selling large plump strawberries and the country's ubiquitous balls of fresh mozzarella-like white cheese line village roads.

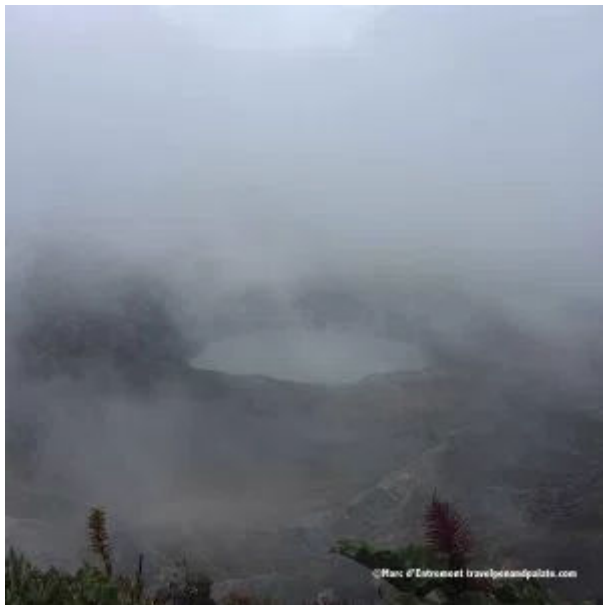


strawberries & white cheese



plants at Parc National Volcan Poas

We stopped first at one of Costa Rica's 27 national parks, which along with private wildlife and biological reserves encompasses nearly a third of the country – the largest percentage of protected national land on Earth. Central America is a seismically potent part of the Pacific Ring of Fire, and Parc National Volcan Poas encompasses one of Costa Rica's six active volcanoes. Exacerbated by the temperature differential of the venting volcano, the crater is often shrouded in mist that wafts up the steep walls of the caldera. Yet when the mist parts mineral rich turquoise lakes are visible.



Volcan Poas

The spacious modern visitor center at Parc National Volcan Poas (<http://www.costarica-nationalparks.com/poas-volcanonationalpark.html>) has fine educational exhibits of the surrounding ecology. The gift shop displays top quality pottery and woodwork from some of Costa Rica's most famous artists.



Crafts at the Visitor Center Parc National Volcan Poas

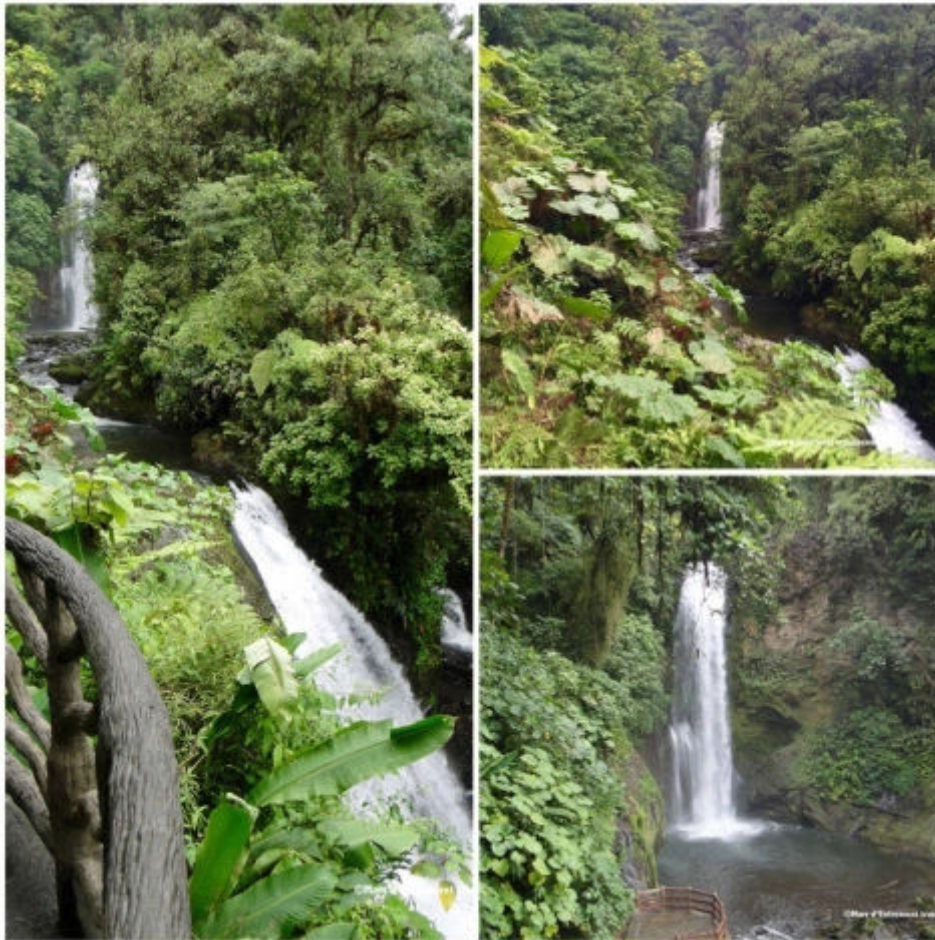
I was particularly taken with the ingenious creations made from recycled materials such as a life-size toucan crafted from a single automobile tire.



(toucan crafted from a single automobile tire. toucan crafted from a single automobile tire.)

toucan crafted from a single recycled automobile tire with carved wood beak

Our objective for the day was a visit to the privately owned La Paz Waterfall Gardens and Peace Lodge (<http://www.waterfallgardens.com/>)– one of the Small Distinctive Hotels (<http://www.distinctivehotels.com/>) of Costa Rica. Florida entrepreneur Lee Banks purchased this property with its five spectacular waterfalls with the intention of preserving its pristine biosphere. Visitors take self-guided tours along several miles of well-designed wooden walkways through the hills, along the La Paz River providing numerous vistas of the spectacular falls.

Save

La Paz Waterfall Gardens

Within the gardens is a large butterfly house with a colorful collection of over 4,000 butterflies from 40 species native to this mile-high environment – only a small portion of Costa Rica's over 1,200 species. The butterfly conservatory is part of an educational heritage village of pre-industrial rural life.

Save



In the butterfly conservatory, La Paz Waterfall Gardens

The visitor center complex is the gateway to the gardens and Peace Lodge. The architectural integration of the structures with their native wood and stone mirrors the surrounding environment. Like all Small Distinctive Hotels, the quality of the cuisine matched the beauty of the surroundings.



(left) Vanessa Gonzalez & (right) Executive Chef Diego Seitour

Lunch with Vanessa Gonzalez, restaurant manager, and Executive Chef Diego Seitour highlighted the quality of local ingredients and the creativity of Costa Rican talent. Diego's French grandfather and Argentine born father were chefs. His Spanish mother added an additional culinary insight to his environment. Diego was born in Costa Rica and studied culinary arts in France and Costa Rica but worked in restaurants since he was a boy. I found this mix of talents and culinary backgrounds common in Costa Rica.



sea bass ceviche

Lunch started with a sea bass ceviche. The paper-thin slices of sea bass were garnished with pajibaye (<https://travelpenandpalate.com/2016/07/15/cream-of-pejibaye-a-costa-rican-national-dish/>) – the iconic steamed bright orange Costa Rican fruit of the Peach Palm tree – and napped with a lime, orange juice and olive oil dressing that was bright and intense. Diego adds meat bones to the broth when simmering the pajibaye to provide a depth of flavor uncommon when the fruit is simply cooked in water.



trout Napoleon

Surrounding the base of a waterfall adjacent to the swimming pool at Peace Lodge is a large free form trout pond fed by the La Paz River. Chef Seitour uses the organically farmed trout in his menus. His impressive trout Napoleon is a pair of fillets sandwiched between grilled onions and eggplant resting on risotto cakes that have been pan seared. The accompanying vegetables and rice have a smoky flavor, which gives depth to the trout. The fish is glazed with a red and yellow pepper jam.

Papaya and Curry Soup blends the natural sweetness of papaya with the spice of curry creating a warm flavored soup.

Diego has assembled an impressive collection of craft beers for Peace Lodge. A local Escalante brew was dark and strong with a distinct hint of chocolate followed by coffee notes that worked well with the warm tones of the soup. Famed Spanish chef Ferran Adrià created Estrella Damm Inedit for Barcelona based Damm S.A. that had strong citrus overtones with a light and effervescent mouth feel. It paired well with both fish dishes.



Papaya Curry soup



Peace Lodge

Save

Hugging the hillside, the village-like complex of 18 rooms and suites of Peace Lodge (http://www.waterfallgardens.com/about_peace_lodge.php) are unique. Each is individually designed to integrate the Cloud Forest into the room while providing maximum privacy. Large log beds, stone gas fireplaces – Peace Lodge is 5,300 feet elevation – plant infused bathrooms with their own waterfalls and hot tubs on private patios and balconies are only a few of the serene elements that make Peace Lodge a sought after refuge and honeymoon haven.



Save

Peace Lodge

I found it unique that Peace Lodge suggests no more than a three day stay. The expressed purpose is to encourage guests to explore the rest of Costa Rica. After over a week at five Small Distinctive Hotels I was no longer surprised at this sentiment, which seems to run counter to maximizing profits. What makes the Costa Rican experience memorable is the obvious pride both the owners of these beautiful hotels and ordinary citizens from scientist to street vendors have for their peaceful nation and their eagerness to share it with visitors.



trout pond & the swimming pool at Peace Lodge

When you go: Juan Santamaría International Airport (SJO (<http://www.govisitcostarica.com/region/city.asp?cID=407>)) is served by many airlines worldwide and is within an easy 20 minute drive to downtown San Jose and an hour to La Paz Waterfall Gardens/Peace Lodge

Disclaimer: The author was a guest of Small Distinctive Hotels (<http://www.distinctivehotels.com/>), ENroute Communications (<http://enroutecommunications.com/>) and Revista Ander de Viaje (<http://www.revistaandar.com/inicio/>). Special thanks to my guide throughout my stay in Costa Rica Mauricio Aymerich, director Small Distinctive Hotels. Transportation within Costa Rica was provided by Toyota Rent a Car of San Jose (<https://toyotarent.com/>). A Rav4 made Costa Rica's mountain roads, especially the few unpaved, safe and comfortable.

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