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SMALL DISTINCTIVE HOTELS OF COSTA RICA TOUCH THE SOUL

Posted by Travel with Pen and Palate | Aug
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View of the Pacific Ocean from an infinity pool,
Villas Caletas



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by Marc d'Entremont

Nine boutique hotels, each averaging fewer than 50 rooms, are members of the Small Distinctive Hotels of Costa Rica. On a recent trip I had the pleasure of being a guest at five of the hotels. Each is privately owned, several in the second generation, unique in architecture and setting, luxurious with fine dining and backstories as distinctive as the properties. Yet all this comfort helps others; each property visited touched the soul in unexpected ways.

Hotel Belmar – the new look of success



Hotel Belmar

"We've grown smaller," Pedro Belmar said quietly. That would not ordinarily be a hotel's best business plan, but when you're the second-generation general manager and heir to a famous family mountain retreat that has your name on everything, continued success requires thinking out of the box.

When his parents, Pedro and Vera Belmar, opened their home as a bed and breakfast in

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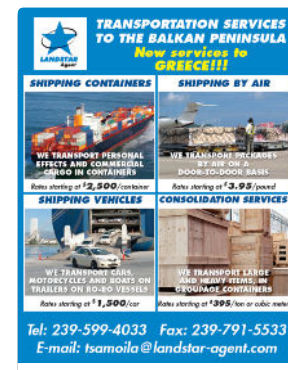
1985 there was nary a paved road to what is recognized today as a world treasure – the **Monteverde Biological Reserve**. The 13 room all cedar main lodge built in the 1990s is their homage to a love of alpine architecture. A wood shop on site provides the maintenance and crafts designated cedar dishes for both the dining room and bar.



beef carpaccio Hotel Belmar

ond generation Pedro, Jr, and his sister transformed the original home into the sleek wood and glass nine room Chalet. The Chalet is the center of the hotel's wellness program, spa services and organic juice and tea bar. The juices are made from fruits and vegetables grown on the compact but expanding hotel organic garden and on the eight acres at the nearby Belmar family farm which provides much of the produce for the hotel's Celajes Restaurant.

A smoke house made from recycled materials produces smoked cheese, bacon and sausage with the wood shop supplying the cedar chips. Plans are to grow



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mushrooms using the farm's coffee hulls and natural compost.

Methane gas is collected for kitchen use through the hotel's biological water filtration system. The system uses no energy yet produces methane, which is stored in a tank for the kitchen. Clean water is returned to the mountain stream in exchange for energy. "My parents had the ideas," says Pedro taking little credit for the **Hotel Belmar's** success in achieving Costa Rica's highest awards for sustainable tourism.


Pedro wants to position the Celajes Restaurant as a unique destination in its own right. It already commands a sweeping vista of the forest, mountains and Gulf of Nicoya far below.





organic garden ingredients for Hotel Belmar bar

The bar reaches deep into the hotel's organic garden for unique flavors. Bitters and syrups are house made. Room mini bar options include excellent house bottled cocktails. The hotel's compact brewery was created using recycled equipment and all bottling is done on site.

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The freshness of both the ingredients and artistry of Celajes Restaurant does not disappoint. Breakfast can include a bowl of coconut milk and yogurt with chia seeds, fruit, tarragon and basil accompanied by house made granola. A lunch of beef carpaccio was a visually stunning platter of ultra thin slices of raw beef napped with a caper vinaigrette. The perfume of a light dessert of verbana water, lavender flowers, tarragon, tropical fruit and guanabanas sorbet linked the dinner to the scents of a Cloud Forest evening.

Pedro Belmar and his diverse staff enhance the guest experience by living the true meaning of less is more.

Hotel Grano de Oro and the House of Light



A blend of old, restoration and cutting edge, Grano de Oro is firmly established as San Jose's premiere property. Two restored early

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20th century mansions are connected by a modern lobby and include interior courtyard gardens and many original architectural features that meld the two structures while adding 21st century conveniences. Grano de Oro's atmosphere is that of being a house guest in a grand home.



Duck breasts, Grano de Oro

With understated elegance and graceful service, the exquisite cuisine of Executive Chef Francis Canal Bardot has set the standard in San Jose for a quarter century. Chef Bardot is also a small farmer. He grows much of the organic produce used in the dining room of the Hotel Grano de Oro and humanely raises some of the poultry.

In conversations while dining with General Manager Marco Montoya, second generation owner Michelle Cooke and her sommelier husband Ciro DeAngles I was able to discern Eldon and Lori Cooke's vision for success. In an age when employee loyalty in the hospitality industry is measured in months, the hotel's staff members are lifers. Marco Montoya started his career 25 years ago when the hotel opened. Chef Bardot has

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been in charge of the restaurant for 23 years and many of the chambermaids will eventually retire after long careers.

The imagination and artistry in creating plates that satisfy both the eyes and the taste buds is the true test of a skilled chef. Suckling pig rillettes with craft beer sauce were wrapped in homemade brioche. Locally raised braised saddle of rabbit stuffed with a mousseline was but one choice in a select entrée menu.



cream of pejibaye

The lunch menu tantalized with that most iconic of Costa Rican soups, **cream of pejibaye**. Nearly impossible to have outside of Costa Rica this smooth, tasty palm fruit is a must have when visiting the country. A quinoa cake shined with tender chunks of grilled octopus, peas, scallions and herbs accompanied by a tomato relish.

John Calamos, Sr. Honored by Pan Arca dian Federation of America Museum Chairman honored for contributions to community

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Breakfast receives the same attention to detail with entrees such as poached eggs in truffle cream with oyster mushrooms and asparagus.

That's the luxury side of **Hotel Grano de Oro**, but Eldon and Lori Cooke became concerned with a social problem that plagues many areas of the world, not just Costa Rica: the sexual abuse of young women. Beyond the abuse were the issues of abandonment, especially of the children that often resulted from abuse, and life long psychological scars.

They opened Casa Luz ("House of Light") in San Jose. Casa Luz provides multi-year residential programs for abused teenage mothers and their children and a safe home. The program includes all necessary monetary, emotional and psychological support that victims need.

Just ask and the front desk will be pleased to discuss this significant humanitarian project while you enjoy the elegance of Grano de Oro, knowing a portion of the hotel's profits help support this house of light.

Peace Lodge and La Paz Waterfall Gardens



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Peace Lodge

Of course there are tropical gardens and a waterfall in the bathrooms of guest suites at Peace Lodge. After all it's nestled within La Paz Waterfall Gardens. In 18 large individually decorated suites, guests luxuriate in river stone hot tubs on plant-bedecked balconies and within private courtyards. Rooms with river stone gas fireplaces open onto views of waterfalls and meandering free-formed trout ponds all designed to make you resign the tensions of the day.

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Napoleon of trout, Peace Lodge

ear on the menu in the three hotel restaurants under the command of Executive Chef Diego Seitour. A Napoleon of trout



sandwiches grilled onions and eggplant that rests on pan seared risotto cakes. Paper thin slices of tucurrique sea bass ceviche are garnished with steamed pajibaye and corn napped with a lime, orange juice and olive oil dressing that is bright and intense. Papaya and curry soup has a natural sweetness that blends beautifully with the spice of curry.

Located within an easy drive from San Jose and close to **Parc National Volcan Poas**, Peace Lodge is an integral component of the privately owned La Paz Waterfall Garden, a destination in its own right. The vision of Florida entrepreneur Lee Banks, the garden and hotel protect a plethora of local fauna and animals in this area of the forest and encompass five stunning waterfalls. **Peace Lodge** and La Paz Waterfall Gardens are on-going eco-tourism success stories.

Cuna del Angel – discretely guarding your health



Hotel Cuna del Angel

If gluten intolerant, everything served at Cuna del Angel is safe to eat and to all other guests it's simply delicious. Founder and



owner Tom Nagel's passion for natural healthy eating developed over time, but second hand experience with celiac disease made the 100% gluten-free decision easy.



spinach tagliatelle, Hotel Cuna del Angel

A quick read of the classic European inspired menu at the hotel's La Palapa restaurant gives guests not a clue their dining health is being guarded. The array of breads vie with such classics as spinach tagliatelle with artichokes, beef tenderloin accented by porcini mushrooms, and a presentation of greens in the salads that's an evocation of the surrounding forest. Deeper reading reveals the pastas are made from cassava, lentil and garbanzo bean flours and the salad greens are sustainably harvested.

Even imaginative dessert creations are impressive especially given that they are prepared as a component to a balanced gluten-free meal and not just an extravagant indulgence.

Demonstrating a commitment to local, organic and sustainable foods Tom's farm uses hydroponics and permaculture



agricultural methods to grow much of the hotel's vegetables, greens, herbs, legumes and raises chickens for eggs. The farm produces its own natural fertilizer utilizing a bio digester with its methane gas byproduct channeled to other uses. A natural wood vinegar herbicide is made through a distillation process that condenses a smoldering fire of wood and banana leaves.

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La Palapa restaurant, Cuna del Angel

na del Angel's kitchen is harvested from the farm's hives but only from the upper layers so as to minimize disturbance to the colony. Four hundred cocoa trees discovered on the farm produce the dense, smooth dark Tom's Chocolate Bar, but they're not for sale. Tom donates the bars for charity fundraisers and uses them as a delicious business card.

All of these techniques take time, but to Tom the alternatives are not debatable.

Hotel Cuna del Angel has sixteen spacious rooms. Wellness at the hotel extends beyond gluten-free foods to the attractive spa and the extensive list of outdoor activities along



the southern Pacific coast of Costa Rica. The hotel is ideally situated for half and full day excursions for a plethora of activities including **Corcovado National Park** and **Manuel Antonio National Park**. Or simply relaxing at the hotel's infinity pool surrounded by the jungle with the chirping of birds might be the best prescription for wellness.

Villa Caletas – gazing into infinity



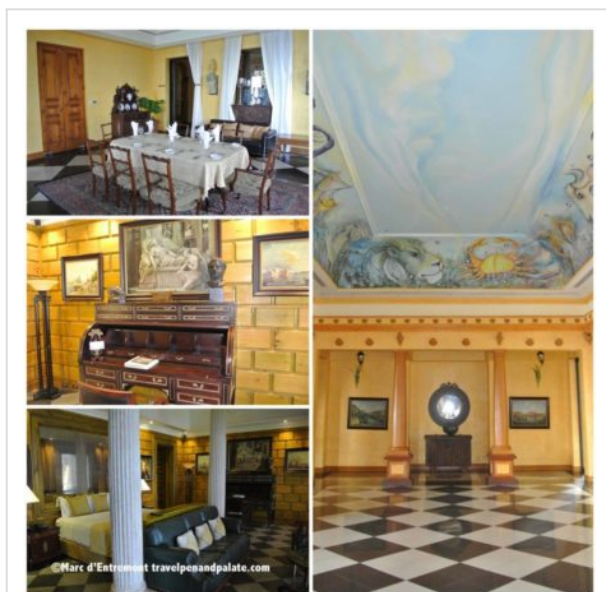
On over 700 acres of improbable mountain wilderness, using building methods that hearkened back to the days of the pyramids, Denis Roy created the hotel, restaurants and spa complex of Villa Caletas and the Zephyr Palace. A fusion of river stone castle and tropical Victorian architecture, the 50 rooms range from stunning to awe inspiring.

Yet due to previous cattle overgrazing, the lush hillsides of today were barren and eroding into the clear Pacific below. Fifteen hundred trees were planted from the beach up the mountain, and Villa Caletas continues



to spearhead major reforestation projects in the region.

Befitting the Small Distinctive Hotels commitment to sustainable practices, ten percent of electricity is solar powered and all hot water is provided through a system of air conditioner heat transfer. Each room's air conditioning system uses smart technology reducing the temperature automatically when no one is present and increasing it to a guest's pre-set comfort zone when they enter their room.



Zephyr Palace

Villa Caletas complex of buildings is set among the lush restored mountain landscape. A massive open-air palapa with hand carved pillars set on the edge of a cliff is dedicated to Denis' passion for yoga. The Serenity Spa, tucked behind the palapa, is a haven of calm. The glass walls and wide balconies of Villa Caletas art filled suites provide panoramic views of Herradura Bay.



And in seven massive individually designed and decorated suites the Zephyr Palace provides luxury befitting royalty.

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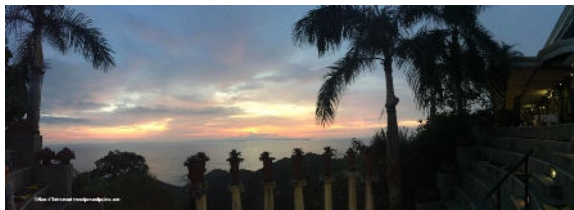


Grilled yellow fin tuna, Villa Caletas

Travel journalist Executive Chef Fernando Adaniz and food and beverage manager Pablo Lombardo oversee a cuisine that matches the style of Villa Caletas. Lunch started with a trio of ceviche: mango, sea snails and fish paired with a light and lemony chardonnay. Grilled rare yellow fin tuna was accompanied by a timbal of yucca and napped with pipian sauce – roasted pumpkin seeds.

Pre dinner drinks commenced at sunset. The steep Greek inspired Villa Caletas amphitheater adjacent to the open-air Anfiteatro Bar and Restaurant is a local destination for observing beautiful sunsets for which Costa Rica has a well deserved reputation. Soft ambient music added to the charm.

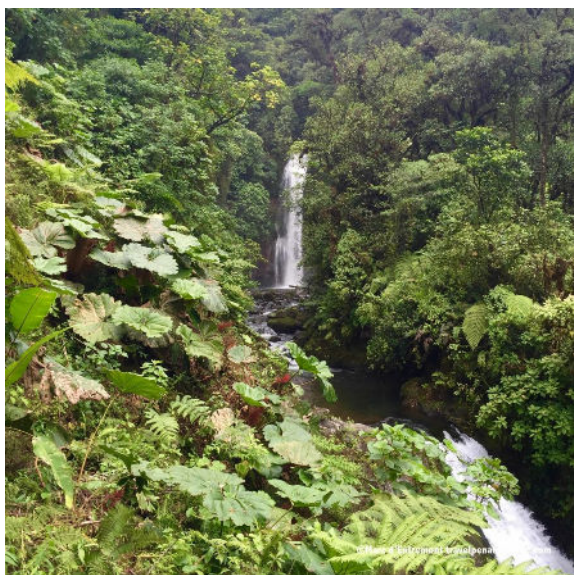




sunset from Villa Caletas

Segueing to a cliff side table Chef Fernando Adaniz opened dinner with a seafood terrine of lobster, shrimp and mussels with chipotle mayonnaise. Of course **Villa Caletas** makes all its breads, pastries and desserts in house.

I had to remind myself that with the gentle evening breeze and lush vegetation surrounding all that it was not long ago that this site was a barren wasteland. That's why the many infinity pools dotting Villa Caletas become a metaphor for Small Distinctive Hotel owners, managers and chefs – they conjure visions gazing into infinity that transform what we humans often damage into what we desire.



La Paz Waterfall Gardens



When you go: Juan Santamaría International Airport (**SJO**) is served by many airlines worldwide and is within an easy 20 minute drive of downtown San Jose.

Disclaimer: The author was a guest of **Small Distinctive Hotels, ENroute**

Communications and **Revista Ander de Viaje**. 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**. A Rav4 made Costa Rica's mountain roads, especially the few unpaved, safe and comfortable.

Hotel Belmar – <https://www.hotelbelmar.net/>

Hotel Grano de Oro –

<https://www.hotelgranodeoro.com/>

Peace Lodge –

https://www.waterfallgardens.com/about_peace_lodge.php

Hotel Cuna del Angel –

<https://www.cunadelangel.com/>

Villa Caletas –

<https://www.hotelvillacaletas.com/>

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Travel with Pen and Palate

Marc travels, cooks, eats, observes, interacts, lives and writes. As a chef, food, wine and travel writer, he seeks out connections among people, their activities, the environment and what they eat that tell the story of a region/culture,



whether that be in the remote Andes Mountains or the streets of Philadelphia. He serves on the Board of Directors for the International Food, Wine and Travel Writers Association (IFWTWA), and is an active member in the American Culinary Federation (ACF). Experience includes over 35 years as a chef, chef educator, hotel and restaurant manager and teacher of history, writing and theater. He lived for many years in Puerto Rico and Canada (Nova Scotia) and travels extensively in southern South America, Southeast Asia, Europe, North America and southern Africa. And he is in love with Greece. Links to Marc's articles can be accessed at

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