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## **Rainforest adventure in Costa Rica not for the squeamish**

### **Lodge can only be reached by boat**

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**Playa Nicuesa is small, with three single-room cabins like this one, two doubles and four rooms in the Mango House. All are surrounded by the rainforest.**

Gary May

It sounds as though a band of banshees is whooping it up outside our door. No longer are the distinctive, ghostly roars of the howler monkeys coming from deep in the rainforest, they are right outside our cabin. We lie in bed, beneath our bug net, grateful we'd decided to pull the louvred doors closed the night before, after awakening that day to small animal droppings strewn across our floor.

A visit to the Playa Nicuesa Lodge on Costa Rica's South Pacific shore is a thrilling experience, but not one for those squeamish about bugs, poisonous snakes and brazen howler monkeys. The lodge can only be accessed by boat.

There are no roads to the outside world, no quick dashes to a nearby hospital in case of snakebite. This is the rainforest, and the lodge is established as a place to experience all that it has to offer.

Sure, you could spend your time reading novels while lounging in a hammock, splashing in the warm waters of the Pacific's Golfo Dulce and fishing off the dock for red snapper. No one will mind. But to appreciate Playa Nicuesa at its best, you should venture farther afield.

To help do that, the lodge employs a group of friendly, knowledgeable and English-speaking guides who, because of its isolation, live on-site. To escape for some R&R, the guides, too, must take the resort's boat and cross the bay to Puerto Jimenez or Golfito, where you can catch a plane.

Erick Cruz Correa is one such guide, a serious 34-year-old who takes deserved pride in his expertise on the plants and animals on the lodge property, which abuts Piedras Blancas National Park.

During a forest walk around the 165-acre resort, Erick stops frequently to explain the uses of various plants: how a tea made from the piperacea can be rubbed on the skin to fight infection, or how juice from the noni alleviates indigestion and flushes the system.

The ebullient bartender Jonathan Gonzales not only creates fabulous local drinks, he also volunteered his time one evening to take a small group on a late-night stroll, flashlights in hand, to seek out the resident caiman and crocodile, which like to spend their evenings at the lagoon where it enters the ocean.

Freiman Venegas Zuniga and Juan Diego Soto lead us one day to a pristine waterfall in the national park where, after the steamy trek, we gratefully slip into the refreshing pool that forms at its base. On the way back we hike through an old plantation once operated by the family who owned the property before selling it to Americans Michael and Donna Butler.

The Butlers left New York, where he was an urban planner and she designed urban spaces, to set up Playa Nicuesa in 2003 as a true sustainable preserve. "Sustainable" and "eco-friendly" are the current buzzwords that drive Costa Rica's burgeoning tourist industry, but dig just beneath the surface and often you'll find little action to back them up.

The Butlers' enterprise is one of the exceptions. They generate their own electric power but keep the lights down low, have no electronic gadgetry such as TVs and Internet and built their all-wood resort from either naturally fallen or farm-grown wood.

There are 19 woods used in the resort's construction, all from the region, including almond, teak and eucalyptus.

Ingredients for the truly gourmet meals, prepared by chef Edixon Lazcano, are either grown on-site or purchased at a nearby market.

"People are fascinated with the tropics," says Michael Butler. "They want to live simply, live healthy, have an active lifestyle. There's a fascination with getting in touch with nature. The fact that it's reachable only by boat makes it more attractive."

Donna Butler says many guests have been inspired to return to Playa Nicuesa in order to do volunteer work in the area. The lodge is small and will remain so. There are four rooms in the Mango House and five cabins -- three single-room and two double -- located throughout the property. The lodge can be booked for conferences or family gatherings and with extra beds for children can accommodate about 25 people.

Each cabin comes with an oversized open-air shower, the water from which helps irrigate a little indoor garden. Don't worry about losing your room key -- there isn't one.

Guests come to the soaring, open-air main lodge for communal meals. The table groans with fresh fruit, vegetables and fish. There's lots of Costa Rican coffee and teas all day long. After dinner, guests linger a while to socialize but with a long, active day under their belts they soon drift back along the path to their cabin or room. Better get some sleep: those howler monkeys will be rousing you from bed before you know it.

### **IF YOU GO:**

- Where: Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge is on the Golfo Dulce/Osa Peninsula.

When to go: Playa Nicuesa is closed from Oct. 1 to Nov. 15. High season runs from Nov. 16 to April 30, but it can still be very rainy into early December. The rainier "green season" runs May 1 to Sept. 30.

- How to get there: Air Canada has regular daily flights to San Jose, Costa Rica. From there, fly to Puerto Jimenez or Golfito on Nature Air ([www.natureair.com](http://www.natureair.com)). There, a Playa Nicuesa representative will meet you for the boat trip to the resort.

- Cost: High-season rates start at \$180 per person per night for a Mango House suite and \$200 for a private cabin, including all meals and some activities. Activity packages are available or tours and yoga/massage can be purchased individually.

- Other activities: Grab a kayak and visit Casa Orquidias private botanical garden; go horseback riding or mountain biking; charter a day-long fishing expedition; take the mangrove boat tour to see the boas hanging from the branches under which you pass; snorkel; windsurf; sign on for an edible landscaping lesson and help chef Edixon Lazcano prepare dinner.

For more information: Go to [www.playanicuesa.com](http://www.playanicuesa.com)

- Bartender Jonathan's favourite drink: This is a traditional Costa Rican drink, similar to a dark mojito.

Ingredients: the local Centenario Conmemorativo brand dark rum, quartered fresh limes, two or three teaspoons of brown sugar, crushed ice, sprinkle of cinnamon.

Pour 1.5 ounces of rum into a large, sturdy glass. Fill the glass three-quarters full with quartered limes. Crush the limes with a pestle, being careful not to crack the glass (even Jonathan

sometimes does). Add two or three teaspoons of brown sugar. Fill glass with crushed ice. Sprinkle with cinnamon.

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