

**Pack up, escape to the middle of nowhere**  
**Eco-sensitive resorts in Costa Rica do their part, try to make difference**

By CHRISTINA JONAS Hamilton Spectator  
Sat. Feb 21 - 7:22 AM



A room at the Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge in Costa Rica. The lodge is located in the Osa Peninsula, an environmentally sensitive resort set on a 66-hectare private preserve in one of the most remote areas of Costa Rica. (Christina Jonas / Hamilton Spectator)

**IF YOU GO**

- Costa Rica has two seasons — rainy and dry. The rainy season runs from May until mid-November. It might rain just in the evening, or it could rain for an entire week. The average temperature is 29 C.

- Rooms at Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge ([www.nicuesalodge.com](http://www.nicuesalodge.com)) range from \$180 to \$230 per person per night during

GOLFITO, Costa Rica — You smell them before you see them, or at least our guide did.

"Oh, wow," exclaimed Erick, a young Costa Rican, motioning us to be quiet.

As we crouched in a thicket, deep within a rainforest, he pointed toward the riverbed. "Peccaries."

We watched in amazement as eight of the wild boar-like creatures clattered noisily across the rocks of a dry riverbed. The wildest one knew we were there and came to investigate.

It was only then that Erick told us that these animals will eat anything, including humans.

"Do we run or make lots of noise?" I whispered, not taking my eyes off the beast.

"No, climb a tree," he replied.

"But you said earlier not to touch the trees because there could be snakes in them," I retorted, incredulous at the predicament we found ourselves in.

"Save your life first, then worry about the snakes."

With that, Erick rose, laughing, and the peccary darted for the undergrowth. We learned that in this area there are two species — the friendlier collared peccaries that we had just met, and white-lipped peccaries that are much more aggressive.

As we continued our hike to a picturesque waterfall, we were awed by the beauty of the rainforest. Leaves were as big as elephant ears and trees towered 55 metres. Moss and ferns grew thick underfoot, adding their hue to the lush green canvas, while brilliant jewel-coloured dragonflies, multi-coloured butterflies and a dazzling array of flowers added splashes of vibrancy.

It is horrifying to think that only one-quarter of Costa Rica's original forest cover is still standing, and that, despite the steps the country has taken to conserve nature, about 8,000 hectares are deforested annually.

the dry season, and \$150 to \$205 during the rainy season. Prices include boat pickup and drop-off, three meals per day and unlimited self-guided hikes on preserve and the use of kayaks, windsurfers, snorkelling and fishing equipment. A two-night minimum stay is required (four nights during holidays).

- At Selva Verde Lodge and Rainforest Reserve ([www.selvaverde.com](http://www.selvaverde.com)), rooms cost \$80 to \$155 per night, depending on how many people are staying in the room, and include breakfast. In the dry season, rooms cost \$95 to \$210. A bird-watching walk is complimentary, as are self-guided hikes, and the front desk can help you make reservations for area activities. There is also a pool.

Hamilton Spectator

Our trip took us to two resorts trying to make a difference.

The first was Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge in the Osa Peninsula, an environmentally sensitive resort set on a 66-hectare private preserve in one of the most remote areas of Costa Rica. To get there you must fly from San Jose to Puerto Jimenez, landing at a small, single-runway airport before boarding a boat for a trip across the Golfo Dulce (sweet gulf).

From the water the area looked desolate, except for a lone pier. That's because the lodge and cabins are set amidst the dense forest, affording guests close-up views of white-faced monkeys, green parakeets and scarlet macaws.

The resort was built by Michael and Donna Butler, former New Yorkers, who wanted to combine conservation with ecotourism, nature, adventure and sports.

"It was like escaping to the middle of nowhere," Michael said.

The couple's vision included a tree house-style lodge, the use of alternative energy, open-air cabins with private outdoor showers, a limited number of guests (22 is the maximum) and the promotion of sustainability and ecotourism, whereby they conserve the environment and improve the well-being of the local people.

Lodge meals focus on national and regional cuisine, and often feature fish caught that morning by guests.

Costa Rica, a country roughly the size of Nova Scotia, has five per cent of the world's flora and fauna, so it has a lot to

lose. It is home to more than 9,000 species of plants, 200 mammals (half of which are bats), 160 amphibians, 220 reptiles, 850 birds and numerous insects.

The second resort we visited is a pioneer of the ecotourism movement in Costa Rica.

Giovanna Holbrook, matriarch of the family that owns tour operator Holbrook Travel, was visiting the Sarapiquí region in 1984 when she learned of plans to destroy 200 hectares of primary rainforest. She impulsively purchased the property to save the forest, and shortly after built Selva Verde Lodge and Rainforest Reserve, which in addition to accommodations, features a nature reserve with hiking trails, a butterfly garden and an education and conservation resource centre for area residents, travellers and volunteers.

Gabriel Gonzalez, the manager, said the resort is part of the Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST) program, which encourages companies to use recycled products, properly dispose and treat waste, install water- and energy-saving devices, conserve and expand Costa Rican forests and implement better information management systems.

The Sarapiquí region is also known for hiking, whitewater rafting, horseback riding, ziplining and excursions to area volcanoes and botanical gardens.

Christina Jonas is a Hamilton-based freelance writer whose trip was subsidized by Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge and Selva Verde Lodge.