

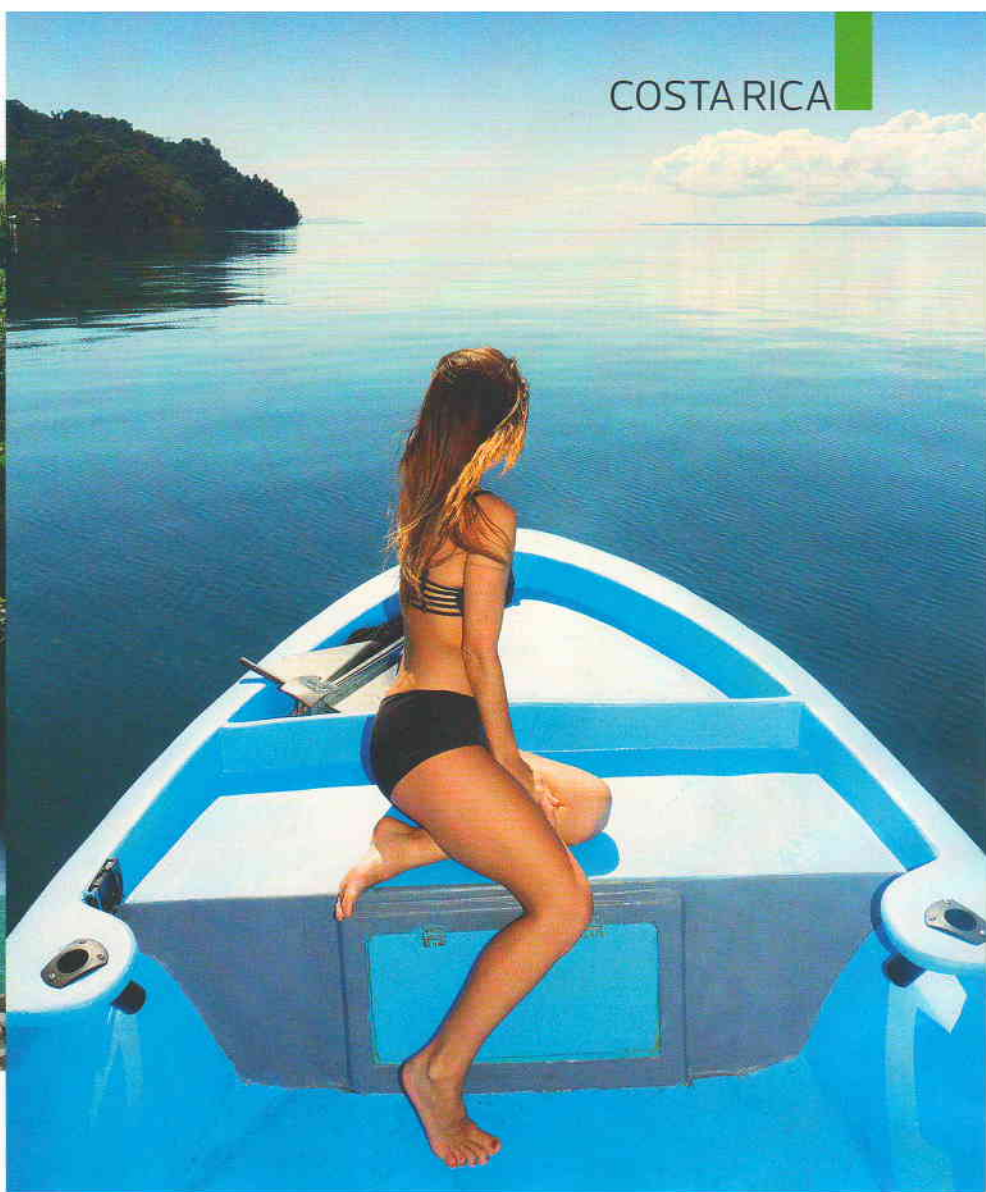
# Mist opportunities

Smoking volcanoes, cloud-shrouded jungle — new flights mean it's easier than ever to savour Costa Rica's thrillingly different Caribbean idyll, says **Alex Robinson**

Photography: **Alex Robinson**

Remote access:  
a solo surfer on  
the beach at crowd-  
free Santa Teresa.  
Opposite, internal  
flights come with  
rainforest views





# I slip out of the boat

onto the warm sand, liquid-smooth around my toes. It's as black as squid ink, a mix of crushed lava and coral, broken by waves over millennia. Federico, the guide, has rushed ahead. We hear him, his voice thin against the crash of the surf. He's excited.

*'Un nido! Tortugas, tortugas. Come quick!'*

He's standing over a patch of broken beach and pointing down. I see nothing. Then there's a twitch of movement, a cluster of tiny turtles iron-grey in the dark sand. I could fit them inside a coconut shell. It's a miracle he spotted them. They're barely moving. Most are as still as a photograph. Are they dead?

'No. They've just hatched,' says Federico. 'They'll move again in a minute.'

The biggest one does, at first with a shuffle, then lurching to life, scurrying towards the sea. Soon dozens follow and the empty beach is alive with movement. As the baby turtles reach the surf, the clouds part, lighting the waves and the sand in shafts of late-afternoon sunlight. The beach stretches black against the bottle-green Atlantic, receding into forested hills. Kilometres away, mist is rising from the trees, steamed by the sun into clouds, soon to fall again as rain. The air is filled

with music: the chorus of tree frogs, birds singing, the percussion of the waves. It's all classic Caribbean.

Or rather it is – but with a twist. A few months earlier I'd been squeezed into a carriage on the Tube with a friend I hadn't seen for a while. It was winter and I was pale and puffy, but he looked sickeningly tanned and fit. What was his secret? Caribbean sunshine, he replied. Jamaica? Not exactly, he answered, whipping out his mobile and flashing a series of stunning pictures: a towering volcano, toucans flying over verdant rainforest and a strip of sand set between headlands of foliage.

Costa Rica. How intrepid, was all I could muster. But such a cinch, he said, disappearing into the crowds. By the time the Tube had juddered into Covent Garden, I'd resolved to follow him. Costa Rica, I soon discovered, is an easy-access paradise – it's just overlooked by the fly-and-flop holidaymakers who prefer the familiarity of Barbados's beaches and barbecues. Now, with new flights on the horizon (as of May 2016, BA will fly non-stop to the capital, San José), that may change.

When I booked, I found dozens of tour operators offering a pot-pourri of the Central American beauty's natural attractions, mixing guided trips with self-drive >

**Morning call: opposite, breakfast by the pool at Nayara Springs Hotel. Above, a waterfall pounding down near Arenal; boating on the tranquil waters of the Golfo Dulce inlet**



## I climbed out of the plane into what felt like a different

discovery. The volcanoes my friend had shown me run through its central mountains; those virgin rainforests spread wild across the south. In 10 days I'd see them all in comfort and at leisure (the country is tiny). And I'd get a few days to unwind on some glorious Pacific beaches.

Tortuguero, on the Atlantic coast, was the perfect place to start my Costa Rican discovery. Federico was a mine of information, and the turtles were hypnotising, as they began the autumn hatching season. Other wildlife was equally exuberant – I spent three days in a whirl of brilliant-green macaws in flocks floating over pristine forests; caimans basking on river beaches; and sloths hanging sleepily in fan-like cecropia trees.

Ready to explore more, I took a 20-minute flight to San José, where I picked up a hire car, and soon found myself driving on winding roads over misty hills, through valleys green with coffee plantations and banana trees, to Arenal. This perfectly conical volcano fumes into a clear-blue sky, veiled with myriad waterfalls, clothed in lush vegetation. I washed away what was left of London with a swim in the icy Rio Fortuna cascade, which plunges into a deep pool set in a rainforest glade. I also warmed myself in the hot springs

gushing from the mountainside – at the Nayara Springs Hotel they are diverted into private plunge pools. The steamy mineral water was luxuriously soothing under the shimmering stars and, after a long soak, I slept on cool white cotton.

Arenal's forests are filled with the kind of wildlife you won't find in your average all-inclusive resort. At the Mistico Reserve, I walked across rope bridges strung above the canopy. Metres away, toucans flitted through leaves and velvety-black howler monkeys delicately plucked fruit from the trees. At night the soothing sounds of the forest lulled me into deep sleep.

More spectacular scenery lay ahead: after a couple of days I watched Arenal's peak shrink in the rear-view mirror as I began a convoluted journey around the mountains. I cut through the Cordillera – Costa Rica's central ridge – past volcanic lakes and lava fields, before dropping onto a rocky plain, dotted with more volcanoes. Three hours later and I was at the bar of the Rio Perdido resort – in time to see the sun sink orange over hazy mountains, ice-cold Mojito in hand.

My room was a brightly-coloured pod on stilts in a forest chirruping with cicadas – incongruously artificial

Doing what comes naturally: from left, a baby turtle scurrying towards the waves; the cocktail bar at Latitude 10; the Arenal volcano



## country, the air perfumed with tropical scents

in the heart of unspoiled nature, but cool and comfortable, all the same. I heard the eerie call of coyotes at night and woke to golden light, the rat-a-tat of woodpeckers – and a wildlife walk in search of forest cats. It was the perfect precursor to a hot-water swim in the limpid stream that gives Rio Perdido its name: the ‘Lost River’ oozes from the base of Miravalles volcano, steaming through a hidden valley shaded by butterfly-filled trees.

The next morning, after a drive from Rio Perdido to the city of Liberia, I boarded a tiny turbo-prop to Golfito, in Costa Rica’s far south. From the window of the plane, the views were simply to-fly-for – a strip of coast to the right, a spine of volcanic mountains to the left. But as soon as I could begin to take it in, we began to drop, flying low over peaks dense with steamy vegetation that fell into an emerald-green valley. I saw dolphins in the water, fishermen casting a broad bellnet. A cluster of houses gathered around a church, then we skidded onto a runway cut from the forest. Just 70 minutes after taking off, I climbed out into what felt like a different country, the air perfumed with the scent of tropical trees.

Two athletic-looking guides welcomed me. ‘Hi, I’m Veronica,’ said a twentysomething.

### WRITER’S TIP

Sign up for one of Rio Perdido resort’s early-morning or night safaris, and keep your eyes peeled for the beautiful, elusive local coyotes

‘And I’m José,’ said her chiselled companion, the muscles rippling in his tanned forearms. Both wore fawn shorts and khaki shirts stamped with ‘Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge’ – I could imagine them both abseiling waterfalls.

We set off in a 4WD then climbed into a speedboat, which whisked around the edge of the Golfo Dulce inlet, past whooping gulls, more dolphins and countless coves fringed with little black-sand beaches. The forest towered behind them. A flock of scarlet macaws cackled loudly. Sir Francis Drake is said to have moored the *Golden Hind* just round the coast from here, on his way around the world. We stopped to catch tuna and Spanish mackerel, and scanned the water for whales, which nurse here every year between December and March.

The Playa Nicuesa Lodge lay tucked away under trees behind a coal-dark sandy bay, hidden in a tropical garden brilliant with red heliconia, creamy orchids and the flickering flight of sapphire-blue and emerald-green hummingbirds. World-class wilderness – and not a mosquito in earshot. Veronica handed me a welcome drink, tangy and sharp – tropical *maracuyá* passionfruit with a kick of lime, ginger and sugar-cane rum. ➤



Simply does it: above, Tortuga Lodge in the Tortuguero National Park; whitefish with ginger and plantain as served at Latitude 10. Opposite, catch of the day



## It's a place for body-surfing the waves, watching monkeys watching me shower – and yoga, possibly

**BESURE TO ORDER...** ...one of the barman's house cocktails, made with Costa Rican rum, citrus fruit, ginger and lemongrass grown in the lodge's organic garden. And relax...

'Ready for a rainforest hike?' she asked.

For sure I was – I couldn't wait to walk among the towering trees I'd seen from the plane. So after a lunch of red snapper and ginger-sautéed vegetables, and energised by the sun and sea, we set off. The sun was high in the sky, the air humid and sticky – then we entered the forest and the air cooled. I was amazed by how little light penetrated to the forest floor. And by the silence, as quiet as a cathedral. Where were all the animals?

We stopped at the base of a tropical cedar – its jutting buttress roots as big as buses, its trunk a tower of wood twice as broad as a Land Rover. Then came a shuffle in the undergrowth, a thick pungent smell and a chitter of teeth. I dimly made out a shape a few metres ahead. Then another. The hairs rose on my arms.

'Peccary!' I shouted.

I'd seen a documentary about these Labrador-sized pigs, which rather dramatically described them as the piranhas of the rainforest, marauding through the trees in bands, trampling and chewing anything that gets in their way. I began to sweat. Veronica and José froze. Were they terrified too?

No. They were laughing.


'Shouldn't we climb a tree or something?'

'They aren't dangerous,' said Veronica. Wrong species, she explained. These were collared peccary, not white-lipped. My fear faded into embarrassment.

Further up the trail, we saw jaguar footprints in the mud, a boa twisted round a forest vine, and a gang of white-faced capuchin monkeys, one with a tiny baby clinging to its back. Then the forest cleared and for half an hour we scrambled up a rocky river valley before reaching a beautiful waterfall – a rushing stream of white water plunging over a moss-covered cliff into a cool pool. It was deliciously fresh and clean enough to drink. I swam open-mouthed, gulping in the pure rainforest mineral water. The sparkling river and oxygenated air left me feeling 10 years younger.

I spent the next few days fishing, kayaking through mangroves in search of crocodiles, and learning to make a rum cocktail – with crushed sugar-cane and pink ginger I'd dug myself from the Lodge's garden. But soon the beach was calling: time to move on to my final stop, Santa Teresa. This tiny surf town on the northwest coast is where Matt Damon, Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Moss go when they don't want to be seen. They fly in by >



A full-page photograph of a tropical coastline. In the foreground, a person stands on a dark, jagged rock formation that juts out into the water. The water is a vibrant blue-green. To the left, a large, leafy tree with some orange-tinted leaves leans over the rock. The background is a vast, hazy expanse of dense green forest covering a hillside, with a bright sky above.

Metres away, toucans flitted  
past and velvety-black howler  
monkeys delicately plucked  
fruit from the trees

Call of nature: the  
stunning scenery  
of the Golfo Dulce  
inlet. Opposite,  
a hummingbird  
feeding from a  
heliconia flower



helicopter. My wallet wouldn't stretch quite that far, so back at Liberia airport I took keys to another rental car and spent three hours winding round some of the roughest, steepest roads I've ever driven, cursing at every switchback-turn. There were resorts nearer Liberia, so why had I chosen the remotest? Then as the sun was low in the evening sky, I dropped down the last hillside and saw Santa Teresa beach before me. There were no houses – they must be hidden beneath the trees – only kilometres of sandy bays, broken by forested mountain spurs, washed by Pacific waves. A surfer caught one of them, riding it into the coast as light glinted off his board.

At the Latitude 10 resort, Bali-inspired hardwood cabins were lost in foliage on the shore – supermodel Gisele Bündchen fell in love with them, apparently. Walls were dark, wooden shutters opened onto the forest, and the bed was a huge organic cotton-dressed four-poster draped with mosquito nets. No air-con – the constant sea breeze cools far better.

Here was a place for body-surfing the waves, ambling along the beaches, watching the monkeys watching me shower from my open-roofed bathroom – and, on my final day, taking a yoga session with Cristina Kalyani Paes, whom I found via a notice in the town's wholefood cafe, Zwart. She teaches yoga to Gisele, Matt Damon and a host of other names, but didn't seem fazed. On the stroll across the sand towards Manzanillo beach, she pointed out her house – it was set in a green valley behind the beach. Gisele lived next door.

Supermodel neighbour, supermodel setting... I could quite understand when Cristina explained to me how Costa Rica had changed her – how it had washed away all her ambitions and anxieties. 'I came for a long holiday, but simply couldn't keep away,' she said. She had me stretching in ways I never believed I could. I felt lithe – and, after 10 minutes' meditating to the sound of the waves, utterly Zen-calm. As ready for the flight back to London, I supposed, as I'd ever be. ■



## Get Me There

map: Scott Jessop

### Go independent

**Thomson Airways** ([flightsthomson.co.uk](http://flightsthomson.co.uk)) starts flights to Liberia, in Costa Rica's northwest corner, in November, from £569. As of May 2016, **BA** will fly from Gatwick to the capital, San José; returns from £546.

in rainforest next to a black-sand beach on the dolphin-filled Golfo Dulce. Seafront beach boutique resort **Latitude 10** (00 506 8309 2943, [latitude10resort.com](http://latitude10resort.com); doubles from £150, B&B) is a clutch of open-air casitas tailored for honeymoons.

### Where to stay

**Tortuga Lodge** (00 506 2709 8136, [tortugalodge.com](http://tortugalodge.com); doubles from £167, room only) has rooms set in a tropical garden by the Tortuguero River. **Nayara Springs** (00 506 2479 1600, [nayaraspings.com](http://nayaraspings.com); doubles from £190, B&B) has glass-fronted villas decked out in hard wood, set in tropical gardens at the base of the Arenal volcano. **Rio Perdido** (00 506 2673 3600, [rio-perdido.com](http://rio-perdido.com); doubles from £158, B&B) is a scattering of forest bungalows 40km from Liberia International Airport. **Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge** (00 506 2258 8250, [nicuesalodge.com](http://nicuesalodge.com); doubles from £124, full board) has villas set

### Go packaged

**Journey Latin America** (020 8600 1881, [journeylatinamerica.co.uk](http://journeylatinamerica.co.uk)) can sort the trip as featured: 15 nights (plus one in San José), from £3,329pp, B&B, with transfers, excursions and flights; an extra £995 buys a three-night add-on to Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge. On a tighter budget? A trip taking in turtle-watching and beaches, but omitting other destinations, costs from £1,760. As of May 2016, **Hayes & Jarvis** (01293 738939, [hayesandjarvis.com](http://hayesandjarvis.com)) will use the new BA route; expect to pay from £1,599pp for a 10-night trip.

### Further information

See [visitcostarica.com](http://visitcostarica.com).

