

Upscale tourists hunger for 'eco-luxurious' experiences

Featured In USA Today
February 21, 2008



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PENINSULA PAPAGAYO, Costa Rica — A herd of tan cattle ambling down a sparsely traveled, newly paved road creates what locals call a “Costa Rican traffic jam.”

Howler monkeys roar in rosewood trees outside \$2,000-a-night suites with plunge pools at the Four Seasons Resort Costa Rica at Peninsula Papagayo, where servers shuttle drinks to Rolex-wearing loungers on beaches that a decade ago were cooling-off spots mainly for locals or occasional backpackers.

Guanacaste Province, a remote and once-impoverished region in northwest Costa Rica near the Nicaraguan border, is bidding to be the next luxury hotspot.

Igniting a hotel building boom: thousands of acres of undeveloped Pacific beachfront property, Costa Rica's reputation as a peaceful eco-destination and a thriving international airport outside the province's capital city of Liberia with three dozen non-stop flights from the USA a week in high season. Saturday, Delta launches one from New York's JFK airport.

Hotel chains are eager to emulate the success of the 4-year-old Four Seasons, which is filled almost to capacity during the winter and spring high season. The least expensive room can cost \$1,000 a day.

Among more than a dozen resorts being built or on the drawing board, most are within an hour from the Liberia (“LEE-bare-ia”) airport:

- The JW Marriott Guanacaste Resort & Spa is due this year.

- Construction is about to start on 650-acre Cacique, Costa Rica, spearheaded by former America Online chairman Steve Case. It will include the first Miraval spa resort outside the USA and a One & Only hotel from Atlantis magnate Sol Kerzner. There'll be an Andre Agassi/Steffi Graf tennis center and a discovery center headlined by Philippe Cousteau, a grandson of the French aquatic explorer. Phase 1 is due in 2010.

- At least two more hotels — brands yet to be announced — are expected to join the Four Seasons on the 2,300-acre Peninsula Papagayo by 2010, says peninsula developer Alan Kelso. One will be at a marina for luxury yachts, with condos, shops and restaurants, which is under construction.

- The Mandarin Oriental, Costa Rica is expected in 2009.

- Rosewood Hotels & Resorts plans to open the 80-suite Rosewood Costa Carmel by the end of 2010, says CEO Bob Boulogne.

New lodgings include a multi-villa hideaway called Recreo, which even lets guests detox or volunteer in villages and get massages afterward. Hilton just opened an upscale all-inclusive resort. Other chains also are expected to put down roots in this rural region of dry tropical forests, volcanoes, sugar cane fields, national parks and cattle ranches.

“A lot of people with a lot of money are trying to put money here,” says tour guide José Agüero González, who, like many Costa Ricans here, moved from elsewhere because of the tourism boom.

Agüero, a smiling and stocky 32-year-old, works for Swiss Travel Service, a premier Costa Rica tour operator. Like many Costa Ricans who deal with tourists, he speaks good English. Taking the wheel of a shiny four-wheel-drive Mitsubishi, he is eager to explain the Guanacaste way of life.

“People around here, they don’t make a lot of money. But they are happy. I’m happy. I wake my wife with a kiss. I have a nice breakfast. Maybe a cheese sandwich. Nice, simple things.”

That philosophy is reflected in the Costa Rican catchphrase *pura vida* (pure life) that serves as a greeting, farewell or expression of thanks and good wishes.

With just hours to give a visitor a taste of Guanacaste — challenging because of spread-out towns and attractions, two-lane roads or unpaved tracks — Agüero points the SUV toward Palo Verde National Park. There, sunning crocodiles, stunning herons and chattering monkeys populate the banks and mangrove tangles of the Tempisque River. Costa Rica has about 5% of the world’s plant and animal species, says Agüero, who has a bachelor’s degree in eco-tourism.

Hotel developers also wax poetic about their respect for nature.

Travelers are interested in an “eco-luxurious” experience, says Miraval CEO John Vanderslice. His project boasts suites that open onto “living walls” of trees and plants. “You’ll feel like you’re living in an indigenous eco-system,” he says. The spa likely will offer adventures on the nation’s famed ziplines that zoom tourists from platform to platform at treetop level.

What is selling Guanacaste as a destination is “nature and authenticity,” says Cacique exec Philippe Bourguignon, the former head of Club Med and Euro Disney who now is CEO of Case’s Revolution Places Development.

Costa Rica’s green image and the eco-tenor of the times are “pushing us toward a construction program that’s green from scratch,” Rosewood’s Boulogne says.

Some question whether developers walk their talk.

August tests of water flowing into the sea in Tamarindo — a Guanacaste surfing and fishing town that’s now a symbol of overdevelopment — turned up high levels of bacteria. December tests were improved, but some samples had bacteria, area newspaper *The Beach Times* reported. Development is “unfettered ... the government can’t keep up. Some people are developing without regard for regulations,” says *Beach Times* editor/publisher Ralph Nicholson.

Farther north, health officials ordered the Allegro Papagayo resort to close last week until it resolved improper sewage disposal. Guests are being put in other lodgings, and it is expected to open in a few weeks, a resort spokeswoman says.

Across a bay from the Allegro, the gated Peninsula Papagayo development — which includes the Four Seasons — has its own sewage treatment plants. “I’m happy the authorities are cracking down,” says peninsula developer Kelso. “As a Costa Rican, I am against (contaminating nature). When the health department shuts (a resort) down, people will learn.”

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Unlike developers who act as if plopping down air-conditioned luxury hotel rooms amid pristine forests is a plus for the environment, Kelso takes a realistic point of view.

“We’re creating more jobs, but I can’t say we’re making the environment better. We try to do as much as we can to be a responsible developer” — 70% of the peninsula’s 2,300 acres is to stay open space — “but look, we’re not Greenpeace.”

Once-laid-back Tamarindo now is stuffed with condo developments for Americans and Canadians, real estate offices and fast-food joints.

What’s happening is “development before infrastructure,” says Tish Tomlinson, an ex-Californian whose Dragonfly Bar & Grill, a romantic tentlike eatery, wins good reviews. As sushi chefs assemble shrimp rolls to the strains of Norah Jones on the sound system, Tomlinson, a blonde in a minidress, flits about her casual/chic eatery.

Though Tamarindo causes some sophisticates to shudder, it also has tranquil lodgings such as the beachfront Hotel Capitán Suizo, whose bungalows with four-poster beds are decorated with local art and historic photos. You can share walkways at night with raccoonlike *coatimundis* or cuddle an orphaned monkey named Alice.

A 20-minute drive from town, the hilltop, adults-only Los Altos de Eros (“the heights of love”) just was named the world’s top luxury lodging and best for service in TripAdvisor’s “Travelers’ Choice” awards. The red tile-roofed villa started out as a retirement oasis for an American former dot-com exec and his British wife. They’ve made it an inn and spa. Twenty-eight staffers care for a maximum 10 guests.

“We couldn’t put together such a good (staff) anywhere else — we couldn’t afford it,” says co-owner Calvin Haskell. “Costa Ricans are beautiful” inside and out, he says.

Hotel developers say they’re not worried about oversaturation. With the influx of luxe, “the destination will be (better) known, and that’s a good thing,” says Four Seasons general manager Luis Argote. Competition “keeps us on our toes.”

Rosewood’s Boulogne agrees: Top brands swarming a region “sends a message to the world.”

Developers, who are putting money into paving roads, water and energy conservation and investing in Costa Rican community programs, brush aside tourism drawbacks. Beaches tend to be small and aren’t lapped by Caribbean-blue water; driving is tedious (it can take a half-hour to reach the Four Seasons front door from the main road, for instance).

Such concerns fade when Agüero’s Sunday tour leads to a serendipitous stop. Near the tiny town of Mansion, a fiesta is taking place.

Kids play Foosball on aging tables and a cowboy holding a plastic cup of beer smiles at an outsider as he makes his horse prance in time to merengue music blaring from loudspeakers. It’s a travel moment that doesn’t take a MasterCard or 300-thread-count hotel sheet to savor.