

The Arenal Volcano

Livin' la Pura Vida

The Gringo Show Heads to Costa Rica

Text and photos by Matt Kettmann



was walking on a remote and hidden beach as the wash of the ocean made that water-and-pebble-filled sound I'd only ever heard on those soothing sleep-aid tapes: *shhhhhh... crashhh... shhhhhh... crashhhhh*. Hermit crabs scurried

beneath my bare feet. Tide pool-dwelling sea snails hid slowly from my moving shadow. Shells as big as my fist accessorized the shoreline. A lush, dark jungle of green trees and low, even greener shrubs protected the quaint cove, its prickly, impassable façade hiding the abundance of wildlife that crept close by. The empty blue-green sea smiled up at me with its wind-fed whitecaps. And the thought finally hit me. "So this is la pura vida."

The beach was part of the Cabo Blanco Reserve, a thoroughly protected nature lover's paradise at the southern tip of the Nicoya Peninsula on Costa Rica's Pacific coast. It was my first discovery of such complete tranquility and freedom, but definitely not the last.

Pura vida.

If you've been to Costa Rica, you know the phrase. From the surf breaks to the radio waves, grocery stores in big towns to beachside bars in deserted ones, those two ubiquitous words summarize the essence of the Costa Rican lifestyle. While Ticos, as Costa Ricans call themselves, use the words to mean "hello," "goodbye," "cool," and, seemingly, "why would you want to be anywhere in the world other than here?"—*pura vida* translates directly to "pure life." The two little words speak volumes about the treasures of Costa Rica, a conservation-minded, military-free country that has managed to exalt and protect nature while maintaining a reliable infrastructure of roads, electricity, healthcare, and telephones.

Enter the "Gringo Show," as my three friends and I came to call ourselves. With a good lead on a time-share condo, Diamond—an aptly nicknamed geologist—emailed me a few months earlier and hatched the idea of traveling to Costa

Rica. My jewelry-making neighbor Alchemy joined the roster a few weeks later, and the fourth horseman was my pal Dirty. Together we were strong, our brains and brawn mixed with equal parts belligerence and bravery, qualities that ensured both safety and amusement.

What ensued were two-and-a-half weeks of eye-opening, hilarious travels—smiling children, helpful Ticos, great food, cold beer, and stunning landscapes in addition to tweaked-out drug dealers, swindling cabbies, crooked cops, pitch-black jungle excursions, backed-up toilets, and waterlogged kayaks. And those were just the good things.

Coastal Throne

We began our journey lying in the lap of luxury, settling in after a quick plane flight to the southern Nicoya Peninsula at a five-star resort called Florblanca. A beautiful Argentine woman named Barbara showed us our room—or rather, our two-story, two-bedroom villa, which was bigger than my house, with outdoor bathroom, sprawling patio and living room, and huge, ocean-view bedrooms. When I thought it couldn't get any more plush, we were introduced to Florblanca's pool area, where a teak-endowed eating and lounging area overlooked raging surf and a pristine beach just steps from the yoga studio and bar.

For the next few days—when we weren't watching wily monkeys, multicolored iguanas, fireflies, and bee-sized hummingbirds from our porch—we spent our time cruising the beach in search of rocks and waves while admiring the wacky tracings made in the sand by the underground-dwelling crabs. We biked through the towns of Santa Teresa and Malpais, where we ate our first round of *casados*, the traditional Costa Rican lunch of rice, beans, meat, and salad. Then, past oceanfront soccer fields, dreadlocked surfers, and a quaint fishing community, we reached Cabo Blanco. There we encountered an entire

social community of white-faced capuchin monkeys. Their leader tried to scare us while the others scurried into the tallest trees.

At night and in the mornings, we feasted on Florblanca's first-class eats. Breakfast was hollowed-out papayas filled with exotic fruits, fresh smoothies, hot muffins, and strong Costa Rican coffee followed by stuffed French toast with raspberry drizzle, which we ate while overlooking our very own beach. And for dinner, we regaled ourselves with filet mignon, pork chops, seared ahi, spicy sushi rolls, red miso soup, noodle-filled seaweed salad, and salmon in eggplant shell. We washed it all down with wasabi-infused Bloody Marys and fresh mint-filled *mojitos*.

Tequila and Tides

Before we left Florblanca, Europcar delivered us a rental vehicle that would become our smelly confidant for the remainder of our trip. The Daihatsu Terio, perhaps the world's smallest 4x4, seemed squatty at first, but proved reliable on all roads, from potholed highways to rocky, weed-covered paths. We got the insurance that covered everything except "driving into rivers," which was a serious consideration, since during our first day on the road—when we went to the hippy-esque town of Montezuma—we almost drove into the same river twice.

Our first major haul in the Terio was our drive north to one of the many towns called Playa Hermosa, this one being just up the coast from Playa del Coco, close to Nicaragua. Someone drew us a sure path on our map, but never wanting to do things the easy way, we pressed our luck on a few side roads. That proved downright dangerous, as a rifle-wielding man told us at one point to turn around immediately, leaving us to wonder what was going on farther down the road.

As night fell, we arrived at our time-share



Dirty surfs at a secret break

◀ **Costa Rica** cont'd from pg. 35

condo in Playa Hermosa—where we'd be staying for a week. The next morning, clear skies revealed a large bay beneath our bluff-side dwelling, so we headed down to the beach with our snorkeling gear and rented a couple kayaks. The rental guy pointed out two secluded beaches and the islands we'd seen that morning, explaining that it would probably take a few hours to snorkel those spots.

Once we got our crafts in the water, we realized why it would take so long—the fiberglass kayaks took on so much water, they were more like submarines than boats. Still, we made it to the first beach after awhile and snorkeled in the bath-water warm sea, where we discovered blue and yellow fish, puffer fish with spikes, moray eels, coral reefs, and urchins. Then we headed to the islands, where the fish were bigger and the water rougher. By the time we headed back to the mainland, Dirty had caught two fish with his Hawaiian sling.

That night, we had dinner in Playa del Coco, a slightly seedy town with plenty of bars. At the Tequila Bar, owned by a cool man named Luis, we ran into some girls who convinced us to karaoke with them (the “howler” shots of spicy tequila may have played a role, too). Luis and his wife joined us at the karaoke bar, where Diamond sang “Copacabana,” I did a rendition of “Folsom Prison Blues,” and the girls sang everything from Madonna to Guns 'n' Roses. The whole town came out to watch.

A couple days later, we hired our own personal boat that took us to the world-class surf spots Witch's Rock and Ollie's Point, made famous by Bruce Brown's *Endless Summer* movies.

The waves proved solid and the line-up empty, save for one other boat. The soft sandbar break of Witch's Rock, which occasionally boasts a crocodile or two, was timid compared to the bending barrels of the more secluded Ollie's Point, so named for its proximity to the place where Oliver North landed planes loaded with cargo for Nicaraguan rebels during the Iran-Contra Affair. Our guide for the day, Wilbert, turned out to be the best surfer in the bunch, though Dirty, who grew up mastering the waves of Huntington, had his share of nice rides too. I got rocked plenty of times, my body board often providing the top of the skin sandwich with the rocky seafloor as the bottom.

Road Less Traveled

We'd been in Costa Rica almost two weeks, but couldn't shake the image of the Arenal Volcano from our heads. We'd seen it from the plane when we originally descended on Costa Rica, its

perfectly conical shape spewing a slim stream of smoke into the blue sky, surrounded by a massive lake. Everyone we met on our trip said to go there—even though it had just had a major eruption a few weeks before. So we decided to leave the condo a day early, hopped in our Daihatsu, and started driving inland.

After a few hours of good and bad roads—and an odd incident with a police officer who tried to get us to upgrade our rental car so we could fit women on our laps—we reached the lake at the base of the volcano. We wound around it, into branch-drooping, fern-laced jungle, only catching quick views of the base of the active volcano, its

How To Costa Rica

Florblanca Resort: Call (506) 640-0232 or visit www.florblanca.com.

Encanta la Vida: Call (506) 735-5678 or visit www.encantalavida.com.

The Backyard: Call (800) 948-3770 or visit www.centralamerica.com/cr/hotel/backyard.htm.

Europcar: Call (506) 257-1158 or visit www.europcar.co.cr.

top shrouded in clouds and fog. We settled into the Cabinas Guayabos, a quaint inn run by a nice family, with the back patios directly facing the volcano. We heard the rumble of the beast, as blazing rocks the size of cars tumbled down its side. The clouds had rolled away, allowing us to witness fiery red projectiles shooting out of the top and tumbling down the volcano face.

The next morning, we headed back toward the beach, specifically Jaco, the most bustling beach resort town in Costa Rica, where we stayed at the surfer-filled bar/hotel called the Backyard. Once south of there, all the creature comforts we had enjoyed—reliable roads, electricity, sporadic, goods-filled towns—gradually disappeared. It's actually a good sign: It means you're entering a realm of the tourist-trodden country that's less traveled, where residents enjoy dirt roads and shun electrical wires because they impact the wanderings of monkeys.

Down that way, past where the oil palm fields die out near the surfer hub of Dominical, there's an easy-to-miss right turn toward the Osa Peninsula, which Dirty made, fast and uncaring about how the pig-sized potholes jostled those in the backseat. Soon we approached Puerto Jimenez, a fisherman's heaven and the last bastion of civilization on the Osa. We picked up some Imperial beer, rum, juice, and snacks, readying ourselves for what would

be three nights in a remote paradise called Matapalo at the tip of the peninsula.

Another hour or so down the road, past trees teeming with rainbow-colored macaws, jungle huts appeared, barely hidden behind the relentless foliage that completely overwhelms the area. As the smell of saltwater mixed with the sounds of rain, a hand-carved wooden sign emerged: Encanta la Vida (love life), it said, the last of our Costa Rican destinations.

We checked into our own three-story “pole house,” where toucans mingled with spider monkeys outside our front porch. Five minutes from our doorstep was a series of empty beaches, where the sand literally moved with crustacean activity and pelicans surfed the wind that sailed off the consistent shore break.

At Backwash Bay, the jungle encroached on the sand, a natural setup that lends itself to the occasional beach-strolling jaguar. The sand continued around the corner to Pan Dulce, but we went the other way, wanting to reach the famed spot of Matapalo by dusk. We'd been told to get there via the tiny, lone road, but we instead ambled over some craggy rocks and found our way there by beach. Night was falling fast—as it does close to the equator—and we couldn't find the road through the dense jungle that circled the beach.

“This is gonna get real interesting real fast,” said Diamond, to which we all issued a somewhat panicked chuckle, collectively imagining the myriad jungle dangers nearby. Luckily, a Tico dressed in boardshorts emerged from a small house and directed us to the “road,” whose knee-deep puddles we navigated with only Bic lighters and slippery, mud-covered sandals.

It wasn't until the next morning that we learned what sort of danger we were actually in, when Mike (pronounced “Moyke” in his Aussie accent), the resident adventure leader, told us over breakfast that pit vipers, one of the world's more deadly snakes, cruise Matapalo's road at night. “Don't go out without flashlights again, mates!” he exclaimed, warning that even walking to our room at night could prove disastrous.

Over the next couple days of intermittent rain, sunshine, and monkey sightings, which were interspersed with hammock naps, mellow surfing, and a memorable trip to the only beachside bar around, we found the Osa to be Costa Rica's hidden paradise. It's a place to drop off the earth, for reasons pleasurable and suspect. For that reason, the mix of equal parts Tico and gringo who live there are wary of visitors, fearful that they will spill the beans about what Matapalo has to offer. So don't go there, unless hidden paradise is your idea of a good time. ■