I 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 … crshhh … shhlllll … crshhhhhhh. 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, swinging cabbies, crooked cops, pitch-black jungle excursions, backed-up toilets, and waterlogged kayaks. And those were just the good things.

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 admiring the wacky tracings made in the sand by the underground-dwelling crabs. We biked through the towns — 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 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.

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.

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Our first major haul in the Terio was our drive north to 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.

Costa Rica’s Natural Treasure

Coastal Throne

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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 squat 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...
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, andurchins. 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-dropping, fern-laced jungle, only catching quick views of the base of the active volcano, its 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 Iaco, 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 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.

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

Top tips for your trip to Costa Rica:

- Rent a car: It’s the best way to explore the country. Europcar is a reliable option.
- Stay in a resort: Florblanca Resort or Encanta la Vida are great choices with access to the beach.
- Go on a nature tour: Costa Rica is known for its natural beauty. Take a guided tour to see the wildlife.
- Eat local: Tacos, pupusas, and casados are delicious and affordable.
- Learn about the culture: Costa Ricans are friendly and proud of their heritage.
- Be prepared for the weather: Costa Rica has a tropical climate with wet and dry seasons.

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Dirty surfs at a secret break