

# Experience pura vida in Costa Rica

From Costa Rica's tallest active volcano, Irazu, both the Pacific and Caribbean coasts are visible on a clear day.

By Danielle Leonard

Beach vacations will always be a popular choice for us Canadians seeking a break from winter, but travellers are increasingly interested in destinations that also offer heart-pumping adventure and immersive cultural experiences. It's no wonder Costa Rica has become a hot spot, given its expansive beaches, lush rainforests, abundant sunshine and plethora of opportunities to explore.

I recently visited Costa Rica with my sister to discover the allure of this Central American country. We settled in San Jose, the nation's capital and a central location to launch our excursions. Although there is no beach within an hour of the hotel, we had come to explore the diverse offerings of the country. And, sitting on a beach all day, every day, was certainly not the way to do it. With experiences ranging from guided nature hikes to adrenaline pumping zip lining, we decided to start our adventures slowly.

Our first outing was a tour of the Cafe Britt coffee plantation. It seemed a fitting place for Canadians, given our affection for Tim Horton's coffee. Why not learn about the process that culminates in a steaming cup of java, provided through a drive-thru window? Led by two entertaining guides, we learned that Costa Rica has about 2,000 coffee planta-

tions. Most are small producers that use sustainable growing practices with each region creating its own distinct flavour. Cafe Britt, now predominantly a roaster, sources from many local regions to develop its unique coffee blends that are exported around the globe.

Of particular interest was seeing the coffee plant and coffee cherries (cereza in Spanish) that grow on it. Each cherry houses two small pale coffee beans coated in a pulp that's surprisingly sweet. The full tour included a guided walk through the shaded grounds, a breakdown of the roasting process and a lesson on how to professionally taste coffee. Certainly, the experience gave me a greater appreciation for all the work that goes into a single cup; and the distinct impression that my Tim Horton's coffee is no match for the gourmet blends of Costa Rica.

While it was tempting to eat all meals in our hotel that boasted three high quality restaurants, my sister and I were on a mission to experience true Costa Rican cuisine. I asked the driver who shuttled us to and from the coffee plantation for enlightenment on their specialty dishes. Without hesitation he explained that for breakfast, they eat rice and beans. For lunch, they eat rice and beans. For dinner, it's a dish of, you guessed it... rice and beans. And meat.

Unfazed by the country's apparent lack of

culinary creativity, we tried as many dishes as possible at local restaurants and eventually came to a few conclusions. Their ceviches are worth a try, and can be found on most menus. In general, portions are large; an appetizer was as filling as a typical entree at home. The fried plantains, called patacones ticos, are awesome. Simple, yet delicious, these are like thick, crispy tortillas that taste great with just about any fixings. We enjoyed them with ceviche, guacamole, refried beans and more.

After taking a day to relax by the pool, we signed up for a volcano tour. There are six active volcanoes in Costa Rica, and an additional 61 that are dormant. We opted for the country's tallest active volcano — Irazu. On a clear day, we were told, one can see both the Pacific and Caribbean coasts. Unfortunately, clear days are unusual, and our tour was no exception.

With an altitude of 11,260 feet, cool weather is a given. We were happy that we'd donned pants and sweaters.

As with all of our experiences up to that point, we found the people of Costa Rica to be warm and friendly. Granted, we were spending the bulk of our time in tourist areas, but as any seasoned traveller will admit — this offers no guarantee of hospitality.

Most Costa Ricans we met spoke fluent English. While they appreciated my efforts

to practice my limited Spanish vocabulary, the best response came when I uttered their favourite phrase, 'pura vida'. As a local explained, "It means hello, how are you, life is good, everything is awesome, anything good!" In other words, few rules dictate when or how to use it. So, I used the phrase liberally. Always with great results.

It was time to amp up the adventure when we headed into the Costa Rica Atlantic rainforest tour inside a private reserve within the Braulio Carrillo National Park. We were paired with two sisters from Texas. Patty, 56, and Sharon, 57, were empty nesters travelling without their husbands for some girl bonding time. Not to be outdone by any youngsters (my sister and I being in our 40s), they were as gung-ho as anyone about zip lining over the rainforest canopy.

Others we met were less enthused. "We are on the wuss tour," replied one older gentleman in a group of grey-haired tourists, when asked who else was zip lining. A key feature of the Costa Rican vacation is that the spectrum of experiences range from "wuss" to anxiety-producing. Travellers are welcome to settle anywhere along that continuum.

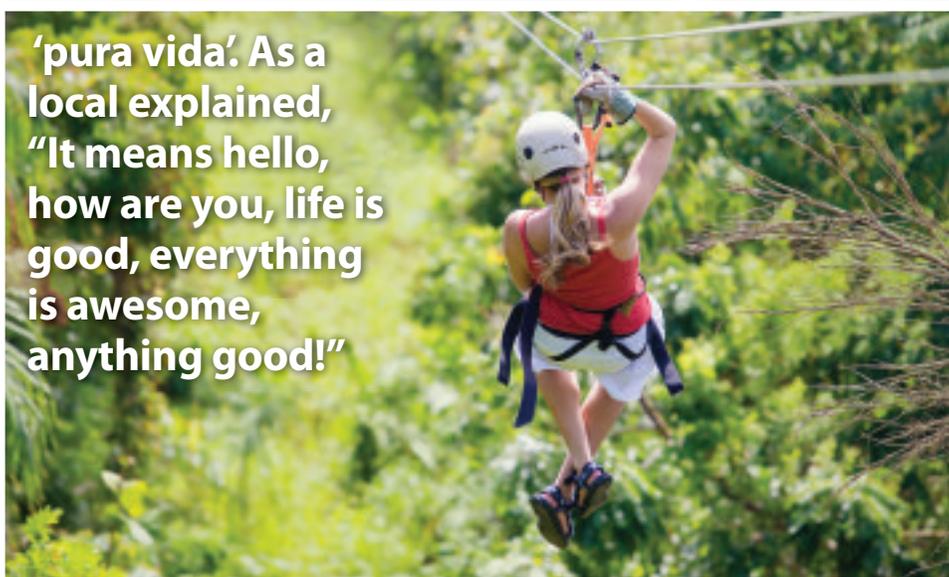
Our zip line guides were fantastic. Patient, humorous and safety-focused, they helped each of us overcome fears and enjoy the experience of flying across the sky over a canopy of trees. In the final zip line, dubbed "adrena-line", which takes more than a minute to cross, we were warned that half of all participants didn't make it all the way across. For me, the thought of halting halfway across a line that dangles several hundred feet above ground, struck a chord of primal fear. Under the guide's careful instruction on how to zip "cannonball-style", I and every one else made it across with ease.

After zip lining, we enjoyed a guided walk through the rainforest. True to its name, rain poured down on us. In fact, due to the country's varied landscape, travellers should beware that rain is not uncommon. As Canadians, we tend to prefer southern destinations that bleed sunlight from dawn to dusk, but a visit to Costa Rica can often include a range of weather. In other words, pack a sweater and pants for evening and rain poncho for daytime. Just in case.

Despite the rain, we were rewarded with



Tour guides at Café Britt coffee plantation.



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spottings of a toucan, sloth and a walking stick insect that looked like moss. The tour concluded with a relaxing 60-minute tram ride above the rainforest where the pitter patter of rain almost lulled us to sleep — the one true indicator of our age, perhaps.

With one full day remaining in Costa Rica, we hit the beach. Skipping the hotel-arranged excursions, we opted to drive to surfer's paradise, Playa Hermosa. Fortunately, we knew a local Costa Rican who offered to drive us.

Hermosa was almost empty when we arrived, making it feel like our private beach. True to its reputation as a surfer's haven, there were plenty of waves just the right height for jumping. If anyone thinks you need kids around to play in the water, they're mistaken. We jumped waves for an hour (admittedly, kids would last much longer.)

The most defining feature of Hermosa is

its dark grey sand. Even in our flip flops, the sand burned our feet as we walked across it. Anyone with sensitive feet may want to pack closed toe shoes for this outing.

A short drive from Hermosa is Jako (pronounced Hawko), a bustling beach town. Its main drag is lined with restaurants, cafes, souvenir shops and hotels. When we were there, the street was teeming with people and cruising motorists. Known for its party atmosphere, Jako has a gritty feel to it and may not be everybody's cup of tea once the sun goes down.

We stayed until late afternoon, enjoying a margarita and some fried plantains at one of the breezy restaurants. We followed that with a stroll along the street to window shop and pick up some overpriced souvenirs for the kids we left at home. It was a small price to pay for a little pura vida. [en](#)