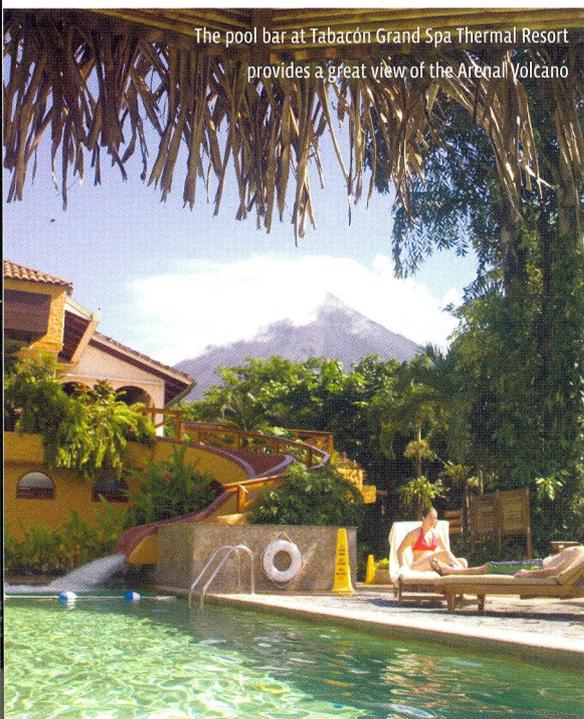


Costa Rica's Five Must-Have Experiences

Costa Rica has it all — beautiful beaches, tropical gardens, active volcanoes, and rainforests bursting with exotic plants and animals. It's hard to know where to start exploring this eco-friendly nation, where more than 26 percent of the land is preserved in national parks and biological preserves, and hard to say “adios” to its peace-loving people.



Pockets of tropical gardens at Tabacón give the natural hot pools a sense of privacy



The pool bar at Tabacón Grand Spa Thermal Resort provides a great view of the Arenal Volcano

Zooming On A Zip Line

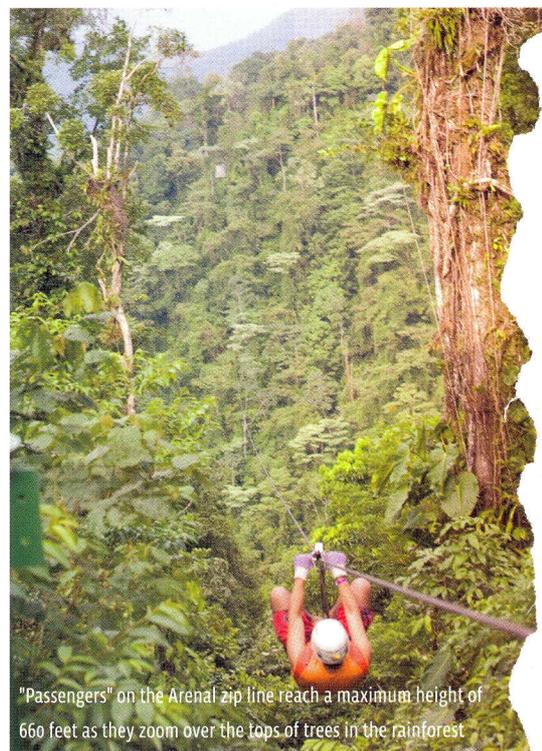
“How was the view?” someone asked me at dinner, and I honestly couldn't describe it. There's something about hanging from a cable 600 feet off the ground that's a little distracting. At Arenal, a system of zip lines stretch across 1.7 miles between forest-clad ridgelines in the vicinity of the famous volcano. “Passengers,” clipped to steel lines, travel at speeds of up to 40 mph, which renders the rainforest a blur of lush green vegetation. After one section, my husband described the volcano tossing red-hot rocks (the lava isn't liquid like Hawaii), but I was only brave enough to sneak a peek at a birds-eye view of Arenal Lake. Mostly I just focused on the speed and the height and the thrill of it all so that I could remember the experience forever.

(www.skyadventures.travel)

Indulging At Tabacón

After the zip line, we submerged our adrenalin-pumped bodies in the hot springs at Tabacón Grand Spa Thermal Resort. Located at the base of the Arenal Volcano, the natural waterfalls and river pools here are rich in beneficial minerals and surrounded by tropical rainforest. On this particular night, a full moon shone on the steam rising off the water. The best volcano view in the resort is from the swim-up bar in one of the manmade pools that complement the natural springs — a great spot for a celebratory drink.

The spring water made my skin feel baby soft, and it only got



“Passengers” on the Arenal zip line reach a maximum height of 660 feet as they zoom over the tops of trees in the rainforest

better when I treated myself to an aromatherapy massage in Tabacón's Grand Spa. All treatments take place in open-air bungalows surrounded by running water and rainforest sounds. Afterwards I savored the experience in the well-appointed resting area — the best I've ever seen in any spa. (www.tabacon.com)

Hiking In Manuel Antonio

Because we stayed at Arenas del Mar, on the edge of Manuel Antonio National Park, we were able to explore the area with the resort's terrific naturalist guide. In just over six hours, Paolo showed us red-winged grass hoppers — insects the size of birds that make great monkey meals; two types of colorful Haleconias — from which hummingbirds extract nectar; and a pair of alpha male

white-faced monkeys vying for dominance. We also saw orange crabs, three-toed sloths, raccoons, and black iguanas. Paolo guided us to Manuel Antonio's best beaches — ranging from petite Gemelas surrounded by lava rocks to the popular Espadillo South — and got us to the local flea market just before it closed. It was a perfectly wonderful day.

Back at Arenas del Mar, we relaxed on the private shoreline and enjoyed our beautiful Ocean Breeze suite, complete with a Jacuzzi on a large beach-view balcony, a king bedroom, separate sitting area, and two bathrooms. Monkeys and iguanas often appear in the thriving green



Guests at Arenas del Mar resort enjoy a beautiful view of Playa Espadilla and Playitas Beach

environment of the resort. (www.arenasdelmar.com)

Traveling With Locals

Having heard horror stories from fellow travelers who had opted to drive themselves around Costa Rica (lack of signage being the worst problem), my husband and I opted to leave the driving to the pros at Costa Rica Expeditions. Founded by Michael Kaye in 1978, this ecotourism company is hands-down the most experienced and reliable in the country and has received numerous awards from *Travel + Leisure*, *National Geographic Traveler*, and others.

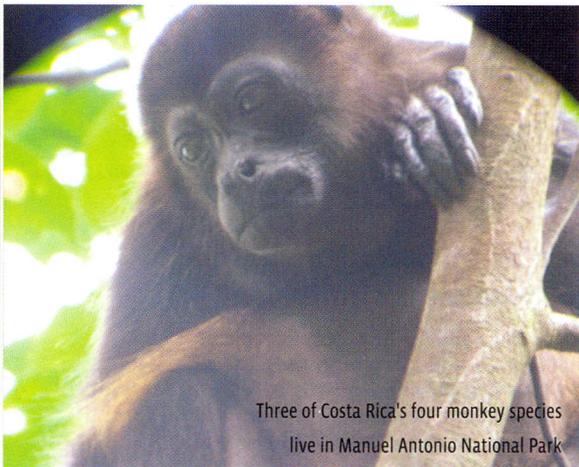
With Costa Rica Expeditions, we stopped for lunch at roadside restaurants and enjoyed authentic local food while learning more about the country from our naturalist guide and driver.

At one point, I expressed an interest in visiting a primary school, and soon found myself in a classroom meeting students and

their teacher. En route from Monteverde to Arenas del Mar, my husband got some great photos because guide William Granados took us to a private home with an outstanding view. (www.costaricaexpeditions.com)

Marveling At The Gardens

It's almost impossible to describe the colorful plant life in Costa Rica. Vivid red *Justica* towers over the roadside, along with myriad other tropical plants. In fact, the whole country feels like one huge botanical garden. All of the lodging options described in the "If You Go — Places To Stay" sidebar on www.ranchandcoast.com offer substantial gardens, but none are more impressive than those at Xandari Resort. Here, you will find beds bursting with red torch ginger, bromeliads, *Haleconia*, *Clivia*, *Brunfelsia*, flowering ginger, banana palms, and much more. An orchid house, orchards, and a four-kilometer walking trail leading to five waterfalls are other reasons why Costa Rica's gardens are a must-have experience. ELIZABETH HANSEN



Three of Costa Rica's four monkey species live in Manuel Antonio National Park



Xandari Resort near San Jose is home to the most outstanding tropical gardens we saw in Costa Rica