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Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge review

Eco-friendly adventure, massage and yoga in Costa Rica

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The Quick Read: Accessible only by boat, Playa Nicuesa is an eco lodge set in a 165-acre private reserve in Costa Rica’s Golfo Dulce region, bordered by ocean and rainforest that leads onto a national park. The location is paradisiacal – an emerald coast with jade water in which dolphins play and turtles dive. It’s one of the most biologically diverse places in the world, with lush forestry, humongous leaves, three types of monkeys, iguanas, sloths, toucans – it’s like the Oscars for wildlife. There’s yoga and massage, but really you come for the wildlife. It’s perfect for hiking, snorkeling, fishing and jungle kayaking expeditions – though you can just meditate in a hammock. With a carbon footprint so small it’s almost a paw mark, the lodge has 5 leaves – the highest award for sustainability in tourism – but deserves an entire tree.

££



If you want to disappear into the jungle, this is the place for you

it definitely is.

Who it’s best for: Anyone who wants to switch off (literally) and get back to nature and a real eco-life, plus families with eco-keen children (over age 6). It’s not necessarily where you’d go to develop your yoga practice – unless you pick one of their dedicated yoga retreats with care. If you balk at communal meals and the risk of scorpions in your shoes, it’s not for you. But if you’re keen on adventure, are a bit of an eco-warrior or even mildly concerned about the planet,

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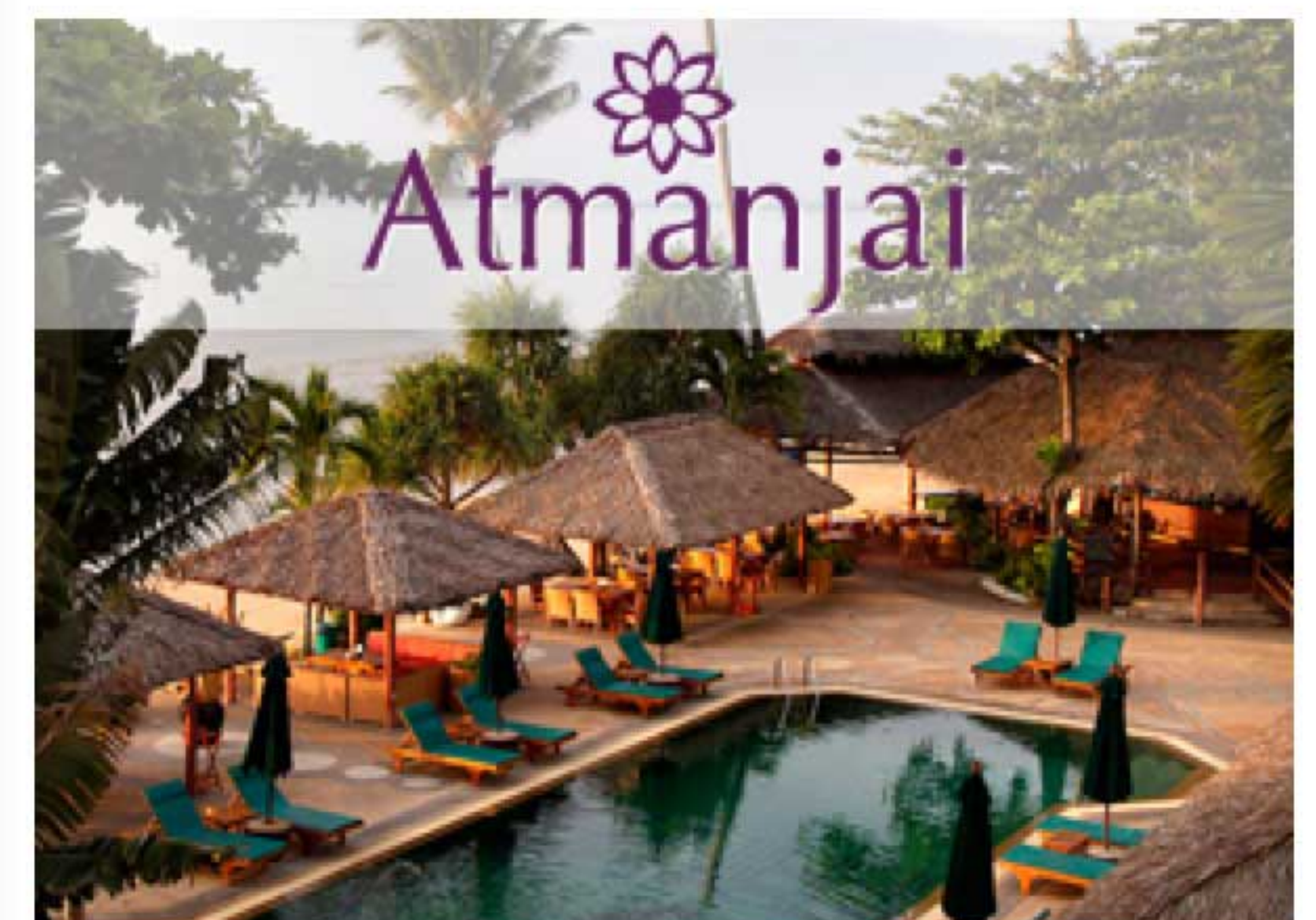
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Charles Eisenstein



Atmanjai
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What you can do: Activities (mostly at additional cost) and the environment (free) are the stand-outs here – whether it's self-guided jungle trails, horseback riding or heading into the jungle to spy crocodiles and boa constrictors with one of the knowledgeable guides. The boat and kayaking expedition, into the rivers that run off the mangrove and rainforest, is beyond-the-beyond.

There are also night hikes by torchlight to search for kinkajous, snakes, spiders and jungle cats. The sustainability tour is an eye-opener to the ways of dedicated eco living.

Nicuesa runs two yoga classes a day – morning and afternoon. They vary enormously. Depending on when you visit, your yoga teacher may only have just finished training – or may have decades of experience and be able to do every sort of yoga standing on their head. Classes are designed by the teacher based on their training, certification and yogic influence. It's possibly the only place in the world where a yoga class stops to watch a wild coati (pointy-nosed and long-tailed mammals).

The 'spa' offering consists of various types of massage. There isn't a dedicated spa space – you get massaged on the yoga deck. As with the yoga, the therapist (and therapies) changes with the seasons.

Whatever you do, you'll also find yourself taking lots of showers. And then taking another shower. And another. Because it's so humid.



Arrive gently, by boat



The (wifi free – gasp) bedrooms

Where you stay: The lodge used to be a cacao plantation but now it grows banana, papaya, watermelon, pineapple, oranges, starfruit, guava and other exotic tropical fruits. There are five private cabins of varying sizes and a separate four room guest house – all constructed from naturally fallen trees with hardwood floors and mozzie nets canopied over queen-sized four-posters.

The cabins have wooden louvre doors, tree trunks holding up the roof, branches for towel rails and wood-effect fans. The doors don't have locks and, instead of a safe, there's an old-fashioned wooden treasure chest. Clothes are placed in a plastic box to stop them getting damp; but unfortunately the bed

and sheets can't be treated similarly. Towels are rolled into cotton origami and laced with bougainvillea.

Each cabin has a private terrace on which to loll in a hammock watching a hummingbird fluttering over flowers. Plus a delicious private hot water (solar-powered) open-air shower with a view of the rain forest.

The main lodge is like a ginormous tree house on two floors. Its roof is part recycled plastic roofing (it looks like tiles) and partly thatch roofing. Built from 19 different types of wood from certified plantations (from almond to teak), there's wooden furniture, a hammock on the upper floor and a bar under a thatch roof in which to take fresh cocktails and eat appetisers. Plus there's a library of recycled books and a shelf with animals' bones and jars of snakes.



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How was it for us: My teenage daughter and I reached Playa Nicuesa from the capital St Jose in Tintin's 12-seater plane courtesy of SANSA (fliers have to be weighed along with their luggage) before a 30-minute boat trip.

The only sounds were those of the crickets and the monkeys. With no TV, no radio, no generator whirring and no cell phone connection (there is wifi but only in the lodge), this was detox heaven

but teenager hell (my daughter was unimpressed by the lack of wifi in her room). It's owned by an American couple and that slight American vibe comes through in the disclaimers to be signed before activities. There's a gentle humour too (under 'self-guided activities' comes: 'world-class hammock swinging'.)

The yoga didn't do it for me – the teacher was too inexperienced – but I liked the fact that it became Bikram-esque simply by virtue of the climate! I had an excellent Swedish massage with Alejandra Montoya. She can also do hot stone (though cool stone would be more enticing in these parts) and Thai – plus a touch of shiatsu and Rolfing.

Massaging takes place in the yoga deck which is open sided. If you hear a rustling, it'll only be a curious coati.

I was won over by my alarm clock (howler monkeys and birdsong) and all the sounds, sights and smells of the jungle. Not to mention swimming with plankton at night – so that the Pacific lights up around your body – and snorkelling with tropical fish during the day.



Caroline and her daughter, cut off from the Cloud



The 'al fresco temple' of the rainforest

We kayaked on the rivers that run off the rainforest, finally stopping in a clearing as the sun filtered through, and listening to the screechings and twitterings of the forest. Conservationist Manfredo treats this al fresco temple with reverence – he asked us to sit in silence for a few minutes to consider whether this wondrous place is somewhere worth keeping for future generations.

I was impressed by their sustainability – from the mountain-filtered water to the solar-powered electricity. From how they divided the trash into six sections – including separate piles for aluminium and steel tin cans – to asking guests to take off their shoes in order to save on wood and cleaning products. There's an option to learn about the edible garden – how to open a coconut and juice a sugar cane – and then make, say, mango salsa.

There are lots of interesting recycled library books (a tad mouldy from the humidity) but the eco lights are too dim to read under after dusk and the clip-on reading lights attract the insects.

I wasn't mad about needing to shake my shoes for scorpions. But I *was* crazy about taking showers with Nicuesa's home-made mango papaya bodywash and banana conditioner. The simplicity of life with little technology was beguiling but, above all, I was seriously smitten with the lush forest and its inhabitants.

What we took home: I was really switched onto eco sustainability by the staff's passion.

Would we go back: Yes, if they invent an ecologically-sound dehumidifier (humidity runs here at 90 percent) so that I'm not wetter before my shower than after. And if the midges and mosquitoes would consider taking a holiday when I'm there. But as far as nature goes, it has it with bells on.

People watch: There are lots of enthusiastic and ecologically keen staff – average age 25 – who get super-excited about anteaters and the sound of whales. But Alejandra gets the thumbs up for her massages – she has magic hands and is very intuitive.

Food watch: They offer hearty portions of good, wholesome tropical-Latino food – a veg and non-veg option – with an awareness of guests' allergies. There's also a children's menu.



Gather in the lodge to swap stories over boca

Breakfast is a buffet with fruit platters, granola, freshly baked bread or tortillas, juices, coffee and tea plus a 'breakfast of the day' (omelettes, sweet plantains, pancakes). For lunch, think big salads, yucca and cheese melt, quesadillas, home-baked coconut bread.

Boca (a Costa Rican snack such as guacamole and chips or ceviche) is served at the bar before dinner – when people tend to gather to exchange tales of their day's adventures while sipping a (real deal) pina colada or a delicious mocktail. Dinner could be freshly-caught fish cooked in coconut followed by pineapple pie.

You choose your lunch at breakfast and your dinner option at lunch. Some of the food has zero miles (they grow most of their own fruit, herbs and spices). Some is organic and it's all locally sourced. Communal tables mean you'll be sitting down with others at dinner, though at other meals diners flit in and out. You won't get better fresh fruit juices anywhere. Mango and passion fruit is a particular favourite; but who'd turn down fresh watermelon juice?

👑 **What's queenly:** The breathtaking beauty of the environment. That there are enough wild animals to open a zoo and enough hikes and trails to keep David Attenborough happy. Also, a guest comment questionnaire that allows the respondent to tick 'yuck' as an answer.

What's lowly: The yoga was more of an exercise class with the focus firmly on glutes and stretching rather than chakras or pranayama.



Don't think you can just stroll off a plane to reach this jungle haven

Insider tip: It's difficult to reach, so schedule an overnight stay in the capital San Jose en route. Then you'll be refreshed for the plane/taxi/boat trip.

Price with a companion: From \$450 (£290) for two people sharing a room per night during high season including accommodation, meals and snacks, taxi or boat transfer and use of kayaks, snorkelling and fishing equipment.

Price per person going solo: From \$280 (£180) per person per night during

high season including accommodation, meals and snacks, taxi or boat transfer and use of kayaks, snorkelling and fishing equipment.

Value for money: You never feel cheated here. Activities are reasonably priced – from \$25-100 (£16-65); yoga comes in at \$15 (£10) for a group session and massage is \$75 (£50) for 50 minutes.

Reviewed by **Caroline Phillips**