

# Into the WILD

From cascading waterfalls to slumbering sloths; Lizzie Pook enjoys relaxation and exhilaration in the Costa Rican rainforest

Arenal Volcano

The fireflies dancing in the air above the private Jacuzzi look like tiny clusters of stars. I'm on the balcony of my chic mountainside cabin in Costa Rica's misty Central Valley – there's champagne, there's a hot tub and there is one of the most spectacular views I've ever seen. It would probably be the most romantic thing in the world apart from the fact that I've been soaking up that view for so long I'm getting gradually pinker by the minute like a lobster in a cooking pot.

I'm staying at El Silencio Lodge & Spa, which is fast turning out to be one of the most calming and luxurious places I have ever visited. The remote eco-lodge is set amid 500 acres of lush cloud forest, filled with waterfalls, exotic birds and plenty of other wildlife, such as wild cats, monkeys and sloths.

It's nothing short of idyllic – all babbling brooks, yoga decks and dewy mountain air. And, if the dinner I've just wolfed down is anything to go by, you can expect some pretty fantastic food alongside your storybook

surroundings. Produce is farmed on site (there's a trout farm, the chef keeps 40 hens for eggs and he even makes his own cheese) and honeymooners can also opt for a private dining experience – where you'll be treated to the finest Costa Rican fare with only the murmurings of the rainforest for company.

## WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

Although I'd happily spend the entire trip on my balcony (I'm interspersing Jacuzzi time with kicking back in my rocking chair), there are plenty of eco adventures on offer, such as waterfall hiking, zip-lining and river rafting. But it's not all about the high-adrenaline pursuits. The next morning, we rise early and set off on a birdwatching tour with our guide, Benicio. Sheltered by the rainforest canopy we tick woodcreepers, warblers and

hummingbirds off our lists, and when we dip our toes in a nearby waterfall, we hear the unmistakable call of eagles hunting overhead. The



El Silencio Lodge & Spa



Manuel Antonio National Park



El Silencio Lodge & Spa



The yoga deck at El Silencio Lodge & Spa

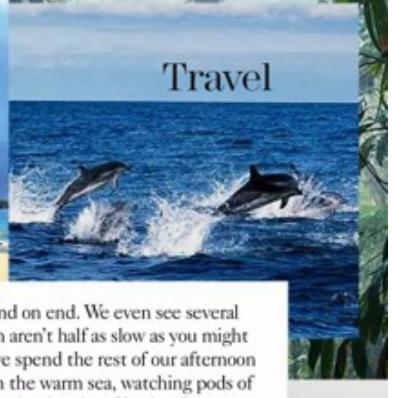


PHOTOGRAPHS BY GETTY IMAGES



Manuel Antonio National Park

Capuchin monkeys



my neck stand on end. We even see several sloths, which aren't half as slow as you might think, and we spend the rest of our afternoon swimming in the warm sea, watching pods of dolphins cartwheel and surf in the distance.

On our way back to the airport, sandy, satisfied and sun-kissed (OK, a little bit sunburnt), our driver suddenly pulls off the road. "Go and have a look over the bridge," he says, with a wry smile. I hop out and peer over the edge.

Below, 15 stupendously huge crocodiles bask in the mud next to the river. I can't quite believe it. I squeal and yank my camera out of my bag, snapping away with excitement. There's no doubt about it, Costa Rica is a wildlife-lover's dream. But it's also one of the most peaceful, relaxing and beautiful places I have ever visited. Something tells me I'll be back.

David-Attenborough-worthy bonanza is all topped off when a rustling of leaves above us signals the arrival of a wiry spider monkey with a tiny baby clutched to its back, gliding between trees and scampering down trunks with long, stringy limbs.

Back at the lodge, it's breakfast time, so we order a round of Eggs in a Saddle (poached eggs, salsa and corn tortillas) before our next activity – a brisk hack around the lodge's mountain trails. Confession: I've never ridden a horse before, so the instructor introduces me to Pinto, a small but beautifully formed brown and white mare. "Excellent," I think. "This is going to be so relaxing." But, as the group canters ahead, gallantly crossing streams and galloping across fields, Pinto literally refuses to budge. She trudges forwards occasionally, when she feels like it, snaffling leaves, apples and blackberries from the nearby bushes. At least I can console myself with the breathtaking mountain views...



his-and-hers vanity stations and beautiful stained glass windows. Outside, there's an inviting al fresco shower (shampoo with a side of hummingbird anyone?), a beautiful volcano-view decking area, comfy hammock and infinity pool. Guests can choose to have their breakfast on their decking area in the morning, if they like, or even get champagne delivered as the sun goes down – the perfect excuse for an al fresco nightcap.

I'm reluctant to leave my room; not only because it is painfully beautiful, but also because our activity for the afternoon involves submitting myself to the kind of G-force normally reserved for NASA astronauts. We're zip-lining, and I'm absolutely terrified. But once I'm there, harnessed up and clipped onto a wire that seems sturdy enough, I'm determined to make the most of what must be one of the most exhilarating views you're ever likely to clap eyes on. As I launch myself off the platform, 200 metres above the rainforest floor – with an eagle's eye view of monkeys ferreting about in the canopy below – a vast scene unwraps around me: forest for as far as the eye can see, an azure lake spilling across the horizon and Arenal Volcano presiding grandly over the scene. I don't think I've ever experienced such a rush. I am officially hooked.

**TAKE A BREAK**

That afternoon – with a saddle-sore backside in need of some TLC – I head to the on-site spa, hidden deep in jungle surroundings. I opt for the Herbal Dream massage, a relaxing aromatherapy treatment that promises to send me to sleep within minutes. Given the spa's floor-to-ceiling windows and huge skylight, the treatment takes place to a soundtrack of soothing tropical rain and thunder, which rumbles round the valley like a huge bowling ball. Sheer bliss.

The next stop on our trip is the award-winning Nayara hotel, which sits in the shadow of the mist-topped (and thankfully dormant) Arenal Volcano. The hotel grounds are strewn with flowers, giving the air a heady summery scent, and the villas are some of the most exquisite I've ever seen. Lofty and bamboo-thatched, they each have a huge four-poster bed, luxurious double showers, expansive



**GO THERE**

Rainbow Tours offers a seven-night tour of Costa Rica visiting San José, the Central Valley, Arenal Volcano and Manuel Antonio National Park from £1985 per person. This price includes direct flights with British Airways from Gatwick Airport, accommodation on a B&B basis, transfers and selected excursions, [rainbowtours.co.uk](http://rainbowtours.co.uk); [arenalnayara.com](http://arenalnayara.com); [elsilenciolodge.com](http://elsilenciolodge.com)

**THE GOOD LIFE**

Our last port of call is Manuel Antonio National Park – a stunning blend of rugged rainforest, murky mangrove swamp, white sand beaches and sprawling coral reefs. This is where Costa Rica's wildlife really impresses. On our afternoon stroll we see raccoons, black squirrels and capuchin monkeys. When a group of howler monkeys passes high above us, whooping and calling, the hairs on the back of



Nayara

