

# Costa Rica: The place to surf, or learn to

## Surf's up: Costa Rica a divine spot for even the mildly adventurous

May 22, 2012|By Eric Vohr, Special to Tribune Newspapers

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(Michaela Urban photo)

From Pavones, one of the longest left-hand waves in the world, to Witches Rock, a 12-foot-high, 300-yard-long wave featured in "Endless Summer," Costa Rica has some of the best surfing known to humanity.

And if none of that registers with you, don't worry.

Because while this surf mecca attracts the world's best, it's also great for beginners. My travel partner had never picked up a surfboard in her life. By the end of the vacation, she was ripping it up. So, if you're curious about surfing and looking for a vacation that's part adventure, part exercise and all relaxation, buy a round-trip ticket to San Jose, rent a four-wheel drive with a roof rack and tour Costa Rica's west coast.

My main advice is travel during the dry season (mid-December to mid-May) and don't worry about trying to find the "best" spot. There's plenty of beautiful beach and surf to go around. Here's a quick hit on my favorite locales.

### **Montezuma**

Montezuma is not a great surf destination, but it's a great place to start your adventure.

A five-hour drive from San Jose, Montezuma will wash off the stress and dust of travel and settle you into the beach mentality that Costa Rica locals call *pura vida*. Home to some of the most exotic beachside restaurants, bars and night life in Costa Rica, this artist-commune hamlet is known for its healing arts and yoga communities, eco-tourism lodges and canopy tours. It also hosts the annual Costa Rica International Film Festival, which attracts top filmmakers and talent from around the globe.

Hotels range from \$10 a night for a dorm bed and a shared bathroom at the clean and eclectic Hotel Lucy, right on the waterfront, to \$300 a night at Ylang Ylang, which offers secluded romantic private beachside

bungalows, a pool, a spa and daily yoga classes. Cheap eats are found at the Bakery Cafe (one of our favorite breakfast spots), or enjoy an upscale romantic meal at Playa De Los Artistas right on the beach. The cuisine is Mediterranean, and the ingredients are always fresh.

### **Mal Pais**

Many towns in Costa Rica are known for surfing, but Mal Pais is one of the few that is quintessentially surf. It's also a favorite spot for celebrities. Forbes Magazine calls this place one of the 10 most beautiful beaches in the world. But in spite of the stardust, Mal Pais is a laid-back, noncommercial getaway that delivers great surf.

If you've never been on a surfboard, take a lesson (all the schools in Mal Pais are good). Once you get the basics, rent the longest board you can find — there are surf board rental shops all over town — and ask the locals to send you to a beach with waves of about 2 to 3 feet.

Lodging prices in Mal Pais are the same as you'll find in most beach towns in Costa Rica. If you want to go cheap, you can find cheap. If you want to spend money, you can do that too. But don't rely too heavily on your guidebook. Ask the locals if they can recommend a good spot; it's all part of the adventure. On our trip, we didn't book anything in advance, nor did we stay in hotels. We just asked locals if they knew a good place to stay, and we consistently found fantastic private bungalows that were affordable and almost always on the beach.

### **Nosara**

In contrast to the earthy surfing mecca of Mal Pais and the hippy eccentricity of Montezuma, Nosara is the oldest expatriate community in Costa Rica. And in spite of its dirt roads and rustic feel, it attracts visitors from all walks of life.

And it's no wonder, because this spot has a lot to offer. The Nosara Yoga Institute is top-notch professional career yoga training center known throughout the world. Similarly, the Ostional Wildlife Refuge is famous for its olive ridley and leatherback sea turtle populations. And, of course, there is fantastic surf plus great surf rental shops and surf schools. In fact, many consider Nosara to be one of the best places to learn. (The smaller waves are easier to ride than at other beaches.)

Like most Costa Rican beach spots, there are numerous restaurants and hotels ranging from cheap to expensive. We met a British surfer along a road who found us a two-bedroom house with a kitchen and pool overlooking the rain forest for \$30 a night. It even had a grill, which we used to cook up freshly caught lobster tails we picked up from a fisherman on the drive up.

### **Cabo Matapalo**

For us, the most magical beach town in Costa Rica is Cabo Matapalo. Near the Panama border at the outermost point of the Osa peninsula, it's a remote paradise far off the tourist path. If you want to see wildlife, this is the place. Howler monkeys shook the jungle with their booming calls, while flocks of red blue, green and yellow macaws sailed from tree to tree like crows, and spider monkeys regularly watched us doing dishes. Of course, we could have skipped the jumbo crayfish that occasionally nipped at our toes in the stunning crystal blue waterfalls in Corcovado National Park.

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Cabo Matapalo is the only place where we suggest you book a place in advance. There are no hotels, and most of the bungalows were full when we arrived. In fact we were scrambling as the sun was setting, wondering if we were going to have to sleep in the car. That being said, we did manage to find one of the most beautiful places to stay on our whole trip, though I think pretty much anywhere you stay in Cabo Matapalo is awesome. Prices are a little higher here, starting at about \$100 a night, but it is well worth it.

There are few sure things in life, but Costa Rica is one of them. I've been there many times and plan to keep going. This is not an expensive trip; and for what it delivers, it's a winner. And please don't sign up for one of those all-inclusive safe resort packages: You'll never experience the glory. Go wild, rent a car, rent a board, paddle out, learn as you go and discover the pura vida that is Costa Rica. Who knows, it might change your life. It changes mine every time I go.

### **If you go**

**Montezuma:** low end, Hotel Lucy (phone 011-506-2642- 0273, [hostelz.com/hostel/125438-hotel-lucy](http://hostelz.com/hostel/125438-hotel-lucy)); high end, Ylang Ylang (888-795-8494, [ylangylangbeachresort.com](http://ylangylangbeachresort.com))

Eating: low end, Bakery Cafe (011-506-2642-0458); high end, Playa De Los Artistas (011-506-2642-0920, [playamontezuma.net/playadelosartistas.htm](http://playamontezuma.net/playadelosartistas.htm))

**Mal Pais:** low end, Mal Pais Surf Camp and Resort (011-506-2640-0061, [malpaissurfcamp.com](http://malpaissurfcamp.com)); high end, Beija Flor (011-506-2640-1007, [beijaflorresort.com](http://beijaflorresort.com));

Eating: low end, Umi Sushi (011-506-2640-0968); high end, Mary's Restaurant (011-506-2640-0153, [maryscostarica.com/main.html](http://maryscostarica.com/main.html))

**Nosara:** low end, Rancho Congo (011-506-2682-0078, [nicoyapeninsula.com/vacationrentals/nosara-congo](http://nicoyapeninsula.com/vacationrentals/nosara-congo)); high end, Harmony Hotel (011-506-2682-4114, [harmonynosara.com/en/index.html](http://harmonynosara.com/en/index.html))

Eating: low end, Beach Dog Cafe ([tinyurl.com/cy8ken8](http://tinyurl.com/cy8ken8)); high end, La Luna (011-506-2682-0112, [tinyurl.com/cm4t3h](http://tinyurl.com/cm4t3h))

**Cabo Matapalo:** all high end, Tucan Terra ([tucanterra.com/tucan.html](http://tucanterra.com/tucan.html)); Lapa Rios ([tinyurl.com/cbb8zdd](http://tinyurl.com/cbb8zdd))

Eating: Buena Esperanza Bar ([tinyurl.com/dxlnjes](http://tinyurl.com/dxlnjes))