

GETAWAY

## Costa Rica

Be worlds away by lunchtime

by STEVE FENNESSY



Above: Playa Virador; below: Iguanas everywhere!; Four Seasons Resort at Peninsula Papagayo



YOU KNOW THOSE “MOMENTS” that the travel industry promises if you just hop on a plane and get to an exotic beach? Those moments of existential bliss, of zen-like relaxation, possible (we’re ~~so~~ told) only by traveling great distances and coughing up great gouts of cash?

I don’t have those moments. At least I didn’t until one rainy afternoon on the west coast of Costa Rica, two days into a getaway at the Four Seasons Resort at Peninsula Papagayo ([fourseasons.com/costarica](http://fourseasons.com/costarica)).

As its name suggests, the property’s forty-five acres are situated on a point of land that juts into the sea, with the Pacific on one side and a sheltered bay—Bahia Culebra—on the other. This has some serious hedonistic implications, most notably two beaches, one facing southeast, the other nestled in a cove that faces northwest. So the decision here isn’t pool or beach, it’s which pool (there are four) or which beach? We tended to wind up on Playa Virador, the quieter, more picturesque side. (Want an even more secluded beach? Scale the boulders at the western point of Playa Virador for a remote, hundred-yard stretch visible only to passing boats.) Playa Blanca, a three-minute walk across the peninsula’s isthmus—past the pools and lounge chairs situated under cooling misters—is more suited to activities: kayaking, volleyball, and chasing the sand crabs that seem to be everywhere. This is also where, three times a week, the resort chefs display the day’s catch, and you can select that night’s entree.

One evening we hopped in a kayak and paddled out a few hundred yards from the shores of Playa Blanca to watch the sun set into the ocean. Another memorable night we sat at the chef’s table in the kitchen of Di Mare, one of the resort’s five restaurants. Santiago Lanza, the affable chef, described each dish, from the compressed cantaloupe to the cherry tomato risotto to an orgiastic platter of scallops, lobster, grouper, prawns, and tuna, all surrounded by roasted vegetables. It didn’t hurt that he kept our glasses filled with a Chilean Sauvignon Blanc.

The Four Seasons resort is in the northwest corner of Guanacaste, one



BEACH: DON RIDDLE; IGUANAS: STEVE FENNESSY; ROOM: DANA KLEIN

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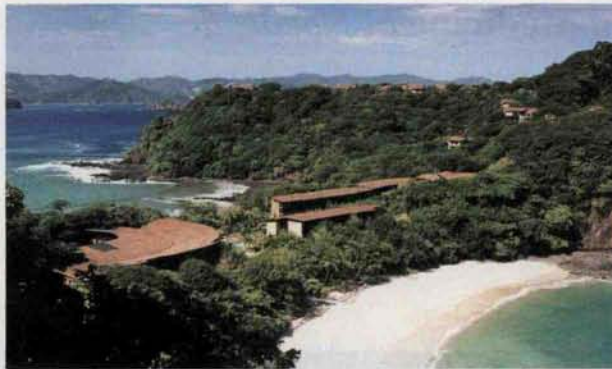
of the country's seven provinces and home to one of the world's most threatened habitats: the tropical dry forest. "Dry" is a bit of a misnomer, given the area's average annual rainfall of about fifty inches. But virtually none of that comes between December and April, when the trees lose their leaves, making it easy to spot the howler monkeys that swing from their branches.

When we visited in October, it rained for an hour or so every afternoon, just after lunch. Which brings me to my moment. The Four Seasons here is known almost as much for its opulent spa as its gasp-inducing views. After an hour-long "aromatherapy" massage, I discovered the hot and cold plunge pools on the secluded covered deck. From here nothing was visible but the trees and the ocean beyond, and the only sound was the rain soaking the jungle. You can have your beach. I'll take this moment any day.

**Why you should go:** The **FOUR SEASONS RESORT AT PENINSULA PAPAGAYO** is so easy to get to from Atlanta, you can leave your house in the morning for the four-hour Delta flight (\$872 round-trip) and, thanks to the two-hour time change and the thirty-minute drive from Liberia International Airport to the resort, be eating lunch beachside by 1 p.m. We stayed in the residence club, a short walk up the hill from the beach, where the bedrooms opened up onto views of the forest and sea.

**What to do:** We went **ZIP-LINING AT WITCH'S ROCK**, just fifteen minutes from the resort (\$80, [witchsrockcanopytour.com](http://witchsrockcanopytour.com)). With eleven cables—the longest a dizzying 1,500 feet long and hundreds of feet above the forest floor—it's not for the faint of heart. And pack your **GOLF clubs**. The resort's Arnold Palmer–designed course boasts wide fairways, elevated ocean views, the occasional snake, and roaming families of coati, a sort of cross between a raccoon and an anteater. Most impressive hole: No. 6, which drops 200 feet from tee to green (\$220 greens fees; \$155 after 2 p.m.).

**Side trips:** The Four Seasons can arrange any manner of expeditions, as far away as into Nicaragua. I opted for a six-hour getaway that included a guided boat tour up the Tempisque River within the nearby **PALO VERDE NATIONAL PARK**. Howler monkeys screeched at us from the trees, iguanas posed on overhangs, and at least one crocodile eyed us suspiciously from a riverbank (\$150, including lunch on the way back). ■



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