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posted: 1/29/2016 6:00 AM

Five-star pampering at Costa Rica's top resorts



Costa Rica's Arenal Volcano forms a backdrop for Nayara Springs, rated the nation's No. 1 resort by two travel magazines.

Courtesy of Nayara Springs



Guests at Nayara Springs and Nayara Hotel, Spa and Gardens enjoy hiking in Costa Rica's Arenal Volcano National Park.

Courtesy of Nayara Springs



Suites at Nayara Hotel, Spa and Gardens have a view of Arenal Volcano from the veranda.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



A footbridge in a tropical rain forest connects Costa Rica's top two resorts, Nayara Springs and Nayara Hotel, Spa and Gardens.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



Visitors to Arenal Volcano National Park often find the summit of the near perfect cone shrouded in clouds.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



Nayara Hotel, Spa and Gardens is set within 15 acres of tropical rain forest and gardens. The vegetation is so thick it forms a privacy screen around guest suites.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

By Katherine Rodeghier
Daily Herald Correspondent

The afternoon shower that lulled me to sleep has stopped and the clouds are lifting. Standing on the veranda of my suite, I watch hummingbirds flit over still-wet tropical foliage and gaze in amazement as Arenal Volcano slowly emerges from the mist, its nearly symmetrical shape black against the brightening sky.

The third most active volcano in the world, Arenal last erupted in 2010 but still simmers and occasionally groans. As I continue to gaze I notice a small cloud at the cone's summit stubbornly refusing to disperse. Then it hits me: That's no cloud, it's smoke.

Seeking adventure

A hot spot for adventure travel, Arenal Volcano National Park ranks among [Costa Rica's](#) most popular parks and preserves that cover a quarter of the country. Together they shelter 6 percent of the biodiversity in the world. Small wonder filmmakers chose this Central American nation as the setting for "Jurassic Park."

The rain forest surrounding Arenal makes a great place to experience the outdoors sans dinosaurs. You can zip line between trees, clamber across suspension bridges at the Arenal Hanging Bridges, horseback ride to the La Fortuna Waterfall, traverse the base of the volcano on all-terrain vehicles and navigate class III rapids of the Sarapiquí River.

Me? I'm content with a half-day hike in the national park, leaving me plenty of time for pampering at a pair of five-star resorts that consistently rank as Costa Rica's finest.

Earning top marks

Readers of Condé Nast Traveler magazine rated [Nayara Hotel, Spa and Gardens](#) the No. 1 resort in both Central and South America in 2013.

I see why.

My suite is so luxuriously appointed I barely persuade myself to leave it: indoor and outdoor showers, champagne in the mini-fridge, sheers draping a big, four-poster bed under a domed ceiling where an oversized fan gently stirs the air. Best of all, the wraparound veranda beckons with a hot tub, hammock, two chaise lounges and a marble-topped table for two.

The resort nestles among 15 acres of tropical gardens and rain forest, the foliage of palms, orchids and wild ginger so thick around my veranda I'm ensured privacy. At night with the windows open I feel I'm sleeping in a botanic garden, one with a volcano rising just beyond the trees.

Nayara surpassed itself when it opened sister resort [Nayara Springs](#) in 2013. It took the magazine's No. 1 spot in the 2015 rankings, pushing the older property to No. 2 in Central and South America. Rival magazine Travel & Leisure rated the new resort even higher, ranking it No. 1 not only in Latin America but No. 2 in the world.

I have the best of both worlds. A footbridge spans a ravine between the two properties giving guests the freedom to use the facilities of each. One exception: Nayara Springs is adults-only.

The Hotel, Spa and Gardens is bigger with 50 suites. The Springs has 16 villas with 19 more opening in 2016, each with a private plunge pool fed by natural mineral hot springs. In 2017, Nayara plans to open a luxury tented resort with 24, 945-square-foot tents each with en-suite bathroom, plunge pools and adjoining tent that can be a lounge or a second bedroom.

Spas on both the Springs and Spa and Gardens offer body treatments using local ingredients, such as coffee, aloe vera, chocolate clay and volcanic mud. I soak in one of the hot tubs tucked into palms next to the garden's koi pond and cool off with a dip in the pool before ordering a fruity cocktail from the swim-up bar.

Reaching for a culinary star

Estonian celebrity chef Jaak Toomsalu oversees dining at both resorts and has made it his personal goal to earn Costa Rica's first Michelin star.

Amor Loco specializes in Latin American fare. At Altamira, fresh seafood and organic meats spiced with the flavors of Peru, Mexico, Argentina and Costa Rica sizzle over open flames on grill nights. Sushi Amor adds a Latin touch to sushi and offers guests tastings of flavored vodkas from a dispensing machine. A similar machine dispenses samples of wine in the Nostalgia wine and tapas bar where a five-course wine pairing dinner is served to a handful of guests seated on its veranda.

Each restaurant pulls ingredients from the resorts' own organic garden, greenhouse and dairy farm.

Guests get in touch with their inner selves in complimentary yoga classes and with the outdoor world in free, twice weekly bird-watching tours on the resorts' grounds frequented by toucans and hummingbirds. There's also a resident sloth.

The resorts help guests book tours to the national park and nearby attractions. My husband and I go on our own, pointing our rental car down a rutted gravel road in Arenal Volcano National Park.

Exploring the park

We hike the Las Coladas Trail, a mostly flat path of sandy grit expelled from a volcanic explosion in 1968. Wax myrtles, heliconias and secondary growth trees line the way. Birds resembling wild turkeys or pheasants dart out of our path and we spot a herd of peccaries snorting piglike in the brush. The park, I've been told, has one of the world's highest concentrations of tropical plants and wildlife.

The trail suddenly turns steep and a rough staircase of black lava draws us upward. We clamber over volcanic boulders to a plateau. To the right we see Lake Arenal, to the left Arenal Volcano. Part of the Pacific Ring of Fire, it stands 5,358 feet, but we see only the base. As so often happens, clouds obscure its peak, disappointing visitors.

Jagged, black rocks, the detritus of a lava flow in 1992, meander toward the foot of the volcano before disappearing into the trees on its flanks. Signs with big yellow letters warn in Spanish and English: "Danger. Area of High Volcanic Activity. No Trespassing."

Message received. We turn around. It's starting to rain, anyway. Time to head back to the comfort of our suite and, perhaps, a nap.

Arenal, Costa Rica

Costa Rica Tourism Board: (866) 267-8274 or visitcostarica.com

Where to stay

Nayara Hotel, Spa & Gardens: from \$320 per night in February, arenalnayara.com

Nayara Springs: from \$650 per night in February, nayaraspings.com, (866) 311-1197

Rates at each property include breakfast, in-room Wi-Fi and telephone calls to the U.S. and Europe. Transportation can be arranged to airports in San Jose and Liberia, each about three hours away.

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