



# HUMAN NATURE

TEXT AND PHOTOS LINE TILLER

**You can be totally green yet still be a world class eco-tourist in Costa Rica. Du kan være helt grønn og likevel bli verdens beste økoturist i Costa Rica.**



**Totally Green.** The tree house community, Finca Bellavista, is one among a host of eco-destinations in Costa Rica. Here you can sleep 30 metres above the flowers, and find river friendly shampoo in the bathroom – also up in the trees.





**Not an easy hike:** Even though it sounds romantic to hike around in a "cloud forest," heavy showers and tricky mud slides might surprise you. For the Reddy's, a family from Boston, it did just that, around the mountain village La Fortuna. For six hours. This is the rain forest after all.



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**(1) Water for Americans.** We found Mark and Margareth Bleecker from Chicago, in the wedding suite. They weren't on their honeymoon. But they could not say no to a night in the wild, at Pacuare Lodge, where the water from the river runs through the house, and ends up in a pool, before it turns into a waterfall, and goes back to the river.

**(2) A shower with a view.** Eco-tourists, Erika and Jason Greenwood feel sorry for the tree trunk that goes through their shower when the soapy water hits the bark.

**T**HERE IS A REASON that pineapple tastes better in Costa Rica. There is a reason for people to live in this small, volcanic country between two milky white shores in peaceful coexistence with howler monkeys that sound eight times their size and weird lizards with shocking turquoise tails that have yet to make the fauna books. A quarter of Costa Rica is devoted to unspoiled national parks. Good eco-hotels and environmentally-friendly tour operators are designated by five leaves instead of five stars. The Central American country wants to be the world's first carbon neutral nation by 2021, a goal locals, politicians, and over two million tourists a year are all marching towards.

One small environmental footprint at a time. "This is a place where you drown in the rain forest and play in the creek, but drop the all-inclusive hotel bracelet. So those who pick Costa Rica are probably more adventurous than the average tourist. Or what do I know? I rarely leave the rainforest," says Matt Hogan, carpenter and founder of the Finca Bellavista sustainable treehouse community in a "secret place" in the south of the country.

On the way there, aboard a local bus down the west coast, coconut palms come into view, with the intense smells of recent grass fires, blueberry juice and saltwater wafting through open windows. Costa Rica is such a healthy part of

**D**ET ER EN GRUNN til at ananasen smaker bedre i Costa Rica. Det er en grunn til at folk i det lille vulkanlandet mellom to neiende melkehvite kyststriper lever fredelig side om side med brølaper – som høres åtte ganger så store ut som det de er – og små øgler med knallturkise haler som ennå ikke har nådd faunaleksikonet. En fjerdedel av Costa Rica består av urørte nasjonalparker. Dyktige økohotell og miljøvennlige turoperatører tildeles fem løvblad istedenfor fem stjerner, og det mellomamerikanske landet har som mål å bli verdens første karbonnøytrale nasjon innen 2021, noe både lokalfolk, politikere og over to millioner turister årlig hjelpes med å trække fram.

Et stadig mindre fotavtrykk om gangen. – Dette er et sted hvor man drukner i regnskog og leker i bekken, men dropper all-inclusive-hotell-armbåndet. Så de som velger Costa Rica er nok mer eventyrlystne enn den gjennomsnittlige turist. Eller, hva vet jeg, det er sjelden jeg forlater regnskogen, sier Matt Hogan, snekker og grunnlegger av det miljøvennlige trehyttesamfunnet Finca Bellavista på et «hemmelig sted» sør i landet.

Når man fraktes dit med lokalbussen, ned vestkysten, kokospalmer i sikte, slår en intens lukt av nyslukket gressbrann, blåbærsaft og havsalt inn gjennom vidåpne vinduer. Costa Rica er et så sunt stykke jordklode at økoturister kan





**Two stories of awesome.** Finca Bellavista offers eight different tree houses for rent. All with solar power and candles, none with power outlets. Miss Bios, is located next to a magnificent river, no neighbours, except monkeys and weird birds.

From time to time, of course, someone arrives in high heels pulling a wheeled suitcase.

MATT HOGAN



the planet that eco-tourists can find natural, eco-friendly shampoo in the hotel bathroom and puddle jump around the country with Nature Air, the world's only carbon neutral airline – with airport vehicles running on recycled cooking oil.

**IN 2006**, after a surfing holiday, Hogan and his wife Erica from the U.S. state of Colorado, sold everything they owned and anteed up a million dollars for two wild mountains, a pair of rushing rivers and an endless number of waterfalls. Now, they send tourists up into the trees.

“From time to time, of course, someone arrives in high heels pulling a wheeled suitcase,” says Hogan.

That's not how a nature holiday works. Electricity, from solar panels, is only available at a few outlets at base camp. And forget about updating Instagram. In early evening, guests exhausted from more than enough oxygen intake, trudge through the pitch-black jungle with rechargeable flashlights. Then, they drift off to sleep, far above the ground, surrounded by mosquito netting and listening to a symphony of plump fireflies and birds that look like zoo escapees. Then they awaken to a shower with a built in tree trunk – or more accurately – a tree truck with a built in shower.

“When I see soapy water slosh against the bark before it disappears down the drain, I feel incredibly guilty about the environment,” says hair stylist Erika Greenwood from Oklahoma City and smiles almost apologetically even though she paid extra for biodegradable toiletries on this trip.

She came with her husband, Jason, to take a break from her own reality for a week, and ended up seeing daily life in a whole new light.

“We are so spoiled. We never think about what happens to the paper we throw in the toilet. It just disappears. But Costa Rica has opened my eyes,” says Greenwood.

Av og til ankommer selvfølgelig noen i høye hæler trillende på en rullekoffert.

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finne naturvennlig sjampo på hotellbadet og har muligheten til å luft hoppe rundt i landet med Nature Air, verdens eneste karbonnøytrale flyselskap – ettersom flyplassbilene ruller på resirkulert fritryolje fra de ansattes privatkjøkken.

**I 2006**, etter en tilfeldig surferferie, solgte Matt Hogan og kona Erica fra Colorado, USA alt de eide, la en million dollar på bordet og kjøpte to ville fjell, et par brusende elver og et uendelig antall fossefall. Nå sender de turister opp i trærne.

– Av og til ankommer selvfølgelig noen i høye hæler trillende på en rullekoffert, sier Hogan. Det er ikke slik det fungerer på naturtur. Strøm, fra solcellepanel, finnes bare i et par stikkontakter nede på basecamp. Instagramoppdateringer herfra kan du bare glemme. Tidlig på kvelden, når gjestene er søvnige etter å ha inhalert mer enn nok oksygen, må de trække gjennom kullsvart jungel med oppladbare lommelykter for så å slukne langt over bakken med 360 graders myggnettingutsikt til et symfoniorkester av feite ildfluer og papegøyer man tror har flyktet fra en zoo. Før de kan våkne til en dusj med innlagt trestamme, eller rettere sagt, en trestamme med dusj.

– Når jeg ser såpevannet skulpe mot barken før det forsvinner i sluket, får jeg så utrolig dårlig samvittighet overfor naturen, sier hårstylist Erika Greenwood fra Oklahoma City og smiler nesten unnskyldende – selv om hun har brukt ekstra dollar på nedbrytbare baderomsprodukter, spesielt for denne turen.

Sammen med ektemannen Jason kom hun hit for å mørklegge sin egen virkelighet i en uke, men endte opp med å se hverdagslivet i et helt nytt lys.

– Vi er så bortskjemte til vanlig, vi tenker jo aldri over hva som skjer med papiret når vi kaster det i do. Det bare forsvinner. Men Costa Rica har åpnet øynene mine, sier Greenwood.

**FACTS**

**Finca Bellavista**

- The world's first modern environmentally-friendly tree-house community, which is in the middle of the rainforest in southern Costa Rica.
- Consists of a base camp with a restaurant, lounge, bonfire area, and dozens of treehouses spread out between a long river and two mountains.
- Sales of land and treehouses, plus eight cabins for rent.
- Closest Internet connection is 40 minutes away.
- Offers night hikes with excellent odds of spotting sloths, snakes and tarantellas, plus zip-lining and organic cooking courses in the garden.

[fincabellavista.com](http://fincabellavista.com)

**Pacuare Lodge**

- Among the world's most eco-friendly luxury bungalows for rent. In northeast Costa Rica.
- Surrounded by tropical, wild animals and rafting rivers.
- Hires locals, uses only five per cent of its rainforest and has several environmental conservation programs, including monitoring wild jaguars.
- Draws 2,500 tourists a year.

- Visitors have included singer Norah Jones, actor Matthew McConaughey, and an Arab prince with four nieces (one claiming to own her country's only electric car).

[pacuarelodge.com](http://pacuarelodge.com)





**(1) Does not get more real.** If you hire a local nature guide, be prepared to get sweaty, muddy, chop your way through the jungle with a machete, and pet a little angry bat. **(2) Zip-lining** One of the many green activities in Costa Rica are their zip-lining-systems. Basically speeding through, and over, the tree tops, dangling over creeks and animals with only a steel wire to support you. But don't worry, its safe, and a bit scary. **(3) Danger, danger.** Costa Rica has an



incredible amount of strange and interesting animals. This one is said to be called "Strawberry Poison-Dart Frog," which should set off an alarm bell, but our nature guide assured us it would just sting a little if he attacks. **(4) Recycling, everywhere.** Plastic, aluminum, paper, glass, waste, it will all be recycled in Costa Rica. At least they try to do so in most establishments.



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**"WE SAVE TREES"** say eco-friendly restaurant napkins around the country. Four different recycling stations are the norm for most average sized companies. The main airport in San Jose has three representatives from ICT, the Costa Rican organisation for sustainable tourism, who spent two years asking people what they think of the country. This gang takes visitors seriously.

"An eco-tourist is different. She has knowledge and conscience to build a healthier world, when it comes to the environment, of course, but also in terms of compassion and economics" says ICT President Alberto Lopez.

Some of the first eco-tourists to Costa Rica are said to be birdwatchers in the 1970s. Then came biologists, followed by surfers, backpackers and now families with children. Lopez say its microclimate, diversity and peaceful people are mainly what makes Costa Rica a natural choice.

**AFTER AN EARTHQUAKE OF A** half-hour ride along a bumpy, mud track in a Toyota 4x4 with an air intake "snorkel" (for crossing high water), we finally stop at a fast-flowing river in the middle of the Costa Rican highlands, not far from the village of Turrialba. This is the only way to get to a place National Geographic called one of the world's 25 best eco-destinations is by rafting.

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**«VI REDDER TRÆR»** står det trykt på miljøvennlige restaurantservietter rundt om i landet. Fire forskjellige resirkuleringsstasjoner er normalen hos de fleste bedrifter med jevn menneskelig gjennomtrekk. På hovedflyplassen i San Jose har tre representanter fra ICT, Costa Ricas organisasjon for miljøvennlig turisme, i to år gått rundt og spurt tilreisende om hva de synes om landet. Denne gjengen tar besøk alvorlig.

– En økoturist er annerledes. Hun har kunnskap og samvittighet til å bygge et sunnere verdenssamfunn. Selvfølgelig når det gjelder miljø, men også medmenneskelig og økonomisk, sier ICT-direktør, Alberto Lopez.

Noen av de første økoturistene i Costa Rica skal ha vært fuglekikkere på 1970-tallet. Så kom biologene, så surferne, dermed backpackere og nå barnefamiliene. Lopez mener landets mikroklima, mangfold og fredfulle folkeslag er hovedårsaken til at Costa Rica har blitt det naturlige valget for mange.

**ETTER EN JORDSKJELVLIGNENDE** halvtime langs en humpete gjørmevei i en Toyota 4x4 med «snorkel» (i tilfelle flom) stopper vi endelig ved en hissig elv midt i Costa Ricas høyland, ikke langt fra landsbyen Turrialba. Den eneste måten å ankomme det National Geographic har kalt en av verdens 25 beste øko-destinasjoner, er via rafting.

"I came here 25 years ago with rubber boats and tents, bought land from a lonesome cattle farmer and now own 340 hectares (840 acres) of rainforest," says Roberto Fernandez, a Costa Rican.

Here, in the middle of nowhere, he built luxury cabins for the Pacuare Jungle Lodge out of teak and pine from a replanting program.

"Costa Rica still uses old buses and some politicians don't want to invest in environmentally-friendly ones. But I think the local 'ticos' (natives) feel strongly about taking care of the land, and we have long history of planting trees," says Fernandez.

**KIWI FRUIT**, mountain moss, Granny Smith apples, mint soap: Costa Rica has so many shades of green that they deserve their own colour chart. The project to "adopt" a newly planted tree, then follow its development online after you get home has been such a success that Hernandez's soil doesn't have room for more seeds right now. His advanced turbine in the river provides cabins with more than enough electricity from a modest trickle of water. In the kitchen, dinner is cooked on methane produced in a sort of sun-heated, inflatable tent from pig excrement following the animals' breakfast of organic food waste. A clear conscience

– Jeg kom hit for 25 år siden med gummibåt og telt, kjøpte land av en ensom oksebonde og eier nå 340 hektar regnskog, sier Roberto Fernandez fra Costa Rica.

Her, i midten av ingenting, har denne karen bygd opp luksushyttene Pacuare Jungle Lodge med teak og furu fra et treplanteprogram.

– Costa Rica bruker fortsatt gamle busser og har noen politikere som ikke ønsker å investere i miljøvennlige alternativer. Men jeg tror lokale «ticos» føler et sterkt ansvar for å ta vare på landet, og vi har blant annet en lang historie med å plante trær, sier Fernandez.

**KIWIKJØTT**, fjellmose, Granny Smith-eple, mintsåpe – Costa Rica inneholder så mange forskjellige grønnfarger at noen bør lage en ny fargeskala basert på dem. Prosjektet med å «adoptere» og plante et tre, for så å følge utviklingen på nett når man kommer hjem, har vært en så stor turistsuksess at Fernandez ikke har plass til flere frø i bakken akkurat nå. I elva har han installert en avansert turbin, og dermed forsyner en relativt svak elvesprut alle hyttene med mer enn nok strøm. På kjøkkenet kokes middagen med metangass – som kommer fra opphetet grisebæsj – i et slags oppblåst telt i sola, etter at dyrene har blitt foret med det økologiske matavfallet fra frokosten. En samvittighetsfull bungalownatt





**Smiling eggs.** Finca Bellavista grows and harvests around 70 per cent of their entire usage of food. When the healthy breakfast is over for the humans, Alexa Hooley throws the leftovers to the hens, who pop out about 20 fresh eggs every day.

bungalow costs about 4,000 kroner (euro 500) a night, but includes a suite with river water fed into the building, droplets forming a decorative fountain in the living room, then water going into the terrace pool, before becoming a waterfall on its way back to the river.

“This vacation makes me feel ashamed of the two huge water tanks we have at home in Chicago. It teaches you that you’re not at the Hilton,” says Mark Bleecker in the bridal suite.

This is a place where you miss nothing, even though most of your normal world is missing.

“Costa Rica teaches us,” says Bleecker before waving his finger toward a mountain. “And we should listen, if not for ourselves, for our grandchildren.”

koster rundt 4000 kroner, men da bor du i en suite hvor vann fra bekken føres inn på baksiden av huset, hvor dråpene først fungerer som fontenedekorasjon i stua, deretter som badebassengvann ved terrassen, så foss, før vannet forsvinner tilbake i elva.

– Denne ferien får meg til å gremmes over de to enorme varmtvannstankene vi har hjemme i Chicago. Slikt lærer du ikke på Hilton Hotel, sier Mark Bleecker i bryllups-suiten.

Dette er et sted hvor man ikke savner noe, men hvor man likevel er frarøvet det meste av verden.

– Costa Rica utdanner oss alle, sier Bleecker før han ivrig vifter pekefingeren mot en fjelltopp.

– Og vi bør lytte, om ikke for oss selv, så for våre barnebarn.

## FACTS

### ECO-TOURISM IN COSTA RICA

- Costa Rica has the world’s highest density of national parks in terms of land area and wants to be the first carbon neutral country by 2021.
- Despite its size, Costa Rica is one of the biologically richest places in the world. In 10,000 square kilometres (3,860 square miles) are 615 different species, in contrast to the United States’ 114. Costa Rica has over 500,000 different animals, insects and plants.
- Has a huge variety of such green activities as rainforest tours with local guide, zip lining (soaring over the treetops hanging from a high wire), rafting, surfing and horseback riding.
- Since eco-tourism is often more expensive than mass visitors, Costa Rica targets tourists from highly educated, wealthy countries in North America and Europe.
- 20 per cent of so-called “responsible tourists” are willing to pay extra for environment-ally friendly tourism.
- Education in eco-tourism has accelerated in Costa Rica in recent years.

Sources: Costa Rican Tourism Board (ICT), lonelyplanet.com, eco-tourist expert Wilman Solano at Pacuare Lodge and Wikipedia.



### Fastest way there

- **Costa Rica/Juan Santamaria International Airport:** With Lufthansa via Frankfurt (from 17 hours, 50 minutes).