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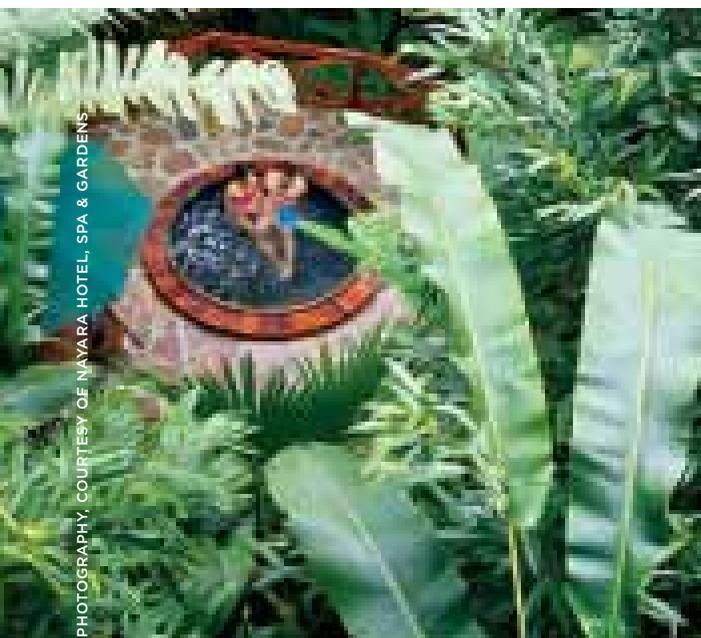
Win a four-night holiday for two at the fabulous Nayara Hotel, Spa & Gardens. Enter online at canadianliving.com/winthis.

Howler monkeys and toucans are eye candy in the Costa Rican rainforest, but it's a four-star resort in Arenal that will steal your heart.

BY JOANNE BLAIN

Every tense muscle in my body is yielding to the firm hands of my masseuse as I lie face down on her table, focusing on nothing more than identifying the delicately floral-scented oil expediting her rhythmic strokes. It's like many skilled massages I've had at top-notch spas around the world, but with one key difference: One entire wall of the treatment room is open to the Costa Rican rainforest, so I can hear the rain drumming steadily on the leaves of giant palm trees just a metre from my head, and hear the distant calls of tropical birds taking shelter from the deluge. Nature's symphony beats the usual spa soundtrack of pan flutes hands down.

I'm staying at the Nayara Hotel, Spa & Gardens, and I'm determined to take advantage of every opportunity to indulge myself at this luxurious property, voted by *Travel + Leisure* magazine in 2012 as the top resort in Central and South America, and the sixth best in the world. It deserves every accolade. With its 50 private casitas (bungalows), the hotel manages a delicate balancing act of offering both intimacy and every conceivable amenity in one of Central America's most stunning locations. »



PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY OF NAYARA HOTEL, SPA & GARDENS



In northern Costa Rica, near the town of La Fortuna, Nayara Hotel is nestled at the base of the Arenal Volcano, which erupted regularly until late 2010. Don't feel too disappointed that the star attraction is taking a siesta; the Arenal area offers a wealth of other attractions to make up for the lack of lava.

The morning after my arrival, I join Desafio Adventure Company for a floating tour of the Peñas Blancas River, about half an hour from La Fortuna. Our guide, José, steers our inflatable raft down the river while looking for wildlife in the dense foliage. Our first score is a group of howler monkeys jumping from branch to branch and unleashing their curious guttural call that earned them their name. Farther down the river, José's keen eye picks out sloths, toucans, kingfishers, iguanas and egrets.

But it's just a gentle prelude to the afternoon adventure with Desafio. Against my better judgment, I find myself at the top of a steep waterfall, strapped into a harness, preparing to rappel down the rocks, water rushing over them, to the fast-moving stream below. It's a test of my nerves with a big reward at the end: a zip-line that will send me soaring high over the water to the bottom of a picturesque

gorge. I emerge sodden and exhilarated – and ready for more pampering back at Nayara.

Who would expect to find a wine bar and sushi bar in the middle of the rainforest? Well, Nayara has them. After a glass of sparkling cava in the cosy bar, I head to Sushi Amor, the resort's Latin twist on a Tokyo restaurant. Brightly painted tables and chairs, and an intricately patterned tile floor form the unexpected backdrop to spanking-fresh fish with a Costa Rican flair, including white tuna rolls with jalapeño chili and seared salmon dressed with passion fruit sauce.

It's a short walk up a flagstone path lined with tropical flora to my casita, where I'm reminded why Nayara is a favourite of honeymooners and couples looking for a romantic retreat. Close the door and you're in a private oasis with a soaring ceiling, a plush king-size bed and a private deck with a Jacuzzi tub designed for two. In the morning, a double-headed outdoor shower offers another opportunity for togetherness. I share mine with a tiny green frog who doesn't seem to mind that I am hogging all the hot water.

Breakfast is served buffet style in the open-air Altamira Restaurant. You can go the traditional route with an omelette and bacon, or go Latin with



TRIP TIPS

GETTING THERE: Air Canada and WestJet fly to Costa Rica. **IF YOU GO:** The Arenal area is about a two-hour drive from Juan Santamaría International Airport in San José and about two and a half hours from Liberia Airport. **WHERE TO STAY:** The Nayara Hotel, Spa & Gardens (arenalnayara.com) offers private casitas starting from about US\$245 per night. **THINGS TO DO:** Desafio Adventure Company (desafio.costarica.com), Costa Rica Sky Adventures (skyadventures.travel) and Eco Termales Hot Springs (arenalvolcanohotsprings.com/eco_termales) all have packages that can be booked in advance.

huevos rancheros, fried yucca and gallo pinto (the ubiquitous Costa Rican mix of rice and black beans).

Well fortified, I set out for the La Fortuna Waterfall, a 65-metre column that roars down a forested canyon to an emerald pond below. Getting a photo at the base of it is worth the 500 steps down the steep gorge. (Just hold onto that thought on the long climb back.)

There's plenty more to do in the Arenal area, including zip-lining high above the trees at the Sky Adventures theme park, hiking in Arenal Volcano National Park and soaking in the Eco Termales Hot Springs.

But you might find it hard to tear yourself away from Nayara, especially as the day winds into evening. A late-afternoon dip in the pool or a soak in one of three hot tubs nestled in the greenery nearby is the perfect prelude to dinner at Altamira Restaurant. The menu, which changes daily, favours locally caught fish and Latin-inspired dishes, such as patacones (fried plantains) and seviche, all paired with a well-chosen selection of Latin American and international wines.

An expansion at Nayara, scheduled to open this fall, will add three more spa rooms, a new restaurant, another pool and 16 more casitas in an adults-only area of the resort. The rainforest and all of its attractions still beckon, but the lap of luxury will be even harder to leave. ■