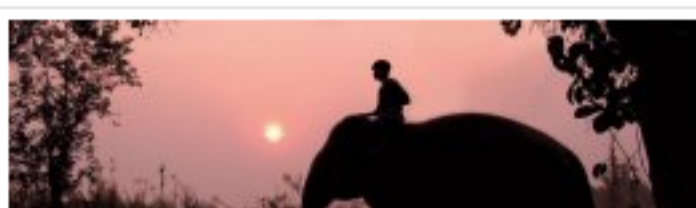


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# In Search of Pura Vida: The Magic of Costa Rica

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*A simple breakfast and stunning view at Nayara Hotel.*

*Pura vida* is a simple phrase that means "pure life." It is a greeting heard as frequently as "hello" -- on every street corner, restaurant and even home in Costa Rica. At the beginning of my travels to La Fortuna de San Carlos in the La Ajuela province, I smiled fondly in response to the phrase from the people who spoke it. But, by the end of my weeklong trip, I internalized these words and understood them deeply.

The ride from San Jose is scenic, with hills of majestic green stretching as far as the eye can see. Cattle roam freely on roadsides, and it is clear that there is no real barrier between humans and animals, and no hierarchy either. After about a three hour drive, which entailed a sloth sighting, a local plate full of chicharron, beans and rum, we arrived at our hotel in La Fortuna.

I chose [Nayara Hotel & Spa Gardens](#) because of its great reputation and proximity to the outdoor activities that many who come to Costa Rica search for: ziplining, horseback riding, hiking, canyoning, white water rafting and, of course, the hot springs. Nayara did not disappoint on any level. From the hospitality of its staff, pristine grounds and diverse dining options, to its breathtaking views of the Arenal volcano and endless rainforest, Nayara is a nature lover's paradise.

You have not ziplined until you have ziplined in Costa Rica. Never have I felt more fear and exhilaration as I whizzed across the rainforest, 650 feet high in the air. A stunning view of Lake Arenal sat in the distance, seemingly as limitless as the trees below. It is these kinds of experiences that remind you that life is bigger than your cubicle and student loans.

A trip to the Arenal Hanging Bridges is also a wonderful way to be suspended on a walkway in the heart of the rainforest. Thanks to conservation efforts, the rainforests in Costa Rica are protected and well-preserved. They are also a great reminder that human beings are not the only living things on this earth trying to sustain a life. During our tour, we spotted wild boars with their babies, birds searching for food, poisonous frogs, rainbow colored reptiles, and a few very persistent mosquitoes.

After a full day of hiking and ziplining, it was time to unwind. Back at Nayara a hot stone massage and milk bath at the resort's spa melted my muscles and the tension that city living often causes. The sound of cicadas, birds and who knows what else filled my ears, and in this moment, I found absolute peace.

The next day entailed a visit to Tabacon Thermal Springs. The springs comprise 97 percent rain water, three percent magma and 100 percent sheer paradise. You can easily spend a full day in one of the 16 pools, surrounded by lush gardens and the sound of streaming water. To avoid crowds, arrive before noon.

The only thing better than a relaxing day at the hot springs is good food, of course, and we experienced a plethora of that during our stay. Nayara's sushi bar and Nostalgia wine bar are not to be missed. Our wine pairing included some of the freshest ceviche and vegetables I've had outside of the states. In the town of La Fortuna, Anch'io Ristorante is a nice spot to stop by if you are craving an American food fix of pizza. And then there's Novillito's Steakhouse. This was a highlight meal I will not soon forget. A simple roadside restaurant, Novillito's tender steak was grilled right in front of us, served with fried yucca, rice and beans. The portions are generous and the prices, more than fair. Add to this the hospitality and laid back feel of Tico culture, and it is an ideal restaurant for anyone visiting the area.

During my six days in La Fortuna, I was in awe of the Arenal volcano, of nature and its constant ability to renew itself and grow. I was awakened by the sounds of monkeys, birds, lizards and beautiful rolling thunder. After experiencing a small glimpse into Costa Rican culture and the richness of its people, *pura vida* came to take on a new meaning for me. *Pura vida* means to live life with a deep appreciation for everything around you, despite your circumstances. It is the recognition that everything is full of life -- from a small frog, to a young kid on the street selling jewelry, and that everything is worthy of deep respect. This reverence for life is a feeling that I plan to practice each day. Costa Rica, I will be back.