

Outdoors

# THE WILD SIDE



FOLLOW THE SURFERS  
TO COSTA RICA'S REMOTE  
NICOYA PENINSULA.

BY KATE WICKERS  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BALL & ALBANESE





**W**E BUMP ACROSS unpaved road for the last five miles of the nearly five-hour journey from Monteverde's cloud forests to Santa Teresa, a hippie-chic Pacific Ocean surf town surrounded by dense rain forest on the southern end of Costa Rica's Nicoya Peninsula. "Why has the road run out?" I ask the driver.

"Because we don't want too many people coming here," he replies, grinning back at me in the rearview mirror. I suspect he might be telling the truth.

I roll down my window and inhale the brisk, salty breeze. A steady pilgrimage of international surfers, hungry to ride the relentless world-class breaks that crash here, first put Santa Teresa

on the map in the 1990s. Today, more travelers have caught on to the area's natural beauty and the charming, final-frontier vibe of the town's sole dusty strip of independent businesses, which include surf schools, yoga studios, and restaurants. It's gloriously low-key, but the nearby eco-luxe hideaway, Nantipa, means a comfortable stay is still in the cards. As we drive over a pothole and a lightning bolt zigzags across the sky, I decide I'm going to like it here.

I'd come to Costa Rica to unwind after two weeks on the road, but the primeval bellow of a howler monkey outside my bungalow serves as a wake-up call, so I strike out for a sunrise ramble. The Nicoya Peninsula is one of

the world's five Blue Zones, designated regions where it's believed people live longer, healthier lives. I pick my way over driftwood left smoothed by the sea from Playa Santa Teresa to Playa Hermosa and on to Playa Carmen, passing other early birds. Some sit in quiet contemplation gazing at the sea, others practice yoga, and a steady stream of surfers run, boards under their arms, to join those already out riding on the crest of a wave. Above them, great frigatebirds swirl, hunting for breakfast.

Tempting as it is to swing in a hammock all day, there's much to explore. Costa Rica is one of the world's most biodiverse countries – home to five percent of the earth's species – and the



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Cabo Blanco Reserve at the peninsula's southern tip showcases some of that range well. In 1963 Cabo Blanco became the first area in Costa Rica to be designated as protected, but it wasn't accessible to visitors until the 1980s. There's a ranger station and hiking trails that cut through nearly five square miles of evergreen forest, leading to Playa Cabo Blanco (with its nesting grounds for brown boobies) and a rugged headland with views over turquoise waters to small offshore islands.

There's also the privately owned Curú Wildlife Refuge, part of the Tempisque Conservation Area, on the peninsula's east coast, about an hour's drive from Santa Teresa. The park offers gentler hikes through five habitats, including tropical forest (where white-faced capuchin monkeys sit still and watchful) and mangrove forest. The park has nearly two miles of sheltered bays that are a popular nesting spot for hawksbill and olive ridley

turtles. At low tide, the mangroves' long, leggy roots sink into the sand, and crimson land crabs scurry into their burrows as hikers trek by. Rickety wooden bridges span small streams where signs warn of crocodiles, and as temperature rise, gray and green iguanas soak up the sunlight.

BACK ON THE BEACH at Santa Teresa, I watch the surfers at Roca Mar, the area's best point break. This spot attracts the pros, but even novices can get in on the action with some help. Nantipa doesn't have its own surf school, but they point guests to Vacoqo Surf for group and private lessons. After a few days, I find my sunset ritual: a Guaro Sour (a sugarcane-based liquor with lime) from the beachfront Ranchos Itauna bar. I love watching the sky shift nightly, morphing from thundercloud steel gray to tangerine and violet.

The chance to be a castaway on the tiny nature reserve of Isla Tortuga, a

## FYI

"It's no wonder royalty, Hollywood stars, and elite athletes retreat to Santa Teresa for a digital detox. Miles of surf and swimmable beaches, waterfalls, ancient caves, and coastal nature parks make a recipe for a hidden haven. Nantipa's beachfront restaurant, Manzú, is one of the best in town. For a special occasion, have your advisor arrange a private, fully catered dinner under the stars on the beach."

— John Clifford, Virtuoso travel advisor, San Diego

single square mile of deciduous forest rimmed with picture-perfect sands, is one I jump at. I reach the hammock-strung island by boat from Montezuma, a town just 12 miles from Santa

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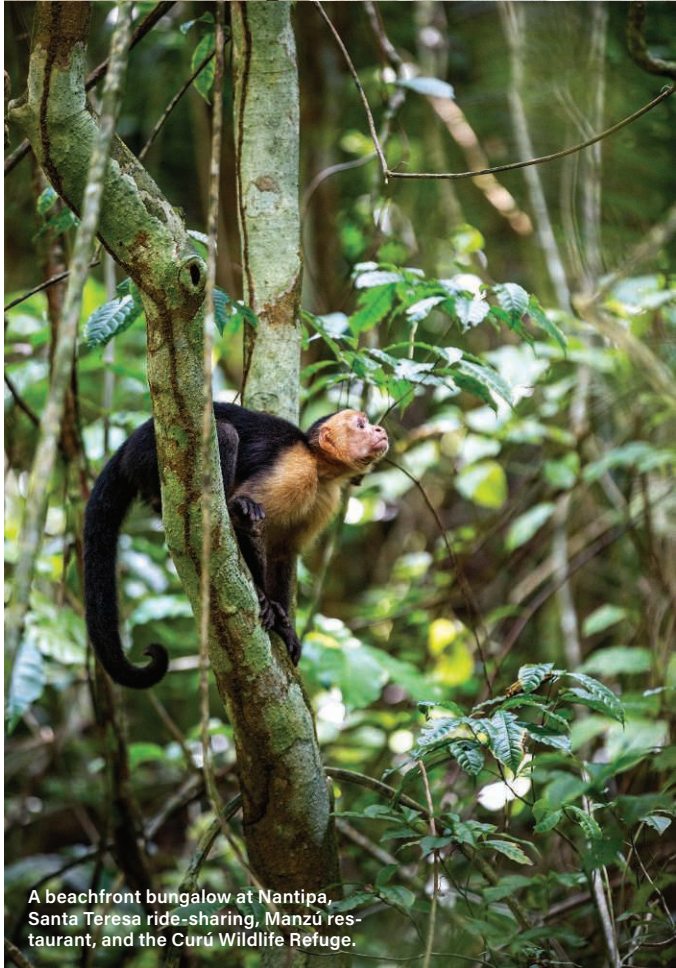


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A beachfront bungalow at Nantipa, Santa Teresa ride-sharing, Manzú restaurant, and the Curú Wildlife Refuge.





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Teresa that's famous for its eponymous waterfall, arriving with a resolve to do nothing. But for those with energy to burn, there's a water-sports kiosk with kayaks and paddleboards to rent, and a trek to a 570-foot-tall lookout with views over a canopy of rare indio desnudo hardwood trees. Shoals of needlefish, iridescent parrotfish, and shimmying angelfish keep me company as I snorkel in clear water, before the

ocean's gentle lap lulls me to nap in my hammock cocoon.

A day later, I head back toward Montezuma once more, this time by the light of a crescent moon, to visit the small town of Paquera and witness one of nature's most spectacular shows: bioluminescence. The production of light by dinoflagellates (single-celled plankton) is best viewed from the water, and while many visitors opt for boat tours,

the prime way to see the phenomenon is by kayak. I dip my paddle into moonlit waters and watch the plankton defend themselves by glowing in ethereal greens and electric blues, creating a glittering, starry underwater world in which startled fish appear to fly, leaving luminous streaks. Their wake – like everything else I've experienced on this wild, remote peninsula – makes beautiful marks on my memory.

## Surf's Up in Santa Teresa

**STAY** Tucked beneath rattan and palm trees steps from the beach, **Nantipa's** 11 bungalows, eight suites, and pair of three-bedroom villas infuse modern style into the heart of Santa Teresa. Nap in a hammock by your private plunge pool, sign up for yoga, or join hotel staff on a daily beach cleanup. *Doubles from \$480, including breakfast daily and a \$100 hotel credit.*

**GO** Virtuoso advisors can work with **Swiss Travel**, an on-site tour connection in Costa Rica, to create custom and sustainable itineraries on the Nicoya Peninsula and beyond. Highlights of a five-day trip to Santa Teresa include a private surf lesson, a day trip to Montezuma, overnights at Nantipa, and plenty of downtime. *Departures: Any day through 2023; from \$1,708.*

A few of days zip-lining and hiking in Monteverde's cloud forests precede surf lessons, kayak excursions, and nature walks on the Nicoya Peninsula during **Avanti Destinations'** seven-day private tour of two of the country's more biodiverse, off-the-beaten-path destinations. *Departures: Any day through October 2023; from \$1,639.* 📍

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