



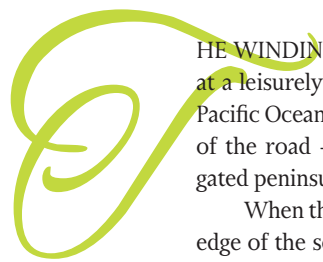
Private indulgence **COSTA RICA**

Little touches of eco-extravagance on Papagayo Peninsula will welcome you into your “villa years.”

DOUG WALLACE

COURTESY VISIT COSTA RICA

Papagayo Peninsula



THE WINDING ROAD through tailored grounds is capped at a leisurely 40 kmph. Glimpses of a golf course and the Pacific Ocean can be seen through the trees – on both sides of the road – as we make our way through Papagayo, a gated peninsula in northern Costa Rica.

When the road has almost come to an end, right at the edge of the sea, we pull into Exclusive Resorts Poro Poro, our home for the week – a private villa overlooking Culebra Bay. A team of people greet us at the door: Valentina the concierge, a porter, a chef and a bartender have congregated to create a warm welcome that includes fresh ceviche and rum punches, along with a quick orientation to the ample amenities. The villa is a stunner, with a vaulted bamboo ceiling, natural colours, subdued lighting and an

inviting infinity pool on a big deck. I could really get used to this, I think, breaking into a smile that lasts all week.

Privacy is the new luxury, of course and no one knows this better than Exclusive Resorts. It's a global private travel club, where members pay a 10-year membership fee for access to a portfolio of 500 vacation homes that they own or manage all over the world. A personal concierge is just a text away, ready with a list of things to do in the vicinity. We don't waste time deciding what we're going to do in Poro Poro, because I pre-selected our agenda from home in advance, including the meals: Fully on board with the “food-menities” trend, our Papagayo escape comes with a pre-stocked fridge. We can even have someone come in and prepare breakfast if we want. Yes, please.

We hub-and-spoke from our home base

This part of the world has always been one of my favourites. Costa Rica's Guanacaste province is filled with beaches and wetlands, mountains and volcanoes, waterfalls and rainforests delivering incredibly biodiverse eco-tourism. Protected conservation areas offer ecological, geological and zoological discoveries around every corner. What's more, the attention that goes into preserving the land and protecting the wildlife make it one of the more eco-conscious nations in Central America. The countryside is so beautiful, most people escape the city for the rural areas once they can afford it. Unsurprisingly, Costa Rica has one of the highest life expectancy rates in the world.



COURTESY EXCLUSIVE RESORTS

Exclusive Resorts Poro Poro private villa



Private villa

Peninsula Papagayo itself is a natural paradise – beaches on all three sides, protected forest filled with hiking trails and exotic birdlife, white-faced capuchin monkeys and raccoon-like coatis combing the underbrush. Most of the private homes and villas here are up in the trees, so visitors can watch the animals below without disturbing them. The vantage point also makes for some of the best sunsets.

When it comes time to drop the forest bathing for a while and actually get some exercise, there are eco-adventure decisions to be made. We have our choice of hikes in the volcanos, dips in the hot springs, ziplining and ATVing, horseback riding and sanctuary visits (cue even more exotic critters). Across the bay and down the coast lies an abundance of beach towns to explore, little local enclaves filled with condos to rent, plus beach bars and boat tours. As you can imagine, the watersports are pretty cool, with snorkeling and diving adventure aplenty. The nearby marina is busy with yacht traffic and I chastise myself that I left the binoculars at home.



Infinity pool, private villa



Private villa

It's a good thing I brought my hollow leg.

At Poro Poro, all our physical activity is rewarded with culinary decadence – starting with cocktails: Valentina surprises us one late afternoon with a mixology class right in our own kitchen. Yonier the bartender has arrived with everything he needs to make four delicious cocktails in slow succession. There are all manner of juices – Costa Rica has some of the best fruit in the world, year-round – plus things like dehydrated pineapple and luscious liqueurs. We help him, mostly with the shaking, but I also hand-torch cinnamon smoke into our glasses – yes, rather sophisticated but also delicious. By the time Yonier has packed up and left, we are tipsy, almost too much so to make dinner. Luckily, Valentina has also ordered a “grill pack,” sent to us

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earlier in the day, a dinner kit with everything ready to cook. All we have to do is fire up the barbecue.

The resort Chef Nicolas Devenelle comes over one evening to create a local feast of shrimp salad, scallop risotto and grouper with pasta, all Guanacaste specialties. The icing on the cake is the meringue on a lemon tart. The culinary journey continues another night down the road within the complex at Poro Poro Restaurant, where Devenelle and his team run the kitchen like a laboratory, turning out even more inventive seafood dishes under the stars. We happen to arrive on sushi night and eat as much of it as possible.

More gastronomic wonder awaits us off-property, too. At Prieta Beach Club, my poke bowl comes not in a bowl, but a banana leaf. Two restaurants here surround a couple of



Poro Poro Restaurant



Dinner prepared by private chef

pools that cascade down to the black-sand beach, filled with loungers and inviting cabanas. My cocktail has a little bag of truffle popcorn clipped to the side of my glass with a tiny wooden peg. And at nearby Andaz Hotel Papagayo, we sink into pan-seared snapper with bisque sauce and chicken stew with smoked mozzarella. We walk off the meal with a moonlit stroll around the hotel, stopping to watch a wedding dance in full swing – shoes off, ties undone. Papagayo has a way of getting everyone to let their hair down.

On our last night, just as the double massage we're having by our pool comes to an end, it starts to rain. Tomorrow will be another lush, green day, the perfect farewell. I determine that my villa years have not only arrived, they're also here to stay – and I plan to bring my friends along with me. ■