

DREAMING OF LAS CATALINAS

AN ENCHANTING
UPSCALE RESORT TOWN
CASTS A SOOTHING
SPELL ON VISITORS
TO BIODIVERSE
GUANACASTE
IN COSTA RICA.

[by Doug Wallace]

A PAIR OF BROWN pelicans are diving for lunch in the Pacific surf while I sit lost in thought on a piece of driftwood. My feet are tucked into the black lava and basalt sand.

Playa Danta is my little stretch of beach for a few days in Las Catalinas, a compact, walkable town in the northern province of Guanacaste, Costa Rica. Though it looks to be a century or more old, Las Catalinas is actually the new kid on the beach-town block, built on the concept of new urbanism, where architecture is interwoven with nature and encourages a sense of community. It's also completely car-free, to support its commitment to enhanced health and wellness. Established in 2006, it continues to grow, designed in a miscellany of European and Latin American colonial styles.

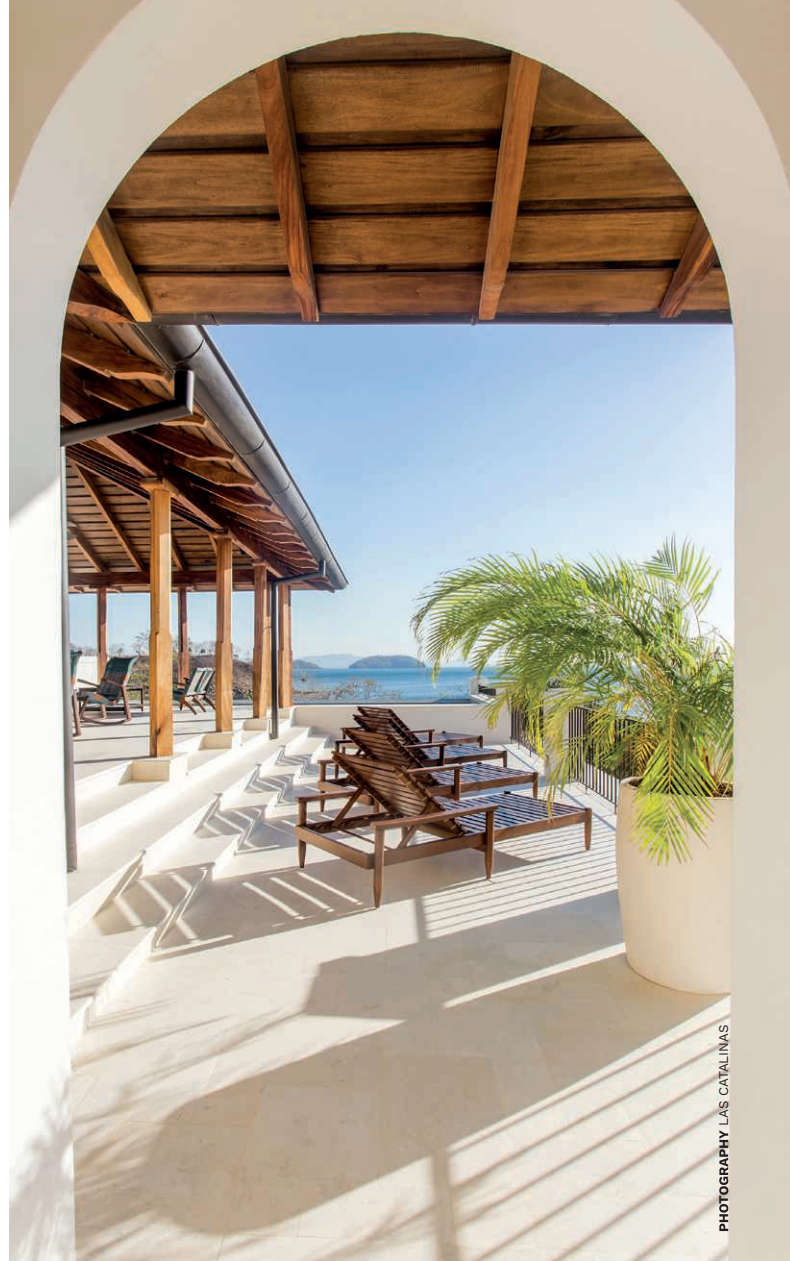
A taste of the tropics

It's a friendly little spot—a neighborhood of stately private homes, big villas and cozy apartments to rent, and a newly refurbished hotel. Your travel advisor can offer advice on which style of accommodations would best suit your needs.

While finding our bearings, my partner and I pass through tiny courtyards, up and down stone stairwells, past fountains and along ivy-covered walls. The rows of houses in between come in many shapes and sizes in colors of blue, turquoise, vermilion, pink and white. It brings back memories of Havana, Panama City's Old Town and Palma de Mallorca. Wooden balconies sport a jumble of shrubbery and shutters that keep the heat of the day out of houses' high square windows. It's like we're trespassers in a Renaissance painting, until we approach an outdoor gym with equipment and weights all made of polished wood, and suddenly we've shifted into an episode of *The Flintstones*.

What you want, when you want

In the center of Las Catalinas, there are crowds of patio-goers taking in the warm afternoon sun. I linger at a restaurant in the shade beneath a giant elephant ear tree, watching bicyclists and joggers casually pass by. Children run around largely unchaperoned here, a community characteristic that's all but lost these days. They laugh as they dodge the jets of a splash pad fountain in the main square, while their parents sit in the swing chairs of the nearby pub or shop in the smattering of boutiques.



PHOTOGRAPHY LAS CATALINAS

Clockwise from top left:

Unwind at the Santarena Hotel's rooftop terrace and pool; sip a cocktail at the hotel's bar; cycle the town's 26 miles of trails.





"IT'S LIKE WE'RE TRESPASSERS IN A RENAISSANCE PAINTING."



Young married couples are taking afternoon *pintxos* at the patio tables. We introduce ourselves to people who turn out to be wedding guests and nod to residents out walking their dogs. We feel part of their extended family, even though we're staying at the central Santarena Hotel, itself a gathering point, and home to Ponciana restaurant, the town's fancy fine-dining spot.

Sweet escape

The Santarena has a colonial-mansion style that I get used to really fast, particularly the rooftop infinity pool that's picture-perfect at sundown with a drink in hand. The 45 airy rooms are filled with artworks and wooden furnishings made by local artisans. Balcony floors are clad in Cuban-style pressed tiles in colors that mirror those of the town below. On the main floor, a welcoming sitting room is dressed up in a multi-layered contemporary vein with bold patterns, rich textures, palm leaves and rattan chairs. I notice there's

a wine tasting going on at the bar and make a mental note to enquire about the next one. Wine fits perfectly with the beach town's overall philosophy—to create a fulfilling and fun experience. But health and wellness is first and foremost here, so I decide to first get a little exercise.

Wellness awaits

Costa Rica has one of the highest life expectancy rates in the world, particularly the nearby community of Nicoya. It's noted for being one of the world's five blue zones, regions where people live far longer than average.

Regular exercise, of course, is one of the characteristic components. As well as the wooden gym and associated fitness classes, Las Catalinas has watersports covered in spades—boogie boards, kayaks and stand-up paddleboards, plus surfing lessons, scuba diving and snorkeling. There are also private sailing tours and fishing trips, but the real workout is on the trails that overlook the town and the beach. >




Las Catalinas' two beaches are ideal for swimming, surfing, snorkeling and scuba diving.

Hike more than 400 hectares of protected forest connected by a single-track trail system. The paths are excellent—nature at its absolute finest—and the yellow elder trees add a pop of color. The variety of flora is astounding, and the fauna includes very loud monkeys and raccoon-like coatis, plus a plethora of birds, including spiraling hawks, saucy magpie-jays and such exotic creatures as toucans and macaws.

Further afield

Travelers willing to venture just outside Las Catalinas will find all sorts of activities and excursions. Costa Rica is a champion of eco-tourism, with around 30 national parks, dozens of wildlife refuges

and eight biological reserves that afford plenty of spots to get your eco-adventure on. In Guanacaste, active visitors can strap on a zipline harness in the rocky canyons or head for a hike in the Rincón de la Vieja National Park, before stopping to recharge at one of the many hot springs nearby. There are also coffee plantations and sloth reserves to visit.

On our final morning, we go for one last hike, weaving along a short trail through the gumbo-limbo trees, hummingbirds darting around us. When we eventually reach the ocean, the tide is out, so we gingerly navigate the volcanic rocks between Playa Danta and Playa Dantita, its tiny cousin. We stop for a swim and my beach reverie returns, the sun in my eyes. I let the moment sink in and solidify, much like my experiences in Las Catalinas are bound to do, long after I return home. 

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