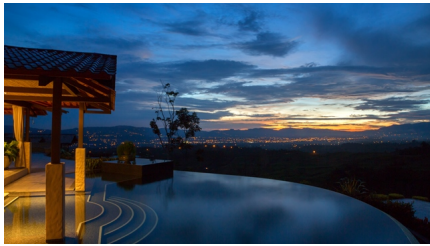


Costa Rica Escape: Chasing Clouds

Written by Allison Young

Wednesday, 19 October 2016 11:17 - Last Updated Wednesday, 19 October 2016 11:24



Having your head in the clouds can be a good thing, and a trip to Costa Rica's coastal and mountain regions only proves it.



It's impossible not to notice the clouds in Costa Rica. Sometimes big, billowy, floaty mounds of marshmallow, other times mystical and low-slung, whether sailing over the Pacific or kissing the jungle, their puffy presence can be perennially felt. But it's not the clouds that are different, it's you.

People talk of the Costa Rica downshift like it's a mysterious thing that just happens as soon as you clear passport control, like you fill your lungs with the chrysanthemum-scented air and, bam, you're struck with a vortex like calm usually reserved for unicorned places like Sedona. And even if you're not into that sort of thing, even if you're a Type-A traveler who would never leave the country without an international calling plan because God forbid you miss a text while you're in the jungle, arriving at the Liberia airport in Costa Rica is like taking a Xanax and one of the side effects are more salient clouds.

First, follow the clouds to Las Catalinas, a dreamy destination in the northwest Guanacaste province that's planned to perfection. Not that the coastal oasis sprung organically. American internet millionaire and mountain biker Charles Brewer and his partners set out to create a walkable eco-town following the New Urbanism philosophy on the 1,200-acre ocean-side plot, and he's doing it one hacienda-style McMansion and cobblestone pathway at a time. Surrounded by crescent beaches and 20 miles of hand-cut hiking and biking trails and staffed by at-your-service concierges and housemoms who whip up breakfasts and tropical smoothies, the growing town is like a resort version of Airbnb that lets you live in a sustainable community with all the indulgences of hotel life. Heck, as well as rentable flats and villas with as many bedrooms and bathrooms as you need, there's a hotel and spa in the works and an activities list that makes Phoenix feel pedestrian. Chase clouds while catamaraning along the coast, helicopter over the Santa Rosa National Park and spot a rare butterfly or actually swim with a mega pod of spinner dolphins rather than just spying them through binoculars.

All that adventure can work up an appetite that only a beachfront restaurant can satiate. Pull up a chair or hammock at Limonada, the culinary command post at Las Catalinas, and sip back a jalapeno-infused margarita made with fresh passionfruit and lime juice while deciding between the snapper ceviche or the octopus gazpacho to start. Costa Rican cuisine isn't flamboyant or flambéed, but it is a feast of locally sourced and fresh-caught ingredients, tasty in its toned-down simplicity. And don't be surprised if a few margaritas in the clouds change to a kaleidoscope of tropical colors. Thankfully, the next-day hangover seems less near the equator.

When you get sick of the languid, lazy clouds lingering over the Pacific and the mango-colored sunsets that go with them (if that's even possible), there's a whole other side of Costa Rica to explore, a place of coffee plantations and verdant sloping hillsides. The chill vibe is the same, but the cloud formations turn from fluffy to fanciful, with vapory cloud forests at eye level that looks magical in daylight and mysterious under moonlight. These are the next clouds on the agenda.



Flying into AltaGracia, the haute hacienda tucked into the mountains of Pérez Zeledón in Southern Costa Rica, you'll wonder if the resort

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sprang serendipitously from the lush hillsides; it looks that effortless. Surrounded by geometrically perfect pineapple fields and family-owned coffee plantations where the beans are handpicked, there's a palpable love of the land that can be felt even from above.

The 350-acre property looks at once like a natural wonder and modern-day oasis, and from the ground it's just as breathtaking. Each of the 50 casitas, linked by manicured paths, boast sweeping terraces and window walls, not to mention brag-worthy square footages that make getting lost in your casita plausible (the minimum size is 1,173 square feet). You'll immediately know you're in a special place and the two pools on property only seal the deal: there's the spa pool, a picture-perfect pond that looks like a football field floating under a two-story atrium, and the resort's own infinity pool, a swimming hole so perfect it blows every other infinity pool in South America, even the world, out of the water. But it's the natural surroundings that will really feed your soul, lush and lovely views of uninterrupted jungle in every direction. The downshift continues.

The change of scenery gives you new excuses to explore. With 28 stables on property and horses in every make and model, there's a large riding ring and surrounding trails to trollop. You can even hop on a horse and tour a nearby coffee co-op. Of course, a four-wheel-drive car is always an option. The resort also features a landing strip and fleet of Ultra-Lights, fancy two-seater flying machines that feel like gliding through the air in a convertible. The pilot will take you over waterfalls and plantations, and even all the way to the Pacific to see the famous Whale Tale, a sand bar formation shaped like a whopper of a tail. If you're really lucky, you might just fly right through a cloud, feel the minute drops of moisture on your skin for yourself. You'll try to grab it but quickly realize clouds are better enjoyed than caught. **Getting There** Southwest Airlines just opened up a direct route from LAX to Liberia, Costa Rica, with more international destinations to come. southwest.com.

To Learn More

Hacienda AltaGracia altagracia.aubergeresorts.com. Las Catalinas lascatalinas.cr.