

EXPLORING ☀️ COSTA RICA

Guaria de Osa: Nature and Well-being off the Beaten Path

By Tamara Neely
Tico Times Staff

A motorboat carrying nine tourists into a bay off the Osa Peninsula landed with a jolt on a pristine beach in a remote corner of the Osa Peninsula, shaking shrieks and laughter out of its passengers. That was my introduction to Guaria de Osa resort.

Its full name is Guaria de Osa Rainforest Ocean Discovery Center and Ethnobotanical Gardens – a big name that speaks to the vision and interests of the people at its helm. Guaria de Osa, on Costa Rica's southern Pacific coast, lies 15 minutes by boat from Corcovado National Park, revered for its primary rain forest supporting an abundance of wildlife. The property covers 10 acres, and is set up as if a peppering of huts and two main lodges were plunked down in the middle of a garden, with a sloping sandy beach and the warm ocean along one side and dense forest on the other.

An extended stay of a week or more is warranted here; the journey from San José is long (bus or plane, then a taxi, then a boat and possibly a hike), and there's a lot of nature to take in.

First, there is beach time, just feeling the sand and fooling around in the waves. Then there is Corcovado National Park, which can



be hiked on your own or with a guide, such as Jonathan Miller-Weisberger, ethnobotanist and mastermind behind Guaria de Osa, to guide you through and pick out flora and fauna with expert eyes and teach you about indigenous medicinal uses of the plants found there.

Made up of 54,540 land and 2,400 marine hectares, Corcovado is the kind of place peo-

ple get excited about because of the intense biodiversity it shelters; the park is full of howler and white-faced monkeys, sloths, frogs, snakes, countless birds and never-been-logged forest.

Close by is Caño Island, an uninhabited biological reserve and site of a pre-Columbian cemetery, as well as some of the region's famous stone spheres of unknown origin. Known for certain, however, is that the island is a good spot for snorkeling and diving, and the boat trip often rewards tourists with glimpses of whales and dolphins.

If you feel like staying closer to home, the Río Claro is a pretty river that can be reached by walking down the beach. Plastic canoes can be rented for paddling upstream to a waterfall.

Miller-Weisberger leads walks through the Guaria de Osa garden for kids and adults. His interests include medicinal applications of plants, world vision of indigenous cultures and old-world ideas such as the I Ching – the spirit of which casts a turn-on and tune-in vibe about the place.

He and partner Mónica Serrano, from Ecuador, welcomed our group at the beach when our boat landed, and led us to our accommodations. My room was a wood-



framed hut with a tarp pulled tight over a center beam, creating a tent-shaped roof over an open-air space – no door – surrounded by jungle.

A safe for valuables is made available, but Guaria de Osa guests are a one-love kind of crowd, so I wasn't worried about my belongings – rather, I fretted over how to modestly change in and out of my bathing suit several times a day, with the heat and the ocean always beckoning.

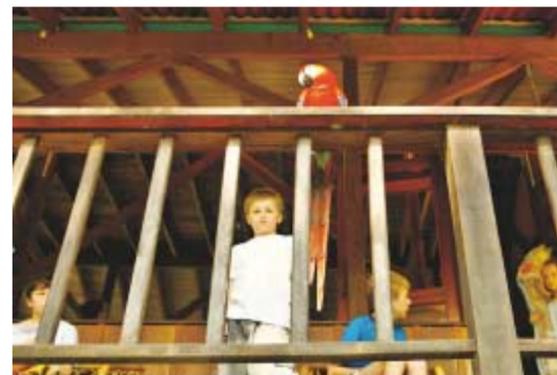
Despite this logistical puzzle, the hut was beautiful and I felt closer to nature than I had for a long time. At dusk, frogs, crickets and cicadas started chirping, and from my bed I could see huge tropical leaves lit with moonlight, and feel the nighttime breeze, perfumed with ylang-ylang flowers. The mosquito netting kept out biting insects, and when the sun started to rise I heard the birds wake up, their peeps and songs and squawks progressing into a wall of noise.

It was like camping, only with a comfortable bed, three prepared meals a day, all-day homemade ginger and lemongrass tea, coffee, hot showers and flush toilets. The shared bathrooms feature lovely tiling in the roomy shower stalls, and each sink in the communal area is tiled with handpicked

shells from the beach. (For those wanting more separation from the wild, Guaria de Osa offers five rooms with private bathrooms and closing doors.)

The Lapa Lapa Lodge is a striking, three-story, pagoda-style structure, made by local craftsmen out of wood felled naturally by windstorms or found in a pasture cleared more than 20 years ago. This is the center space for retreat and relaxation at the resort. There is space to hang out or meet on the lower floor, in rattan furniture and hammocks, while the second floor is wide open, with wood floors designed for yoga, dance, tai chi, qigong, capoeira and other body-movement practices. The top floor offers a prime view of the Pacific Ocean, across the botanical garden, past the tent huts and the dining hall and over the jungle treetops. It's a fine spot to take in the sunset.

When the dinner bell rings, guests head for the Chozo Lodge, to be greeted by Ronald Delgado, caretaker and all-around good guy, whose musical team plays marimba tunes while guests file through, pick up plates and serve themselves from the buffet of home-cooked dishes, including *gallo pinto*, fish, plantain, vegetable curry, fried chicken and salad made by Delgado's wife Laura, with



help from others in the kitchen.

Guaria de Osa doesn't serve beer or cocktails, but if you're looking for a nightcap and a bit of adventure, you can take a pleasant stroll down the beach to an open-air bamboo bar with a neighborhood feel, under a ceiling of endless stars.

On a clear night, the bioluminescence can be seen in the ocean, crashing in the waves, or up close if you get in for a swim, with sparkling swirls of light following your every movement in the water.

Guaria de Osa is a comfortable, luscious place to dig into the natural beauty and abundant wildlife of the Osa Peninsula. The rate for two guests, for four days and three nights, is \$612 per person, including three meals a day, coffee and tea bar, three rainforest and ocean adventures and round-trip boat transfers. For more information, visit www.guariadeosa.com, or call 358-9788 or 786-6753 in Costa Rica or (510) 235-4313 in the United States. ■

Osa's Utopia: Guaria de Osa Rainforest Ocean Discovery Center and Ethnobotanical Gardens is tucked away in the remote southwest corner of Costa Rica, near Corcovado National Park on the Osa Peninsula. Clockwise from top left, a wood-floored room offers space for yoga and other body-movement practices; a group arriving by boat from Sierpe approaches Guaria de Osa's beach at sunset; the three-story, pagoda-style Lapa Lapa Lodge is the center space for retreat and relaxation; a young visitor plays with natural cotton on an ethnobotanical tour that educates guests about tropical plants and their uses; Ana, the highly entertaining macaw, is a favorite among the lodge's younger guests; the airy dining room is a pleasant place for meals.

Photos by Shannon Mendes | Tico Times

A Place of Health and Well-Being

Jonathan Miller-Weisberger, founder of Guaria de Osa, studied ethnobotany at Humboldt State University in the U.S. state of California before heading down to Amazonian Ecuador to work on a rain-forest conservation project. He ended up staying in Ecuador more than 10 years before finding this piece of paradise in southern Costa Rica, where he set up a home base to support conservation and education through tourism.

His partner and co-administrator Mónica Serrano, from Ecuador, is a massage therapist who practices a traditional Chinese massage called *tui na*, while his mother, Dahlia Kresch Miller, Guaria de Osa's international liaison, has a Master's degree in interdisciplinary studies of consciousness from John F. Kennedy University, and is working on a Ph.D. in social and cultural anthropology at the California Institute of Integral Studies. As such, the three are interested in alternative healing, ancient cultures and sharing ideas.

Guaria de Osa offers healing treatments for guests, including palm diagnoses for health, reiki, foot reflexology and massage. Miller-Weisberger learned the healing properties of plants from indigenous elders, and regularly assists guests with minor ailments such as sinus headaches, for which he might treat guests with a concoction of bitter orange leaves poured over the forehead. Neighbor Victorio Villarreal, a *curandero* (traditional healer), may come to assist if a guest has a more serious ailment.

To share ideas with teachers, practitioners, healers and elders, the folks at Guaria de Osa host weeklong retreats called "Sentient Experimentals." A retreat earlier this month, for example, discussed nonviolent communication, featuring speakers from London, England. Family yoga was the focus of a retreat earlier this year, with instructors for adults and kids coming in from the United States.

Miller-Weisberger is planning two tours to the Amazon region of Ecuador as an extension of Sentient Experimentals. The tours are scheduled for July, and are an invitation from indigenous elders to share their world-view and knowledge of the medicinal properties of Amazonian jungle plants.

With a genuine dedication to health and well-being, and theories of life from the microcosmic to macrocosmic scale, Guaria de Osa is a good place for anyone inclined to put such ideas in their pipes and smoke them. Sting, the British musician known for his Tantric ways, spent a week here practicing yoga and relaxing (TT, March 10) – a testament to the turn-on vibe of this magical place.

–Tamara Neely



Shannon Mendes | Tico Times

Cotton Pickin' Fun: Jonathan Miller-Weisberger dons a cotton moustache for a young visitor.



Roy Arguedas Arias | Tico Times