

Guanacaste, Costa Rica

By Camille Pepe Sperrazza

Costa Rica has mountains, volcanoes, and beaches. If you are looking for a beach getaway, fly into the relatively new, all modern Liberia Airport (airport code LIR). Enjoy staying in the Guanacaste beach area. From here, day trips to volcanoes, ziplines, mud spas, and more can be arranged, allowing you to experience the highlights of Costa Rica. I have personally inspected every resort below.

"The Big Boys":

Riu Guanacaste - You can't go wrong staying at an all-inclusive Riu which is why I always recommend them, and choose to be a preferred Riu business partner. This resort is one of the best in the area. Open only about three years, it's all new and modern. The lobby area is spacious and gorgeous, especially at night when huge, colorful floor vases and fountains light up and glow. There are several pools, an infinity pool, and swim-up bar. There are even tiled lounge chairs inside the pool itself. The black sand beach is one of the largest in this vicinity. While all Costa Rica beaches are public, because this one is isolated, surrounded by mountains, it certainly has a private feel. The gardens around the resort are beautifully maintained, and contain exotic flowers. At night, this resort is jumpin' with an evening show at the huge outdoor theater, packed bars, a casino on the premises, and a late night disco. (Don't plan to go to bed early if your room is located in the vicinity of the outdoor theater, as you'll hear the entertainment from there). In the evening, the lobby is alive with "shot stations," featuring unique alcoholic concoctions, layered with colors, prepared by bartenders who are show artists. You'll also find carts set up, with special treats, such as the sweetest fresh coconut candy I enjoyed one evening. The usual Riu perks are all here: Rooms are spacious, with large balconies and great views; floors are tiled throughout the resort; and a huge buffet serves everything you can imagine for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Each dinner buffet features a different theme, so food selections change nightly. If you prefer a sitdown meal, there's a steakhouse, Italian bistro, and Asian restaurant. Reservations must be made between 9 am - noon daily. There's also a poolside buffet, with ice cream, and a sports bar, with grab-and-go sandwiches, hot dogs, fruit, nachos, popcorn, and more. This bar is open 24 hours. Use of the gym, jacuzzi and sauna, located in the spa area are complimentary - a great go-to place for some quiet time. Spa services were very reasonably priced.

Riu Palace - The Palace is the Riu's top-of-the-line all-inclusive resort that opened next to the Riu Guanacaste, November 2012. When you stay at a Palace, your room is either a junior suite or a full suite. All have balconies with fabulous views. Rooms are spacious and modern, with Jacuzzi-type tubs, walk-in showers, and fully-stocked bars. Breakfast buffets usually include champagne, and dinner buffets usually feature chocolate fountains. There are sit-down options such as The Steakhouse, which also serves lobster; The Krystal, the Palace's fusion-themed gourmet dining experience; an Italian restaurant, open for both lunch and dinner; and a Japanese restaurant. There is also a cappuccino bar, with gourmet coffees, both hot and cold, as well as snacks. When you stay at the Riu Palace, you have access to both the Riu Guanacaste and the Palace, including all pools, pool bars, and shows. Both

properties share a casino and shops. I have stayed at Riu Palace resorts round the globe, and they are always a fantastic experience.

J.W. Marriott - Marriotts are 5-star experiences, but as our incredible host pointed out, the J.W. Marriott is a 5-star full service luxury experience - an important distinction. Here, the waiter wouldn't dream of taking a dish away, if some one at your table still had a fork in hand. Staying here means impeccable service, and food is top-of-the-line. No, it's not all-inclusive. It's for the discriminating guest who wants to be pampered. One distinctive feature of every room is that it contains a huge balcony, and if a pesky fly is bothering you while you're enjoying the majestic view, simply press a button, and magically, a screen will drop down to protect you from the elements. The spa area has been rated one of the best in all of Latin America, and it sure is beautiful and elegant. Fruit-infused water is everywhere, and a clear glass tea pot contained fresh starfruit tea, beautifully presented, a unique treat. Choose to have spa services in little huts or on rooftops overlooking dazzling views. There are 4 restaurants and 2 bars, including a high-end steakhouse and an Asian fusion. A lovely courtyard is great for group cocktail parties and weddings. There's a conference center and meeting space. A one-bedroom deluxe ocean view suite can connect into a deluxe ocean view, an ideal arrangement for families with generous budgets.

The Westin Playa Concha - This is all-inclusive; a huge property, surrounded by a golf course. In fact, golf carts will pick you up to take you wherever you want to go. One of the highlights of staying here is that it contains an adult only section - The Royal Beach Club, an area exclusively for those over 18 years old. It has its own lounge, with concierge services, and an adult only pool. A standard room here is modern, but small. Royal suites are larger, featuring living rooms, and jacuzzis on the balconies. These are located on the third floor, but as all were fully booked, couldn't be viewed firsthand. Children are welcome in a separate section of the resort. There are 8 restaurants, a nice shopping area, and a gourmet coffee shop. The pools are decorated with little huts, Tahiti-style, and the vicinity is dotted with covered lounge beds for two. All very pretty. The beach area is short, and the sand contains lots of shells, so wear flip flops. The deluxe junior suite features a bed on the upper level, a living room below, and a little kitchenette to the side. Attractive and modern. Groups are welcome, and there is a nice event center.

Hilton Papagayo - This all-inclusive property is located in the Papagayo section, which many consider to be the nicest area, as the ocean is a lovely shade of blue, and beaches are sandy-colored and familiar-looking, even if a bit small. The seas are calm and serene here, and as the beach is accessed only from the main area or via boat, there's a sense of privacy, even though the beach is public. There is an adult only pool area near the spa, and an adult only restaurant, but management says that during busy season, this sometimes changes to accommodate guests. There are kids' activities and connecting family rooms. Junior suites have private pools. An ocean front room has a lovely view of the water. The resort is built on hills, so be prepared to break a sweat walking around, or do what most do - call for the open air cars to drive you from place to place. It's a bit of an adventure being in these cars in the evening, going up and down hills, when it's dark. You may have to climb numerous steps, uphill, to get to your room, and rooms are spread throughout the resort. There are 4 a la

carte dinner options included in the all-inclusive package, but when I spent the night there, not all were open, and the resort was very quiet. You won't have to wear a wristband at this all-inclusive. Recommended for those seeking quiet time in a lovely setting, reminiscent of country cottages.

"The smaller players":

Hotel Playa Flamingo - Good things often come in small packages, and discovering this boutique 120-room resort was one pleasant surprise. Here, they take pride in a clean, pollution-free beach and environment. The modern open-air lobby allows a great view of the huge pool, and is surrounded by shops that include a beauty salon and real estate office. There's a 24-hour air-conditioned fitness center. A family center has ping pong tables, games, and a miniature kiddie theater where movies are shown. For adults, there's a small casino. Rooms are spacious and modern. A studio family suite has a couch that opens, providing accommodations for 6 people, something you don't often find. There's a kitchenette, too. Ocean view suites have lovely balcony views to the right and to the front of the rooms. There's a living room and a kitchenette. This resort is for those who want a smaller, more local type of experience.

Hotel Cala Luna - Cozy, intimate, modern, and private are words that come to mind. It's lots of fun to spot monkeys in the trees as you walk the grounds. Breakfast is included, but pay for everything else. Still, you can enjoy complimentary cocktails during happy hour, held at the beach between 5:30 - 6:30 pm. The intimate beach is more for viewing than swimming, so plan to spend days by the pool area which contain inviting beds nearby. Pump-your-own suntan lotion is provided, a nice touch. A villa garden room has an ultra modern couch, lush with colorful pillows, a patio with private pool, a dining table, and two bedrooms. It's a beauty; cozy and cute. This resort is open to all, but I think it's ideal for couples seeking quiet down time, who want to go a bit off the beaten path, without compromising too much luxury.

El Tamarindo Diria - If you want to be right in the small town of Tamarindo, able to walk the streets, this is the place. You will be provided with a more local type of experience. In fact, one of the restaurants takes pride in offering "typical Guanacaste food". In case it's not your thing, fear not. There's a pizzeria and a steakhouse too. Breakfast is included, but pay for everything else. Rooms are small, but contain some nice views as each has a balcony or a patio.

Hotel Villa Sol - This resort is in the Papagayo area, where the water is a lovely shade of blue. Seemingly everywhere you look, there are grand, sweeping ocean views, including at the restaurant and pool. It's all-inclusive, and while everything at the lunch buffet was tasty - local seafood, cooked in the tastiest sauce; chicken prepared with flavorful spices - you won't find an abundance of options, as many of us have come to expect of all-inclusive properties. The rooms are cozy, with ocean views. Bathrooms are small, with pretty stone-like walls. In addition, there are villas and condos. For those looking for a more local type experience.

Hotel Borinquen, Rincon de la Vieja area. If you want to go ziplining or partake in a volcanic mud experience, depending on the tour you select, you may find yourself here. We traveled about an hour and a half from the Riu Guanacaste, to this particular place in the mountains, but you may wind up elsewhere on your tour, so your experience may be different. Some members of our group chose to ride a horse up a mountain, then go ziplining. Others decided upon the hot springs and mud treatment. I was among the latter, an experience which takes place entirely outdoors. It's not a 5-star luxury spa treatment. Think of it more as a "playing in the mud" type of experience, reminiscent of early childhood. Still, many members of our group enjoyed its uniqueness. First we entered an outdoor hut where natural sulfur provides steam, opening the pores. Next, help yourself to mud, putting it all over the body. After you've baked in the sun, scrub it off in the outdoor shower. Then, immerse yourself in the outdoor springs. There are three of them, all different temperatures. There's a lovely pool on the premises, too. You can stay at the hotel, and the grounds are beautiful, but it's for those open to being off the beaten path.

There are many other tour options when staying in the Guanacaste area, including day trips to Nicaragua. As tours change frequently, contact us for the latest information, always subject to change at the discretion of the tour operator. Be aware that Costa Rica is a bit buggy, so insect repellent and after bite care are highly recommended. When it's time to head home, there is a Costa Rica tax of \$28 per person that must be paid at the airport.



This article was accurate when it was written, but details such as those provided above can change immediately, and are always at the discretion of the resorts and operators.

For more information or to book a trip, [contact](#) "Commodore" Camille today.

This article was accurate when it was written, but everything in life changes. Enjoy the journey!