

turkeys and wildcats. Meanwhile, the age-old flora is so rich in oxygen that it serves as “the lungs of the planet,” said our guide.

For another view of this rich ecosystem we signed up for a zip-line tour over the rainforest’s canopy. For \$35 each we were harnessed into a pulley system and a team of young-yet-seasoned guys sent us gliding along 10 steel cables—the longest one stretched more than half a mile. We floated above the trees from one platform to another, doing our best to absorb the jade stillness blanketing the earth below.

We capped off the adventure with local beers and *casados* (traditional plates of rice, beans, meat and salad) at our favorite little La Fortuna joint, Soda el Río. The tab for both of us came to about \$9, with tip.

The bargain prices for a good Costa Rican *soda* (diner) and a nice hotel are tough to beat. They’re also easy to get used to, which is why we were reluctant to blow a whopping \$29 for a two-hour trip by private bus (a 10-seat minivan) to our next destination: the beach.

We knew that taking the Pacific coast was the way to go, since the Caribbean side is known for more volatile weather and a Rasta lifestyle (not that there’s anything wrong with that). Still, there are a bevy of *playas* to choose from on the ocean side. It pays to ask around, because instead of heading to Tamarindo—a well-known tourist trap—we zeroed in on Playa Sámara.

It’s painful to divulge how idyllic, affordable and genuine Sámara is, because it’s already on the brink of a tourist explosion. But on that first morning, after a breakfast of *buevos fritos* (fried eggs), bread and fresh local pineapple, watermelon and papaya, as we laid our towels on the sand, stared out at the ocean and listened to the rustling of the palm trees, there was no place else I wanted to be for the rest of the trip.

That we had just emerged from a rainy few days in the mountains only intensified my adoration of this little town. Our hotel, the Belvedere, cost \$45 a night but was priceless for its location on a hill overlooking the ocean and our quiet, clean room with its own veranda.

Every night, we discovered a new *soda* and ate local seafood and *gallo pinto* (traditional beans and rice), or found a beach bar for a colada and some Marley in the evening breeze. It wasn’t difficult to wake up early, knowing that our days would be spent swimming and boogie boarding, reading and just gazing. It was 80 degrees with blue skies. We were welcomed everywhere in our swimsuits, shorts and sandals. What more could anyone want?

It was *pura vida*. ■



## Permaculture at Punta Mona

Ben, a shirtless Aussie with dreadlocks, a beard and a nimbus of earthy body odor, was a fitting ambassador to the Punta Mona Center for Sustainable Living and Education. On the south Caribbean coast of Costa Rica, this tropical hamlet is nestled against a white-sand beach, swaddled in lush greenery and tucked safely away from the traditional resorts. It is accessible by boat or a four-mile guided hike from Manzanillo. Visitors are greeted with a hand-painted welcome sign: “*Bienvenidos a Punta Mona.*”

With little more than a “G’day,” Ben, an intern, led me and my companions on an interactive tour of the gardens. We tasted two types of hibiscus, one with purple leaves and the other with hints of orange. We rubbed cinnamon leaves and blades of lemongrass between our fingers and inhaled the pungent citrus and spice. Ben pointed out galanga, shell ginger, torch ginger, tree basil, tomatoes, passion fruit and watermelon, just a few of the more than 180 kinds of fruits and vegetables grown on the property. Most of the 100-acre organic farm is untouched primary and secondary forest.

Punta Mona is a working model illustrating the concepts of a permaculture community (short for permanent culture and permanent agriculture). Its design system mimics the natural systems of the environment and fosters ecological sustainability. Nitrogen-fixing plants are strategically arranged to rejuvenate the soil. Rainwater is collected in a catchment system and slowly purified through sand filtration. Solar power is used for lights, hot showers and satellite Internet. Egg-laying chickens roam freely around the property. Even the toilets feed a biomass converter that produces gas to fuel the kitchen. This process lends itself to a new euphemism for going to the

bathroom: making methane.

All the buildings at Punta Mona are constructed from the wood of fallen trees, including kasha, *piñon* and mahogany. The main house is a three-story structure with a dining hall and two tiers of bunk-style sleeping accommodations. The middle tier boasts a reading porch with several hammocks that offer views of the ocean glinting in the sun.

Across from the main house is an open-air kitchen where three meals a day are prepared. (They are included in the \$40 a night cost.) Fresh coffee, ginger tea, banana and star fruit pancakes, lentils with beans and rice, boiled *chaya* (a green also known as “tree spinach,” which is toxic if eaten raw), and a fish soup might be served. During my stay, a local fisherman caught a nurse shark and I found myself eating grilled shark steak and shark ceviche for dinner.

To signal meal times, a volunteer trumpets a conch shell (above), emitting a bellow that calls interns, permanent residents, neighbors and short-term visitors—an eclectic blend of young and old from various corners of the world—to gather in the dining hall. Over the course of three days, I ate with teachers from the capital city of San José, college students, a fire twirler, a grandmother, a permaculture pilgrim, a nomad, a vacationer and a married couple who make Punta Mona their permanent home.

During the days, I lazed around, walked on the secluded beach, skinny-dipped and tried to spot the shrieking howler monkeys (left) in the jungle. Kayaking, snorkeling and taking rejuvenating mud baths in the river are other options. But the activities are not the main attraction at Punta Mona. Visitors come for the rare opportunity to learn about, and be a part of, a successfully ecologically sustainable community.

— Nina Krieger

