

SJO LIR

# PRESSING PAUSE

Getting away from it all—and back to myself—in the Costa Rican rainforest. **BY JENNIFER BUEGE**

**RISING 5,479 FEET** into the air, Costa Rica's Arenal Volcano seems like it would be hard to miss. But the vagaries of rainforest weather ensure that it plays a constant game of hide-and-seek, sometimes disappearing behind a shroud of mist and clouds, other times basking in a sunny spotlight.

Even when not visible, the volcano's presence looms large over the area. It draws tourists by the hundreds of thousands to La Fortuna, the town at its base. It heats the local hot springs. And it provides the exfoliating, detoxifying mud used in spas around the region.

After spending 80 minutes prone on a massage table while a masseuse kneads her way around my body, apply-

ing mud section by section and working it in circles, I can attest to the powers of this magical elixir. My skin has never felt so soft. And I've never felt so Zen.

A nature soundtrack accompanies the service—a real one, the sounds drifting in over the balcony of the open-air treatment room. A toucan calls from nearby, and I lazily open my eyes to see if I can spot it. No dice. But I do notice that it's growing dark outside, and I immediately want to roll over and take a nap. Instead, the masseuse ushers me into a hot shower, where I scrub off the remnants of my experience—and the last remaining bit of stress I had packed with me.

For the past several months, I've been dreaming of escape: escape from the news, escape from routine, escape from the necessary (yet increasingly irritating) demands of day-to-day life. I've yearned to find my own bit of space for a few days, sit by a pool and just relax, bloblike, before having to return to the real world—which is what led me to the new wellness program at the adults-only Nayara Springs resort. In addition to eating well and winding down with health-focused activities, guests can opt for a full "detox" by giving up their phones, something I decided to forgo. After all, what would happen if I chanced upon Tony, the resident sloth, and couldn't snap a photo?

The day had started off leisurely: sleeping in, then sitting down to a traditional Costa Rican breakfast—beans, rice and scrambled eggs served with tortillas, plus local cheese, sweet plantains and passionfruit juice—on the patio of my villa. Birds chirped and flitted through the surrounding greenery, which created a natural frame for a stunning view of the volcano.

Afterward, I joined a walking tour of the grounds, crossing my fingers that we'd see Tony or some of the other wildlife frequently spotted in the area. Naturalist Juan Pablo led our small group along the paths winding through Nayara, pointing up just as we were about to enter the Armadillo Trail. "Look!" he said. We peered into the tree and saw a little brown bundle—a sleeping sloth. It wasn't Tony, but I felt that

it still counted. As the days pass, I also come across a variety of birds, frogs and butterflies, a male howler monkey who's made Nayara his home after being kicked out of his troop and a family of peccaries (wild pigs) grunting their way through the underbrush.

Days are bookended by morning yoga classes and candlelit meditation sessions at dusk. In between are long walks—including several fruitless searches for Tony, who appears to have taken a vacation himself, and a hike to La Fortuna waterfall: roughly 500 steps down, 500 steps up—countered by even longer soaks in my villa's private, spring-fed plunge pool. And restorative afternoon hammock siestas become

regular indulgences. Meals are delicious and varied, spread out among the resort's many restaurants, with menus anchored by local ingredients and complemented by creative cocktails and wine pairings. At night, a symphony of cicadas lulls me to sleep. It's a cycle of rest, relax and repeat. Ahhhhhh.

By the morning of my departure, Nayara Springs has done its job of returning me to my better self. And while I'm not quite ready to start the long trip home (what, and leave all this?), I head to the airport happy, knowing that underneath all the stress, anxiety and occasional crankiness, there is a better me—I just needed a little help finding it again. ▽



The view of Arenal Volcano from the pool at Nayara Springs resort.

OSCAR OBREGON / COURTESY OF NAYARA SPRINGS

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## SPOTLIGHT



A Leadbeater's possum at Healesville Sanctuary in Victoria, Australia.

### In Danger: Leadbeater's Possum

Being cute and adorable doesn't win you a "get out of extinction free" card in the game of life. Consider the tiny Leadbeater's possum. This 3- to 5-ounce bundle of gray, black and white fur with large round eyes and prominent ears is found in Australia's Central Highlands. It's been trying to elude extinction's grim reaper for over half a century. Officially declared extinct in the 1950s, it reappeared in the wild again in 1961. What's the main threat? Continued logging of Victoria's mountain ash forests, where it lives, to make paper. In response, Australian conservationists are calling for the creation of a new Great Forest National Park. That would be great news indeed for the Leadbeater's possum—and wildlife lovers everywhere.

— **COSTAS CHRIST**

For more information on the endangered species included in National Geographic's Photo Ark project, led by photographer Joel Sartore, visit [natgeophotoark.org](http://natgeophotoark.org).