

A Costa Rica Golf Adventure Appeals to All

There are a number of great reasons as to why the Central American nation of Costa Rica is such a worthwhile vacation spot, and we'll cover that ground shortly. But in the meantime, let me present two simple facts:



Cariari Country Club

Over the last 60-plus press and/or discovery trips I've participated in over the last dozen years to five countries and more than 20 states, I have never been without my golf clubs. But on a recent family foray to Costa Rica, instead of dragging along my casket-sized, rolling travel-cover and sticks, my "golf bag" was the size of a tobacco pouch, and contained only a half-dozen balls, some tees and a glove.

It's not that I'm such a huge fan of rental sets, and truthfully, the various clubs I used during my rounds in Costa Rica were literally and metaphorically a mixed bag. But there is so much to see, do and experience in this tropical paradise, I purposely limited golf to just two rounds total during a weeklong visit, leaving plenty of time for adrenaline-fueled adventuring.

Landy Blank knows the Costa Rican golf scene as well as most anybody as he is the owner and founder of Costa Rica Golf Adventures, a specialty tour company. "We first came here 20 years ago, and we loved it so much we kept coming back," begins the native Philadelphian who has lived in Costa Rica for some 15 years. "The people are wonderful and very welcoming, as is the climate. Part of the country is mountainous, so temperatures are cooler, and it's very warm down at the beach."

Interest in golf has grown dramatically from both tourists and *Ticos* (slang for a native Costa Rican) in recent years. The National Golf Association has tripled in

size since Blank began his business in the mid-1990s. So these words sound strange coming from a golf tour operator. "I wouldn't call Costa Rica a bona fide golf destination," continues Blank, who moved to Central America from Charleston, South Carolina. "To me, a golf destination is when you can park yourself in a hotel, and play a range of courses either on or near property. There are half-a-dozen viable golf options in Costa Rica, though they are fairly spread out. There are three courses on the northwest coast in Guanacaste, two in greater San Jose, and one in the central pacific area near Jaco Beach." Costa Rica is often described as the size of West Virginia, and just as rugged in terrain. A common expression states that if God himself squashed the island flat, the landmass would be the size of Texas. "It's not very big, but it's not easy to get around," offers Blank. "The roads are tricky, with potholes and such, full of switchbacks, hairpin turns, one-lane bridges. A destination might only be 100 miles away, but can take three hours of driving to get there. So you don't play one course in San Jose (the capital city) in the morning, and another one in the afternoon elsewhere. It doesn't generally work that way." Driving isn't particularly easy at Cariari Country Club, either, though it's not quite life-threatening. It's tight, target oriented, tree-lined and full of OB stakes, a situation that's psychologically exacerbated by the presence of a sticky white substance ringing many of the omnipresent hardwoods on the course from the ground up, a resin that deters insect infestation. From a glance from the tee box it appears as though all these trees are also OB, in addition to the real stakes. Lots of ravines, hard doglegs, plenty of fairway woods and hybrids off the tee and a few road crossings give one a sense the course is shoehorned onto the available acreage. It's a crazy-quilt property as a whole, slightly disjointed, with netting, odd ditches and plenty of housing. But the individual holes are quite interesting and fun to play, taken one at a time.



Battling the Rapids in Costa Rica

Uphill and down, narrow and wider, plateau greens, tough bunkering. Barely 10 minutes from the nation's main airport in San Jose, Cariari is an excellent way to begin a vacation, particularly if one is staying at the nearby Ramada Herradura, just a half-mile down the road. With many U.S. flights landing in the evening, staying at this well-appointed Ramada and touring Cariari early the next morning before heading towards the beach or mountains is an efficient way to begin a Costa Rican adventure.

Of course, some guys come to Costa Rica and never get too far from San Jose. They just want to golf, gamble and have a good time with the ladies. (Both casino gambling and prostitution are legal. The two "shrines" to the latter are the Del Ray Bar in San Jose and the Beetle Bar in Jaco Beach for those so inclined.) Others, such as this correspondent, come to golf, but just as importantly experience the outdoors in other ways, either on zip-lines, ATV's, in a kayak or sailboat, or even on a rappel line. Bearing all that in mind, it's easy to understand that despite his company's name, Landy Blank also handles groups that don't play golf at all. This is not surprising, considering that fishing, whitewater rafting, even bird-watching are among the many activities available to non-golfers. For pure thrills, it's hard to beat zip-lining - unless you're inclined to lower yourself down a sheer rock wall, tethered to a climbing rope, either adjacent to, or actually through a natural waterfall; more on the latter in a moment. Zip-lining is ubiquitous throughout Costa Rica. It combines speed, height, natural

surroundings and awesome views, assuming one has enough wherewithal to look around while traversing from tree to tree on a wire and pulley system. The Canopy Vista Los Suenos tour features 13 separate "zips," a latticework of wires stretched among the thick forests near the Los Suenos Resort. However, for every 10 adventurous souls willing to zip-line, probably only one or two will be willing to hitch themselves to a climbing rope and descend through the waterfalls, a uniquely adrenaline-fueled adventure offered by Pure Trek Canyoning up in the Arenal Volcano Region.

You can get just as wet without wearing a climbing harness or helmet, courtesy of the snorkeling, kayaking and sailing adventures offered by Kayak Jaco and its gregarious owner, American Neil Kahn. For those adventure-starved and time-pressed, one can get a "two-for-one" water experience by kayaking to the gorgeous beach near the company headquarters in Jaco, then snorkeling among the rocks just offshore, feeding grounds for dozens of different species of fish. It's all that most would require, water-wise, and making it back to the hotel for lunch or a midday tee time is easily within reason.

Jose Quesada is the Director of Golf at La Iguana Golf Club, at the Marriott Los Suenos Resort near Jaco Beach, not even 15 minutes from the recommended kayaking and zip-line adventures. "Years ago the only courses in the country were private. But because a number of resort and public-access courses have opened over time, now golf is becoming another vacation activity that visitors really enjoy, with all of our other great activities," explains the native Costa Rican.

They will really enjoy the game at the highly-unusual La Iguana. It occupies a narrow valley that is by turn part rainforest, part jungle and part wildlife refuge, and eventually, a more standard resort experience that concludes on flatter terrain with some long-range ocean view holes. "You experience different climates, and different environments on our golf course. It's like a little tour of Costa Rica itself," concludes the pro.

La Iguana is a spectacular, if indifferently maintained golf course, and the chance to fail in spectacular fashion is lurking around every fairway bend. High jungle walls hem in the golfer, often on both sides. The wetlands, pinching fairways, cross-hazards, lateral hazards and oddly-angled greens force a golfer to play defensively and a bit off-balance. Repeat plays and a degree of familiarity would mitigate this feeling somewhat, but an initial playing (and let's face it - most resort guests or visitors are only playing a round or two at most) will leave many golfers a bit out of sync.



One of the Tight Holes at La Iguana Golf Course

This may be a golf course at a resort, but it isn't a typical resort course by any stretch. La Iguana is a tough, albeit exhilarating test, and only as the course descends from the upper reaches to the flatland of the resort does it begin to mellow and return to normal as the ocean holes give way to the finish.

While the Marriott Los Suenos is a fine and elegant hotel, an equally great lodging option is the well-appointed condominium rental program at Los Suenos Resort, as administered by the management company, www.stayincostarica.com. Spacious and tastefully decorated, the program allows families to spread out a bit, access a private pool and private gym, and rent golf carts to tour the spacious property, if so desired. And because it features fully-equipped kitchens, visitors have the option of cooking any meal from the comfort of their temporary home.



The Springs Resort and Spa

Let me conclude by recommending two distinctive Costa Rican lodging properties that are utterly delightful and, in keeping with the recurring theme of this travelogue, are completely golf-free. Every room, every pool, every deck, restaurant, lobby area and stairwell at the superb Springs Resort and Spa has a billion-dollar view of the Arenal Volcano looming just across the valley. It's one of the 10 most active volcanoes in the world and is accessible by day hikes or nightly lava viewing expeditions. Many guests eschew leaving the property, however, instead luxuriating in no less than 18 separate freeform naturally-fed hot springs and pools, ranging in temperature from 76 to 103 degrees. While reaching the world-class Springs Resort is a three-hour expedition from San Jose, the bucolic Vista del Valle Plantation Inn, despite its serene setting, is remarkably just 30-odd minutes from the airport. Even the most nature-centric hotels are usually pockets of shrubbery, trees and gardens set amidst the various bungalows. But this low-profile, tucked-away inn, with its smattering of villas, cabins, cottages and "casitas," turns this sensibility inside-out.



Pool with Volcano on View at Springs Resort & Spa

This place is an unending field of flora, fauna, forest and garden, dotted with the occasional lodging property. The twisting paths from the main restaurant and pool area wind up and through an amazing array of flowering plants and vegetation. Finding one's bungalow nestled amidst all the rich foliage, at least the first few forays from the lobby area, is an adventure in and of its own. In this small way, it's a microcosm of an initial visit to the wonderful country of Costa Rica.

For more information, be sure to visit:

www.golfcr.com

www.kayakjaco.com

www.stayincostarica.com

www.puretrekcostarica.com

www.thespringscostarica.com

www.vistadelvalle.com