

Luxury travel

Surfing and yoga in a Costa Rican paradise

Helena de Bertodano delights in the west coast town of Santa Teresa, where nature is king and Mel Gibson directs traffic

I am lying on the deck of beautiful Casa Java, a centuries-old teak villa in Santa Teresa, a jungle town on the coast of Costa Rica. Nancy, the yoga instructor, speaks dreamily: "Let negative thoughts softly melt away... Sense the belly move on the breath like a wave, like the tide coming in and going out." In the distance I can hear the pounding of real waves; a barely visible path winds through the coconut palms and almond trees to a pristine strip of beach.

Suddenly a wet sploge lands on my face, just beneath my left eye. Tentatively opening my right eye, I see an iguana shimmying along a branch of the moringa tree, whose green frond-like leaves stretch out above me. Seriously? Has an iguana just pooped on me? I spring into action, breaking the trance-like spell, and go inside to clean my face. Nancy, who is wearing a T-shirt with the motto "You are the Universe in Ecstatic Motion", glances up, then resumes her meditative pose. As I return to join the supine bodies on the deck, I wonder if this is what people meant when they talked about coming to Santa Teresa to be at one with nature.

Although only 75 miles from the capital, Santa Teresa is on the southern Nicoya Peninsula, which feels like an island unto itself. The sense of remoteness is part of its magic: while other parts of Costa Rica have seen a spike in tourists, this hidden surfers' paradise is so far off the beaten path that its natural beauty is undimmed. In a so-called Blue Zone (one of five areas in the world where people statistically live longer) and separated from the mainland by the Gulf of Nicoya, it takes a long journey by road and ferry to get here, or a scenic internal flight to the neighbouring town of Tambor.

Then, unless you have your own helicopter — as the locals Gisele Bündchen and Mel Gibson do — it is a jolting 50-minute drive along a potholed road to reach the former fishing village of Santa Teresa. Although more travellers are finding



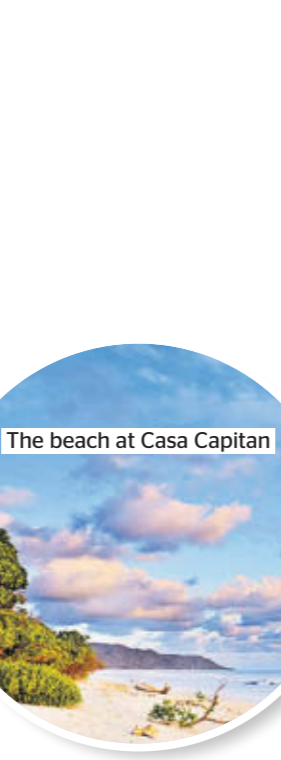
their way to Santa Teresa it still retains its authentic feel. The main street is a merry clutter of shack-like shops and cafés, although the words "organic" and "green" pop up more frequently than you might expect. Capuchin and howler monkeys sometimes swing from tree to tree overhead, and at one point I found myself walking alongside an armadillo. A golden corteza tree marks the crossroads at the top of the town, shedding its bright yellow blossoms on the floor. Abandoned cars rust gently into the ground.

When something does not go according to plan, the locals have a simple explanation, which I learn on a deep-sea fishing trip with my two sons. After two hours at sea they have caught nothing. "Es la luna [It's the moon]," says the captain, shaking his head mournfully. Freddie Meadows, our companion, a Swedish-British professional surfer who has spent much of his life here, erupts with laughter. "Everything is about the moon in Costa Rica. It's such an epic excuse... I've never heard anyone argue with it, it's a testimony to the power of nature here." Yet seconds later my teenage son has a mahi-mahi on the line and, after a tense few minutes, he lands it in the boat. Dinner is secure for tonight.

From the sea almost no dwellings are visible on the coast, just miles of tropical jungle, rimmed by sandy beach and clear



Casa Dewa



The beach at Casa Capitan

green-blue water. However, there is one house that everyone knows. Perched on a hilltop, its eco-friendly green roof does not quite camouflage it. "La casa de Mel": Gibson's house. Of the celebrities who have set up home here, Gibson was perhaps the first and has stayed the longest. Tom Brady and his wife, Bündchen, also own a property near by, and a host of other celebrities have holidayed here: Matt Damon, the Hemsforth brothers and Leonardo DiCaprio, to name a few. Mark Ruffalo is in town when we arrive, and the word on the street is that Susan Sarandon has bought a plot of land.

They come for the same reason as everyone else: the outstanding natural beauty and the surfing. Except no one has seen Gibson in the water. "I've never seen him surf," says Freddie, who launched a series of surfing/yoga/culinary retreats here this month. "But I've seen him direct traffic on New Year's Eve; he was having a good time."

If nature is king in this area, then Freddie's mother, Carlota, is queen. A Swedish former model who used to make Bali her home, she first came to Santa Teresa in 2001. Not being the sort of person who does things by halves, she later brought her guesthouse, Casa Java, a 400-year-old *gladak*, with her and had it painstakingly reconstructed in the jungle next to a much larger eight-bedroom property,

Casa Capitan, which she built out of driftwood and hardwood.

Capitan is a stunning villa, shaped like a catamaran and set in the shade of several giant banyan trees. Carlota filled it with treasures from Bali, Europe and Costa Rica and made it the family home. On the top floor is a wheel that, when turned, opens the roof so that you can sleep under the stars. Now that her sons have grown up she rents it out, along with Java and a third property, Casa Dewa, which she built out of massive columns of ironwood rescued from the bottom of the ocean in Indonesia. "They had been lying there for 80 years and were completely intact. Irresistible to someone like me."

There is no one quite like Carlota. Her artistic sensibility and imagination have brought this area alive. She was the first person to see that there was a potential for luxury living, which she has achieved with almost no environmental impact. Her houses incorporate the jungle; she did not chop down a single tree, instead building around them, and most of the en suite bathrooms in her fabulous villas are outdoors. Yellow-bellied tyrannulets (a local bird) swoop through the spacious, cool living areas while crabs, and even sloths, have been known to saunter in.

Sitting outside on the deck in early evening, you are enveloped by the smell of the fragrant ylang-ylang trees. The surrounding jungle is a riot of noise: the



Casa Dewa

hum of the cicadas, the deep guttural cries of the howler monkeys, the last chirruping of the birds, the crashing of the ocean in the distance. Large leaves fall crisply to the ground.

Danny DeVito and Bruce Springsteen were among her earliest guests and since then, by word of mouth, she has brought in a steady stream of technology billionaires, aristocrats and celebrities. Bündchen's youngest sister recently married at Capitan, where palm trees lead from the large curved pool down to the sea. At night, candlelit dinner tables are set up between the trees. The villas are almost at their best at night, when subtle lights illuminate stone statues and glow through latticed

lampshades, sending abstract lines across the walls.

The Carlota effect has spread and a handful of excellent restaurants have opened. Koji's is reputed to be the best in town. Run by Koji Hyodo, a tall Japanese surfer chef, it is set on a hill and serves the freshest fish, the lightest tempura and green tea matcha ice cream that he sources in Japan. If Hyodo doesn't like the look of the fish one day, he closes the restaurant.

However, it is not all luxury living. The backpacker culture is alive and well: accommodation is available in every price category, from cheap hostels to the serene Florblanca hotel, a collection of 11 villas perfectly suited for couples. Yet Carlota's

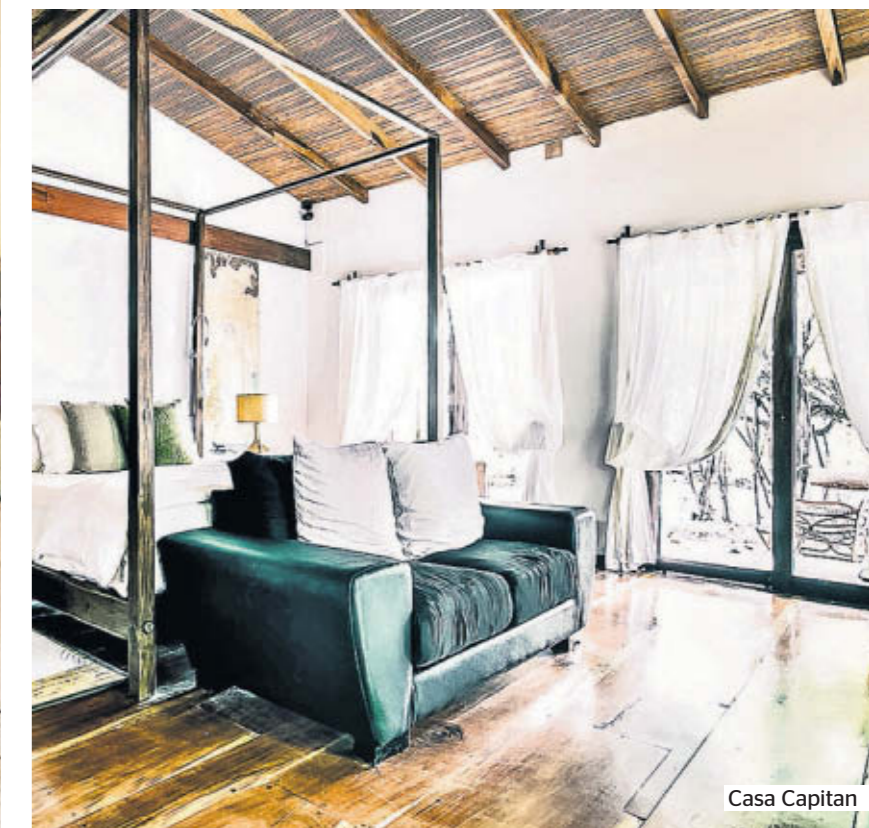
Need to know

Helena de Bertodano was a guest of Casa Java, which costs from £575 a night for eight people (Dewa sleeps 12, Capitan sleeps 16). (00 506 2640 0421, info@hotelsareboring.com). Surfing/yoga/culinary retreats are held three times a year (book at freddiemeadows.getaways.com).

How to get there British Airways (ba.com) flies direct to San Jose from £624 return. Or fly with Virgin Atlantic to Miami and onward to San Jose with American Airlines. Carmonair flies from San Jose to Santa Teresa (carmonair.com); the 25-minute flight costs \$780 (£550) for up to five people.



Casa Capitan



Casa Capitan

villas are a once-in-a-lifetime experience, worth every penny, especially if you avoid peak holiday weeks and self-cater. Of course, most of her guests hire private chefs. Two of the best are Pablo, who also runs TP8, a local Italian restaurant, and Torsten, a German chef, who serves exquisite six-course meals using local produce, especially seafood, and has cooked for almost every passing celebrity, catering to a string of strange dietary requirements.

Alicia Vikander, for example, ate only white fish and avocado. His favourite clients were the Hemsworths, whose stipulation was "anything, just lots of it". Although surfing is the main activity, there is plenty to keep non-surfers occupied. Carlota's villas come with world-class yoga instructors and masseuses on request. One day she arranges an Ayurvedic massage for me with Jessica, who is sweet and gentle. She tells me that I will feel all my stresses and worries surfacing and that I might want to laugh or cry. Actually, after 20 minutes of having warm sesame oil poured over my forehead, I fall asleep.

We rent quad bikes one day and set off to the Montezuma waterfalls, or try to, except I cannot persuade my quad to reverse away from the excellent bakery where we buy our picnic lunch, managing to hold up traffic in both directions. Where is Gibson when you need him? My 17-year-old son gallantly returns to rescue me, at which point my 12-year-old daughter hops off my

quad and wisely opts to join her brother instead. Although I begin to get the hang of it by the end of the day, I am not a fan.

I feel safer on the horses. Carlota keeps four on her property for guests to use, and one day, as the sun sets, I ride Indio, a lively chestnut horse, down to the beach. A couple of lone surfers are catching their final waves of the day, but otherwise the beach is deserted as we gallop along.

Returning to Casa Java, I see what looks like a red carpet slowly moving from the jungle to the beach. Thousands of red crabs have emerged to lay their eggs, an annual event that signals the beginning of the rainy season. Sure enough, that night, lightning fractures the sky, the power goes out and rain pelts down. The next morning the beach has erupted in tiny hillocks with crabs skittering in and out of each mound with claw-fulls of sand.

After a few days here it is hard to argue with the local belief that there is magic in the air. Some say that the Nicoya Peninsula sits on a giant crystal, which is why many people believe that a visit here will cure them of all their aches and pains and why you find crystals on the beach. I am a little sceptical: in two weeks here I have not seen a single crystal. However, on my last morning, I go for a dawn walk along the beach and find at my feet a glittering purple gem. Then I see another. And another. If this continues, maybe I can afford to return.