

Is Costa Rica the perfect destination for a family holiday?

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A beach on the Nicoya Peninsula

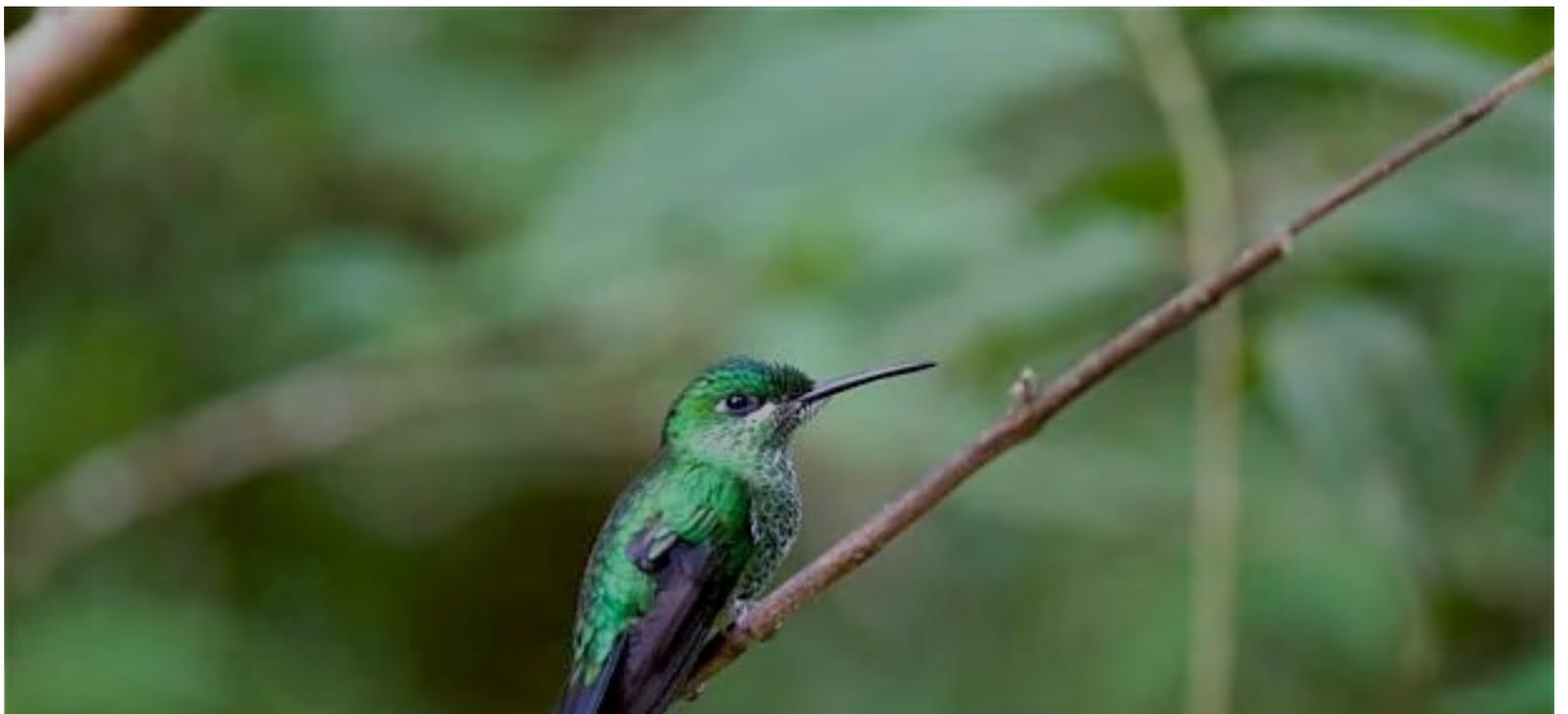
By **Douglas Rogers**

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“Daddy, you look like a marshmallow on a stick of gingerbread.”

I’m used to being insulted by my eight-year-old daughter, but this one hurt. Not because it wasn’t true – my pasty white body was belly down on a surfboard in shallow waves off a Central American beach – but because, frankly, I wish I had come up with it myself. Even the gingerbread reference was apt: it was the day after Christmas.

We were three days into an eight-day holiday in Costa Rica and, despite no reindeer, snowmen or carol singing, there was no place my wife Grace and our children Madeline, eight, and Whitaker, six, would rather be. Since our children were born, my family has spent every Christmas except for one in the freezing climes of the Northern Hemisphere. The exception was a safari to Zimbabwe back in 2010. I grew up in Africa and am used to Christmas holidays around a swimming pool, the braai blazing and perhaps a game drive.



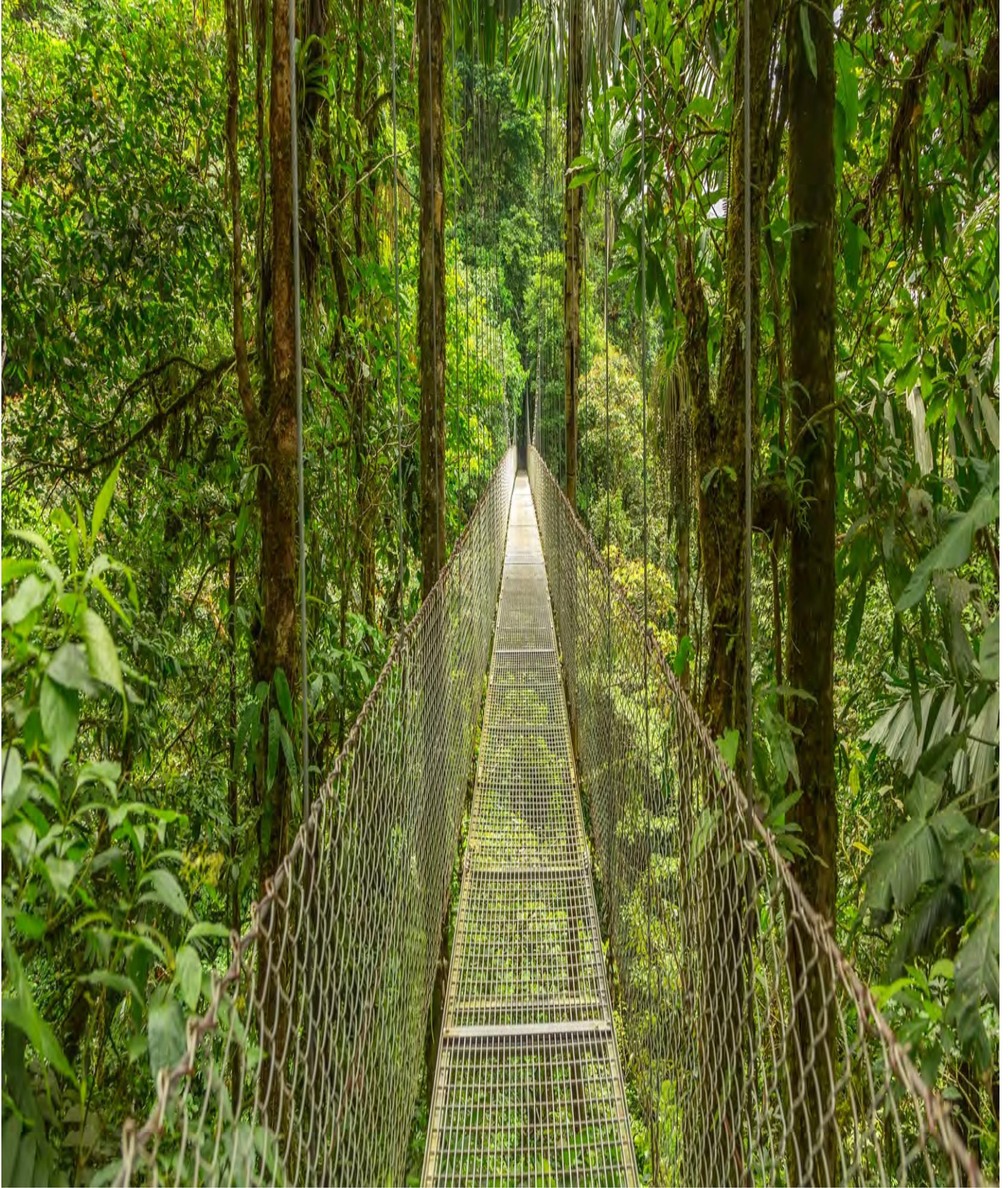
The flights were long, there were malaria tablets and yellow fever jabs to get, and for all the wonderful open spaces of Africa, a safari is simply not that easy to pull off with small children. All this before my American wife raised security concerns: “Zimbabwe is not exactly Switzerland..”

For Christmas just gone, determined to get away from the cold, we decided on somewhere different. It wasn't just sun and convenience we were after, but outdoor adventures that could keep the children – and us – active. It didn't take long to work out that Costa Rica – small, pacifist, relatively prosperous, green and mountainous (and known as the Switzerland of the Americas) – was the perfect destination for an adventurous family.

A sliver of a country sandwiched between Panama and Nicaragua, the Atlantic and Pacific lapping its shores, Costa Rica is unique for the region. In 1948 it abolished its military and began pouring money into conservation. By the Seventies and Eighties, when much of Latin America was in the grip of caudillos and death squads, Costa Ricans – Ticos – were declaring vast swathes of the country, from lush rain forests to tropical dry coastlands, protected nature reserves, and teaching school children about biosphere and sustainability. With 0.03 per cent of the Earth's land mass, but five per cent of its biodiversity, Costa Rica was “green” before the term existed, and it has been a paradise for outdoor enthusiasts – surfers, hikers, white-water rafters and zip-liners – for years.

We persuaded our friends Kathy and Mike and their four boys (aged 11 to 17), to join us, and booked a house online in Playa Avellana, a beach town south of Tamarindo, on the Pacific's popular Nicoya Peninsula. The house was owned by a former Silicon Valley entrepreneur Bob Witty, who gave up software for surf to run Real Surf Trips, a Costa Rica travel company with two surf camps in the area.





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The Nicoya Peninsula is the most visited part of the country and yet, this being Costa Rica, that doesn't mean shopping malls, six-lane highways and multi-story resort hotels. Ten miles out of Avellana, nearing the end of a four-hour drive from San José airport to the west coast, the road suddenly became a dusty dirt track. We thought we had taken on a wrong turn. But no, this is development Costa Rica style: the government intentionally keeps roads unpaved and airports small, and ensures hotels comply with strict environmental building codes.

“We have an expression: if we don't build it, they will come!” a Tico in the tourist industry told me, a Field of Dreams philosophy in reverse.

We got to the house late evening, the sun setting over the glassy Pacific. A modern two-story glass and timber structure set in dense woodland about a mile from the beach, it had five bedrooms and all the modish comforts: open-plan kitchen, slide glass doors opening on to a swimming pool rimmed by hammocks.

Christmas Day dawned, my children woken not by Santa's “Ho-ho-ho!” but by the screaming of howler monkeys in fernlike guachipelín trees. An iguana the size of a small crocodile sunned itself by our pool, and we sent Madeline up a papaya tree to pick our fruit for breakfast. Gifts were opened around the pool, the big people sipping delicious rich cups of fresh Costa Rican Tarrazú coffee.

We had booked a zip-line excursion, and made our way to Pura Aventura, a canopy outfitter on a cattle ranch a half-hour drive south. The wonder of Costa Rica's conservation ethos is that while it takes every effort to preserve its forests, it also goes to great lengths to make sure you see them – even from a wire suspended above a canyon.

Zip-lining is a major industry, and we joined a dozen other families (mostly American and British) on Pura Aventura's 14-station zip-line above the slopes and canyons of a dense. I have a fear of heights and was concerned for my children, but the fearlessness of youth meant they took to the zip-line like

monkeys, doing the in-tandem with a guide. One of the lines is suspended and my wife did hers upside down. It remains the highlight of their trip.

The following day we had a surf lesson. Nicoya is famous for its surf schools and through Bob Witty we had booked a four-hour lesson. Six children and four adults gathered on our local beach, Playa Avellana, at dawn.

A ribbon of white sand facing turquoise ocean, Avellana is, without doubt one of the world's great beaches. Aside from the coconut sellers, the only business around is a stylish beach bar, Lola's, once described by Esquire magazine as one of the best beach bars in the world.

Surfing reveals your age and condition. Ten years ago I could at least get up on a surf board; this time even in such gentle left breaks, and I could barely get to my knees.

My children on the other hand, used to riding around on scooters, were near naturals, and within an hour both were up. Not to be subjected to further shame, the marshmallow sneaked off to Lola's for an early piña colada.

The days folded into each other, a wonderful gauzy routine set in. We would walk or drive to the beach early morning, swim and body surf in warm water, lunch on ceviche, tuna steaks and mojitos at Lola's (fish and chips for the children), then cool down at home in the heat of the afternoon, adults taking siestas in hammocks, the children in the pool. Then we would return to the beach to swim until sunset before a long, lazy dinner back home. On three nights we even hired a chef through Bob Witty.

We broke one day up with an excursion to Tamarindo, the largest town on Nicoya, but for my money too commercial, its beach not remotely as attractive as Avellana.

And on the second to last day we headed into the interior, for a hike in Rincón de la Vieja Volcano National Park, a vast tropical forest famous for its still-active 6,217ft-high cinder cone volcano. My children were both huge Dora the Explorer fans when little, and glimpsing the volcano, shrouded in cloud, had them recalling their younger TV years. When a howler monkey yelped my son said “Shut up Boots.”

The park is dotted with bubbling geysers as well as waterfalls into which you are invited to swim, the water as cold as ice. It all seemed so remote and exotic, our own wonderland, except that on the hike back to the car, we bumped into another family who we knew from back home. We had no idea they were also in Costa Rica. But that fit a theme, too: Costa Rica is wild and exotic, but at the same time safe, accessible and perfect for children.

Miraviva offers a 12 night self-drive family trip to Costa Rica including horseback riding, zip-lining, forest trekking, canyon and beach time on the Pacific coast from £3,890 per person based on a family of four travelling, including International flights, accommodation and car hire.