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costa rica's secret coast

Chart a beach escape to
the Osa Peninsula, where
a little-known route leads
to unparalleled natural beauty



The beaches from
Dominical south offer
great surfing, from
beginner to advanced,
without the crowds
found farther north.

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Drake Bay

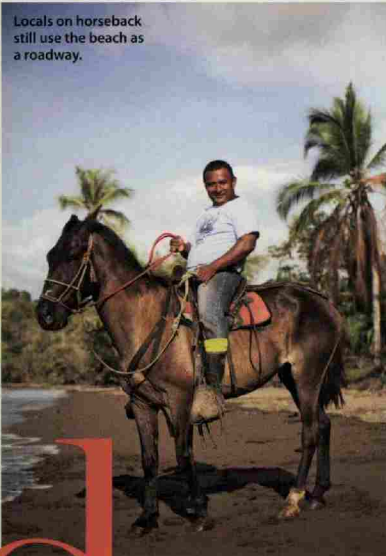


El Castillo hotel

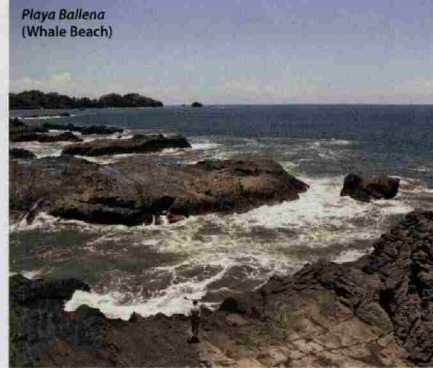
The Costa Rican soda (food stand)



Locals on horseback still use the beach as a roadway.



Fresh plantains



Playa Ballena (Whale Beach)

driving toward the sea in Costa Rica, I took the dirt road—and that made all the difference. It wasn't my plan, exactly; the dirt road just sort of happened. Like most visitors, I flew into the country's thoroughly commercialized capital, San José, and quickly aimed my rental car through the crowded streets and straight for the Pacific. But when I reached the ocean a few hours later,

instead of checking into a world of bustling casinos and big resorts, I kept heading south. Eventually the asphalt gave out, and a dirt road unraveled between banana plantations and palm trees. The coast kept going to my right, so I followed. Twenty miles later, pavement returned, though without the billboards. Jungle canopies and chill beaches ruled. I'd entered the real Costa Rica. For a generation now, Costa Rica has been the go-to destination for travelers seeking unspoiled shorelines. But recently, chain hotels and charter flights have turned once-peaceful coastlines into party towns. That's what drew me to the Osa Peninsula. Home to miles of

undiscovered beaches and Costa Rica's largest national park, the area contains one of the most important remaining tracts of rain forest on the Pacific coast. It's a place filled with authentic small towns, friendly locals offering home-cooked specialties, howler monkeys gamboling in the trees, and pods of dolphins playing in boat wakes.

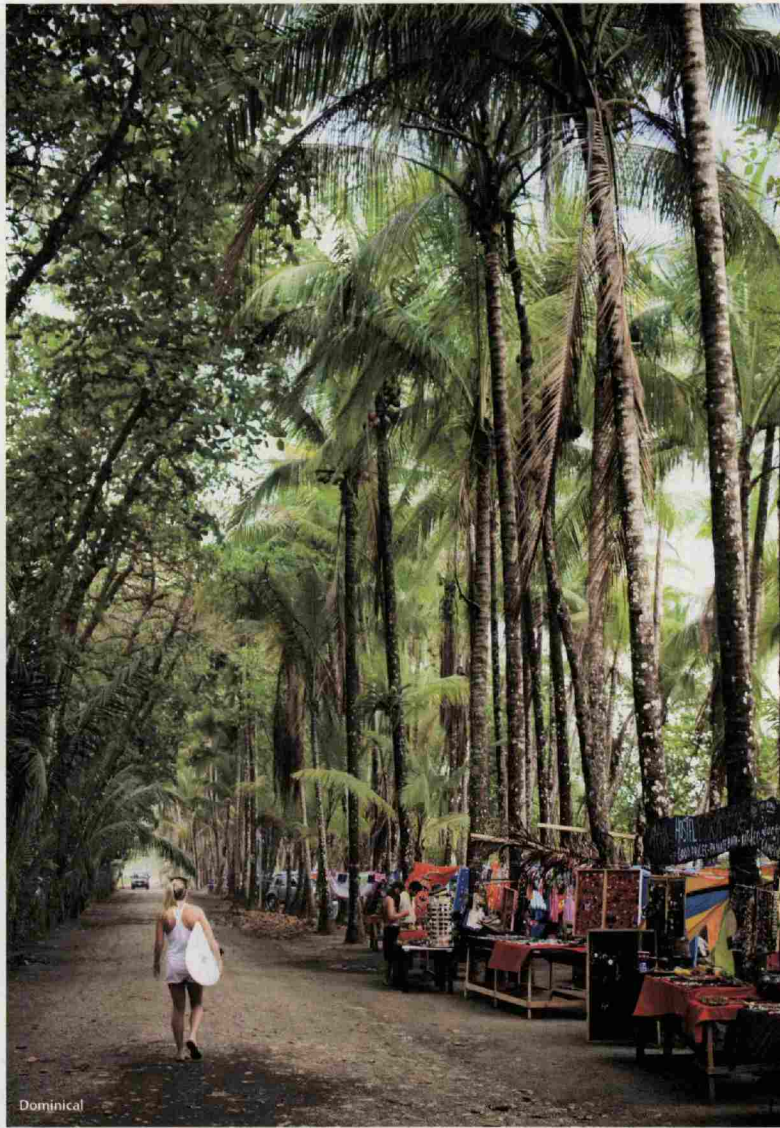


The open-air dining terrace at Cuna del Angel hotel



My first stop is Ojochal, the kind of town that makes you feel like you're the wisest traveler in the world when you discover it. It's quiet and flanked by two comfortable inns, and the dining options run from American-style pizza to inventive regional tapas. At Exotica, a thatched roof pairs with polished concrete floors, and the blackboard menu touts the freshest catch—ceviche and banana-curry shrimp the day I visit. All of this sits within a 10-minute drive to four beaches that likely will be empty except for picnicking locals, surfers, and a cart vendor selling fruit pops.

At the town's El Castillo hotel, I meet owner Steve Church. We sip Coronas while the Oregon native explains how he and wife Vicki opened their boutique hotel here in 2008. Steve's travels had taken him from Africa to the Amazon, but when he came to Osa, he knew he had found something special, a place where



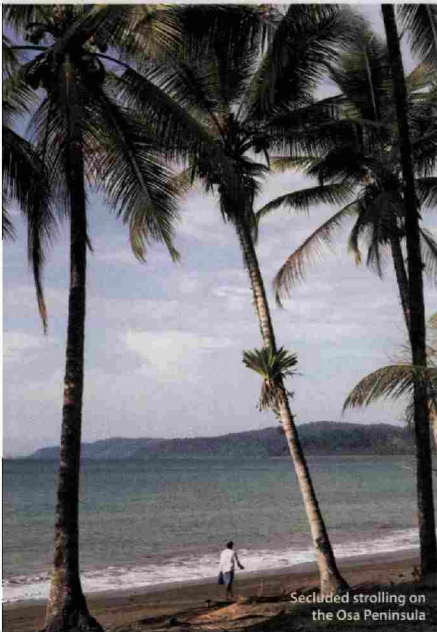
Dominical

he could open an inn on the edge of the wild. "I've traveled all over the world, so it's nice to have a place down here away from it all—with these beaches and jungles, but with the comforts of a small town," says Steve.

I linger in Ojochal for a couple of days, then head even farther south to the riverside town of Sierpe to catch a ferry. The boat carves through a water world where the coffee-colored >

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Secluded strolling on the Osa Peninsula

THE FERRY CAPTAIN EFFORTLESSLY WEAVES THROUGH THE SURF, AND WE TRAVERSE LONG, SMOOTH SWELLS THAT LAST TOUCHED SHORE SOMEWHERE NEAR THAILAND

Sierpe River runs taut and disappears into mangrove trees that outline our course. After an hour or so, the river's mouth opens to the Pacific Ocean and endless sky. Lines of breakers roll toward us in white stripes. The ferry captain effortlessly weaves through the surf, and we traverse long, smooth swells that last touched shore somewhere near Thailand. Fifteen minutes later, we reach the hamlet of Drake Bay.

The bay curves into a lush landscape interspersed with concrete homes painted in bright-to-faded colors, small lodges under palm trees, decks on stilts, and a wide, sandy beach. Horses carry two men across the sand on their way home from work. Three sailboats are anchored offshore, the slight nod of their mast tips the only indication

of movement in the glass-smooth bay. As the sun softens behind a cloud, the water changes color, transforming into a bowl of poured silver.

I wander the town's cobblestone and dirt streets, passing by several *sodas*, combination family-run cafés and convenience stores that open to the street, their tables topped with plastic plates of the day's catch, rice, beans, and fruit. I get a room at Hotel Jinetes de Osa, basic lodging right on the beach. And because the road ends at the water, I jump in.

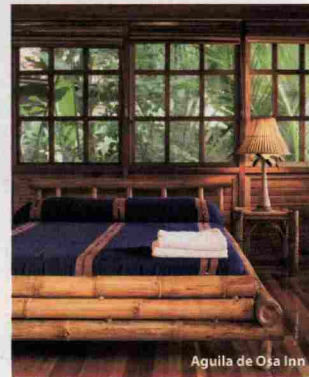
A few luxury eco-lodges here, tucked behind thick foliage at the edge of Drake Bay, tame the peninsula into a four-star experience, complete with Internet access, fine dining, and high-thread-count sheets in private

bungalows. Seafood is brought in daily by lodge boats. It's served with fresh veggies and tropical mango, papaya, and star fruit. You can eat the fruit plain or in a *batido*, a fruit-milk-sugar shake. All of the lodges are within earshot of bird calls and gentle waves. Guides lead trips to the nearby Corcovado National Park—Costa Rica's largest national park, with 100,000 acres of dense rain forest laced with trails—which is home to monkeys, anteaters, and scarlet macaws. Guests also can grab boats to Isla Caño, a lonely block of island visible off the coast with some of the country's best snorkeling and diving.

I do a little of everything: hike the park, swim the waters, and lounge on the beach. There is no resort blaring



music, no cars crowding parking lots or hotel towers obscuring the view. When traveling, it's easy to find comfort and forget about the culture. But thanks to that dirt road, the Osa Peninsula's marriage of authenticity and accessibility is cause for celebration. >



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GO GUIDE: COSTA RICA

GET THERE

Fly to San José, then catch a small-plane flight to Sierpe or rent a car for the four- to five-hour drive to Ojochal. Renting a car here is as easy as renting in the States. Costa Ricans drive on the right side of the road, and main highways are generally well-marked and well-paved (aside from the 20 miles of dirt on the way to Osa). Watch your speed; traps are common. Spring sees the best weather, with temps ranging from 60s to 80s and low precipitation. December through May are the driest, sunniest months.

WHERE TO STAY
OJOCHAL

■ **El Castillo:** World travelers Vicki and Steve Church make you feel like long-lost friends during your stay at



El Castillo hotel



Tapas at Exotica

their five-room inn on a hillside overlooking the Pacific. Oversize rooms, a pool, and the relaxed dining room make it hard to get out and explore. Rates start at \$100; 970/349-5350 or castlecr.com.

■ **Cuna del Angel:** This small boutique hotel hangs on a forested hillside above the *Costa Ballena* (Whale Coast). Rent a Jungle Room, decorated Caribbean-style, and enjoy the pool and open-air dining. Rates start at \$79; cunadelangel.com.

OSA PENINSULA ECO-LODGES

■ **Aguila de Osa Inn:** A full-service lodge in the heart of coastal jungle and at the edge of Drake Bay, *Aguila de Osa* offers private bungalows, an open-air restaurant, a boat shuttle, guided tours into forest and to remote beaches, and snorkeling and diving at Isla Caño. Rates start at \$482 per person, double occupancy, for two nights, including meals, a tour, and airport transfers; aguiladeosa.com.

■ **La Paloma Lodge:** Another option for luxury living on the Osa Peninsula, *La Paloma* sits a few hundred yards through the jungle from *Aguila de Osa* Inn with private bungalows, dining—all the amenities. Rates start at \$1,040 per person for three nights, including transportation from San José, meals, and two tours; lapalomalodge.com.

■ **Lapa Rios:** On the south end of the Osa Peninsula, *Lapa Rios* seems like the original eco-lodge. Fly straight into the remote location and a car will take you the rest of the way for maximum relaxation—private bungalows, fresh food, a pool, and tours, all of which supports local conservation efforts, education, and employment. Rates start at \$255 per person per day, double occupancy, including meals, tours, and airport transfers; laparios.com.

DRAKE BAY

■ **Hotel Jinetes de Osa:** If you'd rather not splurge at the all-inclusives, this lodge offers comfortable, clean rooms and family-style dining a few banana trees from the beach and an easy walk into town. Rates start at \$55 per person per day, double occupancy, including meals; jinetesdeosa.com.

WHERE TO EAT

■ **Exotica** and **Citrus:** These two Ojochal eateries might be the biggest surprises of the southern coast. Modern interiors, fancy cocktails, and inventive small plates.

■ **Gringo Mike's:** The Saturday night buffet is when all the locals come out to this pizzeria; gringomikescr.com.

■ **La Parcela:** A typical Costa Rican cantina on a point of land poking into the Pacific. Eat fresh seafood in the open-air dining room; laparcela.net.

■ **Jade Mar:** Take a table overlooking the water and order fresh Costa Rican basics—rice, beans, and veggies with chicken, pork, beef, or fish.

WHERE TO PLAY

■ **Dominical:** Surf forgiving beginner waves. The Green Iguana Surf Camp rents boards and offers lessons; greeniguanasurfcamp.com.

■ **Ojochal:** Ask any local for directions to the tropical swimming hole, complete with deep, clear pool, waterfall, and jungle canopy.

■ **Drake Bay:** Shawn and Vanessa will take you on any tour: kayaking, snorkeling, diving, hiking; costa cetacea.com.

■ **Corcovado National Park:** A trail from Drake Bay follows the western coastline, but the best way to see the park is with a guided tour and boat shuttle. Several lodges offer excursions. Independent guides can also be hired in Drake Bay.



WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

■ **Blue Morpho butterfly:** You can't miss this distinctive butterfly with wings the color of the sky.

■ **Crocodile:** Look down from the Tárcoles River bridge on Route 34 to see 8-footers basking on sandbars.

■ **Dolphin:** Common, rough-toothed, and spotted dolphins swim in Drake Bay and around Isla Caño.

■ **Howler monkey:** They get their name for good reason. Hear them, then see them in the forest.

■ **Sea turtles:** The olive ridley turtle nests on Isla Caño.

■ **Toucans and macaws:** The tropical birds can be seen in Corcovado National Park and elsewhere.

■ **Whales:** Isla Caño off Drake Bay offers great whale-watching.

BEST BEACHES

■ **Most romantic:** Playa Ventana, near Ojochal. The cave systems here form natural windows to the ocean, which is safe for swimming.

■ **Best beach walk:** Playa Ballena, three miles north of Ojochal, is two miles of wide, flat sand.

■ **Best beginner surfing:** Rent boards in Dominical, then head out to Playa Colonia, part of the Ballena National Marine Park.

■ **Most seduced:** Walk the wild coast trail south from La Paloma Lodge and *Aguila de Osa* Inn. You'll soon discover a private, black-sand beach. 🌴

ILLUSTRATION: MATT CASERTA