

desti nations

Caribbean & Central America

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Party in **Turks and Caicos** at Nikki Beach
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Relax at Jungle Spa in **Costa Rica**



BETWEEN MOUNTAIN AND SEA

ADVENTURER BRENDAN POWELL TREKS TO A SPA HOTEL PERCHED ON THE EDGE OF A CLIFF ABOVE THE PACIFIC.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRENDAN POWELL

AS AN ORANGE SUN SINKS INTO A PAPAYA and grenadine sky, a small gregarious community of guests trickles in from the day's activities and gathers at the bar for exotic martinis. Distracted by the panoramic view out over the Pacific, we introduce ourselves over the insistent buzzing of cicadas; others watch from the cliffside hot tub, while a honeymooning couple whispers in each other's ears. Eventually our chef walks through the intimate crowd, personally informing each guest that dinner is ready to be served

The site of our spontaneous cocktail party is Rancho Pacifico, a boutique spa hotel quite unlike any other in Costa Rica. Perched 2000 feet above the

tiny Pacific town of Uvita, the hotel is located, according to its owner, at the point in all Central America where mountains loom closest to the sea.

Far below us the beach is seemingly endless, a protected park punctuated by the distinctive landmark of the Whale's Tail, a massive sand spit that widens or disappears with the tide.

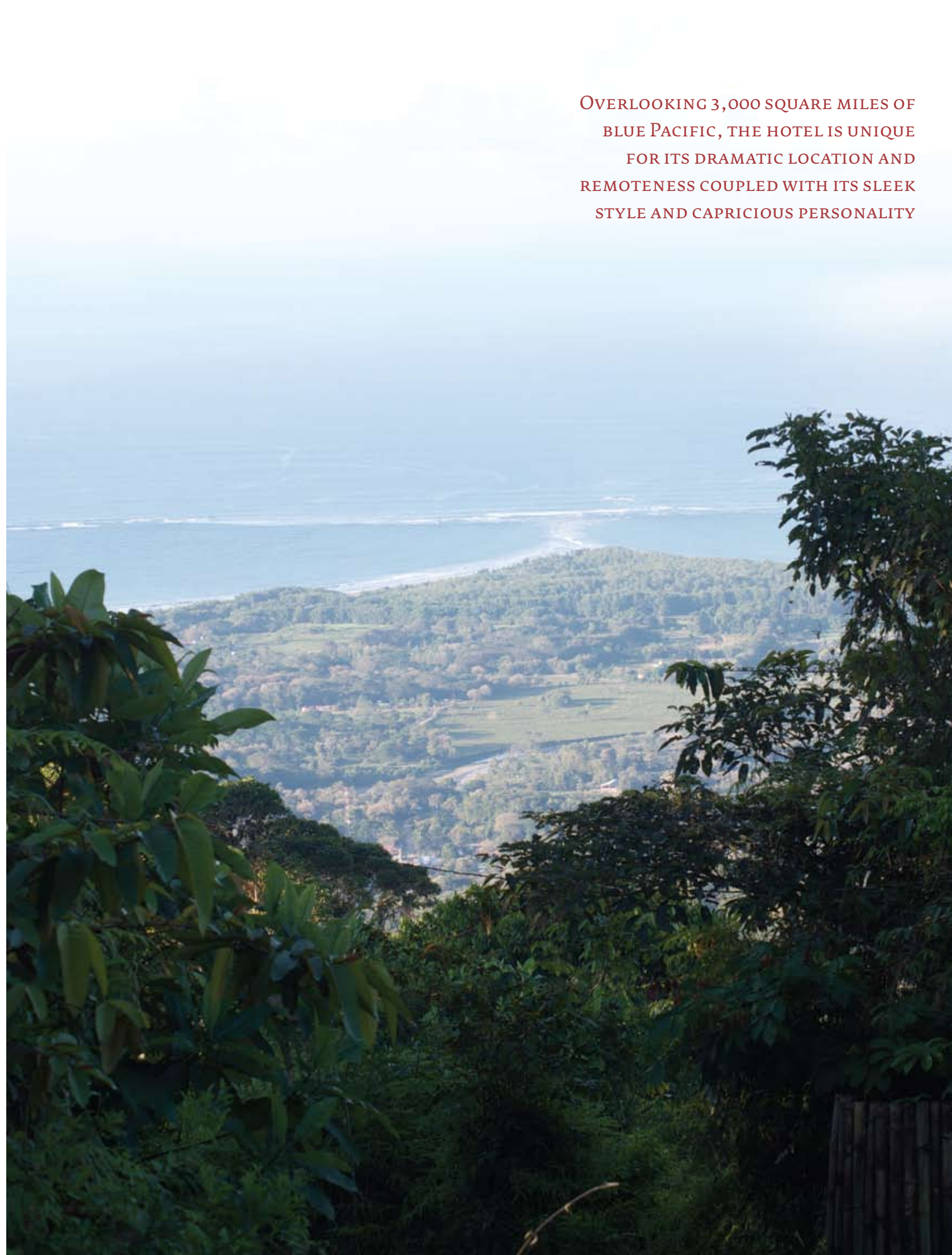
In the centre of this mostly empty beach Rancho has a friendly outpost; later in the week my girlfriend and I visit for another spectacular sunset, easily hopping a lift back to the hotel in time for a top-notch four-course dinner.





Blissfully above the worst of the mid-day heat, the hotel sits on 60 acres of private jungle, which is itself surrounded by protected primary rainforest as far as the eye can see. In the early mornings we are awoken by howler monkeys and untold birds, including the unmistakable sound of toucans. Before breakfast—and still in our robes—we have better luck birding from our balcony than we’ve had in a week of hiking trails.

Truly, the setting is superb. But what makes Rancho Pacifico most outstanding is its personality, the source of which is sitting next to me at the bar sipping vodka.



OVERLOOKING 3,000 SQUARE MILES OF BLUE PACIFIC, THE HOTEL IS UNIQUE FOR ITS DRAMATIC LOCATION AND REMOTENESS COUPLED WITH ITS SLEEK STYLE AND CAPRICIOUS PERSONALITY



NATURE IS NEVER MORE THAN AN ARM'S REACH AWAY. SPA SUITES HAVE JAPANESE-STYLE SOAKING TUB WITH A VIEW OVER THE FOREST CANOPY

Rancho Pacifico is the product of an unusual husband-and-wife team: Silvia Jimenez is both a former Miss Costa Rica and a retired ENT surgeon; Garrison Krause is a former PBS television host. The hotel is literally a product of Garrison's imagination—the design was entirely his, one without an elaborate plan. “I just built what I liked and hoped people would come.”

Garrison's aim (it seems natural to use first names, as we all do during our stay) was to accentuate as much

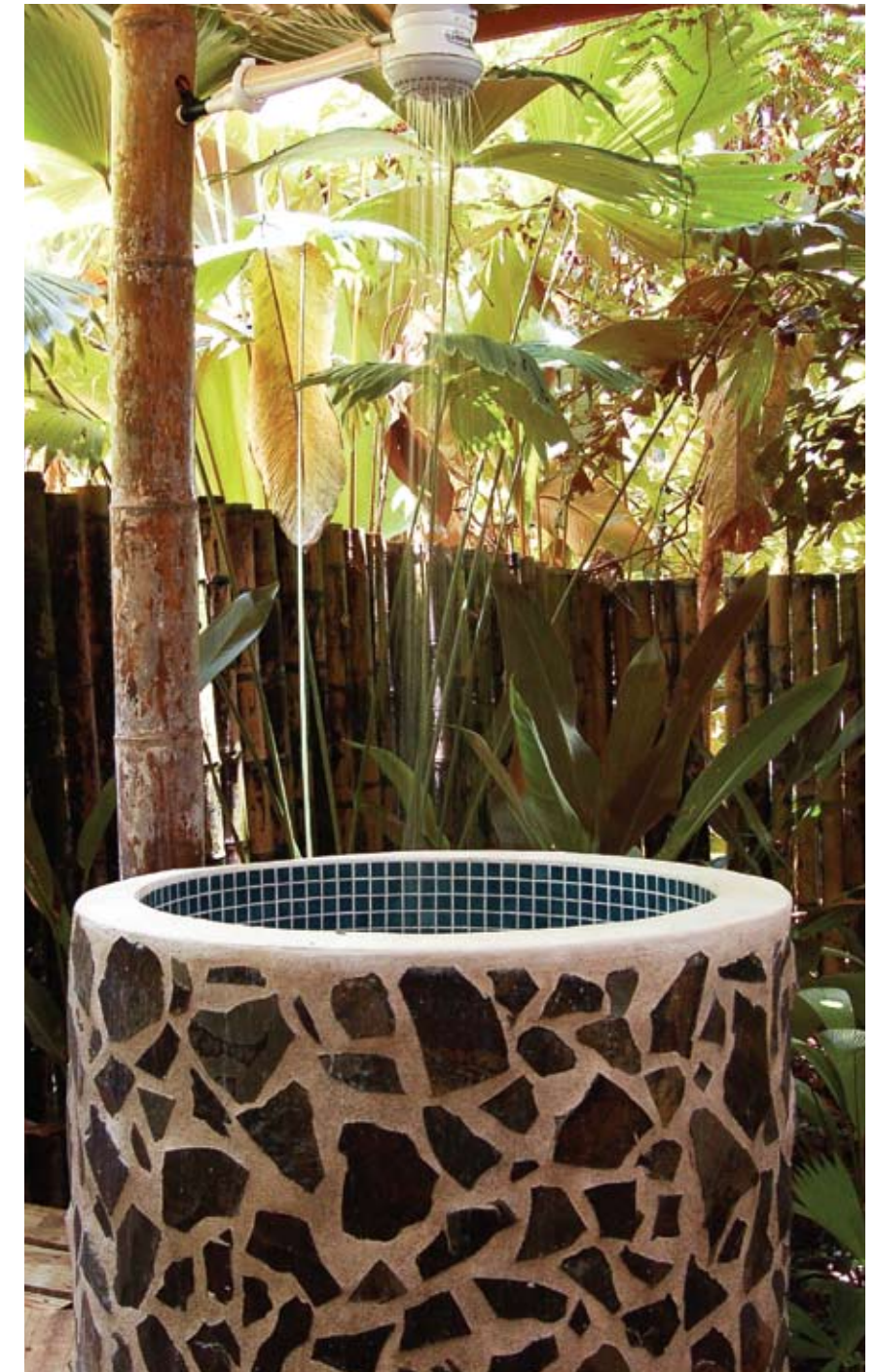
as possible the contrast between the raw environment of the Costa Rican jungle and the sleek style and delicious pampering of a luxury spa hotel.

On this front he has been unquestionably successful. There is no air conditioning; an open-concept design, high-powered ceiling fans, and the higher altitude deem it mostly unnecessary. In fact, there doesn't seem to be as much as a single pane of glass in the entire place. Instead, he has opted for screens, or better: nothing at all.

The intimate Spa Tranquila literally hangs off the edge of the mountain, in an open-walled building that invites you to step off into a sunset vista at the end of your treatment. Where greenery isn't already inside your room, it's never more than an arm's reach away.

But more distinctive is how Garrison's own personal quirks and whims have also translated into those of the hotel, from plunge pools to the 40-bottle vodka collection lined up with pride behind the bar. The result is unsurpris-





QUIRKY TOUCHES INCLUDE A TUBULAR STAND-UP BATHTUB, TYPICAL OF THE WHIMSICAL APPROACH OF THE HUSBAND AND WIFE TEAM THAT DESIGNED THE PLACE

ingly unique, unquestionably modern, and quirky without the slightest hint of kitsch.

Keeping this home-grown quality in mind during your stay can be useful, as it makes sense of the occasional incongruous elements that might not appear in a more conventionally planned

hotel. Most often these are minor, and simply add to the hotel's capricious character. (Our tubular stand-up bathtub, for example, although very groovy, would probably take 30 minutes to fill with the existing shower.)

Staff attitude also mirrors the personality of its creator: laid back, hands

off and casual like family, almost to a fault. Owners mingle with the guests, and great effort has been made to avoid reminders that this is, in fact, a hotel. Unless specifically requested, there is no constant signing of bills that sometimes punctures the serenity of magic places. The overall effect is like visiting a friend's modern, luxury mountain





ONE OF THE LAST BEST
PLACES, RANCHO SITS ON
60 ACRES OF JUNGLE
AND IS PERCHED ABOVE
PLAYA UVITA, LAUDED
FOR ITS PINK AND GOLD
PRISTINE BEAUTY





getaway in the jungle, complete with their pets Leo the cat and Tito, their ever-present miniature pinscher.

There is a certain communal experience to Rancho Pacifico, and at times I feel like I am hanging out with Garrison and a bunch of his interesting, diverse friends—which seems to be the demographic drawn to the hotel. A natural camaraderie surfaces around the bar at sunset, and several groups end up pulling tables together for dinner, an occurrence the owners say

is not unusual. This communalism thrives parallel to Rancho's obvious appeal as a honeymoon destination; a steady flow of romantic couples passes through during our stay, and the place is nothing if not romantic.

The next day's sunset proves equally arduous. Against the cicadas' continued protest, I endure a hot-stone massage while howler monkeys growl in the distance and the sun sets between my feet. The tiny spa belies its comprehensive offering, and therapists

Marco and Vivian are magicians. We decide to rename the couples' massage the "break-up massage," having both fallen instantly in love with our respective therapists.

Later, any last vestige of stress pummeled and squeezed from me, we again retire to the bar to contemplate the next day's activities. As Tito runs laps around the table our tropical cocktail party resumes; all the while the Pacific stretches to the horizon behind us ♦

IF YOU GO

At the 2007 World Travel Awards Rancho Pacifico received a nomination in the category Leading Boutique Hotels—Central and Latin America. At writing the hotel was also awaiting completion of its designation as a Small Luxury Hotel of the World.

Rancho Pacifico has five suites and one-, two- and three-bedroom villas; each of the two spa suites has a Japanese-style soaking tub with a view over the forest canopy, while villas are fully equipped with small private pools and extensive decks and full kitchen facilities. All bathrooms feature signature double showers with walk-outs to a garden or deck. Beyond the spa, the hotel can arrange activities from fishing and surfing to horseback riding and a nearby canopy zip line, in addition to arrangements in San Jose and elsewhere. Note that Rancho Pacifico maintains an adults-only policy; guests must be over 14.

Nature Air and SANSA both fly daily from the capital San Jose to Palmar Sur, less than an hour by small aircraft, with beautiful views of the mountains and coast along the way. From here Rancho Pacifico can arrange a pick-up for US\$55 per party; the drive takes less than an hour. Nature Air flights leave from the domestic Tobias Bolaños airport, located in Pavas, 20-30 minutes away from Juan Santamaria International (SJO). The SANSA terminal is next to the international one.

If you choose to arrive by land, Rancho Pacifico arranges vans from San Jose for US\$165 per party up to six, approx. 3.5 hours. If you choose to drive, be advised that the final steep climb from the coast is inadvisable without 4WD; call ahead and arrange to be met in Uvita.

Room rates start at US\$200 including breakfast, villas from US\$400; spa/dinner packages also available.

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