

S B L S

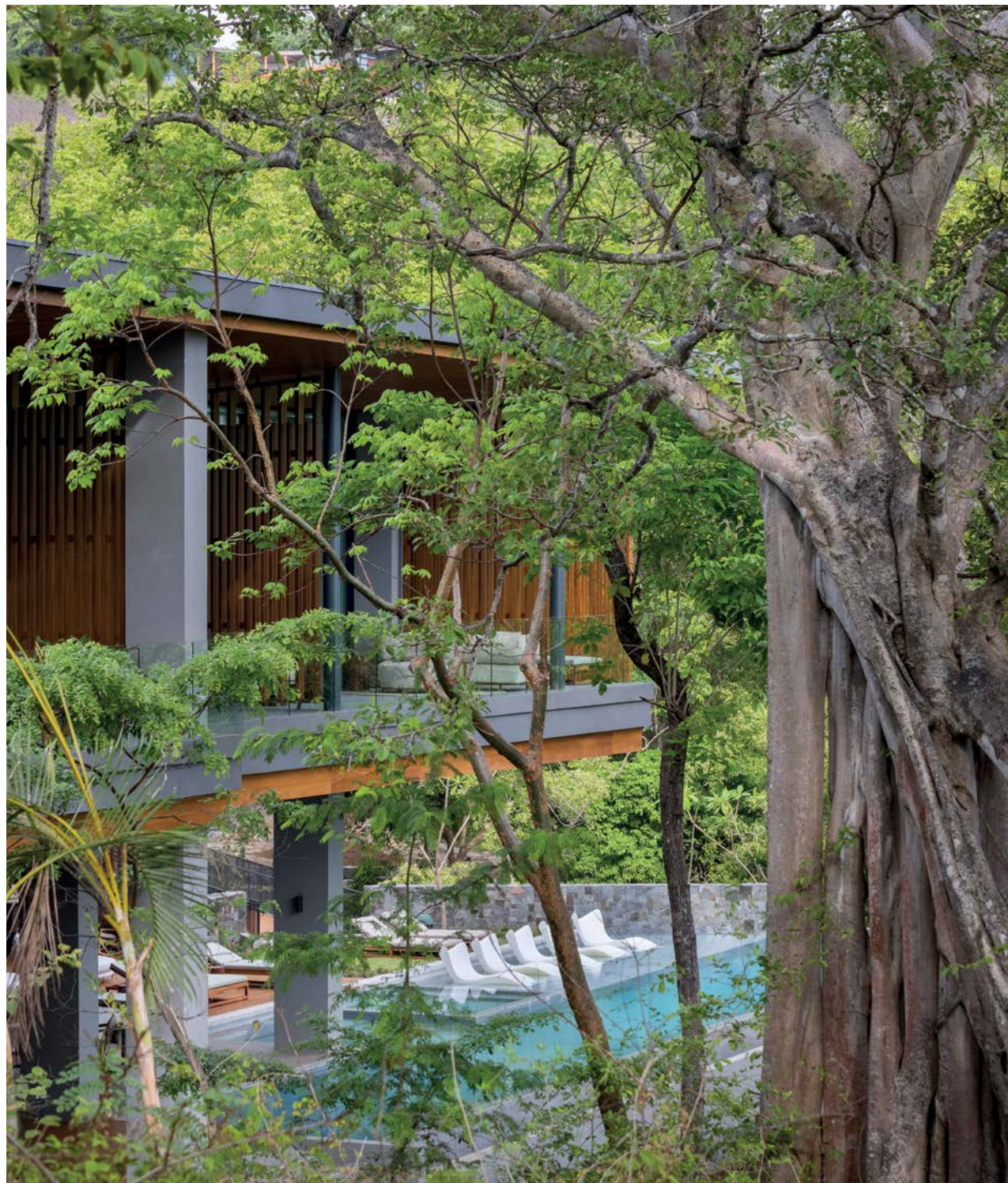
Santa Barbara Life & Style Magazine

November/December 2023



SEASON'S GREETINGS

PURA



VIDA

ADVENTURE IS ALIVE AND WELL IN THE HEART OF COSTA RICA'S LUSH PENINSULA PAPAGAYO

BY Alexandra Lee

Finally. The sound I've been waiting for. A low and intimidating call, the sound of the howler monkey, radiates deep from inside the tropical dry forest, the quintessential proof that I'm indeed in the lush bounds of Costa Rica. The distinctive howl accompanies the *whir* of flourishing palm fronds inches from my ears as the zipline nears the landing platform. I perform a graceful (or so I'd like to think) dismount, landing on tippy toes with help from my Papagayo Explorers guide, only to realize that the boyish grin on his face is a dead giveaway—the monkey noises were *him* all along. The elusive primate has escaped my grasp once again.

Though, it shouldn't have. The sign "more monkeys than humans" caught my eye on our chauffeured journey from Guanacaste Airport to Peninsula Papagayo, a lush jut of largely undeveloped land that's to be my home for the week. Rather than stay at a traditional resort, I've opted for a more customized and intimate experience at Villa Avellana, a brand-new, privately owned beachfront estate with its own expertly trained culinary team, state-of-the-art amenities, and endless list of curated activities. It's due to the limitless planning efforts of the villa's concierge team that I've wound up high in the treetops, testing out my Tarzan talents, much like the monkey I'm in search of.

Our zipline tour is rounded out, naturally, by an afternoon ropes course, though the combination of swinging obstacles and humidity ensures that "*beginner*" it is not. As I jump off a 20 foot-high platform, clutching onto nothing but a rope, I'm suddenly grateful I hadn't researched this aerial excursion beforehand. Once safely on the ground, our reward? Fresh coconuts cracked with a machete, and one final test—climb up a netted rope bridge into the gnarled branches of a Monteverde ficus tree, where a platform awaits with ice cold Coca Colas, sparkling water, nuts, and energy bars. Afternoon refreshments, of course, are best enjoyed in the tree canopies. An Indiana Jones-type Land Rover escorts us back through the forest, where I keep my eyes peeled for dark masses hiding in the foliage—I'd been lucky

enough to spot an expertly camouflaged iguana earlier. I spy something, getting momentarily excited, before realizing it's just a massive termite nest. After all, Costa Rica's comparatively tiny landmass is home to nearly 6% of the world's biodiversity, including insects.

Back at the villa, the blissful minutes of a much-needed face mask and massage slip into an hour, while the music of rhythmic ocean waves reaches the indoor-outdoor massage deck and soothes me half to sleep. Villa Avellana seamlessly melds the untamed adventure of a lush jungle backdrop with pristine coastline, boasting 330 feet of private beachfront where the bartender, Tatiana, can easily set up her collection of homemade cocktail bitters for sunset sips (and in a few hours, she does).

My massage is interrupted only by the impending nightfall, and I retreat to my room's plush duvet, awaiting an evening of wine pairings and salsa dancing ahead. The villa's 10 luxurious ensuite bedrooms are dressed in dreamy wood tones and modern neutrals, and with the addition of a kid's bunk bedroom, the residence can easily fit up to 23 guests for the adventure of a lifetime. Having made its official debut this August, Villa Avellana is available for total buyout, ideal as an intimate escape for large family milestones, blowout birthdays, wellness retreats, and even corporate bonding experiences. Between its sparkling lap pool, 12-person jacuzzi, three acres of walking trails, yoga deck, ping-pong room, and indoor theater (the list goes on), the villa's namesake and owner Mike Avellana has ensured there's more than enough action to satisfy every party, additionally distributing pre-visit surveys to customize dining and activity preferences before arrival. There are no key cards for the rooms, contributing to the villa's intentional design towards community and connection.

After indulging in a hot shower using Villa Avellana's own hair mask, I reluctantly slip from my velvety robe into evening attire, though you could just as easily wear sweatpants to dinner here. Executive Chef David Moya

presents a daily menu of locally-sourced flavors as refined and elegant as restaurant dining, but in the comfort and privacy of a home. I choose a sunset spritz from Tatiana's cocktail list, before making myself comfortable at Madera Bar for a tapas-style wine pairing dinner. First up is Moya's take on Costa Rican oysters, one fried atop a luscious aioli, the other raw in a zingy passionfruit bath. His playful "fish tacos" feature slices of fresh mahi mahi atop a red cabbage "cracker." Throughout our stay, I find that shrimp croquettes with black garlic aioli, short ribs with Costa Rican mole, and water squash ceviche in leche de tigre are all creations to write home about. The next day at lunch, red cabbage dressed in chimichurri, of all things, is what lures me back for seconds. Chef Moya's curation of a menu that's *actually* healthy, while simultaneously surprising, is an underrated and refreshing delight. To round out the night, we let down our hair and refine our salsa footwork with the help of a private instructor, the dose of vibrant Latin energy a perfect nightcap to an already chart-topping day.

The next morning I awake to the music of a thundering rainstorm. It's 7 a.m., though my remote-controlled blackout shades would have me believe otherwise. I slip to the sliding glass door that separates my suite from its private oceanview terrace, opening it just a crack, as thick humidity seeps into my air conditioned space. I realize the "rainstorm" is only a light mist, but the villa's proximity to the ocean had made it sound like a thrashing downpour. Early morning yoga is hot without intention, the humid air providing enough detoxifying heat to get the morning started. I make a new friend on my post-yoga beach walk, a tiny crab whose black-and-white speckled shell camouflages seamlessly into the volcanic sand. Little did I know, another cunning crab would sneak into the villa later that night, an unwelcome dinner guest.

Breakfasts at Villa Avellana are always a family-style ordeal. We congregate over heaps of luscious local fruit, croissants, chia seed pudding, fresh-squeezed green juice, and some sort of freshly cooked eggs—I opt for the Costa Rican-style Gallo Pinto, a dish of rice, beans, and eggs, or a fresh omelet with all the fix-ins. Morning coffee always comes with a lesson, the villa's coffee connoisseur indulging me in conversations about the daily blends—my favorite, from the Tarrazú region—and the local method of brewing, using a colorful clay pot called the vandola. The conversation here is as rich as the coffee, the dining room's family style tables prompting long discussions as a digestif to every meal.

The morning rain has postponed our yachting excursion, yet lucky for my sudden post-breakfast sweet tooth, we've scheduled a chocolate making class instead. Henrik Bodholdt, founder of Costa Rican company Maleku Chocolate, walks us through every step of the cacao-pod-to-chocolate process, and I'm surprised to

learn that the cacao fruit is actually tangy and delicious, similar to a passionfruit. As we crack open roasted cacao husks to reveal the raw nib (a laborious task, we learn) I'm even more surprised when Henrik confirms a fact I've always wished to be true: chocolate (well, raw cacao) is the world's best superfood. A dangerously rich brownie aroma infuses the air as I mold my ground cacao, which now resembles a pile of dirt, into my own chocolate bar, mixing in sugar, dried orange, and powdered milk for a custom flavor. It won't be long until my bar vanishes off the plate—for health reasons, of course.

Once the weather has cleared, we suit up for an afternoon sail on the villa's private 42-foot Boston Whaler yacht, helmed by a hand-selected captain—the villa's General Manager Thomas Freitag, who is half-Costa Rican, has personally chosen every staff member for their respective roles. Boating after a rainstorm is not for the faint of heart, as we zoom repeatedly over choppy waves, exposed to the elements on the front of the yacht. As sprays of salt water splash haphazardly into my hair, I realize this moment is true *pura vida*. Although the phrase doesn't have a true definition, I've decided that I, right now, am living it. Jagged rocks and tiny islands jut spontaneously from the gray-blue depths, the result of volcanic activity from eons ago. We dock and dive into bathtub-warm waters, swimming out to a seemingly untouched black sand beach where a secret cave lies in wait of our discovery. Every few minutes, I have to remind myself that this place is real, that the massive vines and secret caves aren't a part of some Jurassic Park movie set.

Mustering the last of the day's energy, I make my way out for a final paddleboard session on Playa Nacascolo. Guided by Thomas, who doubles as an expert spearfisher, we set out on the serene waters as the clouds finally clear, reflecting brilliant turquoise back into our eyes. He points excitedly at the odd turtle or elusive fish every now and then, even letting me borrow his polarized sunglasses, but my novice eyes only grasp bits of bright coral hiding underneath the crystalline surface. That's good enough for me.

As we return our boards and head back up the wooden ramp, we're delighted to spy an army of red crabs, pinchers up, gathering amongst the mangroves. "Do you hear that?" Thomas asks suddenly, referring to a repetitive howl from above. It's closeby. We divert our gaze from the crab colony to the trees, and there it is: a howler monkey hangs lazily between branches, calling to some invisible friend while its restless baby climbs about, as if to taunt its mother's lack of energy. *Now I can go home*, I think to myself as we drive the golf cart leisurely back to the villa, having seen my monkey. While the lush peninsula is a land of novelty, a paradise of firsts, Costa Rica has taught me that *pura vida* is all about mentality, residing with me long after I've left its aquamarine shores.*



BEDROOM

WELLNESS STUDIO



villaavellana.com