

A BATHING SUIT, SANDALS,
AND A LOVE OF THINGS
WET—FROM LOCAL
BREWS TO VOLCANIC
POOLS—ARE ALL YOU
NEED TO REVEL IN THIS
CORNER OF COSTA RICA.
BY ABIGAIL GREEN

Flip-Flop Paradise

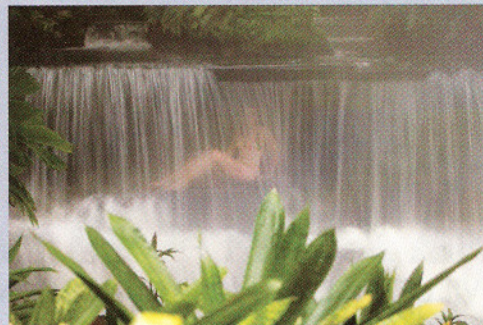
The sloth is giving me the eye. From his dry perch beneath a canopy of leaves, he's taking in the view of a sopping-wet tourist—me—dangling above the Costa Rican wilderness. I am harnessed and hanging from a cable strung through the treetops of the country's rainforest. I can see what he's thinking: "There's a reason we call this a *rainforest*."

I don't mind getting wet, though; I was prepped for precipitation. Hotel concierges, guidebooks, and even friends who had been to Costa Rica were deliberately vague when asked about the climate. While rainfall is more likely during May through November—cleverly dubbed the "green season" by a savvy tourism industry—the weather can range from sunshine to showers in the span of a few hours, so it's best to be prepared for anything. (Costa Ricans, called *ticos*, can spot the tourists by their tendency not to carry umbrellas.) No matter what time of year you go, though, there are some pre-

When my fingers start to prune, I seek out a different kind of liquid asset at one of the bars half-hidden among the mangroves. The choice is easy—a cold Imperial, the local brew. The view from here, as from most anywhere at Tabacon, is of the perfectly cone-shaped volcano, which serves as the springs' very own hot water heater.

Once I've cooled off, I slip into a different pool. This one's even warmer and includes a waterfall. Following another bather's lead, I position myself on a ledge beneath the falls and let the warm water rub the kinks out of my shoulders. So much for that masseur I was going to see later at Tabacon's on-site spa.

After an afternoon nap, I meet up with a group of Americans heading into the nearby town of La Fortuna for dinner. Our cab drops us at a plain-looking roadside restaurant—no menu, no matchbooks—where we sample the tasty *casado* tipico, a local dish featuring a dollop of beans, rice, salad, a fried



TRAVEL FILE

CURRENCY The colon (C). Major credit cards are widely accepted at hotels, restaurants, large department stores, and supermarkets. Many of the larger resorts and hotels accept U.S. dollars.

ACCESS America West, American Airlines, Continental, Delta, and U.S. Airways all fly to Juan Santamaria International Airport in San Jose, Costa Rica.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS U.S. passport (no visa necessary for less than a 90-day stay)

VACCINATIONS None is required, but the CDC recommends hepatitis A or immune globulin (IG), typhoid, and booster doses for tetanus-diphtheria and measles as needed.

dictable rewards: the Eden-like flora, the diverse fauna, and friendly locals.

What's the big deal about getting wet, anyway? It's the main attraction at the Tabacon Hot Springs Resort & Spa. Tabacon sits at the foot of the still-active Arenal Volcano in northern Costa Rica, just south of Nicaragua and midway between the Pacific and Caribbean coasts that flank the country. Like most hotels here, the resort is an eco-tourist's wet dream—rainforest views, open-air restaurants, and sturdy furniture hewn from local teak. But the highlight is the natural hot springs just down the hill, free to hotel guests.

Minutes after arrival at Tabacon, I throw on my island mufti—bathing suit and flip-flops—hop on the shuttle, and head straight to the hot springs. An attendant issues me a towel, a locker key, and a map showing a labyrinth of paths leading to interconnected pools of varying size and temperature. I pick a path and start walking. Within seconds, the bathhouse and other guests disappear from view. I slip into a bathwater-warm pool, surrounded by palm fronds and some red, waxy, thistle-like flowers. I am alone, except for the iguana. It's clear that he won't mess with me if I don't mess with him.

egg, fried plantains, and sometimes meat or chicken.

It's raining pretty hard on the morning I decide to take the world-famous canopy tour. Offered all over Costa Rica, this tour is a grown-up's version of those "zip" lines that kids once strung between two trees in their backyards. Except instead of hanging from a plastic pulley a few feet above the ground, you're helmeted, gloved, harnessed, and clipped onto a series of sturdy cables strung from trees hundreds of feet above the rainforest floor. Any reservations I had while scaling the rope ladder to the first platform evaporate when I leap into the misty air and glide through the trees.

The wildlife here puts on a show better than anything on Broadway. Our guides point out electric-blue butterflies, pointy-snouted coatimundi, and tiny, neon-green tree frogs. A howler monkey grunts in the distance, and squadrons of calling birds wing across the sky. And then there's the sloth, who, I'm convinced, is now smirking at me from his perch. I smirk back and move to the next tree-top, making memories as I go. ©

