

In search of a **PURA VIDA**

After surviving colonisation, deforestation and enforced labour, Costa Rica's Indigenous people are reviving traditions and ecosystems lost to the centuries – and visitors are welcome to join in

Words **Lina Zeldovich**

Jeffrey Villanueva picked a ripened yellow cacao fruit off the tree and hacked it open with a sharp knife, showing me the white seeds inside. On a wood-burning stove underneath the tall canopy of the Costa Rican jungle, more seeds were already roasting inside an iron pot, giving off a fragrant aroma. He stirred them with a wooden spoon and, once they were done, transferred them onto a long, hand-carved tray.

Next, he ground the dark-brown seeds by hand, unloading the tray onto a boulder before picking up a stone and rocking it back and forth across the seeds, crushing them into a powder.

“Want to try your hand at it?” he asked me in Spanish, translated by my guide, Pedro Flores. I took over the stone, which I could barely lift, and mimicked Jeffrey’s hand movements the best I could. Once the seeds were pulverised, we gathered up the powder. Soon enough, I was sipping my morning cacao drink the authentic way: boiled in water and without sugar or milk. It was a far cry from the way I make hot chocolate at home, using a pre-packaged mix.

Costa Rica is famous for its forests and wildlife, but many visitors overlook the

cultures found here. The country is home to eight Indigenous peoples, comprising 24 communities spread across the country. Each is preserving and restoring traditions, foodways and crafts, some of which were thought lost following colonisation and the arrival of the Spanish in the mid-16th century.

Jeffrey belongs to the Bröran people of the Térraba (also spelt Teribe) community, who have resided on the banks of the Térraba River in southern Costa Rica for many generations. Though traditionally hunters and fisherpeople, the Térraba also grow beans and corn, embracing the wisdom of their ancestors, which states that: to have a long, healthy life, all food must be made and eaten fresh.

The morning’s cacao-making process was a testament to that – it was the freshest, most fragrant drink of cacao I’d ever savoured.

The tour operator I’d arrived with works with the local communities to help them share traditional recipes and crafts, as well as tell their stories in their own voices. However, that history often isn’t easy to hear.

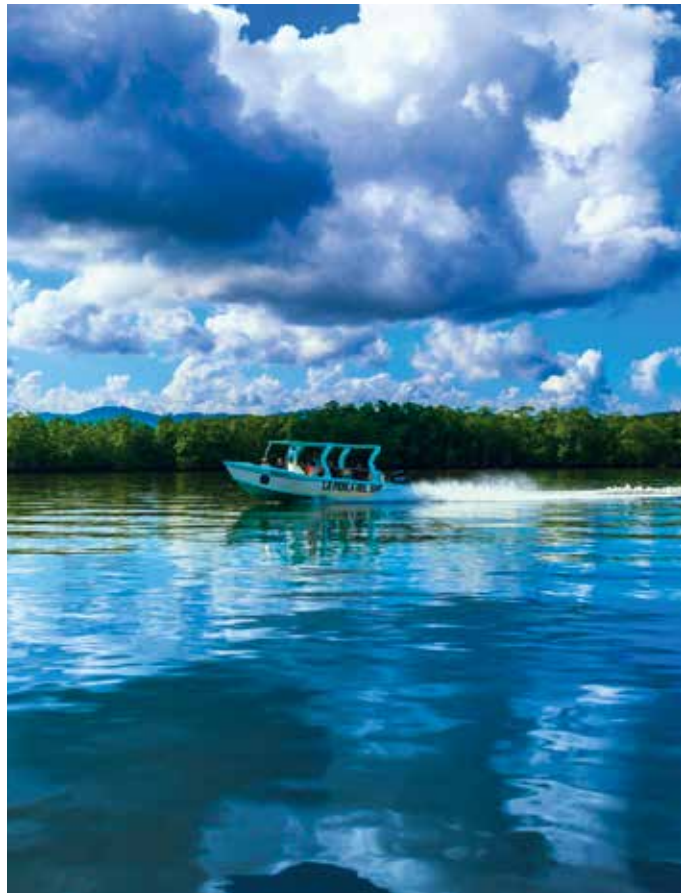
Before the Spanish arrived in Costa Rica, its Indigenous people lived off their ancestral lands for generations, taking only what was needed and conserving the rest. When ►

“Costa Rica is home to eight Indigenous peoples, comprising 24 communities spread across the country”

Down south (right) An aerial view of the remote peninsula forests of Puntarenas, a southern province that is home to a number of Indigenous peoples, including the Boruca and various Térraba communities

Alamy





Living off the land (*this page; clockwise from top*) Jeffrey demonstrates the art of roasting and grinding cacao beans to make the perfect pick-me-up – albeit one that is far from instant; the estuary of the Térraba and Sierpe rivers is home to one of the best-preserved mangrove forests in Costa Rica; a grey-capped flycatcher is one of many birds benefitting from the careful stewardship of the forests by the Bröran and Boruca peoples; (*opposite page*) grinding cacao beans by hand is hard work, but it's all part of the Bröran's wider belief system, which encourages them to freshly make all their food from scratch

Alamy, Lisa Zeldovich

the conquistadors came, they decimated communities. The ranchers who followed in their wake clear-cut entire forests for farmland and pastures, destroying the ecosystems that Costa Rica's Indigenous people relied on for fishing and hunting. Later, rubber barons forced them to work on these same plantations, breaking families apart.

But, just as Mother Nature regenerates itself, so did Costa Rica's Indigenous communities. They have spent years reviving cultures and traditions that were lost during this period, which they are now proud to share with anyone who visits. From cooking and carving to planting trees, they now welcome visitors to learn what they call *pura vida* – a pure way of life. I had arrived here to experience just that, and to see how it offered a different slant on Costa Rica's usual wildlife, nature and volcano itineraries.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MASKS

The Bröran people of the Térraba community consider themselves matriarchal, viewing women as teachers who preserve traditions down the generations. They're also known for their wood-carving skills, so later on that morning, it was arranged for me to

meet Caroline Villanueva, a female carver of ceremonial masks. She learnt the craft from her father, Bolmar, and now teaches others.

While I watched Bolmar carve a warrior mask from a chunk of timber, Caroline outlined the shape of a toucan – Costa Rica's beloved bird – on another piece of wood. She then directed me to take a chisel and mallet to it. Thanks to her guidance, about an hour later, the toucan took shape and we progressed to the painting stage. As I followed her instructions, I added more words to my measly Spanish vocabulary – *amarillo* for yellow, *rojo* for red, *verde* for green.

I also learnt that masks are hugely important to many Indigenous cultures here, representing everything from jungle animals and fearless fighters to evil spirits in festivals and celebrations. Every December, the Bröran people stage a masked performance named *Danza del Toro y la Mula* (Dance of the Bull and the Mule), symbolising the fight between the Spanish and Costa Rica's Indigenous people. At the end, the mule, representing the latter, defeats the bull, celebrating the Bröran's people's independence.

"We carve a lot of masks for this show every year," Caroline told me.

THE COLOURS OF THE BORUCA

By the peak heat of the early afternoon, I had made the short journey to reach the Boruca (aka Brunca) community. Their territory also lies in the south, and they are known for making dyes from natural materials.

Hiding from the sun in the shade of a tree, I watched as Luisa Leiva and Marina Lazaro laid out heaps of green leaves next to little balls of yarn and bowls of water.

"See all these leaves? They come from different plants," Luisa told me. She pointed at her display as Pedro translated. "They're all green, but they will make different colours once we rub them in water."

She massaged one bunch that she called *shuska* in the Borucan language, which almost instantly produced a deep purple colour. Meanwhile, Marina's heap yielded a rich indigo shade – the plant's name was *azul de mata*, which roughly translates as bush blue.

I summoned my rudimentary Spanish and asked whether green leaves can make green colour? "Si," replied Luisa, rubbing the next batch, which she called *tuente*; it quickly turned a vivid green.

By the time Luisa had finished, we had a full rainbow. A paste made from the ►





“The community believes that birds are their sisters and animals are their brothers, so the more trees they plant, the more animals will return”

achiote bush yielded a reddish-orange hue, the pulp of the mango fruit gave a rich yellow, and the bark of the amarillion tree made brown. There was also the mucus of a particular type of sea mollusc, known as the murex snail, which turned a vibrant lilac colour when left in the sun.

The snails don’t even need to be killed to create this, Luisa explained. “You just pick one up and blow on it gently. It will release a few drops of mucus, and then you put it back,” she said. “The snails come out only at certain times a year, so we have to travel down to the shore when they’re there.”

As soon as the women dipped their yarns into the bowls, the threads soaked up the dyes greedily, instantly changing colour. However, for these colours to last and not fade in the sun, the yarns would have to be boiled for hours, and sometimes even days. Once dried, the women then weave them into clothes, blankets and bags.

“For the snails, you’d have to take your textile with you and put the mucus on it right away,” Luisa said. “That snail dye is so strong that it lasts for years, even as the fabric itself falls apart.”

The practice of making natural dyes almost disappeared towards the end of the 20th century, but the Borucan women gathered the wisdom from the Elders bit by bit and revived the ancient art. “Now we’ll pass it on to the next generation,” Luisa told me.

WATCHING THE FOREST GROW

Elias Elizondo Castro, the cultural leader of the Maleku, likes to meet his guests in traditional clothing, and greeted me wearing a skirt made from the bark of the mastate tree and a matching headband. However, the majority of Maleku people wear Western clothing most of the time these days, in part because there aren’t too many mastate trees left on their territory. In fact, there aren’t many trees left at all here.

The Maleku people are still recovering from their difficult past. Although they ►



Deep in the forests (this page; clockwise from top) You can hear a howler monkey from, literally, miles away – they have one of the loudest calls in nature; the protected wetlands of Térraba-Sierpe, between Puntarenas and Golfito, are home to incredible nature; Caroline Villanueva explains the importance of masks to the Bröran people; (opposite page) the Maleku are replanting the lost forest in the hope of attracting wildlife such as the jaguar back to their land

Alamy; AWL; Lina Zeldovich



Five more Indigenous communities in Costa Rica

Cabécar

One of Costa Rica's largest Indigenous groups (nearly 17,000), the Cabécar people reside in the remote Talamanca mountains. They are a matriarchal community, who maintain centuries-old knowledge of the forests and trails, passing it down the generations.

Chorotega

The Chorotegas describe themselves as descendants of the Mexican cultures who settled in Costa Rica centuries ago. They live in the Matambú district of Guanacaste province and are known for making beautiful pottery decorated in geometric designs reminiscent of the Aztec and Maya. They also use natural dyes to paint their ceramics.

Bribri

The Bribri (meaning courageous) live throughout the Talamanca mountains. They are skilled in a number of artisanal crafts, but they are particularly known for making woven bags, hats, cups and plates, as well as crafting jewellery from coconut shells.

Huetar

The Huetars live in the Indigenous Reserve of Quitirrisí. They are predominantly farmers, though they are also known for producing woven baskets, kitchen utensils, and colourful fans made from palm tree leaves. They have an extensive knowledge of plants, which they still use for medicine.

Ngäbe

The Ngäbe weren't recognised in Costa Rica as an Indigenous community for a long time. They were considered 'outsiders', because they originally came from Panama, and it wasn't until the 1980s that they were granted their Indigenous rights. Today, they live in the southern part of Costa Rica.

Lina Zedovich





managed to avoid the conquistadors' wrath due to their remote location in the country's far north, their community was decimated in the 19th century by Nicaraguan slave traders, who kidnapped them to work in the rubber plantations. By the early 20th century, the once flourishing Maleku nation had dwindled from 6,000 to barely 250. To add insult to injury, their forests were later cut down and turned into farmland.

It wasn't until about 35 years ago that the community took back their land and began replanting trees. Today, the Maleku, who are Costa Rica's smallest Indigenous community (just 650 people), continue their reforestation efforts in a bid to restore their native ecosystem to what it once was.

Traditionally, the Maleku were hunters and fisherpeople, but with their forests gone, they switched to farming. Yet they have held fast to their traditions: the community still believes that birds are their sisters and that animals are their brothers, and that the more trees they plant, the more animals will return to their jungle home, including the jaguar.

“It wasn't until about 35 years ago that the Maleku community took back their land and began replanting trees”

“For us, forests mean life,” Elias told me. He then asked whether I'd like to help him plant some trees, and invited me to follow. As a keen gardener, I'm familiar with the task, but planting a tree in the jungle is an altogether different experience. As we walked along the narrow forest path carrying the small saplings, Elias motioned for me to stop.

“Let me check there are no poisonous snakes here,” he said, stepping off the path into the thicket. He shuffled through a thick layer of fallen leaves, cleared a small circle on the ground and nodded to me, indicating that it was safe to follow.

Breathing in the aroma of the forest floor, I dug the shovel into the black dirt. I made a hole and lowered the sapling into it, covering it with leaves. Then we sang a song in Spanish, which roughly translated to: “Grow, grow little tree and become big and strong.”

“That tree will make nuts that the toucans like to eat,” Elias told me as we returned to the path, “so more toucans will come. And other animals will follow too.” ►

The old ways (left) While modern Maleku have taken to wearing Western clothing, Elias Elizondo Castro sticks to the traditional clothes of his people, typically made from mastate bark



Embracing forest life (this page; clockwise from top left) A squirrel monkey clings to a branch in the mangroves of the Térraba-Sierpe, one of the largest wetlands in Central America; the keel-billed toucan might not be the national bird of Costa Rica (that's the clay-colored thrush!), but there are few species more synonymous with the country; cooking alongside the women of Juanilama, a community that began in the early 1990s with 125 families being granted land by the government – now it welcomes visitors to see their traditional lifestyle first-hand; making dye the Boruca way with Luisa Leiva and Marina Lazaro

BACK TO BASICS

Later that evening, as the storm clouds began to form, I arrived at the Juanilama Agro-Ecological Community, near Santa Rosa de Pocosol. Its members don't belong to any Indigenous culture, but their story is unique. They were originally a group of 125 low-income families who were gifted a parcel of land from the Costa Rican government in 1991. They chose to make the rainforest their home, but it hasn't been easy. Not everyone made the transition, explained Giselle Perez, one of the founders.

"When we first came here, we had no electricity or running water, and life was so hard that almost half the people left," she said. But those who stayed built their *pura vida* by raising farm animals and growing fruit and veg in the vast jungle.

Yamileth Soto Mendez, another founder, began cooking dinner on a woodburning stove in the community kitchen, underneath a wooden canopy. More women joined in, and so did I, following their instructions at grinding cheese, frying plantains and folding *enyucados* – a dish of cassava stuffed with ground beef and chorizo sausage. Soon

enough, the enyucados were sizzling in hot oil inside the cast-iron pans, while the fried plantains were cooling off on plates.

Just then, lightning painted the dark sky as torrential rain began to pour. A few seconds later, the electricity cut out, leaving us almost

in the dark, save for the stove fire. None of that fazed the women of the Juanilama community, who continued setting up the table and shoving wood into the fire. One of them tapped on her phone and hot salsa music suddenly filled the space.

"Forward step, then back," Giselle said, showing me the dance moves.

She took breaks to flip the enyucados in the darkened kitchen as the other women cheered me on. Around us, the rain pounded and the thunder roared, but our cooking and dancing lesson went on until dinner was ready.

As we were sitting down to enjoy our meal, I realised that I'd had more than a cooking and dance class; I'd just had a lesson in *pura vida* – the concept woven into the Costa Rican psyche so tightly that it's essentially their second nature. Life is beautiful, no matter what happens, it says. It's a lesson that we could all embrace. **W**

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**Need to know****When to go**

Costa Rica is visitable year-round. The **dry season** is roughly December to April, though it varies across the country, depending on which coast you're on. Between May and November is the **wet season**, though this can often mean a mix of sunshine and sudden showers throughout the day.

**Getting there & around**

British Airways (ba.com) offer non-stop flights to San José from London Gatwick Airport for around £580 return, taking 11.5 hours. **Delta** (delta.com), **JetBlue** (jetblue.com) and other major airlines all require connections.

**Currency & visa**

Currency: The Costa Rica colón is currently around CRC677 to the £UK. US dollars are widely accepted across the country.

Visa: Not required by UK nationals for stays of up to 180 days.

**Carbon offset**

A return flight from **London to San José** produces 968kg of carbon per passenger. *Wanderlust* encourages you to offset your travel footprint through a reputable provider. For advice on finding one, visit wanderlustmagazine.com/inspiration/sustainable-travel.

**Where to stay**

In San José, the author stayed at **Hotel Presidente** (hotel-presidente.com). Other accommodations on the tour itinerary ranged from modern hotels to stays within Indigenous communities' homes.

