


Central America and the Caribbean > Costa Rica

REVIEW:

Nekajui, A Ritz-Carlton Reserve: First Guest

The perfect distillation of Costa Rica's myriad attractions.

 SAVE

ROOMS

107

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Why book?

For the perfect distillation of Costa Rica's myriad attractions: verdant nature, clear blue water, wildlife galore, and the freshest food you'll ever eat. Also, there's a funicular.

Set the scene

Peninsula Papagayo, a manicured coastal enclave in the northwestern Guanacaste region, has been attracting tourists since the Four Seasons opened a resort there 20 years ago. Andaz followed ten years later, and like clockwork we have a third property on the roster. The trio are distinct despite their proximity and shared resources like the golf course and adventure outfit Explorers, with whom you can canoe and zipline. It's a situation of symbiotic luxury, wherein Nekajui ("garden" in the language of the indigenous Chorotegan people) fits like a bird of paradise brooding atop its nest on the hill. From this vantage point, you've got a clean view of the densely-wooded, monkey-populated hillside that slopes down to the Pacific. No matter where you stand—in one of the three pools (one of which is adults-only), on the suspension bridge that links the main structure (La Casona) with some of the accommodations—you'll have a stunning view of sunset.

The backstory

For the unfamiliar, Ritz-Carlton Reserves are the steady five-star brand's deepest delve yet into uber-luxury. I've heard it described a few ways: as an answer to Aman; "if the whole hotel was club level"; and, of course, like these properties are the reserve label bottles of the Ritz-Carlton vineyard, and are accordingly more refined. Amplifying the exclusive mise en scene—it feels like you're staying at a particularly prosperous friend's cultivated estate—is the low room count. There just won't be that many people around, proportional to space.

The rooms

Rooms here run the gamut from standard bedrooms orbiting main building La Casona and its courtyard to farther-

flung suites and villas. No matter their size, and most of them are considerably capacious, these rooms are totally comfortable and unpretentious with carved wood motifs on the walls and smooth terrazzo floors. In the suites, a humble entryway gives way to a massive living room complete with a sectional, coffee table, and built-in shelving that conceals a big TV—if you want to unplug while you're here, and you should, you can pretend it isn't there. The tech is serious but unobtrusive, with extensive but easy-to-follow commands for light dimming and ceiling fan operating. The floor-to-ceiling glass doors that line the west-facing wall to make the most of a stunning hillside view are easily blocked from light and prying eyes by curtains at the push of a button. Ocean-facing balconies, a guarantee across any room category, may or may not have a plunge pool.

If the suite sounds like the most lavish option, know that that title actually goes to the tents. There are three of them and they sit at the lowest elevation of all the accommodations—just a hop, skip, and tumble from the beach below. Each has two bedrooms—the third tent's second is a bunk room, while the other two are perfectly symmetrical in their king bed floor plans. Linking these rooms is a massive sunken living room that, when the flaps are open, bleeds seamlessly into the deck with its deep couches and plunge pool.

Food and drink

Ask anyone working on the food and beverage here how they like working in Costa Rica and they might as well sing back their exultant response. The food here is good in part because they are good at what they do, but if you ask them it's all in the natural bounty of quality produce and meat. Led by the intrepid Chef Lulu Elizaga, the food program here is top notch and indelible across several locations. There's Mirador, Elizaga's breakfast concept with a charming tray-to-table continental option wherein you can pick your fresh fruit, pastries, and charcuterie from a beautiful presentation brought to your tableside (you must also try the skirt steak and eggs, so simple and so good). Upstairs, Café Rincon is an excellent, casual eatery with fabulous Costa Rican coffee (some of which is roasted onsite) as well as a pastry case laden with buttery croissants and inventive pastries and a menu with such ways to start the day as breakfast burritos and acai bowls.

At night, Elizaga hands over control of the Mirador space to chef Diego Muñoz for his Peruvian dinner concept Puna, where ceviche and oysters kick off a potentially long and always fabulous meal that touches bone marrow, chicken and prawn escabeche, and some seriously succulent pork belly. Lulu, meanwhile, has designed the dinner down at Iberian-inflected Niri Beach Club, where the soft smell of smoke shifts in the ocean breeze thanks to the open kitchen with its wood burning ovens. Not to be missed down this way are the grilled catch of the day, pillowy tortilla de patatas, and flatbreads (called cocas) with Iberico ham and figs.

The spa

Nimbu Spa & Wellness, tucked down by the tents, is a real showstopper with its massive hydrotherapy infinity pool down to which you descend in your robe from a grand stair. There's a ladies' and a gentlemen's flanking the stairwell on this upper entry level, each outfitted with a cold plunge, sauna, steam room, and showers inside and out. Chef Lulu has built a light and breezy menu of salads (clean proteins like black beans and grilled chicken addable), smoothies, and juices for easy digestion pre- or post-pamper. The treatments are straightforward—body scrubs, massages, facials in any combination.

The area Peninsula Papagayo is probably as close to a country club as you can get in Costa Rica, what with the trimmed grass lawns of its entry checkpoint. But beyond the gates, this place is still wild and wildly committed to conservation via various initiatives that you can read about [here](#). Expect to see monkeys (both howler and white-faced), koatis, and perhaps even a leopard. There's also the Explorers outfit, which offers all sort of adventures up and down the 11-mile coastline from zip lining and a ropes course high in the canopy of 250-acre Palmares Preserve to canoeing (they have a windjammer) and snorkeling in the crystalline water.

The service

This is quintessential Costa Rican hospitality. Earnestly friendly and smiling, the staff will know your name—and you'll

want to know each of theirs. Every room has a dedicated Manzu (Chorotegan for “friend”) whose job is to assist you however they can (they are never lurking nor will you feel guilty if you don’t really need much from them—you can get their Whatsapp on check-in and chat with them that way.) Need a golf cart to ferry you to the beach? Not sure when your dinner at Puna is? Ask your Manzu, they’ll take it from there.

For families

Costa Rica has long been an excellent destination for families for those aforementioned adventure activities that, here, are provided in spades by Explorers. On property, there’s also a fully-staffed kids’ club if you need some time apart for whatever reason. The playground here may be one of the world’s cutest with its bug-shaped jungle gym.

Accessibility

Elevators and ramps make the main structure easily traversable for all, while a golf cart can easily be called upon to ferry guests elsewhere when needed. The funicular ensures any and everyone can reach Niri Beach Club, although the stairs thereafter make the beach less accessible.

Anything left to mention?

Keep your eyes and ears peeled for secret experiences you can enjoy onsite, as well as the development of site-exclusive activities like stargazing.

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