

SELLING "GREEN" STYLE

These boutique hotels in Costa Rica make sustainable tourism a reality

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At this year's EXPOTUR Travel Mart held in May, Costa Rica Minister of Tourism Carlos Ricardo Benavides stated it very simply: "Sustainability is an obligation of all of us on this planet," he said. This was true 10 years ago when the Costa Rican Tourism Institute (ICT) set up the Certificate of Sustainable Tourism, or CST. (www.sustainable-tourism.co.cr). Now, even more than ever, it's time for travel agents and tour operators to sell sustainable tourism in Costa Rica.

Briefly, the CST is a rating system based on a scale of 0-5 with level-five green leaves considered a model of sustainable tourism. It's a voluntary certification program open to lodgings, tour operators, airlines and car rental agencies within Costa Rica. The CST certification standards are rigorous; there are still only a handful of lodgings with full five-leaves status, but more are applying every day.

No one is more informed about sustainable tourism in Costa Rica than Glenn Jampol, president of the National Ecotourism Society or Camara Nacional de Ecoturismo (CANAECO). Jampol was on the original committee that set up the CST guidelines a decade ago. He was in New York City recently to accept an award from the Rainforest Alliance, (www.rainforestalliance.org) and travels the world lecturing and consulting about sustainable tourism.

"The CST guidelines are very strict," says Jampol. "Every set of questions, and there are about 1,000 of them, have to be backed up by evidence. Our guests are also part of the process in that we ask them to evaluate their experience during their stay. Now about 12-15 percent of them choose sustainability as the most important element

of their trip. Sustainability is about saving money, too, and that's good business. Our goal at the National Ecotourism Society is that [some day] we won't need the society anymore, because everything will be sustainable."

Jampol and his wife Teri Jampol are owners of Finca Rosa Blanca Coffee Plantation and Country Inn (www.fincarosablanca.com, 506-2269-9392), located just 20 minutes from San Jose's international airport above the Central Valley. A boutique hotel and one of the country's most exclusive hideaways, Finca Rosa Blanca offers 13 unique suites focused on coffee culture, comfort, art and design. The hotel features a restaurant and bar with magnificent views, a full-service spa, private tours of its organic shade-grown certified coffee plantation, as well as guided volcano tours, bird watching, nature walks, horseback tours, and an infinity chemical-free swimming pool and Jacuzzi hot tub. Finca Rosa Blanca continues to achieve the highest five-leaves CST status.

The Jampols also own **Arenas del Mar Beach & Nature Resort** (www.arenasdelmar.com, 506 2777-2777), which is on the Central Pacific coast of Costa Rica. The first hotel to be built according to the strict CST standards, Arenas del Mar is a 38-room beach and nature resort with spectacular views of the Manuel Antonio National Park. Nestled in 11 acres of rainforest above two tree-shaded white-sand beaches, the resort has guestrooms, apartments and suites offering great ocean views, elegant dining in two restaurants with a focus on fresh local ingredients, two fresh-water swimming pools with views of the rainforest and beach, and a spectacular spa. Arenas del Mar's personalized service aims to exceed guest

expectations, and the resort is the perfect model of sustainability with the full five-leaves CST status.

San Jose's Hotel Grano de Oro (www.hotelgranodeoro.com, 506 2255-3322) is considered to be the city's best property and consistently gets top billing according to *Travel & Leisure* and *Condé Nast Traveler*. Situated on a shady street just off Paseo Colon, the city's main thoroughfare, the Grano de Oro was converted from a tropical Victorian mansion into a 40-room hotel, and it maintains the warmth and comfort of a private home. A member of the Small Distinctive Hotels of Costa Rica, this charming property also has an extensive sustainability program and is in the process of getting its CST status. The hotel signed the Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children and Adolescents from Commercial Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism in Costa Rica. In 2003, the owners of Hotel Grano de Oro opened Casa Luz, (www.casaluz.org), a home for young mothers who have been sexually abused and/or exploited.

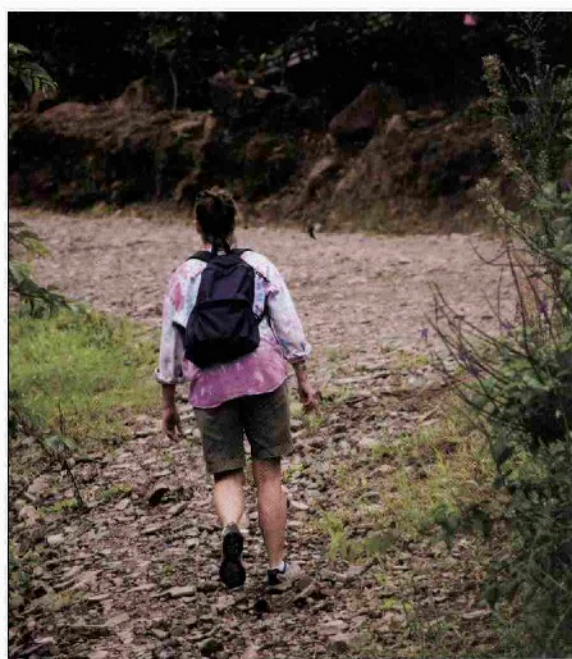
On the beautiful Osa Peninsula (soon to be named a UNESCO World Heritage Site), Lapa Rios Ecologde (www.laparios.com, 506-2735-5130) is another excellent green choice for your clients. Lapa Rios is an upscale 16-bungalow eco-lodge in the middle of 1,000 acres of preserved rainforest prized for its biodiversity. The 60-plus staff members are from the local isolated area, and environmental education is fundamental to the employees and international guests' experiences. The development of the local primary school is mostly funded by the lodge's Traveler's Philanthropic outreach. Lapa Rios has the full five-leaves CST

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Costa Rica is a world leader in sustainable tourism.

status and is consistently voted one of Latin America's top resorts by *Condé Nast Traveler, Travel & Leisure* and Andrew Harper.

On the Nicoya Peninsula, there are two eco-lodges worth mentioning for their sustainable practices. The Harmony Hotel (www.harmonynosara.com, 506-2682-4114) is the perfect combination of low-key luxury, wellness and sustainability. Situated on the Guiones Beach in Nosara, a spot famous for its beautiful surroundings and impressive surf, this is an excellent place for your clients to unwind, relax and get in tune with their natural rhythms. The Harmony is a 25-room hotel with a strong focus on sustainability striving to show an alternative development model by taking into consideration the local community and the surrounding natural wonders. The hotel caters to upscale surfers, yoga enthusiasts, honeymooners and families with older children looking for an authentic and relaxed experience. The Harmony Hotel restaurant features mostly vegetarian dishes, a raw food juice bar and a Healing Center, a place of restoration, nurturing and peace.

Also on the Nicoya Peninsula in Santa Teresa, Latitude 10 Resort (www.latitude10resort.com, 506-2640-0396) is a sustainable hotel that not only connects guests with nature, but also respects it in all areas of operation. Latitude 10's five casitas were designed and built by a local architect without any trees being cut down. The wooden

structures enable one to sleep completely in harmony with nature. A favorite with surfers, this resort also offers horseback riding excursions, tropical canopy tours, and boat and fishing excursions. In respect for the beaches here, the Malpais/Santa Teresa area has met strict environmental standards allowing it to proudly fly the Blue Flag or Azul Ecologica since 2001.

The new Springs Resort and Spa (www.thespringscostarica.com, 954-727-8333 or 506-2401-3310) is located 1,000 feet above the Arenal Valley with impressive views of the Arenal volcano from each of its 54 sizeable guestrooms, suites and villas. The resort features 18 pools of natural hot and cold springs, four restaurants, five bars and a full-service spa. In addition, the Springs has a Wildlife Rescue Centre where six out of seven wild cat species now make their home.

ICT also has been encouraging the reclamation of rural areas that had been cleared for cattle and dairy farms. A good example of this is Rancho Margot (www.ranchomargot.org, 506-2479-7259), which was started six years ago by Juan Sostheim and his family. "It was 400 acres with no trees, but I saw it for what it could be" says Sostheim, a former chemist. "My goal was to create a self-sufficient ranch integral to the community. With

on the slopes of San Gerardo de Dota, just south of San Jose. Owner Efran Chacon first saw the property in the early 1960s when he was out exploring the primary tropical cloud forest with his brother. From a simple family farm, the Savegre has grown to a five-star property with a four-leaves CST status. The Savegre offers 20 suite rooms and 20 standard rooms surrounded by lush gardens. The Bromelias Restaurant specializes in trout freshly caught from the Savegre River. At Les Robles Bar and Café, guests can share the day's adventures or stay in touch with friends via Wi-Fi Internet. The Savegre's 1,000-acre private reserve property is next to Los Quetzales National Park, Costa Rica's newest and the best place to sight the resplendent quetzal. Matilde Chacon, the founder's granddaughter, runs the new Rio Spa.

Of special note, the intimate Monte Azul (www.monteazul.com), designed by partners Carlos and Randall, is an exquisite boutique property dedicated to nature, art and design. Located south of San Jose above the Chirripo River in a cloud forest, Monte Azul is on Condé Nast Traveler's 2010 Hot list.

Costa Rica in a joint effort with France, the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and other U.N. agencies

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education, tourism and production we work with students and tourists to experience agro-tourism in a sustainable way. We produce our own energy using bio-digesters, and we use waste kitchen oil to make soaps and bio-diesel fuel. We also have an extensive Spanish language program and yoga teacher training. We are totally sustainable."

Another successful family-run sustainable property is the Savegre Hotel, Natural Reserve and Spa (www.savegre.com, 866-549-1178 or 506-2740-1028)

earlier this year announced the creation of the U.N. Global Partnership for Sustainable Tourism. This organization has been formed to help governments and businesses make all tourism, everywhere, become more environmentally, socially and economically sustainable. So when you sell Costa Rica, you can sell the attractions of sustainable tourism as well. @

For more information, visit www.visitcostarica.com.