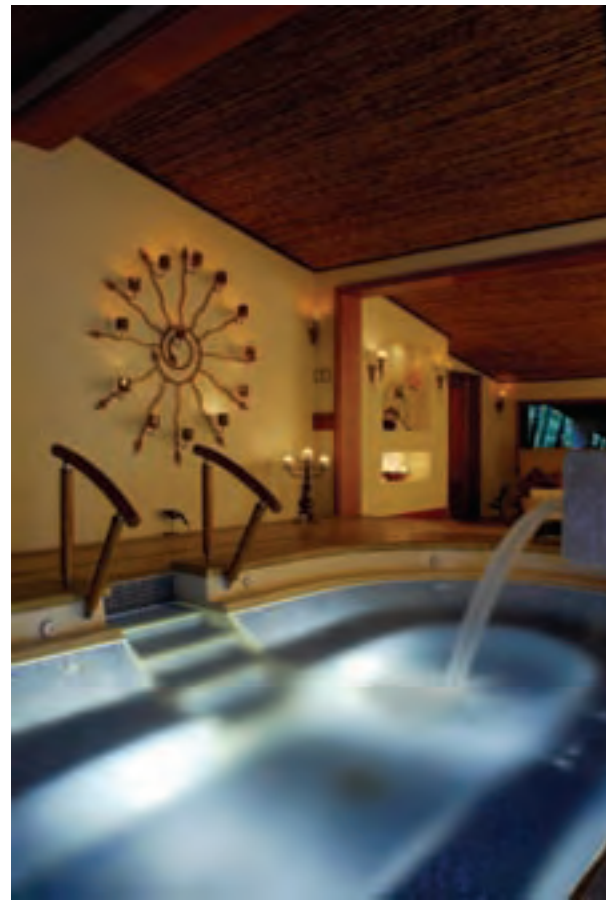


A photograph of a spa area. In the center, a tall, narrow stone structure holds a steaming hot spring. The steam is visible rising from the top. On either side of the hot spring are wooden lounge chairs with cushions. In the foreground, a swimming pool with blue mosaic tiles is visible. The background shows arched doorways leading to other parts of the resort. The lighting is warm and ambient.

Natural

By Judy Alexandra DiEdwardo

Costa Rica's pristine, five-star luxury rain forest resort with steaming volcanic hot springs, stellar cuisine and a state-of-the-art spa.



iving in the tropics, I never imagined being lured to soak in northern Costa Rica's steaming volcanic hot springs while watching plumes of steam waft from the nearby active Arenal volcano. If anything, I am always eager to travel north to cooler temperatures.

But “hot” at Tabacón Grand Spa Thermal Resort in La Fortuna de San Carlo, a three hour drive north of San Jose, is quite different. Tucked within 400 acres of northern Costa Rica's lush tropical rain forest in the Arenal volcano foothills, year round temperatures hover comfortably in the 80s thanks to its geography and the natural cooling effect of the ubiquitous vegetation that drapes the landscape. Add to that the exotic chatter of Toucans and Howler monkeys from the rain forest canopy above, and a soak in 100-plus degree mineral-rich thermal water cascading through exotic tropical gardens is a world away from the chlorinated hot tub at the Marriott. It's downright dreamy.

That's what visitors to these natural hot springs probably thought when they first flocked to this volcanic wonder in the 1980s, when there was little more than a small restaurant catering to bathers in search of the mineral-rich springs' healing properties. But in 1993, a group of Costa Rican investors capitalized on its potential and began building an eco-friendly world-class hot springs complex. Through a series on renovations and advancement, Tabacón expanded. Today, this world-class, five-star, high-tech resort features 114 luxury rooms and a full spectrum of resort amenities that include restaurants and a world-class spa.

INTERNATIONAL KUDOS Tabacón has received numerous international awards including the coveted five-star certification, making it one of the top resorts in Costa Rica. In addition, *Travel + Leisure* magazine readers voted Tabacón as one of the highest ranking hotel spas in Mexico, Central and South America in the 2006

World's Best Awards Readers' Poll, while *Spa Finders* and the readers of *Luxury Finder* magazine named Tabacón among the 10 best mineral spring spas in the world.

Tabacón also holds a certification for sustainable tourism from the Costa Rican Tourism Board and the World Tourism Organization for creating a natural paradise without endangering the environment. Even though the country covers an area the size of West Virginia, it is home to six percent of the planet's bio diversity. Concerned about preserving this natural treasure, Tabacón has developed several sustainability plans and programs, such as using biodegradable, organic products, using the hot springs for 100 percent of the resort's hot water, protecting water sources from pollution, and using hydroelectric power.

For the second consecutive year, Tabacón received the World Travel Award as the leading resort in Costa Rica. The prestigious award represents votes received from

more than 100,000 travel agency professionals and tour operators from over 200 countries worldwide. The most recent feather in Tabacón's already impressive crown is its recently awarded membership to The Leading Hotels of the World, giving this 114-room tropical getaway a well earned distinction for its level of service.

WORLD-CLASS SPA EXPERIENCE Tabacón's spa is a story unto itself. It is the brainchild of General Manager Uwe Wagner whose 35-plus years experience in the luxury resort and spa industry explains his affinity for the elegant simplicity of Asian design in creating the open-air Grand Spa. More than 40 spa treatments, as well as group yoga classes, span the spectrum from traditional facials and massages to specialty marine and volcanic mud wraps to the more exotic Thai and Watsu massage.

New to Tabacón is a pre-Hispanic steam bath ritual that is widely used in Mesoamerican cultures as both a



spiritual and physical cleansing experience. Similar to the native American Indian sweat lodge, participants in Temazcal sit inside womb-like adobe huts where a resident local Shaman applies a series of therapeutic practices including massage, hydrotherapy, aromatherapy, chanting, visualization, and meditation exercises while guiding the mind to a state of relaxation, awareness and well being. Additionally, the heat and the healing properties of different medicinal plants used in the therapy are reputed to alleviate bone, muscle and other systemic afflictions.

Guests lounge in oversized chaises at a private spa pool sanctuary before being ushered off to individual spa treatments in one of 13 outdoor therapy bungalows, replete with private jacuzzis set against the unrelenting sound of the miles of springs that wind throughout the grounds.

The spa experience is highlighted by resident spa concierge, a 20-something native Costa Rican from the nearby town of La Fortuna, who takes personal attention to new heights. Imagine a dotting spa butler who plies you with chilled fruit sorbets and chocolates while fluffing your pillow and adjusting your headrest while awaiting to escort you to your spa bungalow? If anything is to be stolen from this resort, it will surely be him. ^{stb}

Tabacón Grand Spa Thermal Resort is open year round. Rates are from \$215. For reservations and information call 877-277-8291 or access their website at: www.tabacon.com.



Adventure Attractions

ARENAL NATIONAL PARK AND VOLCANO: This pristine, native park offers stellar views of the smoldering volcano and actual lava flow activity. The Arenal Volcano rises to more than 5,000 feet at its summit, although the exact summit height changes frequently due to the volcanic activity. It has been active since 1968 and continuously ejects gases, water, fumaroles, and sometimes the eruptions are accompanied with powerful thunder and/or lava emissions. It is possible to see the Volcano erupting from the resort or from the hot spring's area. In the park, short hiking trails go through some young secondary forests and old lava from previous eruptions. Park rangers keep a sharp eye on the volcanic activity and alert visitors to which trails are open.

LAKE ARENAL: This is the largest in Costa Rica and offers many year-round activities: windsurfing, fishing, boat tours, kayaking, horseback riding and mountain biking along the shore. Lake Arenal was enlarged to three times its original size to form a basin for the area's hydroelectric project, which now provides up to 40-percent of the country's hydroelectric supply. Windmills catch the wind that whips along the top edge of the Tilarán mountains on the west side of the lake. The lake's other claim to fame is its rainbow bass sport fishing.

SKY TREK: New from Costa Rican Sky Adventures, and not for the faint hearted or height-phobic, the Sky Trek cable system takes visitors to the highest point of the Arenal Reserve. Located a short 20-minute ride from Tabacón, Sky Trek consists in an elevated zip line system that includes eight cross-sectional 5/8-inch steel cables with a total length of 1.7 miles that cover distances from 98 to 2,400 feet, and a height from 65 to 650 feet. The cables wind through and above the trees for picture-perfect views of the Arenal Volcano and Arenal lake. Adventurers are secured in a state-of-the-art harness system that is attached to the cable, which travels to each of the eight elevated Sky Trek stations where guides assist every step of the way. www.skytram.net