DESTINATION OF THE YEAR: UNLOCKED

1. BAJOS DEL TORO
En route from San José to La Fortuna, stay at a lake ecodome in the cloud forest. At El Silencio Lodge & Spa, the staff will quickly leave you alone morning coffee to enjoy on your deck along with awe-inspiring mountain views. "Take a hike along the lodge’s private trails," says Angélica Núñez, an on-site ecologist, which traces a pristine creek until you reach a grand waterfall. Along the way, the ecocentric will enlighten guests about the vulnerable cloud forest ecosystem. The lodge also arranges a unique cultural experience such as tortilla making at a local home.

2. LA FORTUNA
An epicenter of adventure, La Fortuna magnetizes travelers with two natural wonders: Arenal Volcano, rising over the land with its emerald slopes and cratered peak, and La Fortuna Waterfall, which pours forth from a 220-foot cliff. Spend the night in a cliff-top tent with spectacular rainforest views at Naranjo Tent Camp. To further elevate this only-in-Costa Rica experience, take a private cocktail-making class at La Fortuna Pub in downtown La Fortuna and follow it with a night of dancing.

3. SANTA TERESA
This small, walkable beach town in the southern Nicoya Peninsula is heaven on earth for surfers, adventurers, and expats from all over. Whether or not you stay at the beachfront boutique Hotel Namaste, make a point of eating on-site at Manz. The Pure Vida Tasting Menu is an amazing introduction to elevated Costa Rican cuisine, and the restaurant is right on the beach. Or, walk to local restaurants serving a range of cuisines, from Katana for Asian to Tierra y Fuego for Italian. After, spend a day exploring Cara Wildlife Refuge, a hidden gem where a knowledgeable private guide can point out white-faced and howler monkeys as well as white-tailed deer, the national symbol of Costa Rica.

4. NOSARA
This beach-town gem has an inviting, peaceful aura. Here, discover the wholesome, simple lifestyle that makes the Nicoya Peninsula an idyllic place to unwind. From Casa Hacienda to the charming Hacienda Buena Vista, Nosara offers a variety of accommodations for those seeking a retreat from the hustle and bustle of daily life. The beach is perfect for swimming, surfing, or simply lazing in the sun with a good book.

5. OSA PENINSULA
If you want to disconnect from everything, go to Cabo Matapalo, a hidden spot on the Osa Peninsula’s southern tip. The main draw is Corcovado National Park, teaming with monkeys, snakes, and even pumas. Check into the all-inclusive Lapa Rios Lodge that is set on a 1,000-acre reserve. The property’s expert concierge can arrange private kayaking, scuba diving, whale/dolphin watching excursions, or surfing lessons. After dark, experience the marvel of bioluminescence on a nearby beach.

6. ZONA DE LOS SANTOS
For the ultimate coffee lover’s tour, start in Santa María de Dota. This small village in the cloud forest is the first of several coffee-growing towns named after saints in the Zone de los Santos (Zone of the Saints). Along the 15-mile route, visit plantations dotting the lush mountains where some of the world’s best coffee beans grow. Arrange a private tour and tasting at a coffee farm such as Monte Copys, which is nestled in the cloud forest with waterfall access and lookouts. In the jungle, keep an eye out for the elusive quetzal—a resplendent bird with iridescent green and red plumage and long tail feathers.

7. THE TALAMANCA MOUNTAIN RANGE
Once you reach Santa Elena, unpack your bags at the Hacienda AltaGracia Auberge Resorts Collection, an all-inclusive luxury mountain retreat with a spa, coffee farm, horse stables, pools, and more. Explore on horseback, take riding lessons, or try horse therapy to spend some therapeutic time with these beautiful animals. In addition, they have a four-course dinner on Sundays, which features dishes inspired by the area’s indigenous culture and made with the hacienda’s garden-grown bounty. That’s not to be missed.

8. THE PACUARE RIVER
Adrenaline junkies: The Pacuare River is your destination for exhilarating whitewater rafting. At a hidden location amid the rushing river and immersed in nature, the Pacuare Lodge is an ecotourism gem with exceptional farm-to-table food (ask for a private dinner in an outside setting). Book a River View Suite or a Canopy Villa with its own private suspension bridge over the jungle, and be sure to try one of the lodge’s cultural experiences—such as a trip to an indigenous town high in the mountains, where you can learn about the people’s traditional way of life.

9. TORTUGUERO
The “mini Amazon” is located on Costa Rica’s northeast Caribbean coast and is home to the Tortuguero Lodge & Gardens, an ecopark property that offers sweeping views of the rainforest and lazy lagoons. Head out to Tortuguero National Park and explore one of the best places in the world to see nesting giant green sea turtles from June to October. For another view of the park, try a boat tour led by an experienced naturalist who can point out monkeys, tropical birds, and wildcats that you may otherwise miss.

10. PUERTO VIEJO
On the southern Caribbean coast lies Puerto Viejo de Talamanca. Hire a private guide to help you find two- and three-toed sloths—the adorable, slow-moving creatures that live high in the rainforest canopy. Then, relax on a white-sand beach and swim out to the protected reefs for some next-level snorkeling. Once you’ve worked up an appetite, you’ll find some of the country’s best seafood here. Check out the inviting KOKi Beach Restaurant & Bar, which turns both relaxing and diving into art forms. It’s very popular at night, with a charming beachfront ambiance. Try the shrimp ceviche and grilled octopus—some of the best you’ll find anywhere in Costa Rica.

11. TURrialba
More off-the-beaten path than Arenal, the Turrialba Volcano deserves a place on any Costa Rica bucket list. Hike in Turrialba Volcano National Park with an expert guide, and keep an eye out for toucans and monkeys as well as wild lava flows (the last eruption was in 2014). Once you’ve worked up an appetite, dine at the nearby Manuelito Beach Hotel in the Casa Turire Hotel. On the menu, you’ll find gourmet country dishes made with herbs and vegetables from the property’s garden.

12. SÁMAR
In the upper Nicoya Peninsula on the Pacific Coast, this lesser-known beach enclave has plenty of Costa Rican charm. Sámara is a more secluded area than more developed coastal towns like Tamarindo or Playa Flamingo, yet it has a family-friendly beach and a laid-back vibe of a secret paradise to call your own. Hire a private guide to lead you on a hike through a rare tropical dry forest at Werner-Sauter Biological Reserve—an ecosystem that’s unusual because it has evolved to thrive amid a natural scarcity of water. Early morning is best for spotting native wildlife and avoiding the midday heat. Enjoy the spectacular views from the top before heading down. Request that your guide stop at a nearby mango plantation where you can sample the sweet fruit before heading on.

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