

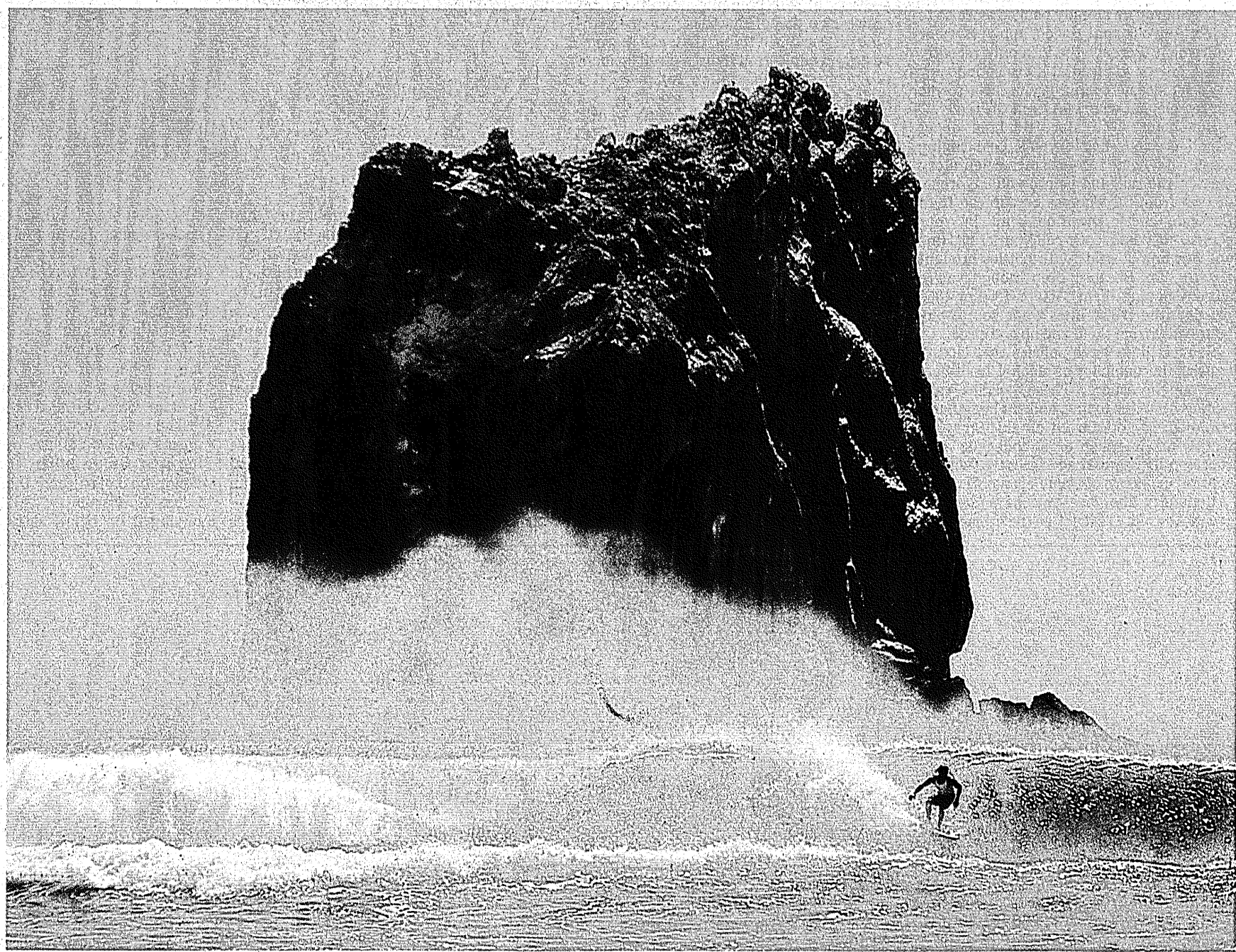
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WEEKEND ESCAPE

In time for fall planting, a garden expert's tour of some of the best places to buy plants in North Orange County's hotbed of nurseries. **L4**

SECTION L • SUNDAY, OCTOBER 19, 1997



Big breaks: Witches Rock surf spot north of Tamarindo on Pacific coast.

Costa Rica,

From Surfing Beach to Jungle Lodge

BY
**HILLARY
HAUSER**

O SA PENINSULA, Costa Rica—Encanta la Vida means “enchanted with life” in Spanish, and it’s the name of a jungle lodge in Costa Rica where I’ve been loving life for about a week. I am looking out onto a jungle scene straight out of a Pablo Neruda poem: howler and white-faced capuchin monkeys swinging through the trees, a pair of scarlet macaws lurching about on a branch, bright blue butterflies flitting above the tropical shrubs below.

A big-billed toucan flaps through, carrying its gaudy beak around like a piece of luggage, and then a scruffy-looking iguana that has been lounging all morning on a tree limb suddenly falls to earth with a thud.

I have been spying on these and other creatures through one of the powerful telescopes on Encanta la

Please see LODGES, L10



Things are jumping: Poison-arrow frog, in a country hopping with wildlife.

Green acres: Observation deck at Encanta la Vida lodge on the verdant southern coast.



HILLARY HAUSER

Latin America/Mexico: Costa Rica



AL SCHABEN / Los Angeles Times

Watch tower: Iguana in Playa Grande.

change in tide, the waves suddenly stood up and Kipling's horses' manes went into dramatic full display.

We surfed until the end of the day, but the best was yet to come, in what some travelers might call a disaster: When we got in our cars at the end of the day to get out of there, Bruce, Karen and I couldn't cross the estuary. The tidal change that had made the waves so great at Witches Rock had pushed the water level high at the road crossing.

In another car, the Taylors and the Charests somehow had managed to get across—they were nowhere to be seen. The three of us went back to the beach, ate peanut butter on crackers for dinner, and in the dark we lay on our backs and looked up at the stars.

Suddenly we saw a flash of light in the sand. In the middle of the beach a pond created earlier in the day by the ocean at high tide was now drying, and the dying planktonic animals were lighting up with a brilliant phosphorescence. We leaped to our feet to investigate, and discovered that wherever we walked our footprints lighted up in brilliant neon light. We began to dance on the makeshift dried-ocean dance floor, creating brilliantly lighted patches where we hit the sand. We jumped and danced and laughed like children for the good part of an hour.

We got across the estuary at about 9:30 that night, with Karen and I wading in front of the car to make sure Bruce didn't drive it into some unseen hole. Later, as we ate a very late dinner at the Brahmadero in Liberia (where I found out Brahma-cattle steaks are delicious!), the three of us

reflected on the wonders of impromptu adventure.

Although there are plenty of deluxe hotels and resorts in Costa Rica, and plenty of places to go dining and shopping, to really appreciate the essence of the country, you just have to slow down. The fantastic microcosms of nature that exist in Costa Rica go undetected by visitors who cannot change gears and readjust their focus. This, it turns out, is what has captivated those who want to live here full-time.

At the opposite end of the country, at Encanta la Vida, Brian Daily echoes that philosophy.

A short walking distance from beautiful, deserted beaches, Encanta la Vida is advertised as a luxury lodge, built on 10 tropical acres in the Cabo Matapalo area of the Osa Peninsula. But I'd describe it as a very homey wildlife observation post.

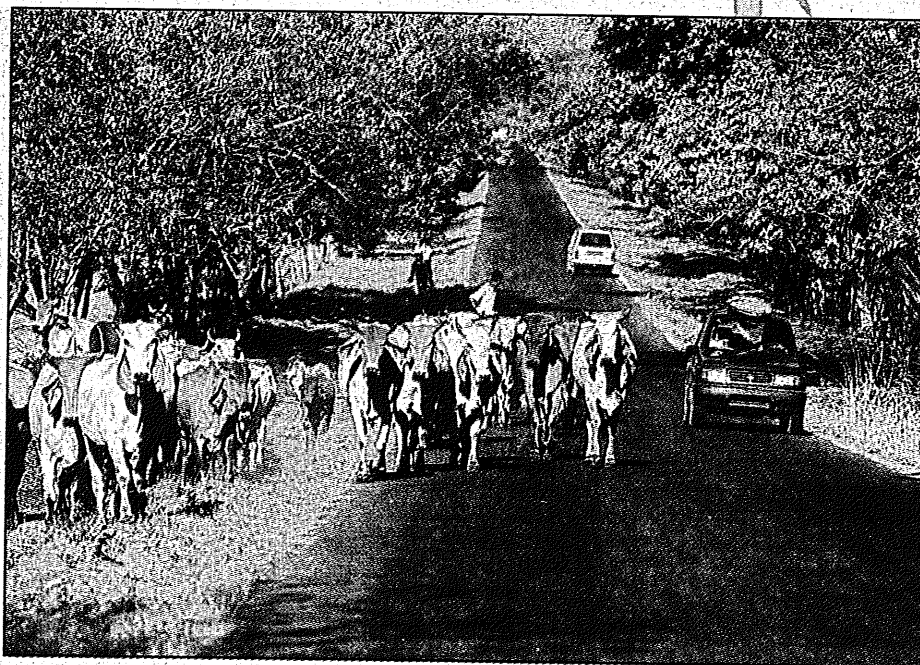
My first view of Encanta la Vida put a smile in my heart—a jungle lodge with four bedrooms (two with private bath), and an adjacent *cabina* with three bedrooms (two with private baths) on three floors. In the main house, one room, the Ranchita, is a dream, a circular room with high thatched ceiling, private bath and a door opening onto a beautiful jungle vista. Brian Daily, the owner, lives here when he is in Costa Rica, often accompanying guests out on fishing or scuba trips.

The best part of the house, I was soon to realize, is the upstairs veranda, which became our observation post for a week. From here, we observed the monkeys in the trees, the incredible birds in their bright plumage, the iguanas, bright blue morpho butterflies, and even a coatimundi nosing about in the bushes. We observed up close the bright green and black poison-arrow frog, so-called because certain tribes of Colombian Indians used the skin secretions of the frogs for poisoning the tips of their arrows and blowgun darts.

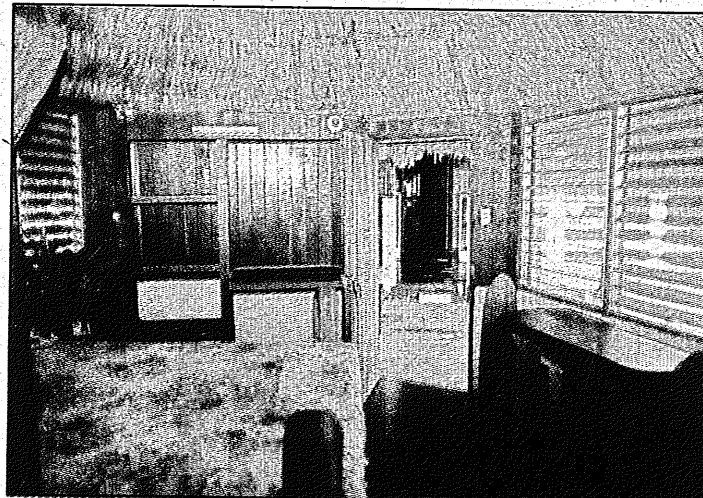
Fillo Nuñez, the pleasant Costa Rican who runs Encanta la Vida full-time, is there to point out the wildlife, to escort you on kayaking trips, to saddle up the friendly horses that are available to ride. The horses and kayaks, as well as the nature walks with Nuñez, are included in the room rate. Also included are three meals a day, cooked for us by Nuñez's sister, Marta, who set out delicious Costa Rican-style dishes that included a lot of fresh fish, *gallo pinto*, shredded cabbage salad and fried plantains.

During our time at Encanta la Vida, we had the main house to ourselves; two men from the San Francisco Bay area were staying in the adjacent *cabina*.

The Charests, Bruce and Karen and I went off on hikes, to Cabo Matapalo and to Land's End, where a beach of bleached white rocks jumble into jagged lava in the tidal zone. We went kayaking with Fillo Nuñez to Land's End, where we paddled through an open cave, and I snorkeled along the coastline, bumping into parrot-



AL SCHABEN / Los Angeles Times



HILLARY HAUSER

Moving right along: Sharing the roadway in Playa Grande, above; Ranchita Room of the Encanta la Vida on the Osa Peninsula in the humid, jungle south, near Panama, left.

fish, black angelfish, tons of sergeant majors and brightly colored wrasses.

Fishermen can hire boats to go out for marlin, yellowtail, bonita, dorado, amberjack and pargo.

On various afternoons Bruce, Karen and Pierre rode Diamante and Cocolito, two friendly, banana-eating horses.

But mainly you stop doing everything and watch. You walk and watch, you sit and you look. You get used to cold-water showers (it actually comes out lukewarm), and you conserve electricity at night by using flashlights everywhere you go. You see the humor in meeting up with a big old toad in your shower and in watching a tarantula crawl up to the breakfast table. I myself would rather have these things than discos, bars and shopping centers.

One day we hired a boat (about \$350) and made the one-hour trip up to Corcovado National Park by sea. I was unprepared for what I was to see: Here, where a virgin rain forest comes down to the beach,

the first thing we ran into were large tracks in the sand, left by a tapir.

We walked into the Corcovado jungle on a nine-mile trail, and with monkeys swinging through limbs overhead, I felt as if we had walked back to the beginning of time. Here the jungle is not so much the Hollywood view of tropical lush growth, but a jumble of hardwood trees and strangler figs, strange trees that wrap their roots around another, dissimilar tree, eventually taking over the host tree.

At the end of the Corcovado trail we walked out onto a jagged lava beach at low tide, and Bruce looked up to see a black vulture sitting in a seaside cave.

This is the essence of Costa Rica, and it's the sort of wildness that has captured the hearts and souls of the people who say they can live nowhere else.

Hauser is a freelance writer based in Summerland.

GUIDEBOOK

Surf and Turf in Costa Rica

Getting there: From Los Angeles to San José International airport, the Costa Rican airline LACSA, and United, have direct service; lowest fares begin at about \$710 including tax. There is connecting service for the same price on American, Continental and Mexicana.

We found it helpful to deal with a travel agent experienced with Costa Rica. In the Santa Barbara area, one is Travelworld ([805] 963-6521), which can book rental cars and lodgings in the San José area. Commuter flights within the country are best booked from there; SANSÁ flies small but modern, comfortable airplanes San José-Tamarindo and San José-Puerto Jiménez on the Osa Peninsula (both \$50, one way).

Where to stay: In the Playa Grande area, Casa Verde (APDO 271-5150, Santa Cruz, Guanacaste, Costa Rica, Central America; telephone/fax 011-506-653-0481) has three air-conditioned rentals: the big house with full kitchen (\$95 a night) and two *cabinas* (\$59 and \$45). Transportation from Tamarindo airport and boat transportation to Witches Rock available.

On the Osa Peninsula, Encanta la Vida (Puerto Jiménez, Osa Peninsula, Costa Rica, Central America) has a 2½-story main lodge with four bedrooms, two with private bath. Rate is \$65 per person per day plus tax, two-day minimum, including all meals and services, use of horses and ocean kayaks. A separate *cabina* rents for about \$60 plus tax. Fishing trips \$350 a day. In the U.S., call Natalie at (805) 969-4270, fax (805) 969-0238. In Costa Rica, call Isabel at tel. 011-506-735-5062, fax 011-506-735-5043.

When to go: Officially the dry season is December to April, the wet season May to November. The best time to visit Encanta la Vida (Osa Peninsula) is December through August. In both the north and south, the wettest times are September and October.

For more information: Consulate General of Costa Rica, 1605 W. Olympic Blvd., Suite 400, Los Angeles, CA 90015; tel. (213) 380-7915, fax (213) 380-5639.

—H.H.

Latin America/Mexico: Costa Rica



HILLARY HAUSER

Poolside: Casa Verde in Playa Grande in Costa Rica.

LODGES

Continued from L1

Vida's observation deck. I've come to Costa Rica, however, to focus my mental telescope on a phenomenon I've been noticing for years: Almost everyone I know who visits this Central American "rich coast" comes home with serious plans to move here, either part- or full-time. They come for a simple vacation and suddenly they're plotting second mortgages to finance the buying of a Costa Rican lot.

Sure, the country is full of friendly people, has a high literacy rate and great schools, is politically stable, and there are miles and miles of pristine beaches. It always seemed to me, however, that there had to be something more—something that would cause people to dedicate all future vacations to this place.

Take, for example, Brian and Bonnie Taylor, who visited Costa Rica, then went home to Maui and put a "For Sale" sign on their home and snorkeling business. They sold everything to high tail it permanently to the Playa Grande area, a white-sand coastal stretch near the resort town of Tamarindo. Situated in the drier north, toward the Nicaraguan border, Tamarindo has long been a destination for surfers who know they can get their fill of uncrowded waves here on the Pacific side of the country.

Then there's Brian Daily, a gregarious Santa Barbara abalone/urchin diver who built Encanta la Vida on the Osa Peninsula in the humid, jungly south, near Panama. He's now applying for *residencia*, which requires living in Costa Rica at least four

months out of the year.

When my longtime traveling pals Bruce and Karen Raph recently announced plans to continue *their* Costa Rican land hunt, I asked to go along, or at least meet up with them, to see what all the fuss was about.

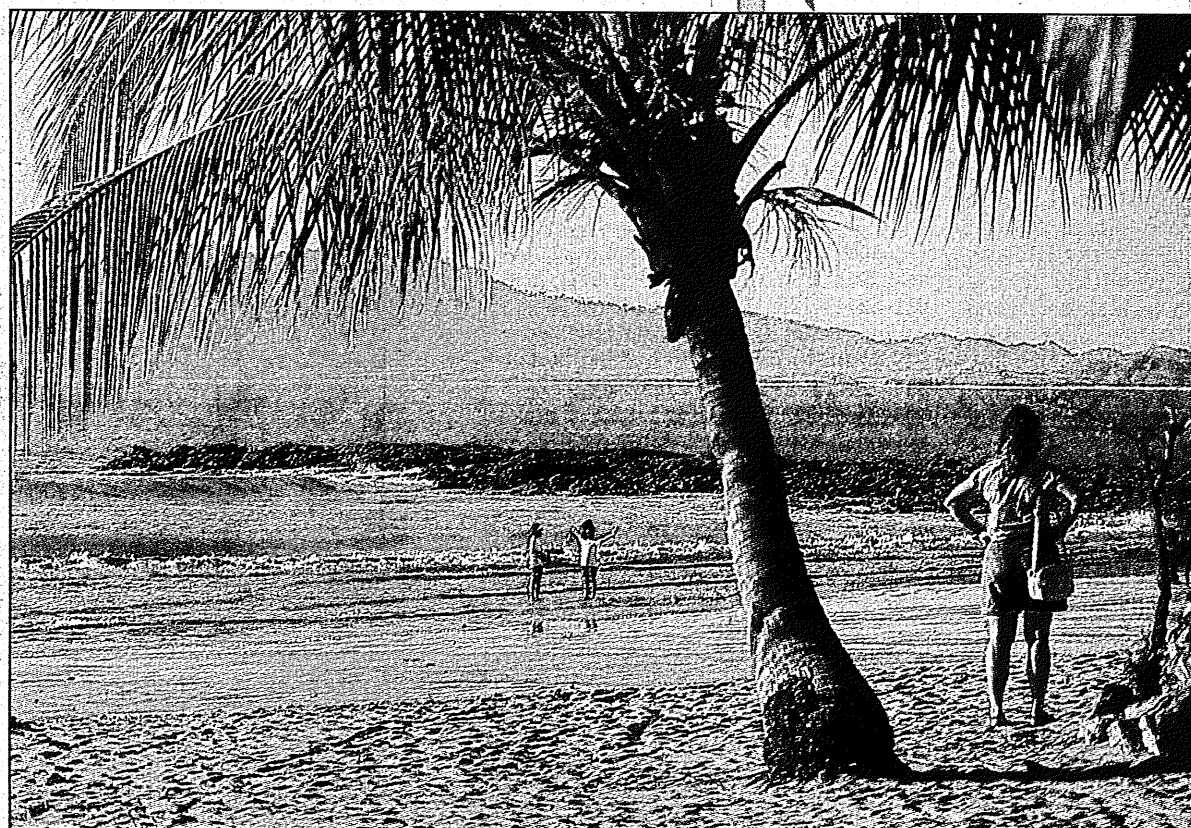
The Raphs were going off land-hunting for the first part of our expedition, so I flew to San José with two other friends, Pierre and Linda Charest, who, like me, were first-timers to Costa Rica.

The five-hour drive over the Interamericana Highway from San José north to Playa Grande gave me a fairly decent overview of Costa Rica's northern countryside. We were there in the dry season (December-April), so the rolling hills looked like California, but with Fijian-like heat in the air. Later in the year, those hills would turn green and lush, a different landscape.

The permanent fixtures were perfectly shaped volcanoes and magnificent Guanacaste trees, big spreading green-leafed things from which comes the name of the province. Brahman cattle, with their long, lumpy ears, seemed to grace every pasture we passed.

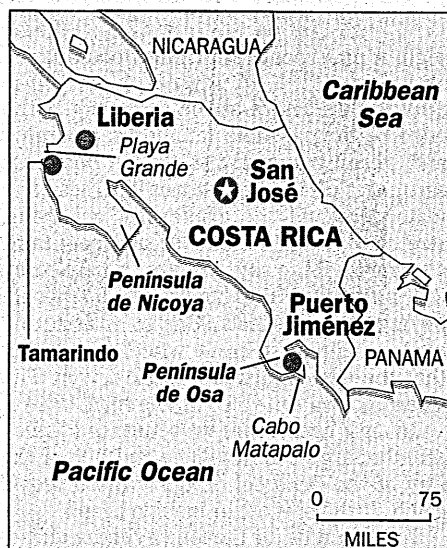
The roads into the Tamarindo/Playa Grande area are a bumpy rock and dirt affair, one of which took us quite literally to the front door of Casa Verde. This is the attractive L-shaped hacienda built by the Taylors about smack in the middle of the Playa Grande beach between Tamarindo and Playa Grande proper, a slowly developing enclave of small hotels and lodgings inside the southern hook of Cabo (Cape) Velas.

In Costa Rica, a room for rent is called a *cabina*, and the Taylors have two. The Charests settled into the large one with full



AL SCHABEN / Los Angeles Times

Hmm, no shopping malls: White-sand beach at Tamarindo, a popular destination for surfers.



Los Angeles Times

kitchen; I took the other with refrigerator and coffee maker. We jumped into our bathing suits and headed for the beach.

Playa Grande is exactly what its name implies: "Big Beach," a truly grand, immense, half-moon stretch of coastline. The water is crystal clear and warm over a pleasant, sandy bottom, even in the surfing zone. Casa Verde is across the road from the beach; you get to the water by walking a 100-yard path through Guanacaste trees and various coastal shrubs. From here it is a good half-hour walk to Tamarindo (south) or Playa Grande (north), so to get around easily, a rental car (available in

Tamarindo) is advisable.

The Taylors, who live at Casa Verde, are part of a growing population of Americans building private homes in Costa Rica and renting out rooms and suites, or sometimes entire houses. Their particular calling card is very affordable rent (about \$45 to \$60 a night), a beautiful little swimming pool and an out-of-the-way location, although some might consider it isolated. They provide maid service, as well as boat arrangements for surfers to popular spots hard to reach by road. They also rent their own one-bedroom house to visitors for \$95 a night. The house and the *cabinas* are air-conditioned, which is strongly suggested in Costa Rica.

In the resort town of Tamarindo, with its many restaurants and beach-side cafes, there are assorted hotels, private homes and *cabinas* for rent. Among them is the Hotel Tamarindo, a large, palm-studded beachfront resort with restaurant, bar, pool and 70 rooms that rent for about \$140 a night for two.

After the Charests and I checked into Casa Verde, we spent the next two days surfing in the area—in front of Marker 25, at "the Rock" farther north, and in front of the Bucanero Hotel.

Each morning we saw big tracks that led from sandy mounds at the edge of the jungle growth to the sea, but we were never able to stay up late enough (about 1 a.m. when we were there) to watch Playa Grande's famed leatherback turtles, which carried out their procreative rituals nearly every night. In many places there were broken eggshells

from baby turtles that already had made their escape back to the ocean.

On some mornings, we drove to Keiri's in Playa Grande for delicious breakfast of eggs and *gallo pinto* (Costa Rica's typical mix of rice and beans).

The highlight of our stay in this part of the country was Witches Rock, a surf spot made famous in Bruce Brown's "Endless Summer II" movie. It's a 2½-hour drive north from Playa Grande through the big town of Liberia, with a final rough and bumpy haul through the Santa Rosa sector of the Guanacaste Conservation Area.

After lurching our way over a wild, rocky road that resembled more of a river bottom than a road, we finally reached an estuary that nearly swamped our cars, but we slowly waded through and reached the beach at Playa Naranjo.

This beach is raw and wild, with vultures eating dead and desiccated turtles on sand blown smooth by hot, offshore Pajagayo winds. The day we were there, these winds had turned the ocean a deep blue, feathering the tops of the waves into the white "horse's mane" of Rudyard Kipling's poetry. Witches Rock is a dramatic sight—a gigantic round crag, split in half and jutting up straight from the ocean bottom, sort of a top-heavy version of Yosemite's famed Half Dome.

Here, the estuary empties into the sea, creating sandbars that make wonderful waves to ride—mainly when the tide begins to come up. We all got into the water, but it was after lunch, about 2 to 3 p.m. when the fun really began. With the