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## A New Reason To Go To Nicaragua Now: The Inn At Rancho Sant...



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For about the past ten years, people have been calling Nicaragua the new Costa Rica. The people who live there respectfully disagree.

Nicaragua is less touched by tourism, more culturally rich, and home to a population whose hospitality is innate—and who still make up most of the people you encounter in restaurants and hotels. It's also still remarkably affordable, while having low crime statistics similar to those of its more popular neighbor. There's a colonial city in the country's center, and the nature is as impressive as anything in Central America: volcanoes, rain forests, beaches and exceptional surf breaks. Every expat and part-time homeowner I met seemed to feel that they'd hit the jackpot or gamed the system. They almost couldn't believe their luck.

One of those enclaves for insiders is about to become less of a well-kept secret. [Rancho Santana](#), a residential and resort community with dozens of privately owned and rentable houses, villas, casitas and condos on 2,700 acres, is opening [an intimate inn](#) next month. It will make a particularly picturesque corner of the country's Pacific coast accessible to couples or others who want to stay in high-luxury, local-feeling surroundings, without renting one of the larger accommodations.

The inn, which is adjacent to the community's clubhouse and flagship restaurant, contains 17 individually decorated rooms and suites (from a mere \$249), designed in a rugged but romantic style. Although the building is new, it has the feel of an old hacienda, with all the rooms opening around a central courtyard, and virtually everything on display made by local artisans or even in house, in Rancho Santana's iron works and wood shop. The art was curated by Delray Beach's Ford Fine Art, which is also opening a gallery at Rancho Santana next month to spotlight Central American modernist artists, which general manager Chris Currey predicts will be the most important gallery in Central America. The large bathrooms have beautiful tiles in colorful patterns. (I stayed as a guest of the inn.)



But no one goes anywhere just for the architecture or the art. Rancho Santana is graced with five sandy crescents of beach, some reached only via a hike or horseback ride, which all but ensures their privacy. A couple of them have beginner-friendly and more advanced surf breaks, and there's a surf shop to rent boards or sign up for well-taught lessons.

Living up to the *Rancho* in its name, the resort is also equestrian-centric, with stables that house horses from mellow mares for easy trail rides to spirited dancing stallions that only guests who compete in dressage or teach horsemanship are allowed to ride. Program director Beverly Bean was on a horse before she could walk; became skilled at Level 1 dressage, including dancing her horse to music; and came to Nicaragua in part because of the country's passionate, authentic horse culture.

That culture extends to *hipicas*, festivals that originally honored patron saints with parades of decorated horses and riders in fine costumes. Bean is about to be honored in one in May, becoming both the first foreigner and the first woman to receive this honor. For this and other *hipicas*, Rancho Santana takes guests to watch from comfortable tent parties with good food and drink.

Speaking of good food and drink, the main restaurant, La Finca y el Mar, is exactly that, serving fresh food from the organic farm and local fishermen. The menus cater to a variety of American tastes, serving everything from a gouda burger with yucca fries to an omelet with kale, barbecue pork ribs to butternut squash arancini. A Belgian baker is in house to make pastries and ice cream, and Mexican chef Jorge Alvarez—who founded the popular Los Tacos No. 1 in New York—is re-creating Baja beach food at a new beach and surf club on the development's most remote beach.

Good luck finding ceviche tostadas that delicious in Costa Rica.