As winter approaches, I leave wet and chilly London and turn toward the bright warmth of the Republic of Costa Rica. This section takes a different approach to recreation than the previous section on the United Kingdom. Instead of featuring agencies and practices that use recreation therapeutically, you will learn how a single form of recreation—ecotourism—provides therapeutic benefit that enhances quality of life for all Costa Ricans, including those with disabilities.

Costa Rica, which translates as “rich coast,” comprises a mere .03% of the earth’s surface yet contains 5% of the earth’s biological diversity (Anywhere Costa Rica, 2012). Nowhere else in the world is biodiversity so dense. From its tropical flora and fauna, to its diverse landscape of jungle forests, mountains, volcanoes, wetlands, and beaches, to its abundant waters of lakes, rivers, waterfalls, and oceans, Costa Rica teems with organic life.

The value Costa Ricans have placed on their natural wealth has been an evolving process. After stretches of rain forest were burned and converted to cattle lands in the 1970s and 1980s, people became increasingly aware of the devastating effects of deforestation. While many natural areas still need protecting, conservation has become a national priority and the country exerts tremendous effort and coordination to preserve and maintain balance with nature. As an example of Costa Rica’s commitment to protecting its natural treasures, in 1998 the Ley de Biodiversidad, or Biodiversity Law, was passed. The objective of this law, most recently amended in 2008, is “the conservation of biodiversity and the sustainable use of the resources as well as to distribute in an equitable manner the benefits and derived costs” (World Intellectual Property Organization, 2012). Today 26% of Costa Rica’s lands are protected, and that figure grows every year (Instituto Nacional de Biodiversidad, 2012).
Mario Fernández Silva, the ambassador of Costa Rica, expresses his country’s commitment to conservation this way:

We are declaring peace with nature. We feel a strong sense of responsibility about looking after our wealth of biodiversity. Our attitude is not progressive, it is conservative. Our view is that until we know what we have, it is our duty to protect it.

Fernández Silva’s reference to “declaring peace with nature” mirrors Costa Rica’s bold decision in 1958 to abolish its national army. The country decided the resources used to support the army would be better spent on protecting nature and improving quality of life for its citizens—a courageous move which has enriched their nation in many ways. While some may question the wisdom of this decision, as one Costa Rican explained to me, “When one has no enemies, one needs no army.”

In 2010 the World Future Council honored Costa Rica with a Futures Policy Award for their exemplary biodiversity policies. On behalf of the World Future Council, Dutch film-maker Jan van den Berg lived with an indigenous tribe in southern Costa Rica and documented the positive results of the Biodiversity Law. His beautiful film, A Cinematic Tribute to Costa Rica’s Biodiversity Policy, may be viewed online.

Guaria morada, the national flower of Costa Rica

The remainder of this section describes two powerful and far-sighted initiatives related to ecotourism, which have furthered Costa Rica’s commitment to preserve its biodiversity and natural resources:

- **Certificación para la Sostenibilidad Turística**, or Certification for Sustainable Tourism
- **Programa Bandera Azul Ecologica**, or Blue Flag Ecological Program

Also described is Ley N° 7600, or Law No. 7600, which ensures access to public places, including ecotourism ventures, by citizens with disabilities. You will then learn about four ecotourism lodges that employ sustainable practices. Through their stories you will see how the principles behind Costa Rica’s award-winning policies are exercised to support local ecologies, economies, and cultures, while providing access to individuals with disabilities.
Certification for Sustainable Tourism

Tourism is the primary source of income in Costa Rica, yet traditional tourism practices have seriously exploited Costa Rica’s natural, cultural, and social resources. The right of future generations to these resources has also been compromised. To shift tourism from exploitation to sustainability, the Costa Rican Institute of Tourism has established the national Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST) program. The model of sustainability upheld by the CST calls for a “balanced interaction between the use of our natural and cultural resources, the improvement of the quality of life among local communities, and the economic success of the industry, which also contributes to national development” (Costa Rica Tourism Board, 2012).

The purpose of the CST program is to provide measurement parameters to evaluate the degree to which tourism businesses comply with sustainability standards. Two kinds of tourism businesses may apply for certification: lodging companies and tour operator companies. Evaluation occurs across four dimensions (Turismo Sostenible, 2012), as follows:

1. Physical-Biological Parameters: evaluates the interaction between the company and its surrounding natural habitat
2. Infrastructure and Services:
   - **Lodging Companies**: evaluates management policies and operational systems and infrastructure (energy saving, water purity, and waste handling)
   - **Tour Operators**: evaluates the degree to which tourist products are designed in relation to two aspects—market trends and the sustainability practices of the places visited
3. External Client: evaluates the degree to which clients are allowed and invited to contribute actively to the company’s sustainability policies
4. Social-Economic Development: evaluates the interaction between the company and adjacent communities, and the degree to which the growth and development of the region is supported

Across these four dimensions, a scale of five levels is used to rate the extent that a company has achieved sustainability. Each level is represented by a “leaf.” A rating of “one leaf” means a company has taken its first steps toward sustainability; “five leaves” means a company’s sustainability practices are outstanding. The ambitious goal of the national tourism board is to eventually replace the customary “five-star” system of rating services and amenities with the “five-leaf” system!

Earning CST certification is a rigorous process that requires extensive documentation, and the ecolodges you will read about exemplify different levels and stages in the certification process. Once a business is certified it is listed by level and province on the CST website. Thus the CST program rewards businesses for using sustainable practices by advertising them to the public, which is growing increasingly aware of the need for sustainability and seeks to patronize businesses that value it.
Blue Flag Ecological Program

Modeled after a highly successful program by the same name in Europe, Costa Rica launched its Blue Flag Ecological Program in 1996 to address the water quality of the country’s beaches, coastal areas, and tourist accommodations. The impetus for initiating the program was the imminent threat of beach pollution and its detrimental effects on public health, natural resources, and the tourism industry. The Blue Flag Ecological Program is effectively averting these dangers through two key mechanisms—the coordinated efforts of key governmental offices and citizen participation.

The National Blue Flag Commission, which administers the Blue Flag Ecological Program, is comprised of representatives from the following national partners:

- Costa Rica Tourism Institute
- National Water and Sewer Service
- Public Health Ministry
- Environment Ministry
- Education Ministry
- National Tourism Chamber

These partners are responsible for making coordinated decisions that impact sustainability in Costa Rica. Information is shared among the groups, communications facilitated, and, when measures in one area affect another, decisions are made together.

Beaches, hotels, schools, and coastal as well as inland communities may participate in the Blue Flag Ecological Program. Similar to the CST program, strict criteria are used to evaluate sustainable practices that affect the water. For example, Costa Rican coastal communities are evaluated in five areas, which are weighted by percentage, as seen below in Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Microbological quality of the ocean’s water</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of potable water</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of coastal sanitation areas (garbage, treated industrial waste and run-off water)</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental education</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security and administration</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A coastal community must meet 90% of the sustainability criteria above to receive a Blue Flag. Beaches are monitored monthly and, if quality is compromised, Blue Flags are revoked until deficiencies are remedied.
After years of polluted beaches, Manuel Antonio National Park, earns its first Blue Flag in 2010. The park is the second most visited tourist destination in Costa Rica.

Educating the public about protecting natural areas is an essential aspect of the Blue Flag Ecological Program. The livelihood of coastal communities depends on the purity of its natural resources, and the program makes it possible for tourists to enjoy these lovely places.

Similar to the CST program, the ability to display a Blue Flag gives a business a marketing edge. It symbolizes to the public that the ocean is safe for swimming and the water is potable. Because of the Blue Flag Ecological Program, environmentally aware tourists can make conscious decisions to spend their vacations at a beach or accommodation that has been awarded a Blue Flag. The success of the program is demonstrated by the ever-increasing number of Blue Flags seen flying over Costa Rica’s coastal communities every year.
Accessibility: *Ley N° 7600*

Similar to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 in the United States, Costa Rica passed legislation on 2 May 1996 to provide accessibility to all their citizens: *Ley N° 7600*, or Law No. 7600, *Equal Opportunities for People with Disability*. Also similar to the United States, Law No. 7600 was enacted to remedy problems that Costa Rican society faced over the availability of social, educational, and vocational services to people with disabilities. *Law No. 7600*, which is referred to by its number, has four primary objectives:

1. To serve as a tool for people with disabilities to reach their maximum potential, fully participate socially, and exercise their rights and obligations under the judicial system
2. To ensure equal opportunities in realms such as health, education, work, family life, recreation, sports, and culture
3. To eliminate discrimination against people with disabilities
4. To establish the basis and materials to enable Costa Rican society to take the necessary measures to provide opportunities for persons with disabilities and ensure non-discrimination (Costa Rica Law No. 7600, p. 4)

Law No. 7600 has four parts, which are summarized in Table 2 on page 110. Part II of the law is the most relevant to recreation and ecotourism. It addresses access to (a) physical space, (b) transportation, and (c) culture, sport, and recreation activities.

Access to *physical space* applies to new construction, additions, and remodeling of buildings, parks, sidewalks, gardens, squares, and restrooms, among other structures. Since ecotourism development usually requires new construction or remodeling, the requirements for accessibility must be satisfied. Examples of accommodations include ramps, handrails, and visual, auditory, and tactile signage. Five percent of parking spaces must also be accessible, and located near the entrance of a primary building.

Rules governing access to *transportation* are intended to ensure mobility and safety for people with disabilities during public transport. In the words of the law, transport should be “totally accessible.” People without disabilities cannot park in accessible parking spots, and at least 10% of taxis must be adapted for riders with disabilities. Access also applies to terminals and stations of public transportation.
Table 2. Costa Rican Law No.7600, Equal Opportunity for People with Disability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part I</th>
<th>Defines terms and provides fundamental principles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Defines “disability” as “any physical deficiency [sic], mental or sensory impairment that limits substantially one or more of the major activities of an individual”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Provides objectives of the law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Outlines responsibility of the State to providing services and programs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part II</th>
<th>Access to various aspects of society</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Health services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Physical space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Transportation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Culture, sport and recreation activities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part III</th>
<th>Actions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Addresses budgetary allocations to provide support services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Support training about individuals with disabilities and their rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Supports written policies about non-discrimination distributed in the workplace</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part IV</th>
<th>Enforcement of Law</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Details penalties for violating the law (e.g., irregularities in recruitment and hiring procedures, discrimination, exclusion, contempt of accessibility standards)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Law No. 7600 also states, “Places where cultural, sports, and recreation activities are carried out should be accessible to everyone.” This aspect of the legislation applies to both public and private places.

While Law No. 7600 has helped improve accessibility in Costa Rica, similar to the United States, many older public buildings and places remain inaccessible. Since ecotourism businesses are obligated to follow code when they remodel or build new buildings, they are often at the forefront of ensuring accessibility for customers.

**Ecotourism Accommodations**

The remainder of this section describes four accommodations in Costa Rica and the sustainable practices they use: El Bosque Lodge, Hotel Buena Vista, Los Campesinos, and La Cusinga Ocean and Rainforest Lodge.

These lodges and hotels differ in location, how they are operated, the tourist attractions in the area, and the degree to which they are accessible and participate in the CST program. These differences illustrate the range of ecotourism ventures, and their stages of development, that exist in Costa Rica.
El Bosque Lodge. High in the mountains of northwest Costa Rica, El Bosque Lodge is situated in Monteverde. Widely known for its mountain and tropical biodiversity, Monteverde, which translates as “Green Mountain,” is one of the most frequently visited areas in Costa Rica.

The founding of Monteverde, and the establishment of its ecotourism industry, is owed largely to Quaker families who settled in the area in the 1950s. A group of Quakers, mostly from Fairhope, Alabama, arrived in Monteverde as conscientious objectors who refused to register for the draft during the Korean War. The settlers first earned their living as dairy farmers selling cheese, but later turned to hospitality and tourism using sustainable methods. Today ecotourism in Monteverde flourishes, and the area is recognized as the best example in Costa Rica of how the local people and economy are supported through sustainable tourism.

El Bosque Lodge, or “The Forest Lodge,” is a family-owned business. Minor Vargas, one of the family members, tells me his parents purchased the property in the 1970s from one of the original Quaker families who had settled in the area. At first Minor’s parents took over the Quakers’ family business and earned their livelihood as cheese farmers. In the mid-1990s, however, they joined the growing trend of tourism in the area and opened the lodge.

To make space for the lodge, Minor and his family cleared the dense jungle by hand using a machete. “Everything is still done by hand,” Minor says, “using sustainable methods.” Buildings are made from teak and cyrus planted for this purpose on the family’s land. A spring supplies fresh water. Kitchen scraps and paper are composted for the garden. The restaurant, a recent addition, serves coffee grown in their own organic plantation. (Minor says organic farming is difficult in the Cloud Forest because there are so many fungi that can potentially harm the plants). Everything that can be recycled is salvaged and reused. Glass, plastic, and even computers are taken to neighboring Santa Elena where they are sorted and recycled.

Minor Vargas, owner of family-run El Bosque Lodge, refurbishing a table
The prime attraction in this area is the Monteverde Cloud Forest Biological Reserve, which is home to abundant species of birds, insects, and mammals, as well as profuse tropical vegetation. Tourists also travel to Monteverde to zipline through the cloud forest and walk on hanging bridges amid the treetop canopy.

El Bosque Lodge is not yet part of the CST program. Minor explains that participation in the program requires a great deal of time to prepare the application and to document sustainable practices, which necessitates extensive data collection. The paperwork is begun but, due to recent staffing cuts, has not been finished. Minor tells me that, because of the poor economy, he had to lay off four employees, which was especially difficult because three of them were his nephews. Aside from family members, only three full-time people are currently employed at the lodge. All their time is needed to run and maintain the lodge so, at the moment, the CST application remains incomplete.

While El Bosque Lodge is not CST certified, sustainability is an extremely important value and way of life for the Vargas family. Minor tells me his family ascribes to sustainable practices, not so much for the tourism income it provides, but because Monteverde is their home. They feel a tremendous sense of place and love for the land here, and Minor and his family are committed to preserving it for future generations.
Hotel Buena Vista. Located minutes from the Juan Santamaria International Airport in Alajuela, Hotel Buena Vista is ideally situated for eco-travelers entering and leaving the country. In contrast to the more rustic and remote El Bosque Lodge, this accommodation is a beautiful Spanish colonial style resort on the outskirts of the largest metropolitan area in Costa Rica. Amenities include luxury rooms and villas, a spacious patio and swimming pool, tropical gardens, a coffee plantation, and a panoramic vista overlooking the city and distant volcanoes.

Attractions in the area include city tours of San José, orchid gardens, tropical bird and animal zoos, and day trips to Poás Volcano. Hotel Buena Vista also offers custom tours to anywhere in the country.

Owned by a United States citizen, Hotel Buena Vista employs only local staff. Christian Martínez has been the hotel’s manager for 9 years. He is responsible for all operations, including hiring staff. He tells me that employees include front desk staff, restaurant workers, a housekeeping and maintenance crew, van drivers, and a gardener. Staff typically do multiple jobs, pitching in wherever they are needed. In fact, the day I arrive Christian is the one who picks me up at the airport!

Among Christian’s responsibilities is oversight of the CST program. Christian says, “The hotel submitted its first application 5 years ago. We currently have three leaves and are re-evaluated every 2 years. We were only the
second hotel in Alajuela to become CST certified.” Christian explains the initial stages of acquiring certification:

When we first expressed interest, CST staff came to the hotel and gave us a 3-hour introduction to the program, letting us know everything that was involved. The application required a lot of documentation, such as photographs and water analysis. After looking around, they gave us the “okay” to apply and said we could e-mail them with any issues that came up while completing the application.

Hotel Buena Vista implements numerous sustainable practices that meet all four areas of the CST program: surrounding natural environment, services and infrastructure, guest involvement, and social-economic development. Hotel Buena Vista is particularly strong in the area of services and infrastructure:

- Every room has a recycling program.
- Light bulbs are energy efficient, and can only be turned on by hooking the room key on the doorknob.
- Toilet paper and soap are biodegradable, and leftover water from washing the floors is reused to water plants.
- Fruit is composted on the premises.
- New vans are purchased every 5 years, to ensure they will pass emissions tests.

Additionally, solar panels are installed on the roofs of the new villas, which heat hot water for the villa units and swimming pool. There are six panels and, altogether, cost 5,500,000 Colones ($11,000) to install—an indication of the hotel’s commitment to sustainability. Over time, Christian says the use of alternative energy will save the hotel money.

Guests are also involved in sustainable practices. The hotel educates patrons about its conservation measures and encourages them to participate and recycle. Guests may also support local artisans by purchasing souvenirs—textiles, sculptures, jewelry, and articles made of tropical wood—at the gift store.
Questionnaires that evaluate sustainability at the hotel are also distributed to guests, and the data is compiled and submitted to CST administrators every 6 months.

The hotel contributes substantially to the local people and economy. Local residents are hired as employees and receive training. To find reliable staff, Christian says, “We ask our employees, ‘Do you know anyone in the community who is looking for work?’ These personal recommendations work well for us. We have a very stable staff.” Christian says the hotel has been hit by the economic downturn and he was faced with letting staff go. Employees banded together and asked to work reduced hours rather than have anyone laid off, and that is what management decided to do.

Hotel Buena Vista contributes substantially to the local people and economy. It provides local residents with jobs and training. The hotel also works closely with the local elementary school. Income earned from recycling is given to the school, which is spent on classroom supplies and kitchen equipment. If an educational group stays at the hotel, they often make donations to the school. Occasionally classes pick up garbage around the neighborhood and the hotel donates ice cream for a party afterward. The school also runs the Blue Flag Ecological Program for the community, which Hotel Buena Vista sponsors. In fact, the hotel has been awarded its own Blue Flag.

Christian says that participation in the CST program has been an asset for Hotel Buena Vista. CST standards inspire hotel staff to take on new projects and to renovate rooms. The hotel can locate suppliers of sustainable equipment and materials from a database the CST provides. And customers are made aware of the hotel’s sustainability practices from the CST website.

Los Campesinos. My companions and I travel by jeep along an unpaved mountain road, up and down and back and forth for over an hour, swerving often to avoid mud puddles and potholes. No signs of civilization are evident the entire way. The road threads narrowly beneath an umbrella of vegetation until at last we emerge at Los Campesinos.

We seem to have reached the end of the world. A chaotic din of cicadas heralds us. Before us lies a camp of simple structures perched on a cliff overlooking a huge gorge and waterfall. A narrow suspension bridge, only three planks wide, stretches impossibly far out above the river and across to the other side of the gorge. I am told only four people can be on the bridge at one time—it can’t be guaranteed to hold any more weight!
Los Campesinos, loosely translated as “The Peasants” or “The Country Folk,” is uniquely run as a cooperative of 17 families, which includes 40 people who are active working members. Victor Chacón, a guide who was born here, recounts the difficult history of their community, revealing just how persistent and resilient these people are:

Fifty-five years ago our community was founded by three families that came from nearby Quepos. At this time, the government was giving people free land for agriculture and cattle ranching to help support their livelihood. The families had land near Quepos but the soil was depleted, so they came here where the land was virgin forest. They cleared part of the forest and planted corn, beans, casaba, yucca, and sugar cane. For 30 years, from 1960 to 1990, the economy was based on cattle and agriculture, and the community grew to 37 families.

In 1990 the Minister of Agriculture encouraged farming communities to try different crops to establish new markets in
the area. The Minister financed the planting of crops, but did no market research and gave no support to sell the produce. At the advice of the Minister, the families planted vanilla. It was a very labor-intensive proposition—vanilla is an orchid that needs to be pollinated by hand. Soon the whole community was dedicated to producing vanilla.

The North American who helped us develop the industry gave us only 5% of the profits but, even so, we managed to make a living. By 1994 we had good vanilla production with three buyer associations. Then a fungus appeared. In 6 months the plants were destroyed. There were no jobs and people started leaving. From 37 families, only 14 families remained. The last family to leave owned this farm.

Then the government began to support people who wanted to go into tourism. It was a tough time to change people’s minds from agriculture to tourism, but eventually we decided to take a risk and pursue tourism. Even though we live in a remote area, we knew we had a beautiful attraction with the waterfall and river. We got small grants to start building. We built the kitchen, bridge, and trails. We started selling 1-day tours to people in Quepos.

At first it was difficult to do marketing because there was no electricity or telephone line. Our marketing strategy was to provide the best service we could so tourists would spread the word about us. Later we received a grant from an environmental program with the United Nations to do internships and exchanges with other groups who used different marketing techniques. That’s how the Rural Tourism Association started, which provides marketing for all the rural tourism businesses in this area.

A key issue in starting the cooperative has been training, which we’ve received from the government. We received valuable training about how to run a cooperative.

Típico (typical) breakfast at Los Campesinos

Los Campesinos dining room
Our cooperative has three committees: administration, finance, and well-being, which provides help if someone needs it. Cooperative members rotate jobs so everyone has an opportunity to earn money. Jobs include being a tour guide, kitchen worker, grocery store keeper, or maintenance staff, and pay is based on experience and training. It’s been a process to gain trust among all the members of the cooperative, especially when there is money involved. It’s important the members feel involved in the project, that it’s their project.

Victor continues by explaining that the community no longer wants to depend on only one source of income. Presently, about half the income comes from tourism and half comes from family projects, such as farming and raising pigs. The community also sells handicrafts made by members of the cooperative.

Over time the cooperative has added simple cabins, or cabins, which include an accessible unit. The road to the unit has been widened to allow passage by an accessible van. All structures are one-story to ease mobility. Additionally, the small unpaved parking lot has one accessible spot with a very unusual marker! (See photo below.)

Activities provided by Los Campesinos staff include guided nature hikes on two trails, rappelling from the suspension bridge, rafting, horseback riding, and farm tours. The restaurant serves three meals a day built around traditional Costa Rican fare of rice and beans.

Since its humble origins, Los Campesinos has used sustainable practices all along. The community is completely in charge of their own decisions, and their income from tourism directly supports their economic well-being.

Porch leading to rooms

Basic double room

Steps made from recycled tires, a common method in Costa Rica, to allow passage by accessible vans

An international universal access parking sign—hand painted on a boulder!
Victor Chacón demonstrates the use of a solar stove

Within 30 seconds in the solar stove, a dry leaf completely disintegrates

Everything is done by hand at Los Campesinos, without assistance from machinery. Structures are built from trees growing on the property. Food is grown locally and organically. No hunting is allowed in the forest. Staff have begun the process of CST certification and they have received an initial evaluation. Altogether Los Campesinos provides a simple and basic service, which fits and somehow amplifies the beauty of the natural surroundings.

Los Campesinos is very remote and Victor tells me a better income could be had in Quepos, where tourist accommodations abound. “But,” he says, “families here prefer to earn a smaller income and live within the pristine forest than earn more money by working for someone else in the city.”

La Cusinga Ocean and Rainforest Lodge.

In 1971 a fellow from Florida purchased the 600 acres upon which La Cusinga Ocean and Rainforest Lodge stands for the lucky sum of 2,700 Colones ($2,266, with inflation). He still owns the property today, located near Dominical along the warm Pacific coast. A more beautiful land and seascape is hard to imagine.

At first the owner tried, unsuccessfully, to raise cows. Then he planted trees. In the late 1990s, two cabins were built for use by researchers and groups studying Spanish. Eventually the buildings were expanded into a lodge, which was named La Cusinga, after a toucan-like bird that inhabits the area. All structures are built from teak and other tropical woods harvested from the forest on the property. As you can see from the photographs, the open and airy architecture is designed to afford the dweller the greatest exposure to the lush beauty of the natural surroundings.
Besides relaxing in a hammock overlooking the sea, guests can take part in a variety of activities. Four hiking trails are available. Two trails cut through the tropics—one interprets jungle vegetation and trees, and another leads down to the sea. Yoga classes may be arranged. Often, just after sunrise, turtles are seen asleep on a nearby rocky point. Guests may volunteer to work with them at a nearby turtle hatchery sponsored by ASANA, Asociación Amigos de la Naturaleza del Pacífico Central y Sur, or Friends of Nature of the Central and Southern Pacific Coast. Kayaking in the Terraba River Mangrove Forest and Wetlands as well as snorkeling are also on hand. All these wonderful outdoor experiences—plus access to wifi!

I am learning about La Cusinga from a young man named Sergio Arias. He is the full-time director of the lodge’s CST program. He likens the program’s four areas of sustainability to the four legs of a table: “They all need to work together, in balance, to support sustainability. You can’t be sustainable in one area, and not in another.”

La Cusinga has engaged in several conservation measures to protect the surrounding environment. Sergio recounts,

The owners planted hundreds of trees to reforest land that had supported cattle farming. There are 400 different species of vegetation here now. We also have howler monkeys that help distribute seeds naturally as they move about the forest. Scarlet macaws used to live in this area, but three years ago they disappeared. We plant wild almond trees now to attract them and they have started to come back.
Sergio Arias, CST Director at La Cusinga, in his outdoor “office”

La Cusinga has many sustainable practices related to food. Organic fruit trees are grown for use in the dining room. Sergio says, “Sometimes animals eat the fruit, but that’s okay. They are part of nature’s system too.” A small greenhouse garden provides for salads. Other produce, most of it grown organically, is delivered from farmers near the mountain town of Perez Zeledon. Tea is made from wild tamarind. All kitchen scraps are recycled. And food “to go” is wrapped in banana tree leaves instead of cartons. Sergio instructs, “When you’re finished eating, simply compost the leaves or toss them anywhere to biodegrade by nature!”

Guests may be involved in sustainability too. Sergio educates guests about the lodge’s practices by giving them tours of the recycling, composting, and gardening areas. Signage instructs guests how to separate recyclables. Guests may also be involved in the lodge’s sustainability projects:

Sergio describes some of La Cusinga’s sustainable practices related to services and infrastructure. “Our water is heated with a passive solar system on the roof of the main building. The system cost $1,500 but it reduces our bills by 60%. The cost will be recovered in 5 years, and the life span of the system is 30 years.” Smart shower heads reduce the amount of water normally used by half. Biodegradable soap comes in large containers, which are refilled. Staff receive training about recycling—on the difference between compostable and non-compostable items in the kitchen, and how to separate various containers.

Solar panel used to heat water

Starfruit and cashews are two of the many tropical fruits grown organically on the property

Sergio demonstrates how to compost raw kitchen scraps for the garden

Heyne: International Perspective
Some groups take on work projects. For instance, the Sierra Club painted the local school. Interchange between visitors and real Costa Ricans is very important for promoting cultural awareness and understanding. We also have a beach clean-up program. We usually have “green travelers” but trash comes in from the ocean. If we want pristine beaches we need to change the minds, not just of the local coastal community, but the minds of the people living upstream of the river, whose final destination is the ocean.

Sergio says the CST website is a good tool for guests to be “responsible travelers.” Guests can “go online and see the kinds of businesses they want to support.”

Besides participating in community projects, La Cusinga supports the local culture by displaying and selling artwork, primarily masks, made by indigenous people. Additionally, the lodge provides employment for the local residents.

Accessibility is another important feature of the resort. Instead of saying “people with disabilities,” Sergio prefers to use the phrase “people with special capacities” or “special skills.” “We all have ‘disabilities’,” he says, “Some of us are left-handed, or a little blind, or we are tall and our trousers are too short. The main disability is in the mind.”

Sergio says Costa Rica has “a long way to go” to becoming accessible. Curb cuts are fairly common throughout Costa Rica, but even in the capital city of San José, crosswalks and traffic lights are rare, much less ramps, elevators, automatic door openers, and accessible parking. At La Cusinga, however, access is an important consideration.

A Blue Flag flies next to the universal access sign for parking

Entrance to an accessible cabina
Sergio describes the accessibility features at the La Cusinga and how Law No. 7600 is followed:

If a hotel has less than 25 units, at least one unit must be accessible. Our accessible cabina is right near the parking lot, which has an accessible parking space. The cabina features wider doorways, a clear unobstructed pathway from the entrance to the bathroom, and grab bars in the bathroom and shower. Windows extend further down the wall to allow someone sitting in a wheelchair to have a full view.

Providing accommodations for people with disabilities, besides being something we want to do, makes good business sense. People with disabilities always come with someone else, in fact normally three or four people come with them, which adds up to more business for the lodge.

Sergio concludes, “Sustainable practices are good for the environment and good for people. It’s not easy to operate sustainably—and it’s voluntary—but we can’t be egotistical or selfish and say, ‘This is mine and I’ll just take and destroy.’ We need to be conscious about our relationship with the environment.”

“No Artificial Ingredients”

“No artificial ingredients.” Thus says one of the slogans of the National Tourism Board of Costa Rica. The four accommodations described in this article exemplify this slogan through their commitment to sustainable practices. The success of Costa Rica’s sustainability efforts is owed largely to the information the tourism board provides to its citizens and visitors. Education is instrumental in helping people understand the value of the natural world and stewardship of the country’s sensitive ecosystems. Sergio tells me, “Costa Rica aspires to be the first carbon neutral nation in the world.” As such, Costa Rica continues to be an international model for ecotourism and sustainability.