

'Pura Vida!'

As Costa Rica's locals offer 'pure life' as a common greeting, its realtors pitch Houstonians a convenient, well-priced piece of paradise | *By Jeff Gremillion* |



As you jump from a deck amid sky-high treetops in a Costa Rican rainforest, harnessed to a pulley attached to a cable tethered to trees behind and ahead of you, you wonder: Is this how it feels to buy a home here?

"Not at all," says developer David Finkelstein of Houston, who five years ago was drawn to the country's Pacific coast—to resort complex Los Sueños, near the ramshackle, surfer-savvy village of Jaco—for the deep-sea fishing that's lured so many Houstonians recently. It was simple, he says, for he and wife JoAnna to hire a Costa Rican lawyer, create a Costa Rican corporation, and buy their condo and marina slip in which to park their 58-foot Garlington. Nothing like *zip-lining*.

That ease (and low property taxes, a few hundred bucks annually for most) has made the West Virginia-sized nation, whose misty green mountains abut Dolphin-dense turquoise seas, attractive to Americans. And its central Pacific has become even more alluring, especially for Houstonians. Thanks to daily non-stops on Continental to the capital of San José—and the opening this summer of a national highway decades in the making, that shortens the ground commute from the airport from nearly two hours to less than one—a traveler can get from here to Herradura in five hours.

Current bargains are also tempting, as downturn prices settle 20 percent below 2006 figures, says realtor and property manager Larry Savage (Stay in Costa Rica, 866.888.6424). Savage, a reformed SoCal beach

WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE
One of Costa Rica's black-sand Pacific beaches, above, and, at right, a mod Los Sueños condo



bum, focuses on Los Sueños, which sprawls over 1,100 acres with condo complexes—three-bedrooms start at about \$500K—and homes of South American- and Medit-inspired styles, boasting indoor-outdoor living spaces, huge open kitchens, staff quarters and views of rocky bays or green vistas. A Chicagoan is offering his 5,000-square-foot, five-bedroom "Puesta del Sol"—marble foyer, tiered infinity pool and all—for \$4.5 million. Other Los Sueños houses start at \$2 mil.

There's also a party-hearty Marriott on the resort grounds. It features the top-notch Sibö spa, and the Nuevo Latino resto, where "molecular" entrees include Cointreau-basted lamb chops meant to be spritzed with the spray bottle of passion-fruit juice on the side.

More typical fare is showcased at fab dive "I Love Sushi," a short drive from Sueños. There, *another* vintage hippie proffers basic preparations of fish caught hours before. The charm's in the simple exhilaration, not totally unlike jumping feet-first into the jungle. ■

Higher Love

Tell it on the mountain: Houston loves these elevated vacay vistas



A Deer Crest home, listed at \$8.5 mil

PARK CITY, UTAH Society fixtures Melissa and Michael Mithoff have long owned in nearby Deer Valley, where prices are back at healthy '05 levels of \$700 per square foot. Now the fam is building a home in the "low key" area enclave of Deer Valley, says Melissa. "It's not so much *the scene*" as Aspen. Lots go for \$1 million, as ski-in houses with heated drives start at \$5 mil. Restos include Jean-Georges in the new St. Regis, while Sundance-hosting Park City remains culturally cool.

CASHIERS, N.C. Prefer golf to gondolas? Hit the shrimp-and-grits-savvy Blue Ridge Mountains' two-stoplight village of Cashiers near Asheville. Like a half-dozen other prominent H-Town couples, Julian and Janeen Ferritta own a stacked-stone retreat with views of the courses of two country clubs, where they had to be residents to join. With limited inventory, prices have remained stable; a five-bedroom on one golf course is now listed at \$3 mil.

AUSTIN, TEXAS The nearest *high* is the best for many locals, like interior designer Renea Abbott, who just remodeled her 3BR Medit home on Lake Austin in the foothills. "When people come up to visit," she says, "the next thing you know they're looking for houses." Lakeside homes start at \$2 mil. More urbane Hill Country options include ATX's new Austonian high-rise—units start at \$400K—and the residences at the W, opening soon. Prices in the region are just a tad off '07, uh, peaks. —Allison Bagley