



MANY HAPPY RETURNS

There's a certain sense of discovery—of both place and self—that comes from revisiting a destination you've already been to. **DAVID AMSDEN** reflects on 10 trips to the sleepy Costa Rican beach town of Nosara.

THE QUESTION OF where to travel next occupies a curious swath of real estate in my mind. It's part itch and part scratch, a compulsion that brings comfort. I ask it incessantly, between trips and during trips, whether I'm feeling rooted or restless. I've been like this for as long as I can remember, with one eye always wandering toward the horizon, seeking the promise of adventure the way a plant seeks sunlight. Without it, I wilt.

What's surprised me, in recent years, has been that the place I often daydream about going to next is somewhere I've already been. For ages the idea of returning to a destination, no matter how alluring, struck me as borderline heretical: too decadent, I believed, or too basic. I saw it as a misappropriation of the finite time and money required for travel—the vacation version of comfort food, but with the tab of a lavish meal.

Maybe my shift in attitude can be chalked up to getting older, or maybe to Costa Rica. Six years ago, I journeyed there for the first time on what was perhaps the most ▶

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GETTING THERE

The closest major airport to Nosara, Costa Rica, is Liberia International Airport, which lies about 2½ hours north by car. In town, the **Harmony Hotel** (*harmony.nosara.com*; doubles from \$430) channels a casual, beachy vibe, as does the nearby **La Luna** (*Playa Pelada*; 506-2682-0122; entrées \$11–\$21), a local hang beloved for its wood-fired pizzas and fresh ceviche.

► impromptu trip of my life. Clichéd stuff: best friend ended an engagement, called me up in the fugue state of heartbreak, declared that he needed to get away. A day later we were in Nosara, a beatnik utopia on the Pacific coast that's long been popular with surfers, yogis, and nebulous searcher types.

It is not an easy place to reach (long flight followed by a bumpy drive over dirt roads) or the easiest place to be (rough surf, an unpredictable power and water situation). But like many, we chose Nosara for those exact reasons—the waves, the remoteness—and because we'd heard whispers about the Harmony Hotel, a stylish homage to surf culture that provides an unexpected pinch of polish in an otherwise wild location.

Those 10 days unspooled in an edifying stupor: getting pounded by waves, talking about life at the hotel's open-air bar, drifting off to sleep with the sores of muscles to the symphony of howler monkeys roaring in the jungle canopy. When the trip ended, we vowed to return, a sentiment I always mean in the delirium of the moment but that invariably gets snuffed out by my conviction that traveling is about the unseen. Yet six months later, there I was, meeting up with my friend in Nosara for a repeat of the same experience. And then again six months after that.

It became a thing and remains a thing, one of those traditions born of instinct and continued through intention. Six years since that first trip, I've been back 10 times, often staying for about a month, which is to say I've now spent more time visiting Nosara than anywhere else on the planet. When COVID-19 upended all global norms and quarantine reduced travel to the few rooms of my Los Angeles apartment, it wasn't the trips untaken that began to occupy my mind—it was Nosara. Thoughts of returning provided a salve, a flicker of light in the dark.

Return trips, I've realized, offer more than mere comfort. There's something adventurous about committing to making the far-flung familiar—building a deeper relationship with a location, I would say, as

opposed to enjoying a place in the manner of a saucy fling. Instead of the escapist buzz that comes from mainlining new sights and cultures, and adding some geotagged zing to a social media feed, returning to a place affords an opportunity to experience something equally rare and challenging: self-discovery. For me, it's a chance to check in and take note of how I've grown in the space between trips.

When I arrive in Nosara now, I paddle out in the waves alongside familiar faces, all members of a satellite community fostered over the years. I know the guy who rents me my ATV—the dominant mode of local transport, be it for a jaunt to the beach or a meal at La Luna, my beloved pseudo-Mediterranean mainstay. (The café sits at the end of a perilous road, and the views there at sunset are reliably hallucinogenic.)

I know to visit in October if I want to witness the hundreds of thousands of sea turtles that lay eggs at Ostinal, the black-sand beach, or to go in April to relish the first rainfall that marks the end of the country's scorching dry season. Though I now opt to rent a house in town, the Harmony remains a fixture, its bar my “local,” an extension of home more than a respite from it.

A formative period of my life—the bulk of my thirties—can be traced through Nosara. In those dirt roads and emerald waters, I have measured where I've been and who I've become, and gotten a clearer sense of where I might want to go. I learned that I am saner when I surf, a lesson that led me to relocate my life to California.

I can also see that my relationship with Nosara has taught me about the kind of relationships I want to cultivate in the world at large. I didn't meet my partner there, but I did confront some corners of myself in a way that primed me for the moment we met. And once we can travel again, I know my next return trip to Nosara will be our first visit together. ●