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Your next wildlife vacation should be in Central America

Let these 12 luxury lodges convince you

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PUBLISHED: DEC 15, 2017 | 20:52:53 IST



Photo: Getty Images

Costa Rica
La Paloma Lodge



Photo: Lapa Rios Lodge

It isn't tough to spot 50 shades of green here even as you lie in bed. The staff also helps you interact with as many creatures as possible. Swim with dolphins, mobula rays, barracudas and white-tip sharks in the Caño Island Biological Marine Reserve; trek through the Corcovado National Park and spot jaguars, tapirs, boas and sloths; zip-line across the jungle with howler monkeys and scarlet macaws at eyelevel. ([Website](#); doubles from CRC10,64,000 or Rs1,20,000; minimum three-night stay)

Lapa Rios Lodge

All the bungalows are set on a ridge looking out to the sea, so you'll have photo ops aplenty. Step out and explore the 1,000 acres of protected rainforest—you can meet creatures like frogs, bats and kinkajous. Go on a tour along beaches studded with colourful starfish and sea cucumbers and learn about the Golfo Dulce's marine ecosystems, or rappel down waterfalls. ([Website](#); doubles from CRC4,11,700 or Rs46,300)

Guatemala

Laguna Lodge

Every suite here has a bedroom with a view. Wake up in a hand-hewn four-poster bed to the sight of Lake Atitlan and three volcanoes—San Pedro, Toliman and Atitlan. Hike through the resort's private 100-acre nature reserve to see the belted flycatcher and the beautiful mountain trogon. Shop for jade jewellery in Panajachel and reserve your evenings for sundowners at the Lava Bar as the imposing volcanoes melt into darkness (try the bartender's mix of Guatemalan rum, carrot and apple juice). ([Website](#); doubles from GTQ1,450 or Rs12,600)

La Lancha



Photo: : Press | La Lancha in Guatemala

Overlooking Lake Petén Itza, the resort's casitas (think thatched roofs, natural wood furniture and traditional textiles) are either enveloped in foliage or face the lake. Explore the forests via suspension bridges that bring you into the heart of the action—the trees are filled with the chatter of birds and monkeys. Make a day trip to the Yaxha-Nakum-Naranjo Natural Monument and scale the Mayan temple-pyramids; you might spot Morelet's crocodiles and howler monkeys, too. The Maya Biosphere Reserve, a 45-minute drive from La Lancha, is home to jaguars and pumas. ([Website](#); doubles from GTQ1,100 or Rs9,700)

Belize



Photo:

Getty Images | A jaguar head seen behind foliage in Belize

Turtle Inn

Japanese baths and hand-carved Balinese doors add a touch of luxury to the 25 thatch-roofed cottages and villas that sit on a white-sand beach. Jump into the warm, clear waters that house the Belize Barrier Reef, a UNESCO World Heritage site, and spot multicoloured fish and spectacular coral gardens that look like entire cities. (Visit between late March and June to swim with graceful whale sharks.) If you'd rather stay dry, opt for a boat cruise in search of the shy West Indian manatee or hike in the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary & Jaguar Preserve. And spend a night or two on Coral Caye, Turtle Inn's private island, where you can channel Robinson Crusoe. ([Website](#); doubles from BZ\$640 or Rs20,600)

Nicaragua

Jicaro Island Luxury Lodge

Located on an island in Lake Nicaragua, Jicaro conducts guided tours that show off dazzling local flora and fauna. Go kayaking past flocks of brown-coated Montezuma's oropendulas and hike through forests in the Mombacho Volcano Natural Reserve to see the tiny endemic Mombacho salamander and two-toed sloths. But your interaction with wildlife actually begins at breakfast in your own two-storey tree house, when colourful birds pop by. Plus, the sustainable food programme brings produce not just to the lodge's kitchens, but also to locals. ([Website](#); doubles from NIO12,000 or Rs25,700)

Morgan's Rock



Photo: Julien Capmeil | Morgan's Rock Hacienda and Ecolodge

It's easy to be hypnotised by the stunning ocean view from the balcony of your villa, as the breeze causes your suspended daybed to sway. But pull yourself away and explore the 4,000 acres of jungle attached to the property or its private beach visited by green and

olive ridley turtles all year round; between September and March, you can see baby turtles taking their first steps. The jungle, too, is teeming with wildlife—anteaters, scarlet macaws and white-tailed deer. The resort also has a ton of kid-friendly activities, from horse riding to milking cows. ([Website](#); doubles from NIO8,000 or Rs17,000)

Honduras

The Lodge & Spa at Pico Bonito When you tire of climbing up and down the four-storey observation decks in pursuit of the many beautiful birds (the blue-bodied lovely cotinga and the bright-green emerald toucanet) that nest in the Pico Bonito National Park, loll on the hammock by the porch of the all-wood cabins and enjoy flavourful, organic Honduran coffee. Night walks reveal tree frogs, possums and bats, while boat rides in the Cuero y Salado Wildlife Refuge could lead to manatee sightings. PS: Jaguars have been photographed in the vicinity of the property. ([Website](#); doubles from HNL4,000 or Rs11,000)

Panama

La Loma This could well be Willy Wonka's factory in the wild. It's that kind of place where you wake up to the heady scent of wild cacao beans being magicked into chocolate bars at the lodge's chocolaterie and where you can watch white-faced capuchins scramble across treetops in search of succulent cacao pods. Set on 57 acres of mangroves, tropical forests and mango and cacao plantations, the hotel immerses visitors into the wild. By day, snorkel to see colourful damselfish, wrasses and barracudas and at night, dine while iguanas and poison dart frogs observe you from trees. ([Website](#); doubles from US\$240 or Rs15,500)

Canopy Lodge Never leave your room without binoculars, for you never know when you'll chance upon an avian beauty. Set in a giant crater of an extinct volcano, near the Central Panamanian village of El Valle de Anton, this is one of the country's best birding spots. Dainty hummingbirds will keep you company at breakfast while the calls of the red-legged honeycreeper, the rufous-vented ground-cuckoo and blue-gray tanagers will lure you into the trails. Non-birders can enjoy the mudbaths and thermal pools at the local health centre. ([Website](#); doubles from US\$370 or Rs23,900 for a minimum two-night stay)

Mexico

Andaz Mayakoba Resort Riviera Maya



Photo: Tadeu Brunelli | Andaz Mayakoba Resort Riviera Maya

Part of the gated Mayakoba resort, this hip hotel makes excellent use of its beachfront location. Go diving and explore the world's second largest coral reef, the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef, off nearby Cozumel Island. Keep an eye out for delicate gorgonian sea fans, spotted eagle rays and green turtles. You can also spot ocelots and Central American tapirs in the forests of the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage site, about an hour away. Back at the hotel, get a taste of Latin America at OllaTaco. If you're partial to ceviche, a meal at OllaCeviche is highly recommended. ([Website](#); doubles from MXN3,300 or Rs12,100)

Banyan Tree Mayakoba

The wake-up calls at this all-villa resort are among the most melodious you'll ever hear, mostly because they're the cheerful songs of some 200 bird species found in the area. Commune with nature as you soak in your private pool or enjoy a round of golf on the 18-hole, Greg Norman-designed golf course. But the real reason to visit is to explore the surrounding mangroves and freshwater lagoons, where you're bound to see crocodiles lazing on muddy banks and monkeys swinging from the trees. ([Website](#); doubles from MXN7,300 or Rs27,000)