

INSIDER'S GUIDE TO  
**SPAS**

REVIEWS

# The Retreat Costa Rica

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If you take Nature in all her glory and combine her with artistic sensitivity and loving kindness, you create a benchmark experience: Welcome to The Retreat Costa Rica.

Dreamt up by founder Diana Stobo, a celebrity chef, author, and life coach (with an MA in Hospitality from Cornell), and lovingly given form around a former private villa by her partner Enrique Herrera, who grew up on a large ranch in the Costa Rican jungle, the Retreat opened its beautiful doors in 2015.



*Founder Diana Stobo and Enrique Herrera*

Now with 13 rooms and a new spa, The Retreat is a luxury boutique hotel, world-class destination spa, and yoga retreat rolled into one incredible package—with a dream-team staff and nourishing farm-fresh cuisine that most spas can only imagine.

It may sound trite to write that the location is magical—but it is. Situated amidst the rainforest at the base of a 50-acre crystal-quartz mountain outside the colorful town of Atenas, Alajuela, in Costa Rica, The Retreat offers vast and painterly views of the renowned Blue Zone, Nicoya Peninsula, the Pacific Ocean, and the lush Costa Rican rainforest valley. (The property is in the process of becoming Blue Zone certified.) The Retreat's resident peacocks are called Tarzan and Jane, and they reflect a loving mix of LA sophistication and remarkable indigenous creativity.



*A Junior Suite at The Retreat*

Stobo and Herrera have managed to create a true retreat in every sense of the word. Once you step foot on the property, you won't want to leave—and not just because it's difficult to get there. (Hint: Use their car service! My adventurous husband rented a car at the airport in San Juan, and a late flight and a wrong turn put us at midnight out in a field at the edge of a cliff, and then the correct turn put us down the steepest road that's ever been paved. I arrived more shaken than stirred—but the staff, who had waited up, immediately made everything delightful.)

I had signed on for a five-day Immersive Wellness Program, with a focus on the ever-elusive Balance. As it turns out, the first morning I awoke in the Coco Suite, was seven years to the day that Stobo had first stepped foot on the property. Coincidence? I think not. My husband went to yoga, but I went to the open kitchen and grabbed a cup of the fine organic coffee that's grown and roasted on the property, and took off, cup in hand. I had a brand-new spa to discover!

## Vida Mia Healing Center and Spa

Vida Mia Healing Center and Spa opened August 1<sup>st</sup> of 2019, and is the first Ayurvedic healing center in Costa Rica. It is overseen by the affable and knowledgeable Dr. Vinod Balakrishnan, a naturopath, acupuncturist, and Ayurvedic doctor who honed his craft at Taj Hotels. Dr. Vinod has the clearest eyes I've ever seen. He wakes up at dawn each day to do 300 sun salutations—before he hikes the steep mountain to the spa. He is no-nonsense, does not mince words, and is extremely kind.



*Vida Mia Healing Center and Spa*

Rebuilt on the site from a former residence, Vida Mia encompasses 8,000 square feet, is spread out over two floors with lots of open-air space, and includes a Meditation Deck and Gratitude Lounge Café with a plant-based menu and superbly curated organic and biodynamic wines. The view—and even the placement of the building and the pools—is reminiscent of the magically suspended gardens in the movie *Avatar*: You’re literally hanging out in the jungle.

The seven light-filled treatment rooms are named for indigenous healing crystals, with mesmerizing mountain and sea views. The design throughout is simple and chic and follows Feng Shui principles. Lots of clean crisp white and neutral earth tones soothe the eye with splashes of turquoise throughout. As in so many contemporary spas, there is not a sharp corner to be found here. This is a place to embrace softness . . .

There’s a warm Quiet Pool for Watsu (one of two saline pools), a cold plunge in the form of an ice-cold water cascade, a nicely situated covered Jacuzzi, and in a truly creative twist—two water swings, where you can swing to your heart’s content above the Watsu pool and out towards the horizon where the mountains meet the sea.

During my stay, I spent a good amount of time traipsing between the chromotherapy-imbued steam room scented with fresh herbs picked from the garden and outfitted with a custom-designed tile recliner that fit my curves perfectly, and the inviting outdoor Jacuzzi and cold water cascade. There are lots of pillow-filled nooks and crannies to nap in between treatments and soaking. One day, I followed a garden path and discovered a wonderfully rustic outdoor shower, along with the makings of a volcanic clay bath. It wasn’t quite ready for use during my stay, but I have no doubt it will be a wonderful option to offer guests. A mud bath and invigorating shower en plein air.

## Transformational Treatments

The treatments here are topnotch, the therapists exceptional. Products used in the Farm-to-Spa rituals are handcrafted fresh from the organic gardens (the Radiant Sunshine facial, for example, uses fresh avocado, lemon, and oatmeal to exfoliate and cleanse, as well as a moringa and green tea mask). I was extremely pleased to discover that Shankara is the only product line the spa uses—a gorgeously formulated Ayurvedic-based line that donates 100 percent of its net profits to humanitarian causes. Talk about synergy.



*A spa treatment at Vida Mia*

In addition to authentic Ayurveda treatments and Farm-to-Spa rituals, Vida Mia also offers a number of Detox and Energy rituals, Crystal Healing therapies, an Aesthetic menu, and a Yoga and Fitness menu. Acupuncture is also available.

During my stay, I experienced a rejuvenating Abhyanga Massage that was truly transformational and had me floating for days, as well as a lovely Shankara Ayurveda Facial with Kansa Wand Chakra Therapy that refreshed and revitalized my flight-weary skin.

The most intense treatment of all was the out-of-this-world Sensual Love Journey, a 120-minute crystal healing ritual for couples. Created to “strengthen a couple’s heart connection,” the ritual involved side-by-side amethyst scrubs, followed by an outdoor crystal-infused shower to “clear old energies and make room for new ones.” A moonstone dust and aromatic oil soak in a hydrotherapy tub outfitted with chromatherapy ensued, followed by a blissful massage with a rose quartz and orange essence body oil. The placement of chakra stones resulted in some of the most powerful energy work I’ve experienced and put me in another world altogether—one full of light and love. The spa room was a treat in itself, complete with a floating bed and floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the lush landscape.

## A Gastronomic Adventure

The excellent Boca Dulce restaurant features a terrace that overlooks a happy organic garden. Menus here are based on an anti-inflammatory diet and are lovingly crafted from organic produce that is mostly grown on The Retreat’s own soil-rich organic farm.



*Menus are plant-based using fresh organic produce*

At breakfast you’ll find lots of fresh local fruits, grain-free baked goods (the kitchen is grain-free and dairy-free, except for the occasional goat yogurt and cheese), homemade granola, chia pudding, farm-fresh eggs (scrambled eggs with zucchini and mushrooms was a favorite), as well as fresh-squeezed juice and smoothies. Lunches feature fabulous soups and elaborate build-your-

own salad bowls, while dinner is a three-course “organic delight gastronomic adventure.” Locally and sustainably raised fish, fowl, beef, and lamb are served. I loved the soups, especially the hearts of palm soup topped with fresh lavender and almonds.

## Not to be Missed

While [THE RETREAT](#) offers a number of off-site excursions, including a Farmer’s Market tour, Atenas Culture tour, and a visit to Manuel Antonio National Park, my husband and I were quite content to stay put. Our favorite experiences in addition to the spa and cuisine were:



*The author’s husband, Stephen Kiesling, swinging in the jungle*

- The daily guided Nature Hike, a moderate 5k hike through the property’s organic coffee plantation, over pathways, into the jungle, and down to the river where you’ll find wooden swings hanging from grand trees.
- The morning and late-afternoon yoga class.
- A tour of the property’s organic gardens.
- Sunset and a glass of biodynamic wine in the the Gratitude Lounge.