

March 29, 2023

<https://www.cntraveller.com/hotels/san-jose/the-well-at-hacienda->

## The Well at Hacienda AltaGracia, Costa Rica spa review

*Take solace in spa treatments in the Costa Rican rainforest*



### Set the scene

With two stunning coastlines to choose from, the surfer-strewn beaches make up a large slice of **Costa Rica**'s premium real estate pie, alongside properties close to footfall-heavy landmarks like Arenal volcano. Which is why, in the remote hilltops of Pérez Zeledón, Hacienda AltaGracia, Auberge Resorts Collection has curated a demonstration of the country's best bits, all within 150 acres of its very own ecosystem. And despite being set amid a remote, inland rainforest, there's no shortage of entertainment and experiences: those that come for the hotel need not leave; those that come for the spa won't want to. Honeymooners and families use the private airstrip to arrive from San José, whilst more often than not those arriving solo are here for The Well.

## **What's the backstory?**

The Well's story might sound familiar: high-flyer leaves executive role in finance to start wellness retreat. But in Rebecca Parekh's previous career, you might have found her at the Capitol, leading members of congress in a meditation. A former Deutsche Bank executive turned COO for Deepak Chopra, Parekh founded The Well after receiving life-changing craniosacral treatment in a spa in Sedona. Having launched in **New York** and **Washington in Connecticut**, The Well at Hacienda AltaGracia, an Auberge resort, is her first international outpost. With the help of integrative medicine specialist and acupuncturist Dr Frank Lipman, holistic health coaches Amanda Carney, Lauren Ferioli and Karim Soto, The Well has established itself as a spa destination that takes delivering long-lasting results seriously.

## **What's the wellness concept?**

The Well's approach taps into Rebecca's own experience of burnout. Integrative medicine is combined with ancient Chinese techniques and peer-reviewed science. Treatments that ten years ago would have been seen as 'alternative' are trickling down into mainstream healthcare, and The Well has been a leader in this field. It views both deep healing and preventative care through a wide-angle lens, and provides guests with manageable advice they can take back to everyday life after their visit. Every guest who books a casita at the hotel is given a 30-minute consultation before their visit, during which a health coach will start to map out a programme for them. On mentioning that she had symptoms of plantar fasciitis, one guest arrived to find the team had not only designed a treatment programme for the duration of her stay, but had adjusted her hiking activities and placed a Madero foot roller and epsom salts in her casita.

## **What are the signature treatments?**

Therapists at The Well are trained in craniosacral therapy, a hands-on treatment that taps into the body's craniosacral rhythm and uses energy to address blockages, pain or immobility in fluids, bones, tissues and organs. As well as using light touch, it involves an energy-based healing method not dissimilar to reiki that helps regulate the nervous system. The spa's signature treatment takes place in the Calientillo River, in which guests are invited to place anything that no longer serves them in a sound bowl, which is then flushed away with the natural current. With a purifying coffee scrub (using grounds from Tesoro Chico and honey by Pollen Keepers, both local small-batch producers), it's an aura-cleansing ritual inspired by the water which is the literal bedrock of The Well's ethos. "All of our properties are centred around that idea that where there is water, there is life, there is community," Senior Vice President, Development & Operations Vivianne Garcia-Tunon explains. In 2023, her team – headed up by Karim Soto – is launching a brand new in-water hydrotherapy massage to emulate a "return to the mother's womb", using motion, touch, cradling, and massaging of pressure points to release pain and renew energetic free flow.

Therapists are trained to provide treatment for pregnant people, and there is a protocol in place for cancer patients, but oncology massage certification is not available in the same way that it is in the UK.

## **Which therapist should I book?**

Karim Soto is The Well's Lead Therapist, and has spent her career working in outdoor treatment areas, making her an expert in – and key creator behind – the river bath. "Karim is a mother of four, and she could probably take over a country by herself," says Vivianne, "and her daughter is also one of our superstar therapists." Karim's intuitive approach combines the perfect pressure with an understanding of how healing it can be to get in touch with nature, whilst Michelle Stoppi is the resort's craniosacral master. Specialists such as journaling expert Laura Rubin are brought in for retreats on a regular basis (Rubin will be on site from 20-22 March 2023).

### **What makes it different?**

Those hoping to train here have access to the usual IV infusions, infrared cabins and Celluma light therapy to aid recovery. But aside from the property's tension-melting location in the leafy valley of Pérez Zeledón, it's the all-round, deep-rooted approach that provides relief from chronic conditions, pain and emotional trauma that sets The Well apart. Hacienda AltaGracia is the last-resort resort: people that have tried everything, and nothing has worked, turn to the team here, and most walk away wishing it had been their first stop. The wider medical community has started to embrace craniosacral therapy, with researchers at John Hopkins and the Cleveland Clinic investing money and time into studying massage therapy and energy healing. From **equine therapy** at the on-site stables to reiki healing, treatments are delivered with a light touch and are carefully curated around the experiences you want to enjoy at the hotel. And speaking of which, don't be surprised if you come across a familiar face in the spa – staff are encouraged to take part in the retreats, as part of The Well's ambition to be the 'healthiest employer in the world'. "This is not one of those places where the guests aren't allowed to see staff doing a **yoga class**," says Vivianne. "One of our wranglers, Diego, is also training in craniosacral therapy – horses have seven times more energetic auras than human beings."

### **What else do they offer?**

At around 2,200 feet altitude, you might not expect to find much else besides the spa. But Mark Wright, Hacienda AltaGracia's general manager, was determined to bring some of Costa Rica's best bits to the property after its reopening, the idea being that it's a destination in itself. Before Auberge took it over in 2021, guests complained that there weren't enough things to do. Now, in harmony with the spa's celebration of the natural world from its waterways to its canopy, you can scale a carboncillo tree with guide Diego Mora, take in the landscape via hike or horseback (ask for Reinaldo, who makes regular stops to nibble on overhanging plants), or simply hang out and watch the hummingbirds: the whole property purposefully makes it possible to connect with your surroundings.

### **Where do you stay?**

There are 50 hilltop casitas, each of which could house a large family but you'll only have to share with your plus-one. New York-based interior designer Nina Gotlieb draws on Costa Rica's wood and leather exports for tone and texture, and there's a touch of safari lodge – mahogany, binoculars, **bird-watching** books. A private infinity pool looks out over shifting skies colliding with mountainous landscape: the tide to the south pushes clouds inland, where they sit suspended in rainforest. Watch native bird species like Cherrie's tanager disappear into the frosted tips of an arbol de maya tree and listen to the birdsong of curious blue-gray tanager. There are acres of gardens (looked after by Ana Orozco, "our plant, herb and flower fairy") to wander, custom-made cabanas by the communal pool, three different restaurants and an essential all-day snack bar designed to keep you going between outdoor pursuits.



### **Anything else to mention?**

Tico culture is famously relaxed, and you'll likely catch the phrase 'pura vida' over and over during your visit. It's a catch-all phrase for hi, bye, good luck, good job... but its literal translation – pure life – embodies the country's attitude beyond the cliché. Don't miss the morning walks with Mark's dog Bagheera, or the treetop canopy climb – it's a natural high in every sense, and Diego's stories will distract you from the vertigo.

### **Final word**

Medicalised spa environments can sometimes be exhausting or exasperating, but this is the opposite. At The Well, they work hard to flip the narrative, and what comes across powerfully is the sense that they're on your side. Whatever you're looking to improve through your visit, you're a team tackling the problem together.



























