

As travelers, we face the challenge to choose between notorious destinations, ones that hold promise and influence, and destinations less traveled, ones that offer unique authenticity and adventure. The disadvantages for each are affluent. A city like Paris or Bangkok, we are subject to lingering in long lines and dodging selfie sticks. On the infamous island of Capri, you can take a €25 taxi or the €2 bus up to Anacapri. The €2 bus makes more fiscal sense, but when it rolls up carrying tourists like sardines holding suitcases over their heads, it's hard not to reconsider.

Opting for a city less familiar with the masses, however, means subjecting travel plans to the unexplored and unexpected. It could be a hidden gem, or it could be in the middle of nowhere. When I visited Schwarzsee, Switzerland, I picked it because of its small, countryside charm and wild, romantic scenery. It was all of those things, but I had caught Schwarzsee in the middle of an off-season, where the small ski lift had closed, and it was too wet and cold for hiking. At an attempt to bar hop and meet locals, my friend and I walked down the creepily quiet street near our mountain chalet only to find a single pub with the lights off and an out of order gas station.

For most of us, time is of the essence. We want to make the most out of our elected time off. It's reasonable to want to visit the cities that roll off the tongues of the people we know and show up on the social media accounts of the people we don't. They are the cities we read about in literature older than we are. It's also reasonable to want the opposite, to seek an experience that can feel more genuine and less curated for consumerism. For that, we look for destinations off the beaten path that will give us the same promise and influence as some of the most popular and desirable cities in the world.

In the late fall of 2016, I traveled with a [gap year program](#) to Costa Rica where we experienced some of the most remote and exciting places I had ever been. We meandered through the small island of Tortuguero and hiked through the Costa Rica Highlands and slept at remote homestays in the middle of the rainforest. We hit the big guns too, like Monteverde and Manuel Antonio, and it made for a genuinely wholesome, bona fide experience. But, the one place that is seared into my memory, a place I can still smell when it rains, is the kind of place you won't find on TripAdvisor.

Rancho Mastatal took me by sweet surprise. The campus is home to more than 300-acres of rainforest, with access to over ten kilometers of trails, a library, a permaculture farm, and the warm and welcoming core team that makes everything possible. The ranch opened in 2001 and offers experiential educational opportunities through programs and onsite integrated, working systems that focus on permaculture, natural building, fermentation, and other sustainability practices. The ranch is fueled by the people of the region, the ranch team, and the countless people who participate in their varied programs and leave their impactful footprint behind. It's ideal for visitors who embrace responsible tourism and

have a desire to learn about sustainability practices that are applicable in both the local region and around the world.

The first person we met upon arrival was an Ohio native named Scott. He was the farm manager for the ranch, amongst other accolades like a food system designer, an agroforester, and the co-founder of a landscape design firm called Porvenir Design. His passion for regenerative agriculture and community development was palpable as he introduced us to his home. I will never forget when he said, 'I hope this place changes your life.'

Over the next two weeks of our stay, Scott showed us why Mastatal is one of Costa Rica's best-kept secrets. We swung in vibrant hammocks and read used books from the library. We ate rich vegetarian meals every day with locally sourced food and salad from a garden merely ten feet away from the kitchen table. We shared beers with the ranch team at the single bar in town and played games of pick up soccer in the football field nearby. We swam in swimming holes and jumped off waterfalls. Within walking distance, we visited La Iguana Chocolate to indulge in the local chocolate treats and stopped by the indigenous reserve of Zapaton to learn about medicinal plants in the region.



Swimming hole within walking distance of Rancho Mastatal

Most importantly of all, we learned what makes Rancho Mastatal sustainable and ever-present. We learned about the importance of designing and building structures to minimize the impact on the environment, using materials like wood, earth, straw, bamboo, stone, and manure. They offered us hands-on experience; we used earth material to build up a wall for the new community center, and we chopped bamboo with machetes for the new visitor lodges. We contributed to the kitchen needs by picking leaves from the garden for salad and uprooting turmeric from the ground. The turmeric stained our hands for days. For the first time in my life, I was introduced to exotic delicacies like pejibaye, ojoche, starfruit, and breadnut.



Washing and preparing the turmeric for use

It was a magical place. One that made biodigester toilets feel like sanctuaries and goat's milk taste like fresh squeezed lemonade. If it weren't for the gap year program itinerary, I would have never known about the ranch. It isn't on the list of top ten places to visit or something you'll find in travel books like Lonely Planet or National Geographic. It isn't saturated with tourists and commercialism. Rancho Mastatal simply exists. In that simplicity lives a genuine and pure Costa Rican experience, something that makes the path less traveled invigorating and rewarding.

On the day we left, I struggled to find the words to say. How do I tell Scott he was right—this place did change my life. I didn't know how to say it, so I didn't say anything at all.

Anyway, I think he knew.

To learn more about Rancho Mastatal and the experiential education programs they offer, visit their [website](#).

