

EXPLORING ☀ COSTA RICA

AmaTierra Redefines the Three Rs: Relax, Renew, Rejuvenate

By Vicky Longland
Special to The Tico Times

The full moon rises as dusk falls and a group of yoga aficionados gently stretch in the open-air exercise studio against a vista that drops away toward the forested valley floor and hills beyond. At AmaTierra hotel and wellness center, this monthly celebration is only one of the many ways to relax the body and renew the mind.

The hotel lies on the winding but wonderfully pothole-free Highway 27, 19 kilometers past Puriscal toward Orotina, about an hour's drive southwest from San José. This is increasingly the route of choice to the coast for savvy drivers who want to avoid the truck-clogged Highway 1 to the Pacific port of Puntarenas; a narrow suspension bridge past the hotel prevents big trucks from noisily taking over this road.

This bodes well for the hotel, which opened in early 2006, as its intention is for guests to find an oasis of peaceful surroundings and indulge in the wide choice of massage therapies, wellness programs and herbal consultations.

AmaTierra owner Jill Ruttenberg is a qualified American Herbalists Guild clinical herbalist, yoga instructor and massage therapist. Originally from the U.S. state of



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Colorado, via California and Arizona, Ruttenberg and husband Bob decided to escape the rat race and set up a residential center catering to people who want to chill out in beautiful surroundings.

"People arrive at AmaTierra with their 'New York baggage,' stressed and depressed, but within days they've eased out and started to relax," Ruttenberg says.

With a mission that guests "feel cared for and cared for," the hotel soon conveys the message that a stay here means unwinding and letting oneself be pampered.

Accommodations consist of five cottages split into two suites each, while above, the open social area and dining balcony share views of the infinity-edge pool and deck and panoramic scenes over dense forest toward Orotina. Wireless Internet is available in the upper part of the hotel and will soon be extended to all suites.

Being so steeply set into the mountain-side does mean plenty of steps to climb from one's room to the restaurant and lounge, and there is no wheelchair access. Each cottage is tucked into the slope surrounded by the many mature mango or *pochote* trees and garden shrubs that fill the three-hectare grounds. All rooms have a queen-size bed, fridge, coffeemaker, ceiling



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fans, Jacuzzi bathtub and television for viewing DVDs from the hotel's selection of nearly 350 movies, provided free to guests. A dividing wall separates the bed from a lounge area that can be converted into an extra sleeping space if necessary. The small terrace holds a couple of chairs and seat hammock.

Decor is minimal, but the interiors are made colorful with warm sand-tone walls and soft furnishings that reflect the name of each room. I stayed in Sangria, with its bright red bedspread, pillows and cushions. Menta, Rosa, Café and Dorado, to name a few more, pretty much go through the color chart.

An honor system operates for juice, beer

and sodas from a well-stocked fridge by the pool. Although no hard liquor is sold, Bob enjoys recommending the variety of wines he stocks from his collection in the dining area.

In his former life, Bob was in the music promotion and marketing industry with a special interest in jazz, so music rates high at AmaTierra. Evenings often become jam sessions around the piano, accompanied by whatever instruments guests might have brought along.

Room rates include a full breakfast featuring typical *gallo pinto*, juice, fruit plate, locally baked whole-wheat breads, a wide choice of teas and fresh coffee. Lunch and

dinner are also available if preordered, and you can choose between a full vegetarian and fish or chicken (no red meat) dish imaginatively prepared by local cooks under Jill's supervision. There's a pleasant informality at mealtimes as guests often join up tables to share the day's adventures or relaxing experiences down in the wellness center.

Certainly the *pièce de résistance* is the newly inaugurated two-level pavilion. Built along feng shui lines, the octagonal building holds the therapy and massage rooms below while above is the spacious, open-air yoga studio. A synthetic thatch roof looking just like dense palm fronds was chosen



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by the Ruttenbergs for its durability and rustic warmth.

"We are so pleased with how it's turned out," Jill says. "The whole place is very peaceful, and the upper floor can also be used for seminars and workshops or retreats of all kinds."

Jill spent many years studying under such holistic luminaries as Joel Penner, from whom she learned about traditional Chinese medicines, and Michael Tierra of the East West School of Herbolgy in Santa Cruz, California. She took her master herbalist certification with Andrew Weil's program in integrative medicine at the University of Arizona.

In her beautiful, light-filled office, Jill showed me an array of shelves filled with different tinctures and lotions, many of which she makes herself, using herbs from the hotel's organic gardens. As she explained their uses, she shook several jars that were in the process of becoming powerful herbal remedies, explaining that this has to be done daily between the new and full moon to maximize their curative powers.

Massage sessions (\$75 for one hour) range from aromatherapy de-stress, deep tissue and lymphatic massage to Jill's specialty, abdominal chi mover. This entails 45 minutes of gentle strokes to move the life force energy throughout the belly and unblock "stuck" energy that causes emotional stress and indigestion, with a 10-minute final head and foot rub. She also gives sound therapy to rebalance chakras using the hauntingly penetrating tones of Tibetan singing bowls and other sound tools.

Other specialists come in to offer shatsu, Reiki, ear candling, detoxification treatments and acupuncture. Visitors are encouraged to have a personalized nutritional herbal con-

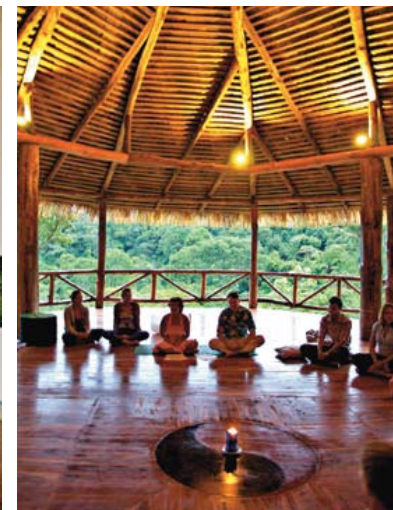


Photo by Simón Bolívar



Photo courtesy of AmaTierra

A Place to Be Well: From top left, AmaTierra guests dine with a sweeping view; the new two-level pavilion holds therapy and massage rooms below and a yoga studio above; herbalist, yoga instructor and massage therapist Jill Ruttenberg makes many of the tinctures and lotions used at AmaTierra using herbs from the hotel's organic gardens; the spacious, open-air yoga studio invites meditation; rooms have queen-size beds and sitting areas.

sultation (\$95 for 75 minutes) to improve health and lifestyle. Jill makes an assessment using Chinese medicine tongue and pulse methods and recommends dietary changes and custom-made herbal formulas for each person's particular constitution.

Several packages are available, from a Relax & Renew Wellness Weekend to five- and seven-day packages. Guests are also

taken on excursions to nearby Turubari Tropical Park and Carara National Park, on horseback to a hot springs and waterfall, or a day trip to the beach.

Because of its proximity to San José and easy access, AmaTierra makes a convenient getaway for some alternative three Rs: relax, renew and rejuvenate. Or go the whole way and add another couple for "romantic retreat." ■



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Getting There, Rates, Info

Take Highway 27 from Ciudad Colón to Puriscal, then follow signs for Turubari Tropical Park and Orotina. Nineteen kilometers past Puriscal, look for AmaTierra signs; the hotel is on the right. Airport or San José pickup is offered for \$60 one way.

Rates for an overnight stay for two including breakfast are €40,000 (\$72) for residents and Costa Ricans; nonresident rates for bed and breakfast are \$127 single and \$149 double. Lunch costs \$7, dinner \$25, per person. Visit the hotel's Web site or call for other package deals, such as the three-day Wellness and Adventure Package including meals and lodging, two yoga classes, wellness treatment of choice and guided tour to Turubari park for \$595 per person.

The hotel is nonsmoking and does not accept children under 4. For information and reservations, call 2419-0110, e-mail amatierra@gmail.com or visit www.amatierra.com.