

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE OF INTERIOR DESIGN

APRIL 2004



Four Seasons Costa Rica

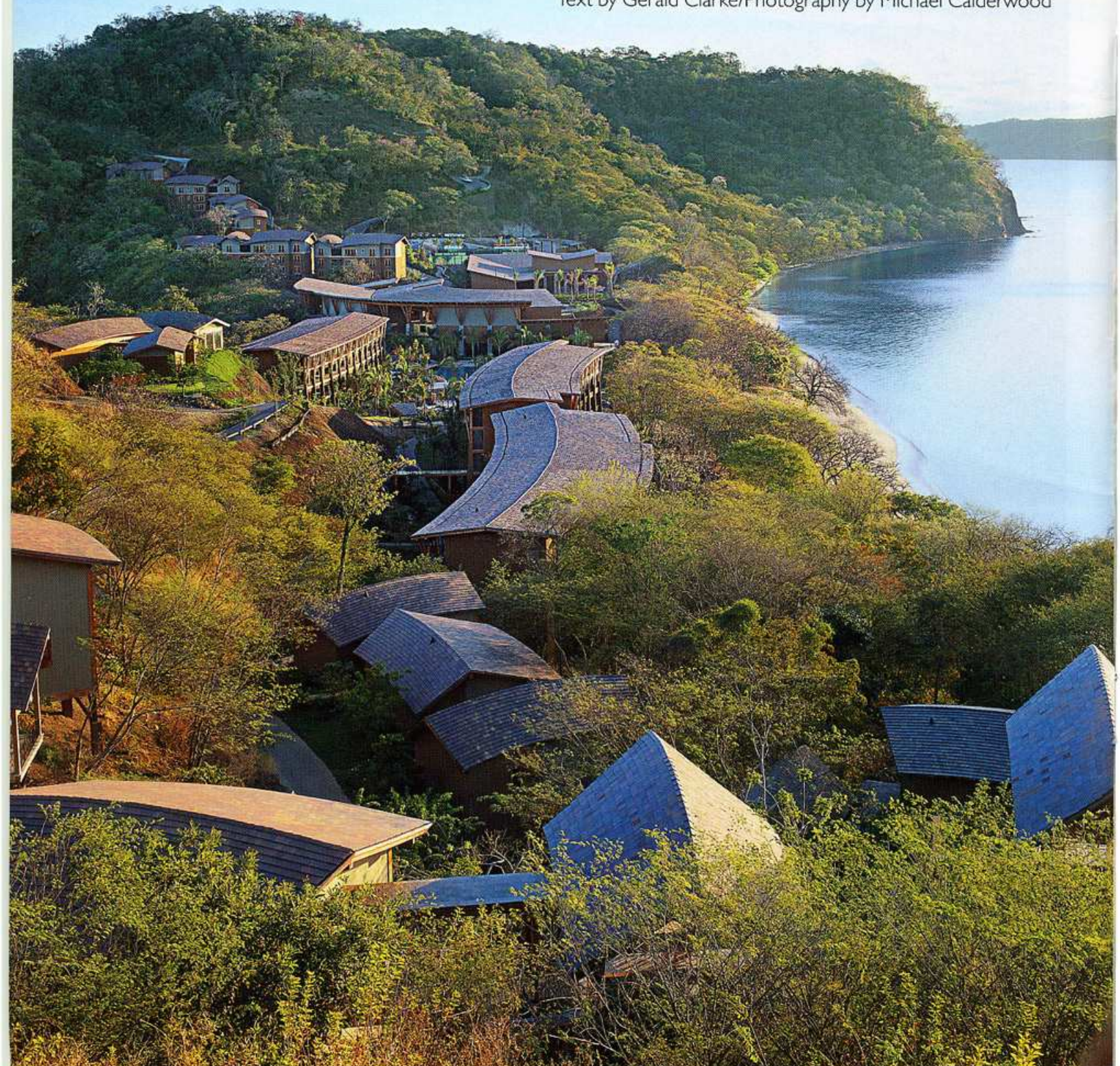
A FRESH TAKE ON REGIONAL DESIGN AT A LUXURY
RESORT ON THE PENINSULA PAPAGAYO

Four Seasons Costa Rica

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RESORT ON THE PENINSULA PAPAGAYO

Architecture by Ronald Zürcher Gudián/Interior Design by Brayton + Hughes Design Studio

Text by Gerald Clarke/Photography by Michael Calderwood



USUALLY ARCHITECTS want their buildings to stand out from their surroundings, to boldly proclaim their skill, vision and occasionally their ego. But Ronald Zürcher Gurdán, the architect of a remarkable new resort on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica, is not one of them. The location of the Four Seasons Resort on the Peninsula Papagayo is so beautiful, he says, that his greatest challenge was to build something respectful. "I didn't want to compete with nature," he explains, pointing to some white constructions several miles away, on the other side of the Golfo de Papagayo, that do

just that. "See how those buildings stand out? But if you're over there, looking this way, you don't see our hotel at all—it's camouflaged." He means that literally, and he went so far as to send Papagayo dirt to a paint laboratory so that his buildings would blend in with the ground on which they sit.

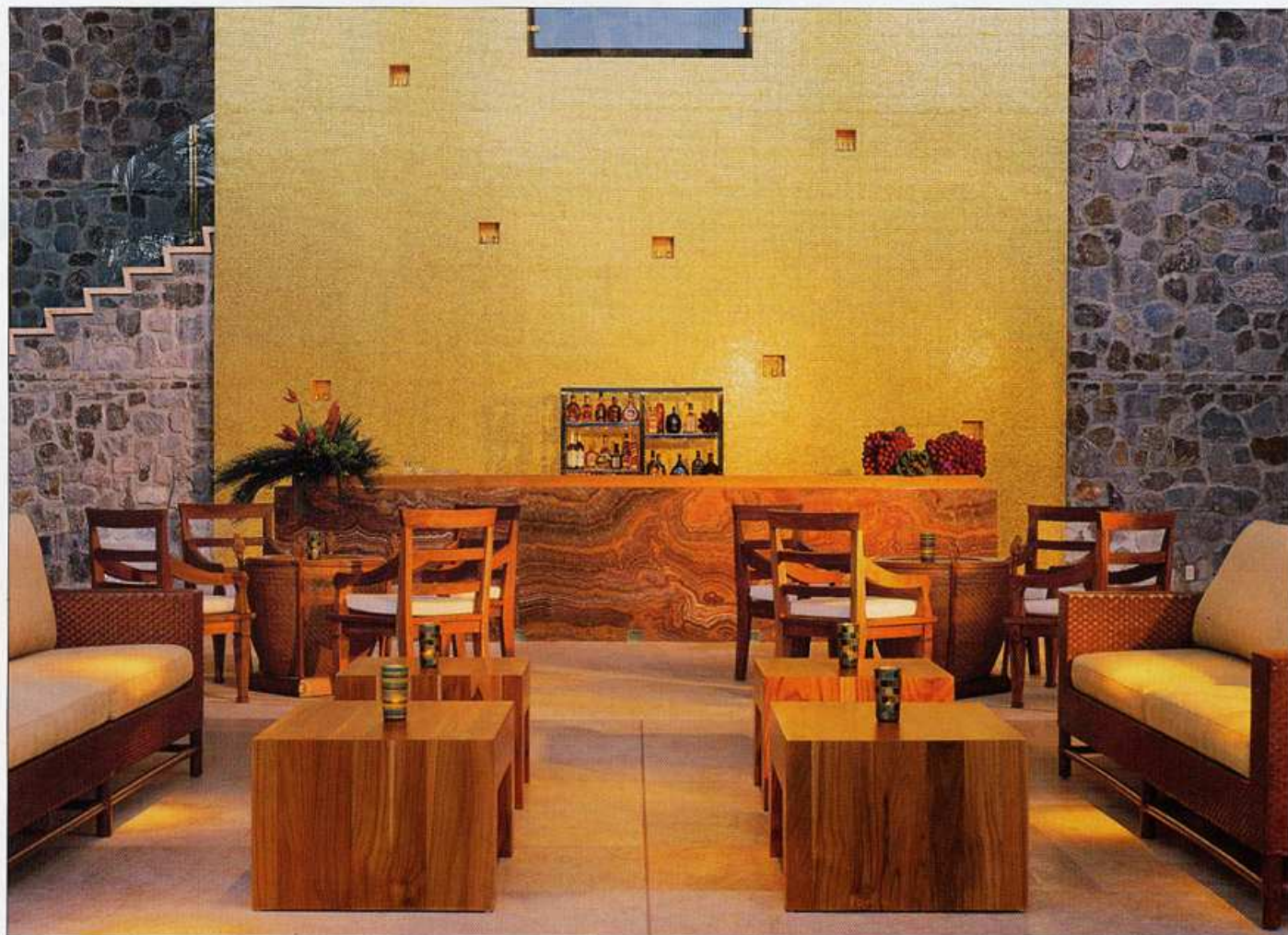
Most new hotels and resorts in Costa Rica—or, indeed, in all of Central America—are built in a Spanish colonial style, with arches, columns, courtyards and tile roofs. Zürcher, whose firm is based in the country's capital, San José, wanted a style more authentically Costa Rican, a style inspired by the artifacts of the



OPPOSITE: Turtles and armadillos inspired the forms of architect Ronald Zürcher Gurdán's meandering buildings at the Four Seasons Resort Costa Rica.

ABOVE: "There is as much indoor-outdoor living as we could devise," designer Richard Brayton, who worked closely with Zürcher, says of the open lobby.

BELOW: Small tiles covered in gold leaf were used behind the bar "to catch the afternoon sun," explains the architect. The fabrics are from Perennials.

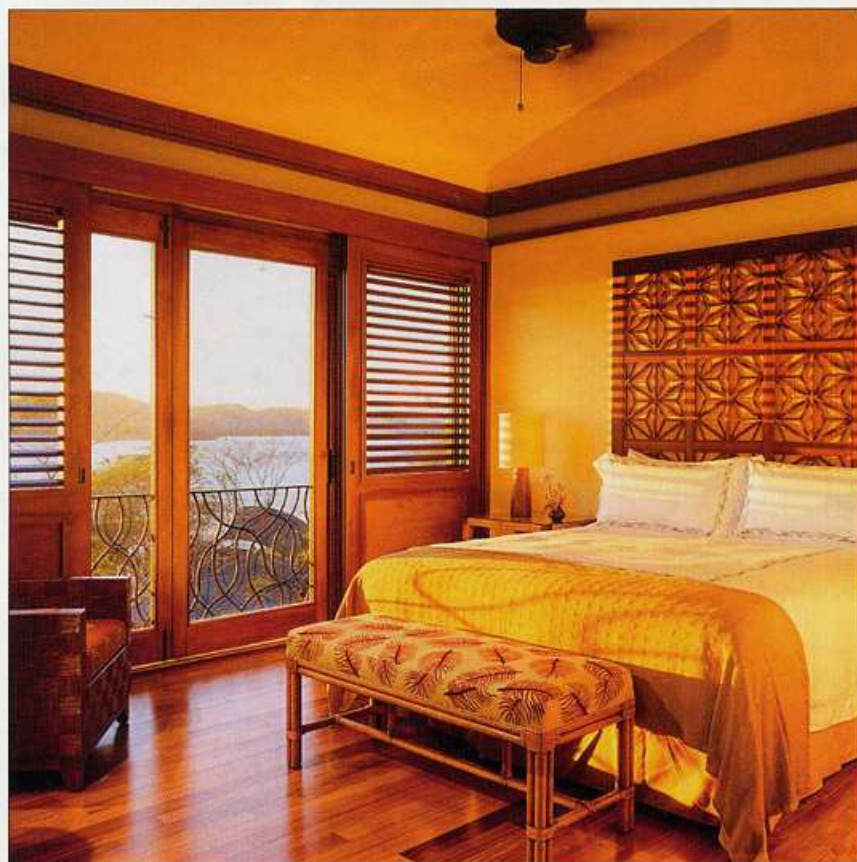


Glowing light fixtures and a mixture of wood and stone textures help to create a warm environment in the restaurant Di Mare. Costa Rican artist Joaquín Rodríguez del Paso did the floral painting. Chairs by McGuire.



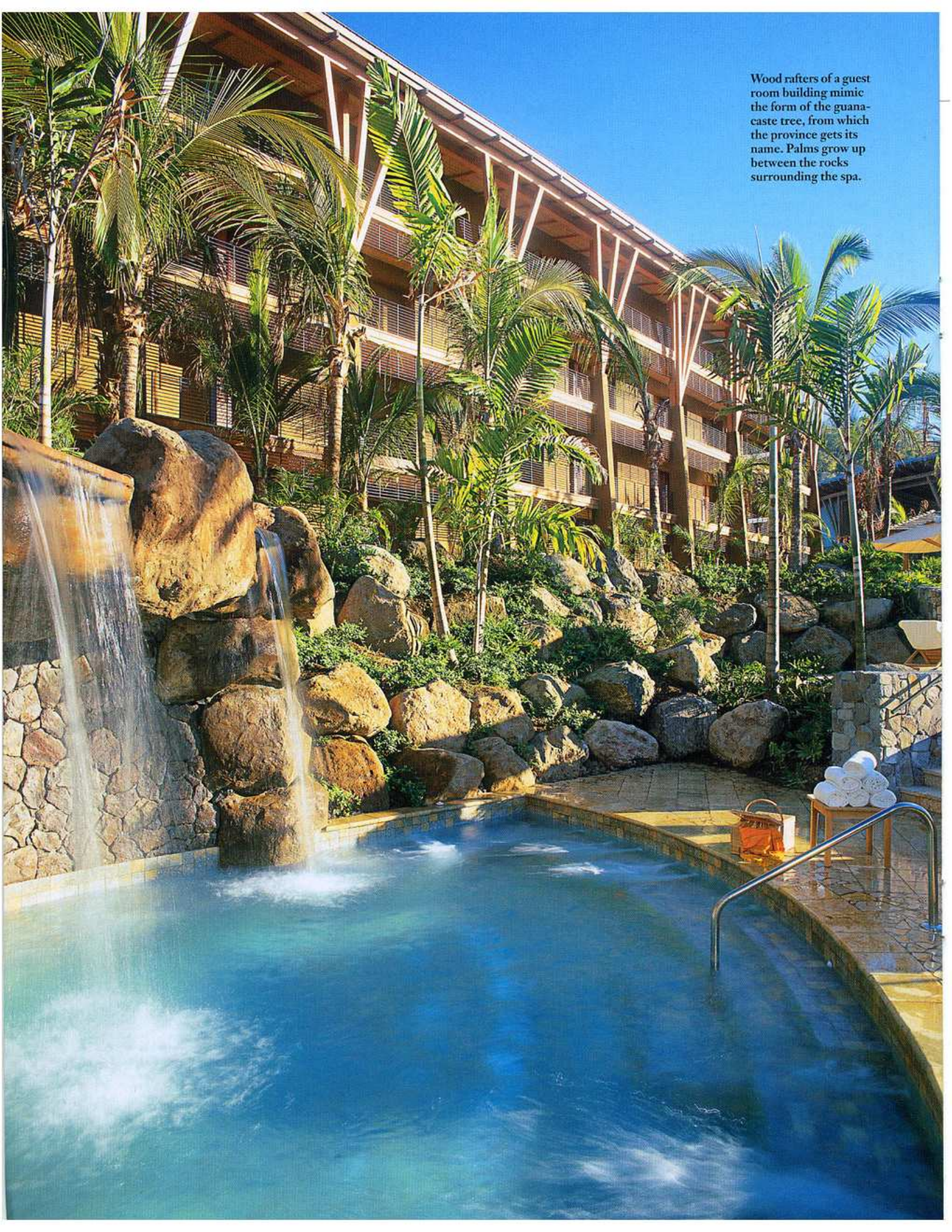
natives who lived in the region before Columbus and the Spanish conquest. "I always wanted to create a Costa Rican vocabulary for this area," he says. "The only other things I've designed around here are houses. This project was big enough to say: 'Let's do it!'"

To do it he had to become a student again, reading books, interviewing professors and looking at the world around him with keen eyes. "I didn't want this project to look like one in Bali, Japan or Mexico," says the architect, "so I studied very deeply to see what being Costa Rican means. I read a lot about the pre-Columbian culture in this area, and I talked to anthropologists and archaeologists. I even talked to tomb robbers. Surprisingly, the tomb robbers gave me a beautiful interpretation of what they found; they were amazed by the natural beau-



ABOVE: The terrace of a suite, one of 25 in the resort, steps down to a private plunge pool overlooking the bay. LEFT: A premier suite's bedroom is flooded with sunlight.

TOP: The railing off the sitting room of a premier suite "is twisted like mangrove roots and painted gray to match the trunks of the neighboring trees," says Zürcher.



Wood rafters of a guest room building mimic the form of the guana-caste tree, from which the province gets its name. Palms grow up between the rocks surrounding the spa.

ties they found around them.”

What came out of all that study was the realization that the pre-Columbian inhabitants were also awestruck by their surroundings. Though it is about half the size of Kentucky—it covers roughly .03 percent of the globe’s land mass, to be precise—little Costa Rica has nearly 5 percent of the earth’s plant and animal species. The vocabulary Zürcher was seeking was all around him—in the trees, the animals, the birds, even the butterflies.

For his most important designs, however, the architect looked not to the country’s most dramatic creatures, such as the elegant jaguar or the riotously colored scarlet macaw, but to two of its most humble—the turtle and the armadillo, both of which just happen to make their homes on the narrow peninsula. Following their lead, Zürcher gave several of the resort’s low-lying buildings the round shape of a turtle’s shell and mimicked the armadillo’s arched, humped back for the roofs of many of the buildings on higher ground. “I noticed that armadillos walk in families, one after the other,” he says. “So in-



stead of having large, single roofs, I’ve done the roofs in pieces, each one in the shape of an armadillo. From a distance the buildings look like families of armadillos.”

Other inspirations came from pre-Columbian ceramics. The main building, where guests register, has the round outline of a native vase, and its thin columns are V-shaped, just like the designs on the lips

of those vases. In the middle of the lobby Zürcher placed a gentle overflow fountain, a modern version of such a vase. On it he had inscribed, in both Spanish and the indigenous language Cabecar, the words of a pre-Columbian Genesis. They say: “The one at the head table created everything that would honor him. He made all the trees, all the animals that

ABOVE: The colors and materials used in the 153 guest rooms and exterior spaces, including the Presidential Suite’s deck, were “chosen to reflect nature,” says Brayton.

BELOW: Situated on the Peninsula Papagayo, the resort lies between two beaches. John Harrigan, of Florida-based EcoPlan, was the landscape architect.



FOUR SEASONS

live in the water, those that walk on the earth and those that fly in the sky.”

Richard Brayton, a partner in the San Francisco firm Brayton + Hughes Design Studio, did the interiors and was also determined to respect the environment—“probably one of the most beautiful pieces of property in the world,” he says. “For the most part we chose colors that would blend in with nature. We did not want to do traditional interiors. Guests will spend as much time outside as inside, and we wanted a feeling of flow from indoors to outdoors. You have to rely on simplicity to allow that to happen.”

Some good advice also came from the boss—Isadore Sharp, the founder, chairman and chief executive officer of the Four Seasons chain. “He’s an architect himself, and he gave me ideas and feedback,” says Zürcher. Originally, for example, Zürcher wanted a waterfall to connect one swimming pool to its lower neighbor. Sharp vetoed the idea, saying that the sound of the waterfall would drown out the sound of the waves—and when people come to an ocean resort, they want to hear the sound of the waves. “He was right, of course,” says Zürcher.

The Four Seasons Resort Costa Rica at Peninsula Papagayo has all the usual amenities of an expensive retreat: swimming pools, tennis courts, a golf course and not one but two beaches. But it also has something its sand-and-surf competitors in the Caribbean don’t have: It is surrounded by one of the world’s richest environments. Many of his guests will come simply to relax, observes Luis Argote, the resort’s general manager. But others will also come to explore. Within a two-hour drive are volcanoes; rain forests; lazy, crocodile-populated rivers; and faster rivers for white-water rafting. Just a few minutes away there is also something called a canopy tour, which puts visitors in harnesses and sends them flying on a cable high over the treetops. “The first part was a bit scary,” admits Argote, who tried it himself. “After that it’s exhilarating—fun!” Like the Four Seasons itself—and many other things in Costa Rica. □

*Four Seasons Resort Costa Rica at
Peninsula Papagayo
Guanacaste, Costa Rica
506-696-0000*