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Chill vibe, great food, craft beer at Kaya's

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A wooden cantina is the main attraction of Kaya's, and what it makes it stand out among all the other hotels, hostels and lodges of Puerto Viejo.



Lindsay Fendt

Murals and crafted wood adorn the rooms and lobby at Kaya's place in Puerto Viejo, where guests can kick back and enjoy a locally brewed beer.

Puerto Viejo is filled with places to stay that provide the real Caribbean experience. Whether it's an eco-lodge nestled among the trees, offering visitors regular views of wildlife, or a hostel that promises the quintessential Caribbean party, there's a mountain of options.

Then there are the places just outside of town, but still close enough to partake in the nightlife. A short walk from these brings you to numerous bars, restaurants and galleries, while a stroll back along the beach allows you to soak up the sun or take a dip in the ocean. While staying at Kaya's Place, you can do just that.

Located just north of central Puerto Viejo, Kaya's Place is situated across the street from the smooth, black sands of Playa Negra. Owner and Vermont native JT Ficociello bought the property in 2004 from a Puerto Viejo local named Kaya, a Tico with a peculiar history in the small town.

One of the employees at Kaya's recounted tales of the man's rough past, excessive drinking and penchant for woodworking. JT described him as legendary builder. "He was the first person to really define the Afro-Caribeño rustic building style." The entire hotel is modeled after Kaya's work, with thatched roofs and

enormous, polished tree trunk.

Each room at Kaya's is unique, giving each visitor a distinct experience. Some of the rooms have bunks while others have large beds, all made of handcrafted wood. There are intricate and colorful murals covering the walls of the rooms and hallways, depicting snakes, lizards and the rainforest. On the second floor of the main building, there is a spacious balcony, filled with hammocks and benches, providing guests with a view of the Caribbean across the street.

In addition to small, private rooms, the hotel offers accommodations for large groups. The Guava House can hold up to four and has air conditioning, TV and a kitchen with all the amenities. The Private Cabin is a two-story house reminiscent of jungle bungalow with its winding staircase. It can accommodate more than five people, with two bedrooms downstairs and a large room with five beds upstairs.

Instead of venturing into town for a meal, guests have the opportunity to indulge in savory meals in the main house. A majority of their ingredients come from a farm that JT owns in the area, while the rest are purchased from local vendors.

JT is also in the process of acquiring livestock such as cows, pigs, chickens, rabbits and ducks to provide a more authentic gastronomic experience. "The goal is to be more self-sustaining and produce our own food," he says.

The kitchen also features a wood fire oven for items such as the pizza especial, a thin-crust pizza covered in garlic, sausage, mushrooms, onions, pepperoni and peppers. There's also the Stromboli, a massive Italian turnover stuffed with cheese, onions, ham and tomato sauce. The restaurant makes its own bread, using the wood oven to bake it to perfection.

The main attraction of Kaya's, and what it makes it stand out among all the other hotels, hostels and lodges of Puerto Viejo, is the bar. The wooden cantina is a new addition to the hotel, offering craft beer on tap from the Bri Bri Springs Brewery, a joint venture between JT and Mike Blackoicz.

Originally from Chicago, Mike is a self-taught brewer with some cooking skills that carried over to brewing. JT has been brewing since he was 14. When he was in college, he worked for the famous Red Hook microbrewery in Seattle, Washington. The two met in Puerto Viejo while Mike was traveling, when they started talking about their mutual love of beer. Now the Chicago native lives in Costa Rica, brewing beer full time. "Opportunity knocked, and I answered the door," says Blackoicz.

The fruits of their brewing labor have resulted in two full-bodied beers which they always have on tap at the bar. The first is a chocolate porter, which uses cacao beans harvested by the local Bri Bri population. The second is the Osa Honey Ale, a crisp, refreshing beer made with honey from the rainforest, a great way to cool down after a hike through the jungle. The duo also produces various meads - a type of alcohol usually produced by fermenting honey and water - using various local fruits like pineapple and mango.

Once JT has finished his farm, he plans to use the methane produced by the animals to heat the still used in the brewing process. In turn, the spent grains will be used to feed the livestock. He also uses the water from a natural spring on his farm to brew the beer, water the produce and give to the animals. "I'm really trying to give a lot back to the roots of where we are, using local ingredients and local traditions," says JT. The hotel can also set guests up with adventure tours, employing local guides or staff to lead the trips.

One such guide is Captain Zero, a U.S.-born local legend who has been in Puerto Viejo since before Spanish became the predominant language (when the locals spoke Caribbean-influenced English). For about \$30 he'll take you on an authentic jungle tour, showing you animals and natural sights most tourists never experience. Kaya's also offers volunteer programs; guests are given free room and board for working at the hotel.

Duties include cleaning, bartending, reception and gardening, and JT has plans to start moving some of the work up to his farm once it's finished. Whatever your strengths, there's probably a job for you, "It's where their talents lie and where our needs are," he says. Not a bad gig, if you want to immerse yourself in the Caribbean lifestyle. Or, you can simply relax by the beach and drink great beer. Hard to argue with that.

Going there

Located 100 meters north of the bridge into Puerto Viejo, Kaya's Place is about a 4-hour drive from San José. If you are driving, take Highway 32 east to Limón. From there, drive down Highway 36 to Highway

256, which will take you through Puerto Viejo.

You will see Kaya's Place on your right-hand side about 5 minutes before crossing the small bridge into Puerto Viejo. You can find public buses in San José at El Gran Terminal del Caribe.

The bus will take you to the center of Puerto Viejo and from there, it's about a 10 minute walk north. Rates range from \$19 for smaller rooms with shared bathrooms to \$125 for the Guava House.

For more information call 2750-0690 or 2750-0060 or email ***info@kayasplace.com***.