

A quick guide to Costa Rica

The only way to travel

## Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2. A Brief History of Costa Rica.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>3. The Regions of Costa Rica.....</b>	<b>10</b>
San Jose and the Central Valley.....	10
Guanacaste and the Nicoya Peninsula.....	10
The Central Pacific Coast.....	11
The Southern Pacific.....	11
The Talamancan Mountains.....	11
Monteverde and Arenal.....	12
The Caribbean Lowlands.....	12
<b>4. Costa Rica- An Easy Place to Visit.....</b>	<b>13</b>
Stability.....	14
Infrastructure.....	14
Safety and Crime.....	14
Medicine.....	14
Economic travel.....	15
<b>5. Activities and Attractions.....</b>	<b>16</b>
National parks, protected areas, and natural wonders.....	16
Volcanoes and hot springs.....	16
Beaches.....	17
Rafting.....	18
Fishing.....	18
Surfing.....	18
Diving and snorkeling.....	18
"Canopy" zip lines.....	18
Butterfly Gardens.....	19
Serpentariums.....	19
Get Married in Costa Rica.....	20
Cosmetic surgery and dental work.....	20
<b>6. How to get to Costa Rica, Entrance Requirements, and Border Issues.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>7. What to bring to Costa Rica and Travel Tips.....</b>	<b>22</b>
The Passport.....	22

Money Matters.....	23
What to pack.....	23
Food and drink.....	24
<b>8. How to Explore All Corners of Costa Rica.....</b>	<b>28</b>
Driving.....	28
Transfer and shuttle service.....	30
Public Transportation.....	30
Internal flights.....	31
Ferries and boat rides.....	32
<b>9. Explore Costa Rica on your own or with a tour? .....</b>	<b>32</b>
Tours on your own.....	32
San Jose Walking Tour .....	32
Visits to national parks and birding .....	33
Seeing volcanoes and soaking in hot springs .....	34
Canopy zip lines .....	34
Tours with tour companies.....	34
Coffee and Banana Tours .....	34
The Rain Forest Aerial Tram .....	35
Diving tours.....	35
Turtle watching.....	35
Fishing.....	35
The Crocodile Tour.....	36
Horseback riding .....	37
Mountain Bike Tours .....	37
<b>10. Costa Rica- smaller historic hotels instead of resorts.....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>11. What to do and expect by region.....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>San Jose and the Central Valley.....</b>	<b>39</b>
Outside of San Jose- Cartago and Turrialba.....	42
Outside of San Jose-Heredia.....	43
Outside of San Jose-Alajuela.....	45
<b>Guanacaste and the Nicoya Peninsula.....</b>	<b>48</b>

Beaches.....	48
Guanacaste Mountains- Rincon de la Vieja.....	54
Santa Rosa and Guanacaste National Parks.....	56
<b>Central Pacific Coast.....</b>	<b>58</b>
Carara National Park.....	58
Jaco.....	59
Quepos and Manuel Antonio National Park.....	60
<b>The Southern Pacific.....</b>	<b>61</b>
Dominical.....	61
The Osa Peninsula.....	62
Golfito.....	65
<b>The Talamancan Mountains and Valle de El General..</b>	<b>65</b>
Cerro de la Muerte.....	66
Chirripo.....	68
<b>Monteverde and Arenal.....</b>	<b>69</b>
Volcan Arenal.....	72
Other things to do near Arenal.....	74
<b>The Caribbean Lowlands.....</b>	<b>76</b>
Sarapiquí and surroundings.....	76
Tortuguero National Park.....	78
The other Puerto Viejo and nearby places of interest.....	79
<b>12. Moving to and living in Costa Rica.....</b>	<b>81</b>
Changes.....	81
Making the move and residency.....	84
Real Estate.....	84
Ex-pat clubs and organizations.....	85
Tico phrases and slang.....	86
<b>About the Author.....</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>Index.....</b>	<b>88</b>

## 1. Introduction

The hazy clouds in the evening skies are slowly painted orange, red, and violet by the setting of the tropical sun over the Pacific Ocean. Silhouetted against this colorful display, squadrons of pelicans lazily flap and soar in unison over waves that meet the sand with a whisper. At a nearby restaurant, guests relax and take in the sights and sounds of this tropical paradise while enjoying fresh, grilled mahi-mahi, juicy tuna steaks, and fantastic *ceviche* washed down with ice-cold beers or fresh fruit drinks. A variety of vacationers are seated at the bar and tables; three guys from Houston excitedly talking with their guide about the fish they hope to catch on their charter scheduled to set sail the next day, a few surfers who contemplate their natural playground and look forward to the morning swells, and a family chatting with their local guide about the monkeys they will see while horseback riding. While they look forward to their first full day in Costa Rica, a welcome breeze off the Pacific rustles the coconut palm fronds and brings smiles to their faces.



Inland, scenic, jade-green mountains rise into the clouds and conceal the metropolis of San Jose. On the other side of the jagged peaks, folks are enjoying the perfect 70 degree weather as they stroll down the historic streets of the Amon and Otoya neighborhoods. In the busy, central plaza, some visitors are taking in the scene of hundreds of pedestrians who are commuting, shopping, and socializing in this car-free zone. Others have already sat down to dinner for their first

night in Costa Rica at friendly bars and restaurants in historic buildings such as that which houses the Hotel Dunn Inn.

A quick hop over the mountain range to the north reveals an ashen, cone-shaped peak that solemnly rises from the surrounding rain forests. Standing out in its vibrant green surroundings, this mountain reveals its volcanic nature and demands attention with deep rumblings, regular eruptions of steam and ash, and is capped with glowing lava. In the nearby town of La Fortuna, diners pause while cutting into their juicy steaks to look up and catch a glimpse of Arenal Volcano in action as do the couples relaxing in hot springs after a long day of travel.



Heading south from the smoking mountain, fields of bananas, pineapple plantations, and tropical rain forests carpet the humid lowlands. At small towns along the Caribbean Coast, young travelers walk sandy, mud-puddle streets on their way to restaurants and bars with old, faded, revered posters of Bob Marley after a day of snorkeling, surfing, and getting into the mode of the Caribbean lifestyle. Some have just arrived but quickly fall into the timeless Caribbean rhythm where relaxation is the only rule.

The above scenarios are just a small sampling of what vacationers to Costa Rica experience every single day in this small (about the size of the state of West Virginia), yet exciting, dynamic country. Incredibly, the tourists at the above sites could have all arrived on the same flight and could all be on the first day of their vacations. Jampacked into this former Spanish backwater are high mountains wreathed in clouds, extensive beaches on two oceans, the city life of San Jose, rain forests, and volcanoes. Such a wide variety of attractions, political stability, good infrastructure, and friendly

people make Costa Rica one of the most exciting countries in the world. Many visitors like it so much that they end up staying for good.

## **2. A Brief History of Costa Rica**

A land inhabited by several Amerindian tribes for about 7,000 years, indigenous peoples in Costa Rica never developed civilizations with large-scale infrastructures such as those established by the Mayans, Aztecs, or Incas. At the time the Spanish arrived in the early 1500s, the inhabitants of Costa Rica lived in villages or small towns, and cultivated crops such as beans, corn, and cassava. Columbus, the first European known to have visited the area, met the natives just after anchoring his ships near modern day Limon on the Caribbean coast. In this fourth and final voyage to the Americas, upon rowing ashore, he and his crew found that the locals were friendly, welcoming, and wore so many gold ornaments that he couldn't help but decide to name the place "Costa Rica", or Rich Coast".

Unfortunately for the locals, this was a perfect combination for marking their lands for conquest. Unbeknownst to the Spanish, however, was that the locals had only dressed up for the occasion. They didn't have any mines of precious ores waiting to be plundered and about all that the land seemed to offer to the invaders was an unhealthy mix of misery, hardship, and tropical disease. To further add to the chagrin of the Spaniards, they quickly found out that it would be impossible to get rich off of using the natives as slaves because the local population was simply too small. Dreams of quick, easy wealth were rapidly replaced by the stark realities of surviving from one day to the next. About the only place in sixteenth century Costa Rica where the Spanish seemed to get the upper hand was around modern day Cartago. Like many modern day inhabitants of this Central American nation, they found things much easier in the Central Valley because of the pleasant climate and fertile volcanic soils. In fact, the change from the heat, humidity, disease, and starvation of the lowlands was so welcome that the Spanish established their capital in Cartago. During the next three hundred years, the Spanish colonists slowly expanded and founded communities in the Central Valley and elsewhere. Unlike some other regions of the Spanish colonial empire, because of its lack of riches, Costa Rica was fairly isolated and

ignored during this period of time and developed an agrarian society where even the governor had to work his own fields. These factors may explain why Costa Rica has tended to have fewer problems with class differences than other countries in the region.

After finally gaining independence from Spain in 1821, under the leadership of Juan Mora Fernandez, Costa Rica focused on cultivating the crop for which the country is still known to this day; coffee. With a perfect climate for this cash crop, the benefits Costa Rica reaped from the caffeinated bean paid for the first large advances in its infrastructure with the construction of roads, schools, a national theater, and other buildings.

The next major event in the history of Costa Rica was the invasion led by William Walker in the 1850s. An American with ego-maniacal plans to conquer and enslave Central America followed up by construction of a canal through Nicaragua, Walker first invaded that country and then proceeded on to Costa Rica in 1856. When he crossed the border with his army of filibusters, several thousand Ticos (what Costa Ricans call themselves) from all backgrounds successfully fought and evicted Walker's army from the ranch in northern Costa Rica where they had arrogantly set up their headquarters. After being chased into Nicaragua by thousands of angry Ticos, while Walker and his forces were holed up in yet another wooden ranch house, a drummer boy named Juan Santamaria flushed them out by setting fire to the structure. Although he lost his life in the attempt, Costa Rica won the battle because of his heroic actions, he was named a national hero, and continues to be honored more than a century later by having his name on Costa Rica's main airport.

After the Walker incident, Costa Rica experienced peace for nearly one hundred years before internal strife resulted in the Civil War of 1948. Tensions began to mount in 1940 when upon being elected president, Rafael Angel Calderon put into place a variety of social reforms related to workers rights such as social security and minimum wage; changes that upset the owners of plantations and factories. Although the constitution prohibited Calderon from being reelected president for a consecutive

term, he sidestepped this rule by supporting a puppet candidate named Teodoro Picado who was declared the winner despite accusations of voter fraud. When the opposition party won at the next presidential election in 1948, Calderon simply refused to recognize the winner and demanded a recount of the votes. Before the ballots could be counted, though, they were burned, the election was annulled, and Picado remained in power. While these events were taking place, a successful coffee grower named Don Pepe Figueres returned to Costa Rica after being exiled to Mexico for six years for speaking out against Calderon. As soon as the election was annulled, operatives of Figueres took the airport at San Isidro and airlifted in troops that had been training in Guatemala. Armed groups in support of Figueres rose up throughout the country and proceeded to take other strategic locations. After forty days of battling Nicaraguan soldiers and workers from communist unions whom Picado had hired as mercenaries, the forces of Figueres reached the capital. A treaty was negotiated with Picado, and Figueres took control of the government for 18 months before handing it over to Ulate, the supposed winner of the contested presidential election of 1948. During the short rule of Figueres, he kept the reforms that Calderon had established while also introducing a new constitution that gave women and blacks the right to vote, abolished the communist party, established an electoral tribunal, and got rid of the army. Although Figueres may have done this to avoid being overthrown himself, his unusual decision has been beneficial to Costa Rica as funds that would have been spent on the military were used to improve public education. Costa Rica also became known for being a model, peace-loving, stable country; a reputation that was strengthened when president Oscar Arias won the Nobel Peace Prize for negotiating an end to civil war in Nicaragua.

Since the civil war, the population of Costa Rica has grown as has the country's infrastructure. Although cash crops such as bananas, coffee, and sugar are still important parts of the economy, tourism and technology have also become major players.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, bolstered by its image as a peaceful, stable country with beautiful national parks, tourism in Costa Rica exploded like the Arenal

Volcano. Since then, it has become one of the most important sectors of the Costa Rican economy, and Costa Rica continues to be a top choice for visitors to Latin America.

### **3.The Regions of Costa Rica**

#### **San Jose and the Central Valley**



San Jose and around half of Costa Rica's population are situated in a region known as the Central Valley. With an elevation of about 1,200 meters (nearly 4,000 feet), and a pronounced dry season, the climate of the Central Valley is so nice, it's no wonder that such a high percentage of the country lives

there. The temperature reaches the upper 70s or low 80s most days, and nights are usually in the 60s. Dry, breezy weather predominates from January to April while afternoon rains fall for the rest of the year. Being the capital of Costa Rica, embassies and consulates are found in San Jose as are the offices of large businesses and corporations that work in the country. Other, mid-sized cities are found in the Central Valley as is the Juan Santamaria airport. Since much of the Central Valley is urbanized, this is the place to go for business and city life. Nevertheless, Costa Rica is so small that a short drive will quickly take you from the concrete of the city to the coffee farms, mountains, and tropical forests of the surrounding countryside.

#### **Guanacaste and the Nicoya Peninsula**



Located in northwestern Costa Rica, this is a region of windswept savannas, cattle farms, and cowboys. For folks who feel a need to escape the rains of more humid regions, Guanacaste beckons with hot, dry, sunny weather except during the rainy months of August to November. Guanacaste is also

famous for its many beaches. While some are suitable for surfing and others for swimming, they are all good for sun, sand, waves, and warm, tropical water.

### **The Central Pacific Coast**



South of Puntarenas, as the climate becomes more humid, rain forest and oil palm plantations replace the dry, windswept plains of Guanacaste. Most of the attractions of this region are found along the narrow coastal plain that is flanked by the Pacific Ocean to the west and mountain ranges to the east. The

beaches and national parks of the Central Pacific are some of the most visited in the country, and the waters off the coast offer some of the best deep sea fishing in Central America.

### **The Southern Pacific**

South of Dominical, the Osa Peninsula juts into the Pacific like a big, rebellious toe. The wild rain forests and mangrove swamps of this jungle wilderness beckon to visitors looking for adventure while a short drive to the east brings them to the Panamanian border.



### **The Talamancan Mountains and Valle de El General**



The massive Talamancas rise into the clouds to the south of Cartago and are the highest

mountains in Costa Rica. Visitors can trek through their cool, montane, rain forests on the way up to Chirripo, Costa Rica's highest peak. In the groves of immense, moss-covered trees, hikers might see the Resplendent Quetzal (a bird so spectacular that the Mayans thought it was a messenger of the Gods), or glimpse a Central American Tapir as it crashes away through the undergrowth.

### **Monteverde and Arenal**

A region of cloud forests, rain forests, immense wetlands, cattle farms, and the most famous active volcano in Costa Rica, this part of northern Costa Rica is the best area in the country for letting the volcanic hot springs soak away the tensions and worries of everyday life.



### **The Caribbean Lowlands**



Mainly populated by the descendents of Jamaicans and indigenous peoples, this area of Costa Rica is an interesting mix of cultures with that of the Caribbean Islands holding a prominent place. Due to their Jamaican heritage, many people speak English and the Rasta way of life is commonplace. The port of Limon is the capital of this region although most visitors looking for the beach spend their time in the small seaside towns of Cahuita and Puerto Viejo de Talamanca. Ecotourists spend more of their time in the rain forests of the Sarapiquí and Tortuguero regions.

#### **4. Costa Rica- an easy place to visit**

Technology has made the world a much smaller place than it used to be. The internet ensures that we can see videos and images from just about everywhere and communicate with people on the other side of the globe. An abundance of airlines and flights to have made it incredibly easy to visit amazing places again and again that would have been otherwise impossible to see in person or would have required a once in a lifetime expedition. Such advances in technology have made Costa Rica one of the easiest places to spend a vacation partly because the educated populace and very high degree of internet use has resulted in numerous websites where tourists can easily plan their entire trip. Hotels, car rentals, adventure tours, and even reservations at some restaurants can be easily booked online. The years of experience as a major tourist destination, large number of professional guides, and government that takes tourism very seriously also make having a fantastic time in Costa Rica all that much easier.

In addition to knowing that you will be visiting a place with a great deal of successful experience in tourism, travel to and within Costa Rica is pretty easy. If you are reading this while drinking excellent coffee in your room at some historic hotel, then you probably already know what I mean. If you haven't been to Costa Rica yet, then I tell you the same thing I have told people since my first trip to Costa Rica in 1992; Costa Rica is a lot closer than you think and you need to go there. Well, at least I felt that way on my first visit (and fifteen years later still do). Coming from New York, I thought that this small, Central American country was incredibly distant. Although it would have been if I were hitchhiking, since I arrived by air, it only took two short flights to get me to San Jose by 6pm. From anywhere in North America, flights to Costa Rica take less than a day to get to a stunning, tropical country with amazing national parks, fantastic volcanoes, beautiful beaches, friendly people, and a fairly developed infrastructure. For folks from Canada and the United States of America, in my opinion, Costa Rica is really too easy to visit to not go at least once in your lifetime. Although it's much further from Europe or Australia, the attractions

that Costa Rica has to offer combined with the ease in seeing all of them more than make up for the long flights.

There are also other basic reasons why people who discover Costa Rica keep coming back or even move to this beautiful corner of Central America:

- **Stability** – Costa Rica has avoided conflicts that have plagued so many other countries in the region. Although the factors are complex, this might be related to the fact that Costa Rica has no army. Instead of paying for armed forces and risking a military coup (a regular occurrence in Latin America during the twentieth century), money was instead invested in free public education. Not only have there been no military takeovers in Costa Rica since then, but a strong, educated middle class developed and brought stability while other countries in the region fell under dictatorships or suffered through civil wars.
- **Infrastructure** – Stability in Costa Rica has also helped in developing an infrastructure that keeps improving. Although roads always need fixing, most keep getting better all the time.
- **Safety and Crime** – Crime in Costa Rica is similar to that of many developed countries and can be avoided by taking precautions such as not walking around alone at night, not showing off whatever baubles or designer watches you felt were necessary to bring on vacation, and by not leaving valuables or bags of any type in an unattended car. In fact, you should NEVER leave a car unattended even in the most remote of areas. Locals don't do these things and neither should you. If you are driving and get a flat tire, make sure your doors are locked when you get out of the car and be very careful about who you accept help from as thieves have developed a scam whereby they puncture the tire of a car at a stop sign or traffic light and then offer to help while an accomplice lifts whatever bags are in the car. Bags should also be kept within sight or on your person when riding buses and don't trust strangers no matter how friendly they appear to be.

- Medicine (including dental)– The medical facilities in Costa Rica are good enough for the average tourist and usually cheaper than at home. Sometimes the costs are so much lower that tourists come to Costa Rica specifically for medical procedures.
- Economic travel – Although prices have increased since tourism took off in Costa Rica, there is no reason why any visitor should be paying more than they would have paid for a trip within North America. Well, as long as you stay away from resorts, but no visitor should stay at an expensive resort in Costa Rica in any case. Many of the best hotels are moderately priced at \$40 to \$100 per night, there are plenty of good, local restaurants where a healthy, tasty meal can be bought for \$5, and beaches are free by law. Although your bill will add up quickly by signing up for a whole bunch of tours, going on at least one or two guided excursions will probably be worth the cost. Don't forget that the spectacular scenery in Costa Rica is always free of charge.

## 5. Activities and Attractions

Although the information above explains why Costa Rica is too easy to visit to not go, of course the main reasons why you need to come to Costa Rica (even if you've already been in the past) are the incredible number of attractions packed into this country. Below are descriptions of some of the more common attractions and activities you may enjoy.

- National parks, protected areas, and natural wonders – The incredible biodiversity of Costa Rica that has been featured in National Geographic, on TV shows, and in many books is one of the main reasons why people choose Costa Rica for a vacation. Tourists and residents experience many of the natural wonders of this small country by visiting the national parks and reserves that occupy 25% of Costa Rican territory. Most are pretty easy to visit, have ranger stations with basic facilities, offer well-maintained trails, and give the visitor the chance to experience the wonders of lowland rain forest, dripping wet cloud forest, tropical swamps, tropical dry forest, coral reefs, and beautiful scenery.



These tropical habitats are filled with life and visitors with a guide might see monkeys, sloths, countless exotic birds such as toucans, parrots, Scarlet Macaws, trogons, and hummingbirds, iguanas, bats, caimans, crocodiles, sharks, sea turtles, Boa Constrictors, and maybe even a tapir or one of the six species of wild cats found in Costa Rica. The national parks of Costa Rica are open most days of the year from 8 until 4 and charge \$8 to \$10 to enter. Some also allow camping for a small, daily fee.

- Volcanoes and hot springs – Costa Rica is a very mountainous country. Geologically speaking, the mountain ranges are pretty young, are still rising, and show their growing pains in the form of earthquakes and volcanic activity. Although earthquakes do happen in Costa Rica, small, fairly non-destructive tremors are what have mostly occurred and are an infinitesimally small threat to tourists. Unless you decide to illegally climb Arenal or jump into other active craters, the same goes for volcanoes.

There are at least a few active, volcanic craters in the country, most can be easily visited, and all are monitored and closed to the public if considered dangerous.

Arenal, the most active and spectacular, puts on regular shows with eruptions of



steam, ash, and glowing lava near its peak. Before that lava reaches the surface, it heats ground water to provide Costa Rica with a variety of fantastic hot springs, many of which are nestled in lush, tropical forest.

- Beaches – With two coasts, Costa Rica has more than enough beaches to choose from. From seashores with rough water only suited for surfing to sandy romantic coves awaiting discovery and sheltered bays for folks of all ages, the widest variety are found along Pacific Coast of Guanacaste. Some of the more famous and popular beaches are situated just south of Puntarenas while further south on the Osa Peninsula, wild, deserted beaches with rough, rogue waves await the most adventurous of travelers. On the Caribbean, the sandy beaches at Tortuguero are important nesting grounds for sea turtles while the shoreline



near the Panamanian border is good for surfing, snorkeling in coral reefs, and pretending to be a Rasta. Keep in mind that not all beaches are suited for swimming because of

dangerous riptides, and most lack lifeguards.

- Rafting – Costa Rica has excellent river rafting along the Turrialba, Pacuare, and other rivers that rush out of the central, volcanic highlands on their way to the Caribbean Coast. Monkeys and toucans are frequently sighted while rafting these beautiful rivers that slice through canyons cloaked in tropical rain forest.
- Fishing – Costa Rica has excellent fishing on both coasts. Charters out of Jaco troll the blue water for billfish, dorado, wahoo, tuna, and whatever else takes the hook. The billfish action in particular is especially good and most fishing is catch and release to keep it that way. If you are afraid of boats or don't have hundreds of dollars to charter one, surf casting turns up super-strong Roosterfish, snappers, and even Dorado. On the Caribbean, world class tarpon lurk in the forested canals and coastal swamps, and feisty peacock bass smash lures in Lake Arenal.
- Surfing – Thousands of beach breaks combined with the relaxed, good-natured attitude that prevails on both coasts make Costa Rica one of the top choices for surfing vacations. The consistent, year-round surf and innumerable spots for surfing make up for the lack of huge waves. Even if you don't know how to surf, Costa Rica is an ideal place to learn as lessons are offered at many of the surf beaches.
- Diving and snorkeling – Costa Rica has several sites that are very good for experiencing colorful fish, corals, and sea turtles. Two of the best dive sites are at Caño Island, and most of all, at La Isla del Coco. A World Heritage Site, Cocos Island is famous for the huge schools of hammerhead sharks and other large fish that inhabit its rich waters. It can only be visited on pre-arranged tours although these two companies do regular trips there:

The Okeanos Aggressor <http://www.aggressor.com/subpage10.php>

The Undersea Hunter <http://www.underseahunter.com/>

- “Canopy” zip lines – This adventure activity has become so popular in Costa Rica that it has given rise to a new word in the local Spanish vocabulary.

Instead of referring to the upper levels of the forest or an awning, “Canopy” in



Costa Rican Spanish means an exciting trip through and above the forest on a cable or zip line. Although the original canopy tour still operates at a few sites, you won't have to look far to find a place that offers a

“canopy” experience as there are operators in every region of the country. All provide safety gear although none have done that which every “canopy” experience really needs; speakers that play the Indiana Jones theme song while you zoom through the tropical rain forest.

- Butterfly Gardens – A radical change from adventure tourism yet still part of the true Costa Rican experience, butterfly gardens or “mariposarios” are always worth a visit and could be just what you need after rappelling down a waterfall or doing the canopy thing. Casually watching dozens of exquisite, native butterflies fluttering around peaceful gardens often has a calming,

soothing effect (in fact there is one used for therapy at the National Psychiatric Hospital). You won't have to worry about the butterflies escaping since these gardens have netting that keeps them inside. In addition to learning about the incredible diversity of butterflies found in Costa Rica, mariposarios are also fantastic places for photography.



- Serpentariums –For those who would rather see some of the snakes found in Costa Rica than butterflies, there are a few serpentariums in the country with exhibits of native species. Since snakes are very difficult to see in the wild,

this might be your only chance at getting a close, safe look at Boas and venomous snakes such as the infamous Fer-de-Lance, Bushmaster, and Coral Snakes. The best in the country is the Parque Reptilandia near Dominical along the road between this town and San Isidro:

<http://www.dominical.biz/reptiles/SnakeBite.htm>

- Get Married in Costa Rica –Why not get married in a tropical paradise and start the honeymoon right after the reception? Several tour providers can take care of the paperwork and provide an official to perform a civil ceremony in Costa Rica.
- Cosmetic surgery and dental work –The low costs for a wide variety of medical procedures and dental work carried out by professional, certified physicians and dentists has made Costa Rica a very popular choice for the medical tourist. The costs are so much lower than in the United States that it is often cheaper to get medical procedures and/or dental work done while taking a vacation in Costa Rica. The bang for your buck is even better when convalescence is aided by the soothing sound of ocean waves on a hot, sunny beach, or the fresh air of forested mountains. A few of the more established providers of, and agencies that can arrange cosmetic surgery and dental care are:

Rosenstock Lieberman Clinic <http://www.cosmetic-cr.com/>

Gabriel Alberto Peralta <http://costaricaplasticandcosmeticsurgery.com/>

Peralta Mantilla Plastic Surgery Clinic <http://plasticsurgeryincostarica.com/>

Health Escapes <http://www.healthcostarica.com/>

Arriva Costa Rica <http://www.arrivacostarica.com/>

## **6. How to get to Costa Rica, Entrance Requirements, and Border Issues**

Costa Rica can be reached by land and sea although most people from North America and Europe arrive at one of two international airports; Juan Santamaria airport near Alajuela in the Central Valley, and the airport at Liberia. Juan Santamaria is a twenty minute drive from San Jose and the largest airport in the country. Most days, flights make connections to major airports in Canada, the United States of America, Spain, Germany, and various Latin American capital cities.

The airport at Liberia is available to folks leaving from Toronto, Canada, and several cities in the United States. This is an excellent option if you plan on visiting the beaches of Guanacaste.

To get to San Jose from the airport, orange airport taxis are available that charge \$20. A far cheaper and perfectly good alternative is taking one of the frequent \$1 buses to San Jose and then continuing on to your hotel by taxi. Make sure you clarify with the driver that the bus you are boarding is headed to San Jose because buses to Alajuela and Heredia also stop at the airport.

If arriving to Costa Rica from Panama by bus or car, the border crossing at Paso Canoas gets the most traffic. This is a typical Latin American border crossing that involves waiting in several lines, getting your passport stamped as you exit and then again as you enter, having your bags checked, and generally being confused. If driving, all papers have to be in order for your vehicle (ownership, registration, inspection, etc.) and you will probably have to pay fees for insurance and road use. There might be less of a wait at the border after the big trucks have been processed (mid morning).

The other main border crossing between Panama and Costa Rica is on the Caribbean side at Sixaola-Guabito. In keeping with the Caribbean way of life, this border crossing tends to be more easy-going and quicker than that of Paso Canoas. It

also includes a walk (or drive) across an old bridge over the Sixaola River. This isn't for the faint of heart as the swirling brown waters can be seen between the wooden boards and rusty holes. After breathing a sigh of relief upon reaching the riverbank, you will probably find yourself waiting in line for an hour or so with the international backpacking crowd as there are just one or two officials to check passports.

The border crossing with Nicaragua is at La Cruz and is similar to the Panamanian experience except it is even more time consuming.

All border crossings officially require a passport valid for at least six months and a return ticket (even a bus ticket is valid). When arriving by air, immigration usually doesn't bother checking the return ticket although they have every right to do so. Land crossings, on the other hand, almost always check for return tickets and sometimes require a certain amount of cash or a credit card although such treatment is typically reserved for travelers who appear to be homeless or on drugs.

Driving down through Mexico and Central America is also possible although this trip is not an easy one as it involves several border crossings and the possibility of shake-downs by police.

## **7. What to bring to Costa Rica and Travel Tips**

### **The Passport**

As for any international vacation or visit, you should bring a passport valid for at least 6 months. Once you arrive, you can lock it in the safe at your hotel, but ALWAYS carry a copy of the passport pages that show your picture, personal information, and your entrance date into Costa Rica. If you didn't bring a copy from home, ask your hotel to make one for you. In fact, make two copies and leave the second one in your hotel room just in case you lose the first copy. This way, you won't risk losing your passport by having it fly off into the dense rain forest while zipping through the canopy, it won't get swallowed by a sea turtle after it falls overboard while fighting a giant marlin, nor will it get lifted by a beautiful stranger

you may have become acquainted with. And if by chance you do lose your passport, that all important copy will be vital in getting a new one at the embassy.

Always bring your passport when traveling to different regions within Costa Rica, but keep it locked up during tours or if out on the town (although you will need it to use a credit card). Carrying around the copy is important because by law you are supposed to have the copy or the real thing on you at all times. Police will ask you for it at checkpoints (mostly near borders), and sometimes in bars when searching for illegal immigrants, and could detain you if you don't have that copy of your passport showing when you arrived.

### **Money matters**

Fortunately, visiting Costa Rica doesn't have to cost an arm and a leg and there are ATMs that accept most debit cards. Although many places accept American dollars, the exchange rate is better if you change your money at the airport upon arrival, at a bank, or make withdrawals in colones at ATMs. Don't ever exchange money on the street unless you want to get ripped off or start a collection of counterfeit bills. Master Card and Visa are accepted at hotels, higher end stores, and restaurants. Some places may charge a hefty fee to use them, though, so make sure to always inquire before swiping your card.

### **What to pack**

Clothes- Costa Rica is tropical and warm but has elevations with differing climates. If you are just going to stick to the Central Valley and the coasts, dress for weather that reaches the 80s during the day and falls into the 60s at night. If you plan on visiting mountainous areas of the country, be ready for 60 degree temperatures during the day and forty degree temperatures at night.

Wide-brimmed hat- If you are going to spend a lot time outdoors, this will keep the sun out of your eyes and face and could make you feel more adventurous.

Umbrella- It rains a lot in Costa Rica.

Sunscreen- The tropical sun is no joke. The sun of the north might be friendly and feeble but once it soars through tropical skies, it becomes unforgiving, ferocious, and ready to severely burn you in a matter of minutes. Defend yourself with sunscreen that provides the highest amount of protection.

Camera- Whatever the reason for your trip, please, don't forget your camera!

Binoculars- Costa Rica is a country that really needs to be seen to be believed. Binoculars always come in handy and will help you to better appreciate the scenery, birds, sloths, and whatever else you came to see.

Spanish phrase book- Although many people working in the tourism sector speak English, this is still a predominately Spanish speaking country. Try and use some Spanish to impress the locals, make friends, and because it's the polite thing to do (see the last chapter for some Tico phrases).

Flashlight- The electricity may go off, many remote lodges do not even have it, and it's handy for night walks in the jungle.

## **Food and drink**

There is no shortage of restaurants in Costa Rica. From small family diners known as "sodas" to eateries that serve Peruvian, Chinese, Italian, French, El Salvadoran, and Mexican food, tourists have a pretty wide choice of options to choose from when dining out in the Central Valley or at tourism hotspots such as Jaco, Quepos, Arenal, and Monteverde. Many hotels have restaurants or bars with kitchens that dish up Tico flavored recipes or international cuisine. No matter where you go, of course the most common restaurants serve local dishes. Despite Costa Rica not being well known for the culinary arts, these recipes are typically healthy and delicious if fairly basic.

The following describes several of the Tico dishes and drinks found on most menus of family run diners (known as "sodas") and pubs:

**Gallo Pinto:** Also simply called, “Pinto”, this is a fancy name for rice and beans. To liven up this traditional staple, Ticos not only called it “Spotted Rooster”, but also discovered ingenious ways to convert plain old rice and beans into a scrumptious way to start the day. This basic breakfast for many Ticos is prepared with black beans, rice, and bits of onion, green pepper, cilantro, and other flavors.

**Cilantro or Culantro:** Although not a dish by itself, this herb is omnipresent in Tico cooking and therefore merits recognition.

**Platanos:** Ripe platanos (plantains) are fried up as a very sweet side dish with a piece of cheese, or when unripe are served as toasted, starchy “patacones”.

**Arroz con Pollo:** Ticos make some very tasty varieties of this dish with a lot more ingredients than just rice and chicken.

**Arroz con Camarones:** Like rice with chicken but with shrimp, this has a totally different taste and is a must if you like seafood!

**Arroz con Atun:** Rice made with tuna is another tasty, healthy, commonly served Tico dish.

**Arroz con Leche:** If you aren’t tired of rice yet, try this rice pudding made with milk.

**Picadillo:** This refers to any number of side dishes made with seasoned, finely cut vegetables or potatoes that are usually mixed with bits of meat.

**Chayote:** A native, rather tasteless vegetable that is often a principle component of picadillos.

**Frijoles Molidos:** Tico style refried beans are often mixed with a bit of coffee, sugar, and butter for a side dish bursting with flavor.

**Casado:** A dish that means, “married”, perhaps this is what you could look forward to for dinner in traditional Costa Rica after tying the knot. Even if you prefer to be

single, you will still enjoy this typical, economical meal served at small restaurants. A casado usually comes with rice, beans, plantains, salad, and your choice of chicken, beef, or fish.

Olla de carne: When you go to Grandma's house on the weekend, this is what she makes. Although the name of this dish can be literally translated as, "Pot of Meat", or "Cauldron of Meat", the pronunciation of "Olla de Carne" sounds like "Oh yeah, day carnay!" and gives a better representation of the happy feelings one gets when slurping down this savory beef and vegetable stew.

Seafood: Being a small country with two coasts, excellent sea food is pretty easy to come by in Costa Rica. Some of the fish commonly served are Corvina (Sea Bass), Dorado (Mahi-Mahi), Atun (Tuna), and Pargo (Snapper). Tilapia is also farmed and served throughout the country. Some of the dishes to try are "Sopa de Mariscos" (seafood soup), "Ceviche" (pieces of fish marinated with lime, hot peppers, and onion), and "Coctel de Camarones" (good, old fashioned shrimp cocktail). Fish can be served as "empanizado" (breaded), "a la plancha" (grilled), or "sudado" (steamed).

Chicharrones: Popular, unhealthy, and therefore absolutely delicious, this is the Tico version of pork rinds, cracklin, or pieces of deep fried, fatty pork. Often served at parties, chicharrones are best enjoyed with a cold beer.

Beer: Tico beer brands such as Imperial, Pilsen, and Bavaria are basic brews that have interesting German themed names but aren't too exciting as far as taste goes. They are nevertheless drinkable, especially when served cold on a hot Costa Rican night.

Refrescos Naturales: This is the term for blended fruit drinks sweetened with sugar.

Common flavors are:

Mora (raspberry)- just like the raspberry you know so well .

Limonada (lime)- better than lemonade and perfect for hot weather.

Guanabana (soursop)- a pleasant tropical fruit.

Cas (no translation)- a slightly sour, refreshing fruit.

Tamarindo (tamarind)- although you may have tried this flavor in Indian restaurants, the drink is toned down, has a hint of coffee, and is very refreshing.

Maracuya (passion fruit)- a sweet, heavy flavored fruit (just like passion).

Piña (pineapple)- yep, fresh pineapple and it's at least one hundred times better than canned!

Sandia and Melon (watermelon and cantaloupe)- the drink version of these fruits.

Carambola (star fruit)- tangy but looks cooler than it tastes in my opinion.

In addition to family run sodas and pubs that serve much of the above, chains of Tico restaurants and food businesses that you will see are:

**Bakeries:** Despite importing all of their wheat flour, Ticos can't get enough of baked goods. No matter where you go, there always seems to be a local bakery filled with baguettes, cakes, and pastries. And if there isn't one around, the local grocery store probably sells bread, empanadas, and other baked goods. The most common bakery chain is Musmanni; a business that seems to have one of its orange and white branches in just about every town in Costa Rica. They have good bread but don't hesitate to try the baked goods from any number of other smaller bakeries that you may discover. For great cakes and other desserts, the more well known establishments are Chantilly, Spoon, and Giacomini.

**Roasted chicken restaurants:** A common feature in much of Latin America, Costa Rica has its own version of delicious chicken roasted over a wood fire. RostiPollo, the biggest chain for this chicken goodness in Costa Rica, serves quarters, halves, and entire birds with a side dish of marinated plantain pieces, and cole slaw soaked in

vinegar. These restaurants are easily recognized by the pile of firewood seen near the entrance and all those chickens getting roasted on a spit in the front window.

Chinese restaurants: Although briefly mentioned above, they get mentioned again because they are such a common feature of the culinary landscape. The food is good at many of these restaurants but don't expect the dishes to taste like their counterparts elsewhere. Although still obviously Chinese in style and flavor, recipes tend to be simpler, and service always includes a few slices of perplexing white bread and butter.

Vegetarian Restaurants: Although far and few between in this meat-loving society, many restaurants will leave out or replace certain items if a vegetarian meal is requested. In more populated and touristy areas, actual vegetarian restaurants exist, including a small chain in San Jose known as Vishnu. In addition to decorating their restaurants with an assortment of fruits and vegetables (which I assume get served as needed), they will also seat you with strangers when the restaurant gets crowded.

Pulperias: This is the name for the small, neighborhood grocery stores that are so commonplace in Costa Rica. If you are from New York, you may be reminded of Puerto-Rican bodegas. If you ask a Tico where the nearest bodega is, though, they will probably give you a funny look, laugh, or if they happen to know where the nearest warehouse is, might direct you to one because that is what "bodega" means. Ask for the "pulperia" and get ready to wait in line because at most of these small stores, you have to tell the one guy at the counter what you need, he has to then go find it, and will never be in as much of a hurry as you. Because of this very personal if inefficient means of service, pulperias can be great places to meet folks from the neighborhood.

## **8. How to Explore all Corners of Costa Rica**

### **Driving**

One of the classic examples of Tico artwork is the painted ox cart. Decorated with intricate designs, these works of art are a reminder of how difficult it was to transport goods and travel within Costa Rica not too long ago as their strong, wooden wheels were needed to navigate the rocky, muddy tracks that acted as roads. A late friend of mine who used to be a carpenter often recounted his stories of delivering wooden chairs, dressers, and other furniture to clients with just such a cart hitched to a horse. He wasn't Amish, he was just using the technology that was prevalent in Costa Rica only 60 years ago. Fortunately for both locals and tourists, things have drastically changed since then and although rough tracks only suitable for oxcarts can still be found, there are drivable roads to most areas of the country.

Renting a vehicle is the best way to fully explore the byways, streets, and highways of Costa Rica and can be done online with the vehicle picked up at the airport upon arrival. Several international and local rental companies are found in Costa Rica that offer a wide range of vehicles including SUVs and trucks with four wheel drive. For the more adventurous tourist visiting remote biological stations, four wheel drive is necessary but tourists just sticking to main towns and most beaches will be fine with a small car.

No matter which vehicle you drive, a driver's license and insurance are required. Valid licenses from most countries are recognized but insurance usually is not. Visitors renting a car usually don't have to worry about overlooking this because the rental agencies are always happy to inform you of the temporary insurance policies they sell. Once you get the car rented and hit the road, drivers will quickly discover that unsafe driving is commonplace, various pedestrians and cyclists appear to be suicidal, all gas stations are full service, and there aren't very many signs. Everything will work out fine, though, as long as you drive defensively, never expect other cars or trucks to follow any driving rules whatsoever, and watch for people and animals on the road (especially at night). Many tourists do this every day without problems, and compared to many other places I have been, I find the driving fairly easy (and oddly similar to that of New Jersey). To cope with confusing signage or just the lack of it,

ask for detailed directions at the car rental desk for your first destination or better yet just use the GPS units that come with most rentals.

If you speak Spanish, you can also rely upon locals for directions. Since many people would rather fib and make up directions than admit that they aren't sure of the route (they don't want to lose face or look bad), make sure you ask at least three different people along the way or ask at a gas station.

**Tip:** When parking your vehicle, look for the presence of a character who resembles a homeless crossing guard carrying a stick (seriously). Upon parking your car, this person may or may not acknowledge you but will certainly do so as you are about to drive away. Known as the "Guachimán" (no coincidence that this is pronounced like "watch-e-man"), these people work by looking after unattended cars. Although it's hard to believe that the sticks they carry pose a threat to anyone, they seem to keep your car safe and should be paid a few hundred colones. Expect to see these interesting characters just about everywhere.

### **Transfers and shuttle service**

If you don't feel comfortable with driving along the twisting mountain roads of Costa Rica (although those of the lowlands are wonderfully straight and flat), there are several shuttle and transfer services that will chauffeur you to wherever you want to go. These can get pretty expensive but are very comfortable and erase the tensions and worries associated with driving yourself.

Some of these companies are:

<http://www.easyridecr.com/>

<http://www.interbusonline.com/home/home.asp>

<http://www.costaricashuttleservice.com/>

### **Public Transportation**

## Buses and taxis

Despite the heavy traffic in and around San Jose, most Ticos don't own a car. If everyone comes to own a car, truck, taxi, or motorcycle, this point in time will be marked by sudden, permanent, solidified gridlock in San Jose. Until then, to avoid having to deal with present day traffic problems, you can always live like the locals and take the bus or taxis. Bus routes go to most places in the country, rides are fairly cheap, and there are usually two types; the “directo” and the “indirecto”. For a quicker, more comfortable ride, take the “directo” or direct bus. It may stop a few times along the way but won't come to a jarring halt every time someone on the side of the road waves it down. This is what the “indirecto” buses do and act as the main source of transport for many Ticos in rural areas. These authentic rides are a good way to get a taste of local life because the driver won't hesitate to turn up the radio so everyone can enjoy his favorite songs, and vendors may get on the bus to sell various trinkets. These buses will happily stop for you as well although you might have to stand.

**Tip:** Many buses have two electronic posts that count the number of passengers that get on. Don't stand between them or they will count you more than once. The bus driver hates this because he will be responsible for the number of fares that are registered so make sure you do not stand between the posts.

Official taxis are red and have meters. Unofficial taxis can also be red but don't have a meter. For the sake of safety, it's best to pick the one with the meter. There are plenty in most places (they congregate around parks) and like taxis anywhere, they will stop if you wave them down. Fares are around \$2 per mile but make sure the driver is using the meter. Although some taxi drivers speak English, most don't and may drive a little further than normal once they notice that you hail from elsewhere. It's best to consider this a short tour as they won't go too far out of their way (they can't because Costa Rica is so small), and it will probably just cost you a dollar extra.

## Internal Flights

Although Costa Rica is small enough to forgo air travel within the country, for folks who would rather avoid hours of curvy, mountain roads, there are flights from San Jose to Liberia, some of the beaches, Tortuguero, Golfito, and the Osa Peninsula. All of these are short duration flights in small planes, have spectacular scenery, and make travel to Carate on the Osa much more comfortable than the long, bumpy, dusty ride that involves a few stream crossings.

Nature Air and Sansa are the two companies that have domestic flights. Nature Air operates out of Tobias Bolano Airport in Pavas while Sansa uses Juan Santamaria.

Nature Air: <http://www.natureair.com/>

Sansa: <http://www.flysansa.com/>

Ferries and boat rides

With roads going just about everywhere and few islands, there aren't too many ferries within Costa Rica. The two main exceptions are the motorboats that travel between Golfito and Puerto Jimenez, and the much larger ferries capable of carrying vehicles between Puntarenas and the Nicoya Peninsula. All destinations serviced by ferry service can be reached by road although riding the boat will shorten your travel time somewhat. If taking your car on ferries out of Puntarenas, make sure you arrive two to three hours before the departure time as there is always a line for these ships. Tickets for the ferry between Golfito and Puerto Jimenez can be purchased at the boat while those for the Puntarenas ferry are sold at the Musmanni bakery near the dock.

There is also boat transport along the Sarapiquí River and through the canals near Tortuguero.

For bus and ferry schedules to popular destinations, see [http://www.visitcostarica.com/ict/paginas/LEYES/pdf/ItinerarioBuses\\_en.pdf](http://www.visitcostarica.com/ict/paginas/LEYES/pdf/ItinerarioBuses_en.pdf)

## **9. Explore Costa Rica on your own or with a tour?**

Fortunately, Costa Rica's small size and infrastructure make it feasible to discover much of this country on your own. Nevertheless, no matter how much of an explorer you might be, taking tours and hiring local guides will make better use of your time, could be your only option if you don't rent a car, and most all, could be the ingredient that makes this vacation the best you have ever had. Most folks visiting Costa Rica opt for at least a few tours and there are itineraries for nearly everything. There are many tour companies in San Jose with several found in the pleasant Amon and Otoya Barrios. Most quality hotels such as the Dunn Inn Hotel for example, can also arrange tours. The following are a sampling of itineraries that you can do on your own or with a travel agency:

Tours that you can take with a guide or do on your own if you have a rental car

- San Jose Walking Tour

Would you like to learn about the coffee barons who built the impressive national theater in the Plaza de la Cultura? How about the history of the beautiful Amon and Otoya neighborhoods as you stroll their scenic streets or learn why there are bullet holes on the outer walls of the National Museum? Walking tours of San Jose are a fun way to learn about these and other interesting tales of the city while strolling through its pleasant parks and walkways. On tours that include a visit to the excellent National Museum, you will learn all about Tico history with the help of displays that range from exhibits of pre-Colombian artifacts to representations of the ecosystems found in Costa Rica. This is the type of tour that you can also do on your own over the course of a day or two although you won't get the interesting insider information that qualified guides love to extoll. One way to get an idea of what San Jose has to offer in terms of a walking tour is to purchase the visual travel tour for San Jose, Costa Rica at [http://visualtraveltours.com/tours\\_show.html?id=188](http://visualtraveltours.com/tours_show.html?id=188)

- Visits to national parks and birding

National Parks can be visited on your own since many have well-maintained trails and ranger stations. To get the most out of visiting these complex, extremely

biodiverse forests, though, it's best to visit with a qualified, naturalist guide. An experienced guide will teach you about the rain forest while showing you many of its secrets and will point out many of the animals and birds that you probably wouldn't have found otherwise.

One of the most popular ecotourism activities is bird watching or birding. With over 800 species identified in a country the size of West Virginia, Costa Rica is a major destination for birders. If not on an organized tour, most visiting birders hire a knowledgeable, local guide to help them see as much as possible.

Most tour companies do trips to various national parks that can be booked through your hotel. A few of the tour providers that are especially well known for ecotourism are:

Costa Rica Expeditions <http://www.costaricaexpeditions.com/w13/index.php>

Costa Rica Tours <http://www.costaricatours.net/>

Greenway Nature Tours <http://www.costarica-ecotourism.com/>

Some local companies that specialize in birding trips are:

Birdingcraft Tours [http://birdingcraft.com/wordpress/?page\\_id=336](http://birdingcraft.com/wordpress/?page_id=336)

Gone Birding Tours <http://www.angelfire.com/bc/gonebirding/>

Costa Rica Gateway <http://www.costaricagateway.com>

- Seeing volcanoes and soaking in hot springs

Visiting hot springs and such volcanoes as Poas, Irazu, and Arenal can be easily done on one's own with a rental vehicle. See the regional sections for the Central Valley and the Northern Caribbean for details.

- Canopy zip lines

Flying through the canopy of the rain forest has become as easy as showing up at one of the many sites that offer this activity although you can also book this in advance.

Below are types of tours that can only be done with a travel agency. Most of these can be arranged through your hotel or through such companies as:

Grayline Costa Rica <http://graylinecostarica.com/>

Costa Rica Tours <http://www.costaricatours.com/>

- Coffee and Banana Tours

The volcanic soils and mountain climates of Costa Rica have produced excellent coffee for more than one hundred and fifty years. To learn more about growing and processing the “bean” that helped develop Costa Rica, take the Britt coffee tour. After learning about coffee, learn all about bananas with the Chiquita banana tour. This tour includes a visit to a banana plantation and a small theatrical performance that comes replete with a dance by the Chiquita Banana Girl.



- The Rain Forest Aerial Tram

Just an hour’s drive from San Jose, tours to the rain forest aerial tram include an hour and a half gondola ride through the canopy of beautiful, primary rain forest. Their excellent bilingual guides will tell you all about this incredible habitat and will do their best to find and point out the toucans, parrots, sloths, monkeys, and other

animals that are occasionally seen during this once in a lifetime experience. This company also has an aerial tram near Jaco.

- Diving tours

Unless you arrive with a boat and team that are equipped with gear for exploring the deeps on your own, there are several diving tours to such sites as La Isla del Coco and coral reefs in the Pacific and Caribbean.

- Turtle watching

Costa Rica has several beaches where endangered sea turtles come to nest. Since care must be taken to disturb them as little as possible, tours are organized to give tourists the chance to see these amazing creatures as they lumber up onto the beach in the middle of the tropical night.

- Fishing

Unless you have a boat and know how to fish in the ocean, chartering one is the best way to hook onto billfish, dorado, tuna, and other finned adversaries of the blue water. There are also fishing guides for inland sites where you can catch monster Tarpon and Peacock Bass.

- The Crocodile Tour



The late Steve Irwin wasn't the only guy in the world who played with crocodiles. A few people in Costa Rica have been getting into the water with these monstrous beasts for years and have made a business out of it by giving crocodile tours on the Rio Grande de Tarcoles between

Puntarenas and Jaco. While the American Crocodile has declined in many areas, it

has thrived in the waters of this river and is easily seen from the bridge along the coastal highway. For some, though, seeing a sleeping crocodile that measures 12 feet from the tip of its scaly tail to its long, tooth-filled snout isn't enough. They would rather get up close and personal with these river predators and get just such an opportunity with the crocodile tours. During the short trip, an educational talk about the ecosystem of the river is given and various birds are pointed out until the boat stops and a brave (or extremely careless) soul gets out to wade in the river. He then proceeds to smack the surface of the water with half of a dead chicken. Sooner or later a massive, prehistoric looking crocodile making a beeline for the guy with the chicken swims close enough to the boat to touch. When the crocodile reaches him, the chicken (the presumed bait) is presented with outstretched arm, and the scaly beast practically leaps into the air to grab its lunch from his hand. Whether you come back from this tour feeling that it was educational, frightening, exciting, or a demonstration of stupidity, you will never forget it!

See <http://www.cocodilemantour.com> for more about the Crocodile Tour.

- Horseback riding

Riding tours are available just about everywhere and are a great way to experience the beautiful mountain and beach scenery in Costa Rica. Tours for this activity can usually be arranged from your hotel or through most of the tour operators in the country.

- Mountain Bike Tours

A very popular activity in Costa Rica, mountain biking tours are available for those ready to get some serious exercise during their vacation by pedaling their way through the rugged countryside. Although the going won't be easy, tour participants will get to see areas of Costa Rica that most tourists don't visit.

## **10. Costa Rica- Smaller, Historic Hotels instead of Resorts**

Large, multi-storied hotels heavy on glass, fountains, and glitz, or all-inclusive resorts so separated from the local community that guests forget where they flew to might have their place in Dubai, Miami, Hong Kong, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Cancun, or New York City, but they don't belong in Costa Rica. Sure, if you want to visit Costa Rica and don't mind feeling like you could be Anywhere, Latin America, then you probably also won't mind staying at large hotels and resorts that have about as much character as plastic shopping bags. If you go for this option, though, I hope you don't mind if you have a less than fulfilling Costa Rican experience, because that is exactly what you can expect. Thankfully, there are better options for accommodation in Costa Rica that will enrich your vacation and make you realize why so many people feel so good about visiting this friendly country.

Travelers to Costa Rica should realize that they don't need to stay at large hotels when there are smaller, cozier options that provide excellent service with modern amenities in settings that have a wonderfully Tico atmosphere. Since such places charge less for a more satisfying Costa Rican experience, visitors to the country can't go wrong in staying at moderately priced, historic hotels that capture Costa Rica's flavor like a good "gallo pinto".

An excellent gallo pinto always includes cilantro. Without the Spanish Parsley that gives it that absolutely Tico essence, the colorfully named "gallo pinto" reverts to mere rice and beans. Since you are visiting Costa Rica and aren't here for just rice and beans, then you might as well skip lodging that leaves out the cilantro and go for the gallo pintos of accommodation. One of the best choices for lodging in San Jose that receives and surpasses the gallo pinto stamp of authenticity is the Hotel Dunn Inn found in the quiet Barrio Amon.

Although the term, "barrio" in North America often has connotations of neglected, inner-city areas not suited for tourism, in Spanish, this word simply means "neighborhood". As for Barrio Amon, this neighborhood is known for its quiet, safe

streets, and large, historic houses. Along with the adjacent Barrio Otoya, Barrio Amon was built when coffee became established as a serious cash crop. With the fruits of their volcanic crops, the “coffee barons” of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries built and lived in the large, wooden houses so typical of these neighborhoods and brought a sense of sophistication to this area that can be felt to this day. Although descendants of some of these coffee families still reside in the neighborhood, most of the colorfully painted, wooden houses have been converted into offices or quaint restaurants and hotels such as the Hotel Dunn Inn.

Officially listed on the registry of historic buildings in Costa Rica, the structure that houses the Hotel Dunn Inn is a wooden mansion that was built in 1929. Unlike many similar structures that have been razed to make way for far less appealing concrete buildings, the owners of the Hotel Dunn Inn have taken care to preserve the character of the mansion while carefully remodeling the interior with beautiful tropical woodwork and brick. Upon entering, guests are greeted by the warm, bilingual staff and a view of the Tropix bar

. One of the nicest pubs in Costa Rica, the Tropix resembles a setting for a film that could involve romance, intrigue, suspense, and excitement. In all honesty, during the seventies and eighties, such scenarios probably weren't too far from the truth as the Tropix was a favorite meeting place for the CIA. Although the spy games of the cold war are a thing of the past, one can't expect romance and excitement to simply disappear from a bar with such a history as the Tropix.

The Hotel Dunn Inn offers a few different rooms that range in price from around \$60 for a standard in the low season to around \$125 for a suite during the high season. Differences in accommodation are mostly a matter of size of the room, bed, and number of beds. All rooms come with cable TV, private bath, a ceiling fan, telephone, mini bar, and a safety deposit box. A variety of services can also be arranged by the friendly and highly experienced staff such as room service, internet, laundry, tours, rental cars, and barber.

If guests tire of the pleasant, quiet atmosphere found at the Hotel Dunn Inn, the noisier, more active center of San Jose is just an easy four to five block walk to the south.

## **11. What to do and Expect by Region**

### **San Jose and the Central Valley; more to do than you might think**

Most tourists visiting Costa Rica fly to San Jose and end up spending at least a night or two in the city even if their trip is centered around outdoor activities and attractions elsewhere. If you feel stuck in San Jose for a day or two, or even a week, you really shouldn't worry about missing out on anything because there is plenty to do in and around the city. In fact, once you get an idea of how many attractions and activities are possible as day trips, you might end up staying in San Jose for longer than expected.

#### **Things to see and do while walking around San Jose**

After a sumptuous breakfast of gallo pinto, excellent coffee, and tropical fruits at your hotel, walk to the Plaza de la Cultura to meet people and watch the crowds go by, the families play, and the street artists perform. This is the main meeting point for people in San Jose and a great place to sit back, relax, and enjoy the life of the city. If it gets too hot and you feel like viewing pre-Colombian artifacts or more recent works of art, the Gold Museum is conveniently located beneath the plaza. You could also visit the National Theater that forms the plaza's southern wall. Both of these attractions charge around \$10 to visit. If you don't feel like visiting any museums, but could use a bite to eat or cold drink, several cafes and restaurants are available in the area.

After you've had your fill of the Plaza de la Cultura, pedestrian walkways head east, west,



and south. Walking east will take you a few blocks past a variety of stores, a few small casinos, and nice bars, while strolling west takes you past an English speaking book store and good department stores. Further on, a few blocks past the statue of the fat lady and the flower vendors, you will come to the Central Market.



The Central Market is a perfect place to buy interesting souvenirs of all types, fresh ground coffee, fruits and vegetables, herbs, or a good, cheap lunch. A visit to this indoor market with its labyrinth of wares and vendors trying to get your attention is always an adventure. With the crowded conditions and narrow

corridors, keep in mind though, that it is also a favored lair for pickpockets.

If you feel like you need a change from the dim interior of the central market or have no interest in bargaining over wooden sculptures or hammocks, exit the building and walk south past the Parque de la Merced and take a left on the pedestrian walkway (only do this during the day as this park isn't the safest of places after dark). Strolling up the pedestrian walkway leads past more businesses and eventually reaches the Parque Central; another meeting place and hang out for all types of people. If you are interested in theater, the Melico Salazar Theater is just across the street although productions are in Spanish. Walking just one block west will take you back to the Plaza de la Cultura.



Several blocks east of the Plaza de la Cultura and past the end of the pedestrian walkway is another, smaller market. This one mostly deals in arts and crafts and is a good place to look for souvenirs. A block past that, up the hill and to the right along the pedestrian walkway is the National Museum. If you only

visit one museum in Costa Rica, go to this one (cost \$6). Located in the former army barracks, the museum has excellent exhibits about Tico history and culture, a butterfly garden, and displays of Pre-Colombian artifacts (including a few large stone spheres).

After a visit to the National Museum, walk north along the pedestrian walkway to the National Park. This large park shaded by tall, tropical trees has quiet walking and running trails, lots of benches for relaxing and reading the paper, and a monument that shows William Walker fleeing in defeat from heroic, muscled figures that represent the Central American countries. Walking west from the northwest corner of the National Park will take you past some government buildings and leads to the Spanish and Morazon Parks. These small parks have shaded walkways, bronze busts of past leaders, benches with smooching couples, a fountain, and a tall, dome-like structure that is sometimes used for outdoor concerts.



On the northern side of the Parque Morazon, you may note a rather odd, yellow building. This is a metal structure that is used as a school and is unimaginatively yet descriptively known as the “Edificio Metalico” or “Metallic Building”. Pre-fabricated in France, the Edificio Metalico was built in the late 1800s because it was hoped that its metallic structure would withstand earthquakes better than the many buildings that were damaged or knocked down by a strong earthquake just before that time. Although it has fared well during seismic events, I can't help but wonder how this metal building is coping with rust in the rainy climate of Costa Rica. Continuing north after the Metallic Building, you will reach the quiet, historic streets of the Barrio Amon; one of the best and most strategic areas to stay when in San Jose.

**Tip:** Check out the Spyrogyra Butterfly Garden near El Pueblo. A quiet, hidden oasis of green in the heart of San Jose, for a \$5 entrance fee, visitors can relax in a tropical garden filled with exquisite butterflies and small pond. They also have a few trails outside of the garden along which sloths are occasionally seen.

### **Outside of San Jose- Cartago and Turrialba**

Costa Rica's first capital is a forty minute drive to the east of San Jose, has a slightly cooler, wetter climate, and hosts the statue of “La Virgen” that Ticos make pilgrimages to every year during the first days of August. Although journeying to the basilica on foot isn't the only thing to do in Cartago, there seems to be more of interest outside of the city. Before leaving Cartago, check out the “ruins” of another church at the central plaza. Upon completion of its foundation in 1910, a powerful earthquake not only interrupted progress but must have been strong enough to convince the local government that if the church were to ever be finished, it would probably collapse with the next earthquake because construction has been on hold ever since.



Outside of Cartago, one of the most exciting trips to take is a visit to **Irazu volcano**. A massive mountain that looms just outside of town, the 11,000 foot mountain is one of the easiest volcanoes to visit in Costa Rica. A good, paved road with spectacular scenery will take you right up to the National Park and a parking lot near the crater. The ten dollar entrance fee for Irazu National Park is well worth it as you get the chance to peer into a massive volcanic crater amidst spectacular mountain scenery. Watch for the troops of raccoon-like Coatis that look for handouts near the park entrance and also be careful that your vehicle is locked and that nothing of value is in sight as thieves have been known to steal from cars in the parking lot.

**Tip:** On the way down from Irazu, a good spot for lunch is the Nochebuena restaurant. Replete with a volcano museum, hummingbird feeders, and trails through cloud forest, this friendly, cozy establishment has a great buffet and an extensive menu with great desserts.

If the visit to Irazu seemed a bit cold, you can always warm up in the Orosi Valley just south of Cartago. A great place to escape the city and go for a country drive, the honking traffic and miles of concrete are replaced by birdsong, lush coffee plantations, and the pleasant town of Orosi. Continuing past this town, the road leads to the beautiful cloud forests of Tapanti National Park. The perfect place for a picnic by a rushing, mountain river, this national park can get crowded on weekends.

Turrialba is a town east of and lower in elevation than Cartago and is situated on the flanks of the volcano that shares its name. As this volcano has been very active recently, when the area is open to visitors, they are only allowed to stay for half an hour because of toxic fumes and acidic gases. In any case, most tourists come to Turrialba for white water rafting and visiting the Guayabo National Monument. The rafting and kayaking center of Costa Rica, trips on the Reventazon, Pacuare, and Pejibaye rivers all start from here. If the rivers are too high or low for rafting, trips get canceled and folks take the hour and a half bus up to Guayabo to explore the only extensive set of pre-Colombian ruins in Costa Rica. Little is known about this non-Mayan town (including the culture that built it) that was inhabited from 1,000 A.D. until 1400 A.D. and may have had a population of 10,000.

### **Outside of San Jose-Heredia**

Also known as the “Ciduad de las Flores” or “City of Flowers”, travel agents like to say that this is because of all the gardens in the city while Ticos claim that this title stems from the fact that Heredia is filled with beautiful women. In reality, these half truths are just a lot more exciting than the fact that the city got this title because of the Flores family; a rich, coffee clan that dominated politics and social culture in Heredia

during the late nineteenth century. Their house presently acts as the city museum and is found just north of the main church and park.

Among Ticos, Heredia is mostly known for being a university town while for tourists it's a place they might pass through on day trips to the nearby mountains. This means that Heredia is a good day trip if you want to get off the beaten path and immerse yourself in Tico culture. While the city itself has plenty of shops and good restaurants, there are also a few interesting sites in the nearby mountains.

To dine at a quirky restaurant that overlooks the Central Valley, follow the signs to Añoranzas along the road to San Rafael and the Tyrol Hotel. If you would rather have a drink, a more romantic meal, or even stay the night in one of their cabins, try the adjacent Balbek Restaurant. If you would like to take new found friends out for a picnic, the Monte de la Cruz Park is further up the road near the Condesa and Tyrol hotels. This mountain park has picnic shelters with grills and a few trails that lead to a spectacular overlook of the Central Valley and costs \$4 to enter. The roads around this area are also good for hiking as is the Volcan Barva sector of Braulio Carrillo National Park. Located near the village of Sacramento above the towns of Barva and Santa Barbara, this site has good hiking trails through cool, high-elevation forests, beautiful scenery, and a crater lake. To find Volcan Barva, just follow the brown volcano signs on roads that go uphill from the town of the same name. Once you reach Sacramento, you will probably need a vehicle with four-wheel drive.

**Tip:** To learn about the ecosystems and amazing biodiversity of Costa Rica, visit **INBIO Parque**. Run by the National Institute of Biodiversity, INBIO carries out biological inventories in the country as well as promoting sustainable development. INBIO is located in the town of Santo Domingo between San Jose and Heredia and is open from 8:30-2pm from Tuesday to Friday, and 9:00-3:30pm on weekends. Admission with a guided tour is \$23. <http://www.inbio.ac.cr/en/default.html>

### **Outside of San Jose-Alajuela**

A small city near the airport, Alajuela (like Heredia and Cartago), has more of interest to the tourist outside of the city limits. Found only an hour's drive uphill from Alajuela, the largest and most visited attraction in the area is **Poas Volcano**. After paying the \$10 entrance fee, a half mile walk with sulfur-scented air brings tourists right up to the edge of the huge, steaming crater. To make sure you get a clear view of this massive hole, go before 10am because by that time the crater will have clouded over. When you have had enough of hanging out near the crater of an active volcano, head downhill to the park at Fraijanes. This family friendly park is a perennial favorite for many Ticos who enjoy picnics in its misty pine forests, walks around the crater lake, and other recreational activities.

Past Poas to the north is an area that was severely damaged by a strong earthquake in January, 2009. The road to Cinchona may not be open for some time but it has been repaired at least as far as the La Paz Waterfall Gardens. These are some of the most beautiful gardens in Costa Rica with many hummingbird feeders, well maintained trails through cloud forest, a serpentarium, small zoo, and spectacular views of the La Paz waterfall. Very expensive lodging is available while entrance fees for a day visit are \$35. <http://www.waterfallgardens.com/index.html>

Back near hot Alajuela, one of the main attractions for locals are the Ojo de Agua swimming pools. The name of this park refers to the cold spring water that rushes out of the ground and is diverted to fill a large swimming pool. There are also ponds, picnic areas, and a small restaurant where visitors can relax with a cold beer.

Interesting towns somewhat near Alajuela are Grecia, Sarchi, and Zarcero. A twenty minute drive northwest of Alajuela, Grecia is a small town with an interesting red church that looks like it belongs in a fairy tale. For a natural wonder that also looks quite magical, check out the 190 foot waterfalls at Los Chorros found just outside of Grecia near the town of Tacaes (follow the signs). While viewing the cataracts, you



might see people on adventure tours who are rappelling down through the sheets of water. If you would like to make other people watch and wonder if you will fall to your death while enjoying an adrenaline rush, contact the Tropical Bungee tour company for rappelling and bungee jumping in the area:

[http://www.bungee.co.cr/tropical\\_bungee\\_costa\\_rica\\_usa/tropical\\_bungee\\_costa\\_rica\\_rappel.htm](http://www.bungee.co.cr/tropical_bungee_costa_rica_usa/tropical_bungee_costa_rica_rappel.htm)

Sarchi and Zarcero are far less adventurous, small towns near Grecia that will be interesting to visit if you like painted ox-carts (Sarchi), or are really into topiary (Zarcero).

### **Where to Stay in the Central Valley**

Since everything in the Central Valley is close together and all of the attractions mentioned above can be done on day trips out of San Jose, you might as well base yourself out of the Amon or Otoya barrios (see section on moderately priced hotels instead of resorts). However, if you need to stay near the airport, here are a few other suggestions of moderately priced hotels:

The Villa Pacande [http://www.villapacande.com/index.php/en\\_US/home](http://www.villapacande.com/index.php/en_US/home)

Villas Colibri <http://www.villascolibri.com/>

Hotel Los Volcanes <http://www.hotellosvolcanes.com/index.html>

If you need to stay in Escazu, a nice bed and breakfast option is:

The Casa de las Tias Bed and Breakfast: <http://www.hotels.co.cr/casatias.html>

Santa Ana has the private, unique Zamora Estate <http://www.zamoraestate.com>

### **Nightlife**

Tourists in search of drinks, dancing, or meeting people can easily do so at one of the many bars and nightclubs found in San Jose and the Central Valley. While bars and pubs generally close after midnight, nightclubs may keep their doors open until three or four in the morning. Hotel bars and pubs are pretty common, often serve good food, and are reliable options for talking over a few drinks. You won't have any problem finding establishments like so in the Amon and Otoya Barrios or along the pedestrian walkway that is the Avenida Central.

For clubs with loud music and dancing (most of which have a door charge) the restaurant and bar complex near the Amon and Otoya Barrios known as El Pueblo has quite a few options for dining, drinking, and dancing, and is popular among tourists and locals. To experience a popular, well established club where you can learn how to dance to Latin Music, try Castro's in Barrio Mexico, San Jose. For another, excellent option for dancing to Latin music, try Rumbo's near Alajuela in affluent San Antonio de Belen. Even if you don't know how to dance, these places are perfect opportunities to meet someone who can teach you. Or, if you want to seriously impress the locals (and meet dance partners) take Latin dance lessons at dance schools such as Merecumbe. Don't think that Ticos were born knowing how to dance despite them telling you this. They learned at family and social events, and because knowing how to dance is important in Tico culture, lots of them took lessons at places like Merecumbe. <http://www.merecumbe.net/>

Needless to say, you should always take a cab when visiting bars and night clubs not only because it's obviously unsafe to drink and drive, but also because like any big city, to play it safe, you shouldn't walk around at night.

***Tip:*** Getting around San Jose

In San Jose center, walking is the best way to get around town. You can get in some exercise, have the freedom to explore more shops, meet more people, and with all that heavy traffic attempting to squeeze through the streets, it's just easier to do. The grid-like streets of San Jose and other cities of the Central Valley aren't too

difficult to navigate with a map- it's the hidden or nonexistent signs that present challenges. The best way to orienteer your way around the city is to find a landmark on a map, know what the cardinal directions are, and count the blocks you are walking from the landmark. If you speak Spanish, you can also do like the locals and ask for directions. If you don't speak Spanish, try asking for directions anyway; someone who speaks English will probably help you out and and you might end up making a friend.

## **Guanacaste and the Nicoya Peninsula**

A region of dramatic vistas and hot, dry weather, Guanacaste is visited by just as many Ticos as it is by foreign tourists. With its distinctive cowboy-like culture that includes an annual hunt for a crocodile around Easter time, Guanacaste is always a fun, interesting region to visit. It's especially good for escaping the rainy weather of other parts of the country, is easy to get to via the Pan-American highway from San Jose (follow the signs to Puntarenas and Liberia), and is also accessible by flights to the airport near Liberia.

### **Attractions and possible itineraries**

There are two options as far as activities go for visitors flying into Liberia; beaches or mountains. Even if you aren't sure which to pick, the most important thing to remember is that Costa Rica is so small that you don't have to choose between those options because you can do both. Base yourself at the beach and do a day trip or two into nearby national parks, or stay near Liberia and do day trips to the beach, followed up by the mountains. The drives will be beautiful and you are bound to have a great time no matter where you go.

### **Beaches**

Guanacaste has more beaches along its extensive Pacific Coast than anywhere else in Costa Rica. Since it would take years to fully experience all of them, I will just mention some of the major beaches here and leave the rest for you to discover. Keep in mind that Ticos love to visit these beaches just as much as you do and will be enjoying them en masse during the Christmas and Easter holidays. More importantly, be careful when swimming at any beach you visit as several people drown every year in Costa Rica because of riptides or rough water even when the beach appeared to be safe for swimming.



Public buses access some of the beaches and all can be visited on your own by following the signs.

### **Playas Nacascol, Panama, and Coco**

The closest beaches to Liberia, these are all between a half hour or forty minutes from the airport. Nacascol is actually on an extensive resort but since access to all beaches is free by Costa Rican law, the resort will shuttle you from a parking lot to the sandy bay. Incidentally, this beach is not bad but it's fairly small, isn't the best for swimming, and is nothing to speak of compared to many other beaches in Guanacaste. Instead, go to Playa del Coco with its beautiful, long, sandy beach that is kind of rough for swimming but is the place to go for the beach town experience replete with plenty of restaurants, hotels, bars, a few dance clubs, and basic, sandy fun. Offshore attractions in the form of diving and fishing are also possible at Playa del Coco. For a more tranquil setting, visit the Playa Panama; a quiet beach whose soft sand and calm waters make it a favorite for families. This beach has few restaurants, hotels, or facilities of any kind although vendors will certainly be there to sell you snacks, drinks, and handicrafts.

**Tip:** Two of the more established dive outfitters are Rich Coast Diving <http://www.richcoastdiving.com>

and Deep Blue Diving Adventures <http://www.deepblue-diving.com>

### **Places to Stay**

A wide variety and number of lodging options that range from thatch roof cabanas to resorts are found at Playa del Coco. In keeping with the moderately priced, quality hotel theme, a few suggestions are:

Flor de Itabo <http://www.flordeitabo.com>

Villa del Sol Bed and Breakfast <http://www.villadelsol.com>

Hotel Villa Flores Bed and Breakfast <http://www.hotel-villa-flores.com>

### **Playas Flamingo, Brasilito, Conchal, and Potrero**

The white sands of Playa Flamingo are a rare find on the Pacific Coast. One of Costa Rica's oldest beaches, the beauty of Playa Flamingo still makes it worth a visit despite having become somewhat overdeveloped and overpriced. For a beach that has retained more of its Tico character, including cheaper lodging and restaurants, try the nearby Playa Brasilito. To see one of the most beautiful beaches in Costa Rica, walk (or drive a very rough road with a stream crossing) about a mile south of Brasilito to Playa Conchal. The calm, clear waters make this picture perfect beach a great spot for snorkeling although it isn't so good for swimming because of the deep water. One of the quietest beaches in the area is just north of Brasilito at Potrero. Although the brownish, gray sands might not coincide with your conception of the perfect beach, it has a timeless, relaxed atmosphere, and calm waters that are good for swimming.

### **Where to Stay**

Guanacaste Lodge in Flamingo <http://www.guanacastelodge.com>

Hotel Brasilito <http://www.brasilito.com>

Rancho Nany

### **Playas Grande and Tamarindo**

These two popular beaches aren't all that good for swimming because of their many rocks and riptides. Nevertheless, if you just have to take a dip, stick to the southern part of the beach as this is the calmest and safest area. Otherwise, do what most people do at Playas Tamarindo and Grande and go surfing. If you don't know how, this is a good place to learn as surfing conditions are almost always good and there are several surf shops in town that give lessons.

When not riding the waves or figuring out how to stand on a surf board, you can walk the extensive beach, partake in the usual variety of activities offered around popular tourism sites in Costa Rica, or enjoy meals at one of the many restaurants and bars in town. At night, you might notice that there are very few lights near the beach, especially around Playa Grande. This is because this whole area is part of the “Las Baulas Marine National Park”. “Baulas” is the name for the huge, ancient looking Leatherback Turtles that nest on the beaches of Playa Grande. Lights are kept to a minimum near the beach because they disorient this critically endangered species and contribute to nest failure.

To keep disturbance of the turtles to a minimum, turtle viewing can only be done by tours organized through the park rangers. As spots on these tours are limited, you will probably need to reserve in advance. The easiest way to do it is to book a tour through your hotel in Tamarindo that will provide transportation to Playa Grande and visit a Leatherback Turtle exhibit before venturing onto the dark beach in search of these ancient behemoths.

There are quite a few places to stay in Tamarindo and Playa Grande. Here are just a few suggestions of moderately priced hotels:

Villa Amarilla

Hotel Mamiri <http://www.hotelmamiri.com>

Villas Macondo <http://www.villasmacondo.com>

### **Playas Samara, Carrillo, and Nosara**

To enjoy some of the more remote beaches in the country, make your way to this wild, western sector of the Nicoya Peninsula. Although you can drive to Samara on a good, paved road, it is just about as far as you can motor from San Jose and still be in Costa Rica. Despite (or by virtue of) being located out in the Tico boondocks, Playa Samara has modern comforts while managing to retain a relaxed, no -worries atmosphere. The many attractions of Samara include rides in an ultralight aircraft above the bay, snorkeling and diving trips to a coral reef, surfing lessons in gentle waves, and riding along jungle flanked roads on rented bicycles.

If you ride a few miles south along the coast, you will reach Playa Carrillo. A smaller village than Samara (which isn't exactly a metropolis), the deeper waters at Carrillo are good for surfing and fishing. Although boats can be chartered here, this is also a good area for surfcasting. If you didn't bring your fishing gear, ask at your hotel about renting some.

A fifteen minute drive north of Samara along a curvy, country road will bring you to Nosara; a remote, quiet beach with a jungle backdrop that hosts Howler Monkeys, parrots, iguanas, and other tropical wildlife. This town is popular with backpackers, ex-pats, and especially surfers as it hosts Playa Guñones, one of the best beaches for surfing in Costa Rica. Although the seashore is scenic, it's better for surfing than swimming. If you don't surf, at least you can go hiking along roads through the surrounding area, at the Nosara Biological Reserve, or take another turtle tour at night (this time to see Olive Ridley Turtles).

### **Where to Stay**

There are a number of places to stay and restaurants for dining at all of these beaches. At Playa Samara, some ideas for lodging are:

Bungalows Casa Valeria

Entre Dos Aguas Bed and Breakfast

Tico Adventure Lodge <http://www.ticoadventurelodge.com>

**Around Playa Carrillo, try:**

The Casa Buenavista Bed and Breakfast

<http://www.samarabeach.com/casabuenavista>

Carrillo Club <http://www.carrilloclub.com>

Cabinas el Colibri <http://www.samarabeach.com/elcolibri>

**In the Nosara area, try:**

Casa Romantica <http://www.casa-romantica.net>

Cafe de Paris <http://www.cafedeparis.net>

Villa Mango Bed and Breakfast <http://www.villamangogocr.com>

**Playas Malpais, Montezuma, Tambor**

Visitors to these beaches in the southern Nicoya Peninsula often find themselves waking up to the loud, hoarse, calls of Howler Monkeys. Formerly very difficult places to get to because of the rugged nature of the countryside, ferry service from Puntarenas (combined with better roads) has made them very accessible as well as increasing their popularity as tourist destinations. Montezuma in particular appears to have become a focal point for almost everyone visiting Costa Rica while Malpais (known for its consistently good surfing since the 1970s) has essentially become the nexus of Tico surf culture.

Classic and modern day hippies give Montezuma a similar vibe to that of Malpais except that the place seems (strangely enough) more organized (although the upgrade in infrastructure is probably related to the jump in non-hippie tourists). As for Tambor, visitors can choose between two extremes; a quiet village on a large, empty beach, or a large resort that even offers guests the chance to out-think each other with a chess board that sports three foot high pieces (seriously). As far as swimming goes, the quiet beaches at Tambor are best, those of Montezuma are better for hanging out and enjoying the scenery (because of the rough water and currents), and at Malpais, you shouldn't venture into the water unless you have a surfboard. Interestingly enough, the atmosphere of these places seems to parallel their beaches as Tambor has a very zen-like, quiet quality with few people around, Montezuma always has an active, young crowd that parties into the night, and Malpais is, like its waves, consistently good for surfing but not a whole lot else.

## **Where to Stay**

### **Around Malpais:**

Hotel Buenos Aires <http://www.hotelbuenosaires.malpaiscom>

Don Jon's

Frank's Place

### **Around Montezuma:**

Hotel la Cascada <http://www.playamontezuma.net/cascada.php>

Hotel la Aurora <http://www.playamontezuma.net/aurora.htm>

Hotel el Jardin <http://www.hotelejardin.com>

### **Around Tambor village:**

Cabinas El Bosque

Cabinas Christina

Hotel Costa Coral

### **Guanacaste Mountains- Rincon de la Vieja**

When driving along the Pan-American highway near Liberia, a hefty mountain capped in clouds rises from the plains to the east. This is Rincon de la Vieja, the largest volcano and one of the most interesting national parks in northern Costa Rica. Accessible with a rental car or as a day tour from hotels in Liberia and most Guanacaste beaches, Rincon de la Vieja and its immediate surroundings are excellent for hiking, viewing waterfalls, rafting, and witnessing volcanic activity. Accessibility is via a fairly rough road that takes about an hour to get to the main entrance from Liberia.

At the main entrance, there is a spectacular vista of the Guanacaste plains stretching to the Pacific Ocean. From this entrance, fairly long trails lead to waterfalls (with at least one that has a swimming hole), and a five mile trail that leads to the summit. Although the waterfall trails are easily done on your own, it's best to hire a guide (inquire at your hotel) for the strenuous hike to the lagoon at the peak. Not only do those clouds you saw from below disorient and increase your chance of getting lost (hikers who left the trail have died here), but there are also geysers, boiling mud pits, and other examples of geothermal activity near the trail that although interesting, are potentially fatal if you accidentally step into one. To see some of these phenomena from a safe distance on your own, try the Las Pailas trail that leaves from the main entrance and loops through tropical forest and grasslands.

While hiking this and other trails through the park, if you walk slowly and quietly, you will probably see some of the animals that live here as this important national park protects a huge amount of habitat for monkeys, deer, wild cats, tapir, coatis, many toucans, parrots, and other birds and animals. Coatis in particular are especially easy to see around the picnic areas where these raccoon like animals have become tame.

**Tip:** Be very careful with your food if you see a coati. These inquisitive animals are very bold and will literally snatch it from your hand. It's also a bad idea to feed them not only because this makes coatis more dependent upon people but also because they won't hesitate to use their sharp teeth and claws if they want more of your snacks or feel threatened.



Rafting and other adventure activities around Rincon de la Vieja such as horseback riding, rappelling, and the ever present canopy zip lines can be arranged through many tour companies as well as at your hotel.

If you need a massage or would like to relax in hot springs after a long hike through the park, you can do so at the Simbiosis Spa at Hacienda Guachipelin along the main road to the volcano.

### **Lodging close to Rincon de la Vieja**

Hacienda Guachipelin <http://www.guachipelin.com>

Rincon de la Vieja Mountain Lodge <http://www.rincondelaviejalodge.net>

### **Lodging closer to Liberia**

Rancho Curabande Lodge <http://www.rancho-curabande.com>

Posada el Encuentro Lodge <http://www.posadaencu.com>

Canyon de la Vieja Lodge <http://www.canyonlodgeegte.com>

### **Santa Rosa and Guanacaste National Parks**

Around forty minutes north of Liberia along the Pan-American highway is the entrance to the Santa Rosa and Guanacaste National Parks; two areas that are

important for preserving dry forest habitat and sites of historic importance. While Santa Rosa was named a national park mostly because of an important battle against William Walker that took place there, Guanacaste was named a national park at the urging of Dan Janzen, a prominent tropical ecologist.

Janzen pushed for protection of the forests found between Santa Rosa and the mountains upon realizing that tropical dry forest was an ecosystem that received very little protection, and that many animals used this area to migrate from Santa Rosa National Park to higher, wetter elevations in the mountains during the harsh, dry season. Fortunately, the Costa Rican government followed Janzen's advice and with the establishment of Guanacaste National Park helped protect a section of this country's amazing biodiversity that had been previously neglected. In establishing the park, they also gave tourists the chance to explore wild, tropical forests with jaguars, tapirs, monkeys, and pre-Colombian petroglyphs. Visitors to Guanacaste National Park might see some of its wildlife and petroglyphs by driving and hiking the rough road and trails that lead to the Maritza Sector of the park. The road that provides access to this area of the park leaves the Pan American highway a few miles south of Colonia Bolanos.

Visitors who would like to hike trails in wild areas of dry and evergreen forest near the little visited Cacao Volcano can access this area by driving north from Liberia about 20 miles, taking a right at Potrerillos, then a left at Quebrada Grande. Both of these sectors have biological stations where you can fill up on water and perhaps meet a scientist or two. Basic accommodation is also available but should be reserved in advance by calling 2666-5051. It should be emphasized that, like any large, wild area, visitors should not leave the trails at Guanacaste National Park, nor should they visit if they don't come prepared with plenty of water and food. Although access to Santa Rosa National Park is easier than Guanacaste (and thus less of a chance of getting lost), roads past the headquarters are usually closed. The trail to the "casona" battle site is always open and animals can often be seen at watering holes in the park (ask at the ranger station for locations). Getting to Santa Rosa is very easy; just look for the

flags and signs on the western side of the Pan-American Highway 26 miles (42 kilometers) north of Liberia.

### **Where to Stay**

If not bunking in dormitories (often full, call the number above for reservations) or camping, you can stay at the same hotels mentioned for Rincon de la Vieja or at the following hotels:

Hotel la Plazuela <http://www.hotellaplazuela.com/>

Hacienda los Inocentes <http://www.losinocenteslodge.com>

### **Central Pacific Coast**

The beaches of this region in Costa Rica have always provided a quick, easy day trip or weekend escape from San Jose. The ride to the coast should take less than the present hour and a half drive once the new highway to Caldera is completed. Supposedly, it will cut travel times to the coast by half but the date for its grand opening remains to be seen as does the amount of traffic it can manage. Until then, beach goers headed to Jaco and Quepos will have to stick to the usual routes through Orotina or Puntarenas. These work well in any case, have good signage, and easy to find.

The quickest route is the one through Atenas, San Mateo, and Orotina (look for the exit five minutes past the airport). This road twists and turns its way out of the Central Valley and has a couple of nice cafes along the way (past Atenas) that are worth a stop for their overlooks. In the lowlands, about fifteen to twenty minutes after Orotina, you will come to a long bridge that crosses a river and has dozens of people walking out onto it and peering down into the river. They are all looking at the group of American Crocodiles (some of them about 12 feet long) that hang out below the bridge.



Whether the crocs are waiting for some unlucky person to fall in or because they like the attention, they are quite faithful to this spot and provide some of the best looks anywhere at these rare creatures. To see them, park your car at the tourist shop or crocodile restaurant, walk out onto the narrow sidewalk to the middle, and look down. Needless to say, this is a busy road and there are potentially dangerous crocodiles below so be very careful!

### **Carara National Park**

The other side of the bridge marks the limit of Carara National Park, a reserve that protects a highly threatened forest only found in southern Costa Rica and western Panama. Easy loop trails through the tall, primary rain forests (including one that is handicap accessible) are found at the headquarters on the left side of the road, and there is a one way trail near the river (flooded during the wet season). A self guided brochure comes with the \$10 entrance fee although you will see far more by going on a guided tour. Hotels from San Jose to Jaco should be able to arrange this, and one or two guides often hang out at the entrance hoping for clients.

This area is especially popular with birders because of the huge number of bird species that occur here (well over 300), including a healthy population of Scarlet Macaws. The other principle tour in this area is the Crocodile Tour (see tour section) which is usually arranged in advance but can also be purchased at their offices on the main road through Tarcoles; a seaside village reached by taking the first right after the Nativa Resort.

### **Where to stay**

There aren't too many options for accommodation around Carara. Most visitors stay in nearby Jaco although two close, moderately priced hotels are:

Cerro Lodge <http://www.cerrolodge.com>

Hotel Carara <http://www.hotelcarara.com/>

## **Jaco**

Twenty to thirty minutes south of Carara is Costa Rica's version of Daytona Beach. The high rise condominiums and hotels that face the wide, sandy beach are about as non-Tico in character as one can get, but if you like partying at a crowded beach town, surfing, or going deep sea fishing, then you might like Jaco. The beach itself isn't nearly as nice as others in the country and the water can be kind of rough for swimming (and is polluted), but the consistent breaks appeal to surfers. Tours that range from visits to Carara to blasting through the countryside on ATVs, hang gliding, or fishing for Marlin are all sold at the many travel agencies found at hotels in the area and along the main strip.

## **Where to stay**

Apartotel Flamboyant <http://www.apartotelflamboyant.com/indexi.php>

Hotel Pochote Grande <http://www.hotelpochotegrande.net/>

Hotel Mar de Luz <http://www.mardeluz.com/>

## **Quepos and Manuel Antonio National Park**

From Jaco, an hour south along the coastal highway will bring you to picturesque Quepos. Traditionally a fishing village, the huge effect that tourism has had upon Quepos is evident in the disproportionate number of restaurants, hotels, and tourists that one encounters. Despite this, in my opinion, it still retains its small town feel and Costa Rican flavor. While many of the touristy restaurants are good but rather overpriced, look for small sodas on some of the back streets in town for the most authentic Tico cuisine and don't hesitate to eat an excellent breakfast at the popular soda in the bus station.



The main reason Quepos has become such a tourist hot spot is because of Manuel Antonio National Park. On the other side of the steep, forested hills next to Quepos, Manuel Antonio National Park and the adjacent beaches are some of the most picture perfect, paradisaical looking beaches anywhere in the world.

The combination of turquoise water, powdery white sand, dramatic rocky islands, and exuberant rain forests with monkeys and sloths could make you feel like you have stepped into a postcard.

Since this seems to be a feeling that most of us want, the park has had to impose limits on the number of people in the park at any one time, so to make sure you experience Manuel Antonio, get there early! After making the 15 minute drive up and over the steep hills next to Quepos, to enter the national park, walk south along the beach and wade across a small stream to the official entrance and pay the park fee. There are a few, easy trails through rain forest and to the beaches, one of which leads to overlooks with vistas of the Pacific Ocean and rocky islands frequented by hundreds of seabirds. If the number of people in the park has reached its limit and you don't want to wait in line until someone walks out, just go for a stroll or go swimming on the beach outside of the national park. This beach is pretty nice and is actually where most of the people are. Lounge chairs can be rented and vendors selling cold drinks and snacks will keep you refreshed.

**Tip:** Parking can be difficult here with especially aggressive, occasionally drunk “Guachimen” trying to get your business. If you would rather avoid these guys altogether, use the services of one of the paid parking lots.

### **Where to stay**

There seems to be more hotels than houses in and around Quepos. Three of the nice, moderately priced ones are:

Rafiki Safari Lodge <http://www.rafikisafari.com/>

Cabinas Pedro Miguel <http://www.cabinaspedromiguel.com/>

Hotel Mono Azul <http://www.hotelmonoazul.com/>

Hotel las Tres Banderas <http://www.hotellastresbanderas.com/>

## **The Southern Pacific**

### **Dominical**

From San Isidro/Perez Zeledon, if you follow the signs to Dominical, you will drive up and over a coastal mountain range cloaked in rain forest before reaching the coastal highway. Taking a right will lead you to the most visited beaches in the country and bring you back up towards San Jose. Head left and you will pass through laid back Dominical and one of the most tranquil and scenic areas of the southern Pacific Coast. Despite the inviting ocean off of the ample, beautiful beaches at Dominical, the rough waters are more suited to surfing than swimming. If you took lessons at one of the beaches in Guanacaste, you could try the left and right breaks, and tubular waves. If those lessons didn't work out, then head south along the coast to explore Ballena Marine National Park.

Gazing out at the ocean and Isla del Caño, you might spot a Humpback Whale as it breaches the surface. The whales are the reason for the creation of this protected area as they favor these calm, protected waters for calving and preparing their young for the open seas. For swimming and snorkeling, try the calm water at the beautiful beaches just south of Punta Uvita. If you want to go diving or be taken to the best snorkeling spots, contact the Mystic Dive Center <http://www.mysticdivecenter.com>

Your hotel will have detailed information about tours to beautiful waterfalls and doing other adventure type activities in the area.

To get back into the shade of the rain forest, visit Hacienda Baru for their hiking trails that often harbor White-faced Capuchins, peccaries, many birds, and other tropical wildlife. Several types of guided tours by keen-sighted, knowledgeable locals are available, as is accommodation. At Baru, guests can expect a quality ecotourism experience as the owners helped pioneer green tourism in Costa Rica and have been very important for conservation around Dominical. <http://www.haciendabaru.com/>

### **Other places to stay**

Hotel Domilocos <http://www.domilocos.net/>

Albergue Alma de Hatillo Bed and Breakfast  
<http://www.cabinasalma.com/index.html>

Hotel Roca Verde <http://www.rocaverde.net/>

### **The Osa Peninsula**

South of Dominical and Ballena Marine National Park, after about an hour, the coastal highway reaches Palmar Norte. Crossing the bridge will bring you to Palmar Sur and closer to the Osa Peninsula; one of the wildest areas in Costa Rica. The area around Palmar Sur also happens to be where most of Costa Rica's mysterious, pre-Columbian stone spheres have been found. Some of these still dot the surrounding area although most have been removed by collectors (there are some good examples in the National Museum in San Jose).

To continue on to the Osa, you can either take the boat from Sierpe to Drake Bay, or continue along the highway southeast to Chacarita and take the right to Rincon. Boats that motor down the river through the mangroves to Drake Bay leave Sierpe whenever they fill up with passengers and cost around \$20-\$30 per person. You could also go solo but that would cost far more to rent the entire boat and would forgo

sharing the exhilarating (read scary) part of the boat ride when the captain confronts the waves at the mouth of the river.

Exiting the boat at Drake Bay, you will see that the ride was worth it and not just because you avoided drowning or being eaten by the crocodiles or bull sharks that live in the river. Hillsides covered in the rain forests of Corcovado National Park overlook the bay and if you don't see brilliant Scarlet Macaws upon arrival you probably will sometime that first day and on many other occasions during your visit to the Osa.

The wonderful, pristine forests of the peninsula are especially good for wildlife viewing and you have a very good chance of seeing four species of monkeys, plenty of toucans, parrots, agoutis, and much more. Go with an experienced guide and you could even see a Tapir, Puma or Jaguar. In fact, if you hope to truly explore the rain forests of Corcovado National Park, you are best off hiring a guide for your own safety because this is an unforgiving, jungle wilderness. There are several trails that can be used for trekking through Corcovado but this should not be done alone and should only be attempted with proper preparations and supplies. Luckily, you can still see a lot of animals on trails in the Drake Bay area and around other hotels on the Peninsula. A few of the many options for lodging in the Drake Bay area are:

Hotel Jinetes de Osa <http://www.costaricadiving.com>

Pirate Cove <http://www.piratecovecostarica.com>

Cabinas el Mirador <http://www.miradordrakebay.com>

If you don't like boat rides through the mangroves, take the other route to the Osa that passes through Rincon. This will take you to the main town on the peninsula, frontier-like Puerto Jimenez. Eccentric ex-pats, adventurous tour guides, biologists, and flocks of Scarlet Macaws that occasionally fly down the main street brand this town with character and make it an exciting place to stay for a few days. Despite the frontier-like atmosphere, there is a bank in town, a clinic, tasty restaurants, internet

service, and other comforts of the modern world. Excursions into the park and excellent kayak tours into the mangroves near Puerto Jimenez are very easy to arrange here. You won't have any trouble finding a tour as you will probably be approached by more than one person trying to sell you a variety of itineraries. One of the better providers for adventurous tours into the park is Mike Boston of Osa Adventure <http://www.osaaventura.com/index.php> Personable and knowledgeable, Mike won't hesitate to catch reptiles and snakes so you can get a close look at these evasive animals.

Visiting Corcovado National Park is very difficult on your own but can be done by taking the truck-taxi or driving to Carate. As this involves fording at least two streams, getting there by car is only possible during the dry season and takes around 4 hours on a rough road. At Carate, you then have to wade another river and walk a mile along the hot beach before reaching the La Leona ranger station. The other access point is along a rough road from la Palma that must be hiked for several miles to reach the Los Patos Ranger Station.

### **Where to stay near Puerto Jimenez and surroundings**

Several very nice, expensive lodges are available on the way to and near Carate. If you have to pick one of them, Luna Lodge is the closest to the park, has great views, is filled with wildlife, and provides excellent service overall.

<http://www.lunalodge.com/index-en.html>

A few moderately priced options are:

La Choza del Manglar <http://www.manglares.com/index.htm>

Cabinas Jimenez <http://www.cabinasjimenez.com>

Agua Luna <http://www.jimenezhotels.com/cabinasagualuna/>

### **Golfito**

The quickest way to get to this small, rather dilapidated seaside town is via the one and a half hour motorboat ferry that leaves every morning at six from Puerto Jimenez. Otherwise, it's a two to three hour drive around the Golfo Dulce. Gofito is mostly frequented by Ticos and residents who come here to buy goods in the duty free zone at discounted prices and in doing so keep the town alive. There isn't too much in Gofito for tourists other than it being a place to escape from the rest of the world but outside of town, you could watch birds in the forests of the Gofito Wildlife Refuge, charter a boat for excellent fishing, or take sea kayak tours to nearby Playa Zancudo. If you are a resident who is interested in shopping in Gofito, check the following website for good advice on how to go through the ordeal:

<http://www.liveincostarica.com/articles/living/shopping.htm>

### **Places to stay**

Centro Turistico Samoa del Sur <http://www.samoadelsur.com>

Hotel Sierra <http://www.hotelsierra.com/>

Hotel Golfo Azul

## **The Talamancan Mountains and Valle de El General**

Towering to heights of 12,000 feet, the cool climate of the Talamancas is perfect for tourists who need a break from the tropical heat of the lowlands. Unless you opt for an adventurous, multi-day trek through the rugged wilderness of La Amistad International Park, access into the Talamancas is easiest along the highway that connects Cartago with San Isidro de El General.

**Tip:** As is common with many towns and cities in Costa Rica, San Isidro de El General is known by more than one name. To keep you on your toes (or confused), locals usually refer to this city as “Perez Zeledon” or plain old “Perez”.

Traveling along this good, well-maintained road is a far cry from the past when the trials, tribulations, and dangers of using this route to cross over this mountain on foot gave it the ominous name of “Cerro de la Muerte” (“Mountain of Death”). Accidents still happen along this road (especially at night when foggy weather can make visibility a nightmare), so be careful when driving and only do it during the day. With that warning in mind, you shouldn't be frightened off of taking this road. The pastoral scenes and mossy, montane rain forests are a spectacular sight and well worth the drive as are stops at friendly roadside cafes and diners.

There are also some detours off of the highway that make for nice day trips from San Jose. One of these is the route through the area known as “Los Santos” because most of the towns are named after saints (although I'm not sure why this place gets singled out for this distinction because this is the case for most of Costa Rica). The turn off for this road (route 202) is about 30-40 minutes from Cartago and is the first main road that exits the highway (watch for signs to Tarbarca, Frailes, and Aserri). This is a nice drive for the scenery and for visiting small towns in the mountains that produce the best coffee in Costa Rica. If you follow the signs all the way to Aserri, it also makes a loop back into the San Jose area.

The Toucanet Lodge is a good option for moderately priced accommodation in the Los Santos area. <http://www.eltoucanet.com/ing.htm>

Further along the highway towards San Isidro, the road passes through extensive areas of forest and the attractions are geared towards ecotourists. At kilometer 70, watch for the Quetzal's Paradise on the right. This is probably the easiest place to see the famed Resplendent Quetzal anywhere. The owner, Eddie Serrano, always knows where to find them and charges \$10 for a three hour tour to see one of the most spectacular bird species in the world. After getting your fix of iridescently plumaged quetzals, you might want to go on hiking tours of longer duration that he also offers. Small cabins are available for accommodation. <http://www.quetzalsparadise.com/ing/tours.php>

Just past the Quetzal Paradise, another good place for hiking is the Iyok Ami reserve at kilometer marker 71. A reserve with plenty of trails for walking through beautiful cloud forests, they also have a restaurant and modest lodging. As this place can be a bit difficult to find, the owner will meet you at the entrance if you contact her in advance. Their website is <http://www.ecotourism.co.cr/iyokami/index.htm>

At kilometer 80, the turn off to San Gerardo de Dota leads to several, well established lodges that are popular with ecotourists, some of which have (unfortunately) dramatically increased their prices over the years. A good option with more moderate prices is the Trogon Lodge. <http://www.grupomawamba.com/trogonlodge/index.html>

Make sure to reserve in advance for this one, however, as it often gets booked with groups on package tours.

Not long after the turn off to San Gerardo, you will crest over the mountain at the highest section of the road (about 11,000 feet) and begin your descent onto the Pacific Slope. Five to ten minutes later, watch for the La Georgina diner on the left. This small, friendly diner that serves good, traditional Tico cuisine is a great place to break up your trip over the mountain with coffee or lunch. While dining, you will be entertained by the hummingbirds that visit feeders just outside of the windows. If interested in hiking, their trails are also some of the best found on Cerro de la Muerte and as of 2009 were still free to use. These trails go through very wild, high elevation primary forest that hosts quetzals, many other birds, and tapirs. If you decide to stay at La Georgina, they also offer lodging in basic rooms and cabins at low prices. [http://infoturistica.net/hospedajes/georgina\\_eng.html](http://infoturistica.net/hospedajes/georgina_eng.html)

From la Georgina, the highway quickly descends to the El General Valley. Stop at the Vista del Valle restaurant for an incredible view of San Isidro. If you can't get enough of their view, stay at their cabins. <http://www.ecotourism.co.cr/vistadelvalle/>

You will know when you have finally reached San Isidro (aka Perez) when you feel the hotter climate of the valley, and especially when you see the signs

proclaiming in Spanish that “Jesus is the General in this valley”! San Isidro doesn't have too much to offer to the tourist other than a chance to pick up groceries, buy shoes, or sing karaoke with the local San Isidrinos (or perhaps they prefer to be called Perezenos?). This is a jumping off point, though for an ascent up Chirripo, Costa Rica's highest mountain.

The first step in “climbing” Chirripo (aside from getting into serious shape), is the drive up to the village of San Gerardo de Rivas (first you did the Dota and now it's Rivas). So as not to be confused with the larger town of Rivas found along the way, locals refer to this village as San Gerardo. In any case, don't succumb to confusion and just follow the signs to the end of the road to get there.

Climbing Chirripo is very popular among Ticos as well as among tourists and since only a certain number of people are allowed onto the trail, reserving a spot is best if you are on a tight schedule. If you have plenty of time to spare, you will probably be ok by claiming one of the ten spots that the ranger station in San Gerardo sets aside for hikers making the ascent the following day. For this option, make sure to get to the ranger station when they open at 6:30 A.M. because you won't be the only one using this strategy. If you would rather reserve in advance, the easiest option by far is to book a trip with a travel agency that will make the reservation for you. If not, you will have to contact the park office in Perez at 8771-31-55 on the first working day of the month before your trip and then send the fees via wire transfer.

Whether you have a reservation or not, all Chirripo climbers must check in at the ranger station in San Gerardo the day before their ascent to pay fees (\$15 for two days, \$10 for additional days), and most of all, to make sure that space is available in the shelter where they will pass the night (since no camping is allowed, this shelter is the only option). Water is available but you will have to bring your own food, cooking supplies (stoves can be rented in town), and bedding (blankets can be rented in town as well). As far as what to wear or bring, be advised that although the lower part of the trail is warm and humid, nighttime temperatures often drop below freezing at the shelter. Only being allowed to stay at the shelter makes the first day of the hike the

most difficult because the uphill walk takes around 10 hours to get there. The rest of the hike is much easier and there is no technical climbing involved.

Once you get back down to San Gerardo, you can soak in hot springs near town (all uphill walks of a mile or two), swap tales of sore muscles and accomplishment at the Roca Dura Cafe, or try to find out how the locals (apparently “super people”) are able to run the annual marathon up and down Chirripo in a matter of hours.

If you don't feel up to a long, uphill hike, there are other hiking trails near this pleasant village at the Cloudbridge Reserve <http://www.cloudbridge.org/>

### **Where to stay**

Hotel el Pelicano (check out the unique wooden sculptures in the lobby)

<http://www.hotelpelicano.net/indexi.php>

El Descanso [http://www.sangerardocostarica.com/accommodations/el-descanso/langswitch\\_lang/en/](http://www.sangerardocostarica.com/accommodations/el-descanso/langswitch_lang/en/)

Casa Mariposa <http://www.hotelcasamariposa.net/>

## **Monteverde and Arenal**

The combination of smoking volcanoes, beautiful hot springs, waterfalls, trails through fantastic cloud forests, and good tourist infrastructure make these two popular destinations a must see for all visitors to Costa Rica. The close proximity to each other also makes a combined visit to these exciting destinations suitable as an easy three or four day trip from San Jose.

Although it takes around three to four hours to drive up the curvy, unpaved, mountain road to Monteverde, the drive (or bus ride) is signed, straightforward, a bit frightening for some, and offers beautiful views of the Tilaran Mountains. To get to

Monteverde, take the Pan American Highway from San Jose towards Liberia and leave the highway to the right at Rancho Grande when you see signs for Santa Elena and Monteverde. At this point, you ascend up, up, and up some more along a dusty, dirt road for about two hours until arriving at the town of Santa Elena (if this is any consolation, the road is actually much, much better than it was in the past). This is the main town near Monteverde and is where you can go for internet access, groceries, to sign up for tours, meet fellow travelers, and do other non-forest based, social activities. There is also a nice butterfly garden, orchid garden, a unique bat display, and, if you want to see all those venomous snakes that you did not see in the wild, a serpentarium. Of course there are also plenty of hotels and restaurants here as well, those in town tending to be cheaper than the many options for lodging and dining that are found along the road to the reserve.

To visit the famous Monteverde Reserve, you can walk several miles uphill, drive, or take a taxi up a road that passes through pleasant, mountain scenery and goes by the Monteverde cheese factory. Established by the Quaker community that moved to Monteverde from Alabama during the 1950s, this is a great place to purchase good cheese in Costa Rica (an uncommon find). Upon arrival to the reserve (open from 7 until 4), excellent, naturalist guides will be waiting to show you the beauty of the cloud forest, including looks at Resplendent Quetzals. To take one of their short, guided tours and thus greatly improve your chances of seeing a quetzal and other animals, sign up at the gate.



You can also explore the trails in the beautiful, mossy, dripping cloud forest on your own. A few of the more interesting sights in the forest are at “la ventana” or “the window” where clouds from the Caribbean Slope can be seen skimming the treetops along a ridge as they pass over to the Pacific Slope, and the bridges over deep ravines that will give you a bird's eye view into the canopy.

After walking the trails of this peaceful, verdant forest that helped spur the conservation movement in Costa Rica, check out the art and hummingbird galleries near the entrance. The art gallery showcases works by local artists and the hummingbird gallery is a live display of wild hummingbirds that come out of the forest to visit several feeders. Accustomed to people, dozens of these glittering, pugnacious, miniscule birds feed from feeders at arms length for excellent photo opportunities. After a visit to the reserve, you might want to stop at Stella's Bakery on your way back down to Santa Elena. This excellent cafe serves tasty, healthy food, and some of the best baked goods in the country. Back in Santa Elena, another interesting restaurant is the Tree House which is, as its name indicates, a tree house that was built in and around a large fig tree.

In addition to the Monteverde Reserve, there are also trails through drier forest at the Bajo del Tigre Reserve near Stella's Bakery, the Finca Ecologica (a good place to see sloths), and extensive trails through cloud forest at the Santa Elena Reserve. This latter reserve receives fewer visitors than Monteverde and is a good option for longer day hikes. Entrance fees for these private reserves vary from \$7 to \$15. For more information about guided hikes and many of the tours offered at Monteverde, including overnight trips to more remote areas and the original canopy tour, see <http://www.monteverdeinfo.com/index.htm>

### **Where to Stay in Monteverde**

There are literally dozens of hotels to choose from in the Monteverde area, many of them quite good. Here is a very small sampling of moderately priced places to stay:

Hotel Finca Valverde <http://www.monteverdeinfo.com/hotel/finca-valverde/index.html>

El Bosque Lodge <http://www.monteverdeinfo.com/monteverde-hotels/el-bosque-lodge/>

The Quetzal Inn <http://www.monteverdeinfo.com/quetzal-inn/>

## **Volcan Arenal**

While walking the trails through the Santa Elena and Monteverde cloud forests, you may hear a rumble that is far too deep to be thunder and will see its source if you climb the observation tower in the Santa Elena Reserve to view the Arenal Volcano. Arenal is the next mountain to the north from the Monteverde area and can be reached after a two hour drive that goes through Tilaran and around the lake. If you are very lucky and have a clear day, you will have an excellent view of the normally cloud covered volcano, will probably see steam coming out of its peak, and may even notice a boulder or two tumbling down its slopes. If you truly need a closer look at the volcano, there are a few trails within this national park for this purpose. The entrance to the park is signed and found along a road that leaves the highway near the eastern end of the lake. Needless to say, don't leave the trails to climb the volcano because even if you do have a death wish, the rescuers who will have to retrieve your body probably don't and will be put into harms way by ascending the active flanks of Arenal.

For safe, very close looks, in addition to observation points in the national park, the Arenal Observatory Lodge provides the closest, best views of any of the hotels in the area. If the hotel is full (it often is), you can still visit their grounds to walk several, excellent trails, or view the volcano from their restaurant. As a side note, although the view from this restaurant is unbeatable, for mysterious reasons, except for the buffet breakfast, the food is not only overpriced but is also rather poor in quality. At least along the road back to and in La Fortuna, there are several restaurants with much better fare.

Also along the road between the volcano and La Fortuna are the Tabacon Hot Springs Resort and Spa (<http://www.tabacon.com>). This book shies away from recommending resorts with the exception of this one because it is one of the best hotels in Central America and at least offers day passes (around \$80) to visit their hot springs, pools, and spa. The spa often fills up with people in package tours to the Arenal area, so make your reservations far in advance if you want to soak and indulge

yourself in the opulent atmosphere of the Tabacon springs for a day. Fortunately for those of us who don't have wads of cash, there are several other, cheaper hot springs such as the Baldi hot springs, the Springs Thermal Waters, Eco Termales near La Fortuna, and the Termales del Bosque, Aguas Termales de la Marina, and El Tucan near Ciudad Quesada. The Baldi and Springs Thermal Waters ([www.baldihot springs.cr](http://www.baldihot springs.cr)) both have extensive pools of varying temperatures, and charge similar admission fees (\$30-\$40), but the Baldi looks a bit more like a water park with its pair of waterslides. For a much quieter, intimate hot spring experience, make reservations for the Eco Termales (<http://www.arenal.net/tour/eco-termales-hot-springs/>). The owners only allow access by reservation and limit the number of people using the springs at any given time. They charge \$25 and also serve excellent, home made, Tico dishes.

Although the gray slopes of Arenal aren't visible from Ciudad Quesada (aka San Carlos), the volcano is only an hour away by car, and prices are much cheaper than the inflated, expensive cost of everything around la Fortuna. For tourists on a tight budget looking for the volcanic hot spring experience, they can try out the no frills Aguas Termales de la Marina for \$2 (locally known as “El Tucanito”) or pay \$12 to soak in a few small pools at the El Tucan resort found along the highway east of town near Aguas Zarcas. One of the best options in the area (also my personal favorite and the most popular among Ticos) is across the street at the Termales del Bosque. For \$10, visitors can walk a trail through rain forest to a series of hot spring pools next to a jungle stream. While relaxing at this gorgeous location, watch for monkeys and parrots in the trees overhead. Like most of the hot springs in the area, thirsty clients can buy drinks at a bar near the rejuvenating waters.



### **Where to Stay around Arenal**

Arenal Observatory Lodge <http://www.arenalobservatorylodge.com/EN/>

Nido del Colibri Bed and Breakfast <http://www.hummingbirdnestbb.com>

Monte Real Hotel <http://www.monterrealhotel.com>

Termales del Bosque (Ciudad Quesada) <http://www.termasdelbosque.com/>

Tilajari Hotel Resort <http://www.tilajari.com/>

**Tip:** Getting the best views of the volcano is a matter of luck and determination. Just keep watching or checking the volcano and have your camera at hand for that lucky break when the clouds suddenly reveal the smoking peak.

### **Other things to do near Arenal**

#### **Rain forest trails**

In addition to the usual adventure tours, visitors to the Arenal area can go canoeing on Lake Arenal, or walk through the rain forest on excellent trails at the Hanging Bridges of Arenal. The bridges are a series of spans over steep ravines that give views into the forest canopy. The trails are great and their workers often know where hidden animals and snakes can be seen but the entrance fee of \$22 to go for a walk seems pretty darn high. Cheaper trails that may lack hanging bridges but go through nice rain forest with the same wildlife can be walked at the Arenal Observatory Lodge and the excellent Ecocentro Danaus found about a mile and a half east of La Fortuna off of the road to El Tanque.



Further afield at the Heliconias Lodge near Bijagua, there is another trail with hanging bridges that in my opinion are more spectacular than those near Arenal. Approximately three hours by car from La Fortuna, while driving through Bijagua, take a left turn at the National Bank and watch for signs to Las Heliconias.

From here it is a fairly rough ten minute drive up to the lodge. Their version of a “hanging bridges trail” goes through excellent primary forest and costs \$10.

## **Waterfalls**

With all those mountains and rainfall, there seems to be at least one beautiful, jungle waterfall that merits a visit in every region of Costa Rica. The main waterfall near La Fortuna goes by the same name as the town and is just 3 miles off of the highway to San Ramon. It costs \$8 to walk the steep trail through the forested canyon to see the the 120 foot high falls and swim in the beautiful, tropical river.

To see a waterfall in an incredible river colored light blue by a mix of sulphur and calcium carbonate, visit the Rio Celeste in Volcan Tenorio National Park. The trip takes about two and a half hours from La Fortuna, one hour of which is a hike through the rain forest which makes this a good trip to do as a tour. Nevertheless, if you want do it on your own, drive to Guatuso from La Fortuna and follow the signs to the ranger station of the national park. The trail starts near this point and the rangers will be able to to direct you to it. Accommodation is available near Rio Celeste in the form of very basic, cheap cabins at the Rio Celeste Lodge, and at the moderately priced La Carolina Lodge (<http://www.lacarolinalodge.com/>).

## **Caño Negro Wildlife Refuge**

Most visitors to these extensive wetlands south of Lake Nicaragua opt for a tour of the area because the rough roads and swampy conditions can make things tough to do on your own. Tours to Caño Negro can be easily booked through most tour operators in La Fortuna and those who sign up can expect boat rides through wetlands and rain forests that harbor 1000s of caimans, herons, egrets, cormorants, storks, sloths, wild cats, and other wildlife. Although you can't expect to see jaguars and other shy animals during your time at Cano Negro, you will still have plenty to look at because the boat tour operators tend to know where a lot of the animals are and usually make efforts to see them. Caño Negro is also a good area for fishing and there are plenty of tours available for going after the Tarpon and Peacock Bass that lurk in these waters.

If you try this adventure on your own, drive your four wheel vehicle up to either Los Chiles or Upala and follow the signs from there. Access to these towns could be very difficult during the wet season.

### **Where to Stay**

Caño Negro Fishing Club

Caño Negro Villas

**Tip:** Only book your tours or guides through the websites of travel agents or with the agent at your hotel. Unfortunately, several travelers have been scammed by people on the street who sold them non-existent, half price tours.

### **The Caribbean Lowlands**

The plains of banana fields and patches of rain forest that seem world's away from the bustle of the Central Valley are just on the other side of the jade green mountains to the north of San Jose. A quick highway up and over them (a sector of beautiful Braulio Carrillo National Park) brings tourists to the hot, humid lowlands in just sixty minutes. Once you coast onto the flat roads of the lowlands, visitors can go one of two ways; to the rain forests and slow, tropical rivers of Sarapiquí, or to Caribbean flavored Limon and the lazy, coconut palm beaches near the Panamanian border.

No matter which route you take, you can't go wrong if you came to Costa Rica to experience rain forests and tranquil, tropical beaches. If you aren't sure whether you should go to Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí, or to Puerto Viejo de Talamanca, you can relax and think it over at one of the good, Tico restaurants at this junction or while buying luscious pineapples, aromatic papayas, and other tropical fruit. If you have visions of monkeys, sloths, and toucans, take a left on the road that leads to the Sarapiquí region. If Bob Marley melodies played against a backdrop of sighing

Caribbean waves are going through your head, then go right and follow the signs to Limon.

### **Sarapiqui and surroundings**

On the way to Puerto Viejo de Sarapiqui, as you drive through the mostly deforested countryside, hills cloaked in green forest can be seen far off to the left. With no roads seeming to head that way, they seem hopelessly inaccessible. However, there is one road that reaches and penetrates the heart of that rain forest wilderness. Although it's so rough that a tractor is needed to reach the lodge at the end, visitors that endure the ride will have reached Rara Avis; one of the oldest ecolodges in Costa Rica (<http://www.rara-avis.com>).

Founded by biologists in the late 80s and early 90s, Rara Avis is situated in one of the most remote areas on the Caribbean Slope and provides visitors with a chance to experience the amazing biodiversity of a rain forest wilderness. The lodging is basic but comfortable and moderately priced, the food very good, the atmosphere absolutely peaceful, the extensive trails through primary rain forest are filled with wildlife (think tapirs, monkeys, many birds, snakes, etc.), and the resident guides are passionate about sharing this special place with the guests that make it up the road. It is that road, though, that weans out the less adventurous as well as those with brittle bones.

More like an extremely rough track, the high amount of rainfall and muddy soils ensure that the access road to Rara Avis can't be driven with any rental vehicle. The trip up to the lodge involves leaving your car at their office in Las Horquetas, riding in the back of a very tough, truck-like vehicle, and then switching to a cart hitched to a tractor. The ride on the truck gets rough but the tractor is worse with bone jarring bumps as it jolts its way up to the lodge. At least once the trails are reached, you can get out and walk the rest of the way. I don't want to put off travelers going to Rara Avis as I think it offers one of the top rain forest experiences in Central America, but

you should be aware of the challenge in getting there. Because of the time and effort involved in reaching the lodge, plan on staying at least two nights.

If the remoteness or jarring road associated with Rara Avis doesn't sound appealing, then continue on past Las Horquetas to Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí. An official port that was only accessible by river until the late 1970s, this small, lowland town has become a major stop for ecotourists. One of the main attractions in the area is the La Selva biological station run by the Organization for Tropical Studies. Hundreds of studies investigating the rain forest have been carried out at this well maintained biological station and researchers are still given preference over ecotourists. If the station isn't full, you can stay in a room with bunk beds for about \$70 per night and take meals in the cafeteria with researchers, students, and birders. Although the food isn't the best (it is a cafeteria after all), the chances for observing and taking great pictures of tropical wildlife are excellent. If you can't stay the night, day visits can only be done on one of their guided tours; short but sweet walks where their naturalist guides talk about and show you various aspects of the rain forest.

Various ecolodges in the area also offer the possibility of experiencing rain forest. Some of the better ones in terms of wildlife observation are:

Selva Verde <http://www.selvaverde.com>

El Gavilan <http://www.gavilanlodge.com>

Hacienda Pozo Azul <http://www.pozoazul.com>

No matter where you stay in the Sarapiquí region, your hotel will be able to arrange the usual adventure tours and boat rides along the Sarapiquí River that are often good for spotting caimans, iguanas, sloths, and Howler Monkeys.

If you are looking to really get off the beaten track and stay at remote lodges in little visited, lowland rain forests, there are a few possibilities north of Sarapiquí near the Nicaraguan border. Expect a rain forest adventure at the following two lodges:

Maquenque Ecolodge <http://www.maquenqueecolodge.com>

Laguna del Lagarto Lodge <http://www.lagarto-lodge-costa-rica.com/>

### **Tortuguero National Park**

Just before reaching the Caribbean lowlands, a few hills can be seen in the distance over the patchwork of banana fields, pasture, and bits of forest. Those distant hills mark the site of Tortuguero, one of Costa Rica's largest national parks. Named after and established because of the beaches that are used as nesting sites by sea turtles, Tortuguero National Park is just as well known for the boat rides along canals and waterways through tall, lowland rain forest. These boat trips are easily organized through hotels at Tortuguero and are a comfortable, easy way to see a good amount of rain forest wildlife. Toucans call from the canopy, parrots and endangered Great Green Macaws fly overhead, iguanas bask in the trees, basilisk lizards run over the water, monkeys shake tree branches in protest, sloths hang from tree limbs, and caimans coldly eye you from the water. The luckiest of tourists have even seen Jaguars that occasionally come to the beach to hunt sea turtles.

Tortuguero is a wonderful, wild place to visit but is very hard to do on your own. For this reason, trips to Tortuguero are best done on tours booked through travel agents. There are plenty available and almost all agencies will be more than happy to sign you up.

### **The other Puerto Viejo and nearby places of interest**

If you decided to let the Bob Marley melodies guide you to the coast, just pass right on through Limon and head south to Cahuita, Puerto Viejo de Talamanca, and Manzanillo. The beautiful, tropical beaches, easy-going attitudes, and cheap prices mostly attract the younger backpacking crowd, but also have plenty to offer to older travelers. Cahuita has a small national park of beautiful beaches backed by dense rain forest. Offshore, the most extensive coral reef on Costa Rica's Caribbean Coast awaits

snorkelers and divers. Guided trips to view the colorful reef life can be booked in Cahuita town, a great place to become acquainted with Tico-Caribbean culture.

### **Places to stay in Cahuita**

Hotel Magellan Inn <http://www.magellaninn.com/>

Suizo Loco Lodge <http://www.suizolocolodge.com/>

Hotel National Park Cahuita <http://www.anywherecostarica.com/destinations/cahuita-costa-rica/hotels/hotel-national-park-cahuita>

**Tip:** Be careful in Cahuita. Crime is sometimes worse here than at other places and tourists have been robbed in the national park.

Puerto Viejo de Talamanca is the next main town south of Cahuita and is the most popular among tourists visiting the area. The warm, clear waters, waves, rain forests on hills that overlook the town, and the active social scene offer something for everyone. The waves in particular attract surfers who want to try their luck on the challenging “salsa brava” that breaks on the reef before surfing the easier waves that break near Punta Cocles. In addition to adventure activities that can be arranged through hotels and travel agents in this small town, there are also trips to nearby Indigenous Reserves where you can learn about the medicinal plants used in these rain forest cultures.

### **Where to Stay:**

Villas del Caribe <http://www.villasdelcaribe.com/>

Casa Camarona <http://www.casacamaronaco.cr/>

Sia Tami Lodge [http://www.siatami.com/es\\_siatamilodge.html](http://www.siatami.com/es_siatamilodge.html)

To visit quieter beaches, go south from Puerto Viejo to Punta Uva and Manzanillo. A very small, seaside village, Manzanillo is adjacent to the swampy rain forests of the

Gandoca-Manzanillo Wildlife Refuge. To access the refuge, there are trails that parallel the beach and a few that enter the heart of the reserve. Wildlife can also be seen along the main road to Puerto Viejo and along quite side roads. Nevertheless, the best attraction in this area is the absolutely gorgeous beach with its clear, turquoise waters, and coral reef just offshore. You can snorkel it on your own or take tours with the Punta Uva Dive Center (<http://www.puntauvadivecenter.com/location.html>). If you aren't certified to dive, you might as well learn with the Dive Center at the colorful reefs of Punta Uva instead of back home in a swimming pool.

### **Places to Stay**

Cabinas Manzanillo

Azania Bungalows <http://www.azania-costarica.com/>

Totem <http://www.totemsite.com>

## **12. Moving to and Living in Costa Rica**

Literally thousands of Europeans and North Americans have moved to Costa Rica. The idea of living here may also cross your mind after you experience the beauty, stability, and friendly nature of this exciting Central American nation. Before you make the big move, keep in mind that a fair number of people who had decided to settle down in Tiquicia only stayed a short time after discovering that not everything in Costa Rica was sunshine, butterflies, and smiles. This doesn't mean that one shouldn't consider moving here, just that one needs to know what moving to and living in Costa Rica entails.

The following factors need to be seriously taken into account if you are thinking of moving to Costa Rica:

### **Changes**

Have you spent much time immersed in a different culture? Do you speak Spanish? How familiar are you with Latin culture? Have you ever lived in a country less developed than the one you are coming from? Have you ever lived in a tropical country? If you can answer yes with positive experiences to all of these questions, then you probably don't have a lot to worry about as far as adjusting to life in Costa Rica. If you answered "no" to any of the above, then you will probably need to make some major adjustments regarding communication, ways of thinking, and philosophy.

The best way to ascertain whether or not you will be happy with those changes is to live in Costa Rica for at least a few months. Make an attempt to learn Spanish, befriend some Ticos, immerse yourself in the culture, check out ex-pat clubs and organizations and ask them about their experiences. Do all of this before building that house or purchasing that beach front property. You may find out that you like visiting Costa Rica but don't like living here, that Costa Rica is a great place to live for half of the year, or that yes, Costa Rica is your future home.

To give you a heads-up on what to expect regarding the questions above, living in a different culture means that a great deal of ideas, behaviors, and beliefs will differ from those you feel most comfortable with. These are often very subtle and can range from the way you greet people to the way in which you disagree with someone, to the worldviews that people hold. Whatever the differences, feeling comfortable with them depends upon your degree of open-mindedness, adaptability, and willingness to accept that you might never understand or be able to accept some aspects of the other culture. Most differences and misunderstandings are related to communication but even if you learn Spanish (and you should at least make an attempt), you will still probably never be able to pick up on every subtlety or slang word although you will be at least be able to basically communicate with the majority of people in your community. A good way to get an idea of what it's like to live in Costa Rica is by studying Spanish and living with a Tico family. A few of the many institutes and communities that offer such programs are:

The CPI Spanish Immersion School <http://www.cpi-edu.com/>

The Conversa Learning Park <http://www.conversa.com/>

The CRLA school <http://www.spanishandmore.com/>

Living with a Tico family will also help you become familiarized with Latin culture. Expect people to be very expressive, perhaps more extroverted than you are used to, and very talkative (which will be perfect for learning the language). You may find yourself living with an extended family as like many other places in Latin America, Ticos tend to be very family oriented, and the social dynamics may remind you of a small town (think heavy gossip) even if you are in the city. Although the noise level in Costa Rica is far below that of many other places in Latin America, don't be surprised to hear your neighbors testing out the high volume settings on their speakers or for them to set off large firecrackers for no apparent reason. You will probably still run into macho attitudes now and then but much less than in the past. You may also run into people smiling and agreeing with you when they feel the opposite but they won't say that directly to your face because that would be bad behavior. Whatever circumstances you run into, just remember that people are people no matter where you go and are always vastly more similar to each other than different.

The infrastructure of Costa Rica is not as developed as that of North America or Europe but is still pretty good overall. For example, the following scenario is not that uncommon: After weaving through a street cratered with pot holes and walking past the guard with the pump-action shotgun (because the police force is small), you take a number or wait in a long line to carry out your bank transactions. After an hour in the bank, on your way home, you stop at the local pulperia to buy some bread but the owner doesn't have change for your 10,000 colon bill. Since he knows you, he gives you the bread anyways with the promise that you will pay the next time you visit his store. After arriving back home, you turn on the computer but the internet isn't working for some unknown reason. Frustrated, you sit down to watch TV but are foiled shortly thereafter when the electricity goes out. It's a beautiful day in any case so you go back outside, buy the paper, and walk to a nearby park to read it. An hour

later, you return home to find that the electricity is back on and that your internet is working just fine.

If the above sounds unbearable, don't even think of living in Costa Rica. If it sounds manageable, you probably won't have too many problems in adapting to the infrastructure but it's still a good idea to experience it before making the big move. Another thing that most people deal with just fine and enjoy is living in the tropics. The weather is a major advantage but comes with a few consequences. All of that humidity and lack of a killing frost means that mold can be a major issue for your books, clothes, and health, and you will probably share your house with some cockroaches, ants, and termites. Nevertheless, these issues are easily remedied with a dehumidifier brought from your home country, and by keeping your place very clean or hiring an exterminator.

### **Making the move and residency**

If you find that you will adapt well to Costa Rica and still love the place, you may wish to apply for residency. Do it with a lawyer that specializes in residency and start the process as soon as possible. The three types of residency are:

1. Pensionado- This is for retirees who can show that they will receive at least \$1000 per month. After three years of living in Costa Rica as a Pensionado, you can apply for permanent residency.
2. Rentista- As long as you can deposit \$2,500 per month in a Costa Rican bank (and you may have to deposit \$150,000, enough for five years), and live in Costa Rica four months out of the year, you can get Rentista status. Like people with Pensionado status, after three years living in the country, you can apply for permanent residency. By investing \$50,000 in certain sectors of the economy or \$200,000 in any legal business, you can qualify as an “Inversionista”. As an Inversionista, you can apply for permanent residency in two instead of three years.

3. Permanent- The only way to qualify for this coveted category right off the bat is to marry a Costa Rican citizen or have a first degree relative who is a Costa Rican citizen. This is the only residency status that allows you to work in Costa Rica.
4. Tourist Status- Many people reside in Costa Rica as tourists and are able to do so by taking advantage of the loophole that allows them to be legal as long as they leave the country every 90 days. Don't rely on this strategy for too long because all indications point towards this loophole getting closed or enforced sometime soon.

### **Real Estate**

There is plenty of land available in Costa Rica and oh, how they want to sell it to YOU! The sellers will assume you are rich and will almost certainly ask for prices more inflated than the Goodyear Blimp. Before settling on a price, bargain for the land, look around and compare, and to avoid buying land that wasn't actually for sale, hire a lawyer or agent to help you with the process. Realtors and real estate agents can help you out in this respect but be sure to pick a bilingual realtor who can demonstrate experience in selling property because realtors in Costa Rica don't have to be licensed.

Beach front property may be tempting but there are laws that make it very difficult (and impossible until you have been a resident for five years) to own property that is 200 meters from the high tide line. Thus, stay away from realtors that insist on selling you property on the beach; you can probably get a place within walking distance of the beach in any case.

If you do buy land, do not leave it unattended. Pay someone to watch it or better yet, be there as much as possible or you may have to deal with squatters.

A few reliable real estate brokers and attorneys are:

Rico Realty (specializing in the Arenal area) <http://www.ricorealty.com>

Pablos Matamoros Arosemana: [pamatamoros@yahoo.com](mailto:pamatamoros@yahoo.com), (506) 222-2790

Juan Carlos Esquivel <http://www.eyalaw.com>

### **Ex-pat clubs and organizations**

As much as you may enjoy being immersed in Costa Rican culture and society, it's always good to meet other ex-pats. They are the best people to go to for advice about living in Costa Rica, have had the same problems you may be experiencing, often have fascinating stories about the very interesting lives they have led, and are people with whom you can joyously speak the language you grew up with.

Some ex-pat organizations:

The Association of Residents of Costa Rica is a good place to get information about many aspects of living in Costa Rica from other ex-pat residents. <http://www.arcr.net/>

The Birding Club of Costa Rica email [costaricabirding@hotmail.com](mailto:costaricabirding@hotmail.com)

The Yahoo forum "Costa Rica living"  
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/CostaRicaLiving/>

Costa Rican-North American Cultural Center <http://www.cccncr.com/>

The Little Theatre Group  
[http://www.littletheatregroup.org/whats\\_happening/news.html](http://www.littletheatregroup.org/whats_happening/news.html)

The New Comers Club of Costa Rica <http://www.newcomersclubofcostarica.com/>

The Women's Club of Costa Rica <http://wccr.org/text/home/home.shtml>

### **Tico Phrases and Slang**

Best learned by staying with a Tico family or making Tico friends, you will nevertheless impress Ticos if your Spanish vocabulary includes the following words and phrases:

Boca (boka): Means “mouth” but is also the word used for snacks in a bar.

Buena Nota (bwaynuh notah): Good deal! Excellent! Right on!

La CAJA (lah cahhah): Although the word means “box”, this is the acronym for social services and can also mean the state run clinic.

Cien metros (seeyen metros): One city block.

Chavalo (chahVAHlo): A kid or adolescent. Chavala if the youngster is a girl.

Chunches (choonchays): Things, stuff.

DeVerdad (de vairdahd): Really!?

Gaseosa (gahsayosa): Soda pop.

Güila (wheeluh): Kid.

Güey puchica (wheypuchikah): Holy smokes! Darn it! Shoot!

Hypermas (eepearmahs): The name of a large store.

La Bomba (la boahmba): Gas station.

La Pulpe (la poolpay): Short for pulperia.

Me caye bien (may khai beeyen): I like you in a platonic way.

Mucho gusto instead of De nada (muchoh goostoh): Ticos say this for your welcome much more than “de nada”.

Mai (my): Dude! Man! A very common and important word to know.

Mas (mahs): The word means “more” but people often use it to refer to Costa Rica's version of a large grocery store chain; “Mas por Menos”.

Paño (pangyo): Ticos say this instead of “toalla” to mean towel.

Para llevar (pahdha jayvar): Referring to carry out or take away food.

Pura Vida (poodha veeda): This most comprehensive phrase can be translated as, “Cool! Sweet deal! That's what I'm talking about! Hello! See you later!”

Polo (pohloh): Dim-witted.

Que dicha (kay dichuh): A very common phrase that means, “what a relief”, “very well”, “good to hear that”.

Que rajado (kay rah-ha-do): That's messed up! What a mess!

Salado (sahlahdo): That's too bad. Too bad for you. For Canadians, this is the Tico equivalent of “sucked in”.

Si Dios quiere (si deeohs keyayray): An expression that reflects how religious many Ticos are that means, “If that's what God wants” or “God-willing”.

Tiquicia (teekeyseeuh): A general term for Costa Rica and its culture.

Tuanis (twooahneece): Taken from the English “too nice”, it means “sweet”!, “awesome”!

Upe (oopay): Is anyone home?

Usted (oohstead): Means “you”. Ticos use this instead of the “tu” form.

Vos (vohs): Another way to say, “you”.

## About the Author

After visiting Costa Rica several times since 1992, Patrick O'Donnell finally made the decision to stay for good in 2007. He lives in Santa Barbara de Heredia with his Tica wife and daughter, writes about everything related to Costa Rica, and gives personalized birding tours.

## Index

- aerial tram, 35
- Agua Luna, 65
- Aguas Termales de la Marina, 73
- Alajuela, 3, 20, 21, 45, 47
- Albergue Alma de Hatillo Bed and Breakfast, 62
- Amon and Otoya neighborhoods, 5, 33
- Añoranzas, 44
- Apartotel Flamboyant, 60
- Arenal**, 2, 4, 6, 9, 12, 17, 18, 24, 34, 69, 72, 73, 74, 85
- Arenal Volcano, 6, 9, 72
- Arriva Costa Rica, 20
- Arroz con Atun, 25
- Arroz con Camarones, 25
- Arroz con Leche, 25
- Arroz con Pollo, 25
- Association of Residents of Costa Rica, 86
- ATMs, 23
- Azania Bungalows, 81
- Bajo del Tigre Reserve, 71
- Bakeries, 27
- Balbek Restaurant, 44
- Baldi hot springs, 72
- Ballena Marine National Park, 62
- Barrio Amon, 38, 42
- Beaches, 2, 3, 17, 48
- birding, 3, 33, 34, 88
- Birdingcraft Tours, 34
- Border**, 2, 20
- Braulio Carrillo National Park, 44, 76
- Britt coffee tour, 34
- Bungalows Casa Valeria, 52
- Butterfly Gardens, 19
- Cabinas Christina, 54
- Cabinas El Bosque, 54
- Cabinas el Colibri, 53
- Cabinas el Mirador, 64
- Cabinas Jimenez, 65
- Cabinas Pedro Miguel**, 61
- Cafe de Paris, 53
- Cahuita, 12, 79, 80
- Caño Island, 18
- Caño Negro, 75, 76
- Canopy zip lines, 3, 34
- Canopy" zip lines, 2, 18
- Canyon de la Vieja Lodge, 56
- Carara National Park, 4, 58
- Carate, 31, 64
- Caribbean Coast, 6, 18, 79
- Caribbean Lowlands**, 2, 4, 12, 76
- Carrillo Club, 53
- Cartago, 3, 7, 11, 42, 43, 45, 66
- Casa Camarona, 80
- Casa Mariposa, 69
- Casa Romantica, 53
- Casado, 25
- central market, 40
- Central Market, 40
- Central Pacific Coast**, 2, 4, 11, 58
- Central Valley, 2, 3, 7, 10, 20, 23, 24, 34, 39, 44, 46, 47, 58, 76
- Centro Turistico Samoa del Sur, 65
- Cerro de la Muerte, 4, 66, 67
- Cerro Lodge, 59

Chayote, 25  
 Chicharrones, 26  
 Chinese restaurants, 27  
 Chiquita banana tour, 34  
 Chirripo, 4, 12, 68, 69  
 Cilantro or Culantro, 25  
 Civil War, 8  
 Cloudbridge Reserve, 69  
 Cocos Island, 18  
 coffee, 8, 9, 10, 13, 25, 26, 33, 34, 38, 40,  
     43, 44, 66, 67  
 Coffee and Banana Tours, 3, 34  
 Columbus, 7  
 Corcovado National Park, 63, 64  
 Cosmetic surgery, 2, 20  
 Costa Rica Expeditions, 33  
 Costa Rica Gateway, 34  
 Costa Rica Tours, 33, 34  
 Costa Rican-North American Cultural  
     Center, 86  
 dancing to Latin music, 47  
 dental, 2, 14, 20  
 Diving, 2, 3, 18, 35, 49  
 Diving and snorkeling, 2, 18  
 Dominical, 4, 11, 19, 61, 62  
 Don Jon's, 54  
 Don Pepe Figueres, 9  
 Drake Bay, 63  
 Eco Termals, 73  
 Ecocentro Danaus, 74  
 Edificio Metalico, 42  
 El Bosque Lodge, 71  
 El Descanso, 69  
 El Gavilan, 78  
 El Pueblo, 42, 47  
 El Tucan, 73  
**Entrance Requirements**, 20  
 Entre Dos Aguas Bed and Breakfast, 52  
 ex-pat organizations, 85  
 Ferries, 3, 32  
 Fishing, 2, 3, 18, 35, 76  
 Flor de Itabo, 50  
 Fraijanes, 45  
 Frank's Place, 54  
 Frijoles Molidos, 25  
 Gabriel Alberto Peralta, 20  
 Gallo Pinto, 24  
 Gold Museum, 40  
 Golfito, 4, 31, 32, 65  
 Golfito Wildlife Refuge, 65  
 Gone Birding Tours, 34  
 Grecia, 45, 46  
 Greenway Nature Tours, 34  
 Guanacaste, 2, 3, 4, 10, 11, 17, 21, 48,  
     49, 50, 54, 55, 56, 57, 62  
 Guayabo National Monument, 43  
 Hacienda Baru, 62  
 Hacienda Guachipelin, 56  
 Hacienda los Inocentes, 57  
 Hacienda Pozo Azul, 78  
 Hanging Bridges of Arenal, 74  
 Health Escapes, 20  
 Heliconias Lodge, 74  
 Heredia, 3, 21, 43, 44, 45, 88  
 Horseback riding, 3, 37  
 hot springs, 2, 3, 6, 12, 16, 34, 56, 69, 72,  
     73  
 Hotel Brasilito, 50  
 Hotel Buenos Aires, 54  
 Hotel Carara, 59  
 Hotel Costa Coral, 54  
 Hotel Domilocos, 62  
 Hotel Dunn Inn, 5, 38, 39  
 Hotel el Jardin, 54  
 Hotel el Pelicano, 69  
 Hotel Finca Valverde, 71  
 Hotel Golfo Azul, 65  
 Hotel Jinetes de Osa, 63  
 Hotel la Aurora, 54  
 Hotel la Cascada, 54  
 Hotel la Plazuela, 57  
**Hotel las Tres Banderas**, 61  
 Hotel Los Volcanes, 46  
 Hotel Magellan Inn, 79  
 Hotel Mamiri, 51  
 Hotel Mar de Luz, 60  
**Hotel Mono Azul**, 61  
 Hotel Pochote Grande, 60  
 Hotel Roca Verde, 62  
 Hotel Sierra, 65  
 Hotel Villa Flores Bed and Breakfast, 50  
 immigration, 22

INBIO, 44  
 Infrastructure, 2, 14  
**Irazu volcano**, 42  
 Iyok Ami reserve, 67  
 Jaco, 4, 18, 24, 35, 36, 58, 59, 60  
 Juan Carlos Esquivel, 85  
 Juan Mora Fernandez., 8  
 Juan Santamaria, 8, 10, 20, 31  
 La Amistad International Park, 66  
 La Carolina Lodge, 75  
 La Choza del Manglar, 65  
 La Cruz, 21  
 La Fortuna, 6, 72, 74, 75  
 La Georgina, 67  
 La Isla del Coco, 18, 35  
 La Paz waterfall, 45  
 La Paz Waterfall Gardens, 45  
 La Selva biological station, 77  
 La Virgen, 42  
 Laguna del Lagarto Lodge, 78  
 Las Baulas Marine National Park, 51  
 Leatherback Turtles, 51  
 Liberia, 20, 21, 31, 48, 49, 54, 56, 57, 70  
 Limon, 7, 12, 76, 79  
 Los Chorros, 46  
 Los Santos, 66  
 Luna Lodge, 64  
 Manuel Antonio National Park, 4, 60  
 Manzanillo, 79, 80, 81  
 Maquenque Ecolodge, 78  
 medical tourist, 20  
 Medicine, 2, 14  
 Melico Salazar Theater, 41  
 Monte de la Cruz Park, 44  
 Monte Real Hotel, 73  
**Monteverde**, 2, 4, 12, 24, 69, 70, 71, 72  
 Montezuma, 53, 54  
 Mountain Bike Tours, 3, 37  
 Musmanni, 27, 32  
 Mystic Dive Center, 62  
 National Museum, 33, 41, 63  
 National parks, 16  
 National Parks, 4, 33, 56  
 Nature Air, 31  
**Nicoya Peninsula**, 2, 3, 10, 32, 48, 52, 53  
 Nido del Colibri Bed and Breakfast, 73  
 Nochebuena restaurant, 43  
 Observatory Lodge, 72, 73, 74  
 Ojo de Agua swimming pools, 45  
 Olla de carne, 25  
 Orosi, 43  
 Osa Adventure, 64  
 Osa Peninsula, 4, 11, 17, 31, 62, 63  
 Oscar Arias, 9  
 Pablos Matamoros Arosemana, 85  
 Palmar Norte, 62  
 Parque Central, 41  
 Parque de la Merced, 41  
 Parque Morazon, 41  
 Parque Reptilandia, 19  
 Paso Canoas, 21  
 Peralta Mantilla Plastic Surgery Clinic, 20  
 Picadillo, 25  
 Pirate Cove, 64  
 Platanos, 25  
 Playa Zancudo, 65  
 Plaza de la Cultura, 33, 40, 41  
**Poas Volcano**, 45  
 Posada el Encuentro Lodge, 56  
 Puerto Jimenez, 32, 64, 65  
 Puerto Viejo de Talamanca, 12, 76, 79, 80  
 Pulperias, 28  
 Punta Uva Dive Center, 80  
 Punta Uvita, 62  
 Puntarenas, 11, 17, 32, 36, 48, 53, 58  
 Quepos, 4, 24, 58, 60, 61  
 Quetzal's Paradise, 66  
 Rafael Angel Calderon, 8  
**Rafiki Safari Lodge**, 61  
 Rafting, 2, 18, 56  
 Rancho Curabande Lodge, 56  
 Rancho Nany, 50  
 Rara Avis, 77  
 Renting a vehicle, 29  
 Resplendent Quetzal, 12, 67  
 Rico Realty, 85  
**Rincon de la Vieja**, 4, 54, 56, 57  
 Rio Celeste, 75  
 Rio Celeste Lodge, 75

Rio Grande de Tarcoles, 36  
 Roasted chicken restaurants, 27  
 Rosenstock Lieberman Clinic, 20  
 Safety and Crime, 2, 14  
 San Gerardo de Dota, 67  
 San Isidro, 9, 20, 61, 66, 68  
**San Jose**, 2, 3, 5, 6, 10, 13, 20, 21, 28,  
 30, 31, 32, 33, 35, 38, 39, 40, 42, 43,  
 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 52, 58, 59, 61, 63,  
 66, 70, 76  
 Sansa, 31  
 Santa Elena, 70, 71, 72  
 Santa Rosa, 4, 56, 57  
 Sarapiquí, 4, 12, 32, 76, 77, 78  
 Sarchi, 45, 46  
 sea turtles, 16, 17, 18, 35, 79  
 Selva Verde, 78  
 Serpentariums, 2, 19  
 Sia Tami Lodge, 80  
 Sierpe, 63  
 Simbiosis Spa, 56  
 Sixaola-Guabito, 21  
**Southern Pacific**, 2, 4, 11, 61  
 Springs Thermal Waters, 73  
 Spyrogyra Butterfly Garden, 42  
 Stability, 2, 14  
 Stella's Bakery, 71  
 Suizo Loco Lodge, 79  
 Surfing, 2, 18  
 Tabacon Hot Springs Resort and Spa, 72  
**Talamancan Mountains**, 2, 4, 11, 65  
 Tapanti National Park., 43  
 Teodoro Picado, 8  
 Termales del Bosque (Ciudad Quesada),  
 74  
 Termales del Bosque., 73  
 The Birding Club of Costa Rica, 86  
 The Casa Buenavista Bed and Breakfast,  
 53  
 The Casa de las Tias Bed and Breakfast,  
 46  
 The Conversa Learning Park, 82  
 The CPI Spanish Immersion School, 82  
 The CRLA school, 82  
 The Crocodile Tour, 3, 36  
 The Little Theatre Group, 86  
 The New Comers Club of Costa Rica, 86  
 The Okeanos Aggressor, 18  
 The Quetzal Inn, 71  
 The Undersea Hunter, 18  
 The Villa Pacande, 46  
 The Women's Club of Costa Rica, 86  
 The Yahoo forum "Costa Rica living",  
 86  
 three types of residency, 84  
 Tico Adventure Lodge, 52  
 Tilajari Hotel Resort, 74  
 Tortuguero, 4, 12, 17, 31, 32, 78, 79  
 Totem, 81  
 Toucanet Lodge, 66  
 Trogon Lodge, 67  
 Tropical Bungee tour company, 46  
 Tropix bar, 39  
 Turrialba, 3, 18, 42, 43  
**Valle de El General**, 4, 11, 65  
 Vegetarian Restaurants, 28  
 Villa Amarilla, 51  
 Villa del Sol Bed and Breakfast, 50  
 Villa Mango Bed and Breakfast, 53  
 Villas Colibri, 46  
 Villas del Caribe, 80  
 Villas Macondo, 51  
 Vishnu, 28  
 Volcan Barva, 44  
 Volcanoes, 2, 16  
 William Walker, 8, 41, 56  
 Zamora Estate, 46  
 Zarcero, 45, 46