

Destination Costa Rica

Costa Rica is sometimes referred to as the Switzerland of Central America because of its comfortable lifestyle, peaceful democracy and overwhelming natural beauty. But is this merely the depiction on a postcard or does it have relevance for today's Tico (Costa Rican)?

Early in the 20th century, this view could rightly be called an optimistic caricature. At best, Costa Rica was an occasional democracy with widespread poverty and no discernible environmental protection policy. In the second half of the century, however, sustained economic growth created a viable middle class, a generous social welfare state and one of the world's most progressive environmental movements.

To put things in perspective, consider the fact that prior to 1950, half of the country struggled with grinding poverty, and living beyond the age of 50 was an achievement in itself. Today, less than one in five Ticos lives below the poverty line and life expectancy is on a par with the US.

As recently as 1980, Ticos lived on family farms, shopped at the neighborhood *pulperia* (corner grocery store), listened to state radio and had never visited a shopping mall. Today, urban sprawl is transforming the Central Valley, shopping at supermarkets is a matter of course, satellite TV is the norm and American-style shopping malls are all the rage.

Of course, with economic empowerment comes tremendous social change. More women have entered the workforce though opportunities in the tourist and service sectors. The divorce rate has increased and family size has shrunk. More Ticos are entering higher education, and they are doing so in Costa Rica. Migrant laborers from Nicaragua work the coffee plantations, while Tico tenants seek better jobs in the city.

Given the rise in quality of life throughout the country, Ticos are generally self-content and passive about politics. But underneath the easygoing veneer is discernable pride and support for their unarmed democracy.

As stated by recently re-elected President Oscar Arias in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, 'we seek peace and democracy together, indivisible, an end to the shedding of human blood, which is inseparable from an end to the suppression of human rights.' A unique point of view – not only in Central America, but in the whole of the world.

Lifestyle and democracy aside, Costa Rica remains mind-bendingly beautiful. Although there are certainly other countries in the world that enjoy divinely inspired natural landscapes, Costa Rica boasts a higher biodiversity than both Europe and the US combined.

In the past, the Costa Rican government viewed the rain forest as a valuable source of timber, arable land and grazing pastures. However, following a near devastating economic collapse in the 1970s, Costa Rica emerged as a global pioneer in sustainable development, providing a model in which economic and environmental interests are complementary.

But it is not without some contention. Conservation and ecotourism are administered by two powerful bureaucracies – the Ministry of Environment and Energy (Minae) and the Costa Rica Tourism Board (ICT) – who frequently clash. The San José-based eco-elite often seem removed from the concerns of local residents, who still use the land to survive. In addition, the lure of paradise has attracted foreign capital, which inflates property values and displaces the local populace.

FAST FACTS

Population: four million
(USA: 300 million)

Life expectancy at birth:
78 years (USA: 78 years)

Adult literacy: 96%
(USA: 99%)

Population living below
the poverty line: 18%
(USA: 12%)

Population using the
internet: 29% (USA: 69%)

Annual carbon dioxide
emissions per person: 1.6
tons (USA: 20.2 tons)

Annual coffee consumption
per person: 3.9kg
(USA: 4.2kg)

Passenger cars per 1000
people: 103 (USA: 478)

Protected land: 27%
(USA: 16%)

Number of species of
birds: 850+ (USA: 500+)

Furthermore, the success of the green revolution has created a new concern, namely the need for sustainable tourism (see p417). The increasing number of visitors to Costa Rica has led to more hotels, more transportation and more infrastructure upgrades. In addition, the tourist-driven encroachment on the rain forest inevitably places stress on the fragile ecosystem that people are flocking to see.

Of course, one of the many reasons why Costa Rica remains such a fascinating tourist destination is that it is very much unique in Latin America. Although it is certainly not without its problems, Costa Rica is one of the few places in the region where environmental issues are given a proper forum for discussion, as opposed to mere lip service.

Getting Started

Costa Rica is the most user-friendly country in Central America. Most of the tourist hotspots are well connected by cheap buses, accommodations is plentiful and decent eateries are thick on the ground in nearly every corner of the country. Unlike some other parts of the region, dining without fear for your stomach, meeting and engaging locals, and accessing the internet are all things that can be taken for granted.

Predeparture planning will usually make your trip a bit smoother, but on the whole it's unnecessary unless you're on a tight timetable, and it's usually more enjoyable to give into the idea of adventure travel. Indeed, Costa Rica has something for everyone, especially if you are an impulsive traveler seeking an adrenaline rush. Of course, if you prefer to spend some quality time with a good book on a sun-drenched beach, Costa Rica has quite a few of those, too.

For shoestringers, transport around the country is plentiful – local buses can carry you to just about every nook and cranny, and boats will pick up where buses leave off. For the more discriminating or time-pressed travelers, minivans with air-con, domestic flights and charters can reach even the most remote corners. Accommodations also range from bargain-basement cabins, campsites and hammock hotels, all the way up to 1st-class resorts loaded with every conceivable luxury.

Lodging is abundant throughout Costa Rica, and it's usually easy to find someplace to stay when you arrive in town. The exceptions to this rule are the weeks between Christmas and New Year's Day, and before and during *Semana Santa* (the week preceding Easter Sunday). It is also a good idea to book accommodations ahead of time during the school vacation in January and February.

Note that because Costa Rica has a high standard of living, prices here tend to be a good deal higher than those of other Central and Latin American nations. However, although your dollar may not stretch as far here as in neighboring countries, you can expect an extremely high quality of goods and services throughout Costa Rica.

WHEN TO GO

Generally, the best time to visit Costa Rica is the dry season from December through April, which locals refer to as *verano* (summer). Dry season does not mean it does not rain – it just rains less (so perhaps should be called the 'drier season'). Costa Rican schools are closed from December to February; beach towns are busy during this period, especially on weekends. Lodgings during *Semana Santa* are usually booked months ahead.

In May begins the rainy season, or *invierno* (winter) as it's known locally. The tourism ministry has come up with the more attractive denomination of 'green season.' The early months of the rainy season are actually a wonderful time to travel to Costa Rica: you can avoid the tourist bustle and lodging is slightly cheaper. During this time, however, rivers start to swell and dirt roads get muddy, making travel more challenging. Some more remote roads may not be accessible to public transportation, so always ask locally before setting out. Bring your umbrella and a little patience.

Because of the number of North American and European tourists, some Costa Rican towns experience a mini-high season in June and July, during the northern summer holidays. Expect to pay high-season prices in some towns at this time.

See the Directory for more information on climate (p529) and festivals (p532).

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- checking the latest visa situation (p537) and government travel advisories (p530)
- insect repellent containing DEET; and if you're planning large-scale jungle adventures (or staying in budget lodging), a mosquito net
- learning at least a few basic phrases in Spanish
- Pepto-Bismol or an antidiarrheal, in case you get a bad dose of the runs
- sunblock and a hat, so you don't get cooked by the tropical sun
- clothes that you don't mind getting absolutely filthy or wet
- a swimsuit and a beach towel
- a poncho for rainy days and wet boat trips
- a pair of river sandals or reef-walkers and sturdy jungle boots
- an alarm clock for catching early-morning buses
- a waterproof, windproof jacket and warm layers for highland hiking and camping
- a flashlight (torch)
- binoculars and a field guide
- miscellaneous necessities: umbrella, padlock, matches, pocketknife
- an appetite for fresh fruit
- a thirst for cold lager
- your sense of adventure.

For surfers, the travel seasons vary slightly. For the most part, the Pacific coast sees increased swells and bigger, faster waves during the rainy season, starting in late June and peaking in the worst rainy months of September and October. The Caribbean side, however, has better waves from November through May. Some breaks are consistent year-round.

Wildlife enthusiasts may wish to plan their trip around the seasons of the critters. Turtle season on the Caribbean coast is from late February to October, with the peak season for leatherbacks in April and May, and for green turtles in August and September. On the Pacific coast, the season for leatherbacks is from October to March.

Birders will be overwhelmed by feathered friends any time of year, but the best season to spot the resplendent quetzal is between November and April. Spring (March through May) and autumn (September through November) are good times to watch the migratory flocks.

Fishing, also, is good year-round, but you might choose your season if you have your heart set on a specific fish. Anglers head to the Caribbean coast between January and May in search of tarpon, while the autumn (September through November) is the season for snook. On the Pacific coast and in the Golfo Dulce, the best time to snag that sailfish is between November and May.

COSTS & MONEY

Travel costs are significantly higher here than in most Central American countries, but cheaper than in the USA or Europe. And if you're arriving from inexpensive Central American nations, such as Nicaragua, get ready to bust that wallet wide open.

Prices in Costa Rica are frequently listed in US dollars, especially at up-market hotels and restaurants, where you can expect to pay international

HOW MUCH?

4WD rental for one week:
US\$250-400

Zip-line adventure
through the canopy:
US\$40

Admission to Parque
Nacional Manuel Antonio:
US\$7

Taxi from the interna-
tional airport into central
San José: US\$15

Second-hand longboard
from a surf shop:
US\$100-250

prices. Most types of tours are charged in US dollars. In fact, US dollars are widely accepted, but the standard unit of currency is still the colón.

Shoestring travelers can survive on US\$25 to US\$35 a day, covering just the basics of food, lodging and public transportation. The cheapest hotels start at about US\$7 to US\$15 per person for a bed, four walls and shared bathroom. Better rooms with private bathroom start at roughly US\$15 to US\$20 per person, depending on the area. It is possible to eat cheaply at the many *sodas* (lunch counters), where you can fill up on tasty *casados*, which are set meals, for about US\$2 to US\$3.

Midrange budgeters can travel comfortably for anywhere from US\$50 to US\$100 per day. Hotels in this category offer very good value, and double rooms come with comfortable beds, private bathroom, hot water (most of the time) and even breakfast, for US\$20 to US\$80 per night. Many hotels in this price range also have shared or private kitchenettes, which allows travelers the opportunity to cook – this is a great option for families. A variety of restaurants cater to midrange travelers, offering meals that range from US\$5 to US\$10.

Top-end visitors can find a good selection of restaurants and hotels in the touristy towns and within some of the major resorts. Luxurious beachside lodges and boutique hotels can cost from US\$80 up, and offer truly world-class meals that begin at around US\$15.

Lodging prices are generally higher in the dry season (December to April), and highest during holiday periods (between Christmas and New Year and during *Semana Santa*). During slower seasons, most hotels are eager for your business, so you can try to negotiate a lower rate. Some of the more popular tourist areas (Monteverde, Jacó, Manuel Antonio and many of the beaches on the *Península de Nicoya*) are also more expensive than the rest of the country.

TRAVELING RESPONSIBLY

Since our inception in 1973, Lonely Planet has encouraged its readers to tread lightly, travel responsibly and enjoy the magic independent travel affords. International travel is growing at a jaw-dropping rate, and we still firmly believe in the benefits it can bring – but, as always, we encourage you to consider the impact your visit will have on both the global environment and the local economies, cultures and ecosystems.

Sustainable tourism does not have a clear and straight-forward definition, though at its purest form it refers to striking the ideal balance between the traveler and their surrounding environment. To be a bit more specific, sustainable tourism aims to minimize the impact of the traveler on the local ecosystem and culture while simultaneously improving the local economy and generating revenue to protect the environment.

Although in theory this should be extremely easy to implement, the unfortunate reality is that competing interests and so-called ‘progress’ often get in the way of sound fiscal planning and responsible conservation. However, the beauty of sustainable tourism is that it starts with the individual, which means that every one of us can play our own small part in advancing these ideas.

In regard to the physical environment, travelers can aim to minimize negative environmental impacts, and to make positive contributions to the area, such as through volunteer work in conservation (see p538). Individual travelers have the power to help protect and conserve local resources.

In regard to the cultural environment, travelers can aim to respect local traditions, get involved with local events, and foster authentic interactions

TOP 10



For a small country, Costa Rica is jam-packed with sights and attractions. Hopefully the following lists will inspire you to seek out all that this beautiful country can offer.

IDYLIC SUNSET SITES

Grab a magic moment in Costa Rica while you enjoy the last rays of the day:

- 1 Taking in the view from **Crestones Base Lodge** (p381) on Cerro Chirripó.
- 2 Looking out from **Cabinas El Mirador Lodge** (p403) in Bahía Drake.
- 3 Viewing the fiery Volcán Arenal from **El Castillo** (p244).
- 4 Sailing on the deep blue Pacific from **Tamarindo** (p270).
- 5 Sipping an ice-cold *cerveza* (beer) at **La Taberna** (p464) in Tortuguero.
- 6 Munching at **Ronny's Place** (p351), high up on the cliffs in Manuel Antonio.
- 7 Hiking at twilight in **Bosque Eterno de los Niños** (p176) in Monteverde.
- 8 Reggae-listening at **Johnny's Place** (p486) in Puerto Viejo de Talamanca.
- 9 Sitting on the dock in the bay at the **Banana Bay Marina** (p433) in Golfito.
- 10 Relaxing on colonial steps at **Plaza de la Democracia** (p90) in San José.

WORST ROADS

Conquer the dishevelled roads to uncover hidden gems and secluded spots:

- 1 Oldie, but goodie – the road from **Tilarán to Monteverde**.
- 2 The punisher – **Puerto Jiménez to Carate**.
- 3 Dude, where's the transmission? – bumping and grinding to the waves at **Playa Naranjo**.
- 4 A river runs through it – crossing the Río Ora between **Playa Carrillo and Islita**.
- 5 You call this a road? – **Golfito to Pavones**.
- 6 Bone-cruncher – **Buenos Aires to Reserva Biológica Dúrika**.
- 7 Car-nivore – the stretch between **Tamarindo and Avellanas** gobbles up vehicles like candy.
- 8 Road less traveled – the steep climb up to **Altamira and La Amistad**.
- 9 Keep on truckin' – swerving with the big rigs on the Interamericana between **Cañas and Liberia**.
- 10 Lake defect – dodging huge potholes on the road around **Laguna de Arenal**.

BEST BEACHES

With two coastlines fringed with sun-kissed beaches, Costa Rica is a beach-lover's paradise:

- 1 **Manzanillo** (p491) The Caribbean coast's most scenic stretch of sand.
- 2 **Playas San Miguel and Coyote** (p298) Abandoned beaches, backed by rugged wilderness.
- 3 **Playa Conchal** (p267) Crushed shells and turquoise water.
- 4 **Playa Grande** (p267) Sweeping blonde sand backed by mangroves, great surf.
- 5 **Playa Matapalo** (p358) Surfing the waves, hiking to waterfalls.
- 6 **Playa Montezuma** (p304) Empty white sands, rocky coves and killer sunrises.
- 7 **Playa Mal País** (p310) Huge, crashing surf for kilometers in each direction.
- 8 **Playa Negra** (p277) Dark sands and crystal clear waters.
- 9 **Playa San Josecito** (p436) Scarlet macaws roosting in the almond trees overhead.
- 10 **Playa Sámara** (p293) A destination for sophisticated beach goers and fun-loving families.

and understanding between them and their hosts. Ideally, tourism should be a two-way street whereby travelers learn just as much from locals as locals do from travelers.

Finally, travelers can ensure that their presence results in financial benefits for the host community and operates in line with the principles of fair trade. Always be aware of the power of your money, especially since many local economies throughout Costa Rica (and the world) have been adversely affected by the rise in tourism.

Common sense combined with the basic principles of sustainable travel will ensure that destinations remain desirable for both the traveler and the local. Regardless of whether you're sitting on a beach, roaming the streets, hiking through the jungle or sitting in a bar, you have the power to affect change in a positive way.

Don't be afraid to give suggestions to other travelers and to listen to theirs as well – the best advice always comes from your peers. Take only pictures. Leave only footprints. Kill only time.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

While you're in the midst of predeparture planning, check out the following recommended titles to start developing your sense of Costa Rica.

- *A Naturalist in Costa Rica* (Dr Skutch). An icon among birders, Skutch weaves his philosophies into his beautiful descriptions of flora and fauna in this enchanting memoir and natural history guide.
- *Around the Edge* (Peter Ford). A story of the author's travels along the Caribbean coast from Belize to Panama, on foot and by boat.
- *Green Dreams: Travels in Central America* (Stephen Benz). An astute analysis that questions the impact visitors are having on the region and its people.
- *Green Phoenix* (William Allen). An absorbing and inspiring account of the author's efforts, alongside American and Costa Rican scientists and activists, to conserve and restore the rain forest in Guanacaste.
- *Ninety-Nine Days to Panama* (John and Harriet Halkyard). A retired couple's detailed and entertaining account of driving an RV (complete with pet dog Brindle) from Texas to Panama.
- *So Far from God: A Journey to Central America* (Patrick Marnham). The winner of the 1985 Thomas Cook Travel Book Award gives an insightful and amusing account of a leisurely meander from Texas to Panama.
- *Traveler's Tales Central America* (eds Larry Habegger and Natanya Pearlman). A collection of striking travel essays on the region from renowned writers such as Paul Theroux and Tim Cahill.
- *Walk These Stones* (Leslie Hawthorne Klingler). This Mennonite service worker writes about her experiences living, working, praying and sharing in the small village of Cuatro Cruces.

INTERNET RESOURCES

CIA Factbook (www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html) An excellent overview of Costa Rica's political, economic and environmental standing.

Costa Rica Guide (www.costa-rica-guide.com) Nicely organized website with detailed maps and travel information on each region.

Costa Rica Link (www.1costaricalink.com) An online directory that provides a great deal of information on transportation, hotels, activities and more.

Costa Rica Tourism Board (www.visitcostarica.com) The official website of the Costa Rica Tourism Board (known as the ICT) is a great introduction to the country. You can research your trip, and organize accommodations, tours and car rental from this site.

Guías Costa Rica (www.guiascostarica.com) Links that connect you with everything you'd ever need to know – from entertainment to health to government websites.

Lanic (<http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/ca/cr>) An exceptional collection of links to the websites (mostly in Spanish) of many Costa Rican organizations, from the University of Texas.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Provides information on travel in Costa Rica, links to accommodations and traveling tips from the all-important Thorn Tree bulletin board.

Tico Times (www.ticotimes.net) The online edition of Costa Rica's excellent English-language weekly newspaper.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

THE BEST OF COSTA RICA

Two Weeks to One Month/Northwestern Costa Rica & Península de Nicoya

This route takes travelers by bubbling volcanoes, hot springs and tranquil cloud forests before hitting the sun-kissed beaches of the Nicoya.

From **San José** (p78), head north to **La Fortuna** (p230), where you can hike through forest on the flanks of **Volcán Arenal** (p241) then soak in hot springs. Come down from the mountain and hop on the jeep-boat-jeep service across Laguna de Arenal to **Monteverde** (p170) and search for the elusive quetzal at **Reserva Biológica Bosque Nuboso Monteverde** (p190).

For a change of scene, head west to the biggest party town in the Nicoya, **Playa Tamarindo** (p270), and enjoy the excellent surf in this brash town. Nature buffs will not want to miss the nesting leatherback turtles at **Playa Grande** (p267), while hardcore surfers should head straight south along a dismal dirt road to **Playas Avellanas** and **Negra** (p277).

Continuing south, don't miss the stunning beaches and cosmopolitan cuisine at **Playa Sámara** (p293) and legendary swells at **Mal País** and **Playa Santa Teresa** (p310). Wind down your trip at laidback **Montezuma** (p304) and head back to San José via **Jacó** (p328) by jet boat and bus.

For a taste of all that Costa Rica has to offer, this classic route will take you into the mountains and cloud forests of the interior before sweeping you down into the Península de Nicoya.



PACIFIC COASTAL EXPLORER **One to Two Weeks/Central Pacific Coast**

For days on end of sun, surf and sand, head south along the central Pacific coast for back-to-back beach towns dedicated to the pursuit of hedonism.

Kick things off in the resort town of **Jacó** (p328), a heavily Americanized gringo enclave of fine dining, teeming bars and raging nightlife. In case you need a reminder that you're still in Costa Rica, backtrack a bit north up the coast to **Parque Nacional Carara** (p323), home to large populations of enchanting scarlet macaws.

Heading south along the coast, your next stop is the port town of **Quepos** (p341), which serves as a convenient base for the country's most popular national park, **Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio** (p353). Here, the rain forest sweeps down to meet the sea, providing refuge for rare animals, including the endangered Central American squirrel monkey.

Continue on south to **Hacienda Barú National Wildlife Refuge** (p359), where you can clamber on a canopy platform and sloth-spot in the trees. If you haven't had enough of the postcard-perfect Pacific coast, keep heading south to **Dominical** (p359) to catch some more waves, or to tiny and tranquil **Uvita** (p363) to escape the tourist crowds.

From Uvita, you can either continue south to the far-flung **Península de Osa** (p394), or head back to **San José** (p78) en route to the **Caribbean coast** (p444).



This excursion continues where the Best of Costa Rica route ends, and winds through the beaches and rain forests of the central Pacific region.

CARIBBEAN COASTAL EXPLORER **One to Two Weeks/Caribbean Coast**

Spanish gives way to English, and Latin beats change to Caribbean rhythms as you begin to explore the ‘other Costa Rica.’

Hop on the first eastbound bus out of **San José** (p78) and get off at **Cahuita** (p468), capital of Afro-Caribbean culture and gateway to **Parque Nacional Cahuita** (p475). Stick around and get your fill of this mellow little village before moving on to **Puerto Viejo de Talamanca** (p477), the Caribbean’s center for nightlife, cuisine and all-round positive vibes.

From Puerto Viejo, rent a good old-fashioned pushbike and ride to **Manzanillo** (p490), from where you can snorkel, kayak and hike in the **Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Gandoca-Manzanillo** (p491).

For the adventurous at heart, head north to grab a boat from **Moin** (p456) and travel the canal-lined coast to the village of **Tortuguero** (p461), where you can watch nesting green and leatherback turtles. Of course, the real reason you’re here is to arrange a canoe trip through the mangrove-lined canals of **Parque Nacional Tortuguero** (p458), Costa Rica’s mini-Amazon.

After spotting your fill of wildlife amidst seemingly endless watery passages, head back to San José via water taxi and bus through **Cariari** (p448) and **Guápiles** (p447).

The Caribbean coast is a world onto its own, and provides a striking and memorable contrast to time spent elsewhere in the country.



ROADS LESS TRAVELED

TREKKING ACROSS OSA **One to Two Weeks/Península de Osa & Golfo Dulce**

Home to Costa Rica's most pristine nature, the Osa peninsula is an undeniable draw for anyone wanting some rugged wilderness exploration.

Either head down the Pacific coast or fly into **Puerto Jiménez** (p408), which serves as the gateway to Osa. Here, you can spend a day or so kayaking around the mangroves or otherwise soaking up the charm of this tiny town.

Next, head north to **La Palma** (p407), from where you can visit the **Reserva Indígena Guaymí** (p407) and observe firsthand the traditional lifestyle of one of Costa Rica's indigenous groups.

Next, head to **Los Patos ranger station** (p425), which will be the starting point for a trek across the spectacular **Parque Nacional Corcovado** (p416).

The first day of the trek lands you at **Sirena ranger station** (p416), one of the country's best wildlife-watching spots, especially for squirrel monkeys and Baird's tapirs. It's worth spending an extra day or so exploring the trails around this area without a pack on your back.

Finally, the last day of the hike brings you to **La Leona ranger station** (p425). In the nearby village of **Carate** (p415), catch the colectivo (small bus or shared taxi) toward Puerto Jiménez and ask to be dropped at **Cabo Matapalo** (p413), where you can chill out for as long as you like, enjoying some of the country's most beautiful beaches.



One of the highlights of any trip to Costa Rica is time spent trekking through the dense jungles of the Osa peninsula, which are positively teeming with wildlife.

RIDING RÍO SAN JUAN & SARAPIQUÍ

One to Two Weeks/Northern Lowlands & Caribbean Coast

Travel the river route through some of Costa Rica's most remote regions in the sparsely populated northern lowlands and Caribbean coast.

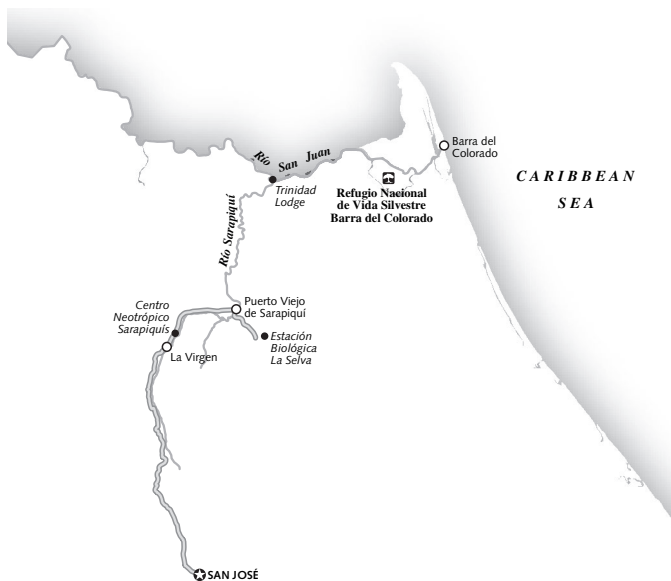
From **San José** (p78), bus to the tiny town of **La Virgen** (p511), a rafting and kayaking mecca where you can take a ride on the Río Sarapiquí and spend the night at the luxurious **Centro Neotrópico Sarapiquí** (p514).

As soon as you've gotten your bearings, follow the Río Sarapiquí on the bus to **Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí** (p516), where you can wander through banana plantations, spot wildlife and mingle with busy scientists at the **Estación Biológica La Selva** (p519).

Of course, don't wait too long to leave terra firma and grab the morning boat up the Río Sarapiquí to **Trinidad Lodge** (p517), on the south bank of the Río San Juan. Stay on a working ranch, ride horses and go birding before setting out, again by boat, along the Río San Juan, with your eye to the Caribbean coast.

This river (Nicaraguan territory) offers an incredible ride, which will take you through wildlife hotspots, ranches, forest, old war zones (from when Contras inhabited the area) and the remote **Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Barra del Colorado** (p465) to the village of **Barra del Colorado** (p465) and its loose assortment of lodges, where you can go sportfishing, bird-watching and croc hunting (with binoculars, not guns).

You'll have to depend upon tides, weather and independent boatworkers, but if you work it out, you'll see more wildlife and incredible scenery than you have ever imagined.



HIKING IN THE TALAMANCAS **Two to Three Weeks/Southern Costa Rica**

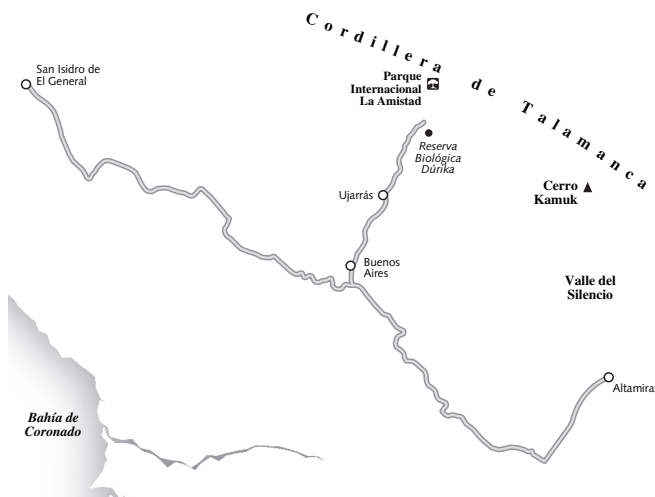
Costa Rica's most unexplored mountainous area is home to two spectacular hikes, which can be done separately or bundled together if you've got the time.

Gear-up in **San Isidro de El General** (p374) before heading southeast through pineapple plantations to the small agricultural town of **Buenos Aires** (p381). Arrangements can be made here for transport via dirt road to the wonderfully remote **Reserva Biológica Dúrika** (p382), a self-sustaining community nestled in the Cordillera de Talamanca.

From this point, hire a local guide and trek through **Parque Internacional La Amistad** (p389), one of Costa Rica's last true wilderness areas. You can also pay a visit to the neighboring indigenous community of **Ujarrás** (p382).

If you haven't had your fill of nature yet, then head from Buenos Aires to **Altamira** (p390), where you'll find the headquarters for Parque Internacional La Amistad. From here you can take the 20km guided trek through **Valle del Silencio** (p391), one of the most isolated and remote areas in all of Costa Rica, ending up at a small refuge at the base of the **Cerro Kamuk** (p391).

From here, make the return trip through Altamira and back to the rowdy roads near the Interamericana.



The isolated Cordillera de Talamanca is one of the most remote areas in the country and home to indigenous communities and incredible vistas.

TAILORED TRIPS

SURFING SAFARI

Costa Rican shores have been attracting surfers since *Endless Summer II* profiled some of the country's most appealing breaks.

Playa Tamarindo (p270) serves as a good base for several tasty surfing sites. You can start with a boat trip to the granddaddies of all surf breaks, Witch's Rock and Ollie's Point in the **Parque Nacional Santa Rosa** (p218).

Next, hit the isolated beaches at **Playas Avellanas** and **Negra** (p277), whose famous waves were featured in the movie. Down the coast, **Playa Guiones** (p288) is cooking all year long, and from there it's just a hop, skip and long jump to the legendary **Mal País** (p310).

The next big stop is **Jacó** (p328) and **Playa Hermosa** (p339) on the central Pacific coast, offering consistent waves, but keep moving south for good breaks at **Matapalo** (p358) and **Dominical** (p359).

Afterwards, hightail it way south to **Cabo Matapalo** (p413) on the Península de Osa, before skipping back to the mainland for one of the continent's longest left-hand breaks at **Pavones** (p439).

And don't forget the Caribbean. Catch a boat to the uninhabited **Isla Uvita** (p455) off the coast of Puerto Limón or frolic in the waves on the endless Playa Negra north of **Cahuita** (p468). Further south the famous Salsa Brava at **Puerto Viejo de Talamanca** (p477) is for experts only, while Playa Cocles has consistent waves that service surfers of all skill levels.

RAFTING SAFARI

Experience the country's world-class rivers while soaking in the sight of pristine rain forests and wildlife on a 10-day safari.

From San José head east to **Río Pacuare** (p159) for two days of enchanted Class IV white water. Move on to the nearby Pascua section of the **Río Reventazón** (p159) for 24km of heart-pumping Class IV+. Travel west to the central Pacific coast and spend a day of gentler rafting, taking in the beach-fringed rain forest of **Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio** (p353), home to more than 350 species of birds. Afterwards, suit-up for a quick half-day down the challenging **Río Naranjo** (p347), close by.

Cap it all off with two days on the largely unexplored **Río Savegre** (p347), putting in on the remote, Class IV+ upper Río División, the main tributary of the Savegre. The next day will have you continuing downstream to the bridge take-out on the Costanera, the Pacific coastal highway leading north to San José.



On the Road



MATTHEW D FIRESTONE Coordinating Author

I've always thought there was something surreal about suspension bridges spanning vast expanses of jungle. I guess it has something to do with my lifelong quest to be Indiana Jones. Sometimes I like to run across these kinds of bridges, pretending I'm being chased by angry savages. Then of course, I realize how stupid I look, and secretly hope that no one saw me.



GUYAN MITRA Rafting is certainly one of the coolest things you can do in Costa Rica. All I remember from our boat trip is a flurry of commands bellowed by our guide: Paddle! Get down! Faster! I ignored them all, clung to the boat and yelled like a poodle most of the way down.

WENDY YANAGIHARA After my traveling *compañero* practically veered off the road when he saw the waves at Ostional, we pulled over, he paddled out, I jotted notes, and *this* guy flipped across my towel. I walked him to the waterline and wished him long life as he was swept away.



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