

Costa Rica

Mention Costa Rica and people think paradise. The country's Disneylike cast of creatures – ranging from howler monkeys to toucans – are populous and relatively easy to spot. The waves are prime, the beauty is staggering and the sluggish pace seductive. A peaceful oasis in a tumultuous region, this tiny nation draws 1.5 million visitors every year.

What's on tap? The question is, what isn't? Active travelers can surf, hike, snorkel and spot wildlife for starters. The incredibly varied topography means you can cruise the cloud forest one day, climb a volcano the next, and finish passed out on a hot sandy beach. Adrenaline junkies have myriad ways to make mothers worry – among them zipping through canopy lines hundreds of meters long and riding the rough surf of the Pacific.

Of course, the frenzy to snatch a piece of Shangri La has its consequences: since the boom, tourism is more chic and less cheap; classic destinations are now crowded destinations; and local culture is often lost or cast aside. But while nature here suffers its blows, like everywhere, Costa Rica's fans – ranging from international ecologists to proud Ticos (Costa Ricans) – are vocal and vigilant.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 51,100 sq km
- **Budget** US\$35 to US\$50 per day
- **Capital** San José
- **Costs** Dorm bed US\$10, bottle of beer US\$1.50, three-hour bus ride US\$4
- **Country Code** ☎ 506
- **Languages** Spanish, English on the Caribbean coast
- **Money** US\$1 = ₡520 (colones), US dollars frequently accepted
- **Population** 4.5 million
- **Seasons** Dry (December to April), wet (May to November)
- **Time** GMT minus six hours ; no daylight saving time



TRAVEL HINTS

Hiking at first with a local guide will clue you into what to look for on independent hikes. The best cheap eats are *sodas* (lunch counters), offering fresh fare.

OVERLAND ROUTES

You can enter overland from Nicaragua (Peñas Blancas, Los Chiles) and Panama (Sixaola, Paso Canoas). Check visa requirements in advance.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Parque Nacional Tortuguero** (p555) Paddling a maze of canals with growling howlers, sloths, crocs, turtles and manatees.
- **Puerto Viejo de Talamanca** (p564) Grooving to the reggae beat and rugged surf of this Caribbean beach town.
- **Montezuma** (p592) Giving in to the seductive tranquility of this terminally chilled-out Pacific beach town.
- **Parque Nacional Chirripó** (p609) Scaling Costa Rica's highest peak (3820m), where the panorama yawns from the Atlantic to Pacific.
- **Monteverde** (p569) Stalking two-toed sloths and tarantulas in a night tour of the cloud forest.
- **Off the beaten track** (p613) Blazing a trail through the pristine rainforest of Parque Nacional Corcovado, pulsing and chattering with wildlife.

CURRENT EVENTS

A huge influx of expats, US retirees and foreign travelers has ignited real-estate frenzy alongside a focus on expensive goods and services geared toward this new market. While foreigners bring much-needed investment, they also drive up property prices and displace cash-strapped locals.

It's no wonder some Ticos bristle at the thought of being in Uncle Sam's pocket. This fear was the major impetus for the resistance met by the recently passed Central American Free Trade Agreement (Cafta). Its main proponent, former President Oscar Arias Sánchez, touted its economic benefits, which include increased access to US markets and thousands of new jobs. Critics argued, albeit unsuccessfully, that Costa Rica's small farmers and domestic industries would come out the losers, unable to compete with the anticipated flood of cheap US products.

What's interesting is that this economic and cultural alignment with the USA is unique in today's Central America. While most of Latin America has elected leftist, socialist governments in a turning away from the USA, Costa Rica has placed its bets on this strategic alliance. The 2010 presidential election, which was won by Arias' former Vice President, Laura Chinchilla, served as a popular referendum of the center-right National Liberation Party.

HISTORY

Lost Civilization

Costa Rica's rainforests have been inhabited for 10,000 years. The region long served as an intersection for America's native cultures.

About 500 years ago, on the eve of European discovery, as many as 400,000 people lived in today's Costa Rica.

The Central Valley hosted roughly 20 small tribes, organized into chiefdoms, with a *cacique* (chief) leading a hierarchical society that included shaman, warriors, workers and slaves. To the east, the fierce Caribs dominated the Atlantic coastal lowlands. Adept at seafaring, they provided a conduit of trade with the South American mainland. Concentrated tribes of indigenous people in the northwest tended cornfields and were connected to the great Meso-American cultures. Aztec religious practices and Maya jade and craftsmanship are in evidence on the Península de Nicoya, while Costa Rican quetzal feathers and golden trinkets have turned up in Mexico. The three chiefdoms found in the southwest showed the influence of native Andean cultures, including coca leaves, yucca and sweet potatoes.

Heirs of Columbus

On his fourth and final voyage to the New World in 1502, Christopher Columbus was forced to drop anchor near today's Puerto Limón after a hurricane damaged his ship. Waiting for repairs, Columbus ventured into the verdant terrain and exchanged gifts with welcoming natives. He returned from this encounter claiming to have seen 'more gold in two days than in four years in Spain.' Anxious to claim its bounty, Columbus petitioned the Spanish Crown to have himself appointed governor. However, by the time he returned to Seville, his royal patron Queen Isabella was on her deathbed, and King Ferdinand awarded the prize to a rival. Columbus never