



Central Pacific Coast

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Best Places to Eat

- » Agua Azul (p313)
- » Roadside ceviche stands, Costenara Sur (p322)
- » Soda Nanyoa (p327)
- » Cevicheria El Dorado (p307)
- » Citrus (p333)

Best Places to Stay

- » Perla de Pacifico (p279)
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- » Sonidos del Mar (p292)

Why Go?

Stretching from the rough-and-ready port of Puntarenas to the tiny town of Uvita, the central Pacific coast is home to both wet and dry tropical rainforests, sun-drenched sandy beaches and a healthy dose of wildlife. On shore, national parks protect endangered squirrel monkeys and scarlet macaws, while offshore waters are home to migrating whales and pods of dolphins.

With so much biodiversity packed into a small geographic area, it's no wonder the coastal area is often thought of as Costa Rica in miniature. Given its close proximity to San José and the Central Valley and highlands, and its well-developed system of paved roads, the region is a favorite weekend getaway for domestic and international travelers.

While threats of unregulated growth and environmental damage are real, it's also important to see the bigger picture, namely the stunning nature that first put the central Pacific coast on the map.

When To Go

West of the Cordillera Central, rains fall heavily between April and November. The hillsides are particularly lush and green during this time, while in summer (December to March) little rain falls, leaving the countryside dry and barren-looking.

History

Prior to the tourism boom in Costa Rica, the central Pacific coast – particularly the Quepos port area – was historically one of the country's largest banana-producing regions. However, in response to the 1940 banana blight that affected most of Central America, the United Fruit Company (also known as Chiquita Banana) introduced African palms to the area. Native to West Africa, these palms are primarily cultivated for their large, reddish fruits, which are pressed to produce a variety of cooking oils.

Although the banana blight finally ended in the 1960s, the palm plantations were firmly entrenched and starting to turn a profit. Since palm oil is easily transported in tanker trucks, Quepos was able to close its shipping port in the 1970s, which freed up resources and allowed the city to invest more heavily in the palm oil industry. In 1995 the plantations were sold to Palma Tica, which continues to operate them today. With the exception of commercial fishing and tourism, the palm oil plantations serve as the primary source of employment in the Quepos area.

In more recent years, this stretch of the Pacific has grown increasingly popular with the package-holiday crowd, as it's quite easy – particularly for North Americans – to squeeze in a one-week retreat and be back to work on Monday. Unable to resist the draw of paradise, a good number of baby boomers nearing retirement have relocated to warmer climes.

This demographic shift has been facilitated by the Costa Rican government's decades-old policy of offering tax incentives and legal residence to foreigners who buy property or start businesses and enterprises in the country. Foreign investment has thus far blessed this region with vitally needed economic stimuli, though the rising cost of living has priced a significant percentage of local Ticos out of the market.

A sparkling new marina at Quepos has brought in a larger volume of tourists visiting Costa Rica on yachts and cruise ships, and several exclusive high-end gated communities continue to attract an even greater number of wealthy immigrants. Things are indeed changing quickly along this stretch of coastline, though it's difficult to imagine that the authenticity of the coastal fishing villages, agricultural plantations and protected areas could ever be lost.

Parks & Reserves

The central Pacific coast is home to a number of parks and reserves, including the most visited national park in Costa Rica.

» **Hacienda Barú National Wildlife Refuge** (p223)

A small reserve that encompasses a range of tropical habitats and is part of a major biological corridor that protects a wide range of species.

» **Parque Nacional Carara** (p281) Home to 400 different species of birds, including the rare scarlet macaw, which is amazingly a commonly sighted species in the park.

» **Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio**

(p317) The pristine beaches, rainforest-clad mountains and wildlife never fail to disappoint in this, Costa Rica's most touristed national park.

» **Parque Nacional Marino Ballena**

(p331) A vitally important marine park, and is the country's premier destination for both whale- and dolphin-watching.

① Getting There & Around

The best option for exploring the coast in depth is to have your own form of private transportation. With the exception of a few odd unpaved stretches of dirt off the main highways, the central Pacific coast has some of the country's best roads.

Major cities and towns along the coast, such as Puntarenas, Jacó, Quepos, Dominical and Uvita, are serviced by regular buses. Generally speaking, public transportation is frequent and efficient, and is certainly more affordable than renting a car.

Both **NatureAir** (www.natureair.com) and **Sansa** (www.flysansa.com) service Quepos, the base town for accessing Manuel Antonio. Prices vary according to season and availability, though you can expect to pay less than US\$75 for a flight from San José or Liberia.

PUNTARENAS TO QUEPOS

The northern reaches of the central Pacific coast extend from the maritime port of Puntarenas, a historic shipping hub that has fallen on harder times, to the booming town of Quepos, which is a gateway to Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio. In between are vast swaths of forested hillsides and wilderness beaches, which together protect large concentrations of remarkable wildlife. However, the local spotlight is fixed firmly on the surf city of Jacó, which plays host to a colorful cast of characters.