



Central Valley & Highlands

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Why Go?

It is on the coffee-cultivated hillsides of the Central Valley that you'll find Costa Rica's heart and soul. This is not only the geographical center of the country, but also its cultural and spiritual core. It is here that the Spanish first settled, here that coffee built a prosperous nation, here that picturesque highland villages still gather for centuries-old fiestas. It is also here that you'll get to fully appreciate Costa Rica's country cooking: artisanal cheeses, steamy corn cakes and freshly caught river trout.

Curvy mountain roads and cattle traffic force travelers to slow their roll. Quaint (and sometimes quirky) agricultural towns invite leisurely detours to farmers' markets and church processions, a refreshing break from the tourist-industrial complex on the coasts. But it's not all cows and coffee – world-class rapids, resplendent quetzals and close encounters with active volcanoes all show off the rich landscape in which Costa Rica's character is rooted.

When to Go

An elevated altitude and landlocked location mean that the Central Valley and Highlands are far more temperate than the coasts. Temps hover around 25°C (77°F) year-round, making the region a popular retreat for weekenders *josefinos* (inhabitants of San José) seeking to escape the heat. During 'green' season, from June to December, afternoon showers are not uncommon, but the sun usually shines through after an hour or so of rain. This is also the high season for rafting, June through October being the best months.

History

As in other parts of the country, there is little in the historical record about the ethnicities that inhabited the Central Valley prior to the arrival of the Spanish. What is known is that the people of the area – largely the Huetares – practiced an animist religion, produced stone sculpture and clay pottery, and communicated in a Chibchan dialect that is now extinct. They also developed and maintained the ancient highland city of Guayabo – which is today the biggest and most significant pre-Columbian archeological site in the country.

European settlement in Costa Rica would not begin in earnest until 1563, when Juan Vázquez de Coronado founded the colonial capital of Cartago, what is today Costa Rica's oldest Spanish city. Over the next two centuries, Spanish communities would pop up in Heredia, San José and Orosi. Throughout this period, however, the area remained a colonial backwater; a checkerboard of Spanish farming communities and *indios bravos* (fierce Indians) who had not come under colonial dominion, and who practiced a largely itinerant agriculture.

It was only after independence, in the 1830s, that the area began to prosper with the expanded cultivation of coffee. The *grano de oro* (golden bean) transformed the country, providing the revenue to invest in urban infrastructure such as electricity and pavements, not to mention many baronial mansions. Coffee has since been overtaken as a key agricultural export by pineapples and bananas. But its legacy lives on, reflected in the culture, architecture and traditions of many highland towns.

ALAJUELA & THE NORTHERN VALLEY

Volcanoes shrouded in mist, undulating coffee *fincas* (plantations), bustling agricultural centers. The area around the provincial capital of Alajuela, 18km northwest of San José, seems to have it all – including Juan Santamaría International Airport, just 3km outside the city. The proximity to the airport makes this area a highly convenient transit point if you are entering or leaving the country here. For travelers seeking to avoid San José, it offers a good selection of local restaurants and accommodations.

Alajuela

POP 47,900

Costa Rica's second city is also home to one of the country's most famous figures: Juan Santamaría, the humble drummer boy who died putting an end to William Walker's campaign to turn Central America into slaving territory in the Battle of Rivas in 1856. A busy agricultural hub, it is here that farmers bring their products to market.

Alajuela is by no means a tourist 'destination.' Much of the architecture is unremarkable, the streets are often jammed and there isn't a lot to see here. But it's an inherently Costa Rican city, and, in its more relaxed moments, it reveals itself as such, where families have leisurely Sunday lunches and teenagers steal kisses in the park. It's also a good base for exploring the countryside to the north.

Sights & Activities

ALAJUELA CITY CENTER

Parque Central

PARK

(Aves Central & 1 btwn Calles Central & 2) The shady Parque Central is a pleasant place to relax beneath the mango trees, or people-watch in the evenings.

Museo Juan Santamaría

MUSEUM

(☎2441-4775; www.museojuansantamaria.go.cr; Av 1 btwn Calles Central & 2; admission free; ☀10am-5:30pm Tue-Sun) Situated in a century-old structure that has served as both a jail and an armory, the Museo Juan Santamaría chronicles the life and history of Juan Santamaría. A basic exhibit area contains vintage maps, paintings and historical artifacts related to the conflict that ultimately gained Costa Rica's independence. It also hosts rotating exhibitions and occasional performances in the small auditorium.

Cathedral

CHURCH

(Calle Central btwn Aves Central & 1) To the east of Parque Central is the 19th-century cathedral, which suffered severe damage in the 1991 earthquake. The hemispherical cupola is unusually constructed of sheets of red corrugated metal. Two presidents are buried here.

Iglesia La Agonía

CHURCH

(Calle 9 btwn Aves Central & 1) A Renaissance-inspired structure, built in 1941, houses the Iglesia La Agonía, a popular local spot for