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PLAN YOUR TRIP

YOUR PLANNING TOOL KIT

Photos, itineraries, lists and suggestions
to help you put together your perfect trip

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UNDERSTAND COSTA RICA

GET MORE FROM YOUR TRIP

Learn about the big picture, so you
can make sense of what you see

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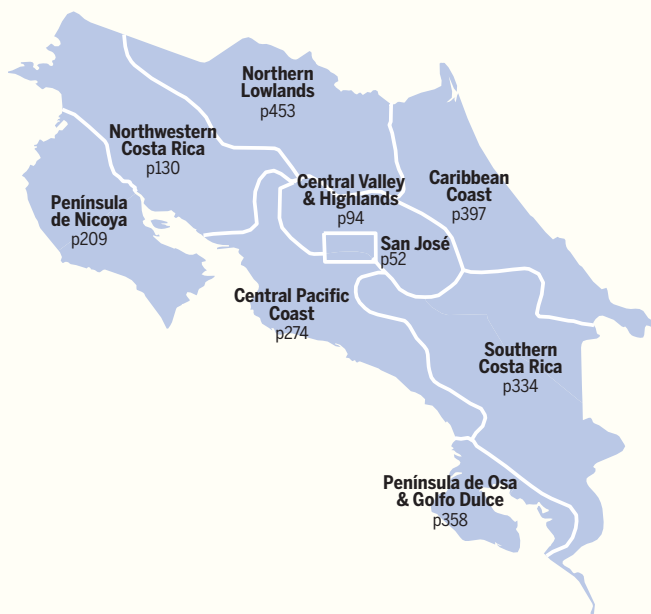
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Nate Cavalieri,
Adam Skolnick, Wendy Yanagihara

➤ Every listing is recommended by our authors, and their favourite places are listed first

➤ Look out for these icons:



Our author's top recommendation



A green or sustainable option



No payment required

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› Costa Rica



Top Experiences >



Sarapiquí Valley

A paddling paradise with excellent ecolodges (p456)

CARIBBEAN
SEA

11°N

Parque Nacional Tortuguero

Glide on waterways past herons and nesting turtles (p412)

San José

Dig into Costa Rican culture and cuisine (p52)

Southern Caribbean Coast

A remote mix of indigenous, Tico and Afro-Caribbean cultures (p420)

10°N

Cerro Chirripó

Icy lakes, wind-swept highs and rugged hiking (p345)

Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio

Accessible rainforest and beautiful beaches (p317)

Golfo Dulce

Kayak mangrove channels alongside dolphins (p365)

PANAMA

Boquete

Concepción

David

Puerto Armuelles

84°W

83°W



OUR STORY

A beat-up old car, a few dollars in the pocket and a sense of adventure. In 1972 that's all Tony and Maureen Wheeler needed for the trip of a lifetime – across Europe and Asia overland to Australia. It took several months, and at the end – broke but inspired – they sat at their kitchen table writing and stapling together their first travel guide, *Across Asia on the Cheap*. Within a week they'd sold 1500 copies. Lonely Planet was born.

Today, Lonely Planet has offices in Melbourne, London and Oakland, with more than 600 staff and writers. We share Tony's belief that 'a great guidebook should do three things: inform, educate and amuse'.

OUR WRITERS



Nate Cavalieri

Coordinating Author, Central Pacific Coast, Southern Costa Rica, Península de Osa & Golfo Duce Nate Cavalieri traveled extensively in Latin America on a 2009 trip around the world, but quickly realized that Costa Rica required a lengthy return visit for his undivided attention. Nate lives in Oakland, California, where he writes about life's most colorful diversions: travel, music and professional cycling. His dozen titles for Lonely Planet include guides to the Caribbean, Mexico, Northern California and Colorado. For this edition he took up surfing, got really into the mythology of the Quetzal and nearly destroyed an economy-class rental car. You can check in on him via Twitter (@natecavalieri) or visit www.natecavalieri.com.



Adam Skolnick

Northwestern Costa Rica, Península de Nicoya, Northern Lowlands Adam Skolnick writes about travel, culture, health, sports and the environment for Lonely Planet, *Men's Health*, *Outside* and *Travel + Leisure* among others. He has authored and co-authored 16 previous Lonely Planet books, and has travelled and reported throughout Central America. You can read more of his work at www.adamskolnick.com.



Wendy Yanagihara

San José, Central Valley & Highlands, Caribbean Coast On her first trip to Costa Rica in 1996, Wendy wandered out to Zarcero to check out the loopy topiaries of the public plaza, and met Evangelisto Blanco himself (the man behind the land-scaping). Fifteen years later, she was pleased to discover that both Zarcero and Señor Blanco have changed only slightly. She has covered the Nicoya Peninsula and northern zone before for Lonely Planet, but on this trip she discovered the surprising delights of San José and a taste for Caribbean *rondón*. When not on the road for Lonely Planet, she lives in southern California.

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itineraries

Whether you've got six days or 60, these itineraries provide a starting point for the trip of a lifetime. Want more inspiration? Head online to lonelyplanet.com/thorntree to chat with other travelers.



Two Weeks Essential Costa Rica

This is the trip you've been dreaming about: a romp through paradise with seething volcanoes, tropical parks and ghostly cloud forests.

From **San José**, beeline north to **La Fortuna**. After hiking the forest on the flanks of **Volcán Arenal**, soak in the area's hot springs. Then catch a boat across Laguna de Arenal, and a bus to **Monteverde**, where you might just encounter the elusive quetzal on a stroll through the **Reserva Biológica Bosque Nuboso Monteverde**.

It's time for the beach: head west to the biggest party town in Nicoya, **Playa Tamarindo**, and enjoy the ideal surf and rowdy nightlife.

Continuing south, go through **Montezuma** where you can connect via jet boat to **Jacó**, another town with equal affection for surfing and partying. Spend half a day on the bus down to Quepos, the gateway to **Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio**. A full day in the park starts with some jungle hikes and wildlife-watching and ends with a picnic and a dip in the park's perfect waters.



Two Weeks Northern Costa Rica

A deep exploration of the north presents travelers with all of Costa Rica's banner attractions and some of its off-the-beaten-path destinations in a tidy, low-mileage package.

After landing in **San José**, make for the hanging bridges and breathtaking scenery of the **Reserva Biológica Bosque Nuboso Monteverde**, one of Costa Rica's most unique and iconic destinations. Just watching the mists roll over the dense forests is entertaining, but the add-ons here sweeten the deal: there are dizzying zip lines and areal walkways, excellent hikes and one of the country's best butterfly gardens.

After a few days in the cloud forest you'll be ready for **Arenal**, the country's biggest active volcano. Though just a quick bus ride away, the glowering mountain seems like a different world. Although it seems to be in heading into a period of dormancy, Arenal remains an incredible sight. Another few hikes and you'll be ready for the area's hot springs.

Now, leave the tourists behind and head into the northern lowlands, an agricultural zone where real-life Costa Rica awaits. Community tourism initiatives have sprung up in this historically farm-based economy, with inviting ecolodges and family stays. After a couple days of connecting with easygoing Ticos, make for **La Virgen** to raft the county's wildest waters on the **Río Sarapiquí**.

With the remaining week, it's time to hit the beach. Catch a bus for **Playa Tamarindo**, to party with other travelers, sample some of the country's finest international cuisine and take a few surfing lessons. If you're here during turtle season, **Playa Grande** will host a horde of nesting leatherbacks; if you're not, the human action on the beach is an equally illuminating mating ritual.

You can either stay put or string together a series of southbound buses to visit one heavenly beach after the next: there's stunning sand and contemporary cuisine at **Playa Sámara** or legendary swells at **Mal País** and **Playa Santa Teresa**. Any of them would be excellent places to swim in warm Pacific waters and chill out on the beach. Wind down your trip with a bit of yoga at **Montezuma** and head back to San José via Jacó by jet boat and bus.



LOOK DIE BILDRENTIER DER FOTOGRAFEN ENGELHART / ALAMY ©



PALL TOPP / DREAMSTIMES

- » (above) Hiking in the Reserva Biológica Bosque Nuboso Monteverde (p177)
- » (left) Volcán Arenal (p145)



Two Weeks Pacific Coast Explorer

Kick things off in the resort town of **Jacó**, a scrappy, if cosmopolitan enclave of fine dining and raging nightlife. In case you need a reminder that you're still in Costa Rica, backtrack north up the coast to **Parque Nacional Carara**, home to large populations of enchanting scarlet macaws.

Heading south along the coast, drop in on **Quepos**, a convenient base for the country's most popular national park, **Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio**.

Here, the rainforest sweeps down to meet the sea, providing refuge for rare animals, including the endangered Central American squirrel monkey.

Continue on south – stopping to sample the roadside ceviche stands – and visit **Hacienda Barú National Wildlife Refuge** to look for sloth, or keep heading south to **Dominical** for more waves. For deserted beach wandering keep on to Uvita, where you can look for whales off **Parque Nacional Marino Ballena**.

From Uvita, you can either continue south to the far-flung **Península de Osa**, or head to San José.

Two to Three Weeks Southern Costa Rica & Osa

Hand's down the best itinerary for adventurers. Either head down the Pacific coast or fly into **Puerto Jiménez**, which serves as the gateway to Osa. Here, you can spend a day or so kayaking the mangroves and soaking up the charm of this tiny town.

The undisputed highlight of Osa is **Parque Nacional Corcovado**, one of the country's best wildlife-watching spots. Spend a few days exploring the trails with backpack in hand; particularly well-equipped travelers can trek across the entire park.

Return to Puerto Jiménez and link up with the Uvita, where you wander empty beaches and surf a bit in the **Parque Nacional Marino Ballena**. Then, it's off to the mountains. Link together buses for **San Gerardo de Rivas**, where you can spend a day getting used to the altitude and hiking through the **Cloudbridge Nature Preserve**. End the trip with an exhilarating two-day adventure to the top of **Chirripó**.



One to Two Weeks Caribbean Coast

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

Hop on the first eastbound bus out of **San José** for **Cahuita**, capital of Afro-Caribbean culture and gateway to **Parque Nacional Cahuita**. Get your fill of this mellow little village before moving on to **Puerto Viejo de Talamanca**, the Caribbean's center for nightlife, cuisine and all-round positive vibes.

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

For the adventurous at heart, grab a boat from Moín to travel the canal-lined coast to **Tortuguero**, 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**, Costa Rica's mini-Amazon.

After spotting your fill of wildlife, head back to San José via water taxi and bus through **Cariari** and **Guápiles**.

One Week Central Valley

The central valley circuit is about sleeping volcanoes, strong cups of coffee and the spiritual core of the country. Since most tourists head toward Costa Rica's distant beaches, you'll enjoy mountain markets and colonial squares without the huge crowds.

Begin the scenic circuit of the region's gaping volcanoes by hiking the volcanic lakes and trails surrounding **Poás**, one of Costa Rica's most accessible glimpses into an active volcano. Move on to the **Monumento Nacional Arqueológico Guayabo**, the country's only significant archeological site, where visitors marvel at petroglyphs and a system of aqueducts.

With the geological and archeological wonders complete, rush the white water of the **Río Pacuare**, one of the country's best white-water runs, and some of the most scenic rafting in Central America.

Finally, swing south into the heart of the **Orosi Valley**, Costa Rican coffee country, and take the caffeinated 60km loop passing the country's oldest church and endless green hills. End this short circuit on a spiritual note at the country's grandest colonial temple, the Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles in **Cartago**.

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