



Northwestern Costa Rica

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Why Go?

You've probably heard of northwestern Costa Rica's superstars: misty cloud forests and that now-dormant volcano delivering old lava fields, a stunning lake and bubbling hot springs. Venture further and you'll discover aquamarine rivers, affordable ecolodges, magnificent waterfalls, grassy savanna, Costa Rica's second-biggest city, and the most epic bay you've never heard of, blessed with world-class wind and powdery sand. With a shiny new airport terminal, it's never been easier to explore the great northwest.

When to Go

The climate varies widely from the dry heat of Guanacaste to the swirling, ever present mist of Monteverde and, to a lesser extent, Arenal and Tenorio. It gets cool at night in the mountains – even during the dry season, so pack your bags accordingly. Guanacaste is Costa Rica's driest province, getting very little rain from November to April, when the winds bless (and blast) Bahía Salinas. Humpback whales migrate up the coast in September and October.

ARENAL ROUTE

If you've got your own wheels and a little time, take the road from Ciudad Quesada to the Arenal area – you are in for one beautiful ride. With the backdrop of Volcán Platanar, the road winding through this green, river-rich agrarian region passes through prosperous, quaint towns bright with bougainvillea. In front of you, if the weather cooperates, the resolute peak of Arenal will loom.

Past La Fortuna, the paved road (beware of potholes) hugs the north bank of Laguna de Arenal. On either side of the road, up the green slope and down on the lakeside, turn-outs and driveways for lovely inns, kooky ersatz Austrian mini-villages, hip coffeehouses and eccentric galleries appear like pictures in a pop-up book. Scattered in between, you can't help but notice the real-estate signs offering lots for sale, but the area is bucolic and not overdeveloped, and each stop feels far enough away from the next to offer a sense of isolation.

Heading back around the western edge of the lake, you'll pass through the lakeside Nuevo Arenal and down to the pleasant mountain town of Tilarán before descending toward the Interamericana. Note that this route is also well served by public transportation.

Ciudad Quesada (San Carlos)

POP 29,900

The official name of this small city is Ciudad Quesada (sometimes abbreviated to 'Quesada'), but all the locals know it as San Carlos, and local buses often list San Carlos as the destination. It's long been a bustling ranching and agricultural center, known for its *talabaterías* (saddle shops), where a top-quality saddle can cost US\$1000. Get a sense of that at **Feria del Ganado** (cattle fair and auction), which is held every April and accompanied by carnival rides and a *tope* (horse parade).

DON'T MISS

PARKS & RESERVES

Northwestern Costa Rica has a wealth of parks and reserves, ranging from little-visited national parks to the highlight on many visitors' itineraries, Monteverde.

- » **Parque Nacional Guanacaste** (p204) One of the least-visited parks in Costa Rica. The land transitions between dry tropical forest and humid cloud forest.
- » **Parque Nacional Palo Verde** (p189) Stay at the research station and take a guided tour to see some of the 300-plus bird species recorded in this rich wetland.
- » **Parque Nacional Rincón de la Vieja** (p197) Peaceful, muddy isolation can be found at this national park just outside of Liberia, where bubbling thermal activity abounds.
- » **Area de Conservación Guanacaste** (p200) Access legendary surf, hike through the largest stand of tropical dry forest in Central America and visit a historical battle site.
- » **Parque Nacional Volcán Arenal** (p145) Centered on the perfect cone of Volcán Arenal, the clouds will sometimes disperse, revealing the hulking giant.
- » **Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Bahía Junquillal** (p204) Another small, peaceful protected site, this refuge has a beach backed by mangrove swamp and tropical dry forest.
- » **Reserva Biológica Bosque Nuboso Monteverde** (p177) Costa Rica's most famous cloud forest, Monteverde receives a steady stream of visitors without having lost its magic.
- » **Reserva Biológica Lomas de Barbudal** (p190) If you're here in March, you might be lucky enough to catch the yellow blooms of the *corteza amarilla* tree in this tropical dry forest reserve.
- » **Reserva Santa Elena** (p180) Slightly less crowded and at a higher elevation than Monteverde, this is also a good place to spot a quetzal.