



# Southern Costa Rica

## Includes »

The Road to Chirripó.....	335
San Isidro de El General .....	341
Parque Nacional Chirripó .....	345
The Road to La Amistad .....	350
Reserva Biológica Dúrika .....	350
Parque Internacional La Amistad .....	356

## Why Go?

Wild, vast and largely unexplored, southern Costa Rica is cut through the middle by the jagged range of the Cordillera de Talamanca and buttressed by agricultural lowlands that produce edible exports. If you're over Costa Rica's well-oiled tourism machine or burned out by beaches, welcome: this region is rugged, undeveloped and frosted by high-altitude chill.

For thrill-seekers, southern Costa Rica packs a punch with the country's highest peak, Cerro Chirripó (3820m), and Central America's wildest swath of protected land, the incomprehensibly vast Parque Internacional La Amistad. And while Monteverde is the country's most iconic cloud forest, southern Costa Rica offers equally mystical environments, including the heavenly Cloudbridge Nature Preserve.

In a country where only distant echoes of pre-Columbian influence remain, this is home to Costa Rica's visible indigenous presence. Large populations of Bribri, Cabécar and Brunka live high in the mountains, clinging to traditions amid the changing tides of modernity.

## Best Places to Eat

- » Casa Botania (p354)
- » Pizzería Restaurante Lilliana (p355)
- » Kahawa Café & Restaurante (p340)
- » Cocolisos Truchero (p344)
- » Soda La Terminal (p342)

## Best Places to Stay

- » Casa Mariposa (p344)
- » Savegre Hotel de Montaña (p339)
- » Monte Azul: Boutique Hotel + Center for Art & Design (p344)
- » Crestones Base Lodge (p349)
- » Casa Botania (p354)

## When to Go

Like the rest of the country there are seasonal variations in rainfall, but southern Costa Rica gets as soaked with rain as some of the coastal regions do. Due to elevation, much of the region can be very chilly at night. The best time for serious bird-watching (particularly if you want to see a quetzal) is between November and May. The week leading up to Easter and Christmas season is also high season, mostly due to Ticos looking to escape the city for the mountains.

## History

Costa Rica's indigenous population was almost entirely wiped out through both the direct and indirect effects of colonization. Spanish conquistadors eventually gave way to Catholic missionaries, though the end result was the same, namely the complete disruption of pre-Columbian life in the New World.

Even as late as the 20th century, indigenous groups were actively excluded from the Spanish-dominated society and pushed to the fringes. In fact, citizenship was not granted to the indigenous population until 1949, and reservations were not organized until 1977. In the last three decades, indigenous groups have been allowed to engage in their traditional languages and customs.

Still, an increasing number of indigenous youths find themselves unable to subsist on their ancestral lands, and many shed native traditions in favor of employment in the agricultural sector. Others have turned to the tourism sector for work, though as a population, economic gains have been modest.

## Climate

Given its geographic diversity, the climate varies considerably throughout the southern zone. In the lowlands, it remains hot and humid year-round, with marked rainfall from mid-April through mid-December. In the highlands, however, you can expect much cooler temperatures year-round (getting as low as 4°C or 40°F at times).

## Parks & Reserves

The parks and reserves of southern Costa Rica offer great opportunities for wildlife-watching and hiking.

### » **Cloudbridge Nature Preserve** (p343)

A tiny private reserve on the slopes of Cerro Chirripó that is operated by two New Yorkers, and is the site of an ongoing reforestation project.

### » **Parque Internacional La Amistad**

(p356) This enormous bi-national park is shared with Panama and protects a biological corridor of incredible ecological significance.

### » **Parque Nacional Chirripó** (p345)

Home to Costa Rica's highest and most famous peak, Cerro Chirripó, which on a clear day offers views of both the Pacific and the Caribbean.

### » **Parque Nacional Los Quetzales**

(p340) Costa Rica's newest national park is extremely rich in birdlife and offers a good chance of spotting the quetzal in all its resplendent glory.

» **Reserva Biológica Dúrika** (p350) This private reserve within Parque Internacional La Amistad is home to an independent, sustainable community committed to conservation.

## i Getting There & Around

Because of complicated, frequently changing bus schedules, it's best to have your own 4WD ride if you want to explore the region in depth. That said, it's fairly easy to connect via bus to departure points for Amistad and Chirripó. Note that addresses in this part of the country are virtually non-existent, and the numbered posts along the Carretera Interamericana are used to locate things. Those numbers count the kilometers from San José.

Major towns in the southern zone are serviced by regular buses, though public transportation can get sporadic once you leave these major hubs.

**NatureAir** ([www.natureair.com](http://www.natureair.com)) and **Sansa** ([www.sansa.com](http://www.sansa.com)) service Palmar, which is a jumping-off point for the southern zone. Prices vary according to season and availability, but usually you can expect to pay a little less than US\$75 for a flight from San José or Liberia.

## THE ROAD TO CHIRRIPO

Traveling south from San Jose, the road to Parque Nacional Chirripó passes through gorgeous countryside of redolent coffee plantations and cool, misty cloud forests. The first major area of interest is the Zona Santa or 'Saint's Zone,' a collection of highland villages that famously bear sainted names: San Pablo de León Cortés, Santa María de Dota, San Marcos de Tarrazú, San Cristóbal Sur and San Gerardo de Dota. Further south in the Valle de El General, family-run *fincas* (farms) dot the fertile valley, though the action tends to center on San Isidro de El General, southern Costa Rica's largest town and major transportation hub.

## Santa María & Valle de Dota

Centered on a grassy soccer field and surrounded by lavish plantations, Santa María de Dota is a picturesque Costa Rican town that merits at least a quick stop if you're driving (on bus, the detour would likely take a whole day). It's a sleepy place where mist rolls across the mountains and coffee production is the economic lifeblood. It seems as if the Coope-dota processing facility employs half the town.