



# Caribbean Coast

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## Why Go?

While the sunny climate and easy accessibility of the Pacific have paved the way (literally) for development on that rich coast, the Caribbean side has languished in comparison. The same rain-drenched malarial wildness that thwarted the first 16th-century Spaniards from settling here also isolated this region for centuries afterward. Thus, its culture – influenced by indigenous peoples and West Indian immigrants – blended slowly and organically and is distinctly different from that of the rest of Costa Rica.

It still takes a little more effort to travel here to see the nesting turtles of Tortuguero, raft the Río Pacuare or dive the reefs of Manzanillo. Life is more rugged and rustic on this coast, allowing wildlife to thrive. And it's well worth tasting its unique flavors: the *rondón* (spicy seafood gumbo), the lilt of patois, and the uncrowded stretches of palm-lined beaches.

## Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Sobre Las Olas (p169)
- ➔ Soda El Patty (p147)
- ➔ Selvin's Restaurant (p184)
- ➔ La Pecora Nera (p185)
- ➔ Cool & Calm Cafe (p186)

## Best Off the Beaten Track

- ➔ Selva Bananito (p168)
- ➔ La Danta Salvaje (p144)
- ➔ Punta Mona (p188)
- ➔ Turtle Beach Lodge (p159)
- ➔ Aiko-logi (p172)

## When to Go

- ➔ From December to March, the biggest swells hit the southern Caribbean and the surfers descend.
- ➔ Turtle-nesting season from March to October means egg-laying and hatching spectacles in Tortuguero.
- ➔ The best times for sportfishing are from January to June and September to December, although fishing is good year-round in the northern Caribbean.

## History

In 1502 Christopher Columbus spent a total of 17 days anchored off the coast of Puerto Limón on what would be his fourth and final voyage to the New World. He dropped anchor at an isle he baptized La Huerta (today known as Isla Uvita), loaded up on fresh water, and never returned.

For Costa Rica's Caribbean coast, this brief encounter foreshadowed the colonization that was to come. But it would be centuries before Europeans would fully dominate the area. Because of the difficult nature of the terrain (croc-filled swamps and steep mountain slopes) and the malaria delivered by relentless fleets of mosquitoes, the Spanish steadfastly avoided it. For hundreds of years, in fact, the area remained the province of indigenous ethnicities – the Miskito in the north and the Cabécar, Bribri and Këköldi in the south – along with a mix of itinerant Afro-Caribbean turtle hunters from Panama and Colombia.

It was the building of the railroad, beginning in 1871, that solidified the area's West Indian accent, with the arrival of thousands of former Jamaican slaves in search of employment. The plan was to build a port at the site of a grand old lemon tree (hence the name, Puerto Limón) on the Caribbean Sea, so that coffee barons in the Central Valley could more easily export their crops to Europe. The railway was intended to unify the country, but it was a source of segregation as well. Blacks were not allowed to vote or travel freely around Costa Rica until 1949. Out of isolation, however, sprung an independent culture, with its own musical and gastronomic traditions, and even its own unique language, a Creole called Mekatelyu – which is still spoken today.

## Parks & Reserves

Many refuges and parks line the Caribbean coast. These are some of the most popular.

**Parque Nacional Cahuita** (p170) A patch of coastal jungle is home to armadillos, monkeys and sloths, while the protected reef is one of the most important on the coast.

**Parque Nacional Tortuguero** (p152) Jungle canals obscure snoozing caimans, while howler, spider and capuchin monkeys traipse overhead. The star attraction, however, is the sea turtles, which nest here from March to October.

## Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre

**Barra del Colorado** (p162) A remote park that draws fishing enthusiasts who come to hook species such as snook, tarpon and gar.

## Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre

**Gandoca-Manzanillo** (p186) A rich rain-forest and wetland tucked away along the country's southeastern border, with rivers full of manatees, caimans and crocodiles.

## Getting There & Away

When traveling to Puerto Limón and the southern Caribbean, it's easy enough to hop on any of the regular buses from San José. Buses also connect most towns along the coast, from Sixaola, on the Panamanian border, to Puerto Limón. The roads are in good condition, so driving is also an option.



The north is a little trickier. Much of the area is only linked up by waterways, making boats the sole means of transport. Puerto Limón, Tortuguero, Parímina and Barra del Colorado all have landing strips, but only Tortuguero has daily commercial flights.

## THE ATLANTIC SLOPE

The idea was simple: build a port on the Caribbean coast and connect it to the Central Valley by railroad, thereby opening up important shipping routes for the country's soaring coffee production. Construction began in 1871, through 150km of dense jungles and muddy mountainsides along the Atlantic slope. It took almost two decades to build the railroad, and the first 30km reportedly cost 4000 men their lives. But when the last piece of track was laid down in 1890, the economic forces it unleashed permanently changed Costa Rica (and the rest of Central America, for that matter). It was the dawn of the banana boom, an industry that would dominate life, politics and the environment in the region for almost a century.

Today, the railroad is no longer. Likewise, banana production is not as mighty as it once was, supplanted in many areas by pineapples and African oil palms.

## Parque Nacional Braulio Carrillo

Enter this under-explored **national park** ( 2206-5500; adult/child \$12/5;  8am-3:30pm) and you will have an idea of what Costa Rica looked like prior to the 1950s, when 75% of