Central Valley & Highlands

It is on the coffee-draped hillsides of the Central Valley that you will find Costa Rica’s heart and soul. This is not only the physical center of the country, it is its cultural and spiritual core. It is here that the Spanish first settled. It is here that coffee built a prosperous nation. And it is here that picturesque highland villages still gather for centuries-old fiestas. It is also here that you’ll get to fully savor Costa Rica’s country cooking: artisanal cheeses, steamy corn cakes, crisp pieces of pork and fresh-caught river trout. It’s a simple cuisine, but it is comforting – one that feels like home.

For the traveler, the Central Valley offers a break from the tourist industrial complex on the coasts. In this mountainous region of nooks and crannies, entertainment consists of hanging out in a bustling mountain town, and watching folks gather for market days and church. That doesn’t mean, however, that there is nothing to do. You can ride raging rapids, see space-age shrubbery, visit the country’s oldest colonial church, attend solemn religious processions, look for trogons in mist-shrouded forests and hike myriad volcanoes – the geological phenomena that have provided the country with its indescribably fertile soil and its long-running agricultural traditions. So take you’re your time. When you explore the Central Valley, you’ll not only witness great beauty – you’ll see the landscape that gave Costa Rica its character.

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- White-knuckling it down the cascading rapids of the Ríos Reventazón or Pacuare (p148)
- Seeing the country’s most venerated religious relic at the Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Los Ángeles (p138) in Cartago
- Peering into the mammoth craters of the area’s grumbling volcanoes: Irazú (p140), Poás (p124) and Turrialba (p151)
- Winding along scenic mountain roads to Zarcero (p130), home of trippy topiary and organic farming
- Hiking through the serene surroundings at the country’s major archaeological site, Monumento Nacional Arqueológico Guayabo (p149)
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 Huetar – 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 (p149) – which is today the biggest and most significant pre-Columbian archaeological site in the country.

Though Columbus grazed the country’s shore in 1502, European settlement in Costa Rica would not begin in earnest until 1563, when Juan Vásquez 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’), native ethnicities that 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.

Climate
For this part of the world, the weather is surprisingly mild. Year-round the mercury hovers around 25°C (77°F). The elevated altitude and landlocked location mean that it is far more temperate than the blistering coasts. During rainy season, from June to December, afternoon showers are not uncommon, but the sun usually pokes through after an hour of rain.

Parks & Reserves
Watch wildlife and explore volcanic landscapes in some of the Central Valley’s magnificent national parks.

Los Ángeles Cloud Forest Adventure Park (p133)
This away-from-the-crowds reserve offers the chance to

whiz through the treetops on a canopy tour or trot through hills on horseback.

Monumento Nacional Arqueológico Guayabo (p149) See the outline of an ancient forest village nestled into a lush hillside at the country’s biggest and most important pre-Columbian archeological site.

Parque Nacional Tapanti-Macizo Cerro de la Muerte (p144) This little-visited park receives more rainfall than any other part of the country, so it’s full of life – a perfect outpost for dedicated bird-watchers.

Parque Nacional Volcán Irazú (p140) One of the few lookouts in the country that affords views of both the Caribbean and the Pacific, Irazú also lays claim to being the country’s highest active volcano.

Parque Nacional Volcán Poás (p124) Easily accessible, this park has a shimmering crater lake and plenty of surrounding cloud forest.

Dangers & Annoyances
While the area is generally considered to be very safe, there are regular reports of car break-ins. Try to always secure guarded parking and never leave valuables in your car.

Getting There & Around
While all of the towns in this area are connected by regular buses, renting a car makes sense if you want to explore the many worthwhile hard-to-reach corners. Locals occasionally wave down passing cars. If you do this, beware that there are risks (see p550), and always offer to help with gas costs.

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 Santamaria international airport, just 3km outside the city. The proximity to the airport is key, for this area makes a highly convenient transit point if you are entering or leaving the country. And for travelers seeking to avoid San José, it offers a good selection of bustling eateries, atmospheric B&Bs and well-equipped city inns.

ALAJUELA
pop 43,000
Costa Rica’s second city is also home to one of the country’s most famous figures: Juan Santamaría, the humble drummer boy who