

On the Road



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Península de Osa (p390) is truly a stunning landform, but there is a whole different world lying offshore beneath the surface of the shallow seas. Down here, maritime life of every shape, color and size dashes and darts across your field of vision. Suddenly you hopelessly wish that the remaining oxygen in your tank didn't limit your time in the underwater world.

CEŠAR G SORIANO After weeks of sweltering under the infamous Guanacaste heat, it was time to cool off. So I took the day off for a bit of diving in Sámara (p286), a beautiful beach town whose flora and fauna are equally impressive on land as they are beneath the waves. *iPura vida!*



CAROLINA A MIRANDA On this trip I got to explore the absolutely idyllic (and often overlooked) Central Valley. At El Silencio (p131) in Bajos del Toro I planted a tree – with name tag! – in memory of my father and father-in-law. My plan is to go back in a year to see how it's doing.

Destination Costa Rica

Costa Rica is sometimes referred to as the Switzerland of Central America because of its comfortable lifestyle, peaceful democracy and overwhelming natural beauty. But is this merely the depiction on a postcard, or does it have relevance for today's Tico (Costa Rican)?

Early in the 20th century, this view could rightly be called an optimistic caricature. At best, Costa Rica was an occasional democracy with widespread poverty and no discernible environmental protection policy. In the second half of the century, however, sustained economic growth created a viable middle class, a generous social welfare state and one of the world's most progressive environmental movements.

To put things in perspective, consider the fact that prior to 1950, half of the country struggled with grinding poverty, and living beyond the age of 50 was an achievement in itself. Today, less than one in five Ticos lives below the poverty line, and life expectancy is on a par with the USA.

The 'green revolution' kicked off in the 1970s when world coffee prices dropped due to oversupply, and Costa Rica plunged into economic crisis. However, the unpredictable nature of the global commodity markets created a rather unusual alliance between economic developers and environmental conservationists. If wealth could not be sustained through exports, then what about imports – of tourists? By 1985, tourism was annually contributing US\$100 million to the Costa Rican economy, and today almost one-third of the entire country is under some form of environmental protection.

Costa Rica annually attracts more than one million tourists each year, and continues to serve as testament to the fact that conservation and development need not be competing interests. Need more proof? As recently as 1980, Ticos lived on family farms, listened to state radio and shopped at the neighborhood *pulperia* (corner grocery store). Today, shopping at supermarkets is a matter of course, satellite TV and wireless internet are the norm, and American-style malls are all the rage.

Furthermore, with economic empowerment has come tremendous social change. More women have entered the workforce though opportunities in the tourist and service sectors. The divorce rate has increased and family size has shrunk. More Ticos are entering higher education, and they are doing so in Costa Rica. Migrant laborers from Nicaragua and Colombia work the coffee plantations, while Tico tenants seek better jobs in the city.

Given the rise in quality of life throughout the country, Ticos are generally self-content and passive about politics. But underneath the easygoing veneer is discernible pride and support for their unarmed democracy.

As stated by former President Oscar Arias Sánchez in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, 'we seek peace and democracy together, indivisible, an end to the shedding of human blood, which is inseparable from an end to the suppression of human rights.' This is a unique point of view – not only in Central America, but in the whole world.

Lifestyle and democracy aside, Costa Rica is mind-bendingly beautiful. Although there are certainly other countries in the world that enjoy divinely inspired natural landscapes, Costa Rica boasts a higher biodiversity than Europe and the USA combined. Its small size also means that traveling from cloud forest to coastline and from summit to savanna is quick, easy and enjoyable.

FAST FACTS

Population: 4.25 million

Life expectancy at birth: 77.6

Adult literacy: 94.9%

Population living below the poverty line: 16%

Population using the internet: 34%

Annual carbon dioxide emissions per person: 1.85 tons

Annual coffee consumption per person: 3.8kg

Passenger cars per 1000 people: 103

Protected land: 27%

Number of species of birds: 850+

Getting Started

Costa Rica is the most user-friendly country in Central America. Most of the tourist hot spots are well connected by cheap buses, accommodations are plentiful and decent eateries are thick on the ground in nearly every corner of the country. Unlike in some other parts of the region, dining without fear for your stomach, meeting and engaging locals, and accessing the internet are all things that can be taken for granted.

Predeparture planning will usually make your trip a bit smoother, but on the whole it's unnecessary unless you're on a tight timetable, and it's usually more enjoyable to give in to the idea of adventure travel. Indeed, Costa Rica has something for everyone, especially if you are an impulsive traveler seeking an adrenaline rush. Of course, if you prefer to spend some quality time with a good book on a sun-drenched beach, Costa Rica has quite a few of those, too.

For shoestringers, transport around the country is plentiful – local buses can carry you to just about every nook and cranny, and boats will pick up where buses leave off. For the more discriminating or time-pressed travelers, minivans with air-con, domestic flights and charters can reach even the most remote corners. Accommodations also range from bargain-basement cabins, campsites and hammock hotels, all the way up to 1st-class resorts loaded with every conceivable luxury.

Lodging is abundant throughout Costa Rica, and it's usually easy to find someplace to stay when you arrive in town. The exceptions to this rule are the weeks between Christmas and New Year's Day, and before and during *Semana Santa* (the week preceding Easter Sunday). It is also a good idea to book accommodations ahead of time during the school vacation in January and February.

Note that because Costa Rica has a high standard of living, prices here tend to be a good deal higher than those of other Central and South American nations. However, although your dollar may not stretch as far here as in neighboring countries, you can expect an extremely high quality of goods and services throughout Costa Rica.

WHEN TO GO

Generally, the best time to visit Costa Rica is the dry season from December through April, which locals refer to as *verano* (summer). Dry season does not mean it does not rain – it just rains less (so perhaps should be called the 'drier season'). Costa Rican schools are closed from December to February; beach towns are busy during this period, especially on weekends. Lodgings during *Semana Santa* are usually booked months ahead.

In May begins the rainy season, or *invierno* (winter) as it's known locally. The tourism ministry has come up with the more attractive denomination of 'green season.' The early months of the rainy season are actually a wonderful time to travel to Costa Rica: you can avoid the tourist bustle and lodging is slightly cheaper. During this time, however, rivers start to swell and dirt roads get muddy, making travel more challenging. Some more remote roads may not be accessible to public transportation, so always ask locally before setting out. Bring your umbrella and a little patience.

Because of the number of North American and European tourists, some Costa Rican towns experience a mini high season in June and July, during the northern summer holidays. Expect to pay high-season prices in some towns at this time.

See the Directory for more information on climate (p529) and festivals (p531).

For surfers, the travel seasons vary slightly. For the most part, the Pacific coast sees increased swells and bigger, faster waves during the rainy season, starting in late June and peaking in the worst rainy months of September and October. The Caribbean side has better waves from November through May. Some breaks are consistent year-round.

Wildlife enthusiasts may wish to plan their trip around the seasons of the critters. Turtle season on the Caribbean coast is from late February to October, with the peak season for leatherbacks in April and May, and for green turtles in August and September. On the Pacific coast, the season for leatherbacks is from October to March.

Bird-watchers will be overwhelmed by feathered friends any time of year, but the best season to spot the resplendent quetzal is between November and April. Spring (March through May) and autumn (September through November) are good times to watch the migratory flocks.

Fishing is also good year-round, but you might choose your season if you have your heart set on a specific fish. Anglers head to the Caribbean coast between January and May in search of tarpon, while the autumn (September through November) is the season for snook. On the Pacific coast and in the Golfo Dulce, the best time to snag that sailfish is between November and May.

COSTS & MONEY

Travel costs are significantly higher here than in most Central American countries, but cheaper than in the USA or Europe. And if you're arriving from inexpensive Central American nations, such as Nicaragua, get ready to bust that wallet wide open.

Prices in Costa Rica are frequently listed in US dollars, especially at up-market hotels and restaurants, where you can expect to pay international prices. Most types of tours are charged in US dollars. In fact, US dollars are

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- checking the latest visa situation (p537) and government travel advisories (p530)
- insect repellent containing DEET; and, if you're planning large-scale jungle adventures (or staying in budget lodging), a mosquito net
- learning at least a few basic phrases in Spanish
- Pepto-Bismol or an antidiarrheal, in case you get a bad dose of the runs
- sunblock and a hat, so you don't get cooked by the tropical sun
- clothes that you don't mind getting absolutely filthy or wet
- a swimsuit and a beach towel
- a poncho for rainy days and wet boat trips
- a pair of river sandals or reef-walkers and sturdy jungle boots
- an alarm clock for catching early morning buses
- a waterproof, windproof jacket and warm layers for highland hiking and camping
- a flashlight (torch)
- binoculars and a field guide
- miscellaneous necessities: umbrella, padlock, matches, pocketknife
- an appetite for fresh fruit
- a thirst for cold lager
- your sense of adventure

IT MUST BE THE MONEY

Starting in 2010, Costa Rica will roll out some seriously big bills, namely in denominations of 20,000 and 50,000 colones. Since almost two-thirds of the cash currently circulating is in 10,000 colones bills, the Central Bank is hoping that the larger denomination bills will result in a more equal distribution of money.

According to the treasury director of the Central Bank, one side of the six new bills will feature important figures from Costa Rican history, while the other will highlight the country's natural heritage.

Of course, if you're going to roll out some new currency, then why not add a bit of flash to the cash? The new bills will have variable lengths, and there's even talk of switching from cotton fiber to plastic. After all, there's nothing worse than trying to dry out your wallet after a serious surf session!

widely accepted, but the standard unit of currency is still the colón. See also boxed text, p535.

Shoestring travelers can survive on US\$25 to US\$35 a day, covering just the basics of food, lodging and public transportation. The cheapest hotels start at about US\$7 to US\$15 per person for a bed, four walls and shared bathroom. Better rooms with private bathroom start at roughly US\$15 to US\$20 per person, depending on the area. It is possible to eat cheaply at the many *sodas* (lunch counters), where you can fill up on tasty *casados* (set meals) for about US\$2 to US\$3.

Midrange budgeters can travel comfortably for anywhere from US\$50 to US\$100 per day. Hotels in this category offer very good value, and double rooms come with comfortable beds, private bathroom, hot water (most of the time) and even breakfast, for US\$20 to US\$80 per night. Many hotels in this price range also have shared or private kitchenettes, which gives travelers the opportunity to cook – this is a great option for families. A variety of restaurants cater to midrange travelers, offering meals that cost from US\$5 to US\$10.

Top-end visitors can find a good selection of restaurants and hotels in the touristy towns and within some of the major resorts. Luxurious beachside lodges and boutique hotels can cost upwards of US\$80, and offer truly world-class meals that begin at around US\$15.

Lodging prices are generally higher in the dry season (December to April), and highest during holiday periods (between Christmas and New Year and during *Semana Santa*). During slower seasons, most hotels are eager for your business, so you can try to negotiate a lower rate. Some of the more popular tourist areas (Monteverde, Jacó, Manuel Antonio and many of the beaches on the Península de Nicoya) are also more expensive than the rest of the country.

TRAVELING RESPONSIBLY

As one of the world's most iconic ecotourism destinations, Costa Rica spoils travelers with a never-ending assortment of environmentally friendly activities. Animal lovers can help baby sea turtles scamper out to sea, while tree huggers can help plant new life in the forest floor. Green thumbs can try their hand at organic agriculture, while nature lovers can explore some of the planet's most pristine landscapes. Indeed, few tourist spots so easily combine wildlife-watching, adventure travel, volunteering and environmental conservation in one earth-friendly package.

However, the greatest challenge to travelers in Costa Rica is preserving the purity of this destination for future generations. The secret is out, the tourism

HOW MUCH?

Car rental for one week
US\$200-500

Zip-line adventure
through the canopy
US\$35-60

National park admission
fees US\$5-15

Taxi from the
international airport into
central San José US\$12

Secondhand longboard
from a surf shop
US\$100-250

TOP FIVE ECOLOGES

It's easy to lie down for the night in a hotel when you know that your stay isn't negatively impacting the environment. Although there is certainly no shortage of ecolodges in Costa Rica, the following lists some of our favorites:

- **Esquinas Rainforest Lodge** (p433) A private reserve that is managed by 'Rainforest for the Austrians,' a group that helped establish Parque Nacional Piedras Blancas.
- **Punta Mona** (p496) This remote retreat on the edge of the Caribbean is a working experiment in organic permaculture farming.
- **Hotel Sí Como No** (p344) This ecotourism pioneer is testament to the fact that luxury and sustainability are not incompatible.
- **Celeste Mountain Lodge** (p220) An innovative lodge constructed out of recycled wood, plastic, truck tires, coconut fiber and scrap metal.
- **Tiskita Jungle Lodge** (p438) Set on 100 hectares of orchards, this jungle lodge has more than 100 varieties of tropical fruit from around the world.

industry is booming, and travelers are leaving behind a larger footprint on the country than ever before. As a result, travelers are increasingly looking at ways to minimize the impact of their stay in Costa Rica and to travel in the most sustainable way possible. Fortunately, it's not too hard to think green while in Costa Rica.

Protect the Environment

One of the simplest things you can do before going to Costa Rica is learning about the country's major conservation and environmental issues (see the Environment chapter, p55, for more information). While traveling in Costa Rica, don't be afraid to ask questions, especially since the best source of information about an area is usually a local.

Here is a useful list of author-tested tips:

- Fill up your bottle from a rainwater-collection system, and purify natural water sources while hiking. Reuse plastic bottles.
- When you arrive in a new town, ask around to see if there are any recycling programs. If a system is in place, spread awareness among your fellow travelers.
- While walking along a beach or a trail, pick up any garbage you see. Your actions might inspire another person to do the same.
- Stick to the trails as this reduces the erosion caused by human transit. Likewise, don't damage plants, and always observe wildlife from a distance.
- Always follow the basic snorkel and scuba guidelines, keep garbage out of the water, and remember not to eat or purchase endangered or undersized seafood.
- Feeding the animals interferes with their natural diets and makes them susceptible to bacteria transferred by humans or pesticides contained within fruit.
- When in doubt, remember that common sense and awareness are always your best guides, regardless of where you are in the world.

Stimulate Local Economies

One of the most immediate benefits of tourism is a strong financial boost to the local economy. Keep this in mind if the opportunity arises to spend money at a locally run business or vendor.

Enjoy the creativity of a local artisan. If you spot a piece on display that catches your eye, buy it instead of saying you'll come back later. In all cases, you'll be surprised how far your colones can stretch.

If purchased directly from the source, arts and crafts generate income from the ground up and encourage communities to maintain their traditional practices. Spend your money where it counts and help ensure a culture's future.

In Costa Rica, there are also a number of cooperatives that purchase indigenous crafts from villages around the country, sell them at a premium, and return the profits to the artisan. An excellent example of this commendable practice is Galería Namu (p95) in San José, which is regarded as the premier indigenous art boutique in the country.

A great way of stimulating local economies in a sustainable manner is to frequent businesses that are dedicated to these aims. See boxed text on p539 for more information on various aspects of ecofriendly businesses. For a list of ecofriendly businesses in Costa Rica, see the GreenDex on p586.

Give Back a Little

Costa Rica is justifiably famous as a leading 'voluntourism' destination, particularly because there is a wide range of programs on offer. Depending on your particular needs and interests, you can choose a program in a variety of fields ranging from environmental conservation to community action. For a list of volunteer programs in Costa Rica, see p538.

TRAVELING WITH CHILDREN

Wild animals, active volcanoes, rainforests, beaches – what kid wouldn't love Costa Rica? Parents are guaranteed a good time as well, and will definitely appreciate the country's myriad adventure possibilities as well as a culture that dotes on children. We have authored segments of this guidebook with the needs of little ones in mind, so look for special kid-focused headings.

Families could go just about anywhere in Costa Rica and be perfectly happy. Even San José has a few sights for children, but it's best to get out of town and into the countryside. For an overview of outdoor activities and

TOP FIVE WAYS TO SAVE THE RAINFOREST

- **Plant a tree** At Selva Bananito Lodge (p470) on the Caribbean coast, you can help reforest a former banana plantation while learning about the conservation philosophy from the lodge's conscientious owners, the Stein family.
- **Drink organic, shade-grown coffee** Organic coffee-growing avoids the use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers, minimizing their impact on flora and fauna. Shade-grown coffee ensures the survival of old-growth forests and is planted under shade plants that produce nitrogen and improve the quality of both the soil and the coffee crop.
- **Educate the masses** Work on a community education program with the Fundación Corcovado (p427), a grassroots organization dedicated to preserving one of Costa Rica's last true frontiers – Parque Nacional Corcovado.
- **Say no to beef** One of the main reasons for forest clearing in Central America is to make way for cattle pasture – mostly to feed the export market. If you can't bypass that burger, make sure you know where your cow came from. Consider indulging in grass-fed beef, which is better for your health and better for the environment.
- **Recycle and reuse** Proper waste disposal relieves pressure on crowded landfills and reduces the chance of illegal dumping. Whenever possible, avoid bottled water and purify your own.

TOP 10



For a small country, Costa Rica is jam-packed with sights and attractions. Hopefully, the following lists will inspire you to seek out all that this beautiful country can offer.

IDYLIC SUNSET SITES

Grab a magic moment in Costa Rica while you enjoy the last rays of the day.

- 1 Taking in the view from **Crestones Base Lodge** (p377) on Cerro Chirripó.
- 2 Looking out from **Cabinas El Mirador Lodge** (p399) in Bahía Drake.
- 3 Viewing the fiery Volcán Arenal from **El Castillo** (p174).
- 4 Sailing on the deep blue Pacific from **Tamarindo** (p263).
- 5 Sipping an ice-cold *cerveza* (beer) at **La Taberna** (p465) in Tortuguero.
- 6 Munching at **Ronny's Place** (p346), high up on the cliffs in Manuel Antonio.
- 7 Hiking at twilight in **Bosque Eterno de los Niños** (p197) in Monteverde.
- 8 Reggae-listening at **Johnny's Place** (p487) in Puerto Viejo de Talamanca.
- 9 Sitting on the dock in the bay at the **Banana Bay Marina** (p431) in Golfito.
- 10 Relaxing on colonial steps at **Plaza de la Democracia** (p75) in San José.

WORST ROADS

Get ready to shift your transmission into overdrive.


- 1 Oldie, but goodie – the road from **Tilarán to Monteverde**.
- 2 The punisher – **Puerto Jiménez to Carate**.
- 3 Dude, where's the transmission? – bumping and grinding to the waves at **Playa Naranjo**.
- 4 A river runs through it – crossing the Río Ora between **Playa Carrillo and Islita**.
- 5 You call this a road? – **Golfito to Pavones**.
- 6 Bone-cruncher – **Buenos Aires to Reserva Biológica Dúrika**.
- 7 Car-nivore – the stretch between **Tamarindo and Avellanas** gobbles up vehicles like candy.
- 8 Road less traveled – the steep climb up to **Altamira and La Amistad**.
- 9 Keep on truckin' – swerving with the big rigs on the Interamericana between **Cañas and Liberia**.
- 10 Lake defect – dodging huge potholes on the road around **Laguna de Arenal**.

BEST BEACHES

With two coastlines fringed with sun-kissed beaches, Costa Rica is a beach-lover's paradise.

- 1 **Manzanillo** (p494) The Caribbean coast's most scenic stretch of sand.
- 2 **Playas San Miguel and Coyote** (p292) Abandoned beaches, backed by rugged wilderness.
- 3 **Playa Conchal** (p260) Crushed shells and turquoise water.
- 4 **Playa Grande** (p260) Sweeping blond sand backed by mangroves, great surf.
- 5 **Playa Matapalo** (p352) Surfing the waves, hiking to waterfalls.
- 6 **Playa Montezuma** (p298) Empty white sands, rocky coves and killer sunrises.
- 7 **Playa Mal País** (p305) Kilometers of huge, crashing surf.
- 8 **Playa Negra** (p271) Dark sands and crystal-clear waters.
- 9 **Playa San Josecito** (p433) Scarlet macaws roosting in the almond trees overhead.
- 10 **Playa Sámara** (p286) A destination for sophisticated beach-goers and fun-loving families.

their required skill levels, see the Costa Rica Outdoors chapter on p405. We've also put together a special 'Fun for Kids' tailored-trip itinerary on p31.

From plush jungle ecolodges to beachside jungle tents, you can find the type of accommodations your family needs pretty much anywhere tourists go. Most midrange and top-end hotels have reduced rates for children under 12, provided the child shares a room with parents. Top-end hotels will provide cribs and usually have activities for children. Throughout this book, we have marked particularly kid-friendly accommodations with this symbol: . If you spot this in a destination listing, you should feel more than free to arrive at check-in with the little ones in tow.

Costa Rican cuisine is simple and hearty and somewhat bland (beans and rice and grilled chicken or steak are omnipresent), making it acceptable for even the most finicky eaters. Special kids' meals are not normally offered in restaurants, though some fancy lodges do them. However, most local eateries will accommodate two children splitting a meal or can produce child-size portions on request. If you're traveling with an infant, stock up on milk formula and baby food before heading to remote areas, and always carry snacks for long drives in remote areas – sometimes there are no places to stop for a bite.

Tired of juice and water? Here are some local drinks that your kids are sure to love: *batidos* (fresh fruit shakes), either *al agua* (made with water) or *con leche* (with milk); coconut milk (sipped through a straw straight from the cracked-open coconut); *horchata* (cinnamon-spiked rice milk). And don't worry too much – generally speaking, tap water and ice cubes in Costa Rica are safe for foreigners to consume.

Some additional tips and resources:

- Children under the age of 12 get a 25% discount on internal air travel, while children under two fly free (provided they sit on an adult's lap).
- If you're traveling with an infant, bring disposable diapers, baby creams, baby aspirin and thermometer from home, or else stock up while in San José.
- For a complete resource on traveling with kids, get Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children* guide.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

While you're in the midst of predeparture planning, check out the following recommended titles to start developing your sense of Costa Rica.

- *Naturalist in Costa Rica* (Dr Skutch) – an icon among bird-watchers, Skutch weaves his philosophies into his beautiful descriptions of flora and fauna in this enchanting memoir and natural history guide.
- *Around the Edge* (Peter Ford) – a story of the author's travels along the Caribbean coast from Belize to Panama, on foot and by boat.
- *Green Dreams: Travels in Central America* (Stephen Benz) – an astute analysis that questions the impact visitors are having on the region and its people.
- *Green Phoenix* (William Allen) – an absorbing and inspiring account of the author's efforts, alongside American and Costa Rican scientists and activists, to conserve and restore the rainforest in Guanacaste.
- *Ninety-Nine Days to Panama* (John and Harriet Halkyard) – a retired couple's detailed and entertaining account of driving an RV (complete with pet dog Brindle) from Texas to Panama.
- *So Far from God: A Journey to Central America* (Patrick Marnham) – the winner of the 1985 Thomas Cook Travel Book Award gives an insightful and amusing account of a leisurely meander from Texas to Panama.

- *Traveler's Tales Central America* (eds Larry Habegger and Natanya Pearlman) – a collection of striking travel essays on the region from renowned writers such as Paul Theroux and Tim Cahill.
- *Walk These Stones* (Leslie Hawthorne Klingler) – this Mennonite service worker writes about her experiences living, working, praying and sharing in the small village of Cuatro Cruces.

INTERNET RESOURCES

CIA Factbook (www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook) An excellent overview of Costa Rica's political, economic and environmental standing.

Costa Rica Guide (www.costa-rica-guide.com) Nicely organized website with detailed maps and travel information on each region.

Costa Rica Tourism Board (www.visitcostarica.com) The official website of the Costa Rica Tourism Board (known as the ICT) is a great introduction to the country. You can research your trip and organize accommodations, tours and car rental from this site.

Guias Costa Rica (www.guiascostarica.com) Links that connect you with everything you'd ever need to know – from entertainment to health to government websites.

Lanic (<http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/ca/cr>) An exceptional collection of links to the websites (mostly in Spanish) of many Costa Rican organizations, from the University of Texas.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Provides information on travel in Costa Rica, links to accommodations and traveling tips from the all-important Thorn Tree community forum.

Tico Times (www.ticotimes.net) The online edition of Costa Rica's excellent English-language weekly newspaper.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

THE BEST OF COSTA RICA

Two Weeks to One Month / Northwestern
Costa Rica & Península de Nicoya

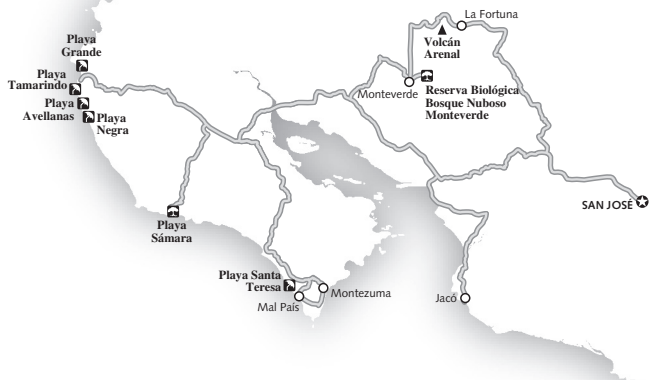
This route takes travelers by bubbling volcanoes, hot springs and tranquil cloud forests before hitting the sun-kissed beaches of the Nicoya.

From **San José** (p66), head north to **La Fortuna** (p158), where you can hike through forest on the flanks of **Volcán Arenal** (p171), then soak in hot springs. Come down from the mountain, take a boat across Laguna de Arenal, then a bus to **Monteverde** (p191), where you can search for the elusive quetzal at **Reserva Biológica Bosque Nuboso Monteverde** (p211).

For a change of scene, head west to the biggest party town in the Nicoya, **Playa Tamarindo** (p263), and enjoy the excellent surf in this brash town. Nature buffs will not want to miss the nesting leatherback turtles at **Playa Grande** (p260), while hard-core surfers should head straight south to **Playas Avellanas** and **Negra** (p271).

Continuing south, don't miss the stunning beaches and cosmopolitan cuisine at **Playa Sámara** (p286) and legendary swells at **Mal País** and **Playa Santa Teresa** (p305). Wind down your trip at laidback **Montezuma** (p298) and head back to San José via **Jacó** (p322) by jet boat and bus.

For a taste of all that Costa Rica has to offer, this classic route will take you into the mountains and cloud forests of the interior before sweeping you down into the Península de Nicoya.



PACIFIC COASTAL EXPLORER **One to Two Weeks / Central Pacific Coast**

For days on end of sun, surf and sand, head south along the central Pacific coast for back-to-back beach towns dedicated to the pursuit of hedonism.

Kick things off in the resort town of **Jacó** (p322), a cosmopolitan enclave of fine dining and raging nightlife. In case you need a reminder that you're still in Costa Rica, backtrack a bit north up the coast to **Parque Nacional Carara** (p318), home to large populations of enchanting scarlet macaws.

Heading south along the coast, your next stop is the port town of **Quepos** (p336), which serves as a convenient base for the country's most popular national park, **Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio** (p349). Here, the rainforest sweeps down to meet the sea, providing refuge for rare animals, including the endangered Central American squirrel monkey.

Continue on south to **Hacienda Barú National Wildlife Refuge** (p354), where you can clamber on a canopy platform and sloth-spot in the trees. If you haven't had enough of the postcard-perfect Pacific coast, keep heading south to **Dominical** (p354) to catch some more waves, or to tiny and tranquil **Uvita** (p358) to escape the tourist crowds.

From Uvita, you can either continue south to the far-flung **Península de Osa** (p390), or head back to **San José** (p66) en route to the **Caribbean coast** (p442).

This excursion continues where the Best of Costa Rica route ends, and winds through the beaches and rainforests of the central Pacific region.



CARIBBEAN COASTAL EXPLORER One to Two Weeks / Caribbean Coast

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

Hop on the first eastbound bus out of **San José** (p66) and get off at **Cahuita** (p469), capital of Afro-Caribbean culture and gateway to **Parque Nacional Cahuita** (p477). Stick around and get your fill of this mellow little village before moving on to **Puerto Viejo de Talamanca** (p479), the Caribbean’s center for nightlife, cuisine and all-round positive vibes.

From Puerto Viejo, rent a good old-fashioned pushbike and ride to **Manzanillo** (p492), from where you can snorkel, kayak and hike in the **Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Gandoca-Manzanillo** (p494).

For the adventurous at heart, head north to grab a boat from **Moin** (p456) and travel the canal-lined coast to the village of **Tortuguero** (p461), 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** (p458), Costa Rica’s mini-Amazon.

After spotting your fill of wildlife amid seemingly endless watery passages, head back to San José via water taxi and bus through **Cariari** (p449) and **Guápiles** (p447).



The Caribbean coast is a world unto itself, and provides a striking and memorable contrast to time spent elsewhere in the country.

ROADS LESS TRAVELED

RIDING RÍO SAN JUAN & SARAPIQUÍ

One to Two Weeks / Northern Lowlands & Caribbean Coast

Travel the river route through some of Costa Rica's most remote regions in the sparsely populated northern lowlands and Caribbean coast.

From **San José** (p66), bus to the tiny town of **La Virgen** (p499), a rafting and kayaking mecca where you can take a ride on the Río Sarapiquí and spend the night at the luxurious **Centro Neotrópico Sarapiquí** (p503).

As soon as you've gotten your bearings, follow the Río Sarapiquí on the bus to **Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí** (p505), where you can wander through banana plantations, spot wildlife and mingle with busy scientists at the **Estación Biológica La Selva** (p508).

Of course, don't wait too long to leave terra firma and grab the morning boat up the Río Sarapiquí to **Trinidad Lodge** (p506), on the south bank of the Río San Juan. Stay on a working ranch, ride horses and go bird-watching before setting out, again by boat, along the Río San Juan, with your eye to the Caribbean coast.

This river (Nicaraguan territory) offers an incredible ride, which will take you through wildlife hot spots, ranches, forest, old war zones (from when Contras inhabited the area) and the remote **Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Barra del Colorado** (p467) to the village of **Barra del Colorado** (p467) and its loose assortment of lodges. There you can go sportfishing, bird-watching and croc hunting (with binoculars, not guns).

You'll have to depend upon tides, weather and independent boatworkers, but if you work it out, you'll see more wildlife and incredible scenery than you have ever imagined.



HIKING IN THE TALAMANCAS **Two to Three Weeks / Southern Costa Rica**

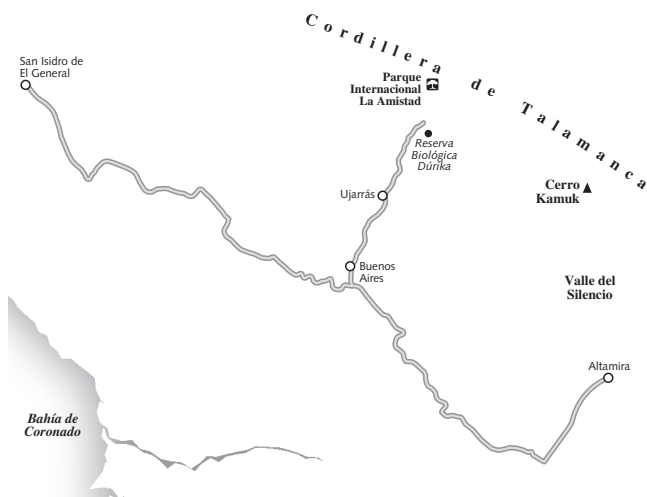
Costa Rica's most unexplored mountainous area is home to two spectacular hikes, which can be done separately or bundled together if you've got the time.

Gear up in **San Isidro de El General** (p369) before heading southeast through pineapple plantations to the small agricultural town of **Buenos Aires** (p378). Arrangements can be made here for transport via dirt road to the wonderfully remote **Reserva Biológica Dúrika** (p378), a self-sustaining community nestled in the Cordillera de Talamanca.

From this point, hire a local guide and trek through **Parque Internacional La Amistad** (p385), one of Costa Rica's last true wilderness areas. You can also pay a visit to the neighboring indigenous community of **Ujarrás** (p378).

If you haven't had your fill of nature yet, head from Buenos Aires to **Altamira** (p386), where you'll also find the headquarters for Parque Internacional La Amistad. From here you can take the 20km guided trek through **Valle del Silencio** (p387), one of the most isolated and remote areas in all of Costa Rica, ending up at a small refuge at the base of the **Cerro Kamuk** (p387).

From here, make the return trip through Altamira and back to the rowdy roads near the Interamericana.



The Cordillera de Talamanca is one of the most remote areas in the country and home to indigenous communities and incredible vistas.

TAILORED TRIPS

SURFING SAFARI

Costa Rican shores have been attracting surfers since *Endless Summer II* profiled some of the country's most appealing breaks.

Playa Tamarindo (p263) serves as a good base for several tasty surfing sites. You can start with a boat trip to the granddaddies of all surf breaks, Witch's Rock and Ollie's Point in the **Parque Nacional Santa Rosa** (p234).

Next, hit the isolated beaches at **Playas Avellanas** and **Negra** (p271), whose famous waves were featured in the movie. Down the coast, **Playa Guiones** (p282) is cooking all year long, and from there it's just a hop, skip and long jump to the legendary **Mal País** (p305).

The next big stop is **Jacó** (p322) and **Playa Hermosa** (p332) on the central Pacific coast, offering consistent waves, but keep moving south for good breaks at **Matapalo** (p352) and **Dominical** (p354).

Afterwards, hightail it way south to **Cabo Matapalo** (p418) on the Peninsula de Osa, before skipping back to the mainland for one of the continent's longest left-hand breaks at **Pavones** (p435).

And don't forget the Caribbean. Catch a boat to the uninhabited **Isla Uvita** (p454) off the coast of Puerto Limón or frolic in the waves east of town at **Playa Cocles** (p489). Further south the famous Salsa Brava at **Puerto Viejo de Talamanca** (p479) is for experts only.



RAFTING SAFARI

Experience the country's world-class rivers while soaking in the sight of pristine rainforests and wildlife on a 10-day safari.

From San José head east to **Río Pacuare** (p148) for two days of enchanted Class IV white water. Move on to the nearby Pascua section of the **Río Reventazón** (p148) for 24km of heart-pumping Class IV+. Travel west to the central Pacific coast and spend a day of gentler rafting, taking in the beach-fringed rainforest of **Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio** (p349), home to more than 350 species of birds. Afterwards, suit up for a quick half-day down the challenging **Río Naranjo** (p342), close by.

Cap it all off with two days on the largely unexplored **Río Savegre** (p342), putting in on the remote, Class IV+ upper Río División, the main tributary of the Savegre. The next day will have you continuing downstream to the bridge takeout on the Costanera Sur, the Pacific coastal highway leading north to San José.



EXPLORING OSA

Home to Costa Rica's most pristine nature, the Península de Osa is an undeniable draw for anyone wanting some rugged wilderness exploration.

Either head down the Pacific coast or fly into **Puerto Jiménez** (p413), which serves as the gateway to Osa. Here, you can spend a day or so kayaking around the mangroves or otherwise soaking up the charm of this tiny town.

Next, head north to **La Palma** (p403), from where you can visit the **Reserva Indígena Guaymí** (see boxed text, p413) and observe firsthand the traditional lifestyle of one of Costa Rica's indigenous groups.

The undisputed highlight of Osa is **Parque Nacional Corcovado** (p421), one of the country's best wildlife-watching spots. It's worth spending a few days exploring the trails with backpack in hand, and particularly well-equipped travelers can even trek across the entirety of the park.

Finally, unwind at **Cabo Matapalo** (p418), where you can chill out for as long as you like, enjoying some of the country's most beautiful beaches.



FUN FOR KIDS

Whether you've got little angels or devilish troublemakers, Costa Rica is 100% kid-friendly and fun for everyone.

Costa Rica's top-billed family destinations are the remote mountain villages of **Monteverde** and **Santa Elena** (p191), where a grocery list of sights and activities awaits. Depending on the ages and the interests of your children, you can take them hiking through rainforest, zip lining through the canopy or even on a tour through a working dairy farm.

Another kid-friendly destination is **Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio** (p349), which woos little hearts and minds with its offering of charismatic creatures. Teach the little ones about the wonders of nature as you spot monkeys bounding through the trees, or simply spend your time sprawling out on gentle ocean-lapped sands.

Continuing with the safari theme, **Parque Nacional Tortuguero** (p458) is traversed by jungle rivers that are chock-full of crocodiles, iguanas and snakes. While little hands and legs should stay inside the boat at all times, the adventure factor runs high here.

White-water rafting on the **Ríos Reventazón** and **Pacuare** (p148) is also a possibility as both rivers have sections with smoother runs that are family-approved. Note, however, that children must be at least nine years old, and even older for tougher runs.

For a taste of the exotic, you can't go wrong with a visit to **Volcán Arenal** (p171). Watching lava spew forth and light up the evening sky is sure to captivate even those with the shortest of attention spans.



The Authors



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Coordinating Author, Central Pacific Coast, Southern Costa Rica, Península de Osa & Golfo Dulce

Matthew is a trained anthropologist and epidemiologist, though he postponed his academic career to spend his youth living out of a backpack. To date he has authored more than 20 guidebooks for Lonely Planet, and covered far-flung destinations from the Darién Gap to the Dead Sea. When he's not in graduate school, out in the field or on assignment, he likes to spend his time exploring the American West with his parents, or catching up with the in-laws in the foothills of Mt Fuji.



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Carolina has traveled Costa Rica top to bottom and east to west on numerous occasions over more than a half-dozen years. During these sojourns, she has eaten ungodly amounts of *chifrijo* (rice and beans with fried pork and salsa) and seen some of the most spectacular scenery on earth. When she isn't getting lost along jungle trails in Costa Rica, she works as a freelance writer in New York City, where she contributes stories to *Time*, *Budget Travel*, *Travel + Leisure*, *Florida Travel + Life* and the public radio station WNYC. She is the author of the uncouth and saucy cultural blog C-Monster.net. Find her on Twitter at @cmonstah.



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Bitten by the wanderlust bug at birth, César has based all his life decisions on the travel opportunities they would afford. Desperate to flee his Virginia hometown after college, he joined the US Army – and was promptly deployed to war-torn Bosnia and Hercegovina. As a career journalist, César landed his first dream job at *USA Today*, where he covered everything from celebrity gossip to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. In 2006 César changed gear and became a London-based freelance writer. This is his eighth and final guidebook for Lonely Planet; in 2010 César switched careers again and is now a US Foreign Service Officer.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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David Lukas wrote the Environment chapter. He is an avid student of natural history who has traveled widely to study tropical ecosystems in locations such as Borneo and the Amazon. He has also spent several years leading natural-history tours to all corners of Costa Rica, Belize and Guatemala.

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