

# Northern Lowlands



It's getting harder and harder to get away from it all in Costa Rica – it's only natural for a country this richly blessed with varied gifts to be such a desirable destination. So the saturation point of popular *playas* (beaches) means spillover to the next not-so-secret sliver of coast, and zip lines continue to proliferate over the canopies from Monteverde to Manzanillo. But travelers who stray to the wild rivers and tropical jungle of the northern lowlands find that in these places, the getting away is still good.

Tourism has certainly touched the lowlands, creating added revenue for a local economy whose living has historically been made from agriculture. Plantations of bananas, sugarcane and pineapples roll across the humid plains from the Cordillera Central to the Nicaraguan border; these plantations are fringed by the tropical forest which was slashed to create the plantations. But green is the color of budding tourism around these parts. Conservationists team with landowners and local governments to make ecotourism work for all parties involved – whether it's the family farmer, the naturalist or the endangered great green macaw.

Bird-watchers, hoping to spot this macaw in the wild, flock to remote lodges in the verdant rainforests of the San Juan–La Selva Biological Corridor, while paddlers who are in the know show up to run the fun rapids of the Río Sarapiquí. Wildlife-watchers and fisherfolk alike head to the lagoons of Caño Negro, and travelers of all stripes are hopping launches up the Río Frío for the languid, fauna-rich river crossing to Nicaragua. This is real-life Costa Rica, where the balance of agricultural commerce and ecological conservation converge to create a contemporary work in green progress.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Exploring the lagoons of **Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Caño Negro** (p516) to take a gander at spoonbills or a stab at tarpon
- Rafting the wildlife-rife **Río Sarapiquí** (p501) near La Virgen
- Keeping your eyes peeled for crocs and sloths as you float to the **Río San Juan** (see boxed text, p515) at the Nicaraguan border
- Slip-sliding through swampy jungle to spot poison-dart frogs and rare green macaws at **Laguna del Lagarto Lodge** (p512)
- Exploring the ruins of **Centro Neotrópico Sarapiquí** (p503) and traipsing the suspension bridges of nearby **Tirimbina Rainforest Center** (p503)



## History

Life in the northern lowlands has always followed the rhythms of seasonal rains – when riverbanks swelled and flooded across the plains the landscape was transformed into a vast swamp that enabled people to subsist on fish, fowl and small game. However, as populations flourished and resources were strained, the earth was altered with the swing of a hoe, and the lowlands were slowly reshaped by farming interests.

In the early 1900s the United Fruit Company planted bananas across Costa Rica and built a railroad from the Caribbean coast to transport them. Many locales in the northern lowlands were originally established by, or branched off from, the banana trade and these settlements continue to make agriculture their business.

## Climate

As in most of Costa Rica, the climate varies within this region. From the hot, dry Llanura de Guatusos along the Nicaraguan border, the northern plains roll southward to swampy lowlands and tropical hardwood forests. In the northern lowlands the dry season runs from April to November. However, the lush jungles surrounding the rivers in the region, such as the Río Frio and the Río Sarapiquí, receive rainfall at almost any time of year.

## Parks & Reserves

Several notable refuges and parks are found in the northern lowlands, offering opportunities for low-key, crowd-free boat tours and wildlife-watching.

**Parque Nacional Braulio Carrillo** (p508) Ecolodges in the Sarapiquí area can arrange rainforest tours and have accommodations at the northern end of Braulio Carrillo.

**Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Caño Negro** (p516) The lagoons of Caño Negro attract a wide variety of birds year-round, though prime time for bird-watchers is between January and July.

**Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Mixto**

**Maquenque** (see boxed text, p510) Though there isn't much in the way of infrastructure at this recently formed refuge, local lodges can take you into this remote rainforest.

## Getting There & Around

Transportation hubs in the lowlands include Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí and San Miguel to the southeast, and Upala and Los Chiles to the northwest, all of which are served by daily buses from San José. If you're not in a

hurry, you can get around with little hassle via public bus, but having your own vehicle will allow you greater ease in getting to the appealingly far-flung reaches of this relatively tourist-free region. In the far north, the border outpost of Los Chiles serves as a launching point for lovely river trips across the border to San Carlos, Nicaragua (see boxed text, p515).

## THE SARAPIQUÍ VALLEY

This flat, steaming stretch of *finca*-dotted lowlands was once part of the United Fruit Company's cash-cow of banana holdings. Harvests were carried from the plantations to Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí where they were packaged and shipped down the river on boats destined for the lucrative North American market. However, with the advent of the railway in 1880 that connected much of the country to the new shipping port in Puerto Limón, Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí became a sleepy backwater.

Banana harvesting continued in the area through most of the 20th century, though in recent years farmers have switched to a more lucrative cash crop – sugarcane. Although Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí has never managed to recover its faded glory, the area around the town is still one of the premier destinations in Costa Rica for kayakers and rafters. There are also a number of stellar ecolodges in the region that are open to nonguests, and feature everything from rainforest hiking and suspension bridges to pre-Columbian ruins and chocolate tours.

From San José, the road north of San Miguel drops for 12km to the village of La Virgen and then flattens out as it bisects agricultural country for an additional 13km to Bajos de Chilamate. The old port town of Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí lies 6km further along this road. Buses linking either San José or Ciudad Quesada with Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí are the primary means of public transportation along this route.

## LA VIRGEN

Tucked into the densely jungled shores of the wild and scenic Río Sarapiquí, La Virgen was one of a number of small towns that grew and prospered during the heyday of the banana trade. Although United Fruit has long since packed up and shipped out, the town is still