

Southern Costa Rica



In southern Costa Rica, the Cordillera de Talamanca descends dramatically into agricultural lowlands carpeted with sprawling plantations of coffee beans, bananas and African palms. Here, *campesinos* (farmers) work their familial lands, maintaining agricultural traditions that have been passed down through the generations. While the rest of Costa Rica embraces globalization, life in the southern zone remains constant, much as it has for decades, and in some places, centuries on end.

In a country where little pre-Columbian influence remains, southern Costa Rica is where you'll find the most pronounced indigenous presence. The region is home to large populations of Bribri, Cabécar and Brunka, largely confined to private reservations, who are largely succeeding in maintaining their traditions despite outside pressures to modernize.

Costa Rica's well-trodden tourist trail seems to have bypassed the southern zone, though this isn't to say that the region doesn't have any traveler appeal. On the contrary, southern Costa Rica is home to the country's single largest swath of protected land, namely Parque Internacional La Amistad. Largely unexplored, this national park extends across the border into Panama and is one of Central America's last true wilderness areas.

And while Monteverde is the country's most iconic cloud forest, southern Costa Rica offers many equally enticing opportunities to explore this mystical habitat. If you harbor any hope of spotting the elusive resplendent quetzal, you can start by looking in the cloud forest in Parque Nacional Los Quetzales. Or, if you want to stand on top of the Cordillera Central, you can climb the cloud-capped heights of Cerro Chirripó (3820m), Costa Rica's highest peak.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Wondering why you're the only one around in the pristine but untouristed **Parque Internacional La Amistad** (p385)
- Trekking to the top of Costa Rica's highest summit at **Cerro Chirripó** (p374)
- Catching a glimpse of the Maya bird of paradise in **Parque Nacional Los Quetzales** (p367)
- Getting a history lesson at the vibrant Fiesta de los Diablitos at the **Reserva Indígena Boruca** (p378)
- Following the steps of one of Costa Rica's greatest ornithologists at **Los Cusingos Bird Sanctuary** (see boxed text, p372)



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. Fortunately, in the last three decades, indigenous groups have finally been allowed to engage in their traditional languages and customs.

However, an increasing number of indigenous youths are finding themselves unable to subsist on their ancestral lands, and many are choosing to shed their native ways in favor of employment in the agricultural sector. Others have turned to the tourism sector for work, though as a population group, 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 (p373) 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 (p385) This enormous bi-national park is shared with Panama and protects a biological corridor of incredible ecological significance.

Parque Nacional Chirripó (p374) Home to Costa Rica's highest and most famous peak, which offers views of both the Pacific and the Caribbean on a clear day.

Parque Nacional Los Quetzales (p367) 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 (p378) This private reserve within Parque Internacional La Amistad is home to an independent, sustainable community committed to conservation.

Getting There & Around

The best way to explore the region in depth is with your own form of private transportation, though you will have to leave your wheels behind if you plan on trekking through La Amistad or scaling Chirripó. Note that this chapter refers to the numbered posts along the Carretera Interamericana, which 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) and **Sansa** (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, the road to Parque Nacional Chirripó passes through stunning countryside of redolent coffee plantations and cool 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 green, grassy soccer field and surrounded by lavish plantations, Santa María de Dota is a charming Tico (Costa Rican) town that merits at least a quick stop. As you'd imagine, coffee production is the economic lifeblood of Santa María, especially since the Coopedota processing facility employs much of the town.

Coopedota (☎ 2541-2828; www.coopedota.com) can give you the complete picture of where your caffeine fix comes from: the Coffee Experience