



Costa Rica

One of Central America's smallest countries, bordering Panama to the south and Nicaragua to the north, Costa Rica is economically and socially advanced with a long tradition of democracy. It is also one of the safest and friendliest countries to visit in Latin America, with an incredible degree of biodiversity. From the spectacular volcanoes that surround the Meseta Central, fast-flowing rivers fall steeply away through lush tropical rainforest towards the Caribbean or Pacific coasts.

Costa Ricans call themselves 'ticos', and nearly all are of mixed Spanish and Indian descent, although in the Caribbean province of Limón a third are black (many of whom speak Jamaican English).

It is easy to combine visits to Costa Rica with Belize, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Peru and Ecuador.

Climate and when to go

The dry season is December to April. During the 'green' or rainy season (May to November, wettest September and October) days usually start warm and sunny with refreshing rain, mostly short lived, appearing in the afternoon. The most popular time to visit is between December and February but there are less visitors at other times.



Golfo Dulce



Heliconia



San José and the Central valley

This is picturesque and fertile land, temperate in climate and characterised by coffee plantations, pretty towns and spectacular, often active volcanoes. The highest peaks rise above the clouds to nearly 4,000 metres, and on their slopes cloud and rain forests teem with orchids and birds. **San José** lies in one of the wide, rich valleys and has an excellent climate. Few of its older buildings have survived the centuries, as earth tremors are fairly frequent.

The Central highlands

From San José it is less than 40 miles to **Volcán Poás**, passing through the pleasant town of Alajuela and coffee plantations before climbing up into dwarf cloud forest. When free from clouds, the smoking crater and its turquoise lake are an amazing sight. The extremely active **Volcán Arenal** can be reached from San José (120 miles) or on the way to the Pacific coast. It is particularly impressive on clear nights when lava flows can often be seen. This is the best base for boat trips into the **Caño Negro Wildlife Refuge**, considered to be one of the region's richest spots for bird watching. Arenal lake is enormous, created for hydroelectric purposes and renowned amongst windsurfers. To the south lies the **Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve**, home to more than 400 species of birds and reached by a challenging ride or bone-jolting road. Heading west from Arenal you drop down into the dry heat of Guanacaste's savanna. From Liberia a winding road heads north into the foothills of the **Rincón de la Vieja** volcano, with hot springs, clear rivers and abundant wildlife.

The Caribbean coast

To the north is the popular attraction of **Tortuguero** National Park's canals. Visits are quite packaged but good lodges provide a comfortable base for river exploration and there are some excellent birding opportunities, plenty of alligators and monkeys. Between July and October the beaches provide nesting sites for the Atlantic green turtle. The ocean here has strong currents and many sharks, so is not safe for swimming. South of Puerto Limón, the ocean is more benign, with good surf, lovely sand and coral beaches, and a vibrant Afro-Caribbean culture.



Monteverde



Poás volcano

POÁS VOLCANO LODGE



On the flanks of Poás Volcano, Central valley. Set in lovely gardens and surrounded by farmland, the lodge was originally built by an English family as their home. It has a warm and cosy atmosphere with charming local staff. Poás Volcano National Park and La Paz Waterfall Gardens are nearby.

HOTEL XANDARI



Close to San José. Small boutique hotel on a coffee plantation with stunning views, a beautiful place to relax after an international flight. 16 rooms (each with own terrace) and lap pools set in colourful gardens. 5 waterfalls in grounds, Poás volcano, San José or Lancaster Gardens within easy reach.



CASA CORCOVADO JUNGLE LODGE



Tucked away in a 170 acre private reserve bordering Corcovado National Park in Drake Bay (Osa Peninsula). Beautifully designed bungalows built using local materials with ceiling fans, mosquito nets and hot water showers. Small spring-fed swimming pool. Guided tours to Corcovado National Park and Isla del Caño are included.

LAPA RIOS



Near Puerto Jiménez on the tip of the Osa Peninsula. Comfortable jungle lodge nestled in the rainforest. All rooms have mosquito nets, showers, a veranda and fine views over the sea. Pretty pool, and the Golfo Dulce beach is a 15 minute walk downhill. Activities include riding, walking, and optional excursions to Corcovado National Park.

The Pacific coast

The **Nicoya Peninsula** is a dry tropical zone with some of Costa Rica's best beaches. There are a few sprawling resort hotels but huge stretches of largely unspoilt coastline still exist. Tamarindo has a long beach and some excellent accommodation, or for those seeking privacy and a feeling of isolation, the area of Malpaís further south is still wonderfully untouched. Here one can find some enticing small hotels, and explore the coastal hills on horseback.

The mainland Pacific coast is easily accessible from the peninsula by ferry, or by road and air from San José. Mountains drop directly down to the coast (which causes high rainfall) through tropical rainforest with a profusion of wildlife, and yet more good beaches. At Carara

Biological Reserve crocodiles and scarlet macaws can be seen. Further south is the very popular **Manuel Antonio** with fine hotels set above good beaches. The famous National Park has forested hills, swamps and beaches and is home to many birds, sloths, monkeys and snakes.

Half of the **Osa Peninsula**, separated from the mainland by the **Golfo Dulce**, is covered by the **Corcovado National Park**, mainly primary rainforest with more than 400 species of birds and many amphibians and mammals (including six cat species). Humpback whales can be seen in December and January, and there is good snorkelling and diving off Isla del Caño. 530km off the coast is Isla del Coco, also a National Park with good scuba diving and superb fishing.



Pacific coast


COLORES DEL PACIFICO



 3km from Flamingo beach. A stunning hotel on a hillside, with just 8 beautifully decorated rooms overlooking the sea. The main house has a bar, restaurant and swimming pool. Lovely views of the bay, especially at sunset.

FLOR BLANCA



 Malpaís, on Nicoya Peninsula. Beautiful and tranquil beachfront hotel with spacious villas, each opening out onto a terrace. Large pool and stylish restaurant. Activities include surfing, mountain biking, riding and bird watching.

PUNTA ISLITA



Secluded position on Nicoya Peninsula. Beautiful luxury hotel with lovely views over the Pacific. Rooms, some with private plunge pool, set around gardens. Infinity pool, bar and open-air restaurant. Activities include riding, boat trips, and canopy tours.

MAKANDA BY THE SEA



Near Manuel Antonio National Park. Romantic hideaway with studios and villas, a beautiful drop-away pool and fantastic views. Lush hillside leads down to a small and effectively private beach.



Nicaragua

Bordered by Costa Rica to the south and Honduras to the north, Nicaragua has overcome a decade of political instability and is rapidly developing into a wonderful destination offering a mix of colonial cities, stunning beaches and fascinating wildlife. The south-west of the country is dominated by Lake Nicaragua, around which the majority of the population live. To the east of the lake is a thin ribbon of imposing volcanoes, many active, and to the west lies the Pacific. On the far side of the mountains, the land drops away into the eastern lowlands, and tropical forests extend east as far as the Caribbean (usually referred to as the Atlantic).

It is very easy to combine the south of Nicaragua with Costa Rica.

The Central mountains and Eastern lowlands

The mountainous central region is covered with oak and pine forests, and coffee plantations. The Atlantic coast is prone to heavy rain and fearsome mosquitos. The population is mainly Indian, with a strong African influence (Moskitia was never colonised by the Spanish) and the major industries are gold mining, fishing and timber. The famous Corn Islands are renowned for their pristine white beaches and undisturbed coral reefs.



Nandaime church, Granada

The Pacific lowlands

Stretching from the Gulf of Fonseca to the southern border with Costa Rica, this is arguably Nicaragua's most beautiful region and encompasses golden coastline, wonderful volcanoes and the vast Lake Nicaragua, known for its freshwater sharks. This is the country's colonial heartland, with interesting and attractive colonial cities (particularly León and Granada), a famous handicraft market at Masaya, as well as Managua, Nicaragua's capital.



Cerro Negro



Masaya festival

MORGAN'S ROCK



2 hours' drive west from Granada on the Pacific coast. A spectacular setting on a wide sweeping bay with white sand (a turtle nesting ground in season). Detached bungalows with views to the forest, and lovely wooden furniture. Pool, and open platform for yoga and spa activities. Horses, sugar plantation, shrimp farm, butterfly house, tropical dry forest reserve.



Pacific coast



Costa Rica Itineraries

TORTUGUERO, ARENAL, MONTEVERDE AND TAMARINDO



Visits some of the country's most popular highlights. Private guides ensure you get the very most out of your visit.

San José

Days 1-2: 2 nights at the Hotel Xandari (see page 77), with local attractions such as Poás or the Lancaster Gardens within easy reach.

Tortuguero National Park

Days 3-4: Driven through the cloud forest of the Braulio Carillo National Park and continue by boat through the Tortuguero channels to Pachira Lodge, a comfortable base for 2 nights. Boat excursions to explore the tropical rainforest.

Arenal

Days 5-6: Fly back to San José and driven to Arenal for 2 nights at the Hotel Arenal Paraíso. Rustic cabins have views of the volcano (on a clear day). Good restaurant and pool.

Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve

Days 7-8: Continue round Lake Arenal and on to the comfortable and homely Trapp Family Lodge for 2 nights. This is the closest lodge to the Reserve.

Tamarindo

Days 9-13: Continue west (5 hours) to Tamarindo, for 5 nights at the Hotel Capitán Suizo, whose bungalows are set in tropical gardens, and direct access to the beach. A hire car will be delivered for the duration of your stay.

Days 14-15: Fly back to San José and driven to the elegant Hotel Alta for your final night. Driven to San José airport the following day for onward connections.



Flamingo



Capitán Suizo



Arenal volcano



THE OSA PENINSULA, MANUEL ANTONIO AND GRANADA



A stunning journey along the Pacific through coastal rainforests and golden beaches to Nicaragua and the colonial highlight of Granada.

The Central Valley, Costa Rica

Days 1-2: Arrive in San José and spend 2 nights in the small country inn of Finca Rosa Blanca, with a pretty pool and lovely views.

Osa Peninsula/Golfo Dulce

Days 3-5: Fly to Palmar Sur and on by boat for 3 nights at the Casa Corcovado Jungle Lodge, bordering the National Park (see page 78).

Manuel Antonio

Days 6-9: Fly on to Quepos for a 4 night stay at Makanda by the Sea, a romantic hideaway with fantastic views (see page 78). Close by is the tropical Manuel Antonio National Park, a good place to see the three-toed sloth and squirrel monkeys.

Granada, Nicaragua

Days 10-15: Fly, via San José, to the lovely colonial town of Granada in Nicaragua for 2 nights at the Hotel Colonial, within walking distance of the city's many fine churches and museums. Full day excursion to the surrounding countryside and boat trip on Lake Nicaragua. Driven an hour south for 3 nights at the working farm and lodge of Morgan's Rock (see page 79), set between the virgin forest and untouched golden beaches of the Pacific coast. Continue by road to Managua for onward connections.



Finca Rosa Blanca



Osa Peninsula



León Cathedral



SELF DRIVE: POÁS, THE CARIBBEAN AND PACIFIC COASTS



Drive yourself through a landscape of volcanoes, cloud forests, coasts and highlands.

San José and the Central valley

Day 1: Spend the first night at the Hotel Grano de Oro, a former private mansion in a quiet side street in the centre of San José.

Days 2-3: Collect 4x4 hire car (comprehensive driving instructions provided) and drive to Poás Volcano Lodge for 2 nights (see page 77).

Days 4-5: Drive 3-4 hours east to Turrialba, for 2 nights at Casa Turire, set in an old plantation (cane, coffee, and macadamia), on the shores of a small lake.

Caribbean coast

Days 6-7: Continue east (3 hours) to Puerto Viejo, on the southern Caribbean coast, for 2 nights at the Hotel Cariblue, a 5 minute walk from the beach and 2 miles from town. Pretty cabins are set amongst lovely gardens.

Central highlands

Days 8-9: Drive (5-6 hours) north-west for 2 nights at Bosque de Paz Lodge, in a privately-owned forest reserve, with a humming bird and butterfly garden.

Nicoya Peninsula

Days 10-11: Drive to Puntarenas, take a ferry to the Nicoya Peninsula, and continue to Malpaís (5-6 hours in all). Not far from the fishing village and surfers' haven of Santa Teresa is the Hotel Flor Blanca (see page 78) where you spend 2 nights.

Days 12-14: Drive north (5 hours) for 3 nights at the Hotel Colores del Pacifico (see page 78), on a hillside just outside the town of Flamingo.

San José

Days 15-16: Hand back the car at Tamarindo and fly back to San José for a final night at the Hotel Grano de Oro. Transfer to the airport for onward connections.



Casa Turire



Cariblue



Santa Teresa

AA ADVENTURE OPTIONS

For those who prefer their feet off the ground here are a few of Costa Rica's many adventure options:

For water sports head to the Pacific coast where you can enjoy **kayaking**, **snorkelling** and **diving**. Live-aboard dive yachts spend a week at the beautiful Isla del Coco Marine Park, 330 miles south-west of Puntarenas and home to white-tip reef sharks, hammerhead sharks, dolphins, manta and marbled rays and giant moray eels.

The Pacific coast also offers some of the best blue water and inshore sports **fishing** (sailfish and marlin) in the world whilst the Caribbean is excellent for billfish, snook and tarpon all year round.

Costa Rica has many excellent rivers for white-water **rafting**, perfect for both beginners and

experts. Part of the routes will allow time to observe birds, insects and flora. 2 or 3 night trips with overnight stays in remote lodges on the riverbanks are also possible.

Canopy tours, sky walks and sky treks take you across the treetops on a combination of suspension bridges, zip lines and walkways for the best vantage point of the rainforest.



Preparing for the Skytrek



Skytrek in Monteverde



Rainmaker canopy walkway near Quepos