



GEODYSSEY

COSTA RICA

PANAMA & NICARAGUA

Travel guides

Planning your trip

Tailor-made holidays

Small group holidays

Touring holidays

Wildlife experiences

Selfdrive holidays

Where to stay

Beaches

Specialist birdwatching

Planning your holiday

If you enjoy planning your holiday in detail, there is plenty to help you in this brochure. Browse the early pages on each country for inspiration. Then choose whether you prefer to travel independently on a private tailor-made trip, or as part of a small group.

Tailor-made holidays

Our tailor-made service is just that. We design your trip just for you to reflect your tastes and budget, matched against what is available in each country.

The designs in this brochure can be taken off-the-peg, or you can pick and choose from them as a starting point

Making a booking

The Booking Information insert included with this brochure covers dates, prices, and how to book. (If yours is missing or has become out of date then please call us for a replacement or download it from our website.)

It's good to know that when you book your holiday with Geodyssey you not only get the benefit of our in-depth knowledge of our destinations from many years of making travel arrangements to Latin America, and our up-to-date knowledge of the best places, old and new. You also get our experience in designing holidays for different tastes and budgets, the confidence that your money is fully protected, and the reassurance that

Sustainable travel

We try to support local economies, minimise any harmful impact on the natural environment, and encourage conservation wherever we can. Your holiday will not only benefit you it will also benefit local people and their communities.

We see our relationships with local hotels, guides and organisers as long-term partnerships that benefit our customers and them. To help hotels adopt sustainable practices Geodyssey has formed a partnership with the Rainforest Alliance, described below.

Air travel accounts for 3-4% of global carbon emissions, but the destruction of forests has been estimated to amount to 20-30% of the total - up to ten times more. When fuel is burned, that's much the end of the story, but when a forest is cut down it also reduces the planet's ability to absorb carbon from the atmosphere, and has a major effect on biodiversity with the loss of many animal and plant species.

By choosing a holiday that values the environments of the tropics you are doing a great deal to support the planet too-perhaps much more than the impact of the fuel used to take you there (which you may choose to CO2 offset as well).

Costa Rica, Panama and Nicaragua all protect large areas in national parks and reserves. By visiting them you are supporting their efforts in a very positive way.

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for your own unique holiday. Often you can choose both how you would like to travel and the level of accommodation you prefer.

Call or email us with your choices and questions and we will discuss them with you and prepare a full written proposal. We can modify this as often as necessary to create your perfect trip.

Meals can be included or left for you to decide during your holiday. For each day of the sample itineraries shown here, BLD (breakfast, lunch, dinner) indicates the meals that are included in the prices given in the Booking Information insert.

If you would like a guide, we will

if anything goes wrong while you are away you have a network of helpful, knowledgeable and resourceful people locally and back in the UK to support you. We're just a phone call away when you are planning your trip, preparing to leave, or out in your destination.

When you get back we will send you a short questionnaire to make sure everything went well and to gather your comments on the places you visited. We will also ask what you think of us. More than 95% of our customers describe their overall level of satisfaction with their holiday as "Excellent" or "Good", with over 90% rating it as "Excellent". A staggering 99% rate the service that our office provides as "Excellent".



Geodyssey and The Rainforest Alliance

Back in 2007 we formed a partnership with The Rainforest Alliance to work towards best management practices in sustainable tourism in Costa Rica. We are very proud that we were the first travel company in the UK to form such a partnership with them for any country. It has worked so well that it has now been extended to Nicaragua and to Ecuador.

The Rainforest Alliance also help promote sustainable production of timber, and sustainable farming of coffee (look for their symbol on coffee jars in your supermarket), so it is exciting to see a similarly professional approach being applied to travel.

One of the things we like best about this initiative is that it is locally based and in tune with how things work in each country. Hoteliers receive training and technical assistance, including workshops and seminars on best management, health and safety, and sustainability.

They are encouraged to seek certification with an appropriate body.

It is a remarkable, locally-driven effort which we encourage you to support by choosing hotels which have already received accreditation, from level 1 to level 5 (the highest).

Note that most accreditation schemes do not relate to the hotel's structure but

arrange for a trained and experienced English-speaking guide appropriate to your interests.

When you are happy with a proposal, send us your booking form.

Small group holidays

To join in with a convivial small group, led by a knowledgeable local guide, please see our popular *Costa Rican Odyssey* on p22.

Add-ons

Whichever style of holiday you choose, you can always add time at the beach or special extensions for wildlife viewing, walking, etc.

We protect ALL our customers

The air holiday packages in this brochure are ATOL protected by the Civil Aviation Authority. Our ATOL number is 5292.



ATOL protection extends primarily to holiday arrangements that include air travel for customers who book and pay in the UK.

Geodyssey also provides equivalent financial protection for customers who do not buy flights from us and/or who book and pay from outside the UK.

Please see the Booking Information insert for more information.

to how it is operated, and some of the most sustainably-run hotels are not yet accredited.

Tribal communities

Meeting tribal people and other indigenous communities on their terms as an invited and welcome guest can be a wonderful and enriching experience.

Their ways of life can be under great pressure, however, and it is vitally important that every member of their community is treated with great consideration, politeness and respect.

We strongly encourage you to make the effort to experience the lives of different cultures in the country you visit, and to make the sort of contribution to their lives that they themselves would most welcome - personally through the respect you pay them, perhaps with a willingness to acknowledge your own society's shortcomings, as well as materially in ways they may suggest - perhaps by buying handicrafts made for visitors or with useful and appropriate gifts where needed.

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Take the family

Costa Rica makes a great destination for adventurous families. There is a lot to see within reasonable travel times, and hotels for most budgets.

Many places that are geared up for visitors have genuinely interesting small-scale attractions to entertain young minds—especially those with an interest in wildlife or wacky outdoor pursuits. Vaccinations are the fewest in the tropics, and the slight risk of malaria entails only the mildest weekly pills. Selfdrive is especially popular for families, and excellent value.

Panama would be a moderately more adventurous choice, depending which parts of the country you choose. Nicaragua's undoubted attractions may or may not be appreciated so readily by younger teenagers.



Hotels

When describing hotels we use the following to indicate relative prices:

MID-RANGE A good standard option which we think is comfortable and pleasant but without frills, at a price to suit the typical traveller. Guest bedrooms all have private bathrooms of course.

UPPER RANGE Something superior marks these hotels out, such as particularly nice décor and furnishings, above average food or an enviable location, with a price to match.

TOP RANGE At the upper end of what is available. A special place to stay, but at the top of the market price-wise. High prices do not always mean luxury facilities, but may reflect the remoteness of the location.

Our personal favourites are marked with the Geodyssey logo in gold.



Guides

Our guides are all local people—the best person to introduce you to a country is someone who lives there. A good guide turns a successful trip into a truly memorable one with insights that foreign guides struggle to match. They are typically well-educated, fluent English speakers and very experienced. They know how to make things work locally and how to put things back on the rails if there are last minute hitches.

Specialist naturalist and birdwatching guides are also available. Drivers may have English which at best is only serviceable — you will have plenty of opportunity to practise your Spanish or your sign language with them!

A note of caution

Costa Rica, Panama and Nicaragua are all developing countries. Allowance must be made for occasional inadequacies and shortcomings: a corresponding degree of caution, flexibility, and patience will also help. Nicaragua is far less developed than Costa Rica or Panama but has its own rewards. While Nicaragua's infrastructure improves we strongly recommend travelling with an experienced English-speaking driver/guide.





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PHOTOS

01 Forest giants are a feature of Costa Rica's lowland rainforests.

02 Coral islands in the San Blas archipelago in Panama's Kuna Yala.

03 The city of León in Nicaragua has some of the finest early colonial churches in Central America.

04 Three-toed sloths are a common sight in many areas; this one was hanging over a main road in northwest Costa Rica.

Welcome

This brochure is part of our growing series of in-depth travel brochures for selected countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Our aim is to provide you with a wide choice of travel and holiday ideas that bring out the best in each destination, so that you can pick the holiday that suits you the best.

In each country we focus on travel experiences rather than just staying put at the beach. We highlight the distinctive places to visit, the best opportunities to see wildlife, ways to gain insights into local cultures and communities, and characterful hotels. There are different ways to get around too, from joining a small group with a knowledgeable local guide, to hiring a car and setting off on your own, catching special tourist buses, or having a private guide or driver all to yourself. Beaches are not forgotten—how could they be when there is such a fabulous choice for winding down at the start or end of a trip?

Also included in the mix are special options like birdwatching at all levels, leg-stretching day walks, and adventurous treks. We also offer rafting, surfing and diving for beginners and intermediates, so you can blend these in as well.

We bring all this together for you in a well-organised trip that makes the best use of your precious time and the budget you decide on.

About Geodyssey

Geodyssey is not an ordinary travel company. We started life in 1993 as a travel specialist for Venezuela, an extraordinary country for which we developed our own dedicated and personal style that many seem to like.

We have grown, but we are still a small team and we really care about each and every customer. We aim to provide the best choices, excellent service, and excellent value in each country we offer. Travel is our passion, and we want to share that with you. Each of us has travelled widely in our destinations (and beyond), so if one of us happens not to have visited a particular place we offer, the chances are that someone else on our team will have been there, probably several times. At the last count we had between us visited Costa Rica about twenty times, and as this goes to press I'm setting off to Panama again to explore new ideas and revisit old favourites.

It seems to work. Our customer satisfaction scores are phenomenally high, and many clients travel with us again and again.

When you are deciding where to go for your next holiday you'll want to turn to someone who really knows the area you'd like to visit. For Costa Rica, Panama or Nicaragua, we hope you'll choose us.

Gillian Howe
Managing Director

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The admirable sloth

No animal could be better adapted to life in the tree-tops, or seem more admirably content with its existence, than the sloth.

Sloths are cousins, not of monkeys, but of anteaters and armadillos, and all three are found only in the New World. Hanging upside down high in a tree, they reach out with sinuous arms to tear slowly but firmly at their favourite leaves. Like cows and sheep, they have several stomachs where the long process of digesting all that greenery can take place. Even so, there is not much energy to be had from such a diet, so the sloth doesn't waste any. Their movements are preternaturally slow, of course, and they like nothing better than sunbathing, especially in the morning, to warm their tummies and help speed their digestion. Amazingly, they are confident swimmers.

Once a week they clamber down to the forest floor, poke a hole in the earth, make a discrete deposit, and slowly make their way back up. A howler monkey, whose diet is similar, would accomplish the equivalent task on the move, high in the trees (and will deliberately do so on your head if he doesn't like you). Why does the sloth go to all that bother?

The answer seems to be that the sloth is doing some gardening. It doesn't roam far, spending its life on perhaps 40 individual trees, but takes about 10% of their output of leaves - a huge proportion. Mineral nutrients are hard to come by in the forest so by returning a proportion (perhaps as much as half) accurately to the roots the next leaf crop is given a boost. Yet another reason for admiring the sloth.





02

Costa Rica

Costa Rica is a jewel of a country. Within a small area it has abundant wildlife, wonderful scenery, fine beaches and much more. It is easy to get around and there are some excellent places to stay.

Most people visit Costa Rica for the experience of nature that it offers. It is incredibly rich in biodiversity, with over 5% of all the species on earth to be found in an area a fifth the size of the UK. Wildlife reserves and national parks cover 25% of the country, helping to maintain these precious natural wonders. Getting to see the natural side of Costa Rica has been made easy with numerous park trails, elevated walkways in the canopy and river boat trips.

Within this small space there is also a great variety of scenery: mountains tipped with misty cloud forest, lowlands swathed in rich rainforest, dry and dusty ranch lands, long beaches and rocky coves. There are impressive volcanoes, including one that spews red lava on an almost daily basis, wild rivers tumbling through narrow gorges, and country roads that wind through sleepy villages whose farming families grow coffee, flowers, or fruits.

Costa Rica is a great place for touring, with a local guide, in a group or on your own, or for just taking off in a hire car and going at your own pace.

If you want a lively time then adrenaline is available in plenty, with zip-lines high through the forest, surfing on Pacific rollers, whitewater rafting, trekking and horse riding all easy to find. If you prefer to slow things down, there are plenty of lovely beaches of all kinds, and boutique hotels with spas to pamper you and swimming pools to laze by.

Often called the Switzerland of Latin America, Costa Rica is peaceful and well organised. It has no army, educational and health standards are relatively high, and English is widely spoken. There is a good choice of accommodation, ranging from well-kept small guesthouses and eco-lodges to ultra-stylish boutique hotels.

It's a great destination for first-timers to Latin America, superb for wildlife enthusiasts, wonderful for families with older children, and excellent for adventurous honeymooners.



Pura vida!

From top to bottom Costa Ricans call themselves 'Ticos'—a nickname that instantly conveys the friendly simplicity and open-heartedness that you will find throughout Costa Rica as you travel.

PHOTOS

01 Three-toed sloths are good swimmers. We saw this one while we were rafting on the Pacuare river, climbing a vine (slowly) to return to the treetops.

02 Gaudy at night, Red-eyed Tree Frogs tuck in their legs during the day, shut their eyes and appear almost completely green, see panel p9.

Wherever you go you'll find a love for life and nature and a determination to make the most of whatever lady luck brings. It's summed up in the phrase '*Pura vida!*'—literally 'pure life'. You can say it when someone asks how you are, when you hear good news, or just any time you'd like to say something positive. *Pura vida!*

You'll sometimes hear a slang called *pachuco*, largely unintelligible to the outsider. If you don't mind not understanding the answer, you might try "*Pura vida mae!*"—*mae* being the equivalent of 'mate' or 'dude' in pachuco. You're sure to get a surprised laugh and a cheerful welcome in return.

Around Costa Rica

Mountain sierras strung with volcanoes run the length of Costa Rica creating some of its most dramatic scenery, between the long shorelines of the Caribbean to the east and the varied coastline of the Pacific to the west.

CENTRAL VALLEY

The hub of Costa Rica is the Central Valley, a wide plateau ringed by mountains and volcanoes and home to 70% of Costa Rica's population. Its spring-like climate is perfect for the many coffee plantations, market gardens and fruit fields that checker the landscape.

There is lots to see and do in and around the Central Valley and it is well worth spending a few days there. Some of the many sights are shown in the panel on this page.

As well as San José, three of Costa Rica's larger towns, Alajuela, Cartago and Heredia, are also in the Central Valley, along with many smaller towns and villages. It's a busy place, in contrast to almost the whole of the rest of the country.

SAN JOSÉ

Fully a third of the country's population lives in San José itself, a bustling, congested modern city in the middle of the Central Valley, where most international flights arrive. It is worth a short visit for a taste of local life and to take in some of the principal sights:

- the **National Theatre** is the most lavish building in the capital. Funded by a coffee tax in the late 19th century its baroque interior parades the wealth of the coffee planters in neocolonial style.
- the **Pre-Columbian Gold Museum** is an underground museum containing thousands of gold artefacts from as early as 500 BC. On show are body ornaments, bracelets, earrings, chest plates, little bells and earrings, intricately worked representations of local animals, and delicate figurines. A gallery in the foyer shows the work of contemporary Costa Rican artists.
- the **Jade Museum** holds the largest collection of

jade carvings in the Americas and has displays of pre-Columbian art, pottery and sculpture. The museum is on the top floor of an office building and so has good views over the capital.

- the **Museum of Costa Rican Art** contains a small collection of 19th and 20th century painting and sculpture by national and international artists with changing exhibitions. It is located in a large, well-planted park near the city centre.

There is a good choice of hotels in the city and the surrounding countryside—see p24 for examples.

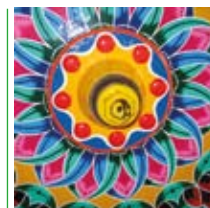
CARIBBEAN SLOPES

East from San José, the road climbs into the mountains, passing volcanoes left and right, and descends through lush rainforest on the Caribbean slopes of the Cordillera Central. These days it's a short drive to the coast—just a couple of hours or so—but it was practically inaccessible from San José until the arrival of the railway at Puerto Limón in 1890. This heralded Costa Rica's banana boom, with plantations replacing swathes of forest behind the long sweeps of Costa Rica's wild Caribbean shores. Jamaican workers brought a West Indian flavour and today Puerto Limón and beach communities in the south have an easy-going African-Caribbean feel.

To the north of San José and the Cordillera Central a wide triangle of lowland runs across to the Caribbean and up into Nicaragua. There are some very special places for wildlife in this region, including Sarapiquí (p9), Caño Negro, Maquenque and the flooded forest of Tortuguero (p11).

PACIFIC SLOPES & OSA PENINSULA

Westwards, it is an even shorter journey from San José to the Pacific ocean, reaching the sea close to the mouth of the Gulf of Nicoya. Going south from



Into the Central Valley

There are characterful small towns and villages dotted around the Central Valley, and other sites easily reached on day trips from San José.

■ **Grecia's church** is made entirely of iron—a novel approach inspired by the fate of its predecessor, which burned down. The parts were forged in Belgium and bolted into position in the 1890s.

■ Neighbouring **Sarchí** is a centre of folk art, chiefly colourful kaleidoscopic designs that were traditionally painted on ox-carts. The most elaborate convey the bride and groom from church.

■ **Zarcero's** town square is jam-packed with topiary clipped into arches—a surreal photo stop.

■ **La Paz waterfall & butterfly garden** A popular attraction with 5 waterfalls, large butterfly enclosures and hummingbird garden.

■ **Lankester Botanical Gardens** holds an internationally renowned collection including 800 orchid species. Peak bloom is between February and May. Excellent plantings of heliconia, bromeliads, palm, ferns, cacti and bamboo in extensive gardens.

■ **Irazú and Poás Volcanoes** see p12.

■ **The Orosí Valley**, shielded by steep-sided mountains, is a very pretty place with two colonial sites of interest: the church of Orosí, one of the few to have survived Costa Rica's earthquakes, and the ruins of Ujarrás, the country's oldest church from 1575.

■ **Coffee plantations** Costa Rica produces some of the best coffee in the world (for the national economy it is truly the grano d'oro—the golden grain). The most famous plantations are Britt and Doka and both offer popularised tours of their fields and the process of coffee production. Several smaller coffee fincas provide their own, more down-to-earth, experience.

here, good beaches begin almost immediately but are at first rather busy, being the closest to San José. Beyond Jacó things start to ease, and soon you reach Quepos and the beautiful Manuel Antonio National Park, where verdant tropical forest opens onto picturesque white sand beaches. Wildlife is good here too: see p9.

Southwards beyond Manuel Antonio lie quiet natural beaches and the sleepy villages of Dominical and Uvita.

Some stylish boutique lodges have recently appeared on this part of the coast, while the good-hearted Hacienda Barú is also a national wildlife refuge rising from beach to mountain ridge.

Further still lies the Osa Peninsula, jutting into the Pacific Ocean. Thanks to its remoteness, heavy rainfall and dense jungle it ranks as one of the most biodiverse places in the world. More on p9.

CENTRAL HIGHLANDS & THE SOUTH

The long Pan American Highway heading south from San José ascends the highest pass in Costa Rica, Cerro de la Muerte, a cold and windy place of Andean-type páramo vegetation and low oak trees. The tranquil cloud forests of San Gerardo de Dota are tucked away close by below, see p10.

Descending through the Talamanca mountains, the road continues south to the border with Panama. This little visited region is home to the Wilson Botanical Gardens, where the Organisation for Tropical Studies has a research centre in well-planted grounds with beautiful flowers and plantings of gingers, lilies, heliconias, bromeliads, agaves and bamboo. The star of the show is the garden's collection of over 700 palms. The Organisation for Tropical Studies has a research centre here with accommodation for scientists and visitors.

A large part of the Talamanca range is protected by La Amistad International Park which continues into Panama.



02

NORTHWEST & NICOYA

Northwest from the Central Valley, the Central Cordillera gives way to lower ranges that continue into Nicaragua.

A morning's drive from the capital brings you to the cloud forests of Monteverde or, on the other side of the mountains, the lava-spewing Arenal Volcano, see p12.

Beyond them are the ranch lands of Guanacaste, the cultural soul of Costa Rica, and the dwelling place of the country's *sabañeros* (cowboys). The seasonally parched landscape with its herds of grazing Brahma cows seems a far cry from the lush forests of the south and east. Here you can experience a slice of an authentic rural Costa Rica, an area that retains its quintessential Tico feel. In fact the national dish, gallo pinto, consisting of rice, beans and herbs, originates from the Guanacaste region. At weekends it is not unusual to come across a village fiesta with be-hatted riders on their proud-stepping horses kicking up the dust. Bull-fighting Latino style (where the bull is harried but unharmed) is as popular here as baseball.

Liberia, the regional capital, is a very pleasant country town worth a stop. Near its centre there are atmospheric colonial streets, partly restored, and a great many small shops providing everything from groceries, haberdashery and haircuts to complicated brightly painted agricultural machinery.

Beach resorts speckle the coast of the Nicoya Peninsula in the far west of the region, see p26.



Turrialba

The small town of Turrialba, approached eastwards over the mountains from the Central Valley, is a popular spot for whitewater rafting on the Reventazón and Pacuare Rivers. Pacuare Lodge (p25) is a special favourite for us. Soaring above the region stands Turrialba Volcano (p12), with hikes up its forested flanks to the summit. Nearby Guayabo NP is an archaeological site with 3000 year old ruins and some of the last pre-montane forest left in the region.

The Centre for Tropical Agricultural Research, a world-renowned for research into tropical crops, offers landscaped gardens and trails that also make for some easy birding. Hacienda Tayutic (p25) offers great views and an experience of estate-based country life.



PHOTOS

01 We took this view of Arenal Volcano during a walk on the 'Hanging Bridges', see panel on page 12

02 Costa Rica has six toucan species. This is the Keel-billed toucan found in lowland and mid-elevation forests throughout most of the country.

Rio Celeste and Tenorio Volcano

The electric blue waters of the well-named Rio Celeste, charged with volcanic minerals, tumble down forested slopes around Tenorio Volcano NP in the northern Central Cordillera. Though well off the beaten track, a handful of attractive lodges can now be found in this area. There's a good road from Liberia and back roads over the hills to Caño Negro or along the eastern side of the mountains down to Arenal, making this an interesting stepping stone for exploring some relatively hidden parts of Costa Rica.

COSTA RICA

When to visit Costa Rica

■ **Dry season** Between December and April there are clear blue skies and sunshine, particularly in the Central Valley, the highlands and the beaches of the north and central Pacific coast (Tamarindo, Nicoya, Jacó and Quepos). This is the most popular season, with Christmas, Holy Week and Easter being particularly busy. Book well in advance at these times, as the best hotels can fill early.

■ **Green season** In Costa Rica's May to November 'green' season, mornings are typically clear, while afternoons grow cloudy and may bring rain – a short sharp burst or a couple of hours. Skies usually clear for a magnificent sunset before more rain at night. Travel is less popular, but the scenery is greener, prices can be lower, and there can be other bonuses, including wildlife events such as turtles coming to lay their eggs. September and October are the wettest months, when conditions can be tiresome.

■ **Temperatures** Costa Rica is in the tropics, so temperatures are fairly constant all year, just varying with altitude. At sea level, a tropical 30–35°C is typical, tempered by sea breezes. The Central Valley and San José at around 3800ft average a very pleasant 26°C. In the highlands temperatures can sometimes hover at around a chilly 10–13°C.





Monkeys

Among the most memorable of Costa Rica's mammals are its 4 species of monkey. At 12-14in plus tail, the squirrel monkey is the smallest. Slender and agile, they roam the forest looking for insects, fruit and nectar from the ground right up to the highest branches. They travel in small groups, making so many squeals, whistles and chirps that they are impossible to miss. They are found so patchily that it is thought they may have been introduced from South America by man. Manuel Antonio NP is a good place to find them.

White-headed capuchin monkeys are the most commonly seen, sometimes together with squirrel monkeys. Mid-sized (14-22in plus tail) they move in similar groups, gracefully, agilely, not calling much, but there is always plenty of movement in the branches to give away their presence. Their diet is similar, with wasps being a special favourite. Black-handed spider monkey (aka Geoffroy's spider monkey) are seen occasionally: they are larger usually generally black monkeys swinging by their arms from branch to branch mostly high up. They need large forest areas and are considered threatened.

Mantled howler monkeys (pictured) are truly wonderful. They are entirely black, with a pale frosted fringe of hair on their sides or lower back. The long throaty roars called by the lead males to coordinate their groups echo for miles. You will usually find them sitting around or moving slowly (upright rather than hanging); their diet of fruit and leaves making for a comparatively stolid life.

01

Where to see Costa Rica's wildlife

To see the greatest variety of Costa Rica's fabulous wildlife you should visit as many different habitats as you can.

In many areas of Costa Rica your morning alarm is more likely to be the call of a howler monkey than the revving of a car engine. Among a wide choice of places to see wildlife, two areas really stand out: Tortuguero in the north of the Caribbean coast and the Osa Peninsula, on the southernmost part of the Pacific coast. Visits to either can be added to the beginning or end of your trip, see p21.

The wildlife you will see in any area depends on the habitats found there. Costa Rica offers several good opportunities to experience three of the most significant tropical life zones: lowland rainforest, cloud forest and tropical dry forest. If you would like to see the widest range of wildlife then choose examples from each life zone rather than all the same.

FLOODED FOREST

Tortuguero National Park

The flooded forests of Tortuguero National Park on the north Caribbean coast provide a unique experience. Boats take the place of cars, gliding along the narrow river channels between the trees.

From the water, the forest presents a lush wall of green, a dense tangle of palms, mimosa, wild almond and morning glory. Sloths hang motionless in the trees by the river, warming their bellies in the sun to activate the digestion of their latest meal of leaves. Family troupes of mantled howler monkeys exchange throaty roars, while white-headed capuchin monkeys pick delicately at fruiting trees

above branches where large iguanas lie motionless in the sun. Their cousins, iridescent emerald green Basilisk or 'Jesus Christ' lizards, their long crests raised, prepare to skip and dash across the water's surface, while tree frogs tuck in their blue legs and close their bright red eyes so all that remains visible is their leaf-green skin. Stalking the water's edge, tiger herons hunt for fish among tree roots and lianas. In the rivers, caimans lose themselves in the tangle of branches along the shore and play a waiting game. When the coast seems clear, young river otters cavort in playful groups, their parents keeping watchful guard.

Among the more extraordinary creatures found here are garfish, ancient creatures with crocodilian snouts, and greater bulldog bats that glide across the water at night to pluck dreaming fish in their strong claws.

There are several lodges at Tortuguero where guests stay on a full board basis and are taken out each day on shared excursions by resident naturalist guides, mostly by boat. Access to Tortuguero is by motorboat or by plane from San José.

Though there is plenty of sunshine, Tortuguero's rainfall is tremendously high all year round. The wildlife is prepared for this, as are the lodges which are well stocked with rubber boots, waterproof ponchos, and covered boats.



Turtles

Of the world's 7 species of turtle, 5 nest in Costa Rica. Green Turtles arrive in huge numbers at Tortuguero from June to October. Local conservation volunteers lead nightly small groups to see them. Hawksbills and Loggerheads have also been known to nest here at this time although sightings are very rare.

Around the same months Olive Ridley Turtles, the smallest of the 5, nest on the Pacific at Playas Ostional and Nancite. Their arrivals are timed according to the moon, with each *arribada* generally lasting about a week around the last and first quarter of the moon.

Leatherback Turtles have been seen at Playa Grande on the Nicoya Peninsula between October and mid-March however numbers have dwindled massively and the chances of seeing them are now extremely small.



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Maquenque

Costa Rica's newest national park, Maquenque lies in the deep lowlands of the San Carlos river which seeps slowly northwards to join the Rio San Juan. The amount and variety of wildlife here easily rivals the more famous Tortuguero, although more effort and time are required to see it. The emblem species of this area is the endangered, almost legendary, Great Green Macaw. Maquenque Ecological (see p23) is the place to stay here. Maquenque is a 4 hour drive north from San José.

LOWLAND RAINFOREST

At Sarapiquí and other parts of the Caribbean slopes northeast of the Cordilleras, and in the far south west, conditions suit very dense tropical rainforest—very wet, essentially non-seasonal, lowland forest. Parts of the mid-Pacific and south east coast support a less drenched but still rich rainforest.

Inside an undisturbed rainforest it is dark. The upper 'canopy' layer of foliage of mighty buttress-rooted trees blocks out the intense tropical sun. Creepers and climbers wind around their trunks in search of any light that penetrates the canopy, while twisted lianas hang down like ropes. Where the sun reaches the forest floor, fast growing species spring up in a dash for the light.

Mantled howler monkey, black-handed spider monkey, white-headed capuchin, brown-nosed coatimundi, sloth, agouti, white-lipped peccaries and whitetail deer all inhabit the rainforest along with more furtive creatures like jaguar, puma, ocelot, jaguarundi and tapir. But sight lines are short and the canopy is high, so it will be harder than you might imagine to see the animals: they will be aware of you and most will be keen to stay out of sight. It is more likely to be the small things—tree frogs, morpho butterflies, columns of leaf-cutter ants, extraordinary fungi and the plants' often cunning and intricate defence mechanisms—that will keep you enthralled.

Sarapiquí area

The Organisation for Tropical Studies' La Selva research station is widely recognised as one of the world's leading centres for the study of lowland tropical rainforest. It offers a well thought-out series of paved trails through part of its extensive reserve. It is easily accessed from lodges in Sarapiquí and from San José—even in a day trip, as is nearby

Brulio Carrillo NP which protects an area of similar forest.

A popular attraction in this general area is the **Rainforest Aerial Tram**, in which four-person open cable cars soar almost silently through the canopy on the slopes of a private rainforest reserve, passing an arm's length from epiphytes and ferns and offering a monkey's-eye view of life in the tree-tops. The ride lasts about 1½hr and suits all ages.

South Caribbean

On the Caribbean coast in the southeast, near the Panamanian border, is **Gandoca-Manzanillo National Wildlife Refuge** which protects an area of lowland rainforest and wetlands. The lovely Almonds and Corals lodge (p25) lies within the park area.

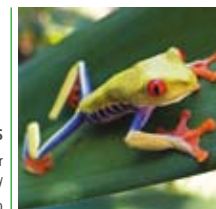
Mid-Pacific

On the mid-Pacific coast, **Carara Biological Reserve** covers a transitional area between dry forest to the north and primary evergreen rainforest to the south. The nearby floodplains of the Río Tárcoles have wetlands rich in water birds and waders, amphibians and reptiles. An oxbow lake beneath the main road bridge over the Tárcoles is home to large American crocodiles of up to 4m. Pause here at dusk and you may be rewarded with the magnificent sight of scarlet macaw, a threatened species, flying to their roosts from feeding grounds in the forest. Villa Lapas Lodge and Cerro Lodge (both p23) are convenient for the reserve.

A little further south, **Manuel Antonio National Park** spreads over a series of bays and headlands where breakers wash up to a pocket of rainforest teeming with wildlife. There are pristine white sand beaches, coral reefs and hiking trails. Cathedral Point is a classic tombolo: an island linked to the land by a sand spit. Most visitors take the 1km forest path to the beach. Even on this short trail there are great wildlife viewing opportunities—four species of monkey (including squirrel monkey), coati, racoons, sloths, iguanas, toucans and parrots are regularly seen. There are several hotel options close to the park (an area that is becoming overbuilt, and busy in high season) and around the small but growing town of Quepos; many are on cliff tops above the Pacific, but the upscale hotel Arenas del Mar and mid-range Espadilla are by the beach (both p27).

South Pacific—Golfo Dulce & Osa Peninsula

At the southernmost end of the Pacific coast, the Osa Peninsula wraps around the waters of the Golfo Dulce. The rainforest grows tall here, thriving on the heavy rainfall which averages 5.5m a year and stimulates an incredible variety of flora and fauna, 4% of which are endemic species. The dense forest is home to over 400 species of bird and 114 species of mammal, including such elusive 'spectaculars' as jaguars, ocelots and tapirs who stalk its green shadows. Much more common are troops of mantled howler monkeys bellowing from their leafy perches, capuchin and spider monkeys peering out from breaks in the treetop foliage, and sloths hanging semi-camouflaged against the verdant background. The rustle of dry leaves gives away the presence of peccaries scurrying about in the undergrowth. Iridescent blue morpho butterflies, the size of small dinner plates, dance in the sunlight filtering through the leaves. Brightly coloured pairs of scarlet macaw squawk loudly to each other in mid-air as they cross the jungle canopy.



PHOTOS

01 Mantled howler monkey

02 A good place to see Scarlet Macaw is Carara NP on the way to Quepos and Manuel Antonio NP on the Pacific coast

03 White-headed capuchin monkey

04 Squirrel monkey

05 Hoffman's Two-toed Sloth, more accurately 'two-fingered' as all sloths have three toes on their feet

06 The Neotropical River Otter is quite widely found around forested lowland rivers, such as in the Sarapiquí area

Frogs

Perhaps nothing evokes Costa Rica more readily than the Red-eyed Tree Frog, although they are found in lowland forests throughout Central America and into South America.

They are mostly nocturnal, preferring to spend the day tucked away below a leaf when they appear completely green. Their gaudy colours suddenly flash into life when they move, an off-putting surprise to a predator.

Costa Rica has many more frogs to offer, some just as colourful and astonishing - look for the Blue Jeans Frog for example (you'll win no prizes for working out how it got its name).

The easiest places to see the commoner species are in captivity in 'frog gardens' around the country.



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Most of the peninsula, where the forest is at its richest and least disturbed, is protected by Corcovado NP, while Piedras Blancas NP protects a good portion of the remaining forest on the mainland side of the gulf. The leading lodge on the peninsula is Casa Corcovado Lodge (p21 and 23), on the shores of the Pacific deep within the park itself, surrounded by the forest, and accessible only by boat—a spirit-lifting journey through mangroves, along the forested shores of Drake Bay, to a wet landing at the lodge’s jungle-backed beach. Danta Corcovado Lodge and Lapa Rios Lodge face inland across the gulf, and although they are accessible by road, their experience of the forest is less intense. Some of the lodges in the Dominical area offer day trips by boat into Corcovado NP from the north.

You can explore the lowland rainforest of Piedras Blancas NP on the mainland from Esquinas Rainforest Lodge. Further down the coast, on the wild Burica peninsula and almost in Panama, Tiskita Lodge offers a rustic forest experience.

Some of the lodges on the Pacific, including Casa Corcovado, offer boat trips to Caño Island where a pair of perfect stone spheres mark a traditional burial ground of the Diquis Indians. As you approach the island there is a good chance of seeing bottle-nosed dolphin, bull shark, and perhaps one of three species of whale. Snorkelling and diving are also possible though visibility can be poor.

CLOUD FOREST

On the higher slopes of the cordilleras the forests are cool and moist. Mists shroud the trees for at least part of each day, creating the conditions for orchids, bromeliads, mosses and lichens to festoon the branches. Tree ferns are common.

Such ‘cloud forests’ support many of the plants and animals that are found in lowland rainforest, but they also harbour some unique species. Among the birds, many of the most colourful tanagers only inhabit cloud forests, along with the most spectacular bird of the neotropics, the Resplendent Quetzal (see panel).

Costa Rica has four key places where you can experience cloud forest. Monteverde is the most famous and has grown very popular. If you prefer your nature in tranquillity we recommend San Gerardo de Dota, Bajos del Toro or Los Angeles.

Monteverde

Monteverde was founded in the late 1950s by Quakers from Alabama escaping the draft. It is perched high on the Atlantic slope of the Cordillera de Tilarán, northwest of San José, sheltered from constant strong winds. A bone-shaking, deliberately unpaved road winds up to it from the Pan American Highway. The settlers cleared the forest on the lower slopes for grazing but visiting biologists found the cloud forest above the community rich in flora and fauna and in 1972 a private reserve was created to protect the watershed and its remaining habitat; contiguous reserves have been added protecting the Santa Elena Cloud Forest and most recently a Children’s Everlasting Forest. There are several lodges and small hotels to choose from, see p25.

The settlement of Santa Elena, which serves the Monteverde Reserve, is a disorderly assortment of lodges and ‘eco experiences’. Access to the forest is highly commercialised, with marketing that draws tens of thousands of visitors each year. There are guided nature walks into the Monteverde Reserve and canopy walks along networks of high suspension bridges and trails with fascinating opportunities to see the forest at different levels. There is a hummingbird gallery, a butterfly garden, a serpentarium, an orchid garden, and a number of adrenalin-rush ‘canopy tours’ on zip-lines—see p13.

San Gerardo de Dota

Compared to the full-on experience of Monteverde, San Gerardo de Dota is the Garden of Eden—a quiet forested valley alive with streams that tumble down from the mountains. If you are lucky enough to visit when the sun is shining the valley seems truly charmed, as though you have stepped into the pages of a fairy tale.

This is the most reliable place in Costa Rica to see the Resplendent Quetzal. As sightings are easiest in the morning when the weather is finest it is best to stay overnight. There are three nice lodges that also offer horse-riding, hiking and fishing. San Gerardo de Dota is not far below the highest point in Costa Rica, the highlands of Cerro de la Muerte, so can be cold at night.

Bajos del Toro

The small farming village of Bajos del Toro is noteworthy for the delightful cloud forest lodge of

Bosque de Paz (p23), within a 700ha private reserve of cloud forest rising up behind it on the Cordillera Central. Alternatively you can stay at El Silencio (p24) an upmarket mountain retreat and spa near the village.

Los Angeles

The quiet cloud forest of Los Angeles on the edge of the Central Valley is not far from the pleasant mountain town of San Ramón.

The place to stay here is Villa Blanca (p24), with a short trail near the lodge that provides a taste of the cloud forest. During March the lodge provides transport to a neighbouring reserve for the chance to see quetzals.

DRY FOREST

West of Costa Rica’s cordilleras the climate becomes progressively drier as one travels north through Costa Rica and into Nicaragua.

The dry season in the northwest corner of Costa Rica is very pronounced. To minimise water loss during this period of drought, woodland trees such as the *guanacaste* – the national tree of Costa Rica, the startlingly red flowered *flamboyán*, and the ‘naked Indian’ or *gumbo-limbo*, shed their leaves. Such deciduous dry forests are scarce in the tropics and can be very good for wildlife viewing, particularly when the leaves are off the trees. Black-handed spider monkey, white-headed capuchin monkey, coati, tamandua, agouti, blue jay, toucan and long-tailed manakin can all be seen quite readily.

The principal dry forests in Guanacaste, now protected against clearance for ranching, are found in the three national parks of Santa Rosa, Guanacaste and Rincón de la Vieja.

There are also good opportunities to see tropical dry forest in Nicaragua, the private Domitila reserve (p45), just across the border, being a good example.

Santa Rosa NP

Santa Rosa NP is home to several mammals including armadillo and white tailed deer as well as 253 species of bird and some 3,140 species of butterflies and moths.

Trails wind through the park, including the Quebrada Duende trail which passes petroglyphs carved by indigenous peoples.



National parks and reserves

25% of Costa Rica's land area lies within national parks and other state reserves, of which about two-thirds receive active protection. Additionally all mangroves have been put under state ownership and protection. National parks charge a modest entry fee.

There are also a good many private reserves, like the excellent cloud forest reserve at Bosque de Paz.



The Resplendent Quetzal

The spectacular iridescent plumage of the Resplendent Quetzal, a bird of the cloud forest (see p10), made it the sacred bird of the Maya. The male has a crested head, glittering green back, maroon lower breast shading to a bright crimson belly and dramatic 25" streamers that trail as it flies.

Like other trogons, the quetzal is a secretive forest bird, but often stays on a favoured perch for a long time—giving good opportunities for lengthy views. It is easiest to see in the March–June nesting season.

04

Rincón de La Vieja NP

A handful of lodges near Rincón de La Vieja offer rustic yet comfortable bases from which to explore the area. Hacienda Guachipelín (p25) is an adventure lodge and cattle ranch, where you might start the day watching the cows being milked before embarking on a day of adventures. Optional activities on offer include guided nature walks, horse riding in the national park, ranching cattle, natural mud baths, and full day hikes up the volcano itself.

WETLANDS

Costa Rica has seven RAMSAR Sites (wetlands of international importance), whose wildlife typically includes aquatic and wading birds such as anhinga, roseate spoonbill and the threatened jabiru, plus masked howler monkey, white-faced capuchins, sloth and caiman. They include the flooded forest of Tortuguero and Maquenque (p8) and two others of special interest.

Palo Verde

Long known to birders, Palo Verde National Park is most productive in the dry season when this seasonally flooded wetland set amid the arid dry forests of the north Pacific Guanacaste state becomes an oasis for migrant and resident birds.

Caño Negro

Also popular with birdwatchers, Caño Negro Wildlife Refuge, north of Arenal near Los Chiles, consists of a seasonal lake and surrounding marsh.

Costa Rica's life zones

This map, based on WWF data, shows in broad terms where Costa Rica's life zones are to be found—when nature has been left to itself. Farming and other human activities have diminished the areas that retain their natural ecosystems.

■ **Lowland rainforest** swathes both sides of Costa Rica's central mountain ranges, often right down to the sea. Shown in green on the map, the darker shades correspond to lower elevations, with the flooded forests of Tortuguero in the northeast among those shaded darkest. Much depends on rainfall, so lowland forest on the drier Nicoya Peninsula is in reality

much less dense than on the wetter Osa Peninsula, with many gradations between the two.

■ **Cloud forest**, shown in blue shades, occurs at higher elevations—notably at Monteverde, Bajos del Toro and San Gerardo de Dota. Higher still, the vegetation turns to páramo (a high altitude moorland), in areas of the palest blue on the map.

■ **Tropical dry forest** is shown in brown. It occurs in the northwest.

■ **Mangrove** dots the coast and is shown in pink. Within each area there may be many pockets where habitats are different through local influences.



PHOTOS

01 Massive 'forest giants' that emerge through the canopy of other trees are a feature of Costa Rica's lowland rainforests.

02 Flooded forest, of which Costa Rica's Tortuguero National Park

is a great example, are especially rich in wildlife that is easy to see.

03 Canopy walkways are an excellent way to experience the forest. There are good ones at Monteverde and at Arenal.

04 Ethereal cloud forests swathe the higher elevations of Costa Rica's mountain ranges, thriving in the moisture-bearing air from the Pacific or the Caribbean.

Mountains of fire

Costa Rica's 200 volcanoes include some of the most accessible and dramatic active volcanoes in the Americas.



01

IRAZÚ AND POÁS

Irazú and Poás volcanoes can each be visited easily on day trips from San José, with roads that take you to within a few hundred metres of their craters. Although both are classed as active, they seem content with the occasional burst of steam and gas from their vivid crater lakes. You'll need a prompt start to arrive at the craters before the clouds roll in for the day, usually around 10am.

Irazú looms above the city of Cartago and at 3432m is the tallest volcano in Costa Rica. It has four dramatic lagoon-filled craters. The main crater is just over 1km wide, with vertiginous walls 300m deep and a sulphurous green lake at the bottom. Be prepared to be blasted by cold winds at the top where the bare pumice creates a moonscape effect. On a very clear morning it is possible to see both the Atlantic and the Pacific from here.

37km north of Alajuela, Poás is a strombolian volcano—a conical shape created by a long succession of non-catastrophic eruptions. Its vast crater is 1320m wide and 300m deep. At the bottom is a circular hot lake. It is reached by a scenic drive from San José, first passing a region of coffee cultivation, then through cloud forest. The final walk to the crater is in a stunted elfín forest and areas with little or no vegetation apart from arrayán, a bush with very leathery leaves, and occasional large-leafed 'poor man's umbrella', *Gunnera insignis*.

TURRIALBA

The easternmost of Costa Rica's active volcanoes and one of the largest, Turrialba stands at 3340m and is covered in cloud forest vegetation. This stratovolcano has three craters at the upper end of a broad, wide summit depression. It is possible to hike or drive up to the rim, where you can walk some of the way around the craters' edge.

Since a series of eruptions in 1866 Turrialba has been quiet, though its steaming craters hint at its explosive potential.

Warm rain gear is recommended at the summit, which can often be damp and chilly.

ARENAL

Arenal Volcano rises in a perfectly symmetrical cone above the town of La Fortuna.

Arenal is one of the region's most consistently active volcanoes, though even it has periods of relative slumber. When active it spews almost daily outpourings of incandescent lava, mushroom clouds of gas and steam, and ejects hot boulders that bounce hundreds of meters down its slopes—all helping to ease the pressure deep below the volcano where the Cocos plate is being driven under the Caribbean plate at a rate of 9cm a year.

In its active periods Arenal's performances are most impressive on a clear night when red-hot lava can be seen flowing from the top of the cone. In the day, ash clouds billow up from the crater and there are dull thuds and rumblings from deep within.

RINCÓN DE LA VIEJA

Sulphurous vents and bubbling mud pots spatter the dry forests of Rincón de la Vieja National Park, evidence of the volcanic activity deep underground.

Above it all rises Rincón de la Vieja, a 1816m stratovolcano whose 400km² bulk includes nine eruption points, one of which is still active.

South of the active crater is a large freshwater lagoon, Los Jilgueros—a good place for Black-faced Solitaire and Baird's Tapir.



Around Arenal

The Arenal area is worth stopping for a night or two, there is a good selection of things to see and do:

■ Hot springs

Arenal can be frustratingly obscured by cloud, but even if visibility is not good there are attractive, popular, open-air thermal baths a short distance from the foot of the volcano where you can relax in warm sulphurous waters until well into the night, often with the volcano's rumblings as a soundtrack.

■ Hanging Bridges

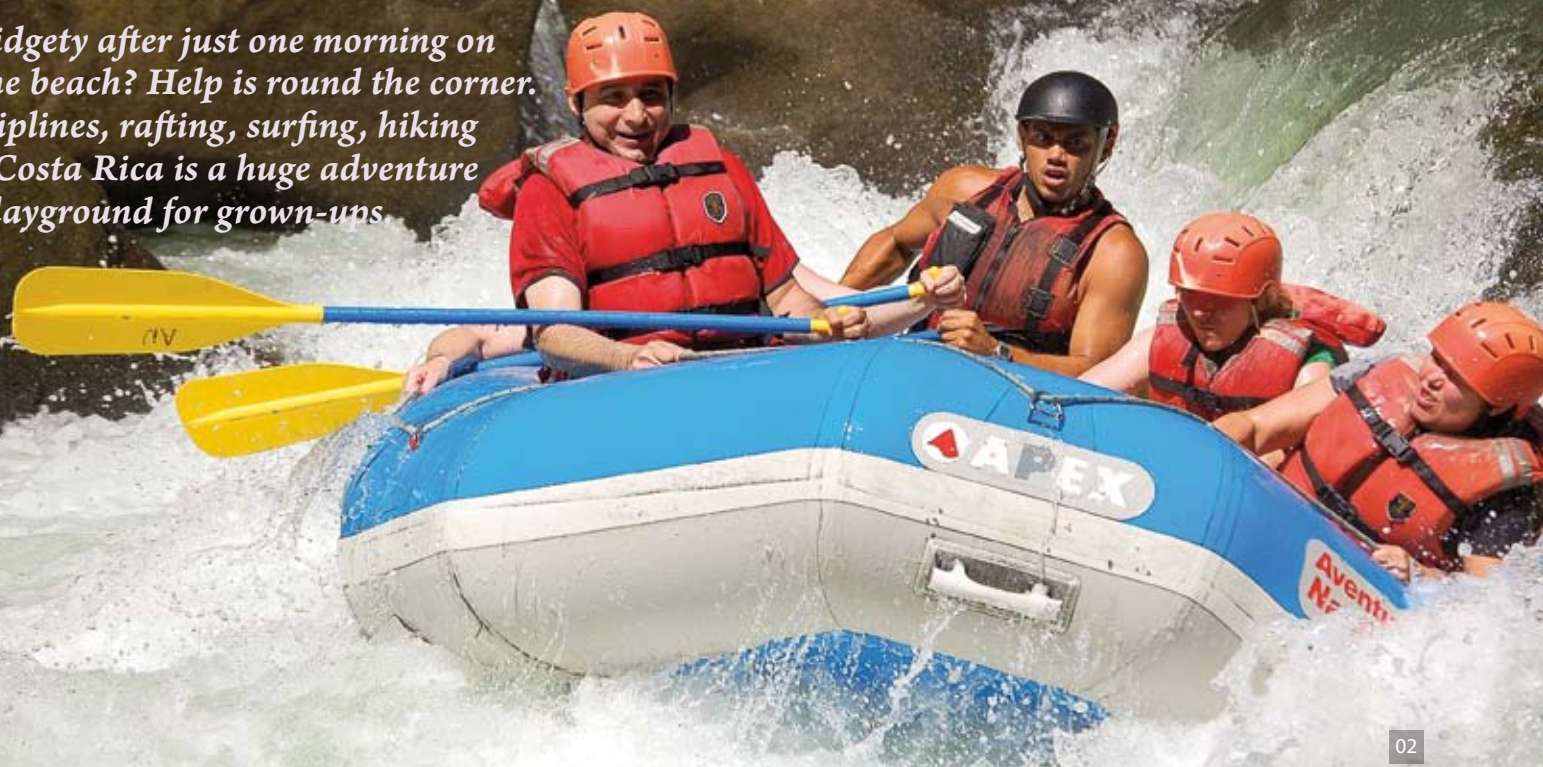
The lowlands near to Arenal Lake are swathed in forests that can be explored on a series of paths and suspended walkways known as 'The Hanging Bridges'. Gently sloping paved trails meander through the shaded forest, opening out at regular intervals on to footbridges suspended over the forest canopy giving great views over the verdant canopy, across the valley to the volcano. It is not uncommon to see families of howler monkeys resting in the tree branches on a hot day, or toucans surveying their forest domain.

■ Arenal's eruptions

Arenal's bubbling activity is characteristic of a strombolian volcano, and should make Arenal safe from catastrophic eruptions. Active phases can last years, with occasional peaks such as in August 2000 when in a day of thunderous explosions Arenal ejected 20 outflows of gas and rock and a 1km high column of ash. Even in its quieter periods the volcano is seldom silent. When active the show can be seen very well from safe distances, but real dangers confront those who venture off-limits. Poisonous gas and incandescent avalanches claim the lives of the foolhardy.

Active Costa Rica

Fidgety after just one morning on the beach? Help is round the corner. Ziplines, rafting, surfing, hiking – Costa Rica is a huge adventure playground for grown-ups.



02

EXPLORING THE CANOPY

Getting high up into the canopy is a fascinating way to experience the life of the forest and there are several ways to do it in Costa Rica.

One good option is to walk on hanging bridges suspended on cables through the forest. There is a lovely suspension bridge at Sarapiquí and aerial tours at Monteverde, Braulio Carrillo National Park and Arenal to name only some.

Cable cars, such as the Rainforest Tram, are an even easier alternative.

For a high adrenaline experience, zip wires are the only way to fly. Strapped in a light harness with pulley attached, you are sent whizzing along a succession of cables strung between platforms set on trees or metal pylons. Usually the lines are among or below the tree tops, but the final stages of Sky Trek at Monteverde are very long, fast and high—you can be in the cloud as you zoom along. Also called 'canopy tours', ziplines are available in many parts of the country.

WALKING AND HIKING

Many national parks have good trails for general walkers, especially those in the cooler air of mountains and volcanoes. Volcán Irazú, Monteverde to Arenal, Bajas del Toro and Rincón de la Vieja National Park are also great for longer day walks. See the Cerro Chirripó panel for a stretching and rewarding 4 day trek.

WHITewater RAFTING

There is some wonderful rafting in Costa Rica, most notably on the Pacuare and Sarapiquí rivers.

Grades I and II are suitable for beginners, grades III to IV are for the slightly more experienced (and can usually be undertaken on your second day of rafting), above that you need to be fully trained and

experienced beyond our scope. Safety briefings and basic training are given on the spot, to which you must pay close attention.

Rafting is not only great fun but can take you through incredible scenery in locations only accessible by river. In the less hectic moments you float down the river in perfect bliss.

RIDING AND RANCHING

Horse riding is available in many parts of Costa Rica, so we can fit in as little or as much as you want into your trip. Latin Americans are less precious about riding than the British making it so much more fun, though riskier. Rounding up cattle in Rincón de la Vieja, galloping along the beach at Nosara or pottering around on the slopes of Turrialba are some of our favourite riding experiences.

SURFING & SUP

Costa Rica's Pacific coast has plenty of great surfing beaches, and most resort towns offer surfing lessons to get you going. Try it! Tamarindo is the place most associated with surfing in Costa Rica but for a laid back natural experience head for Nosara or Sámara. There are good places on the south Caribbean too.

Stand-up paddle boarding (SUP) is really catching on. You'll find it in most of Costa Rica's established surfing spots, with easy flatwater SUP on Lake Arenal and mangrove areas at the coast. You may even get to try SUP yoga!

DIVING

There is a great scuba location at Isla del Caño (sharks almost guaranteed), and diveable reefs at Cahuita and Gandoca-Manzanillo on the Caribbean. Beware currents. Mainland Costa Rica doesn't offer enough for a purely diving holiday, unless you can include the world-class Cocos Islands (see panel).



Cerro Chirripó trek

Cerro Chirripó in the Cordillera de Talamanca has the highest peak in Costa Rica at 3819m. Protected in a national park, its a rugged landscape with great views, lakes and cirques. We arrange 4 day treks to the summit also taking in Mount Terbi, impressive rock formations known as the Crestones, and Lion's Valley savannah. You need to be fit already, of course, but this is a great way to stretch yourself during your holiday in quite different scenery.



PHOTOS

01 The main crater lake of Poás volcano, at an altitude of 2300m, is the most acidic lake in the world.

02 It's a tough job but somebody's got to do it. Our Tenille Moore (centre right) and Julie Middleton (far right) rafting the Pacuare river on their way to visit the wonderful Pacuare Lodge (p25). Julie is now with The Travel Foundation which helps mainstream tour companies understand, manage and take effective action on sustainable tourism.

Cocos Island diving

Cocos Island, 500km off the Pacific coast, is an uninhabited rainforested jewel. Its waters explode with life, including innumerable white tip reef sharks, schooling hammerheads, dolphin, manta and marbled rays, giant moray eel, sailfish, occasional whale shark, large schools of jacks and tuna, marlin, and more. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, Jacques Cousteau called it "the most beautiful island in the world". It was nominated as one of the seven wonders of world and is among the top ten ocean dive locations. Its remoteness means few have dived it, but we offer a week-long live-aboard trip that makes an amazing experience.

Planning your trip

Tailor-made holidays

Costa Rica has the most options for the traveller of any country in Central America. The suggestions on these pages are a starting point and can be adapted in many ways. Browse through them to see which appeal to you the most, then contact us to talk through your ideas.

Where to stay

There is a wide choice of hotels and lodges, from stylish to rustic, from urban to wilderness, with well-kept family-run hotels being the most plentiful. See pages 23-25 and 27 for a small selection of the nearly 200 hotels we offer.

Getting around

There are four sensible options for getting about in Costa Rica:

- **Private guided touring** An English-speaking guide, who will usually also be your driver, accompanies you between destinations and on excursions in each place. You can sit back and relax while you travel, gain some real local insight, and make the most of your time.
- **Private transfers** An experienced local driver (not necessarily English-speaking) collects you from your hotel and transfers you to your next destination. There are no travel worries, it is a private service, and you have your independence in each location. Pick-up times can be adjusted to suit you.
- **Shuttle-bus** This is the most cost effective option, making use of a well-developed minibus transfer network between popular locations. A minibus seating about 12 people collects you from your hotel and drops you at the door of your next hotel. You share the journey with other visitors, not necessarily from the UK. Departure times are fixed and there may be some waiting. This option works well when travelling between the main tourist regions, but private transfers are required for the more remote destinations.
- **Selfdrive** A hire car is a great way of enjoying Costa Rica. Distances are relatively short, but many minor roads are unpaved, so you will need a relaxed approach and a sense of adventure. SatNav/GPS is a great help.

Whatever your mode of transport, we can pre-book your local excursions for you to help make best use of your time in an area.

Food and drink

Hearty wholesome food is the order of the day. Usually a little plain for European tastes, menus tend to rely on national favourites or standards like pizza and pasta. Few would choose Costa Rica for a gourmet experience, but that's not to say that you won't find delicious dinners here and there.

Small group holidays

As an alternative to a tailor-made holiday, our Costa Rican Odyssey (p22) is an excellent way to see the country with everything taken care of, in the company of like-minded travelling companions, and escorted throughout by a naturalist guide.



TOURING & WILDLIFE - CHOOSE MID OR UPPER RANGE HOTELS & LODGES - CHOOSE PRIVATE TRANSFERS, SHUTTLE-BUS, OR SELFDRIVE

Coast to Coast

One of the best all-round tours of Costa Rica, visiting the Caribbean side and the Pacific, Arenal volcano, the flooded forest of Tortuguero, rainforest at La Selva, and the cloud forests of Monteverde.

San José

Day 1 You are met on arrival at the airport and driven to your hotel in the San José area, which we helped you choose in the price category you preferred.

Caribbean (Gandoca-Manzanillo)

Day 2 B In the morning you are driven eastwards to the south Caribbean coast (4hr), passing through the lowland rainforest of the Braulio Carrillo NP, where you stay for 2 nights at a lodge near the Gandoca-Manzanillo Wildlife Refuge.

Day 3 B Today you are free to relax on a pristine local beach or take up one of the many optional activities available locally. There are walking trails through the rainforest, you can hire bicycles, go snorkelling on the coral reefs or try an aerial zip-line through the jungle.

Visits to local indigenous community projects are possible if booked in advance.

Tortuguero

Day 4 BLD Early this morning you are driven north along the Caribbean shore to a dock where you board a motorboat for the journey to your lodge in the flooded forests of Tortuguero, see p8.

After lunch you are taken to visit Tortuguero village and the local beach, where your guide will introduce you to the history of the area and habitats of the national park.

Day 5 BLD A full day based at Tortuguero, including an excursion by boat through the narrow channels of the flooded forest for wildlife viewing, shared with others from the lodge. An English-speaking local naturalist guide provided by the lodge will help point out the creatures.

Sarapiquí

Day 6 BL After breakfast at the lodge you are transferred by boat back to the dock, then onwards by road to a local restaurant for lunch. If you have chosen to have a hire car it will have been brought here for you to collect.

Travel to Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí (1hr) where you stay for 2 nights.

Day 7 B Today is free to take advantage of one of the local activities. You could take a nature walk at La Selva Biological Station, whitewater raft down the Sarapiquí River or take a more leisurely 'river float' to enjoy the forest scenery at the water's edge. You could choose to end the day with a night hike at La Tirimbina in search of nocturnal species.

Arenal

Day 8 B Get a reasonable start this morning to travel to the Arenal area, where you stay for 2 nights.

Day 9 B A free day for your pick of the many local attractions. You could try one of the canopy tours, such as 'Hanging Bridges' for excellent views across the treetops to the outstretched valley, or visit a choice of hot springs where you can relax in thermal waters.

Monteverde cloud forests

Day 10 B Travel along the north shore of Lake Arenal then up the winding country roads to Monteverde cloud forest, your base for the next 2 nights. In the afternoon you could visit the hummingbird gallery or the local cheese farm.

Day 11 B You are free today for your own choice of activities in the Monteverde area. There are guided nature walks through the Santa Elena and Monteverde cloud forests, a choice of two very good canopy walks, zip wires and horse-riding.

Pacific coast

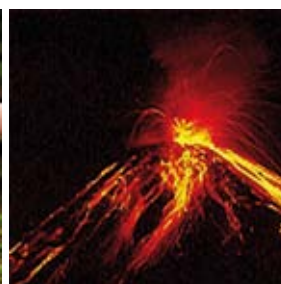
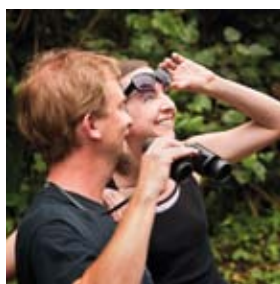
Day 12 B Travel westwards this morning to the Pacific coast, where you spend 3 nights relaxing at the beach at Tamarindo (or your choice of beach destination - see p26-7).

Days 13-14 B Free to relax on the beach.

San José

Day 15 B A final free morning at the beach before you travel back to San José for a final night.

Day 16 B If you are using a hire car drop it off at the international airport before checking in for your chosen flight home. Alternatively you will have a private transfer from your hotel to the airport to co-ordinate with your departure time.





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TOURING & WILDLIFE • MID-RANGE HOTELS & LODGES • SHUTTLE-BUS

Costa Rica Nature Explorer

A wonderful trip visiting Costa Rica's main locations for wildlife, staying in good quality mid-range lodges where nature is the focus.

San José

Day 1 You are met at the airport on arrival and driven to a mid-range hotel in San José.

Tortuguero

Day 2 BLD Early this morning you are picked up from your hotel by shuttle-bus, and taken by road and boat into the flooded forest of Tortuguero on the north Caribbean coast. Here you stay for 2 nights on a full board basis at a lodge in the national park. Regular tours with naturalist guides are included, with great opportunities to see sloth, monkeys, basilisk lizards, tree frogs and other amphibians, waterbirds, and turtles in season.

Day 3 BLD A day of wildlife safaris in Tortuguero national park.

South Pacific jungle lodge

Day 4 BLD An early flight from Tortuguero to San José then onwards by air to Golfito on the south Pacific. You are met and driven 30min to Esquinas Rainforest Lodge, your base for 3 nights. Set within the jungle of Piedras Blancas NP, Esquinas is part of a project combining conservation, research and community development. It makes a peaceful setting to enjoy the sights and sounds of the tropical rainforest. The biodiversity is tremendously high with over 140 species of tree per hectare, around 2500 species of plants and more than 360 species of birds.

Day 5 BLD A free day for nature viewing. The lodge has a good series of jungle trails with opportunities to see colourful birds, butterflies, bizarre insects, frogs, and possibly monkeys, agouti-pacas, peccaries, and coatis. The understorey of the secondary forest has heliconias, ferns, and other more light-hungry plants, and the primary forest has walking palms, buttress-rooted forest giants, orchids and bromeliads, passion flowers, and endless lianas.

Day 6 BLD Second free day at the lodge which also offers optional mangrove tours, village excursions, horse riding, kayaking and dolphin watching boat trips in Golfo Dulce, a bay separating Piedras Blancas NP and the Osa Peninsula. Three species of porpoise live and breed here all year round. Humpback whales can be seen at times. There is a 90% chance of seeing bottlenose dolphins playing and swimming by the boat.

Sarapiquí

Day 7 BD Fly to San José, to be met at the airport for the drive to Sarapiquí to stay 3 nights at a mid-range hotel. If you have chosen the self-drive option you are taken to collect your car at the airport for the drive to Sarapiquí, otherwise your own private driver will take you. The afternoon is free to settle in and enjoy the grounds. In the early evening you are collected for a private tour of La Tirimbina reserve for nocturnal animals such as porcupines, frogs, opossums and kinkajous, and returned to your hotel at around 9pm.

OTS La Selva

Day 8 BLD A full day at La Selva Reserve—widely considered one of the world's foremost sites for tropical forest research. One of the reserve's guides shows you the forest and gives insights into current projects. There are great birding and wildlife opportunities.

Day 9 BD A free day either to relax and enjoy the grounds of your lodge, or to take an optional excursion, booked in advance or locally, such as a nature trip on the Sarapiquí river.

Maquenque Ecologde

Day 10 BLD Today you travel 2hr by private transfer, or driving yourself, from the foothills of the sierra across the plains for 3 nights at Maquenque Lodge (p23), a super lowland rainforest retreat for every aspect of natural history, with knowledgeable biologist staff.

Day 11-12 BLD The lodge offers a selection of excellent nature safaris by boat or on trails (including night walks in the forest), which you choose and pay for at the lodge at quite modest cost.

Bosque de Paz cloud forest

Day 13 BLD By road with either a private driver or selfdrive to Bosque de Paz (p23), one of our favourite lodges in Costa Rica, set in its own 700ha private cloud forest reserve, to stay 2 nights.

Days 14 BLD A day to enjoy gardens and cloud forest trails at Bosque de Paz. There is great birding on the little approach road.

San José

Day 15 B After a cloud forest dawn, return by road (self-drive or private driver) to San José in good time for afternoon flights home.

Just a week in Costa Rica

It's amazing what you can see in just a week. Wildlife, volcanoes, and cloud forest make the most of a short visit.

San José

Day 1 You are met on arrival at San José airport and driven to a favourite mid-range hotel.

Tortuguero

Day 2 BLD Early today you are collected from your hotel by a tourist minibus shuttle service, shared with others, and driven to the Caribbean coast, then taken by boat into Tortuguero NP (p8) to stay 2 nights full board at a wildlife lodge by the flooded forest. Breakfast is en route.

A daily programme of wildlife safaris in the national park is included, led by the lodge's resident English-speaking naturalist guides and shared with others.

Day 3 BLD Wildlife safaris in the flooded forest.

Arenal Volcano

Day 4 BL Return by boat then road to the Arenal Volcano region (p12) for 2 nights at a mid-range hotel with a view of the volcano.

Day 5 B A free day in Arenal. Several tours are available locally at extra cost, eg Arenal Volcano reserve and the hot springs, Caño Negro Wildlife Refuge, a choice of two very good canopy walks, zip wires, or horse riding to the beautiful La Fortuna waterfall.

Monteverde

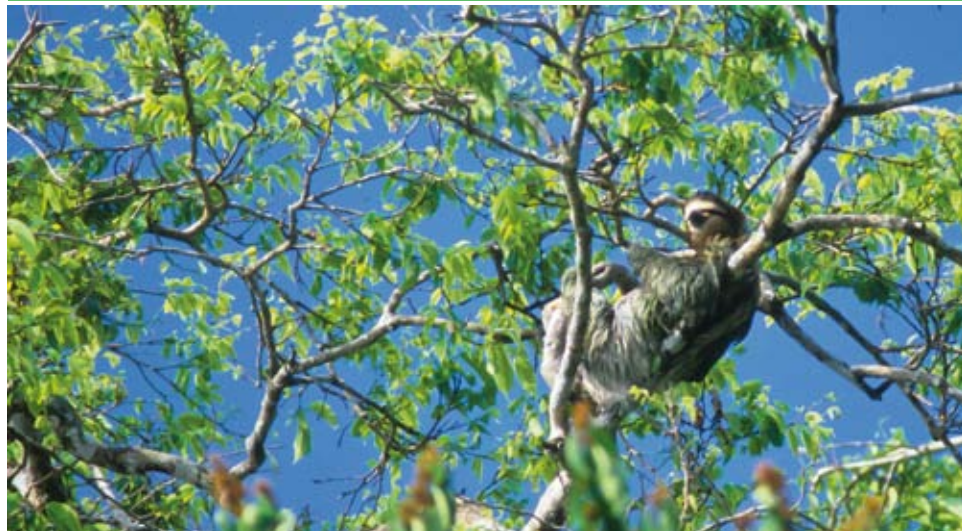
Day 6 B You are collected from your hotel for a boat journey across Arenal lake, with super views. You are then shuttle-bussed into the mountains of Monteverde (p10) for a 2 night stay at a mid-range lodge.

Day 7 B Free in Monteverde. Excursions available locally at extra cost include walking or birdwatching in the Monteverde or Santa Elena cloud forest reserves, canopy walkways, ziplines, horse riding, a butterfly garden, and a cheese factory.

Day 8 B This morning you are shuttle-bussed back to San José (4hr), or to your next destination - perhaps a beach hotel on the Nicoya Peninsula or near Manuel Antonio NP.

You could also combine this itinerary with a visit to Nicaragua or Panama, perhaps our 'Just a week in Panama' (p37) or 'Just a week in Nicaragua' (p45).





TOURING AND WILDLIFE • UPPER AND TOP RANGE HOTELS AND LODGES • CHOOSE PRIVATE TRANSFERS OR SELFDRIVE



Creature Comforts

First-rate wildlife and nature experiences while staying in some of Costa Rica's best boutique and spa hotels and wildlife lodges.

San José

Day 1 You are met on arrival at San José and driven to the lovely Xandari Spa (p24), set among coffee and fruit plantations overlooking the Central Valley, where you stay for 2 nights.

Poás Volcano and Doka Coffee Estate

Day 2 BLD Your guide collects you in the morning for a scenic drive through the Central Valley to Poás Volcano (p12), reaching the rim of its steaming crater. Continue to the Doka Estate coffee farm for an insight into high quality coffee growing and preparation, with lunch and a visit to their butterfly garden. Back at Xandari Spa there is time to relax or take one of the optional treatments.

Bajos del Toro

Day 3 BLD Part of the morning is free for relaxation or a spa session, then it's on to Bajos del Toro for a 2 night stay at El Silencio (p24), a boutique lodge and spa in a private reserve of cloud forest filled with bromeliads, orchids, ferns and clear mountain streams. You travel either by private transfer, or if on a self-drive option, your hire car is delivered to your hotel mid-morning in good time for the journey; you return it on day 10.

Day 4 BLD An 'eco-concierge' is available to accompany you on a walk to experience the rich life of the cloud forest (with good birding opportunities). There is time to enjoy the private Jacuzzi on your terrace, or the hotel's spa facilities at an extra charge.

Arenal

Day 5 B You have the morning free to explore and enjoy the cloud forest before travelling on to the Arenal area. Stay for 2 nights at the delightful Lost Iguana hotel (p25), which has a good view of the volcano. Rest of the day free to explore the grounds or relax by the hotel's pool.

Day 6 BD This morning you visit the Hanging Bridges with a private English-speaking local guide, for spectacular views across the trees to Arenal Volcano. You return to Lost Iguana for free time then in mid-afternoon walk with your guide in Arenal Reserve. This is followed by a visit to a hot springs to lounge luxuriantly in thermal waters amid landscaped gardens, taking dinner at its restaurant—with the volcano's dramatic rumblings in the distance.

Manuel Antonio

Day 7 B Travel south to the Central Pacific coast to stay 3 nights at Arenas del Mar (p27), one of the few beachside hotels in the Manuel Antonio/Quepos area.

Day 8 B A free day. We suggest a visit to the nearby Manuel Antonio NP, the most scenically beautiful region in the country. Take the popular trail through the trees for the chance of seeing sloths, monkeys, agouti and a variety of birds. At the path's end you are rewarded with a stunning view across the bay and out to sea, with pristine white sand beaches nearby. At low tide it is even possible to stroll back to your hotel along the shore.

Day 9 B A free day to relax at the beach or pool. You might take advantage of one of the options offered by the hotel, such as sea kayaking, horse riding or a mangrove boat tour, or indulge in one of their spa treatments. Trim your hold luggage down to 14kg per person, leaving the excess to go by road to your hotel in San José to await your arrival on day 13.

Osa Peninsula

Day 10 BLD A choice of two ways to experience the Osa Peninsula, one of the most biodiverse areas in the world, in a 3 night stay. For the remote Casa Corcovado Lodge (p23) catch a flight from Quepos to Palmar Sur to be met and transferred to Sierpe dock for the wonderful boat journey through mangroves, across Drake Bay and along the Pacific shore (can be rough), arriving with a wet beach landing. For the award-winning Lapa Rios (also p23), return to San José airport and fly to Pto Jiménez to be driven 20min to the lodge. Self-drivers drop off their hire cars at Quepos or San José airports.

Day 11-12 BLD At Casa Corcovado your visit includes two full days of wildlife and other excursions, at Lapa Rios two wildlife excursions are included with others available locally at extra cost.

San José

Day 13 B This morning you are taken to the airstrip for your flight to San José, to be met and taken to Hotel Grano de Oro (p24).

Day 14 B A private transfer from your hotel to the airport for your flight home. Or you might extend your stay with time at the beach (p26) or a visit to Tortuguero (p8 and 21).

Costa Rica Chill-out

A relaxing getaway with a difference: a spa hotel, jungle rafting, some wonderful wildlife, and a beautiful Pacific beach.

Countryside spa

Day 1 You are met on arrival at the airport in San José and taken to Xandari Spa (p24) set in a 40 acre coffee and fruit plantation overlooking Costa Rica's Central Valley. The rooms have original art and custom designed furniture. There are 2 lap pools in the gardens with sun decks and sun beds. Stay for 2 nights to take advantage of the hotel's numerous spa facilities and relaxing atmosphere.

Day 2 B A free day to relax at the hotel. Surrounded by delightful gardens and picturesque waterfalls, the Spa Village offers a range of optional pampering treatments in your own private Jalapa (palm-roofed hut) with Jacuzzi and stunning views of the valley. The outdoor restaurant sources its fruits, vegetables and herbs from the plantation's own gardens.

Jungle boutique lodge

Day 3 BLD You are transferred early in the morning to the start of a whitewater rafting ride to Pacuare Lodge, set beside the river in a forested gorge, where you stay for 2 nights. Your guides introduce you to the essentials of rafting, and the safety measures you need to know, then it's onto the river for an exhilarating hour's ride on class II and III rapids to reach the lodge. After lunch you can relax and enjoy this gorgeous setting.

Day 4 BLD Today is free to relax or take part in some of the lodge's activities, at additional cost, which include rafting, mountain biking and horse-riding. You can also visit a nearby village of the Cabecar community, or be pampered in the lodge's spa.

Day 5 BL You could leave by road after crossing the river by cable gondola, but it's far nicer to raft out on class III-IV rapids. You are met by your private driver for the return by road to San José.

Wildlife at Tortuguero

Day 6 BLD This morning you are taken to the airport to catch a flight to the flooded forests of Tortuguero on the Caribbean coast. You are collected on arrival at the airstrip and transferred the short distance by boat to your lodge on the bank of the river near the national park. Stay for 2 nights on a full board basis.

Day 7 BLD Take a boat ride through the narrow river channels of the flooded forest for the chance of seeing a host of wildlife





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TOURING AND WILDLIFE • MID OR UPPER RANGE HOTELS AND LODGES • SELFDRIVE

Secret Costa Rica

Step into the natural side of Costa Rica to experience country life and meet the people, visit some wonderful wildlife locations, and relax at out-of-the-way beaches.

including monkeys, tiger herons, basilisk lizards, sloth, river otter and caiman. This is one of the best places in Costa Rica to see wildlife and you will be delighted at how easy it is to get really close encounters. You could also visit the wild local beach, where sea turtles nest between July and October.

Pacific coast selections

Day 8 B After an early breakfast you are taken by boat back to the airstrip for your flight to San José. Change planes and fly onwards to the Pacific coast for 6 nights at your choice of beach hotel. There are many to choose from depending on the style of hotel and type of beach you prefer.

For a sophisticated retreat we suggest **Punta Islita**, one of the ‘Small Luxury Hotels of the World’.

Alternatively, **Kurà Design Villas** is an away-from-it-all hip hotel looking over the Pacific near Uvita.

For an alt-style ‘barefoot’ hideaway that’s right on the beach, consider **Ylang Ylang** on the south coast of Nicoya Peninsula.

The upper range **Alma del Pacífico** is stylishly designed and has relatively easy access to a number of attractions.

If bars and nightlife are more your thing then Tamarindo may suit you, here **Capitán Suizo** and **Cala Luna** are good options.

Harmony is a holistic natural retreat at Nosara with a spa, yoga and a laid-back vibe.

Days 9-13 B Free to relax on the beach.

San José mansion

Day 14 B In the morning fly back to San José where you stay overnight at Grano de Oro, a Victorian mansion converted into an upper-range hotel. It combines a fin de siècle style with art and furnishings by Costa Rican artists. The dining room here is considered to be one of the top spots to eat in the city; a lovely option for your final night in Costa Rica. To top it off we suggest you stay in the garden suite with its wrought-iron king-sized bed, small patio terrace and private Jacuzzi.

Day 15 B A private transfer is arranged today to connect with your chosen international flight home.

San José

Day 1 You are met on arrival in San José and driven to a hotel in your preferred price category for a 2 night stay.

Day 2 B A free day to relax and acclimatise at your hotel, or take an optional tour to explore the Central Valley, perhaps to see a volcano or visit a coffee farm.

San Gerardo de Dota

Day 3 B This morning your hire car is delivered to your hotel. From here you drive yourselves to San Gerardo de Dota. On the way you might choose to visit Lankester Botanical Gardens and the Orosí Valley (p6). Stay for 2 nights at a mid-range hotel in the lovely valley of San Gerardo (p10).

Day 4 B You are taken on an early morning birdwatching walk in the cloud forest, with others, in the most reliable part of the country for Resplendent Quetzal. This peaceful setting is also home to a wide variety of flora and fauna.

South Pacific (Dominical)

Day 5 B Today you continue southwards to the Pacific coast near Dominical, arriving in time to relax at an upper range hotel nestling between trees on a hillside with fantastic views over the ocean, or a similar mid-range hotel nearby.

Day 6 B You are free today to take advantage of the optional local excursions. You might take a boat trip to visit Corcovado NP on the Osa Peninsula, or to Caño Island for the chance of seeing dolphins and whales (best in July-October and January-April).

Day 7 B A second free day for you to do as you please. There are horse riding options, nature walks, canopy tours in the forest, or you might visit Hacienda Barú a national wildlife refuge with habitats from wetland and secondary forest in the lowlands to primary forest on the highland coastal ridge. The refuge has 7km of walking trails and an orchid and butterfly garden.

Playa Esterillos de Este

Day 8 B After breakfast drive north along the coast to Playa Esterillos de Este, a long undeveloped stretch of broad sands. The sea here is too rough for swimming, but it is a popular spot for

surfing—fun to watch. In case you might like to do some nature viewing or sightseeing you are within 45min drive of both the Carara Reserve and Manuel Antonio NP. Stay a night at either a mid-range or an upper range hotel by the beach at Esterillos de Este.

Guanacaste ranch

Day 9 B After breakfast drive north to the characterful Guanacaste region (p7), whose dry forest life zone stands in contrast to the lush rainforests of the south Pacific and the cool cloud forest of San Gerardo de Dota. Stay 2 nights at La Enseñada: a homely ranch with a swimming pool and views across to the Gulf of Nicoya.

Day 10 B A variety of options today. Perhaps saddle up and go out on horseback with the cowboys, if your riding skills are up to it, or hike through the surrounding countryside. In the dry season there are excellent birdwatching opportunities at the ranch, in habitats similar to Palo Verde NP (p29).

Nosara

Day 11 B After breakfast at the ranch, drive to Nosara on the Nicoya Peninsula. Here the shoreline has been set aside as a wildlife reserve, so it’s a short walk over the foreshore to the sands. Nearby Ostional Wildlife Refuge is an important Olive Ridley Turtle nesting ground; the turtles nest from July to November, with their largest numbers from August to October. Humpback and Grey whales are seen in winter. Stay 3 nights at either a mid-range or an upper range lodge.

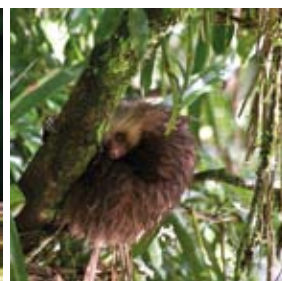
Day 12 B Free day for optional excursions in the Nosara area, eg guided tours in the Nosara Biological Reserve, guided boat rides up the Nosara river, or relaxing on pristine natural beaches.

Day 13 B A second free day in Nosara. Spectacular sunsets blaze over the ocean on a clear evening.

Day 14 B You have most of the morning free in the Nosara area before you must make your way back to the San José area to your chosen hotel.

San José area

Day 15 B Today you drive to San José airport to drop off your car in time for your flight home.





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TOURING AND WILDLIFE

Costa Rican Adventures

Get ready for two weeks of action-packed adventure, all different, all over Costa Rica. It's a heady mix that delivers lots of excitement, but with comfortable accommodation too. Ideal for lively couples, friends and families.

San José

Day 1 You are met on arrival off your chosen international flight and driven to a mid-range hotel in the San José area.

Zip-lining through the treetops

Day 2 B You are collected from your hotel for a zip-lining adventure. You'll whiz between 21 platforms suspended high in the tree-tops below Poas volcano, with an impressive 600m long cable as the finale.

Whitewater rafting

Day 3 BL With an early start, drive to the Pacuare River to meet your rafting guides for safety training and an exhilarating day rafting class II-IV rapids.

You are then transferred by road to Arenal for 4 nights.

Canopy walk, SUP and hot springs

Day 4 BD Early today you join a group with a naturalist guide for the Hanging Bridges—a system of trails and suspended walkways with views into and over the forest and to the valley below. Wildlife sightings will include a variety of birds, possibly a troupe of howler monkeys, and much else.

In the afternoon you have a go at stand-up paddle boarding, the fast-growing watersport, on Lake Arenal.

An evening at the hot springs brings relaxation in thermal pools as the volcano rumbles in the distance; dinner is included.

Volcano hike and waterfall swim

Day 5 BL A demanding 6hr hike to the summit of Cerro Chato volcano. From the top there are amazing views across to the smoking summit of neighbouring Arenal and down into the emerald green lagoon that fills Chato's long-dormant crater, to which you can walk down and bathe in with care. The first half of the hike up is easy, the second is a strenuous trek ascent, often muddy, through virgin rainforest.

You descend to arrive at La Fortuna waterfall with the option of a refreshing swim.

Canoe through a nature reserve

Day 6 BL An early start to travel to the wildlife refuge of Caño Negro where you paddle by canoe along narrow waterways through flooded forest, rich in wildlife. You'll see some of the refuge's 350 species of birds, basilisk lizards and iguanas, turtles and caimans, and maybe much more.

Return to overnight at Arenal.



Cloud forest by night at Monteverde

Day 7 B Travel on to the mountains of Monteverde for 2 nights in the cloud forest at a characterful mid-range lodge. Afternoon free to sample the eco-experiences of Santa Elena before an evening tour (shared) to experience the cloud forest's nocturnal wildlife.

Canopy adventures

Day 8 B Today you ride a gondola-tram high into the cloud-forest canopy for a high-adrenaline ride on an awesome circuit of zip lines—some very long and high. You are collected from, and returned to, your hotel, with the afternoon free to relax or try some of the other eco-experiences on hand locally.

Adventure ranch

Day 9 B Down the mountains to Rincón de la Vieja for 2 nights at an adventure lodge and cattle ranch. In the afternoon you can pick an optional adventure activity: hiking, biking, and riding are usually available, to waterfalls, hot springs and streams. If you're competent in the saddle you might even join the cowboys to round up cattle or horses (check your travel insurance covers 'ranching').

Day 10 B We've included a one-day 'adventure pass' for you. Start with a zip-line, then a horse-ride to the start of a river-tubing adventure. Later relax in hot springs and take on open air bath in volcanic mud (better than it sounds!)

Pacific beach at Tamarindo

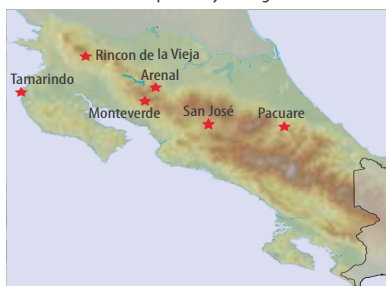
Day 11 B Beach time! Travel to the lively beach town of Tamarindo for 3 nights, with an attractive wide white-sand beach that's a favourite with surfers, plus beach cafes, bars and restaurants. You should arrive at lunchtime, leaving the afternoon for the beach. Be mindful of sea currents which can be dangerous in some areas.

Day 12-13 B Two days to bask on the beach or enjoy the ocean. You might take a 4hr surfing lesson to cover the basics or to hone your technique. Or try SUP (quietwater or surf), scuba, kayaking or sailing. You can book any of these locally at reasonable extra cost.

San José

Day 14 B After a morning free in Tamarindo, return by road to San José to the mid- or upper range hotel of your choice.

Day 15 B You are driven to the airport for your flight home.



Bribri and Chira Island communities

A really wonderful opportunity to be welcomed by, learn from and enjoy the life of two special communities. Memorable experiences engage you with the Bribri, and the life of the Chira islanders in the beautiful Gulf of Nicoya.

The Bribri people have lived in the forests of southern Costa Rica for millennia, with their own language, culture and way of life, which they are keen to share and protect. Meanwhile ecotourism brings the people of Chira Island an alternative contribution to complement their livelihood from artisanal fishing.

San José

Day 1 You are met at the airport on arrival, and driven to your hotel chosen from El Rodeo or Jade y Oro.

Both of these hotels have joined in the Rainforest Alliance's Sustainable Management Practices programme and both are among Costa Rica's proud holders of level 3 certification.

Caribbean coast

Day 2 B You are collected from your hotel by shuttle-bus for the 7hr journey to the Caribbean coast to stay 3 nights at your choice of accommodation near Puerto Viejo. For a good mid-range option we suggest Caribblue (see p27) which also has level 3 certification. It's a small hotel in lovely mature grounds with tall trees and a swimming pool, just across a quiet lane from Playa Codes, which is a wild unspoilt beach popular with surfers. The dramatic Almonds & Corals Lodge (p25), which has achieved level 5—the highest possible sustainability certification, is an upper range option, tucked away in the forest close to the sea within the Gandoca-Manzanillo Wildlife Refuge.

Bribri community

Day 3 BL Today you visit the indigenous Bribri people, travelling into their lands by dugout with guide and boatmen.

After a boat journey on the Yorkin river, which separates Costa Rica and Panama, you arrive at their village. Here you are received at the Casa de las Mujeres with a welcoming snack and presentation by way of introduction to the life of the community.

To see things firsthand for yourself you will be shown around parts of the village and into the forest on which it relies. Trails, including one across a hanging bridge, introduce you to the community's medicinal plants and food crops. Lunch is Bribri style (bananas in fresh chocolate sauce is a favourite dessert). There is much to find out about and visitors are made very welcome amid great fun.

You can return to your hotel for the night if you wish, but with prior arrangement you are invited to stay a night in the community. Conditions are rustic but this is an exceptional experience. A simple dinner may be followed by stories told around the fire. Next morning there's a choice of walks, followed by lunch, returning to your hotel in the afternoon—with a host of memories.

Jungle at the beach

Day 4 B Wherever you choose to stay in this part of Costa Rica be prepared to be woken at dawn by the call





E • MOSTLY MID-RANGE LODGES • MIX OF SHUTTLE-BUS AND PRIVATE TRANSFERS



ACTIVE AND ADVENTURE • MID-RANGE HOTEL AND BASIC LODGES

Communities

from and contribute to you in the world of f of Nicoya.

of howler monkeys in the trees above your cabin. Today is a free day either to relax and enjoy the Caribbean coast, or to choose something more active.

Almonds and Corals offers a good range of activities if you are staying there. Alternatively, if you've the energy, we can arrange a full day hike into the Talamanca mountains. In October/November and February/March tens of thousands of hawks and eagles pass over this area as they migrate.

Day 5 B Return by shuttle-bus to overnight at your San José hotel.

Chira Island fishing community

Day 6-7 BLD You are collected by car in the morning for the first part of your journey to Chira Island in the Gulf of Nicoya. Arriving at Costa de Pajeros Pier you are taken 30min by boat through the mangroves and out to Chira Island, where you stay for 2 nights in a simple lodge built by the community to welcome their new guests.

Chira Island is home to a traditional community that has relied on artisanal fishing in the beautiful Gulf of Nicoya for generations. When fish stocks began to fall because of commercial over-fishing a group of determined women turned to ecotourism to help save their community. While you are their warmly welcomed guest on the island you will be able to hear their story, see and learn about their artisan fishing methods, and visit an island bird sanctuary. You will also be able to meet and chat to the splendid women of the Chira Island Women's Association about their amazing efforts to keep their community together and to build a sustainable future that respects their very special environment and the beautiful Gulf of Nicoya. Beach sunsets are a special treat.

To see something of the island's wonderful natural setting you might take an early birdwatching trip on your second morning, or a bike ride, or a boat ride into the mangroves.

Day 8 B With fond farewells, you say goodbye to Chira Island and make your way onwards.

You might travel to San José or Liberia for your flight home, or, if you can stay longer, spend time at the beach on the Nicoya Peninsula (see p26-27), or choose from the host of other possibilities in this part of the country.

Costa Rica & Nicaragua off the beaten track

An adventurous and very varied trip between Costa Rica and Nicaragua, mostly completely off the beaten track. Rich wildlife experiences, wonderful scenery, evocative history, isolated river settlements and vibrant art communities make this very special indeed.

Caño Negro, Costa Rica

Day 1 LD You are collected from your hotel in San José or Arenal and driven to Caño Negro Wildlife Refuge, still in Costa Rica, for 2 nights at a comfortable lodge with pool. Caño Negro is an important wetland for migratory birds and 350 resident bird species, as well as emerald basilisk, iguanas, river turtle and caiman. Among 160 mammal species are howler, capuchin and spider monkeys, and jaguar. Afternoon free to relax and explore.

Day 2 BLD A morning excursion by boat through the water channels of the reserve. There are 310 species of plants and many species of fish including the 'living fossil' garfish. The afternoon is free to relax by the pool or take an optional excursion, such as mountain biking, fishing, kayaking or further nature viewing.

Solentiname archipelago, Lake Nicaragua

Day 3 BLD Transfer to the border at Los Chiles where your Nicaraguan guide will be waiting on the other side to take you by road and boat to the Solentiname archipelago—a cluster of 36 islets in Lake Nicaragua. Here you stay 2 nights on San Fernando island at a simple family-run guest-house (with fans and private bathrooms).

In the 1970s, inspired by Ernesto Cardenal, priest, poet and Minister of Culture in the Sandinista government, a group of fishermen and locals developed a contemplative community and painting school—the Escuela Primitivista de Solentiname.

Today, more than 50 painters and artisans are working in the islands. Their vibrant naive art is strongly linked to their tropical surroundings. After lunch, stop at a local museum before visiting the artists in their home studios.

Los Guatuzos Wildlife Reserve

Day 4 BLD Morning boat ride to the southern shore of Lake Nicaragua to visit the forests of Refugio de Vida Silvestre Los Guatuzos. Its superbly rich bird life includes parrots, trogons, roseate spoonbill, jabiru, osprey, herons and egrets, while howler monkey, sloth, caiman, iguanas and agouti are also common. We return to our lodge for lunch, then the afternoon is free to relax or explore locally. The archipelago often enjoys magnificent sunsets.

San Juan river to El Castillo & local farm

Day 5 BLD Today your boatman will navigate along the Río San Juan to El Diablo Rapids and the waterfront village of El Castillo, a happily isolated community of around 1000 souls within earshot of the rapids. The San Juan river was a route for the export of Incan gold to Spain, known in those days as the 'dubious passage'. Small wooden houses built on stilts on the river front lie beneath the impressive black stone Fortress of the Immaculate Conception, built by the Spanish in 1675 against marauding pirates and foreign navies (usually British). In 1780, Horatio Nelson, then 22 and already captain of his first frigate, took part in an expedition which circled the fortress, captured it from landward and occupied it for 9 months. The fort has a museum and library, and there are evocative views from the ramparts.

El Castillo's residents work farms in the surrounding hills and fish the river, and in recent years have started to get involved in sustainable tourism. You visit a farm, walk their trails, help harvest the vegetables, hear about their relationship with the rainforest and its protection. Stay 1 night in El Castillo in a small hotel with private bathrooms, a/c and a riverfront deck.

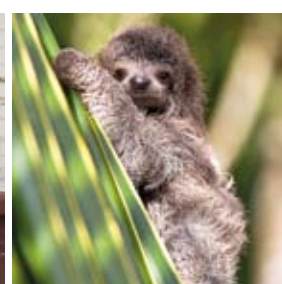
Indio-Maíz Biological Reserve & Sábalos

Day 6 BLD We travel on the Bartola river to visit the Indio-Maíz Biological Reserve, which protects part of the largest area of primary rainforest in Central America. Inside this pristine forest some trees reach 50m in height. Here we walk for 2hr on the Bartola Trail then travel along the river to a lodge at Sábalos with private reserve where guests can enjoy relaxing in a hammock, birdwatching, kayaking, horse riding and artisanal fishing. Sport fishing for Tarpon is also possible here but at extra cost. Rooms at the lodge have fans and private bathrooms.

Managua

Day 7 B Morning free to enjoy the lodge's range of activities. In the middle of the day you travel by river to San Carlos for the early afternoon flight to Managua, where the tour ends.

We can arrange an extension of your stay in Nicaragua, perhaps visiting León and Granada or the beach.



Planning your trip Selfdrive in Costa Rica

Selfdrive is a good way to see Costa Rica. Distances in Costa Rica are quite short, and road conditions are reasonable for the purpose of getting around on holiday with no great speed or urgency.

There are two popular possibilities for a selfdrive holiday in Costa Rica. If you are travelling at a busy time of year then your accommodation must be pre-booked on a fixed **Pre-booked Selfdrive** itinerary. At other times, we can either pre-book everything for you, or you can take advantage of our **Freedom Selfdrive** scheme which gives plenty of flexibility.

Either way, apart from a few dual carriageways around the capital, the few major routes tend to be equivalent to minor country A roads in the UK, but bumpy enough that you rarely feel comfortable going faster than 50mph. Small country roads are the norm everywhere else. Side roads in country areas are often unpaved. You have to be patient and not mind getting lost from time to time (though a GPS/SatNav helps a lot).

The **Booking Information insert** shows cars, rates, insurance details etc, and the dates that the Freedom Selfdrive scheme operates.

Tailor-made holidays with self-drive options

Several of the tailor-made holiday suggestions on pages 14-19 would suit a selfdrive trip:

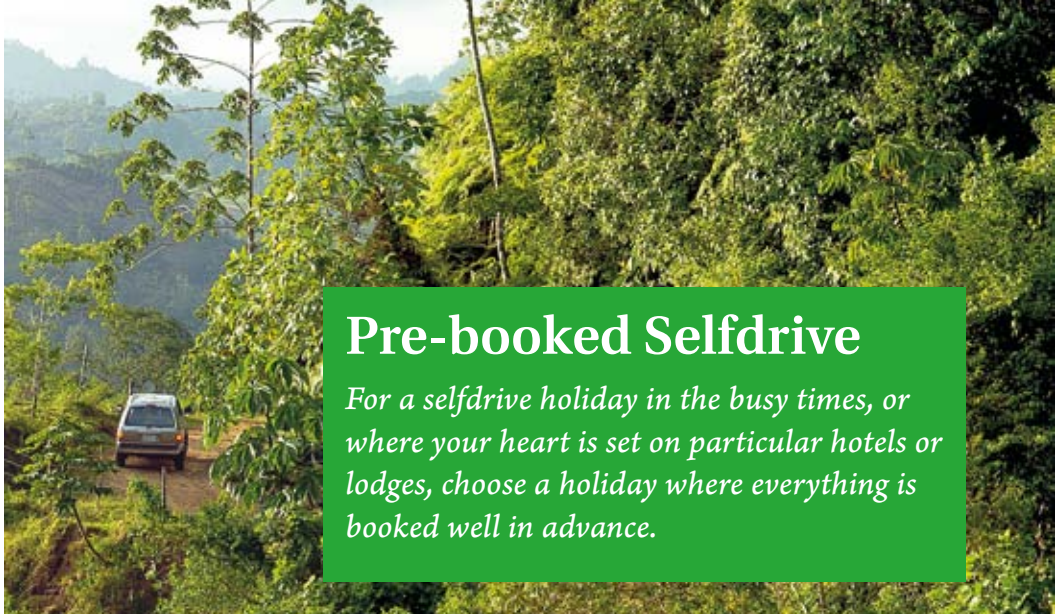
Coast to Coast	p14
Costa Rica Nature Explorer	p15
Creature Comforts	p16
Secret Costa Rica	p17
Costa Rican Adventures	p18



Driving from San José

Arenal	194km	3.5h
Monteverde	168km	4.5h
Liberia	217km	4h
Santa Rosa NP	269km	4.5h
Tamarindo	274km	5h
Sámara	250km	4.5h
Tambor	171km	5h
Quepos	192km	3.5h
Dominical	162km	5h
San Isidro del General	134km	4h
Turrialba	68km	2h
Limón	131km	2.5h
Guápiles	47km	2h
Puerto Viejo (South Caribbean)	203km	4.5h

Distances are approximate, times may vary significantly.



Pre-booked Selfdrive
For a selfdrive holiday in the busy times, or where your heart is set on particular hotels or lodges, choose a holiday where everything is booked well in advance.

Pre-booked selfdrive

On a pre-booked selfdrive holiday all your accommodation is confirmed for you in advance. As well as the car, we provide you with good maps, a mobile phone if you'd like one, and 24hr local support. You might choose a tailor-made holiday that has a selfdrive option (see the list on the left) or one of the routes below. There are many hotel choices, see p23-25 and 27 for examples.

Starting from San José

Route 1: Classic Costa Rica

11 days/10 nights: volcanoes, cloud forest, jungle at the beach

Day 1 arrive San José. **Day 2** Visit **Poás Volcano** then to La Fortuna for 1 night near **Arenal Volcano**, perhaps visit hot springs this evening. **Day 3** North shore of Lake Arenal via Tilarán to **Monteverde** 3 nights. **Day 4-5** Free at Monteverde e.g. cloud forest walk, canopy tour. **Day 6** Drive to mid-Pacific area, 1 night at **Carara / Jacó**. **Day 7** Visit Carara NP and/or Jacó beach, continue to **Manuel Antonio/Quepos** 3 nights. **Day 8-9** Free at Quepos e.g. beaches and jungle of Manuel Antonio NP. **Day 10** Drive back to San José or Alajuela for final night. **Day 11** Drop car at airport, fly home.



Route 2: South Pacific Explorer

15 days/14 nights: S Pacific coast, Osa Peninsula, cloud forest, páramo

Day 1 arrive San José, 2 nights. **Day 2** explore **Central Valley**. **Day 3** to **mid Pacific coast** stay in e.g. Carara/Jacó/Esterillos Este 2 nights. **Day 4** e.g. visit **Carara reserve** or relax at beach. **Day 5** visit **Manuel Antonio NP** then to Dominical 2 nights. **Day 6** relax or e.g. visit **Hacienda Baru**, whale watch (seasonal), **Caño Island** or **Corcovado NP**. **Day 7** to **Osa Peninsula** (e.g. Danta Corcovado) or **Golfo Dulce** (Esquinas) 3 nights. **Days 8-9** exploring locally. **Day 10** to **San Gerardo de Dota** 2 nights. **Day 11** e.g. quetzal tour, forest walk, páramo. **Day 12** to **Turrialba** region via Lankester Botanical Garden, 2 nights. **Day 13** e.g. **Guayabo Monument**, **Irazú** region, CAITE, rafting. **Day 14** **Orosí Valley**, return San José **Day 15** Drop car at airport, fly home.



Starting from Liberia

Route 3: The Northwest

15 days/14 nights: cowboys, volcanoes, wetland, cloud forest, beach

Day 1 arrive **Liberia**. **Day 2** Drive to ranch at **Rincón de la Vieja** 2 nights. **Day 3** Free at ranch, e.g. riding, hike up volcano, walk in dry forest. **Day 4** Drive to La Fortuna near **Arenal Volcano** 4 nights. **Day 5 & 6** Free in Arenal area e.g. hot springs, walking, riding, windsurfing. **Day 7** **Caño Negro** wildlife river trip. **Day 8** Drive to **Monteverde** 2 nights **Day 9** Free in Monteverde e.g. zip line, canopy walk, night hike, nature walk **Day 10** Drive to beach on **Nicoya Peninsula** 5 nights e.g. Tamarindo, Potrero, Nosara, Sámara. **Day 15** Drop car at **Liberia airport**, fly home.



Route 4: Off the beaten track

15 days/14 nights: dry forest, volcanoes, cloud forest, beach, wetland

Day 1 arrive **Liberia** 2 nights. **Day 2** e.g. visit **Rincón de la Vieja** (e.g. riding, hike up volcano, walk in dry forest). **Day 3** to **Bijagua** area **Day 4** Free e.g. walk to **Rio Celeste** **Day 5** to La Fortuna near **Arenal Volcano** 2 nights. **Day 6** Free in Arenal area e.g. hot springs, walking, riding, windsurfing. **Day 7** to **Los Angeles cloud forest** 2 nights **Day 8** free e.g. cloud forest nature walk & spa **Day 9** Ferry to Paquera stay at e.g. **Playa Tambor/Montezuma/Santa Teresa** 4 nights **Day 13** to Abangaritos 2 nights. **Day 14** free at **Hacienda La Enseñada** e.g. horse riding or birdwatching **Day 15** Drop car at **Liberia airport**, fly home.



Planning your trip

Extra wildlife

For excellent wildlife, Tortuguero (p8) in the north-east, and the Osa Peninsula (p9) in the far south-west, can easily be added to the start or end of almost any itinerary, and complement self-drive trips very well.

Tortuguero add-on

Day 1 BLD Early in the morning you are collected from your hotel in San José and transferred by shuttle-bus to the dock for Tortuguero, with a stop for breakfast en route. You board a motor boat for the journey to your mid-range lodge. Stay 2 nights full board including daily wildlife viewing excursions with resident naturalist guides, shared with other guests.

Day 2 BLD A full day at Tortuguero with an excursion by boat through the quiet river channels of the national park.

Day 3 BL This morning you take the boat back to the dock, where a shuttle-bus collects you and returns you to San José, stopping for lunch en route at a restaurant near Guápiles. To combine with a selfdrive option on p20-21 your hire car can be delivered to you here (for onwards travel to Sarapiquí or Arenal), or in San José in the late afternoon.

Osa Peninsula add-ons:

Casa Corcovado

Day 1 LD You are picked up at your hotel in the San José area and driven to the airport for a morning flight to Palmar Sur. A short drive brings you to the dock at Sierpe for a boat through mangroves to open sea along the coast to Osa Peninsula. Wet beach landing at Casa Corcovado (p23) for 3 nights full board with 2 shared tours led by resident naturalist guides.

Day 2 BLD Visit Corcovado NP home to over 400 species of birds and 114 species of amphibians and mammals.

Day 3 BLD Today you might take the boat trip to Caño Is. (p9)

Day 4 B By boat to Sierpe, fly from Palmar Sur to San José.

Lapa Rios

Day 1 LD From your hotel you are driven to San José's domestic airport for a morning flight to Puerto Jiménez, and then driven (45min) to Lapa Rios (p23) for 3 nights full board with 2 shared tours led by naturalist guides.

Day 2-3 BLD Choose from early birding walks, wild waterfall hike, medicine trail, strenuous ridge walk and night hike, led by resident guides. Optional excursions at extra cost include riding, surf lessons, kayaking, and dolphin trips in Golfo Dulce

Day 4 B To Puerto Jiménez for morning flight to San José.

Extra adventure

This short stay at the wonderful Pacuare Lodge fits easily at the start or end of most itineraries.

Whitewater rafting add-on

Day 1 LD Early morning start from San Jose to drive to the Pacuare river, where you are met by your rafting guides for basic training and safety instruction. Raft down a tumbling mountain river through steep canyons and class II-III rapids to arrive eventually at Pacuare Lodge, nestling in a forested gorge. You stay 2 nights here on a full-board basis. After a hearty lunch, you are free to relax and enjoy the lodge and its surroundings, or perhaps choose from the lodge's excellent range of excursions at additional cost.

Day 2 BLD Free to relax, explore or perhaps take an optional excursion, payable locally.

Day 3 BL You leave Pacuare by raft for an even more exhilarating day of whitewater rafting, approximately 3½hrs over class III to IV rapids, with a break for a picnic lunch on the river bank. Arriving at the landing point you travel onward by road, eg back to San José, to the Caribbean coast, or to Arenal.

Freedom Selfdrive

In the quieter seasons, Freedom Selfdrive has all you need for a great holiday in Costa Rica, going wherever and whenever you please with a wide selection of choices.

Freedom Selfdrive

Freedom Selfdrive is a special scheme that allows you to benefit from the discounts that hotels are prepared to give when they would otherwise have empty rooms, while giving you the freedom to travel around Costa Rica without a fixed schedule. It operates for most of the year, but not the busiest seasons.

What's included

We've put it all together at a very low price in one simple package that includes:

- **choice of good quality recent model 4WD car** with unlimited mileage, and insurance with CDW.
- **wide choice of accommodation** Book as you go throughout Costa Rica staying at the many hotels and lodges in the scheme in a choice of categories (see brochure insert for details or check our website).
- **easy arrival and departure** When you arrive you are met at the airport and driven to your hotel. On your return you can drop your car by the airport.
- **easy-to-use Geodyssey Travel Planner** Travel advice, recommended routes, driving times, and a detailed guide to each hotel in the scheme.
- **latest guide book** Choose either the Rough Guide to Costa Rica or Costa Rica Handbook.
- **road maps** We include a good road map of Costa Rica, and the Tourist Board's general map, both designed for visitors to the country.
- **mobile telephone with 60min free calls** Book hotels, ask for advice, or stay in touch (outgoing national calls only). Good coverage throughout most of Costa Rica. Deposit required.
- **on-the-spot support** Personal briefing when you arrive. 24hr local help line for advice, information and emergencies during your stay.

With Freedom Selfdrive you book your accommodation as you go and use vouchers for payment. Our Freedom Selfdrive scheme is always being updated with new hotels and vehicles.

The **Booking Information insert** shows cars, rates, insurance details etc, and the dates that the Freedom Selfdrive scheme operates.

How Freedom Selfdrive works

First, make your choice of:

- **car**
- **hotel category**

When you book you let us know your choice of hotel in or near San José for your first night. Flights from Europe arrive at Alajuela, near San José, in the early evening. You are met at the airport and driven to your hotel.

At about 8.30am next day you have a briefing meeting at your hotel with our local organiser who will provide your hotel vouchers, answer questions about driving in Costa Rica and discuss your travel plans. At around 9am your car is delivered to the hotel by the rental company. With it you can also receive a local mobile phone and a satnav (at a small extra charge).

Then you go as you please, choosing hotels and lodges from the category you selected. There are around 100 in the scheme as a whole, covering almost the entire country. The only condition is that you book as you go, no sooner than the morning of the day before. If you are planning to stay more than 1-3 nights at a certain place we recommend pre-booking that section before you travel, especially at beach hotels during local holidays.

In each main area there is a choice of hotels and lodges, so if one hotel is full there is a very good chance that another will have space. The scheme is very flexible, and you can upgrade to a higher category hotel at any time by paying an appropriate supplement.

If within a main area where you want to stay no hotels in your category have space (which is unlikely) just call the 24hr local helpline who guarantee to find you a reasonable alternative at no extra cost.

At the end of your trip, simply drop the car at the rental company's office at the airport. Simple.

Combining countries

Costa Rica and Nicaragua

The easiest land route between these two countries is by road at Peñas Blancas in northwest Costa Rica, but for a more adventurous option see also our 'Costa Rica and Nicaragua off the beaten track' (p19) which uses the San Juan River to connect with Costa Rica.

There are several flights a day between San José and Managua and international airlines that operate to each country offer open-jaw tickets that allow you to fly into one and out from another.

Costa Rica and Panama

It is possible to cross between Costa Rica to Panama at Paso Canoas on the Pan-American Highway.

Daily flights between the two countries make the route less arduous for those wanting to hop across the border for a few days of beach time.

There are three flights a week between San José and Bocas del Toro.

Costa Rican Odyssey

This enthralling small group escorted tour has a strong accent on Costa Rica's nature and wildlife, complemented by wonderful scenery and times when local life takes centre stage.

SMALL GROUP HOLIDAY • TOURING & WILDLIFE • MAX PARTICIPANTS 12 • 14 DAYS/13 NIGHTS • GRADE: EASY

Discover the wildlife of flooded forest, rainforest, cloud forest and dry forest, including the world famous sites of Monteverde and La Selva in a convivial small group. We also see two of the country's largest and most active volcanoes, visit tropical dry forest in Guanacaste, and explore both coasts—the Caribbean and the beautiful central Pacific coast.

We stay at good quality comfortable mid-range hotels and lodges and are escorted throughout by an experienced and knowledgeable professional naturalist guide with excellent English. An excellent way to experience Costa Rica.

San José

Day 1 We meet in San José in the early evening at our comfortable mid-range hotel where we stay for 2 nights. You will be met at the international airport from any flight arriving that day and driven to the hotel (½hr).

Poas volcano and the Doka Coffee Estate

Day 2 BLD This morning we drive through scenic farmlands and coffee plantations to the slopes of Volcán Poas (p12). Ascending through cloud forest we reach the windswept summit where we walk to the crater's lip looking down to the steaming aquamarine lake below (clouds permitting!).

We descend to the lush Doka Coffee estate. Here we tour the plantation, learning the secrets of growing and harvesting top-quality coffee and roasting the beans to produce the best flavours.

Tortuguero

Day 3 BLD This morning we descend (3hr) through the Braulio Carrillo National Park, and cross banana plantations, to a dock just inland from the Caribbean coast.

From here a 1½hr boat ride takes us along the waterways of the flooded forest into Tortuguero NP (p8). We stay 2 nights at cabin-style lodge, with a swimming pool and gardens.

Day 4 BLD A full day at Tortuguero. We explore the smaller channels of the flooded forest by boat for wildlife viewing with the lodge's naturalist guide.

We hope to see three-toed sloths, large iridescent blue morpho butterflies, howler monkeys, capuchin and spider monkeys, toucans, poison dart frogs and the 'Jesus Christ' or Basilisk lizard.

Day 5 BLD After breakfast we return by boat and then 2hr by road to Sarapiquí to stay 2 nights. The afternoon is free to enjoy the lodge's facilities, relax by the pool or in the gardens, walk or birdwatch.

La Selva

Day 6 BLD Today we visit nearby OTS La Selva Biological Station, one of the world's most important centres for research into tropical rainforest (p9). One of La Selva's bilingual naturalists joins us for a guided walk and provides an overview of their research, education and conservation programmes.

Showy birds such as toucans, parrots, trogons, and hummingbirds, and mammals such as monkeys, peccaries, agoutis, and coatis, are seen frequently. We return in the afternoon with time for activities around the lodge.

Arenal Volcano

Day 7 BD This morning we drive 2½hr to La Fortuna near Arenal Volcano (p12). After some free time in the afternoon we visit hot springs, where hot pools, streams and waterfalls are laid out for open-air bathing. We stay at a mid-range lodge outside La Fortuna with good views of the volcano, weather permitting.

Rincón de la Vieja

Day 8 BLD Rounding the northern shore of Lake Arenal, we drive 4hr north on the Panamerican Highway to Guanacaste, to a lodge in open country below the volcanic peaks of Rincón de la Vieja (1816m) and Santa María (1916m)—where we stay 1 night.

We walk in Rincón de la Vieja NP (p11) through dry forest to see hot springs, mud pots and sulphurous vents spawned by the volcanic activity underground.

Monteverde

Day 9 B Today we make the 3½hr drive to Monteverde. The scenery en route is reminiscent of the low Alps and dairy farming is a main occupation.

We stay 2 nights at mid-range hotel not far from the Monteverde Reserve.

Day 10 B Early this morning we take a guided walk in the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve (p10), home of the Resplendent Quetzal which is best seen January-May when the aguacadito, or little avocado tree, is fruiting.

We visit a hummingbird gallery where a string of feeders are kept constantly replenished at the edge of the cloud forest to the delight of the local hummingbirds.

We then experience the cloud forest from the Sky Walk, a wonderful trail via a series of suspended walkways at canopy height giving a rare view of the orchids, bromeliads, mosses and lichens that weigh down every bough. The walkways are sturdily built with strong wire mesh from floor to the handrails, which are set high for security.

Join a small group holiday

This small group trip (maximum 12 participants) runs during Costa Rica's dry season. It has been carefully designed to make the most of your time away, and with attention to what makes group travel work best for everyone on the trip. Our clientele is predominantly from the UK, we offer fair pricing with no 'local payments', and no single supplements for those willing to share.

For dates, prices and further details of this tour and other Geodyssey small group holidays, please see the insert that accompanies this brochure or check our website.

Central Pacific coast

Day 11 B We descend from the mountains to the Pacific coast to visit Carara Reserve, a transitional mix of 'dry' and 'rain' forest ecosystems. Mammals include monkeys, armadillos, agoutis and most of the large felines—though, of course, the latter rarely allow themselves to be seen. Birds include toucans, trogons, guans, and macaws. If the tide is high we visit the mouth of the Río Tárcoles to see the mangroves and watch sea and water birds such as boatbilled heron and black-necked stilt, stopping at a bridge over a spot favoured by crocodiles and alligators. Here at dusk we may also witness the wonderful sight of scarlet macaw returning from their forest feeding grounds to their roosts in the mangroves (particularly reliable between January and March). We then stay for 2 nights by the Pacific ocean at a mid-range hotel on the beach.

Manuel Antonio NP

Day 12 B This morning we visit Manuel Antonio NP for some of the most beautiful scenery in Costa Rica along a series of headlands including Cathedral Point, a classic tombolo or island connected to the land by a sand spit. Breakers wash up to a rainforest teeming with wildlife—monkeys, coati, raccoons, sloths, iguanas, toucans and parrots. There are sparkling white sand beaches (the nearest is 1km from the entrance), coral reefs and forest hiking trails. Afternoon free to relax at our hotel and enjoy the pool.

San José

Day 13 BLD This morning we visit Else Kientzler Garden and the folk art of Sarchí (p6), on our way back to San José for our final night in Costa Rica.

Day 14 B You will be transferred to the airport for your chosen international flight home: most depart in the morning.

Optional add-ons can be arranged, eg to the Osa Peninsula (p21) or one of the beach hotels on p27.



Where to stay in Costa Rica

We travel extensively in Costa Rica, usually once or twice a year, to keep an eye on which hotels currently best suit the different tastes of our clients.

We particularly look for hotels in great locations or with character, with good standards to suit their style, often run by wonderful owners with a real passion.

The examples on these pages have been chosen to illustrate what is available; the full range of hotels that we offer in Costa Rica runs to well over 150, in many different styles covering practically the whole of the country. We have stayed in or visited most of them ourselves.

All this groundwork and experience means when we design your holiday we can offer the places to stay that are most likely to suit you best.

HOTEL EXAMPLES

- Wildlife lodges - this page
- Hotels for touring - page 24
- Beach hotels - page 27
- Key to symbols - page 2



Natural suggestions: Wildlife lodges



Bosque de Paz Lodge

MID-RANGE

Bajos del Toro

3

This delightful family run lodge has 9 comfortable bedrooms and great home cooking. It is set in a 700ha private cloud forest reserve and seven well-maintained trails of varying length and strenuousness run from the lodge through the forest. Nectar feeders have been hung in the garden, attracting good numbers of hummingbirds while butterflies are drawn to the pretty flowering plants.

A lovely option for those wanting to relax and experience the true nature of a cloud forest.



Mawamba Lodge

MID-RANGE

Tortuguero

Set in 15 acres of tropical gardens in walking distance of Tortuguero village, this lodge's 54 rooms are basic wooden cabins that blend well with the surrounding forest, from which strange jungle sounds emanate as you lie abed. Private nature trails and a butterfly farm introduce the flora and fauna of the forest. There is a red-eyed tree frog project by the swimming pool, plus a bar and buffet-style restaurant. Stays include all meals with morning and afternoon boat trips through the canals to see the abundant wildlife. We like Mawamba's moderate size and good location, but it can be busy and there are alternatives that are worth considering.



Casa Corcovado

UPPER RANGE

Osa Peninsula

5

Tucked away in the rainforest by the Pacific, Casa Corcovado Jungle Lodge is a 170 acre private reserve bordering Corcovado NP (p9). Designed and built by a US naturalist with over 25 years of local experience, this unique lodge blends in with its jungle environment and is an ideal base for an in-depth rainforest experience. The 14 individual bungalows offering unpretentious comfort, with beautiful stained glass doors and handmade wooden shutters. There is a restaurant, bar and spring-fed pool. It is reached by motorboat, first through mangroves, then on the open sea, arriving at a beach for a wet landing—a journey that's an experience in its own right.



Lapa Rios

TOP RANGE

Osa Peninsula

5

Set in a private nature reserve spread over 1000 acres of lowland tropical rainforest, Lapa Rios overlooks the point where the Golfo Dulce meets the wild Pacific Ocean: a private nature reserve and eco-lodge which has won many awards for its sustainable practice. The lodge is built in harmony with the surrounding forest and beach environment. The main building and 16 bungalows line three ridges connected by walking paths and steps. Built with local materials on a steep hillside over 350ft above the sea, Lapa Rios catches the cooling tropical breezes. This lodge is legendary in Costa Rica. A great eco-luxury option and ideal for honeymoons.



Maquenque Ec Lodge

MID-RANGE

Boca Tapada, San Carlos

A wonderful family-run eco-lodge set in its own private 60ha reserve within the Maquenque Wildlife Refuge. Its lowland rainforest is especially good for birdwatchers and for people with a strong interest in Costa Rica's wildlife, from beetles and butterflies to bats and basilisks. The lodge's conservation-minded team, all biologists, guide many of the nature tours (on foot or by boat), which include very productive night walks. The 14 comfortable bungalows sleep up to 4 and have private bathrooms with solar hot water, fan, and deck. Restaurant, bar, swimming pool.



Hacienda Barú

MID-RANGE

Dominican

Hacienda Barú is a 300ha National Wildlife Refuge with a broad range of habitats for nature viewing: pristine beach, wetland, secondary forest and primary forest up on the highland of the coastal ridge. There are two types of accommodation all with private bathrooms, hot water shower, and fans. There is a swimming pool and open-air restaurant serving typical Costa Rican cooking. There is a canopy observation platform, zip line and tree climbing and escorted birding hikes, night walk and mangrove walk all available locally.

Worth a mention

Selva Verde Sarapiquí

4 MID-RANGE

This lodge is a haven for birdwatchers and nature enthusiasts. Built on stilts over the Sarapiquí River, with 40 simple comfortable rooms, a la carte and buffet restaurant.

Villa Lapas nr Jacó

1 MID-RANGE

Popular with birdwatchers and others due to its proximity to Carara NP. There are 55 rooms in lush tropical gardens. Most guests stay on a full board basis. There are trails, a swimming pool, canopy walk and a zip line in the grounds.

Rancho Naturalista nr Turrialba

MID-RANGE

15-room family-run birders lodge. Full board basis includes the resident bird guide's services from first light until dark. Good views of Turrialba and Irazú volcanoes.

Savegre Lodge San Gerardo de Dota

4 MID-RANGE

Owned by the Chacón family since 1954, this is a superb family-run hotel with 31 comfortable rooms and home-cooked food including fruit from their own orchard and trout from their own stream-fed pools.

OTS Las Cruces San Vito

MID-RANGE

A 12 room lodge in Wilson Botanical Gardens, geared to visiting scientists.

La Enseñada nr Palo Verde NP, Gulf of Nicoya

2 MID-RANGE

A family-run working farm with simple wooden cabins, swimming pool and lawns looking out to the Gulf. They offer horse riding, mangrove trips, and forest trails. A beautiful location in which to relax, with great birding around.

Esquinas Rainforest Lodge Golfito

3 MID-RANGE

Set in primary rainforest of Piedras Blancas NP in the remote southern zone. Walking, birding, boat and kayak trips. Landscaped gardens, 10 miles of marked trails. Rustic rooms, 'haute cuisine' restaurant, stream-fed pool, small lake.

Cerro Lodge Carara

MID-RANGE

Birders lodge on a farm in Tarcoles 10 minutes from Carara NP. Bungalow-style rooms with private bathrooms. Swimming pool, dining room and reception area.

Tiskita Lodge Pavones

UPPER RANGE

A long-established family-run lodge close to the Panama border, in simple style with dramatically natural rustic rooms.

Where to stay in Costa Rica

Inn keeping: Characterful hotels for touring



Grano de Oro UPPER RANGE
San José 4

Our favourite amongst the more upmarket downtown hotels in San José, Grano de Oro is an elegant place to stay. It is located in the west of the city near the Parque Metropolitano La Sabana and the Museum of Costa Rican Art. Formerly a private Victorian mansion it has been extended over the years and now has 40 tastefully decorated rooms in three price categories. The hotel's impressive dining room has been lovingly crafted in fin de siècle style and it is considered one of the city's top places to dine. There is a small internal patio filled with tropical plants and a roof-top Jacuzzi with a couple of sun loungers if you tire of sightseeing.



Finca Rosa Blanca TOP RANGE
Alajuela, Central Valley 5

A lovely place to begin or end your visit to Costa Rica—a small, luxury-priced, eco-award-winning lodge in easy reach of the airport on a cool coffee-growing plateau with a wonderful vista of the Central Valley. Originally built as a fine private home in an eclectic style inspired by Gaudi, each room is unique, with original paintings and sculpture to decorate the common areas. There is a spring-fed natural swimming pool, organic vegetable garden and stables. 10 acres of grounds are filled with tropical plants, fruit trees and impressive, 300 year old Higuerón trees. The honeymoon suite is on two levels with panoramic views.



Xandari Spa UPPER RANGE
Alajuela 3

Xandari was created by architect Sherril Broudy and artist Charlene Broudy to reflect the natural beauty of Costa Rica. There are 22 spacious villas decorated with original art and custom furniture, set apart on a 40 acre coffee and fruit plantation overlooking the Central Valley. All villas have a private terrace with garden, a walled-in sun area, bar kitchen, and either a king or two queen beds. There are two swimming pools, a heated outdoor Jacuzzi and a dining room with a panoramic view of the Central Valley. With 4km of scenic trails within its grounds, this is a great place to start or end your trip and perhaps take a treatment in the lovely spa.



Vista del Valle UPPER RANGE
Alajuela, Central Valley 2

This peaceful hotel is a good option for relaxing final nights before the flight home. Located 25min from the airport and set on a hillside among beautifully planted gardens, the hotel enjoys lovely views across the Central Valley. Accommodation is in self-contained wooden cottages inspired by Japanese design, dotted amongst trees and plants. Two rooms have outdoor showers and private patios. The open-air restaurant is perched on a cliff overlooking the green valley below. There is a swimming pool and on-site equestrian centre. In the grounds you can enjoy the birds and butterflies, or perhaps follow a self-guided trail to a 300ft waterfall.



Hotel Bougainvillea MID-RANGE
Heredia, Central Valley 4

Here you'll easily forget that you're just 15min from both downtown San José and the airport. Set amidst the coffee farms of Santo Domingo de Heredia, this family-owned and run hotel has extensive grounds laid out with tall trees and brightened by plentiful flowers. Rooms are a little bland but large, with two double beds, a sitting area and a full range of facilities, with most having free wi-fi. Each has a balcony giving views of the mountains on one side and the gardens on the other. There is a pleasant dining room, swimming pool and tennis courts. A good option for those who prefer to be convenient for San José but outside the city centre.



Villa Blanca Cloud Forest Hotel UPPER RANGE
San Ramón 5

A unique countryside hotel overlooking dairy pastures and pristine cloud forests that support an inventory of flora and fauna that is similar to that at Monteverde, yet within reasonable driving time from San José airport, so it is possible to stay here on your first night. The hotel has 34 secluded and well-appointed casita rooms with fireplaces: very cosy. On the hilltop the Hacienda, the main house, serves fresh baked breads and you can sample the best campesino style cuisine in the region with the buffet menus. The hotel has high sustainable management credentials.



La Quinta MID-RANGE
Sarapiquí 5

A good choice for visitors interested in birdwatching, hiking, river rafting and a peaceful stay in a homely setting. It has received high accolades and certification for sustainable tourism. On the doorstep is Braulio Carrillo National Park an extensive primary tropical rainforest, OTS La Selva reserve, world class river rafting, and mountain biking trails. The hotel is run by a Costa Rican family who do everything possible to make each guest's stay a very pleasant one. They have transformed a working farm to a haven of secluded cabins, with gardens, frog and butterfly areas, a freshwater pool and extensive trails (wheel chair accessible). Rooms are basic but comfortable, the cooking is very good. It's a child-friendly option, too.



El Silencio TOP RANGE
Bajas del Toro 5

Costa Rica's only up-market hotel in a cloud forest setting. It comprises 16 very spacious, stylish cabins with large picture windows, L-shaped sofa area, gas fire and whirlpool tub on deck. The emphasis is on 'well being' and the chef prides himself on locally-sourced in-season food from which he creates exciting recipes. With 500 acres of private reserve there are several trails to follow into the cloud forest, some by beautiful waterfalls (an 'eco-concierge' will help you decide). Other activities include horse-riding, coffee tours and birdwatching. There is a spa using El Silencio's own natural products, and a yoga studio.



Monte Azul UPPER RANGE
Chirripo

Monte Azul is a mountain hideaway boutique lodge in the middle of a lush 125 acre private nature reserve just outside Chirripo National Park. The lodge's grounds are set alongside 1km of the Chirripo river. The 7 suites and spacious rooms have stylish décor including items from the collection of original contemporary art which marks out this lodge as something special. The level of equipment is high with fine cotton bed linen, designer kitchens, and modern bathrooms. Monte Azul also has an emphasis on sustainable ecotourism, and offers plenty of on-site activities and tours, many that offer an insight into the local way of life.



Arenal Observatory Lodge MID-RANGE

Arenal 4

The reward for a little bone-shaking on a windy, stoney track through conifer forest to reach this hotel is its proximity to Arenal volcano and its beautiful views of Arenal Lake. Originally a Smithsonian Institute research station, the lodge provides modest comfortable standard rooms and more spacious 'Smithsonian' rooms with excellent views of the live volcano and the chance of thrilling displays. There is a swimming pool over a short hanging bridge and a sunken Jacuzzi in a glass gazebo. The hotel is in a private reserve where volcanic earth supports excellent forest. A well marked trail system provides easy access for walks; the lodge area is good for hummingbirds. Other activities include mountain biking, rafting, canopy tours, and riding.



Lost Iguana UPPER RANGE

Arenal

The Lost Iguana, one of Arenal's boutique hotels, offers luxury in a natural setting. It is an upscale retreat nestling in the jungle on its own 100 acre property. Each of its spacious rooms has fantastic views of Arenal Volcano and the gorge of the Arenal River, and all have private balconies (suites have their own private Jacuzzi on the balcony). The tasteful décor has a Balinese influence, with colourful artwork, wall hangings and furnishings.

You might spend the day walking on trails that guide you through the surrounding forest, relaxing at the double pool with swim-up bar, dining at the open air restaurant, or enjoying a massage at the Dos Rios Spa.



Hotel Belmar MID-RANGE

Monteverde 5

This Swiss chalet-style lodge perched high on a hill is a good example of the many functional, family-run, mid-priced, wood-built lodges found in and around Monteverde. This particular lodge has especially high ratings for sustainable tourism. The guest rooms are mostly functional, wood-walled and homely, each with private bathroom. Recently renovated suite-style rooms have balconies and bathrooms with jacuzzi-style baths. There are great views from its mountaintop position down to the far distant Gulf of Nicoya with breathtaking orange-red sunsets on clear nights. The simple restaurant offers good meals for the hungry traveller.



Hacienda Guachipelin MID-RANGE

Rincón de la Vieja 2

An adventure lodge on a working ranch dating back over a hundred years, at the foot of Rincón de la Vieja volcano in an important area of tropical dry forest. The ranch continues to raise cattle and breed horses on a third of its large area, with the remainder set aside for conservation and replanting. The guest experience is kept plain and simple, with down-to-earth but comfortable cabins, and a country-style bar and eating area. There is an outdoor pool and pleasant views. Service is often fairly rough and ready—especially in high season when the ranch gets busy with day-trippers. Choose quiet dates if you can. The main reasons for staying are the dry forest (p11), the volcano with its fumaroles, hot springs, etc (p12), and the opportunity to experience cowboy life first hand (p13). Walking, riding, ranching, and various adventure activities are available locally.



Pacuare Lodge TOP RANGE

Turrialba 5

One of our favourite lodges in Costa Rica—a unique jungle getaway deep inside enchanting tropical forest on the edge of the Pacuare river. It is an award-winning ecodge committed to sustainability completely surrounded by nature in its purest state. You really do feel wrapped in the heart of the jungle here. There are 2 'jungle' rooms, 12 'river view' suites and 5 'linda vista' suites. A honeymoon suite set high in the canopy has a private plunge-pool and a unique hanging bridge. There is no electricity, everything is lit by candlelight—very romantic. Getting there is an adventure in itself, either by whitewater rafting or by 4WD then cross a river by gondola. The restaurant, which looks over the river, is magical at night and the food can be superb. For something very special ask to dine at 'El Nido'—a platform in the treetops accessed by zipline! There is a riverside spa offering massages and treatments.



Oxygen Jungle Villas UPPER RANGE

Uvita

Hot-listed contemporary boutique hotel, for couples only, in hills above lovely natural beaches on the hip part of the Pacific coast beyond Manuel Antonio NP. 12 gorgeous Balinese style villas each with private terrace, king-size bed, a/c, and wi-fi. Great views from most parts of the property over the distant Ballena marine national park – good for whale-watching in season. Stylish restaurant, bar, lounge, lovely infinity pool, large sun decks, gardens, jungle trails, spa, yoga. Surfing, riding, whale-watching, wildlife trips to Osa Peninsula or Hacienda Barú are all bookable with the lodge.



Almonds and Corals UPPER RANGE

South Caribbean 5

This is a very special ecodge where you are both in comfort and very close to nature. In dense rainforest behind Caribbean beaches the lodge's elegant tented guest rooms are raised on stilted platforms linked by winding boardwalks. With solar powered electricity a romantic atmosphere is created in each room with four poster bed, Jacuzzi, fan and separate area with toilet and shower. It is the creation of Aurora and Marco who came to camp in the area 25 years ago and dreamed of their perfect lodge for lovers of nature—a superb example of sustainability and comfort working hand in hand. You won't need an alarm call: howler monkeys, bush chickens and a variety of birds will ensure that you are awake as dawn breaks.



Lagarta Lodge MID-RANGE

Nosara, Nicoya 4

Set on a hill 40 metres above sea level, Lagarta Lodge offers a wonderful view of the coastline of Ostional, the mountains, and the river mouth from Rio Nosara and the forest, which belongs to the Reserva Biológica Nosara. The lodge has just 6 rooms which can sleep up to 4 people in each. The rooms are basic but have exceptional views and each has either a balcony or terrace. There is a small swimming pool and the restaurant and bar is one of the best places in the area to watch the spectacular sunsets. The Swiss owners are extremely friendly. This is a haven for nature lovers with access to the private reserve on the doorstep. Agoutis, howler monkeys and many species of birds are all spotted (or heard) regularly.

Worth a mention

Makanda by the Sea Quepos TOP RANGE

Perfect for honeymooners or romantic break. There are spectacular views from the 11 rooms and the swimming pool towards Manuel Antonio NP and the open ocean. All rooms are tastefully decorated with king size beds, sofas and kitchenettes. We recommend this hotel for privacy and a personal touch. No children.

Cristal Ballena Dominican 4 UPPER RANGE

Mediterranean-style, small resort hotel on hillside between forest and Pacific near Uvita and Marino Ballena Marine NP. All 19 rooms have wonderful ocean views. Large swimming pool among lawns attractively edged by traveller palms.

Danta Corcovado Osa Peninsula MID-RANGE

Sustainably run lodge on a small farm with optional tours into Corcovado NP, Guaymi indigenous reserve, etc. Good for nature lovers; not for the bug-phobic.

Hacienda La Isla Sarapiquí 4 MID-RANGE

Small colonial-style lodge set in gardens in the foothills of Braulio Carrillo NP. 14 deluxe rooms furnished in antique style. Swimming pool, al fresco restaurant. Riding, canopy tours are bookable at the hotel.

Rio Celeste Hideaway Tenorio Volcano NP UPPER RANGE

Comfortable small hotel set within the rainforests of Tenorio NP. 26 casitas private bungalows, pool, restaurant. Riding, biking, walking options, inc Rio Celeste falls.

Silencio del Campo Arenal MID-RANGE

Small resort-style hotel 5km from La Fortuna with 20 spacious stand-alone villa-style rooms, each with a views of the volcano. Two swimming pools (one for adults, one for children), on-site hot-springs and spa, and a restaurant specialising in traditional Costa Rican cooking such as *casado* and *gallo pinto*.

Life's a beach

Costa Rica has a wide choice of pleasant beaches that are just right for a few days' stay.



NICOYA PENINSULA

The Nicoya Peninsula on the north Pacific coast enjoys Guanacaste's long dependable dry season from December to May, and has a good choice of yellow sand beaches. Impressive sunsets over the Pacific are a feature almost everywhere. Good beaches have all attracted foreign visitors including expatriates in search of paradise, giving a cosmopolitan atmosphere, but most remain nonetheless agreeably low-key and relaxed.

Tamarindo is a fishing village that has grown into a busy beach resort with a choice of restaurants, bars and shops. Its attractive long, wide, yellow-sand beach is a favourite with surfers and windsurfers. Leatherback turtles nest at Playa Grande from October to March (but have become rare lately); wildlife trips go into nearby mangroves and wetlands. North of Tamarindo, upmarket **Playa Ocotal** and neighbouring budget **Playa El Coco** are good for divers: both are in reach of top offshore dive sites of Bat Islands (bull shark) and Catalinas (manta ray in April). **Playa Hermosa** has a hide-away feeling but there's a choice of restaurants and bars, and the sea is good for swimming rather than surfing. To the south lie the dark sand beaches of **Playa Potrero**, a peaceful area with a handful of beach front hotels at the end of a long bumpy road off the main highway, worthwhile if you stay a few days or more.

At **Playas Nosara** three wild beaches separated by hilltops form a spread out community of mainly ex-pats with an off-beat 'end of the road' feel. Nearby a private reserve is home to howler monkeys, coati and racoon. Olive Green Ridley turtles lay here between August and December with mass nestings

or *arribadas* typically during the last quarter of the moon. **Playa Sámara** is set in a deep horseshoe bay with a wide sandy beach protected by a reef. It is a fishing village that has grown into a beach resort popular with swimmers, windsurfers, backpackers, and young Costa Ricans. The village supports a few beachside snack bars and a handful of cafés and restaurants. **Playa Carrillo**, 15min south of Sámara, is a quiet, attractive, beige sand beach in a semi-circular bay of calm water protected by a reef, backed by a boulevard of shady palms and is a good spot to watch the sun set.

By Nicoya's southern tip, **Montezuma** is a friendly laid back village run by expats with an eco-conscience with boutiques, bars, and a limited selection of restaurants (lots of veggie options). Beyond rocky coves lie wonderful wild beaches backed by forest. There are walks and horse rides on the beach to waterfalls. Further on, **Santa Teresa** and **Malpais** attract surfers and young travellers plus some upscale glitterati, with a mix of lively bars eateries and luxury villas dotted along a bumpy road set back from the ocean. In the other direction, **Tambor** is a secluded getaway, with calmer sea and a pristine palm-backed beach.

CENTRAL PACIFIC

Beautiful **Manuel Antonio National Park** (p9) has verdant forest opening on to pristine white sands (closed Mondays—go to small local beaches), and is deservedly much visited. Most hotels are between **Quepos** and the park along 7km of road that runs through the forested hills; there's a mini real-estate boom underway here. Quepos itself offers restaurants, cybercafés and lively bars. **Esterillos Este**, a little further away from the park, is much

quieter: a stunning undeveloped stretch of sand with a few hotels and restaurants but not much more.

Jacó, with its discos and nightlife, is the closest to San José and is popular with surfers, backpackers and week-enders; rip tides make swimming inadvisable.

SOUTH PACIFIC

Dominical has a number of attractive forest-backed beaches. Those further south at **Uvita** and **Playa Tortuga** are more secluded and situated close to Ballena National Park, a good area for snorkelling and birdwatching. There are strong breaks at Dominical, making it popular with surfers but swimming is not recommended.

SOUTH CARIBBEAN

The wild beaches between **Manzanillo** and **Cahuita**, around Puerto Viejo, are certainly beautiful though not safe for swimming due to strong currents. Coral reefs offer good snorkelling when sea conditions are right. Nearby one of the world's top surfing beaches produces a wave called the 'Salsa Brava' featured in the movie *Endless Summer II*.



Whales and dolphins

Costa Rica's waters see around 40 species of dolphin, porpoise and whale—nearly half the world's total. The Osa Peninsula is particularly favoured by a number of species including Bottlenose, Spinner, Spotted and Common Dolphin. If you are lucky you will be joined by dolphin pods playing at the front of your boat across Golfo Dulce or over to Caño Island. Orcas, with distinctive black and white markings, can be seen here too, and Sperm, Blue and Pilot Whales. Humpbacks migrate to Costa Rica from colder northerly waters, arriving between November and December to mate. They remain until March around the southern Pacific coast to give birth.

Costa Rica for honeymooners

Grooms under pressure to create the perfect honeymoon need look no further: Costa Rica is a dream destination. It is especially suitable for adventurous honeymooners who want to do more than just lie on a beach. The diversity of the country means you can enjoy everything from beaches, rainforests and cloud forests to volcanic landscapes while staying in very comfortable hotels. Costa Rica boasts some really special accommodation, so whether you are looking for

luxury, a small boutique experience or more budget options, we can provide them.

Beautiful sunsets, candle-lit jungle rooms, private Jacuzzis and wild, romantic beaches are the backdrop to your perfect honeymoon.

See our 'Costa Rica Chill-out' (p16) or call us with your ideas, sit back and relax, and we will put the whole trip together for you to suit your budget.



Where to stay in Costa Rica

Beach hotels to fall in love with

There are many options for hotels by the sea in Costa Rica. Which is right for you will depend on your preferences for style of hotel and type of beach. Many beaches are wild or not suitable for swimming because of currents. The hotel's own pool is then especially important if you plan to just relax, and there are some wonderful examples to choose from.

The hotels shown below are all on the sands or within a few steps, many others are not - either because the beach is protected or because a higher location brings superb views. We have selected them from the many that we have visited ourselves.



Sugar Beach UPPER RANGE

Playa Pan de Azucar, Nicoya

This away-from-it-all hotel is on Playa Pan de Azucar, a secluded pristine beach north of Potrero Bay, down a very bumpy road. It suits those looking for seclusion and privacy: perfect for honeymooners and couples. Perched above the ocean, it is in a great spot to catch soft sea breezes and for viewing the sunsets. There are 25 rooms of different configurations, many with ocean views and large terraces. There is a small pool and a lovely open air restaurant serving great local fish. Guests report seeing plenty of wildlife within the grounds, especially iguanas and exotic birds, but mainly they rave about the beach which is virtually empty all year round.



Capitán Suizo UPPER RANGE

Tamarindo, Nicoya

Over many years our clients have given excellent feedback about this hotel, which is one of the best options in Tamarindo, and wonderful for families. It is small and attractive, right on the beach, with a beautiful free-form pool. Within the gardens you will see birds, monkeys and iguanas. There are 8 thatched bungalows and 22 rooms. The ground floor rooms have air-conditioning and the upper floor, ceiling fans. The open-air restaurant serves international cuisine with a Swiss twist. The hotel is within walking distance of central Tamarindo but in a tranquil area. Early booking is advised, especially for Christmas, Easter, July and August.



Harmony UPPER RANGE

Nosara, Nicoya

Two minutes from Playa Guiones, one of the most pristine beaches in Costa Rica (wild, brilliant for surfing, but with strong currents), Harmony is set back from the beach as the area is preserved, so there are no ocean views. The 24 simple rooms are set around a small, free-form pool and are tastefully furnished with wooden floors and decks, crisp white sheets on king-size beds and indoor and outdoor showers. The emphasis here is on well-being. Food is pure and natural and there is a yoga studio and spa. The atmosphere is very laid back and exemplifies the Costa Rican art of 'chillaxing'. A super hotel for couples and families and any surfer dude!



Punta Islita TOP RANGE

Punta Islita, Nicoya

On a remote verdant hillside with magnificent views over the Pacific, Punta Islita is one of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World, and certified as a Sustainable Standard Setter by the Rainforest Alliance. It has a long-standing reputation as one of the most upscale hotels in the country. Its design is elegant yet natural, with tiled floors, wooden furniture and vibrantly coloured textiles. Guest rooms are dotted around the property, many with ocean views. There is a spa and a picture-perfect infinity pool with stunning views out to sea. Activities arranged by the hotel include golf, riding and nature walks. A popular choice with honeymooners.



Ylang Ylang UPPER RANGE

Montezuma, Nicoya

Something special. A 10min walk along the sands from the village of Montezuma leads you to this secluded paradise on a forest-backed beach. There is no road access, but porters from the lodge are on hand to carry your bags. A winding path fringed with exquisite heliconias and ginger plants takes you from the restaurant, past the pretty pool to the cluster of igloo bungalows nestled amongst the foliage. Each of the 7 private bungalows has a terrace and glass-free windows plus a carefully screened outdoor shower. Rooms with views of the beach and fully enclosed private bathrooms are also available.



Tango Mar UPPER RANGE

Tambor, Nicoya

Set in extensive grounds on Nicoya's southern shore, Tango Mar has an enviable beachfront setting. 18 rooms are within yards of the sands, 5 suites modelled on Polynesian-style wooden cabañas are just 20m from the beach, while 12 individual villas are set apart on a hillside away from the main buildings and reached by self-drive golf buggies—the view from the cliff near these suites, looking down the palm-fringed coast and out to sea, is quite breathtaking. Overlooking the beach are two small swimming pools and an open-air bar, while the main restaurant faces the water's edge. Golf, spa facilities and riding are available on site.



Bosque del Mar UPPER RANGE

Playa Hermosa, North Pacific

A family-run beachfront boutique hotel at the quieter end of Playa Hermosa, about 30min from Liberia airport. There 32 well-appointed suites in 4 categories. Each has a telephone, bathroom with hot water, living room, mini bar, a/c, ceiling fan, flat screen cable TV, and terrace. On-site facilities include a beach front lounge bar, restaurant, wifi access, swimming pool and jacuzzi, spa services, dive centre and locally bookable tours. The hotel's à la carte restaurant *Niromi* serves a fusion of Costa Rican and international cuisine with plenty of fresh seafood.



Arenas del Mar TOP RANGE

Manuel Antonio, Central Pacific

This luxury hotel is one of the few in Manuel Antonio with easy access to both Playitis Beach and Playa Espadillas. In places the ground is very steep, so golf buggies are used. All rooms are opulently decorated and extremely comfortable. Most have ocean views. The apartments have a living area and a Jacuzzi on the balcony. There are 2 swimming pools, a fine dining restaurant, beach bar and spa. When built it was the first 100% sustainable development project in Costa Rica, utilising all the guidelines of the Certification for Sustainable Tourism.

Worth a mention

Alma del Pacífico, Esterillos Este TOP RANGE

Formerly Xandari Pacífico. Set directly on the beach. Spacious rooms in a colourful Mexican theme. The al fresco restaurant has views to garden and beach, and there is a swimming pool and spa. A good choice for honeymooners.

Cala Luna, Tamarindo UPPER RANGE

Beautiful boutique hotel 10min from Tamarindo's busy beachfront, 2min from a quieter beach. Lovely pool, al fresco dining. 20 rooms plus villas with private pools.

Clandestino, Parrita MID-RANGE

Small 'barefoot' boutique hotel on the sands of the beautiful natural Palo Seco beach. 12 rooms, pool, bar, restaurant, wifi. Carara and Manuel Antonio are in reach.

Playa Espadilla, Manuel Antonio 3 MID-RANGE

Close to Manuel Antonio NP, one of the few mid-range properties by the beach. En suite rooms with a/c in a 2-storey building. Restaurant, pool, bar, tennis courts.

Tropico Latino, Santa Teresa UPPER RANGE

Directly on the beach among palms to shade an ample pool. Rustic *casitas* have sea or garden views, all en suite, a/c, fan and porch area. Italian-leaning restaurant, spa.

Bahia del Sol, Potrero, Nicoya 4 UPPER RANGE

Quiet area looking over a bay with one of the few beaches in Costa Rica suitable for swimmers (though seal colour sand). Lovely freshwater swimming pool.

Caribblue, near Puerto Viejo, Caribbean coast 1 MID-RANGE

Between the jungle and the beach, artily colourful wooden bungalows with verandahs and hammocks set around a large tropical garden. Bar and restaurant with sea food specialities. Good for a 2-3 night stop.



PHOTO: Resplendent Quetzal, San Gerardo de Dota, Costa Rica
T Spooner & C Eagles (taken on a Geodyssey holiday)

Birdwatching in Costa Rica

Costa Rica attracts birdwatchers at all levels, from beginners to the neotropics to experts chasing rarities and endemics.

COSTA RICA'S BIRDS

Costa Rica can boast more than 850 species of birds (including a high number of regional endemics) in an extremely small area, approximately the same size as Wales. It is one of the most biodiverse places on the planet thanks to its position between North and South America, its tropical climate, and differences in altitude and habitat.

Many of Costa Rica's year round avian inhabitants are colourful, tropical varieties, such as hummingbirds, parrots, toucans and trogons. Others are drab, shy and secretive like the antbirds and

woodcreepers. From December to April you can add winter-resident migrants from North America to your list. There is an excellent field guide and a good site guide with sketch maps of birding trails and local species lists.

Lodges are good, travel times short, and local guides can usually find most of their birds.

Birdwatching with Geodyssey
We have organised trips for birdwatchers to the neotropics for over 20 years, with many leading neotropical specialists using our unrivalled services.

Planning your birdwatching trip to Costa Rica

Our birdwatching itineraries can be tailored to suit your dates and budget, as well as your level of expertise and your previous experience of birding in this region.

Our classic *Birds of Costa Rica* itinerary opposite has been designed to suit most birdwatchers visiting this part of the world for the first time and dedicating their time to birdwatching. This and most other birdwatching itineraries we provide can be arranged in any of three ways:

- **Ornithologist guided** by a Costa Rican ornithologist who also drives you about

- **Local driver, self-guided** a local driver takes you from site to site, you spot and identify your own birds

- **Selfdrive, self-guided** you drive yourself from site to site, spot and identify your own birds
You can also do-it-yourself! With a flight, hire-car, accommodation vouchers, a guide book and a field guide, you are all set for your own birding trip. Take advantage of our very economical *Freedom Self-drive* scheme (p21) and make up your itinerary as you go, or choose *Prebooked Selfdrive* for a fixed itinerary designed for you in advance.

Key birding sites

■ NE Lowlands

La Selva is a 1500ha reserve run by the Organisation for Tropical Studies. 60% is primary rainforest, the rest a mix of secondary rain forest, abandoned pasture, swamp, and old cacao, laurel and peach palm plantations. Elevations range from 35m to 200m. 480 species are listed and it is one of the best places to pick up those that are hard to find elsewhere. The old growth forest is good for tinamous, antbirds, wrens and woodcreepers; forest edges bring tanagers, orioles, woodpeckers, etc. Notable specialities include Red-fronted Parrotlet, Tawny-chested Flycatcher, Striped-breasted and Black-throated Wren. Higher, **Virgen del Socorro** is good for warblers, flycatchers, honeycreepers, and hummers; its specialities include Black-crowned Antpitta, Blue-and-gold Tanager, Red-headed and Prong-billed Barbet, Emerald Tanager, Tawny-capped Euphonia, Black-faced Antthrush, Ocellated Antbird, Brown-billed Scythebill, Black-crested Coquette, and Green Thornbill. In **Braulio Carrillo NP** at Quebrada Gonzalez, Zeledon's Tyrannulet, Tawny-capped Euphonia and Sooty-faced Finch can be found.

■ Arenal Volcano

Arenal Observatory Lodge has good birding in protected forest. Costa Rican specialities here include the endemic Coppery-headed Emerald, White-bellied Mountain-gem, Lattice-tailed and Orange-bellied Trogon, Black-thighed Grosbeak, Zeledon's Tyrannulet, Bare-necked Umbrellabird and Sooty-faced Finch.

■ Mid Pacific Lowlands

Carara Biological Reserve occupies a transition zone between primary tropical dry forest and primary evergreen forest, so it is possible to find White-throated Magpie-jay, Rufous-naped Wren, Hoffmann's Woodpecker, Rose-throated Becard and Fiery-billed Araçari, Riverside Wren, Black-bellied Wren and Black-headed Antshrike all within the same area. Highlights of Carara are the Scarlet Macaw and an active Orange-collared Manakin lek. It also boasts Plain Xenops, White-whiskered Puffbird and five species of Trogon. Nearby at the mouth of the **River Tárcoles** the marshes are rich in waterfowl and wading birds.

■ Talamanca mountains

San Gerardo de Dota is year-round the most reliable place in Costa Rica for Resplendent Quetzal. Between 1500–2500m is mainly oak forests and above the tree line (at 3000m) on **Cerro de la Muerte** lies páramo, stunted windblown shrubs, bamboo and tree ferns. Clouds and fog are common, usually developing in the afternoon. This is the place for near-endemics Volcano Junco and Yellow-winged Vireo plus Hairy and Acorn Woodpecker, Long-tailed and Black-and-yellow Silky-flycatcher, Black-throated Green Warbler, Ochraceous and Timberline Wren, Sooty Robin, Sooty-capped Bush-tanager, Flame-throated Warbler, Flame-Coloured and Summer Tanager, Golden-browed Chlorophonia, Blue-hooded Euphonia, Blue Seedeater, Black-billed Nightingale-thrush, Black-faced Solitaire, Collared Trogon, Green-fronted Lancebill, Black Phoebe, Black-capped Flycatcher, Silvery-throated Jay, Large-footed, Yellow-thighed and Peg-billed Finch and Zeledonia. Its many species of hummingbird include Magnificent, Volcano, Green Violet-ear and Fiery-throated Hummingbird.

■ Turrialba region

Rancho Naturalista is a birders lodge at 1000m offering a mix of mountain and lowland species and access to **Tapantí NP**. Notables include Black Guan, Chiriquí Quail-dove, Prong-billed Barbet, Streak-breasted Treehunter, Golden-bellied Flycatcher, Black-faced Solitaire, Golden-browed Chlorophonia. Other special birds in the region are Grey-tailed Mountain-gem, Blue-and-gold and Spangle-cheeked Tanager, Bare-shanked Screech-owl, Sulphur-winged Parakeet and Black-bellied Hummingbird. The lodge's resident ornithologists regularly see difficult species such as Chestnut-headed Oropendola, Purplish-backed Quail-dove, Black-crested Coquette, Green Thorntail, Snowcap, Tawny-throated Leaf-tosser and Dull-mantled Antbird.

■ Monteverde and Santa Elena

452 species have been recorded in the **Monteverde** area. Resplendent Quetzal move about in the forest reserve during the year in search of food. There is a Hummingbird Gallery where typically 7 species of hummingbird can be seen at the feeders, most notably the endemic Coppery-headed Emerald. Nearby **Santa Elena Reserve** gives the option of a Canopy Walk on a network of 7 suspension bridges and trails allowing different observational levels in the cloud forest. Costa Rican specialities found here include Black-breasted Woodquail, Black Guan, Buff-fronted Quail-dove, Fiery-throated Hummingbird, Magenta-throated Woodstar, Scintillant Hummingbird, Orange-bellied Trogon, Prong-billed Barbet, Ruddy Treerunner, Streak-breasted Treehunter, Golden-bellied Flycatcher, Dark Pewee, Zeledonia, Golden-browed Chlorophonia, Spangle-cheeked Tanager, Black-faced Solitaire, Sooty-capped Bush-tanager, Black-thighed Grosbeak and Slaty Flowerpiercer. It is also a good location for Grey-breasted Wood-wren, Long-tailed Manakin, Slaty-backed Nightingale-thrush, Three-striped Warblers, Spotted Barbtail, Three-wattled Bellbird, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, Emerald Toucanet, White-eared Ground-sparrows and Rufous-browed Peppershrike.

■ NW Lowlands

Palo Verde NP comprises seasonally dry forest and extensive wetland vegetation bordering the **Tempisque River** near its estuary in the Golfo de Nicoya. From September to March, several thousand herons, storks, egrets, grebes, ibis, ducks and Northern Jacanas flock to the lagoons and surrounding areas to feed and mate. This is the only area in Costa Rica to see Jabiru, Glossy Ibis, Fulvous Whistling-ducks, Bay-winged Hawks and North American waterfowl. Nearby La Enseñada has similar access.

■ South Pacific

Close to the Panama border this is the region where at mid-high elevations most of the birds with very restricted distributions are found. Good birding locations include **Térraba**, **Las Cruces** and **Las Tablas**. Look for Riverside and Black-bellied Wren, Red-breasted Blackbird, Thick-billed and Spotted-crowned Euphonia, Black-headed Brush-finch, Crested Bobwhite, Band-rumped Swift, White-crested Coquette, Beryl-crowned and Snowy-bellied Hummingbird, White-tailed Emerald, Baird's Trogon, Golden-naped and Red-crowned Woodpecker and Tawny-winged Woodcreeper. Locally at **Coto Brus**, Rudy Foliage-gleaner, Rosy Thrush-tanager and Lance-tailed Manakin occur. In the lowlands around **Golfito** and the **River Esquinas** the endemics Black-cheeked Ant-tanager and Mangrove Hummingbird are to be found along with other specialities of these lowlands such as Red-throated Caracara, Marbled Wood-quail, Fiery-billed Araçari Turquoise Cotinga and Pale-breasted Spinetail.



The Birds of Costa Rica

This is a well-nigh perfect itinerary for a holiday dedicated to birdwatching for first-timers to Costa Rican birds. It features a combination of key habitats that produces long lists, comfortable accommodation in enjoyable locations, and minimum travelling.

San José

Day 1 Met on arrival, you are driven to a mid-range hotel.

Carara Reserve

Day 2 BLD Dawn birding in the hotel's lovely and productive grounds, then drive to the Tárcoles River on the mid-Pacific coast for 3 nights at Cerro Lodge or Villa Lapas, both are birders lodges close to mangroves and the Carara Reserve—a boundary between tropical dry and humid forest offering a mix of species including White-throated Magpie-Jay, Stripe-headed Sparrow, Fiery-billed Araçari and Black-bellied Wren. This is one of two sites in Costa Rica for Scarlet Macaw, reliably seen from the bridge over the Tárcoles at dusk or dawn.

Day 3-4 BLD Two full days' birding in the Carara Reserve and Tárcoles. The reserve's notable birds also include Hoffmann's Woodpecker, Orange-collared Manakin, Panama Flycatcher and Black-hooded Antshrike. Look for Zone-tailed Hawk, Gray-chested Dove, Long-billed Hermit, Purple-crowned Fairy, Blue-throated Goldentail, Baird's Trogon, Long-tailed and Tawny-winged Woodcreepers, Dusky and Chestnut-backed Antbird, Dot-winged Antwren, Spectacled Antpitta, Black-faced Anthrush, Golden-crowned Spadebill, Greenish Elaenia, Slate-headed Tody-flycatcher, Northern Bentbill, Rose-throated Becard, Rufous-breasted, Black-bellied and Riverside Wrens, and Western Tanager. Tárcoles river banks bring Collared Plover, Spotted and Western Sandpipers, and mangroves near its mouth the endemic Mangrove Hummingbird plus Brown Pelican, numerous egrets and herons, White Ibis, Osprey, Plumbeous Kite, Mangrove Black-hawk, Rufous-browed Peppershrike and Mangrove Vireo.

Palo Verde area

Day 5 BLD After a final early morning in the Carara area drive up the coast to La Enseñada Refuge by the Gulf of Nicoya, for 2 nights. La Enseñada is a 1000 acre cattle and horse ranch whose birds are similar to the nearby Palo Verde NP but with better access and accommodation. An afternoon on the ranch's trails by a variety of aquatic habitats—freshwater lagoon, saltwater lagoon, mangrove and river, plus some forest habitats—should produce pelicans, herons, parrots, parakeets, bellbirds, trogons, kingfishers, White Ibis, Great Egret, Montezuma Oropendola, Double-striped Thick-knee and possibly Jabiru. Migrant shore birds are also seen.

Day 6 BLD Full day birding the trails at La Enseñada. This entire region is most productive in the December–April dry season. At other times substitute 2 nights at Tortuguero, which we would place at the start or end of this itinerary.

Sarapiquí

Day 7 BLD Drive to Selva Verde Lodge at Sarapiquí (Caribbean slopes) for 3 nights. Bird the grounds for Black-and-white Owl, Great Green Macaw, Snowy Cotinga and Sunbittern.

La Selva

Day 8 BLD A full day at nearby OTS La Selva and surrounding area for NE lowland forest species at 35–200m. Specialities include White-tipped Sicklebill, Green Thorntail, Spectacled Antpitta, Bare-necked Umbrellabird, Canebrake Wren, Black Hawk-Eagle, Slate-coloured Grosbeak, Olive-backed Euphonia, Tiny Hawk, Great and Slaty-breasted Tinamou.

La Virgen del Socorro

Day 9 BLD Bird La Virgen del Socorro for Tawny-capped Euphonia, Emerald Tanager, and the endemic Coppery-headed Emerald.

Braulio Carrillo to Rancho Naturalista

Day 10 BLD Morning's birding Braulio Carrillo NP where targets include Lanceolated Monklet, Sharpbill, Black-crested Coquette, Rufous-fronted Wood-Quail, Dull-mantled Antbird, Purplish-backed Quail-Dove. Continue to Rancho Naturalista near Turrialba for 3 nights, a birders lodge at 1000m, for a mix of mountain and lowland species. Balcony feeders attract Gray-headed Chachalaca, Collared Araçari, Passerini's Tanager, Montezuma Oropendola, Blue-crowned Motmot, Lined and Black-cheeked Woodpeckers, Golden-hooded and White-lined Tanagers, and Scarlet-rumped Cacique. Hummingbird feeders meanwhile buzz with Green Thorntail, White-necked Jacobin, Green-crowned Brilliant, Green-breasted Mango, and Rufous-tailed Hummingbird. Vervain flowers attract Black-crested Coquette and Snowcap. Surrounding trees bring Keel-billed Toucan, Brown-hooded and White-crowned Parrots, and Masked and Black-crowned Tityras.

Day 11-12 BLD Two full days' birding at Rancho Naturalista and around, where specialities include Purplish-backed Quail-Dove, Lanceolated Monklet, Rufous Motmot, Brown-billed Scythebill, Checker-throated Antwren, Spotted Antbird, White-crowned Manakin and Tawny-chested Flycatcher.

Tapantí and to San Gerardo de Dota

Day 13 BLD Birding in the Tapantí montane forest where a key target is Rufous-rumped Antwren, then drive onwards to San Gerardo de Dota to either Trogon or Savegre Lodge.

San Gerardo de Dota & Cerro de la Muerte

Day 14 BLD A memorable morning's birding for Resplendent Quetzal. Ascend to Cerro de la Muerte for páramo species: Volcano Hummingbird, Black-capped flycatcher, Ochraceous Pewee, Red-fronted Parrotlet, Barred Parakeet, Timberline and Ochraceous Wrens, Yellow-winged Vireo, Wrenthrush, Volcano Junco, Blue Seedeater and Peg-billed Finch.

Day 15 BLD A morning's birding at San Gerardo de Dota, then return to San José for a final night in a mid-range hotel.

San José

Day 16 B Driven to the airport for your flight home.





Panama

Panama offers some of the most amazing experiences in Central America. For us, it's close behind Costa Rica for wildlife and nature you can see easily, coupled with strong tribal cultures, a vivid history that's full of surprises, and beaches in variety. Travelling through the Panama Canal on a 'partial transit' day trip brings its amazing technical achievement to life.

With all this on offer, plus better and better facilities and real enthusiasm from Panamanians to show off the very best of their country, Panama is a fabulous choice for adventurous travellers.

Nearly 30% of Panama's land is protected in national parks, forest reserves and wildlife sanctuaries, which provide great opportunities to see the country's great wealth of flora and fauna. Panama's contorted shape and its location at the southernmost range of many North American species and the northernmost range of many South American species creates a melting pot rich in animal and plant life. There are around 950 species of birds (more than in North America and Europe combined), plus 220 mammals, 354 reptiles and amphibians, and more than 10,000 species of plants.

But it's not only the nature that pulls you in. Panama has a fascinating history as a Spanish colony and transit route for the conquistadors' riches from Peru, often plundered by pirates, with some evocative sites to visit. Panama City combines a

colonial past with a brash modernity that springs from its new standing as Latin America's leading trading centre. Next to the city, the Panama Canal, the key to this success, is a truly amazing engineering achievement, and the trials and tribulations of building it make a remarkable story that lives long in the mind.

There are few countries where tribal communities of indigenous peoples survive with such fortitude, struggling against the odds to preserve thousand year old cultures and a future for their children. The largest, the Kuna, have a degree of autonomy over their homelands, which include the beautiful islands of the Kuna Yala (San Blas) archipelago. They warmly welcome visitors for a taste of their paradise at delightful simple lodges purpose-built by the communities.

With 1500 islands and 1000 miles of Caribbean and Pacific coast it's easy to find a white sand beach to get away from it all, or some great places for snorkelling, diving or surfing.



Molas

The traditional costume worn every day by most Kuna women is very striking. The most important element is the colourful blouse, or *mola*, sewn with reverse appliqué designs in bright contrasting colours. Patterns often use geometric shapes, Kuna symbols, stylised birds, fish, etc. Generally 3-5 layers of fabric are used and very fine stitching is employed for the best garments, worn by the older ladies with magnificent authority and charm.

More often than not, the appliqué work is reduced to a square panel worn on the front and back of the blouse. These mola panels are also sold separately to visitors. You can find them in the villages of the Kuna Yala and now and again in craft markets and shops in other parts of Panama.

Many are designed with visitors in mind, with especially eye-catching designs that may be quite loosely stitched. You can buy single squares, or panels made up into wall hangings, table cloths, etc. Buying them is an excellent way to support Kuna women without diluting the community's stock of 'real' molas. They are easy to pack, and a great way of bringing back home a lively taste of Panama.

PHOTOS

01 Our John Thirtle took this picture at a landing strip in the San Blas islands in the Kuna Yala. 'Beaded leggings and arm bands are worn every day by Kuna ladies, an essential expression of their culture as well as looking great with molas and strong cotton prints. This lady was seeing her daughter on to the plane back to college in Panama City - an anxious moment for her.'

02 Coral island, San Blas (see p35).

Around Panama

Step beyond Panama City and the narrow Canal zone and you are quickly in two very different Panamas. To the west low mountains, rolling landscapes and some great beaches echo Costa Rica, while to the east lie the magical islands of the Kuna Yala/San Blas and the intense wilderness of the Darién.

PANAMA CITY

One in every three Panamanians lives in Panama City. It's a sleek metropolis that curls impressively around a wide bay facing the Pacific ocean, thriving on its role as one of the world's great trading gateways: Latin America's Hong Kong or Singapore.

The west of the city presses against the Panama Canal itself, where the spectacular Bridge of the Americas brings the Panamerican Highway from the rest of Central and North America to docks that busily load and unload freight for the Canal. Towards its eastern outskirts lie the ruins of the original city, Panama la Vieja, where the riches of the Incan empire first arrived by ship from Peru and were carried by the 'royal road' to the Caribbean for onward shipment to the Spanish court—until, that is, the city was comprehensively sacked in 1671 by the Welsh pirate Sir Henry Morgan. After this onslaught the city was rebuilt at Casco Viejo, quite near the mouth of today's Canal, this time surrounded by a high stone wall and moat. Thus protected, Casco Viejo flourished unscathed for centuries, with wonderful colonial buildings in Spanish, French, and Italian styles crowding narrow streets and small plazas that echo its contemporary, old Havana. Like Havana, the ravages of time have taken their toll since Casco Vieja's heyday, but restoration projects have brought new life (and some boutique hotels), and the area has received UNESCO World Heritage status.

All great cities must have a great park, and Panama City's outshines all-comers. Its Metropolitan Natural Park brings tropical forest to within 10min of the heart of downtown, with well-maintained trails, 250 bird species, iguanas, tortoises, sloth and anteater, and the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, from whose canopy crane you can survey life in the tree-tops.

The Smithsonian is also involved in Panama City's most notable new building, the *Biodiversity Museum: Panama Bridge of Life* (or just 'BioMuseo'). Designed

by Frank Gehry (Guggenheim Bilbao), and much delayed in construction, this remarkable building is sited at Amador on the Pacific end of the Canal looking back to the City. Eight galleries describe the origin of the isthmus, its impact on evolution, and the huge biodiversity that has emerged.

THE PANAMA CANAL

Formally handed back to Panama at midnight on 31 December 1999, the Panama Canal's revenues now benefit the Panamanian economy—these days one of the strongest in Latin America. Today around 14,000 ships (about 5% of world shipping) pass through the Canal's 80km each year, with a double lock at Miraflores on the Pacific side, and a single lock at Pedro Miguel, to reach Gatún Lake, the highest point, before the triple Gatún lock that connects to the Caribbean. A new 'third' set of locks by-passes the old locks at both ends of the canal to accommodate even larger ships. The story of the Canal is so vivid (see box), and the engineering feat so awesome, that a 'transit' through the Canal, or part of it on a day trip, is a must for anyone.

AROUND THE CANAL

National parks

Among the Canal's many surprises is its natural surroundings of rigorously protected forest. Deforestation would reduce the rainfall flowing into the rivers that feed the Canal and its locks, and the consequent erosion would quickly block its channels with silt. National parks protect much of the watershed that feeds the Canal.

Soberanía NP covers the forested hillsides east of the Canal. It is a paradise for birdwatchers, with a record 525 species listed in a single 24 hour period in 1996. The magnificent forest of cotton, cuipo and oak trees is also home to 100 mammal species, 55 amphibian and 79 species of reptile including agouti, cotton-topped tamarind monkey, caiman, collared peccaries, night monkey, jaguar

and white-tailed deer. A former USAF radar tower, now converted to a birders' lodge, perches on a hill with fantastic 360° views into and over the forest canopy. The gently rolling landscape of Las Cruces National Park bordering Soberanía to the south boasts its fair share of flora and fauna and is renowned for palm and cotton trees that burst into colour in April and May. The recently established San Lorenzo National Park to the west of the Caribbean end of the Canal protects a mix of habitats, mostly wet lowland forest, and is similarly bird-rich but harder to access.

Gatún Lake, created by the damming of the mighty Chagres river to form the central section of the Canal, is now teeming with wildlife and well worth a visit. Barro Colorado Island within the lake is world famous for the study of tropical nature.

A little further afield, **Chagres NP** protects the river's headwaters, and offers a preview of the great forests of the Darién that lie beyond. Important spectaculars such as the harpy eagle and tapir inhabit its rugged landscape, accessible by road from Panama City. Lush valleys and boisterous rivers stand in contrast to towering craggy peaks, the highest of which is Cerro Jefe, at 1007m.

Colon and Portobelo

There are three ways to cross to Colon at the Caribbean end of the Canal: by the Canal itself, by a single oft-clogged highway, or by train—a memorable hour-long journey closely following much of the Canal. It crosses Gatún Lake on causeways, and has impressive views at many stages, including all the locks. It was originally built to bear massive amounts of spoil from the Canal's excavations to construct harbours at either end.

Colon itself is chaotic and best avoided, but a pleasant drive along the coast brings you to the pretty harbour town of **Portobelo** which stood at the Caribbean end of the Royal Road that brought Incan gold across the isthmus from Panama Vieja. Under repeated attack by pirates in the 17th and

Panama's history

Panama's role as a bridge between oceans is at the core of a past riddled with invasions and misdeeds. In 1513 it was proclaimed a colony of Spain after Vasco Núñez de Balboa landed on its shores, crossing the isthmus to discover the Pacific. Spanish rule lasted until 1821, during which time privateers including Sir Francis Drake and Sir Henry Morgan looted its ports, drawn by stores of Incan gold waiting to be shipped back to Spain. On his final mission to sack Panama City Drake died of fever and was buried at sea off Portobelo.

Goods crossed by the Royal Road until in 1850 a transcontinental railway was built that proved invaluable in the San Francisco gold rush. As part of Colombia, rights to build a canal were sold to the French in 1880, but after nine years and thousands of lives lost, construction was abandoned. In return for a generous Canal Treaty, the US supported independence from Colombia in 1903.

The ensuing relationship between the USA and Panama was marked by periods of great instability, culminating in the invasion of 1989 to overthrow the corrupt General Noriega. Ownership of the Canal was finally handed to Panama in 1999 and the US withdrew all troops. The long-standing affiliation has left its mark, and some areas of the capital and beyond still retain a US feel.

Despite its tempestuous past, Panama now has one of the most stable economies in Latin America, with a well-developed services sector and an economy dependent on trade.



18th centuries, the Spanish built a series of forts along this stretch of coast to protect the area, the remains of which still stand sentinel today. The most imposing is San Lorenzo Fort, positioned at the mouth of the Chagres. Jungle rich with birdlife surrounds its well-preserved ramparts with their original cannon—some still on their mounts, others lying scattered. Sir Francis Drake attacked the area three times, the first unprofitably, the second massively successfully (plundering a year's shipment of silver destined for the Spanish throne), and the third fatally. He lies in a lead coffin out to sea 20 fathoms deep. Portobelo is home of a Black Christ, a wooden statue found by fishermen in the 17th century which saw off a period of the plague. Amid great festivities the statue is born through the town on 21 October, with many purple-robed pilgrims walking the roads, some on their knees, in the preceding days and weeks.

CENTRAL PANAMA

El Valle

3 million years ago a large volcano destroyed itself in a massive eruption that left a crater 5km across, the second largest in the world. Nestling inside the crater is **El Valle**, a tranquil mountain town with a pleasant year-round spring climate: a favourite

retreat for wealthy Panamanians being just 2 hours by road from Panama City. It's a good place to relax and explore, and a delight for walkers with trails leading across flower-strewn mountain slopes, lush cool forests with babbling mountain streams and ancient burial grounds. Attractions include canopy tours, the 80ft El Chorro El Macho waterfall and Pozos Termales hot springs, where you can soak in thermal waters or take a dip in mineral-rich volcanic mud baths. Traders from indigenous communities arrive from far afield to set up stall at the vibrant Sunday market, offering traditional handicrafts including the distinctive woven basketry of the Embera people who live in the forests of Darién, and the carved woods of the Ngöbe Buglé from the western provinces of Chiriquí and Bocas del Toro. You can also find the beautiful hand-stitched 'molas' of the Kuna community (see panel, p31).

Santiago and the Azuero Peninsula

The Panamerican Highway leads onwards via the bustling city of Santiago between the mountains of the Central Cordillera and the Azuero Peninsula. The peninsula is a bastion of country life and folk culture—small farms, cowboys, fiestas, and ladies in ruffled *pollera* dresses, with a coast that's dotted with surf beaches.

PHOTOS

01 Just outside the city, Soberanía NP protects the canal's watershed. Birdwatchers have counted 380 species in a single day here—a world record.

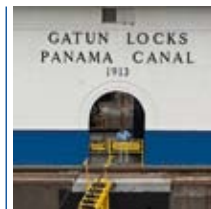
02 Coral reefs around the San Blas archipelago or around the islands in the Pacific offer excellent snorkelling.

03 A British cannon bearing the emblem of George I or II guards the mouth of the Chagres River.

04 Kuna girls 'helping' at their mother's mola stall.

05 The second oldest church in the Americas is in the sleepy town of Natá de los Caballeros.

06 Collared Araçari, a member of the toucan family, are convivial birds—they even help raise each other's chicks.



How the Canal was built

Finally completed in 1914, the Panama Canal stands as a testament not only to engineering ingenuity but also the power of big ideas.

The French began construction work in 1882 under Ferdinand de Lesseps, the bombastic engineer of the Suez Canal, on a similar 'sea-level' canal without locks. The huge task of cutting through the low mountains of the isthmus, coupled with ignorance of yellow fever and malaria, brought the French scheme to collapse in 8 years, after the loss of over 20,000 lives and the best part of a billion francs raised from French banks and small private investors.

Ten years later, a wily US government bought out the remains of the French project, manoeuvred the independence of Panama from Colombia, and took a hefty strip of land either side of the Canal under their effective sovereignty. 'Tough politics', Theodore Roosevelt admitted, 'but it meant the Canal got built'.

When to visit Panama

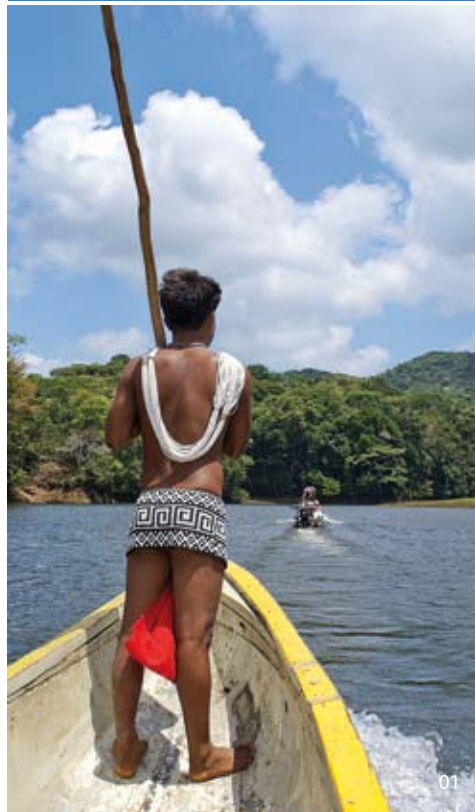
■ **December–April** Panama's drier season, is the generally favoured time of year for visitors, but usually only Christmas and the week before Easter are very busy.

■ **May–November** Travel outside the dry season is less popular, but the scenery is greener and prices can be lower. If you are planning to dive or snorkel the water visibility is better during the rainy season as there is less wind. Panama is outside of the hurricane belt. September is generally the wettest month in Panama City.

It is not uncommon for Bocas del Toro to receive at least one torrential downpour on a weekly basis throughout the year.

■ **Temperatures** Panama lies in the tropics just north of the Equator, so temperatures are fairly constant all year round, just varying with altitude. At sea level, temperatures are a tropical 30–35°C, tempered by sea breezes. Up in the highlands temperatures generally hover around 15–19°C.





01



02



03



04

WESTERN PANAMA

Eventually the highway reaches the city of David below the Chiriquí Highlands—some of Panama’s greatest scenic pleasures with coffee plantations, fields filled with orange trees or dotted with dairy herds, and misty cloud forests with tumbling mountain streams. The towering Volcán Barú, the highest point in Panama at 3475m, offers spectacular views of both the Pacific and Atlantic on clear days. To the east, amid the greenery, the picturesque town of Boquete has an alpine feel harking back to its European heritage. A handful of charming lodges make this a good base for exploring the area, which has some great walking and birdwatching trails. It is one of the most reliable places in the country to see the Resplendent Quetzal.

Straddling the border with Costa Rica, La Amistad International Park boasts an extraordinary level of biodiversity and a wildlife population that includes black-handed spider monkeys, tapir and five species of cat.

EASTERN PANAMA

The Kuna Yala

The **Kuna Yala** (‘land of the Kuna’) extends from the mountains to the Caribbean along most of eastern Panama, and includes the beautiful coral islands of the San Blas (or Kuna Yala) archipelago.

The Kuna are the largest of Panama’s indigenous groups, numbering about 50,000. Their oral history traces their origins to mainland Colombia, though some ethnographers link them to Costa Rica, and some Kunas claim they came to earth by UFO.

Apparently from the forest, they may have been forced by war and disease to migrate, finding haven in the early 19th century along the Caribbean coast and islands of Panama.

They established densely-housed defensive villages on some islands, from which they fish or commute to the mainland to hunt and farm the jungle. Their loyalties to Colombia after Panama’s

independence led to an uprising in the 1920s; protracted negotiations brought limited autonomy in 1952.

Faced with the modernities of today’s Panama, the Kuna’s sense of identity and culture remain very strong. With effective leadership based on frequent community meetings, they strive to safeguard their society while developing on their own path.

Men dress in western style, but most Kuna women follow their community’s lively fashions, with strings of colourful beads wound around forearm and calf, beaded necklaces over printed cotton tops in mola designs (see panel p31), and cotton skirts. A good number of young Kuna attend college and pursue careers beyond their community, while continuing to support their home.

Most communities are keen to benefit from visitors to their islands, which though small are among the most beautiful in the Caribbean.

The Darién

Fully half of Panama lies east of the Canal, but beyond the Canal, Panama City, and the San Blas islands, the isthmus is almost entirely wild. The forests of **Darién** and its proximity to Colombia have ensured it remains one of the few true wildernesses in Central America. Low mountain ranges run behind the Caribbean coast, while ranges on the Pacific side are broken only by the Golfo de San Miguel which leads into Darién’s densely forested lowlands.

Darién is brimming with wildlife and has some of the world’s best birding, but its inhospitable terrain, poor communications, and proximity to Colombia mean opportunities to experience it safely are limited. At the time of writing, we only advocate flying to well-established locations, and remaining with reputable local guides throughout. With such safeguards, Darién is a very remarkable destination for the adventurous traveller and wildlife enthusiast.



The ‘Darién Venture’ and how Great Britain was born

In the 1690s, William Patterson, a Scot from Dumfriesshire who had travelled the Caribbean in his youth and made good in England on his return (rising to become a director of the Bank of England), put together an investment scheme to capture the imagination of the times. Hearing reports from coastal raiders of a location on the Panama isthmus where valleys led through to the Pacific, he proposed to establish a trading post with an easy route between the oceans. Having failed to interest investors in Europe and England, and despite the fact that the area was claimed by Spain, he finally persuaded the parliament of Scotland to back the idea. In 1695 a company was established and funds poured in from patriotic Scots; about half the nation’s savings.

Five ships set off from Edinburgh in July 1698, and landed at the promptly named New Caledonia Bay on the Darién. Early success was reported back to Scotland and more money raised, but meanwhile the valleys to the Pacific turned out to be a fiction, starvation set in, and the settlement was abandoned. Unawares, a second expedition arrived, tried to restart the abandoned colony, but failed again. A third arrived at the ghostly scene, set to work, but was soon blockaded by a Spanish fleet and made to leave in April 1700.

The venture cost over 2,000 lives and the savings of a nation. Scotland’s economy was in tatters and its political strength sapped. Soon the only solution was for Scotland to merge into Great Britain through the Act of Union in 1707. As part of the deal England repaid the entire Darién debt with 5% interest—through a new bank that was later named the Royal Bank of Scotland.

What little remains of the settlement has been excavated by archaeologists at Punta Escoces, or ‘Scottish Point’, close to the Colombian border, sadly out of reach to most present-day travellers.

PHOTOS

- 01 Travelling upriver with Embera boatmen to their village
- 02 Downtown Panama City
- 03 Black-handed Spider Monkey
- 04 Hummingbird rivals
- 05 Islands in the San Blas archipelago - part of the Kuna Yala



Perfect beaches

Panama has the most amazing variety of beautiful beaches and coral islands to enjoy, in every style—sophisticated sun worship, alt-chill, snorkelling coral reefs, scuba diving, surfing Pacific rollers, and simple, close-to-nature, life by the sea.

05

CARIBBEAN

San Blas (Kuna Yala)

In the **San Blas or Kuna Yala archipelago** the Kuna people build small simple lodges in truly beautiful locations, some on special islets a short distance from their own island villages. The turquoise water is a delight for snorkelling and kayaking, with beautiful white-sand beaches providing the backdrop.

Fresh fish and seafood are the order of the day, simply but often deliciously prepared. The welcome is warm; in return careful and enlightened respect for Kuna sensibilities is essential.

If you yearn for somewhere simple and beautiful, a true escape from the modern world, touching lives lived away from the humdrum, then we wholeheartedly urge you to go.

Bocas del Toro

Six islands and more than 200 islets swathed in forest and surrounded by waters bursting with marine life make up the archipelago of **Bocas del Toro**. Colón is the largest island, home to Bocas del Toro town: a laid-back jumble of small hotels, bars, and restaurants (including a few excellent choices).

There are quieter places to stay out among the islands, some with wooden cabins on stilts over shallow blue waters. Getting to your chosen beach for the day is part of the fun, perhaps involving a water-taxi and a forest hike, or paddling by sea kayak. The islands receive a fair share of rain, mostly at night, and a drenching tropical downpour can punctuate a sunny day at any time of year. 4 species of turtle lay their eggs between March and September on Isla Bastimentos NP, whose coral reefs offer good diving. The Ngöbe Buglé indigenous community live on some of the remoter islands.

Portobelo

Pretty Portobelo's sleepy charms (see p 32) are an easy hop from Panama City. Stay at a luxury retreat a short boat ride from the dock, with pristine sea views against a background of tropical rainforest.

PACIFIC

The Pearl Islands (Las Perlas)

The 103 small islands of the **Las Perlas archipelago** are easily reached by 2 hour ferry or 30 minute flight from Panama City. Isla Contadora is the most developed island.

Here you can laze, swim, snorkel over coral gardens (or see them from a glass-bottomed boat), or walk forest trails. Beaches are secluded and natural, and the style is subdued, with mostly 3* accommodation and menus based around the day's catch.

Isla Taboga

17km into the Pacific from Panama City lies the 'Island of Flowers', where Paul Gauguin stayed after his stint with the French Canal project; the island influencing his later use of colour. Today there's an air of serenity, with sandy coves forest trails and pineapple groves fanned by trade winds.

Playa Blanca

90 min by road from Panama City, all-inclusive resorts beside calm Pacific waters offer a US-style holiday experience, with golf courses, tennis courts, spas, Jacuzzis and water sports.

The sands are bright white during the sunny season (November-April), while at other times black volcanic sands are washed down from El Valle.

Playa Santa Clara

Well past Playa Blanca, Playa Santa Clara's sandy beaches provide an alluring alternative if you've a hire car. There's a handful of nice self-catering beachside cottages and laid-back beach bars.

Azuero Peninsula

Westwards again, the Azuero Peninsula's long wide beaches, fringed by coral reefs, are a reminder that paradise still exists.

Playa Venado offers secluded beaches, riding, fishing, surfing, hiking, nature walks, whale watching, and famous sunsets over the Pacific, while Pedasi's waters are filled with ocean game fish.

Isla Cañas is an important nesting spot for tens of thousands of sea turtles.

Gulf of Chiriquí

Hundreds of miles of beautiful unspoiled beaches and islands, mostly with national park protection. Relatively unknown outside Panama, the Gulf of Chiriquí's undisputable attractions are slowly being revealed.

The Boca Chica area has some classy boutique lodges that make a perfect spot to mix adventure and relaxation. Some of the islands here have white sand beaches, hiking trails, snorkelling, kayaking and good wildlife viewing: the park has resident populations of monkeys, nesting sea turtles and 280 species of bird.

Santa Catalina

The closest access point to Isla Coiba (see box). Its small hotels and cabins are simple but neat and clean.



Coiba NP

In the Gulf of Chiriquí to the south of the mainland, Coiba is Panama's largest island. A penal colony until the late 1990s, Coiba is largely uninhabited, with only a biological station and a few rangers' huts punctuating its thick virgin forest. The island is within one of the largest marine national parks in the world, and its waters are home to an astonishing amount of marine life including six shark species, manta rays and migratory humpback whales. Extensive coral reefs offer excellent diving opportunities. The land-based natural wonders are equally impressive, with botanists citing 1450 species of plant, along with two species of crocodile and turtle, 21 endemic birds, 6 species of iguana and a large nesting population of scarlet macaw. The island is usually reached by a boat journey of 2-3 hours. Accommodation is rudimentary.

Planning your trip

Tailor-made holidays

A small country with good infrastructure, you can cover most of Panama in a 2 week touring holiday, with a choice of ways to travel.

Sample itineraries

The sample itineraries shown here indicate what works best in Panama in various styles. They give you a starting point. Pick one or two that most appeal to you and talk things through with one of our specialists.

Where to stay

There is a growing number of hotels and lodges in Panama with good quality mid-range places on offer in most of the main areas. Boutique style lodges are springing up throughout the country. Accommodation on the Kuna Yala San Blas archipelago is generally basic, in keeping with the simple life of the islands.

Getting around

Panama is reckoned to have the best air network of any country in Latin America—most parts of the country can be reached easily from Panama City. Roads are generally pretty good too, though the shape of the country can make for some long journeys. There are three sensible options for travelling by road, which we can arrange for you:

- **Private guided touring** An English-speaking guide who will usually also be your driver, accompanies you between destinations and on excursions in each place. You can sit back and relax while you travel, gain some real local insight, and make the most of your time.
- **Private transfers** An experienced local driver (not necessarily English-speaking) collects you from your hotel and transfers you to your next destination. It is a private service, and you have your independence at each location. Pick up times can be adjusted to suit you.
- **Selfdrive** A hire car is a great way of enjoying Panama. The roads are very good but navigation is not always straightforward and English is not commonly spoken so you need to feel comfortable if you choose this option.

Whatever your mode of transport, we can pre-book local excursions (private or shared) to maximise your time in the area.

Food and drink

In Panama City you will find something from every corner of the world, including French, Japanese, Italian, Thai, Middle Eastern, and Chinese food. In regional areas, traditional Panamanian cuisine is a mix of Afro-Caribbean, indigenous, and Spanish cooking influences, often incorporating a variety of tropical fruits and vegetables. US influence has led to burger joints and the like, and fast-food chains are plentiful in Panama City.



TOURING & WILDLIFE • MID-RANGE HOTELS & LODGES • PRIVATE TRANSFERS

Panama Odyssey

This private tour is ideal for active people who would like to discover something of the real Panama and its wildlife as well as seeing the main sights.

Panama City

Day 1 You are met at the airport on arrival and driven to your preferred hotel for a 4 night stay.

Day 2 B Although Panama has much, much else to discover and explore, no first visit could miss seeing the Canal. Your guide picks you up from your hotel to visit the Canal's Miraflores Lock, where massive ships squeeze through with inches to spare, and a small museum neatly sums up the history of the Canal's construction and its engineering feats. It will usually be possible to explore the ruins of Old Panama, founded in 1519 and sacked in 1671 by Welsh buccaneer Sir Henry Morgan. The city relocated to Casco Viejo, formerly with sturdy walls against pirates, where you'll stroll streets redolent of Old Havana. You'll visit the Canal's Pacific entrance at Amador: also the location of the brand new Gehry *BioMuseo*, bringing you bang up to date.

On the Panama Canal

Day 3 BL Today you go on the Panama Canal itself, making a 'partial transit' through the Miraflores and Pedro Miguel locks: so much large scale engineering, so vital for a century of the world's commerce, yet set in a near Garden of Eden with lush tropical rainforests descending to its sides.

Portobelo & Embera

Day 4 BL From the Pacific to the Caribbean on an everyday commuter train, then to the sleepy harbour of Portobelo where the vast majority of the Incas' gold was shipped to Spain. The line runs alongside the Canal at many points, crossing Gatún Lake on causeways with super views. You might just spot crocodiles, monkeys and toucans on the way. From Portobelo your guide will take you to a small dock to travel by dug-out boat to a village of the tribal Embera community for an insight into their ways of life.

San Blas Islands and the Kuna people

Day 5 BLD Leaving Panama City with early morning start for the short flight to the San Blas islands in the Kuna Yala. You stay at a charming lodge owned and run by the Kuna community: simple and rustic but with bathrooms en suite. You will have the opportunity of visiting their nearby village and experiencing the Kuna way of life (little English or even Spanish is spoken). Lunch and dinner feature fresh seafood.

Day 6 BLD Visit other islands in the Kuna community in the morning and later have the chance to relax on one of the beautiful white sand beaches, or snorkel.

Chiriqui highlands and Boquete

Day 7 B A morning flight back to Panama City, with an onward connection to David in western Panama from where you are driven to the mountain town of Cerro Punta for 2 nights. Stop en route to see pre-Columbian petroglyphs, with dozens of carved stones and boulders among flower-filled gardens.

Day 8 B A free day to relax or explore your mountain setting. The lodge arranges a guided morning walk for guests, often into beautiful cloud forests alive with birds in La Amistad NP. After lunch you might choose to visit one of Latin America's finest orchid nurseries with over 2000 varieties from all over the world.

Day 9 BL Your guide takes you for a leg-stretching walk on the first section of the Los Quetzales Trail, through lovely cloud forest which opens out here and there to give fine views. Among the birds and wildlife, there is a good chance between January and May of seeing the beautiful Resplendent Quetzal.

Then travel by road around the volcano to the thriving little town of Boquete where you stay for the next 2 nights.

Day 10 B Visit a coffee farm today. Coffee from this region is among the world's best and you will see how it is harvested, selected, dried, and roasted.

Wildlife around the Canal

Day 11 B A free morning to relax and enjoy the hotel's pretty gardens or potter around Boquete. Later return to Panama City by air and on by road to Gamboa Rainforest Resort for 3 nights.

Day 12 B After breakfast take a wildlife boat trip on Gatún Lake. There are good chances of seeing spectacled caiman, green iguana, land turtle, capuchin monkey, two-toed sloth, capybara, and many different birds. Spend the afternoon at leisure.

Day 13 B Together with your guide you take a stroll on the 'Pipeline Road' to the Rainforest Discovery Centre, a birdwatching centre with an observation tower, on the border of Soberanía NP.

Day 14 B Morning free at the Gamboa resort. Transfer back to Panama City and either embark on additional journeys in Panama, perhaps to the beach, or fly home



Driving

Panama City - El Valle	126km	2h
El Valle - Pedasi	372km	4.5h
El Valle - David	370km	4h
David - Boquete	37km	1h
Boquete - Almirante	195km	3h

Distances are approximate, times may vary significantly.





TOURING & WILDLIFE • MID-RANGE HOTELS & LODGES • SELFDRIIVE

Self-drive Panama

With reasonable roads and much to see along the way, a self-drive holiday in western and central Panama makes good sense for the independent-minded traveller. This varied route would even suit an adventurous family.

Panama City

Day 1 You are met on arrival and driven to your preferred hotel in Panama City for a 3 night stay.

Day 2 B A brief introduction to Panama: the Canal, Old Panama, Casco Viejo, and Amador as for Day 2 of 'Panama Odyssey' opposite.

Day 3 BL You are driven to the station for the excellent train journey carrying commuters to the Caribbean, running mostly beside the Canal, and across Gatún Lake on a causeway. You visit the sleepy harbour of Portobelo, where Incan gold was loaded onto Spanish ships in the 16th century. Then continue to a village of the indigenous Embera community, arriving by dug-out boat for insights into their tribal way of life.

El Valle

Day 4 B Pick up your hire car this morning. It's about 2hr to your first stop at El Valle where you spend 2 nights at a charming family-run guest house in lush gardens.

Day 5 B A free day to explore El Valle, ringed by the lip of an extinct volcano. There are hiking, horse riding, biking and birdwatching options; flowering plants bloom in its 'eternal spring' micro-climate. Small scale attractions include waterfalls, thermal waters, mud baths, and petroglyphs. The excellent, totally chi-chi, Los Mandarino restaurant is a must.

Santiago

Day 6 B On the Panamerican Highway for 2-3 hours to Santiago, a bustling country town.

A small side trip leads to the church of San Francisco de La Montana. Built in 1727 this pilgrimage site has elaborate carvings and vibrant frescos mixing Catholic images with indigenous folklore.

Stay the night just outside Santiago.

Boquete

Day 7 B A mostly picturesque drive towards David. You pass grazing horses and cattle in the fields, sparkling rice paddies, coffee plantations and rivers tumbling down from the central Cordillera.

You continue towards the cloud forests of Barú volcano and the mountain resort of Boquete for 2 nights.

Day 8 B A free day. There is plenty to do: hiking, bird-watching, whitewater rafting, zip-lines and hot springs and some extraordinary gardens. Coffee estates run good tours.



TOURING & WILDLIFE • MID-RANGE HOTELS • PRIVATE TRANSFERS

Just a week in Panama

A week of touring in Panama that combines well with time at a beach, or with a visit to Costa Rica.

Panama City

Day 1 You will be met on arrival at Panama City and transferred to your preferred hotel for a 3 night stay.

Day 2 B A brief introduction to Panama: the Canal, Old Panama, Casco Viejo, and Amador as for Day 2 of 'Panama Odyssey' opposite.

On the Canal

Day 3 BL Today you embark on a 'partial transit' of the Panama Canal. For a fuller description see Day 3 of 'Panama Odyssey'.

Boquete & the Chiriquí Highlands

Day 4 B A morning flight to David in the western province of Chiriquí, where you are met and driven to the mountain town of Boquete on the flank of Barú Volcano, a lively place with lots of activities for outdoorsy weekenders from Panama City.

Day 5 BL Out and about in the highlands. You are collected from your hotel and driven to a waterfall trail for country walking to experience cloud forest nature, birds and lovely views. Then it's on to an exuberant garden of tropical plants.

You next visit a coffee plantation where you learn about coffee cultivation and have the chance to sample different bean varieties and roasts. The day ends at Caldera Hot Springs; take a bathing costume to join locals in thermal waters set in woods and open countryside.

Bocas del Toro

Day 6 B You are collected from your hotel in the morning and driven over the mountains through forest to the Caribbean coast and by boat to the wonderful Bocas del Toro Archipelago.

Day 7 B Day at leisure with plenty of options for things to do. You might take a boat trip around the islands for swimming and snorkelling, or out to one of the beaches for a day's relaxing.

Day 8 B Fly back to Panama City. Alternatively, you could take a direct flight from Bocas del Toro to San José and continue your holiday with a tailor-made itinerary in Costa Rica.





BEACH • MID/UPPER-RANGE HOTELS & LODGES • PRIVATE TRANSFERS



ACTIVE & ADVENTURE

Panama Chill-out

Beautiful locations make this a memorable getaway, an unusual honeymoon, a chilled-out break. Add more beach days to suit.

Panama City

Day 1 Arrive in Panama City and transfer to your hotel in Casco Viejo, the atmospheric colonial part of the city, recently restored.

Day 2 B A free day to recover from your flight and enjoy the sights and sounds of the area.

Until quite recently very run-down, Casco Viejo's streets are quietly becoming some of the most hip in Central America. There are some stunning renovations, and a selection of great cafes, bars and restaurants.

Pacific Coast Retreat

Day 3 B By air to David in western Panama where you are met and driven down to the ocean and the calm waters of the Gulf of Chiriquí, with beautiful white sand beaches and 25 islands and coral reefs protected within a marine national park.

Lovely as it is, the gulf is only just beginning to become known outside Panama. A slowly expanding choice of places to stay includes a good hotel on the mainland with fine views across the gulf, and a more upmarket resort secluded from the world on an island in the gulf.

Day 4-5 B Two free days to relax. If you like to be active there are optional tours visiting nearby islands, beaches and mangroves.

Day 6 B Return by air from David to Panama City to stay the night. Enjoy a night out in the city's cosmopolitan downtown or atmospheric Casco Viejo.

Caribbean Coast Retreat

Day 7 B A morning's drive to the pretty harbour town of Portobelo, where you are taken by boat to a private retreat with pristine sea views against a backdrop of tropical rainforest.

Day 8-10 B Three free days to relax by the Caribbean.

You can laze by the hotel's infinity pool, take a boat to nearby deserted beaches or sign up for activities such as snorkelling, kayaking, guided hikes, or art workshops.

Day 11 B You are returned by road to Panama City for your final night in the city.

Day 12 B Transfer to the airport for flights home.



Panama Adventures

Step beyond the ordinary with up-for-it experiences face-to-face with nature in jungles, mountains and coral islands. Sinew-stretching treks, exciting rafting, riding, biking, zip-lines, snorkelling—all in one exhilarating fortnight.

Panama City

Day 1 On arrival in Panama City you will be met at the airport and driven to your preferred hotel for a 3 night stay.

Canopy Crane and Panama City

Day 2 B With an early start to see the forest come to life, your guide will collect you to experience the Smithsonian Canopy Crane for a bird's eye view into and over the forest of the remarkable Metropolitan Natural Park. Later you explore Panama City, your guide taking you to see Panama La Vieja, Casco Viejo, and the Canal at Miraflores Lock.

Las Cruces Jungle trail and Gatún Lake

Day 3 BL Just 45 minutes from Panama City in Soberania NP is the Las Cruces trail, a 400 year old stone road built through the jungle to connect Panama City on the Pacific with the town of Cruces from where the Spaniards continued their passage by small boat, down the Chagres River to Fort San Lorenzo and the Caribbean Sea. A 6 mile hike along this mostly flat but muddy and uneven trail (5 hrs) takes you into rainforest and past historic landmarks. Be prepared to get your feet wet fording creeks along the way.

On arrival at the Chagres River you have a picnic lunch on a small island, then travel by expedition boat across Gatún Lake in the Panama Canal, where you pass gigantic cargo ships in sharp contrast with the natural surroundings. Along the way, there are opportunities to spot green iguana and three-toed sloth resting on tree branches, crocodile, osprey hunting for peacock bass, snail kite and keel-billed toucan among much else. On islands within the lake there are capuchin, howler monkey, spider monkey, and Geoffrey's tamarin.

Multi-active in the Chiriquí Highlands

Day 4 B Leisurely start for a flight to David below the Chiriquí Highlands. You are met and driven to Volcán on the west of Barú volcano for 2 nights at Los Quetzales Lodge at a cool 2200m.

The lodge's 400ha reserve extends into Barú NP and La Amistad reserve. There is time to stretch your legs on a walk near the lodge.

Day 5 B Lots to do around here. The lodge's options include riding in nearby farming scenery or walking in their cloud forest reserve. Mountain bikes are available independently. Spa therapies include massage, hot stones and reflexology. It is 10 min walk to an impressive orchid farm.

Los Quetzales Trail

Day 6 BL The Los Quetzales Trail runs for 10km through fabulous cloud forest on the slopes of Volcán Barú. It's a very scenic walk of about 5hr (sometimes up and down, sometimes muddy), with good chances of seeing a number of birds and mammals. The locals put a near 100% chance of seeing the Resplendent Quetzal here January to May; 25% at other times. As you emerge at the rangers station at the end of the trail a vehicle will be waiting with your

luggage to take you to your lodge in Boquete for a 3 night stay.

Zip-lines and hot springs

Day 7 B First today is a 'canopy adventure' that has you gliding through the forest for 3km on 11 different zip-lines 30-60m above ground. It's quite a buzz, and ostensibly you can spot orchids, ferns and bromeliads high in the trees as you whizz by, feet first, crash-helmeted and harnessed, hanging from a pulley. Later, relax in the caldera pools: open-air mineral-rich waters, heated geo-thermally.

Whitewater rafting

Day 8 B Several good rafting rivers tumble down the volcano carving their way through the cloud forest. There's a gentle 2½hr class II introduction, several class III trips, and an exhilarating world class 4hr class IV run. For pristine nature and waterfalls the 3hr mostly class II and III rapids on the Río Gariche are recommended. Choose sensibly, according to season and your experience. Rest of the day free at the lodge.

Island-hopping in Bocas del Toro archipelago

Day 9 B Crossing to the Caribbean by road you take a boat to the reefs and islands of Bocas del Toro. You stay 3 nights at a 2-3* lodge in the wacky little town of Bocas del Toro, mingling with locals, expats and backpackers in its bars and cafes. (Or upgrade to a quieter superior over-the-water lodge on a remoter island.)

Day 10 B Today you go island-hopping in the marine national park, on a shared trip that starts with a short boat ride from Bocas pier to Dolphin Bay where there is an excellent chance that dolphin will play around the boat. On to Coral Keys for some great snorkelling, and stop at a simple restaurant nearby for lunch (not included). Continue by boat to the aptly named Red Frog Beach for a spot of relaxation (and frog spotting). Boat back to Bocas pier in the late afternoon. Bocas pier is a short walk from your hotel.

Day 11 B A second day's shared island-hopping, beginning with a short boat ride from Bocas pier to Playa de las Estrellas, where snorkellers can see the many starfish usually found in the clear waters here. On to the white sands of Boca del Drago for some beach time and swimming in calm turquoise sea. There's a simple restaurant here for lunch (not included). In the afternoon it's onwards by boat to visit Bird Island, home to large colonies of sea birds, and then return to Bocas pier.

Panama City

Day 12 B A leisurely start for the mid-morning flight back to Panama City. You are met on arrival and driven to your hotel. There's free time for shopping, city sightseeing, etc.

Day 13 Transfer to the airport for your flight back to the UK or perhaps add a 2 night trip to the Kuna Yala (San Blas) archipelago - see days 4 and 5 of our 'Panama Odyssey' itinerary on p36.



ACTIVE & ADVENTURE

Camino Real Trek

A satisfying, fairly rugged short jungle trek to follow the gold of the Incas from the mountains to the Caribbean.

Panama City

Day 1 On arrival at the airport you are driven to your hotel in Panama City to meet your guide and the rest of the group.

Old Panama and an Embera village

Day 2 BLD We visit the ruins of Old Panama where Spanish ships from Peru landed with their cargoes of Incan gold and silver. The Camino Real, or 'Royal Road' began here; we drive inland to join it in the mountains of the Serranía de San Blas in Chagres National Park. Boarding a dug-out at Madden Lake we are taken to the starting point of our trek, near a village of the Embera people. We are their welcome guests: their rich culture, music, dances and crafts make this a special day. We camp in tents in the village - a real privilege.

Crossing the continent

Day 3-5 BLD Our trek on the Camino Real is mostly through primary rainforest: home to jaguar, howler monkeys, anteaters and more than 560 species of bird, including the harpy eagle - the largest in the world. We experience the forest at first hand while reliving the trail's evocative history.

We walk 5-7 hours each day, sleeping in tents in the forest. Original cobbled sections of the trail date back to the time when this was the principal route between the Caribbean and the Pacific. Conditions underfoot can be muddy, steep, and slippery. At first the Camino Real follows the Boquerón River ascending close to its source in the mountains before cresting the ridge and descending to the Caribbean. Along the route we will also find remains of manganese mines from the late 1800s, complete with railway tracks and the relics of old locomotives abandoned to the forest.

Nombre de Dios

Day 6 BLD On our fourth day of trekking we reach Nombre de Dios on the Caribbean, where the Incan silver and gold arrived from the Camino Real until the town was sacked by Sir Francis Drake in 1596. A short drive along the coast takes us to Portobelo which replaced Nombre de Dios (high in the hills we will have passed the fork in the Camino Real that led down to Portobelo). We visit the Spanish forts and some of its old colonial churches. Overnight in a waterfront lodge.

By train to Panama City

Day 7 BLD There is free time today to relax by the sea or go snorkelling or diving (extra cost) - perhaps to look for Drake's lead coffin which was lowered into the waters here. In the afternoon we catch the train for Panama City on the first railway to cross the American continents, with great views of Gatun Lake and the canal. We stay at our original hotel with a farewell dinner by the ocean.

Day 8 B If not extending your stay, you can be taken to the airport for your flight home.

Where to stay in Panama Country, city and beach



Panamonte Inn TOP RANGE

Boquete

The oldest and most characterful property in Boquete, dating from 1914. Built in a welcoming New England clapboard style, it has lovely gardens, a bar with comfortable sofas and log fire, and a fine restaurant: an ideal base for visiting the Chiriquí Highlands. 3 luxurious garden junior suites and new garden terrace rooms have been added to the original inn's chintzily furnished standard rooms, which are light but rather small. All are air-conditioned, with ceiling fans, television, internet service and telephone. Honeymooners might choose a garden suite or the 'Ingrid Bergman' suite—her favourite room at the hotel. There is a small spa with a selection of treatments. The hotel is 5 min drive from the centre of Boquete village. It's a great location for walkers and birdwatchers. There's a wide assortment of activities in the area, including visits to gourmet coffee plantations, rafting, riding, mountain biking and canopy walks.



JW Marriott Panama Golf & Beach Resort TOP RANGE

Playa Blanca, near Panama City

An alternative to downtown hotels, this recently upgraded luxury hotel has 109 rooms and 9 suites over 4 floors within a new resort development with upmarket holiday homes and a shopping centre, set on the beautiful white sand beach of Playa Blanca, 1½ hrs drive from Panama City. Rooms are very well appointed with luxurious bedding, cable TV, wi-fi, pull-out sofa bed and roll-away bed, and spacious bathrooms with separate tub and shower. All have balconies overlooking the pool, the lake or the Pacific Ocean. There are 3 restaurants, 2 bars, a large pool area with bar and food service, spa, fitness centre, equestrian centre and beach club. A new 18 hole Nicklaus-designed par-72 championship golf course bordering the ocean has its own clubhouse and restaurant.



Bocas del Toro Hotel MID-RANGE

Isla Colon, Bocas del Toro

This is a jaunty, inn-style hotel right on the waterfront close to the heart of Bocas village, with lively bars, restaurants, and water taxi docks all just a short stroll away. It's an historic wooden building with creaky floors that make you feel you could almost be at sea. A deck area is built out over the water where breakfast is served while little boats serving the bustling waterfront putter by. Three of the rooms have balconies and ocean front views, all have a/c and private bathrooms, wi-fi, TV, etc. Not for light sleepers.



Villa Camilla TOP RANGE

Pedasi, Azueros Peninsula

A lovely beach option, especially as part of a selfdrive trip around western Panama. The stylish 7 room Villa Camilla is part of a condo development on a secluded stretch of land on the Azuero Peninsula spread over 800 acres of rolling hills overlooking a coastline of hidden coves, cliffs and sandy beaches. The hotel itself is 300m from the beach, so you wake to the sound of distant surf and perhaps the squawks of visiting parakeets. The beach here is darkish volcanic sand (not white or gold), but this is a lovely and relaxing place to stay, much superior to other options in the area. Rooms are very civilised and comfortable with private facilities and a/c, complemented by a good restaurant and a lovely swimming pool with a stand of palm trees. Activities that can be booked locally include surfing lessons, riding, biking, and hiking. There is wi-fi in the public areas.



Uaguinea and Akwadup Lodges UPPER RANGE

Kuna Yala (San Blas)

The stuff of dreams. Two small and very simple lodges built and run by a Kuna community. You are their guest, invited to live beside them on their own very amenable terms, and to visit their village and their fields on the mainland (a few hundred metres away) with a guide they provide. Uaguinea Lodge is on an islet just across the water from their own island village of closely packed family houses using every inch of available space. Its thatched wooden cabins face the ocean beneath coconut palms, ten steps of pure white sand from the turquoise shallows. Akwadup (see photo) is newer, not so close to the village island, a little smarter, and built over the water. Each has a pleasant bar-cum-dining room, with variable, sometimes excellent, food. Cabins are rustic with fan, en suite bathrooms with cold shower, and a deck with hammocks. Full board. No children under 14 years please.

Worth a mention

Las Clementinas Panama City (historic quarter) UPPER RANGE

Characterful boutique hotel of 5 spacious apartments behind a grand façade in historic Casco Viejo. All modern comforts, art, books, and some great views. Lots of steps (no lift). Nice roof terrace with bar/restaurant.

Country Inn & Suites Panama City (Amador) MID-RANGE

US style hotel with 159 balconied rooms saved by its great location by the entrance to the Canal. The only restaurant is TGI Fridays; there's a wide choice a taxi ride away.

Los Quetzales Volcán MID-RANGE

High in cloud forest at 2200m, a timber-built lodge in gardens by a river. Simple spacious rooms. Small spa. Friendly atmosphere, hearty food. Nights around 7°C.

Finca Lerida Boquete MID-RANGE

Outside Boquete, a working coffee farm with cabin cottages each with living room with open fire, 2 bedrooms and a bathroom. There's a more modern 'ecolodge' too.

American Trade Hotel Panama City (historic qtr) UPPER RANGE

Much praised 2014 Ace Hotel conversion of a landmark former US department store and apartments from 1917. 50 rooms, rooftop pool, restaurant, cafe, jazz bar. Hip.

Bocas del Mar Chiriquí Coast TOP RANGE

16 contemporary cabanas by the waterfront 2km from Boca Chica. Stunning white sand beaches reached by watertaxis.

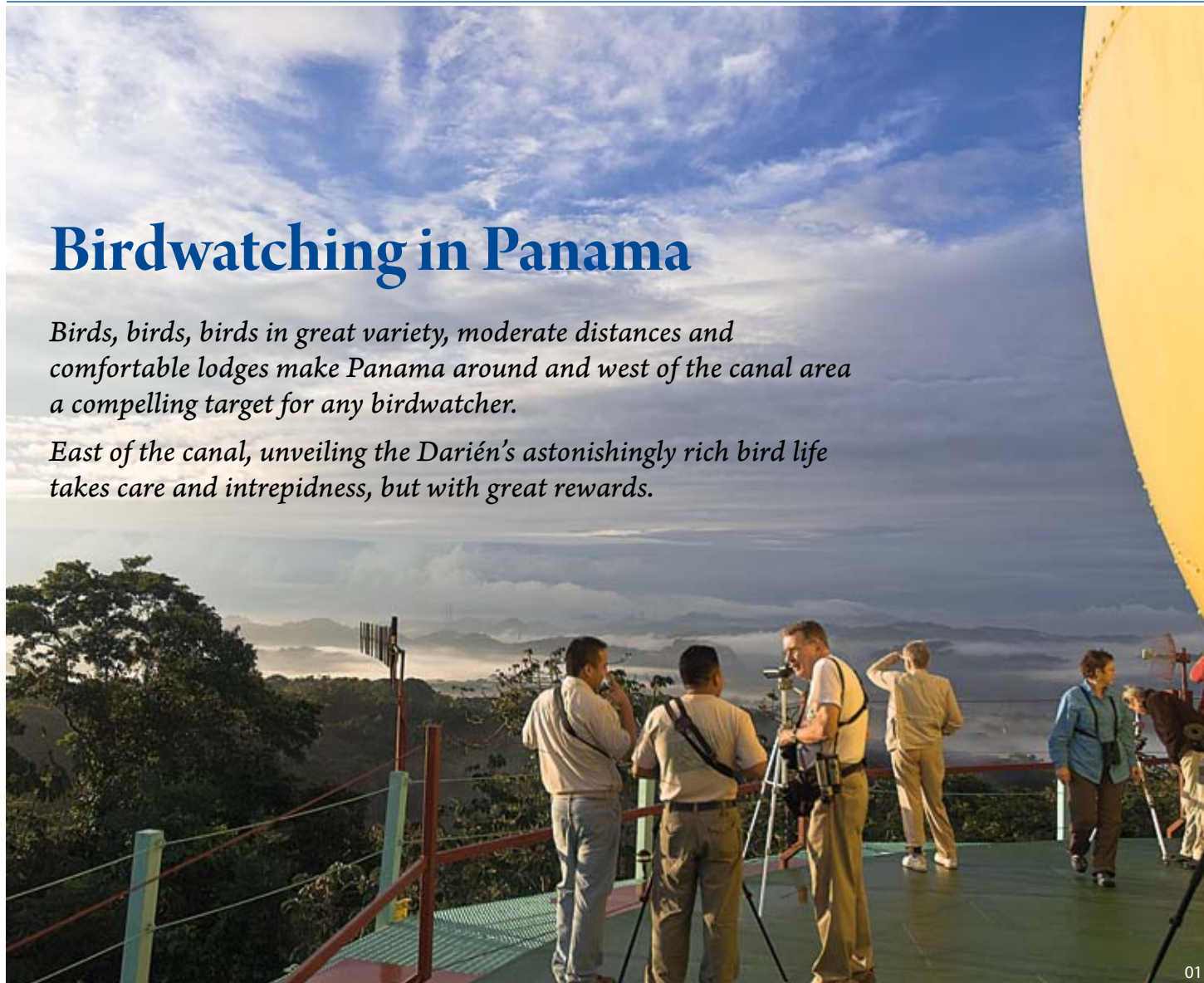
Canopy Tower/Lodge/Camp UPPER RANGE

Three lodges primarily for birdwatchers. See page 41.

Birdwatching in Panama

Birds, birds, birds in great variety, moderate distances and comfortable lodges make Panama around and west of the canal area a compelling target for any birdwatcher.

East of the canal, unveiling the Darién's astonishingly rich bird life takes care and intrepidity, but with great rewards.



01

Panama offers over 970 species of birds in a broad range of habitats, many of which can be visited quite easily. A first-class field guide, an up-to-date site guide, and some very proficient local two-legged guides, make for a very pleasant and productive birding holiday while staying in reasonably good accommodation in some very enjoyable locations. After all, the world record for the most species seen in one day was set in Panama!

Panama also offers expedition birding for the dedicated enthusiast, to find birds that few others

will ever see. Our 'Birding the Darién' is a fine example to set the pulse of any neotropical specialist racing.

Whether you are a relative newcomer to the region, or have already developed a taste for seeing so many different species in such a short space of time, we can help design the perfect trip for you. We'll do our best to match your birding ambitions, the amount of effort you enjoy putting in, the time you have available, and your budget, with the fabulous birding opportunities that Panama offers.

Planning your birdwatching trip to Panama

Because our expertise is in travel and logistics (backed by a good understanding of what birders need and current conditions for birders on the ground) we are able to design and support tailor-made birdwatching trips to suit a wide range of interests, styles and budgets.

Whether you are travelling solo, as a couple, or with a group of fellow birders we provide all you need for a well-organised, successful and enjoyable tailor-made birdwatching holiday in Panama.

We can provide experienced English-speaking local birdwatching guides to escort you throughout, or just in those areas where you feel you might need support. We design itineraries to suit all levels, from newcomers to neotropical birding to seasoned hands out to boost their life lists with hard-to-find endemics, and in all styles, from dawn-to-dusk birders to those who prefer an easier

time or like to combine their birding with sightseeing or general wildlife viewing. Self-drive is possible in the canal area and western Panama.

We can also arrange birding days as part of general tours - an increasingly popular choice.



02

Key birding sites in Panama

■ Central/Canal

Soberanía NP, in the southern canal area is home to 520 species of bird, the trails here include Pipeline Road, Semaphore Hill Road, Plantation Road and Old Gamboa Road. Nearby are the Miraflores Ponds and Camino de Cruces.

On the northern Atlantic/Caribbean side of the canal area is the famous **Achiote Road** in San Lorenzo NP and near Colon the Sierra Llorona reserve.

Metropolitan Park in Panama City is surprisingly productive. For a day's birding from the capital are Chagres NP, Cerro Jefe, Cerro Azul & Tocumen Marsh. 2hr drive west of Panama City are **El Valle de Antón** and **El Copé** (aka Omar Torrijos NP) - the most easterly places where the foothill endemics of the Talamanca Range can be found.

■ West

A short flight to David in the **Chiriquí Highlands** near Costa Rica offers birding in La Amistad reserve, Barú Volcano NP, Volcán Lakes, Cerro Punta, Boquete, Fortuna Forest Reserve and Palo Seco Protection Forest.

■ East

2½ hours drive east of Panama City are Burbayar Lodge and the Nusagandi Reserve in the **Serranía de San Blas/Kuna Yala** where some Darién species can be seen without rugged travel or security concerns. For the more intrepid, who are prepared to share bathrooms, sleep a night in a tent and who take account of Foreign Office warnings but are not deterred, we arrange visits to Canopy Camp, Cana and Cerro Pirre in the **Darién NP** bordering Colombia.

PHOTOS

- 01 Early morning birding from the Canopy Tower
- 02 Harpy Eagle
- 03 Spectacled Owl
- 04 Rufous-crested Coquette



SPECIALIST BIRDWATCHING • MID AND UPPER RANGE HOTELS AND BIRDING LODGES (SOME RUSTIC) • PRIVATE TRANSFERS

Birds of Panama

Expect a very long list from this trip, even though you are staying in comfort. A wide variety of habitats, some very very productive locations, some rarities, some spectaculars—a perfect combination! An optional, more rustic, extension adds hard-to-find species and Darién endemics.

Panama City

Day 1 You are met at the airport on arrival and driven to a comfortable hotel in an interesting location: a former US base just across from the Miraflores Lock on the Panama Canal. Its grounds are great for birds.

Pipeline Road

Day 2 BLD A full day on the very productive Pipeline Road with your local specialist birdwatching guide. Amongst a very long list look for Slaty-tailed Trogon, Cinnamon Woodpecker, and Chestnut-backed Antbirds, Black-faced Antthrush, Fasciated Antshrikes, White-flanked and Checker-throated Antwrens and Black-breasted and White-necked Puffbirds.

Metropolitan Natural Park

Day 3 BLD A full day birding Metropolitan park, mostly semi-deciduous forest, with a list of 200 species. Look for Rosy Thrush-tanager, Lance-tailed Manakin, Slaty Antwren, Pheasant Cuckoo, and Panama endemic Yellow-green Tyrannulet.

Soberanía NP

Day 4 BLD Early pick-up for a morning's birding in Soberanía NP. Onwards later for 2 nights at Sierra Llorona Lodge on the Caribbean side of the isthmus at 1000ft. Dusk birding in the lodge's grounds.

Achiote Road

Day 5 BLD Full day birding the lovely Achiote Road to Fort Lorenzo for Caribbean lowland birds. The local Christmas Bird Count often reports over 340 species in a 24h period here. The many opportunities include Crested Oropendola, Collared and Slaty-backed Forest-Falcons, Plumbeous and Semiplumbeous Hawks, Hook-billed Kite, Band-tailed Barbtroop, Rufous-breasted Hermit, Ocellated Antbird, Olivaceous Flatbill, Black-tailed Trogon, Speckled Mourner, Purple-throated Fruitcrow, Chestnut-mandibled Toucan and Spot-crowned Barbet.

Sierra Llorona & Miraflores Lock

Day 6 BL Birding the forest around the lodge. Good for raptors, Pied Puffbird, Wide-headed Wren, Great Tinamou, Grey Hawk, Barred Forest-falcon, Gray-headed Chachalaca, Blue-headed Parrot, Brown-hooded Parrot, Shining Honeycreeper, Indigo Bunting, Blue Cotinga and Long Billed Starthroat. Afternoon visit to Miraflores Lock to see the Canal at work on huge ships that barely fit the double locks' massive chambers, then to Amador to a hotel beside the Canal's Pacific entrance. The Gehry *BioMuseo* is close by.

Chiriquí Highlands

Day 7 BLD Morning flight to David in the Chiriquí Highlands. Bird mangroves near David for Yellow-billed Cotinga and Macho de Monte lakes area near Volcán for Masked Duck, Northern Jacana and other water birds. On to Los Quetzales Lodge at Guadalupe (6300ft), your base for 2 nights.

La Amistad National Park—Cerro Punta

Day 8 BLD Birding the Cerro Punta area with excellent chances of Resplendent Quetzal in the Jan-May nesting season, 25% otherwise. Apart from 10 species of humming-bird, look for Blue-throated Toucanet, Great Curassow, Black Guan, Collared Redstart and Yellow-thighed Finch.

Boquete

Day 9 BLD Day of birding on Barú Volcano in the La Amistad Park, switching to the western side of the volcano to stay at Finca Lerida, a coffee hacienda in Boquete for 3 nights.

Volcán Barú NP

Day 10 BLD Day of birding the eastern slopes of Barú Volcano from Boquete for further mid and high elevation species.

Palo Seco Forest Reserve

Day 11 BLD Early start, dropping down to the Palo Seco Forest Reserve on the Caribbean lowlands for the day. This is a good place for Rufous-winged Woodpecker, Black-capped Pygmy-Tyrant, Ashy-throated Bush-Tanager, Immaculate Antbird, and Olive-Back Euphonia as well as many warblers.

Day 12 B Birding in the grounds of your lodge in Boquete. Transfer to David for a mid-afternoon flight to Panama City for 2 nights.

Engineering or Nature

Day 13 BL Decisions, decisions. On the one hand you could visit to Gatún Locks, continue across the isthmus to Colon and catch an afternoon train back alongside the Canal with views of the lake, the forest and the engineering. Or, at a supplementary cost (and depending on the day of the week), you could either make a 'partial transit' of the Canal itself, or visit the Smithsonian Institute's tropical research centre at Barro Colorado Island.

Panama City

Day 14 B Transfer to the airport for your international flight home, or extend your trip to experience the birds of Burbayar.

Burbayar extension

Day 14 BLD From Panama City drive 2-3hr for 2 nights at Burbayar Lodge in the Serranía de Kuna Yala, near Nusagandi, for many Darién endemics. The lodge is attractively rustic, using recycled wood with cane walls it has private bathrooms, some solar power and candles at night. Staff are from local Kuna communities.

Day 15 BLD Full day birding at Burbayar. The many highlights include Speckled Antshrike, Black-crowned, Thicket and Streak-chested Antpittas, Green Manakin, Scaly-breasted and Stripe-throated Wrens, Black-striped and Wedge-billed Woodcreepers, Red-throated Caracara, and King Vulture.

Day 16 B After a final dawn's birding at Burbayar, transfer to the airport for international flights departing in the afternoon.

Birding the Darién

Cana field station

Day 1 LD From Panama City by chartered light plane to Santa Cruz de Cana, in Darién World Biosphere Reserve below Pirre Mountain, for 2 nights at the Cana Field Centre (1600ft), double rooms in wood cabins, shared bathrooms, hot water. Specialities include Blue and Gold, Red-and-green, Great-green and Chestnut-fronted Macaws, Black tipped Cotinga, Swallow Tanager, Red-throated Caracara, Streaked Antwren, Dusky-backed Jacamar, and Ornate Hawk-Eagle.

Mine Trail

Day 2 BLD Today explore the Mine Trail from Cana FC. Specialities here include Great Curassow, Crested Guan, Dusky-faced Tanager, Olivaceous Piculet. Bird the Seteganti Trail's open scrub areas and mature forests—good for various woodpeckers (such as Crimson-bellied and Red-rumped), Red-billed Scythebill and Brown Violetear.

Pirre cloud forest

Day 3 BLD A slow fairly strenuous 5hr hike to Pirre Cloud Forest at 4200ft, good for specialities such as Beautiful Treerunner, Tooth-billed Hummingbird, Slaty Antwren, Tody Motmot, Yellow-eared Toucanet, Rufous-breasted Antthrush, Immaculate Antbird, Rufous-vented Ground Cuckoo, Pirre Warbler, Pirre Hummingbird, Pirre Bush Tanager, Greenish Puffleg, and Orange-bellied Euphonia. On to the top of Pirre Mountain for Golden-headed Quetzal, Gray and Gold and other tanagers, Sharpbill, Chlorophonia and other highland species. Night in screened tents under a tin roof in a forest clearing.

Day 4 BLD Morning descent, birding along the way. The afternoon is spent birding around the main camp. Possibilities include Grey-cheeked Nunlet, Spotted Barbtail, Barred Puffbird, Yellow-green Tyrannulet, Jet Antbird, Black-crowned, Fulvous-bellied, Ochre-breasted and Scaled Antpittas, White-fronted Nunbird, Cinereous Becard and Golden-headed Manakin. Overnight Cana field station.

Panama City

Day 5 B This morning, after some last minute birding from the Cana airstrip back to Albrook airport in Panama City where the tour ends.



Easy birding in Panama

Canopy Tower, Soberanía NP

Day 1 BLD You are met on arrival in Panama City and driven to Canopy Tower in Soberanía NP for 7 nights full board with daily birding excursions led by experienced English speaking local bird guides, in groups of up to 8 birders. In a week you can reasonably hope to see 275-300 species. The lodge is a converted US military metal-skinned radar tower on a hilltop with upper level dining area and wide top viewing platform that are excellent for canopy birds. Rooms have fans and windows looking into the trees; some have private bathrooms, others share. Plumbing limitations mean guests are urged to have rapid military-style showers. The tower is very popular in the raptor migration season (mid-Oct - mid-Nov).

Day 2 BLD Semaphore Hill and Plantation Trail.

Day 3 BLD Summit Pond and Old Gamboa Road.

Day 4 BLD First half of Pipeline Road. Summit Garden, Harpy Eagle exhibit.

Day 5 BLD Ammo Dump Pond and Chagres River. Evening owling.

Day 6 BLD Second half of Pipeline Road

Day 7 BLD Round-up day, or visit Miraflores Lock, Panama Canal.

Canopy Lodge, El Valle

Day 8 BLD Some final birding before a 2hr drive to Canopy Lodge for 4 nights full board with shared birding excursions. Canopy Lodge has stylish rooms in bird-friendly gardens by a stream, next to the protected area of Cerro Gaital. Rest of day birding the Cariguana trail.

Day 9 BLD Cerro Gaital trail and a local waterfall.

Day 10 BLD Chorro Macho trails and private gardens with well-attended feeders.

Day 11 BLD El Chiru forest and La Zamia trail.

Day 12 B Return by road to Panama City for your flight home.



Nicaragua

01

Nicaragua is a very, very special country, blessed with wonderful scenery, a rich colonial heritage, a taste for the arts, and a strong sense of community and humanity.

The impressive scenery of Nicaragua's Pacific basin and the rich colonial architecture of its two historic cities, Granada and León, are a perfect complement to neighbouring Costa Rica. There are some excellent places for time at the beach too, great wildlife experiences, and plenty of off-the-beaten track places to engage a traveller's curiosity.

GRANADA

As one of the oldest European settlements in the Americas, this beautiful city is filled with nostalgia and romance. Wander through its brightly painted streets (many in the centre have recently been spruced-up in ice-cream shades) and behind the impressive colonial frontages you'll catch glimpses of quiet inner courtyard gardens where poets dream.

The Convent of San Francisco displays pre-Columbian treasures from Isla Zapatera, including large basalt Chorotega figures. Horse-drawn carriages—the city's taxis since 1524—allow you to explore the city at a leisurely pace.

Five minutes from the city lie Las Isletas de Granada, a freshwater archipelago of 354 rocky islands in Lake Nicaragua. This water-bound community is a mix of ritzy weekend villas on private islands, interspersed with some very humble homes and lately a boutique hotel. Locals are mainly fishermen and caretakers of the luxury properties. The area is great for birdwatchers, with osprey, cormorants, kingfishers, oropendolas, gnat-catchers, egrets, parrots and parakeets all to be seen.

Now ranked as one of the safest countries in Central and South America, Nicaragua is peaceful, democratic and welcoming. Although cursed by dictators until their overthrow in 1979 (only to be followed by the seven year struggle against the Contras) twenty-five years of peace have allowed its people to rebuild their lives and establish a peaceful, natural Nicaragua of their own choosing.

Although Nicaragua remains one of the poorest countries in the world with a GDP of just \$1,200 per head, Nicaraguans are working hard to rebuild their

economy and the positive warmth and genuineness of their welcome is remarkable.

A proportion of international aid has been directed to the restoration of Nicaragua's architectural heritage and to encourage tourism. A sprinkling of well-run characterful hotels is being added to each year, helping to make Nicaragua a very attractive, unusual and satisfying place to discover and explore. We recommend it thoroughly.

LEÓN

The university city of León, twinned with Oxford, has some of the best preserved classic colonial architecture in Central America.

The iconic Cathedral of León, one of the region's grandest, took 113 years to build and is among León's dozen or so impressive churches from the colonial era. Other sights include the Museum of Art Ortiz-Gurdian set in a lovely colonial home, and the museum of Rubén Darío, one of the greatest poets in the history of the Spanish language, in the house where he lived.

The old city, León Viejo, was Nicaragua's first capital and was founded by the Spanish in 1524 below looming Momotombo volcano. In 1610 the entire city was evacuated to its current location. Six months later Momotombo erupted and León Viejo was smothered in ash. It was not until 1967 that its ruins were found. It is now a UNESCO World Heritage site. The foundations have been uncovered of homes, the country's first mint, a church, a convent, a brothel, and the cathedral where the conquistador Cordoba is buried.

MASAYA NP

Masaya National Park includes two volcanic cones and five craters all within one enormous crater. The main cone, Masaya Volcano itself, is one of just four in the world that maintains a constant pool of lava. A road takes you to the lip of its deep vertigo-inducing crater, crossing solidified lava from a flow in 1772.

The Chorotega people called Masaya 'burning mountain' and made sacrifices of young women and boys to appease its goddess of fire. The Spanish wondered whether the volcano's magma might be a door to Hell and erected a precautionary cross at the crater's edge; a replacement can be seen today.

Around the park are whitewashed villages known as Los Pueblos Blancos, considered the cradle of Nicaraguan tradition and folklore, whose residents take much pride in their Chorotegan ancestry. Each village specialises in its own craft: pottery, hammock-making, leatherwork, basket-making and so on. They are all for sale at Masaya's market. On Thursday nights folk musicians and dancers give enthusiastic performances here—a great chance to spend time among local families on an evening out.

LAKE NICARAGUA

Lake Nicaragua is the largest lake in Central America. It connects to the Caribbean via the Río San Juan, which forms part of the border with Costa Rica. The river was navigable by small vessels, making the city of Granada on the far side of the lake an Atlantic port, though only 50 miles from the Pacific. Plans to build a canal to the Pacific once rivalled the prospect of a canal through Panama.

As well as the islets close to Granada, described above, there are two principal islands in the lake, Ometepe and Zapatera, and the Soltentine archipelago.

Ometepe Island

Ometepe's dramatic outline of twin volcanoes rising from the lake, linked by a narrow isthmus, instantly marks it as a special place. Concepción is the slightly larger of the two cones—still active and one of the most symmetrical in the world. Its sibling, Maderas, considered extinct, is swathed in dense tropical forest and has a cold, misty crater lake. A gorgeous waterfall pours from its western face and small coffee *fincas* flourish on its lower slopes.

Ometepe is scattered with large carved basalt idols and numerous petroglyphs, dating from at least 1500BC, and probably much earlier—testimony to this inspirational setting.

Solentiname archipelago

This cluster of 36 islets at the southern end of Lake Nicaragua is home to a remarkable artistic community of more than 50 painters and artisans whose vibrant naïve art is strongly linked to their tropical surroundings. The islands are studded with carved stones, sacred caves and burial grounds of the Chorotega, Nahuatl and Guatuso peoples.

RIO SAN JUAN

Few places are as isolated and evocative as the jungle settlements along the San Juan river, which flows from Lake Nicaragua into the Caribbean. Things might have been so different. The Spanish considered this a major trading route connecting Granada with the Caribbean and defended it with a castle (below which now lies the small town of El Castillo) and several forts. The English tussled them for it more than once; the young Horatio Nelson had a prominent role in taking the castle in 1780 as part of a short-lived British venture to capture all Spain's colonies in Central America.

Very little has troubled the river and its villages since those distant times, and daily life potters along quietly and harmoniously. It's a great area to visit for a flavour of how river communities live, and to see three excellent wildlife reserves: the easily-accessed Bartola Reserve close to El Castillo, the large and remote Indio-Maíz reserve further down river, and the excellent Los Guatusos wetland reserve on the southern edge of Lake Nicaragua, accessed from San Carlos where the river leaves the lake.

NORTHERN HIGHLANDS

Driving north from the lowlands around Lake Managua and Lake Nicaragua you soon enter the attractive scenery of Nicaragua's lush Northern Highlands, where cool cloud forests, small *fincas*, and sleepy villages stand in sharp contrast to the dry plains and bustling cities of the south. It's a very peaceful and welcoming region.

Most of the nation's coffee, one of Nicaragua's great gifts to the world, is grown here. Some of the coffee farms now operate as agrotourism lodges (see



our website for details), though accommodation everywhere in the highlands is spartan. The reason to visit is to explore the cloud forested hills, home to agouti, howler monkeys, deer, sloth, puma and ocelot, toucans, trogons, hummingbirds and the Resplendent Quetzal. Birding is in its infancy in the highlands, but the auguries are good.

The cities of Matagalpa and Jinotega are centres for coffee. Small scale attractions include the tiny village of San Rafael del Norte, from where Sandino coordinated his troops in 1927; now home to a rickety but memorable museum in his honour.

MANAGUA

Nicaragua's capital city, Managua, the usual arrival point for visitors, is an easy-going place spread out by the shores of Lake Managua below Volcán Tiscapa. Its future is plain to see as the smart offices of newly-arrived multinationals spring up along roads packed with jostling traffic bearing packed buses, well-worn Ladas and shiny 4x4s.

The city's plusher tree-lined avenues and a scattering of small office blocks soon give way to networks of busy streets and markets.

The revolutionary period is marked by a striking 59ft silhouette of Sandino placed on the ruins of the hated Somoza's presidential palace high on Volcán Tiscapa, while an eternal flame burns at the memorial to Carlos Fonseca, second only to Che Guevara in the pantheon of 1960s revolutionaries.

Nature Reserves

18% of Nicaragua is protected in reserves, but ecotourism and wildlife conservation falls far short of its potential and is a story waiting to unfold. Each and every visitor makes a difference. Here are 3 examples.

Juan Venado

The Juan Venado reserve protects part of an important coastal wetland corridor and can be visited in an easy day trip from León. A 1hr drive brings you to a local beach where you board a waiting motor boat to explore the reserve on an enthralling 2hr trip. Isla Juan Venado is a narrow barrier island 22km long separating the ocean from the shore at a river estuary. Beyond the sandbar are important mangrove areas, and the estuary is home to an abundance of life including caiman, crocodiles, iguanas, crustaceans and other marine creatures. The reserve includes a nesting beach for endangered Leatherback turtles. Olive Ridley turtles nest on the sand spit.

Domitila Reserve

Domitila is a private reserve conserving tropical dry forest, where in the dry season the trees shed their leaves to minimise water loss. Domitila is a haven for birds, butterflies, howler monkeys and other mammals including jaguarundi, puma, sloth. There are 15km of trails for hiking, birdwatching and riding, 9 freshwater lagoons, and thermal waters to bathe in.

Montibelli Reserve

A 160 ha private reserve for day visitors. Mostly dry forest and former coffee plantations on 360-720m slopes, just 30 mins from Managua. Visitor trails give good birding (over 100 species listed).

PHOTOS

01 Parish church of San José del Sur on Ometepe Island, below Volcán Concepción.

03-05 Street scenes in Granada



Planning your trip

Tailor-made holidays

A holiday in Nicaragua might sometimes be more challenging than one in Costa Rica or Panama, but you will be well rewarded by the memorable places you visit.

With good flight connections, and a simple road crossing at Peñas Blancas, it is easy to combine Nicaragua and Costa Rica on the same trip.

Sample itineraries

The sample itineraries shown here indicate what works well in Nicaragua. They give you a starting point. Pick the ideas that most appeal to you and talk things through with one of our specialists.

Where to stay

Nicaragua has a small but growing number of great places to stay. New arrivals often feature stylish design in natural materials, are strong on conservation and sustainability, and are run by owners with a great passion. There are good options in each of the principal towns, often newly-updated or in well-restored colonial buildings.

The Rainforest Alliance has been working hard to promote sustainable development among hoteliers, to match its impressive results with foresters and coffee growers. Within our full range we feature all the relatively upscale hotels that have so far been verified by Rainforest Alliance, see examples on p46-47 marked with a **V**.

Getting around

The best way to see Nicaragua is to be driven by an English-speaking local guide, which is often a real delight. It means you can hear about Nicaragua from someone who understands the country well and is likely to have lived through its struggles. You'll get to know Nicaragua as it is now, with your guide to show you the more unusual things as well as the sights in the surprisingly few guide books to the country.

Food and drink

Nicaraguan food is simple but good. Among local dishes, *gallo pinto* (fried rice and beans) is as popular as in Costa Rica. Maize is the staple in *nacatamal* (like Mexican tamales), tortillas and much else. There are 'international' choices for visitors, with steak, pork, chicken, pastas and pizzas prepared in standard ways or with a local twist. By the coast fish and seafood are the norm, often super fresh. Tropical fruits abound: mango, papaya, jocote, bananas, pipian and avocado, and others you will not have heard of. Nicaraguan beer is excellent, and there are imported options too. Chilean or Argentinian wines are usual when eating out. To start the evening try the delicious *el macua*, Nicaragua's favourite tippie, made with rum and a guava and lemon juice mix. Flor de Caña is the leading local brand of rum, and very good it is too.

Some recent history

Nicaragua's capital, Managua, still bears scars from the 1972 earthquake that destroyed its downtown area. The misuse of relief money eventually brought on the 1978-79 Sandinista revolution that overthrew General Somoza, the dictator whose corrupt dynasty, long supported by the US, had siphoned off over half the country's wealth. Well aware of the General's father's crimes during his presidency, Franklin Roosevelt had said "He's a bastard, but he's our bastard".

The Sandinistas won elections in 1984, only to be opposed by the US-backed 'Contras' who resented the left-wingers' associations with Cuba and the Soviets. US policy collapsed when the Contras were found to be covertly funded by US sales of arms to Iran, allowing a peace agreement to be reached. The subsequent 1990 elections were won by a woman, Doña Violeta Chamorro, whose sons had fought on opposite sides. She consolidated the peace, and brought together both her country and her family. US financial support that helped elect her thereupon wilted.



TOURING & WILDLIFE • CHOOSE MOSTLY MID-RANGE, OR UPPER RANGE HOTELS & LODGES • PRIVATE TRANSFERS

Nicaraguan Odyssey

A hugely enjoyable and varied holiday, touching each era from prehistory to the Revolution, visiting glorious colonial cities, lively villages and isolated settlements, in a stunning array of landscapes, with wildlife, creative arts and community projects along the way.

Managua

Day 1 You are met on arrival at Managua airport and driven to your characterful hotel in a quiet suburb for a 2 night stay.

Day 2 BL After a leisurely start to recover from your journey you meet your guide this morning to begin a tour of the capital, visiting the old downtown area and National Museum, the hilltop Sandino memorial, the new centre with its ultra-modern cathedral, and the evocative 'Footprints of Achualinca' made 6,000 years ago.

León

Day 3 BL Today you travel to the colonial city of León, visiting the ruins of León Viejo on the way. Your guide will show you León, the intellectual heart of the country, with its colonial churches and impressive cathedral, the Museum of Ortiz-Gurdian, one of the finest contemporary art galleries in Central America, or the Rubén Darío museum, one of the greatest Spanish language poets. You stay 2 nights in the heart of the historic quarter.

Rural life

Day 4 BL Today you'll learn something of rural Nicaragua's culture and traditions in the villages northwest of León. A small field of boiling mud fumaroles is a curiosity worth a stop on your way, with a glimpse of village life in tiny San Jacinto beside it. Travelling on you call at the rustic town of El Viejo, known for its doughnuts and a C17 Basilica of the Immaculate Conception. Norwich has the distinction of being twinned with this lovely little town.

By mid-day you reach the town of Chinandega, in one of the most fertile valleys in Central America, which has an impressive colonial church of its own. (One of the area's crops is sugarcane, some of which ends up in Flor de Caña, the nation's favourite rum.)

A foundation was created here in response to the intense child poverty that arose in the 1980s and today they care for 400 lively kids—if you'd like to drop by and say hello you can practise your Spanish amid a bombardment of chatter and big-eyed grins, and valiant attempts to play impossibly large musical instruments. A museum at Chorotega holds 1500 pre-Columbian artefacts and a young trainee from the foundation may join your guide to show you round. Nicaragua's past, present and future all in a few hours.



Juan Venado reserve

Day 5 BLD This morning you visit the Juan Venado reserve (p43), an hour's drive from León. You are met by your private boat to explore the estuary, mangroves and wetlands behind the 22km barrier island: a quiet natural world teeming with life. Returning to modern life you take the Pan American to the village of Masatepe, where you stay 2 nights at the lovely Puerto del Cielo (p46).

Pueblos Blancos craft villages

Day 6 BL Today you visit the evocative 'white villages' below the massive Masaya volcano. Each village specialises in a particular handicraft—from pottery to hammocks, baskets, leather or woodwork. They are busy and attractive little places. You return to your lodge with time to relax and enjoy its spectacular views.

Ometepe Island

Day 7 BLD The ferry from San Jorge takes you across Lake Nicaragua to Ometepe. You explore the island with your guide, including Laguna Charco Verde, a mysterious pool said to cover an enchanted city, and the hamlet of Altigracia with Nahuatl idols beside the church. Stay 2 nights at the wonderful Totoco Ecological, or at the lakeside Villa Paraiso, with the rest of the day free.

Day 8 BD A free day to unwind in this great location, with a short country walk to San Ramón Cascade, a lovely 110m waterfall. More strenuously, you could hike with a guide up to the crater of Volcán Concepción; kayaking and horse riding are also available locally.

Granada

Day 9 BL Catch a late morning ferry off the island to be met at the dock for the drive to Granada for 2 nights.

Day 10 BL A tour of the splendid city of Granada, including the Cathedral, Convent of San Francisco, Casa de los Leones and Museo de Granada—a private museum within a grand home. There is free time to wander and enjoy the city by yourself. In the late afternoon take a boat tour on the lake through Las Isletas de Granada.

Mombacho Reserve and Masaya at night

Day 11 BL Driving north from Granada you visit the cloud forests of Mombacho Reserve. Orchids and bromeliads deck the stunted trees, and you will hear about the reserve's endemic species, colourful frogs, howler monkeys and white face capuchins.

The conservation group that looks after the reserve helps coffee growers use sustainable methods, which you will see at a Rainforest Alliance certified plantation. Schoolchildren are taught about the environment: volunteer pupils work as park rangers and guides, and help in the tree nurseries.

After some free time back in Granada, you are driven south at dusk to Masaya Volcano. Parakeets fly in to roost as the sun sets, when you await the exodus of thousands of bats from a lava tube on the volcano's flank, on their nightly foragings. The intrepid can don



TOURING & WILDLIFE • CHOOSE MOSTLY MID-RANGE OR MOSTLY UPPER RANGE HOTELS • PRIVATE TRANSFERS

Just a week in Nicaragua

A week of touring Nicaragua that combines well with a trip to Costa Rica, or time at the beach on the Pacific coast or the Corn Islands

hard hats and masks to explore the tube. Up on the crater's rim, molten magma may be seen glowing deep below. At 19.30h drive to Managua for 1 night.

San Carlos and the Solentiname Archipelago

Day 12 BD A morning to relax by the hotel pool and store any surplus luggage (there is a 14kg limit on your flight today). Transfer to Managua airport for the daily flight to San Carlos where you are met and taken to the dock for your journey by boat to Solentiname to stay 2 nights, calling at La Venada Island to visit one of the artist families whose naïve paintings depict fantastical forest scenes.

Los Guatuzos and Mancarron Island

Day 13 BLD By boat from the islands to the rich Los Guatuzos reserve. Here there are turtle and caiman conservation projects and a canopy walk leading to a choice of forest trails.

After lunch you return to the archipelago to Mancarron Island where artist families create brightly painted carvings of animals, birds and fish. There is a small archaeological museum, and a church of great significance to many Nicaraguans as it was destroyed in retribution when its priest, the liberation theologian Ernesto Carnival, an important poet who became Culture Minister after the revolution, called for the end of the Somoza regime. Return to your lodge for sunset.

San Juan River and El Castillo

Day 14 BLD By boat back to San Carlos, then down the San Juan River to the riverfront town of El Castillo. You visit the fort and its museum and explore the quirky little town. Onwards by boat to your lodge in its private forest reserve. The rest of the day is free for relaxing in a hammock, watching life on the river go by, walking forest trails or birdwatching. Kayaking, horse riding and artisanal fishing are available locally at your own risk but no extra cost.

Managua

Day 15 BL Free at the lodge, before taking the public boat back to San Carlos for lunch and the flight to Managua. You are met on arrival, taken to your hotel, and reunited with any stored luggage.

Day 16 B You are driven to the airport for your flight home, or onwards to the Corn Islands, for example.



Granada

Day 1 You are met in the morning on your arrival at Managua airport (or the Costa Rican border at Peñas Blancas) by your experienced English-speaking local guide, who drives you to Granada where you stay 3 nights at a comfortable central hotel.

Day 2 BL You explore the colonial city of Granada with your guide to show you its churches, archaeological museums, quiet side streets and attractive main plaza, ending with a boat ride among the Isletas de Granada—the small islands described on p43.

Mombacho reserve and Masaya at night

Day 3 BL Today you visit the Mombacho reserve and see Masaya Volcano at night, as Day 11 of our 'Nicaraguan Odyssey' opposite.

Pueblos Blancos craft villages

Day 4 BLD Leaving Granada you visit the villages known as Los Pueblos Blancos described in Day 6 of our Nicaraguan Odyssey. Stay overnight at a lodge with a spectacular hillside view.

León Viejo UNESCO World Heritage Site

Day 5 BL A morning to relax in a hammock, by the hotel pool or take an optional spa treatment. After lunch you are driven north along the shores of Lake Managua, where ox carts plough rich soil and mud bricks bake in the sun, to the ruins of Old León, buried by an eruption in 1610 and now an impressive archaeological UNESCO site. Onwards to stay at a comfortable hotel in León for 2 nights.

León

Day 6 BL A full day to explore León with your guide, including visits to Subtiava church, Ortiz-Gurdian and Rubén Darío museums and Cathedral. Take your time and wear a hat in its dry season heat. You will also be driven out of town to visit San Jacinto's hot springs.

Managua

Day 7 BL Driving to Managua, you see the sights of this most unusual capital. There is much living history to hear, tales from the 1972 earthquake and the revolution which followed, the National Museum, the modernist cathedral and the Footprints of Achualinca. Stay a night in the city at a comfortable hotel.

Day 8 B Transfer to the airport for the flight home, or flights to the Corn Islands, or the San Juan River, or by road to Pacific beaches.



Joining in

It seems to be in the soul of Nicaraguans to support each other. Call it socialism, liberation theology, charity, volunteering, community spirit, or just a proper way to live, you'll find this whole-hearted spirit bubbling up a lot—sometimes organised through unions, cooperatives, councils, churches or schools, other times just done that way.

From the traveller's point of view, helping your neighbour rather than preying on them accounts for the fact that Nicaragua is a relatively safe place to visit. It also means that there is an enlivening human warmth to be experienced and shared as you travel about.

What better way could there be than to join in? There are several community development projects that welcome visitors to experience and share local ways of life under the 'ecotourism' banner.

For examples, a group of villages in the province of Grenada have joined together, each offering visitors something different: country walks, cycling, riding on an ox cart, donkey or horse, seeing how crops are grown, or recounting tales from the 1980s. You stay in spare rooms (some with private bathroom), dorm rooms, or hammocks.

There's a similar sustainable tourism project in Jinotega

with a focus on coffee, history, culture and religion.

Let us know if you might like to include experiences like these in your tailor-made holiday. (You only pay the charge made by the community, we add nothing.)

You could also stay at an ecotourism lodge such as the award-winning Finca Esperanza Verde, see p46.

Nicaragua is the poorest country in Latin America after Haiti, with 40% of the population struggling to get by on little more than a dollar a day. Any visit to Nicaragua will have a positive impact, and by joining in you are making your contribution where it is needed most.



Where to stay in Nicaragua Hotels for touring



El Convento UPPER RANGE

León

A lovely hotel created from a convent founded in 1639, set around a formal courtyard garden with fountain and palms, in the heart of León in walking distance of the Central Plaza. 31 spacious guest rooms with 2 queen beds, all with private bathroom and a/c, in an austere décor with thick walls giving a quiet, cloistered atmosphere that feels rich in history. There is one suite for an extra special stay.

The rooms open off a broad tiled corridor decorated with artefacts with a religious theme. Public areas are very elegant with beautiful antiques from the Spanish colonial era and art on the walls. There is a fine restaurant and a patio café.



Jicaro Island Ec lodge TOP RANGE

Granada

A boutique eco-retreat on a wooded rocky islet on Lake Nicaragua among the 300 islands of Las Isletas, a 15min boat ride from Granada, with views across the water to the dramatic outline of Mombacho Volcano. The style is understated Zen, with a focus on wellness, romance, relaxation and good food. Each of the 9 light and airy casitas is on two levels with bedroom above and living area and bathroom below. Both levels give onto private decks with lake views and over-sized hammocks.

There is a small infinity pool. Yoga and massage sessions are available. There is no space on the island to stretch your legs, so take a book. The restaurant's menu is founded on organic local ingredients including lake fish. Romantic dinners can be taken on a private floating deck, though not out of view.



Totoco Lodge UPPER RANGE

Ometepe Island

Another super new ec lodge, this time in the magical surroundings of Ometepe Island, Totoco Lodge is set on slopes of Maderas Volcano with a commanding view across the island to Concepcion, its twin. The lodge was built by hand, literally, and is run with great attention to detail by a committed young team who have put the best sustainable technology into practice in a labour of love. The result is both homely and spectacular. The lodge opened with 4 thatched casitas with private bathrooms and terrace with hammock. Lovely home cooking is served in the open sided thatched dining room.



Hotel Plaza Colón UPPER RANGE

Granada

Overlooking Granada's colourful main square and directly opposite the cathedral, Hotel Plaza Colón is a standard choice for visitors to the city. Rooms in the front, historic part of the hotel are very spacious with lovely polished floorboards, and some have wonderful balconies onto the square. Further back the rooms are neat and modern, set around an attractive series of patio courtyards, one with pool—they don't have the view but they are quieter. There's a pleasant bar, a restaurant linked to the hotel, and others to choose from nearby. Hotel Plaza Colón has achieved 'verified' status with Rainforest Alliance.



Hotel Los Robles UPPER RANGE

Managua

A small hotel in a quiet residential area in central Managua not far from shops and nightlife. The hotel is in colonial style around a courtyard garden with fountain, and decorated with many interesting antique pieces. All rooms have a/c and en suite facilities. A comfortable base from which to explore Managua or to overnight at the start or end of a trip.



Montecristo River Lodge MID/LOW RANGE

Sábalo, San Juan River

A river front lodge backed by rainforest 1hr by boat from San Carlos, near the historic town of El Castillo. Simple wooden cabins around a garden, each with queen and single bed, fan and private facilities. It's not much, but good for the area. Walks on forest trails, kayaks, canoes, horses, and artisan fishing are included, or just relax in a hammock and watch life on the river go by. Guests must climb 65 steps to arrive at the lodge. All meals and standard drinks are included.

Worth a mention

La Gran Francia Granada UPPER RANGE

Dating from 1524, restored in the 1990s, and in the heart of the colonial centre, this is one of a small handful of good choices for a visit to Granada.

Villa Paraiso Ometepe Island MID-RANGE

A simple lodge with wonderful views on a sandy lake shore between Ometepe's two volcanoes, 1hr from the port at Moyogalpa. Can be windy.

Contempo Managua UPPER RANGE

A boutique hotel in uber-urban style with the feel of a private residence. Each room is uniquely decorated. In house upscale restaurant. Convenient for city and south.

Hacienda Puerto del Cielo Masaya UPPER RANGE

Small new ec lodge and spa in a stunning location high on a hill with commanding views over Lake Catarina to Masaya National Park. Just 9 guest rooms so far.

Slow...
slower...
stop.



Three angles of relaxation at Nicaragua's beaches—resorts to recline in, eco-lodges to lay back in, and the totally horizontal vibe of the Corn Islands.

NICARAGUA'S PACIFIC BEACHES

With plenty of fine weather, miles of palm-backed sandy shores, and a small but growing number of good places to stay, Nicaragua's Pacific coast makes a good option for beach time. It's even worth considering in combination with a holiday in Costa Rica.

There are a couple of good hotel options in the small but growing southern town of San Juan del Sur: the hill-top Pelican Eyes (aka Piedras Y Olas) with cottages, winding paths, and infinity pools, and the smart and simple Hotel Victoriano downtown at the waterfront (both p47).

Just north of San Juan lies Morgan's Rock, a high-priced boutique ec lodge set among trees overlooking its own private beach (p47).

Moving up the Pacific coast (dubbed Nicaragua's 'Pacific Riviera'), at El Astillero there is a remote, stylish eco beach getaway called Punta Teonoste (p47). It's a bit harder to get to, but worth the journey. Nicaragua's premier surf break is nearby.

Further north, a top-of-the-range mainstream beach resort near Masachapa and Pochomil offers all the trimmings, including a huge swimming pool, a choice of restaurants, bars, tennis and a casino. It is set on 3km of uninterrupted sand surrounded by towering palms. The beach is good for swimming with a very gradual shelf and a weak current, but you may feel rather separated from the real Nicaragua.



PHOTO: Beach cafes at San Juan del Sur

Where to stay in Nicaragua

At the beach



Punta Teonoste

UPPER RANGE

Pacific coast

A boutique-style eco-resort along a long pristine beach. The atmosphere is chic, relaxed and stylish. There's a large pool, a spacious open-plan reception, bar and restaurant, and a small gym and spa. The 16 whitewashed adobe-style bungalows, have private decks with hammocks, a living area connecting with an *al fresco* shower and wc, and a four poster bed upstairs under a steep thatched roof. Active options include trips to the Chacocente Wildlife Refuge, notable for the turtles that nest on its beaches in large numbers. Surf breaks near the lodge attract expert surfers. Punta Teonoste has good sustainability credentials (including no a/c in the rooms). Getting there is an insight into rural life on dirt roads that ford streams.



Morgan's Rock

TOP RANGE

San Juan del Sur

An internationally-known high-end ecolodge in a private nature reserve, with a focus on conservation, community development and reforestation—one of the pioneers of ecotourism in Central America. 15 stylish, spacious wooden bungalows are spread on a cliff above a private bay where turtles nest (August–November). They are connected to a main lodge by lots of steps and a sturdy 110m suspension bridge over a forested canyon. Each bungalow has a king size bed, a sofa bed, and a private deck with ocean view and outdoor shower. There is an infinity swimming pool. The private 800ha dry forest reserve has howler monkey, sloth and many birds.



Arenas Beach

MID-RANGE

Big Corn Island

Our favourite on the Corn Islands. Set on the best beach (white sands, water usually calm, clear and blue-green), with truly great sunsets. Mid-range in quality but ticks the boxes for clean spacious beach accommodation with a/c and fan, modern en-suite facilities, etc and even wi-fi when it works. Step across a sandy lane and you're on the beach where there are sun-loungers (non-adjustable) and gazebos to relax under if the sun is too strong or a shower passes over. Lobster, ceviche, fish etc (plus steaks and pizzas) are served in the relaxed restaurant. That's all you'll need.

Worth a mention

Mukul Guacalito de la Isla, Emerald Coast

TOP RANGE

Stylish cottages and villas with plunge pools set in 4 miles of sweeping coast. An eco-sensitive upscale resort with 2 restaurants, beaches, surfing, hiking, spa, golf.

Pelican Eyes / Piedras y Olas San Juan del Sur

UPPER RANGE

Mid-size resort on a hillside facing the ocean, with a nice bar and restaurant, varied accommodation, choice of pools. Lots of steps and winding paths. Good excursions.

Hotel Victoriano San Juan del Sur

MID-RANGE

Neat rooms with shutters and balconies in cream and white around a small pool. A good choice for a seaside experience on the beachfront.

THE CORN ISLANDS

Twice daily flights from Managua deliver a few handfuls of astute beach lovers to the Corn Islands, 70km off Nicaragua's Caribbean coast.

Life on Big Corn and Little Corn is about as simple as life can get. Forget the luxuries normally associated with the Caribbean, these islands are so far off the tourist map that you'll have trouble paying more than a few dollars for a lobster dinner. English is the lingua franca, thanks to the islands' long

history as a British protectorate from 1655 to 1894.

Accommodation is simple, relaxed and as basic as can be, and that's the secret of the Corn Islands. You're not here to be pampered or look good, you're here to escape from all that, to draw breath, and to revel in the sparse beauty of the beach, the sky and the blue-green sea.

Take your snorkel, a powerful sunscreen, and a moderate mosquito repellent. Leave the rest behind.

Classy Chill-out

This upmarket itinerary works well on its own or combined with touring Nicaragua or Costa Rica.

Managua

Day 1 You are met on arrival at the airport and driven to your chosen hotel in the capital.

Jicaro Island

Day 2-4 BLD You are collected from your hotel and privately transferred to the colonial city of Granada, with a short side-trip to see Masaya Volcano, driving up to the very rim of its huge crater. After lunch and a walking tour of the city you are taken by boat out to Jicaro Island Ecolodge in Lake Nicaragua for 3 nights full board.

Pacific beach

Day 5-7 BLD After a leisurely start, you return by boat to Granada and are privately driven to your chosen Pacific beach setting: Punta Teonoste, Morgan's Rock, or Aqua Spa yoga and wellness retreat.

Day 8 B You are collected in the mid or late morning and driven to Managua (or other onwards destination).

Corn Islands

Step down to the simple life. Pure sea, pure sky, pure beach and very little else to clog your mind.

Big Corn Island

Day 1 You are transferred to Managua airport for your flight to Big Corn Island to be met by the hotel's shared taxi service and driven to Arenas Beach Hotel (this page) for 3 nights.

Days 2-3 B Two free days on the islands (but we can extend this to as many days as you can spare). You can simply relax, of course, which is the whole idea, or take a cab to good snorkelling spots. Your stay is on a B&B basis so you can sample the various eateries around the island. To explore further afield, take the ferry to the even more basic Little Corn Island. (It may be a bumpy crossing, but usually only in January and February. The ferry returns early, around 1pm.) There is good diving around Big Corn if you bring your PADI certificate.

Day 4 B Depending on your onward travel arrangements you are transferred to the airport to catch the early morning or afternoon flight to Managua where you are met and helped on your way.

This travel brochure is part of a series prepared by Geodyssey on some of our destinations in Latin America and the Caribbean.

For others in the series please call us or visit www.geodyssey.co.uk



Geodyssey and Rainforest Alliance have established an alliance to support Best Management Practices in Sustainable Tourism since 2007.



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