



GEODYSSEY COSTA RICA

Travel guide
Tailor-made holidays
Small group holidays
Touring holidays
Wildlife experiences
Selfdrive holidays
Active holidays
Where to stay
Beaches

Welcome

This brochure is part of our 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 to bring out the best in each destination, so you can pick the holiday that suits you the best.

In each country we focus on travel experiences rather than just staying in one spot. 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, with a fabulous range of options for winding down at the start or end of a trip.

Also included are special options like birdwatching at all levels, leg-stretching day walks, adventurous treks, and a great range of other activities and challenges.

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

About Geodyssey

Geodyssey is not an ordinary travel company. We started life in 1993 as a specialist for Venezuela, an extraordinary country for which we developed a uniquely thorough approach that produced some spectacular travel experiences at that time.

We have grown since then 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 at least twenty times and spent the equivalent of at least six years in the country.

It seems to work. Our customer ratings 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 we hope you will choose us.

Gillian Howe
Managing Director

The Geodyssey Guide to Costa Rica

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Holiday ideas

With the exception of our small group trips all our holidays are tailor-made for private individual travel. Our knowledgeable specialists for Costa Rica will work with you to design a trip to suit you best: the right itinerary, the right balance of activity and rest, the hotels you'll most enjoy. (Active families should turn to p28-29!) These suggestions illustrate a few of the options, out of many. Contact us to create your perfect trip.

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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, 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, hiking 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 style-led luxury hotels at eye-watering prices.

Costa Rica is a great destination for first-timers to Latin America, superb for wildlife enthusiasts, wonderful for families with teenagers or young explorers, excellent for honeymooners and an inspired choice for active older travellers.



PHOTOS
Front cover
Three-toed sloth in a cecropia tree, a favourite for their diet of leaves.

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.

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.

02 Sunset approaches at Playa Ventanas on the South Pacific coast

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.

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 chequer 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. San José has been largely neglected by visitors but these days it is well worth a short visit to enjoy a slice of real everyday Costa Rican life outside of the tourist centres. There are some pretty tree-lined squares, parks and buildings of interest, together with an up-and-coming foodie/cultural scene, focused around the Amon and Escalante neighbourhoods. Some of the city's principal sights include:

- **National Theatre** This 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.
- **Pre-Columbian Gold Museum** 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.

- **Jade Museum** The largest collection of jade carvings in the Americas with displays of pre-Columbian art, pottery and sculpture. The museum is now set in a large, modern building fashioned to resemble a block of raw jade stone.
- **Museum of Costa Rican Art** A small collection of 19th and 20th century painting and sculpture by national and international artists with changing exhibitions. It is located in La Sabana park near the city centre.
- **Central Market** Crammed with stalls selling everything from medicinal herbs to poultry, ceramics to ice cream. Some of the city's best 'sodas' or local cafés are found here.

There is a good choice of hotels in the city and the surrounding countryside—see p30 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



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.

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 Arenal Volcano (see p12) viewed from the cloud forest at La Fortuna to the north of the Cordillera Central.



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some very special places for wildlife in this region, including Sarapiquí, Caño Negro, Boca Tapada (p9) and the flooded forest of Tortuguero (p8).

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 here, good beaches begin almost immediately but are at first rather busy, being the closest to San José.

Soon you reach Quepos and the beautiful and very popular Manuel Antonio National Park, where verdant tropical forest opens onto picturesque white sand beaches. Wildlife is good here too: see p9.

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

Some stylish boutique lodges have appeared on this part of the coast, perched on steep hills looking to the ocean. The good-hearted Hacienda Barú is a national wildlife refuge that rises from the lodge at beach level to a 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 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 OTS 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.

PHOTOS

- 01 Forest giant in the 'Hanging Bridges' reserve (p12)
- 02 Crater lake at the top of Poás Volcano (p12)
- 03 Playa Vargas in Cahuita NP on the south Caribbean (p9, 15)
- 04 Horsemen lining up at a 'tope' festival at Zarcero in the Central Highlands.
- 05 Deep in the flooded forest in Tortuguero NP (p8)
- 06 Pool at Lapa Rios (p32) looking to Golfo Dulce on the south Pacific
- 07 Floral profusion



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 (p31) 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, CATIE, world-renowned for research into tropical crops, offers landscaped gardens and trails that also make for some easy birding.



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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 Arenal Volcano, see p12.

Beyond them you arrive into 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 experience a slice of an authentic rural Costa Rica, an area that retains its quintessential Tico feel. 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. The national dish, *gallo pinto*, a simple but delicious combination of rice, beans and herbs, originates from this part of the country.

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 p15.



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.

PHOTOS

- 01 Hot springs in Rincón de la Vieja NP in Guanacaste
- 02 Waterfall on the Rio Celeste (this page)
- 03 Hanging Bridges (p13)



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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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.

The wildlife you will see in any area depends on the habitats found there. Costa Rica offers several good opportunities to experience four of the most significant tropical life zones: flooded forest and its near kin 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 and vivid 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 pools at night to pluck quietly dreaming fish from the water 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.

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

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 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.

- PHOTOS
- 01 Red-eyed tree frog. Everyone's favourite.
 - 02 A good place to see Scarlet Macaw is Carara NP on the Pacific coast
 - 03 White-headed capuchin monkey
 - 04 Squirrel monkey
 - 05 Hiding in the flower-bed
 - 06 The Neotropical River Otter lives in forested lowland rivers, such as in the Sarapiquí area



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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 peccary 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

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 Braulio 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.

Boca Tapada

Boca Tapada is home to a new wildlife reserve, the proposed Maquenque NP, which lies in the deep lowlands of the San Carlos River as it seeps slowly northward to join the Rio San Juan. The quantity and variety of wildlife here easily rivals the more established 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 p32) and Laguna del Lagarto are the places to stay here.

Boca Tapada is a 4 hour drive north from San José.

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. Up the coast from Gandoca-Manzanillo, Cahuita National Park is one of Costa Rica's smallest but most photogenic reserves, protecting a lush strip of wildlife rich rainforest, wetland and mangrove forest, white-sand beaches and a large marine area that contains Costa Rica's largest coral reef. There are boardwalks and trails for hiking, as well as offshore snorkelling.

Mid-Pacific

On the mid-Pacific coast, Carara National Park covers a transitional area between dry forest to the north and primary evergreen rainforest to the south. The nearby floodplains of the Rio 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. Macaw Lodge, Villa Lapas Lodge and Cerro Lodge (p32) 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 you could see some great wildlife – 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 a little 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 p33).

South Pacific and the 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 pumas, 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.



Turtles

Of the world's 7 species of turtle, 5 nest in Costa Rica. Green Turtles arrive in huge numbers at Tortuguero from July 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 can be seen on the beaches of the Pacuare reserve on the Caribbean coast between March and June. They have also 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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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 nature-focussed lodge on the ocean side of the peninsula is Casa Corcovado Lodge (p32), on the shores of the Pacific beside the park, 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.

For relaxation in nature the wonderful Playa Cativo sits on the shore of the Golfo Dulce accessible only by boat.

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. 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 1950s by Quakers from Alabama escaping the draft. It is perched high on the Atlantic slope of the mountains northwest of San José. 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 p31.

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 & Los Quetzales NP 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 from the mountains. 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. A handful of nice lodges offer birdwatching, horse-riding, hiking and fishing. San

Gerardo de Dota and Los Quetzales NP are 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 cloud forest lodge of Bosque de Paz (p32) an early pioneer of eco-tourism in Costa Rica, within a 700ha private reserve of cloud forest rising up behind it on the Cordillera Central. Alternatively you can stay at El Silencio (p30) 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 (p30), with various short trails near the lodge that provides a taste of the cloud forest. Between mid-February and May 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.

Santa Rosa NP

Santa Rosa NP is home to several mammals including armadillo and white tailed deer as well

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, such as the excellent cloud forest reserve at Bosque de Paz.

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.

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 (p31) 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 and natural mud baths.

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 mantled howler monkey, white-faced capuchins, sloth and caiman. They include the flooded forest of Tortuguero and Maquenque (p8-9) and two others of special interest Palo Verde and Caño Negro.

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, protects a seasonal lake and surrounding marsh.



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.

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.

01 Mantled howler monkey males signal with long roars that echo through the forest and are heard for miles.

02 'Blue jeans' frogs are usually found in forest leaf-litter

03 Green violet-ear hummingbird, San Gerardo de Dota.

PHOTOS
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

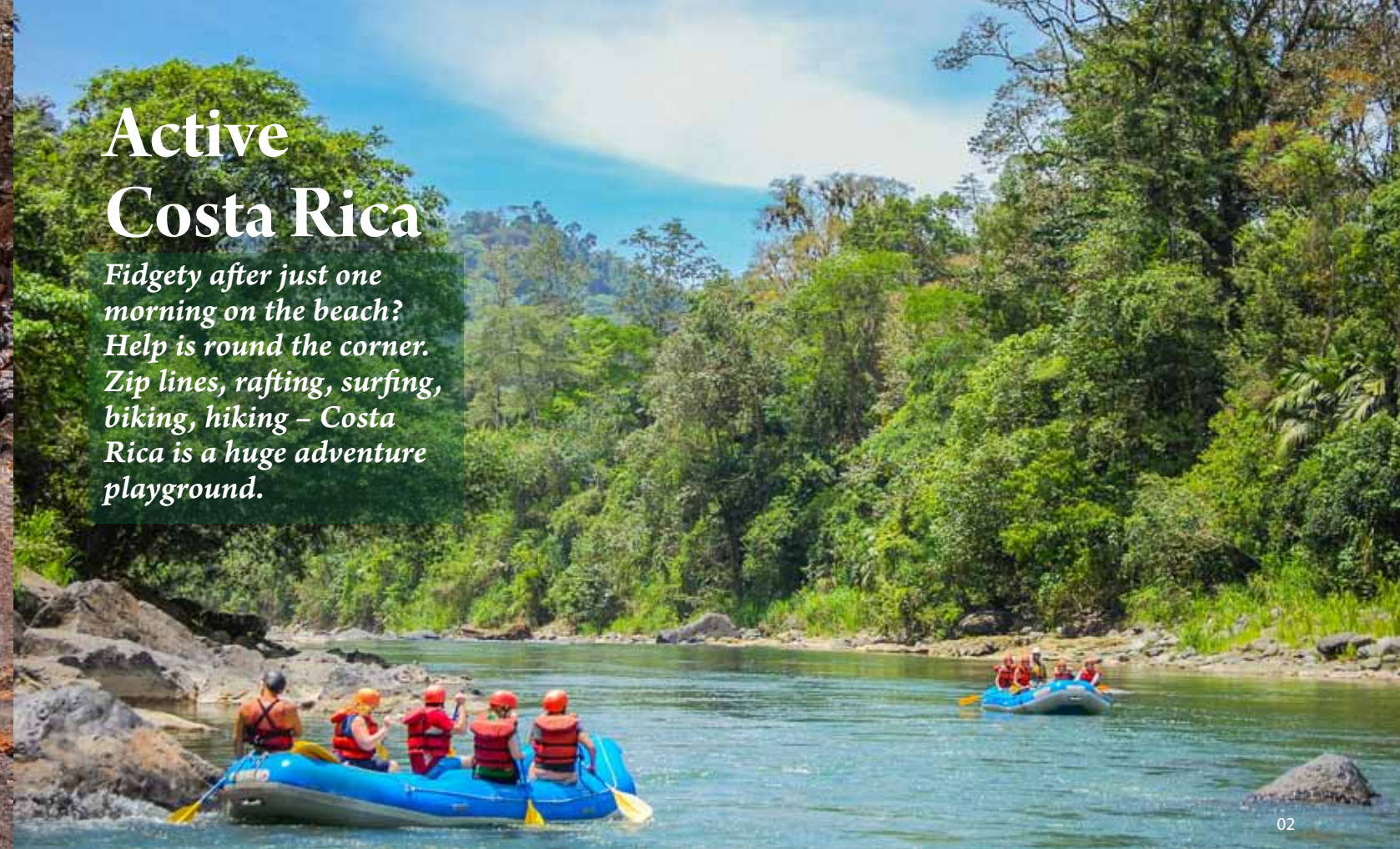
Costa Rica's 200 volcanoes include some of the most accessible and dramatic active volcanoes in the Americas.



01

Active Costa Rica

Fidgety after just one morning on the beach? Help is round the corner. Zip lines, rafting, surfing, biking, hiking – Costa Rica is a huge adventure playground.



02

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. 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 elfin 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. Turrialba entered a new eruptive cycle in 2016 and regularly spews gas and ash high into the skies

above the Central Valley - at the time of writing the National Park here remains closed due to the increase in volcanic activity.

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 rumbles from deep within.

Thermal waters from Arenal's inner workings feed tumbling springs that are just right for bathing.

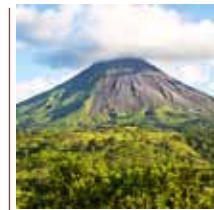
RINCÓN DE LA VIEJA

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.

Costa Rica's volcanoes are constantly evolving, each calming down for a time then becoming eruptive again in its own barely predictable cycle. The authorities scale back visitor access when rising activity demands it.



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 rumbles 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.

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', zip lines 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, Bajos del Toro and Rincón de la Vieja National Park are also great for longer day walks.

Cerro Chirripó in the Cordillera de Talamanca has Costa Rica's highest peak at 3819m. Protected in a national park, it is a rugged landscape with great views, lakes and cirques. We arrange 4 day treks to the summit that also take 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.

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.

KAYAKING, SURFING & SUP

Costa Rica's Pacific coast has plenty of great surfing beaches, and most resort towns offer surfing lessons to get you going.

Tamarindo is the place most associated with surfing in Costa Rica but for a laid back natural experience head for Nosara or Sámara. Santa Teresa or Mal Pais are good options for a more hip surf scene. There are also some great 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!

Kayaking is on offer on the inland waterways of Tortuguero and on the Pacific coast near Quepos and near Tamarindo in channels through the mangroves.

DIVING

Costa Rica doesn't offer enough for a purely diving holiday (unless you can include the world-class Cocos Islands—see panel), but there is a great scuba site at Isla del Caño with sharks almost guaranteed and you could easily cross the border into Panama for easy diving at Bocas del Toro archipelago (p19).



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.

PHOTOS

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

Selfdrive

Selfdrive is a very good choice, with everything planned and ready for you to just enjoy your trip.



Escapism

Opportunities to relax and spend time in nature at wonderful properties



Beach

Costa Rica has an excellent choice of great beaches on its Pacific and Caribbean shores.



Selfdrive is a great way to see Costa Rica. Driving times are usually quite reasonable, and road conditions are fine for the purpose of getting around on holiday with no great speed or urgency.

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 bendy and 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.

Patience is the main requirement for driving in Costa Rica. Local drivers are not generally in a hurry, and their cautious speeds allow for the occasional surprise.

GPS navigation is very helpful. Road signs are few and finding your way using a paper map can lead to heated in-car debates. It's almost certain that you will get lost at some stage, when you will find Costa Ricans very pleased to offer roadside directions.

SELFDRIIVE HOLIDAYS

These itineraries can all be designed to work well as selfdrive holidays. We can vary any one of them to suit you and the things you most like to see and do:

Coast to Coast	16
Couple's Escape	17
Just a Week	17
Southern Pacific Explorer	18
Costa Rica Nature Explorer	22
Plants and Gardens of Costa Rica	24
A Quieter Costa Rica	24
Life in Costa Rica	25
The Birds of Costa Rica	27
Costa Rican Adventures	28
Young Explorer's Costa Rica	29
Day Walks in Costa Rica	29

Our selfdrive holidays include fully comprehensive car insurance.

There are some fabulous hotels at the top end of the market in Costa Rica. There is nothing that is excessively luxurious in the conventional sense, but a good number offer style, comfort, space, artful ideas and high levels of service in utterly lovely surroundings. Some combine this with their own excursions into nature with high quality guides or well-run activities to inspire and stretch you.

Very often there is also a lovely pool to relax by, a small spa to indulge in, or a wellness menu with yoga, treatments or massage.

You will eat well too, with well-prepared standards, lots of tropical fruits and salads, and fresh local produce. You shouldn't expect high levels of gastronomy or the very latest trends, but you may well be surprised now and then.

Even so, your expectations should take into account the remoteness of a lodge's setting.

The situation is always changing, new properties come on to the scene while others have difficulty maintaining their standards. However you can be sure that little of this escapes our attention.

SAN JOSÉ & THE CENTRAL VALLEY

San José has plenty of business hotels, but currently only one that offers something with more character: the very successful Grano de Oro.

Around the Central Valley the long-established Finca Rosa Blanca and Xandari Plantation are both in superb locations and within a reasonable drive of the airport, while Villa Blanca, Poás Volcano Lodge, and the excellent Chayote Lodge offer countryside surroundings in more distant settings.

MOUNTAIN LODGES

Three high-end lodges vie with each other below Arenal Volcano: Arenal Nayara, Nayara Springs and Tabacón Grand Spa.

Set in the mountains east of the Central Valley and best accessed by rafting whitewater rapids, Pacuare Lodge gives a sublime off-grid experience.

Two more typical mountain lodges achieve high standards, El Silencio in the cloud forests of Bajos del Toro north of the Central Valley and Hacienda Alta Gracia in the Chirripó mountains to the south.

JUNGLE LODGES

Our own favourites are Costa Rica's best jungle lodges, cast away in deepest nature yet managing to achieve their individual visions of style and comfort for their high-end visitors. In the southwest these include the lovely Playa Cativo, the excellent Lapa Rios, and the very remote Casa Corcovado.

A number of lodges are gathered beside the wildlife rich flooded forests of Tortuguero national park. The best of these is Manatus.

BEACH

There are too many lovely beach hotels to name here. Some of our favourites include Kura Design Villas, Arenas del Mar, Latitude 10, Four Seasons Papagayo, Villa Manzu, Flor Blanca, Cala Luna, Andaz Peninsula Papagayo, El Mangroove, and Harmony. Just let us know what you like best.



Costa Rica's huge variety of lovely beaches are easily the best in Central America (though closely followed by parts of Nicaragua and Panama), with a lovely long and varied Pacific coast and good beaches along the southern part of the Caribbean coast.

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 attract foreign visitors and expats in search of paradise, giving a cosmopolitan atmosphere, but most remain agreeably low-key and relaxed.

Tamarindo has grown into a lively beach resort with restaurants, bars and shops. Its 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 very 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. Playa Hermosa has a hideaway vibe 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 peaceful Playa Potrero with a handful of beach front hotels at the end of a long bumpy road—worthwhile if you stay a few days.

At Playas Nosara three wild beaches separated by hilltops form a spread out community of mainly expats with an 'end of the road' feel. Nearby a private reserve is home to howler monkeys, coati and racoon. Just down the coast at Ostional, Olive Green Ridley turtles make mass nestings or *arribadas* between August and November typically during the last quarter of the moon. Playa Sámara has a deep horseshoe bay with a wide sandy beach shielded by a reef. It is a fishing village grown into a beach resort for swimmers, windsurfers, backpackers, and young Costa Ricans, with 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 (p9) has verdant forest behind 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 through forested hills; a mini real-estate boom is underway. Quepos itself offers restaurants, cybercafés and lively bars. Esterillos Este, a 45min drive up the coast, 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 weekenders; 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 close to Ballena NP: good for offshore snorkelling and birdwatching. Strong breaks at Dominical, make 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 mostly not safe for swimming due to strong currents. Coral reefs well off the shore offer good snorkelling when sea conditions are right. Nearby one of the world's top surfing beaches produces the 'Salsa Brava' wave featured in Endless Summer II.



Touring Holidays

Great all round itineraries for individual holidays tailor-made to suit you best.



CHOOSE MID OR UPPER RANGE HOTELS AND 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 at the price level you preferred.

Southern Caribbean coast

Day 2 B In the morning you are driven eastwards (4h) beyond the mountains that ring the Central Valley, passing through the rainforest of Braulio Carrillo NP to reach the Caribbean. You travel along the coast to spend 2 nights in the south Caribbean.

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. You might hire bikes, go snorkelling on offshore coral reefs or hike the forest trails of Cahuita NP. Visits to projects run by local indigenous communities are possible if booked in advance.

Tortuguero National Park

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. 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 will help point out the creatures.

Sarapiquí lowland rainforest

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 be brought here for you to collect. Travel to the lowland rainforest of Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí (1h) 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—an important reserve for wildlife research and conservation; whitewater raft down the Sarapiquí River or take

a more leisurely 'river float' to enjoy 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 volcano

Day 8 B This morning you travel to the Arenal volcano area, where you stay for 2 nights.

Day 9 B A free day for your pick of the many local attractions. You could do the Hanging Bridges Canopy tour for excellent views across the treetops to the outstretched valley, or visit your choice of hot springs where you can relax in thermal waters with views of the volcano.

Monteverde cloud forest

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, canopy walks, an array of zip line excursions 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 p15).

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. If you have a hire car, drop it at your hotel this evening.

Day 16 B Today you are driven to the international airport for your flight home.



UPPER RANGE HOTELS AND LODGES • PRIVATE TRANSFERS

Couple's Escape

A relaxing and inspirational couple's escape with an accent on nature, active well-being, and more than a little luxury. A spa hotel, a jungle lodge reached only by rafting whitewater rapids, a grand city hotel, a thermal springs retreat and a beautiful Pacific beach. Great times together.

Hill-top lodge and spa

Day 1 You are met on arrival at the airport in San José and taken to Xandari Costa Rica, a gorgeous art-filled lodge and spa set among gardens in a former coffee estate with magnificent views across the Central Valley. You stay for 2 nights with time to relax.

There are 3 swimming pools with sunbeds and sun beds, a Yoga studio, and an on-site 'Spa Village' which offers its treatments in your own private palm-roofed *jalapa* with hot-tub and views to forest and valley.

Walking trails lead from the lodge through its private forest reserve which has 5 waterfalls.

Xandari's terrace restaurant sources its fruits, vegetables and herbs from the lodge's own gardens.

Day 2 B A free day to relax at Xandari.

Boutique lodge in the jungle

Day 3 BLD With an early start, you are taken to the banks of the Pacuare River to meet your rafting guides for safety training and an hour's rafting class III-IV rapids to the award-winning Pacuare Lodge where you stay for 2 nights.

After lunch you are free to get involved in activities or relax and enjoy this very special location, off-grid in the wilderness with good food and a wonderful atmosphere for couples.

Day 4 BLD The lodge has a lovely spa and offers a great range of active options, including river-rafting, zip-lining, walking and mountain biking, and a very special invited visit to a Cabécar indigenous community.

Grand Victorian mansion

Day 5 BL You could leave Pacuare by cable gondola across the river to a waiting vehicle, or take an exhilarating whitewater rafting trip on class III-IV rapids to reach the road.

You are driven to San José for a night of finery at a Victorian mansion artfully converted to an upper range hotel whose restaurant is considered one of the grandest in the city. Its fin de siècle style is complemented by the work of Costa Rican artists.



Hideout on the Lost River

Day 6 B Today travel to Costa Rica's northwest into the Guanacaste ranchlands crossed by wild rivers with dramatic gorges and tumbling waterfalls.

Here you stay for 3 nights at Rio Perdido ('lost river'), an upmarket contemporary lodge in a 600 acre private reserve. Activities include swimming in a geothermal canyon with hot river pools and a range of hiking trails, plus mountain biking, tubing and a canopy zip line at additional cost.

Rio Perdido also has a succession of outdoor swimming pools, a stylish alfresco bar and restaurant, and rather good spa to revive and restore you.

Days 7 - 8 B At Rio Perdido.

Pacific beaches

Day 9 B Beach time coming up. You travel onwards to the Pacific coast for a 6 night stay at your choice of oceanside hotel.

Here are some ideas from many. We can help you choose.

- **Punta Isita:** a sophisticated retreat on a verdant hilltop with stunning ocean views
- **Kurà Design Villas:** an away-from-it-all hip hotel looking over the Pacific at Uvita
- **Ylang Ylang:** alt-style 'barefoot' hideaway right on the beach on the south coast of the Nicoya Peninsula.
- **Alma del Pacífico:** stylish upper range hotel with relatively easy access to a number of attractions
- **Cala Luna:** a good option close to the bars and nightlife at Tamarindo
- **Harmony:** a holistic natural retreat at Nosara with spa, yoga and a laid back vibe
- **Casa Chameleon Las Catalinas:** minimalist contemporary design, your own private pool villa and stunning ocean views

Days 10 - 14 B At the beach.

Day 15 BL This morning travel back to San José where you have day use of Xandari Costa Rica, including lunch, before you are taken to the international airport for your flight home.



CHOOSE MID OR UPPER RANGE HOTELS
CHOOSE PRIVATE TRANSFERS, SHUTTLE BUS OR SELFDRIVE

Just a Week

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 downtown hotel where you stay the night.

Tortuguero National Park

Day 2 BLD Early this morning you travel by coach (there is an option to fly) towards the Caribbean coast to a river dock for a boat ride through the waterways to your wildlife lodge for a 2 night stay beside the flooded forest not far from the village of Tortuguero. This afternoon you could join a tour to visit the village.

Day 3 BLD A full day based at Tortuguero, including a wildlife boat trip through the narrow channels of the flooded forest with the lodge's resident English-speaking naturalist guides.

Arenal Volcano

Day 4 BL Return by boat then road to the Arenal Volcano region for 2 nights at a hotel with a view of the volcano. If you opt to have a hire car, this will be delivered to you in Arenal later on today.

Day 5 B A free day in Arenal. A very good choice of tours is available locally at extra cost, e.g. to explore the Arenal Volcano reserve, to visit relaxing hot springs, walking high in the canopy at 'Hanging Bridges', riding zip lines, rafting on the Balsa River, or horse riding to the 'La Fortuna' waterfall.

Monteverde Cloud Forest

Day 6 B Today you travel up into the mountains of Monteverde for a 2 night stay at a characterful lodge in the cloud forest.

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, zip lines, horse riding, a butterfly garden, and an orchid garden too.

San José

Day 8 B Today travel back to San José, or to your next destination—perhaps a beach hotel on the Nicoya Peninsula, or a trip to the Osa Peninsula in the southwest. We could also combine this trip with a visit to Panama, such as 'And Panama Too' (p19).





UPPER AND MID-RANGE HOTELS AND LODGES • SELFDRIIVE

Southern Pacific Explorer

A two week selfdrive holiday with lots of flexibility for nature viewing, activities, or simply enjoying the country. You follow the Pacific coast southwards to the quiet bays and undisturbed rainforest of the Golfo Dulce and the Osa Peninsula and return through mountains stopping at a peaceful cloud forest valley and in the farmlands of Turrialba.

San José and the Central Valley

Day 1 You are met on your arrival in San José and transferred to your hotel on the outskirts of the city where you stay for 2 nights.

Day 2 B Your hire car is delivered to your hotel this morning ready for you to explore the Central Valley. You could drive on country roads through lush coffee-growing areas rising through cloud forest to lofty Poás Volcano to walk to its rim with the steaming aquamarine waters of its crater lake below you. The village of Sarchí is known for artists who create the vivid geometric designs on ox carts that are a feature of the Central Valley's rural heritage.

Mid-Pacific

Day 3 B Driving west towards the Pacific you stay 2 nights either in forested hills at a nature-focused lodge with extensive gardens and grounds where scarlet macaws fly, or by the coast at Esterillos Este, a stunning undeveloped beach with ocean surf.

Day 4 B Spend a morning at your lodge or at the beach, or go wildlife-spotting in the Carara reserve for monkeys, armadillos, agoutis and birds including toucans, trogons and macaws. In the late afternoon join a trip on the Tárcoles river to see crocodiles (some over 4m long), iguanas, basilisk lizards and lots of birds.

South Pacific at Dominical

Day 5 B Continuing an often-scenic drive down the mid-Pacific coast you should pause at Manuel Antonio a much-visited national

park (closed on Mondays) with beautiful headlands and coves of sparkling white beaches and coral reefs leading to Cathedral Point, a 'tombolo' island linked by a sand spit. There are short trails into the rainforest which teems with wildlife—sloths, monkeys, coatimundi, racoons, iguanas, toucans and parrots. The coast road continues to Dominical where you stay for 3 nights by low hills swathed in luxuriant primary forest overlooking the Pacific.

Day 6-7 B Dominical is a wonderfully natural area that was difficult to reach until recently. During your 2 days here you could visit Hacienda Baru, a private wildlife refuge with walking trails, 3km of beach and orchid and butterfly gardens. We have included one of three special trips into the calm waters of Marino Ballena marine national park: a boat trip with the chance to see pilot whales, 2 resident species of dolphins, humpback whales (who can be highly acrobatic) who visit from mid-July to late October and in smaller numbers from mid-December to late March; or a boat trip to snorkel on coral reefs (if visibility is good around the coral or there are whales, dolphins or turtles about); or a trip to sea-kayak and snorkel. Underwater visibility is best from December to July.

Osa Peninsula and the Golfo Dulce

Day 8 BLD A morning's drive further south to Golfo Dulce and the Osa Peninsula, which has the most biodiverse and pristine forests in all Costa Rica, for 3 nights at one of a range of good lodges.

Day 9-10 BLD Depending on your choice of lodge there are excursions to hike in Corcovado NP, visit indigenous communities, go kayaking, take a night walk, tour a cocoa farm, a cooking tour, or bird watching. Some are restricted and best booked in advance.

Southern highlands

Day 11 B Looping back you drive inland and then north ascending to high *paramó*. A turning leads into the peaceful valley of San Gerardo de Dota, among cloud forest festooned with orchids and bromeliads, a favourite area for the beautiful resplendent quetzal. You stay 2 nights at a lodge in the valley.

Day 12 B This is a lovely area for walking and exploring or simply relaxing in the grounds of your lodge. Included is an early morning shared birding tour to see quetzals, trogons and hummingbirds.

Turrialba

Day 13 B To complete the circle you drive north into the Turrialba valley for a taste of typical country life with a lot of active options. You could visit the gardens of the CATIE research centre or take an evening tour of a coffee estate followed by dinner. Stay 2 nights.

Day 14 B We have included either a guided visit to the site of the ancient city of Guayabo, a mountain biking or horse-riding outing in the area, or a rafting trip on excellent class II-IV rapids.

Day 15 B Drive from Turrialba to drop off your hire car at San José airport in time for your flight home.



COSTA RICA AND PANAMA • MID-RANGE HOTELS AND LODGES • CHOOSE PRIVATE TRANSFERS OR SHUTTLE-BUS

Along the Caribbean

The British summer coincides with Costa Rica's 'green season' (p34). The Caribbean side gets the best weather at this time, with some dry sunny weeks. It is the season for turtle nesting too. From there you cross into Panama to visit the lovely Bocas del Toro archipelago and then fly to Panama City.

San José

Day 1 You are met on arrival at San José airport and taken to your chosen hotel.

Turtle beaches and flooded forests

Day 2 BLD This morning you are taken by road and boat to your wildlife lodge at Tortuguero on Costa Rica's Caribbean coast where you stay for 3 nights.

Here there are great opportunities to see sloth, monkeys, basilisk lizards, tree frogs, and waterbirds in the flooded forests behind long wild beaches where turtles nest between July and October.

Day 3 BLD Join a boat tour through narrow river channels into the flooded forest to see green iguanas, kingfishers, white-faced capuchin monkeys, black river turtles and the chance of rarer species such as great green macaw and the extraordinary boat-billed heron.

Day 4 BLD A free day. Options include kayaking, wildlife trips by boat and trips in controlled groups after dark to see turtles nesting.

Talamanca Mountains

Day 5 BLD Returning by boat to the road you are driven down the Caribbean coast to the little town of Bananito and to a lodge in the Talamanca mountains by La Amistad NP for a 2 night stay.

Days 6-7 BLD Two full days at your lodge with activities that could include horse-riding, bird-watching, or a range of walks through primary forest in La Amistad, some at extra cost.

Caribbean Coast

Day 8 BL After a final morning and lunch at the lodge you are driven to Bananito from where you travel to your lodge in Cahuita in tropical gardens a short walk from Playa Negra. Stay for 3 nights.

Day 9 BL Cahuita has its own national park where you walk beside a long horseshoe beach backed by forest with monkeys, sloth, racoons, poison dart frogs, snakes, iguanas and lots of birds.

Day 10 B Free to relax at the pristine local beach or join activities available locally such as snorkelling or swimming in Cahuita NP.



Into Panama: Bocas del Toro

Day 11 B Early this morning you travel across the border into Panama and board a boat to Colon Island in the Bocas del Toro archipelago. Here you spend 4 nights at a waterfront property in Bocas town with its lively travellers bars and small restaurants.

Day 12 B The first of 2 days exploring the archipelago by boat. A short ride brings the boat to Laguna Bocatorito where there is a high chance of dolphin circling and surfacing in its quiet waters. You continue to Coral Key to snorkel sheltered reefs (considered the best in the whole archipelago) with many coloured corals with lots of fish. The boat sails to Red Frog Beach for an afternoon looking for its tiny red citizens or relaxing on its beautiful, wild, white sands. The boat returns to Bocas town late in the afternoon.

Day 13 B This morning your motor boat sails to Playa de las Estrellas where you snorkel to look for the starfish that give this beach its name. Sail on to Boca del Drago to relax on a white sand beach with calm turquoise sea and later to Isla de Pájaros, or 'Bird Island', with spectacular scenery and large numbers of sea birds.

Day 14 B Free in Bocas del Toro. Relax or choose a third boat trip.

Panama City and the Panama Canal

Day 15 B Catch the mid-morning flight for 3 nights in Panama City, with the rest of the day free to explore the capital. (It is possible to fly back to San José instead.)

Day 16 B Today you visit the Panama Canal's Miraflores lock to see huge vessels squeezing through. After a short visit to the lock's museum and visitor centre you explore *Casco Viejo*, Panama City's historic colonial quarter, with your local guide.

Day 17 BL A memorable 'partial transit' of the Panama Canal sailing in a relatively small tourist boat to experience the engineering feats that raise ships of 90,000 tons 85 feet above sea level within a near Garden of Eden of lush rain forests that surround this truly unique achievement.

Day 18 B You are taken to Panama City's international airport in time for your flight home.



CHOOSE MID UPPER OR TOP RANGE HOTELS • PRIVATE TRANSFERS

And Panama Too

A short stopover in Panama to see the Panama Canal, following on from a trip to Costa Rica. Call us for other options.

Panama City

Day 1 At the end of your time in Costa Rica you arrive at San José airport and catch a regional flight to Panama City (1h 25m) instead of flying home. You are met on arrival and transferred to your preferred hotel for 4 nights.

Canal Locks and Panama Viejo

Day 2 B After breakfast your private guide takes you to the Miraflores Lock which lifts and lowers huge ships between sea level on the Pacific side and the Miraflores Lake, 16m higher. Busiest hours for shipping are 9-10am and 2-5pm. A sheltered observation terrace gives a great view of the lock in operation. You visit the Visitor Centre and museum, together showing the history of the canal, its significance to Panama and world trade, its engineering, and the new third lock expansion.

Returning to the city you visit Casco Viejo, its very atmospheric Spanish colonial quarter echoing the colonial streets of Old Havana in Cuba. The rest of your day is free for your own sightseeing, such as the striking Frank Gehry Biomuseo.

Canal Railway and Portobelo

Day 3 BL This morning (Mon-Fri only) you are taken on the original railway between Panama City and the town of Colón at the Caribbean end of the Canal. This fascinating 1-hour journey runs beside much of the Canal, crossing part of the main Gatun Lake on low bridges. Afterwards, you visit the Panama Canal Expansion Observation Centre to see the new locks, one of the largest infrastructure projects of the 21st Century so far.

A little further you visit the sleepy harbour town of Portobelo where Incan gold and silver was loaded on Spanish ships. Ruins of fortresses, castles and military bases are surrounded by the returning forest. A typical Panamanian lunch is served at a local restaurant and you are driven back to your hotel in Panama City.

Sail through part of the Panama Canal

Day 4 BL Today you are picked up for a 'partial transit' by boat through part of the Panama Canal, joining a guided group with commentaries in English and Spanish. A tremendous experience otherwise reserved for sailors and cruise ship passengers.

Day 5 B At an appropriate time you are transferred back to Panama City's international airport for a return flight back to San José then home, or more directly to the UK on an 'open-jaw' ticket.

There are all sorts of good options for travel in Panama (though travel conditions are quite different to easy-going Costa Rica).

For example you could travel by bus from San José to spend time in Bocas del Toro before continuing to Panama City, much as for days 11-18 of 'Along the Caribbean' on this page.

Visit www.geodysey.co.uk/panama for a full range of ideas.

Small Group Holiday

Geodyssey's small group holidays have always been a strong favourite.

Our group sizes are small, our guides have real local knowledge, and our groups always seem to get along very well together.

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 visit our website at www.geodyssey.co.uk/groups.



Costa Rican Nature Odyssey

This enthralling small group tour, escorted by a local naturalist guide, visits all Costa Rica's key habitats for wonderful wildlife experiences, lovely scenery and times when local life takes centre stage.

San José

Day 1 We meet in San José in the early evening at a comfortable mid-range hotel—our base for our first 2 nights. You are met at the airport from any flight arriving today and driven to the hotel.

Poás Volcano & Doka Coffee Estate

Day 2 BL After breakfast we gather in the lobby for a morning drive through lush coffee growing areas and then through cloud forest as the road climbs up the slopes of the mighty Poás Volcano. We walk to the rim to see across the volcano's massive crater with its hot aquamarine lake steaming below us. After some time to explore this strange landscape we continue by road to the prestigious Doka Estate, a long-established family-run coffee estate. Here we tour its well-tended plantations and learn about the complexities of cultivating, harvesting and roasting high quality coffee.

We may not be permitted to approach Poás Volcano if it is in a very active phase. Instead we would visit La Paz Waterfall Gardens where a very scenic garden trail beside a series of waterfalls is accompanied by a hummingbird gallery, walk-in butterfly house and ranarium for close up views of tiny bejewelled frogs.

Tortuguero flooded forest

Day 3 BLD This morning we drive down through the Braulio Carrillo National Park, then through banana plantations to Caño Blanco dock near the Caribbean coast. From here a boat ride (1½h) takes us along the waterways of the flooded forest into Tortuguero National Park. We stay 2 nights at a cabin-style lodge with a swimming pool and well-tended gardens.

Day 4 BLD A full day at Tortuguero where we explore the smaller channels of the flooded forest by boat with the lodge's naturalist guide. The wildlife we see should include three-toed sloths, large iridescent blue morpho butterflies, howler monkeys, white-faced capuchin and spider monkeys, toucans, poison dart frogs and the 'Jesus Christ' or basilisk lizard that skips across the water surface.



Sarapiquí lowland forest

Day 5 BL Leaving Tortuguero we travel by boat (1½h) and road (2h) to Sarapiquí to stay 1 night. The afternoon is free to enjoy our lodge's facilities, relax by the pool or in the gardens, walk or birdwatch.

OTS La Selva

Day 6 BL Today we visit the Organisation For Tropical Studies La Selva Biological Station, one of the world's most important centres for research into tropical rainforests. A resident bilingual naturalist joins us for a guided walk and provides an overview of the centre's 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.

After lunch we drive (2½h) to La Fortuna below Arenal Volcano where we stay for 2 nights at a mid-range lodge with good views of the volcano.

Arenal Volcano

Day 7 B This morning we take a walk along a system of trails on the forest floor and suspended walkways high in the forest canopy. Here we hope to see a variety of birds and possibly a troupe of howler monkeys, as well as beautiful views over the forest canopy and out onto the valley below with Arenal rising up in front of us. The afternoon is free to relax in the grounds of our hotel and try bathing pools fed by springs warmed from deep in the earth.

Tropical dry forest and cowboy culture

Day 8 BLD We drive across the mountains and down to the shores of the Gulf of Nicoya in Guanacaste state. This is Costa Rica's cowboy ranching region where weekend riders sport well-groomed horses, stetsons and frilled jackets and working days are dusty and hard. Here the dry season is so pronounced that woodland trees shed their leaves to minimise water loss. After a suitable lunch we travel south to Carara on the mid-Pacific coast for 2 nights.



FULLY ESCORTED • FIXED DATES • MIN 4 MAX 12 PARTICIPANTS • GRADE: EASY

Wildlife on the Tárcoles river and in the Carara reserve

Day 9 BL We take a boat trip through mangroves along the Rio Tárcoles for a good variety of sea and water birds including boatbilled heron and black-necked stilt, with a good chance of seeing crocodiles (some very large) and alligators.

Back ashore we visit the nearby Carara Reserve, a transitional area between dry forest 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.

A wonderful sight in this area is scarlet macaw returning from their feeding grounds in the hills to roost in the mangroves (particularly reliable between January and March).

The sequence of today's activities could be switched around according to the times of the tides.

Manuel Antonio NP and Dominical

Day 10 BL Today we visit the popular Manuel Antonio National Park for beautiful scenery of coves and rocky headlands leading to Cathedral Point, a 'tombolo' or island connected to the land by a sand spit. Ocean waves break on sparkling white sand beaches backed by rainforest teeming with wildlife including monkeys, coatimundi, racoons, sloths, iguanas, toucans and parrots. The nearest beach is 1km from the entrance and there are hiking trails into the forest.

If the park is not too busy we take our picnic lunch here and continue in the mid afternoon to our new base further down the coast to the quieter less-developed Dominical area where we stay for 2 nights.

Corcovado and the Osa Peninsula

Day 11 BL We set out early this morning for a boat ride to Corcovado National Park on the Osa Peninsula. We would expect to see sea birds, probably whales and dolphins, and perhaps turtles along the way. From our landing we take two guided walks on different trails deep in the rainforest, each of about 2 hours. Just being in such pristine rainforest is a wonderful experience on its own, and we would expect good chances of seeing sloths, spider,



howler, and white-faced monkeys, coatimundis and raccoons, and possibly even tapirs. There is a great variety of birds to find and a huge array of different plants and trees.

A picnic lunch is served near the ranger station at the end of the first walk, and after the second we arrive at the boat again which takes us back to base.

For anyone who doesn't enjoy a boat trip on the sea we can arrange a guided nature walk in Ballenas national park instead—just be sure to let us know in advance.

Los Quetzales NP cloud forest

Day 12 BD Turning inland we drive up into the hills and stop at Los Cusingos Refugio des Aves, a wonderful private reserve and birding hotspot that continues the work of the late naturalist and writer, Dr Alexander Skutch. The road ascends as we continue into paramo highlands, over the mountain pass of the Cerro de la Muerte, and turn down into the very pretty cloudforested valley of San Gerardo de Dota where we stay for 2 nights.

Day 13 BD This is the most reliable part of Costa Rica to see Resplendent Quetzal as their favourite food source, the wild avocado tree, bears fruit here all year round. We take a walk in this lush, cool habitat looking out for quetzals, toucans, trogons and enjoying the rich flora and fauna of the cloud forest, its trees festooned with bromeliads, epiphytic orchids and ferns.

It has been a busy few days so we take an afternoon off to relax at the lodge where there are opportunities for strolling and birding in the grounds.

San José

Day 14 B To spend as much time as possible in this beautiful valley we leave in the late morning to drive back towards the capital. En route we stop at the Lankester botanical gardens, full of bamboos and orchids, and make our way into San José for our final night in Costa Rica downtown in the capital.

Day 15 B This morning we have an informal walking tour in the city centre perhaps stopping at one or two museums or galleries (entrance fees not included). Then in the afternoon you are taken to San José airport in good time for your flight home.



Natural Costa Rica
Tailor-made itineraries specially designed to visit the best places in Costa Rica for wildlife and covering all the important habitats, to experience beautiful natural places, wonderful gardens, and to experience real Costa Rican life.



We are especially grateful to Maurice Windsor for this stunning photo of a puma in the grounds of his lodge on a recent trip with Geodyssey

MID-RANGE HOTELS AND LODGES • CHOOSE PRIVATE TRANSFERS OR SELF-DRIVE

Costa Rica Nature Explorer

A wonderful trip visiting Costa Rica's main locations for wildlife in a wide range of habitats, staying in careful selections of good quality lodges where nature is the focus.

San José

Day 1 You are met on arrival and driven to a comfortable hotel to relax after your international flight.

Flooded Forest of Tortuguero

Day 2 BLD Early this morning travel with others by road and then boat to the wildlife rich flooded forest of Tortuguero on the north Caribbean coast where you stay for 2 nights. Wildlife opportunities are great here with chances to see sloth, monkeys, basilisk lizards, iguanas, tree frogs and birds. Turtles nest on ocean beaches between July and October.

Day 3 BLD Today you join a boat trip through the narrow rivers and channels of the flooded forest while your naturalist guide helps to point out wildlife and birds.

Biodiverse South Pacific Rainforest

Day 4 BLD Catching an early flight from Tortuguero you fly via San José to Golfito deep on the south Pacific coast (p6 and 9). You are met and driven to Esquinas Rainforest Lodge set in the jungle of Piedras Blancas, a national park with very high biodiversity including over 140 tree species per hectare and 2500 other plants. Over 360 species of birds have been recorded. This peaceful, rainforest setting is your base for the next 3 nights (or upgrade to lodge of your choice on the Osa Peninsula).

Day 5-6 BLD Two days at the lodge. Esquinas 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 understory 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.

The lodge also offers 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. Humpback whales visit these waters between mid-July and late



October and in smaller numbers from mid-December to late March. There is a 90% chance of seeing bottlenose dolphins playing and swimming by the boat. The lodge is part of a project combining conservation, research and community development.

Sarapiquí Lowland Forest

Day 7 BD Fly back to San José and travel on to Sarapiquí (p9) for 3 nights at a mid-range lodge. The afternoon is free to settle in and enjoy the hotel grounds before an early evening night walk in search of nocturnal animals such as porcupines, frogs, opossums and kinkajous.

Day 8 BLD Today you spend the day at OTS La Selva Biological Reserve—widely considered one of the world's most important sites for tropical forest research and conservation.

A naturalist guide from the reserve leads you through the forest and explains current projects. There are great birding and wildlife opportunities.

Day 9 BD Free day to relax in your lodge's grounds or take an optional excursion, such as a nature boat trip on the Sarapiquí river.

Remote Nature Retreat

Day 10 BLD Today you travel across the plains for a 3 night stay in the remote lowlands at Boca Tapada in northern Costa Rica (p9).

Day 11 BLD Your 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 locally at quite a modest cost.

Day 12 BLD A free day to relax and enjoy the grounds of your lodge or to take another excursion locally.

Cloud forest

Day 13 BLD Travel this morning to the quiet of the cloud forest (p10) where you stay for 2 nights at Bajos del Toro or Los Angeles.

Day 14 BLD A day to enjoy trails through the extraordinarily rich habitat of the cloud forest. There are great birding opportunities.

Day 15 B After a final dawn in the cloud forest, you return by road to San José airport for your international flight home.



UPPER RANGE HOTELS AND LODGES • PRIVATE TRANSFERS

Creature Comforts

First-rate wildlife and nature experiences in first-rate surroundings. Stay at some of Costa Rica's best boutique hotels and wildlife lodges in wonderful locations—including two in the Osa Peninsula region. Relax, explore and enjoy.

Central Valley

Day 1 You are met on arrival at San José airport and transferred to Finca Rosa Blanca (p30).

Finca Rosa Blanca is a small luxury-priced, eco-award-winning lodge on the cool hills of a coffee estate with wonderful views across the Central Valley.

Poás Volcano and La Paz waterfall

Day 2 BL Your guide collects you this morning for a scenic drive through the Central Valley to Poás Volcano, passing through cloud forest up to the stunted trees and bushes high on the volcano's slopes.

You walk to the rim of the volcano to look across its mighty crater with steam rising from the vivid aquamarine waters of its crater lake.

You then visit the lovely La Paz waterfall garden, walking garden trails to reach the waterfalls. The owners have added several small attractions including a hummingbird gallery busy with birds, a serpentarium, a butterfly garden and a frog house.

You return to Finca Rosa Blanca with some time to relax and enjoy its facilities which include a wellness menu.

Palo Verde wetlands

Day 3 BD There could be time for you to take Finca Rosa Blanca's short coffee tour this morning before you are driven via the Puente La Amistad (which spans the Tempisque River at the crook of the Gulf of Nicoya) to stay for 3 nights at Estancia Rancho Humo, an upmarket ecolodge near the Palo Verde wetlands reserve—internationally recognised RAMSAR seasonal wetlands.

You could arrive at the lodge by boat along the Tempisque River at an extra cost.

Day 4-5 BLD Two full days at Estancia Rancho Humo on a full board basis. The estancia offers a good range of habitats including mangrove, wetlands, tropical dry forest and pastures, which in turn support a large variety of wildlife.

Birding around the estancia is particularly productive, with storks,

herons, ducks, egrets, spoonbill, plovers, sandpipers, rail and many others to be expected.

The ranch offers several excursions at extra cost, including river trips, horse-riding and birding tours into the wetlands.

Osa Peninsula rainforest

Day 6 BD This morning you are collected and driven to the airport at San José for an afternoon flight to Puerto Jiménez on the Osa Peninsula—one of the most biodiverse places on earth.

You are met on arrival and driven to Lapa Rios Ecolodge (p32) where you stay for 4 nights on a full board basis.

A daily selection of tours led by the lodge's resident naturalist guides and shared with other guests is included in your stay. Lapa Rios Ecolodge is situated at the start of a private 1000 acre forest reserve that is a biological corridor into Corcovado NP, 80% of which is undisturbed primary forest. Your afternoon is free to explore the lodge's grounds or choose from its wellness menu.

The lodge is set on a hillside so there are lots of steps.

Days 7-9 BLD Three full days at Lapa Rios. The lodge's options include an adventure hike through virgin rainforest to waterfalls; early morning and sunset birding; an Osa trail rainforest hike; a medicinal plants interpretative walk; and night walks in the jungle.

Though not suitable for swimming, the beautiful local beach below the lodge is a favourite with scarlet macaws who come to feast in the almond trees that line the shingle shore.

Golfo Dulce

Day 10 BLD This morning you return to Puerto Jiménez and travel onwards by boat across the Golfo Dulce (look out for playful dolphins along the way) to the beautiful Playa Catio Lodge (p31), set beside the beach within a 1000 acre private reserve that merges with Piedras Blancas NP.

You stay at Playa Catio for 3 nights on a full-board basis. You could spend the rest of your first day here settling in and exploring its self-guided hiking trails. The lodge has a lovely swimming pool to relax by and a wellness menu to choose from at its Spa.





MID-RANGE HOTELS AND LODGES • CHOOSE ESCORTED AND DRIVEN OR SELFDRIIVE (UNESCORTED)

Plants and Gardens of Costa Rica

What could be nicer than two weeks of delightful gardens? Costa Rica has plenty for you to visit, some created by designers with an eye for landscape, some planted by specialists in tropical nature, some conjured up by the delightfully green-fingered, and some the work of eco-experimenters.

The Central Valley

Day 1 You are met at San José's airport and taken to your hotel in the Central Valley outside the city, with over 10 acres of flower-filled gardens and a swimming pool. You stay here for 3 nights.

Day 2 B A day to relax and enjoy the hotel's gardens planted with a great variety of lilies, heliconias, palms, ornamental trees, bromeliads and orchids. Very popular with butterflies and birds.

Day 3 B Three notable gardens lie within easy drives of your hotel. The popular Else Kientzler Garden has wide array of tropical plants set in large gardens in formal and landscaped styles. The beautiful forest garden reserve of Nectandra shows the natural richness of the cloud forest. Ark Herb Farm, primarily a nursery, boasts one of the largest collections of herbs, flowers and ornamental plants in Central America. You could choose to visit one or two of them, or the spectacular La Paz Waterfall Gardens, or Poás Volcano.

The Orosí Valley

Day 4 BD Leaving the Central Valley you travel to the area below the impressive Turrialba volcano to call at CATIE, a world centre for research for tropical agriculture, especially coffee, with spacious gardens busy with birds (including toucans) butterflies and lizards. You continue to the Orosí valley, a tranquil, pretty place flanked by steep-sided mountains dotted with villages, coffee fincas, tumbling rivers and waterfalls. You stay 2 nights outside the small town of Cachi at a small hotel in verdant gardens.

Day 5 BD Visit Lankester Botanical Gardens, laid out in areas of heliconia, bromeliads, palm, ferns, cacti and dramatic stands of bamboo. Its greenhouses hold 800 orchid species that mostly bloom between February and May.

San Gerardo de Dota

Day 6 BD A moderate drive up and over the mountains brings you into the enchanting valley of San Gerardo de Dota deep in the cloud forest. You stay two nights at a lodge at the valley's end.

Day 7 BD Exploring the cloud forests of Los Quetzales NP you walk beneath branches laden with orchids, bromeliads, ferns and moss. Look for the Resplendent Quetzal that gives the park its name.



UPPER RANGE HOTELS AND LODGES • CHOOSE PRIVATE TRANSFERS OR SELFDRIIVE

A Quieter Costa Rica

An inspiring trip spending time in upmarket lodges in just country life, step out in beautiful mountain scenery and of quiet wetlands.

Chayote Country

Day 1 B On arrival in San José you are driven to an upmarket lodge atop a hill above Llano Bonito, a village typical of Costa Rica's 'Chayote Country' of coffee, farms and rural life. Stay here 3 nights.

Day 2 BL The small town of Naranjo is an epicentre of Costa Rican coffee, ringed by haciendas that produce some of the finest coffee in the world.

Your local guide takes you to a growers' cooperative to see how the best coffee is made at international scale, with an informal tasting session to follow.

After a country style lunch in the town's market and a walk around the stalls with your guide you visit the home of 'Don' Carlos a respected artisanal coffee grower. He and his family welcome occasional visitors to their beautifully landscaped private gardens and for a chat over a cup of their exquisite coffee.

Day 3 BL A second day of rural life, exploring villages in the highlands above the Central Valley with your local guide.

You visit La Palmita, famous for its homemade sweet treats, and continue to Zarcero, a small town around a pretty church beside gardens of extraordinary topiaried arches.

Amid beautiful mountain scenery you visit the villages of Palmira and Pueblo Nuevo and call at a small family-run farm. At Bajos del Toro in the cloud forests you stop for lunch at a local 'soda' cafe.

The gorgeous waterfall of Toro Amarillo (photo p34), one of the most beautiful in Costa Rica, pours into the crater of an extinct volcano. Gardens teeming with hummingbirds lead you to the crater's rim for a stunning view opposite the falls. Allow about 2 hours if you'd like to walk the forest trails to the base with a stiff hike back up.

Rio Celeste

Day 4 B The bejewelled waters of the Rio Celeste (p7) tumble down mountainsides into impossibly blue lagoons and wind through green forests in scenes from a fairy tale. The river flows through the relatively unknown Tenorio NP, a great area for



three areas. Experience authentic explore the rich wildlife

walking in nature with wildlife all around.

After a journey of 3 hours or so you arrive at a lovely upper range lodge set in forest next to the Tenorio reserve: your base for 3 nights. The rest of the day is free to relax and enjoy the lodge or opt for one of the activities available locally at extra cost.

Day 5 B With a local guide you walk on trails that wind through the forest of the reserve, arriving first at a look-out with a picture postcard view of Rio Celeste waterfalls. Further on you reach a timber platform with stunning views over the forest.

As you walk you could see howler monkeys and squirrels, and possibly even tapir, below trees festooned with bromeliads and through areas of elegant palms.

The trail ends at 'Los Teñidores', where the waters of two small rivers bearing different minerals come together to create a celestial blue and the start of Rio Celeste itself. The whole 7km trail takes around 4h and is rocky and steep in parts.

Day 6 B A free day to spend at your lodge, or take an excursion. These may include walking, horse-riding, or biking trips, a safari river float, a 'Finca Verde' cultural tour, guided bird watching, and perhaps a night walk in the forest, all payable locally.

Caño Negro

Day 7 BLD Today you travel to Caño Negro where you spend 3 nights at a nature lodge. Caño Negro Wildlife Refuge includes internationally important wetlands that are home to more than 350 species of birds, as well as emerald basilisk, iguanas, river turtles and caiman. Jaguar are present but highly elusive as ever. The afternoon of your arrival is free.

Day 8 BLD Today you are taken on a nature-viewing trip by boat into the reserve with an experienced local naturalist guide.

Day 9 BLD A free day relax at your lodge or choose from the excursions, such as canoeing, wetlands wildlife. Night walks are usually also on offer. Each is at extra cost paid locally.

Day 10 B This morning travel back to San José in time to check in for your flight home.



MID RANGE HOTELS AND LODGES • CHOOSE PRIVATE TRANSFERS OR SELFDRIIVE

Life in Costa Rica

Experience local life and culture. Get to know the real San José, visit indigenous communities, explore the rainforest, taste chocolate and delve into the heart of rural life in 'Chayote Country'.

San José

Day 1 You are met on arrival at the airport and driven to your chosen hotel in downtown San José where you stay for 2 nights.

Day 2 B Discover some of San José's long-established neighbourhoods through their local stories and special foods. This morning your bilingual guide will share the best anecdotes of the city's history and local everyday life on a walking tour through the neighbourhoods of Amón, Aranjuez, Otoya and Escalante, stopping along the way to try local dishes and snacks, coffee and liqueurs.

Turrialba

Day 3 B Travelling to the farming valley of Turrialba you stay for 3 nights, arriving in time to start exploring.

Day 4 B Today you are taken on a guided walking tour of CATIE, a world centre for the study of tropical plants, fruit trees, coffee and cacao. You visit its plantation and botanical gardens—also popular with toucans, oropendolas, butterflies and lizards.

Day 5 B Free day in Turrialba with time for active options payable locally such as rafting, horse-riding, mountain biking, and zip-lining to country walks—or just relax!

Southern Caribbean

Day 6 B Onwards to the southern Caribbean coast near the border with Panama to stay 4 nights at a lodge in rainforest between Puerto Viejo and Manzanillo a short walk back from Playa Chiquita.

Day 7 BL A wonderful day, visiting the Bribri indigenous community in their Yorkin reserve. You travel by dugout canoe down the Yorkin River, the natural border between Costa Rica and Panama, to their village set in grounds planted with cocoa and banana, where your village guide takes you on a nearby trail learning about the community's way of life before enjoying a Bribri style lunch. We may be able to arrange for you to spend a night at the community's guest house rather than returning to your lodge.

Day 8 B This morning visit a local home in Puerto Viejo where you help to prepare simple but delicious dishes using local produce, perhaps with patacones (fried plantain), or rice and beans, and local fruits. Enjoy the food you helped prepare while the

conversations turn to their culture and traditions.

Day 9 B A day free to relax on a pristine local beach. Local options include a boat tour to see tucuxi dolphin, an animal rescue centre, and a very special Kekoldi indigenous community.

Sarapiquí

Day 10 BD Travel north to the lowland rainforests of Sarapiquí for a 3 night stay. In the evening take a night walk into La Tirimbina reserve to spot nocturnal species.

Day 11 B Visit La Tirimbina on a special chocolate tour that covers the production process and a tasting of the different flavours produced locally.

The rest of the day is free to relax or take local excursions such as a safari river float or a nature walk on rainforest trails.

Day 12 B You visit OTS La Selva, one of the world's most important centres for tropical rainforest research with a 3900 acre reserve of hugely biodiverse forest. Toucans, parrots, trogons, hummingbirds, monkeys, peccaries, agoutis, and coatis are seen frequently.

Chayote Country

Day 13 B Today travel into the mountains to 'Chayote Country' near Naranjo, a region where coffee, agriculture and rural life take centre stage. Stay for 2 nights.

Day 14 BL The small town of Naranjo is ringed by haciendas that produce some of the finest coffee in the world. Your day begins at a growers' cooperative to see how the best coffee is made at international scale, with an informal tasting session. After a country style lunch in the town's market you visit the home of 'Don' Carlos a respected artisanal coffee grower. He and his family welcome occasional visitors to their beautifully landscaped private gardens and for a chat over a cup of their exquisite coffee. Intricately-painted farm carts created in the nearby town of Sarchí are proudly shown off in rural fiestas and whenever this region's rich rural traditions are put on display.

Day 15 B Travel to San José airport for your flight home.



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.

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 a good place to pick up those 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: 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 Thorntail. 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 (Los Quetzales)

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 Hairly 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 **Tapanti 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,

PLANNING YOUR TRIP

We have organised trips for birdwatchers to the neotropics for over 25 years, with many leading neotropical specialists using our unrivalled services.

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* trip opposite has been designed to suit most birdwatchers visiting Costa Rica for the first time for a trip dedicated to birdwatching. This and most of the birdwatching trips we design can be arranged in any of three ways:

- **specialist guided** by an experienced Costa Rican birding guide who also drives you about
- **local driver, self-guided** a driver takes you from site to site, you find and identify your own birds
- **selfdrive, self-guided** you drive yourself from site to site, and find and identify your own birds

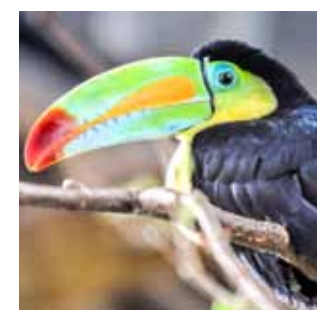
Prong-billed Barbet, Ruddy Treerunner, Streak-breasted Treehunter, Golden-bellied Flycatcher, Dark Pewee, Zeledonia, Golden-browed Chlorophonia, Spangle-cheeked Tanager, Black-faced Solitaire, Sooty-capped Bush-tanager, Black-thighed Grosbeak and Slaty Flowerpiercer. It is also a good location for Grey-breasted 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 has seasonal dry forest and extensive wetland vegetation bordering the **Tempisque River** near its estuary in the Gulf of 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 for Jabiru, Glossy Ibis, Fulvous Whistling-ducks, Bay-winged Hawks and North American waterfowl. Nearby La Enseñada has similar access.

■ South Pacific

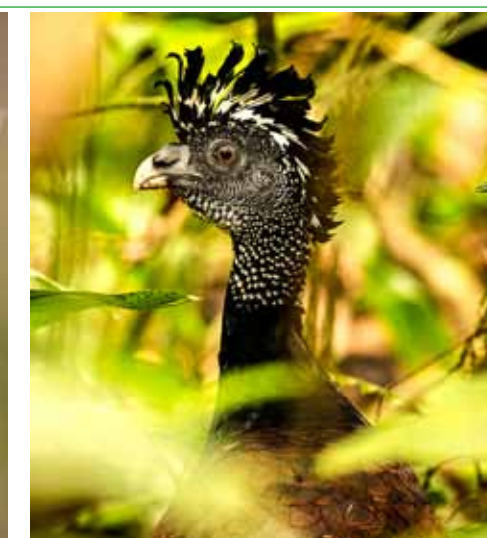
Close to the Panama border this is the region where at mid-high elevations most of the birds with very restricted distributions are found. Good birding locations include **Térraba**, **Las Cruces** and **Las Tablas**. Look for Riverside and Black-bellied Wren, Red-breasted Blackbird, Thick-billed and 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.



GEODYSSEY | COSTA RICA



MID-RANGE HOTELS AND LODGES - CHOOSE SPECIALIST GUIDED, LOCAL DRIVER SELF-GUIDED, OR SELFDRIVE SELF-GUIDED



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 BLD Two full days' birding in the Carara Reserve and Rio Tárcoles area. 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 Antthrush, 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.

Day 4 BLD Another full day's birding in the Carara Reserve and Rio Tárcoles area.

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



GEODYSSEY | COSTA RICA

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 Biological Station

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, Lineated 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



GEODYSSEY | COSTA RICA

Birdwatching in Costa Rica

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



CHOOSE MID OR UPPER RANGE HOTELS AND LODGES • CHOOSE PRIVATE TRANSFERS, SHUTTLE-BUS OR SELFDRIVE

Costa Rican Adventures

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

San José

Day 1 You are met off your chosen international flight and driven to your hotel in the San José area where you stay the night.

Pacuare River white-water rafting

Day 2 **BL** With an early start, you are taken to the Pacuare River to meet your rafting guides for an initial safety training. You then set off on an exhilarating whitewater rafting trip down class II-IV rapids. At the end of the rapids you travel by road to the Arenal volcano area where you stay for 4 nights at a hotel with volcano views.

Canopy walks, SUP and hot-springs

Day 3 **BD** Early today you join a group with a naturalist guide to explore the Hanging Bridges—a system of forest trails and walkways suspended high in the trees with views into the canopy and to the valley below. Wildlife sightings could include a variety of birds, three-toed sloths, troupes of howler monkeys, and much else.

In the afternoon you head to Arenal Lake to try stand-up paddle-boarding or 'SUP'. You stand on a large board similar to a surfboard with a long-handled paddle to move yourself across the lake.

In the evening you relax in natural thermal waters at wonderful open-air hot springs, with dinner included.

Caño Negro wildlife reserve by canoe

Day 4 **BL** An early start to travel to Caño Negro wildlife reserve where you paddle by canoe along narrow waterways through a flooded forest that is very rich in wildlife. The reserve is home to 350 species of birds, basilisk lizards, iguanas, turtles, caimans and much more. A naturalist guide helps you spot the creatures.

Volcano hike

Day 5 **B** This morning you meet up with your guide for a walk in the Arenal reserve, hiking a trail that winds through the forest surrounding the volcano and takes you over recent lava flows and through the area hit by the 1968 eruption. After the hike you are dropped back at your hotel with the rest of the day free to relax or to take extra excursions you can book locally, such as mountain biking or horse-riding to waterfalls.

Cowboy country

Day 6 **B** Today you travel northwest to cowboy country in Rincón de la Vieja, where you stay for 2 nights at an adventure lodge on a working ranch. If you are a competent rider you could even join the real cowboys to help round up cattle and horses to bring them back to the corral.

Day 7 **BL** Early risers can watch the cows being milked on the farm. After breakfast you start the day with a zip-line tour through the canopy tree tops before horse riding through the forest followed by a river-tubing adventure.

You end an action-packed day by relaxing in hot springs and experiencing an open-air bath in a pool of mineral rich volcanic mud (much better than it sounds!)

Monteverde

Day 8 **B** Today travel to the mountains of Monteverde for 2 nights at a characterful lodge in the cloud forest.

Your afternoon is free to sample the panoply of eco-experiences available in and around Santa Elena, such as hummingbird galleries, butterfly farms and orchid gardens.

Canopy adventures

Day 9 **B** Today you explore the cloud forest from the tree-tops starting with a gondola-tram ride up through the forest canopy where you may spot birds, monkeys and sloths.

You then start an adrenaline trip around an awesome circuit of zip lines that whiz through the trees—some very long and very high.

The afternoon is free to relax at your hotel or for extra excursions available locally before a walk in the cloud forest after dark in search of nocturnal creatures.

Pacific beach

Day 10 **B** Travel to the beach of your choice for a 4 night stay. We suggest Santa Teresa for its off-beat very hip style. There's an attractive wide, white-sand beach that's a favourite with surfers, plus casual beach cafes and bars, and low-key restaurants. You should arrive by the mid-afternoon.

Days 11-13 **B** Three free days to relax on the beach. You might book yourself a surfing lesson with an English-speaking instructor who can help you start from scratch, or hone your technique.

Other activities may be arranged locally at extra cost.

San José

Day 14 **B** Return by road, crossing the Gulf of Nicoya by ferry, to San José where you stay the night.

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



MID AND UPPER RANGE HOTELS AND LODGES • CHOOSE PRIVATE TRANSFERS OR SELFDRIVE

Young Explorers Costa Rica

A wonderful opportunity for inquisitive young explorers to get their first experiences of the natural worlds of the American tropics, getting into the rainforest and seeing its wildlife right up close, with all sorts of active adventures along the way and not too much time spent in a vehicle.

San José

Day 1 On arrival in San José you are met and taken to a comfortable hotel with a pool and lovely extensive gardens filled with flowering plants where you stay for the next 3 nights.

Day 2 **B** Today is free to relax after the long flight and enjoy the gardens and facilities at your hotel.

La Paz Waterfall Gardens

Day 3 **BL** Today you visit La Paz Waterfall Gardens, a nature park with a series of gorgeous waterfalls and with some very good extra attractions with a nature focus. There's a large butterfly house, a hummingbird gallery which attracts 26 different species, and a ranarium where you can see the colourful leaf-frogs and poison dart frogs up close as they roam about their special landscaped enclosure. There is also a chance to see monkeys, snakes and rescued big cats. A great introduction to Costa Rica's nature.

Flooded forest of Tortuguero

Day 4 **BLD** Early this morning you catch a short flight to the flooded forest of Tortuguero. On arrival you travel by boat to your lodge by the national park where you stay for 2 nights. After lunch you join a visit to Tortuguero village where your guide explains the area's history and habitats.

The local beach is favoured by nesting turtles between July and October when you can join carefully managed night walks to see them.

Day 5 **BLD** Today you join a boat tour through the narrow rivers and channels of the flooded forest to see some great wildlife. Here you could see three-toed sloth sunning themselves in the morning sun, basilisk lizards getting ready to skip over the water surface, tree frogs hiding under leaves, kingfishers darting along the river edge, monkeys bustling about in the trees and black river turtles lined up on a dry log ready to plop back into the water as you pass.

Sarapiquí rainforest

Day 6 **BL** This morning you travel by boat through the waterways to a dock, where you travel onwards by road to the lowland rainforests of Sarapiquí where you stay 3 nights at a lodge set in a private biological reserve with 9km of jungle trails and one of the longest suspension bridges in the country. The rest of your afternoon is free to explore the forest in the lodge's grounds.

La Selva Biological Station

Day 7 **B** This morning you visit the Organisation for Tropical Studies' inspiring La Selva reserve for a tour with a resident naturalist guide. OTS La Selva is one of the world's most important centres for research into tropical rainforests. Its reserve holds 3900 acres of old growth and undisturbed tropical wet forests with enormous species diversity: more than 1900 plant species, 330 tree species, and 436 species of birds. You should see toucans, parrots, trogons, hummingbirds, monkeys, peccaries, agoutis, and coatis.

It is common to see biologists and conservationists hard at work in the field or in the lab and your guide will be happy to try to answer questions about their research projects. After an inspiring, informative tour you have the rest of the day free.

Chocolate tour and rainforest night walk

Day 8 **BD** Morning free to enjoy your lodge grounds before an early afternoon chocolate tour to learn about producing chocolate—growing, harvesting, fermenting, drying, milling, and tasting! In the evening you are taken on a guided night walk into La Tirimbina reserve in search of nocturnal creatures such as porcupines, frogs, possums, kinkajous and tarantulas.

Arenal volcano and hot springs

Day 9 **BD** Travelling onwards to Arenal you stay for 2 nights at a lodge with a great view of the volcano.

In the late afternoon you visit the hot springs to relax in the warmth of the thermal waters, with the rumblings of the volcano in the distance.

Hanging Bridges

Day 10 **B** With a local naturalist guide you visit the Hanging Bridges—a system of trails and suspended walkways through the forest where you could see sloths, possibly a troupe of howler monkeys, and lots of birds, as well as enjoying some beautiful views over the forest canopy and out across the valley below. Afternoon free to relax by the hotel pool.

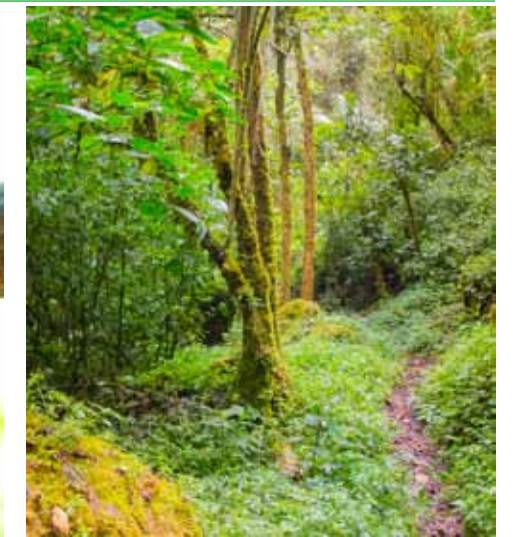
Manuel Antonio National Park

Day 11 **B** Today travel down to Manuel Antonio on the mid-Pacific coast where you stay for 4 nights at a family-friendly hotel set on the cliff top with a free shuttle service down to the beach.

Day 12 **B** Join a guided walk into Manuel Antonio NP (closed Mondays) with some of the most beautiful scenery in Costa Rica and a forest teeming with wildlife. Afternoon free.

Days 13-14 **B** Free at Manuel Antonio.

Day 15 **B** Travel to San José airport (about 3h) for your flight home.



MID RANGE HOTELS & LODGES • CHOOSE PVT TRANSFERS OR SELFDRIVE

Day Walks in Costa Rica

Guided and independent day walks in natural sceneries with comfortable lodgings. The amount of walking is tailored to suit you.

San José

Day 1 You are met on arrival and taken to your hotel in San José.

Southern highlands

Day 2 **BD** This morning travel south into the highlands to the cloud forests of the San Gerardo de Dota valley to stay the night.

Day 3 **BLD** You walk with a guide descending, sometimes steeply, through pristine cloud forest into the beautiful Copey de Dota valley (14km/6h), for 2 nights at a family-run mid-range lodge.

Day 4 **BD** A day of country walks on quiet village lanes in this picturesque fruit-filled valley.

Dominical

Day 5 **B** By road to Dominical beside the Pacific, for 2 nights at a hacienda close to the ocean with a wildlife reserve extending from beach, wetlands and lowland forest up to primary forest on a high ridge. The hacienda has 7km of trails, 3km of beach and an orchid and butterfly garden.

Day 6 **B** A morning's guided hike through primary and secondary forest. Afternoon free to explore the hacienda's self-guided trails.

Gulf of Nicoya

Days 7-8 **BD** Travel up the Pacific coast to the Gulf of Nicoya. Stay 2 nights at a working ranch with extensive nature trails in dry forest and ranchlands, and views over the Gulf.

Montezuma

Days 9-12 **BD** By road and ferry to the laid-back village of Montezuma. Beyond rocky coves lie long beaches backed by forest, perfect for long walks. Stay 4 nights at a beach front lodge outside the village.

Arenal

Day 13 **B** Inland to Arenal for 2 nights at a hotel with volcano views.

Day 14 **B** This morning you join a shared guided walk of about 5km over a mixed terrain from open plains to lakeshore, lava and mountain trails, with some areas very good for wildlife and birds.

Day 15 **B** Travel to San José and depart Costa Rica.



Active Costa Rica

Action packed holiday ideas for thrill seeking couples, adventurous families, day walkers who like comfortable lodgings, serious hikers, and multi-active all-rounders. Each can be adapted to suit you best.

Where to stay in Costa Rica

Lodges for touring



Grano de Oro UPPER RANGE
San José 5

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 features tastefully decorated rooms in seven 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 Higueurón trees. The hotel offers a tour of its own coffee estate. The hotel's lovely honeymoon suite is on two levels with panoramic views.



Xandari Costa Rica UPPER RANGE
Alajuela, Central Valley 4

Xandari was created by architect Sherril Broudy and artist Charlene Broudy to reflect the natural beauty of Costa Rica. The property features 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 three swimming pools, a heated outdoor Jacuzzi and a dining terrace 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 Xandari's lovely spa.



Hotel Bougainvillea MID-RANGE
Heredia, Central Valley 4

Here you'll easily forget that you're just 15 minutes 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 wifi. 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.



Chayote Lodge UPPER RANGE
Llano Bonito, Central Valley

Set in the small mountain village of Llano Bonito, a 50 minute drive from San José's international airport, Chayote offers guests the opportunity to experience real life and local culture in Costa Rica's central valley. Each of the spacious 'recibidor' suites are decorated with artwork and wooden furniture made by local artisans from local products, as well as featuring private suspended balconies offering stunning views out over the central valley. The lodge's restaurant and bar serves fresh, locally-grown, seasonal produce including ingredients such as palmito cheese, coffee and squash. The lodge operates a number of different tours showcasing the surrounding area and local way of life.



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 comprises secluded and well-appointed casita rooms all featuring a cosy seating area and fireplace. There are a variety of nature trails onsite and tours and hikes with resident naturalist guides can be arranged at the hotel (at an additional cost). 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
Bajos del Toro 5

One of the few up-market hotels in Costa Rica that are in a cloud forest setting. It comprises 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 using locally-sourced in-season produce 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.



Rio Perdido UPPER RANGE
Miravalles Volcano

A modern, stylish, upmarket lodge set in a 600 acre private reserve nestled in a remote part of Guanacaste's tropical dry/dwarf forest- a region characterised by dramatic gorges, tumbling waterfalls, wild rivers and thermal hot-springs. This lodge is a perfect base for those looking to combine adventure and relaxation. Each of the Rio Perdido's stand-alone bungalows are well equipped and tastefully decorated. Guests are transferred around the property by electric golf-carts and can enjoy a number of facilities including a swimming pool, a restaurant and bar area with views out over the forest canopy, and a spa. There are a variety of activities available to keep guests busy including on-site hiking trails in the reserve, a thermal canyon with hot river pools, mountain biking, tubing, and a canopy zip line.

We travel extensively in Costa Rica throughout the 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.



Arenal Observatory Lodge MID-RANGE
Alajuela, Central Valley 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 volcano. 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 'barefoot' luxury in a natural setting. It is an upscale retreat nestled 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 UPPER-RANGE
Monteverde 5

This Austrian chalet-style lodge perched high on a hill top is a fairly typical example of the many family run, wood built lodges found in Monteverde. From its mountinside position guests can enjoy views down to the far distant Gulf of Nicoya with breath-taking orange-red sunsets on clear nights. Accommodation is in wood panelled guest rooms, or more recently renovated suite-style rooms featuring jacuzzi-baths and large balconies with stunning cloud forest views. The hotel restaurant serves nutritional meals using locally grown produce including cheese, yoghurt, milk, coffee, fruits, and vegetables. This particular lodge has especially high ratings for sustainable tourism.



Hacienda Guachipelin MID-RANGE
Rincón de la Vieja 3

An adventure lodge on a working ranch dating back over a hundred years, at the foot of Rincón de la Vieja volcano in an area of tropical dry forest. The ranch continues to raise cattle and breed horses on a third of its land, with the remainder set aside for conservation and replanting. The guest experience is kept simple, with down-to-earth but comfortable cabins, and a country-style bar 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. 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 ecolodge committed to sustainability completely surrounded by nature in its pure state. Suites are secluded, spacious and beautifully decorated. 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 here 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 zip line! There is also a riverside spa.



Playa Cativo TOP RANGE
Golfo Dulce

A small waterfront lodge set amongst 1,000 acres of private rainforest reserve surrounded by the Piedras Blancas National Park on the Golfo Dulce. As there are no roads, the lodge is accessed by boat from Golfito or Puerto Jiménez. The property is constructed from reclaimed hardwood and decorated with locally crafted artisanal tiles and artwork. Rooms are either in the main building or in stand-alone cabins and feature views onto the tropical gardens or stunning ocean views. Lodge facilities include a gourmet restaurant, a bar and a freshwater chemical-free swimming pool. There are a variety of self-guided tours on-site around the grounds as well as complimentary use of snorkelling equipment, kayaks and stand-up paddle boards. Other tours are available at an additional cost.

Worth a mention

Makanda by the Sea Quepos TOP RANGE

Perfect for honeymooners or a romantic break. Rooms are tastefully decorated and feature spectacular views of Manuel Antonio NP and the open ocean. We recommend this hotel for privacy and a personal touch. No children.

Cristal Ballena Dominical 5 UPPER RANGE

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

Suizo Loco Lodge Cahuita MID-RANGE

Located 3km outside of Cahuita and a 20 minute walk from Playa Negra. Set in landscaped gardens with swimming pool and restaurant specialising in seafood.

Aguas Claras Puerto Viejo UPPER RANGE

Upmarket property, 4 minute walk from the beach. Rooms are uniquely decorated with local artwork set in stand-alone *casas* in a tropical landscaped garden.

Rio Celeste Hideaway Tenorio Volcano NP 4 UPPER RANGE

Comfortable small hotel set within the rainforests of Tenorio NP comprising private bungalows *casitas*, pool and restaurant. Excursions available locally including rafting, kayaking, birdwatching, nature tours, hiking.

Senda Monteverde Monteverde TOP RANGE

24 contemporary hillside bungalows each with own living area and deck, some with sunset views to the distant Pacific. Relaxed, lively, wholesome, comfortable.

Silencio del Campo Arenal MID-RANGE

Small resort-style hotel 5km from La Fortuna with spacious stand-alone villa-style rooms, each with views of the volcano. Two swimming pools, spa, and on-site bathing pools fed by hot springs. The restaurant specialises in traditional dishes.

Where to stay in Costa Rica

Wildlife lodges



Bosque de Paz Lodge MID-RANGE

Bajos del Toro 3
This small family run lodge was a pioneer in tourism for conservation in Costa Rica. It is set in a vast private cloud forest reserve and five 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, with bedrooms that are comfortable but quite simple and cooking that is homely. Meals are served at fixed times.



Mawamba Lodge MID-RANGE

Tortuguero
Set in 15 acres of tropical gardens in walking distance of Tortuguero village, this lodge's 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 an afternoon boat trip through the canals to see the abundant wildlife. We like Mawamba's moderate size and good location, though like most lodges here it can be busy.



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 (p10). Designed and built by a US naturalist with over 35 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 individual bungalows offer 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 from Sierpe or Drake Bay. The boat ride from Sierpe is an adventure in its own right first through mangroves, then on the open sea. In either case you arrive at the beach in front of the lodge for a wet landing.



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 ecolodge which has won many awards for its sustainable practice and is a legend in Costa Rica. The lodge is built in harmony with the surrounding forest and beach environment. The main building and bungalows line three ridges connected by walking paths and lots of steps. Built with local materials on a hillside over 350ft above the sea, Lapa Rios catches the cooling tropical breezes. A great eco-luxury option and ideal for honeymooners.



Maquenque Ecolodge MID-RANGE

Boca Tapada, San Carlos 4
A wonderful family-run ecolodge 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 comfortable bungalows sleep up to 4 and have private bathrooms with solar hot water, fan, and deck. Three special treehouse rooms are set high in the forest beyond the edge of the main area. The hotel also features a restaurant, bar and swimming pool.



Hacienda Barú MID-RANGE

Dominical
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.



Macaw Lodge MID-RANGE

Carara 3
A family owned ecolodge set within a 264 acre private forest reserve and tropical botanical garden. The lodge is located in a transitional zone between dry and wet forests, in a wonderfully remote location nestled amongst the hills and lush forests of Cerro de Turubares, around a 45 minute drive from the Carara region on the central Pacific coast. Over 300 species of migratory and resident bird species can be seen here. The lodge is a model of sustainability and self-sufficiency producing 100% of its own energy. Rooms and cabins are clean and simple. The lodge's restaurant serves delicious home-cooked organic food under the 'farm to table' concept using fresh local produce, much of which is grown on-site, and the open-air dining room has lovely views out over the grounds.



Rancho Humo UPPER RANGE

Palo Verde
A boutique eco lodge set in a 1,100 hectare traditional estate ranch on the banks of the Tempisque River bordering the Palo Verde National Park. The ranch's extensive grounds protect a range of habitats: mangrove, wetlands, dry tropical rainforest and pastures, offering impressive birding and nature viewing opportunities. The hotel has modern and well equipped rooms and suites with some featuring terraces with views of the wetland plains. There is a small outdoor swimming pool and restaurant with an outdoor dining area. Activities available at extra cost include a visit to the Palo Verde Biological Station, a cattle ranch farm experience, horse-riding, birding and off-site tours to visit Barra Honda caves or Monte Alto nature reserve.

Worth a mention

Danta Corcovado Osa Peninsula 2 MID-RANGE

A family-run lodge set on a 35 hectare farm with a focus on sustainability and supporting the local community. Accommodation is either standard rooms or more isolated bungalows, each with alfresco private bathrooms. Not for the bug phobic.

Selva Verde Sarapiquí 2 MID-RANGE

This lodge is a haven for birdwatchers and nature enthusiasts. Built on stilts over the Sarapiquí River, with 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. Rooms are set 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.

Savegre Lodge San Gerardo de Dota 5 MID-RANGE

Owned by the Chacon family since 1954, this is a superb family-run hotel with 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 3 MID-RANGE

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

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.

Rancho Naturalista nr Turrialba MID-RANGE

Small, 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.

Where to stay in Costa Rica

Beaches



Sugar Beach MID/UPPER RANGE

Playa Pan de Azúcar, Nicoya 4
This away-from-it-all hotel is on Playa Pan de Azúcar, 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 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 5
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 and open-air restaurant. Within the gardens you can spot different birds, monkeys and iguanas. Accommodation ranges from superior rooms to standalone bungalows and ocean view bungalows. All rooms have air-conditioning and ceiling fans. 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 5
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 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, grown locally on the hotel's farm, and there is a yoga studio and spa. The atmosphere is very laid back and exemplifies the Costa Rican art of chillingax. A super hotel for couples and families and any surfer dude!



Punta Islita TOP RANGE

Punta Islita, Nicoya 5
On a remote verdant hillside with magnificent views over the Pacific, Punta Islita is one of two 'Autograph Collection' Marriott hotels in Costa Rica. It has a long-standing reputation as one of the most upscale hotels in the country and a strong sustainability ethos. 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 MID/UPPER RANGE

Montezuma, Nicoya
Something special but quirky. A 10 minute 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 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 but much less individualistic in style. Rates include dinner from a simple set menu with no red meat.



Tango Mar UPPER RANGE

Tambor, Nicoya 5
Set in extensive grounds on Nicoya's southern shore, Tango Mar has an enviable oceanfront setting. There is a range of different accommodation available including beach front rooms, suites modelled on Polynesian-style wooden cabañas just 20m from the beach, and individual villas 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 is breathtaking, overlooking the palm-fringed coast and out to sea. The hotel features 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
Bosque del Mar is a family-run beach front boutique hotel located at the quieter end of Playa Hermosa, about a 30 minute drive from Liberia airport. There are spacious and well-appointed suites, some with ocean views and others with tropical garden views. On-site facilities include a lounge bar, a beach front restaurant, outdoor swimming pool and Jacuzzi and spa. A variety of tours can be booked locally from the lodge (at an additional cost) including zip lining, rafting, horse riding, snorkelling and visits to Palo Verde and Rincón de la Vieja National Park.



Arenas del Mar TOP RANGE

Manuel Antonio, Central Pacific 5
This luxury hotel is set in 11 acres of private nature reserve and is one of the few properties in Manuel Antonio with easy access to both Playitas Beach and Playa Espadillas. All rooms are opulently decorated and extremely comfortable. Most have stunning ocean views, especially the suites which feature a living area and Jacuzzi on the balcony. There are 2 swimming pools, a beach bar, spa and 2 restaurants- one with great views of Manuel Antonio National Park and another set directly on the sand by the ocean. When built it was the first 100% sustainable development project in Costa Rica, utilising all the guidelines of the Certification for Sustainable Tourism. In places the ground is very steep, so golf buggies are used to get around the property.

Worth a mention

Alma del Pacífico Esterillos Este TOP RANGE

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

Cala Luna Tamarindo 5 UPPER RANGE

Beautiful boutique hotel 10min from Tamarindo's busy beach front, 2min from a quieter beach. Lovely pool, alfresco dining. Rooms inc villas with private pools.

Olas Verdes Nosara, Nicoya 3 UPPER RANGE

Small boutique hotel set in forested grounds just back from Nosara's stunning, wild Playa Guiones - one of Costa Rica's finest surf beaches with world class surf breaks. Great option for families, younger couples and those keen to surf.

Playa Espadilla Manuel Antonio, Central Pacific 2 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.

Shawandha Lodge Puerto Viejo, Caribbean coast MID-RANGE

Set in 5 acres of secondary forest and 200m away from Playa Chiquita beach. Lodge comprises spacious bungalows, swimming pool, and restaurant serving French/Costa Rican cuisine. Excursions exploring the surrounding region can be booked locally.



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