

DESTINATION REPORT

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YOUR TRAVEL SNAPSHOT: Destinations included in this guide

Costa Rica

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INTRODUCTION

Costa Rica's diverse natural landscape, coupled with an abundance of outdoor activities and a focus on environmental sustainability and preservation, make it no surprise that the country has been rated as one of the happiest places on Earth.

Visitors can fly through the rain-forest canopy on a zipline, go white-water rafting, climb a volcano, relax on a white-sand beach, check out colorful marine life while snorkeling, or try to hook a big one on a deep-sea fishing excursion. That's why so many people choose to go there: In the past decade, the number of visitors has more than quintupled, and tourism has become the leading sector of the nation's economy.

Costa Rica is practically synonymous with ecotourism—travel that incorporates education about the environment and promotes preservation of natural resources. The country has a large number of national parks and nature preserves that boast a rich array of birds, mammals, reptiles and rain-forest plants. The variety of birds, in particular, is astounding: Some 850 species are packed into a relatively small area.

The country also excels in adventure sports, including surfing, mountain biking, river rafting, hiking and scuba diving. Those who prefer a less strenuous vacation can view several active volcanoes, take boat trips down jungle rivers and float through the treetops in a rain-forest aerial tram or speed through the forest canopy on any of several dozen thrilling zipline systems.

GEOGRAPHY

A small country—just 75 mi/120 km separates the Pacific Ocean from the Caribbean Sea at the narrowest spot—Costa Rica still has some of the most diverse scenery in the world. Its coasts have both sandy beaches and marshy swamps, and its interior is dotted with volcanoes and rugged mountain chains, dense rain forests and abundant, unusual flora.

Its geographic diversity and elevation, ranging from sea level to more than 13,000 ft/4,030 m atop Cerro Chirripo, have blessed the nation with 12 distinct life zones. The most secluded area in Costa Rica is the Oso Peninsula in the southern part of Puntarenas Province. It is true jungle rain forest, and it has one of the most diverse ecocultures in the world. It is difficult to traverse, and tourists have to receive permission before they are flown in to visit the area.

Approximately 25% of the country's land has been set aside in protected areas, earning Costa Rica a reputation as an environmentally sensitive country and leader in ecological conservation. However, nonprotected areas have not fared so well: During the past few decades, Costa Rica has had one of the highest rates of deforestation in the world. The country is now coming to terms with the large resorts being built to serve the growing numbers of travelers and a condominium construction boom that has been spawned in its wake.

HISTORY

Columbus first saw this portion of Central America in 1502 during his last trip to the New World. But Spanish settlement did not begin until the mid-1500s because early expeditions were beset by disease and resistance from the indigenous people. The Spanish did find some gold in the area—inspiring the name Costa Rica (Rich Coast)—but not the large reserves they sought.

Colonization proceeded slowly along the east coast until the Spanish finally moved to the cooler, fertile valleys and mesas of the interior, known as the Central Valley. The predominantly mountainous terrain kept the plantation system, with its attendant slavery, from developing in Costa Rica (an exception was the far northwest plains). Instead, the colonists gathered near the indigenous communities and built small-scale subsistence farms. Towns grew slowly and evolved intense rivalries for political dominance.

Such independence and self-reliance are thought to be the reasons democracy came more naturally to Costa Rica than to its neighbors when the country gained its independence in the early 1820s. Brief civil wars erupted among

the major cities in which the more liberal forces of San Jose emerged victorious, moving the country toward fair, democratic elections in the late 1800s and establishing San Jose as the undisputed capital.

In the 1940s the country became politically polarized, and civil war broke out once again. After a brief struggle, socialist insurrectionist Jose Maria "Don Pepe" Figueres emerged as the country's leader. He continued to be a central figure in Costa Rican politics through the 1970s, overseeing reforms that helped keep the country peaceful and prosperous in a region known for its armed conflicts and wretched poverty.

Costa Rica abolished its military in 1948 and invested in education and public-health facilities, actions that helped prevent a flood of rural poor into the major cities. These measures have prompted many to view Costa Rica as a model Latin American country, although it has had its share of economic problems that accelerated in the 1980s and continue today. Costa Rica has cut back on its extensive social programs to deal with a large national deficit, massive internal debt and a massive influx of Nicaraguan refugees and unemployed. Costa Rica has, in illegal Nicaraguan neighbors who are seeking the "Costa Rican dream," a problem similar to that of the U.S. with illegal aliens seeking the American dream.

The tourism boom that began in the 1980s has brought rapid development to much of the country. Nonetheless, Costa Rica's democratic system has been challenged by corruption and cronyism—several past presidents have been indicted. In 2006, former President Oscar Arias (winner of the 1987 Nobel Peace Prize) was re-elected president after successfully lobbying for a constitutional change permitting presidents to serve more than one term. In 2010, Costa Rica elected its first female president, Laura Chinchilla.

SNAPSHOT

The main attractions of Costa Rica are amazingly diverse natural beauty, wildlife, bird-watching, black- and white-sand beaches, deep-sea and river fishing, scuba diving, snorkeling, casinos, surfing, white-water rafting, volcanoes, horseback riding, good restaurants, world-class resorts and spas, and its friendly, well-educated people (often known simply as Ticos).

Those who enjoy exotic plants and animals and those who participate in outdoor activities will get the most out of Costa Rica. To observe the country's varied forests, visitors need to be moderately fit and comfortable with the claustrophobic, often damp jungle environment, or with the hot, dry conditions of the forests in the province of Guanacaste to as far south as northern Nicoya Peninsula.

POTPOURRI

You're likely to notice that plastic-surgery and medical vacations are advertised heavily as a tourism option in Costa Rica. If people you know return from a trip to Costa Rica looking younger, healthier and particularly refreshed, it may be that they went under the knife.

Costa Rica has a rich mix of races and ethnicities. Two of the nation's heroes are NASA astronaut Franklin Chang, a Costa Rican of Chinese ancestry, and Olympic swimmer Claudia Poll, whose parents emigrated from Germany. Poll won the first gold medal in the country's history at the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta.

Ticos take a little bit of nature into their homes with pets (a lot of birds) and flowers and plants. Even the simplest home will have pots of flowers and plants in the yard.

In the 1850s, Costa Rica was invaded by an army led by American William Walker, who had earlier taken over Nicaragua and hoped to rule all of Central America. A hastily convened and poorly equipped Costa Rican army defeated Walker's forces, spoiling his plans of empire and leading to his eventual demise.

Hotel Capitan Suizo in Tamarindo has a program to rescue orphaned howler monkeys, nurse them back to health and protect them from predators in special open-topped cages at night. Two troupes of howlers visit the hotel regularly, and during those visits, the orphans play with the other babies from the troupe and then retire to their cages when the others leave. Once the orphans regain their strength, they should be adopted by one of the groups.

Costa Rica was the first country in Central America to grow coffee (in 1808) and bananas (in the 1870s). Coffee is often referred to in Costa Rica as *grano de oro*, or grain of gold.

The most mysterious relics of pre-Columbian culture are the perfectly round stone spheres—up to 6 ft/2 m in diameter—that are scattered throughout southern Costa Rica in the Diquis Delta archaeological zone. Archaeologists can explain almost nothing about them. The spheres are under consideration as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

The seed from a guanacaste tree is unusually large, round and hard and has a glossy sheen. Costa Ricans believe that to give someone one of these seeds brings good luck to the recipient of the gift. The recipient in turn gives the seed to another person to bring good luck to that person.

LOCATION

Costa Rica has two cruise terminals. On the Caribbean side, ships dock at Puerto Limon. The Puerto Limon terminal has its own crafts market with more than 100 artists, phones, a pharmacy and salons offering manicures, pedicures and massages when a cruise ship is in port. Taxis are available both inside and outside the terminal gates. Only one block from the town's main square, the Limon port is well-located for exploring on foot. A selection of shops, restaurants and Internet cafes is within a 10-minute walk of the port.

On the Pacific, ships dock at the cruise-ship pier in Puntarenas City. A tourist information center and an air-conditioned waiting room offering international call service, a bank and a snack shop are located directly in front of the dock. Cruise visitors are greeted by tour companies promoting trips to popular destinations and a wall of vendors selling arts and crafts along the boardwalk. The town is small enough to explore on foot. A walking map is available at the tourist information center. Outdoor restaurants and cafes are just steps from the dock, many of which line the boardwalk, known as the Paseo de los Turistas.

About one quarter of arriving ships dock at the container port of Puerto Caldera, 8 mi/13 km south of Puntarenas City. This dock is primarily used when a transfer is involved. Principally a container-ship terminal, Caldera has few facilities for cruise passengers. A tourist information center offering international phone service is open when a ship is in port. Taxis are available.

SHORE EXCURSIONS

Cruise-ship passengers can choose from two dozen or so exciting shore excursions. On the Caribbean, the most popular offerings include nature excursions along the canals leading to Tortuguero National Park (cruise-ship time limitations prevent full tours of this very isolated national park); tours of the Costa Flores horticultural farm; a ride on the Rain Forest Aerial Tram; trips to the Caribbean surfer capital of Puerto Viejo or the heavily Caribbean-influenced Cahuita; a visit to the Veragua Rainforest Research and Adventure Park; and white-water rafting on the Reventazon River.

Passengers arriving at Puntarenas City or Puerto Caldera are typically offered day trips to San Jose, and to Poas Volcano and Sarchi (the center for crafts); a catamaran excursion to Isla Tortuga; a ride on the Pacific Aerial Tram; a trip to Jaco to enjoy its surfer culture; and a hike in Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve or Manuel Antonio National Park.

SIGHTSEEING

Costa Rica is one of the most biologically diverse areas in the world. It's tucked into a small geographic area, and visitors have huge opportunities to experience nature in its many forms. With flights available throughout the country as well as fast and efficient shuttle services, it's possible to visit Tortuguero National Park on the Caribbean one day and Corcovado National Park in the Osa Peninsula the next. Other spectacular parks, wildlife refuges and biological reserves in Costa Rica include Manuel Antonio National Park, Monteverde Cloud Forest Biological Reserve and the Gandoca-Manzanillo Wildlife Refuge.

Costa Rica is also home to a variety of historical sites. Many of these can be visited in one day from San Jose, including a historic tour of Cartago, former capital of Costa Rica and home to one of the country's most important religious sites; Orosi, where you can visit the 18th-century Iglesia San Jose de Orosi and its adjacent museum; and Turrialba, whose foothills shelter one of the country's most important archaeological sites, Guayabo. Be sure to also make a stop at the Lankester Botanical Garden, as well.

An English-language guide to the museums of Costa Rica is available at tourist information centers.

BEACHES

Although Costa Rica is not primarily a beach destination, this dynamic bit of geography has stretches of beach on a par with the Mexican Yucatan or any island in the Caribbean. You'll find laid-back beaches for diving, snorkeling and fishing; others backed by rain forest (or tropical dry forest) where monkeys go down to the shore; and well-developed areas complete with large resort-style hotel complexes.

With 735 mi/1,180 km of coastline on two oceans, Costa Rica has no shortage of beaches. Some of them are practically deserted, but even these relatively uninhabited shores usually have at least one hotel nearby. More than a dozen beaches have been developed to the point where they offer a range of hotels, shops and restaurants, and even casinos and nightclubs. Many of the country's beaches have dangerous riptides, so visitors should always inquire when and where it's safe to swim.

The shorter Caribbean coast has some of the finest beaches in the country, predominantly with black volcanic sand and a tropical island flavor; many are favored by marine turtles for nesting. Cahuita National Park has a lovely, palm-lined beach. The offshore coral reef provides protection from the rough surf, allowing swimming, scuba diving and excellent snorkeling. In addition to a variety of coral species, tropical fish and rays, the waters are also home to nurse sharks, which you may be lucky enough to spot. Puerto Viejo de Talamanca, just south of Cahuita (not to be confused with Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí that lies inland), has a black-sand beach and is renowned for its surfing and laid-back attitude.

Many of the country's prettiest and most popular beaches are found in the northwest province of Guanacaste and the Nicoya Peninsula on the Pacific coast. Locals head there to relax, surrounded by a gorgeous landscape and temperate climate. Though not especially attractive, Playa del Coco has calm water, and the fishing village there offers more contact with locals than most beaches. Hermosa, to the north, has a lovely swimming beach with a number of hotels and restaurants. Playa Panama, the next beach to the north, is less developed and has calmer water.

The next bay north is the Gulf of Papagayo laden with exclusive luxury resorts. You will find limited public beach access. The ocean is especially calm there, making it a great spot for children and nonswimmers.

The well-developed resort town of Tamarindo is teeming with the widest selection of accommodations in the area. It's also popular with surfers, and you can view sea turtles on evening tours to nearby Playa Grande—a miles-/kilometers-long stretch of white sand also renowned for surfing. South of Tamarindo, there are fewer hotels and the roads can get rough, but the hilly coastal scenery is gorgeous. Nosara, near Ostional, is a beautiful beach where turtles also nest.

Farther to the south is Samara, another favorite with surfers and backpackers. Islita and Carrillo also have hotels, and the latter is protected by a nice cove. Around the tip of the Nicoya Peninsula lie the popular beaches of Mal Pais and Santa Teresa, with world-class surf and increasingly upscale hotels and restaurants to match. Nearby Montezuma is good for swimming and snorkeling, and there are plenty of low-budget accommodations, a luxury hotel, and a growing number of cafes and restaurants. A spectacular three-tiered waterfall is within walking distance of town, but be careful as the hike to the falls is treacherous in areas. Montezuma is also a good launching point for those wanting to spend an afternoon on Turtle Island or take a water taxi to Playa Herradura, near Jaco.

Following the curve of the peninsula, next comes the quiet village of Tambor with its lush tropical forest. Tambor is just 5 mi/8 km from the ferry terminal to Puntarenas City. Tambor beach earns the nickname "Drum Beach" because the combination of coral reefs and shallow grade causes the surf to break with an unusual drumming sound. Tambor beach is closest to Paquera where the ferry from Puntarenas docks.

Across the Gulf of Nicoya, Jaco Beach (Costa Rica's fastest growing beach town) is one of the most popular surfing locations but also one of the most dangerous. The extreme southern end of the beach near the Hotel Club del Mar is best for swimming. Nearby Playa Herradura, once regarded as the country's fishing capital, boomed following the construction of a large hotel complex, with a golf course and the country's largest marina. Jaco Beach is located 45 mi/75 km southwest of San Jose and is a popular spot with Costa Ricans and those on package tours. There is a wide selection of hotels, but the beach can get crowded on weekends because of its

proximity to the capital. Although Jaco is large and popular, it's not necessarily one of the prettiest beaches.

Farther south, the miles-/kilometers-long and ruler-straight beaches of Esterillos have begun to blossom. A short distance away is Manuel Antonio National Park and the town of Quepos, where dozens of hotels are strung along a ridge with spectacular views over the world-famous national park, with its choice of three beaches (one good for snorkeling). The beaches south of Manuel Antonio have high surf that washes onto volcanic sands backed by mangrove swamps and forest that grow more lush with every mile/kilometer. Dominical, formerly a funky favorite of surfers, has evolved to offer every accommodation from budget surf camp to deluxe villas and ecolodges.

An hour south of Dominical is Uvita Beach with its unique *tombolo*, or sandbar. The *tombolo* is shaped like a whale's tale, and it fittingly marks the entrance to the Marino Ballena National Park, where northern humpback whales can be viewed December-April and southern humpbacks appear July-October. A few minutes south is Ojochal Beach, known for serving some of the best cuisine outside of the capital.

In the extreme south, Zancudo and Pavones are palm-shaded beauties backed by rugged mountains, with some of the most fabulous surf in the country.

BIRD WATCHING

Costa Rica's small size, its diverse ecologies and its numerous national parks make the country a spectacular place for bird-watching—more than 850 species live in Costa Rica. Many companies offer tours specifically designed around bird-watching.

One hot spot for birders is the Costa Rican Bird Route (Ruta de las Aves) in the north. The route combines access to remote locations and lodging (<http://www.costaricanbirdroute.com>). Tirimbina Rainforest Reserve in Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí is an easy trip from San Jose and home to 50% of the country's registered bird species. Phone 506-2761-1579. <http://www.tirimbina.org>.

Costa Rica is home to the elusive and resplendent quetzal, which was sacred to the ancient Maya. The best places to spot this iridescent bird with the long tail feathers are the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve, the Santa Elena Cloud Forest and Finca del Eddie Serrano high above San Isidro del General.

BOATING & SAILING

Surprisingly, Costa Rica is not a big destination for boating and sailing, despite the large number of private yachters that call in. The country has encountered strong opposition to marina construction, primarily from environmentalists, though a few marinas have popped up. The virtually ruler-straight Caribbean coast has very few safe anchorages and as yet has no marinas. By contrast, the Pacific coast is blessed with many bays and coves, and has marinas located in Los Suenos, Papagayo and Pez Vela.

The main hub is Los Suenos Marina (phone 506-2630-4000 or toll-free 866-865-9759; <http://www.lossuenosresort.com>) at Playa Herradura, near Jaco. Complete marina services are available, as are yacht rentals. Golfito and Quepos cater to the sportfishing charter boats. Day excursions and sunset cruises are offered from there, as well as from the most popular beach resorts, notably Tamarindo and Jaco. Farther north in the Gulf of Papagayo, the Four Seasons Marina Papagayo offers complete marina services. It also organizes fishing, kayaking and Jet Ski excursions.

A popular day cruise option to travel from Puntarenas City to Isla Tortuga, a gorgeous island in the Gulf of Nicoya. Fringed by white-sand beaches and blessed with lush rain-forest trails and excellent snorkeling, it gets crowded on weekends. The main operator is Calypso Cruises, which offers cruises aboard a sleek catamaran. Phone 506-2256-2727. Toll-free 800-887-1969. <http://www.calypsocruises.com>.

Though it has two ocean coasts, Costa Rica's most-coveted boating waters may be its inland rivers. Costa Rica is a white-water paradise, with a range of rivers to suit every ability. Spectacular scenery and fantastic wildlife encounters are universal elements of all rafting trips. They range from white-water runs that will thrill rafting veterans to gentler trips that are perfect for novices. Several professional outfitters offer daily trips out of San

Jose to the Reventazon, Pacuare and Sarapiqui rivers.

The Reventazon River has the country's most popular runs, including one with class II and III rapids and one with class IV and V rapids that is limited to those with rafting experience. The area near the town of Turrialba is considered the rafting and kayaking capital of the country. It's also the winter training grounds for Olympic kayaking teams from around the world.

The nearby Pacuare River (class III and IV) offers the longest and most spectacular trip, passing through pristine rain forests, rocky canyons and several waterfalls. It is usually paddled over a two-day trip, with an overnight at a magnificent rain-forest lodge. Rios Tropicales, one of Costa Rica's pioneer rafting and kayaking companies, operates the lodge and offers two- and three-day trips. Phone 506-2233-6455. Toll-free 866-722-8273. <http://www.riostropicales.com>.

The Sarapiqui River (class III) passes similar scenery. It can be rafted with outfitters based in San Jose or with those in the Puerto Viejo de Sarapiqui and La Fortuna areas. The beautiful Savegre (class II and III) and rambunctious Naranjo (class IV) rivers both flow out of mountains near Manuel Antonio National Park. The mellow Corobici, located near the northwest town of Canas, is more a float than a white-water trip and is the perfect river for families and bird-watchers.

FISHING

Costa Rica has world-class sportfishing and boasts several well-respected fishing lodges. Some of the main lodges to consider are Rio Colorado Lodge (phone 506-2232-4063 or toll-free 800-243-9777; <http://www.riocoloradolodge.com>) and Rio Parismina Lodge (phone 506-2220-7597 or toll-free 800-338-5688; <http://www.riop.com>).

Most beach resorts on the west coast also offer fishing charters, but the most popular fishing ports are Flamingo, Coco, Herradura Bay, Quepos, Drake Bay and Golfito. Costa Rica Dreams offers a fleet of six sportfishing boats out of Los Suenos Resort and Marina near Jaco. It offers full- and half-day inshore and offshore charters, custom packages and sunset cruises (phone 506-2637-8942; <http://www.costaricadreams.com>). Bubba's Costa Rica Fishing Report offers half- and full-day fishing trips on boats ranging in size from 26 ft/8 m to 60 ft/18 m. Phone 506-2778-7217 or toll-free 800-972-4534. <http://www.costaricafishingreport.com>.

The best fishing on the Caribbean coast is found in the canals and rivers around Barra del Colorado, Tortuguero and Parismina.

Big marlin and sailfish are caught off the Pacific coast, tarpon and snook on the Caribbean side. Tour companies also can arrange trips for trout in the mountain streams and rainbow bass (*guapote*) in Lake Arenal. Contact Richard Krug, former sportfishing columnist for *The Tico Times*. He books sportfishing trips throughout the country. Phone 506-2282-7215 or toll-free from North America 800-407-9438. <http://www.richardkrug.com>.

GOLF

Golf continues to grow hand-in-hand with Costa Rica's tourism boom. Golfers have plenty of courses to choose from, ranging from modest nine-hole courses to an Arnold Palmer-designed 18-hole, par-72 championship course. Some of the newest courses are at Los Suenos Marriott Ocean & Golf Resort (<http://www.golflaiguana.com>) and the Four Seasons Papagayo, which is only open to resort guests. Phone 800-819-5053. <http://www.fourseasons.com/costarica>.

Other courses include Hacienda Pinilla Golf & Country Club in Guanacaste (phone 506-2680-3000; <http://haciendapinilla.com>); Valle del Sol in San Jose; and Tango Mar Hotel, Beach, Spa & Golf Resort on the Nicoya Peninsula's Tambor Beach. Phone 506-2683-0001. Toll-free 800-297-4420. <http://www.tangomar.com>.

HIKING & WALKING

Hiking and walking trails abound throughout Costa Rica. There are even beautiful hikes just outside of the capital in the hills of Escazu. Many of the most-visited national parks have well-maintained trails, most of which are accessible for beginning to intermediate hikers. For more advanced hikers, there is no shortage of challenging treks. Nearly all hotels also organize guided hikes for guests, an activity that is often included in the room rate. The elements, in particular the humidity, create one of the greatest obstacles to hikers and walkers.

Costa Rican mountaineer Warner Rojas, founder of the tour agency Pico Tours, organizes regular hikes around Costa Rica for all ability levels. Pico Tours also creates custom itineraries. Phone 506-2289-6135. <http://www.picotours.com>.

HORSEBACK RIDING

Countryfolk throughout Costa Rica still rely on horses for transportation, and horseback riding is a popular activity everywhere. Almost every area will have a setting that is ideal for a horseback ride—along the many beaches or through a tropical forest to an isolated swimming pool at the base of a waterfall. The waterfall at La Fortuna (near Arenal) and the terrain of the Central Valley make for splendid rides as well.

Because companies change frequently, it's best to check with hotel tour desks or front-desk personnel for information on where horseback riding is available.

SCUBA & SNORKELING

Don't expect Caribbean-style scuba diving or snorkeling in Costa Rica. Most diving is off the Pacific coast, where the water is rougher, colder and cloudier. You'll see fewer coral reefs but a good number of fish and large sea turtles. Bill Beard's Diving Safaris, located at Playas del Coco, is the headquarters for diving trips (toll-free 877-853-0538; <http://www.billbeardcostarica.com>). The Bat Islands, off Santa Rosa National Park, are the main destinations and are served by numerous dive operators in northwestern Nicoya.

On the Osa Peninsula on the southwest coast, where the waters are warmer, the Aguila de Osa Inn (phone 506-2296-2190; <http://www.aguiladeosainn.com>) arranges diving trips to the Cano Island Biological Preserve. Stony coral, huge schools of fish, manta rays and sharks often are seen. Have lunch on the beautiful beach at Cano Island, where there's a burial site used by pre-Columbian people that includes mysterious stone spheres.

The Costa Rica Adventure Divers offers dive trips from a small beachfront lodge, Jinetes de Osa, at Drake Bay. The company also provides opportunities off Cano Island to see abundant tropical fish with a certified PADI instructor. Phone 506-2231-5806. Toll-free 866-553-7073. <http://www.costaricadiving.com>.

You may have heard of Isla del Coco, off the Pacific coast. It is the site of more than 500 legendary treasure hunts and was the inspiration for Robert Louis Stevenson's classic story *Treasure Island*. It also is considered the best diving destination in the world for big marine animal sightings—particularly enormous schools of hammerhead sharks containing some 200-600 individuals. You'll also see whale sharks, manta rays, marble rays, white-tail reef sharks, humpback whales and dolphins.

The island is about 250 mi/400 km west of Puntarenas, where most live-aboard dive boats depart. It takes a serious diver to brave the 32-hour open-water crossing. Trips normally are for seven to 10 days. Among the boats offering the trip are the *Okeanos Aggressor* (phone 506-2257-0191 or toll-free 800-348-2628; <http://www.aggressor.com>), and the *Sea Hunter* and its sister ship, *Undersea Hunter* (phone 506-2228-6613 or toll-free 800-203-2120; <http://www.underseahunter.com>).

The best places for diving on the Caribbean side are the Gandoca-Manzanillo Wildlife Refuge and Punta Uva located between Puerto Viejo and Manzanillo. Contact the Punta Uva Dive Center at 506-2759-9191; <http://www.puntauvadivecenter.com>.

SPAS AND HEALTH CLUBS

Another Costa Rican growth industry, fueled by the competition between the luxury hotels and resorts, is the explosion of full-service spas. Guests find a complete range of services, including various types of massage, body treatments and wraps, hand and foot therapies, facial treatments and facial care enhancements, manicures, pedicures, whirlpool baths and as many as 15 waxing services.

To enhance the impact of these services, hotels and resorts go to great extremes to create special environments. Seclusion in separate quiet areas or buildings, with views, is considered essential for high success.

El Silencio Lodge & Spa

This spa is located in a separate building surrounded by tropical rain forest at the base of the Poas Volcano. Treatment rooms are designed to provide a feeling of peace and solitude. Bajos del Toro, Costa Rica. Phone 506-2761-0301. <http://www.elsilenciolodge.com>.

Los Altos de Eros

The inn sits atop a mountain with an expansive ocean view and surrounded by tropical forests, and the most spectacular views are reserved for the secluded cabana that houses the spa in quiet isolation. Troupes of howler monkeys serenade in the early morning and evening. Tamarindo, Costa Rica. Phone 506-8850-4222 or 786-866-7039 (U.S.). http://losaltosdeeros.com/spa_services_open_air.htm.

Renova Spa

The Renova Spa, which resembles a palace with a lush garden pavilion, contains eight treatment rooms, including five rooms that are exclusively for couples massages. The spa caters to guests of the adjacent Hotel Riu Palace, located in Guanacaste. Guanacaste, Costa Rica. Phone 506-2681-2300. http://www.renovaspa.com/costaRica_guanacaste.htm.

Rio Perdido

The Rio Perdido spa integrates the resort's isolated location in a rugged canyon into the treatment rooms, along with the thermal river that cuts through the property. Services include hydrotherapy in the natural hot water pools, reflexology, aromatherapy, and deep tissue and traditional massage treatments. Phone 506-2673-3600. <http://www.rioperdido.com>.

Tabacon Grand Spa Thermal Resort

This spa has a unique location within the thermal springs water park. The secluded area is tucked away amid dense tropical foliage and provides an atmosphere of lush isolation. In the evening, the steam rising from the thermal pools lends a magical touch along the lighted paths and pools. La Fortuna, Costa Rica. Phone 506-2519-1999. Toll-free 877-277-8291. <http://www.tabacon.com/grand-spa>.

The Hilton Papagayo

The resort has individual buildings and guesthouses that cascade from a terrific view of the Papagayo Gulf down to a volcanic black-sand beach. The spa is located on top of a separate building, with open-air treatment rooms offering an aerie-like view of the beach and the gulf. Playa Arenilla, Golfo de Papagayo, Costa Rica. Phone 506-2672-0000. <http://www.hilton.com>.

The Springs Resort and Spa

Situated in the hills outside of the tourist hub of La Fortuna with sweeping views of Arenal Volcano, The Springs brings competition to the local luxury market. Natural springs are fed from underground pools and the spa offers a variety of unique treatments. The hotel also has pools, restaurants and a wildlife preserve. The same owners run The Peace Lodge at La Paz Waterfall Gardens. La Fortuna, Costa Rica. Phone 954-727-8333 (U.S.). <http://www.thespringscostarica.com>.

SURFING

Costa Rica has the best surfing in Central America, especially in the extreme southwest at Zancudo and Pavones; on the Nicoya Peninsula at Playa Grande and Malpais; in northern Guanacaste at Tamarindo; and on the central Pacific coast at Dominical. The favorite surfing beaches in Costa Rica, though, are Tamarindo, Hermosa and Payones. Surfing championships are often held at Tamarindo, but die-hard surfers love Hermosa near Jaco. However, avid surfers insist that Pavones, in an isolated part of the wild Oso Peninsula, is heaven itself.

There is also fabulous surfing on the Caribbean side at Puerto Viejo, but its famed Salsa Brava break is for experienced riders. The Cocles Beach break just a few minutes south is best for recreational surfers. Many travel agencies in San Jose advertise surfing trips and classes: One to try for information on surfing off the Pacific coast is the Mango Surf Shop. Phone 506-2225-1067. <http://mangosurfshop.com>.

OTHER OPTIONS

An adventurous way to experience Costa Rica's rain forests is on a canopy tour. Several companies give visitors a chance to don rappelling gear, climb high above the forest floor and swing through the trees on ziplines connected to platforms in the treetops. Part thrill ride and part nature tour, the experience allows you to view the rain forest as birds and other wildlife do.

The tours aren't for everyone, particularly those with a fear of heights. (The tallest platforms are six to 10 stories in the air.) Some can also be strenuous. They're also expensive (26,725 CRC-53,450 CRC per person, depending on the location), but the tours afford fascinating and thrilling views of the rain forest that you can't experience any other way.

Among the companies offering the adventure is the Original Canopy Tour, which operates in Monteverde, Mahogany Park in San Jose, Limon and Drake Bay (phone 506-2291-4465, or 305-433-2241 in the U.S.; <http://www.canopytour.com>). Alternatives include Vista los Suenos in Jaco (<http://www.canopyvistolossuenos.com>), the Monteverde Extreme Canopy (<http://www.monteverdeextremo.com>), the Atlantic Rainforest Aerial Tram (<http://www.rainforestrams.com>), Sky Trek in La Fortuna (<http://www.arenal.net/tour/skytram-skytrek>), Canopy Safari in Manuel Antonio (<http://www.canopysafari.com>), and Adventure Park and Hotel Vista Golfo (<http://www.adventureparkcostarica.com>).

Another option is floating high above the scenery in a hot-air balloon, sipping a cold drink and snapping photos for the folks back home. Serendipity Adventures is Costa Rica's only hot air ballooning outfitter that takes visitors on soaring trips. It also offers other unique outdoor adventures. Toll-free 800-635-2325. <http://www.serendipityadventures.com>.

Or take a slow ride on a tree canopy aerial tram. The oldest aerial tram is the Rain Forest Aerial Tram on the Caribbean coast, next to the Braulio Carillo National Park near Cahuita. The Pacific Aerial Tram is adjacent to the Carara National Park near Jaco (phone 506-2257-5961; <http://www.rainforestrams.com>). A third aerial tram, the Sky Tram, is located near the Arenal Volcano in Arenal Volcano National Park near the Arenal Volcano Observatory. Phone 506-2479-9944. <http://www.arenal.net/tour/skytram-skytrek>.

Pacific Bungee, near Jaco, offers water touchdowns, rocket launchers, big swings and, of course, classic bungee jumping. Phone 506-2643-6682. <http://www.pacificbungee.com>.

PERFORMING ARTS

Costa Rica has had a strong tradition of arts and theater since the mid-20th century, when former President Jose Figueres abolished the country's army and placed an emphasis on arts and culture as building blocks for democracy.

Although there are dozens of events happening at any one time, it has historically been difficult to get information about performances. This is changing. In addition to the weekend section of the *Tico Times* newspaper, which comes out every Friday, *GAM Cultural* is a robust monthly collection of events happening around San Jose. Free copies are available in tourist information centers or online at <http://issuu.com/gamcultural>.

You can also check the Thursday VIVA section of the *Spanish LA Nacion* newspaper for the latest on entertainment in Costa Rica.

BULLFIGHTS

Bullfights are common throughout Costa Rica, especially in Guanacaste province. They provide an opportunity for even the squeamish to watch the event: Unlike in Mexico or Spain, in Costa Rica there are no professional matadors and the bull isn't killed. Instead, any male who so chooses can jump in the ring to torment the bull (at times the ring teems with young men doing their best to thoroughly annoy the bull).

Guanacaste Province has many *fincas* (ranches) and, therefore, a cowboy culture. With cowboys come rodeos, and rodeos are very popular in this province. The favorite event is, naturally, bull riding.

The small town of Tillaran, a stop on the scenic route between Monteverde and Puntarenas, has bullfights, rodeos and other festivities in mid-April, known as the Festivales de Abril.

SOCCER

Soccer, or *futbol*, is to Costa Rica what football is to the U.S. Small towns around the country have grassy soccer fields, and you can catch a game just about every Sunday.

Costa Rica's national team, Seleccion Nacional, has made it to the World Cup more than once. On game days in San Jose, people don purple jerseys in support of the capital city's team, Saprissa. Shouts and honks can be heard around town when Saprissa plays La Liga from nearby Alajuela.

Costa Rica Expeditions can arrange tickets as well as organize games for teams that would like to travel to Costa Rica to play. Phone 506-2257-1665. <http://www.costaricaexpeditions.com>.

SHOPPING

Shop for gold replicas of pre-Columbian jewelry, Guaitil pottery, traditional miniature painted oxcarts, jewelry made of semiprecious stones, hand-painted feathers, wood carvings and leather goods. The quality of crafts has increased immensely—especially noteworthy are the exquisite wooden bowls and finely crafted boxes of variegated hardwoods.

For local treats such as coffee, rum, coffee liqueur, macadamia nuts and hearts of palm, try virtually any hotel gift store, plus the exceptional Cafe Britt stores in Juan Santamaria International Airport and throughout the country. Coffee is relatively cheap in Costa Rica: A law requires that a portion of the annual crop remains in the country for domestic consumption. However, stick with the export quality brands, which are immeasurably better. The larger supermarkets have excellent coffee selections.

Costa Rica has a population that believes strongly in folk medicine. As a result, you'll find stalls in most markets that are run by herbalists displaying plants, spices and other remedies.

San Jose has some of the best options for shopping. Vendors set up shop on the west end of the Plaza de la Democracia to sell T-shirts, leather goods, jewelry and handicrafts. The crowded Central Market has practically everything—from fresh produce to souvenirs. Across the street is the Flower Market, which has more handicraft items. The National Artisans Market sells reproductions of pre-Columbian gold jewelry and wood carvings, and the souvenir marketplace at La Casona offers a substantial supply of affordable gifts. The Museum of Pre-Columbian Gold in the Plaza de la Cultura sells handcrafted replicas of museum pieces as well as contemporary jewelry styles.

The two largest craft sources are the San Jose suburb of Moravia, and Sarchi, about 30 mi/48 km west of San Jose. Each has dozens of shops selling every imaginable craft and indigenous item. Fine art by Costa Rica's growing body of accomplished artists is available at galleries in the center of San Jose. Many galleries and design stores are located in Barrio Amon.

Nine blocks of Avenida Central in downtown San Jose are blocked to vehicular traffic and form a shopping promenade. This has become known as the largest open-air shopping mall in Latin America and features every kind of shop and store imaginable. For upscale shopping, head to Multiplaza Escazu, a huge indoor mall selling all of the latest fashions. There are also restaurants and a movie theater.

Shopping Hours: Generally Monday-Friday 8:30-11:30 am and 2-6 pm, Saturday 8:30-11:30 am.

DINING OVERVIEW

Good Costa Rican cuisine is available in many venues throughout the country, from fine-dining establishments to small restaurants that carry a mixed menu to modern-mall food courts to small local, family-run places called *sodas*.

San Jose has some excellent restaurants, and many of them are found in the small hotels that have been created from old coffee-baron mansions. This includes the wonderful Hotel Grano de Oro and El Oasis Restaurant in Hotel Santo Tomas. The Amon District has any number of these great small-hotel restaurants.

Of course, there are many great stand-alone restaurants throughout the San Jose metropolitan area and the four- and five-star hotels and resorts that have sprung up all over Costa Rica provide some terrific gourmet restaurants.

One of Costa Rica's delightful peculiarities is that, because the country is a magnet for Europeans, there are superb international restaurants, even in out-of-the-way places. German, Swiss, Italian and Greek eateries abound, with good food at reasonable prices. You'll also find a wide variety of international cuisine, including excellent Chinese and Italian food, in San Jose.

A *casado* (which means "married") is a set-price meal, often eaten for lunch. It typically consists of black beans, rice, *picadillo* (diced vegetables and sometimes meat), meat and either yucca or *maduro* (fried banana). *Gallo pinto* (black beans and rice alone) becomes addictive and is the national dish, especially popular at breakfast. *Salsa lizano* is a typical breakfast condiment and common ingredient in *gallo pinto*. On the Caribbean, *gallo pinto* is flavored with coconut.

Other local specialties are *palmitos* (hearts of palm, usually served in a salad) and *cajeta* (a thick dessert made of milk and sugar). *Bocas* are appetizers—ranging from fried potatoes and yucca to broiled steak and fish—that are served with beer or cocktails. The tamales and *corvina* (sea bass) are especially good. Don't order *mondongo* unless you like tripe.

Meals in Costa Rica are even nicer when accompanied by fresh juice, and there are all kinds of wonderful tropical fruits, including mangoes, papayas, pineapples that rival Hawaiian fruit, sweet ripe melons and *zapotes* (a fruit with an orangelike pulp that resembles an avocado). These fruits find their way into delicious and refreshing *batidos* (shakes) made with milk or water.

A nice way to savor Costa Rica's coffee is to take a tour of the Cafe Britt Coffee plantation in Heredia, where you can sample blends from local beans. It has a large gift shop and restaurant, as well. There are Britt gift shops throughout Costa Rica in airport terminals, resorts, hotels and tourist attractions, where they freely dispense samples of coffee, chocolate and chocolate-covered nuts and fruits. And all make greatly appreciated souvenirs. Phone 506-2277-1500. Toll-free 800-462-7488. <http://www.coffeetour.com>.

ETIQUETTE

Ticos are frequently praised for their strong democratic traditions and lack of civil strife. Many of the country's business practices and social attitudes will seem familiar to visitors from North America, though in some respects Costa Rica shares traits with its Latin American neighbors, too.

Appointments—Schedule meetings well in advance of your visit. Costa Ricans are usually punctual for business meetings and expect punctuality from others, although being fashionably late for social events is the norm.

Personal Introductions—Handshakes are the norm, but typically this is a light, almost gentle holding of hands. Maintain direct eye contact. Use last names with the appropriate Spanish title. If your acquaintance has a professional title, you will learn it when introduced. If not, *senor* (man), *senora* (married woman) and *senorita* (unmarried woman) are appropriate. Costa Ricans use educational titles, such as *Ingeniero* (engineer) and *Doctor* (for a college graduate). The title and the person's last name should be used until you are instructed otherwise.

Ticos have two surnames, one from their father and one from their mother. The father's surname will be given first during the introduction, and that's the name that is used to address or speak of the person. Thus, *Senorita Maria Rojas Vargas* would be addressed as *Senorita Rojas*. Bilingual business cards are a good idea—Spanish on one side and English on the other.

Negotiating—Plan to spend some time getting to know one another before you discuss business. That aside, the negotiating style in Costa Rica is similar to that found in North America, and meetings will typically be more to the point than in other parts of Central and South America. Decisions are typically made only after thorough internal discussions are held, so expect that process to take some time. Things move much more slowly in Costa Rica than in North America, including decision-making and follow-through. Bloodlines often trump all other considerations in business decisions (especially in awarding contracts), and corruption and cronyism have become increasing problems.

Business Entertaining—Business acquaintances are most likely to gather for a formal meal in the evening. Allow such a dinner to be a social event unless your Tico counterpart wishes to delve into business. Rarely do Ticos invite business associates to their homes.

Body Language—In Costa Rica, personal space is closer than many visitors may be accustomed to, but there is generally less touching than in many other Latin American countries. The hug (*abrazo*) is not often seen in Costa Rica, even between close friends.

Gift Giving—Gift giving is common in business relationships. If you're invited to the home of an acquaintance, take along a bottle of wine, candy or flowers (but avoid lilies).

Conversation—Costa Rica is an ecological wonderland. Praising the beauty of the country and asking about its natural resources are good conversation starters. History and art also are excellent topics. Political discussions are generally less problematic than in other countries of the region, but avoid religion and comments generally critical of Latin America.

Other Information—The country's progressive attitudes extend to the role of women in business, and women have assumed important political roles. In May 2010, Laura Chinchilla became Costa Rica's first female president. Although machismo has not been erased, women visiting the country on business will encounter fewer obstacles than in many other parts of Latin America.

Costa Ricans are often reticent to say no, to provide negative information or to admit that they cannot provide requested information, preferring to tell a person what they wish to hear. This can be especially problematic when promises are made with no intention of being honored. This *quedar bien* (literally to "remain well," but more accurately meaning "to give a good impression") often results in miscommunication and misunderstanding.

PERSONAL SAFETY

Costa Rica remains significantly safer than most Latin American countries, and most visitors are not likely to encounter any trouble. However, the country has experienced a rise in crime, mostly around passport theft and burglary.

Travelers have been the victims of pickpocket theft, purse-snatching, muggings and car break-ins, and a growing body of malfeasants have devised clever schemes specifically aimed at trusting tourists. Violent crimes are less common but are reportedly on the increase, and a few tourists have been sexually assaulted. Women should never camp and hike alone. Many women report Peeping Toms in cheaper accommodations.

Visitors should exercise common sense and be especially cautious in downtown San Jose, at national parks and at beaches. Crime in Costa Rica is largely opportunistic. Do not leave valuables in a car, especially at national parks and other remote areas, and keep an eye on your bag when you are shopping, eating, riding public transportation and so on.

You should consult park authorities before setting off on hikes to be sure trails are safe. Be aware that there is a long history of real estate scams, many of them aimed at North Americans. In budget accommodations, check that windows and doors are secure (take your own lock as a backup). Most hotels have safe boxes. Leave your passport locked at the hotel or a safe place, and carry a copy of the data page and the Costa Rica entry stamp.

Prostitution in Costa Rica is not illegal but most activities surrounding it are. As in many big cities, San Jose has a red-light district, which has an increased incidence of crime. In particular, prostitutes are known to frequent the Hotel & Casino Del Ray. It is best to avoid this area, especially at night.

More and more tourist police patrol popular destinations. Their uniforms are clearly marked with the words "Tourist Police" on the back. They can be contacted at 506-2286-1473. In an emergency, dial 911.

Exercise caution when swimming on both the Pacific and Caribbean coasts as many beaches have strong rip tides. Most resorts identify beach conditions by the various color-coded flags with red being used as a sign for "swimming is forbidden." Always ask about local current conditions before swimming or practicing any watersports.

Adventure tourism is big business in Costa Rica. Though overseen by the government and the Ministry of Health, enforcement is not always strict. We recommend playing it safe and dealing with well-established operators that you've researched prior to your arrival. Never hire a freelance guide other than through a respected local tour operator. Remember that a freelance operator likely does not carry necessary insurance.

For the latest information, contact your country's travel-advisory agency.

HEALTH

Although sanitary conditions and water quality in Costa Rica are better than in most other countries in Central America, you still need to exercise caution in more remote parts of the country and along the Caribbean.

Hot, freshly cooked food should be safe (especially if it's included on a package tour), but peel fresh produce before eating, make sure meat is cooked thoroughly, and be wary of local dairy products (with the exception of Monteverde cheese). While it's safe to drink tap water in many areas, including San Jose, most people drink filtered or bottled water. To be on the safe side, stick with boiled or prepackaged drinks and check the safety seals before drinking.

Malaria is generally low but travelers susceptible to it should consider the necessary precautions, especially those visiting the Pacific southwest and Caribbean shore zones. Consult your doctor about appropriate measures, take plenty of insect repellent, and wear long pants and long-sleeved shirts at dusk and dawn. Hepatitis A and typhoid vaccinations are also recommended. The most serious medical problems—diarrhea, amoebic dysentery, dengue fever, malaria and typhoid—occur more frequently outside the capital but still are relatively uncommon. The most common ailment you are likely to encounter is traveler's diarrhea, which is usually caused by a change in diet and stress from travel. Stay hydrated and consider packing a relief agent such as Imodium.

Snakes abound in Costa Rica, including approximately 20 venomous species. Although snakebites are rare, they do

occur, and it is wise to always wear footwear that covers the ankles while hiking. Avoid handling leaf litter and look before placing your hand on branches or in crevices. The aggressive and potentially fatal fer-de-lance is responsible for most snakebites and deaths and should be given a very wide berth if encountered.

Costa Rica generally has a strong national health-care system with well-trained physicians and nurses. Hospitals in San Jose are good, but many expatriates and tourists have complained about bureaucratic delays and slow treatment. Most essential medicines are available, but take all prescription medicine needed for the trip.

The sun can be strong, so use sunscreen liberally and wear a hat. Don't forget a pair of comfortable walking shoes. Hiking boots are best if you are venturing into the rain forest. Take plenty of extra socks. Your feet are likely to get wet, and fresh socks help prevent blisters and infections.

For the latest information, contact your country's health-advisory agency.

DOS & DON'TS

Do know what *pura vida* (pronounced *POO-ra BEE-da*) means. The often-heard phrase literally translates as "pure life." Costa Ricans use this to say hello and goodbye and to express general happiness.

Don't pick plants or pick up seashells, and don't damage trees or foliage. In many areas, trees are protected by the government, and individuals must obtain permission to remove or trim a tree, even to prevent damage to a house.

Don't be surprised to see male vacationers in the company of prostitutes, notably in downtown San Jose and in Jaco. Although Costa Rica is a staunchly Catholic nation, prostitution is legal and, although frowned upon in respectable circles, is an accepted part of the social landscape.

Do take a nice supply of U.S. dollar bills. It's an easy way to provide that extra tip for good service at a restaurant, or to reward extra service from the bell staff or drivers.

Do carry a big umbrella, especially in the "green" season. It does rain. A lot.

Don't plan museum visits for Monday. Most are closed.

Do try to speak Spanish, no matter how limited your vocabulary. Costa Ricans appreciate the effort, and they love to help you learn new phrases or improve your language skills.

Do reconfirm airline reservations out of the country. Reservations are frequently canceled (particularly during the December and January holidays) if they're not confirmed at least 72 hours in advance. Car rental reservations also may be canceled if you arrive late—unless you let the rental company know that your flight is delayed.

Geostats

Passport/Visa Requirements: U.S. and Canadian citizens need passports but not visas. Proof of sufficient funds and onward passage are also required. There is a departure tax of about 14,000 CRC.

All U.S. citizens must have a passport when traveling by air to or from Bermuda, Canada, the Caribbean, Central and South America and Mexico. Citizens of Canada, Mexico and the British Overseas Territory of Bermuda also must have a passport or other designated secure document to enter the U.S.

Passports are required for land crossings at the Canadian and Mexican borders with the U.S. and for cruise passengers returning to the U.S. from Mexico, the Caribbean, Canada or Bermuda. Reconfirm travel-document requirements with your carrier prior to departure.

Population: 4,695,942.

Languages: Spanish and English.

Predominant Religions: Christian (Roman Catholic).

Time Zone: 6 hours behind Greenwich Mean Time (-6 GMT). Daylight Saving Time is not observed.

Voltage Requirements: 110 volts.

Telephone Codes: 506, country code. All phone numbers in Costa Rica now have eight digits. Seven-digit numbers must now add the prefix 2 (land line) or 8 (cell phone). Emergency numbers and 800 or 900 numbers remain the same;

Currency Exchange

Costa Rica's currency is the colon. U.S. dollars are accepted as legal currency throughout the country. The colon has been losing value at a steady rate for years.

Be aware that US\$100 bills are becoming increasingly suspect because of counterfeiting. Some bills have actually been confiscated. If you are going to take U.S. dollars, be sure the bills are clean and unmarked, otherwise you may have difficulty using them.

Don't change money in the streets. It's illegal, and you would probably end up with worthless counterfeit money. Besides, you'll get a better exchange rate at your hotel. For that reason, if you must change money at the exchange booths in the airport, change the smallest amount necessary.

Traveler's checks can be difficult and time consuming to change.

Taxes

Costa Rica issues various taxes. There is a value added tax (VAT) of 13%, which is a sales tax imposed on all goods and services, such as hotel rooms, with the exception of food items and medicine. Small budget hotels are usually an exception. Restaurants typically add a 10% service charge on the bill.

Tipping

Most menu prices include the 13% restaurant tax and the 10% service charge. Restaurants list whether these are included or not at the bottom of the menu. Add a small tip on top of the 10% service charge if you feel the service was excellent.

Tip tour guides but not taxi drivers, unless they provide an extra service.

Weather

The best time to visit is the relatively dry period of December-May, but we suggest avoiding the Christmas and Easter holidays because everyone seems to go to the beach. (Businesses are shut down, and all the hotels are full.) January is our favorite time to go, but Costa Rica is really a year-round destination. Tourism promoters are trying to encourage travel in the rainy season (June-October) by selling it as the "green season." The vegetation looks nicer then, and prices are lower, but you can almost be guaranteed at least a brief thunderstorm every day in late afternoon or early evening.

Temperatures in San Jose and the Central Highlands are moderate to springlike (and even alpine and cool at higher elevations), and a breeze almost always blows. The mountains can be quite cool at night. Coastal areas tend to be hot and steamy, but hot and dry in the Pacific northwest.

Guanacaste has a pronounced dry season and can be insufferably hot in summer away from the shore. Along the coast, humidity generally increases southward. An umbrella and other rain gear are necessities no matter when you visit.

What to Wear

Dress in Costa Rica is conservatively casual. Bathing suits and short shorts are for the beach or river rafting. You'll feel comfortable during the day in casual sports clothes, but in a good restaurant or at the theater at night, you should adhere to local customs.

In San Jose, Tico men wear collared shirts and slacks and women wear skirts, jeans or dresses, though young adults are prone to adopt a sexier look, with skin-tight jeans de rigueur for women. Dress conservatively in the countryside.

For hiking, wear comfortable shoes (which will most likely get muddy) or lightweight hiking boots, along with lightweight pants and long-sleeved shirts to guard against thorns and biting insects. Take along a hat, not only as protection against the sun but also to keep leaves and other rain-forest debris out of your hair.

Carry a light raincoat or poncho in wet season (and stick a couple of sealable plastic bags in your pocket to protect your camera). We also recommend a change of socks (especially on long day tours) to help prevent blisters. You will need warm, waterproof wear for hiking Chirripo and other extreme upland areas.

Telephone

Phone service in Costa Rica is very good. You do not need to dial the area code (506) when dialing in-country.

In March 2008, the telephone system was changed to 11 digits (including the area code) in response to increased demand for cell phones. This was accomplished by adding a "2" in front of the last seven digits for a landline, and an "8" in front of the last seven for a cell phone (the last seven digits start with 3 or 8). If you encounter an old seven-digit number, just add a "2" or an "8" as appropriate.

Pay phones are plentiful in all metropolitan areas. They accept phone cards, called *tarjetas telefonicas* (sold in small shops, or *sodas*, everywhere), or coins. The cost to call anywhere in the country is about 100 CRC (about US\$0.20). Pay phones are still readily available in urban areas and places like the airport, gas stations and hotel lobbies.

Cell phones are problematic. Costa Rica uses signal bands for GSM, UTMS and LTE. If you have a quad band phone, you will be able to pick up the GSM frequency, but roaming fees apply and can be costly. If you have a GSM phone, you can use it with a prepaid SIM card. Prepaid SIM cards can be bought at the airport and at ICE (Costa Rica's telecommunication monopoly) offices. If you intend to use your cell phone in Costa Rica, try to verify service availability with your provider and identify plans with reduced roaming charges.

An alternative is to rent a cell phone, sometimes for as little as 4,300 CRC per day with a minimum contract and deposit. Cell Phones Costa Rica has a multitude of rental plans, including four-day, weekly, monthly and long-term ones (phone 506-2293-5892; toll-free 877-268-2918; <http://www.cellphonescr.com>). Ace Telecom Corp. offers roaming service for as low as 10,156 CRC for two weeks (toll-free 877-223-8353; <http://www.acetelecom.com>).

Internet Access

Internet access is readily available throughout Costa Rica. Every significant metropolitan area has a plethora of Internet cafes, and small towns have at least one or two. Depending on remoteness, the price is usually 500 CRC-1,000 CRC per hour. These places come and go very quickly, and the equipment is occasionally dated and unable to accept USB connections and flashcards. Some of the newer Internet cafes offer wireless Internet service.

Large hotels and resorts will provide complete business centers with computers, printers, fax machines and wireless Internet access. Sometimes there is a charge for this service, but often it is complimentary. Even the smallest hotel will usually have at least one computer with Internet access that guests may use. Hotels are adding wireless Internet access, sometimes in all rooms, but there may be a daily charge for the service.

Many cafes and restaurants, especially those that cater to tourists, advertise free Wi-Fi with a purchase.

Mail & Package Services

Postal service in Costa Rica is efficient and reliable. Postal clerks are courteous and will provide assistance with packages. Rates are very reasonable.

The main post office (*correos*) in downtown San Jose has a philately office that sells beautiful envelopes for those who would like to send home something more than a post card.

Newspapers & Magazines

The largest newspaper in Costa Rica is *La Nacion*, and it is distributed throughout the country (<http://www.nacion.com>). *La Republica* is favored by the business elite. <http://www.larepublica.net>.

The major English-language newspaper, published every Friday, is the *Tico Times* (<http://www.ticotimes.net>). *A.M. Costa Rica* is a popular online publication in English. <http://www.amcostarica.com>.

To find out what is happening around the country, look for the monthly publication *GAM Cultural* (<http://issuu.com/gamcultural>)—available in tourist information centers—and the Thursday VIVA section of *La Nacion*.

Free detailed maps of Costa Rica are available throughout the country at tour offices, restaurants, hotels and car rental agencies. Costa Rica's tourism chamber, the ICT, develops excellent city maps, many of which are available in hotels as well as ICT offices. Each major tourist area will also have general, not-to-scale maps of that specific area, with subscribing businesses prominently identified on the map.

Transportation

Getting to Costa Rica is relatively easy, particularly from North America. Numerous airlines fly into the country's four international hubs; San Jose's modern Juan Santamaria International Airport (SJO) and the newly improved Liberia International Airport in Guanacaste are the popular ones. Getting around the country, however, can be an entirely different matter depending on the destination because of sometimes dismal road conditions. Although the country is small, it takes some time to get from place to place.

Adventurous travelers will want to strike out on their own in a rental car, but other visitors may prefer to leave the driving to someone else. We suggest hiring a driver or signing up for one of the numerous private or group tours offered to the country's parks and preserves. However, if you like to drive, make sure your vehicle has four-wheel drive and high clearance. Costa Rica's famously poor roads have been improved year by year, but many still have more holes than Swiss cheese or are unpaved, and access to many prime destinations (such as Monteverde and Malpais) is the stuff of *Indiana Jones* movies.

Air

Most visitors arrive by air at San Jose's Juan Santamaria International Airport (SJO), which is on the outskirts of Alajuela, 12 mi/19 km west of the city. Within Costa Rica, there is air service between principal cities. All in-country flights originate or terminate in San Jose, using the small Tobias Bolanos Airport in the suburb of Pavas, 4 mi/6.5 km west of downtown.

The Juan Santamaria International Airport (SJO) has been renovated, with a refurbished ticketing area, gate areas that were brought up to international standards, expanded immigration and commercial areas, and a second floor equipped with heightened security for outbound passengers. Handicapped access also has been improved, and there are nice waiting areas and a VIP lounge. More commercial areas are being added. For more information, contact 506-2437-2626. <http://www.fly2sanjose.com>.

San Jose's airport taxi service is renowned for its reliability. The orange-colored taxis run daily 24 hours. It's best to make a reservation. Phone 506-2222-6865. <http://www.taxiaerpuerto.com>.

The Daniel Oduber International Airport in Liberia, Guanacaste, has improved access to Monteverde Cloud Forest, Arenal National Park and to the beach resorts of Guanacaste Province, and increasingly receives direct international flights. Traffic is growing faster than airport services, so immigration lines may be long. Phone 506-2668-1010. <http://www.liberiacostaricaairport.net>.

If you don't have a lot of time while visiting Costa Rica but still wish to see as many areas as possible, we recommend the in-country flights, which are fairly reasonable (about 40,088 CRC one way).

Charter flights also are available in the country and are handy for reaching otherwise difficult-to-access locations such as Corcovado National Park. Many are reasonably priced and often much more convenient than scheduled flights to remote destinations. Remember to reserve ahead, because the planes are tiny—usually with capacity for four to 10 people.

Helicopter service throughout Costa Rica is available from Volar Helicopters. Phone 506-2290-9741. <http://www.purovuelo.com>.

Bus

Intercity buses connect most areas of the country. Most are modern air-conditioned buses, and the service is usually extremely efficient. Look for *directo* (express) buses, which are much faster than the normal *corriente* or *colectivo* services that make many stops.

Buses can vary widely in comfort depending on the time of day and type of service. The most difficult part about traveling by bus in Costa Rica is figuring out where the bus stop is located. In San Jose, there are several terminals throughout the capital, each servicing a particular area of the country. Pick up a bus schedule at the ICT information office in San Jose, located at the Plaza de la Cultura. Schedules also are published online (<http://thebusschedule.com>). Don't rely solely on the schedule, though; call to confirm your departure time with the bus company.

Buses also run to the most remote rural backwaters, but a rule of thumb is the more remote the destination, the older and less reliable the bus. In addition, two bus companies, Interlink and Greyhound, provide scheduled daily service between key tourist destinations. Although more expensive than regular bus companies, they are an efficient way to get between key destinations on the tourist trail that might otherwise require changing buses in midpoint towns.

Rates are usually reasonable, and the bus system is one of the best transportation deals in the country. It also can be a good way to people-watch: You might share your seat with farmers traveling with their livestock or day laborers carrying belted machetes. Drivers tend to sing along with their portable radios, playing the music loud so that everyone can enjoy it.

Car

Costa Rica can be reached by road via the Pan-American Highway that runs from Mexico through Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua and continues on to Panama. The trip is only recommended for experienced travelers, as road conditions are poor, border crossings complicated and bandits a worrisome threat. It is best to travel in a caravan, if possible.

Road conditions within Costa Rica aren't the best, but they have improved dramatically. We recommend rental vehicles only to experienced travelers who are familiar with driving conditions in developing countries. Roads in remote areas are often dusty and rough during the dry season. In the rainy season, conditions may be awful. Watch for mud slides, fallen trees and livestock blocking roadways.

Drive cautiously. *Traficos* (traffic police) use radar guns, but a worse threat is the aggressive, sometimes daredevil (and dangerous) driving habits of locals. Costa Ricans, otherwise so civil, are terrible drivers: They become especially daring on steep hills and sharp curves. Driving is the most dangerous in San Jose, where drivers are discourteous and aggressive to a fault. Pedestrians never have any legal right-of-way, and drivers take full advantage of that fact. Even Ticos who live outside of San Jose are in awe of the traffic.

Additionally, in late July and early August, the roads around Cartago get exceptionally crowded because of the annual pilgrimage to Basilica de Nuestra Senora de los Angeles in Cartago to honor patron saint La Negrita. Expect the tiny roads leading to and from the area to be crowded with pilgrims arriving from every corner of the country.

If you do rent a car, a four-wheel-drive vehicle is a must. Though the vehicles are more expensive, the improved traction and extra ground clearance are often necessary—particularly in some national parks, which can be accessed *only* by four-wheel-drive vehicles. The minimum age for vehicle rentals varies among the various car rental agencies but generally you need to be at least 21 years old. The legal driving age in Costa Rica is 18 years old.

When renting a vehicle, be sure to purchase theft insurance that is valid in Costa Rica and photograph the inside and outside of the vehicle at the time of rental—as your own protection against any claims of damage by the leasing company. Many car rental agencies now offer full comprehensive insurance coverage for a modest fee. With this coverage, any damage to the car is covered whether or not the driver is at fault (except in the event that the driver was involved in an illegal activity at the time of the accident). This coverage eliminates the need for a careful inspection when the car is accepted and when it is turned in.

A good map is essential if you're driving, because roads are not always well-marked. (A reliable Costa Rica map is available from International Travel Maps. Phone 604-273-1400 or check <http://www.itmb.com>) Be aware that different local maps, even those provided by the car rental agency, will often vary significantly from map to map. One map may show certain towns and roads that are not on another and vice versa.

Ship

Costa Rica is a popular destination for cruise ships. On the Pacific coast, ships dock at Puntarenas or the container port of Puerto Caldera. On the Caribbean coast they stop at Puerto Limon.

Cruise ships are usually only in port for about 12 hours, which limits the tours and sightseeing that are available. With careful planning, though, it is possible to enjoy a lot of the wonders of this unique country. Remember, however, even though Costa Rica is a small country, it does take a lot of time to get from one point to another, especially if there is a volcanic mountain range between the two points.

Taxi

Taxis are available in many parts of the country and can often take you to points where there is no bus service. Within San Jose, they are efficient and have meters (though you may have to ask that they be turned on). If there is no meter, establish the price before setting out, otherwise you are more than likely to be gouged. Take only authorized taxis, which are red and have yellow triangles on the side doors. Illegal taxis operate throughout the country and are called *pirata* taxis. Sometimes prices are lower in *piratas*, but their service is not regulated.

Never let a taxi driver pick up another passenger after you have hired it, and don't get into any taxi containing anyone other than the driver, as numerous robberies have been reported under these circumstances.

Taxis also can be hired for longer trips: Payment is usually by the hour or the half-day, and many drivers will wait for you while you visit parks or other attractions. Make sure you agree to costs before the journey begins. Most taxi drivers accept both U.S. dollars and local currency.

Chauffeur-driven luxury transportation is offered by VIP Costa Travel. Toll-free 800-254-1080 from the U.S. <http://www.vipcostatravel.com>.

Wheelchair-accessible transportation is available from Taxis Alfaro (phone 506-2222-4136 or 506-2221-8466) or TransCare. Phone 506-2288-1769 or 506-8395-1070. <http://www.transcarecr.com>.

Other

Tour buses are often a convenient alternative to rental cars, especially for first-time visitors. You can sign up at most hotels and resorts or contact the companies beforehand.

Among those offering tours in Costa Rica are Horizontes (phone 506-2222-2022; <http://www.horizontes.com>), Costa Rica Expeditions (phone 506-2257-0766; <http://www.costaricaexpeditions.com>), Swiss Travel (phone 506-2282-4898; <http://www.swisstravelcr.com>) and Expediciones Tropicales (phone 506-2257-4171; <http://www.expedicionestropicales.com>).

Most are based in San Jose but will arrange for a guide to meet you and take you almost anywhere in the country.

For More Information

Tourist Offices

Costa Rica: Costa Rica Tourist Board ICT, P.O. Box 777-1000, San Jose, Costa Rica. Toll-free 800-343-6332 from North America (the line is answered in English) or phone 506-2299-5800 within Costa Rica for information and emergencies. The tourist board's main information center in San Jose is beneath Plaza de la Cultura, Calle 5, Avenida Central y Segunda. Phone 506-2222-1090. <http://www.visitcostarica.com>.

Costa Rica does not maintain tourist offices in Canada or the U.S.

Costa Rica Embassies

Canada: Embassy of Costa Rica, 350 Sparks St., Suite 701, Ottawa, ONK1R 7S8. Phone 613-562-2855. Fax 613-562-2582. There are also consulates in Ottawa, Vancouver and Toronto.

U.S.: Embassy of Costa Rica, 2114 S St. N.W., Washington, DC 20008. Phone 202-234-2945. Fax 202-265-4795. <http://costarica-embassy.org>. There are also consulates in Atlanta, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, St. Paul, MN and Tucson.

Foreign Embassies Serving Costa Rica

Canada: Canadian Embassy, La Sabena Executive Business Centre, Building No. 5, Third Floor, San Jose (mailing address: P.O. Box 351-1007, Centro Colon, San Jose, Costa Rica). Phone 506-2242-4400. Fax 506-2242-4410. <http://sanjose.gc.ca>.

U.S.: U.S. Embassy, Calle 120 Avenida O, Pavas (mailing address: Apartado 920-1200, Pavas, San Jose, Costa Rica). Phone 506-2519-2000. Fax 506-519-2305. <http://sanjose.usembassy.gov>.

Recommended Guidebooks

Costa Rican Natural History, edited by Daniel H. Janzen (University of Chicago Press). Flora and fauna of the country.

A Guide to the Birds of Costa Rica by F. Gary Stiles (Cornell University Press). Used by many tour guides, it's a must for birders.

Moon Costa Rica by Christopher P. Baker (Avalon Travel Publishing). A detailed background on the country is given with extensive practical information for every budget. Superb maps.

Additional Reading

Costa Rica: A Traveler's Literary Companion, edited by Barbara Ras (Whereabouts Press). An anthology of short stories that show the country through the eyes of its writers.

Life Above the Jungle Floor: A Biologist Explores a Strange and Hidden Treetop World by Donald Perry (Simon & Schuster).

The Ticos: Culture and Social Change in Costa Rican by Mavis Biesanz, Richard Biesanz and Karen Biesanz (Lynne Rienner Pub). Engaging look at Costa Rican society placed in a historical and comparative perspective.

What Happen: A Folk History of Costa Rica's Talamanca Coast by Paula Palmer (Zona Tropical). A cultural history of the Caribbean Coast.

Taking Care of Sibo's Gift by Gloria Mayorga (Editorama, S.A.). A look at the people of the Kekoldi Indigenous

Reserve and their struggle to maintain their identity, which is closely tied to caring for the environment, in the face of increasing development.