

## Costa Rica

### Overview

#### Introduction

Costa Rica offers the adventurous traveler an abundance of outdoor activities. 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.



*Landscape, Costa Rica*

Costa Rica is practically synonymous with eco-tourism—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, non-protected 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 as far south as northern Nicoya Peninsula.

# Port Information

## 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 20% 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.

## 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.

# See & Do

## 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.

## Recreation

### 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 where you will find limited public beach access. The ocean is especially calm there, making it a great spot for children and non-swimmers.

The well-developed resort of Tamarindo, with the widest selection of accommodations in the area, is 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 (the most developed beach resort in the country) 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 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 Esterillo 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 eco-lodges.

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. 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.

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 virtually ruler-straight Caribbean coast has very few safe anchorages and as yet has no marinas. By contrast, the Pacific coast is blessed with bays and coves.

The main base is Los Suenos Marina 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. Further north in the Gulf of Papagayo, the Four Seasons Marina Papagayo offers complete marina services.

The most popular option is a day cruise 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 is popular and gets crowded on weekends.

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 Sarapiquí 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.

The Sarapiquí River (class III) passes similar scenery. It can be rafted with outfitters based in San Jose or with those in the Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí 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.

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. 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.

## **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.

## **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, many of which are accessible for beginning to intermediate hikers. For more advanced hikers, there is no shortage of challenging treks. Many 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.

## **Horseback Riding**

Country folk 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. The Bat Islands, off Santa Rosa National Park, are the main destinations and are served by numerous dive operators in northwestern Nicoya.

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 animals. 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.

The best places for diving on the Caribbean side are the Gandoca-Manzanillo Wildlife Refuge and Punta Uva located between Puerto Viejo and Manzanillo.

## **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.

## 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.

## 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.

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.

## Performing Arts

Costa Rica has 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.

While 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.

## Spectator Sports

### 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.

## 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

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, including the always-popular Tin-Jo (Asian), Le Chandelier (French), El Balcon de Europa (Italian and Continental), La Esquina de Buenos Aires (Argentinean), Machu Picchu (Peruvian) and Cafe Moro (Mediterranean). Also, 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.

## Security

### 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.

**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.

**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 (there's a good reason that almost every building in the country has barred windows).

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 and even murdered. 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.

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. Always ask about local current conditions before swimming or practicing any water sports.

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 can be a problem in the Pacific southwest and Caribbean shore zones, including Tortuguero and Barra del Colorado national parks. 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 also are 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 19 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.

# Facts

## 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.

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

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.

Do be respectful of the natural habitat: Turn off your flash when taking pictures of wildlife, and don't feed the animals.

Do be prepared for crowded roads around Cartago during 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.

Do be extremely careful about negotiating the heavy traffic in San Jose while driving. Costa Ricans seem to become Mr. Hyde when they get behind the wheel of a car—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.

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.

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

Do speak highly of Costa Rica's progressive reputation, as your Tico counterparts most certainly will. They often claim there are more teachers in their country than police officers. In fact, it is Costa Rican tradition to elect former teachers to the presidency. In heavily armed Central America, that's particularly unusual.

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:** 4,195,914.

**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;

# Money

## 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

Most tourist hotels apply a 16.8% government tax. Check to see whether this is included in quoted rates. Small budget hotels are usually an exception.

## 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. 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.

## **Communication**

### **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).

Cell phones are problematic. Costa Rica only uses a GSM signal band. 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. 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 San Jose's modern Juan Santamaria International Airport (SJO). 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) recently completed a major terminal renovation. The ticketing area was refurbished and gate areas brought to international standards. The immigration and commercial areas were expanded, and a second floor equipped with heightened security for outbound passengers was opened. Handicapped access has also been improved, and there are renovated waiting areas and a VIP lounge. More commercial areas will also be added. For more information, contact 506-2437-2626.  
<http://www.alterra.co.cr>.

Funds to improve airports around Costa Rica, including Daniel Oduber International Airport in Guanacaste, Puntarenas, Limon and San Jose's Tobias Bolanos Airport, were allocated in mid-2010.

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.taxiaeropuerto.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.

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.

If you do rent, 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.

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.

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>.

For More Information

### Costa Rica Embassies

**Canada:** Embassy of Costa Rica, 325 Dalhousie St., Suite 407, Ottawa, ON K1N 7G2. Phone 613-562-2855. Fax 613-562-2582. There are also consulates in Ottawa, Montreal 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, Puerto Rico, New York, Dallas, St. Paul, MN, San Francisco 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>.

## **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. 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. A cultural history of the Caribbean Coast.

*Taking Care of Sibó's Gift* by Gloria Mayorga. 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.

## **Arenal National Park**

Located about 60 mi/100 km northwest of San Jose, Arenal National Park encompasses a large area in northwest Costa Rica, but the most remarkable feature—one of the most impressive sights in the country, in fact—is Arenal Volcano, which has been active since a surprise eruption in 1968.



*Beauty and a beast*

One of the most popular places for viewing Arenal is at its base, where a volcano-heated stream flows into a small waterfall and then diverts into a series of mineral baths that are part of Tabacon Hot Springs, a resort complex with eight swimming pools. (It welcomes day visitors as well as overnight guests.) You can lie in the pools at night and listen to Arenal erupt.

Because eruptions and weather are unpredictable, it's best to spend at least one night near the volcano, either in the town of La Fortuna or at one of the lodges in

the area to maximize chances of viewing the almost daily eruptions (you can ask to be awakened if an eruption happens at night). La Fortuna has a good selection of accommodations, and a nearby waterfall is a worthwhile excursion for experienced hikers. You also can ride horses up to the lava flow, which is also accessible by hiking trails.

The volcano is still considered a potential danger when approaching areas susceptible to pyroclastic flows, so use a qualified guide for these hikes and horseback rides. Note that the side of the crater where lava flows originate will vary as the crater wall builds up and collapses. Viewing the fiery eruptions in the evening may be possible from one location and not possible from there a year later.

Lake Arenal is just west of the volcano, with fishing, hotels and, at the western end of the lake, windsurfing. In fact, some rate it as a world-class spot for the sport because of the strong and constant winds. The vistas are fantastic; many hotels have both lake and volcano views.

Although it's only 20 mi/30 km (as the crow flies) from Arenal Volcano to Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve, the indirect roads and bus connections take the better part of a day. If you're not driving, it's possible to travel via a more direct route, taking a boat across Lake Arenal. Combined service by Jeep, motorboat and then taxi cuts the trip even more.

## **Cahuita National Park**

Created to protect one of Costa Rica's three coral reefs on the Caribbean coast, Cahuita National Park has a black-sand beach lined with palm trees. There is also a nature trail in the park that runs through the lowland rain forest and provides opportunities for viewing birds and other wildlife, including monkeys, armadillos and sloths.

Because most of the reef is in shallow water near the coast, it's perfect for snorkeling. Glass-bottomed boats leave from the nearby town of Cahuita. You also can fish, kayak, bicycle and horseback ride in the area.

Only 90 mi/145 km southeast of San Jose, Cahuita offers an island feeling, minus the heavy tourist population. Take advantage of its Caribbean culture to get your hair braided, listen to reggae and dance all night.

## **Corcovado National Park**

Covering one-third of the Osa Peninsula on the Pacific coast near the Panamanian border, Corcovado is one of the country's wildest and most remote parks. Its thick forests, deserted beaches and swamps are home to most of the

country's endangered species, including jaguars, tapirs, scarlet macaws, four kinds of monkeys, poison dart frogs and crocodiles.

Choose your accommodations carefully—there are quite a few lodges in the area, but many of them are basic (and not all have electricity). Each offers different activities, too—from horseback riding to deep-sea fishing. There are also bunks and camping space at the Sirena ranger station, but they must be reserved at the MINAE ranger station in Puerto Jimenez.

On the northern edge of the park, you'll find the Rio Claro National Wildlife Refuge (formerly Marenco Biological Reserve). This private reserve is sometimes visited by ships after they cruise through the remote Golfo Dulce, and passengers are brought in on small motorized boats.

Although the park is petite (1,235 acres/500 hectares), its location near the immense Corcovado National Park means there are many more rain-forest animals than you'd expect in so few acres/hectares. This area is especially good for seeing scarlet macaws. The most popular trail is to the Rio Claro's cascades and beautiful swimming hole.

The best time to visit is December-April.

## **Limon**

### **Overview**

## Introduction

Once an important banana port on Costa Rica's Caribbean coast, Puerto Limon is better known today as a good jumping-off point for visitors headed to Cahuita and Tortuguero national parks, or the Gandoca-Manzanillo National Wildlife Refuge. The city is also sometimes called simply "Limon" by locals, although that is also the name of the province.



*Tropical landscape with view of Isla Uvita*

Puerto Limon, which is about 100 mi/160 km east of San Jose, is also a popular stop for cruise ships. Unfortunately, there really isn't much to see or do in Puerto Limon itself—unless you are there for the huge Columbus Day Carnival in October.

This may soon change, however, as a major restoration project is under way in Puerto Limon to refurbish cultural buildings and improve infrastructure, including the Museo Regional de la Provincia de Puerto Limon, which used to reside in the colonial-era post office. Puerto Limon also hosted the XII Festival Internacional de las Artes in March 2010.

Bringing further recognition to this oft-forgotten city, the Transat Jacques Vabre sailboat race finished in Puerto Limon in 2009, and the city is expected to continue hosting this event. An environmental impact study to expand Puerto Limon has also been approved, and investors are bidding on the project.

## Highlights

**Sights**—Exploring the Mercado Central (Central Market); relaxing at Playa Bonita; a boat trip up the Tortuguero Canal; snorkeling at Cahuita; viewing wildlife at Tortuguero National Park.

**Memorable Meals**—The bargain-priced buffet at Just Wright Place Restaurant in Puerto Limon; top-notch service and an international menu at Park Hotel Restaurant; fish ceviche at Ceviche San Andres; jerk chicken at Jammin' Restaurant in Puerto Viejo; tenderloin steak in coconut sauce at Coral Reef Restaurant in Cahuita; authentic Caribbean cuisine at Maxi Restaurant and Bar in Manzanillo; watching the waves crash at Sobre Las Olas Restaurant at Playa Negra.

**Late Night**—Chilling with killer tropical cocktails at the bars in Cahuita, Puerto Viejo and Manzanillo; grooving to calypso during the city's annual Carnival.

**Walks**—Hiking the wilderness trails in Cahuita National Park; trekking in the Gandoca-Manzanillo National Wildlife Refuge.

**Especially for Kids**—An evening turtle-watching excursion at Tortuguero National Park; viewing sloths up close at Aviarios del Caribe Sloth Refuge; butterflies, snakes and frogs at the Veragua Rainforest Research and Adventure Park.

## Geography

Puerto Limon occupies a small bay surrounded on the north and west sides by low hills. It is open to the south, and for many miles/kilometers beyond is a marshy, mangrove-lined coastal plain. A small, craggy island—Isla Uvita—sits in the bay.

In 1991, the shore upon which Puerto Limon sits was heaved upward as much as 6.5 ft/2 m in places by an earthquake, and the seafront boulevard (which once overlooked a small beach) today overlooks a high-and-dry coral reef. The rocky, indentured shoreline north of town is backed by thickly forested hills.

Two beaches—Playa Bonita and Playa Portete—draw locals on weekends. Playa Bonita is by far the prettiest. Tucked between forested headlands, it has a coral reef offshore, and the tubular waves that wash ashore draw surfers.

## History

Limon Bay has a unique spot in Costa Rica's history. It was there that Christopher Columbus first stepped ashore on the region's Caribbean shores in 1502 during his fourth and last voyage to the New World. The Genoese explorer anchored off Isla Uvita and called the region La Huerta (The Garden). Spanish conquistadores soon decimated the local population (many native people were enslaved to work in gold mines elsewhere in Central America), although that part of the coast was never really settled to any degree.

Pirates were a constant scourge along the coast. Many operated as loggers and smugglers—they also introduced the first African slaves to the region—and allied with coastal natives against the Spanish. Cacao was introduced in the 17th century, and for the next two centuries was the region's major export.

In the latter part of the 19th century, Jamaican laborers were imported to work alongside Chinese indentured laborers building the Atlantic Railroad (completed in 1880), linking the then-minor port town of Puerto Limon to San Jose. Many

stayed to infuse the coast with distinctive Caribbean island cultural traits. The railroad's developer, Minor Keith, negotiated a huge land grant as part of the railroad deal and introduced bananas to the Caribbean lowlands. The industry thrived until disease struck in the 1930s.

In 1979, the cacao industry was effectively destroyed by *Monilia* fungus. The desultory port town limped along and was dealt another blow in 1991 when a severe earthquake destroyed many buildings, including the city's major hotel. Since then, a remarkable recovery and development has taken place, assisted by a regional tourism boom and major investments in a cruise terminal.

## **Port Information**

### **Location**

Cruise ships stopping on the Caribbean coast usually dock at Puerto Limon, which is the major port city and transportation hub of Costa Rica's east coast. The cruise terminal opens directly onto the main square in town—Parque Vargas. The terminal has its own crafts market with more than 100 artists, telephones, a pharmacy, and salons offering manicures, pedicures and massages when a cruise ship is in port. The main open-air market used by locals is just a two-block walk from the terminal.

Taxis are available both inside and outside the terminal gates, though it's best to take the ones inside as they have been approved by the port authority. Internet access is not available at the terminal, but there is an Internet cafe next door to Brisas del Mar Restaurant in Parque Vargas. Future plans for the terminal include a clothing store, a snack shop and a post office.

Many cargo ships (including those that carry paying passengers) sometimes bypass the city in favor of Moin, a dock about 4 mi/6 km northwest of Puerto Limon. Moin is little more than a pier where passengers disembark for tours and shore excursions, although private boats depart from there to Tortuguero. (The pier also serves the nearby banana plantations and oil refinery.) Neither Puerto Limon nor Moin has a tourist information booth.

### **Shore Excursions**

Cruise ship passengers can choose from at least two dozen or so exciting shore excursions. The most popular offerings include nature excursions to Tortuguero National Park, Cahuita National Park, tours of the Costa Flores horticultural farm, a ride on the Rain Forest Aerial Tram, a Limon city tour and white-water rafting on the Reventazon River.

Most cruise passengers take ship-sponsored shore excursions because local transportation is limited. The bus system is not dependable, and rental cars aren't readily available. But it is possible to fashion your own itinerary to nearby parks and preserves.

Another option is to take one of the authorized taxis that depart from inside the terminal gates. (If you decide to take a taxi outside the gates, look for red taxis with a yellow triangle on the side doors.) For short trips, it is best to ask drivers to use the meter. Fares for longer trips can sometimes be negotiated. Many drivers speak some English. Tipping is not expected, but you might add a little extra for good service.

Several short trips are possible from Puerto Limon and Moin. Just north of the ports are the Tortuguero canals. A boat is the best way to explore this swampy terrain, and most depart from the Moin pier. Cahuita National Park, about an hour's drive south of Puerto Limon, can also be visited easily by taxi from either port. The park contains the only mature coral reef on the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica, and the adjacent village of Cahuita is filled with colorful Caribbean charm, as well as small cafes, excellent restaurants and good shopping. A taxi from the port to the park or village should cost about 24,000 CRC each way.

Just north of Cahuita (about a 18,700 CRC taxi ride each way from the port) is Aviarios del Caribe Sloth Refuge, offering opportunities to see sloths and other creatures, including a bird-filled lagoon.

Guided tours—and their prices—vary from cruise line to cruise line. Book early because some fill up fast. Some include lunch and drinks, and the number of stops varies, so the final price may vary significantly.

## Potpourri

Manatees inhabit the waters of wetland systems along the shore. These marine mammals spend most of their time submerged and thrive on munching water hyacinths. To spot them, look for bubbles erupting at the surface—the result of flatulence.

Sloths can often be seen in the trees around Puerto Limon and even crawling along telegraph wires. Many of the sloths at the Aviarios del Caribe Sloth Refuge center have been electrocuted while crawling along the wires.

Many black *costenos* (coast-dwellers) speak a lilting patois—part English, part Spanish, part Creole—that can dumbfound visitors.

Iguanas are called "tree chickens" by *campesinos* (farmers), who eat them. Other Costa Ricans consider the giant lizards to be a "poor-man's food."

Because hard currency was scarce in colonial times, cacao beans were sometimes used as currency.

Since the Caribbean coast is relatively straight, there are no marinas on that side of Costa Rica because there are no bays or harbors for shelter.

Banana and pineapple plantations predominate in the area in and around Limon Province. Banana plantations enfold the maturing stalks of bananas in blue plastic bags to ensure that they arrive in supermarkets in pristine condition. When driving past a banana plantation at certain times of the season, all the banana trees appear to have giant blue blossoms hanging from them.

The idea to export bananas from Central America originated when U.S. railroad entrepreneur Henry Meiggs traveled to Costa Rica to build a route from San Jose to Limon. Upon Meiggs' death, his nephew Minor Keith took over and started planting bananas to feed the workers. When the railroad was finished, he began exporting the crop, which later gave birth to the United Fruit Co.

Around 80% of all goods imported and exported in Costa Rica pass through Moin port.

## **See & Do**

### **Sightseeing**

Puerto Limon is a fairly tranquil city, notwithstanding its importance as the country's main trading port. The main highway into the city is chock-full of large container trucks heading to and from the docks, and extreme caution is required while driving the highway. Large container-storage farms dominate the scenery on the drive into this port city. The highway between San Jose and Limon washes out on occasion, so check conditions before taking to the road. The old highway through Turrialba is a scenic alternative.

The city itself, however, is relatively calm. Life centers around the Mercado Central, or Central Market (Avenidas 2/3 and Calles 3/4). Leafy Parque Vargas has a bust of Christopher Columbus and an interesting, albeit much aged, mural profiling the region's history. The town hall (on the park's north side), the recently restored Galeria Cristal and the Black Star Line are structures of note in the city. The colonial-era post office, home of the Museo Regional de la Provincia de Puerto Limon, is also being restored. It's best to take a city tour to soak up Limon's nostalgic feel. If you have time, Puerto Limon's real pleasure lies in wandering the back streets lined with colorful timber homes in typical Caribbean style.

## Amusement Parks

### Veragua Rainforest Research and Adventure Park

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Off Highway 32 (a short drive west of Limon)  
Limon, Costa Rica

**Phone:** 2296-5056

<http://www.veraguarainforest.com>

This attraction is both an educational center where you can observe biologists at work and a theme park complete with an aerial tram ride. The park offers a special "shore excursion" for cruise visitors on a tight schedule.

## Zoos & Wildlife

### Aviarios del Caribe Sloth Sanctuary

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Off Highway 36  
Cahuita, Costa Rica

**Phone:** 2750-0775

<http://www.slothrescue.org>

This private reserve contains cages full of sloths and other creatures, plus a lagoon filled with kingfishers, egrets and herons. The guided tour includes a canoe ride through the Estrella River Delta.

Open daily from 7 am-5 pm (last tour begins at 2:30 pm). 13,400 CRC adults, 8,000 CRC children ages 5-11, free for children younger than 5.

## Other Options

### Jungle Breeze

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Limon, Costa Rica

**Phone:** 8854-8301

<http://www.junglebreeze.com>

This facility offers guided walking tours, horseback riding, canopy tours, a zipline and a heliconia garden.

Reservations recommended but not required. Admission to the grounds is 10,700 CRC adults, 8,000 CRC children. Prices for tour packages vary. .

## Recreation

Near the port, there is surfing at Playa Bonita, and a few companies organize a city tour of Puerto Limon. However, most tourist activities are in the surrounding areas. Appealing ventures for those keen on being immersed in the natural environment include a boat trip up the Tortuguero Canal toward Tortuguero National Park, visiting Cahuita National Park and hiking in the Gandoca-Manzanillo Wildlife Refuge.

North of Tortuguero, Barra del Colorado is a prime locale for game fishing (tarpon and snook are the feisty prizes). One-, two- and three-day white-water trips on the Reventazon River prove thrilling.

Hikers can follow coastal trails through Cahuita National Park (teeming with wildlife), the Gandoca-Manzanillo Wildlife Refuge to spot leatherback turtles, or the more rugged, lonesome and demanding Hitoy-Cerere National Park.

Snorkeling is best along the reefs in Cahuita and Manzanillo, and scuba diving is popular in Punta Uva (south of Puerto Viejo) and Manzanillo. Dolphin-spotting trips are also offered at Manzanillo and Punta Uva.

Isla Uvita, a small island off the coast near Puerto Limon, is a great place for kayaking, scuba diving and snorkeling.

Surfing is popular at Puerto Viejo, south of Cahuita. The famous "Salsa Brava" break is for experienced surfers, while the beach break at Playa Cocles, just to the south, is more gentle.

## Nightlife

Although a swinging nightlife is somewhat lacking in Puerto Limon itself—unless you happen to be in town for the city's huge Columbus Day Carnival celebration in October—action awaits to the south. The strong Caribbean influence and backpacker culture in Puerto Viejo, Cahuita and Manzanillo produces a fun

nightlife scene that includes calypso music and dancing on the beach, fueled by exotic tropical drinks. There are also more upscale options starting to appear.

## Shopping

The best place to shop for local artwork in Puerto Limon is the open-air Galeria Cristal, where local artists create and sell their pieces. More than 100 craft stalls can be found inside the cruise terminal when a cruise ship is in port. The central market also sells hammocks and crafts. Souvenirs La Casona, at Parque Vargas, sells T-shirts, hats and crafts from around Costa Rica (phone 2758-5752).

The best choices, however, are found in Cahuita and Puerto Viejo, which have dedicated souvenir stores selling hammocks, batiks, shell and coral jewelry, and gorgeous wood carvings. Stalls line the shore in Puerto Viejo selling arts and crafts and ethnic jewelry from all over Central America. Take a stroll down the main east-west road in Puerto Viejo for higher-end arts and crafts.

Info Boutique in Cahuita has a nice selection local crafts, souvenirs, and guidebooks and reading material in English. Tribal Market Art Cafe in Playa Chiquita, between Puerto Viejo and Manzanillo, sells carefully chosen ethnic textiles and crafts from around the world.

## Dining

Puerto Limon has several excellent bargain restaurants, although gourmands should keep their expectations in check. The Mercado Central has snack counters where you can fill up on typical local dishes for less than 3,000 CRC.

Although good restaurants and swinging nightlife are somewhat lacking in Puerto Limon itself, action awaits to the south. Puerto Viejo, Cahuita and Manzanillo provide strong Caribbean influence and cuisine, as well as offer surfer and backpacker culture and fun nightlife. There are also more upscale options starting to appear.

## Security

### Personal Safety

Downtown Puerto Limon is not particularly appealing to visitors. Except for a few nice parks and some monuments, there isn't much to see. We recommend avoiding the city at night unless you're in a group and/or are accompanied by a

local tour guide. Caution is required while walking, as pickpockets abound. Avoid the sailors' bars near the port.

Crime in Costa Rica is largely opportunistic. Don't leave your belongings unattended in stores, restaurants, on public transportation or at the beach. When hiking, it's best to leave valuables secured at the hotel, including expensive jewelry, and to take along just copies of your passport's data page and Costa Rica entry stamp.

Costa Rica is relatively safe when compared to many Latin American countries, but as everywhere, drugs are having an impact, and crimes are becoming more frequent and more violent. Just remain alert and avoid run-down or suspicious areas.

Tourist police patrol around Puerto Limon, Cahuita, and between Puerto Viejo and Manzanillo. Their uniforms are clearly marked with the words "Tourist Police" on the back. They can be contacted at 2286-1473. In an emergency, dial 911.

Stay in groups when visiting national parks and preserves. Women should exercise extra caution and never hike isolated trails alone. The best way to see a national park in Costa Rica is with a certified local tour guide. This is not only safer, but you will also see more wildlife.

Beware of dangerous riptides, which can drag you out to sea, and avoid swimming in the ocean during high surf.

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

## **Weather**

Costa Rica's Caribbean coast has its own unique microclimate. Tradewinds keep the weather hot and humid most of the year, and short but heavy rainfall occurs often.

## **Transportation**

Getting to Puerto Limon is relatively easy since the airport immediately south of town opened. It offers frequent links from San Jose to Puerto Limon and to destinations farther south. However, access to Tortuguero and Barra del Colorado is limited to small planes and water taxis.

The town of Puerto Limon is sufficiently small that you can walk virtually everywhere, although taxis are required to get to nearby Playa Bonita.

If you plan to head out of town, we recommend that you take a private or group tour from one of the companies offering trips to the country's parks and preserves, or hire a private taxi.

## **Air**

Puerto Limon International Airport (LIO) is about 4 mi/7 km south of Puerto Limon. Airport facilities have been remodeled and expanded but remain fairly basic. Phone 2758-1379.

Sansa Airlines operates from Juan Santamaria Airport, and Nature Air operates from Tobias Bolanos Airport, a small general-aviation airport in the suburb of Pavas, west of San Jose.

Taxis are available at the airport.

## **Public Transportation**

Costa Rica also has a good intercity bus system for those interested in exploring on their own. Transported MEPE (phone 2257-8129) buses operate four times daily from San Jose's Grand Terminal del Caribe. Additional buses pass through Puerto Limon en route to Cahuita and Puerto Viejo. Buses for San Jose depart from Calle 9, Avenida 2, in Puerto Limon.

Public buses regularly head south from Avenida 4, between calles 2 and 4, toward Sixaola with stops in Cahuita and Puerto Viejo.

Bus schedules are available at Costa Rica Tourism Institute offices in San Jose. Avenida 4, San Jose. Phone 2290-5800.

For quick and reasonably priced transportation between hotels around Costa Rica, make reservations with Interbus. Phone 2283-5572.  
<https://www.interbusonline.com>.

## **Taxi**

Within Puerto Limon, taxis provide the most reliable transportation for visitors. Make sure you only get into official taxis, which are the small red cars with a white or yellow sign and a yellow triangle on the side doors. Cruise ship visitors have access to authorized taxis that wait within the terminal gates.

Illegal taxis operate throughout the country and are called *pirata* taxis. Sometimes prices are lower in *piratas*, but their service is not regulated.

Cabs are commonly available and inexpensive, but make sure the meter is set when you enter the vehicle. Some drivers may claim that their meter is broken, but generally this is a scam. Nonetheless, if this happens to you, make sure to set the fare before beginning your trip—destinations within downtown should cost less than 2,225 CRC. Invariably, taxi drivers will inflate their rates for tourists—sometimes by two or three times the legal fare.

Ask your cruise director or hotel concierge for the appropriate fare before hailing a cab. Drivers are usually amenable to serving as private tour guides, but settle on a price beforehand.

## Events

Every August, Puerto Limon comes alive for the Black Culture Festival, which celebrates Afro-Caribbean culture with music, dance and even dominoes.

Puerto Limon also hosts the nation's biggest festival—Carnival—during the week of 12 October, when Columbus Day is celebrated. This Mardi Gras-style party draws as many as 100,000 spectators for a bacchanal featuring live calypso bands, beauty contests and floats. Watch out for pickpockets and drunks.

Costa Rica celebrates Independence Day with all Central American countries on 15 September. The celebrations begin on 14 September, when a freedom torch is brought from Nicaragua by Costa Rican relay runners, arriving in the old capital of Cartago in time for the singing of the National Anthem at 6 pm. This is followed by parades, marching bands and parties that continue until dawn on 15 September.

All of Costa Rica also celebrates Mother's Day on 15 August, when mom is queen for the day. This special tribute to mothers is celebrated on the same day as the Virgin Mary's ascent to heaven.

During Semana Santa (Holy Week), the week preceding Easter Sunday, there are festivities and processions. Ticos flock to the beaches during this time, so plan far in advance.

## Manuel Antonio National Park

One of the most popular parks in Costa Rica, located 30 mi/48 km south of San Jose, Manuel Antonio National Park has become the focus of the debate that concerns Costa Rica as a whole. It was intended to preserve nature, but its popularity threatens the environment that visitors go to see.



*Tropical beach in park*

Responding to some of the ill effects of mass visitation (including pollution from hotels and automobiles and deleterious interactions between humans and wildlife), the government has taken steps to limit the number of visitors to Manuel Antonio: Camping is no longer allowed, the park is closed on Monday, and only 600-800 visitors are allowed in daily, depending on the day of the week.

After wading through an estuary at the entrance to the park—anywhere from ankle deep to waist deep, depending on the tides—you can choose from exceptional white-sand beaches. (For a small fee, a boat will paddle you across.) Playa Espadilla Sur—also called Second Beach—is especially good for snorkeling and swimming.

A network of trails runs through the forest, allowing you to observe an abundance of wildlife: birds, white-faced capuchin monkeys, coatis, sloths, and colorful crabs and lizards. There are a number of activities that you can enjoy in the area surrounding the park, including rafting, surfing, sea kayaking, horseback riding and sportfishing (especially for sailfish mid-December to late April).

One excursion to consider is the Canopy-Safari trip, which includes breakfast, a Jeep ride into the forest and ziplining and rappelling through the forest. You can go in the morning and spend time on the beach when you return.

If you're planning to stay several days in the Manuel Antonio area, try to get a room at one of the hotels that line the road between the park and the town of Quepos. They're more expensive than those in town, and you must book well in advance, but they're worth it: Many are discretely built into the jungle and take you close to the wildlife—we saw a sloth ever so slowly cross the road in front of our hotel.

Quepos, a fishing town with a marina, several sportfishing operators and a base for local activities, boasts a large number of restaurants and modest accommodations, plus shops and art galleries where you can catch up on your souvenir shopping.

## Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve

If the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve were Costa Rica's only attraction, nature lovers would still flock to the country. This reserve, on the steep slopes of a mountain range and 120 mi/195 km northwest of San Jose, is home to rare and unusual wildlife, including jaguars and pumas, although the thick vegetation and daily mists from which the reserve takes its name can make viewing them difficult.



*View of forest*

Among the 450 species of birds in the reserve are emerald toucanets and the aptly named resplendent quetzal. Listen for the call of the three-wattled bellbird, which emits a loud metallic "bonk" in the ear of a potential mate. The best birding occurs September-April when many birds are migratory.

Getting to Monteverde used to be tough: You had to spend several hours on dreadful roads. However, the paved road now continues to the town of Guacimal, and plans are in place to finish it all the way to Santa Elena. An extended stay is a good idea in high season (December-May), because you may have to wait a few hours to be admitted to the park. (The number of people allowed in is limited.)

The hiking trails in the reserve are excellent but sometimes muddy. Take rain gear, as well as warm clothing in any season.

The community of Monteverde, near the reserve, is an interesting stop. It was founded in the early 1950s by American Quakers who were attracted to Costa Rica because of its lack of an army. The Quakers built a cheese factory in this pleasant town and have taken charge of maintaining the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve and raising funds for its expansion. If you visit the cheese factory, you can try all the local specialties, including the beloved Palmito cheese. (If not, you can purchase Monteverde cheese in almost any market.) There are also coffee plantations that offer tours.

Comfortable accommodations, including a wide range of alpine lodges, are available, but be sure to book well in advance. It can be difficult to get around Monteverde because of its mountainous terrain, but taxis (all four-wheel-drive vehicles) are easily accessible and affordable.

The main village is Santa Elena, about 1 mi/2 km below Monteverde, which is actually a community of widely dispersed individual homes. Most services and facilities are in Santa Elena, which has some of the more interesting attractions locally. Our favorite is the serpentarium, displaying all manner of snakes. The local community operates the Santa Elena Cloud Forest Reserve, with all the same species (plus spider monkeys) as the more popular Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve.

Nearby Selvatura offers several attractions, including a rain-forest canopy walk plus the Jewels of the Rainforest insect collection.

Small businesses have sprung up to cater to the influx of travelers. The businesses tend to be environmentally and culturally sensitive—from a gallery specializing in hummingbird art and feeders to cooperatives selling local women's needlework to a small butterfly garden. (The ingenious camouflage techniques employed by caterpillars and chrysalises are fascinating—some look like leaves, raindrops or foul-tasting beetles.)

## **San Jose**

## **Overview**

## **Introduction**

San Jose, Costa Rica, is the country's social, political and commercial center, and it's more cosmopolitan and prosperous than many cities of Central America. San Jose is a pleasant place to visit, although it has comparatively few colonial structures, and most travelers use it as a stepping stone to somewhere else in the country. Volcanoes and mountains ring the city's neighborhoods and suburbs; cloud forests, raging rivers and rain forests lie within a few hours' drive.



*Early evening over city*

San Jose has its own attractions worth exploring, however, and these are on the increase. The capital has entered a revitalization period—condos are going up to attract urban dwellers, cultural events are on the rise, and older neighborhoods have revived thanks to the boom in tourism. Because there has traditionally been a lack of urban planning, San Jose's architecture is a mishmash of historic colonial structures, glass high-rises and run-down buildings. In many ways, this is part of its charm. On the downside, the city's streets are plagued by congestion and pollution in a country renowned for its environmental prowess, though this is thankfully changing.

Amidst it all, the city is blessed with high-quality restaurants, excellent art galleries, museums and boutique-hotels. San Jose's delightful spring-like climate is never too hot and never too cold because of the city's location in the Central Valley surrounded by mountains. And the Ticos, as locals are known, are friendly hosts who do their best to make your stay enjoyable.

## Highlights

**Sights**—The European-style Teatro Nacional; the elevated square in Parque Central; the variety of goods and lively activity at the Mercado Central; the crafts fairs in front of the Museo Nacional.

**Museums**—Exhibits of pre-Hispanic cultures and colonial artifacts, and exhibits on 19th- and 20th-century history and culture at the Museo Nacional; pre-Columbian gold sculpture, jewelry and other artifacts at the Museo de Oro Precolumbino; pre-Columbian jade figurines and jewelry at the Museo de Jade; contemporary art at the Museo de Arte Costarricense.

**Memorable Meals**—A romantic dinner at Restaurant Grano de Oro; the sample platter at Lubnan; hip, bohemian La Hoja De Aire; *parilla* at La Esquina de

Buenos Aires; people-watching at News Cafe and Restaurant on Avenida Central; delicious seviche and Peruvian seafood at Machu Picchu.

**Late Night**—Disco at El Tobogan; live bands and a hip beatnik crowd at El Cuartel de la Boca del Monte; live jazz at the Jazz Cafe in San Pedro or Escazu; DJs and live house music at Club Vertigo.

**Walks**—Exploring the galleries, cafes and stately mansions of barrios Amon and Otoya; strolling the pedestrian precincts along Avenida Central and Avenida 4; walking leafy Parque Nacional; a walking tour of downtown San Jose.

**Especially for Kids**—The hands-on science exhibits at Museo de los Ninos; INBioparque in Santa Domingo; La Paz Waterfall Gardens with its aviary, butterfly farm, hummingbird garden and Costa Rican jungle cats exhibits.

## Geography

Sitting in the middle of the fertile Meseta Central (Central Valley), with volcanoes to the north and a rugged tectonic mountain chain to the south, San Jose has grown awkwardly into a metropolitan area of more than 1 million residents. Its jumble of potholed streets confounds visitors and residents alike.

All main roads eventually lead to the intersection of Avenida Central and Calle Central in the heart of downtown. Several of Costa Rica's most famous landmarks lie within a few blocks of this intersection and are clustered around a series of plazas and parks. The congested downtown should be seen on foot.

Finding your destination in San Jose can be particularly difficult, as there are few street signs, and street numbers are even rarer. Addresses are referred to by the nearest street junction (for example, Avenida 2 between Calle 3 and Calle 5, expressed in shorthand as A2, C3/5). And to make things even more confusing, residents usually give directions by referring distances and compass directions from common landmarks (some of which no longer exist). Many locals don't even know the name or number of the street they live on.

Several upscale neighborhoods circle the center of downtown. The 19th-century barrios Amon and Otoya to the north are both undergoing gentrification, and several turn-of-the-20th-century mansions have been converted into hotels and restaurants. San Pedro to the east is home to the University of Costa Rica along with trendy cafes and nightspots. At the western edge of downtown, the La Sabana district surrounds the largest metropolitan park and extends west to Rohrmoser, home to foreign embassies.

Farther out, where San Jose has extended its sprawl into the Meseta Central, several important suburbs are essentially part of the city. Escazu and

Rohrmoser, both upscale, are home to foreign embassies. Access in and out of Escazu has greatly improved as it grows into the capital's new business and financial center. The international airport is in Alajuela, a separate town about 12 mi/19 km west of San Jose. Between the two, the area of Ciudad Colon has several modern hotels that cater to leisure, business and convention travelers.

## History

When Spanish conquistadors arrived in Costa Rica in the early 16th century, there were some 400,000 indigenous people inhabiting the region. Their cultures were not as sophisticated as those of the ancient Maya and Aztecs to the north, but they had developed agriculture, metallurgy, animistic religious beliefs and a hierarchical system of government.

By 1564, when the Spanish established their colonial capital at Cartago, near present-day San Jose, there were only about 120,000 indigenous people left in Costa Rica, mainly because of diseases and forced labor inflicted by the Spanish. By 1611, that number had shrunk to 10,000.

Attracted by the Central Valley's rich soil and temperate climate, Spanish settlers founded San Jose in 1737. By the time the competing city factions that fought for Costa Rica's independence designated the city as the capital in 1823, the coffee industry was prospering and bringing wealth to what had been a dusty little town in the middle of the country. San Jose became the commercial center for the booming coffee-export business in the mid-1800s, and coffee barons built handsome mansions with European designs and furnishings.

The city's cultural elite also funded construction of the neoclassic Teatro Nacional (National Theater), which opened in 1897 as a European-style opera house. By the early 20th century, San Jose was a cosmopolitan city (it was one of the first electrified cities in the world) with electric trolleys ferrying office workers and residents to well-ordered neighborhoods.

A short civil war in 1948 tore the city apart (bullet holes from the battles are visible in the walls of the Museo Nacional). The war led to the establishment of Costa Rica's constitution and the abolishment of the military in 1949. The country became an oasis of peace amid Central America's wars and revolutions, assisted by the government's commitment to, and guarantees in, health and education.

The city became an important financial and political hub for the entire region and benefited from a large influx of foreign investment, most recently in the high-tech and pharmaceutical industries. (Major international companies such as Intel and Motorola have built assembly plants outside San Jose in recent years.)

Costa Rica never entered into the military conflicts that plagued its neighbors, and its former president, Oscar Arias Sanchez, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987 for brokering peace among the Central American nations. In 2005, Arias successfully lobbied for a repeal on the one-term restriction for presidents and the following year became the first Costa Rican president elected to a second term.

## Port Information

### Location

You will likely fly in or out of San Jose's Juan Santamaria International Airport (SJO) if your cruise ship begins or ends its journey at one of Costa Rica's ports—Puntarenas and the nearby container port of Puerto Caldera on the Pacific coast, or Puerto Limon or the nearby container port of Moin on the Caribbean side.

The road between Puntarenas and San Jose has cut the drive to the capital to just one hour. The road between San Jose and Limon is unpredictable weather-wise, so visitors on a tight schedule should consider booking a charter flight.

### Shore Excursions

Cruise lines do not generally offer side trips to San Jose, but tour companies will design a tour for you, and day trips to San Jose are possible. The extra planning and effort are worthwhile. Although each area of Costa Rica is special and wonderful, a visit to San Jose—even a short one—is essential to really appreciate the full flavor of this unique country. If you choose to add days to either end of your cruise, there is plenty to see and do in San Jose and in the nearby countryside.

San Jose's main visitors center is downtown, beneath the Plaza de la Cultura. There is also a Costa Rican Tourism Institute booth with brochures and maps at the Juan Santamaria International Airport.

## Potpourri

The city's principal landmark is called Coca-Cola because a Coca-Cola bottling plant was located there many years ago. A busy local bus terminal is now at that location, and it is an area to avoid, especially at night.

Youth gangs, which were the scourge of tourists downtown in the 1990s, were called *chapulines* (grasshoppers) because they operated by swarming their prey.

During the 19th century, Costa Rica's capital was rotated between four competing cities. San Jose was named the nation's capital after the three rival cities formed a league and attacked San Jose, which won the "War of the League."

Construction of the Teatro Nacional was financed by local coffee barons, who voted a tax on coffee after Europe's leading opera company refused to perform in theater-less Costa Rica while touring Central America.

The nickname for a Costa Rican is Tico. San Jose's inhabitants call their city *chepe*—the local nickname for anyone named Jose—and residents of San Jose are called Chepes.

The buying and selling of genuine pre-Columbian art in Costa Rica is strictly against the law. Many individuals and families who owned such treasures before it became illegal have contributed them to such organizations as the Gold and Jade museums. Those who maintain possession of artifacts are strictly regulated in how they may handle and display them. Many hotels have custody of and display genuine pre-Columbian artifacts.

The Don Carlos Hotel has an antique post-Columbian restraining device, similar to a U.S. colonial-era stock, on display. The device consists of two immense logs lying one atop the other, with horizontal leg holes drilled through where the logs met. Prisoners (usually drunks) were seated on opposing side of the logs, with their legs through the hole in the lower log and the upper log was then placed over and padlocked to the lower log, trapping the prisoners' legs. The jailer could then go home at night, knowing his prisoners would still be there the next morning. The only other device like this in Costa Rica is on display in the National Museum.

Filibusters were individuals, usually North Americans, who, in the mid-19th century, raised armies and attempted to overthrow small, often Central American, countries. William Walker was a notorious—and unsuccessful—North American filibuster in Costa Rican history during the 1840s.

The *guanacaste* tree is the national tree of Costa Rica. It is a towering shade tree that is predominately found in Guanacaste Province. It gets its name from the indigenous Indian names for tree (*guana*) and ear (*caste*), as the curled seed pods resemble a human ear. It was selected as the national tree in honor of Guanacaste Province's act of voting to leave Nicaragua and join Costa Rica in 1826.

San Jose's 35,000-seat national stadium in Sabana Park was financed by the Chinese government and built by Chinese workers.

# See & Do

## Sightseeing

Most of San Jose's important attractions are located within easy walking distance of each other around downtown, which is best navigated on foot. Begin your exploration with a tour of the National Museum, the repository of the country's history.

Move on to the Museo de Oro Precolumbino and the adjacent National Theater, then take a break for coffee and people-watching at the Plaza de la Cultura. From there, pay a visit to the Jade Museum in the Amon district.

Once you've hit all the highlights, stroll the back streets of barrios Amon and Otoya, where handsome old coffee-baron mansions now house trendy cafes and boutique-hotels.

Whether you pack sightseeing into a short amount of time or stretch it out over a few days, be sure to take time to appreciate the town's atmosphere. San Jose is not particularly noted for its attractions but more for its easygoing lifestyle and nightlife. Weekends are the time to experience downtown at its best; the notorious traffic is somewhat less congested than during the week, and Ticos have a more casual attitude as they stroll the streets and congregate in the city's many parks to chat and relax.

## Casinos

There are several casinos in downtown San Jose. One of the most popular is the Hotel and Casino Del Rey which has table games, slots and a lively sports bar. Phone 2258-4880. Toll-free 866-727-0270 (from the U.S.). <http://www.delreyhotel.com>.

## Fiesta Casino

Garden Court Airport Hotel  
Alajuela, Costa Rica

**Phone:** 2223-1234

<http://www.fiesta.cr>

Costa Rica's largest casino is just a mile/kilometer from the Juan Santamaria International Airport. The casino offers a variety of table games including craps, roulette and poker. There is a second location in downtown San Jose.

## Historic Sites

### Catedral Metropolitana

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Calle Central at Avenida 2  
San Jose, Costa Rica

With its location on the Parque Central, you can't miss San Jose's largest cathedral. The whitewashed, columned edifice is minimal in design and mixes a Corinthian capital with a Byzantine dome. The most rewarding view is from the inside, where you can appreciate the stained-glass windows imported from France.

Monday-Saturday 6 am-6 pm, Sunday 6:30 am-9 pm. Free.

### Iglesia Merced

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Avenida 2  
San Jose, Costa Rica

The recently renovated, neo-Gothic Merced Church rewards visitors with mosaics, marble staircases and sculptures, the most famous being *Cristo Agonizante* by Manuel Zuniga. Visitors can also scale the 89-ft/27-m tower to enjoy city views and marvel at the tower's six bells and the German clock that hasn't needed a single piece replaced in more than 100 years.

Guided tours are offered daily at 10 am and noon. 5,457 CRC per person. Special tours can be organized.

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### Plaza de la Cultura

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Avenida Central at Calle 3  
San Jose, Costa Rica

Downtown's main plaza has been spiffed up with benches, a small clock tower, flower gardens and several clusters of shade trees. The plaza often plays host to

political speeches, live performances, news reports and national celebrations. Marimba bands, jugglers and clowns are also regulars on the town square. The plaza is a great place for people-watching in the evenings and on weekends. The National Theater is on the plaza's south side, and the Museo de Oro Precolumbino is beneath the theater.

## **Plaza de la Democracia**

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Avenida Central at Calle 15  
San Jose, Costa Rica

The National Museum rises above this series of recently renovated stairways and platforms where Ticos gather on weekends. Note the statue of national hero Don "Pepe" Figueres on the southwest corner. Street lights decorate the park and illuminate the museum's facade at night. Artisans display their wares at open-air stands along the edge of the plaza.

## **Teatro Nacional**

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Avenida 2 (between Calle 3 and Calle 5)  
San Jose, Costa Rica

**Phone:** 2221-1329

<http://www.teatronacional.go.cr>

The nation's architectural treasure, this European-style theater was completed in 1897 and is full of murals, frescoes and gold ornamentation. Try to see a performance, if time allows, but at least take a self-guided tour of the neoclassical 100-seat opera house. The ceiling mural depicting the production of bananas and coffee is worth the price of admission. The theater's restaurant, Teatro Cafe, is a pleasant place to stop for lunch or coffee.

Monday-Friday 9 am-4 pm, Saturday 9 am-5 pm. One-hour performances take place Tuesday at noon and Thursday at 5 pm in the theater's foyer. Guided tours are offered on the hour 9-11 am and 1-3 pm and are included in the 3,810 CRC entrance fee.

## **Museums**

### **Museo de Arte Costarricense**

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Parque La Sabana  
San Jose, Costa Rica

**Phone:** 2222-7155

<http://www.musarco.go.cr>

An excellent collection of 19th- and 20th-century Latin paintings and wooden sculptures and murals is housed in what was the country's first airport terminal. A stroll through the adjoining park makes for a relaxing afternoon.

Tuesday-Saturday 10 am-4 pm, Sunday 10 am-2 pm. 400 CRC (free on Sunday).

### **Museo de Arte y Diseno Contemporaneo**

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Avenida 3 (between Calles 15 and 17)  
San Jose, Costa Rica

**Phone:** 2255-3638 or 2257-7202

<http://www.madc.ac.cr>

More an art gallery than a museum, the National Museum of Contemporary Art and Design hosts exhibits by Costa Rican and other Latin American artists and designers. It is situated on the sprawling grounds of San Jose's former National Liquor Factory, a historical landmark that was transformed into a performing and fine-arts center. Wheelchair-accessible.

Open Monday-Saturday 9:30 am-4:45 pm. Adults 600 CRC, children free.

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### **Museo de Jade**

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11th Floor, Instituto Nacional de Seguros (INS), Avenida 7 (between Calle 9 and Calle 11)  
San Jose, Costa Rica

**Phone:** 2287-6034

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<http://portal.ins-cr.com/Social/MuseoJade>

Not to be missed, the Jade Museum has one of the world's largest collections of pre-Columbian jade figurines and jewelry. More than 7,000 pieces, with many backlit to demonstrate jade's transparency to best effect. Also exhibits of indigenous Indian history and culture.

Monday-Friday 8:30 am-3:30 pm, Saturday 9 am-1 pm. 4,366 CRC adults, free for children younger than 12.

### **Museo de los Ninos**

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Calle 4 at Avenida 9  
San Jose, Costa Rica

**Phone:** 2258-4929

<http://www.museocr.com>

The Children's Museum features hands-on learning about nature and science. Thirty-nine rooms contain interactive exhibits that range from a TV studio to model ecosystems, plus three working robots. The complex is housed in the city's former penitentiary and includes the Museo Historico Penitenciario and the Galeria Nacional, displaying contemporary Costa Rican art.

Tuesday-Friday 8 am-4:30 pm, Saturday and Sunday 9:30 am-5 pm. Hours may vary by season. 1,100 CRC adults, 800 CRC children.

### **Museo de Oro Precolumbino**

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Plaza de la Cultura at Avenida Central  
San Jose, Costa Rica

**Phone:** 2243-4202

<http://museosdelbancocentral.org>

A must-see, the gold museum contains almost 2,000 pieces of pre-Columbian gold sculpture and jewelry, along with a collection of pre-Columbian pottery and dioramas of pre-Columbian indigenous Indian life.

Daily 9:30 am-5 pm. About 4,500 CRC adults, free for children younger than 12.

### **Museo Nacional**

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Avenida Central, between Calle 15 and Calle 17  
San Jose, Costa Rica

**Phone:** 2257-1433 or 2258-0725

<http://www.museocostarica.go.cr>

Located in the bullet-pocked Bellavista Fortress, which was once the headquarters of the Costa Rican national army, this museum contains exhibits about pre-Hispanic cultures, history and modern Costa Rica. The building itself is an impressive piece of architecture with great views of San Jose.

Daily except Monday 8:30 am-4 pm. About 3,820 CRC.

## **Neighborhoods & Districts**

### **Barrio Amon and Barrio Otoya**

Several tropical-style mansions constructed by coffee barons in the late 1800s line the streets of these contiguous older neighborhoods on the north edge of downtown. Many of San Jose's most charming small hotels, along with galleries and cafes, are located in the mansions. Avenida 9 is the main street and is lined with delightful ceramic murals dedicated to the culture and history of Costa Rica.

## **Parks & Gardens**

### **Parque Central**

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Calle Central at Avenida 2  
San Jose, Costa Rica

A bandstand sits in the middle of this colorful, elevated square in front of the Catedral Metropolitana and is often the site of national celebrations and news reports (the colors make for good TV). The park is framed by leafy trees, and there are many stores in the surrounding area.

### **Parque la Sabana**

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At the west end of Paseo Colon  
San Jose, Costa Rica

San Jose's largest metropolitan park has jogging trails and paths that wind through groves of eucalyptus trees and broad lawns. It has a lake and stables for

horseback rides. The park is also home to the city's new national stadium, which was inaugurated in 2011. Avoid the southwest side, where muggings have been reported.

## **Parque Morazan**

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Calle 5 at Avenida 3  
San Jose, Costa Rica

This peaceful downtown park features a fountain, statues and busts of key figures in Latin American history, and the unusual domed Templo de Musica, which was reportedly modeled after La Trianon in Paris. On the park's north side stands the Escuela Metalica, a prefabricated metal school that was built in Brussels and shipped from France in 1892. The small Parque Espana adjoining Parque Morazan's west side has paths winding through tall trees and lush tropical vegetation.

## **Parque Nacional**

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Calle 15 at Avenida 1  
San Jose, Costa Rica

Two historically significant monuments can be found in this large, tree-shaded urban park. The main one, in the center of the park, is a statue showing the Central American nations driving out U.S. filibuster William Walker. The other is a likeness of national hero Juan Santamaria, a courageous drummer boy who was killed in the battle against William Walker's army. The latter now resides within the forecourt of the Legislative Assembly, on the park's southwest corner. Other important buildings surround the park, including the National Library and Electoral Tribunal.

## **Zoos & Wildlife**

### **INBioparque**

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San Jose, Costa Rica

**Phone:** 2507-8107

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<http://www.inbio.ac.cr/inbioparque>

Located in nearby Santo Domingo, this park is dedicated to educational programs on conserving and sustaining Costa Rican biodiversity. Although intended for all ages, the interactive exhibits have a special emphasis on educating children about the importance of protecting the country's ecology for the future. Attractions include a butterfly farm, a lagoon with caimans and iguanas, a bee farm, and displays of Costa Rican trees, plants, animals, birds and snakes.

Tuesday-Friday 8:30 am-2 pm, Saturday and Sunday 9 am-3:30 pm. 12,551 CRC adults, 7,094 CRC children. .

### **Parque Zoológico Simon Bolivar**

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Avenida 11 (between Calles 7 and 9)  
San Jose, Costa Rica

**Phone:** 2233-6701

<http://fundazoo.org>

The National Zoo is a good place to get acquainted with Costa Rica's varied wildlife. Some of the enclosures are small by North American standards, but the animals look well cared for. There are also labeled examples of Costa Rican plants.

Open daily 9 am-4:30 pm. 2,100 CRC adults, 1,400 CRC children ages 3-12, free for children younger than 3.

## **Recreation**

Costa Rica is a haven for nature lovers and outdoors enthusiasts, so it's ironic that San Jose has so few resources for recreational activities. The best place for outdoor play is Parque la Sabana (at the end of Paseo Colon), the city's largest park. It has a running track, a poorly equipped gymnasium, a swimming pool and soccer fields. Most of San Jose's other parks are too small for recreational activities. You will find a few golf courses on the outskirts of the city.

Recreational day trips out of the city—such as white-water rafting trips, zipline canopy tours and nature tours—are abundant.

## **Nightlife**

San Jose has a vibrant nightlife scene—Ticos love to dance. Clubs featuring salsa, merengue, *cumbia* and other Latin music are located all over downtown. You'll find that most nightclubs don't really get busy until midnight, and some have a nominal cover charge, especially if there's live music. Many bars serve *bocas*, which are appetizers similar to the tapas served in Spain. Most bars technically close at 2 am, but people usually keep partying. Bars rarely close completely until 4 am on the weekend. However, many bars close at midnight during the week.

El Pueblo in Barrio Tournon is home to two wildly popular discos. San Pedro, the university district, has alternative clubs featuring jazz, rock and blues music on weekends, as well as the popular Calle Amargura, full of bars, restaurants and cafes. The bar scene in the Escazu area also is hopping and tends to draw a more upscale crowd. Consult with the front-desk personnel at your hotel or look in the English-language newspaper, *The Tico Times* (<http://www.ticotimes.net>), for your best bets.

## Performing Arts

Overall, Costa Rica's strong tradition of arts and theater is reflected in San Jose. There are dozens of events happening at any one time, and it is becoming easier to get information about performances, although it still lacks the sophistication and support one might expect from a capital city.

## Spectator Sports

Soccer (*futbol*) is Costa Rica's favorite spectator sport, and San Jose has one of the nation's top teams, Saprissa. The regular season runs August-May (games are usually on Sunday afternoons and some Wednesday evenings), with championships in June. Ticket holders can choose between the cheap, sunny side of the stadium (*sol*) or the more expensive, shady side (*sombra*). *Futbol* is the one sport that causes the otherwise friendly Ticos to get a bit unruly. Those interested in stirring things up would do well to join the rowdies in the *sol*.

Costa Rican bullfighting (Las Corridas a la Tica) is more of a comical spectacle than the gory ritual encountered in most other Latin American countries. Large groups of volunteer "bullfighters" tease the bull and then run for cover with the enraged animal in hot pursuit. The high season for bullfighting in San Jose is the week after Christmas, when bullfights (*corridas*) are staged in Zapote, a suburb of San Jose.

Boxing continues to increase in popularity with more and more big names entering the ring. Most matches are held in the Gimnasio Nacional in Sabana Park. Basketball also has a small but loyal following in Costa Rica.

## Shopping

The most popular souvenirs found in local markets and shops are made from the gorgeous, rare woods found in the forests. Lustrous purple-heart, mahogany or teak bowls, plates, boxes and puzzles fill the shelves in souvenir shops, along with wooden hair clips, beaded necklaces, and handmade drums and guitars. Miniature *carretas* (oxcarts) are based on those once used by rural farmers, but often are painted with colorful whirling designs. A few shops carry rough-hewn masks made by the Boruca Indians of southern Costa Rica.

Many stalls selling artisans' work line the west side of Plaza de la Democracia. You can also window-shop for high-quality crafts and less-expensive souvenirs by strolling down Calle 7, starting at Avenida Central, where several craft stores are concentrated, and ending at Namu. San Jose's best art galleries also concentrate there, with everything from traditional *tico* rural scenes to abstract paintings by artists who command thousands of dollars for their works. Juan Santamaria International Airport also has excellent souvenir stores.

Coffee is another popular Costa Rican souvenir. The beans grown in the countryside are among the finest in the world, and some travelers fill their suitcases with dozens of bags of them. The most popular brands are Britt and 1820, but many shops also sell coffee from the Monteverde cloud forests and small regional processing plants, such as Cafe Rey. Most souvenir and gift shops sell coffee, or you can visit a large supermarket and stock up on several varieties (at better prices). The Cafe Britt stores at Juan Santamaria International Airport are also well-stocked.

Bargaining is less common in Costa Rica than in other Latin countries. You may be able to haggle for a better price from street vendors or in public markets, but expect to pay the asking price in established shops.

The craft center in the town of Sarchi, a 45-minute ride from San Jose, is a favorite source for gifts and souvenirs. Tourists can watch the artisans and crafts makers at work while they shop.

**Shopping Hours:** Shops are generally open Monday-Saturday 9 am-7 pm. Some are also open on Sunday during the high season.

## Galleries

Fine-art galleries are on the increase as San Jose rediscovers its vibrancy, in particular in the Barrio Amon district. For the latest on galleries and exhibitions, contact the Museo de Arte y Diseno Contemporaneo and inquire about the Art City Tour. <http://www.madc.ac.cr>.

## Dining

Until a few years ago, visitors to San Jose were hard-pressed to find alternatives to the local menu of rice and beans combined with beef, fish or chicken. The most familiar regional dish has long been *gallo pinto*, a blend of black beans, white rice and spices typically served at breakfast (Ticos often eat massive quantities of food at the morning meal). Many visitors get very fond of it and request *gallo pinto* at all meals.

*Casados*, set-price bargain meals combining rice, beans and chicken, fish or beef, are the standard entrees at lunch and dinner. *Casado* plates usually include a shredded vegetable salad and fried plantains or yucca. For an inexpensive and filling meal, stop at one of the *sodas*—small diner-like cafes where a *casado* and coffee generally costs less than 3,500. You'll find *sodas* in nearly every neighborhood. (You'll also have no trouble finding U.S. fast-food restaurants.)

Tropical fruits play an important role in local cuisine, and everyone should try the country's homegrown pineapples, papayas, mangoes and melons in fruit plates, juices and ice creams. We recommend a *batido*—a fruit shake—as a perfect way to beat the heat. Vegetables are less varied and often consist of boiled squash, carrots and potatoes. Appetizers, called *bocas*, include flaky empanadas and *patacones* (refried plantain patties).

Most restaurants in San Jose rely on time-honored standards, but an increasing number is catering to more discerning diners. The city has several excellent Italian restaurants, thanks to the large number of Costa Ricans of Italian ancestry. Asian restaurants thrive also, including a new crop of sushi bars. Meanwhile, chefs from around the world are designing menus in hotel and restaurant kitchens, drawing on local ingredients and foreign techniques. Sophisticated cafes are attracting a chic urban crowd, and historic mansions are now elegant restaurants. The most exciting restaurants are clustered in the fashionable and hip neighborhoods—Amon, Otoya, La Sabana and San Pedro. There are also some excellent restaurants popping up around Escazu.

For most Ticos, dinner begins around 7:30 pm. Although some restaurants do serve food into the night, it can be difficult to find food after 10 pm.

Security

## Health

The tap water is generally considered safe to drink in San Jose and at most major hotels and restaurants. Most hot, cooked food should be safe, but peel fresh fruit and raw vegetables before eating them. Make sure meat is cooked

thoroughly and avoid local dairy products that are not properly sealed and refrigerated. Most restaurants in San Jose (and major tourist venues) have high sanitary standards, but that isn't always true of restaurants outside the capital city. You may want to stick to bottled water or soft drinks when you are in small towns and rural areas.

Incidents of dengue fever are on the rise in Costa Rica, so protect yourself with a good insect repellent. Fortunately, this is not as great a concern in San Jose and the central highlands, where the climate precludes the presence of mosquitoes.

Snakes abound in national parks that you might visit on day trips; Costa Rica has 19 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.

Medical and emergency services are very good in Costa Rica. In an emergency, dial 911. The best hospital for English-speaking travelers is the Clinica Biblica at Avenida 14 and Calle Central. The hospital's emergency phone number is 2257-5252.

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

## Facts

### Money

#### Currency Exchange

ATMs have appeared all over the city, and you'll find several in the pedestrian area along Avenida Central and the Plaza de la Cultura. You can usually withdraw either colons or U.S. dollars—most businesses will accept either currency.

Generally speaking, the most convenient place to change money is at your hotel, though you may get a slightly better exchange rate at banks. Be forewarned, however, that many banks have a time-consuming process for changing money and often have long lines. Major banks accept traveler's checks at a slightly lower rate than cash.

It is best to carry clean and unmarked U.S. dollars, as other currencies can be difficult to exchange. Do not exchange money on the street; it is not only illegal,

but currency forgery has become a major problem in Costa Rica—you could end up with useless paper. For this reason, large bills are sometimes rejected or even confiscated.

Most banks are open Monday-Friday 8:30 am to 3 or 4 pm. Banks are usually the least crowded in the early morning.

## **Taxes**

Most tourist hotels apply a 16.8% government tax. Check to see whether this is included in quoted rates. Small budget hotels are usually an exception.

Restaurants charge a 13% tax which is either included in the menu prices or added to the bill. Check the bottom of the menu to see if the tax is included or not.

The airport departure tax is about 14,000 CRC.

## **Weather**

The climate in San Jose is temperate, with temperatures ranging 65-75 F/18-22 C year-round. The dry summer season runs mid-November to April, and the days are mostly clear. This is Costa Rica's high season, when hotels and attractions are packed and prices are highest.

The rainy season runs from the end of April to early November. Showers and heavy downpours typically occur in the afternoon, though at times it also rains for days on end. Occasionally the streets will flood. Follow the local tradition and carry a fold-up umbrella during the wet season.

In an effort to retain a certain number of visitors despite the cloudy skies, tourism promoters call this time the "green season." It's an appropriate name: During the rainy season, the countryside is lush, and rivers and waterfalls are at their best. Many hotels lower their rates during this season.

The best time to visit San Jose is in early December. Everything is still green, and tourism businesses have just geared up for the high season.

## **What to Wear**

Dress in San Jose is conservative yet casual. Men and women wear suits and other business attire in downtown offices and at business meetings. Bathing suits and short shorts or skirts are considered appropriate for the beach or river rafting—not for downtown. In central San Jose, you'll feel comfortable during the day in casual sport clothes, including walking shorts and sneakers. Evening

dress is a bit more formal in good restaurants, but jackets and ties are required in only the fanciest establishments. Women can wear skirts, dresses or slacks.

For hiking, we suggest you pack comfortable shoes (which will most likely get very wet and muddy) or hiking boots, lightweight long pants and long-sleeved shirts. We also recommend taking along a hat and packing a light raincoat or poncho. Dress conservatively if you plan on visiting small countryside communities. If you go river rafting, you will need a change of clothes and footwear.

## Transportation

Getting to San Jose is relatively easy from North America and the rest of the world. Getting around in downtown San Jose by car is difficult because streets are narrow and often congested. We suggest walking or taking taxis to sightsee within the city. *Note:* Addresses can pose challenges for first-time visitors.

Pedestrians do not have the right-of-way, however, and the drivers take full advantage of this fact. Be especially cautious at intersections

If you plan to head out of town, we recommend that you take a private or group tour from one of the companies offering trips to the country's parks and preserves.

### Air

The international airport, Juan Santamaria Airport (SJO), is about 11 mi/17 km north of San Jose. Airport facilities have been extensively remodeled and expanded. The ticketing area has been refurbished and gate areas brought to international standards. The immigration and commercial areas have been expanded, and a second floor equipped with heightened security for outbound passengers is open. New waiting areas along with a VIP lounge have also been completed. More commercial areas will also be added. Handicapped access has been improved. Phone 506-2437-2626. <http://www.alterra.co.cr>.

Sansa Airlines operates from Juan Santamria Airport to airstrips around the country. All other in-country flights are available from Tobias Bolanos International Airport, a small general-aviation airport in the suburb of Pavas, west of San Jose (phone 2232-2820).

### Connecting Transportation

*Best way:*

Taxis are always available. It is best to use the official airport taxi service (Taxis Unidos Aeropuerto), which has a ticket booth at the airport. The orange-colored taxis run 24/7. You prepay for an official taxi at the booth before boarding your taxi. The usual daytime fare to downtown San Jose is about 10,000 CRC (phone 506-2222-6865; <http://www.taxiaeropuerto.com>). Avoid freelance taxi drivers touting their services outside the airport departure lounge.

*Other option:*

Some hotels offer courtesy pickup. Ask at the airport or call your hotel from there.

If you don't have a lot of baggage and feel adventurous, catch a bus from Alajuela to San Jose. They run frequently from bus stops just outside the terminal and cost only 450 CRC. Be sure to catch the one going from Alajuela to San Jose, rather than the one headed for Alajuela—they both stop at the same place and both say Alajuela on their signs.

## **Bus**

Costa Rica has a good intercity bus system for those interested in exploring on their own. Bus schedules are available at Costa Rica Tourism Institute offices in San Jose. Avenida 4, San Jose. Phone 2299-5800 or 2291-5764.

## **Car**

We do not recommend renting a car if you're timid behind the wheel: Traffic is heavy almost everywhere, and drivers tend to be reckless—even riding in the backseat of a taxi can prove terrifying. If you decide to do so, though, rental car agencies are plentiful in San Jose. However, driving a car in central San Jose can challenge even the most fearless driver, and it is often quicker to walk.

You will only need a car if you plan on numerous visits to outlying suburbs, such as Escazu and San Pedro, and if you intend to tour outside the city on day excursions (in which case we highly recommend a four-wheel-drive vehicle). Rates begin at about 22,250 CRC a day, and you will need your passport and driver's license to rent a vehicle.

## **Public Transportation**

The public-transit system consists of a fleet of smoke-spewing buses that serves every part of the city. However, there is no central bus terminal, and the system can be confusing; buses can be jam-packed, especially at rush hour, and we find

that it is often faster to walk between locales close to downtown. Watch your possessions, because pickpockets are common. On the up side, a bus ride is inexpensive—generally 200 CRC-450 CRC. The stops are marked with signs, some of which show the routes. Unless you are on a penny-pinching budget, however, you are better off sticking with taxis.

## **Taxi**

Within San Jose, taxis provide the most reliable transportation for visitors. Make sure you only get into official taxis, which are the small red cars with a white or yellow triangle on the side doors. Illegal taxis, called *piratas*, are privately owned vehicles that usually wait at bus stations. Although fares may be cheaper, their service is not regulated.

Cabs are commonly available and inexpensive, but make sure the meter, called *la maria*, is set when you enter the vehicle. Some drivers may claim that their meter is broken, but generally this is a scam. Nonetheless, if this happens to you, make sure to set the fare before beginning your trip—destinations within downtown should cost less than 3,500 CRC.

Invariably, taxi drivers will inflate their rates for tourists—sometimes by two or three times the legal fare. Ask your hotel concierge for the appropriate fare before hailing a cab. Drivers are usually willing to serve as private tour guides, but settle on a price before getting in. Taxis are no longer permitted to charge extra for rides after 10 pm.

## **Events**

Many of San Jose's offerings are based on religious holidays and annual festivals. The Christmas season is a high point for bullfights and general merrymaking, highlighted by the Festival of Lights (Festival de la Luz), when floats adorned with Christmas lights parade through town.

Fireworks light up the sky every night between Christmas and New Year's Day.

As for secular events, there's not much to choose from—soccer, concerts and the occasional play—but the natural surroundings should provide enough activities to fill your plate.

## **Tortuga Island**

Tortuga Island in the Gulf of Nicoya is usually seen as part of a popular day-trip excursion that begins with a bus ride from San Jose to Puntarenas. From there, a boat takes you to the island for a day of snorkeling, paddling or sunbathing on

sands as white and soft as fresh-ground sugar. Day excursions also leave from the Nicoya Peninsula.

## **Tortuguero National Park**

A lush, tropical jungle 55 mi/90 km northeast of San Jose and accessed only by water, Tortuguero offers the opportunity to see monkeys, sloths, manatees, caimans, snakes, river otter, macaws, toucans and dozens of other wildlife species.

Toured in small outboard boats or dugout canoes along Tortuguero's lagoons, the park is best seen in August, when the green sea turtle goes ashore at night to nest and lay eggs on the beach, which runs unbroken for 22 mi/35 km. But keep in mind that August also is the rainy season: Take something to keep your camera dry.

Plan to spend at least a night in one of the jungle lodges tucked along the canals so you can take an evening turtle-watching excursion or a predawn boat ride to observe the birds and animals. Visit the Cano Palma Biological Station near the village. Before touring the area, we suggest reading Archie Carr's book *So Excellent a Fish*, which provides a good description of the life of the green turtle.