



Costa Rica

Chapter 1

Overview



Whether you're a first time traveler, or a well seasoned globetrotter, this **Central American** country has much more to offer than you may realize. Costa Rica is a place where you can connect with nature like you never have before. It's full of both relaxation and adventure of every kind. From beaches to mountains, to jungles, to wildlife, Costa Rica packs in a stunning variety of places to explore. In this course we go over every region of Costa Rica. We zoom in to each area and show you exactly what they are known for and what you might want to consider doing on your trip. We give you tips on the best way to get around and what to look out for in each place.

From the **best beaches**, to the **unique wildlife**, **cultural fusions** and **cuisines**, we show you all of it and explain the context behind each place. We also give you a solid understanding of this country's unique history and culture, going into both the political history as well as the biological context, explaining why this country is so biodiverse.

By the end of this course you will be armed with the information to build your perfect itinerary for your trip. You'll also have a solid understanding of Costa Rica's context, both historical and ecological. Our goal is to empower you with the knowledge you need to experience this unique country in the best way possible.

This is Costa Rica

This is Costa Rica, a tiny Central American country about the size of the US State of West Virginia.



This PDF guide summarizes everything we talk about in this course. This will be a digital file you can download and print out or keep on your phone, tablet, or computer.

Airports

Visitors to Costa Rica can fly into two international airports: The San José and Liberia Airport.

Juan Santamaría International Airport in San José

- ✈ The busiest airport in the country.
- ✈ Receives daily flights from major airports in the Americas and Europe.
- ✈ Located in the center of the country.
- ✈ It's almost always cheaper to fly into San José as opposed to Liberia.

Daniel Oduber Quirós International Airport in Liberia

- ✈ Much smaller than San José.
- ✈ Receives daily flights from many major US and Canadian cities.
- ✈ It makes sense to fly here if you plan on spending your time in Guanacaste.



Major Regions

Guanacaste

Home to more than 300 beautiful beaches, stunning sunsets, surfing, and the driest weather throughout most of the year.

Central Costa Rica

Think mountains, volcanoes, hot springs, coffee plantations, and cloud forests when you think of Central Costa Rica.

San José

The capital of the country. This is Costa Rica's most densely populated region and is also home to picturesque mountain towns when you venture outside the metro area.

Caribbean Coast

- ✈ Here you will find a very different Costa Rica in terms of culture, food, and natural environment.
- ✈ The northern Caribbean coast is rainy, home to mangrove forests and freshwater canals.
- ✈ The southern Caribbean coast is home to about a dozen laid back beach towns.



Central Pacific Coast

- ✈ This is the most visited region in the country.
- ✈ It has some of the country's most popular beach towns nestled next to tropical wet forests as you venture inland.

Osa Peninsula

- ✈ This region is located along the Southern Pacific coast.
- ✈ The least developed and most biologically intense place in the country and consists of mostly protected rainforest.

Seasons in Costa Rica

Costa Rica has two main seasons: the rainy season which Costa Ricans call winter and the dry season which is known as summer.



The **rainy season** typically lasts from May to mid-November.



The **dry season** goes from mid-November through April.

Note: Since there are so many microclimates in Costa Rica this is not always the case. We'll be sure to let you know what type of weather to expect in each region.

History of Costa Rica

Petrospheres

One of these tribes most mysterious contributions to history is hundreds of perfectly round stone petrospheres.

Independence

Costa Rica remained a Spanish colony for more than 300 years and gained independence in 1838.

Democracy

Costa Rica officially adopted a democracy in 1869.

Intermediate Area

Costa Rica is part of what's known as the "intermediate area" between two important cultural regions: the Mesoamerican cultural region and the Andean cultural region.

Colonization

The Spanish began their colonization of Costa Rica in 1502 when Christopher Columbus arrived at the Caribbean Coast of Costa Rica during his fourth voyage to the Americas.

Battle of Rivas

An American Lawyer, William Walker, funded a private army to conquer parts of Latin America and tried to invade Costa Rica but was defeated at the Battle of Rivas.

Civil War

Costa Rica's bloodiest conflict was the Civil War that took place in 1948 due to disputed results from a presidential election.

Small Tribes

Costa Rica was never home to any major ancient civilizations such as the Mayas or the Incas, instead, it was sparsely populated with small tribes of people.

Rich Coast

Costa Rica, which means "rich coast" in English, was created by the Spanish, as they expected to find a large quantity of gold here.

National Hero

Juan Santamaría set fire to a barrack where Walker's soldiers were staying, ultimately weakening his army and causing them to retreat. He is now honored as Costa Rica's national hero.

Civil War

After the Civil War a new constitution was drafted which guaranteed free elections, voting rights for women and afro-Costa Ricans and the abolition of the army.



Petrospheres



Costa Rica Today

- ✈ Costa Rica's government is considered a "Democratic, free and independent republic" .
- ✈ Instead of an army, they have a national police force called the Fuerza Publica which is in charge of domestic ground security.
- ✈ Costa Rica has one of the most progressive healthcare systems in the world, universal healthcare is provided to all citizens.
- ✈ In January of 2018, the court issued a mandate requiring that member countries require the legalization of same sex marriage. Costa Rica was given 18 months to reform their laws, meaning that marriage equality is guaranteed as of May 26, 2020.
- ✈ There is a large and very active LGBTQ+ community in Costa Rica, centered mainly in San José and Manuel Antonio.



Keel-billed Toucan

Pura Vida

It is a uniquely Costa Rican phrase which literally translates to "pure life".

Could be used as a greeting or farewell, to say thank you or your welcome, as an expression, and in many other situations.

It's a phrase that encompasses how Ticos like to live their lives - simply, relaxed, stress free and positive.



Tarcoles, Costa Rica



Why is Costa Rica so Biodiverse?

Costa Rica actually sits on the border of four very active tectonic plates, the Cocos Plate, Caribbean Plate, South American Plate and Nazca plate. The constant shifting and colliding of these plates formed Costa Rica's mountains and volcanoes. It also has created a large change in elevation in a rather small land area. This steep elevation, coupled with the fact that Central America is situated very close to the Equator, created the perfect breeding ground for a wide array of biodiversity.

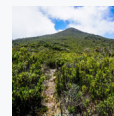
Costa Rica's Natural Environments



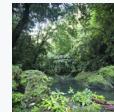
Tropical Dry forest



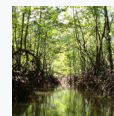
Alpine tundra



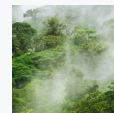
Subalpine rain paramo



Rainforest



Mangrove forest



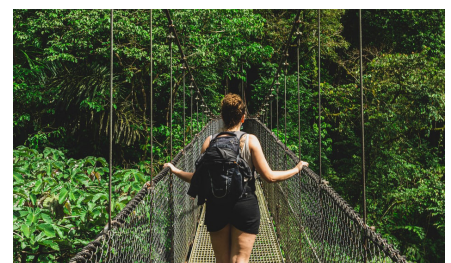
Cloud forest



Costa Rica is about the size of the US state of West Virginia, which has just one biome, compared to the 12 in Costa Rica. Although Costa Rica takes up approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of a percent of the globe's landmass, it's estimated that it contains roughly 4% of the world's species. Roughly 27% of the country's territory is considered protected by the government.



Over the past few decades, Costa Rica has invested significantly in renewable resources, and more than 95% of all of the energy the country produces comes from these sources such as wind, solar, geothermal and hydroelectric energy.



Many credit Costa Rica with creating the idea of ecotourism, or tourism directed towards supporting exotic or threatened environments. It's estimated that almost 80% of tourists who come to the country support ecotourism in one way or another.

Chapter 2

Region by Region

San José

The largest metropolitan area in the country.

The country's busiest airport, Juan Santamaría International Airport, is located 18km west of downtown San José.

✈ Traffic

- Rush hour in San José can be painfully slow.
- If you aren't looking to make the trek into downtown you can easily find accommodations next to the airport in Alajuela.

✈ Avenida Central

- Some of Costa Rica's most important museums
- The Central Market
- National Theatre
- Government offices

✈ Barrio Escalante

An up and coming neighborhood home to trendy restaurants and bars making this an ideal place for a night out.

✈ Parque la Sabana

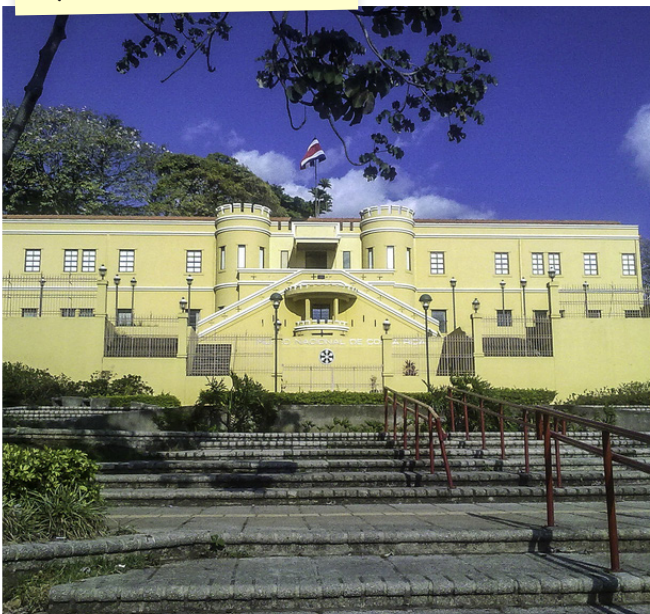
- Located in downtown San José.
- It is the country's largest and most significant urban park.
- La Sabana is considered "the lungs of San José" by Costa Ricans.
- The Museum of Costa Rican Art and the National Stadium can be found here.

✈ Transportation Hub

- You can catch a bus out of one of the dozen or so bus stops located downtown.
- There are also domestic flights that leave from here that go to all parts of the country which is a popular way to quickly get to other parts of the country.

✈ Most tourists who come to Costa Rica don't spend more than one night in San José.

National Museum of Costa Rica



Those who do stay here typically do in order to catch a bus to experience the country's main attraction, nature.



Central Pacific Coast

The Central Pacific Coast is Costa Rica's most visited region.

It's home to some of the most popular beach towns for both local and foreign visitors. Ideal place to visit if you aren't spending a lot of time in the country.

Popular towns

- ✈ Jacó (1.5 hours from San José)
- ✈ Manuel Antonio (2.5 Hours from San José)
- ✈ Uvita (3 hours from San José)

The beach towns here are easy to navigate. you will have a wide variety of restaurants, hotels, and activities to choose from. Large numbers of tourists visit these towns each year, meaning you will almost always deal with crowds.

If you go a little further south towns such as Dominical and Uvita are less developed and have significantly fewer tourists. These towns are still very accessible and easy to navigate for foreigners, however there is a smaller variety of hotels and restaurants to choose from when planning your trip.

Looking to escape the crowds?

If you have a rental car you can easily go to beaches such as Esterillos, Bejuco or Matapalo.



Surfing

- ✈ Playa Hermosa, just south of Jacó, is the heart of surfing culture on the Pacific coast and has hosted international surf competitions for many years.
- ✈ If you are an experienced surfer, Playa Hermosa is for you.
- ✈ If you are a beginner, consider beaches such as Jacó or Manuel Antonio since the tide is usually more calm.



Wildlife

- ✈ Visiting this region will also allow you to experience tropical wildlife while at the beach.
- ✈ Manuel Antonio is home to a national park where, after a short hike you will be on a beach where you will see lots of monkeys!
- ✈ The entire coast is home to wildlife such as scarlet macaws, toucans, hummingbirds, iguanas and even crocodiles.



Weather

- ✈ Rain is a daily occurrence both on the beach and inland during the rainy season (May - mid-November) and less so in the dry season (mid-November - April).
- ✈ During the rainy season it's hot and sunny in the mornings, with a predictable rainstorm around 1pm which could last for an hour or the rest of the day.
- ✈ It's almost always dry in the mornings, allowing you to plan your day around the rain.
- ✈ During the dry season, rainstorms happen during the afternoon, but are much less frequent.



Waterfalls

There are several waterfalls along the coast which make for a great day trip. Nauyaca Falls is the most impressive, but you can easily find them around Manuel Antonio and Uvita.





Samara Beach



Tamarindo Beach

Guanacaste

Guanacaste is home to the beach-dense Nicoya Peninsula.

The whole region has the highest concentration of beaches in the country with more than 300 along the coastline. This region is home to Costa Rica's second international airport, which is right here near the city of Liberia, the capital of Guanacaste Province. If you plan on spending your time here, it's best to fly into Liberia. From Liberia airport you can be at a great beach like Playa Hermosa in as little as 30 minutes.

Beach Destinations

- ✈ Tamarindo beach is 1.5 hours away
- ✈ Sámara is 2 hours
- ✈ Montezuma is just under 4 hours away.

The few main highways leaving Liberia are paved, but most roads that connect beach towns are gravel roads making travel times slower the farther south you travel.



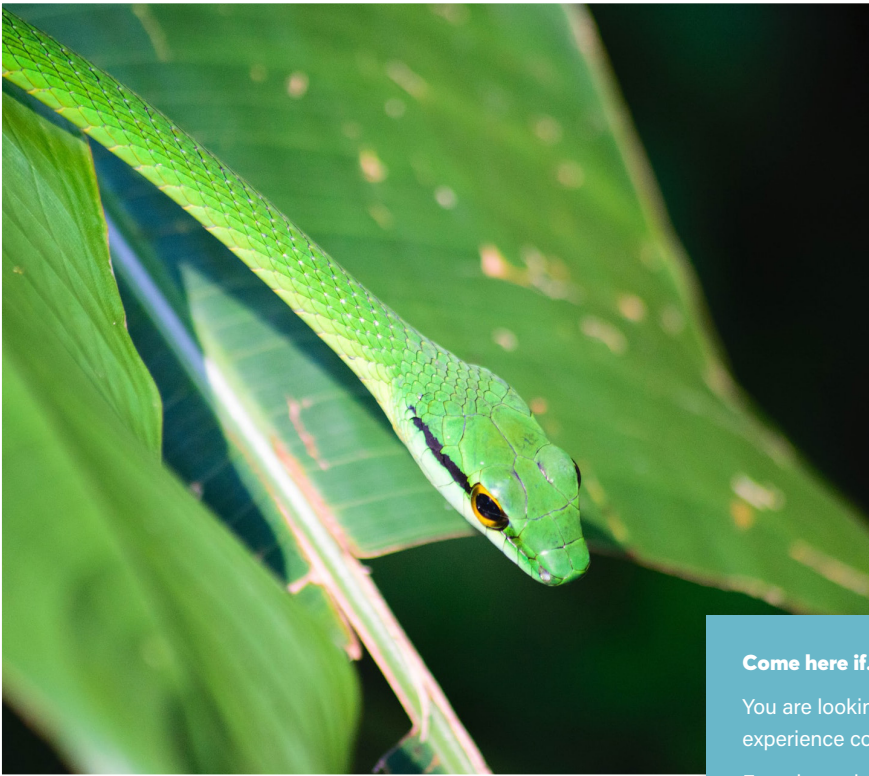
Weather

- ✈ Guanacaste has some of the driest and most predictable weather in the country, making it a great place to visit year round.
- ✈ The region is technically considered dry tropical forest, meaning it's not as green or lush as the Central Pacific Coast.
- ✈ As you travel farther south down the peninsula, you can expect more rain and lush vegetation similar to the Central Pacific Coast.
- ✈ Guanacaste is home to most of Costa Rica's all inclusive beach resorts.
- ✈ Similar to the Central Pacific Coast, it's easy to road trip from beach to beach here. Since there are more beaches, it's something you can do for several days. Make sure to rent a SUV with 4WD if you plan on doing this.



National Parks

- ✈ Rincón de la Vieja National Park is the most popular, which is known for its hiking and boiling pools of mud.
- ✈ Llanos de Cortéz is one of the most impressive waterfalls in the area and is worth a day trip.



Come here if...

You are looking for adventure and a biologically intense experience complete with jungle trekking and whale watching.

Experienced travelers would do well here, patience and flexibility are qualities you should possess when visiting.

Osa Peninsula

Most of the Osa Peninsula is protected land and is considered the most biologically intense place in the country.

- ✈ Puerto Jiménez is the biggest town on the peninsula, and offers the peninsula's only real tourism infrastructure.
- ✈ Corcovado National Park
 - This park offers some of the best bird watching and wildlife observation in the country.
 - You will need to organize a tour within the park, as infrastructure within the park is very limited and it's quite easy to get lost in the jungle.
 - It's unlike any other jungle experience out there and is highly recommended if you are looking for a rustic jungle experience.



Tree Frog



This area of the country is also one of the wettest, meaning that forests here are lush, humid and dense. This is an important reason why the area is so biodiverse.



Whale and dolphin watching are also popular here when humpback whales migrate through the waters off the coast from late July to November and December through March.



The peninsula also offers some spectacular tropical beaches almost devoid of crowds. Beaches south of Puerto Jiménez and around Bahía Drake are some of the most stunning and remote in the country.

Central Costa Rica

One of the most popular things to do here is to visit the cloud forests near Monteverde.

Adventure activities are another huge draw to the region.

- ✈ Ziplining
- ✈ White water rafting
- ✈ Hiking
- ✈ This region is also great for more leisurely activities
- ✈ Relaxing at hot springs
- ✈ Unplugging at eco-retreats
- ✈ Touring coffee or chocolate farms

Activities

- ✈ Selvatura Canopy in Monteverde
- ✈ Río Pacuare Rafting - Exploradores Outdoors
- ✈ Tabacón Hot Springs in La Fortuna



Come here if...

If beaches aren't your thing, or if you need a break from the ocean head to Central Costa Rica.

This region of the country is home to adventure, unique microclimates, waterfalls, volcanoes, coffee farms and some of the best views of the country.

Central Costa Rica is also home to most of Costa Rica's best known volcanoes, some of which you can drive up and visit for an afternoon.

- ✈ Driving up Poas or Irazú volcanoes gives you the unique opportunity to look down the crater of a volcano.
- ✈ Volcán Arenal is Costa Rica's most well known volcano located in La Fortuna, however you can't hike up it since it's active. If you're lucky, you can see lava rolling down the side of the crater at nighttime.

Volcanos

- ✈ Volcán Poás
- ✈ Volcán Irazú
- ✈ Volcán Arenal

Volcan Arenal



Driving through central Costa Rica is beautiful, and there are countless small idyllic mountain towns you will pass through giving you a taste of what rural mountain life is like. Keep an eye open for restaurants with a "mirador", or a lookout point.

Towns such as Monteverde and La Fortuna are teeming with tourists, so be prepared.

If you are looking to escape the crowds and disconnect, consider heading south towards San Isidro de El General.

- ✈ There are many eco-lodges which offer retreat-style getaways and allow you to really immerse yourself in nature.
- ✈ This part of the country is also home to Cerro Chirripó, Costa Rica's tallest mountain, which you can summit with a guide in just two days.

The Caribbean Coast

The Caribbean coast of the country is different from other regions in Costa Rica both ecologically and culturally.

The Caribbean coast has a unique history compared to the rest of the country which began in the 1870s.

At this time in history, the Costa Rican government was constructing a railway. Due to a labor shortage at that time, construction companies brought in thousands of foreign workers, mostly from Jamaica, to help with construction. Afro-caribbean migrant workers suffered from harsh segregation laws during this time, and up until 1945 people of African descent were only allowed to live in Limón province. During this time, a new creole language developed in Limón which fused Jamaican Creole with Spanish. Limonese Creole, a regional language is still widely spoken today by more than 60,000 people. The language is often called "Mekatelyu" which comes from the words "make I tell you" which in standard English would be "let me tell you." If you travel to the Caribbean, you will likely hear Limonese Creole being spoken by locals.



Language, food and West Indian culture are part of what makes Limon so unique compared to the rest of the country.

How to Travel Here

- ✈ In order to get here, you'll need to fly into San José.
- ✈ There is just one main highway that connects the coast with San Jose, Ruta 32.
 - It's one of the most spectacular drives in all of Costa Rica which cuts through primary forest as you descend into the caribbean lowlands. To get from the San José airport to the southern beaches of Puerto Viejo, it will take you about 4 hours.



Tortuguero

Up here you have a national park called "Tortuguero".

Accessing Tortuguero in the north is a bit more tricky, as there is no terrestrial transportation to get you to town, which is situated along a series of canals surrounded by mangrove forests.

- ✈ The easiest way to get here is to take a half hour domestic flight from San José to Tortuguero.
- ✈ Your other option is taking a shuttle or public bus to Pavona, then taking a boat to Tortuguero. There are no cars in Tortuguero, so don't rent a car if you plan on coming here.

Most visitors who come to Costa Rica visit either the northern or southern coast, the city of Puerto Limón in the center of the province is an industrial port city that most tourists just pass through.



Weather

Most of Limón province consists of tropical forest and flat coastal lowlands that are wet most of the year.



Beaches

The southern beaches surrounding Puerto Viejo are much less developed than beaches in Guanacaste or the Central Pacific, but they have their own unique charm.

Reggae music, jerk chicken, beach cruiser bicycles and beautiful beaches make this part of the country a hidden gem for tourists. It has a unique vibe unlike any other beaches in the country.

Come here if...

You are looking to experience laid back caribbean vibes, distinct food, and afro caribbean culture.

Head specifically to Tortugero National Park if you are interested in sea turtles and navigating dense mangrove forests through tropical canals.

Chapter 3

Building Your Itinerary

Itinerary 1:

Central Pacific Coast

Beach and Jungle, 7 days

1. You fly into San Jose
2. Rent a car
3. Head to Manuel Antonio, which is 3.5 hours away and in our Central Pacific region.
4. You spend a few nights at the beach, visiting the national park and taking some surf lessons.
5. You then head to the Pérez Zeledón area of the country, which is 2 hours from Manuel Antonio.
 - a. You found a cool eco-retreat on Airbnb and plan on immersing yourself in the jungle for two nights, making a visit to Nauyaca Waterfall as well.
6. From there, you head back to San José, which is a 4 hour drive, and return your rental car.
7. The following morning you will be picked up for an overnight rafting trip on the Río Pacuare, that you booked through **Exploradores Outdoors**, which is a 3 hour drive.
 - a. You'll raft down the river to your cabin and spend the night along the river
8. The following morning you'll raft down the rest of the river and will be dropped back at your hotel in San José where you can salsa dance, eat a nice meal and have some fun before you head back home the following morning.

Itinerary 2:

Guanacaste

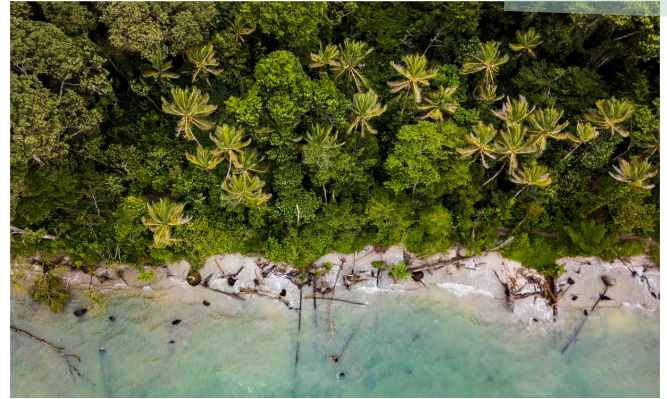
Beach and Mountain, 7 days

1. You fly into Liberia, rent a car and head to Tamarindo which is 1.5 hours west.
2. Spend four nights in Tamarindo relaxing at the beach, visiting some beaches around the area, go out one night for a party on the beach and try your hand at surfing.
3. Drive to La Fortuna, which is 3.5 hrs away and spend three nights nursing your sunburn and relaxing at Tabacon Hot Springs, doing the **Catarata La Fortuna** waterfall hike and touring a coffee farm
4. From La Fortuna, you head back to Liberia, a 2.5 hour drive, and catch your flight home.



Itinerary 3:**Caribbean Coast****6 days**

1. You fly into San Jose and take a taxi to your hotel downtown.
2. You spend a day in the city hitting up some museums like Museo De Jade, visiting the Mercado Central and party for a night and Club Vertigo.
3. After realizing you are really bad at dancing salsa, you head to a club to dance the night away to electronic music.
4. The following afternoon, you take the public bus to Puerto Viejo for about 4 hrs.
5. You're now in the Caribbean Coast region and you spend three nights there, surfing at the beach, riding bikes from beach to beach and hiking through Cahuita National Park.
6. On the [Exploradores Outdoors](#) website, you booked an overnight rafting trip for the following day which cost you around \$25.
7. They will pick you up in a private van, take you rafting and you will sleep along the Río Paciare.
8. After rafting the next day, the van will drop you off at a hotel near the San Jose Airport at an airport hotel in Alajuela, so you can easily catch your early morning flight back home the following day.

**Itinerary 4:****Mountain, Jungle and Beach****6 days**

1. You fly into San Jose and make your way to La Fortuna (3 hrs) in a private shuttle that you booked with Interbus.
2. You spend two nights in La Fortuna and do a waterfall hike, visit some hot springs and tour a coffee farm.
3. From there, you take a jeep, a boat, and another jeep you can book through your [hotel](#).
4. This brings you up into the mountains to Monteverde where you will spend two nights exploring the cloud forest on foot and from above during a zipline tour you booked through [Selvatrua's](#) website.
5. From there, you take a private shuttle to Tamarindo which is about 3 hrs away. Here, you spend your last two nights at the beach before flying out of Liberia back home.

Itinerary 5:

Osa

7 days

1. After arriving in San Jose, you grab a connecting domestic flight to Puerto Jiménez that you booked on [Google Flights](#) and that costs you around \$90. The flight takes about 40 minutes.
2. You will be in the Osa region of the country which is a dense, biodiverse region. You spend three nights there, relaxing on beautiful beaches like Playa Puntarenitas on day one.
3. You hike through the dense and wild Corcovado National Park the following day.
4. From Puerto Jiménez, you take a shuttle to the remote town of Uvita, 3 hours, where you spend three nights.
5. You spend time at Bahía Ballena National Park exploring the beach and seeing the whale's tale, rent a bike to ride around town and do a whale watching boat tour which you booked with the help of your hotel.
6. From Uvita, you take a shuttle to San José, 4 hours, where you spend a night in a hotel close to the airport.

Note: These are just a few ideas of itineraries you can put together. Remember, Costa Rica is really small and it's easy to get from place to place and yet as you move across the country you cross over numerous biospheres and climatic zones.



Getting Around the Country

Renting a Car



Pros

- 🚗 Renting a car allows you the freedom to easily go wherever, whenever.
- 🚗 It's comfortable and allows you to go "off the beaten path."
- 🚗 If you are traveling in a small group, this is a great option to consider, as it may be cheaper than paying for transportation individually.
- 🚗 This is also a great option for families with kids.



Cons

- 🚗 Driving in Costa Rica can be tough, especially in the city. Ticos are defensive drivers and regulations aren't widely enforced meaning people tend to follow their own rules on the road.
- 🚗 If you are staying in San José reconsider a rental car, traffic can be a nightmare.
- 🚗 Renting a car is slightly cheaper than renting a car in the US, however it's not the cheapest way to get around the country.



Tips

1. Driving laws are similar to those in the USA, you can generally expect to abide by the same rules and regulations.
2. You must drive with your driver's license AND passport, so make sure you keep it on you when driving.
3. If you are traveling off any main highways to more isolated locations, it's always a good idea to ask about the road conditions before you leave.
4. We recommend renting a car with 4WD - this will allow you to go almost anywhere.
5. Make sure to have some local currency on hand for tolls when leaving San Jose, cards are not accepted at toll booths.
 - a. Most rental companies will give you the option to rent a "Quick Pass" for a surcharge, meaning you won't need to have cash on hand for tolls. You will be billed for your tolls when returning the car.
6. Google Maps works really well in Costa Rica and can help you navigate to almost any destination in the country.
7. A "Guachimán" is someone who watches over your car. Typically, they wear some sort of reflective vest and will approach your car with a smile and help you park your car by signaling when to pull forward, stop and reverse.
 - a. It's best to give them whatever loose change you have in the car or 1,000 colones.

Driving times

Driving times on Google Maps are pretty accurate, however it's smart to add at least 45 minutes to those times to account for heavy rain or traffic, even outside San José.

Driving times from San José

San José - Jacó (2.5 hours)
 San José - Manuel Antonio (3.5 hours)
 San José - Puerto Viejo (4 hours)
 San José - La Fortuna (3 hrs)
 San Jose - Monteverde (3 hours)
 San Jose - Tamarindo (4.5 hours)

Driving times from Liberia

Liberia - Tamarindo (1.5 hours)
 Liberia - Santa Teresa (4.5 hours)
 Liberia - Monteverde (2 hours)
 Liberia - La Fortuna (2.5 hours)
 Liberia - Manuel Antonio (4 hours)

Don't rent a car if...

- 🚗 You plan on going to Tortugero, as there are no roads that lead there.
- 🚗 You are headed to Puerto Jiménez in Osa, most roads are not paved and can be hard to navigate.
- 🚗 Traveling to the southern part of Guanacaste, roads here are also not paved, which translates to slow driving times. SUVs and 4x4 are recommended if you are traveling here.

You should consider renting a car if...

- 🚗 You are going to more than two destinations while in the country.
- 🚗 If you are only visiting one or two destinations, it's probably more economical to use a shuttle service.

Flying

The quickest and most expensive way to get around the country is flying domestically. Costa Rica is well connected for such a small country, and most major tourist destinations are serviced by two commercial airlines, Sansa and Skyway.

Tickets usually cost between \$70 and \$150 each way and flights usually take between 30 - 45 minutes.

Shuttles

If you're not keen on driving, but would prefer a direct and comfortable way to travel, consider using private shuttles.

- ✎ Interbus is the most well known shuttle company, and you book online just like a flight.
- ✎ They will pick you up and drop you off directly at your hotel in a 10 passenger air conditioned van, which is very convenient.
- ✎ If you are staying at an Airbnb, you will have to get yourself to a hotel where they do pickups close to you, which should be a quick Uber/taxi ride.
- ✎ Prices are between \$50 and \$100 each way and they travel to almost every popular tourist destination around the country.
- ✎ You can book just a few days in advance, although during the high season (Jan - May) we suggest booking a week or so ahead of time.

Tour operator

There are a large network of tour operators out there that can design an itinerary based on exactly what you want to do. The great part about this is that they worry about getting you from point A to B, taking out all the transportation hassle and guesswork out of the equation. This tends to be pricey, but depending on the company they can coordinate just transportation or your entire vacation. You should choose this option if you want to come to Costa Rica, but don't want to plan any of the logistics.



Braulio Carrillo National Park

Tip: We recommend showing up a half hour before the bus is scheduled to leave to secure a seat.



Public transportation

- ✎ Costa Rica has a very reliable network of inter-city public buses that's really cheap. A one way trip to almost anywhere in the country will cost less than \$20, typically around \$10 for a 3-4 hour journey.
- ✎ Unlike most of Central America, busses in Costa Rica aren't "chicken buses." Most are similar to greyhound busses you see in the US but may not have AC.
- ✎ Traveling in public buses is surprisingly comfortable.
- ✎ Directo means direct, and these busses make just one stop so passengers can buy a snack and use the restroom.
- ✎ Colectivos, or "collective" busses stop at several towns along the way to pick up additional passengers. If possible, it's worth the extra money to take a direct bus as this will save you time.

Getting your bus ticket

- ✎ Taking the bus is pretty straightforward. You will need to purchase a ticket at the bus station.
- ✎ You can also purchase a few days beforehand - so if you know your itinerary you can purchase a to and from ticket at the same time.
- ✎ There are more than 15 terminals where busses leave from San José, meaning it's important to know which terminal you are going to. Typically they are arranged by location (example: Terminal del caribe - busses traveling to Limón).
- ✎ Even if you don't speak Spanish, you can use the [bus guide provided by the ICT](#), figure out where your bus leaves from and take an Uber to the terminal.

Choosing a Beach

Central Pacific Coast Beaches

Jacó

- ✈ Synonymous with partying, surfing and nightlife.
- ✈ It's not secluded by any means, and is a popular destination year round.
- ✈ The main strip is full of restaurants, bars, clubs and even a casino.
- ✈ Come here if you are looking to surf and party, don't come here if you are looking for a secluded beach getaway.

Manuel Antonio

- ✈ Home to Costa Rica's most visited National Park.
- ✈ The public beach and the beaches within the national park are beautiful - smooth brown sand, palm trees, and relatively calm water perfect for swimming make it an ideal vacation spot for any beach goer.
- ✈ This beach is teeming with tourists almost year round.
- ✈ The narrow 7km road which takes you from Quepos to Manuel Antonio is saturated with hotels and restaurants, and it's very clear that this town is built to receive large numbers of tourists.
- ✈ If you don't mind crowds and want to spend time relaxing at the beach and eating well, come here. It still doesn't offer a secluded beach feeling, but it definitely is beautiful and worth a visit.



Dominical

- ✈ It's about an hour south of Manuel Antonio.
- ✈ The small and quiet beach town sits at the mouth of the Barú River, and the beach itself is rocky and lined with palm trees.
- ✈ It's not a great beach to come to if you are looking to relax on a sandy, comfortable beach, however it's beautiful and has killer sunsets.
- ✈ The town has a relaxed, laid back vibe and has just a fraction of the amount of tourists that Manuel Antonio does.
- ✈ It tends to shut down pretty early, and with just a handful of restaurants and hotels, there really isn't much to do besides relaxing and surfing.
- ✈ Come here if you are looking to unplug, avoid crowds and experience a small, slow moving beach town.

Uvita

- ✈ This town is larger and more spread out than Dominical, but it's still much smaller than Manuel Antonio.
- ✈ The beaches within the Bahía Ballena National Park are beautiful, have soft sand perfect for relaxing and during low tide form a whale's tale visible from above.
- ✈ The beach is almost never crowded and is within a national park, meaning it has a very secluded feeling.
- ✈ The town is more spread out but still tiny, with dirt roads making it a great place for renting bicycles. It has a small town feel and more of a tourist infrastructure, meaning there are more restaurant and hotel options than Dominical.

Osa Peninsula Beaches

- ✈ Beaches south of Puerto Jimenez all are very secluded and don't really have any services.
- ✈ Think dirt roads leading to a parking lot right next to the beach. This is a perfect place to come if you are looking for virgin beaches devoid of tourists.
- ✈ When you think of a tropical paradise on a deserted island, these are the beaches that will come to your mind.
- ✈ Come here to spend the afternoon relaxing, but with little to no services available along these beaches you'll need to have a car and bring food and water for the day.

Guanacaste beaches

Tamarindo

- ✈ Has a small beach-town feeling and a pretty developed tourism infrastructure.
- ✈ The beach here is beautiful - soft tan sand, calm waters and just a handful of restaurants and hotels that line the beach.
- ✈ Tamarindo has some of the best sunsets Costa Rica has to offer.
- ✈ A lot of tourists come here, so prepare yourself for that, however the crowds are less intense than they are in Manuel Antonio.
- ✈ The town itself has a lot of restaurants, bars and good nightlife, so this is a great place to come if you are looking to relax on a beautiful beach by day and experience decent nightlife.

Nosara

- ✈ The three beaches bordering the town of Nosara - Playa Nosara, Playa Pelada and Playa Guiones are all beautiful and feel much more secluded than Tamarindo.
- ✈ Think tan-sand natural beaches divided by rocky outcrops with palm trees and surfers.
- ✈ Nosara is heavily forested and most roads aren't paved, meaning after a long day at the beach you head back to your hotel in the jungle.
- ✈ It attracts a lot of surfers, is slow moving, relaxed and has a surprising amount of small, trendy restaurants. It's a great place to come if you want to relax at the beach, eat well and disconnect.

Montezuma

- ✈ Montezuma has an off the beaten bath feel.
- ✈ It's a small town accessed by bumpy dirt roads, meaning it's less crowded than most beaches on the Nicoya Peninsula.
- ✈ The beaches are beautiful - great for relaxing and surfing - and are located next to a pretty impressive waterfall and nature reserve.
- ✈ The town attracts a lot of backpackers and surfers and has a good variety of international food to try.
- ✈ This is a great place to head if you want to combine both jungle and beach and are looking for a more bohemian vibe.



Witch's Rock, Guanacaste

Caribbean Coast beaches

Puerto Viejo de Talamanca

- ✈ Dirt roads, beach cruiser bikes and dense jungle create an environment where time stands still and you can really focus on relaxing.
- ✈ Beaches have soft sand all around and are great to soak up the sun and relax.
- ✈ Come here if you are searching for a uniquely Caribbean vibe nestled within the jungle.

Tortuguero

- ✈ Like most beaches along the Northern Caribbean coast, Tortuguero is nestled next to dense mangrove forests and canals.
- ✈ Waves along these mostly black-sand beaches are particularly strong and don't make for great surfing or swimming.
- ✈ Three species of sea turtles nest along these beaches most of the year, so accessing beaches at nighttime (when turtles nest) is prohibited unless you are part of an organized tour.
- ✈ During the day however it's a nice place to relax and really feels like you are in the jungle.
- ✈ Think of coming to Tortuguero as more of a jungle experience with the added plus of having access to the beach.

Jungle and Mountains

Cloud Forest

A **Cloud forest**, also called montane rain forest, includes vegetation of tropical mountainous regions in which the rainfall is often heavy and persistent.

Condensation occurs because of cooling of moisture-laden air currents deflected upward by the mountains. The trees in the cloud forests are typically short and crooked. Essentially, it's a tropical forest inside a cloud.

Monteverde

A small mountain town that sits right next to Reserva Santa Elena. One of Costa Rica's largest cloud forest reserves. The town itself is small, quaint and geared to tourists who come specifically to experience the forest first hand.

There are several ways you can experience the cloud forest, such as guided hikes during the day or night, or walking through hanging bridges built throughout the canopy.

Hikes through the forest can be done either on your own or accompanied by a naturalist guide. If you want to hire a guide, it's best to do so a day in advance. Your hotel or hostel will have guides that they work with, or you can alternately visit one of several travel agencies that are downtown to arrange a tour.

Zip Lining

The most exciting way to experience the cloud forest in Monteverde is to harness up and zip line through the canopy. Costa Rica is world famous for its zipline in Monteverde, it's actually been voted one of the top adventure activities to do in all of Latin America. You literally zoom through the canopy on a series of more than a dozen cables.

La Fortuna

Home to Costa Rica's most famous volcano, Volcán Arenal.

One of the most popular things to do in La Fortuna is to visit hot springs.

- ✈ There is a high concentration of hot springs in the area which are naturally heated by the geothermal energy generated by the volcano.
- ✈ There are a handful of options when it comes to choosing your ideal hot springs
- ✈ Baldí Hot Springs is great for families with things like waterslides and play areas.
- ✈ Tabacón Hot Springs is great for adults and hone in on the relaxing and beauty aspects of a hot spring experience.
- ✈ La Fortuna is also home to a quite impressive and accessible waterfall called Catarata La Fortuna.
- ✈ In addition to hot springs and waterfalls, you can book a wide variety of adventure activities such as hiking Cerro Chato below the base of Volcán Arenal.
- ✈ Lake Arenal is just a stone's throw away from La Fortuna, and offers paddle boarding, kayaking and other lake activities.

Río Pacuare

One of Costa Rica's hidden gems located in central Costa Rica just before the caribbean lowlands. This area of the country is home to rich primary forest, and rafting down the Río Pacuare is one of the most unique and exciting ways to experience Costa Rica's biodiversity.

While rafting down the river, you will see primary forest and the region's unique flora and fauna. This is a great way to learn about Costa Rica's very small indigenous population first hand.

Regardless of whether or not you chose a luxury like Rio Pacuare Lodge, or more affordable options like Exploradores Outdoors, rafting the river is the same. If you have time, we highly recommend doing an overnight rafting tour.



Pacuare River



Arenal Volcano

