



The Tico Way

With its lush tropical jungles and amazing array of wildlife, Costa Rica offers an affordable paradise for travelers of all interests

BY GEORGIA DE KATONA



You've thought about traveling in Latin America for years, but maybe you've put it off because of safety concerns, or worries about the water, or the fact that you don't speak a word of Spanish. Here's the push you need: Costa Rica really is as great as you've heard. It is safe and easy to travel, the country is filled with things to see and do, and your adventures will take place in an almost supernaturally tropical setting.

Sure, Costa Rica has been "discovered." There is a sizable international expatriate community in addition to a healthy flow of tourists. What the presence of all these folks from all over the world means is a whole lot of amazing food options (expat Italian chefs! French pastries! amazing Thai food!), beautifully designed and appointed eco-hotels and resorts (read: good beds) and a lot of English speakers for the myriad activities to choose from.

No matter how many people end up here, there are very few places that feel overrun, and the locals are as easygoing and friendly as you could hope—it's the Tico way ("Tico" is how Costa Ricans refer to themselves). You decide the octane level of your vacation and go from there: You can just as easily catch every possible wave rolling in on either coast, ride every zip line in the country and hike all 121 volcanic formations as you can watch birds from your hammock for days on end.

Some fun facts: Costa Rica has no standing military, and 801 miles of coastline in a country smaller than Lake Michigan. This little country, just .03 percent of the planet's surface, holds fully 5 percent of the world's biodiversity and 10 percent of the world's butterflies. "Eco" isn't a trendy catchphrase here, it is a national priority, evidenced by fully 25 percent

of the country being established as protected forests and reserves and a national pride in "pura vida"—a phrase you're likely to see and hear throughout the country that roughly refers to good life, pure life or vibrant life, and may also be used in greeting. The indigenous population is small (about 2.5 percent) and more remote than in other Central American countries, with their reserves in the jungles well off the beaten path. On the Caribbean side of the country, the city of Puerto Limón (known simply as "Limón") has a vibrant Afro-Caribbean culture, with its own Creole language of Meketelyu.

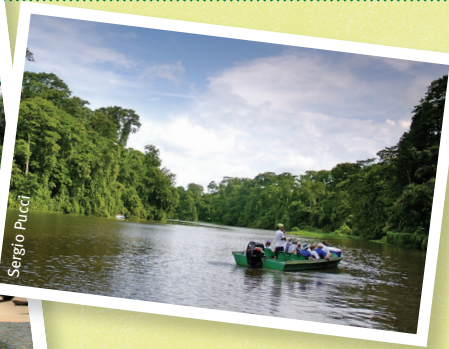
A parade in Limón celebrating the African Caribbean culture.



Carnaval celebrations in Limón, which take place over a week in early to mid-October, fill the streets with calypso and reggae music and thousands of dancers.

Retreat and Relax

FLY INTO San José and head straight to one of the coasts or Chirripó National Park. It is easy to catch a flight to your destination on the coasts from the airport, especially if you don't want to rent a car (although it is easy and safe to drive here). If you decide to visit Chirripó National Park, you can take a 45-minute taxi for about \$30. We've based this article on the very doable itinerary of hitting both coasts and a major inland highlight over a nine-day period. The three lodges we suggest here have staff on hand to help you plan day excursions of any intensity level. Take advantage of their expertise. Remember, prices vary widely from low season (roughly August through October) to high season (December through April).



The jungle safari-type accommodations at Tortuga Lodge and Gardens provide a relaxing place to unwind in between jungle walks and other outdoor adventures.



> Book your stay in Tortuguero at Tortuga Lodge and Gardens.

Gorgeous, luxe, jungle safari-type accommodations (\$198 high season, \$138 low season) set in lush grounds with a fantastic infinity pool overlooking the river, and an excellent riverside bar/restaurant make this the ideal base for exploration in the area. The friendly and professional staff will happily arrange adventures and guides for you. They've attended to all the little details, even providing rain boots for muddy walks through the jungle. Tortuga Lodge is as great for couples as it is for families traveling with kids. This is one of those places that lures guests back for return stays; you'll understand why once you've visited.

Website: <http://www.tortugalodge.com/>



Offering an abundance of wildlife and things to do, the Iguana Lodge also suits travelers who'd prefer to hit the hammock.



The Rio Chirripo Retreat features yoga, hikes and cheese tours.



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Early evening sky over the city of San José, Costa Rica.

of the turtles. The village itself is a colorful collection of buildings and a few shops set smack dab in the breathtakingly lush tropical foliage. P.S. This village—indeed the Caribbean side of the country as a whole—is off the radar for most of Costa Rica’s 1.5 million annual visitors. It is gorgeous and it is mellow. Make it a part of your itinerary.

If you start asking folks who’ve been to Costa Rica about where to go inland, you’ll likely hear comments about Monteverde Reserve, which is a private cloud forest reserve. This is one of those

places that is often overrun with tourists, and seems to require separate charges for “activities” every time you turn a corner. It is beautiful, make no mistake, but for a less manic, and much less expensive, experience you should head straight to Chirripó (“eternal waters”) National Park. You’ll travel from lush, lowland tropical forests to the higher, and cooler, cloud forests. For those keen to hike to the highest peak in Costa Rica (approximately 3,820 meters above sea level), and willing to make the 30-mile trek that leads to the top, you will pass through the cloud forest into



A sea turtle digs in the sand to deposit her eggs in Tortuguero National Park.

the páramo, the bare, scrub brush area above 3,400 meters, with its own unique highland wildlife and spectacular views over the cloud forest all the way to the Atlantic. If day hiking is all you intend to do, you’ll be thrilled with the waterfalls and the beauty of the lush,

Monteverde Landscape, Costa Rica





Clockwise: The sun sets over the ocean in Corcovado National Park. A hiker pauses beneath falls in the Osa Peninsula. A white-faced capuchin monkey eats star fruit on the Osa Peninsula, Costa Rica, near Drake Bay Rainforest stream in Monteverde National Park.

foggy forest, not to mention ever more birds and wildlife to gaze at.

The Pacific side of the country is by far the most popular tourist destination, but that shouldn't put you off from heading there, particularly if you want to surf (or learn). To avoid some of the

to the comings and goings of tourists, though they are as friendly and welcoming as you'd hope. The wide open beaches stretch for miles, the water is clean and blue, and the not-to-be-missed Corcovado National Park is the major destination of this region. This

season, but the best for spotting creatures if you can handle a couple of rain showers a day. December through April is high season in this paradise.)

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busier "scenes," head to the Osa Peninsula on the southern end of the country. It is more remote and more expensive, though not prohibitively so, and it is jaw-droppingly beautiful. The local scene unfolds with little attention

park has one of the highest concentrations of biodiversity on the planet, 13 major ecosystems, dozens of waterfalls, and the only vibrant, dense, old-growth rain forest left on the Pacific Coast. (August through November is the wet

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Costa Rica National Parks Info for Tortuguero, Chirripó and Corcovado National Parks
<http://www.costarica-nationalparks.com/>