

Getting Started

Costa Rica has something for everyone. If you are an impulsive adventurer seeking an adrenaline rush, you will definitely find it in Costa Rica. If you prefer to spend some quality time with a good book on a sun swept beach, we've got a few of those too.

For budget types, transport around the country is plentiful: local buses can carry you to just about every nook and cranny; boats will pick up where buses leave off. For the more discriminating or time-pressed, mini-vans with air-con, domestic flights and charters can reach even the most remote corners. Accommodations also range from bargain-basement cabins, campsites and hammock hotels, all the way up to first-class resorts loaded with luxury.

Lodging is abundant and it's usually easy to find someplace to stay when you arrive in town. The exceptions to this rule are the weeks between Christmas and New Year's Day and before and during *Semana Santa* (the week preceding Easter Sunday). It is also a good idea to book accommodations ahead of time during the school vacation in January and February.

Note that because Costa Rica has a high standard of living, prices here tend to be a good deal higher than those of other Central and Latin American nations.

WHEN TO GO

Generally, the best time to visit Costa Rica is the dry season from December through April, which locals refer to as *verano* (summer). Dry season does not mean it does not rain; it just rains less (so perhaps should be called the 'drier season'). Costa Rican schools are closed from December to February, when beach towns are busy, especially on weekends. Lodgings during *Semana Santa* are usually booked months ahead.

In May begins the rainy season, or *invierno* (winter) as it's known locally. The tourism ministry has come up with the more attractive

See the Directory for more information on climate (p532) and festivals (p535).

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Checking the latest visa situation (p541) and government travel advisories (p532)
- Insect repellent containing DEET; and if you're planning large-scale jungle adventures (or staying in budget lodging), a mosquito net
- Pepto-Bismol or an antidiarrheal, in case you get a bad dose of the trots
- Sunblock and a hat, so you don't get cooked by the tropical sun
- Clothes that you don't mind getting absolutely filthy or wet
- Swimsuit and beach towel
- A pair of river sandals or reef-walkers and sturdy jungle boots
- A waterproof, windproof jacket and warm layers for highland hiking
- A flashlight (torch)
- Binoculars and a field guide
- Miscellaneous necessities: umbrella, padlock, matches, pocketknife
- Your sense of adventure

denomination of 'green season'. The early months of the rainy season are actually a wonderful time to travel to Costa Rica: you can avoid the tourist bustle and lodging is slightly cheaper. During this time, however, rivers start to swell and dirt roads get muddy, making travel more challenging. Some more remote roads may not be accessible to public transportation, so always ask locally before setting out. Bring your umbrella and a little patience.

Because of the number of North American and European tourists, some Costa Rican towns experience a mini-high season in June and July, during the northern summer holidays. Expect to pay high-season prices in some towns at this time.

For surfers the travel seasons vary slightly. For the most part, the Pacific coast sees increased swells and bigger, faster waves during the rainy season, starting in late June and peaking in the worst rainy months of September and October. The Caribbean side, however, has better waves from November through May. Some breaks are consistent year-round.

Wildlife enthusiasts may wish to plan their trip around the seasons of the critters. Turtle season on the Caribbean coast is from late-February to October, with the peak season for leatherbacks in April and May and for green turtles in August and September. On the Caribbean coast, the season for leatherbacks is from October to March.

Birders will be overwhelmed by feathered friends any time of year, but the best season to spot the resplendent quetzal is between November and April. Spring (March through May) and autumn (September through November) are good times to watch the migratory flocks.

Fishing, also, is good year-round, but you might choose your season if you have your heart set on a specific fish. Anglers head to the Caribbean coast between January and May in search of tarpon, while the autumn (September through November) is the season for snook. On the Pacific coast and in the Golfo Dulce, the best time to snag that sailfish is between November and May.

COSTS & MONEY

Travel costs are significantly higher here than in most Central American countries, but cheaper than in the USA or Europe. And if you're arriving from inexpensive Central American nations such as Nicaragua, get ready to bust that wallet wide open.

Prices in Costa Rica are frequently listed in US dollars, especially at up-market hotels and restaurants, where you can expect to pay international prices. Most types of tours are charged in US dollars. In fact, US dollars are widely accepted, but the standard unit of currency is still the colon.

Shoestring travelers can survive on US\$20 to US\$30 a day, covering just the basics of food, lodging and public transportation. The cheapest hotels start at about US\$5 per person for a bed, four walls and shared bathrooms. Better rooms with private bathrooms start at roughly US\$10 per person, depending on the area. It is possible to eat cheaply at the many *sodas* (lunch counters), where you can fill up on tasty *casados* (set meals) for about US\$2 to US\$3.

Midrange budgeters can travel comfortably for anywhere from US\$50 to US\$100 per day. Hotels in this category offer very good value, and double rooms come with comfortable beds, private bathrooms, hot water (most of the time) and even breakfast, for US\$20 to US\$50 per night. Many hotels in this price range also have shared or private kitchenettes, which allows travelers the opportunity to cook. (This is a great option

HOW MUCH?

SkyTrek zip-line
adventure in Monteverde
US\$40

Admission to Parque
Nacional Manuel Antonio
US\$7

A bus from San José
to Puerto Viejo de
Talamanca US\$7.75

Taxi from the inter-
national airport into cen-
tral San José US\$12-15

Two hours of surfing
lessons in Tamarindo
US\$30

TOP TENS

Idyllic Sunset Sites

Abundant nature + peaceful surroundings + great views = No more worries

- The mountaintop hostel on Cerro Chirripó (p385)
- From the lookout above El Mirador Lodge in Bahía Drake (p408)
- The view of Volcán Arenal from Cabina La Fortuna (p237)
- A sunset sail from Tamarindo (p276)
- At La Taberna in Tortuguero (p466) sipping a *cerveza*
- Sunset from Ronny's Place in Manuel Antonio (p353)
- Reggae-listening at the Sunset Bar in Puerto Viejo de Talamanca (p490)
- Twilight hike in the Children's Eternal Forest (p193) in Monteverde
- On the dock of the bay at the Banana Bay Marina (p431) in Golfito
- The hills of San José from the Plaza de la Democracia (p100)

Worst Roads

It is a badge of honor for travelers to boast about the disastrous roads they've survived in Costa Rica. A list of the most bragworthy:

- Oldie, but goodie – the road from Tilarán to Monteverde
- The punisher – Puerto Jiménez to Carate
- Dude, where's the transmission? – bumping and grinding to the waves at Playa Naranjo
- A river runs through it – crossing the Río Ora between Playa Carrillo and Islita
- You call this a road? – Golfito to Pavones
- Bone-cruncher – Buenos Aires to Reserva Biológica Dúrika reserve
- Car-nivore – the stretch between Tamarindo and Avellana gobbles up vehicles like candy
- Road less traveled – the steep climb up to Altamira and La Amistad
- Keep on truckin' – swerving with the big rigs on the Interamericana between Cañas and Liberia
- Lake defect – dodging huge potholes on the road around Laguna Arenal

Best Beaches

This is what we came for...

- Manzanillo (p494) – surfing and snorkeling along the Caribbean's most scenic stretch
- Playas Coyote & San Miguel (p301) – abandoned beach, backed by rugged wilderness
- Playa Conchal (p271) – crushed shells and turquoise water
- Playa Grande (p271) – sweeping blonde sand backed by mangroves, great surf
- Playa Matapalo (p360) – surfing the waves, hiking to waterfalls
- Playa Montezuma (p308) – empty white sands and rocky coves, killer sunrises
- Playa Mal País (p313) – huge, crashing surf for kilometers in every direction
- Playa Negra (p471) – people of color, beaches of color
- Playa San Josecito (p411) – scarlet macaws roosting in the almond trees overhead
- Playa Sámará (p295) – destination of sophisticated beach goers
- Playa Zancudo (p437) – gentle, luminescent waters and vast, empty sands

for families.) A variety of restaurants cater to midrange travelers, offering starters (often as filling as a main meal) that range in price from US\$5 to US\$10.

Top-end visitors can find a good selection of restaurants and hotels in the touristy towns and within some of the major resorts. Luxurious beach-side lodges and boutique hotels can cost anywhere from US\$80 – and all the way up – and offer meals that begin at US\$20.

Lodging prices are generally higher in the dry season (December to April), and highest during holiday periods (between Christmas and New Year and during *Semana Santa*). During slower seasons, most hotels are eager for your business, so you can try to negotiate a lower rate. Some of the more popular tourist areas (Monteverde, Jacó, Manuel Antonio and many of the beaches on the Península de Nicoya) are also more expensive than the rest of the country.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

There are surprisingly few travelogues specifically about Costa Rica. Dr Alexander Skutch – who lived for years near San Isidro de El General – wrote *A Naturalist in Costa Rica*, which is part natural history, part memoir. An icon among birders, Dr Skutch weaves his philosophies into his beautiful descriptions of flora and fauna.

Green Phoenix, by science journalist William Allen, is an absorbing and inspiring account of his efforts, alongside American and Costa Rican scientists and activists, to conserve and restore the rainforest in Guanacaste.

In *Walk These Stones*, by Leslie Hawthorne Klingler, this Mennonite service worker writes about her experiences living, working, praying and sharing in the small village of Cuatro Cruces. Her account of village life is poignant, but if you are not into spiritual questions it is not for you.

Many more books are accounts of journeys through Central America by various means. *Ninety-Nine Days to Panama*, by John and Harriet Halkyard, is a retired couple's detailed and entertaining account of driving an RV (complete with pet dog Brindle) from Texas to Panama. Peter Ford's *Around the Edge* is the story of the author's travels along the Caribbean coast from Belize to Panama, on foot and by boat. *The Old Patagonian Express: By Train Through the Americas*, by Paul Theroux, details the author's journey by train from a suburb of Boston all the way to Patagonia. Sadly, many of the train routes he took are no longer in operation, but it's still a great book.

In Lonely Planet's *Green Dreams: Travels in Central America* by Stephen Benz, the author astutely analyzes and questions the impact visitors are having on a region and its people. *Traveler's Tales Central America*, edited by Larry Habegger and Natanya Pearlman, is a collection of striking travel essays on the region from renowned writers such as Paul Theroux and Tim Cahill.

So Far from God: A Journey to Central America, by Patrick Marnham, was the winner of the 1985 Thomas Cook Travel Book Award. It's an insightful and often amusing account of a leisurely meander from Texas down to Mexico City and on into Central America.

Though not specifically about Costa Rica, bird-watchers will enjoy *Birders: Birds of Tribe* by Mark Cocker, a true celebration of the bird enthusiast's determination to endure hours of boredom and terrible weather – all to catch a glimpse of some rare and spectacular avian species.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Costa Rica Guide (www.costa-rica-guide.com) Nicely organized website with detailed maps and travel information on each region.

Costa Rica Link (www.1costaricalink.com) An online directory that provides a great deal of information on transport, hotels, activities and more.

Guías Costa Rica (www.guiascostarica.com) Links that connect you with everything you'd ever need to know – from entertainment to health to government websites.

Lanic (<http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/ca/cr>) An exceptional collection of links to sites of many Costa Rican organizations (mostly in Spanish), from the University of Texas.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Provides summaries on traveling to most places on earth, including the all-important Thorn Tree bulletin board, where you can ask questions of travelers who've been to Costa Rica recently; the site can link you to useful travel resources elsewhere on the Web.

Tico Times (www.ticotimes.net) The online edition of Costa Rica's excellent English-language weekly newspaper.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

SURF & TURF

One Week / San José to Playas Avellana & Negra

This popular route takes travelers by bubbling volcanoes, steamy hot springs and tranquil cloud forest before hitting the beach.

From San José head north to **La Fortuna** (p237) on the eastern folds of Cordillera de Tilarán, where you hike through thick forest on the flanks of **Volcán Arenal** (p249), followed by a good soak in the hot springs. Then hop on the jeep-boat-jeep service across Laguna de Arenal to **Monteverde** (p187) and search for the elusive quetzal at **Reserva Biológica Bosque Nuboso Monteverde** (p207). End your stay with a zip-line canopy tour.

Then, make a beeline to the pretty surf of **Playa Tamarindo** (p274), where travelers can loll by the beach, or pursue water- and land-based frolics. Nature buffs will not want to miss the nesting leatherback turtles at **Playa Grande** (p271).

From here, continue south along a dismal dirt road for more sun and surf at **Playas Avellana & Negra** (p281). Now, sufficiently suntanned and surf-weary, you can head back to San José.



This 605km loop could take more than three weeks if you study Spanish or volunteer in Monteverde, make a stop for world-class windsurfing in Laguna de Arenal, celebrate Guanacaste Day in Santa Cruz, or explore the beaches south of Tamarindo.

COAST TO COAST**Two Weeks / Jacó to Uvita & Cahuita to Manzanillo**

Surfers, sun-worshippers and party-goers may want to catch some waves and some rays on both coasts. First head to **Jacó** (p329), the quintessential beach-party town on the Pacific coast. Take the jet boat to lovely, laid-back **Montezuma** (p307) for a different vibe. Surfers will want to head to the other side of the Nicoya Peninsula to check out the swells at **Mal País** and **Santa Teresa** (p313).

Backtrack to Jacó, and then continue on to **Manuel Antonio** (p354) for a chance to see the endangered squirrel monkey at the world famous **Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio** (p356). If you haven't yet had enough of the post-card-perfect Pacific coast, continue further south to **Dominical** (p362) to catch some more waves, or to **Uvita** (p366) to escape the tourist crowds.

Now it's time to explore the Caribbean side, but first you have to make it back to **San José** (p88). Hop on the first eastbound bus out of the capital and get off at **Cahuita** (p470), capital of Afro-Caribbean culture and gateway to **Parque Nacional Cahuita** (p478). Stick around and get your fill of this mellow little village, before moving on to **Puerto Viejo de Talamanca** (p480), the Caribbean's center for nightlife, cuisine and positive vibes. Rent a bike and ride to **Manzanillo** (p494), from where you can snorkel, kayak and hike in the **Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Gandoca-Manzanillo** (p496).

You'll cover 575km on the Pacific side (plus the boat ride to Montezuma) and 580km on the Caribbean side, making this the ultimate road trip. One week on each coast is the bare minimum.



PEAK TO BEACH

Two Weeks / San José to Jacó

From the highest summit down to tropical beaches, this itinerary takes you high and low and through everything in between.

Start by heading south on the Interamericana out of San José, into the Zona de Los Santos. Visit the coffee plantations in the valley near **Santa María de Dota** (p371) or go bird-watching in the highlands of the **Parque Nacional Los Quetzales** (p375). Continue past the looming **Cerro de la Muerte** (p376) and straight down the mountain to the pleasant agricultural city of **San Isidro de El General** (p377). From here, ride the winding dirt road north-east to **San Gerardo de Rivas** (p381) and prepare for the two-day climb up Costa Rica's highest peak, **Cerro Chirripó** (p384). Linger around the summit for incredible day hikes before making your way back down.

Return through San Isidro to **Dominical** (p362) and enjoy a laid-back vibe and powerful surf. If you're addicted to Pacific sunsets, stay in **Escleras** (p364) for staggering views. Continue on north to **Hacienda Barú** (p361), where you can clamber on a canopy platform and sloth-spot in the trees. Head further up the coast to the port of **Quepos** (p343), before dipping south and landing in the country's most popular national park, **Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio** (p356). Wind down your trip with some fun and sun in the resort town of **Jacó** (p329), an adequate reintroduction to gringo-life before flying out of San José.



A 675km loop leads from San José inland to San Isidro and then on to the Pacific coast at Dominical and up the coast, so there's no need to backtrack. Add another week if you decide to use Dominical as a base for exploring the wonders of the southern coast.

ROADS LESS TRAVELED

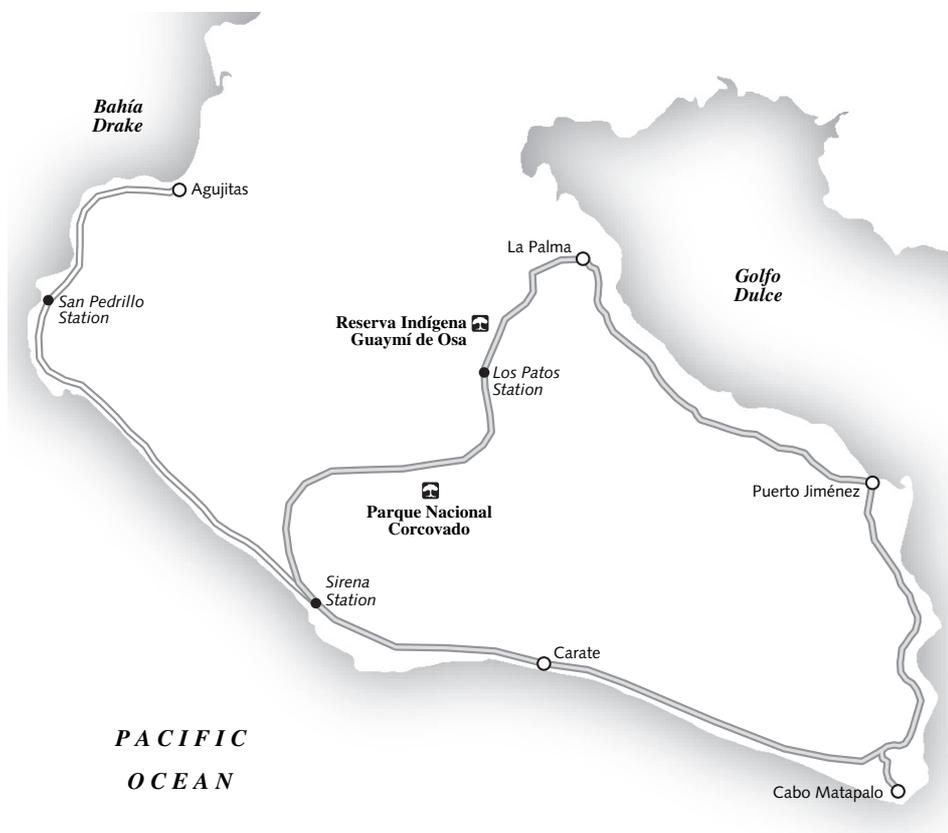
OSA ADVENTURE

One Week / Puerto Jiménez to Puerto Jiménez

You only have a week but you still want to see the most distant corner of Costa Rica?

Fly into **Puerto Jiménez** (p422), where you can spend a few days kayaking around the mangroves, panning for gold and otherwise soaking up the charm of this tiny town. Head north to **La Palma** (p419), from where you can visit the **Reserva Indígena Guaymí de Osa** (p422) and observe firsthand the lifestyle of one of Costa Rica's indigenous groups. Next, head to **Los Patos ranger station** (p414), which will be the starting point for a trek across the **Parque Nacional Corcovado** (p413). The first day of the trek lands you at **Sirena station** (p414), one of the country's best wildlife-watching spots, especially for squirrel monkeys and Baird's tapirs. It's worth spending an extra day exploring the trails around this area without a pack on your back. Finally, the last day of the hike brings you to La Leona ranger station. In the nearby village of **Carate** (p428), catch the *taxi colectivo* to the **Cabo Matapalo** (p427), where you can chill out for the rest of the week, enjoying some of the country's most beautiful beaches. From here, it's a quick taxi ride back to Puerto Jiménez, for your return flight to San José.

This 120km round-trip fits perfectly into a one-week vacation. But if you have time to spare, you can undertake the more strenuous hike to San Pedrillo station and spend some time in Agujitas on beautiful Bahía Drake.



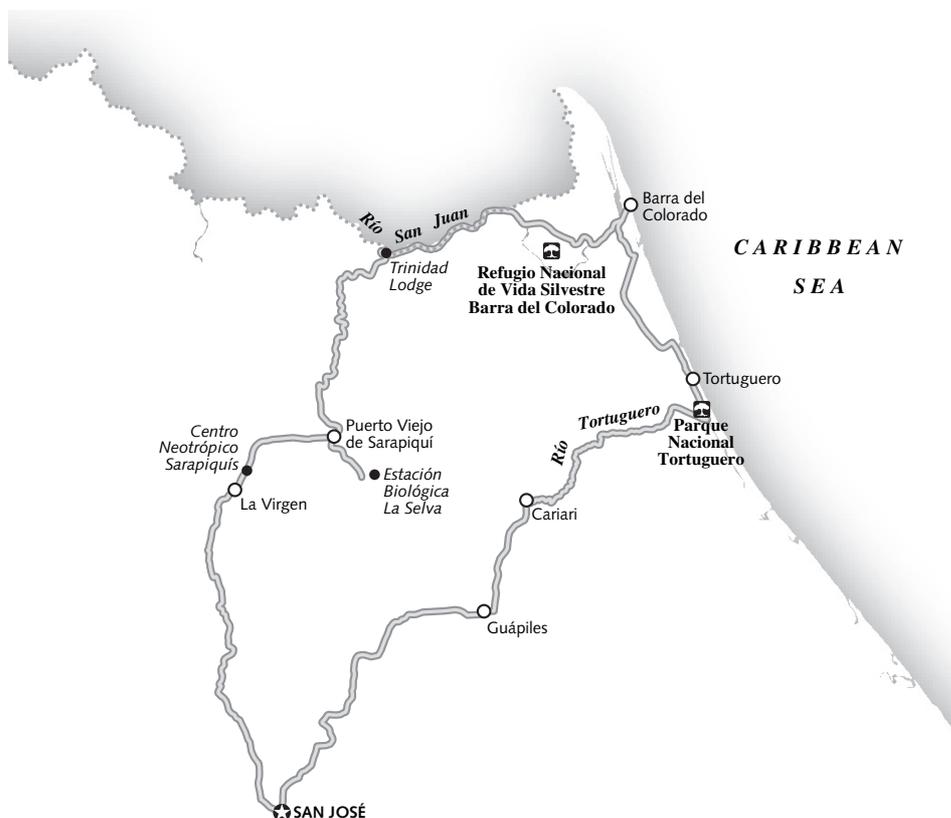
RIDING THE RÍO SAN JUAN

10 Days / La Virgen to Tortuguero

Travel exclusively by boat in some of Costa Rica's (and Nicaragua's) most remote regions near the sparsely populated northern Caribbean coast.

From San José, head to the tiny town of **La Virgen** (p515), a rafting and kayaking mecca where you can take a ride on the Río Sarapiquí and spend the night at the luxurious lodge **Centro Neotrópico Sarapiquí** (p518). Then head up the river to **Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí** (p520): take a day to wander through banana plantations, spot wildlife and mingle with busy scientists at the **Estación Biológica La Selva** (p522). Leave terra firma and grab the morning boat up the Río Sarapiquí to **Trinidad Lodge** (p521), on the south bank of the Río San Juan. Stay on a working ranch, ride horses and go birding before setting out, again by boat, along the Río San Juan, with your eye to the Caribbean coast.

This river (Nicaraguan territory) offers an incredible ride, which will take you through a combination of ranches, forest, wildlife and old war zones (from when Contras inhabited the area), and through the remote **Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Barra del Colorado** (p467), to the village of **Barra del Colorado** (p467) and its loose assortment of lodges, where travelers can go sportfishing, bird-watching and looking for crocs. Afterwards, continue to the more touristed village of **Tortuguero** (p461), to watch green sea and leatherback turtles and to canoe through the infinite canals of **Parque Nacional Tortuguero** (p459), Costa Rica's mini-Amazon. Then head to San José via water taxi and bus through **Cariari** (p448) and **Guápiles** (p445).



This trip is only 200km, and could be done in a week if the tides, weather and the various independent boatmen you'll need all work out. But if you're going to the trouble (and expense), get your captain to take it slowly and you'll see more wildlife and incredible scenery than you ever imagined.

EXPLORING THE TALAMANCAS

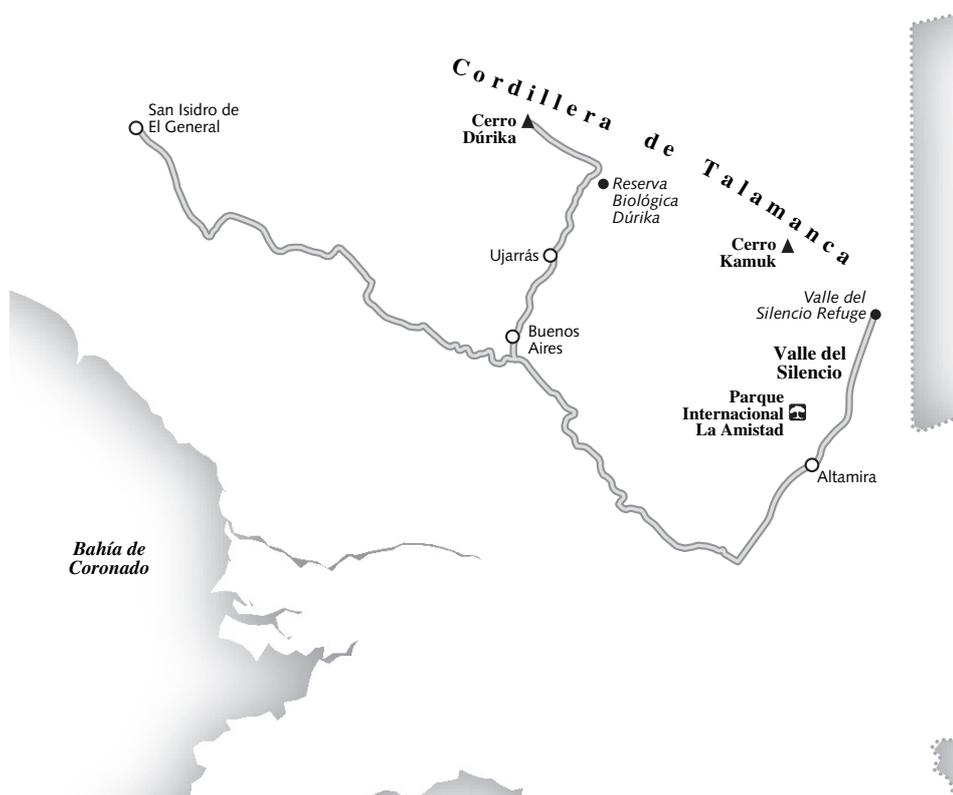
Two Weeks / San Isidro to
Parque Internacional La Amistad

Delve into the mountainous area that remains Costa Rica's most unexplored. You can do either of the following hikes separately (for a shorter trip) or bundle them into one if you've got plenty of time.

Gear up in **San Isidro de El General** (p377) before heading southeast through pineapple plantations to the small agricultural town of **Buenos Aires** (p386). Arrangements can be made here for transport via dirt road to the wonderfully remote **Reserva Biológica Dúrika** (p387), a self-sustaining community nestled in the Cordillera de Talamanca. From this point, undertake the six-day, round-trip hike-and-climb of **Cerro Dúrika** (3280m), situated inside the Parque Internacional La Amistad. Visits to the neighboring indigenous community of **Ujarrás** (p387) are also available.

If you haven't had your fill of nature yet, then continue on south from Buenos Aires to Altamira, where you'll find the headquarters for **Parque Internacional La Amistad** (p398). From here you can make the 20km guided trek through **Valle del Silencio** (p399), one of the most isolated and remote areas in all of Costa Rica, ending up at a small refuge at the base of the Cerro Kamuk. From here, make the return trip through Altamira and back to the rowdy roads near the Interamericana.

It's 210km straight up and down mountains in the isolated Cordillera de Talamanca, one of the most remote areas in the country and home to various indigenous communities, unspoiled wildlife and incredible vistas. Stay and work as a volunteer in the Dúrika reserve if you wish.



TAILORED TRIPS

SURFING COSTA RICA

Costa Rican shores have been attracting surfers since *Endless Summer II* profiled some of the country's most appealing breaks.

Playa Tamarindo (p274) serves as a good base for several tasty surfing sites. Start with a boat trip to the granddaddies of all surf breaks, Witch's Rock and Ollie's Point in the **Parque Nacional Santa Rosa** (p227). Then hit the isolated beaches at **Playas Avellana** and **Negra** (p281), whose famous waves were featured in the movie. Down the coast **Playa Guiones** (p291) is cooking all year long, and from there it's just a hop, skip and long jump to the oh-so-trendy **Mal País** (p313).

The next big stop is **Jacó** (p329) and **Playa Hermosa** (p339) on the central Pacific coast, offering consistent waves, but keep moving south for good reef breaks at **Matapalo** (p360) and **Dominical** (p362). Afterwards, hightail it way south to **Cabo Matapalo** (p427) on the Península de Osa, before skipping back to the mainland for one of the continent's longest left-hand breaks at **Pavones** (p440).

And don't forget the Caribbean. Catch a boat to the uninhabited **Isla Uvita** (p456) off the coast of Puerto Limón or frolic in the waves on the endless Playa Negra north of **Cahuita** (p470). Further south the famous Salsa Brava at **Puerto Viejo de Talamanca** (p480) is for experts only, while Playa Cocles has consistent waves that service surfers of all skill levels.



RAFTING SAFARI

Experience the country's world-class rivers while soaking in the sight of pristine rain forests and wildlife on a 10-day safari.

From San José head east to the **Río Pacuare** (p177) for two days of enchanted Class IV white water. Move on to the nearby Pascua section of the **Río Reventazón** (p177) for 24km of heart-pumping Class IV+. Travel west to the central Pacific coast and spend a day of gentler rafting, taking in the beach-fringed rain forest of **Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio** (p356), home to more than 350 species of birds. After, suit-up for a quick half-day down the challenging **Río Naranjo** (p348), close by. Cap it all off with two days on the largely unexplored **Río Savegre** (p348), putting in on the remote, Class IV+ upper **Río División** (p378), the main tributary of the Savegre. The next day will have you continuing downstream to the bridge take-out on the Costanera, the Pacific coastal highway leading north to San José.



Snapshot

In the February 2006 presidential election, former president and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Oscar Arias narrowly beat Citizens' Action Party (CAP) candidate Otton Solís. After weeks of investigating potential irregularities and re-counting votes – reminiscent of another presidential election you might remember – Solís conceded. Arias earned just 18,169 votes more than his opponent, winning the popular election by a 1.2% margin.

Solís' showing was significant, as his CAP was a newcomer on the political scene, founded only in 2000. Attempting to break into Costa Rica's two-party system, CAP's platform promotes citizen participation and condemns corruption – issues made relevant by the previous administration.

The topic that dominated this election, however, was the Central American Free Trade Agreement (Cafta), the regional treaty that is currently hung up in the Legislative Assembly. Costa Rica is the only one of the six signatories that has not ratified the agreement.

Proponents of Cafta – including Arias – tout its economic benefits, including increased access to US markets and thousands of new jobs. Critics argue that the accord does not protect Costa Rica's small farmers and domestic industries, which will struggle to compete with the anticipated flood of cheap US products. As Solís explained, 'The law of the jungle benefits the big beast. We are a very small beast.' Opponents have vowed to strike, demonstrate and do anything to keep the agreement from proceeding.

Critics are also concerned about Cafta's effects on the environment – always a hot issue (literally and figuratively). They fear that the international trade agreement will take precedent over local conservation laws, forcing Costa Rica to allow off-shore oil drilling and open-pit mining, among other detrimental activities.

While these questions are pertinent – and activists are right to ask them – there are more pressing threats to the environment in Costa Rica. Soaring tourist numbers and increased infrastructure create stress on ecological habitats – ironic, as that is what people come to enjoy. The proliferation of small hotels is difficult to regulate, while big-business developers pose an ongoing threat. Sustainable tourism – that fine line between economic profits and environmental conservation – is proving difficult to execute (see p66). Communities experience other side effects of the tourist boom, like child prostitution and drug addiction.

Fortunately, local communities are active and aware. Conservationist, educational and cultural organizations have helped protect the environment, preserve local culture and enhance education. For travelers, these organizations offer a great opportunity to get involved – see p542.

Meanwhile, Costa Rica is becoming more diverse, more cosmopolitan. North Americans and Europeans continue to arrive in droves, in search of their own piece of tropical paradise. They bring much-needed investment, but also drive up property prices and displace cash-strapped Ticos.

Nicaraguans are coming south in search of employment, education and other opportunities lacking in their poorer homeland. Rightly or wrongly, immigrants are often blamed for increases in crime, fueling ongoing animosity between Nicas and Ticos (see p235).

Despite these tensions, typical of a multicultural society, Ticos are not blind to the value of increasing globalization – even in their own communities. In a country that boasts about its biodiversity, they are wise to welcome a little 'human diversity' too.

FAST FACTS

Population: four million

Life expectancy at birth:
78 years (USA: 78 years)

Adult literacy: 96%
(USA: 97%)

Population living below
the poverty line: 18%
(USA: 12%)

Percentage of population
using the Internet: 29%
(USA: 56%)

Annual carbon dioxide
emissions per person
(metric tons): 1.2
(USA: 19.9)

Annual coffee
consumption per person:
4.1kg (USA: 4kg)

Passenger cars per 1000
people: 82.2 (USA: 477.8)

Percentage of protected
land: 27% (USA: 16%)

Number of species of
birds: 850 (USA: 508)

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