

Costa Rica: 'Pura Vida'



Leatherback turtle

Costa Rica has been well documented as one of the forerunners of 'eco-tourism' and one of the most bio-diverse countries in the world. It has long been a favourite for travellers lured by its verdant forests, colourful wildlife and wild Pacific beaches as well as the huge range of physical activities on offer including zip-lining through the canopy and white water rafting. Combined with the friendly and proud nature of the Ticos and the country's renowned political stability it hardly comes as a surprise to learn that almost two million people visit Costa Rica every year. All too often, however, we see trips to Costa Rica covering a somewhat formulaic and well beaten route. This year our specialists have been exploring some of the lesser-known, yet equally incredible areas to gain a greater insight into the country and enhance the trips that we design for clients. Sarah Powell has discovered some real gems.





River View Cabin, Pacuare Lodge



Quetzal



Tango Mar beach, Tambor

San Ramon

The cloud forests are usually high up on anyone's 'must see' list for a trip to Costa Rica, home to some of the country's most spectacular birdlife as well as the Costa Rican national favourite pastime, zip-lining. To this end the Los Angeles biological reserve near San Ramon is an essential stop for any visitor, added to which the Resplendent Quetzal is more frequently spotted here than in the more renowned location of Monteverde. The Villa Blanca lodge represents everything that a cloud forest lodge should be; cosy villas nestled in the dramatic forest setting with log fires for the cold evenings, expert guides and birdlife abounding in its gardens.

Pacuare

Hidden in the pristine rainforest-covered Talamanca mountain range lies one of Costa Rica's best kept secrets: the Pacuare Lodge. The Pacuare River is one of the best white water rivers in the country and provides access to this unique lodge, nestled on its banks in a steep gorge. The raft in on gentle category I-II rapids takes you deep into the rainforest, surrounded by evocative sights, sounds and smells. A wonderful way to experience Costa Rica's true wilderness without having to compromise on comfort; whilst the lodge relies on candlelight at night and solar heating, the canopied beds and hardwood floors add a touch of 'barefoot luxury'. This is also one of the few places in Costa Rica where you can meet one of the country's last remaining indigenous groups of people, the Cabécar.

Rincón de la Vieja

Using Liberia airport, northern Costa Rica's international hub, makes the area of Rincón de la Vieja, just an hour away, an excellent alternative beginning or ending to any trip. The 140 square kilometre national park takes its name from the imposing active volcano and is made up of truly spectacular landscapes from barren volcanic craters, rolling hills, steaming fumaroles and boiling geysers. Activities range from lounging in hot springs and thermal mud pools to horse-riding, canopy tours and wonderful trekking. The family-run Borinquen Mountain Resort and Spa is fabulous, offering friendly service, comfortable rooms and great facilities. For something a little more off the beaten track, Tenorio Volcano National Park is one of the least visited parks in Costa Rica, yet is easily accessible from Rincón de la Vieja or Arenal. This area is home to the eye-catching Rio Celeste River, coloured an almost impossible shade of blue by the high mineral content. Although sightings are rare, this is also one of the main habitats for Costa Rica's large cat population, which includes jaguars, ocelots and cougars.

Turrialba

Lying on the verdant slopes of Costa Rica's central mountain chain is Turrialba. A combination of reliable rainfall, powerful rivers and rich volcanic soils has made this an important agricultural region carefully developed to ensure a balance with nature and conservation. You can take plantation tours and visit the

CATIE agronomical research centre to learn more about Costa Rica's diverse flora, and Hacienda Tayutic for a taster of traditional hacienda life. A night or two here works perfectly on the way to or from Tortuguero National Park or combined with Pacuare and the Caribbean coast.

Dominical

Manuel Antonio National Park is one of Costa Rica's prime tourist destinations, yet just forty kilometres to the south is the relatively unknown beach town of Dominical. The dark sand beaches, popular with surfers, are backed by palm trees which then give way to the lush forest-covered foothills of the Talamanca mountain range. Beautiful waterfalls and wildlife rich mangroves are easily accessible, whilst from December to March and August to October the Marino Ballena National Park plays host to migrating humpback and pilot whales, as well as bottlenose dolphins.

Nicoya Peninsula

Finally, for somewhere to relax there are a couple of new spots along the Nicoya Peninsula that have captured our attention. The Harmony Hotel is a laidback but meticulously run property on the wide, sandy Nosara Beach. The simple yet elegant bungalows, the relaxing spa, yoga sessions and healthy local food make for blissful relaxation without breaking the bank. Flor Blanca meanwhile, near Malpais, is the kind of place that dreams are made of; luxuriously furnished villas, truly delectable food and attentive yet

unstuffy service. Dark wood and minimalist Asian furnishings create an almost zen-like atmosphere, being an idyllic blend of luxury and nature. The pilates and meditation sessions, beautiful pool and pristine expanse of beach will tempt all to unwind.

Whilst we wouldn't want to forget some of Costa Rica's classic sights such as Arenal and Tortuguero, we do think that it's well worth incorporating some of these alternative areas to really get the most out of a trip to this diverse country.

Sarah Powell

Costa Rica Specialist

FACT FILE

A two week trip to Costa Rica incorporating San Ramon, Turrialba, Tortuguero National Park, Arenal and Nosara starts from approximately £2,850 per person. December through to April are generally the best months to visit Costa Rica but September and October are the only months we would suggest avoiding. For further details please contact Paula, Nick, Patrick or Sarah on 01993 838 665.



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