

Costa Rica

IN 2009, COSTA RICA TOPPED THE HAPPY PLANET INDEX, reporting the highest life satisfaction in the world, and, once you've visited this beautiful and diverse land, it's easy to understand why.

Costa Rica is a small country (just under two and a half times the size of Wales) and for those who enjoy beautiful scenery, activity and wildlife, it's hard to beat. The landscape is varied with dense jungle, mystical cloudforest, active volcanoes and great beaches all teeming with exotic wildlife. Although the country only covers 0.03% of the world's land mass, it is home to over 6% of the world's total identified species. That's 850 species of birds and 250 species of mammals. And with about a quarter of the country dedicated to national parks, wildlife refuges or reserves, Costa Rica's best assets are well protected.

Here are some of Costa Rica's highlights.

Tortuguero National Park

A great area for spotting a range of wildlife and water-birds, Tortuguero National Park is one of the most visited in Costa Rica. Although it is a reasonably remote area just over 250 kilometres from San Jose on the north east Caribbean coast, it is easily accessible by road and boat or by plane. The park covers 190 square kilometres and is well worth the journey, particularly between July and September when endangered green turtles make their way up to the beach to lay their eggs in the sand.

Arenal Volcano

Considered Central America's most active volcano and in the top ten most active in the world, the impressive Arenal volcano is not to be missed. The last major explosion was in 1968 and the volcano has been erupting ever since. On a clear day smoke can often be seen billowing from the top and by night lava flows down its sides. Even if bad weather obscures the summit, you will certainly hear the explosions at night. The area around the volcano is rich in wildlife and after exploring on foot, on horseback, or by boat, you can relax in the naturally-heated thermal springs found nearby.



Tiger frog, Tortuguero National Park

Cloudforest Reserves

Thanks to their high altitude Costa Rica's magical cloudforests attract different species of flora and fauna from their low-lying cousins. One of the most memorable is the beautiful resplendent quetzal, a stunning little bird of emerald green and ruby red plumage. The most well-known of the cloudforest reserves is Monteverde, which offers a variety of



Blue hummingbird, Tortuguero National Park

experiences from birdwatching to horseriding, canopy walking and zip lining. Monteverde is now quite a substantial town, so for those in search of a more peaceful ambience, the more remote San Gerardo de Dota to the south of San Jose, or the Los Angeles cloudforest reserve near San Ramon may be a better bet.

Osa Peninsula

The Osa Peninsula to the south of the country is a wild and rugged area, accessed only by plane, and is the most biologically diverse place on the planet. Since it is less visited and less developed than much of the rest of the country, the wildlife and birdlife here is prolific.

In addition, the marine life can be fantastic with humpback whales from the Arctic visiting between late October and the end of April, and those from the Antarctic here between late July and early November. This gives Costa Rica the longest humpback whale watching season in the world, and if you are there in August you are likely to see the mothers with their calves.



FACTfile

A 14-day trip to Costa Rica including including San Jose (1), Tortuguero National Park (2), Arenal (3), Monteverde (4) and time on the beach in Playa Potrero (5) costs from £1,895 per person including international flights and shared transfers throughout.

A more comprehensive 18-day trip that includes some of the hidden gems of Costa Rica, such as Turrialba (6) and Pacuare Lodge (7) costs, from £3,830 per person.

www.audleytravel.com/costarica

Getting around

There are many ways of exploring Costa Rica depending on your route. Car hire, shared shuttle transfers, private chauffeur-guide and light aircraft flights are all available, and we also offer expedition cruises between Costa Rica and Panama. Please see www.cruisewest.co.uk/audley for more information.

Beaches

With over 1,300 kilometres of coastline, Costa Rica has a variety of beaches, from sheltered, golden sands ideal for swimming to more rugged and wild beaches with black volcanic sand and strong surf. As a general rule the Pacific coast is more developed and has a wider range of accommodation options. The Caribbean coast is a more laid-back area, with smaller, more simple hotels and virtually deserted beaches.



Beach at Manuel Antonio National Park

Hidden Gems

Turrialba

A charming little town worth visiting for its birdlife, plantations and activities.

Puerto Viejo de Talamanca

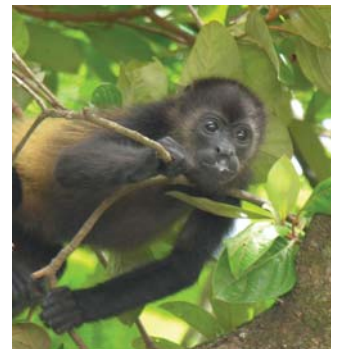
Wildlife refuges, national parks and the indigenous people of the Kekoldi reserve, all provide an alternative insight into the country.

Tenorio Volcano or Rincon de la Vieja National Park

Excellent hiking in breathtaking surroundings.

Pacuare Lodge

A luxurious jungle lodge accessed by a thrilling white water raft trip.



Baby howler monkey, Osa Peninsula

Responsible Travel Update



In Costa Rica, we have teamed up with Friends of Conservation to support VIDA, an NGO, who are working with communities to conserve threatened habitats and species. Areas demanding particular attention are the cloudforest region of Montverde and the southern coastline where research continues into whale populations.

www.vida.org