

Explore Costa Rica A User's Guide



A supplement to the travel guide Explore Costa Rica.

Much of this information is not available in any other printed guidebook. Comments and/or questions may be sent to internetmail@savethemanatee.com If you have not done so already, you can also show your appreciation (as well as help enhance your trip) by purchasing a copy. You can also order it from any bookstore in the US or Europe or (at the discounted price of US\$20) from this web page:

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Dear Readers:

Thank you for purchasing Explore Costa Rica. If you have not purchased our guide, please see the link at the bottom of the page. Here are some suggestions for planning your trip.

SOME GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

I suggest you stay away from large resorts — which you can find everywhere — and patronize smaller bed and breakfasts and lodges. Many lodges have their own private reserves, and you will find a level of personalized service you won't find in many other places.

I recommend that you try to stay at one or more community-run tourist lodges. These projects are highlighted throughout the text with a huge “e.” Expect a local experience.

Be wary of theft, especially in hotel rooms and along the beaches. Costa Rica now has 125 tourist police patrolling, but there are still problems. Passport thefts are at epidemic levels. An alert attitude goes a long way towards preventing theft.

Don't try to do too much. Nature is the major reason to visit Costa Rica. I recommend staying in one place (or several places) because you will see much more that way.

Some suggestions for “Tourist Trap Alternatives” are given in the sidebar on page 111. I have another sidebar on “Selecting a Rainforest Lodge” on page 131.

SOME SUGGESTIONS ON PLACES TO TRAVEL:

As there are a lot of areas in Costa Rica, we'll highlight some places that aren't as well known. The most popular places are Jaco Beach, Tamarindo, Manuel Antonio, Arenal, Monteverde, and Tortuguero. While there are innumerable activities at these places and many places to stay, they are definitely touristic and get most of the crowds. While *Explore Costa Rica* does cover these in detail, it differs from other guides in that it also covers lesser known gems.

First of all, I'd recommend not to plan an extended stay in San José. It's fine for a day or two, but there's no reason to stay longer.

My top pick in the city for sightseeing would be the Museo de Jade. After that, I would recommend the Art Museum, the National Museum, and the Gold Museum in that order. If you want to stay in the city center, Barrio Otoya is a quiet area within walking distance of most attractions. I recommend the Cinco Hormigas Rojas, an unusual bed and breakfast (p. 194), as well as the Hotel Aranjuez (p. 194). Both of these are Costa Rican owned-and-operated.

Other places I would recommend include the Costa Rican owned and operated Casa del Parque Hostel (p. 187) at Parque Nacional and the Quaker-run Casa Ridgeway (p. 187).

There are also a few backpacker-priced hotels which I also include in my guide. And the outlying suburbs of Escazú, Los Yoses, and San Pedro have many nice hotels to offer.

Of course, you can also stay in the area of San José, for example in the towns of Heredia and Alajuela. The Pura Vida Hotel in Alajuela (p. 239) is run by expat Brit Bernie and Nhi, his charming Vietnamese-born

wife. A good budget choice in Alajuela is the Vida Tropical (p. 237). A place to check out in Heredia would be the Galeria Octagono (p. 257). A very expensive but acclaimed hotel is the Finca Rosa Blanca (p. 258) and the Hotel Bougainvillea is another good choice (p. 258). A good tour near Heredia is that offered by the Ark Herb Farm (p. 260).

Atenas is another outlying town, albeit a bit farther out. It has the El Cafetal (p. 244). Another nice place to stay for those with larger budgets is Vista del Valle Plantation Inn (p. 249).

In the Central Valley I recommend a visit to Orosi (p.276), a quiet valley with many places to stay, and the Else Kientzler Botanical Garden (p. 247). Guayabo (p. 286) is a nice (if small) archaeological site, and a reader wrote recently to rave about Guayabo Lodge (p. 285). It's also fun to walk around towns such as Atenas (see above).

If you're heading to the Caribbean Coast (or even if you are not), Casa Río Blanco (p. 266) is an intimate rainforest lodge with a small reserve. Many people say nice things about Isla Las Heliconias (p. 267).

While there is not much in the way of great architecture in Costa Rica, one cathedral worth visiting is the Basilica de Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles which enshrines a statuette of the Black Virgin; it has a remarkable story behind it (p. 269).

Many people go to Monteverde to look for a quetzal and hike through cloud forest. The Dota area (p. 271) is a great alternative. Dantica (p. 272) is a deluxe new lodge here which has hiking trails and an art gallery.

The Northern Zone is an area not too far from San José which has a lot to offer. I particularly like Rara Avis (p. 294), a remote rainforest lodge here.

Monteverde gets a lot of visitors. I like the Ranario (p. 301) here as well as the Children's Eternal Rainforest (p. 304) which offers great night hikes as well as daytime visits.

Tilarán, by Lake Arenal, is another out-of-the-way place, and Casa Mañana (p. 319) and the recently refurbished Hotel La Carreta (p. 318) are good bets. A neat place near the lake is La Ceiba Tree Lodge (p. 322).

Near Arenal volcano, the Arenal Observatory Lodge is a deluxe choice and a world-into-itself is (p. 324). An alternative to touristy La Fortuna is the pleasant town of San Carlos (p. 332).

Way up near the Nicaraguan border, Laguna del Lagarto (p. 335) is an overlooked gem with primary forest (giant trees! poison dart frogs!) right near the lodge.

The Caño Negro National Wildlife Refuge (p. 337) is a good place to see birdlife and provides a good alternative to the increasingly crowded Tortuguero.

Guanacaste is a magnet for resort tourism these days. Because it is more arid and more touristy than other areas, it's not my favorite. But I recommend exploring towns such as Nicoya, Santa Cruz, Liberia, and Cañas, as well as visiting Rincón de la Vieja (p. 354), a national park surrounding a volcano. Lomas Barbudal (p. 347) is a less visited reserve, and Miravalles Protected Zone (p. 349) surrounds Miravalles Volcano. Santa Rosa (p. 358) is one of the nation's best national parks, one which contains rare tropical dry forest; it's a great choice. Isla Chira (p. 430) affords a chance to stay at a lodge run by locals on a small island. On the peninsula, Curú reserve (p. 411) is a family run place. Playa Nosara (p. 389) is one of the better surfing beach villages. Laguna Lodge (p. 392) has a nice reserve here, and the Harbor Reef (p. 391) has nice digs and a good restaurant. Ostional (p. 394), is an out-of-the-way turtle nesting spot where you can stay at Hotel Luna Azul (p. 395). Playa Sámara has the Flying Crocodile (p. 397) which also have an ultralight aircraft.

Hotel Punta Islita (p. 402) is an upscale resort which really tries to give back to the community.

Heading South, near Carara are the Pura Vida Botanical Gardens and Waterfalls (p. 432), a recommended stop on this coast.

Jacó Beach is very touristed as is, to a lesser extent, the area around Manuel Antonio National Park. There are innumerable hotels along this coast. Bahari Beach Bungalows and Rafiki Safari Lodge (p. 462) are two unique lodges near Matapalo, to the south of Quepos. Hacienda Barú (p. 463) is a great reserve with cabins and restaurant which is near the surfing hotspot of Dominical. Further down the coast, Ojochal (p. 474) is a quiet beach town with many accommodation options.

In “The Southern Zone,” I’ve always found the town of San Isidro to be a pleasant place. Interesting places to visit in the area include Los Cusingos Neotropical Bird Sanctuary (p. 499), and La Botija (p. 480). An interesting experience would be to stay with disabled-travel activist Monic Chabot (p. 479). A cool place to visit near Chripó is Cloudbridge Preserve (p. 486). South of Golfito, a good choice in rainforest lodges is Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge (p. 495). Another nice place is Tiskita Lodge (p. 501). Wilson Botanical Gardens (p. 502) is also away from the fray. Playa Zancudo (p. 497) is away from it all.

There are innumerable places to stay in the Osa peninsula, but a few of the more special ones include Bosque del Río Tigre (p. 516), Iguana Lodge and its neighbors (p. 517), and Luna Lodge (p. 517).

Tortuguero gets a lot of visitors these days, but you can get here via local transport as described in the book. Casa Marbella (p. 554), run by naturalist Daryl Loth, is a good choice in the village.

To the south, Cahuita National Park (p. 564) offers entrance by donation, and it’s a good place to see wildlife. The village has a number of cheap alternatives as well as pricer options. Stay out of the town center to avoid noise from the bar.

Further south, Puerto Viejo (p. 573) is a long time favorite. However, it is much more touristy than it used to be. (Locals are fighting off the prospect of a new marina here). You can stay in town (Cashew Hill is one nice choice) or head down the road to Manzanillo; you’ll find many options on the way.

Concluding Remarks

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Explore Costa Rica



Travel with travel guide author Harry S. Pariser around Costa Rica and experience its wonders! Dive and snorkel off the coast of the remote Osa Peninsula. Experience the Caribbean coast with its rich Jamaican culture. Visit the small hotels of the Pacific Coast and the Nicoya Peninsula and remote lodges in the heart of the rainforest. Dine everywhere from gourmet restaurants to local sodas. Ascend by rope and pulley into the rainforest canopy, explore caves, surf, kayak, canoe, bungee jump, mountain bike, trek, or just lay back on a beach, relax, and watch the monkeys at play. Internal air flights, bus travel, ferry schedules, what to do, what to avoid. Studying Spanish, volunteer programs, and sustainable tourism. Maps, photos, web sites, useful tips. Humorous, informative, educational, detailed. There's no other guide quite like it!

Explore Costa Rica specs:

- ▶ 668 information-packed pages
- ▶ 38 maps, and 30 color and 80 black and white photos
- ▶ All ranges and types of accommodation including nature lodges
- ▶ Whitewater rafting, surfing, horseback riding, snorkeling, and scuba
- ▶ Birdwatching, hiking, whale watching, canopy climbing, and ballooning
- ▶ Complete background information: animals, rainforests, history, culture
- ▶ Travel basics for neighboring nations and excursions to Cuba
- ▶ Volunteer opportunities, language schools, environmental organizations
- ▶ Car rental, buses, plane travel, and ferries
- ▶ Thousands of web sites, e-mails, phone numbers, and fax numbers
- ▶ *Internet updates*

“Harry Pariser's *Explore Costa Rica* is an ideal, very highly recommended travel guide and planner. This informational compendium is wonderfully enhanced with color photography and covers everything from surfing to hiking, horseback riding to ballooning, cruising the countryside to wandering around the towns, and much, much more!” — *Midwest Book Review*

“Geared towards the nature-conscious traveler, this guide is loaded with practical information and candid observations.” — *Trips*

“*Explore Costa Rica* devotes special attention to natural attractions and outdoor activities as well as to environmental issues. Complete background information covers Costa Rica's natural history, geography, culture, government, and economics.” — *Travel Weekly*

Harry S. Pariser has authored ten travel guides to Central American and Caribbean destinations. He is the recipient of the Lowell Thomas Award (Best Guidebook—1995 Silver) from the Society of American Travel Writers for *The Adventure Guide to Barbados*. His articles have appeared in *The San Jose Mercury News*, *Caribbean Travel & Life*, *The Japan Times*, *Costa Rica Outlook*, *Weissmann's Travel Reports*, and other publications. Mr. Pariser resides in San Francisco, California.

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