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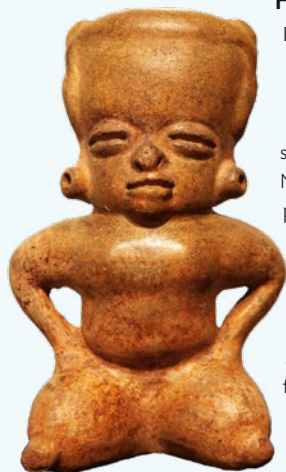
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■ Pages 2–3: The quintessential cone of Arenal volcano, centerpiece of a national park
 Opposite: Surfing is a popular activity on both the Caribbean and Pacific coasts.

CHARTING YOUR TRIP

Abundantly blessed by Mother Nature, Costa Rica—a world leader in ecotourism—enthalls for its scenic beauty and tropical wildlife. Wilderness lodges throughout the country immerse you deep in the animal and avian world, placing you in close proximity to monkeys, jaguars, marine turtles, and birds by the score.

The diversity of terrains also astounds. You can explore a lowland rain forest or snorkel a coral reef in the morning and steep yourself in the mist-shrouded cloud forest or hike the rim of a steaming volcano in the afternoon. Active travelers rave about the dizzying options offered by this small-size nation. Sportfishing. Mountain biking. White-water rafting. Horseback riding. Even golf! Your options are seemingly endless.



■ Pre-Columbian pottery figure

How to Visit in One Week

Despite so many options, it's easy to plan an itinerary that condenses the crème de la crème. A week-long visit should begin in San José, the capital city, where rental cars, buses, and planes are all readily available for your touring needs. Although it lacks the colonial structures of many other Central American cities, San José's Teatro Nacional is a neoclassical gem, and several superb museums honor pre-Columbian cultures. The city's key sites can all be seen in one day.

San José makes a great base for visiting the surrounding Central Highlands, where there's plenty to keep you busy. De rigueur sights include Poás volcano, a little more than an hour by road northwest of San José, where you can drive to the summit and peer down into the steaming depths. While here, you'll want to visit La Paz Waterfall Garden, five miles (8 km) to the east, with superb exhibits on butterflies, birds, snakes, and frogs, as well as rigorous hikes to the waterfalls. The drive from San José to Poás takes you through coffee country. En route, stop at Café Britt for a fun-filled tour that explains coffee culture, from the plantation to the cup.

Visitor Information

For the most up-to-date information on recommended hotels, travel agencies, ecotourist hot spots, ways to get around, and awe-inspiring tours, check out the Costa Rican government's official tourism website at visitcostarica.com.

Another excellent resource is the

English-language weekly *Tico Times*, available online at ticotimes.net. Once a print newspaper, the website offers an overview of the country's current events as well as travel ideas within Costa Rica and details on local restaurants and arts and cultural happenings.

Money Matters

While the national currency is the *colón*, U.S. currency is widely accepted. Most stores, shops, restaurants, and tour companies take dollars. One tip: Bring lots of single dollar bills for tips, streetside souvenirs, and other small purchases, as change for larger bills may be hard to come by. If you do use colones, know that exchange rates are notoriously fickle; check the rate before leaving for your trip, but expect some fluctuation upon arrival. Travelers checks are difficult to cash due to widespread fraud. Credit

cards are widely accepted. Many banks have ATMs that work with U.S. bank cards, usually with a small usage charge.

Admission Costs

The \$—\$\$\$\$ scale used in this guidebook delineates entry fees into Costa Rica attractions:

\$ = Under \$10

\$\$ = \$10–\$15

\$\$\$ = \$15–\$20

\$\$\$\$ = \$20–\$25

\$\$\$\$\$ = Over \$25

Next, consider two days exploring the Monteverde region—about 100 miles (160 km) west of Poás via a cliff-hanging, newly-paved road—where options are boundless. Start with a hike in the world-famous Monteverde Cloud Forest Biological Reserve, considered ground zero for birders keen to spot a resplendent quetzal. A zip-line ride on the Sky Tram adds an adrenaline rush to your forest exploration. And you'll want to check out the area's many fine restaurants, plus its quirky nature exhibits, including Bat Jungle, the Serpentarium, and Selvatura Park's many bio-exhibits spanning amphibians, butterflies, hummingbirds, and even a sloth sanctuary.

To close out your week's adventure, drive to Volcán Arenal—Costa Rica's most conical volcano—a circuitous three-hour trip from Monteverde around Laguna de Arenal. Even if the clouds dampen the view of the volcano, there's fabulous hiking on trails at the base, horseback riding, and even helicopter rides—plus steaming hot springs in which to soak.

If you're eager to visit the beach during your week's stay, bypass Arenal and head southeast from Monteverde to the coast. Any of the country's stellar Pacific beaches will beckon—fine locations include Jacó and Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio (about three and four hours southeast of Monteverde, respectively).

If You Have More Time

Costa Rica's biggest draw, undoubtedly, is wildlife viewing. You'll see monkeys, iguanas, and a rainbow of birds everywhere, but dozens of national parks and private wildlife reserves offer unparalleled opportunities for spying a Noah's

NOT TO BE MISSED:

A drive up Irazú volcano 90

White-water rafting on the Río Pacuare 96

Hiking the cloud forest at Monteverde 108

Bird-watching at Parque Nacional Palo Verde 112

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Watching leatherback turtles lay eggs at Playa Grande 141

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Lazing at a top wilderness lodge 186–187

A boat tour at Tortuguero 224



■ Traditional oxcarts, vestiges of a bygone era in Costa Rica, are a rare sight today.

Ark worth of wildlife species. Corcovado (on the Osa Peninsula southeast of the capital, a nine-hour drive or a short flight away) and Tortuguero (150 miles/240 km by road and canal northeast of San José on the Caribbean), for example, both offer genuine wilderness experiences and a chance to experience Costa Rica's

incredible natural diversity, while beaches up and down the Caribbean and Pacific shores promise virtually guaranteed viewing of marine turtles nesting and hatching.

Birding is also world-class throughout the country, with more than 870 species recorded to date. In addition to quetzal-spotting in Monteverde, birders flock to Caño Negro wildlife refuge (about 50 miles/80 km north of Arenal) for waterbirds by the thousands, and Carara National Park (a three-hour drive west of San José) to see rare scarlet macaws.

For exploring more off-the-beaten-path zones, the southwestern Pacific coast of Nicoya, in the western reaches of the country, offers challenges by 4WD (if fording rivers is your idea of fun). Also, remote parts of both the Northern Lowlands and the Osa Peninsula beyond Corcovado have been opened up, permitting access

Renting a Car

Renting a 4WD car is a fabulous way to get around Costa Rica, but it comes with some warnings.

Roads throughout the country are poor. Local drivers can be reckless. Stray cattle, pedestrians in the road, and potholes are additional hazards.

Don't leave anything in your car, for fear of theft. Don't pay tickets on the spot; take care of them with the rental company.

Insurance is mandatory, and most rental companies refuse to honor insurance issued abroad. Drive the speed limit, be on your guard, and you'll be fine.

to pristine areas teeming with wildlife. And the Talamanca mountains, knifing southeast from San José, are a rugged frontier where indigenous communities on both the Caribbean and Pacific sides are now opening up to tourism.

Active Pursuits

Costa Rica is also famous for surfing, and surfers come from far and wide for its diamond-dust beaches and thrilling breakers. Beaches up and down the Pacific coast (especially Jacó) have great surfing, and instruction is available everywhere. Puerto Viejo, on the Caribbean, is also a fine option.

Costa Rica has few coral reefs, but scuba diving is nonetheless superb, with large pelagics (including manta rays and sharks) being the biggest draw. Drake Bay, on the Osa Peninsula, and Playas del Coco in northern Nicoya are the main centers, but experienced divers will want to try Isla Cocos, 300 miles (485 km) off the Pacific coast.

White-water rafting in Costa Rica is also top shelf, with rivers such as the Central Highland's Pacuare and the Reventazón drawing aficionados to their rapids as they cascade Caribbean-bound.

Sportfishing gives anglers rod-bending fights to remember. Seeking tarpon or snook? Then head to Parismina or Barra del Colorado, on the Caribbean. On the Pacific, sportfishing vessels set out principally from Playas del Coco, Tamarindo, Playa Herradura (near Jacó), Quepos, and Golfito. ■

What to Take

Costa Rica has a tropical climate, so dress accordingly. Expect hot days with warm evenings, except in mountain areas where nights can be chilly. Avoid bright colors if you want to get close to wildlife. Informal wear is fine nearly everywhere, but you might want to bring a more elegant outfit for smarter restaurants in San José.

You'll want comfortable shoes for hiking, but be prepared to get them wet (bring a spare pair). Also bring insect repellent, sunglasses, sunscreen, and a hat or cap to ward off the tropical sun.

Wet or Dry? Best Times to Visit Costa Rica

The nation has distinct wet (May–Nov.) and dry (Dec.–April) seasons, and weather is predictable throughout the year. Dry season is considered the best time for touring, as sunny skies are the norm. It's also high season, when many hotels are full, rental cars are booked, and rates for both are high. However, Costa Rica also has a dozen distinct climatic zones, with many microclimates and regional variations. Along the Caribbean and the Pacific southwest, there is a good chance of rain-fall year-round. And while temperatures throughout the country vary little year-round, Guanacaste and northern Nicoya broil in spring.

The wet season sees a drop in visitors and hotel and car rental rates. The Institute of Costa Rican Tourism (ICT) promotes this time of year as "green season" with good reason: The country is lush from all the rains. In much of the country, rain-fall is typically an afternoon affair, often limited to short-lived downpours. However, the Caribbean, Pacific southwest, and Northern Lowlands often see day after day of heavy rains. And exploring such off-the-beaten-path corners as southwest Nicoya and the Osa Peninsula can be tough going.

Note that Costa Ricans call the summer wet season *invierno* (winter) and the winter dry season *verano* (summer).

