

WE SEE
COSTA RICA

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COSTA RICA

THE INDEPENDENT TRAVEL GUIDE

PURA VIDA · COSTA RICA

See what's *worth the trip.*

Seven places worth a trip of their own. Sixteen worth planning around. Twenty-six worth a detour.

www.WeSeeCostaRica.com

07	16	26	27
MUST-GO	PRIORITY	IF TIME	EXPERIENCES

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Plan by value, not by popularity.

This guide ranks places by what is worth changing your plans for: uniqueness, iconic appeal and depth. Difficulty, cost and crowds are filters, not penalties. The result is a shortlist you can actually build a trip around.

The three tiers

MUST-GO Worth a trip of its own. These are the anchors; build the itinerary around one or two.

PRIORITY One to three days, or the core of a regional route. Add them when they fit the geography.

IF TIME Half-days, stopovers and easy add-ons. Good when they are on the way; not worth reshaping the trip for.

A note on accuracy

Every price, permit and closure in this guide was checked in November 2026 against SINAC, MINAE, OVSICORI and operator information. Things change fast in Costa Rica. Treat the figures as planning numbers, not quotes, and confirm the day before you go.

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Read the status lines. Costa Rica's parks close for volcanic activity, rain, maintenance and wildlife protection. The "Current status" notes are part of the advice, not small print.

Small country. Long distances.

Costa Rica looks compact on a map, but mountain roads, boat crossings and rain make the drive times longer than the kilometres suggest. Use this map to group places, not to navigate.



Must-go (7) · Priority (16) · If time (26) · SJO · San José / Alajuela · LIR · Liberia

Two international gateways

SJO (San José / Alajuela) is the main gateway for Arenal, Monteverde, the Caribbean, the Central Valley and the south. **LIR** (Liberia) is the better door for Guanacaste, Nicoya and Rincón de la Vieja.

Approximate drives: SJO–La Fortuna 3 h; LIR–La Fortuna 2.5 h; LIR–Tamarindo 1–1.5 h; SJO–Uvita 3.5–4 h; SJO–Puerto Viejo 4–5 h. Add 30–60 minutes for rain, roadworks or a stop.

How to group a trip

North loop: Arenal → Monteverde → Rincón / Guanacaste. **Caribbean:** Tortuguero → Sarapiquí → Puerto Viejo. **South:** Uvita → Sierpe → Drake / Corcovado → Golfo Dulce.

Do not try to cross the country twice in one week. Two bases per week is a good rule; three is ambitious; four is a driving holiday.

All 23 key places.

The seven must-go and sixteen priority places, with the two numbers that matter most when you are arranging a route: how long to stay and when to go. Stay is a suggested minimum, not a maximum; "best months" is a long-term window, not a guarantee.

#	PLACE	TIER	STAY	BEST MONTHS
01	**Arenal Volcano & La Fortuna** Northern plains / Central volcanic range (Alajuela)	MUST-GO	3–4 days	Dec–Apr
02	**Monteverde–Santa Elena Cloud Forest** Tilarán Mountains (Puntarenas)	MUST-GO	2–3 days	Dec–Apr
03	**Corcovado National Park / Osa Peninsula** South Pacific / Osa Peninsula	MUST-GO	3–4 days	Dec–Apr
04	**Tortuguero National Park** North Caribbean	MUST-GO	2–3 days	Jul–Oct
05	**Cerro Chirripó** Talamanca Range (San Gerardo de Rivas)	MUST-GO	3 days	Dec–Apr
06	**Isla del Coco (Cocos Island)** Eastern Pacific, offshore from Puntarenas	MUST-GO	10–12 nights	Jun–Nov
07	**Río Pacuare Canyon (2-day)** Caribbean slope / Turrialba–Siquirres	MUST-GO	2 days / 1 night	Dec–Apr
08	**Manuel Antonio National Park** Central Pacific	PRIORITY	2–3 days	Dec–Apr
09	**Tenorio Volcano NP / Río Celeste** Northern plains (Bijagua gateway)	PRIORITY	Half-day–1 day	Dec–Apr
10	**Poás Volcano National Park** Central Valley (Alajuela)	PRIORITY	Half day	Dec–Apr
11	**Rincón de la Vieja National Park** Guanacaste (ACG)	PRIORITY	1–2 days	Dec–Apr
12	**Cahuita–Puerto Viejo (incl. Manzanillo/Gandoca)** South Caribbean	PRIORITY	3–4 days	Feb–Apr · Sep–Oct
13	**Uvita / Marino Ballena National Park** South Pacific	PRIORITY	2–3 days	Jul–Apr
14	**Sierpe–Térraba Mangroves** South Pacific (Sierpe)	PRIORITY	Half day	Dec–Apr
15	**Golfo Dulce / Piedras Blancas** South Pacific	PRIORITY	2–3 days	Dec–Apr
16	**Sarapiquí / La Selva** Northern plains (Heredia)	PRIORITY	2–3 days	Dec–Apr
17	**Santa Rosa National Park (ACG)** Northern Guanacaste	PRIORITY	1–2 days	Dec–Apr
18	**Ostional National Wildlife Refuge** Nicoya Peninsula (north of Nosara)	PRIORITY	3–4 nights	Jul–Dec
19	**Bat Islands / Islas Murciélagos** Northern Guanacaste (Santa Rosa marine area)	PRIORITY	1 day	May–Nov
20	**San Gerardo de Dota / Los Quetzales** Talamanca Range (Savegre Valley)	PRIORITY	1–2 days	Jan–Jun
21	**Caño Negro Wildlife Refuge** Northern plains (Los Chiles)	PRIORITY	1 day	Dec–Apr
22	**Pavones** South Pacific (south shore of Golfo Dulce)	PRIORITY	3–5 days	Apr–Oct
23	**Nicoya Peninsula Beaches** Nicoya Peninsula / Guanacaste	PRIORITY	5–7 days	Dec–Apr

03 · SEVEN MUST-GO

Worth the flight.

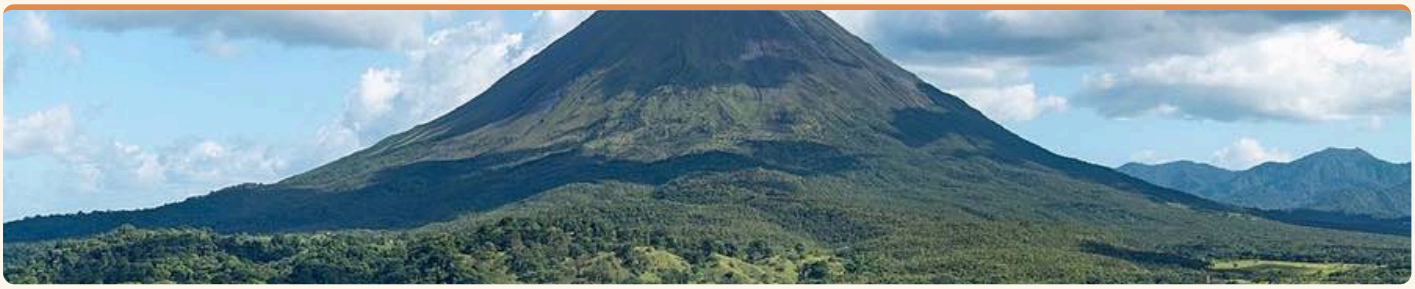
These are the anchors: places that justify the international trip on their own. You do not need all seven. Pick one or two, then let the rest of the route follow the geography.

Arenal Volcano & La Fortuna · Monteverde–Santa Elena Cloud Forest · Corcovado National Park / Osa Peninsula · Tortuguero National Park · Cerro Chirripó · Isla del Coco (Cocos Island) · Río Pacuare Canyon (2-day)

Arenal Volcano & La Fortuna

Northern plains / Central volcanic range (Alajuela)

One valley with a postcard volcano, geothermal springs, a waterfall and rainforest. The park is one trail; the cluster is the reason to come.



Arenal from the La Fortuna side. The cone is often wrapped in cloud by mid-morning.

Why it is worth the trip

Arenal National Park alone is a lava-field walk. La Fortuna adds hot springs, a waterfall, hanging bridges and rainforest night walks—four experiences in one base.

- **Four landscapes, one valley.** Volcano, geothermal springs, a river waterfall and rainforest, all within 30 minutes of La Fortuna.
- **No lava—still iconic.** The last magmatic activity ended in 2010. The draw is the perfect cone, the 1968 lava fields and the hot springs; summit and Cerro Chato trails are closed.
- **Easy to reach, hard to match.** About 3 h from SJO and 2.5 h from LIR. A natural first stop before Monteverde or Río Celeste.

What to do

Arenal Volcano National Park

2–3 H · EASY · PARK TICKET

Walk the 1968 lava flows and look for the cone between clouds. Trails are short; the volcano often hides by mid-morning.

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Hot springs

2–4 H · EASY · BOOK AHEAD

Commercial springs (Tabacón, Baldí, EcoTermales) versus free riverside pools (El Choyín). Commercial springs are easier; free ones are hotter and more local.

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

La Fortuna Waterfall

2 H · 500 STEPS · ~US$20

A 70 m waterfall with a swimming hole. The stairs are steep but short; go early to avoid tour groups.

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Mistico hanging bridges

2–3 H · EASY · GUIDE OPTIONAL

A network of suspended bridges through secondary rainforest; good for families and birding. Mistico is the most convenient; Monteverde is wilder.

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Activity links go to GetYourGuide; we may earn a commission at no extra cost to you.

THE PRACTICAL PICTURE

Best months	Dec–Apr
Stay	3–4 days
From gateway	~3 h / ~2.5 h
Effort	Low–mid
Budget	Park US$16.95; springs and tours extra.
Permit	None

CURRENT STATUS

No lava flow since October 2010; summit and Cerro Chato trails are closed long term.

BOOK AHEAD

Park entry	First slot; volcano views are best early.
Hot springs	Evening day passes sell out in high season.

WHAT TO ADD NEXT

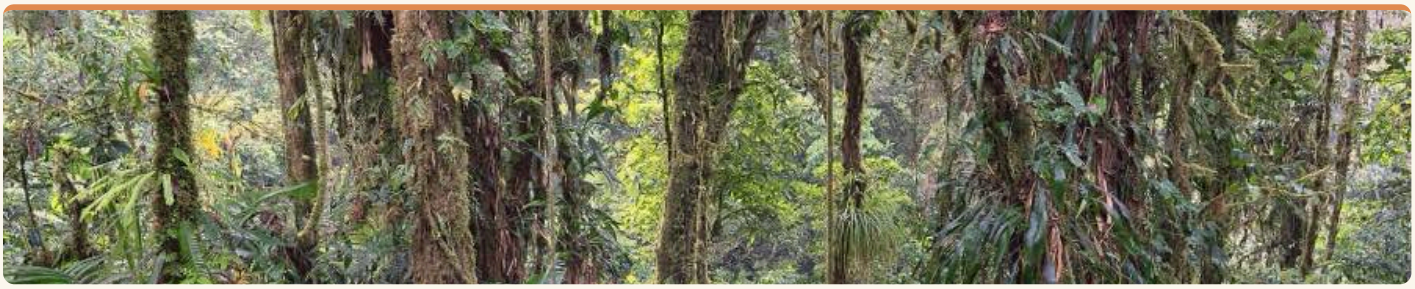
Río Celeste 1.5 h

A blue river and waterfall in Tenorio Volcano National Park. A long half-day from…

Monteverde–Santa Elena Cloud Forest

Tilarán Mountains (Puntarenas)

A cloud forest on the Continental Divide, where the trees are gardens and the weather changes by the minute. Come for the forest, not for a guaranteed quetzal.



Why it is worth the trip

Monteverde is not one park. It is a ridge of cloud forest, two separate reserves, a Quaker-founded community and a village that turned canopy research into a tourism economy. The forest is the reason; the zip line is the bonus.

- **Cloud forest, not rainforest.** Tropical cloud forests cover less than 0.3% of the planet's land. Monteverde protects one of the most intact examples: moss, orchids, bromeliads and trees that drink from the…
- **Two reserves, two different days.** Monteverde Reserve is the classic, with timed circuits and a hanging bridge. Santa Elena is smaller, higher, community-run and quieter, with Arenal views on clear days. They are…
- **The birthplace of the canopy tour—not the zip line.** A research zipline went up at La Selva in 1979; the commercial canopy tour was developed here in the 1990s. The claim is 'modern canopy tourism', not 'invented…

What to do

Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve

2–4 H · EASY–MODERATE · BOOK A SLOT

The reserve protects about 4,100 ha of cloud forest and opens 7:30–4. Three circuits range from the 1.4 km Essence Trail to the 4.1…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Santa Elena Cloud Forest Reserve

2–3 H · EASY–MODERATE · ₡10,000

A 310 ha reserve managed by the Santa Elena high school, on the Caribbean slope of the divide. It is smaller and often quieter…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Canopy / zipline

2–3 H · MODERATE · BOOK AHEAD

Monteverde is where the commercial canopy tour took shape in the 1990s. Operators such as Selvatura, Treetopia, 100% Aventura, Monteverde Extremo and The Original…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Hanging bridges

1.5–3 H · EASY · TICKET

Selvatura has a network of eight suspension bridges; Treetopia's Sky Walk has six. Both put you at canopy level without a harness, which makes…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Activity links go to GetYourGuide; we may earn a commission at no extra cost to you.

THE PRACTICAL PICTURE

Best months	Dec–Apr
Stay	2–3 days
From gateway	~3–3.5 h / ~4–4.5 h
Effort	Moderate
Budget	Reserve US$25–30; zipline and bridges extra.
Permit	None

CURRENT STATUS

Quetzal sightings are not guaranteed; San Gerardo de Dota is the more reliable site.

BOOK AHEAD

Monteverde Reserve	Timed slots; book online, first shuttle 7:30.
Santa Elena	Self-guided needs no booking; guides book ahead.

WHAT TO ADD NEXT

Río Celeste 2.5–3 h

A blue river and waterfall in Tenorio Volcano National Park. A long detour from…

Corcovado & Osa Peninsula

South Pacific / Osa Peninsula

One of the last great lowland rainforests on the Pacific side of Central America. You do not drive through it; you take a boat, walk with a guide, and sleep inside the park if you can.



Why it is worth the trip

Corcovado is not a viewpoint. It is a working rainforest the size of a small country park, with a coastline, a marine reserve and a research station at its centre. The value is not one animal; it is how many you can see in a day.

- **One of the densest forests on earth.** The park protects about 42,570 ha of land and 5,375 ha of sea. SINAC describes it as holding roughly 2.5% of the world's biodiversity—four monkey species, tapir, macaws,…
- **Sirena is the wildlife station.** Sirena is the only sector with beds and meals, and the best base for dawn and dusk. The daily cap is 366 (230 day visitors, 105 overnight, 31…
- **The coast is part of the park.** Corcovado is rainforest and beach in one: La Leona's coastal trail, Drake Bay's boats and Isla del Caño's reef. You can combine jungle, whale season and snorkelling in…

What to do

Sirena Station

2 DAYS · GUIDED · BOOK AHEAD

Sirena is the station most people mean when they say 'Corcovado'. It has the highest wildlife density, the only beds and meals, and trails…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Claro River trails

3–5 H · MUDDY · GUIDE REQUIRED

The trail network follows rivers and old logging routes through primary forest. It is hot, humid and often muddy; the reward is the chance…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

San Pedrillo Station

7.5 H · GUIDED · BOOK AHEAD

San Pedrillo is the easier day trip from Drake Bay: a 45-minute boat, a flat first trail, a waterfall and some of the oldest…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Isla del Caño

6 H · SNORKEL · BOOK AHEAD

A small island about 45 minutes by boat from Drake Bay, with a coral reef, clear water and two snorkel sessions. The GetYourGuide tour…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Activity links go to GetYourGuide; we may earn a commission at no extra cost to you.

THE PRACTICAL PICTURE

Best months	Dec–Apr
Stay	3–4 days
From gateway	5–6 h
Effort	Moderate–high
Budget	Entry US$15/day; Sirena overnight packages from ~US$345.
Permit	Licensed guide + permit required

CURRENT STATUS

Sirena 366/day; San Pedrillo 120; La Leona, Los Patos and El Tigre 80 each. Sirena, Los Patos and El Tigre close in October.

BOOK AHEAD

Guide / operator	Book first; the guide is mandatory.
Sirena lodging	Reserve beds and meals months ahead.

WHAT TO ADD NEXT

Golfo Dulce 2–2.5 h

A tropical fjord with dolphins and quiet water. A good decompression stop after Corcovado,…

Tortuguero National Park

North Caribbean

A roadless maze of canals and rainforest on the Caribbean coast, and the western hemisphere's most important green turtle nesting beach. You arrive by boat; the village has no cars.



Why it is worth the trip

Tortuguero is two trips in one: a canal safari through flooded forest, and a night on a nesting beach. Neither is possible by car, which is why the place still feels like a frontier.

- **The turtles come by the thousand.** Tortuguero is the largest green turtle rookery in the western hemisphere. Green turtles nest July–October, with August–September the peak; leatherbacks come ashore March–June. Night access is only with…
- **The canals are the road.** The park protects about 76,937 ha of canals, lagoons and rainforest. There are no roads: you arrive by boat from La Pavona or by a small plane, and…
- **A village with no cars.** Tortuguero village sits on a sandbar between the canal and the sea. Walkways replace streets, the Sea Turtle Conservancy explains the research, and the park station is at…

What to do

Canal boat tour

2–3 H · EASY · BOOK AHEAD

The standard tour runs through the park's narrow channels in a small boat, with a guide scanning the banks for monkeys, sloths, caimans, herons…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Kayak the canals

2.5 H · EASY–MODERATE · BOOK AHEAD

A guided kayak trip covers less distance than a boat but gets you closer to the water and into channels a motor cannot enter.…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Turtle nesting night tour

2 H · NIGHT · LICENSED GUIDE

From July to October, licensed guides take small groups onto the nesting beach after dark. You wait until a turtle is confirmed, then walk…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Night rainforest walk

2 H · NIGHT · BOOK AHEAD

The forest after dark is a different ecosystem: red-eyed frogs, sleeping birds, snakes, insects and the occasional armadillo or anteater. It runs year-round and…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Activity links go to GetYourGuide; we may earn a commission at no extra cost to you.

THE PRACTICAL PICTURE

Best months	Jul–Oct
Stay	2–3 days
From gateway	5–6 h
Effort	Low–moderate
Budget	Entry extra; public boat fares capped from 1 July 2026; stay in the village.
Permit	Entry ticket

CURRENT STATUS

Last boat around 16:30; low-water crossings can take longer; turtle walks only with park or licensed guides.

BOOK AHEAD

Park ticket	SINAC online; not sold at the gate.
Boat	Confirm the last departure before booking a late arrival.

WHAT TO ADD NEXT

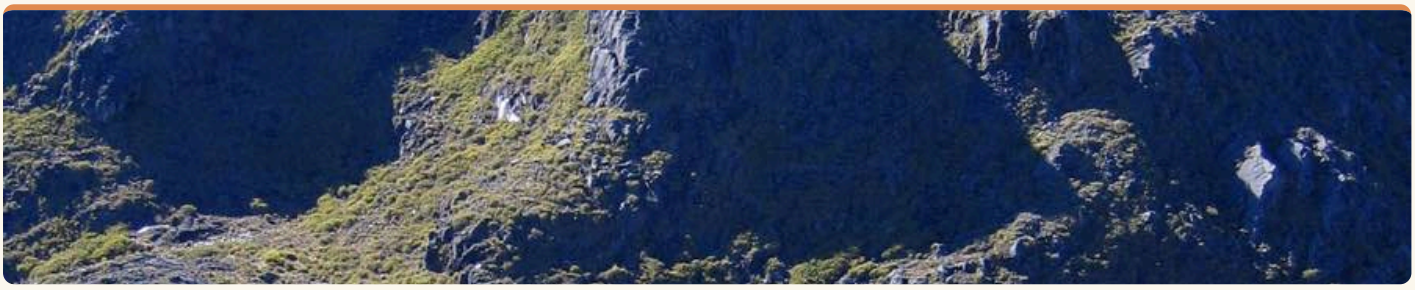
Pacuare 3–4 h

The next great river: Class III–IV rafting and a roadless canyon. A natural adventure…

Cerro Chirripó

Talamanca Range (San Gerardo de Rivas)

Costa Rica's highest peak at 3,820 m, reached by a 14.5 km climb to a basic mountain hut and a dawn walk to a two-ocean summit. This is the country's only tropical alpine páramo.



Why it is worth the trip

Chirripó is not a volcano and not a beach. It is a glacial landscape of lakes, rock spires and páramo, with a permit system that keeps the mountain quiet.

- **The roof of Costa Rica.** At 3,820 m, Cerro Chirripó is the highest point in the country and one of the highest peaks in Central America. On a clear morning the summit looks…
- **A glacial landscape.** The park protects about 50,150 ha of cloud forest, subalpine forest and páramo. U-shaped valleys, moraines and lakes such as Laguna Ditkevi are relics of the last ice…
- **A permit-controlled mountain.** Only about 60 people can sleep at Base Crestones each night. Entry and beds are two separate bookings, and the dry-season window sells out months ahead.

What to do

San Gerardo to Base Crestones

14.5 KM · +2,000 M · 6–10 H

The standard route starts at the ranger station in San Gerardo de Rivas (1,520 m) and climbs through cloud forest to Base Crestones (3,400…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Summit at dawn

5.1 KM · +450 M · 2–3 H UP

From the hut, a 5.1 km trail climbs another 450 m to the summit. Most people leave around 03:00 to reach the top for…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Crestones Base Camp

3,400 M · 60 BEDS · BOOK AHEAD

Base Crestones is the only accommodation inside the park: dormitory bunks, cold showers and a basic kitchen. There is no camping and no village;…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Glacial lakes

VALLE DE LOS LAGOS · EASY–MODERATE · EXTRA DAY

With a second night at the hut, the lakes and secondary valleys open up: Laguna Ditkevi, the Morrenas valley and the Ventisqueros ridge. They…

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Activity links go to GetYourGuide; we may earn a commission at no extra cost to you.

THE PRACTICAL PICTURE

Best months	Dec–Apr
Stay	3 days
From gateway	3–4 h
Effort	Very high
Budget	Entry ~US$18 plus 13% IVA; beds ~US$30–50.
Permit	Permit + Base Crestones bed

CURRENT STATUS

About 60 beds a night, sold out within hours in high season; book around six months ahead; confirm with SICORE.

BOOK AHEAD

SINAC permit	Online; dry season sells out in hours.
Crestones bed	Book with the Consorcio after the permit.

WHAT TO ADD NEXT

San Gerardo de Dota 2–3 h

Quetzal country in a high cloud-forest valley. A gentle recovery stop after Chirripó.

Isla del Coco

Eastern Pacific, offshore from Puntarenas

A rainforest island 550 km off the Pacific coast, reachable only by liveaboard, with hammerhead cleaning stations and some of the most reliable big-animal diving in the eastern Pacific.



Why it is worth the trip

Cocos is not a beach stop. It is a remote national park and UNESCO site where the diving is the reason, the crossing is the price, and the island itself is a cloud-forested fortress.

- **A shark sanctuary.** The park protects about 199,790 ha–2,390 ha of land and 197,400 ha of sea. Scalloped hammerheads gather at cleaning stations; silky sharks, whale sharks, tiger sharks and giant…
- **A rainforest island.** Cocos rises straight out of the Pacific into cloud forest, waterfalls and cliffs. Chatham and Wafer bays are the only easy anchorages, and the ranger station is the…
- **Liveaboard or nothing.** There are no hotels, no day trips and no airstrip. Every visitor arrives on a licensed liveaboard after a crossing of about 36 hours, and diver numbers are…

What to do

The 36-hour crossing

36 H · LIVEABOARD · OPEN OCEAN

The boat leaves Puntarenas and runs about 36 hours each way. The first and last days are open-ocean passage: sleep, rig gear, watch for…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Hammerheads & big pelagics

JUN–NOV · ADVANCED · CURRENTS

Scalloped hammerheads gather in schools at cleaning stations such as Bajo Alcyone, often in hundreds. Silky sharks, blacktip reef sharks, tiger sharks, eagle rays…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Reef & dive conditions

30–35 M · AOW + 50 DIVES · DAN INSURANCE

Most days run four dives from tenders, often deep and almost always in current. Operators typically require Advanced Open Water and 50–100 logged dives.…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

The rainforest island

2,390 HA · LANDING · RANGER ESCORT

Between dives, boats sometimes land at Chatham or Wafer Bay for a ranger-led walk. The island is steep, wet and covered in cloud forest,…

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Activity links go to GetYourGuide; we may earn a commission at no extra cost to you.

THE PRACTICAL PICTURE

Best months	Jun–Nov
Stay	10–12 nights
From gateway	2 h + 36 h
Effort	Advanced dive
Budget	Liveaboard US$6,000–8,500; park fee ~US$554.
Permit	Arranged by the liveaboard operator

CURRENT STATUS

Authorized liveaboards only; no lodging and no day trips; a fuel surcharge applies in 2026.

BOOK AHEAD

Liveaboard	6–12 months ahead; peak season longer.
Certification	AOW and recent logged dives.

WHAT TO ADD NEXT

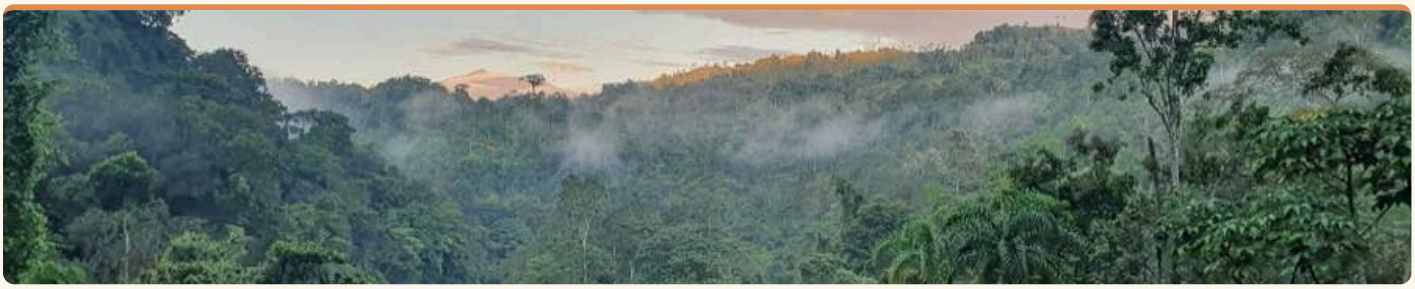
Corcovado 5–6 h + boat

The rainforest counterpoint to Cocos: boats, trails and wildlife instead of blue water.

Río Pacuare Canyon

Caribbean slope / Turrialba–Siquirres

Two days, one roadless canyon, and the best whitewater in Costa Rica. A day trip gives you a taste; the overnight run is the real thing.



Why it is worth the trip

The Pacuare is not a river you drive past. It cuts through a rainforest canyon with no road access, and the only way to see the good part is to sleep inside it. That is why the two-day run, not the day trip, is the reason to come.

- **A canyon you can't drive into.** About 36 km of river, 38+ named rapids and waterfalls dropping straight into the channel. No road follows the good section; the river is the route.
- **Two days is the unit.** A day trip covers a short lower section. The overnight run adds the upper canyon, a river lodge and a second morning on the water—the full arc of…
- **Class III–IV, not expert-only.** Commercial guides do the reading; you need to swim, paddle on command and be comfortable in moving water. Water levels change the difficulty more than experience does.

What to do

The two-day run

2 DAYS · III–IV · BOOK AHEAD

The standard two-day trip starts near Turrialba, rafts the upper canyon to a riverside lodge, then finishes the lower rapids the next day. Operators…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Upper canyon

DAY 1 · RAINFOREST WALLS · WATERFALLS

The first day is the reason the trip exists: a narrow forested valley, waterfalls on both walls, and rapids that keep coming. The river…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Lower rapids

DAY 2 · 38+ RAPIDS · BIG WATER

The second day strings together the best-known rapids, with more continuous whitewater and fewer pauses. Guides read the line; paddlers follow the commands. It…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Waterfall stop

SHORT STOP · SWIM · NO TRAIL

Most trips stop at a side waterfall for a short scramble and a swim. It is not a hike; it is a cold, loud…

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Activity links go to GetYourGuide; we may earn a commission at no extra cost to you.

THE PRACTICAL PICTURE

Best months	Dec–Apr
Stay	2 days / 1 night
From gateway	~2.5–3 h
Effort	Moderate–high
Budget	About US$300–525 per person, meals, lodging and gear included.
Permit	None

CURRENT STATUS

Minimum age is usually 12; water levels can change routes and age limits.

BOOK AHEAD

Two-day run	Book 2–4 weeks ahead; confirm the lodge and meals.
Water level	Ask 48 hours before; it can change the route.

WHAT TO ADD NEXT

Turrialba 1–1.5 h

The rafting base and a coffee/volcano town. The volcano itself is often closed; use…

04 · SIXTEEN PRIORITIES

Make time.

One to three days each, or the core of a regional route. These are not consolation prizes: several are the best reason to visit their part of the country. Add them when they shorten a transfer or deepen a region you are already in.

Manuel Antonio National Park · Tenorio Volcano NP / Río Celeste · Poás Volcano National Park · Rincón de la Vieja National Park · Cahuita–Puerto Viejo (incl. Manzanillo/Gandoca) · Uvita / Marino Ballena National Park · Sierpe–Térraba Mangroves · Golfo Dulce / Piedras Blancas · Sarapiquí / La Selva · Santa Rosa National Park (ACG) · Ostional National Wildlife Refuge · Bat Islands / Islas Murciélagos · San Gerardo de Dota / Los Quetzales · Caño Negro Wildlife Refuge · Pavones · Nicoya Peninsula Beaches

Manuel Antonio

Central Pacific

The easiest place in Costa Rica to see a sloth in the morning and swim at a postcard beach in the afternoon. Rainforest, wildlife and warm Pacific water in one small park.



Why it is worth the trip

Manuel Antonio is the country's most visited park for a reason: it is small, accessible and unusually generous with wildlife. The trade-off is crowds and a strict entry system.

- **Forest that ends at the sea.** The park protects a pocket of humid tropical forest, mangrove and marine habitat around four beaches. Trails run from the entrance to lookouts and coves, so you can…
- **Wildlife at eye level.** Sloths, white-faced capuchins, howler and squirrel monkeys, iguanas and raccoons are routine. A naturalist guide finds far more than a self-guided walk, especially in the first two hours…
- **Easy, but not casual.** It is 2.5–3 hours from San José and close to Quepos, which makes it a low-effort stop. Entry is timed, tickets are online only, and the park closes…

What to do

National park & wildlife

2–3 H · EASY · BOOK AHEAD

A guided walk from the main entrance covers the flat forest trails, the wildlife and the history of the park. Sloths, capuchins, howler monkeys…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Playa Manuel Antonio

HALF DAY · EASY · PARK TICKET

The park's best-known beach sits at the end of the trail network: pale sand, calm-ish water and forest right behind it. It is a…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Catamaran & snorkel

3.5–4 H · EASY · BOOK AHEAD

A catamaran trip is the easy way to see the coastline, snorkel in a sheltered bay and get lunch without planning a hike. It…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Mangrove kayak

2 H · EASY · BOOK AHEAD

The mangrove channels around Damas Island are flat, shaded and full of birds, crabs and occasional monkeys. A guided kayak moves slowly enough to…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Activity links go to GetYourGuide; we may earn a commission at no extra cost to you.

THE PRACTICAL PICTURE

Best months	Dec–Apr
Stay	2–3 days
From gateway	2.5–3 h
Effort	Low
Budget	Foreign adult US$18.08 including tax.
Permit	Ticket + timed entry

CURRENT STATUS

Open Wednesday–Monday 07:00–16:00 (last entry 15:00), closed Tuesday; the 600/800 figures are simultaneous in-park capacity, not daily ticket caps.

BOOK AHEAD

Park ticket	SINAC online only; no gate sales.
Tuesday	Park closed; plan around it.

WHAT TO ADD NEXT

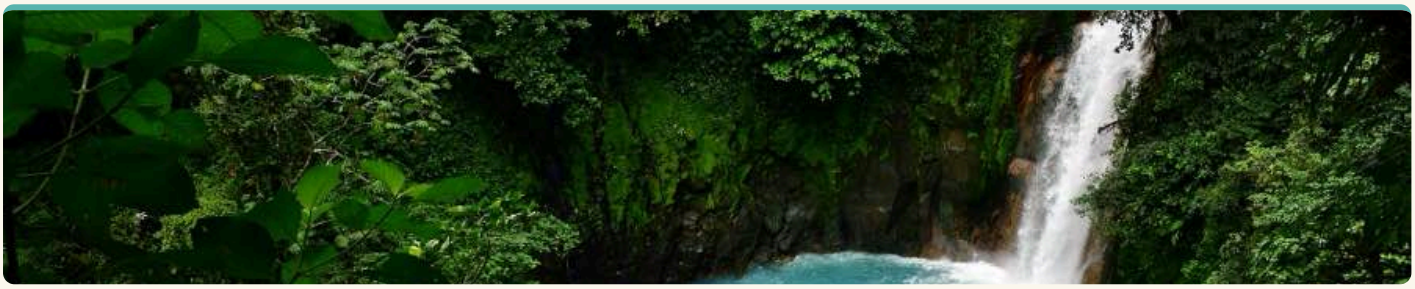
Uvita 1.5–2 h

The whale-tail sandbar and two humpback seasons. The natural next beach stop south.

Tenorio Volcano & Río Celeste

Northern plains (Bijagua gateway)

A milky-blue river, a waterfall and a short rainforest trail. Come for the colour, not for a swim—and check whether the lower falls are open.



Why it is worth the trip

Río Celeste is not a hot spring or a filter. The milky blue comes from mineral particles suspended in the water. The park is small, the trail is short, and the colour is the reason to come.

- **The colour is real.** Aluminium silicate particles scatter light in the water, producing the blue. It is strongest in the dry season; after heavy rain the river can turn brown.
- **A short trail, not a long hike.** The main walk is about 3–4 hours round trip, with mud, steps and a waterfall. The lower waterfall stairs have been partly closed since 2025; check before you…
- **Pair it with Bijagua.** The gateway village has lodges, night walks and a reasonable chance of seeing a Baird's tapir. Treat Río Celeste as an overnight, not a rushed day trip from…

What to do

Río Celeste waterfall

3–4 H · STEPS · CHECK STATUS

The waterfall is the image everyone comes for: a white curtain dropping into a milky-blue pool. The lower viewing platform has been partly closed…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

The blue river

3–4 H · EASY-MODERATE · NO SWIMMING

The trail follows the river through rainforest, with several viewpoints and a stretch of bubbling hot springs. Swimming is not allowed inside the park;…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

River tubing

2 H · EASY-MODERATE · BOOK AHEAD

Outside the park, operators run inflatable-tube trips on the lower Río Celeste, through a mix of rapids and calm pools. It is the most…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Bijagua & tapir night walk

2 H · NIGHT · BOOK AHEAD

Bijagua is the service village for Río Celeste and the base for Tapir Valley night walks. Baird's tapir is the prize; frogs, insects and…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Activity links go to GetYourGuide; we may earn a commission at no extra cost to you.

THE PRACTICAL PICTURE

Best months	Dec–Apr
Stay	Half-day–1 day
From gateway	~2.5 h
Effort	Moderate
Budget	About US$13.56; daily cap 1,200.
Permit	Ticket

CURRENT STATUS

The lower waterfall stairs have been half-closed since 13 June 2025 and remain intermittent in 2026; swimming is prohibited.

BOOK AHEAD

Park ticket	Online; last entry 14:00.
Bijagua lodge	Book one night if you want the night walk.

WHAT TO ADD NEXT

Caño Negro 1.5–2 h

A Ramsar wetland with jabiru, spoonbills and caiman. Best in the dry season; a…

Poás Volcano

Central Valley (Alajuela)

One of the world's largest volcanic craters, with an acid lake, cloud forest and a paved path to the rim. It is the easiest big volcano in Costa Rica—when the mountain is open and the cloud stays away.



Why it is worth the trip

Poás is not a hike. It is a short, paved walk to the edge of a 1.5 km-wide crater, with cloud forest and coffee country on the drive up. The catch is that the mountain is active and the rules can change.

- **One of the largest craters.** The main crater is about 1.5 km wide and 300 m deep, with a hyper-acidic turquoise lake at the bottom. It is one of the most accessible active…
- **Cloud forest at the top.** The park sits at about 2,700 m, where elfin forest, gunnera and hummingbirds replace the tropical lowlands. Even if the crater is clouded in, the trail and visitor…
- **An active volcano with rules.** After the August 2026 eruption, the park halved its daily capacity, made helmets mandatory and limited the viewpoint to 56 people for 20 minutes. Check the status on…

What to do

Main crater viewpoint

1–1.5 H · EASY · TIMED TICKET

A flat, paved 600 m path leads from the visitor centre to the crater rim. You get up to 20 minutes at the viewpoint,…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Sombrilla de Pobre trail

1–2 H · EASY–MODERATE · HELMET

The second open trail loops through elfin cloud forest above the crater, with gunnera, bromeliads and birds. It is short but exposed and often…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Coffee farm tour

2–5 H · EASY · BOOK AHEAD

The Alajuela and Poás slopes grow some of the country's best-known coffee. Farm tours explain the bean-to-cup process, include a tasting and often add…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

La Paz Waterfall Gardens

HALF DAY · EASY · BOOK AHEAD

La Paz is a private nature park on the Vara Blanca road: a chain of waterfalls, a cloud-forest trail, an aviary and a butterfly…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Activity links go to GetYourGuide; we may earn a commission at no extra cost to you.

THE PRACTICAL PICTURE

Best months	Dec–Apr
Stay	Half day
From gateway	1.5 h
Effort	Low
Budget	Entry extra; online reservation required.
Permit	Ticket + timed entry

CURRENT STATUS

After the 27 August 2026 eruption: 1,064 daily cap; viewpoint limited to 56 people per 20 minutes; helmets mandatory on the main trail; Laguna Botos closed; last entry 14:00.

BOOK AHEAD

Park ticket	SINAC online only; no gate sales.
8:00 slot	Best odds for a clear crater.

WHAT TO ADD NEXT

Arenal 2.5–3 h

The other classic volcano, with hot springs and a lake. A natural next stop.

Rincón de la Vieja

Guanacaste (ACG)

A drive-up volcanic park with bubbling mud, steam vents, waterfalls and hot springs. The crater is closed; the geothermal valley is the reason to come.



Why it is worth the trip

Rincón de la Vieja is not a crater hike. The active crater has been closed since 2011, but the lower Las Pailas sector puts you beside boiling mud pots, fumaroles and steaming ground in a short, easy loop.

- **Mud pots and fumaroles.** The 3 km Las Pailas loop passes boiling mud, hot water pools, steam vents and a mini volcanic cone. It is one of the most accessible geothermal landscapes…
- **Waterfalls and hot springs.** Oropendola, La Cangreja and La Leona are the waterfall add-ons; Río Negro and the private hot springs are where you soak afterwards. Some are inside the park, some…
- **An active volcano with rules.** The crater trail is closed and the volcano had more than 100 steam eruptions in 2026. Las Pailas and the waterfall trails usually stay open, but access can…

What to do

Las Pailas loop

3 KM · EASY–MODERATE · PARK TICKET

The loop is the park's signature walk: mud pots, fumaroles, hot pools and a small volcanic cone, all within about two hours. The ground…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Oropendola & Río Negro

HALF DAY · MODERATE · BOOK AHEAD

Oropendola is a 25 m waterfall in a canyon outside the national park, usually paired with the Río Negro hot springs. The combination is…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Guachipelín adventure

FULL DAY · MODERATE · BOOK AHEAD

Guachipelín is the adventure hub on the Liberia side: ziplines, hanging bridges, river tubing, horseback riding and hot springs, often sold as a multi-activity…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

La Leona waterfall

3–5 H · MODERATE · BOOK AHEAD

La Leona is a slot-canyon waterfall with a turquoise pool, reached by a rough trail and a short swim or wade. It is outside…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Activity links go to GetYourGuide; we may earn a commission at no extra cost to you.

THE PRACTICAL PICTURE

Best months	Dec–Apr
Stay	1–2 days
From gateway	1–1.5 h
Effort	Moderate
Budget	Entry extra; hot springs and mud baths cost more.
Permit	Ticket

CURRENT STATUS

Crater trail closed since 2011; 249 phreatic eruptions were recorded July–September 2026 and the alert level was lowered on 30 October; check SINAC and OVSICORI before travel.

BOOK AHEAD

Park ticket	SINAC online only; no gate sales.
Monday	Las Pailas is closed.

WHAT TO ADD NEXT

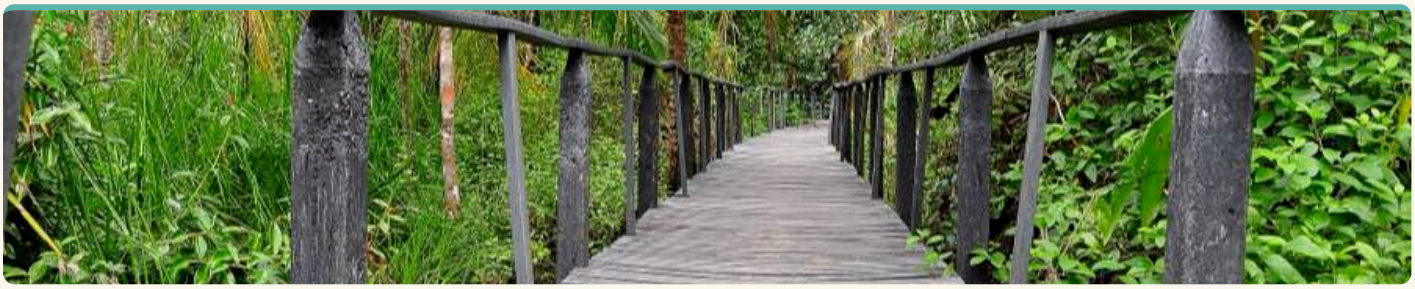
Arenal 2.5–3 h

The other classic volcano, with hot springs and a lake. A natural next stop…

Cahuita & Puerto Viejo

South Caribbean

The Caribbean side of Costa Rica: a reef you can walk to, a national park trail through rainforest, surf at Puerto Viejo and a slower, Afro-Caribbean rhythm.



Why it is worth the trip

The south Caribbean is not the Pacific. The food, language and music are different, the reef is protected, and the pace is slower. Cahuita and Puerto Viejo make a natural pair.

- **Reef and rainforest on one trail.** Cahuita National Park protects about 1,102 ha of land and 23,290 ha of marine area, including one of the best-developed coral reefs on the Costa Rican Caribbean. An…
- **A distinct Caribbean culture.** This is the heart of Costa Rica's Afro-Caribbean community: Creole English, coconut rice, reggae, and a history that runs through the banana and cacao economies.
- **Two bases, two moods.** Cahuita is quiet and park-focused; Puerto Viejo has surf, restaurants and nightlife. Manzanillo and Gandoca, 30 minutes south, are wilder and less developed.

What to do

Cahuita National Park

2–4 H · EASY · PARK ENTRY

The flat coastal trail runs from Kelly Creek in Cahuita village to Puerto Vargas, with beach access, rainforest, sloths, monkeys and crabs. It is…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Reef snorkeling

2–3 H · EASY · BOOK AHEAD

Snorkeling is only allowed in designated areas and, in practice, with a certified guide. Boat tours position you over the coral rather than the…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Puerto Viejo surf

HALF DAY · MODERATE · SURF TOWN

Puerto Viejo is the Caribbean surf base: Salsa Brava is a serious reef break for experienced surfers, while Playa Cocles and Playa Chiquita have…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Manzanillo & Gandoca

HALF DAY · EASY · BOOK AHEAD

South of Puerto Viejo, the road ends at Manzanillo and the Gandoca-Manzanillo Wildlife Refuge. The reef is in good condition, the beach is quiet,…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Activity links go to GetYourGuide; we may earn a commission at no extra cost to you.

THE PRACTICAL PICTURE

Best months	Sep–Oct
Stay	3–4 days
From gateway	4–5 h
Effort	Low
Budget	Cahuita entry extra; diving and surf lessons cost more.
Permit	Cahuita park ticket

CURRENT STATUS

Cahuita National Park charges entry; Manzanillo and Gandoca are separate protected areas.

BOOK AHEAD

Snorkel	Morning trips and calm days fill first.
Park entry	Donation at Kelly Creek; fee at Puerto Vargas.

WHAT TO ADD NEXT

Tortuguero 2.5–3 h

Turtle beaches and canal rainforest. Continue north instead of backtracking to San José.

Uvita & Marino Ballena

South Pacific

A marine park with a sandbar shaped like a whale's tail and humpback whales from both hemispheres. Uvita is the rare place where the wildlife calendar runs almost all year.



Why it is worth the trip

Marino Ballena is Costa Rica's first marine national park, and one of the few places where humpbacks from both the northern and southern hemispheres breed in the same bay. The whale tail is the postcard; the water is the reason.

- **Whales from both hemispheres.** Southern humpbacks arrive July–November, peaking August–October. Northern humpbacks arrive December–April, peaking January–March. May–June is the gap between populations.
- **The whale tail.** The tombolo at Punta Uvita is a sandbar that appears at low tide and curves into the shape of a whale's fluke. The walk from the Uvita entrance…
- **A marine park, not just a beach.** The park protects several kilometres of coast, a reef and open water used by dolphins, turtles, rays and migrating whales. It is also a working example of locally…

What to do

Whale watching

3–4 H · EASY · BOOK AHEAD

Boats leave from Bahía Uvita for a 3–4 hour trip offshore, usually with a snorkel stop. In peak season, mothers and calves are common;…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

The whale tail

2–3 H · EASY · LOW TIDE

Enter at the Uvita sector, walk south along the beach and out onto the sandbar as the tide drops. The shape is only visible…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Caño Island snorkeling

FULL DAY · MODERATE · BOOK AHEAD

A day trip to Isla del Caño combines a boat crossing, two snorkel stops and beach time. The island's reef is clearer than the…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Corcovado day trip

8–12 H · MODERATE · BOOK AHEAD

Uvita is far enough south to reach Corcovado's San Pedrillo or Sirena sectors by boat in a long day. It is a taste of…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Activity links go to GetYourGuide; we may earn a commission at no extra cost to you.

THE PRACTICAL PICTURE

Best months	Jul–Nov
Stay	2–3 days
From gateway	3.5–4 h
Effort	Low
Budget	Entry about US$6.78; whale trips extra.
Permit	Ticket

CURRENT STATUS

Whale sightings are not guaranteed and trips cancel in rough seas; the sandbar depends on tides.

BOOK AHEAD

Whale boat	Morning trips fill first in peak season.
Park ticket	Buy at the Uvita gate; no online booking.

WHAT TO ADD NEXT

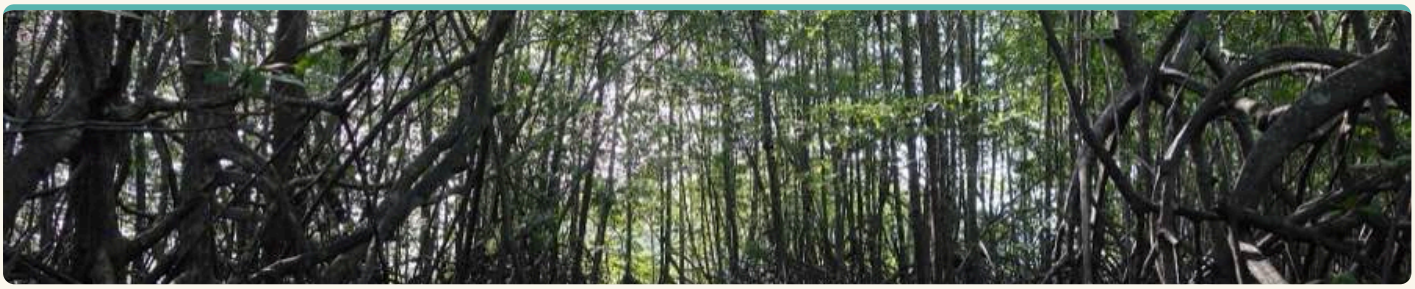
Manuel Antonio 1.5–2 h

The easier rainforest-and-beach park. A good contrast if Uvita feels too quiet.

Sierpe–Térraba Mangroves

South Pacific (Sierpe)

The largest mangrove system on Central America's Pacific coast: a maze of tidal channels, wildlife and the boat route to Drake Bay.



Why it is worth the trip

Sierpe is not a beach stop. It is a working estuary and the southern gateway to Corcovado and Drake Bay, with wildlife concentrated along the tidal channels.

- **The largest Pacific mangrove.** The Térraba–Sierpe wetland covers about 26,800 ha and was declared a Ramsar site in 1995. It is the biggest mangrove system on the Pacific side of Central America.
- **Wildlife on the water.** Boat tours find monkeys, crocodiles, caimans, sloths, herons, kingfishers and raptors. The animals are used to slow boats, but the guide's local knowledge is what makes the trip.
- **The Drake Bay connection.** The river mouth is the start of the boat route to Drake Bay and Corcovado. Many travellers use Sierpe as a half-day wildlife stop on the way south.

What to do

Mangrove boat tour

3 H · EASY · BOOK AHEAD

Small boats run through the tidal channels with a local guide, stopping for monkeys, crocodiles and birds. The route depends on the tide and…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Wildlife spotting

2–4 H · EASY · GUIDE HELPS

The estuary is a nursery for fish and birds, and the trees are full of monkeys and iguanas. Crocodiles are common on the muddy…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Mangrove kayak

3 H · MODERATE · BOOK AHEAD

A kayak gets into smaller channels and is quieter than a motorboat. It is a longer, more physical half-day, usually starting near Sierpe or…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Corcovado via Sierpe

FULL DAY · MODERATE · BOOK AHEAD

Sierpe is one of the boat gateways to Corcovado's Sirena station. The day is long and weather-dependent, but it adds serious rainforest to a…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Activity links go to GetYourGuide; we may earn a commission at no extra cost to you.

THE PRACTICAL PICTURE

Best months	Dec–Apr
Stay	Half day
From gateway	4 h
Effort	Low
Budget	Boat tours about US$60–90 per person.
Permit	Boat tour

CURRENT STATUS

Tides determine the route; rainy-season water levels change some channels.

BOOK AHEAD

Boat	Morning trips are best; book a day ahead.
Tide	Ask which channels are open.

WHAT TO ADD NEXT

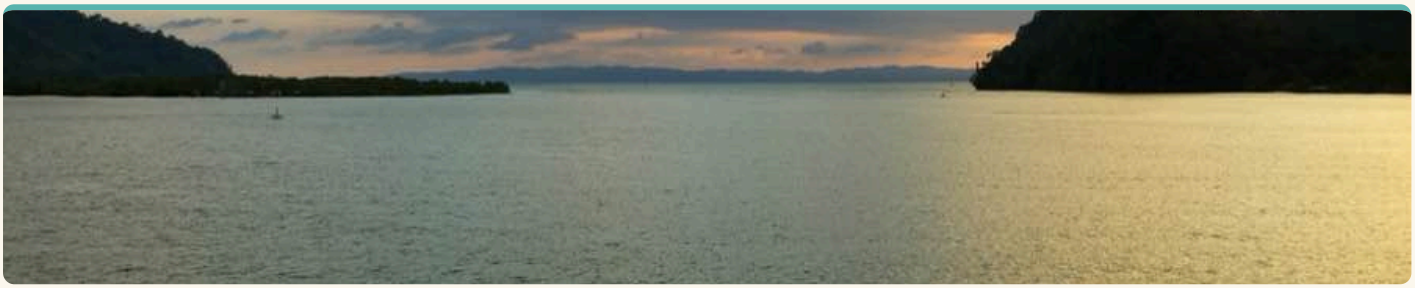
Corcovado — 1 h by boat

The main rainforest destination; Sierpe is one of the boat gateways to Sirena.

Golfo Dulce

South Pacific

One of the world's few tropical fjords: a deep, quiet gulf with resident dolphins, seasonal humpbacks and rainforest running down to the water.



Why it is worth the trip

Golfo Dulce is not the Osa's main event, and that is the point. It is a slow, water-focused stop where the wildlife is in the gulf rather than on a trail.

- **A rare tropical fjord.** The gulf cuts deep into the coast, with steep forested shores and calm water. It is one of the few tropical fjords in the world and a natural…
- **Dolphins and whales.** Bottlenose and spotted dolphins are resident; humpbacks pass through in both seasons. Sightings are never guaranteed, but the gulf is a serious marine corridor.
- **Rainforest at the edge.** Piedras Blancas National Park protects lowland rainforest around the gulf. It is quieter and less visited than Corcovado, with good birding and small lodges.

What to do

Dolphin & whale boat tour

3–4 H · EASY · BOOK AHEAD

Boats leave from Puerto Jiménez or Golfito for a few hours on the gulf, looking for resident dolphins and, in season, humpbacks. The water…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Kayak & bioluminescence

3.5 H · MODERATE · BOOK AHEAD

A guided kayak goes out in the late afternoon and returns after dark, when bioluminescence can light up the water. It is a quiet,…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Diving at Golfito

HALF DAY · CERTIFIED · BOOK AHEAD

Golfito has wreck and reef dives inside the gulf, with calmer conditions than the offshore seamounts. It suits certified divers who want an easy…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Humpback season

SEASONAL · BOAT · LUCK

Humpbacks move through the gulf in both migration windows, usually July–October and December–April. They are not resident, so sightings are a bonus rather than…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Activity links go to GetYourGuide; we may earn a commission at no extra cost to you.

THE PRACTICAL PICTURE

Best months	Dec–Apr
Stay	2–3 days
From gateway	5–6 h
Effort	Low–moderate
Budget	Boats and lodging extra; cheaper than the eastern Osa.
Permit	None

CURRENT STATUS

Whale shark records are sporadic; do not expect to swim with them.

BOOK AHEAD

Boat	Morning departures are calmer.
Dive	Bring certification and logbook.

WHAT TO ADD NEXT

Corcovado — 1–2 h + boat

The big rainforest; Puerto Jiménez is a gateway to La Leona and Carate.

Sarapiquí & La Selva

Northern plains (Heredia)

A working rainforest: La Selva is a research station, not a theme park. Come for birds, night walks, chocolate and a river that actually runs.



Why it is worth the trip

Sarapiquí is not the postcard rainforest of waterfalls and volcano views. It is a lowland wet forest with a research station at its centre, and the value is density: birds, frogs, ants, cacao and a river you can raft.

- **A rainforest with a research budget.** La Selva protects about 1,600 ha and has been studied for decades: 470 bird species, 2,077 plants, 125 mammals and 61 km of trails. It is one of…
- **Not a waterfall stop.** The visual drama is lower than Arenal or Monteverde. The payoff is access: a guided walk where the guide knows what is calling, flowering or moving.
- **River and chocolate.** Sarapiquí adds two things the cloud forest does not: Class II–IV rafting and a cacao/ chocolate circuit at Tirimbina. It is the most family-friendly rainforest stop on the…

What to do

La Selva Biological Station

3 H · GUIDED · BOOK AHEAD

La Selva is a working research station, not a national park. Visitors join a 3-hour natural-history walk on well-kept trails; the guide explains the…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Sarapiquí rafting

HALF DAY · II–III / III–IV · BOOK AHEAD

The Sarapiquí has two products: a family-friendly Class II–III upper run and the tighter Class III–IV Jungle Run. It is not Pacuare, but it…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Tirimbina Reserve

2–3 H · EASY · TICKET

Tirimbina is a private reserve with a long suspension bridge over the Sarapiquí, forest trails and a cacao plantation. The bridge is the gateway;…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Great green macaw & birding

DAWN · GUIDE · SCOPE

Sarapiquí is one of the best places in Costa Rica for great green macaw, along with toucans, trogons, manakins and antbirds. The birds are…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Activity links go to GetYourGuide; we may earn a commission at no extra cost to you.

THE PRACTICAL PICTURE

Best months	Feb–Apr
Stay	2–3 days
From gateway	~2 h
Effort	Low–mid
Budget	La Selva tours extra; rafting about US$60–100.
Permit	La Selva requires booking

CURRENT STATUS

La Selva is a research station, not a national park; book ahead.

BOOK AHEAD

La Selva	Book 2–4 weeks ahead; 8:00 walk fills first.
Rafting	Book 1–2 weeks ahead; confirm minimum age.

WHAT TO ADD NEXT

Arenal 2 h

Volcano, hot springs and waterfall. The most natural pairing; the road via La Virgen…

Santa Rosa

Northern Guanacaste

One of Central America's largest tropical dry forests, with a historic hacienda, empty beaches and the marine corridor of the Bat Islands.



Why it is worth the trip

Santa Rosa is not a rainforest. It is a hot, open dry forest where the wildlife is harder to see but the landscape and the history are distinct.

- **One of the last dry forests.** The park protects a large tract of tropical dry forest, a habitat that has almost disappeared from Central America. The trees are deciduous, the undergrowth is open and…
- **La Casona and 1856.** La Casona is the old hacienda where the Battle of Santa Rosa was fought in 1856. The small museum explains the campaign and the park's role in Costa…
- **Coast and Bat Islands.** The park includes beaches and the marine area around the Bat Islands, one of the best places in the country to dive with bull sharks in season.

What to do

La Casona & history

1 H · EASY · PARK TICKET

La Casona is a restored hacienda and a small museum about the 1856 battle and the cattle frontier. It is the cultural anchor of…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Dry forest trails

2–3 H · EASY–MODERATE · WATER NEEDED

The trails are short but hot and exposed. The reward is the strange dry-forest flora, the big fig trees and the chance of coatis,…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Wildlife spotting

1–2 H · EASY · MORNING

Santa Rosa is good for iguanas, coatis, white-tailed deer and dry-forest birds such as trogons and motmots. The wildlife is less dense than in…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Bat Islands

FULL DAY · ADVANCED · BOOK AHEAD

The Bat Islands are a marine add-on, reached by boat from Playas del Coco. In season, bull sharks come close to the rocky reefs;…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Activity links go to GetYourGuide; we may earn a commission at no extra cost to you.

THE PRACTICAL PICTURE

Best months	Dec–Apr
Stay	1–2 days
From gateway	1 h
Effort	Low
Budget	Entry extra; diving extra.
Permit	Ticket

CURRENT STATUS

Witch's Rock surf break sits on its coast; Bat Islands diving is booked separately.

BOOK AHEAD

Park	Ticket online or at the gate.
Dive	Book the Bat Islands with a licensed shop.

WHAT TO ADD NEXT

Bat Islands 1.5–2 h

Bull shark diving from Playas del Coco; the marine add-on to Santa Rosa.

Ostional

Nicoya Peninsula (north of Nosara)

One of the world's most reliable mass nesting beaches for olive ridley turtles. The event is unpredictable, regulated and unlike a normal turtle tour.



Why it is worth the trip

Ostional is not a guarantee. It is one of the few beaches where olive ridley turtles arrive in mass nesting events called arribadas, and the dates are decided by the ocean.

- **Mass nesting.** During an arribada, thousands of olive ridley turtles can come ashore over a few days. The refuge is one of the most important nesting sites for the species…
- **Community-run access.** Visits are managed with local guides and the Ostional Development Association. Groups are small, lights are restricted and the beach is closed outside guided visits.
- **Nosara next door.** Nosara and Playa Guiones are 20–30 minutes away, with surf, yoga and restaurants. Ostional is the wildlife half of a Nicoya beach stay.

What to do

The arribada

SEASONAL · GUIDED · CASH

When an arribada starts, hundreds to thousands of turtles come ashore to dig nests and lay eggs. It can last a few hours or…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Night turtle tour

1–2 H · NIGHT · LICENSED GUIDE

Night visits are only allowed with an authorised local guide. The guide controls the group, keeps lights off and explains the nesting process without…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Hatchlings

DAWN / DUSK · SEASONAL · LOOK, DON'T TOUCH

Weeks after nesting, hatchlings emerge and head for the sea. It is a smaller, quieter spectacle than the arribada, and just as fragile.

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Nosara & Guiones

HALF DAY · EASY · BOOK AHEAD

Nosara is the practical base: surf schools at Guiones, yoga, cafés and a protected green zone. It is a short drive from Ostional and…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Activity links go to GetYourGuide; we may earn a commission at no extra cost to you.

THE PRACTICAL PICTURE

Best months	Jul–Dec
Stay	3–4 nights
From gateway	2.5–3 h
Effort	Low
Budget	Guide about US$25 per person, cash.
Permit	Certified guide required

CURRENT STATUS

ADIO-certified guides only; groups of nine or fewer; no flash or white light; do not touch or block turtles.

BOOK AHEAD

Guide	Arrange through the lodge or ADIO.
Nights	Stay three or more in season.

WHAT TO ADD NEXT

Nicoya beaches 0.5–2 h

Nosara, Samara, Tamarindo and the rest of the peninsula.

Bat Islands

Northern Guanacaste (Santa Rosa marine area)

A cluster of rocky islands in Santa Rosa's marine area, known for close bull shark encounters and advanced diving rather than coral gardens.



Why it is worth the trip

The Bat Islands are a dive add-on for experienced divers. The draw is the chance to see bull sharks in open water, with no feeding and no baiting.

- **A bull shark site.** The islands are one of the most reliable places in Costa Rica to see bull sharks, especially from June to October. The sharks patrol the rocky points and…
- **Advanced conditions.** Currents, surge and open-ocean crossings make this an advanced dive. Most operators require Advanced Open Water, recent logged dives and dive insurance.
- **Part of Santa Rosa's marine area.** The islands sit in the marine zone of Santa Rosa National Park. Access is by boat from Playas del Coco, and the crossing is weather-dependent.

What to do

Bull shark dive

2 DIVES · ADVANCED · SEASONAL

The dive plan usually puts you on a rocky point or cleaning station and waits for sharks to pass. Sightings are not guaranteed, and…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

The dive day

FULL DAY · BOAT · BOOK AHEAD

A typical trip leaves Playas del Coco in the morning, crosses to the islands and does two dives with a surface interval. The crossing…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Other marine life

BONUS · BLUE WATER · LUCK

The islands also hold reef fish, rays, turtles and occasional dolphins or whales on the crossing. The big animals are the reason, but the…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Surface interval & coast

BETWEEN DIVES · COAST · WEATHER

The surface interval is a chance to see the dry coast and the islands from the water. There is no beach landing or resort…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Activity links go to GetYourGuide; we may earn a commission at no extra cost to you.

THE PRACTICAL PICTURE

Best months	May–Nov
Stay	1 day
From gateway	~45 min
Effort	High
Budget	About US$150–250 per person, gear and insurance extra.
Permit	Arranged by the dive operator

CURRENT STATUS

Trips cancel in rough seas; do not touch or block bull sharks.

BOOK AHEAD

Dive shop	Book with a licensed operator in Playas del Coco.
Certification	Bring card and logbook.

WHAT TO ADD NEXT

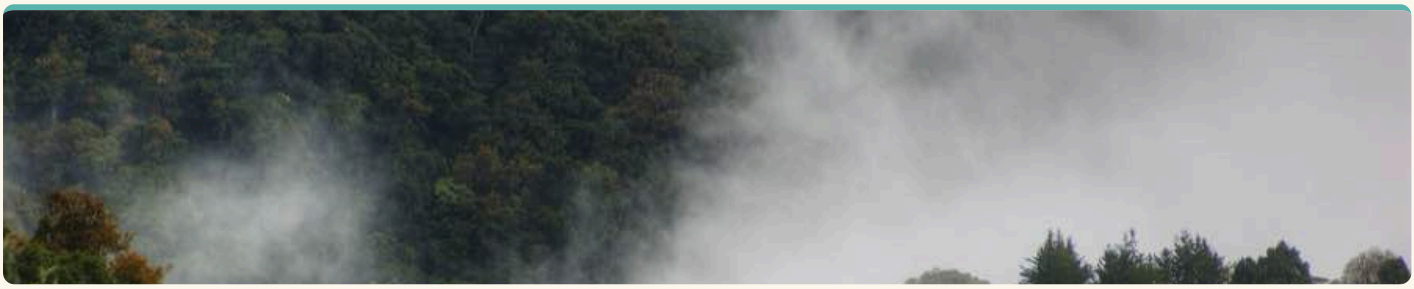
Santa Rosa 1–1.5 h

Dry forest and history; the land side of the same marine area.

San Gerardo de Dota

Talamanca Range (Savegre Valley)

A high cloud-forest valley in the Talamanca mountains, and one of the most reliable places in Costa Rica to see a resplendent quetzal.



Why it is worth the trip

San Gerardo is a valley, not a park gate. The appeal is the combination of high cloud forest, a clear river and a very good chance of seeing a quetzal with a local guide.

- **The quetzal.** The resplendent quetzal is the prize, and the Savegre valley is one of the most reliable places to see it. March–April is the peak; birds are still possible…
- **Cloud forest and river.** The valley sits around 2,200 m, with mossy forest, orchids, hummingbirds and the clear Savegre River. It is cool, quiet and a strong contrast to the coast.
- **Small-scale tourism.** Lodges are family-run and low-rise. There is no town centre or nightlife; the point is to sleep close to the forest and wake early.

What to do

Quetzal tour

2–3 H · EASY · BOOK AHEAD

A local guide knows the fruiting trees and the current territories. Tours leave before dawn, when the birds are most active, and usually include…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Cloud forest birding

2–3 H · EASY · MORNING

The valley is full of hummingbirds, tanagers, woodpeckers and mixed flocks. Feeders at the lodges concentrate birds, but the forest trails are better for…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Savegre River walk

1–2 H · EASY · COOL

The Savegre is one of the cleanest rivers in the country, with trout farms and quiet banks. A short walk along the river is…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Los Quetzales & trails

HALF DAY · MODERATE · PARK TICKET

Los Quetzales National Park protects cloud forest around the valley. Trails are muddy and high, with a chance of quetzal, tapir and highland birds;…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Activity links go to GetYourGuide; we may earn a commission at no extra cost to you.

THE PRACTICAL PICTURE

Best months	Jan–Jun
Stay	1–2 days
From gateway	2–2.5 h
Effort	Low–moderate
Budget	Los Quetzales about US$10; lodging and guides extra.
Permit	Los Quetzales ticket

CURRENT STATUS

Quetzals are not guaranteed; a local guide improves the odds.

BOOK AHEAD

Guide	Book a dawn quetzal tour.
Lodge	Stay in the valley, not in San Isidro.

WHAT TO ADD NEXT

Chirripó 2–3 h

Costa Rica's highest peak and páramo; a completely different mountain trip.

Caño Negro Wildlife Refuge

Northern plains (Los Chiles)

A wetland on the Nicaraguan border where the dry season concentrates birds: jabiru, roseate spoonbill, herons, caiman and monkeys. The boat is the point.



Why it is worth the trip

Caño Negro is a Ramsar wetland and a working river system, not a zoo. In the dry season the water retreats, fish concentrate and birds follow. That is the window worth planning around.

- **Dry season concentrates life.** From January to April the lagoons shrink and wildlife crowds the remaining channels. February–March is the peak for bird density.
- **Jabiru and spoonbill.** Caño Negro is one of Costa Rica's most reliable wetlands for jabiru, the country's largest bird, plus roseate spoonbill, herons and kingfishers. More than 300 species have been…
- **A boat, not a hike.** The visit is a 2–3 hour boat ride from Los Chiles or Caño Negro village. It is low-effort and good for families, but it is not a walking…

What to do

Boat tour

2–3 H · EASY · BOOK AHEAD

The standard tour runs 2–3 hours through the wetland channels. Guides know where the birds are and how close the boat can approach without…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Jabiru

FEB–MAR · GUIDE · SCOPE

The jabiru is the bird most people come for: a huge stork with a black neck and a red throat patch. It nests in…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Roseate spoonbill

JAN–APR · EASY · MORNING

The spoonbill's pink wings and flat bill make it the most photogenic bird in the wetland. It feeds in shallow water, often in groups,…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Caiman & reptiles

BOAT · EASY · KEEP DISTANCE

Spectacled caiman are common along the muddy banks, often half-hidden in the vegetation. The guide will spot the eye shine or the shape; you…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Activity links go to GetYourGuide; we may earn a commission at no extra cost to you.

THE PRACTICAL PICTURE

Best months	Jan–Apr
Stay	1 day
From gateway	~2.5–3 h
Effort	Easy
Budget	Refuge about US$10; boat tour US$45–65.
Permit	Ticket + boat tour

CURRENT STATUS

Best by boat in the dry season; some channels close in the wet season.

BOOK AHEAD

Boat tour	Book 1–2 days ahead in the dry season.
Transport	Confirm pickup from La Fortuna or Liberia.

WHAT TO ADD NEXT

Arenal 1.5 h

Volcano, hot springs and waterfall. The most natural pairing; Caño Negro is often sold…

Pavones

South Pacific (south shore of Golfo Dulce)

One of the world's longest left-hand waves, at the end of a slow road south of Golfito. For surfers it is a pilgrimage; for everyone else it is a remote beach.



Why it is worth the trip

Pavones is not a general beach stop. It is a surf town at the end of the road, and the reason to come is a single, very long left-hand wave.

- **A world-class left.** On a good south swell, the wave can run for more than a kilometre and last two to three minutes. It is a point break with a fast,…
- **Remote and slow.** The road from Golfito is rough and the town is small. There are no big resorts, few ATMs and limited English; the appeal is the wave and the…
- **A seasonal window.** The south swell runs roughly April–October. Outside that window the wave can be flat, and the green season can make the road worse.

What to do

The left wave

SOUTH SWELL · ADVANCED · REEF

Pavones is a point break that wraps around the bay, producing a long left wall on a solid south swell. It is not a…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Surf sessions

2–4 H · ADVANCED · BOARD HIRE

Most surfers ride two sessions a day, early and late, and rest through the heat. Board rental and lessons are available in town, but…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Beach & waterfalls

HALF DAY · EASY · 4WD

Pavones has a long dark-sand beach, river mouths and waterfalls inland. It is a place to slow down, not a checklist of attractions; a…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Golfito gateway

HALF DAY · EASY · SUPPLY STOP

Golfito is the practical gateway: flights, banks, supermarkets and the last reliable services before Pavones. The drive south is slow and can be rough…

FIND ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Activity links go to GetYourGuide; we may earn a commission at no extra cost to you.

THE PRACTICAL PICTURE

Best months	Apr–Oct
Stay	3–5 days
From gateway	6–7 h
Effort	High
Budget	Lodging and surf camps extra; cheaper than Santa Teresa.
Permit	None

CURRENT STATUS

Surf is inconsistent, with reef and strong currents; the access road can require 4WD in the rainy season.

BOOK AHEAD

Lodging	Book around the swell forecast.
Board	Bring your own or reserve a rental.

WHAT TO ADD NEXT

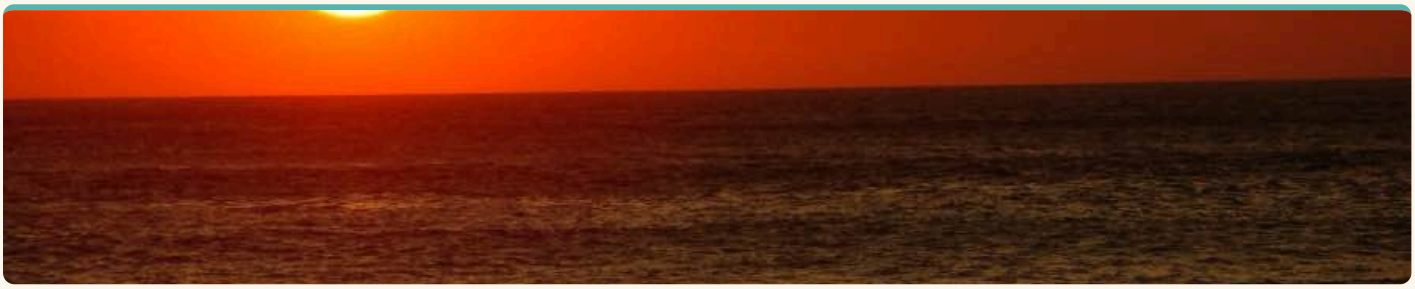
Golfo Dulce 1.5 h

Dolphins, kayaking and calm water on the other side of Golfito.

Nicoya Peninsula Beaches

Nicoya Peninsula / Guanacaste

A hundred kilometres of coast with very different moods: surf and yoga at Nosara, design hotels at Santa Teresa, family beaches at Samara and Tamarindo.



Why it is worth the trip

The Nicoya Peninsula is not one destination. The right base depends on whether you want surf, yoga, families, nightlife or quiet.

- **Nosara / Guiones.** Surf, yoga, cafés and a protected green zone. It is the most wellness-oriented base, with a long beach break and a laid-back village.
- **Santa Teresa / Malpaís.** Sunset, design hotels and a younger crowd. The surf is consistent, the road is dusty and the scene is more fashion than family.
- **Samara & Tamarindo.** Samara is a curved, family-friendly bay; Tamarindo is the busiest resort town with flights, tours and nightlife. Carrillo and Conchal are quieter, prettier beaches in between.

What to do

Nosara & Guiones

3–5 DAYS · EASY · BOOK AHEAD

Guiones is the surf beach; Nosara town has the cafés, yoga and services. The green zone keeps the beach low-rise and the pace slow.

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Santa Teresa & Malpaís

3–5 DAYS · EASY–MODERATE · BOOK AHEAD

Santa Teresa is a long surf strip with sunset bars, boutique hotels and a younger scene. Malpaís is quieter and rockier, with tide pools…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Sámara

2–4 DAYS · EASY · BOOK AHEAD

Sámara is a curved bay with calm water, a palm-lined promenade and plenty of families. It is the easiest base for swimming and a…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Tamarindo

2–4 DAYS · EASY · BOOK AHEAD

Tamarindo has the most services on this coast: flights, tours, restaurants and nightlife. The beach is long, the estuary is behind it and the…

BOOK ON GETYOURGUIDE →

Activity links go to GetYourGuide; we may earn a commission at no extra cost to you.

THE PRACTICAL PICTURE

Best months	Dec–Apr
Stay	5–7 days
From gateway	1–2 h
Effort	Low
Budget	Wide range, from hostels to high-end resorts.
Permit	None

CURRENT STATUS

Ostional, Bat Islands and Santa Rosa are scored separately; this entry covers the peninsula's beaches and surf towns.

BOOK AHEAD

Base	Choose north or south, not both in one day.
Car	Book 4WD in the green season.

WHAT TO ADD NEXT

Ostional — 0.5 h from Nosara

The olive ridley arribada; a separate wildlife night in season.

If time remains.

Half-days, stopovers and seasonal stops. These are worth doing when they are on the way. They are not worth reshaping a trip around—unless one of them is the reason you came.



VOLCANOES & MOUNTAINS

Irazú Volcano National Park

Central Valley (Cartago)

A drive-up crater edge, with Pacific and Caribbean views on a clear day; high value if you are already on the Cartago route.

Best Dec–Apr **Stay** Half day **Access** SJO ~1.5–2 h



VOLCANOES & MOUNTAINS

Turrialba Volcano National Park

Caribbean slope (Cartago)

The appeal is the active crater and the raw volcanic landscape, not a polished park experience. Access changes with activity and weather.

Best Dec–Apr **Stay** Half day **Access** SJO ~2–2.5 h



VOLCANOES & MOUNTAINS

Miravalles / Las Hornillas

Guanacaste

Walk into a secondary crater in a private geothermal field, with mud baths, hot springs and hanging bridges—easy to add…

Best Dec–Apr **Stay** Half day
Access LIR ~1.5–2 h



VOLCANOES & MOUNTAINS

Bajos del Toro

Central Valley (Alajuela)

A 90 m crater waterfall, a chain of blue falls and a canyon in one place, within 1.5–2 h of…

Best Dec–Apr **Stay** Half day–1 day
Access SJO ~1.5–2 h



VOLCANOES & MOUNTAINS

Braulio Carrillo / Barva

Central Valley

The closest large rainforest and cloud forest to SJO, with a Barva crater lake and high birding value—an easy nature…

Best Dec–Apr **Stay** Half day
Access SJO ~1–1.5 h

If time remains, continued.



VOLCANOES & MOUNTAINS

La Amistad International Park

Talamanca

A UNESCO cross-border biosphere reserve and Costa Rica's wildest boundary—for serious hikers, not a quick roadside stop.

Best Dec–Apr **Stay** 2–3 days **Access** SJO ~4–5 h



WETLANDS & RAINFOREST

Carara National Park

Central Pacific

A dry-to-wet forest transition with scarlet macaws, sloths and crocodiles at the Tárcoles bridge—a high-value stop on the coastal highway.

Best Dec–Apr **Stay** Half day **Access** SJO ~1.5 h



WETLANDS & RAINFOREST

Palo Verde National Park

Guanacaste (Tempisque)

A Ramsar wetland and dry forest with huge dry-season bird concentrations; the boat tour is the main reason to come…

Best Dec–Apr **Stay** Half day
Access LIR ~1.5–2 h



WETLANDS & RAINFOREST

Isla San Lucas

Puntarenas

A former prison island turned national park, with history, a quiet bay and a short boat ride from Puntarenas—an easy…

Best Dec–Apr **Stay** Half day
Access SJO ~1.5 h to Puntarenas



BEACHES & STOPOVERS

Montezuma / Cabo Blanco

Southern Nicoya Peninsula

Waterfall, beach and a relaxed backpacker atmosphere at the southern tip of Nicoya; Cabo Blanco adds a wild reserve.

Best Dec–Apr **Stay** 1–2 days
Access SJO ~3.5–4 h

If time remains, continued.



BEACHES & STOPOVERS

Playa Conchal

Guanacaste

A shell-sand beach with clear water and resort facilities in one place—easy if you are already in Guanacaste.

Best Dec–Apr **Stay** Half day–1 day **Access** LIR ~1 h



BEACHES & STOPOVERS

Jacó

Central Pacific

The convenience is the point: 1.5–2 h from SJO, surf schools, restaurants and a long dark-sand beach.

Best Dec–Apr **Stay** 1–2 days **Access** SJO ~1.5–2 h



BEACHES & STOPOVERS

Dominical / Nauyaca Falls

South Pacific

A surf village and the Nauyaca double waterfall—a natural stop on the South Pacific route.

Best Dec–Apr **Stay** Half day–1 day

Access SJO ~3–3.5 h



BEACHES & STOPOVERS

Tárcoles Crocodile Bridge

Central Pacific

A quick, reliable look at large American crocodiles from the bridge, right on the coastal highway.

Best Dec–Apr **Stay** 15–30 min

Access SJO ~1.5 h



CULTURE & CITIES

San José

Central Valley

The capital is a real city with museums, markets and coffee; useful as a base or a rainy-day stop.

Best Dec–Apr **Stay** Half day–1 day

Access SJO ~20–30 min

If time remains, continued.



CULTURE & CITIES

Cartago / Orosi

Central Valley

Colonial history, the Orosi church and Lankester Botanical Garden in a coffee valley; pairs with Irazú.

Best Dec–Apr **Stay** Half day–1 day **Access** SJO ~45–60 min



CULTURE & CITIES

Liberia

Guanacaste

The LIR gateway with a compact colonial centre and cathedral; useful for a meal or an overnight before Guanacaste.

Best Dec–Apr **Stay** Half day **Access** LIR ~15 min



CULTURE & CITIES

Limón

Caribbean

The Caribbean port has Afro-Caribbean food and music, and is the gateway to Cahuita and Puerto Viejo.

Best Feb–Apr · Sep–Oct **Stay** Half day
Access SJO ~2.5–3 h



CULTURE & CITIES

Golfito

South Pacific

The western gateway to Golfo Dulce and Pavones, with a duty-free port and fishing history—useful as a southern-route transit.

Best Dec–Apr **Stay** Half day–1 day
Access SJO ~4–5 h



CULTURE & CITIES

Sarchí

Central Valley

The painted oxcart is Costa Rica's craft symbol; the town is an easy coffee and souvenir stop.

Best Dec–Apr **Stay** 1–2 h
Access SJO ~45–60 min

If time remains, continued.



CULTURE & CITIES

Grecia

Central Valley

A coffee town with the distinctive red metal church and a lively central market, close to SJO.

Best Dec–Apr **Stay** Half day **Access** SJO ~45 min



CULTURE & CITIES

Guayabo National Monument

Cartago / Turrialba

Costa Rica's most important pre-Columbian archaeological site, with stone roads, water channels and mounds in a forest setting.

Best Dec–Apr **Stay** Half day **Access** SJO ~1.5 h



CULTURE & CITIES

Finca 6 / Diquís Stone Spheres

South Pacific (Palmar Sur)

Costa Rica's only UNESCO cultural site (2014): pre-Columbian stone spheres in situ, with a small museum.

Best Dec–Apr **Stay** 1–2 h

Access SJO ~3.5–4 h



CULTURE & CITIES

Nicoya Interior / Blue Zone / Guaitil

Nicoya Peninsula

The Blue Zone story, the pottery village of Guaitil and colonial Nicoya make a cultural detour from the beach route.

Best Dec–Apr **Stay** Half day–1 day

Access LIR ~1.5–2 h



SEASONAL & SPECIAL

Las Baulas National Marine Park

Guanacaste (Playa Grande)

A leatherback marine park and the long beach at Playa Grande; the conservation story matters even though turtle tours inside…

Best Oct–Feb **Stay** Half day **Access** LIR ~1 h

If time remains, continued.



SEASONAL & SPECIAL

La Paz Waterfall Gardens

Central Valley (Vara Blanca)

A private waterfall garden with animal exhibits, easy paths and good facilities—a reliable family stop on the Poás route.

Best Dec–Apr **Stay** Half day **Access** SJO ~1–1.5 h

How to choose a detour

- **Follow the route, not the list.** A detour is only worth it if it sits on the way to somewhere you already planned to go.
- **Check the day.** Las Pailas closes Mondays; Bajos del Toro closes Sundays; Turrialba and Guayabo can close after heavy rain.
- **Half-day means half a day.** Add the drive, parking and a meal; a "quick stop" can eat four hours.
- **Seasonal is seasonal.** Las Baulas has no turtle tours inside the park; Ostional needs a licensed guide and luck.

Good pairings

- **Poás + La Paz + Sarchí:** one volcano morning, waterfalls in the afternoon, crafts on the way down.
- **Irazú + Cartago / Orosi:** crater early, colonial churches and coffee later.
- **Carara + Tárcoles:** forest walk in the morning, crocodiles from the bridge at midday.
- **Sierpe + Corcovado:** mangrove channels one day, Sirena or Drake the next.

Do the thing where it is best.

Each experience is attached to the place that does it best, so nothing is counted twice. Use this list to choose a highlight, then book it with a licensed local operator.



EXPERIENCE

Canopy Tour / Zipline

Monteverde-Santa Elena Cloud Forest · Sarapiquí / La Selva

Costa Rica did not invent the zipline: Donald Perry rigged a research cable in Sarapiquí in 1979, and Monteverde turned the canopy tour into a commercial product in…

BEST DEC–APR



EXPERIENCE

Bat Islands Bull Shark Dive

Santa Rosa National Park (ACG)

Open May–November, peaking June–October; no feeding.

BEST MAY–NOV



EXPERIENCE

Isla del Caño Snorkeling / Diving

Corcovado National Park / Osa Peninsula

Among the most complete coral reefs on the Pacific side; visibility varies strongly by season.

BEST DEC–APR



EXPERIENCE

Whale & Dolphin Watching

Uvita / Marino Ballena National Park · Golfo Dulce / Piedras Blancas

Uvita has southern humpbacks July–November and northern humpbacks December–April; Golfo Dulce also has resident bottlenose and spotted dolphins. Boat trips run about US$75–120 per person for 3–4 hours.

BEST JUL–APR



EXPERIENCE

Turtle Night Walk

Tortuguero National Park · Ostional National Wildlife Refuge

Tortuguero green turtles July–October; Ostional arribadas July–December; Las Baulas no longer runs tours inside the park.

BEST JUL–OCT



EXPERIENCE

Quetzal Watching

San Gerardo de Dota / Los Quetzales

January–June, peaking March–April; best between 05:15 and 08:00.

BEST JAN–JUN

Do the thing where it is best, continued.



EXPERIENCE

Canyoning / Waterfall Rappelling

Arenal Volcano & La Fortuna · Bajos del Toro

Lost Canyon near Arenal is the best-known; water levels affect routes in the rainy season.

BEST DEC–APR



EXPERIENCE

Night Rainforest Walk

Monteverde–Santa Elena Cloud Forest · Sarapiquí / La Selva

Amphibians, reptiles, nocturnal mammals and insects; never go in alone.

BEST DEC–APR



EXPERIENCE

Hot Springs

Arenal Volcano & La Fortuna · Rincón de la Vieja National Park

Arenal has the widest choice; wild river springs need care and local rules.

BEST DEC–APR



EXPERIENCE

Whitewater Rafting

Río Pacuare Canyon (2-day) · Turrialba Volcano National Park

Pacuare is the classic Class III–IV overnight canyon; Sarapiquí and Reventazón add family-friendly and big-water options.

BEST DEC–APR



EXPERIENCE

Hanging Bridges

Monteverde–Santa Elena Cloud Forest · Arenal Volcano & La Fortuna

Mistico near Arenal is the most convenient; Monteverde's bridges feel wilder.

BEST DEC–APR



EXPERIENCE

Sportfishing

Golfito · Uvita / Marino Ballena National Park

Quepos, Los Sueños and Golfito have world-class sailfish; a narrow audience.

BEST DEC–APR

Do the thing where it is best, continued.



EXPERIENCE

Horseback Riding

Nicoya Peninsula Beaches · Arenal Volcano & La Fortuna

Beach, dry forest and rainforest edges; choose operators that provide helmets and insurance.

BEST DEC–APR



EXPERIENCE

Coffee Tour

Poás Volcano National Park · Arenal Volcano & La Fortuna

Poás, Arenal and Monteverde have the most standardized coffee visits; Tarrazú in Cartago grows world-class coffee but has thinner tourism infrastructure.

BEST DEC–APR



EXPERIENCE

Chocolate / Cacao Tour

Sarapiquí / La Selva · Cahuita–Puerto Viejo (incl. Manzanillo/Gandoca)

Tirimbina and Puerto Viejo are the usual bases; good for families.

BEST DEC–APR



EXPERIENCE

Mangrove Kayak

Sierpe-Térraba Mangroves · Cahuita–Puerto Viejo (incl. Manzanillo/Gandoca)

Sierpe and Damas are quiet and good for birds.

BEST DEC–APR



EXPERIENCE

Canal & Mangrove Boat Safari

Tortuguero National Park · Caño Negro Wildlife Refuge

Tortuguero's canals, Caño Negro's wetlands and Sierpe's mangroves are all boat-first; the boat and the season decide what you see.

BEST JAN–APR · JUL–OCT



EXPERIENCE

Volcano Viewpoints

Arenal Volcano & La Fortuna · Poás Volcano National Park

Arenal's 1968 lava field, Poás's acid lake and Rincón's mud pots; Poás uses timed entry and helmets, and Rincón's crater trail is closed.

BEST DEC–APR

Do the thing where it is best, continued.



EXPERIENCE

Waterfalls & Swims

Arenal Volcano & La Fortuna · Tenorio Volcano NP / Río Celeste

La Fortuna, Río Celeste, Nauyaca and La Leona are four different waterfall experiences; swimming rules and water levels vary.

BEST DEC–APR



EXPERIENCE

Isla del Coco Liveaboard

Isla del Coco (Cocos Island)

Liveaboard access only: a 36-hour crossing, hammerhead cleaning stations and whale sharks are the reason to go.

BEST JUN–NOV



EXPERIENCE

Chirripó Summit Hike

Cerro Chirripó

14.5 km to Base Crestones, then 5.1 km to the summit; the park permit and the beds are separate bookings, and the crater is not on this route.

BEST DEC–APR



EXPERIENCE

Sloth & Monkey Wildlife Tour

Manuel Antonio National Park · Cahuita–Puerto Viejo (incl. Manzanillo/Gandoca)

Sloths, capuchins and howler monkeys; Manuel Antonio, Cahuita and Arenal are the easiest places to arrange a guided walk. Do not feed them.

BEST DEC–APR



EXPERIENCE

Corcovado Rainforest Trek

Corcovado National Park / Osa Peninsula

Rainforest trekking at Sirena or San Pedrillo; a guide is mandatory, and mud and boat transfers are the real barriers.

BEST DEC–APR



EXPERIENCE

ATV / UTV

Jacó · Nicoya Peninsula Beaches

Commercial and easy to substitute; check safety and insurance.

BEST DEC–APR

Do the thing where it is best, continued.



EXPERIENCE

Sunset Catamaran

Nicoya Peninsula Beaches · Manuel Antonio National Park

Social and party-oriented; suits families and groups.

BEST DEC–APR



EXPERIENCE

Birdwatching

Sarapiquí / La Selva · Caño Negro Wildlife Refuge

Choose the destination that fits the species you want; treat it as an activity attached to a place, not a trip on its own.

BEST DEC–APR



EXPERIENCE

Surf Lessons

Nicoya Peninsula Beaches · Jacó

Tamarindo, Sámara and Jacó suit beginners; Pavones is for intermediate and advanced surfers.

BEST DEC–APR

Booking an experience

- **Use a licensed operator.** Ask who holds the park permit and who the guide will be.
- **Confirm the details.** Pickup, minimum age, weight limit, insurance and whether park fees are included.
- **Keep a weather buffer.** Volcanic activity and rough seas can cancel a trip at short notice.

What the prices mean

Prices are 2026 planning ranges for foreign adults, usually including tax where that is how the operator quotes them. Park entry, transport and gear are sometimes separate.

Pick the month by what you want to see.

Turtles, whales, quetzals and dry-season beaches do not peak together. The Pacific and the Caribbean also run on different calendars. Choose the experience first, then the month.

MONTH	WHAT PEAKS	WHERE TO GO
Jan	Pacific dry season; northern humpbacks off Uvita	Nicoya, Arenal, Monteverde, Corcovado, Uvita
Feb	Caño Negro bird peak; dry-season trails	Caño Negro, Guanacaste, Arenal; avoid Chirripó race dates
Mar	Quetzal peak; Semana Santa crowds build	San Gerardo de Dota, Monteverde, Nicoya
Apr	Dry season ends; Pavones south swell begins	Pavones, Nicoya, Arenal; Easter is busy
May	Green season starts; Bat Islands season opens	Arenal, Sarapiquí, Monteverde; Chirripó maintenance late May
Jun	Caribbean relatively dry; hammerhead season at Coco	Puerto Viejo, Cahuita, Tortuguero; Isla del Coco
Jul	Tortuguero green turtles; southern humpbacks arrive	Tortuguero, Uvita, Golfo Dulce
Aug	Turtle peak approaches; Ostional builds	Tortuguero, Ostional, Uvita; Nicoya roads worsen
Sep	Ostional peak; Caribbean dry window	Ostional, Puerto Viejo, Cahuita; Pacific is wet
Oct	Ostional peak; Sirena closes; turtle season ends	Ostional, Caribbean; avoid Corcovado's Sirena
Nov	Rainy season ends; Corcovado reopens	Corcovado, Osa, Uvita; lower prices
Dec	Dry season begins; northern whales return	Nicoya, Arenal, Monteverde, Uvita; holidays busy

The Caribbean exception. September–October is the wettest stretch on the Pacific, but often the driest window on the south Caribbean. Do not copy a Pacific itinerary onto Puerto Viejo.

Dry season · Dec–Apr

Best for beaches, volcanoes and clear views.

- Pacific coast and Nicoya are at their driest.
- Highest prices and holiday crowds; book early.
- Cloud forest is still wet—expect mist any month.

Green season · May–Nov

Best value, lush forest, fewer people.

- Rain usually arrives in the afternoon; mornings are usable.
- Turtles, whales and Ostional peak in this window.
- Some roads and trails get muddy; keep a buffer day.

Caribbean · Sep–Oct

A separate climate, not a copy of the Pacific.

- Often the driest, sunniest window on the south Caribbean.
- Reef visibility depends on recent rain, not the month.
- February–April is the second good window.

Wildlife windows

Pick the month by the animal, not the weather.

- Green turtles: Tortuguero, Jul–Oct.
- Humpbacks: Uvita, Jul–Nov and Dec–Apr.
- Quetzal: San Gerardo de Dota, Jan–Jun.

Routes, booking order, budget.

Three shapes that work, plus the practical order of operations. Adjust the days to your flight and tolerance for driving; keep at least one weather buffer in the green season.

First trip · 10 days

The classic loop: volcano, cloud forest, Pacific beach.

- Day 1 – Land at SJO, transfer to La Fortuna
- Days 2–3 – Arenal: volcano park, waterfall, hot springs
- Day 4 – Transfer to Monteverde; night walk
- Day 5 – Monteverde Reserve and canopy
- Day 6 – Transfer to Manuel Antonio
- Days 7–8 – Manuel Antonio park, beach, catamaran or kayak
- Day 9 – Return to San José
- Day 10 – Fly home

Wildlife · 12 days

Turtles, rainforest and the Osa, with less beach time.

- Day 1 – SJO to Tortuguero
- Days 2–3 – Canals, Jaguar Trail, turtle night tour in season
- Day 4 – Boat out; transfer to Sarapiquí
- Day 5 – La Selva walk and Tirimbina
- Day 6 – Transfer to Arenal
- Day 7 – Arenal volcano and night walk
- Day 8 – Fly or drive to Drake Bay
- Days 9–11 – Corcovado: Sirena overnight and San Pedrillo
- Day 12 – Return to San José

South · 14 days

Cloud forest, whales and the last great lowland rainforest.

- Days 1–3 – Arenal and La Fortuna
- Days 4–5 – Monteverde
- Day 6 – Transfer south via Jacó
- Days 7–9 – Uvita: whale tail, whales, Caño Island
- Days 10–12 – Drake Bay and Corcovado (Sirena overnight)
- Days 13 – San Gerardo de Dota for quetzals
- Day 14 – Return to SJO

Book in this order

6–12 months	Isla del Coco liveaboard; Christmas and New Year; Chirripó beds
3–6 months	Corcovado Sirena beds; high-season rental cars; Pacuare lodge
1–3 months	Poás, Manuel Antonio and Tenorio tickets; Tortuguero lodges
2–4 weeks	Monteverde timed slots; shuttles; rafting and canopy tours
48 hours	Weather, SINAC closures, OVSICORI volcano status, road conditions

Daily budget, excluding flights

Budget Hostels, public buses, sodas, shared tours	US$60–90
Mid-range 3-star hotels, shuttles, one guided tour a day	US$120–200
Comfort Boutique lodges, private transfers, premium guides	US$250–450
Expedition Isla del Coco liveaboard, plus park fee and travel	US$6,000+

Park tickets, guided tours and domestic flights are extra. The Isla del Coco liveaboard is a separate expedition budget.

Pack light. Book early. Stay flexible.

What to bring

- Rain shell and a warm layer for cloud forest and Chirripó
- Quick-dry clothes, swimsuit, closed shoes with grip
- Reef-safe sunscreen, insect repellent, after-bite
- Refillable water bottle; single-use plastic is banned in several parks
- Headlamp with red light, binoculars, dry bag
- Passport, copies, cash in colones and small US bills
- Dive card and logbook if diving; medication in original packaging

Health & safety

Tap water is generally safe in cities and towns; use filtered or bottled water in rural areas. Mosquito repellent matters in the lowlands and at dawn/dusk. Check routine vaccines and any yellow-fever requirement for your route with a travel clinic.

Rip currents are the most common beach hazard. Swim near lifeguards, follow flags and never turn your back on a big swell. Volcanic gases, heat and dehydration are the other quiet risks.

Travel with respect

Use licensed guides in Corcovado, Tortuguero, Ostional and Chirripó. Keep the distance rules, skip the flash, never feed wildlife and stay on marked trails. Single-use plastic is banned in several parks; carry a refillable bottle.

Buy from local operators and family lodges where you can. In turtle and whale seasons, choose the boat that keeps its distance and does not chase the animals.

Before you leave

Check SINAC for park tickets and closures, OVSICORI for volcano status, and your operator for the day's water or sea conditions. Save offline maps and copies of your passport. Carry small bills for guides, parking and sodas.

> **Verification date:** November 2026. Prices, permits and closures change frequently; confirm before you book.

Costa Rica basics

MONEY

The colón (CRC) is the local currency; US dollars are widely accepted in tourist areas. Cards work in towns and hotels; carry cash for rural sodas, guides, parking and tips. ATMs are scarce on the Osa and Nicoya coasts.

LANGUAGE

Spanish is the national language. English is common in hotels and tour offices; the south Caribbean also speaks a Creole English. A few phrases go a long way, especially outside the main tourist towns.

DRIVING

Drive on the right. Mountain roads are slow, and night driving is best avoided. A 4WD helps in the green season and on unpaved roads; download offline maps before leaving town. Police checkpoints are routine.

POWER & CONNECTIVITY

120 V, US-style plugs. Wi-Fi is common in lodges but can be slow; buy a local eSIM for backup. Cell coverage is patchy in parks, on boats and in the Osa.

HEALTH

Travel insurance with medical evacuation is worth it. Pharmacies (farmacias) are common in towns; bring prescriptions in original packaging. For serious issues, private hospitals in San José are the usual choice.

EMERGENCY

Dial 911 for police, fire or ambulance. Save your lodge's number and your embassy contact. For park emergencies, contact the ranger station or your licensed guide first; they know the local protocol.

Pura vida.
Now go plan the trip.

This guide is a snapshot of the full site: the same rankings, the same status notes, the same bias toward places that are worth the journey. Use it offline, then check the live site for updates before you fly.

SOURCES

- SINAC · national parks, tickets and closures
- MINAE · environmental ministry announcements
- OVSICORI · volcano and seismic monitoring
- ICT · Costa Rica tourism board
- NOAA Fisheries and Sea Turtle Conservancy
- UNESCO World Heritage Centre
- Licensed operators and local guides, 2026
- Photo credits · weseecostarica.com/assets/img/CREDITS.md

A NOTE ON THE NUMBERS

Prices are in US dollars for foreign adults and include tax where that is how the park quotes them. Drive times are estimates for normal conditions. Wildlife sightings are never guaranteed. This guide is independent; it is not a navigation tool.

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SCAN FOR THE LIVE GUIDE
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