

COSTA RICA

Caribbean Jungle & Cloud Forest

8 days

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Day 1 Arrival in San Jose

Arrival in San Jose, Costa Rica's capital. The city sits on a plateau in the Central Valley at 1,200 metres (3,700 feet) elevation, surrounded by mountains and coffee-growing valleys. Founded in the 1730s, San Jose became Costa Rica's capital in 1823, displacing the older colonial town of Cartago.

The city's population of approximately 340,000 represents a significant portion of Costa Rica's total population of five million, with the greater metropolitan area accounting for nearly half the country's residents. The downtown core features a mix of Spanish colonial architecture, 19th-century buildings from the coffee boom era, and contemporary structures. The National Theatre, completed in 1897 with funds from a coffee export tax, exemplifies the wealth generated during Costa Rica's coffee golden age.

This evening we meet our Tour Leader and fellow travellers for a welcome dinner.

Overnight in San Jose.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 San Jose - Boat to Tortuguero

This morning we travel by bus from San Jose through Braulio Carrillo National Park, one of Costa Rica's largest protected areas, covering 47,600 hectares (117,600 acres). The park protects five distinct life zones, from lowland rainforest to cloud forest, with elevations ranging from 50 to 2,906 metres (164 to 9,534 feet). The main highway through the park descends dramatically from the Central Valley to the Caribbean lowlands, passing through dense forest.

If season and harvest schedules permit, we visit a working banana plantation to learn about Costa Rica's most important agricultural export. We then pass through a region known for cocoa production — cacao trees grow in the shade of taller forest trees, and Costa Rican chocolate has gained international recognition for quality.

We board our riverboat and spend the afternoon journeying through interconnecting rivers and canals to the Caribbean coast and Tortuguero Park. This water thoroughfare extends 160 kilometres (100 miles), comprising natural rivers, lagoons, estuaries, and connecting waterways that run nearly to the Nicaraguan border. The canal serves as the main transportation route for the northern coastal region, complete with directional signs and branches from the main trunk route.

As we travel, we watch for toucans with their distinctive large beaks, several species of monkeys moving through the canopy, and possibly a sloth hanging motionless from a branch. Coatis — members of the raccoon family with long snouts and ringed tails — sometimes forage along the banks. Stands of red mangroves, their roots visible above water, line sections of the canal, while water hyacinth floats in quieter areas. We pass occasional settlements where residents rely on dugout canoes and small boats for transport, much as people have done for centuries. The sounds of howler monkeys and birdsong dominate over human activity.

NOTE: We strongly recommend travellers bring a smaller overnight bag to Tortuguero due to limited space on the boat and minimal portering assistance. Main luggage will be securely stored until we depart from Tortuguero.

Overnight in Tortuguero.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 3 Tortuguero: Forest Walk & Village

An early morning boat ride offers an opportunity to observe the coastal rainforest as it awakens. Bird activity peaks in the early morning hours, and wildlife is most active before the heat of the day. The canals wind through dense vegetation where five-fingered leaves, aerial roots, and hanging vines create layers of forest structure from water level to canopy.

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After lunch we visit Tortuguero village, accessible only by boat. The settlement's economy traditionally depended on turtle hunting and logging, but conservation efforts and tourism have shifted local livelihoods. We may walk on the Caribbean beach where several turtle species nest annually. Green sea turtles nest from July to October with peak activity in August, while hawksbill turtles share this season. Leatherback turtles, the largest sea turtle species, nest from February to April. Individual turtles may be encountered throughout the year, though nesting activity concentrates in these seasons.

We visit the Tortuguero Museum, which documents the area's ecology and the conservation efforts that have made this one of the Caribbean's most important turtle nesting sites. Displays cover the life cycles of different turtle species, threats they face, and the research conducted here since Dr. Archie Carr established the Caribbean Conservation Corporation's research station in 1955. Video presentations explain the decades-long conservation work that has helped recover turtle populations from near-extinction.

NOTE: The exact order of activities in Tortuguero may vary depending on weather and tidal conditions.

Overnight in Tortuguero.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 4 Tortuguero - Baldi Hotsprings - Arenal/La Fortuna Area

After an early breakfast we travel by boat 1.5 hours to reunite with our land transport, then continue by road to the La Fortuna/Arenal area. The route passes through rolling hills covered with sugar cane fields — sugar has been cultivated in Costa Rica since colonial times and remains an important crop.

We stop at Baldi Hotsprings near Arenal Volcano (located outside the risk zones established by the National Prevention of Risks and Emergency Commission). Here a geothermally heated river flows through landscaped grounds featuring native plant species and attracting diverse birdlife. We have time to relax in various pools fed by individual springs at different temperatures. The thermal water emerges from underground heated by the volcanic system beneath Arenal.

Arenal Volcano, which rises 1,633 metres (5,358 feet) above sea level, was one of the world's most active volcanoes from 1968 to 2010, producing regular lava flows and explosive eruptions. In December 2010, the volcano entered a resting phase, with no lava or explosive activity since then, though it continues to emit gases. The volcano's perfect cone shape results from its youth — geologically, Arenal is only about 7,000 years old.

Weather and visibility permitting, we can view the volcano this evening.

Overnight at Arenal/La Fortuna.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Arenal - Monteverde Cloud Forest

Today we travel through rural countryside to the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve area, approximately four hours by road. The final section of the journey follows unpaved roads that climb into the mountains — the rough conditions have helped preserve the area's ecological integrity by limiting development.

Monteverde's cloud forest exists because of specific conditions: trade winds carrying moisture from the Caribbean meet mountains along the continental divide, forcing air upward where it cools and condenses into clouds. During the dry season (December through April), when lowland forests receive little rain, the cloud forest remains enveloped in mist that nourishes the ecosystem.

This constant moisture supports an extraordinary diversity of epiphytes — plants that grow on other plants without parasitizing them. Trees are covered with orchids, bromeliads, mosses, and ferns that obtain nutrients directly from rain, mist, and organic debris rather than from soil. More than 420 orchid species have been identified in Monteverde, along with over 200 fern species. The forest canopy filters sunlight, creating dim conditions on the forest floor where shade-tolerant plants like philodendrons, heliconias, and begonias thrive.

The reserve, established in 1972, now protects over 10,500 hectares (26,000 acres) and hosts over 400 bird species, including 30 species of hummingbirds. The resplendent quetzal, with its iridescent green plumage and long tail feathers, lives here year-round. Mammal species

include howler monkeys, white-faced capuchins, spider monkeys, coatis, and, more rarely, pumas, ocelots, and jaguars.

This afternoon we visit the Butterfly Garden, where native butterfly species and other insects are raised in controlled environments. The facility contributes to research on butterfly ecology, their role in pollination, and their sensitivity to environmental changes including pollution and climate shifts.

Overnight in Monteverde.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Monteverde Cloud Forest

This morning we explore the cloud forest reserve with a local naturalist guide. The trails range from relatively easy walks to more challenging terrain, and we adjust our route based on weather conditions and group preferences. Our guide helps identify species and explains the ecological relationships that sustain cloud forest biodiversity.

Beyond the quetzal and hummingbirds, the reserve hosts six trogon species, numerous tanagers, and the three-wattled bellbird, whose distinctive call carries through the forest. Approximately 500 butterfly species inhabit the reserve. Mammal diversity includes over 100 species, though many are nocturnal and rarely observed — agoutis and coatis are among the more commonly seen during daylight hours.

This afternoon you may choose an optional canopy walk excursion. Suspension footbridges strung across gorges provide perspective on the forest from above, revealing the dense epiphyte growth and allowing observation of canopy-dwelling species. The bridges vary in length up to 170 metres (558 feet) and rise as high as 40 metres (131 feet) above the ground. At a leisurely pace, the walk takes approximately 90 minutes. Your Tour Leader can help arrange this activity and advise on current pricing.

Cloud forests by definition experience frequent cloud cover and wind, along with rain even during the "dry" season. Waterproof clothing and layers are essential.

Overnight at Monteverde.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Monteverde - San Jose

Today we return by road to San Jose.*

Time-permitting, we recommend a visit to the Gold Museum in downtown San Jose (optional), easily the country's best with thousands of different examples of Pre-Columbian gold artifacts (the museum closes at 16:30).

* Today's road transfer to San Jose will not be accompanied by your tour leader, who will be continuing with travellers who have chosen a longer tour option. Your evening meal and departure will be managed by a local guide in San Jose. If you'd like to consider an upgrade to the longer version, which also includes Nicaragua, please refer to tours CR2 and PA3 on our website.

Overnight in San Jose.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Depart

Departure from San Jose.

BUEN VIAJE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast