Tour Code
CR1

ADVENTURESABROAD

COSTA RICA

Caribbean Jungle & Cloud Forest

8 days

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Day 1 Arrival in San Jose

We arrive in San Jose, Costa Rica's capital, set on a plateau in the Central Valley at 1,200 metres, ringed by mountains and coffee farms. Founded in the 1730s, San Jose took over as capital from the older colonial town of Cartago in 1823, and the coffee wealth of the following century is still visible downtown, where Spanish colonial buildings sit alongside grander 19th-century ones. The National Theatre, finished in 1897 and paid for with a tax on coffee exports, is the clearest example.

The mountains around us are the first hint of what actually built this country. Over the days ahead we will meet them directly: some cooling quietly, some still very much awake and at least one lake that turns out to be an old crater that simply filled with water. This same restless ground runs the length of the country, and most of what we see over the days ahead will trace straight back to it.

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

Overnight in San Jose.

Included Meal(s): Dinner

Day 2 San Jose - Boat to Tortuguero

This morning we drive from San Jose through Braulio Carrillo National Park, dropping from the cool Central Valley into the Caribbean lowlands on a highway that cuts straight through the forest.

If the season allows, we stop at a working banana plantation, still one of Costa Rica's biggest exports, and pass through cacao country, where trees grown in the shade of taller ones supply the beans behind the country's chocolate.

At the coast we board a riverboat for the crossing into Tortuguero, travelling a 160 km/100 mi network of rivers, lagoons and canals that is the only route in or out of this stretch of coastline.

We pass settlements that still get around by dugout canoe, watch for toucans and monkeys in the canopy, and keep an eye out for a sloth or two hanging motionless overhead. Coatis forage along banks lined with red mangrove roots, and past the boat engine, howler monkeys and birdsong are about the only sound.

NOTE: pack a smaller overnight bag for Tortuguero; boat space and portering are limited, and main luggage stays securely stored until we depart.

Overnight in Tortuguero.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 3 Tortuguero: Forest Walk & Village

An early boat ride catches the coastal rainforest waking up, when birds and wildlife are at their most active. Around us the forest builds itself in layers, from waterline roots to a canopy tangled with vines.

After lunch we visit Tortuguero village, reachable only by boat, where turtle hunting and logging once drove the local economy before conservation and tourism took over.

We walk the beach where green turtles nest from July to October, one of the most important nesting sites for the species anywhere in the Western Hemisphere. Hawksbill turtles share that same window, and leatherbacks, the largest of all sea turtles, nest between February and April.

The Tortuguero Museum tells the rest of the story: research here goes back to 1955, when Dr. Archie Carr founded what became the Caribbean Conservation Corporation. The population recovery since is one of the better conservation comebacks in the region, and today's rangers still walk these same beaches counting nests each season.

NOTE: the order of today's activities may shift with weather and tides.

Overnight in Tortuguero.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 4 Tortuguero - Ecotermales Hot Springs - Arenal/La Fortuna Area

An early breakfast and a boat ride reunite us with our land transport, and we continue by road through sugar cane country, a crop grown here since colonial times, toward La Fortuna and Arenal.

We stop at Ecotermales Hot Springs, just outside Arenal's designated risk zones, where a geothermally heated river feeds a series of pools at different temperatures, each one a reminder of what is happening underground nearby.

Arenal itself rises 1,633 m/5,360 ft in a near-perfect cone, a shape that comes from being geologically young, only about 7,000 years old.

From 1968 to 2010 it was one of the most active volcanoes on Earth, throwing regular lava flows and explosions that reshaped the surrounding farmland more than once. Since December 2010 it has been quiet, still venting gas but producing no lava.

It is our first close look at Costa Rica's volcanic spine, not dead, just resting. Weather permitting, we get a clear view of it this evening from La Fortuna, the small town that grew up in its shadow.

Overnight at Arenal/La Fortuna.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Arenal - Monteverde Cloud Forest

Today's drive to Monteverde runs about four hours, the last stretch on unpaved roads that climb into the mountains, rough enough that they have done as much as any park boundary to keep this area undeveloped.

Monteverde's cloud forest exists because trade winds carrying Caribbean moisture hit the continental divide here and are forced upward, cooling into the mist that keeps this side of the mountains wet even in the dry season.

That constant damp supports an unusual amount of life growing on other life: over 420 orchid species and 200 types of fern live as epiphytes, drawing what they need from rain and air rather than soil.

Established in 1972 by a small community of Quaker settlers and local conservationists, the reserve now protects more than 10,000 hectares and over 400 bird species, including the resplendent quetzal, whose iridescent tail feathers make it one of the most sought-after sightings in Central America.

Howler monkeys, capuchins and coatis are common; pumas and jaguars exist here too, though rarely seen.

This afternoon we visit the Butterfly Garden, a research facility raising native species to study pollination and how sensitive they are to a changing climate.

Overnight in Monteverde.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Monteverde Cloud Forest

A local naturalist guide leads this morning's walk through the reserve, adjusting the route to the weather and the group.

Beyond the quetzal and hummingbirds, listen for the three-wattled bellbird, whose call carries well beyond where the bird itself is visible, and watch for any of the roughly 500 butterfly species that call Monteverde home.

This afternoon is free, or you may choose an optional canopy walk: suspension bridges up to 170 m/560 ft long and 40 m/130 ft above the forest floor.

Optional: at an easy pace the full canopy walk takes about 90 minutes and gives a rare look at the forest from the inside rather than below it; your Tour Leader can help arrange it and confirm current pricing.

NOTE: cloud forests earn their name; expect wind, mist and rain even in the dry season, so waterproof layers are essential.

Overnight at Monteverde.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Monteverde - San Jose

We return by road to San Jose today.*

If time allows before dinner, the Gold Museum downtown is worth the stop, generally regarded as the country's best, with thousands of pieces of pre-Columbian gold work on display (last entry 16:30).

* Today's transfer will not be accompanied by your Tour Leader, who continues on with travellers who chose the longer routing. You will be dropped off at the hotel by your local driver/guide in time for an included evening meal at the hotel.

Overnight in San Jose.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Depart

We depart from San Jose, from a country where nearly everything we saw traced back to the ground itself -- a cone still cooling at Arenal, a cloud forest fed by the mountains that made it and a canal system that has carried people and cargo since long before any of us arrived. Buen viaje!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast