Tour Code
CR2

ADVENTURESABROAD

COSTA RICA & NICARAGUA

Coastal Wonders, Cloud Forest, Lakes & Volcanoes

14 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 - Crocodile Safari - Quepos

Today we leave the mountains for the Pacific, heading south toward Quepos, gateway to Manuel Antonio National Park. We break the drive with a boat excursion on the Tarcoles River, the Jungle River & Crocodile Adventure, home to one of Central America's largest crocodile populations.

These American crocodiles, some reaching 4-5 m/13-16 ft, split off from alligators millions of years ago and are equally at home in fresh and salt water. Expect to see several sunning on the mudbanks.

Scarlet macaws, which mate for life, are among the more than 50 bird species along the river, a population that nearly disappeared here before conservation work brought it back.

NOTE: high tides occasionally affect this excursion.

Continuing south, we find a coast that runs drier and more developed than the Caribbean side, with more than ten national parks along its length. Quepos began as a banana port in the 1930s under the United Fruit Company. When disease ended that trade, African oil palm took its place, and today it is tourism that keeps the town running, set on a narrow strip between ocean and forested hills.

Overnight near Quepos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Manuel Antonio National Park

This morning we walk Manuel Antonio National Park, one of Costa Rica's smallest parks at just 683 hectares but among its richest, protecting one of the last stretches of primary forest on this coast that still runs right down to the sand.

We are likely to see all three of the park's resident monkeys: howlers, capuchins and the endangered Central American squirrel monkey, found nowhere else in the country. Iguanas over 1 m/3 ft long sun themselves on branches overhead, unbothered by the trail beneath them.

The park holds four distinct beaches, from Espadilla Sur, shaded by forest to the high-tide line, to Puerto Escondido, the most remote, reachable only over a rocky point.

Offshore, modest coral formations draw parrotfish and angelfish for anyone who wants to snorkel, while pelicans dive through the surf and frigate birds circle above on wingspans over 2 m/6.5 ft. After the guided portion, you are welcome to keep exploring on your own and take a taxi back when ready.

Overnight near Quepos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Quepos - Rincon de la Vieja

We head north on the Pan-American Highway toward Rincon de la Vieja, with our river excursion already behind us.

We continue inland to Rincon de la Vieja National Park, established in 1973 around a cluster of six volcanic peaks and the 32 rivers they feed. This is where the ground starts talking again: fumaroles, boiling mud pots and hot springs across the park have drawn comparisons to Yellowstone.

NOTE: this is one of the longer driving days of the tour.

Overnight near Rincon de la Vieja.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Rincon de la Vieja National Park

This morning's hike follows the Las Pailas Trail directly into the volcanic activity we glimpsed yesterday, through cloud forest and out onto open slopes where fumaroles hiss and mud pots bubble in shades of grey, some hot enough to scald.

The mechanism is straightforward: rainwater sinks underground, heats near the magma below and rises back to the surface here as steam and mud, a cycle that has run continuously since long before anyone was here to name it.

NOTE: the trail has moderate to challenging sections, with roots and uneven, sometimes steep ground; talk to your Tour Leader about your fitness level beforehand.

Wildlife along the way includes coatis, agoutis, armadillos and, less predictably, capuchins and howler monkeys, while the birdlife around the lodge grounds is equally rewarding.

This afternoon is free for optional river tubing, horseback riding, or simply soaking in a natural hot spring warmed by the same system we just walked over.

Rincon de la Vieja closes out Costa Rica's run of volcanoes, from Arenal's cone to these steaming vents, a reminder of how much of this small country still sits on active ground.

Overnight near Rincon de la Vieja National Park.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Rincon de la Vieja, Costa Rica - Granada, Nicaragua

We cross into Nicaragua today and continue to Granada. The country takes its name from the Nicarao people who once lived along these lakeshores, combined with the Spanish word for water, a fitting name for a nation built around its two great lakes.

Granada, founded in 1524, is among the oldest European-founded cities still standing in the Americas, set on Lake Nicaragua's shore where colonial-era traders once moved goods overland to the Pacific after crossing from the Caribbean by river and lake.

That wealth made Granada worth destroying. In 1856, American adventurer William Walker, briefly self-declared president of Nicaragua, ordered the city burned rather than surrender it to his rivals; a plaque near the ruins still reads Aqui fue Granada, here was Granada.

The Cathedral we see this afternoon was rebuilt after that fire, its yellow dome now the city's defining silhouette, while La Merced's bell

tower, spared the worst of the damage, still gives the best rooftop view over the lake.

NOTE: please have your passport ready for the border crossing.

Overnight in Granada.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Granada: Ometepe Island Excursion

Today we visit Ometepe, an island whose name means two hills in Nahuatl, an accurate description of two volcanoes joined by a narrow isthmus into one hourglass-shaped island in the middle of Lake Nicaragua.

Concepcion, the larger and still active of the pair, rises 1,610 m/5,280 ft and last produced ash in December 2007. Maderas, its dormant twin, reaches 1,394 m/4,570 ft and carries its own small crater lake at the summit, a quieter echo of what Concepcion is still doing.

The ferry crossing takes about 90 minutes, over water that is, improbably, home to bull sharks, the only large freshwater lake in the world where they are found, a population that once swam up from the Caribbean before damming largely closed that route.

On the island we see petroglyphs carved into boulders long before the Spanish arrived, their spirals and figures still debated by researchers, and stop for lunch at Santo Domingo Beach, right on the isthmus between the two volcanoes, before exploring the port town of Moyogalpa.

NOTE: this is a genuine full-day outing; talk to your Tour Leader about the alternative of a day at leisure in Granada.

Overnight in Granada.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 13 Granada - Masaya Volcano National Park - Managua: City Tour

On the way to Managua we stop at Masaya Volcano National Park, where the Santiago crater has erupted often enough through recorded history that Spanish colonists once took its glowing lava lake for a mouth of hell and planted a cross at the rim to try to seal it.

The volcano still vents sulphur dioxide today, and conditions permitting, we can look straight into the crater, which sometimes glows red after dark.

From there we visit Laguna de Apoyo, proof that not every crater stays angry: this one, blown out some 23,000 years ago, simply filled with water, reaching depths of 200 m/660 ft and staying a geothermally warm 26 degrees C/79 degrees F year-round, with its own microclimate and endemic fish.

In Managua, the Old Cathedral stands deliberately unrepaired, a memorial to the 1972 earthquake that killed an estimated 10,000 to 20,000 people and levelled much of the city centre.

We also see the Presidential House, the National Palace of Culture and the newer Metropolitan Cathedral, completed in 1993 with a dome that breaks sharply from traditional design.

Overnight in Managua.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Departure

We depart from Managua, having followed the same underground fire from Arenal's cooling cone to Rincon de la Vieja's steaming vents, through Ometepe's twin peaks to Masaya's glowing crater and Laguna de Apoyo's quiet lake, one country's volcanoes telling four very

different stories. Buen viaje!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast