

COSTA RICA & NICARAGUA

Coastal Wonders, Cloud Forest, Lakes & Volcanoes

14 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.

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 - Quepos

This morning we descend from the mountains to the Pacific coast and continue southward to Quepos, gateway to Manuel Antonio National Park. The Pacific coast differs markedly from the Caribbean side — less humid, with a more pronounced dry season, and more accessible, resulting in greater tourism development.

The Pacific coast includes over ten national parks and numerous reserves protecting diverse ecosystems: tropical dry forests in the north (where trees lose leaves during the dry season), transitioning to rainforest in the south, plus mangroves, wetlands, and coral reefs. These protected areas support populations of howler monkeys, white-faced capuchins, spider monkeys, and numerous bird species.

Quepos began as a banana port in the 1930s when the United Fruit Company established operations here. After banana cultivation declined due to disease, African oil palm became the primary crop. Today tourism dominates the local economy. The town sits at the northern end of a narrow coastal strip between the ocean and steep forested hills, with Manuel Antonio National Park occupying the peninsula south of town.

The region's beaches are protected by headlands that create calm bays suitable for swimming, unlike some Pacific coast areas where strong currents and waves make ocean swimming dangerous. The combination of accessible beaches, nearby rainforest, and abundant wildlife makes this one of Costa Rica's most visited areas.

Overnight near Quepos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Manuel Antonio National Park

This morning we walk through Manuel Antonio National Park, one of Costa Rica's smallest national parks at only 683 hectares (1,687 acres), yet one of its most biodiverse. The park's size belies its importance – it protects one of the few remaining primary forests on Costa Rica's Pacific coast that extends to the ocean, creating habitat for species that require both forest and coastal environments.

We follow forest trails and walk along white sand beaches, likely encountering several of the park's three resident monkey species: howler monkeys, whose calls carry through the forest; white-faced capuchins, known for their intelligence and curiosity; and endangered Central American squirrel monkeys, which exist only in this region of Costa Rica. Green iguanas, some exceeding one metre (three feet) in length, sun themselves on branches, while various crab species scuttle along the beaches.

The park contains four beaches. Playa Espadilla Sur lies just inside the park entrance, where forest grows to the high-tide mark, providing rare shade on a tropical beach. Playa Manuel Antonio, more sheltered and calm, offers good swimming conditions. Playa Escondido features tidal pools where fish, sea urchins, and crabs become temporarily stranded between tides. Playa Puerto Escondido, the park's most remote beach, requires walking over a rocky promontory.

The waters offshore host coral formations, though not as extensive as Caribbean reefs. Snorkelling reveals tropical fish species, including parrotfish, angelfish, and pufferfish. Brown pelicans dive for fish just beyond the surf, while frigate birds soar overhead on two-metre (six-foot) wingspans.

After our guided walk, you may continue exploring the park independently, returning to the hotel by taxi when ready.

Overnight near Quepos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Quepos - Crocodile Safari - Rincon de la Vieja

Today we travel north on the Pan-American Highway toward Rincon de la Vieja National Park. En route we enjoy a boat excursion on the Tarcoles River, one of Costa Rica's most important wetland ecosystems and home to one of Central America's largest crocodile populations.

The Tarcoles River attracts wildlife because it drains agricultural lands in the Central Valley, carrying nutrients that support fish populations, which in turn attract crocodiles and wading birds. American crocodiles here can reach 4-5 metres (13-16 feet) in length, though larger individuals exist. These reptiles, which diverged from alligators millions of years ago, inhabit both freshwater and saltwater, and can be seen basking on mudbanks or floating motionless in the river.

Over 50 bird species frequent the river, including the scarlet macaw, Costa Rica's largest parrot. Scarlet macaws, which mate for life and can live over 50 years, nearly disappeared from this region due to habitat loss and pet trade, but conservation efforts have helped recover populations. Roseate spoonbills, wood storks, and various heron species wade in the shallows, while frigate birds patrol overhead. The boat also passes through Estero Guacalillo, an extensive mangrove system containing four mangrove species, each adapted to different salinity levels.

NOTE: Occasionally high tides may affect this visit.

We continue to Rincon de la Vieja National Park, established in 1973 to protect the area around two volcanoes: Rincon de la Vieja (1,916 metres/6,286 feet) and Santa Maria (1,916 metres/6,286 feet). The park encompasses six volcanic peaks and 32 rivers and streams fed by the volcanoes. Geothermal activity manifests in fumaroles, boiling mud pots, and hot springs, earning comparisons to Yellowstone National Park. The Vrizuela vulcanicola, a bromeliad species, exists only in this park and nowhere else on Earth.

Overnight near Rincon de la Vieja.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Rincon de la Vieja National Park

This morning we hike the Las Pailas Trail to observe volcanic features. The trail involves moderate to challenging terrain – undulating paths,

uneven surfaces, exposed roots, and some steep sections. Please discuss your fitness level and any concerns with your Tour Leader, who can advise whether the hike suits your abilities.

The trail passes through cloud forest before emerging onto open slopes with expansive views. Volcanic activity is evident throughout: fumaroles release sulphurous steam, mud pots bubble and plop as gases escape from beneath, and thermal streams flow hot enough to scald. The mud's grey colour comes from volcanic clay; its temperature can exceed 90°C (194°F). The geothermal features result from rainwater seeping underground, heating as it approaches magma chambers, then rising back to the surface.

The forest along the trail shelters wildlife including coatis, agoutis, armadillos, and occasionally white-faced capuchins and howler monkeys. Bird species include parrots, trogons, motmots, and various hummingbirds. The volcanic soil supports unusual plant adaptations, including species that tolerate the sulphuric compounds and high temperatures near geothermal features.

This afternoon you may continue exploring on your own, participate in optional activities such as river tubing or horseback riding, or soak in natural hot springs. Your accommodation's grounds attract numerous bird species — the combination of forest, open areas, and water creates diverse habitat that supports over 300 species recorded in the area.

Overnight near Rincon de la Vieja National Park.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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

Today we continue north to Granada, Nicaragua, crossing the international border (have your passports ready). Nicaragua is Central America's largest country by area (130,373 square kilometres/50,336 square miles) yet has relatively low population density compared to its neighbours.

The country's name derives from "Nicaro," referring to the Nahuatl-speaking Nicarao people who inhabited the shores of Lago de Nicaragua before Spanish conquest, combined with the Spanish word "agua" (water), referencing the large lakes Lago de Nicaragua (also called Cocibolca) and Lago de Managua (Xolotlan). At the time of conquest, "Nicaragua" specifically denoted the narrow strip of land between Lake Nicaragua and the Pacific Ocean — a lowland corridor that has long been proposed as a canal route to compete with Panama.

Granada, founded in 1524, ranks among the oldest continuously inhabited cities established by Europeans in the Americas. Set on the northwestern shore of Lake Nicaragua (the largest lake in Central America at 8,264 square kilometres/3,191 square miles), Granada became wealthy through trade — goods traveled from the Caribbean up the San Juan River, crossed Lake Nicaragua to Granada, then moved overland to the Pacific for shipment to South America and beyond.

Upon arrival we explore Granada before dinner. The Fortaleza La Pólvora, built in 1749, served as a gunpowder storage facility and defensive position. Several churches display Spanish colonial architecture: La Iglesia de Xalteva (1534), La Iglesia de la Merced (1781-1783), whose bell tower offers city views, and the Cathedral, which has been rebuilt multiple times after fires and wars, most recently completed in 1915. Plaza Colón, the main square, remains the city's social centre. The Convento de San Francisco, built in 1529, now houses a museum containing pre-Columbian stone statues with human and animal forms created by indigenous people between 800 and 1200 AD.

Overnight in Granada.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Granada: Ometepe Island Excursion

Today we visit Ometepe Island in Lake Nicaragua. The name "Ometepe" comes from Nahuatl words meaning "two hills," describing the island's distinctive profile: two volcanoes connected by a low isthmus forming an hourglass shape. The island measures 276 square kilometres (107 square miles).

The two volcanoes, Concepción and Maderas, dominate the landscape. Concepción, the larger and more active, rises 1,610 metres (5,282 feet) and maintains a nearly perfect cone shape. The volcano remains active, with its most recent significant eruption occurring in December 2007, producing ash clouds and minor explosions. Maderas, dormant for centuries, reaches 1,394 metres (4,573 feet) and hosts a small crater lake at its summit.

After driving along the southern shore of Lake Nicaragua to the ferry dock, we board the boat for the 1.5-hour crossing. Lake Nicaragua is the only large freshwater lake in the world that hosts bull sharks — these sharks adapted to freshwater and once swam up the San Juan River from the Caribbean, though damming has largely ended this migration.

On the island we tour sites including ancient petroglyphs carved into boulders by indigenous people centuries before Spanish arrival. The symbols — spirals, human figures, and geometric patterns — have been interpreted as relating to fertility, astronomy, and territorial markers, though their exact meanings remain debated.

For lunch (included today instead of dinner), we stop at Santo Domingo Beach on the isthmus connecting the two volcanoes. We also explore Moyogalpa, the main port town, before taking the ferry back to the mainland and driving to Granada.

Overnight in Granada (dinner on your own this evening).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

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

Today we travel to Managua with a stop at Masaya Volcano National Park. The park encompasses two volcanoes (Masaya and Nindirí) and five craters. Masaya Volcano has erupted periodically throughout recorded history, with significant eruptions in 1670 and 1772. Spanish colonists considered the volcano's lava lake a manifestation of hell and erected a cross at the crater rim in an attempt to exorcise what they perceived as evil.

The volcano remains active, continuously emitting sulphur dioxide and other volcanic gases. Visitors can approach the Santiago crater rim (depending on gas emissions and safety conditions at the time of visit) to peer into the crater, which sometimes glows red at night from the lava lake far below. The surrounding landscape bears evidence of past eruptions — volcanic rock and ash cover large areas where specialized vegetation has gradually reestablished itself.

We also stop at Laguna de Apoyo, a volcanic crater lake 6 kilometres (3.7 miles) in diameter, formed approximately 23,000 years ago by a massive eruption. The lake reaches depths of 200 metres (656 feet), and its water maintains a consistent warm temperature of about 26°C (79°F) year-round due to geothermal heating. The crater's steep walls create a microclimate that supports species found nowhere else, including several endemic fish species.

In Managua, we visit historical sites including the Old Cathedral, severely damaged by the 1972 earthquake that destroyed much of the city centre and killed an estimated 10,000-20,000 people. The cathedral has remained in ruins, both as a memorial and due to structural instability. We see the Presidential House, the National Palace of Culture (which now houses the National Museum), and the waterfront along Lake Managua. We stop for photos at the new Metropolitan Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, completed in 1993, whose dome design represents a departure from traditional cathedral architecture.

Overnight in Managua.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Departure

Departure from Managua.

BUEN VIAJE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast