

COSTA RICA & NICARAGUA

Coastal Wonders, Cloud Forest, Lakes & Volcanoes

14 days

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Day 1 Arrival in San Jose

Today we arrive in San Jose, Costa Rica.

San Jose, the capital of Costa Rica, is on a plateau in the Central Valley at 1200 m (3,700 ft), ringed by lush green mountains and valleys. The population of this city is probably half of the whole country! The main downtown area is a bustling collection of well-laid-out streets filled with bustling traffic and lined with eclectic, historic architecture. On the surface, it is a gritty downtown area, but you'll also find friendly people, quirky spots, and the historic side of San Jose which might just change your initial impression.

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 Carillo National Park, one of Costa Rica's largest. If season/harvest time permits, we will visit a working banana plantation and then pass through a region known for its cocoa production. We then board our riverboat* and spend the afternoon journeying through myriad interconnecting rivers and canals that take us finally to the Caribbean coast and Tortuguero Park.

The park is a water thoroughfare which is a 160 km (100 mile) stretch of natural rivers, lagoons and estuaries, and connecting man-made waterways that run almost to the Nicaraguan border. The canal is the main "highway" of the northern coastal region, complete with directional signs and branches from the main trunk route.

As we go along the canal, keep a keen lookout for views of pastel-coloured toucans and monkeys of various type; if we're lucky, a lazy sloth hanging from a branch, and maybe a coati or two roaming the forest. Stands of mangroves and water hyacinth appear here and there. Scattered along the way are people, too -- fishers and farmers whose dugouts serve all the purposes of pickup trucks elsewhere. Mostly the banks remain wild, and the calls of monkeys and whistles of birds predominate over the noises of humans.

* We strongly recommend that travellers bring a smaller bag to take to Tortuguero due to limited space on the boat and the lack of personnel to help you with baggage. Your luggage will be securely stored until we are reunited with it upon departure from Tortuguero.

Overnight in Tortuguero.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 3 Tortuguero: Forest Walk & Village

Tortuguero Park is a fascinating place to explore. An early morning boat ride offers an opportunity to observe an awakening coastal rain forest full of lush vegetation and unique bird life.

After lunch we visit the village of Tortuguero accessible only by river boat; you may choose to walk on the Caribbean beach where several turtle species lay their eggs each year. We will visit the Tortuguero Museum with its excellent displays pertaining to the ecology of the area and an informative video presentation specific to turtle conservation in Tortuguero and the entire Caribbean region (the Green Sea and Hawksbill turtles' nesting season runs from July to October with the peak in August, and the Leatherback turtles nest from February to April. It is possible to see individual turtles at any time of the year).

NOTE: The exact order of our activities in Tortuguero may vary depending on weather and other variables.

Overnight in Tortuguero.

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

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

After an early breakfast we travel by boat 1½-hour to reunite with our land transport and then continue by road to the La Fortuna/Arenal area.

We travel through rolling hills covered with sugar cane fields to overnight near Arenal Volcano. We make a stop at the Baldi Hotsprings (located near Arenal and outside the Risk Zones established by the National Prevention of Risks and Emergency Commission). Here a geothermally-heated river flows through beautifully landscaped grounds featuring many plant and tree species and great birdlife. We will have time to relax in or around the various pools (bring a towel). The springs feature several hot pools with different temperatures fed by individual springs and three swim-up bars.

This evening (weather & volcanic activity permitting) we can view the volcano.

Overnight at Arenal/La Fortuna.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Arenal - Monteverde Cloud Forest

Today we travel through a rustic rural countryside to the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve area (+/- 4 hours).

Covered in a mantle of moss, ferns and orchids, this private reserve is home to over 400 species of birds and a great number of animals. The forest is created by the winds, particular temperature and moisture conditions, and mountainous topography which combine during the dry season to hold a steady cloud cover along the continental divide. The rains and the moisture in the air nourish trees and plants rooted in the ground, as well as many plants that live at the upper levels of the forest, and take their nutrients directly from the mist and dust that pass through the air. The result is an enchanted fairy-tale environment where trees are laden with orchids, bromeliads, mosses and ferns that obscure their branches, where the moisture and mild temperatures and sunlight filtered by the forest canopy encourage the exuberance of begonias, heliconias, philodendron and many other tropical plants in every available space on the ground.

This afternoon we have a guided tour of the "Butterfly Garden" where butterflies and other endemic insects are raised and protected in a controlled environment allowing scientists to study them -- their place in the food chain and their response to things like increased pollution and climate change.

Overnight in Monteverde.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Monteverde Cloud Forest

We have a full morning exploring the cloud forest reserve with the help of a local naturalist guide. There is more to the forest than the trees and lesser plants. Of over 320 bird species, the most notable is the quetzal with its long arc of tail feathers. Assorted trogons in addition to the quetzal inhabit the reserve, along with more than 50 varieties of hummingbird. About 500 kinds of butterfly are found at Monteverde. Among the more than 100 mammalian species are howler, white-faced and spider monkeys, coatis and their cousins, raccoons; as well as the rarely observed pumas, ocelots, jaguars, tapirs, and kinkajous.

This afternoon you may choose to go on an optional "Canopy Walk" excursion, located within the cloud forest. Suspension foot-bridges are strung across deep gorges allowing one to get a bird's eye view of the forest from a totally different perspective than we experienced this morning. At a leisurely pace, one can complete this easy and fascinating walk in about 90 minutes. Your Tour Leader can help you plan this activity (your Tour Leader will advise re the current price while on tour).

REMEMBER: This can be a wet and windy place by definition; you should be prepared for varied conditions.

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Overnight at Monteverde.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Monteverde - Quepos

This morning we descend from the interior mountains to the Pacific Coast and continue southward to the town of Quepos, gateway for the Manuel Antonio National Park, an unspoiled haven of natural beauty on the shores of the Pacific.

The Pacific coast of Costa Rica is more developed than the Caribbean coast, so dozens of charming beach towns line the way. The Pacific coast is also home to more than 10 national parks and many other reserves, wildlife refuges, tropical dry forests, rainforests, mangroves, wetlands and coral reefs. These parks offer great opportunities for some unique wildlife encounters, such as howler monkeys, white-faced capuchin, and spider monkey, both inside and outside the parks and reserves.

Nestled along the picturesque Pacific coast of Costa Rica, Quepos serves as the perfect starting point to explore Manuel Antonio National Park. With its walkable streets and relaxed vibe, this is a perfect locale for travellers seeking an authentic experience in a tropical setting.

Overnight near Quepos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Manuel Antonio National Park

This morning we enjoy a leisurely walk through part of Manuel Antonio Park. While strolling the forest trails and the white sand beaches, we'll likely encounter monkeys, iguanas, sea creatures and bird life of amazing variety. After our morning walk, you may like to continue to explore the park and return to the hotel by taxi on your own.

Manuel Antonio National Park is an area of sand curving around a bay strewn with islands of rock, and shaded by green bordering forests. All are back-dropped by dramatic cliffs. Manuel Antonio beach is one of the few places in Costa Rica where unspoiled primary forest grows right to the high-tide mark, allowing visitors to bathe at times in the shade.

South Espadilla is the northernmost of the park's beaches, followed by calmer Manuel Antonio beach, offshore of which are some coral spots. Third Beach has tidal pools where brightly coloured fish and eels are temporarily stranded. Last is Puerto Escondido, access to which is made difficult by the bordering rocky promontory.

Overnight near Quepos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Quepos - Crocodile Safari - Rincon de la Vieja

Today we head north again on the Pan-American Highway and travel to Rincon de la Vieja National Park. En route we'll enjoy an informative crocodile safari.*

The safari provides visitors with an exciting opportunity to enjoy one of Costa Rica's most beautiful ecosystems. The tour takes place along the Tarcoles River and is accompanied by a bilingual guide, who will share interesting information and spot an assortment of critters. Most notably, the Tarcoles River is known for its abundance of crocodiles, some of which can grow up to 15 ft in length. Other animal sightings include over 50 species of bird -- including the rare scarlet macaw -- as well as an assortment of iguanas and lizards. Heading downstream, the boat will also pass through Estero Guacalillo, an extensive mangrove system which houses four different types of mangrove trees.

Known for its stunning diversity of flora and fauna, Rincon is home to two volcanoes, the Rincon de la Vieja and the Santa Maria, as well as six different volcanic peaks and thirty two rivers and streams. The park has small geysers, bubbling mud pots and mineral hot springs that have earned it the name, "Costa Rica's Yellowstone". One more thing that is unique from Rincon de la Vieja Volcano is the Vrizea Vulcanicola

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bromeliad, endemic to this park and Costa Rica.

* Occasionally this visit may be impacted by high tides.

Overnight near Rincon de la Vieja.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Rincon de la Vieja National Park

We will have a full morning with a somewhat CHALLENGING walk (undulating, uneven terrain -- talk to your Tour Leader re your suitability) along Las Pailas Trail to view the best volcanic activity you can see in the country. The trail takes us through cloud forest, open grassy slopes and near a wide array of volcanic features including impressive boiling mud pots, fumaroles, and thermal streams.

This afternoon you can continue your on-foot exploration on your own or take part in a number of optional activities, including river tubing, horseback riding and/or hot springs soaking. Or you can simply relax and enjoy the birdsong and magnificent views.

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 (have your passports handy!).

The country of Nicaragua derives its name from Nicaro, the name of the Nahuatl-speaking tribe which inhabited the shores of Lago de Nicaragua before the Spanish conquest of the Americas, and the Spanish word Agua, meaning water, due to the presence of the large lakes Lago de Nicaragua (Cocibolca) and Lago de Managua (Xolotlan), as well as lagoons and rivers in the region. At the time of the Spanish conquest, Nicaragua was the name given to the narrow strip of land between Lake Nicaragua and the Pacific Ocean. This is the largest yet most sparsely populated country in Central America.

Granada is set by Lago Nicaragua and is one of the most beautiful cities in Central America. Countless historical buildings share the city's cobblestone streets with elegant homes and tranquil parks, an urban elegance complemented by nearby natural attractions.

Upon arrival you'll be able to explore Granada before our evening meal. Of interest are the Fort La Polvora, Xalteva Church, Xaltera walls, and the church La Merced. A walk through the Main Square Colon takes you to the Cathedral, the Casa de los Leones, and the old Convent of San Francisco, where you can admire the impressive stone-carved statues with animal and human form.

Overnight in Granada.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Granada: Ometepe Island Excursion

Today we will enjoy an excursion to Nicaragua's famous Ometepe Island, one of the most impressive sights in Central America. The name Ometepe means 'two hills' in the native Nahuatl language. The island measures 276 square kilometers and it houses two majestic volcanoes connected through a small strip of land. The two volcanoes, Concepcion and Maderas, are joined by a low isthmus to form one island in the shape of an hourglass. Concepcion Volcano is still active, and most recently erupted on December 5, 2007.

Ometepe is somewhat isolated from the rest of Nicaragua and therefore maintains its special mystery and charm. After driving along the southern shore of the lake to the boat dock, we will board the ferry for the 1.5 hour ferry ride on Lake Nicaragua to Ometepe Island where we will enjoy a sightseeing tour of the island, including some petroglyphs.

For lunch (included today instead of dinner) we will make a break at Santo Domingo Beach, and then we will explore the harbour town of

Moyogalpa. At the end of our day we will then travel by ferry back to the shore where we begin our drive back 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 travel to Managua and have a city tour on arrival.

En route we stop at the Masaya Volcano National Park, which comprises two volcanoes and five craters (our program here may be impacted by volcanic activity levels at the time of our visit). The volcanoes have erupted several times in history, and were feared by both the indigenous people and the Spanish conquerors. The eruptions have had a dramatic impact on the surroundings. Rocks and volcanic ashes still cover the area surrounding the volcanoes. The nature is rough yet peaceful. Different types of vegetation appeared after the eruptions. Visitors can peek over the edge at the Masaya Volcano and look into the impressive crater, which is continuously emitting smoke and sulphur gases. We also stop at Laguna de Apoyo, the largest crater lagoon in Central America at 6 km across.

In Managua, we will visit historical sites such as the Old Cathedral, destroyed by the earthquake of 1972; the Presidential House, the National Palace of Culture, the waterfront, and the National Museum. We also stop for a photo at the new Metropolitan Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception of Mary.

Overnight in Managua.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Departure

Departure from Managua.

BUEN VIAJE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast