



Costa Rica Travel Tips

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Chapter 1

New Chapter

Costa Rica Travel Tips

If you're planning a trip to Costa Rica, there's more to just walking into a travel agency and buying a ticket. But why start with a travel agent? Most of us spend a lot of time and money on our holidays, yet rarely do we take the trouble to plan them properly. We almost invariably forget to do something beforehand or fail to pack something important. Often as not, we will not get to see and do all the things that we wanted to, simply because of a lack of planning.

This little book can become your guide! The facts contained in it will help to reinforce your background knowledge of Costa Rica, and could very well help you to determine what to do, and where to go when you ultimately get there! Thanks to the internet, travel discounts are widely available. However, if you don't know where to look, then you are likely paying 'retail prices' for travel related expenses to Costa Rica. The best travel discounts are constantly changing, so use the ebook and our web site resources to help research all your Costa Rica vacation plans and maximize your visit.

Also this ebook can help potential purchasers of property in Costa Rica, whether looking for investment property, income from vacation rentals, or a permanent retirement home. Looking for a dentist, how about getting that tummy tuck or knee replacement. Costa Rica has become world renown for their medical tourism and you can find the Doctors and retreats within our resources.

As exciting as traveling Costa Rica is, the really scary part is the prospect of returning home and telling your friends and family how your dream trip turned into your worst nightmare. All because you weren't prepared! Make no mistake... this ebook can help you with how to make the best decisions about your resort, hotel, condo, private vacation rental and destination within Costa Rica so you can actually experience memories that will last a lifetime. Within our resources also comes

video's that are educational describing volunteering, real estate investments strategies, accommodations including the topics covered in that specific category in greater detail, this publication is loaded with information that is a goldmine when it comes to discovering Costa Rica.

So let's get started!

Please refer to our Costa Rica frequently asked questions page for answers to your specific questions about Costa Rica

INTRODUCTION TO COSTA RICA

Costa Rica, the official title of which is the Republic of Costa Rica, translates into English as, literally, "Rich Coast" (which it was named by Christopher Columbus and his team of fellow explorers), and there could not be a more apposite description of this extraordinary place, a must see destination for any traveler. Whether you are a student backpacking your way across the world, a retiree taking time out to enjoy the finer things in life, or simply wanting to spend some time with your family while simultaneously giving them the holiday of a lifetime, Costa Rica is undoubtedly the place to be. First discovered by the Spanish early in the sixteenth century, it was first colonized in 1563, and remained a colony up until 1821, when Costa Rica was

truly born, becoming one of several Central American countries that jointly declared independence from Spain.

Costa Rica is the first country in the world to abolish its own army, one of the top countries of the Human Development Index (which ranks nations by their level of human development and is also used to imply whether the nation itself is developed or developing) in Latin America, the fifth in the world in terms of the 2008 Environmental Performance Index, Costa Rica is already planning to become the first carbon neutral country by 2021, and has good reason to be so forward thinking and environmentally conscious, with its natural habitats and landscape one of its most extraordinary and attractive features. With the extraordinary opportunities afforded by its unique environment (such as scuba diving, volcano climbing and windsurfing), together with its relaxed lifestyle, a lifestyle and attitude highly prized by the native Ticos (as the Costa Ricans call themselves), and the fact that its people have the longest lifespan of anywhere in Latin America, Costa Rica was ranked as being number one in the Happy Planet Index by the New Economics Foundation, and is regarded as the greenest country in the world. Costa Rican's laid back reputation is very well deserved too, relaxed even in the work place (you will very rarely see someone wearing a tie in Costa Rica, with dressing for comfort the main priority by far). Costa Rican's are happy to chat

about almost anything, but art, family, history and eco-tourism are always popular subjects to discuss with the locals.

Compared to other Latin America countries in particular, Costa Rica is a very prosperous place, with construction booming (especially along the coastline), a growing technology sector and ever-increasing success in the export industry. Ever wonder where Major League Baseballs are made? See our Costa Rica fun facts for more detail information and interesting tid-bits about Costa Rica.

Costa Rica is a democracy along the lines of the United States, with a population of around four and a half million people, almost a third of who live in the Central Valley, near to the capital city of San Jose. Other provinces beside the capital city are Alajuela, Cartago, Guanacaste, Heredia, Limon, and Puntarenas. It is the second to last nation in a series of small countries that together make up the isthmus of Central America. It is located at the center point between two oceans and two continents, where the geography caused by this coming together of land and water has created an area which contains within its relatively small size an astounding five percent of the bio-diversity of the entire world, with more than two hundred species of animal life, more than two thousand kinds of trees, over a thousand different types of orchids, and more than eight hundred separate species of ferns. The astonishing amount of wildly diverse animal and botanical life is contained in an area no larger than that of the state of West Virginia in the United States, only fifty nine hundred square kilometers. It has coastlines along both those oceans (the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea). The Caribbean coast is low, marshy, short, and straight, with wide lowlands and bordered by lagoons and mangrove swamps. The New York Times only recently described Costa Rica's Caribbean coast as "a world apart from the rest of the country. The pace is slower, the food is spicier, the tropical heat is more palpable, and the rhythmic lilt of patois and reggae music fills the air". The Pacific coast is more rugged terrain, with much narrower lowlands.

Costa Rica is a very civilized and progressive country, one of whose main foreign policy objectives is to foster human rights and sustainable development as means to securing growth and stability. Indeed, it has been noted on many occasions by foreign observers that Costa Rica's commitment to environmental sensitivity is one that is without parallel elsewhere in the world, with one whole quarter of their entire country having been set aside as national parks and other protected areas. This commitment has made Costa Rica

a haven for nature whose value cannot be underestimated.

Up until just a few years ago, Costa Rica's main industry was agriculture. This is no longer the case, however – now the main industry of Costa Rica is tourism, and this e-book will endeavor to both show the reader why this is the case and to encourage you to put Costa Rica atop your list of top travel destinations, and how to make the most of your time in the country if and when you do decide to visit there. The popularity of tourism in Costa Rica has been growing rapidly since the mid 1990s. Perhaps the first and in many ways one of the most important facts to establish about Costa Rica for the prospective tourist, is that Costa Rica is a very safe and politically stable holiday destination.

Violent crime is very low, and almost non-existent against foreign visitors to the region, with the most serious regular crimes committed against tourists being pick-pocketing and/or breaking into rental cars. It is easily the most visited nation in the region of Central America, with approximately two million foreign visitors coming to the country every year, most of whom come from either the United States, Canada or Europe. The most popular form of tourism is that which Costa Rica has been the undeniable pioneer in – eco-tourism, with animals and botanical miracles that are found in no other place on Earth, and which will be explored and explained more fully later in this guide.

Located in the tropics, Costa Rica has two distinct seasons – dry and rainy, with consistent temperatures (generally of the mild subtropical nature) year round yet which often differ vastly between regions due to the variance in elevation between the various territories. To put it in simpler terms, the higher you go, the colder it gets – and vice versa. The climate is another of Costa Rica's strongest selling points, with extremes of temperature (in either direction) a very rare, nay almost non-existent, occurrence. The dry season begins in late November, usually continuing on through to the middle of April, when the wet season gets underway, with the months of September and October usually being the wettest of all.

The beginning and end of the wet season are probably the most ideal months for tourists to plan their holidays, as there are usually less foreign visitors, the foliage is green and prices are generally lower, with mornings in the wet season often being particularly breathtaking and beautiful. The differences in temperature between the various regions explains the wildly different climates and attractions in various sections of Costa Rica, from the chilly cloud forests and mountain peaks of one region, to the hot, steamy jungles and fertile pastureland of others. Its

mountains consists of several ranges, with volcanoes (including the Arenal Volcano, which erupted as recently as 1968) and plateau areas. Costa Rica has a population of four to four and half million people. While there is a large white contingent, generally of Spanish ancestry, (around eighty five percent), it is a multi racial community with many people of black descent, as well significant numbers of Amerindian, Chinese, English, Dutch, French, Italian, Irish, Lebanese, Portuguese and a large Jewish community. There are also many expatriates from many foreign countries such as the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Germany and the Netherlands, as well as many others. The official language of Costa Rica is Spanish, so it would be helpful to brush up on the language, although the fact that English is taught in most private and even public schools means that you may be surprised by how easy communication is with the natives when you arrive in the country. Almost every community now has elementary and high schools and the country has a literacy rate of ninety six percent, one of the highest in the region. The constitution of Costa Rica guarantees a universal education, with attendance of both primary school compulsory, and both preschool and high school available to students free of charge. There are also both public and state universities.

Now that you know a little about Costa Rica, and have an interest in visiting this extraordinary country, we will go on to explore some of this nation's most popular tourist destinations and attractions.

ATTRACTIONS AND ACTIVITIES OF COSTA RICA

Costa Rica has an almost endless supply of attractions and activities for the tourist to enjoy. Be it the bustling activity of Costa Rica's capital city, San Jose, the exotic beauty of the nation's numerous national parks, or the extraordinary sights and sounds of the Monteverde Cloud Forest, Costa Rica has something for everyone. No visitor to this unique country will be disappointed by what they find available to discover there, and this chapter will endeavor to at least introduce some of these amazing attractions.

We will begin with the country's national parks system. For a country whose economy has become so intertwined with eco-tourism, it is not surprising that Costa Rica has an enormous and enchanting selection of such places to visit. Visit our Costa Rica map for locations of national parks and reserves.

NATIONAL PARKS OF COSTA RICA

ARENAL VOLCANO NATIONAL PARK

One of the most active volcanoes in the world today, Arenal Volcano

first erupted in 1968 and has been attracting an endless stream of tourists ever since. The park, located on the west side of the volcano, is part of the Arenal Conservation Area which runs across two hundred thousand hectares of the country's north. The volcano is the neighbor to Lake Arenal, site of the Lake Arenal Dam, Costa Rica's largest hydroelectricity project, and which runs year round activities such as fishing, kayaking, sail boating, windsurfing and several boat tours. The lake is a haven for bird lovers, with species such as aricaris, hummingbirds, kingfishers, toucans and woodpeckers all in abundance in the area. The park runs several tours to the volcano itself, in addition to numerous other attractions such as rafting tours and the famous Costa Rica hot springs. There is also a second volcano, Chato, located within the park, within whose crater lies a lagoon. Unlike Arenal, however, Chato is inactive and believed to have been so for around three and a half thousand years.

BARRA HONDA NATIONAL PARK

Barra Honda National Park, part of the Tempisque Conservation Area, is best known for its limestone caverns, created by water cutting a course through its small limestone mountains. There are more than forty such caverns, most in very good condition, with a network of hiking trails used to access them. There you will see some amazing calcareous formations including cave grapes, curtains, needles, pearls, roses, soda straws and terraces, in addition to the expected stalactites and stalagmites. The caves themselves range in depth from just a few feet to a staggering seven hundred and eighty feet (two hundred and forty meters). It is estimated that barely fifty percent of the caverns have actually so far been explored. While a somewhat secondary attraction to the astonishing caverns, Barra Honda National Park also features a protected tropical dry forest, which is one of the last such areas in the world.

POAS VOLCANO NATIONAL PARK

Poas Volcano National Park, one of the most visited protected areas in the whole of Costa Rica, features two massive craters at it's centre, one of which measures almost a mile in diameter and is nine hundred feet deep, featuring an average sized lagoon at its bottom, the other of which is a completely filled crater known as Botos Lagoon. One of the reasons for the popularity of the park is its close proximity to Costa Rica's capital city, San Jose, as well as the massive forest that surrounds the two craters. The park is home to four very different types of habitat, from a cloud forest to areas with little to no vegetation, to the forest, to an area of arrayans, and covers in its entirety an area of about sixteen thousand acres (around sixty five kilometers). The park is also home to the famous

La Paz waterfall, by far the most photographed waterfall in the whole of Costa Rica. Many bird species exist within the park, including the Clay-Colored Robin, tanagers, toucans and the Resplendent Quetzal, in addition to many different types of plant and animal life including the Poas Magnolia Tree and Bang's Mountain Squirrel.

BRAULIO CARRILLO NATIONAL PARK

Located only twenty kilometers northeast of San Jose, Braulio Carrillo National Park is one of the most rugged regions on the whole of Costa Rica, a mixture of towering volcanic mountains and a tropical rainforest and fauna and flora sanctuary that positively heaves with an abundance of tropical plants, waterfalls, trees and orchids. The national park has several different habitats within its parameters, including cloud forest and tropical wet, leading to a variety of different vegetation and wildlife, including caoba, caobilla, gavilan, manu and the oak, together with eagles, jaguars, ocelots, and the feared fer-de-lance snake, as well as the famous white-faced monkey .If you include the park on your travels, then you definitely have to take a trip on its Aerial Tram, which features twenty cable cars that enables visitors to take a trip through the forest and spot much flora and fauna that would not be visible from ground level. There are numerous rivers and an almost infinite number of waterfalls to be found within the park, too, as well as several inactive volcanoes including Barva, The Barva Lagoon (about seventy meters in diameter and filled with fresh water) and The Cache Negro.

COCOS ISLAND

This National Park is, as the name suggest, an island off the Pacific shore of Costa Rica itself, with a rectangular shape and a land mass of approximately two miles by five miles and a perimeter measuring just over twenty three kilometers. One of the key attractions of Cocos Island is its appeal to scuba divers, with a healthy population of large marine species in the deep waters surrounding the island, including dolphins, Hammerhead and whale sharks, mantas and marbled rays, giant moray eels, and sailfish, as well as the occasional large schools of Creole fish, green turtles, jacks, silver tip and silky sharks and tuna. Cocos Island is a World Heritage Site with over eighty seven different species of birds, including finch and flycatchers and the well known Cocos Island cuckoo. The island contains numerous rivers and waterfalls, many containing extraordinarily rare species of fresh fish, while the high altitude, verdant cloud forest, highly unusual for such a small island, gives Cocos Island an entirely unique eco-system all of its very own.

CAHUITA NATIONAL PARK

A National Park located in the Caribbean La Amistad Conservation Area of Costa Rica, situated on the south coast, around forty three kilometers away from Limon, Cahuita National Park contains an extraordinary fourteen kilometers worth of beach, shaded by lush forests, mangroves, marshlands and palm trees. There is a protected marine area which contains within it the Coral line Reefs, a nesting ground for sea turtles which is also a great favorite for scuba divers and snorkelers. The reef is estimated to have around thirty five different species of coral, forty four varieties of crustaceans and around one hundred and twenty three different types of fish, while on land the park contains numerous birds, including the green ibis, keel-billed toucans, the low swooping Swainson, the Central American curassow and the rufous kingfisher, as well as a multitude of animals including agoutis, armadillos, howler and capuchin monkeys, coatis, iguanas, pacas, raccoons, tree-dwelling sloths and tamanduas. The park contains within it around one thousand and sixty seven hectares of land.

CHIRRIPO NATIONAL PARK

A National Park located in the mid-section of Costa Rica's Talamanca Range, Chirripo National Park plays an important role in the nation's conservation efforts by protecting a large number of species from the fungi, insect, plant and animal kingdoms. Chirripo contains five different ecosystems within its borders, which encompass three Provinces within Costa Rica, from Cartago to Limon to the capital city of San Jose, including lower montane (areas located below the subalpine zone) wet forest, lowland tropical wet forest, montane wet forest, premontane tropical wet forest and subalpine wet forest. The park also contains a scientific research station, the Las Nubes Centre for Neotropical Conservation and Research, managed by Toronto's York University. The park contains over fifty thousand hectares of high-elevation land, featuring within it jaguars, tapirs and a large population of pumas, in addition to several hundred species of birds.

CORCOVADO NATIONAL PARK

A National Park on the Osa Peninsula on the South West of Costa Rica, Corcovado National Park has been described by National Geographic as "the most biologically intense place on Earth" and is widely regarded as the finest of all the biological reserves and national parks in Costa Rica, comprising an area across four hundred and twenty five kilometers of land. Corcovado features all four of the nation's monkey species, the the Mantled Howler, Geoffroy's Spider Monkey, the White-faced Capuchin and even the very rare Central American

Squirrel Monkey. That is not only the endangered species to be found within Corcovado, which is also one of the last places left in the world to play host to the scarce Happy Eagle and Baird's Tapir, and one of the last places in Central America to be home to the Jaguar, along with other large felines such as the Puma. Corcovado's lagoons and rivers are teeming with Bull Sharks, American Crocodiles and the Spectacled Caiman. There are at least thirteen different varieties of vegetation, included in the montane and cloud forest.

IRAZU VOLCANO NATIONAL PARK

Irazu Volcano Park covers two thousand, three hundred and nine hectares of land within its borders, composed of pristine montane forest, with a peak of four thousand, four hundred and thirty two meters high. Located at the eastern end of the Central Valley in the Central Volcanic Conservation Area of Costa Rica, the volcano after which the park is named remains active. While its last major eruption was over forty years ago in 1963, there are still intermittent smaller eruptions and lava streams occurring occasionally since that time. A reforestation attempt is focused on the park, attempting to rebuild the area that was affected by the eruptions, with alder, oaks, conifers and many other exotic plant and trees. Wildlife in the park includes armadillos, coyotes, foxes, hummingbirds, owls, rabbits, robins and squirrels, although the park's major attraction is the volcano, and particularly its two largest craters, the biggest of which is nine hundred feet, while the other, named Diego de la Haya, (around three hundred feet deep) features within it a beautiful lake that changes colour from emerald green to crimson red before your eyes.

There are a number of other National Parks, including La Amistad and Las Baulas National Marine Park, for which there simply isn't the space to cover here. What matters most is that if and when you decide to make Costa Rica your next holiday destination, there is a never ending world of natural delights waiting for you to discover.

MONTEVERDE CLOUD FOREST

The Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve is one of the cloud forests of Costa Rica (other examples include the Brauillo National Park, Irazu Volcano National Park, the Juan Castro Blanco National Park and Poas Volcano National Park). The cloud forests are one of the world's most unique environments, formed by a mixture of wind (trade winds from the Caribbean Sea which push moist air into the Cordillera Tilaran, where it is pushed upwards by the angle of the mountain ranges, resulting in excessive humidity which creates an environment perpetually filled with clouds and mist for about nine months of the year.

The Monteverde Cloud Forest is probably the most famous and possibly the finest example of the phenomenon, the region standing at an elevation of about five thousand feet and containing within its boundaries an astonishing wealth of botanical marvels, including four hundred different species of birds (around twenty one percent of which are long distance migratory birds which procreate in North America and either pass through or stay in Monteverde for the winter season), six hundred types of butterflies, three hundred varieties of orchids and two hundred kinds of ferns. This is in addition to more than five hundred types of trees, a hundred species of mammals and a hundred and twenty varieties of reptiles and amphibians. In total, there is something like two and half thousand different varieties of plant life within the reserve. Alas, what was possibly Monteverde's most famous amphibian species, the Golden Toad, became extinct in 1989. The Monteverde Cloud Forest is predominantly cool, misty and rainy, with sunlight barely getting a look in through the clouds, creating a wondrous environment with bromeliads growing on trees, ferns erupting from tree trunks and an abundance of wild orchids. Indeed, the Monteverde region is widely recognized as containing the largest number of orchids in the entire world, over five hundred known species, an amazing thirty four of which have been discovered in the reserve and are otherwise new to science itself!

The Monteverde reserve, named after the nearby town of Monteverde, covers over ten and a half thousand acres of land, including an outdoor hummingbird park (there are fifty species of them alone in Costa Rica) and an insectariums known as the 'Jewels of Costa Rica', which features an astounding array of insectoid life, including iridescent butterflies, alarmingly sized beetles and bugs with luminous 'headlights'. The reserve includes within its borders six separate 'zones', divided into distinctly different ecological categories, ninety percent of which are virgin forests. The Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve is currently being visited by more than seventy thousand tourists per year, and it is not difficult to see why. If you come to Costa Rica for a holiday, there is simply no way you cannot take a trip to the Monteverde Cloud Forest.

SAN JOSE

The capital city of is located in the nation's Central Valley and is a thriving metropolis filled with activities, landmarks and other attractions that are guaranteed to appeal to tourists. There are an endless array of fascinating historical landmarks including the National Theater of Costa Rica (which holds performances several times a week, including sessions by

the National Symphonic Orchestra), the Melico Salazar Theatre (which, while less elaborate than the National Theater nonetheless maintains a packed schedule of musical concerts, plays and recitals), Central Park and the La Sabana Metropolitan Park, the Cathedral and the Hotel Presidente, a four star hotel located in the downtown area which holds over a hundred rooms and is situated just meters away from many of the city's major

cultural and historical landmarks. The city also plays host to many excellent museums, including the Gold Museum which features gold artefacts from ancient Latin American civilizations, a natural history museum (the Museo de Ciencias Naturales La Salle), a National Centre of Arts and Culture (Centro Nacional de Arte y Cultura), children's museum (Museo de los Niños) and even a museum of popular culture (the Museo de Cultura Popular).

San Jose is not just about historical landmarks and museums, however – it is a thoroughly modern city filled with major expressions of art and architecture and a major centre for commerce. Indeed, for tourists interested in getting a look at good old-fashioned commercialism in Costa Rica, there are plenty of ways to spend your shopping dollar. Avenida Central is a major commercial and pedestrian thoroughfare, while San Pedro's Calle de la Amargura contains many bars, discos and restaurants, with relatively cheap prices for food and drinks. "Sand Live" is a famous inside/outside bar and large concert hall which stages numerous extreme metal and rock concerts. El Pueblo, meanwhile, is a highly diverse collection of more than fifty art galleries, shops, bars, clubs and restaurants. More family-friendly activities to enjoy in San Jose include the Lankester Botanical Gardens on the outskirts of the city, the Simon Bolivar Zoo which features a whole host of animals native to Costa Rica, including iguanas and the famous white-faced monkey, and Pueblo Antigua, a theme park modeled after the San Jose of the nineteenth century. Although San Jose is classified as being in the tropical rainforest zone, its elevation actually gives it a relatively mild temperature (usually ranging between fifteen and twenty eight degrees centigrade), as does the predominance of high winds, and even overseas tourists will find it a pleasant environment in which to spend their holiday time. In short, San Jose is an ideal tourist destination, and the perfect place to make your central point to begin your exploration of Costa Rica.

ADDITIONAL ATTRACTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

In addition to the capital city of San Jose and the obvious attractions of the many National Parks to be found within the region, Costa Rica also

has many other appealing destinations for the eager tourist to seek out and explore.

The resort town of Manuel Antonio, which sits near to the National Park of the same name, has many appealing characteristics all its own. The main road is covered with restaurants and upscale hotels, while there are many other more affordable accommodations on offer for those on a more limited budget. Often frequented by movie stars and the like, one of Manuel Antonio's must-see attractions is the novelty nightclub known as El Avion, which was actually constructed around an old C-123 aircraft, and is in actuality the sister plane of the one at the centre of the notorious Iran/Contra scandal from the 1980s.

The Costa Rican province of Puntarenas, located on the edge of the Central Pacific Ocean, features on its coast the city of Jaco, which boasts numerous discos, nightclubs, restaurants and shops, as well as some quite magnificent beaches, widely known for their consistent two to four meter (6 to 12 feet) surfs, that are ideal for any keen surfers who want to catch a wave or two in a foreign country. Just down the road in Hermosa the ISA Billabong surfing championships were held in July- August 2009. Another popular destination for surfers is Tamarindo, which once upon a time was a very well kept secret. Nowadays, of course, the secret is out, but while progress may have changed Tamarindo a little, providing it with numerous accommodations ranging from the simple to the simply decadent, from quaint motels to luxury villas and romantic spa lodges, it's more natural charms remain undiminished by its newfound popularity. The seven kilometer long white beaches are still there, as are the steep seaside hills, abundant flora and fauna and of course the excellent surf.

Over on the Caribbean coast meanwhile, lies the city of Limon, in the centre of which you will discover the fabulous open air market, and the very attractive Vargas Park, which is situated on the waterfront and contains many tropical flowers and tall palm trees, from which keen observers will be able to view sloths hanging from the branches.

When it comes to Costa Rica therefore, there is an almost endless list of places to visit, things to do, and natural wonders to explore.

HOW TO SAVE MONEY VISITING COSTA RICA

We know what you're thinking. "Costa Rica sounds lovely, and we'd love to go, but even if we can afford the airfare, we couldn't possibly afford to have a really good holiday there on our limited budget, right?" Wrong. You don't have to be an affluent retiree or a high-flying businessman to have a thoroughly enjoyable vacation in Costa Rica. An

ordinary family on an ordinary income can have the trip of a lifetime to this incredible country without breaking the bank, and this chapter will endeavor to provide a few ideas as to how this might be possible for you too.

Let's get started. The number one financial question for most tourists will of course be the price of airfares. This just takes a little bit of research and persistence. There are always great airfare packages available, it is just a matter of finding them. Subscribe to airline newsletters and bookmark discount airfare websites to keep yourself up to date with whatever new offers may be coming down the pipeline. There are plenty of online e-zines, sites such as www.bestfares.com and even printed material such as "Frommer's Costa Rica" or the Costa Rica edition of the popular "Lonely Planet" book series to check out. For a list of Costa Rica guides. Many of these outlets can also provide practical financial advice for when you have arrived in the country and want to enjoy your vacation without spending all your

holiday money on the first day. It should be noted that booking online often saves a little bit of money, and it is advertised to book your vacation as early as possible as the closer you leave it to the flight date, the more expensive it usually is. Be aware of the fact that there is a difference (and often not an inconsiderable one) between the price of direct and non-stop flights. For a list of Airports and National airlines in Costa Rica. While not the optimum choice, there is no doubt that the cheapest time to travel to Costa Rica is in the country's "rainy season", which lasts from May through to November. While that may not sound too appealing, in truth there are some distinct advantages to visiting in what is referred to as the "off-season". For one thing, the rain makes the temperature and general climate far less hot and humid than it is in the drier months, especially at the beach front, which can be a major plus for those who may otherwise find the humidity a little much. Most Costa Rica hotels offer large discounts during these months, the scenery is fresh and green, while mornings are usually warm and rain-free and you can still be guaranteed a magnificent sunset late in the day. There is also the simple fact that there will inevitably be fewer tourists in the country, which will make your visit feel considerably less crowded and more peaceful.

Many hotels also offer vacation packages which include organized tours (to National Parks and area attractions) as well as just simple accommodation. These packages can be a major saver for the budget conscious traveler.

Some hotel and resort recommendations:

? Hotel Buena Vista

? La Mansion

? Apartotel Cristina

? Ocotal Resort

? To see all Hotel and Resort listings

The most basic vacation package is just airfare and accommodation, which can still save money, but many more advanced ones also offer adventure tours including organized hiking and kayaking tours. If you'd rather do it yourself, and even hotels sound a little steep, hostels are becoming an increasingly attractive alternative for travelers to Costa Rica. While there is obviously less space (and privacy) than a hotel room, beds are offered for an incredibly cheap rate and this is a guaranteed budget saver. Certainly a hostel would be a very smart choice for the single traveler especially.

If a hostel does not sound like it's for you, but you still balk at the price of hotel rooms, take a closer look around. There are many Costa Rica vacation homes available for rental (often for as long as a month) that provide a rather more luxurious abode than a hotel or even some resorts, yet will end up costing you considerably less than the equivalent length of time. Some vacation rental homes even include luxuries such as a maid or even a chef to cook your evening meal for you! There are hundreds of such rental homes (including villas) to choose from in Costa Rica and with greater space and freedom than a hotel room, often for less money even for a couple, they are understandably an increasingly popular choice for tourists to the area.

Some vacation rental recommendations:

? Villa los Lomas 4 bdrm

? Villa la Amistad 2 bdrm

? Villa Elana 3 bdrm

? See all vacation rentals here

If you do stay in a hotel or other catered establishment, try and ensure breakfast is included in your rate; it is the norm to provide breakfasts for guests in Costa Rica, and this can often end up saving you a fair bit (from three to ten dollars per person) than if you were forced to look elsewhere for your first meal of the day. Many bed and breakfast places have sprung up in the last few years, which range in price from expensive guest houses with their own pools and tennis courts too, on the lowest end of the market something as simple and basic as renting a room in someone's home.

If you're feeling a little more adventurous, There are over five hundred different Costa Rica spa resorts, offering both the usual services of such places (body scrubs and polishes, different types of exfoliating treatments, and massages) as well as numerous recreational activities such as golf, horseback riding, tennis, scuba diving and other kinds of water sports. Many of the spas also offer special children's programs. At this point, you might be thinking "That'll be well out of my price range", but check them out – you may be surprised, as most of the spa resorts in Costa Rica end up being half the price that you would pay for the same treatment in the United States and Europe. There are also mountain and jungle lodges available to rent in some of the more remote areas of Costa Rica, and while these do tend to be rather more on the expensive side, they may be worth checking out regardless, as there can be some surprisingly good deals to be found, particularly in the off season.

When it comes to getting around in Costa Rica, we recommend walking or the use of public transport. Public transport is highly affordable (you can expect to pay less than fifty US cents for travelling in and around the Central Valley, and even going further afield, such as to the coasts, will still generally only cost you around a dollar, which is remarkably cheap) and for the most part runs to a tight schedule. Bus schedules are even available to peruse online. If using a taxi, be sure to use government owned taxis (which are easily distinguished by their color (red) and the fact that their car number is highlighted on the light on the top and a yellow triangle on the side of the taxi) only, as their rates are fixed in order to ensure cheap

transportation, while privately owned taxis can get away with pretty much charging what they feel like!

If you do feel the need to travel by car, be certain to do business only with a qualified car rental agency. Make sure the car is well maintained before agreeing to take it (checking the tires is particularly important since flat tires are commonplace in Costa Rica due to the poor condition of many of the country's roads). The smaller the car, the cheaper things will work out for you (especially when it comes to filling up with gas). All gas prices are the same as they have been fixed by the Costa Rican government, so you do not have to worry about trying to find a cheaper gas station or be concerned that you are being taken for a ride by any duplicitous operators.

When it comes to food, avoid the temptation of frequenting any familiar-looking American chains. These are usually considerable more expensive than the local options available. Try local cuisine instead, by visiting

markets, which is a very easy way to pick up fresh and inexpensive food. Soda stores, the Costa Rican version of 'mom and pop stores', are found throughout the country and offer authentic Costa Rican food at an affordable price, particularly cheap casados which include beans, cabbage salad, meat, rice and vegetables, sometimes even tortillas.

The most popular national dish is called 'gallo pinto' ("spotted rooster" in English), which is made from black beans and fried rice, often including fried eggs as well. It is usually served for breakfast but can also serve as a tasty and inexpensive lunch dish. Supermarkets are also highly recommended for picking up the basics such as bread, cheese, fruit, juice and water (while water is considered to be safe to drink in most of the country, particularly the Central Valley, it is still recommended to buy it bottled just to be on the safe side). Another good way to save money is to befriend the

locals, particularly hotel staff. They will always be able to point you in the right direction to get both the cheapest and the highest quality food and other deals. If going on a road trip, it is highly recommended that you take your own refreshments and snacks. Taking your own cooler pre-packed with items such as cool drinks, water and ice, fruit and sandwiches will save you a lot of money, as snacks and refreshments at roadside pit-stops such as gas stations can be very costly.

For communication needs, it might be a good idea to get a short-term phone rental lease (most car rental agencies should be equipped for such deals as well) as even making long distance calls from a rented cell phone can end up being considerably cheaper than the equivalent call from hotels or resorts, who can be quite handy at adding pretty hefty surcharges to your bill.

However budget conscious you have been, we recommend taking a little more than you may have planned, just in case. A little bit of spare cash (say between seventy five to a hundred US dollars) can help keep you solvent on your trip with such minor expenses as taxi fares, tips and not forgetting the twenty seven dollars it costs you to check out of the country when you're ready to go home! On the subject of tips, this is another area where being aware of the culture and customs of Costa Rica can save you money.

Taxi drivers, for instance, do not expect to be tipped, and while hotel staff, porters and wait staff do, most restaurants already add a ten percent service charge to the bill, while hotels add a three percent tourist tax and a ten percent service tax. In those areas, tip – but don't go overboard with it, since the majority of the tip has already been included in the bill

to start with. Fifty cents (or the local equivalent) is considered to be an acceptable tip for workers such as bell boys and luggage handlers.

In terms of what to take with you to Costa Rica in your luggage, there are some things that are advisable to bring in your luggage rather than attempt to purchase once you have actually arrived. Insect repellent is one such example; in Costa Rica it is regarded as an item for tourists and the price is generally much higher than you

would pay for it at home. Likewise, cheap plastic bottles of things like shampoo and liquid soap, as well as general health items such as aspirin, band-aids, antacids and cold remedies and sunscreen, are all advisable as things to bring with you. And, of course, don't forget your toothbrush! If you have to buy something along those lines, try a local pharmacy rather than the one in the hotel you are staying at.

It would be a good idea, depending on how much luggage you are planning to take, to include a few extra changes of wardrobe, since the cost of dry cleaning in most hotels in Costa Rica may come as a nasty surprise to the unprepared. At the same time, however, do try to pack as light as possible within the boundaries of this advice. Making sure that your luggage is within the airline's weight limit (usually about fifty pounds or less) will also save you the unnecessary expense of paying penalties for luggage overages.

You may be surprised to learn that an increasing number of apartments, hotels, resorts and vacation homes allow you to bring your pet or pets with you on your visit. While you will obviously have to pay airfare for them, this could still end up saving you a pretty penny that you would otherwise have to throw away on boarding your pets while you were away.

Of course, you may be coming to Costa Rica for another reason other than just a normal holiday, perhaps to take advantage of the plastic and/or cosmetic surgery or dental health care system in the country, which is one of the best in the world, yet considerably more affordable than its overseas equivalent. Costa Rica's doctors and dentists are fully qualified, while cosmetic and plastic surgery offers the latest in technological advances and is of a comparable standard to that in the US, yet a whole lot cheaper. Even if you are just coming for a normal holiday, you may be tempted to go to the dentists to take advantage of the enormous savings on such procedures as teeth whitening and cosmetic dental veneers which are all hugely popular with tourists.

At the end of the day, you have obviously come to Costa Rica for a vacation holiday, and that means entertaining and fun activities for you and

any other traveling companions. Fortunately, entertaining yourself when you have made it to Costa Rica is not as costly as you might think. Entrance to National Parks usually only costs around six dollars, plus an extra two dollars for camping (if allowed). Reasonably priced or sometimes even free activities and places to visit such as bird watching, botanical gardens, butterfly farms, hiking, horseback riding, kayaking and snorkeling are all available in and around National Parks and local beaches.

The city of San Jose offers numerous activities and tourist attractions that are easily accessible for those on a limited budget. Costa Rica has architectural and cultural history on display for all to see at the National Theater and the plentiful museums in the area, as well as many fascinating and eclectic local markets and shops. Well known public beaches such as Manuel Antonio, Jaco, Domincal, Quepos, Santa Teresa, Malpais, Playa Samara, Tamarindo and Coco on the Pacific Coast, as well as Cahuita, Limon, Punta Uva, Puerto Viejo and Playa Manzanillo on the Caribbean Coast, are all free and easily accessible to tourists via public transport. Tourist offices are available in San Jose or at the Juan Santamaria International Airport for further advice on how to reach popular tourist destinations.

US dollars (particularly ones, fives, tens and twenties) are accepted in most tourist areas without the need to exchange them for the local currency, particularly if the bills are new and clean. If you would rather not carry a lot of money around, major credit cards are also accepted in most major tourist areas, especially VISA. That said, using cash will often result in discounts as most vendors dislike the high percentages that credit card merchant companies charge on transactions. Some smaller local vendors will only accept local currency, so it is advisable to have at least some of your money exchanged, which can be accomplished at any bank, who will also give you a more favorable exchange rate.

At this time the exchange rate is over 575 colones per one US dollar, take a calculator for easy calculations. It can save you mucho time and hassle free

purchases. Notes come in 500 (\$0.87), 1,000 (\$1.74), 2,000 (\$3.48), 5,000 (\$8.70), 10,000 (\$17.40). Coins are 5, 10, 20, 25, 50, 100, and 500. Save your change, it's a good way to pay your departure taxes.

Keep a list of your expenses (in local currency and the United States dollar equivalent) and update it regularly while on your vacationing. This should help your spending in check and avoid going over your planned budget. Don't forget to include souvenirs you are planning to buy for

friends, relatives etc in your initial budget and stick to it. This can often be a surprisingly costly venture otherwise!

In truth, the best way to save money visiting Costa Rica is simply to plan your trip well in advance and just use a little common sense. Be sure to follow this advice and you will be guaranteed not only a memorable, once in a lifetime experience on your Costa Rican vacation, but also one that won't break your bank balance.

TRAVEL TIPS

Costa Rica is a fascinating, complex and thriving country with its own unique identity that, in turn, needs its own unique approach from any tourist wishing to visit that amazing nation. Before we even reach all that however, we need to first consider the basics of travel and tourism that apply to visiting almost anywhere in the world. For one – only drink bottled or boiled water. While Costa Rica is certainly not in the realm of Mexico for its notorious drinking water, there can be bugs in the water supply that could give you some nasty cases of stomach upsets. The last thing you want to do on your vacation of a lifetime is to end up spending most of it on or face down in the toilet. Likewise, when it comes to food, make sure you can cook, peel or at least wash it – otherwise, avoid.

When it comes to food, local or otherwise, the best advice is – make sure you have enough. Do not skip meals in an attempt to save money, as this can be hazardous to both your health and to the enjoyment of your Costa Rica experience. Making sure you have snacks (as simple as cheese and crackers, nuts, raisins, fresh fruits, or instant breakfast drinks and sachets of tea and coffee) can be a lifesaver when on holiday, particularly if that holiday involves, as it invariably will, lots of walking and exercise! Not only is it vital to keep yourself replenished (especially if you are not used to that level of exercise in your ordinary, everyday life) but having such healthy snacks on hand already will save both your wallet and your waist line!

If you or anyone you are traveling with has any kind of special dietary requirements, this should be taken into account and budgeted for accordingly, and most travel providers will offer deals to accommodate such needs providing you bring it up early enough.

Invest in travel insurance. Be it trip cancellation insurance or medical insurance, it is always a good idea to get both. There are many travel insurance companies out there, with many different types of coverage and varying costs. Do your research, and pick the one that is best for you (not necessarily the cheapest). It is no use saying "I won't need it" and then finding out that you do, and ending up severely out of pocket. Your

vacation is supposed to be a ticket to paradise, not financial ruin.

Get some health advice. Before setting off on your trip, consult your health professional to discuss such things as your length and style of travel, basic and special medicines you may require for your trip, allergies and any other pre-existing medical conditions you may have, pregnancy issues etc. Ask about any immunization prescriptions you may require, and ensure that you have some basic knowledge of what to do in the case of any medical emergency that may arise. People who wear glasses would be well advised to bring an extra pair of glasses with them on their trip, just to be on the safe side.

It is a good idea to arrange a house sitter for your home or, if that is beyond your budget, at least notify a neighbor or trusted friend that you will be away and arrange

for them to 'keep an eye on' your home, be it collecting junk mail and/or newspapers (contact your post office to have your mail stopped during your trip), watering plants, as well as leaving them your itinerary and any emergency contact numbers you have in order for them to be able to get in touch with you should any reason materialize that they would need to do so.

Have an "out the door checklist". This might sound obvious, so obvious that many people don't do it and then end up forgetting something important. This checklist should include at least a basic first aid kit (with band-aids, anti-bacterial ointment, any prescriptions that you or other family members require, allergy and cold medicines, and some kind of off-the-shelf simple painkiller), camera and associated supplies, all relevant travel documents (such as your passport and copies of your passports, plane tickets, medical information including your blood type, travel insurance information, driver's licenses, emergency contacts, address details for your vacation accommodation and traveler's checks/currency) and standard vacation items such as insect repellent and sunscreen. A typical clothes packing list includes such items as one or two pairs of pants, four to six shirts, clothes that are climate appropriate (with at least one 'dressy' outfit should some kind of formal occasion arise), a sport jacket(s) if you are a man (not many restaurants require them to be worn in Costa Rica but if you are traveling to one of the luxury resorts as Four Seasons consider carrying one), three to five pairs of underwear, two pairs of cotton socks, at least one pair of sturdy and broken-in boots or sandals, sleepwear, and swimsuits/bathing suits.

If you plan on renting a private rental home you may be able to pack lighter do to having a washer and dryer to wash you cloths. If you plan

on visiting the rain forest or cloud forests, don't forget to bring with you either a cheap fold-up raincoat or poncho or at least a collapsible umbrella. Bad weather occurs everywhere (even Costa Rica in the dry season is not immune to the occasional downpour in some areas as Caribbean and Osa Peninsula) and the last thing you want is to be caught in the rain without protection, and end up getting soaked and possibly even sick in

the process. A few forward thinking preventative tip and tricks here and there can go a long way to ensure minor annoyances do not turn into holiday-threatening crises.

If you are a tourist from overseas, and are thus in for a long international flight, wear comfortable, broken-in shoes and loose (not tight-fitting) and wrinkle resistant clothes for a more comfortable flight. Make numerous visits to the wash room, and if you are traveling with younger family members, toys, games and snack packs are advised to keep them occupied and prevent them from getting bored and irritated during the long flight. A small DIY kit, consisting of such items as rubber bands, instant glue, paper clips, masking tape, tissue paper, toilet paper, hand sanitizers, wipes (good sensible hygiene will go a long way toward preventing you from becoming sick while on holiday), a small sewing kit or even Velcro is also recommended, taking up a very limited amount of space but potentially coming in very handy during any minor emergencies that may crop up during your vacation. We cannot emphasize this enough – check, double-check and then check again every aspect of your luggage, including the handles, wheels and zippers on all your suitcases and bags, to make sure everything is where and how you want it.

The mention of sunscreen provides a nice lead-in to the next point to note – respecting the sun. In addition to buying and applying liberal amounts of sunscreen to your self and your family, remember to wear a broad-rimmed hat and drink plenty of fluids, especially water (the bottled variety, of course). A good travel water bottle with a secure cap would be a worthwhile investment before setting out on your travels. Be sure to keep any bottled liquids in sealable plastic bags that will not leak. The last thing you want is any leaky bottles ruining your clothes and/or other items and potentially leaving you with some costly laundry bills. A great addition would be to carry a back pack to keep your every day items in (camera, water bottles, dry snacks etc.). Also recommend a waist or fanny pack to keep you passport(s) money and any other valuables in. Most have zippers to keep those unwanted hands out of reach. Both of these items are a must when you are choosing to be

active during your vacation.

The night before your departure, try to get plenty of sleep. Make sure you have an alarm clock and/or wake-up call(s) arranged if you have an early flight. If you are not driving yourself and are using some other kind of transportation service (taxi etc), be sure to call to confirm your booking and time, ensuring you have left plenty of transit time in your schedule. Arrive at the airport at least two hours before departure time. The last thing you want to do is miss the plane and have the holiday ruined before it has even begun. Likewise, if your flight includes a stop-over, make sure that you know beforehand how long will it be, and what airport, city and/or other location that stopover will be taking place in. Seating arrangements on the plane can be made ahead of time, or even during booking, so that you can be certain of getting an arrangement that is comfortable for you or suits your particular needs (if you are travelling with family, especially children, you will most likely want to arrange to be sitting together, for instance, or if you or anyone in your group were to be pregnant or have some other special seating requirement of any kind). Remember to verify these details upon checking in at the airport and on boarding the plane on the day in question.

Another important issue for all travelers, wherever their destination, is of course that of safety and security. Fortunately, there are some easy to follow tips that apply to all destinations that can help. For one, however strong the temptation, do not bring precious possessions (such as sentimental and/or irreplaceable items) with you on your holiday. Leave them at home where they belong. As mentioned above A waist/fanny pack would be a very smart purchase, providing you with an ideal home with which to store essential items like your travel documentation, credit cards, traveler's checks, money, passport etc (it would be a smart and prudent idea to take photocopies, 2 each of travel documents and keep them elsewhere from the originals, providing you with a 'back-up' should the worst indeed happen. If such documents are stolen, inform police and the relevant authorities as soon as possible). Here is a great list of consulates in Costa Rica .

Likewise, a backpack for travel items such as cameras and laptops would also be very useful and safety conscious, providing both security against theft while maintaining easy access to them for yourself (it is a good idea to maintain a small inventory of any technological equipment you are taking with you. If you can keep a hold of proof of purchase receipts (if they are new or appear new) for them as well, then so much the better for when it comes to passing through Customs, who could try to charge

you for items you brought with you in the first place!).

When it comes to electronic equipment such as the type mentioned above, make sure you have brought with you a reasonable supply of rechargeable batteries and/or a charger kit in order to avoid having to purchase expensive replacements or even miss out on taking the photographs or video footage that you really want to. Keep valuables concealed, maintain limited cash upon yourself, do not flaunt the cash you do have in public, and keep your cash and traveler's checks etc in different places (not all in the same suitcase, for example). In the event that your traveler's checks are stolen, be sure that you have a list of the check numbers saved (and located elsewhere). Never leaving your luggage and/or valuables in rental cars or other forms of transportation will likewise keep the odds low of you becoming the target of any kind of criminal activity. It is important to remember, however, that the chances of that happening, particularly if you follow the above advice, are very low, and while you certainly want to be watchful, you don't want "security conscious" to drift into "paranoia" and spoil your vacation. Just take basic precautions and exercise a little common sense (as you would in your own country) and in all likelihood everything will turn out just fine. Mark your luggage with some kind of identification, be it a quality luggage tag, permanent marker, or simply some other form of easily identifiable characteristic (such as colorful ribbons or stickers) which will make it obviously stand out among other items of luggage. This will help you find your luggage when you are standing with hundreds of others at the airport luggage carousel.

If you are planning on visiting any kind of tourist attraction or location, be sure to check online beforehand whether this place will actually be open to the public during your visit, and the price of entry. You do not want to make a long trip somewhere, only to find that it is either closed or that it is beyond your budget.

Look out for the dates of any national holidays that may occur during your stay in particular.

2009 1/1 New Year's Day. 4/10-13 Easter (Semana Santa). 4/11 Juan Santamaría's Day. 5/1 Labor Day. 7/25 Guanacaste Annexation. 8/2 Virgin of Los Angeles, Feast of Patroness of Costa Rica. 8/15 Mothers' Day. 9/15 Independence Day. 10/12 Dia de la Raza (Columbus Day). 12/25 Christmas Day.

2010 1/1 New Year's Day. 4/2-5 Easter. 4/10 Juan Santamaría's Day. 5/1 Labor Day. 7/25 Guanacaste Annexation. 8/2 Virgin of Los Angeles, Feast of Patroness of Costa Rica. 8/15 Mothers' Day. 9/15 Independence

Day. 10/11 Dia de la Raza (Columbus Day). 12/25 Christmas Day.

Likewise, if there are any particular special events that occur at certain times of the year that you would be especially interested in and enjoy attending, a little forward planning can ensure that you will be able to be there for that event during your planned vacation time.

Finally, a little bit of fun advice that applies to any foreign country where the language is not predominantly English (many Costa Ricans do speak English, but you never know) – communication with non-English speaking locals can be achieved with simple gesturing (while visiting in Spain, to give a basic example, my mother once successfully managed to get a shop assistant to point her toward their milk supply by miming milking a cow!) and a friendly smile. The latter is important as, even if they can't help you/don't understand, a friendly smile is all the more likely to get them to find you someone who can. Perhaps the simplest advice would be – don't forget to bring a Spanish dictionary with you! A very good Costa Rica Spanish phrase book published by Lonely Planet.

Costa Rica – The Specifics

Please refer to our Costa Rica frequently asked questions page for answers to specific questions about Costa Rica

The above is of course fairly basic travel advice that, as noted, applies to pretty much any foreign destination. When it comes to Costa Rica, however, there are many pieces of advice specific to that nation alone, which when taken can make your much anticipated vacation even more of a magical experience than ever.

Let's start simple, with some basic information. Costa Rica uses the metric system, is on Central Standard Time (which is six hours behind Greenwich Mean Time) but does not alter its clocks for daylight savings time, meaning that in the months from April to December, local Costa Rican time is one hour ahead of Central Standard Time. The area/country code for telephone calls in Costa Rica is 506 throughout the entire nation, and there are many internet cafes spread throughout. You certainly won't have any trouble locating one if you are anywhere even near to the capital city of San Jose.

When it comes to shopping hours, Costa Rica opens early, usually between eight to nine am, through to six or seven pm six days a week (most places still usually close on a Sunday). Bank hours are usually nine am to three pm, while government offices open from eight am to either four or five pm. It should be noted that many businesses close between eleven thirty am and two thirty pm, as the two hour lunch is a fairly common practice in Costa Rica. Particularly in the smaller towns and

rural areas.

ATM's are easily accessible in most places in Costa Rica, dispensing money in both US dollars and the local currency of colones. In tourist areas, almost everything will be priced in dollars, although it should be noted that sometimes things can actually be cheaper when paid for in colones. Let us emphasize **MOST OF THE TIME**.

When you book your accommodation, please make sure that you have done so in the "right" areas, if in San Jose. Do not fall for a "too good to be true" package deal which may well be just that, especially if you were to then find yourself staying in the Zona Roja (the Red Zone) area of San Jose, which is an area in the city's downtown we advise you to stay well clear of in any event, being a very unpleasant and high-risk area. You do not even want to visit there, let alone find yourself based there. **ALWAYS** go with a reputable travel agent or take advice from someone who has been there done that.

If you are driving yourself (and any foreign visitor to Costa Rica who has a valid driver's license and is eighteen years or over can drive in the country for up to ninety days – just make sure you have your passport (at least a copy) with you at all times as that proof of entry is required for a police officer to accept a foreign license), then

watch yourself on the roads. One of the more unfortunate aspects of Costa Rica is the standard of driving, which is usually much lower than in most Western countries. There are many slow moving vehicles (usually trucks) on the roads of Costa Rica and this can often cause frustration among drivers, who take dangerous risks to overtake these slow vehicles and frequently end up paying the price for doing so.

There are very few traffic police in Costa Rica, resulting in more aggressive drivers. Indeed, it is very likely that if you do rent a car in Costa Rica, you will probably have to be a little aggressive yourself – but always remember to drive very defensively and to use caution at all times. Do not unnecessarily danger yourself, regardless of the behavior of others on the road. When it comes to the roads themselves, they are usually of reasonable quality. The Pan-American Highway is the main highway in Costa Rica and you will be using it at some point if you are driving. While the pot-holes on Costa Rica's roads are somewhat justly (in) famous, the highways are being constantly improved and provide a mostly pleasant driving experience.

Roads to local beaches likewise contain potholes you would not find in North America, but are generally well kept. These potholes are primarily caused by the amount of heavy rain during the country's wet season.

The most problematic roads in the country are inevitably those that lead to the more remote locations of Costa Rica (such as the Caribbean, Monteverde, Dominical and the Osa Peninsula). These are almost all in poor condition and you should not attempt to drive on them unless you have rented yourself a 4 x 4. Safety belts are required by law (with an average driving speed of seventy to eighty kilometers per hour (forty four to fifty miles per hour) on main roads and forty to fifty kilometers per hour (twenty five to thirty two miles per hour) on most back roads), and it would be highly ill-advised to drive at night due to the unpredictable nature of the roads and the lack of safety features such as guard rails on many hairpin turns in the hills. Also you might find yourself face to face with a large animal such as a horse or cattle.

If you would like to get around Costa Rica by car and yet the thought of driving yourself in an unknown and occasionally dangerous environment seems a little on the daunting side, it is possible to book yourself a rental car with a local and experienced driver to take care of that side of things for you, and there are several tour companies that provide this sort of service, so check around before booking. Most if not all vacation rental owners can help you with transportation rentals. If you are driving yourself, the smartest thing you could possibly do is purchase for yourself a GPS system. With almost every address in the whole of Costa Rica given in terms of reference points, a GPS system can be a life saver when you realize that many addresses still use old reference points that may have been given another name in recent years or, indeed, may no longer exist at all. If you want to get around in Costa Rica, get yourself a GPS system (most vehicle rental agencies will be able to provide you with one for about \$8 dollars per day).

If you do get lost, look out for either buses or public phone boxes, both of which are good ways to be able to find out exactly where you are. Buses usually carry on their windows a small sign indicating where they are from and where they are going, while public phone boxes have a blue sign above them that indicates their location, no matter how small that town may be. Remember that city streets (locally known as calles) run one way with avenues (avenidas) running perpendicular to them. There are other ways of getting around in Costa Rica, with other hired vehicles such as motorbikes (be aware, however, that motorbike rental companies almost always insist on a guaranty deposit of around six hundred US dollars beforehand) and mini-vans, the latter of which usually comes with an experienced local driver. The vans are always clean and comfortable, and most hotels and vacation rental owners will be able to assist

you with acquiring this service. Thanks to the internet, almost any vehicle imaginable can be booked by you online and then be waiting for you when you arrive in Costa Rica. One last little fun tid-bit to mention about driving through Costa Rica is, don't be afraid to stop off at the rest rooms that can be found on most roads – a beer and a casado will only cost you around three US dollars, and are thus an excellent and cheap distraction on your trek. Just don't drink TOO much of the beer if your driving! If you are planning to explore San Jose or other areas on foot, be sure to remember – pedestrians do NOT have right of way.

The next question to answer that many first time tourists ask is – “Well, I can't fit in the whole country in my vacation. Where exactly should I go?” The simplest way to answer that question is to determine precisely what you are going to Costa Rica for, and where your interests lie. For instance, is your main aim in coming to Costa Rica is to spend day after day luxuriating in the sun on the country's most beautiful beaches? Do you want a family friendly holiday in exotic yet simultaneously reassuringly familiar surroundings? Or would you be inclined to want to explore more of the local culture and places that are perhaps a little bit more off the beaten track? The answer to those questions will then lead you to the destination that will be most likely to provide you with the enjoyable and satisfying vacation that you are looking for.

For the family friendly vacation, the best place to head would be to Costa Rica's West Coast. The West Coast is probably the most 'touristy' place in Costa Rica, with numerous common chain restaurants and fast food franchises. There is less emphasis on the local culture and more emphasis placed on luxurious surroundings, with traditionally Western style concrete footpaths, and plenty of upscale resorts. Certainly, for families, honeymooners looking for luxury or even businessmen and women who need certain amenities to facilitate their work will probably find that the West Coast is by far the most appropriate destination for all their needs, with many child-based activities, spas and massage therapists lined up for your entertainment and relaxation.

On the other hand, those of you who are interested in visiting Costa Rica precisely because they want to experience somewhere a little less commercialized and a little more 'back to nature' will undoubtedly be better served by heading over to the country's East Coast. The East Coast of Costa Rica is definitely the place to go to experience the delights of the country's hugely popular and successful “eco-tourism” industry. This is the place to be for backpackers, the environmentally conscious, and people who want to relax on beaches minus the tourist overcrowding

and can perhaps do without at least some of the comforts of home for a while, in order to experience the culture of a foreign country more or less undiluted by the more commercial aspects that are found on the West Coast. The old-fashioned Costa Rican way of life is what you will find here, with dirt roads lined with hostels, private homes and open air local restaurants.

The other question frequently asked by tourists is of course “How long should I come for?” While inevitably budget has to factor into that decision – not to mention how much time you can actually take off from work and other responsibilities – our advice would still be to take at least ten days in Costa Rica if you can. A week on its own will simply not be enough for you to truly experience even a true representative sampling of some of the delights that this country has to offer. Let’s face it, the first and last days of any trip are usually taken up with all the hassles and business of traveling itself, rather than enjoying your surroundings. This basically means that if you were only to come to Costa Rica for seven days that would actually just be an all-too-brief five days, then you can not actually experience and appreciate Costa Rica. This is, quite simply, just not long enough in our opinion, and after reading the rest of this guide, we’re sure you’ll agree on that point.

On that note, when you first arrive, don’t fall into the trap of trying to fit everything into the first twenty four hours – relax, take a stroll, and get the feel of your

surroundings. Burdening yourself with an overwhelming schedule will only end up leaving you feeling like you need a holiday at the end of the vacation and, in all honesty, who wants that? There is nothing wrong with simply relaxing, taking a breath, and just enjoying where you are. It will probably take you a couple of days to fit into the relaxed atmosphere of “Pura Vida” and to remember that, in Costa Rican time – there’s ALWAYS a good excuse to be late.

The next question that we imagine would be first and foremost on the tourist mind is – what airport do we use? For an extensive list of Costa Rica airports both national and international visit. There are several alternatives, although the biggest and indeed Costa Rica’s primary airport is the Juan Santamaria International Airport, situated in San Jose, which serves over a million people per year, the majority of whom are tourists from Canada, the United States and Europe, connecting to such cities as Los Angeles, New York, Phoenix and Toronto among many, many others. The airport also features the usual amount of book, souvenir and duty free shops that can be expected of any major international airport,

as well as restaurants such as Burger King and Mc Donald's.

While there are two other international airports in Costa Rica, only one of those, the Daniel Oduber Quiros International Airport in Liberia, Guanacaste, is used by major airlines, including American Airlines and United Airlines, Delta, Continental, and connects to such cities as Atlanta, Houston, Chicago, Miami, Vancouver and even London. Liberia's airport caters primarily to tourists wishing to sample the delights of the North Pacific Coast. It is the easiest way by far to reach such places as El Coco, Golfo de Papagayo, Nosara, Playa Flamingo, Playa Grande, Playa Hermosa, Playa Tamarindo, Samara and indeed the entire Nicoya peninsula with its many amazing National Parks. The airport, which was named after the former President of Costa Rica (a keen supporter and advocate of development and expansion in Guanacaste and who first proposed the idea of building an airport in the region) when it opened in 1995, currently accepts fourty to fourty five flights a week. For almost all flights within Costa Rica itself (and its closest neighbors such as Nicaragua and Panama) the domestic carriers entitled Nature Air and Sansa have many daily flights throughout the country from many smaller airports.

Since bringing back plants or raw foods from Costa Rica is illegal, one of the most common and desirable commodities for visitors to take back home with them is the country's delicious roasted coffee, widely regarded as one of the best in the world. San Jose Airport has many stores that will sell you the best coffee the country has to offer, but there are many other locations to acquire the best blends, such as supermarkets or even direct from the roasters themselves. If you are serious about your coffee, avoid the more expensive touristy-type places that will try to sell you less for more; the best plan is to take advantage of the deals offered by those venues recommended above and to bring with you at least one near-empty suitcase which you can use to fill almost entirely with up to a year's supply. The best place to buy coffee is to visit and tour one of the many coffee plantations of Costa Rica. Cafe Britt is one the more popular tours with many others to choose from. For more information about Café Britt coffee tours.

There are many websites on the net that will explain how to keep your coffee supply fresh for that length of time, as well as detail the best types of coffee to buy, covering everything from the finest growing regions to different types of roasting and bean types.

Be sure to protect yourselves against mosquitoes. While there have been a few outbreaks of dengue fever in some areas of Costa Rica – and one

apparent case of malaria in 2006 – these incidents are incredibly rare and the chances of you becoming involved in such a case are slim to none; none the less, when traveling into the rain forest or along the rivers wearing lightweight but long pants, long sleeved shirts and using insect repellants that contain deet are always a sensible precaution to take in such climates. If venturing into the more rural areas, an anti-malaria medication may be appropriate, so consult your Doctor. However, if you intend to stay in the more touristy areas of Costa Rica, basic and simple precautions against mosquito bites should be more than adequate protection.

While Costa Rica can of course be very warm, it can get rather cold in the evening in some of the higher elevations so don't forget that light jacket or sweater. Tourist destinations are not the place you want to be buying such an item either, as they will invariably end up costing you more than one you could have purchased at home. Planes can also be quite cool, so a good sweater or jacket could come in handy there too. Always ask for a blanket and a pillow before sitting down in your seat on a plane too, for a little extra comfort, especially if you are planning on taking a nap at any time during your journey.

All of the above is good advice, but perhaps the best advice is the one we have saved until at last. For all of the above, the most invaluable things you can take with you on your vacation to Costa Rica are a positive outlook, patience, understanding, flexibility, an acceptance and appreciation of the different way of life and culture of the Costa Ricans a little simple human kindness and, perhaps most importantly of all, a good sense of humor. Take this along with your budget and your vacation plan and we feel confident that you will have one of the best experiences of your entire life in this extraordinary, magical and totally unique country.

As they say in Costa Rica,
"Pura Vida!"



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