

History

LOST COSTA RICA

The coastlines and rain forests of Central America have been inhabited by humans for at least 10,000 years. On the eve of European discovery some 500 years ago, an estimated 400,000 people were living in today's Costa Rica, though sadly our knowledge about these pre-Columbian cultures is scant. The remains of lost civilizations were washed away by torrential rains, and Spanish conquerors were more intent on subjugating rather than describing native lifestyles.

Unlike the massive pyramid complexes found throughout much of Latin America, the ancient towns and cities of Costa Rica (with the exception of Guayabo; see boxed text, p36) vanished in the jungles, never to be seen again by the eyes of the modern world. However, tales of lost cities still survive in the oral histories of Costa Rica's indigenous communities and there is hope among archaeologists that a great discovery lies in waiting. Considering that much of the country consists of inaccessible mountains and rain forests, perhaps these dreams aren't so fanciful.

The origin of earth – according to Bribri and Cabécar creation myth – is the subject of the beautifully illustrated story *When Woman Became Sea* by Susan Strauss.

HEIRS OF COLUMBUS

On his fourth and final voyage to the New World in 1502, Christopher Columbus was forced to drop anchor near present-day Puerto Limón after a hurricane damaged his ship. While waiting for repairs, Columbus ventured into the verdant terrain, and exchanged gifts with hospitable and welcoming chieftains. He returned from this encounter, claiming to have seen 'more gold in two days than in four years in Española.' Columbus dubbed the stretch of shoreline from Honduras to Panama as Veraguas, but it was his excited descriptions of 'la costa rica' or the 'rich coast' that gave the region its lasting name.

Anxious to claim its bounty, Columbus petitioned the Spanish Crown to have himself appointed governor. But by the time he returned to Seville his royal patron Queen Isabella was on her deathbed, which prompted King Ferdinand to award the prize to Columbus' rival, Diego de Nicuesa. Although Columbus became a very wealthy man, he never returned to the New World, and died in 1506 after being worn down by ill health and court politics.

To the disappointment of his *conquistador* (conqueror) heirs, the region was not abundant with gold, and the locals were considerably less than affable. Nicuesa's first colony in present-day Panama was abruptly abandoned when tropical disease and warring tribes decimated its ranks. Successive expeditions launched from the Caribbean coast also failed as

TIMELINE

11,000 BC

The first humans occupy Costa Rica and populations quickly flourish due to the rich land and marine resources found along both coastlines.

2500 BC

Costa Rica is home to some of the first pottery-making villages in the Americas, such as those of the Monagrillo culture.

1000 BC

The Huetar power base in the Central Valley is solidified following the construction and habitation of the ancient city of Guayabo, which is continuously inhabited until its mysterious abandonment in 1400.

LIFE BEFORE THE CONQUEST

The invasion of Central America by the Spanish *conquistadores* (conquerors) brought about incalculable human suffering and loss; entire cultures and histories were erased by sword and disease alike.

What is known about pre-Columbian Costa Rica is that early inhabitants were part of an extensive trading zone that extended as far south as Peru and as far north as Mexico. The region hosted roughly 20 small tribes, organized into chiefdoms, indicating a permanent leader, or *cacique*, who sat atop a hierarchical society that included shamans, warriors, toilers and slaves.

Adept at seafaring, the Carib dominated the Atlantic coastal lowlands, and served as a conduit of trade with the South American mainland. In the northwest, several tribes were connected to the great Mesoamerican cultures. Aztec religious practices and Maya jade and craftsmanship are in evidence in the Península de Nicoya, while Costa Rican quetzal feathers and golden trinkets have turned up in Mexico. In the southwest, three chiefdoms showed the influence of Andean Indian cultures, including coca leaves, yucca and sweet potatoes.

There is also evidence that the language of the Central Valley Huetar was known by all of Costa Rica's indigenous groups, which may be an indication of their power and influence. The Central Valley is home to the only major archaeological site uncovered in Costa Rica, namely Guayabo (p160).

Thought to be an ancient ceremonial center, Guayabo once featured paved streets, an aqueduct and decorative gold. Here, archaeologists uncovered exquisite gold ornaments and unusual life-size stone statues of human figures, as well as distinctive types of pottery and *metates*, stone platforms that were used for grinding corn. Today, the site consists of little more than ancient hewed rock and stone, though Guayabo continues to stand as a testament to a once-great civilization of the New World.

Still a puzzle, however, are the hundreds of hand-sculpted, monolithic stone spheres that dot the landscape of the Diquis Valley in Palmar (p384) and the Isla del Caño (p406). Weighing up to 16 tons and ranging in size from a baseball to a Volkswagen, the spheres have inspired many theories: an ancient calendar, extraterrestrial meddling, or a game of bocce gone terribly awry.

In recent years, Costa Ricans of all backgrounds have taken an increased interest in the pre-Columbian history of their country. A sign of increasing cultural tolerance.

In light of Costa Rica's enormous ecotourism market, indigenous communities seeking to attract tourist dollars have also jumped on the green bandwagon. For more information on sustainable travel in these highly sensitive areas, see p421.

pestilent swamps, oppressive jungles and volcanoes made Columbus' paradise seem more like a tropical hell.

A bright moment in Spanish exploration came in 1513 when Balboa heard rumors about a large sea and a wealthy, gold-producing civilization across the mountains of the isthmus – almost certainly referring to the Incan empire of Peru. Driven by equal parts of ambition and greed, Balboa scaled the continental divide, and on September 26, 1513, he became the first European

to set eyes upon the Pacific Ocean. Keeping up with the European fashion of the day, Balboa immediately proceeded to claim the ocean and all the lands it touched for the king of Spain.

The thrill of discovery aside, the *conquistadors* now controlled a strategic western beachhead from which to launch their conquest of Costa Rica. In the name of God and king, aristocratic adventurers plundered indigenous villages, executed resisters and enslaved survivors throughout the Nicoya peninsula. However, none of these bloodstained campaigns led to a permanent presence as intercontinental germ warfare caused outbreaks of feverish death on both sides. Since the area was scarce in mineral wealth and indigenous laborers, the Spanish eventually came to regard it as the 'poorest and most miserable in all the Americas.'

NEW WORLD ORDER

It was not until the 1560s that a Spanish colony was firmly established in Costa Rica. Hoping to cultivate the rich volcanic soil of the Central Valley, the Spanish founded the village of Cartago (p149) on the banks of the Río Reventazón. Although the fledgling colony was extremely isolated, it miraculously survived under the leadership of its first governor, Juan Vásquez de Coronado. Preferring diplomacy over firearms to counter the indigenous threat, Vasquez used Cartago as a base to survey the lands south to Panama and west to the Pacific, and secured deed and title over the colony.

Though Vasquez was later tragically lost at sea in a shipwreck, his legacy endured: Costa Rica was an officially recognized province of the Viceroyalty of New Spain (Virreinato de Nueva España), which was the name given to the viceroy-ruled territories of the Spanish empire in North America, Central America, the Caribbean and Asia.

For roughly three centuries, the Captaincy General of Guatemala (also known as the Kingdom of Guatemala), which extended from Texas to Panama with the exception of modern-day Belize, was a loosely administered colony in the vast Spanish empire. Since the political-military headquarters of the kingdom were in Guatemala, Costa Rica became a minor provincial outpost that had little if any strategic significance or exploitable riches.

As a result of its backwater status, Costa Rica's colonial path diverged from the typical Spanish pattern in that a powerful landholding elite and slave-based economy never gained prominence. Instead of large estates, mining operations and coastal cities, modest-sized villages of small-holders developed in the interior Central Valley. According to national lore, the stoic, self-sufficient farmer provided the backbone for 'rural democracy' as Costa Rica emerged as one of the only egalitarian corners of the Spanish empire.

Equal rights and opportunities were not extended to the indigenous groups and as the Spanish settlement expanded, the local population decreased

Visit World Mysteries at www.world-mysteries.com/sar_12.htm for an investigation of Costa Rica's mysterious stone spheres.

100 BC

Costa Rica becomes part of an extensive trade network that moves gold and other goods and extends from present-day Mexico down through to the Andean empires.

AD 800

Indigenous production of granite spheres begins in the Diquis region, though to this day archaeologists and historians remain divided as to the spheres' intended function and significance.

1502

Christopher Columbus docks his boat at Puerto Limón on the Caribbean coast during his fourth and final voyage to the Americas, ushering in the start of the colonial era in the New World.

1522

Spanish settlement develops in Costa Rica, though it will still be another several decades before the colonists can get a sturdy foothold on the land.

1540

The Kingdom of Guatemala is established by the Spanish, and includes much of Central America, including Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and the Mexican state of Chiapas.

1562

Spanish *conquistador* Juan Vásquez de Coronado arrives in Costa Rica under the title of governor, determined to move the fringe communities of Spanish settlers to the more hospitable Central Valley.

THE LEGACY OF COLUMBUS

Despite the fact that Christopher Columbus never made landfall in what was to become the US, he is revered by the majority of Americans as a national hero. Columbus discovered the New World on October 12, 1492 and the US celebrates the discovery every year, though it's usually observed on a Monday so everyone can spend the day shopping – it's hard to pass up Columbus Day sales.

Recently, however, several cities across the US have removed the national holiday from their calendars. Claiming that Columbus' life was anything but admirable, critics view the day as a celebration of conquest and suffering. In the US Virgin Islands, Columbus Day has been replaced by Puerto Rico-Virgin Islands Friendship Day, which honors the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean who suffered under Spanish colonialism. In the state of South Dakota, Columbus Day has been replaced by Native American Day, which aims to increase awareness of the past history and modern plight of this oft-overlooked indigenous group.

The growing dissent in the US over the legacy of Columbus brings about a simple question: what did Columbus actually discover? Prior to his arrival in 1492, the US had already been 'discovered' by other explorers and immigrants, not to mention the native peoples that were living there. However, Columbus' impact on history is simply to do with the fact that his journeys came at a time when mass media was improving across Europe. By reporting what he saw to Europeans across the social spectrum, Columbus was attributed in the public eye with the discovery of the New World.

In 1828, the great American storyteller Washington Irving published a historical narrative titled *The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*, which aimed to build a foundation of American folklore. His efforts propelled Columbus into the national spotlight, though adulation of the explorer peaked in 1892 when the country celebrated the 400th anniversary of his arrival in

dramatically. From 400,000 at the time Columbus first sailed, the number was reduced to 20,000 a century later, and to 8000 a century after that. While disease was the main source of death, the Spanish were relentless in their effort to exploit the natives as an economic resource. Central Valley groups were the first to fall, though outside the valley several tribes managed to survive a bit longer under forest cover, staging occasional raids. However, as in the rest of Latin America, repeated military campaigns eventually forced them into submission and slavery.

THE FALL OF AN EMPIRE

On October 27, 1807, the Treaty of Fontainebleau, which defined the occupation of Portugal, was signed between Spain and France. Under the guise of reinforcing the Franco-Spanish army occupying Portugal, Napoleon moved tens of thousands of troops into Spain. In an act of military genius, Napoleon ordered his troops to abandon the ruse and seize key Spanish fortifications. Without firing a single shot, Napoleon's

the Americas. All across the country, monuments to Columbus were erected, while cities, towns and streets changed their names, including the capital cities of Columbus (Ohio) and Columbia (South Carolina). The admiration of Columbus was particularly embraced by Italian-American and Catholic communities, who began to view their ancestor as one of the founding fathers of the US.

The need to separate myth from reality brings about a second question: what did Columbus actually achieve? If you ask any American school child, they'll proudly tell you that Columbus proved the world was round even though everyone in Europe thought the world was flat. By defying the conventions of the time and sailing west to get to the Far East (Columbus died believing that he had arrived in the East Indies), Columbus is often hailed as a model of the American 'can-do' attitude. Of course, it is arguable that Columbus didn't actually prove that the world wasn't flat, because Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan was the first person to circumnavigate the globe. (Actually, Magellan didn't circumnavigate the globe in one trip since he was killed in 1521 at the Battle of Mactan in the Philippines. Instead, it was the 18 survivors of his expedition that returned to Spain after a journey of more than three years.)

Unfortunately, history often has a way of succumbing to popular myth and lore. Since Columbus Day in the US is generally thought of as a celebration of the nation's history, there is little room for public discourse on the subject. Today, the majority of Americans do not know the full extent of Columbus' story; critics of the holiday argue that disregarding history is an injustice to the surviving indigenous communities of the New World.

Not surprisingly, this theme has been picked up by politicians across Latin America, most notably left-wing President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, who campaigned in 2003 to wipe out Columbus Day across the Americas. Of course, it's unlikely that Chávez' message will fall on receptive ears in the US, especially given the lukewarm relationship between the two countries.

troops seized Barcelona after convincing the city to open its gates for a convoy of wounded soldiers.

Although Napoleon's invasion by stealth was successful, the resulting Peninsular War was a horrific campaign of guerrilla combat that crippled both countries. As a result of the conflict as well as the subsequent power vacuum and internal turmoil, Spain lost nearly all of its colonial possessions in the first third of the century.

In 1821, the Americas wriggled free of Spain's imperial grip following Mexico's declaration of independence for itself as well as the whole of Central America. Of course, the Central American provinces weren't too keen on having another foreign power reign over them, and subsequently declared independence from Mexico. However, all of these events hardly disturbed Costa Rica, which learned of its liberation a month after the fact.

The newly liberated colonies pondered their fate: stay together in a United States of Central America, or go their separate national ways. At first, they came up with something in between, namely the Central American

1563

The first permanent Spanish colonial settlement in Costa Rica is established in Cartago by Juan Vásquez de Coronado, who chooses the site based on its rich and fertile volcanic soils.

1737

The future capital of San José is established, sparking a rivalry between neighboring Cartago that will eventually culminate in a civil war between the two dominant cities.

19th century

Costa Rica's coffee boom takes off as the country discovers its environmental conditions are ideal for coffee cultivation. By the end of the century, coffee accounts for 80% of foreign-currency earnings.

1821

Following a unanimous declaration by Mexico on behalf of all of Central America, Costa Rica finally gains its independence from Spain after centuries of colonial occupation.

April 1823

The Costa Rican capital officially moves to San José after intense skirmishes with the conservative residents of Cartago, who take issue with the more liberal longings of the power-hungry josefinos.

December 1823

The Monroe Doctrine formerly declares the intentions of the USA to be the dominant imperial power in the Western hemisphere despite protests from European powers.

Federation (CAF), though it could neither field an army nor collect taxes. Accustomed to being at the center of things, Guatemala also attempted to dominate the CAF, alienating smaller colonies and hastening its demise. Future attempts to unite the region would likewise fail.

Meanwhile, an independent Costa Rica was taking shape under Juan Mora Fernandez, first head of state (1824–33). Mora tended toward nation building, and organized new towns, built roads, published a newspaper and coined a currency. His wife even partook in the effort by designing the country's flag.

Life returned to normal, unlike the rest of the region where post-independence civil wars raged on. In 1824, the Nicoya-Guanacaste Province seceded from Nicaragua and joined its more easygoing southern neighbor, defining the territorial borders. In 1852, Costa Rica received its first diplomatic emissaries from the US and Great Britain.

COFFEE RICA

In the 19th century, the riches that Costa Rica had long promised were uncovered when it was realized that the soil and climate of the Central Valley highlands were ideal for coffee cultivation. Costa Rica led Central America in introducing the caffeinated bean, which remade the impoverished country into the wealthiest in the region.

When an export market was discovered, the government actively promoted coffee to farmers by providing free saplings. At first, Costa Rican producers exported their crop to nearby South Americans, who processed the beans and re-exported the product to Europe. By the 1840s, however, local merchants had already built up domestic capacity and learned to scope out their own overseas markets. Their big break came when they persuaded the captain of the HMS *Monarch* to transport several hundred sacks of Costa Rican coffee to London, percolating the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

The Costa Rican coffee boom was on. The drink's quick fix made it popular among working-class consumers in the industrializing north. The aroma of riches lured a wave of enterprising German immigrants to Costa Rica, enhancing the technical and financial skills in the business sector. By century's end, more than one-third of the Central Valley was dedicated to coffee cultivation, and coffee accounted for more than 90% of all exports and 80% of foreign-currency earnings.

The coffee industry in Costa Rica developed differently from the rest of Central America. As elsewhere, there arose a group of coffee barons, elites that reaped the rewards for the export bonanza. Costa Rican coffee barons, however, lacked the land and labor to cultivate the crop. Coffee production is labor intensive, with a long and painstaking harvest season. The small farmers became the principal planters. The coffee barons, instead, monopolized processing, marketing and financing. The coffee economy in Costa Rica created a wide network of high-end traders and small-scale

Thirty-three out of 44 Costa Rican presidents prior to 1970 were descended from just three original colonizing families.

In the 1940s children learned to read with a text that stated, 'Coffee is good for me. I drink coffee every morning.'

growers, whereas in the rest of Central America, a narrow elite controlled large estates, worked by tenant laborers.

Coffee wealth became a power resource in politics. Costa Rica's traditional aristocratic families were at the forefront of the enterprise. At midcentury, three-quarters of the coffee barons were descended from just two colonial families. The country's leading coffee exporter at this time was President Juan Rafael Mora (1849–59), whose lineage went back to the colony's founder Juan Vásquez. Mora was overthrown by his brother-in-law, after the president proposed to form a national bank independent of the coffee barons. The economic interests of the coffee elite would thereafter become a priority in Costa Rican politics.

BANANA EMPIRE

The coffee trade unintentionally gave rise to Costa Rica's next export boom – bananas. Getting coffee out to world markets necessitated a rail link from the central highlands to the coast, and Limón's deep harbor made an ideal port. Inland was dense jungle and infested swamps, which prompted the government to contract the task to Minor Keith, nephew of an American railroad tycoon.

The project was a disaster. Malaria and accidents churned through workers as Tico recruits gave way to US convicts and Chinese indentured servants, who were in turn replaced by freed Jamaican slaves. To entice Keith to continue, the government turned over 800,000 acres of land along the route and provided a 99-year lease to run the railroad. In 1890, the line was finally completed and running at a loss.

Keith had begun to grow banana plants along the tracks as a cheap food source for the workers. Desperate to recoup his investment, he shipped some bananas to New Orleans in the hope of starting a side venture. He struck gold, or rather yellow. Consumers went crazy for the elongated finger fruit. By the early 20th century, bananas surpassed coffee as Costa Rica's most lucrative export and the country became the world's leading banana exporter. Unlike the coffee industry, however, the profits were exported along with the bananas.

Costa Rica was transformed by the rise of Keith's banana empire. He joined with another American importer to found the infamous United Fruit Company, soon the largest employer in Central America. To the locals, it was known as *el pulpo*, the octopus – its tentacles stretched across the region, becoming entangled with the local economy and politics. United Fruit owned huge swathes of lush lowlands, much of the transportation and communication infrastructure and bunches of bureaucrats. The company sparked a wave of migrant laborers from Jamaica, changing the country's ethnic complexion and provoking racial tensions.

For details on the role of Minor Keith and United Fruit in lobbying for a CIA-led coup in Guatemala, pick up a copy of the highly readable *Bitter Fruit* by Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer.

1824

The Nicoya-Guanacaste region votes to secede from Nicaragua and become a part of Costa Rica, though the region's longing for independence from both countries continues to this day.

1843

William Le Lacheur, a Guernsey merchant and ship captain, helps to firmly establish a trade route from Europe to the Pacific coast of Central America via Cape Horn.

1856

Costa Rica puts a damper on the expansionist aims of the war hawks in the USA by defeating William Walker and his invading army at the epic Battle of Santa Rosa.

1889

Costa Rica's first democratic elections are held, a monumental event given the long history of colonial occupation, though unfortunately blacks and women were prohibited by law to vote.

1890

The construction of the railroad between San José and Puerto Limón is finally completed despite years of hardships and countless deaths due to diseases and accidents, such as malaria and yellow fever.

1900

The population of Costa Rica reaches 50,000 as the country begins to develop and prosper due to the increasingly lucrative international coffee and banana trades.

BIRTH OF A NATION

The inequality of the early 20th century led to the rise of José Figueres Ferrer, a self-described farmer-philosopher and the father of Costa Rica's unarmed democracy. The son of Catalan immigrant coffee planters, Figueres excelled in school and went abroad to study engineering. Upon returning to Costa Rica to set up his own coffee plantation, he

GREAT SCOUNDRELS IN HISTORY: WILLIAM WALKER

As the Spanish empire receded, another arose. In the 19th century, the US was in an expansive mood and Spanish America looked increasingly vulnerable.

In 1853, a soldier of fortune named William Walker landed in the Mexican territory of Baja California with 45 men intending to privately conquer Mexico and Central America, establish slavery and mandate white control of the region. Walker succeeded in capturing La Paz, the capital of the territory, and declared himself the president of the new 'Republic of Lower California.'

However, less than three months after occupying the region, he was forced to retreat back to the other California due to lack of supplies and an unexpectedly strong Mexican resistance. Although he was later put on trial for conducting an illegal war, his legendary campaign won him popularity among expansionists in the conservative west and south of the US, which prompted the jury to acquit him in only eight minutes.

In 1856, Walker was back to his old tricks again, this time capitalizing on the civil war that was raging in Nicaragua. After raising a small army, he managed to sack the city of La Virgen and cripple the Nicaraguan national army. One month later, he conquered the capital of Granada and took control of the country through puppet president Patricio Rivas. Soon after, US President Franklin Pierce fully recognized Walker's regime as the legitimate government of Nicaragua.

Before long, Walker was marching on Costa Rica, though Costa Rican President Juan Rafael Mora Porras guessed Walker's intentions and managed to recruit a volunteer army of 9000 civilians. In a brilliant display of military prowess, a ragtag group of fighters surrounded Walker's army as they lay waiting in an old hacienda (estate) in present-day Parque Nacional Santa Rosa (see p218). The battle was over in just 14 minutes and Walker was forever expelled from Costa Rican soil.

During the fighting, a drummer boy from Alajuela, Juan Santamaría, was killed while daringly setting fire to Walker's defenses. The battle soon became national legend and Santamaría was exalted as a Costa Rican patriot and immortalized in statues (and in an airport) throughout the country.

After returning to Nicaragua, Walker declared himself president of the country. However, Walker's popularity was waning on all sides and soon he found himself being repatriated to the US. Of course, Walker's messianic ambitions were far from realized and after a brief hiatus he set out once again for Central America.

On his final (and ultimately fatal) expedition, Walker tried to invade Honduras, which quickly perturbed the British, who saw him as a threat to their affairs in British Honduras (present-day Belize) and the Mosquito Coast (present-day Nicaragua). After being captured by the British Royal Navy, Walker was quickly handed over to the Honduran authorities, who chose death by firing squad as a fitting punishment for trying to take over their country.

organized the hundreds of laborers on his farm into a utopian socialist community, and appropriately named the property La Luz sin Fin, or 'The Struggle without End.'

In the 1940s, Figueres became involved in national politics as an outspoken critic of President Calderón. In the midst of a radio interview in which he badmouthed the president, police broke into the studio and arrested Figueres. He was accused of having fascist sympathies and banished to Mexico. While in exile, however, he formed the Caribbean League, a collection of students and democratic agitators from all over Central America, who pledged to bring down the region's military dictators. When he returned to Costa Rica, the Caribbean League, now 700-men strong, went with him and helped protest against the powers that be.

When government troops descended on the farm with the intention of arresting Figueres and disarming the Caribbean League, it touched off a civil war. The moment had arrived: the diminutive farmer-philosopher now played the man on horseback. Figueres emerged victorious from the brief conflict and seized the opportunity to put into place his vision of Costa Rican social democracy. After dissolving the country's military, Figueres quoted HG Wells: 'The future of mankind cannot include the armed forces.'

As head of a temporary junta government, Figueres enacted nearly 1000 decrees. He taxed the wealthy, nationalized the banks and built a modern welfare state. His 1949 constitution granted full citizenship and voting rights to women, blacks, indigenous groups and Chinese minorities. Today, Figueres' revolutionary regime is regarded as the foundation for Costa Rica's unarmed democracy.

THE AMERICAN EMPIRE

Throughout the 1970s and '80s, the sovereignty of the small nations of Central America was limited by their northern neighbor, the US. Big sticks, gun boats and dollar diplomacy were instruments of a Yankee policy to curtail socialist politics, especially the military oligarchies of Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua.

In 1979, the rebellious Sandinistas toppled the American-backed Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua. Alarmed by the Sandinistas' Soviet and Cuban ties, fervently anticommunist President Ronald Reagan decided it was time to intervene. The Cold War arrived in the hot tropics.

The organizational details of the counter-revolution were delegated to Oliver North, an eager-to-please junior officer working out of the White House basement. North's can-do creativity helped to prop up the famed Contra rebels to incite civil war in Nicaragua. While both sides invoked the rhetoric of freedom and democracy, the war was really a turf battle between left-wing and right-wing thugs.

The Last Country the Gods Made, by Adrian Colesberry, is a collection of essays and photographs, providing an overview of Costa Rican history, geography and society.

1914

Costa Rica is given an economic boost following the opening of the Panama Canal. The canal was forged by 75,000 laborers, many thousands of whom died during construction.

1919

Federico Tinoco Granados is ousted as a dictator of Costa Rica in one of the few episodes of brief violence in an otherwise peaceful political history.

1940

Rafael Ángel Calderón Guardia is elected president and proceeds to improve working conditions in Costa Rica by enacting minimum-wage laws as well as an eight-hour day.

1940s

José Figueres Ferrer becomes involved in national politics and opposes the ruling conservatives. Figueres' social-democratic policies and criticism of the government angers the Costa Rican elite and President Calderón.

1948

Conservative and liberal forces clash, resulting in a six-week civil war that leaves 2000 Costa Ricans dead, many more wounded and destroys much of the country's fledgling infrastructure.

1949

Hoping to heal its wounds while simultaneously charting a bold new course for the future, the temporary government enacts a new constitution that abolishes the army, desegregates the country, and grants women and blacks the right to vote.

For a remarkably one-sided biography of Oliver North, who now works as a war correspondent for Fox News, check out www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,50566,00.html.

Under intense US pressure, Costa Rica was reluctantly dragged in. The Contras set up camp in northern Costa Rica, from where they staged guerilla raids. Not-so-clandestine CIA operatives and US military advisors were dispatched to assist the effort. Allegedly, Costa Rican authorities were bribed to keep quiet. A secret jungle airstrip was built near the border to fly in weapons and supplies. To raise cash for the rebels, it was reported that North neatly used his covert supply network to traffic illegal narcotics through the region.

The war polarized Costa Rica. From conservative quarters came a loud call to re-establish the military and join the anticommunist crusade, which was largely underwritten by the US Pentagon. In May of 1984, over 20,000 demonstrators marched through San José to give peace a chance, though the debate didn't climax until the 1986 presidential election. The victor was 44-year-old Oscar Arias, who despite being born into coffee wealth, was an intellectual reformer in the mold of Figueres, his political patron.

Once in office, Arias affirmed his commitment to a negotiated resolution and reasserted Costa Rican national independence. He vowed to uphold his country's pledge of neutrality and to vanquish the Contras from the territory, which prompted the US ambassador to suddenly quit his post. In a public ceremony, Costa Rican school children planted trees on top of the CIA's secret airfield. Most notably, Arias became the driving force in uniting Central America around a peace plan, which ended the Nicaraguan war, and earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987.

THE GREEN REVOLUTION

In the 1970s, world coffee prices rapidly dropped due to oversupply, which plunged Costa Rica into an economic crisis. However, the unpredictable nature of the global commodity markets created a rather unusual alliance between economic developers and environmental conservationists. If wealth could not be sustained through exports, then what about imports – of tourists?

Drawing on the success of the Reserva Natural Absoluta Cabo Blanco, the country's first federally protected conservation area (see p314 for more information), Costa Rica embarked on a green revolution. In 1975, the Reserva Biológica Bosque Nuboso Monteverde recorded only 500 tourists, though it wasn't long before the rain forest was essentially paying for itself. By 1985, tourism was annually contributing US\$100 million to the Costa Rican economy.

The ecotourism boom was on. By 1995, there were more than 125 government-protected sites, including national parks, forest preserves and wildlife reserves. The very same year, annual tourist revenues exceeded US\$750 million and surpassed coffee and bananas as the main source of foreign currency earnings.

Success also encouraged private landholders to build reserves and today almost one-third of the entire country is under some form of environmental protection. Since 1999, Costa Rica has attracted more than one million tourists each year and continues to serve as a testament to the fact that development and conservation need not be competing interests.

COSTA RICA TODAY

In the February 2006 presidential election, Oscar Arias once again returned to office after narrowly beating Citizens' Action Party (CAP) candidate Otton Solís. After weeks of investigating potential irregularities and recounting votes, Solís conceded. Arias earned just 18,169 votes more than his opponent, winning the popular election by a 1.2% margin.

Solís' showing was significant, as his CAP was a newcomer on the political scene, founded only in 2000. Attempting to break into Costa Rica's two-party system, CAP's platform promoted citizen participation and condemned corruption – issues made relevant by the previous administration. However, the topic that dominated this particular election was the US-Central American Free Trade Agreement (Cafta).

Proponents of Cafta – including Arias – touted its economic benefits, including increased access to US markets and the prospect of job creation. Critics argued that the accord did not protect Costa Rica's small farmers and domestic industries, which would inevitably struggle to compete with the anticipated flood of cheap US products. As Solís explained, 'The law of the jungle benefits the big beast. We are a very small beast.'

Critics were also worried about Cafta's effects on the environment – always a hot issue (literally and figuratively). They feared that the international trade agreement would take precedent over local conservation laws, forcing Costa Rica to allow offshore oil drilling and open-pit mining, among other detrimental activities. However, at the time of writing, Cafta was set to go into effect from October 1, 2008 and it's near impossible to accurately predict the eventual ramifications of this accord.

Prior to his re-election, President Oscar Arias founded the Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress; on the web at www.arias.or.cr.

1963

Reserva Natural Absoluta Cabo Blanco at the tip of the Nicoya peninsula becomes Costa Rica's first federally protected conservation area through the efforts of Swedish and Danish conservationists.

1987

President Oscar Arias wins the Nobel Peace Prize for his work on the Central American peace accords, which brought about greater political freedom throughout the region.

2000

At the start of the new millennium, the population of Costa Rica tops four million, though many believe the number is far greater due to burgeoning illegal settlements on the fringes of the capital.

2005

A devastating fire at San José's Calderon Guardia hospital kills 17 patients and two nurses, a landmark event that shatters the atmosphere of a country unaccustomed to dealing with tragedy.

2006

Nobel laureate Oscar Arias is elected president for the second time in his political career on a pro-Cafta (US-Central American Free Trade Agreement) platform despite winning by an extremely narrow margin.

2007

A national referendum narrowly passes Cafta. Opinion is divided as to whether opening up trade with the US will be beneficial for Costa Rica.

The Culture

TICO PRIDE

Costa Ricans, or Ticos, take great pride in defining themselves by what they are not. In comparison with their Central American neighbors, they aren't poor, they aren't illiterate and they aren't beleaguered by political tumult. It's a curious line-up of negatives that somehow adds up to one big positive.

Ticos are also extremely proud of their country, from its ecological jewels, high standard of living and education levels to, above all else, the fact that it has flourished without an army for the past 50-plus years. They view their country as an oasis of calm in a land that has been continuously degraded by warfare. The Nobel Prize that Oscar Arias received for his work on the Central American peace accords is a point of pride and confirms the general feeling that they are somehow different from a grosser, more violent world. Peace is priceless.

Ticos are inevitably well mannered and will do all they can to *quedar bien* (leave a good impression). Conversations start with a cordial *buenos días* (good morning) or *buenas tardes* (good afternoon), as well as friendly inquiries about your well-being before delving into business. Bullying and yelling will get you nowhere, but a smile and a friendly greeting goes a long way.

LIFESTYLE

A lack of war and the presence of strong exports and stronger tourism have meant that Costa Rica enjoys the highest standard of living in Central America. For the most part, Costa Ricans live fairly rich and comfortable lives, even by Western standards.

One of the main reasons for the social cohesiveness of Costa Rican society is the strength and influence of family ties. Indeed, the family unit remains the nucleus of life in Costa Rica and serves as a support network for everyone involved. Families socialize together and groups of the same clan will often live near each other in clusters. Furthermore, celebrations, weddings and family gatherings are a social outlet for rich and poor alike, and those with relatives in positions of power – nominal or otherwise – don't hesitate to turn to them for support.

Given this mutually cooperative environment, it shouldn't come as a surprise that life expectancy in Costa Rica exceeds that of the US. In fact, most Costa Ricans are more likely to die of heart disease or cancer, as opposed to the childhood diseases that tend to claim lives in many developing nations. A nationwide healthcare system and proper sanitation systems account for these positive statistics, as does a generally stress-free lifestyle, tropical weather and a healthy and varied diet.

Similar to the industrialized world, families have an average of 2.2 children. For the most part, Costa Rican youths spend ample time on middle-class worries, such as dating, music, belly-baring fashions and *fútbol* (soccer). Primary education is free and compulsory, contributing to the 97% literacy rate. Costa Rica also has a comprehensive socialized medical system and pension scheme that looks after the needs of the country's sick and elderly.

The middle and upper class largely reside in San José and the major cities of the Central Valley highlands (Heredia, Alajuela and Cartago) and enjoy a level of comfort similar to their economic brethren in Europe and the US. They live in large homes or apartments, have a maid, a car or two and, for the lucky few, a second home on the beach or in the mountains. On the outskirts of these urban areas, the urban poor have hastily constructed shanty towns, but certainly not on the scale of some other Latin American countries.

The most comprehensive and complete book on Costa Rican history and culture is *The Ticos: Culture and Social Change in Costa Rica* by Mavis, Richard and Karen Biesanz.

The home of an average Tico is a one-story construction made of concrete blocks, wood or a combination of both. In the poorer lowland areas, people often live in windowless houses made of *caña brava*, a local cane.

For the vast majority of *campesinos* (farmers) and *indígenas* (indigenous people), life is hard, and poverty levels are higher and standards of living are lower than in the rest of the country. This is especially true along the Caribbean coast where the descendants of Jamaican immigrants have long suffered from a lack of attention by the federal government. However, although poor families have few possessions and little financial security, every member assists with working the land or contributing to the household, which creates a strong safety net.

As in the rest of the developing world, globalization is having a dramatic effect on family ways. These days, society is increasingly geographically mobile – the Tico that was born in Puntarenas might end up managing a lodge on the Península de Osa. And, with the advent of better paved roads, cell (mobile) phones, electrification and the presence of 50,000-plus North American and European expats, change will continue to come at a steady pace for the Tico family unit.

ECONOMY

For nearly 20 years, Costa Rica's economy has remained remarkably stable thanks to strong returns on tourism, agriculture and industry. Commerce, tourism and services (hotels, restaurants, tourist services, banks and insurance) account for 60.4% of the total gross domestic product (GDP), while agriculture and industry make up 8.6% and 31% respectively.

Principle agriculture exports include pineapples, coffee, beef, sugar, rice, dairy products, vegetables, fruits and ornamental plants, while industrial exports include electronic components (microchips), food processing, textiles, construction materials, fertilizer and medical equipment.

Poverty levels have also been kept in check for more than 20 years by strong welfare programs. Although approximately 18% of the populace lives below the poverty line, beggars are few and far between, and you won't see the packs of ragged street kids that seem to roam around other Latin American capitals.

A subsistence farmer might earn as little as US\$100 a year, far below the national average of US\$12,500 per capita. However, even in the most deprived region, such as the Caribbean coast, most people have adequate facilities and clean drinking water. In fact, Unicef estimates that 92% of households have adequate sanitation systems, while 97% have access to potable water.

Increased legal and illegal immigration from Nicaragua has started to put a strain on the economic system. At present, there are an estimated 300,000 to 500,000 Nicaraguans in Costa Rica, who serve as an important source of mostly unskilled labor, but also threaten to overwhelm the welfare state.

Foreign investors continue to be attracted by the country's political stability, high education levels and well-developed tourism infrastructure. At the same time, the government is struggling to curb inflation, tackle its rising debts and reform its antiquated tax system. However, the current administration believes that the soon-to-be-implemented US-Central American Free Trade Agreement (Cafta) will result in an improved investment climate.

POPULATION

Costa Ricans call themselves Ticos (men and groups of men and women) or Ticas (females). Two-thirds of the nation's almost four million people live in the Meseta Central (Central Valley) and almost one-third is under the age of 15.

The expression *matando la culebra* (meaning 'to be idle,' literally 'killing the snake') originates with peons from banana plantations. When foremen would ask what they'd been doing, the response was, '¡Matando la culebra!'.

In the 1940s, Costa Rica was an overwhelmingly agricultural society, with the vast majority of the population employed by coffee and banana plantations. By the end of the century, the economy had shifted quite dramatically, and only one-fifth of the labor force was employed by agriculture. These days, industry (especially agro-industry) employs another one-fifth, while the service sector employs more than half of the labor force. Banking and commerce are prominent, but tourism alone employs more than 10% of the labor force.

Most inhabitants are *mestizo*, a mix of Spanish with Indian and/or black roots, though the vast majority of Ticos consider themselves to be white. Although it's difficult to offer a precise explanation for this cultural phenomenon, it is partly due to the fact that Costa Rica's indigenous populations were virtually wiped out by the Spanish *conquistadores* (conquerors). As a result, most Costa Ricans prefer to trace their ancestry back to the European continent and take considerable pride in the purity and clarity of their Spanish.

Indigenous Costa Ricans today make up only 1% of the total population. These groups include the Bribri and Cabécar (p494), the Brunka (p382), the Guaymí (p408) and the Maleku (p504). For more information on their histories, see boxed text Endangered Cultures, opposite.

Less than 3% of the population is black, the vast majority of whom are concentrated on the Caribbean coast. Tracing its ancestry to Jamaican immigrants who were brought to build railroads in the 19th century, this population speaks Mecatelio: a patois of English, Spanish and Jamaican English. It identifies strongly with its counterparts in other Caribbean countries; coconut spiced cuisine and calypso music are only a couple of elements that travelers can enjoy. In Limón, still common are the rituals of *obeah*, or sorcery, passed down from African ancestors.

Chinese immigrants (1%) also arrived in Costa Rica to build railroads in the 19th century, though there have been regular, more voluntary waves of immigration since then. In recent years North American and European immigration has greatly increased and it is estimated that roughly 50,000 North American expats live in the country.

SPORTS

The national sport is, you guessed it, *fútbol*. Every town has a soccer field (which usually serves as the most conspicuous landmark) where neighborhood aficionados play in heated matches.

The *selección nacional* (national selection) team is known affectionately as La Sele. Legions of rabid Tico fans still recall La Sele's most memorable moments, including an unlikely showing in the quarterfinals at the 1990 World Cup in Italy and a solid (if not long-lasting) performance in the 2002 World Cup. Most recently, Tico fans were celebrating La Sele's qualification to participate in the 2006 World Cup in Germany, although the team failed to progress beyond the first round. Costa Rica has also played several times in the Copa America, twice making it to the quarterfinals. Women's soccer is not followed with as much devotion, but there is a female national team. The regular season is from August to May.

Surfing is growing in popularity among Ticos. Costa Rica annually hosts numerous national and international competitions that are widely covered by local media.

Bullfighting is also popular, particularly in the Guanacaste region, though the bull isn't killed in the Costa Rican version of the sport. More aptly described, bullfighting is really a ceremonial opportunity to watch a drunk cowboy run around with a bull. The popular Latin American sport of cockfighting is illegal.

Get player statistics, game schedules and find out everything you ever needed to know about La Sele, the Costa Rican national soccer team, at www.fedefutbol.com (in Spanish).

Costa Rica hosts an annual tennis tournament known as La Copa del Café (The Coffee Cup).

MULTICULTURALISM

The mix of mainstream *mestizo* society with blacks, Asians, Indians and North Americans provides the country with an interesting fusion of culture and cuisine. And while the image of the welcoming Tico is largely true, tensions always exist.

For the black population, racism has been a reality for more than a century. About 75% of the country's black population resides on the Caribbean coast, and this area has been historically marginalized and deprived of services by a succession of governments (black Costa Ricans were not allowed in the Central Valley until after 1948). Nonetheless, good manners prevail and black visitors can feel comfortable traveling around the entire country. Asian Ticos and the small Jewish population have frequently been the subject of immature jokes, though Jewish and Asian travelers alike can expect to be treated well.

It is Nicaraguans who are currently the butt of some of society's worst prejudice. During the 1980s, the civil war provoked a wave of immigration from Nicaragua. While the violence in this neighboring country has ended, most immigrants prefer to stay in Costa Rica for its economic opportunities. Many nationals like to blame Nicas for an increase in violent crime, though no proof of this claim exists (see boxed text Nica vs Tico, p229).

ENDANGERED CULTURES

The Europeans that made the long journey across the Atlantic did not come to admire the native culture. Spanish *conquistadores* (conquerors) valued the indigenous populations as an economic resource: they ruthlessly leveled tribal society, plundered its meager wealth and hunted down and enslaved the survivors. Catholic missionaries followed closely behind, charged with eradicating heathen beliefs and instilling a more civilized lifestyle. As a result, native culture in Costa Rica came close to extinction.

The remnants of a traditional native lifestyle survived at the outer margins, kept alive by isolated families beyond the reach of law and popular culture. The indigenous groups were not even encouraged to assimilate, but instead were actively excluded from Spanish-dominated society. Well into the 20th century, they were forbidden from entering populated regions and were denied fundamental political and legal rights. Indigenous peoples were not granted citizenship until the 1949 constitution, though in practice their status did not change much as a result.

In 1977, the government created the reservation system, which allowed indigenous groups to organize themselves into self-governing communities. The government, however, retained title to the land. With this change, it was now permitted to engage in traditional languages and customs – for those descendants who could still remember their roots. Ironically, this more tolerant government policy also meant access to public education and job opportunities, which accelerated native language loss and Tico acculturation.

Presently, there are 22 reservations in Costa Rica but indigenous cultures remain highly endangered. The language of the once-robust Central Valley Huetar is already extinct. In Guanacaste, the cultural inheritance of the Chorotega tribe, descendants of the rich Mesoamerican tradition, is now all but depleted. Many of the Bribri and Cabécar who remained in the Caribbean lowlands tended to shed their native ways after finding employment on the banana plantations. The only exception is in remote pockets of the south, where some Guaymí still speak the native tongue, wear traditional garments, and hunt and gather to subsist (see boxed text Guaymí, p408).

The Brunka, also called Boruca, is what remains of three great chiefdoms that once inhabited the Peninsula de Osa and much of the south; now they are restricted to a reservation in the valley of the Río Grande de Térraba. While their annual Fiesta de los Diablitos attracts much outside attention, their language is nearly extinct and their land is threatened by a proposal for a huge hydroelectric project (see p383).

NORTH AMERICAN IMMIGRATION

Costa Rica is currently grappling with identity issues raised by the influx of North American (and some European) settlers. Many Ticos are starting to feel that they are being discriminated against in their own country. It is not hard to see why, especially considering that more than two-thirds of all coastal property is owned by foreigners. Signs are in English, prices are in dollars and many top-end resorts are managed exclusively by foreigners, with locals serving primarily as maids and gardeners.

Some foreign hotel owners make a point of keeping their business in exclusively foreign hands. 'No Ticos,' one hotel manager on the Pacific coast said proudly. Yet another confided, 'These Latin Americans don't like to work.' This is certainly not the attitude of the majority of North American immigrants, but nobody can deny that discrimination exists. In contrast, some travelers have complained that Costa Rica is somehow a 'less authentic' destination because of the large numbers of North Americans.

But it is worth recognizing the contributions immigrants have made. Many European and North American immigrants have been responsible for organizing, supporting and financing the nation's major conservation and environmental efforts. It was two immigrants from Scandinavia who helped found the country's first national park, the Reserva Natural Absoluta Cabo Blanco (p314). On the other hand, some North American immigrants are choosing to live in gated residential communities that have little connection to the daily lives of most Ticos. Clearly, Costa Rica is in a state of cultural evolution, and it remains to be seen where the country will head in the years to come.

Indigenous populations remain largely invisible to many in Costa Rican society. Many indigenous people lead Westernized, inherently Tico, lives, and others inhabit the country's reserves and maintain a more traditional lifestyle (see boxed text *Endangered Cultures*, p49). Note that one translation of Indian is *indio*, which is an insulting term; *indígena* is the preferred term, meaning 'indigenous.'

MEDIA

Satellite TV is fairly ubiquitous in Costa Rica, which means that you can choose anything from Venezuelan *telenovelas* (soap operas) and Hollywood movies to Premier League football and CNN. Likewise, there is a full spectrum of radio programming, though the mix tends to skew toward reggaetón. If you read Spanish and you want to catch the latest news and politics, look no further than the daily *La Nación*.

The law guaranteeing freedom of the press in Costa Rica is the oldest in Central America, dating from 1835. While Costa Rica certainly enjoys more press freedom than most Latin American countries, do not expect a great deal of probity from its media. The outlets are limited and coverage tends to be cautious, largely due to conservative media laws.

Surprisingly, Costa Rica has a *desacato*, or insult law, on its books. This is common in most Latin American countries and allows public figures to sue journalists if their honor has been 'damaged' by the media. A 'right of response' law allows individuals who have been criticized in the media equal attention (time or space) to reply to the charges. These laws are considered to limit the freedom of the press and provide officials with a shield from public scrutiny. Indeed, in a 2003 survey, 41% of reporters polled indicated that they had left out some information due to legal concerns, while 79% said they felt some pressure to forego investigation of certain issues.

The 2001 assassination of radio journalist Parmenio Medina gave reporters another reason not to dig deep. Medina was the host of a popular

investigative program called *La Patada* (The Kick). Shortly before broadcasting a series on financial irregularities at a now-defunct Catholic radio station, Parmenio Medina was shot to death outside his home in Heredia. Nine men, including a priest, were brought to trial in connection with the murder at the end of 2005, though the verdict has been delayed due to frequent appeals.

Other laws prevent journalists from doing an effective job. Libel and slander laws put the burden of proof on reporters and they are frequently required to reveal their sources in court. In July 2004, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights struck down a defamation decision against Mauricio Herrera Ulloa of *La Nación*. The Costa Rican government has promised to abide by the ruling, which called for a revision of the criminal libel laws, though progress has been frustratingly slow.

RELIGION

More than 75% of Ticos are Catholic (at least in principle). And while many show a healthy reverence for the Virgin Mary, they rarely profess blind faith to the dictates coming from Rome – apparently 'pure life' doesn't require being excessively penitent. Most people tend to go to church for the sacraments (baptism, first communion, confirmation, marriage and death) and the holidays.

Religious processions on holy days are generally less fervent and colorful than those found in Latin American countries such as Guatemala or Peru, though the procession for the patron virgin, La Virgen de los Ángeles, held annually on August 2, does draw penitents who walk from all over Central America to Cartago to show devotion. Semana Santa (the week before Easter) is a national holiday: everything (even buses) stops operating at lunchtime on Maundy Thursday and doesn't start up again until the afternoon of Holy Saturday.

Roughly 14% of Costa Ricans are evangelical Christians; increased interest in evangelical religions is attributed to a greater sense of community spirit within the churches. The black community on the Caribbean is largely Protestant and there are small Jewish populations in San José and Jacó. There are sprinklings of Middle Easterners and Asians who practice Islam and Buddhism, respectively.

WOMEN IN COSTA RICA

Women are traditionally respected in Costa Rica (Mother's Day is a national holiday) and since 1974, the Costa Rican family code has stipulated that husband and wife have equal duties and rights. In addition, women can draw up contracts, assume loans and inherit property; sexual harassment and sex discrimination are against the law. In 1996, Costa Rica passed a landmark law against domestic violence, one of the most progressive in Latin America.

But only recently have women made gains in the workplace, with growing roles in political, legal, scientific and medical fields. In 1993, Margarita Penon (Oscar Arias wife) ran as a presidential candidate. In 1998, both vice presidents (Costa Rica has two) were women: Astrid Fischel and Elizabeth Odio.

Despite some advances, machismo is not a thing of the past. Antidiscrimination laws are rarely enforced and women are generally lower paid and are less likely to be considered for high-level jobs. They also have more difficulty getting loans, even though their repayment record is better than that of men. In the countryside, many women maintain traditional roles: raising children, cooking and running the home.

In conjunction with two indigenous women, Paula Palmer wrote *Taking Care of Sibö's Gifts*, an inspiring account of the intersection between the spiritual and environmental values of the Bribrí.

For Costa Rican news in English, check out the weekly *Tico Times* at www.ticotimes.net or the tabloid *Inside Costa Rica* at www.insidecostarica.com.

Follow current events in Costa Rica at the website of the top daily, *La Nación*, at www.nacion.com.

ARTS

Literature

Few writers or novelists are available in translation and, unfortunately, much of what is written about Costa Rica and available in English (fiction or otherwise) is written by foreigners.

Carmen Naranjo (1930–) is one of the few contemporary Costa Rican writers who has risen to international acclaim. She is a novelist, poet and short-story writer who also served as ambassador to India in the 1970s, and a few years later as Minister of Culture. In 1996, she was awarded the prestigious Gabriela Mistral medal from the Chilean government. Her collection of short stories, *There Never Was a Once Upon a Time*, is widely available in English. Two of her stories can also be found in *Costa Rica: A Traveler's Literary Companion*.

Tatiana Lobo (1939–) was actually born in Chile, but has lived since 1967 in Costa Rica where her many books are set. She received the noteworthy Premio Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz for Latin American women novelists for her novel *Asalto al Paraíso* (Assault on Paradise).

José León Sánchez (1930–) is an internationally renowned memoirist. A Huetar Indian from the border of Costa Rica and Nicaragua, he was convicted for stealing from the famous Basilica de Nuestra Señora de los Ángeles (p149) in Cartago, and sentenced to serve his term at Isla San Lucas, one of Latin America's most notorious jails.

Illiterate when he was incarcerated, Sánchez taught himself how to read and write, and clandestinely authored one of the continent's most poignant memoirs: *La Isla de los Hombres Solos* (called *God Was Looking the Other Way* in the translated version). He served 20 years of his 45-year sentence and went on to produce 14 other novels and serve in several high-level public appointments.

Theater

The most famous theater in the country is the Teatro Nacional (p87) in San José. The story goes that a noted European opera company was on a Latin American tour but declined to perform in Costa Rica for lack of a suitable hall. Immediately, the coffee elite put a special cultural tax on coffee exports for the construction of a world-class theater. The Teatro Nacional is now the premier venue for plays, opera, performances by the national symphony orchestra, ballet, poetry readings and other cultural events. It is also an architectural work in its own right and a landmark in any city tour of San José.

Visual Arts

The visual arts in Costa Rica first took on a national character in the 1920s, when Teodórico Quirós, Fausto Pacheco and their contemporaries began painting landscapes that varied from traditional European styles, depicting the rolling hills and lush forest of Costa Rican countryside, often sprinkled with characteristic adobe houses.

The contemporary scene is more varied and it is difficult to define a unique Tico style. Several individual artists have garnered acclaim for their art work, including the magical realism of Isidro Con Wong; the surreal paintings and primitive engravings of Francisco Amighetti; and the mystical female figures painted by Rafa Fernández. Other artists incorporate an infinite variety of themes in various media, from painting and sculpture to video and site-specific installations. The Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo (p84) in San José is the top place to see this type of work and its permanent collection is a great primer.

Many art galleries are geared toward tourists and specialize in 'tropical art' (for lack of an official description): brightly colored, whimsical folk paintings depicting flora and fauna that evoke the work of French artist Henri Rousseau.

Folk art and handicrafts are not as widely produced or readily available as in other Central American countries. However, the dedicated souvenir hunter will have no problem finding the colorful Sarchí oxcarts (p135) that have become a symbol of Costa Rica. Indigenous crafts, which include intricately carved and painted masks as well as handwoven bags and linens, are also widely available.

Music & Dance

The mix of cultures in Costa Rica has resulted in a lively music scene, incorporating elements from North and South America and the Caribbean islands. Popular dance music includes Latin dances, such as salsa, merengue, bolero and cumbia.

One Tico salsa group that has made a significant name for itself at a regional level is Los Brillanticos, which once shared the stage with Cuban legend Celia Cruz during a tour stop she made in San José. Timbaleo is a salsa orchestra founded by Ramsés Araya, who became famous as the drummer for Panamanian salsa superstar Ruben Blades. Taboga Band is another long-standing Costa Rican group that plays jazz-influenced salsa and merengue music.

San José features a regular line-up of domestic and international rock, folk and hip-hop artists, but you'll find that the regional sounds are equally vibrant, featuring their own special rhythms, instruments and styles. For instance, the Península de Nicoya has a rich musical history, most of it made with guitars, maracas and marimbas. The traditional sound on the Caribbean coast is calypso, which has roots in the Afro-Carib slave culture.

Guanacaste is also the birthplace of many traditional dances, most of which depict courtship rituals between country folk. The most famous dance – sometimes considered the national dance – is the *punto guanacasteco* (see the boxed text *La Fiestas de Guanacaste*, p204). What keeps it lively is the *bomba*, a funny (and usually racy) rhymed verse, shouted out by the male dancers during the musical interlude.

See a stunning and comprehensive visual database on Central American contemporary art at the website for the Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo at www.madac.ac.cr/.

Costa Rica: A Traveler's Literary Companion, edited by Barbara Ras, is a fine collection of 26 short stories by modern Costa Rican writers, offering a valuable glimpse of society from Ticos themselves.

Food & Drink

All it takes is a quick glance at the menu to realize that Costa Rica is firmly rooted in the tropics. From exotic fruits such as mangoes, guavas and lychees and the obligatory cup of shade-grown coffee, to fillets of locally raised fish and a zesty *ceviche* (uncooked but well-marinated seafood) featuring the catch of the day, Costa Rica is just as much a feast for the palate as it for the eyes.

Of course, Costa Rica remains fiercely true to its Latin roots by featuring rice and beans prominently at most meals. Thatched country kitchens can be found all over Costa Rica, with local women ladling out basic but hearty home-cooked specials known as *comida típica* (typical food). And of course, Costa Ricans go wild for a good steak, which partially explains the abundance of cattle ranches throughout the country.

If you prefer your Tico (Costa Rican) fare a bit more upscale with a nouveau twist, the country's trendier tourist areas have seen a high level of immigration from Europe and the US, which assures a wide selection of just about anything you might want to munch on. Whether you're partial to sushi or souvlaki, this little country can go miles to satiate your appetite.

STAPLES & SPECIALTIES

If you're looking for rich and fiery *mole poblano* (meat in a rich chocolate sauce), or a perfectly crafted avocado soup, you've come to the wrong country. Sadly, the complex and varied dishes concocted in Mexico and Guatemala never made it south of the border. Costa Rican food, for the most part, is very basic and somewhat bland. The diet consists largely of rice and beans – and beans and rice – though it's fresh, hearty and honest fare.

Breakfast for Ticos is usually *gallo pinto* (literally 'spotted rooster'), a stir-fry of rice and beans. When the beans and rice are combined, the rice gets colored by the beans and the mix obtains a speckled appearance. Served with eggs, cheese or *natilla* (sour cream), *gallo pinto* is generally cheap (usually a dollar or two), filling and sometimes can be downright tasty. If you plan to spend the whole day surfing or hiking, you'll find that rice and beans is great energy food. If you are not keen on rice and beans, many hotels will provide what they refer to as a 'tropical breakfast,' which is usually bread along with a selection of fresh fruits. American-style breakfasts are also available in many eateries and are, needless to say, heavy on the fried foods and fatty meats.

Most restaurants offer a set meal at lunch and dinner called a *casado*, or a 'married man's' lunch. This meal is always cheap, heavy on the stomach and well balanced with meat, beans, rice and salad. An extremely popular *casado* is the ubiquitous *arroz con pollo*, which is (as its name implies) chicken and rice that is usually dressed up with grains, vegetables and a good mix of mild spices. Also look out for *patacones*, which are mashed plantains that are fried and eaten like fries.

Food is not heavily spiced, unless you're having traditional Caribbean-style cuisine. The vast majority of Ticos have a distinct aversion to hot sauce, though most local restaurants will lay out a spicy *curtido* (a pickle of hot peppers and vegetables) or little bottles of Tabasco-style sauce for the diehards. Another popular condiment is *salsa lizano*, the Tico version of Worcestershire sauce.

Considering the extent of the coastline, it is no surprise that seafood is plentiful and fish dishes are usually fresh and delicious. Fish is often fried, but may also be grilled or blackened. While not traditional Tico fare, *ceviche*

Order gourmet Costa Rican coffee and other treats at www.cafebritt.com.

Concinando con Tia Florita is a popular Tico cooking show. Check out the recipes and meet Tia Florita herself at www.concinandocontiaflorita.tv.

Entradas: Journeys in Latin American Cuisine, by Joan Chatfield-Taylor, has some of Costa Rica's most popular recipes – and many others.

THE GALLO PINTO CONTROVERSY

No other dish in Costa Rica inspires Ticos quite like their national dish of *gallo pinto*, that ethereal medley of rice, beans and spices. Of course, exactly what combination of this holy trinity makes up authentic *gallo pinto* is the subject of intense debate, especially since it is also the national dish of neighboring Nicaragua.

Both countries claim that the dish originated on their soil. Costa Rican lore holds that the dish and its iconic name were coined in 1930 in the neighborhood of San Sebastián, which is on the southern outskirts of San José. Nicaraguans claim that it was brought to the Caribbean coast of their country by Afro-Latinos long before it graced the palate of any Costa Rican.

The battle for the rights to *gallo pinto* doesn't stop here, especially since the two countries can't even agree on the standard recipe. Nicaraguans traditionally prepare it with small red beans, while Costa Ricans swear by black beans. And we're not even going to bore you with the subtle complexities of balancing cilantro, salt and pepper.

Much to the dismay of patriotic Costa Ricans, Nicaragua currently holds the world record for the biggest ever pot of *gallo pinto*. On September 15, 2007, a seething vat of *gallo pinto* fed 22,200 people, which firmly entrenched Nicaragua's name next to *gallo pinto* in the *Guinness Book of World Records*.

While traveling in Costa Rica, it's probably best not to mention this embarrassment. Geopolitics, complicated histories and mutual bad blood aside, Costa Ricans aren't too happy about Nicaraguans laying claim to their national dish!

is on most menus and usually contains either octopus, tilapia, dorado and/or dolphin (the fish, not Flipper). Raw fish is marinated in lime juice with chillies, tomatoes and herbs. Served chilled, it is a delectable way to enjoy fresh seafood. Emphasis is on 'fresh' here – this is raw fish (think sushi), so if you have reason to believe it is not fresh, don't risk eating it.

The most popular foreign food in Costa Rica (at least amongst the Ticos) is Chinese. Nearly every town has a Chinese place and even if it doesn't, menus will likely include *arroz cantonés* (fried rice). Italian food is also extremely popular and pizza parlors and Italian restaurants of varying quality abound. Of course, the locally produced pizzas are sometimes heavily loaded cheese bombs.

If an establishment doesn't exactly impress you with its cleanliness, then it might be advisable not to eat fruits, vegetables or salads there. If they are improperly washed, you could be sending your stomach a little bacteria surprise, though generally speaking water from the tap in Costa Rica is of sufficient quality to drink.

DRINKS

Coffee is probably the most popular beverage in the country and wherever you go, someone is likely to offer you a *cafécito*. Traditionally, it is served strong and mixed with hot milk to taste, also known as *café con leche*. Most drinkers get *café negro* (black coffee) and for those who want a little milk, you can ask for *leche al lado* (milk on the side). Many trendier places serve cappuccinos and espressos and milk is nearly always pasteurized and safe to drink.

For a refresher, nothing beats *batidos* – fresh fruit drinks (like smoothies) made either *al agua* (with water) or *con leche* (with milk). The array can be mind-boggling and includes mango, papaya, *piña* (pineapple), *sandía* (watermelon), *melón* (cantaloupe), *mora* (blackberry), *zanahoria* (carrot), *cebada* (barley) or *tamarindo* (fruit of the tamarind tree). If you are wary about the condition of the drinking water, ask that your *batido* be made with *agua enbotellada* (bottled water) and *sin hielo* (without ice), though again, water is generally safe to drink throughout the country.

Coffee was thought to energize workers, so in 1840 the government decreed that all laborers building roads should be provided with one cup of coffee every day.

TRAVEL YOUR TASTE BUDS

Think you've got a strong palate, an iron gut and the will to travel your taste buds? Here is our list of Costa Rica's top five less-than-popular culinary oddities.

- **Mondongo (tripe soup)** Unless you grew up eating the stuff, it's difficult for most people to dig into a hot, steamy bowl of boiled intestines. Assuming you can forget about what you're eating, where they came from and what used to pass through them, flavors like chewy, stringy and spongy don't exactly get the mouth watering and the stomach grumbling.
- **Ceviche de pulpo (octopus ceviche)** Sushi aficionados the world over may disagree with us, but it takes a bit of mental preparation to put a piece of raw octopus in your mouth. Although the citric acid in the lime juice arguably cooks the octopus, it's still rubbery and hard to chew, and it's difficult to describe the feeling of the suckers sliding down your throat.
- **Vino de palma (palm wine)** The preferred firewater of rural *campesinos* (farmers) throughout Costa Rica, palm wine is the fermented sap of the *palma de corozo* tree. After burning your innards, inducing temporary blindness and killing a few million brain cells, you will be treated to one of the worst hangovers of your life.
- **Chicharrones (fried pig skin)** Although hot, salty and oily are usually good adjectives for describing a snack food, it's hard to eat pig skin if you've ever seen one rolling around in its own filth. Of course, 'pork rinds' are a popular snack food in the US, though the real thing is less like a pork-flavored potato chip and more like a greasy slab of pork-flavored fat.
- **Huevos de tortugas (turtle eggs)** Although they're rumored to increase virility, prolong erections and make you a champ in the sack, eating the eggs of endangered sea turtles is just plain wrong. Although they do occasionally appear on the menu, the taste is an earthy mix of species extinction and environmental insensitivity.

A bottled, though less-tasty alternative, is a local fruit beverage called 'Tropical.' It's sold in many stores and restaurants and the most common flavors are *mora*, *piña*, *cas* (a tart local fruit) and *frutas mixtas* (mixed fruit). Just shake vigorously before drinking or the powder-like substance at the bottom will remain intact.

Pipas are green coconuts that have a hole macheted into the top of them and a straw for drinking the 'milk' – a very refreshing and filling drink. *Agua dulce* is sugar-cane water, or in many cases boiled water mixed with brown sugar. *Horchata*, found mostly in the countryside, is a sweet drink made from cornmeal and flavored with cinnamon.

The usual brands of soft drinks are available, including some favorites you thought were long-gone, like Crush and Squirt. In rural areas, and especially on buses, don't be surprised if your soda (or your juice) is served in a plastic bag. Plastic bags are cheaper than plastic bottles or other containers, so locals fill plastic bags with a variety of beverages and sell them from coolers at the side of the road. If you are lucky, it will also have a straw, which makes it a lot easier to enjoy your drink. If it's a long bus ride, don't be surprised if a few people fill up the bags again and toss them from the window!

The most popular alcoholic drink is beer, and there are several local brands. Imperial is perhaps the most popular – either for its smooth flavor or for the ubiquitous T-shirts emblazoned with their eagle-crest logo. Pilsen, which has a higher alcohol content, is also known for its saucy calendars featuring *las chicas Pilsen* (the Pilsen girls). Both are tasty pilsners. Bavaria produces a lager and Bavaria Negro, a delicious, full-bodied dark beer. This brand is popular among the young and well-educated, but it's not so easy to find outside of the trendiest spots.

After beer, the poison of choice is *guaro*, which is a colorless alcohol distilled from sugar cane and usually consumed by the shot, though you

Are you worried that you'll head back home and dearly miss *salsa lizano* or Tropical drinks? Thankfully www.lapulp.com sells Costa Rican products and will ship the goods to just about anywhere in the world.

can order it as a sour. It goes down mighty easily, but leaves one hell of a hangover.

As in most of Central America, the local rums are inexpensive and worthwhile, especially the Ron Centenario, which recently shot to international fame. The most popular rum-based tippie is a *cuba libre* (rum and cola), which hits the spot on a hot, sticky day, especially when served with a fresh splash of lime. Premixed cans of *cuba libre* are also available in stores, but it'd be a lie to say the contents didn't taste weirdly like aluminum.

Most Costa Rican wines are cheap, taste cheap, and will be unkindly remembered the next morning. Imported wines are available but expensive and difficult to store at proper temperatures. Chilean brands are your best bet for a palatable wine at an affordable price.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

The most popular eating establishment in Costa Rica is the *soda*. These are small, informal lunch counters dishing up a few daily casados. Other popular cheapies include the omnipresent fried- and rotisserie-chicken stands.

A regular *restaurante* is usually higher on the price scale and has slightly more atmosphere. Many *restaurantes* serve casados, while the fancier places refer to the set lunch as the *almuerzo ejecutivo* (executive lunch).

For something smaller, *pastelerías* and *panaderías* are shops that sell pastries and bread, while many bars serve snacks called *bocas*, which are snack-sized portions of main meals.

Lunch is usually the day's main meal and is typically served at around noon. Dinner tends to be a lighter version of lunch and is eaten around 7pm.

Quick Eats

Street vendors sell fresh fruit (sometimes prechopped and ready to go), cookies, chips (crisps) and fried plantains. Many *sodas* have little windows that face the street and from there dispense *empanadas* (corn turnovers with ground meat, chicken, cheese or sweet fruit), tacos (usually tortillas with meat) or *enchilados* (pastries with spicy meat).

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

If you don't mind rice and beans, Costa Rica is a relatively comfortable place for vegetarians to travel.

Most restaurants will make veggie casados on request and many are now including them on the menu. They usually include rice and beans, cabbage salad and one or two selections of variously prepared vegetables or legumes.

With the high influx of tourism, there are also many specialty vegetarian restaurants or restaurants with a veggie menu in San José and tourist towns. Lodges in remote areas that offer all-inclusive meal plans can accommodate vegetarian diets with advance notice.

Vegans, macrobiotic and raw food-only travelers will have a tougher time as there are fewer outlets accommodating those diets. If you intend to keep to your diet, it's best to choose a lodging where you can prepare food yourself. Many towns have health-food stores (*macrobióticas*), but selection varies. Fresh vegetables can also be hard to come by in isolated areas, and will often be quite expensive.

EATING WITH KIDS

If you're traveling with the tots, you'll find that 'kids' meals' (small portions at small prices) are not normally offered in restaurants, though some fancy lodges do them. However, most local eateries will accommodate two children splitting a meal or can produce child-size portions on request. You can ask for

No alcohol is served on Election Day or in the three days prior to Easter Sunday.

TOP EATS IN COSTA RICA

- Try Asian fusion at **Restaurante Tin-Jo** (p103) in San José.
- Savor spicy, delicious fish tacos from **El Loco Natural** (p485) in Puerto Viejo de Talamanca.
- Grab gourmet sandwiches and sweeping views at **Sun Spot** (p351) in Manuel Antonio.
- Sample the best woks and sushi you've ever tasted at **Wok & Roll** (p276) in Tamarindo.
- Try anything off the menu at **Restaurante Exótica** (p366) in Ojochal.

restaurant staff to bring you simple food, rice with chicken or steak cooked *a la plancha* (on the grill).

If you are traveling with an infant, stock up on formula and baby food before heading to remote areas. Avocados are safe, easy to eat, nutritious and they can be served to children as young as six months old. Young children should avoid water and ice in drinks as they are more susceptible to stomach illnesses.

Always carry snacks for long drives in remote areas – sometimes there are no places to stop for a bite.

For other tips on traveling with the tykes, see p529.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

Costa Ricans are open and informal, and treat their guests well. If you have the good fortune to be invited into a Tico home, you can expect to be served first, receive the biggest portion and perhaps even receive a parting gift. On your part, flowers or wine are both fine gifts to bring, though the best gift you can offer is extending a future dinner invitation to your hosts.

Remember that when you sit down to eat in a restaurant, it is polite to say *buenos días* (good morning) or *buenas tardes* (good afternoon) to the waitstaff and/or any people you might be sharing a table with. It is also polite to say *buen provecho*, which is the equivalent of *bon appetit*, at the start of the meal.

EAT YOUR WORDS

Don't know your *pipas* from your *patacones*? A *batido* from a *bolita*? Get beneath the surface of Costa Rica's plentiful cuisine by learning the lingo. For pronunciation guidelines, see p557.

Useful Phrases

Do you have an English menu?

¿Hay una carta en inglés? ai oo-na kar-ta en een-gles

I'd like ...

Quisiera ... kee-sye-ra ...

I'm a vegetarian.

Soy vegetariano/a. (m/f) soy ve-khe-te-rya-no/a

The bill, please.

La cuenta, por favor. la kwen-ta, por fa-vor

Food Glossary

ON THE MENU

almojabanos	al-mo-kha-ba-nos	similar to <i>tortilla de maíz</i> , except hand-rolled into small sausage-sized pieces
batido	ba-tee-do	milkshake made with fresh fruit, sugar and milk

bocas	bo-kas	savory side dishes or bar snacks
bolitas de carne carimañola	bo-lee-tas de kar-ne ka-ree-man-yo-la	snack of mildly spicy meatballs a deep-fried roll made from chopped meat and boiled yuca
carne ahumada	kar-ne a-hoo-ma-da	smoked, dried ('jerked') meat
ceviche	se-vee-che	marinated raw fish or shellfish
chichas	chee-chas	heavily sweetened fresh fruit drinks
comida corriente (casado)	ko-mee-da ko-ree-en-te ka-sa do	set meal of rice, beans, plantains and a piece of meat or fish
corvina	kor-vee-na	a flavorful white fish
empanada	em-pa-na-da	corn turnover filled with ground meat, chicken, cheese or sweet fruit
gallo pinto	ga-lyo peen-to	literally 'spotted rooster'; a soupy mixture of rice and black beans
hojaldres	ho-khal-dres	fried dough, similar to a donut; popular with breakfast
huevos fritos/revueltos	we-vos free-tos/re-vwel-tos	fried/scrambled eggs
licuado	lee-kwa-do	shake made with fresh fruit, sugar and water
mondongo	mon-dong-go	tripe soup
patacones	pa-ta-ko-nes	green plantains cut in thin pieces, salted, pressed and then fried
pipa	pee-pa	coconut water, served straight from the husk
plátano maduro	pla-ta-no ma-doo-ro	ripe plantains baked or broiled with butter, brown sugar and cinnamon; served hot
raspados	ras-pa-dos	shaved ice flavored with fruit juice
ropa vieja	ro-pa vye-kha	literally means 'old clothes'; a spicy shredded beef combination served over rice
seco	se-ko	alcoholic drink made from sugar cane
tajadas	ta-kha-das	ripe plantains sliced lengthwise and fried
tamales	ta-ma-les	ground corn with spices and chicken or pork, wrapped in banana leaves and boiled
tasajo	ta-sa-kho	dried meat cooked with vegetables
tortilla de maíz	tor-tee-ya de mai-ees	a thick, fried cornmeal tortilla

BASICS

azúcar	a-soo-kar	sugar
cuchara	choo-cha-ra	spoon
cuchillo	choo-chee-lyo	knife
hielo	ee-e-lo	ice
mantequilla	man-te-kee-lyo	butter
pan	pan	bread
plato	pla-to	plate
sal	sal	salt
servilleta	sair-vee-lye-ta	napkin
sopa	so-pa	soup
taza	ta-za	cup
tenedor	te-ne-dor	fork
vaso	va-so	glass

Costa Rican Typical Foods, by Carmen de Musmani and Lupita de Weiler, is out of print, but it is perhaps the only Tico-specific cookbook ever written.

MEALTIMES

desayuno	de-sa-yoo-no
almuerzo	al-mwer-so
cena	se-na

breakfast
lunch
dinner

FRUITS & VEGETABLES

aguacate	a-gwa-ka-te
ensalada	en-sa-la-da
fresa	fre-sa
guanábana	gwa-na-ba-na
manzana	man-za-na
maracuyá	ma-ra-koo-ya
naranja	na-ran-kha
piña	pee-nya
zanahoria	sa-na-o-rya
zarzamora	zar-za-mo-ra

avocado
salad
strawberry
soursop
apple
passionfruit
orange
pineapple
carrot
blackberry

SEAFOOD

camarón	ka-ma-ron
filete de pescado	fi-le-te de pes-ka-do
langosta	lan-gos-ta
langostino	lan-gos-tee-no
pescado	pes-ka-do
pulpo	pool-po

shrimp
fish fillet
lobster
jumbo shrimp
fish
octopus

MEATS

bistec	bee-stek
carne	kar-ne
chuleta	choo-le-ta
hamburguesa	am-boor-gwe-sa
salchicha	sal-chee-cha

steak
beef
pork chop
hamburger
sausage

DRINKS

agua	a-gwa
bebida	be-bee-da
café	ka-fe
cerveza	ser-ve-sa
leche	le-che
ron	ron
vino	vee-no

water
drink
coffee
beer
milk
rum
wine

COOKING TERMS

a la plancha	a la pa-ree-lya
frito	free-to

grilled
fried

Environment David Lukas

THE LAND

Despite its diminutive size, 51,000-sq-km Costa Rica is a study in contrasts and contradictions. On one coast it fronts scenic Pacific shores while only 119km away lies the muggy Caribbean coast, with a range of active volcanoes and alpine peaks in between. Rich in natural resources, Costa Rica has gone from suffering the highest rates of deforestation in Latin America in the early 1990s to being a global model for tropical conservation. Now in charge of an exemplar system of well-managed and accessible parks, Costa Rica is perhaps the best place in the world to experience rain-forest habitats, while its stunning natural landscape is easily the top reason tourists visit this delightful country.

With a length of 1016km, the Pacific coastline is infinitely varied as it twists and turns around gulfs, peninsulas and many small coves. Rugged, rocky headlands alternate with classic white- and black-sand beaches and palm trees to produce an image of a tropical paradise along some stretches. Strong tidal action creates an excellent habitat for waterbirds as well as a visually dramatic crashing surf (perfect for surfers). Inland, the landscapes of the Pacific lowlands are equally dynamic, ranging from dry deciduous forests and open cattle country in the north, to lush, magnificent tropical rain forests in the south.

Monotonous in comparison, the Caribbean coastline runs a straight 212km along a low, flat plain that is inundated with brackish lagoons and waterlogged forests. A lack of strong tides allows plants to grow right over the water's edge along coastal sloughs, creating walls of green vegetation. Broad, humid plains that scarcely rise above sea level and murky waters characterize much of this region.

Running down the center of the country, the mountainous spine of Costa Rica is a land of active volcanoes, clear tumbling streams and chilled peaks clad in impenetrable cloud forests. These mountain ranges generally follow a northwest to southeast line, with the highest and most dramatic peaks in the south near the Panamanian border (culminating at the 3820m-high Cerro

Adrian Forsyth has written several colorful children's books about the rain forest, including *Journey through a Tropical Jungle* and *How Monkeys make Chocolate*.

OUT ON A REEF

Compared to the rest of the Caribbean, the coral reefs of Costa Rica are small fry. Heavy surf and shifting sands along most of the Caribbean coast produce conditions that are unbearable to corals, but on the southern coast two beautiful patches of reef are protected on the rocky headlands of Parque Nacional Cahuita and Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Gandoca-Manzanillo. These diminutive but vibrant reefs are home to more than 100 species of fish and many types of coral. Countless damselfish, sergeant majors, parrotfish and surgeonfish gather to feed on abundant marine algae, while predatory barracudas come to prey on the fish. Gandoca-Manzanillo is a famous nesting ground for four species of sea turtle. Even better, turtle volunteers have been patrolling these beaches since 1986 to prevent poachers and the turtle populations are doing really well thanks to their efforts.

Unfortunately the reefs are in danger due to sediments that wash downriver from logging operations, and from toxic chemicals that wash out of nearby agricultural fields. In 1991 an earthquake lifted the reefs up as much as 1.5m, stranding and killing large portions of this fragile ecosystem.

So far the coral reefs of Costa Rica have been largely overlooked, but with these threats hanging over them, there's little time to lose.

Chirripó). The difficulties of traveling through, and farming on, these steep slopes have, until recently, saved much of this area from development and made it a haven for wildlife.

Carol Henderson's *Field Guide to the Wildlife of Costa Rica* is a handy all-in-one resource.

In the midst of the highlands is the Meseta Central – or Central Valley – which is surrounded by mountains (the Cordillera Central to the north and east and the Cordillera de Talamanca to the south). It is this fertile central plain, 1000m and 1500m above sea level with abundant rainfall and consistently mild temperatures, that contains four of Costa Rica's five largest cities and more than half of the country's population.

Like most of Central America, Costa Rica's geologic history can be traced to the impact of the Cocos Plate moving northeast and crashing into the Caribbean Plate at a rate of about 10cm every year – quite fast by geological standards. The point of impact is called a 'subduction zone,' and this is where the Cocos Plate forces the edge of the Caribbean Plate to break up and become uplifted. It is not a smooth process, and hence Central America is an area prone to earthquakes and ongoing volcanic activity (see p530). Arenal, in the north, is one of the world's most active volcanoes.

WILDLIFE

Dr Alexander Skutch is famous for the *Guide to the Birds of Costa Rica*, but he also wrote several other contemplative books about his feathered friends, including *A Naturalist in Costa Rica* and *The Minds of Birds*.

Nowhere else in the world are so many types of habitats squeezed into such a tiny area. The range of habitats in Costa Rica, a consequence of its unique geography, creates an incredibly rich diversity of flora and fauna – in fact, no other country on the planet has such variety. Measured in terms of number of species per 10,000 sq km Costa Rica tops the list of countries at 615 species, compared to a wildlife-rich country such as Rwanda that has 596, or to the comparatively impoverished US with its 104 species. This simple fact alone (not to mention the ease of travel and friendly residents) makes Costa Rica the premier destination for nature lovers from all over the world.

The large number of species in Costa Rica is also due to the relatively recent appearance of the country. Roughly three million years ago Costa Rica rose from the ocean and formed a land bridge between North and South America. As species from these two vast biological provinces started to mingle, the number of species essentially 'doubled' in the area where Costa Rica now sits.

Animals

Though tropical in nature – with a substantial number of tropical animals such as poison-dart frogs and spider monkeys – Costa Rica is also the winter home for more than 200 species of migrating birds that arrive from as far away as Alaska and Australia. So don't be surprised to see one of your familiar backyard birds feeding alongside trogons and toucans. Individual animals and insects are given more coverage in the *Wildlife Guide*, p193.

With a total of 850 species recorded in Costa Rica, it's understandable that birds are one of the primary attractions for naturalists who could stay for months and still barely scratch the surface in terms of seeing all these species. Birds in Costa Rica come in every color, from strawberry-red scarlet macaws to the iridescent jewels called violet sabrewings (a type of hummingbird). Because many birds in Costa Rica have restricted ranges, you are guaranteed to find different species everywhere you travel.

Visitors will almost certainly see one of Costa Rica's four types of monkeys or two sloths, but there are an additional 230 types of mammals awaiting the patient observer. More exotic sightings might include the amazing four-eyed opossum or silky anteater, while a lucky few might spot the elusive tapir, or have a jaguarundi cross their path.

Two-toed sloths descend from the trees once every two weeks to defecate.

The extensive network of national parks, wildlife refuges and other protected areas are prime places to spot wildlife. But remember that these creatures do not know park boundaries, so keep your eyes peeled in the forested areas and buffer zones that often surround these sanctuaries. Early morning is the best time to see animals because many species sleep during the hottest part of the day. Spotting one of the nocturnal species – such as Baird's tapir, the silky anteater and the kinkajou – requires going out at night with a strong flashlight (a great item to pack for your Costa Rica trip).

If you are serious about observing birds and animals, the value of a knowledgeable guide cannot be underestimated. Their keen eyes are trained to recognize the slightest movement in the forest, and they recognize the many exotic sounds. Most professional bird guides are proficient in the dialects of local birds, greatly improving your chances of hearing or seeing these species. Furthermore, a good local guide will often have an idea where certain species tend to congregate – whether it's quetzals eating fruit in an avocado tree, or American crocodiles catching fish at the mouth of a river. Through its National Biodiversity Institute, Costa Rica now trains local citizens to be professional nature guides as an alternative to letting all this skilled work go to foreign guides.

No season is a bad season for exploring Costa Rica's natural environment, though most visitors arrive during the peak dry season when trails are less muddy and more accessible. An added bonus of visiting between December and February is that many of the wintering migrant birds are still hanging around. A trip after the peak season means fewer birds, but is a stupendous time to see dried forests transform into vibrant greens and it's also when resident birds begin nesting.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

As expected in a country with unique habitats and widespread logging, there are numerous species whose populations are declining or in danger

While the female scarlet macaw sits on her nest, the male regurgitates food for her to eat, and later does the same for their chicks.

The seven species of poison-dart frog in Costa Rica are beautiful to look at but have exceedingly toxic skin secretions that cause paralysis and death.

LOOK BUT DON'T JUMP IN

In 2006 swimming with dolphins and whales in Costa Rica was made illegal. It is also illegal to attempt to capture or harass them. Dolphin- and whale-watching tours have become increasingly popular in recent years, leading to an explosion in the number of operators. Unfortunately, too many operators are out for a quick buck, often at the expense of the animals.

In a survey conducted by the Cetacean Society International, 17 of the operators refused to cooperate by answering survey questions, and all of the tour companies investigated made mistakes such as harassing animals, not carrying lifejackets and having motor problems. Only one company had knowledgeable guides that could provide 'reasonable natural-history information.' Lacking experience and knowledge, many operators have been conducting their tours without due attention to the integrity of the star players – the animals themselves.

In short, too much attention from tourists has caused some dolphins and whales to stress out. Research indicates that in some heavily touristed areas, dolphins are leaving their natural habitat in search of calmer seas. Some scientists believe that having humans at close proximity in the water disrupts feeding, nursing and other behavior. There is growing concern about the long-term human impact on the health of these marine mammals. The 2006 legislation banning swimming with marine mammals was enacted with their best interests in mind.

When your boat comes across these amazing creatures of the sea, do not jump in the water. From the comfort of the boat you can have an awe-inspiring and longer-lasting experience (the dolphins and whales usually swim away quickly when humans are in the water, but they might stay and swim around a boat indefinitely). And more importantly, you won't disturb the peace of these gentle giants.

DREAM OF THE BOUNTIFUL TURTLES

There are seven kinds of sea turtles, four of which frequent Costa Rica's beaches: olive ridley, leatherback, green and hawksbill. All four species are classified as endangered or critically endangered, meaning they face an imminent threat of extinction. While populations of some species are increasing, thanks to various protection programs along the Caribbean coast, the risk for these *tortugas* is still very real.

Destruction of habitat is a huge problem. With the exception of the leatherbacks, all of these species return to their natal beach to nest. That means that the ecological state of the beach directly impacts that turtle's ability to reproduce. All of the species prefer dark, undisturbed beaches, and any sort of development or artificial lighting (including flashlights) will inhibit nesting.

A devastating number of turtles are killed every year when they get caught in loglines or gill nets, which are sometimes used by commercial fisheries. The Leatherback Trust estimates that 63% of all Pacific leatherbacks get hooked by loglines, resulting in a 15% to 18% death rate.

Hunting and harvesting eggs are two major causes of declining populations. Green turtles are actually hunted for their meat. Leatherbacks and olive ridleys are not killed for meat, but their eggs are considered a delicacy – an aphrodisiac no less. The hawksbill turtles are hunted for their unusual shells, which are sometimes used to make jewelry and hair ornaments. Of course, any trade in tortoise-shell products and turtle eggs and meat is illegal, but a significant black market exists for these products.

Enforcement of hunting and harvesting bans requires lots of nighttime beach patrols during turtle-nesting season. There are many opportunities for volunteers to assist with beach patrols and education programs, see p460 for more information.

of extinction. Currently, the number-one threat to most of Costa Rica's endangered species is habitat destruction, followed closely by hunting and trapping.

The legendary resplendent quetzal – the bird at the top of every naturalist's must-see list – teeters precariously as its home forests are felled at an alarming rate. Seeing a noisy scarlet macaw could be a birding highlight in Costa Rica, but trapping for the pet trade has extirpated these magnificent birds from much of their former range. Although populations are thriving in the Peninsula de Osa, the scarlet macaw is now extinct over most of Central America, including the entire Caribbean coast.

Sea turtles get a lot of attention in Costa Rica, and the work of several conservation groups has dramatically improved the nesting success of these turtles on Costa Rican beaches. See boxed text Dream of the Bountiful Turtles, above.

Central America's largest land mammal, the 300kg Baird's tapir, is a sought-after source of protein, making it a target for hunters. The tapir's habit of commuting between feeding patches and waterholes on distinctive 'tapir trails' makes it extremely vulnerable to hunting. Tapirs are now restricted to the least accessible wilderness areas. Similarly, the gigantic 600kg West Indian manatee is an easy victim for hunters, especially since they are placid and have no defenses. Manatees still populate the canals of Parque Nacional Tortuguero, though they are elusive.

Costa Rica's sexiest endangered species is undoubtedly the reclusive jaguar. Jaguars require a large area to support enough prey to survive. Annually, an individual jaguar needs the equivalent of 53 white-tailed deer, 18 peccaries, 40 coatis, 25 armadillos and 55 ctenosaurs. That is for one jaguar! Owing to clearing for cattle ranches and overhunting of jaguar prey, suitable habitat for viable populations of jaguars now occurs in only a handful of protected

The tale of the green turtle's rebound in Tortuguero is told in two popular books by Archie Carr: *The Windward Road: Adventures of a Naturalist on Remote Caribbean Shores* and *The Sea Turtle: So Excellent a Fish*.

If wildlife is your thing, bring along Lonely Planet's *Watching Wildlife in Central America* by Luke Hunter and David Andrew.

The following list outlines the current endangerment levels for each of Costa Rica's turtles and the places where you can (still) see them.

Olive ridley Endangered – the world population of nesting females is estimated to be 800,000. Olive ridleys are unique in that thousands of turtles descend on one beach to nest *en masse*. This happens in Parque Nacional Santa Rosa (p218) and Refugio Nacional de Fauna Silvestre Ostional (p292) between July and November. They are also unique in that it is legal to harvest a limited number of eggs from the first laying – usually for sale in San José. The idea is to give locals a stake in protecting the nests from illegal poachers from the outside. Unfortunately, it also has the effect of encouraging illegal harvesting in other areas, as the sale is not regulated.

Leatherback Critically endangered – the world population of nesting females is estimated to be 35,000. Leatherbacks nest on the northern Caribbean coast around Parque Nacional Tortuguero (p458) and the beaches of Parísimina (p456) from March to June. Pacific leatherbacks have laid eggs on Playa Grande in the Parque Nacional Marino Las Baulas de Guanacaste (p269) for thousands of years, but the number of nesting turtles has declined dramatically in recent years. In the 2005–06 season, Playa Grande attracted only 51 turtles, which is nonetheless an improvement from the previous year.

Green Endangered – the world population of nesting females is estimated to be 88,520. Green turtles nest in Parque Nacional Tortuguero (p458) and surrounding beaches from mid-June to mid-September. Green turtles represent the rare success story. Thanks to information collected by the Caribbean Conservation Corporation (see p461), scientists realized in the 1980s that fewer than 3000 female green turtles were nesting in Tortuguero annually, compared to tens of thousands in earlier decades. The alarming data helped them convince a coalition of public and private groups to initiate long-term conservation efforts geared toward bringing the turtles back. Today, more than 20,000 of the lovely ladies show up on these shores to breed during the year, and the number continues to climb.

Hawksbill Critically endangered – the world population of nesting females is estimated to be 22,900. These beauties only make rare appearances on beaches around Tortuguero between February and September, while they are more common at Parque Nacional Marino Ballena (p365) from May to November.

areas, such as Parque Nacional Corcovado (p416) and Parque Internacional La Amistad (p389).

Plants

Floral biodiversity is also high – close to 12,000 species of vascular plants have been described in Costa Rica, and more are being added to the list every year. Orchids alone account for about 1400 species.

Experiencing a tropical forest for the first time can be a bit of a surprise for visitors from North America or Europe, where temperate forests tend to have little variety. Such regions are either dominated by conifers, or have endless tracts of oaks, beech and birch. Tropical forests, on the other hand, have a staggering number of species – in Costa Rica, for example, almost 2000 tree species have been recorded. If you stand in one spot and look around, you'll see scores of different plants, and if you walk several hundred meters you're likely to find even more.

The diversity of habitats created when this many species mix is a wonder to behold – one day you may find yourself canoeing in a muggy mangrove swamp, and the next day squinting through bone-chilling fog to see orchids in a montane cloud forest. If at all possible, it is worth planning your trip with the goal of seeing some of Costa Rica's most distinctive plant communities, including rain forests, mangrove swamps, cloud forests and dry forests.

Classic rain-forest habitats are well represented in parks of the southwest corner of Costa Rica or in mid-elevation portions of the central mountains. Here you will find towering trees that block out the sky, long looping vines and many overlapping layers of vegetation. Large trees often show buttresses, wing-like ribs that extend out from their trunks for added structural support.

The tallest tree in the rain forest is usually the silk cotton tree, or the ceiba. The most famous example is a 70m elder in Corcovado.

Costa Rica's national tree is the guanacaste, commonly found on the lowlands of the Pacific slope.

COSTA RICA'S EASTER BLOSSOM

Among Costa Rica's 1400 species of orchids, the guaria morada (*Cattleya skinneri*) is celebrated with special reverence. Blooming around the time of Lent and Easter, this gorgeous orchid with dense clusters of lavender-rose flowers is prominently displayed on altars, homes and churches everywhere in Central America. In the old days these flowers grew liberally on the walls and roofs of old houses and courtyards, where they added a special charm. However, this ancient custom fell by the wayside and they are no longer a common sight.

In honor of the orchid's links to history and tradition, it was chosen as Costa Rica's national flower in 1937. Unfortunately, the plant's amazing popularity has resulted in wild populations being harvested without restraint, and an alarm was raised in 2004 that it could become extinct in the wild without immediate action. Hopefully the orchid's numbers will begin to increase again, because although they are easy to grow commercially, no quantity of orchids in a greenhouse can replace the flowers found in the wild forests of Costa Rica.

Along brackish stretches of both coasts, mangrove swamps are a world unto themselves. Growing stilllike out of muddy tidal flats, five species of trees crowd together so densely that no boat and few animals can penetrate. Striking in their adaptations for dealing with salt, mangrove trees thrive where no other land plant dares tread. Though often thought of as mosquito-filled backwaters, mangrove swamps play extremely important roles. Not only do they buffer coastlines from the erosive power of waves, they also have high levels of productivity because they trap nutrient-rich sediment and serve as spawning and nursery areas for innumerable species of fish and invertebrates.

Most famous of all, and a highlight for many visitors, are the fabulous cloud forests of Monteverde (p190), with fog-drenched trees so thickly coated in mosses, ferns, bromeliads and orchids that you can hardly discern their true shapes. Cloud forests are widespread at high elevations throughout Costa Rica (such as the Parque Nacional Chirripó area, p378) and any of them would be worth visiting. Be forewarned, however, that in these habitats the term 'rainy season' has little meaning because it's always dripping wet from the fog.

For a complete change of pace try exploring the unique drier forests along the northwest coast. During the dry season many trees drop their leaves, creating carpets of crackling, sun-drenched leaves and a sense of openness that is largely absent in other Costa Rican habitats. The large trees here, such as Costa Rica's national tree, the guanacaste, have broad, umbrella-like canopies, while spiny shrubs and vines or cacti dominate the understorey. At times, large numbers of trees erupt into spectacular displays of flowers, and at the beginning of the rainy season everything is transformed with a wonderful flush of new green foliage.

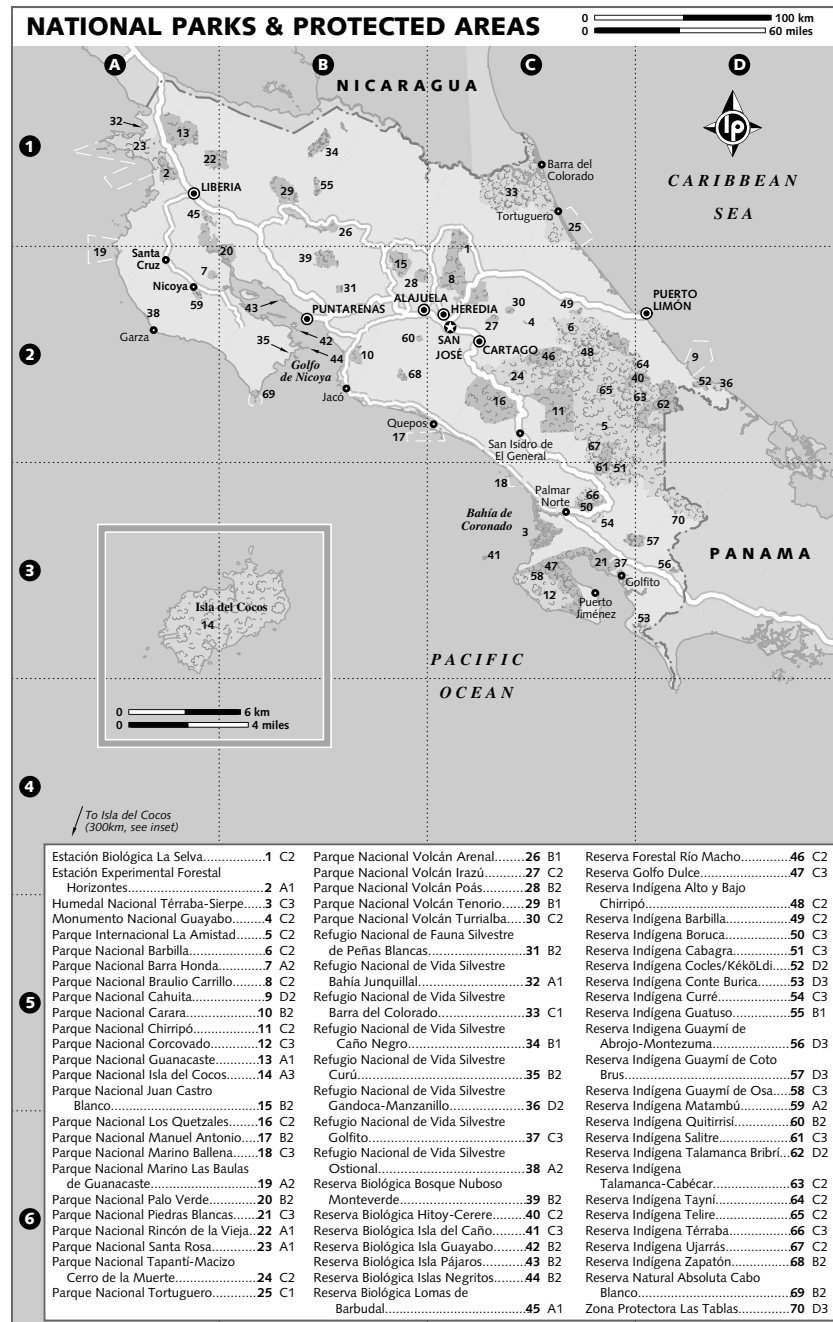
If you can't make it to one of the areas above check out the fantastic orchid gardens at Jardín de Orquídeas (p175) or Lankester Gardens (p152), which is near Cartago and home to more than 800 types of orchids.

NATIONAL PARKS

The national-park system began in the 1960s, and has since been expanded into a National Conservation Areas System with an astounding 186 protected areas, including 32 national parks, eight biological reserves, 13 forest reserves and 51 wildlife refuges. At least 10% of the land is strictly protected and another 17% is included in various multiple-use preserves. Costa Rican authorities enjoy their claim that more than 27% of the country has been set aside for conservation, but multiple-use zones still allow farming, logging and other exploitation, so the environment within them is not totally protected.

Michael Crichton's book *Jurassic Park* is set on Isla del Cocos. In it, he refers to Ticos as 'Ticans.'

For maps and descriptions of the national parks, go to www.costarica-nationalparks.com.



Travelers will be surprised to learn that, in addition to the system of national preserves, there are hundreds of small, privately owned lodges, reserves and haciendas (estates) that have been set up to protect the land, and many of these are well worth visiting.

Although the national-park system appears glamorous on paper, a report a few years ago from the national conservation body (Sinac; Sistema Nacional de Areas de Conservación) amplified the fact that much of the protected area is, in fact, at risk. The government doesn't exactly own all of this land – almost half of the areas are in private ownership – and there isn't a budget to buy it. Technically, the private lands are protected from development, but many landowners are finding loopholes in the restrictions and selling or developing their properties, or taking bribes from poachers and illegal loggers in exchange for access to their lands.

On the plus side is a project by Sinac that links national parks and reserves, private reserves and national forests into 13 conservation areas. This strategy has two major effects. First, these so-called megaparks allow greater numbers of individual plants and animals to exist. Second, the administration of the national parks is delegated to regional offices, allowing a more individualized management approach in each area. Each conservation area has regional and subregional offices delegated to provide effective education, enforcement, research and management, although some regional offices play what appear to be only obscure bureaucratic roles.

Although many of the national parks were expressly created to protect Costa Rica's habitats and wildlife, a few parks preserve other resources such as the country's foremost pre-Columbian ruins at Monumento Nacional Arqueológico Guayabo (p160); an important cave system at Parque Nacional Barra Honda (p286); and a series of geologically active and inactive volcanoes in several parks and reserves.

Most national parks can be entered without permits, though a few limit the number they admit on a daily basis and others require advance reservations for accommodations within the park's boundaries (Chirripó, Corcovado and La Amistad). The average entrance fee to most parks is US\$10 per day for foreigners, plus additional fees for overnight camping where permitted.

Many national parks are in remote areas and are rarely visited – they also suffer from a lack of rangers and protection. Others are extremely – and deservedly – popular for their world-class scenic and natural beauty, as well as their wildlife. During the '90s in the idyllic Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio (p353), a tiny park on the Pacific coast, the number of visitors reached 1000 per day in the high season and annual visitors rocketed from about 36,000 in 1982 to more than 150,000 by 1991. This number of visitors threatened to ruin the diminutive area by driving away the wildlife and polluting the beaches. In response, park visitors have since been limited to 600 per day and the park is closed on Mondays to allow it a brief respite from the onslaught.

With Costa Rican parks contributing significantly to both national and local economies through the huge influx of tourist monies, there is little question that the country's healthy natural environment is important to its citizens. In general, support for land preservation remains high because it provides income and jobs to so many people, plus important opportunities for scientific investigation.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Costa Rica is a mixed bag in terms of its environmental issues. No other tropical country has made such a concerted effort to protect the environment and in 2008 Costa Rica was ranked one of the top five nations in the world for its overall environmental performance. At the same time, as the global

The fabulous limestone caves of Parque Nacional Barra Honda were formed in the remains of ancient coral reefs after they were uplifted out of the ocean.

The National Biodiversity Institute is a clearing-house of information on both biodiversity and efforts to conserve it; see www.inbio.ac.cr.

leader in the burgeoning ecotourism economy, Costa Rica is proving to be a case study in the pitfalls and benefits of ecological tourism.

Deforestation

Can you believe that this tropical paradise was once entirely carpeted in lush rain forests? Tragically after more than a century of clearing for plantations, agriculture and logging, Costa Rica lost about 80% of its forest cover before the government stepped in with a plan to protect what was left. Through its many programs of forest protection and reforestation, 52% of the country is forested once again – a stunning accomplishment in a mere 20 years.

Despite protection for two-thirds of the remaining forests, cutting trees is still a major problem for Costa Rica, especially on private lands being cleared by wealthy landowners and multinational corporations. Even within national parks, some of the more remote areas are being logged illegally because there is not enough money to hire guards to enforce the law.

Apart from the direct loss of tropical forests and the plants and animals that depend on them, deforestation leads directly or indirectly to other severe environmental problems. Forests protect the soil beneath them from the ravages of tropical rainstorms; after deforestation much of the topsoil is washed away, lowering the productivity of the land and silting up watersheds and downstream coral reefs. Cleared lands are often planted with a variety of crops, including Costa Rica's main agricultural product, bananas, the production of which entails the use of pesticides and blue plastic bags to protect the fruit. Both the pesticides and the plastic bags end up polluting

More than 30% of Costa Rica's forests were cut to raise low-grade beef that went into US fast-food hamburgers, TV dinners and pet food.

POPULAR PROTECTED AREAS

Area	Features	Activities	Best Time to Visit	Page
Parque Nacional Cahuita	easily accessible hiking trail, coral reef, beaches, howler monkeys	beach walking, snorkeling	year-round	p475
Parque Nacional Chirripó	Costa Rica's highest summit, cloud forest, beautiful mountain views, diverse animal and plant life at varying altitudes	strenuous two-day hike to summit	dry season (Jan-Mar), closed in May	p378
Parque Nacional Corcovado	vast, remote rain forest: giant trees, jaguar, scarlet macaw, tapir	exploring off-the-beaten path, wildlife-watching	year-round, though trails bad in rainy season (May-Nov)	p416
Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio	beautiful accessible beaches, mangrove swamp, diverse marine life, eroded rocks	beach walking, exploring	avoid peak season if possible (Jan-Mar)	p353
Parque Nacional Santa Rosa	unique dry forest: guanacaste (Costa Rica's national tree) monkey, peccary, coati	wildlife-watching, hiking	dry season (Jan-Mar) for spectacular flowering trees	p218
Parque Nacional Tortuguero	wild Caribbean coast: sea turtle, sloth, manatee, crocodile, river otter	beach walking, canoeing, turtle-watching	turtle egg-laying season, check with park for details	p458
Reserva Biológica Bosque Nuboso Monteverde	world-famous cloud forest: resplendent quetzal, epiphytes, orchid, three-wattled bellbird	bird-watching, wildlife-watching	avoid peak season if possible	p190
Reserva Natural Absoluta Cabo Blanco	scenic remote beaches, seabirds, marine life, three species of monkey	beach walking, bird-watching	year-round	p314

THE PRICE OF ECOTOURISM

Costa Rica has so much to offer the wildlife enthusiast it is no small wonder that ecotourism is growing in the country. More than 70% of foreign travelers visit one or more nature destinations, and half of these visitors come specifically to see Costa Rica's wildlife.

Such has been its popularity that 1.9 million tourists visited in 2007, which is double the figure of 20 years ago. Tourism revenues (an estimated US\$1 billion) recently surpassed those of the banana and coffee industries, and prices for the traveler have risen in tandem. At first, the growth in tourism took the nation by surprise – there was no overall development plan and growth was poorly controlled. Some people wanted to cash in over the short term with little thought for the future. Unfortunately, this attitude has changed little even as pressure has grown to regulate the industry more closely.

Traditionally, tourism in Costa Rica has been on a small and intimate scale. The great majority of the country's hotels are small (fewer than 50 rooms) and staffed with friendly local people who work closely with tourists, to the benefit of both. This intimacy and friendliness has been a hallmark of a visit to Costa Rica.

But this is changing. The financial bonanza generated by the tourism boom means that new operations are starting up all the time – some are good, many are not. The big word in Costa Rica is 'ecotourism' and everyone wants to jump on the green bandwagon. There are 'ecological' car-rental agencies and 'ecological' menus in restaurants. People want tourists, they want the money that tourists carry, but unfortunately there's little infrastructure to take care that these very tourists who are interested in ecotourism don't wreck the environment or have a role in despoiling any more wilderness.

Taking advantage of Costa Rica's 'green' image, a growing number of developers are promoting mass tourism by building large hotels with accompanying environmental problems (for more

the environment. See boxed text Tallying the True Cost of Bananas, p450, for information on how this has impacted humans as well.

Because deforestation plays a huge role in global warming, there is a lot of recent interest in rewarding countries like Costa Rica for taking the lead in protecting their forests. The US recently announced a deal to forgive US\$26 million of Costa Rica's debt in exchange for increased efforts to preserve rain forests. The Costa Rican government itself sponsors a program that pays landowners US\$50 for each hectare of forest they set aside and is petitioning the UN for a global program that would pay tropical countries for their conservation efforts.

Tourism

The other great environmental issue facing Costa Rica comes from the country being loved to death, directly through the passage of more than one million foreign tourists a year, and indirectly through the development of extensive infrastructure to support this influx (see boxed text The Price of Ecotourism, above). Every year, more resort hotels and lodges pop up, most notably on formerly pristine beaches or in the middle of intact rain forest. Many of these projects are poorly planned and necessitate additional support systems, including roads and countless vehicle trips, with much of this activity unregulated and largely unmonitored. There is growing concern that many hotels and lodges are simply dumping wastewater into the ocean or nearby creeks rather than following expensive procedures for treating it. With an official estimate that only 4% of the country's wastewater is treated and with thousands of unregulated hotels in operation, there's a good chance that some hotels and lodges aren't taking care of their wastes.

It is worth noting, however, that many private lodges and reserves are also doing some of the best conservation work in the country, and it's really

Few organizations are as involved in building sustainable rain forest-based economies as the Rainforest Alliance. See the website for special initiatives in Costa Rica: www.rainforest-alliance.org.

The world-famous Organization for Tropical Studies runs three field stations and offers numerous classes for students seriously interested in tropical ecology. See www.ots.ac.cr.

information see boxed text Clamor in Tambor, p304, and the discussion in The Papagayo Problem boxed text, p262). Apart from the immediate impacts, such as cutting down vegetation, diverting or damming rivers and driving away wildlife, there are secondary impacts such as erosion, lack of adequate waste-treatment facilities for huge hotels in areas far from sewage lines, and the building of socially, environmentally and economically inadequate 'shanty towns' to house the maids, waiters, cooks, janitors and other staff.

Another problem is that many developers are foreigners – they say that they are giving the local people jobs, but most locals don't want to spend their lives being waiters and maids while watching the big money go out of the country. We recommend staying in smaller hotels that have a positive attitude about the environment and are more beneficial to the locals, rather than the large, foreign-owned, mass-tourism destinations.

Amid all this, the government tourist board (ICT; Instituto Costarricense de Turismo) has launched mass-marketing campaigns all over the world, touting 'Costa Rica: No Artificial Ingredients,' yet hasn't followed up with the kind of infrastructure necessary to preserve those ingredients (nor does it lobby for them). Many people feel a certain degree of frustration with the ICT for selling Costa Rica as a green paradise but doing little to help preserve it.

The big question is whether future tourism developments should continue to focus on the traditional small-hotel, ecotourism approach, or turn to mass tourism, with planeloads of visitors accommodated in 'megaresorts' such as the ones in Cancún, Mexico. From the top levels of government down, the debate has been fierce. Local and international tour operators and travel agents, journalists, developers, airline operators, hotel owners, writers, environmentalists and politicians have all been vocal in their support of either ecotourism or mass tourism. Many believe that the country is too small to handle both forms of tourism properly. It remains to be seen which faction will win – or if both can coexist peacefully together.

inspiring to run across homespun efforts to protect Costa Rica's environment spearheaded by hardworking families or small organizations tucked away in some forgotten corner of the country. These include projects to boost rural economies by raising butterflies or native flowers, efforts by villagers to document their local biodiversity, or amazingly resourceful campaigns to raise funds to purchase endangered lands. The Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Curú (p302), Tiskita Jungle Lodge (p441) in Pavones, La Amistad Lodge (p392) and Rara Avis (p520) near Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí are but a few examples. Costa Rica is full of wonderful tales about folks who are extremely passionate and generous in their efforts to protect the planet's resources.

How to Help

Despite the economic benefits of tourism for Costa Rica (more than US\$1 billion a year), there are many negatives. The best way to minimize the impact of your own visit is to research and be aware of your options. Have in mind the goal of finding small, locally owned businesses that have a sincere concern for their community and environment. Most of Costa Rica's problems with tourism stem from overuse of popular sites, lack of enforcement, exploitation of the local workforce, haphazard development, and culturally insensitive development projects. It's a safe bet that the vast majority of these problem issues are the product of foreign-owned companies looking to profit off of Costa Rica's lucrative tourism industry. Be particularly alert for 'green-washing' by companies that falsely portray themselves as environmentally conscious (for more details see Green Costa Rica, p417). Check out the GreenDex, p588, for reputable green organizations in Costa Rica. If nothing else, consider joining one of the many exciting environmental volunteer programs like the **Costa Rica Conservation Trust** (www.conservecostarica.org).

Green Phoenix, by science journalist William Allen, is an absorbing account of his efforts, alongside scientists and activists, to conserve and restore the rain forest in Guanacaste.

Adventure Travel

Costa Rica's extraordinary array of national parks and reserves provides an incredible stage for the adventure traveler. Adrenaline junkies of the world unite – from mountain-biking excursions and multiday jungle treks to some of the best white water in Central America and seafaring on both the coasts – if you want it, Costa Rica's got it.

HIKING & TREKKING

There is no shortage of hiking opportunities around Costa Rica, from day hikes in the countless private reserves to longer trips in some of the national parks.

Especially notable for day hikes are the fumaroles and tropical dry forest in **Parque Nacional Rincón de la Vieja** (p216), the postcard perfect beaches of **Parque Nacional Cahuita** (p476) and the cloud-forest reserves of **Santa Elena** (p202) and **Monteverde** (p191).

For those who want multiday adventures, the hikes through **Parque Nacional Corcovado** (p426) are nothing less than incredible. This last remaining strand of coastal Pacific rain forest is packed with macaws, monkeys, tapirs and peccaries, and offers totally rugged adventure. Also check out historic **Parque Nacional Santa Rosa** (p220), which offers opportunities to hike and camp in tropical dry forest.

Mountaineers will enjoy the steep and arduous hike through the *páramo* (highland shrub forests and grasslands) up **Cerro Chirripó** (p379) – the highest mountain in Costa Rica at 3820m. And for the trekker that appreciates complete solitude in absolute wilderness, there's **Parque Internacional La Amistad** (p391). This heavily forested and rarely traversed park offers some of the most breathtaking scenery in the country.

Many local companies offer guided hikes in different parts of Costa Rica; see p524.

Safety on the Trail

Costa Rica is hot and humid: hiking in these tropical conditions can really take it out of you. Overheating and dehydration are the main sources of misery on the trails, so be sure to bring plenty of water and don't be afraid to stop and rest. Make sure you have sturdy, comfortable footwear (see opposite) and a lightweight rain jacket.

Unfortunately, some readers have told us horror stories of getting robbed while on some of the more remote hiking trails. Although this is certainly not a common occurrence, it is always advisable to hike in a group for added safety. Hiring a local guide is another excellent way to enhance your experience, avoid getting lost and learn an enormous amount about the flora and fauna in your midst.

PUTTING DOWN THE GUIDE

No, we're not talking about insulting the local guy who is leading you through the rain forest. We're talking about closing this book and leaving it behind. Following your own trail, catch your own wave and paddle up your own stream. It is bound to be an adventure more memorable than the one you'll find along the gringo trail.

So put your guidebook down for a day or – even better – a week. Explore the places that are not covered in the pages of this guide and discover your own lonely planet.

Trail Source (www.trailsource.com) provides information on hiking in Costa Rica. It also has info on horse riding and mountain biking. A monthly fee applies.

THESE BOOTS WERE MADE FOR WALKING

With its ample supply of mud, streams and army ants, hiking through Costa Rica's parks can be quite an adventure – particularly for your shoes. Footwear is a personal issue, but here are some options for keeping your feet happy in the jungle.

- Do as the locals and invest in galoshes (rubber boots), especially for the rainy season. Rubber boots are indestructible, protect you from snakes and ticks, provide excellent traction and can be easily hosed off at the end of the day. The downside of the rubber boots is that they are not very comfortable. Plus, river crossings guarantee that the boots will fill up with water at some point, and then your feet are wet for the rest of the day. If you are larger than a size 44 – men's 10 in the US – consider buying them abroad. Price: approximately US\$6.
- High-end sport sandals (like Chacos or Tevas) are used by climbers to scramble up boulders to the starting points for climbing routes. These are great for crossing rivers, as the water runs right off them (and your feet). However, be aware that there are lots of creepy crawlies living in the rain forest, some of which might like to make lunch out of your toes, and sandals offer little protection. Price: US\$50 to US\$100.
- There is something to be said for good, solid, waterproof hiking boots. You don't have to pay an arm and a leg for sturdy boots that offer strong support and keep your feet marginally dry. If you can't stand the idea of walking around with wet feet, consider tossing a pair of sandals into your pack too, and change your shoes for the river crossings. Price: US\$80 to US\$200.

Some of the local park offices have maps, but this is the exception rather than the rule. If you are planning to do independent hiking on long-distance trails, be sure to purchase your maps in San José in advance (see p534).

MOUNTAIN BIKING

Some cyclists claim that the steep, narrow, winding and potholed roads and aggressive Costa Rican drivers add up to a poor cycling experience. This may be true of the main roads, but there are numerous less-trafficked roads that offer plenty of adventure – from winding and scenic mountain paths with sweeping views to rugged trails that take riders through streams and by volcanoes. For information on tour operators, see p525.

DIVING & SNORKELING

There's good news and there's bad news. The good news is that Costa Rica offers body-temperature water with few humans and abundant marine life. The bad news is that the visibility is low because of silt and plankton. If you are looking for turquoise waters and plenty of hard coral, head for Belize and Honduras. However, if you're looking for fine opportunities to see massive schools of fish as well as larger marine animals such as turtles, sharks, dolphins and whales, then you have arrived in exactly the right place.

Some of the best areas for diving and snorkeling are off the northern part of the Peninsula de Nicoya at **Playas del Coco** (p255), **Ocotillo** (p263) and **Hermosa** (p261), where you can expect to see manta rays, sharks and dozens of species of fish, all in large numbers. See also the boxed text **Divers Do It Deeper**, p259. Dive shops in the area provide gear and guides, as well as offer courses.

Another top dive spot is **Isla del Caño** (p406), which is home to giant schools of fish. You can organize excursions to Isla del Caño in **Bahía Drake** (p401).

The Caribbean coast offers fewer opportunities for snorkeling and diving, although **Puerto Viejo de Talamanca** (p481) and nearby **Manzanillo** (p492) are emerging centers. Most snorkel trips and dives are fairly easy and nontechnical, making this a good place for beginners.

It is illegal to swim with dolphins and whales in Costa Rica.

Costa Rica is home to one world-class dive destination, namely **Isla del Cocos** (p443), which is 500km and a 36-hour ocean journey southwest of the Costa Rican mainland. Although its home to an astonishing amount of marine life, the island does not allow camping and does not provide accommodations, so you'll be spending a lot of quality time on your boat.

For practical information about diving see p523.

WHITE-WATER RAFTING & SEA KAYAKING

Since the mid-1980s, rafting and kayaking have been major contributors to the country's ecotourism-based economy. From Class II to Class V, Costa Rica's rivers offer magical white-water experiences for both first-time runners and seasoned enthusiasts. The wildest months are from June through October, though rafting can be done year-round.

The country's most popular rafting rivers are the Pacuare and Reventazón, both located in the Central Valley town of **Turrialba** (p159). North of Turrialba, the little-known town of **La Virgen** (p512) is famous in white-water circles as a base for rafting and kayaking on the Río Sarapiquí. Several rivers near the thriving tourist mecca of **Manuel Antonio** (p347) on the central Pacific coast also offer great white water and wildlife-watching year-round.

With 1228km of coastline, two gulfs and plentiful mangrove estuaries, Costa Rica is an ideal destination for sea kayaking. Sea kayaking is a great way for beginning or expert paddlers to comfortably access remote areas and catch rare glimpses of birds and wildlife.

On the Pacific side, the Península de Nicoya's **Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Curú** (p302) offers stunning paddling along palm-lined beaches, rock arch formations and estuaries teeming with birds and colorful crabs. On the central Pacific coast, **Isla Damas** (p340) and the nearby **Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio** (p354) are equally as riveting.

On the Península de Osa, the Río Agujitas in **Bahía Drake** (p401) and the mangroves around **Puerto Jiménez** (p409) are optimal for exploration by kayak.

Heading over to the Caribbean side, **Parque Nacional Tortuguero** (p459) is a coastal park that spans approximately 31,000 hectares and is well known for its amazing network of lagoons and canals.

Details on river trips and outfitters are given in the regional chapters of this book, or see p526.

SURFING

Point and beach breaks, lefts and rights, reefs and river mouths, warm water and year-round waves make Costa Rica a favorite surfing destination. See the surfer's map (p75) for an idea of what's around.

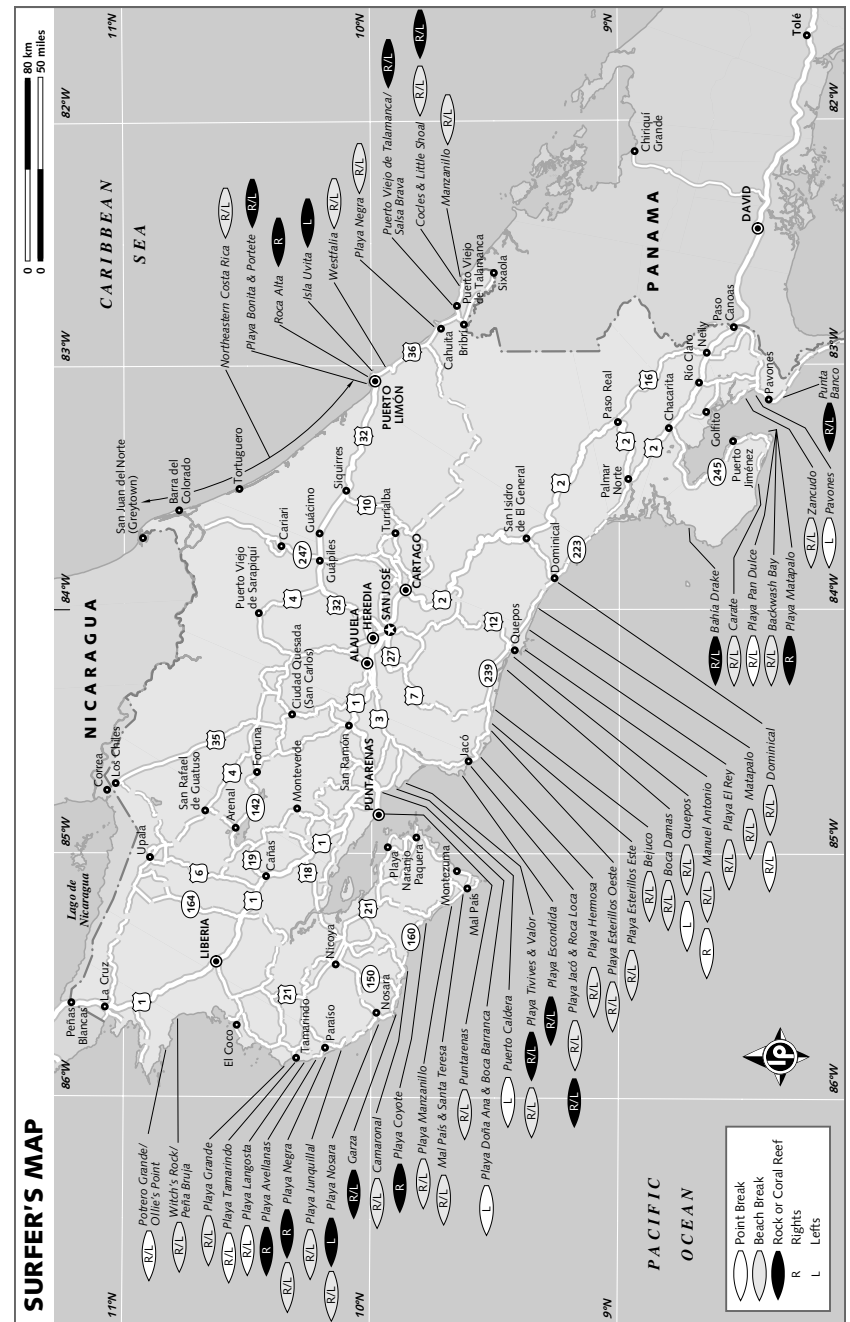
Waves are big (though not Hawaii-big) and the many reef breaks offer hollow and fast rides. For the most part, the Pacific coast has bigger swells and better waves during the latter part of the rainy season, but the Caribbean cooks from November to May. Basically, there is a wave, somewhere, waiting to be surfed at any time of the year.

If you are in the market for a good, cheap board, great places to start your search include **Jacó** (p330), **Mal País** and **Santa Teresa** (p311), and **Tamarindo** (p273). It's usually possible to buy a cheap long board for about US\$250 to US\$300, and a cheap short board for about US\$150 to US\$200. Most surf shops will buy back your board for about 50% of the price you paid.

For the uninitiated, lessons are available at almost all of the major surfing destinations. On the Pacific coast, Jacó and Tamarindo are popular places to learn.

The waters off of Isla del Cocos are home to schooling scalloped hammerheads, countless white-tip reef sharks and even whale sharks.

In the Shadow of a Sphere, by Tom Youngholm, is an imaginative – almost supernatural – novel about a young musician's adventures on Costa Rica's white water.



Log on to the Costa Rica Surf Report (www.crsurf.com) and check out Costa Rica's surf scene.

Península de Nicoya & Northwestern Costa Rica

Playa Tamarindo (p273) is Surf City, USA. Tamarindo has been a major surfing mecca ever since Patrick and Wingnut stopped here in the film classic *Endless Summer II*. The smaller beaches in town may be good places to learn, but more-experienced surfers will appreciate the bigger, faster (and less-crowded) waves at **Playas Negra** and **Avellanas** (p277) as well as **Playa Junquillal** (p280), to the south. These are also possible jumping-off points for excursions to the infamous beach breaks at Ollie's Point and Witch's Rock in **Parque Nacional Santa Rosa** (p221). The most consistent waves are north of Tamarindo on the deserted beaches of **Playa Grande** (p267).

Mal País and **Santa Teresa** (p311) are in their second generation as surf destinations and have a groovy scene to match the powerful waves.

Central Pacific Coast

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Adventure Travel

Costa Rica's extraordinary array of national parks and reserves provides an incredible stage for the adventure traveler. Adrenaline junkies of the world unite – from mountain-biking excursions and multiday jungle treks to some of the best white water in Central America and seafaring on both the coasts – if you want it, Costa Rica's got it.

HIKING & TREKKING

There is no shortage of hiking opportunities around Costa Rica, from day hikes in the countless private reserves to longer trips in some of the national parks.

Especially notable for day hikes are the fumaroles and tropical dry forest in **Parque Nacional Rincón de la Vieja** (p216), the postcard perfect beaches of **Parque Nacional Cahuita** (p476) and the cloud-forest reserves of **Santa Elena** (p202) and **Monteverde** (p191).

For those who want multiday adventures, the hikes through **Parque Nacional Corcovado** (p426) are nothing less than incredible. This last remaining strand of coastal Pacific rain forest is packed with macaws, monkeys, tapirs and peccaries, and offers totally rugged adventure. Also check out historic **Parque Nacional Santa Rosa** (p220), which offers opportunities to hike and camp in tropical dry forest.

Mountaineers will enjoy the steep and arduous hike through the *páramo* (highland shrub forests and grasslands) up **Cerro Chirripó** (p379) – the highest mountain in Costa Rica at 3820m. And for the trekker that appreciates complete solitude in absolute wilderness, there's **Parque Internacional La Amistad** (p391). This heavily forested and rarely traversed park offers some of the most breathtaking scenery in the country.

Many local companies offer guided hikes in different parts of Costa Rica; see p524.

Safety on the Trail

Costa Rica is hot and humid: hiking in these tropical conditions can really take it out of you. Overheating and dehydration are the main sources of misery on the trails, so be sure to bring plenty of water and don't be afraid to stop and rest. Make sure you have sturdy, comfortable footwear (see opposite) and a lightweight rain jacket.

Unfortunately, some readers have told us horror stories of getting robbed while on some of the more remote hiking trails. Although this is certainly not a common occurrence, it is always advisable to hike in a group for added safety. Hiring a local guide is another excellent way to enhance your experience, avoid getting lost and learn an enormous amount about the flora and fauna in your midst.

PUTTING DOWN THE GUIDE

No, we're not talking about insulting the local guy who is leading you through the rain forest. We're talking about closing this book and leaving it behind. Following your own trail, catch your own wave and paddle up your own stream. It is bound to be an adventure more memorable than the one you'll find along the gringo trail.

So put your guidebook down for a day or – even better – a week. Explore the places that are not covered in the pages of this guide and discover your own lonely planet.

Trail Source (www.trailsource.com) provides information on hiking in Costa Rica. It also has info on horse riding and mountain biking. A monthly fee applies.

THESE BOOTS WERE MADE FOR WALKING

With its ample supply of mud, streams and army ants, hiking through Costa Rica's parks can be quite an adventure – particularly for your shoes. Footwear is a personal issue, but here are some options for keeping your feet happy in the jungle.

- Do as the locals and invest in galoshes (rubber boots), especially for the rainy season. Rubber boots are indestructible, protect you from snakes and ticks, provide excellent traction and can be easily hosed off at the end of the day. The downside of the rubber boots is that they are not very comfortable. Plus, river crossings guarantee that the boots will fill up with water at some point, and then your feet are wet for the rest of the day. If you are larger than a size 44 – men's 10 in the US – consider buying them abroad. Price: approximately US\$6.
- High-end sport sandals (like Chacos or Tevas) are used by climbers to scramble up boulders to the starting points for climbing routes. These are great for crossing rivers, as the water runs right off them (and your feet). However, be aware that there are lots of creepy crawlies living in the rain forest, some of which might like to make lunch out of your toes, and sandals offer little protection. Price: US\$50 to US\$100.
- There is something to be said for good, solid, waterproof hiking boots. You don't have to pay an arm and a leg for sturdy boots that offer strong support and keep your feet marginally dry. If you can't stand the idea of walking around with wet feet, consider tossing a pair of sandals into your pack too, and change your shoes for the river crossings. Price: US\$80 to US\$200.

Some of the local park offices have maps, but this is the exception rather than the rule. If you are planning to do independent hiking on long-distance trails, be sure to purchase your maps in San José in advance (see p534).

MOUNTAIN BIKING

Some cyclists claim that the steep, narrow, winding and potholed roads and aggressive Costa Rican drivers add up to a poor cycling experience. This may be true of the main roads, but there are numerous less-trafficked roads that offer plenty of adventure – from winding and scenic mountain paths with sweeping views to rugged trails that take riders through streams and by volcanoes. For information on tour operators, see p525.

DIVING & SNORKELING

There's good news and there's bad news. The good news is that Costa Rica offers body-temperature water with few humans and abundant marine life. The bad news is that the visibility is low because of silt and plankton. If you are looking for turquoise waters and plenty of hard coral, head for Belize and Honduras. However, if you're looking for fine opportunities to see massive schools of fish as well as larger marine animals such as turtles, sharks, dolphins and whales, then you have arrived in exactly the right place.

Some of the best areas for diving and snorkeling are off the northern part of the Peninsula de Nicoya at **Playas del Coco** (p255), **Ocotillo** (p263) and **Hermosa** (p261), where you can expect to see manta rays, sharks and dozens of species of fish, all in large numbers. See also the boxed text **Divers Do It Deeper**, p259. Dive shops in the area provide gear and guides, as well as offer courses.

Another top dive spot is **Isla del Caño** (p406), which is home to giant schools of fish. You can organize excursions to Isla del Caño in **Bahía Drake** (p401).

The Caribbean coast offers fewer opportunities for snorkeling and diving, although **Puerto Viejo de Talamanca** (p481) and nearby **Manzanillo** (p492) are emerging centers. Most snorkel trips and dives are fairly easy and nontechnical, making this a good place for beginners.

It is illegal to swim with dolphins and whales in Costa Rica.

Costa Rica is home to one world-class dive destination, namely **Isla del Cocos** (p443), which is 500km and a 36-hour ocean journey southwest of the Costa Rican mainland. Although its home to an astonishing amount of marine life, the island does not allow camping and does not provide accommodations, so you'll be spending a lot of quality time on your boat.

For practical information about diving see p523.

WHITE-WATER RAFTING & SEA KAYAKING

Since the mid-1980s, rafting and kayaking have been major contributors to the country's ecotourism-based economy. From Class II to Class V, Costa Rica's rivers offer magical white-water experiences for both first-time runners and seasoned enthusiasts. The wildest months are from June through October, though rafting can be done year-round.

The country's most popular rafting rivers are the Pacuare and Reventazón, both located in the Central Valley town of **Turrialba** (p159). North of Turrialba, the little-known town of **La Virgen** (p512) is famous in white-water circles as a base for rafting and kayaking on the Río Sarapiquí. Several rivers near the thriving tourist mecca of **Manuel Antonio** (p347) on the central Pacific coast also offer great white water and wildlife-watching year-round.

With 1228km of coastline, two gulfs and plentiful mangrove estuaries, Costa Rica is an ideal destination for sea kayaking. Sea kayaking is a great way for beginning or expert paddlers to comfortably access remote areas and catch rare glimpses of birds and wildlife.

On the Pacific side, the Península de Nicoya's **Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Curú** (p302) offers stunning paddling along palm-lined beaches, rock arch formations and estuaries teeming with birds and colorful crabs. On the central Pacific coast, **Isla Damas** (p340) and the nearby **Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio** (p354) are equally as riveting.

On the Península de Osa, the Río Agujitas in **Bahía Drake** (p401) and the mangroves around **Puerto Jiménez** (p409) are optimal for exploration by kayak.

Heading over to the Caribbean side, **Parque Nacional Tortuguero** (p459) is a coastal park that spans approximately 31,000 hectares and is well known for its amazing network of lagoons and canals.

Details on river trips and outfitters are given in the regional chapters of this book, or see p526.

SURFING

Point and beach breaks, lefts and rights, reefs and river mouths, warm water and year-round waves make Costa Rica a favorite surfing destination. See the surfer's map (p75) for an idea of what's around.

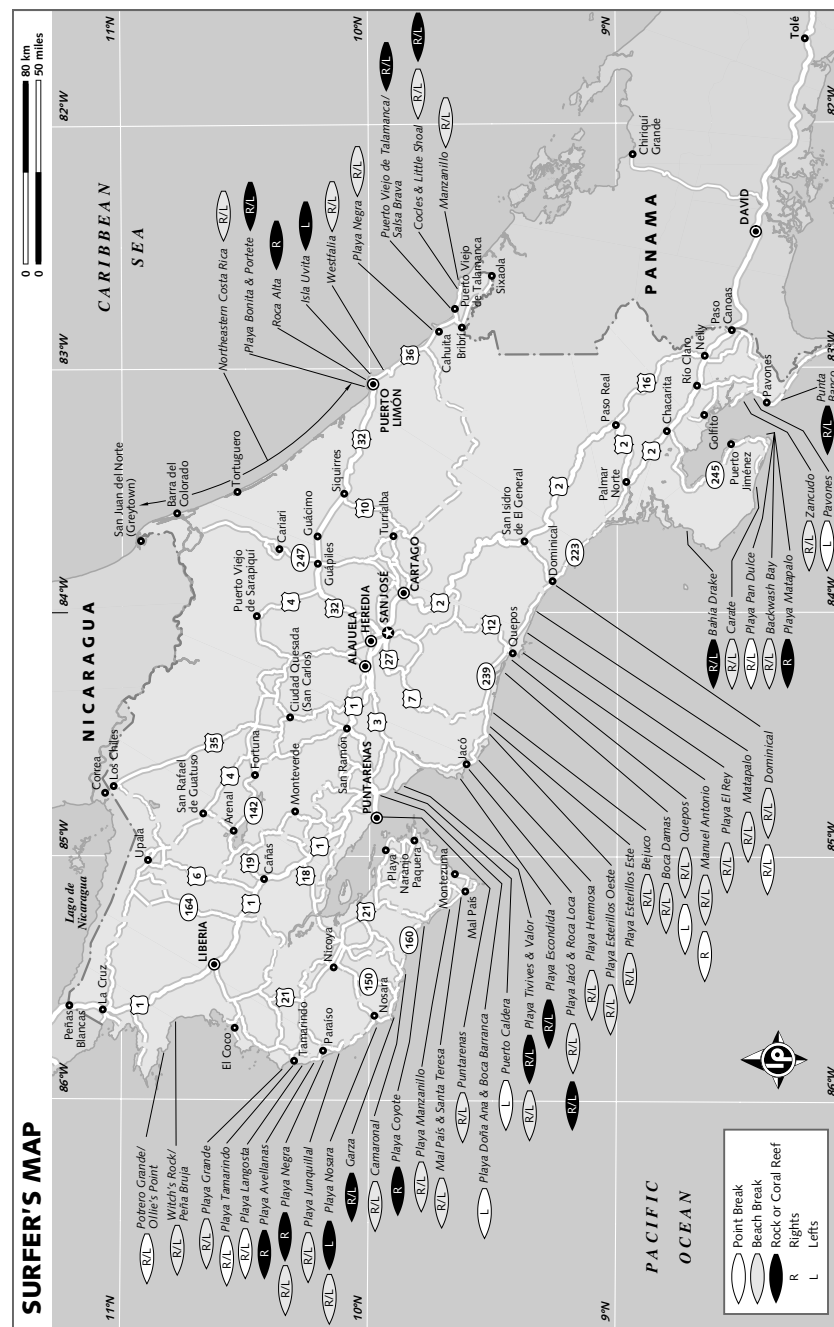
Waves are big (though not Hawaii-big) and the many reef breaks offer hollow and fast rides. For the most part, the Pacific coast has bigger swells and better waves during the latter part of the rainy season, but the Caribbean cooks from November to May. Basically, there is a wave, somewhere, waiting to be surfed at any time of the year.

If you are in the market for a good, cheap board, great places to start your search include **Jacó** (p330), **Mal País** and **Santa Teresa** (p311), and **Tamarindo** (p273). It's usually possible to buy a cheap long board for about US\$250 to US\$300, and a cheap short board for about US\$150 to US\$200. Most surf shops will buy back your board for about 50% of the price you paid.

For the uninitiated, lessons are available at almost all of the major surfing destinations. On the Pacific coast, Jacó and Tamarindo are popular places to learn.

The waters off of Isla del Cocos are home to schooling scalloped hammerheads, countless white-tip reef sharks and even whale sharks.

In the Shadow of a Sphere, by Tom Youngholm, is an imaginative – almost supernatural – novel about a young musician's adventures on Costa Rica's white water.



Log on to the Costa Rica Surf Report (www.crsurf.com) and check out Costa Rica's surf scene.

Península de Nicoya & Northwestern Costa Rica

Playa Tamarindo (p273) is Surf City, USA. Tamarindo has been a major surfing mecca ever since Patrick and Wingnut stopped here in the film classic *Endless Summer II*. The smaller beaches in town may be good places to learn, but more-experienced surfers will appreciate the bigger, faster (and less-crowded) waves at **Playas Negra** and **Avellanas** (p277) as well as **Playa Junquillal** (p280), to the south. These are also possible jumping-off points for excursions to the infamous beach breaks at Ollie's Point and Witch's Rock in **Parque Nacional Santa Rosa** (p221). The most consistent waves are north of Tamarindo on the deserted beaches of **Playa Grande** (p267).

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A morpho butterfly flashes electric blue wings

TOM BOYDEN

Costa Rica has some of the most diverse wildlife in the world. From stunning, colorful birds to fleeting glimpses of rare mammals, it is a land of surprises and enchantment.

This guide includes a fraction of the common species that you might see in Costa Rica. Wildlife enthusiasts are encouraged to bring one of the many excellent wildlife books (listed throughout the Environment chapter, p61) and to hire local guides where possible.

INSECTS

More than 35,000 species of insects have been recorded in Costa Rica, but thousands remain undiscovered. Butterflies and moths are so abundant that Costa Rica claims 10% of the world's butterfly species. In excess of 3000 species have been recorded in Parque Nacional Santa Rosa (p218) alone.

Dormant fer-de-lance lies ready to strike

JOHNNY HAGLUND



The distinctive morpho butterfly, with its electric-blue upper wings, lazily flaps and glides along tropical rivers and through openings in the forests across Costa Rica. When it lands, though, the wings close and only the mottled brown underwings become visible, an instantaneous change from outrageous display to modest camouflage.

AMPHIBIANS

The 160 species of amphibian includes the tiny and colorful poison-dart frog, in the family of Dendrobatidae. Some are bright red with black legs, others are red with blue legs, and still others are bright green with black

markings. Several species have skin glands exuding toxins that can cause paralysis and death in many animals, including humans. Dendrobatids, which are widespread in tropical areas, were traditionally used by forest Indians as a poison for the tips of their hunting arrows.

REPTILES

More than half of the 220-plus species of reptile in Costa Rica are snakes. Snakes are rarely seen, but keep an eye out for the fer-de-lance and bushmaster, two deadly poisonous snakes. Both have broadly triangular heads and are widespread at lower elevations. The fer-de-lance, which can be anything from olive to brown or black in color, has a pattern of Xs and triangles on its back. The bushmaster is usually tan colored with dark diamond-shaped blotches.

Of the country's lizards, the most frequently seen is the abundant ameiva lizard, which has a white stripe running down its back. Also common is the bright-green basilisk lizard, noted for the huge crest running the length of its head, body and tail, which gives it the appearance of a small dinosaur almost 1m in length. It is common along watercourses in lowland areas. Seen in the same areas is the stocky green iguana, which is regularly encountered draping its 2m-long body across a branch over water.

BIRDS

The wealth of Costa Rica's world-famous avifauna is one of the top reasons visitors choose to travel here. The country hosts more bird species (approximately 850) than huge areas such as Europe, North America or Australia. The sheer numbers and variety are somewhat baffling and overwhelming and, in patches of healthy rain forest, the din of countless birds all calling at once will leave a lasting impression on even the most hardened travelers.

In addition to diverse forest birds, Costa Rica also hosts spectacular seabirds, including the magnificent frigatebird. This distinctive black bird, with an inflatable red throat pouch,

Proud basilisk shows off his prehistoric figure

MARK NEWMAN





Does my nose look big in this? The chestnut-mandibled toucan in profile

TOM BOYDEN

is large, elegant and streamlined. It makes an acrobatic living by aerial piracy, harassing smaller birds into dropping their catch and then swooping to catch their stolen meal mid-air. Frigatebirds are found along both coasts but are more common along the Pacific.

Larger species of herons include the boat-billed heron, a stocky, mostly gray bird with a black cap and crest, and distinctively large, wide bill. The yellow-crowned night-heron is quite common in coastal areas and has an unmistakable black-and-white head with a yellow crown. Despite its name, it's mainly active by day.

The descriptively named roseate spoonbill is mostly seen in the Palo Verde (p208) and Caño Negro (p506) areas. It has a white head and a distinctive spoon-shaped bill, and feeds by touch. The spoonbill swings its open bill back and forth, submerged underwater, while stirring up the bottom with its feet, until it feels food and then snaps the bill shut.

A favorite waterbird for many visitors is the northern jacana, which has extremely long, thin toes that enable it to walk on top of aquatic plants, earning it the nickname 'lily-trotter.' It is common on many lowland lakes and waterways. At first glance its brown body, black head, yellow bill and frontal shield seem rather nondescript, but when disturbed the bird stretches its wings to reveal startling yellow flight feathers.

Of the 16 species of parrot recorded in Costa Rica, none is as spectacular as the scarlet macaw – unmistakable for its size (84cm long), bright red body, blue-and-yellow wings, long red tail and white face. Macaws are seen flying overhead, in pairs or small flocks, calling raucously to one another. Recorded as common in 1900, it is now rare to see them outside of Parque Nacional Carara (p323) and Corcovado (p416) due to deforestation and poaching for the pet trade.

Over 50 species of hummingbird have been recorded – their delicate beauty is matched only by their extravagant names. Largest is the violet sabrewing (found in mid-elevations), which has a striking violet head and body with dark green wings. Over 20 species may be seen at local feeders, including the purple-throated mountain-gem and crowned woodnymph.

The most famous of Costa Rica's 10 species of trogon is the resplendent quetzal (ket-sal), easily the most dazzling and culturally important bird in Central America. It had great cer-

emonial significance to the Aztecs and the Mayas and is the national bird and symbol of Guatemala. It is extremely difficult to keep in captivity, where it usually dies quickly, which is perhaps why it became a symbol of liberty to Central Americans during the colonial period. The male lives up to its name with glittering green plumage set off by a crimson belly, and white tail feathers contrasting with bright-green tail coverts that stream over 60cm beyond the bird's body. The head feathers stick out in a spiky green helmet through which the yellow bill peeks coyly. The quetzal is found from 1300m to 3000m in forested or partially forested areas. Locals usually know where to find one; good places

to look are in Reserva Biológica Bosque Nuboso Monteverde (p190) and the namesake Parque Nacional Los Quetzales (p372). Quetzals hang around slightly lower altitudes like Monteverde for nesting season (March to June), but are easily spotted at higher altitudes between November and April. At other times they are less active and quite wary, as are all the trogons.

Toucans are classic rain-forest birds and six species are found in lowland forests in Costa Rica. Huge bills and flamboyant plumage make species such as the chestnut-mandibled toucan and keel-billed toucan hard to miss. The chestnut-mandibled toucan is mainly black with a yellow face and chest, red under the tail and a bicolored bill – yellow above and chestnut below. The keel-billed toucan is similarly plumaged but the bill is multicolored. But with toucans, even smaller species such as the collared aracari are notable.

About half of Costa Rica's birds are passerines, a sprawling category that includes warbler, sparrow, finch and many other types of birds. Nearly limited to the tropics, however, are tanager and cotinga. The blue-gray tanager is common in Costa Rica and a resident of open, humid areas up to 2300m. The male scarlet-rumped tanager is jet black with a bright-scarlet rump and lower back – a flashy and unmistakable combination.

The male red-headed barbet is striking with its bright-red head and chest, yellow bill, green back and yellow belly. It forages in trees at mid-elevations. The white-fronted nunbird



A resplendent quetzal shakes a tail feather

TOM BOYDEN

A roseate spoonbill stretches its wings

LUKE HUNTER



A blue-gray tanager surveys the area

RALPH HOPKINS



is an upright-perching black bird of the Caribbean lowlands. It's immediately identified by its red bill with white feathers at the base.

Cotinga are even more dramatic in appearance – two species are pure white and two are a sparkling blue color. One of the strangest cotinga is the three-wattled bellbird, a highlight for visitors to Monteverde reserve (p190) because of its penetrating metallic *bonk!* and eerie whistling calls (not to mention the male's odd appearance).

MARINE ANIMALS

Long famous are the giant sea turtles of Costa Rica, impetus for the establishment of Tortuguero and several other coastal national parks. With a shell up to 1.6m long, the massive 360kg leatherback turtle is a stunning creature. The smaller olive ridley is legendary for its remarkable synchronized nesting, when tens of thousands of females emerge from the sea on the same night. All sea turtles are highly endangered and the conservation efforts on their behalf are some of the most important projects in Costa Rica.

In a few of the rivers, estuaries and coastal areas (especially around Parque Nacional Tortuguero, p458) you may glimpse the endangered West Indian manatee, a large marine mammal (up to 4m long and weighing 600kg, though usually smaller), which feeds on aquatic vegetation. There are no seals or sea lions in Costa Rica, so a manatee is easy to recognize.

Costa Rica has one of the most biologically diverse marine ecosystems in the world and an astounding variety of marine mammals. Migrating whales arrive from both the northern and southern hemispheres. Deep-water upwellings are constant year-round, making these waters extremely productive

'With a shell up to 1.6m long, the massive 360kg leatherback turtle is a stunning creature'

and creating ideal viewing conditions at any season. Humpback whales are seen almost every month, while common, bottle-nosed and spotted dolphins are year-round residents. Seeing more than a dozen other species of dolphin and whale is possible, including orca, blue and sperm whale, and several species of relatively unknown beaked whale. All of these animals are best seen on guided boat tours along both coasts.

LAND MAMMALS

Five species of sloth are found in the neotropics, and the two species widespread in Costa Rica are the brown-throated three-toed sloth and Hoffman's two-toed sloth. The diurnal three-toed sloth is often sighted, whereas the nocturnal two-toed sloth is seen less often. Both are 50cm to 75cm in length with stumpy tails. Sloths hang motionless from branches or slowly progress upside down along a branch toward leaves, which are their primary food.

Anteaters lack teeth and use a long, sticky tongue to slurp ants and termites. There are three species in Costa Rica, including the giant anteater, which reaches almost 2m in length and has a tongue that protrudes an astonishing 60cm up to 150 times a minute!

Two species of armadillo inhabit Costa Rica. The best known is the nine-banded armadillo. Despite its name, there can be from seven to 10 bands. These armadillos grow up to 1m long (one-third is tail). Largely nocturnal, they eat insects, fruit, fungi and carrion.



A white-faced capuchin ventures hesitantly out of the undergrowth

ALFREDO MAIQUEZ

Costa Rica has four monkey species and in some places you can see all four at the same location. The Central American spider monkey is named for its long and thin legs, arms and tail, which enable it to pursue an arboreal existence in forests throughout Costa Rica. Spider monkeys swing from arm to arm through the canopy, and can hang supported just by their prehensile tail while using their long limbs to pick fruit. They rarely descend to the ground and require large tracts of unbroken forest. Logging, hunting and other disturbances have made them endangered.

The loud vocalizations of a male mantled howler monkey can carry for more than 1km even in dense rain forest. Various described as grunting, roaring or howling, this crescendo of noise is one of the most characteristic and memorable of all rain-forest sounds. Inhabiting wet lowland forests, howlers live in small groups. These stocky blackish monkeys with coiled prehensile tails reside high in the canopy so they can be hard to spot.

The small and inquisitive white-faced capuchin is the easiest to observe in the wild. It has a prehensile tail that is typically carried with the tip coiled. Capuchins occasionally descend to the ground where foods such as corn and even oysters are part of their diet. Their meticulous foraging and prying into leaves, litter and bark makes them a joy to watch.

The diminutive Central American squirrel monkey persists only in isolated areas of the south Pacific coastal rain forests, including Manuel Antonio (p353) and Corcovado (p416) national parks, where it travels in small to medium-size groups during the day, squealing or chirping noisily and leaping and crashing through vegetation in search of insects and fruit in the middle and lower levels of lowland forests.

The white-nosed coati is the most frequently seen member of the raccoon family. It is brownish and longer, but slimmer and lighter, than a raccoon. Its most distinctive features are a long, mobile, upturned whitish snout with which it snuffles around on the forest floor looking for insects, fruit and small animals; and a long, faintly ringed tail held straight up in the

air when foraging. Coatis are found country-wide in all types of forest up to 3000m.

Lacking the facial markings and ringed tail of its cousins, the cuddly kinkajou is a raccoon relative found in lowland forests. It is an attractive reddish-brown color and is hunted both for food and the pet trade. Nocturnal and mainly arboreal, it jumps from tree to tree searching for fruits (especially figs), which comprise most of its diet.

The southern river otter lives in and by fast-moving lowland rivers, but is infrequently seen. It is a rich brown color with whitish undersides and has the streamlined shape of an aquatic weasel. The similarly shaped tayra is more easily spotted; it is blackish brown, with a tan head, and is territorial and arboreal. It is more than 1m long (the tail is about 40cm) and found in forests up to 2000m.

It is every wildlife-watcher's dream to see a jaguar in the wild. However, these big cats are extremely rare and well camouflaged, so the chance of seeing one is remote. Jaguars have large territories and you may see their prints or droppings in large lowland parks with extensive forest such as Corcovado (p416). Occasionally you may hear them roaring – a sound more like a series of deep coughs. There's no mistaking this 2m-long yellow cat with black spots in rosettes and a whitish belly. Good luck seeing one.

Other Costa Rican felids include the ocelot, a little more than 1m in length with a short tail and a pattern of many beautiful rosettes. Though it is the most common of the Costa Rican cats, it is shy and rarely seen. It adapts well to a variety of terrain, wet and dry, forested and open, and has been recorded in most of the larger national parks.

The widespread collared peccary lives in a variety of habitats. An adult is about 80cm long and weighs around 20kg, and has coarse gray hair and a light collar. The larger white-



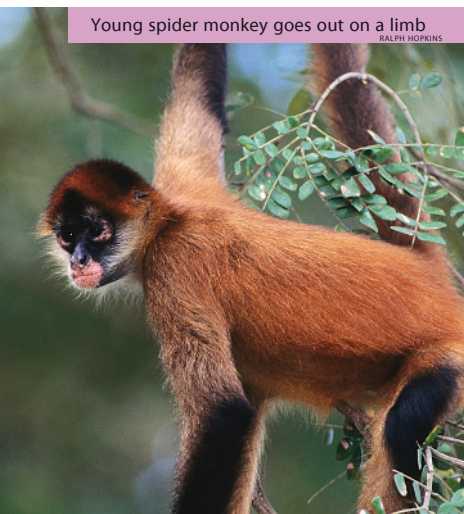
White-nosed coati preens his lustrous coat
LUKE HUNTER

lipped peccary is darker and lacks the collar but has a whitish area on the lower chin. Peccaries are noisy and aggressive with audible tooth gnashing and clicking.

Large rodents are among the most commonly seen rain-forest mammals. The Central American agouti is diurnal and terrestrial and found in forests up to 2000m. It looks like an oversized cross between a rabbit and a squirrel, with a very small tail and short ears. The closely related paca looks similar, except it has white stripy marks on its sides and is twice the size of an agouti. It is common but nocturnal.

David Lukas is an expert in natural history.

Young spider monkey goes out on a limb
RALPH HOPKINS



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