

COSTA RICA

Over the past 60 years or so, Costa Rica has become the Switzerland of Central America. It is safe, small (about the size of W Virginia), Politically stable, and has much to offer travelers. There is more biodiversity per square mile in Costa Rica than anyplace else on the planet. The country has mountains (some over 10,000 ft high), over 100 volcanoes (6 still active), Pacific and Caribbean beaches, dozens of national parks, beautiful landscapes, and a welcoming, warm people. Costa Rica is Grand Central for travelers who enjoy active and adventuresome holidays. It seems like everywhere you visit offers trekking, biking, white water rafting, zip lines, hiking, kayaking, and many other options.

The Westin Playa Conchal: This is Starwood's first all-inclusive property, and was formerly the Paradisus Playa Conchal. The property is about 1 hour South of Liberia airport (LIR) which recently opened a brand new, spacious terminal. The Westin is on a vast estate, which includes a golf course, a series of residences, and the resort, which offers 406 rooms spread out over a large area. The hotel offers junior suites and suites, as well as 'Royal' suites and jr suites. The Royal-designated rooms (over 100) have a separate check-in, and a dedicated restaurant for breakfast/lunch. The hotel has an enormous spa, several restaurants, and two swimming pools (one devoted to Royal-room guests). Rooms are spacious, even in the entry level category, and start at around 500+ sq ft, and up. The property was completely full when I visited, mostly with families and honeymooners. The hotel has access to a public beach, but has no real facilities on the beach itself.

The Tabacon Hot Springs hotel: The Arenal area is one of the top attractions in Costa Rica, and offers a wide range of eco-adventures in a relatively small area around the town of La Fortuna.

Tabacon stands out for several reasons: First, it was the first upscale hotel in the area, going back over 15 years.,The property is superbly run by Daniel Pape, the GM, who does a great job managing the resort. The property offers attentive service, fine dining, comfortable rooms, and is a Leading hotel of the world. In addition, the resort is across the road from the best, largest, and most beautiful hot springs in the area, fed by hot water coming from the volcano. The hot springs are a destination unto themselves- a vast complex featuring a spa (with treatment rooms housed in private wooden bungalows where you hear the river running next to you), swimming pool, bar, restaurant, and of course - the hot springs, framed by acres and acres of flowers and stunning tropical gardens, all around the springs. The river cascades through a series of narrows, waterfalls, and rocks (all made of black lava), and is a sight to behold. The water is about 104F and has therapeutic benefits, according to many visitors. Bring water shoes, as the pools have sandy and/or rocky bottoms. Note - guests at Tabacon have exclusive use of the springs early in the morning, which is fantastic. The site gets most crowded from 1pm to sundown. Tip: the springs are open until 10pm, and it's great fun to enjoy the hot springs under the stars.

The **Tabacon hotel** offers 102 rooms in various sizes and configurations. The property is spread out among tropical gardens and dense vegetation. There are rooms in the main building (convenient to bar, front desk, and gym), with a short walk to the main restaurant, Los Tucanes. My favorite rooms were the Rainforest suites, which have an open, spacious configuration and private terraces facing the forest. If you want rooms with views of the Arenal volcano, then your best bet are the Honeymoon suites, especially those on the 2nd floor. Note - the volcano is usually covered with clouds, so you cannot guarantee to your clients they will see the volcano, even if they are staying in a mountain-view room. If you have a family, book the Master Suites, which can accommodate up to 6. The hotel has a shuttle to take you to/from the springs, which are down the road from the hotel (it's an easy 5-10 minute - walk).

Although Costa Rica offers endless options to adventure travelers, the area of the **Arenal Volcano** stands out for several reasons. First, the number of options available -choose from canoeing, bungee jumping, canyoning, hiking, horseback riding, National Parks, canopy tours, windsurfing on Lake Arenal, whitewater rafting, kayaking, and more. Secondly, the area offers a number of high-quality outfitters, who would not be out of place in the Alps. Thirdly, the area is very accessible - by air from San Jose and

Manuel Antonio on Nature Air, and finally, the roads into La Fortuna (the small town in the foothills of the volcano) is easily reached by paved roads from multiple directions. The Arenal's main competitor is the Monteverde cloud forest, a beautiful national park, but - much harder to reach as the only way in/out is on a narrow unpaved road into Santa Elena, that takes 1 hour and 15/20 minutes to negotiate, longer in the rainy season.

If you want to get a taste of the rainforest from various perspectives, then visit **Sky Adventures**, the gold standard of the region. This company has the best infrastructure, the best guides, the best safety record, and excellent equipment built in Europe. Sky offers hikes through a private rainforest reserve, complete with canopy bridges, suspended over 100 ft from the forest floor. You literally walk over the trees and the vegetation, and are eye-level with birds and monkeys. The entire hike takes 3-4 hours and is challenging, especially due to the heat and humidity. But, like every challenge, the rewards are fantastic. The bridges are amazing (some over 450 ft long, suspended over the forest), you see beautiful waterfalls, and get a sense of the rainforest few get to experience. If you do not want to do the entire loop, then go up to the first bridge, and turn back. I highly recommend a guide to go with you. The trails are clearly marked, but a naturalist will explain to you the trees, flowers, birds, vegetation, and will take your visit to the next level. If you are feeling brave, Sky offers a course of 8 zip lines, which are thrilling. You soar over the forest at 50-55mph, with clear views of the volcano in the distance, a sight to behold. If you are not ready to zip line, you can still go up the mountain in a tram to the lookout point, which offers breathtaking views, and take the tram back down.

Our Destination specialists in Costa Rica can arrange your tickets with Sky Adventures, and Sky will gladly pick up./drop off your clients at their hotel, which makes it very simple. The road to Sky Adventures is all paved, except for the last 15 minutes or so. Sky also offers canopy bridges and zip lining in the Monteverde area. Visit www.skyadventures.travel to get a full picture of the company and their services.

Manuel Antonio National Park, on Costa Rica's Pacific coast, was almost bulldozed 40 years ago to make room for development. Thankfully, smart minds prevailed and the land now occupied by the park was left intact. Because Manuel Antonio is easily accessible (only 2.5 hours from San Jose by car on the new highway, or 25 minutes by air from San Jose), it is one of Costa Rica's most heavily visited parks. Manuel Antonio is unusual because it is set on the Pacific and has some of the most beautiful beaches in Costa Rica within the park itself. Manuel Antonio is famous for its troops of monkeys and birds. To avoid the crunch of visitors and have a better chance of seeing wildlife, get up early and visit the park at 7am when it opens (daily except Monday). Once inside the park, paths are clearly marked. Do not miss the hike to Cerro Cathedral, a forested peninsula with amazing views of the coastline behind you. Tip - the park has a rest stop with bathrooms and showers. Bring a towel and a picnic, and enjoy a swim in the park's beautiful beaches.

Outside the park are a series of public beaches you can enjoy at your leisure. There are a number of stands offering beach chairs, drinks, and umbrellas.

Where to stay? One of the top choices in this area is undoubtedly the **Gaia resort**, on a hill, overlooking the forest and the Pacific. This small hotel offers 20 rooms in various configurations, and opened 6 years ago. You arrive at a parking area off the main road, and are whisked up a steep hill to the hotel on a golf cart by one of the hotel's staff members. Once you are at the main reception area, you either go up the stairs to the main restaurant/bar, or down to your room in one of three wings. La Luna restaurant has breathtaking views of the forest and the ocean, and this is where sophisticated travelers and locals in the know come to see the sunset and enjoy a leisurely meal. The hotel has pools cascading on 3 different levels, with a small bar where you can enjoy a drink or light fare. The smallest room starts at 350sq ft, and is decorated simply with white linens, wood floors, and wicker furniture. Bathrooms are comfortable and well laid out, many with jacuzzis and windows with views of the forest. My favorite rooms were the larger suites and deluxe suites facing the Pacific, a number of which have a private roof deck above the room. The largest accommodation is the villa, with 2 bedrooms and 2 baths, on 3 levels, with a big sun terrace on the top floor. Gaia is all about privacy, modern design, intimacy, unique architecture, and a welcoming

staff that will greet you by name within an hour of your arrival, no matter where you are. The hotel also has a terrific spa, offering a wide range of treatments.

Notes: This is primarily an adults-only resort. Children 14 or older are welcome. The hotel has an excellent concierge/front desk that can organize just about any activity you request in the area. I also appreciated the courtesy shuttle to the beach, Manuel Antonio park, or area restaurants. Hotel is now a member of SLH, but will be moving to Preferred Hotels as of July of this year. High season is December - April. The rainiest period is typically September and October, although afternoon showers are frequent starting in May through November. Getting here: You can fly nonstop from La Fortuna/Arenal area on Nature air (30 minute flight instead of 5 hour+ drive) or from San Jose on Sansa or Nature Air (20 minutes). Gaia is a Signature resort and offers terrific amenities, including breakfast, a \$100 spa credit, and a \$50 resort credit.

El Silencio Lodge, about 2 hours North of San Jose. El Silencio is the sister property of **Punta Islita**, the terrific resort on the Pacific owned and operated by Grupo Islita, a leading Costa Rican hotel company. El Silencio has won many awards and has been recognized by leading consumer travel publications since it opened 4 years ago. It's easy to see why. The property blends into the tropical rainforest, with a simple, stylish, authentic design that feels very much part of the land. El Silencio was originally three separate farms in a deep valley, surrounded by the greenest mountains you will ever see. A river runs through the property, and in most places you hear water running, no matter where you are. The property has a main building, which has the main restaurant, a cozy bar (complete with fireplace), and a small room with 2 computers with high-speed internet access. El Silencio offers 15 individual chalets, nestled into the hillside overlooking the main building and the river that crosses the estate. All chalets are the same (what matters is proximity to the main building), have about 700 sq feet of space, and can sleep up to 4 people (two sleeper sofas in the living room). The rooms are spacious, have well laid-out bathrooms, and feature an outdoor jacuzzi. All chalets have a nice terrace with two rocking chairs - a welcome touch.

Why come to El Silencio? First, for privacy. The lodge has acres and acres of virgin forest and trails, so you can enjoy hikes to spectacular waterfalls and rivers, without leaving the property or running into hordes of tourists. Second, for the service. Costa Ricans in general are a warm and welcoming people, but I must tell you, El Silencio takes service to the next level. You truly feel you are staying in someone's home. The hotel has 3 staff for every guestroom, so you get a very high level of personal attention. Third, for the superb dining. The menu offers a range of choices at every meal, including vegetarian entrees. Everything is well prepared, fresh, and delicious. Trout come from the hotel's on-site ponds (you can fish your own, if you so desire!), and many vegetable and herbs come from the hotel's own orchards. The expression "Farm to table" never had so much meaning. Finally, for the choice of activities, on/off property. The hotel offers all kinds of hikes, horseback riding, visits to nearby towns to meet local families, zip lining, river rafting, and more. One of my favorite hikes is the one to El Toro waterfall, about 15 minutes' away. You arrive at an enormous gorge, at the top of the waterfall, and walk down to the water's edge. If you are feeling brave, you can rappel down the rocky cliffs next to the waterfall. Before you leave, spend time in the hotel's gardens, meeting point of hundreds of hummingbirds in every color of the rainbow (the man who runs the estate has feeders everywhere). For hard-core hikers wanting a challenge, the hotel offers a hike to the summit of the Poas volcano, over 9,000 ft high, which takes about 6-7 hours, depending on how fit you are.

El Silencio is the perfect place to start/end a Costa Rica journey. It's only 2 hours from San Jose, and less than 2 hours from the Arenal Area. Note - this hotel is right in the middle of the forest, so expect some rain in the afternoons, for most of the year. Try to schedule your activities in the morning, and enjoy the hotel's spa or a good book in the afternoon.

Note: the rooms do not have TV/internet. El Silencio is about 4500 ft above sea level, so nights and early mornings are cool. After the 95F heat of Manuel Antonio, a cool evening in the 50s was a Godsend. You can book El Silencio through Signature's Destination Specialists.

Other recommendations: **Corcovado National Park**, on the Osa Peninsula in Southern Costa Rica to experience a primary rainforest (fly into Puerto Jimenez, stay at Lapa Rios), visit the **Caribbean region near Puerto Viejo de Talamanca and Cahuita Park** (stay at Le Camaleon, a small luxury hotel on the Caribbean sea), a visit to **Monteverde Cloud Forest** (the national park that put Costa Rica as an eco-destination on the map), and a stay at **Punta Islita**, on the Pacific Coast, for the seclusion, peace and quiet, and superb service/facilities.

Practical advice:

Money matters: There are 500 Colones to \$1 USD. My advice is not to change Dollars into Colones. Everywhere I went, I used Dollars without a hitch. Bring small bills with you for tips and small purchases.

Domestic Air: To save time on multi-destination itineraries, fly with Sansa or Nature Air. Nature Air flies 2 engine prop airplanes, Sansa offers more modern equipment with 1 engine. Airplanes are small, but flights are usually 25-30 minutes long, longer to Puerto Jimenez. Note: both carriers have weight restrictions, enforced with varying degrees depending on loads and time of year. If you have a lot of luggage, my advice is to leave heavy suitcases with your destination specialist, who will store bags and deliver to you when you come through San Jose again in the itinerary. Also note - Sansa flies to Juan Santamaria (SJO) Main airport, Nature air flies to Tobias Bolanos airport, also in San Jose, about 25 minutes from SJO.

Airport Tax: You must pay \$28 departure tax. Tip: pay the tax at your hotel, and save time on day of departure.

Hotels in San Jose: Chances are, you will be overnighing in San Jose on the first or last day of your trip. If you want a centrally located hotel with access to shops/restaurants, book the **Real Intercontinental** (a Signature hotel). Note - request a room in the new Club wing, with separate check-in and additional services. If you want a hotel closest to the airport, book the San Jose Marriott hotel. If you want a hotel downtown, try the classic **Grano de Oro**, a charming small hotel with a colorful history.