

Sandy's Travel Tips: Exploring Costa Rica

By Sandy Bornstein



For years, Costa Rica had been near the top of my bucket list. Initially, I envisioned a brief stay. Perhaps, I'd only stop part of the day at a couple of cruise ship ports. While doing my preliminary research, I learned that Costa Rica had more than beaches and rainforests.

Yes, it does have 800 miles of Caribbean and Pacific coastlines, but it also has five mountain ranges that include six active volcanoes and 14 major rivers.

My head was spinning as I read about the diverse terrains and ecosystems that were affected by the Caribbean and Pacific Coasts. I learned

that some things were available in several places while other things were one-shot deals.

I readjusted my initial plans. Instead of limited port visits, my adventure was expanded to two weeks. I searched for a fast-paced itinerary that would provide a sampling of Costa Rica's diverse geography. I wanted to encounter as much wildlife as possible, while also participating in outdoor and indoor activities.

In this month's article, I'm going to share information about five regions and offer my suggestions for places to visit.

San José

Most travelers fly into San José, the capitol of Costa Rica. The city is located in the Central Valley and is surrounded by mountains and volcanoes. To get acclimated to Central America, I recommend staying a day and taking a self-guided or guided city walking tour.

The street traffic can be intense since residents have a minimal number of public transportation options. Those seeking to head indoors to escape the rain (May-November), or the intense sunshine (moderate temperatures with high humidity) the rest of the year, can visit the Teatro Nacional Costa Rica, the Precolumbian Gold Museum, the Jade Museum, or the Museo Nacional. Your first stop should be the Teatro Nacional Costa Rica, a 19th century treasure.

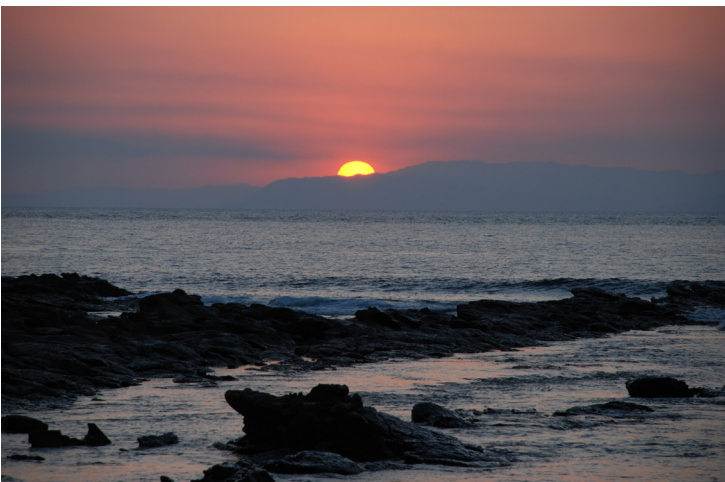
Sarapiquí

On the way to Sarapiquí, stop at the Poás Volcano National Park. This national park has one of the two active craters near San José. Take the Botus Trail to the Mirador del Cráter Principal and the Mirador Laguna Botus. Along the way there will be plenty of photo opportunities as you walk through a cloud forest that is filled with lush vegetation. If you're lucky, you'll be able to take more unique pictures of geysers that extend up to several hundred feet. The best time to go is usually first thing in the morning.

Nearby, on the slopes of the Poás Volcano, you can arrange for a coffee tour at the Doka Estate. My husband doesn't drink coffee and yet remained interested throughout the tour. Coffee along with bananas, cardamom, cacao, pineapple, and corn are the major crops grown in this region. Visiting a pineapple farm is another option.

Adventure seekers can go rafting on the Sarapiquí River. If you're expecting an exhilarating ride, don't go near the end of the dry season. You'll need to paddle nonstop to propel your raft.

Trekkers can spend hours exploring the trails that are connected by suspension bridges inside the Tirimbina Biological Reserve. Hiking through the rainforest ignites your awareness of nature and is an invigorating experience. This facility is known for its



preservation of the endangered tropical forest ecosystems. The reserve offers presentations, including a nighttime demonstration that showcases bats. Don't forget your bug spray.

La Fortuna and Arenal Volcano

La Fortuna is about a two and a half hour drive from Liberia International Airport or three to four hours from San Jose. The climate is a bit more unpredictable since its inland location is affected by both coasts.

This small town has a central park that is surrounded by restaurants and shops. The Arenal Volcano, Costa Rica's most active volcano, plays peek-a-boo throughout the day. If you can capture a photo, don't hesitate. Clouds might roll in quickly.

Arenal Volcano National Park is situated within the Arenal Conservation Area. The park has a network of short trails that run through a secondary forest and former lava fields. La Fortuna also has several thermal hot springs.

Wildlife along the Rio Frio is plentiful. If you want to see spider and howler monkeys as well as sloths, caimans, and birds, book a river cruise. Some cruises take their passengers to the Nicaragua border for a quick photo op. You'll probably be less inclined to visit a zoo after you take pictures of these species in their natural setting.

Guanacaste

By heading northwest, the climate shifts to a unique dry tropical climate. You'll pass by large open fields as you enter cattle ranching territory. I recommend visiting the rustic Buena Vista Lodge located in the foothills of Rincon de la Vieja Volcano. This off-the-beaten-track facility offers a variety of amenities—horseback riding, zip-lining, a hot spring spa, a waterfall, waterslide, trails with suspension bridges, and a tropical dry forest that is the home to peccaries, armadillos, howler monkeys, Amazon parrots and hundreds of birds. The therapeutic mud treatment is relaxing, but falls short of a Dead Sea experience. The ability to participate in several different activities in one location is a definite perk.

Pacific Coast Region (Jaco and Manuel Antonio National Park)

Jaco is a popular destination that is best known for its world-class surfing and nightlife. The adjacent coastline is dotted with beaches. The nearby forests are home to an abundance of wildlife. Travelers looking for a resort experience that includes a private beach can check out the Punta Leona complex. I never paid much attention to birds until I saw numerous scarlet macaws. Watch out for the giant lizards that parade up and down the walkways, pool deck, and beachfront.

If you're in this area, you'll need to spend several hours at Manuel Antonio National Park. Along the way, enjoy a seaside meal in Quepos, a harbor town that is below sea level.

Nature lovers can stroll through nearby Manuel Antonio National Park. The Cathedral Point Loop Trail, as well as other trails, offer spectacular views and opportunities to see squirrel and capuchin monkeys, iguanas, three-toed sloths, and a wide assortment of birds. The Cathedral Point Loop trail goes through the lush rainforest that sometimes borders the shoreline. Sun worshippers and surfers can head to one of the public beaches at this beautiful national park.

Costa Rica's largest habitat for crocodiles is located along the Rio Tarcoles. This polluted river captures the waste from the Central Valley and empties into the



Pacific Ocean. The noticeable foam and debris along the river banks doesn't stop visitors from enjoying the flora and fauna.

Bird lovers will be enchanted by the large assortment of flying creatures. While I did spot several crocodiles, our guide was surprised that there were fewer than anticipated. Consider booking a tour that ends close to dusk so that you can add sunset pictures to your collection.

Costa Rica offers a multitude of travel options. Itineraries can be adjusted to meet the particular needs of a young couple, family or empty nesters.

Feel free to visit my website—www.sandrabornstein.com to learn more about Costa Rica and other destinations. If you end up booking a trip to Costa Rica, I'd love to hear about your adventure. Send an email to sbornstein@bestversionmedia.com. ■