

Coast-aah Rica

Costa Rica has traditionally been a popular destination because of its peaceful reputation in comparison to neighboring countries. At the conclusion of the 1948 civil war, a new progressive constitution was signed and the army was (and still is) disbanded. The ensuing environment made the country a popular and comfortable place to visit. Costa Rica is also a popular tourist attraction because of its beaches and exploding eco-tourism attractions.

The northwest corner of the country is the Nicoya Peninsula and contains some of the best beaches. Coco Beach and Terminado Beach are the two most popular beach destinations in this area. Terminado has one main street that contains many accommodations, restaurants and souvenirs. The main attraction is the beach as many people lay on the beach, rent a horse for a ride on the beach and then seemingly the whole city watches the sunset on the beach. Also entertaining is watching the pelicans dive-bomb for fish in the water.

Marino Las Baulas near Playa Terminado is a nature reserve that attracts many. The goal is to see the huge leatherback turtles lay their eggs during the night. The turtles can weigh over 1,000 pounds. The nesting season is usually in January and February and many tours can be taken to see the turtles. If you miss the turtles there are several iguanas to see, some in the various hotels' backyards.

There are a couple cities on the peninsula that many people visit. Montezuma is a backpacker's haven while many tourists visit Puntarenas as a transit point. The city itself doesn't have much but is located on an island so it's a good place for fishing and for other water activities.



In the north central part of the country is the most visited reserve in Costa Rica, Monteverde. Unfortunately, it is a bit overrated, as tourists can only see a handful of birds and some vegetation. The cloud rainforest is certainly interesting to hike in and the Continental Divide crosses through Monteverde. The park also contains a hummingbird zoo, which has a diverse group of hummingbirds.

One of the more interesting places in Monteverde is the Frog Pond. The building has many brightly-colored dart frogs and includes a good tour. They also have asthma beetles. Supposedly, if you have asthma and eat this live beetle three times a day for three months, you will be cured. The beetle tastes like pepper.

Northeast of Monteverde, near the city of La Fortuna is Volcan Arenal. It is the most active volcano in Central America with minor eruptions every few hours. I was able to see a small eruption on the boat ride in from Monteverde, as a cloud of dust rose from the crater. It is possible to see lava if it's a clear day. Due to the explosions that have killed people as recently as 1999, it's not possible to walk to the crater and visitors have to stay a safe distance away.

A rainforest surrounds the volcano, which makes it possible to see wildlife including spider monkeys and quetzals in the trees. Descending from the rain forest, the

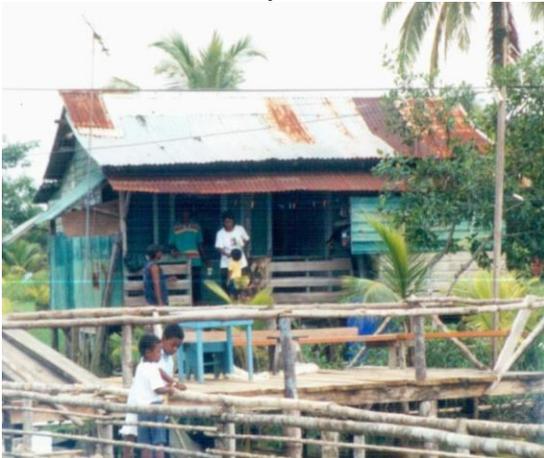
hot baths that were created after the '68 explosion that killed 80 people in a nearby town are a part of most tours. The water in this area was cold before the eruption but now it is hot and it gets channeled into hot baths. The hot baths also include a bar area so visitors can drink and relax in the water.

Proceeding to the south is the capital of San Jose. There are several good museums to visit in addition to feeling the flavor of city life. The Jade Museum is the gem of Costa Rica's museums as it houses the world's largest collection of American jade. The National Museum has a diverse amount of exhibits including archeological, jade, art and natural history. Perhaps more interesting is the outside of the building, which still contains bullet holes from the 1948 civil war.

Most of the action in San Jose is located along Central Avenue, which for the most part is a pedestrian mall. The stores on the mall are predominately the big international fast food shops but there are several local shops to peak in. The Plaza de La Cultura is a large square where people eat after visiting the nearby restaurants. The square also contains the National Theater, which was built in the 1890's. A block to the west is the Metropolitan Cathedral and Park Central.

The main city in the southeast corner is Port Limon. The city is not a tourist town rather it is a port town located on the Caribbean Sea. It has all the activities associated with a port town, but it is a change of pace from the rest of the country. This area has a black-influenced culture as is typical of Central American cities on the Caribbean. The Park Vargas is interesting to visit during the day or night as it has several tropical trees. During the day, it is conceivable to see the elusive sloth and at night there is a sense of intrigue walking through the park. At the other end of the pedestrian walkway is the Mercado where many locals hang out to pass the time.

Limon is not far from Panama and thus a trip across the border to the archipelago of the Bocas del Toro should be considered. This archipelago has a series of unspoiled islands. The main city on Colon Island is Bocas del Toro, which can serve as the main



base for visiting other islands. Several of the accommodations seem to be falling into the sea and there aren't many high-end hotels yet. This is a good place to rent a bike (check the tires and brakes before you rent) to ride along the washed-out dirt roads. Sometimes a bike or truck is the only transportation option. A place in the interior to bike to is La Gruta, which is a cave that contains numerous bats inside. Outside is a statue of the Virgen del Carmen and an area to pray.



There are several boat captains (mine led the boat "Free Willy") that will take passengers to the neighboring islands. Bastimentos Island is about ten minutes away. The small city bearing the island's name can be visited to get an idea of how the people there live. Most live in a very small shack although there are elaborate houses on the backside of the island being kept up by locals. There are attractive flower-beds throughout the island; some put into old upside-down boats that are no longer seaworthy.

Costa Rica is the most touristy country in Central America, which is both good and bad. The peaceful climate has made it a welcoming place. The natural beauty, with a range of animals and vegetation is enjoyable even for those who are not nature-lovers. To escape tourists, go to Limon or across the border to Bocas del Toro. These are a few of the numerous reasons why Costa Rica attracts so many tourists.