

Costa Rica: Natural Parks & Tropical Forests

San José • Arenal • Monteverde • Manuel Antonio • San Gerardo de Dota

Travel to Costa Rica, where it's easier to be at one with nature than anywhere else in the world. Imagine blinking at the fluttering brilliance of a Blue Morpho Butterfly ... stumbling upon a Three-toed Sloth napping in the forest canopy ... cocking your head to return the inquisitive look of a giant Green Iguana ... spotting a Resplendent Quetzal gliding through the trees. As we travel from volcanic mountain ranges to misty cloud forests and bountiful jungles, our small group will explore this intense biodiversity up close. And we'll also mingle with Costa Rica's people, whether sharing a meal at the home of a local family, or visiting the children of a village school. It's almost impossible to believe that there could be so many wonders in such a small place without witnessing them for yourself.

Most meals are included and accommodations include Savegre Lodge, Villas Lirio, El Establo Mountain Resort, and El Tuscano Resort & Thermal Spa.

Day 1

After breakfast, we gather for a Welcome Briefing. Then we board our coach and begin our ride northwest from San José into the northern lowlands of Costa Rica along the Pan-American Highway. As we travel through the countryside outside of San José, we'll have many fine views of the country's agricultural landscapes. We'll stop en route to visit a 100-year-old coffee *finca* (plantation) and Costa Rican National Heritage Site: Doka Estate.

Locally owned by the Vargas Ruiz family for more than 70 years, this *finca* is a modern operation that uses time-honored techniques—such as the oldest working water-powered mill in all of Costa Rica—to produce delicious gourmet coffee. As we tour the estate, we'll see the various steps in the production of this important national export, and learn about the history of coffee's introduction to Costa Rica, how the combination of rich mountain soil and a near-perfect coffee-growing climate made it a natural crop for the country, and why locals call the coffee bean the *grano d'oro*, or golden seed. By the end of the tour, you may have a newfound appreciation for the cup of coffee you can enjoy as we sit down for an included lunch at the *finca*.

From there, we'll continue on toward our next lodgings. We check in, then join our Trip Leader for a Welcome Drink and orientation walk, followed by dinner at the lodge.

Day 2

Early this morning, you can elect to join a nature walk led by our Trip Leader in the area around our hotel, at the time of day when many birds are most active. We have breakfast together afterward, then travel to Costa Rica's remote northern border, near the Caño Negro Wildlife Refuge. This reserve is home to hundreds of species of wildlife, and is an important stopping point for many migrating species of birds, including Costa Rica's largest colony of neo-tropical cormorants.

Once there we board a small touring boat to explore the Río Frío, a complex inland waterway where we'll likely see wading birds—like Northern Jacanas and Wood Storks—as well as many turtles and butterflies. Keep your binoculars and camera ready—we might be lucky enough to spot larger animals, like spider or howler monkeys, sloths, and caimans that live by the river.

After lunch, we return to our hotel, where we have the opportunity to relax in the soothing waters of the hotel's hot springs during an afternoon at leisure. We regroup this evening for dinner at our lodge.

Day 3

We immerse ourselves in local culture this morning, as we set out to experience *A Day in the Life* of a Costa Rican village. We'll begin by meeting one of the leaders of the Altamira village community, who will teach us more about life in Altamira. From there, we'll continue to a local school (when in session), which is supported in part by Grand Circle Foundation—part of the *World Classroom* initiative. Here, a few members of Costa Rica's next generation will take a break from their studies to meet us. We'll have time to speak with them one-on-one before we meet with some of their parents and teachers to learn about Costa Rica's educational system.

We'll get an even closer look at daily life afterward, as we join a local family for a Home-Hosted Lunch, dining on traditional Costa Rican *casado*—a meal that typically contains rice, beans, plantains, salad, and chicken or beef. As we eat, we'll have a chance to share stories with our gracious hosts. Many OAT travelers call this opportunity for personal intercultural exchange a highlight of their adventure.

Later, we'll return to our lodge and have some leisure time to relax at its hot springs before we gather for dinner at our hotel.

Day 4

This morning as we continue our travel in Costa Rica, we take a relaxing boat ride on Lake Arenal. We enjoy views that can range from the cone of the Arenal Volcano in the distance to the peaceful, verdant lakeshore. Cruising along the serene waters, we may spot more of Costa Rica's diverse birds and wildlife. We continue on, sometimes over unpaved roads, to the Monteverde Cloud Forest, stopping en route for lunch at a local restaurant, and enjoying the scenery as we climb to Monteverde's 4,600-foot elevation.

Monteverde is renowned for its unique environment and diversity of natural life. The mountainsides on which the forest is located trap the warm, humid air rising from the ocean, creating dense clouds that provide near-constant moisture, supporting a large number of mammal, bird, and plant species. Our hotel here is near the Monteverde Cloud Forest Biological Reserve, a protected area where this exceptional natural diversity is preserved

Day 5

The Monteverde Cloud Forest Biological Reserve tops our agenda today, as we depart our lodge after breakfast on a guided nature walk through this acclaimed 26,000-acre reserve. Founded in 1972 as a refuge for local wildlife, Monteverde today is a protected region dedicated to scientific research and education. Stretching down both the Caribbean and Pacific slopes of the Tilarán Mountain Range, the reserve exhibits eight distinct ecological zones. This variety of habitat combined with a yearly average rainfall of 97 inches results in a very large and diverse plant community, with more than 300 species of orchids alone. Monteverde is also home to 100 mammal species, 400 bird species, and more than 120 species of amphibians and reptiles.

Our guide will aid us in finding and identifying a wide variety of the local creatures and plant life. Hummingbirds (including the Violet Sabrewing Hummingbird) are ever-present and we might glimpse some of the other notable avian residents, such as a Black Guan, a chlorophonia, or an exotic mot-mot. There are some endangered species dwelling in this tree haven as well, including the Three-Wattled Bellbird (whose call

carries nearly two miles). We'll also keep our eyes peeled for White-faced Capuchin Monkeys cavorting in the canopy.

After lunch at a local restaurant that specializes in regional food, as well as delicious handmade chocolates, you have the remainder of the afternoon to do some exploring on your own. Or, perhaps you'll join us for an optional Hanging Bridges tour, and discover the lush cloud forest from a unique vantage point. On this excursion, we'll follow a system of suspension bridges that spans the canopy of the Monteverde Cloud Forest, examining the flora and fauna of the rain forest from a bird's-eye view. Every step of the way, a local naturalist guide will explain the unique characteristics of the canopy and point out animals, birds, and plants peculiar to this treetop milieu.

Day 6

After breakfast this morning, gear up and join our optional Forest Canopy ride. Using techniques developed by cavers and climbers, we'll ascend high above the forest floor and traverse from tree to tree in the forest via a series of thrilling zip-lines—it's a great chance to enjoy the thrill of the adventure and another wonderful view of the treetops.

Lunch is on our own in nearby Santa Elena today, and this afternoon, you can join our optional *The World of Butterflies & Bats* tour. We begin with a visit to Costa Rica's most extensive butterfly garden. Founded by a world-renowned entomologist, this collection of live butterflies and other insects includes everything from brilliant Blue Morphos to Central America's more unusual varieties. It's a great opportunity to learn about the life cycle of these tropical beauties. Then we'll discover the fascinating lives of jungle bats at an indoor habitat and museum where the lighting reverses day and night—so we can see the bats active as they would be after dark—and special equipment enables us to hear the sounds of these amazing flying mammals.

Or, take the morning and afternoon to explore Monteverde at your own pace. Rest, take a short nature hike, catch up on your journal, or drop a line to friends back home with tales of your adventures so far. Dinner this evening is on your own.

Day 7

We depart the cloud forest today and continue our travel in Costa Rica by heading south to the lush environs of the Pacific Coast and Quepos, home to the renowned Manuel Antonio National Park. En route, we'll stop at Hacienda Nosavar, a 640-hectare cattle ranch. Here, we'll explore Costa Rica's vibrant cowboy culture on a horseback ride along the scenic shores of Río Tárcoles—a river known for its large population of crocodiles. After a traditional Costa Rican lunch at the hacienda, we'll continue to our hotel, arriving in the mid-afternoon. We'll have time for an orientation walk, as well as some time at leisure, before selecting a spot for dinner on our own. Please note: If Day 7 falls on a Sunday, we'll enjoy a picnic lunch and head directly to Manuel Antonio National Park, where we'll enjoy our included nature walk followed by free time at the beach.

Day 8

We spend our morning in Manuel Antonio National Park, a critical habitat for migrating birds from the U.S. and Canada. While comparatively small (just 1,700 acres), this lush park is home to several distinct ecosystems, each teeming with wildlife. The park includes four marvelous beaches, island bird sanctuaries, and a luxuriant rain forest. And perhaps because of its small size, a morning full of wildlife sightings—including Howler and Capuchin monkeys, sloths, coatis, and countless birds—isn't at all unusual. In particular, we'll keep an eye out for the endangered Squirrel Monkey, as Manuel Antonio is one of only two of its habitats in the country.

We're bound to work up an appetite after a morning of discovery, so we'll head back to a local restaurant for an included lunch. Afterward, you'll have a little leisure time, which you might use to explore the nearby town of Quepos. Named for the native Quepoa people whom the Spanish conquered in the late 16th century, the town has seen prosperity as a banana- and African palm oil-exporting center, but is now a mecca for sport fishing.

Later, we'll have the opportunity to enjoy a taste of the ocean's bounty when we set out for a local restaurant, where we'll enjoy views of the sunset over our included dinner. **Please note:** *If Day 8 falls on a Monday, when Manuel Antonio Park is closed, we'll spend the morning at leisure in the neighborhood of our hotel. All other included and optional activities are as described above.*

Day 9

This morning, our small group departs for San Gerardo de Dota. We'll stop en route at an old family dairy farm in the valley of San Isidro de El General. Known as Finca Don Tavo, the farm was founded in 1921 by the grandfather of the current owners, the Barrantes. Here, we'll experience Costa Rican farm life firsthand by feeding and milking some of the cattle. After lunch together on the *finca*, we'll continue our journey, traveling into the mountains on the Pan-American Highway.

Afterward, we continue on toward San Gerardo de Dota, the stunning location of which—in the lush, mountain-walled valley of the Savegre River—is the reward for a long day of travel. We learn our way around our hotel and get a preview of tomorrow's discoveries during a late-afternoon orientation walk. We'll have some time to relax before gathering for dinner at our hotel.

Day 10

Early this morning, we set out with a purpose: to spot the Resplendent Quetzal. On a birder's "life list," this legendary bird is among the most coveted species to sight. Happily for us, we're in one of the most populous quetzal nesting areas on the planet (owing in large part to its altitude of 7,000 feet). Our Trip Leader will escort us into the green valley forest in search of this elusive bird renowned for its brilliant plumage.

Perhaps because of its rarity, the Maya esteemed the quetzal as the most sacred bird in the sky. While its feathers flash iridescently in the tropical sun, the bird is predominantly green and can be hard to spot in its jungle habitat. Whether or not we're successful at spotting a quetzal today, there is plenty to observe in this high-altitude tropical environment, and sightings of a variety of interesting birds are quite likely.

We return to our hotel for breakfast, and enjoy the remainder of the day at leisure. Our hotel makes it easy for us to get closer to the unique ecosystem of San Gerardo de Dota, with nearby elective activities such as birdwatching, hiking, horseback riding, and trout-fishing. Lunch and dinner are included at our hotel today.

Day 11

This morning, the final leg of our journey returns us to Costa Rica's capital, San José. En route, we stop to witness a woodworking demonstration by local artisans, then continue on our leisurely drive across the verdant countryside of the Central Valley, stopping once more to enjoy lunch on our own.

On arrival in San José, we get acquainted with the city on a sightseeing tour. Originally little more than a few simple houses at a rural crossroads, San José's central location relative to the villages, farms, and plantations of the Cordillera Central ultimately earned it its place as Costa Rica's capital city in 1823. As the city attracted

entrepreneurs and the intelligentsia in the mid-1800s, its leaders looked to Europe for architectural inspiration, and today it is a modern city with the largest urban population in the country.

The highlight of our discoveries will be a tour of the Teatro Nacional. Truly the nation's showpiece, the theater was erected at the behest of coffee barons when one of Europe's foremost opera companies left Costa Rica off its Americas tour because there was no proper place to perform. Not intending to be snubbed again, the barons declared a tax on coffee, imported European workers and artists, and built a theater whose Renaissance façade, richly rendered murals, and architectural detail make it the rival of any opera house on the Continent.

We check into our hotel in the afternoon following our tour, and enjoy the afternoon at leisure to rest up for our flight or explore San José on our own. Tonight we gather to wish each other *adios* during a Farewell Dinner at a local restaurant.

Day 12

After breakfast, you'll transfer to the airport for your flight home, or travel to Costa Rica's southern Caribbean coast to begin your Tortuguero National Park: Ultimate Rain Forest Experience optional post-trip extension.