



Arenal Volcano rises above the lush forest in Costa Rica.

# Natural Treasures

*Discovering Costa Rica's ecological wonders*

By Leslie Forsberg

**Traveling along the broad, foliage-lined canal**, our launch sends up a fine mist of cooling spray that's a welcome contrast to the intense sun and humidity of the jungle. The engine throttles down as we pass a snake-necked, teal-eyed anhinga, perched Phoenixlike on a drifting log, drying its wings in the sun. Cristobal, our captain, noses the tour boat into a canal where mangrove roots finger mud banks in arthritic gnarls.

Dense vegetation closes in until we're gliding through a shady tunnel. A thick, musklike scent pervades the air, and a cacophony of birdcalls surrounds us.

On my left, an emerald basilisk lizard

resembling a miniature spinosaurus jumps off a buttressed root, splashing into the water and then, to my disbelieving eyes, actually runs atop the water, erect, paddling with its hind feet. "We call them the

'Jesus Christ lizard' since they can walk on water," says our naturalist, Roberto. A bread box-size iguana that blends in with its vivid virescent surroundings slowly eases down a trunk to the water's edge. Just beyond, an iridescent Blue Morpho butterfly the size of my two hands, thumbs together, seems to glow from within, as it flits through the emerald jungle.

"Crocodile!" calls Roberto, and our heads swivel to the right as he gestures to a bumpy "log" 15 feet away, nearly dis-

guised by fallen leaves. As we cruise slowly past the 8-foot reptile, the boat's atmosphere is electric with excitement. With a lash of its tail, the crocodile paddles into the water, swimming toward us. All arms are pulled in as cameras click. Curiosity satisfied, the reptile turns and swims off. A troop of spider monkeys high above us scrambles to a nearby tree as the male makes a loud, insistent "ooh!" sound and showers us with torn-off palm branches. A tiny baby clings to a branch, the monkey's hanging tail forming a perfect C. Suddenly it falls, and we all gasp—yet it merely lands on a lower branch before scrambling back up the trunk to join its troop.

I feel as though I'm in a *Wild Kingdom* TV show from my childhood; there are so many sights and sounds I hardly know in which direction to turn. This is biodiversity in its most concentrated sense—and this is Costa Rica.

Nearly 5 percent of the planet's biodiversity (nearly a half-million species—the greatest concentration of species in the world) can be found in this Central American country of 4.6 million people, though Costa Rica—an area smaller than the state of West Virginia—occupies only .03 percent of the planet. Costa Rica's residents,



THE PALMER / ISTOCKPHOTO

Zip-lining provides visitors a unique perspective of Costa Rica's forest canopies.

called *Ticos*, recognize the importance of their biological treasures: They've designated an astonishing 25 percent of their country as protected lands, in national parks and conservation areas.

On a seven-day "Adventures by Disney" Costa Rica trip, heading out from the bustling central capital of San José, each experience lives up to the tour name. Our days are spent exploring the plants and animals of rain forest and cloud forest jungles, whitewater rafting, and zip-lining through the forest on an active volcano. Our evenings are filled with hearty local-foods meals (typically, delicious iterations of beans and rice, fried plantains and chicken or fish), along with searching for nocturnal denizens and soaking in magma-warmed hot springs.

The sheer diversity of landscapes makes Costa Rica one of the most exciting places on the planet to visit. Among the country's attractions are Pacific and Caribbean beaches, active and dormant volcanoes, high-elevation cloud forests and low-elevation rain forests, and rushing



## WHEN YOU GO

For more information, go to [www.visitcostarica.com](http://www.visitcostarica.com).

## LODGING

**Laguna Lodge Tortuguero** (888-259-5615, [www.lagunatortuguero.com](http://www.lagunatortuguero.com)), one of the country's leading eco-lodges, is situated between the Caribbean and the Tortuguero Lagoon. Whether swimming in the pool, strolling through the botanical garden, or enjoying a tropical drink in the open-air lounge, guests are surrounded by natural beauty.

Every room at **Hotel Arenal Manoa** (506-2479-11-11, [www.arenalmanoa.com](http://www.arenalmanoa.com)) is spacious, with an impressive view of the Arenal Volcano through an immense glass wall. The grounds feature extensive tropical gardens, waterways and pools.

Most who arrive in San José book a hotel for at least the first night before setting off for adventure. **Hotel Indigo** (877-846-3446; [www.ichotelsgroup.com](http://www.ichotelsgroup.com)) is a contemporary boutique hotel with an outdoor swimming pool, situated in Santa Ana, on the outskirts of San José.

## FAST FACTS

- More than 850 bird species, 1,200 butterfly species and 1,300 orchid species can be found in Costa Rica.
- Costa Rica has nearly 800 miles of coastline—132 on the Caribbean, and 631 on the Pacific.
- Costa Rica was visited by Christopher Columbus in 1502. Long a Spanish colony, Costa Rica became a sovereign nation in 1838, and the country has remained a peaceful, stable democracy for almost all of its history.

**Adventures by Disney** offers guided vacations (with or without children) to destinations around the globe. See [www.adventuresbydisney.com](http://www.adventuresbydisney.com) for details.

rivers that drain to the sea.

In Tortuguero National Park, on a Caribbean coast alluvial floodplain 50 miles north of Limón, my senses are overwhelmed with the vivid sights, sounds and scents of the tropical rain forest. The park is exceptional not only for its land-based plants and animals, but because it's also home to four types of turtle—leatherback, hawksbill, olive ridley and, perhaps most notably, the green sea turtle. The park's sand beaches are the green turtles' primary nesting site in the Western Hemisphere.

Our *panga* swings into the dock at the Sea Turtle Conservancy (STC), founded by renowned naturalist Archie Carr, where we're greeted by an international team of scientists, including Madrid biologist Lucia. We learn that STC helped establish the park in 1970 to protect green turtles, and that the organization works with local villagers to promote ecotourism. "Our local volunteers patrol 22 miles of beaches at night during nesting season, July through October," Lucia says. "When we find a turtle, we tag it and take three points of reference. Then we return 70 days later to excavate the nest and record what's happened." Many times the eggs have been eaten by roving jaguars, yet from being close to extinction in the



NIK WHEELER / ALAMY

1960s, the population of nesting female green turtles climbed to more than 13,000 in 2011.

Another kind of animal confronts me upon my arrival at Laguna Lodge, on a spit of land between the jungle and the Caribbean, where the *panga* deposits me, along with other new arrivals. Alongside

the path to my cabin, I'm stunned to see an insect the size of my hand, crouched in a crevice of a stump. It's not just any insect—it's the rhinoceros beetle, with a slick carapace and bizarre upraised horn that would give it a menacing appearance if it weren't palm-size; its size corresponds with the leaves of nearby foliage.

Yet another type of animal—the frog—can be seen in the evening. I join others in a nocturnal search for the tiny amphibians in the lodge's "frog garden," a popular local feature. As our eyes adjust to the moonlight, we peer beneath leaves and at stem junctions. A dry "clucking" sound draws our attention, and several of us zero in on a floppy palm where a member of the species considered the country's unofficial mascot, the iconic red-eyed tree frog, rests, its elbows and knees crooked tightly as if ready to jump.



NHPA / SUPERSTOCK

Top: A family enjoys a soak in the Tabacon hot springs.

Left: A young spider monkey dangles from a branch in Corcovado National Park.

I'm the one jumping the next day at Sky Trek zip line, at 5,437-foot Arenal Volcano. The volcano looms over the landscape of central Costa Rica, northwest of San José. It takes some internal dialogue to strap on a harness and step into thin air, soaring 600 feet above the forest canopy, directly toward the volcano along a line that appears threadlike in the vast scenery. Scary? You bet—for the first six seconds. Then it's sheer joy and exhilaration. I even find myself singing as I zoom through empty space, the wind in my face, zooming toward the first ramp, where my compatriots are cheering me on. The zip line laces back and forth across the chasm 10 times, ending with a half-mile run, high above a lake, that finishes with a flourish—dashing through a tunnel of rain forest trees. I've been on other zip lines, but this one is exceptional, and I can't imagine a more dramatic setting.

The volcano isn't merely a scenic backdrop. It's a living volcano that was the country's most active for more than 40 years, burying three villages when it erupted in 1968, and emitting lava and smoke on a daily basis until 2010, when its activities diminished in intensity.

In addition to Costa Rica's six active volcanoes, there are many that are dormant or extinct. One of the benefits of volcanic activity occurs when rainwater seeps into the earth and is superheated by magma, emerging as hot springs. The base of Arenal is famed for its thermal springs, and in the evening I relax in the steaming, sulfurous water of Hidalgo Hot Spring, fed by a cascade of warm water that tumbles into a series of exquisite pools. The setting is enchanting, with a half-moon bridge between two of the pools, twinkling lights in the trees and the soothing sound of cicadas in the air. I soak in the water and enjoy the excited chatter of my fellow travelers about the day's zip-line adventure.

When we arrive back at Hotel Arenal Manoa, I'm greeted by a night visitor: An armadillo is parked on my porch. Maybe it was hoping for a midnight snack? As I approach the door, it ambles off into the

nearby jungle. There seems to be no need to go in search of wildlife in Costa Rica—it comes to you.

One of the best parts of travel in the tropics is the sweet taste of tropical fruit. On a tour of the more than 3,000-acre organic Finca Corsicana the following day, our tour guide, Miguel, offers chunks of pineapple he cuts from the plants and carves up, for us to sample while on a wagon tour of the farm fields. An astonishing 38 million pineapples are harvested here annually. Miguel explains how pineapples grow from shoots sent up by the stiff-leaved plants.

Later, we enjoy yet more sweet local pineapple, along with other tropical fruits, during an afternoon break from whitewater rafting down the Sarapiquí River. We're encouraged to toss the rinds into the river, which swiftly turns into a contest to see who can throw them the farthest; there are plenty of birds and animals to enjoy them downstream.

We paddle hard down bucking rapids that drench us, then laze about, watching the scenery on slow, sun-drenched passages. Local kids jump off low banks to splash and play in the heat of the day at a couple of deep-pool spots. Towering riverside trees offer occasional spectacular bursts of color, ranging from the purple of jacaranda trees to the fluorescent yellow *corteza amarilla* tree.

A flock of plump green parrots lands in the riverside trees, and between their cheerful banter and the chatter of the river, the effect is mesmerizing—much like everything I've encountered in this beautiful country that holds some of the world's greatest natural treasures. ▲

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## GETTING THERE



Use Mileage Plan miles to visit Costa Rica via partner airlines American Airlines and Delta. For more information or to enroll in Mileage Plan, go online to [alaskaair.com](http://alaskaair.com) or call 800-654-5669.