

NORTH AMERICA · WILDLIFE · BEACHES · ADVENTURE · HIKING · MOUNTAINS



Costa Rica

Around a quarter of Costa Rica is protected, and its wildlife is unusually easy to see: sloths and capuchins in Manuel Antonio, nesting turtles at Tortuguero, quetzals in Monteverde's cloud forest. Arenal's volcano rises over hot springs, and both the Pacific and Caribbean coasts have surf beaches. Domestic flights save hours on the winding roads between regions.

 Before you go, read the UK government's travel advice for Costa Rica and entry requirements (visas, passport validity). Last updated by FCDO 19 May 2026.

 CAPITAL San José	 CURRENCY Costa Rican colón (CRC) £1 ≈ CRC 606	 LANGUAGE Spanish	 BEST TIME Dec–Apr
 DAILY BUDGET £50–£260 ££ Moderate	 PLUGS Type A, B 120V · adapter needed	 FLIGHT FROM LONDON 11h 30m direct ~£600–£1,100 return	 TIME ZONE UTC-6 standard time

Costa Rica is smaller than Scotland yet spans Caribbean lowlands, a spine of volcanoes and a long Pacific coastline, with around a quarter of its land in national parks and reserves. A classic two-week first trip loops from San José to Arenal and La Fortuna, across to Monteverde's cloud forest, then down to the Pacific at Manuel Antonio or out to the surf towns of the Nicoya Peninsula. With longer, add Tortuguero's canals on the Caribbean side, the reggae-tinged coast around Puerto Viejo, or the Osa Peninsula, where Corcovado protects some of the country's richest rainforest.

Costa Rica is one of the most expensive countries in Central America: prices are often quoted in US dollars, and park fees, guided tours and lodges add up quickly. In return, infrastructure is good, guides are well trained and most things run smoothly. Distances look short on the map, but mountain roads make journeys slow, so most people base themselves in three or four places. The December to April dry season brings peak prices and crowds, especially at Christmas and Easter; the green season's afternoon downpours mean lower rates and lush forest. Families, wildlife-watchers, surfers and first-timers in Latin America all find it easy going.

Top 5 highlights

- 1

NATURE

Arenal Volcano and La Fortuna

Arenal's near-perfect cone, quiet since 2010 after four decades of eruptions, looms over La Fortuna. Hike across old lava flows in the national park, then soak in the thermal rivers and spa pools along the road west of town.
- 2

NATURE

Monteverde Cloud Forest

Mist-soaked reserves straddling the Continental Divide shelter resplendent quetzals, dozens of hummingbird species and hundreds of orchids. Walk the trails at dawn with a guide, or see the canopy from hanging bridges and ziplines.

3

WILDLIFE

Manuel Antonio National Park

Small but crowded with life: sloths, white-faced capuchins and squirrel monkeys move through forest that runs down to white-sand coves. Tickets are sold online only, and the park closes on Tuesdays.

4

WILDLIFE

Tortuguero National Park

Reached only by boat or light aircraft, this canal-laced Caribbean park is a major nesting beach for green turtles, watched on guided night walks from July to October. Early canoe trips find caimans, monkeys and herons.

5

WILDLIFE

Corcovado National Park

On the remote Osa Peninsula, Corcovado protects lowland rainforest where tapirs, scarlet macaws and all four of Costa Rica's monkey species live. Entry requires a licensed guide; most visitors stay in Drake Bay or Puerto Jiménez.

Biggest cities

LARGEST CITY

San José

≈ 1.4 million people

Most visitors pass straight through, but a day covers the Gold Museum beneath Plaza de la Cultura, the Jade Museum, the gilded National Theatre and lunch at a soda in the Mercado Central.

2ND LARGEST CITY

Alajuela

≈ 320,000 people

Minutes from Juan Santamaría airport, Alajuela makes an easy first or last night, with a mango-shaded central park and quick access to Poás Volcano and the coffee farms on its slopes.

3RD LARGEST CITY

Cartago

≈ 165,000 people

The colonial capital until 1823 has the Basílica de los Ángeles, the country's most important pilgrimage church, the ruins of an earthquake-wrecked parish church, and the road up Irazú Volcano.

Alajuela and Cartago lie within the Central Valley's wider Greater Metropolitan Area but are distinct cities with their own centres. San José's figure covers its metropolitan cantons; the other two are canton populations (2022 estimates).

When to go to Costa Rica

Best time: **Dec–Apr.**

Jan

Feb

Mar

Apr

May

Jun

Jul

Aug

Sep

Oct

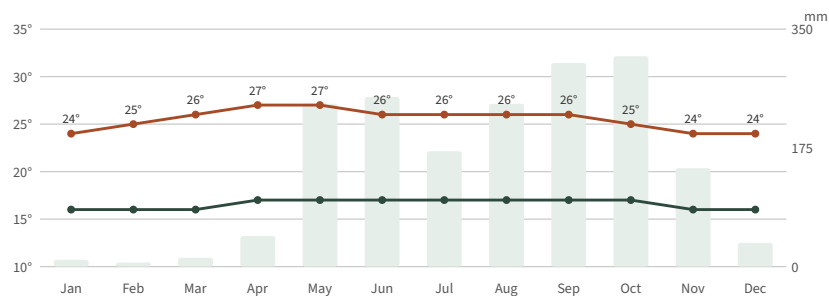
Nov

Dec

■ Best ■ Good ■ Mixed ■ Poor

Average climate in San José

— High °C — Low °C ■ Rain (mm)



Festivals & events

Jan	Fiestas de Palmares Two weeks of concerts, fairground rides, a horseback tope parade and Costa Rican-style bullfighting, in which amateurs dodge the bull and none is killed, in a small town north-west of San José.
Mar	Día del Boyero On the second Sunday of March, San Antonio de Escazú honours oxcart drivers with a parade of brightly painted carts, a tradition recognised by UNESCO as intangible cultural heritage.
Aug	Romería a la Virgen de los Ángeles In the days before 2 August, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims walk from across the country, many through the night, to Cartago's basilica to honour La Negrita, Costa Rica's patron saint.

How much does Costa Rica cost?

SHOESTRING £50 per person / day ≈ CRC 30,308 hostels, street food, buses	MID-RANGE £120 per person / day ≈ CRC 72,739 3-star hotels, restaurants, some taxis	COMFORTABLE £260 per person / day ≈ CRC 157,601 4-star+, guided trips, private transfers
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Estimates per person per day, excluding flights. Prices vary by season and city.

Food to try

Gallo pinto Rice and black beans fried together with onion, sweet pepper, coriander and a splash of Salsa Lizano, eaten for breakfast with eggs, fried plantain and sour cream.	Casado The everyday lunch plate at any soda: rice, beans, salad, fried sweet plantain and a choice of chicken, fish, beef or pork, at a fair price.	Rondón A Caribbean-coast stew of seafood and root vegetables simmered in coconut milk; the name comes from 'run down', a legacy of the Jamaican families who settled around Limón.
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Getting around

Public buses are cheap and reach almost everywhere, though journeys between regions often mean changing in San José. Shared tourist shuttles such as Interbus link the main hubs door to door. Sansa flies small planes to Tortuguero, Drake Bay, Puerto Jiménez and Liberia, saving hours. Car hire suits independent itineraries; choose a 4x4 for Monteverde and the Osa, and navigate with Waze. Uber operates around the Central Valley.

Practical information

PLUGS & VOLTAGE  A B 120V — bring a UK-to-A/B adapter	EMERGENCY NUMBERS Telephone: 911 (ambulance, fire, police) Source: FCDO “Getting help”
DIALLING CODE +506	TIME ZONE UTC-6 (standard time)

TAP WATER

Generally safe to drink

DRIVING

On the right

TIPPING

Restaurant bills include a 10% service charge by law, so extra tipping is optional. Tip guides, drivers and hotel staff a few dollars for good service.

ETIQUETTE

Ticos value politeness and avoid confrontation, so stay calm if things run late. 'Pura vida' works as greeting, thanks and goodbye; cover up away from the beach and never feed wildlife.

MAIN AIRPORTS

Juan Santamaría International Airport (SJO), San José; Daniel Oduber Quirós International Airport (LIR), Liberia

Visas & entry for Costa Rica

Shown for a British passport.

No visa needed

You can visit Costa Rica without a visa for up to 180 days under a tourist visa waiver. The exact period is at the discretion of the immigration officer on arrival.

For more information on requirements or if you plan to work, or stay for a longer period, check with the Costa Rican Embassy in the UK.

From the UK government's FCDO entry requirements for British passport holders — read the full page for passport validity, permits and exceptions.

Health & vaccinations



See a travel health nurse, GP or travel clinic **6–8 weeks before you go**. Make sure routine UK vaccinations (such as MMR and diphtheria-tetanus-polio) are up to date.

RECOMMENDED FOR MOST TRAVELLERS

Hepatitis A

Tetanus

SOMETIMES ADVISED — DEPENDS ON YOUR TRIP, ACTIVITIES AND HEALTH

Chikungunya

Dengue

Rabies

Typhoid

YELLOW FEVER CERTIFICATE

A yellow fever certificate is only required if you arrive from (or transit through) a country with yellow fever risk — not if you fly direct from the UK.

MALARIA

Low risk of malaria

- There is a low risk of malaria in Limon Province (but not in the city of Limon (Puerto Limon): awareness of risk and bite avoidance recommended.

Source: TravelHealthPro (National Travel Health Network and Centre), checked 21 October 2026. This is a summary, not medical advice.

Public holidays in Costa Rica

The next 12 months. Banks, offices and some sights may close, and transport and hotels get busy around these dates.

Fri 25 Dec 2026	Christmas Day
Fri 1 Jan 2027	New Year's Day
Thu 25 Mar 2027	Maundy Thursday
Fri 26 Mar 2027	Good Friday
Sun 11 Apr 2027	Juan Santamaría Day
Sat 1 May 2027	International Labour Day
Sun 25 Jul 2027	Annexation of the Party of Nicoya to Costa Rica
Sun 15 Aug 2027	Mother's Day
Wed 15 Sep 2027	Independence Day

National holidays only. Dates based on lunar calendars can move by a day or two depending on official announcements.

Useful phrases in Spanish

ENGLISH	SPANISH	SAY IT
Hello	Hola	<i>OH-la</i>
Thank you	Gracias	<i>GRAH-see-as</i>
Please	Por favor	<i>por fa-VOR</i>
Excuse me	Disculpe	<i>dees-KOOL-peh</i>
How much is this?	¿Cuánto cuesta?	<i>KWAN-toh KWES-ta</i>

Know before you go

- Online car-hire quotes often exclude Costa Rica's mandatory third-party liability insurance, which can add substantially to the price at the desk; check exactly what is included before booking.
- Prices are often quoted in US dollars and dollars are widely accepted, but change comes back in colones at poor rates; pay by card where you can and decline conversion into pounds.
- Start days early: wildlife is most active around dawn, park trails are quieter, and in the green season the rain usually arrives in the early afternoon.

Visa, health and safety rules change. Before you book or travel, check the FCDO travel advice (gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice) and TravelHealthPro (travelhealthpro.org.uk). Costs are estimates. © 2026 Pick My Trip.