

Costa Rica WAYS

This tiny country crams in attractions for every type of holidaymaker, says Ella Buchan

“Costa Rica is a very dangerous country,” said our guide Juan Carlos, a stern look crossing his face like a shadow.

“Because, when you come here, you will fall in love.”

The frown dissolved into a wide, infectious smile. It was a sight we became accustomed to during our time exploring this Central American country.

Ticos, as Costa Ricans call themselves, are happy, generous of spirit and armed with a wicked sense of humour.

Juan Carlos had a point.

ADVENTURE



FAMILY



HONEYMOON



PICTURES: TABACON; THE FAMILY ADVENTURE COMPANY; EXODUS

Blessed with an abundance of good looks and charm, Costa Rica is a temptress.

Nestled between Nicaragua and Panama, it's the size of Denmark yet packs in more than countries twice its size.

With colourful wildlife and a landscape of rainforest-clad mountains, volcanoes and champagne-coloured beaches, the tricky part is choosing which slice of paradise to explore.

Thomson now operates direct flights to Liberia, while British Airways is launching a route to the capital San Jose in May.

More accessible than ever, a trip here can be tailored to most clients – from those wanting a family break with a difference to honeymooners looking for the romantic holiday of a lifetime.

ADVENTURE

Costa Rica is the ultimate adventure playground, made for those with itchy feet and active limbs. In the shadow of Arenal Volcano, La Fortuna makes a great base for clients looking to pack a lot in. Sky Adventures has zip wires through the treetops and over canyons, from £50 or [→](#)

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LEFT: Sloths are common in Costa Rica

RIGHT: The Pacific coast, surfers' paradise



PICTURES: ICTVVISITCOSTARICA.COM

→ £33.50 for children. You can also cross the canopies via a series of hanging bridges (adults £25, children £17).

To the north, the Caño Negro Wildlife Refuge sits on the Nicaraguan border. Boats chug along the chocolate river, with expert guides pointing out storks, sloths and 'Jesus Christ' iguanas skimming over the water. Get Your Guide has an eight-hour tour from £50.

BELOW: Hotel Punta Islita, Guanacaste



The climate is temperate, the people are friendly and the wildlife is straight from a storybook

The Pacific coast is a surfers' paradise. A popular spot is Playa Hermosa near Jaco, which has a busy strip of bars, restaurants and shops. Playa Guiones in Guanacaste is great for beginners with surf schools Nosara Tico and Agua Tibia. Hotel options include the Gilded Iguana, with large, airy rooms just steps from the waves, from £35 per night.

A quarter of Costa Rica is protected, whether it's a national park or a private reserve. For a quieter alternative to the rather busy but beautiful Manuel Antonio National Park in central Costa Rica that's still just three hours from capital San Jose, suggest secluded Hacienda Baru, a nature refuge with a lodge where rooms start from £40 a night. On-site tours include scaling a tree the height of a 10-storey building, £30, and 'night in the jungle', where guests trek to a basic jungle camp and spot wildlife by torchlight after dinner (£90). We snoozed to the chirruping of tree frogs and awoke to an orchestra of toucans, howling monkeys and 'laughing falcons'.

To combine a bit of everything, suggest Exodus' new 11-day Costa Rica Mixed Activity itinerary, which will get clients white-water rafting on the Sarapiquí River, zip-lining through the Monteverde cloud forest, biking

around Lake Arenal, and snorkelling off a catamaran on the Pacific Coast. Starting from £2,059, the trip includes flights, transfers, accommodation, some meals, guiding, transport and excursions.

► **FAMILY**

The country is perfect for families looking for accessible adventures. The climate is temperate, the people are friendly and the wildlife is straight from a storybook.

For those who prefer to stay in one location, holidays at Hotel Punta Islita in Guanacaste come with adventure included. Rates at the coastal resort include unlimited sunset horse rides, kayaking through the mangroves, monkey walks and moonlit excursions to see olive ridley turtles nesting on the beach. Scarlet macaws from the hotel-sponsored Aria Project, which rehabilitates injured parrots, swoop past guests' patios, some of which have whirlpool baths and plunge pools. Standard rooms have two double beds from £215 per night, while bigger families might want to consider a villa, from £440.

Kids will love a tour around Don Juan Farm in La Fortuna (adults £23, children £10), a coffee plantation dedicated to educating children in sustainable farming practices. The guides are armed with an arsenal of knowledge - and machetes, which they use to cut papaya and cocoa pods along the way. Added delight comes from an inquisitive kitten, friendly pigs and a dog named Tequila.

Costa Rica is a perennial favourite for family adventure tours - the country's diversity, small size and



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→ great, safe infrastructure make it ideal. The Family Adventure Company offers a two-week extravaganza suitable for over-fives, where families will visit coffee plantations and butterfly farms, boat along the waterways of the Tortuguero National Park and tread the high rise canopy walkways of Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve, and spend time at the beach. The itinerary moves at a relaxed pace so kids don't get exhausted and most hotels have swimming pools. The trip, including flights, starts from £2,259 per adult and £2,033 per child.

G Adventures has a nine-day Costa Rica Teenage Adventure, suitable for over-12s, which visits La Fortuna, Monteverde and Manuel Antonio, with plenty of activities from rafting and horse-riding to zip-lining and snorkelling on offer, with lots of free time and choice, so even awkward teens can be kept happy. Prices start from £629, including accommodation, transport, guiding and some activities.

▶ HONEYMOON

From cabins in the clouds to candyfloss sunsets on the Pacific coast, destinations don't come much more romantic than Costa Rica.

Recommend clients start or end their trip with a few nights at Hotel Grano de Oro in the capital, San Jose. Chic rooms (from £100 per night) at the restored Victorian mansion have marshmallow-soft beds, thick robes and period furniture. Some have private patios with trickling fountains.



ABOVE: El Silencio Lodge & Spa



The elegant lamplit restaurant is a local favourite for dates and anniversaries, filled with couples huddled over plates of savoury crème brûlée. Hip neighbourhoods Amon and Escalante are a short cab ride away. Recommend Ravi for stonebaked pizza on the pretty patio, and tiny jazz club El

Sotano for a taste of local nightlife. The rooms at Arenal Kioro Suites & Spa, from £140 a night, come with a volcano view. The perfect pyramid seems so close that should it suddenly erupt the sliding glass doors would shatter. Luckily, Arenal isn't currently active. Each of the hotel's enormous rooms has a hot tub and patio or balcony. Thermal pools fed by natural hot springs are scattered around the gardens. Nearby Tabacon Grand Spa and Thermal Resort also has its own hot springs, and the hotel's honeymoon packages are packed with experiences from zip-lining to horse riding.

At the northern tip of the Caribbean coast, Tortuguero National Park is where green turtles nest. Evergreen Lodge is reached by boat over glassy water, past rainforest roamed by tapirs and jaguars. Cosy, secluded cabins start at £150 per night.

Only 90 minutes from San Jose airport but secluded in a 500-acre tropical forest, every detail at El Silencio is designed to encourage guests to reconnect with nature and each other. The impeccably-designed cabins at this member of Relais & Chateau are tucked away for complete privacy. Floor-to-ceiling sliding doors lead to a decked patio and outdoor jet tub, fed by pure spring water. For clients seeking the ultimate romantic getaway, El Silencio's three-night honeymoon package includes chocolate-dipped fruits, a couple's massage in the spa, activities including horse riding and a sunset dinner in the forest, from £790 per couple. TW

BELOW: Canyoning with G Adventures

BELOW RIGHT: Arenal Kioro Suites & Spa

