



THE ROUGH GUIDE TO

# COSTA RICA



# INSIDE THIS BOOK

**INTRODUCTION** What to see, what not to miss, itineraries and more

**WILDLIFE GUIDE** Easily identify mammals, birds and reptiles with our illustrated wildlife section

**BASICS** Pre-departure tips and practical information

**THE GUIDE** Comprehensive, in-depth guide to Costa Rica, with area highlights and full-colour maps throughout

**CONTEXTS** History, landscape, conservation and tourism, plus recommended books covering Costa Rica and a useful language section

We've flagged up our favourite places – a perfectly sited hotel, an atmospheric café, a special restaurant – throughout the Guide with the ★ symbol



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# THE ROUGH GUIDE TO **COSTA RICA**

This eighth edition updated by  
**Stephen Keeling and Shafik Meghji**







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## Introduction to Costa Rica

Democratic and prosperous, Costa Rica is Central America's biggest tourist destination. The draw is not ancient Mesoamerican ruins or Spanish colonial history, but nature; the country is one of the most biodiverse areas on the planet, an ecological treasure-trove whose wide range of habitats – lush rainforests and untouched beaches, steaming volcanoes and dense mangrove swamps – supports an incredible variety of wildlife, from those loveable sloths and tiny, fluorescent green frogs to brightly plumed macaws and toucans. And it's also peaceful; with its long democratic tradition Costa Rica is an oasis of political stability.

Though this idyllic image might not do justice to the full complexities of contemporary Costa Rican society, it's true that the country's complete absence of military forces (the army was abolished in 1948) stands in sharp contrast to the brutal internal conflicts that have ravaged its neighbours. This reputation for peacefulness has been an important factor in the spectacular growth of Costa Rica's tourist industry – almost three million people visit the country annually, mainly from North America. Most of all, though, it is Costa Rica's outstanding natural beauty, and the wildlife that accompanies it, that has made it one of the world's prime **ecotourism** destinations, with visitors flocking here to hike trails through ancient rainforest, peer into active volcanoes or explore the Americas' last vestiges of high-altitude cloudforest, home to jaguars, spider monkeys and resplendent quetzals.

Admittedly, tourism has made Costa Rica less of an "authentic" experience than many travellers would like: some towns seemingly exist purely to provide visitors with a place to sleep and a tour to take, while previously remote spots are being bought up by foreign entrepreneurs. And as more hotels open, malls go up and potholed tracks get tarmacked over, there's no doubt that Costa Rica is experiencing a significant social change, with the darker side of outside involvement in the country – sex tourism, conflicts between foreign property-owners and poorer locals and, in particular, drug trafficking – all on the increase.



Costa Rica's **economy** is the most diversified in Central America, and has become even more so since the country finally entered into the then-controversial Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) in 2009, enhancing its economic ties with the US in the process. Computer processors and medical supplies now sit alongside coffee and bananas as key exports, although the country's revenue from tourism still outstrips everything else. It is thanks to this money, in particular, that Costa Ricans – or Ticos, as they are generally known – now enjoy the highest rates of literacy, health care, education and life expectancy on the isthmus. That said, Costa Rica is certainly not the wealthy, globalized country that it's often portrayed to be – a significant percentage of people still live below the poverty line. While it is modernizing fast, its character continues to be rooted in **distinct local cultures**, from the Afro-Caribbean province of Limón, with its Creole cuisine, games and patois, to the traditional *ladino* values embodied by the

## BIODIVERSITY UNDER PROTECTION

Despite its small size, Costa Rica possesses over five percent of the world's total **biodiversity**, around 165 times the amount of life forms it might otherwise be expected to support. This is in part due to its position as a transition zone between temperate North and tropical South America, and also thanks to its complex system of interlocking **microclimates**, created by differences in topography and altitude. This biological abundance is now safeguarded by one of the world's most enlightened and dedicated conservation programmes – about 25 percent of Costa Rica's land is protected, most of it through the country's extensive network of national parks and wildlife refuges.

Costa Rica's **national parks** range from the tropical jungle lowlands of Corcovado on the Osa Peninsula to the grassy volcanic uplands of Rincón de la Vieja in Guanacaste, an impressive and varied range of terrain that has enhanced the country's popularity with ecotourists. Outside the park system, however, land is assailed by **deforestation** – ironically, there are now no more significant patches of forest left anywhere in the country outside of protected areas.





PACIFIC OCEAN



Isla del Coco (see inset)



NICARAGUA

Metres

3000

2000

1500

1000

500

0

CARIBBEAN  
SEA

LIMÓN

HEREDIA

CARTAGO

SAN JOSÉ

PUNTARENAS

PANAMA

0 25  
kilometres



## FACT FILE

- The Republic of Costa Rica lies on the Central American isthmus between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, consisting of a mountainous backbone – known as the **Continental Divide**, which rises to 3820m at the summit of Cerro Chirripó, its highest point – flanked by low-lying coastal strips. The country's **area** of 51,100 square kilometres (which includes the 24 square kilometres of Isla del Coco, 535km southwest of the mainland) makes it slightly larger than the Netherlands, slightly smaller than West Virginia.

- Costa Rica's **population** is largely of Spanish extraction, though there's a substantial community of English-speaking Costa Ricans of African origin along the Caribbean coast, as well as 64,000 indigenous people. Costa Rica is a young country: out of its population of 4.8 million, around a quarter are aged under 15; men currently enjoy a life expectancy of 77, women 82.

- The country's main **exports** are **coffee** and **bananas**, though in recent years income from these products has been overtaken by that from **tourism**. Despite widespread poverty (around twenty percent of the population), the free and compulsory primary education system means that the country boasts a **literacy** rate of 96 percent, the best in Central America.

- Costa Rica's **wildlife** is mindboggling: the country is home to around 250 species of mammal (including ten percent of the world's bat population); over 400 varieties of reptile and amphibian; nearly 900 species of bird; and a staggering 250,000 types of insect, including a quarter of the world's known butterflies.

*sabanero*, or cowboys, of Guanacaste. Above all, the country still has the highest rural population density in Latin America, and society continues to revolve around the twin axes of countryside and family: wherever you go, you're sure to be left with mental snapshots of rural life, whether it be horsemen trotting by on dirt roads, coffee-plantation day-labourers setting off to work in the mists of the highlands or avocado-pickers cycling home at sunset.

## Where to go

Although almost everyone passes through it, hardly anyone falls in love with **San José**, Costa Rica's capital. Though often dismissed as an ugly urban sprawl, "Chepe" enjoys a dramatic setting amid jagged mountain peaks and is home to the country's finest museums, as well as some excellent cafés and restaurants, a lively university district and a burgeoning arts scene. The surrounding **Valle Central**, Costa Rica's agricultural heartland and coffee-growing region, supports the vast majority of the country's population and features several of its most impressive volcanoes, including steaming Volcán Poás and Volcán Irazú, its deep-green crater lake set in a strange lunar landscape high above the regional capital of Cartago.

While nowhere in the country is further than nine hours' drive from San José, the far north and the far south are less visited than other regions. The broad alluvial plains of the **Zona Norte** are dominated by the now-dormant cone of Volcán Arenal, which looms large over the friendly tourist hangout of La Fortuna, while the dense rainforest of the Sarapiquí region harbours monkeys, poison-dart frogs and countless species of bird, including the endangered great green macaw. Up by the border with Nicaragua, the seasonal wetlands of the Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Caño Negro provide a haven for water birds, along with gangs of basking caimans.



# Author picks

Our authors have tramped around towns and trekked through jungles, rafted down rivers and paddled up canals, and consumed more coffee than is probably good for them. Here are a few of their favourite things...

**Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Los Ángeles** In a country not necessarily known for its architectural heritage, Cartago's showpiece church (p.143) is a stunner, with a gilded interior to match.

**Time with the OTS** Spend a few days with the Organization of Tropical Studies at their biological stations in La Selva (p.72) or Palo Verde (p.245) and you'll see why their guides are rated some of the best in the country.

**Little-known beaches** Escape the crowds at the gorgeous beaches of Playa Junquillal in Guanacaste (p.281) and Ojochal's Playa Tortuga on the southern Pacific coast (p.377).

**Sodas** Basic, cheap and unfailingly friendly, Costa Rica's ubiquitous *sodas* are a great place to tuck into a plate of *gallo pinto* or a traditional *casado*. Try *La Casona Típica* in San José (p.108), *Soda Luz* in Orosí (p.148) or *Johanna* in Golfito (p.389).

**Off-the-beaten-track reserves** The most famous national parks can get crowded in peak season, so try Parque Nacional Juan Castro Blanco (p.129), take a multiday hike in the Bosque Eterno de los Niños (p.312) or visit Parque Nacional Los Quetzales, home of the iconic resplendent quetzal (p.364).

**Kayaking around Curú** There are few more enjoyable ways of watching wildlife than paddling a kayak through the limpid waters of the southern Nicoya Peninsula (p.321), camping on beaches and spotting monkeys, sloths and seabirds along the way.

**Traditional cafés** San José's traditional cafés are wonderfully atmospheric places for people-watching and sampling Costa Rican coffee. Try the elegant *Alma de Café* inside the Teatro Nacional, rustic *Café Rojo* or colonial-style *Café Hacienda Real* in Escazú (p.108).

Our author recommendations don't end here. We've flagged up our favourite places – a perfectly sited hotel, an atmospheric café, a special restaurant – throughout the Guide, highlighted with the ★ symbol.

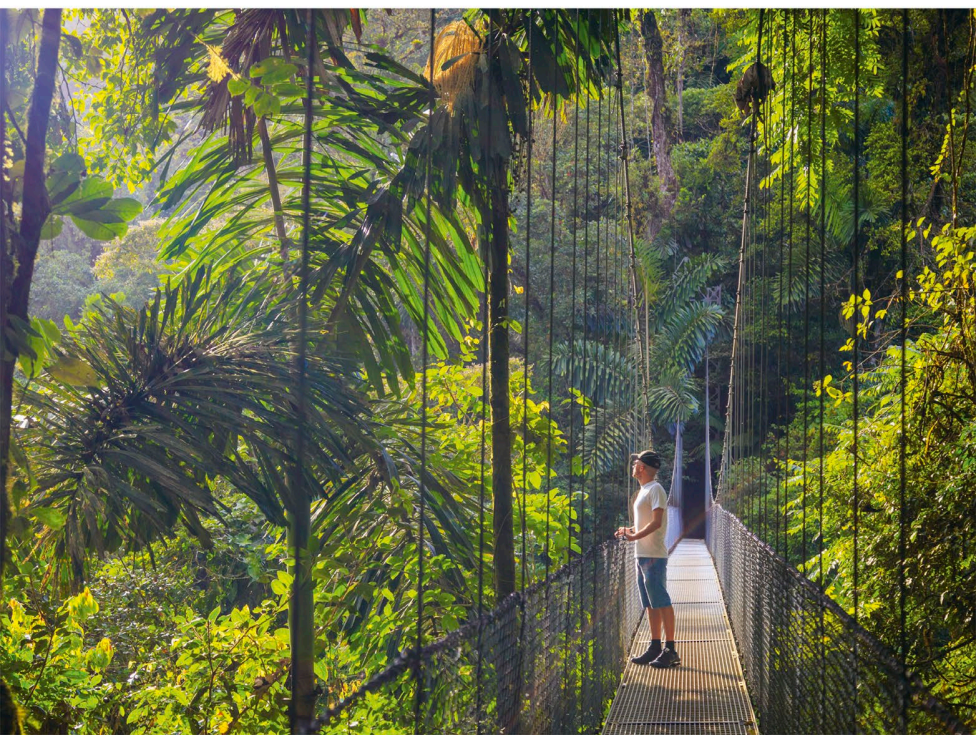
**FROM TOP** SEA-KAYAKING, REFUGIO DE VIDA SILVESTRE CURÚ; EATING AT A SODA; BIRDWATCHING, PARQUE NACIONAL PALO VERDE



In the northwest, cowboy culture dominates the cattle-ranching province of **Guanacaste**, with exuberant ragtag rodeos and large cattle haciendas occupying the hot, baked landscape that surrounds the attractive regional capital of Liberia. The province's beaches are some of the best – and, in parts, most developed – in the country, with Sámara and Nosara, on the Nicoya Peninsula, providing picture-postcard scenery and superb sunsets.

Further down the **Pacific coast**, the surf-oriented sands of Montezuma and Santa Teresa/Mal País, on the southern Nicoya Peninsula, draw travellers looking to kick back for a few days (or weeks), while popular Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio, Costa Rica's smallest national park, also enjoys a sublime ocean setting and has equally tempting beaches. Further inland, nestled in the cool highlands of the Tilarán Cordillera, Monteverde has become the country's number-one tourist attraction, pulling in the visitors who flock here to walk through some of the most enchanting cloudforest in the Americas.

**Limón Province**, on the Caribbean coast, is markedly different to the rest of the country. It's home to the descendants of the Afro-Caribbeans who came to Costa Rica at the end of the nineteenth century to work on the San José–Limón railroad – their language (Creole English), religion (Protestantism) and West Indian traditions remain relatively intact to this day. The reason most visitors venture here, however, is for Parque Nacional Tortuguero, and the three species of marine turtle that lay their eggs on its beaches each year.





## RUMBLE IN THE JUNGLE

Costa Rica is set in one of the most **geologically active** areas on Earth. Ringed by the convergence of five major tectonic plates, it sits on the western edge of the Caribbean Plate, at the point where it slides beneath the Cocos Plate; this subduction (where one plate sinks into the Earth's mantle) formed a chain of volcanoes that stretches 1500km from Guatemala to northern Panama. Costa Rica itself is home to some 112 **volcanoes**, though only five (including the major visitor attractions of Volcán Poás and Volcán Irazú) are considered active – Volcán Arenal, for so long the most active volcano in the country, has been in a resting phase since July 2010.

The ongoing friction between the Caribbean and Cocos plates causes around 1500 **earthquakes** in Costa Rica each year, although only a small proportion of these are actually felt and fewer still are strong enough to cause significant damage – the worst incident in recent times was the earthquake that struck near Cinchona, 50km north of San José, in January 2009, when forty people were killed.

Travellers looking to venture off the beaten track will be happiest in the rugged **Zona Sur**, home to Cerro Chirripó, the highest point in the country, and, further south on the outstretched feeler of the Osa Peninsula, **Parque Nacional Corcovado**, which protects the last significant area of tropical wet forest on the Pacific coast of the isthmus. Corcovado is probably the best destination in the country for walkers – and also one of the few places where you have a fighting chance of seeing some of the more exotic wildlife for which Costa Rica is famed, such as the scarlet macaw.

## When to go

Although Costa Rica lies between eight and eleven degrees north of the equator, temperatures (see box, p.80), governed by the vastly varying altitudes, are by no means universally high, and can plummet to below freezing at higher altitudes. Local microclimates predominate and make weather unpredictable, though to an extent you can depend upon the **two-season rule**. In the dry season (roughly mid-Nov to April), most areas are just that: dry all day, with occasional northern winds blowing in during January or February and cooling things off; otherwise, you can depend on sunshine and warm temperatures. In the wet season (roughly May to mid-Nov), you'll have sunny mornings and afternoon rains. The rains are heaviest in September and October and, although they can be fierce, will impede you from travelling only in the more remote areas of the country – the Nicoya Peninsula and Zona Sur especially – where dirt roads become impassable to all but the sturdiest 4WDs.

Costa Rica is generally booked solid during the peak season, the North American winter months, when bargains are few and far between. The crowds peter out after Easter, but return again to an extent in July and August. Travellers who prefer to play it by ear are much better off coming during the low or rainy season (euphemistically called the “green season”), when many hotels offer discounts. The months of November, April (after Easter) and May are the **best times to visit**, when the rains have either just started or just died off, and the country is refreshed, green and relatively untouristy.

**OPPOSITE** RAINFOREST IN PARQUE NACIONAL VOLCÁN ARENAL

# 23

## things not to miss

It's not possible to see everything that Costa Rica has to offer in one trip – and we don't suggest you try. What follows is a selective and subjective taste of the country's highlights: stunning national parks, brooding volcanoes, gorgeous beaches and exhilarating outdoor activities. All highlights are colour-coded by chapter and have a page reference to take you straight into the Guide, where you can find out more.







## 1 TREKKING IN PARQUE NACIONAL CORCOVADO

Page 390

Straddling the Osa Peninsula in the far south of the country, this biologically rich, coastal rainforest is one of Costa Rica's finest destinations for walking and wildlife-spotting.

## 2 TEATRO NACIONAL, SAN JOSÉ

Page 93

Central America's grandest theatre, extravagantly done out in gold and marble and built in imitation of the Palais Garnier in Paris.

## 3 TURTLE-WATCHING

Pages 173, 274 & 295

View some of the thousands of turtles – leatherback, hawksbill, olive ridley and green – that come ashore to lay their eggs each year, and, if you're lucky, watch their hatchlings' perilous journeys back to sea.





4



5



6

**4 VOLCÁN ARENAL**

Page 214

The lava may have stopped spewing, but Arenal is still a magnificent sight, and the surrounding area is one giant adventure playground – soak in volcanic hot springs, zipwire through the forest canopy or sign up for any number of other outdoor activities.

**5 PARQUE NACIONAL SANTA ROSA**

Page 260

This magnificent park protects a rare stretch of dry tropical rainforest – and the wildlife that calls it home.

**6 INDIGENOUS COSTA RICA**

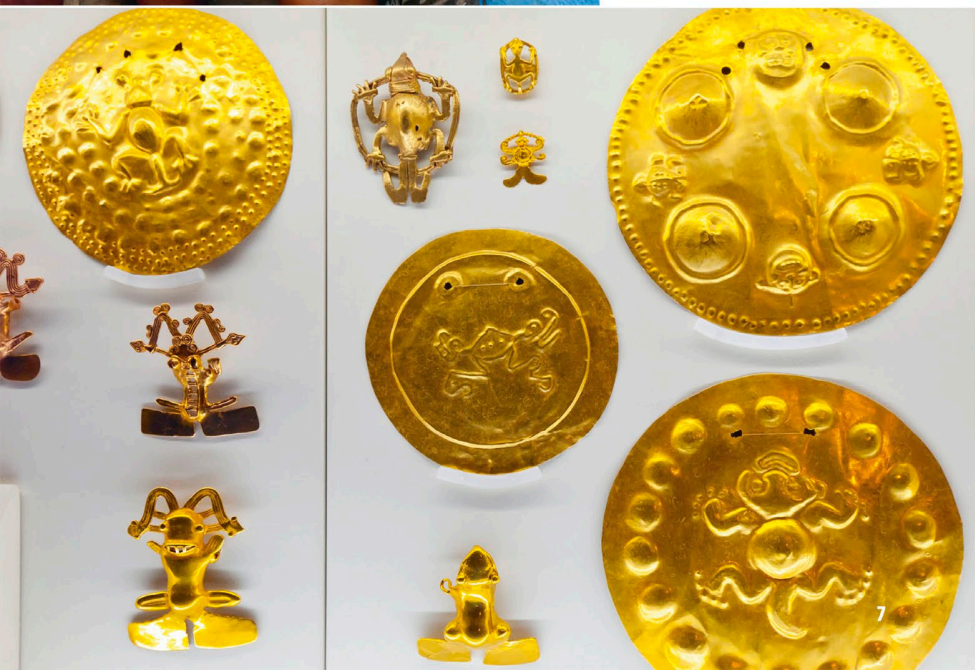
Pages 193, 220 &amp; 379

Learn how the Maleku use medicinal plants, shop for crafts at a women's co-operative in the Gulf of Nicoya or take a walking tour with the Bribri – just some of the ways of gaining a better insight into Costa Rica's remaining indigenous communities.

**7 MUSEO DE ORO PRECOLOMBINO**

Page 92

One of the country's best museums, with a dazzling display that features more than 1500 pre-Columbian gold pieces.









## **8 PARQUE NACIONAL MANUEL ANTONIO**

Page 349

This perennially popular park boasts white-sand beaches, tropical forests full of sloths and monkeys, and stunning coastal scenery peppered with striking rock formations.

## **9 REFUGIO NACIONAL DE VIDA SILVESTRE CAÑO NEGRO**

Page 224

Crammed with caimans and home to hundreds of species of bird, this isolated reserve near the Nicaraguan border is one of the most important wetlands in the world.

## **10 ISLAS TORTUGA**

Page 323

Pristine white sands, palm trees and lush jungle await on these tropical islands off the Nicoya Peninsula.

## **11 RESERVA RARA AVIS**

Page 232

Costa Rica's premier ecotourism destination flourishes with primitive ferns and has more kinds of plants, birds and butterflies than the whole of Europe.









## 12 STAYING AT AN ECOLODGE

Pages 56 & 389

From rustic simplicity to luxury in the jungle, Costa Rica has some of the Americas' best ecolodges, all offering a variety of ways to immerse yourself in the natural world. Try *Lapa Rios* in the Osa Peninsula (pictured).

## 13 NAUYACA WATERFALLS

Page 375

Costa Rica is laced with jungle cascades, and these are some of the country's most captivating.

## 14 PLAYA COCLES

Page 192

One of the most appealing beaches on the entire Caribbean coast, a long stretch of fine sand backed by swaying palms and sprayed by barrelling waves, just a couple of kilometres from the laidback backpackers' haunt of Puerto Viejo de Talamanca.

## 15 JAGUAR RESCUE CENTER

Page 193

This wildlife rehab centre provides close encounters with howler monkeys, sloths, snakes and other injured animals before they're released back into the wild.





## 16 WHITEWATER RAFTING

Page 66

Whitewater rafting is one of Costa Rica's most exciting outdoor activities, whether you're floating down the Peñas Blancas or riding Class-V rapids on the Pacuare.

## 17 EL DÍA DE LA RAZA, PUERTO LIMÓN

Page 165

Young bloods and grandparents alike take to the streets during Costa Rica's most exuberant carnival.

## 18 MONTEVERDE

Page 302

Experience the bird's-eye view – and a touch of vertigo – from a suspended bridge in the lush Monteverde cloudforest.

## 19 VOLCÁN POÁS

Page 132

Poás is one of the world's more easily accessible active volcanoes, with a history of eruptions that goes back eleven million years.

16









**20 SURFING**

Page 69

Boasting nearly 1300km of palm-fringed coastline, and a variety of beach breaks, reef breaks, long lefts and river mouths, Costa Rica has a wave for just about every surfer out there.

**21 COFFEE**

Page 58

Sample an aromatic cup of Costa Rica's most famous export, and the foundation of the country's prosperity.

**22 PARQUE NACIONAL RINCÓN DE LA VIEJA**

Page 251

Clouds of sulphurous smoke and steaming mud pots dot the desiccated slopes of Volcán Rincón de la Vieja, one of the country's most thermally active areas.

**23 EXPLORING THE TORTUGUERO CANAL**

Page 171

Take a slow boat north from Puerto Limón along the Tortuguero Canal, past luxuriant vegetation and colourful wooden houses on stilts.

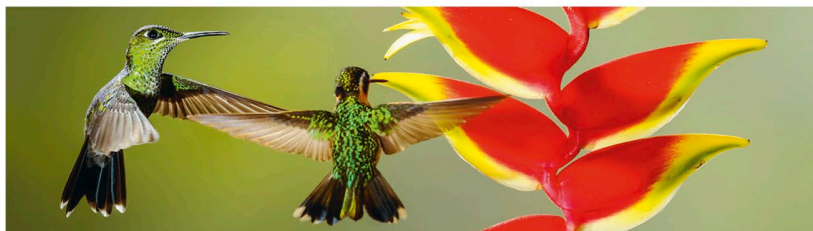


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# Itineraries

The following itineraries will give you a taste of everything that's addictive about Costa Rica, from the wildlife-rich wetlands of the north and the remote rainforests of the south, to surf-lashed Pacific beaches and nesting turtles on the Atlantic coast. You may not be able to cover everything, but even picking a few highlights will give you a deeper insight into the country's natural wonders.

## CLASSIC COSTA RICA

All the big hitters, from volcanoes to beaches via wildlife-rich national parks, can be ticked off on a simple, fairly central two-week circuit.

- ① **San José** The oft-overlooked capital has Costa Rica's best museums and its widest range of restaurants, and is worth at least a night at the beginning or end of your trip. **See p.84**
- ② **Poás or Irazú** Two active volcanoes lie a short hop from San José: choose Volcán Poás for its boiling acid pools, Volcán Irazú for its milky-green crater lake and views of both oceans. **See p.132 & p.144**
- ③ **Parque Nacional Tortuguero** Even if you're not here for the turtle-nesting seasons, you'll see plenty of other jungle wildlife as you paddle through the network of forest-fringed canals. **See p.171**
- ④ **The Arenal region** Volcán Arenal itself may be quiet, but the bustling town of La Fortuna is still an essential stop for walks in the national park and all manner of other outdoor activities. **See p.214**
- ⑤ **Monteverde** Arguably the most famous reserve in Costa Rica, where you can hike through the cloudforest in search of resplendent quetzals. **See p.302**
- ⑥ **Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio** Further south along the coast, Manuel Antonio is Costa

Rica's smallest national park – and also its most popular. Finish your trip spotting sloths and squirrel monkeys, or relaxing on a white-sand beach. **See p.349**

## WILDLIFE-WATCHING

Diverse and abundant, Costa Rica's wildlife is the country's single biggest attraction. Allow a minimum of three weeks for the below, longer if you want to go deeper into Corcovado.

- ① **Parque Nacional Tortuguero** Green, hawksbill and giant leatherback turtles, plus howler monkeys, sloths and caimans – not a bad way to start any trip. **See p.169**
- ② **Reserva Rara Avis** Remote jungle lodge in the heart of the Sarapiquí region, with an impressive bird list and a bounty of unusual reptiles and amphibians. **See p.232**
- ③ **Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Mixto Maquenque** This important wedge of protected rainforest on the border with Nicaragua represents the country's last refuge of the stunning great green macaw. **See p.237**
- ④ **Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Caño Negro** Wily caimans bask on the riverbanks during the dry season; migratory birds swell the resident populations during the wet. **See p.224**
- ⑤ **Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Ostional** At certain times of the year, thousands of olive ridley turtles storm the beaches at

Ostional, in one of nature's most spectacular sights. **See p.295**

**6 Parque Nacional Carara** The hot northern lowlands meet the humid southern Pacific at Carara, meaning even greater varieties of wildlife, from armadillos and agoutis to both types of toucan. **See p.337**

**7 Parque Nacional Corcovado** The one place in the country where you have a realistic chance of seeing a tapir, an ocelot or even the famously elusive jaguar. **See p.390**

## OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

Costa Rica is one giant natural playground. You could spend months just surfing the waves at Santa Teresa and Mal País, but three weeks should be enough to cover the below.

**1 The Río Pacuare** Start your trip by tackling one of the wildest rivers in Central America and some-time host of the World Whitewater Rafting Championships. **See p.152**

**2 Arenal** Hike the old lava-flow trails of Parque Nacional Volcán Arenal and take a dip in volcano-fed hot springs: the pricey Balneario

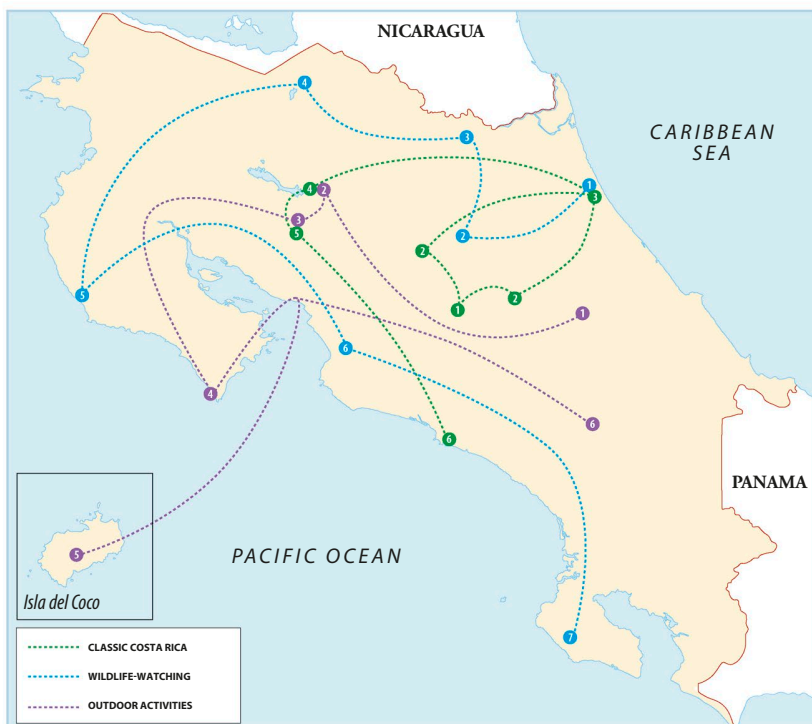
Tabacón is the most popular, the smaller Ecotermales Fortuna the most relaxed. **See p.206**

**3 Monteverde** Birdwatching tours and guided night walks, of course, but also hanging bridges and ziplines – the canopy-tour craze that has swept the country (and the world) started in Monteverde. **See p.302**

**4 Santa Teresa and Mal País** Popular surfer hangouts on the southern tip of the Nicoya Peninsula, offering a variety of beginner-friendly and much more challenging beach and reef breaks. **See p.334**

**5 Isla del Coco** It's a long way to go and expensive to get there, but Isla del Coco, 535km off mainland Costa Rica (and some 36hr in a boat from Puntarenas), is simply the best scuba-diving destination in the country. **See p.320**

**6 Parque Nacional Chirripó** Climb up through cloudforest and alpine paramo, and past crestones and glacial lakes as you tackle Cerro Chirripó, Costa Rica's highest point. **See p.368**





# Wildlife

Thanks to Costa Rica's celebrated position as a land bridge between the temperate zone to the north and the Neotropics to the south, the country's varied animal life features tropical forms like the jaguar, temperate-zone animals such as deer and some unusual, seemingly hybrid combinations like the coati. Many of the country's more exotic mammals (*mamíferos*) are nocturnal or endangered, or have been made shy by years of hunting and human encroachment; as such, you are far more likely to come into contact with some of the smaller and more abundant species. Amphibians and reptiles (*anfibios y reptiles*) are much more evident, though, and birdlife is particularly numerous, with 850 species of bird (*ave*), more than the US and Canada combined.

This field guide helps you identify some of the more common and distinctive animals that you might spot in Costa Rica, together with their Spanish names. The abbreviations used below are:

**EB** Estación Biológica  
**PN** Parque Nacional  
**RB** Reserva Biológica

**RBBN** Reserva Biológica Bosque Nuboso  
**RNA** Reserva Natural Absoluta  
**RNdVS** Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre

## MONKEYS

Costa Rica is home to four species of monkey. As their diets consist of slightly different foods, it is not unusual to see mixed-species groups foraging together, with spider monkeys on the lookout mainly for fruit, howler monkeys favouring leaves, and white capuchin and squirrel monkeys feeding mostly on insects. Although comparatively prevalent, Costa Rican monkeys are threatened by habitat loss, which limits their movement and exposes them to disease.

### **MANTLED HOWLER MONKEY** (*MONO CONGO* or *MONO AULLADOR*) *ALOUATTA PALLIATA*

The most common species of monkey in Costa Rica, the shaggy howler monkey lives in troupes of around ten to fifteen, led by a dominant male, in both primary and secondary wet and dry forest, in particular PN Tortuguero. Although also the least active of the country's monkeys, covering less than 1km of ground a day, they are easily located: the male's distinctive, rasping gorilla-like bellow, which announces dawn and dusk and even the onset of heavy rain, can be heard several kilometres away.

### **CENTRAL AMERICAN SPIDER MONKEY** (*MONO COLORADO* or *MONO ARAÑA*) *ATELES GEOFFROYI*

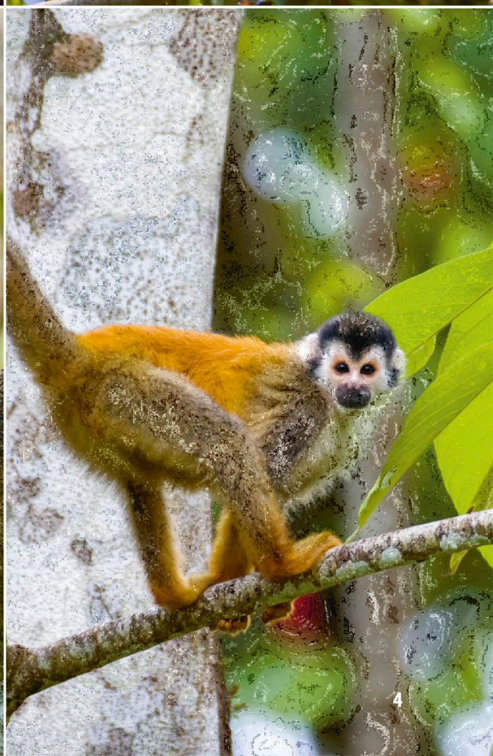
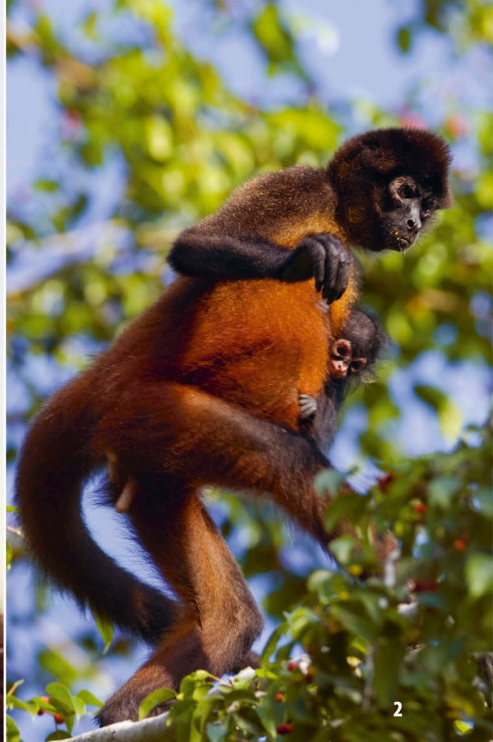
The spider monkey takes its name from its ability to glide through the trees, gibbon-like, using its long arms and fingers and its strong prehensile tail – watching a troupe making their gymnastic way through the upper canopy (usually following a well-worn trail known as a “monkey highway”) is a magical experience. Traditionally hunted for meat (they are allegedly the region's best-tasting primate) so now wary of humans, spider monkeys can be seen ranging in troupes of up to forty in mature, undisturbed forest in PN Guanacaste, PN Santa Rosa, PN Tortuguero and PN Santa Elena.

### **WHITE-FACED CAPUCHIN MONKEY** (*MONO CARABLANCO*) *CEBUS CAPUCINUS*

The only Costa Rican ape not listed as endangered, the highly intelligent white-faced capuchin monkey is noted for its dexterity and use of tools, both as weapons and for getting food. Named for their physical resemblance to Capuchin friars, the monkeys' distinctly humanoid pink face (it's actually the surrounding fur that is white) makes it a popular pet. As well as living in most forms of forest, white-faced capuchins are also found in mangroves, particularly in PN Manuel Antonio and RNA Cabo Blanco.

### **CENTRAL AMERICAN SQUIRREL MONKEY** (*MONO TITÍ*) *SAIMIRI OERSTEDII*

The squirrel monkey is restricted to a few pockets of mostly secondary wet forest on Costa Rica's southwest Pacific slope, principally the areas in and around PN Manuel Antonio. Their delicate grey and white faces have long made them attractive to pet owners and zoos, and consequently they have been hunted to near extinction in Costa Rica. Although uncommon, and small in stature (30cm), they are easy to spot, large troupes of up to seventy hyperactive individuals announcing themselves with a cacophony of high-pitched chattering.





**SLOTHS**

True to their name, Costa Rica's two species of sloth (*perezoso*, which means "lazy" in Spanish) are inherently adverse to movement, with an extremely slow metabolism that allows them to sleep for up to twenty hours a day. Their sharp, taloned claws are best suited to the arboreal world, and yet once a week, risking life and limb, they descend to the forest floor to defecate – though experts still debate why they do this, one theory is that it marks the tree as being "occupied" to other sloths and animals.

**HOFFMANN'S TWO-TOED SLOTH**

(*PEREZOSO DE DOS DEOS*) *CHOLOEPUS HOFFMANNI*

Mostly nocturnal, the two-toed sloth is common in both primary and secondary wet forest, and more mobile than its three-toed cousin, but is still difficult to spot – the greasy green algae that often covers their brown hair camouflages them from their main predators, eagles, and means that, from a distance, they can easily be mistaken for a hornet's nest. They prefer disturbed growth, particularly in PN Tortuguero, RBBN Monteverde and EB La Selva – look for them hanging out in the mid- and upper branches of cecropia and guarumo trees.

**BROWN-THROATED THREE-TOED SLOTH**

(*PEREZOSO DE TRES DEOS*) *BRADYPUS VARIEGATUS*

Diurnal and nocturnal, the three-toed sloth is the one you're more likely to see on the move, but even then they can spend more than eighty percent of the time asleep. They also prefer disturbed growth, and can often be seen curled around the V-shaped intersections between branches in PN Manuel Antonio, PN Corcovado, PN Cahuita and PN Tortuguero. Apart from the difference in digits on their hands (both species have three toes on their feet), they have greyer, wirier hair than two-toed sloths, with a brown stripe on their back, black eye masks and a stubby tail (two-toed sloths are tail-less).

**CATS**

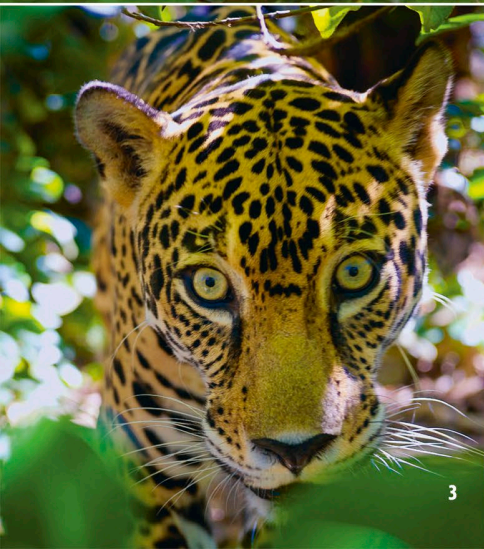
Costa Rica has half of the New World's dozen wild cat species, which in descending size order are the jaguar, puma (*puma*), jaguarundi (*león breñero*), ocelot, margay (*caucel*) and oncilla (*tigrillo*); the very rare black panther is in fact a melanistic (dark) form of jaguar. Nocturnal and shy at the best of times, they are incredibly difficult to spot – indeed, all six are listed as endangered – and require areas of (rapidly disappearing) pristine wilderness to thrive.

**JAGUAR (TIGRE) *FELIS ONCA***

The largest of Costa Rica's cats, the semi-sacred jaguar was once common throughout Central America, especially in the lowland forests and mangroves of coastal areas, but is now an endangered species, hunted by man – incredibly, right up until the 1980s – for its valuable pelt and because of its reputation as a predator of calves and pigs. A solitary nocturnal hunter, the jaguar stalks its prey – whatever's most abundant, from turtles to tapirs – often killing it by biting straight through the skull. You may spot tracks (four rounded toe prints, about 10cm wide) in the morning mud, though deep-forest hiking in PN Corcovado offers the only real (and very rare) chance of seeing one in the wild.

**OCELOT (MANIGORDO) *FELIS PARDALIS***

The sleek and elegant-looking ocelot, with its beautiful roseate patterning, is similar in appearance to the jaguar, though considerably smaller, and is another animal you are very unlikely to see – it is threatened due to habitat loss and a slow reproductive cycle. Mostly nocturnal, ocelots spend up to twelve hours roaming through primary and secondary forest (occasional sightings include PN Tortuguero and RB Tirimbina) and across open country for a variety of prey, particularly rodents. Its tracks are fairly easy to distinguish, with the forepaw print wider than the hind paw – hence its Spanish name ("Fat Hand").





**RACCOON FAMILY**

There are seven members of the raccoon (or Procyonidae) family in Costa Rica, an omnivorous group of New World species that have long tails to aid their arboreal antics and are united by their strong hearing and night vision and their excellent sense of smell. The most unusual-looking species is the brilliantly named kinkajou, though the one you're most likely to see is the ubiquitous coati.

**KINKAJOU** (*MARTILLA*) *POTOS FLAVUS*

Ranging in colour from russet orange to grey brown, the kinkajou uses its long, narrow tongue to eat fruit, nectar and insects, and is most often seen hanging from branches by its prehensile tail. Common in primary and secondary forests, including RBBN Monteverde and EB La Selva, it is one of the most frequently seen of Costa Rica's nocturnal mammals; look out for the orange reflection of its eyes in torchlight. The kinkajou is slightly bigger than the similar-looking olingo, which is absent from the Pacific slope, and uses its tail like a fifth limb as it moves about the forest canopy (olingos favour jumping).

**WHITE-NOSED COATI** (*PIZOTE*) *NASUA NARICA*

With its long muzzle and ringed tail, held aloft to aid its balance, the coati (often mistakenly called coatimundi) looks like a confused combination of a raccoon, domestic cat and an anteater. The coati is very common, and its habituation to humans and comparative abundance makes it easy to spot: coatis are regularly seen in roadside bands of a dozen or more, on the scrounge for food, or scavenging in national-park car parks. Groups are made up of females and their young only, save for mating season, when a solitary male joins them temporarily – he is banished soon after, as he will harm the pups.

**RODENTS**

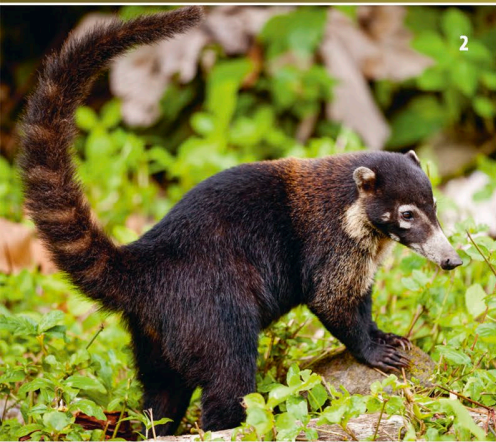
There are 47 species of rodent in Costa Rica, ranging from pocket gophers and spiny rats to the Mexican hairy porcupine. The majority are common across the country, with most of them contributing to their surrounding environment by dispersing seeds and providing an important link on the food chain for larger carnivores; the important exceptions are the black rat, brown rat and house mouse, introduced species that are responsible for contaminating food, spreading disease and often adversely affecting native ecosystems.

**CENTRAL AMERICAN AGOUTI** (*GAUTUSA*)*DASYPROCTA PUNCTATA*

Often seen on trails or foraging along the forest floor, the rabbit-like agouti is common in both primary and secondary forest, and – thanks to their comparative abundance and diurnal activities – is the Costa Rican rodent you are most likely to come across, particularly if you're spending much time in PN Manuel Antonio or PN Carara. Agoutis spend most of their time alone (though monogamous pairs will share territory), and will follow troupes of white-faced capuchin and spider monkeys, feeding on fallen titbits. They make their dens in hollow trees or log piles.

**PACA** (*TEPEZCUINTLE*) *AGOUTI PACA*

Roughly fifty percent larger than the agouti, the solitary paca is nocturnal and uncommon, and so less readily seen. They make their dens near forest rivers; their burrows contain one or more secret exits (known as *uzús*), through which a paca will burst if cornered, often jumping into the water to escape danger. Pacas are easily distinguishable thanks to their rows of white spots, but can sometimes be mistaken for baby tapirs (see p.32), though the latter has a longer snout, a more defined streak patterning and white-tipped ears.





**BATS**

With 109 species in Costa Rica, bats make up over half of the country's mammal species; most of them are spotted whizzing about at dusk, though you can also see them hanging out by day, sleeping on the underside of branches, where they look like rows of small grey triangles. For the best bat-viewing opportunities, head to PN Barra Honda caves on the Nicoya Peninsula, where they roost in huge numbers.

**GREATER FISHING BAT** (*MURCIÉLAGO PESCADOR*)  
*NOCTILIO LEPORINUS*

Costa Rica is home to both species of fishing bat (also known as bulldog bats, due to their stout heads, folded faces and large canines), although it is easy enough to tell the two apart – as the name suggests, the greater fishing bat is much larger than the lesser variety (about 12cm in length, compared to 6cm), and its clawlike feet are proportionately much bigger. It is only found below elevations of around 200m; you may see one skimming the water in PN Tortuguero, casting its aural net in front in search of food – being blind, it fishes by sonar.

**WHITE TENT BAT** (*MURCIÉLAGO BLANCO*)  
*ECTOPHYLLA ALBA*

One of only two whitish bats in Costa Rica (the other is the larger northern ghost bat), the furry, ball-like white tent bat roosts in small groups underneath the leaves of heliconia plants, rattlesnake plants and banana plants. Look for folded-down midsections in horizontal leaves that are close to the ground; the bats create their protective “tents” by gnawing through the leaf veins. White tent bats only inhabit forests on the Atlantic slope, and, although generally uncommon, are relatively abundant in EB La Selva.

**OTHER MAMMALS**
**NORTHERN TAMANDUA (COLLARED ANTEATER)** (*OSA HORMIGUERO*) *TAMANDUA MEXICANA*

Of the two species of anteater that inhabit Costa Rica (the giant anteater, a third, was once found on both the Caribbean and Pacific slopes but is now thought to be extinct in Costa Rica), you're more likely to see the northern tamandua or collared anteater, which is more prevalent than the silky anteater, though largely nocturnal. It hunts ants, termites and occasionally bees, digging into nests using its sharp claws and vacuuming them up with its proboscis-like sticky tongue. Good places to spy one include PN Rincón de la Vieja and Reserva Rara Avis – look for large gashes in termite mounds (smaller scuffs are usually the work of other animals), and its distinctive interlocking paw tracks.

**COLLARED PECCARY** (*SAÍNO*) *TAYASSU TAJACU*

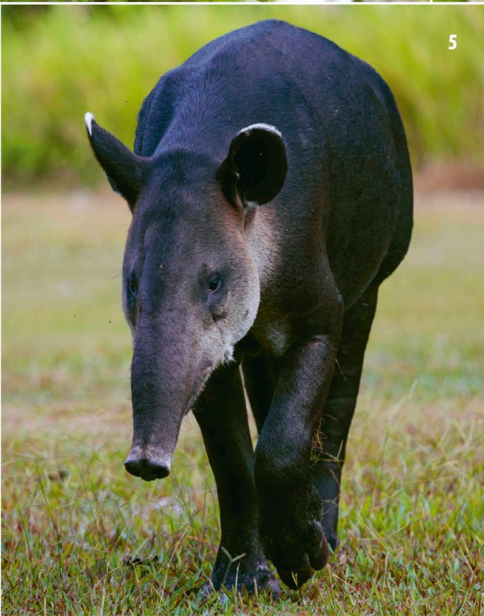
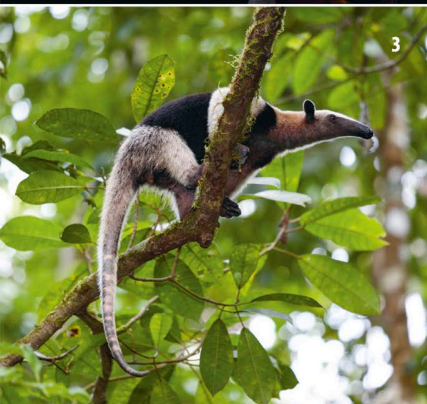
Of the two barely distinguishable species of peccary, a kind of wild boar, that forage through the rainforest undergrowth in Costa Rica, the collared peccary is the much more frequently seen, particularly in PN Corcovado, PN Santa Rosa and PN Braulio Carrillo. While they may clack their teeth when aggravated, collared peccaries are much less aggressive than the more elusive white-lipped variety (*chanchito de monte*), which are essentially restricted to PN Corcovado. Longer-haired than their cousins, they can travel in battalions of several hundred and are dangerous when threatened; the best route of escape is to climb a tree.

**BAIRD'S TAPIR** (*DANTA*) *TAPIRUS BAIRDII*

One of the largest, most extraordinary-looking mammals in the Neotropics, the Baird's tapir resembles an overgrown pig with a sawn-off elephant's trunk stuck on its face. Their antediluvian look comes from their prehensile snout, small ears and delicate cloven feet; adults have a stout reddish-brown body, young have additional white streaks. Weighing as much as 300kg (and vegetarian), they are extremely shy in the wild, largely nocturnal, and stick to densely forested or rugged land. Consequently, they are very rarely seen by casual rainforest walkers, though you may spot one in the inner reaches of PN Corcovado, and there have been occasional sightings at Rara Avis – look in muddy areas around water.

**WEST INDIAN MANATEE** (*MANATÍ* or *VACA MARINA*) *TRICHECHUS MANATUS*

Among Costa Rica's marine mammals, the sea cow or manatee is arguably the most beguiling, an amiable herbivore that is elephantine in size and well intentioned, not to mention endangered. Manatees all over the Caribbean are declining in number, due to the disappearance and pollution of the fresh- and saltwater riverways in which they live. Your only reasonable chance of seeing one is in the Tortuguero canals in Limón Province, where they sometimes break the surface (main sightings are early morning), though there are a few in the more recently protected lagoons of the RNdVS Mixto Maquenque, near the border with Nicaragua – at first, you might mistake it for a tarpon, but the manatee's overlapping snout and long whiskers are quite distinctive.





## TURTLES

Five species of marine turtle visit Costa Rica's shores: greens, hawksbills, leatherbacks and olive ridleys, and the strange blunt-nosed loggerhead, which seems not to nest in Costa Rica, but can sometimes be seen in Caribbean coastal waters. Nesting takes place mostly at night, when hundreds of turtles come ashore at a certain time of year, visiting the same beach each time (the same beach, in fact, on which they themselves hatched) and laying hundreds of thousands of eggs. They are found in shallow and (in the case of the leatherback and olive ridley) deep ocean, and shallow bays, estuaries and lagoons.

### LEATHERBACK TURTLE (*TORTUGA BAULA*)

*DERMOCHELYS CORIACEA*

The leatherback turtle (see box, p.276) is the largest of Costa Rica's sea turtles, growing to a length of around 2m and weighing around 300kg. Leatherbacks have a soft, dark-grey ridged carapace – not a shell like other sea turtles, but actually a network of bones overlaid with a very tough leathery skin (hence the name). Although they nest in most numbers at PN Marino Las Baulas on the western Nicoya Peninsula (Oct–Feb), leatherbacks also come ashore elsewhere, including PN Tortuguero and RNdVS Gandoca-Manzanillo (both March–May). Their numbers have declined considerably due to loss of beachfront habitat and manmade hazards such as rubbish dumping (they can choke on plastic bags, which they mistake for jellyfish), and they are now listed as endangered.

### GREEN TURTLE (*TORTUGA VERDE*) *CHELONIA MYDAS*

The green turtle, long prized for the delicacy of its flesh, has become nearly synonymous with its favoured nesting grounds in PN Tortuguero (Pacific greens, as opposed to Atlantic greens, nest at PN Santa Rosa and PN Manuel Antonio), with some turtles travelling 2000km to reach their breeding beaches (they nest July–Oct). Green turtles have a heart-shaped shell and are similar in appearance to the hawksbill, which have closer mosaic patterns on their flippers. Green turtles were classified as endangered as long ago as the 1950s, but are making a bit of a comeback thanks in part to the protection offered by areas like Tortuguero.

### HAWSBILL TURTLE (*TORTUGA CAREY*)

*ERETMOCHELYS IMBRICATA*

The hawksbill turtle, so-named for its distinctive hooked “beak”, is found all over the tropics, often preferring rocky shores and coral reefs. It used to be hunted extensively on the Caribbean coast for its meat and shell, but this is now banned; poaching does still occur, however, despite their being listed as endangered, and you should avoid buying any tortoiseshell that you see for sale. Hawksbills have heart-shaped shells, like green turtles, but with mottled tortoise-shell patterns. Unlike greens and olive ridleys, hawksbills prefer to nest alone, coming ashore on beaches in PN Tortuguero, PN Santa Rosa and PN Marino Ballena (July–Oct).

### OLIVE RIDLEY TURTLE (*TORTUGA LORA*)

*LEPIDOCHELYS OLIVACEA*

Growing to around 70cm, the olive ridley is the smallest of Costa Rica's sea turtles. Like greens and hawksbills, they also have a heart-shaped shell, although their distinctive colouring tells them apart. They nest (July–Nov) on just a few beaches along the Pacific coast, principally Playa Nancite in PN Santa Rosa and RNdVS Ostional, coming ashore in their thousands (an event known as an *arribada*; see box below) – unusually, often during the day. Despite these seemingly huge *arribadas*, olive ridleys are also unfortunately listed as endangered.

## ARRIBA THE ARRIBADA!

**Olive ridley turtles** are one of only two species of marine turtle that nest in vast numbers (kemp's ridleys being the other), a mass gathering of up to eight thousand turtles known as an **arribada** (Spanish for “arrival”). *Arribadas* can last over twelve hours, with a steady stream of females crawling slowly out of the water to a free patch of sand beyond the high tide line where they will begin to lay their eggs. Each individual will lay around one hundred eggs over the course of a few days; according to estimates, more than **eleven million eggs** may be deposited during a single *arribada*. It is the sheer number of eggs that is the evolutionary reason behind the unusual behaviour of the olive ridleys: with so many eggs and hatchlings for predators to prey on, the likelihood of a hatchling making it out to sea increases dramatically. Despite the mass layings, however, the odds are still stacked overwhelmingly against the young turtles – only one out of every three hundred hatchlings from the protected beaches of the Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Ostional, for example, will reach adulthood.





**CROCODILIANS AND LIZARDS****AMERICAN CROCODILE** (*COCODRILO*) *CROCODYLUS ACUTUS*

Travelling along Costa Rica's waterways, you may well see crocodiles hanging out on the riverbanks, basking in the sun, or lounging in the muddy shallows – you have a decent chance of spotting one in PN Tortuguero, RNdVS Mixto Maquenque and RNdVS Gandoca-Manzanillo, and are virtually guaranteed to see them under the so-called Crocodile Bridge near Tárcoles on the Pacific coast (see p.338). Crocodiles live in both freshwater and brackish water, mostly in lowland rivers, lagoons and estuaries but also occasionally in the sea, near the mouth of rivers. They are aggressive and dangerous, and have been known to kill humans in Costa Rica. Crocodiles have a longer, more pointed snout than caimans, with two projecting teeth, one on either side of the lower jaw, which caimans lack.

**SPECTACLED CAIMAN** (*CAIMÁN* or *GUAJIPAL*)*CAIMAN CROCODYLUS*

Smaller and lighter in colour (tan or brown) than “flatter”-looking crocodiles, and with a shorter snout, caimans inhabit lowland rivers, swamps and wetlands, particularly PN Tortuguero, PN Palo Verde and RNdVS Caño Negro, where they will sometimes perch on submerged tree branches, scuttling away at your approach; in the dry season, large numbers gather in diminishing pools of water with only their eyes and snout visible. Caimans feed on various aquatic wildlife and carrion, and will even eat other young caimans. Although common locally, caimans (like crocodiles) are under constant threat from hunters, who sell their skin to make shoes and handbags.

**GREEN IGUANA** (*IGUANA VERDE* or *GALLINA DE PALO*)*IGUANA IGUANA*

Pot-bellied iguanas are the most ubiquitous of Costa Rica's lizards, as common here as chickens are in Europe or the US (indeed, their Spanish name means “tree chicken”, though this is a reference more to the taste of their meat). Masters of camouflage, they like basking on

high branches over water, or on riverbank rocks. Their colours vary from lime green to orangey brown (a yellow or orange head indicates a breeding male). Green iguanas are distinguished from their spiny-tailed cousins by the comb-like yellow crest along their spine; a large, circular scale below their ear; and a hanging throat sac (dewlap), which is used to regulate body temperature and for courtship and territorial displays. Despite their size (they can grow up to 2m), they are very shy, and when you do spot them, it's likely that they'll be scurrying away in an ungainly fashion.

**SPINY-TAILED IGUANA (BLACK IGUANA)***(IGUANA NEGRA) CTENOSAURAS IMILIS*

More terrestrial than the green iguana, the tetchier spiny-tailed or black iguana can often be seen on or by the side of roads, or at the back of Pacific-coast beaches, basking on logs on the forest floor. Apart from the difference in colour, they can be told apart from the green iguana by the bands of spiny scales that encircle their tail and the black stripes that extend to their dorsal crest. They are the world's fastest lizard, escaping predators by hitting speeds of up to 35km/h.

**EMERALD BASILISK LIZARD** (*BASILISCA VERDE*)*BASILISCUS PLUMIFRONS*

One of the more incredible reptilian sights in and around the rivers and wetlands of Costa Rica is the tiny form of a basilisk lizard skittering across the water: its partially webbed hind feet, and the speed at which it can move them, enable the basilisk to “walk” on water (for up to 4.5m), earning it the nickname “Jesus Christ” lizard. When not in flight, basilisks are regularly seen in damp leaf litter and on low-hanging branches. Emerald basilisk lizards – which are easy to spot in PN Palo Verde and RNdVS Caño Negro – are more colourful than brown (Pacific slope) and striped (Caribbean slope) basilisks. It's also easy enough to differentiate between the sexes: males have three crests along their back, females have two.





## SNAKES

Of the 162 species of snake (*serpientes* or *culebras*) that call Costa Rica home, only 22 are venomous. These are usually well camouflaged, but some, such as the highly venomous coral snake (*coralillo*), advertise their danger with a flamboyance of colour: although retiring, they are easily spotted (and avoided) thanks to their bright rings of carmine red, yellow and black (though note that the many-banded coral snake has only red and black rings). Snakes are largely nocturnal, and for the most part far more wary of you than you are of them, so the chances of actually spotting one – let alone getting bitten (see p.61) – are very slim.

### FER-DE-LANCE (*TERCIOPELO*) *BOTHROPS ASPER*

The fer-de-lance pit viper has adapted quite well to cleared areas and grassy uplands, although you are far more likely to see them in places that have heavy rainfall (such as the Limón coast) and near streams or rivers at night (they are absent from Guanacaste's dry forest and the Nicoya Peninsula). Though it can reach more than 2m in length, the *terciopelo* ("velvet") is very difficult to spot – its brown body, marked with cream chevrons and dark triangles resembling "X"s (sometimes an hourglass), resembles a big pile of leaves. Along with the bushmaster, the fer-de-lance is one of the few snakes that may attack without provocation, and is extremely dangerous (its venom can kill within 2hr).

### CENTRAL AMERICAN BUSHMASTER

(*MATABUEY*) *LACHESIS STENOPHRYS*

The largest venomous snake in the Americas (reaching 3m), the bushmaster is extremely aggressive and packs a highly potent bite (its Spanish name translates as "bull killer").

Fortunately, it is rarely spotted, as it is restricted to remote primary wet forests on the Caribbean slope (the black-headed bushmaster is endemic to the Osa Peninsula), prefers dense and mountainous territory and is nocturnal. Bushmasters are recognized by their thick, triangular head, with a broad, dark stripe running behind the eye, and the dark triangles that run down from the ridge along their back.

### EYELASH VIPER (*BOCARACÁ*) *BOTHRIECHIS SCHLEGELII*

The very pretty eyelash viper is usually tan or bright green or decked out in a lichen-like pattern of browns, greys and mottled green, but is sometimes brilliant yellow when inhabiting golden palm-fruit groves. Largely arboreal and generally well camouflaged, it takes its name from the raised scales around its eyes – other notable features are its large triangular head, which is clearly distinguishable from its neck, and vertical pupils. Eyelash vipers are quite venomous to humans and should be given a wide berth if seen hanging from a branch or negotiating a path through the groves.

## FROGS

There are many, many frogs (*ranas*) in Costa Rica, the most famous of which are the brilliantly coloured miniature poison-dart frogs. With markings as varied as wallpaper, they are relatively easy to see, but you should never touch one – these frogs secrete some of the most powerful natural toxins known to man through their skin, directly targeting the heart muscle, paralyzing it and causing immediate death. You will most likely see Costa Rica's frogs around dusk or at night; some of them make a regular and dignified procession down paths and trails, sitting motionless for long periods before hopping off again.

### RED-EYED TREE FROG (*RANA CALZONUDA*)

*AGALYCHNIS CALLIDRYAS*

The nocturnal red-eyed tree frog is physically striking: relatively large, it is an alarming bright green, with orange hands and feet and dark blue thighs; its eyes are pure red, to scare off potential predators. Very common and abundant in wet forest, swamps and small pools, red-eyed tree frogs are particularly active during the wet season, and on humid nights you can often hear breeding males calling (a short "chuck" or "chuck-chuck") for the larger female.

### FLEISCHMANN'S GLASS FROG (*RANA DE*

*CRISTAL*) *HYALINO BATRACHIUM FLEISCHMANNI*

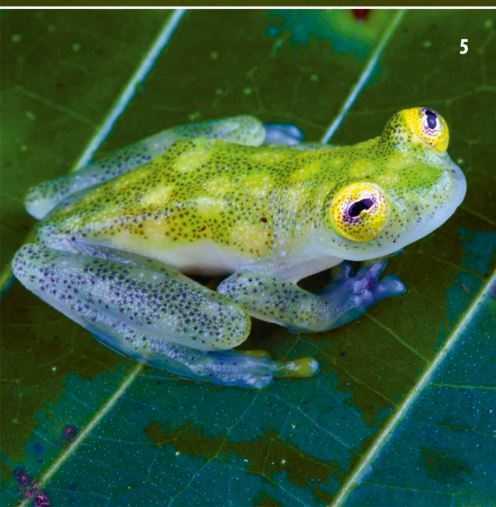
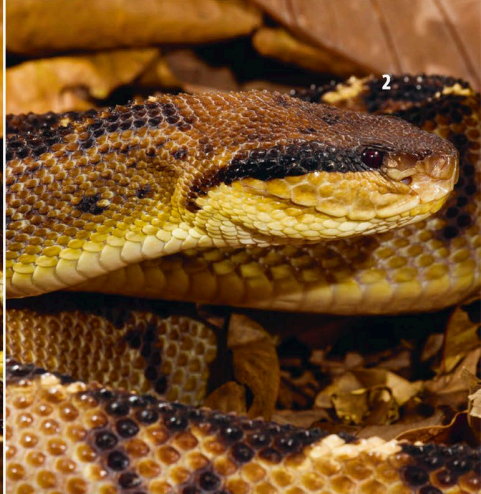
The extraordinary Fleischmann's glass frog is a living biological lesson – their inexplicably transparent belly affords you the dubious pleasure of observing its viscera and digestive processes through its skin. Glass frogs are fairly common and widespread in moist and wet forest,

where they are usually found on leaves overhanging fast-flowing water, so you have a good chance of spotting one; they are most active on rainy nights, when the male calls (a whistle-like "wheet") from the underside of a leaf.

### STRAWBERRY POISON-DART FROG

(*RANA VENENOSA ROJA Y AZUL*) *OOPHAGA PUMILIO*

If you're spending any time on the Caribbean side of the country, you are almost guaranteed to see the diminutive but extravagantly coloured strawberry poison-dart frog, also known as the "Blue Jeans" thanks to its dark-blue hind legs. They are very common and abundant in wet forest, particularly the Sarapiquí – look in the leaf litter round the base of trees for them feeding on ants (if their colouring doesn't give them away, their loud "buzz-buzz-buzz" croak will). If you're lucky, you may even spot a female carrying her tadpoles, piggy-back style, one at a time, to take refuge in small water pools that form in treetop plants.





## BIRDS

Birds, both migratory and indigenous, are abundant in Costa Rica – indeed, with nearly 900 different species, the country is home to more varieties than in the US and Canada – and most visitors take a birdwatching trip (see p.71) of one sort or another while they're here. Costa Rica's national bird is the rather dour-looking clay-coloured robin (*el yigüirro*), a somewhat surprising choice given that the competition includes some of the most colourful species in the Americas. Many birds are best observed while feeding – quetzals, for instance, are most often sighted when they are foraging from their favoured aguacatillo tree, and you might catch a glimpse of a hummingbird hovering over a flower as it sips on its nectar.

### MAGNIFICENT FRIGATEBIRD (*RABIHORCADO MAGNO*) *FREGATA MAGNIFICENS*

The magnificent frigatebird is a very common sight along the Pacific coast (less so on the Caribbean side of the country), where they are often spotted just offshore or in mangrove keys, or circling over fishing boats at harbours and docks – they are easily recognized by their sleek forked tail and large wingspan (up to 2m). Due to its absorbent plumage, the frigatebird rarely dives underwater, instead feeding by snatching food from the sea or other birds. The male is the more “magnificent” of the two, inflating its enormous scarlet pouch (gular sac) to attract females.

### BOAT-BILLED HERON (*PICO CUCHARA*) *COCHLEARIVUS COCHLEARIVUS*

The chunky, funny-looking boat-billed heron is fairly common in Costa Rica's wetlands, mangroves and coastal lowlands. Its large eyes and sensitive bill enable the heron to hunt at night, but it is easier to see during the day, resting in trees near the water's edge. Its call is a throaty croak, which helps locate it amid the branches, though there's little chance of missing this species; its eponymous beak snaps shut loudly when disturbed.

### ROSEATE SPOONBILL (*ESPATULA ROSADA*) *PLATALEA AJAJA*

As the only pink bird in Costa Rica, there is no mistaking the roseate spoonbill. Common in coastal waters and open wetland in the Pacific lowlands, particularly around the Río Tempisque and in the Gulf of Nicoya, it is restricted to RNdVS Caño Negro on the Caribbean side of the country – birds are usually seen feeding in groups in shallow fresh- and saltwater, trawling for food with their flattened, spatula-shaped bill. The spoonbill's unique pink plumage is attained through its diet of crustaceans.

### NORTHERN JACANA (*JACANA CENTROAMERICANA*) *JACANA SPINOSA*

Anyone spending much time in the wetlands of PN Palo Verde and RNdVS Caño Negro and the waterways of PN Tortuguero will come to know the northern jacana rather well – it is common in wetlands, ponds and rivers across the country but is particularly prevalent in these three protected areas. A rather ungainly looking bird, the

northern jacana's giant spindly feet and elongated toes enable it to walk on floating vegetation in search of insects and seeds. It is easily agitated, displaying its recognizable lemon-yellow underwings when taking flight. Northern jacanas are usually seen in pairs, though the female mates with several males, who care for separate clutches of eggs.

### LAUGHING FALCON (*GUACO*) *HERPETHOTHERES CACHINNANS*

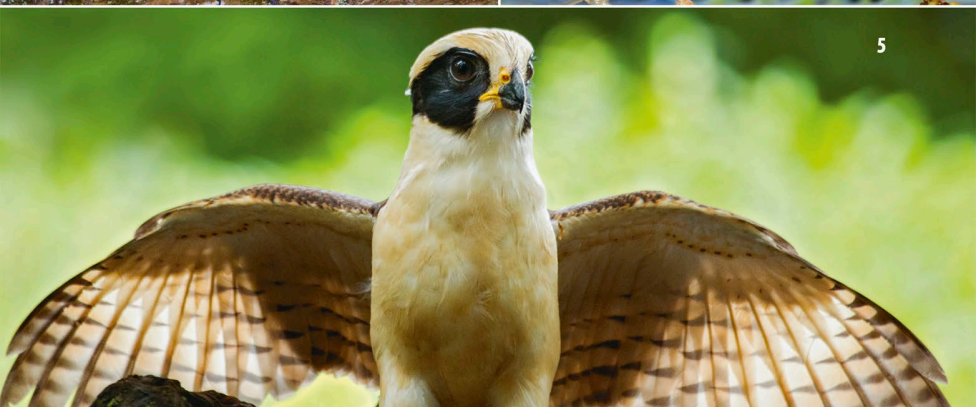
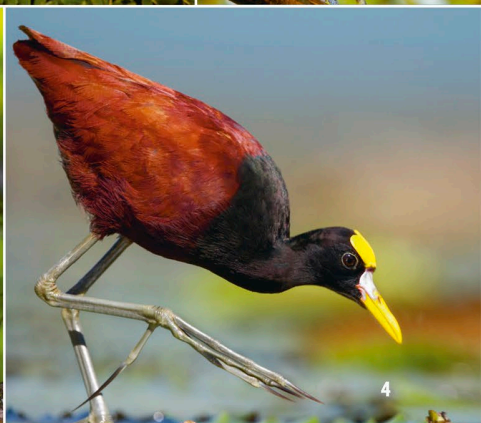
Of Costa Rica's raptors, the laughing falcon, found all over the country, probably has the most distinct call, which sounds exactly like its Spanish name – the “laughing” bit comes from a much lower-pitched variation, which resembles muted human laughter. The falcon preys on reptiles, including venomous snakes, biting off the head before bringing the body back to its eyrie, where it drapes it over a branch, sings a duet with its mate and proceeds to dine.

### RED-CAPPED MANAKIN (*SALTARIN CABECIRROJO*) *PIPPA MENTALIS*

The diminutive star of many a wildlife documentary, the red-capped manakin is famous for its flamboyant leks, where males gather to woo females with elaborate courtship displays that range from short swoops to a variety of nifty tree-branch moves. Aside from the eponymous “helmet”, males are also easily identified by their bright yellow thighs; like most manakins, the female is a dull green colour. They are common in primary rainforest on the Caribbean and central and southern Pacific slopes, and are regularly filmed at EB La Selva.

### MONTEZUMA OROPENDOLA (*OROPÉNDOLA DE MOCTEZUMA*) *PSAROCOLIUS MONTEZUMA*

You are unlikely to visit Costa Rica without seeing a Montezuma oropendola. These large, russet-coloured birds are very common in gardens, wet forests and forest fringes of the Caribbean lowlands (less so higher up, and rarer on the northwest Pacific slope) and are easily distinguished thanks to their outsized beaks, pretty facial markings and golden tails. Courting males are even more noticeable, tipping off their perch and flicking their wings while uttering a long, warbling call that ends with a loud gurgle. Oropendolas live in noisy colonies of skillfully woven hanging nests (*oropéndola* means “gold pendulum”), which dangle from tall trees like Christmas decorations.





**SCARLET MACAW** (*LAPA ROJA*) *ARA MACAO*

The endangered scarlet macaw, with its liberal splashes of red, yellow and blue, was once common on the Pacific coast of southern Mexico and Central America. The birds, which are easily distinguished from the rest of Costa Rica's predominantly green parrot species, live in lowland forested areas, but these days your best chance of spotting them is in the dense cover of PN Corcovado and the Osa Peninsula, although their numbers are on the increase in PN Carara and the RNdVS Curú, and to a lesser extent PN Palo Verde and RB Lomas Barbudal. They are usually spotted in or near their tree-trunk nesting holes, wrestling seeds, fruit and nuts from the upper branches, or while flying high in pairs (they are monogamous) and calling to one another with their distinctive raucous squawk.

**VIOLET SABREWING** (*ALA DE SABLE VOLÁCEO*)*CAMPYLOPTERUS HEMILEUCUS*

Of the fifty-plus species of hummingbird (*colibrí*) in Costa Rica, the violet sabrewing is the largest, and one of the most beautiful, its deep, iridescent purple plumage shimmering like sequins. Its wings are big enough for you to hear them beating, but despite its size, the sabrewing is timid and easily scared off feeding sites by smaller birds. Sabrewings prefer the forest understorey but are often seen hovering around heliconia and banana plants and are a regular at nectar-feeders – RBBN Monteverde is a good place to spot them.

**RESPLENDENT QUETZAL** (*QUETZAL*)*PHAROMACHRUS MOCINNO*

With a range historically extending from southern Mexico to northern Panama, the dazzling resplendent quetzal was highly prized by the Aztecs and the Maya. In the language of the Aztecs, *quetzali* means, roughly, “beautiful”, and along with jade, the jewel-coloured feathers were used as currency in Maya cities. Top of most visitors' birdwatching wish-list, the *quetzal* is unfortunately endangered due to the destruction of its favoured cloudforest habitat, and the male in particular – who possesses the distinctive streamer-like feather train, up to 1.5m long – is still pursued by poachers. These days the remaining cloudforests, particularly RBBN Monteverde, PN Los Quetzales and the area around San Gerardo de Dota in the Zona Sur, are among the best places to see them (March–May is most favourable).

**BLUE-CROWNED MOTMOT** (*BARRANQUERO*)*MOMOTUS MOMOTA*

The blue-crowned motmot is readily seen in gardens and forest fringes of the Valle Central, and also in the Pacific lowlands. As its name suggests, this particular member of the motmot family sports a turquoise-blue cap, though it is more noticeable for its distinctive pendulous tail, which

ends in twin racket-shaped tips. The blue-crowned motmot nests in burrows in earthbanks and is able to sit motionless for a long time, perched on a branch in the lower canopy, before darting out for prey such as insects and small lizards.

**CHESTNUT-MANDIBLED TOUCAN** (*DIOS TEDE*)*RAMPHASTOS SWAINSONII*

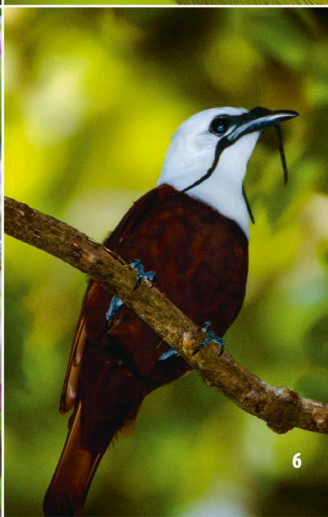
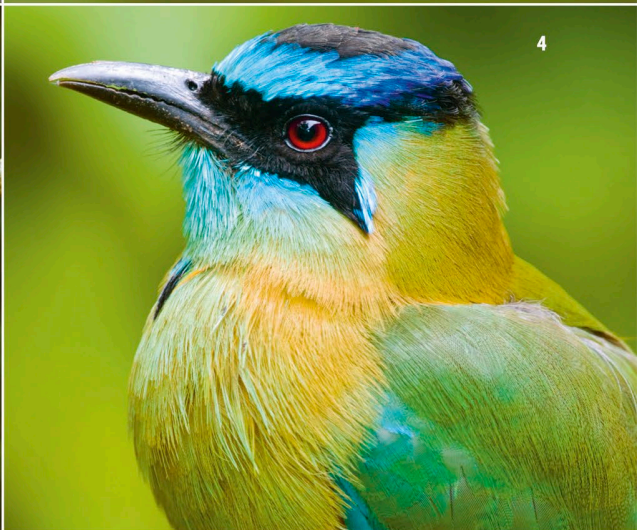
Costa Rica is home to six members of the toucan family, which include toucanets and aracarís, the largest of which is the chestnut-mandibled toucan. Named for the two-tone brown colour in their bill, which differentiates them from the flamboyantly adorned keel-billed toucan (*tucán pico iris*), chestnut-mandibled toucans are fairly common in coastal lowlands, wet forests and clearings across the country, although they're generally easier to see on the Pacific slope (you are most likely to see keel-billed toucans, however, in the Caribbean lowlands, particularly the Sarapiquí area); both varieties are often spotted at dawn and dusk – though sometimes as early in the afternoon as 4 or 4.30pm – sitting in the open upper branches of secondary forest. The chestnut-mandibled toucan's Spanish name is derived from its onomatopoeic call; the keel-billed toucan's is more of a monotonous croak.

**THREE-WATTLED BELLBIRD** (*CAMPENERO*)*TRICARUNCULADO*) *PROCNIASTRICA RUNCULATUS*

Spend a few days in the cloudforests of PN Santa Elena and RBBN Monteverde and you're likely to hear the distinctly un-bell-like metallic “eenk” of the three-wattled bellbird, a strange-looking bird whose appearance is defined by the black, wormlike strands that dangle from its beak; audible from almost a kilometre away, its call is considered one of the loudest bird songs on earth. Despite a variety of ongoing conservation efforts, the bellbird is becoming increasingly less common in wet and humid forests; between March and June, you may also spot them in the Tilarán and Talamanca *cordilleras*, to which they migrate during the breeding season.

**BARE-NECKED UMBRELLABIRD** (*PÁJARO-**SOMBRIILLA CUELLINUDO*) *CEPHALOPTERUS GLABRICOLLIS*

Endemic to Costa Rica and western Panama, the bare-necked umbrellabird is a difficult species to spot – confined to a strip along the Caribbean slope from Volcán Miravalles south, it is uncommon, and generally silent. But there's no mistaking this bizarre-looking bird if you are lucky enough to see one: it has a cropped, overhanging crest, which makes it look like it's sporting a bad basin-style hairpiece. During the breeding season (March–June), the male is even more distinctive, inflating his impressive scarlet throat sac during courting displays. Usually found in wet-forest lowlands, but migrates to higher altitudes to breed.







HOTEL BED AND BREAKFAST SIGN

## Basics

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