

The Vagabond

Discovering the 'Pura Vida' in Costa Rica

It's May and that means the rainy season in Costa Rica! Perfect time to go for budget nomads—off-season rates apply and you won't be encountering more Americans than *Ticos*, (as Costa Ricans are affectionally called). Besides, it only rains a little in the afternoon—big damn deal!

There's mucho reasons to visit Costa Rica. It has long been viewed as the most stable country in Latin America, unplagued with political uprising and with a more steady economy than its neighbors. The temperature hovers around 70 degrees during the day year round in most parts of the country.

by ande wanderer

While beach bums and thrill seekers will have no problem reviving themselves in Costa Rica, the country was also one of the first to appeal to eco-travelers who go there with the intention of learning about the rain forest and its wildlife. Like many southern countries, Costa Rica is threatened by environmental degradation, but the government, at the urging of conservationists, is continually striving to funnel the money made off

of tourism back into sustaining the environment (and thus the tourism industry). The rain forest is shrinking, but not as fast as it could be. The country also has few of the massive resorts, like those found in places like Cancun, which are destructive to the environment and create a chasm between tourist and locals.

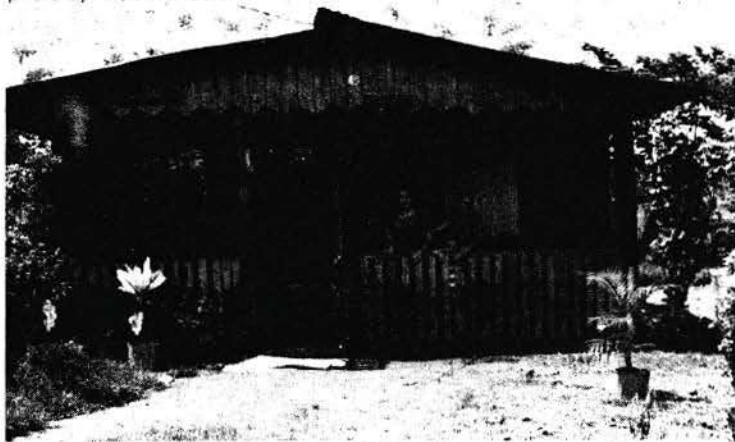
The capitol, San Jose, lays conveniently in the Central Valley, ensuring that any destination within Costa Rica's borders is only a few hours' bus ride away and getting there is not going to cost more than \$7. Those more at home with urban wildlife may prefer to use San Jose or the nearby college area of San Pedro as a jumping off point from which to explore other regions. There is a varied intellectual and night life in San Pedro especially. Music offerings range from salsa and mariachi to reggae and techno clubs; there's even an underground music scene for those looking to check out shows *en Español*.

From the Central Valley there are tons of possible day trips to nearby sites like the active volcano of Volcán Poas and the Guayabon National Archeology Monument. There's plenty of mountain biking in the area too. Those planning to stay a while

might want to buy one instead of renting. They only cost around a hundred bucks, and with all the colleges in the area reselling them is easy.

Twenty percent of the country is government protected national reserves containing rainforests of varying ecosystems. Costa Rica has 1/25 of the world's plant and animal species within its borders, including

photo by Ande Wanderer



Costa Rica's natural beauty makes the outdoors a 5-star spa.

850 species of birds. One of the most elusive and sought after is the Quetzal. It is considered a symbol of freedom for Central American's because it cannot survive in captivity. It can be glimpsed at the private rain forest reserve at Monte Verde, a not-to-be-missed destination up in the cloud forest in the northern part of the country. Because of the climate there rainbows are everywhere—triple rainbows in the sky and small circular ones dusting the landscape. Monte Verde is like the land of Oz; you half expect to see elves and find pots of gold. The locals and the sizable expatriate Quaker population who inhabit the area act blasé about it—they see this anomaly everyday. To add to Monte Verde's surreal feeling, there is an extensive butterfly garden, where you can walk amongst hundreds of exotic varieties.

The charming English-speaking Caribbean coast is a nice respite for those looking for a break from hablaning Español. Buses leave frequently from San Jose to the dilapidated but charming town of Puerto Viejo with its black sand beaches and rustic discos. A short way from Puerto Viejo is Cahuita National Park. The town of Cahuita is a favorite for those wanting to lounge around in hammocks and make sand castles all day. There is an extensive coral reef in this area that can be explored with snorkeling equipment. Like at most Costa Rican beaches, you can rent a simple cabin on the beach, or find a place to camp out under the stars—there's plenty of hammocks hung about. True city slickers should be warned though—you might get spooked during the night by the cries of the white-faced howler monkey and other wildlife in the rain forest vegetation. A bit further south at the Manzanilla National Wildlife refuge there are more glorious white sand beaches and a sustainable resources conserve where you can watch big turtles lay their eggs and per-

haps spot manatees, crocodiles, and dolphins swimming offshore. An equally glorious beach experience can be had at Manual Antonio, on the western coast.

Ticos are a delightful lot, who enjoy sharing their country. An often cited drawback culturally is that Costa Rica is not as diverse as their neighbors to the north—the indigenous population of Costa Rica was obliterated

by the colonizers. Only 6% of the population are indigenous *Bri Bri*'s who live in the southern region. Those interested in ancient civilizations might want to check out the Mayan cultural center in San Pedro.

Visiting Costa Rica is not as inexpensive as some other Latin American countries, but the water's okay to drink and special inoculations aren't necessary. Many budget-conscious folks get dental work done, if needed, while visiting Costa Rica—they have the same technology as here and it's much less expensive. Public transportation is very cheap in Costa Rica, and you can always find a cabin or a room for under \$15. Also those who are interested in relocating there for a while might find work in Costa Rica, whether it be as a computer systems consultant or a river raft guide.

Whatever adventures you choose in Costa Rica—you'll soon appreciate the unofficial national motto of the *Ticos*—'Pura Vida!' You'll just have to go there to find out the meaning of 'pure life' for yourself. ✕

Costa Rica Roundup

• *Best rain forest experience: National Wildlife Refuge: Barra del Colorado near Nicaragua. To be seen — cougars, crocodiles, deer, monkeys, the green macaw, the tapir and manatee.*

• *Best beach: Manual Antonio; Northwest Costa Rica. To be seen — beautiful beach, coastal rain forest.*

• *Best traveler's home base: San Pedro; Central Valley. To be experienced — international social scene, varied entertainment, cultural activities.*

Ad Space