Central Pacific Coast
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Central Pacific Coast

Why Go?
Stretching from the rough-and-ready port of Puntarenas to the tiny town of Uvita, the central Pacific coast is home to both wet and dry tropical rainforests, sun-drenched sandy beaches and a healthy dose of wildlife. On shore, national parks protect endangered squirrel monkeys and scarlet macaws, while offshore waters are home to migrating whales and pods of dolphins.

With so much biodiversity packed into a small geographic area, it’s no wonder the coastal region is often thought of as Costa Rica in miniature. Given its close proximity to San José and the Central Valley and highlands, and its well-developed system of paved roads, this part of the country is a favorite weekend getaway for domestic and international travelers.

While threats of unregulated growth and environmental damage are real, it’s also important to see the bigger picture, namely the stunning nature that first put the central Pacific coast on the map.

When to Go
- West of the Cordillera Central, rains fall heavily between April and November. The hillsides are particularly lush and green during this time
- In summer (December to March) little rain falls, leaving the countryside dry and barren looking.
- Festival fans will want to visit from around mid-January to late February, when music and art gatherings light up Jacó and Uvita.

Best Places to Eat
- Citrus (p406)
- Exotica (p406)
- Graffiti (p367)
- Sabor Español (p403)
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Out-of-the-Way Beaches
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Central Pacific Coast Highlights

1. Watching troops of monkeys, lazy sloths and gliding brown pelicans at Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio (p389).
2. Surfing the beach breaks of Jacó (p362), Playa Hermosa (p370) and Dominical (p397) – or learning how.
3. Sampling some of the coast’s most sophisticated cuisine in Ojochal (p405).
4. Listening for squawking pairs of scarlet macaws flying...
overhead at Parque Nacional Carara (p356).
5 Scanning the horizon for pods of breaching humpback whales from the deserted beaches of Parque Nacional Marino Ballena (p403).
6 Unearthing the ramshackle historic charms of Puntarenas (p353).
7 Getting a guided animal-spotting tour at the Hacienda Barú National Wildlife Refuge (p395).
History

Prior to the tourism boom in Costa Rica, the central Pacific coast – particularly the Quepos port area – was historically one of the country’s largest banana-producing regions. However, in response to the 1940 banana blight that affected most of Central America, the United Fruit Company (also known as Chiquita Banana) introduced African palms to the area. Native to West Africa, these palms are primarily cultivated for their large, reddish fruits, which are pressed to produce a variety of cooking oils.

Although the banana blight finally ended in the 1960s, the palm plantations were firmly entrenched and starting to turn a profit. Since palm oil is easily transported in tanker trucks, Quepos was able to close its shipping port in the 1970s, which freed up resources and allowed the city to invest more heavily in the palm-oil industry. In 1995 the plantations were sold to Palma Tica, which continues to operate them today. With the exception of commercial fishing and tourism, the palm-oil plantations serve as the primary source of employment in the Quepos area.

In more recent years, this stretch of the Pacific has grown increasingly popular with the package-holiday crowd, as it’s quite easy – particularly for North Americans – to squeeze in a one-week retreat and be back to work on Monday. Unable to resist the draw of paradise, a good number of baby boomers nearing retirement have relocated to these warmer climes.

This demographic shift has been facilitated by the Costa Rican government’s decades-old policy of offering tax incentives and legal residence to foreigners who buy property or start businesses and enterprises in the country. Foreign investment has thus far blessed this region with vitally needed economic stimuli, though the rising cost of living has priced a significant percentage of local Ticos out of the market.

A sparkling new marina at Quepos has brought in a larger volume of tourists visiting Costa Rica on yachts and cruise ships, and several exclusive high-end gated communities continue to attract an even greater number of wealthy immigrants. Things are indeed changing quickly along this stretch of coastline, though it’s difficult to imagine that the authenticity of the coastal fishing villages, agricultural plantations and protected areas could ever be lost.

Parks & Reserves

The central Pacific coast is home to a number of parks and reserves, including the most visited national park in Costa Rica.

**Hacienda Barú National Wildlife Refuge** (p395) This small reserve encompasses a range of tropical habitats and is part of a major biological corridor that protects a wide range of species.

**Parque Nacional Carara** (p356) Home to no fewer than 400 species of bird, including the rare scarlet macaw, which is, amazingly, a commonly sighted species in the park.

**Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio** (p389) The pristine beaches, rainforest-clad mountains and dense wildlife never fail to disappoint in Costa Rica’s most touristed national park.

**Parque Nacional Marino Ballena** (p403) A vitally important marine park, this is the country’s premier destination for both whale- and dolphin-watching.

Getting There & Around

The best option for exploring the coast in depth is to have your own form of private transportation. With the exception of a few odd unpaved stretches of dirt off the main highways, the central Pacific coast has some of the country’s best roads.

Major cities and towns along the coast, such as Puntarenas, Jacó, Quepos, Dominical and Uvita, are serviced by regular buses. Generally speaking, public transportation is frequent and efficient, and is certainly more affordable than renting a car.

Both [NatureAir](http://www.natureair.com) and [Sansa](http://www.flysansa.com) service Quepos, which is the base town for accessing Manuel Antonio. Prices vary according to season and availability, though you can expect to pay a little less than US$75 for a flight from San José or Liberia.

**PUNTARENAS TO QUEPOS**

The northern reaches of the central Pacific coast extend from the maritime port of Puntarenas, a historic shipping hub that has fallen on harder times, to the booming town of Quepos, which is the main access point for Parque Nacional Manuel Anto-
nio. In between are vast swaths of forested
hillsides and wilderness beaches, which
together protect large concentrations of
remarkable wildlife. However, the local
spotlight is fixed firmly on the surf city of
Jacó, which plays host to a colorful cast of
characters.

**Puntarenas**

Port cities the world over have a reputation
for polluted waters, seedy streets and slow
decay, which might be a traveler’s first im-
pression of little Puntarenas, Costa Rica’s
gateway to the Pacific. But just under the
surface are some down-to-earth charms –
one’s largely absent in the country’s most
heavily traveled regions. As the closest coast-
tal town to San José, Puntarenas has long
been a popular escape for landlocked Ticos
(Costa Ricans) on the weekend, but dur-
ing the week activity along the oceanfront
promenade slows to an amenably languid
pace, all the better to enjoy the beachfront
*sodas* (informal lunch counters), tiny mu-
seums and busy market.

The city’s ferry terminal is a convenient
way to connect to pristine beaches on the
central Pacific coast or to southern Nicoya.
While most travelers are only stopping by en
route to the greener pastures and bluer seas
elsewhere, those who get stuck here over-
night could do a lot worse.

**History**

Prior to the mid-20th century, Puntarenas
was the largest and most significant open-
water port in Costa Rica. Some of the finest
coffees to fill European cups were carried
to the continent on Puntarenas-registered
freighters, and the steady flow of capital
transformed Puntarenas into the ‘Pearl of
the Pacific.’ However, after the construction
of the railway leading from the Central Val-
ley to Puerto Limón in 1890, a more direct
shipping route to Europe initiated the city’s
decline in importance, though Puntarenas
did manage to remain a major port on the
Pacific coast. Visitors get a whiff of the
city’s glory in the lovely stone church at its
center, but modern history has left many
unattractive sights: polluted waters, ero-
ding structures and tacky souvenir stands
that close up when the hulking cruise ships
leave port.

**Sights & Activities**

**Museo Histórico Marino**

*(MUSEUM)*

(☎ 2661-5036, 2256-4139; Av Central btwn Calles
3 & 5; ☉ 8am-1pm & 2-5pm Tue-Sun) **FREE**

This museum describes the history of Puntarenas
through audiovisual presentations, old pho-
tos and artifacts.

**Casa de la Cultura**

*(GALLERY)*

(☎ 2661-1394; Av Central btwn Calles 3 & 5;
☉ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri) Casa de la Cultura has
an art gallery with occasional exhibits as
well as a performance space offering sea-
sonal cultural events.

**Parque Marino del Pacífico**

*(AQUARIUM)*

(☎ 2661-5272; www.parquemarino.org; adult/child
under 12yr US$10/5; ☉ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) This
marine park has an aquarium that show-
cases manta rays and other creatures from
the Pacific. The park sits on the site of the
old train station and has a tiny splash pool,
snack bar, gift shop and information center.

**Paseo de los Turistas**

*(Promenade)*

Stroll beside the beach on the Paseo de los Turistas, a pedestrian
boulevard stretching along the southern
edge of town. Cruise ships make day visits
to the eastern end of this road, and a vari-
ety of souvenir stalls and *sodas* are there to
greet passengers. On weekend nights, this
is the place to knock back beers and find
the party.

**Tours**

Tour operators will greet passengers disem-
barking from cruise ships. Quality and price
are greatly variable, but a few come highly
recommended.

**Calypso Cruises**

*(BOAT TOUR)*

(☎ 2256-2727, 2661-0585; www.calypsocruises.
com; Av 3, near Calle 9; day trips adult/student/
child under 7yr US$139/129/75) This long-
established, top-class, gringo-owned cata-
maran makes day trips to Tortuga’s brilliant
white beaches. Trips come with a picnic
lunch, fresh fruit, snacks and booze. The
same company also operates Puntarenas’
only fine-dining establishment, El Shrimp
Shack.

**Odyssey Tours**

*(ADVENTURE TOUR)*

(☎ 8994-6245, 2635-2221, 8319-1315; www.odys-
seytours.cr; ☀) Diego and Alvaro, a pair of
friendly bilingual brothers, host a variety of
customizable day tours and come with a
slew of excellent recommendations. Costa Rica’s full suite of adventures are on offer: white-water rafting, trips to local canopy walks and nearby national parks.

🌟 Festivals & Events

Puntarenas is one of the seaside towns that celebrates the **Fiesta de La Virgen del Mar** (Festival of the Virgin of the Sea) on the Saturday closest to July 16. Fishing boats and elegant yachts are bedecked with lights, flags and decorations and sail around the harbor, seeking protection from the Virgin as they begin another year at sea. There are also boat races, a carnival, and plenty of food, drinking and dancing.

住宿

There’s no shortage of accommodations in Puntarenas, though plenty of the very cheapest ones cater to the clientele that want to pay by the hour. Also, high humidity and lots of rain makes even the most upscale options muggy, so make sure there’s a fan.

**Hotel Cabezas**

(2661-1045; Av 1 btwn Calles 2 & 4; s/d without bathroom US$14/24, with bathroom US$20/30; [ unfold; 8706-9101, 2661-4290]) This no-nonsense budget option is an excellent choice. Pastel-painted rooms have functional overhead fans and screened windows, which means you’ll sleep deeply without needing air-con. Although you certainly shouldn’t leave your valuables strewn about, this hotel is safe, secure and surprisingly quiet.

**Cabinas Joyce**

(2661-6096; www.hotellapunta.net; cnr Av 1 & Calle 35; s/d US$70/80; [ unfold; 8706-9101, 2661-4290]) This is the best option near the bus station; a spotless little joint of tiled rooms overseen with a hawkish eye by the cantankerous, if lovable, Joyce.

**Hotel La Punta**

(2661-0696; www.hotellapunta.net; cnr Av 1 & Calle 4; s/d US$70/80; [ unfold; 8706-9101, 2661-4290]) For early-morning ferry departures, Hotel La Punta is an appealing choice. Conveniently located one block from the dock, its 10 rooms are arranged around a landscaped courtyard and small pool. Comfortable accommodations feature terra-cotta floors, cable TV and fridge.

**Hotel Tioga**

(2661-0271; www.hoteltioga.com; Paseo de los Turistas btwn Calles 17 & 19; d deluxe/balcony incl breakfast from US$85/96; [ unfold; 2661-0696, 2661-4290]) Opened in 1959, this is the most established hotel in Puntarenas. It’s worth paying a bit more for the balcony rooms, which have sweeping views of the beachfront.

**Double Tree Resort by Hilton Central Pacific**

(2663-0808, 800-555-555; www.doubletree-centralpacific.com; all-inclusive packages per person from US$290, child under 12 yr US$51; [ unfold; 8706-9101, 2661-4290]) This all-inclusive, family-friendly resort gets top billing for its enormously curvaceous swimming pool, immense offering of water sports and around-the-clock entertainment. While there are certainly nicer beaches down the coastline, there is excellent value to be had here, especially if you book in advance online.

用餐

The freshest, cheapest food is available in the small stands and sodas near the Central Market. This is also the stomping ground of a motley mix of sailors, drunks and prostitutes, but the scene is raffish rather than dangerous – during the day, at least. There are more sodas along the Paseo de los Turistas between Calles Central and 3, but most of the sit-down options around there are touristy and overpriced.

Self-caterers can head to the **MegaSuper** (2661-5301; Calle 3 btwn Avs 1 & 3) supermarket or the Central Market, where you can find cut-to-order tuna steaks for a pittance.

**La Casona**

(2661-1626; cnr Av 1 & Calle 9; casados US$5-12; [ unfold; 8706-9101, 2661-4290]) This bright-yellow house is marked with a small, modest sign, but it’s an incredibly popular lunch spot, attracting countless locals who jam onto the shaded, greenery-laden deck across from Parque Mora y Cañas. Portions are heaped, and soups are served in bathtub-sized bowls – bring your appetite.

**Marisquería Kaite Negro**

(2661-5566; cnr Av 1 & Calle 19; dishes US$6-12; [ unfold; 8706-9101, 2661-4290]) On the north side of town, this rambling restaurant is popular with locals, and serves good seafood and a variety of tasty bocas (appetizers). If you really want to see the place swinging, the open-air courtyard comes to life on weekends with live music and all-night dancing.

**El Shrimp Shack**

(2661-0585; Av 3 btwn Calles 7 & 3; meals US$7-18; [ unfold; 8706-9101, 2661-4290]) Offering
the most upscale dining in Puntarenas, El Shrimp Shack’s silly name belies a gracious interior – wood-paneled walls, marble-topped tables, antique light sconces and a stunning stained-glass ceiling, all within a century-old house with harbor views. Shrimp dishes feature prominently, though other options include burgers and excellent ceviche (seafood marinated in lemon or lime juice, garlic and seasonings).

La Yunta Steakhouse

STEAKHOUSE $$
(2661-3216; Paseo de los Turistas btwn Calles 19 & 21; meals US$6-20; 8am-midnight) A favorite with the cruise-ship crowd, this long-running steakhouse has professional service (bow ties!), a tiered veranda overlooking the boardwalk and ocean, and impressive portions of well-prepared, tender meat. The menu is rounded out by seafood.

Drinking & Nightlife

Entertainment in the port tends to revolve around boozing and flirting, though occasionally there’s a more highbrow offering at the Casa de la Cultura (p353). On the weekends, follow crowds of Ticos to the countless bars lining the Paseo de los Turistas.

El Oasis del Pacífico

BAR
(2661-6368; cnr Paseo de los Turistas & Calle 5; 9am-10pm Sun-Thu, to 1am Fri & Sat) A popular spot with a lengthy bar and a warehouse-sized dance floor; during the day, pay a small fee to use the shower facilities.

Capitán Moreno’s

CLUB
(2661-6888; cnr Paseo de los Turistas & Calle 13; 11am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-8pm Sat & Sun) A time-honored spot for shaking some booty, with a huge dance floor right on the beach.

Orientation

Situated at the end of a sandy peninsula (8km long but only 100m to 600m wide), Puntarenas is just 110km west of San José by paved highway. The city has 60 calles (streets) running north to south, but only five avenidas (avenues) running west to east at its widest point. As in all of Costa Rica, street names are largely irrelevant, and landmarks are used for orientation.

Information

The major banks along Av 3, to the west of the market, exchange money and are equipped with 24-hour ATMs. There’s also a Banco de Costa Rica (BCR) ATM opposite the pier on the Paseo de los Turistas.

Puntarenas Tourism Office
(Catup, Cámara de Turismo de Puntarenas; 2661-2980, 24hr 2284-6600; 11am-6pm Tue-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat) Opposite the pier on the 2nd floor of Plaza del Pacífico. It closes for lunch.

Getting There & Away

BOAT
Car and passenger ferries bound for Paquera and Playa Naranjo depart several times a day from the northwestern dock (Av 3 btwn Calles 31 & 33); other docks are used for private boats. If you are driving and will be taking the car ferry, arrive at the dock early to get in line. The vehicle section tends to fill up quickly and you may not make it on. In addition, make sure that you have purchased your ticket from the walk-up ticket window before driving onto the ferry. You will not be admitted onto the boat if you don’t already have a ticket.

Schedules change seasonally and can be affected by inclement weather. Check with the ferry office by the dock for any changes. Many of the hotels in town also have up-to-date schedules posted.

To Playa Naranjo (for transfer to Nicoya and points west), Coonatramar (2661-1069; www.coonatramar.com; adult/child US$2/1, bike/car US$4/18) has daily departures at 6:30am, 10am, 2:30pm and 7:30pm.

To Paquera (for transfer to Montezuma and Mal Pais), Naviera Tambor (2661-2084; www.navieratambor.com; adult/child US$1.60/1, bike/car US$4.50/23) also has several daily departures between 5am and 8:30pm.

BUS

Buses for San José depart from the large navy-blue building on the north corner of Calle 2 and the Paseo de los Turistas. Book your ticket ahead of time on holidays and weekends. Buses for other destinations leave from across the street, on the beach side of the Paseo.

Jacó US$2.30, 1½ hours, departs 10 times daily between 5am and 5:30pm.

Quepos US$4, 3½ hours, departs 10 times daily between 5am and 5:30pm.

San José US$5, 2½ hours, departs every hour from 4am to 9pm, stopping en route at the Alajuela airport.

Santa Elena, Monteverde US$3, 3½ hours, departs 8:30am and 1pm.

Getting Around

Buses marked ‘Ferry’ run up Av Central and go to the ferry terminal, 1.5km from downtown. The taxi fare from the San José bus terminal in Puntarenas to the northwestern ferry terminal is about US$2.
Buses for the port of Caldera (also going past Playa Doña Ana and Mata de Limón) leave from the market about every hour and head out of town along Av Central.

**Around Puntarenas**

The road heading south from Puntarenas skirts the coastline, and a few kilometers out of town you’ll start to see the forested peaks of the Cordillera de Tilarán in the distance. Just as the port city fades away, the water gets cleaner, the air crisper and the vegetation more lush. At this point, you should take a deep breath and heave a sigh of relief – the Pacific coastline gets a whole lot more beautiful as you head further south.

About 8km south of Puntarenas is Playa San Isidro, the first ‘real’ beach on the central Pacific coast. Although it is popular with beachcombers from Puntarenas, surfers prefer to push on 4km south to Boca Barranca, which some say is the third-longest left-hand surf break in the world. Conditions are best at low tide, and it is possible to surf here year-round. However, be advised that there isn’t much in the way of services out here, so be sure that you’re confident in the water and seek local advice before hitting the break.

Just beyond the river mouth is a pair of beaches known as Playa Doña Ana and El Segundo, which are relatively undeveloped and have an isolated and unhurried feel to them. Surfers can find some decent breaks here, too, though, like Playa San Isidro, they are more popular for Tico beachcombers on day trips from Puntarenas, especially during weekends in high season. There are snack bars, picnic shelters and changing areas, and supervised swimming areas.

The next stop along the coast is Mata de Limón, a picturesque little hamlet that is situated on a mangrove lagoon and locally famous for its bird-watching. If you arrive during low tide, flocks of feathered creatures descend on the lagoon to scrounge for tasty morsels. Mata de Limón is divided by a river, with the lagoon and most facilities on the south side.

A major port on the Pacific coast is Puerto Caldera, which you pass soon after leaving Mata de Limón. There aren’t any sights here, and the beach is unremarkable unless you’re a surfer, in which case there are a few good breaks to be had (though be careful, as the beach is rocky in places).

Buses heading for the Caldera port depart hourly from the market in Puntarenas, and can easily drop you off at any of the spots described here. If you’re driving, the break at Boca Barranca is located near the bridge on the Costanera Sur (South Coastal Hwy), while the entrance to Playa Doña Ana and El Segundo is a little further south (look for a sign that says ‘Paradero Turístico Doña Ana’). The turnover for Mata de Limón is about 5.5km south of Playa Doña Ana.

**Parque Nacional Carara**

Situated at the mouth of the Río Tárcoles, this 52-sq-km park is only 50km southeast of Puntarenas by road or about 90km west of San José via the Orotina highway. During our last visit, the visitor center visible from the road was a half-remodeled mess, though there were murmurs of a renovation. A short paved trail begins at the Carara ranger station (3km south of Río Tárcoles; admission US$10; 7am-4pm Dec-Apr, 8am-4pm May-Nov), where there are bathrooms, picnic tables and a short, wheelchair-accessible nature trail. Guides can be hired here for US$25 per person (two-person minimum) for a two-hour hike.

The dry season from December to April is the easiest time to go, though the animals are still there in the wet months. March and April are the driest months. Rainfall is almost 3000mm annually, which is less than in the rainforests further south. It’s fairly hot, with average temperatures of 25°C (77°F) to 28°C (82°F), but it’s cooler within the rainforest. An umbrella is important in the wet season and occasionally needed in the dry months. Make sure you have insect repellent.

**Sights**

With the help of a hired guide, it’s possible to visit the archaeological remains of various indigenous burial sites located within the park, though they’re tiny and unexciting compared to anything you might see in Mexico or Guatemala. At the time of the Europeans’ arrival in Costa Rica, these sites were located in an area inhabited by an indigenous group known as the Huetar (Carara means ‘crocodile’ in the Huetar language). Unfortunately, not much is known about this group, as little cultural evidence was left behind. Today the few remaining
Huetar are confined to several small villages in the Central Valley.

If you're driving from Puntarenas or San José, pull over to the left immediately after crossing the Río Tárcoles bridge, also known as Crocodile Bridge. If you scan the sand-banks below the bridge, you'll have a fairly good chance of seeing as many as 30 basking crocodiles. Although they're visible year-round, the best time for viewing is low tide during the dry season. Binoculars will help a great deal.

Crocodiles this large are generally rare in Costa Rica as they've been hunted vigorously for their leather. However, the crocs are tolerated here as they feature prominently in a number of wildlife tours that depart from Tárcoles. And, of course, the crocs don't mind, as they're hand-fed virtually every day.

Activities

Wildlife-Watching

The most exciting bird for many visitors to see, especially in June or July, is the brilliantly patterned scarlet macaw, a rare bird that is commonly seen in the Parque Nacional Carara. Its distinctive call echoes loudly through the canopy, usually moments before a pair appears against the blue sky. If you're having problems spotting them, it may help to inquire at the ranger station, which keeps tabs on where nesting pairs are located.

Dominated by open secondary forest punctuated by patches of dense, mature forest and wetlands, Carara offers some superb bird-watching. More than 400 species of bird inhabit the reserve, though your chances of spotting rarer species will be greatly enhanced with the help of an experienced guide. Some commonly sighted species include orange-billed sparrows, five kinds of trogon, crimson-fronted parakeets, blue-headed parrots, golden-naped woodpeckers, rose-throated becardes, gray-headed tanagers, long-tailed manikins and rufous-tailed jacamars (just to name a few!).

Birds aside, the trails at Carara are home to several mammal species, including red brockets, white-tailed deer, collared peccaries, monkeys, sloths and agoutis. The national park is also home to one of Costa Rica's largest populations of tayras, weasel-like animals that scurry along the forest floor. And, although most travelers aren't too keen on stumbling upon an American crocodile, some truly monstrous specimens can be viewed from a safe distance at the nearby Crocodile Bridge.

According to the park rangers, the best chance of spotting wildlife is at 7am, when the park opens.

Hiking

Some 600m south of the Crocodile Bridge on the left-hand side is a locked gate leading to the Sendero Laguna Meándrica. This trail penetrates deep into the reserve and passes through open secondary forest and patches of dense mature forest and wetlands. About 4km from the entrance is Laguna Meándrica, which has large populations of heron, smoothbill and kingfisher. If you continue past the lagoon, you'll have a good chance of spotting mammals and the occasional crocodile, though you will have to turn back to exit.

Another 2km south of the trailhead is the Carara ranger station.

SCARLET MACAWS

With a shocking bright-red body, blue-and-yellow wings, a long, red tail and a white face, the scarlet macaw (Ara macao) is one of the most visually arresting birds in the neotropical rainforest. It also mates for life and can live up to 75 years, flying across the forest canopy in pairs, squawking like pterodactyls – there are few birds in Costa Rica with such character, presence and beauty.

Prior to the 1960s the scarlet macaw was distributed across much of Costa Rica, though trapping, poaching, habitat destruction and increased use of pesticides devastated the population. By the 1990s the distribution was reduced to two isolated pockets: the Península de Osa and Parque Nacional Carara.

Fortunately, these charismatic creatures are thriving in large colonies at both locales, and sightings are virtually guaranteed if you have the time and patience to spare. Furthermore, despite this fragmentation, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature continues to evaluate the species as ‘Least Concern,’ which bodes well for the future of this truly emblematic rainforest denizen.
About 1km further south are two loop trails. The first, Sendero Las Araceas, is 1.2km long and can be combined with the second, Sendero Quebrada Bonita (another 1.5km). Both trails pass through primary forest, which is characteristic of most of the park.

**Sleeping & Eating**
Camping is not allowed, and there’s nowhere to stay in the park. As a result, most people come on day trips from neighboring towns and cities such as Jacó.

**Restaurante Los Cocodrilos**
(Costa Rican $)
(2428-2308; mains US$5-12; 6am-8pm; P)
Located on the north side of the Río Tárcoles bridge, this is the nearest place to get a decent meal. It has inexpensive, filling meals and is extremely popular with travelers stopping to check out the crocodiles.

**Information**

**DANGERS & ANNOYANCES**
Increased tourist traffic along the Pacific coast has resulted in an unfortunate increase in petty theft. Vehicles parked at the Laguna Meándrica trailhead are routinely broken into, and although there may be guards on duty, it is advised that drivers leave their cars in the lot at the Carara ranger station and walk along the Costanera Sur for 2km north or 1km south. Alternatively, park beside Restaurante Los Cocodrilos (be sure to tip the parking attendants on your return).

**Getting There & Away**
Any bus traveling between Puntarenas and Jacó can leave you at the park entrance. You can also catch buses headed north or south in front of Restaurante Los Cocodrilos. This may be a bit problematic on weekends, when buses are full, so go midweek if you are relying on a bus ride. If you’re driving, the entrance to Carara is right on the Costanera and is clearly marked.

**Tárcoles & Around**
The small, unassuming town of Tárcoles is little more than a few rows of houses strung along a series of dirt roads that parallel the ocean. As you’d imagine, this tiny Tico town isn’t much of a tourist draw, though the surrounding area is perfect for fans of the superlative, especially if you’re interested in seeing the country’s tallest waterfall and some of its biggest crocodiles.

About 2km south of the Carara ranger station (p356) is the Tárcoles turnoff to the right (west) and the Hotel Villa Lapas turnoff to the left. To get to Tárcoles, turn right and drive for 1km, then go right at the T-junction to the village. Local buses between Orotina and Bijagual can drop you off at the entrance to the Parque Nacional Carara.

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**GARABITO**

The area encompassed by Parque Nacional Carara was once home to a legendary indigenous hero, a local cacique (chief) named Garabito. Commanding a vast area from the Golfo de Nicoya to the Central Valley, he led a fierce struggle against the Spanish in the mid-16th century.

At the time, a favorite tactic of the Spanish conquistadors throughout Latin America to weaken native resistance was to turn tribes against each other and decapitate the tribal leadership – literally. Although each story has grisly variations, the fate of captured caciques often involved public humiliation at a show trial, brutal torture and decapitation. Sometimes, the heads of caciques would be mounted and displayed.

Garabito was a different story. The popular chieftain constantly disrupted the Spanish establishment in the Pacific region and, in 1560, Guatemalan high command dispatched a military force to arrest him. Garabito, who claimed to have never spent two nights in the same bed, eluded capture, but the Spanish managed to seize his wife, Biriteka, as a hostage. Garabito countered by having one of his followers dress up as the chieftain and allow himself to be captured. While the camp celebrated catching who they thought was Garabito, the real Garabito escaped with his wife. The ruse is a celebrated victory of Costa Rica’s indigenous underdogs, but eventually Garabito too had to accept defeat at the hands of the Spanish. Senior in years and lacking the support that had fueled his earlier series of rebellions, Garabito surrendered in the 1570s, and was even baptized as a Christian.
Sights & Activities

Catarata Manantial de Agua Viva
WATERFALL
(☎ 8831-2980; admission US$20; ☄ 8am-3pm)
This 200m-high waterfall is claimed to be the highest in the country. From the waterfall, it’s a steep 3km hike down into the valley; at the bottom, the river continues through a series of natural swimming holes. The falls are most dramatic at their fullest, during the rainy season, though the serene rainforest setting is beautiful any time of year.

Keep an eye out for brightly colored poison-dart frogs as well as the occasional pair of scarlet macaws. A 5km dirt road past Hotel Villa Lapas leads to the primary entrance to the falls.

Jardín Pura Vida
GARDENS
(☎ 2637-0346; admission US$20; ☄ 8am-5pm)
In the town of Bijagual, this private botanical garden offers great vistas of Manantial de Agua Viva cascading down the side of a cliff, and there are some easy but altogether pleasant hiking trails. There is a small restaurant on the grounds, and you can also arrange horseback riding and tours through the area.

At the time of writing the Jardín was up for sale, so its future is uncertain.

Tours

This area is known for crocodile-watching tours, and travelers anywhere near this part of the coast will be bombarded with advertisements and flyers for them. Although it will be hard for adrenaline junkies to resist, these tours have a dubious impact on the natural habitat of the magnificent animals who lurk in the mudflats of the Río Tárcoles. Although they are definitely a spectacle to behold, it’s frustrating to watch the crocodiles being hand-fed by the tour guides. If you do visit the crocodiles on a tour, ask a lot of questions and do your part to encourage responsible interaction with the animals. Tours usually cost US$25 per person for two hours.

Both Crocodile Man (☎ 2637-0771; www.crocodilemantour.com) and Jungle Crocodile Safari (☎ 2637-0656; www.junglecrocodilesafari.com) have offices in Tárcoles. The tours leave from town or you can arrange to be picked up at your hotel.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Villa Lapas
RESORT $$$
(☎ 2439-1816, 2637-0232; www.villalapas.com; all-inclusive r from US$130; 🌟🌟🌟🌟🌟) Located on a private reserve comprising both secondary rainforest and tropical gardens, this resort offers rooms housed in an attractive Spanish colonial–style lodge. Guests can unwind in relative comfort in between guided hikes, bird-watching trips, canopy tours and soaks in the pool. Geared towards a birding crowd, the pace here is slow and low-key.

Alongside the Río Tárcoles, the hotel grounds include the kitschy ‘Santa Lucia Town,’ which has a couple of souvenir shops and a wedding chapel.

Getting There & Away

There are no buses to Tárcoles, but any bus between Puntarenas and Jacó can leave you at the entrance. If you’re driving, the entrance to the town is right on the Costanera Sur and is clearly marked. If you’re staying at Hotel Villa Lapas, it’s possible to arrange a pick-up from either San José or Jacó with an advance reservation.

Playa Herradura Area

Until the mid-1990s, Playa Herradura was a rural, palm-sheltered beach of grayish-black sand that was popular mainly with campers and local fishers. In the late 1990s, however, Herradura was thrown into the spotlight when it was used as the stage for the movie 1492. Rapid development ensued, resulting in the construction of one of the most high-profile marinas in the country, the Los Sueños marina.

While parts of the beach today look like one giant gravel pit, Playa Herradura represents one possible future for the central Pacific coast. Sprawling complexes of condos and high-rise apartments are slowly encircling the bay and snapping up the mountain-side, while the marina boasts rows of luxury yachts and sportfishing vessels. Although opinionated detractors of Playa Herradura are quick to lob insults, there are some truly world-class hotels on the beach and high up in the surrounding mountains that are worth seeking out.

Sleeping & Eating

You have to pay to play in Playa Herradura, so consider moving further down the coast to Jacó if you’re not prepared to bunk down in the top-end price bracket.
Although the views of the Pacific are amazing, what makes this blufftop hotel truly unique is its fusion of architectural styles, incorporating elements as varied as tropical Victorian, Hellenistic and French colonial. The ultraexclusive accommodations are located on the tiny headland of Punta Leona, perched high on a dramatic hillside at the end of a serpentine driveway.

Each room is arranged amid the tropical foliage of the terraced property, affording a singular sense of privacy and isolation. The interiors of the rooms are tastefully decorated with art and antiques, with windows looking onto spectacular views. There is also a French-influenced restaurant, several semi-private infinity pools, and a private 1km trail leading down the hillside to the beach.

Los Suenos Marriott Ocean & Golf Resort

With golf course behind and marina in front, this sprawling 200-room resort at Playa Herradura embodies the upscale comfort envisioned for the development, all wrapped up in a hacienda-style aesthetic. Interconnected pools meander through the landscaped property, while luxurious rooms include such comforts as hair dryers, iPod docks, and windows that actually open to catch the ocean breezes.

Zephyr Palace

On the same property as the elegant Villa Caletas, its over-the-top sibling takes the decadence to another level of luxury. At this veritable marble palace, seven individually decorated theme rooms that wouldn't look out of place in Las Vegas evoke the splendor of ancient Rome, pharaonic Egypt and the Orient.

Jimmy T’s Provisions

For gourmets looking to self-cater in style, Jimmy T’s is a dream come true. His small store on the docks of the Los Sueños marina might cater mostly to the yachting set, but it’s stacked floor to ceiling with organic, imported and rare-in-Costa-Rica delicacies. Italian cheeses, grass-fed meat, Asian foods – it’s a delight for travelers who love to cook.

Getting There & Away

The Herradura turnoff is on the Costanera Sur, about 6km after the Costanera Sur leaves the edge of the ocean and heads inland. From here, a paved road leads 3km west to Playa Herradura. There are frequent local buses (US$2.25, 20 minutes) connecting Playa Herradura to Jacó.

Jacó

Few places in Costa Rica generate such divergent opinions and paradoxical realities as Jacó. Partying surfers, North American retirees and international developers laud it for its devil-may-care atmosphere, bustling streets and booming real-estate opportunities. Observant ecotourists, marginalized Ticos and loyalists of the ‘old Costa Rica’ absolutely despise the place for the exact same reasons.

Jacó was the first town on the central Pacific coast to explode with tourist development and, despite ups and downs over the years, it remains a major draw for backpackers, surfers, snowbirds and city-weary josefinos (inhabitants of San José). Although working-class Tico neighborhoods are nearby, open-air trinket shops and tour operators line the tacky main drag which, at night, is given over to a safe but somewhat seedy mix of binge-drinking students, weed-slinging surfers and scantily clad working girls.

While Jacó’s lackadaisical charm is not for everyone, the surfing is excellent, the restaurants and bars are generally great and the nightlife can be a blast. Tourist infrastructure here is among the best in the country, and all around the greater Jacó area you can expect some high-quality service for your money. Despite its more off-putting features, it’s impossible to deny Jaco’s good side, which put it on the map in the first place: the sweeping beauty of the beach, the consistently fine surf and the lush tropical backdrop.

History

Jacó has a special place in the hearts of Ticos, as it is the quickest oceanside escape for landlocked denizens of the Central Valley. Many Ticos recall fondly the days when weekend shuttle buses would pick up beach-seekers in the city center and whisk them away to the then-undeveloped Pacific paradise.
The secret got out in the early 1990s, when Canadians on package tours started flooding in, though for the most part tourism remained pretty low-key. Things picked up a bit in the late 1990s, when surfers and anglers the world over started visiting Costa Rica en masse, though Jacó remained the dominion of Central Valley Ticos looking for a little fun and sun. However, things changed dramatically as soon as retiring baby boomers in search of cheap property began to relocate here.

In only a few years' time, Jacó became the most rapidly developing town in all of Costa Rica. Plots of land were subdivided, beachfronts cleared and hillsides leveled, and almost overnight Jacó became the exclusive enclave of moneyed expats. Ticos were happy that development brought coveted Western institutions such as paved roads and fast-food restaurants, but as the initial flash of cash and glitz started to fade, some began to wonder if they had inadvertantly sold out the ground beneath them.

The global economic crisis of 2008 was in some ways a blessing in disguise for little Jacó, halting construction of high-rise condo developments, whose empty shells now languish amid razed open space.

Jacó’s future is anything but certain. Optimists point out that the town is simply experiencing growing pains, and argue that drugs and prostitution have subsided with the increasingly stable infrastructure. Pessimists are quick to retort that wealth attracts opportunism, especially of the illicit kind, and that the problems in Jacó are just getting started.

Regardless of which camp you fall into, what is certain is that the country is casting a watchful eye on Jacó, and will ultimately point to the city as either an example of development gone awry or a success story of wealth creation.
Activities

Swimming
Jacó is generally safe for swimming, though you should avoid the areas near the estuaries, which are polluted. Be advised that the waves can get crowded with beginner surfers who don’t always know how to control their boards, so keep your wits about you and stay out of their way. Riptides occasionally occur, especially when the surf gets big, so inquire about local conditions and keep an eye out for red flags marking the paths of rips.

Surfing
Although the rainy season is considered best for Pacific coast surfing, Jacó is blessed with consistent year-round breaks. Even though more advanced surfers head further south to Playa Hermosa, the waves at Jacó are strong, steady and a lot of fun. Jacó is also a great place to start a surf trip as it’s easy to buy and sell boards here.

If you’re looking to rent a board for the day, shop around as the better places will rent you a board for US$15 to US$20 for 24 hours. There are too many surf shops for us to list them all. Our favorite place to rent is Carton Surf Shop (☎ 2643-3762; www.cartonsurfboards.com; Calle Madrigal; ☏ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-3pm Sun), run by the friendly Villalobos brothers, near the beach at the southern end of the main drag on Calle Madrigal.

Six-time national surf champion Álvaro Solano runs the highly respected Vista Guapa Surf Camp (☎ 2643-2830, in USA 409-599-1828; www.vistaguapa.com), which is recommended by readers. Weekly rates including full board start at around US$1000. Check the website for directions.

Hiking
A popular local pastime is following the trail up Mt Miros, which winds through primary and secondary rainforest and offers spectacular views of Jacó and Playa Hermosa. The trail actually leads as far as the Central Valley, though you only need to hike for a few kilometers to reach the viewpoint. Note that the trailhead is unmarked, so ask a local to point it out to you.

Horse Riding
Be wary of winging it here; readers have reported incidents of horse abuse in Jacó and visitors will see malnourished and mistreated animals on offer near the beach.

Discovery Horseback Tours (☎ 8838-7550; www.horseridecostarica.com; rides from US$75) Nearby beach and rainforest rides are available through this highly rec-

JACÓ FOR CHILDREN

Jacó has long been on the radar of Tico families looking to swap the congestion of San José for the ocean breezes of the central Pacific coast. Therefore, you’ll find that your children are very well cared for in Jacó, and there is enough going on to keep even those with the shortest attention spans amused for days on end.

Families flock to the beach, and, compared with more famed surfing destinations up and down the coast, the waves here are modest. As with any water-based activities, the usual amount of parental watch is required, though young children can safely splash about on most days. However, strong surges often accompany ill weather, so it’s always best to survey the scene and inquire locally about conditions.

Beyond the beach you’ll find a laundry list of activities on offer, and a good number of operators offer discounts for young children.

There is a tremendous diversity of accommodations in the Jacó area, and aside from the more backpacker-oriented youth hostels and the upmarket boutique hotels, the vast majority welcome children. Smaller, more intimate B&B types are good for maintaining a comfortable, familial atmosphere, while larger resorts have a range of child-friendly amenities. If possible, book in advance if you need to reserve child beds or have other special requests. Hotels with pools can save the day, especially when the mercury starts to rise.

Eating out with children is a breeze, since nearly all of the places in town offer English menus and/or have English-speaking staff, and there are plenty of familiar takeout options. Fruit smoothies are an excellent way to keep your kids properly hydrated and happy.
ommended outfit, run by an English couple who offer an extremely high level of service and professionalism.

Kayaking
Kayak Jacó
(2) 2643-1233, 8869-7074; www.kayakjaco.com; tours from US$70) This reliable company facilitates kayaking and sea-canoeing trips that include snorkeling excursions to tropical islands, in a wide variety of customized day and multiday trips. Though it does have a presence at Playa Agujas, 250m east of the beach, it's best to phone or email in advance.

Spas
Serenity Spa
(2) 2643-1624; www.serenityspacr.com; Av. Pastor. Díaz; 9:30am-7pm Mon-sat, to 5pm Sun) Serenity Spa, east of Calle Bohío, offers the full range of spa services.

Courses
School of the World
(2) 2643-2463; www.schooloftheworld.org; 1-4 week packages US$540-2225) This popular school and cultural-studies center offers classes in Spanish, surfing, yoga, art and photography. The impressive building and activities center also houses a cafe and art gallery. Rates include kayaking and hiking field trips and onsite lodging. Spanish and surfing are the most popular programs. See the website for directions.

Tours
Tours around the area include visits to Parque Nacional Carara (from about US$50) as well as longer-distance trips around the country. Another popular destination is Isla Damas – you can organize tours here or in Quepos, further south. Isla Damas is not technically an island but the tip of a pointed mangrove forest that juts out into a small bay just south of Parrita. During high tide, as the surrounding areas fill with water, this point becomes an island, offering an incredible opportunity for bird- and other wildlife-watchers. Boating tours can be arranged from Jacó for around US$70 per person, but more avid adventurers can opt for a sea-kayaking expedition with several operators that work with local hotels.

Virtually every shop, hotel and restaurant in town books tours, as Jacó operates on a lucrative commission-based system. As you’d imagine, it’s hard to know who is greasing whose palms and who is running tours, though usually it works out. Still, you shouldn’t book anything from touts on the streets, and if an offer from a vendor seems too good to be true, then most likely it is.

In Jacó there is also a handful of competing companies offering similar package canopy tours.

Gray Line Tours
(2) 2220-2126; www.graylinecostarica.com; Best Western Jacó Beach Resort, Av Pastor Díaz) Gray Line Tours is one longstanding agent that receives good reviews. It books tours throughout the country as well as private intercity transportation.

Vista Los Sueños Canopy Tour
(2) 2637-6020, in USA 321-220-9631; www.canopyvistalossuenos.com; tours from US$80; hourly tours 8am-3pm) The longest zip lines in the area belong to Vista Los Sueños, which offers 14 cables accessed by tractor cart though the lush hillside.

Festivals & Events
Mid-January in Jacó brings with it the Jungle Jam music festival. Featuring international acts (heavy on the reggae) as well as local up-and-comers, the four-day event is based at Docelunas (p366) but hosts shows throughout Jacó’s venues.

Sleeping
Jacó has hosted a variety of tourists for years, and there’s a wide spread of places to lay your head. From spare concrete-block dives with little more than a bed and a fan to upscale resorts with full amenities, there’s a lot to choose from in just a few blocks.

The center of town, with its many bars and discos, can mean that noise will be a factor in where you choose to stay. The far northern and southern ends of town have more relaxed and quieter accommodations.

Reservations are highly recommended on weekends in the dry season and during the Jungle Jam music festival.

The rates given are high-season rates, but low-season rates could be as much as 30% to 40% lower. If you plan on a lengthy stay (more than five days), ask about long-term rates.
1. **Parque Nacional Corcovado (p458)**
   One of the most biologically diverse places in the world, this national park is home to countless endangered species.

2. **Yellow tree frog, Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio (p387)**
   Costa Rica’s smallest national park is full of wildlife, swaying palms and coconuts.

3. **Fungi, Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio (p387)**
   The forest is full of living organisms – from animals, birds and reptiles, to epiphytes and fungi.
Central Pacific Coast

**Buddha House**  
(2643-3615; www.hosteldhhouse.com; Av Pastor Díaz; dm US$15, d with/without bathroom US$65/35; P *) An oasis of calm in the midst of hustling Jacó. Bold colors and modern art create an artistic atmosphere at this ‘boutique hostel’. Communal areas include a breezy patio and a spotless kitchen. This place is perfect for budget travelers who don’t want the party in their living room.

**Jacó Inn**  
(2643-1935; www.jacoinn.com; Av Pastor Díaz near Calle Bohío; dm US$12, r US$25-45; P F) Situated down a shaded alley in the middle of town, Jacó Inn is a fantastic deal for the price. Cozy dorms in the main house share a chilled-out living area and homey kitchen, while private rooms in the hangar-like addition are spare and spotless. Surfboards can be rented and surf lessons arranged with the friendly staff, who foster a welcoming vibe.

**Cabinas Antonio**  
(2643-3043; cnr Av Pastor Díaz & Bulevar; s/d US$30/40; P E) Something of an institution among shoestringers and local Tico families, this clutch of cabinas at the northern end of Jacó is one of the best deals in town. Basic rooms are uninteresting at best, but they are clean and cozy, and come with private cold shower and cable TV. Most importantly, they’re just steps from the surf.

**Camping El Hicaco**  
(2643-3004; Calle Hicaco; campsites per person US$7; P) The only proper campground in town: there are picnic tables, bathrooms and a lockup for gear, though its proximity to the bars and clubs means you might not get much shut-eye. Don’t leave valuables in your tent as theft is a big problem here.

**AparHotel Vista Pacífico**  
(2643-3261; www.vistapacifico.com; d incl breakfast US$68-121; P E) Located on the crest of a hill just north of Jacó (off Bulevar), this gem of a hotel is run by a warm young Canadian couple. Homey, comfortable rooms and suites with kitchen facilities come in a variety of configurations. Its favorable elevation offers not only panoramic views of the coastline and valley but also blessedly cool breezes.

**Posada Jacó**  
(2643-1951; www.posadajaco.com; Calle Las Olas; r US$100; P E) Surprisingly quiet for being steps from Jacó’s main drag, this tiny creekside hotel has a well-kept garden and pool area with a communal barbecue. Suites are the best deal here, complete with kitchenettes and terraces in low-key, friendly environs.

**Sonidos del Mar**  
(2643-3912, 2643-3924; www.sonidosdelmar.com; Calle Hidalgo; houses US$250; P F) Set within a mature tropical garden, these guesthouses may be two of the most beautiful in Costa Rica. The design is impeccable, from the vaulted Nicaraguan hardwood ceilings to the hand-laid volcanic-rock and pebble showers. Owner Lauri is a skilled artist and a collector who has lovingly filled each room with original paintings, sculptures and indigenous crafts.

Each house comes with a fully equipped gourmet kitchen and secure parking, and the beach is only 50m away. The houses can accommodate up to six people each, though they can more comfortably put up eight between them. Cheaper weekly and monthly rates are available.

**Docelunas**  
(2643-2211; www.docelunas.com; Costanera Sur; d/junior suite incl breakfast US$169/197; P E) Situated in the foothills across the highway, ‘Twelve Moons’ is a heavenly mountain retreat consisting of only 20 rooms sheltered in a pristine landscape of tropical rainforest. Each teak-accented room is uniquely decorated with original artwork, and the luxurious bathrooms feature double sinks and bathtubs. Yoga classes, offered regularly, are free with room rates.

A full spa uses the hotel’s own line of beauty products, and you can swim in a free-form, waterfall-fed pool. The open-air restaurant serves everything from marlin ceviche to vegan delicacies. To reach the hotel, make a left off the Costanera just after the third signed entrance for Playa Jacó.

**Hotel Poseidon**  
(2643-1642; www.hotel-poseidon.com; Calle Bohío; d incl breakfast from US$107; P E) It’s hard to miss the huge Grecian wooden carvings that adorn the exterior of this small American-run hotel. On the inside, sparkling rooms are perfectly accented with stylish furniture and mosaic tiles, and include amenities like fridges and hair dryers. There’s a pool with swim-up bar, a small Jacuzzi and an open-air restaurant serving some of the best food in Jacó.
Eating

The quality of fare in Jacó is high, and aside from the Quepos and Manuel Antonio area, the city proudly boasts the most diverse offering of international cuisine on the central Pacific coast. While the vast majority of eateries cater primarily to Western palates, there are still a few local spots that have weathered the storm of change.

It’s worth pointing out that hours can fluctuate wildly, especially in the rainy season, when many shops close sporadically, so it’s best to eat early.

★ Taco Bar  MEXICAN $  
(2643-0222; Calle Pops; meals US$6-12; breakfast from US$3; 7am-10pm Tue-Sun, noon-10pm Mon) A one-stop shop for Mexican, seafood, salads and smoothies. Get your drink in the gargantuan 1L size or your greens at the salad bar featuring more than 20 kinds of exotic and leafy components. And, of course, there’s the obligatory fish taco, which may be one of the planet’s greatest food combinations.

Soda a Cachete  COSTA RICAN $  
(2643-1831; Av Pastor Díaz; meals US$4-8; 7am-7pm Thu-Tue) Although many of the local sodas have been pushed out by gringo palates, this little place survives through its loyal following, who drop by for huge, excellent breakfasts and set lunches. A few bucks will get you rice, beans, a fish or meat dish of the day and some juice. It’s across from the Red Cross.

Más x Menos  SELF-CATERING $  
(Av Pastor Díaz; 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, to 10pm Sat, 7am-9pm Sun) This Western-style supermarket has an impressive selection of fresh produce, and local and international culinary items.

★ Graffiti  INTERNATIONAL $$  
(2643-1708; www.graffiticr.com; mains US$8-22; 5-10pm Mon-Sat) The decor is what you might expect from the name, and live music on weekends ups its game, but the spotlight here is fixed on the plate. Those in the know come for the famous cacao-and-coffee-encrusted filet mignon, macadamia-and-passionfruit catch of the day, decadent cheesecake and creative cocktails. Reservations are highly recommended.

Caliche’s Wishbone  INTERNATIONAL $$  
(2643-3406; Av Pastor Díaz; meals US$9-18; noon-10pm Thu-Tue) Overseen by the charming Caliche, this has been a Jacó favorite for years and years. The eclectic menu includes pizzas, pitas, stuffed potatoes, pan-seared sea bass and tuna-sashimi salads, though its justifiable fame comes from the fact that everything is quite simply fresh, delicious and good value. It’s south of Calle Bohío.

Rancho Santana  COSTA RICAN $$  
(2643-4234; Calle Hidalgo; mains US$5-9; 11am-midnight) Though slightly out of the way, this Tico-run spot is worth a leisurely dinner under the breezy rancho (house-like building), with its tree-trunk beams, thatched roof and rustling palms. Traditional fare – the casados and ceviche rule – is served by friendly staff in a completely unpretentious setting.

Tsunami Sushi  JAPANESE $$  
(2643-3678; www.tsunamisushicr.com; Av Pastor Díaz; meals US$10-30; 5-10pm Sun-Thu, to 1am Fri) Reservations are recommended at this popular sushi spot, one of the best on the central Pacific coast. Play your cards
right and the half-off specials throughout the week can save you some serious colones. Find it in the mall Il Galeone.

**Rioasis**
PIZZERIA $$
(2643-3354; Plaza Jacó, Av Pastor Díaz; pizzas US$9-13; 11:30am-10pm; □) Admit it – sometimes pizza seems like the best thing ever in the moment. When it comes to Rioasis’ wood-fired pie, topped with all kinds of gourmet goodness, it usually is. The place is next to BCR.

**El Hicaco**
SEAFOOD $$$
(2643-3226; www.elhicaco.net; Calle Hicaco; mains US$15-30; 11am-midnight) This oceanside spot brims with casual elegance and is regarded as one of the finer dining experiences in Jacó. Although the menu is entirely dependent on seasonal offerings, both from the land and the sea, the specialty of the house is seafood, prepared with a variety of sauces highlighted by Costa Rica’s tropical produce.

**Lemon Zest**
FUSION $$$
(2643-2591; www.lemonzestjaco.com; Av Pastor Díaz; mains US$10-30; 5-10pm; □□□□) Chef Richard Lemon (a former instructor at Le Cordon Bleu Miami) wins many accolades for Jacó’s most swish menu. The roster of upscale standards – including Caribbean-style jerk pork chop and seared duck in blackberry sauce – might lack a creative concept, but the dishes are carried out with due sophistication, accompanied by a well-matched wine list.

**Drinking & Nightlife**

Jacó isn’t the cultural capital of Costa Rica: it’s where people go to get hammered and party the night away. There are numerous raging bars and dance clubs that cater to good-times-seeking expats and travelers, but choose your venues carefully, as prostitution figures prominently.

**Le Loft**
CLUB
(2643-5846; Av Pastor Díaz; cover US$10; 9pm-2am) The Loft is Jacó’s sleekest night-life venue, offering some much-needed urban sophistication. Live DJs spin essential mixes while the pretty people preen and be seen. There’s a calendar of special events and a balcony perch for checking out the street life.

**Monkey Bar**
CLUB
(2643-2357; Av Pastor Díaz; 9pm-2:30am Tue-Sun) Attracting a younger crowd of locals and visitors, Monkey Bar pumps with good times, reggaetón and pheromones.

**Bohio Beach Bar & Bubba’s Fish Tacos**
BAR
(2643-3112; Calle Bohío) Fortification for a surf session (or a long day of lounging on the beach) is sometimes an immediate need. In such scenarios, Bohio Bubba’s meets the basic requirements: huge fish tacos, ice-cold Imperials and a beachfront locale. Decidedly better during daylight hours.

**Clarita’s Beach Hotel and Sports Bar and Grill**
SPORTS BAR
(2643-3327; www.claritashotel.com) Catch the game on the big screen, day-drink with a fun crowd, enjoy live Tico-style music played by local oldsters and stay the night if you don’t want to leave – the hotel is quite comfortable and offers rooms (set back from the raucous beachfront bar) from US$60. It’s at the western end of Bulevar.

**Orientation**

Playa Jacó is about 2km off the Costanera, 3.5km past the turnoff for Herradura. The beach itself is about 3km long, and hotels and restaurants line the road running just inland. The areas on the northern and southern fringes are the most tranquil and attractive, and are the cleanest.

Note that, in an effort to make foreign visitors feel more at home, the town has placed street-name signs on most streets. These names are shown on the map, but the locals continue to use the traditional landmark system.

**Information**

There’s no independent tourist-information office, though several tour offices will give information. Look for the free monthly Jaco’s Guide or the quarterly Info Jaco. For cash, there are ATMs everywhere, though the best rates will be found at the big branches like Banco Popular.

**DANGERS & ANNOYANCES**

Aside from occasional petty crime such as pickpocketing and breaking into locked cars, Jacó is not a dangerous place by any stretch. However, the high concentration of wealthy foreigners and comparatively poor Ticos has resulted in a thriving sex and drugs industry. To be fair, the local council has done an admirable job cleaning things up in recent years, and these vices are not as public as they once were. But this is not to say that Jacó is now squeaky clean.
Jacó is the epicenter of Costa Rica’s prostitution scene. Assuming that the working girl or guy is over 18 (not always a given), prostitution is legal in Costa Rica, but travelers who wish to explore this dark corner of Costa Rican nightlife should carefully consider the health and safety risks and negative social impacts.

### Getting There & Away

**AIR**
NatureAir ([www.natureair.com](http://www.natureair.com)) and Alfa Romeo Aero Taxi ([www.alfaromeoair.com](http://www.alfaromeoair.com)) offer charter flights. Prices are dependent on the number of passengers, so it’s best to try to organize a larger group if you’re considering this option.

**BOAT**
The jet-boat transfer service that connects Jacó to Montezuma is, far and away, the most efficient way to travel between the central Pacific coast and the Península de Nicoya. The journey across the Golfo de Nicoya only takes about an hour (compared to about seven hours overland), though at US$40 it’s definitely not cheap. (For a small extra fee you can bring your bicycle or surfboard.) The bonus? Sometimes travelers see dolphins along the ride. Several boats leave daily from Playa Herradura, 2km north of town. Reservations are required and can be made at most tour operators in town (the most consistent daily departure is at 10:45am). It’s a beach landing, so wear the right shoes.

**BUS**
Buses for San José stop at the Plaza Jacó mall, north of the center. The bus stop for other destinations is opposite the Más x Menos supermarket on Av Pastor Díaz. (Stand in front of the supermarket if you’re headed north; stand across the street if you’re headed south.) The departure times listed here are approximate since buses originate in Puntarenas or Quepos. Get to the stop early!

- **Puntarenas** US$2, 1½ hours, departs 6am, 9am, noon and 4:30pm.
- **Quepos** US$2, 1½ hours, departs hourly from 6:30am to 2:30pm, 6pm and 7pm.
- **San José** US$5, three hours, departs 5am, 7am, 9am, 11am, 1pm, 3pm and 5pm.

### Getting Around
Getting around in Jacó is easy on foot; strolling the length of town in flip-flops takes about 20 minutes.

**BICYCLE & SCOOTER**
Several places around town rent out bicycles, moped scooters and scooters. Bikes can usually be rented for about US$3 to US$5 an hour or US$8 to US$15 a day, though prices change depending on the season. Mopeds and small scooters cost from US$25 to US$50 a day (many places ask for a cash or credit-card deposit of about US$200).

**CAR**
There are several rental agencies in town, so shop around for the best rates.

- **Budget** (☎️ 2643-2665; Av Pastor Díaz, near Calle Bohio; ☄️ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat, to 4pm Sun)
- **Economy** (☎️ 2643-1719; Av Pastor Díaz; ☄️ 8am-6pm) South of Calle Ancha.

**TAXI**
Taxis to Playa Hermosa from Jacó cost between US$10 and US$15. To arrange for a pick-up, call **Taxi 30-30** (☎️ 2643-3030), or negotiate with any of the taxis along Av Pastor Díaz.

### Battling the Blood Suckers
Whether you call them skeeters, mozzies or midges, everyone can agree that fending off mosquitoes is one of the most annoying parts of traveling in the tropics. Although the scientific evidence surrounding effective mosquito-bite prevention is circumstantial at best, the following is a list of road-tested combat strategies for battling the blood-suckers.

- Wear socks, long trousers and a long-sleeved shirt, especially at dusk, when mosquitoes feed.
- Eat lots of garlic (not recommended if you’re traveling with your significant other).
- Fill your room with the smoke of the ever-present burnable Costa Rican mosquito coils.
- Invest in a good-quality mosquito net, preferably one that has been chemically treated.
- Never underestimate the power of spraying yourself with DEET.
Playa Hermosa

Regarded as one of the most consistent and powerful breaks in the whole country, Hermosa serves up serious surf that commands the utmost respect. You really need to know what you’re doing in these parts – huge waves and strong riptides are unforgiving, and countless surfboards here have wound up broken and strewn about on the shoreline. Still, even if you’re not a pro, the vibe is excellent, the surfers are chilled out and the beach lives up to its name.

Several places on the Pacific coast have names that translate to ‘beautiful beach’ in Spanish, but none is more deserving than this lovely 10km-long strip of gray sand. It has seen significant investment in recent years: billed as an upscale alternative to Jacó, the shore sports a couple of brand-new top-end hotels and notably more tony visitors, but in comparison with that in neighboring Jacó and Playa Herradura, development is modest. For the time being, Hermosa is very much a slow-paced beach town edged by the Costanera Sur and the surf-washed shores of the Pacific.

Activities

Surfing

Most of the wave action takes place at the northern reaches, where there are no fewer than half a dozen clearly defined beach breaks. These have tons of power and break very near the shore, particularly in the rainy season between May and August. Conditions are highly variable, but you can expect the maximum height to top out around high tide. Swell size is largely dependent on unseen factors such as current and offshore weather patterns, but when it gets big, you’ll know. At times like these, you really shouldn’t be paddling out unless you have some serious experience under your belt. Playa Hermosa is not for beginners, and even intermediate surfers can get chewed up and spat out here. To watch and appreciate, park at the small road by the Backyard Hotel and wander out to the beach.

Yoga

Vida Asana Retreat Center

High in the hills above Playa Hermosa lies this retreat, which offers fully customizable packages combining yoga, surfing and healthy organic meals. Reservations are highly recommended, and prices are dependent on the size of your party, the season and the extent of requested instruction. The accommodations are breezy, rustic and set amid lush jungle.

Festivals & Events

If you don’t think you can hack it with the aspiring pros, you might want to give the surf on this beach a miss. However, consider stopping by in late July or early August, when local pro surfers descend for the annual national surf competition. Dates vary, though the event is heavily advertised around the country, especially in neighboring Jacó.

Sleeping

Most accommodations in Playa Hermosa are clustered along a few hundred meters of highway and the beach road paralleling it, which basically comprise the village. Rates vary wildly depending on season, demand and the whims of proprietors, and they’re often negotiable.

Cabinas Las Arenas

Las Arenas caters to the backpacking surfer crowd by sticking to the basics in an effort to keep prices on the low side. The property comprises 10 cabins that can each sleep up to four, providing tremendous bang for your buck if you’re traveling in a group. There’s also a good restaurant on the premises.

Cabinas Brisa del Mar

A classic no-frills surfers’ crash pad, this Floridian-run spot has basic rooms with air-con, private hot shower and cable TV, as well as a communal kitchen where you can self-cater. If the surf is looking too small (or too big!), you can pass the time on the basketball court or with a few games of table tennis.

Tortuga del Mar

Top-end accommodations with a recession-proof midrange price tag, this Floridan-run spot has basic rooms with air-con, private hot shower and cable TV, as well as a communal kitchen where you can self-cater. If the surf is looking too small (or too big!), you can pass the time on the basketball court or with a few games of table tennis.
ing excellent use of local hardwoods to construct lofty ceilings that catch every gust of the Pacific breezes.

The larger studios are spacious and even feature mini kitchenettes that make self-catering a real possibility within this price bracket.

Cabinas Las Olas Hotel (2643-7021; www.lasolashotel.com; r US$45-75, skyboxes US$100; (P) This distinctive three-story A-frame building is home to an awesome ‘skybox room’, a teak-accented, ocean-facing penthouse where you can fall asleep to the sounds of the surf and wake to a surf check. If that’s booked, you can also rent one of several beachside rooms, from spartan budget digs to bigger rooms that include kitchenettes and sleep up to three.

Costanera B&B (2643-7044; www.costaneraplayahermosa.com; d incl breakfast without/with air-con US$50/55; (P)) Blink and you may miss Costanera, a tidy Italian-run B&B – so look carefully for the yellow buildings, as it’s a great deal in this neighborhood. Five rooms of various sizes and shapes have vaulted wooden ceilings and beachfront terraces, each offering a fair degree of privacy and intimacy.

Hermosa Beach Bungalows (2643-7190, 2643-1513; www.hermosabeachbungalows.com; bungalows US$200-250) These attractive, two-bedroom bungalows on stilts are individually owned, but a third are managed by onsite concierge Twinka. Most are pet-friendly, and all have modern bathrooms, washers, dryers and balconies. Trimmed in bright, tropical colors, the bungalows surround a pool and community rancho, and the property faces a long stretch of beach 1km south of town.

Backyard Hotel (2643-7011; www.backyardhotel.com; r/ste incl breakfast from US$150/260; (P) Right next door to Playa Hermosa’s perenially popular Backyard Bar – upside or downside? Your call! – Backyard Hotel offers cool, tiled rooms that are enticingly lush for little Hermosa. Outfitted with quality linens and mattresses, mini-bars, hair dryers and alarm clocks, they also come with private terraces, most of which have beach or jungle views.

Backyard Bar (2643-7011; meals US$5-10; (noon-late; (P)) Backyard Bar’s expansive menu reaches beyond the usual surfer fare, though the burritos are a good bet if you’re in the mood for the usual. As the town’s de facto nightclub, the Backyard Bar occasionally hosts live music, heavy pours at its nightly happy hour and a local surf contest every Saturday from 4pm until sunset.

Bluegrass Cafe & Bakery (8945-9885; Costanera Sur; mains US$2-6; (7am-3pm Wed-Mon; (P) Hot cinnamon rolls, whole-grain and jalapeño-cheddar bread, banana-cream pies and cinnamon-fig loaves are all lovingly made by a super-friendly Texan – who also serves up pulled-pork and chicken curry with rice on or in sandwich form. Well worth a stop for quality baked goods and Shannon’s impromptu bluegrass stylings. (There’s also a bluegrass jam every Sunday afternoon.)

Jungle Surf Café (meals US$4-9; (8am-9pm Thu-Tue high season only) If you’re looking for a quick bite between sets, this terminally laid-back cafe is a local institution that offers everything from kebabs and fish tacos to cold beer and fruit smoothies.

Getting There & Away
Located 5km south of Jacó, Playa Hermosa can be accessed by any bus heading south from Jacó, see p369 for detailed information. Frequent buses running up and down the Costanera Sur can easily pick you up, though determined surfers can always hail a taxi (with surf racks) or hitchhike.

Playa Esterillos
Fifteen minutes south of Jacó but a veritable world away, Playa Esterillos lures those who simply want to catch some surf, sun and scenery (sans scene), as there isn’t much else to do along this miles-long expanse of beach. Playa Esterillos is signed off the highway in several sections: Esterillos Oeste (West), Centro (Central) and Este (East). Esterillos Oeste has a mini-supermarket a couple of sodas, a tiny tour office and a Tico-village vibe absent in Jacó; Esterillos Este has more of a resort feel, with upscale accommodations and a string of holiday homes along the beachfront.
The most luxe of the resorts is the modern Alma del Pacífico (2778-7070; www.almadelpacifico.com; bungalows US$236-293, villas US$349-519; ★★★★☆), located in Esterillos Este. Each individually designed villa encompasses a range of intriguing elements, including wooden-lattice ceilings, sheer walls of glass framing private gardens, concrete-poured furniture done up with custom leatherwork and impossibly intricate mosaic tiling. The onsite restaurant specializes in gourmet and organic cuisine.

If such a splurge will sink your budget, check out the laid-back Hotel Pelicano (2778-8105; www.pelicanbeachcostarica.com; r US$96-153; ★★★☆☆) a bit further south: it’s affordable, safe and homey, and on the same dreamy stretch of the Pacific. Fairly basic rooms with wooden or tile floors surround a small pool, and the open-air restaurant is the perfect refuge from the sun after a day at the beach – the ceviche paired with a cold Imperial is the bomb.

In Esterillos Oeste, seek out the intimate Hotel La Dolce Vita (2778-7015; www.resortladolcevita.com; s/d from US$58/85; ★★★☆☆), where tidy rooms are steps from the beach.

Rainmaker Aerial Walkway

Rainmaker is a privately owned rainforest that offered the first aerial walkway (www.rainmakercostarica.org; guided tour only) through the forest canopy in Central America. Although its star has faded a bit, the place is still regarded as one of the region’s best. From its tree-to-tree platforms there are spectacular panoramic views of the surrounding primary and secondary rainforest, as well as occasional vistas out to the Pacific Ocean. The reserve is also home to the full complement of tropical wildlife, which means that there are myriad opportunities here for great bird-watching as well as the occasional monkey sighting. The trips are often completed by a swim in a natural pool at the base of a waterfall.

Tours with naturalist guides leave hotels in Manuel Antonio and Quepos daily except Sunday; reservations can be made at most hotels or by calling the Rainmaker office (2777-3565, in USA 540-349-9848). A self-guided trip through the aerial walkway costs only US$15 per person (kids are free!) and for US$35 a guide is included. Bird-watching and amphibian and reptile tours (US$90) are also on offer. Binoculars are invaluable for watching wildlife, as are water and sun protection for staying hydrated and sunburn-free.

There are short interpretive trails that enable the visitor to identify some of the local plants, and some long and strenuous trails into the heart of the 20-sq-km preserve. Keep your eye out for poison-dart frogs, which are very common along the trails.

Rainmaker also offers opportunities for volunteers to participate for two weeks to one month in one of the four departments needed to run and preserve the project. There are also opportunities to work with local schools and various community-outreach programs. Contact it for more information regarding fees and placements.

A large colorful sign marks the turnoff for Rainmaker on the Costanera Sur at the northern end of Pocares (10km east of Parrita or 15km west of Quepos). From the turnoff it’s 7km to the parking area.

Parrita & Around

A bustling town on a river of the same name, Parrita is home to a tremendous palm-oil processing plant. If the wind is blowing right, the fried-food odor of the plant can be smelled from several kilometers away. Although palm oil doesn’t perhaps have the immediate recognition of olive oil, the product finds its way into just about everything, from chocolate bars to french fries. If the smell whets your appetite, stop by Café Café (2779-9851; mains US$3-5; 6am-7pm) in Parrita, in a yellow corner building about 100m north of the river, for a surprisingly good selection of pastries, wraps, pizzas, sandwiches and coffee drinks.

While you’re rolling through the area, a glimpse of the day-to-day maintenance of the palms is fascinating. To keep them free of insects, workers clear growth on the forest floor and apply poison to the trunks. To encourage fruit growth and provide easy access to the pod the fronds are regularly clipped. Pods are then transported to
processing plants, where the fruits are separated and pressed. Huge big-rigs full of fruit come flying down this relatively poor stretch of the Costanera Sur – be careful on the road out there!

Parrita is about 40km south of Jacó, and can be reached on any bus heading south from there. Just south of the Río Parrita is the signed turnoff for Playa Palo Seco (p376). After Parrita, the coastal road dips inland through more palm-oil plantations on the way to Quepos.

**PARQUE NACIONAL MANUEL ANTONIO & AROUND**

As visitors find themselves along this small outcrop of land that juts into the Pacific, the air becomes heavy with humidity, scented with thick vegetation and alive with the call of birds and monkeys, making it suddenly apparent that this is the tropics. The reason to come here is the stunning Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio, one of the most picturesque bits of tropical coast in Costa Rica.

If you get bored of cooing at the baby monkeys that scurry in the canopy and scanning for birds and sloths, the turquoise waves and perfect sand provide endless entertainment. However, there's no pretending that Manuel Antonio is anyone's secret (despite being the smallest of Costa Rica's national parks, it's also one of the most popular.) See Tours, p375 for more information.

Little Quepos, the once sleepy fishing and banana village on the park's perimeter, has ballooned with this tourism-based economy (although it is, admirably, clinging to its roots despite ongoing socioeconomic transformation), and the road leading from Quepos to the park is overdeveloped. However, the rainforested hills sweeping down to the sea and the blissful beaches make the park a stunning destination worthy of the tourist hype.

Note that, for purposes of clarity, we've divided our coverage into four sections: Quepos proper (the area's only proper small city), the road from Quepos to Manuel Antonio, the tiny Manuel Antonio Village and the national park itself.

**Quepos**

Located just 7km from the entrance to Manuel Antonio, the small, busy town of Quepos serves as the gateway to the national park, as well as a convenient port of call for travelers in need of goods and services. Although the Manuel Antonio area was rapidly and irreversibly transformed following the ecotourism boom, Quepos has largely retained an authentic Tico feel, particularly when you get out of the middle of town. Exuding an ineffable charm absent from so much of the central Pacific, Quepos still has glimmers of traditional Latin America, even while being a heavily traveled stop on the tourist-packed gringo trail.

While most visitors to the Manuel Antonio area prefer to stay outside Quepos, accommodations are generally cheaper and better in town, though you will need to organize transportation to both the national park and the beaches. Quepos can be an appealing place to stay, especially since it's home to a burgeoning restaurant scene that belies its small size, as well as one of the country's best hostels. Quepos is also gridded with easy-to-walk streets, which provide the opportunity to interact with the friendly locals, who have thus far weathered the storm of change with cheerfulness and optimism.

**History**

The town's name was derived from the indigenous Quepoa, a subgroup of the Brunka (Boruca), who inhabited the area at the time of the Spanish conquest. As with many indigenous populations across the region, the Quepoa were quickly decimated by newly introduced European diseases. By the end of the 19th century no pure-blooded Quepoa were left, and the area proceeded to be colonized by farmers from the highlands.

Quepos first came to prominence as a banana-exporting port in the early 20th century, though a huge bout of banana blight in the mid-20th century obliterated the industry. African oil palms, which currently stretch toward the horizon in dizzying rows around Quepos, soon replaced bananas as the major local crop, though unfortunately they generated a lot less employment for the locals.

The future, on the other hand, is looking bright for locals, as foreign visitors are
coming to the Manuel Antonio area by the boatload, and more people means more jobs in the area’s rapidly expanding tourism industry. The opening of the Marina Pez Vela may also have profound effects on this humble town, though questions of sustainability and the need for balanced growth continue to be fiercely debated in the local media.

**Activities**

**Titi Canopy Tours**

(7277-3130; www.titicanopytour.com; Costanera Sur; daytime/nighttime tours US$65/80; tours 7:30am, 11am & 2:30pm) Offering zip-lining adventures during the day and night, this outfit has friendly, professional guides and a convenient location just outside of central Quepos (150m south of the hospital). Tour rates include drinks, snacks and local transportation; group discounts are available.

**H2O Adventures**

(rios.tropicales; 7277-4092; www.h2ocr.com) The venerable Costa Rican rafting company Ríos Tropicales has a franchise in Quepos called H2O Adventures. Rates for Class II to IV rapids start at US$67 in low season. In summer they are US$82.
Diving
The dive sites are still being developed in the Quepos and Manuel Antonio area, though the following operator has been recommended by readers. The dive sites are away from the contaminated beaches, so water pollution is not a problem when diving.

Oceans Unlimited
(2777-3171; www.scubadivingcostarica.com; 2-tank dive US$98) This shop takes its diving very seriously, and runs most of its excursions out to Isla Larga and Isla del Caño, which is south in Bahía Drake (connected via a two-hour bus trip). It also has a range of specialized PADI certifications, and regular environmental-awareness projects that make it stand out from the pack. It’s located 400m up the road to Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio.

Sportfishing
Sportfishing is big here, and offshore ventures are said to be best from December to April, when sailfish are being hooked. By and large this is a high-dollar activity and you can expect to pay upwards of US$1000 to hire a boat for the day. If you want to shop around a bit, visit the office of Marina Pez Vela (2774-9000; www.marinapezvela.com), 500m south of the town center, which can connect you with captains of boats best suited to your needs.

Quepos Sailfishing Charters
(2777-2025, toll free in USA 800-603-0015; www.queposfishing.com) This Quepos-based outfitter gets good reviews from travelers and offers charters on a fleet of variously sized boats. Rates vary significantly depending on season, number of people and size of boat. It also offers packages that include accommodations and transfers.

Tours
There are numerous reputable tour operators in the Quepos area, but the scene can be a bit tricky because of the abundance of third-party booking agents who work on commission. The best way to arrange a tour is through your hotel or hostel. Travelers also give glowing reviews of tours booked out of foreign-language bookstore Jaime Peligro (p378).

Sleeping
Staying in Quepos offers a cheaper alternative to the sky-high prices at many lodges on the road to Manuel Antonio. It can also be more convenient, as all the banks, supermarkets and bus stops are in Quepos. Still, those who save a bit here on a room may have to spend it on taxi rides to the park. Reservations are recommended during high-season weekends and are necessary during Easter and the week between Christmas and New Year’s Eve.

Wide Mouth Frog Backpackers
(2777-2798; www.widemouthfrog.org; dm US$12, r with/without bathroom US$50/40) Friendly, secure and ideally outfitted for travelers of all stripes – this backpacker outpost is one of the best hostels in the country. Brightly tiled rooms and dorms with clean shared bathrooms are situated around the pool, which is fenced for children’s safety but also attractively landscaped. The communal kitchen is fully equipped and has a spacious, open-air dining area.

Hotel Sirena
(2777-0572; www.lasirenahotel.com; s/d/tr incl breakfast from US$82/94/105) This intimate boutique hotel is a welcome and warm addition to the Quepos scene, and is easily the best midrange option in town. The Sirena’s whitewashed walls, blue trim adventure-travel shop offers reputable river rafting, sea kayaking, horseback riding, mangrove tours and dolphin-watching excursions. It’s no fly-by-night operation – it’s been around since 1989 – and has a proven commitment to ecotourism principles.
and aromatherapy offer a slice of breezy Mediterranean serenity. In their rooms, guests enjoy crisp white linens, air-conditioning, cable TV and a minifridge. Rooms upstairs get much better light.

**Best Western Hotel Kamuk**
(2777-0379; www.kamuk.co.cr; r incl breakfast from US$80-147; P ⚪ ⚪ ⚪ ⚪ ) While the Best Western standard ensures professional service, the Hotel Kamuk is all Costa Rican, from the bones of its historic building to the colonial decorative elements. Rooms are on the small side but have all of the modern conveniences, as well as a pool and open-air restaurant overlooking the waterfront. Check the internet for discounts.

**Hotel Villa Romántica**
(2777-0037; www.villaromantica.com; s/d incl breakfast from US$77/111; P ⚪ ⚪ ⚪ ⚪ ⚪ ) A short walk southeast from the town center brings you to this peaceful garden oasis, which is overflowing with verdant greens and tropical flowers; rooms are bright and open. If you're looking for a compromise between the convenience of staying in Quepos and the intimate proximity to nature found in Manuel Antonio, this is an excellent choice.

**Eating**

One benefit of staying in Quepos proper is the accessibility of a wide range of dining opportunities – from cheap local sodas to the best sushi on the central Pacific coast – all within a short stroll. The **mercado central** (Central Market; ⌚ hours vary) is packed with produce vendors and good sodas too numerous to list, so follow your nose and the locals. Self-caterers should also check out the **farmers market** (ᒌ 4pm Fri-noon Sat) near the waterfront, where you can buy directly from farmers, fisherfolk, bakers and other food producers.

**Soda Come Bien**
(2777-2550; mains US$3-6; ⌚ 6am-5pm Mon-sat,.to.11am sun) The daily rotation of delicious cafeteria options might include fish in tomato sauce, *olla de carne* (beef soup with rice) or chicken soup, but everything is fresh, the ladies behind the counter are friendly and the burly portions are a dream come true for hungry shoestringers. Or, pick up a fresh *empanada* (savory turnover) before or after a long bus ride.

**Super Mas**
(2777-1162; ⌚ 8am-8pm Mon-sat,.to.1pm sun; ⚪ ) Don't mistake this market for your average supermarket: the wondrous aisles of Super Mas have an astonishing array of imported goods, fresh bread and liquor.

**Tropical Sushi**
(2777-1710; meals US$10-27, all-you-can-eat sushi US$26; ⌚ 4-10:30pm) This is without doubt the best sushi on the central Pacific coast. Chef Fuji (originally from Japan, and a resident of Costa Rica for 15 years) serves up delicious sushi and other authentic Japanese cuisine in this cozy little spot. As he's the only one manning the kitchen, expect to have a leisurely dining experience.

Although the sushi is a sure bet, the other menu offerings are also worth a try, such as the *donburi* (pork or chicken and egg over rice), steamed dumplings and tempura.
Gran Inca  
**PERUVIAN $**
(2777-4347; mains US$7-15; 5-10pm Tue-Sun)  
The no-frills look of this Peruvian-run spot belies the excellent food you'll find here. The menu encompasses a variety of traditional dishes, ranging from Peruvian-style ceviche to steak sautéed with peppers and onions. While the dishes might sound similar to Tico fare found everywhere, the flavors are lively and distinctive, and a welcome change of pace.

Escalofrío  
**ITALIAN $**
(2777-1902; gelato $2, mains US$9-20; 2:30-10:30pm Tue-Sun; )  
Gelato lovers should make a point of stopping here, to choose from more than 20 flavors of the heavenly stuff. This spacious alfresco restaurant may also be the only game in town on Sunday night during slow season, a godsend especially if you enjoy wood-fired pizza, pasta and gnocchi. Across the street, its deli makes excellent sandwiches with imported Italian meats and cheeses, perfect for toting on excursions to Manuel Antonio.

Monchados  
**CARIBBEAN $**
(2777-1972; dishes US$8-15; 5pm-midnight)  
Although the food is inconsistent, this counts as a Quepos institution among gringos. The long-standing Mex-Carib spot offers traditional Limón-style dishes and Mexican standards. Food here is eclectic, innovative and never bland, a theme that’s also reflected in the vibrant decorations and fairly regular live music.

**Drinking & Nightlife**

Nightlife in Quepos has a good blend of locals and travelers, and it’s cheaper than anything you’ll find in the Manuel Antonio area. If you are looking for something a bit more sophisticated, however, it’s easy enough to jump in a taxi. Keep in mind that the action won’t start warming up until around 10pm.

**Café Milagro**  
**CAFÉ**
(2777-1707; www.cafemilagro.com; drinks US$3-6; 7am-5pm Mon-Sat)  
Café Milagro sources its coffee beans from all over Costa Rica and produces a variety of estate, single-origin and blended roasts to suit any coffee fiend’s palate. Aside from the glorious caffeine buzz, you can feel good about purchasing its bagged beans, as it donates 1% of its profits to environmental causes via international nonprofit 1% for the Planet.

**Dos Locos**  
**BAR**
(2777-1526; 7am-11pm Mon-Sat, 11am-10pm Sun)  
This popular Mexican restaurant is the regular watering hole for the local expat community, and serves as a venue for the occasional live band. Opening onto the central cross streets of town, it’s fun for people-watching (and cheap Imperials). There’s an English-language trivia night every Thursday. Added bonus: breakfast is served here all day.

**El Gran Escape**  
**BAR**
(2777-0395; 6am-11pm)  
This longstanding pub, formerly located in central Quepos, had moved to a swish new location at Marina Pez Vela at the time of writing. Sportsfishers can disembark to find cold beers and pub grub awaiting them right at the marina (a short taxi ride from town).

**Cuban Republik Disco Lounge**  
**CLUB**
(8345-9922; cover US$4; 9pm-3am Thu-Sun)  
Cuban Republik hosts the most reliable party in central Quepos, and it has some kind of drink special nearly every night if

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**QUEPOS FOR CHILDREN**

The entire Quepos and Manuel Antonio area is one of Costa Rica’s leading family-friendly destinations. With beaches and rainforest in close proximity – not to mention a healthy dose of charismatic wildlife – the region can enchant young minds regardless of their attention spans.

You’ll find that most families with children congregate in the hotels and resorts lining the Quepos–Manuel Antonio road, but this is more due to accommodations density than other factors. In fact, the appeal of Quepos for children is that there is plenty to explore beyond the hotel walls, which can give parents a bit of fresh air and breathing room.

All in all, the town’s excellent restaurant scene is kid-friendly, and the local Ticos are very welcoming to little ones. And finally, while you’re not exactly on the beach or up in the forest, it’s just a short and uneventful ride out to Manuel Antonio if the kids need an idyllic day on the beach.
you arrive early (before 10:30pm or 11pm). Later, the volume gets loud, the drinks get more pricey and things tend to careen out of control. Women get in for free before 11pm on Friday night.

**Musik Club**
(☎ 2777-7060; ☄ 4pm-2am Mon-Sat) The decor of this futuristically themed place (white plastic furniture and lasers) is a bit heavy-handed, but the centrally located club has theme nights, requisite (dangerously cheap) ladies’ specials and a molar-rattling sound system.

**Casino**
(♣ slot machines 11am-6pm, all games 6pm-4am)
If you feel like putting your cash on the line, there's a small but suitable casino at the Best Western Hotel Kamuk, but the scene gets a bit seedy.

### Orientation
Downtown Quepos is a small checkerboard of dusty streets that are lined with a mix of local- and tourist-oriented shops, businesses, markets, restaurants and cafes. The town loses its well-ordered shape as it expands outward, but the sprawl is kept relatively in check by the mountains to the east and the water to the west.

Southeast of the town center is the Marina Pez Vela, whose marine slips opened to much fanfare in 2010. Though the global economic crisis slowed development somewhat, the next phase of shops and restaurants debuted in late 2013, with longtime Quepos bar El Gran Escape relocating to a shiny new spot in the marina’s commercial hub.

### Information
Look out for Quepolandia, a free English-language monthly magazine that can be found at many of the town’s businesses. Both Banco de San José and Coopealianza have 24-hour ATMs on the Cirrus and Plus systems. Other banks will all change US dollars and traveler’s checks.

The best source of books for travelers within miles is Jaime Peligro (☎ 2777-7106; www.queposbooks.com; ☄ 9:30am-5:30pm Mon-Sat), which has a complete selection of local guides, literature in a number of languages and tons of local information.

### Dangers & Annoyances
As in other well-traveled parts of Costa Rica, theft is a problem, and the usual common-sense precautions apply: lock valuables in a hotel safe and never leave anything in a car.

When leaving bars late at night, walk in a group or take a taxi. Women should keep in mind that the town’s bars attract rowdy crowds of plantation workers on weekends.

Note that the beaches in Quepos are polluted and not recommended for swimming. Go over the hill to Manuel Antonio instead, where some of the dreamiest waters in Costa Rica await.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR
Both NatureAir (www.natureair.com) and Sansa (www.sansa.com) service Quepos. Prices vary according to season and availability, though you can expect around US$75 for a flight from San José or Liberia. Flights are packed in the high season, so book (and pay) for your ticket well ahead of time and reconfirm often. The airport is 5km out of town, and taxis make the trip for a few thousand colones (do not pay more than US$8), depending on traffic.

#### BUS
All buses arrive at and depart from the busy, chaotic main terminal in the center of town. If you’re coming and going in the high season, buy tickets for San José in advance at the Transportes Morales ticket office (☎ 2777-0263; ☄ 7-11am & 1-5pm Mon-Sat, 7am-1pm Sun) at the bus terminal; colectivo fares (not listed) to San José are slightly cheaper and take two hours longer.

- **Jacó** US$2.80, 1½ hours, 10 departures daily from 4:30am to 5:30pm.
- **Puntarenas** US$3.90, three hours, 10 departures daily from 4:30am to 5:30pm.
- **San Isidro de El General, via Dominical** US$4, three hours, departs 5:30am, 11:30am and 3:30pm.
- **San José (Tracopa)** US$9, three hours, departs 4am, 6am, 7:30am, 9:30am, noon, 1pm, 2:30pm and 5pm.
- **Uvita, via Dominical** US$8, two hours, departs 6:30am, 9:30am and 5:30pm.

### Getting Around

#### BUS
Buses between Quepos and Manuel Antonio (US$0.60) depart roughly every 30 minutes from the main terminal between 7am and 7pm, and less frequently after 7:30pm. The last bus departs Manuel Antonio at 10pm. There are more frequent buses in the dry season.

#### CAR
A number of American car-rental companies operate in Quepos; reserve ahead and reconfirm to guarantee availability.

**Budget** (☎ 2774-0140; www.budget.co.cr; Quepos airport; ☄ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat, to 4pm Sun)
X MARKS THE SPOT

Locals have long believed that a treasure worth billions and billions of dollars lies somewhere in the Quepos and Manuel Antonio area, waiting to be discovered. The legend was popularized by English pirate John Clipperton, who befriended the coastal Quepos during his years of sailing to and from the South Pacific. Clipperton’s belief stemmed from a rumor that in 1670 a number of Spanish ships laden with treasure escaped from Panama City moments before it was burned to the ground by Captain Henry Morgan. Since the ships were probably off-loaded quickly to avoid being raided at sea, a likely destination was the San Bernadino de Quepos Mission, which had strong loyalty to the Spanish crown.

John Clipperton died in 1722 without ever discovering the legendary treasure, and the mission closed permanently in 1746, as most of the Quepos had succumbed to European diseases. Although the ruins of the mission were discovered in 1974, they were virtually destroyed and had long since been looted. However, if the treasure was indeed as large as it’s described in lore, it is possible that a few gold doubloons could still be lying somewhere, waiting to be unearthed.

TAXI

Collectivos taxis between Quepos and Manuel Antonio will usually pick up extra passengers for a few dollars. A private taxi will cost a few thousand colones. Call Quepos Taxi (2777-0425) or catch one at the taxi stand south of the market. The trip between Quepos and the park should cost about US$15. At night, there is an abundance of private taxis; have the front desk of your hotel call one.

Quepos to Manuel Antonio

From the Quepos waterfront, the road swings inland for 7km before reaching the beaches of Manuel Antonio Village and the entrance to the national park. This route passes over a number of hills awash with picturesque views of forested slopes leading down to the palm-fringed coastline.

This area is home to some of Costa Rica’s finest hotels and restaurants, though navigating the area without a car is challenging. While shoestringers and budget travelers are catered for, this is one part of the country where those with deep pockets can bed down and dine out in the lap of luxury.

Note that the road to Manuel Antonio is steep, winding and very narrow. Worse, local bus drivers love to careen through at high velocities, and there are almost no places to pull over in the event of an emergency. At all times, you should exercise caution and drive and walk with care, especially at night. Be particularly aware of pedestrians.

Sights & Activities

Manuel Antonio Nature Park & Wildlife Refuge

Formerly known as Fincas Naturales, this private rainforest preserve and butterfly garden breeds about three dozen species of butterfly – a delicate population compared to the menagerie of lizards, reptiles and frogs that inspire gleefully grossed-out squeals from the little ones. A jungle night tour (US$39 for adults, US$29 for children) showcases the colorful local frogs and their songs.

Amigos del Río

Pack all of your canopy-tour jungle fantasies into one day on Amigos del Ríos’ ‘10-in-One Adventure’, featuring zip lining, a Tarzan swing, rappelling down a waterfall and more. The seven-hour adventure tour includes a free transfer from the Quepos and Manuel Antonio area as well as breakfast and lunch.

Cala Spa

If you’re sunburned and sore from exploring Manuel Antonio – even better if you’re not – the Cala Spa offers aloe body wraps, citrus salt scrubs and various types of massage to restore body and spirit. Open daily by appointment only.
Central Pacific Coast
Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio & Around

Central Pacific Coast Signs & Activities

Quepos to Manuel Antonio

See Quepos Map (p374)
Manuel Antonio Area

Sights
1 La Playita..................B5
2 Manuel Antonio Nature Park &
  Wildlife Refuge ..........C4
3 Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio D4
4 Playa Espadilla ..........B5
5 Turtle Trap..................D7

Activities, Courses & Tours
6 Amigos del Rio ...........B2
    Cala Spa ..................(see 19)
7 Manuel Antonio Surf School B1
8 Marina Pez Vela ..........A1
9 Oceans Unlimited .........B1

Sleeping
10 Arenas del Mar ...........A4
11 Babaloo Inn ...............C3
12 Backpackers Manuel Antonio C3
13 Backpackers Paradise Costa
    Linda .......................C5
14 Hotel Casitas Eclipse ...C4
15 Hotel Costa Verde .......C5
16 Hotel La Mariposa .......B4
17 Hotel Mono Azul ..........B2
18 Hotel Playa & Cabinas Espadilla D5
19 Hotel Sí Como No ......C4
20 Hotel Tres Banderas ....B2

Eating
21 Hotel Villa Roca .........C4
22 La Posada .................D5
23 Makanda by the Sea ....B4
24 Mimo’s Hostel ...........B2
25 Vista Serena Hostel ....C3

Drinking & Nightlife
34 Bar Mogambo ..........C5
35 El Avión ...................A1
36 Ronny’s Place ............B2
37 Salsipuedes ...............B3

Entertainment
38 Liquid Disco Lounge ....C5
39 Sí Como No Cinema ....(see 19)

Manuel Antonio Surf School
SURFING
(MASS; ☎️ 2777-1955, 2777-4842; www.manuelantoniosurfschool.com; group lessons US$65) MASS offers friendly, safe and fun small-group lessons daily, lasting for three hours and with a three-to-one student-instructor ratio. Find its stand about 500m up the Manuel Antonio road south of Quepos.

Sleeping

The Quepos–Manuel Antonio road is heavily skewed towards ultra-top-end hotels, but plenty of noteworthy midrange accommodations and excellent budget hostels are hidden along the way. High-season rates are provided throughout this section, though – as elsewhere in the region – low-season rates can be as much as 40% lower. Reservations are an absolute must for busy weekends and holiday seasons.

Although the sleeping options along the Quepos–Manuel Antonio road are closer to the park than those in Quepos, many of them will still require a taxi or a long walk along the busy road to reach the park.

Vista Serena Hostel
HOSTEL
(🌟; 2777-5162; www.vistaserena.com; incl breakfast dm US$10-16, bungalows without bathroom US$45-60; 📍) In an area that is hopelessly overpriced, it’s a relief to find such a great budget hostel. Perched scenically on a quiet hillside, this memorable spot allows guests to enjoy spectacular ocean sunsets from a hammock-filled terrace and strum the communal guitar. The pick-and-span white-tiled dorms have shared bathrooms, a communal kitchen and a TV lounge.

For those who want a bit more privacy, there are also bungalows and a house that sleeps up to eight. Super-friendly owners Sonia, Conrad and Alex speak fluent English, and are commendable for their efforts in assisting countless travelers. To top it off, a short trail hike through local farmland leads to a remote wilderness beach.

Backpackers Manuel Antonio
HOSTEL
(🌟; 2777-2507; www.backpackersmanuelantonio.com; dm/d incl breakfast US$12/35; 📍) This locally owned hostel has a very sociable vibe and a good location – relatively near the entrance of the park and walking...
distance from a good grocery store and bakery. The dorms are clean and secure and there’s a grill and pool out back. Larger rooms, with a bunk and double bed, are good for families.

★ Hotel Mono Azul  
HOTEL $$  
(2777-2572; www.monoazul.com; r US$55-85, ste from US$115, child under 12yr free; P *) The Mono Azul represents terrific value as well as being a great family option – nestled in a tropical garden and decorated throughout in a rainforest theme, rooms are arranged around three pools and a game room. Ten percent of hotel receipts are donated to Kids Saving the Rainforest (KSTR), founded here by two local schoolchildren in 1999. The girls were concerned about the endangered mono tití (Central American squirrel monkey). Many of these adorable critters were run over on the narrow road to the national park or electrocuted on overhanging electrical cables, so KSTR purchased and erected monkey ‘bridges’ across the road (you can see them, often in use, as you head to the park). All proceeds from the hotel’s onsite souvenir shop also go directly to KSTR.

Mimo’s Hotel  
HOTEL $$  
(2777-0054; www.mimoshotel.com; d/ste from US$73/119; W) Run by a delightful Italian couple, this whitewashed and wood-trimmed hotel has spacious, clean, terra-cotta-tiled rooms. The property is connected by lovely stone paths, bringing guests to two palm-fringed swimming pools, a glowing Jacuzzi and a restaurant serving Italian-influenced dishes. The owners speak half a dozen languages, and have a wealth of knowledge about Costa Rica.

Hotel Tres Banderas  
HOTEL $$  
(2777-1871; www.hoteltresbanderas.com; d/ste incl breakfast US$90/113; P *) This welcoming roadside inn is owned by a Polish-born US citizen who lives in Costa Rica – hence the very appropriate moniker, tres banderas (three flags). Fourteen doubles and three suites are spacious affairs with imported tiles and local woods and, while some could use a bit of air, all come with jungle-facing terraces furnished with leather rocking chairs. Dinner is often prepared on an outdoor grill and guests congregate to dine together around the deep central pool, which lends a communal flourish to the property.

Babaloo Inn  
HOTEL $  
(2777-3461; www.babalooinn.com; d/ste from US$73/119; P W) Standard rooms at the Babaloo Inn come with private balcony overlooking a luscious garden. However, we’re partial to the larger king rooms featuring dramatic ocean views, comfortable sitting area, oversized beds and shower, small kitchenette and enough space for a family of four. All rooms come with fully stocked minibar and DVD player, perfect for a rainy day.

Makanda by the Sea  
VILLA $$  
(2777-0442; www.makanda.com; studios/villas incl breakfast from US$299/452; P W) Comprising just six villas and five studios, Makanda has an unmatched air of intimacy and complete privacy. Villa 1 (the largest) will take your breath away – one entire wall is open to the rainforest and the ocean. The other villas and studios are air-conditioned and enclosed, though they draw upon the same minimalistic, Eastern-infused design schemes.

QUEPOS TO MANUEL ANTONIO FOR CHILDREN

The Quepos to Manuel Antonio stretch of road is home to the lion’s share of accommodations and restaurants in these parts, and you will see plenty of vacationing families wherever you go. But it’s worth pointing out that many of the high-end boutique hotels and upscale eateries are not always very welcoming to babies and young children. Assuming, however, that you avoid anything with obvious over-the-top glitz and glamour, your children will be well catered for at many of the establishments covered in this section.

A word of caution: driver visibility is limited along parts of the narrow, steep and winding road, particularly during low-light and foul-weather conditions. If you find yourself walking along the road (there is no shoulder), keep a close eye on your children at all times, and warn them to be careful of passing cars. Likewise, always drive carefully, and return the favor by keeping an eye out for pedestrians.
The grounds are also home to a beautiful infinity pool and Jacuzzi, both offering superb views out to sea, as well as a series of flawless Japanese gardens in which you can stroll and reflect on the beauty of your surroundings. And, if you’re still not impressed, you can access a private beach by taking the 552 steps down the side of the mountain – bliss! Note that guests must be 16 or older.

**Hotel Costa Verde**  
**HOTEL $$$$**  
(2777-0584; www.costaverde.com; efficiency units/studios from US$130/168, Boeing 727 fuselage home US$565; P @ @ @ @) The collection of comfortable rooms and studios at Costa Verde occupy a verdant setting frequented by troops of monkeys. Efficiency units incorporating teak trim and furnishings are attractively tiled and face the encroaching forest, while more expensive studios have full ocean views. But the most coveted accommodation is the airplane-tree-house hybrid made out of a decommissioned Boeing 727 fuselage.

The 727, which juts out of the jungle in the most surreal way, has two bedrooms with three queen-sized beds, two bathrooms, kitchenette and private terrace. The owners of Costa Verde are also the masterminds behind several eateries along the road to Manuel Antonio, including El Avión (p385), which was also fashioned from a retired fuselage.

**Arenas del Mar**  
**BOUTIQUE HOTEL $$$$**  
(2777-2777; www.arenasdelmar.com; r incl breakfast US$350-825; @ @ @ @) This visually arresting hotel and resort complex is consistently shortlisted among Costa Rica’s finest upscale hotels. Despite the extent and breadth of the grounds, there are only 40 rooms, which ensures an unmatched degree of personal service and privacy. It has won numerous ecotourism awards since its establishment and was designed to incorporate the beauty of the natural landscape.

In short, the overall effect is breathtaking, especially when you’re staring down the coastline from the lofty heights of your private open-air Jacuzzi.

**Hotel Sí Como No**  
**HOTEL $$**  
(2777-0355; www.sicomonacom; r US$243-475, ste US$531; P @ @ @ @) This internationally acclaimed hotel was the area’s first luxury accommodations option, so unsurprisingly it snatched up the best view of the coastline. Fifty-plus pristine rooms of various sizes are elegantly decorated with hand-carved furniture. This hotel was listed in the book *1000 Places to See Before You Die*, principally for the immaculate gardens and world-class views from every corner.

**Hotel Casitas Eclipse**  
**HOTEL $$$$**  
(2777-0408; www.hotelcasitaseclipse.com; r/ste/casitas from US$158/215/373; @ @ @ @) Casitas Eclipse consists of nine attractive, bright-white houses spread around three swimming pools. The bottom floor of each house is an enormous junior suite, while the upper floor is a standard room with private terrace. These have a separate entrance, but a staircase (with lockable door) combines the two and, voilà, you have a sumptuous casita sleeping five.

**Eating & Drinking**

Many hotels listed previously have good restaurants open to the public. As with sleeping venues, eating and drinking establishments along this stretch are skewed upmarket. Reservations are recommended on weekends and holidays and during the busy dry season.

There are more eating options in the surrounding area in Quepos and Manuel Antonio Village.

**Falafel Bar**  
**MEDITERRANEAN $**  
(2777-4135; mains US$5-9; 11am-7pm) Adding to the diversity of cuisine to be...
found along the road, this new falafel spot dishes up authentic Isareli favorites. You’ll also find plenty of vegetarian options, including couscous, fresh salads, stuffed grape leaves and even French fries for the picky little ones.

Super Joseth SELF-CATERING $$(2777-1095; 7am-10pm; P) Although it’s a godsend for self-caterers, Super Joseth is a grocery stop that’s reflective of its location – a bit pricey, stocked for foreign travelers and very busy. It has a full selection of booze (Campari®), sunblock and upscale picnic goods.

★ Café Milagro CAFE $$$(2777-0794; www.cafemilagro.com; mains US$6-19; 7am-9:30pm; P) With a menu full of vibrant, refreshing delectables – like gazpacho, or salads tossed with mango and chayote squash in passionfruit dressing, or fish tacos with chunky guacamole, or banana-macadamia pancakes – this appealing cafe is worth a stop morning, noon or night. Like its sister cafe in Quepos, it also serves a mean cuppa joe.

Agua Azul INTERNATIONAL $$$(2777-5280; www.cafeaguazul.com; meals US$7-18; 11am-10pm Thu-Tue) Perched on the 2nd floor with uninterrupted ocean views, Agua Azul is a killer lunch spot on this stretch of road – perfect for early-morning park visitors who are heading back to their hotel. The breezy, unpretentious open-air restaurant, renowned for its ‘big-ass burger’, also serves up excellent fajitas, panko-crusted tuna and smoked-trout salad.

Claro Que Sí SEAFOOD $$$(2777-0777; Hotel Sí Como No; meals US$8-20) A casual, family-friendly restaurant that passes on pretension without sacrificing quality, Claro Que Sí proudly serves organic and locally sourced food items that are in line with the philosophy of its parent hotel, Sí Como No. Guilt-free meats and fish are expertly complemented with fresh produce, resulting in flavorful dishes typical of both the Pacific and Caribbean coasts.

Restaurante Barba Roja SEAFOOD $$$(2777-0331; www.barbarojaarestaurant.com; meals US$7-20; 10am-10pm Tue-Sun) A Manuel Antonio area institution, the Barba Roja has morphed into a seafood-and-steak spot with an unexpected but respectable sushi menu. The terrace affords fantastic ocean views, best enjoyed with a local Libertas y La Segua craft brew (pints are US$5) and some edamame (steamed soybeans) as you contemplate your dining options.

Kapi Kapi Restaurant FUSION $$$$(2777-5049; www.restaurantekapikapi.com; meals US$15-40; 4-10pm) While there is some stiff competition for the title of best restaurant in the area, this Californian creation certainly raises the bar on both quality and class. The menu at Kapi Kapi (kapi kapi is a traditional greeting of the indigenous Maleku people) spans the globe from America to Asia. Pan-Asian-style seafood features prominently, brought to life with rich continental-inspired sauces.

South American wines and Costa Rican coffees complete this globetrotting culinary extravaganza. True to its name, Kapi Kapi welcomes diners with soft lights, earthy tones and soothing natural decor, which perfectly frame the dense forest lying just beyond the perimeter.

La Luna INTERNATIONAL $$$$(2777-9797; mains US$8-55; 7am-11pm; P) Unpretentious, friendly and first rate, La Luna makes a lovely spot for a special-occasion dinner, with a spectacular backdrop of jungle and ocean. An international menu offers everything from pizza to lobster tails, with a Tico-style twist – such as grouper baked en papillote, with plantain purée and coconut milk. Or enjoy the inexpensive tapas menu from 4pm to 6pm.

Salsipuedes BAR $$$(2777-5019; tapas US$6-8; 7am-10pm Wed-Mon) With fantastic views at sunset, Salsipuedes (‘leave if you can’) is a great place for tapas and beer – or for the more adventurous, cocktails made with guaro (a local firewater made with sugarcane). Quesadillas, ceviche, and white bean and chicken stew are some of the tasty tapas on offer.

Ronny’s Place BAR $$$(2777-5120; www.ronnyplace.com; mains US$6-14; noon-10pm) The insane views at Ronny’s Place, of two pristine bays and jungle on all sides, make it worth a detour (just for a drink; don’t bother eating here). While plenty of places along this stretch of road boast similar views, the off-the-beaten-path location makes it feel like a secret find. Look for the well-marked dirt road off the main drag.
El Avión
(2777-3378; mains US$6-14; 📍) This unforgettable bar-restaurant was constructed from a 1954 Fairchild C-123. Allegedly, the plane was purchased by the US government in the '80s for the Nicaraguan Contras, but it never made it out of its hangar in San José because of the Iran-Contra scandal that embroiled Oliver North and his cohorts. (The plane is lovingly referred to as ‘Ollie’s Folly’.)

In 2000 the enterprising owners of El Avión purchased it for the surprisingly reasonable sum of US$3000 and proceeded to cart it piece by piece to Manuel Antonio. It now sits on the side of the main road, where it looks as if it had crash-landed into the side of the hill. It’s a great spot for a beer, guacamole and a Pacific sunset, and in the evenings during the dry season there are regular live-music performances.

Entertainment
Sí Como No Cinema
(2777-0777; www.sicomono.com; Hotel Sí Como No; 🕒8:30pm) This 45-seat theater shows a fun rotation of popular American movies. If you spend US$10 at the hotel’s restaurant or bar, admission is free.

Getting There & Away
A good number of visitors who stay in this area arrive by private or rented car. The public bus from Quepos will let you off anywhere along the road.

GAY GUIDE TO MANUEL ANTONIO
For jet-setting gay and lesbian travelers the world over, Manuel Antonio has long been regarded as a dream destination. Homosexuality has been decriminalized in Costa Rica since the 1970s – a rarity in all-too-often machismo-fueled, conservative Central America – and a well-established gay scene blossomed in Manuel Antonio soon after. Gay and lesbian travelers will find that it’s unlike any other destination in the country.

It’s not hard to understand why Manuel Antonio first started attracting gay travelers. Not only is the area stunningly beautiful but also it’s long attracted liberal-minded individuals. There is a burgeoning artist community and a sophisticated restaurant scene.

Sights & Activities
During daylight hours, the epicenter of gay Manuel Antonio is the famous La Playita, a beach with a long history of nude sunbathing for gay men. Alas, the days when you could sun in the buff are gone, but La Playita is still widely regarded as a playful pick-up scene for gay men.

Sleeping
A significant number of hotels in the Manuel Antonio area advertise themselves as being gay-friendly and even the ones that don’t are unlikely to discriminate. If you want to enjoy the freedom and peace of mind that comes with staying at exclusively gay accommodations, book a room at the gay-owned and -operated Hotel Villa Roca (2777-1349; www.villaroca.com; d/apt incl breakfast from US$113/192; ☑️, a collection of brightly whitewashed rooms and apartments situated around a central pool and sundeck. The expansive view from the pool takes in an uninterrupted view of the water and rocky offshore islands. This is also the place to catch incredible sunsets.

Eating & Drinking
The Manuel Antonio area has always been proud to host one of the most sophisticated and cosmopolitan restaurant scenes on the central Pacific coast. A few venues have particularly good gay-oriented events. Bar Mogambo (2777-6310; 🕶️4pm-midnight Tue-Sun) is a friendly spot with an excellent happy hour, and Liquid (2777-5158; ☕️9pm-3am Tue-Sun), a club near the bottom of the hill, is a good place for young gay guys to party. After enough deceptively strong, colorful cocktails the dance floor is a blast. It has theme parties every night of the week and a raucous annual ‘Mr Liquid’ competition.
1. Crested caracara  
2. Parque Nacional Marino Ballena
3. Scarlet macaw  
4. Punta Uvita (‘Whale Tail’), Parque Nacional Marino Ballena
Reserves of the Central Pacific Coast

Costa Rica’s best road trip follows the Costanera Sur, along a string of fantastic natural parks. With wet and dry tropical forests and long beaches, these parks are alive with brightly colored birds, curious monkeys and a veritable army of iguanas – all of which show off the country’s stunning biodiversity.

Rancho La Merced National Wildlife Refuge
Surrounding Parque Nacional Marino Ballena on the southern part of the central Pacific coast, this former cattle ranch (p402) has excellent horse trails, primary and secondary forest and miles of mangrove channels.

Parque Nacional Marino Ballena
It’s appropriate that this lovely, relatively quiet national park (p403) is shaped like a whale’s tail; from the beaches it’s possible to spot the migrating giants as they swim near shore.

Hacienda Barú National Wildlife Refuge
Excellent trails and naturalist-led hikes make this the best bird-watching spot on the central Pacific coast (p395). And just in case spotting rare tropical birds doesn’t thrill you, there’s also a zip line.

Catarata Manantial de Agua Viva
With macaws overhead, this picture-perfect jungle waterfall (p359) drops 183m from one swimmable pool to the next. It’s best during the rainy season, when the flows are full.
Central Pacific Coast  Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio & Around

Central Pacific Coast  Sights & Activities

Manuel Antonio Village

As you travel the road between Quepos and Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio, the din from roaring buses, packs of tourists and locals hunting foreign dollars becomes increasingly loud, reaching its somewhat chaotic climax at Manuel Antonio Village, whose beer advertisements and barkers have inched right up to the gates of the park. Hordes descend on this tiny oceanside village at the entrance to one of the country’s most celebrated tourist destinations. Don’t show up all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, expecting deserted beaches and untouched tropical paradise. Higher primates tend to be the most frequently sighted species, especially during the congested dry season, when tour groups arrive en masse.

While it can be difficult at times to have a quiet moment to collect your thoughts, the environs here really do look as glossy and polished as the travel brochures suggest. And, when troops of monkeys climb down from the forest canopy to the tropical sands, you can get up close and personal with some marvelous wildlife. The moral is to arrive in Manuel Antonio with some realistic expectations, though you’re likely going to have a memorable visit.

Sights & Activities

Body boards and kayaks can be rented all along the beach at Playa Espadilla. Whitewater rafting and sea kayaking are also popular in this area. Don’t worry about finding a place to rent equipment; they’ll find you. The possibility of good snorkeling in the area is nearly nonexistent due to crowded waters and low visibility.

Also, don’t be fooled – you do not need to pay to use the beaches, as they’re outside the park.

Playa Espadilla

There’s a good beach, Playa Espadilla, near the entrance to the Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio, though you need to be wary of rip currents. There are some lifeguards working at this beach, though not at the other beaches in the area. For years Playa Espadilla was one of Costa Rica’s only nude beaches, but the nearby construction of a big hotel seems to have ended that tradition, and those who bathe in the buff have been known to suffer police harassment.

La Playita

At the far western end of Playa Espadilla, beyond a rocky headland (wear sandals), is one of Costa Rica’s most famous gay beaches and a particular draw for young men. The beach is inaccessible one hour before and after the high tide, so time your walk well.

Sleeping & Eating

The village of Manuel Antonio is the closest base for exploring the national park, though the selection of eating and sleeping options is not as varied as in Quepos proper or the Quepos to Manuel Antonio stretch of road. It’s also completely overrun with foreigners.

Backpackers Paradise Costa Linda  Hostel$

(2777-0304; www.costalindabackpackers.com; r per person from US$12; Calling this backpacker pad a paradise is most definitely a stretch, but you can’t really beat the price when you can amble out to the beach or the national park in just a few minutes. While the staff is a bit harried, and the shared bathrooms could be cleaner, the food is good and the place eminently budget-friendly.

Hotel Playa & Cabinas Espadilla  Hotel $$$

(2777-0903; www.espadilla.com; cabins/r from US$120/189; Two favorably located properties in one: the hotel is centered on a large swimming pool and tennis courts, and the more affordable cabinas across the road are slightly closer to the beach. While the accommodations are fairly bland for the price, compared to swisher properties up the road, you do have extremely convenient access to park and playa from here.

La Posada  Bungalow $$$

(2777-1446; www.laposadajungle.com; bungalows incl breakfast US$141-266; These private jungle bungalows each sleep four to six guests, and all come equipped with kitchenette, TV with DVD player, safe and terrace. But the real beauty of staying here is the location right next to the park – from your bungalow you’ll see squirrel monkeys and other wildlife crisscrossing the trees and rooftops.
MONKEY BUSINESS
There are a number of stands on the beach that cater to hungry tourists, though everything is exuberantly overpriced and of dubious quality. Plus, all the food scraps have negatively impacted the monkey population. Before you offer a monkey your scraps, consider the following risks to their health:
- Monkeys are susceptible to bacteria transmitted from human hands.
- Irregular feeding will lead to aggressive behavior as well as create a dangerous dependency (picnickers in Manuel Antonio suffer downright intimidating mobs of them sometimes).
- Bananas are not their preferred food, and can cause serious digestive problems.
- Increased exposure to humans facilitates illegal poaching as well as attacks from dogs.

It should go without saying: don’t feed the monkeys. And, if you do happen to come across someone doing so, take the initiative and ask them politely to stop.

Hotel Vela Bar & Restaurant  
SEAFOOD $  
(2777-0413; www.velabar.com; meals US$6-13, s/d US$49/64; P) Hotel Vela is primarily known for its justifiably famous thatched-roof bar and restaurant, which serves up some of the freshest seafood in the area. However, the attractive little hotel is also surprisingly affordable – rooms here are fairly basic, but it’s hard to beat the price, considering that you can stroll over to the park entrance in two minutes.

Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio
A place of swaying palms and playful monkeys, sparkling blue water and riotous tropical birds, Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio (2777-0644; park entrance US$16, parking US$3; 7am-4pm Tue-Sun) embodies Costa Rica’s postcard charms. It was declared a national park in 1972, preserving it (with just minutes to spare) from being bulldozed and razed to make room for a coastal development project.

Although Manuel Antonio was enlarged to its present-day size of 19.83 sq km in 2000, it is still the country’s smallest national park. Space remains at a premium, and as this is one of Central America’s top tourist destinations, you're going to have to break free from the camera-clicking tour groups and actively seek out your own idyllic spot of sand.

That said, Manuel Antonio is absolutely stunning, and on a good day, at the right time, it’s easy to convince yourself that you’ve died and gone to a coconut-filled paradise. The park’s clearly marked trail system winds through rainforest-backed tropical beaches and rocky headlands, and the views across the bay to the pristine outer islands are unforgettable. As if this wasn’t enough, add a ubiquitous population of iguanas, howlers, capuchins, sloths and squirrel monkeys.
Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio

There’s good reason that Manuel Antonio is Costa Rica’s most popular national park: this stunning green gem has excellent beaches, accessible trails and lots of wildlife. It can be crowded, but at times it seems like the monkeys outnumber the people.

Although not as untamed as some of Costa Rica’s other parks, Manuel Antonio’s light hiking makes a good primer on the tropical rainforest environment. Here, you spend a leisurely morning navigating trails and scanning the canopy for wildlife before spending dreamy afternoons picnicking under swaying beach palms and swimming in the turquoise Pacific. The day ends as sundown sets the horizon ablaze and dinner is served at a cliffside restaurant. This is the Costa Rica you’ve been dreaming about.

WILDLIFE CHECKLIST

White-faced capuchin monkeys Often seen near the beach; keep your eyes peeled for cute babies.

Mantled howler monkeys You’ll likely hear these beasts before you spot them; their call makes an iconic soundtrack to Costa Rica’s rainforest.

Squirrel monkeys These tiny monkeys, which often live in groups of between 20 and 75, are absolutely adorable.

Sloths Two-toed and three-toed varieties can be seen lazing about in Manuel Antonio’s canopy.

Toucans These memorable birds of paradise are among the park’s 180 winged species.

Black spiny-tailed iguanas (ctenosaurs) They might lazily pose for your camera, but they’re the fastest-running lizards on earth.
Sights & Activities

Hiking & Swimming

After the park entrance, it’s about a 30-minute hike to Playa Espadilla Sur and Playa Manuel Antonio, the park’s idyllic beaches, which is where most people spend a good part of their time in the park. There will be numerous guides leading clusters of groups along the flat hike, so a bit of eavesdropping will provide solo shoestring travelers an informal lesson on the many birds, sloths and monkeys along the way. Eventually, the obvious, well-trodden trail veers right and through forest to an isthmus separating Playas Espadilla Sur and Manuel Antonio. This is also where there’s a park ranger station and information center (its hours are random, but we’ve yet to see it open, so be pleasantly surprised if it is staffed).

Geography fun fact: this isthmus is called a *tombolo* and was formed by the accumulation of sand between the mainland and the peninsula beyond, which was once an island. Along this bridge is the park’s two amazing beaches, Playa Manuel Antonio, on the ocean side, and the slightly less visited (and occasionally rough) Playa Espadilla Sur, which faces Manuel Antonio Village. With their turquoise waters, shaded hideouts and continual aerial show of brown pelicans, these beaches are dreamy.

At its end, the isthmus widens into a rocky peninsula, with thick forest in the middle. Several informal trails lead down the peninsula to near the center of it, the *Punta Catedral*. If you bushwhack your way through, there are good views of the Pacific Ocean and various rocky islets that are bird reserves and form part of the national park. Brown boobies and pelicans nest on these islands.

At the western end of Playa Manuel Antonio you can see a semicircle of rocks at low tide. Archaeologists believe that these were arranged by pre-Columbian indigenous people to function as a *turtle trap*. (Turtles would swim in during high tide, but when they tried to swim out after the tide started receding, they’d be trapped by the wall.) The beach itself is an attractive one of white sand and is popular for swimming. It’s protected and safer than the Espadilla beaches.

Beyond Playa Manuel Antonio, if visitors return towards the trail from the entrance of the park, the trail divides and leads deeper into the park. The lower trail is steep and slippery during the wet months and leads to the quiet *Playa Puerto Escondido*. This beach can be more or less completely covered by high tides, so be careful not to get cut off. The upper trail climbs to a *lookout* on a bluff overlooking Puerto Escondido and Punta Serrucho beyond – a stunning vista. Rangers reportedly limit the number of hikers on this trail to 45.

The trails in Manuel Antonio are well marked and heavily traversed, though there are some quiet corners near the ends of the trails. Off-trail hiking is not permitted without prior consent from the park service.

Watch out for the *manzanillo* tree (*Hippomane mancinella*) – it has poisonous fruits that look like little crab apples, and the sap exuded by the bark and leaves is toxic, causing the skin to itch and burn. Warning

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SAVING THE SQUIRREL MONKEY

With its expressive eyes and luxuriant coat, the *mono tití* (Central American squirrel monkey) is a favorite among Costa Rica’s four monkey species. It is also in danger of extinction, as there are only roughly 1500 of these animals left in Manuel Antonio, one of its last remaining native habitats.

Overdevelopment is one of the animal’s greatest threats. To remedy this problem, a conservation project known as the *Titi Conservation Alliance* ([2777-2306; www.monotiti.org]) is taking bold measures to prevent further decline. This coalition of organizations is helping to create a sustainable wildlife corridor between Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio and the Zona Protectora Cerro Nara in the northeast.

To achieve this aim, it is reforesting the Río Naranjo, a key waterway linking the two locations. More than 10,000 trees have already been planted along 8km of the Naranjo. This not only has the effect of extending the monkeys’ habitat but also provides a protected area for other wildlife to enjoy. Scientists at the Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica have mapped and selected sites for reforestation, and business owners in the area as well as private donations support the project financially.
signs are prominently displayed beside examples of this tree near the park entrance.

**Wildlife-Watching**

Increased tourist traffic has taken its toll on the park's wildlife, as animals are frequently driven away or – worse still – taught to scavenge for tourist handouts. To its credit, the park service has reacted by closing the park on Monday and limiting the number of visitors to 600 per day during the week and 800 per day on weekends and holidays.

Even though visitors are funneled along the main access road, you should have no problem seeing animals here, even as you line up at the gate. White-faced *capuchins* are very used to people, and normally troops feed and interact within a short distance of visitors; they can be encountered anywhere along the main access road and around Playa Manuel Antonio.

You'll probably also hear **mantled howler monkeys** soon after sunrise. Like capuchins, they can be seen virtually anywhere inside the park and even along the road to Quepos - watch for them crossing the monkey bridges that were erected by several local conservation groups.

*Coatis* can be seen darting across various paths and can get aggressive on the beach if you're eating. Three-toed and two-toed *sloths* are also common in the park. Guides are extremely helpful in spotting sloths, as they tend not to move around all that much.

However, the movements of the park's star animal and Central America's rarest primate, namely the **Central American squirrel monkey**, are far less predictable. These adorable monkeys are more retiring than capuchins, and though they are occasionally seen near the park entrance in the early morning, they usually melt into the forest well before opening time. With luck, however, a troop could be encountered during a morning's walk, and they often reappear in beachside trees and on the fringes of Manuel Antonio Village in the early evening.

Offshore, keep your eyes peeled for pantropical spotted and bottle-nosed *dolphins*, as well as humpback *whales* passing by on their regular migration routes. Other possibilities include orcas (killer whales), false killers and rough-toothed dolphins.

**Big lizards** are also a featured sighting at Manuel Antonio – it's hard to miss the large *ctenosaurs* and green iguanas that bask along the beach at Playa Manuel Antonio and in the vegetation behind Playa Espadilla Sur. To spot the well-camouflaged basilisk, listen for the rustle of leaves along the edges of the trails, especially near the lagoon.

**White-Water Rafting & Kayaking**

While not as popular as Turrialba, Manuel Antonio is emerging as a white-water rafting and sea-kayaking center. Although you shouldn’t expect the same level of world-class runs here as in other parts of the country, there are certainly some adrenaline kicks to be had.

**TOP PICKS: KIDDY FUN IN MANUEL ANTONIO**

- Buy a wildlife picture book and make a game out of spotting animals.
- Teach your kids how to read a map and use a compass to navigate.
- If your older children have an adventurous streak, take them rafting.
- Cool off by splashing in the gentle surf at Playa Manuel Antonio.
- When in doubt, even the fussiest of tykes love playing in the sand.

**Tours**

Hiring a guide costs US$25 per person for a two-hour tour. The only guides allowed in the park are members of Aguila (a local association governed by the park service), who have official ID badges, and recognized guides from tour agencies or hotels. This is to prevent visitors from getting ripped off and to ensure a good-quality guide. Aguila guides are well trained and multilingual (French-, German- or English-speaking guides can be requested). Visitors report that hiring a guide virtually guarantees wildlife sightings.
Information

Visitors who drive themselves will be accosted with parking touts as they approach Manuel Antonio Village; the charge is usually US$3. There have been reader reports of break-ins and thefts, so, as anywhere in the country, never leave anything in your car. Note that the road here is also very narrow and congested, so it’s suggested that you leave your car at your hotel and take an early-morning bus to the park entrance instead, then simply walk in.

The park entrance is at the end of the road that forks northeast before you arrive at the beach roundabout. The ticket window is on the left side of the road; count your change carefully to ensure you’ve been given the right amount back. Here you can hire naturalist guides to take you into the park.

The ranger station and national park information center (2777-0644) is just before Playa Manuel Antonio. Drinking water is available, and there are toilets, beach showers, picnic tables and a refreshment stand. There is no camping and guards will come around in the evening to make sure that no one has remained behind. The information center keeps woefully unpredictable hours.

The beaches are often numbered – most people call Playa Espadilla (outside the park) ‘1st beach’, Playa Espadilla Sur ‘2nd beach’, Playa Manuel Antonio ‘3rd beach’, Playa Puerto Escondido ‘4th beach’ and Playa Playitas ‘5th beach’. Some people begin counting at Espadilla Sur, which is the first beach in the park, so it can be a bit confusing trying to figure out which beach people may be talking about. Regardless, they’re all equally pristine, and provide ample opportunities for swimming or restful sunbathing.

The average daily temperature is 27°C (80°F) and average annual rainfall is 3875mm. The dry season is not entirely dry, merely less wet, so you should be prepared for rain (although it can also be dry for days on end). Make sure you carry plenty of drinking water, sun protection and insect repellent. Pack a picnic lunch if you’re spending the day.

To exit the park, you can either backtrack to the entrance or follow the trail along Playa Espadilla Sur to the Camaronera estuary, which can be anywhere from ankle to thigh deep, depending on the tides and the season. A small trail leads to the shallowest spot to cross. However, in an impressive display of opportunism, there are boaters here to transport you 100m for the small fee of about US$1.

Getting There & Away

The entrance and exit to Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio lies in Manuel Antonio Village.

QUEPOS TO UVITA

South of Quepos, the well-trodden central Pacific tourist trail begins to taper off, evoking the feel of the Costa Rica of yesteryear – surf shacks and empty beaches, roadside ceviche vendors and a little more space. Intrepid travelers can have their pick of any number of deserted beaches and great surf spots. The region is also home to the bulk of Costa Rica’s African-palm-oil industry, which should be immediately obvious after the few dozen kilometers of endless plantations lining the sides of the Costanera.

Known as the Costa Ballena, the beautiful length of coastline between Dominical and Ojochal is more accessible than ever since the completion of the Costanera Sur. For the time being, the area retains an easy-going, unjaded allure despite the growing numbers discovering its appeal.

Rafiki Safari Lodge

Nestled into the rainforest, with a prime spot right next to the Río Savegre, the Rafiki Safari Lodge (2777-5327, 2777-2250; www.rafikisafari.com; s/d/st incl all meals US$189/327/420, child under 5yr free; P @ @) combines all the comforts of a hotel with the splendor of a jungle safari – and getting here is half the fun. The owners, South African expats who have lived in the area for years, have constructed 10 luxury tents on stilts equipped with modern bathroom, private porch and hydroelectric power. All units are screened in, allowing you to see and hear the rainforest without actually having creepy-crawlies in your bed. There’s a spring-fed pool with a serious waterslide and ample opportunity for horseback riding, bird-watching (more than 350 species have been identified), hiking, white-water rafting and unplugging. And of course, South Africans are masters on the braai (barbecue), so you know that you’ll eat well alongside other guests in the rancho-style restaurant. This place makes for a great three-day stay; it’s too remote to warrant the transport for only one night, but guests exhaust all the activities on offer after three days.

The entrance to the lodge is located about 15km south of Quepos in the small town of Savegre. From here, a 4WD dirt road parallels the Río Savegre and leads 7km inland, past the towns of Silencio and Santo Domingo, to the lodge. However, if you don’t have private transportation, the lodge can ar-
range all of your transfers with advance reservations. Word to the wise: bring your own flashlight to supplement the standard-issue loaner that comes with your room keys.

Hacienda Barú National Wildlife Refuge

Located on the Pacific coast 3km northeast of Dominical on the road to Quepos, this wildlife refuge (2787-0003; www.hacienda-baru.com; admission US$7, each extra day US$2; guided tours US$20-60) forms a key link in a major biological corridor called the ‘Path of the Tapir’. It comprises more than 330 hectares of private and state-owned land that has been protected from hunting since 1976. The range of tropical habitats that may be observed here include pristine beaches, riverbanks, mangrove estuaries, wetlands, selectively logged forests, secondary forests, primary forests, tree plantations and pastures.

This diversity of habitat plus its key position in the Path of the Tapir account for the multitude of species that have been identified in Hacienda Barú. These include 351 birds, 69 mammals, 94 reptiles and amphibians, 87 butterflies and 158 species of tree, some of which are more than 8.5m in circumference. Ecological tourism provides this wildlife refuge with its only source of funds with which to maintain its protected status, so guests are assured that money spent here will be used to further the conservation of tropical rainforest.

There is an impressive number of guided tours on offer. You can experience the rainforest canopy in three ways – a platform 36m above the forest floor, tree climbing and a zip line called ‘Flight of the Toucan’. In addition to the canopy activities, Hacienda Barú offers bird-watching tours, hiking tours, and two overnight camping tours in both tropical rainforest and lowland beach habitats. Hacienda Barú’s naturalist guides come from local communities and have lived near the rainforest all of their lives. Even if you don’t stop here for the sights, the onsite store carries an excellent selection of specialist titles for bird-watchers.

For people who prefer to explore the refuge by themselves, there are 7km of
well-kept and marked, self-guided trails, a bird-watching tower, 3km of pristine beach, an orchid garden and a butterfly garden.

The Hacienda Barú Lodge (d incl breakfast US$96) consists of six clean, two-bedroom cabins located 350m from Barú beach. Guests staying here receive free admission to the refuge. The red-tile-roofed, open-air restaurant serves a variety of tasty Costa Rican dishes (US$6 to US$10).

The Quepos–Dominical–San Isidro de El General bus stops outside the hacienda entrance. The San Isidro de El General–Dominical–Uvita bus will drop you off at the Río Barú bridge, 2km from the hacienda office. A taxi from Dominical costs about US$5.

If you're driving, the El Ceibo gas station, 50m north of the Hacienda Barú Lodge, is the only one for a good distance in any direction. Groceries, fishing gear, tide tables and other useful sundries are available, and there are clean toilets.

**Dominical**

Dominical hits a real sweet spot with the travelers who wander up and down its rough dirt road with a surfboard under an arm, balancing the day’s activities between surfing and hammock hang time. And although some may decry the large population of expats and gringos who have hunkered down here, proud residents are quick to point out that Dominical recalls the mythical ‘old Costa Rica’ – the days before the roads were all paved, and when the coast was dotted with lazy little towns that drew a motley crew of surfers, backpackers and affable do-nothings alike. Dominical has no significant cultural sights, no paved roads and no chain restaurants, and if you’re not here to learn to surf or to swing in a hammock it might not be the place for you.

But the overall picture is a bit more complex, especially since Dominical is starting to stretch its legs, seeking to attract more than the college-aged and shoestringer sets. The completion of the Costanera Sur, which runs right by town, is facilitating the spread of development further south along the coast, which has brought along with it an intense wave of foreign investment. Although reliable wi-fi is now available throughout town, the dirt roads are still unpaved and Dominical remains the sort of place where it’s best to just slow down, unwind and take things as they come.

### Sights & Activities

Dominical owes its fame to its seriously sick point and beach breaks, though surf conditions here are variable. There is a great opportunity to learn surfing in the white water beach breaks, but beware of getting in too deep, as you can really get trashed out here if you don’t know what you’re doing. If you’re just getting started, stay in the white water or make for the nearby Playa Dominicalito, which is a bit tamer.

**Centro Turístico Cataratas Nauyaca**

This Costa Rican family-owned and -operated center is home to a series of wonderful waterfalls that cascade through a protected reserve of both primary and secondary forest. The family runs horseback-riding tours to the falls, where visitors can swim in the inviting natural pools. Led by experienced guides, the six-hour tours include breakfast, lunch and transfers from Dominical – reservations required. Alternatively, you can pay US$5 and hike to the falls independently if you’re in decent shape.

The center is located 10km up the road to San Isidro de El General; you’ll find the junction just north of the turnoff for Dominical. Accommodations in Dominical can also arrange tours.

**Parque Reptilandia**

This Costa Rican family-owned and -operated center is home to a series of wonderful waterfalls that cascade through a protected reserve of both primary and secondary forest. The family runs horseback-riding tours to the falls, where visitors can swim in the inviting natural pools. Led by experienced guides, the six-hour tours include breakfast, lunch and transfers from Dominical – reservations required. Alternatively, you can pay US$5 and hike to the falls independently if you’re in decent shape.

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**Parque Reptilandia**

Though Parque Reptilandia is a reptile lover’s dream come true on any day, keep in mind that Friday is feeding day. If you’re traveling with kids who love slick and slimy reptiles and amphibians, or you yourself just can’t get enough of these prehistoric creatures, don’t miss the chance to get face to face with Costa Rica’s most famous reptiles. The animal park is home to everything from alligators and crocodiles to turtles and poison-dart frogs.

Our favorite is the viper section, home to such infamous critters as the deadly fer-de-lance. The park is located in the town of Platanillo, which is 7km up the road to San
Find the junction just north of the turnoff to Dominical.

**Bamboo Yoga Play** *(US) 2787-0229, in USA 323-522-5454; www.bamboo yogaplay.com; classes US$14)* Complementary as yoga is to surfing, it’s no wonder the practice is sweeping across Costa Rica. This lovely Dominical studio offers a variety of classes for all levels, including unique dance-yoga-flow hybrid styles and even burlesque dance. The studio also serves as a center for yoga and arts retreats and offers several tidy accommodations for people interested in yoga-intensive stays.

**Dominical Surf Adventures** *(RAFTING, SURFING) 8897-9540, 2787-0431; www.dominicalsurfad ventures.com; 8am-5pm Mon-sat, 9am-3pm Sun)* A bit of an adventurer’s one-stop shop; visitors can book white-water trips, kayaking, snorkel and dive trips and surf lessons from this humble little desk on the main drag. Rafting trips start at US$80 (for runs on the Class II and III Guabo) and include a more challenging run on the Rio Coto Brus’ Class IV rapids. Thankfully, there’s no hustling sales pitch.

**Pineapple Kayak Tours** *(KAYAKING) 8362-7655, 8873-3283; www.pineapplekayaktours.com; tours US$)* Run by a friendly young Tico-American couple, Pineapple Kayak Tours runs kayaking and stand-up paddleboard (SUP) day trips from local rivers, mangrove forests and Ventanas Caves. Find the office next to the police station in Dominical.

**Courses**

**Adventure Education Center** *(LANGUAGE COURSE) (US) 2787-0023, in USA & Canada 800-237-2730; www.adventurespanishschool.com)* This school runs one-week Spanish-language programs, starting at US$260 without accommodations. Private lessons are available, as are discounts for longer periods of study. Various lodging options are available, from homestays to hotels.

**Tours**

Dominical has emerged as a jumping-off point for trips to Parque Nacional Marino Ballena and, further south, Parque Nacional Corcovado. Get details at **Dominical Information Center** *(8651-9090, 2787-0454; www.dominicalinformation com)*, which can hook you up with local tour operators who can customize tours to your interests. Dominical Surf Adventures also has a suite of tours. Excellent kayak and stand-up paddleboard (SUP) day trips are on offer from Pineapple Kayak Tours, in local rivers, mangrove forests and Ventanas Caves.

**Sleeping**

Dominical proper is home to the majority of the area’s budget accommodations, while midrange and top-end places are popping up on the outskirts of town. The rates given here are for high season, but low-season rates could be 30% to 40% lower. Note that there are additional accommodations options in the nearby mountaintop village of Isidro de El General. Although Dominical attracts some serious surfers and the waves can be gnarly, the quality of surf instruction here is among the best and most affordable in the country. For beginners who need lots of time and attention, the two most important questions to ask are about the ratio of students to instructors and if rates include board rental. There are scores of shops and instructors who offer services with a wide range of quality; the following come highly recommended.

**Costa Rica Surf Camp** *(2787-0393, 8812-3625; www.crsurfschool.com; Hotel DiuWak; all-inclusive packages per week from US$1105)* This fantastic, locally owned surf school prides itself on a two-to-one student-teacher ratio, with teachers who have CPR and water-safety training and years of experience. The amiable owner, Cesar Valverde, runs a friendly, warm-hearted program.

**Sunset Surf** *(8827-3610, 8917-3143; www.sunsetsurfdominical.com; Domilocos; all-inclusive packages per week from US$1315; 8am-4:30pm)* Operated by Dylan Park, who grew up surfing the waves of Hawaii and Costa Rica, Sunset offers a variety of packages (including one for women only). It has a three-to-one student-instructor ratio and Park is an excellent teacher.

**LEARNING TO SURF IN DOMINICAL**

Although Dominical attracts some serious surfers and the waves can be gnarly, the quality of surf instruction here is among the best and most affordable in the country. For beginners who need lots of time and attention, the two most important questions to ask are about the ratio of students to instructors and if rates include board rental. There are scores of shops and instructors who offer services with a wide range of quality; the following come highly recommended.
Escaleras. Although most of the year Domi­nical has an unflappably laid-back vibe, the place goes bananas over the holidays, when Ticos from around the country flock to the coast. Travelers on the thinnest of shoe­strings can probably get away with camping on the beach, but the local police are likely to move you along after a few days.

**In Town**

In addition to the spots listed below, there are several budget places right along the beach road. Because they’re in the middle of party central, be aware that late-night noise is an issue.

★ Posada del Sol

HOTEL $$(2787-0085, 2787-0082; d from US$30; P @ $$)

There are only five rooms at this charming, secure, tidy little place, but if you score one, consider yourself lucky (no advance reservations are taken). Posada del Sol hits the perfect price point and has basic comforts – hammocks outside each room, a sink to rinse out your salty suit and a clothesline to dry it.

It’s no place to party (it’s a short stroll to the beach or to the bars in town), but the warm-hearted, watchful proprietor, Leticia, makes the place so inviting. Single travelers should check out the tiny single in the back – a great deal. Located 30m south of the school.

Cool Vibes Hostel

HOSTEL $$(Piramys; 8353-6538, 8353-6428; www.hostedominical.com; dm US$10; P @ $$)

Run by a sweet young French couple, this lovely hostel is a quiet beachfront haven at the southern end of town. Taking full advantage of ocean views, the hostel has two open-air dormitories with single and double beds draped in mosquito nets. A huge, airy lounge has hammocks, wi-fi and TV, and there’s a communal kitchen and surfboards for rent.

Accommodations are quite limited, so it’s first come, first served.

Que Nivel

CABINA $$(2787-0127; r US$35-45) Que Nivel may not be the best choice for restless sleepers or lovers of light, but it’s affordable and near the beach. Concrete rooms downstairs are quite dark, although they come with air-con and are decorated in cheery colors with a surprisingly modern look. Upstairs, fan­only rooms get better light. There’s a shared kitchen, as well as a lively restaurant-bar.

**Domilocos**

HOTEL $$$(2787-0244; www.domilocos.com; r incl breakfast US$75; P @ $$)

On the road in the southern end of town, Domilocos is a solid midrange option, with Mediterranean-inspired grounds, an attractive plunge pool lined with potted plants and one of the town’s best restaurants, ConFusione. Tile­floored rooms with solid beds and bamboo furniture are basic but spacious and clean.

Hotel Villas Río Mar

HOTEL $$$(2787-0052; www.villasriomar.com; bungalows US$89, ste US$140; P @ $$)

From the turnoff into town, a right turn will bring you to this property about 800m from the village. Here you’ll find a few dozen polished­wood bungalows, each with a private hammock­strung terrace, as well as a handful of luxury suites that accommodate small groups. Río Mar also offers a pool, Jacuzzi, tennis court, playground, equipment rental, restaurant and bar.

Hotel DiuWak

HOTEL $$$$(2787-0087; www.diuwak.com; r US$105-145, ste US$200; P @ $$)

While the location in the center of town is super­convenient, this hotel could use a bit of an upgrade for these prices. Rooms range greatly in size and are quite comfortable, with hot water and all the modern conveniences you would expect, amid a lovely tropical garden. Onsite amenities include a bar, restaurant, convenience store, fitness center and spa.

**Around Dominical**

Albergue Alma de Hatillo

B&B $$$(8850-9034; www.cabinasalma.com; r US$70-140; P @ $$)

One of the most loved B&Bs on the entire Pacific coast, this hidden gem is run by Sabina, a charming Polish woman who has legions of dedicated fans the world over. If you’re looking for a quiet base from which to explore the Dominical area, this tranquil spot is home to immaculate cabins spread among several hectares of fruit trees.

Guests rave about the organic produce on offer at Sabina’s restaurant, as well as the daily yoga classes in her open­air studio. The B&B often hosts yoga retreats, so it’s best to book ahead as early as possible. You’ll find it in the village of Hatillo, about 6km north of town along the Costanera Sur.

Hotel y Restaurante Roca Verde

HOTEL $$$(2787-0036; www.rocaverde.net; r US$85; P @ $$)

Overlooking the beach about
Central Pacific Coast

Quepos.Uvita

Eating & Drinking

1km south of town, this US-owned hotel has common spaces with tile mosaics, festive murals and rock inlays. Ten tropical-themed rooms are comfortable and have terra-cotta tile floors and pretty handpainted flora and fauna decorating the walls. Still, the real action takes place in the festive communal areas, which include an open-air bar and pool.

There’s also a restaurant, open 8am to 9pm Tuesday to Saturday, 8am to 5pm Sun.

Costa Paraiso

BOUTIQUE HOTEL $$$$  
(2787-0025; www.costa-paraiso.com; d US$140-150; P* P* P* ) In a prime spot overlooking a rocky cove in Playa Dominicalito, this snug hideaway lives up to its name. Each of the five rooms is beautifully appointed in a modern tropical style, with cool tile floors, wood beams and furniture and windows oriented to catch ocean breezes and views. Bonus: the in-house restaurant (p400) is a destination in itself.

All but one room (which does come with fridge and coffeemaker) has a kitchenette. Keep an eye out for the tiny sign on the ocean side, 2km south of Dominical – it’s a sharp turn that goes steeply downhill.

Cascadas Farallas

LODGE $$$$  
(2787-8378; www.waterfallvillas.com; ste/villas from US$125/190; P* P* P* ) Although it’s a bit outside Dominical proper, this spiritual retreat is located beside a series of cascading waterfalls. Balinese-style suites and villas are decked out from floor to ceiling with Asian art, and all have balconies facing the waterfalls. Regular yoga and meditation sessions are balanced with exclusively vegan cuisine. This eco-retreat has no TV and no wi-fi.

To reach the property, take the San Isidro de El General fork (just north of the Dominical turnoff) for 6km, and look out for the sign marking the entrance.

Eating & Drinking

The restaurant scene in Dominical is of a high standard, catering mostly to foreign guests. The town also loves to party, though the scene changes from night to night. Maracatu hosts lots of live music and DJs; the late-night scene unfolds at San Clemente on Friday and Hotel y Restaurante Roca Verde on Saturday.

In Town

Soda Nanyoa

COSTA RICAN $  
(2787-0195; mains US$3-7; 6am-10pm) In a town that caters to gringo appetites with inflated price tags, Nanyoa is a gratifying find: an authentic, moderately priced, better-than-most Costa Rican soda. The big pinto breakfasts and fresh-squeezed juice are ideal after a morning session on the waves, and at night it lets patrons bring their own beer from the grocery across the street.

Chapy’s Healthy Subs & Wraps

DELI $  
(2787-0283; meals US$5-10; 11am-6:30pm; P* P* ) With crunchy wraps and thick, grilled-veg sandwiches stacked high on homemade focaccia, Chapy’s is a vegetarian’s delight. As healthy as they are delicious, the sandwiches can be dressed in spicy hummus and homemade sauces. If you need a lunch to grab and go, this place has the best stuff in town.

Andres Poveda on Costa Rican Pride

The founder of the Costa Rican Hostel Network has spent the last several years raising the bar for Costa Rica backpackers.

What does it mean to be Costa Rican? To understand this, all you need to do is spend some time hanging out with us Costa Ricans, or, as we prefer to call ourselves, Ticos. I think one of the most infectious qualities of Ticos is that we don’t think too much about the future, and instead prefer to have a great time and simply enjoy the moment. You know, almost immediately upon arriving in this country, travelers are greeted with the words pura vida, which really is a catch-all phrase for Ticos. Although it directly translates as ‘pure life’, pura vida really is a philosophy of living that all of us strive to uphold.

What is the best way for travelers to experience Costa Rica? The great thing about this country is that it has a youthful spirit, so you don’t have to be 18 or 21 to have a good time here. In Costa Rica the great social equalizer is beer, so all you have to do is grab a bottle and just interact with the people around you.
Central Pacific Coast

**Moca Café**  
CAFÉ $  
(☎️ 8783-2806; mains US$3-9; ☕️ 6am-6pm; 🕑) Best espresso in town, hands down. The airy riverside cafe also discourses some of the best eats around here.

Café de Ensueños  
CAFÉ $  
(meals US$4-8; ☕️ 6am-8pm) Run by a lovely Tico family, this cafe is tucked away at the end of the southern spur road. Organic coffee drinks, fresh juices and hearty breakfasts are served alfresco under a covered terrace – an excellent spot for a quiet, unhurried morning.

**Maracutú**  
VEGETARIAN, ASIAN $$  
(☎️ 2787-0091; www.maracutucostarica.com; meals US$6-12; ☕️ 11am-1am; 🕑) This ‘natural restaurant and world music’ spot hits a lovely high note in Dominical, serving mostly vegetarian and vegan dishes of international provenance, but skewing towards Asian. From vegan pad thai to shiitake soba salad, the food is made from organic and locally sourced produce as much as possible. For your aural pleasure, the musical rotation changes genres nightly.

**San Clemente Bar & Grill**  
BAR  
(☎️ 9am-midnight) Near the center of the village away from the beach, this classic Dominical watering hole is decorated with broken surfboards on the walls and serves up big breakfasts and Tex-Mex dishes (meals US$5 to US$12). It’s also one of the more popular places to drink with like-minded travelers from around the world.

**Tortilla Flats**  
BAR  
(☎️ 2787-0033) The beachfront Tortilla Flats is the de facto place for surfers to enjoy session beers and tacos after a morning in the water. Its open-air atmosphere is pleasant, the surf videos on continuous loop and the good times abundant, but the staff is unfortunately surly.

**¿Por Qué No?**  
FUSION $$  
(☎️ 2787-0025; www.cpporqueno.com; mains US$5-14; ☕️ 7am-2pm & 5:30-9:30pm, closed Mon night) Blackberry-and-cream-cheese-stuffed French toast, anyone? (Served with real maple syrup – this Canadian-run establishment doesn’t mess around.) If breakfast doesn’t turn you on, it’s worth making a reservation for any other time of day, as the creative, well-executed Tico fusion cuisine at this restaurant at the Costa Paraíso hotel represents some of the best eats around here.

**Organic, locally sourced ingredients are used whenever possible.** Dishes like mango jerk chicken, vegetarian cassoulet and wood-fired pizza are quite reasonably priced, especially considering the quality and freshness, and the gorgeous oceanfront location can’t be beat.

**Shopping**

Bookstore by the Seashore  
BOOKS  
(bookstorebytheseashore@gmail.com; ☕️ 11am-4pm Mon-Sat) The central Pacific coast is a virtual desert when it comes to good English-language bookshops, so readers who love actual paper books will want to stock up at this oasis. A shop on the road into town, Bookstore by the Seashore is packed with well-curated used fiction, nonfiction and genre titles – in excellent condition, and most for five bucks a pop.

**Orientation**

The Costanera Sur bypasses the town entirely; the entrance to the village is immediately past the Río Barú bridge. There’s a bone-rattling main road through the village, where many of the services are found, and a beach road parallel to the ocean. About 100m south of this intersection is a southern spur road with a couple of accommodations, a laundry and a cafe.

**Information**

There’s a Banco de Costa Rica (BCR; ☎️ 2787-0381; ☕️ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) on the highway just outside of town, and a postal service upstairs in the same small shopping center.

**Dangers & Annoyances**

Waves, currents and riptides in Dominical are very strong, and there have been drownings in the past. Watch for red flags (which mark riptides), follow the instructions of posted signs and swim at beaches that are patrolled by lifeguards. If you’re smart, this is no problem, but people die here every year.

Also, Dominical attracts a heavy-duty party crowd, which in turn has led to a burgeoning drug problem.

**Getting There & Away**

**BUS**

Buses pick up and drop off passengers along the main road in Dominical.  
**Palmar** US$2, 1½ hours, departs 4:45am, 10:30am and 3pm.
Quepos US$8, two hours, departs 5:30am, 8:30am, 1pm, 1:20pm and 3pm.

Uvita US$1.20, 20 minutes, departs 4:45am, 8:30am, 10:30am, 12:40pm, 1pm, 3pm, 5pm and 9:40pm.

TAXI
Taxis to Uvita cost US$10 to US$20, while the ride to San Isidro de El General costs US$25 to US$35, US$55 to US$65 for Quepos. Cars accommodate up to five people, and can be hailed easily in town from the main road.

**Sights & Activities**

Uvita is a perfect base for exploring Costanera Sur, which is home to some truly spectacular beaches that don’t see anywhere near the number of tourists that they should attract. All the better for you, if crowds aren’t your thing.

Surfers passing through the area tend to push on to more extreme destinations further south, though there are occasionally some swells at Playa Hermosa (not to be confused with the one south of Jacó) to the north and Playa Colonia to the south. However, if you’ve just come from Dominical, or you’re planning on heading to Pavones, you should look no further.

**MOVIES IN THE JUNGLE**

The decade-long (give or take) tradition of Friday and Saturday night movies, high on the hillside in Escaleras, had taken an indefinite hiatus on our last visit. The creators of this magical event may revive Cinema Escaleras (☎ 2787-8065; www.moviesinthejungle.com) at some point in the future; check the website for signs of life.
might be a bit disappointed with the mild conditions here. If you're a beginner, this can be a good place to practice.

**Reserva Biológica Oro Verde**

A few kilometers before Uvita you'll see a signed turnoff to the left on a rough dirt road (4WD only) that leads 3.5km up the hill (look over your shoulder for great views of Parque Nacional Marino Ballena) to this private reserve. Two-thirds of the 150-hectare property is rainforest, and there are guided hikes, horseback-riding tours and bird-watching walks. Tour prices vary.

The reserve is on the farm of the Duarte family, who have lived in the area for more than three decades.

**Rancho La Merced National Wildlife Refuge**

A few kilometers before Uvita, opposite the turnoff to Oro Verde, is this 506-hectare national wildlife refuge (and former cattle ranch) with primary and secondary forests and mangroves lining the Río Morete. Here you can take guided nature hikes, horseback-riding tours to Punta Uvita and bird-watching walks. Tour prices vary.

You can also stay at La Merced in a 1940s farmhouse, which can accommodate up to 10 people in double rooms of various sizes (doubles US$85).

**Tours**

**Bahía Aventuras**

A well-regarded tour operator in Uvita, Bahía Aventuras has tours running the gamut, from surfing to diving to hiking, and spanning the Costa Ballena to Corcovado. Tour rates are variable.

**Festivals & Events**

**Best Fest**

Adding to the festival season that's developing along the central Pacific coast, this new music festival kicks off at the beginning of February and features a great mix of danceable, up-and-coming Tico and American bands.

**Envision Art, Music & Sacred Movement Festival**

Four days of spoken word, music, yoga, performance art, permaculture, dreadlocks and DJs descend on Uvita in late February. Attendees set up camp in a jungle setting near the beach in Uvita.

**Sleeping & Eating**

The main entrance to Uvita leads inland, east of the highway, where you’ll find a number of eating and sleeping options. More guesthouses, sodas and local businesses are along the bumpy dirt roads that surround the edges of the park.

**Flutterby House**

Is it possible to fall in love at first sight with a hostel? If so, the ramshackle collection of colorful Swiss Family Robinson–style tree houses and dorms at Flutterby has us head over heels. Run by a pair of beamng Californian sisters, the hostel is friendly, fun and well situated within a short stroll of Marino Ballena’s beaches.

It rents out boards and bikes, sells beer for a pittance, has a tidy, open-air communal kitchen as well as a new restaurant, and it employs downright visionary sustainability practices. Follow the signs from the main highway; it’s near the south entrance gate of the park.

**Cabinas Los Laureles**

Set up on a forested property with a short trail running through it, this 14-room spot in Uvita offers authentic Costa Rican hospitality. Of the friendly Tico family that runs the place, son Victor is bilingual and conscientious about referring guests to other locally-run businesses. He also runs good kayaking and mountain-biking tours via Uvita Adventure Tour (8918-5681, 2743-8008; uvitadventuretours.com; mountain-biking/kayaking tours from US$35/65).

**Cascada Verde**

If you’re looking for a quiet retreat in the jungle, this hostel is for you. About 2km inland and uphill from Uvita, it’s run by a young German couple who keeps the atmosphere peaceful and the facilities spotless. There’s a large communal kitchen, plenty of indoor and outdoor spaces for relaxing, and a waterfall and pools a short walk away.
Because of the open architecture style, be aware that there’s very little noise privacy – but you’ll also hear the jungle symphony surrounding you.

**Tucan Hotel**

HOSTEL $  
(☎) 2743-8140;  www.tucanhotel.com;  campsites/hammocks/dm  US$6/6/10, d from US$25;  🍽  🍺  🍷  🍸  Located 100m inland from the main highway, this is a most popular hostel for international travelers. There is a variety of accommodations to suit all budgets, from simple tents and hammocks to dorms, private rooms and the lofty tree house. With a shared kitchen, daily movies at 4pm and a convivial atmosphere, Tucan Hotel is a reliable budget choice.

**Bungalows Ballena**

BUNGALOW $$$  
(☎) 8309-9631, 2743-8543;  www.bungalowsballena.com;  apt/bungalows  US$125/250;  🍽  🍺  🍷  💖  These fully outfitted apartments and stand-alone bungalows are an excellent mid-market option for families and large groups. All have kitchens, wi-fi and satellite television. The place is outfitted for kids – there’s a playground and a big, welcoming pool in the shape of a whale's tail. Find it 300m north of the park’s main entrance.

**Sabor Español**

SPANISH  
(☎) 8768-9160, 2743-8312;  Playa Colonia;  mains  US$7-22;  🍽  noon-3pm & 6-9:30pm Tue-Sun) Having had a successful run in Monteverde, charming Spanish couple Heri and Montse realized that they wanted to live by the ocean – to Uvita’s good fortune. Thus, their sublime gazpacho, paella, tortilla española and other Spanish specialties can now be savored with sangria at the end of a dirt road in Playa Uvita, in a lovely rancho setting.

**Orientation**

The area off the main highway is referred to locally as Uvita, while the area next to the beach is called Playa Uvita and Playa Bahía Uvita (the southern end of the beach). The beach area is reached through two parallel roads that are roughly 500m apart – they make a C-shape connecting back to the road. The first entrance is just south of the bridge over the Río Uvita and the second entrance is in the center of town. At low tide you can walk out along Punta Uvita, but ask locally before heading out so that the rising water doesn’t cut you off.

**Information**

You can find bus schedules, an area map and other useful information at www.uvita.info. Also keep an eye out for the free print magazine *Ballena Tales*, a wonderful resource for visitors, with bilingual articles, tide charts and listings of local businesses from Dominical to the Peninsula de Osa.

**DANGERS & ANNOYANCES**

When enjoying the local beaches, be aware that personal possessions that are left unattended have been known to melt away into the jungles that fringe the shorelines.

In fact, it’s best not to bring anything valuable to the beach with you. Until recently, petty theft was the worst problem around the national park and area beaches, but unfortunately, a few in-person (non-violent) robberies had been reported at the time of research. Get the latest word from the staff at your accommodations.

**Getting There & Away**

Most buses depart from the two sheltered bus stops on the Costanera in the main village.  
**San Isidro de El General**  US$1.25, two hours, departs 6am and 2pm.  
**San José**  US$5, 3½ hours, departs 5:15am and 1:15pm.

**Parque Nacional Marino Ballena**

This stunner of a marine park (☎ 2743-8236; admission US$7) protects coral and rock reefs surrounding several offshore islands. Its name comes not only from the humpback whales that breed here but also because of the Punta Uvita ‘Whale Tail’, a distinctive sandbar extending into a rocky reef that, at low tide, forms the shape of a whale’s tail when viewed from above. Despite its small size, the importance of this area cannot be overstated, especially since it protects migrating humpback whales, pods of dolphins and nesting sea turtles, not to mention colonies of seabirds and several terrestrial reptiles.

Although Ballena is relatively off the radar of many coastal travelers, this can be an extremely rewarding destination for beach lovers and wildlife-watchers. The lack of tourist crowds means that you can enjoy a quiet day at the beach in near solitude – a rarity in Costa Rica. And, with a little luck and a bit of patience, you just might catch a glimpse of a humpback breaching or a few dolphins gliding through the surf.
Sights & Activities

The beaches at Parque Nacional Marino Ballena are a stunning combination of golden sand and polished rock. All of them are virtually deserted and perfect for peaceful swimming and sunbathing. And the lack of visitors means you’ll have a number of quiet opportunities for good bird-watching.

From the ranger station you can walk out onto Punta Uvita and snorkel (best at low tide). Boats from Playa Bahía Uvita to Isla Ballena can be hired for up to US$45 per person for a two-hour snorkeling trip, though you are not allowed to stay overnight on the island.

To delve into the underwater beauty of the park, take a dive with the Argentine-run Mad About Diving (2743-8019; www.madaboutdivingcr.com).

There is also some decent surfing near the river mouth at the southern end of Playa Colonia.

Wildlife-Watching

Although the park gets few human visitors, the beaches are frequently visited by a number of animal species, including nesting seabirds, bottle-nose dolphins and a variety of lizards. And from May to November, with a peak in September and October, olive ridley and hawksbill turtles bury their eggs in the sand nightly. However, the star attraction are the pods of humpback whales that pass through the national park from August to October and December to April.

Scientists are unsure as to why humpback whales migrate here, though it’s possible that Costa Rican waters may be one of only a few places in the world where the whales mate. There are actually two different groups of humpbacks that pass through the national park from August to October and December to April.

Ojochal Area

Beyond Uvita, the Costanera Sur follows the coast as far as Palmar, approximately 40km away. This route provides a coastal alternative to the Interamericana, as well as convenient access to points in the Peninsula de Osa. En route, about 15km south of Uvita, you’ll pass the tiny town of Ojochal, on the inland side of the highway.

Ojochal also serves as a convenient base for exploring nearby Parque Nacional Marino Ballena, and there are plenty of accommodations here to choose from, despite its small size. Though Ojochal has attracted quite a multicultural expat population, its friendly, well-integrated vibe has a distinctly different cultural feel from that of surfer-dominated Dominical.

Just north of Ojochal, about 14km south of Uvita, is the wilderness beach of Playa Tortuga, which is largely undiscovered and virtually undeveloped, but home to some occasional bouts of decent surf.

Sleeping

There’s not much of a nucleus to Ojochal – most of the sleeping and eating options are spread out along the Costanera Sur.

Lookout at Playa Tortuga BOUTIQUE HOTEL $$ (2786-5074; www.hotelcostarica.com; d US$79-110; P $ $ $) This beautiful hilltop sanctuary is home to a dozen brightly painted bungalows awash in calming pastels. The grounds are traversed by a series of paths overlooking the beaches below, but the highlight is the large deck in a tower above the pool. Here you can pursue some early-morning bird-watching, or perhaps better yet, some late-afternoon slothful lounging.

It also has a wood-fired BBQ, excellent for grilling a fresh catch. Look for the signed turnout on the eastern side of the road just after Km 175.

Hotel Villas Gaia CABINA $$ (8382-8240; www.villasgaia.com; r incl breakfast from US$85, casa US$153; $ $ $) Along the beach side of the road is this beautifully kept collection of shiny wooden cabins.
with shaded porches, set in tranquil forested
grounds. An excellent restaurant serves a vari-
ety of international standards, and the hilltop
pool boasts a panoramic view of Playa Tor-
tega. The beach is a pleasant 20-minute hike
along a dirt path that winds down the hillside.

**Diquis del Sur**
B&B $$
(2) 2786-5012; www.diquiscostarica.com; r per day/week from US$55/330; 🌟🌟🌟🌟🌟
In Ojochal proper, this bed and breakfast is run by a
delightful French-Canadian couple who make
it feel like a home away from home. Accom-
modations are in a variety of fairly modest
rooms, though all have kitchenettes condu-
cive to self-catering. There’s also a good res-
taurant onsite, and the well-maintained prop-
erty is landscaped with flowers and fruit trees.

There are also villas for long-term rent.
An interesting side fact: the property is
named after the ‘Diquis Spheres’, which are
pre-Columbian stone balls, many of which
were found in this area (for more, see p449).

**Finca Bavaria**
BOUTIQUE HOTEL $$
(2) 8355-4465; www.finca-bavaria.de; s/d from
US$64/74; 🌟🌟🌟🌟🌟
This quaint German-run
inn comprises a handful of pleasing rooms
with wooden accents, bamboo furniture,
romantic mosquito-net-draped beds and...
high-tech German toilets. The lush grounds
are lined with walkways and hemmed by
forest, though you can take in sweeping
views of the ocean from the hilltop pool.

Look for the signed dirt road at Km 167.

An amazing German breakfast buffet is
available for an additional US$8.

**La Cusinga**
ECOLODGE $$$
(2) 2770-2549; www.lacusingalodge.com; Finca
Tres Hermanos; s/d US$136/172; 🌟🌟🌟🌟🌟
Awarded five out of five leaves by government-
run Certified Sustainable Tourism (CST)
program, this lovely ecolodge is a model
of sustainable practices. It’s also a relax-
ing place to unplug – in place of televisions
there are yoga classes. Located on a private
reserve that borders on Parque Nacional
Marino Ballena, it has access to hiking,
bird-watching, snorkeling and swimming in
the national park.

Accommodations are in natural-style
wooden and stone rooms with terra-cotta
tiled floors and crisp white linens. The res-
taurant offers a savory, sustainable menu
of upcale Costa Rican rural dishes that in-
cludes locally raised chicken, fresh seafood
and organic produce. Its location, about
5km south of Uvita, is well signed on the
highway.

Eating

Ojochal is an enclave of excellent cuisine,
from Mediterranean to Indonesian, and it’s
home to a patisserie, pizzeria, butcher and
farmers market. There are too many eateries
to list here, but you can find them at www.
elsabordeojochal.com.

**Ballena Bistro**
CAFE $$
(2) 2786-5407; Costanera Sur, Km 169; 🌟🌟🌟🌟
tue-sun, to 8pm Thu; 🌟🌟🌟🌟🌟
The main attraction of multiuse Goathouse 169, this
bistro offers substantial and fresh dishes,

REVIVING ROOTS

Ojochal’s namesake, once on the verge of extinction in the area, is making a slow come-
back. Though the tall, leafy ojoche tree (Brosimun alicastrum) takes about 30 years
to mature, making this a long-term project, the local community has begun putting the
ojoche back into Ojochal.

As Ojochal’s population grew through the 1950s, most stands of ojoche were felled
for cattle grazing and lumber. But in the same decade the tree’s starchy fruit provided
nourishment to many local families during severe drought. The pulp of the fruit can be
eaten raw, boiled, or made into flour. The fruit (also known as the ‘Maya nut’, though not
a true nut) has a low glycemic index and high protein content, and it’s rich in fiber, fat,
folate, iron and antioxidants.

Around 2009, the grass-roots community group Comité de Ojoche began to replant
ojoche trees in the area in an effort to reestablish Ojochal’s connection with its roots
(so to speak), and to save the tree from local extinction while reforesting the area with a
nutritious and culturally valuable food source.

Hotel Villas Gaia offers walking tours of the ‘Ojoche Route’, and you can buy ojoche
flour from the local women’s entrepreneurial association, which helps to fund the
ojoche-revival project.
such as lentil, beet and feta salad, Brazilian coconut fish soup and Belgian beef stew. Salads, burgers, wraps, fresh juices and cold beers round out the menu. This is a smashing spot to break up a long drive or pick up some damn good picnic fixings.

★ Citrus INTERNATIONAL $$$
(‡2786-5175; meals US$10-30; 11am-9pm Mon-Sat; †) With its fresh, bright, Moroccan-inspired flavors Citrus is a standout, even among the excellent choices within strolling distance. Offering New World dishes that are heavily influenced by Southeast Asian and north African culinary traditions, and benefiting from its candlelit riverside location, Citrus welcomes patrons with flair and bravado.

★ Exotica INTERNATIONAL $$$
(‡2786-5050; dishes US$10-30; 11am-9pm Mon-Sat) This phenomenal gourmet restaurant certainly sets a high benchmark for Ojochal. The nouvelle French dishes each emphasize a breadth of ingredients brought together in masterful combinations. Some of the highlights include oil-drizzled fish carpaccio, wild-duck breast topped with tropical-fruit tapenades and homemade desserts.

With more than a decade in the business, yet only nine tables for diners to choose from, this is an intimate culinary experience that is certainly worth seeking out.

Getting There & Away
Daily buses between Dominical and Palmar can drop you off near any of the places described here. However, given the infrequency of transportation links along this stretch of highway, it’s recommended that you explore the area by private car.