

# Simply Smart Travel

## To Costa Rica

BY JEFFREY R. ORENSTEIN, PH.D.

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The Arenal Volcano dominates the scene around La Fortuna, Costa Rica. It last erupted in 2006.



*Editor's Note: If you enjoy traveling, this column is for you. My goal is helping people of any age and budget get the most from their precious travel time and dollars. I'll share what I have learned on trips near and far and provide travel ideas and tips from experts.*

Why do about 70,000 American expatriates call Costa Rica home and so many vacation there? Maybe it's because you can buy a nice home there for \$50,000. Possibly it's because Costa Rica is a stable democracy that values freedom, has no army, has more teachers and professors than police and is dedicated to carbon neutrality by 2021. Adding to its allure is that English is a required second language in Costa Rican schools and most tourism-related people speak it fluently. Perhaps it is because many Americans work for Intel, Microsoft or other American companies there.

It could be because this uncrowded country of 4.7 million people is renowned for its ecotourism, beautiful seacoasts, abundant rain forests, active and accessible volcanoes, national parks and other environmental preserves that constitute 25% of the nation.

The answer depends on who is asking but for most of us it is summed up in Costa Rica's ubiquitous slogan, *pura vida*. Literally, "pure life" in Spanish, visitors and residents use it to mean the good life.

My wife and I visited in February, 2014 and loved it. Here are few things we learned that may help you plan a simply smart trip to Costa Rica.

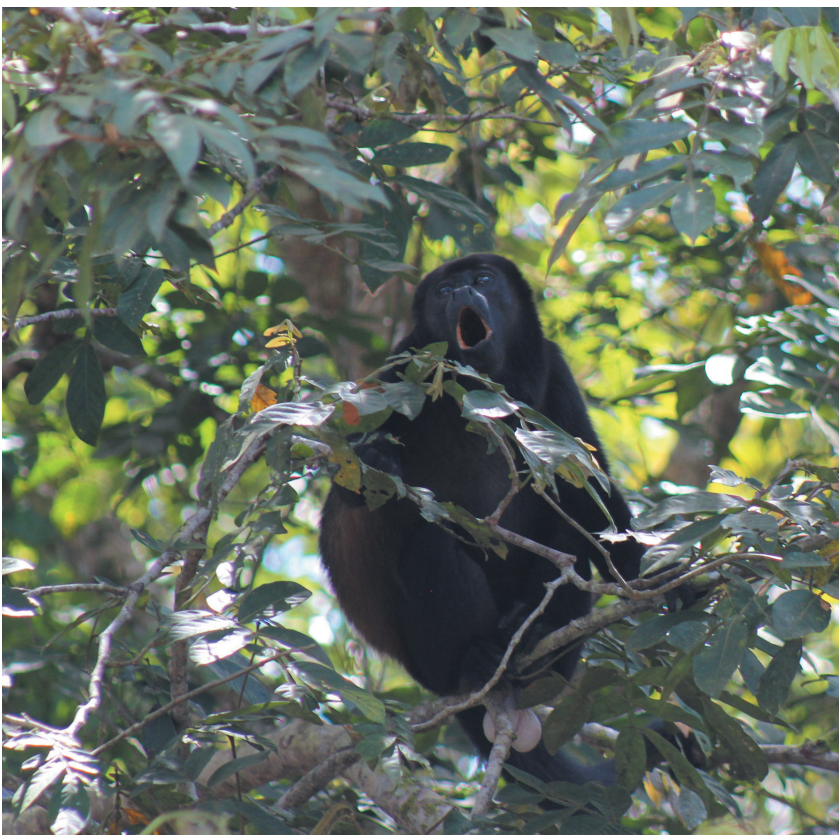
#### BEFORE YOU GO

Your first decision is whether to opt for a self-guided trip or an organized tour. Either can work well for the smart traveler, but I suggest booking a tour for your first trip to this lovely Central American nation. My reasons are simple: the roads are not great or well-marked, most tour operators have satisfactory arrangements with tourism buses, hotels and local guides that will make your trip easier and more comprehensive, and chances are pretty good that you'll get a knowledgeable bi-lingual group guide. We traveled with an eight-day Manatee Chamber of Commerce tour handled by Mayflower Tours in Chicago and found it to be well-organized, comprehensive and reasonably priced. Our local guide was a walking encyclopedia of knowledge about the country's politics, economy, geography, flora and fauna.

There are more than 200 tour operators recognized by the Costa Rican tourist board (ICT), most based in San José, and many tour operators in North America and Europe also run Costa Rican tours. There are also many customized itinerary tours including wildlife expeditions and the increasingly-popular medical tourism. Before booking a tour that is right for you, do your homework by researching operators on the web and/or consulting a good travel agent. Once you've visited Costa Rica on a tour and want to return to see more, you should know enough to take your next trip on your own.

The best visiting time is December through April, the dry season. February is the most popular time, and we see why because we experienced gorgeous weather. Temperatures were in the 90s along the Pacific coast and in

A Howler Monkey making a huge racket in the Cano Negro Wildlife Preserve







Volcanic emissions bubble up from the crater of the Poas Volcano

the 70s in the mountains. Nighttime temperatures dipped into the 50s in the mountains. It didn't rain while we were there and that is unusual. They don't call it the rainforest for nothing! Be aware that Costa Rican schools close from December to February for the coffee

harvest, and beach towns and national parks are busy then, especially on weekends.

May, when the rainy season begins, is a good shoulder season for Costa Rican travel since prices are a bit cheaper and tourist sites are a bit less crowded, though rivers start to rise and some roads get muddy.

Wildlife enthusiasts may wish to plan their trip around the seasons of the critters they want to see, of course. Monkeys, crocodiles, birds, sloths, agouties (large rodents), frogs and iguanas are not hard to find if you know where and when to look. (*see sidebar at the end of this article*)

Where should you go? A tour makes that decision for you, but if you're going it alone and have a week or so, I recommend flying into San Jose, visiting the Poas Volcano National Park, touring a coffee plantation, (the Doka Estate Plantation has an excellent tour and lunch), visiting La Fortuna and the Arenal Volcano (The Royal Corin Resort at the foot of the volcano offers luxury with a view) and planning at least a day or two on either the Pacific or Caribbean coasts—or both.

The 104 degree volcanic hot springs pool at the Royal Corin Hotel at the base of the Arenal Volcano. Check out the in-pool bar!





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We stayed at the DoubleTree all-inclusive resort in Puntarenas on the Pacific, and the view was magnificent and accommodations were fine for couples or families. From there, side trips can be arranged to the Manuel Antonio National Park and the Jungle Crocodile Safari on the Tarcoles River to see the birds, monkeys and crocodiles.

If you have more time, the Cano Negro National Wildlife Refuge near Los Chiles (close to Nicaragua in the northern lowlands) is a must-see and has a fabulous boat tour that offers great wildlife spotting at every bend in the river. You'll also enjoy Monteverde in the central highlands, Tamarindo in Guanacaste and Puerto Viejo and Tortuguero on the Caribbean and touring San Jose and the central valley region. Small towns worth visiting and great vistas await you all along the way.

What should you pack? While you should check the weather before you leave at [www.wunderground.com](http://www.wunderground.com) to see what temperatures are expected during your stay, generally you should pack casual, leisure clothes and some rain gear. Forget the ties or high heels even at nice restaurants or luxury hotels. Definitely pack a good digital camera with a telephoto capability and lots of photo storage since Costa Rica offers an almost infinite supply of photo opportunities. The local electrical current is the same as in the U.S. so no converters are needed. A good Spanish-English dictionary will also help if you get off the beaten path.

#### GETTING THERE

The country has two international airports. The largest is Juan Santa-maria International Airport (SJO) at Alajuela, on the outskirts of the capital city San Jose and the other is Daniel Oduber Airport (LIR) at Liberia, in Guanacaste in the northwest. Both are served by major airlines from the U.S. and elsewhere.

The other popular way to go is by cruise ship. It's an easy way to travel and shore excursions are plentiful, but your short onshore stay is only a tantalizing appetizer.

#### WHEN YOU ARE THERE

There is no significant rail system in the country so getting around is restricted to domestic flights (NatureAir and Sansa), rental cars, shuttles, private vans, some ferries and public buses. Taxis can be hired by the hour, half or full day. Meters aren't



One of the many crocodiles who call the Tarcoles River home.

used for long trips and taxi quality varies widely so caveat emptor and agree on a fare before you climb in.

Since hiring a car and driver can cost the same or less than a daily car rental, I recommend it because someone who knows the roads will do the driving and you can enjoy the scenery you came to see. Don't rent a car unless you are familiar with the country. Roads are not good, signposts are scarce and the omnipresent semis and buses can be intimidating on narrow, steep and winding roads.

Costa Rica is not known for shopping, and the country has no major indigenous products other than agriculture. Frankly, the only thing I recommend bringing back is some coffee purchased at a plantation.

Older travelers should have little trouble touring the country, although some of the national parks require a mile or two of walking, at a leisurely pace, through moderately uneven paths to see the choicest sights.

After Your Trip, don't forget to share the great photos you'll take. I hope you get to experience Costa Rica soon. You'll love it.

#### For More Information

Smart travelers research online before going. For Costa Rica I recommend . . .

- ▶ [www.anywherecostarica.com](http://www.anywherecostarica.com)
- ▶ [www.visitcostarica.com](http://www.visitcostarica.com)  
(the official tourism site)
- ▶ [www.therealcostarica.com](http://www.therealcostarica.com)  
(quirky but interesting)



ORENSTEIN IS THE CO-PUBLISHER AND EXECUTIVE EDITOR OF *LIVING ON THE SUNCOAST* MAGAZINE. HE AND HIS WIFE, VIRGINIA, ENJOY SIMPLY SMART TRAVEL AND WRITING ABOUT IT. HE CAN BE REACHED AT [ORENSTEIN@LIVINGONTHE SUNCOAST.COM](mailto:ORENSTEIN@LIVINGONTHE SUNCOAST.COM) COMMENTS FOR POSTING ON THE LIVING ON THE SUNCOAST SIMPLY SMART TRAVEL BLOG ARE WELCOME.