COSTA RICA

Costa Rica is Central America's jewel. It's an oasis of calm among its turbulent neighbours and an ecotourism heaven, making it one of the best places to experience the tropics with minimal impact. It's also mostly coastline, which means great surfing, beaches galore and a climate built for laziness.

Costa Rica's enlightened approach to conservation has ensured that lush jungles are home to playful monkeys, languid sloths, crocodiles, countless lizards, poison-dart frogs and a mind-boggling assortment of exotic birds, insects and butterflies. Meanwhile, endangered sea turtles nest on both coasts and cloud forests protect elusive birds and jungle cats.

Thrill seekers can fly through forests on zip lines, peer into boiling volcanoes, surf oversized waves and dive with dolphins and whales – all in the course of a normal day. Then again, if you have some serious chilling to do, you can always lounge in a hammock and enjoy the pure life, or *pura vida* – a national expression that sums up the desire to live the best, most hassle-free existence.

Electricity: 110V, 60Hz
Time Zone: GMT/UTC -6
Dialling Code: 506

Climate
As far as climate goes, the late-December to mid-April dry season is the most pleasant. But of course, this is when everyone else goes to Costa Rica, so prices increase and hotels are full. Although some roads are impassable in the wet season, it's still worthwhile to visit at this time, and things are much quieter.
April, May and mid-October to mid-December should give you the best of both worlds.

Festival Calendar
2nd week in March - San Antonio de Escazu (outside San Jose) hosts the annual Oxcart Driver's day festival, featuring parades and open-air marimba night dancing
April - Holy Week/Easter - Almost as festive as Christmas with lots of parades and attractions.
May 1st - Battle of Rivas
July 25th - Guanacaste Day
August 2nd - Virgin of Los Angeles day
September 25th - Independence Day
October 12th- Columbus Day
December 18th – January 5th - (San Jose) - A great time to be in the capital. Fireworks displays, dancing, confetti throwing, horse parades, bull running, carnivals and fairs all celebrating Christmas

Currency
The Costa Rican Colon is the official currency and Costa Rica is one of the more expensive countries in Central America. For budgeting purposes, between 20 and 25 USD per day should be sufficient in San Jose. Meals are much cheaper in rural areas. While you may have little difficulties changing Australian dollars or British Pounds in San Jose, the US dollar is best for the smaller towns. The same can be said por travellers' cheques and credit cards. Banks are generally open between 9am to 3pm, but the line-ups can be frustrating. You may find yourself in one line to get your transaction approved and then another line to actually receive your money. When changing travellers' cheques, you will most likely be required to show your passport and even your proof of purchase, so keep your receipt with you. Remember to ask for smaller denominations as changing larger colones bills can be troublesome in rural areas. You can easily withdraw colones with your credit card, but not US currency

Visas
Visa requirements vary greatly from country to country. It is your responsibility to check with your local Costa Rica consulate for the most current requirements. At present, citizens of the USA, Canada, the UK, most Western European countries, Argentina, Israel, Japan, Panama, South Korea and Uruguay do not require a Visa for travel of up to 90 days. Citizens of Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, France, Sweden and most Eastern European countries do not require a Visa for travel of up to 30 days.

Health

Dengue fever, transmitted by the Aedes aegypti, is unlike the malaria mosquito, as it is most active during the day, and is found mainly in urban areas, in and around human dwellings. Signs and symptoms of dengue fever include a sudden onset of high fever, headache, joint and muscle pains, nausea and vomiting. A rash of small red spots sometimes appears three to four days after the onset of fever. Severe complications do sometimes occur. You should seek medical attention as soon as possible if you think you may be infected. A blood test can indicate the possibility of the fever. There is no specific treatment. Aspirin should be avoided, as it increases the risk of haemorrhaging. There is no vaccine against dengue fever.

Cholera (low risk) This diarrhoeal disease can cause rapid dehydration and death. Cholera is caused by a bacteria, *Vibrio cholerae*. It is transmitted from person to person by direct contact and often via healthy carriers of the disease or via contaminated food and water. It can be spread by seafood, including crustaceans and shellfish, which get infected via sewage. Cholera exists where standards of environmental and personal hygiene are low. Every so often there are massive epidemics, usually due to contaminated water in conditions where there is a breakdown of the normal infrastructure. The time between becoming infected and symptoms appearing is usually short, between one and five days. The diarrhoea starts suddenly, and pours out of you. It's characteristically described as 'ricewater' diarrhoea because it is watery and flecked with white mucus. Vomiting and muscle cramps are usual, but fever is rare. In its most serious form, it causes a massive outpouring of fluid (up to 20L a day). This is the worst case scenario – only about one in 10 sufferers get this severe form. It's a self-limiting illness, meaning that if you don't succumb to dehydration, it will end in about a week without any treatment. You should seek medical help urgently; in the meantime, start re-hydration therapy with oral re-hydration salts. You may need antibiotic treatment with tetracycline, but fluid replacement is the single most important treatment strategy in cholera. Prevention is by taking basic food and water precautions, avoiding seafood and having scrupulous personal hygiene. The currently available vaccine is not thought worthwhile as it provides only limited protection for a short time.

Hepatitis - Several different viruses cause hepatitis and they differ in the way that they are transmitted. The symptoms in all forms of the illness include fever, chills, headache, fatigue, feelings of weakness and aches and pains, followed by loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, dark urine, light-coloured faeces, jaundiced (yellow) skin and yellowing of the whites of the eyes. Hepatitis A is transmitted by contaminated food and drinking water. Seek medical advice, but there is not much you can do apart from resting, drinking lots of fluids, eating lightly and avoiding fatty foods. Hepatitis E is transmitted in the same way as hepatitis A; it can be particularly serious in pregnant women. Hepatitis B is spread through contact with infected blood, blood products or body fluids, for example through sexual contact, unsterilised needles (and shaving equipment) and blood transfusions, or contact with blood via small breaks in the skin. The symptoms of hepatitis B may be more severe than type A and the disease can lead to long-term problems such as chronic liver damage, liver cancer or a long-term carrier state. Hepatitis C and D are spread in the same way as hepatitis B and can also lead to long-term complications. There are vaccines against hepatitis A and B, but there are currently no vaccines against the other types. Following the basic rules about food and water (hepatitis A and E) and avoiding risk situations (hepatitis B, C and D) are important preventative measures.

Malaria - If you are travelling in endemic areas it is extremely important to avoid mosquito bites and to take tablets to prevent this disease. Symptoms range from fever, chills and sweating, headache, diarrhoea and abdominal pains to a vague feeling of ill-health. Seek medical help immediately if malaria is suspected. Without treatment malaria can rapidly become more serious and can be fatal. If medical care is not available, malaria tablets can be used for treatment. You should seek medical advice, before you travel, on the right medication and dosage for you. If you do contract malaria, be sure to be re-tested for malaria once you return home as you can harbour malaria parasites in your body even if you are symptom free. Travellers are advised to prevent mosquito bites at all times. The main messages are: wear light-coloured clothing; wear long trousers and long-sleeved shirts; use mosquito repellents containing the compound DEET on exposed areas (prolonged overuse of DEET may be harmful, especially to children, but its use is considered preferable to being bitten by disease-transmitting mosquitoes); avoid perfumes and aftershave; use a mosquito net impregnated with mosquito repellent (permethrin) – it may be worth taking your own, and impregnating clothes with permethrin effectively deters mosquitoes and other insects.

Best time to go

As Costa Rica has such a diverse topography and is located in a tropical climate zone, you will probably experience rain regardless of when you go. It's a small price to pay however for the beautiful rain forests that you will encounter. December to April are probably the driest seasons. But there really isn't a bad time to visit

Costa Rica. Even during the wettest seasons, the rainfall tends to be heavy only for a couple of hours a day. Temperatures vary with altitude. San Jose's temperatures range between 15 C and 21 C while the coastline areas are much hotter.

Upon arrival

Once you've reclaimed your baggage and cleared customs, you will be warmly welcomed to Costa Rica, assisted with your luggage and taken you to your hotel by private air-conditioned minivan/bus. Please do not leave the airport terminal building unless you have made contact with Amazing Peru staff. Also ignore the calls from taxi drivers as your private transport has been provided for you.

Food and drink

Drink only bottled water. Pasteurised milk is widely available. Avoid dairy products that are likely to have been made from unboiled milk. Avoid street food vendors and the cheaper restaurants.

What to eat

To try some typical foods, here is a selection of what we recommend.

Gallo pinto - A dish made up of rice, black beans and spices (sometimes with fried eggs) traditionally served at breakfast
Flan - A cold caramel custard
Mazamorra - A pudding made from corn starch
Arreglados - Puff pastries filled with beef, chicken or cheese
Sopa negra - Black bean soup with a poached egg
Empanadas – A yuca bread turnover stuffed with meat and cheese
Ceviche - Seafood marinated in a lemon, onion, sweet red pepper, garlic and coriander sauce
Potacones - A great snack found on the Caribbean coast. Fried plaintains and french fried potatoes.

What to drink

Coffee of course!
Guaro - the national firewater, drank by the shot!
Horchata - A corn meal drink flavoured with cinnamon
Café Rica - A locally made coffee liqueur

Highlights

San Jose (altitude: 1160 m above sea level)

Visitors should plan on spending at least a few days in this bustling metropolis. It is more cosmopolitan than you might expect. There are shopping malls, excellent restaurants and good nightlife. There is really so much to do that the following suggestions are just a guide.
The Jade Museum - One of Costa Rica's most famous museums. It is home to the world's largest American jade collection. It's located on the 11th floor of the Instituto Nacional de Seguros, offering a spectacular view of the city. It is open from Monday to Friday, 9am to 3pm. Admission is free
National Theatre - Probably the most ornate of public buildings, the Theatre has marble staircases and gilded ceilings. It is best to visit during one of many frequently held performances. Otherwise, it is open from 9am to noon and from 2pm to 6pm.
Central Market - A great place to hunt for souvenirs and sample some Costa Rican delicacies.
The Gold Museum - Contains a great collection of pre-Columbian gold. Open between 10am to 5pm, admission free. There are also free English guided tours at 2pm on Tuesdays and Thursdays and at 11 am and 3pm on Saturdays and Sundays.
El Pueblo - An area of the city that offers a great variety of restaurants, nightclubs and shopping. You can walk from one to the other, along cobblestone streets, choosing between discotheques, reggae bars, jazz clubs and every type of international cuisine conceivable. Bars and restaurants in this area tend to be pricier than those found in other areas, but it is definitely worth a night in San Jose.

Day Excursions from San Jose

Guacima - A butterfly farm featuring the second largest collection of species of butterflies in the world just 35 minutes outside of the capital.

Las Nubes - A small village just 32 kilometers outside San Jose with spectacular views of Irazu (the highest active volcano in Costa Rica).
Instituto Clodomiro Picado snake farm - 30 minutes away.
Coffee plantations - There are numerous plantations that you can visit from San Jose.

Monteverde
This small community in northwestern Costa Rica was founded by Quakers in 1951 and is now a popular and interesting destination for both local and international visitors. The small town of Santa Elena is the closest settlement to the Monteverde cloud-forest reserve. The road leading from the town's center to the reserve is clustered with attractions including the butterfly garden, the serpentarium, a cheese factory, and a number of art galleries.

Pacific Beaches
Swim or relax on one of Costa Rica's beaches; the Pacific coast has a pleasing mixture of luxury resorts and deserted beaches. Golfito, on the southern Pacific coast, is an important port and jumping-off point for the region's fantastic beaches. Heading northeast from the town, the coast features numerous remote coves, with jungle-lodge accommodations and virgin rain forest backdrop. The coastal Parque Nacional Corcovado, on the Península de Osa, has a huge colony of scarlet macaws.

Parks
Over 40 years of government funding have given Costa Rican parks and wildlife quality and quantity of biological reserves and well-preserved ecosystems. The national park northwest of Parque Nacional Volcán Arenal, has at its center the perfectly conical 1633m (5356ft) Volcán Arenal. The volcano has been exceptionally active since 1968, when huge explosions triggered lava flows. The degree of activity varies from week to week; sometimes there is a spectacular display of flowing red-hot lava and incandescent rocks flying through the air, while at other times just a gentle glow.

Caribbean Coast (Costa Rica)
The Caribbean has more cultural diversity than the Pacific coast. Half of this coastal area is protected by national parks and wildlife refuges, which has slowed development and the building of access roads, making it an especially verdant place to get away from it all. The main city is Puerto Limón, which has a tropical park teeming with flowers and sloths. Parque Nacional Tortuguero is the most important Caribbean breeding ground of the green sea turtle and has plenty of birds, monkeys and lizards.

Península de Nicoya
This area on the northwestern Pacific coast is difficult to traverse because of the lack of paved roads; however, it's well worth the effort because it contains some of the country's best and most remote beaches. There are also some small and rarely visited wildlife reserves and parks. Parque Nacional Marino las Baulas de Guanacaste includes Playa Grande, an important nesting site for the massive *baula* (leatherback turtle). Playa del Coco is the most accessible beach on the peninsula, in an attractive setting.

Hotels
All the hotels we recommend are clean, well located and comfortable hotels varying in services as according to their category. We rarely use hostels as the price difference is negligible between a good hostel and a hotel. We do endeavour to choose the best hotels in line with your budget. There are five star hotels all the way to modest three star establishments. We will always quote you with good hotels on all our programmes but upgrades or downgrades will be available as per your request. However, as the price will decrease with downgrades, this will ultimately reflect in the services and standards of the hotel.

Flights
Unless otherwise stated, we provide the internal flights in your programme. We can provide international flight quotes upon request. We work directly with the best airlines in South America but are not responsible for any changes in flight schedules or cancellations made by the airlines. This is the responsibility of the airline in question. We will always endeavour to minimise any delays or changes but cannot guarantee a successful outcome.

Insurance
It is a mandatory requirement that all our customers take out adequate travel insurance cover. Once you have obtained your insurance, it is company practice to check the validity and cover of your insurance policy and we

hold the right to refuse travel to anyone whose insurance does not satisfy Amazing Peru's stringent criteria. These include cancellation and curtailment, death or injury, medical insurance, emergency repatriation, delayed baggage, loss and theft etc.