

[Costa Rica -- December 7-16, 2017](#)

In 1502, Christopher Columbus visited a tiny country in Central America and dubbed it the "[rich coast](#)" for the gold worn by the friendly locals. Today, much of Costa Rica's wealth lies in its progressive preservation of its abundant ecology. Bridging Panama on the southeast and Nicaragua on the north, Costa Rica's attractions range from volatile volcanoes to sleepy sloths. Smaller than West Virginia, it is home to 5% of all plant and animal species on the planet. **Click on each day's hyperlink for pictures!**

[Thursday – 12/7/17 San Jose](#)

We arrived in [San Jose, Costa Rica](#) at 7:30am and went to the [Crowne Plaza](#). We met up with friends from Costa Rica, Alejandra Vargas, who is in Law School and her dad, Alejandro Vargas who is a Judge. We were given the grand tour of San Jose, which included the [National Stadium](#) (built as a gift from the Chinese), the [Museo Nacional de Costa Rica](#) replete with a bullet ridden Tower from the 1948 Civil War. We saw the [Supreme Court](#), a statute dedicated to Central America beating back [William Walker](#). We had lunch at Tierra Nuestra, where we first tried Cacique, Ceviche, Cimarron and Casado. I had plenty of opportunities to practice my Spanish. We visited the [Metallic Building](#), the [National Theater](#), [Central Avenue](#), [La Sabana Park](#), the [National Monument](#), and the [Children's Museum](#). We enjoyed the Christmas decorations resplendent throughout the city. Costa Ricans take their Christmas decorations very seriously! After our grand tour of the historic and vibrant San Jose, we returned to the hotel exhausted and jetlagged. We went to bed early to get up 5 am to leave for the eco-rich [Tortuguero](#) and [Pura Vida](#), used ubiquitously as hello, goodbye, how are you, it's cool, chill, have a nice day, which seems to be Costa Rica's trademark phrase.

[Friday - 12/8/17 San Jose to Tortuguero](#)

We left San Jose traveling east to the shores of the scenic [Caribbean Coast](#) and [Tortuguero](#), which lie in the most remote jungles of Costa Rica. We drove through lush vegetation and acres of [Banana Plantations](#), one of Costa Rica's major exports. We got to [Evergreen Lodge](#) in time for lunch. Afterwards, we took a short boat ride to the [Sea Turtle Conservancy](#) and then walked on the [Caribbean Coast](#) to [Tortuguero](#), for a walking tour of the tiny village. We even managed to see some incredibly colorful [Toucans](#). We had dinner at the [Hotel Evergreen](#) and crashed in the room without A/C, where it was 86 degrees with 100% humidity. It was so hot and humid that I almost passed out.

[Saturday – 12/9/17 Tortuguero](#)

We were awakened by the birds and Howler Monkeys in full communication mode. We took a river cruise to the [Cano Negro Wildlife Refuge](#) through another [Banana Plantation](#) and saw what it takes to harvest bananas. Back at the lodge, we took a guided hike through trails in the nearby rainforest where we saw our first [3-Toed Sloth](#). It was here we were introduced to the [Tree Cutter Ants](#). Humans must abdicate their bitching rights when they [see what these little guys](#) do day in and day out.

[Sunday – 12/10/17 Tortuguero to San Jose](#)

It [rained](#) heavily throughout the night. Our short (109km) trip back to San Jose lasted a grueling 9 hours because a landslide blocked the return route. However, the highlight of this trip was getting to see a 3-Toed Sloth only 10 feet above us, [languishing in the tree](#). She showed us all her tricks like a slow dance, which kept our rapt attention for 20 minutes!

[Monday, December 11, 2017 San Jose to Arenal](#)

We traveled up into the highlands, which was our first experience with the small and dangerous 2 lane roads. Edgardo, our guide, told everyone on the bus, if you are scared because of the too-close trucks, cars and canyons below, do what the driver does, "close your eyes". It was a needed slice of humor to quash the fears associated with this trek. Our first stop was [Sarchi](#) for some local souvenirs and the location of the largest ox-cart. We proceeded even further into the hilly terrain to the into the highlands en route to [Arenal](#), enjoying the beautiful countryside, which is why Costa Rica has been given the moniker of the [Switzerland of Central America](#). We passed through [La Fortuna](#) and caught our first glimpse of the awe-inspiring [Arenal Volcano](#) and then headed to our hotel, [Arenal Manoa](#). Seeing the Volcano from our front porch was exquisite, not to mention the huge room replete with many amenities.

Tuesday, December 12, 2017 Arenal

Breakfast at the lodge included great food and the best view of the [Arenal Volcano](#). We opted for a cruise on the Rio Frio, which was very brown due to the previous day's deluge of rain. We got to spend the evening at the acclaimed [Ecotermales Hot Springs](#) which was like a huge outdoor Jacuzzi.

Wednesday, December 13, 2017 Arenal to Monteverde

Early In the morning, we went on a 2 mile hike on Las Coladas trail in [Arenal National Park](#) to learn more about the plants, trees, wildlife, insects, and birds. We even saw an anteater at the start of our trek. At the end of the trail, we hiked up over the lava rocks for a spectacular view of Lake Arenal. En route to [Monteverde](#), we drove entirely around [Lake Arenal](#). Later, we stopped in a very windy town (the region harnesses over 80% of the energy for Costa Rica) called [Tilarán](#). Finally, after a very treacherous road trip to the highest point in Costa Rica, we arrived at [Hotel El Establo](#). Although, it was 63°F, it felt so much colder here, no not as cold as the Midwest and East Coast, but to this native Californian, it was bitterly cold and they had no heater. Perhaps it felt colder because we were up so high? The cold notwithstanding, the sunset and views were magnificent. We were able to see more than 60 miles west, to the [Nicoya Peninsula](#), on the pacific coast.

Thursday – December 14, 2017 Monteverde

We headed out early to the Cloud Forest at [Selvatura Park](#). We started amongst hundreds of [hummingbirds](#) who rested on your hand while feeding. Our 2 mile trek took us over 8 hanging bridges, rising up nearly 5,000 feet high up in mountains. One bridge we walked actually took us across the [Continental Divide](#), which separates the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. The Forest boasts an extraordinarily diverse ecosystem, home to 120 species of reptiles and amphibians, 130 species of mammals, and an astounding 500 species of birds, not to mention more than 3,000 species of plants. After the rigorous hike, we had lunch and toured the [San Juan Plantation](#), a traditional Costa Rican coffee, sugar and cocoa plantation. Even though I don't like or drink coffee, the tour was very informative, entertaining and interactive. Our last meal before heading back to San Jose was at [Morphos](#).

Friday – December 15, 2017 Monteverde to San Jose

We left early in the morning for one more long drive down the treacherous mountainside back to San Jose. We stopped at a fruit stand on the Nicola Coast and got back to San Jose at about 4pm. We discovered a Casino at the hotel and tried our luck, but it would have been easier to just hand them the 1000 Mil Colones since I couldn't understand the slot machines there!!! We had dinner at the [Fuji Restaurant](#) with Charlie and Sam, a young couple on their honeymoon.

Costa Rica Parting Thoughts & Observations

Language

My mother tongue is English and I speak German fluently. Spanish is my third language, but I was able to converse, get information, and keep myself and husband out of trouble. At least I have no fear of making a mistake when speaking the language. Hmmmm, maybe I should apply that skill in everyday life!!! Costa Ricans use an N instead of an M, so it was always fun to hear "Sonetines". In Mexico and other Latin American countries, the response to gracias is usually de nada or no hay de que. I found out that only Costa Ricans use the phrase "con mucho gusto."

Infrastructure

Roads are usually 2 lanes and "muy peligroso" (dangerous) and accidents killed 450 people in 2017. It doesn't help that the terrain is curvy, hilly and mountainous and the infrastructure is in dire need of repair. We were lucky that Jose Pablo was an excellent driver, as we made it from San Jose to Arenal to Monteverde and back to San Jose intact. It helped that he had a sense of calm and humor for those who were a tad nervous. I asked him, "tiene Usted miedos?" (are you afraid?), he replied with complete confidence, "ninguno, usted?" (Not at all, you?) This managed to calm my nerves somewhat. I had to ask him again and this time he replied with such bravado and wit, "si, tengo mucho miedo", (yes I am really scared!) which took my anxiety way down. While the lakes, volcanoes, forests, mountains and hillsides were all breathtaking, the majority of my time on the bus was spent riveted on the 6" piece of road (asphalt, mud or gravel) that was all that stood between the bus and the canyons below.

[Military](#)

The 1949 Constitution abolished the Costa Rican army as a result of their short Civil War. They believed that an army was too great an expense given the nature of Costa Rica's emerging economy and believed the money could be better spent in other areas like education and that a police force would be capable of maintaining the civil order. That may explain why Costa Rica has a 96% literacy rate.

[Where Ex-Pats Retire](#)

Costa Rica holds 2nd place in the list of best places for ex-pats. The top 3 places are Bahrain, Costa Rica and Mexico and the bottom 3 are Kuwait, Greece and Nigeria.

[Currency](#)

The Costa Rican unit of currency is the Colón. Named after Christopher Columbus, the first European to visit Costa Rica, the Colón has a value that fluctuates between 500-550 Colones per \$1USD. The cost of travel in Costa Rica is higher than other countries in Central America, but is still cheaper than in the US (I disagree, things were pretty expensive in Costa Rica, but it was interesting because everyone from the smallest towns to the biggest cities all took \$USD).

[Politics](#)

Corruption, bribery, economic strife, social upheaval, healthcare costs and [immigration](#) issues (75% of those who immigrate are from Nicaragua to do the manual labor in the coffee, sugar and banana plantations.) Bad politics exist in every country on the planet, every country has their own problems, some more than others. But, it is the spirit and character of the people that drives the country, and Costa Ricans (Ticos) are warm and friendly.

[Our Guide](#)

The warmth, intelligence and spirit of the Ticos was perfectly embodied in our guide, Edgardo. He was so knowledgeable, eager and excited to talk about his beloved Costa Rica and was forthright and straightforward. He told us "las malas y las buenas". He had a great sense of humor, a passion and enthusiasm for educating and informing. He was always there to answer questions however naïve, dumb or difficult. He went out of his way to make people feel comfortable, calm and informed. It was him and his presence that made this trip to Costa Rica so memorable.

[Costa Rican Food](#)

[Casados](#) (married in Spanish) consists of rice, beans, and meat, and normally comes with cabbage-and-tomato salad, fried plantains, and/or tortillas. Fresh fruit and local vegetables were plentiful, including [Chayotes](#), which have the texture of cucumbers, but are never eaten raw. The food is not spicy. Costa Rican [sodas](#) are little restaurants serving traditional food.

[Cacique Guaro](#)

A high pure sugar cane liquor and is the best-selling distilled spirit in Costa Rica. It is not very expensive; I got 12.342 oz. for \$4USD. It has a neutral taste but it is "muy fuerte" (strong 30%). People usually drink it from a shot glass. I am a Diet Coke fiend; unfortunately, they don't have Diet Coke in Costa Rica, yes Coke Light and Coke Zero, but neither of these is Diet Coke. I actually had to substitute Regular Coke. And yes I could have drank water or juice, but do not judge me!!!!

[Animals](#)

We saw 8 out of the 9 exotic animals including: [Sloths](#), [Frogs](#), [Monkeys](#), [Hummingbirds](#), [Butterflies](#), [Macaws](#) and [Toucans](#) and even a [Coati](#). Most animals live high up in the trees and have the perfect camouflage. It was difficult to take a picture or even see them. At the end of trying and not succeeding, I decided to take a picture and "say" it was that animal, because if I couldn't see it, how could anyone challenge me. I managed to "capture" great shots of the animals from the internet and you will be able to tell which are my attempts and those from the internet. I am now convinced, I don't need to take pictures in real time, I will just write what I saw and then pull the better-taken pictures off the internet!!