



It may be small but Costa Rica is one of the most biodiverse countries in the world. With a staggering 29 national parks, the Central American nation's rugged topography, dense rainforests and steaming volcanoes give way to mangrove swamps and miles of secluded tropical beach. These lush, undisturbed landscapes thrum with exotic wildlife, such as howler monkeys and quetzal birds, and are heavily protected. In fact, Costa Rica is lauded for its ecological efforts, receiving the UN's highest environmental honour, the Champions of the Earth award, in 2019 for ambitious climate-change policies and its role in protecting nature, with plans to become carbon-neutral by 2050. Eco-conscious travellers can rest assured that many of the country's hotels, adventure activities, reserves and wellness retreats operate to similar high sustainable standards. From its welcoming culture to the misty cloud forests of Monteverde, here are five reasons to visit Costa Rica when we can travel again.

THE ECOTOURISM MOVEMENT

Volunteering schemes, carbon offsetting and ethical campaigns are woven into Costa Rica's travel industry by virtue of its long-established ecotourism movement. At the heart of this is the country's Pura Vida pledge – a commitment to educating both tourists and the travel trade about responsible tourism with five key steps: Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST), carbon offsetting, volunteering, respecting the environment and quality assurance. As the custodian of heaving rainforests, sublime beaches and 6.5 per cent of the world's biodiversity, Costa Rica has compelling reasons to protect the environment. By acknowledging these five principles, visitors can be confident they're making responsible choices while enjoying this dramatically wild landscape, 28 per cent of

which remains stringently protected. The tourism board's CST programme – an accreditation for hotels, tour operators and restaurants adhering to these sustainable practices – is a key element of the Pura Vida pledge and is a useful guide for eco-conscious travellers. **Up in the highlands above the Costa Rican capital San José, artist-owned resort Finca Rosa Blanca is a stellar example of such eco-endeavour. The sustainably forested coffee plantation is locavore in style, using the organic bounty of its farm, greenhouse and orchards to create delicious seasonal dishes, as well as a tasting menu paired with its own fresh Arabica brews. Finca Rosa Blanca is well located for exploring several of Costa Rica's natural wonders, notably the nearby steaming volcanoes, standing on the continental divide at Barva Volcano or marvelling at the moonscape surrounding the active Irazú volcano, as well as bird-watching, ziplining through the forest canopy and going on high-altitude coffee hikes which include cupping lessons.**

A FEELING OF SPACE

Costa Rica's vastly disparate landscape, carved down its green middle by a mountainous spine and sandwiched between the Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Sea, lends itself to long, windy journeys which can be as joyful as the destination itself. Take remote, upmarket eco- hotel Pacuare Lodge, which is 70 miles east of San José on the banks of Costa Rica's pretty Pacuare River and enveloped in the Bajo del Tigre forest. The lodge's jaguar conservation efforts are impressive, as are its eco-inspired adventures which make the effort to reach it worthwhile. Most guests eschew the long drive from the capital and its jolt-worthy dirt tracks for a dramatic white-water-rafting entrance and departure. Once off the raft, you step into a smart lodge whose wild isolation feels otherworldly. A lack of crowds is not unusual in Costa Rica and adds to the allure of its parks, wildlife reserves and colourful towns. The cleanliness of the magnificent Savegre River, which begins at Cerro de La Muerte and flows into the Pacific, is owed to the small number of inhabitants, including tapirs and crocodiles, along its banks. Santa Rosa National Park in Costa Rica's north-west, home to one of the world's last remaining tropical dry forests as well as untamed Pacific beaches such as Danta and Santa Elena, retains this sense of undiscovered charm where visitors have large swathes of forest and coastline to themselves. Wildlife enthusiasts should also visit the turtle-nesting beaches – Tortuguero on the Caribbean coast and Las Baulas National Marine Park on the Pacific – keeping eyes peeled when venturing into the vibrant rainforests for protected wildlife such as spider monkeys and white-tailed deer.

THE HEALING POWERS OF NATURE

Costa Rica's lush jungles and isolated stretches of coast are a big draw for those keen to shrug off the stresses of modern life and reconnect with nature. There are numerous wellness activities and retreats, most with admirable ecological and conservation credentials, such as Le Cameleon boutique hotel in Limon, not far from the town of Puerto Viejo on Costa Rica's Caribbean coast.

Hidden away in the jungle's thick foliage that meets the beach, this contemporary-styled eco-hotel is not only aesthetically sensitive to its surroundings with open air communal spaces and a pool wrapped in tropical plants, but is crucially mindful of its environmental impact, with recycled waste, careful water management and the exclusive use of solar power. Such efforts mean that a rich rainforest soundtrack and the movement of the waves set the rhythm of the place. Le Cameleon harnesses its bountiful location, using raw, organic foods cooked no higher than 52 degrees to salvage health-improving enzymes, and the beach's pretty sunrises and serene tempo for yoga classes and massages, as well as the bay for surfing, snorkelling and kayaking. Another of Costa Rica's protected gems is the Orosi Valley, the setting for Tapanti National Park – simply venturing through it is enough to lower stress levels. Some 35km from San José in the Province of Cartago, the peaceful green valley is carved by rivers and thermal waters and few superlatives do it justice. Further north-west of the capital lies Bajos del Toro – a cloud forest at an altitude of 1,442 metres that's home to Costa Rica's largest waterfall, Catarata del Toro which tumbles into a volcanic crater. Stay at nearby eco-lodge and spa El Silencio and find peace doing outdoor yoga or going on guided nature walks into the surrounding tropical forests, usually accompanied by the thrum of hummingbirds.

OFF-GRID ADVENTURE

The establishment of both the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve in 1972 and the Santa Elena Cloud Forest Reserve in 1989 (one of the first reserves controlled by its local community) was pivotal in catalysing Costa Rica's sustainability movement. Both form part of the country's famous Monteverde Cloud Forest in the north-west province of Sierra de Tilarán. This dense, emerald mass heaves with exotic wildlife, insects and plant species, and draws intrepid spirits with high-altitude hikes along hanging bridges, zip-lining and nature spotting (look out for squawking macaws and docile sloths). Adrenalin junkies head to La Fortuna in Alajuela to see the majestic – and active – Arenal volcano. After a long day hiking the surrounding forests and lava fields, visitors can soak in one of the many geothermal hot-spring pools at the volcano's base. Surfers and waterbabies should make for the beaches along the Gulf of Papagayo, just south of Santa Rosa National Park, where the mangroves are doused in brilliant sunlight. Stay at El Mangroove, a stylishly pared-back hotel right by the water, with boat trips, kayaking and snorkelling in the bay. Manuel Antonio's beaches are well-known for their beauty, as is Arenas del Mar, an elevated eco-friendly and community-focused stay on the beachfront with the surf at Espadilla nearby. A lesser-known pocket of coast can be found in Marino Ballena National Park where a two-mile stretch of white sand, Playa Uvita, mimics the shape of a whale's tail. Fittingly, this is one of the best spots for whale-watching during mating season – from mid July to mid November and mid December to mid April.

THE WARM CULTURE

Costa Rica's vibrant culture is a welcome post-lockdown balm. The sustainably wired nation's Pura Vida pledge derives from the greeting used as an expression of happiness, which translates as 'pure life' or 'full of life', much like Costa Rica's rainforests and coastline. You'll find this positive energy in the family-owned cafés, artisanal shops and in places such as the Bribri reserve, located in the formidable Talamanca Mountain range along the banks of the Yorkin River. Here, the community who live in the Yorkin Indigenous Reserve welcome a small number of visitors each day, taking them into their family life, cooking meals with them and sharing the warmth of their culture. Such is the spirit of Costa Rica's hospitality – a blueprint for allowing tourism to grow in harmony with nature and the surrounding communities.