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INDEPENDENT PARKING IN COSTA RICA

by

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(note: prices cited below will have increased significantly from the original writing date)

There are three basic choices for those who wish to explore Costa Rica's flora and fauna. First, there are a number of private preserves around the country in a variety of settings. Visiting these usually is a package deal which includes room and board, guided tours etc., and a correspondingly high fee.

The second and obvious choice for independent budget travelers was the national parks and reserves. These are located all around the country and vary widely in what they have to offer. Details on the parks will follow, including some budget strategies.

Third, you can simply go off on your own to areas with reasonably intact forests and find trails used by locals to gather forest products or to get around. This can be take a bit of time and asking around, but it is certainly worthwhile since you will be where few visitors ever go. Unless you have enough time, though, this can be frustrating if your search is fruitless.

Unless you just want to skip the whole deal and go to Panama instead, the national parks will still be the choice for most budgeteers in Costa Rica. Let me add first, then, that you can buy a "yellow ticket" a day in advance for only \$10, which is good for admission to any park. These can be purchased at any park and from the national parks office in San Jose. According to the office, there are no other options, such as a possible package of tickets or a "one-pass" type of deal.

For those parks allowing camping, the cost is still less than \$2 per night. And while park rangers are

very strict on complying with the \$15 admission, they are quite slack on the daily aspect of it: once you're in, you're in, and they probably won't make you pay the fee each day. You can also avoid paying at all if you are so inclined by coming in through an untended entry, if one exists, or by coming at night (if you are camping).

Primarily, though, the expensive entry requires you to plan carefully and seek value for your ticket price. Some parks offer no more than a couple of short loop trails, and \$7.50 per two-kilometer hike is really not worth it.

If your time is limited, think about visiting a park in the San Jose area in central Costa Rica first, and then venturing out to one of the remote parks in the corners of the country. For scheduling purposes, it would be fairly easy to visit a park per day in the center and on the Pacific side.

In the mountains around San Jose (the Meseta Central), the biggest park is the huge, lush, wet Braulio Carrillo to the north. Good for nature, but unfortunately for us, there is very limited access to the park. There are three entry points, two have only small hiking trails. The third leads toward the Barva volcano and has a longer trail for hiking. You can also camp there. Since one ticket is good for same-day entry at all three entry points, this might be good value if you have a car and if it's not raining.

A couple of hours south is the Tapanti wildlife refuge, and this is probably the best bet in the area. If you are car-less, consider overnighting in Paraiso or Orosi and hitching an early ride with an electric company truck. (Look for vehicles with ICE on the side. There is a hydroelectric plant in the back of the park and a fair few ICE trucks go back and forth.) This rarely visited park has 250 species of birds. The flora is lush and birding takes patience, except for the abundant humming birds. There are a few trails for visitors and some rough, challenging blazes up to the power pylons for the intrepid. Don't lose your sense of direction.

There are no camping facilities at the park but if you show up with your tent they may let you set up at the headquarters or in one of the picnic pavilions by the river. Ask for Sergio, a helpful and

knowledgeable park ranger who has spent a lot of time studying wildlife management in the US and who makes a good cup of rainy-day coffee. He can also help flag down a passing ICE truck at about 4 p.m. for your trip back.

On the old road east to the Caribbean coast from San Jose is a small archaeological ruin near the charming mountain town of Turrialba. The Guayabo National Monument is not impressive if you have been to the Yucatan ruins, but it is Costa Rica's largest pre-Columbian ruin. If you have time and money it is probably worth it. There are also two volcanoes in the area. Near Turrialba is Irazu, which, just before I arrived, has its first major eruption since 1963. Access is now limited: check at the park headquarters. North of San Jose is the popular Poas volcano, said to have the second-broadest crater in the world. Again, it is up to you to decide whether you want to pay \$10 or \$15 to smell sulphur and look at a big hole through the fog.

CARIBBEAN COAST

Other national parks are scattered all across the country. A good bet if your time is short is to head over to the Caribbean coast. The northern half is the Tortuguero park, a sanctuary and nesting ground for green turtles. You can get there by boat from Moin (\$50-70 per boat; organize a group) or you can now take a bus from Siquirres to the villages of Suerre or Freeman and catch a boat from there (\$30-40) to Tortuguero village. The park is best seen along the canals by boat, either a guided tour or rented canoe. There is limited camping: get information first from the park headquarters.

An option with a lot of flexibility is to go south of Puerto Limon, a funky, dirty, Caribbean town, down to the area of Cahuita National Park and the area of Puerto Viejo. From the village of Cahuita you can walk 8 kilometers into the park (no entry toll) and camp along a nice beach. Plenty of howler monkeys are in the area, and you should see things like sloths and coatimundis, along with the odd toucan and other birds. There are plenty of herons on the beach, and a small reef off the point.

On down at Puerto Viejo, a surf bum kind of town, you can camp at Miss Iris's (\$2 per night). She is a wonderful old woman of Jamaican descent with a subtle sense of humor. Behind the village school you

can hike up the mountains on local trails to get a view of the coast in mountain cool and blissful tranquility. Snorkeling and biking gear can be rented in town.

You can also arrange to take a jungle walk with a native Bribri indian guide. They will take you through the jungle, feeding you various plants and telling you about their lives along the way. You won't see native villages but it is interesting to hear their story. Spanish is needed. You can arrange this in Puerto Viejo at the interesting Asociacion Talamanca de Ecoturismo y Conservacion (ATEC) office for about \$13. For half that price, you can go directly to the hut where the Bribri sell inexpensive handicrafts, behind the Pinguino Cabinas two kilometers from the town, to arrange a tour for the next day (ask for Lucas or his sister Gloria). Either way the money goes to a good cause.

PACIFIC COAST

On the Pacific coast, the climate is truly dry in the dry season (our winter), and in some areas it is the only time the roads are not flooded.

In the far northwest is the peninsula park of Santa Rosa. This is also turtle country and you will need at least a couple of days to appreciate the park. There are plenty of trails (walking and four-wheel drive), beaches and three camping areas. Bring in your own food; you can also get meals for about \$4 at the headquarters. Locals seem to like this park a lot and will tell you how easily you can see the wildlife, due to the sparse foliage in the dry season. Of course, this helps the animals see you all the better as well and avoid contact accordingly. Still, you can see lots of green parrots, jays and huge iguanas down by the spectacular beach.

From the park you can also see two local volcanos looming cloudily in the distance, Orosi and Vieja, which are also their own respective national parks. You will have to hitch a ride in the seven kilometers to Santa Rosa from the Pan American highway turnoff; this can be hard at night, but it is a lovely walk under the stars.

Down on the southern Pacific coast is the wild Corcovado National Park. This is growing in popularity and only a limited number of people are allowed in at any given time. It takes a few days to see (mostly on foot) and needs a bit of planning, but should be well worth all the effort. Check with park headquarters in San Jose for details and reservations. Another recommended trip is to the country's highest mountain, Chirripo, and the surrounding cloud forests, and the largest stretches of Costa Rica's virgin forests. It is part of the vast La Amistad International Park, shared with Panama. A visit here will also take some advance planning and consultation with the headquarters office.

There are many other parks, private reserves and gardens in the country. The ones listed here are generally in areas where fewer tourists tend to visit. Get a good guidebook or two, send off for information, and determine before you go which parks you want to see. Once in San Jose, start at the national parks headquarters office. Try not to do too much and you can avoid those pesky grinchies; just remember your insect repellent and rain gear.

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There are plenty of accommodations, small restaurants and usually enough buses to get you around the country. Some areas can get crowded during various times of the year, though, so plan ahead. North Americans receive a three-month visa at the border. A reasonable daily budget is between \$20 and \$30; Costa Rica is probably the most costly country in the region, and there are plenty of things upon which to blow your money.

Aero Costa Rica (800-237-6274) has flights out of Miami and Orlando, with occasional deals.

The national park headquarters (Servicio de Parques Nacionales) in San Jose is located on Avenida 8 just off Calle 25, next to the office of the Ministerio de Recursos Naturales, Energia y Minas (tel. (506) 222-1090).

The main tourist information office is under the Plaza de la Cultura in the center of town, next to the

Museo de Oro. There is also an office at the airport if you arrive during business hours. You can write for brochures and information to I.C.T. (Instituto Costarricense de Turismo), PO Box 777-1000, San Jose. Telephone: (506) 223-1733, 223-8423, fax (506) 223-5452.

In-country transport will mainly be by bus. There have been no trains since the 1992 earthquake. Fares to anywhere in the country will be less than \$10. There are also plenty of rental vehicles available in San Jose. A domestic airline, Sansa, has puddle-jumpers which hop all over the country for reasonable fares. Hitching goes well outside of the crowded San Jose region, although Ticos (native Costa Ricans) often don't understand the concept and may drop you at the nearest bus station. Sometimes, especially if you hitch on the dodgy Pan American highway, you may be asked to pay a fare.

Accommodations vary greatly in San Jose, with value not always commensurate with price. There are a few places for under \$10. One popular stop is the Hotel Astoria, on Avenida 7 between calles 7 and 9. Showers are lukewarm, rooms in the back are under \$7. Towards the bus station is the unassuming Hotel Marlyn, known only to a few travelers. It is on Calle 4 between avenidas 7 and 9. Same price and showers as the Astoria. Both have 24-hour security.

Out in the countryside you can usually find plenty of rooms for under \$10. I really liked the old wooden Pension Dorita (\$3.50, cold shower) in Limon, across from the Puerto Viejo bus stop. On the northwest side of the country, avoid the youth hostel in Liberia, which hoses you for \$16 per night.

Best bet for food is at the small restaurants called sodas. They are everywhere and meals run between \$3 and \$7. They will often change money for a good rate as well. San Jose has a variety of restaurants but things get more limited as you get away from tourist stops. There are a few supermarkets in San Jose (look for the "Mas X Menos" around town) and plenty of small food shops in smaller towns.

You can use San Jose as a base and take organized daytrips from there. It is more expensive but much easier. These average from \$48 upwards which includes transport and admission. You can find information about these excursions as well as visits to private reserves, farms and gardens, other tours,

etc., from the many travel offices and agents in San Jose. Here is a quick sample: Irazu or Poas volcano, \$28. Manuel Antonio National Park, \$95. Braulio Carrillo National Park and banana plantation, \$65. Corcovado National Park tour, two days and one night, \$120.

For information on Costa Rica call the Costa Rica Tourist Board (aka the Instituto Costarricense de Turismo) toll-free at 800-327-7033. Once in-country, you can pick up the moderately helpful tourist publication, "Costa Rica: Tourist Orientation Guide". It contains a yellow pages with hotels, restaurants, airlines, travel agents, etc.

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