



Traveling Costa Rica /Bas must see Costa Rica

There are certain things in your life that you can gaze upon, retrospectively, and deem them “Life-Changing” or merely “Life-Happening”. I’d have to say that moving to Costa Rica last January was definitely one that I would characterize as “Life-Changing”. Although I believe to itemize every detail of that experience would be ridiculous so I will sum up my favorite parts of Costa Rica that I think everyone, if life permits, should experience. Now considering this to be my home, I am often asked by friends, family and friends and family of friends and family as to what people should see or experience while visiting Costa Rica. What’s the “Don’t go home without seeing this...” list. And again, I’ll reiterate the same claim with you as I do with them... You can’t see all of Costa Rica in a couple of weeks. Just know that your first visit will ultimately lead you to your next visit and so on and so on...to the extreme that I have eventually relocated my entire life to Costa Rica. So, to express my opinion with no merit to do so, I advise that all week or two week travelers pick out 3 spots additionally to San Jose. I think it’s really important to at least spend a few days in a location to really get a good feel as to what that location has to offer. Therefore, too, it is important to pick locations that are multi-sided locations. By “Multi-sided” I mean that there is more to do than just one default activity. I enjoy having some options when I’m vacationing...of course, the most important option being that I have the choice to do nothing (which tends to be my most consistent winner, especially when vacationing).

So, in that, my dear friend from my last home (in St. Thomas, U.S.V.I) came to visit me for two weeks to see if I was really doing as well as I had claimed and to see what all of the Costa Rica hype was really about. My friend, coming from the Caribbean, expressed no real desire to visit the Caribbean side of Costa Rica this trip because he’s lived, seen and experienced the Caribbean lifestyle for nearly 15 years. Instead, he was really interested in seeing the Pacific coast and, besides that, left every other decision in my hands.

Armed with this responsibility, I took charge of his allotted two weeks of medicinal freedom and planned his scarce and sacred time carefully, including all of the places that I found in Costa Rica that are, to me, more than mind-blowing. My friend arrived in San Jose and that’s where our little Costa Rican adventure began.

First, as a traveler to Costa Rica, I can pretty much assure you that you will need to spend at least two nights of your vacation in the city of San Jose. Most flights don’t enter Costa

Rica in enough time for you to painlessly plan an escape from the tentacles of San Jose and inevitably, you end up finding a hotel. It is very common for travelers to spend their first night in downtown San Jose to catch a bus the next day and to stay outside of San Juan (usually in Alejuela) near the airport for a convenient and fast get-a-way.

One of the first thing First-timers realize about San Jose is that it's a full blown city, fully equipped with tall buildings, traffic, smog and a ton of people. Little red taxi cabs dance, bounce, scurry and buzz through traffic at an incredibly talented, yet relentlessly crazy and inhibited pace. It is because San Jose has few road signs, many unmarked one way avenues, no respected speed limits and drivers with no real sense of space that I choose to let someone else do the driving in and around San Jose.

So, with that covered, I parked my car at the airport to pick up my friend and then we scooted off in one of the official Red Devil taxi cabs. As usual, the first question the taxi driver asks is where we're staying and regardless of where we answer (and usually without listening to where you've said anyway) he immediately suggests a nicer and less expensive hotel that would be more accommodating. Know that taxi drivers can receive some handsome commissions for taking you somewhere other than where you've planned. I suppose you can't blame them for trying to tweak your schedule a bit and make 4 times their cab fair.

Showing my experience with this, I immediately answer that, no...in fact we do want to go to the hotel I suggested. The taxi driver swung his head around to look at us and asked, "Where are you staying again"? See...Not listening. So, I repeat the destination and the taxi takes an immediate right in response. Sometimes these taxi drivers get really, really creative and suggest that the hotel you want to go to is "Booked" or "Full". This can be an effective method and usually scares most tourists but if you take off your tourist hat and put on your hometown brain one more time, what are the odds that this taxi driver knows the occupancy of your hotel? This is especially common if you plan to stay in a hostel where reservations usually aren't accepted...All the taxis will insist that there are no vacancies where you want to go. I usually ask them to prove it or that I want to go there anyway...maybe I'm meeting other people there or something...

Anyway, we arrive at the hotel, get unsettled and head out for a night on the town. There are nearly an unlimited number of clubs and restaurants that you can go. Depending on what you like, I'd suggest talking with the hotel staff and have them suggest some places. There are large club and village type environments that host a ton of events, music and food but just be a little on guard with your valuables and money. Where there are a lot of people there tend to be more incidents of petty thievery and such. Being in a big city like San Jose is not why I moved to Costa Rica. I really enjoy the natural beauty of the country, so, with my suggestion, we planned an early escape the next day and headed to the city of Tambor (which is where I live). The Nicoya peninsula is really nice because it is a really laid back environment and it's absolutely beautiful. Having the advantage of living in Tambor, I live along the side of Bahia Ballena which is a beautiful bay on the Pacific but due to its shape, ends up being a very calm and tranquil body of water. What I like best about Nicoya (and Tambor) is that within 30 minutes I can visit 4 other cities that all host an abundance of activities that are all a little different and unique to one another.

So, using Tambor as a central spot (and really you could use any of the 4 cities as a hub) I created short day trips for my friend and I. One day we drove 20 minutes to the easy-going town of Montezuma where we visited the waterfalls. These waterfalls are a great retreat because you can park right near them. I'm all for hiking to see waterfalls but it's pretty neat when you can just drive up there, see the waterfalls and then have time to go see the rest of the town. Montezuma is a nice, little hippie town known for its clinging youth and its good selection of restaurants. There are amazing restaurants in Montezuma and it really makes the whole trip worthwhile to check them out. How many times have you driven 20 minutes or so for dinner? Here it's the same thing but you're in another town. If you've ever felt the need to purchase some hand made wooden or leather jewelry, Montezuma may be a dangerous place for you. The streets are littered with home made stands exhibiting endless amounts of goods to hang on any part of your body that will allow it. I'm sure you could even muster enough courage into one of these hippies to make a hole for you to hang something on, too, if you were so inclined, but I'd rather find my adventures on the beach or in the restaurants. Remember, the nearest clinic is in Cobano (about 15 minutes away).

My friend really enjoyed Montezuma but he wasn't "Over-joyed" over the whole experience. He liked the ocean and he really liked the food and the art. I reassured him that it's okay to not love somewhere...Montezuma is a great place for me to visit once every couple of weeks. Some people like it so much they find that they can't leave it.

The next day we traveled the newly repaired and beautiful road through Cabuya. Cabuya is a remote little location in Nicoya that has only recently been opened to the exposure of the tourists because of the new road that takes you from Montezuma to Mal Pais along the coast. Before the new road, you had to trek back through Montezuma, Cobano and then head to Mal Pais that way. This new road allows you to take full advantage of the scenic route to Mal Pais. And believe me...it's scenic!

While you're passing through Cabuya you'll notice a small island about a 100 yds from the coastline. This island is actually a cemetery. It's actually, really, really cool. During low tide, the sea takes a few steps back to reveal a sand bar that appears to form the perfect walkway to this little island. When funeral processions pass, they have to time it for the low tide. Then, once they've lowered you down, the people jump off the island and watch as the high tide comes in to seal the deal and provide your body some seclusion and privacy for about 12 hours or so. Then, inevitably, the tide will wash out again and, again, giving you the option of receiving visitors.

Once the car rose above the hills of Cabuya we descended into the valley which precedes Mal Pais. This is a great part of the road because it snakes along side a healthy creek and there is dense canopy overhead which serves as a great shade.

Mal Pais hosts one of the most beautiful coasts I've ever seen. It is truly remarkable. It will remind most of driving down highway 1 in California. There really isn't too much in Mal Pais. It's mostly just a surfer's paradise. There are a few little shops and hotels along the strip but most of the action tends to be in Santa Teresa. Santa Teresa is about 10 minutes from Mal Pais and is on the same road. It's kind of bizarre, those who

emphatically stress the differences between Mal Pais and Santa Teresa. You can walk from Mal Pais to Santa Teresa and never know you'd left one and entered the next. Someone at the payphones (near the boundary line) may exclaim, "Bienvenido a Santa Teresa (Welcome to Santa Teresa)"! but I seriously doubt it.

Santa Teresa hosts one of the best places in Costa Rica to watch a sunset. Actually, it is one of the last places in Costa Rica to see the sunset! You ever see a picture on the web or a postcard where the sky looks like someone through a box of Crayolas on a hot skillet? That's really what the sunsets look like in Santa Teresa. Only when I took my own pictures did I believe it. So, my friend and I enjoyed the sunset and he took enough pictures to please any small group of Japanese tourists. Another great thing about Santa Teresa is there is a fantastic, wood grille, gourmet pizza place right on the beach. You can sit there and have great pizza, watch the waves and with proper timing witness the sunset mentioned above.

With bellies full and our retinas burned out from staring into that glowing orange ball, we traveled east back to Tambor. Tambor is a great place if you really want to just fall off the face of the earth for a while and that's exactly what we did. Climbing in and out of hammocks was almost an over-exertion but we managed.

After about a week or so of the Tambor Torture, we jumped back in the car to make our way back to San Jose. We had about 5 days to kill getting there so I decided to take him to Jaco beach on the Pacific seaboard.

Jaco is a hip little surf town that isn't so little any more. The first time I'd visited Jaco was about 4 years ago and already it's blown into this tiny America on the coast. There are pizza huts, subways, 24 hr grocery stores and everything. It was definitely a shock to the system and I think my friend sensed it too...No big deal, switch gears and we were off. We stayed in this little hotel right on the water called Casablanca. This is a great little place because of its location on the beach and for the hotel itself. It's very safe and the rooms are very clean. It's about \$100 a night or so...depending on the season, of course. In Jaco we took part in a nice massage, a really great dinner and a couple of the late spot bars and clubs. If you're in Jaco for the weekend you'll definitely see the bars opening until breakfast but this was a Tuesday and most things calmed down around 2 or 3...Thank the heavens! The next day we took a few hours on the beach and had some good breakfast and coffee. This day we were driving all the way to La Fortuna to visit the great, majestic Volcano Arenal. This is one of my favorite places in Costa Rica. It's absolutely stunning.

If you're traveling to or from Jaco, it will be great if you can be in your own car because there is a famous bridge about 15 minutes from Jaco where you can park, hit a little restroom break, buy some goodies, grab a bite to eat and look at 15 foot salt water crocodiles. Yep...that's right...Big, enormous, potential man-eating beasts of the river. Luckily, you have a very safe vantage point of about 50 feet directly above these little critters. You'll see the tourists hanging on the bridge to get the best pictures of these ancient creatures and it is pretty creepy. I've never heard of any incident or accident with one of these scaly animals but it's pretty exciting to see them in their natural environment. I've seen tours where these guys opt to leave the guided boat tour, wade in

waist-high water to tantalize these beasts with meat other than their own bodies and I think, “Yeah...that’s pretty cool...” but I really don’t wanna see it. I’m certain I’ll be on the tour with one-armed Juan when he learns two valuable lessons 1) Never underestimate your opponent and 2) How to fasten your belt.

So, we stopped at the bridge and watched the teeth and eyeballs submerge and re-emerge for about an hour, grabbed some waters and hit the road again. The trip from Jaco to La Fortuna is about 4 ½ hours if you decide to drive through the cloud forest. Who wouldn’t want to drive through the cloud forest? I’d seen Cloud City on the videos. So, on we drove. We’re coming Lando!

The cloud forest is a lot cooler to sit and have a couple of drinks while it slowly moves in...if you’ve ever seen the movie *The Fog*...it’s EXACTLY like that but without the leper colony subplot. But to drive through the mountainous, snaking roads and bridges barely able to see your hood ornament can add a little more excitement to your trip than you probably wanted. Just take it slow and enjoy it...it’s really pretty spectacular to see.

Just as you exit the cloud’s embrace you find yourself nearly on top of La Fortuna. The volcano is visible from here, too but odds are it’s difficult to see. As many times as I’ve been to Arenal I’ve never been able to see the volcano when I’m driving in or out. Usually, the best visibility is in the morning or late at night.

The town of La Fortuna is a small little town that has just about everything you’d really need. If you’re just traveling through, then you’ll definitely find everything you’ll need for your trip. Heck, I even found an auto mechanic because my car died while I was in La Fortuna this time around...It’s good to be in a town that at least has a mechanic! Anyway, La Fortuna is known for the great views of Arenal, the hot springs and the waterfall. This is why La Fortuna is a must see!

Arenal is the really tricky part of this trip...you never know when you’re going to be able to see the guy blow...That’s why I suggest you stay at least two nights in La Fortuna. There are several activities to keep you busy and at night, maybe you’ll get lucky and watch the big guy lose his head. The first night my friend and I were in town we stayed at Arenal Paraiso. This is a fantastic little resort facing the Volcano Arenal. We each got a private cabin facing the monster for about \$70/night. It was worth every freakin’ penny! The resort itself has nearly everything you could ever want...massage, good restaurants, gift shop and even hot springs...but I suggest enjoying the professional hot springs.

What are hot springs, you ask? Well...there is a lot of water deep under the earth that is full of minerals and other ad-craving elements that supposedly revitalize your skin...I really don’t care about that hub bub...it could be true it could be false. All I know is that Arenal heats up these rivers of water to about 165 degrees Fahrenheit and can pretty much cook you. Of course, if you travel to the Baldi hot springs (which is my favorite..isn’t the cheapest but it’s just so damn cool) you can choose the temperature of your water. They also have cool, natural pools as well. It is probably one of the most relaxing things you can do in your life. You pay for a full day pass at Baldi so I wouldn’t suggest only going for an hour or so. I’d say get there at about 10 when they open and get

a feel for the place. Enjoy and relax. Then after dinner, head back up there and spend a few hours. If you're lucky, they'll kill the lights at night so you can watch the Mighty Arenal explode. That would be the experience that you tell everyone about, I promise.

My friend and I fully enjoyed and took advantage of the hot springs and even worked in a massage or two throughout the day. We ate well and enjoyed La Fortuna. The next day, we drove to the great waterfall of La Fortuna. It's a spectacular spectacle (I really just wanted to type that). I've seen a few waterfalls in my life but this one is probably the largest that I'd seen. Not to mention you're allowed to try your luck and swim in the thing. I'm pretty sure if the water hit you it would kill you but then again, maybe not. I don't think people are that smart and I don't remember anyone ever dying. I think I've read that 4 people a year die from opening soda bottles and such...so I suppose anything is possible. Moral of the story is the waterfall is a must see. I believe it costs nearly \$5 to get in but it's worth it.

La Fortuna is also a good place to check out the Canopy Tour (Monteverde is my favorite Canopy Tour). La Fortuna has pretty much managed to incorporate all things sought after by tourists and made them available. You'll see that it is a town conditioned to tourism and they welcome it and cater to it well.

Our last night in La Fortuna was a great one. The sky miraculously cleared itself of any substance and allowed us to view one of the most amazing shows I've ever seen: The Arenal volcano and all its splendor. Eruption after eruption we sat outside our cabins, drinking coffee. We sat mostly in silence with the exceptional "ooh" and "aahh". It was like we were school children on Fourth of July. We were very lucky. I hear of stores of visitors coming to Arenal and never seeing it. They may hear it crack, pop and fizzle but they never get the satisfaction of watching the molten lava smother the cone like some sort of raspberry syrup. This is why I suggest anyone to spend at least two nights in La Fortuna. It's also important to spend the money for a nice hotel that gives you views of the volcano all night long. If you have to travel to see the show you're really limiting yourself and your chances. You didn't come to Costa Rica to gamble, did you? That's what Las Vegas is for...

In conclusion, break your time in Costa Rica into just a few places that offer a variety of activities. Don't try to kill yourself seeing every little thing you can or wake up in a different town every day. Your vacation will become a blur. I, too, own a great photo album of Europe and I can't tell you what any of those pictures are, either. Don't treat Costa Rica the same way you do other destinations. Costa Rica doesn't work that way. So, here is the layout for those who have at least two weeks to spend in Costa Rica:

Day 1-San Jose (downtown hotel for the buses...if you have a rental car, it doesn't matter where you stay).

Day 2,3,4,5 & 6 -Nicoya Peninsula (come stay in Mal Pais/Santa Teresa, Montezuma or Tambor) use the place as a hub and take day trips to each one. They're easy to navigate and they're relatively close together.

Day 7 (8)- Head to Jaco or Manuel Antonio. You have to cross the ferry and head south. Jaco is more lively and Manuel Antonio is more mature. You pick.

Day 9, 10 & 11 La Fortuna and Arenal. You can spend more time here if you want. Just make sure you spend enough time here to see the volcano explode. Trust me, if you leave without seeing it, it would be an injustice.

Day 12, 13 are extra days that I believe you would spend in either Jaco or Manuel Antonio depending upon your speed. Day 13 you have to make your way back to San Jose. I suggest staying in Alejuela. It's cheaper and closer to the airport.

Information: <http://www.c21costaricainfo.com>

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