

7 Day Costa Rica Itinerary



General Tips

When should I go to Costa Rica?

Anytime! Seriously, even in the “wet” season there is still plenty of opportunity for sunshine, and likewise during the “dry” season there is opportunity for rain. In my experience rainfall is typically for an hour or two in the afternoon. Bring a light rain jacket, and shoes you don’t mind getting wet and you’ll be fine. However, Costa Rica’s dry season is December to April, offering warm, sunny weather ideal for hiking and wildlife viewing, though it’s also the peak tourist season. The wet (“green”) season is May to November, with lush landscapes, fuller waterfalls, and exciting rafting conditions, but also daily afternoon showers, higher humidity, and lower prices.

Where do I fly?

Costa Rica offers two international airports, San Jose and Liberia. The flights to San Jose are more broadly available, and offer you time to check out the lovely capital city. This itinerary will focus on a flight landing in San Jose, but could easily be modified to Liberia if you find a great flight deal.

Should I drive or hire a driver?

Driving in Costa Rica is an adventure, and if you’re new to driving outside of the United States a driver or shuttle services might make your trip smoother. Alternatively, if you’re up for an adventure, cautious and aware of your surroundings, and enjoy stopping at random places along the way - rent a car and drive yourself!

Trip Overview

Day	Location	Highlights
Day 1	San Jose → La Fortuna	Drive to La Fortuna (2.5 hrs) and enjoy hot springs and views of Arenal Volcano
Day 2	La Fortuna (Arenal)	Mistico Hanging Bridges, Arenal Volcano Hiking, hot springs
Day 3	La Fortuna	La Fortuna Waterfall, optional Rio Celeste day-trip

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Day 4	La Fortuna → Monteverde	Drive around Lake Arenal, and coffee farm tour
Day 5	Monteverde	Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve, zip-lining or night walk
Day 6	Monteverde → Manuel Antonio	Drive to the Pacific coast, beaches and wildlife
Day 7	Manuel Antonio → San Jose	Explore Manuel Antonio National Park; return to San Jose for flight

Detailed Itinerary

Day 1 - Arrival & Transfer to La Fortuna (Arenal)

- **Morning/Afternoon:** Fly into San José (SJO). After clearing customs, pick up your rental car and drive ~56 mi/90 km to La Fortuna; expect a 2½ hour trip, so aim to leave by midday to arrive before dark (mountain roads are poorly lit). En route you can stop in small towns for snacks and scenery.
- **Evening:** Check into your hotel. Relax in one of the area's hot-spring resorts such as [Baldi](#). These springs are heated by the Arenal volcano and are famous for lush jungle settings. Enjoy a soak and a traditional dinner at the springs

Day 2 – La Fortuna & Arenal Volcano

- **Breakfast:** Enjoy Costa Rican coffee and gallo pinto (rice and beans) at your hotel or a local soda (diner).
- **Mistico Hanging Bridges Park:** Spend 2–3 hours exploring [Mistico Arenal Hanging Bridges](#). This private reserve features a series of suspension bridges and provides spectacular views of Arenal Volcano on clear days. Tours are self-guided or guided; guides increase your chances of spotting wildlife.
- **Lunch:** Stop at a local restaurant such as Restaurante El Novillo del Arenal which offers volcano views.
- **Afternoon:** Choose an adventure: hike [Arenal Volcano National Park](#) (check local regulations), kayak or paddleboard on Lake Arenal for volcano views, or take a zip-line tour across canyons near the volcano.
- **Evening:** Return to your hotel and unwind in the hot springs. [Tabacón](#), [Baldi](#) and other spas offer pools, waterfalls and kid-friendly slides.

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Day 3 – La Fortuna Waterfall & Optional Río Celeste

- **Morning:** Drive 15 minutes to [La Fortuna Waterfall](#). This 246-ft (76 m) cascade descends from the extinct Cerro Chato volcano and requires hiking down. Bring comfortable shoes and a swimsuit—after the descent you can swim in one of the two turquoise pools below the falls.
- **Lunch:** Picnic near the waterfall or return to town for lunch.
- **Afternoon:** Option 1 – Free time to enjoy more hot springs or visit a chocolate or wildlife farm. Option 2 – [Río Celeste day-trip](#): Tenorio Volcano National Park's Río Celeste is famous for its electric-blue water; a four-hour guided hike passes the Los Teñideros confluence where two streams chemically combine to form the turquoise river and includes a waterfall. It's less crowded than Arenal.

Day 4 – Transfer to Monteverde & Coffee Tour

- **Morning:** Depart La Fortuna for Monteverde. A popular route uses a boat across Lake Arenal (3½ hours) followed by a shuttle; the journey offers scenic views and bypasses rough roads. Alternatively, drive the 3–4 hour route yourself (scenic but winding; aim to arrive before dark).
- **Afternoon:** After arriving in Monteverde, [visit a working coffee farm](#). Many tours let you participate in the farm-to-cup process—from picking beans to roasting and tasting. Nearby Santa Elena town offers restaurants and cafes.
- **Evening:** Relax or explore Santa Elena. Book a cloud-forest night walk to spot nocturnal animals such as armadillos, kinkajous, porcupines and frogs.

Day 5 – Monteverde Cloud Forest & Zip-Lining

- **Morning:** Explore the [Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve](#). This 26,000-acre protected area contains eight ecological zones and over 100 mammal species, and offers bird-watching, canopy tours and zip-lining. Wear long pants, closed shoes and pack rain gear—it can be misty and cool. Guided walks provide telescopes for wildlife viewing.
- **Afternoon:** Experience the Sky Walk/Tram/Trek at Sky Adventures Monteverde Park. Suspension bridges reach heights of up to 984 ft above the canopy, gondolas whisk visitors over the rainforest and a zip-line returns you to the base. Monteverde is the birthplace of the modern canopy tour and its zip-line is considered one of the most thrilling in Costa Rica. Alternatively, visit Selvatura Park's hummingbird and butterfly gardens.
- **Evening:** Enjoy dinner at a local restaurant; consider the [Tree House Restaurant](#) in Santa Elena. For nightlife, some venues feature live music, such as [Bar Amigos](#).

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Day 6 – Drive to Manuel Antonio & Beach Time

- **Morning:** Depart Monteverde for Manuel Antonio (about 3½ hours). The drive descends from cool mountains to warm coastal plains; an optional stop at the [Crocodile Bridge](#) over the Río Tárcoles lets you see large crocodiles from the bridge.
- **Afternoon:** Check into accommodations near [Manuel Antonio National Park](#) or in Quepos. Head into the park for your first look at its beaches and wildlife. The park is small—less than 5,000 acres—but contains rain forest, mangrove forest and swamp; beaches line both sides of a tiny peninsula called Cathedral Point. Because visitation is limited to about 1,200 people per day, arrive early (gates open around 7:00 a.m.) and bring reusable water bottles—disposable bottles are prohibited.
- **Evening:** Enjoy dinner in the town of Quepos or dine at [El Avión](#), a restaurant built inside a cargo plane that offers ocean views. Catch the sunset over the Pacific around 5 p.m. for vivid colors.

Day 7 – Manuel Antonio National Park & Departure

- **Morning:** Join a guided tour of Manuel Antonio National Park. Guides help you spot the park's abundant wildlife: white-faced capuchin monkeys (known for stealing food), spiny-tailed iguanas, hermit crabs, sloths (both two- and three-toed) and a variety of birds. After the walk, relax on Manuel Antonio Beach, listed among the world's most beautiful beaches. Remember not to feed wildlife and keep belongings secure.
- **Afternoon:** Spend more time at the beach or hike one of the park's short trails. For adventure, take a catamaran cruise with snorkeling; many tours include a sunset dinner. Alternatively, you can rent surfboards or take a surf lesson on a nearby beach—waves are gentle and suitable for beginners.
- **Evening:** Drive back to San José (about 3 hours) and return your rental car. If your flight departs the following morning, stay overnight near the airport.

Optional Variation – Tamarindo Instead of Manuel Antonio

If you prefer surf culture over rainforests, substitute Tamarindo for Manuel Antonio:

Day 6: From Monteverde, drive about 1½ hours to Tamarindo Beach. After checking into a beachside hotel, relax on the white sands and enjoy warm waters perfect for swimming, surfing and snorkeling. Tamarindo has restaurants and nightlife along the waterfront.

Day 7: Take a surfing lesson; Tamarindo's gentle waves and lack of strong rip currents make it ideal for beginners. Spend the remainder of the day exploring nearby beaches or estuaries. Return to San José for your flight.

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Practical Tips

Reservations: In high season (December–April) and on weekends, book accommodations, park tickets, and tours well in advance; Manuel Antonio limits daily visitors.

In Quepos, highly recommend [Manuel Antonio Estates](#), the views are beautiful, very peaceful, and there is a waterfall in the neighborhood.

In Tamarindo, if you are looking for a fun stay to meet fellow travelers, check out [La Oveja Surf House](#).

Driving: Roads between La Fortuna and Monteverde can be steep and potholed; use a 4×4 vehicle and avoid driving after dark. Waze is widely used in Costa Rica for navigation.

Weather: Early September falls in the wet season; expect midday rain showers and carry waterproof gear. Mornings are usually clear—plan hikes early.

Health & Safety: Use insect repellent, drink bottled or purified water, and watch your belongings—monkeys at Manuel Antonio are notorious for stealing food.

Check out our Google Maps that includes the places linked here and more!
<https://maps.app.goo.gl/DVdpGZWmTy5YCjNUA>

Enjoy your week exploring the diverse landscapes of Costa Rica! Thank you for considering this itinerary for your Costa Rica adventure. I hope it helps you envision a memorable journey through La Fortuna, Monteverde, and Manuel Antonio or Tamarindo. If you have any questions or would like personalized assistance tailoring this trip to your interests and travel dates, please don't hesitate to reach out. I'd love to help you make the most of your time in Costa Rica.

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