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Top 10 Romantic Things to Do in Costa Rica

San Jose, 7 Days

Table of contents:

Guide Description 2

My List 3

San Jose Snapshot 6

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Guide Description

AUTHOR NOTE: Costa Rica is an amazing destination for romantic activities, so we put together our best choices for things to do in and outside San Jose. Whether you are looking for exotic destinations with savage natural landscapes or prefer to stay on the safe side with guided tours and museum visits, Costa Rica has it all. Visit the best outdoor spot for perfume sampling and smell the 800 different orchid species at the Lankester Gardens, or dive into a luxuriant setting at the La Paz Waterfall Gardens - swimming with trouts included. Make the most of Costa Rica's wonders at the INBio Park, where nature and culture come together to offer you an attractive and well informed experience. Interested in some man made wonders as well? We highly recommend the Jade Museum for a huge collection of sophisticated artifacts and the interactive Children's Museum for an easy, playful afternoon.

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My List

contact:
tel: 2433-8989
www.zooave.org

location:
Alajuela

hours:
Daily 9am-5pm

1 Zoo Ave

DESCRIPTION: Dozens of scarlet macaws, reclusive owls, majestic raptors, several different species of toucans, and a host of brilliantly colored birds from Costa Rica and around the world make this one exciting place to visit. In total, over 115 species of birds are on display, including some 80 species found in Costa Rica. Bird-watching enthusiasts will be able to get a closer look at birds they might have seen in the wild. There are also large iguana, deer, tapir, ocelot, puma, and monkey exhibits -- and look out for the 3.6m (12-ft.) crocodile. Zoo Ave. houses only injured, donated, or confiscated animals. It takes about 2 hours to walk the paths and visit all the exhibits here. © Frommer's

contact:
tel: 2225-0643
www.waterfallgardens.com

location:
Varablanca

hours:
Daily 8:30am-5:30pm

2 La Paz Waterfall Gardens

DESCRIPTION: The main attraction here consists of a series of trails through primary and secondary forests alongside the La Paz River, with lookouts over a series of powerful falls, including the namesake La Paz Fall. In addition to an orchid garden and a hummingbird garden, you must visit their huge butterfly garden, which is easily the largest in Costa Rica. A small serpentarium, featuring a mix of venomous and non-venomous native snakes, and several terrariums containing various frogs and lizards, are added attractions. There's also a man-made trout pond where you can cast for trout, or just take a swim with them. While the admission fee is a little steep, everything is wonderfully done and the trails and waterfalls are beautiful. A buffet lunch at the large cafeteria-style restaurant costs an extra $12 (£6) for adults, or $6 (£3) for kids. This is a good stop after a morning visit to the Poás Volcano. Plan to spend 2 to 4 hours here. The hotel rooms (Peace Lodge) are some of the nicest in the country. © Frommer's

contact:
tel: 2507-8107
www.inbio.ac.cr

location:
Santo Domingo de Heredia

hours:
Daily 8am-6pm (admission closes at 4pm)

3 INBio Park

DESCRIPTION: Run by the National Biodiversity Institute (Instituto Nacional de Biodiversidad, or INBio), this place is part museum, part educational center, and part nature park. In addition to watching a 15-minute informational video, visitors can tour two large pavilions explaining Costa Rica's biodiversity and natural wonders, and hike on trails that re-create the ecosystems of a tropical rainforest, dry forest, and premontane forest. A 2-hour guided hike is included in the entrance fee, and self-guided-tour booklets are also available. There's a good-size butterfly garden, as well as a Plexiglas viewing window into the small lagoon. One of my favorite attractions here is the series of wonderful animal sculptures donated by one of Costa Rica's premiere artists, José Sancho. There's a simple cafeteria-style restaurant here for lunch, as well as a coffee shop and gift shop. You can easily spend 2 to 3 hours here. © Frommer's

contact:
tel: 2552-3247
www.jardinbotanicolankester.org

location:
San Jose

hours:
Daily 8:30am-4:30pm

4 Lankester Gardens

DESCRIPTION: Costa Rica has more than 1,400 varieties of orchids, and almost 800 species are cultivated and on display at this botanical garden in Cartago province. Created in the 1940s by English naturalist Charles Lankester, the gardens are now administered by the University of Costa Rica. The primary goal is to preserve the local flora, with an emphasis on orchids and bromeliads. Paved trails meander from open, sunny gardens into shady forests. In each environment different species of orchids are in bloom. There's an information center and a gift shop, and the trails are well tended and well marked. Plan to spend between 1 and 3 hours here if you're interested in

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flowers and gardening; you could run through it more quickly if you're not. You can easily combine a visit here with a tour at Cartago and/or the Orosi Valley and Irazú Volcano. © Frommer's

contact:
tel: 2256-0012

location:
Av. 11 and Calle 7
Barrio Amón

hours:
Mon-Fri 8am-4pm; Sat-Sun 9am-4:30pm

5 Parque Zoológico Simón Bolívar

DESCRIPTION: This zoo no longer suffers from the overwhelming sense of neglect and despair that once plagued it, though it's still pretty lackluster and depressing. Why spend time here when you could head out into the forests and jungles? You won't see the great concentrations of wildlife available in one stop here at the zoo, but you'll see the animals in their natural habitats, not yours. The zoo is really geared toward locals and school groups, with a collection that includes Asian, African, and Costa Rican animals. There's a children's discovery area, a snake-and-reptile house, and a gift shop. You can easily spend a couple of hours here. © Frommer's

contact:
tel: 2454-2070
www.elsegarden.com

location:
Sarchi

hours:
Daily 8am-4pm

6 Else Kientzler Botanical Garden

DESCRIPTION: Located on the grounds of an ornamental flower farm, on the outskirts of the tourist town Sarchí, these are extensive, impressive, and lovingly laid out botanical gardens. Over 2.5km (1 1/2 miles) of trails run through a collection of more than 2,000 species of flora. All of the plants are labeled with their Latin names, with some further explanations around the grounds in both English and Spanish. There's a topiary labyrinth, as well as a variety of lookouts, gazebos, and shady benches on the grounds. A children's play area features some water games, jungle gym setups, and a child-friendly little zip-line canopy tour. Over 40% of the gardens are wheelchair accessible. **Tuan** (tel. **2258-2004**) buses leave San José about five times throughout the day for Sarchí from Calle 18 between avenidas 5 and 7. The fare is $1.20 (60p). Alternatively, you can take any Grecia bus from this same station. In Grecia they connect with the Alajuela-Sarchí buses, leaving every 30 minutes from Calle 8 between avenidas Central and 1 in Alajuela. © Frommer's

contact:
tel: 2287-6034

location:
Av. 7 between calles 9 and 9B
San Jose

hours:
Mon-Fri 8:30am-3:30pm; Sat 9am-1pm

7 Museo de Jade Marco Fidel Tristán (Jade Museum)

DESCRIPTION: Jade was the most valuable commodity among the pre-Columbian cultures of Mexico and Central America, worth more than gold. Located on the first floor of the INS (National Insurance Company) building, this popular museum houses a huge collection of jade artifacts dating from 500 B.C. to A.D. 800. Most are large pendants that were parts of necklaces and are primarily human and animal figures. A fascinating display illustrates how the primitive peoples of this region carved this extremely hard stone. The museum also possesses an extensive collection of pre-Columbian polychrome terra-cotta vases, bowls, and figurines. Some of these pieces are amazingly modern in design and exhibit a surprisingly advanced technique. Particularly fascinating is a vase that incorporates real human teeth, and a display that shows how jade was embedded in human teeth merely for decorative reasons. All of the explanations are in English and Spanish. Allot at least an hour to tour this museum. © Frommer's

contact:
tel: 2258-4929
www.museocr.com

location:
San Jose

hours:

8 Museo de Los Niños (Children's Museum)

DESCRIPTION: If you're traveling with children, you'll definitely want to come here, and you might want to visit even if you aren't. A former barracks and then a prison, this museum houses an extensive collection of exhibits designed to edify and entertain children of all ages. Experience a simulated earthquake or make music by dancing across the floor. Many exhibits encourage hands-on play. The museum sometimes features limited shows of "serious" art and is also the home of the National Auditorium. You can spend anywhere from 1 to 4 hours here, depending on how long your

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Tues-Fri 8am-4:30pm; Sat-Sun 10am-5pm

children linger at each exhibit. Be careful, though: The museum is large and spread out; it's easy to lose track of a family member or friend. This museum is a few blocks north of downtown, on Calle 4. It's within easy walking distance, but you might want to take a cab because you'll have to walk right through the worst part of the red-light district. © Frommer's

contact:
tel: 2289-4404

location:
Le Monestère

hours:
Mon-Sat 6pm-1:30am

9 La Cava Grill

DESCRIPTION: This place is a cozy and warm spot built underneath the popular yet overpriced and overrated Le Monestère restaurant. While the decor is much less ornate, the service much less formal, and the menu much less French, the view is just as spectacular. Grab a window seat on a clear night and enjoy the sparkle of the lights below. The menu features a range of simply prepared meat, poultry, and fish. More adventurous diners can try the tepezquintle (a large rodent, also called a paca), which is actually quite tasty. There's live music and a festive party most weekend nights in the attached bar. My big complaint here is that the wine list is borrowed from the upstairs restaurant, and is pretentious and expensive. © Frommer's

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San Jose Snapshot

Local Info

San José is small and cozy. Although its style and architecture are contemporary, some buildings of strong European influence, mainly British and French, can still be found as a heritage of the economic coffee prosperity from the turn of the century. Towards north and west of the city, we can still appreciate some old adobe structures with tile roofs that have been preserved with care, which evoke past remembrances of the large coffee plantations and farms. Although district areas do exist, these are small quadrants for property census and electoral organization mainly. The administrative division of the country was defined by regions or cantons which have their own municipalities, and can be considered as small urban zones and towns, with their own unique personality and characteristics. Thanks to the topography, there is a great diversity of micro-climates that determine in many cases the type of production on the region. Distances are easily covered by car or public transportation.

San José Downtown

Very early, within the drowsiness of the dawn and the growing murmur of the first by-passers, this small city awakens indulged in laziness after a night of great food, drinking, and fun. The exquisite smell of fresh bread and recently brewed coffee from the highlands fills the air that surrounds the coffee and soda shops, meanwhile the rustling of fast-paced steps, car motors and horns increases even more.

Due to its small size, friendly and charming San Jose, or Chepe as known affectionately by theticos is worth to be checked by foot. Not so long ago, the Central Avenue was closed to vehicle traffic and embellished with stone paving and gardens, so the tourists and locals as well could walk by in comfort or just sit down to enjoy the passing-by of the very beautiful Costarrican women!

Just ask anyone on the street:'How are you?' The answer invariably will be:Pura Vida!(Pure Life!)

This expression explains in two words the charm, positivism, and friendliness of the local people towards a newcomer. Oh! If you do not speak Spanish, there is a very good chance you will get an answer in English!

It is important to note; that San Jose's Municipality has made great efforts to protect the security of is inhabitants and visitors as well, but some areas in downtown may be considered dangerous. However, as in any city, prevention is always a good measure.

Escazú

The district of the witches! If you ever need a magic potion for luck or love, or want to cast a spell on someone, you will have to look around Escazú. This is more of a legend than a reality. Actually, Escazú has become a major commerce and entertaining area, with beautiful hotels and fabulous restaurants. Its residential zones are ample and highly priced. Located in the foothills of the mountain, you just need to go up a few meters to enjoy a breathtaking view of the whole city.

Santa Ana

Heading West from Escazú a few kilometers on the same road, you will find the very impressive Santa Ana Valley. Its marvelous weather has helped to turn this zone into in a highly developed area in very short time. Many residents from the more dense areas, tired of the noise and turmoil have moved over to Santa Ana in a quest for tranquility and warmth.

The main produce of this region are onions that are planted in the area with great pride. Other vegetables are also produced and there is a flourishing pottery industry as well.

Montes de Oca

The district of the youth and the culture! The University City Rodrigo Facio, the Universidad de Costa Rica is located in the main urban zone, San Pedro. This area has become the preferred place for students and intellectuals. There are moderately priced small cafés and bars around the University and student boarding houses. Bed and Breakfast and apartment hotels are nearby to house the tourists. This is a very traditional commerce area of Malls, restaurants, and entertaining as well.

There are other more rural areas, farther from the city environment within San Jose. Puriscal, Tarrazú and Aserrí, as well as Acosta, Dota and Pérez Zeledón standout for the beauty of their scenery, with small markets of local products and artisan stores. The travel agencies have tours to drive you over, and there is always a public transportation service and car rentals for the adventurous one. No doubt, San Jose is in all of its urban and rural expressions, a glamorous and modern great city with beautiful and wonderful towns to discover. ©

History

Embraced by the splendorous and perennial green-blue mountains that form the Cordillera of Talamanca and the Central Volcanic Cordillera, lies the city of San José. Established around a small hermit in honor of Saint Joseph in May 21, 1737, in what was known as The Plain of the Mount's Mouth, it extends on a southeast-northwest axis. Its growth from a small villa to Costa Rica's capital city was hard and painful.

"Four leagues north from Aserri, in a very pleasant plain, there is an ugly village with the diminutive of Villita, just developing. It is composed of eleven roof-tiled and fifteen straw houses, which form no plaza or street. It lacked water which was then carried by open channels; the church is the most narrow, humble and indecent from all those I saw in that province; its patron Saint Joseph."

With these textual words, starts the oldest registered description of San José, made in 1751 by the bishop Agustín Morel de Santa Cruz. With less than one hundred

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and fifty inhabitants, building a town was a challenge, since there was not even water for basic needs. Presbyter Don Juan de Pomar y Burgos was then assigned tola Villita(Small Village) and commissioned to construct a water system and establish a parish. It is important to note that all the village settlements from that time were highly influenced by a very powerful ecclesiastic and religious government. It is precisely doña Maria de Torres, mother of the priest Manuel Antonio Chapui, a great promoter of the development of San Jose, who donated the land that is actually known asLa Sabana.. This is one of the largest city parks of San Jose and used to be our International Airport some forty years ago.

Nevertheless, San José was not meant to be Costa Rica's capital city from the beginning. It was not until 1823, in the time of Costa Rica"s independence from Spain, that this honor was taken away from the more traditional Cartago and given to more dynamic and growing, San José. It was this great communal effort oriented towards agriculture and commerce that established the basis to design the future of the young city. In the educational area, towards 1814, the Santo Tomas Education House was established by the neighbor's own initiative. It was declared University of Santo Tomas by public decree in 1843. Minor studies consisting of lessons in Latin, Castilian and Philosophy were imparted as major studies in Law, Medicine, and Theology. With the economic growth of the city, thanks to the coffee and tobacco plantations, by 1860 many youngsters had the opportunity of traveling and studying in universities abroad, mainly in England.

It is worth noting that this educational process was extended in the course of time to make Costa Rica what it is today: A country of educated and well mannered people who love peace.

In the agricultural area, San José was known for its coffee and tobacco plantations. This activity flourished all over the Central Valley and the producers started buying land and farms away from the city. They also built homes downtown in the venerable Barrio Amon to spend seasons with family and friends. Actually, Barrio Amon has become a place of Bed and Breakfast hotels, restaurants, and commerce established precisely on these nostalgic and charming homes.

Nowadays, San José is a small city where visitors can enjoy all sorts of attractions, go shopping, or please the palate in one of its excellent restaurants. Exciting and fashionable, it is indeed a city worth to be lived!
©

Hotel Insights

Just picture yourself, in an everlasting line at the airport immigration counter at arrival, after a few exhausting hours on that plane! Even worse, there was a tremendous turbulence and the guy in the next seat did not stop trying to sell you a life insurance policy during the flight! As if this was not enough, the airline carrier lost your Gucci bag! At this point, what you are probably wishing for is a soft, clean, big bed at a charming, nice hotel, right?

Escazú

San José experienced a great tourism boom growth in the eighties and hotels of all sorts were built. It is important though, to know the reason of your visit to make the right choice.

With the increase of business class tourism, wonderful convention centers and resorts that offer business travelers all the convenience required to carry on with their work were developed. At the Tara Resort Hotel Spa the guest receives luxurious accomadations in addition to fast Internet connections, fax, secretarial services, voice mail, and conference rooms are some of the features offered. For the LGBT crowd, the Banderas Annex adds many amenities such as horseback riding and massage. The resort Inter Continental Real Costa Rica includes jacuzzis, swimming pools, tennis courts and gyms, as well as nice bars with live music for demanding tastes. If you are traveling with the family, a wonderful option is the Apartotel María Alexandra, where they also have a full service tour agency.

Downtown

For the traveler who is more interested in the city life, Downtown San José offers quite an array of medium to small size hotels. They have the advantage of their location, so they are great if you want to explore the city by foot and you can always catch a cab or bus easily if you want to go further. They apply as well to the business traveler who has affairs in town and although they do not offer the same amount of services that a resort does, they are generally clean and comfortable. One great option is the Hotel Santo Tomás, among their amenities you will find bar and restaurant service, cable TV, air conditioning and a travel agency. If shopping is your weakness, stay at the Hotel Aloki where you are close to retail stores that carry almost anything you might want to buy.(With the exception of wild animals and endangered species that is!). For history buffs, stay at the Hotel Vesuvio which is located near many monuments. For more affordable lodging, stay at the Casa Ridgway, a hostel for young travelers.

La Sabana

The tourism boom created the bed and breakfast phenomenon as well. Just a few blocks north of Central Avenue, in the historical and charming Barrio Amón, you will find some options that operate in the old mansions of the coffee plantation owners from the turn of the Century. The Apartotel El Sesteo is one such hotel. After some restoration, the Hotel Barceló Palma Real and the Hotel Barceló Rincón del Valle have been turned into charming hotels, full of history and tradition. You will find bed and breakfast hotels in the San Pedro and Escazú areas as well as in some rural zones. They generally offer comfortable and clean rooms, telephones, and air conditioning or fans, and cable TV. Most of them have private bathrooms and breakfast is part of the fare. The Cacts Hotel is an option for travelers in family groups, or whose final destination is a

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beach or mountain resort, but wish to spend a few days in the city.

Outside the City

Finally, outside of the city there are a few hotels that will suit the traveler on a modest budget. If not ideal, they are also an option. One of these hotels is Prado.

It is worth mentioning that some medium sized, more specialized excellent hotels like the Los Lagos Hotel and the Hotel Occidental La Condesa which is located in the mountains. Superb restaurants with European chefs and lavishly decorated rooms are their seal. They are perfect for honeymooners or persons who want to relax and forget all about everything, although their rates are a bit on the high side.
©

Restaurants Insights

With all the coming and going, the morning stroll and the shopping spree downtown, it seems like your stomach has forgotten that just a few hours ago it enjoyed breakfast at the hotel veranda. You note that theOeufs à la Benedictine, thegallo pinto with sour cream and the pancakes with bacon Texas fashion, all washed down with coffee and freshly squeezed orange juice, really made for a super international and sumptuous breakfast! Enough to forget about lunch! No way! Your stomach demands with an awful and loud growl as a reminder that is time to indulge again.

Downtown

Since you are close to the hotel, you decide to go back, change, and drop your shopping bags. On the way out, you almost sit back down again on the same veranda where you had breakfast this morning, but your instinct reminds you that hotel restaurants(with clear exceptions, that is) are good for breakfast, and breakfast only. Therefore, you go out in quest for good food at other times.

Finding a good restaurant is not a problem. In the gastronomic arena, San José puts on airs of a big city andsavoir faire, rubbing shoulders and rivaling with more cosmopolitan towns. With the development of a solid and always growing tourism industry, restaurants specializing in dishes from all over the world are common including fast food chains, small cozy restaurants, and five star rooms. Since the coastlines are so close together, seafood is known for its freshness, as they are brought in daily refrigerated, but not frozen. At Tin JoCorvina, shrimp from the Pacific and lobster from the Caribbean are served Chinese style, although themarisquerías offer the widest variety, the freshest product and the best prices.

Escazú

Concerning the indigenous gastronomy, the corn kitchen stands out. As a heritage from the indigenous tradition all the way from Northern Mexico to South America, the tortillas, tamales, corn biscuits, and a wide array of dishes made out of corn are part of the daily diet. This are combined with beans andpicadillos, meats and all sort of vegetables. There are some specialized quality restaurants developing a new Costa Rican cuisine like Casa de Doña Lela which mixes genuinely local ingredients with others of higher lineage in the preparation of truly original and exclusive dishes.
For italian food, try Cerutti and Alfredo, both are well recommended by the locals. French cuisine at Le Monastere is always a wonderful option for dining in Escazú and for Pervian fusion try La Divina Comida.

Montes de Oca

Montes de Oca and the university area is a very busy district, with lots of hungry students at lunchtime. To fulfill this need, besides the fast food chains and the picturesque Chinese restaurants, economical refreshment room outlets and sodas are found all over. The bar La Castilla serves great drinks and snacks. Every establishment makes it differently but there is no doubt they carry the home made seal. If you are on a tight budget or otherwise want to try something really local, go to La Isabela Tapas& Wine Cellar for some spanish tapas and for coffee lovers, try Casa del Café and choose among a huge variety of flavors.

Outside of the City

San José, all the way down from Central Avenue to Sabana Oeste, Escazú, and San Pedro is the mecca for culinary arts. Nevertheless, you will find good typical restaurants and outlets practically in every corner of this little piece of land. Outside of the city, for a real Argentine experience, go to El Novillo Alegre for Argentinian steak. Pan e Vino offers traditional Costa Rican cuisine and Ichiban provides diners with Japanese dishes. Another choose is Antigua which serves international cuisine.

So now that you made up your mind with a firm decision and a demanding stomach, there is only one thing left to say, Bon Appetite!
©

Nightlife Insights

When the day is over, almost melancholic and disheartened, the vibrant and noisy city yields gradually to murmurs and tranquility. San José starts transforming its formal business and commerce face, into a makeup of coquetry and glamor! Bars and taverns get crowded with business men and women, public workers, professionals, and patrons of all kinds, wishing to release the pressures of the working day and anxious for new friendships.

Nightlife

San José and the surrounding cities are packed with small bars and taverns that in many cases are traditional landmarks. It is true that some years ago, ladies sitting on a barstool were looked upon with disdain, times have changed. It is common to see groups of women sitting on the stools nowadays, a sign that they are open to conversation and friendship. The tables are relegated to more intimate or business conversations. Establishing contact with the local people is easy, as by natureticos are friendly and talkative.

At the sports bar Hooligan's, the preferred drink per excellence is beer, which is of

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outstanding quality. Imperial, Pilsen, and Bavaria are traditional brands along with some newer ones with appealing names for the young at heart such as Rock Ice. For stronger spirits, the Zambra Lobby Bar in the neighborhood of Escazú is the place to try Guaro Cacique, the national drink, which is mixed most of the time with Coca-Cola, Ginger Ale, or in cocktails. For jazz enthusiasts, the Jazz Café hosts renowned artists that play until late.

Museums

There are a large number of museums in San José and each one offers the visitor a glimpse into this beautiful country. The Popular Culture Museum, the Childrens Museum and the Gold Museum(Museo de Oro) are ideal for the family. The National Museum narrates the history of Costa Rica and houses a tremendous amount of pre-columbian art. For those lepidopterists(butterfly collectors)out there, go to the La Salle Natural Science Museum and for something a little more macabre, there is the Criminology Museum. For more contemporary works, the Costa Rican Art Museum displays both international artists and local ones. If you thought jade masterpieces were only made in China, the Jade Museum proves this assumption wrong, since it contains some fine artifacts created in Latin America.

Eco-Tours

Costa Rica is known to have some of the most diverse flora and fauna on the planet thanks to its varied topography. And although the country has its share of deadly, venemous snakes, there are other attractions throughout the city of San José that can help you avoid them, while still enjoying the rich eco-history of the capital. The Lankester Botanical Garden is one such place, it mainly focuses on orchids and their cultivation while Zoo Ave, the city zoo has many exotic animals, even a 12 foot long crocodile. For the family, take them to the Spirogyra Butterfly Garden and learn in detail about butterflies, their reproduciton and life cycle alongside more information about the natural history of Costa Rica and the preservation of ecosystems. If you would actually like to climb into the trees, take the Original Canopy Tour, which is a zip-line tour through massive trees in the rain forest. An informative tour can also be had by visiting the INBioparque, this is a 20 acre theme park that describes in detail(with bi-lingual guides) about the various topographies and climates in Costa Rica.

Galleries

San José has an innumerable amount of artists and no shortage of galleries to house their works. If you are looking to buy some art, visit the Andromeda Gallery and purchase some contemporary art at modest prices. At the Galería Ocelote, fine works from national artists are on display here as well as indigenous handicrafts. The ever popular Galeria Roberto Lizano is a gallery with a rotation of artists from throughout Costa Rica, a place to see the true nature of this culture. Galería José Vargas is a gallery where the owner, Mr. Vargas, reproduces masterpieces from some of the greatest artists of all time, such as Da Vinci, Dürer and Van Eyck.

Festivals& Celebrations

In Costa Rica, it seems as if every day there is a festival or celebration happening, so no matter when you go, you are bound to find one. Religion plays a large role in the theme of these festivals and celebrations like San Ramón's Day where celebrants hold a procession in homage to more than 30 different saints, including San Ramon. Another festival remembering the patron saint of Costa Rica is the festival for the Virgen de Los Angeles. More secular celebrations include the Dia de la Raza(Columbus Day) which celebrates the Hispanic heritage and Guanacaste's Day, a day where the citizens of this town chose whether to belong to Nicaragua or remain as Costa Ricans. Another festival where the visitor can party at the beach is the Virgin of the Sea Celebration, this festival remembers the virgin of Mount Carmel with food, special masses, parades and music, all while getting a tan under the warm July sun. All Saints Day and All Souls Day is one of the most important festivals in Costa Rica, it honors the deceased and visitors should be mindful of becoming belligerent. On the other hand, to celebrate the living, Easter Week is where the whole country shuts down for days to hold massive processions throughout the streets. More secular and interesting festivals include, the National Orchid Show, Day of San José, Worker's Day or labor day and University Week which celebrates on the campus of the University of Costa Rica.
©

Things to Do Insights

A Spiritual Experience: Visiting Heredia& Cartago

If you are staying in San José and want to venture out a bit to visit some of the more quaint towns nearby, you may want to go to the historical towns of Heredia and Cartago as well as visit the gateway town of La Fortuna, which offers access to the Arenal Volcano. Easily accessible by taxi, car, and bus from many points in San Jose, these neighboring towns offer a tourist a chance to become immersed in the local culture, to meet many friendly townsfolk, and to experience a bit of natural life away from the hustle and bustle of the city.

When you visit both towns, you are immediately struck by the strong influence of the Catholic Church on the area. This is especially prevalent in Cartago inside the Our Lady of the Angels Basilica. This church is dedicated to the patron saint of Costa Rica, Our Lady of the Angels and offers the visitor a glimpse into a very tranquil sanctuary. The church is also home to many beautiful displays of religious statues, carvings, and art. If you are lucky to be in town during the Christmas season, you may also be able to partake in a town parade that features floats, music, marionettes decorated with Christmas attire, and evening fireworks. It seems as if the whole town comes alive during these celebrations, which also draw people from other towns and local villages who come to enjoy the festive mood and good will offered.

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In Heredia, a religious undertone can be felt in one of the open-air concerts often held here. Whether you are religious or not, it is a spiritual experience to listen to a gospel concert performed live here. Attending this type of concert, you can feel the interest emanated by the crowd as people gather to contemplate the music as well as the day in general. No place for worrying about the day's troubles, you can get a sense of peacefulness and calm here as you mingle with the crowds who often attend these festivities dressed in their Sunday best.

Arenal Volcano

Another point of interest that provides an uplifting experience is a visit to the town of La Fortuna, home of the Arenal Volcano, which is one of the most active volcanoes in all of Central America. When you visit the volcano, you can see nature in its most majestic form as you feel, from an observation point nearby, the earth trembles beneath you. Many tours of this volcano are available from San Jose and other local area hotels and tourist agencies.(See Expediciones Tropicales for an example of a tour group that offers tours to this volcano.) These tours are worth taking as it is truly spiritual experience to stand on a lava slope and watch burning lava flow. Additionally, the rumbling from the live volcano leaves you in awe of Mother Nature over man.

The area surrounding the volcano is also home to many hot springs where you can relax in the warm and calming sulfurous waters. If you are a fan of horseback riding, you will also be able to find guides in La Fortuna that can accompany you across mountain ridges and pass flowing rivers to the Arenal Lagoon, which is a beautiful mountain lake. Although you may catch a glimpse of a speedboat on the lake as it passes by, this modern intrusion into the area does not detract from the tranquil, almost timeless scenery that you view from your vantage point on high. **Pueblo Antiguo**

The Pueblo Antiguo singular theme park is an unforgettable experience of color, music, and wonderful food. It presents three important aspects of great cultural and historical relevance, recreated on a very realistic setting: The city at the turn of the century, the countryside, and the Caribbean coast. Magic occurs through the architecture, live folklore dances and songs, carnivals, fireworks, boat rides, and lots and lots of fun!

Just close your eyes for a moment and imagine yourself in turn of the century San Jose: Horse-drawn carriages rolling over tile-paved roads, beautifulseñoritas wearing laced white gloves and matching sun umbrellas, taken by the arm of elegant gentleman in top or"pita" hats. The buildings resemble those of the epoch, and represent the Municipal Market, the Church and Plaza, the Central Park, the Congress, the Bank, the Fire Station and some souvenir stores and restaurants—Oh! even a train on tracks!

Perhaps the countryside is one of the most nostalgic remembrances of our little piece of land, that although still exists, are being swallowed little by little by the impact of the urban expansion. The Costa Rican peasants are well known for their honesty, candor and kindness. In this setting, you will be able to enjoy typical dances, songs and masquerades, oxcarts, hundred years old adobe and tile houses(some are real structures brought specially to Pueblo Antiguo), and thetrapiche(cane mill) where the most delicious sugar cane juice was extracted and cooked in huge pans. Oh! A dairy farm with cows is also included!(Sorry, milking is not allowed).

You better bring a hat, sunglasses, and tanning lotion! This setting will really transport you over to the Atlantic Coast where the re-creation of the world famous Tortuguero canals with its exuberant vegetation, exhort our nature lover and explorer's spirit and plunges us into a realm of relaxation and peacefulness.

More Tours

Experience all of Costa Rica on Classic Journey's Costa Rica Guided Tour. This exclusive and luxurious eight-day walking trip takes groups to unique and breathtaking natural and historic sites throughout the country. With Tours María Alexandra you can ride on the back of a Harley-Davidson or more affectionately known as a"hog" with your own private guide or rent one of your own. Saint Germain Tours is owned and operated by Costa Ricans and leads travelers throughout San José and its environs. The tour agencies Mitur and Cotur offer excursions in the Caribbean and both take you to Tortuguero Island, which is a magnificent day trip to see with all of its flora and fauna. For those more intrepid travelers, Nature Adventures and Tropical Rivers are two companies that take clients rafting on some of the myriad canals and rivers that traverse Costa Rica.

Carnival

It's Carnival time! Get yourself ready to enjoy the rhythm and joyfulness of an authentic Caribbean Carnival. The colorful dresses and disguises, the eternal smiles and sensual movements of the dancers will electrify you all the way up and down! Get yourself in the mood, do not be shy, and shake your body! Afterwards, a bilingual guide will give you a tour over all three settings and will tell you stories and legends about the country. If by then you are hungry, a delicious typical lunch awaits you at the restaurant El Ventolero, where you will experience the tradition of Costa Rica's best cuisine.

San José Central Market

If you have an adventurous spirit and uninhibited personality, you will love this market which will take no more than just a few morning hours(Saturdays and Sundays exclusively). First, get dressed in comfortable and loose fashion clothing: shorts, T-shirt, hat, and sandals in the Summer time(between February and April). In the green or rainy season(May to November) jeans and tennis shoes are appropriate. Oh, and you will need a large umbrella. December and January are cold months, so keep a windbreaker or sweater handy. A small backpack is a good idea, and of course your photographic or video camera with lots of film. San Jose is a safe place fair enough, but as in any other city,

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there may be pickpockets now and then. So please, and for your own safety, leave your Rolex and jewels at the hotel safety box, and do not go around showing great deals of money! Regarding money, you will need some cash, no more than ¢5000. Another good idea is to make this tour in a group. Sell the idea to your new friends at the hotel!

Once armed, cameras I mean, equipped, and with a happy full stomach you are ready to go! Catch a cab and ask him to take you to your destiny: the closestFeria del Agricultor(San José Central Market. These are small open-air markets. You will find them all over the city skirts, in towns and districts. Here, farmers from around the country bring their fresh produce for sale. Fruits, vegetables, and legumes of all kinds are neatly arranged in wooden palettes, which create an unforgettable symphony of color and smell. Meats, chicken, and fish are sold too, and cleanness all over is acceptable. This is a real, absolutely local, and very, verytico setting. Feel at ease. Unless you are sporting a tinted green and pink punk haircut, you might expect just some funny curious looks and a few giggles. Buy some fruit and take it back to the hotel!

Since by now you should start getting hungry, it is time for lunch! Forget about fancy restaurants and chain fast food outlets. Today they are forbidden! Take note of the direction the taxi took to take you there(North, South, and the like). Generally, this ride should be on a range of one to one and a half kilometers from where you started, so we are going to re-create it on our way back by foot. If you get lost, just ask! There should be a fewsodas(small refreshment rooms) close to any farmers market. Most of them are tidy, clean and inexpensive places. Go in one that appeals you, and ask for acasado, which is served with some sort of meat of your choice, and rice, beans, vegetables, plantain and salad on the side. To wash it down, thefrescos prepared in water(no soda pop please) are just delicious. Pineapple, blackberries, tamarind,cas, etc. just to mention a few, or try one prepared in milk likehorchata,crema,pinolillo,cebada, or cocoa. If you are a big eater, you can also haveempanadas(a sort of turnover) filled with meat, potato and sausage, beans or cheese, or try the wonderful sweet, ripe plantainempanadas, filled with mashed black beans or melted cheese. So, if you asked for typical food, this is the real thing. If you get tired of walking with all those fruits in your backpack, just grab a cab back to the hotel!

Guided Tours Classic Journeys(+1 800 200 3887/ http://www.classicjourneys.com/) Coast to Coast Adventures(+011 506 2280 8054/ http://www.ctocadventures.com/)

Specialty Tours Go with a Wheelchair(+011 506 2454 2810/ http://www.gowithwheelchairs.com/)

Ecological Tours Tropical Rivers(+1 888 722 8273/ http://www.riostropicales.com/) Natural Adventures(+ 1 800 321 8410/ http://www.adventurecostarica.com/)

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Travel Tips

Getting There:

By Air: The Juan Santamaria International Airport(SJO) lies 11 miles north of downtown. Major airlines include:

American Airlines(+1 800 433 7300/ http://www.aa.com) Continental(+1 800 525 0280/ http://www.continental.com) Delta(+1 800 221 1212/ http://www.delta.com) Mexicana(+1 800 531 7921/ http://www.mexicana.com) Iberia(+1 800 772 4642/ http://www.iberia.com) United(+1 800 241 6522/ http://www.ual.com) US Airways(+1 800 428 4322/ http://www.usairways.com)

Buses marked'Ruta 200 San José' exit from the airport about every 15 minutes between 6AM-10PM. Since San Jose lacks a central terminal the buses drop passengers off near the city center on Avenida 2. Rides take 35 minutes and cost USD.55 cents. Luggage space is limited. If you are saddled with backpacks and/or suitcases consider a taxi.

Taxi Unidos(+011 506 221 6865) is the official cab company of the airport. These orange taxis charge a fixed rate, usually around USD12. Rides last 20 minutes. Avoid the unregulated cabs that lurk about the front terminal. The drivers are famous for ripping off tourists.

Rental Car Companies include: Alamo(+1 800 327 9633/http://www.alamo.com) Budget(+1 800 527 0700/http://www.budget.com) Europcar(+011 506 443 2336/http://www.europcar.com) Hertz(+1 800 654 3131/http://www.hertz.com) Thrifty(+1 800 367 2277/http://www.thrifty.com)

By Train: Due to tracks being ravaged by earthquakes and mudslides there is no international train service into San José.

By Bus: Despite being known as the transportation hub of Costa Rica there is no central bus station. Nor is there one predominant bus line. Instead there are a number of small bus companies, many of which whose'terminals' consist of a window facing out on the street. Tica Bus(+011 506 221 8954) is the closest thing to an international bus company, providing service to San Salvador, Panama City, Guatemala City, and Managua.

By Car: San José can be accessed via the Inter-American Highway, which is part of the Pan American Highway. Bear in mind that Costa Rica holds the world's highest car fatality rate. Despite this dire statistic the highway abounds with staggering jungle scenery and is well maintained.

Getting Around:

Because most locals don't own cars San José's bus system is extremely extensive, seemingly servicing every street corner. Rides cost around USD.15 cents. Buses are usually crowded making them heaven for pickpocket opportunists, so keep guarded attention on valuables.

Red taxis are easy to hail from the street. Drivers are supposed to charge via meters, or'marias' as the locals say, so be sure it is on before entering. Rates start at USD.75 cents the first mile and USD.35 cents

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thereafter. If you would prefer to call ahead for a taxi try Coopetico(+011 506 224 7979) or Coopeguaria(+011 506 226 1366).

Walking is the best means of transportation through downtown. It is faster than driving. Most of the main attractions such as the Jade Museum and the National Arts Museum are all close to each other. Avoid, however, wearing expensive jewelry and carrying cameras and loose handbags or you will become a marked target for thieves.
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Fun Facts

San Jose Country: Costa Rica

San Jose by the Numbers:

Population: 300,000 Elevation: 3021 feet Average Annual Precipitation: 70.8 inches Average January Temperature: 66 degrees F/ 18C Average July Temperature: 69 degrees F/ 20C

Quick Facts:

Major Industries: Food Processing, Textiles& Clothing, Construction Materials, Fertilizer, Plastic Products Ethnic Mix: 94% Caucasian, 3% African American, 1% Amerindian, 1% Chinese, 1% Other Electricity: 120 volts, 60Hz Time Zone: GMT-6 Country Dialing Code: 506

Did You Know?

Why does coffee grow so well around the city? It's the climate. The Central Valley, in which the city sits, has a perfect climate. At 1,125m(3,690 ft.) above sea level, San José enjoys springlike temperatures year-round.

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