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# Top 10 Fun Restaurants of Costa Rica

## San Jose, 7 Days

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# Guide Description

**AUTHOR NOTE:** Costa Rica offers a cosmopolitan array of restaurants to choose from, so expect dining out to be an adventure in taste, atmosphere and scenery. Whether local or international, most of the cuisine you will find in Costa Rica is served in breathtaking locations that will compliment your food better than any extra spices.

Try the open air veranda at Cafe Mundo to get a taste of the local bohemian art scene or go for the award winning Michelin cuisine at Park Cafe for two contrasting experiences. Another spot not to miss is La Yunta Steakhouse, where the huge portions of meat cooked to perfection will keep you seated long after dinner to admire the view of the ocean.

Some of the best wine lists are to be found at the elegant Jurgen's, the stylish Donde Carlos, or at the good old Italian La Piazzetta. Whatever your choice, you are in for some memorable culinary experiences in these Costa Rica restaurants.

# My List

**contact:**  
tel: 2289-4404

**location:**  
Le Monestère

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

## 1 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

**contact:**  
tel: 2281-0541

**location:**  
San Pedro

**hours:**  
Mon-Fri 11:30am-1am; Sat  
4pm-midnight

## 2 Olio

**DESCRIPTION:** The exposed brick walls, dark wood wainscoting, and stained-glass lamps imbue this place with character and romance. Couples might want to grab a table in a quiet nook, while groups tend to dominate the large main room or crowd the bar. There are even a few outdoor tables on a narrow sidewalk beside some train tracks, and nonsmokers might want these, as the main bar and dining areas are often tightly packed and smoke-filled. The extensive tapas menu features traditional Spanish fare, as well as bruschetta, antipasti, and a Greek mezza plate. For a main dish, I recommend the chicken Vesuvio, which is marinated first in a balsamic vinegar reduction and finished with a creamy herb sauce; or the arrollado siciliano, which is a thin filet of steak rolled around spinach, sun-dried tomatoes, and mozzarella cheese and topped with a pomodoro sauce. The midsize wine list features very reasonably priced wines from Italy, France, Spain, Germany, Chile, Greece, and even Bulgaria. © Frommer's

**contact:**  
tel: 2222-6190

**location:**  
Calle 15 and Av. 9  
San Jose

**hours:**  
Mon-Thurs 11am-11pm; Fri  
11am-midnight; Sat 5pm-  
midnight

## 3 Café Mundo

**DESCRIPTION:** This popular place mixes creative cuisine with an ambience of casual elegance. Wood tables and Art Deco wrought-iron chairs are spread spaciouly around several rooms in this former colonial mansion. Additional seating can be had on the open-air front veranda and in the small gardens both front and back. The appetizers include vegetable tempura, crab cakes, and chicken satay alongside more traditional Tico standards such as patacones (fried plantain chips) and fried yuca. There's a long list of pastas and pizzas, as well as more substantial main courses, nightly specials, and delicious desserts. One room here boasts colorful wall murals by Costa Rican artist Miguel Cassafont. This place is almost always filled with a broad mix of San José's gay, bohemian, theater, arts, and university crowds. © Frommer's

**contact:**  
tel: 2290-6324

**location:**  
San Jose

**hours:**  
Tues-Sat noon-2pm and  
7-9:30pm

## 4 Park Café

**DESCRIPTION:** Having opened and run a Michelin two-star restaurant in London and another one-star joint in Cannes, Richard Neat now finds himself turning out his impressive fusion cuisine in an intimate space spread around the interior patio courtyard of a stately old downtown mansion, which also doubles as an antiques and imported furniture store. The menu changes regularly but might feature some roasted scallops with ricotta tortellini in a pumpkin jus, or some expertly grilled quail on a vegetable purée bed, topped with poached quail egg. Presentations are artfully done, and often served in such a way as to encourage sharing. The well-thought-out and fairly priced wine list is a perfect complement to the cuisine. © Frommer's

**contact:**  
tel: 2283-2239

## 5 Jurgen's

**location:**  
San Jose

**hours:**  
Mon-Fri noon-2:30pm and  
6-10pm; Sat 6-10:30pm

**DESCRIPTION:** Housed in a boutique business-class hotel, this elegant little restaurant serves excellent European-style continental fare in a refined atmosphere. The lighting is low and service extremely professional. You'll find poached salmon with a dill sauce, and grilled tilapia with a Dijon mustard sauce. The steaks are top cuts of beef, perfectly prepared. This place has one of the more extensive wine lists in town. The owner, Jurgen Mormel, also has several gourmet specialty food shops around San José and in Playa Herradura. © Frommer's

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**contact:**  
tel: 2228-0980

## 6 Taj Mahal

**location:**  
San Jose

**hours:**  
Tues-Sun noon-3pm and  
6-11pm

**DESCRIPTION:** The only true and dedicated Indian restaurant in the country, this place does a good, but not great, job. The menu is quite extensive and covers most of the traditional bases with biryanis, vindaloes, tikka masalas, and a variety of curries. They have an authentic tandoor oven, and the tandoori meats are excellently prepared. The restaurant is spread out through several rooms in a converted home. The decorations and furniture are mostly imported from India. I like the few outdoor tables in the backyard, especially for lunch. As at Tin Jo, this is a great choice for vegetarians. © Frommer's

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**contact:**  
tel: 2221-8451

## 7 La Piazzetta

**location:**  
Paseo Col&ouacuten near  
Calle 40  
San Jose

**hours:**  
Mon-Sat 11:30-3pm and  
6:30-11pm

**DESCRIPTION:** With a long menu and formal service, this restaurant reminds me of the Italian restaurants of old in New York's Little Italy. The menu includes quite a few risotto dishes, as well as several lobster offerings and some Sicilian fare. The veal scaloppini in a truffle sauce is excellent. Salads are colorful and artistically arranged. For dessert, sample a classic chocolate mousse or tiramisu. The wine list is quite extensive, with good and reasonably priced offerings from Italy, and most other prominent wine producing regions around the world. © Frommer's

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**contact:**  
tel: 2225-0819

## 8 Donde Carlos

**location:**  
San Pedro

**hours:**  
Mon-Fri noon-3pm; Mon-  
Thurs 6:30-10:30pm; Fri  
6:30-11pm; Sat noon-11pm;  
Sun noon-7pm

**DESCRIPTION:** Bold architectural touches abound in this stylish restaurant, yet the food is built primarily around simple, perfectly grilled meats and fresh fish. You pass the wood-burning Argentine-style charcoal grill as you enter. I like the outdoor tables on the second-floor balcony when the weather permits. Most folks stick to the hearty steak options, but you can also order a wide range of sausages and offal meats, as well as fresh tuna. Don't pass on the apple pancake dessert, since it's delicious. All portions are huge, and this place has a good and reasonably priced wine list to boot. © 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 its 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 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 Aserri, as well as Acosta, Dota and Pérez Zeledón stand out 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

## San Jose Snapshot continued

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 to the 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 as La 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 Amón to spend

seasons with family and friends. Actually, Barrio Amón 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 accommodations 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 Cacti Hotel is an option for travelers in family groups, or whose final destination is a

## San Jose Snapshot continued

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 the Oeufs à la Benedictine, the gallo 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 and savoir 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 Jo Corvina, 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 and picadillos, 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 Peruvian 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 choice 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 nature they are friendly and talkative.

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

## San Jose Snapshot continued

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, venomous 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 reproduction 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 Galería 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 Día 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 townfolk, 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.

## San Jose Snapshot continued

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, beautiful señoritas 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 the trapiche (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 closest FERIA 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 cleanliness all over is acceptable. This is a real, absolutely local, and very, very tico 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 few sodas (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, the *frescos* prepared in water (no soda pop please) are just delicious. Pineapple, blackberries, tamarind, etc. just to mention a few, or try one prepared in milk

like *horchata*, *crema*, *pinolillo*, *cebada*, or *cocoa*. If you are a big eater, you can also have *empanadas* (a sort of turnover) filled with meat, potato and sausage, beans or cheese, or try the wonderful sweet, ripe *plantain empanadas*, 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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