

THE BEST OF COSTA RICA



First coming to the attention of international travelers in the mid-1990s, Costa Rica is currently—and consistently—one of the hottest vacation and adventure-travel destinations in Latin America, with over two million visitors each year. Despite the boom in vacationers, Costa Rica remains a place rich in natural wonders and biodiversity, where you can still find yourself far from the maddening crowds. The country boasts a wealth of unsullied beaches that stretch for miles, small lodgings that haven't attracted hordes of tourists, jungle rivers for rafting and kayaking, and spectacular cloud- and rainforests with ample opportunities for bird-watching and hiking. In addition to the country's trademark eco- and adventure-tourism offerings, you will also find luxury resorts and golf courses, plush spas, and some truly spectacular boutique hotels and lodges.

Having lived in Costa Rica for more than 18 years, I continue to explore and discover new spots, adventures, restaurants, and lodgings—and my “best of” experiences keep on coming. In this chapter I've selected the very best of what this unique country has to offer. These places and experiences are covered in greater detail elsewhere in the book; this chapter is merely meant to give you an overview of the highlights so that you can start planning your own adventure.

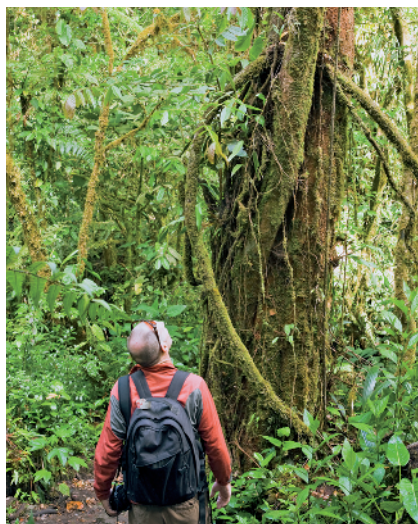
THE best OF NATURAL COSTA RICA

- **Rincón de la Vieja National Park** (northeast of Liberia, in Guanacaste): This is an area of rugged beauty and high volcanic activity. The Rincón de la Vieja Volcano rises to 1,848m (6,061 ft.), but the thermal activity is spread out along its flanks, where numerous geysers, vents, and fumaroles let off its heat and steam. This is a great place to hire a guide and a horse for a day of rugged exploration. There are waterfalls and mud baths, hot springs, and cool jungle swimming holes. You'll pass through pastureland, scrub savanna, and moist secondary forest; the bird-watching is excellent. See p. 198
- **The Río Sarapiquí Region** (north of San José between Guanacaste in the west and the Caribbean coast in the east): This region is a prime place for an ecolodge experience. Protected tropical forests climb from the Caribbean coastal lowlands up into the central mountains, affording you a glimpse of a plethora of life zones and ecosystems. **Braulio Carrillo National Park** borders several other private reserves here, and a variety of ecolodges will suit any budget. See “Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí” in chapter 9.

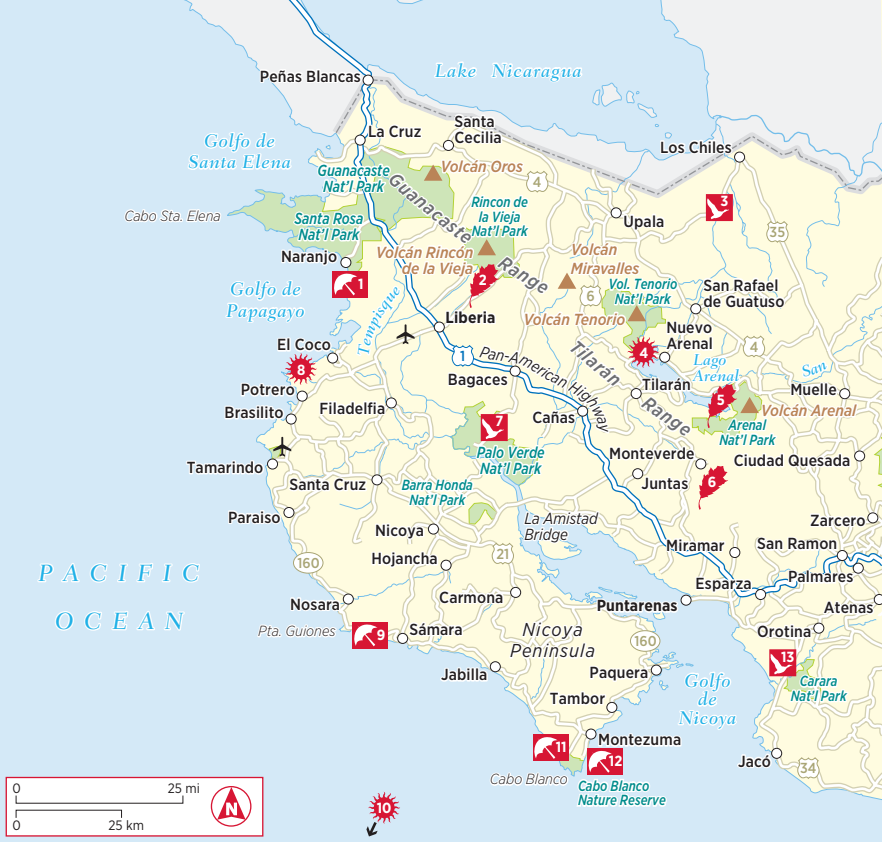


Manuel Antonio National Park.

- **Arenal Volcano/Tabacón Hot Springs** (near La Fortuna, northwest of San José): When the skies are clear and the lava is flowing, Arenal Volcano offers a thrilling light show accompanied by an earthshaking rumble that defies description. You can even see the show while soaking in a natural hot spring and having a drink at the swim-up bar at **Tabacón Grand Spa Thermal Resort** (2519-1900; www.tabacon.com). If the rushing torrent of volcano-heated spring water isn't therapeutic enough, you can get an incredibly inexpensive massage here. See "Arenal Volcano & La Fortuna" in chapter 9.
- **Monteverde Biological Cloud Forest Reserve** (in the mountains northwest of San José): There's something both eerie and majestic about walking around in the early morning mist surrounded by bird calls and towering trees hung heavy in broad bromeliads, flowering orchids, and hanging moss and vines. The reserve has a well-maintained network of trails, and the community is truly involved in conservation. Not only that, but in and around Monteverde and Santa Elena, you'll find



Monteverde Biological Cloud Forest Reserve.



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The Best of Costa Rica



a whole slew of related activities and attractions, including canopy tours that allow you to swing from treetop to treetop while hanging from a skinny cable. See p. 326.

- **Manuel Antonio** (near Quepos on the central Pacific coast): There's a reason this place is so popular and renowned: monkeys! The national park here is full of them, even the endangered squirrel monkeys. But you'll also find plenty to see and do outside the park. The road into Manuel Antonio has many look-outs that consistently offer postcard-perfect snapshots of steep jungle hills meeting the sea. Uninhabited islands lie just off the coast, and the beaches here are perfect crescents of soft, white sand. See "Manuel Antonio National Park" in chapter 10.
- **Osa Peninsula** (in southern Costa Rica): This is Costa Rica's most remote and biologically rich region. **Corcovado National Park**, the largest remaining patch of virgin lowland tropical rainforest in Central America, takes up much of the Osa Peninsula. Jaguars, crocodiles, and scarlet macaws all call this place home. Whether you stay in a luxury nature lodge in **Drake Bay** or outside of **Puerto Jiménez**, or camp in the park itself, you will be surrounded by some of the most lush and most intense jungle this country has to offer. See chapter 11.
- **Tortuguero Village & Jungle Canals** (on the Caribbean coast, north of Limón): Tortuguero Village is a small collection of rustic wooden shacks on a narrow spit of land between the Caribbean Sea and a dense maze of jungle canals. It's been called Costa Rica's Venice, but it actually has more in common with the South American Amazon. As you explore the narrow canals here, you'll see a wide variety of herons and other water birds, three types of monkeys, three-toed sloths, and caimans. If you come between June and October, you might be treated to the awe-inspiring spectacle of a green turtle nesting—the small stretch of Tortuguero beach is the last remaining major nesting site of this endangered animal. See "Tortuguero National Park" in chapter 12.



Leatherback turtle tracks heading to the sea.

THE best BEACHES

With more than 1,200km (750 miles) of shoreline on its Pacific and Caribbean coasts, Costa Rica offers beachgoers an embarrassment of riches.

- **Santa Rosa National Park:** If you really want to get away from it all, the beaches here in the northwest corner of Costa Rica are a good bet. You'll have to four-wheel-drive or hike 13km (8 miles) from the central ranger station to reach them. And once there, you'll find only the most basic of camping facilities: outhouse latrines and cold-water showers. But you'll probably have the place almost to yourself. In fact, the only time it gets crowded is in October, when thousands of olive ridley sea turtles nest in one of their yearly *arribadas* (arrivals). See p. 206.
- **Playa Tamarindo:** Although it can be argued that Tamarindo has become too overdeveloped, crowded, and chaotic, it still earns a place on this list. The beach here is long and broad, with sections calm enough for swimmers and others just right for surfers. Tamarindo also has lodgings to suit every budget, a host of tour and activity options to keep you busy, as well as excellent restaurants at almost every turn. Located about midway along the beaches of Guanacaste province, Tamarindo makes a good base for exploring other nearby stretches of sand, as well. See "Playa Tamarindo & Playa Grande" in chapter 7.
- **Playa Avellanas:** Just south of Tamarindo, this long, white-sand beach has long been a favorite haunt for surfers, locals, and those in-the-know. Playa Avellanas stretches on for miles, backed largely by protected mangrove forests. On the verge of "being discovered," there's still very little going on here—aside from the new, nearby JW Marriott resort and Lola's, perhaps my favorite beachfront restaurant in the country. See p. 244.
- **The Beaches Around Playa Sámará:** Playa Sámará itself is nice enough, but if you venture just slightly farther afield, you'll find some of the nicest and least developed beaches along the entire Guanacaste coast. **Playa Carrillo** is a long, almost always deserted crescent of palm-backed white sand located just south of Sámará, while **Playa Barrigona** and **Playa Buena Vista** are two hidden gems tucked down a couple of dirt roads to the north. The land all around Playa Barrigona was purchased by actor Mel Gibson, but the beach, like all beaches in Costa Rica, remains open to the public. See "Playa Sámará" in chapter 8.
- **Playa Montezuma:** This tiny beach town at the southern tip of the Nicoya Peninsula has weathered fame and infamy, but retains a funky sense of individuality. European backpackers, vegetarian yoga enthusiasts, and UFO seekers choose Montezuma's beach over any other in Costa Rica. The waterfalls are what set it apart from the competition, but the beach stretches for miles, with plenty of isolated spots to plop down your towel or mat. Nearby are the **Cabo Blanco** and **Curú** wildlife preserves. See "Playa Montezuma" in chapter 8.



Santa Teresa surfer.



Punta Uva.

- Malpaís:** While the secret is certainly out, there's still some time to visit Costa Rica's fastest growing hot spot before the throngs and large resorts arrive. With just a smattering of luxury lodges, surf camps, and assorted hotels and cabins, Malpaís is the place to come if you're looking for miles of deserted beaches and great surf. If you find Malpaís is too crowded, head farther on down the road to Santa Teresa, Playa Hermosa, and Manzanillo. See "Malpaís & Santa Teresa" in chapter 8.
- Manuel Antonio:** The first beach destination to become popular in Costa Rica, Manuel Antonio retains its charms despite burgeoning crowds and mushrooming hotels. The beaches inside the national park are idyllic, and the views from the hills approaching the park are enchanting. This is one of the few remaining habitats for the endangered squirrel monkey. Rooms with views tend to be a bit expensive, but many a satisfied guest will tell you they're worth it. See "Manuel Antonio National Park" in chapter 10.
- Punta Uva & Manzanillo:** Below Puerto Viejo, the beaches of Costa Rica's eastern coast take on true Caribbean splendor, with turquoise waters, coral reefs, and palm-lined stretches of nearly deserted white-sand beach. Punta Uva and Manzanillo are the two most sparkling gems of this coastline. Tall coconut palms line the shore, providing shady respite for those who like to spend a full day on the sand, and the water is usually quite calm and good for swimming. See "Puerto Viejo" in chapter 12.

THE best ADVENTURES

- Mountain-Biking the Back Roads of Costa Rica:** The lack of infrastructure and paved roads here that most folks bemoan is a huge boon for mountain bikers. There are endless back roads and cattle paths to explore. Tours of differing lengths and all difficulty levels are available. Contact **Coast to Coast Adventures** (☎2280-8054; www.ctocadventures.com). See p. 184.

- **Swinging Through the Treetops on a Canopy Tour:** This unique adventure has become ubiquitous in Costa Rica. You'll find zip-line canopy tours all over the country. In most cases, after a strenuous climb using ascenders, you strap on a harness and zip from treetop to treetop while dangling from a cable. Check the various destination chapters to find a canopy tour operation near you.
- **Rafting the Upper Reventazón River** (near Turrialba): The Class V Guayabo section of this popular river is serious white water. Only experienced and gutsy river runners need apply. If you're not quite up to that, try a 2-day Pacuare River trip, which passes through primary and secondary forests and a beautiful steep gorge. Plans to build a dam here have thankfully been rejected, or at least stalled, for the time being. **Aventuras Naturales** (800/321-8410 in the U.S., or 2225-3939 in Costa Rica; www.toenjoynature.com) can arrange these tours. See p. 106.
- **Surfing and Four-Wheeling Guanacaste Province:** This northwestern province has dozens of respectable beach and reef breaks, from Witch's Rock at Playa Naranjo near the Nicaraguan border to Playa Nosara more than 100km (62 miles) away. In addition to these two prime spots, try a turn at Playa Grande, Punta Langosta, and playas Negra, Avellanas, and Junquillal. Or find your own secret spot. Rent a four-by-four with a roof rack, pile on the boards, and explore. See chapter 7.
- **Battling a Billfish off the Pacific Coast:** Billfish are plentiful all along Costa Rica's Pacific coast, and boats operate from Playa del Coco to Playa Zancudo. Costa Rican anglers hold world records for both blue marlin and Pacific sailfish. Go to Quepos (just outside Manuel Antonio) for the best après-fish scene, or head down to Drake Bay, the Osa Peninsula, or Golfo Dulce if you want some isolation. **Costa Rica Outdoors** (800/308-3394 or 2231-0306; www.costaricaoutdoors.com) can help you find a good charter skipper or specialized fishing lodge. See chapters 7, 8, 10, 11, and 12.
- **Trying the Adventure Sport of Canyoning:** While far from standardized, canyoning usually involves hiking along and through the rivers and creeks of steep mountain canyons, with periodic breaks to rappel down the face of a waterfall, jump off a rock into a jungle pool, or float down a small rapid. **Pure Trek Canyoning** (866/569-5723 or 2479-1313; www.puretrekcostarica.com) and **Desafío Expeditions ★★** (2479-9464; www.desafiocostarica.com) in La Fortuna, and **Psycho Tours** (8353-8619; www.psychotours.com) near Puerto Jiménez, are the prime operators. See chapters 9 and 11.



A canyoning tour.



Hammerhead shark.

Lake Arenal: With steady gale-force winds and stunning scenery, the northern end of Lake Arenal is a national windsurfing and kitesurfing hot spot.



- Surfing Pavones** (on the southern Pacific coast): Just 13km (8 miles) from the Panamanian border at the southern reaches of Costa Rica's Pacific coast, Pavones is reputed to have one of the longest rideable waves in the world. When this left-point break is working, surfers enjoy rides of almost a mile in length. Much more can be said about this experience, but if you're a surfer, you've heard it all before. Contact **Casa Siempre Domingo** (☎8820-4709; www.casa-domingo.com), the most comfortable hotel in town, for current wave reports and other local information. See "Playa Pavones: A Surfer's Mecca" in chapter 11.

THE **best** DAY HIKES & NATURE WALKS

- Lankester Gardens:** If you want a really pleasant but not overly challenging day hike, consider a walk among the hundreds of distinct species of flora on display here. **Lankester Gardens** (☎2552-3247; www.jardinbotanicolankester.org) is just 27km (17 miles) from San José and makes a wonderful day's expedition. The trails meander from areas of well-tended open garden to shady natural forest. See p. 162.
- Rincón de la Vieja National Park:** This park has a number of wonderful trails through a variety of ecosystems and natural wonders. My favorite hike is down to the Blue Lake and Cangrejo Falls. It's 5.1km (3¼ miles) each way, and you'll want to spend some time at the base of this amazing lake; plan on



Rincón de la Vieja National Park.



La Selva Biological Station.

at least 5 hours for the outing, and bring along lunch and plenty of water. You can also hike up to two craters and a crater lake here, and the Las Pailas loop is ideal for those seeking a less strenuous hike. This remote volcanic national park is about an hour north of Liberia (it's only 25km/16 miles, but the road is quite rough), or about 5 hours from San José. See p. 198.

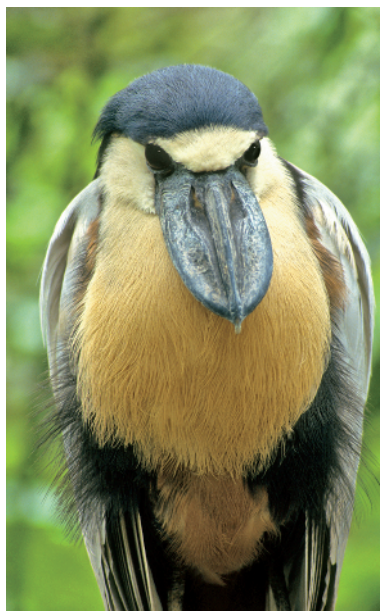
- **La Selva Biological Station:** This combination research facility and rustic nature lodge has an extensive and well-marked network of trails. You'll have to reserve in advance ([2524-0607](tel:2524-0607); www.threepaths.co.cr) and take the guided tour if you aren't a guest at the lodge. But the hikes are led by very informed naturalists, so you might not mind the company. The Biological Station is located north-northeast on the Caribbean slope of Costa Rica's central mountain range. It'll take you about 1½ hours to drive from San José via the Guápiles Highway. See p. 293.
- **Arenal National Park and Environs:** There's great hiking all around this area. The national park itself has several excellent trails that visit a variety of ecosystems, including rainforest, secondary forest, savanna, and, my favorite, old lava flows. Most of them are on the relatively flat flanks of the volcano, so there's not too much climbing involved. There's also great hiking on the trails at the Arenal Observatory Lodge, and the trail down to the base of the La Fortuna Waterfall is a fun scramble. It's about a 3½-hour drive from San José to La Fortuna and Arenal National Park. See "Arenal Volcano & La Fortuna" in chapter 9.
- **Monteverde Biological Cloud Forest Reserve:** In the morning rush of high season, when groups and tours line up to enter the reserve, you'd think the park was named "Crowd Forest." Still, the guides here are some of the most professional and knowledgeable in the country. Take a tour in the morning to familiarize yourself with the forest, and then spend the late morning or

afternoon (your entrance ticket is good for the entire day) exploring the reserve. Off the main thoroughfares, Monteverde reveals its rich mysteries with stunning regularity. Walk through the gray mist and look up at the dense tangle of epiphytes and vines. The only noises are the rustlings of birds or monkeys and the occasional distant rumble of Arenal Volcano. The trails are well marked and regularly tended. It's about 3½ hours by bus or car to Monteverde from San José. See p. 326.

- **Corcovado National Park:** This large swath of dense lowland rainforest is home to Costa Rica's second-largest population of scarlet macaws. The park has a well-designed network of trails, ranger stations, and camping facilities. Most of the lodges in Drake Bay and Puerto Jiménez offer day hikes through the park, but if you really want to experience it, you should hike in and stay at one or more of the campgrounds. This is strenuous hiking, and you will have to pack in some gear and food, but the reward is some of Costa Rica's most spectacular and unspoiled scenery. Because strict limits are placed on the number of visitors allowed into the park, you'll always be far from the crowds. See "Puerto Jiménez: Gateway to Corcovado National Park" in chapter 11.
- **Cahuita National Park:** The trails here are flat, well-maintained paths through thick lowland forest. Most of the way they parallel the beach, which is usually no more than 90m (295 ft.) away, so you can hike out on the trail and back along the beach, or vice versa. White-faced and howler monkeys are common, as are brightly colored land crabs. See p. 456.

THE best BIRD-WATCHING

- **Observing Oropendola and Blue-Crowned Motmot at Parque del Este:** A boon for city bird-watchers, this San José park rambles through a collection of lawns, planted gardens, and harvested forest, but it also includes second-growth scrub and dense woodland. Oropendola and blue-crowned motmot are common species here. See p. 163.
- **Spotting Hundreds of Marsh and Stream Birds Along the Río Tempisque Basin:** Hike around the Palo Verde Biological Station, or take a boat trip down the Bebedero River with **Swiss Travel Services** (☎2282-4898; www.swisstravelcr.com) or **Safaris Corobici** (☎2669-6191; www.nicoya.com). This area is an important breeding ground for gallinules, jacanas, and limpkins, and is a common habitat for numerous heron and kingfisher species. Palo Verde is about a 3½-hour drive from San José. See p. 200.



Boat-billed heron.



Red-lored parrot.

- **Looking for 300-plus Species of Birds in La Selva Biological Station:** With an excellent trail system through a variety of habitats, from dense primary rainforest to open pasturelands and cacao plantations, this is one of the finest places for bird-watching in Costa Rica. With such a variety of habitats, the number of species spotted runs to well over 300. La Selva is located just a few miles south of Puerto Viejo. See p. 293.
- **Sizing Up a Jabiru Stork at Caño Negro National Wildlife Refuge:** Caño Negro Lake and the Río Frío that feeds it are incredibly rich in wildlife and a major nesting and gathering site for aquatic bird species. These massive birds are getting less common in Costa Rica, but this is still one of the best places to spot one. **Caño Negro Natural Lodge** (☎2265-3302; www.canonegrolodge.com) sits right on the edge of the refuge and makes a great base for exploring this region to the north of La Fortuna. See p. 305.
- **Catching a Scarlet Macaw in Flight over Carara National Park:** Home to Costa Rica's largest population of scarlet macaws, Carara Biological Reserve is a special place for devoted bird-watchers and recent converts. Macaws are noisy and colorful birds that spend their days in the park but choose to roost in the evenings near the coast. They arrive like clockwork every morning and then head for the coastal mangroves around dusk. These daily migrations give birders a great chance to see these magnificent birds in flight. The reserve is located about 2 hours from San José along the central Pacific coast. See p. 345.
- **Looking for a Resplendent Quetzal in the Cerro de la Muerte:** Don't let the name (Mountain of Death) scare you away from the opportunity to see this spectacular bird, revered by the ancient Aztecs and Mayas. Serious bird-watchers won't want to leave Costa Rica without crossing this bird off their lists, and neophytes might be hooked for life after seeing one of these iridescent green wonders fly overhead, flashing its brilliant red breast and trailing 2-foot-long tail feathers. **Trogon Lodge** (☎2293-8181; www.grupomawamba.com)

can almost guarantee a sighting. The Cerro de la Muerte is a high mountain pass along the way to San Isidro de El General about 1½ hours from San José. See “En Route to San José: Three Places to See Quetzals in the Wild” in chapter 10.

- Spotting Hundreds of Species at Wilson Botanical Gardens:** With more than 7,000 species of tropical plants and flowers, the well-tended trails and grounds of this beautiful research facility are fabulous for bird-watching. Hummingbirds and tanagers are particularly plentiful, but the bounty doesn't end there—more than 360 different species of birds have been recorded here. Wilson Gardens is located about an hour outside the town of Golfito. See “Golfito: Gateway to the Golfo Dulce” in chapter 11.
- Taking Advantage of the Caribbean's Best Birding at Aviarios del Caribe:** In just a few short years, Aviarios del Caribe (☎2750-0775; www.slothrescue.org) has established itself as the prime bird-watching resort on the Caribbean. If it flies along this coast, chances are good that you'll spot it here; more than 330 species of birds have been spotted so far. Located on the Caribbean coast, Aviarios del Caribe is about a 3-hour drive from San José. See p. 459.

THE best DESTINATIONS FOR FAMILIES

- San José:** If you're spending any time in San José, you'll probably want to be outside the rough-and-tumble downtown area. The best place to experience Costa Rica's capital city (and still get a decent night's sleep) is the **Doubletree Cariari By Hilton** (☎800/222-8733 or 2239-0022; www.cariarisanjose.doubletree.com). With facilities that include several large pools, a gym, a casino, shuttle service to a nearby spa and 18-hole golf course, and a game room (not to mention a babysitting service), there's something here for everyone. If you're traveling with teens, they'll feel right at home at the nearby Mall Cariari, which has a multiplex theater, an indoor skating rink, and, of course, a food court. Just 15 minutes from downtown, it's well situated for exploring all of the city's sights and attractions. See p. 144.
- La Paz Waterfall Gardens** (☎2225-0643; www.waterfallgardens.com): This multifaceted attraction features paths and suspended walkways alongside a series of impressive jungle waterfalls. Kids



San José Children's Museum.



La Paz Waterfall Gardens.

love the variety and vibrancy of the various attractions, from the buzzing hummingbirds to the impressive power of the waterfalls. The rooms at the **Peace Lodge** here are some of the best in the country. See p. 162.

- **Playa Hermosa:** The protected waters of this Pacific beach make it a family favorite. However, just because the waters are calm doesn't mean it's boring here. I recommend staying at the beachfront **Hotel Playa Hermosa Bosque del Mar** (☎2672-0046; www.hotelpayahermosa.com) and checking in at **Aqua Sport** (☎2672-0050), where you can rent sea kayaks, sailboards, paddleboats, beach umbrellas, and bicycles. See “Playa Hermosa, Playa Panamá & Papagayo” in chapter 7.
- **Playa Tamarindo:** This lively surf town has a bit of something for everyone. This is a great spot for teens to learn how to surf or boogie-board, and there are a host of tours and activities to please the entire family. **Hotel Capitán Suizo** (☎2653-0353; www.hotelcapitansuizo.com; p. 238) has an excellent location on a calm section of beach, spacious rooms, and a great pool for kids and adults alike. See “Playa Tamarindo & Playa Grande” in chapter 7.
- **Monteverde:** Located about 160km (99 miles) northwest of San José, this area not only boasts the country's most famous cloud forest, but also sports a wide variety of related attractions and activities. After hiking through the reserve, you should be able to keep most kids happy and occupied riding horses; squirming at the local serpentarium; or visiting the butterfly farm, frog pond, bat jungle, and hummingbird gallery. More adventurous families can take a horseback ride or one of the local zip-line canopy tours. See “Monteverde” in chapter 9.
- **Playa de Jacó:** On the central Pacific coast, this is Costa Rica's liveliest and most developed beach town. The streets are lined with souvenir shops, ice-cream stands, and inexpensive eateries; there's even a miniature-golf course.

Older kids can rent a surf- or boogie board, although everyone should be careful with the rough surf. The **Club del Mar Condominiums & Resort** (☎866/978-5669 or 2643-3194; p. 349) is situated at the calm southern end of the beach. The hotel has a large free-form pool and some shady grounds, and is accommodating to families with small children. See “Playa de Jacó, Playa Hermosa & Playa Herradura” in chapter 10.

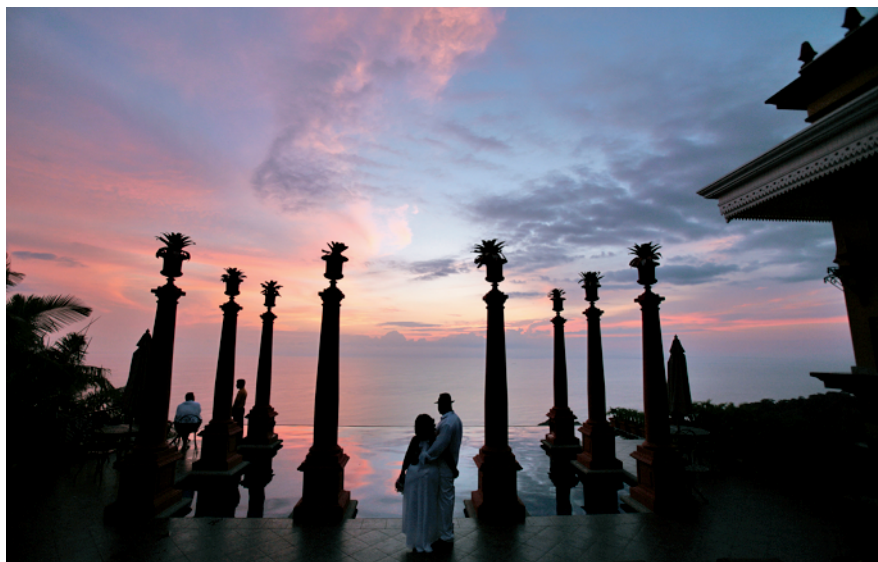
- **Manuel Antonio:** Manuel Antonio has a little bit of everything: miles of gorgeous beaches, tons of wildlife (with almost guaranteed monkey sightings), and plenty of active-tour options. There’s a load of lodging options, but **Hotel Sí Como No** (☎2777-0777; www.sicomono.com), with its large suites, two pools, water slide, and nightly movies, is probably your best bet. See “Manuel Antonio National Park” in chapter 10.

THE **best** LUXURY HOTELS & RESORTS

- **Marriott Costa Rica Hotel** (San Antonio de Belén, San José area; ☎888/236-2427 or 2298-0844; www.marriott.com): Of all the contenders in the upscale urban market, the Marriott seems to be doing the best job. Maybe because it’s the newest, but everything is in great shape, the service is bend-over-backward, the restaurants are excellent, and the hotel boasts all the facilities and amenities you could want. See p. 143.
- **Peace Lodge** (north of Varablanca; ☎954/727-3997 in the U.S., or 2482-2720 in Costa Rica; www.waterfallgardens.com): While the bathrooms of the deluxe units are the most luxurious and unique in the country, everything else is done in grand style as well. Each room comes with at least one custom-tiled Jacuzzi on a private balcony. The hotel adjoins the popular La Paz Waterfall Gardens. See p. 143.
- **Four Seasons Resort Costa Rica** (Papagayo Peninsula; ☎800/819-5053 or 2696-0000; www.fourseasons.com/costarica): This was the first large resort to cater to the high-end luxury market in Costa Rica, and it’s still the best. Within its first month of operation Michael Jordan and Madonna were notable guests, and the stars keep coming. A beautiful setting, wonderful installations, a world-class golf course, and stellar service continue to make this the current king of the hill in the upscale market. See p. 212.
- **Florblanca Resort** (Playa Santa Teresa; ☎2640-0232; www.florblanca.com): The individual villas at this intimate resort are some of the largest and most luxurious in the country. The service and food are outstanding, and the location is breathtaking, spread over a lushly planted hillside steps away from Playa Santa Teresa. See p. 270.
- **Hotel Punta Islita** (on the Pacific coast in central Guanacaste; ☎866/446-4053 in the U.S. and Canada, or 2231-6122 in Costa Rica; www.hotelpuntaislita.com): This great getaway is perched on a high, flat bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. The rooms are large and comfortable, the food is excellent, and the setting is stunning. If you venture beyond your room and the

hotel's inviting hillside pool, there's a long, almost always deserted beach for you to explore, as well as a wealth of activities for the more adventurous. See p. 279.

- **The Springs Resort & Spa** (near Arenal Volcano; ☎954/727-8333 in the U.S. and Canada, or 2461-1700 in Costa Rica; www.thespringscostarica.com): Opulent rooms with extravagant bathrooms, a series of sculpted hot spring pools, excellent restaurants, extensive facilities, and fabulous views make this the top luxury hotel near the Arenal Volcano. See p. 308.
- **Villa Caletas** (north of Jacó; ☎2630-3003; www.hotelvillacaletas.com): Spread out over a steep hillside high above the Pacific, these individual villas have a Mediterranean feel. The Greek Doric amphitheater follows the same motif. Carved into the hillside, the theater frequently features evening concerts of jazz or classical music. The "infinity pool" here was one of the first in Costa Rica and is still my favorite. Sitting in a lounge chair at the pool's edge, you'll swear that it joins the sea beyond. See p. 353.
- **Arenas del Mar** (Manuel Antonio; ☎fax 2777-2777; www.arenasdelmar.com): With large and ample rooms, excellent service and amenities, a beautiful little spa, and the best beach access and location in Manuel Antonio, this hotel has a lot to offer. See p. 370.
- **Hotel Sí Como No** (Manuel Antonio; ☎2777-0777; www.sicomono.com): Although there are fancier and more posh places in Costa Rica, the large modern suites and villas, spectacular views, attentive service, and first-rate facilities here earn this small resort a spot on this list. See p. 373.



Villa Caletas.

THE **best** MODERATELY PRICED HOTELS

- **Hotel Grano de Oro** (San José; ☎2255-3322; www.hotelgranodeoro.com): San José boasts dozens of old homes that have been converted into hotels, but few offer the luxurious accommodations or professional service found at the Grano de Oro. All the guest rooms have attractive hardwood furniture, including old-fashioned wardrobes in some rooms. When it's time to relax, you can soak in a hot tub or have a drink in the rooftop lounge while taking in San José's commanding view. See p. 137.
- **Hôtel Le Bergerac** (San José; ☎2234-7850; www.bergerachotel.com): This classy little hotel has been pleasing diplomats, dignitaries, and other discerning travelers for years. Ask for one of the garden rooms or get the old master bedroom with its small private balcony. See p. 139.
- **Villa del Sueño Hotel** (Playa Hermosa; ☎800/378-8599 or ☎/fax 2672-0026; www.villadelsueno.com): It's not right on the beach (you'll have to walk about 90m/295 ft.), but everything else here is right on the money: clean, comfortable rooms; a nice refreshing pool; and an excellent restaurant. You can't do better in Playa Hermosa. See p. 215.
- **Amor de Mar** (Montezuma; ☎fax 2642-0262; www.amordemar.com): Clean, spacious, and comfortable rooms set on a sloping lawn that leads down to a rocky coastline, with a natural pool carved into the rocks, all add up to my idea of a tropical paradise. See p. 264.
- **Samara Tree House Inn** (Playa Samara; ☎2656-0733; www.samaratreehouse.com): The beachfront studio apartments, set on raised stilts, are just steps from the sand. The whole complex is centrally located and well-run, making this the best hotel option in Playa Samara at any price. See p. 278.
- **Hotel Fonda Vela** (Monteverde; ☎2257-1413; www.fondavela.com): With plush, modern rooms and an excellent restaurant, the Fonda Vela, one of the original hotels here, is perennially a top choice in Monteverde. The hotel is located close enough to the Cloud Forest Reserve that you can even walk there. See p. 334.
- **Cabinas Sol y Mar** (Playa Zancudo; ☎2776-0014; www.zancudo.com): These beachfront rooms are a real bargain. In fact, they fall into our "inexpensive" category. No matter, they feel out of that price range with a prime location just steps from the surf, surrounded by lush gardens and shady palm trees. The bar and restaurant here are excellent, lively, and justifiably popular. See p. 432.
- **Caribblue Bungalows** (Playa Cocles; ☎2750-0035; www.caribblue.com): Try to get one of the private wooden bungalows here. If you do, you might be so happy and comfortable that you won't want to leave. Just 90m (295 ft.) or so away, however, are the warm waves of the Caribbean Sea. If this place is full, the neighboring **Azania Bungalows** (☎2750-0540; www.azania-costarica.com) is just about as good. See p. 476.

THE best ECOLOGES & WILDERNESS RESORTS

Ecotodge options in Costa Rica range from tent camps with no electricity, cold-water showers, and communal buffet-style meals to some of the most luxurious accommodations in the country. Generally, outstanding ecolodges and wilderness resorts are set apart by an ongoing commitment (financial or otherwise) to minimizing their effect on surrounding ecosystems and to supporting both conservation efforts and the residents of local communities. They should also be able to provide naturalist guides and plentiful information. All of the following do.

See “Sustainable Tourism” on p. 68 for more info on sustainable travel to Costa Rica.

- **La Selva Biological Station** (south of Puerto Viejo; ☎2524-0607; www.threepaths.co.cr): Sure, this place is geared more toward researchers than tourists, but that (along with the surrounding rainforest and extensive trail system) is what makes this one of the best ecotourism spots in the country. See p. 293.
- **Arenal Observatory Lodge** (near La Fortuna; ☎2290-7011; www.arenalobservatorylodge.com): Originally a research facility, this lodge has upgraded over the years and features comfortable rooms with impressive views of Arenal Volcano. There are excellent trails to nearby lava flows and a nice waterfall. Toucans frequent the trees near the lodge, and howler monkeys provide the wake-up calls. See p. 310.
- **Monteverde Lodge & Gardens** (Monteverde; ☎2257-0766; www.montevelodelodge.com): One of the original ecolodges in Monteverde, this place has only improved over the years, with great guides, updated rooms, and lush gardens. The operation is run by the very dependable and experienced Costa Rica Expeditions. See p. 334.
- **La Paloma Lodge** (Drake Bay; ☎2293-7502; www.lapalomalodge.com): If your idea of the perfect nature lodge is one where your front porch provides some prime-time viewing of flora and fauna, this place is for you. If you decide to leave the comfort of your porch, the Osa Peninsula’s lowland rainforests are just outside your door. See p. 407.
- **Bosque del Cabo Rainforest Lodge** (Osa Peninsula; ☎/fax 2735-5206; www.bosquedelcabo.com): Large, comfortable private cabins perched on the edge of a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean and surrounded by lush rainforest make this one of my favorite spots in the country. There’s plenty to do, and there are always great guides here. See p. 420.
- **Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge** (Golfo Dulce; ☎866/504-8116 or 2258-8250; www.nicuesalodge.com): This lodge is by far the best option on the Golfo Dulce. Set in deep forest, the individual bungalows here are a perfect blend of rusticity and luxury. See p. 428.
- **Tortuga Lodge** (Tortuguero; ☎800/886-2609 in the U.S. and Canada, or 2257-0766 in Costa Rica; www.tortugalodge.com): The canals of Tortuguero snake through a maze of lowland primary rainforest. The beaches here are major sea-turtle nesting sites. This is not only the most comfortable option



Tortuga Lodge.

in the area, but also another of the excellent ecolodges run by Costa Rica Expeditions. See p. 448.

- **Selva Bananito Lodge** (in the Talamanca Mountains south of Limón; ☎2253-8118; www.selvabananito.com): This is one of the few lodges providing direct access to the southern Caribbean lowland rainforests. There's no electricity here, but that doesn't mean it's not plush. Hike along a riverbed, ride horses through the rainforest, climb 30m (100 ft.) up a ceiba tree, or rappel down a jungle waterfall. There's fabulous bird-watching in the area, and the Caribbean beaches are nearby. See p. 454.

THE **best** BED & BREAKFASTS & SMALL INNS

- **Finca Rosa Blanca Coffee Plantation & Inn** (Heredia; ☎2269-9392; www.fincarosablanca.com): If the cookie-cutter rooms of international resorts leave you cold, then perhaps the unique rooms of this unusual inn will be more your style. Square corners seem to have been prohibited here in favor of turrets and curving walls of glass, arched windows, and a semicircular built-in couch. It's set into the lush hillsides just 20 minutes from San José. See p. 142.
- **Vista del Valle Plantation Inn** (near Grecia; ☎2450-0800; www.vistadelvalle.com): This is a great choice if you want something close to the airport but have no need for San José. The separate cabins are influenced by traditional Japanese architecture, with lots of polished woodwork and plenty of light. The gardens are meticulously tended, and the restaurant is excellent. A nice tile pool and Jacuzzi overlook a deep river canyon. See p. 145.

- **Sueño del Mar** (Playa Tamarindo; ☎/fax 2653-0284; www.sueno-del-mar.com): You might think you're dreaming here. The rooms feature African dolls on the windowsills, Kokopeli candleholders, and open-air showers with sculpted angelfish, hand-painted tiles, and lush tropical plants. The fabrics are from Bali and Guatemala. Somehow all this works well together. Add in the requisite hammocks under shade trees right on the beach and a small pool, and you really have something. The lodge's breakfasts are earning local renown; yours is included in the price of your room. See p. 239.
- **Arco Iris Lodge** (Monteverde; ☎2645-5067; www.arcoirislodge.com): This small lodge is right in Santa Elena, and it's the best deal in the Monteverde area. The owners are extremely knowledgeable and helpful. See p. 333.
- **Cabinas Los Cocos** (Playa Zancudo; ☎/fax 2776-0012; www.loscocos.com): If you've ever dreamed about chucking it all and setting up shop in a simple house right on the beach, give it a trial run here first. See p. 431.
- **Casa Verde Lodge** (Puerto Viejo; ☎2750-0015; www.cabinascasaverde.com): This is my favorite budget lodging along the Caribbean coast. The rooms are clean and airy and have comfortable beds with mosquito nets. The owners are friendly and always doing some work in the gardens or around the grounds. See p. 474.
- **Tree House Lodge** (Punta Uva; ☎2750-0706; www.costaricatreehouse.com): The collection of private houses at this small beachfront property are the most creative and luxurious accommodations to be found on the Caribbean coast. I like the namesake Tree House, although the Beach House Suite is quite spectacular as well. See p. 475.

THE best RESTAURANTS

- **Grano de Oro Restaurant** (San José; ☎2255-3322): This elegant little hotel has an elegant restaurant serving delicious Continental dishes and decadent desserts. The open-air seating in the lushly planted central courtyard is delightful, especially for lunch. See p. 150.
- **Bacchus** (Santa Ana; ☎2282-5441): Set in a wonderfully restored and updated ancient adobe home, this restaurant serves up arguably the best Italian fare in the San José metropolitan area. See p. 153.
- **Park Café** (San José; ☎2290-6324): A former Michelin two-star chef has set up shop in the interior patio garden of an old downtown mansion. The results are predictably fabulous. The regularly changing menu here is always varied, creative, and fairly priced. See p. 150.
- **Ginger** (Playa Hermosa; ☎2672-0041): Serving an eclectic mix of traditional and Pan Asian-influenced tapas, this sophisticated little joint is taking this part of Guanacaste by storm. They've got a list of creative cocktails to match the inventive dishes. See p. 215.
- **Mar y Sol** (Playa Flamingo; ☎2654-4151): In a beautiful room on a high hilltop with great views, the Catalan chef here serves top-notch international fare. See p. 229.



Mar y Sol.

- **Dragonfly Bar & Grill** (Tamarindo; ☎2653-1506): Southwestern American and Pacific Rim fusion cuisines are the primary culinary influences at this popular restaurant. Portions are large, service excellent, and prices fair. See p. 242.
- **Lola's** (Playa Avellanas; ☎2652-9097): With a perfect setting on the sand and excellent hearty fare, this is one of the best beachfront restaurants in the country. See p. 245.
- **Nectar** (at Florblanca Resort, Santa Teresa; ☎2640-0232): Guanacaste's best boutique resort also has one of its best restaurants. The menu changes nightly but always has a heavy Pan-Asian fusion flavor to it. The setting is romantic and subdued, in an open-air space just steps from the sand. See p. 272.
- **Playa de los Artistas** (Montezuma; ☎2642-0920): This place has the perfect blend of refined cuisine and beachside funkiness. There are only a few tables, so make sure you get here early. Fresh, grilled seafood is served in over-size ceramic bowls and on large wooden slabs lined with banana leaves. See p. 267.
- **El Lagarto** (Playa Sámara; ☎2656-0750): Witnessing the giant grill stations being fed with fresh coals from a raging fire overhead is worth the price of admission here, but the food and ambience are also fabulous. The menu is large, and the fresh seafood and massive steaks are all expertly prepared. See p. 279.
- **Sofia** (Monteverde; ☎2645-7017): Sofia serves excellent New Latin–fusion fare at a small space about halfway along the rough dirt road between Santa

Elena and the Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve. Their sister restaurant, **Chimera** (☎2645-6081), which specializes in creative tapas, is also excellent. See p. 337.

- **El Galeón** (Playa Herradura; ☎2630-4555): If you're looking for fine dining with an inviting ambience in the Jacó and Playa Herradura area, it's hard to beat this fusion restaurant. I recommend one of the outdoor tables, with a view of the bay and marina. See p. 354.
- **El Patio Bistro Latino** (Quepos; ☎2777-4982): A casually elegant little place, El Patio Bistro Latino has made a name for itself in the Manuel Antonio area. The chef's creative concoctions take full advantage of fresh local ingredients. Its intimate setting is a welcome little oasis in Quepos. See p. 376.
- **La Pecora Nera** (Puerto Viejo; ☎2750-0490): I'm not sure that a tiny surfer town on the remote Caribbean coast deserves such fine Italian food, but it's got it. Your best bet here is to allow yourself to be taken on a culinary roller-coaster ride with a mixed feast of the chef's nightly specials and suggestions. See p. 480.

THE best VIEWS

- **The Summit of Irazú Volcano** (near San José): On a very clear day, you can see both the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea from this vantage point. Even if visibility is low and this experience eludes you, you can view the volcano's spectacular landscape, the Meseta Central, and the Orosi Valley. See p. 182.
- **Iguanazul Hotel** (Playa Junquillal; ☎2658-8123; www.iguanazul.com): On a high bluff above Playa Junquillal, this hotel has a wonderful view of the Pacific and the windswept coastline in either direction. It gets best around sunset and is better yet if you can commandeer one of the hammocks set in a little palapa on the hillside itself. See p. 247.
- **Tabacón Grand Spa Thermal Resort** (near Arenal Volcano; 877/277-8291 or 2460-2020; www.tabacon.com): Arenal Volcano seems so close, you'll swear you can reach out and touch it. Unlike Irazú Volcano (see above), when *this* volcano rumbles and spews, you may feel the urge to seek cover. Most rooms have spectacular views from sheltered private patios or balconies. See p. 308.
- **Villa Caletas** (Playa Hermosa de Jacó; ☎2630-3003): You'll have a view over the Golfo de Nicoya and the Pacific Ocean beyond. Sunsets at the hotel's outdoor amphitheater are legendary, but it's beautiful here during the day as well. See p. 353.
- **Hotel La Mariposa** (Quepos; ☎800/549-0157 or 2777-0355; www.lamariposa.com): This place has arguably the best view in Manuel Antonio, and that's saying a lot. Come for breakfast or a sunset drink because, unfortunately, I've had bad luck with dinner here. See p. 372.



Summit of Mount Chirripó.

- o **The Summit of Mount Chirripó** (near San Isidro): What more can one say? At 3,724m (12,215 ft.), this is the highest spot in Costa Rica. On a clear day, you can see both the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea from here. Even if it isn't clear, you can catch some pretty amazing views and scenery. See "San Isidro de El General: A Base for Exploring Chirripó National Park" in chapter 10.

THE **best** AFTER-DARK FUN

- o **Night Tours** (countrywide): Most Neotropical forest dwellers are nocturnal. Animal and insect calls fill the air, and the rustling on the ground all around takes on new meaning. Night tours are offered at most rain- and cloud-forest destinations throughout the country. Many use high-powered flashlights to catch glimpses of various animals. Some of the better spots for night tours are **Monteverde**, **Tortuguero**, and the **Osa Peninsula**. Volcano viewing in **Arenal** is another not-to-miss nighttime activity.
- o **El Cuartel de la Boca del Monte** (San José; ☎2221-0327): From Wednesday to Saturday, San José's young, restless, and beautiful pack it in here. Originally a gay and bohemian hangout, it is now decidedly mixed and leaning toward yuppie. There's frequently live music. See p. 175.
- o **San Pedro** (San José): This is San José's university district, and at night its streets are filled with students strolling among a variety of bars and cafes. If you'd like to join them, keep in mind that **Terra U** caters to the college crowd, **Mosaikos** is popular with young Tico rockers, **Omar Khayyam** is a great



San Pedro at night.

place to grab an outdoor table and watch the crowds walk by, and the **Jazz Café**, as its name indicates, is a hip live-music venue that often features local jazz and rock outfits. See “San José After Dark” in chapter 6.

- **Tamarindo** (Guanacaste): The most developed and popular destination on Guanacaste’s Gold Coast, Tamarindo also boasts the area’s best nightlife scene. **Bar 1** is my first choice. But I also like the open-mic nights at **Pasatiempo**, and the after-hours scene at **Rey Sol**. See “Tamarindo & Playa Grande” in chapter 7.
- **San Clemente Bar & Grill** (Dominical; ☎2787-0055): This is a quintessential surfers’ joint, but whether you hang ten or not, this is where you’ll want to hang out in Dominical at night. The fresh seafood and Tex-Mex specialties are hearty, tasty, and inexpensive. And there are pool, Ping-Pong, and foosball tables, as well as televised sporting events and surf videos. See “Dominical” in chapter 10.
- **Jacó** (Central Pacific coast): While some of the late-night scene here can be seedy—you’ll find a few strip clubs and brothels—plenty of respectable



San Clemente Bar & Grill.

places are around for those looking for after-hours fun. My top spot is the laid-back beach front **Ganesha Lounge**. I also like to shoot pool and toss down a few at **Tabacón**. See “Playa de Jacó After Dark” in chapter 10.

- **Puerto Viejo:** This small beach town on the southern end of Costa Rica's Caribbean coast is one of the most active after-dark scenes in the country. **Johnny's Place** and **Stanford's** take turns as the major dance-and-party spot, but there are several other happening places, as well as a few after-hours beach bonfires and jam sessions, to be found. See “Puerto Viejo” in chapter 12.

THE **best** WEBSITES ABOUT COSTA RICA

- **The Tico Times** (www.ticotimes.net): The English-language *Tico Times* makes it easy for *norteamericanos* (and other English speakers) to see what's happening in Costa Rica. It features the top story from its weekly print edition, as well as a daily update of news briefs, a business article, regional news, a fishing column, and travel reviews. There's also a link to current currency-exchange rates.
- **Latin American Network Information Center** (<http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/ca/cr>): This site houses a vast collection of information about Costa Rica, and is hands-down the best one-stop shop for browsing, with helpful links to a diverse range of tourism and general information sites.
- **Costa Rica Maps** (www.mapcr.com): In addition to offering up, for sale, a wonderful waterproof map to the country, this site features several excellent downloadable nationwide, regional, and city maps, and a host of other useful information.
- **The U.S. Embassy in Costa Rica** (www.usembassy.or.cr): The official site of the U.S. Embassy in Costa Rica has a good base of information and regular updates of concern to U.S. citizens abroad, as well as about Costa Rica in general.
- **CostaRicaLiving E-Board** (www.crl-eboard.info): This is an information clearing house site put together by the folks at Costa Rica Living newsgroup. This site is chock-full of useful information, suggestions, reviews, and tips. If you want more information, feel free to join the newsgroup. The active newsgroup deals with a wide range of issues, and its membership includes many longtime residents and bona fide experts.
- **La Nación Digital** (www.nacion.com): If you can read Spanish, this is an excellent site to read regularly or simply browse. The entire content of the country's paper of record is placed online daily, and there's also an extensive searchable archive. It does maintain a small summary of major news items in English, although this section tends to run about a week behind current events.