

Chapter 1

Discovering the Best of Costa Rica

In This Chapter

- ▶ Scoping out Costa Rica's top accommodations
 - ▶ Finding the finest restaurants
 - ▶ Exploring the best beaches, adventures, and attractions
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For such a small country, Costa Rica is a rich and varied destination. You can visit rain forests, cloud forests, and active volcanoes. You can walk along miles of beautiful beaches on either the Pacific or the Caribbean coast. And, you can stay at luxurious large resorts or romantic boutique getaways.

Adventure hounds will have their fill choosing from an exciting array of activities, and those just looking for some rest and relaxation can grab a chaise lounge and a good book.



This chapter is designed as an at-a-glance reference to the absolute “best of the best” that Costa Rica has to offer. These attractions are highlighted by — what else — a Best of the Best icon when they appear elsewhere in this book.

The Best High-End Hotels and Luxury Resorts

As recently as five years ago, finding anything to fit in this category was difficult. Not any longer. Costa Rica now boasts quite a few top-notch luxury properties ranging from isolated and unique boutique hotels to large beach resorts. The following are the best of the best:

- **Costa Rica Marriott (San José):** The Marriott is hands down the best of the large resort and business class hotels in the San José area. Everything is in great shape, the service is bend-over-backward, the restaurants are excellent, and the hotel features all the facilities and amenities you could want, save a golf course. See Chapter 11.

- ✔ **Peace Lodge (north of Varablanca):** The rooms here abound in beautiful design touches, and the bathrooms in the deluxe units are the most spectacular in the country. Each room comes with at least one custom-tiled Jacuzzi on a private balcony. The hotel adjoins the popular La Paz Waterfall Gardens. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Four Seasons Resort (Papagayo Peninsula):** This is the first major resort to really address the ultra-high-end luxury market in Costa Rica. Within its first month of operation, both Madonna and Michael Jordan were notable guests. A beautiful setting, wonderful installations, world-class golf course, and stellar service make this the current king of the hill in the upscale market. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Paradisus Playa Conchal (Playa Conchal):** This large and luxurious all-inclusive resort has all the trappings, including an 18-hole Robert Trent Jones golf course. As a bonus, it's located on the beautiful seashell-strewn wonder of Playa Conchal. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Makanda by the Sea (Manuel Antonio):** The large and luxurious villas here are superbly decorated and set on a forested hillside with wonderful views out to the sea. The overall vibe here is intimate and romantic, and the service and food are excellent. See Chapter 15.
- ✔ **Villa Caletas (north of Jacó):** Spread out over a steep hillside, high above the Pacific Ocean, these large and luxurious individual villas have a Mediterranean feel. 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. See Chapter 16.
- ✔ **Hotel Punta Islita (Nicoya Peninsula):** Perched on a high, flat bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean, Punta Islita is very popular with honeymooners, and rightly so. The rooms are large and luxurious, 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 Chapter 19.
- ✔ **Flor Blanca Resort (Playa Santa Teresa):** The individual villas at this boutique resort are some of the largest and most beautiful in the country. The service and food are outstanding, and the location is breathtaking, spread over a lushly planted hillside just steps off Playa Santa Teresa. See Chapter 19.

The Best Accommodations Values

Not looking to spend a fortune? No problem. Costa Rica is chock-full of excellent hotel and lodging values. Get the most for your accommodations dollar by booking into one of these fine establishments:

- ✔ **Hotel Grano de Oro (San José):** San José boasts dozens of old homes that have been converted into hotels, but few offer the luxurious accommodations or professional service that can be found at the Grano de Oro. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Hotel Le Bergerac (San José):** 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 Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Villas Nicolás (Manuel Antonio):** Most of the spacious, separate units here feature large, private balconies or terraces with classic views over the rain forest to the sea at a fraction of the cost of most other Manuel Antonio hotels offering similar views. See Chapter 15.
- ✔ **Villa del Sueño Hotel (Playa Hermosa):** It's not right on the beach (you'll have to walk about 90m/295 ft.), but everything else about this place is right on the money, including clean, comfortable rooms; an inviting refreshing pool; and an excellent restaurant. You can't find a better deal in Playa Hermosa. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Hotel El Sapo Dorado (Monteverde):** Roomy wooden cabins with fireplaces and private porches are spread across an open hillside planted with fruit trees and tropical flowers. The hotel has an excellent restaurant and is a great place to enjoy some of the best sunsets in town. See Chapter 17.
- ✔ **Amor de Mar (Montezuma):** The rooms here are simple, but they are also clean, comfortable, and well-maintained. And the setting is superb. A long grassy lawn leads down to the rocky coast, where you'll find a swimming-pool-sized tide pool carved into a coral rock outcropping. See Chapter 19.
- ✔ **Azania Bungalows (Playa Cocles):** This place features large and lovely private wooden bungalows spread around lush grounds. Just 90m (295 ft.) or so away, however, are the warm waves of the Caribbean Sea. See Chapter 21.

The Best Ec lodges

Costa Rica is a major ecotourism destination, and you'll find a wealth of wonderfully run ecolodges and nature resorts. Some of them, including several listed here, make a strong case for being listed among the top luxury hotels in the country.

- ✔ **Arenal Observatory Lodge (La Fortuna):** Originally a rustic research facility, this lodge has upgraded quite a bit over the years and now features comfortable rooms with impressive views of the Arenal volcano. There are also excellent trails to nearby lava flows and a beautiful waterfall. Toucans frequent the trees near the lodge, and howler monkeys provide the wake-up calls. See Chapter 18.

- ✓ **La Paloma Lodge (Drake Bay):** 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 rain forests are just outside your door. See Chapter 20.
- ✓ **Bosque del Cabo Rainforest Lodge (Osa Peninsula):** Large and comfortable private cabins perched on the edge of a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean and surrounded by lush rain forest make this one of my favorite spots in the country. There's plenty to do, and there are always great guides here. See Chapter 20.
- ✓ **Lapa Rios (Osa Peninsula):** Costa Rica's first upscale ecolodge has aged well. The duplex bungalow rooms all have spectacular views and are set into a lush forest. A number of tours are available for guests, and the guides are often local residents who are intimately familiar with the environment. See Chapter 20.
- ✓ **Corcovado Lodge Tent Camp (Osa Peninsula):** Located right on the border of Corcovado National Park, the accommodations here are in spacious individual tents set within walking distance of the crashing surf. The whole operation is run by the very dependable and experienced Costa Rica Expeditions. See Chapter 20.
- ✓ **Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge (Golfo Dulce):** This new lodge is by far the best option on the Golfo Dulce. Set in deep forest, the individual bungalows here are a beguiling blend of rusticity and luxury. See Chapter 20.
- ✓ **Selva Bananito Lodge (inland from the Caribbean coast):** This is one of the few lodges providing direct access to the southern Caribbean lowland rain forests. There's no electricity here, but that doesn't mean it's not plush. Hike along a riverbed, ride horses through the rain forest, climb 30m (100 ft.) up a ceiba tree, or rappel down a jungle waterfall. See Chapter 21.

The Best Restaurants

Although Costa Rica is not known for its fine food, you'll have no trouble dining well. The following restaurants run the gamut in terms of cuisine and ambience, from local fresh seafood served on plastic lawn chairs set in the sand to top-notch Pacific-Rim fusion served in an elegant and refined setting. If your travels take you near any of these, don't pass up the chance for a meal:

- ✓ **Bakea (San José):** The creative and varied décor of this rambling old colonial home, coupled with the excellent fusion cuisine coming out of the kitchen, makes this one of the top restaurants in the city. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Grano de Oro Restaurant (San José):** This elegant little hotel has a similarly 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 Chapter 11.

- ✔ **Camarón Dorado (Playa Brasilito):** Simple, fresh seafood served on plastic lawn furniture set in the sand just steps from the crashing waves makes this place a wonderful spot. The attentive, semiformal service makes it even better. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **La Laguna del Cocodrillo (Tamarindo):** The newest high-end fusion restaurant to hit the scene in Tamarindo is so far the best. The atmosphere is casually elegant, and the dishes are downright delicious. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Sunspot Bar & Grill (Manuel Antonio):** The menu changes regularly at this elegant restaurant housed under canvas tents poolside at one of Manuel Antonio's top hotels. There are precious few tables here, so be sure to reserve in advance. See Chapter 15.
- ✔ **Ginger (Playa Hermosa):** Serving an eclectic mix of traditional and Pan-Asian-influenced tapas, this sophisticated little joint is taking this part of Guanacaste by storm. Ginger even has a list of creative cocktails to match the inventive dishes. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Sophia (Monteverde):** This new place serves excellent Latin fusion fare in an intimate setting about halfway along the rough dirt road between Santa Elena and the Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve. See Chapter 17.
- ✔ **Nectar (at Flor Blanca Resort, Santa Teresa):** 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 Chapter 19.
- ✔ **La Pecora Nera (Puerto Viejo):** 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 Chapter 21.



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.

- ✔ **Playa Tamarindo:** Although it's on the verge of becoming a little too overdeveloped, crowded, and chaotic, Tamarindo is still one of Costa Rica's best beaches. Tamarindo has ample lodgings to suit every budget, as well as excellent restaurants at almost every turn. The beach here is long and broad, with sections calm enough for swimmers and others just right for surfers. Located about midway

along the beaches of Guanacaste province, Tamarindo also has one of the liveliest nightlife scenes on this coast. See Chapters 13 and 14.

- ✓ **Playa Nacascolo:** This narrow band of soft white sand is a rare treasure on this coast, which is typified by coarser, darker sand beaches. Although it's within the grounds of the massive Four Seasons Resort, it's public property and open to all. See Chapter 14.
- ✓ **Playa Manuel Antonio:** Costa Rica's original rain-forest-meets-beach destination retains its charms despite burgeoning crowds and mushrooming hotels. The beaches inside the national park are idyllic, and the views from the hills outside the park are enchanting. This is one of the few remaining habitats for the endangered squirrel monkey. See Chapter 15.
- ✓ **Playa Montezuma:** This little beach town at the southern tip of the Nicoya Peninsula has weathered fame and infamy and yet retains a funky sense of individuality. The nearby 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. Also nearby are the Cabo Blanco and Curu wildlife preserves. See Chapter 19.
- ✓ **Malpaís:** If you're looking to visit Costa Rica's newest hot spot before the throngs discover it, head out to Malpaís. Here you'll find miles of nearly deserted beaches, great surf, and just a smattering of lodges, surf camps, and simple *cabinas*. If Malpaís is too crowded for you, head farther on down the road to Santa Teresa, Playa Hermosa, or Manzanillo. See Chapter 19.
- ✓ **Punta Uva and 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 Chapter 21.

The Best Adventures and Activities

Costa Rica is a top-notch destination for adventure travel. The options and activities are many. Here are some of the best activities and adventures awaiting you:

- ✓ **Rafting the Pacuare River (near Turrialba):** This class III and IV river passes through primary and secondary forests and a beautiful steep gorge that, sadly, might be dammed soon. Get there quick! **Ríos Tropicales** can take you on this river. See Chapter 12.
- ✓ **Surfing Guanacaste Province:** This northwestern province has dozens of respectable beach and reef breaks, from Witch's Rock up 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** and **playas Negra** and **Avellanas**. Or, find your own secret spot. Rent a 4-x-4 with a roof rack, pile on the boards, and explore. If you want to learn, most of the popular surf beaches up here have surf schools. See Chapter 14.

- ✔ **Battling a billfish off the Pacific coast:** Billfish are plentiful all along Costa Rica's Pacific coast, and boats operate from most coastal beach and port towns. Go to **Quepos** (just outside Manuel Antonio) for the best fish scene, or head down to **Drake Bay**, the **Osa Peninsula**, or **Golfo Dulce**, if you want some isolation. See Chapters 15 and 20.
- ✔ **Swinging through the treetops on a canopy tour:** This unique adventure is becoming quite the rage. 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. There are canopy tours all around Costa Rica. **The Original Canopy Tours** runs several operations in locations around the country. See Chapter 17.
- ✔ **Mountain-biking the back roads of Costa Rica:** The lack of paved roads 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. The area around Lake Arenal and the Arenal volcano is a perfect place to ride some fat-track bikes. Contact **Bike Arenal**. See Chapter 18.
- ✔ **Kayaking around the Golfo Dulce:** Slipping through the waters of the Golfo Dulce by kayak gets you intimately in touch with the raw beauty of this underdeveloped region. In addition to the open gulf waters where dolphins often frolick, **Escondido Trex** takes folks on trips into mangrove swamps and into river estuaries. See Chapter 20.

The Best Family Spots

Costa Rica's rugged reputation should not discourage family travel. Here are a few of the ample attractions and activities available to please tourists of all ages, as well as some of the hotels, resorts, and destinations perfectly suited to family travel:

- ✔ **La Paz Waterfall Gardens:** This multifaceted attraction features paths and suspended walkways alongside a series of impressive jungle waterfalls. Kids love the variety of natural attractions, from the immense butterfly garden to the hummingbird garden. The rooms at the **Peace Lodge** here are some of the best in the country. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **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** has an excellent location on

a calm section of beach, spacious rooms, and a great pool for kids and adults alike. See Chapters 13 and 14.

- ✓ **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. Numerous lodging options are available, but **Hotel Sí Como No** with its large suites, two pools, water slide, and nightly movies, is probably your best bet. See Chapter 15.
- ✓ **Playa Hermosa:** The broad stretch of sand and 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. Check in at **Aqua Sport** where you can rent sea kayaks, sailboards, paddleboats, beach umbrellas, and bicycles. See Chapter 16.
- ✓ **Allegro Papagayo Resort:** This large all-inclusive resort probably has the most extensive facilities, widest array of tours and activities, and best-run children's program in the country so far. The hotel is located on a very calm section of Bahía Culebra, and it even has a separate "Fun Club" on a beautiful nearby white-sand beach. See Chapter 13.
- ✓ **Monteverde:** Monteverde not only boasts the country's most famous cloud forest, but it 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, and hummingbird gallery. More-adventurous families can take one of the local zip-line canopy tours. See Chapter 17.

The Best Nightlife

Costa Rica has plenty of places to dance the night away — many of my favorites are set right on the water's edge. Here is a sampling of what you'll find:

- ✓ **El Cuartel de la Boca del Monte (San José):** This is where San José's young, restless, and beautiful congregate. From Wednesday to Saturday, the place is jam-packed. Originally a gay and bohemian hangout, it's now decidedly mixed and leaning toward yuppie. There's frequently live music here. See Chapter 12.
- ✓ **Terra U (San José):** At night, the streets of San José's university district are filled with students strolling among a variety of bars and cafes. The Calle de Amargura, or "Street of Bitterness," is the heart and soul of this district, and Terra U, a bustling bar, sits smack-dab in the center of this street. See Chapter 12.
- ✓ **Mar y Sombra (Manuel Antonio):** Located on the beach a couple hundred meters from the national park entrance, this is the hottest

spot in the Manuel Antonio area. There's a large, open-air dance floor and plenty of tables set in the sand. If the dancing gets too intense, you can always cool your feet in the ocean. See Chapter 15.

- ✔ **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 meanings. 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 even have high-tech night-vision goggles. Some of the better spots for night tours are **Monteverde**, the **Osa Peninsula**, and **Tortuguero**. Volcano viewing in **Arenal** is another not-to-miss nighttime activity. See Chapters 17, 18, 20, and 21.
- ✔ **El Bambú (Puerto Viejo):** The tiny beach town of Puerto Viejo has one of the most active after-dark scenes in the country. The small, open-air waterfront bar El Bambú is my favorite of the bunch. This place is packed every Monday and Friday for Reggae Night. If the dance floor gets too hot and sweaty, you can always grab a table in the sand. See Chapter 21.