

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 compact country, Costa Rica is a marvelous and multifaceted 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 little 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 or hammock 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, listed in the order in which they appear in the book. 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

Not too long ago, finding anything to fit in this category was difficult. Now, it's a breeze. Costa Rica 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 resorts and business-class hotels in the San José area. Everything is in great shape, the service is bend-over-backwards, the restaurants are excellent, and the hotel features all the facilities and amenities you could want, save a golf course. See Chapter 11.

- ✔ **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 — and all at a great price. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Finca Rosa Blanca Coffee Plantation & Inn (Heredia):** My favorite boutique hotel in the San José metropolitan area. If the cookie-cutter rooms of large hotels leave you cold, then the unique rooms of this artistic inn may be up your alley. Finca Rosa Blanca is set among the lush hillsides and coffee plantations of Heredia, just 20 minutes from San José. 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.
- ✔ **Arenas del Mar (Manuel Antonio):** This boutique resort combines beautiful views with easy beach access, a rare commodity in Manuel Antonio. With large and ample rooms, excellent service and amenities, a fabulous restaurant, and a beautiful little spa, this place has a lot to offer. See Chapter 15.
- ✔ **Four Seasons Resort (Papagayo Peninsula):** The Four Seasons is currently the only major resort to really address the ultra-high-end luxury market in Costa Rica. Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, Madonna, Pink, and Michael Jordan are just a few of the notable guests who have come here. A beautiful setting, wonderful installations, a world-class golf course, and stellar service make this the current king of the hill in the upscale market. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Westin Playa Conchal Resort & Spa (Playa Conchal):** This large and sprawling resort features plush, all-suite accommodations, a massive, free-form pool, a fabulous golf course, and extensive spa facilities. It's also set on one of the prettiest beaches on the Guanacaste coast. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **JW Marriott Guanacaste Resort & Spa (Hacienda Pinilla):** This place offers beautiful rooms, ample facilities, top-notch service, and the largest swimming pool in Central America. The ocean is just steps away, and several other excellent beaches are nearby. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **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.
- ✔ **Tabacón Grand Spa Thermal Resort (Arenal Volcano):** In addition to having the most lush and luxurious natural hot springs and adjacent spa, this resort offers stylish rooms with excellent views and proximity to the active Arenal Volcano. Service and food here are top-notch as well. See Chapter 18.

- ✔ **The Springs Resort & Spa (Arenal Volcano):** This resort features opulent rooms with extravagant bathrooms, a series of sculpted hot-spring pools, excellent restaurants, extensive facilities, and fabulous views. See Chapter 18.
- ✔ **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.
- ✔ **Tree House Lodge (Punta Uva):** A unique and beautifully designed collection of private houses offers one of the most creative and luxurious accommodations on the Caribbean coast. I like the namesake Tree House suite, where a live tree occupies a central part of the living area, although the Beach House suite is also quite spectacular. See Chapter 21.

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 a room at one of these fine establishments:

- ✔ **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.
- ✔ **Hotel Aranjuez (San José):** True budget seekers should look no further when looking to crash in San José. Great location, clean rooms, ample common areas, and plenty of perks make this a perennially popular choice. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **El Velero Hotel (Playa Hermosa):** Set right on the beach, this little hotel offers cozy, upbeat rooms at a great price. A small pool and excellent restaurant round out the offerings here. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Hotel Verde Mar (Manuel Antonio):** One of Manuel Antonio's few true beachfront hotels is also one of its best bargains. Rooms are large and attractive and, most important, just a short walk from the surf. See Chapter 15.
- ✔ **Villas Nicolas (Manuel Antonio):** The stellar views and large, private balconies offered in most rooms at this spot go for much, much more at most other Manuel Antonio hotels. See Chapter 15.

- ✓ **Arco Iris Lodge (Monteverde):** Located right in the center of Santa Elena village, this small, homey lodge feels remote and private. Rooms are well done and cozy, and the service is excellent. See Chapter 17.
- ✓ **Amor de Mar (Montezuma):** The rooms here are simple, but they're 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-size tide pool carved into a coral rock outcropping. See Chapter 19.
- ✓ **Cabinas Sol y Mar (Playa Zancudo):** These beachfront rooms are a real bargain. Cozy and well equipped, they're set 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 Chapter 20.
- ✓ **Playa Negra Guesthouse (Cahuita):** Located just across a dirt road from a lovely section of Playa Negra (Black Beach), this quiet little lodge offers up simple, cozy accommodations, with lush gardens, friendly service, and an appropriately laid-back Caribbean vibe. See Chapter 21.
- ✓ **Casa Verde Lodge (Puerto Viejo):** Lush gardens, tidy rooms, amiable hosts, and great prices make this my favorite hotel in the tiny town of Puerto Viejo. The refreshing pool and close proximity to everything are nice perks as well. See Chapter 21.
- ✓ **La Costa de Papito (Playa Cocles):** This place features large and lovely independent and duplex wooden bungalows spread around lush grounds. Just 90m (295 ft.) or so away, however, are the warm waves of the Caribbean. See Chapter 21.

The Best Ecolodges

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:

- ✓ **Monteverde Lodge (Monteverde):** Run by the folks at Costa Rica Expeditions, this was one of the first ecolodges to open in Monteverde, and it remains one of the best. Beyond the comfortable accommodations and great food, the excellent guides are the greatest asset here. See Chapter 17.
- ✓ **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.
- ✔ **Playa Nicuesa Rainforest Lodge (Golfo Dulce):** This 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 lodge is one of the few 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.
- ✔ **Tortuga Lodge (Tortuguero):** Run by pioneering ecotourism operator Costa Rica Expeditions, this is the most comfortable and best-equipped lodge in the Tortuguero area. The hotel has lush grounds, a beautiful pool, and excellent naturalist guides. 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 restaurants, don't pass up the chance for a meal:

- ✔ **Park Café (San José):** The creative cooking of a 2-star Michelin chef combine with elegant décor and a romantic ambience in this courtyard treasure. The menu changes regularly but never disappoints. 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.

- ✓ **Bacchus (Santa Ana):** Set in a wonderfully restored and updated ancient adobe home, this restaurant serves up the best Italian fare in the metropolitan area. The setting is elegant and the service is refined. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Dragonfly Bar & Grill (Tamarindo):** It's almost always packed at this popular Tamarindo eatery. Southwestern American and Pacific Rim fusion cuisines are the primary culinary influences here. Portions are massive, service excellent, and the prices fair. See Chapter 13.
- ✓ **Lola's (Playa Avellanas):** Fresh fruit juices, flash-grilled tuna, excellent salads, crisp Belgian fries, and more are served up at this delightful beachfront restaurant. Hammocks are hung from coconut trees, and the waves are just steps away. See Chapter 13.
- ✓ **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.
- ✓ **El Gran Escape (Manuel Antonio):** Fresh seafood perfectly prepared, immense portions, and a lively, welcoming vibe make this longstanding hot spot the top restaurant in downtown Quepos. See Chapter 15.
- ✓ **El Patio Bistro Latino (Quepos):** This casual but elegant little place is a welcome oasis in the somewhat seedy city of Quepos. The chef's creative concoctions take full advantage of fresh local ingredients. See Chapter 15.
- ✓ **Sophia (Monteverde):** This 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 Reserve. See Chapter 17.
- ✓ **Café Caburé (Monteverde):** With a creative, wide-ranging menu and lovely setting, this casual spot is a must stop in Monteverde. Even if you don't come for the food, you'll want to sample some of the excellent, homemade artisanal chocolate creations. 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 open-air space just steps from the sand. See Chapter 19.
- ✓ **Playa de los Artistas (Montezuma):** Whether you choose a seat on a tatami mat on the sand or one of the more traditional tables, this place is the perfect blend of refined cuisine and beachside funkiness. Fresh grilled seafood is the specialty here, and it's done to perfection. See Chapter 19.

- ✔ **Brisas del Mar (Malpais):** Boasting, arguably, the best sunset view in Malpais and Santa Teresa, this chef-owned and -run restaurant features a regularly rotating and always rewarding chalkboard menu of contemporary fusion fare. 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 has 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 some people may find Tamarindo overdeveloped, crowded, and chaotic, it's still one of Costa Rica's best beach destinations. 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 dark-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 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, may 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 4x4 with a roof rack, pile on the boards, and explore. If you want to learn, most of the popular surf beaches 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. You can find canopy tours all around Costa Rica. Check the various destination chapters to find a canopy-tour operation near you.
- ✓ **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 Arenal Volcano is a perfect place to ride some fat-track bikes. Contact **Bike Arenal**. See Chapter 18.

- ✔ **Trying the sport of canyoning:** A relatively new and nonstandardized adventure sport, 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** and **Desafío Expeditions** in La Fortuna, and **Psycho Tours** near Puerto Jiménez, are the prime operators. See Chapters 18 and 20.
- ✔ **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 frolic, **Escondido Trex** takes folks on trips into mangrove swamps and 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.
- ✔ **Papagayo Peninsula:** Forming a large, sheltered bay, the Papagayo Peninsula is home to several of the country's top all-inclusive resorts, all of which feature dedicated children's programs, as well as scores of activities, amenities, and in-house facilities. The **Hilton Papagayo Resort** is an excellent choice for families. See Chapters 13 and 14.
- ✔ **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 monkey sightings almost guaranteed), 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. I recommend staying at **Hotel Playa Hermosa Bosque del Mar** and checking in at **Aqua Sport**, where you can rent sea kayaks, sailboards, paddleboats, beach umbrellas, and bicycles. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Monteverde:** Monteverde 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, and hummingbird gallery. More-adventurous families can take one of the local zip-line canopy tours. See Chapter 17.