

PURA VIDA IN COSTA RICA WITH CONTIKI

The first day of the tour was spent getting acquainted with our fellow travelers. The hotel we stayed at was the TRYP Sabana, located just a short walk from downtown San Jose. We met at the hotel later in the afternoon and went on a walking tour through downtown San Jose while our trip manager educated us on some of the Country's history. We walked through the various shops and markets that line the city streets and saw the famous National Theatre of Costa Rica. The included dinner was at a local steakhouse where we tried fresh empanadas, listened to live music, and celebrated the first day of our trip with new friends. On the way back to the hotel, our trip manager let us know which bars and clubs in town were the best for experiencing some of the city's night life.

The next morning, en route to the second hotel, we stopped for an included lunch at a restaurant surrounded by small forest. Here our trip manager pointed out sloths and poison dart frogs while explaining the cultural significance of the enormous Kapok tree towering above us. During our transit, we also got to see the expansive plantain and banana farms that blanket much of the Costa Rican countryside.

The second and third days of our trip were spent at the Pachira Jungle Lodge in Tortuguero National Park located on the country's Caribbean coast. Tortuguero, or Land of Turtles, is known for being the one of the most important turtle nesting sites in the western hemisphere. The lodge itself is only accessible by boat which required an hour-long ride through the winding canals that snake through the dense Costa Rican jungle. All of our meals at the lodge were included in the tour.

It is worth mentioning that Tortuguero is a particularly humid area throughout the rainy season, and due to the environmental protections in the area, pollutant producers like two-stroke engines and freon air conditioning are not allowed. We spent a lot of time at the pool to escape the heat. Bug spray is also your best friend as the jungle environment is a haven for mosquitos, especially during the rainy season. The jungle surrounding the

lodge is replete with a wide variety of wildlife and we spent a lot of time exploring the area by boat and on foot. We were able to spot toucans, howler monkeys, iguanas, basilisk lizards, caiman, blue land crabs, sloths, raccoons, and more exotic ants and spiders than you could ever want to see. The optional activity offered at this location was a moonlit turtle walk. With the help of a local conservation worker, groups are taken out at night onto portions of the 18-mile long coast to witness the spectacular march of sea turtles making their way up the beach to lay their eggs. We were told it is also not uncommon to spot jaguars in the adjacent jungle as they often prey on the vulnerable turtles. People from all over the world can volunteer to work for the conservatory for a summer and help protect the endangered turtles that nest there.



After saying goodbye to the land of turtles, we were back on the road towards our next hotel in Sarapiqui. Along the way, our trip manager had us stop at one of his favorite fruit stands where we were able to taste a variety of the local fruits grown in the area. For accommodations we

stayed at the Pozo Azul Tent Suites. Surrounded by yet another forest, the rooms themselves were similar to the cabins at the Pachira Lodge. Dinner and breakfast the next morning were included here.

Our included activity was a chocolate tour where we learned about the history of making chocolate from cocoa trees and happily tasted each step in the process. The optional tour offered was white water rafting which is worth trying. The rapids are perfect for those with no prior experience, and the instructors keep things interesting with little games and activities throughout.



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DAY FIVE & SIX

The fifth and sixth days of our tour were spent in the Arenal providence of Costa Rica. Our hotel was the Volcano Lodge and Springs near La Fortuna. A definite step up from cabin living, the property is packed with vibrant vegetation, mossy brick roads, and an assortment of pools and natural hot springs. The rooms here also featured air conditioning. Only breakfast was included during our stay at this hotel, so we took the short drive into town to find local restaurants for lunch and dinner. Fortunately, practically every business throughout Costa Rica accepts USD, so exchanging currency was not an issue.

The two optional activities I participated in were waterfall repelling and a cultural tour. The waterfall repelling was one of the funnest activities of the trip, consisting of four repells ranging from 30 feet to 200+ feet, and two 'water surprises' as described by our instructors. The larger repells required a degree of ziplining, not for the faint of heart, but a lot of fun. Lunch was also included in this activity.



The cultural tour was also a lot of fun. It began by spending some time at a local school, watching school children perform cultural dances, and joining in on the fun. We spent some time talking with the kids, learning about their favorite classes and foods while answering questions they had about our own lives. Due to the low average wage in Costa Rica, international travel is not widely accessible to those born there and participating in this cultural exchange was a valuable experience for all of us. The second part of the tour

was visiting Casona Rio Fortuna, a traditional country estate, where we got to try a lot of locally grown fruit, observe how sugar cane was traditionally processed, make our own tortillas, and have a nice included dinner with live music.

The last two days of the tour were located at Tamarindo Beach on the country's Pacific coast. After a four-hour drive from the Arenal Providence, we were greeted with fantastic beach views of the open ocean. I should mention that our coach driver throughout the tour was exceptional, his ability to safely maneuver our large bus on the often-difficult Costa Rican roads was fantastic.

The hotel we stayed at was the Wyndham Esplendor, another fantastic location, this time featuring an infinity pool looking out towards the sea. It is worth noting that Wi-Fi throughout the majority of the trip was very spotty except for at this hotel. If internet access is a necessity, an international data plan is highly suggested.

The two optional activities I participated in were surf lessons and a catamaran cruise. For the surf lessons, we spent about two hours with surf instructors who helped us go from zero experience to being able to successfully ride small waves, and that was a lot of fun. The catamaran cruise took us on a tour around the coast, giving us great views of the rolling jungle hills and pink sunset. Our Contiki group was not the only group on the small ship, but there was enough room for everyone to enjoy the trip, including netted areas on the bow perfect for laying out and appreciating the ocean breeze. The ship held an open bar throughout the cruise and an included lunch. At one point the ship dropped anchor near a secluded cove where we were able to jump off the ship and swim or snorkel as well.

Upon returning to the hotel after a long day of water activities, we had an included steak dinner and said our last goodbyes to Costa Rica and new friends.

The last day was a travel day. The closest airport in Liberia is about an hour to an hour and a half drive from Tamarindo, and it is highly suggested that you pre-book a shuttle as a taxi will be more expensive. I picked up some last-minute souvenirs from the airport, spent the last of my Costa Rican Colones, and made it back home, exhausted, but refreshed and grateful for getting to experience *pura vida* (pure life) in Costa Rica.

My dog was happy to have me back too.

