Costa Rica

Pura vida: from Caribbean canals to Pacific beaches

RECOMMENDED LENGTH	DATES	TRANSPORT	ESTIMATED FROM, EXCL. FLIGHT
16 days	**Your choice** you pick the dates	**Self-drive** or private driver	**€1,790** p.p.

My recommended private route through Central America's greenest country: the canals and turtle beaches of Tortuguero, Arenal volcano with its hot springs, the cloud forests of Monteverde and the monkeys and sloths of Manuel Antonio. You finish with three relaxing days on the Pacific coast near Uvita, where whales pass by. You travel with your own party on your own dates, by rental car or with private transfers; hotels and the airport pickup are arranged in advance.

- ✓ Personally composed
- ✓ No group travel
- ✓ At your own pace
- ✓ Leave out or add what you like
- ✓ Dates of your choice
- ✓ Eat wherever you like

Highlights

- Looking into the steaming crater of Poás volcano, with a coffee tasting at a historic estate
- By boat through the jungle canals of Tortuguero (chance of nesting sea turtles in July–October)
- The perfect volcanic cone of Arenal and an evening in natural hot springs
- Hanging bridges above the rainforest
- Monteverde cloud forest by day and by night
- Monkeys, sloths and white beaches in Manuel Antonio National Park
- The 'whale's tail' of Marino Ballena and a boat trip with a chance of humpbacks and dolphins
- Coffee and chocolate farms run by local families

Best time to travel

JAN FEB MAR APR MAY JUN JUL AUG SEP OCT NOV DEC

best time to travel: advice only, you travel when you like

TRAVELLERS
Only your own party, from 1 traveller. No group travel, no fellow travellers you don't know.

LENGTH
Recommended: 16 days · shorter or longer is always possible

DATES
Completely flexible: you leave on the day that suits you.

Your route on the map

Map: Natural Earth (public domain) · the arcs show the order of the route, not the exact road

1. **San José (Alajuela)**
   2 nights · day 1–2
2. **Tortuguero**
   2 nights · day 3–4
3. **La Fortuna (Arenal)**
   3 nights · day 5–7
4. **Monteverde**
   2 nights · day 8–9
5. **Manuel Antonio**
   2 nights · day 10–11
6. **Uvita**
   3 nights · day 12–14

overland, arrow = direction of travel · day trip

DAY 6 Hanging bridge above the rainforest at Arenal

DAY 11 Three-toed sloth in Manuel Antonio

My recommended route

This is the route as I put it together for you. It is a starting point, not a fixed programme: leave out what doesn't appeal to you, add what you would like to do and travel at your own pace. Everything below is arranged for you in advance. Prefer a guide? I can add a local guide to any activity.

DAY 1

Arrival in San José SAN JOSÉ (ALAJUELA)

Flight from Brussels with a connection to San José. A driver is waiting in the arrivals hall with a name sign and takes you to your hotel close to the airport, in Alajuela (approx. 10–20 minutes). Your travel documents and local SIM or eSIM instructions are ready for you. You stay here two nights, so you can catch your breath after the long flight before heading into nature.

DAY 2

Poás volcano and coffee SAN JOSÉ (ALAJUELA) ◆ BREAKFAST

The time difference will have you up early anyway, which suits the day: in the morning the crater is most likely to be clear. A private driver collects you at your hotel and drives approx. 1 hour past coffee plantations and strawberry fields up the slopes of Poás volcano. From the viewpoint you look into one of the largest active craters in the world. Poás is active and the park can close without warning, so we follow its status right up to the day itself. On the way back, a tour and tasting at Hacienda Doka, a family estate on the volcano's slopes with the oldest coffee mill in the country still in use. Free afternoon. If the park is closed or it is pouring with rain, you spend the morning in San José instead: the Pre-Columbian Gold Museum, the National Theatre and the central market.

DAY 3

To Tortuguero TORTUGUERO ◆ BREAKFAST · LUNCH · DINNER

You are collected early at your hotel. The drive runs through the rainforest of Braulio Carrillo National Park down to the Caribbean lowlands, with breakfast en route, then by boat (approx. 1.5 hours) along rivers to Tortuguero, reachable only by water or air. You do not need a car here. At Comfort and Premium level you stay full board at a lodge between canal and sea, at Budget level in a guesthouse in the village.

DAY 4

Canals and turtles TORTUGUERO ◆ BREAKFAST · LUNCH · DINNER

Early boat trip through the narrow canals: howler monkeys, caimans, kingfishers and, with luck, a sloth. Visit to the village and the Sea Turtle Conservancy visitor centre. From July to October you can join an optional evening walk to see nesting green turtles; by law this is only allowed with a licensed guide.

Jungle canal in Tortuguero National Park

DAY 5

To Arenal volcano LA FORTUNA (ARENAL) ◆ BREAKFAST

Boat back to the mainland and transfer to Guápiles. If you self-drive, your rental car (4x4) is waiting there, with a briefing from the rental company and our route notes; you drive approx. 3 hours past pineapple and banana plantations to La Fortuna. If you travel with private transfers, your driver meets you in Guápiles. In the evening you relax in the hot springs at the foot of Arenal (entry included).

DAY 6 **Volcano and hanging bridges** LA FORTUNA (ARENAL) ◆ BREAKFAST

Hike across old lava flows in Arenal National Park, then over hanging bridges above the rainforest, looking out for birds, frogs and snakes. You drive there yourself or are collected at your hotel.

DAY 7 **La Fortuna at your own pace** LA FORTUNA (ARENAL) ◆ BREAKFAST

Morning visit to a small chocolate and cacao farm, with a tour by the family. Free afternoon: La Fortuna waterfall, rafting or (optional) a day trip to the sky-blue Río Celeste.

DAY 8 **Around Lake Arenal to Monteverde** MONTEVERDE ◆ BREAKFAST

By rental car you drive approx. 3–3.5 hours around Lake Arenal and along mountain roads to Monteverde, stopping wherever you like. Without a car you take the classic jeep-boat-jeep: across the lake and then along the mountain roads (approx. 3.5 hours). Afternoon tour of a coffee farm.

DAY 9 **The cloud forest** MONTEVERDE ◆ BREAKFAST

Morning walk in the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve, looking for the quetzal, hummingbirds and howler monkeys. Free afternoon (optional zip-lining). In the evening a night walk by torchlight: tarantulas, tree frogs and sleeping birds.

Moss-covered cloud forest of Monteverde

DAY 10 **To the Pacific coast** MANUEL ANTONIO ◆ BREAKFAST

You drive yourself or with your private driver (approx. 4 hours) to Quepos and Manuel Antonio, stopping at the Tárcoles River bridge, known for its huge crocodiles. Leave nothing visible in the car at that stop.

DAY 11 **Manuel Antonio National Park** MANUEL ANTONIO ◆ BREAKFAST

Early walk through the park: squirrel monkeys, sloths, iguanas and white coves for swimming. Free afternoon. (The park is closed on Tuesdays; we plan your dates so that this day does not fall on a Tuesday.)

DAY 12 **To Uvita and Marino Ballena** UVITA ◆ BREAKFAST

Short drive (approx. 1 hour), self-drive or by private transfer, along the coast to Uvita. At low tide, walk out on the whale-tail-shaped sandbar in Marino Ballena National Park; we send you the tide times.

DAY 13 **Whales and waterfalls** UVITA ◆ BREAKFAST

Boat trip with a licensed local operator along the coast with a chance of humpback whales (July–October and December–March) and dolphins, plus snorkelling at the rocks. Optional afternoon to the Nauyaca waterfalls.

Humpback whale breaching in Marino Ballena

DAY 14 **Beach and pura vida** UVITA ◆ BREAKFAST

A completely free day at the beach or by the pool. Fancy something more? A surf lesson, a mangrove kayak trip or a day in Corcovado National Park (compulsory with a licensed guide since 2014) can always be added.

DAY 15 **Back to San José and departure** AAN BOORD ◆ BREAKFAST

You drive (approx. 3.5–4 hours) to San José airport and return your rental car there, or your private driver drops you at departures. Evening flight to Europe.

DAY 16 **Arrival in Brussels**

Arrival in Brussels after a connection. A few days later I call you to hear how it went.

What I arrange for you

1. **Pickup on arrival**
At Juan Santamaría airport (San José) a driver waits in the arrivals hall with a name sign; he tracks your flight and also waits if it is delayed. The drive to your hotel in Alajuela takes 10 to 20 minutes. If you self-drive, you return your rental car at the airport on the last day; otherwise your private driver drops you at departures.

2. **Hotels**
Every night is booked and confirmed in advance, at the level you choose: Budget, Comfort or Premium. Prefer another hotel? I change it.

3. **Transport**
You choose: self-drive with a rental car waiting for you, or a private driver and private transfers. Domestic flights, trains and boats where they make sense, all booked in advance.

4. **Activities, at your pace**
The activities and entrance tickets on the route. No guide or group travels with you: you set the pace, and anything you would rather skip, you simply leave out.

5. **Eat wherever you like**
Breakfast is included, as are the meals at remote camps and lodges where there is no alternative. For the rest I give you my restaurant tips, but you are completely free to choose where you eat. I never recommend a place because I earn a commission on it.

Estimated prices per person

PER PERSON, BASED ON 2 TRAVELLERS, EXCL. INTERNATIONAL FLIGHT

ACCOMMODATION LEVEL	Self-drive rental car, everything pre-booked	Private driver private transfers and driver
Budget simple, clean and well located	€1,790 p.p.	€1,960 p.p.
Comfort characterful mid-range	€2,100 p.p.	€2,270 p.p.
Premium the best addresses on the ground	€3,310 p.p.	€3,450 p.p.

WITH 4 TRAVELLERS	approx. 13% off per person: you share the car and driver. E.g. Comfort, private driver: approx. €1,975 p.p.
TRAVELLING SOLO	supplement of approx. 55%: you cover the cost of the room and transport alone. E.g. Comfort, private driver: approx. €3,520 p.p.
INTERNATIONAL FLIGHT	I'm happy to book your flight for you, or you book it yourself; if I book it, the flight price for your dates is in your personal quote. Return flight Brussels–San José not included: allow about € 650–990 p.p. depending on the month (cheapest in January, most expensive in July and December). I find you the best flight with your quote.

SELF-DRIVE
Costa Rica is a classic self-drive destination. Your rental car (4x4) is waiting on day 5 in Guápiles, after Tortuguero, where no car is needed, and you return it at the airport on day 15: no one-way fee. Your Belgian licence is sufficient (together with your passport with entry stamp), you drive on the right and distances are short, although on the narrow, winding roads you rarely average more than 50 km/h. Drive in daylight only, use Waze and never leave anything visible in the car. Full insurance is included in the price; fuel and the small tolls are paid by you.

WITH A PRIVATE DRIVER
Prefer not to drive? Then we arrange private transfers between all stops, each with a licensed driver who collects you at your hotel and stops wherever you like on the way. It is not one driver who stays with you throughout: locally you are collected for each activity, or distances are walkable or a short taxi ride. To Monteverde you take the classic jeep-boat-jeep across Lake Arenal. The price difference with self-drive is small in Costa Rica, because rental cars with the mandatory insurance are expensive.

ESTIMATED PRICES Estimated prices: per person, based on 2 travellers sharing a room, excl. international flight, estimated from desk research (2027 price level). The binding price is the one in your personal proposal and booking confirmation.

Estimated price. In high season the price can be higher, in low season lower; your exact price is in your personal quote.

Three accommodation levels

Budget

Simple, well-reviewed B&Bs and small hotels with private bathroom (e.g. Casa Lima B&B near the airport, Casa Marbella in Tortuguero village, Hotel Monte Real in La Fortuna, Casa Jungle B&B in Monteverde, Blue Morpho House near Manuel Antonio, Cascada Verde in Uvita). In Tortuguero you stay in the village with breakfast, not at a full-board lodge.

Comfort

Characterful lodges and mid-range hotels (e.g. Hotel Bamboo Aeropuerto, a full-board lodge in Tortuguero such as Mawamba, La Fortuna Lodge or Hotel Campo Verde with volcano views, Casitas del Bosque in Monteverde, Hotel Flor Blanca in Manuel Antonio, Tucan Hotel or Ranchos Remo Lodge in Uvita).

Premium

The best lodges on the route: a boutique hotel in the Central Valley, a top full-board lodge in Tortuguero (e.g. Evergreen or Pachira), a resort with its own hot springs at Arenal, a cloud-forest lodge, Hotel Plaza Yara or similar in Manuel Antonio and La Cusinga Lodge or Alborada in Uvita. These are the best boutique hotels and lodges (approx. €150–260 per room); true luxury (five-star resorts) on request.

Possible guided moments

Prefer a guide? I can add a local guide to any activity.

- Poás: a driver-guide instead of just a driver
- Arenal: a naturalist guide for the national park and the hanging bridges
- Monteverde: a naturalist guide for the morning walk in the cloud forest
- Manuel Antonio: a naturalist guide with a spotting scope, who finds sloths and monkeys much faster
- Tortuguero (July–October): the night turtle tour, by law only with a licensed guide
- Corcovado (as an extension): only with a licensed guide since 2014
- Prefer a guide? I can add a local guide to any activity.

Ideas to adapt the route

- Shorter (10–12 days): drop Tortuguero or Uvita
- Rather head straight into nature? Then we drop the second night in San José and the Poás day
- Longer: two or three nights on the Osa Peninsula (Corcovado, compulsory with a licensed guide) from Uvita, or a few beach days in Guanacaste
- Río Celeste and Tenorio National Park as an extra day between La Fortuna and Monteverde
- The Caribbean coast at Cahuita and Puerto Viejo instead of or after Tortuguero
- At Budget level: drive your own rental car to the La Pavona dock (guarded parking) and take the public boat to Tortuguero
- With children: fewer moves, three bases (Arenal, Monteverde, Pacific coast)

Included

- ✓ 14 nights at the comfort level of your choice (Budget, Comfort or Premium), double room with breakfast; at Comfort and Premium level full board at a lodge in Tortuguero
- ✓ Airport pickup in San José and transfer to your hotel in Alajuela, where you stay two nights
- ✓ Transport to and from Tortuguero (road and boat) and the canal boat trip
- ✓ Your choice: rental car (4x4) from day 5 to day 15 with full insurance and our route notes, or private transfers between all stops (with jeep-boat-jeep to Monteverde) and airport drop-off
- ✓ On day 2 a private driver (Poás volcano and coffee estate, or San José in bad weather)
- ✓ All listed excursions and park fees: Poás volcano (timed tickets), Doka coffee estate, Arenal hot springs, Arenal National Park and the hanging bridges, cacao farm, coffee farm and cloud forest in Monteverde, the night walk, Manuel Antonio, Marino Ballena and the Uvita boat trip

Not included

- International flight (I'm happy to book it for you, or you book it yourself; allow approx. €650–990 pp, depending on the month)
- Other meals and drinks (you get my restaurant recommendations)
- When self-driving: fuel, tolls and parking (indicative ± €110 per car for the whole route; paid locally) and the deposit on your credit card
- Optional activities (zip-lining, rafting, Río Celeste, night turtle tour, which by law is only allowed with a licensed guide)
- Tips for drivers (and guides, if you take one)
- Travel and cancellation insurance
- Personal expenses

Practical information

VISA (BELGIAN CITIZENS)
No visa required (Belgium is in 'Group 1'); stays up to 180 days possible, immigration decides the number of days granted. Passport valid for the length of stay (6 months recommended). Proof of return or onward travel within 90 days is mandatory.

HEALTH
No mandatory vaccinations when arriving from Europe (yellow fever certificate only required when arriving from risk countries such as Colombia). Dengue occurs: protect against mosquitoes. Good sun protection. Consult a travel clinic (ITG/Wanda).

CURRENCY & PAYMENT
Costa Rican colón (CRC); US dollars accepted almost everywhere. Card payment is common.

FLIGHT TIME FROM BRUSSELS
No direct flight; approx. 14–17 hours with a connection in Madrid, Frankfurt, Paris or Amsterdam.

TIME DIFFERENCE
UTC-6: 7 hours behind Belgium in winter, 8 hours in summer.

LANGUAGE
Spanish; English fairly common in the tourism sector.

MEALS
Breakfast is included every day; at Comfort and Premium level also full board at the Tortuguero lodge, where there is no alternative. For the other meals you get my restaurant recommendations, but you are completely free to choose where and when you eat: I never steer you to expensive restaurants in return for a commission.

GUIDES
By default you travel without a guide. Prefer a guide? I can add a local guide to any activity.

As of September 2026: check diplomatie.belgium.be (travel advice) and wanda.be (health) before you travel.

Travelling responsibly

Costa Rica is a pioneer in ecotourism. Wherever possible we choose lodges holding the national CST sustainability certification, work with licensed naturalist guides when you want one, visit family businesses (coffee, cacao) and support national park management through park fees. By law, turtle tours are only allowed with a licensed guide, without torches or flash. Flight CO_2 offsetting is available.

Steennot Travels

Contact

Steennot Travels (in formation) · Lentestraat 80, Ghent, Belgium
Phone and WhatsApp +32 475 23 18 45 · info@steennot-travels.be
steennot-travels.be

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ESTIMATED PRICES

Estimated prices: per person, based on 2 travellers sharing a room, excl. international flight, estimated from desk research (2027 price level). The binding price is the one in your personal proposal and booking confirmation. Interested? Join the no-obligation list at steennot-travels.be or email info@steennot-travels.be. Other dates, more or fewer days, something left out or added? Everything can be adapted.

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DAY 4 **Jungle canal in Tortuguero National Park** · Photo: Javier Losa · CC BY 2.0 (creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0) · commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CostaRica_(6108230689).jpg · *cropped, resized*

DAY 6 **Hanging bridge above the rainforest at Arenal** · Photo: Peter Sheik · CC BY 2.0 (creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0) · commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Arenal_Hanging_Bridges,_Costa_Rica2.jpg · *cropped, resized*

DAY 9 **Moss-covered cloud forest of Monteverde** · Photo: Cephas · CC BY-SA 4.0 (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0) · commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Monteverde_Cloud_Forest_01.jpg · *resized*

DAY 11 **Three-toed sloth in Manuel Antonio** · Photo: Bernard Gagnon · CC0 (creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/deed.en) · commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pale-throated_sloth_in_Costa_Rica.jpg · *cropped, resized*

DAY 13 **Humpback whale breaching in Marino Ballena** · Photo: Giles Laurent · CC BY-SA 4.0 (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0) · commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:001_Humpback_whale_breaching_in_Ballena_Marine_National_Park_Photo_by_Giles_Laurent.jpg · *resized*