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The Truth About Costa Rica

By J Schipper

If you are thinking of travelling to Costa Rica, reading about my experiences may help you decide

what to see and do while you are there. My husband and I went there at Christmas on a 10 day group tour with the Caravan company, a travel tour provider which also has guided tours of Mexico, Guatemala, Copper Canyon and the Canadian Rockies.

The tour started in San Jose, the capital of Costa Rica. The hotel was modern and quiet, with a great buffet of (fairly) authentic food. Due to the tropical climate, local produce of excellent quality is available year-round, obviously grown on small farms, not the giant factory farms common in North America. The local watermelons were the most delicious I'd ever eaten, small (less than a foot in diameter), with bright red, extremely sweet flesh; completely different from the pale, tasteless, huge commercially grown Californian and Mexico melons sold back in the States. Rice and beans were served at almost every meal, however there was always a variety of spiced meat stews and also spicy vegetarian dishes. I'm not vegetarian, but I love vegetables, so I was really pleased by the menu, and it was one of the highlights of the trip. Bad food and noisy accommodations can really detract from a tour even if the scenery is great.

On my last tour with Caravan, we went to Mexico, and chicken was on the menu so often that to this day my husband won't eat any more of it. "All pollo'ed out," is how he puts it. But that wasn't the case this time; so obviously, even with the same tour company, each tour is different, since the details are largely arranged by local agents.

We didn't spend much time in San Jose itself, just drove through it on the way to local attractions. But I noticed barred windows and spirals of razor wire surrounding just about every house and building, and two armed guards at the exits of an appliance store, of all places. In front of a bank, I could understand it, but at a store selling washing machines? The tour guide said that the local crime rate is extremely high. In Mexico, I saw some barred windows, but little barbed wire. I am told that theft is a problem all through Latin America, and an acquaintance who has travelled widely around the continent told me not to take anything valuable along on my trip. However, even with this warning, the sight was really jarring. I'm not used to that at all in Canada and the States, and even the Caribbean doesn't have such obvious problems. Despite the fact that Costa Rica is a trendy retirement location for a lot of Gringos,

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this would really make me think twice about moving there.

Costa Rica is a volcanic area, and the tour group went to see two volcanoes, the Poas Volcano and the Arenal Volcano. The Poas Volcano was at a high altitude, covered with a cloud forest full of streaming, eerie mist unlike anything I've seen elsewhere. The crater, which contains a bright green, highly acidic lake, was poorly visible due to the misty conditions, but the just the walk through the forest was worthwhile by itself.itself.

The second volcano we visited was the Arenal, and I highly recommend that any travellers to Costa Rica set aside a day to visit the hot springs on the side of the mountain. I've never seen a water park like this one! Admission is a hefty \$25.00 US, probably priced out of range for most of the locals, but it's worth every penny. The hot spring has about a dozen huge pools each about 30 feet across, two with bars in the center. Each pool is a different temperature, from lukewarm to scalding. All the pools are surrounded by tropical foliage and winding paths. It's entirely possible to spend an entire day at

these heavenly springs without getting bored.

Our group took a ride on the Aerial Tram, which runs amongst the canopy of the rain forest. Every now and then, a giant blue Morphos butterfly would flutter around the tram, so bright and iridescent it appeared to be lit by a spotlight. We saw many birds and butterflies, but no colorful snakes, unfortunately, though there are supposed to be many varieties of them in the rainforest. Also no jaguars, as they are rare and very shy.

If you plan to hike into the rain forest, even on groomed trails, be sure to wear hiking boots, not sandals, and also long pants that can be tucked into those boots. I'm not kidding when I make this recommendation : the rain forest floor is full of biting ants, both leaf cutter ants and army ants, which have huge nests several yards across. These poisonous ants really bite, and I found this out the hard way as I and several other people on the tour were wearing sandals, and we found ourselves doing a skittish dance to stop the insects from crawling over our feet and biting us. Still, I came away with a swollen ankle due to one ant which had managed to latch on. I wonder how the local Indians who once lived in the rainforest dealt with this, as they went barefoot all the time.

We also spent two days in the Tortuguero wildlife preserve, heaven for birdwatchers. There were all kinds of exotic birds including Toucans. We also saw some small caimans, iguanas, and several species of monkeys. Surprisingly, given the humid rain forest, there were very few mosquitoes.

The most impressive crocodiles, about 15 feet long, were not in the park but in a river outside the game preserve. About a dozen of them could be seen from the top of bridge, basking in the water below and sunning themselves on sandbars. The guide told us that locals had previously been entertaining themselves by buying whole chicken carcasses and dangling them from ropes over the bridge just above the reptiles' noses to tease them. However, there was now a policeman stationed at one end of the bridge to prevent this practice, as it as lot like feeding bears, very unadvisable as it causes the animals to become pests.

We also went on a tour led by a naturalist who fed fish to an 8-foot wild crocodile by hand, even going

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so far as to handle the animal and hold its tail. The crocodile did not seem at all upset by this treatment and made no attempt to bite; I suppose it knows when the tour is coming by and expects to be fed.

We also spent a day at Jaco Beach in the Manuel Antonio National Park. If you go there, come in the early morning, because the park only allows a limited number of visitors at one time, and once the park is full, those who arrive later have to wait in a line outside the gate. The beach was beautiful, clean with warm, tropical water.

All in all, it was a very interesting trip, entirely different from Mexico, the only other Latin American country I have visited. It was a unique experience, well worth the money.

J Schipper loves to travel

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Traveling In Costa Rica

By Carmen Ross

Costa Rica is full of fascinating things to see and do. When you visit Costa Rica the first thing that you will notice is the friendly environment that permeates every aspect of the society in Costa Rica. And there are not many places on earth that are as beautiful all year round as Costa Rica. In Costa Rica you will be able to sit on the beach and luxuriate under the sun or choose from a variety of adventures that you just cannot find back at home.

If you are staying in Costa Rica you will want to check out all of their fabulous museums. There are over 30 different fantastic museums in Costa Rica and each of them will take your breath away with their amazing artifacts. You will find some of the most fantastic finds in Costa Rica at their museums. These museums are a great way to spend the day when you need a little break from the sun and the beach.

The sun in Costa Rica is powerful so be sure to bring some good sunscreen and a hat, getting sunstroke in Costa Rica is no way to enjoy your vacation.

There are many other gorgeous sites to see in Costa Rica besides the sun and the museums and one of them is the variety of trees. If you love the outdoors then Costa Rica is the place for you. There are many hikes and treks that you can go on in Costa Rica that will thrill your senses. You will get to see a good portion of the wildlife in Costa Rica as they go about their daily business, which is always fun and exciting. Costa Rica is a great place to visit either on your own or with others.

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Carmen Ross is the owner of Costa Rica Travel And Real Estate Site. (

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). Her site contains information and resources for

people interested in traveling to Costa Rica and living in Costa Rica.



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