

I

Preparing for Your Trip

Travel in the tropics, particularly in the backcountry, presents some challenges that may be unfamiliar to a traveler from more temperate climes. The culture, weather, terrain, and biotic components of Costa Rica's environment should all be taken into consideration before you set out on your trip. This chapter gives you information about what activities are available and where, the best times to go, what to expect in the way of accommodations and food, how to get around, what to bring, and how to stay healthy and have a safe trip.

WHAT TO DO

There are a wide variety of outdoor activities you can pursue within the boundaries of Costa Rica's parks and reserves. This tropical country's beauty can be explored through terrestrial pursuits such as hiking and caving, as well as by aquatic sports such as scuba diving and kayaking. The following should help you decide what activities you want to undertake and what specialized equipment to bring beyond the essentials, which are detailed later in this chapter. Route descriptions for each type of activity listed below are given in the four chapters in Part II, with the exception of birding and wildlife-watching, which are covered in Chapter 2, in the Flora and Fauna sections.

Hiking and Backpacking

Costa Rica's parks and reserves offer diverse day hikes and backpacking trips. The visitor can hike steamy lowland forests, long, deserted beaches, and strenuous mountain paths. Almost all the parks have at least a few reasonably maintained short trails, and some, such as Santa Rosa, have excellent trail systems. In general, there are fewer well-maintained, long backpacking trails than you may have come to expect in North America. There are exceptions in Corcovado, Monteverde, and Santa Rosa, but most long trails either were there before the area became a park or exist for utilitarian purposes for park personnel. This means that trails are almost never marked with tree blazes or other markings, and you need to be a little vigilant so as not to stray off main paths. For some areas, such as the largely unexplored La Amistad National Park, map and compass skills are a necessity. This is changing, and as more Costa Ricans and foreign tourists have shown interest in extensive backpacking trails, there has been serious discussion about the creation of trails that cross the country both north-south and east-west. Hopefully, a future edition of this book will have a description of a Costa Rican version of the Pacific Crest Trail or the Appalachian Trail.

Opposite: Palm trees in old pasture, Curú Wildlife Refuge

Whatever the length and difficulty of the trails you hike in Costa Rica, remember that the intensity of the sun and humidity are more than you might be used to. Take it easy at first, and remember to carry and drink lots of water. It is not uncommon to need to drink three liters a day in the hot lowlands.

Mountain Biking

Some of the parks provide excellent opportunities for mountain biking. Palo Verde, Lomas Barbudal, Peñas Blancas, and Ballena all have dirt roads that are untraveled save for the rare four-wheel-drive vehicle or horseback rider. Be prepared for a variety of surface conditions, as trails here can produce rim-bending rocks, mud up to the chainstays, and tire-puncturing thorns. You should bring all tools, tires, and spare parts with you.

Snorkeling and Scuba Diving

Costa Rica has two true coral reefs, both located off the Caribbean coast. The first, in Cahuita National Park, is the more mature and extensive of the two but was badly damaged by the 1990 earthquake; it is still worth snorkeling around. The second is farther to the south in Gandoca-Manzanillo Wildlife Refuge. It's a younger and less extensive reef, but it seems to be more biotically intact. Good snorkeling can also be found in Manuel Antonio National Park on the Pacific side.

Scuba diving is a relatively new sport in Costa Rica, but the newly created Ballena National Park and Isla del Caño feature some very attractive situations for experienced deepwater divers. The remote Isla del Cocos National Park is becoming world-renowned for its diving, but it is remote and expensive to get to. If you are going to dive without a guide or tour, you should bring all of your equipment with you, as no one rents it yet. You may be able to refill tanks through some of the dive tour operators out of Playa Hermosa or in Limón on the Caribbean side.

Sea Kayaking

Opportunities for sea kayaking exist on the Tortuguero canal on the Atlantic side, and in the Nicoya Peninsula and the Golfo Dulce region on the Pacific side. Each of these areas requires you to be experienced at weather prediction and dealing with tides. Kayaking in the side channels and creeks of the Tortuguero region further requires the use of topographic maps and a compass, as it is very easy to become disoriented in some of the backwater areas. Seas on the Pacific side are more predictable during the dry season. Tour operators out of San José offer package trips, or you can bring your own equipment.

Caving

Experienced cavers can explore the limestone caverns of Barra Honda National Park, covered in Chapter 5, Northwestern Region. All caves in the park require specialized equipment, although it is possible to arrange a trip to one of the caverns with park rangers. Recently, a large cave system was discovered in the vicinity of La Amistad National Park, and this has yet to be explored.

WEATHER AND CLIMATE

Costa Rica has a remarkable range of climatic conditions for such a small country. Sharp contrasts in topography create a variety of weather conditions, from torrid temperatures in the lowlands to cool breezes in the upland valleys to the chill of the high mountains, where subfreezing temperatures have been recorded.

Costa Rica's climate is also characterized by wet and dry seasons. Many visitors become confused when talking with Costa Ricans about the seasons; they seem to be reversed in relation to those in the Northern Hemisphere. When Costa Ricans talk about *verano* (summer), they mean the hot dry season between December and May, and *invierno* (winter) refers to the wet season between May and November. This corresponds with seasons in Spain and is a carryover from the Spanish Mediterranean region from which the first colonists arrived.

Along with the rest of the world's climate, these seasons are becoming increasingly erratic, but the following generalities can be made.

The Atlantic or Caribbean side is driest from February through April, and wettest from November through January. However, you should be prepared for rain at any time during the year in this part of the country.

The Pacific side and central parts of the country are driest from January through March. Guanacaste Province, which includes Santa Rosa and Rincón de la Vieja National Parks, has a dry season in which virtually no rain falls in the lowlands for the duration. During the dry season in Guanacaste, it's a good idea to check with park personnel or local people about the availability of water on backcountry trips before setting out. During the dry season from December to March, the more popular parks can become quite crowded, particularly during Costa Rican school holidays.

The rainy season is from the end of May to November. The change in the landscape is quite spectacular with the coming of the first rains, shifting from browns and grays to vibrant greens virtually overnight. A major consideration for backcountry travelers is that access to Corcovado National Park is very limited during the rainy season on the Pacific coast, and the muddiness of trails and intensity of biting insects make hiking over long distances unpleasant. However, if you are not planning on visiting any of the more remote parks, and particularly if you would like to visit the popular ones such as Manuel Antonio and Chirripó, try to do so during the rainy season. The parks are surprisingly deserted during this period. You might be more likely to get wet, but the solitude can be worth it.

Holidays

You may want to plan your trip around the Costa Rican holidays listed below, when the entire country shuts down. Obviously, if you're on an extended back-packing trip during these times, you won't be affected. However, in urban areas the buses, shops, and government offices become nonoperational and hotel rooms can be more difficult to find. Banks are also usually closed. All of this can mean frustrating delays or require unexpected changes in travel plans. To help

you anticipate and avoid such problems, the official holidays are listed below.

December 30 and January 1—New Year's

March 19—Saint Joseph's Day

Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday (usually late March to mid-April)—Holy Week

April 11—Juan Santa Maria Day

May 1—Labor Day

June 29—Day of Saint Peter and Saint Paul

July 25—Guanacaste Annexation Day

August 2—Virgin de los Angeles Day

August 15—Mother's Day

September 15—Independence Day

October 12—Columbus Day

December 8—Day of Immaculate Conception

December 25—Christmas

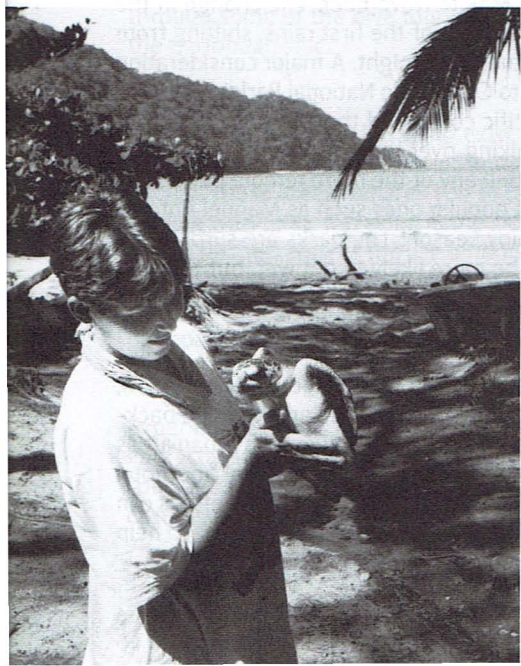
WHAT TO EXPECT IN COSTA RICA

To the North American or European traveler, Costa Rica feels the least culturally different of all the Central American countries. Yet there are some differences that a visitor to the parks and backcountry away from San José will encounter. Things happen more slowly. If the bus or plane is late, don't panic. Costa Ricans are generally very friendly people who are eager to please, so don't be insulted if someone in the countryside gives you directions that turn out to be wrong. It's possible that they did not know the answer to your question, and were trying to give you an

Sea turtle and friend, Curú Wildlife Refuge

answer that they thought you wanted to hear. Sometimes people in the countryside are so taken aback at the sight of a foreigner popping out of the forest onto their isolated farms that they just point without thinking. It's always a good idea to try to strike up a little bit of pleasant conversation before asking logistical questions, to let them get over the shock.

Foreign visitors coming in by plane first encounter what is commonly termed the Meseta Central or Central Valley. This has been the center of Costa Rica's population since colonial times, at least. Today, more than half of Costa Rica's 4.1 million people live there. The region actually encompasses two intermountain valleys. The lower and larger one contains the capital city of San José, as well as Alajuela and Heredia; the higher, smaller valley



contains Cartago and the smaller cities around it. Although densely populated and largely deforested, the Meseta contains some very interesting parks such as Braulio Carrillo and Poás.

The Meseta is located within the mountain ranges that comprise the “spine” of the country. Farthest north is the Guanacaste Cordillera, which gives way to the Tilaran and Central Cordilleras progressing southward. Farthest south is the Talamanca Cordillera, in which the nation’s highest peak is located: Chirripó (elevation 3821 meters), in the national park of the same name.

To the east of the mountains lie the plains or *llanuras* of Guatuso, San Carlos, Tortuguero, and Santa Clara. In their natural state, these are plains only in the sense that they are quite flat; they were once covered with forests and wetlands, with remnants protected in such places as Tortuguero National Park and Caño Negro Wildlife Refuge. In contrast, the Pacific coast is punctuated by a number of hilly peninsulas, including the Nicoya in the north and the Osa in the south. This gives the Pacific coast considerably more coastline than the Atlantic—1254 kilometers compared with the Atlantic’s 212 kilometers.

Accommodations

If you are not going to be camping within the park boundaries, you have a wide variety of hotels and other accommodations to choose from. Starting from the bottom, *pensión*, or the word *tipico*, indicates a low-priced establishment. These tend to be frequented by Costa Ricans more than by tourists, and range in quality from abysmal holes to spartan but quite comfortable accommodations. You can meet a good cross section of Costa Rican society in these places, with a range that is similar to the quality of the accommodation. The rule is to take a look at the room before putting any money down. If there is a bar connected to the establishment, choose a room well away from it. In even the smallest towns, bar life can be quite loud and rowdy.

Cabinas are another option. The term usually indicates something similar to a motel, but it can also mean cabins that are separated from each other. In coastal areas, they can range in quality from terrible, hot-tin-roof convection ovens to luxury places that cost more than \$80 a night. Private nature reserves provide good potential bases to explore the parks, and these vary widely in quality and price.

Food

One way to avoid potential illness or stomach problems when eating out in Costa Rica is to follow this rule of thumb: Never eat in a place where the sanitary conditions are obviously so bad that you would not eat there if the place were in your home city. Also, request that meat be well done, and avoid raw salads that you don’t prepare yourself. The most bang for your *colón* (meaning the Costa Rican currency, although for those with a really weak stomach, it could be the other kind) are *casados*, mixed plates that combine rice, beans, chicken, meat, or fish, and sometimes potatoes and vegetables. After one of these, you can hike all day.

Refrescos, or sweetened fruit drinks, are also highly recommended. They are less sweet than the now ubiquitous soda pop, and they actually have some nutritional value. Bear in mind, however, that these drinks are made with local water. It's probably best to avoid buying them at roadside establishments.

Unless you are planning an extended backpacking trip into one of the more remote parks and want to cut down the weight with freeze-dried food, there is little if any need to bring any food supplies with you to Costa Rica. Costa Rica's markets have a tremendous variety of lightweight trail foods at very reasonable cost. Dried fruits such as mangos, bananas, and figs are easy to find, as are peanuts, cashews, and macadamia nuts, all considerably cheaper than in the United States. (Macadamias are particularly rich and can give you an upset stomach if you overindulge, so go easy on them.) Several varieties of beans and rice are available at the smallest village store. Prepackaged dairy and canned products are all safe here, unlike in Mexico and Costa Rica's neighboring countries.

A couple of good places to do pre-trip shopping in San José are the Mercado Central, an indoor market located at Calles 6/8 in San José with stalls selling everything imaginable, or *supermercados* such as Mas X Menos, in San José and Alajuela.

Transportation

Getting around in Costa Rica is generally not very difficult, and usually you have several options for getting to each park or reserve. Renting a vehicle is obviously the most efficient way to get around, but there are some drawbacks. One is the expense. Costa Rican rental rates are as high or even higher than in the United States, and insurance, which is mandatory, adds to the cost. Many credit cards offer free insurance if you use them to rent a car, but if you get into an accident, you may have to hang around until the credit card company provides you with an attorney—sometimes it's a matter of days. Be advised that all Costa Rican car insurance typically has a deductible of between \$1000 and \$1500, depending on the size of the vehicle, and you will probably be forced to pay this even if the accident was the other driver's fault. (This is an obvious gouge on tourists and it would be nice if the system were changed.) An increasing number of private citizens rent their vehicles to tourists, usually at a rate cheaper than the rental companies. If you decide to try this, make sure the owner of the vehicle has an insurance policy that covers all drivers of the vehicle.

Driving in Costa Rica, while not quite as rigorous as in Mexico, still should not be undertaken without serious thought. The main highways, though usually in good shape, mostly have two lanes and are heavily trafficked by both private vehicles and eighteen-wheel trucks. Costa Ricans traditionally pass on blind curves to get around trucks and are generally pretty macho when it comes to their potential demise behind the wheel; consequently, the country has one of the highest traffic mortality rates in the world. And, please, avoid driving at night, particularly in cattle grazing areas.

You also should be advised that speed limits are very low all over the country, and plenty of traffic cops equipped with radar await the arrival of a *gringo*

rico as he or she races to catch the last ferry out of Puntarenas. Getting a ticket can be a real hassle, and the police have the right to take your license and hold it hostage until you show up at the local court to pay the fine. Lately, there have been many reports (and I have experienced it personally) of police forcing speeders to pay outrageous bribes in order to avoid this process. Should this happen to you, ask the policeman for his identification badge and take down the number located in the lower left-hand corner. If he refuses, write down the location and time of the incident and report it to the *Dirección de Transito* (Transit Directorate) in San José. Eventually, the authorities might be embarrassed enough to do something about the situation. They are considering doing away with the tourist license plates currently required on rental vehicles, and this would help. The best way to avoid trouble, however, is to drive the speed limit and always wear your seat belt.

Luckily, there are some good alternatives to renting a vehicle. You can get taxis, including four-wheel-drive vehicles, from almost any village in the country. Even though taxi prices in 2008 had gone up dramatically compared to even the previous year, taking a taxi and arranging for it to pick you up at a designated time and place is almost always cheaper than having a rental car sit unused for several days while you are exploring. You also don't have to deal with the hassle of driving and the expense of gas, which is about four times the cost of fuel in the United States.

Buses go just about everywhere and are very reasonable. They vary tremendously in quality, however. Some, such as the cross-country San Isidro bus from San José, are gleaming, comfortable, and modern, while local buses are often ancient relics, loud and hot. Buses are owned and operated by private companies, and some of them run on only a few routes. Schedules are prone to change and it's a good idea to call ahead (if you speak Spanish) to get the latest arrival and departure times, or call the *Instituto Costarricense de Turismo* (ICT) or Costa Rican Tourism Institute at 223-1733 for information.

The bus "terminals" are located in different parts of San José. The relevant address and telephone number for each is provided in the introduction of each park description. Many buses leave from the "Coca-Cola" bus terminal—so called because of a bottling plant that used to be there—located in the western part of the city between Avenidas 1 and 3. This is one of the rougher areas of the city, with many pickpockets and baggage thieves on the prowl. Be particularly wary at night, and don't walk around in this neighborhood after dark. Take a taxi from the terminal to your destination.

The shuttle service—vans that operate on regular routes—is a recent development. These vans are much cheaper than taxis, and the one I've used, Interbus, has been quiet, well-organized, and efficient. For more information, visit www.interbusonline.com or phone 283-5573.

It is also possible to fly within Costa Rica. Naturair and SANSa, the two internal airlines with regular routes within the country, offer reasonable rates and are a lot faster than the bus. You should always go to the airline offices at the airport and prepay your ticket either in person or online, preferably several days in advance, or they will not hold your reservation. For the latest schedules



A tree frog from the Pacific lowlands

Pay phones take 5, 10, and 20 colón coins. You should be ready with a handful of them, particularly if you are calling to somewhere more than 25 kilometers distant. To make a call at a pay phone, place a few coins in the slot and dial your number. When the party at the other end answers, the phone will consume your coins and you'll have a few minutes to talk before you begin to hear a series of beeps—how many minutes depends on how much money you put in, the individual peculiarities of the phone, and where you're calling. Once you hear the beeps, you need to put more coins in the slot within about 10 seconds or you'll be abruptly cut off.

One of the great innovations taking hold in various parts of the country is the use of prepaid phone cards. These are by far the cheapest way to call inside and outside the country; directions on how to use them are printed on the back of the card. However, the only phones available in many rural areas are at small grocery stores or hotels. These phones may not be coin-operated, so you'll have to let the storekeeper connect you and you'll pay after the call.

and ticket policies, contact SANSA at 223-4179 (website www.flysansa.com) or Naturair at 800-235-9272 (toll-free USA/Canada) or 506-299-6000 for reservations (website www.natureair.com). Keep in mind that both airlines enforce strict and somewhat unreasonable baggage weight limits of 25 pounds or so, which can be quite difficult for those of us carrying large amounts of camera or backpacking gear.

A couple of privately run small airlines fly little Cessnas seating up to four people and gear to some of the more remote areas, such as Corcovado from San José or such places as Golfito. Chartering such a plane is not cheap, but it may be worth it if the expense is split between three or four people. One such company is VETSA (phone 232-1010) in San José.

Telephones

The country code for calls from outside Costa Rica is 506. All telephone numbers within Costa Rica have seven digits. Long-distance calls within the country do not require an area code but do cost more than local calls.

Cell phone coverage is pretty good by Central American standards. Some cell phone companies have "roving" agreements with the Costa Rican cell system, but it can be expensive. Check with your cell phone company before you depart for rates and extra fees.

Government Agencies in Costa Rica

Several government offices can provide invaluable assistance to backcountry travelers. The *Servicio de Parques Nacionales* (SPN) or National Parks Directorate has two offices in San José where visitors can obtain information about visiting the parks and preserves. The *Fundación de Parques Nacionales* or National Parks Foundation seems to be a more consistent source of up-to-date information about the parks than the official government offices are; they generally do not have maps, however. The National Wildlife Directorate administers the country's wildlife refuges. A group called the *Instituto Nacional de Biodiversidad* or National Institute of Biodiversity offers specialized information on scientific research being conducted in the parks and preserves system. Topographic maps are available at the *Instituto Geographico Nacional* (IGN) or National Geographic Bureau. The *Instituto Costarricense de Turismo* (ICT) or Costa Rican Tourism Institute provides information, in English, about bus schedules and private reserves, but its information on national parks is often out of date. The *Dirección Forestal* (Forestry Directorate) manages the forest reserve system but is not very helpful about providing information to visitors. Traffic accidents should be reported to the *Dirección de Transito* (Transit Directorate) by calling 911.

For the addresses and phone numbers of these agencies, see Recommended Resources.

A Word About Park Entrance Fees

Since the first edition of this book was published in 1993, fees for entering the parks have been on a roller-coaster ride, rapidly shifting from almost nonexistent to exorbitant to reasonable. The fees for foreign visitors were less than \$2 in the early 1990s, but in 1994 they were abruptly raised to \$15 per park. The roar of disapproval from tour operators and individual tourists forced entrance fees back to \$6 in 1996. Since then, different fees have been charged for different parks depending on the number of visitors. Higher fees are assigned for parks that attract too many visitors (according to the government), and those with few visitors are less expensive. In practice, many of the less visited areas often don't have the staff or facilities to handle the money collected anyway, and consequently you might not be asked to pay. However, please pay all fees requested of you, and feel free to ask for a receipt if it is not offered.

In 2008 a lively discussion about park fees began in Costa Rica. At the time of publication, a case was scheduled to go to the Costa Rican Supreme Court to address the issue of entrance fees being collected and then disappearing into the government's general coffers, with nothing being returned to the parks that generated the funds in the first place. A positive outcome from this case might help to ameliorate the problems of the country's parks and reserves (see sidebar).

lengthy water trips, or where there might be a chance of getting lost for extended periods. It's not acceptable to play jungle explorer and "improve" well-used trails already being maintained by parks personnel. Using a machete safely requires some training and a good deal of experience and attention. Many experienced trail workers have prematurely ended their careers with one poorly placed glancing swipe that ended up in their knee, or worse. However, should you elect to carry a machete, go for one of the front-weighted, smaller versions that have been developed by the U.S. or British military. These are easier to control, less fatiguing to use, and a good deal more packable than the cheapos available in country. The Paratrooper, golok, and jungle knife models put out by Martindale, a British company, are ideal and reasonably priced. Available in the United States from www.jungleknife.com. More information at: www.ralphmartindale.co.uk/.

Maps

The maps provided in this book are for orientation only. Good topographic maps can be purchased in San José at Librería Lehmann at Calle 3, Avenida Central, and from the Instituto Geographico Nacional at Avenida 20, Calles 5/7. You may have to visit both in order to get exactly what you want, as they are rarely fully stocked. Popular maps sometimes go out-of-print for several months.

HEALTH PRECAUTIONS

Compared to other Latin American countries, Costa Rica is remarkably clean, and preventive health care and sanitation are generally good. What follows is a brief guide to some of the potential health problems that a visitor to the back-country might encounter.

Drinking Water

Bottled water and soft drinks are all safe. Tap water is generally safe to drink in the Central Valley (San José, Heredia, and Alajuela), but you should filter, chemically treat, or boil tap water elsewhere, particularly on the Atlantic coast. All water along the trail should be treated. Water can be chemically treated with a variety of agents, including commercially available hydroclonozone, halazone, and iodine. You can also use chlorine laundry bleach at a ratio of eight to ten drops per quart of water—be aware that chlorine is not effective in killing *Giardia lamblia*—or tincture of iodine at a ratio of five to seven drops per quart of water. There are some excellent filters on the market that do not impart a chemical taste to the water, but the good ones are quite expensive. If you treat water by boiling it, do so for a minimum of five minutes. Whatever treatment method you use, make sure you drink a lot of water; a consumption rate of a gallon per day per person on long hikes in the tropics is not out of the ordinary.

Diarrhea

The most common cause of *turista* is a rapid change of diet followed by contact with a new strain or two of *E. coli*, a bacteria that everyone has in their gut but

which can cause the trots for those who do not have the local variety already in residence. Of primary importance in preventing turista is drinking only safe or treated water. You can also pick up all sorts of parasites from eating unwashed fruit and vegetables; you need to either stay away from those types that you cannot peel, or wash them well with treated water.

The general rule for diarrhea is to let it run its course for 48 hours, making sure that the victim stays well hydrated with clean water or bottled beverages (but no alcohol or caffeine). If the symptoms persist beyond this period, if they are causing severe dehydration, or if the stools contain blood (a sign of severe infection by amoebas), then you have to do something about it. To stop things up, Lomotil is the best thing; it comes in pill form and is very effective. The problem is that by stopping your body's efforts at getting rid of the pathogen, you allow it to multiply and this can cause even worse problems later on. Lomotil should be looked upon as an emergency drug. A good, wide-spectrum antibiotic such as Bactrim will kill most pathogenic gut bacteria, and if you are planning on doing backpacking or boating trips of several days' duration you might consider also bringing along Flagyl, which kills protozoans such as amoebas and giardia that antibiotics won't touch. These are all prescription drugs, and you should check with your doctor to make sure that you can tolerate them; some people have allergies to various antibiotics and some drugs are contraindicated for pregnant women. Never drink alcohol while taking Flagyl, as this will make you violently ill. A natural alternative to Lomotil for stopping diarrhea is good old campfire charcoal; use at least a couple of tablespoons mixed with water several times a day. It is not as effective as Lomotil and tastes awful, but it will help in a pinch. Natural antibiotics, which may have some value as preventive treatments, are garlic and papaya seeds. The latter work pretty well to get rid of worms if taken on an empty stomach and well chewed.

Heat

The tropical sun in Costa Rica is much stronger than in temperate zones. Don't make it a goal of your trip to get a terrific suntan in two days; trust me, you will be sorry. Wear sunscreen. Take it easy and acclimatize for the first couple of days before going out even on a long day hike, unless you are extremely fit and have come from a hot, humid climate.

The symptoms of heat exhaustion, caused by overexertion at high temperatures, are faintness, rapid and/or fluttery heartbeat, nausea, paleness of the face, and clammy skin. This should be a clear warning to hole up in a shady place for a while and drink a lot of fluids. Eating something sugary also seems to help. This condition is not dangerous in itself, unless it passes on to the next stage, which is heat stroke. The symptoms of heat stroke are flushed, hot, dry skin; severe nausea; and severe headache. This is very serious, and brain damage can result. The treatment is to lower the victim's body temperature as soon as possible, preferably by immersion in a body of water. If this is unavailable, remove the victim's clothing, sponge water over the skin, and fan vigorously. Massage the person's extremities to bring blood to them. Repeat this until the symptoms abate. At this point you need to go for help if possible, because when

the person becomes active again, there may be a recurrence.

You may consider bringing along some sort of electrolyte replacement powder for severe cases of dehydration and heat distress, or you can make your own (it's cheaper but tastes pretty horrible):

$\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon salt

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon baking soda

$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon potassium chloride

4 teaspoons glucose or dextrose

(This amount of powder is for one quart of water.)

Altitude Sickness and Hypothermia

If you are planning to go to Chirripó, the summit of which is at 3820 meters, you need to concern yourself with altitude sickness. You should acclimatize yourself in a mid-elevation area such as Monteverde or Rincón de la Vieja for a few days before making the arduous climb to the highest point in Costa Rica. The symptoms of altitude sickness are headache, nausea, lack of appetite, and breathlessness. The only cures are to tough it out for several days or descend to a lower elevation.

Believe it or not, hypothermia (a lowering of the body's core temperature) is a possibility at middle and high elevations in the tropics. Usually this occurs when people don't have protection from the rain and then are exposed to wind. If you are going to travel outside the lowlands, you should bring along some waterproof raingear such as a poncho or jacket (see What to Bring, in this chapter), some lightweight long underwear, a lightweight sweater, and perhaps a lightweight warm hat, particularly if you're a cold sleeper and have only a lightweight sleeping bag. Treat hypothermia victims by getting them into dry clothes and warming them with hot fluids. In more severe cases, the victim may have to get into a sleeping bag with one or more people, as the victim may have lost the ability to generate enough heat without help.

Malaria

This disease was almost eradicated from Costa Rica in the 1950s and 1960s, but lately it has made a comeback in a few areas because of health-care cutbacks, combined with refugees from Nicaragua bringing the disease with them. If you plan to spend a lot of time on the border region in the north (Tortuguero, Barra del Colorado, and Caño Negro) or in the Talamanca range near the Indian reservations, you should strongly consider taking antimalarial medication. Luckily, the type of malaria that is cropping up is not chloroquine-resistant, and this is the most benign of the antimalarial drugs. Keep in mind that you need to start treatment two weeks before you are potentially exposed. **Note:** You might want to call the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (phone 404-639-3311)—in Atlanta, Georgia, to make sure that chloroquine-resistant forms have not been reported by the time you go. You should also simply avoid being bitten by malaria-carrying mosquitoes. This means keeping yourself covered as much as possible when mosquitoes are present, using repellent, and sleeping under a mosquito net if you're not in a tent.

Dengue Fever

Unfortunately, Costa Rica has had occasional outbreaks of this very unpleasant disease since 1995. It's caused by a virus carried by day-flying *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes, and the latency period between getting bitten and showing symptoms is about a week. Victims suffer high fever, chills, and aching joints, which have inspired the nickname "breakbone fever" in some parts of the world. Symptoms can last for two weeks, but with proper treatment the mortality rate is less than 1 percent. There is no vaccine, and the cure consists solely of supportive therapies. Generally, it's a disease of more populated areas, as the mosquito prefers human-altered habitat and seems to find people to be the tastiest of potential meals, so it's unlikely to be present in the backcountry.



Sobralia orchid

Fungus Infections

The warm, humid climate of most of Costa Rica provides excellent conditions for the growth of fungus, particularly on your feet. Bring along some antifungal foot powder, keep your feet as dry as possible, and change your socks often. You may want to include some sort of antifungal ointment in your medicine kit for more severe cases. The best place to pick up a fungus infection is in cheap hotels where sanitation is lax; you may want to wear flip-flops in the shower.

NOXIOUS FAUNA

The threat of snakes, insects, and big cats in the tropics has been greatly exaggerated by movies and the popular imagination. There are, however, still some creatures that you should be cautious of that you won't find farther north, so here's a discussion of the fauna to avoid.

Wasps, Ants, and, Yes, Africanized or "Killer" Bees

If you are allergic to the stings of hymenopterid insects (those listed above), bring a bee sting kit that includes oral antihistamines and injectable epinephrine, and be well acquainted with how to use it before setting out on your trip. Bees and ants come in all sizes, colors, and shapes and inhabit every imaginable niche; be careful not to sit on nests or disturb those ensconced in thick vegetation. Army ants are fascinating creatures and are well worth stopping to watch when they're in the process of moving from



Large adult green iguana, Palo Verde National Park

one bivouac site to another, but watch that some of the soldiers don't stray up your pantleg.

Africanized or "killer" bees arrived in Costa Rica some time in the mid-1980s and are a considerable threat in a few areas, mostly in Guanacaste Province. They are noticeably present in Palo Verde National Park and at Barra Honda. These aggressive creatures, which look almost exactly like regular European honeybees, are the products of a misguided experiment by researchers in Brazil, who wanted to find a way to boost honey production. They imported bees from Africa that proved to be poor honey-producers, were highly aggressive, and swarmed readily, abandoning commercial-style hives for a free-ranging life in the wild. The bees appear to prefer nesting on rocky, steep hillsides, under large rocks, or in crevices in cliff faces. Research indicates that dark colors are more aggravating to bees than light ones (the reason why all beekeepers' suits are white). When traveling in areas known to harbor Africanized honeybees, avoid wearing dark clothing.

Should you come into contact with a nest and be attacked, cover your face as much as possible and run in a zigzag pattern until out of the bees' protective range. See chapters 5 through 8 for more specific details on how to avoid coming into contact with these obnoxious creatures in each locality. Take very seriously the precautions about areas to be avoided and the need for guides in other areas. Africanized bees are aggressive and dangerous.

No-see-ums or Biting Midges

These annoying little insects, known as "flying teeth" in the southeastern United States and as *parrujas* in Costa Rica, are a problem in some areas near both coasts and particularly near mangrove forests and salt marshes. They are small enough to get through conventional mosquito netting, and DEET-containing repellent does not faze them. What they don't like is Avon's Skin-So-Soft bath

oil, which can be used straight or diluted 50 percent with water and applied with a spray bottle. A little goes a long way with the latter method.

Scorpions

These distant cousins of spiders are a lot scarier looking than they are dangerous. Most species in Costa Rica deliver a sting that is not much worse than your average bee sting. Watch where you put your fingers, particularly when moving rocks or logs, and shake out all clothes and boots before putting them on. Treat stings with an anesthetic cream and cold compress if available, or with analgesics or painkillers.

Chiggers

People generally come into contact with chiggers by walking in grass that has been previously inhabited by cattle or other livestock. Chiggers are the immature form of a common mite that attaches itself to your skin. Contrary to popular belief, it doesn't burrow into you but instead inserts its mouthparts into your skin and liquefies a small portion of tissue with its saliva. To facilitate this, it sets up an immune response in your skin that results in the creation of a stylo-some, a sort of drinking straw. The incredible itching that victims experience is part of this immune response. After four days, the chigger drops off to begin a new life as an adult, feeding on decomposing plant and animal matter.

You, however, are probably scratching yourself to distraction. Prevention is the best cure for chiggers. Try to stay out of pastures or grassy areas. If that's not possible, wear long pants tucked into your socks, and put some insect repellent around the area where the pants and socks meet. Permethrin sprays, which are applied only to clothes (never to bare skin) ahead of time and allowed to dry, seem to be quite effective as a chigger repellent, and they also work for ticks. Chiggers also hate sulfur, and if you are planning to go to some of the more seriously chigger-ridden places such as Corcovado (the "lawn" outside the ranger station is loaded with them) you might want to bring some to dust on your pantlegs and waist area. However, the sulfur will permanently stink up your clothes; a few guides have mentioned to me that some European tourists "smell like the devil" as a result of using the stuff. If you get a bad case, some anesthetic and/or cortisone ointment will help quell the itching, at least temporarily, and antihistamines help some people. It is also a very good idea to wipe yourself down with alcohol after traveling through potentially chigger-ridden territory, paying particular attention to areas where your clothing binds tightly to your body. The cheap ethyl alcohol sold in just about any countryside *tienda* or drugstore works well for this purpose.

Ticks

Ticks, like chiggers, are fond of pasture areas and tall grass. Fortunately, there are no serious tick-borne diseases (such as Lyme disease) in Costa Rica, but these little arachnids can still be an annoyance. They like to ensconce themselves in the dark crevices of your body and places where clothing is tight against the body, such as at your waist. If you are traveling in open, grassy areas, give yourself and your traveling companions the once-over at the end of

the day. A tick becomes harder to remove the longer it's had its mouthparts in your skin (that's all it has in you, as a tick doesn't really have a "head"). Very small ticks, about the size of a pinhead, called "seed ticks," can be removed with a piece of tape. Larger ones must be killed with kerosene, gasoline, or alcohol; contrary to popular belief, once a tick has its mouthparts in its victim and begins to feed, it cannot back out. Then it should be carefully pulled out with a pair of tweezers, as close to the mouthparts as possible. You don't want to leave the mouthparts in, as the site can become infected. Wash the site well and put some antibiotic ointment on it.

Chigoes or Jiggers

These small insects, related to fleas, grow up to the size of a pea. They burrow into the bottoms of the feet, usually a toe, of people who walk around barefoot in the villages of the Atlantic side of Costa Rica. You can also pick up hookworms in this way, so it is unwise not to wear sandals or flip-flops. In the unlikely event that you pick up one of these creatures, pick it out with a sterile needle and then put some antibiotic ointment in the hole.

Torsalo Fly Larvae

This is another parasite visitors to the parks rarely encounter, but just in case, here's a description of the beast and how to deal with it. A *torsalo* is the larvae of a fly (*Dermatobia hominis*) that is totally harmless in its adult form; it doesn't even have mouthparts and lives only to reproduce. The process begins when an adult fly finds a mosquito and then forcibly lays her eggs on the underside of the mosquito's abdomen. When the mosquito finds a mammal to feed on, the animal's body heat signals the eggs to hatch and the tiny (at this point) larvae drop down onto the host's skin and burrow in through the mosquito bite or a hair follicle. The larva lives a fat and happy life for between two and three months before dropping out of its burrow to pupate on the ground, by which time it measures up to 2 centimeters.

Human hosts usually discover the presence of this unwanted guest long before that, having felt a persistent itch and then discovering the larva's burrow surrounded by a hardened cyst and an opening from which it extends its breathing tube, located on its rear end. To get rid of one, the best method is to cover the breathing hole with some sort of glue (rubber cement is ideal) and a piece of tape. Then cover this with more glue to completely seal it. In 24 hours you can take the tape off, gently remove the suffocated larva with a pair of tweezers, and treat the wound with antibiotic salve. Under no circumstances should you try to pull or squeeze out a *torsalo* without performing the above procedure, as the larva possesses a series of hooks at its mouth with which it will firmly anchor itself in its burrow. If you rupture the larva, an allergic reaction and possibly a serious infection can result. For a humorous description of one man's decision to keep a *torsalo* through to maturity, see the chapter entitled "Jerry's Maggot" in Adrian Forsyth and Ken Miyata's *Tropical Nature*.

Snakes

It might surprise you, but visitors to Costa Rica's wild areas seldom see venomous snakes. Most venomous species are nocturnal and sedentary and spend the day in a semitorpor. There are two main groups of seriously venomous snakes in Costa Rica: pit vipers and coral snakes. Pit vipers such as the fer de lance, neotropical rattlesnake, and bushmaster are relatively heavy-bodied, have a triangular head that is noticeably differentiated from the body, and have a heat-sensing pit between the nostril and the eye. The venom of snakes in this group breaks down tissue near the location of the bite, and in some species it can affect the central nervous system. Coral snakes are brightly colored, secretive members of the cobra family that are active primarily at night. They have short fangs that are fixed in position at the front of the mouth (contrasted with the pit viper's fangs, which are large and fold back). Their venom is primarily toxic to the central nervous system.

Though these reptiles are seldom encountered, you should still be aware that they are around. Always watch where you put your hands and feet, particularly in tall vegetation, and don't go anywhere at night without a flashlight. Should you encounter a snake, do not attempt to kill it unless someone has already been bitten and you need it for identification purposes. These reptiles are an interesting and important part of the biotic community, and many bites occur when someone is attempting to capture or kill one. Give any snake that you see plenty of room to move out of your way, or walk a good distance around it. If a snake bites you or a member of your party, the first thing is not to panic. Attempt to identify the snake.

After you attempt to identify the type of snake that caused the bite, it is important to keep the victim calm. If you are by yourself, under no circumstances should you take off running for help; if it was indeed a venomous bite, you will only be speeding the spread of venom. Many bites, even from dangerously venomous species, are "dry"—that is, they did not include the injection of venom. Keep an eye on the bite for any marked swelling, discoloration, or numbness around the area of the bite, or a tingling or metallic taste in the mouth. However, do not delay the evacuation of the victim as soon as possible. It is generally considered unsafe and not particularly effective to make the traditional crossed razor cuts over the fang marks, but the

Godman's pit viper, a species of venomous snake found in the Costa Rican uplands



Cutter company makes something called the Extractor that works well at drawing out venom from snake, bee, and wasp injuries. If you don't have an Extractor, you can try sucking some of the venom out as long as you don't have open lesions in your mouth. Carrying antivenin is not a good idea, as an anaphylactic reaction to the serum is a strong possibility. This can be as bad or worse than the snakebite, and the kind of supportive therapy necessary for pulling somebody through this type of reaction is only available in hospitals.

I'm frequently asked about snake-proof boots for the tropics. Unfortunately, most of the brands frequently available in outdoor shops and catalogues (usually made in China) are stiff and uncomfortable and will give you blisters if you walk long distances in them, particularly in tropical, wet conditions. The most comfortable that I've found are the custom-made (and rather spendy) boots produced by the Russell Moccasin Company (www.russellmoccasin.com).

All of this sounds scary, but remember that encounters with venomous snakes in Costa Rica are rare. Of the 500 bite cases reported per year (almost all *campesino* field workers), there are fewer than fifteen fatalities.

Jaguars and Pumas

More nonsense has been written about these two animals than practically all the others. Seeing a jaguar in Costa Rica is a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence, and it will probably consist of a fleeting view of the cat's rear end as it disappears into the forest. Both jaguars and pumas are shy and avoid humans completely, even as food items. Puma sightings seem to be on the rise, which might indicate that they're becoming more common as lands are cleared, and the more

adaptable puma is taking over territory formerly inhabited by jaguars. Whether the pumas of Costa Rica will lose their fear of humans, as have the pumas in neighboring countries to the north, remains to be seen.

SAFETY PRECAUTIONS

Theft

While the vast majority of Costa Ricans are honest, gracious people, you should guard against theft in a few of the most popular parks. Manuel Antonio and Cahuita are very popular and crowded at certain times of the year, and their small size and easy access make them easy hunting grounds for thieves. Never leave your valuables, including your sunglasses

Raccoon in oil palm tree, Curú Wildlife Refuge



and snorkeling equipment, alone while you are swimming. Don't leave valuables in your car, even in the trunk, if you can help it. Women traveling alone in these two places should also exercise caution. The only other "hot spot" within the parks is along the Siquirres Highway through Braulio Carrillo National Park. There have been instances of robbery on the scenic turnoffs, and park authorities suggest that you not leave your car at the turnoff to the short trails near the road. Leave it at a ranger station and walk to the trailheads.

This information is not given to make you paranoid and hypervigilant. Exercise caution at these few places. Elsewhere, anyone you meet on trails in the backcountry will be as surprised to see you as you are to see them.

Riptides

Riptides probably injure or kill more people than all other hazards to tourists combined and account for 80 percent of all drownings in Costa Rica. These strong currents run perpendicular to the shoreline. Sadly, most people caught in a riptide would survive if, instead of panicking, they conserved their energy by swimming parallel to the shore, toward where waves are breaking if possible. The best thing is to avoid swimming at dangerous beaches, or avoid swimming in water that comes above your thighs. Beaches known for having riptides close to the parks are the beach north of Manuel Antonio National Park, Espadilla Sur inside the same park, and the beaches that border both sides of Cahuita National Park. Many others are dangerous, so exercise caution and inquire first whether the beach is safe.

A NOTE ABOUT SAFETY

Safety is an important concern for all outdoor activities. No guidebook can alert you to every hazard or anticipate the limitations of every reader. Therefore, the descriptions of roads, trails, routes, and natural features in this book are not representations that a particular place or excursion will be safe for your party. When you follow any of the routes described in this book, you assume responsibility for your own safety. Under normal conditions, such excursions require the usual attention to traffic, road, and trail conditions, weather, terrain, the capabilities of your party, and other factors. Keeping informed on current conditions and exercising common sense are the keys to a safe, enjoyable outing.

Political conditions may add to the risks of travel in Central America in ways that this book cannot predict. When you travel, you assume this risk, and should keep informed of political developments that may make safe travel difficult or impossible.

The Mountaineers