

Tom Brantley is a writer. MacLean's Inc. (2)

PICK AN ADVENTURE



*In Costa Rica you
can climb a volcano
or surf with the ticos*

By Tony Hagar

Short drives through Costa Rica can take you from rich tropical waterfalls to barren, smoky volcanoes.

YOU DON'T HEAR MUCH about Costa Rica on the news, and your parents probably never thought about going there. But students around the world are heading there for vacation or study. It's exotic enough for your

friends to ask, "You're going where?" But it's friendly enough to order *cerveza* with hand gestures.

The tiny country has everything: a cosmopolitan capital, beautiful beaches, protected rain forests, loads of national parks, even active volcanoes. You can't complain about a place where decent hotels cost as little as \$5 a night and meals are even less. The *Lonely Planet* guide says a determined budget traveler can get by on \$10 a day. Sure beats Florida.

Costa Rica, sandwiched between Nicaragua and Panama, is split down the middle by mountains. Most of the people live in the central plains, where the capital, San Jose, sits. On either side of the mountains, the land slopes down to the Pacific and Caribbean coasts.

When you fly to Costa Rica, you'll fly into San Jose. It's a big city with a North American feel, shopping malls and all, but the native Costa Ricans, called *ticos*, are legendary for friendliness.

Check out the jade and gold museums, and run up to Heredia, just north of San Jose, where the national university is, but try to stay away from the Pizza Hut.

Enough of the city. That's not the reason to go to Costa Rica. If you take the road north out of the capital, you can hit the Poas Volcano National Park. The crater bubbles and steams and even erupts once in a while.

Keep going north and you'll come to the Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve. The forest lies high in the mountains, high enough that you can walk through the clouds. There are regular programs here for students, or you can check it out on your own. Either way, you have to see it.

Amanda Wojtalik, of the University of Georgia, studied biology there. "I lived in a corner of a building in Monteverde which put me about 20 feet from the entrance to the rain forest," she says. "Every morning I was woken up by howling monkeys. It was the eeriest alarm clock I ever had, like ghosts or something."

Now head west to the Pacific and follow the coast down to Nicoya Peninsula, where you'll find sand, surf, wildlife and night life. Even the resorts here are comfortably remote. Check out the beaches at Playa del Coco and Playa Samara. If you're in Costa Rica during the summer, and the volcano isn't bizarre enough for you, go to Ostional National Wildlife Refuge to see tens of thousands of sea turtles arrive for the nesting season. That should blow your mind. Or follow the students to Manuel Antonio National Park, with its beautiful beaches and cheap lodging.

Suppose you've done all this. Guess what? You still haven't even hit the Caribbean coast. At least get to the area around Cahuita National Park where you can play on black sand beaches or, if you still haven't had enough adventure, surf in the Caribbean with the *ticos*.

Just don't ever say you were bored in Costa Rica. ☺