

Ocean special on the Caribbean coast of Panama

Project Overview

Are you a water baby? Then have a go with this two week amazing trip saving endangered turtles and spending time snorkelling or sea kayaking!

You will have an amazing time learning about endangered turtle species as you help to protect their nests and eggs from predators on the Caribbean coast of Panama. Then watch as the little cuties make their way along the beach to the sea! You will also be able experience the golden white sands of the beach too and, after your days of hard work are over, you can take to the waters on a surfboard for your surf lesson and then maybe try out a kayak too! The dolphin watching tour is a definite must and will surely make all your friends back home green with envy! After all this, if you've still got the energy, you can snorkel and take in the beautiful sea life or, if you fancy, simply chill and do absolutely nothing as the sun's warm rays beat down.



Trip Highlights

- Experience both Costa Rica and Panama
- Helping protect endangered leatherback turtles
- Dolphin watching in the Bocas del Toro islands
- Try your hand at surfing with a lesson included in the trip
- Take up kayaking and snorkelling if you fancy
- Hit the beautiful Caribbean beaches

Detailed Itinerary

Day 1: Arrive in Costa Rica

Welcome to Costa Rica. You will spend the night in a guest house in Alajuela settling into the tropical climate and meeting your fellow travelers, if you have some energy you can go out exploring!

Overnight in Alajuela in hostel. Dinner included.

Day 2: Orientation and San Jose

You will have an orientation meeting on life in Costa Rica and Panama, do's and don't and how to get the most out of your time on the trip. You will have more time to explore Alajuela before dinner.

Overnight in Alajuela in a guest house: breakfast, lunch and dinner included.

Day 3: Travel to Panama

Today you will travel down to Sixaola where you will cross the border into Panama after your quick visit to the immigration office! You will then set off for the Bocas Del Toro province of Panama where the turtle project is located, but first you will have to board a boat to as it located off the mainland accessible via a network of canals. Here you will settle into your accommodation which is separated from the beach by palm trees - sounds nice doesn't it? The shared accommodation is basic with cold water showers and electricity available for only a couple of hours a day!

Accommodation, breakfast and dinner included.

Days 4 to 8: Work at the turtle project

Today is the day that you can really get stuck into your turtle project and help these little cuties! During your time at the project you will be getting involved in various activities ranging from night beach patrols, nest monitoring, assisting in the relocation of nests, beach cleaning to general maintenance - all in the knowledge that all that you do will be helping the survival of this endangered species. If you're lucky you may also spend some time monitoring manatees.

Basic shared accommodation, breakfast, lunch and dinner included.

Day 9: Beach time!

Today is the day that you will transfer to your beach location and settle in to your hostel in Bocas. After arriving and settling into the hostel the day is yours either to chill on the beach or explore the areas - it's totally up to you.

Hostel accommodation in Bocas and breakfast included.

Day 10: Surf lesson

Surf's up! Get out your board and out in the surf for your surf lesson. If you haven't surfed before, don't worry - the instructors are used to beginners and with a little dedication you will be standing before you finish. A must for all water lovers, surfing is a great sport but don't underestimate just how tiring it is - be prepared for a good night's sleep and some aching muscles.

Hostel accommodation in Bocas and breakfast included.

Day 11: Dolphin watching

Head out today on a dolphin watching tour and marvel at these fantastic creatures playing in the sea - a great trip but don't forget the sunscreen!

Hostel accommodation in Bocas and breakfast included.

Day 12: Have another go on a surfboard!

Get the surfboard at the ready and hop on for another lesson in the waters of the Caribbean! See how much you can remember and how much you have improved - or not as the case may be! After surfing the day is yours to do as you wish - explore, chill, read a book - it's up to you!

Hostel accommodation in Bocas and breakfast included.

Day 13: Another water day – sea-kayaking!

As long as your arms can cope after the surfing yesterday, it's time to head into the sea again, this time on a sea-kayak. This is a great way to experience a different side to the sea and a huge amount of fun. Once you're paddled-out then it's back to the beach and time for you to chill.

Hostel accommodation in Bocas and breakfast included.

Day 14: Alajuela

Unfortunately it's time today to leave the beach and head back to Alajuela - doing the same trip as on Day 3 but in reverse. There should be time to spend in Alajuela shopping for souvenirs or simply exploring this pleasant Costa Rican town and soaking up the lifestyle and culture.

Overnight in a guest house in Alajuela: breakfast and dinner included.

Day 15: Departure

It's time to say goodbye to Costa Rica and either head back to the airport or on to new adventures and travels in Central America.

Project details

The project that you will be involved with is an initiative that combines a focus on turtle conservation and self sustainable living. It prioritises activities involving the local community and aims not only to preserve and care for turtles but also to educate and improve the lives of the inhabitants. The area was declared a protected wetlands in 1994 and the project has great scope for expansion but needs the help of people like yourself.

Why the project needs volunteers?

As the wetlands were previously only protected by law and not the Ministry of the Environment there were many out of town poachers affecting the turtle population. The local community got together and formed AAVECOMA –The Association of Friends and Neighbours of Coastal Nature in 2000 and has had a profound effect on diminishing almost all the poaching activities in the area. People like yourself are needed to help with the project and continue the great work in preserving not only the endangered turtle species, but the many other animal species such as manatees, sloths, raccoons and many species of marine bird.

Your role as a volunteer

You will be getting involved in helping the project protect the turtles by locating and relocating nests, nest monitoring, collection of bio metric data from nesting turtles, night beach patrols, beach cleaning and basic construction work – there is plenty to do so be prepared to work hard and be flexible to the needs of the project hosts.

Where the project is based

The project is based in the Bocas Del Toro province of Panama situated around 1 hour from the Costa Rican - Panama border. Transport from San Jose to Panama will be by local bus and then by boat. Please don't forget to have the certificate of your yellow fever vaccination as you may be required to show it upon entering Costa Rica and / or Panama.

Where you'll be staying

You will be staying in a range of different accommodation throughout the trip as listed below:

In Alajuela: Hostel Maleku, a friendly basic guest house near the i-to-i office

At the turtle project -Volunteer accommodation – basic but clean accommodation, dormitory style rooms with up to 5 people per room. Three western style toilets and 3 cold water showers from a water tank that captures the rain. There is a generator for electricity that comes on for a couple of hours per night.

In Bocas – comfortable hotel accommodation based on shared rooms, private bathroom with hot water shower and western style toilet.

Please arrange your flight to arrive into San Jose (SJO) on the specified arrival date. If your flight is arriving earlier we may be able to arrange an 'early airport pick-up' for a small fee, please contact your nearest i-to-i office to arrange this.

Fast Facts

Project Information

- Project Duration: Min 2 weeks
- Project Costs: £899.00 for 2 weeks
- Location of project: Bocas Del Toro province in Panama, an hour from the Costa Rica - Panama border
- Arrival Airport: San Jose (airport code SJO)
- Activities: Working on a turtle project monitoring turtle nests, relocating nests, night beach patrols, 2 surfing lessons, kayaking tour, dolphin watching tour, snorkelling, chilling on a beach!
- Working Hours: Full days on tour, at the project 2-4 hours in the morning and 2-4 hours in the afternoon plus 2-4 hour night patrols
- Getting to the project: On site
- Requirements: Minimum Age 18
- Other: Semana Santa (Latin America Holy week) will be from March 26th to April 4th 2010 and from April 15th to April 24th 2011, you may have some disruptions to the placement during this time

What's Included

- Accommodation: Varied – guest house in Alajuela, volunteer accommodation at the project, hostel accommodation in Bocas, based on shared rooms or dormitory rooms.
- Food: Meals as detailed on the itinerary
- Airport Pickup: Included on arrival date. Ask us for details if you're arriving early! Transfer back to the airport at the end of the tour
- Training: In-country orientation
- Support: Pre-departure helpdesk, Local in-country team and 24 hour emergency support

What's not included

- Flights, Insurance, Visas, Local Transport

Country Guide - Costa Rica

A little bit of history...

Costa Rica, dubbed the rich coast by Columbus, was a melting pot of cultural diversity long before the Europeans came, with Mesoamerican and South American groups settling on the land. The area was not defined by one tribe or group but a mix of indigenous people. Faced with Indian resistance and tropical diseases, it took the Spanish around 60 years to colonise the country and Cartago. The central highlands was founded as a colony in 1563. The colony soon diminished in importance, however, as there was not a large Indian workforce to sustain it, it was far removed from major trading routes. Costa Rica became somewhat of a poor relation to other Spanish-seized nations despite the gradual establishment of cities in the fertile central highlands during the 1700s. Costa Rica's status saw a turnaround in the 19th century as it gained full independence (1838) and achieved economic growth through coffee exports. Today it has a healthy economy driven by its growing industries that include tourism and electronics, and is the most affluent country in Central America.

A peace-loving and forward thinking nation, Costa Rica held its first democratic elections in 1889 and abolished its army in 1948 to invest in the country's social and cultural needs. Despite a brief dictatorship and a six week civil war in the first half of the twentieth century, Costa Rica has achieved political stability and has managed to escape military dictatorships and violence that has befallen its neighbours.



Sights and sounds

Costa Rica is like Dr. Who's tardis: it's a small country but there is a vast array of species and natural beauty residing within its borders. It contains round 5 per cent of the world's biodiversity and a quarter of the country is designated a national park or reserve. With 26 national parks, Costa Rica is renowned for its progressive approach to conservation and ecotourism. Parque Nacional Corcovado boasts the largest primary rainforest on the American Pacific coastline and is home to around 140 mammal species including the endangered Baird's Tapir, jaguars and howler monkeys, as well as crocodiles and sharks on the coastal track of the park. The country's turtle haven, Parque Nacional Tortuguero, lies on the Caribbean coast and it's where Hawksbill, Loggerhead, Green and Leatherback turtles lay their eggs. Getting to the park is an adventure in itself since it can only be reached by sea or air.

To get closer to the clouds, Costa Rica's volcanoes provide the perfect vehicle. The country houses around 100 volcanoes with only a handful active. Volcán Irazú, the country's highest volcano at over 3400m, is active and its last major eruption was in 1963. It makes for a worthwhile trek to the summit where it's possible to see the Pacific and Caribbean on rare clear days. For night owls, the active Volcán Arenal is best viewed from afar when the sun goes down for a chance of seeing it spouting spectacular explosions of hot orange lava. The Arenal Hanging Bridges, which consist of 15 suspension bridges in front of the volcano, provide great views of the volcano and the surrounding rainforest. Close to the volcano is Laguna de Arenal, the largest lake in Costa Rica, often hailed as one of the best windsurfing spots in the world. White water rafting, horse back riding and fishing are also popular activities in the area.

With an abundance of wildlife, rainforests and natural wonders to choose from in Costa Rica, it is also worth exploring the acclaimed Monteverde cloud forest. Lauded for its enormous range of plant and wildlife species, it's a full on jungle experience with muddy trails and thick clouds hovering overhead. Adding to the area's uniqueness is the Quaker community which settled close by in a town also known as Monteverde in the 1950s.

Sandwiched between the Pacific and Caribbean, Costa Rica has no shortage of fine beaches, whether white or black sand, tranquil or high spirited. On the pacific coast, Dominical is a cosy beach community and popular surfing destination with various national reserves and parks within easy travelling distance. One of the highlights on the Caribbean coast is Punta Uva which is picture postcard personified. The Nicoya Peninsula, meanwhile, is among other things, a hub for idyllic beaches from the secluded charms of Mal Pais to surfers' paradise Santa Teresa.

If you come across random large stone spheres, these are just another of country's unexpected and unique features. The existence of the spheres, which range from a few centimetres to 2 metres in diameter, were discovered in the 1930s and it's not known why, what or who, but they are believed to have been made around 200BC to 1600 CE. Around 300 have been found so far in various part of the country.

Best time to go...

It's simple: dry, hot weather is like honey to a bee for tourists, but during the rainy season, you'll find less crowds and usually cheaper hotel rates. To avoid the crowds and also a chance of dry weather, late April and May along with mid October to mid December are the best bet since the dry season tends to run from late December to mid April. The rain may hamper sunbathing but it doesn't take away from the natural diversity of the country. Easter week is one of the busiest times especially in and around beach resorts. It's hot year round with the coast boasting the hottest temperatures, averaging 89°F (32°C), while the highlands are relieved by cooler temperatures at night.

Getting around

Like most Latin American countries, if you want to get around, bus is the way to go. Since the population is largely concentrated to the centre of the country, this is where roads and buses are most abundant. San Jose is the main departure point and depending on where you want to travel to and from, it is sometimes easier to return to San Jose to take the next leg of your journey. Buses vary from crowded old school buses to air conditioned luxury. But you get what you pay for and for long distance journeys on direct buses will get you to your destination an hour or two earlier than the cheaper corriente or normal variety that stop on demand. Buses are at their most crowded during major holidays, especially Easter, and at weekends and on Mondays and Fridays. In San José the majority of buses leave from what is commonly known as Le Coca Cola, the former site of the bottling factory and most services stop at 10pm.

Car rental is a popular option but it can be expensive and you need to be prepared to deal with unruly drivers and the occasional potholed roads. For long journeys, flying is a good way to get to your destination quicker and domestic airlines like Nature Air and Sansa offer good rates and fly to cities as well as remote destinations.

Taxis are a good way to get to remote areas and around towns and cities. Agree on a fare before you set off, and for shorter journeys make sure the metre is switched on. It's worth noting that taxi drivers tend to identify areas by landmarks rather than by address so it helps if you know what your destination is near.

Highlight: San José

The cosmopolitan bustle of capital city San José is far removed from the natural wonders of Costa Rica, but with most journeys beginning and ending in the city it's a good place to while away a few days. Although there are few reminders of its colonial past what with skyscrapers, department stores and fast food chains dominating the city skyline, its museums, plazas and surrounding areas provide an alternative look at Costa Rican life. Museo de Jade, one of the country's most renowned museums, offers a look at the world's largest collection of American jade, together with various archaeological exhibits. Built in 1897, Teatro Nacional, the national theatre, is one of the city's most striking buildings with marble staircases and gilded ceilings. For immersion in city life, the main market, Mercado Central, is a good way to meet locals and find a bargain, while for people watching, head to the parks such as Parque Nacional and Parque Central.

San José is also the country's transport hub and is the best base to explore from. Parque Nacional Braulio Carrillo is the closest national park to the city, less than an hour's drive away, and amongst its lush vegetation it's possible to capture the sight of quetzals, eagles, jaguars. You can also view the park from the comfort of cable cars and see flora and fauna that would otherwise go unseen by taking the hiking route. La Paz Waterfall Gardens is a nature park one hour from the city that features five waterfalls and a butterfly observatory. Also within striking distance of the city is one of the oldest national parks in the country, Parque Nacional Volcán Poás, with this being Costa Rica, an active volcano is the main attraction.