

Sea turtle conservation on the Caribbean coast of Panama

Project Overview

Enjoy the beach life while helping the endangered turtle species - and this is called work?

This is a great opportunity to learn more about the wetlands area of Panama and experience the range diverse species that are in danger of extinction. You will be a major help in preserving the endangered turtles and manatees of the area and also have the opportunity to learn lots about these creatures and marine biology in the process. You will be a key contributor in safeguarding the existence of these amazing animals but do be prepared for some hard work! The patrols are during the night when the females come up to the beach to lay their eggs! During the day your work may include cleaning the beach, preparing the food for the manatees and working on the organic farm. But having said that - you can laze on the beach in your spare time too!



Trip highlights

- Spending your days on stunning beaches - and your evenings helping ensure the survival of these wonderful creatures
- Sampling the local food – of two countries that is!
- Enjoy exploring Bocas del Toro in Panama in your time off and all the activities it has to offer such as snorkeling, diving, surfing, and its marine national parks.

What the project does and why it needs you?

After experiencing Costa Rica you will head over the Panamanian border and will be based in the San San Wetlands area - just into Panama itself. This project was founded in 2000 as part of a strategy led by the Government of Panama to bring communities together to help its conservation plans. It's main aims are to conserve the natural resources of the area, the important mangrove areas of the San San Pond, to monitor the manatees in the nearby canals and to help preserve the locally endangered turtle species. There are over 16,000 hectares of marsh land in the 'San San Pond' which remain part of the protected area of the Republic of Panama.

San San Pond is located approximately 30 km from the Costa Rica-Panama border and is a remote area backed by mangrove swamps. With the help of environmentalists the small community of San San is now supporting the turtle nesting process instead of poaching the turtle eggs that they had been so used to doing. The project now needs help to protect these nests, to locate and relocate the nests at risk and release hatched turtles into the sea.

The turtle season on this coastline runs from beginning of March through to the end of July each year, with the peak nesting period being April and May. The hatchling turtles usually start to appear from mid May to the end of the season with the number of nesting adult female turtles arriving on the beach decreases from June to the end of July.

Who is it for?

This is for anyone who loves being outdoors, living on a tropical coastline and wants to experience a unique way of life going back to basics, most importantly knowing that they are helping to preserve an endangered species - that sounds to us like everyone! You will need to be flexible due to the demands of the project and be prepared for some hard work - including long nights on beach patrols!

What you'll be doing

You will be involved mainly in patrols of the beaches looking out for turtle nests and relocating those at risk, this will mainly include night patrols so be warned! You will also be involved in the monitoring of the manatee population of the marshes during the day, so you will need to catch up on your sleep when you can!

Be prepared to be flexible as the project may want you to get involved in other activities as required such as general maintenance. You will be working 6 days a week with one day off. An approximate timetable for the day is 2 hours in the morning and 2 hours in the afternoon with night patrols lasting 4 hours or so (please note that night patrol schedules may vary).

Where you'll be staying

You will be staying in a two-storey house that has 8 bedrooms. Bedrooms are shared with space for 4 people in each room, all located on the upper floor, with a 'bodega' (or small store/ shop) on the ground floor. The water supply for showers is from a water tank that catch the rain, so in unusually dry periods water can run short, however there is a well that can also be used for bucket showers. The accommodation is owned, maintained and operated by the project association. There is no full time electricity but a generator does come on for a couple of hours every night. You will be in a beautiful but relatively isolated area and the nearest commercial facilities about 40 minutes by boat and then 10 minutes by car. The local residents are very friendly and welcoming - this really is a 'Robinson Crusoe' kind of experience!

What you'll be eating

You will be eating Caribbean food usually consisting of rice, beans, plantains, salads, some meat, fish and vegetables. Although the menu may get repetitious the food is all tasty and hearty and believe us, you will miss rice and beans once you are back home.

Advice and what to bring

- A mosquito net
- Some light weight clothing which should be dark and act as camouflage during the night patrols
- A head torch with a red light or normal torch with red cellophane
- A dark color rain jacket
- Comfortable shoes (covering the toes for protection on the night patrols)
- A sweater for the chilly night patrols
- Lots of mosquito repellent for when you are not working with the turtles

You will need proof that you have had the yellow fever vaccination to enter Panama - if you get a Yellow Fever inoculation before you travel you do receive a certificate that is valid for 10 years.

When you are off duty you will need to make your own entertainment so don't forget your books, music, playing cards and a good supply of jokes and stories!

When you arrive

Please arrange your flight to arrive in San Jose (airport code SJO) on the specified arrival date for onward transfer to your allocated project. Most locations are quite isolated and although there will be local people close by, towns with internet access or international telephone are likely to be a bus journey away, visitable on your days off.

Detailed Itinerary

Day 1: Arrival in Costa Rica

Welcome to Costa Rica. After being picked up at the airport you will spend the night in Alajuela, a small city close to the capital. Get settled into the tropical climate and exciting rhythm of this unique Latin American paradise.

Day 2: Orientation

Today you will have a detailed orientation on life in Costa Rica and Panama, do's and don'ts and of course information about the sea turtle project..

Day 3: Transfer to the project

Welcome to the wonderful world of sea turtle conservation! After a transfer of about 6 hours by public bus from Alajuela and then a boat journey you will reach your destination in Panama. Here you'll be able to settle into your accommodation and begin working on the project with the turtles and manatees. During your time at the project you will get involved in lots of activities such as night beach patrols, collecting turtle eggs, gathering measurements and data of turtles and new hatchlings, as well as daily manatee inspection tours of the nearby canals and marshes, general maintenance around the project and activities required due to the demands of the project. You can also get involved in teaching English to the local community!

Day 4 and onwards: Project work and enjoying Costa Rica

During your time at the project you will be able to get involved in a range of activities such as night beach patrols, collecting turtle eggs, gathering measurements and data of turtles and new hatchlings, as well as daily manatee inspection tours of the nearby canals and marshes, general maintenance around the project and activities required due to the demands of the project. You can also get involved in teaching English to the local community if you want to!

At the end of your project (which of course depends on how long you have booked for!) you will need to make your way back to San Jose Airport (SJO) in Costa Rica for your flight home - or if you are lucky you'll be heading on for more travels and adventures in Central America. Don't forget that our in country and the project team are there to advise you as and when needed.

Fast Facts

Project Information

- Project Duration: Min 1 week - Max 4 weeks
- Project Costs: £549.00 for 1 week, £195.00 for every week thereafter
- Location of project: *San San Pond on the Caribbean coast of Panama,*
- Arrival Airport: *San Jose, Costa Rica (airport code SJO)*
- Activities: *Turtle beach patrols, monitoring manatee population of the marshes , recording data and activities required by the project*
- Working Hours: *6 days a week, 2 -4 hours in the morning, 2 -4 hours in the afternoon, 4 hour night patrols, all other time is free*
- Getting to the project: *Project accommodation on site*
- Requirements: *Minimum Age 17 (17 with written parental consent)*
- 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: *Shared basic dormitory accommodation*
- Food: *3 meals a day*
- Airport Pickup: *Included on arrival date. Ask us for details if you're arriving early!*
- Training: *In-country orientation*
- Support: *Pre-departure helpdesk, Local in-country team and 24 hour emergency support*

What's not included

- *Flights, Insurance, Visas, Return Airport transfer, 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 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 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 hours 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.