

Sea turtle conservation on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica

Project Overview

Interested in beautiful beaches and preserving our flappy-friends?

This is an ideal project if you want to play an important role in preserving an endangered species and gaining an insight into marine biology. Marine turtles are an endangered species, so you'll receive specific training which will enable you to help with research and data collection. You could be working on a specialised marine turtle conservation project where you can get involved in clearing beaches in preparation for the nesting season, as well as regular beach patrols. This is a great opportunity to help safeguard the existence of these fascinating animals, whilst spending lots of time on the sun-kissed beaches of Costa Rica's pristine Pacific coastline.



Trip Highlights

- Spending your days on stunning beaches - and your evenings helping ensure the survival of these wonderful creatures
- Sampling the local food - beans and rice may not sound much but when you're in Costa Rica it tastes great!
- Experiencing a totally different way of life - unless you're lucky enough to usually live on a tropical beach of course

What the project does and why it needs you?

We work with a number of projects based on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica where it is mainly the Ridley and Leatherback turtles that come inland to lay their eggs. All 3 projects we work with are in stunning locations - Matapalo, Ostional or Buena Vista.

In the past there has been considerable poaching of turtle eggs which were then sold or consumed, thus leading to the turtle species becoming endangered. Much work has been done by local communities with various projects being set up to help preserve this species and to help to limit the amount of poaching. As more communities have been made aware of the plight of the turtles there has been a steady increase in the numbers of the hatchlings making their journeys back into the sea safely. The history of turtle protection on the Pacific coast started about 15 years ago.

The turtle season on the Pacific coast runs from the end of June to the middle of February each year, with the peak nesting period being August through to December. The baby turtles hatch within 45 to 54 days depending on incubation temperatures, generally hatching during the night although some people laid on the beach during the day see a little turtle head popping up through the sand!

Who is it for?

This is for anyone who loves being outdoors, living a unique way of life, loves conservation and the thought that they will be helping to preserve an endangered species. You will need to be flexible due to the demands of the project and have a good level of fitness - the work can be demanding, and be warned about the nights on the beach until the early hours on the night patrols. Just think - spending your days and nights on tropical beaches, hmmm not too bad!

What you'll be doing

You will be working on night patrols to watch for turtles coming up onto the beach to lay their eggs, data and measurement gathering, transfer of eggs from nets to hatcheries, beach cleaning, general building and maintenance work of the hatcheries and various activities as and when required by the project.

You will be working 5 to 6 days a week which will be a mix of day and night patrols, as it is 24/7 you will need to be flexible. In low season volunteers can participate in the construction of the hatchery (June and July) it's hard manual labour but is imperative to the success of the project - without a hatchery no turtle nests can be saved.

Where you'll be staying

Think pristine tropical paradise, think of stepping out of your every day life. Did Robinson Crusoe have air con, nice hot showers, an extensive menu of tasty nibbles and access to his mates on Facebook? No, he didn't and neither, dear traveller, shall you! If you have a genuine interest in nature and conservation and are happy to spend time in the close company of like-minded individuals, giving the project of your best and with a bit of physical labour thrown in, you will love your stay in Costa Rica. You may not love the cold showers, the back-of-beyond-without-electricity and rice and beans, rice and beans and more rice and beans, but the turtles will thank you for it (metaphorically at least!) and you will be immersed in a genuine cultural experience.

Ostional - you will be staying at one of eight homestays which are all a 5 minute walk away from each other or at the project station in a dormitory room. There is no hot water and you will need to bring a sleeping bag liner or sleeping bag with travel pillow and pillowcase. A mosquito net is required. Three meals day are provided for you.

Mata Palo – you will be staying in a rustic house at the project which is whilst small has clean and basic accommodation. Each room has bunk beds and there is electricity and cold water. No bedding is provided so you will need to bring a sleeping bag liner or sleeping bag with travel pillow and pillowcase. A mosquito net is required. Three meals per day are provided for you.

Playa Buena Vista – you will be staying at a wooden shack on an upper platform either on a mattress or a 'camping bed'. Tents are also available depending on the number of volunteers. Bush toilets with septic tanks are available and there is an outdoor cold water shower (although water supplies are limited!). This is real back to basics living and there is no electricity - so leave the hair straighteners at home! As bedding is not provided you will need to bring a sleeping bag liner or sleeping bag with a travel pillow and pillowcase. A mosquito net is required. Three meals day are provided for you.

What you`ll be eating

You will be eating Costa Rican food usually consisting of rice, beans, plaintains, salads, some meat, fish and vegetables. Rice and beans are the staple food of Costa Rica and whilst they don't sound much, believe us they are very moreish and you'll definitely miss them when you leave.

Advice and what to bring

- A mosquito net is necessary
- 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 light weight dark color rain jacket
- Comfortable shoes (covering the toes for protection on the night patrols)
- Lots of mosquito repellent for when not working with the turtles
- A sweater for the chilly night patrols
- Beach wear for during the day.

When you are off duty you may need to make your own entertainment so don't forget your books and music – the more jokes and card games you know too the more friends you will have!

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, visit-able on your days off.

Day 1: Arrival in Costa Rica

Welcome to Costa Rica. After being picked up at the airport you will spend the night in a guest house 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, do's and don'ts and of course information about the sea turtle project.

Day 3: Transfer to your project

Today you will transfer to your project by public transport which will take between 5 and 6 hours depending on which of the 3 projects you are placed at. Here you will be welcomed to the wonderful world of sea turtle conservation and have a little bit of time to settle in to your accommodation and explore the local area.

Day 4 and onwards: Project work and enjoying Costa Rica

During your time at the project you will get involved in loads of activities such as night beach patrols, collecting turtle eggs, gathering measurements and data of turtles and new hatchlings, general maintenance of the hatcheries and other activities requested by the project.

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) 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: *One of three locations on the Pacific coast - Ostional, Mata Palo or Buena Vista*
- Arrival Airport: *San Jose (airport code SJO)*
- Activities: *Turtle beach patrols, monitoring nests and recording data*
- Working Hours: *Flexible; 5 to 6 days a week, a mix of day and night work, with shift durations between 2 to 8 hours. All other time is free*
- Getting to the project: *Dependent on location; on site or walking distance*
- Requirements: *Minimum Age 17 (17 years 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

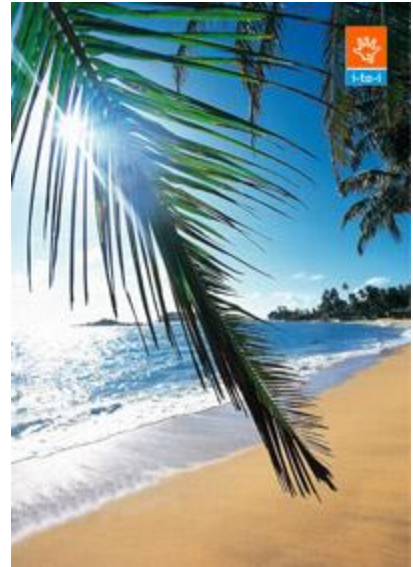
- Accommodation: *Various shared accommodation, basic and clean with cold water*
- Food: *Three meals per day*
- Airport Pickup: *Included on arrival date. Ask us for details if you're arriving early!*
- Training: *In-country orientation*
- Support: *Pre-departure helpdesk, Local in-country team and 24 hour emergency support*

What's not included

- *Flights, Insurance, Visas, Return Airport transfer, Local Transport*

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 is 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 a 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.