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The Best of Costa Rica

From lush rainforests and tropical beaches to spectacular hiking and breathtaking ecoadventures, where do you start?

by David Appell

FOR SUCH AN ITTY-BITTY COUNTRY (SMALLER THAN WEST VIRGINIA, ABOUT two-thirds the size of Scotland, and three-quarters the size of Newfoundland), Costa Rica's jam-packed with enough sights and experiences to keep you busy for weeks and reminiscing (not to mention make your friends and family green with envy) for years. But although point-to-point air flights are quick, distances on the ground that look short on the map can take a lot longer where the rubber meets the road.

You probably have only 1 or 2 precious weeks of vacation time, and we suspect you have your own ideas about how to spend it. That's why we're going to cut through the brochure-speak and help you home in on the best of the best, right from the start.

A QUICK LOOK AT COSTA RICA

SAN JOSE & THE CENTRAL VALLEY

Climate comfy at 1,050 to 1,500m (3,500–5,000 ft.) above sea level, this is the heart and soul of Tiquicia (the local name for Costa Rica). It's home to the country's capital and a mix of city, suburbia, rolling countryside—including lots of coffee-growing areas—and a surprisingly big chunk of wilderness where you can thrill to volcanoes, quetzals, and lots more. San José, meanwhile, may not be the most lovely city in the world, but it's definitely well worth a stop for its quality museums, dining, and nightlife. And the fetching cities and towns of Alajuela, Heredia, and Cartago that ring the capital also make excellent bases for seeing a good bit of the rest of the country.

NORTHERN ZONE

North of the Central Valley between the jungly lowlands stretching east to the Caribbean and the dry plains going westward to the Pacific, this rich, rolling region is not only Costa Rica's farming breadbasket but also a playlist of its greatest eco- and soft-adventure hits. World-famous Arenal volcano still regularly belches glowing lava, and nearby Lake Arenal is a primo windsurfing magnet. Farther east and north, the wetlands of Caño Negro Wildlife Refuge serve up world-class birding, the Venado caves spectacular spelunking, and Sarapiquí rip-roaring rafting on Class IV and V whitewater.

MONTEVERDE

On a mountaintop in the Tilarán range between Arenal and the Guanacaste coast, this extension of the northern zone is such a singular spot that it rates its own chapter. Home to Costa Rica's most famous cloud forest (misty, riotously green, and wildlife-rich), this mountaintop also has a remarkable, quirky community of Ticos (as Costa Ricans call themselves) and gringo expatriates who have turned it into one of the "greenest," most conservation-minded communities in the world. Digs range from humble/no frills to full-scale resorts. If you can handle the rocky drive along steep mountain roads, it's well worth the trip.

CENTRAL PACIFIC COAST

An easy drive from San José, this stretch is home to Costa Rica's first beach resorts. It's also the most easily accessible coastline in Costa Rica. Playa de Jacó is a popular destination here, not only for its beach but also for its party-hearty bar and club scene. Manuel Antonio shows off its spectacular views and the country's most popular national park (and, sure, some partying, too, especially in Quepos right next door). More low key are the beach areas like Dominical, Punta Uva, and Esterillos. But the region isn't just about the beach; there's also some amazing nature here, from the scarlet macaws of Carara to the whales, dolphins, and sea turtles of Ballena Marina park, which also protects the country's biggest coral reef.

OSA PENINSULA

For truly hardcore ecoseekers, here's the Holy Grail. In many ways the country's last and wildest frontier, this remote 1,619-sq.-km (625-sq.-mile) chunk of land jutting out into the Pacific way down south has very little development and is home to primeval rainforests, including the legendary Corcovado National Park, where wildlife-spotting is tons easier than pretty much anywhere else in Costa Rica. Meanwhile, the coasts around Matapalo, Carate, and Drake Bay have some wonderful ecolodges, surfing, whale-watching, and countless ways to be amazed at the lushness of nature on land and sea.

CARIBBEAN COAST

Costa Rica's sometimes funky "left coast" is less famous and popular than the Pacific side. But it has some truly lovely beaches along with groovy beach towns, both laid-back and buzzing (thanks in good measure to the reggae vibe brought in by the Jamaican expats who settled here). You can also visit indigenous communities in the hills just inland or head to the northernmost section of coast for an Amazon-like experience at ecolodges on the jungle-lined canals of Tortuguero. Puerto Viejo's "Salsa Brava" is one of the most famous waves in the world, which helps make the area a surfer magnet. There's also some killer whitewater just a little ways inland.

GUANACASTE & NICOYA PENINSULA

Once a land of cowboys and fishermen, this is Costa Rica's go-go cutting edge of tourism, with golf courses and gated condo complexes threatening to overrun the laid-back coastal towns of old. But though towns like Tamarindo and Playa del Coco have become party central, others such as Nosara have managed to keep the honky-tonk at bay—especially down the Nicoya coast, with villages like Malpaís

and Montezuma. Surfing's big all along this stretch, but you can also see marine turtles down south, volcanoes up north, and inland traditional villages producing ages-old pottery and other crafts.

BEST NATURAL SIGHTS & ATTRACTIONS

VOLCANO-WATCHING Volcanoes, dead and alive, dot the entire country. Most active and thus most thrilling to view are Arenal in the Northern Zone (p. 90), Rincón de la Vieja in Guanacaste (p. 292), and Poás in the Central Valley (p. 56). Of the three, Arenal gives it up the most (you can actually see lava on clear days), while at the other two you can catch some geyser and other sulphuric action.

HOT SPRINGING With all those volcanoes come geothermal springs, and in various parts of the country you'll find "spas" to loll around in, from the Orosi Valley near San José up to Rincón de la Vieja near Guanacaste's border with Nicaragua. But the most elaborate are in Arenal, Las Fuentes, Baldi, Eco Termales, and especially Tabacón, an elaborately landscaped hot-water park you've got to see to believe (p. 102).

BIRD-WATCHING This birders' paradise is home to nearly 900 species, some unique to this part of Central America. The top spots to see them include La Selva, way up north near Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí (p. 110), a bio-research station where the (concrete) paths are excellent and 500 species live (especially toucans, various parrot varieties, flycatchers, hummingbirds, and dacnis). Others include national parks like Carara, on the Pacific just north of Jacó (p. 155), known for its scarlet macaws but also harboring various trogons, manakins, and birds like the golden-naped woodpecker and fiery-billed aracari. Up the coast in north Guanacaste, in the tropical dry forest of Santa Rosa (p. 290), you can spot various hummingbirds and parrots, and species like the roadside hawk and white-throated magpie-jay. Closest to San José, the best part of the Central Valley's Braulio Carrillo (p. 72) for birding is the Quebrada González trail, whose wet foothill forest harbors all manner of tanagers, antshrikes, and woodcreepers; you'll also spot tweeters here you probably won't elsewhere, like the streak-crowned antvireo, lattice-tailed trogon, and yellow-eared toucanet.

SEA TURTLE NESTING Several species of huge marine turtles use Costa Rican beaches as annual mating, nesting, and hatching grounds, and watching these ancient creatures return year after year to answer their ancient instincts is incredibly moving, and quite a learning experience. The best places to witness them in action at various times of year are Guanacaste's Playa Ostional (p. 318), Nancite (p. 291), and Grande (p. 303); Playa Tortuga near Dominical (p. 187) along the Central Pacific; and Tortuguero (p. 235) and Gandoca (p. 253) on the Caribbean coast. You'll probably see the biggest number (a mix of four species) at Tortuguero because this entire stretch of coast is off limits to the big development that scares them away, but it's also one of the most inaccessible viewing spots—you'll ideally need to devote at least 2 to 3 days to a visit here.

WHALE- & DOLPHIN-WATCHING Humpback and sperm whales, orcas, various dolphins—they're all here, usually seasonally and sometimes permanently.

Top spotting spots include Ballena Marina national park in the Central Pacific (p. 177) and off Drake Bay in the Osa Peninsula (p. 194).

OTHER WILDLIFE-SPOTTING Practically anywhere you go offers great possibilities, but we'd say the pick of the litter is the Osa Peninsula's Corcovado National Park (see p. 196), whose larger-than-usual chunk of primeval forest harbors more than a dozen micro-climates and ecosystems, along with ocelots, margays, tapirs, peccaries, exotic tree frogs, jaguars, and pumas. For crocs, the Central Pacific's Carara and Bijagual (p. 155) are pretty sure bets.

BEST ACTIVE EXPERIENCES

CANOPY TOURS & ZIPLINES Now it's catching on from Mexico to Jamaica, but it's here that this uniquely thrilling way of touring the upper reaches of the rainforests originated. Firmly strapped into a harness, you zip from tree to tree hanging from a reinforced steel cable. Monteverde has some of the zippiest ziplines (p. 129), and Nosara now has the longest lines in the country (p.315) but you can find them all over Costa Rica.

WHITEWATER RAFTING Spectacular scenery and H₂O that'll get your adrenaline surging are found in the Central Valley's Pacuare and Reventazón rivers near Turrialba (p. 86), and way up north on the Peñas Blancas, Toro, and Sarapiquí (p. 106).

RIDING THE SURF Costa Rica's coasts have some of the gnarliest waves on earth. On the Caribbean coast, near Puerto Viejo, is Playa Pirriplí's world-famous "Salsa Brava" break (p. 266). On the Pacific side, in Guanacaste, it's Playa Naranjo (p. 291), Tamarindo (p. 303), Guiones, and Nosara (p. 316); in southern Nicoya, it's Santa Teresa, Los Cedros, Carmen, and Mar Azul (p. 337). The Central Pacific has Jacó, Hermosa, and Esterillos (p. 139), and farther south Dominical (p 140). Down in the Osa, check out Matapalo, Pan Dulce, and Backwash beaches (p. 211).

DIVING & SNORKELING With two *costas ricas* (rich coasts) and pair of reefs, Tiquicia has as much to see under water as on land. On the Caribbean side, check out Cahuita (p. 245) and Manzanillo (p. 252), where you'll get some of your best reef action, visibility, and riots of tropical fish. Pacific hot spots include Guanacaste's Catalina and Bat Islands in Santa Rosa Park (p. 290), which also have loads of fish, great visibility most of the year, and harbor manta rays and sharks (bull, tiger, and whitetip) to boot.

Possibly the country's best scuba/snorkel spot, though, is way down in the Osa Peninsula: Caño and Coco islands, off Drake Bay (p. 225), with crystalline H₂O and a Jacques Cousteau special's worth of very varied marine critters, including mantas, morays, barracuda, reef sharks—you'll probably spot dolphins, too. **FYI:** Caño's much closer in and less pricey.

BEST PEOPLE-WATCHING BEACHES

Starting out on the Caribbean side, the biggest "scene" is Playa Cocles, just south of Puerto Viejo, which in spite of a good crowd on the sands in season has a verdant tropical backdrop. Things really get hopping out on the Pacific coast, along strands like Guanacaste's Tamarindo (p. 278), Flamingo (p. 295), and Coco

(p. 280), backed up by towns with something of a honky-tonk flavor—Jacó down on the Central Pacific (p. 139) also falls into this category. For a certain amount of action plus a slightly less hopped-up town accompanying it, try Montezuma on the southern Nicoya (p. 330), or the Central Pacific's Playa Espadilla in Manuel Antonio (p. 172).

BEST BEACHES FOR THAT CASTAWAY FEEL

On the Caribbean side, we're fans of the Robinson Crusoe-like feel at Punta Uva (p. 260), while Pacifically speaking Guanacaste's Santa Rosa National Park has several that are lovely but hard to get to, including Playa Naranjo (p. 291) and Nancite (p. 291). Down in Guanacaste's resortier areas, try Playa Panamá (p. 280), Playa Grande near Tamarindo (p. 303), and the Sámara area's slightly more off-the-beaten path playas Buena Vista and Barrigona (p. 327). Farther south still, along the Central Pacific, we like Playa Arco in Ballena Marina National Park (p. 185), or if you want to be a little closer to a town, Manuel Antonio's Playa Biesanz and La Macha (p. 173). And as far south as you can go, on the Osa, it doesn't get much wilder than Sirena beach in Corcovado National Park (p. 196), though much of the sands along Drake Bay (p. 221) also do the trick, and are a bit more accessible.

BEST BEACHES FOR KIDS & FAMILIES

Mixing both calm waters and lots of stuff to do, Cahuita's Puerto Vargas (p. 250), and Chiquita, south of Puerto Viejo (p. 266), is the kid-friendliest along the Caribbean. Over on the Pacific, for the same reasons, we like Playa Pelada in Nosara (p. 316), with its great beach-shack eatery and tire swings hanging from trees, and south of Nosara in Sámara, at playas Sámara and Carrillo (p. 326). There's also Playa Herradura (p. 153), north of Jacó.

BEST MUSEUMS & HISTORIC SITES

The Central Valley is the star in this area, San José is the star in the Central Valley, and the stars in San José are the Precolumbian Gold Museum (p.32), followed by the Jade Museum (p. 33) and National Museum (p. 33), the last set in an old fort on a rise east of downtown. Art lovers, meanwhile, will find a lot of talent on display at the Museo de Arte Costarricense (p. 34). Historic spots are few and far between down here, but a pair not to miss are San José's elegant National Theater (p. 32) and the smaller nearby city of Cartago's large, fetching pilgrimage church, Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles (p. 46). If you're up in Guanacaste, don't miss La Casona in Santa Rosa National Park, site of a 19-century battle that was a defining moment in Tico history (p. 291).

BEST CULTURAL EYE-OPENERS

Although Costa Rica is a Spanish-speaking Latin American country, parts of it provide peeks at other cultures. There's the reggae/rasta flava of the Caribbean coast's Limón, Puerto Viejo, and Cahuita, where blacks descended from Jamaican immigrants still speak English with an island lilt (p. 230). Then there are the indigenous tribes that used to run the place before the Spaniards pushed them out into the hills and jungles. You can meet their descendants the BriBri near the

Caribbean coast (p. 232) and the Guaymí on the Osa Peninsula (p. 217). In inland Guanacaste, you can see the handiwork of the vanished Chorotegas, whose striking pottery the locals still craft in the town of Guaitil (p. 305).

BEST PLACES TO EAT

Though far from a culinary hot spot, Costa Rica does have some world-class dining. Bright spots include the tropical Latin fusion of La Luz and Grano de Oro in San José (p. 31) and Sofia in Monteverde (p. 125). Up in Arenal, under the volcano, you can dig into the nouvelle Latin and international at Acuarelas and Tabacón (p. 100).

Out on the coasts, stop in the *stupendo* Italian at La Pecora Nera, just outside Puerto Viejo (p. 265), on the Caribbean. On the Pacific side, the pick of the Guanacaste resorts includes the Med-Asian fusion and polished ambience at Ginger in Playa Hermosa (p. 289); La Laguna del Cocodrilo Bistro in Tamarindo (p. 302), serving French cuisine with local twists overlooking a *cocodrilo*-filled lagoon; La Luna in Nosara, with an elegant open-air vibe and fab seafood (p. 314); and sophisticated Asian-inflected continental at Nectar in Malpaís (p. 335).

Down in Manuel Antonio, the must-nosh is La Hacienda, serving nouvelle Latin-Med-Asian amid open-air elegance. Finally, down in the Osa, you won't want to miss the international fare with fresh local ingredients at Jade near Puerto Jiménez (p. 209).

WEEKLONG ITINERARIES

HITTING THE HIGHLIGHTS

For a reasonably representative Tico city-mountain-beach sampler, here's a four-stop itinerary you can squeeze into a week (if you don't mind hitting the road and changing hotels a fair bit). Having a car on this one helps with flexibility, but it's not a must-have; there are plenty of transport options between and at each stop.

Day 1 San José

After flying in, you can take in the major downtown attractions in a day. Get a sense of what this country was and is all about with visits to sights like the Precolumbian Gold Museum (p. 32), National Museum (p. 33), Mercado Central (p. 28), and National Theater (p. 32). They're close and compact enough to do them all in a full day, depending on your level of interest. Also, to get more of that old-time vibe, consider a bite along the way at the historic Cafetería 1830 in the Gran Hotel de Costa Rica (p. 29), the cafe in the National Theater, or the old-time-Tico-farmhouse-style Nuestra Tierra (p. 29).

Day 2 San José to Arenal/La Fortuna

Leave early in the morning for the 3½- to 4½-hour bus or car ride to the town of La Fortuna (you can take a half-hour flight, too). After settling in and having lunch, head up to Arenal Volcano National Park (p. 102) on your own or with a guide (a good idea for getting the most out of the wildlife-spotting) and hike trails both short and long, through forest and lava fields. Many trips take place to hit their halfway mark at sunset so that trekkers can hike up to where they can clearly see glowing lava snaking down the volcano. Afterward, soak your weary feet and

other body parts at Tabacón or other local volcanic hot springs (p. 102); if you take a guided tour, hot springs will usually be included in the package (p. 102).

Day 3 Arenal to Monteverde

Feel free to soak up more of Arenal in the morning, and ideally take an adventure tour like whitewater rafting, caving, canyoning, or hiking down to the lovely La Fortuna waterfall (p. 104). Then after lunch, drive around Lake Arenal to Monteverde, which will take a good chunk of the afternoon. Stroll around the town of Santa Elena.

Day 4 Monteverde

Get up at dawn and hit the famous Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve (more critters are out first thing in the A.M.). You'll spend the rest of the morning roaming 13km (8 miles) of trails and trying to spot some of the thousands of animal species—including the magnificent, elusive quetzal. You can go on your own, but spending a little extra on the savvy local guides will pay off big time, and you'll spot lots more that way (p. 129). In the afternoon, check out one of a trio of famous canopy tours (p. 129), which will strap you into a harness and send you careening down steel cables through the treetops. The Original Canopy Tour is the tamest—good for beginners, small kids, and seniors—while Selvatura has the biggest circuit and longest lines, plus a slew of other on-site attractions like canopy suspension bridges and great butterfly, hummingbird, and insect exhibits.

Day 5 Monteverde to Manuel Antonio

In the morning, either take an early tour of a local coffee plantation (p. 131) or, for something a little low-key, pay a visit to the local Quakers at their cheese/ice cream factory (p. 131). Around midday, drive out to the Pacific coast and head south to Manuel Antonio. Leave early enough to get settled and still get in some afternoon beach time on Playa Espadilla (p. 172). Around sunset, drinks or a nosh at any of the hilltop cafes, restaurants, and hotels to ogle the dazzling display is practically de rigeur.

Day 6 Manuel Antonio

Get up early and head to Manuel Antonio National Park, where you can spot monkeys and other various varmints (with or without a guide), then head to one of four bodacious beaches. In the afternoon, you've got a choice of two nearby canopy tours, a nature refuge where you stroll through the canopy on suspension bridges, or a reserve right in Manuel Antonio's Sí Como No resort, which includes a nice butterfly garden (p. 174).

Day 7 Leaving San José

Leave early from Manuel Antonio and head to the capital; it's 3 to 3½ hours by road, 25 minutes flying. Use any spare time you have before your flight out of San José to buy last-minute souvenirs and gifts, or catch things you missed. If you can't—hey, there's always next time. . . .

GETTING THE ADRENALINE PUMPING

Along with eco comes adventure, and hurling you down rivers and waterfalls, into caves, and through the treetops has become quite the growth industry, with scores

of adventure outfitters and attractions throughout the country. Here's an itinerary that'll let you sample most of the highlights in a week—and it promises to leave you breathless with excitement.

Day 1 San José

After flying in, you'll probably need to overnight in the capital before tomorrow's early-morning whitewater, so rest up—and while you're here, take part of the afternoon to check out a couple of the highlights downtown, like the Precolumbian Gold Museum (p. 32), National Museum (p. 33), Mercado Central (p. 38), and National Theater (p. 32). But if you get in early enough, and really want to squeeze in a thrill right off the bat, zip 39m (130 ft.) over a river canyon on a wire at Canopy Adventure (p. 72), which borders Braulio Carrillo National Park.

Day 2 San José to Turrialba

Up 'n' at 'em, you're off to have a whack at the whitewater on the Pacuare River near Turrialba, in nearby Cartago province (p. 86). Any one of a bunch of outfitters we list will pick you up, and you can do it as a day trip or an overnigher. Either way, they'll provide your eats and extras.

Day 3 San José or Turrialba to Arenal/La Fortuna

In Turrialba, your river outfitter can get you a transfer up to Arenal; from San José, you'll probably rent a car, or take a bus or shuttle van; it should take you about 4½ hours (if you must rush, a flight from SJ's takes half an hour). Drop your bags and head for an afternoon soak at one of the hot springs (p. 102), then an evening hike for a closer peek at the lava-spewing volcano (some outfits running the volcano tours end up with a hot-spring soak; if yours does you might want to skip the afternoon visit).

Day 4 Arenal/La Fortuna

Head off with one of the local adventure outfitters for a morning of canyoning—that is, hiking along mountain canyon rivers and streams, floating down a little whitewater, jumping off a huge boulder into the water, and—coolest of all—rap-pelling down several waterfalls (p. 106). (You'll probably need to book this at least a day in advance). Grab a quick lunch, catch your breath, then head out on your afternoon jaunt, 45 minutes north of La Fortuna in the Venado caves (p. 92), complete with plenty of stalactites, stalagmites, streams—and bats. After all that exertion, another soak, this time at night, could be just the ticket.

Day 5 Arenal to Monteverde

Maybe you're raring for another full day of Arenal-area *adrenalina*. But if you'd rather move on to mountaintop Monteverde, don't go via the same-old same-old car or bus around Lake Arenal. Instead, do a 2½-hour jeep-boat-jeep or jeep-boat-horse trip (p. 118). You'll get there by lunchtime, then in the afternoon you can hit one of the trio of canopy tours (p. 129), which will strap you into a harness and send you careening down steel cables through the treetops. If you're the type who prizes a rush, go with Selvatura, where the lines are so long you'll swear you were flying (the canopy suspension bridges are fab here, too). While the Original Canopy Tour is the most famous, it may be a bit too slow for someone who chooses this adrenaline itinerary.

Day 6 Monteverde to San José

Today you get up at dawn and hit the famous Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve (more critters are out first thing in the morning). You're on the hunt for the elusive quetzal (with binoculars not bullets, of course—you wouldn't want to slaughter one of these splendid rare birds). Hire a guide to help you track one down and also help you identify the other slithering or cuddly creatures you'll be passing on the trail. After lunch, do another zipline or take a horseback ride and hike out to a waterfall and swimming hole with a local outfitter (p. 133). If you have an early flight, make your way back to San José in the late afternoon.

Day 7 Leaving San José

Back to the airport—with lots of cool pix and memories, right?

BEACHY FAMILY FUN

More than a few parts of Costa Rica can be a tricky for families traveling with kids (especially little ones). But here's a week that's doable for most ages. By basing yourself at one beach resort and taking day trips, you'll get to mix sun 'n' fun with a good dollop of the eco-wonder the country's famous for.

Day 1 Arrive Playa Hermosa, Guanacaste

Mamá, are we there yet? You'll skip San José and fly right into Liberia, then drive or take a bus (40 minutes to an hour) out to the Pacific coast's Papagayo Gulf. We especially like the trio of horseshoe beaches at Playa Hermosa, Panamá, and Coco, and our pick hereabouts is Playa Hermosa's Villa del Sueño (p. 285), especially great for families because of its bevy of services and extras. This'll be your base.

Day 2 Hang Out & Chill

Enjoy the weather, hit the pool and beach, and get out a bit to explore the Playa Hermosa area, which has volleyball and a good selection of watersports and other stuff to do out on the sand.

Day 3 Raft the Corobicí, Do a Canopy Tour, Check Out the Turtles

For a nice gentle float down a nearby river where you'll see lots of critters, hook up with Safaris Corobicí (☎ 669-6191; www.nicoya.com) for a couple of hours to a half day; it's a winner for all ages. You might also have time to zip through the treetops on a canopy tour (perfectly safe and okay for most kids older than 6; p. 294). And if you're around between late September and late February, take a nighttime tour to see the awesome sight of leatherback turtles laying eggs and later the babies racing to the water at Playa Grande (p. 304); this can run late into the night and involve a good bit of standing and walking on sand, so make sure your little guys and gals are up for it.

Day 4 Explore Nearby Towns & Beaches

The big "action" around here is the booming beach town of Playa del Coco, popular with Tico families and with a festive vibe a bit on the Coney Island side (p. 280). There's lots of stuff to do and places to eat—and if you're here the last

weekend in March, you'll get to see the festivities surrounding the sand-sculpture competition called Papagayo Sand Fest (p. 290).

Day 5 Rincón de la Vieja National Park & Hacienda Guachipelín

Head a little farther afield today, northward up to a national park where you'll spend the whole day seeing some way-cool (er, actually hot) bubbling mud pots and geysers, checking out an awesome waterfall swimming hole, and doing some fun activities at a resort called Hacienda Guachipelín, with wall climbing, tubing, horseback riding, rappelling, cattle round-ups, and thermal springs (p. 293).

Day 6 Tamarindo—Surf Lessons, Anybody?

A short drive south of Playa Hermosa, Tamarindo (p. 303) is another rockin' beach town with a lot of fun stuff to do, including a bunch of surfing schools where any child older than 6 can learn to ride surf or boogie boards (and they'll even snap pics of you doing it!).

Day 7 Leaving Liberia

Have one last morning by the water, then head to the airport. On the flight back, have the kids work on their presentations for show-and-tell.