The resplendent quetzal is one of the most beautiful birds in the world.
With over 500,000 plant and animal species, perhaps no other country on the planet contains such dense biodiversity. Costa Rica is bestowed with an intense array of biodiversity and environmental attractions - majestic volcanoes, misty cloud forests, stunning river valleys, and hundreds of beaches along the Pacific and Caribbean coasts. Cruise ships dock at a commercial port in Puerto Caldera or in center city Puntarenas. The ports are twelve miles apart, on the Pacific coast. You will need transportation to visit tourist sites.

Costa Rica is ~ 200 miles long and 85 miles wide. It's bordered by Nicaragua on the north and Panama on the south.

**Nature is spectacular, and Costa Rica Is the Best of Nature**

Costa Rica is more than a vacation destination. It's an interactive sensory experience. The country is bestowed with an intense array of biodiversity and environmental attractions - majestic volcanoes, misty cloud forests, stunning river valleys, and hundreds of beaches along the Pacific and Caribbean coasts. Costa Rica carries a fascinating ecological story, woven through the history of a peaceful and family-oriented culture.

Costa Rica is a small country that encompasses just 0.03% of the world’s land mass. With over 500,000 plant and animal species, perhaps no other country on the planet contains such dense biodiversity. According to Costa Rica’s National Biodiversity Institute (INBio), the biodiversity in Costa Rica represents close to 4% of the total species on Earth

Costa Rica offers many exciting ways to immerse yourself in its natural elements. It is the consummate destination for exploring ecosystems and connecting with a peaceful culture. Whether discovering fascinating species with a friendly Costa Rican guide, zipping across the rainforest canopy, or relaxing in a volcano-heated hot spring, there are a variety of tours and activities to engage travelers of all types.

(Source: Costa Rica Tourist Bureau)


There are a great number of tourist sites and activities:

- 36 national parks and reserves that comprise 25% of the area of the country,
- cloud forests, rainforests, volcanoes, waterfalls, coffee plantations,
- sanctuaries to see birds, butterflies, animals,
- many beautiful beaches,
- many bird watching sites,
- river rides, hiking, zip-lining, four-wheeling, rock climbing, rafting, diving, surfing, sport fishing,
- and more!

See this link for descriptions of tourist sites [http://www.anywherecostarica.com/destinations](http://www.anywherecostarica.com/destinations)

**CAVEAT**

Information contained herein is believed to be accurate. PLEASE verify the information you use for your travel plans. Opinions expressed are my own. This port guide is protected by copyright law - see the last page of this guide for legal notices.

*Tom Sheridan*
Excursions from a cruise ship are limited by slow travel in the mountains. The Continental Divide runs north-south through Costa Rica. Most shore excursions are between the dock and the Arenal Volcano, Monteverde, Poas Volcano, Sarchi, and San Jose areas.
Two Cruise Ship Ports

There are two cruise ship ports on the Pacific Ocean side of Costa Rica.

- **Puntarenas** port is in center city. A tractor-pulled pedestrian train runs between the ship and the city. You'll find shops, restaurants, and open air soda fountains offering tropical fruit drinks, snacks, and sandwiches. You can walk along the sea or swim at the beach, but there is not much to do in the city.

- **Puerto Caldera** is a commercial port used by cruise ships. There's nothing to do in a commercial port.

Excursions from either port will take you to the same tourist sites.

Two Cruise Ports (12 miles apart)

Puntarenas has a very long beach. The **photo at left** was taken near the cruise ship dock.

The train (**photo below**) transports people from the ship into the city.
Excursions from a cruise ship are usually limited within the area between the dock and the Central Highlands due to travel time. There are only a few roads through the mountains, and they're difficult to maintain because of heavy rainfall. During the rainy season, some roads are flooded. Traffic and accidents can delay travel. We encountered a road closure due to an accident. Our driver knew the local roads and found an alternate route.

Tour with a guide who knows the area and speaks English well.

We took the ship's bus excursion to Poas Volcano. Our guide was Gilberth Calvo. Gil is proud of his country and enthusiastically shares his knowledge. He stops the bus when he spots animals or plant specimens we should see and photograph. He brings a variety of plants with him to explain growth habit. Gil is sensitive to, and interacts well with tourists. He's an excellent guide. His website is www.tropicalangelservices.com. If I had organized a group, I would have booked a tour with him. His email is tropicalangelservices@gmail.com.

Carry an umbrella, light rain jacket, or poncho

We knew it rains year-round in Costa Rica, but made the mistake of thinking the weather at the cruise dock was the weather we would encounter on our tour. The fact that it is warm and sunny at the ship is irrelevant. Weather in the mountains can be entirely different!

There are micro-climates, and temperature drops 3.56°F for each 1000-foot increase in elevation. The temperature at the cruise dock was 75°F, but it dropped to 43°F on the mountain. Our tour was to Poas Volcano at an elevation of 2,708 meters (8,885 feet) in a cloud forest. A cloud forest, also called a fog forest, is a tropical rain forest at the peaks of mountains with persistent, low-level cloud cover that retains moisture. We stepped from the bus onto the mountain and found ourselves in damp, high moisture cloud cover. Rain comes from clouds. DUH! It started to rain and there was a slight breeze. Undeterred, we walked a half-mile
to the observation deck hoping the rain would stop. We couldn't see the volcano through the dense cloud cover. It didn't stop raining; it got worse. I was dripping wet and cold by the time I returned to the bus. Both of my cameras were soaking wet because I had not brought my camera bag.

Be prepared for changes in temperature, fog, and brief rainfall on your tour through the mountains. Expect to encounter clouds in a cloud forest. The clouds may move out of the way allowing you to get great photos. They may block your view, or they may dump rain on you.

**GPS Coordinates for Tourist Sites**

Throughout this guide, I've listed GPS coordinates for tourist sites. You won't be using these coordinates for driving a car, but they are useful to find sites on maps and preview an area before you visit it. It's easy to locate large cities on Google Maps. But small towns and tourist sites are difficult to locate because they are only visible on the maps at very high magnification. If you know the GPS coordinates, you can pinpoint that location regardless of the scale of the map whether it is a street, satellite, terrain, or Google Earth view.

The GPS coordinate location appears as a down pointing green arrow with a red balloon at the nearest street address. “Get Directions” shows the sites as green balloons in the order you enter them as A, B, C.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Puerto Caldera dock</td>
<td>N 9 54.685, W 84 43.150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coffee plantation La Luisa</td>
<td>N 10 5 44.45, W 84 11 29.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parque Nacional Volcan Poas</td>
<td>N 10 11 26.54, W 84 13 58.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunch at Restaurante Freddo Fresas</td>
<td>N 10 9 25.62, W 84 11 44.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grecia</td>
<td>N 10 4 23.08, W 84 18 40.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarchi Largest oxcart in the world</td>
<td>N 10 5 23.83, W 84 20 43.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarchi souvenir store</td>
<td>N 10 5 31.10, W 84 20 49.93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Ship's Excursion Tour to Poas Volcano** (route map below)

Open this port guide in one window on your computer and Google Maps in a second window. Copy and paste the GPS coordinates into “Get Directions” to create the route map above. Google calculates this route is 140 miles (225 km) and 4 hours driving time.
First stop – monkeys at the side of the road

Shortly after we left the port, Gil saw monkeys in the trees and told our driver to stop. We got off the bus. Gil pointed out where the monkeys were and gave us time to take photos. My first impression was, “Wow, this is my kind of tour guide. Most guides would not stop the bus.”

Second stop – La Luisa Coffee Plantation

The coffee plantation was high up in the mountains. There were flowers in bloom, pathways to walk around, and a shop where you could buy hot coffee, a snack, or bagged coffee to take with you.
It was a relaxing, scenic stop. Gil recommended that I try a mild coffee. It was very good. You can read about the La Luisa farm and buy coffee from their website at [www.dokaestate.com](http://www.dokaestate.com)

Third stop – sloth in the trees
Gil stopped the bus so we could photograph a two-toed sloth sleeping in a tree. It strikes me as an ugly animal that only a mother could love. (photo right)

Fourth stop – Poas Volcano
I didn't get any photos of the volcano because of the cloud cover and rain. That's OK, there's no guarantee of getting pictures in a cloud forest.

My only regret is that I failed to take my light rain coat that would have prevented me from getting wet.

The photo at left is what I had hoped to see from the observation deck at Poas Volcano. Guess I'll have to go back and try again.

Poás is one of Costa Rica's largest and most active volcanoes. The crater is a mile in diameter. The sulfuric pool bubbles and emits smoke. Visitors who are lucky to avoid the cloud cover sometimes see geysers exploding into the air, reaching as high as 820 ft (250 m).

Trivia: Even if you get soaking wet in the rain at Poas Volcano, you'll dry out on the bus ride to the lunch stop at Freddo Fresas.
Fifth stop – lunch at Freddo Fresas

It's a traditional Costa Rican lunch buffet including rice, beans, beef, and chicken. It was very good. The restaurant was clean and comfortable. All the furniture was hand made and it is very sturdy.
I used spot metering on the bird and a fast shutter speed. **(photo below)**

---

**Sixth stop - Grecia**

Grecia is a popular tourist site in the rolling hills of Central Valley near sugar cane plantations. It's touted as the cleanest town in Latin America.

The main square has a well-manicured park with huge shade trees and the Cathedral de la Mercedes. It's a Gothic-style church made from metal panels imported from Belgium. **(photo left)**

We drove around the town, stopped for few photos, and drove on.

Tourist attractions near Gracia include:

- Rock Bridge, a unique structure. There is only one like it in the world, in China,
- Sugar cane plantation tours,
- A museum with more than 50,000 insects and butterflies,
- A butterfly garden,
- Bungee jumping off the Colorado River bridge,
- Rappelling down Los Chorros Waterfalls, and
- World of Snakes reptile museum.
Seventh stop – Sarchi

Sarchí Norte (Photo left) is one of the most beautiful churches in Costa Rica. The inside of the church has carvings and a vaulted hardwood ceiling.

Years ago, oxcarts were used to carry coffee from the mountains to the Pacific ports. This huge oxcart is across the square from the church. (photo below)

There's a big oxcart, but there is a much more important story. Here's my description of Sarchi:

Sarchi is the most famous crafts center in Costa Rica. The artisans and craftsmen are incredibly good at crafting and painting wood articles. There are over 200 stores and family-owned woodworking factories providing a wide range of products. This is a great place to see and purchase distinctive souvenirs for your home, office, family, and friends.

Fabrica de Carretas Eloy Alfaro is an impressive souvenir shop, especially if you like premium hardwood products. See this website for photos, descriptions, and pricing http://www.eljardin.co.cr/souvenirs.html

Products include wood inlay tables, wooden trunks, small painted oxcarts for use as serving tables and bars, folding wood and leather bar chairs, decorative painted chairs, small antique wood cars, a variety of wood carved products, artwork for walls, and kitchen products such as cutting boards, bowls, serving trays, wood insulators for hot pans, etc.

There were many designs of antique cars and planes. The planes were around $ 20 USD. Glass framed butterfly collections were ~ $ 25 to 63 USD. The large collection at right was $ 63.
There were attractive murals. Note the small, child-sized chairs. (Photo below)

We were treated to tasty samples of pineapple, watermelon, mango, and bananas. (photo left) The bananas are smaller and sweeter than those at stores in the US.

I don't know what the women's restroom was like, but the men's room had some interesting decoration. (Photo below)

The stop at Fabrica de Carretas Eloy Alfaro was fun and relaxing. As an amateur wood worker, I was impressed by the quality of work. In addition, the products are made from fine hardwoods that are very expensive in the US.

We left Sarchi for a leisurely drive back to the ship. It was on a road parallel to the one we had taken into the mountains. The sun was setting, and we had good views of the evening sky.

Our tour was enjoyable. I liked all the stops, and Gil was a great guide. I would recommend this tour, but it is not the only excursion to consider. Everyone I talked to on our ship enjoyed their tour, and they went on many different excursions.
Arenal Volcano

Cruise ships offer a tour with stops at the El Jardin Souvenir Shop and Restaurant that has a butterfly farm with orchids and native flowers. The second stop is in San Ramon. The final stop is at the Tabacon Resort near the Arenal Volcano and Arenal Lake. It about a three hour-drive, one-way from Puntarenas Port to Tabacon Resort.

Map of Arenal Volcano Area

Tourist activities range from hiking, zip-lining, and rafting in white water rapids to relaxing in hot springs. Lake Arenal offers boat tours, kayaking, fishing for bass and a large fighting fish with sharp teeth called “guapote”. Due to consistent strong winds, the lake is recognized for world-class windsurfing and sailboarding.

Use these GPS coordinates to locate tourist sites on a map.

<table>
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<td>N 9 54.685, W 84 43.150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Ramon</td>
<td>N 10 5 13.84, W 84 28 11.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabacon Resort (hot springs)</td>
<td>N 10 28 20.43, W 84 43 55.03</td>
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<td>Arenal Volcano National Park</td>
<td>N 10 27.677, W 84 43.698</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sky Trek, Sky Tram near Arenal Volcano</td>
<td>N 10 25.488, W 84 44.157</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Ecoglide Canopy Tour</td>
<td>N 10 28.521, W 84 40.599</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Costa Rica has excellent websites for tourists.

Arenal Volcano = [http://www.arenal.net/arenal-volcano-overview.htm](http://www.arenal.net/arenal-volcano-overview.htm)
Arenal Volcano National Park = [http://www.arenal.net/arenal_volcano_national_park.htm](http://www.arenal.net/arenal_volcano_national_park.htm)
Lake Arenal = [http://www.arenal.net/lake-arenal.htm](http://www.arenal.net/lake-arenal.htm)
Tours in the Arenal Volcano area = [http://www.arenal.net/arenal-volcano-tour.htm](http://www.arenal.net/arenal-volcano-tour.htm)
Monteverde- Santa Elena Is a Huge Area with Many Tourist Attractions

Trivia: Monteverde and Monte Verde are both correct spellings.

The Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve has 35,000 acres administered by the Tropical Science Center to protect birds and butterflies, mammals, insects, and thousands of species of plants. It has eight different life zones along the Continental Divide. Each life zone has its own set of plant and animal life. Collectively, these zones have over 100 species of mammals, 400 species of birds, and 1,200 species of amphibians and reptiles. It’s one of the few remaining habitats that support all six species of the cat family – jaguars, ocelots, pumas, oncillas, margays, and jaguarundis – as well as the endangered three-wattled bellbird and resplendent quetzal. There are over 8 miles (13 km) of trails for visitors to explore on their own or with a guide.

In addition to cloud forests, there are two rainforests. A rainforest is defined as a dense evergreen forest with an annual rainfall of at least 406 centimeters (160 inches). A cloud forest is a rainforest in the clouds because of its high elevation in the mountains. Cloud forests are cooler, damper, and grayer than a rainforest and have nearly a constant mist.

See  http://www.monteverdeinfo.com/monteverdes-cloud-forests.html

The Santa Elena Cloud Forest Reserve is 765 acres adjacent to, and similar to, Monteverde. However, Santa Elena is a habitat for spider monkeys, not found in the Monteverde Reserve. Also, this reserve is operated by
the community of Santa Elena rather than a government agency. It has trails ranging from 1-3 miles (1-5 km) in length and an observation tower that affords fantastic views of Arenal Volcano when the weather is clear.

Popular excursions in the Monteverde- Santa Elena area include hiking, bird watching, walking on the hanging bridges, riding the aerial tram, zip-line tours and visiting butterfly gardens, insect museums, and orchid gardens.

**Limitation of Google Maps**

Google Maps show large cities at any map scale. However, small villages like Monte Verde and Santa Elena are difficult to find on the maps because they are only visible under high magnification. This makes it impossible to see Monte Verde and Puntarenas on a Google map because the map size would be as big as your living room wall. GPS coordinates show the location of the site at any map scale. And you can create custom maps using the “Get Directions” to show the location of several small tourist sites (map below). The Monteverde Welcome Center is 70 Km and a 1.5 hour drive from the Puntarenas dock.

![Map of Monteverde area](map.jpg)

**GPS Coordinates to create the map above**

<table>
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<tr>
<td>Puerto Caldera dock</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monteverde Welcome Center</td>
<td>N 10 18.404, W 84 49.856</td>
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<td>San Luis Waterfall (45-minute hike from this location)</td>
<td>N 10 16.947, W 84 47.948</td>
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<tr>
<td>Entrance to Monteverde Reserve</td>
<td>N 10 18.153, W 84 47.725</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children's Eternal Rain Forest Bajo del tigre</td>
<td>N 10 18.351, W 84 48.875</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children's Eternal Rainforest Information Center</td>
<td>N 10 18.656, W 84 48.813</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monteverde Orchid Garden</td>
<td>N 10 19 1.90, W 84 49 24.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selvatura Park</td>
<td>N 10 20 5.50, W 84 47 9.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Elena Cloud Forest Reserve</td>
<td>N 10 20.630, W 84 47.762</td>
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This website is excellent

Download this FREE pdf map from http://mapcr.com/PDF/MonteverdeSantaElenaMap.pdf
Planning Your Excursion in Costa Rica

We've only been to Costa Rica once. This guide describes our tour to Poas Volcano in detail. I have included sources of information for excursions to Arenal Volcano and the Santa Elena-Monteverde area. Use the tourist websites for Costa Rica. They are excellent.

When researching a new cruise destination, I begin by saving the cruise line's description of excursions from their website as pdf files. I ignore the price and look for elements of different excursions that might be combined into the “best” tour for us. Sometimes, it is a ship's excursion. Other times, it's a private tour. Private tours are usually lower cost than the ship's excursion. But you need to find a good guide and organize a group or join a private tour organized by a fellow passenger.

I believe the Santa Elena-Monteverde area is the best location for my next cruise to Costa Rica. It is the closest tourist area to the port and has a number of sites I'd like to visit. My priority is to visit butterfly gardens, orchid gardens, and ride an aerial tram. Here is a description of one of the butterfly gardens.

Monteverde Butterfly Garden (El Mariposario)  
GPS coordinates = N 10 18.622, W 84 49.187

The Monteverde Butterfly Garden – known locally as El Mariposario – is one of Monteverde’s most visited attractions. Situated in Cerro Plano, which lies between the town of Santa Elena and the Monteverde Reserve, the Butterfly Garden is comprised of four climate-controlled butterfly gardens, a medicinal plant garden, a biodiversity center, and a live leafcutter ant colony. Visitors can observe some of the most fascinating and beautiful insects in all of the tropics.

http://www.monteverdeinfo.com/butterfly-garden/butterfly-garden.html
http://www.monteverdebutterflygarden.com/visit.html

Weather Information for Puntarenas

For climate information on any location, see http://worldweather.wmo.int/171/c01128f.htm#climate

Instituto Meteorologico Nacional  
Weather Information for Puntarenas

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Climatological Information</th>
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To convert precipitation mm to inches, multiply by 0.0393701

Attention: Please note that the averaging period for climatological information and the definition of "Mean Number of Precipitation/Rain Days" quoted in this web site may be different for different countries. Hence, care should be taken when city climatologies are compared.
User Feedback Is Welcome

Goal
My guides are designed to help you plan a great cruise vacation by providing information such as where the ship docks, location of tourist sites, public transit, walking tour maps, things to see and do, travel issues unique to the port, etc. Knowledge of ports is important when planning shore excursions because you have to make many decisions and commitments long before your ship docks. I believe the information in this guide is accurate, however you are responsible to verify accuracy of the information that you use to plan your vacation.

Information on cruise ports frequently changes such as bus routes, admission fees to sites, rental car locations, etc. Cruise Critic is the best source for up-to-date, detailed information on travel details for shore excursions, reviews of cruise ships, etc. There are many knowledgeable people on Cruise Critic who are willing to share their expertise and travel experience. I highly recommend [www.CruiseCritic.com](http://www.CruiseCritic.com); it's free to join.

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Fortunately, a friend of mine on that ship complained to the purser and the ship stopped violating my copyright.

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Tom Sheridan