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TOURS OF EVERY STRIPE

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By Martha Stevenson Olson

COSTA RICA'S reputation as a stable democracy - with low crime, friendly people, a quarter of its acreage in nature preserves and no standing army - has for decades been luring American surfers, ecologists and jungle trekkers and, in recent years, tourists and families, seeking natural beauty and diversity. Jungle lodges, beach resorts and spiritual retreats, from rustic to luxurious, pepper the country. According to Michael Kaye, an American expatriate who helped pioneer ecotourism in Costa Rica in 1978 with his company, Costa Rica Expeditions: "When we started, there were probably 100,000 to 150,000 visitors to Costa Rica. The latest estimates are over a million" a year.



Central America is still a new destination for many Americans, however, and even in Costa Rica independent vacations can be difficult, particularly if you're driving, because of the poor roads. So tours make sense. Many of the global tour companies, such as Tauck and Backroads, include Costa Rica among their offerings, and various smaller tour companies have sprung up to meet the demand for more specialized trips.

Learning from Costa Rica's success, other Central American countries are working to become destinations for vacationing Americans who seek pristine nature, tropical beaches and a blend of cultures close to home.

Belize, the former British colony wedged between Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula and Guatemala, has been known for its dazzling barrier reef and islets; recently, however, inland Belize, with little-explored Maya ruins, rain forest and underground rivers, has been gaining tourism momentum. Panama, too, is moving to attract visitors to its many islands (some of Las Perlas islands were featured recently on the "Survivor" series), and to tap into the eco-tourism movement via jungle expeditions and mountain retreats. Nicaragua is gaining buzz among the adventurous, and Honduras has begun to attract more travelers to its Caribbean coast, especially to the Bay Islands, which offer good snorkeling and diving. Guatemala and El Salvador are still blips on most travelers' radar screens, although the charming colonial city of Antigua, Guatemala, draws many students of Spanish, and El Salvador has legendary surf beaches.

Travelers seeking an introduction to any of these countries can find it on one of a growing number of tours. Here are some possibilities. Prices, unless noted otherwise, are per person, based on double occupancy, and do not include airfare from the United States.

ADVENTURE

Backroads offers trips that explore the outdoors by foot, bike, kayak or white-water raft for every level of fitness, said Ken Husband, a spokesman. In Costa Rica, the company has several six-day tours, including a biking trip priced at \$2,498 and a multisport trip that includes biking, white-water rafting, hiking and kayaking, for \$2,798. In Belize, the company offers an eight-day multisport vacation that includes visits to the barrier reef, Maya ruins and rain forest, for \$3,498. Most trips include at least one interior flight, stylish lodging and fine cuisine, with nearly all meals included. Some tours also have departures for families and singles. Information: (800) 462-2848 or www.backroads.com.

Easygoing walking tours that explore natural history and culture are the specialty of Classic Journeys, based in La Jolla, Calif. Its eight-day tour to Costa Rica includes visits to the Arenal Volcano, the Monteverde Cloud Forest, Carara National Park and Manuel Antonio Park, and a mangrove boat ride or white-water rafting trip. The price, \$2,295, includes all meals and stays in high-end, historic lodges and hotels, with departures Feb. 15, March 14, May 16 and June 27. A family-oriented trip with a similar itinerary departs from San Jose April 4 and June 27. **Information:** (800) 200-3887 or www.classicjourneys.com.



Caravan Tours, in Chicago, offers five tours to Mexico, Costa Rica and Guatemala, all very reasonably priced. The 11-day Guatemala trip includes stops at Tikal and Copan, as well as visits to Lake Atitlan, Chichicastenango, the Rio Dulce area and Antigua. All transport, hotels, meals and a guide are included at \$1,114. Departures are at two-week intervals through the spring. Similarly, a 10-day trip to Costa Rica, from \$993, includes visits to San Josi, the Poas Volcano, the Tortuguero National Park, the Arenal Volcano, cloud forests and Manuel Antonio Park, with hikes and boat trips. The tour departs about twice weekly through the spring. Information: (800) 227-2826 or www.caravantours.com.

Several tour companies focus primarily on Costa Rica, including Costa Rica Expeditions. The Web site, www.costaricaexpeditions.com, lists dozens of trips, either customized or with fixed departure dates, that are categorized as relaxing, moderately strenuous or strenuous. There are self-drive tours as well, with the company booking the car and the accommodations and providing an itinerary. The company owns and operates Corcovado Lodge Tent Camp, the Tortuga Lodge, Monteverde Lodge and Costa Rica Expeditions White Water, and books its trips either directly or through other tour companies like International Expeditions or Wilderness Travel. One strenuous itinerary is the 10-day Tortuguero, Corcovado and Pacuare Adventure, which includes a boat trip through Tortuguero National Park, hiking in the Corcovado National Park and a two-day white-water rafting trip on the Pacuare River, with stays in San Josi at the Hotel Grano de Oro, from \$1,798. Information: (506) 222-0333 or (506) 257-0766 or visit the Web site above.

For those who truly want to get close to nature, there is a 10-square-foot platform 120 feet high in the tree canopy at the Corcovado Lodge Tent Camp. Up to two overnight guests are hoisted by spinnaker winch to the platform after dinner for the night; the bathroom facility is a covered bucket. "Waking up at that height when the forest wakes up is an incredible experience," said Mr. Kaye.

CULTURE

A 14-day trip through Costa Rica organized by Overseas Adventure Travel starts at \$1,490 and includes round-trip air from Dallas, Houston or Miami. The tour provides accommodation, most meals, transportation and a guide, and visits to the Arenal Volcano, Monteverde Cloud Forest and Manuel Antonio Park as well farms, plantations, a school and a local family. Kayaking, horseback-riding, trout-fishing and cooking lessons are available. Extensions at the beginning and end of the trip are also possible. Information: (800) 493-6824 or www.oattravel.com.

The Adventure Center, an adventure travel company, has several trips to Central America, including a 12-day Pacific to Caribbean exploration of Panama, at \$1,190, that combines walks in dense rain forest, bird-watching, colonial history and indigenous traditions, with an optional side trip to the San Blas Islands. Departures for the 12-day trip are April 3, April 10 and May 29, Aug. 28 and throughout the fall. A 15-day trip to Nicaragua, at \$1,320 a person, features an "in-depth exploration" of many parts of the country, with hikes, bird-watching, flights to Corn Island and Bluefields, and visits to colonial cities like Lesn, Granada, and Managua. Spring dates are filled; fall departures include Nov. 13 and 27. Information: (800) 228-8747 or www.adventurecenter.com.

Itineraries in Costa Rica, Belize and Guatemala are offered by Adventure Life Journeys, based in Missoula, Mont., which specializes in trips to Latin America. A 12-day tour departing April 2 visits Guatemala during Semana Santa, the holy week before Easter, when processions and huge puppets parade along streets decorated with dyed sawdust and flowers. Visits to Chichicastenango's colorful market, Lake Atitlan and Tikal are included, along with several days in the colonial city of Antigua, where much of the pageantry is centered. At \$1,285, the trip includes stays in comfortable hotels and lodges (with breakfasts), along with in-country transportation except the flight between Guatemala City and Flores, near Tikal, which adds \$125 a person. A nine-day trip in Belize (with a side trip to Tikal), includes two nights at Glover's Reef, a coral atoll, or Ambergris Caye, with snorkeling, sea kayaking or windsurfing available, then three nights at a jungle lodge inland, with excursions along the river and to a Maya ruin. Departures are Jan. 24, Feb. 22, Feb. 28, March 27, April 24 and May 22 and start at \$1,690, which includes most meals but not the \$137 plane fare from Belize City to Dangriga and from Flores to Belize City. Information: (800) 344-6118 or www.adventure-life.com.

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For current prices, dates and more information on Classic Journeys' cultural walking adventure in Costa Rica, please visit www.ClassicJourneys.com/CostaRica or call 800-200-3887.