

The Best of Southern Costa Rica

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly San José.
Day 2/3	Talamanca Mountains.
Day 4/5	Las Cruces Biological Centre.
Day 6/7	Piedras Blancas National Park.
Day 8/10	Corcovado National Park.
Day 11/12	Carara National Park.
Day 13	Depart San José.
Day 14	Arrive London.

Departs

January, February, March, April & November.

Focus

Birds, mammals and other wildlife.

Grading

Grade A/B (see Page 6 for additional information).

Dates and Prices

Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code CRI03).

Highlights:

- Three nights in a beach-front lodge on the edge of Corcovado National Park
- Explore the moss-draped cloudforests of the Cordillera de Talamanca
- Numerous colourful tanagers, trogons, toucans & motmots
- Listen to the Corcovado dawn chorus of Mantled Howler Monkeys, birds & other wildlife
- Join night walks in the Piedras Blancas National Park in search of frogs, snakes & nocturnal birds
- Look for mammals including Northern Tamandua, Baird's Tapir and Central American Spider Monkey
- Explore the trails around Las Cruces Biological Station and the Wilson Botanical Gardens
- Led by expert local naturalist guides



Images from top: Corcovado National Park, Baird's Tapir & White Hawk.
Images courtesy of Sarah Jessop & Shutterstock



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Itinerary

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

San José

We depart mid-morning on a direct British Airways scheduled flight from London Gatwick bound for the Costa Rican capital, San José, arriving mid to late afternoon. Here we will meet our expert naturalist/birder guide and make the short drive into San José where we will spend the night at either the comfortable Hotel Bougainvillea or the Hotel Buena Vista.

Day 2 – 3

Talamanca Mountains

This morning we begin our journey south and climb up into the mountainous spine of Costa Rica into the moss-draped cloudforests of the Talamanca Mountains. The habitats we pass through as we drive through the highlands range from open farmland, through lush tropical forest and cloudforest, to páramo. We will journey along the Pan-American highway which ascends gradually from about 1,800 metres in San José to around 3,300 metres (11,000 feet) at its highest point at the Cerro de la Muerte pass. In years gone by people struggled to keep warm on this pass, hence the name 'Mountain of Death!'

We will be based for two nights at either Savegre Mountain Lodge or Suria Mountain Hotel, comfortable lodges which lie at an altitude of around 2,200 metres, on the edge of a fast flowing mountain stream and backed by forest. Patches of hummingbird-friendly flowers dot the grounds, a magnet for such species as Talamanca Hummingbird, White-throated Mountain-gem, Lesser Violetear and the tiny Volcano and Scintillant Hummingbirds. Within mixed tanager and warbler flocks we should look for Spangled-cheeked Tanager, Flame-throated Warbler and Collared Whitestart, whilst other species to search for include Sooty Thrush, Torrent Tyrannulet, Long-tailed Silky-flycatcher, Acorn Woodpecker, Sulphur-winged Parakeet, Black-capped Flycatcher, Black-billed Nightingale-thrush, Timberline Wren, Rufous-collared Sparrow, Large-footed Finch, Yellow-thighed Brush-finch, Sooty-capped Chlorospingus, Golden-browed Chlorophonia, Black-thighed Grosbeak, Slaty Flower-piercer and the beautiful Swallow-tailed Kite. The cloudforests of the Talamanca Mountains are also home to the Resplendent Quetzal, a beautiful species of trogon often touted as one of the most beautiful birds in the world!



Resplendent Quetzal

If the weather permits we will venture up to 3,300 metres to explore the páramo, a habitat type more typically found in the high Andes of South America, which has a very limited and fragmented distribution in Costa Rica. A

number of bird species inhabiting the *parámo* of Costa Rica and neighbouring Panama are found nowhere else, such as Volcano Junco and Peg-billed Finch.

Day 4 – 5

La Cruces Biological Station

We next continue our journey down the mountainous spine of Costa Rica to the mid-elevation forests of Las Cruces Biological Station (a journey of around four hours), located near the small town on San Vito only five kilometres from the Panama border. Las Cruces is a working ecological research station operated by the 'Organization for Tropical Studies' (OTS). The station is set in mid-elevation forests at 1,500 metres above sea level within the attractive Wilson Botanical Gardens. It protects 300 hectares of pre-montane wet forest and is home to over 350 species of bird and 2,000 species of plant. Las Cruces also features a series of very comfortable ensuite chalets for visitors which overlook the gardens, and serves simple – but tasty – home-cooked meals which are served in the dining room shared by visitors and researchers.



Bedroom at La Cruces

The birdwatching at Las Cruces is superb. The open nature of the botanical gardens, and the fruiting trees that dot the grounds, attract a wide variety of species and allows for a very relaxed pace of birdwatching. The staff at the station also put out fruit each morning on a bird table in front of the restaurant. This attracts in a kaleidoscope of colourful tanagers including Speckled Tanager, Scarlet-rumped Tanager, Golden-hooded Tanager and Silver-throated Tanager, plus Green Honeycreeper, Cinnamon-bellied Saltator and the occasional Lesson's Motmot. Other species

to look for in the botanical gardens include Fiery-billed Aracari, Summer Tanager, Spot-crowned Euphonia, Scarlet-thighed Dacnis, Squirrel Cuckoo, Yellow-throated Vireo, Tropical Parula and White-crowned Parrot. The gardens are also a great place to view a range of Costa Rica's dazzling array of orchids and home to Central American Agouti which are frequently seen wandering around the grounds looking for palm nuts.



Golden-hooded Tanager

Once we've enjoyed the birdlife of the botanical gardens we will start exploring the network of trails that lead out into the surrounding pre-montane forest, the Java River Trail being one of the most productive in the reserve. Although the birding here is somewhat more challenging and often involves the locating of fast moving feeding flocks, the rewards are well worth the effort. Species on offer include Red-faced Spinetail, White-ruffed Manakin, Red-crowned Ant Tanager, Scale-crested Pygmy-Tyrant, Golden-winged Warbler, Slate-throated Redstart, Green Hermit, Long-

billed Starthroat, Orange-billed Nightingale Thrush and Brown-billed Scythbill amongst many others. It is also worth spending some time at the top of the canopy tower which gives a birds-eye view of the tree-tops and access to some of the canopy species that live there.

Day 6 – 7

Piedras Blancas National Park



Yellow-throated Toucan

This morning we will drop out of the mountains into the lowland rainforests boarding Piedras Blancas National Park, part of the greater 'Osa Conservation Area'. Here we will be based for two nights at Esquinas Rainforest Lodge, a simple but comfortable retreat on the edge of the forest which offers easy access to a wide variety of habitats from mature rainforest to fields and riverine scrub. Slaty-tailed Trogon, Rufous Jacamar and Buff-rumped Warbler are amongst some of the garden highlights, whilst nearby flowering shrubs attract Blue-throated Goldentail, Long-billed Hermit and

other speedy hummers. The birdlife here is so diverse and abundant that it is not uncommon to see 70 or so species on a single walk! These may include the rare King Vulture, plus Crested Guan, Grey-headed Chachalaca, Northern Jacana, Violet-headed Hummingbird, Stripe-throated Hermit, Olivaceous Piculet, Cocoa Woodcreeper, Riverside Wren, Orange-collared Manakin, Red-capped Manakin, Yellow-crowned Euphonia, Mourning Warbler, Northern Waterthrush, Yellow-throated Toucan and many others. Various sized Basilisk Lizards bask in the sun around the edge of the lodge's small swimming pool whilst a multitude of colourful butterflies, including the spectacular Blue Morpho, add an extra splash of colour to the scene.

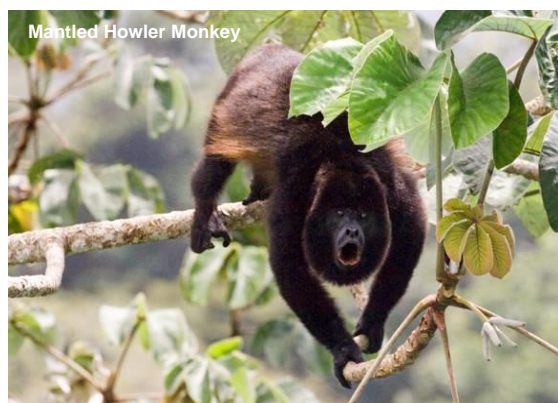
As the sun sets the diurnal birds and other wildlife that we have enjoyed so far are replaced by an equally diverse array of nocturnal inhabitants. After dark we will join a local guide and spend an hour and a half or so exploring the trails near the lodge spotlighting for frogs, snakes, insects and perhaps one or two birds. These should include the attractive Red-eyed Tree Frog (one of Costa Rica's most famous residents) which are quite common here, plus Common Rain Frog, Common Dink Frog, Gladiator Frog, Marine Toad and perhaps one of the bizarre and translucent 'glass frogs'. If fortunate we may also locate a few snakes such as the attractive Eye-lash Pit Viper or even the infamous Fer-de-lance!



Red-eyed Tree-frog

Day 8 – 10

Corcovado National Park



Mantled Howler Monkey

After breakfast we will drive north to Sierpe and board a boat for the 2-hour journey down the Sierpe River and along the palm-fringed Pacific coastline to Drake's Bay on the northern edge of Corcovado National Park. On arrival, we will transfer to Drake Bay Wilderness Lodge or Casa Corcovado for three nights, comfortable beach-front lodges and our base whilst we explore this 'jewel in the crown' of Costa Rica's protected areas. Corcovado National Park covers 424 square kilometres of the Osa Peninsula and protects the largest tract of primary rainforest left on the Pacific coastline of the Americas. Even

in a country as biologically rich and diverse as Costa Rica, Corcovado is special. Named 'the most biologically intense place on Earth' by National Geographic, this vast tract of untouched rainforest, cloud forest, wetlands and

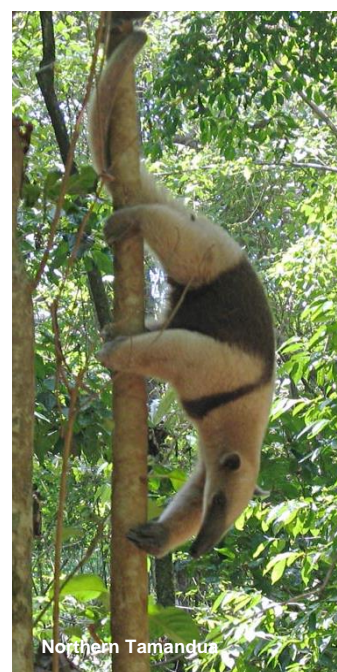


Red-legged Honeycreeper

pristine palm-fringed beaches is a natural history treasure-house second to none! The diversity and abundance of wildlife here is staggering. For example, the park protects 500 species of tree (a quarter of the species in Costa Rica), over 6,000 species of insect, 140 species of mammal, 116 species of amphibian and reptile and more than 400 species of bird. Commoner mammals to look out for include Mantled Howler Monkey, Central American Spider Monkey, Squirrel Monkey and Northern Tamandua. The rare Baird's Tapir is

also frequently seen during early morning walks, although it would take a great deal of luck to find one of the Jaguars or Pumas which still prowl the forests in good numbers. Birdlife is prolific and includes Costa Rica's largest population of Scarlet Macaws, plus White Hawk, Baird's Trogon, Long-billed Antwren, Blue-throated Goldentail, Turquoise Cotinga and the rare White-crested Coquette. Even the Harpy Eagle, the greatest avian predator in the Americas, still retains a toe-hold in the remoter, little visited, areas of the park!

We have two full days to explore the forests, beaches and rivers of Corcovado National Park. On one day we will board a boat for the one and a half hour journey down the rainforest-edged coastline to the Sirena Ranger Station, located in the heart of the national park (this journey can be choppy at times so bring a plastic bag to protect your optics and camera and sandals for stepping out into the water on arrival). Sirena is the only station located on the wide alluvial 'Corcovado Plain', where the wildlife is at its most abundant: indeed this is one of the best places in the whole of Costa Rica for mammals! We will spend the rest of the day here, with a break for a packed lunch, slowly exploring the trails that radiate out from the ranger station. Although the terrain is fairly flat it will be hot and humid so walking here is tiring. Our efforts, however, are sure to be rewarded with a range of mammals outlined above – hopefully including Baird's Tapir – plus groups of White-nosed Coati, Collared Peccary and troops of White-faced Capuchin. Birds to look out for include Chestnut-backed Antbird, Black-throated and Slaty-tailed Trogons, Shining Honeycreeper, Yellow-throated Toucan, Golden-naped Woodpecker, Kentucky Warbler and plenty of beautiful Scarlet Macaws.



Northern Tamandua

On our second full day we will explore the forests and trails closer to our lodge and – if weather conditions permit – take a boat trip through the mangroves to look for waterbirds and other wildlife. Pods of Bottlenose Dolphins are occasionally seen in the area as are a variety of birds including Brown Pelican, Magnificent Frigatebird, Laughing Gull and Royal Tern.

We will also head out in the evening with a spotlight to look for frogs, reptiles, insects and nocturnal birds. This walk will also give us the opportunity to look for a few nocturnal mammals including Kinkajou, Grey Four-eyed Opossum and Crab-eating Raccoon.

NB - all excursions to Sirena are subject to sea conditions and do not operate if the sea is too rough.

Day 11 – 12

Carara National Park

Following breakfast it will be time to return by boat to Sierpe and from there drive north along the Pacific coastline to Hotel Villa Lapas on the edge of Carara National Park, our base for the final two nights of the holiday. Carara supports one of the few areas of pristine lowland tropical forest left on the Pacific slope, and hosts a very large and diverse avifauna. Apart from lush evergreen forest, there are areas of secondary forest and scrub, wetlands, mudflats and mangrove thickets, each of which has its own range of species.



Violet-crowned Woodnymph



Blue Morpho

It is in those first few hours after dawn that bird activity in the forest is at its most frenzied so we will make the most of this time by spending the mornings birding along the forest edge and slowly walking the trails. It will not be long before the temperature starts to rise and bird activity declines. When it does, we will move on to explore some of the other habitats in and around the reserve and probably retreat back to the lodge for a couple of hours siesta. Whilst birds will be our primary focus, we will not fail to be impressed by the diversity of butterflies and dragonflies we are likely to

encounter - the Blue Morpho being the most impressive of the butterfly species we are likely to see. Mammals can be tricky to find in the rainforests, but careful searching may turn up a White-faced Capuchin or Central American Agouti.

We will also join a boat trip around the mangroves and mudflats of the Tarcoles Estuary (timing will depend on the tide). This is an excellent trip and offers the opportunity of seeing a wide variety of birds and the occasional mammal.

Some of the species to look out for during our time in and around Carara National Park include Great Tinamou, Boat-billed Heron, Tricoloured Heron, Roseate Spoonbill, Plumbeous Kite, Crested Caracara, Crested Guan, Northern Jacana, Wilson's (Thick-billed) Plover, Royal Tern, Scarlet Macaw, Orange-chinned Parakeet, Yellow-throated Toucan, Striped Cuckoo, Lesser Nighthawk, Costa Rican Swift, Lesser Swallow-tailed Swift, Long-tailed Hermit, Violet Sabrewing, Green-breasted Mango, Blue-throated Goldentail, Blue-vented Hummingbird, Cinnamon Hummingbird, Black-headed Trogon, Baird's Trogon, White-whiskered Puffbird, Pale-billed Woodpecker, Black-hooded Antshrike, Dusky Antbird, Orange-collared Manakin, Long-tailed Manakin, Northern Royal-flycatcher, Golden-hooded Tanager, Scarlet-thighed Dacnis, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Northern Waterthrush, Philadelphia Vireo, Bronzed Cowbird and White-throated Magpie-jay.

Day 13

In Flight

This morning we should have time for a final walk before making our way back to San Jose in time to catch our mid-afternoon direct British Airways service to London's Gatwick Airport.

Day 14

London

We are due to arrive back in London's Gatwick Airport shortly after midday.

Grading

Grade A/B. This is a traditional wildlife tour with a mix of easy and moderately strenuous walks on forest trails. Some of the trails can be steep and muddy in places (especially in the Talamanca Mountains and Corcovado National Park) and the heat and humidity can make walking in the lowlands tiring. This holiday is best suited, therefore, for those with an average level of fitness who enjoy the outdoors and walking. Since wildlife activity is at its best during the first few hours of daylight, dawn starts will be encouraged! For further information on the grading or level of fitness required to get the most out of this tour please call the Naturetrek office on 01962 733051 or e-mail info@naturetrek.co.uk.

Food and accommodation included in the price

All meals and accommodation are included in the tour price with the exception of evening meals in San Jose. The lodges and hotels we use on this tour are comfortable (not luxurious) and located in excellent locations for birds and other wildlife. All rooms have private facilities and single accommodation is available at the supplement cost outlined on our website and brochure.

Please note that the accommodation outlined above may, very occasionally, need to be amended. Replacement lodges and hotels will always be of the same standard as the ones outlined in the itinerary and will in no way affect your holiday. Should we have to implement any changes to the above we will notify you as soon as possible.

NB - Depending on the availability of rooms at our chosen lodges we may opt to reverse the itinerary of this tour to start in Carara and end in the Talamanca Mountains. The group will spend the same number of nights in each venue as outlined above and, as such, the change will in no way affect the wildlife content of the tour. For further information please call 01962 733051 or email info@naturetrek.co.uk

Weather

The climate of Costa Rica's Pacific slope is typified by a well-defined dry and rainy season. The dry season lasts from December to April, with the latter half of April transitioning into the rainy season which lasts from May to October. November is also a transitional month, although being a tropical country it can – and does – rain at any time of the year, especially in the mountains. Rain usually takes the form of afternoon and evening short/sharp thundery showers which typically pass over quite quickly. The temperature, however, varies very little over the year and is controlled more by altitude rather than the month. The lowlands are hot and humid with temperatures climbing into upper 20's to low 30s centigrade during the day, whereas the daytime temperature in the mountains is more comfortable and it is likely to be chilly at night and in the early mornings.

Flights

British Airways fly direct between London's Gatwick Airport and the Costa Rican capital, San Jose, from early November to the end of March. During these months we use BA's direct flights for all of our groups to Costa Rica (subject to seat availability). Outside these months there are no direct flights from the UK to San Jose and so our groups usually travel with either Iberia Airlines (via Madrid) or Air France (via Paris).

Boat trips

All boat trips in and around Corcovado National Park are subject to weather conditions and do not operate (or can be delayed) if the sea conditions are too rough. The boat trip between Sierpe and Drakes Bay can also be rough at times, especially when exiting the mouth of the Sierpe River, as can the trip down the coast to the Sirena Station. We would therefore advise that you bring waterproof bags to protect your optics and camera etc and sea sickness tablets if subject to motion sickness. The boat transfers are, however, a wonderful way to explore this remote corner of Costa Rica and all part of the Corcovado experience! Please call the Naturetrek office on 01962 733051 for additional information or e-mail info@naturetrek.co.uk.

NB – Please note that, depending on the state of the tides, it may be necessary to step out of the boat into knee high water when landing at the Sirena Range Station. Since it can be rocky underfoot a pair of sandals or beach shoes will be useful.

Extra expenses

Drinks, tips, laundry, airport departure tax, and all items of a personal nature are not included in the cost of the holiday. Please allow around £150 for tips.

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to Costa Rica. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/costa-rica or telephone 0870 6060290 prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book a place on this holiday, you will need to read the Naturetrek terms and conditions in the back of our brochure or on our website, and then book either online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, by calling us on 01962 733051, or by completing and returning the booking form in the brochure together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost. If you do not have a copy of this brochure, please call us on 01962 733051.

Photos courtesy of Paul Stanbury, Paul Gale, Colin Green, Janice Fiske and Shutterstock images.