

Ballena National Marine Park

The cry of seabirds and splashes of the waves are suddenly muted as you submerge your head below the surface to peer into the marine version of a rain forest; the coral reef. Anemones and corals gently sway in the underwater currents. An incredibly colored triggerfish inspects the corals, a torpedo-like barracuda floats suspended at the edge of the reef, a sea turtle seems to fly through the water. You feel like you are in a fantastic aquarium and then you hear a distant sound. It comes from somewhere out there in the greenish-blue surroundings, an ancient drawn out keening noise. You are listening to Humpbacked Whales. They have returned once again to mate in the warm waters of Ballena National Marine Park, Costa Rica.

Location and how to get there

Ballena National Marine Park encompasses 5,400 hectares of ocean from around Dominical south to Piñuela in southwest Costa Rica. Dominical can be reached by two main routes; via the Pacific Coastal Highway that passes through Jaco and Quepos or over the mountains from San Isidro de El General. Both routes are at least a 6 hour drive from San Jose and follow principle highways. If you want ocean vistas as you drive, take the coastal highway. If you would like to drive through vastly different life zones while crossing the highest mountains in Costa Rica to descend to the coast, then take the San Isidro route.

Biodiversity

Although the beach is also part of the park, it's not called a marine park for nothing and underwater is where most of the biodiversity is located. The coral reefs at Ballena are some of the most extensive of the Central American Pacific Coast. They host 100s of fish, echinoderm, crustacean and invertebrate species. Further offshore, Humpbacked Whales occur except during the months of May to June and November. These whale species are the main reason this park was established since Ballena is one of the few places they mate and give birth. The warm water calmed by reefs and islands provide the whales with a safe place to calve and feed their young until they are strong enough to head back out to the open ocean. The small islands are also important nesting sites for seabirds, and the beaches act as nesting grounds for sea turtle species.

Kayaking, Snorkeling and Diving

Paddle a kayak on a guided tour to one of three islands for excellent snorkeling. Snorkeling can also be good from shore, especially during low tide. As along any beach, be careful of riptides. Dive trips around the islands can also be arranged by providers in the vicinity of the park. A few of the animals to watch for are Oceanic Whitetip Shark, Bottlenose Dolphin, Snapper species, Sea Bass, Morays and Parrotfish.

Beaches and Turtles

Ballena Marine National Park has several kilometers of some of the cleanest, nicest beaches in the country. Since not as many tourists make it to Ballena, you are likely to get much of the beach to yourself. Watch for the green iguanas that have adapted to salt water, cute hermit crabs, and Olive Ridley and Hawksbill Turtles in September and October. The sea turtles come to shore at night during these months to nest on the beach.

Hotels

Hotels ranging in price from mid to expensive are found along the beach. Dominical may offer cheaper cabins and camping is also possible within the park.