

The hazy clouds in the evening skies are slowly painted orange, red, and violet by the setting of the tropical sun over the Pacific Ocean. Silhouetted against this colorful display, squadrons of pelicans lazily flap and soar in unison over waves that meet the sand with a whisper. At a nearby restaurant, guests relax and take in the sights and sounds of this tropical paradise while enjoying fresh, grilled mahi-mahi, juicy tuna steaks, and fantastic *ceviche* washed down with ice-cold beers or fresh fruit drinks.

A variety of vacationers are seated at the bar and tables; three guys from Houston excitedly talking with their guide about the fish they hope to catch on their charter scheduled to set sail the next day, a few surfers who contemplate their natural playground and look forward to the morning swells, and a family chatting with their local guide about the monkeys they will see while horseback riding. While they look forward to their first full day in Costa Rica, a welcome breeze off the Pacific rustles the coconut palm fronds and brings smiles to their faces.

Inland, scenic, jade-green mountains rise into the clouds and conceal the metropolis of San Jose. On the other side of the jagged peaks, folks are enjoying the perfect 70 degree weather as they stroll down the historic streets of the Amon and Otoya neighborhoods. In the busy, central plaza, some visitors are taking in the scene of hundreds of pedestrians who are commuting, shopping, and socializing in this car-free zone. Others have already sat down to dinner for their first night in Costa Rica at friendly bars and restaurants in historic buildings such as that which houses the Hotel Dunn Inn.

A quick hop over the mountain range to the north reveals an ashen, cone-shaped peak that solemnly rises from the surrounding rain forests. Standing out in its vibrant green surroundings, this mountain reveals its volcanic nature and demands attention with deep rumblings, regular eruptions of steam and ash, and is capped with glowing lava. In the nearby town of La Fortuna, diners pause while cutting into their juicy steaks to look up and catch a glimpse of Arenal Volcano in action as do the couples relaxing in hot springs after a long day of travel.

Heading south from the smoking mountain, fields of bananas, pineapple plantations, and tropical rain forests carpet the humid lowlands. At small towns along the Caribbean Coast, young travelers walk sandy, mud-puddle streets on their way to restaurants and bars with old, faded, revered posters of Bob Marley after a day of snorkeling, surfing, and getting into the mode of the Caribbean lifestyle. Some have just arrived but quickly fall into the timeless Caribbean rhythm where relaxation is the only rule.

The above scenarios are just a small sampling of what vacationers to Costa Rica experience every single day in this small (about the size of the state of West Virginia), yet exciting, dynamic country. Incredibly, the tourists at the above sites could have all arrived on the same flight and could all be on the first day of their vacations. Jam-packed into this former Spanish backwater are high mountains wreathed in clouds, extensive beaches on two oceans, the city life of San Jose, rain forests, and volcanoes. Such a wide variety of attractions, political stability, good infrastructure, and friendly people make Costa Rica one of the most exciting countries in the world. Many visitors like it so much that they end up staying for good.