

## Traveling with Jewish Taste<sup>®</sup> Costa Rica: Democracy In Paradise

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



Costa Rica is a country of both natural beauty and civic responsibility. The nation is perhaps the best example of democracy in Latin America, having held free elections for well over one hundred years.

Throughout its history, the country has been remarkably tolerant of minorities, thus providing a safe home for its Jews. Today's close-knit Jewish community, numbering about 2,000, dates from before World War II and is primarily of Polish origin.

Reflecting both the nation's adherence to democratic principles and its abiding sense of fair-mindedness, Luis Lieberman, a Jew, was elected Costa Rica's vice president in early February.

Earlier waves of Jews were made up of "converses" fleeing "the Inquisition," and nineteenth century merchants.

The community has a Jewish school, an Orthodox synagogue, a Reform temple, a Chabad House, a community center, a kosher supermarket, a delicatessen, and even a kosher Burger King.



The 'Sinagoga Shaarei Zion'

The country does not have an armed forces, and Costa Ricans are proud to tell you that what the country does not spend on a standing army goes toward supporting social services and education – resulting in a literacy rate of 94.9%.

The country's infrastructure, alas, is not idyllic, but what the roads and bridges lack, the natural landscape has in spades.

Costa Rica is a land of fantastic flora and fauna, and the country boasts many eco-resorts that invite active participation for you to get the most out of your visit. Expert naturalists will guide you over bridges suspended high above the cloud forest canopy, lead you on rafts down rivers, and hike with you through natural wildlife refuges, as you look for animals ranging from two and three-toed sloths, to hummingbirds, to giant iguanas.

The most magnificent place in all of Costa Rica is "the cloud forest" in the mountains of northern Costa Rica, where we found some of the most breathtaking views we have ever experienced.

Situated astride the Continental Divide, the cloud forest features four-hundred bird species, including thirty types of hummingbirds and the magnificent quetzal.

Among crystal clear streams tumbling over waterfalls, the Costa Rican rain forest is one of the most outstanding wildlife refuges in the Western Hemisphere's tropics. You may feel as if you are walking in a magnificent green wonderland – there are hundreds of animal species and its plant-life includes bromeliads, ferns, vines, mosses and tall trees festooned with 420 kinds of orchids.

Even when you may not be looking for nature, it may find you!

During our sojourn on the Pacific coast, we were joined for breakfast on several mornings by one of the many types of monkeys that inhabit the forests. And, as we hiked through the Manuel Antonio Nature Park, one monkey raided a woman's bag and took off with her underwear, draping it over trees for the entertainment of beach-goers.

Costa Rica also offers non-nature oriented places to visit. We visited the National Theater, the Costa Rican Gold Museum, and the National Museum, all in downtown San Jose.



Deep in the 'cloud forest'



Bridges high above yet within the landscape

The National Theater, a beautifully restored and decorated historic building, is home to plays, concerts, and dance performances, as well as annual opera and music festivals.

The National Museum is located in the old Bellavista Fortress, its lovely gardens surrounded by bullet-riddled stone walls. It offers both a beautiful view of the countryside and a brief overview of the country's history, beginning with pre-Columbian artifacts, traveling through the time of the conquistadors, and up to the present.

The Gold Museum, beneath the Plaza de la Cultura, is home to what is claimed to be the largest collection of pre-Columbian gold in the world, consisting of more than 2,600 gold artifacts. Because the collection was established by the Central Bank of Costa Rica, it also features a history of the country's currency and a collection of rare coins and bills.

After all this active touring, you will need a relaxing break. As you travel to Arenal National Park, home to the very active Arenal Volcano, make sure to take some time out for a pleasant soak in the hot springs rich with therapeutic minerals.

Once you have soaked, you will be hungry. Costa Rica offers a wide variety of produce, as well as fish harvested from both the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. The daily diet incorporates this natural bounty. While, like the rest of Central America, beans and rice form the foundation of many meals, Costa Rica provides its own twists.



A sloth

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### Flan de Coco al Caramelo (Coconut Flan au Caramel)

While flan is popular throughout Latin America, this delicious version is a very popular dessert in Costa Rica.



#### Ingredients

Three-quarters cup of sugar	One-half cup milk
1 can condensed milk	One-Half cup shredded coconut
1 can evaporated milk	6 eggs

#### Step 1:

- Pour sugar into a small saucepan, stirring constantly over medium heat until it is a deep golden color. Keep a careful eye on this!
- Pour the caramel over the bottom of an oven-proof dish so that it distributes evenly.

#### Step 2:

- Combine all remaining ingredients in a blender until well combined, about 1 minute.
- Pour mixture over the caramelized sugar and place into a larger pan into which you have poured about one inch of hot water.
- Bake for fifty to sixty minutes in pre-heated 350 degree oven or until set.
- Let cool.
- Run knife around edges, to separate from dish.
- Refrigerate.

Serves 8