

# Southern Costa Rica

## with Naturalist Journeys

February 14 – 24, 2023

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*“Our guide was everything you promised — we felt very lucky to have him as our guide. He was so good-humored and well-informed ... and clearly cares a great deal about — and is very proud of — his country.”*

— Angela Burnett

Southern Costa Rica has long been one of our most popular tours, the itinerary extending south from San José is great for a return to this delightful country or for a first adventure. Join us to explore the Talamanca Mountains, the El General Valley, pristine forest at Esquinas Rainforest Lodge near Golfito, and the eastern side of the Golfo Dulce on the beach. Our expert guides help you get to know this region in detail. Enjoy a special getaway while you experience this gem of the Central American tropics.

Whether a first time trip or a new area of Costa Rica to explore, we know you'll treasure time in this beautiful, easy to get to Central American country. Costa Rica sets high eco-tourism standards as an example for many aspiring nations, with lovely lodges, safe water and food, and highly-trained local guides.

Ask us how you can extend your time at a beautiful lodge in the Corcovado/Osa Peninsula area, ranked as one of the richest contributors to Costa Rica's legendary global biodiversity. At your leisure, enjoy a few more days with a bit of pampering as you experience this very wild and beautiful region. Here, lush mountains reach the sea ... it is simply a stunning destination.

## Tour Highlights

- ✓ Begin your stay at a boutique hotel at the start in downtown San José, a fun base to explore the city
- ✓ Drive the Pan-American Highway south from San José
- ✓ Search for the stunning Resplendent Quetzal and other cloudforest species in the Savegre Valley
- ✓ Visit the farm of the late tropical nature author, Alexander Skutch
- ✓ Immerse in the secluded Si Como No resort, lush with forests, rich in birdlife, and a touch on the luxurious side
- ✓ Explore lush forest trails at Esquinas where an endemic ant-tanager is found

## Tour Summary

11-Day / 10-Night Southern Costa Rica Nature & Birding Tour

\$4390, from San José, Costa Rica

Airport is Juan Santamaria (SJO)

## Day-to-Day Itinerary

### Tues., Feb. 14 Arrivals in San José

Welcome to Costa Rica! Today you arrive in San José where you are met at the airport by a representative from our Costa Rican host company, for a private transfer to the Hotel Bougainvillea. We select this boutique hotel for its spacious rooms, friendly service, and spectacular birdy gardens, just outside the door. This is an environmentally-friendly hotel with a commitment to our planet and hospitality. Those arriving in time can enjoy a welcome dinner with fellow traveling companions and guide. Those that arrive later than dinner have a snack tray on arrival.

*Accommodations at Hotel Bougainvillea (D)*

### Wed., Feb. 15 San José | Mirador Quetzales | Savegre Mountain Lodge

After a delightful breakfast, and some birding in the hotel garden, we drive south on the Pan-American Highway towards the Talamanca Mountains, the backbone of southern Costa Rica. We stop in Cartago for a look at the lovely cathedral, then it's a beautiful drive up into the mountains, where we stop at the family-run cloud forest reserve, Mirador Quetzales. Here we enjoy lunch, and a chance to walk lush forest trails in search of Costa Rica's most famous and elegant bird, the Resplendent Quetzal.

Our destination today, just 51 miles from San José, is the Rio Savegre Valley, which sits at a cool 7,000 feet. En route, we pass over the Cerro de la Muerte (Mountain of Death). This 11,000-foot peak was named for early

explorers who, traveling on foot, died of hunger, exposure, and storms while crossing. Although we may encounter some rain and fog, we soon rise above the clouds to a realm of flower-filled fields, hillside farms, and fantastic views. We make a few stops for photographs and to see what's in bloom.

The Savegre Valley holds a number of family farms, all with beautiful grounds traversed by a clear river. Our lodge is in a lush part of the valley. After settling into our accommodations, we walk the lodge's trails, learning about the flora and fauna of the tropical cloud forest. With luck, we spot the Resplendent Quetzal, the holy bird of the Mayas. Enjoy a fabulous meal tonight at the lodge's restaurant.

*Accommodations at Savegre Mountain Lodge (B,L,D)*

## **Thurs., Feb. 16 The Savegre Valley | Resplendent Quetzal | Rio Savegre**

Today our guides lead us along the clear mountain stream known as the Rio Savegre. Birding here is a treat, with so many colorful species: White-naped Brushfinch, Long-tailed Silky-Flycatcher, Collared Redstart, Northern Emerald-Toucanet, and Flame-colored Tanager, to name a few. We have the day to explore this isolated and beautiful valley, where we hope to find several pairs of Resplendent Quetzal feeding on wild avocado trees. If you'd like a more rigorous hike up the valley's ridgeline, we feature that in the afternoon. Optional horseback riding can be arranged.

The Resplendent Quetzal is found here year-round, as is an incredibly diverse array of flora and fauna. On trails that wind past rivers and lakes, we look for Collared Trogon, American Dipper, Spotted Wood-Quail, Barred Becard, and Silver-throated Tanager, as well as regionally endemic species like Long-tailed Silky-flycatcher, Sulphur-winged Parakeet, Wrenthrush, Golden-browed Chlorophonia, and Black Guan.

Montane oak forest dominates, including magnificent oaks like the Wild Brazillito, Winter's Bark Tree, and Cipresillo. We take a stab at identifying them, then simply admire the hundreds of species of bromeliads, lichens, mosses, and ferns, and the multitude of orchids and colorful flowers. Locals raise fruit on the hillsides and farm trout in small ponds; enjoy meals at the lodge made with a host of homegrown foods.

*Accommodations at the Savegre Mountain Lodge (B,L,D)*

## **Fri., Feb. 17 Golfito | Esquinas Rainforest Lodge**

This morning we travel to the lovely coastal town of Golfito, where the mountains reach the sea. Enjoy lunch at a local restaurant before heading to Las Esquinas Rainforest Lodge, our accommodations for the next two nights adjacent to Piedras Blancas National Park.

The idyllic lodge is an ecotourism project that supports the local community. Lush gardens surround our thatched-roof cabins and verandas, as well as a swimming pool fed by a natural stream. You may not want to stray from the spacious porch that surrounds the main building of the lodge—with the rainforest at arm's length, it's an excellent place to enjoy passive birdwatching. However, the calls of trogons and Scarlet Macaw do lure you onto one of the many trails into the rainforest.

The lowland Pacific Rainforest dominates here, offering diverse and exciting species. We hope to find the endemic Ant Tanager, several species of colorful trogons, Squirrel Cuckoo, secretive Antbird, and mixed flocks that include Golden-hooded Tanager and Green Honeycreeper. Mammals are always secretive, but this is a good spot for both Collared Peccary and the much larger Tapir. Several species of monkey live here, and wilderness-loving species like King Vulture and Black Hawk-Eagle survey you from above. Under huge heliconia leaves we sometimes find Tent-making Bats.

*Accommodations at Las Esquinas Rainforest Lodge (B,L,D)*

## **Sat., Feb. 18 Las Esquinas | Piedras Blancas National Park**

The sounds of myriad birds awaken you at dawn. Enjoy a leisurely morning in your cabin, or opt for an early walk

during the height of bird activity. We meet for a delicious breakfast in the open-air dining room. It's hard to concentrate on food when hummingbirds are feeding young and tanagers come in to feed on fresh fruit at the feeders!

We then enjoy a full day on the lush grounds and adjacent parklands of lowland Pacific rain forest. After breakfast we venture out into the forest on trails that extend into Piedras Blancas National Park. The trail invites us to a scenic ridge above the lodge. After lunch, relax or enjoy a swim. Or, visit the neighboring research center to talk to some of the resident biologists. In a wetland pond we look for White-throated Crake and Pygmy Kingfisher.

In the afternoon we drive out into the farmlands of the valley. Framed by mountains, this beautiful setting offers a glimpse of how people live in the Costa Rican countryside. Both Crested and Yellow-headed Caracaras fly overhead; three species (or more!) of kingfisher call from their perches. We also hope to find more southern species, such as Red-breasted Blackbird and a variety of seedeaters. In the evening we listen to night sounds in the forest and get a well-deserved rest.

*Accommodations at Las Esquinas Rainforest Lodge (B,L,D)*

## **Sun., Feb. 19 Pan-American Highway | Talari Lodge Near San Isidro**

After breakfast, we pack up to drive south on the Pan-American Highway towards the Talamanca Mountains, the backbone of southern Costa Rica.

En route, we pass back over the Cerro de la Muerte then make a well-known birding stop at some communication towers at Cerro Bella Vista (weather permitting) where we may find Volcano Junco and Timberline Wren, and again admire the blooming flora.

We then drop down into the expansive El General Valley, home to the Chirripó River that descends from the heights of Chirripó National Park. In 2019, we started staying at a lodge in this lovely place we always had to rush through on previous tours. Along the El General River is our simple but delightful lodge, which emits a rural ambiance with excellent birding—over 225 species have been recorded on these lushly-vegetated grounds. There is a pool and we enjoy our meals in a dining room with covered, open-air seating. This lodge was a favorite for our group in past years, with so much birding right on the grounds. Search among the fruiting trees for Blue Dacnis, Red-legged Honeycreeper, parrots and toucans; in Cecropia trees we find resident Three-toed Sloth while Slaty Spinetail, and Orange-billed Sparrow may be seen in edges of the undergrowth.

*Accommodations at Talari Mountain Lodge (B,L,D)*

## **Mon., Feb. 20**

### **Los Cusingos—Alexander Skutch's Farm | Talari Hotel Grounds & Trails**

Our hotel has a rich section of river frontage and we explore it for our early morning birding option. We then drive to nearby Los Cusingos Bird Sanctuary, a memorial preserve for a famous naturalist of the Americas: Alexander Skutch.

At Los Cusingos we can get lost in time and forget we are only a half hour from the bustling city and the agriculture of the El General Valley. The home site looks as if Alexander might return from one of his epic walks, full of stories and details of birds seen that day. This pioneer of natural history in Central America, most notably Costa Rica, chronicled the intimate life history of hundreds of species. He wrote numerous books, including the country's first formative field guide.

Skutch first came to Central American in the 1930s, working at a botanist for the United Fruit company. In 1941, he settled in Costa Rica. Over the next 40 years, he would author some 200 scientific papers and 40 books—using a simple typewriter from his desk in a rustic cabin with shuttered windows. He was readily interrupted by birds. He made a life with his sweet wife, Pamela. Our early Naturalist Journeys trips visited them, and we always made

sure to bring her favorite cookies. Dr. Skutch left us just eight days before his 100th birthday. His later writings were deeply philosophical.

Today, the farm is managed by the Tropical Science Center. It is a fabulous place to find mixed flocks of tanagers, and some secretive species like Eye-ringed Flatbill and Royal Flycatcher. A real treat is to see North American migrant warblers here on their winter home alongside resident warblers like the Buff-rumped Warbler. Long-billed Hermit feed in colorful heliconia flowers, and walking near the river we may find beautiful Fasciated Tiger-Heron. The property is named for a real beauty here on the Pacific side of the Continental Divide: the Fiery-billed Aracari. It sits at an elevation of 2700 ft.

We return to the lodge after our visit to relax, and for our avid ones, more birding!  
*Accommodations at Talari Mountain Lodge (B,L,D)*

## **Tues., Feb. 21 Central Pacific Coast | Tarcoles River Boat Trip**

This morning we pack up and continue on our way to the Central Pacific area, where we stay in a lovely valley with a rushing river near the Pacific Ocean. Enjoy sampling the countryside as the morning is largely spent in travel. We arrive in time for lunch.

This afternoon we take a mangrove boat trip on the Tarcoles River. Gliding along we find a good mix of new species. If time permits, especially if we have not seen macaws on our boat trip, we also stop on a high bridge with expansive views. Though busy with traffic, this is the best place in Costa Rica to watch for Scarlet Macaw returning to roost sites. Their calls alert us and, as we wait to see their dazzling colors, we find a host of other species such as Mealy Parrot and, close-at-hand, noisy Rufous-naped Wren.

*Accommodations at Hotel Cerro Lodge or similar (B,L,D)*

## **Wed., Feb. 22 Carara National Park**

This morning we have an early start to enjoy a full morning of birding at Carara National Park, a place many consider to be one of the top ten birding spots in Central America. Here we witness birds and wildlife of a transition forest, walking trails and searching for birds, butterflies, and mammals. This park can claim almost unparalleled diversity along the Central American Pacific Coast, as many species here are at the edge of their range. This is the northern reach of species at home in Pacific Rainforest, and the southern reach for those associated with Pacific Dry Forests.

The open nature of Carara's transitional forests lends itself well to finding birds that are normally difficult to observe elsewhere, such as Great Tinamou, Collared Forest-Falcon, and Streak-chested Antpitta. It's also an excellent place to observe an army ant swarm and its attendant antbirds, including sometimes secretive Black-hooded Antshrike, Bicolored Antbird, Dusky Antbird, and Chestnut-backed Antbird. We may also find Scaly-breasted Hummingbird or Blue-throated Goldentail. Vegetation is impressive in this important ecological reserve.

After lunch, we pack up and continue on to La Ensenada, a country lodge on a lake. This family-run lodge, where we stay the next two nights, features 20 simple, but comfortable, cabins, a swimming pool, and a delightful open-air restaurant that prepares local foods. The lodge is part of a working cattle ranch and fruit farm, and also part of a 100-acre wildlife reserve. All cabins have ceiling fans, wood paneling, high ceilings, and private terraces. This special property holds some of the last remaining primary (old growth) dry forest, as well as a mangrove ecosystem, and is on the beautiful Gulf of Nicoya.

As we settle in, watch the sky for Magnificent Frigatebird and Brown Pelican; we may also be able to enjoy the antics of colonies of Montezuma Oropendola, Piratic Flycatcher, Squirrel Cuckoo, and colorful Cherrie's Tanager and Spot-breasted Oriole in the trees.

We return to bird the grounds of our lodge, have time to relax a bit and join together for a special evening sharing highlights of our journey.

*Accommodations at Hotel Cerro Lodge (B,L,D)*

### **Thurs., Feb. 23 San José**

This morning we enjoy breakfast before departing back to San José ahead of our international departures. We make sure to make birding stops along the way and take time to enjoy lunch at a local restaurant before returning to our convenient airport hotel. We have chosen an airport hotel for the return so you can depart at your leisure tomorrow.

Tonight dinner is casual, but we hope all enjoy an evening to recount memories of a great trip!

*Accommodations at the Bougainvillea (B,L,D)*

### **Fri., Feb. 24 Departures**

You can depart at your leisure today. (B)

## **Tour Details**

### **Plan Ahead!**

Protect yourself with [Allianz Travel Insurance](#). As of January 2017, Naturalist Journeys pays 100% of your flight carbon offset.

### **Cost of the Journey**

Cost of the journey: **\$4390 DBL / \$5045 SGL** from San José, based on double occupancy and includes: airport transfers, accommodations for 10 nights, meals as specified in the itinerary, professional guide services, local guides, local park and reserve entrance fees, and miscellaneous program expenses.

It does not include roundtrip airfare to or from San José, or items of a personal nature like laundry, telephone, drinks from the bar, or gratuities for portage or personal services.

### **Travel Information**

Arrive in San José on February 14, ideally by 2:00 PM if you wish to see the city, and by 5:00 PM to join the group dinner. If you arrive later, we can arrange an airport pickup and a snack on arrival. You may want to arrive a day or two early (at your own cost) to take in the sights of the city. Depart at your leisure on February 24.

### **Photo Credits**

Black-cheeked Woodpecker, Greg Smith (GS); Butterfly, GS; Collared Aracari, GS; Magnificent Hummingbird, Sandy Sorkin (SS); Resplendent Quetzal, GS; Montezuma Oropendola, GS; Iguana, SS.

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