

An aerial photograph of a dense, vibrant green tropical forest. A thin suspension bridge spans across the upper portion of the image, with a few small figures of people visible on it. In the lower-left quadrant, a waterfall cascades down a rocky ledge into a pool of water. At the bottom of the waterfall, a wooden walkway or bridge is visible, with several people standing on it. The overall scene is a lush, verdant landscape.

Spotlight

COSTA RICA · CAMBODIA · JORDAN

COSTA RICA

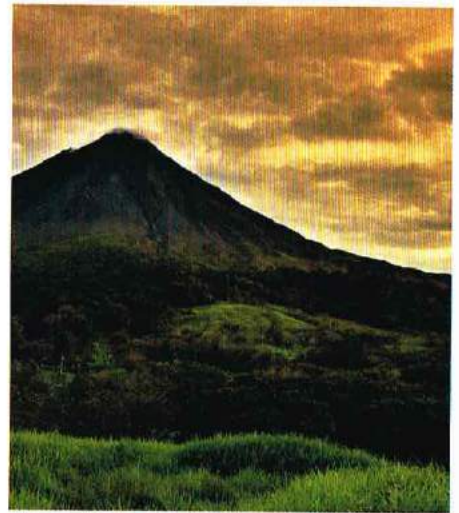
ARENAL VOLCANO

At less than 20,000 square miles in size yet one of the most biodiverse places on the planet, Costa Rica really packs a punch. Caribbean expert Nigel Tisdall reveals his highlights

It was a big surprise when the mighty 1,633m peak of Volcán Arenal burst out of Costa Rica's Cordillera de Tilarán in 1968 – although villagers did like to picnic nearby 'because the ground was warm'. A classic black triangle capped with a quiff of white smoke, this scenic hot-spot is now a star attraction in this enchanting Central American country where nature comes first. A guided tour of Arenal's ashen lavascapes brings a memorable lesson in the powerful forces beneath us, while a bounce around the Edenic Mistico Arenal Hanging Bridges Park, where walkways are suspended on wires up to 45m high, offers a parakeet's view over the rainforest. One of the joys of Costa Rica is its excellent and enthusiastic English-speaking guides and it pays to use them – otherwise you might never spot that peccary hunting for fallen guavas, catch the dapper plumage of the broad-billed motmot, or avoid disturbing the venomous coral snake with its vivid rugby-shirt hoops. There's plenty more to enjoy around here, from testing your courage on zip-lines to hiking to waterfalls and bobbing about in thermal springs with a tico sour (the country's answer to the caipirinha). Check into the utterly romantic, jungle-wrapped casitas at adults-only Nayara Springs (nayaraspings.com), which sits inside the Arenal Volcano National Park, and you'll find exotic birds, radiant flora and luminous green iguanas on the doorstep. A walk to breakfast might well pass a birdwatching scope trained on social flycatcher chicks clamouring for food from their nest in a banana tree, while nightlife is provided by glittering stars and a hearty frog chorus. In August, this immaculate hillside resort opened a sloth sanctuary, which required planting over 300 cecropia trees where these creatures like to feed and hang out. Now more than a dozen have moved in, with their shaggy coats and smudged-black-eyeliner faces, like refugees from the hippy trail who have finally found nirvana □

IN OTHER NEWS

Connecting from various UK regional airports, in October, KLM Royal Dutch Airlines (klm.com) launched a twice-weekly flight from Amsterdam to San José, providing travellers in the regions an alternative to British Airways' direct service from Gatwick. Itineraries often require an overnight in the Costa Rican capital where the **Mercado Central** and opulent 1897 **Teatro Nacional** are worth a visit – well-appointed **Hotel Grano de Oro** (hotelgranodeoro.com), which dates from the turn of the twentieth century, is a charming base. After that, it's all about plunging into exuberant nature in this country blessed with 26 national parks and more bird species than the whole of Europe. At 110km east of San José, **Pacuare Lodge** (pacuare.com) brilliantly mixes adrenaline thrills with total rainforest immersion – its two new riverside Linda Vista Suites feature traditional bark-cloth decoration hand-crafted by indigenous **Cabécar** artisans. In the southwest, the **Osa** peninsula is the best place for a wilderness adventure – **Caminos de Osa** (caminosdeosa.com) is a new community-run venture, spearheaded by local specialist **Horizontes** (horizontes.com), offering activity-packed tours from one to five days. Afterwards, relax on the Pacific coast where luxe eco-lodge **Kurà Design Villas** (kuracostarica.com) has unveiled two lofty Master Suites, or hole up inland at serene **Hacienda AltaGracia** (aubergeresorts.com), which recently expanded its 5km of walking trails and boasts top-class stables, microflight flights over the coffee plantations and the largest spa in Central America. *Abercrombie & Kent offers tailor-made itineraries and escorted tours in Costa Rica (01242-386475; abercrombiekent.co.uk). For more details, go to visitcostarica.com*



Opposite: Mistico Arenal Hanging Bridges Park. This page, from top: Arenal volcano in the eponymous national park. Rafting on the Pacuare River to reach Pacuare Lodge. The ubiquitous sloth, an icon of Costa Rican wildlife