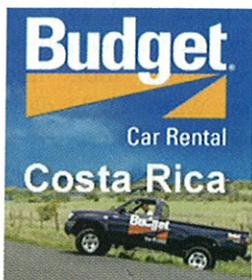


NATURAL WONDERLAND
With its beautiful beaches, fiery volcanoes and cloud forest, Costa Rica is a nature lover's paradise. Thanks to convenient modes of transportation, exploring that paradise is simple.

Almost all of your explorations can be done by public bus for less than \$10 (USD) per trip. Downtown San Jose is the best place to catch the public bus line, but for \$15 to \$25, you can opt for special



tour buses.

Renting a car is another option that allows you to travel off the beaten path and can minimize your worries about tourist-targeted theft.

"With a little bit of orientation, a decent map and the ability to...ask for directions, renting your own vehicle is the best way to get around for [more] flexibility and independence," says Arturo Napoles of the Costa Rica Tourism and Travel Bureau.

Costa Rica offers some of the familiar car rental companies like Alamo and Budget, though most car rental companies require large deposits of up to \$1,000.

If traveling to more remote regions, flying is a great alternative, as domestic flights are usually moderately priced at about \$80 each way. (For more information, check out costarica.com.)

—Tiesha Henderson



The White House Hotel, San Jose

the park where a matronly woman serves us a delicious, typical casado (meal) of rice and beans, fish, plantains and salad for only \$3 per plate. That afternoon, we strip down to our suits and bathe in the warm Pacific Ocean at the edge of the park. Finally, this is the scenic and authentic Costa Rica we have traveled so far to experience.

The last two nights of our rugged trip bring us back to San Jose. This time we stay at the upscale White House hotel (whitehousecostarica.com)—which oddly enough looks like a replica of the U.S. president's abode—in the suburb of Escazu. With its nightclubs, shops and billboards advertising a Black Eyed Peas concert, Escazu is by far the most commercially developed part of Costa Rica we've seen.

It's definitely easier to get around Costa Rica if you rent a car, but we find a restaurant within walking distance of our hotel. Arlene, a retired television personality, has transformed the first floor of her lovely home into a restaurant. On the stormy night we pop in, we are the only patrons and the personable hostess makes us feel right at home. At Arlene's behest, we try the octopus

salad—the spongy tentacles are a turnoff, so I let my fiancé finish it—and delicious salmon pasta.

The next day, we get on the road again for a full-day excursion to the Tabacon hot springs in the Arenal volcano region (arenal.net). This tour is well worth the three-hour pilgrimage. Our private tour guide, Luis, is energetic and knowledgeable. Along the way he identifies different species of birds, including colorful toucans, and has us sample lychee fruit from a roadside fruit stand.

Arenal is closer to Costa Rica's Caribbean side, where the terrain is noticeably flatter and more floral and the climate more humid. When we arrive at the Tabacon Grand Spa and Thermal Resort (tabacon.com) at the foot of the active Arenal volcano, concealed today by an overcast sky, we are in awe of the beautiful natural setting. John and I soak in each of the property's seven thermal pools, which consist of rainwater heated by magma from the earth's core and range from 80 to 107 degrees Fahrenheit. This is truly a divine experience and the perfect pampered ending to our Central American adventure.