



Free & Easy Traveler - Travel Prep Guide

20 Days in Costa Rica & Panama: Caribbean Retreat

- Page 2 **The Basics** - Trip Duration, Start/Finish cities, Destinations
- Page 3 **Epic Experiences & Trip Details** - What's Included, Activities, Travel Budget
- Page 4 **Trip Details** - Travel Budget, Trip Leaders
- Page 5 **Trip Details** - Trip Leaders, Flying to Costa Rica/Panama, Meals, Allergies
- Page 6 **Trip Details** - Transportation, Accommodation, Solo Travelers, Packing Suggestions
- Page 7 **Trip Details** - Packing Suggestions, Laundry
- Page 8 **Travel Essentials** - Passports, Insurance, Immunization
- Page 9 **Travel Essentials** - Immunization, Banking & Money
- Page 10 **Travel Essentials & Communication & Payment** - Costa Rica/Panama Travel Visas, Questions
- Page 11 **Communication & Payment & Cultural** - Communication, Making Payments
- Page 12 **Cultural** - Quick Facts on Costa Rica
- Page 13 **Cultural** - Quick Facts on Costa Rica, Quick Facts on Panama
- Page 14 **Ideas for Reading & Trip Locations** - Tentative Trip Itinerary
- Page 15 **Community Forests International** - We Travel Carbon Free, One Traveler, One Tree

The Basics

Duration: 10 Days

Start & Finish: San Jose, Costa Rica

Adventure Type: Backpackers (age 18 to 27)

Trip Size: 15 – 22 (+2 group leaders)



Epic Experiences

Included in the Price

- Surf a wave
- Whitewater raft down the Rio Pacuare
- Paradise Islands in Panama
- Tasty Tuesday Party at Tasty Waves Cantina

Optional Activities

- Sail through the Caribbean
- Fly Under Water
- Catch a fish and eat it too
- Go Scuba Diving

Trip Details

What's included?

- Surf Breaks along the Caribbean Coast
- All Taxes (GST, PST, Airport tax)
- Return international flights (in/out San Jose) and airport transfers***
- Accommodations for your 10-day Free & Easy experience
- Group travel between destinations
- 2 knowledgeable and fun Free & Easy leaders
- Free and Easy Travel Guidebook
- 15 years of trip leading experience

***Land Only prices do not include your international flight, airport taxes or transfers

What isn't included?

- All meals and drinks (except those mentioned above)
- Activities outside of the ones listed above
- Any Visa or Visa fees

Travel Budget (Canadian \$)

Your personal spending in Costa Rica and Panama will include your food, drinks, shopping, entertainment and any activities outside of those included your FNEZ adventure.

For the entirety of your 10 Day Costa Rica and Panama Trip -- "Caribbean Retreat", we recommend a budget of \$700 - \$1200. Any travel budget will fluctuate between personalities, so ask yourself: "What type of traveller are you?"

The Hippie

Brings about \$600-\$800 for the 10 days. Eats local food, bargains well at the market, finds good prices on drinks and picks, and chooses their optional activities wisely! This traveler is often likely to continue travelling after their FNEZ trip is complete.

The Backpacker

\$800-\$1000 spending money. A bit more frivolous, but is aware of their budget. Takes in most activities they are interested in, without going too extravagant. Likes to party, but always looking for a good deal.

The Rock Star

\$1000 - \$1200: Not too worried about their budget, they'll do almost everything, including lavish amounts of shopping and partying often. There won't be too much holding them back from activities, as this is their trip and don't want to let anything pass them by.

To help you work out your own budget, here are some examples to give you an idea what you will be spending in Costa Rica and Panama.

Food and Drink

Breakfast: \$4-\$9

Lunch: \$5-\$12

Dinner: \$8-\$20

Beer at the store: \$1-\$2

Beer in bar: \$2-\$4

Rum and Coke in a bar: \$2-\$6

Bottle of rum from the Bar (750ml): \$8-\$20

Entertainment & Activities

1 Day Surf Board Rental: \$10-\$15

1 day Peddle Bike Rental: \$5-7

Jaguar Rescue Center: \$15

Sailing/Booze Cruise Day trip: \$50-\$60

Booze Cruise Boat Trip: \$50

Coral Surfing: \$15-\$20

Red Frog Beach Day Trip: \$12

Scuba Diving: \$70

Trip Leaders

Every Free & Easy trip is accompanied by at least two leaders. We like to call them "Leaders" and not "Guides" because they are essentially your well traveled, experienced friends! We hire local guides whenever knowledge of culture, history or safety are necessary (ie; temple tours or jungle treks). Our Leaders main goals

are to ensure everyone on the trip is having the best time possible. Our leaders will arrange the group transportation between destinations, sort out rooms at the accommodations, plan any group meals or activities and assist in any additional activities that anyone may wish to take part in, and ultimately show you the best that each destination has to offer. They know the trip locations well, and have great relationships with all our contacts in each destination. Not to mention they are all extremely fun and easy going people who continue to showcase the essence of what makes us Free & Easy!

Flying to Costa Rica/Panama

Upon registration you can choose between booking your own flights or requesting Free & Easy to book flights for you.

If you book flights with Free & Easy:

- A flight itinerary will be emailed to you approximately 2 – 3 months before your trip's departure. (Assuming you have paid enough money on your account)
- One or both of your leaders will be at the airport in San Jose to pick you up and arrange transport back to the guesthouse.
- Transportation will be arranged for you to get from the guesthouse at the end of the trip to get to the airport to catch your flight.
- You can also ask for any custom flights, and our flight team will give you a price quote for booking this for you.

If you don't book flights with Free & Easy:

- You will be contacted with information on meeting up with your group for the start of the trip in San Jose.

Meals

The ability to experience local food, whether it's from a street vendor, a home stay, or a restaurant, is a huge part of travelling. You'll be able to ask your guides for great options to check out at every destination we go, but for the most part, the journey finding the food, tends to be just as good as the food itself! There will be times that meals will be provided for you, if you have any allergies or food preferences, i.e. vegetarian, please let your guides know!

Allergies!

If you have any allergies, especially food allergies, it is good to be prepared before coming to Costa Rica & Panama. When you try to make special requests when ordering at a restaurant it doesn't always go as planned. Best thing to do is check out Killer Peanut (www.killerpeanut.com), where you can choose from a variety of food allergies and get it translated into Spanish. Simply print out the translation and then show it to the server when ordering food. This will make your life way easier!

Types of Transportation on this trip

- Minivans: The most common mode of transportation on this trip. We rent private, A/C minivans which hold approximately 10-15 people.
- Coaster Buses: Can hold up to 26 people
- Speed boats: The only way to get out to the island of Bocas Del Toro!
- Boat Taxis: The only option for getting around to some of the bars/ islands around Bocas Town.

Accommodations

We have a wide range of accommodations on this trip from beautiful, beach bungalows to guest houses and cozy style hostel cabins. We have chosen each of our accommodations based on quality, location, and relationships with the establishments. Plus there is so much to do on this trip you won't be spending much time in your room anyway!

All our accommodation is based on at least two-person occupancy. If you wish you have your own room you can pay an additional fee in order to do so. Please contact travel@fnez.com before your trip begins if you are interested.

Solo Travelers:

Lots of solo travelers come on our trips and it's a great way to step outside your comfort zone and make lots of new friends. Since all our accommodation is based on at least two-person occupancy you will be rooming with other members of the same sex in your group.

Packing Suggestions:

For a trip to a tropical country, you really don't need any heavy clothing. Also, keep in mind that you'll want to go over there so you may want to only pack half of your backpack, leaving room to buy new stuff once you arrive. Most people end up regretting how much they packed when they realize how easily they could have bought new clothes once they arrived.

It is good to properly prepare supplies for the trip, but don't stress out too much about having everything you think you might need because chances are that you will be able to find whatever it is during your trip. Good quality shoes and/or sports sandals are an exception to that as they are only really available in larger cities. There are also many pharmacies that have medications and first-aid supplies.

In general, you want to avoid packing things that you really don't need to have. There are definitely certain luxuries that are good to have, but you don't want to lug something around for 6 weeks unless you are going to use it. Also, consider that the weight of your bag will likely be INCREASING throughout the trip, and having a lighter backpack

simplifies life immensely. Honestly, look at what you have and cut it in half and you're probably good to go. You're gonna buy lots of new stuff.

Here's some ideas for what you might want to pack:

Travel Essentials

- Passport (make copies)
- Travel insurance (digital and hard copies)
- Airline tickets (digital and hard copies)
- Credit or debit card
- Any entry visas, additional passport photos or vaccination certificates required
- Cover for backpack/ziplock bags for travel essentials

Electronics/Entertainment

- Alarm clock
- Headlamp
- iPods, tablets
- Books, eReaders
- Camera (bring a few memory cards)
- All Chargers (outlets are the same as North America)
- Speakers

Clothing

- Swim wear
- Walking shoes/sport sandals
- Shorts
- Shirts/T-shirts
- Rain jacket
- Underwear
- Sarong (travel towel)

First-aid kit (all can be purchased in Thailand)

Toiletries

- Girls bring feminine hygiene products as they can be hard to find.

Laundry

Laundry facilities are offered by some of the places we stay. Ask your leaders to point out the best places to get laundry done. There will be times when there are no laundry facilities, however your guides will tell you this in advance.

Travel Essentials

There is nothing more important than your health and safety so make sure you read this carefully!

Passports

Everyone **MUST** have a passport for international travel. If you already have a passport, double check to make sure that it is still valid for at least 6 months from the return date of your trip. If it is not valid for a full 6 months from the day you plan on returning to your passport issuing country, you'll have to apply for a new passport before you leave.

The application process for getting a passport may seem simple, but for most people it ends up taking longer than it first appears. Sometimes it can take a few weeks to complete the entire process, so we definitely recommend not leaving it to the last minute.

Insurance

Everyone **MUST** have Travel Medical Insurance of some kind and bring proof with you for this trip. You might not need to purchase a medical insurance policy though because you may already be covered through some other way:

- Your parent's work health plan.
- With a credit card.
- Through a student or work health plan.
- Through private insurance.

While you are away traveling with us, if you decide to extend your plane ticket, you also have the ability to purchase an extension to your insurance policy. **PLEASE NOTE:** It is your own responsibility to be making any extension to your insurance so you cannot expect this will automatically happen when you extend your plane ticket.

If you need to extend your TIC insurance please call 1-800-670-4426

Please Note: At this time we only provide Travel Insurance for those with valid Canadian Citizenship.

Immunizations

For your own safety, there are some shots that are always recommended for travel to Central America.

- Hepatitis A.
- Hepatitis B.
- Tetanus.

- Up to date on ordinary Flu shots.
- Yellow Fever*

We also want to warn you that sometimes travel clinics are over cautious to the extreme and try to sell you everything under the sun. If you want a second opinion about something, do some more research online or contact us. Often they will say that you should take malaria pills. We suggest you try to learn more about the exact locations of any malaria danger before you commit to taking the pills. We can say truthfully, that currently none of the Free & Easy staff or owners take malaria medication when we are on any of our adventures. The feeling amongst many people is that the side effects of the pills are not worth the minimal risk in the regions we travel to. Rather than subject ourselves to the medications we choose to be cautious with mosquito repellent whenever they are present. Since we are not medical professionals we urge you to do your own research and make your own informed decision.

*Please Note: There is no risk of Yellow Fever in Costa Rica, however, the government of Costa Rica requires proof of Yellow Fever vaccination, if you are arriving from a country with risk of Yellow Fever. Yellow Fever IS a risk in certain parts of Panama. The government of Costa Rica and Panama requires proof of yellow fever vaccination if you are traveling from a country with risk of yellow fever. You can check country risk of Yellow Fever and requirements [here](#).

Banking & Money

The easiest way of getting and carrying your money is to simply use the bank machines in the country you are travelling. You can use your regular bank card, using your regular pin number, and the money will come out in the local currency (You need to make sure that you have “cirrus” or “plus” written on the back of your card). At nearly every destination on our trips, you’ll have easy access to a bank machine. This also means you won’t have to get local currency before you leave. Once you arrive, you can just use a bank machine right there at the airport.

Every time you need to make a transaction your account will be charged approx. \$5 fee from your bank and then a possible fee from the local bank. It can get a bit pricey if you’re making withdrawals every few days—so it makes more sense to take out a large sum and then just watch your spending! Although theft does happen sometimes we have found that it is quite rare. So we, ourselves, practice this method.

Be aware that if you are pulling money out on your credit card that this counts as a “cash advance” and you will immediately be charged interest on this amount and not have a grace period or get reward points like you typically would with other credit card purchases. Additionally, you will still be charged those \$5 fees from your bank and the local bank. With this in mind the best option is always to pull out money using your debit card instead of your credit card.

Another suggestion we would like to reinforce is that we highly recommend that you have online banking during the trip. It allows you to check your balances, transfer money, and monitor your transactions from any internet café. In case of any issue with your bank card, online banking always simplifies a situation since you can easily transfer money to another traveler in your group who could then pull out money for you.

Another little helpful hint is signing over power of attorney to someone you trust (i.e., a parent). This means that they can have access to your accounts while you are away. This can help if you lose your bankcard, or there is a problem with it while overseas. It is also useful if you need someone to pay your bills, or make money transfers while you are away.

Costa Rica/Panama Visas

Upon entry into Costa Rica and Panama most countries are automatically granted at least a 30-day tourist visa. Also have your departure flight printed off and ready to show should they ask for it. For this 10-day trip it is NOT necessary that you obtain a visa before departing for Costa Rica and Panama.

You must have 6 months validity on your passport from your arrival in the country right through your planned departure back to your passports issuing country, as well as blank Visa pages. Your travel visa will be issued to you upon entry into Costa Rica and Panama (applies to Canada, Australia, United Kingdom and the United States). There is a \$3 fee per person on the Panama side during entry and exit. In Costa Rica there is also a \$29 USD departure tax payable at the airport with USD/Costa Rican cash or VISA, Mastercard or American Express. We recommend having cash on hand, as there is quite a big fee using credit. The walk in between spots is along the bridge about 150 meters. There is one window on the Costa Rican side and 2 windows one to pay and one to stamp on the Panama side of the bridge.

Panama is 1 hour ahead of Costa Rica so make sure to re-set your clocks on either side.

Please visit [Costa Rica](#) and [Panama's](#) Visa requirements to double check if a Visa is required for your country of origin.

Communication + Payment

Questions

Phone: 1-800-403-5208

Email: travel@fnez.com

Communication

So you have signed up for a Free & Easy adventure and we hope to help make this the easiest travel experience of your life. We want to help you out with anything you need help with. However, there are always things that you will need to take care of yourself and we will make it as easy as possible to explain these things. So we need to have a bit of cooperation from your part and it start with actually **READING** our emails :). Please, make sure you read the emails we send leading up to your trip because we are sending them to make sure that you are as ready as you can possibly be for this travel adventure.

Most of the information we send will be coming through your “Your Trip” account. Please make sure that you have all of the requirements taken care of prior to your trip as well you can also view your account and balance owing and a place for us to give you your downloads and hear news of the upcoming trip. You should receive an email in your inbox notifying you when we do post something on there. Please notify us if you find that you’re not getting the notifications.

Making Payments

Follow this link for a full outline of our payment options.

Check here for the payment schedules for all our trips.

The \$200 deposit reserves your placement on a trip. For all the trips, we have arranged the payment dates to allow you the maximum time to pay for your trip. If you would prefer to pay for the entire trip all at one time, that is no problem. You can also make larger payments earlier whenever it is convenient for you. The payment dates that we have listed are just guidelines that state the last possible date by which payments should be made.

We would greatly appreciate that all payments be made on time. Meeting this simple request makes our job much easier because it allows us to always be looking forward and preparing for the trips, rather than figuring out who and where we need to collect money from. If you expect that a payment will be late, please email us to explain when we can expect the payment. Payment schedules for each of the trips can be reached by clicking the link above.

PLEASE NOTE: All additional costs (for flights, insurance, fees & extras) will be added to your statement of account on the ‘your trip’ page. Please, ensure that you add any additional charges to your final payment unless we require it sooner.

Cultural

Quick Facts on Costa Rica

- Costa Rica is the only country in the Western Hemisphere without an army or military of any kind.
- Costa Rica has a population of 4.5 million and a life expectancy of almost 77 years, one of the highest in the world.
- There are 800 miles of coastline in Costa Rica between the Pacific and Caribbean coasts.
- More than 25% of Costa Rica's land is dedicated to national parks, reserves and wildlife refuges. There are more than 100 different protected areas to visit.
- Costa Rica's official language is Spanish, though a large number of its citizens are bilingual. English, due to its status as the international language of tourists, is the most common second language in Costa Rica.
- Costa Rica hosts more than 5% of the world's biodiversity even though its landmass only takes up .03% of the planet's surface. There are more than:
 - 130 species of freshwater fish
 - 160 species of amphibians
 - 208 species of mammals
 - 220 species of reptiles
 - 850 species of birds
 - 1,000 species of butterflies
 - 1,200 varieties of orchids
 - 9,000 species of plants
 - 34,000 species of insects
 - and still counting as new species are discovered every day
- The sun rises and sets at around the same time 365 days a year. What determines this is the fact that Costa Rica is located between 8 and 11 degrees north of the equator. This means that throughout the whole year, the amount of daylight may fluctuate no more than 1 hour, which is the opposite to a country that is located further north or south where there is less daylight in the winter and more in the summer. The sunrise, then, occurs at approximately 5:30 a.m. and the sunset at about 5:30 p.m.
- It is not common to see people blowing their noses in public. In fact, this custom is considered impolite, disgusting, and even embarrassing. The restroom is the appropriate place to do it.
- When giving directions in Costa Rica, meters and landmarks are used. For instance, "The school is 100 meters south and 50 meters east from the cathedral". It is very common to make reference to landmarks which do not exist anymore, but which became well-known among people. Regarding tourist information, an address such as "between 21st and 23rd streets" might be given; however, Costa Ricans do not even know the name of the streets since that is not what they are familiar with.
- 85 percent of the population is Roman Catholic (official state religion). Other Protestant faiths are practiced, and there is a small Jewish community.

- Free education is compulsory through the end of the 9th year.
- High tourism season is from December 16th to April 30.
- The literacy rate in Costa Rica is an impressive 97%.
- The economy is heavily dependent on tourism, specifically eco-tourism. Extensive national parks and natural splendor have made Costa Rica one of the most visited destinations for tourists from the US and Canada.
- You might be surprised to learn that the number one export is microchips! The Intel microprocessor facility near San Jose accounts for around 20% of exports and 4.9% of the country's GDP.
- The most common and traditional dish is called Casado. This is rice and beans with cabbage and tomato salad, fried plantains, and meat. Generally, vegetables aren't a large part of the diet.
- Punctuality is not as important as in western cultures; don't take offense if your friend or hosts are not as schedule-oriented as you might be accustomed to.
- The national 13% value added tax (often written as i.v.i. in Costa Rica) is added to all goods and services. This includes hotel and restaurant bills. Restaurants also add on a 10% service charge, for a total of 23% more on your bill. Tipping on top of 23% is unnecessary.
- The airport departure tax is \$26. This tax must be purchased prior to check-in. Desks where you can pay this tax are in the main terminal of all international airports.
- Toilets are known as sanitarios, servicios sanitarios, or baños. They are marked damas (women) and hombres or caballeros (men). Public restrooms are hard to come by. You will almost never find a public restroom in a city park or downtown area.
- Although the water in San José is generally safe to drink, water quality varies outside the city. Because many travelers have tender digestive tracts, we recommend playing it safe and sticking to bottled drinks as much as possible.
- The average wage laborer is paid about \$10 per day, the highest in Central America.
- Costa Rica is translated to rich coast. The Spaniards were so impressed by gold ornaments displayed by the natives that they decided it was the richest coast they had encountered.

Quick Facts on Panama

- Panama is the only place in the world where you can see the sun rise on the Pacific and set on the Atlantic.
- The canal generates fully one-third of Panama's entire economy.
- "A man a plan a canal panama" is a palindrome.
- Panama was the first Latin American country to adopt the U.S. currency as its own.
- The population of Panama in 2003 was estimated by the United Nations at 3,120,000, which placed it as number 129 in population among the 193 nations of the world, and the smallest population in Central America.
- The cargo ship Ancon was the first vessel to transit the Canal on August 15, 1914.
- The lowest toll paid was \$0.36 and was paid by Richard Halliburton who crossed the Canal swimming in 1928.

- Seven out of ten Panamanians haven't heard of the song "Panama" by Van Halen.
- Senator John McCain was born in Panama, in the Canal Zone that was, at the time considered U.S. Territory.
- The Panama Hat is really made in Ecuador.
- In Panama, you can swim in the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific Ocean in the same day.
- The oldest continually operating railroad is in Panama. It travels from Panama City to Colon and back.
- Panama City is the only capital city that has a rain forest within the city limits.

Quick Facts Source here

Ideas for Reading

Buying some sort of guidebook on Costa Rica and Panama would be a good idea because it'll have lots of info on things like the culture, history, and geography. It'll have maps and in-depth info on traveling the country. Books like the Lonely Planet or the Rough Guide are especially good if you are planning to travel on your own after the trip because they have all sorts of info on how to get around, where to stay, what to do, and how much things cost. There are also other books like National Geographic and the Insider Guide that have lots of pictures and are better for giving a more in-depth-background on Costa Rica and Panama in general. If you don't need the practical travel information, a book like this might be better.

A good place to start is Amazon, Chapters-Indigo or your favourite local book store!

Trip Locations

Day 1: San Jose

Day 2-4: Puerto Viejo

Day 5-9: Bocas Del Torro

Day 10: Alajuela

Day 11: San Jose

PLEASE NOTE: The above itinerary is tentative. You will receive your confirmed Free & Easy Traveler trip itinerary with the exact routing at least 30 days prior to your departure.

Please be advised we are constantly keeping an eye out for warnings and are well informed on the happenings in the places we go. Our ground team is frequently sending us first hand updates, ensuring the destinations we bring our groups to are safe!

Community Forests International (CFI)

Free & Easy Traveler has joined forces with Community Forests International (CFI) to turn the joy of world travel into an act of global conservation. Travel is an extremely important part of our lives, getting to see and experience the world is what keeps us all connected and reminds us that we all live in the same world and deal with the same problems. But traveling around the world comes at a price and we are well aware of the many buses, planes, ships, etc. that we use to travel that harm the environment. Greenhouse gas emissions are driving increasingly dangerous climate change to the point that some of the places we love most are under threat and we don't want to contribute to the continuing destruction. So we decided to take action.

We Travel Carbon-Free

By tracking the flights of our staff members and calculating the resulting greenhouse gasses, we support CFI to go out and protect and manage a forest in Canada to pull those gasses back out. These emissions become securely stored at CFI's Whaelghinbran Farm. Read more about how CFI offsets our carbon here.

One Traveler, One Tree

But we didn't stop there. Much of the work that CFI does supports community tree planting efforts in Africa and Canada. This work is having incredible results, and we wanted to strengthen their efforts so we decided that for each traveler that comes on a trip with us, we'll provide CFI with the support to plant a tree to help offset that traveler's carbon emissions.

These trees are being used as tools of environmental and social restoration. In Canada, some of these trees were planted along a degraded watercourse and will go on to provide habitat for salmon, trout, hawks and king fisher, just to name a few. In Africa, where CFI was born, these trees were planted as a part of ongoing restoration of degraded lands on the island of Pemba, Tanzania. These trees rebuild the soil that was too poor to grow crops, allowing for trees like mangoes and cassava to thrive and produce food.

We look forward to continuing our relationship with CFI and, along with your help, making the world a greener place to live and travel in! If you want to offset your travel emissions with CFI, or want to support tree planting around the world, find out how here.