

The extraordinary coexistence of riches and poverty, of the beautiful and the obscene, of dynamic activity and Central American calm.

The capital of Costa Rica, San Jose', is situated at the centre of Valle Central and is the only city of considerable size in the country. In a spectacular site, it is surrounded to north and south by the volcanic mountain chains; to the north the still active volcanoes and to the south those that are extinct.

By night, from the summit of one of these mountains or from the belvedere of some restaurant to the south of the capital, the plain is lit up by millions of multicolored luminous points, assisted by the transparent air which makes them seem close by. Even in daytime, with the sunlight, the sight of the dark peaks standing out against the sky is extraordinary, whereas when one descends to road level the splendor declines into the banality of a Central American metropolis.

San Jose' is not blessed with particularly fascinating characteristics. The traffic is chaotic and often dangerous, the shops are generally mediocre, with the exception of the chain stores and the supermarkets where one can find every type of product from every part of the world.

The museums, on the other hand are a pleasant surprise, being very beautiful and well maintained. There are also some elegant buildings and lovely parks. The streets are always crowded and the tree-lined barrios, Amon and Otoyas, give the impression of walking the streets of an old Colonial city, with all the charm of times long passed. At the city centre everything becomes more frenetic, with sellers of fruit, clothing, and lottery tickets at the corner of every street and with hundreds of shoe-shops which invade the pavements.

PLAZA de la CULTURA y MUSEO DE ORO

Hidden beneath the floor of the Plaza de la Cultura is one of the treasures of San Jose', the Museum of Pre-Columbian Gold (Tuesday through Sunday, 10 am -5pm). The building in itself is similar to a bunker and not very attractive, but the ancient works in gold on show are remarkable, and indeed extraordinary if one bears in mind the relatively limited number of works in gold found in this country. The objects on show are almost exclusively works of the Diquis masters, ancient inhabitants of the southeastern area of the country.

MUSEUM OF JADE

On the eleventh floor of the Institute of Social Security building (INS) is the museum of Jade, one of the most interesting museums of San Jose'. It contains the largest collection of American jade in the world. Jade mines have not been discovered in Costa Rica and it remains a mystery to archeologists how the pre-Columbian populations came into the possessions of such a large quantity of these stones.

BARRIOS AMON Y OTOYA

It is interesting to visit the two "barrios" of Amon and Otoya which have been rediscovered and restored after years of neglect. In the Amon barrio one finds examples of tropical architecture, including the Bishops's Castel, the Alianza Francesa building and the Grand Hotel Casa Verde de Amon. Many proprietors of bars, restaurants and hotels have moved back into this area, and an excursion in these quarters is like a trip back in time.

MUSEO NACIONAL

This is housed in a hundred-year-old fort which dominates the Plaza de la Democracia, transformed into a museum after the revolution of 1948, when the army was abolished. The Museum is home to an interesting exhibition on the colonization of Costa Rica, colonial art and archeological pieces.

MUSEO DE CIENCIAS NATURALES LA SALLE

Situated on the southern side of Parque La Sabana, this museum contains a collection of tropical fish and snakes, conserved in formaldehyde. There is also a model of the huge "baula", the largest tortoise on earth, many fossils and a vast butterfly collection.

TEATRO NACIONAL

The Teatro Nacional celebrated its centenary in 1997. It is situated on one side of Plaza de la Cultura, between Calle 5 and Avenue 2, and its exterior is a copy of the Opera in Paris. The elegant interior is covered in red velvet and gold. From the foyer a wide marble staircase leads to the boxes on the first floor, which are well preserved. It is possible one of the most beautiful theatres in South America, and was built with the money of cafetaleros and of the entire population of Costa Rica. Many plays and concerts are put on here.



SHOPPING

Beside the large number of supermarkets, the city boasts several shopping centers; San Jose' 2000, Mall San Pedro, Plaza Mayor, Multi Plaza and others, rich with articles from all over the world. In the city centre one finds artisan shops and markets displaying local products and items from other areas of Central America. For a wider choice and maybe lower prices on this type of merchandise one can visit Moravia, about seven kilometers northwest of the centre. There one finds articles in pottery, leather and wood. In one craft shop there are Bribri products and articles made by the natives of the Talamanca coast on the Atlantic.

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