

Taking a Look at the Gay Side of Costa Rica

By Andrew Stephens

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Adonal Chaves Hernandez lived in West Palm Beach and Fort Lauderdale for nearly 14 years, before returning home to Costa Rica last fall.

"I love South Florida," he says. "But in my mind, there is no more beautiful place in the world than my country."

Only 1,000 miles away and about \$250 air fare from Miami, Costa Rica is a perfect destination for the nature-lover.

Ricardo Brennes is a gay travel agent, based in Costa Rica. He notes that the whole country is about the same size as Florida — you could drive from the Caribbean Sea to the Pacific Coast in a single day. But packed into that small size is incredible diversity. "We have dry flatlands that look like Texas," says Brennes.

"And we have rain-soaked forests, sun-drenched white-sand beaches, and lava-blackened active volcanoes — all within a day trip of each other."

More than one-quarter of Costa Rica's land area is protected by the government, which provides the visitor ample opportunity to see diverse wildlife, such as monkeys, sloths, caimans, sea turtles, and brightly-colored birds in their natural habitat.

Gay Nightlife in the Big City

Of course, some will also want to see the wildlife of a big city. And for that, all roads lead to the capital of San José. It can be congested and noisy, but San José also offers gay nightclubs, shops, hotels and restaurants. There are plenty of tranquil parks, neighborhoods, museums and theaters to get away from the hubbub when visitors need a break.

Although high-end luxury hotels dot the city, most of the cheaper hotels and eateries are west of Calle Central, between Avenidas 1 and 2. Barrio Amon has a number of gay-owned or gay-friendly hotels, such as Joluva, Colours and Keokoldi. But in this writer's opinion, the real pleasures of Costa Rica are to be found outside of the capital.

Visitors will find excellent surfing at Tamarindo, Dominical and Jacó beaches. Windsurfers consider Laguna de Arenal to be among the best locations in the world. You can even go cave-exploring at Barra Honda Park. But my personal favorite is whitewater rafting on the Pacuare or Reventazón rivers. Imagine the adrenaline pumping as you bravely face walls of white churning water — all the while screaming like a big ol' queen!

For those with relaxation in mind, consider the laid-back Caribbean flavor of Costa Rica's East Coast. Or wind your way along scenic mountain paths until you



Sunset on the coast of Costa Rica

men or two women kissing on their lips in the street is not fully accepted yet." And if you are planning a trip strictly for sex, you might want to consider going elsewhere.

"There was a Fort Lauderdale company that advertised in the gay *HotSpots!* Magazine last January, promoting sex tours involving children," recalls Hernandez. "And it infuriated many Costa Ricans.

Church leaders here tried to paint it as a gay issue, but the government rightly pointed out that it was not [since the ad referred to both boys and girls]. Other than that, the Ticos are a peaceful, welcoming, and open-minded people." Brennes concurs. "We have many gay visitors to our country, and I think pretty much everyone has been treated well."

"Pura Vida!"

When it comes to a travel destination that features luxurious accommodations; warm and friendly people; thrilling adventure activities; relaxing beaches; and stunning natural beauty — all in a gay-friendly environment — you will be hard-pressed to find anywhere more perfect than Costa Rica. As the Ticos say, "Pura Vida!" The pure life!

For travel information, contact Ricardo Brennes at www.aratours.com.

discover the nearly-hidden oasis of the Monteverde Cloud Forest. Listen to howler monkeys and watch flocks of scarlet macaws fly overhead, while enjoying a picnic lunch in the rain forest. You can witness the power of Arenal, one of the world's most-active volcanoes, and then soak in the relaxing waters of the nearby hot springs. And for going completely "natural," try the discreetly-nude beach at Playita in Manuel Antonio.

Just how 'Friendly' is Costa Rica?

Acting "appropriately" is the key to enjoying a romantic trip in Costa Rica. Whether you bring a partner or meet one there, Brennes suggests that you just keep in mind that it is a Latin-American country. "You can openly say 'I am gay' and nobody will point at you for that. But two

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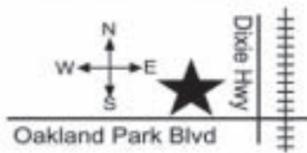
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