

# Get Up and GO!

Kate Chambré discovers the joys of solo travel...

In Northern Ireland a woman would be told to 'catch herself on' if she were to meet a bloke at a bus stop then, an hour later, end up platonically sharing a room in a hostel with him.

But, crazy as it might seem, it's a very different story in Central America, where backpackers of all ages, sexes and nationalities bunk up together, primarily to keep their travelling expenses down.

Meeting fellow travellers on boats, buses (and at bus stops), then sharing rooms and dorms with them is the norm when you're travelling by yourself. You hang out for a few days, and when you tire of each other's company, you move on, after politely exchanging emails, knowing full well you'll probably never hear from each other again.

The freedom of travelling alone knows no bounds. It's liberating and empowering, and – you might find this surprising – something loads of 20- to 40+-year-old women are doing these days.

## Hey, Gringo...

It was a rather impulsive decision of mine to book a ticket to Costa Rica, spurred on by a friend who'd recently returned. Fed up with dreary stories of the recession, not to mention the chilly Northern Irish weather, I used whatever savings I had, decided to throw caution to the wind and go for it.

And so - with a budget of £2,000 for my trip (including flights), equipped with a backpack and *Lonely Planet's* Costa Rica



guide, I took off for just under two months.

There are relatively few places you can travel to in the world that offer such beautiful landscape, exotic wildlife and tropical diversity as Costa Rica.

Bordered by Nicaragua to the north, Panama to the east and south, the Pacific Ocean to the west and south, and the Caribbean sea to the east, Costa Rica, which translates literally as rich coast, offers travellers a vast spectrum of things to see and do.

My seven-week trip was packed full of fun and adventure, and saw me cross the Costa Rican border into Nicaragua, a country much poorer than Costa Rica, but equally as beautiful. I partly wanted to avail of Nicaragua's cheaper prices, but also to escape Costa Rica's 'gringo' tourist trail for a few weeks – which, on occasion, I found devoid of much cross-cultural interaction.

While in Nicaragua, I went to a full moon festival near the coastal town of San Juan del Sur, where I saw my first cock fight; a rather hideous experience and not something I would ever recommend watching.

I also sailed to the magical island of Ometepe where I climbed Maderas volcano. This involved a gruelling nine-hour hike in the rain and mud over very uneven terrain. On the mainland, I later took in the colonial charms of Granada, one of the oldest occupied cities in the western hemisphere, and visited nearby Lagunja de



Apoyo for the day, to swim and kayak in its blissfully warm crater lake.

One of the highlights of my entire trip was travelling for 14 hours by boat across Lake Nicaragua, to a town called San Carlos in the south-eastern region of the country. Once there, I hopped on another boat, and travelled up the Rio San Juan, to the remote village of El Castillo, passing numerous turtles - not to mention crocs - along the way.

## Going Wild

Back in Costa Rica, volcanoes and waterfalls featured high on my itinerary, particularly in the northwestern Guanacaste region of the country where I walked to the base of Volcán Arenal, one of the world's top ten most active volcanoes.

And there were many other activities – canopy tours, yoga and meditation retreats, surfing, river kayaking, white-water rafting, scuba diving, horse-riding, visiting hot springs – I could have participated in, had my budget allowed.

The five days I spent relaxing in the coastal towns of Montezuma, and Santa Teresa (a surfer's paradise) situated on northwest Costa Rica's Nicoya Peninsula ([www.nicoyapeninsula.com](http://www.nicoyapeninsula.com)) would have been perfect, had I not, rather, foolishly forgotten to put sun cream on my feet while out walking along the beach...

My travels also took me to the glorious Osa Peninsula in southwestern Costa Rica,

where, after a ten-hour bumpy bus journey to the region's main town, Puerto Jimenez, I was greeted by Mike Boston, a biologist originally from Moy, Co Armagh. Mike, dubbed the 'Crocodile Dundee' of the Osa, due to his knowledge of the predators, had offered to let me volunteer for his adventure tours company, Osa Aventura ([www.osaaventura.com](http://www.osaaventura.com)). This entailed helping look after a group of tourists during a trek through Corcovado National Park. The experience was incredible, if challenging, and included wading through crocodile- and shark-infested waters at night, covering over 55 km on foot in three days.

During my ten days on the Peninsula, I also visited Osa Wildlife Sanctuary ([www.osawildlife.org](http://www.osawildlife.org)), a non-profit organisation dedicated to the care of orphaned and injured wild animals for subsequent re-introduction to their original habitat. The Sanctuary is located on the northeastern corner of the Golfo Dulce, and can only be reached by boat from Puerto Jimenez.

One of the most liberating things for me about my solo travelling experience, at the grand old age of 30, was that I did not feel as though I had to conform to anything. I wore no make-up, the same clothes throughout my expedition (in between trips to the launderette), ate what and when I wanted, and only hung out and shared rooms with people I felt comfortable around. Even if my first encounter with them did happen to take place in a bus shelter...

## Top tips for female backpackers...

### Transport:

Travelling by local bus and boat is an economical way to see Costa Rica and Nicaragua. It is also a good way to meet local people and other backpackers, take in the spectacular landscape and become immersed in the local culture.

### Food:

There are numerous 'sodas', which are small family-run roadside diners or luncheonettes that offer simple local food; but be aware that some include tax in their bills. Be prepared to pay through the nose if you choose to eat in European style restaurants, particularly in uber-touristy areas.

### Hostels:

Hostels vary in price. On average, expect to pay at least \$5 to \$12 dollars per night if you're sharing a dorm or room. You'll pay a little more - between \$10 to \$30 - if you are on your own (accommodation and food prices are considerably cheaper in Nicaragua). Most hostels offer internet access and have self-catering facilities.

### General Advice:

- Take a good guide book. *Lonely Planet* is considered by many as the traveller's bible.

Learn a bit of Spanish (the Costa Rican and Nicaraguan national language) or at least take a phrasebook with you.

- Don't keep all your money, passport and plane tickets together. Split them up.
- Pre-booking a taxi upon arrival in Costa Rica and Nicaragua's main airports is a must, even if you end up paying over the odds.

- Take a good pair of hiking boots.
- Don't pack too many clothes, as you'll only feel frustrated when you are forced to lug a heavy rucksack around. There are good launderette services in most places. You can also buy clothes while you're there.

- Take plenty of sun cream and mosquito repellent.
- Don't walk around alone by yourself at night.
- Keep your valuables close to you at all times.

### Flights:

You can find good flight deals to Costa Rica by booking on-line via STA travel or Expedia.com. The best time to visit Central America is during the dry season from December to April.