



Latin America Trip (L20A-1) Costa Rica – San José

I headed down to Central America for a 19-day visit to Costa Rica and Panamá.

Many visitors to Costa Rica skip the capital, San José, and typically head for one of the beach resorts. I'm not much of a beach person, so I stayed in San José for the duration but visited other parts of the country through a series of day trips. This photo set focuses on my time in San José.

While in San José, I visited two outstanding museums focused on pre-Columbian (before Columbus and the Europeans arrived) culture and artifacts and a very good national history museum, as well as a few other museums and a number of lesser sites, and soaked up some of the city's atmosphere.

My hotel was on Avenida Central, the main street through the city center, and my sightseeing targets were all within walking distance – well, what I consider walking distance.



Shops and restaurants lined Av. Central, converted to a pedestrian mall for several blocks. It was filled with pedestrians most of the time.



Av. Central felt more upscale than Avenida 4 did. Which only meant that Av. 4 felt like it had a lot more color and character – not that this shadowy picture conveys that very well.



I saw a number of “Ropa Americana” clothing stores. I found out that “gently” used clothes from the United States are sent to Costa Rica and sold in such stores. United States fashion is quite popular.

And note I said “United States fashion”, not “American fashion”. I was told that the term “American” in Costa Rica includes Central and South Americans, including Costa Ricans. Just apparently not when it comes to “ropa”.



A touch of home. I've come across "Las Vegas" clubs in a number of countries, and they often look about like this one does.



You can pick up just about anything in central San José's shopping district.

Don't worry. It's not what you think. The sign on the window suggests that STD actually has something to do with packages.

The first of the museums I visited was the Pre-Columbian Gold Museum, which presented a large collection of gold, pottery and other artifacts from pre-Columbian Costa Rica.



I was quite impressed by how well so many artifacts survived over hundreds and even thousands of years.

Adjacent was the small Numismatic Museum, which mostly featured representative sets of Costa Rican coins and currency over time.



The National Theatre of Costa Rica



Mercado Central (Central Market) features a number of food and merchandise stalls as well as eateries. It seemed to be much more oriented towards the interest of locals than the routine souvenir stalls that dominated in the Mercado Municipal de Artesanías (Municipal Craft Market) a few blocks away.



The Metropolitan Cathedral of San José



Central Park, across the street from the cathedral, is a popular place to hang out on a nice day.



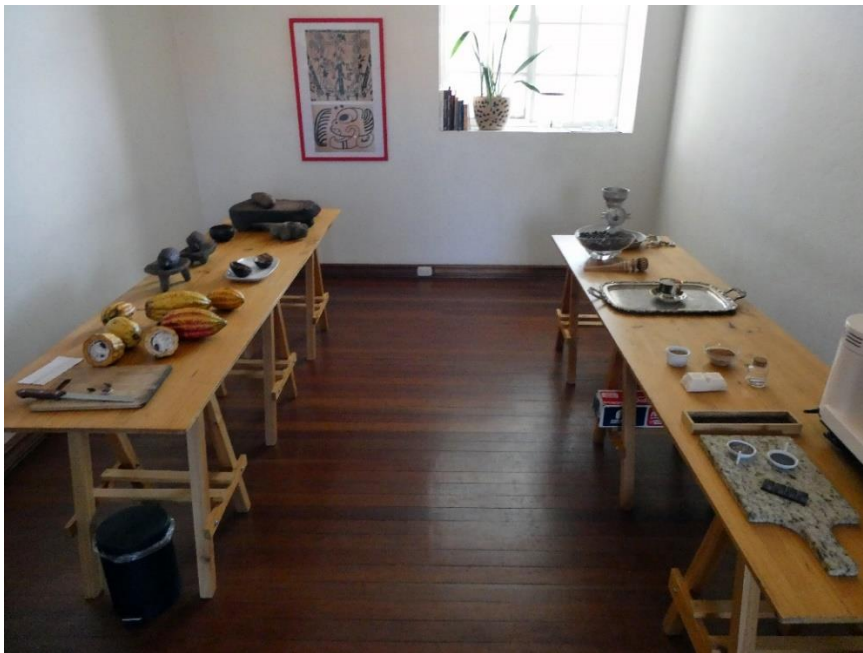
Immediately to the north of the city center are three small parks. Parque España includes this statue of Juan Vasquez de Coronado, the Spanish conqueror and first governor of Costa Rica. His uncle explored much of what is now the southwestern U.S. in the 1540s.



Across the street from the Peace Garden Park is Edificio Metálico, a school building made of metal. It was designed and built in Belgium in 1896, and shipped to Costa Rica. I'd see a second metal building made at the same place on one of my day trips.



I headed north to visit the Simon Bolívar Zoo and National Botanical Garden. Alas, the zoo was a rather sad little place – even the primates here look sad – and the botanical garden wasn't at all informative.



I booked the Botánica Chocolate tour in town, which was very interesting. Botánica Chocolate is a boutique specialty chocolate maker, so this was no factory tour. Instead they provided an interesting overview of the 5000-year history of our use of the pods and seeds of the cacao tree, from which we now extract cocoa solids and cocoa butter used to make chocolate. There were several tastings through the history lesson, culminating in the making of a specialty chocolate bar of my own (chocolate with cardamom).



I went to the misleadingly names Parque Nacional (it's not one of Costa Rica's numerous national parks, just a block-sized city park) to see its "National Monument of Costa Rica", and found a local food festival was underway. I hung out with the locals for a while, listening to music and scrounging up an early dinner at the stalls.

The National Monument itself pays tribute to a Costa Rican military victory over the United States. You read that right. In the pre-Civil War U.S., southerner William Walker thought he'd try to add some slave states to the U.S., first by leading a private invasion into Baja California and then later Nicaragua, Costa Rica's neighbor to the north. After occupying Granada, Nicaragua, Walker declared himself to be the president of Nicaragua, decreed that English was the official language, and re-instituted slavery, which had been banned in Central American countries in the 1820s. Costa Rican president Juan Rafael Mora raised an army of Costa Ricans and other Central Americans, and launched a counter-offensive, killing many of those in Walker's band and driving Walker out of the region.

The biggest consequence was that this went a long way towards establishing national pride and national identity in the countries of Central America.



Castillo Azul is part of the national legislative assembly complex.



A number of murals line the streets in the neighborhood near the legislative assembly complex.

One of the best museums I've come across anywhere was San José's Museum of Jade and Pre-Columbian Culture. It combined its extensive presentation of artifacts with cultural context in a well-organized (and bilingual) way. This museum alone is reason to spend at least a day of your Costa Rica visit in San José – even better if you combine it with the Pre-Columbian Gold Museum and National Museum of Costa Rica.



Carved jade items on display at the Jade Museum



Ceramic items on display at the Jade Museum



The ridged items in the lower left were “stamps” for applying body paint in regular, repeated patterns. The cylindrical ones were used kind of like paint rollers.



It was not unusual to see human or animal features incorporated into the pottery and carvings.



Evidence that native women in the pre-Columbian era did not use bras to provide the lift and separation that they desired.



Beyond the regular exhibits was a room that had thousands of additional artifacts simply displayed on shelves.



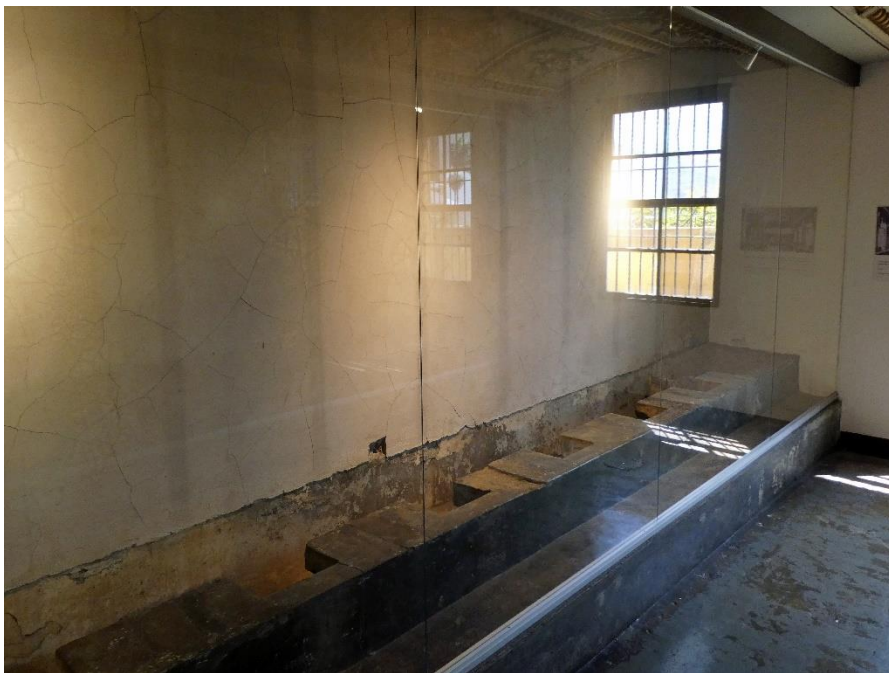
View from the Jade Museum across the Plaza de la Democracia y de la Abolición del Ejército towards the National Museum of Costa Rica, the country's very good national history museum. The museum is housed in what was an army barracks, with bullet damage surviving from the country's 1948 civil war. The plaza itself pays tribute to the country's decision to abolish its military at the end of the war.



The museum does a good job of presenting the country's history from the pre-Columbian era through modern times.



The Diquís Spheres were carved by the extinct pre-Columbian Diquís culture. More than 300 of these “bolas de piedra” (literally, balls of stone) have been found, primarily in the Diquís Delta and Isla del Caño areas of the country, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Although evidence suggests some association between the spheres and tribal chiefs, their meaning is still undetermined. These are on display at the National Museum. Others are on display at the Jade Museum.



Original sit-down “toilets” in the barracks that now houses the museum. Parts of the barracks have been maintained to highlight the history of the structure.



When I first settled into my San José hotel, I took my usual short walk to acquaint myself with the neighborhood and scout out local markets. I was surprised when I almost immediately stumbled upon the city's small Chinatown.



I was just as surprised to find this tribute to Beatle John Lennon in the heart of Chinatown.

My longest city walk was when I headed west out to Parque La Sabana to check out the park and a couple museums in the area.



Along the way I cut through Parque Beneméritos, which featured this tribute to Costa Rica’s national anthem.



Parque La Sabana is a large, flat greenspace that was once the country’s original international airport. Today it mostly features grassy areas, sports fields and the National (soccer) Stadium of Costa Rica.



At its east end is the Museum of Costa Rican Art, which displays a small collection of paintings, photos and sculptures primarily by Costa Rican artists.



The museum is housed in what was the airport's main facility. Its old waiting room – Salón Dorado – displays a bronze-plate bas-relief mural that depicts several scenes based on Costa Rica's history.

Just beyond the far west end of Parque La Sabana is the Natural Science Museum La Salle. It's really more of a display of a massive collection of rocks, insects, shells and taxidermy-stuffed animals than a museum, though, as it provides little more than names and specimens. Still worth seeing, but far enough from the city center that if you skipped a museum, this would be one to skip.



Some of its 8400 examples of 1200 species of butterflies from around the world.



I found very few “sit down for dinner” restaurants in the neighborhood around my hotel. Most were either “sodas” or U.S. fast food chains. A “soda” is sort of the Costa Rican equivalent to a small-town diner, but generally open-air, limited seating and local cuisine with a lot of emphasis on beans and rice.

In addition to the above, I found Carl’s Jr., Wendy’s, Dominos, Starbucks, Taco Bell, Johnny Rocket and other U.S. chains on this trip.

But even the U.S. chains offered some variety that their U.S.-located counterparts don’t, something I’ve found in other countries, too. McDonalds offered a Club House Burger, a triple hamburger with bacon and its McNífica burger, its CBO (cheese-bacon-onion, both burgers and chicken), and fried chicken – options that would make its U.S. dinner menu much more appealing.

For breakfast? The McPinto Deluxe (eggs and sausage with sides of rice & beans, fried plantain and a tortilla) is an option.

And for what it’s worth, the first McDonalds outside of the U.S. and Canada opened in San José, Costa Rica in 1970.



If your dining tastes run more towards ferret-based cuisine, don't bother stopping at one of the local ferreterías. "Ferretería" is not some clever combination of "ferret" and "cafeteria". A "ferretería" is a hardware/building supply store.

This gives you some idea of what I found in San José.