

BELLA VISTA PRIVATE RESORT · COSTA RICA

10 Best-Kept Secrets of Costa Rica

*The local foods, hidden places, and everyday magic
most tourists never discover.*

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PURA VIDA, INSIDER

After years of living in Costa Rica and hosting guests on our mountaintop between San Ramón and Esparza, we've learned something: the real magic of this country isn't on the tour brochures. It's in the everyday culture and the hidden corners the buses never reach — many of them right around us.

Here are ten of our favorite local secrets. Do even a few and you won't feel like a tourist — you'll feel like a Tico.

SECRET N° 1

Slow down at the church-front park

Every Costa Rican town is built around a central park with a grand Catholic church facing it. In the late afternoon and evening, families pour out — kids chasing pigeons, couples on benches, vendors selling snacks. Buy an ice cream, find a bench, and just watch Tico life unfold. It's free, and it's the truest window into the culture you'll ever find.

SECRET N° 2

Eat where the locals eat — a "soda"

Skip the tourist restaurants and look for a *soda*, the tiny family-run eateries on nearly every corner. Order a *casado* — rice, black beans, sweet plantains, fresh salad, and your choice of meat — for just a few dollars. It's the honest, home-cooked heart of Costa Rican food.

Tico tip: wash it down with a *fresco* — a fresh-blended fruit drink.

SECRET N° 3

Wander a weekend "feria"

On Saturday mornings, towns hold a *feria* — an open-air farmers market piled with tropical fruit, vegetables, and flowers grown a few miles away. Sample a fruit you've never seen, and grab a piece of fresh *caña* (sugar cane): chew the stalk and suck out the impossibly sweet juice.

SECRET N° 4

Warm up with agua dulce & squeaky cheese

Straight from that sugar cane comes *agua dulce*, the country's cozy traditional drink: hot water melted with *tapa dulce* (raw cane sugar). Locals pair it with fresh *queso Turrialba*, a mild white cheese that literally squeaks against your teeth. Pure comfort — the taste of the Costa Rican countryside.

SECRET N° 5

Balneario Las Musas, San Ramón

Just outside San Ramón, this local swimming-and-recreation spot hides a large waterfall and forest trails — one leading to the base of the falls, another climbing toward the top. It's where local families cool off, and international visitors almost never find it.

≈ a short drive from Bella Vista

SECRET N° 6

Cataratas Ángel Gabriel

Now we're into the *really* obscure. This dramatic 40-meter waterfall near San Antonio de Zapotal is reached by a moderate 3.6-km outing — with the final approach requiring a 4x4 or high-clearance vehicle. That little bit of effort keeps the crowds away entirely, so you may have this thundering giant all to yourself.

≈ in Bella Vista's backyard · bring a 4x4

SECRET N° 7

Peñas Blancas & Montes de Oro

A whole region most visitors overlook — known for birdwatching, dramatic limestone mountains, and the Jabonal River canyon. Nearby Sabana Bonita opens onto sweeping views across the Gulf of Nicoya toward the mountains of Montes de Oro and San Ramón. Quiet, wild, and yours to explore.

≈ near Bella Vista, toward the coast

SECRET N° 8

Catch a "mejenga" at sunset

Soccer isn't a sport in Costa Rica — it's the heartbeat. As the day cools, head to any town's field for a *mejenga*, a casual pickup game. Watch from the sideline, cheer, and you may just get waved in to play. There's no faster way to feel like part of the community.

SECRET N° 9

Order a "Churchill" in Puntarenas

In the port town of Puntarenas — right on the way to the Pacific coast — locals line up for a *Churchill*: a glorious mountain of shaved ice drenched in syrup, condensed and powdered milk, and crowned with ice cream. Wonderfully over-the-top, uniquely Costa Rican, and almost no tourist knows to ask for one.

SECRET N° 10

Tour the National Theater in San José

Give a couple of hours to the *Teatro Nacional*, Costa Rica's most beautiful building — marble staircases, gold leaf, and, on the ceiling, the famous mural of the coffee and banana harvest. That same painting was once printed on the old **five-colón bill**, so you're standing under a piece of the country's money and its history at the very same time.

★ More secrets near Bella Vista

- **Jesús María Estuary** — not Instagram-famous at all (which is the point): fishing, rich flora and fauna, and clouds of colorful birds.
- **Tivives Beach & El Hoyo** — a hidden Puntarenas surf spot most international visitors have never even heard of.
- **A free hot-spring river** — skip the Arenal resort prices; locals soak in volcano-heated rivers for free. Ask around — that's half the fun.
- **A "fiesta patronal"** — if a town's patron-saint festival lines up with your trip, go: food, music, *topes* (horse parades), and Tico bull-dodging.

YOUR HOME BASE FOR ALL OF IT

Come live it for yourself

Nearly every secret in this guide is within reach of Bella Vista Private Resort — a whole private resort on its own mountaintop, with 360° views, four pickleball courts, a pool, and room for up to 28 guests.

Watch your inbox, too — as a member of our list you'll get **exclusive and last-minute discounts** before anyone else.

Plan your stay at bellavistacostarica.com

P.S. When you land, the customs officer will ask where you're staying — just say "Bella Vista Private Resort, between San Ramón and Esparza," how long you're staying, and have a return ticket handy. You'll sail right through.