

# NW TRAVELER

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## TRAVEL WISE

*Is January the best time to buy a cruise?*

By JANE WOOLDRIDGE  
Miami Herald

You may think of January as the start of 2018, but for the cruise industry, the early months are Wave Season. That's when most lines, home ports and industry groups pull out their big marketing campaigns, urging travelers to book early for the season ahead. Promotions promise "the best deals of the year." But is that really true?

The answer is "maybe."

If you view a "deal" as the rock-bottom price to get on board any major ship, then Wave Season probably won't deliver. Last-minute fares do still exist — if you define "last minute" as within a month of sailing. (Because of security regulations, week-of-sailing bookings are no longer allowed.) If you are not particularly picky about your ship, cabin or itinerary, you can find fares for as little as \$70 per person per night.

But if you view a "deal" as getting the best value for your dollar on a ship and itinerary that's on your favorites list, then you definitely want to check out the January offerings, says Cruise Critic's Carolyn Spencer Brown.

(Tip: Sign up online for news from your preferred cruise lines. They will alert you to flash deals that you may otherwise miss.)

### FARE IS ONLY ONE FACTOR

For sailings in late spring, summer or fall, "Wave Season is definitely a smart time to buy a cruise," says Brown. That's because on most ships, the cruise fare is only one factor in your tab. "You'll want to buy a beverage package. You know you'll want to buy shore excursions." Those and other "value-added" extras — such as airfare, Wi-Fi, specialty-restaurant dining and tips — are often available with the base price as part of Wave Season deals.

That also applies to luxury lines such as Seabourn, Silversea, Crystal and Regent. "Space is more limited on the luxury ships, so bookings have been coming in (earlier), to get the best selection and prices," Jean Sauleau, president of Sixth Star Travel, said in an email. Bookings have picked up in recent years, "so we encourage our clients to book during the Wave season, to get a better price and a better selection."

What's more, Wave Season dictates the rhythm for the rest of the year, says Brown. Hot destinations such as Europe or Alaska can nearly sell out during Wave Season, meaning you might have trouble finding cabins at all. And destinations with relatively few cruises, such as French Polynesia, also book up early.

### SOONER SOMETIMES BETTER

In fact, when it comes to superhot destinations, says expert Stewart Chiron, Wave Season may be too late. "Each destination has its own peak booking period. If people wait until January-March to book Europe or Alaska, prices typically would be 20-40 percent higher than had they booked earlier," he writes via email.

That's also true with river cruises — especially if you're looking for more than one cabin. Specials that package cabin upgrades and well-priced airfares are offered as much as a year in advance; by the time January arrives, those deals are long expired.

The bottom line: If you're traveling with a group on a small ship, book as early as you can set your schedule, and be sure to purchase travel insurance to protect your investment against unexpected problems. If you're booking on a larger ship, keep your eyes open this Wave Season. But once you find a price you like, don't tarry.

River runners rafting to Costa Rica's Pacuare Lodge encounter easy Class 2 rapids getting there; and when they leave, heart-pounding Class 4 and 5 rapids downstream.



STEVE HAGGERTY / TNS



STEVE HAGGERTY / TNS

Keel-billed toucans, brightly colored and slow-flying, are easy to spot in dense rain forests such as those in the Pacuare River gorge.

## Luxury amid nature in safe Costa Rica

By ANNE Z. COOKE  
Tribune News Service

TURRIALBA, Costa Rica — It was 6:01 a.m. when we heard them barking, an insistent "huh-huh-huh-huh" floating through the rain-forest canopy and over Pacuare Lodge.

"Howler monkeys," said Steve, squinting at his watch. Then a toucan weighed in, two long, raspy "screeches" close to our deck, in the Rio Pacuare Forest Reserve, in eastern Costa Rica's Barbillia National Park.

Up in a flash, we grabbed the binoculars and dashed outside, where a chorus of honks, chirps and whistles ushered in the dawn.

"Shhhh!" Steve said, hopefully, peering over the railing into the underbrush. "Listen! Was that a growl?"

Wildlife on parade is a predictable event at most Costa Rican eco-lodges. Coatis, capuchin monkeys, birds and butterflies lead off, followed by sloths, bacillus lizards (also called Jesus lizards because they "walk" on water) and green frogs, with howler monkeys, tapirs, armadillos and tarantulas at the rear. But big cats, ocelots and pumas? Once in a green moon.

"Jaguars? Maybe, but don't count on it," said travel planner Alison Carey, three months earlier when she called to talk about our trip. A Latin America specialist with Scott Dunn Private Journeys (scottdunn.com), Carey and her colleagues research and book custom, personalized adventures for individual travelers.

We'd been to Costa Rica before, but just briefly, on a cruise-ship stopover. This time would be different, we agreed. Hence the call to Scott Dunn, a leader in the growing trend toward custom travel.

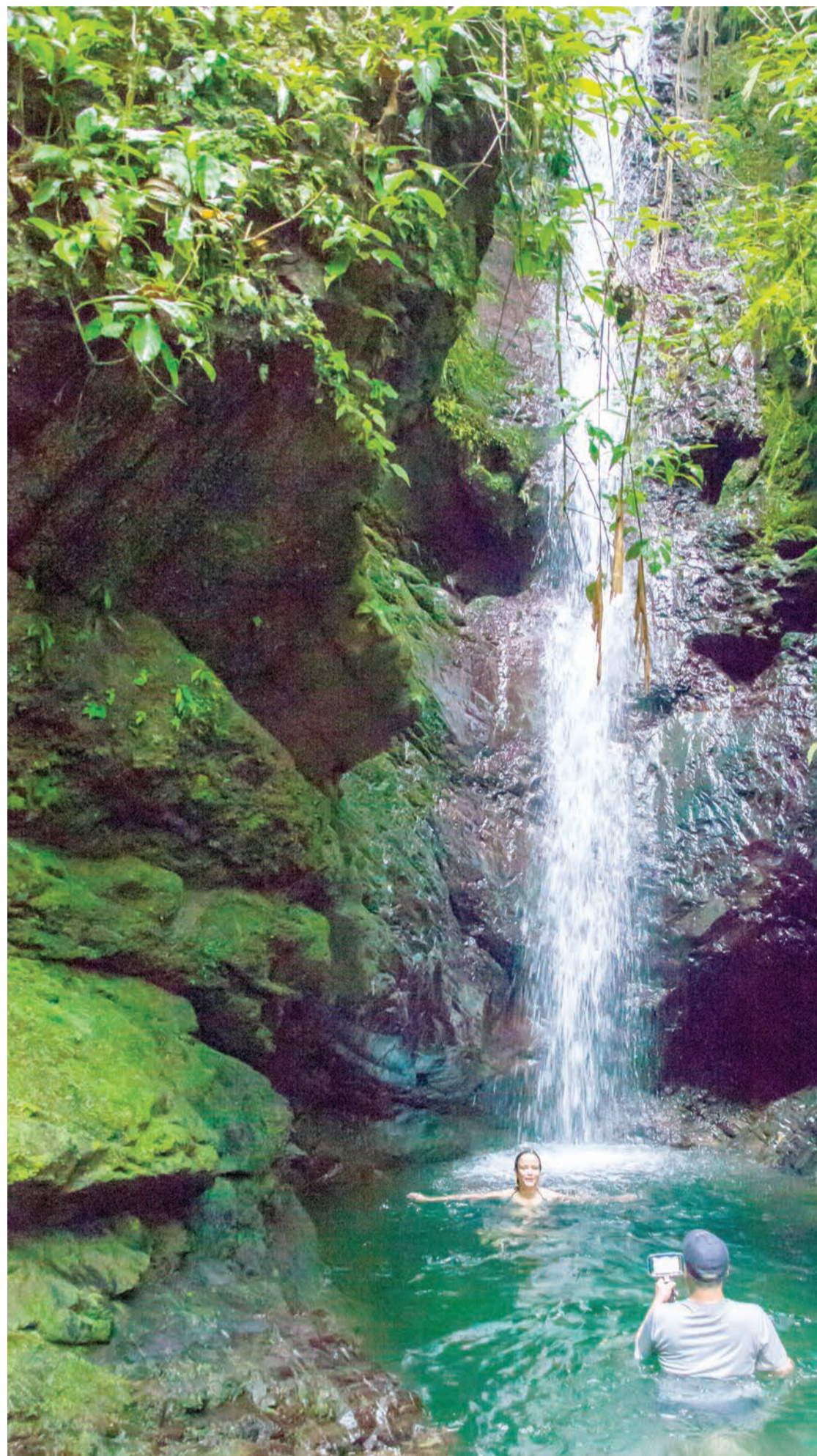
### A SAFE HAVEN

"You'll like Pacuare Lodge," said Carey. "It's on the river, an easy, four-mile raft ride downstream," she said. "It's known for wildlife, and wild cats, too, though they're rarely seen. It's isolated, but that's part of the appeal. You know what they say: Costa Rica is one of Central America's safest countries."

Was it? Sporadic upheavals have plagued Central America for decades, from corrupt governments and armed insurrections to civil wars and more recently, drug trafficking. What makes Costa Rica different?

Then our itinerary arrived in the mail, a spiral-bound notebook listing dates, places and our contacts at

See > COSTA RICA, H2



STEVE HAGGERTY / TNS

A half-hour's hike from Pacuare Lodge leads to a hidden waterfall.

## < Costa Rica

FROM H1

each, with blank space for notes. The last three nights would be on our own, joining well-heeled friends for a reunion at Villa Manzu, a palatial mansion on the Papagayo Peninsula.

But the question lingered. “Is it true? Is Costa Rica Central America’s safest country?” I asked Abel, the driver who picked us up at the Juan Santamaria International Airport, in San José, the capital.

“We think so,” he said, heading for the Finca Rosa Blanca hotel, north of the city. “It’s because we have no military,” he continued. “The money pays instead for schools, high school and college, and for health care and doctors. And it’s all free,” he said.

“Of course, there are always people who don’t want to work and are tempted to steal. But most people here have jobs,” he added as we reached the hotel, a restored, 14-suite Spanish Colonial house and coffee plantation, with a pool and a popular open-air restaurant.

### SUSTAINABLE COFFEE

On time for the day’s coffee-plantation tour, we thought we’d learn about coffee. But the two-hour uphill walk with naturalist Manolo Munoz was as much about sustainable farming as it was about a good cup of joe.

Guiding us among the coffee trees, planted in volcanic soil between banana and poro trees in a mixed-species forest, Munoz explained that “trees add important minerals” to the soil. “A mix of sun and shade grows better ‘cherries’ (coffee beans) than the big commercial farms do,” he said.

That evening, as the sun slipped between the palm fronds and Miguel, the hotel waiter, came around with menus, I decided to see what he’d say. “Uh, Miguel, why do people say Costa Rica is Central America’s safest country?”

“Because we don’t have an army,” he said. “After the civil war, in 1949, the government decided that paying for education, hospitals, culture and parks was more important than guns and soldiers.”

Local police handle regional crime and a national government-supported 70-man team of “commandos,” a trained “security and intervention” group, is available for extreme emergencies. But beyond that, no army.

In Costa Rica, we learned, education, health and the environment are more than a campaign promise. They are the framework for a peaceful future.

No wildlife conversation lasted more than 10 minutes before the topic turned to Costa Rica’s many species, and how they have adapted to the country’s 12 climate



STEVE HAGGERTY / TNS

Hike through the grounds at Costa Rica’s Nayara Springs Resort, near Arenal Volcano, and get lost in the landscaping, with tropical plants and flowers crowding every path, enhancing every pool and flanking every restaurant.



STEVE HAGGERTY/TNS

Arenal Volcano’s unexpected 2010 eruption reminded observers that Central Costa Rica’s most iconic geological feature can be unpredictable.



STEVE HAGGERTY/TNS

Pacuare Lodge’s luxurious Linda Vista Suites, high up in the rain-forest canopy and with screened walls on three sides, feel like being outdoors.

zones, each at a different altitude, from sea level to the summit of frosty, 12,533-foot Cerro Chirripó Volcano.

Rafting through the Pacuare River’s narrow gorge, to Pacuare Lodge on the river bank, we could see the difference between the trees along the river gorge and those on

the mountainside above, where the howler monkeys live.

Alone in the forest, Pacuare Lodge is both self-sustaining (electricity is limited to several hours daily), rustic and luxurious. Candles light the upstairs bar and hall, and the dining room downstairs and

adjoining deck, where all meals are served. Most of the bungalows have some screened walls, bringing the outside in. The first group was built along the river; the luxury suites climb the hill, each a five-star treehouse.

Our days were busy with discovery hikes, wildlife

prowls and trips to the nearby indigenous village, with an occasional plunge pool dip and nap in our hammock. Leisured dinners with like-minded guests made the rain forest silence that much more serene.

### SOPHISTICATION, TOO

A startling contrast, indeed, to our next destination, Nayara Springs Resort, on a highway near Arenal Volcano National Park, in central Costa Rica. Greeted by a uniformed bell hop, we thought we’d made a wrong turn.

But this popular vacation village and honeymoon retreat only masquerades as a hotel. In fact, it offers urban sophistication in a rain-forest setting. With its sumptuous suites — and swimming pools, shaded patios, bars and pubs, a spa and gym, restaurants and shops — connected by a maze of heavily landscaped serpentine paths, each is hidden from the next. A five-minute walk beneath the trees — with resident birds and 30-odd sloths overhead — was a stroll in the woods.

As our trip ended, we said goodbye to our driver, Andreas, who delivered us to Villa Manzu. And there was the mansion, overlooking the ocean, a modern, sandy-colored stone building flanked by grassy lawns and trees, pools and patios.

Art and artifacts lined the corridors and walls. The kitchen-plus-barstools adjoined the living and dining rooms; the theater, two bars, party room and eight luxurious bedrooms with bath completed the luxury. A path to the cliff-side barbecue circle faced the sunset.

With a staff of 12, including butler and three chefs, this luxurious hideaway, on five acres, guarantees privacy for



Source: ESRI  
EMILY M. ENG / THE SEATTLE TIMES

### IF YOU GO

#### Getting there

Fly into Juan Santamaria International Airport, in San José. For Villa Manzu, in Guanacaste Province, fly into Liberia Airport.

#### Lodging

All lodging prices may vary with discounts, dates and availability.

- At **Finca Rosa Blanca**, near San José, double rooms start at \$254 per night; fincarosablanca.com/en.

- At **Pacuare Lodge**, rates for two in a bungalow with meals, most recreation and nonalcoholic beverages start at \$766; three nights are recommended; pacuarelodge.com.

- At **Nayara Springs Resort**, bungalows for two start at \$351; nayarasprings.com.

- At **Villa Manzu**, the all-inclusive rate for the house is priced per night. Multiple guests, groups and families can share the cost. Call for availability and rates; villamanzu.com.

**More information**  
Costa Rica Tourism Board: [visitcostarica.com/en](http://visitcostarica.com/en)

those who can afford it: celebrities, tech-company millionaires, movie moguls, industry titans and sports greats. For us, being there was dumb luck.

“Make yourself at home,” said our hostess, with a warm hug. “Take in the scenery,” or join us in the pool; it’s heated. “Meet our butler, Luis Morena, who makes the most marvelous cocktails.”

Sit at the kitchen counter and “talk ingredients,” with the chefs, or “ask about wine-pairings.” Borrow a kayak or fishing gear and walk down to the beach. Take a car, to visit the Beach Club or play golf. “Villa Manzu has guest privileges.” Arrive by yacht and tie up in the harbor. Or fly: “The driver will meet you at the airport.”

The Villa sleeps 20-plus adults and/or children. Because this is your house, everything’s included: Meals, wine, cocktails, snacks, sports equipment, fishing gear, a car, guides, and as always, Costa Rican hospitality.

# Rick Steves: What’s new in Italy for 2018

By RICK STEVES  
Tribune Content Agency

Italy bubbles with emotion, corruption, traffic jams, strikes, religious holidays and crowds.irate ranters shake their fists at each other one minute and walk arm-in-arm the next. It’s bella chaos, and if you’re up-to-date on your sightseeing and transit info, you’ll love it. Here’s the latest, gleaned from research done for the 2018 edition of my Italy guidebook, to help you enjoy Europe’s richest, craziest culture.

**ROME:** Rome has been improving its tourist infrastructure and offerings. Two new sound-and-light shows in the Trajan’s Forum area are an increasingly popular evening activity: the Caesar’s Forum Stroll and the Forum of Augustus Show. Both help you imagine the world of the Caesars, as colorful images are projected on ancient walls, columns and porticos while English narration brings the story to life. And Ara Com’era (“The Ara as it was”) is a new 45-minute “virtual reality” show at Museo dell’Ara Pacis, which allows visitors to see what the Altar of Peace looked like in its day. The Pantheon, one of the city’s best-preserved ancient monuments, which is currently free to enter, will start charging an entry fee (about \$2) in May.

I still strongly recommend getting the Roma Pass, which is now a plastic card that covers sightseeing and transportation. Rome’s main train station, Termini, has good new dining options: the modern Mercato Centrale market hall and the spacious Terrazza Termini food court.

**POMPEII:** It’s now even more worthwhile to travel south, just beyond Naples, to Pompeii. The site’s best-preserved home, the House of the Vettii, with its many surviving mosaics and frescoes, reopened after a long closure.

**FLORENCE:** As the birthplace of the Renaissance, Florence is a priority on any Italian itinerary. However, sightseers must deal with constant changes to ticketing and entry schemes. Travelers who want to view the Uffizi Gallery’s amazing collection of Italian paintings will pay a significant price increase starting in 2018. Peak-season ticket prices (March through October) are up more than 50 percent to about \$25; tickets drop to \$15 in the winter. Seasonal pricing is also being introduced at the Pitti Palace and Boboli Gardens. And for the first time, sightseers can buy a combination ticket covering all these sights. This three-day ticket gives travelers one-time priority entry to all three sights, and will cost about \$45 in peak season



LAURA VANDEVENTER / RICK STEVES’ EUROPE

A climb up Florence’s Duomo is so popular that it’s best to book a time slot in advance.

(half that in winter).

For the past couple of years, reservations have been required to climb the Florence Duomo’s famous dome, and time slots book up. If climbing the dome is a must for you, book online many days in advance of your arrival at [www.museumflorence.com](http://www.museumflorence.com).

**PISA:** Visiting nearby Pisa is easier than ever with the opening of the new “Pisa Mover” train, which connects Pisa’s airport and its train station in five minutes. Pisa’s main tourist information

office has moved to a convenient spot at the Field of Miracles, next to the Duomo’s ticket office.

**SAN GIMIGNANO:** Visitors to San Gimignano, Italy’s most overrated hill town, may be interested in a new option: gelato-making classes, offered by Sergio di Gelateria Dondoli in his kitchen down the street from his shop. Charismatic Sergio was a member of the Italian team that won the official Gelato World Cup — and his gelato really is a cut above.

**THE NORTH:** Urban im-

provements are underway in bustling northern Italy. Arriving by train in Milan is more convenient now that high-speed Italo trains stop at Milano Centrale (instead of at the less-central Porta Garibaldi station). In Venice, a new shopping hot spot has opened amid all the elegant decay. Located near the Rialto Bridge, the Fondaco dei Tedeschi luxury mall has great rooftop views of the enchanting city.

Cruise ships are now stopping in the port of La Spezia for their excursions to Flor-

ence. And, since this port puts them so close to the popular Cinque Terre region, thousands of cruisers are opting for excursions into this most spectacular stretch of the Italian Riviera. Consequently, the Cinque Terre is experiencing more congestion than ever. The hordes converge on its five tiny ports for the lovely hikes through the national park that connects them. While segments of the regional hike are invariably closed because of frequent washouts and landslides, there are always plenty of open hiking trails available in the nearby hills.

It’s always smart to beware of thieves in any place with tourist crowds (in Italy and beyond), but now that the Cinque Terre’s train stations are so often overcrowded, it’s especially important to guard against fast-fingered pickpockets there.

Italy continues to be as exquisite — and exasperating — as ever. While it may seem as orderly as spilled spaghetti, the country actually functions quite well. If you have a positive attitude, equip yourself with good information and expect to travel smart, you will. Buon viaggio!

Edmonds-based Rick Steves writes European travel guidebooks and hosts travel shows on public television and public radio.