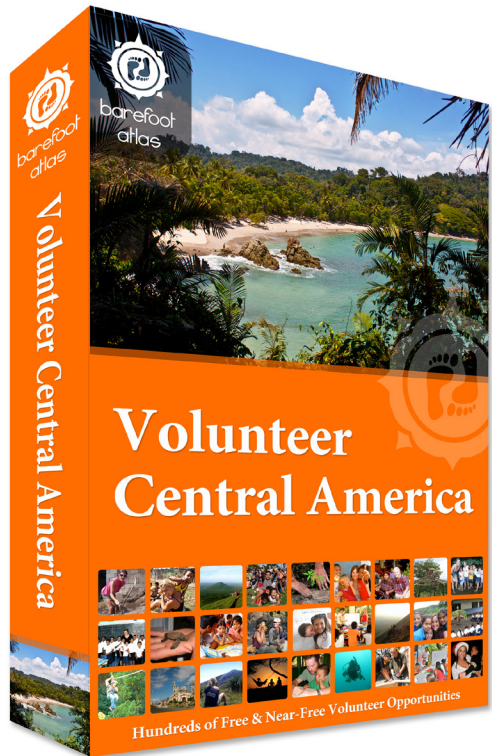


The following is an excerpt from
Barefoot Atlas: Volunteer Central America



Available for download at barefootatlas.com/guides

Be Extraordinary.



Peninsula Nicoya

VOLUNTEER ORGANIZATIONS:

- [Escuela Futuro Verde](#)
- [Rainsong Wildlife Sanctuary](#)

Peninsula Nicoya is a beautiful, wild place. Surfing put it on the map, but the tranquility of life here has attracted all manner of soul-searchers to the small beach hamlets that dot the coast. The area has only recently developed a tourism infrastructure, most notably in Montezuma, and it's still a difficult place to reach, which keeps most of the short-term vacationers away.

Peninsula Nicoya is noticeably poorer than other parts of Costa Rica, but only in economic terms. When it comes to quality of life, the gorgeous beaches and delightfully slow pace make this place rich indeed. Each of the small towns has their own unique style and each one is worth exploring.

MONTEZUMA

Montezuma is the big man on campus in this region. It's become famous as a bohemian paradise, where artists and surfers can trade the noise of civilization for funky small-town charm. The last decade has brought some modern luxuries, but hippie jewelry stands, vegan cafés, and yoga classes still dominate. Around here, someone's always smoking a spliff and the first beer is cracked well before lunch. Nights get wild, and the restaurant scene is as diverse as the community. With accommodations as cheap as US\$10 a night, budget travelers call it paradise. Montezuma's beach is a gorgeous crescent with rocky cliffs defining its borders. For swimming or surfing, most walk north to less rocky, calmer stretches or take buses to find even more remote spots.

CÓBANO

Seven kilometers inland (and straight uphill) from Montezuma lies Cóbano, the region's

capital. It's a small community where tourism doesn't play nearly as big a role as it does at the beach. Aside from the local government, it's also home to most of the big stores and the bank. Cóbano is the peninsula's bus hub, from which it's convenient to explore all the tiny coastal towns.

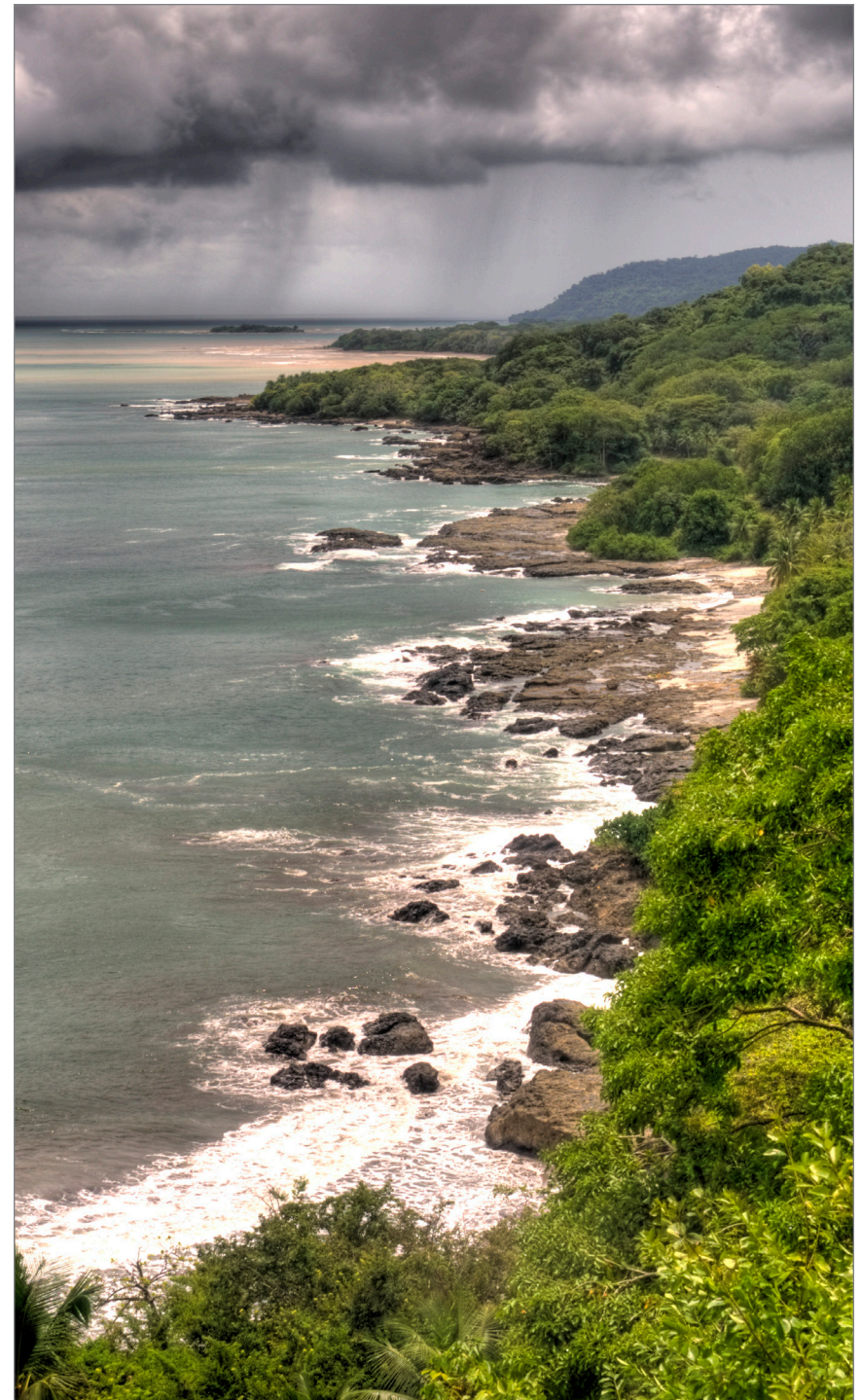
CABUYA

Cabuya is not much of a town — just the intersection of two dusty roads in the summer or two muddy ones in the winter. It's the hot, lazy kind of place where you can't quite figure out how anyone makes a living with all the napping that goes on. The rocky beaches don't draw tourists like the sandy ones of Montezuma. The only reason Cabuya even makes it on the map is because it's the jumping off point for the Cabo Blanco national park.

The small town is completely safe and very local. No one speaks English and everyone always stops to say "hola." The opportunity for cultural exchange here dwarfs that of nearby Montezuma, whose residents are predominantly foreigners.

ORIENTATION & GETTING AROUND

All the towns on the southern tip of the peninsula are within just a few miles of each other. Bad roads make traveling between them slow and bumpy. However, every town is connected to the region's humble capital of Cóbano several times a day by bus. With few roads, someone's always heading your direction, making hitchhiking a popular way to get around.





THINGS TO SEE & DO

SURF MAL PAÍS & SANTA TERESA

You know that mythical place where impossibly attractive people spend their days surfing and their nights watching sunsets from a plank-wood bar, only to end up asleep in each others' arms after passing a bottle around a beach fire? Well, Mal País is that place. It's a string of long empty beaches dotted with little clusters of artistic, hippie communities. Surfing is the only way of life and the waves repay the residents' dedication with perfect breaks all day, every day. It's an incredible place for volunteers to spend their weekends. Buses make the hour-long bumpy trip from Cóbano every day at 7:30 a.m., 11:30 a.m., and 3:30 p.m. The crossroads where the bus drops off marks the border between the Mal País and

Santa Teresa areas. The 3km of beaches south are called Mal País and the 3km of beaches north are called Santa Teresa. Aside from their names, you won't find much difference between the two except that Santa Teresa has more affordable options for accommodations. **Zeneida's Cabinas y Camping** offers sandy campsites with bathrooms and showers for US\$4 a night. If you want a roof, there are plenty of options around the US\$10-20 range. A couple of nice shops in Santa Teresa rent surfboards for US\$10 a day and offer private lessons for US\$40 an hour.

CABO BLANCO RESERVE

Just past Cabuya on the coastal road is the entrance to the **Reserva Natural Absoluta Cabo Blanco**. Cabo Blanco was the very first protected area in Costa Rica, launching the

country's incredible national park system. To come to the peninsula and miss this place would be a big mistake. The reserve is called an "absolute reserve" because people are not allowed in large swaths of it. Where you can hike, wildlife is omnipresent and the beach is breathtaking. There are several trails from the entrance. The park rangers will explain the options when you arrive. To do it right and make it all the way to the beach and back takes at least four hours, usually five.

The park is open Wednesday through Sunday, from 8 a.m. until 4 p.m. The entrance fee is US\$10. Buses leave Montezuma for the park, stopping at Cabuya on the way, every two hours from 8 a.m. until 6 p.m. The trip is just 30 minutes and costs ₡600.

PARTY IN MONTEZUMA

Montezuma is the place to be when you want to cut loose. The whole town revolves around showing tourists a good time. There are dozens of bars, ranging from the soulful stare-at-the-sea kind to the who-is-this-girl-pouring-tequila-down-my-throat type. The centerpiece of the scene is **Chico's Bar** in the middle of town. Every night around 10 p.m. the bass begins to build and the dance floor starts its inevitable slide into epic debauchery.

WHEN TO GO

Peninsula Nicoya is beautiful year round. During the summer (December through June), rain is rare and the lush hillsides turn brown and thin out considerably. The mid-day heat is oppressive, especially in April, but it hardly matters if you're in the waves. The rainy season (July through November) brings lower prices, fewer travelers, and greener hills but, of course, more rain.

ESSENTIALS

SAFETY

Peninsula Nicoya has very little crime. What little petty theft there is happens around Montezuma late at night.

HEALTH

Cóbano is home to a small clinic that offers free health services. It's the right place if you

have stomach issues or other minor ailments. For anything serious, you'll have to make the trip to San José.

BANKING

Cóbano has the only bank around. Montezuma gets by with just an ATM, and Cabuya makes due with neither. It's a good idea to bring all the cash you're going to need with you when you come. The ATM in Montezuma has been known to run out and limited bank hours (and random holidays) can cause unnecessary headaches. If you are making a trip to the bank in Cóbano, expect to spend a few hours in line and bring your passport.

INTERNET

Cóbano, Montezuma, and Cabuya all have Internet cafes. The speeds on the Peninsula are decent but the prices steep (₡1200 per hour).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Getting to the tip of Peninsula Nicoya is a pain, but that's part of the charm. The fastest and most expensive way is to take the 10:45 a.m. fast ferry from Jacó (US\$40). Reservations are required (reservations@thetaxiboat.com). Jacó is connected to San Jose by five buses daily (3 hrs, ₡2000). The second most convenient option is to take one of Montezuma Expedition's US\$45 shuttles (www.montezumaexpeditions.com), offered from every tourist spot in Costa Rica, including the airport in San José. For travelers who can time it right, a good choice is a direct bus from San Jose's Coca-Cola terminal to Montezuma (departs 6 a.m. and 2 p.m., ₡7000). The most complicated, but also the most flexible and least expensive, method of reaching the peninsula is to take a bus to Puntarenas (departs hourly from the Coca-Cola terminal in San José, 2 hours, ₡1800). Then catch the ferry to Paquera (departs every two hours from 6:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m., ₡900). Then, finally, hop on the bus that meets the ferry for an hour-long ride to Cóbano, Montezuma, or Cabuya (₡1000). All routes except the fast ferry from Jacó take about six hours.

Volunteer Organization:

Rainsong Wildlife Sanctuary

WHAT VOLUNTEERS CAN DO

- Care for wounded or sick animals
- Patrol beaches for turtle nests
- Raise and plant tree saplings for reforestation

COSTS

- Volunteering: Free!
- Accommodations: Free!

MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS

- One-month time commitment
- Medical insurance

PERFECT FOR

- Someone who wants to live rustically and spend their days caring for wildlife

Aside from a dozen or so volunteers and the fiery Texan in charge, Rainsong Wildlife Sanctuary (RWS) is also home to one white faced capuchin monkey, two toucans, four porcupines, a bluejay, a green iguana, a guinea pig, four baby howler monkeys, red and yellow river turtles, a couple of parakeets, and a pig that plays soccer. But that's just this week. It's always changing.

Located in the peninsula's small town of Cabuya, RWS cares for ailing animals and gives a voice to the region's original inhabitants. It sits on the doorstep of the Cabo Blanco Nature Reserve, with the same stunning beaches and breathtaking forests that inspired the entire Costa Rican national park system. The project gets involved in any way it can, doing what's necessary to conserve the wildlife here. Each year, RWS attracts over 200 volunteers who lend a hand in achieving these long-term conservation results. The project has a tranquil setting and an earthy, loving vibe that makes it easy to see why so many volunteers choose to come here.

ORGANIZATION & BACKGROUND

RWS was founded in the mid-1990s by Mary Lynn Perry, an American who has been in Costa Rica even longer than that. The project's work is multifaceted. First and foremost, there is the wildlife sanctuary where injured animals receive the care and love they need to recuperate. At any given time, the sanctuary provides a home to dozens of different animals on the mend.

When animals are fully healed, RWS releases them onto a 28-acre reserve adjacent to the sanctuary (another of RWS's projects). The reserve contains some primary forest, but the land was mostly degraded when RWS purchased it. Over the last 16 years, RWS has been repairing the ecosystem by breeding and reintroducing three-toed sloths, baird's tapirs, quetzals, spider monkeys, kinkajous, tepezquintles, tamandua anteaters, green iguanas, crested guans, chachalacs, native pigeons and quail, scarlet macaws... the list goes on. They also have been aggressively reforesting the area and now maintain a plant nursery to grow

endangered hardwood and native fruit trees.

The project gets involved politically on environmental issues, partners with international conservation groups, and promotes environmental education wherever it can. When you add all these projects up, it becomes obvious that RWS is not a formal organization with a narrow mission and annual reports. Instead, they are just protecting what they love every way they can. RWS is the force for conservation in the region. And their work is of special importance because Cabuya borders Costa Rica's oldest national park, the Cabo Blanco Reserve. The pressures of development are strong on this picturesque peninsula. But if there is anything stronger, it is Mary's drive to defend and preserve the homes of the local wildlife.

VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS

Everyone at RWS is a volunteer; it's a labor of love. The project makes a point to match their volunteers' work with their interests and/or experience. In other words: If you love monkeys, okay, you can work with the monkeys. They also encourage and support volunteers who have their own ideas for improving the sanctuary.

What would a Costa Rican wildlife refuge be without a one-armed capuchin monkey? Rainsong's is named Tarzan. Find him on Facebook to join his legion of fans at: facebook.com/pages/TARZAN/278080223351

CARING FOR THE ANIMALS

RWS cares for wounded or infant animals until they are healthy or old enough to survive on their own, at which time they are returned to the wild. Caring for dozens of animals requires more work than you might imagine. There's the daily chores of cleaning cages and preparing food (what volunteers usually start out doing) as well as attending to the animals' medical needs and providing stimulation. As volunteers get comfortable and learn how to care for different animals, they can take on additional responsibilities. As long as you're comfortable with it, you will be handling the animals. RWS believes that providing love is equally as important as food and medicine to an animal's recovery. Petting, playing, and hugging are encouraged.

REFORESTATION & MAINTENANCE

Volunteers chip in with the maintenance of the sanctuary and the reserve. Cages need building. Roofs need patching. There are



always carpentry projects for anyone who can swing a hammer.

Reserve maintenance includes some reforestation work. Volunteers collect seeds, nurse saplings and plant (and plant and plant). The goal is to repair the reserve's ecosystem from the bottom up. Reforestation is a precursor to the successful reintroduction of many species. RWS also sells a portion of its saplings to community members at a huge discount to promote reforestation outside the reserve.

TURTLE BEACH PATROLS

From November through April, RWS adds beach patrols to its list of volunteer activities. It's an unusually long patrolling season because the nearby Manzio beach hosts several species of sea turtles, each coming ashore at different times to lay their eggs. Every night, volunteers pair up to comb the beaches in a race to find new nests before poachers do. When a nest is discovered, the eggs are transferred to a secret hatchery in Cabuya where their chance of survival is much greater. Finding a nest is by no means an everyday occurrence, so volunteers also use the time to pick up trash (mostly washed up plastic) along the beach.

WHAT TO EXPECT

ORIENTATION

New volunteers learn the ropes by shadowing another volunteer for their first few days. They start with simple tasks like cleaning and preparing food, and slowly add responsibilities as they learn about the needs of individual animals in RWS's care.



Regulations in Costa Rica require a five-day quarantine period before foreigners may handle animals to prevent the importation and spread of any diseases. That's five days in Costa Rica, not necessarily five days at RWS. So if you fly in and come straight to RWS, you won't be able to touch the animals until your sixth day. So you may want to pad the front end of your trip with a few beach days.

HOURS AND TIME OFF

RWS volunteers are expected to work six hours a day, six days a week. The workday is divided into morning shifts (roughly 7 a.m. to 1 p.m.) and afternoon shifts (roughly noon to 6 p.m.). Assigned duties rarely take the full shift to complete. The remaining time is devoted to interacting, playing with, and loving the animals.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Part of the allure of volunteering at RWS is the opportunity to stay in the project's rustic little volunteer house. The house is on the reserve and surrounded by rich primary and secondary jungle. There's even a nearby waterfall. The accommodations are rather modest in terms of infrastructure. Everything is open air. The main living quarters, essentially a deck with a roof, are shared by all the volunteers, each in their own tent or with their own pile of sheets. The shower (also shared) has no hot water and the toilets are compost only. Any discomfort, however, is compensated for by the incredible ocean view and the troops of monkeys that swing past your bed every morning.

The very small shared living space makes it a tremendously social experience. Couples who prefer more privacy can take advantage of a second structure, the tiny tree house up the hill — lovingly referred to as the honeymoon suite.

There is an option to forgo the free housing and stay at a guesthouse in Cabuya (US\$8 a night) instead. In this case, volunteers need to commit only four hours a day to RWS.

FOOD

The volunteer house has a rustic kitchen and a refrigerator. There are two small groceries,

a bakery, and a few local restaurants within walking distance. Volunteers often cook big dinners together once or twice a week.

SOCIAL LIFE

Nursing baby monkeys in Costa Rica is an attractive proposition. So, at any given time, there will likely be at least a half dozen other volunteers to share your downtime with. Communal living keeps the international group close. Volunteers take weekend beach trips together and often head into Montezuma together for drinks. Drinking is allowed at the volunteer house (within reason), but showing up to work with a hangover is decidedly not.

STAYING CONNECTED

RWS has WiFi in the sanctuary but not in the area where volunteers sleep. There is an Internet café (and a pay phone) in town. Volunteers can give RWS's landline number to their families in case of emergency.

HEALTH

The biggest health concern for volunteers comes not from the animals but from the water. There is no safe drinking water at RWS. Bring sterilizing tablets or you'll be stuck lugging bottled water back and forth from town every day.

WHAT TO PACK

Volunteering at RWS is a dirty job. Bring plenty of old clothes. They will undoubtedly get some kind of feces on them. Other essentials include a pair of boots, a flashlight, and your own bedding.

WHEN TO GO

RWS is open year round. Their needs are constant but they usually have more volunteers

"I've been at Rainsong for over two months now, and I just can't seem to get enough of the animals. Taking care of baby monkeys never gets old, especially watching them play in the trees. The toucans and the legendary — and always entertaining — Tarzan have made my stay pretty incredible."

- Rania, RWS Volunteer



during the summer (December through June) and less in the rainy season (May to October). November through April is turtle nesting season.

VOLUNTEER REQUIREMENTS

Volunteers typically stay one to three months. On occasion, RWS accepts volunteers for shorter terms. English is the working language so no Spanish is required. No special skills or prior experience working with animals is needed either. Volunteers must be over 18 years of age and send proof of medical insurance before they arrive.

COSTS & DONATIONS

Bring cash with you to Cabuya. There is no bank, and traveler's checks are not accepted anywhere. Volunteering and lodging is free at RWS, but you'll want some money in your pocket for food and weekend trips.

RWS is a registered non-profit in Costa Rica. They can accept donations through Western Union. Contact Mary for specific instructions.

FINDING THE PROJECT

When volunteers are accepted to the program, they'll be provided information about their transportation options. Getting to Cubaya can be tricky but RWS will happily book airport pick ups and shuttles to bring you straight there. If volunteers make their own way by bus (see [Peninsula Nicoya](#)), a RWS volunteer will meet them at the bus stop in Cabuya and walk them to the sanctuary.

HOW TO APPLY

The application form is available to download from the RWS web site. It's a long one with some open-ended questions. Give it the time it deserves and you'll expedite the acceptance process. Keep in mind, volunteering at RWS requires some planning. They need at least one month's notice to screen and prepare for you. Moreover, Mary doesn't check email every day so it can be a week before your application even gets reviewed. If you apply and haven't heard back after two weeks, feel free to send a follow up.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Primary Contact: Mary Lynn Perry, Founder

Organization: Rainsong Wildlife Sanctuary

Web Site: www.rainsongsanctuary.com

Phone: +506 2642 1265 or +506 8387 3607
(Mary's cell)

Email: rainsongwildlifesanctuary@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/pages/Rainsong-Wildlife-Sanctuary-Costa-Rica/141821105847000

Twitter: @RainsongCR

YouTube: youtube.com/rainsongsanctuary

A SHOCKING TRAGEDY

In the last decade, several studies have indicated massive declines in Costa Rica's monkey populations. According to RWS, the country lost 50% of its monkeys between the years of 2002 and 2007 alone. The cause: electrocution by exposed (i.e., uninsulated) power lines. Last year alone, RWS tried to save 40 different victims. Only two survived. A petition from RWS pushed the local government to insulate 20km of wire around Cabuya but there is still a lot of work to do and little time to do it before monkey populations collapse. Mary is vehemently outspoken on the issue. Join her petition through Facebook at: facebook.com/groups/131978196813647/

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