

Costa Rica: La Pura Vida y La Pura Verdad

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Contents

Lo Basico	3
A Popular Destination	3
Geography, Climate and Wildlife	4
What to Know before Coming	6
Travel to Costa Rica	6
Language	6
Dinero	7
Local Cuisine and Food Costs	7
Entertainment Costs	9
Cell phones	10
Covid 19	10
Theft	11
Traffic	12
Owning Property	12
Corporations	13
Bureaucracy	13
Where to Live and Visit	14
The Central Valley	14
Beyond the Valley	17
Arenal	17
Monteverde	17
The Northern Pacific	18
The Central Pacific	19
The Southern Zone	20

The Caribbean Coast	21
Getting Around	22
Having Fun	23
Ticos - The Locals	25
Good to know	26

Lo Básico

A Popular Destination

For decades now, Costa Rica has beckoned conservationists, birdwatchers, and those who long for a slower pace in a gorgeous, natural setting. Outdoor adventurers come for sports and they find them, from zip-line trails to deep-sea fishing camps, with hiking, biking, surfing, and swimming beloved national pastimes. Families who want to expose their kids to a different culture and language are welcomed to a child-friendly, non-militaristic land. Retirees find the climate delightful, and easy access to world-class medical care, comforting.

Geography, Climate and Wildlife

For a small country comparable to the size of West Virginia, Costa Rica boasts a startling variety of geographic settings. These include beaches, volcanoes, rain forests, cloud forests, hot plains, cool mountains, and dense jungles, all graced by waterfalls, coffee fields and spectacular views wherever you go. All this terrestrial diversity has cultivated an enormous wealth of wildlife, with more bird varieties than all North America, and over 500,000 species of mammal and reptile life combined.

Costa Rica's climate varies almost as much as its geography and wildlife. The two main seasons are rainy, from late April to late November, (often referred to as the "green season"), and the dry, from April or early May to early December (euphemistically known as the "gold season"). In the Central Valley, situated between the country's two major mountain ranges, temperatures vary from about 65 degrees Fahrenheit to 85 or 90 on a hot day. Coastal towns and beaches are warmer, sometimes reaching 100 degrees or more during the dry season. In contrast to this blazing heat, some foggy mountain towns dip down to 50, where a thick blanket is comfortable at night. Simply put,

in Costa Rica you can find whatever climate you are looking for... with the exception of snow, although frost and hailstorms are not uncommon at higher altitudes or during a storm.

With all this natural beauty, delicious climate, and political stability, it is not surprising that Costa Ricans, affectionately known as "Ticos", are some of the happiest and longest-living humans on the planet. Ticos are known to be family-centered folk who are friendly to outsiders but keep their relatives close and their priorities personal. A Costa Rican businessman, for example, might think nothing of skipping an office meeting to attend his child's birthday party. They are fun-loving people who, though generally devout Catholics (the country's official religion), remain in favor of religious freedom for all. Courtesy and friendliness are the national characteristics. These values are reflected in local politics, where peaceful transfers of power from one party to the next have been the tradition since 1948. This was the year of revolution, when the military was abolished in favor of education and culture and when the Social Security system was enacted, providing cradle-tograve health care for all, among other benefits. Really, the Tico motto of "Pura Vida!" or Pure Life!

is no lie. But to present a balanced picture, here are a few reasons why Costa Rica is not for everyone.

What to Know before Coming

Travel to Costa Rica

Foreigners entering Costa Rica will need a valid passport. Upon entrance, you will be given a standard 90 day tourist visa. Check your passport upon entering to confirm that 90 days were granted.

Language

The official language of Costa Rica is Spanish and literacy rate is over 95%. While this facilitates different types of communication, Costa Rica is not a completely bilingual (Spanish/English) country and it would be a mistake to move here with this assumption.

In touristy areas, there is a marked increase in the number of bilingual speakers, but there are still many who do not speak a second language. So, before arrival, it is a good idea to brush up on your basic Spanish skills or take an immersion class once you arrive. You will enjoy your life more, get to know locals better and keep your brain healthy!

Dinero

Costa Rica has its own currency which is called the colon. Over the last ten to fifteen years the colon has been stable and has varied from between approximately 500 to 680 colones per \$1 USD.

ATMS are ubiquitous and the use of credit cards is as well. Dollars are generally taken also even at mom and pop businesses. While convenient, be prepared to get hit with a low exchange rate.

Local Cuisine and Food Costs

Costa Rica grows some of the tastiest fruits and vegetables in the hemisphere and offers a wide variety of meats and locally cultivated grains and milk products. In recent years, organic foods have often become prevalent.

Weekly farmers markets are ubiquitous and are generally on Saturdays and Sundays throughout the entire country. If you are on a budget or simply would like to take advantage of the abundant amount of fresh produce available, you do not want to miss these markets. There are also many organic farmers markets, so ask around if you prefer organic produce.

Grocery stores offer aisles and aisles of imported goods. If your income affords it, you can eat as if you never left your country of origin. Products from North America and Europe are plentiful, but expensive. However, there are also many local brands that offer quality fare at a lower cost. So, treating yourself to a few special imported goods while also eating food that is locally grown will be easier on your pocketbook.

Typical meals include rice and beans and simply seasoned lean cuts of beef, chicken or fish, like sea bass or red snapper, and a salad or fresh vegetables. Cilantro is a signature ingredient found in many local dishes. You can find a wide variety of some tasty hot sauces, Costa Ricans are generally not big fans of spicy food and most dishes are quite mild in flavor and spice.

While you can get soda pretty much anywhere, the more typical drink to accompany your meal is

some variation of *fresco* which is a local fruit mixed with milk or water and made in a blender with crushed ice; very refreshing!

Eating out is often more costly and can be disappointing; irregular service and quality varies. Find out from the locals which are the best places and stick with a few. There are plenty of excellent restaurants offering world class meals. A 10% tip and 13% tax are included in the bill, adding almost a quarter to the total cost. Additional tipping is not assumed but adding 5-10% is customary when receiving above average service. If you buy locally, cooking at home is the most reasonably priced way to eat.

Entertainment Costs

Costa Rica has become a mecca for eco-tourism and prices reflect its popularity. Although national parks maintain a lower price for citizens and residents, private recreation facilities usually do not. This means that many of the outdoor sports and diversions, such as zip lines, bungee jumping, hot springs, etc., are more expensive than those living on the local (read: lower paid) economy can afford.

There are other entertainment options like movie theaters, amusement parks, bowling, and public swimming pools that are on par with the cost of the same activities in other countries.

Cell phones

Cell phones in Costa Rica are also widespread, and now often take the place of land lines in homes and businesses. Talk to our neighbors to see which provider has the best coverage in your area. If you are not a resident, you can buy pre-paid chips. Postpaid lines are not available to non-residents. If you are only coming for a short period, also check with your cell phone provider at home to get the costs to connect to the local network upon arrival.

Covid 19

Costa Rica was recognized early in the pandemic for its efficient handling of the Coronavirus. The government maintained a rigorous public health education program for prevention and treatment. The social health care system struggled with the huge influx of Covid patients, but was able to adapt and provide the necessary care to patients who needed to be hospitalized.

Gradually borders reopened at the end of 2020 and testing requirements for entry ended as the country desperately needed to reactivate the tourism industry.

Costa Ricans easily implemented social distancing and other preventative measures. Many public services still require employees to use masks, maintain rigorous personal hygiene, and maintain social distancing. Vaccines and boosters are readily available throughout the country and the vaccination rate is about 80%.

Theft

The prevalence of theft explains the high walls, razor wire and guard posts visible in many neighborhoods. Visitors are warned not to wear expensive jewelry in the cities, to lock vehicles securely and to leave valuables in car trunks when they leave the area. Pickpockets roam crowded markets and are quite skilled. Many a newcomer does not know his wallet has been lifted until he reaches for it. Seasoned residents know not to carry more money or bling than is strictly necessary.

Traffic

Driving can be nerve wracking in Costa Rica, and laws are generally considered suggestions. Added to the negligent attitude behind the wheel, time spent on the road is more challenging due to narrow two-lane streets and an infrastructure that has not kept pace with a booming population and an increasing number of vehicles on the roads.

Nevertheless, the pandemic facilitated broader advances in the construction of a long awaited city beltway system (or *circunvalación*) including wider roads and more bridges to ease the heavy flow of traffic and shorten commutes. In addition, the continued daily restriction of cars based on license plate numbers has helped to alleviate congestion.

Owning Property

As a foreigner, you can purchase titled property without restrictions. The only exception to this is for concession land in coastal areas which have restrictions. Title studies and due diligence are a must before purchasing any property here.

If you do decide to purchase property, it is advisable to title the real estate in the name of a

local corporation as it serves to protect the property from individual liability.

Corporations

Corporations can now be set up in just a couple of days. Limited liability corporations are generally recommended as they are easier to form and register. Not only are corporations used to title assets like real estate and vehicles, thereby mitigating personal liability, but they can also be used to meet certain residency requirements or as an estate planning tool. Furthermore, non-residents can use corporations to open bank accounts, which permit higher balances than personal accounts, to obtain utility services, or to purchase cellular plans.

Bureaucracy

Dealing with the enormous bureaucracy of the Costa Rican government can drive even the most placid folk wild with frustration. Typically, government workers do not speak English; unless you are fluent in Spanish, you may need an interpreter or assistant to negotiate the maze of agencies, ministries, and bureaus any official transaction requires. Moreover, the national characteristics of courtesy and friendliness do not

respond well to rudeness or impatience. Demands to see a manager or boss will get you a frosty stare; threats will get you the door, amid polite looks of disdain from co-workers.

Where to Live and Visit

Costa Rica's varied weather and terrain combine to provide a pleasing array of choices when one considers the question of where to settle. The phenomenon of "micro-climates" means that wherever you are, a five-minute drive (or even walk in some places) can result in a cooler, wetter, hillier environment, or its opposite. But let's start with the most populous, the middle of the country, the Central Valley.

The Central Valley

Costa Rica's capital city of San José is located in the center of the country, surrounded by both uplifted mountains and over 100 volcano cones, most of which are extinct. From San José one can visit four of the major volcanoes: Poás, Barva, Irazú and Turrialba. All these volcanoes are quite active except for Barva. Turrialba and Poás have had more

recent and volatile outbursts which have caused closures in surrounding parks and towns.

With an elevation of between 3280 and 5000 feet (or about 1,000 to 1500 meters), the Central Valley enjoys warm and sunny days between 75 and 85 degrees Fahrenheit. Some spots can drop to a cool 55 degrees at night and even shoot up to a sweltering 95 degrees in lower lying areas. The west side of the valley tends to be a good five to ten degrees warmer and a bit drier as well. During the rainy season, mornings are typically fresh and sunny, warming into the humid afternoon when clouds gather, thunder rolls and the rains begin.

Rainy season downpours can be dramatic. The local word for these lavish showers is *aguacero*. It is a word you hear a lot from May through November. By the end of the rainy season, some people crave the arid months of the oncoming dry season, when December winds blow the clouds away and reduce the humidity. The days grow increasingly warmer through the early months of the year until, by late March, one starts to long for the refreshing rains of the green season again.

The Western side of the central valley is home to Escazú and Santa Ana, both very popular areas for Ticos and Expats alike. The abundance of excellent schools, restaurants, bars, and shops, is a reflection of this popularity. The eastern suburbs of Curridabat and San Pedro are similar in this regard and tend to be cloudier and cooler. The northern suburbs of Heredia are breezy with winding mountainous roads, full of flowers and coffee fields, and boast some of the most amazing views of the Central Valley. The southern part of San Jose is the most densely populated area of the country and tends to be crowded, with a lot of traffic and a higher crime rate.

The Central Valley provinces of Heredia, Alajuela, and Cartago are each at a different elevation, with attendant temperature variations. Prior to the tourism boom beginning in the 1980s, agriculture was Costa Rica's major industry, and farms are still common in these outlying regions. Saturday and Sunday farmers' markets are popular throughout the Central Valley. Centuries of volcanic activity have so enriched the soil that Costa Rica produces fruits and vegetables of a remarkable variety and quality. Not surprisingly, the country's name translates to "Rich Coast."

Beyond the Valley

Arenal

About three hours northwest of the capital in the Northern Highlands region are windy Lake Arenal and the rumbling Arenal Volcano, offering gorgeous views of the beauty and power of nature along with lots of options for outdoor adventures. Hot springs abound and several establishments cater to those who enjoy a steamy soak followed by a plunge in a cold pool. Wind surfers zip across the 35 square miles of this freshwater lake's surface and several hotels and resorts in the area provide guides for fishing and exploration. Attractive local towns are Nuevo Arenal, Tilarán and La Fortuna.

Monteverde

The Lake Arenal highlands region includes Monteverde, settled in the 1950s by Quakers who still produce dairy and other food products for sale. Known as much for its cultural activities as for its world-renowned cloud forest, Monteverde attracts conservationists and eco-tourists, researchers and educators, photographers, and other artists. The

area is rich with waterfalls, hot springs, natural beauty, and burgeoning wildlife.

The Northern Pacific

The northern Pacific and the Nicoya Peninsula are located in the most northwestern part of the country. This region is known as The Gold Coast; gold for its enduring, intense heat throughout the year and for the value of its real estate! Liberia International Airport, located in the center of Guanacaste, has made Nicoya's multi-hued beaches, record-breaking sport fishing, horseback riding, and surfing, accessible to the world.

After two decades of concentrated development in the area, the professionals moved in. Quality medical and dental care are available; good schools have opened with international standards; high-speed internet is accessible; European cuisine is served in fine restaurants and hotels; and boutiques with foreign names are common. Newcomers have built mansions on the hills overlooking many beaches, but some towns still retain the local feel. Much drier and flatter than the rest of the country, Guanacaste can be a dust bowl

in the depths of the "gold season" with temperatures soaring over 100 degrees during the day. But this has not stopped beach lovers from flocking. Some of the more prominent towns include Playas del Coco, Flamingo, Tamarindo, Nosara, and Samara.

The Central Pacific

More easily accessed from the Central Valley, the Central Pacific coast is wildly popular to locals and expats for a day's or a weekend's outing. The beaches of Jaco, Esterillos, Manuel Antonio and Dominical are a few hours' drive on good roads. The town of Quepos and the Manuel Antonio National Park are so popular with foreigners that the winding seven-kilometer road to the beach is literally lined with hotels facing the breathcatching views. All the amenities of a tropical resort area can be had in these towns: however, more solitary, and private experiences are possible with a little exploration of the coast. Working fishing villages dot the shoreline and driving inland a few kilometers will bring a visitor back to the Costa Rica of 20 or 30 years ago.

The Southern Zone

Following the Pacific coast southeast of Dominical is the area known as the Southern Zone, including the Osa Peninsula, certainly one of the wildest parts of Costa Rica featuring the highest concentration of biodiversity in the country. Once you experience the intense afternoon downpours, you will understand why!

On the way south, you will encounter vibrant little like Uvita and coastal towns Ojochal, extremely popular with expats. There are also many developments peppered through the oceanside mountains, with convenient proximity to beach, mountain, and wildlife. Dense, primary rainforest competes with stunning, unpopulated beaches for some of the most precious natural beauty in the country. Although selected boutique hotels and understated lodges exist, the area is remote, and many locations are only available by boat. For wildlife viewing, the Osa Peninsula cannot be topped. Although the area offers fewer amenities than other spots favored by visitors, what beats an after-dark hike through the jungle wearing night-vision goggles?

The Caribbean Coast

Heading east from the Central Valley, the mountain road crosses the Continental Divide to the Caribbean coast. The odd effect of this change is to reverse the country's weather patterns, i.e. the rainy and dry seasons swap. So in October, when the Central Valley is inundated with rain almost daily, the Caribbean is hot and dry, only starting to rain in December, when the rest of the country is drying out. The province of Limon covers the Caribbean coast, from Tortuguero in the northeast, famed for deep-sea fishing camps and inland canal tours, to the beach towns of Cahuita, Puerto Viejo and Gandoca. These towns are slow-paced, laid back and deeply influenced by their Afro-Caribbean culture, food, music, and style. This area is also well known for its exuberant rainforests stretching right up to the shoreline where you will even find some coral reef sections great for snorkeling.

Getting Around

Ground transportation throughout the Central Valley can be had via bus, taxi, train, and Uber. Buses generally hub from stations in San José and go everywhere, including both coasts (the Pacific and the Caribbean) and into both bordering countries (Nicaragua and Panama). They are reasonably priced, safe, comfortable and one of the country's best deals.

INCOFER offers a practical though rudimentary passenger train service and may be a convenient and inexpensive alternative depending on your destination. The train currently runs from San Jose to the suburbs of San Pedro, Curridabat, Pavas, and Belen, and on to the cities of Cartago and Heredia.

Taxis are either nationalized red cabs, required by law to use meters (called "Marias" locally) to gauge distance and pricing, or gypsy cabs, which tend to be cheaper but can be a bit riskier. They estimate prices or the driver will ask the passenger what he has paid in the past for the ride. Ubers require a cell phone and are considerably less expensive than traditional taxis. They are usually dependable, comfortable, clean and a good choice for those unfamiliar with directions.

The Central Valley has two airports, Juan Santamaria International, and Pavas Airport for small, private planes and domestic commercial airlines. Juan Santamaria has been enlarged and upgraded over the last several years and provides high-quality service to the major airlines it hosts and the traveling public it serves. Besides renting hangar space to owners of private planes, Pavas caters to the public flying domestically to beaches, fishing camps, the northern province of Guanacaste and the Osa Peninsula in the southern province of Puntarenas.

Having Fun

If culture calls to you, Central Valley towns offer museums, outdoor and indoor concerts, fashion shows, craft markets and art exhibits. San José boasts The National Theater, a smaller replica of The Paris Opera House, and home to the National Symphony Orchestra, directed by local and guest maestros throughout the music season. The theater is also used for operas, plays, ballets and sometimes rock performances for visiting artists. Live shows are popular, and many bars, clubs and

restaurants offer space for local bands-International live concerts are held at a variety of arenas in the Central Valley at ticket prices that might be considered paltry in more developed countries. *Latinos* love music, and blues, rock, reggae, and Latin dance music (*salsa*, *cumbia*, *merenque*, etc.) are all popular.

Outdoor fun can be had all over the Central Valley. Some companies offer bungee jumping over the rails of bridges. If something more serene calls to you, bird watching groups meet regularly to peer at the flittering of thousands of varieties of avian life. Hikers and bikers find paths throughout national parks and reserves, home to a huge selection of flora and fauna. There is even an amusement and water park for the younger ones.

On a rainy day you can also head to a shopping mall or movie theater; there are plenty scattered throughout the Central Valley. So, there is something for everyone regardless of your interests or hobbies!

Ticos - The Locals

Costa Ricans are some of the healthiest, happiest people on earth, if their renowned longevity (centenarians are common) and quick, friendly smiles are any indicators. While living in one of the world's true beauty spots may account for part of this joy, other, less obvious reasons may exist. For example, Ticos are averse to conflict and tend to avoid arguments. They find the tendency of some foreigners to debate, insist, demand, and raise their voices to prove a point, just, well, *rude*. *Maleducado* is a phrase we sometimes hear in reference to these brusque outlanders, and the expression can be translated as "ill bred."

Part of the ethos of courtesy in Costa Rica is to please others by answering questions a foreigner may have. If they do not know the answer, local people are loath to admit it and feel free to create an answer. This is common when asking for help with things like driving directions or a stalled car.

To blend into the culture as a foreigner, try being quieter, taking up less physical space, and slowing down a bit. People from developed countries tend to expect things to move much faster than is customary here, and often get annoyed with delays. Carrying a good book and being patient are highly recommended and will make life more enjoyable!

Ticos are also very proud and meticulous about their personal hygiene and appreciate it when foreigners do the same. Living in a tropical environment makes it more of a necessity too!

Good to know

- Hold on to your old passport, make a copy of your current one and keep an electronic copy of both. You may need a photocopy of the old one in the future for legal transactions, at the bank or when showing your current id. In many countries, including the USA, passport numbers change when they are lost or renewed.
- Sign all documents in the same way you sign all legal documents, bank setups etc. Lawyers, bank tellers, and in general,

everyone here plays close attention to signatures.

- Non-confrontational works best! Tolerance and kindness go a long way here. *Please* and thank you's are a must to accomplish anything. If you would like to make a complaint, be kind. Ticos do not process anger and direct confrontation well.
- Enjoy the beauty of the fauna and flora here and the multitude of animal and plant species that Costa Rica has to offer.

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