

GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT COSTA RICA

“**PURA VIDA!**” Is the Costa Rican way of saying: “Hello” and also “Goodbye”. It translates to “Pure Life”, and could be compared to the “Aloha!” of Hawaii. However, it is more than a greeting; it is a way of living, of feeling and of being. It is used to express many things: “Cool!”, “Life is great!”, “Everything is fine”, “Thank you”, “You are welcome”!

We invite you to explore the official web site of the Costa Rican Institute of Tourism, where you will find the information stated below in this document and much more:
<http://www.visitcostarica.com/>.

1. LOCATION

Costa Rica is located in Central America. The country borders with Nicaragua on the North, Panama on the South, The Pacific Ocean on the West and The Caribbean Sea on the East.

2. SURFACE

51,100 km²

3. CAPITAL CITY

San José

4. OUR PEOPLE: THE “TICOS”

The Ticos, as Costa Ricans are commonly known, are famous for their hospitality, and are quite happy to live up to their reputation. They are well-educated and hard working people, who are quick with a handshake and a smile. They are well aware of the special land they have, and most likely they will help foreigners when they get lost, even explaining things that might seem bizarre to foreigners, and making their stay as enjoyable as possible. People say the Ticos are their nation's greatest asset, and once you've experienced their friendliness and spontaneity, you'll have no doubt to that regard.

5. OFFICIAL LANGUAGE

Spanish

6. RELIGION

The official religion is Catholic. Freedom of religious choice is respected.

7. GEOGRAPHY

Rugged highlands are found throughout most of the country, ranging from approximately 1,000 to 2,000 meters (3,000 to 6,000 feet above sea level). The Guanacaste Mountain Range, Central Mountain Range, and Talamanca Mountain Range are the main mountain ranges extending the

entire length of the country. There are several active volcanoes (Arenal Volcano, Irazu Volcano, Rincon de la Vieja Volcano and Turrialba Volcano) and the country's highest mountain (Chirripo Hill) with a height of 3,819 m/12,530 ft. The country has a relatively long coastline in both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, as well as a number of rivers and streams that attract specialist kayakers and rafters from all over the world.

8. CLIMATE

In general, the climate in Costa Rica is very pleasant not only during the dry season, which extends from December to April but also during the rainy season, which runs from May to November. During the rainy season rain can be expected in the afternoons, on the other hand the mornings are usually sunny.

Costa Rica has a tropical climate with an average temperature of 22 degrees C (72 degrees F) that increases considerably on the coastal areas. The changes in temperature are considerable and due to the short distances in this relatively small country, they can all be experienced in just one day.

Due to factors such as the geographical location, the weather conditions, the formation of mountain chains, mountains, and valleys, this country experiences different microclimates that give a home to different types of vegetation.

Also, due to the weather characteristics and the topography of the country, different types of forests can be appreciated: the cloud forest, the rain forest, the dry forest, and the transition forest.

9. HISTORY: HERITAGE AND CULTURE

Costa Rican culture is in many ways a reflection of its racial diversity. The predominant influence has long been European, which is reflected in everything from the official language -- Spanish -- to the architecture of the country's churches and other historic buildings. The indigenous influence is less visible, but can be found in everything from the tortillas that make part of a typical Costa Rican meal, to the handmade ceramics sold at roadside stands.

An important aspect of Costa Rica's cultural legacy is their love for peace and democracy. The Ticos like to stand out that their nation is the exception in Latin America, where military dictatorships have long dominated politics.

They take pride in having more than one hundred years of democratic tradition, and almost half a century without an army. The army was abolished in 1948, and the money the country saves by not expending in military issues is invested in improving the Costa Ricans' standard of living, which has fostered a culture of social peace that makes it such a pleasant place to visit.

Costa Rica is known as a country whose constitution abolished the death penalty more than 100 years ago. The seat of the UN University for Peace (*Universidad para la Paz*) as well as the seat of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights is located in Costa Rica. These facts, in addition to the Nobel Prize in Peace awarded in 1987 to former Costa Rican President Oscar Arias, underline the confidence that the international community places in Costa Rica, particularly with regard to the country's dedication to peace and its social and political stability.

Costa Rica recognizes that the environment and natural resources provide goods and services which are indispensable for human kind and determine the quality of life of its citizens. This is the

reason why the country has had a leading role in many environmental issues and has been very active in a number of different fora.

Although the country is small and it covers only 0.03 % of the surface of the globe, it proudly shelters a 6% of the existing biodiversity in the entire world. 25.58 % of the country is composed of conservation and natural protected territory.

10. GOVERNMENT

Costa Rica is a Republic. Its political system is divided in three main powers:

- The Executive Power administrates the country. It includes the President, two Vice-presidents and the Cabinet Ministers.
- The Legislative Power is responsible for promulgating the laws that prevail in the country. The Parliament, composed of 57 Members, is elected every 4 years.
- The Judicial Power is in charge of rendering justice and overseeing the administration of the law. The Supreme Court, composed by the magistrates, is the main organ of the judiciary, but there are also specialized courts for civil, penal and administrative matters.

The Elections Supreme Court is considered the fourth power of the Republic. Every four years national elections are carried out. Among other positions of popular representation, the President of the Republic is elected through direct representation by secret ballot.

11. HEALTH AND EDUCATION

Investments into the health and educational sectors continue to be a priority for Costa Rica. Not having an army has allowed the country to invest additional resources in areas of critical interest to the population. As a result, Costa Rica has a healthy and educated population, with rates of alphabetization and life expectancy similar to those of developed countries. The Costa Rican health care system has a social orientation, granting access to it to all citizens since more than half a century ago.

Costa Rica is the country in Latin America with the highest life expectancy rate at 77.75 years old; it is also one of the countries with the lowest infant mortality rate: 10.82%. It is also far advanced in issues regarding prenatal prevention and control.

Costa Rica is praised because of its efforts for investment in public education that different governments have accomplished throughout the years. There are close to 6,147 elementary, middle, and high schools and more than 50 universities in the country. It is also noteworthy that primary education is compulsory and free of charge.

12. ECONOMY

You don't have to drive very far in Costa Rica -- past the coffee, pastures, bananas, and other crops -- to realize that agriculture is the basis of its economy. Coffee has historically been the country's most important crop, and Costa Rica continues to produce some of the finest coffee in the world. However in recent years less traditional crops have been playing an increasingly important economic role. Bananas are the second most important export crop, with vast plantations covering parts of the Caribbean lowlands. There is also significant land dedicated to the cultivation of

pineapples, sugar, oranges, rice, hardwoods, and ornamental plants, as well as raising cattle for beef and dairy products.

Though agriculture remains the basis of the national economy, today, export of electronic components and textiles counts for more than coffee and bananas and products such as medical equipments, pineapples, fish and seafood, as well as processed food are gaining ground. Furthermore, tourism has become one of the main sources of foreign currency income.

13. INFRASTRUCTURE

Communications

Costa Rica has one of the most advanced telecommunications systems in Latin America, with telephones and fax machines all over the country, and an increasing number of businesses online. There is also mail service and a wide selection of courier services in San Jose.

Most large hotels in the San Jose area have cable TV, with US and European stations. Newspapers and magazines from North America and several European nations are sold in many shops and hotels in and around the capital.

Transportation

It's easy to get around Costa Rica, and if you stick with public transportation, traveling within the country can be quite inexpensive. There are bus services to just about every town and city, and high-quality buses serving the main tourist destinations. Taxis are also plentiful and inexpensive, and in San Jose they are required to operate with meters for most trips.

The standard charge for a taxi ride between the international airport and downtown San Jose is \$15 US. The quickest way to get around is to fly and several domestic airlines offer daily flights to most of the popular tourist destinations. There are also plenty of car rental agencies, most of which rent four-wheel-drive vehicles.

Airports

The main airport is the Juan Santamaria International Airport, located in Alajuela. This airport is only twenty minutes away from the capital San José.

Other important airports are:

- The Daniel Oduber Quiros International Airport, located in Liberia, Guanacaste.
- The Tobias Bolaños Airport located in Pavas, San José, for local as well as international flights.
- There are also landing fields for local flights situated in different parts of the country such as: Limon, Tortuguero, La Fortuna, Tamarindo, Samara, Tambor, Quepos, Palmar North, and Golfito.

14. CURRENCY AND EXCHANGE RATE

There is an ample selection of state owned and privately held banks in San Jose, and throughout the country. The official currency of Costa Rica is the colon; however US dollars are widely accepted. US dollars and traveler's checks can be changed in banks and hotels. Most major credit

cards are widely accepted, and cash advances can be obtained at banks around the country and a variety of places throughout San Jose.

One American dollar \$1US is equivalent to around ₡555 colones. The exchange rate, determined by the Central Bank, fluctuates.

15. FOOD AND MEALS

Costa Rican food is mild compared to Mexican food. Part of the basic diet is rice and beans. It is not unusual to have rice and beans at all three meals of the day. Chicken is the most common meat. Beef is also served.

Most dishes are quite good, although different from what you are probably used to. There are however, many things such as eggs or cereal for breakfast that you will find the same.

Costa Rica has many fruits such as “mangos”, “guava”, “papaya”, small sweet bananas, and other that you probably will not be used to. Try them, you may find that you like them, as well as the juices made from them.

Drinking Water

The water is safe to drink in the cities. Do not drink water from a stream even if you see Costa Ricans do it. Do not drink water from an open well or a well with a hand-pump unless you know it is safe.

16. OTHER GENERAL INFORMATION

- **Local time:** GMT-6
- **Electric current:** 110 volts.
- **Taxes:** All purchases in Costa Rica are levied with a 13% Tax.
- **Airport Tax:** Every traveler should pay US\$28 dollars or its equivalent in local currency at the airport when you are leaving the country.
- **Tip:** 10% Tip is included in restaurant prices. Although some tourists give some percentage extra.
- **Business Hours:** Government offices are generally open from 8:00 am to 4:00 pm, while banks close anytime between 3:00 and 6:00 pm, according to the bank and its branch. Most shops are open from 9:00 am to 6:00 pm, while some open at 8:00 am and others close at 7:00 pm; most grocery stores close at 8:00 pm. Some shops also close for lunch, between noon and 1:00 or 2:00 pm.
- **Telephone International Code:** 00506
- **Other Telephone Numbers**
 - 1116 - International calls through operator.
 - 1112 - Local hour.

- 2437-2400 – Juan Santamaría International Airport.
- 911 Emergency Phone Number.

17. SAFETY TIPS

- Don't leave your belongings unattended whenever you are in a public are, such as: hotel lobby, public transport, airports, restaurants, etc.
- Keep your money and personal belongings in the safety deposit box of your hotel.
- Carry a copy of your passport and entry stamp with you. Bank transactions require a passport (not copy).
- Use the Official Taxi services: red cars with yellow triangles printed on the doors and a meter.
- Exchange money currency only at banks and approved change offices.
- Use ATMs that are located in public, well illuminated areas. Don't allow strangers to stand near you and avoid taking unsolicited help. Count your money and put it away prior leaving the ATM.
- Keep car windows closed and doors locked when traveling and parking. Do not leave items in your car.
- Do not wear expensive jewelry, purses, belts or any object of high value.
- Get company before going to unknown places.
- Memorize your address and telephone number very well in Spanish and carry it written on paper.
- Best if you travel or walk in groups.