



Welcome to Costa Rica

"Working to protect endangered turtles in such a beautiful, unspoiled environment it felt like I was helping to protect my perfect vision of paradise."

With the greatest concentration of biodiversity in the world, Costa Rica is a must for any conservationist. Over 25% of the country is protected in national parks due to the country's progressive policies on environmental protection and sustainable ecotourism. The rainforests, tropical forests, marine areas, and wetlands of Costa Rica are the subject of many university and scientific organisation studies. This "biological crossroads" of the world offers a visitor an unforgettable glimpse of a tropical paradise with over 500,000 species of animal including endangered sea turtles, monkeys and jungle cats, and over 800 species of bird. Seen as an example of political stability in the area, Costa Rica has enjoyed democracy for almost 60 years and is an oasis of calm among its turbulent neighbours.

Know your History

Costa Rica boasts a varied history; in Pre-Columbian times it was the point where the Mesoamerican and South American native cultures met. The indigenous people of this era were part of the Isthmo-Columbian area, also known as the Intermediate area, which produced some of the earliest agriculture, pottery and metallurgy in the hemisphere.

Christopher Columbus

On his last voyage to the New World, Christopher Columbus made the first European landfall in the area in 1502. So impressed with the gold decorations worn by the locals, he named the area the 'rich coast', hence Costa Rica. Settlement of the area began in 1522, and during the 16th Century the Spanish invaders conquered the natives, whose numbers soon dwindled under Spanish occupation.

Modern day Costa Rica became the southern-most province in the Spanish territory of New Spain, and Cartago was the provincial capital. For nearly three centuries, Spain administered the region as part of the Captaincy General of Guatemala under a military governor. After optimistically calling the country "rich coast", the Spanish found little gold or other valuable minerals, and turned to agriculture.

The small landowners' relative poverty, the lack of a large indigenous labour force, the population's ethnic and linguistic homogeneity, and Costa Rica's isolation from the Spanish colonial centres in Mexico and the Andes all contributed to the development of an autonomous and individualistic agrarian society. An egalitarian tradition also arose which has survived the widened class distinctions and consequent accumulations of local wealth brought on later in the 19th Century by the introduction of banana and coffee cultivation.

Independence

Costa Rica declared independence from Spain on 15th September 1821 in a joint declaration with several other Central American provinces. Following a brief period in the Mexican Empire of Agustín de Iturbide, Costa Rica joined the United Provinces of Central America from 1823 to 1839, and in 1824 the capital was moved to San José. In 1838, long after the Central American Federation ceased to function in practice, Costa Rica formally withdrew and proclaimed its sovereignty and independence.

Following independence, Costa Rica found themselves with no regular trade routes to get their coffee to European markets. This was compounded by transportation problems – the coffee-growing areas were on the Pacific Coast, and before the Panama Canal was opened, ships from Europe had to sail around Cape Horn in order to get to the Pacific Coast. This was overcome in 1843, when, with the help of William Le Lacheur, a British merchant and ship-owner, a regular trade route was established.

In 1856, William Walker, an American filibuster began incursions into Central America. After landing in Nicaragua, he proclaimed himself president of Nicaragua and re-instated slavery. He intended to expand into Costa Rica and after entering Costa Rican soil, Costa Rica declared war. Led by Commander in Chief of the Army of Costa Rica, President Juan Rafael Mora, the filibusters were defeated and forced out of the country. Costa Rican forces followed the filibusters into Rivas, Nicaragua, where in a final battle, William Walker and his forces were finally pushed back. Juan Santamaria, a drummer boy who lost his life torching the filibusters' stronghold, was killed in this final battle, and is today remembered as a national hero.

Political stability

An era of peaceful democracy in Costa Rica began in 1889 with elections considered the first truly free and honest ones in the country's history.

Since the late 19th Century, only two brief periods of violence have marred its democratic development. In 1917-19, Federico Tinoco Granados ruled as a dictator, and, in 1948 the 44 day Costa Rica Civil War took place, in which José Figueres Ferrer led an armed uprising in the wake of a disputed presidential election. In 1949, Figueres abolished the army; and since then, Costa Rica has been one of the few countries to operate within the democratic system without the assistance of a military. Figueres became a national hero, winning the first election under the new constitution in 1953.

Since then, Costa Rica has held 13 presidential elections, the latest in 2010. Current president Óscar Arias is the first Nobel Laureate in history to be elected the nation's president after winning the award. In 1987 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to end the civil wars then raging in several Central American countries. Arias has significantly increased funding for education, law enforcement, and road construction, and continues to push for the adoption of the Central America-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR).

Eco-tourism

Although it still maintains a large agricultural sector, Costa Rica has expanded its economy to include strong technology and eco-tourism industries. Costa Rica's main foreign policy objective is to foster human rights and sustainable development as a way to secure stability and growth, and the country has shown an enlightened approach to conservation; in the last few decades the government has created many new national parks, nature reserves and other conservation projects. At present over 25% of Costa Rica is composed of protected forests and reserves.

Money Talks

Costa Rica is heavily dependent on tourism, agriculture and electronics exports to support its economy. With over 23% of Costa Ricans below the poverty line, a lack of maintenance and new investment in its infrastructure, and the 2nd highest inflation rate in Latin America, this developing country managed to grow its economy by nearly 5% in 2006, but inflation hit 13% in 2008 (the highest recorded since 1995) and stalled development once again.

Exports

Aside from tourism, and its geographical advantage as the doorway between South and North America, Costa Rica relies on its agricultural exports to maintain a balance with the budget deficits; bananas, coffee, pineapple, sugar, lumber; wood products, and beef are its staple exports. In more recent years, Costa Rica has also established itself as a solid exporter of electronics and pharmaceuticals, and a strong source for financial outsourcing and software development. Costa Rica has also become the forerunner in ecotourism.

Money

In 1995, with inflation at 22.5%, the Costa Rican colón suffered an all-time low. The country soon emerged from recession in 1997, but has suffered from erratic inflation rates since then. Controlling the budget deficit is still the single biggest challenge for the country's economic policy makers, as interest costs on the accumulated debt takes the equivalent of 30% of the government's total revenues. Because of this, the resources available for investment in the deteriorated public infrastructure are very limited.

ATM machines are present in urban settlements and withdrawals may have a small surplus charge although this is likely to be similar to traveller's cheque commission rates. Credit and debit cards (MasterCard and Visa) are accepted for cash withdrawal at most banks but rarely for general payments. However a credit card will come in useful in the event of an emergency.

Get Culture Savvy

Ticos

"Ticos", as Costa Ricans call themselves, are known to be friendly, laid-back and environmentally aware people. Ticos are peace lovers and avoid conflict; two defining elements of the Costa Rican people are choteo (friendly mockery) used to diffuse situations, and the quedar bien (keeping on the good side of people).

Pura Vida

Pura Vida, meaning "pure life", encapsulates the Costa Rican ideology of living a peaceful and calm life surrounded by nature, family and friends. Costa Ricans are well educated and an egalitarian tradition has survived from Pre-Columbian times. The peaceful and stable politics of Costa Rica is mirrored in the tolerant and friendly locals.

Mayan &Chibcha influences

The varied history of Costa Rica boasts important cultural influences from both the Mesoamerican and the South American regions. The north of Isthmo-Columbia (modern day Costa Rica) was influenced by the Mayan and Nahuatl cultures. While the central and southern portions of the country had Chibcha influences.

Mesoamerica is considered an important culture area having contained some of the most complex and advance cultures of the Americas, including the Olmec, Teotihuacan, the Maya, and the Aztec. These cultures developed complex socio-political societies, reached advanced technological, scientific, and mathematical levels, and participated in long-distance interaction networks resulting in the transmutation of interrelated ideas and ideology.

While the surrounding regions are well known cultural areas, recent archaeological research has shown that Isthmo-Columbia (previously known as the Intermediate area) itself had some of the earliest agriculture, pottery, and metallurgy in the hemisphere, and is likely to have played a critical role in the transmutation of culture both to and between the neighbouring cultures to the north and south.

Ethnicity

Modern day Costa Rica has an extremely varied ethnicity. The north-western part of the country's population (Guanacaste) show native-American ancestry, while the central and southern factions descend from the Spanish conquistadores. The eastern side of the country (Limon) has a predominantly African ancestry due to the African and Jamaican workers brought to work on the construction of railways connecting the urban populations of the Central Plateau to the port of Limon on the Caribbean coast. Thousands of Chinese families also arrived during the railway construction; however the population spread to most of the country, with the largest concentrations in San José and Limon. This cultural mixture has influenced Costa Rican cuisine which is a combination of Spanish, Mexican, American, Caribbean and Southern American influences.

Music &Dance

Music and dance is generally for entertainment purposes only. Older Costa Ricans enjoy dance-oriented genres such as soca, salsa, bachata, merengue, cumbia and Costa Rican swing. The guitar has always been a popular accompaniment, but it was the marimba that was made the national instrument.

Food

Costa Rican food has been influenced from the days of the Spanish occupations. Popular foods include empanadas, which is stuffed bread or pastry, usually with vegetables or meat. Fresh vegetables and fruit are major parts to the Costa Rican diet, and feature heavily in the majority of dishes. The most recognisable Costa Rican dish is the gallo pinto – a dish made from rice and beans, popular in many South and Central American countries. As a whole, food is mild, but very tasty! Eating out, a popular meal are bocas (small dishes), including patacones with black bean dip, chimichurri (tomatoes and onions pickled in lime juice) and with tortilla chips; chifrijo (rice and beans with chicharrones – fried pork skins – and chimichurri), ceviche (fish and/or shrimp with onions and pickled in lime juice) and vigorón (cabbage, chimichurri, yucca, served with lime).

Religion

Despite Catholicism being the official religion, Costa Rica is considered to be tolerant of other religions, some of which include Jehovah's Witness, Judaism, Islam, Hare Krishna and other smaller groups which practice traditions of their ancestry.

La Romería

Catholicism is recognised as the official religion and there are several religious festivals in Costa Rica, the most important is the tradition known as La Romería. Every year on August 2nd, people from all over the country walk from their home to a cathedral dedicated to the Virgin in the city of Cartago. Here they visit a stone image of the Virgin which is said to have appeared in the 16th century to a native Indian in the same location. The Virgin Mary is commonly represented as a patrona, unique to each country among many Latin American countries. The patrona is an important Catholic symbol in Latin America as it is country specific and allows common people to identify with religion and feel a sense of direct contact with a saint to whom they can pray. The patrona of Costa Rica is the "Virgen de los Angeles" also known as "La Negrita".

Holidays

1st January - New Year's Day

March/April - Easter

10th April - Juan Santamaría's Day

1st May - Labour Day

25th July - Guanacaste Annexation

2nd August - Virgin of Los Angeles, Feast of Patroness of Costa Rica

15th August - Mothers' Day and Assumption

15th September - Independence Day

11th October - Dia de la Raza (Columbus Day)

25th December - Christmas Day

Learn the Lingo

Spanish is the official language in Costa Rica, although English is also understood in some areas. Many of the Caribbean's speak a lively dialect of English, known as Creole, while Indigenous languages are also spoken in some isolated areas, primarily Bribri, which is estimated to be understood by around 10,000 people.

Costa Ricans speak standard American Spanish, but they, like most other Central American countries over the years, have developed distinct patterns in their language. The accent is considered to be very similar to the Columbian accent, with one of the unique features being a distinctive sibilant pronunciation of words beginning with "tr" with a less rough, longer pronunciation than in most Central American countries. Costa Ricans usually utilise the respectful "usted" form when addressing one another, this is somewhat formal and surprises some Spanish-speaking foreigners when they arrive. Also, when they do use the familiar form, they often use the more polite "vos" rather than "tú", which is used in most other Latin American countries.

Remember:

The letters **LL** together are pronounced as **Y**

The letter **J** is always pronounced as **H**

The letter **V** is soft, so pronounce it as **B**

ENGLISH	SPANISH	ENGLISH	SPANISH
Greetings		Numbers	
Hi	Hola	1	Uno
Goodbye	Adios	2	Dos
Pleased to meet you!	Mucho gusto!	3	Très
How are you?	Como estas?	4	Cuatro
Good morning	Buenos días	5	Cinco
Good afternoon	Buenas tardes	6	Seis
Good evening/night	Buenas noches	7	Siete
8	Ocho		
About Yourself		9	Nueve
My name is...	Me llamo...	10	Diez
I am from England	Soy de Inglaterra	11	Once
I don't speak Spanish	No hablo Español	12	Doce
I don't understand	No entiendo	13	Trece
What's your name?	¿Cómo se llama usted?	14	Catorce
15	Quince		
In the Shop		16	Dieciséis
I would like.../I want...	Quiero	17	Diecisiete
How much does it cost?	Cuánto vale?	18	Dieciocho
Please	Por favour	19	Diecinueve
Thank you (very much)	(Muchas) gracias	20	Veinte
Yes	Sí	100	Cien
No	No	500	Quinientos
1000	Mil		
In the Restaurant			
Chicken	Pollo		
Vegetables	Vegetales		
Beef	Res		
Meat	Carne		
Cheese	Queso		
Fish	Pescado		
Tomato sauce	Salsa de tomate		
Beer	Cerveza		
I am a vegetarian	Soy vegetariano		

Costa Ricans have long called themselves "Ticos" in reference to the use of diminutives particular to Costa Rican speech. The Spanish common practice of replacing the –o or –a at the end of a noun with –ito or –ita, helps soften speech and appear more approachable when interacting with others. In Costa Rica this morpheme is frequently used and is often replaced with –ico or –ica. This practice

gives words a diminutive but affectionate quality. For example, "momento" (a moment) becomes "momentito" (a brief moment), or in Costa Rica, "momentico".

Pura Vida is a phrase which embodies the Tico lifestyle, translated literally as Pure Life, it is used by many Costa Ricans to refer to the free spirit and love for this tropical country. It can be used as a greeting, to express that you are having a wonderful time, or to refer to something going well.

COSTA RICAN	ENGLISH
Pura vida mae	Cool dude!/life is good
Tico	Costa Rican (male)
Tica	Costa Rican (female)
Ticos	Costa Ricans
Chepe	San José
Macho/Macha	A blond North American/European
Maje	Buddy
Tuanis	Cool, great
Pachanga	Party
Soda	A Costa Rican café
Pulperia	A small shop

Lay of the Land

Costa Rica is located on the Central American isthmus, bordered by Nicaragua to the north and Panama to the south, while the east coast borders the Caribbean Sea, and the North Pacific Ocean lies to the west coast. It has a total of 1,290 km of coastline with a total area of 51,100 km².

Costa Rica's terrain is a coastal plain separated by rugged mountains which run down the spine of the country, and is part of the Neo-tropic eco zone which includes more tropical rainforest than any other eco zone and is one of the most important reserves of biodiversity on earth. Some of the eco regions in Costa Rica include seasonal moist forests, Bocas del Toro, San Bastimentos Island, San Blas mangroves, Mosquitia, Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast mangroves, Southern Dry Pacific Coast mangroves, Central American dry forests, and Talamancan montane forests.

The country is host to many environmental treaties and is noted for its national park system which oversees over 160 protected areas which comprise over a quarter of Costa Rican territory. The largest national park is Cocos Island, "Isla del Coco", which is an island about 500 km from the Pacific coast and 24 km² in area.

What's the Weather like?

Costa Rica's climate is tropical all year round, being only around eight degrees north of the equator; therefore the main seasons are defined by rainfall, and the most of the climate variations affected by altitude. The highlands are generally cooler and less humid; San José, at 1,150 m, is referred to by the locals as having a climate resembling "eternal spring", while the Caribbean coast is much hotter averaging over 30°Celsius during the day and the Pacific coast is a few degrees warmer still.

There are two main seasons: the dry season (known as verano, meaning summer) is generally

between late December and April, and the rest of the year is known as the wet season (or invierno, meaning winter), when the rainfall is often constant. However the Caribbean coast tends to be wet most of the year.

Biodiversity

Costa Rica holds greater biodiversity than both Europe and North America, thanks to its perfect geographical position. Acting as a doorway between North and South America, as well as the Antilles (Caribbean Islands), means that Costa Rica has the floral and faunal advantages from both ends of the continent. From lowland rainforest to cloud forests, to tropical lakes and rivers, this country has the perfect ecosystem for countless species; 9,000 types of vascular plants, 900 different trees, 1,500 species of orchid, 850 species of bird (including 15 kinds of parrots, 50 varieties of hummingbird and 75 different flycatchers), 200 mammal species, 35,000 insect species (including 10% of the world's butterfly species), 150 kinds of amphibian, and – if you can manage much more – 200 varieties of reptiles!

Thankfully, much of these rare and extraordinary species – ranging from the jacaranda tree to harpy eagle to the poison-arrow frog – are protected by Costa Rica's extensive conservation programmes.

Good Books

Guidebooks

- Costa Rica (Lonely Planet Travel Guides) 7th Edition. Mara Vorhees & Matthew Firestone. Lonely Planet, 2006. ISBN 9781741044638
- The Rough Guide to Costa Rica 4th Edition. Jean McNeil. Rough Guides, 2005. ISBN 9781843534297
- Costa Rica: An Ecotraveller's Guide. Hannah Robinson. Chastleton Travel, 2006. ISBN 9781905214228
- Central and South America (Lonely Planet Healthy Travel). Isabelle Young. Lonely Planet, 2000. ISBN 9781864500530
- Latin American Spanish (Lonely Planet Phrase Book) 4th Edition. Lonely Planet. Lonely Planet, 2003. ISBN 9781740591706

Wildlife

- A Guide to the Amphibians and Reptiles of Costa Rica. Twan Leenders. Zona Tropical Publications, 2001. ISBN 9780970567802
- Amphibians and Reptiles of La Selva, Costa Rica and the Caribbean Slope: A Comprehensive Guide. C. Guyer. University of California Press, 2005. ISBN 9780520237599
- Field Guide to the Wildlife of Costa Rica (Corrie Herring Hooks). Carrol Henderson & Steve Adams. University of Texas Press, 2002. ISBN 9780292734593
- Costa Rica (Travellers Wildlife Guides). Les Beletsky. Arris Books, 2004. ISBN 9781844370306
- Costa Rican Wildlife. James Kavanaugh. Waterford Press, 2001. ISBN 9781583550731
- The Diversity of Life (Penguin Press Science). Edward O. Wilson. Penguin, 2001. ISBN 9780140291612

Fiction/Travel journals

- The Mosquito Coast. Paul Theroux. Penguin, 1982. ISBN 9780140060898
- Costa Rica: A Traveller's Literary Companion. Barbara Ras. Whereabouts Press, 1994. ISBN 9781883513009
- An Odd Odyssey: California to Colombia by Bus and Boat, Through Mexico and Central America. Glen David Short. Trafford Publishing, 2006. ISBN 9781552126028
- Assault on Paradise. Tatiana Lobo. Curbstone Press, 1998. ISBN 9781880684467
- When New Flowers Bloomed: Short Stories by Women Writers from Costa Rica and Panama. Enrique Jaramillo Levi (Ed). Latin American Literary Review Press, 1998. ISBN 9780935480474
- The Children of Mariplata: Stories from Costa Rica. Miguel Benavides. Forest Books, 1996. ISBN 978185610019

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INTO THE WILD
THE GAP YEAR BLOG FROM
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