

Costa Rica Fast Facts



Area: 50,660 square kilometers (19,790 square miles)

Population: 4,075,261 (July 2005, estimated)

Population density: 80.4 per square kilometer

Capital: San José

Population: 328,293 (official estimate 2002).

Geography: Demonstrating an environmental sensitivity unparalleled elsewhere, Costa Ricans have set aside one quarter of their land as protected areas and national parks. Ecotourists are rewarded with botanical and animal marvels found nowhere else on Earth. Although Costa Rica is best known as an invaluable refuge for nature, this small nation is also a haven of peace.

Costa Rica is the penultimate link in a chain of small nations that together comprise the isthmus of Central America. Along with the Caribbean and the Pacific, the country's borders are defined by Nicaragua to the North and Panama to the South. Located at the nexus of two continents and two oceans, this confluence of land and water makes the region one of mother nature's great bottlenecks. Here, geography constricts a breathtaking amount of plant and animal life within a modest 19,563 square miles (50,900 square kilometers), an area comparable in size to Denmark or West Virginia. Within this diminutive nation is found an astonishing five percent of the world's biodiversity, including more than 800 species of ferns, 1,000 of orchids, 2,000 kinds of trees, and 200 species of mammals.

Both coastlines of Costa Rica have an abundance of beaches, though the Pacific strands are generally both less developed and less spacious. Between the coasts, the interior of the country is shaped by four cordilleras, or mountain ranges, which run from North to South. The capital, San

Jose, rests roughly in the nation's center, settled within a highland valley. Cascading down to the Caribbean from the central mountains are Costa Rica's many great rivers, including the Reventazon. The Pacific side is marked by two broad peninsulas that hook out into the Pacific, the Nicoya and the Osa. It is a geographic curiosity that their shapes are almost identical, the Osa being a smaller rendition of the Nicoya.

Climate: Costa Rica's climate is renowned as an atmospheric treat. Mild subtropical conditions prevail year-round, and discomforting temperature extremes and prolonged periods of gray are practically nonexistent. Temperature varies mainly according to elevation, the higher the cooler. The brunt of the rainy season lasts from May through November, while a brief dry spell pays a visit from February to April. Costa Rica's rain falls mainly on the Caribbean coast, giving the Pacific a much more arid climate.

Government: Democratic Republic

Head of State and Government: President Abel Pacheco de la Espriella since 2002.

Language: Spanish is the official language. English is widely spoken. Some French, German and Italian are also spoken.

Religion: Roman Catholic 76.3%, Evangelical 13.7%, Jehovah's Witnesses 1.3%, other Protestant 0.7%, other 4.8%, none 3.2%

Electricity: The standard in Costa Rica is the same as in the United States: 110 volts AC (60 cycles). However, three-pronged outlets can be scarce, so it's helpful to bring along an adapter.

Currency and exchange: The unit of currency in Costa Rica is the colón. The colón is divided into 100 céntimos. Currently, two types of coins are in

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circulation. The older and larger nickel-alloy coins come in denominations of 10, 25, and 50 céntimos and 1, 2, 5, 10, and 20 colones; however, because of their evaporating value, you will probably never see or have to handle céntimos, or anything lower than a 5-colón coin. In 1997 the government introduced gold-hued 5-, 10-, 25-, 50-, 100-, and 500-colón coins. They are smaller and heavier than the older coins, and they will eventually phase out the other currency.

There are paper notes in denominations of 1,000, 2,000, 5,000, and 10,000 colones. You might also encounter a special-issue 5-colón bill that is a popular gift and souvenir. It is valid currency, although it sells for much more than its face value. You might hear people refer to a rojo or tucán, which are slang terms for the 1,000- and 5,000-colón bills, respectively. One-hundred-colón denominations are called tejas, so cinco tejas is 500 colones. The 2,000 and 10,000 bills are relatively new, and I've yet to encounter a slang equivalent for them.

In recent years forged bills have become increasingly common. When receiving change in colones, it's a good idea to check the larger-denomination bills, which should have protective bands or hidden images that appear when held up to the light.

As of April 2006, \$1 US = 509.6 colones

If your ATM card doesn't work and you need cash in a hurry, Western Union (tel. 800/777-7777 in Costa Rica or 283-6336; www.westernunion.com) has numerous offices around San José and in several major towns and cities around the country. It offers a secure and rapid, although pricey, money-wire service and telegram service. A \$100 wire costs around \$15, and a \$1,000 wire costs around \$50.

You can change money at all state-owned banks. However, the service at these banks is slow and tedious. This simple transaction can often take as long as an hour and cause unnecessary confusion and anxiety. I don't recommend it. Banks are usually open Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to

4 p.m., although many have begun to offer extended hours.

Fortunately, you don't have to rely on the state's banks. In late 1996 Costa Rica passed a law opening up the state's banking system. Accordingly, private banks have opened around San José and in some of the larger provincial towns and cities. These private banks are kicking the state banks' butts, providing fast service at reasonable commissions, with short or no lines.

Hotels will often exchange money and cash traveler's checks as well; there usually isn't much of a line, but they might shave a few colones off the exchange rate. Be very careful about exchanging money on the streets; it's extremely risky. In addition to forged bills and short counts, street money-changers frequently work in teams that can leave you holding neither colones nor dollars.

ATMs are quite common throughout Costa Rica, particularly in San José, and at most major tourist destinations around the country. You'll find them at almost all banks and most shopping centers. Still, make sure you have some cash at the start of your trip, never let yourself run totally out of spending money, and definitely stock up on funds before heading to any of the more remote destinations in the country. Outside San José and any of the more developed beach destinations, it's still best to think of your ATM card as a backup measure because machines are not nearly as readily available or dependable as you might be accustomed to, and you might encounter compatibility problems.

ATMs are linked to a network that most likely includes your bank at home. The Cirrus (tel. 800/424-7787; www.mastercard.com) and PLUS (tel. 800/843-7587; www.visa.com) networks span the globe; look at the back of your bank card to see which network you're on, then call or check online for ATM locations in Costa Rica. You can also get cash advances on your credit card at an ATM. Keep in mind that credit card companies try to protect themselves from theft by limiting the funds someone can withdraw outside their home country, so call your credit card com-

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pany before you leave home. And keep in mind that you'll pay interest from the moment of your withdrawal, even if you pay your monthly bills on time.

Traveler's checks are something of an anachronism from the days before the ATM made cash accessible at any time. Traveler's checks used to be the only sound alternative to traveling with dangerously large amounts of cash. They were as reliable as currency, but, unlike cash, could be replaced if lost or stolen.

These days, traveler's checks are less necessary because most cities have 24-hour ATMs that allow you to withdraw small amounts of cash as needed. However, keep in mind that you will likely be charged an ATM withdrawal fee if the bank is not your own, so if you're withdrawing money every day, you might be better off with traveler's checks -- provided that you don't mind showing identification every time you want to cash one.

You can get traveler's checks at almost any bank. American Express offers denominations of \$20, \$50, \$100, \$500, and (for cardholders only) \$1,000. You'll pay a service charge ranging from

1% to 4%. You can also get American Express traveler's checks over the phone by calling tel. 800/221-7282; Amex gold and platinum cardholders who use this number are exempt from the 1% fee.

Visa offers traveler's checks at Citibank locations nationwide, as well as at several other banks. The service charge ranges between 1.5% and 2%; checks come in denominations of \$20, \$50, \$100, \$500, and \$1,000. Call tel. 800/732-1322 for information. AAA members can obtain Visa checks without a fee at most AAA offices or by calling tel. 866/339-3378. MasterCard also offers traveler's checks. Call tel. 800/223-9920 for a location near you.

Foreign currency traveler's checks are useful if you're traveling to one country, or to the euro zone; they're accepted at locations such as bed-and-breakfasts where dollar checks may not be, and they minimize the amount of math you have to do at your destination. American Express, Thomas Cook, Visa, and MasterCard offer foreign currency traveler's checks. You'll pay the rate of exchange at the time of your purchase (so it's a good idea to monitor the rate before you take the plunge), and most companies charge a transaction

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fee per order (and a shipping fee if you order online).

If you choose to carry traveler's checks, be sure to keep a record of their serial numbers separate from your checks in the event that they are stolen or lost. You'll get a refund faster if you know the numbers.

Credit cards are invaluable when traveling, and they are widely accepted in Costa Rica (MasterCard and Visa have the greatest coverage, although American Express has relatively wide acceptance and Diners Club is making headway). Credit cards are a safe way to carry money: They also provide a convenient record of all your expenses, and they generally offer relatively good exchange rates. You can also withdraw cash advances from your credit cards at banks or ATMs, provided you know your PIN. If you've forgotten yours, or didn't even know you had one, call the number on the back of your credit card and ask the bank to send it to you. It usually takes 5 to 7 business days, though some banks will provide the number over the phone if you tell them your mother's maiden name or some other personal information. Keep in mind that when you use your credit card abroad, most banks assess a 2% fee above the 1% fee charged by Visa or MasterCard or American Express for currency conversion on credit charges. But credit cards still may be the smart way to go when you factor in things like exorbitant ATM fees and higher traveler's check exchange rates (and service fees).

Because credit card purchases are dependent upon phone verifications, some hotels and restaurants in more remote destinations do not accept them. Moreover, many add on a 5% to 10% surcharge for credit card payments. Always check in advance if you're heading to a more remote corner of Costa Rica.

Credomatic (tel. 295-9898) is the local representative of most major credit cards: American Express, Diners Club, MasterCard, and Visa. It has an office in San José across from the Banco de San José on Calle Central between avenidas 3 and 5. It's open Monday through Friday from 8am to

7pm, and Saturday from 9am to 1pm. You can also call the number above to report all lost or stolen cards 24 hours a day.

Sales tax: All hotels charge 16.3% tax. Restaurants charge 13% tax and also add on a 10% service charge, for a total of 23% more on your bill.

Communications:

Telephone IDD is available. Country code: 506. Outgoing international code: 00.

Mobile telephone GSM 1800/3G network is operated by Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad (ICE). Handsets can be rented, although this can be difficult and time-consuming.

Fax You can make international phone calls, as well as send faxes, from the ICE office, Avenida 2 between calles 1 and 3, in San José (tel. 255-0444). The office is open daily from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. Faxes cost around \$1.50 per page to the United States. (Many hotels also offer the same service for a fee.) Radiográfica (tel. 287-0087), at Calle 1 and Avenida 5 in San José, also has fax service.

Internet/E-mail Internet cafés can be found all over San José and at most major tourist destinations in Costa Rica. Rates run between \$1 and \$3 per hour. Many hotels either have their own Internet café or allow guests to send and receive e-mail. If your hotel doesn't provide the service and there's no Internet café close by, you can buy prepaid cards in 5-, 10-, and 15-hour denominations for connecting your laptop to the Web via a local phone call. Some knowledge of configuring your computer's dial-up connection is necessary, and you'll need to factor in the phone call charge if calling from a hotel. These cards are sold at many supermarkets and drugstores around the country, or contact Racsa (tel. 287-0087; www.racsa.co.cr), the state Internet monopoly, to find out where you can buy one.

Telegram Since the abolition of the inland telegram service in the UK, the Costa Rican Government Telegram Company will not accept tele-

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grams destined for the UK.

Press There are six Spanish-language dailies in Costa Rica and one English-language weekly, the Tico Times. In addition, you can get Time, Newsweek, and several U.S. newspapers at some hotel gift shops and a few of the bookstores in San José. If you understand Spanish, La Nación is the paper of record. Its "Viva" and "Tiempo Libre" sections list what's going on in the world of music, theater, dance, and more.

Mail The main post office (correo) is on Calle 2 between avenidas 1 and 3 (tel. 800/900-2000 toll-free in Costa Rica, or 202-2900; www.correos.go.cr), and is open Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., and Saturday from 7:30 a.m. to noon. At press time, it cost 120 colones (26 U.S. cents) to mail a postcard or letter to the United States, and 140 colones (28 U.S. cents) to Europe. Given the Costa Rican postal service's track record, I recommend paying an extra 430 colones (94 U.S. cents) to have anything of any value certified. Better yet, use an international courier service or wait until you get home to post it. DHL, on Paseo Colón between calles 30 and 32 (tel. 209-6000; www.dhl.com); EMS Courier, with desks at the principal metro-

politan post offices (tel. 800/900-2000, or 202-2900); FedEx, which is based in Heredia but will arrange pickup anywhere in the metropolitan area (tel. 0800/052-1090; www.fedex.com); and United Parcel Service, in Pavas (tel. 290-2828; www.ups.com), all operate in Costa Rica. Note: Despite what you might be told, packages sent overnight to U.S. addresses tend to take three to four days to reach their destination.

You can get stamps at the post office and at some gift shops in large hotels.

If you're sending mail to Costa Rica, it generally takes between 10 and 14 days to reach San José, although it can take as much as a month to get to the more remote corners of the country. Plan ahead. Also note that many hotels and ecolodges have mailing addresses in the United States. Always use these addresses when writing from North America or Europe. Never send cash, checks, or valuables through the Costa Rican mail system.

More about telephone/fax There are no area codes in Costa Rica. All local phone numbers are seven-digit numbers. Costa Rica has an excellent phone system, with a dial tone similar to that

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heard in the United States.

A phone call within Costa Rica costs around 10 colones (3 U.S. cents) per minute. Pay phones take either a calling card or 5-, 10-, or 20-colón coins. Calling cards are becoming more prominent, and coin-operated phones are getting harder to find. You can purchase calling cards in a host of gift shops and pharmacies. However, there are several competing calling-card companies, and certain cards work only with certain phones. CHIP calling cards work with a computer chip and just slide into specific phones, although these phones aren't widely available. A better bet are the 197 and 199 calling cards, which are sold in varying denominations. These have a scratch-off PIN and can be used from any phone in the country. Generally, the 197 cards are sold in smaller denominations and are used for local calling, while the 199 cards are deemed international and are easier to find in larger denominations. Either card can be used to make any call, however, provided that the card can cover the costs. Another perk of the 199 cards is the fact that you can get the instructions in English. For local calls, it is often easiest to call from your hotel, although you will likely be charged around 150 to 300 colones (32 to 63 U.S. cents) per call.

For directory assistance: For directory assistance, call tel. 113; for international directory assistance, tel. 124

For operator assistance: Dial 09 or 116 to get an English-speaking operator

Toll-free numbers: Toll-free numbers are inconsistent. Some begin with 800, others with 0800. Moreover, some actually have eight digits following the 800 or 0800. Calling an 800 number in the States from Costa Rica is not toll-free. In fact, it costs the same as an overseas call.

Time Zone: Costa Rica is on Central Standard Time (same as Chicago and St. Louis), six hours behind Greenwich Mean Time. Costa Rica does not use daylight saving time, so the time difference is an additional hour April through October.

Pets: The dogs or cats must be accompanied by a

health certificate issued by a licensed veterinarian, and endorsed by a Veterinary Services (VS) veterinarian. Additional information shall include:

CERTIFICATION STATEMENTS

- The dog/cat was examined and found to be healthy and free of any clinical signs of infectious disease. Note: In general this examination should be conducted within 2 weeks of the departure date.
- The animals were vaccinated against rabies.

VACCINATION REQUIREMENTS

- See Certification Statement No. 2.
- Animals over 4 months old must be vaccinated against rabies.

OTHER INFORMATION

- It is recommended that a Federal APHIS FORM 7001 (AUG 94), U.S. Interstate and International Certificate for Small Animals be used.
- The accompanying health certificate should be made out at least in duplicate.
- The health certificate does NOT need to be signed by a Notary Public, nor does it need to be stamped by the Costa Rican Consular office.
- Animals exported in commercial lot numbers must be accompanied by an import permit. Personal pet dogs or cats do not need an Import permit.
- The rabies vaccination certificate should accompany the health documents.

Police: Costa Rica is generally considered a very safe country, and what crime does exist tends to be opportunistic rather than violent. The main thing travelers have to worry about is pickpocketing, and if you take a few common-sense precautions you should get by unscathed.

In the past year or so the police (guardia) presence in San José has increased dramatically. If you have anything stolen you will need to report it immediately to the nearest police post. In San José, the

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most convenient method is to head for the Organismo de Investigación Judicial (tel 221-5337 or 221-1365) between Av 6 and 8 and C 15 and 19. In rural areas, go to the nearest guardia rural who will give you a report (you'll do better if you speak Spanish, or are with someone who does).

Any tourist-related crime, such as overcharging, can be addressed to the ICT in San José.

Emergency Numbers: In case of any emergency, dial tel. 911 (which should have an English-speaking operator); for an ambulance, call tel. 128; and to report a fire, call tel. 118. If 911 doesn't work, you can contact the police at tel. 222-1365 or 221-5337, and hopefully they can find someone who speaks English. The numbers for the Traffic Police (Policía de Tránsito) are tel. 222-9330 and 222-9245.

Tipping: Tipping is not necessary in restaurants, where a 10% service charge is always added to your bill (along with a 13% tax). If service was particularly good, you can leave a little at your own discretion, but it's not mandatory. Porters and bellhops get around 75 U.S. cents per bag. You don't need to tip a taxi driver unless the service has been superior; a tip is not usually expected.

Siesta time: Offices are open Monday through Friday from 8am to 5pm (many close for 1 hour at lunch). Stores are generally open Monday through Saturday from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. (many close for one hour at lunch). Stores in modern malls generally stay open until 8 or 9 p.m. and don't close for

lunch. Most bars are open until 1 or 2 a.m.

Toilets: These are known as sanitarios, servicios sanitarios, or baños. They are marked damas (women) and hombres or caballeros (men). Public restrooms are hard to come by. You will almost never find a public restroom in a city park or downtown area. There are usually public restrooms at most national-park entrances, and much less frequently inside the national park. (There are usually plenty of trees and bushes.) In the towns and cities, it gets much trickier. One must count on the generosity of some hotel or restaurant. Same goes for most beaches. However, most restaurants, and, to a lesser degree, hotels, will let you use their facilities, especially if you buy a soft drink or something. Bus and gas stations often have restrooms, but many of these are pretty grim.

Smoking: While not as bad as most of Europe, a large number of Costa Ricans smoke, and public smoking regulations and smoke-free zones have yet to take hold. Restaurants are required by law to have no-smoking areas, but enforcement is often lax, air-circulation poor, and the separating almost non-existent. Bars, on the whole, are often very smoke-filled in Costa Rica.

Drugs: Drug laws in Costa Rica are strict, so stay away from marijuana and cocaine. Many prescription drugs are sold over the counter here, but often the names are different from those in the United States and Europe. It's always best to have a prescription from a doctor.