

## Costa Rica – good to know

Costa Rica is Central America's jewel. It's an oasis of calm and an ecotourism heaven, making it one of the best places to experience the tropics with minimal impact. It's also mostly coastline, which means great surfing, beaches, and a climate built for laziness.

**Full country name:** Republic of Costa Rica

**Area:** 51,100 sq km

**Borders:** North-Nicaragua, Southeast-Panama, West-Pacific Ocean, East-Caribbean Sea

**Capital city:** San José

**Administrative Division:** 7 provinces, 81 countries, 463 districts

**Government:** democratic republic

**Head of State:** 2006 – 2010: President Oscar Arias. From 2010 on: Laura Chinchilla

**Highest Mountain:** Chirripo (3820m. above sea level)

**Largest crater:** Poás Volcano (1km)

**National Flower:** Guaria Morada (*Cattleya skinneri*)

**National Tree:** Guanacaste (*Enterolobium cyclocarpum*)

**National Bird:** Yiguirro (*Turdus grayii*)

**Population:** 4.2 million, 50% live in the Central Valley

**People:** 96% Spanish descent, 2% African descent, 1% Indigenous, 1% Chinese

**Language:** Spanish (english is spoken in the hotels / main attractions)

**Religion:** 75% Roman Catholic, 14% Protestant

**Electricity:** 110V, 60Hz (same as the USA)

**Time:** Costa Rica is 6 hours behind GMT (the same as central time in the USA)

**Currency:** Colón

**Inflation:** 11.3%

**Major Industries:** Tourism, electronics, coffee, bananas, sugar, food processing, textiles.

## Costa Rica

Has had democratic elections since the 19th century and is now one of the most peaceful nations in the world. Armed forces were abolished after the 1948 civil war, and Costa Rica has avoided the despotic dictatorships, frequent military coups, terrorism and internal strife that have torn other countries in the region. Costa Rica is also the safest country to visit in Latin America.

It is also friendly. Costa Ricans delight in showing off their lovely country to visitors, and whenever you go, you will find the locals to be a constant source of help, smiles and information.

## Climate/Best Travel Period

For its close to the equator (8-12 degrees north), Costa Rica has a magnificent tropical climate characterized by low temperature variations year-round.

Most parts are warm all over the year and temperatures is about 25°C/77°F around during the day, slightly higher on the coast. Cooler temperatures at higher altitudes offer welcomed refreshment; especially in altitudes over 3000m (e.g. on the top of some volcanoes) it is perceptibly cooler; but even here, temperatures are almost never below 10°C/50°F. Costa Rica can be discovered all year round, however, one wants to be very sure about sunshine plans his trip between mid December and the end of April.

The Cordillera de Guanacaste, the Cordillera de Tilarán, and the Cordillera de Talamanca split the country in two from Northwest to Southeast. It works as a climatic borderline and exercises an essential influence on the climatic situation. The pacific climate is considered to be tropical – temporary humid, the Atlantic climate on the other hand tropical – constantly humid.

Instead of four season, there are only two: Dry Season and Rainy Season. Costa Ricans simply name them “summer” and “winter”, even though nobody imagines real winter. Winter here means just more rainfall. While the mornings in rainy season are usually sunny, around noon clouds appear and tropical rainfalls start. Nevertheless, after one or more hours, it stops and sun comes out again. The tropical soil gives off an intensive smell, birds continue twittering, and puddles quickly disappear – a veritable tropical spectacle.

## Nature

The country's biodiversity attracts nature lovers from all over the world. The primary attraction for many visitors is the 850 recorded bird species, which include the resplendent quetzal, indigo-capped hummingbirds, macaws and toucans. Costa Rica's tropical forests have 1500 tree species and provide a variety of habitats for the country's fauna including four types of monkey, sloths, armadillos, jaguars and tapirs. There are also a number of dazzling butterflies. National parks cover almost 12% of the country, and forest reserves and indigenous reservations boost the protected land area to 27%.

## Parks

The Costa Rica government has been concentrating on its parks and wildlife for well over forty years now, and the dedication has payed off in the quality and quantity of biological reserves and well-preserved ecosystems. The national park in the northwest of the country, Parque Nacional Volcán Arenal, has at its center the perfectly conical (and iconic) 1633m (5356ft) Volcán Arenal. The volcano has been exceptionally active since 1968, when huge explosions triggered lava flows. The degree of activity varies from week to week; sometimes there is a spectacular display of flowing red-hot lava and incandescent rocks flying through the air; at other times, the volcano is more placid and gently glows in the dark.

Two other environmental highlights include Rincón de la Vieja, northeast of Liberia in northwestern Costa Rica, and Parque Nacional Corcovado. The former is a volcanic wonderland of cones, craters, lagoons, boiling mud pools, sulphur springs, hot springs that visitors can bathe in, and a park that can be explored on foot or horse. Parque Nacional Corcovado, in the southwestern corner of the Península de Osa in the south of the country, has long-distance hiking trails which offers visitors the chance to spend several days walking through lowland tropical rain forest. Make sure you visit in the dry season, and keep your

eyes peeled for wildlife. There are shorter walks around Monteverde and in the coastal Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio, south of Quepos.

### **Sunrise/Sunset**

As Costa Rica is located close to the equator, sun rises between 5 a.m. and 6 a.m. and sunset is between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m. all year round. Dawn and dusk are very short and we recommend considering this when planning your trip across Costa Rica, especially when travelling by rental car. We do not recommend driving at night, due to sometimes very poor road conditions, vehicles without lights or animals on the road.

### **Tips and Taxes**

A 13% sales tax is charged on your bill for any every service, meal or drink purchased. An additional 10% service charge will be added to your restaurant bills. Therefore, it is important to check before ordering if prices stated on the menu include taxes and service charge. If tax and service charge are not included, you must add a 23% to the prices. If taxes and service charge are included, this is usually clearly indicated on the menu. In case you have been satisfied with the restaurant service, you may add a voluntary additional tip. This should be around 3-5 % of the bill. On all lodging bills the sales tax is 13%.

### **Credit Cards**

Credit cards are accepted at hotels, restaurants, and shops all over the country. Though, few small businesses and those without phone line might not accept them. In smaller shops, you may be charged a 7% additional charge covering their credit card commission. VISA and MASTERCARD are mostly accepted. We recommend carrying always a cash reserve. Please ask before consuming, if credit cards were accepted.