



## Costa Rica Practicalities

### TIME DIFFERENCE

Costa Rica is in the Central Standard Time Zone; Daylight Savings Time is not observed.

### MONEY EXCHANGE & PURCHASES

**US Dollars, Cash**—United States dollars are widely accepted. Carry smaller denomination bills (\$1-\$20) in good condition, without writing or tears. Larger bills are regarded with a great deal of suspicion and the new counterfeit resistant currency is only slowly gaining acceptance even years after its introduction.

If you are going to spend US cash you should be adept at doing conversions on the fly and expect to receive your change in colones.

**Costa Rican Colones** —Local currency demonstrates that you are making a sincere effort to learn the culture. The Costa Rican colon, also denoted by CRC, is the official currency of Costa Rica. The symbol for CRC can be written as C: C500 . The colon is subdivided into 100 centimos. Ticos call the 100 colon bill a "teja," while the 500-colon bill is called a "cinco teja." "Rojo" and "tucan" are the slang terms for 1,000 and 5,000 colon bills.

**Credit, Debit, Prepaid Bank Cards**—Many hotels, stores, and restaurants accept payment with credit or debit card; rarely are prepaid bank cards accepted. Be sure to let your card carrier know before your departure that you will be travelling to Costa Rica and ask them for any service or exchange rate fees. In addition to these fees, it is common and legal for individual establishments to charge their own credit card use fees for purchases.

Cards should always be in the name of the participant themselves. Debit cards work well for cash withdrawals, but typically must be run as credit for any purchases.



## TEACHER PLANNING GUIDE

### **WIFI & PHONE USE**

The easiest and quickest way to prepare for phone use while in Costa Rica is by contacting your provider to review the packages they offer for international travel. Many companies have plans that begin at \$10 USD per travel day. WiFi will be available in some establishments, hotels, and families, but cannot be guaranteed, and the signal can vary greatly. Purchasing an international SIM card is also an option, but will likely be difficult to purchase after arrival.

### **VOLTAGE:**

The standard voltage for electrical outlets in Costa Rica ranges between 110 and 120 volts AC. U.S. and Canadian 120 Volt appliances and multiple voltage devices like laptops and cellphones will be fine with Costa Rica's voltage. Plug adapters do not change the voltage, just the physical plug to outlet connection, and some outlets may only be two pronged.

### **STORE & OFFICE HOURS**

Most stores and offices open around 9 a.m. and close around 6 p.m. (malls are an exception). Government offices are open from 7:30 a.m. or 8 a.m. until 3:30 p.m. or 4:30 p.m. Many offices and some stores close for lunch from noon until 1 or 2 o'clock in the afternoon. Banks are generally open from 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.

### **PUBLIC HOLIDAYS**

Very few businesses are open on Costa Rica's national holidays: January 1 (New Year's Day), March 19 (Saint Joseph's Day), Good Thursday and Friday, April 11 (Juan Santamaría Day, the national hero), May 1 (Labor Day), June 1 (Corpus Christi), June 29 (Day of Saints Peter and Paul), July 25 (Anniversary of the Annexation of Guanacaste Province), August 2 (Virgin of the Angels Day, Costa Rica's patron saint), August 15 (Mother's Day), September 15 (Independence Day), October 15 (Columbus Day), December 8 (Day of the Immaculate Conception), and December 25 (Christmas Day).



## TAXES & TIPPING

Resorts, hotels, nightclubs, bars and restaurants must charge twenty-five percent taxes on every bill (15% sales and 10 % service taxes). The ten-percent service tax is a tip, although some people give waiters an additional ten- percent when service is exceptionally good. Tip porters according to personal habit and the quality of service. Costa Ricans do not tip taxi drivers, but some do expect something extra from tourists. Tips are included for all services listed on your program outline.

## STREET ADDRESS SYSTEM

San José and Alajuela streets are laid out in a very logical system: odd-numbered streets (*calle*s) are east of Calle Central, even-numbered streets are west. Odd-numbered *avenidas* are north of Avenida Central and even-numbered are south.

However, most Ticos completely ignore the street numbering system. The accepted way to give directions is from *puntos cardinales* or landmarks. If you call for a taxi, you have to give the name of a church or a *pulperia* (corner store) or a well-known business (like Pollos Kentucky). Then you state how many *metros* you are from there and in what direction. *Cien* (100) *metros* roughly corresponds to one city block. These are some examples of typical ways of giving directions: “*De la pulpería La Luna, cien metros al norte y cincuenta al oeste.*” (“From the La Luna grocery store one block north and half a block west.”) “*De la Iglesia La Soledad, doscientos al sur y trescientos al este.*” (“From the Soledad Church, two blocks south and three blocks east.”)



## SOUVENIRS

Tiny *huacas*, copies of pre-Columbian jewelry representing frogs, lizards, turtles, and humanesque deities, are relatively inexpensive and make lovely necklaces, earrings, and tiepins.

If you need lightweight souvenirs, there are T-shirts, or jewelry made of wood and metal. Colorful scarves, hats, blouses, bags, and sun visors with motifs of native flora and fauna are unusual souvenirs. There will be multiple shopping opportunities during your touring, and last-minute souvenirs can even be purchased at the airport, time permitting. There is an abundance of options ranging from “budget friendly” to “the sky is the limit”.

You can also buy freshly ground coffee or coffee beans in souvenir shops. It is usually ground finer than percolator coffee, for use in the *chorreador*, a filter bag that hangs from a wooden stand. There are percolator grinds available in supermarkets, as well as dried bananas, coconut twirls, macadamia nuts, cashews, and yummy jams and pastes. A *tapa dulce*, the native hard brown sugar, can be grated to add a rich flavor to baked goods or used on cereal and in coffee.

The capital of Costa Rican painted woodcraft is Sarchi, about an hour northwest Alajuela. Everything from salad bowls to rocking chairs to miniature ox carts can be purchased.

Wicker, raffia, and woven palm-leaf items should be spray varnished when you get home. Don't be tempted to buy tortoise shell or alligator-skin goods--they are made from endangered animals that are internationally protected. Customs officials at your home-country airport will confiscate those items.



## **THE PEOPLE**

The “ticos” as Costa Ricans are called, are this nation’s greatest asset. Famous for being friendly and helpful, most “ticos” are quite content to live up to their reputation. “Ticos” are polite, talkative, neat, self-assured, and gregarious; they love their music, soccer, and especially their country.

There are more than three million “ticos,” and about half of them live in the Central Valley, in and around San José. Less than one percent of the population is indigenous, and most live in protected areas around the Talamanca Mountains.

## **WHAT MAKES “TICOS” SO DIFFERENT?**

The answer lies in the country’s history and culture. From the very beginning, Costa Rica has been exposed to little violence. During colonial times, it was one of the few parts of Latin America settled by people more interested in creating a pleasant place to live and start a family than through exploitation.

Most “ticos” are still as warm hearted and friendly as their ancestors. Hospitality, respect and friendship are enjoyed by visitors to Costa Rica. In fact, when asking for directions, “ticos” will often take visitors where they want to go instead of simply saying “one block this direction and three the other”.

## **WHERE DID THE WORD “TICO” COME FROM?**

Costa Ricans often use the diminutive form of words to be more courteous or friendly. They use, however, “-ico”, instead of the more common “-ito”. Although “-ico” is rarely used in other Spanish speaking countries. The word “momento” (moment) thus becomes “momentico” (a very brief moment). Hence, people from other countries started calling Costa Ricans “ticos”.



## THE CUISINE

Costa Rica serves many delicious dishes, which rely on the abundance of fresh ingredients. Don't expect too much spicy food unless you put the salsa on the food yourself. Costa Rican cuisine is much more European in flavoring. The Costa Rican staples are rice and beans, usually black beans, which are often served separately at lunch and dinner, or sautéed together with some peppers and onions as a dish called "gallo pinto", which is served with eggs as the traditional breakfast.

While rice and beans are often accompanied by stewed beef or chicken (carne or pollo en salsa), a sautéed filet of fish (pescado) or a small steak or filet (bistek or lomito). Other popular dishes include chicken roasted over coffee wood (pollo a la parrilla) or pieces of chicken mixed with rice (arroz con pollo).

Costa Rica offers some excellent fresh seafood, as it shares a border with the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. The most popular fish in the country is sea bass (corvina), which is usually sautéed, or sometimes served with garlic (al ajillo). It is also excellent in "ceviche", which is marinated in lime juice. Snapper (pargo) is commonly deep fried whole (pescado entero) and shrimp (camarones) and lobster (langosta) can be served a variety of ways.

Beef and chicken are standard animal proteins, and are frequently roasted or stewed in a mild red sauce.

Heart of palm salad (palmito) and peach palm fruit (pejibaye) are popular side dishes. Another common tropical vegetable is the plantain (platano), or cooking banana, which is used in soups, or fried in sweet strips or patties (patacones). The rain forest potato is cassava (yuca), which is another traditional dish served either in soup or fried in small pieces.

But the most remarkable taste treat to be enjoyed in Costa Rica is the selection of tropical fruits. The bananas and pineapples may be twice as sweet as back home, and exotic fruits like papayas and mangos are common enough, but some of the best sweets in Costa Rica are things one encounters hardly anywhere else, like guanabana, mamon and carambola.



### **THE CUISINE cont:**

Countless fruits and fruit drinks (refrescos) are sold on the city markets, streets, and roadside stands. The refrescos are a combination of fruit and water (en agua) or milk (en leche). Popular flavors include: pineapple (piña), guava (cas), strawberry (fresa), a raspberry cousin (mora) and local treats like maracuya and tamarindo.

### **CLIMATE**

Given Costa Rica's latitude, which is between 8 and 12 degrees north of the Equator, day length and temperature do not change drastically with the seasons. The sun rises around 5 a.m. and sets around 6 p.m. year-round. Temperatures vary due to changes in altitude from one region to another.

The misty highlands are in the 10° - 13°C (50° - 55°F) range, while the Central Valley, at 1200 meters (3800 feet), averages 22°C (72°F). At sea level, the temperature is 26°C (80°F), tempered by sea breezes on the coast. Slight variations occur in December, January, and February, due to cold winds from the North American winter. These cooler temperatures bring on the dry season or "summer", as Central Americans call it, which lasts from December through April. Temperatures start to rise as the sun approaches a perpendicular position over Costa Rica. This causes increased evaporation and brings on the rainy season, or "winter", which lasts from May through November, except for a two week dry season, a time called *el veranillo de San Juan* (the "little summer"), which occurs sometime in July.

The Atlantic Coast has always been an exception to the rule. Trade winds laden with moisture from the Caribbean approach Costa Rica from the northeast. As the moisture rises to the chilly heights of the Cordilleras, it condenses into rain on their eastern slopes. For this reason, there is no definite dry season in the Atlantic zone, but the beaches tend to be sunnier than the mountains. In a similar phenomenon, trade winds from the southeast discharge their moisture against the mountains that separate the Osa Peninsula from the rest of the country. The Atlantic plains and the Osa both receive 4000 to 7000 millimeters (150 to 300 inches) of rain a year, compared to an average of 2500 millimeters (100 inches) in the Central Valley.



## **INTERACT** TEACHER PLANNING GUIDE

### **CLIMATE cont:**

One of the most surprising things for newcomers to the Central Valley is that it's not as warm as they thought it would be. The truly hot months are at the end of the dry season, March and April. December, January, and February are usually rain-free, but the weather can be downright chilly, especially at night or if a wind is blowing. During the rainy season, May to November the days tend to start out warm and sunny and cloud over by noon. The downpour usually starts around 2 or 3 p.m. and it can get pretty cold then, too. Usually, a sweater and long pants are enough to keep you warm. When it rains, it *really rains*, but afternoon downpours are usually short-lived. If you go down in altitude from San José's 3800 feet, you'll be able to wear the kind of clothes you hoped you could wear in the tropics.





## HISTORY

Pre-Columbian Costa Rica was a region of trade and cultural interchange between the predominant empires of North and South America. The eastern half of the country was inhabited by people who were related to the Chibcha Indians of what is today Colombia while the western half was dominated by Chorotegas, who were linked to the Aztec and Mayan traditions to the north. Columbus encountered Indians from the Atlantic coast on his fourth voyage to the New World, when he anchored off of what is today the city of Limón, and the profusion of gold jewelry worn by those Indians is said to have inspired Columbus' name for the region: Costa Rica, or "Rich Coast".

In spite of this early contact, Costa Rica was colonized more slowly than the rest of Central America. The Chorotega Indians were subjugated but the Spanish had little luck with the Chibchas, and Costa Rica never developed the kind of slave society that predominated in Latin America. This forced the colonists to do much of their own work, and has been credited with aiding in the development of democracy. When Central America gained independence from Spain, in 1821, Costa Rica was such a backwater that it took a month for the news to reach San José, and it was so poor that even the colonial governor had to farm to survive.

Later in the 19th century, Costa Rica became involved in the production of coffee, and as the export of the "golden bean" began to enrich the country, it attracted more European immigrants and developed a more cosmopolitan society. Coffee was first shipped out of the Pacific port of Puntarenas, but the need for an Atlantic port caused the country to contract an American to build a railway through the jungle to the Caribbean town of Limón. Because of the steep and forbidding terrain, the railway took 19 years to build and some 400 workers died in the process. Most of the thousands of Jamaican, Italian and Chinese laborers who were hired to help build the railway settled there afterward, increasing the heterogeneity of Costa Rican society. Minor Kieth, the US citizen who built the railway, was given some 800,000 acres in the Atlantic lowlands. He planted them with bananas for export, which marked the beginning of his United Fruit Company, an important force in Central America for the next century.



## **HISTORY cont.**

In 1889 the country began a democratic tradition that has since suffered only two slight setbacks, a 1917 military coup that lasted 30 months and a 1948 revolution that helped define modern Costa Rica. The 20th century saw Costa Rica become very involved in banana production and expand into other export crops. Several administrations established a series of social reforms that included compulsory education, a social security system, socialized medicine and labor rights, all of which combined to make Costa Rica the most progressive nation in Central America.

One of the country's great social reformers was Dr. Rafael Agel Calderón Guardia, who tried to stay in power through a puppet president and when his candidate lost the election, he used the army to seize power. The consequent revolution of the 1948, led by a young farmer named José "Pepe" Figueres, sent Calderón into exile, put the democracy back on track, and resulted in a new constitution being drafted which abolished the army but upheld most of Calderón's social reforms. Costa Rica has thus been able to invest the money most of its neighbors spend on the military into areas such as development, health care and education. The result has been a stable, prosperous nation free from much of the social strife that has plagued the rest of Central America. Oscar Arias, a recent president, tried to interest his neighbors in this philosophy of democracy and demilitarization, and his efforts resulted in slow resolve of many of the region's conflicts and his winning the Nobel Peace Prize.



## **THE GOVERNMENT**

Costa Rica's system of government is similar to that of the United States, with its series of checks and balances. There are three branches of government: the Executive, which consists of the president, two vice presidents and advisors; the Legislative Assembly, with 57 individually elected deputies, which is similar to the U.S. Congress; and the Judicial Branch which consists of civil, criminal and appellate courts and a Supreme Court. The Electoral Tribunal, which supervises elections, is an independent institution.

The President and members of the Legislative Assembly are elected for four-year terms and cannot run for re-election. The two main parties are the National Liberation Party (PLN) and the United Social Christian Party (PUSC).

## **EDUCATION**

Through constant attention to education, Costa Rica has achieved the highest literacy rate in Central America. Its literacy rate rivals that of many larger and more industrialized nations. Since the 1970's, Costa Rica has consistently invested twenty-eight percent of the national budget in education--something which would not have been possible while maintaining armed forces.

The educational system is divided into three major sections. Elementary schooling is free and obligatory. Seventy percent of high schools are public, while accredited private institutions provide the thirty percent. University education began last century, but it wasn't until 1940 that the University of Costa Rica, the country's largest public university, was founded. Thirty years later, several more public universities had been created, including a correspondence school. The first of numerous private universities was established in 1977.



## **TOURISM GUIDELINES: KEEPING NATURE HEALTHY**

1) Wildlife and wildlife habitats must not be needlessly disturbed. By treading lightly, you will see more wildlife, enjoy a richer outdoor experience, and leave nature as you found it. Stay on the trail and don't pick or damage vegetation. Costa Rican law (Law #6048, art. 8) prohibits the removal of any samples of flora, fauna or minerals from a national park.

2) Waste should be disposed of properly. This is just common sense: don't litter.

3) Tourism should be a positive influence on local communities. Look for ways that your visit can benefit local people; stop in the village and buy local crafts, or hire a local guide, etc.

4) Visitors should be culturally sensitive. Remember that you are a guest here. Try to recognize and follow local customs. Don't intrude but do embrace the Costa Rican way of life. Ticos are some of the world's warmest and friendliest people. Get to know them.

5) There must be no commerce in wildlife, wildlife products, or native plants. There are strict international laws prohibiting the purchase or transport of endangered or migratory wildlife. Avoid buying ANY animals or plants, even if it is legal, this includes wild birds, feathers, stuffed birds or animals, sea turtle products of any kind (including skin cream, soap, and jewelry), snakes and lizards or their skins, coral, furs, orchids (except those commercially grown in a hothouse), and other plants. Leather goods made from cowhide are recommended.

6) Your visit to Costa Rica's natural areas should be a rewarding and enriching experience. Your guides will lead you to Costa Rica's fabulous natural assets and also tell you about this country's struggle to conserve these treasures for future generations of Ticos and tourists.

**The campaign to save the tropical rain forests and nature's other gifts is a great international drama; by visiting Costa Rica's natural areas, you have become a part of it.**



## TIQUISMOS... HAVING FUN WITH COSTA RICAN SPANISH

Ticos are amused and delighted when foreigners try to speak Spanish, especially when they include *tiquismos*, expressions that are peculiar to Costa Rican culture.

Not only the vocabulary, but the way of using words is important. Spanish speakers use a lot of *muletillas* (fillers, literally "crutches") in their speech. They "address" the person with whom they are speaking more often than is done in English, and they do it in a way that English speakers might consider slightly offensive. It is common for women to be called *mamita*, *madre*, (roughly corresponding to "honey"). Latins love to use physical characteristics as nicknames. Common ones are *gordo* (fatty), *flaco* (skinny), *macho* or *macha* (Costa Rican for fair-skinned or fair-haired), *negro* (dark-skinned), *chino* (it doesn't matter if you're Asian or just have slightly slanting eyes, your name is *Chino*), *gato* (blue or green eyes). You just have to be slightly *gordo* or *flaco* to merit those names. If you're really *gordo* or *flaco*, and people really like you, you get a special name like *repollito* (little cabbage) or *palito* (little stick).

Any male under 30 is usually called *maje* by his friends. This is a special Costa Rican measure of friendship, which literally means "dummy", but figuratively it is more like pal or buddy. It is used widely as a *muletilla*. *Majes* have various expressions of approval--such as the famous *pura vida* (great, terrific), *tuanis* (cool), and *buena nota* (groovy). *Mala nota* is ungroovy, *furris* is uncool, and *salado* means "too bad for you". Expressions of extreme approval are *que bruto*, *que barbaro*, and disapproval, *que horror*, or fatal, *maje*.

The above expressions are the slang of urban youth. However, all Ticos are aware of polite, courteous, and respectful forms of speech. They make their world more pleasant by using little expressions of appreciation. For example, if someone helps you in a store or on the street, you say "*Muchas gracias, muy amable*". ("Thank you very much, you are very kind.") They will say "Con mucho gusto." (With much pleasure.)

It is customary in the morning to ask, "*¿Cómo amaneció?*" ("How did you wake up?") "*¿Muy bien, por dicha, y usted?*" ("Very well, luckily, and you?") "*Muy bien, gracias a Dios*, ("Very well, thank God."



## **TIQUISMOS... HAVING FUN WITH COSTA RICAN SPANISH cont.**

When talking about a future event or plan, Ticos will often include *si Dios quiere* ("if God wants" or "God willing"). "*Nos vemos el martes, si Dios quiere.*" (We'll see each other Tuesday God willing.") If you want to express the idea of "right away", you can emphatically use the word *¡ya!* keeping in mind that *ya* can also be used to mean already, later, and soon. Natives have 26 different time concepts, perhaps because time is not of such vital importance to their existence. It's what people love and hate about the tropics. Keep that in mind when dealing with the bureaucracy, or when deciding whether or not you have enough time to buy a cold drink when you've been told the bus is coming *ahoritica*. Ticos use the formal *usted* for everyone, probably because it's easier and safer.

Other fillers that are used commonly in Spanish are terms like *fíjate*, *imagínate*, and *vieras que*, for which there are no real equivalents in English. Roughly, they could be translated as "would you believe" or "just think"! These expressions are used to give emphasis on what the speaker is saying. For example: "*¡Fíjate vos que no me dejaron entrar!*" (Would you believe it--they wouldn't let me in!") Or, you might say, "*Imagínese como me dio pena verla así.*" (Imagine how bad I felt to see her like that.)

*Vieras* is often used the same way we use "sure" in English: "*¡Vieras que susto me dio!*" ("I sure was scared!" or, "You should have seen how it scared me!")

*Achará* is another particularly Tico Expression and indicated regret at a loss. *Fíjate que el perro comió mis begonias. Achará mis florecitas.* (Would you believe it--the dog ate my begonias. My poor little flowers!")



## **TIQUISMOS... HAVING FUN WITH COSTA RICAN SPANISH cont.**

When you come to someone's house, especially in the country, it is customary to stand on the ground near the porch and say "¡Upe!" as a way of letting them know you're there (this comes from an old expression referring to "the Virgin of Guadalupe"). When they ask you to come in, as you enter the house you say "Con Permiso." ("With your permission.") If they offer you something to eat, it is much more polite to accept (even if it is only a little) than not to accept. Giving makes people happy, and if you don't let them give to you, it hurts their feelings. People will ask you about your family, whether you're married and how many children you have. Most can't quite grasp the idea of people not being married or not having children. When you're sitting and talking and finally no one can think of anything else to say, you say, "Pues, sí." ("Well, yes.")

Learn some of these expressions and practice them until you don't make any *metidas de pata* (literally, "putting your foot in it", or mistakes). Ticos will be glad to help you. If you do make a mistake, there is a word which is an instant absolution: just say, "¿Diay?" That means, "Well, what can you expect?" or "What can be done about it?" As you get to know the Ticos, you'll find out that this little word comes in very handy.

## **PACKING FOR COSTA RICA**

On any of Interact's Costa Rica programs, you will visit mountains, the beach, and the temperate Central Valley. You need to be prepared for temperatures from the low 50s to the upper 80's, and everything in between.

Rapid and numerous changes in temperature and the probability of rain mean you should be prepared with appropriate clothing. Come prepared to dress in layers and try to bring light weight, fast drying clothing. We hope the following list helps you pack. It is not necessarily comprehensive, and some travelers manage taking much less.

The staff-guide assigned to your group will review touring on a daily basis and advise if there are any special requirements for that day.

Please review your PREGUNTAS Enrollment Booklet, p. 5: LUGGAGE, PACKING & PROPER DRESS.



## **PACKING FOR COSTA RICA cont.**

### **Necessary items:**

Walking shoes with good traction (sneakers, trail runners, hiking boots, etc.) are necessary for hiking in rain or cloud forests.

Sandals or anything that exposes any part of the foot can not be worn during the visit. While rubber boots are offered to participants at the time of the visit, specific sizes may not be available.

Reason: small biting creatures, whether snakes or insects, love to feast on feet. Plus, if you're wearing sandals, we don't think you want to step on a very large centipede.

### **Suggested Packing List**

- Money belt or pouch
- Dry shoes for evening
- Flip flops or river sandals (you don't mind being wet in)
- Underclothes and socks
- At least two pairs of long pants for field days and one for evening shorts.
- Some people like to hike in shorts, although long pants are recommended because of bugs.
- Skirt or dress, females might want a change from pants for the evenings
- Short sleeved t-shirts
- Light weight rain jacket or cheap rain poncho
- Sun hat or cap
- Sweater or sweatshirt
- Light jacket or windbreaker
- Bathing suit
- Sunscreen
- Beach towel
- Plastic bags for dirty clothes and to protect your gear on boats
- Binoculars (sharing is highly recommended) & bird book if you are a serious birder
- Flashlight