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What to Expect

Entrance & Exit Requirements

Most nationalities do not require a visa for stays of up to 90 days, provided you have a passport valid for six months, proof of sufficient funds to support your stay in Costa Rica (US\$100 per 30 days) and proof of onward travel. In the event that you do require a visa, be aware that you cannot get a visa at the border.

There is a departure tax of US\$29, payable by cash or credit card when traveling by boat or land. If traveling by air, most international airlines cover this fee in the cost of your airfare, but if not, you may also pay the departure tax via cash or credit card at the airport.

Check the [US Costa Rican Embassy](#) website for the full list of entrance and exit requirements.

Customs Regulations

When departing Nicaragua, you may not take pre-Columbian or early colonial artifacts. Attempting to remove these items from the country could result in prison time.

Embassy & Consulate Locations

For up-to-date embassy location information, please consult: www.costarica-embassy.org.

Electricity

Electricity in Costa Rica is the same as North America – 120V/60hz. Tourists from Europe and other countries may not be able to use their electrical equipment unless suitable for this voltage. Laptops will most likely work, though you may need to purchase a converter.

Blackouts are common in certain areas of Costa Rica. Electricity in larger cities is reliable, but in smaller towns and rural regions, power outages happen regularly. Many hotels and hostels have generators to supply power during outages, but smaller hotels may not. Eco-lodges powered by solar and hydropower may not be able to support small appliances that consume excessive amounts of power, including hair dryers and other hair styling equipment.

Power surges may also occur in Costa Rica, and can sometimes result in damages. Laptops and camera chargers generally have their own adapters, which offers protection against power surges. It may be useful to purchase a surge protector if you plan to use other equipment or electronics in Costa Rica.

Time Zone

Costa Rica's time zone is the same as US Central Time – GMT-6. Daylight savings time is not observed in Costa Rica.

Money & Currency

Currency: Colones(₡)

Daily Costs

Budget (up to): US\$40

Midrange: US\$40-100

High End (more than): US\$100

Banks, ATMs & Money

Colones come in paper denominations of 1000, 2000, 5000, 10 000 and 20 000. All banks will exchange US dollars, and many will exchange British pounds or euros. Travelers checks are nearly impossible to exchange anywhere in Costa Rica, making credit and debit cards a much more reliable source of money.

ATMs are easily found in most midsize towns in Costa Rica, but you'll need to take cash when heading to rural areas. Credit cards are widely accepted at midrange and upscale hotels and restaurants. Most credit cards include a transaction fee for international purchases. For smaller items, especially in rural areas, cash is recommended. US dollars are used as a secondary currency in Costa Rica, but paying in colones for local items is often cheaper.

It is worth carrying an emergency supply of US dollars in case you have challenges with your cards.

Taxes & Tipping

There is a 13% sales tax on all purchases in Costa Rica, including hotels, food and souvenirs. Most restaurants apply a 10%

gratuuity fee. You are not obligated to tax on top of this, but it is good practice to do so, as the 10% fee is typically shared by several people. To tip your waiter directly, leave money on the table.

Tipping is not widespread in Costa Rica, other than tips for guides and at restaurants.

Guides: tipping guides is recommended as this often makes up a significant portion of their salary.

Restaurants: a tip of around 10% is expected for table service.

Money Saving Tips

- Refill your water bottle. Most hotels will refill your water bottle for US\$0.25. Economical and environmentally friendly!
- Learn to barter. Don't be afraid to try haggling when buying things at the market. It's a common custom here, and may save you some cash.
- Embrace the local cuisine. Western food costs more than double the price of local meals in Nicaragua. By eating typical (*gallo pinto, meat, and plantains*) at street stalls, you can eat for under US\$4 per meal.

- Take the bus. Local buses are the cheapest way to get around Costa Rica. They're less comfortable and convenient than tourist buses and shuttles, but great value for only a few dollars!

Crime & Safety

Though Costa Rica has the lowest crime rate in Central America, tourism-related crime is rife in urban centers including San José, and as a "wealthy" foreigner you may be considered a potential target by scam artists and thieves. San José, in particular, is known for its pickpockets, so never carry a wallet in your back pocket, and keep a tight grip on your purse.

- Pay extra attention to personal safety in San José and other large cities, around remote beaches, and in undeveloped nature reserves.
- Large cities like San José and Limón have neighborhoods that should be avoided. Ask your hotel for the most up-to-date local information, and always ask your hotel to call a trusted taxi.
- Do not leave valuables in parked cars, and never put your bag on the overhead racks of a bus.
- Men should be aware that prostitutes are known for sleight-of-hand and often work in pairs.
- You are most at risk for pickpocketing in crowds and on public transport. Leave flashy jewelry, watches and expensive sunglasses at home. Keep cash divided up and hidden in several different places.
- Note that many taxi drivers in San José are commissioned by hotels to bring them customers, and the hotel scene is so competitive that drivers will often say anything they can to steer you to the places they represent. Be skeptical and firm when telling drivers where you would like to go.

In 2007, Costa Rica established a tourist police force, which has helped to prevent petty crimes against foreigners. These officers can be helpful in the event of an emergency, as many of them speak at least some English.

Immediately report crimes to the local police department (**dial 117**). Your insurance company back home will require an official police report before reimbursing you. While police corruption does exist, the police force here is notably more honest and helpful than in many other Central American nations.

Costa Rica's police force is professional and visible, and the level of corruption is relatively low, by Central American standards. For minor traffic violations, your driver's license may be confiscated, and you may need to pay a fine at the bank and then retrieve your license from the nearest police station. Some people recommend slipping traffic cops a bribe, but that can backfire. You're better off to follow their instructions and hope they let you off with a warning.

Things That Bite & Sting

Chagas Bug & Chagas Disease

Mainly found in *campesino* structures of crumbling adobe in poor, rural areas, the Chagas bug carries Chagas Disease, which manifests in 2% of its victims. Chagas Disease begins with swollen glands and fever, then goes in to a 5 to 30-year remission. If and when it reappears, Chagas Disease causes the heart lining to swell, sometimes resulting in death. There is no cure. For more information on Chagas Disease, [click here](#). The Chagas bug is a large, easily-recognizable insect, which bites its victim (usually on the face, near the lips), feeds on the victim's blood, and then defecates on the newly-created wound.

Dogs

Most towns in Costa Rica conduct a yearly rabies vaccination campaign for dogs, but you should still take precautions. A rabies vaccine is optional but should be considered. If bitten by a dog or other mammal, immediately cleanse the wound with antibacterial soap and seek medical attention.

Mosquitoes

Mosquitoes (*zancudos*) are most active during the rainy season, from May to November, and in areas near stagnant water, including marshes and mangrove forests. They are more common in the lowlands than at higher altitudes, though they can also be found in the mountains.

The mosquitoes that carry malaria bite during the evening and night. Dengue, chikunguya and zika are carried by day-biting mosquitoes.

Scorpions

Scorpions (*alacr  nes* in Spanish) are common in Nicaragua, particularly in dark corners and piles of wood. Although they're big, black and nasty-looking, their sting is no more harmful than a bee sting, if slightly more painful. The risk may be higher for people who are prone to anaphylactic shock.

Spiders

Though there are many species of spiders (*ara  as* in Spanish) in Costa Rica, don't worry. Spiders do not aggressively seek people out, and do much more good than harm by eating things like mosquitoes, and Chagas insects. Still, to avoid them, inspect or shake out your sheets before going to sleep and check your shoes before putting your feet in them.

Snakes

There are 22 species of venomous snakes in Costa Rica, but your chances of running into one is exceedingly rare, unless you're going off-trail deep in the bush (which carries other risks as well – it is not generally advisable to go off-trail without a guide).

Keep an eye out for one of 11 pit viper species, especially the infamous fer-de-lance (called *terciopelo* by locals), the most aggressive and dangerous snake in Central America. Most species of pit vipers that can be found in Costa Rica are generally confined to the Caribbean and Southern Pacific coasts, and humid central highlands.

In addition, there are four other rarely-spotted poisonous snakes in Costa Rica, three species of coral snake and the pelagic sea snake. There are **many** coral mimics with various versions of the famous colored bands, but remember that the true coral has ring

markings **only in this order: red, yellow, black, yellow.**

Health & Hygiene

Health Insurance

Healthcare is generally cheap in Costa Rica, but in many places, particularly rural areas, it is well below acceptable standards. Travel insurance is essential in the event of emergency, so that you are able to receive treatment at the best private hospitals in San José. Ensure that your policy covers emergency helicopter evacuation, medical bills, hospitalization, full coverage for lost luggage, and if you're planning to partake in adventure activities, extreme sports.

Recommended Vaccinations

There are no obligatory vaccinations for Costa Rica, with the exception of Yellow Fever for travelers arriving from affected regions. Typhoid and hepatitis shots are recommended well in advance of your vacation, bearing in mind that many vaccinations require a booster shot after the first dose. Some travelers also choose to take anti-malarial medications.

For up-to-date information on recommended vaccinations, consult the CDC's website [here](#), or visit a travel clinic.

Infectious Diseases

Year over year, mosquito-borne viruses and infections have been decreasing in Costa Rica, due to active preventative measures by the government, including large-scale fumigation efforts in major urban areas.

- **Chikunguya** is a mosquito-borne viral infection transmitted by *Aedes*. It is most commonly transmitted during the early morning and late afternoon. Risk is low in Nicaragua, with peak transmission occurring during the rainy season from May to November.
- **Dengue fever** is a mosquito-borne viral infection transmitted by *Aedes*. It is most commonly transmitted during the day. Dengue occurs year-round with peak transmission during the rainy season from May to December.
- **Leptospirosis** is a rare but serious bacterial infection transmitted through water contaminated with animal urine.
- **Malaria** is a mosquito-borne infection transmitted by mosquitoes, most commonly transmitted in the evening, and more common in rural areas.
- **Zika virus** is a mosquito-borne infection transmitted by *Aedes*. It is of concern to pregnant women as it is believed to affect fetal development.

Zika Virus

The Zika virus is a mosquito-borne disease that has attracted a lot of media attention in the past two years for its rapid spread through tropical and sub-tropical areas of Latin America. The illness

usually only causes mild symptoms (fever, rash, joint pain and red eyes), and in most cases, does not require hospitalization, with many patients not even realizing they have been infected.

The virus, however, poses a significant threat to pregnant women as it is suspected of causing birth defects including microcephaly. Pregnant women should consider postponing travel to areas affected by Zika until the virus has been controlled and more is known about the effects on fetal development. Zika has also been linked to Guillain-Barré syndrome, a rare condition that affects the nervous system, though more research is needed to verify the connection.

Along with mosquito transmission, the virus can also be spread sexually, so use condoms while traveling and for three weeks after returning from Zika-affected areas to avoid infecting partners.

The Nicaraguan government has launched an extensive and aggressive approach to combat the virus which includes large-scale fumigation efforts in urban areas. If you develop Zika symptoms, you are required by local regulations to immediately report your symptoms to the health authorities.

For the latest details on Zika and its risks, consult the Center for Disease Control's dedicated web page, at: www.cdc.gov/zika.

Insect Bite Prevention

- Use a repellent containing lemon eucalyptus, 20-30% DEET or 20% Picaridin, on exposed skin. For travelers looking for a natural alternative to DEET, lemon eucalyptus is shown to be as effective as DEET for up to 6 hours. Heavy exposure to DEET and other insecticides can cause memory loss, headache, weakness, fatigue, muscle and joint pain, tremors and shortness of breath in humans. DEET is not recommended for use on children or infants.
- Wear neutral-colored (beige, light grey) clothing. If possible, wear long sleeved garments.
- Apply sunscreen first, followed by repellent (20+ minutes later).
- When booking accommodations, choose air-conditioned rooms, which offer some protection from insects. At a minimum, select a room with good screens on the windows and doors.

Rip Tides

Many of the Pacific coast beaches have riptides, strong currents that can pull swimmers out to sea. If you find yourself caught in a riptide, you cannot escape the current by swimming toward shore – this will tire you out and may lead to drowning. To break free of the current, swim parallel to shore and use the energy of the waves to help you get back to the beach. **Note: lifeguards are a rarity in Costa Rica.**

Sun & Heatstroke

With close proximity to the equator, in Nicaragua, you will burn much faster, and it is no accident that locals hide away indoors between 10:00 am and 2:00 pm. Hats and SPF 30 sunscreen is recommended at all times to avoid heat and sunstroke. If you do manage to overdo it on the beach, drink lots of water, ensure you are replenishing electrolytes with electrolyte packages or sports drinks, and treat sunburns with aloe vera.

For information on food & water safety in Costa Rica, visit page 13 of the guide.

Geography & Terrain



Costa Rica is located in Central America, bordered by both the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, with Nicaragua to the north, and Panama to the south. The country's total land mass measures 51 060 square kilometers, slightly smaller than the state of West Virginia. Costa Rica has a total of 1 290 km of coastline, with 212 km on the Caribbean, and 1 016 km on the Pacific coast.

The nation's terrain is a coastal plane separated by two mountain ranges, the Cordillera Central and the Cordillera de Talamanca which separate the Pacific and Caribbean watersheds. The Central mountain range contains four large volcanoes, Poás, Barva, Irazú and Turrialba.

Costa Rica's highest peaks can be found in the Talamanca mountain range, with Mount Chirripó extending 3 820 meters above sea level. Much of the Talamanca mountain range is covered by La Amistad Internatioal Park, shared by Costa Rica and Panama.

There are two other mountain ranges in Costa Rica - the Cordillera de Tilarán (to which Arenal Volcano belongs) and the Cordillera de Guanacaste, both located in Costa Rica's north.

Roads & Transportation

Costa Rica has a well-developed tourist framework, and so getting around here is typically easier than in most Central American countries, and you will find there are many options for getting from point A to point B. With major touristic sites throughout the country, spanning coast to coast and top to bottom, you might be using more than one of these methods of transports during your visit.

By Plane

Costa Rica has two domestic airlines, Sansa Airlines and Nature Air, both of which operate out of San José's Juan Santamaría International Airport. Both airlines provide flights on "puddle jumper" propeller planes to destinations throughout Costa Rica, including: Arenal, Drake Bay, Golfito, Liberia, Limón, Palmar Sur, Puerto Jiménez, Punta Islita, Nosara, Quepos (Manuel Antonio), San Isidro de El General, Tamarindo, Tambor, Tortuguero.

Nature Air also operates flights to Bocas del Toro, Panama, and Sansa to Costa Esmeralda, Nicaragua.

In Costa Rica, flight schedules change frequently and without notice. Delays are common due to inclement weather. **You should avoid arranging a domestic flight that makes a tight connection with an international flight.**

By Bus

Local buses operate throughout Costa Rica, mainly in urban centers including San José, Puntarenas, San Isidro de El General, Golfito and Limón. There is also an extensive bus network that runs throughout the country to remote destinations, though many routes may only have one or two departures per day. Local buses will get you to where you need to go, at the expense of comfort and convenience, with most routes picking up passengers on the street along main roads, and allowing as many people to pile on as can fit. The ride can get hot, crowded and uncomfortable on long journeys, so arrive early and try to get a seat. Bus terminals and stations are often busy and chaotic, the perfect place for pickpocketing and purse snatching. Always mind your belongings.

By Taxi or Shuttle

Hiring taxis or arranging shuttle buses ahead of time is an increasingly popular way of navigating Costa Rica. Small, private companies will pick you up at your airport or hotel and transfer you to your next destination. There are several shuttles per day from destinations all over Costa Rica, and the rides are reliable, comfortable and usually air-conditioned. Some even have WiFi! Check our shuttle section for more information.

In San José, taxis are metered, and it is illegal for drivers not to use them. Outside the capital, most taxis do not have meters and fares should be agreed upon in advance. Bartering is common. Taxi drivers are not normally tipped unless they assist with luggage or have provided exceptional service.

By Car

In general, the roads here are poor, and it is recommended that you spring for a four-wheel-drive, particularly if you are exploring areas not along the main tourist trail. The Pacific Coast is the most beautiful area to travel by car, and the highways along the coast are well-maintained.

Gasoline (*petrol*) is widely available, and you can find 24-hour stations along the Interamericana. In more remote areas, fuel may be sold out of homes or at neighborhood corner stores.

Car rentals are generally inexpensive, but it is wise to shop around. Ensure you get unlimited mileage. Carefully inspect rental cars for minor damage and ensure any damage is noted on the agreement. Costa Rican **insurance is mandatory**, even if you have insurance at home. Many insurance policies do not cover damage caused by flooding or driving through rivers, so verify the extent of your policy before doing any off-roading.

Driving Rules

The rules of the road are much the same as in North America. People drive on the right, and signage is standard. Seat belts are obligatory, and speed limits apply to urban areas. There are speed limits of 100km/h to 120 km/h or less on highways, limits are posted. The speed limit is 60 km/h or less on secondary roads. Mind your speed, as traffic police do use radar, and have no qualms about issuing tickets.

Huge potholes are common, especially in rural areas. You will require a valid driver's license, and always carry your passport with you. Police checkpoints are a regular occurrence.

Fording Rivers

Driving in Costa Rica will likely necessitate a river crossing at some point. Unfortunately, many travelers lack experience in this area, which can lead to disaster. If you're driving through water, follow these tips:

- Only cross rivers in a 4WD, with 4WD turned on. Do not drive through rivers in a car. Car engines flood easily, and making your way up a steep, gravel riverbed requires 4WD.
- Verify the water's depth before driving through. The water should be no deeper than your knee. When in doubt, wait for a local car to come along and follow their path through the water.
- Only traverse calm waters. If waves in the river have white crests on them, do not cross. The force of the water will likely flood the engine, and even worse, sweep the car downstream.

- Drive slowly. The pressure of driving through a river too quickly can impair the electrical system. Keep steady pressure on the gas so the tailpipe does not fill with water, but go slowly. If driving a stick shift, drive in first gear.
- Err on the side of caution. Car rental agencies do not insure for water damage, so exercise caution. If you're not sure, wait for a local car to come along and follow their path, or otherwise, turn around.

Society & Economy

Social Climate

The people of Costa Rica are warm and friendly people, and you can expect to be made welcome wherever you go. In November 2017, National Geographic magazine named Costa Rica the happiest country in the world, stating that "Costa Ricans enjoy the pleasure of living daily life to the fullest in a place that mitigates stress and maximizes joy". It's not surprising that one of the most recognizable phrases spoken by Ticos is *pura vida*, or "pure life" in a literal translation. Though most of the country's 4.8 million inhabitants are descendants of Spanish immigrants, many families originated in other parts of Europe, Asia, Africa and Central America. Though Spanish is the dominant language in Costa Rica, there is a strong African-Caribbean influence along the Caribbean coast, where many people speak English and Patois..

The Costa Rican government that has been a stable democracy since 1949, and was the first country in the world to constitutionally abolish its army, following a civil war in the 1940s. The economic, political, and social stability of Costa Rica is one of its most distinguishing characteristics and has played an important role in luring foreign investors to the country.

Costa Rica's government provides free, compulsory education through 11th grade, and citizens enjoy a high standard of living, with a 97% literacy rate, an average life expectancy of 79 years, and an unemployment rate of 8.5%.

The healthcare system in Costa Rica is ranked higher than that of the United States, despite having only a fraction of the USA's GDP. Costa Rica provides universal health care to over 82% of the population, with over 70% of healthcare costs funded by the government.

Economy

Costa Rica has been considered economically stable for many years now, though they do have a high unemployment rate of 8.5%. The per capita GDP is \$12 382. The country has evolved from an economy that once depended solely on agriculture to a diversified economy based on tourism, electronics, IT services, and medical components exports.

The country boasts a \$1.92-billion-a-year tourism industry, and is the most visited nation in Central America, with over 3 million visitors per year.

Weather & Microclimates

Climate

Like much of Central America, Costa Rica's climate is tropical, with two seasons. The summer or dry season, runs from December to April, and winter or rainy season, from May to November. Temperatures are pleasant, and consistent throughout the year. The main seasonal difference involves rainfall, with the worst of the rains falling in September and October. Generally speaking, Costa Rica's Caribbean side receives significantly more rainfall than the Pacific side. Altitude also has an effect on temperatures and rainfall – the highlands have a cooler, more spring-like climate compared to the hot and humid lowlands and coastal regions.

When to Go

The best time to visit Costa Rica is just after the rainy season (December through January). The Pacific coast is lush, green and not too hot. As the dry season progresses, it can become uncomfortably hot in the lowlands and along coastal regions, waterfalls and rivers dry up, and vegetation in the northwestern region begins to die off. This is the best time for bird watching in the rainforests, and snorkeling along the Caribbean, where the waters are calmer and clearer.

For the right traveler, the rainy season (May to November) is also a great time to visit. Hotels often offer reduced rates during the low season, the landscape becomes super lush and green, and the rains are not as bad as they sound, with showers normally occurring in the afternoon and at night.

Christmas, New Years and Easter (called *Semana Santa* in Latin America) are the biggest holidays in Costa Rica, and during these times, locals flock to the beaches, meaning hotels are at capacity and charge premium rates. Many local stores and businesses close down during these periods, and tourist attractions become busy and overcrowded.



Microclimates

Costa Rica's microclimates vary from volcanic land and beaches to cloud forests, lowland rainforests, and dry tropical forests. Despite being a small country, Costa Rica has 12 different microclimates determined by elevation, topography and the country's overall geography. Depending where you're going, in just an hour's drive, it is possible to feel sweltering heat, witness torrential rains, and to shiver from the cold.

Central Valley

The Central Valley, which surrounds and encompasses the capital city of San José, is known for having an "eternal spring" climate, but even in the valley, the climate can be warm and dry or chilly and humid, depending on which side of the valley you're in. In the heart of downtown San José, the average temperature is a comfortable 22°C year round, while in the foothills of Poás Volcano, the average temperature is a breezy 17.4°C. Throughout the valley, you can expect moderate temperatures, clear mornings and rainy evenings.

North & Central Pacific

The North and Central Pacific coasts, are some of the most popular regions for tourists to visit in Costa Rica due to their warm, sunny weather and a wealth of beautiful beaches. Liberia, the capital of Guanacaste, experiences an average temperature of 27°C to 29°C. Further south, there is little change in the average temperatures, with Manuel Antonio boasting an average temperature ranging from 27°C to 30°C.

South Pacific

This region of Costa Rica is home to some of the country's most diverse landscapes, with some of the highest mountain peaks in the country, and also thick stands of lowland rainforest including Corcovado National Park. As a result of this varied topography, the climate in the South Pacific ranges from hot to cold, with temperatures in the higher altitude areas dipping as low as 10°C.

Near the coast, the average temperature and humidity remains high year round, with temperatures seldom dropping below 27°C.

Caribbean Lowlands

The Caribbean lowlands are humid, with heavy rainfall that can sometimes last for days. Although it rains throughout the year, visitors to the Caribbean can enjoy drier weather in September and October, the wettest months in the Central Valley and along the Pacific.

Sustainability

Sustainability

Costa Rica is a global leader in sustainability, producing nearly 93% of its electricity from renewable resources, and protecting roughly 30% of its national territory in national and private reserves. It makes sense, when you consider that this small country holds about 5% of the planet's total biodiversity. Costa Rica is on track to be one of the most sustainable countries in the world – it is working to become the first carbon-neutral country by 2020 – but this hasn't always been the case. In 1940, 75% of Costa Rica was covered in forests, but by 1987 that number had dropped to just 21%. This rapid deforestation was the result of an economic climate that valued changing "unproductive land" (forests) into agricultural land.

In the early 1990s, Costa Rica's government began to see the damage they had done. The soil became infertile after a few years, and the once-precious natural resources, which provided clean air and water for the citizens of Costa Rica, were degenerating rapidly and putting people out of work. This set the Costa Rican government on a path to analyze the economic benefits of healthy ecosystems, and eventually they began to implement policies to encourage conservation.

The government established national parks, began to promote ecotourism, and encouraged organic agriculture. Now, the country has several sustainability-minded programs that cover a broad range of disciplines.

One of the best-known programs is the CST, or Certification for Sustainable Tourism, which rates businesses based on how well they comply with sustainable practices. Businesses receive a rating from zero to five, with five being most sustainable on the scale. Along with making sustainability more mainstream in Costa Rica, the CST program plays an important role with consumers – allowing them to make educated decisions about their own sustainable travel.

The Bandera Azul (Blue Flag) Ecological Program awards communities across Costa Rica with a Blue Flag when they meet specific requirements. The program helps communities to implement environmental education, comprehensive healthcare, and proper waste management. It provides an incentive for people to improve the areas in which they live, through many means, including environmental awareness programs, reforestation practices, and river and beach cleanups.

The Payments for Environmental Services (PES) program encourages landowners to adopt forest management practices that do not hurt the environment, and in return, the Costa Rican government pays these landowners for the ecological services that their healthy land provides. These include clean water, mitigating greenhouse gas emissions, conserving biodiversity, and providing areas for recreation and ecotourism.

The National Emergency Commission is a branch of the central government that coordinates the prevention of risks and the response to emergencies. It raises disaster risk awareness, funds disaster preparedness programs, and provides emergency education across the country.

Sustainability Tips for Travelers

- Reduce waste whenever possible. Bring a durable water bottle and rechargeable batteries. Cut down on packaged foods and materials. Save electricity and water at your hotel by reusing towels, and shutting off lights and air conditioners when you leave a room.
- Go local. Support local businesses rather than international chains. Buy souvenirs from small vendors, dine at local eateries, and stay at hotels with regional ties.
- Show consideration for the traditions and customs of a region. Learn a few phrases in the local language and dress appropriately. Ask people before taking their photo.
- Do not litter, disturb wildlife, or hike off of trails. Don't buy products or food made from endangered species.
- Give back. Learn about ways that you can help the areas you visit. You might plant trees, clean up beaches, or volunteer at a local school.

Biodiversity

Despite being a small country not even the size of West Virginia, nearly 5% of all known plants and animal species in the world can be found here, making Costa Rica not only one of the most biodiverse countries in the world, but the country that possesses the highest density of biodiversity.

Home to more than 500 000 species, Costa Rica's biodiversity is partly attributed to the dramatic shifts in terrain throughout the country - with wetlands, mountains, volcanoes, rivers, and arid plains, and many different types of forests – and partly attributed to its unique geographical location. Together with Panama, Costa Rica formed a bridge connecting the North and South American continents, which has allowed the very different flora and fauna of the two continents to mix.

At the species level, invertebrates make up the majority of Costa Rica's wildlife, with about 493 000 species found throughout Costa Rica. There are around 175 amphibians, 85% of which are frogs (including many species of poison dart frogs, glass frogs, and tree frogs), 225 species of reptiles, 250 species of mammal (four species of monkeys,

two sloths, coatis, tayras, bats, anteaters, pumas, ocelots, jaguarundis, and large fauna including tapirs, jaguars and deer). Hundreds of Costa Rica's 500 000 species are endemic, meaning they exist nowhere else on earth.

There are nearly 900 species of birds that have been recorded in Costa Rica – more species than ever recorded in the United States and Canada combined. More than 600 species are residents, and 200-some are migrants, spending part of each year outside the country. Seven of the species are endemic, and 19 are globally threatened. Some of the most identifiable birds in Costa Rica are scarlet and great green macaws, resplendent quetzals, toucans, and many species of hummingbirds.

While you're here, you'll see evidence of Costa Rica's commitment to protecting its wildlife and their forest homes. There are 163 protected areas in Costa Rica, covering nearly 30% of the national territory. Three of these protected areas are recognized by UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Program: Area de Conservación Guanacaste, Cocos Island National Park, and La Amistad National Park.

Food Guide

Food Safety

Unclean food and water can cause travelers' diarrhea and other diseases. Food and drink is generally safe in larger cities, but the risk is higher in rural areas. Reduce your risk of infection by avoiding:

- Food served at room temperature
- Raw or under-cooked eggs, meat or fish
- Unwashed or unpeeled raw fruits and vegetables
- Unpasteurized dairy products
- Monkeys, bats or other wild game

Tap Water

Tap water is potable in most areas of Costa Rica, but should be avoided in rural areas and in the port cities of Limón and Puntarenas. In small restaurants, ice and juices are often made with untreated water.

Dining Customs & Etiquette

Dining etiquette in Costa Rica is similar to the rules throughout the rest of Latin America. Costa Ricans begin their meals by saying "*buen provecho*", and it is considered rude not to respond with the same greeting, or to begin your meal before the host has begun the meal.

Typical Meals

- **Gallo Pinto:** rice and beans, called *gallo pinto* in Costa Rica, is a staple, and most locals eat it daily. It is a mixture of rice and beans, typically cooked with onion, cilantro, and peppers, and then fried. At breakfast, gallo pinto is typically paired with eggs, fried cheese, and sweet, fried plantain.
- **Casado:** a casado is not a singular dish, but a typical "plate of the day" in Costa Rica. On different casado plates, you can expect to be served a plate containing: rice, beans, salad, tortillas, fried plantain, and your choice of protein (beef, chicken or fish).
- **Tamal:** a Costa Rican tamal is quite different from a Mexican tamale. Costa Rican tamales are wrapped in banana leaves, and the flavor of a tico tamal is much milder in flavor than the typical Mexican preparation.
- **Arroz con Leche:** this dessert is similar to the English preparation of rice pudding, but with a little more flavor – the recipe calls for sugar, salt, lemon zest, and cinnamon!
- **Sopa Negra:** this traditional Costa Rican soup is a delicious vegetarian dish made from black beans, onion, peppers, cilantro, tomatoes and spices.
- **Patacones:** patacones are made from flattened and fried green plantain, and typically served as a snack with salt and pico de gallo.

Along coastal areas you'll come across an incredible diversity of seafood, especially fish, lobster and shrimp. Though once considered a delicacy (and still consumed in some areas), avoid eating turtle eggs, as the sea turtles that produce them are endangered species. Overall, you may find vegetables lacking in the meals you're served in Costa Rica, often no more than shredded cabbage topped with tomato and served with a lime wedge.

On the Caribbean coast, travelers can expect the food to be quite different from that on the Pacific, with heavy Caribbean influences, meaning lots of spice and coconut!

Beverages

Fruit smoothies called *licuados* or *batidos* can be found almost anywhere, and typically consist of fresh fruit (blackberries, pineapple, watermelon, etc.) blended with milk or water, and may be ordered sweetened or unsweetened. Be wary of batidos if you are avoiding untreated water.

Destination Weddings

If you're engaged and considering where to get married, Costa Rica should be on your list! With beautiful landscapes, affordable wedding packages, romantic hotels and qualified professionals, Costa Rica is the perfect place to tie the knot. Why Costa Rica?

- **Cost:** run the numbers and you will likely find that traveling to Costa Rica with your partner and close loved ones will cost much less than a typical wedding at home. Many resorts and hotels in Costa Rica offer attractive, affordable all-inclusive wedding packages that combine lodging, dining, wellness services and your celebration.
- **Unique wedding photos:** Costa Rica offers stunning natural backdrops, charming antique architecture and exotic flora & fauna, meaning spectacular wedding photos, no matter where you go.
- **Culture & flavor:** the ingredients of a wedding in Costa Rica are wild and wonderful. Think costumed folk dancers, great live Latin music, beach bonfires, fresh coconut water and fireworks.
- **Ultimate luxury:** if you're looking for luxury, look no further than Costa Rica. Here, there are resorts that offer the ultimate in luxury, with treetop villas surrounded by jungle, private swimming pools and delicious restaurants serving locally-sourced & freshly-baked delicacies. Best of all? They've got private beach fronts.

Holiday Travel

Peak season in Costa Rica revolves around the weeks surrounding Christmas and Easter or Holy Week, called *Semana Santa* in Latin America. During these time periods, hotel rates increase, and coastal towns fill up with tourists from Costa Rica and neighboring countries. It is best to book far in advance if you plan to travel during Semana Santa – do not expect to find accommodations anywhere without a reservation!

Semana Santa in Costa Rica is an experience like no other – a combination of deeply-rooted indigenous rituals and religious traditions that commemorates the death of Jesus and celebrates his resurrection. Holy Week celebrations last for the entire week, with the main events taking place on Palm Sunday.

Medical Tourism

What is Medical Tourism?

Medical or dental tourism involves the process of traveling outside one's country of residence for the purpose of receiving medical care, or having dental work done. The popularity of travel for medical purposes has exploded in the last few years, with the number of people traveling from richer to less-developed countries to access health services increasing rapidly. Today, medical tourism represents a worldwide, multibillion-dollar emerging market that is expected to grow considerably over the next decade.

As healthcare costs in the developed world (the United States, Canada, and Europe) soar, more and more foreigners are flocking to Central America for dental work, specialty surgeries and medical tests, drawn by affordable prices, convenient travel options and short wait times. Roughly 75 000 foreigners visit Costa Rica each year for medical procedures, and that market is rapidly expanding.

Medical Tourism in Nicaragua

The majority of foreign patients in Costa Rica are from the United States or Canada, with patients also arriving from Spain, and other Central American nations, including Panama. Prices for medical procedures at private hospitals are very competitive. For example, gastric bypass or bariatric surgery, which costs up to US\$30 000, costs only US\$7 500 in Costa Rica, with more complicated cases requiring hernia or gall bladder surgery increasing the price by only US\$500 for a total of US\$8 000.

Types of Procedures

There is a wide range of procedures offered in Costa Rica. The specialties sought by most medical tourists include dentistry (42%), gynecology (22%), preventative medicine (16%), cosmetic surgery (10%), orthopedics and bariatric surgery.

The most common procedures include:

- **Dental:** implants, crowns, veneers, bridges, dentures
- **Cosmetic:** plastic surgery, reconstructive surgery
- **General:** gastric bypass, gastric sleeve
- **Orthopedic:** hip replacements, knee replacements

Packing List

Travel Medical Kit

- Prescription medications
- Pain reliever/anti-inflammatory medication
- Antihistamines
- Antibacterial ointment & Band-Aids
- Pocket knife
- Sunblock
- Insect repellent (with lemon eucalyptus active ingredient)
- Ear plugs & sleep mask
- Motion sickness remedy
- Lip balm with SPF
- Travel sewing kit
- Various sizes of Ziploc bags
- Facial tissues
- Hand sanitizer/hand sanitizing wipes
- Toiletries
- Biodegradable travel laundry soap
- Iodine tablets (for water purification)
- Tampons
- Contraceptive pills

Basics

- USD cash (gratuities, purchases, activities)
- Credit & debit cards
- Passport (verify 6 months validity)
- Photocopies of passport
- Flight confirmations & airline tickets
- Driver's license
- Itinerary information
- Luggage tags
- Watch/alarm clock

Miscellaneous

- Snacks (granola bars, trail mix, etc.)
- Backpack/cross-body bag
- Laundry bag
- Travel size binoculars
- Writing materials
- Music player & headphones
- LCD headlamp or flashlight
- Spanish/English dictionary
- Camera & charger
- Books or Kindle
- Hair ties, clips, or bobby pins

Clothing

- Underwear
- Socks
- Sleepwear
- Tank tops/t-shirts
- Swimwear (2 or more recommended)
- Sarong/quick-dry towel
- Lightweight long-sleeved jacket
- Lightweight fleece jacket
- Shorts/skirts
- Lightweight maxi or sundress
- 2 pairs long pants/leggings
- Sunglasses
- Sun hat/baseball cap
- Sport sandals
- Flip flops
- Sneakers/running shoes
- Rain jacket

