



*Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.*

## BACKGROUND

### Land and Climate

*Area (sq. mi.): 19,730*

*Area (sq. km.): 51,100*

Costa Rica is about half the size of Iceland, or just smaller than the U.S. state of West Virginia. This small nation has a diverse landscape of tropical rain forests, mountain cloud forests, volcanoes, coastal lowlands, over 700 miles of beaches, and beautiful rivers. About 50 percent of Costa Rica is covered by different types of forests. About 30 percent of the total territory is reserved as protected areas. In 2007, Costa Rica announced its goal to become one of the world's first carbon-neutral nations by 2021.

Although Costa Rica lies entirely in the tropical climate zone, elevation changes allow for cooler temperatures in the central highlands. The coastal lowlands are hot and humid; temperatures there average 81°F (27°C) year-round. Most people live at elevations where the climate is generally mild. In San José and other parts of the central valley highlands, temperatures average 67°F (19°C) year-round. Rainfall varies between the wet season (May–November) and the dry season (December–April). The land is subject to frequent earthquakes and occasional volcanic eruptions.

### History

#### *Native Peoples and Colonization*

A variety of native peoples lived in what is now Costa Rica before Columbus arrived in 1502 on his fourth and final

voyage to the Americas. In the north, the indigenous cultures were influenced by Maya civilization. Southern groups were more closely related to the indigenous peoples of South America. Spain eventually colonized the Costa Rican area along with most of Central America. Because minerals were scarce, the area was ignored by the Spanish crown and remained isolated.

#### *Independence and Political Transitions*

In 1821, Costa Rica joined other Central American nations in declaring independence from Spain. In 1824, it became a state of the Federal Republic of Central America. Shortly before the republic collapsed, Costa Rica became a sovereign nation (1838). José Joaquín Sánchez was elected president in 1889 in what was considered the first free and fair election in Central America.

Costa Rica has one of the strongest democratic traditions in Central America. Interruptions in this tradition have been few. In 1917, General Federico Tinoco Granados led a coup that brought him to power until he resigned two years later. The next non-democratic transfer of power happened in 1948, following a disputed election between president Rafael Ángel Calderón and Otilio Ulate Blanco. José Figueres Ferrer staged a rebellion against Calderón, setting off a six-week civil war that resulted in the deaths of roughly two thousand Costa Ricans. Figueres then led an interim government and passed a new constitution that abolished the army before turning power over to Blanco in 1949. Costa Rica has enjoyed peace and democracy ever since. Figueres was considered a national hero and went on to win the presidency in 1953 and 1970.

#### *Modern Politics*

The 1970s and '80s were times of economic struggle for

Costa Rica due to the high cost of oil, rising foreign debt levels, excessive government spending, and conflicts in neighboring countries that discouraged tourism in the region. President Oscar Arias Sánchez played a major role in finding a diplomatic solution to the many military conflicts raging in Central America and received a Nobel Peace Prize in 1987 for his work on the Esquipulas Peace Agreement, which helped bring peace to the region. Costa Ricans take great pride in Arias's award, which is seen as a reflection of the peaceful orientation of the nation.

In the 1990s, Costa Rican presidents worked to reduce the country's deficit by cutting spending and increasing taxes. Weary of rising prices and falling incomes, voters elected businessman Miguel Ángel Rodríguez as president in February 1998. Promising to revitalize the economy, Rodríguez took office in May 1998, replacing José María Figueres. Government plans to privatize some state-owned industries led to the country's worst strikes, demonstrations, and unrest in many years. A court ruled the proposals unconstitutional in April 2000, and the government began pursuing other avenues to modernize the country's industries.

Investigations into corruption allegations against three former presidents—José Figueres, Miguel Ángel Rodríguez, and Rafael Ángel Calderón—began in 2004. In the face of this widespread political scandal, voter turnout was low in 2006 elections, with former president Oscar Arias Sánchez narrowly winning the presidency once again. Elections in 2010 installed Laura Chinchilla as Costa Rica's first female president. Though Costa Rica is known as one of the most stable, developed nations in Latin America, its image has suffered in recent years due to political corruption and a faltering economy.

#### Recent Events and Trends

• **Disputed river border:** In March 2011, the UN International Court of Justice ordered Nicaragua and Costa Rica to remove troops from a disputed region of the San Juan River, which constitutes the border between the two countries. Costa Rica had claimed that Nicaragua had crossed into its territory to dredge part of the river, causing environmental damage. Both countries withdrew their troops, resolving the most recent in a series of conflicts between them over the San Juan River border.

• **Earthquake:** September 2012 saw a major (7.6-magnitude) earthquake strike Costa Rica's Nicoya Peninsula, killing two people and damaging many houses. Costa Rica is subject to frequent earthquakes, most of them minor.

• **Presidential election:** In April 2014, opposition candidate Luis Guillermo Solís overwhelmingly won Costa Rica's presidential run-off election, taking office in May. He is the country's first third-party candidate to serve as president in 44 years and for many voters represents a move away from the corruption associated with professional politicians.

## THE PEOPLE

### Population

Population: 4,755,234

Population Growth Rate: 1.24%

Urban Population: 66%

The majority of people (94 percent) have European or mixed heritage. Three percent of the population is black and lives mostly on the Atlantic Coast. These people are descendants of laborers brought from the Caribbean to build a railroad. They later worked on banana plantations and developed a distinct culture in the region around Puerto Limón. About 1 percent of Costa Ricans are indigenous peoples, while another 1 percent are ethnic Chinese.

About 9 percent of Costa Rica's population was born outside of the country, and roughly three-fourths of the foreign-born population is Nicaraguan, with many of them having entered Costa Rica illegally. The government deports thousands of Nicaraguans yearly. The general population is relatively young, with about 24 percent younger than age 15. Most people live in the central valley highlands.

### Language

Spanish is the official language of Costa Rica. English is widely understood in tourist-oriented areas but not by the general population. Patua (creole English) is spoken by the black population. Bribri, spoken by some indigenous groups, is the most common indigenous language. Ten other native groups speak Spanish or a native tongue.

Costa Ricans refer to themselves as *ticos* (the female form is *ticas*) and are known by that name throughout Central America. The nickname comes from the Costa Rican custom of ending words with the suffix *-tico* (instead of the more common Spanish diminutive *-tito*). So instead of saying *chiquitito* (very small), Costa Ricans say *chiquitico*.

In contrast to most other Spanish speakers, Costa Ricans use the formal form of the word "you" (*usted*) even when addressing close friends. The familiar pronoun *tú* is rarely used, though Spanish's less common familiar pronoun *vos* is heard in some areas. This linguistic characteristic should not be interpreted as a sign of formality in relationships, however.

### Religion

Roughly 92 percent of the population is Christian. About 76 percent of all Costa Ricans claim membership in the Roman Catholic Church. According to the constitution, Roman Catholicism is the state religion, but the constitution also protects freedom of religion. The Catholic Church continues to be very influential, and religion as a whole plays an important role in society.

Evangelical groups, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other Protestants are also common, and a growing number of former Catholics are joining other Christian churches. At the same time, secularization in Costa Rica is leading some people away from organized religion.

### General Attitudes

Costa Rica is a land of courtesy, hospitality, and gentleness. Militarism is despised by nearly all. Aggressiveness, brusqueness, and violence are also shunned. Costa Ricans say they are lovers of peace and conciliation. Confrontation is avoided when possible; people may even say they will do something when they really do not intend to do it, just so they

will not have to disagree.

People value privacy and quiet behavior but will vigorously defend personal honor. Honesty, humility, and formality are respected. A strong work ethic is prevalent among most segments of society, and rural people especially accept hard labor as a necessary part of life. Individuality is an important characteristic, expressed in Costa Rica's relations with other nations and, to a lesser extent, on a personal level. The attitude is due partly to Costa Rican isolation during the colonial period; because *ticos* had little contact with colonial rulers, they developed greater independence. Still, group conformity in values, interests, and thought is important in society.

All people are given respect, regardless of their social class. There is little resentment among the classes because of the traditional respect for all people and a belief that some things are determined by God. The belief that Deity controls some aspects of life, such as one's health or success, is evident in daily speech. People often attribute their achievements to and place hope in God. This tradition is changing with greater education and people's desire for material progress.

### Personal Appearance

Western dress is common throughout the country. Professionals typically wear suits or dress suits to work, while others wear uniforms. Casual outfits consist of tops and jeans, which are very popular among both men and women in urban areas. Rural women are more likely to wear skirts. In urban areas, women often wear tight and revealing clothes and try to dress fashionably, though styles are open to personal taste. Young adults especially may be seen wearing a variety of styles, while older adults tend to dress more conservatively. Shorts (including surfing inspired fashions like board shorts) are only worn in hotter coastal cities or in beach areas. Flip-flops are commonly worn inside the house and around local neighborhoods but not elsewhere.

Costa Ricans carefully consider their appearances when doing errands or other business in public. Clothing is always clean and neatly ironed and shoes are polished. Being well groomed is also considered essential. This includes expectations of neatly cut (and, for men, short) hair and a fresh smell. Those who do not meet these expectations may be discriminated against in minor ways, while those who are very well dressed and groomed are given more respect and are assumed to be financially well-off.

For rodeos and horse parades, men and women throughout the country dress up as *vaqueros* (cowboys), wearing jeans, plaid shirts, belts with large buckles, boots, and hats. During Independence Day, many children dress as *campesinos*, or old-fashioned farmers.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

### Greetings

Polite and respectful greetings are a social norm. Female friends or relatives greet each other with a light kiss on the cheek. If women are not yet acquainted, they may pat each

other on the arm. Men shake hands and may kiss the cheeks of female friends and relatives. It is an insult not to shake every man's hand in a small group.

Common greetings include *Buenos días* (Good day), *Buenas tardes* (Good afternoon), and *Buenas noches* (Good evening). Costa Ricans often respond to the greeting *¿Cómo está?* (How are you?) with the expression *Pura vida* (Pure life), which is understood to mean that the person is doing well. Also a way to say "Okay" or "No worries," *Pura vida* has many uses. *Hola* (Hi) is a casual greeting popular among the youth; older people consider it disrespectful if used to greet them.

In rural areas, people greet each other when passing on the street, even if they are not acquainted. One might simply say *Adiós* or *Buenas*, or more formally *Adiós, señora* or *Buenos días*. This tradition is less common in urban areas. Rural people often bow their heads slightly and touch their hats in greeting. Greetings between strangers or acquaintances are brief, but people who know each other usually take a few minutes to talk about family, work, or health.

One addresses others by professional title either with or without a surname, depending on the situation. *Señor* (Mr.) and *Señora* (Mrs.) are also used, especially for people with whom one is not well acquainted. *Ticos* address friends, children, coworkers, and subordinates by first name. They use the title *Don* with the first name of an older man, or *Doña* for a woman, to show special respect for and familiarity with the person. For example, a child might call the mother of his best friend *Doña María*.

### Gestures

Hand gestures are common and important to everyday conversation. In fact, Costa Ricans often use their hands to express an idea, either with or without verbal communication. To indicate "no," one vigorously waves the index finger (palm out, finger up). When expressing shock or when faced with a serious situation, *ticos* will shake the hand vigorously enough to snap (slap) the fingers together three or four times. There are many different hand greetings in addition to the handshake or wave. For instance, young people slap hands together in a greeting similar to a "high five" or bump fists. Eye contact is important, especially when one is discussing a serious issue or talking to a superior. It traditionally is understood that a lack of eye contact means one cannot be trusted, while a weak handshake is thought to signal disrespect and a lack of interest. Chewing gum while speaking is impolite.

### Visiting

Costa Ricans enjoy socializing. Urban Costa Ricans generally prefer that visits be arranged in advance. Only close friends or relatives drop by unannounced, and then mostly in the afternoon after household chores have been done. Otherwise, uninvited visitors may not be asked into the home. In rural areas, people visit unannounced more often and rarely are turned away. Hosts usually offer visitors something to drink (like coffee) and refreshments (pastries, bread, or crackers). It is impolite to refuse such an offer. Invited guests generally are expected to arrive a few minutes late (later in rural areas).

Punctuality is not customary, but being very late is also not appreciated.

Friends and neighbors often share food, such as freshly caught fish, homegrown produce, or baked goods. Dinner guests usually bring a small gift to their hosts, such as flowers, wine or a bottle of local liquor, a plant, or something to share or to mark the occasion. Hosts usually serve dinner guests refreshments and drinks while they socialize for an hour or so before the meal is served. After dinner, coffee and dessert accompany more conversation. Guests generally leave shortly thereafter.

If a Costa Rican invites someone to dinner or to spend a few days at his or her home, the potential guest must determine whether the invitation is sincere or whether the host is just trying to be polite. Polite invitations often are extended as a gesture of goodwill rather than as an expectation that guests will actually come.

### Eating

Most people eat three meals a day, with midmorning and afternoon coffee breaks or snacks. Breakfast and dinner are the most important meals, as lunch is becoming more rushed and is more often eaten away from home. Business professionals make lunch dates, but dinner is otherwise the meal for entertaining guests. Mealtime is to be enjoyed and is extended by conversation on a variety of subjects. Table manners vary, but as a general rule, one keeps both hands (though not elbows) above the table rather than in the lap. Restaurant bills customarily include a tip of 10 percent. Further tipping is not expected, except in some tourist-oriented areas.

## LIFESTYLE

### Family

#### Structure

While Costa Ricans value family tradition and heritage, family dynamics are changing as the country modernizes. Family members are spending less time at home together and more time working and participating in individual activities. Families have an average of three to five children, though rural families are usually larger. Rural extended families often either share a dwelling or live as neighbors and are especially close-knit, as a lack of recreational resources means they spend a lot of time together. In contrast, the busy schedules of urban families can make finding time together difficult. No matter what their schedules, though, families enjoy gathering together on Sundays.

#### Parents and Children

Young boys start helping their fathers work outside of the home around age six or seven. For example, they may help pick coffee or assist with construction work. At the same age, girls are taught to help with housework, beginning with cleaning their own rooms and washing their own dishes after meals. Grandparents, especially grandmothers, often help raise their grandchildren. Children also commonly receive care from their aunts. Most children live with their parents until marriage. Some parents still cover all living expenses for

adult children, though this practice has become less common in recent years. Children are expected to care for their elderly parents, though state-run facilities are available for those without families.

#### Gender Roles

While the husband makes most final decisions in the home, he shares many responsibilities with his wife. Traditionally, women worked at home, caring for children, cleaning, cooking, and doing laundry. Today, a growing number are seeking higher education and entering the labor force in order to help support their families, and many men are doing more around the house. Some women now work as cooks in restaurant, domestic employees, schoolteachers, and sales assistants. Though it is not common to see women in high-profile corporate positions, they do hold a number of high-ranking positions in government, including that of the president. Domestic violence, often fueled by alcoholism, is a serious problem.

Women traditionally retain their maiden names when they marry. Children carry the surnames of both parents. The second-to-last name in a full name is from the father's side and is considered the family surname.

### Housing

One quarter of the population lives in the urbanized central valley region of the country, including San José and its surrounding cities and neighborhoods. In these and other cities, houses are usually made of cement and have tin roofs. In less urban areas, houses may be made of a combination of wood and cement. Houses are often painted in bright colors. Black security bars protect windows and doors.

Houses are typically one storey, with a living room, a kitchen, one or two bathrooms, and two or three bedrooms. Many also have a dining room and a laundry area with its own sink, where clothes can be rinsed prior to washing, since most machines are only semi-automatic. Common wall hangings include photographs of family and friends and religious images. Art is gaining popularity among affluent families. Ceramic knickknacks are common decorations, and televisions are placed in prominent locations in living rooms. Other electronics and appliances, such as radios, microwaves, and the like are common as well. Floors tend to be made from tile, wood, or smooth, red cement (called *piso lujado*); women sweep, mop, wax, and shine floors daily. By traditional standards, a home must be cleaned thoroughly every day. Children may be enlisted to help with this task, though it is also common for women who work outside the home to employ maids to clean, cook meals, and do the laundry.

Houses in rural areas tend to be more basic. Many homes lack hot water tanks, so they may be equipped with a *ducha*, a hot water heater attached directly to the shower. In all neighborhoods, directions tend to be given in terms of landmarks and distances. So a person may be told to go to "the green house in front of the church" or "100 meters east of the mango tree." In cities, most people rent their homes, while ownership is the rule in rural areas.

### Dating and Marriage

#### Dating and Courtship

Costa Ricans begin socializing in groups at young ages. Pairing off at a young age is rare, except in rural areas where there are fewer people. Dating typically starts around age 14, although in more conservative families girls do not date until age 18. Dating can be casual and is not necessarily expected to end in marriage. Young Costa Ricans often meet for the first time while roller-skating, which is a regular monthly event in many towns; at school; or while socializing with groups of friends. Young adults commonly meet partners at bars and nightclubs or at work. The religiously conservative may meet through church events. Movies, dances, picnics, the December bullfights, and a yearly civic carnival are favorite dating activities.

Girls generally are more restricted in dating than boys. They seldom can have visitors past 10 p.m., unless a courtship is close to marriage. A boy sometimes asks a girl's parents for permission to date her, but this custom is disappearing and no longer occurs in urban areas. When a young couple is dating, the boy commonly visits according to a predetermined schedule. During these visits, which usually happen a few evenings a week and last about two hours, the pair often sits on the porch, takes short walks around the neighborhood, goes to the park, or goes out to dinner.

#### **Engagement**

Often a man proposes to his girlfriend and then gives her a ring on a special occasion, like her birthday or Christmas. The two families visit each other to show formal agreement on their children's marriage. Engagements typically last six months or less.

#### **Marriage in Society**

Couples generally marry in their mid-twenties. Marriage is a valued institution, and having a partner to share a life with is considered important. Those who remain single into their thirties, especially if they are women, may be pitied. Unmarried adults usually live with their parents, especially in rural areas. The exception is unmarried university students, who sometimes live on their own.

Young couples often live together for many years before marrying, an arrangement that is socially acceptable. After three years of cohabitation, the couple is considered to have entered into a common-law marriage, which affords them the same rights as a formally married couple.

#### **Weddings**

Wedding ceremonies are followed by celebrations, during which family and friends drink and share a meal. The food usually consists of *arroz con pollo* (rice with chicken), *picadillo de papaya* (a dish of beef and papaya), refried black beans, and potato chips, followed by an elegant cake. After eating, guests dance.

*El baile del billete* (the dance of the bill) is a common practice during which guests tuck bills of various denominations into the clothing of the bride or groom for an opportunity to dance with one of them until the next guest pays for a turn. This dance relieves the newlyweds of some of the economic burden associated with the wedding.

#### **Divorce**

Divorce is becoming fairly common and does not carry a strong stigma. However, women may find it harder than men to remarry, especially if they have children.

## **Life Cycle**

### **Birth**

Pregnancy and birth are considered a blessing in Costa Rican culture. When a woman is pregnant, her friends and family throw a *té de canastilla* (baby shower) for her. The guests bring gifts and play games. Before they leave, they are given a small *recuerdo* (souvenir), which is usually a plastic knickknack and a ribbon with the family's last name and the date of the party. When a baby is born, neighborhood women, family members, and friends come and visit the new baby and mother, sometimes bringing a gift. Many babies are baptized by the Catholic Church, and another party is held after baptism.

After giving birth, women are given 40 days (*la cuarentena*) to recover. During the first one or two weeks of this period, a woman's mother or mother-in-law comes to help her with household tasks. Formally employed women are entitled to three months of maternity leave, but many women work in the informal market and so do not receive this benefit.

### **Milestones**

At age 15, many Costa Rican girls celebrate their birthdays with a special party called a *fiesta de quince años*, which can be something quite simple, like a family gathering in the home. For wealthy families, as many as one hundred guests may attend a party at a reception hall and enjoy a sit-down dinner, a fancy cake, and dancing with a professional disk jockey. Socially, girls are considered adults after this party, as are boys when they turn 16. At these ages, youth are accepted into adult conversations and given more freedoms. Legally, they are considered adults at 18, when they have the right to vote, drive, and drink alcohol. Children do not typically leave home until they get married.

### **Death**

Following a death, all the neighbors and family members come to the *velorio* (wake). Acquaintances will not stay long, but close friends and family members will generally stay the whole night praying. Those close to the family bring coffee and bread to help those praying stay awake. After the wake, everyone in the community walks behind the hearse as it makes its way from the church to the cemetery. For the last part of the distance, the coffin is carried on the shoulders of six close friends or relatives. Few people are buried; instead, according to recently established sanitary regulations, the deceased is usually laid to rest in a cement box above ground. After losing a family member or friend, Costa Ricans hang a black ribbon on their door for nine days.

### **Diet**

Costa Ricans eat rice and beans in various combinations for nearly every meal. Typical at breakfast is *gallo pinto* (mixture of rice and black beans). A common lunchtime meal is *casado* (rice, beans, salad, meat, plantains, and sometimes eggs). *Olla de carne* (a beef stew with potatoes, onions, and many vegetables) is a national favorite. *Tamales* (meat, vegetables, and cornmeal wrapped in plantain leaves and boiled) are served for Easter and Christmas. Also common are *lengua en salsa* (beef tongue served in a sauce),

*mondongo* (intestine soup), *empanadas* (turnovers), *arroz con pollo* (rice with chicken), and *gallos* (tortillas with meat and vegetable fillings). Bread, tortillas, and fruits are also staple items. Bananas, mangos, pineapples, papaya, watermelons, and various citrus fruits are locally grown and popular. *Ticos* of all ages enjoy coffee. Adults may take two or three coffee breaks each day.

## Recreation

### Sports

*Fútbol* (soccer) is the most popular spectator and participant sport. It is frequently played during recess at school. Elsewhere, children may be seen playing soccer barefoot, using sticks, small trees, or even their shoes as goal markers. Basketball, baseball, volleyball, surfing, auto racing, swimming, cycling, running, and tennis are also popular. Fishing is good in many parts of the country. The wealthy enjoy golf and polo. Rodeos, bull riding, and cockfighting draw large crowds in rural areas.

### Leisure

Beaches are crowded between January and April. Local carnivals, festivals, and bullfights are popular attractions at various times throughout the year. Media broadcasts from the United States are common and have a significant impact on urban trends. People also enjoy going to bars and restaurants, movie theaters, and malls on the weekend. Sunday is a day to spend with family. Rural inhabitants enjoy dancing and drinking with friends at the weekly town dance (*baile*), held on Saturday nights. Children enjoy playing marbles and *trompos*, which involves a small wooden or plastic top spun by pulling a string wrapped around it.

*Ticos* are creative and resourceful when they lack money for recreation. For example, they float down rivers in old car tire inner tubes, fashion rope swings over lakes, make swings from old rice sacks for children, and go fishing with a hook and fishing line wound around an old plastic soda bottle in place of a pole. They also build structures from bamboo and palm behind their homes where they can sit and relax with friends.

### Vacation

Families who can get time off from work take their children on vacation during the mid-year school break, the first two weeks of July. About half of Costa Rican families also vacation at the end of the year or during Holy Week. Most people take trips within the country, as foreign travel tends to be prohibitively expensive. Most people escape the cities and head for the beach or the mountains on vacation.

## The Arts

Dancing is a favorite activity among *ticos* of all ages. Typical Latin dances such as salsa, merengue, and *cumbia*, as well as the Costa Rican swing, are popular. Folk dances include the national dance (the *Punto Guanacaste*), the *cambute*, and maypole dances. Typical musical instruments include the *chirimía* (oboe), guitar, xylophone, accordion, and *quijongo* (a stringed instrument). People enjoy *soca* (a mixture of soul music from the United States and calypso music), calypso, reggae, and other music popular throughout the Caribbean, Central America, and North America.

Brightly painted Costa Rican *carretas* (oxcarts) are well known throughout the world. Other arts include pottery and *molas* (appliqué for clothing or textiles). The Boruca, an indigenous group, are known for their carved wooden masks. These masks were originally made from cedar trees and depicted *diablos* (devils) to scare off Spanish invaders. Today, these colorful masks also feature themes from nature, often combining a human face with the features of animals such as jaguars, toucans, snakes, and crocodiles, and are more often made from native balsa wood.

*Bombas* are a popular oral form of poetry hailing from the province of Guanacaste. These quatrains always begin with the speaker yelling *Bomba!*, after which follow four rhyming lines that often depict humorous, witty, or romantic sentiments.

## Holidays

Costa Rican holidays include New Year's Day; Feast of St. Joseph (19 Mar.); Anniversary of the Battle of Rivas (11 Apr.), during which a Costa Rican army defeated the forces of a U.S. conqueror and in which the national hero, a drummer boy named Juan Santa María, lost his life; *Semana Santa* (Holy Week) and Easter; Labor Day (1 May); Feast of St. Peter and St. Paul (29 June); Annexation of Guanacaste to Costa Rica (25 July); Feast of Our Lady of the Angels (2 Aug.); Central American Independence Day (15 Sept.); *Día del Encuentro de Culturas* (Day of the Encounter of the Cultures), formerly called Columbus Day and then *Día de la Raza*, recognizing the indigenous roots of Latin America (12 Oct.); Feast of the Immaculate Conception (8 Dec.); and Christmas.

### New Year's

New Year's is generally thought of as a time for friends, parties, drinking, and dancing. *Tamales* (meat, vegetables, and cornmeal wrapped in plantain leaves and boiled) and *chicharrones* (fried pork rinds) are foods typical of this holiday. Gifts are exchanged and people often break out in song and light fireworks as the new year approaches. However, many Costa Ricans will interrupt festivities before midnight on New Year's Eve to go home and eat a small, quiet meal with family before returning to their party after midnight. *Flor de itavo* (the flower of a yucca plant) is a special ingredient sold throughout the country for this holiday. It is used to make various dishes, the most popular of which are egg based.

### Semana Santa

After Christmas, *Semana Santa* (Holy week) is the most widely celebrated holiday in Costa Rica. During the period of Lent, leading up to *Semana Santa*, many observant Catholic families put a cross draped with a purple sash on their front lawns. During Holy Week itself, only a minority of families participate in the religious parades that depict the resurrection of Jesus Christ in city centers. Instead, the majority of *ticos* vacation during this holiday. All businesses are closed on the Thursday and Friday prior to Easter Sunday, so many families often spend time at the beach or mountains over the long weekend. *Arroz con leche* (rice pudding), often topped with caramelized coconut sauce, is a common dish during this holiday season.

***Feast of Our Lady of the Angels***

On this religious holiday, Costa Ricans from all over the country make a pilgrimage on foot to the city of Cartago to pay homage to the Virgin Mary. Throughout the year, people pray for a miracle from the Virgin in exchange for making a promise to her (to stop a bad habit, for example) or a pledge to walk from their hometown to visit her in Cartago on 2 August if their prayer is answered.

***Central American Independence Day***

Costa Rica celebrates its independence from Spain on 15 September. In school, students make *faroles*, which are small, portable displays featuring some aspect of Costa Rican culture. A light is attached to each *farol* so that they are visible on the eve of Independence Day, when students and their families gather at the school after dark to show off and enjoy their creations. The next morning begins with a parade that includes floats representing traditional Costa Rican scenes, dancing, *chimmarones* (huge masked puppets accompanied by music), and high school marching bands.

***Christmas***

Christmas is the biggest holiday in Costa Rica and is generally celebrated with family. Families typically decorate evergreen trees—usually fake ones—and display them on their front porches for all to see. Other common decorations include poinsettias and Christmas lights. In preparation for Christmas Eve dinner, the women in a family gather to make hundreds of tamales. These are also shared with neighbors. Many families raise a pig all year to butcher just before Christmas so they will have fresh meat for the tamales. Families also exchange gifts on Christmas Eve. Children may be told that some of their gifts were brought by *el niñoito dios* (the child god), by the Three Kings, or by Santa Claus. Christmas itself is a quiet day spent at home with immediate family.

## SOCIETY

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**Government**

*Head of State: Pres. Luis Guillermo Solís*

*Head of Government: Pres. Luis Guillermo Solís*

*Capital: San José*

**Structure**

Costa Rica is a democratic republic. Its head of state and head of government are a popularly elected president and two vice presidents, all of whom serve a single four-year term with the possibility of a second non-consecutive term. The unicameral Legislative Assembly is comprised of 57 legislators, who are elected by direct popular vote to four-year terms. Since 2010, a gender-based quota that requires 50 percent of legislative candidates to be women has encouraged greater participation of women in political parties. The judicial branch is separate and independent. Costa Rica has seven provinces. The country has no standing military, though it does have an armed National Guard to ensure domestic security; the weaponry the National Guard can legally use is limited.

***Political Landscape***

Most Costa Ricans are affiliated with one of two major

parties: the ruling center-right Social Christian Unity Party (PUSC) and the center-left National Liberation Party (PLN), which have dominated politics since 1949. While these parties have traditionally alternated being in power, other parties, such as the Libertarian Movement Party (ML) and the Citizen Action Party (PAC), have played increasingly large roles in government since the 2002 election. Issues facing the government include further strengthening environmental protections, increasing security, combating drug trafficking, and improving the economy.

***Government and the People***

In recent years, political corruption has become a growing problem. With the exception of Oscar Arias Sánchez, every former Costa Rican president has faced corruption charges. Freedoms of religion, assembly, and association are protected by law and in practice. The press is generally free, though in 2012 the government passed a highly unpopular law that limits the press's right to report on political topics.

Costa Ricans engage in public protests fairly frequently on a variety of topics, including issues related to public sector jobs and various social issues. The government has not given much attention to developing resources for indigenous people, and most of them lack sufficient access to health care and education. Citizens 18 years of age and older are required to vote in national elections, although there is no penalty for not voting; turnout averages above 70 percent. Election day is a national holiday; people often travel to their town of birth, where they are still registered, to vote and enjoy celebrations.

**Economy**

*GDP (PPP) in billions: \$61.43*

*GDP (PPP) per capita: \$12,900*

Despite a relative lack of minerals and other traditional natural resources, Costa Rica has a fairly prosperous economy, especially for the region. This is due in part to Costa Rica's stability; its generally egalitarian society; and its successful timber, agricultural, and tourism industries. Costa Rica's rich biodiversity and environmental protections make it an especially popular destination for ecotourism, and tourism facilities are well developed.

The country's economy experienced relatively steady growth throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. It was briefly hurt by the 2008 global economic crisis but was growing again by 2010. Still, the country faces a relatively high level of debt, along with growing inflation and unemployment levels. Poverty affects about one-fifth of the population, and the country's once adequate social safety net has deteriorated in recent years as the amount of public money available to devote to these programs has dropped and the economy has suffered more generally.

Exports include coffee, bananas, beef, sugar, cocoa, pineapples, watermelon, palm oil, and fertilizer. Costa Rica is one of the largest banana producers in the world. Ornamental flowers are becoming an increasingly important export. Cattle raising is concentrated in the Guanacaste province but is expanding to other areas. Manufacturing and tourism now contribute substantially more to the economy than agriculture. Other industries include food processing, textiles, and

construction materials.

Costa Rica relies heavily on hydroelectric power: hydroelectric power plants supply nearly all of the country's electricity. Costa Rica has been a major recipient of foreign aid, and foreign investment in the country is among the highest per capita in Latin America. The monetary unit is the Costa Rican *colón* (CRC), or plural, *colones*.

### **Transportation and Communications**

*Internet Users (per 100 people): 46*

*Cellular Phone Subscriptions (per 100 people): 146*

*Paved Roads: 26%*

Although cars are available, the most common form of transportation within and between cities is the bus. Fares are inexpensive and the system is efficient. Almost every town and tourist destination can be reached by paved roads. Taxis are commonly available; legal taxis are red or, at the airport, orange. Illegal taxis (called *piratas*, or "pirates") are common.

Telephones are located throughout the country, although remote areas still lack service. Rural homes usually have phones, and when this is not the case, each town has at least one public phone. Cellular phones are common throughout the country, even in most rural areas. Radio stations transmit throughout the country. There are also a number of television stations in Costa Rica. Several national newspapers have wide circulation. The press generally operates free from government interference, though the government has placed some restrictions on political reporting. The postal system is efficient. Less than half of the population uses the internet.

### **Education**

*Adult Literacy: 97%*

*Mean Years of Schooling: 8.4*

#### **Structure**

Primary education is compulsory. It begins at age five, with kindergarten, and lasts through sixth grade. Attendance is well enforced by the government. Though secondary school is not mandatory, the majority of pupils advance to that level, since most jobs require at least a high school education and a diploma is considered very important. Students can choose one of two secondary school tracks: a college preparatory one or a vocational one, which requires completion of an extra (13th) grade.

The majority of students attend public schools. Private schools, most of them religious, are generally thought to provide higher quality education and are affordable for middle-class and affluent Costa Ricans. Evening schools educate the older generation as well as young people who cannot attend secondary school during the day.

#### **Access**

Costa Rica has one of the best urban public education systems in the Americas. Costa Rica puts more of its gross domestic product (GDP) toward education than most other Latin American nations. Education is free, though students are responsible for their own uniforms, books, and supplies. Though the government does offer grants to help needy students with these expenses, the remaining costs can still be

prohibitively expensive for poor families. Students who qualify receive free meals (usually breakfast and lunch) at school, which can be an incentive for parents to send them. Many children walk miles to and from rural schools every day.

#### **School Life**

Math, Spanish, social studies, science, and a foreign language (usually English or French) are the main subjects taught. Teaching techniques focus on memorization and tests. Cheating is fairly common and is not heavily penalized. Classroom overcrowding has necessitated a split in the primary school day, with some students attending a morning session and the remainder going in the afternoon. Most studying is done at school, and homework is minimal. Rural children especially have little time to devote to homework, as they are required to care for younger siblings or work after school to help support their families.

Teachers and students tend to have friendly, caring relationships with each other. Even so, teachers rarely spend time outside of class mentoring or assisting students. More emphasis tends to be placed on students completing grade levels than on the quality of their learning experiences. School activities include the independence day holiday, occasional day and weekend trips, and end-of-year parties.

#### **Higher Education**

After high school, students may attend college or get vocational training. Public universities are free, and scholarships are available to cover expenses such as transportation and materials. To gain admittance to a public university, students must pass an entrance exam. The two largest schools are the University of Costa Rica and the National University. The country is home to several private universities as well. The National Learning Institute offers a wide range of vocational courses free of charge to all, enabling those Costa Ricans with fewer resources to enter the labor force with valuable skills.

### **Health**

A national healthcare system serves all citizens, and medical care is considered very good, though the system suffers from inadequate funding. Wait times for standard appointments can be several hours. Those who can afford it pay for private services to receive quicker care.

Life expectancy has risen in recent years. Infant malnutrition and inadequate prenatal care remain problems in rural areas. Malaria has been reported along the Nicaraguan border and at lower elevations, and dengue fever (also spread by mosquitoes) has been reported on both coasts for over two decades.

## **AT A GLANCE**

### **Contact Information**

Embassy of Costa Rica, 2114 S Street NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 480-2200; web site [www.costarica-embassy.org](http://www.costarica-embassy.org). Costa Rica Tourist Board, phone (866) COSTA RICA, web site [www.visitcostarica.com](http://www.visitcostarica.com).



### Country and Development Data

Capital	San José
Population	4,755,234 (rank=123)
Area (sq. mi.)	19,730 (rank=128)
Area (sq. km.)	51,100
Human Development Index	68 of 187 countries
Gender Inequality Index	63 of 148 countries
GDP (PPP) per capita	\$12,900
Adult Literacy	96% (male); 97% (female)
Infant Mortality	9 per 1,000 births
Life Expectancy	78 (male); 82 (female)
Currency	Costa Rican colón

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