

Before You Leave Home

No vaccines or vaccinations are necessary to travel to Costa Rica. However, if your passport shows recent travel to a country known to have yellow fever, you may be required to show proof of a yellow fever vaccine.

No visa is required for US, UK, EU or Canadian citizens. If you are carrying a passport of another nationality, due check with Costa Rican consular services to see if a visa is necessary. Most visitors are granted an automatic 180 day visa. Some visitors from Central and South America only receive 30 day visas.

Make sure your passport is current and good for at least 6 months after your return date.

There are currently no COVID restrictions or requirements to enter Costa Rica.

What To Bring

This is just a partial list, but includes a lot of items I feel are essential, or close to essential. There's a "Packing List" page on our web site that has links to items you might need to stock up on:

- Good hiking shoes (sneakers will work for hiking in most cases, but in wet/muddy conditions you might prefer something sturdier)
- Sandals or beach shoes
- Light-weight long trousers
- Light-weight long sleeve shirts
- A sweater or sweatshirt
- Light-weight rain jacket or windbreaker
- Shorts and tee-shirts
- Bathing suits (I recommend more than one)
- Broad-brimmed hat
- Sunglasses
- Insect repellent (can be purchased in Costa Rica)
- Sun protection lotion (can be purchased in Costa Rica)

- Camera
- Binoculars
- Refillable water bottle
- Small day pack or fanny back for hikes and excursions

Money

Costa Rica's colorful currency is the colón (colones in plural). Paper bills come in denominations of 1,000, 2,000, 5,000, 10,000 and 20,000 colones.

For quite a long time, the exchange rate hovered in the area of 500 colones to the dollar, in 2016 the rate jumped significantly, hovering in the 545 to 550 colones per dollar range for a long while. By mid-2022, it had reached almost 700 colones per dollar, but then sank rapidly and as of March 2026 was in the 480 range once again.

Most hotels and tour agencies, and some restaurants, actually quote prices in U.S. dollars, and accept dollars.

In addition, many taxis, restaurants and gift shops will accept dollars, although exchange rates may fluctuate radically.

You can change money at all banks in Costa Rica. Since banks handle money exchanges, Costa Rica has very, very few exchange houses. One major exception to this is the Global Exchange (www.globalexchange.co.cr) office at the two international airports. However, be forewarned they exchange at more than 10% below the official exchange rate.

Most ATMs connected to the Cirrus or Plus networks will allow you to withdraw from a bank or debit account in colones, giving the official bank exchange rate. Some charges may apply depending upon your bank and the actual ATM machine. However, so far, ATM fees are the exception, not the rule, in Costa Rica.

Airport taxis accept U.S. dollars, so there is no immediate need to exchange money the moment you arrive.

International credit and debit cards are widely accepted. It pays in advance to sign up for and get a credit card with no foreign exchange fees. It's very convenient to use credit or debit cards for incidental hotel expenses, dining out and most gift purchases.

You'll want cash on hand, particularly small bills (either in colones or dollars), for tips, taxi rides (some taxis now accept credit cards), and spur of the moment purchases.

See below for more info on tipping and dining costs.

Upon Arrival

After getting off the plane, follow signs to “Migración” or Immigration. After waiting and snaking through the line, an immigration officer will inspect and stamp your passport and take the immigration form you filled out on the plane.

Once through immigration you’ll walk to the baggage claim area. There are only 4 carousels. There are a couple of basic information desks here, an ATM, and an IMAS Duty Free Shop. If you want to pick up a bottle or two of wine or spirits for your time in Costa Rica, the prices at this shop are very, very good.

Once you have your bags, you will continue on to “Aduanas” or customs, where you’ll place all your luggage on a conveyor to be X-ray inspected. You should have no problems and soon be on your way to the terminal exit.

The exit area can seem hectic and confusing. A line of limo drivers, taxi drivers, rental car agency representatives, and touts will be waiting and shouting as soon as you exit the terminal. If you are being met by a driver, take your time and find the driver and sign with your name. There’s a relatively calm area where only exiting passengers and drivers are allowed, before exiting into the throng of people. Don’t allow yourself to be rushed or pushed along with the flow into this throng before finding your ride, as it will only be harder to backtrack and find him or her later.

Be sure it really is your assigned driver, there are tales of people who’ve been approached by rogue drivers who claim to have been sent for them.

Duty Free

If you have a few minutes and plan on stocking up, there are two Duty Free shops just off the baggage claim area that have excellent prices on wines and liquors. There’s supposedly a limit on how much you can purchase, but I’ve never seen it enforced. You can certainly buy 3-5 bottles per person, with no problem. You’ll find a Duty Free shop on your right after passing through Immigration Control and before reaching the first baggage carousel, and another beyond the last baggage carousel (this one is usually less crowded).

Taxis & Uber

If you plan on taking a taxi, the official airport taxis charge a slightly higher rate than public taxis, but the difference is negligible, and more than made up for in terms of convenience and security. Official airport taxi drivers are allowed slightly inside the arrival area, to the point where you just leave the building, and they will guide you to their kiosk where you tell the dispatcher you destination and get a ticket. Airport taxis will accept dollars or credit cards.

Uber, while not totally legal, works well in San Jose and at the airport. Uber drivers pick up passengers in front of the Malinche restaurant, which is located about 30 yards from the main terminal exit. Just turn right after exiting and walk along the sidewalk until you reach the restaurant.

General Tips & Pointers

Safety

Overall, Costa Rica is very safe. However, petty crime and robberies committed against tourists are all too common. Basic common sense and some simple precautions are in order. Try not to carry large sums of cash on you, and keep your wallet in your front pocket (for men), and keep a watchful eye and tight grip on your purse (for women). Don't wear obviously expensive jewelry, and be aware that fancy cameras, laptops, tablets and smartphones are prized targets. Leave your valuables locked in the hotel safe whenever possible.

I constantly hear conflicting reports about whether or not tourists need to carry their passports on them at all times. Personally, I recommend making a color copy of the most important pages and carrying that around with you, while leaving your passport in the hotel safe, whenever possible.

Rental cars are easily spotted by thieves. Don't leave anything of value exposed in a car parked on the street, not even for a moment. In fact, try not to park a rental car on the street unattended in Costa Rica, especially in San José. There are plenty of public parking lots around the city. In lieu of an official lot, there are also often unlicensed car watchers (watcheemen) that stake out popular streets and tourist stops. In general, they can be trusted, but again, try not to leave too many valuables in a parked car.

Be wary of solicitous strangers who stop to help you change a tire or take you to a service station. Although most are truly good Samaritans, there have been reports of thieves preying on roadside breakdowns.

Inter-city buses are also frequent targets of stealthy thieves. Try not to check your bags into the hold of a bus, if they will fit in the rack above your seat. If this can't be avoided, keep your eye on what leaves the hold. If you put your bags in an overhead rack, be sure you can see the bags at all times. Try not to fall asleep.

Single women should be cautious and careful, especially after dark. I don't recommend that single women walk alone anywhere at night, especially on seemingly deserted beaches, or dark uncrowded streets.

At the beach: Be careful to not lie or spend significant time directly under a fruit-bearing coconut tree. While the shade may be very welcome, a falling coconut is a potentially lethal danger.

Emergencies

In case of any emergency, dial **911** (which should have an English-speaking operator)**.** If 911 doesn't work, you can contact the police at **2222-1365** or **2221-5337**, and hopefully they can find someone who speaks English.

If you ever need to contact me about anything, or need help with translations or feel in a pinch:

- **Home/office: 2282-4973**
- **Cell: 8330-0539**

Staying Healthy

Staying healthy on a trip to Costa Rica is primarily a matter of being a little cautious about what you eat and drink, and using common sense. Know your physical limits, and don't overexert yourself in the ocean, on hikes, or in athletic activities. Respect the tropical sun and protect yourself from it. Be sure to drink plenty of water and not overexert yourself. Limit your exposure to the sun, especially during the first few days of your trip and, thereafter, from 11am to 2pm. Use sunscreen with a high protection factor, and apply it liberally. Remember that children need more protection than adults. I recommend buying and drinking bottled water or soft drinks, but the water in San José and in most of the country's heavily visited spots is safe to drink.

If You Get Sick

Your hotel front desk will be your best source of information and assistance if you get sick while in Costa Rica. Most state-run hospitals and walk-in clinics around the country have emergency rooms that can treat most conditions, although I recommend the more modern private hospitals in San José if your condition is not life-threatening and can wait for treatment until you reach one of them.

What To Bring (Medicines)

You should obviously bring any and all prescription medicines. And while pharmacies are plentiful around the country, and most hotels do have a basic first aid kit, it's not a bad idea to pack a basic first aid kit, as well as some over-the-counter common cold and upset stomach medicines, to have on hand at the first signs of any oncoming discomfort..

Water

The water in San José and much of the rest of the country is treated and generally safe to drink. That said, many travelers are not accustomed to the local intestinal flora and fauna. It is not uncommon for a visitor to experience minor digestive problems when traveling internationally. If you are concerned or are known to have a delicate digestive tract, I recommend playing it safe and sticking to bottled drinks as much as possible.

Cell Phones

Costa Rica uses GSM phones and chips. If you have a GSM system and a world-capable multiband phone, you should be able to make and receive calls. Check first with your home provider, as international roaming and data charges can vary.

A better, less expensive option is to come with (or buy here) an unlocked quad band phone and simply buy a local SIM chip here from one of the three main cell phone companies—Kolbi, Liberty and Claro. You can buy these chips (or a phone package) at the airport, or at any number of stores in most towns, cities and tourist destinations. The chips can run anywhere from $2-$8 and usually come pre-loaded with some calling minutes. Once you burn through those minutes it's easy to recharge and storefronts, supermarkets and pharmacies all across the country. Local calls are inexpensive, and there is no charge for receiving calls, even international calls.

Personally, I use **Google Fi** for my US provider and while traveling. I find the coverage excellent and the data by use very cost effective.

So far, Kolbi has the best coverage.

In addition, most of the major car-rental agencies offer cell phone rentals. Rates run around $5 to $7 per day or $25 to $50 per week for the phone rental, with charges of fifty cents to $1.50 per minute for local calls and $1 to $3 per minute for international calls.

To call Costa Rica from abroad:

- Dial the international access code: 011 from the U.S. and Canada; 00 from the U.K., Ireland, or New Zealand; or 0011 from Australia.
- Dial the country code 506.
- Dial the 8-digit number.

To make international calls

- To make international calls from Costa Rica, first dial 00 and then the country code (U.S. or Canada 1, U.K. 44, Ireland 353, Australia 61, New Zealand 64). Then, dial the area code and number.

WhatsApp

It's a good idea to connect with us via WhatsApp. WhatsApp is almost universally used in Costa Rica, over simple texting/SMS and other platforms. It's a great way to contact us in a hurry, and for us to put you in contact with your drivers or guides. Simply add us to your contacts and send us a quick message to our WhatsApp number (+1 970-306-6112) and we're good to go.

Or scan the following QR code:

COSTA RICA
CUSTOM
TRIPS

Costa Rica Custom Trips

WhatsApp business account

Scan this code to start a WhatsApp chat with Costa Rica Custom Trips.

Time
Costa Rica is on Central Standard Time (same as Chicago and St. Louis), 6 hours behind Greenwich Mean Time. Costa Rica does not use daylight saving time, so the time difference is an additional hour April through October.

Electricity
Costa Rica uses 110 volts AC (60 cycles) power, just like you'd find in the United States and Canada. However, some wall outlets are only two-pronged, so it's helpful to bring along a 3-prong to 2-prong adapter.

Embassies & Consulates
All international embassies & consulates are located in San José.
United States Embassy: Calle 120 and Avenida 0, Pavas (http://sanjose.usembassy.gov; Tel: 2519-2000); **Canadian Embassy**: Oficentro Ejecutivo La Sabana, Edificio 5 (http://costarica.gc.ca; Tel: 2242-4400); and **British Embassy:** Edificio Colón, 11th Floor, Paseo Colón between calles 38 and 40 (http://ukincostarica.fco.gov.uk/en; Tel: 2258-2025).

Departure Tax
As of this writing, virtually all airlines include the departure tax in the price of your airline ticket. If you are flying on a ticket without the tax prepaid, there is a $29 departure tax that must be paid prior to check-in for your departure flight. There are desks to pay this tax at all international airports, including the small airport in Pavas used by some charter flights.

Although you can pay the airport exit tax with a credit card, it is charged as a cash advance. Most credit card companies hit this kind of transaction with a fee and begin charging interest on it immediately. It is best to pay the airport tax in cash, either dollars or *colones*.

Local Airport Taxes
Several of our smaller local airports/airstrips have added small usage fees or taxes. All passengers must pay USD $8 (or equivalent in colones) in cash upon arrival or departure from La Fortuna (FON); USD $2.50 upon arrival or departure from Tambor (TMU), and USD $6.50 in Tamarindo (TMO).

Tipping
You can count on doing most, if not all of your tipping in dollars if need be, although *colones* will also work and are preferred. As always, tipping is up to the discretion of the client, and should reflect upon the service received.

As a general guideline, I'd recommend $25-$50 (total) for a private driver on most transfers. Five to $15 dollars or so for short drives, and more for the longer drives.

For the various tours, $5-$15 per person for the different tours should be appropriate. Even if there are multiple guides/drivers involved in the tour, one tip is all that's required/expected, and they divvy that up among themselves.

For housekeeping, somewhere in the $2-$5 per night range is common, depending upon the hotel and service received.

At restaurants, 10% service (tip) is automatically included in the bill, so, depending upon the level of service, I usually add on another 5%-10%.

Note: The above recommendations are conservative. More generous tipping is always encouraged and appreciated, especially when warranted by the service.

Dining Out/Meal Costs

In broad terms, eating out will run you $15-$60 per person per meal. On the lower end for lunches and meals at simple Costa Rican restaurants, and on the higher end for dinners and meals at some of the better restaurants around.

I find that eating out at a good restaurant in Costa Rica usually runs me around $40-$60 per person, for dinner. In our case that often translates into a shared appetizer, and a shared dessert and 2 main courses with drinks for around $100 total for 2 people...

Warning: Airport Food Prices

Airport food and shop prices are universally high, but for some reason, given the limited options, the food and drink prices inside the Daniel Oduber International Airport (LIR) in Liberia are some of the highest we've ever encountered.

San Jose's Juan Santamaria International Airport (SJO) has a dozen or so food court options, which while priced high for a captive audience, are not quite as egregious.

Adventure Tour Pictures

Most adventure tours you participate in will have an in house photographer taking pictures throughout the tour and adventure. This is especially true on zip lines, canyoning tours and white water rafting trips. At the end of the tour, you will be given the option to purchase your photos. Most come via digital download, and include, in addition to your specific tour, family, or group, a range of stock photos of the tour in general, and often a range of stock wildlife, flora and local sites of interest or general nature shots.

Pricing for these photos can range from around $40 to $60 per family/group. Some operations will take credit card, but others only cash payment. Although most are flexible enough that they will stop by your hotel later to finalize payment if necessary.

Manuel Antonio National Park

Even if you are visiting the park on a guided tour, be sure to bring along a bathing suit (and water). So that you can enjoy the beaches inside the park after the wildlife viewing and guided tour have ended. Note, due to problem with tourists feeding the monkeys and mapaches, food (of all types) is strictly prohibited and they will search your backpacks.

The National Park Service no longer allows re-entering the park on the same day with the same entrance ticket. You must pay the $16 entrance fee every time you enter the park. In general tickets must be purchased online. You'll need to have a photo of your passport on your phone or the actual passport to enter. Remember, this National Park is closed on Tuesdays.

Snorkeling In Costa Rica

A lot of folks think all tropical ocean destinations offer great snorkeling. While sometimes snorkeling in Costa Rica can be rewarding, in general snorkeling here is not on the par with snorkeling in the Caribbean, Hawaii, South Pacific or Red Sea (as examples). Sea conditions, especially on the Pacific side, can be rough and visibility limited. While you can sometimes (or even often) see large schools of fish and pelagics, you will be hard pressed to find the abundant and vibrant corals and reef fish that are common in other popular snorkel destinations. The best spots for snorkeling (and diving) are the further offshore islands like Isla del Caño (near Drake Bay) and Las Catalinas (off Guanacaste).

Costa Rica's prime snorkel and dive destination is Isla del Coco, but it's over 500km offshore and requires a multi-day trip on a liveaboard boat to visit.

Thank You For Choosing Costa Rica Custom Trips!

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