

Costa Rica

A natural paradise on Earth

- Containing 5% of the world's biodiversity
- Costa Ricans enjoy the highest rate of literacy, health care, education and life expectancy in the region
- Human presence in Costa Rica dates back 10,000 years
- The Spanish named the country as 'Rich Coast' in 1502 due to the golden bands used by inhabitants
- In 1987, Costa Rican President Oscar Arias Sanchez was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize
- 25% of Costa Rica is covered by protected natural areas – a key destination for lovers of eco-tourism
- Local food presents several regional variations and there is also a vast selection of tropical fruits
- Climate is subtropical, with a rainy season from May to November

Costa Rica is a Central American success story: since the late 19th century, only two brief periods of violence have marred its democratic development. Although still a largely agricultural country, it has expanded its economy to include strong technology and tourism sectors.

The country is the penultimate link in a chain of small nations that together comprise the isthmus of Central America. Along with the Caribbean and the Pacific, the country's



borders are defined by Nicaragua to the north and Panama to the south.

From northwest to southeast, Costa Rica measures 460 km and, at its narrowest point, it is only 120 km. In total, the country covers 50,900 km², an area comparable in size to Denmark and there are many points in the mountains where you can view both the Caribbean and Pacific coasts at the same time.

But Costa Rica does not feel small. At the join of two continents and two oceans, the region contains a breathtaking amount of plant and animal life. Within the country is found five percent of the world's biodiversity, including more than 800 species of ferns, 1,000 of orchids, 2,000 kinds of trees, and 200 species of mammals.

Both coastlines of Costa Rica have an abundance of beaches, though the Pacific strands are generally less developed. Between the coasts, the interior of the country is shaped by four cordilleras, or mountain ranges, which run from north to south.

The capital, San Jose, rests roughly in the nation's centre, settled within a highland valley. Cascading down to the Caribbean from the central mountains are Costa Rica's many great rivers, including the Reventazon. The Pacific side is marked by two broad peninsulas that hook out into the Pacific, the Nicoya and the Osa.

Brief history

- Human occupation dates back 10,000 years
- Discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1502
- Costa Rican civil war took place in 1948

The first European explorer to encounter Costa Rica was Christopher Columbus in September 1502 during his fourth and final voyage to the New World. Later, the golden bands that the region's inhabitants wore in their noses and ears would inspire the Spaniard Gil Gonzalez Davila to name the country Costa Rica, or Rich Coast.

Archaeologists now know that civilization existed in Costa Rica for thousands of years before the arrival of Columbus, and evidence of human occupation in the region dates back 10,000 years. Ruins of a large, ancient city complete with aqueducts were recently found east of San Jose.

By the time the Columbus arrived there were four major indigenous tribes living in Costa Rica. The east coast was the realm of the Caribs, while the Borucas, Chibchas, and Diquis resided in the southwest. Only a few hundred thousand strong to begin with, none of these peoples lasted long after the dawn of Spanish colonialism. Some fled, while many others perished from the deadly smallpox brought by the Spaniards.

Having decimated the indigenous labour force, the Spanish followed a common policy and brought in African slaves to work the land. Seventy thousand of their descendants live in Costa Rica today and only 1% of Costa's Rica's 4 million people are of indigenous heritage. An overwhelming 98% of the country is white and those of Spanish descent call themselves Ticos.

Of all the Spanish colonies, Costa Rica enjoyed the least influence as a colony. It was initially a tough and unpopular place to settle, with few valuable or easily exploited resources. The first successful establishment of a colonial city was not until 1562, when Juan Vasquez de Coronado founded Cartago.

When Mexico rebelled against Spain in 1821, Costa Rica and the rest of Central America followed suit. The first head of state was Juan Mora Fernandez, elected in 1824.

The Costa Rican civil war erupted in 1948, after incumbent Dr. Rafael Angel Calderon and the United Social Christian Party refused to relinquish power after losing the presidential election. An exile named Jose Maria (Don Pepe) Figueres Ferrer managed to defeat Calderon in about a month, and he later proved to be one of Costa Rica's most influential leaders, as head of the Founding Junta of the Second Republic of Costa Rica.

Under Ferrer's leadership, women and blacks gained the vote; the communist party was banned; banks were nationalised and presidential term limits established.



A broad culture

- A stable and prosperous country
- Long democratic tradition

In sharp contrast to the brutal internal conflicts in Guatemala or the grinding poverty of Nicaragua, Costa Rica has become synonymous with stability and prosperity – Costa Ricans enjoy the highest rate of literacy, health care, education and life expectancy in the region.

Unlike so many of its neighbours, the country has a long democratic tradition of free and open elections and no standing army (it was abolished in 1948). In 1987, Costa Rican President Oscar Arias Sanchez was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in ending the Nicaraguan civil war.

Costa Rica is noted more for its natural beauty and friendly people than for its culture. The overwhelming European influence erased almost all indigenous culture, and because Costa Rica was a country of subsistence agriculturalists until the middle of the 19th century, cultural activity has only begun to blossom in the last 100 years.

Around 75% of Costa Ricans are Roman Catholics and 14% are evangelical Christians. In practice, most church attendance takes place at christenings, funerals and marriages.

Many Caribbean blacks speak a dialect of English, known as Creole. Indigenous languages are spoken in isolated areas, primarily Bribri, which is estimated to be understood by about 10,000 people.



Outstanding natural parks

- 25% of Costa Rica is a protected area
- Fostering 5% of the world's total wildlife species
- Prime destination for eco-tourism

Costa Rica protects 25% of its total territory under a carefully structured system of national parks, wildlife refuges and biological reserves. In all there are currently some 75 protected areas, established gradually over the past thirty years.

In total the parks and reserves protect approximately 5% of the world's total wildlife species and life zones, among them rainforests, cloudforests, *páramo* (high-altitude moorlands), swamps, lagoons, marshes and mangroves, and the last remaining patches of tropical dry forest in the isthmus. Also protected are areas of historical significance, including a very few pre-Columbian settlements.

Costa Rica's jungles provide a variety of habitats for the country's fauna including four types of monkey, sloths, armadillos, jaguars and tapirs. The primary attraction for many visitors is the 850 recorded bird species, which include the resplendent quetzal, indigo-capped hummingbirds, macaws and toucans. There are also a number of dazzling butterflies.

In recent years Costa Rica has become the prime eco-tourism destination in Central America. Every year hundreds of thousands of visitors – mainly from the United States and Canada – come to walk trails through million-year-old rainforests, raft foaming whitewater rapids, surf on the Pacific beaches and climb the volcanoes that punctuate the country's mountainous spine.





Simple, tasty food

- Several regional variations
- Dishes include rice with a type of meat or fish
- Great selection of tropical fruits

Costa Ricans call their cuisine *comida típica* (“native” or “local” food). Simple it may be, but tasty nonetheless, especially when it comes to interesting regional variations on the Caribbean coast (Creole cooking) and in Guanacaste (the northwest).

Dishes you’ll find all over Costa Rica usually include rice and some kind of meat or fish, often served as part of a special plate with coleslaw salad, in which case it is called a *casado* (literally, “married person”).

The *ubiquitous gallo pinto* (“painted rooster”) is a breakfast combination of red and white beans with rice, sometimes served with *huevos revueltos* (scrambled eggs). You should also try *ceviche* (raw fish “cooked” in lime juice with coriander and peppers), *pargo* (red snapper), *corvina* (sea bass), and fresh fruit, either by itself or drunk in *refrescos*.

Papayas, pineapple and bananas are all cheap and plentiful, along with some less familiar fruits like *mamonos chinos* (a kind of lychee), *anona* (which tastes like custard) and *marañón*, whose seed is the cashew nut.

A mild climate

- Subtropical conditions
- Rainy season from May to November
- Dry period between December and April

Despite its location, mild subtropical conditions prevail year-round and temperature extremes are practically nonexistent. Temperature varies mainly according to elevation, the higher the cooler.

The brunt of the rainy season lasts from May through November, while a brief dry spell pays a visit from December to April. Costa Rica’s rain falls mainly on the Caribbean coast, giving the Pacific a much more arid climate.

Key facts about Costa Rica

Geography	Location	Central America, bordering both the Caribbean Sea and the North Pacific Ocean, between Nicaragua and Panama.
	Total area	51,100 km ² (including Isla del Coco)
	Climate	Subtropical; dry season (December to April); rainy season (May to November); cooler in highlands.
	Terrain	Coastal plains separated by rugged mountains including over 100 volcanic cones, of which several are major volcanoes.
	Elevation extremes	Lowest point: Pacific Ocean, 0 m Highest point: Cerro Chirripo, 3,810 m
People	Population	3,956,507 (July 2004 est.)
	Median age	Total: 25.7 years
		Male: 25.2 years
		Female: 26.2 years (2004 est.)
	Life expectancy	Total population: 76.63 years
		Male: 74.07 years
Female: 79.33 years (2004 est.)		
Ethnic groups	White (including mestizo) 94%, black 3%, Amerindian 1%, Chinese 1%, other 1%	
Literacy	96% of the population aged 15 and over can read and write	
Government	Type	Democratic republic
	Capital	San José
	Administrative divisions	7 provinces: Alajuela, Cartago, Guanacaste, Heredia, Limon, Puntarenas and San José.
	Independence	15 September 1821 (from Spain)
	Suffrage	18 years of age, universal and compulsory
	Chief of state	President Abel Pacheco (since 8 May 2002)

Economy	GDP per capita	€7,296 (2003 est.)
	Industries	Microprocessors, food processing, textiles and clothing, construction materials, fertilizer, plastic products.
	Main exports	Coffee, bananas, sugar, pineapples, textiles, electronic components, medical equipment.
	Export partners	US 25%, Netherlands 6.8%, UK 5%, Mexico 4.5% (2003 est.)
	Import partners	US 33.4%, Japan 4.2%, Mexico 3.5% (2003 est.)
Communications	Nr. of mobile phones	528,047 (2002)
	Internet users	800,000 (2002)
Transportation	Railways	950 km
	Highways	Total: 35,892 km
		Paved: 7,896 km
		Unpaved: 27,996 km (2000)
	Ports	Caldera, Golfito, Moin, Puerto Limón, Puerto Quepos, Puntarenas.
Airports/air fields	149 (2003 est.)	

Sources: Geographia, Lonely Planet, Rough Guides, Discovery, the World Factbook