



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Costa Rica covers 19,730 square miles (51,100 square kilometers) and is just smaller than West Virginia. 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. This small nation has a diverse landscape of tropical rain forests, mountain cloud forests, volcanoes, coastal lowlands, beaches, and beautiful rivers. 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

A variety of native peoples lived in present-day Costa Rica before Columbus arrived in 1502. In the north, the indigenous cultures were influenced by Mayan 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. 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).

Costa Rica's long tradition of changes in government via democratic means has been interrupted by military coups only three times in 150 years. Consequently, Costa Rica has one of the most stable democratic governments in Central America. Civil war erupted for six weeks in 1948 after a dispute over elections. José Figueres Ferrer led an interim government until 1949, when the election dispute was settled. Figueres (who was elected president in 1953 and again in 1970) abolished the army in 1948, and a new constitution was introduced in 1949. Costa Rica has enjoyed peace and democracy ever since.

The nation practices a philosophy of nonintervention in the affairs of foreign governments. Former president Oscar Arias Sánchez (who left office in 1990) was an avid supporter of the Central American Peace Plan. Arias won the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to bring peace to the region. The award is a great source of pride for all Costa Ricans; they believe it emphasizes their distinct heritage.

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. In 2007, Costa Rica announced its goal to become one of the world's first carbon-neutral nations by 2021. Elections in 2010 installed Laura Chinchilla as Costa Rica's first female president.

THE PEOPLE

Population

The population of Costa Rica is roughly 4.5 million and is growing at about 1.3 percent annually. The majority of people (94 percent) have European heritage. Of these, about 7 percent are of mixed heritage (European and indigenous), although many of these are immigrants from other Latin American countries. 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 half a million Nicaraguans living in Costa Rica are illegal immigrants; Costa Rica deports thousands yearly. The general population is relatively young, with about 27 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. 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 *tica*) 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 *chico* (small) or *chiquitito* (very small), Costa Ricans say *chiquitico*.

Religion

Roughly 92 percent of the population is Christian. About 76 percent claims membership in the Roman Catholic Church. Until the mid-1980s, it was the nation's official church, but it lost that status when the government decreed that a democratic nation should not support any particular religion. Although the Catholic Church continues to be very influential, the constitution guarantees religious freedom to the people. Evangelical groups, Jehovah's Witnesses, other Protestants are also common. As is the trend elsewhere, secularization in Costa Rica is leading some people away from organized religion. At the same time, a growing number of religious people are joining other Christian churches, and religion still plays an important role in society.

General Attitudes

Costa Rica is a land of courtesy, domestic enterprise, hospitality, and gentleness. Militarism is despised by nearly all. Children are taught in school that armies are created to oppress rather than protect. Aggressiveness, brusqueness, and violence are also shunned. *Ticos* say they are lovers of peace and conciliation. Confrontation is avoided when possible; people may even say they will do something when they really don't intend to do it, just so they won't have to disagree.

People value privacy and quiet behavior but will vigorously defend personal honor. 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. Individuals are recognized as such, and 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. Women try to dress fashionably, and all *ticos* consider it necessary to be well groomed in public. Clothing is neat, clean, and generally modest, although women sometimes wear short skirts or tight clothes. People bathe every day and place great emphasis on personal cleanliness.

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). *Ticos* 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.” Eye contact is important, especially when one is discussing a serious issue or talking to a superior. It traditionally is understood that the lack of eye contact means one cannot be trusted. Chewing gum while speaking is impolite.

Visiting

Costa Ricans enjoy socializing but do not visit as often as people in other Latin American or Caribbean countries. 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, home-grown 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 mark the occasion. Close friends often bring more personal gifts. 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. Mealtimes are to be enjoyed and are extended by conversation on a variety of subjects. Table manners vary, but as a general rule, one keeps both hands above the table rather than in the lap. Restaurant bills customarily include a tip of 10 percent. Further tipping is not expected.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Costa Ricans value family tradition and heritage. Immediate families have an average of three to five children; rural families are usually larger. Rural extended families often either share a dwelling or live as neighbors. While the husband makes most final decisions in the home, he shares many responsibilities with his wife. Most women do not work outside the home, but a growing number are entering the labor force. Close to one-third of the workforce is female. Women retain their maiden names when they marry. Children carry the surnames of both parents. The second-to-last name in a full name is 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. They are often painted in bright colors. Black security bars protect windows and doors. Inside, floors tend to be made from tile or smooth, red cement, which women sweep, mop, wax, and shine daily. It is 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, and not all have electricity and indoor plumbing. 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.”

Dating and Marriage

Young Costa Ricans begin socializing in groups at young ages. Pairing off is rare, except in rural areas where there are fewer people. 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 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 is allowed a certain schedule for sitting with the girl on the porch or taking short neighborhood walks. This may be for two hours during a few evenings each week.

Marriage is a valued institution; Costa Rica has one of the highest marriage rates in Latin America. Families visit each other to show formal agreement on their children's marriage. Women generally marry in their early twenties; men tend to marry somewhat later. Unmarried adults usually live with their parents, especially in rural areas. The exception is unmarried university students who sometimes live on their own.

Life Cycle

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. Another party is held after the baby is baptized. At age 15, many Costa Rican girls celebrate their birthdays with a special party. It could be something quite simple, like a family gathering in the home. For rich families, as many as one hundred guests may attend a reception hall and enjoy a sit-down dinner, a fancy cake, and dancing with a professional disk jockey. Children do not typically leave home until they get married. Legally, they are considered adults at 18. That's when they have the right to vote, drive, and drink alcohol. Following a death, all the neighbors and family members come to the *velorio* (wake). Mere acquaintances will not stay long, but close friends and family members will generally stay the whole night praying. The deceased is usually buried the next day.

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* (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. *Ticos* of all ages enjoy coffee. Adults may take two or three coffee breaks each day.

Recreation

Fútbol (soccer) is the most popular spectator and participant sport. 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. 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.

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 the *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 *carretas* (oxcarts) are well known throughout the world. Other arts include pottery, *molas* (appliqué for clothing or textiles), and carved wooden masks.

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 de la Raza*, recognizing the indigenous roots of Latin America (12 Oct.); Feast of Immaculate Conception (8 Dec.); and Christmas.

Christmas is generally celebrated with family, whereas New Year's is generally thought of as a time for friends, parties, drinking, and dancing. 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.

SOCIETY

Government

Costa Rica is a democratic republic. Its executive branch has an elected president (currently Laura Chinchilla) and two vice presidents. The unicameral Legislative Assembly is comprised of 57 legislators, who are elected to four-year terms. The judicial branch is separate. Costa Rica has seven provinces. Most Costa Ricans are affiliated with one of two major parties: the ruling Social Christian Unity Party (PUSC) and the National Liberation Party (PLN). Citizens 18 years of age and older are required to vote in national elections, although there is no penalty for not voting and turnout is often low. Election day is a national holiday; people travel to their town of birth to vote and enjoy celebrations.

Economy

Despite a relative lack of minerals and other traditional natural resources, Costa Rica has a fairly prosperous economy. Real gross domestic product per capita has more than doubled in the last generation. This is due in part to Costa Rica's stability; successful tourism, timber, and

agricultural industries; and a generally egalitarian society. The country experienced steady growth in the early 1990s. In the mid-1990s the economy slowed because of low world prices for agricultural products, adverse weather conditions, and government measures to control inflation. Unemployment is low, but underemployment remains a problem. Poverty affects about one-fifth of the population.

Exports include coffee, bananas, beef, sugar, cocoa, 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 more to the economy than agriculture. Other industries include food processing, textiles, and construction materials. Costa Rica has excellent potential for hydroelectric power: hydroelectric power plants supply nearly all of the country's electricity. Tourism facilities are well developed, so the industry is prosperous and important to the economy. Tourists are particularly drawn to Costa Rica's protected areas, and ecotourism has grown in popularity in recent years. Costa Rica has been a major recipient of foreign aid, and foreign investment in the country is increasing. The monetary unit is the Costa Rican *colón* (CRC), or plural, *colones*.

Transportation and Communications

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. Telephones are located throughout the country, although remote areas still lack service. Rural homes usually do not have phones, but each town has at least one public phone. Cell phones are common throughout the country. Satellite systems are used for international communications. Radio stations transmit throughout the country. There are also a number of television stations in Costa Rica. Several national newspapers have wide circulation. The postal system is efficient. Mobile phone and internet use are increasing.

Education

Costa Rica has one of the finest urban public education systems in the Americas. Nearly half of federal government spending goes toward education and health care. Primary and secondary education are compulsory and free, beginning at age seven. Students are responsible for their own uniforms, books, and supplies, which can be prohibitive expenses for poor families. Where facilities exist, children also attend kindergarten at age five and a preparatory year at age six. Enrollment in secondary schools is not mandatory, but more than 40 percent of all pupils advance to that level. Both public and private universities serve the population. Evening schools educate the older generation as well as young people who cannot attend secondary school during the day. A high school diploma is considered very important.

Health

A national healthcare system serves all citizens, and medical

care is considered very good. 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 since 1993.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

Embassy of Costa Rica, 2114 S Street NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 234-2945; web site www.costarica-embassy.org. Costa Rica Tourist Board, phone (866) COST RICA; web site www.visitcostarica.com.

POPULATION & AREA

Population	4,516,220 (rank=122)
Area, sq. mi.	19,730 (rank=127)
Area, sq. km.	51,100

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	62 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	51 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$11,000
Adult literacy rate	95% (male); 95% (female)
Infant mortality rate	10 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	75 (male); 80 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).