

About Costa Rica

Costa Rica has a population of just over 4 million inhabitants. In area it is approximately the size of West Virginia or Wales.

Climate

Costa Rica is a tropical country which contains several distinct climatic zones. There is no winter or summer as such and most regions have a rainy season from May to November and a dry season from December to April. Annual rainfall averages 100 inches nationwide with some mountainous regions getting as much as 25 feet on exposed eastern slopes. Temperature is more a matter of elevation than location with a mean of around 22 Celsius (72° F) in the Central Valley, 28 Celsius (82° F) on the Atlantic coast and 32 Celsius (89° F) on the Pacific coast where Fiesta Resort is located.

Costa Rica's Government

Costa Rica is a democratic republic. Under the 1949 constitution, all citizens are guaranteed equality before the law, the right to own property, the right of petition and assembly, freedom of speech and the right of habeas corpus. The constitution also divides the government into independent executive, legislative and judicial branches. The executive branch is composed of the president, two vice presidents and a cabinet. The legislature is the National Assembly, composed of 57 members (diputados) elected by proportional representation. National elections are held every four years, on the first Sunday of February.

Geography

The country is divided by a backbone of volcanoes and mountains, an extension of the Andes-Sierra Madre chain which runs along the western side of the Americas. Costa Rica has four distinct cordilleras or mountain ranges — Guanacaste and Tilarán in the north, Central and Talamanca in the

south. Costa Rica is part of the Pacific "Rim of Fire" and has seven active volcanoes plus dozens of dormant or extinct cones. Earth tremors and small quakes shake the country from time to time.

The last major quake hit on April 22, 1991. Centered on the Caribbean side southeast of San José, it measured 7.4 on the Richter scale. The country's highest point is Mt. Chirripó (3,797 meters or 12,450 feet). The capital, San José, and the neighboring major cities of Alajuela and Heredia lie in the middle of the Meseta Central (Central Valley). Almost two-thirds of the nation's population live in this small, fertile valley. The Pacific coastal plain is much narrower than its Caribbean counterpart. Both coasts are lined with white and black sand beaches.

Food

Costa Rican food is a fusion cuisine. It combines elements of culinary traditions from Africa, Italy, France, China, and Spain, flavored by traditional grains (rice, corn, and beans), roots (cassava, taro roots, sweet potatoes), spices (coriander, garlic, saffron, parsley, oregano, thyme, nutmeg, salt, and pepper), oils (olive oil, vegetable oil, and lard), sauces (Lizano, Soy, and Worcestershire), fresh fruit, and vegetables. The food is mild to slightly seasoned. A real disappointment to those of us looking for picante! Still, it tastes good.

Two dishes reflect the rural culture and are commonly served in local restaurants. Gallo Pinto consists of rice and beans seasoned with coriander, onions and Lizano sauce and is usually served for breakfast with scrambled or fried eggs and a cup of coffee. Casado consists of white rice, black or red beans served with pork, steak, or chicken, a small portion of cabbage/lettuce and tomato salad, and fried plantains.

Common drinks are horchata (ground rice & cinnamon drink) or natural juice drinks made from star fruit, guayaba, passion fruit, mango, guanabana, and citrus fruits.

Health Issues

You are unlikely to encounter any serious diseases in Costa Rica. Sanitary standards are high and the health system is excellent. During the past two wet seasons there have been several outbreaks of the mosquito-borne disease dengue but so far there have been no reported cases of the more serious hemorrhaging dengue. No vaccinations are required to enter Costa Rica as epidemic diseases have been all but eradicated throughout the country. Infectious hepatitis, a serious problem throughout Central America, is rarely reported in Costa Rica.

Most prescription medicines are available, well, without a prescription.

History of Costa Rica

Columbus arrived near the Port of Limón on September 18, 1502 on his third and last voyage to the Americas. At the time, there were probably no more than 20,000 indigenous inhabitants living in what is now Costa Rica. The native Costa Ricans gave Columbus gold and he returned to Europe with reports of a plentiful supply of the precious metal. However, the adventurers who arrived later to cash in on these amazing riches found only hostile Indians, swamps and disease for their trouble. Several early attempts to colonize the Atlantic coast failed for the same reasons and for almost half a century Costa Rica was passed over while colonization gathered pace in countries to the north and south.

Central America gained independence from Spain on September 15, 1821. However, the news did not reach Costa Rica until a month after the event. The question of whether Costa Rica should join newly independent Mexico or join a new confederation of Central American states resulted in a bitter quarrel between the leaders of San José and their counterparts in the cities of Cartago and Heredia. A brief civil war in 1823 was won by San José and Costa Rica joined the Central America confederation.

Juan Mora Fernandez was elected the country's first head of state in 1824. His progressive administration expanded public education and encouraged the cultivation of coffee with land grants for growers. This quickly led to the establishment of a new Costa Rican elite, the coffee barons, who quickly put their power to use by overthrowing the Costa Rican president, José María Castro. His successor, Juan Rafael Mora, is remembered as the man who mobilized a force of Costa Rican volunteers and defeated William Walker, ending the persistent North American adventurer's ambitions to turn Central America into a slave state and annex it to the United States.

After more than a decade of political turmoil, General Tomás Guardia seized power in 1870. Though he ruled as a military dictator, his 12 years in power were marked by progressive policies like free and compulsory primary education, restraining the excesses of the military and taxing coffee earnings to finance public works.

The next important era began with the election of Dr. Rafael Angel Calderón Guardia in 1940. His enlightened policies included land reform, a guaranteed minimum wage and progressive taxation. But when Calderón's United Social Christian Party refused to step down after losing the 1948 election, civil war erupted. The anti-Calderón forces were led by José María (Don Pepe) Figueres Ferrer who had been exiled to Mexico in 1942. Supported by the governments of Guatemala and Cuba, he won the war which lasted 40 days and cost 2,000 lives.

Figueres became head of the Founding Junta of the Second Republic of Costa Rica. He consolidated the reforms introduced by Calderón and introduced many of his own: He banned the Communist Party, gave women the vote and granted full citizenship to blacks, abolished the armed forces, established a term limit for presidents and nationalized the banks and insurance companies. He also founded the Partido de Liberación Nacional... the party of our current president.

Don Pepe died in 1990 a national hero, his deeds having set the scene for the social and economic progress that would earn Costa Rica the reputation as a peaceful and stable island of democracy in one of the world's most politically unstable, and often war-torn regions. When civil war broke out in neighboring Nicaragua, Costa Rica was drawn reluctantly into the conflict, its northern zone being used as a base first for Sandinista and later for "contra" forces. In 1986, a young lawyer called Oscar Arias Sánchez was elected president on the platform of peace. Arias' tireless efforts to promote peace in the region were rewarded when the five Central American presidents signed his peace plan in Guatemala City in 1987, an achievement that earned him the Nobel Peace Prize. Arias was re-elected president in 2006.

Religion

Around 90% of Costa Ricans are officially Roman Catholic, but only a small percentage of the population actually practice their religion. Religious freedom is granted by the constitution and upheld by the tolerant nature of Ticos (as Costa Ricans like to call themselves).

Holy Week (the week between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday) is a national holiday, and is supposed to be a time of prayer and good behavior, but people in almost every town in Costa Rica take it as an excuse for vacations and, especially, trips to the beach... any beach! In some Latin American countries, when the local priest walks past, the people genuflect and make the sign of the cross. Here in Costa Rica, people couldn't be bothered! Church bells ring out for almost any special (or not so special!) occasion. Most Ticos respond to them by going to the church only on special occasions like: baptism, marriage, and, maybe, Good Friday... if they are not at the beach!

The relationship between Costa Rica and the church has been always weak. For some reason, even in the earliest colonial times, the Church had difficulty in gaining control over people's minds and their morals. Some historians speculate the first settlers here were actually Spanish nobles who

were secretly Jews and had been allowed to escape the Inquisition. Who knows for sure?

Still, every village, no matter how small it is, has a church with its main door facing west, located on the east side of the central plaza. In addition, each town has its own saint's day, which is usually celebrated with secular fervor (lots of cannons exploding). Also, Catholicism is the official state religion as mandated by the Constitution of 1949... in fact, it is legally required that the President of Costa Rica be Roman Catholic.

Protestantism has grown by leaps and bounds during the last 25 years. A few evangelical churches in the Central Valley number over two thousand participants. Of course, the false sects have also grown during this same time period. Jehovah's Witnesses have their headquarters for Central America in Costa Rica (not far from the airport). The Mormons dedicated a temple here about five years ago and have many local meeting houses as well.

In addition, Costa Rica is home to Jews, Buddhists, Hindus and one, small mosque. One of the largest religious groups on the East coast is Rastafarianism.