All you ever wanted to know about Costa Rica...

in less than 15 minutes

Costa Rica is a throwback to the 50s in a lot of ways. Many of the values that we mourn as long gone in our society...are alive and well in Costa Rica

Lead Story Headline

Ever since my wife and I moved to Costa Rica and had discovered that virtually all …or at least 75% of the information on the internet …of the facts, claims, representations and "stories" about life in Costa Rica…were totally wrong…I have wanted to write a book, website, or at the very least …take out a large ad correcting all of the misinformation about this wonderful country.

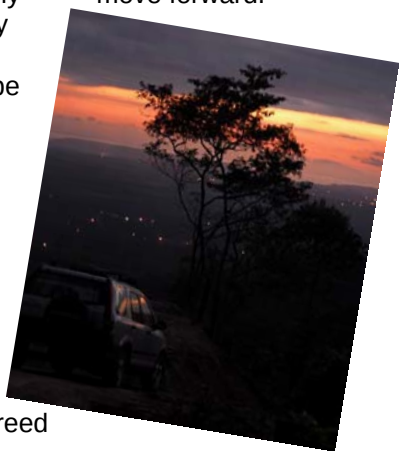
But obviously I haven't.

And honestly, I am too busy to devote the massive amounts of time necessary to write a comprehensive book about Costa Rica from another "gringo" perspective. That has already been done.

And there are websites which are excellent introductions to Costa Rica and which do an excellent job of communicating nearly all facets of life in Costa Rica. And there are also a great many who do a pretty poor job too.

SO… I have decided to write a short "white paper", blog, thesis, or whatever… for those of you who don't want to sit through an hour or two digesting information you probably really don't need or certainly don't want to pay for. Hopefully it will be simple, concise and communicate a great deal of what I really think is necessary to tell everyone who is truly interested in Costa Rica. Remember…it is highly subjective (although most points will be almost universally agreed on by those who live here full time) and …much of it will be a little hard to believe. But just remember…as Dorothy said to Toto…"I don't think we're in Kansas anymore."

For all of its similarities and attractions Costa Rica IS a foreign country with a completely different culture and a completely different way of viewing the world. Keep that in mind as we move forward.



"Why is Costa Rica becoming so popular and why is everyone talking about it?"

…well, seeing as I don't work for the Costa Rican chamber of commerce I would simply say that , for such a small country, it has:

A huge amount of the world's flora and fauna…and 26% of its land is set aside for national parks. The diversity is astounding. There are very few places in the world that you can go for a Sunday drive and see volcanoes, cloud forests, rain forests, agricultural land, mountains, two oceans, rivers, lakes and vistas that will literally take your breath away. There is a truism here that there are no bad views anywhere in the country.

Costa Rica is a throwback to the 50s in a lot of ways. Many of the values that we mourn as long gone in our society…are alive and well in Costa Rica….it is sort of like being a participant in a Spanish "leave it to Beaver" movie. For the most part, the people are truly friendly and welcoming. There are exceptions (covered later) but most people will go WAAYYY out of their way to help you.

You can live well in Costa Rica for about a third as much as it would cost you in the States or Canada.

Costa Rica is the longest running democracy in Latin America…and with all the press about Chavez, Ecuador, Nicaragua and more… that is not a small factor to be considered.

Purchasers of land in Costa Rica have the same rights NO MATTER WHAT THEIR NATIONALITY.

If you are a resident…or even a non resident living in Costa Rica…medical care is always available and is definitely the equal of Stateside medicine. Medications cost approximately one third to one half of what they do in the States or Canada. AND are easier to obtain.

Pretty easy to see Why Costa Rica is so popular.

NOW…let's get to the nitty gritty…

…and I guarantee that some of these will not make me the most popular guy with the Costa Rican chamber of commerce either…
…Costa Rica runs on a "hidden marketplace" that most visitors never see. Almost everything that is bought and sold here operates on a hidden commission basis…for example: you have a piece of land for sale…you tell friends and neighbors and one of them ultimately brings a "gringo" to buy it…you receive a standard 5% commission for your work and introduction. THIS GOES ON WITH OVER 90% OF SALES AND PURCHASES WITHIN THE COUNTRY…for real estate, for automobiles, almost everything. " that's not so much, you say" … and you would be right EXCEPT when someone makes a recommendation that you think is totally unbiased…or someone recommends a specific development or recommends their friend's property because it is "the best" or "the lowest priced" OR (this is my favorite)…"you can buy direct from the owner without any markup or commission".
Kind of puts a different slant on things doesn't it?… all of those newsletters recommending "unbiased" purchases or saying that they have no "hidden agenda"?

"SO… who can you trust? " Well, it ain't the government or the municipalities. There is really very little oversight in almost every area that you might think is regulated. If you purchase a car…the government doesn't care if it is water damaged or labeled as a collision vehicle in the States…and they don't care if the mileage is rolled back. You are on your own. CAVEAT EMPTOR "let the buyer beware". Properties are "marked up" to whatever lever the broker or seller can get. There are no rules or regulations here…or at least very few. Hate to say it but you really are on your own…unless you have a very good and honest friend in Costa Rica watching out for you …it is up to you to ensure you get the truth , the facts, and get exactly what you "think you are buying."

Just remember…if you are thinking about buying land or a house or any "large and expensive purchase"…. think about who is benefiting from your purchase. Land and cars can be marked up an exorbitant amount here…make sure you are getting exactly what you THINK you are paying for. Ask yourself how the land developer can afford to pay a telemarketer in Florida almost 25% of the total purchase price of the land he has never seen? Ask yourself "does the tour operator or the newsletter writer really recommend those properties as the absolutely BEST BUYS…or is he just saying it because he received a 5% commission? Things change in a big hurry if you view the world from this angle.

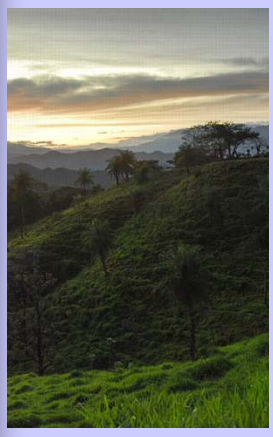
Medical care is always available and is definitely the equal of Stateside medicine. Medications cost approximately one third to one half of what they do in the States or Canada.

Okay, the above being said and out in the open …let's move on, while always remembering the above. Let's clear up a few misconceptions about Costa Rica:
It is not an island. Look at a map…below Mexico and above South America.
The water is safe to drink almost everywhere in the country.
The infrastructure is excellent…not always the most efficient but for the most part, reliable. There are areas of the country where , no matter what anyone says… electric, telephone, and roads may NEVER be available. And even if you ask the municipality or the local utility office…oftentimes they don't know (more on this later)
Internet is available here but high speed or DSL often is not.
Almost all waste is individual septic, not municipal…theoretically all septic systems have to pass code and be approved but , in reality, most are not. Be careful of your neighbors if you rent or build. Check that strange looking runoff as they may not even have a septic system. Almost everyone has a properly functioning septic system, but some don't.

Misconceptions

Costa Rica is a democracy and has a higher mortality rate and literacy rate than the United States. Approximately 10% of the population speaks English. Costa Rica also has no standing army . Costa Rica is a very small country , about the size of West Virginia.
Contrary to what you may read, the roads in Costa Rica are in pretty good shape. Almost all visitors say they are surprised.
"almost everything" that you can get in the States can be found somewhere in Costa Rica. Sadly, good hot dogs are almost impossible to find as the ban from the past "mad cow" episode is still in effect.
While parts of the country are still "backward" and remote, the most populated areas in the Central Valley resemble , in areas, Beverly Hills and Los Angeles. There is definitely crime, mostly petty; and there are problems with drugs…just the same as any other large city almost anywhere in the world.
The more popular tourist areas such as Guanacaste, Jaco, Manuel Antonio, Escazu, Santa Ana are becoming prime crime targets.
Sadly, the poor are attracted to the money and it is common knowledge that the "gringos" have it. Security sometimes can be an issue in these areas.
Costa Rica is NOT one big jungle…and there are not huge spiders or poisonous snakes everywhere. Jungles and rain forests are only a small part of the country. Deaths are extremely rare from insects and poisonous reptiles….in fact, Florida has many more and no one thinks about the creepy crawlies there.
There are not epidemics of dengue fever or malaria here.
I'm sure that I will think of more misconceptions later but for now, let's move on.

There is a real two tier marketplace in Costa Rica…one for gringos and one for Ticos. Guess which tier is the lowest?



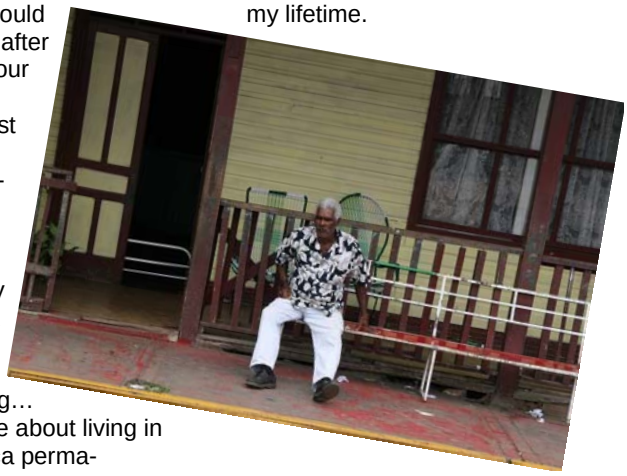
Irritations and inherent problems

This next section contains certain "irritations" and inherent "problems" that almost all gringos find upsetting:

The bureaucracies here are overwhelmingly slow and frustrating. Almost any governmental , either local or national, agency is saddled with seemingly senseless and totally nonsensical rules and guidelines. Plan on long lines, seemingly non-rational guidelines or requirements. This of course, carries over into the private sector as well…banks, department stores, utilities, phone companies, anything with more than 5 employees is seemingly affected with an innate inability to get from point A to point B in a minimum of time. A perfect example of this is a pharmacy which just opened… completely new building , new location, new everything… when you go in and order , the clerk will find what you want and give you a bill … which you have to take to the cashier who is five feet away…to take your money and give you your change. Can't the clerk do the same job? You would sure think so.
Many gringos go almost insane when trying to open up a bank account , get a cell phone or try to get an electrical hookup. It should be simple to get the bank to take your money, right? Wrong, plan on at least a three hour wait …and that is with the proper introduction. It is important to remember that these seemingly senseless rules affect EVERYONE… they are really not targeted to drive gringos insane. Customs is another example …. I can claim the same item that my wife claims and there will be two sets of duties involved depending upon how the inspector feels that day OR how he or she likes you. Laws are selectively enforced as well…sad to say.
Many people who live here claim that most U.S. brands sold here are seconds. I used to scoff at them …but I don't any longer…because, for some strange reason, products purchased here simply do not last as long.
Ticos …almost ALL Costa Ricans…think that gringos have money trees back home. And, it is true that most that move here have more money than most ticos…but Ticos will simply not believe you if you tell them that you "don't have that much money". AND what is worse is that nearly all ticos believe that if they liberate some of your money for themselves, you will not miss it… because you simply don't know what things "really cost" here. There is a real two tier marketplace in Costa Rica… one for gringos and one for Ticos. Guess which tier is the lowest?

You don't really think that a Tico who makes $500-700 per month can afford the same property as we can do you? Or can afford to build the same style of house? Look at it this way… if a group of aliens came to your hometown and started paying outrageous prices for land and houses, wouldn't you raise your prices too? Of course you would . Just be aware that this two tier system is in effect wherever you go…from hotel prices to plane tickets, to furniture, to land and construction to mechanics. Sometimes I think that I have a sign on my forehead written in invisible ink that says " I am a gringo, charge me more." Most of us see ticos as very giving , very mild mannered people who would do anything for you. AND , in a lot of cases this is very true. However, the one exception to this rule is the following : a Tico will almost always tell you what you want to hear. An example: you want to know if your house will be done in time for Christmas…the builder, in almost every case will say , "si, no problemo", knowing full well that there isn't the proverbial snowball's chance it will be done. Another example… you ask if you can get your yard mowed before company arrives or you can get a mechanic to complete your overhaul before Friday …same response: "si , si, no problem." The norm is no show. After a time, you begin to suspect ALL responses and begin to expect the worst. Then you never know the truth from a "lie".

It is important to remember… life here and the culture is completely different. It may not seem like it on the surface…but it is. Many can adapt to the differences without a problem…others can't. I have seen ticos literally stand in line for hours with no sign of impatience…most gringos would be crying after only an hour or two. Trust me, if you are an impatient person and you absolutely know that you cannot abiding waiting… think twice about living in Costa Rica permanently. And if you are a Type A (as I am) , believe me, it is a difficult adjustment.



While life here can be a trial much of the time, it is important to remember…at least for me…that , on balance, life is a heckuva lot better in Costa Rica, even with the problems. I prefer having to put up with a coffee wagon being driven two miles an hour or an extra couple of days waiting for my mechanic to finish his task vs. the alternatives "back home". The day that the bureaucracy becomes streamlined and people here become "efficient" is probably the day that I consider moving to another destination…but somehow I don't think that that scenario will happen in my lifetime.

It is important to remember… life here and the culture is completely different. It may not seem like it on the surface…but it is.

Random FAQ

"I have read about squatters being a problem in Costa Rica. True or false?"
Ask any Tico about squatters and you will get a blank look. The term squatters refers to the "sort of true" myth that says that anyone can "squat" or illegally inhabit someone else's land and gain ownership. The fact is: no one can gain rights to another person's land without having to go through a long and complicated legal procedure and even then it is almost unheard of. There ARE instances where people , usually the poor or illegals, will camp on someone else's land because they have no where else to go. This is common in areas where the owner may not visit his or her property for lengths of time. It is a simple matter to have someone watch your property and if someone is caught illegally camping or staying on your property…the police are called and the illegal's are escorted off. End of story.

Random FAQ

"I have heard that you cannot own property in Costa Rica…that the government leases it to you. Is this true?"

Well, indirectly. The beaches throughout the country belong to everyone. No one can own the land that fronts the ocean (in 99.99% of cases). The next 200 meters past the "high tide" mark is called the maritime zone and each municipality throughout the country cares for its own maritime zones…and leases them to individuals. While the municipality leases the land , it is bought and sold as property. There are a few more complicated rules here but suffice it to say that it is perfectly safe to lease maritime land and it has NEVER been a risk or a problem. The problems have arisen with someone breaks the municipality rules and builds too close to the ocean . Land and property in the rest of Costa Rica can be owned by anyone and he or she has fee simple ownership with no restrictions. There are different rules and regulations governing size , location , and access and a good attorney can help you with these.

" I have read horror stories about buyers of property getting swindled and downright defrauded. Can this really happen?"

Sad to say, it can and does happen. This is why a good , trustworthy attorney is totally necessary. And if you don't know one, ask for referrals . Sometimes there is fraud and it is difficult to catch. Because of the lack of governmental oversight there are a sizeable number of con men that prey on the uneducated. DON'T LET ANYONE PRESSURE YOU AND MAKE CERTAIN THAT YOU FEEL COMFORTABLE WITH YOUR PURCHASE AND THE SITUATION. IF YOU DON'T….WALK AWAY!!

Costa Rica is a very small country , about the size of West Virginia.

"is it difficult to build in Costa Rica if you have just purchased land only?"

It can be …but it can also save you tens of thousands of dollars over buying an existing home. The same types of precautions should be taken here…talk to locals and get their recommendations…ask for references…make sure that your attorney drafts and ironclad contract between you and the builder. There are several different scenarios that you can employ a builder…know your options and find the one that works best for you. Remember too, that it is necessary in all instances to go through a permitting process and the use an of architect is mandatory. Rules and more rules. Know your options.
Attorneys and professional people here are NOT the same as "back home". Do not expect your attorney to "look out" for you. Attorneys here are primarily paper pushers and glorified notaries. They may know the law but they typically keep very poor records and will not remind you of due dates and details that your attorney back home will keep track of for you. Of course, his fees will rarely exceed $25 per hour, either.

"what about my prescriptions and my medicines?"

Pharmacies here are much more than drugstores. Nearly all prescriptions can be filled by a pharmacist here unless they are mood altering or addictive. And normally a doctor is on staff for consult. Common ailments such as bronchitis, colds, grippe, and more are dealt with using common remedies and pharmacists will generally give you an injection themselves in their "back room". Medicines and prescriptions are often available generically here and most anything can be ordered or obtained within a 24 hour period. And of course, the cost is significantly less.

"will I have trouble bringing my pets into the country?"

very rarely will it be a problem.

"if I want to live in Costa Rica permanently will I need some kind of special citizenship or paperwork?"

Most retirees will qualify for residency almost automatically. Younger people intending to live here without pensions or those seeking work may have to leave the country every 90 days for a

Random FAQ

period of three days or 72 hours. The best agency for answering residency questions is ARCR or the Association of Residents in Costa Rica . See www.arcr.net This is also an area that is rife with people who say they "have connections" or can cut corners to help you gain residency. I would have to say honestly that probably half of the people that say they can do this job for you are incompetents. Ask for referrals but make sure you talk to ARCR as they have the best track record of anyone down here.

"is it a good idea to rent before buying?"

Yes, without a doubt. You can always buy a piece of property for investment but , face it, there are literally dozens of drop dead gorgeous locations for residence. It will take a little time to check them all out. You will know when you find the right one. Remember this too: over 50% over the people that buy "on the beach or very close to it" usually buy on impulse AND end up selling or moving within five years.

"are the banks safe?"

The public banks , yes. Private banks are more risky.

"are there a lot of Americans or Canadians living in Costa Rica?"

Well, depends on your definition of a lot. In Grecia, where Rhonda and I live , the number of gringos has swelled to over 500 (pop. 50,000). The more "gringoized" areas such as Santa Ana , Escazu and some beach areas are heavily gringo…but they also have the problems that come with being surrounded by others of the same interests.

Costa Rica is NOT one big jungle…and there are not huge spiders or poisonous snakes everywhere.

"there are bars on the windows everywhere. Does that mean that no one is safe?"

Actually , most of the bars and gates are purely cosmetic and are a cultural detail more than anything. In larger towns or more urban areas bars are used for protection. It is a judgment call and an individual choice.

"are the buses reliable for public transportation?"…

Amazingly enough they are extremely reliable and inexpensive. Many retirees and expats take the buses everywhere in the country as they are very inexpensive.

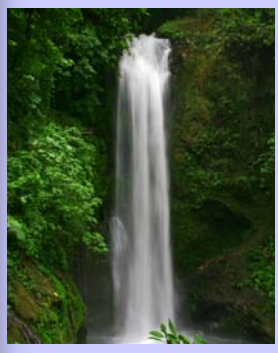
"I have heard that cars are expensive. True or false?"

There is a heavy duty on cars…thus a car that might cost $5000 in the States will cost $8-10,000 here. And remember, because there is not much for regulation for your protection when purchasing a vehicle…the natural inclination is to find the lowest price when you should be willing to spend a little more for a reliable vehicle. Ask for the name of a good mechanic to do a thorough inspection. Never rely upon a private party or car dealer to tell you the truth about the vehicle's condition.

" Can I ship my furniture here along with other household items?"

Sure, but just remember that it will cost you more than just the shipping cost. Rhonda and I purchased everything we needed here and gradually transported everything we really wanted in suitcases. Furniture can be all handmade at VERY reasonable prices and electronic goods are all available as well. There is very little , except for items that have sentimental value, that cannot be purchased here.

" Tell me about the rainy season. Does it rain all the time?"
Depending upon where you live , the average day during rainy season (which is typically June thru November in the Central Valley) has rain perhaps 1-3 hours late in the day and sometimes



Random FAQ

into the evening. Typically the day starts out sunny and then clouds up, with rain following. Great time for relaxation or a nap. Also …everything turns green again and everything grows like crazy. It is not unusual for some trees to grow 6-8 feet during rainy season.

"if I own property or a home in Costa Rica is it safe to leave it unattended for a couple months at a time?"

You wouldn't leave your home unattended "back home" would you? Just hire a local (ask for references) to watch the land or home and take care of it in your absence. It would also be prudent to have someone pay your bills while you are away.

"how much are property taxes in Costa Rica?"

If you follow your attorneys advice (and say you have land worth $100,000) …you will probably pay $100-200 per year.

"what kind of income tax will I be expected to pay in Costa Rica?"

It depends upon your situation but most likely next to nothing if you are retired.

"can I find work in Costa Rica?"

This really depends upon your situation. If you are a bartender, maybe. If you are a teacher, probably not. The rule of thumb is that you cannot take a job away from a Tico when applying for a job. However, and this is a big however, you can work if you have a business of your own and work under the auspices of a corporation. (that you own) . Check with an attorney here.

"are there opportunities to earn money in Costa Rica? How is the business climate?"

Everyone sees things differently. I personally think that Costa Rica , because of the lack of governmental controls…resembles the States in the 50s. To me , there are opportunities everywhere and everyone sees a different one.

"is the government corrupt?"

If you mean are there bribes and can certain officials be "bought", the answer is sometimes. Probably along the same lines as any other country. Bureaucrats in the right positions augment their incomes the same as they do anywhere. Policeman can be persuaded (sometimes) to rip up a speeding ticket. It happens and is part of the culture…but it should definitely not be assumed that everyone is corrupt because they are definitely not.

There are probably almost an infinite number of questions that could be posed and answered here. If any of you have specific questions that you cannot find an answer for, please email me and I will do my best to respond.

I hope that this short "white paper" has helped answer some of the questions that you might have about life in Costa Rica and what to expect. There is still a tremendous amount of misinformation and confusion that exists about life here. It is more than just lying on the beach and it is more than just simply escaping. Life here is not perfect…but for Rhonda and I, it sure beats the alternatives and , our dreams of a life in Costa Rica…could not have turned out better. Come and see for yourselves.

Hasta luego
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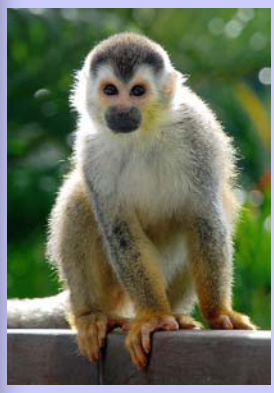
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