

## Did You Know?

- During an earthquake in 1991, the Costa Rican city of Puerto Limón rose 3 feet and never returned to its original elevation.
- In the 18th and 19th centuries, cacao beans were the official currency of Costa Rica. Cacao is native to Central America, and Costa Ricans say this is where the saying “Money grows on trees” comes from.
- Costa Ricans have two last names, but they are usually referred to by their “first” last name.
- Costa Rica was the first country in the Americas to declare war on Germany in World War II. Hitler never attacked Costa Rica, and people joked that it was because he couldn’t find the country because a squashed fly was covering it on his map.
- In parts of Costa Rica, people have found ancient stone spheres, some of which are as tall as 6 feet, weighing as much as 16 tons. The balls are perfectly round, and no one knows who made them or why. Some think they may have been used to predict the best planting seasons.
- A Costa Rican saxophonist set the world record for holding a musical note. He held a note on his saxophone for 90 minutes and 45 seconds, almost doubling the previous record.
- In 2008, three new species of salamander were discovered in Costa Rica’s rain forests, including the dwarf salamander, which is small enough to fit on a person’s fingernail. There are now over 40 known species of salamander in Costa Rica.
- Costa Rica took home its first Olympic medal in 1988, when Sylvia Poll Ahrens won the silver medal in freestyle swimming. In 1996, her sister Claudia, also a swimmer, won Costa Rica’s first gold medal.

## Flag

The flag of Costa Rica was most recently adopted on 21 October 1964. Blue represents the sky. White stands for clear thinking, happiness, wisdom, and power. Red represents the warmth of the Costa Rican people, their love for life, their blood given for freedom, and their generous ways. Costa Rica’s national emblem is shown on the red stripe.



## National Image

Most Costa Ricans would say that the country’s unofficial motto is *Pura Vida*. Literally, it means “pure life,” but it’s often used to answer the question “How are you?” It can also sum up many Costa Ricans’ attitude toward life. This phrase is heard throughout Costa Rica, and there are many restaurants, shops, and hotels named after it.



## People and Places

### Land and Climate

Area (sq. mi.)  
19,730  
Area (sq. km.)  
51,100

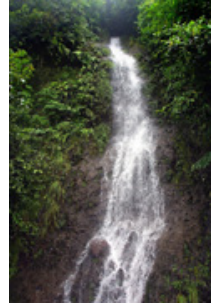
Costa Rica is about the size of Bosnia and Herzegovina or the state of West Virginia. About half of Costa Rica is covered by different types of forests. Within the borders of this small nation, you can find tropical rain forests, mountain *cloud forests* (forests high in the mountains that are almost always covered in mist), volcanoes, flat plains, and rivers. Costa Rica has more species of plants and animals per square mile than almost any other country. Costa Rica is part of the *ring of fire*, a group of volcanoes in the Pacific. There are about a hundred volcanoes in Costa Rica, but most are *dormant* (inactive) or extinct. Several of the active ones have erupted in the last century, and they cause frequent earthquakes.

Although Costa Rica has a tropical climate, temperatures are often cooler in the mountains. The areas with lower elevations are hot and humid. Most people live in areas where the climate is generally mild. Some parts of Costa Rica receive over 12 feet (366 cm) of rain each year. Because it rains so much, Costa Ricans have about 12 different words for rain—one of the most creative is *pelo de gato* (cat's fur), which is a very soft rain.

### Population

Population  
4,814,144

Most Costa Ricans live in the center of the country. The majority of the population has European ancestry. A smaller percentage is *mestizo*, meaning they can trace their ancestry back to both Europeans and *indigenous* peoples (the native Costa Ricans living in the area before the Spanish arrived). A few Costa Ricans have African heritage, most of them descendants of people who came from the Caribbean to help build Costa Rica's railroad. African Costa Ricans live mainly on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean and have developed their own unique culture there. Today, Costa Ricans with *indigenous* ancestry are often treated unfairly and were only granted official citizenship in 1991. Recently Costa Rica's *indigenous* peoples have established their own bank and called for more rights and equality in society.



**Language**

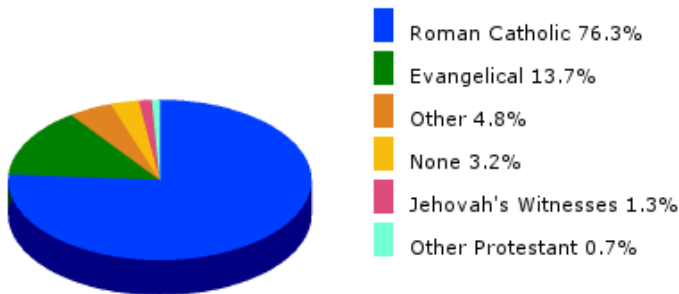
Spanish is the official language of Costa Rica. Costa Ricans call themselves *ticos*. In Costa Rican Spanish, to describe something small or cute, *-tico* is added to the end of the word. Most other Spanish speakers add *-tito*. So instead of saying *chico* (small) or *chiquitito* (very small), Costa Ricans say *chiquitico*. This has become a trademark of Costa Rican Spanish. English is the second most common language and is taught in many public schools. Most of the languages that were once spoken by native Costa Ricans are no longer used, but a few are still spoken. Bribri is a common native language, and some schools teach in both Bribri and Spanish. Most of the people who speak native languages also speak Spanish. Costa Ricans are warm and friendly when they speak. It is common for people to call each other by nicknames. People often call each other *mi amor* (my love), which to them it is just a way of being friendly.



**Can You Say It in Spanish?**

Hello	<i>Hola</i>	(OH-lah)
Good-bye	<i>Adiós</i>	(ah-dee-OHS)
Please	<i>Por favor</i>	(POHR fah-VOHR)
Thank you	<i>Gracias</i>	(GRAH-see-ahs)
Yes	<i>Sí</i>	(see)
No	<i>No</i>	(noh)

**Religion**




Source: *The World Factbook 2016. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2016.*

Missionaries brought Roman Catholicism to Costa Rica in the 1500s, and it has been the main religion ever since. Though not all members attend church services regularly, the Catholic Church is an important influence on Costa Rican culture, attitudes, and history. A lot of Costa Ricans' favorite holidays come from Catholicism, and many villages and towns are named after Catholic saints. Although Catholicism is Costa Rica's official religion, the constitution promises all citizens the freedom to practice whichever religion they choose. Some Costa Ricans belong to other Christian churches, and some native Costa Ricans practice their own tribal religions.

# History

## Time Line

1000 BC	
1000 BC	The first villages are established by a variety of different groups in what is now Costa Rica
1500	
1502	The first Europeans, led by Christopher Columbus, visit Costa Rica
	
1524	Francisco Fernández de Córdova establishes the first Spanish colony in Costa Rica, which lasts less than three years
1561	Juan de Cavallón founds Castillo de Garcimuñoz, the first successful Spanish settlement in Costa Rica
1700	
1723	Irazú Volcano erupts and destroys the city of Cartago
1800	
1808	Coffee is brought to Costa Rica from Cuba; it soon becomes Costa Rica's main crop
	
1821	Following rebellions against Spanish rule, Central America achieves independence from Spain
1823	After a short civil war, Costa Rica becomes part of the United Provinces of Central America, which also includes Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador
1824	Costa Rica's first president, Juan Mora Fernández, is elected
1838	Costa Rica leaves the United Provinces of Central America to become an independent nation

1856	Costa Rica leads the fight against William Walker, an American attempting to take control of Costa Rica with a private army after declaring himself president of Nicaragua	
1870	Tomás Guardia establishes a military <i>dictatorship</i> (absolute rule); during his rule he develops Costa Rica's health care and education systems and builds a railroad to improve the transport of goods	
1871	Minor Keith, an American businessman, begins to grow bananas in Costa Rica, and the fruit becomes one of the country's main <i>exports</i> (goods sold to another country)	
1900		
1924	Guanacaste (an area on the northern Pacific Coast) becomes part of Costa Rica	
1948	A six-week civil war breaks out over presidential election results; Jose Figueres does away with the military in order to invest money in education	
1949	A new constitution grants women and Costa Ricans of African descent the right to vote	
1963	Irazú Volcano erupts again and damages much of the surrounding farmland	
1979	Costa Rica's neighbor Nicaragua is taken over by a group called the Sandinistas; this begins years of fighting in Nicaragua, but Costa Rica stays neutral, refusing to take sides	
1987	Costa Rican president Óscar Arias Sánchez helps establish an agreement to settle conflicts in Central America; Arias wins the Nobel Peace Prize for his part in the agreement	
1991	Costa Rica's <i>indigenous</i> (native) peoples are granted official citizenship	
2000		
2003	The government's plans to <i>privatize</i> certain businesses (make it so they are no longer run by the government) cause strikes among workers who are worried about their jobs	

2005 Costa Rica's Caribbean coast experiences heavy flooding; Costa Rica declares it a national emergency



2010 Laura Chinchilla becomes the first female president of Costa Rica



PRESENT

### European Discovery and Colonization

When Columbus landed on the coast of Costa Rica in 1502, he found a green land of rain forests, mountains, and volcanoes. The native peoples who greeted him were friendly and, even more interesting to the Spanish, they wore gold jewelry. Although Columbus stayed for only 17 days, he named the area Costa Rica (meaning, "rich coast"), assuming that the gold the natives wore was found nearby. When the Spanish returned four years later, the welcome was not as friendly. The Spanish left soon after the local people launched attacks. Later on, other groups tried to start colonies in Costa Rica, but they also failed.



Finally, in 1563, the Spanish established the city of Cartago near the center of the country. At first they searched for the gold that had lured them there, but soon they realized that there was hardly any to be found. The native peoples had traded with tribes from other areas to get it. Since there wasn't any gold, many Europeans lost interest in Costa Rica and returned to Spain. A few stayed in Costa Rica and farmed the land. Although the native peoples nearby fought to keep the Spanish away, the colonists, who had more people and stronger weapons, won in the end. The Spanish also brought diseases that the native peoples had never been exposed to before, and many of the local people died from sicknesses.

Even though the Spanish colonists won control of certain parts of Costa Rica, most of the local peoples lived far from the Spanish colonies. In many ways, Costa Rica was ignored by Spain because it didn't possess gold or other resources that the Spanish were looking for in Central America. The native Costa Ricans were not as affected by colonization as some of the other countries in Central America. When Costa Rica's neighbors began to rebel against Spain's control, Costa Rica was pulled along even though most Costa Ricans weren't as upset by Spain's presence as a lot of their neighbors were.

## Independence

In 1821, Mexico gained its freedom from Spain. Soon after, the nations of Central America became independent as well. These new nations joined together to form a single country called the United Provinces of Central America. The new country didn't last long. Costa Rica left in 1838 to become independent. Soon the remaining countries began to fight over borders and power. The United Provinces broke apart in 1840.

Around this time, coffee was *exported* (sold to other countries) from Costa Rica for the first time. It became very popular in Europe. Although coffee brought in a lot of money for Costa Rica, the industry was run mostly by foreigners and a few wealthy Costa Ricans. Most Costa Ricans were still poor. By 1870 many were growing tired of the wealthy few who ran the coffee industry and their growing power over the country. General Tomás Guardia gained control of the country and began a military *dictatorship* (absolute rule). He changed the way Costa Rica's government was run, reduced the power of people in the coffee industry, and developed Costa Rica's health care and education systems. He also built a railroad to transport coffee through the thick jungle to different parts of the country. Eventually the idea of *democracy* (government by the people) became popular among Costa Ricans, and the first free elections were held in 1890.



## Democracy and Peace

Costa Rica became a *democracy* (government by the people) with the 1890 elections. Both poor and rich Costa Ricans voted in the first elections, although women and blacks would not be able to vote until 1949. Costa Rica also did away with its military, showing the value that Costa Ricans place on peace and marking the beginning of Costa Rica's *neutrality* (the decision not to take sides) in disagreements between other countries.

In 1979, Costa Rica's neighbor Nicaragua was taken over by a group called the Sandinistas. This began years of fighting in Nicaragua, but Costa Rica refused to take sides in the conflict and in other civil wars going on in Central America. Eventually it was Costa Rica's president Oscar Arias Sánchez who helped establish a peace agreement to end fighting in other Central American countries. Sánchez won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987 for his part in this important agreement. Costa Rica has mostly managed to avoid wars, which have badly damaged many of the countries around it. The people are proud of their *democracy*.



## Protecting the Environment

Costa Rica's environment is an important part of the country's economy because it attracts tourists and provides natural resources that the country depends on. There are also many plants and animals that are found only in Costa Rica's rain forests. It is important to Costa Ricans and the rest of the world that these species don't become extinct. In the 1990s, Costa Rica's rain forests were threatened by too many visitors, illegal hunting, *deforestation* (clearing forests to make way for crops and cities), and toxic waste. Now Costa Rica is working to find a balance between using the environment's resources and protecting them so that they don't run out.



In 2007, the government announced that it plans to be one of the world's first carbon-neutral countries. By 2021, Costa Rica hopes to be able to make up for the carbon dioxide it releases into the air by doing things like using energy that doesn't pollute, planting more trees, and driving *hybrid cars* that use two or more different sources of power to move. The Costa Rican government has also set aside about 25 percent of the country as nature reserves.

## Lifestyle

### Games and Sports

Like most of Latin America, Costa Rica is a nation of soccer fans. Most Costa Ricans enjoy both watching and playing. Every town has at least one soccer team, and big cities have soccer stadiums where professional teams play. Costa Rica's most popular soccer teams are Saprissa, from San José, and La Liga, from Alajuela. On game nights, you can hear shouting from bars (from people watching on TVs inside) and car horns honking (from people listening on their car radios) whenever a team scores a goal. Neighborhoods ring with the same yells whenever a goal is scored in a local pick-up match.



In addition to soccer, people like to play basketball and volleyball. Costa Ricans also enjoy spending time at the beach, where they surf, swim, and fish. Surfers come from all over the world to surf on Costa Rica's waves. Whitewater river rafting is becoming popular too, and international competitions are sometimes held on Costa Rica's rivers. Kids love to roller-skate on the weekends and still use four-wheeled skates.

### Holidays

Many Costa Rican holidays are Catholic. Even Costa Ricans who aren't very religious participate in Christian holidays like Christmas and Easter. Preparation starts weeks before as people decorate their homes and buy presents for one another. In San José there are fireworks, bullfights, and festivals during the week of Christmas. Each family sets up a nativity either underneath the Christmas tree or on a table. They wait until Christmas Eve to add the baby Jesus. On Christmas Eve, families gather together for a special meal of *tamales* (cornmeal dough stuffed with a filling) or a barbecue. Adults open their presents on Christmas Eve, and then children hurry to bed so that Santa Claus can bring their presents. Costa Rican kids believe that their Christmas presents are from baby Jesus. Since he is too small to deliver them, Santa Claus brings them for him.



*Semana Santa* (Holy Week) occurs the week before Easter and is a huge holiday in Costa Rica. There are parades throughout the country all week long, and every family who can afford to goes to the beach on vacation that week. They usually stay all the way through Easter Sunday. The capital city of San Jose looks like a ghost town during this week, because so many people are away celebrating.

One of Costa Rica's native tribes, the Boruca, celebrates the *Fiesta de los Diablitos* (Festival of the Little Devils). Versions of this festival are also held in other Latin American countries that were colonized by Spain. One man is chosen to represent the Spanish. He dresses himself as a bull, wearing a homemade costume. The villagers play the "devils," representing the native peoples in Costa Rica. At midnight, some of the villagers gather at the top of a hill to play lively music and taunt the bull. They continue to tease the bull for three days, while they go from house to house and are given food and drink. The festival comes to an end when the devils pretend to kill the bull. This festival retells the story of Spain's colonization of Costa Rica, but the Costa Ricans add a twist at the end—this time the local peoples defeat the Spanish.



## Food

Costa Rican food is simple but flavorful and filling. Rice and beans are eaten with most meals. Breakfast is usually a dish called *gallo pinto* (spotted rooster). It is made of beans, rice, onions, peppers, and spices. *Casado* (married man) is also common and can include meat or fish, fried *plantains* (a starchy banana-like fruit that people cook before eating), eggs, chopped vegetables, lettuce, rice, and beans. Along Costa Rica's Caribbean coast, the food is spicier and coconut milk is a common ingredient. *Rondon* is a vegetable stew made by combining coconut milk, meat or fish, plantains, and *breadfruit* (a member of the fig family). The stew is then cooked for many hours.



Fresh fruit is plentiful and is a big part of the Costa Rican diet. Many people make *refresco natural* for breakfast or a snack. They make it by putting fresh fruit in a blender, straining out the pulp, and then adding water and sugar. *Refresco natural* is always served with *casado* or other homemade meals.

Native Costa Ricans use corn, their most common crop, to make tortillas, *tamales* (cornmeal dough stuffed with a filling), and even *horchata* (a milky drink flavored with sugar and cinnamon). Coffee is a popular drink too, since coffee beans are one of Costa Rica's biggest *exports* (goods sold to other countries).

## Schools

Adult Literacy  
98%

Education is very important to Costa Ricans. They are proud that their first president was a teacher, and they sometimes boast that Costa Rica has more teachers than police officers. Students are responsible for keeping their schools clean. A different class each week stays after to clean the school instead of having a janitor or cleaning person do the work. Costa Rican schools also offer free daily lunch and sometimes breakfast, so children who come from poor families are guaranteed at least one good meal a day. The Costa Rican government spends a higher percentage of its money on schools than most countries, and education is free up until college. Many families receive government scholarships to make it possible for them to send their kids to school.



Students must come to school in a uniform, which includes a special shirt, pants for the boys, skirts for the girls, shoes, and socks. They must bring their own pens, pencils, paper, crayons, scissors, and other supplies. Transportation is expensive if they need to take the bus. Public universities like the University of Costa Rica are also free. Kids are required to attend school from ages five to fourteen. Kids start the school year in February and finish in December, with a two-week break at the beginning of July. English is taught in almost all schools. Many kids learn to read and write in English, though they don't get much practice speaking.

Schools in the cities can be very different from schools in the countryside. In the countryside, sometimes one teacher will teach kids of many different ages at the same time in the same classroom. They may study math, Spanish, science, and social studies. In city schools, kids usually have more choices of subjects to study, like geography, history, science, music, physical education, religion, and art. After high school, many Costa Ricans decide to go to college. Before they apply, students take a test that determines what kind of college they can go to.

## Life as a Kid

Life is very different for kids who live in the city and kids who live in the countryside. Usually kids from the countryside have less money and spend more time helping their families earn a living. They may have to travel farther to get to school and get there by walking or biking. In the cities, kids usually walk to school, take a public bus, or get a ride with their parents. There are no school buses that go around to pick kids up; it is the kids' responsibility to get there.

After school, kids like to watch TV or play video games if they have them. They also like to play soccer and other sports. Some kids play on sports teams. Others play with their friends in any open spaces they can find. Most kids share a bedroom with their brothers or sisters, and houses are usually quite small. Older siblings are responsible for helping with the younger ones, and often three or four generations of a family live in the same home or on the same property.



## Society

### Government

Capital

San José

Head of State

President Luis Guillermo Solís

Head of Government

President Luis Guillermo Solís



Costa Rica's government is divided into three parts, or branches. The president, two vice presidents, and the *cabinet* (a group of counselors that help the president) lead the *executive* branch, which is in charge of running the country. The president must be elected with at least 40 percent of the votes. If none of the people running for president get enough votes, then another election is held between the top two candidates. The *legislative* branch makes the laws. Costa Rica's *legislature* (lawmaking body), the *Asamblea Legislativa*, has 57 members, who are elected by the people every four years. The *judicial* branch includes courts and judges, who decide if the laws follow the constitution. The voting age is 18.

Even though the law says that everyone who is old enough must vote, this law is not enforced. To vote, Costa Ricans travel to the town where they were born. In the days before the election, there are celebrations with people waving their candidate's flag and enjoying their right to choose those who will govern their nation.

## Money and Economy

Currency  
Costa Rican colón



Costa Rica has the strongest economy in Central America. Agriculture is a big part of its economy, and bananas, coffee, and beef are important *exports* (goods sold to other countries). Costa Rica also produces and *exports* processed foods, computer parts, and fabrics. Tourism is an important part of the Costa Rican economy. A new kind of tourism, called *ecotourism*, is growing. Ecotourists not only want to see Costa Rica's scenery and wildlife, but they also try to help preserve the areas they are visiting. They make sure that the money they spend helps local people. Costa Rica's currency was named after Cristóbal Colón, or Christopher Columbus.

## Getting Around

In cities, people depend on buses, taxis, and cars to get around. Buses or cars are used to travel between cities. In the countryside, some people travel on horseback or in carts pulled by horses. Others drive cars or walk. On the coasts, many people ride bikes to get around. Costa Rican highways reach almost all cities and towns. Most roads are paved, but some are in poor condition. Earthquakes, floods, and rain sometimes damage roads. A 1991 earthquake damaged the road to Puerto Limón so badly that no one could reach the city for days. Motorcycles are a very common form of transportation. They don't cost as much to run and are an easy way to get around major traffic in the cities. It is not uncommon to see a whole family squished onto one motorcycle.



## Culture Facts & Contacts

### Payasos

At many Costa Rican celebrations, people like to watch *cimarronas* (small bands that play lively music) and *payasos* (people wearing masks and colorful clothes, similar to clowns). The masks of the *payasos* are usually made from papier-mâché. They might be made to look like something scary (such as the devil or a witch), a *gigante* or *giganta* (giant or giantess), or even a famous celebrity. While the *cimarronas* play music on their way down the street, the *payasos* follow along, dancing and trying to make people laugh. In some cities, there are competitions between different groups of *cimarronas* and *payasos*. After the performance, the audience votes to decide which group was the best. Costa Ricans may hire *cimarronas* and *payasos* for birthday parties, weddings, and other celebrations.

### Learn More

Contact the Embassy of Costa Rica, 2114 S Street NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 480-2200. Or contact the Costa Rica Tourist Board, phone (866) COSTA RICA; web site [www.visitcostarica.com](http://www.visitcostarica.com).

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# Costa Rica



The Barra Honda National Park has a large network of underground caves. Only 19 of the caves have been explored, but the deepest so far is 790 feet (240 m).

At its narrowest point, Costa Rica is just 74 miles (119 km) across.

Costa Rica is home to about 360,000 species of insects, 127 species of snakes, and 870 species of birds.

Cerro Chirripó is Costa Rica's highest mountain; the top is usually hidden by clouds.

