Costa Rica

Overview

AIG Travel rates Costa Rica as a LOW threat location; despite rising levels of crime, few other security concerns present serious risks.

Costa Rica is a Central American nation bordered by Nicaragua in the north and Panama to the south, as well as the Caribbean Sea on its eastern coast and the Pacific Ocean to the west. The country has a population of about 4.9 million people, the vast majority of them identifying as white or mestizo. The population is most concentrated in the center of the country with about 2.1 million people living in the capital San Jose and its metropolitan area. The landscape is marked by two high, central mountain chains which both run from north to south, low coastal regions and heavily forested jungle regions. Costa Rica hosts a stable democracy, a rich biodiversity and an established ecotourism industry, three factors which attract millions of tourists annually.

Although overall levels of crime are generally lower in Costa Rica than in most Central American countries, the country is currently experiencing increasing levels of crime. This is largely attributed to the activities of drug cartels, namely the Sinaloa cartel based in Mexico, which operates in Costa Rica. Levels of both petty and violent crimes have risen in recent years, with the most notable increase taking place in large urban centers such as the capital San Jose as well as the cities of Liberia and Limon. However, petty crime is a higher concern for travelers than violent crime. Kidnapping is an additional concern in the country, and express kidnappings in particular have been increasingly reported especially in large cities including San Jose and Liberia. Kidnap for ransom cases pose a smaller concern, although they are prevalent in northern areas of the country. Most kidnap for ransom cases are solved by security forces.

Costa Rica is considered a stable democracy, but faces issues of corruption and growing economic disparity. President elect Carlos Alvarado Quesada has vowed to fight these and other issues, but because his party has a minority in the National Legislature, these reforms may take some time to be enacted. Protests and demonstrations occur frequently in Costa Rica, often over political and economic developments, although these events typically pass peacefully. Labor strikes are also common and have the potential to disrupt a multitude of public and private sectors.

Infrastructure in large cities is well developed and maintained, but infrastructure is severely limited in more rural areas of the country. Many roadways lack proper signage and adequate lighting in more remote areas of Costa Rica, and internet access is not widely available in these locations. However, internet and cellular service are widely available in larger cities and resort towns.

Costa Rica may be affected by hurricanes and other tropical storm systems during the annual North Atlantic
and Pacific hurricane seasons, which generally run from June to November. This timeframe runs almost simultaneously with the country’s rainy season that lasts from May to October, and resulting rains often cause widespread flooding and landslides, especially in more remote areas of Costa Rica.

**Political conditions**

**Political**

- **The government in Costa Rica is stable and political risk is LOW as there are no foreseeable events that could affect the political environment.**

The government of Costa Rica is generally considered the most stable and democratic government of the region. It is defined as a presidential representative democratic republic and has a multi-party system. Costa Rica’s government is divided into three branches: executive, legislative and judicial. The executive branch is comprised of a president and two vice presidents as well as the president’s cabinet. The president is required to renounce partisanship upon taking office and cannot promote legislation. Legislative powers are exercised by the unicameral Legislative Assembly, which has 57 seats that are currently occupied by representatives of seven different political parties. This spread of power among parties can pose some difficulties in passing legislation, as a large number of viewpoints are represented in the National Assembly. Finally, the judicial branch is composed of the Supreme Court of Justice that includes 22 magistrates.

The current president is Luis Guillermo Solis of the center-left citizen Action Party (PAC) who was inaugurated in May 2014 after running on an anti-corruption platform. However, little has been accomplished during his presidency toward this goal due to the small number of seats held by the PAC in the National Assembly and the subsequent difficulty of passing legislation in a diverse government body. The current vice presidents are Helio Fallas Venegas and Ana Helena Chacon Echeverria of the PAC. Guillermo Solis will be replaced in early May 2018 by President-elect Carlos Alvarado Quesada, also of the PAC, following April 2018 second-round presidential elections.

Former government minister and singer Carlos Alvarado won the vote partially on promises to respect a controversial court ruling in favor of same-sex marriage. He pledged to enforce the January 2018 ruling from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, while his opponent ran on promises to withdraw Costa Rica from the court’s jurisdiction. The pledge led to Fabricio Alvarado’s first-round win, but Carlos Alvarado extended his popularity by promising to boost national security by increasing police funding. He also ran a campaign promising fiscal reform and anti-corruption measures. Rising unemployment nationwide additionally boosted the president-elect’s support as he previously served as labor and social security minister under outgoing President Luis Guillermo Solis. The election results is likely to improve overall national political stability as PAC will maintain power and the country is not expected under Carlos Alvarado to distance from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

The second round of April 2018 presidential elections followed February 2018 general elections that led to significant changes in the Legislative Assembly. While the socialist National Liberation Party maintained its plurality in the vote, the largest change was a 13-seat gain by the right-wing and evangelical-oriented National Restoration Party (PRN). The PRN is now the second largest party amid reaction primarily in rural areas against a controversial international court ruling in favor of same-sex marriage. While the PRN ran on a campaign to significantly refocus national laws, heavy partisanship in the new legislature is likely to prevent much progress by ay party in the long-term. The ruling PAC lost seats in the vote to become the third largest group in the Legislative Assembly.

**Economy**

Costa Rica’s economy is considered strong in relation to neighboring countries, due largely to a regionally-relative strong services sector. It also performs well in both industry and agriculture; the nation is now a large producer of technology hardware, including microchips and semiconductors and is also a net
agricultural exporter. The nation is attempting to diversify its economy and draw greater foreign investment in order to reduce dependence on tourist dollars. These efforts have already seen a great deal of success as the economy grew about 4.3 percent in both 2016 and in 2017. More modest growth is expected in 2018.

Despite continued GDP growth the nation suffers from high levels of poverty with nearly a fifth of the country living in poverty. The government has invested heavily in dozens of anti-poverty programs in recent years with little effect. However, there was a reduction in extreme poverty in 2017 due to a complex set of factors, including regional migration and increased employment opportunities in rural areas. Inflation remains a significant problem in the country, and tariffs on basic food staples such as milk and potatoes disproportionately disadvantage the poor. In addition, the large influx of immigrants from neighboring countries has strained the country’s social welfare system.

**Territorial disputes**

Costa Rica has been engaged in a series of long-standing territorial disputes with Nicaragua that may face resolution in 2018. In February 2018 the United Nations’ International Court of Justice ruled that Nicaragua must vacate a military installation on Isla Portillos in northeastern Costa Rica along the San Juan River separating the two countries. Nicaragua was granted a lagoon in the area by the panel of 15 judges but was ordered to pay a fine to Costa Rica for environmental damages caused by a military dredging operation begun in 2014. The court also drew a new maritime map handing control of possible offshore oil deposits to Costa Rica. Both countries claimed victory in the case, which has been disputed since 2002. The judgment is not expected to spark significant protests in either country, but political disagreements in working out the court decision may occur throughout 2018. These tensions are unlikely to escalate to armed conflict, as Costa Rica has stated on multiple occasions that it would prefer to resolve all conflict through international courts and justice systems.

**Corruption**

- Corruption is of MODERATE risk in Costa Rica and can be found in the government and security forces.

Despite being considered one of the least corrupt countries in the region, Costa Rica has faced numerous corruption scandals in recent years and struggles with corruption, primarily at the political level and in the police force. One recent example of possible corruption among high-ranking officials involves a December 2017 report by a special commission investigating graft among lawmakers. The report accused President Solis of corruption through his direct actions in fast-tracking a legal process allegedly favoring a large domestic industrial company in a foreign imports deal. The report also named other politicians and business leaders involved in the scandal that is likely to end in mid-2018 prosecutions.

Security forces in Costa Rica also demonstrate moderate levels of corruption. Police are occasionally accused of having ties to criminal gangs and working in collusion with such organizations to commit crimes. However, the solicitation of bribes is the most common form of corruption among security forces.

The non-governmental organization, Transparency International, responsible for monitoring global corruption levels issued a Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) for 2017 measuring levels of perceived corruption globally. Report scores range from a scale of 0 to 100, with 0 indicating highly corrupt and 100 indicating little corruption. The report gave Costa Rica a score of 59 and ranked the country 38 out of the 180 countries and territories assessed, indicating Costa Rica has a moderate level of corruption. The country received a lower corruption rating than all of its regional neighbors. The score reflects little change in perceived levels of corruption, after the country received a rating of 58 in 2016.

**Security issues**
General crime

- Crime in Costa Rica is a HIGH threat due to growing levels of crime, kidnapping and growing drug trafficking activity, especially in larger urban centers.

Individuals in Costa Rica face the risk of petty, violent, drug-related and financial crimes. Petty crime poses the greatest risk to individuals in country, with instances of pick-pocketing, bag-snatching and the theft of unattended items posing the biggest risks to travelers. In addition, the U.S. Department of State recognizes Costa Rica as one of the top three countries in which U.S. passport theft occurs; this trend is apparent for other foreign passports as well. These crimes are prevalent in large urban areas and pose an elevated concern on public transportation and near heavy traffic areas, such as commercial centers, transportation hubs and tourist-centric areas including beaches and national parks. In January 2018 criminals robbed a tourist bus at gunpoint in Tortuguero, Limon Province, illustrating the threat of crime to travelers on public transportation. Petty crime rates rose nationally both in 2016 and in 2017. Maintaining vigilance, keeping a low profile and restricting street-level movements at nighttime hours can mitigate the risk posed by petty crimes. Rates of automobile theft and of the theft of goods from unattended vehicles rose significantly in 2017. Such crimes are most likely to occur on weekends and in the capital city. Avoiding unsecured street parking and keeping valuables on person can mitigate the risk of these crimes. There is a notable increase in invasions and robberies of residences and hotels during the holiday season, which occurs annually from November to January.

Violent crime is not committed on the same scale nationally as in neighboring Central American countries; however, it is important to note that violence does pose a concern and there has been a significant upward trend in recent years. Crimes such as armed robberies and sexual assaults are more common, and there have been growing instances of individuals being held up by armed groups when traveling from the capital’s Norman Y. Mineta San Jose International Airport (KSJC/SJC). Petty crimes, such as bag-snatching, can also turn violent when the victim attempts to resist and is subsequently attacked by the criminal. The homicide rate is also growing in Costa Rica despite shrinking rates in all other Central American countries. The rate has risen significantly from 2014 – 2017; however, few of these crimes target foreign travelers, and the primary reason for the growth of violent crime is a worsening trend of private debt collection and revenge killings. Most violent crimes occur in the provinces of San Jose, Limon and Alajuela. Within the capital, the city center, Pavas and La Uruca experience the most significant rates of violent crime. In January 2018 national police indicated plans to substantially increase their ranks by 1,000 people or 15 percent by mid-2018 following a fourth year of rising murders and other crimes in 2017.

The secondary reason Costa Rica faces growing violent crimes is related to the increase of drug-related activity and the growing presence of international criminal organizations such as Mexico’s Sinaloa drug cartel. The Sinaloa cartel’s growing presence in Costa Rica indicates that the country is evolving from a transit point along the drug trade to a prominent stopover and regrouping region for drug traffickers. Costa Rica does not have a strong security presence along its borders, facilitating illicit transnational activity. Increased drug trafficking in the country exacerbates crime levels, as these organizations frequently engage in criminal activity to fund their operations. An increase in drug-related crime nationwide presents a risk to travelers.

Regarding financial crimes, credit card fraud is also a concern in Costa Rica. This crime is often committed in larger urban centers where credit cards are more widely accepted and used. Credit card information is usually obtained by fixtures installed on ATMs or credit card scanners. Financial scams are also a concern for the traveler. In late December 2017 police arrested two men targeting tourists in both currency change fraud and double charging cases in a San Jose marketplace.

Terrorism
• Terrorism is not a significant threat and of LOW risk in Costa Rica, as there are no known domestic or international terror groups that operate in the country.

The risk from terrorism in Costa Rica is rated as low. There are no known terrorist groups operating in the country, and there are no recognized threats stemming from any regional or international terrorist group. It is important to note, however, that because Costa Rica’s borders are porous, it is possible for international drug trafficking organizations such as Mexico’s Sinaloa Cartel to easily transit shipments through the country.

Civil unrest

• Civil unrest is of MODERATE risk as strikes and protests are common in Costa Rica. Such actions frequently prompt localized travel inconveniences, although accompanying violence is rare.

Protests and labor strikes occur frequently in Costa Rica, although they are generally conducted in a non-violent fashion. Most actions cause localized traffic disruptions and can create significant overland delays, with protesters often blocking main roads and thoroughfares. Demonstrations are generally related to economic or political developments within the country, and are most often staged in central portions of the capital San Jose, typically near government buildings and installations. Actions are generally planned well in advance and are highly publicized. However, unions and other organizations do engage in unplanned strikes and demonstrations, often resulting in widespread travel disruptions.

Violence at events occurs rarely, and security forces are known to respond harshly to incidents of violence, often using water cannons and tear gas to disperse crowds when required. Additionally, tensions at political demonstrations are usually heightened, and there is an increased potential of clashes between opposition and pro-government groups.

In one recent example of demonstrations, several hundred supporters of various social groups blocked streets around the educational ministry in December 2017 in protest of social and educational changes to school curriculum. Also in December 2017, supporters of various medical and educational unions carried out several days of protests over pay disputes causing significantly reduced services in national schools and hospitals. Such protest actions can potentially affect travelers in country.

Kidnapping

• Kidnapping in general is of LOW risk in Costa Rica, although express kidnapping is of growing concern.

There is a low threat from kidnapping in Costa Rica, with incidents occurring less frequently than in other Latin American countries. However, kidnap for ransom cells do operate in Costa Rica’s northern border regions, particularly in the San Carlos and Guanacaste areas. Such cases usually are related to drug-trafficking groups. Kidnapping may also target businesspeople. In late November 2017 a national businessman was kidnapped by an unknown criminal group and held for ransom before being killed. However, such incidents are relatively rare compared to other regional countries.

The number of reported express kidnappings is a growing concern in the country. This opportunistic form of kidnapping involves assailants temporarily abducting victims and forcing them to withdraw money from ATMs either until funds run out or credit/debit cards have reached their maximum withdrawal limits. Express kidnapping gangs tend to operate in groups of two or three and incidents are usually initiated near outdoor ATMs. It is important to note that taxi drivers sometimes work in collusion with express kidnapping gangs to deliver victims. Express kidnappings are almost exclusively carried out in large Costa Rican urban centers, such as the capital San Jose as well as the city of Liberia. Criminals often abduct their victims during the evening hours, although express kidnappings can occur during at any time of the day and in any area or
neighborhood of large cities. Individuals can mitigate the risk of express kidnappings by restricting ATM usage to daytime hours and in secure areas, such as guarded bank vestibules.

Travel logistics

Entering the country

**Entry Requirements**

- Individuals entering Costa Rica are required to have a passport that is valid for a minimum of one day from the day you enter Costa Rica. The three month requirement applies to nationals of the U.S. as well as most European, Central and South American countries. All other individuals must have a passport that is valid for six months after arriving in Costa Rica.
- Passport carrying nationals of the following countries are allowed to stay in the country for up to 90 days with no visa: most western European countries, Argentina, Canada, Israel, Japan, Panama and the U.S. Citizens of Australia, Iceland, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, Russia, South Africa and Venezuela are allowed to stay for 30 days with no visa. Citizens from other countries require a visa from a Costa Rican Embassy or Consulate.
- Individuals are required to arrive in Costa Rica with sufficient funds to cover their stays, and a return or onward ticket will be required, demonstrating intention to leave the country.
- Costa Rican law requires visitors to carry their stamped passports at all times while in the country.
- Individuals arriving from a destination where Yellow fever is present are required to present an updated Yellow fever vaccination certificate.
- Recommended vaccinations include Hepatitis A and B, Typhoid, Rabies and Yellow Fever. These vaccinations are in addition to routine vaccines, including measles-mumps-rubella, diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis, varicella, polio and annual flu shot.

Political/Security Risks

AIG Travel rates Costa Rica as a LOW threat location; despite rising levels of crime, few other security concerns present serious risks.

- The government in Costa Rica is stable and political risk is LOW as there are no foreseeable events that could affect the political environment.
- Corruption is of MODERATE risk in Costa Rica and can be found in the government and security forces.
- Crime in Costa Rica is a HIGH threat due to growing levels of crime, kidnapping and growing drug trafficking activity, especially in larger urban centers.
- Terrorism is not a significant threat and of LOW risk in Costa Rica, as there are no known domestic or international terror groups that operate in the country.
- Civil unrest is of MODERATE risk as strikes and protests are common in Costa Rica. Such actions frequently prompt localized travel inconveniences, although accompanying violence is rare.
- Kidnapping in general is of LOW risk in Costa Rica, although express kidnapping is of growing concern.

Infrastructure

Infrastructure in Costa Rica is largely underdeveloped and of MODERATE risk. Road infrastructure in large cities such as the capital San Jose is adequate.
• Although infrastructure has repeatedly been flagged as a priority by the government, infrastructural upgrades have been slow to materialize and projects are often hampered by widespread inefficiency and corruption. For instance, President Solis was accused of corruption related to the fast-tracking of a construction project.

• January 2018 floods and landslides caused significant damage to several major roads, primarily in northeastern Limon province. Heavy rains in late 2017 also damaged national roadways. While government efforts to repair damages have begun, they are not expected to be completed before the end of 2018.

• The majority of Costa Rica's power is supplied by hydroelectric sources, although geothermal and wind sources are used to a lesser extent. These sources generally provide constant, quality service. There have been some power supply problems along the Costa Rican Pacific coast, especially in tourist destinations such as Playa del Coco and during peak holiday seasons.

• Telecommunications, including internet services, are widely available, especially in large cities and resort towns, and the service is generally reliable.

• Infrastructure is very heavily affected during the annual rainy season, which generally runs from May to October, and often results in widespread flooding and landslides. Storms during hurricane season also caused significant flooding in October 2017.

• A small percentage of rural roads are paved and existing infrastructure is often old and badly maintained.

**Air travel**

There are dozens of airports and airstrips that provide flight services to numerous international and domestic locations. There are concerns regarding aircraft maintenance and the safety of private air travel services, although large commercial aircraft are generally well maintained. All major airports in Costa Rica meet strict international security standards. Although security at airports is adequate, theft of unattended items, particularly laptop computers, briefcases and handbags, is common. In addition, there have been reports of narcotics and other contraband being smuggled into the luggage of unsuspecting passengers.

The main airport, Juan Santamaria International Airport (MROC/SJO), is located in Alajuela about 12 mi (20 km) from downtown San Jose and serves as the main entry point into the country. It is the largest airport in Costa Rica and the second largest Central American facility. The airport has a number of facilities, including duty-free shops, restaurants and banks. There are several methods of travel from the airport to San Jose, including a large bus stop outside the main airport building, which offers numerous bus routes at affordable prices. Taxis are also available outside the airport; licensed taxis are generally considered to be safe and can be easily distinguished as they are red with yellow triangles on the door. Private, orange airport taxis are also available and offer another safe mode of transport.

The second largest airport in Costa Rica is Daniel Oduber Quiros International Airport (MRLB/LIR), also known as Liberia International Airport, is located near the northwestern city of Liberia in the Guanacaste province. A restructuring of the airport and its terminal building was completed in early 2012. The airport provides several services including duty free shopping, restaurants and foreign currency exchange offices. Licensed taxis as well as orange airport taxis are available outside the airport building to transport individuals to and from the facility. International car rental agencies are available at both Juan Santamaria and Liberia airports. No major security incidents have been reported at either airport in the past two months. However, a charter flight on carrier Nature Air on the way to Juan Santamaria International Airport crashed on 1 January 2018 killing all onboard, including 10 U.S. nationals. The government barred Nature Air from operating over safety concerns after multiple senior airline staff resigned amid an ongoing investigation into the causes of the crash.

**Getting around**
Travel by taxi is a common method of travel in Costa Rica. Although vehicle rental is available, numerous hazards and a general disregard for traffic laws make this an unsafe travel option. Additionally, buses are widely available for both inter- and intra-city travel, although petty crime poses a concern with this form of transportation. The use of public transportation or self-driving in Costa Rica is not advised.

**Road** – The country's highways and main roads are generally in good condition, especially in large cities. January 2018 floods and landslides caused significant damage to several major roads, however, primarily in northeastern Limon province. Heavy rains in late 2017 also damaged national roadways. While government efforts to repair damages have begun, they are not expected to be completed before the end of 2018. Poor maintenance has resulted in the development of potholes and other hazards in more remote areas of the country. Secondary roads vary in condition and many are in a severe state of disrepair; many of these roadways are unpaved. Roads generally have inadequate or nonexistent signage, and a lack of street lights makes travel at night dangerous. In addition, landslides are common in the rainy season and often cause widespread travel delays and disruptions. In addition, two high-profile accidents occurred in January 2018 illustrating the threat of road travel within Costa Rica. A private bus carrying 22 passengers, including 19 tourists, was involved in an accident near northcentral town Bajo Los Rodriguez in Alajuela Province. At least eight of the passengers – including foreign nationals – were injured in the crash. Meanwhile, a public bus fell into the Tarcoles River 50 mi (80 km) west of San Jose when the bridge it was crossing collapsed. While at least five passengers were killed, a major rescue operation managed to pull 33 other passengers out of the river.

- **Self-Driving** - The minimum age for driving in Costa Rica is 18. The roads in large cities can be overcrowded and narrow, and driving standards are often erratic due to a disregard for traffic laws and road safety. In addition, the presence of pedestrians, cyclists and farm animals pose hazards along roadways. Significant flooding occurred in 2017 causing damage to roads and bridges across the country. While repairs are underway, roadway damage increases the risk of self-driving. Due to these issues, Costa Rica has a very high accident rate.

- **Vehicle rental** - To rent a car, a credit card under the name of the renter as well as a valid driver’s license is required. A deposit, which will depend on the kind of insurance and vehicle hired, will also be required in advance. Drivers between the ages of 18 and 21 are often charged more for car rentals, due to higher perceived risk. Car hire is available at the two main airports and in major urban centers.

- **Bus** - Costa Rica has extensive bus services, connecting most cities and towns across the country. There is also an extensive cross-border bus system which links Costa Rica to Panama in the south and to Nicaragua to the north. The unreliability of some buses poses safety concerns to travelers. Buses that operate within cities are especially dangerous, as overcrowding provides ample opportunity for petty crime such as pick-pocketing, bag-snatching and the theft of unattended items. Additionally, thieves occasionally steal luggage from storage compartments on long-distance cross-border and intercity buses.

- **Taxi** - Licensed taxis, which are red with yellow triangles on the doors, are much more reputable than other taxi services in Costa Rica. Unregistered taxis, referred to locally as "pirata," or pirate taxis, pose heightened security concerns, as individuals may be targeted for crime or scams. Drivers sometimes attempt to scam passengers, especially foreign nationals that they view as vulnerable, by charging them an artificially high fare. A number of sexual assaults have occurred in Costa Rican taxis, directed primarily at unaccompanied women. In this instance, if a female traveler enters the taxi cab first, malicious drivers may depart before other passengers are able to enter the vehicle. Taxi service should be arranged through a trusted hotel or other location, as hailing taxis from the street increases the possibility of being picked up by an unregistered vehicle.

**Culture**
• Costa Ricans have conservative family values, and male and female gender roles are quite traditional. However, women have achieved greater equality in Costa Rica than in neighboring countries and are widely accepted in the workplace.
• Costa Ricans adhere to strict schedules for business, and individuals should ensure they are on time for all scheduled meetings and events.
• Costa Rica’s indigenous population is small, and the vast majority of Costa Ricans consider themselves to be "white." As such, social distinctions based upon race in Costa Rica are not as apparent in other Central and Latin American countries.
• Neither men nor women typically wear shorts. It is more common for men to wear pants and women to wear dresses, skirts or pants.

**Important Dates 2018**

- 1 January – New Year's Day
- 4 February – first-round executive and legislative elections
- 29 March – Good Thursday
- 30 March – Good Friday
- 1 April – Easter Day / Second-round elections
- 2 April – Easter Monday
- 1 May – Workers of Labor Day
- 25 July – Guanacaste Day
- 2 August – Virgin of Los Angeles Day
- 15 August – Mother’s Day
- 15 September – Independence Day
- 12 October – Cultures National Day
- 25 December – Christmas Day

**Health concerns**

Medical facilities are reliable in Costa Rica’s cities and the standard of hygiene and treatment is high; however, health care may be limited outside San Jose and other urban centers. Although emergency medical treatment is available without charge for visitors, comprehensive medical insurance is advised.

There are no inoculation requirements for individuals traveling to the country; however, proof of yellow fever vaccination is required for anyone arriving from a country with risk of yellow fever. Furthermore, vaccinations against Hepatitis A and B, Typhoid, Rabies and Yellow Fever are recommended. The threat of malaria also exists in some parts of the country, especially in lower-lying cantons Matina, Los Chiles (Alajuela province) and Talamanca (Limon province). In addition, there have been a number of cases of dengue fever in some of the provinces, including Central Valley, Puntarenas and Guanacaste on the Pacific Coast, Limon on the Atlantic Coast, and around the capital city of San Jose. There is no vaccine against dengue fever. Individuals may take protective measures against being bitten by mosquitoes, such as applying mosquito repellent, to mitigate the risk of contracting mosquito-borne diseases. In addition, hundreds of cases of influenza A (H1N1)/swine flu, including several deaths, have been confirmed in Costa Rica since the disease was first detected in Mexico in March 2009.

Tap water is generally not safe to drink in Costa Rica; individuals are advised to consume only sterilized or bottled water. This applies to water used for brushing teeth, making ice or washing foods.

**Natural hazards**

Earthquakes are known to occur in Costa Rica and have caused serious injury, deaths and infrastructural damage in the past. The most recent significant earthquake struck northwestern Costa Rica in late 2017 and was followed by several powerful aftershocks. The 6.5-magnitude earthquake resulted in multiple injuries
and significant damage to buildings and houses.

Costa Rica may be affected by both the North Atlantic and East Pacific hurricane seasons which generally run from June to November. The hurricane seasons run near simultaneously with the country's rainy season, which takes place annually from April to December, thus exacerbating the threat of flooding and landslides.

Costa Rica has approximately six active volcanoes, most notably the Poas Volcano and the Turrialba volcano. Most recently, the country declared a state of emergency after the Turrialba volcano erupted in April 2017, and Poas volcanic eruptions cause mid 2017 national park closures. Volcanic activity often causes evacuations and disruptions to travel, including interruption of flight operations.

Money

- **Currency** - The official currency is the Costa Rica colon (CRC), which is divided into 100 centimos. Banknotes are available in 20,000, 10,000, 5,000, 2,000 and 1,000 colon denominations. Coins are available in the amounts of 500, 100, 50, 25, 10 and 5 colon.
- **Foreign exchange** - Currency exchange is widely available at banks, major hotels, international airports, ports of entry and at currency exchange facilities known locally as “casa de cambios”, although exchange facilities are scarce. Foreign currency exchange services may not be as readily available outside major urban centers and remote areas.
- **ATMs / Credit cards** - ATMs are available throughout most cities in Costa Rica. ATMs can be located at most bank branches, shopping malls, hotels and throughout most major tourist locations. Major international credit cards are generally accepted at most major hotels, shopping centers, restaurants and tourist-oriented institutions in major urban centers. However, local vendors and smaller retail shops may only accept cash as payment.
- **Tipping** - Tipping is appreciated, but not expected. Some hotels, restaurants and other entertainment establishments are known to add a 10 to 25 percent service charge on services rendered. In such cases, no tip is required. In any other circumstance, a tip of 10 percent of the total bill is acceptable.
- **Business hours** - Typical business hours in Costa Rica are Monday to Friday from 08:00 to 17:00.

Contact Information

- International dialing code: +506
- International dialing prefix: 00
- Police: 911
- Ambulance: 911
- Fire: 911

Cultural factors

Etiquette and norms

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**Useful information**

- Public holidays
- Weather forecast
- Maps
- Visit Costa Rica
- Electricity: 120 volts, 60 Hz;

**Contact details**

**Important contact details**

- International dialing code: +506
- International dialing prefix: 00

**Emergency numbers**

- Police: 911
- Ambulance: 911
- Fire: 911

**Embassies**

**Australian Consulate**
Escazu, Centro Corporativo Plaza Roble
Edificio El Portico, 3rd Floor
San Rafael de Escazu San Jose
Costa Rica
Tel: +506 2201 0000
Email: aushonconsul.costarica@gmail.com

**British Embassy**
Edificio Centro Colon
San Jose, Costa Rica
Tel: +506 2258 2025
Fax: +506 2233 9938
Email: britemb@racsa.co.cr

**French Embassy**
Curridabat de la Mitsubishi
200 m Sur y 25 m Oeste
Apartado 10177-1000
San Jose
Tel: +506 234 4167
Fax: +506 234 4195
Email: sjfrance@racsa.co.cr
Health advisory

Health infrastructure

The provision of medical care in Costa Rica is good in the capital San Jose, but limited in the rural areas of the country. Private medical facilities are available in the capital and boast 24-hour emergency services as well as surgical theaters and 24 hour pharmacies. It should be noted that some doctors or medical centers will expect immediate payment for treatment, whether individuals have medical insurance or not. Some medical practitioners may speak limited English, but in most cases a Spanish translator will be required. Pharmacies are readily available in the capital and are well stocked; however, pharmacies in rural areas are not as well provisioned and more scarcely available.

Pre-travel recommendations

The following vaccinations are recommended or required if traveling to Costa Rica:

- Hepatitis A (recommended)
- Hepatitis B (recommended)
- Typhoid (recommended)
- Yellow fever (required for travelers arriving from a country where yellow fever is present)

It is also important to ensure that routine vaccinations are up to date for diseases including influenza, chickenpox (or varicella), polio, measles, mumps, rubella, diphtheria, pertussis and tetanus.

Individuals are advised to visit a doctor or clinic that specializes in travel-related medicine at least four to six weeks prior to their intended departure for Costa Rica. This should allow the necessary time for any vaccinations prescribed by the doctor to take effect.
Comprehensive medical insurance, including provision for medical repatriation or evacuation, is strongly recommended. Individuals are also advised to take an appropriate supply of any prescription medication; this should be accompanied by a written doctor's instruction, explaining the need for the medication and justifying the quantities required.

**Significant diseases**

The following are some of the more significant diseases that might affect travelers to the country:

- **Malaria** is a life-threatening parasitic disease transmitted by mosquitoes. The malaria risk in Costa Rica is prevalent in the Limon, Puntarenas and Alajuela provinces and along the country's border with Panama.
- **Dengue fever** is an infectious disease carried by mosquitoes. Outbreaks occur annually in Costa Rica, particularly during the rainy season (May to November). The worst affected areas include San Jose and the Central Valley. The number of dengue cases has significantly decreased in 2014, although the disease remains a prominent concern.
- **Chikungunya virus** is a mosquito-borne illness with symptoms similar to dengue fever. While chikungunya has not yet been reported in Costa Rica as of mid-2014, the government has placed the country on high-alert after the disease was first reported in the Caribbean in late 2013. There have been hundreds of thousands of confirmed or suspected chikungunya cases throughout the Caribbean, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname, several Central American countries and the U.S.
- **Diarrhea** is common among travelers and can be caused by bacteria, viruses or parasites. One of the most common causes is a bacterium known as E.coli, which is transmitted by ingesting contaminated food and liquids.

**Food and water safety**

Tap water is generally not safe to drink in Costa Rica; individuals are advised to consume only sterilized or bottled water. This applies to water used for brushing teeth, making ice or washing foods. In addition, it is not recommended to bathe or swim in rivers. Unpasteurized milk should be avoided. Powdered or tinned milk should be used as an alternative if pasteurized milk is unavailable. Fruit and vegetables should only be consumed if they have been peeled or cooked, and undercooked meat and fish should be avoided. Food from street vendors should also be avoided as this carries a higher risk of causing infection.

**Emergency response**

The emergency number for an ambulance in Costa Rica is 911. It is important to note that ambulance services in the country do not usually provide medical assistance but are used exclusively as a means of transport.

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