

# Costa Rica



**A Guide for Study Abroad Students**

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### Key Words and Meanings

**Tico/Tica** – Synonym for Costa Rican

**Pura Vida** – Costa Rican term for ‘life is good’

### Host Families

Living with a host family is a very common and beneficial aspect to a student's experience while studying abroad in Costa Rica. Just as all families are not the same in the United States, the same holds true for Costa Rican households. Nonetheless, there are aspects about Tico family life that will be useful to you as you plan your study abroad experience.

The profile of a typical Tico host family can vary greatly from single ladies of all ages to old or young families with children. Given this vast difference, expectations can vary greatly depending on the family. Generally, it is very common for families to eat dinner together no matter the size, but they will likely be very willing to save you a plate if you will be late. Many times they will send a lunch to school with you if you will not be able to return from campus to eat. The number of meals the family provides will also depend on a previously determined agreement. Check with your program provider for details.

While in a Tico house it is very important to keep your family updated on what you are doing. In Costa Rica, college students usually live at home until after they graduate. With this in mind, your host family will be very concerned about your well-being. You are not just a visitor, you are a part of their family and they feel responsible for your safety. Whenever you go anywhere you need to let your host family know where you are going and when you will get back. If you will be late, call to let them know or else they will be worried.

Tico households represent the epitome of cleanliness. It is important to do your best to keep your room clean and to not clutter up the house. While in the United States children consider their room as 'their own', and often banish others from entering, for Ticos a child's (or host student's) room is just a place where they sleep. Your room should be picked up so your host mother can sweep and clean your room. They will respect your privacy while you are in your room.

Some families are very willing to include you in their familial rituals, whether that is going to events or entertainment, or the market. The market, or *feria*, is a very important aspect of Tico life. This is a great time to learn while spending time with your family. Usually, families go to a feria that is held near their house once a week. Ask your family to take you with them, tell you the names of the products that are provided, and explain what they do with the product.

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Depending on your host family, it is also very likely they will invite you along to spend time with you outside of the house. Movie theaters are very cheap in Costa Rica, and are a great way to learn Spanish by watching an English film with Spanish subtitles. If there are young adults in the house, it is likely that they will want to take you to see other parts of the country. Sometimes they will travel with you to the beach, which is kind of like having a tour guide all the time! Always tell them where you are going...they might want to go along, too.



### Travel

Costa Rica is becoming an increasingly popular tourist destination for United States citizens, but also for people from all over the world. The most popular time of the year to visit Costa Rica is during the winter holidays, which coincidentally coincides with the dry season, resulting in beautiful weather. There are many options for these short term visitors to reach their destinations, but for you as a temporary local, there will be other options that will likely fit you better.

Travel in Costa Rica is simple, but at times can be painstakingly slow when compared to the U.S. Public transportation is the key to getting around. It is cheap, and the network of buses can get you almost everywhere you want to go. Depending on a number of variables, taking a bus or taxi will be the best options.

The Costa Rican bus system is amazing. There are routes to all parts of the country, and in every neighborhood. When in town, you should not have to walk more than two or three blocks to reach your nearest bus stop. It is imperative to have your family teach you where the nearest bus stops are, because there are no signs or route maps. While this sounds daunting, you will learn quickly how to navigate the different routes to get to where you are going.

At the local level, bus fares are cheap, usually less than one dollar to get where you are going within town. When you board the bus, you will pay the bus driver and he will give you change on the spot. It is best not to use big bills, such as 10,000 colones or greater. When you are approaching your stop, simply pull the string or touch the button to indicate you want to stop. If you cannot get to it, ask your neighbor to do it for you << ¿Podría tocar el timbre? >>. These local buses can get very crowded in the evening when everyone returns home from work...expect your personal space to be invaded!

To travel to the coasts of Costa Rica you will likely need to travel to a larger city, such as San Jose. Ask your host family where to find the terminals that the buses will leave out of. You can buy these tickets about a day in advance so you can be sure to get a seat. Otherwise, you can risk not getting a ticket if you arrive at the station just before you want to leave. Tickets to the coast will generally cost around 10 to 15 dollars. An important note to be aware of if you are going to the Caribbean: the operators of that specific bus line DO NOT sell round-trip tickets. You will have to buy a return ticket when you reach the coast. If you are arriving late on Friday night, chances are the earliest ticket you can get out will be

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extremely late Sunday, and that may be pushing it. On the other hand, if you are traveling to the Pacific, tell the ticket counter attendant you want a ticket *ida y vuelta*, or round-trip... just be sure to keep track of your return ticket throughout the weekend!

Taxis can be another alternative to getting around town in Costa Rica. In fact, taxis may be the quickest form of transportation in the country as taxi drivers, or *taxistas*, seem to be exempt from speeding rules. A 10 minute or so taxi ride can cost between 10 to 20 dollars, so it is best to get a car full of friends to share the fare. At night, getting a taxi is the best option for safety reasons, despite being more expensive than a bus.

Costa Rican taxis are regulated by the government. This means that official taxis are bright red and have their meters set so everyone will pay the same rate for distance and time spent in the cab. It is highly recommended to use only the red taxis, or *rojos*, as others may try to take advantage of a gringo. There are usually taxi stations at many locations throughout town, such as next to the university, in the town square, at the mall, and other locations. There are also taxis all over the roads, so chances are you can flag one down without much effort.

Example of a *taxi rojo*.



<http://www.viajejet.com/category/zonas-geograficas/centro-america/costa-rica/page/2/>

### Food

Food is one of the most important cultural aspects of any country, and in Costa Rica it is no different. Typical food of Costa Rica, or *comida típica*, to say the least is, well...bland. If you are looking for a taste bud shock, please don't get your hopes up.

At almost every meal in Costa Rica you can expect to have rice and beans. Breakfast – rice and beans. Lunch – rice and beans. Dinner – rice and beans. Get the picture? In fact, the national food of Costa Rica is *gallo pinto*. It is common for breakfast, and is rice with beans. While this may be a fairly sarcastic and seemingly dismal outlook on the culinary delights of the country, Costa Rican food is actually one of the things you will miss most after your departure.

Costa Rica has a plethora of fruits and vegetables available all year. At all meals it is very common to have some kind of fresh fruit whether it be pineapple, bananas, mangos or star fruit, you will never have tasted such great produce. Do not expect the bananas to be what you would find in the U.S. Tico bananas are not much longer than your finger, but taste just as great, but with an exotic appeal! What is even better is you will be able to drink all kinds of fresh fruit juices daily. In restaurants, you can order a fruit shake, or *batida*. They can be mixed with water or milk, but either way they are one of the best aspects of Costa Rican food.

Eating in restaurants leaves little surprises food-wise. But your first impression of Tico restaurants may not be what you think of in the U.S. Most eateries in Costa Rica are called *sodas*. Sodas typically hold no more than ten patrons. The plates are typically the same all over, whether in a *soda* or a larger restaurant. Examples of what you can find in restaurants are described below, after a quick overview of what you can expect service-wise in a restaurant.

The service in Tico restaurants is not quite the same as it is in the United States. Expect it to be slower, and do not be afraid to flag your waiter down, which is expected of you. Upon entering a *soda* or restaurant you will likely be able to seat yourself. Your waiter will take your food and drink orders. After that, whenever you need your waiter you will have to flag him down. Do not be offended or consider it poor service. It is what is expected. One important thing to note is the tip is included in the bill, so you don't have to force your brain to calculate 15%. Just pay and enjoy being in Costa Rica!

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*Casados* are a complete meal that will fill you up for a reasonable price, and it is delicious. *Casado*, loosely translated, means married. The pieces of this culinary delight are married together to make a great dish. *Casados* consist of a meat (beef, chicken or fish, ie. *bistec*, *pollo*, *o pescado* in Spanish), picadillo (similar to potato salad), salad, rice and beans (of course), and fried plantains (*plátanos*). *Casados* will typically cost between six and eight dollars and will sufficiently fill you up.

*Arroz con pollo*, or rice with chicken, is also tasty. It is basically what the name implies, and serves as a filling and delicious plate. The rice is cooked with the broth of the chicken and takes on an attractive, earthy color. A person can also order *ceviche* for a tropical island feel. *Ceviche* is soup-like dish with shrimp. It has many spices and herbs to make it the dish with possibly the most intense flavor of any food found in the country. A little more expensive than most dishes, it is definitely a must-try dish if you are on the beach or like seafood in general.

Desserts in Costa Rica are delicious, but definitely different than what you find in the U.S. They are not quite as sweet, and a little drier. Nonetheless, you will probably be hard-pressed to turn them down during your morning or afternoon coffee with the family. One of the most delicious desserts that Ticos make is called *arroz con leche*, or sweet rice or rice with milk (of course there is rice involved, as with everything!). It is made with evaporated milk and sugar. You will probably have a hard time saying no after you try it the first time!

One of the most interesting aspects of Costa Rican food is the buying process. Costa Rica does have a few supermarkets like we would find here in the United States, although they are not very common. Ticos prefer to use farmer's markets, or *feria de agricultor*. These markets typically occur once per week in a designated location, and there will be at least one in each small town. Local farmers bring their produce, including all kinds of fresh vegetables, fruits, flowers and bread. They shout out what they have, trying to be louder and cheaper than their neighbor with similar products. Some even let you try the fruits to draw you in to buy. It truly is a cultural experience that you must see while in the country. \*Note: If you are in Heredia, Costa Rica, go to their market on Saturday mornings. It is four rows of venders one quarter mile long. Truly one of the most impressive things to see in the country!

There is also the normal market, or *feria*. This has basically the same things as the farmer's market, but under a roof. They will also have more clothing or

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household items. Another difference between the market and the farmer's market is there are sodas (restaurants) in the market that serve delicious food right in front of you as you sit and watch them cook your food. The market is also not a place for squeamish individuals if you are worried about seeing animal parts in the butcher shop. They sell everything but the oink when it comes to displaying their products. Expect to see chicken feet, pig's feet, cow stomach, fish looking at you, and no telling what else in the display cases. And don't be surprised if someone walks by with half a hog thrown over his shoulder!

You can also find meat shops, or *carnicerías*, around town. *Panaderías*, are also quite common throughout, with many tasty appearing treats set in the window. The breads usually look sweeter than they are, but are still worth a try. *Fruterías*, or fruit shops, are also common throughout. The moral of the story is this: you are not going to go hungry in Costa Rica unless you are extremely picky!



### University Life

Tico student life is remarkably similar to that of American students. Ticos spend a lot of time in the local eateries hanging out with friends between classes. There will likely be a cafeteria on campus where students will eat lunch (of course it will include rice and beans!). Students also spend a lot of time sitting outdoors due to the nice year-round weather.

If you are taking classes with Ticos, it is interesting to note there will be subtle differences. Professors will pass out syllabi on the first day to orient you to the course as you are likely accustomed. However, classes may not meet several times a week. Many times classes meet for several hours once per week. While this sounds like it will be difficult to sit through, don't panic! College courses in Costa Rica are not immune to what is often called 'Tico Time.' In other words, class will likely not start exactly at the scheduled time, but rather 15 to 30 minutes late. There is no need to worry about having to focus extra hard to get through that material you didn't cover in those 15 to 30 minutes, because a break, or *recreo*, will likely be taken halfway through class. It should not come as a surprise that class may end early, too. All this should teach you one thing: *Pura Vida!* Although, if you are taking classes with other Americans, you will likely be wishing for a little bit of *pura vida*, because class will likely start on time and continue to the scheduled end point.

Tico classrooms are generally set up very similarly to American classrooms, with desks and blackboards. The biggest difference is that the buildings and classrooms are generally open air buildings. You can hear birds singing outside, or a local band playing on campus somewhere, both of which make it difficult to pay attention!



Example of a building interior at the Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica located in Heredia, featuring an open roof with vegetation in the center of the building four stories below. Classrooms are located along the exterior hallways.

### Money & Costs

The currency of Costa Rica is the *colón*. In general, about 500 *colones* will be valued at about \$1. Money can be easily accessed from ATM's around the country, and are typically only found at banks. Money can be obtained in either U.S. dollars, or Costa Rican *colones*. If you are going to Costa Rica for an extremely cheap place to live, you may be surprised. Costs in the country are pretty typical of what a person would find in the U.S., with a few exceptions. Electronics are double the price in Costa Rica, so be sure to have all you need electronic-wise.

Food is comparable in price to what you would find in the U.S. if you go to a super market. Eating out, however, can be cheaper than you expect. Generally, a good meal in a *soda* will be from five to seven dollars. Buying food from markets or from specialized food shops, such as a *panadería* or *frutería*, will be cheaper, also.

Tourist locations, however, are an exception to the comparable prices of the United States. Anything that involves a tourist activity or service will undoubtedly take plenty of money from you. One cost that can sometimes be unexpected is the exit tax, or *impuesto de salida*. This is around \$25, and if you want out of the country you will have to pay it. You can pay the fee at the airport, but sometimes lines can delay you if you are late for your flight. Otherwise, you can take your passport to any Bank of Costa Rica (a government run bank) about a day before your departure. Ask to pay the exit tax, and they will give you a document that you present when you arrive to the airport.

### Climate

Costa Rica is most well-known for its tropical climate. The climate is what drives the country's massive tourism industry, taking advantage of warm temperatures year round while those in the extremes of the hemispheres flock to more agreeable weather. Despite the consistent weather, it is rather ironic to hear Costa Ricans quite often say the same thing Americans quip about, "If you don't like the weather here, wait 10 minutes, and it will change." That may be an exaggeration in our eyes, but some preparation should be taken to truly enjoy the weather of Costa Rica.

The average high and low temperature in San Jose is around 80 and 65° Fahrenheit all year. There, of course, will be variations to this. Obviously, this isn't parka weather, but a light jacket is recommended just in case you need it in the evenings. One interesting phenomenon is that the cold fronts that often grip the U.S. during the winter can sometimes reach Costa Rica. What results is a day that makes Ticos shiver and complain as the temperature may not rise above 70 combined with a consistent wind and light mist, or *llovizna*. Jackets are also highly recommended if you plan on spending time in the more mountainous areas as the temperature is lower the higher you go. If you visit one of the many volcano craters, it will likely be quite cool. At the crater of Poás Volcano, for example, the temperature sometimes drops to near the freezing mark.

Please do not think Costa Rica is devoid of warmth. In fact, the opposite is true, and the previous paragraph is written to forewarn you not to only take shorts and tank tops. Most days are perfect for shorts, sandals and a t-shirt, and the closer you go to the coasts, the fewer clothes you will want to wear due to the heat. The coasts can be between 95 and 100 degrees every day of the year! It is possibly the most oppressive heat you may have experienced if you don't hail from the desert southwest. Because of this, precautions must be taken when you visit these places. Be sure to drink copious amounts of water as you will dehydrate quickly, and *sunscreen is absolutely essential* due to the more direct impact from the sun. The landscape can also be vastly different, varying from a dry forest in the northwest province called *Guanacaste* to more vegetative and tropical areas on the rest of the country's coasts.

In the United States, we have four distinct seasons, but it is common to find that Costa Ricans don't know what they are or when they would even be. This is because Costa Rica has two seasons: wet and dry. The country is divided in half

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by the two seasons, the east and west sides each being in different seasons at the same time. The west side (Pacific) is in the dry season from December to the end of April with the remainder being the wet season and vice versa for the east side (Caribbean). The dry season is aptly named. Instead of arriving to a tropical paradise in January, you may be surprised to find an environment that looks similar to Texas in July...brown and dusty. Every day during this period is marked by pure, sunny skies and rarely any moisture. On the contrary, the rainy season also lives up to its name. Every day around 2 o'clock a downpour should be expected to last for one to two hours. Umbrellas are an essential item to have, and nobody is too manly to go without. Even with an umbrella, there is no guarantee to stay dry, but water impermeable shoes help somewhat. Sometimes tropical systems come through, called a *temporal*, causing rain to fall almost all day for several days.

What is the take-home message? Take sunscreen and be sure to have an umbrella and light jacket!



Clockwise from top left: Beach views at Manuel Antonio; Skyline as seen on the side of Irazú Volcano; Guanacaste region; Lagoon crater at Poás Volcano.

### Odd Cultural Aspects

For the most part, Ticos are very similar to Americans. They have desires similar to Americans, enjoy relaxing on the weekend and trips to the beach, and catching a movie at the theatre. There are some subtle differences that seem odd to us, but are completely normal in their eyes.

- **Sleeping Schedules** – Does going to bed at 9 p.m. and waking up at 6 a.m. sound like a lot of fun to you? Probably not, but this is common for Ticos. Why would they subject themselves to this crazy life routine? Simple...they utilize the amount of daylight they have. Costa Rica does not have a daylight savings time, meaning it gets dark around six in the evening, and the sun rises about 12 hours later. Also, before modern times, Ticos used this schedule to avoid the hot portion of the day. There is no need to cross Costa Rica off your 'Places to Visit' list just because of this. The routine will become natural, and won't seem strange when you quit looking at the time and just enjoy your surroundings.
- **Noise** – Looking for a peaceful place to live? Costa Rica may not be the best option. There are always dogs barking, roosters crowing, neighbors talking and cars driving down the street. Even Ticos recognize that it is a noisy place. Better take some ear plugs.
- **Dogs** – The dogs making noise from the bullet point above are not the kind I am referring to here. I'm talking about stray dogs, or *perros callajeros*, and they are plentiful. They are not mean, do not bother you, and are a rainbow of colors and patterns. Just watch where you walk...
- **Toilet Paper** – A great invention, right? Sufficient water pressure to take care of toilet paper may be even a better invention. There are two keys to this topic: never flush your toilet paper down the drain, and always carry some with you when you leave the house. Trash cans are placed next to all toilets in Costa Rica for you to place your used toilet paper in. I know it is gross, but probably not as gross as a backed up toilet. Secondly, it is uncommon to stock public restrooms with toilet paper, so carrying your own may come in handy when you least expect it.
- **Piropos** – Cat calls. And not the kind you use to call your cat to dinner. If you are a female, get used to being yelled at by men driving by, walking by, or even sitting nearby. They think they are flattering you by commenting on your legs without even knowing you. Those standards may not be appropriate in the U.S., but they won't be changing in Costa Rica any time soon.

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- Street Names – Looking for 5<sup>th</sup> Street? Better start asking where it is, and where you are for that matter. Street names don't exist. You just have to know where you are going and take directions by recognizing landmarks – the tree, the school, the house the old man lives in, the corner where there used to be a tree (not kidding).
- Hot Water – Costa Rica households do not have hot water in their houses, except for in the shower. Ticos wash dishes and clothes in cold water. The water in the shower becomes hot from electrical wires that run to the showerhead and heat the water as it comes out. You may have to turn the heat on by flipping a switch. The showerhead will make a static noise when it begins heating. Most importantly, do not touch the wires!
- Drinking Water – Water in the Heredia area is supposedly safe to drink. Many students, however, experienced some sort of intestinal malcontent at some point during their stay. To be safe, buy bottled water. The supermarkets sell five liter bottles of water for a few dollars. Bottled water can also be purchased from street vendors or in restaurants for a reasonable price.



*¡PURA VIDA!*