

HISTORY

On September 8, 1502, during his fourth and last journey, Columbus discovered Costa Rica. Taken by surprise by a storm, he dropped anchor close to Uvita, near Puerto Limon. In 1506, King Ferdinand of Spain took official possession of this new territory and sent Diego de Nicuesa to govern what would later become Costa Rica. In 1562 a permanent settlement was founded at Cartago, in the middle of the Valle Centrale, and was declared capital of the colony.

Many centuries after, in 1821 Central America declared independence from Spain and Costa Rica signed the Act of Independence on September 15, 1823, and in the same year San Jose' became capital of this new State. The first half of 1900 was a period of adjustment between one President and another, with the coffee bourgeois assuming a steadily more important role. Those were turbulent years and the country navigated along an unstable route towards democracy.

In 1940 Rafael Calderon Guardia was elected President and he promoted reforms including the Industrial Code and the Social Security system, even today unique to Costa Rica in this part of the world.

1948 was the most significant year of this century for Costa Rica: this was the year of "Don Pepe" Figueres, of the revolution and of the Second Republic. The new constitution, in vigor since 1949, recognized the right of women to vote and abolished the army. Costa Rica is the only country in the world without an army.

Following the after war years, the 60's and 70's were a period of development and stability. During the 80's and 90's, however, the country has had to maneuver between serious political disputes in neighboring countries, overcoming serious economic crises. In 1986 Oscar Arias Sanchez was elected President and received the Nobel Peace Prize for his humanitarian and mediation efforts. His peace plan had the stability of the Istmo as its aim and with patience, ability, and time he achieved his ends.

On the economic side, at the end of 1994, the NAFTA Accord was signed with Mexico, United States, and Canada and the Free Market came into being, establishing a privileged route for Costa Rican goods in the North American market as of January 1, 1995. In the last two years there have been impressive developments in foreign investment in industry, chiefly through the Free Zone mechanism and the Industrial Parks (for further information see CEMPO, a private organization, or PROCOMER, a state organization), thus installing high-technology factories in the country. It is hoped that this injection of international industry will help to resolve, at least in part, the problems that afflict the country, such as inflation and internal debt, contemporaneously bringing new developments in exports and in tourism, one of the primary voices in the economy of Costa Rica.

RELIGION

The country is chiefly Catholic, but other religions are present: Hebrew, Baptist, Presbyterian, and Anglican.

TOPOGRAPHY

Costa Rica borders with Nicaragua to the North and Panama to the south. It is washed on the east by the Caribbean Atlantic Ocean and on the west by the Pacific Ocean.

A series of volcanic mountain chains run from northwest to southeast dividing the country in two. At the centre there is a plateau, called the Valle Central, which slopes away both to east and west.

More than half of the population lives on this plateau, which has an extremely fertile volcanic soil. The Atlantic coast is 132 miles long and the Pacific coast 635 miles long. Both coasts are edged with white, pink, and black beaches, islands and coral reefs, which protect a number of bays.

There are 112 volcanic craters, including two on the island of Coco, and four of these are still active – Poas, Arenal, Irazu, Rincon de la Vieja. Poas has the biggest crater in the world and Arenal is one of the most active volcanoes in existence.

WATER

Tap water is drinkable in almost all the country; only in the area of Limon it is advisable to drink bottled water or boil the tap water.

CLIMATE

Costa Rica is a tropical country and has only two seasons: dry and humid. The dry season runs generally from December to April, the humid season runs throughout the rest of the year. The Caribbean coast tends to be humid all year round. There is little variation in temperature from one season to another: the temperature is chiefly influenced by the altitude. The coastal districts are very hot and humid with an average of 21° C at night on the Caribbean coast and above 30°C during the day; the temperature on the Pacific coast is a few degrees higher, but less humid. The average temperature of the Valle Central fluctuates between a minimum of 18°C and a maximum of 27°C

NATIONAL PARKS

Costa Rica has protected its territory creating many national parks to defend nature. The parks can be divided in dry, humid, rainy, and are found from north to south, throughout the national territory. They are controlled by a Parks Organization in collaboration with the INBIO, the Institute of Biodiversity. The parks cover not only forests, but also active volcanoes, coral reefs, caves, pre-Columbian ruins and waterfalls.

POPULATION

Costa Rica has a population of 4,000,000 inhabitants. More than 50% live on the Valle Central, which covers only 4% of the whole country. Literacy is 98% both in cities and in the rest of the country.

LANGUAGE

The official language is Spanish, but English is often spoken.

GOVERNMENT

Costa Rica is a Republic and the government is elected democratically every 4 years.

TAXES

Value Added Tax (VAT) is 17% and is added to shop prices and in hotels, restaurants, etc. In general tourists pay an additional tax of 3% on hotel bills.

BANKS – MONEY CHANGING

There are many banking institutes of different nationalities present in San Jose' and in the other centers. Opening times are from 9am to 3pm, Mon.-Fri. Some remain open until 6pm and open Sat. morning. The official currency of Costa Rica is the Colon, but the US dollar is accepted everywhere. The exchange rate with the dollar varies day by day. One can change dollars in all banks, hotels, and in the International airport.

CREDIT CARDS

The principal credit cards (MC, Visa, Diners Club and AE) are accepted in the whole country.



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