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Module 3

Immigration & Visas



Costa Rica Immigration and Visas

Successfully navigating Costa Rica's immigration system is perhaps the most fundamental aspect of your relocation journey. This section provides comprehensive information about the various pathways to legal residency, application procedures, documentation requirements, and professional assistance options. Understanding these processes from the outset will help you avoid common pitfalls and create a smooth transition to your new life in Costa Rica.

Overview of Visa Types and Residency Permits

Costa Rica offers several options for foreigners wishing to stay beyond the standard tourist visa period—these range from temporary solutions to permanent residency pathways, each with specific requirements and benefits.

Tourist Visas

Most visitors initially enter Costa Rica on a tourist visa, which serves as a starting point while pursuing longer-term options. The duration of stay granted depends on your nationality:

- Citizens from the United States, Canada, European Union countries, and many other "first group" nations typically receive up to 90 days.
- Citizens from countries in the "second group" generally receive 30 days.
- Some nationalities require a consular visa obtained before arrival.

Important considerations regarding tourist visas include:

Tourist status does not permit legal employment in Costa Rica. Conducting business meetings is acceptable, but receiving compensation from Costa Rican sources is prohibited.

To extend a tourist visa, you must leave the country for at least 72 hours before re-entering. This practice, commonly called a "border run," can be done by visiting neighboring countries like Panama or Nicaragua. However, immigration officials have discretion over the length of stay granted upon re-entry and may reduce it if they suspect you're living in Costa Rica without proper residency.

As of 2021, Costa Rica requires visitors to have proof of onward travel (showing you will leave the country).

While many expatriates previously lived in Costa Rica for years by doing regular border runs, immigration authorities have become increasingly strict about this practice. It's now designed truly as a temporary solution while pursuing proper residency.

Temporary Residency Categories

Several temporary residency categories exist for those planning to live in Costa Rica long-term. The most common options for expatriates include: Pensionado (Retiree) Program: Designed for retirees with a guaranteed, permanent pension income of at least \$1,000 USD per month from a government, private company, or qualified financial institution. This income must continue for the applicant's lifetime. Social Security benefits from the United States and many other countries qualify if they meet the minimum amount requirement.

Rentista Program: Created for individuals with a stable, guaranteed non-employment income of at least \$2,500 USD per month for a minimum of two years (typically demonstrated by establishing a Costa Rican bank deposit that disburses this amount monthly) or a lump sum deposit guaranteeing this income for the required period.

Inversionista (Investor) Program: Available to those who invest at least \$150,000 USD in a Costa Rican business, commercial property, or certain qualified real estate. The investment must benefit the Costa Rican economy and create employment opportunities. Additional investment categories include forestry projects (\$100,000) and specific government-certified projects (\$100,000).

Digital Nomad Visa: Introduced in 2021, this newer option caters to remote workers and digital entrepreneurs earning at least \$3,000 USD monthly from foreign sources if applying individually, or \$4,000 USD including dependents. This visa initially grants a one-year stay with the possibility of an extension for an additional year. Unlike other residency categories, digital nomad visa holders are exempt from Caja (public healthcare) enrollment requirements and can use their foreign driver's licenses for the duration of their stay.

Residency Through Family Ties: Foreign nationals who marry Costa Rican citizens or have a child born in Costa Rica can apply for residency based on these family connections. This category requires proof of the relationship through marriage certificates or birth certificates.

Employment-Based Residency: Foreign workers with specialized skills may obtain temporary residency through employment with a Costa Rican company. The employer must demonstrate that no qualified Costa Rican citizens are available for the position, making this a challenging pathway except for highly specialized professionals.

All temporary residency categories (except the digital nomad visa) require enrollment in the Costa Rican public healthcare system (Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social, or CCSS), with monthly contributions based on declared income.





Permanent Residency

Foreign nationals can apply for permanent residency after maintaining temporary residency status for three consecutive years. The primary benefits of permanent residency include:

- There is no need to renew residency status (though the residency ID card, or DIMEX, must still be renewed periodically)
- The legal right to work in any capacity or operate a business
- A pathway to eventual citizenship (after seven years for most nationalities, five years for citizens of Central American countries or Spain)

Permanent residents must still maintain their Caja enrollment and remain in Costa Rica for at least four months each year to maintain their status.

Application Processes and Timelines

The residency application process in Costa Rica involves multiple steps and typically spans several months. Understanding this timeline helps set realistic expectations and proper planning.

Pre-Application Preparation

Before submitting your formal application, several preliminary steps are necessary:

- 1. **Document Collection:** Gather all required documents from your home country, which typically include:
 - Birth certificate
 - Police clearance/background check
 - Marriage certificate (if applicable)
 - Proof of income or pension (specific to your residency category)
 - Passport copies
- 2. **Document Authentication:** All foreign documents must be authenticated for use in Costa Rica through either:
 - The Apostille process (if your country is a signatory to the Hague Convention)
 - Authentication by your country's foreign affairs ministry and the Costa Rican consulate in your country
- 3. **Translation:** A certified translator in Costa Rica must officially translate all non-Spanish documents.
- 4. **Financial Requirements**: Prepare evidence that you meet the financial requirements for your chosen residency category. For pensionados, this typically means obtaining a letter from your pension provider confirming your monthly benefit amount. For rentistas, you'll need to establish the appropriate bank account or financial instrument to demonstrate guaranteed income.

This preparation phase can take one to three months, depending on how quickly you can obtain and authenticate the required documents.

Formal Application Process

Once your documents are prepared, the formal application process follows these general steps:

- 1. Initial Filing: Submit your complete application package to the Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería (Immigration Department). You can do this in person or through a legal representative. Upon submission, you'll receive a comprobante (receipt) with a case number for tracking your application.
- 2. **Fingerprinting and Registration:** Within 90 days of submission, you must report to immigration offices for fingerprinting and biometric data collection.
- 3. **Processing Period:** Once your application is accepted as complete, the processing time typically ranges from 3 to 12 months, depending on the current backlog and complexity of your case.
- 4. **Resolution:** When approved, you'll receive a notification to pay the residency fee and schedule an appointment to receive your DIMEX (Documento de Identidad Migratoria para Extranjeros) residency card.
- 5. **Caja Enrollment:** You must register with the Caja healthcare system within 30 days of receiving your DIMEX (except for digital nomad visa holders).

Throughout this process, you can legally remain in Costa Rica even after your initial tourist visa expires, provided you have the comprobante proving your application is in process.

Renewal Procedures

Temporary residency cards must be renewed:

- After two years for the first renewal
- After three years for the second renewal
- After that, you become eligible to apply for permanent residency

The renewal process is typically less complicated than the initial application, but still requires:

- Proof of continued qualification (ongoing pension, investments, etc.)
- Evidence of Caja payments being up to date
- Demonstration that you have spent at least four months in Costa Rica each year

It is strongly recommended to begin the renewal process at least 30 days before your current residency expires.





Legal Requirements for Temporary and Permanent Stays

Beyond the basic qualifications for each residency category, several ongoing legal requirements apply to foreign residents in Costa Rica.

Healthcare Enrollment

All legal residents (except digital nomad visa holders) must enroll in the Caja, Costa Rica's public healthcare system. Monthly contributions are calculated based on declared income, typically ranging from 7-12% of reported income for pensionados and rentistas. This requirement applies even if you maintain private health insurance, though many expatriates choose to have both for comprehensive coverage.

Presence Requirements

To maintain residency status, foreign residents must spend a minimum amount of time in Costa Rica—generally at least four months (120 days) each year. Extended absences without proper notification or justification can result in the loss of residency status.

Legal Obligations

Foreign residents are subject to most of the same laws and regulations as citizens, with a few exceptions (such as voting rights). Key obligations include:

- Carrying proper identification (your DIMEX card) at all times
- Registering any vehicles or property in your name
- Filing tax declarations if operating businesses or earning Costa Rican income
- Renewing your DIMEX card before its expiration

Work Authorization

The right to work varies by residency category:

- Pensionados and rentistas are prohibited from working as employees in Costa Rica, though they may own businesses and receive profits (but not salaries).
- Digital nomad visa holders can only work for foreign companies or clients.
- Permanent residents and certain categories of temporary residents with special permission may work legally as employees.

Unauthorized employment can result in loss of residency status and deportation.

Path to Citizenship

For those interested in eventually becoming Costa Rican citizens, the general requirements include:

- Seven years of legal residency (five for Central Americans and Spaniards)
- Demonstration of Spanish language proficiency
- Knowledge of Costa Rican history and civics
- Clean criminal record
- Renunciation of previous citizenship (though dual citizenship is tolerated in practice)

Working with Immigration Consultants or Lawyers

Given the complexity of immigration procedures and the language barrier, most expatriates choose to work with professional assistance for their residency applications.

Benefits of Professional Assistance

Working with qualified immigration lawyers or consultants offers several advantages:

- Native Spanish language skills for communication with authorities
- Updated knowledge of frequently changing immigration requirements
- Ability to represent you at appointments, potentially reducing your need to visit offices in person
- Experience navigating bureaucratic challenges and unexpected complications
- Proper preparation of documents to avoid rejections or delays

Selecting the Right Professional

When choosing immigration assistance, consider these factors:

- Experience specifically with your residency category
- Recommendations from other expatriates (online forums and social media groups can be valuable resources)
- Clear communication in your language
- Transparent fee structure with no hidden costs
- Willingness to explain the process rather than simply taking your documents
- Proper licensing (for attorneys, verification through the Costa Rican Bar Association)

Common Fee Structures

Professional fees vary widely based on the services provided:

- Full-service representation typically ranges from \$1,500-3,000 USD for straightforward cases
- Some professionals charge separate fees for document preparation and application submission
- Translation services are often billed separately based on the number of documents
- Additional fees may apply for complex cases or if complications arise When comparing services, ensure you understand precisely what is included in the quoted price and what might incur additional charges.



Red Flags to Watch For

Exercise caution if an immigration professional:

- Promises speedy processing times
- Suggests shortcuts or ways to "workaround" official requirements
- Requires full payment upfront before any services are provided
- Cannot provide references from satisfied clients
- Claims special "connections" within immigration offices

Working Effectively with Your Representative

To ensure a smooth process when working with immigration professionals:

- Provide complete and accurate information about your situation
- Respond promptly to requests for additional documents or clarifications
- Ask questions if you don't understand any aspect of the process
- Keep copies of all original documents
- Maintain realistic expectations about processing times

While professional assistance significantly eases the immigration process, remember that you remain ultimately responsible for your residency status. Stay engaged in the process and ensure you understand the requirements and limitations of your particular residency category.

Throughout your residency application journey, maintaining organized records of all communications, submissions, and receipts will prove invaluable, especially if any questions arise about your status or if you need to transition to a different residency category in the future.

When you are ready, please email us at info@GlobalCitizenLife.org and let us know you are a Masterclass participant. We will then send you email introductions to our partners in Costa Rica.