COSTARICA COSTARICA Contacter class

Module 10 **Practical Tips** www.GlobalCitizenLife.org

© Global Citizen Life LLC

Practical Tips for Day-to-Day Life

Living in Costa Rica requires adjusting to new systems and routines that differ from what you might be accustomed to in your home country. This section provides essential information about navigating daily life in Costa Rica, from transportation options to shopping habits and setting up essential services.

Transportation Options and Driving Rules

Costa Rica offers diverse transportation options depending on your location and needs. Understanding each option helps you make informed decisions about daily travel and longer journeys throughout the country.

Public buses constitute the most extensive and affordable transportation network in Costa Rica. The system connects virtually every town and village across the country, with service frequency varying based on location. In urban areas like San José, buses run frequently from early morning until approximately 10 PM. Intercity routes connect major towns and tourist destinations, though schedules may be less frequent in rural areas. Bus fares are remarkably affordable, typically ranging from \$\psi 250-\$\psi 500\$ (approximately \$0.50-\$1.00) for local routes and \$\psi 2,000-\$\psi 10,000\$ (\$4-\$20) for longer journeys. Most buses operate on a cash-only basis, and seats cannot be reserved in advance except for premium long-distance services.

Taxis provide convenient transportation in cities and towns. Official taxis are red with yellow triangles on the doors and equipped with meters (called "marias"). Always insist on using the meter rather than negotiating a flat rate, as this protects you from overcharging. You may encounter unofficial taxis or "piratas" (pirates) offering transportation services in tourist areas. While sometimes more readily available than official taxis, these unregulated services lack insurance coverage and consistent pricing standards.

Ride-sharing services like Uber operate in larger cities and surrounding areas, providing another convenient option with upfront pricing. The legality of these services has been contested in Costa Rica, though they continue to operate widely, particularly in the Central Valley region.

For those preferring greater independence, driving in Costa Rica offers flexibility but unique challenges. Renting a vehicle typically costs \$40–100 per day, depending on the vehicle type, with mandatory insurance significantly increasing this base price. Four-wheel drive vehicles are strongly recommended for exploring rural areas, particularly during the rainy season when unpaved roads become challenging to navigate.

Costa Rican driving rules generally follow international standards, with driving on the right side of the road and familiar traffic signs. However, road conditions vary dramatically from well-maintained highways to unpaved rural routes with potholes and limited signage. GPS navigation systems often prove unreliable outside major urban centers, with locals commonly providing directions using landmarks rather than street names or addresses. Defensive driving is essential, as you'll encounter diverse hazards, including unmarked road damage, sudden livestock crossings, and varying interpretations of right-of-way rules.

Traffic enforcement has intensified recently, focusing on speeding, seat belt usage, and drunk driving. Police checkpoints are common, especially during holidays and weekends. Always carry your passport or a certified copy, valid driver's license, and vehicle documents during any journey. Traffic violations incur substantial fines, commonly ranging from \$100 to \$400, depending on the infraction.

For intercity travel, domestic flights operated by carriers like Sansa and Aerobell connect major destinations, significantly reducing travel times compared to driving. These small aircraft services typically cost \$50–150 one-way and provide spectacular aerial views of the country's diverse landscapes.



Shopping, Dining, and Entertainment

Costa Rica offers diverse shopping experiences ranging from modern malls to traditional markets. Understanding where to find specific items helps establish comfortable daily routines while managing costs effectively.

Costa Rica features several supermarket chains for groceries, including Automercado (higher-end with imported products), Más x Menos and Fresh Market (mid-range), and Palí and Megasuper (budget-friendly basics). These stores carry familiar products, though imported items command premium prices. Local produce, coffee, and dairy products are generally quality and affordable.

Supplement supermarket shopping with visits to weekly farmers' markets called "ferias," typically held on weekends in most communities. These markets offer the freshest produce at significantly lower prices while providing opportunities to practice Spanish and meet local vendors.

For household goods, stores like EPA, Pequeño Mundo, and Universal carry everything from kitchenware to furniture and electronics. Due to import taxes, imported appliances cost considerably more than in North America or Europe. Consider bringing essential small electronics from home, ensuring they can handle Costa Rica's 110-volt electrical system (similar to the US and Canada).

When dining out, Costa Rica offers options for every budget. Traditional Costa Rican restaurants called "sodas" serve hearty, affordable meals centered around the national dish "casado"—a plate combining rice, beans, plantains, salad, and a protein choice, typically costing \$5–7. Midrange restaurants in tourist areas and cities offer broader menus with meals ranging from \$10–20 per person. High–end establishments, particularly in San José and beach destinations, feature international cuisine with prices comparable to major US cities (\$25+ per person).

Tipping practices differ from North American standards. Most restaurants automatically add a 10% service charge to bills, making additional tipping optional though appreciated for exceptional service. Rounding up taxi fares is customary but not mandatory. Tour guides typically expect tips of \$5–10 per person for half-day excursions.

For entertainment, Costa Rica emphasizes outdoor recreation, with numerous national parks, beaches, and natural attractions charging entrance fees between \$5-20. Urban areas offer movie theaters showing films in English with Spanish subtitles, and cultural venues like the National Theater host performances throughout the year. Nightlife centers around local bars called "cantinas" in smaller towns, while larger cities and tourist destinations feature more diverse options, including dance clubs, live music venues, and casinos. Entertainment costs vary widely but generally remain lower than in North America and Europe.

Internet, Phone, and Utilities Setup

Establishing reliable utilities and communication services is a priority in Costa Rica. Understanding provider options and setup procedures helps ensure smooth transitions.

For internet service, the primary providers include Kolbi (the state telecommunications company), Cabletica, Tigo, and Claro. Coverage and reliability vary significantly by location, making it essential to consult neighbors about local service quality before committing to a provider.

Fiber optic connections have expanded in urban areas and popular expat communities, offering speeds up to 100Mbps. Service often relies on copper infrastructure with correspondingly slower speeds in more remote locations. Monthly costs range from \$30-80 depending on connection type and speed. Initial installation typically requires proof of residency, identification, and sometimes a service deposit.

Mobile phone service operates through the same major providers—Kolbi, Claro, Movistar (Telefónica), and Liberty. Both prepaid and postpaid plans are available, with prepaid options providing flexibility for newcomers still establishing residency. SIM cards cost approximately \$5 and can be purchased at provider stores, airports, and many convenience stores.

Prepaid data packages typically range from \$5-20 for 2-10GB of data, valid for 30 days. For long-term residents, postpaid plans offer better value, with monthly packages starting at around \$25 for comprehensive service. Coverage is generally excellent in populated areas but can be limited in remote regions, particularly mountainous zones.

Depending on location, electricity in Costa Rica is provided primarily by ICE (Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad) or regional cooperatives. The electrical system uses 110 volts with American-style plugs, making most North American appliances compatible without adapters. Service activation requires visiting the local provider office with identification, property documentation (rental agreement or ownership papers), and sometimes a security deposit. Billing occurs monthly with costs reflecting relatively high electricity rates—currently averaging \$0.20-0.25 per kilowatt-hour compared to the US average of \$0.14. To manage costs, many residents install energy-efficient appliances and limit air conditioning use, typically representing the largest electricity bill component.

Water service is managed by AyA (Instituto Costarricense de Acueductos y Alcantarillados) in most areas. Connection requires similar documentation to electricity service. Water quality varies by region, with generally safe drinking water in urban areas and popular expatriate communities. Many residents in rural areas rely on well water or install filtration systems for additional safety. Water bills are typically lower than electricity, averaging \$20-40 monthly for standard residential usage.

Waste management services vary dramatically by municipality. Urban areas generally provide regular collection, while rural residents might need to transport waste to central collection points. Recycling programs exist but differ in comprehensiveness depending on location. In communities without formal recycling collection, private recycling centers accept sorted materials.

For television service, cable and satellite options are available through providers like Cabletica, Tigo, and Sky. Basic packages start around \$30 monthly, with premium channels and international programming available at higher price points. Many expatriates increasingly rely on streaming services, though some content may be geo-restricted, necessitating VPN services to access programming from their home countries.

Understanding utility payment systems helps avoid service interruptions. Most providers offer automatic bank drafts, online payment portals, and payment options through local banks, convenient stores like BAC Credomatic and Banco Nacional, and stores displaying the "Pago de Servicios" sign. Late payments typically result in prompt service disconnection, making timely bill management essential.

By familiarizing yourself with these day-to-day systems and establishing reliable services early in your transition, you'll create a comfortable foundation for your new life in Costa Rica. This will allow you to focus on enjoying all the country has to offer rather than struggling with basic necessities.