**Country Guide: Costa Rica**

**Country Description**: Costa Rica is a Central American country known for its rainforests, beaches and peaceful *pura vida* way of life. More economically and politically stable than most of its regional neighbors, Costa Ricans, or *ticos*, take pride in the fact that they have no standing army. In line with this, the people of Costa Rica are its true stand-out feature. Warm, open and always eager help a lost or struggling tourist, the ticosyou meet in Costa Rica are what make a visit to this tiny tropical country truly unforgettable.

**Culture**: Coffee is king in Costa Rica, and you can see it in the Central Valley’s rolling green plantations, and sip it *con leche* in local cafés. Costa Ricans lead a laid-back lifestyle, where nobody hurries and things will get done *ma*ñ*ana.* In the Central Valley, urban ticos work hard, but spend their weekends strolling around the *Parque Central* with family, or packing a picnic and heading to the mountains for a day of crisp air and relaxation. Young ticos like their nightlife, which usually includes drinks and dancing, sometimes until dawn. There’s salsa and merengue everywhere, of course, but you’ll hear lots of reggae and its offshoot, reggaetone, too, especially as you near the beach.

Costa Rican beaches have a culture all their own. In Santa Teresa, on the Nicoya Peninsula, surfing is taken with a seriousness rivaling religion. Further northwest, the beaches of Guanacaste draw surfers, too, but here they mix with a more polished crowd, which enjoys creature comforts after a day in the waves. If a rough–around-the-edges Rasta and dreadlock culture is more your speed, head instead to the Caribbean beaches of Cahuita and Puerto Viejo and watch the world go by to an even slower beat.

**Things to do and see:** Costa Rica is the most popular tourist destination in Central America for a reason. Every corner of this small but wildly diverse country bursts with ecological wonders, and you are never far from your next outdoor adventure. If you’re a beach lover, take your pick of endless, postcard perfect coastline, or surf one of the country’s many sought after waves, like *Salsa Brava* in the Caribbean. Animal enthusiasts will love the diversity and accessibility of Costa Rica’s many wild things. Watch sea turtles hatch on the Caribbean beaches of Tortuguero Village, see howler monkeys swing from trees in stunning Manuel Antonio National Park, or try to spot toucans on the scenic drive in between.

When you’re ready to escape the heat of the beach, head for Costa Rica’s misty mountains, where you can zip-line through the treetops of Monteverde Cloud Forest, then visit Volcan Arenal and soak in the lava-heated hot springs of its home town, charming La Fortuna. Those wanting even more adventure can hike the country’s highest peak, Chirripó, and be rewarded with a view of the entire country, from Pacific to Caribbean coast.

**Economy:** Though more prosperous that its Central American neighbors, Costa Rica, while growing economically, is still a developing country and many still struggle with poverty and unemployment. Exports such as coffee, pineapples and bananas, once a mainstay of Costa Rica’s economy, have recently dropped in rank as Costa Rica’s primary source of income. These days, ecotourism accounts for a large share of the country’s revenue. In addition, the government’s offer of tax exemptions to foreign companies willing to invest in Costa Rica has resulted in an influx of industries such as global technology, pharmaceuticals, and financial outsourcing.

**Costs comparison:** 1 U.S. dollar = 500 Costa Rican *colones*.

People will tell you that Costa Rica has changed—that it’s expensive now, but it’s still a Central American country with a developing economy. True, everything—including eating out and renting a room-- costs more at the beaches and other tourist destinations, but where you’ll probably be teaching English (the Central Valley), rent, food and transportation are still quite cheap. You might pay 300 USD for a small apartment, or 400 if it’s furnished. Produce can be bought dirt cheap at *ferias*, or farmer’s markets, weekly. Eating out rivals Western prices, especially if you opt for fancier restaurants over small local cafes (called, confusingly, *sodas)*.

**Safety concerns:** Costa Rica is known as the Switzerland of Central America, which refers in part to its peaceful, democratic way of life. Costa Rica does not have a problem with violent crime, except perhaps in the dodgier parts of San José, which you will likely avoid. Petty crime, however, is not uncommon both in the Central Valley and also at the beaches, where tourists may be targeted. A healthy awareness of this fact can prevent you from becoming a victim. Don’t carry much cash when you go out, keep your passport concealed under your clothes rather than in your purse or pocket, and avoid walking anywhere alone at night, especially after a few drinks.

**Demand for teachers**: Costa Rica has a huge demand for English teachers, especially in the Central Valley.

**Major TEFL cities:** San José Heredia, Escazú and surrounding (often charming) suburbs of these cities.

**Student Profile**: At a language institute, most of the students you’ll be teaching will be college students and adult professionals. You will likely teach some kids classes, too, perhaps on weekends. It’s also possible to get a job at a private bilingual elementary, middle or high school, if you prefer to teach only children. These positions often require a teaching license rather than a TEFL certificate, but qualifications vary.

**Typical salary**: Like much of Latin America, teachers in Costa Rica make enough to support themselves comfortably (without the necessity of outside income), but will probably not be able to save any money or pay student loan bills easily. A typical salary range is 800-1000 USD per month, working about 30 hours per week. It’s possible to make more per month teaching at a private bilingual school (K-12), rather than a language institute, but hours are longer. Teachers can pick up private students on the side to supplement their income, at a rate of around 10 USD per hour.

**Teaching hours**: A typical teaching schedule at a language institute is 4-9 PM, Monday through Friday, and perhaps one weekend day (this often rotates). If you teach for an institute that caters to business professionals, you might travel to your students’ place of work, teaching them on a split schedule either before or after work.

**Typical contract length:** Employers tend to prefer hiring teachers for one-year contracts, though it’s possible to find six-month contracts, as well, and potentially even shorter.

**Peak hiring season**: Positions are generally available at language institutes year round, but it’s best to arrive a month or so before the semesters start in February, April and August.

**Preferred hiring requirements**: While English schools in Costa Rica abound, the better institutes will require that you have an onsite TEFL certificate and a college degree (in any subject). If you have an online certificate or do not hold a bachelor’s degree, you can certainly still find teaching vacancies, as demand is high for teachers and new language institutes are continually cropping up.

**Employers provide**: Your teaching contract in Costa Rica will not likely include housing or other benefits such as flight reimbursement or health insurance. However, employers will usually assist you in finding suitable housing.

**How to find jobs**: While you may see some teaching vacancies advertised on TEFL job boards, the majority of language institutes hire teachers who are already in the country. Therefore, to get teaching jobs, it’s a good idea to contact schools directly before you go, in order to set up interviews for after you arrive. It’s important to arrive in peak hiring months, such as January, March and July. Expect to spend a couple of weeks interviewing before landing a job. Bring enough money to support yourself until your first payday, which may be at the end of your first month of teaching.

**Interview tips:** *Ticos* are very put together and take pride in their appearance and personal grooming. Regardless of the laid back atmosphere of Costa Rica, you should dress professionally for an interview, just as you would at home. Bring a copy of your resume, TEFL certificate and degree, as well as a recent photo.

**Work visa process**: Work visas are extremely hard to come by, in part because the process is expensive and time-consuming for employers, especially in light of the fact that TEFL teachers may only stay six months to a year. Therefore, English teachers in Costa Rica generally work on the tourist visa they received when entering the country. This visa will expire 90 days, but can be renewed by leaving Costa Rica for 72 hours (for a weekend in Nicaragua or Panama, for example) and returning, upon which your passport will be re-stamped for an additional 90 days.

**Recommended courses:** Your best option is to take a TEFL course in San José, then begin work afterward. This is because Costa Rican language institutes do not typically hire from abroad, preferring to meet face-to-face first. Taking the course in San José will give you the benefit of job placement assistance from the staff, so that you can find a position immediately after you graduate.

Your next best option is to get TEFL certified via an onsite course in your home country, such as taking the Cambridge CELTA in Denver, Colorado. You will then arrive in Costa Rica fully qualified, and start applying for jobs once there.

Your third best option is to get TEFL certified online, then arrive in Costa Rica and find a position. Online courses of at least 100 hours are accepted by many, but not all, employers in Costa Rica.

**Contact us**: If you have additional questions about teaching in Costa Rica, call Bridge to speak to an advisor. Ask for Jennifer, who taught in Costa Rica for three years!