

## Is Living in Costa Rica Right For You?

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Are you dreading another dark and icy winter up North, depressed by your country's politics and security issues, anxious about making ends meet or in a dead-end job?

Like many others these days, you may dream of alternatives to your current living situation. The idea of leaving behind the stress and expense of the States, Canada or Europe and heading south to the sun has great appeal.

And peaceful, beautiful, friendly Costa Rica seems to fit the bill perfectly. Like any other life-changing decision, however, you need to gather the facts and as much information as possible, but it's also important to get the right attitude before moving to a completely different country.

Without going completely native, learning to adapt and bend to things you can't change really is the path to a new stress-free and fulfilling life.

Costa Rica attracts people from retired or near retirement-age professionals, worried parents disenchanted with the environment that their children are growing up in, rat-race escapees and adventure seekers looking for a challenge.

If you are reading this, then you may recognize yourself among these people. Perhaps you first learned about this peace-loving Central American country through magazine articles, possibly saw a documentary on the television or you have been browsing the articles on this Web site, and have an impression of wonderful climate, welcoming locals, exotic surroundings, cheap cost of living and well... a tropical haven ideal for relocation.

In recent decades, thousands of foreigners have done just that and adopted Costa Rica as their full-time home. For many of these new settlers, it is a dream fulfilled - they buy or build homes, keep busy, get a social life, start a business and happily adapt to life "Tico" (Costa Rican) style.

For the many who have happily settled in Costa Rica, however, there are a few who haven't been able to do so and after a year, they are packing up and heading out again.

This can be put down to two basic factors.

- They have not been able to accept the differences in culture, language and people
- They didn't do their homework beforehand and carefully plan for the many aspects of relocating to a foreign country.

It's important to remember that things aren't exactly like 'back home'. After all, isn't that why you are thinking of coming here in the first place?

There are similarities of course, but take away the US style malls, fast-food outlets and sophisticated nightspots and Costa Rica is very much a Latin American country, with its own definite culture, society, family traditions and approach to how things should be done.

Waiting for an hour in a bank line won't make it move any faster if you rant and rave; needing twelve photos for some residency requirement might seem excessive but there's no point in scowling at the camera; moaning at the traffic cop because you don't understand why he's stopped you isn't going to help.

These are simply a few frustrations to life here, but compared to the 'negatives' you have left back home, are they worth losing your cool about?

That's just the way things are - you aren't going to change the system, so you have to be ready to change some of your own attitudes to work with the system. Be tolerant, be patient, remind yourself of the loads of advantages there are to being in Costa Rica and work around the hurdles in your path.

It is certainly not my wish to prevent anyone coming to Costa Rica but I am sometimes amazed at some recent arrivals who spend their time bashing their adopted country, blaming everything but their inability to fit in.

After living in Ecuador and Colombia for 27 years, coming to Costa Rica has been a positive and welcome change for me. Compared to Ecuador, I feel safer and more accepted into a wide expatriate and local community, and if I have found things to be more expensive, more 'Americanised', less third-world colorful, I have also found less extreme

poverty, less crime, and less day to day hassle and certainly far less official unpleasantness, delay and inefficiency than my years further south.

### Try Before You Buy

Perhaps the best recommendation I can make is to come and visit. Before buying a car, you take a test drive first. Relocation to a foreign country is also a major investment and it is important to 'test drive' the country first.

Ideally, you should consider spending at least a month or two getting to know Costa Rica - from the inside. It's just not enough to do a week's flying visit and expect to get the picture. It's important to get under the tourist veneer and look for the real Costa Rica that might become your home.

"Introductory tours" are available that bring down potential settlers and offer seminars and whistle-stop visits around the country. Whilst providing helpful information, some of the professionals involved have vested interests in wooing your custom and may not provide a balanced appraisal of what day-to-day living is like. Give one a try certainly, but then extend the visit to travel around by yourself.

Successful, content expatriates are often those who have made several visits over the years before finally making the decision to move permanently and finding which part of the country will suit their needs best.

The country is small but very varied and time should be spent in different areas to find out both the positive and negative aspects to each region. The view from that mountain refuge might be gorgeous but what about utilities, access, communications?

Would you be able to tolerate the soaring temperatures and high humidity along some parts of the coast? Do you really want the isolation of the Guanacaste peninsula however beautiful or the cosmopolitan bustle of San José - where is the best mid-way compromise?

You should try to meet other expatriates who have made the transition into the 'Tico' lifestyle. There are many popular watering holes both in the Central Valley and on the beaches to meet with and chat to foreign residents.

English-speaking clubs in San José are worth contacting to find out their angle. Most don't charge for a first visit and you will get to hear about the real 'ins and outs' of what happens here.

### Scoring High with your Homework

As well as giving the country a thorough test drive by coming for an extended visit, do your homework before finally committing to a move. Find out as much as possible about what will be required.

You will save yourself expense, worry and possible disappointment by looking carefully into several main areas such as these:

- Residency requirements
- If setting up a business interests you, what is involved?
- Accessing your income if you depend on a pension or income from outside
- Where to live and what climate?
- Health concerns
- Education of your children
- Getting around

And you need to consider carefully other factors that will influence your successful integration into life here such as learning Spanish or whether you will still have close ties back home that might need you to fly back on a regular basis or even where you are going to find friends.

Looking around this website will help provide much background and answers to these questions and it is well worth reading books, such as Mavis Biesanz' "The Ticos" which is a treasure trove of background information and facts.

In the end, however, it could be your outlook and attitude that can make it or break it - if you can keep a perspective on what you want to move away from and be ready to accept that some things are 'different' here, then you are well on your way to becoming another happy expat down here in Costa Rica.

Vicky Longland loves living in Costa Rica and writes articles for WeLoveCostaRica.com, home of stunning scenery,

sunshine & smiles. Get your free 'Costa Rica Living & Retirement Insider's Guide' at <http://www.welovecostarica.com/public/department69.cfm>