



Costa Rica 2019 Crime & Safety Report



This is an annual report produced in conjunction with the Regional Security Office at the U.S. Embassy in San José.

The current U.S. Department of State [Travel Advisory](#) at the date of this report's publication assesses Costa Rica at Level 1, indicating travelers should exercise normal precautions. Exercise increased caution in Central neighborhood in Limon, all of Liberia city, Desamparados neighborhood in San Rafael, and Pavas and Hospital neighborhoods San José, all due to crime.

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

The U.S. Embassy in San José does not assume responsibility for the professional ability or integrity of the individuals or firms appearing in this report. The ACS Unit cannot recommend a particular individual or location and assumes no responsibility for the quality of service provided. Review OSAC's [Costa Rica-specific](#) webpage for proprietary analytic reports, Consular Messages, and contact information.

Crime Threats

There is considerable risk from crime in San José. Crime is a consistent and significant concern throughout Costa Rica. While the vast majority of visitors to Costa Rica do not become victims of crime, all individuals are potential targets for criminals. The majority of crime and safety threats to U.S. official and private communities are opportunistic acts of theft. U.S. citizens commonly report theft of travel documents. Theft is common in highly populated and tourist areas, particularly in cases where individuals do not closely watch personal belongings, to include beaches and parked vehicles. The most common types of theft that occur include vehicle burglary, home robbery, pickpocketing, smash-and-grab, mugging, and purse/wallet snatching.

Random acts of petty theft remain the primary area of concern; however, armed robberies do occur. Crimes that are more serious (e.g. armed robbery, sexual assault, and homicide) do occur, although less frequently. There is generally a spike in home burglary and robbery during the holiday season. If a thief confronts you, remain calm and do not resist. Most victims of theft receive injuries when they resist a criminal or try to fight back.

Practice good situational awareness with regard to passports. Theft of travel documents is a common complaint among foreign visitors – particularly during peak tourism season in the dry season (December – April), when criminals take advantage of larger crowds. Use a well-secured safe or lockbox wherever you stay. Leave passports in a hotel safe or other secure location, carrying a photocopy or picture on your smartphone of the biographical and entry stamp pages.

The most widely used indicator of crime is the homicide rate. In 2018, there was a decrease from 2017's record-high murder rate. In 2018, there were 584 murders, or 11.6 murders per 100,000 people, per the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. The main factor driving this level of violence is competition among local groups engaged in the sale and transportation of drugs.



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During the past few years, the Government of Costa Rica has passed legislation and undertaken a public campaign to curb promotion of the country as a destination for sex tourism, and to highlight the legal risks of sexually exploiting minors. Tourists who engage in or solicit prostitution exponentially increase their chances of being a victim of theft or violent robbery, or arrested for violating Costa Rica's trafficking-in-persons laws.

Organized crime is an increasing concern. Costa Rican nationals and foreign nationals alike participate in organized crime involving car theft rings, drug traffickers, petty theft, and burglary. Organized criminals use less-monitored areas on Costa Rica's borders and beaches to traffic drugs and other types of contraband. Due to its geographic location, criminal organizations favor Costa Rica as a location to commit financial crimes, including money laundering and financial scams. To address this trend, in 2017 Costa Rica completed its anti-money laundering legal framework and strengthened implementation of these laws. Proceeds from international narcotics trafficking represent the largest source of assets laundered in Costa Rica, although human trafficking, financial fraud, corruption, and contraband smuggling also generate illicit revenue.

Credit card theft/fraud is also a common crime for visitors. Many victims maintain physical possession of their cards, but scammers steal their credit card information and later use it without their knowledge. For more information, review OSAC's Report, [The Overseas Traveler's Guide to ATM Skimmers & Fraud.](#)

Other Areas of Concern

The downtown area of San José is a tourist destination during daylight hours; limit visits after dark due to increased crime potential. Avoid overt displays of wealth, and limit travel to established and frequently visited areas in order to avoid being in the wrong place at the wrong time. U.S. government officials may not stay in certain hotels in downtown San José due to safety concerns.

When traveling in remote areas or by boat, be mindful of limited mobile phone reception and limited first responder access.

Transportation-Safety Situation

For more information, review OSAC's Report, [Security in Transit: Airplanes, Public Transport, and Overnights.](#)

Road Safety and Road Conditions

U.S. citizens commonly report motor vehicle accidents. Driving can be extremely challenging, even to the most experienced driver. Roads are often in poor condition; large potholes are common and can cause severe damage to vehicles. Additionally, most roads are insufficient for the quantity and types of vehicles using these roads; this often results in significant traffic jams and delays, which can lead to aggressive driving behavior, and accidents, which can significantly affect travel times and hinder law enforcement, medical, and fire department response to an emergency. Drivers often ignore traffic laws and speed limits, and rarely use turn signals. Passing on dangerous stretches of highway is common. Drivers do not give pedestrians the right of way.



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Motorcyclists commonly drive without respect to rules of the road, often passing on the right, weaving in and out of traffic without warning, and creating lanes where none officially exists. Heavy traffic provides the opportunity for thieves to steal property left in plain view in vehicles. Another challenge confronting drivers is the lack of street signs/names, which makes finding an address extremely difficult, even with a GPS. Visitors planning to drive should practice defensive driving and exercise common sense. For more information on self-driving, review OSAC's Report [Driving Overseas: Best Practices](#).

Obey all traffic regulations and be familiar with road conditions prior to traveling. Traffic Police occasionally enforce traffic rules; citations can be costly and you must pay before leaving the country. Road conditions may change drastically and suddenly due to weather, construction, or accessibility. The government has imposed a law restricting cars from operating in downtown San José on certain days of the week, depending on the last number on a vehicle's license plate. This tactic has proven to relieve some of the traffic congestion. However, major traffic delays remain a common daily occurrence. In 2018, several large-scale road construction projects generated even more traffic congestion than usual.

Driving outside of San José at night can be treacherous due to narrow or poorly maintained roads, many of which lack adequate lighting, markings, guardrails, and street signs. During the rainy season (May-November), landslides and washed out roads are a common occurrence.

The accident and related fatality rate for pedestrians, bicyclists, and motorcyclists is high. Due to a lack of resources, the Traffic Police are not proactive and do not regularly monitor roads. They mainly respond to traffic accidents. Costa Rica law prohibits the movement of vehicles involved in an accident prior to the arrival of investigative authorities. Those involved in traffic accidents should prepare for a significant wait. As a result, single-lane roads of travel can often back up for miles. The Government of Costa Rica may prevent any driver involved in a vehicular accident from departing the country until all injury claims are settled. This is true even if the driver is not at fault or covered by insurance. The courts often delay settlement until all injured parties have recovered fully and the costs are definitive. As a result, authorities may prohibit travelers from leaving the country until they reach a local judicial resolution.

Public Transportation Conditions

Only use taxicabs from reputable companies. Official, registered taxis are red or orange with a yellow triangle on the side door and functioning meters. The triangle will include a designated number that matches the number on the taxi's license plate.

Uber is available and popular in Costa Rica. There are ongoing disputes between Uber and the taxi union, resulting in government and some private banking sector actions against Uber. For more information on ride sharing, review OSAC's Annual Briefing Report [Safety and Security in the Share Economy](#).



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Aviation/Airport Conditions

There are two main international airports in Costa Rica.

- Juan Santamaria International Airport (SJO) is located approximately 12 miles west of downtown San José. It is the primary airport serving international travelers to the country's capital and central valley regions. SJO is the second busiest airport in Central America, with approximately 15 international airlines serving over four million passengers annually.
- Daniel Oduber Quiros International Airport (LIR, more commonly known as Liberia International Airport) is located in Guanacaste Province. It serves as a tourism hub for visitors to the Pacific coast and western Costa Rica.

In general, air travel is reliable without major security concerns or unnecessary travel delays. Changes in weather conditions and increased levels of volcanic ash can cause flight cancellations or delays.

In addition to the larger international airports, multiple smaller airports and airstrips serve various regions within the country through smaller domestic carriers and a variety of charter flights. Smaller domestic carriers and charter flights do not have the same type of oversight and regulation as the commercial aviation industry in the United States.

Various agencies, including U.S. Customs and Border Protection, and Transportation Security Administration, work closely with the Government of Costa Rica to improve airport procedures for the increased safety of passengers and efficiency of airport operations.

Terrorism Threat

There is minimal risk from terrorism in San José. There are no specific threats of terrorism regarding Costa Rica. Due to Costa Rica's relatively porous borders, the threat for terrorist elements to use the country as a transit point does exist.

Anti-U.S./Anti-Western Sentiment

Costa Rica is generally free from anti-U.S. sentiment. Costa Ricans regard U.S. and other Western travelers in a positive manner, and exhibit overall friendliness toward foreigners. Due to the country's reputation as a leader in ecotourism and biodiversity, Costa Rica now receives almost three million tourists annually from around the world. National and local authorities and businesses work to maintain the country's positive image as an attractive tourism destination.



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Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

Costa Rica has a long tradition of stability and democracy. The country has not had a military since 1948. It takes pride in its peaceful nature and efforts to maintain neutrality.

Civil Unrest

There is minimal risk from civil unrest in San José. Protests occur in the heavily populated areas on occasion and typically center on fair pay and working conditions. Protests are generally peaceful. However, avoid all protests as a safety precaution and as to avoid any perception of interfering in local politics. The Constitution bars foreigners from political activity; authorities could arrest any foreigners involved with protests – even peaceful ones.

In September 2018, protests and civil unrest in the country caused a rare disruption of daily life. Labor union strikes across multiple sectors of the economy, large assemblies of demonstrators, taxi and public transportation static protests on highways, road blockades on major thoroughfares, and isolated instances of sabotage and looting resulted in a temporary deterioration of the security environment in the country. For more information, review OSAC's Report, [Civil Unrest in Costa Rica](#).

Post-Specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

Costa Rica is located in an active earthquake and volcanic zone. The last large earthquake occurred in September 2012, with a magnitude of 7.6. It was one of the largest earthquakes recorded in Costa Rican history, but caused limited damage, considering its size. Smaller earthquakes in the seismic range of 4-5 are much more common and occur throughout the year.

Experts from the Health Ministry and the National University note that fine particulate matter from volcanic ash (frequently from Turrialba and Poas) and automobile exhaust can be a public health concern in the greater metropolitan area, which includes San José and parts of Alajuela, Cartago, and Heredia. These areas are home to approximately 60% of Costa Rica's population, 70% of its vehicle fleet, and 85% of its major industry, according to the National Statistics and Census Institute. In recent years, the average annual amount of fine particle pollution in the greater metropolitan area ranged between 22 and 25 micrograms per cubic meter, more than double the recommended level set by the World Health Organization (WHO).

Serious flooding occurs annually in the Caribbean province of Limón and the Pacific province of Puntarenas. Flash floods and severe landslides occur in other provinces as well, depending on the time of year and rainfall.



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Exercise extreme caution when swimming in the ocean. Many beaches with dangerous rip currents do not have lifeguards or warning signs. U.S. citizens have died in Costa Rica due to these dangers. Check the Costa Rica Tourism Institute (ICT) website, or with your hotel or relevant tour operator to request current information on local swimming and surf conditions. Do not dive into water of unknown depths. Do not swim alone, especially at isolated beaches. Avoid the consumption of alcohol while swimming. If caught in a rip current, swim parallel to the beach and not against the rip current. Once out of the rip current, swim at a 45-degree angle away from the rip current to get back to shore.

Some adventure tourism operators take risks. Government regulation and oversight of firms that organize sporting activities may not always adhere to international standards and best practices. U.S. citizens have died in Costa Rica while participating in adventure sports. Use caution and common sense when engaging in adventure sports (e.g. bungee jumping, sky diving, hiking, rappelling, climbing, whitewater rafting, kayaking). Make sure your medical insurance covers your activity. Never participate in adventure sports alone. Always carry identification and let others know where you are at all times. Before kayaking and rafting, check river conditions and wear a life jacket and helmet. Even popular rafting locations such as the Rio Naranjo near Quepos can become extremely dangerous in flash flood conditions. When hiking, rappelling, or climbing, carry a first aid kit and know the location of the nearest rescue center. Observe all local or park regulations and exercise caution in unfamiliar surroundings.

Do not visit Turrialba Volcano National Park due to continuing volcanic activity. Access to the park remains restricted. On occasion, Poas Volcano National Park has also closed temporarily due to volcanic activity. Check on the status of Poas before traveling to the park. Obtain additional information regarding volcanic activity and other natural disasters in Costa Rica from the following Costa Rican websites (in Spanish):

- [Costa Rican National Emergency Commission](#)
- [Costa Rican Volcanic and Seismic Observatory](#)

Economic Concerns

Costa Rica has been on the U.S. Trade Representative's Special 301 Watch List for deficiencies in its protection of intellectual property rights. Nonetheless, many U.S. companies with extensive intellectual property rights maintain business operations in Costa Rica.

Personal Identity Concerns

Same-sex sexual activity is legal in Costa Rica, and the law protects against discrimination based on sexual orientation. In very limited situations, cultural or religious ideologies may lead to discrimination based on sexual orientation.



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Drug-related Crimes

Costa Rica's strategic location, unevenly monitored borders, limited security forces, and thinly patrolled waters make it a major transit and temporary storage country for illicit drugs. The recently increasing homicide rate is partly due to the increase in organized drug trafficking and associated activities. As the number and size of groups associated with narco-trafficking has increased, so has the presence of illegal drugs, greater domestic consumption, and associated turf wars. The government is steadily increasing its spending on law enforcement agencies, and improving its focus on counter-narcotics programs and organized crime. A key factor in combating the increasing drug-related criminal activity is the strong security cooperation with the U.S. Government. The recent accomplishments in Costa Rica's counter-narcotics programs are due in part to the improvements in equipment, training, and infrastructure achieved in cooperation with the U.S. Government.

Kidnapping Threat

The kidnapping rate is very low, and kidnappings rarely involve U.S. citizens. The majority of kidnappings are a result of feuds between rival criminal organizations. For more information, review OSAC's Report, [Kidnapping: The Basics](#).

Police Response

As in the United States, the police emergency line is 911; however, response times may vary due to the availability of manpower/vehicles, location, time of day, and severity of the accident, particularly outside of San José or major tourist centers.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

Police will give detained U.S. citizens the opportunity to contact friends or family. Those detained by law enforcement should immediately contact the U.S. Embassy at 2519-2000. Harassment of foreigners is not common; should it occur, report the incident to the U.S. Embassy. A defendant has a right to a public defender and translator services.

Crime Victim Assistance

Report a crime in action to Fuerza Publica by calling 911.

To have a crime investigated/prosecuted, report it to *Organismo de Investigación* (OIJ, the investigative/judicial police).

Police emergency, Ambulance, Fire – 911

OIJ – 911, 2295-3639, or 2295-3640

Tourist Police – 2586-4620, 2586-4287, 2586-4457, 2586-4458, or 2586-4143

U.S. Embassy – 2519-2000



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Police/Security Agencies

- *Fuerza Publica*: Uniformed police agency. Performs ground security, law enforcement, counter narcotics, and border patrol functions. This agency is within the Ministry of Public Security.
- *Organismo de Investigación (OIJ)*: Agency that investigates all crimes for prosecution. This agency is within the Poder Judicial (judicial branch).
- *Policía de Transito*: Transit police enforces traffic laws and responds to all traffic accidents. This agency is within the Ministry of Transportation and Public Works.
- *Directorate de Inteligencia y Seguridad (DIS)*: The intelligence agency, within the Ministry of the President.
- *Unidad Especial de Intervención (UEI)*: Special weapons and tactics police unit, specializing in explosives.
- *Migración*: Controls immigration at the borders; Overland ports of entry, sea ports, airports, and maintaining the immigrant detention center for pending deportees; within the Ministry of Governorship and Police.

Medical Emergencies

Medical care in San José is adequate. Most hospitals require payment or deposit up front for services. Public hospitals generally do not accept private insurance, though private hospitals will, if the plan includes suitable coverage for care while abroad. To receive coverage under the Costa Rican public health system, an individual must be a Costa Rican citizen or have residency. The Costa Rican government can place a departure impediment on individuals who attempt to depart without paying medical bills.

Contact Information for Recommended Hospitals/Clinics

San José

Hospital CIMA* – 2208-1000

Hospital Mexico – 2242-6700

Hospital Clínica Bíblica* – 2522-1000

Hospital Calderón Guardia – 2212-1000

National Children's Hospital (Hospital Nacional de Niños) – 2523-3600

Hospital Clínica Católica (Private) San Antonio de Guadalupe – San José – 2246-3000

Hospital Metropolitano (private & Services U.S. Veterans) – San José, principle headquarters: + (506) 2521-9595

*CIMA and Clínica Bíblica will require payment up-front for non-emergency care.

Puntarenas: Hospital Monseñor Sanabria – 2630-8000

Limón: Tony Facio Hospital – 2758-2222

Guanacaste: Enrique Baltodano Hospital – 2690-2300

Ciudad Nelly (Closest to Panama): Hospital Ciudad Nelly – 2785-9600

Nicoya: Hospital Anexión – 2685-8400



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Los Chiles: Hospital Los Chiles – 2471-2000
San Carlos: Hospital de San Carlos – 2460-1176
Cartago: Hospital Max Peralta – 2550-1999
Pérez Zeledón: Hospital Escalante Padilla – 2785-0700
Alajuela: Hospital San Rafael de Alajuela – 2436-1001
Heredia: Hospital San Vicente de Paul – 2562-8100, 2563-8352

Available Air Ambulance Services

[REVA](tel:1-800-753-4195): 1-800-753-4195.

Insurance Guidance

Medicare and Medicaid do not offer coverage outside the United States. Review insurance plans to guarantee coverage in the event of an emergency during travel. Consider supplemental medical insurance with specific overseas coverage, including a provision for medical evacuation (medevac) before traveling.

Country-Specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

The CDC issued updated guidance on the [Zika virus](#) that adds Costa Rica to the list of countries that have ongoing cases of Zika transmission. The CDC offers additional information on vaccines and health guidance for [Costa Rica](#).

OSAC Country Council Information

The San José Country Council currently meets quarterly by invitation only. Please contact OSAC's [Western Hemisphere](#) team with any questions.

U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information

Embassy Address

U.S. Embassy San José, Calle 98 Vía 104, Pavas, San José
(Across the street from Centro Comercial del Oeste Pavas)
Business Hours: Monday-Friday, 0800 – 1630

Embassy Contact Numbers

Switchboard: 2519-2000
RSO Office: 2519-2313
American Citizens Services Section: 2519-2590
Consular Visa Inquiries: 4000-1976

Website: <https://cr.usembassy.gov/>

Additional Resource: [Costa Rica Country Information Sheet](#)



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