



OSAC Country Security Report

Costa Rica

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This report is intended to supplement the U.S. Department of State Costa Rica Travel Advisory and [Costa Rica Country Information Page](#).

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OSAC Country Chapter(s)

San Jose has an active OSAC chapter.

Contact [OSAC's Americas team](#) with any questions.

Costa Rica Travel Advisory

The current U.S. Department of State [Travel Advisory](#) at the date of this report's publication assesses that travelers should exercise increased caution when traveling to Costa Rica due to crime.

Crime

The U.S. Department of State has assessed San Jose as being a **HIGH**-threat location for crime directed at or affecting official U.S. government interests.

The U.S. Department of State has included a Crime "C" Indicator on the Travel Advisory for Costa Rica, indicating that there may be widespread violent crime and/or organized crime present in the country, and/or that local law enforcement may have limited ability to respond to serious crimes.

Crime is a concern in Costa Rica, with non-violent petty crime occurring most frequently. All individuals are potential targets for criminals. Most crime and safety threats to U.S. citizens are opportunistic acts of theft. According to Costa Rican law enforcement, the kinds of crimes that most affect U.S. citizens in Costa Rica include robbery, theft, and assault, with all other crimes reported against U.S. citizens occurring very rarely over the period of 2020-2023. Intentional homicide against U.S. citizens was especially rare, occurring only five times in the same

timeframe. Overall, random acts of petty theft remain the most likely risk for those operating in Costa Rica.

Theft is common in highly populated and tourist areas, particularly in cases where individuals are not watching personal belongings closely, including leaving items on beaches or in parked vehicles.

U.S. citizens commonly report theft of travel documents. Practice good situational awareness regarding 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. Make a copy of your passport identification and entry stamp pages and leave it in your hotel room or keep a picture of them on your phone.

Only use taxi cabs from reputable companies. Officially registered taxis will be 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 license plate. Rideshares like Uber, Didi, and InDriver are available within Costa Rica and are in heavy use among residents and visitors alike. Ongoing disputes between Uber and the taxi union have resulted in protests and strikes.

Public buses are not always reliable forms of transportation, with fluctuating routes and schedules. If traveling by bus, maintain a flexible schedule. Pickpocketing is common on buses and may target tourists that are perceived as wealthy. If traveling by bus you should keep all valuables close and avoid putting them in compartments out of your line of sight.

The Embassy is aware of reports of robbery at rental properties in isolated locations. Research any rental homes to ensure they have adequate security and remember to properly secure all doors and windows. While home burglaries increased year-on-year from 2020 to 2022, a decrease followed in 2023.

More serious crimes, such as armed robbery, sexual assault, and homicide occur, although less frequently. It is not uncommon for criminals to carry a firearm or other weapons when committing a robbery or burglary. 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 theft-related injuries occur when victims resist or try to fight back.

Costa Rica's homicide rate has increased in recent years from 11.5 homicides per 100,000 residents in 2021, to 12.2 in 2022, followed by a substantial increase to 17.2 homicides per 100,000 people in 2023. With 907 homicides, 2023 set a homicide record for Costa Rica, with most incidents being related to increasing narco-trafficking activity in Costa Rica's. This increased insecurity has led to security being a top political issue in the country. The current Costa Rican administration put forth a new national security plan in 2023 to combat rising homicide rates, including an increase in police officers and greater police presence in violent crime hot spots, among other changes.

The U.S. Embassy in Costa Rica released an [alert](#) in 2023 that features a [map](#) of areas where it is recommended to exercise increased caution. Some additional areas are highlighted below by province. OSAC also issued a report in 2024 on [Crime Trends and its Impacts on U.S. Tourists](#).

Costa Rica remains one of the top, first stop transshipment points for narcotics between South America and the United States and Europe. Costa Rica's strategic location and limited security forces make it a major transit and temporary storage country for illicit drugs. Organized crime is a major concern for the population with it linked to the majority of homicides in 2023. As the number and size of groups associated with narco-trafficking have increased, so has the presence of illegal drugs, greater domestic drug consumption, and associated turf wars. The government is steadily increasing its spending on law enforcement agencies and improving its focus on counternarcotics programs and organized crime.

Costa Ricans and third-country nationals alike participate in organized crime via car theft rings, drug trafficking, 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. Criminal organizations favor Costa Rica's central location to commit financial crimes, including money laundering and financial scams. The Costa Rican government has responded to these trends by increasing funding to hire law enforcement personnel, upgrading infrastructure, and better equipping the Costa Rican Coast Guard, counter-narcotics police, and other security forces.

Along isolated coastal areas where drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) are more likely to operate there is a risk of incidental violence. The main drug transshipment routes go along the West (Pacific) Coast of Costa Rica, originating from Colombia and Ecuador and transiting north. Trafficking routes tend to avoid tourist areas such as beaches, although more remote adventure travel may expose tourists to increased risk.

Costa Rica is a source and transit country for human trafficking involving labor and sex exploitation as well as organ trafficking. The trafficking market has grown in part due to tourist demand for sexual services. Costa Rica is a transit country, primarily to the US, for migrants moving through the Central American corridor. Since 2018, there has been an increase in human smuggling at the northern border, with many migrants using irregular crossing points with the help of 'coyote' networks. Since 2018, Chinese smuggling networks with contacts in Asia, Europe, and South America has also been identified, smuggling people to Costa Rica via Panama enroute to the United States. Notably, corrupt officials have been implicated in human smuggling.

Over 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/solicit prostitution exponentially increase their chances of being a victim of theft or violent robbery or being arrested for violating Costa Rica's laws regarding trafficking in persons.

San Jose: Growing drug-related violence has begun to impact areas in San Jose province where expatriates and foreign staff frequently live and visit, such as Escazu, Barrio Escalante, and

Rohrmoser. While U.S. travelers and organizations are not specific targets of this violence, an increase in shootings and drug-related violent crime has the potential to impact those finding themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. Travelers and residents in San Jose should remain vigilant to the threat of violent crime, even when in areas historically considered safe.

Downtown San Jose is a tourist destination during daylight hours. After dark, be aware of surroundings, and limit visits due to the increased potential for crime. Increased caution is advised in the Desamparados neighborhood in San Rafael, near the Coca-Cola bus station, and the Pavas and Hospital neighborhoods in San Jose due to crime.

Alajuela: There are several neighborhoods in and around Alajuela city and the Juan Santamaria International Airport (SJO) where increased caution is recommended. Parts of San Ramon are also higher risk.

Cartago: Exercise increased caution in Turrialba.

Guanacaste: Exercise increased caution in Liberia, Nicoya, Santa Cruz, and areas near the Nicaraguan border.

Heredia: Exercise increased caution in Sarapiquí.

Limon: Exercise increased caution in the greater city of Limon area as the port serves as a key transit location for drug trafficking, as well as in Matina, Siquirres, Guacimo, and Guapiles.

Puntarenas: Increased caution is recommended in large parts of El Roble. Jaco and Bahia Ballena Beach saw about a quarter of reported crimes against U.S. tourists from 2020-2023. So, while they are popular tourist destinations, it is critical to practice travel safety measures when visiting.

Kidnapping Threat

The U.S. Department of State has/not included a Kidnapping “K” Indicator on the Travel Advisory for Costa Rica.

The kidnapping rate is very low, and incidents rarely involve U.S. citizens. Most kidnappings are a result of feuds between rival criminal organizations.

Terrorism

The U.S. Department of State has assessed San Jose as being a **LOW**-threat location for terrorism directed at or affecting official U.S. government interests.

The U.S. Department of State has not included a Terrorism “T” Indicator on the Travel Advisory for Costa Rica.

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

Political Violence and Civil Unrest

The U.S. Department of State has assessed San Jose as being a **LOW**-threat location for political violence directed at or affecting official U.S. government interests.

The U.S. Department of State has not included a Civil Unrest "U" Indicator on the Travel Advisory for Costa Rica. Civil unrest can develop quickly without prior notice, often interrupting logistics and services. Avoid demonstration activity, as even those planned to remain peaceful have the potential to turn violent.

Elections/Political Stability

In April 2022, Costa Rica held presidential run-off elections. Rodrigo Chaves won approximately 53% of the vote in free and fair elections without reports of widespread irregularities. Presidential terms last four years.

Costa Rica has a long history of stable democracy. The country has not had a military since 1948, and prides itself on its peaceful nature and efforts to maintain neutrality. Costa Rica is, at its core, a stable democracy and allows for opposing voices to be heard. Where there has been opposition to government policies, the internal security has worked to keep the peace in a way that allows protests to continue, without too significant a disruption to daily life. The security services tread lightly and uphold principles of human rights.

Protests & Demonstrations

Most protests in Costa Rica are peaceful and commonly occur in heavily populated areas, like parts of downtown San Jose. They often center on fair pay and working conditions, education, and, recently, on the Israel-Hamas conflict. It is recommended to avoid all protests as a safety precaution and avoid any perception of interfering in local politics. The Constitution bars foreigners from political activity and authorities could arrest foreigners involved with protests -- even peaceful ones.

In 2020, in reaction to economic hardship related to COVID-19, protests organized by the group Rescate Nacional saw the largest mobilization in a decade for Costa Rica. The resulting nationwide protests turned violent at times, with 110 law enforcement injured and 60 protestors arrested.

Anti-U.S./Anti-Western Sentiment

Costa Rica is generally free from anti-U.S. sentiment. Costa Ricans regard U.S. nationals and other Westerners in a positive manner and are known for their friendliness toward foreigners.

Due to the country's reputation as a leader in ecotourism and biodiversity, Costa Rica annually receives millions of foreign tourists, and national/local-level authorities and businesses work to maintain the country's positive image as an attractive tourism destination.

Law Enforcement

The emergency line in Costa Rica is **911**, and can be used for reporting crimes, fire and rescue, and medical emergencies. Additional emergency lines are below:

- **Fire and Rescue: 118**
- **Medical Emergencies: 128**
- **Tourist Police: 911, (506) 2258-1008 or (506) 2258-1022** for further assistance.
- To have police investigate/prosecute a crime, you must report it to the investigative/judicial police (OIJ, **2295-3639** or **-3640**).

The country has no military forces. Civilian authorities maintain effective control over the various agencies that have law enforcement and security components. See agencies below:

Fuerza Publica (Public Force): This is Costa Rica's primary uniformed police agency. The Fuerza Publica falls under the Ministry of Public Security and oversees ground security, law enforcement, counter-narcotic efforts, and border patrol functions. Some municipalities manage municipal police forces

Judicial Investigation Department (OIJ): Investigates all crimes for prosecution. This agency is within the judicial branch.

Transit Police: Enforces traffic laws and responds to all traffic accidents. This agency is within the Transportation and Public Works Ministry.

Tourist Police: Stationed in high-traffic tourist areas including recreational areas, beaches, national parks, and tourist sites in order to provide security for tourism. They fall under the Ministry of Public Security.

Intelligence & Security Directorate (DIS): Costa Rica's intelligence agency. This agency is within the Ministry of the President.

Special Intervention Unit (UEI): Special weapons and tactics (SWAT) police unit, specializing in counter-explosives and tactical operations.

Migration & Foreigners Directorate: Controls immigration at the borders and maintains the immigrant detention center for pending deportees. This agency is within the Interior Ministry.

Police Response

Response times may vary due to the availability of manpower/vehicles and based on location, time of day, and severity of the accident, particularly outside of San Jose or major tourist centers. Harassment of foreigners is not common. A defendant has a right to a public defender and translator services.

Travelers with Special Considerations

For [specific traveler concerns](#) in Costa Rica, review the local laws and circumstances on the Department of State's Country Information Page.

- [Women Travelers](#)
- [LGB Travelers](#)
- [Travelers with Disabilities](#)
- [Student Travelers](#)
- [Faith-Based Travelers](#)

Rule of Law, Arbitrary Detention, Official Harassment, Corruption, & Transparency

The U.S. Department of State has not included a Risk of Wrongful Detention "D" Indicator on the Travel Advisory for Costa Rica.

Two major corruption cases drew attention to corruption concerns in Costa Rica in the fall of 2021. While these cases highlight the continued presence of high-level corruption in Costa Rica, analysts note that they also indicate the strength of an independent judiciary willing to pursue high-level officials to enforce rule of law. While this is a positive trend in a region not known for judicial independence, Costa Rica has not had a great deal of success prosecuting complex corruption cases. Costa Rica consistently demonstrates low levels of corruption, coming in second for the region in the Americas Society/Council of the Americas and Control Risks' 2023 Capacity to Combat Corruption Index behind only Uruguay.

The constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention and provides for the right for any person to challenge the lawfulness of his or her arrest or detention in court. The government generally observes these requirements.

The law requires issuance of judicial warrants before police may make an arrest, except where probable cause is evident to the arresting officer. The law entitles a detainee to a judicial determination of the legality of detention during arraignment before a judge within 24 hours of arrest. The law provides for the right to post bail and prompt access to an attorney and family members. Authorities generally observe these rights.

The law provides for an independent judiciary, and the government generally respects judicial independence and impartiality. The law provides for the right to a fair and public trial, and an independent judiciary generally enforces this right. There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees, no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings, and no incidents of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

The law prohibits torture, cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment or punishment, and there are no reports that government officials employed these practices in 2020.

Impunity is not a significant problem in the security forces.

Cybersecurity

Costa Rica has cybersecurity concerns similar to many other countries, with government agencies having suffered cyber-attacks in recent years. Phishing and social engineering scams have also been reported in Costa Rica, and travelers should be mindful of who they share private information with online.

Visitors to Costa Rica commonly encounter credit card theft/fraud. Many victims maintain physical possession of their cards, but criminals steal credit card information and later use it without their knowledge.

Import/Export Restrictions

Costa Rica requires a special permit to import or export items such as explosives, weapons, agricultural items, and animals. There are no known restrictions on satellite phones.

A country-specific listing of items/goods prohibited from being exported to the country or that are otherwise restricted is available from the U.S. International Trade Agency [website](#).

Additional resources and reports can be found in the [OSAC Traveler Toolkit](#).