



## Costa Rica 2012 Crime and Safety Report

Murder; Burglary; Theft; Stolen items; Information Security; Transportation Security; Rape/Sexual Violence; Assault; Drug Trafficking; Earthquakes; Volcanoes; Floods; Landslides and mudslides; Kidnapping; Narco-Terrorism

Western Hemisphere > Costa Rica > San Jose

3/11/2012

### Overall Crime and Safety Situation

The U.S. Department of State rates the criminal threat for San Jose as HIGH. Violent crime is of significant concern to the local security services. In 2011, there were 459 homicides committed, a significant decrease from the 2010 total of 520 out of a population of over 4.5 million people. There has been a noticeable increase in petty crimes such as “smash and grabs” and random theft. Also, home invasions seem to be increasing.

### Crime Threats

Pick-pocketing, muggings, purse snatching, and theft are common occurrences in Costa Rica and seem to be the biggest issues confronting tourists while visiting. The Embassy has seen an increase in passport thefts. Costa Rica ranks among the top three countries in the world in U.S. passport thefts.

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Criminals have also been known to target rental vehicles. Tourists should make an effort to store luggage and other personal items out of plain view and ensure that car doors are locked. Another tactic used by criminals is to puncture the tires of rental vehicles and then follow the car until the driver pulls over to the side of the road. The criminals under the guise of being good Samaritans will approach the vehicle to assist with changing the tire and in the process steal the tourist's personal items.

Violent crimes like murders, robberies, and sexual assaults have been committed against Americans but with less frequency. In the past year, 11 United States citizens were sexually assaulted in tourist areas. Since 2007, at least 14 U.S. citizens have been murdered.

While crime occurs throughout Costa Rica, it is more prevalent in certain locations and at certain times during the year. This past holiday season, there was a spike in the number of home invasions and robberies. All travelers and long-term visitors are encouraged to exercise the same level of caution as they would in any major U.S. city.

## Road Safety

Driving can be extremely challenging to the most experienced driver. Roads are often in poor condition, and large potholes are common occurrences that could potentially cause severe damage to vehicles. Heavy traffic provides the opportunity for thieves to steal property, such as purses and bags that are left in plain view, from vehicles. In downtown San Jose, the government has imposed a law restricting cars from operating on certain days of the week. The last number on a vehicle's license plate determines which day of the week it can operate. This tactic has proven to relieve some of the traffic congestion. Also, a new toll road has

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provided another alternative for drivers to avoid traffic.

Another challenge confronting drivers is the lack of street signs and street names making finding an address extremely difficult even with a GPS. U.S. style street addresses do not exist. An address will start with a common landmark and then give the meters and direction from it. Traffic laws and speed limits are often ignored, turn signals are rarely used, passing on dangerous stretches of highway is common, and pedestrians are not given the right of way. The abundant motorcyclists in particular, drive without respect to rules of the road, often passing on the right, weaving in and out without warning, and creating lanes where none officially exist. As a result, the fatality rate for pedestrians and those riding bicycles and motorcycles is high.

Driving outside of San Jose at night can be treacherous. In many regions of the country, roads lack adequate lighting, guardrails, and street signs. During the rainy season (May to December), landslides and washed out roads are common.

## **Political Violence**

### Historical Perspective

Costa Rica has a long tradition of stable democracy. The country has not had military since 1948.

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## Regional Terrorism and Organized Crime

There are no known indigenous terrorist organizations operating in country.

However, organized crime groups are of significant concern. Both Costa Rican nationals and third country nationals participate in organized crime. Organized crime consists of car theft rings, drug traffickers, petty thieves, and burglars.

## International Terrorism or Transnational Terrorism

There is a low threat for international and transnational terrorism. However, porous borders allow the country to be utilized to traffic drugs and other contraband.

## Civil Unrest

Protests do occur here on occasion but are generally peaceful in nature. In November 2011, a large group of motorcyclists protested against the increase in road tax. The protest was not violent but caused significant traffic delays. Even though protests in Costa Rica are peaceful, all protests should be avoided.

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## Post-Specific Concerns

### Environmental Hazards

Costa Rica is located in an active earthquake and volcanic zone. When planning travel to the area, you should consider that such a disaster may strike without warning. Serious flooding occurs annually in the Caribbean Province of Limon and the Pacific Province of Puntarenas, and flash floods and severe landslides occur in other parts of Costa Rica, depending on the time of year and rainfall. General information about natural disaster preparedness is available from the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA; [www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov)) and from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/index.asp>).

### Industrial and Transportation Accidents

Industrial accidents are not a significant concern.

Transportation accidents are frequent, particularly outside of San Jose. Drivers can be aggressive and at times take considerable risks, especially on highways.

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## Kidnappings

In 2011, there were 10 kidnappings in Costa Rica. The majority of kidnappings committed are a result of feuds between rival criminal organizations. OIJ, Costa Rica's investigative police, have a 100 percent resolution rate on kidnappings.

## Drugs and Narco-terrorism

For years, Costa Rica has been a major transit zone for narcotics due to its geographic location. The absence of a military and a poorly equipped, under manned police service makes it easier for the cartels to operate their illicit trade. In 2011, Costa Rica ranked third in the world in cocaine seizures. About 98 percent of all drug seizures are connected to the Sinaloa Cartel.

## Police Response

Where to Turn for Assistance if you Become a Victim of a Crime and Local Police Telephone Numbers

Police response times vary due to the lack of manpower and vehicles. The uniformed police, Fuerza Publica, has between 12,000 and 15,000 officers working in the entire country. Crime

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is initially reported to Fuerza Publica and then to the Organismo de Investigacion Judicial (OIJ), Costa Rica's investigative police and the organization responsible for investigating all major crimes. All crimes discovered after the fact must be reported in person to the nearest OIJ office.

Police emergency - 911

Ambulance - 911

Fire - 911

OIJ – 911, 2295-3639, or 2295-3640

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

## How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

U.S. citizens who are detained by the police will be given the opportunity to contact friends or family. Those detained by Costa Rican law enforcement should immediately contact the U.S. Embassy at 2519-2000. Harassment is not common with foreigners, but should it occur, report the incident to U.S. government authorities.

## Medical Emergencies

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Medical care in San Jose is adequate. U.S. medical insurance is not always accepted, and most hospitals will require payment up front for services. Supplemental medical insurance with specific overseas coverage, including a provision for medical evacuation, has been useful in many emergencies.

#### Contact Information for Local Hospitals and Clinics in San Jose

CIMA Hospital - 2208-1000 (this hospital is the primary hospital for U.S. Embassy personnel)

Hospital Mexico - 2242-6700

Clinica Biblica Hospital - 2257-5252

Hospital Calderon Guardia - 2212-1000

National Children's Hospital - 2523-3600

Hospital Clínica Católica ( private ) San Antonio de Guadalupe – San Jose –2283-6616

CIMA and Clinica Biblica are private facilities, and will require payment up-front for non-emergency care.

#### In Puntarenas

Hospital Monseñor Sanabria - 2630-8000

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In Limon

Tony Facio Hospital - 2758-2222

In Guanacaste

Enrique Baltodano Hospital - 2690-2300

In Ciudad Nelly (Closest to Panama)

Hospital Ciudad Nelly – 2785-9600

In Nicoya

Hospital Anexion – 2685-8400

In Los Chiles

Hospital Los Chiles – 2471-2000

In San Carlos

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Hospital de San Carlos – 2460-1176

In Cartago

Hospital Max Peralta – 2550-1999

In Perez Zeledon

Hospital Escalante Padilla – 2785-0700

In Alajuela

Hospital San Rafael de Alajuela – 2436-1000

In Heredia

Hospital San Vicente de Paul – 2562-8100, 2261-9971

Red Cross Ambulance -911

Air Ambulance Services

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The Embassy recommends visitors consider purchasing private air medical insurance before traveling to Costa Rica.

#### Costa Rica Medical Response

San Jose - (506) 2286-1818, 2286-4848, 8304-2121

Guanacaste - (506) 2665-2626 (Liberia)

(506) 2670-0047 (Papagayo)

Puntarenas – (506) 2645-7778 (Monteverde/Santa Elena)

(506) 2637-1111 (Jaco)

Limon - (506) 8841-8404 (Tortuguero)

Web page - [www.costaricamedicalresponse.com](http://www.costaricamedicalresponse.com)

#### **Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim**

Maintain a low profile. Do not carry large sums of cash or wear flashy clothing and jewelry. Most businesses accept major U.S. credit cards, and many local ATMs dispense both U.S. dollars and local currency.

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If possible, do not travel alone at after dark, and do not walk in isolated areas at night.

Travelers should purchase an adequate level of locally valid car theft insurance. Never leave luggage or other valuables in a parked vehicle. Park in paid lots whenever possible; if unavailable, park in well-traveled and lighted areas. Always lock vehicle doors and use the anti-theft device and alarm system if the car is so equipped.

When driving, minimize the risk of smash-and-grab robberies. Keep valuable items hidden and if possible, within reach. Valuables left in plain view on the passenger or back seats are easier targets.

Visitors should use taxi cabs that are red or orange only. Visitors should never get into a cab that is occupied by more than just the driver. Visitors should also ensure that the cab has a working meter.

It is highly advisable that visitors avoid city buses. United States government employees are not permitted to use this medium of public transportation, as city buses are a haven for petty thieves and are often robbed.

Passport theft is a big issue in Costa Rica. Tourists are encouraged to leave passports in hotel safes or other secure locations while visiting. Make a photo copy of the biographical and entry stamp pages in lieu of carrying your passport.

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The Embassy recommends visitors be extremely cautious when visiting downtown San Jose after dark.

## Further Information

### Embassy Contact Numbers

American Embassy: 2519-2000

RSO Office: 2519-2313

U.S. Embassy maintains a website at <http://sanjose.usembassy.gov>, and the Consular Section can be reached by email at [consularsanjose@state.gov](mailto:consularsanjose@state.gov). In the event of an emergency involving an American citizen, the Consular Section can be reached at 2519-2188 during working hours.

Note: U.S. style street addresses do not exist. An address will start with a common landmark and then give the meters and direction (i.e. Hospital CIMA, 300 mts. Este). Since the U.S. Embassy in the Pavas neighborhood is a landmark, any taxi should be able to take you there.

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## **OSAC Country Council**

Embassy San Jose has a growing OSAC Country Council. Regional Security Officer, Patrick Mitchell, is the point of contact for all OSAC issues and can be reached at 506-2519-2313 and via e-mail at MitchellPA@state.gov.

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