



DAWN LANE
COSTA RICA

THE INSIDERS GUIDE MOVING TO COSTA RICA



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THE ULTIMATE GUIDE FOR MOVING TO COSTA RICA

When was the last time someone listened to you? Really listened. Because at Blue Water Properties, that's the heart of what we do. The essence of our work goes beyond real estate: It's you. It's understanding your needs, your dreams, your goals.

Our passion is to connect you with yours, whether you're just beginning to research life in Costa Rica, buying a home-away-from-home, or planning your forever investment.

In everything we do, our focus is on quality of service, not on quantity of inventory. We don't pursue the largest portfolio or the most clients: We seek to serve our select clients with outstanding service, fast response times, and attention to detail.

We are the North Pacific's largest independent real estate company and we pride ourselves on being a lifestyle resource for our clients. We strive to provide recommendations for local businesses and services that will help you feel more at home in Costa Rica. We have compiled our best tips and advice into this guide, which we hope will provide direction for your move to paradise!



Chapter 1: Cost of Living in Costa Rica: What to Expect

When you consider moving abroad (or anywhere that's not already "home"), one of the first questions you'll likely have is, how much is it going to cost? If you're asking the same question, keep reading for a comprehensive over- view of the cost of living in Costa Rica

WHAT IS THE COST OF LIVING IN COSTA RICA?

As with so many things, there is no easy answer. Cost of living in Costa Rica (as anywhere) is **dependent on the life you lead**: Your cost of living will be very different if, say, you're a family of four with kids in private schools than if you were a retired couple living on a pension.

Cost of living is also a function of **your lifestyle**. For example, if you eat out often, expect higher food costs. (Ditto, if you love to cook with fancy or imported ingredients.) Living at the beach, especially with an ocean view, is generally more expensive than living on a rural mountain. Homebodies will likely save over frequent travelers. Etcetera, etcetera – you determine your cost of living.

All that said, there are a few **very general rules** to the cost of living in Costa Rica. We'll go into more details below, but for now:

Cost of Living in Costa Rica: 4 Basic Budgets

\$1,000/Month (Bare Minimum)

Both for legal residency (specifically, pensionado residency for retirees and other pension recipients) and for general cost of living purposes, \$1,000/month is about as rock-bottom a budget as you can reasonably expect. And, at current exchange rates, that's still pushing it.

What it Buys: A budget of \$1,000/month will buy you rent in a very modest (and likely, rural) home, groceries (which you'll have to plan wisely), perhaps a few meals at a soda (Costa Rican "diner"), a public CCSS (Caja) healthcare payment (but no private insurance), and modest utilities: electricity (but don't use air-conditioning or a dryer), internet (you can stretch to 50 or 100 Mbps, if you're willing to cut in other areas), budgeted water usage (don't water your garden in the dry season). Your travel, even local, will be very limited.

Bottom line: Yes, you can afford a very (very) modest lifestyle for \$1,000/month. Whether you'll be happy with that lifestyle is up to you.

\$1,500-\$2,500/Month

This budget transitions you into the middle-class category: Depending on the size of your family, you can probably afford extras and some little luxuries, but you won't be living large (unless you're single, and that's still dependent on your definition of "large"). It's also a minimum budget for families: If there are more than two people in your household, you'll really want to hit at least the \$1,500/month minimum to cover your most basic needs.

What it Buys: For \$1,500-\$2,500/month, you can rent a more spacious home (Central Valley or rural) or a beach condo, and you can afford to splash out on your pick of imported groceries, dining out, and frequent recreation/local travel. (But you will still have to prioritize because this budget won't afford it all.) You may buy a car, but it's probably an older model. You can run your a/c (although you may have to budget its use) and dry your clothes in the dryer.

Bottom Line: This is a fairly comfortable budget, especially for singles or couples. (Families, you'll still be meticulously balancing the virtual checkbook.) You won't be counting your colones at every purchase but you won't feel particularly flush, either. (Unless you're very accustomed to frugal living.)

\$2,500-\$4,000/Month

This is what most Costa Rican residents would call a happy medium, especially for social butterflies and families with school-age children. In other words, if you love to dine out frequently, enjoy drinks + live music, and spend your weekends exploring, or if you have growing mouths to feed (and educate), then this budget range is where you begin to feel

What it Buys: For \$2,500-\$4,000 a month, you can more easily rent a spacious home or luxury beach condo, can up your food budget to include restaurant meals and imported groceries, and won't worry about paying utilities. (Unless you're into 24/7 air-conditioning; see our section on Fixed Costs, below.) You can also buy a car, even a newer model (although it'll still be hard to secure financing.)

Bottom Line: You may read a lot about how to live frugally in Costa Rica, but the truth is that said frugal living can be tough on a lot of people. For a moderately comfortable lifestyle, this is the recommended budget.



\$5,000-\$7,500+/Month

The hard truth is that the cost of living in Costa Rica isn't as low as it used to be. What's more, depending on where you're from (and your lifestyle), the **cost of living may be higher than "back home."**

By way of example, while many English-speaking families send their kids to public schools "back home," they often opt for bilingual private schools in Costa Rica, to ease their children's transition to a new country, language, and culture. This very understandable choice will **add \$500-\$1,000/month, per child**, to the monthly budget.

What it Buys: This is where you get into truly comfortable lifestyle territory: You can afford everything you need a lot of what you want, including large homes, even at the beach. Your utilities and healthcare are covered. You own a car (or two). You can pay for private school and extracurriculars and groceries for voracious teenagers. You can travel around Costa Rica and fly "home" for special occasions.

And with all that said, let's talk specifics:

Vehicle Costs

If you plan to buy a car, prepare to **pay cash** (loans are difficult to secure for foreigners) – and a hefty chunk of cash, at that. Be prepared for a little bit of **car-price sticker shock**: Like it or not (agree with it or not), cars are subject to **high import taxes** AND they **retain their value** better and longer in Costa Rica.

And that all boils down to a **higher purchase price** – usually, anywhere from 1.5 to 3 times more expensive than you might expect "back home." For example, in 2024, a 2009 Toyota RAV4 costs about \$14,000; a 2019 Hyundai Tucson is over \$22,000; and an ultra-compact 2018 Suzuki Swift costs about \$11,000.

Unless you purchase an electric vehicle (which are becoming more common, for what it's worth), you'll also be on the hook for gas or diesel, whose prices are government-regulated and set (the same price at every gas station). You can check the day's mandated prices on [RECOPE's website](#). As mid-2024, Plus costs ₡721 per liter, Súper costs ₡742 per liter, and diesel costs ₡624 per liter. To put this in U.S. terms, for example, that's about \$6.49/gallon for Plus, **\$6.68/gallon for Súper, and \$5.62/gallon for diesel** (approximate prices, as of publication).

Additionally, you are legally required to pay a yearly **DEKRA inspection** (formerly Riteve, about \$20) and **marchamo** vehicle tax/registration, which is calculated based on the age and value of your vehicle. You can [check a vehicle's marchamo cost](#) on the INS website. **Full-coverage car insurance** is not mandatory but recommended, especially if you drive a newer model vehicle. For that, you can expect to pay **\$50-\$100+ per month**.

Education Costs

Schooling (and education costs) in Costa Rica start with one big question: **Public or private?**

The answer will be personal. Your choice of schooling will depend on many factors, including your home's location (how far is the commute to a school?), local school availability (how good is the public school? what private schools are within a reasonable commute?), your finances (public schools are free, whereas private schools cost anywhere from **\$4,000 - \$10,000+ per year**), and other factors.



Food Costs

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, here's another area where you can **either tighten your belt or splash out big time**.

Your monthly food costs will depend largely on **how and what you eat**: Do you plan to cook simple Costa Rican fare or do you love to create complex international meals that require long lists of imported ingredients? Do you frequently eat at restaurants? (And, if so, are they local sodas or more upscale international eateries?) Are you big meat-eaters or vegetarians/vegans? Etcetera, etcetera.

A single person who doesn't dine out and eats mostly local products, including ample fruits, vegetables, and legumes, might consume \$150-\$200/month in groceries, while a family of four with two hungry teenagers could easily eclipse \$1,000+/month in food costs, especially if they eat out a few times a month.



Healthcare Costs

In Costa Rica, you'll have access to **public and private healthcare options**. If you have Costa Rican residency, you'll be required to pay into the CCSS, or Caja, Costa Rica's public healthcare; private healthcare is optional.

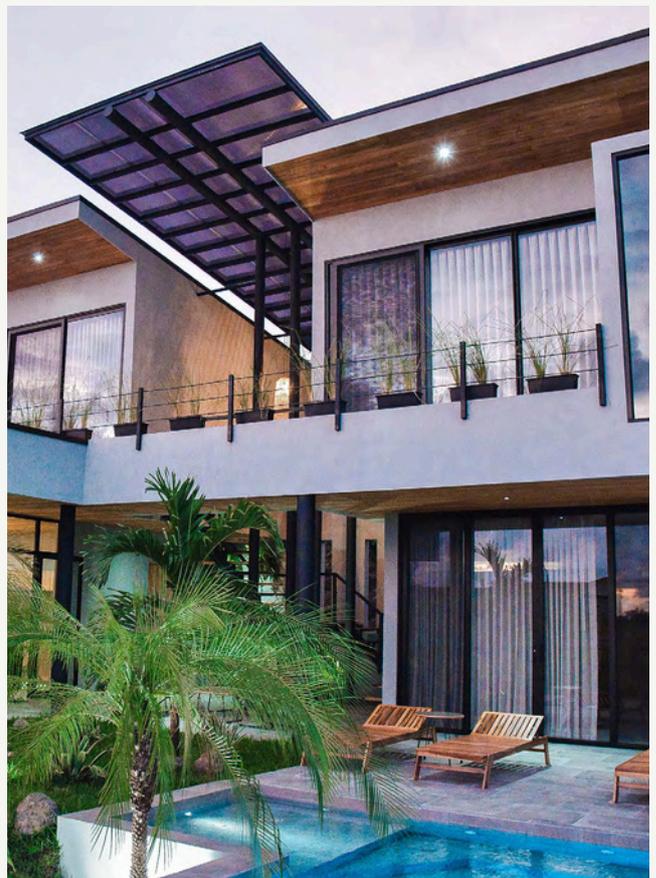
Officially, a Caja contribution is calculated at **5% to 12% of your monthly income**. (How that income is calculated is a different equation...) As a ballpark figure, you're most likely looking at **\$100-\$350/month** per individual or couple. But again, your mileage may vary.

For private insurance, premiums locally usually fall into the **\$125-\$500+ per month** and typically have a deductible AND still, only cover **up to 80% of your costs**. Private healthcare discount plans, including the ever-popular Medismart, offer a sort of middle-ground for private healthcare, offering discounts on in-network care, in exchange for a very modest monthly fee (currently, <\$14.50 for the primary plan-holder and <\$7.25 for additional plan members).

Housing Costs

Now here's a category that offers decent control over how much you spend: You really can choose your target housing cost and then, achieve it.

As a general rule, the Central Valley is less expensive than the coast: In the Central Valley, especially in more rural areas, you really can rent an apartment for \$300/month and a modest home for \$400/month; spacious and luxury homes typically hit \$1,000-\$1,500/month, except in higher-income areas, where they can cost \$2,000+/month. At the beach, smaller and more modest condos start at \$500/month (and that's a bare minimum), while larger and/or luxury condos are \$1,500 - \$2,500+. Houses in beach towns start around \$1,200 and can reach \$5,000+ per month, depending on size, number of bedrooms, ocean views, proximity to the beach, and other factors. (As you get further from the beach, you'll save money.) If you own your home, don't forget the cost of HOA fees, which can be as much as rent: While your total is very much a function of what you get, expect to pay anywhere from \$200 - \$1,000+ per month in HOA fees.



Fixed Monthly Costs

Fixed monthly costs – ah, finally a category where we can provide some hard numbers. (Except where we can't...)

As a general rule, here's what to expect from utilities and other fixed monthly budget items:

- **Internet & Cable:** \$50-\$100, depending on your internet speed and cable package.
- **Water:** \$30-\$100, depending on where you live and your water usage.
- **Electricity:** \$30-\$500/month, depending on whether you have solar panels and how much you use your air-conditioning, pool pump, laundry dryer, and other high-consumption amenities.
- **Home Insurance:** Peg this around \$50-\$100/month, usually paid by the quarter, semester, or year. (Homeowners' insurance is usually covered by your HOA fee, if you have one.)
- **Yard Service:** If you need someone to help with grounds maintenance, budget \$50-\$150/month for a few days a month. (Community groundskeeping is usually covered by your HOA fee, if you have one.)

Remember: The cost of living in Costa Rica, like anywhere else in the world, will depend on the size of your family, your lifestyle, and your priorities. It's entirely possible to thrive in Costa Rica on a budget. There are also plenty of areas to splurge, if you're so inclined. Your life in Costa Rica will be what you make it and your cost of living will reflect those choices.

Chapter 2: Costa Rica Residency for Homeowners: 4 Options, Requirements, Benefits & More

When you consider moving abroad (or anywhere that's not already "home"), one of the first questions you'll likely have is, *how much is it going to cost?* If you're asking the same question, keep reading for a comprehensive overview of the cost of living in Costa Rica

THE BENEFITS OF RESIDENCY IN COSTA RICA

Before we jump into the what and the how, you may be wondering about the why – why should you (and why would you want to) obtain Costa Rica residency?

There are a few really good reasons, most predicated on the desire for permanence: If you plan to make a home in Costa Rica, as opposed to just visiting, then you'll eventually want to apply for residency.

Here are a few of the more compelling reasons to pursue residency:



Legal Right to Reside

While you can live in Costa Rica as a “perpetual tourist” – stay for the permitted 90 days, then exit/ re-enter the country for a new 90-day stamp – this residency limbo provides no legal rights. While it’s uncommon, as a tourist, it’s still possible that an Immigration official could give you less than 90 days – or refuse you entry entirely.

Residency, on the other hand, provides you with legal status in Costa Rica: You will never run the risk of being turned away at the border. And, if you live here, if you have a home here, if you have made a life here, then that’s important.

Costa Rican Driver's License

The process of certifying your home driver's license, or the homologación de licencia, is open only to residents. As a tourist, you must leave the country every 90-180 days (or however often your entry stamp requires), in order to continue driving on your foreign license.

Healthcare Through the Caja/CCSS

You may have heard about Costa Rica's strong public healthcare system, the Caja Costarricense de Salud Social, known alternately as the Caja or CCSS. As a resident, you will pay into the Caja (pronounced ka-ha) and can access all its services, no additional payment is required, ever. What's more, preexisting conditions are covered. (There's no such thing as ineligibility or denial of coverage.)

Ease of Daily Life

There's quite a bit of bureaucracy to life in Costa Rica and that can be a huge hurdle, when you're not a resident. Even the seemingly simple things, like opening a bank account, setting up utilities, or buying a cell phone line – they can all be harder, if not impossible, when you're not a legal resident. Legal residents can also obtain a firma digital, or digital signature, which makes daily life even easier.

As a resident, you'll have a DIMEX ID card, which will allow you to complete every process a citizen can (except vote). You won't have to carry your passport around, either. Bonus: When you board a plane to Costa Rica, you'll no longer have to show proof of onward travel.

Resident Discounts

Many, if not most tourist destinations in Costa Rica offer discount entry to locals. As a resident, you now qualify! (Ex. \$10 national parks typically cost ₡1,000 or about \$2 for locals.)

Upgrade to Permanent Residency (and the Right to Work)

Most residency categories begin as temporary residency, which provides you with a one- or two-year right to reside, with the chance to renew.

By the time you've held Costa Rica residency for three years, most categories allow you to upgrade to permanent residency, which allows for longer residency periods, the right to work, and a path to citizenship.

COSTA RICA RESIDENCY BENEFITS: THEY JUST GOT BETTER!

In mid-2021, Bill of Law N. 22156 passed its second Congressional debate. A few months after the president sign the bill into law, new and even more advantageous regulations will apply to foreigners seeking residency:

- **Reduced \$150,000 Investment Threshold:** The investment threshold will be lowered from \$200,000 (USD) to \$150,000, to include \$150,000+ real estate purchases.
- **Duty-Free Household Imports:** Temporary residency holders – investors (inversionistas), renters (rentistas), and pensioners (pensionados) – will now enjoy an exemption on import taxes for household items, including whole containers, on their first import. (Any following imports will be subject to standard import taxes.)
- **Duty-Free Vehicle Importation:** Temporary residency holders – again, investors (inversionistas), renters (rentistas), and pensioners (pensionados) – will now be exempt from taxes when importing up to two vehicles for personal use.
- **Other Tax Exemptions:** These will include transfer tax exemptions, income tax exemptions, professional-use instruments and materials tax exemptions, and more.



Costa Rica Residency: 4 [Main] Options

There are many paths to living in Costa Rica, including the try-before-you-buy (aka “perpetual tourist”) status, in which new arrivals renew their 90-day stamps until they’re ready to commit. There’s also a new [digital nomad estancia](#), which grants remote workers a 1-year stay (renewable for a second year).

For everyone else, there’s residency. And while there are many paths to residency, four are most common among English-speaking expats and immigrants. They include **investor (*inversionista*)** residency, **retiree (*pensionado*)** residency, **fixed income (*rentista*)** residency, and temporary or permanent residency for **spouses and parents of Costa Ricans**.

As you’d expect, each residency category has its own requirements and benefits. Here’s a quick breakdown:

Option #1: Investor (Inversionista) Residency

Costa Rica’s investor residency category, known as Inversionista residency, is a **temporary residency category** dedicated to anyone who invests in Costa Rica, be it in a business, a forestry/reforestation project or, yes, **real estate investment**.

In order to qualify for Costa Rican residency via your real estate purchase, you will need to buy a property – and your deed of purchase must reflect a purchase price of – for \$200,000+. Per Bill of Law N. 22156, this amount will soon be **reduced to \$150,000**.

Inversionista Residency Benefits:

- **Two-year residency**, renewable for additional two-year periods, for as long as you hold your investment
- **Upgrade to permanent residency** after three years
- **A spouse and dependents** will be included under the umbrella of the inversionista’s residency

Note that, as an inversionista, **you cannot work locally in Costa Rica**. You can work remotely for companies located abroad. You may also earn income from your investment (but you cannot work in/provide labor for your business, if applicable).

Option #2: Retiree / Pensioner (Pensionado) Residency

Retirees qualify for residency via a guaranteed lifetime monthly pension of **\$1,000/month**, via sources including private company pensions, independent retirement programs, or Social Security.

The one caveat is that, while a single \$1,000 pension will cover the primary applicant and a spouse and/or dependents, two sub-\$1,000 pensions cannot be combined to meet the requirement. A single source must meet the \$1,000/month minimum.

Rentista Residency Benefits:

- **Two-year residency**, renewable for additional two-year periods, for as long as you receive your pension
- **Upgrade to permanent residency** after three years
- **A spouse and dependents** will be included under the umbrella of the rentista's residency



Note that, as a *pensionado/a*, you cannot work locally in Costa Rica. You can work remotely for companies located abroad.

Option #3: Renter / Fixed Income (Rentista) Residency

For those too young to draw on Social Security or a pension, Rentista residency offers a fast track to temporary residency.

In brief, you must receive a guaranteed income – this does not include a salaried job, as that is not guaranteed for the duration of your residency – of **\$2,500 per month**, or **\$60,000 for a two-year period**. The most common ways to meet this requirement are through either a **trust in your home country** or a **funded bank account in Costa Rica**.

Rentista Residency Benefits:

- **Two-year residency**, renewable for additional two-year periods, for as long as you have a guaranteed \$2,500/month income
- **Upgrade to permanent residency** after three years
- **A spouse and dependents** will be included under the umbrella of the *rentista's* residency

Note that, as a *rentista*, you cannot work locally in Costa Rica. You can work remotely for companies located abroad.

Option #4: Residency via a First-Degree Relationship with a Costa Rican

There are two primary paths to residency via a first-degree relationship with a Costa Rican: **temporary residency for spouses (of Costa Ricans) or permanent residency for parents (of Costa Ricans).**

Spouses of Costa Ricans will be granted **temporary residency for one-year periods**, renewable for as long as the marriage is valid. After three years, you will be eligible to apply for permanent residency. That said, even as a temporary resident, **you will be eligible to work in Costa Rica.** **Parents of Costa Ricans** are eligible for **permanent residency**, no temporary residency required.

Notably, any child born in Costa Rica is considered a citizen, so if you give birth in Costa Rica, your child will be a citizen and you will be eligible for permanent residency. You will be **eligible to work in Costa Rica.**



HOW TO GET COSTA RICA RESIDENCY

Okay, so you now know that you'd like to become a resident of Costa Rica. You know how you could qualify. And you're ready to take the next step – to see what it will cost (usually, anywhere from the cost of paperwork to about \$3,500 per person), how long it will take (typically, 12-24 months), and all the other details.

Now, you want to know *how*: What's the process for getting residency?

There are two possibilities: Do it yourself or hire a residency lawyer. The latter is far more common, due to the language barrier, immigration lawyer priority status (in other words, they get to and through Immigration faster than an individual), and convenience.

Yes, you can do it yourself. You can collect all the paperwork, get all the required everything (including Apostille stamps, legal translations, and more), and submit all your paperwork. If you choose to take this route, you can save \$thousands – but you must speak Spanish and you'll need a very large dose of patience. We mentioned the bureaucracy, above, and almost nowhere is it greater than at *Migración*, or Immigration.

If you choose to go the professional route, look for immigration lawyer recommendations. There are many offices throughout the country that specialize in just (and, sometimes, only) the residency process. Not only will a lawyer handle all the headaches on your behalf, but your attorney will be sure that things are done right. (There is nothing worse than getting to Immigration with your documents that expire in two weeks, only to be told that you don't have a necessary piece of paperwork... and that it'll take four weeks to get it.)

If you plan on spending a significant amount of time in Costa Rica, the benefits of legal residency far outweigh the inconvenience. With residency, you'll enjoy the legal right to reside, can apply for a Costa Rican driver's license, be able to take advantage of the healthcare system and enjoy a wide array of discounts available to residents. Although the process can be lengthy, follow the easy steps outlined above to gain your residency and solidify your place in Costa Rican society.





Chapter 3: The Pros & Cons of Buying Property in Costa Rica: Condos, Townhomes, Single-Family Homes, Land, Businesses & More!

Choosing property is a difficult process for many. There are several considerations based on one's investment goals and living situations. We are well-versed in the advantages and disadvantages, of buying selling and investing locally. Though there is no singular solution, here is our perspective on buying in Costa Rica, based on the current panorama

FIRST THINGS FIRST: THAT QUESTION (AKA “What type of property should I buy?”)

One of the first things we usually hear at Blue Water Group is the question, “What type of property should I buy?” There is no singular answer that fits the bill for everyone. However, let’s run through a few of your likely considerations.

First of all, let’s discuss your level of comfort: Why are you buying property in Costa Rica? Do you have plans to live here or are you making an investment? How comfortable are you managing your property from abroad? What is your risk tolerance, etc.? There are extremely important starter questions in the process of considering the best type of property to purchase.

If we were to loosely sketch a map between the right buyer and the right type of property, we’d say that if you’re looking for **low-stress**, you’re probably looking for a condo or home that’s in a rental pool. If you’re here for **relocation or in it for the long haul**, you may be looking at a single-family home. And, while most people don’t want to go into the whole building process, many do. And if that’s you, then you can look toward lots and land parcels.

Next, we advise our clients to evaluate their commitment and tolerance for stress. When our clients are looking for a low-maintenance property, we recommend renting a condo or home. If you’re permanently relocating to Costa Rica, purchasing a single-family home may be a better fit. Lastly, though it is not the most popular option, building provides a host of benefits for those who are interested in choosing their own land and lots.

At Blue Water Properties, our realtors have experience both buying and building. Though our realtors love building, we are empathetic to those who prefer to purchase prebuilt properties. Ultimately, buying or building is a personal decision that we are happy to help you make.

The next step in choosing your ideal property is to discuss the pros and cons of buying property in Costa Rica.





BUYING PROPERTY IN COSTA RICA: RENTAL POOL CONDOS AND HOMES

It's pretty common for property management companies in Costa Rica to manage a pool of homes or condos within a single community. This is what we refer to as a "rental pool."

Pros: One of the greatest benefits to working within your community's rental pool is that your property management company will likely have carved out a good **market niche for property rentals**. They know your community and they are well-versed in not only marketing your property, but also in caring for it while you're away.

Cons: There's **no major downside** to this type of arrangement, if it's appealing to you (except that it's predicated on your willingness to rent your property). Your home will still be marketed exclusively. You will still be treated like an individual. You'll just also have the benefits of working within a group of rentals.

CONDO & HOA FEES

If you are purchasing a condo, townhome, or single-family home in a planned community, there will be homeowners fees, also known as HOA or strata fees. Those fees will vary, depending on the community or complex, amenities, the number of units, the size of your unit, and the age of the complex, among other variables.

Pros: The benefits of homeowner fees in Costa Rica are very much based on what you get for what you pay. And this is very much a you-get-what-you-pay-for kind of thing. (And if it isn't a good get for what you'd pay, we'll tell you. We're honest to a fault.)

Cons: The downside is that you're paying for what you get. And, in many of Costa Rica's upscale and resort communities, there are many amenities. If you don't plan to enjoy them all, then you'll be paying for something you don't appreciate.

So, what can you expect in the way of HOA fees, when buying property in Costa Rica? The answer is highly variable, as discussed above, but here is a brief overview:

For Condos and Townhomes:

- **Low HOA Fees (\$100-\$175/month):** In this range, you'll usually get front gate service and road maintenance.
- **Mid-Tier HOA Fees (\$300-\$400/month):** For this monthly fee, you'll receive full grounds maintenance for a 2-bedroom condo, plus community amenities like a resort pool.
- **Upscale HOA Fees (\$500-\$1,000+/month):** In this range, you've either purchased a large condo (3 to 5 bedrooms) or you're in one of Guanacaste's most upscale communities, where you'll find saltwater pools, beach clubs, tennis courts, a possible golf course, and more.

For Single-Family Homes:

Upon first blush, it may be surprising to hear that single-family homes pay lower HOA fees than do condos and townhomes do. But, the reason is clear: if you own a single-family home, you are responsible for your own grounds maintenance and related costs.

This brings your strata fees down significantly, usually in the range of \$100 to \$400 per month, depending on the community.

LOT PURCHASES

If a condo, townhome, or single-family home doesn't quite suit your needs, you may be looking to purchase a lot or land parcel. (You're in good company!)

Pros: One of the greatest things about purchasing land is the very low overhead. Additionally, your purchase doesn't require any immediate action, at least not usually: you can build in a year, or two, or three – whenever you're ready.

Cons: The greatest downside to buying property in Costa Rica – and by that, we mean undeveloped land – is that, eventually, you'll have to develop it. And, that will require permits, and builders, and architects, and engineers... Many people consider this a con, which is why I stated above that so many buyers aren't interested in making the jump into a lot/land purchase.



But, take it from an agency whose realtors are well-versed in building several properties! There are incredible architects and builders and other professionals here who can help you through the process of designing and building your dream property. Because, if you have the right people helping you it doesn't have to be that difficult. We know the right people to streamline the process.

So, if you're thinking about doing it, know that there are resources. Know that I am one of them and that I'd be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

If you're thinking about building, there are several resources in Costa Rica to do so. We are happy to answer your questions!

COMMERCIAL PROPERTIES

Here's one of the best-kept secrets about buying property in Costa Rica: we lack commercial properties, which, in large part, makes commercial property a really hot commodity.

Pros: High demand and low supply are their own **pro**: When you have commercial property, you're in demand. Business owners are often looking for property to lease. Families are always looking for apartments or rental properties. So, commercial property can be a **high-grossing investment** that provides **consistent income**, every month.

Cons: Learning to do business in Costa Rica is its own **learning curve**. If you want to know more about entrepreneurship in Costa Rica, straight from the entrepreneur's mouth, then check out our [Dream Catcher's Costa Rica series on YouTube!](#)

PURCHASING FINCAS (FARMLAND)

Some of our buyers talk about purchasing farms, be it a coffee plantation, a teak farm, or a specialized farm.

Pros: Farms of any sort represent a solid area for investment, with **low overhead** and the opportunity to make a change or cultivate, **whenever you're ready**. You can even buy a development parcel and subdivide the land.

Cons: There are many opportunities but the downside is **cost**: You need to have someone looking in on your land, on a regular basis, to ensure that you don't have any squatters or other issues underway. Bottom line: You'll need to **employ a caretaker** – and that's something that many people don't talk about (but that you really need to think about, when investing in Costa Rica).

There are tons of options for you to choose from when purchasing property in Costa Rica: lot purchases, commercial property, rental condos and more. Each type of property comes with its own advantages and disadvantages. Take a minute to read through the guide above and decide which type of property is right for you and your family.

Chapter 4: Beginning Steps & Costs of Building a Home in Costa Rica

Ah, the allure of building a home in Costa Rica: A dream home. Custom finishes. Your personal touch...in every last detail.

However you imagine your life in Costa Rica, the chances are good that home and hearth are front and center. Because, while home is where the heart is, the heart is also rooted in home. That's why we call it a home, not a house!

"Home" is an important concept. It grounds us. It comforts us. It is our true north. And it's one of the most important decisions you'll make when you finally decide to call Costa Rica "home."

All that to say, we understand why you're considering building a home in Costa Rica. Our founder, Rebecca, did the same thing. More than a dozen times, no less! We have personal and professional experience in everything from finding that "just right" building site (it may not be what you think), to hiring reliable professionals, to estimating out the costs.

Keep reading for our comprehensive guide to building a home in Costa Rica.

BEFORE YOU BUILD: FINDING “HOME” AND PURCHASING A LOT

Before you even consider building a home in Costa Rica, you’ll come up against two me-firsts: One, choosing where you’ll call home, and two, finding the ideal building site.

The first is the more complicated. **Finding your Costa Rican home** is about more than choosing a neighborhood or even a house: For such a small country, Costa Rica’s geography is diverse, its climates many, and its neighborhoods distinct. While there’s no one formula to choosing where is right for you, here are a few considerations:



- **Weather:** The beach is hot and the mountains can be borderline cold (60°F / 15.5°F at night feels a little different without heat!). Somewhere between the two, though, you’ll find your just-right happy spot.
- **Lifestyle:** Perhaps the biggest factor in the bunch, lifestyle is all about you. If you want to surf every day and stroll the sand at sunset, then you won’t be heading for the Central Valley. Likewise...
- **Phase of Life:** Very few people can live “just anywhere” with no concern for phase-of-life considerations. And by this, we mean that if you have school-age children, you’ll probably throw private schools, extracurricular options, and kid-friendly communities into the consideration mix. Likewise, if you require regular medical care, you’ll want to be closer to major medical facilities.
- **Amenities:** Some people prefer to be within a short drive of all things restaurants, shopping, entertainment, and nightlife. Others would like their closest neighbor to be acres away.



There are obviously many, many more factors to consider when choosing a place to build. Before you pick a random spot on the map, **consider how you live**. Don't know how to align your lifestyle with Costa Rica's location options? Please reach out and we would be happy to walk you through the options.

Once you've decided on the general location, it's time to find the **specific where** – your building site. Again, this one's not as simple as you may think: Your **lot purchase** will have a **significant impact on the costs of building a home in Costa Rica**.

Beyond the obvious – a property's purchase price will reflect its location, views, and other important qualities – a **lot's topography can change your life**. It may sound dramatic, but as an example, a steep lot could easily require **six figures in retaining walls and other construction**. It's the kind of number big enough to determine how and what kind of home you can build.

Bottom line: Take the time to find a town or place that fits your lifestyle. Then, search obsessively for your "perfect" lot: not too difficult to build, not on a steep mountainside, not too far from any utilities you might require.

BUILDING A HOME IN COSTA RICA: THE FIRST STEPS

Before you wade into the thick of building a home in Costa Rica, you'll need two things:

- **Boundary Survey:** This survey maps your property's boundaries, which ensures you don't build onto your neighbor's land. Chances are, you'll receive a boundary survey when you purchase your lot.
- **Topographical Survey:** While this isn't a legal requirement, we do not recommend building a home in Costa Rica without this. A topographical survey is used to map and define different elevations within your lot, so you, your architect, and your builder can understand the type of construction you can build (and where on your lot to build it).

It's very important to have both surveys before you even start thinking about building and getting plans.

CHOOSING AN ARCHITECT

The next step in this exciting journey – because yes, we're deep into the fun and dreamy part now! – is to choose your architect.

This may be **the most important step**, as well as choosing a great builder. There is **no one "perfect" architect in Costa Rica**. We highly recommend **asking for personal recommendations** – from friends, from acquaintances and, of course, from your real estate agent! – and **getting references**, but it's more than that.

Finding the "right" architect is really about finding the right architect for you. We recommend **scheduling some architect interviews**. See who you connect well with. Who really listens to your concerns and priorities? And, perhaps most importantly, which architects **share your aesthetic**?

Once you have your shortlist, **check those references**. Go see a few of their homes, if possible. Do what you must to feel perfectly secure in your choice.

AND FINALLY, CHOOSING YOUR BUILDER

Choosing your builder is a lot like choosing your architect: there are wrong choices but there's no one-fits-all right choice.

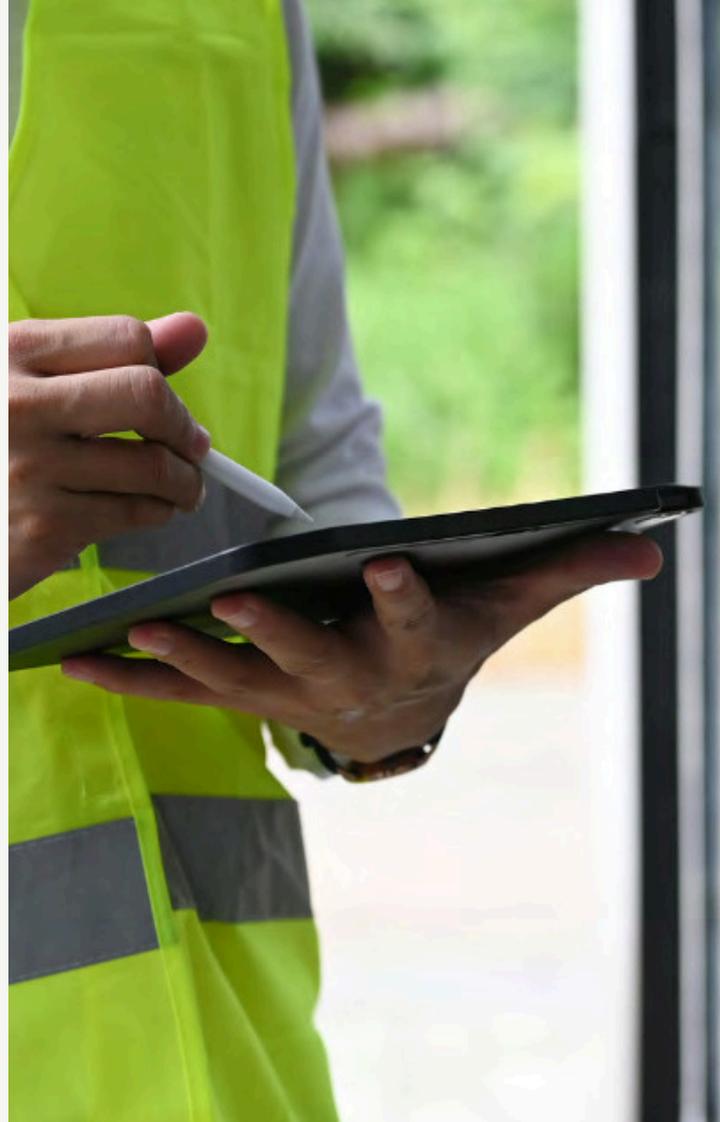
This is about you. So, get those **personal recommendations**. (And only choose a builder who is **highly regarded**. Interview your shortlist. Make **personal connections**. And always, ALWAYS go see the homes they've built. Talk to people who have been in those homes for a few years, and confirm how things are holding up. (Because, as we say in Costa Rica, lo barato sale caro – cheap turns out expensive.)

Bottom line: Your builder decision is an incredibly important one, and will **influence your costs**, your **satisfaction**, and the **overall quality of your home**. Choose wisely.

COSTS OF BUILDING A HOME IN COSTA RICA

Let's jump to it, then: When you're building a home in Costa Rica, there is a huge variety of costs, **usually calculated as project percentages** (and they can crop up in the strangest of places). Here are the big ones:

- **Building Site:** One of your major costs, this cost is very dependent on your preferences. For example, small or sprawling? Ocean-view or in the middle of a mountainous nowhere? In an established community or totally independent?



- **Lot Preparation:** Again, site prep depends on your building lot: Is it flat? Sloped? On a mountainside? Are you building a cantilevered home? Because retaining walls can add \$10K-\$100K+ to your price tag.
- **Build Cost:** It's very difficult to pinpoint the "price per square foot" in Costa Rica. As a general rule, the cost to build is lower in Central Valley and higher at the beach. Another general rule: You'll probably pay **\$80-\$120 per sq. ft.** in the Central Valley and **\$130-\$200 per sq. ft.** at the beach. Again, probably.
- **Architect Fees:** In Costa Rica, the Colegio de Arquitectos (College of Architects) is the governing board that sets fees for all of Costa Rica. By law, you'll pay your architect around **5% of the total project cost**, for pre-project/pre-planning, your home plans, and supervision during the build.



- **Builder Fees:** There are two ways you can pay your builder (and one is far more common). While you can ask for builders to bid a job, it's much more common for them to bid as **cost + contract**, usually for a **fee of 12-15%**.
- **Municipal Permits:** When ready, your architect will file plans with the municipality, in order to process permits. The cost of these permits is pegged at **1% of your project cost**. Side note: This step is much easier today than it was 15 years ago, thanks to many municipalities going digital. Now, your plans could be approved within 2-4 weeks of filing (depending on the municipality).
- **Worker's Compensation:** As required by law, you must purchase a worker's compensation policy through INS (local government insurance agency). This policy is also fixed at **1% of your project cost**.

As your project progresses, there will be **additional costs**, for example for various engineers (structural, electrical, etc.) to review ongoing work.

Building a home in Costa Rica is no easy feat, but it's well worth it. Our homes are the center of our lives, no matter where in the world we live. Begin the process of building a home in Costa Rica by obtaining your boundary and topographical surveys. After choosing your architect and your builder, you will be well on your way to building your dream home in Costa Rica.

Chapter 5:

Concession Property in Costa Rica: Pros, Cons & What You Should Know

Here at the beach, one of the most frequent questions we receive regards “titled” vs. “concession” property in Costa Rica. What are the differences? Is concession property a safe buy? How hard is it to find titled land or real estate? Is there a big cost differential?

For most international buyers, the idea of concession property is a foreign concept. Essentially a municipal lease, concession property entitles you to restricted land use for a specific (and renewable) period of time. And while that may seem like it should set off warning bells, you should know that concession property is very common-place in Costa Rica and is considered a safe purchase. (As always, hire seasoned professionals and complete your due diligence.)

Titled property, on the other hand, is yours free and clear, but it’s only 5% of all oceanfront property in Costa Rica. This makes it hard to find and more expensive to purchase.

With that said, let’s break down the titled vs. concession property in Costa Rica debate into its relevant details:

COSTA RICA'S MARITIME ZONE LAW

In 1977, Costa Rica passed the Maritime Zone Law (Law 6043, la Ley sobre **la Zona Marítimo-Terrestre**), which defined the country's maritime zone as the first 200 meters (about 660 feet) inland from high tide. Specifically:

- **Public Use Zone:** The Public Zone (where new real estate cannot be built) occupies the first 50 meters (~165 feet) from ordinary high tide, as well as all areas exposed during low tide, including mangroves, estuaries, cliffs, rocky outcroppings, etc.)
- **Restricted Use Zone:** The restricted zone occupies the coastline from 50-200 meters inland from ordinary high tide. Municipalities are responsible for their Restricted Use Zone, which they can concession out.



So, what does this mean? Essentially, after 1977, **all Costa Rican oceanfront is public and land use is restricted** for 200 meters / 660 feet inland from the high tide mark.

And what does *that* mean? Bottom line: Buying oceanfront and/or beachfront real estate **is possible and commonplace**, but you'll want to understand titled vs. concession property in Costa Rica and **how it applies to your purchase**.

TITLED VS. CONCESSION PROPERTY IN COSTA RICA: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

In Costa Rica, oceanfront real estate is divided into two categories: titled property (5% of all beach-front property) and concession property (95% of all beachfront property).

Titled property (also known as “fee simple,” in English-language real estate parlance) means that

you have absolute ownership and recognized rights of possession. Titled property holds the greatest and most ownership rights when it comes to Costa Rica real estate. Notably, titled oceanfront or beachfront property is very rare in most of Costa Rica – it’s not as rare in our area of Tamarindo-Potrero-Langosta-Flamingo – due to the Maritime Zone Law.

Concession property is essentially the right to use and enjoy, for a specific time period (usually, 20 years), any property located within the public Maritime Zone. Essentially, concession property is a lease. As mentioned above, Costa Rican law dictates that all oceanfront (50 meters inland, as measured from high tide) is public land; land from 50 to 150 meters inland (200 meters, in total), as measured from high tide, is concession property.

Notably, foreigners have full and equal ownership rights to titled property and most concession property. The only caveat is for concession property held in a corporation: Foreigners may not own more than 50% of the shares in that corporation.

CONCESSION PROPERTY IN COSTA RICA

Let’s start with what you really want to know: Yes, concession property is a safe purchase. (Did you know that even the illustrious Four Seasons at Peninsula Papagayo is a concession property? True story.)

The bottom line is, 95% of oceanfront property in Costa Rica is concession property. It’s common and, for more than four decades, has been the law of the land: The regulations are well known. The kinks are worked out. Concession property can be a great purchase.

Here's how it works: Concession property is essentially a municipal lease, most often renewable in 20-year increments. More importantly, as long as you pay your annual dues/taxes and follow land-use permissions (based on municipal rules), then your concession should be renewable ad infinitum.

Pros of Concession Property in Costa Rica

- **Greater Inventory:** As 95% of all oceanfront property is concession property, in most areas of the country, you'll have more choices, if you extend your search to concession property.
- **Lower Prices (Sometimes):** Concession property is typically priced lower than its titled equivalent but, that said, as oceanfront real estate is already so valuable, concession property is still some of the most valuable real estate on the market.



Cons of Concession Property in Costa Rica

- **Annual Tax/Dues:** Concession property carries its own annual dues, which means that your annual taxes on concession property are higher than they would be on an equivalent titled property.
- **Use Restrictions:** One of the biggest differences between titled vs. concession property in Costa Rica is what you can do with it. While titled property is yours, free and clear, concession property is restricted to municipal regulations on what you can build, how you can use the land, etc.
- **Residency Requirement:** To purchase concession land, you must either have residency for 5+ years or hold your property in a corporation, for which foreign ownership can only account for 49%. (A buyer's attorney often holds the majority share in the corporation, without signing power.)
- **Cannot Serve as Collateral:** Concession land cannot be used as loan collateral. However, as loans are difficult, if not impossible, for foreigners to secure, this is a moot point for most international buyers.

TITLED PROPERTY IN COSTA RICA

While concession property is very common and well regulated, there's no real contest in the debate of titled vs. concession property in Costa Rica: If and when possible, **titled property is preferable** to concession property.

Pros of Titled Property in Costa Rica

- **Very Valuable:** Because inventory is so low, titled beachfront retains its value (and a higher value) than its concession equivalent. You will never have trouble selling your titled oceanfront property.
- **No Restrictions:** Because you own titled property, free and clear, you can do with it as you please – no permissions required.
- **Non-Citizen Ownership:** You do not need to be a citizen or even a long-time resident of Costa Rica to own titled property.
- **Lower Taxes:** Because there are no concession taxes to pay, your annual taxes will be considerably less than a home or land held in concession.

Cons of Titled Property in Costa Rica

- **Low Inventory:** Only 5% of all oceanfront property in Costa Rica is titled. That means that it can be very difficult to find titled land or titled construction, making it even harder to find your "ideal" real estate – a needle in a haystack, in a field full of haystacks.

That said, **titled property is fairly common** in our area of **Tamarindo, Potrero, Langosta, and Flamingo**. The owner of Blue Water Properties, Rebecca Clower, represented buyers here for over 15 years and only this year negotiated her first concession beachfront property. And she has sold a lot of titled oceanfront!

When purchasing property in Costa Rica, it pays to know the difference between "titled" and "concession" property early on. When you know the pros and cons of each type of property, you can make an educated and informed decision about which type of property best fits your needs in Costa Rica. Happy property shopping!

Chapter 6:

Costa Rica Closing Costs: What to Expect and How Much You'll Pay

Buying a home – especially a home abroad – is simultaneously one of the most important and exciting decisions you'll make in life. As with any life-altering decision, make sure to do your research. You're knocking out your initial due diligence and you're at the point where you're running the numbers, which brought you here: How are Costa Rica closing costs calculated? What's included (and, what's not)? Who pays?

Closing costs in Costa Rica are typically higher than what you might see in the United States or Canada. There are a few reasons for that, including how Costa Rica collects taxes. Annual property taxes in Costa Rica are very low (0.25% to about 0.55%, depending on declared value), so property transfer taxes are higher.

That being said, calculations are straightforward and all components of Costa Rica closing costs are calculated as a percentage of the property's value. This brings us to an important side note: In the past (and to some extent, still), there was a bit of a wink-wink culture regarding property tax evasion. Costa Rica is working to remedy this issue. Our best advice is to keep your transactions above board.

With all that said, let's jump into Costa Rica closing costs, their calculation, their total cost, and who pays. For practical purposes, we'll use a \$300,000 property purchase as our basis throughout this section.

COSTA RICA CLOSING COSTS: HOW THEY'RE CALCULATED

In Costa Rica, closing costs are calculated as a total of **four sub-categories**:

- Transfer Taxes
- National Registry & Documentary Stamps
- Legal Fees
- VAT / IVA

These categories are almost exclusively **calculated as a percentage value** of your total property price. So, while there's **no set price** for closing costs, they're fairly easy to calculate.

Notably, to combat the above-referenced transfer tax evasion, Costa Rica has taken to **basing these percentages on the higher of two possible values**: either on the **contracted sales price** or the **registered fiscal value**. You'll see what we mean, in the next section:



1. Transfer Taxes (1.5%)

In Costa Rica, transfer taxes are calculated as a set percentage: 1.5% of **either the property's fiscal value OR the contract price**, whichever is higher.

In other words, if the property's registered fiscal value is the equivalent of \$300,000 but the contract price is \$200,000, transfer taxes will be calculated at 1.5% of \$300,000. Likewise, if the registered fiscal value is the equivalent of \$200,000 but the contract price is \$300,000, transfer taxes will still be calculated at 1.5% of \$300,000.

Total Based on our \$300K Example: \$4,500

2. National Registry + Documentary Stamps

When you live in Costa Rica, you quickly learn that official stamps are required for almost all things legal. That goes sextuple for home-buying legalities.

This sub-category of Costa Rica closing costs hinges on six elements:

1. National Registry Stamps (0.5%)
2. Agrarian Fees (0.15%)
3. Fiscal Stamps (under \$2)
4. National Archive Fees (under \$1)
5. Costa Rican Bar Association Fees (under \$100)
6. Municipal Fees (0.2%)

Some of these fees are nominal (National Archive fees are less than 5¢ – yes, less than a U.S. nickel), while others (ex. Municipal fees and National Registry stamps) are calculated as a percentage of the total sale and can be substantial.

Total Based on our \$300K Example: \$2,410, calculated as: \$1,500 (National Registry) + ¢190,500 (Agrarian) + ¢625 (Fiscal Stamps) + ¢20 (National Archives) + ¢5,000 (Bar Association) + ¢381,000 (Municipal Fees)



3. Legal Fees

Two more fun facts about Costa Rica? The first: Costa Rican law loves a good sliding scale of fees. The second: Only lawyers can become notaries and, in fact, notaries are a professional step up from lawyers.

Side note (because it's important to home-buying and to legalities in Costa Rica, generally): To become a public notary, a lawyer must be part of the Costa Rican Bar Association (el Colegio de Abogados) and must first practice for a minimum two years; from there, s/he may study and apply for an advanced legal degree in notary and registry law. In other words, a Public Notary in Costa Rica is a type of attorney who **specializes in property transfer**.

In practical application, this means that **only a notario público**, or public notary, is legally empowered to transfer property, such as a home purchase. If you don't already have a lawyer, try to choose a firm (*un bufete*) that has at least one notary public. Over time, this will make your legal life in Costa Rica infinitely easier.

As far as Costa Rica closing costs, the cost of a notary public's services is calculated based on a **pre-established, non-negotiable sliding fee scale**:

- Up to 10,000,000 Colones: 2.0%
- 10,000,001 to 15,000,000: 1.50%
- 15,000,001 to 30,000,000: 1.25%
- 30,000,001+: 1.00%

The easy way to think of this is that you'll pay about \$725 (based on a ₡640 to \$1 exchange rate) in tax for the first ₡30M, and then an additional 1% of any amount over ₡30M.

Total Based on our \$300K Example: Approximately \$3,300, calculated as: ₡200,000 (first ₡10M) + ₡75,000 (₡10M-₡15M) + ₡187,500 (₡15M-₡30M) + ₡1,600,000 (₡30M to about ₡190.5M, the equivalent to \$300,000).

4. VAT/IVA (13% Value-Added Tax)

Additionally, a 13% VAT (known in Costa Rica as IVA or I.V.A.) is added to all **legal fees and escrow services**. This is by law and applies to almost all services in and throughout Costa Rica.

Notably, this percentage **is not calculated based on your property cost**. Or, it is, but only in a round-about way: Legal fees are calculated based on the above-referenced sliding scale, and VAT fees are calculated at 13% of your legal fees. Your notary public does not pocket these fees; they are remitted directly to the government, on a monthly basis.

Total Based on our \$300K Example: : \$429 (13% of \$3,300)

Total Transfer/Closing Costs (based on our \$300K example): \$10,639

5. Additional Costs

There may be additional costs associated with your purchase, including **escrow service** (under \$500, typically), a **holding corporation** (optional), due diligence, topography studies, promissory notes, **capital gains tax**, and others.

While these are not calculated as official closing costs in Costa Rica, they're something you should be aware of.



COSTA RICA CLOSING COSTS: WHO PAYS?

In Costa Rica, closing costs are traditionally **paid by the buyer**. (In turn, the seller pays real estate commissions.)

That said, it's becoming more common for buyers and sellers to come to a mutual agreement to **share closing cost fees**. Rule of thumb: If it's a buyer's market (or if you're considering a property that's been on the market for a while), you'll have greater negotiating power regarding closing costs.

Although closing costs in Costa Rica tend to be a bit higher than in the U.S. and Canada, they are fairly straightforward since they are all calculated as a percentage of the property's value. Now that you know the ins and outs when it comes to closing costs, you are one step closer to living the "Pura Vida" in beautiful Costa Rica.



Chapter 7: Buying & Owning a Car in Costa Rica: What to Expect (Including the Costs)

If you're thinking about buying a car in Costa Rica, then you're probably also wondering about the costs, required paperwork, maintenance, and other requirements of owning a car.

Believe it or not, this is one of the more straightforward and easily accomplished tasks in your new life. That said, most people fall into either the dread-it ("ugh, another thing to check off the list!") or enjoy-it ("so close to achieving normalcy!") category.

We hope you'll be the latter – or at least, feel neutral about the whole process. While it is a process, it's also one you can complete in just a few days or weeks (unless you're searching for something very specific).

So, let's get into it:

BEFORE YOU BUY: 4 CONSIDERATIONS

While none of the below will likely change your decision to purchase a car, here are a few considerations that might influence your ultimate choice:

Brand

When it comes to buying a car in Costa Rica, it's best to opt for one of the major brands: Toyota and Hyundai are the most widely sold, with Nissan, Mitsubishi, Suzuki, and Honda trailing close enough behind.

Not only will there be more local mechanics to service these brands – and by local, we mean that you won't have to travel all the way to a specific (and specialized) dealership in San José – but your **costs will be lower**. First, because you won't have to visit that above-referenced "specialized" mechanic or dealership but, even more importantly, because **parts are prevalent**.

Purchase Price

We're not going to go into this too deeply, but be prepared for a little bit of car-price sticker shock: Like it or not (agree with it or not...), cars are subject to **high import taxes** AND they **retain their value** better and longer in Costa Rica.

And that all boils down to a **higher purchase price** – usually, anywhere from 1.5 to 3 times more expensive than you might expect "back home." For example, in 2021, a 2009 Toyota RAV4 costs about \$14,000; a 2019 Hyundai Tucson is over \$22,000; and an ultra-compact 2018 Suzuki Swift costs about \$11,000.

Just remember, when it comes time to sell, your sales price will also be higher (especially if you've purchased one of the bigger brands).



Costa Rican Roads (aka “Do I Need a 4WD?”)

Costa Rican roads are... Well, let’s just say that some are so bumpy, we like to call it a “Costa Rican massage.” And those that aren’t bumpy? Well, they may be narrow. Or potholed. Or paved with molasses (true story).

So, do you need a 4x4 in Costa Rica? The real answer is, “**it depends.**” As we’ll mention throughout this section, it’s more a **cost-benefit analysis** than anything else. If you live in one of the more “urban” areas of Costa Rica, you won’t need a 4x4 – until you do. But, if you live in a beach town or a rural area or far from the hustle and bustle... Well, you’re going to encounter some of those Costa Rican massage conditions.

That said, it’s *still* a cost-benefit analysis: If you don’t often encounter tough roads – if your typical daily, weekly, or monthly wanderings don’t take you off-road or onto dirt backgrounds – then you won’t need a 4WD very often. In that case, it may be best to **save the added purchase cost and gas costs**, and only **rent a 4x4** when you venture out for far-flung adventures.

But, if you live on the hillside or back a dirt road, if you live by the beach or like to take Sunday afternoon rides to places unknown – **in that case, we’d recommend the 4WD.**

Gas Costs (and Full Serve, Everywhere)

Just as a heads-up, gas may (or may not) be pricier than it is back home. It depends on where you used to call home!

Let’s start with the good news: **Gasoline prices are regulated throughout Costa Rica.** And by regulated, we mean that **price is government-mandated**, so it’s always the same, at every gas station (called *la bomba*, by the way). Additionally, gas is *always* full-serve, so know whether you need *Plus* (91 octane), *Súper* (95 octane), or *diesel* – and practice saying it! (*Plus, por favor!*)

Now, on to price: You can check the day’s mandated prices on [RECOPE’s website](#). As mid-2024, Plus costs ₡721 per liter, Súper costs ₡742 per liter, and diesel costs ₡624 per liter. To put this in U.S. terms, for example, that’s about **\$6.49/gallon for Plus, \$6.68/gallon for Súper, and \$5.62/gallon for diesel** (approximate prices, as of publication).

BUYING A CAR IN COSTA RICA

You are on board and you are ready. Here's what you need to know, practically speaking, about buying a car in Costa Rica:

Where to Buy a Car

While it won't ultimately be the specific where you buy, every purchase should begin online. The biggest and most important website for buying cars in Costa Rica is [CRAutos.com](https://www.crautos.com), which has a fairly robust search engine to let you search for your dream vehicle (used or new).

You can also look on Craigslist although, beware, there tends to be a lot of fake listings there, so it's best for getting comparisons. You can also search on Facebook Marketplace, as Facebook is a Big Deal in Costa Rica and so it's no surprise that people list their vehicles there, too.

If you plan to purchase new, then you should also get in touch with local dealerships. Many will be located in San José or, if you're lucky, nearby Liberia. Keep in mind that, when you purchase new from the dealership, foreigners do not qualify for financing. Expect to pay in cash. (You will receive a dealership warranty, though, and that equals peace of mind in Costa Rica!)

Tip: If you purchase through a private individual, you absolutely must hire a private (and trusted) mechanic to look over the vehicle pre-purchase.

Should I Buy in Guanacaste?

You may have heard that you shouldn't buy at the beach/in Guanacaste because the roads are challenging and the salt air can be corrosive. Those things are true but mostly, it comes down to selection – and selection is a lot better in the Central Valley.

So, once you've gotten a handle on general pricing, it's time to start looking for your future vehicle.

And, when that time comes, here's an important tip: Set your online the whole country because if not, you're going to severely limit your options.

What's more, buying a car in San José doesn't have to be a headache, either: There are people and services who will go to Central Valley, professionally review the car, and even bring it back to Guanacaste for you. For anyone who doesn't have the time, or the Spanish, or the patience, this can be a great option.

Warranties and Maintenance

We've already touched on this, but to emphasize, if you purchase new, you'll have a warranty – and that's a huge plus. If you're buying a used car, you'll need a good and reliable mechanic. (Feel free to ask us for recommendations!)

And, as mentioned above, if you want to keep maintenance costs low, purchase a common brand to have access to more mechanics and lower-cost replacement parts.

Purchasing Costs

When it comes time to make your purchase, you can do so in your own name or in a corporation name – it's up to you. The purchase process and cost won't change, either way.

In addition to the vehicle's purchase price, be prepared to pay notary/attorney fees (\$300-\$400) and *traspaso* fees (3% of the registered fiscal value), which cover your fees for property transfer and vehicle registration.

DEKRA (Formerly, Riteve or RTV) + Marchamo

While these aren't purchase costs, they are owning-a-vehicle costs, so we thought we'd mention: When buying a car in Costa Rica, you're responsible for two mandatory annual fees: DEKRA (pronounced dek-ra) and *marchamo*.

Briefly, DEKRA is the annual vehicle inspection process and costs ₡12,000, or about \$20. We'd recommend having your mechanic do a once-over before you go, though, to cover your bases and prevent headaches. (No one loves paying for re-inspection after failing due to a license plate ding...)

Marchamo, on the other hand, is your yearly property tax/license plate fee (more or less) and is calculated based on the age and value of your vehicle. You can [check a vehicle's marchamo cost](#) on the INS website.

Although there are complicated aspects about starting a new life in Costa Rica, thankfully buying a car is not one of them. After considering brand, purchase price, Costa Rican roads and gas costs, you'll be well on your way to purchasing a vehicle to go along with your new life in Costa Rica.

Chapter 8:

Moving to Costa Rica with Kids? There Are a Few Things You Should Know

Are you dreaming of moving to Costa Rica with kids, but does the *thought* of planning it all (let alone implementing said plan) seem daunting? Are you wondering where you should start and what resources are out there to answer your questions and quell your concerns?

Many of our realtors asked the same questions prior to relocating to Costa Rica.

It is natural to have questions about moving with kids and family to the tropics. Some of our clients experience preemptive uncertainty about the minutiae of birthing, nurturing, and raising their children in Costa Rica. What is pre and post-natal care like? Schools? Are there enough activities for kids? How is the healthcare? The list goes on.

You may be asking: will I be happy and fulfilled raising children in Costa Rica? Will my children be happy here?

For our realtors, the answer to these questions were yes! However, as mentioned previously, your decision is personal to your priorities, your family, and most importantly: you. Below we highlight the personal experience Rebecca Clower, the founder of Blue Water Properties.

GIVING BIRTH IN COSTA RICA

If you're starting or expanding your family while in Costa Rica, you probably have lots of questions (and probably some fears) about giving birth in a foreign country.

Our advice is **not to worry too much**: Giving birth in Costa Rica can likely offer the birthing experience you seek. That's because **you'll have your pick of public or private healthcare**. (To clarify, though, public hospital births are primarily for established residents paying into the *Caja Costarricense de Salud Social*, or the Caja.)

Here's a very brief rundown:

Giving Birth at a Public Hospital

If you're a member of the Caja, your public hospital birth entails **no added cost**: For the price of your monthly affiliation, everything – from a natural birth to a cesarean section, plus all your medications and follow-up care – is covered. You'll pay nothing out of pocket, even if you receive emergency care, your child requires the NICU, or other unforeseeable factors.

A no-cost birth is a big motivator, especially when paired with **excellent healthcare**. And, that's the crux of it: Not only does Costa Rican healthcare rank well on the world stage, but the country's public hospitals are well-versed in pre- and post-natal care. You and your baby will receive top-notch treatment, though there will be **no frills added**.

Giving Birth at a Private Hospital

In Costa Rica, and even now at the beach, private hospitals are many. They offer excellent care at a relatively low price – typically, around the \$5,000 to \$8,000 mark, all told (without any major emergency) – and many families go private for the myriad benefits, despite the added price tag.

So, what are the **"tipping points"** that families often reference in explaining **why they chose a private hospital birth over a public hospital?** Here are some of the big ones:

- **English Spoken:** Even for those of us who are bilingual, healthcare is almost its own language. Add in labor pains (not to mention, possible stress or worry over the birthing process, especially if it's your first!) and other factors, and speaking Spanish during birth can be a not-so-appealing prospect. While public hospitals cannot guarantee an English-speaker for your birth, private hospitals allow you to **choose an English-speaking doctor**.
- **A More Personal Experience:** Public hospitals offer top-notch care, but the bedside manner may not be what you're expecting (or wanting). For example, you don't get to choose your doctor; whoever is on call when you arrive, will act as your attending OB. If there's a shift change, you're getting a new doctor and nurse. At a private hospital, **you'll choose your doctor** – and can keep the same OB, throughout your pre-natal care and birthing experience.

- **Pain Relief:** Public hospitals don't offer elective pain relief, such as epidurals. At a private hospital, you can make these decisions for yourself.
- **More Options:** While public hospitals have made major strides, in recent years, to provide a more nurturing and pro-mother/child birth experience, their resources are still limited. If, for example, an elective C-section or a natural birth – a birthing tub, a midwife, a birthing ball, delayed cord clamping, etc. – is important to you, you'll have to opt for private.
- **Privacy:** It's in the name, right? Private hospitals offer the privacy of **your own birthing room** and, later, **your own recovery room**. In a public hospital, you'll likely be sharing with several other women and their newborns. This privacy also affords **round-the-clock visiting hours** for your partner or other visitors, whereas at a public hospital, visitors (including the father) are usually limited to short daily windows.



The Bottom Line: Public vs. Private Hospitals

There are many other points of comparison (probably enough for an entire chapter), but in summary, public hospitals are an excellent option, if you're a resident and seek a no-added-cost birth with top-notch OBGYN care. Private hospitals are an excellent option if you're dedicated to a specific birth plan, seek a more nurturing experience, or you're not yet a resident.

SCHOOLS IN COSTA RICA

If you're thinking of moving to Costa Rica with kids, then you're also definitely thinking about schooling in Costa Rica.

Again, it starts with the big one: **Public or private?** This is another question that will be a personal decision. Your choice of schooling will depend on many factors, including your home's location (how far is the commute to a school?), local school availability (how good is the public school? what private schools are within a reasonable commute?), your finances (public schools are free, whereas private schools cost anywhere from **\$4,000-\$10,000+ per year**), and other factors.

We've pulled together a comprehensive list of [private schools near Tamarindo](#), [Playas del Coco](#), and Nosara, and that should give you a good jump start on your research regarding **bilingual options, methodologies, degree programs** (foreign diplomas, IB degrees, and more), **school calendars** (Costa Rican or U.S. school year?), and more.

As for public schools, here are a few considerations:

- **Cost (Free):** Public education in Costa Rica is free – well, mostly. There is no school tuition and, depending on the student's schedule, snacks/meals are also free. But, there are a few associated costs of public schooling, including mandatory school uniforms and books (low cost, often bound copies).
- **Calendar:** The Costa Rican school calendar runs from February through November. All public schools (and many private schools) follow this calendar.



- **School Day:** One of the most jarring differences between Costa Rican and, say, U.S. schooling is the school day: Most public schools divide the day into morning and afternoon sessions, so your kids will either attend from around (hours vary) **7 a.m. to noon** or **noon to 5 p.m.**
- **Substitutes:** Depending on the school, but more often than not, there is little to no budget for substitute teachers. So, if your child's teacher is ill or otherwise unavailable, there will probably be no class that day. (Consistency is a major point of consideration, for many families, both Costa Rican and resident, when choosing to go private.)

PEDIATRICS, DENTAL & FAMILY HEALTHCARE

Again, this is another Big Topic but, in a nutshell, **your family's health will be well taken care of in Costa Rica.**

If you are members of the public healthcare system (CCSS, a.k.a. the Caja), then **all your public healthcare is covered at no added cost.** That said, the general consensus – a consensus shared by Costa Ricans and residents, both – is that the Caja is best for preventive care (well visits and lab work, mostly) and emergency care.

Need an annual checkup? Kid needs stitches? Have a bone that requires setting and casting? The Caja will be your best friend! And, luckily, there are **Caja clinics** – sometimes called *clínicas*, otherwise *Ebais* – in every area of Costa Rica, usually within a 15- to 30-minute drive.



For everything else, many people choose **private and/or mixed medicine.** Mixed medicine is, essentially, a private doctor who also works with the Caja, providing the ability to write Caja prescriptions (which you'll fill at Caja clinics, at no added cost), order tests through the Caja (ex. need a pricey skin prick test for allergies?), and other mixed benefits.

When moving to Costa Rica with kids, you'll want to secure **private healthcare insurance**, at least to cover the interim between your arrival and accessing public healthcare. But, many families carry dual public-private insurance (public insurance = your monthly Caja payment), to cover all eventualities.

And again, this is a Big Topic with Many Considerations, but a good, generalized statement is that **private healthcare is affordable.** Yes, affordable is relative, but to give you an idea: **With no insurance**, visiting a general practitioner/pediatrician will run you about \$50-\$70. Specialists usually fall into the \$100-\$150 range. Braces (the whole shebang!) are about \$500-\$750. Your child's new Invisalign? About half the cost of what you'd pay in the US.

And again, this is without insurance: Tack on a local private insurance policy, and you're back in the familiar realm of co-pays, deductibles, and policy minimums/maximums, which can **reduce your out-of-pocket costs to about 20% or less**, typically.

FAMILY ACTIVITIES & EXTRACURRICULARS

We have covered lots of the not-quite-fun basics, and don't want to miss out on one of the biggest, shout-it-from-the-rooftops! Reasons we recommend moving to Costa Rica with kids: the **lifestyle!**

Costa Rica is **very, very family-friendly**. Strangers will coo at your baby on the street. (They may even ask if they can hold her while you eat/shop/etc.!) A crying toddler is less likely to elicit grumpy glances than smiles of encouragement or silly antics to make him smile again. You won't get side-eyed for nursing in public. Kids are welcome almost everywhere.

Basically, **you're going to feel welcome** – and that feeling of welcome is a bit like a warm hug, especially when you're feeling a little unsure of yourself, in a new country, and out of your depth. We've all been there! There's also the matter of **childcare**. In addition to **preschools and nursery care** – many private schools accept kids as young as 2, and there are other private nurseries that start young (often, <6 months) – many local families opt for **in-home childcare** or **nannying**, since the average wage is around **\$4-\$8 per hour**.

Beyond that, **family life at the beach revolves around the outdoors**. It's pretty easy to get your kids off their screens, when the alternative involves **hiking, sailing, surfing, kayaking, and visiting volcanoes**.

And speaking of kids at the beach, there are **lots of families here**. In our community, specifically, there are lots of kids and many age ranges. They come from both Costa Rican and expat families, which offers a great lifestyle mix of cultures, languages, and experiences.

Choosing a community with other expats can also be **key to your kids' successful transition**: Living around other kids who have been there, done that – who have faced the same life and cultural challenges – can be of **great benefit to your children**. Their peers will be in similar situations and will understand your kids' bi-cultural experience – all the ups and the downs, come what may. And that resulting empathy, compassion, and advice can **make all the difference**.

If you'd like to chat about family life in Costa Rica, we are happy to answer any questions and address any concerns. We promise not to sugar-coat the truth or tell you what you want to hear: We will always be honest. We will share our personal experiences and advise in any way we can!

Deciding where in the world you're going to raise your family is no small feat. There are tons of factors to consider - including giving birth in a foreign country, pediatric healthcare, family activities, schooling and much, much more. Thankfully, Costa Rica is full of family-friendly communities and is a wonderful place to raise your children and watch your family grow.

CONCLUSION

There you have it! You now have all the insider information you need to build a home, raise a family, and start a life in beautiful Costa Rica. You know what to expect when it comes to the cost of living, residency options, buying a home, concession & closing costs, owning a car, and raising kids in Central America. Congratulations, you're a million steps closer to achieving your dream!

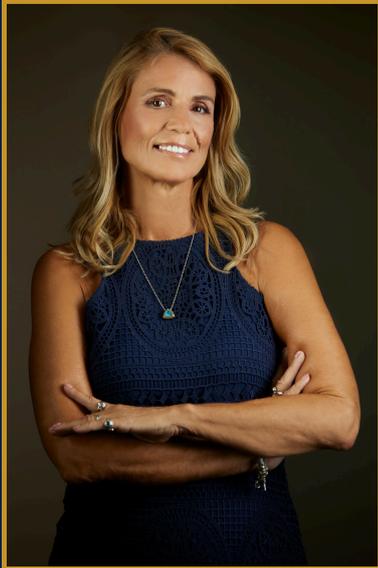
For even more tips on moving to and living in Costa Rica, and for the latest and greatest property listings, don't forget to [click here](#) and subscribe to Dawn Lane Luxury Real estate mailing list. And make sure to follow along for more Pura Vida content on our social media channels linked below.

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