

1.1 Why choose Costa Rica?

Costa Rica Unveiled – Between Pura Vida and Practical Promise

For anyone considering a life reset, Costa Rica has a seductive logic. It's not just the postcards of waterfalls or the "pura vida" smile branding every souvenir. It's the convergence of real-world assets with a cultural rhythm that invites you to breathe, work, and live on new terms. The economy, for one, isn't a jungle, it's surprisingly coherent. Tourism remains the top earner, but not in a one-trick-pony sense. The country has steadily positioned itself as a hub for eco-technology, attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) in sustainable ventures, clean energy, and green infrastructure. Agriculture is still present, with bananas, pineapples, and coffee anchoring the export base, but there's also a shift toward high-value niche crops and agro-tourism. As of the latest data, FDI continues to flow primarily from North America and Europe, and the inflation rate, while not negligible, has stabilized since the pandemic's disruptions, hovering between 2–5% depending on fiscal year. That puts it in a better position than many Latin American neighbors, especially when coupled with its relatively stable job market in the service and tech sectors.

The cost of living tells a more fragmented story. Urban areas like San José or Escazú are pricing in proximity and comfort, with typical monthly rents for a two-bedroom apartment ranging between ₡300,000 and ₡700,000. Salaries, meanwhile, remain modest by international standards. A mid-level tech employee may earn ₡1.2 million/month, while hospitality or education workers average closer to ₡400,000–₡600,000. In rural areas, rent can drop dramatically, ₡150,000 isn't rare, but so can access to well-paid work. The purchasing power gap between these zones is wide, yet cushioned somewhat by a deeply rooted informal economy and barter logic. If you live rurally, you'll likely pay less, but you'll also earn less, and often outside official structures. The choice, therefore, isn't just about cost but about rhythm, expectations, and access.

The local work culture wraps around a unique version of balance. The standard workweek is 8 hours a day, 5.5 days a week, with Saturday often used for catch-up or informal shifts in retail and tourism. However, holidays are generous, and most are respected nationally: expect to see entire neighborhoods quiet on days like Juan Santamaría Day or September 15th (Independence Day).

Add to that the cultural phenomenon of “pura vida”, more than a slogan, it’s a lived elasticity around time, stress, and ambition. Employers may expect reliability, but they’re rarely driven by urgency in the Western sense. Productivity exists, but it moves to a local tempo. Meetings start 10 minutes late. Deadlines stretch. No one dies. And that matters, especially for expats burned out by chronically overclocked systems.

On global indices, Costa Rica performs well across several key metrics. It consistently ranks among the safest countries in Central America, with a homicide rate far lower than regional averages. Healthcare, provided primarily through the CCSS system, is robust and universally accessible, with most citizens and residents covered either as employees or through voluntary contributions. Education quality is mixed: public universities like UCR and TEC are excellent, but primary education varies depending on region. Corruption, while not absent, is less systemic than in neighboring states. The perception is of inefficiency more than malice, what you lose in speed, you often gain back in transparency.

The climate, however, doesn’t negotiate. Costa Rica is split across multiple microclimates, thanks to its topography and dual coastlines. The Pacific side has a dry season from December to April and a rainy season that soaks May through November. The Caribbean coast is wetter year-round, with brief sunny windows. There’s no true hurricane season here, unlike the Caribbean islands, but heavy storms and flooding are seasonal threats, particularly in the Central Valley hillsides. What you gain, though, is unrivaled biodiversity: within a three-hour drive, you can shift from tropical rainforest to high-altitude cloud forest to surf-blasted beach town.

Connectivity within Costa Rica is often underrated. Domestic flights via Sansa or Nature Air can get you from San José to the Nicoya Peninsula or Caribbean coast in under an hour. Intercity buses are widespread, cheap (₡200–₡1,500 depending on distance), and relatively punctual, although comfort varies. Road conditions are improving, but rural roads are still a gamble in rainy months, unpaved, potholed, and sometimes flooded. The international airport at San José (SJO) remains the main hub, with growing connections to North and South America, plus seasonal links to Europe. A second international terminal in Liberia (LIR) serves the Pacific coast and is expanding rapidly to absorb expat and tourist traffic.

Immigration policy is where Costa Rica tries to balance openness and bureaucracy. Investors are welcome, those putting in at least USD 150,000 in a registered business or USD 200,000 in real estate can apply for temporary residency with the right to manage their assets and stay long-term. Retirees with guaranteed pensions of USD 1,000/month (pensionado visa) and passive income holders (rentista visa) also qualify for long-term stays. Both these categories are excluded from formal salaried employment but can manage rental property or their own businesses. As of now, a digital nomad visa also exists, valid for one year (renewable once), tax-exempt on foreign income, with a net income requirement of USD 3,000/month or USD 5,000 for families. Processing times vary: expect 3 to 6 months for most permits, with required documents including birth certificates, police background checks, bank statements, and official translations into Spanish.

Fees are moderate: visa categories range between ₡11,000 and ₡33,000, plus consular charges for paperwork legalization (typically USD 50 per document). The real cost lies in time, appointments are often scheduled weeks out, and document preparation must follow strict formats (apostille, certified translations, notarial verification). DIMEX cards, the local residency ID, can take four months to be issued after approval.

So, why choose Costa Rica? Not because it's perfect, but because it offers a calibrated trade-off. What you lose in fast bureaucracy, you'll gain in breathable days. What you spend on imported cheese, you'll save in health insurance. It's not the land of shortcuts, but it is the land of equilibrium. Between volcanoes and slow buses, between CCSS clinics and jungle howler monkeys, between digital nomads and retired professors, a different pace becomes not just livable, but desirable. And once you adapt, it's not "moving abroad." It's just... life, pura y simple.

1.2 What to expect in practice

Title: Beneath the Surface – What Living in Costa Rica Really Feels Like

Moving to Costa Rica sounds light and breezy until you realize that behind the tropical vegetation lies a thick jungle of paperwork, timing quirks, and expectations that shift like the Pacific tide. The dream of “pura vida” doesn’t vanish, but it does take longer to materialize than most expect. Residency approvals, for instance, are not instantaneous gifts handed at immigration. Even once you’ve submitted all your documents, apostilled, translated, neatly stapled with passport photos clipped just right, your DIMEX card (the holy grail of legal residency) can take up to four months to be printed and picked up, even after approval. And that’s assuming no missing pages or spontaneous policy updates. During that limbo, you’re neither fully here nor quite in violation, just... pending.

The same tempo spills into other practical steps. Looking for long-term housing as a foreigner without a DIMEX? Expect skepticism, especially from formal landlords. Some will demand several months of bank statements, a local guarantor, or a higher deposit. Property search itself can take weeks, especially if you’re trying to avoid overpriced tourist traps or scam listings. Bank accounts are another exercise in patience. BNCR and BAC are the go-to choices, but they each have their quirks. BAC tends to be more friendly to foreigners, while BNCR is better for government-linked payments. Either way, opening an account will involve a face-to-face appointment, a utility bill to prove residence, your passport, and, if you’re lucky, acceptance of your foreign address if you’re not yet officially settled. Without a DIMEX, expect restricted access: no online banking, limited transfers, and suspicion over any large deposits. The “source of funds” interview is not ceremonial, it’s taken seriously.

CCSS enrollment is one of the few steps that can feel almost efficient, especially in urban centers. Once your application is accepted, you can register at a local CAJA office with your passport, lease contract, and a projection of your declared income. The process usually takes a single morning. After that, you receive a Tarjeta de Salud that grants you access to clinics and basic health services. Monthly premiums for voluntary affiliates (non-salaried residents) range from 4% to 9% of declared income. For retirees or freelancers, that might mean ₡30,000–₡120,000 per month. It’s payable monthly, and skipping payments quickly locks you out of appointments.

The daily reality of your income versus your spending hits in the second month. Remote workers earning in USD or EUR usually fare well, especially if they budget cautiously and avoid importing too many foreign habits. But if you're paid irregularly or rely on local freelance work, the math gets tighter. A modest life in the Central Valley can cost between ₡500,000 and ₡800,000 per month for a single person, covering rent, food, transportation, and health. Retirees living on a fixed pension of USD 1,200/month usually do fine, but tend to avoid expat-saturated zones like Tamarindo or Santa Teresa, where rents alone can consume 60% of that budget.

Students and service workers, on the other hand, often live in shared flats or family homes, navigating a thinner margin where ₡3,000 makes a difference in the grocery bill. Bureaucracy in Costa Rica doesn't just slow things down, it shapes how you approach life. Every official document from your home country must be apostilled, translated into Spanish, and often presented in duplicate. Want to exchange your driver's license? First, you'll need a MOPT appointment, booked online weeks in advance. The process requires a medical exam, paid at an approved clinic (₡20,000–₡30,000), along with your passport, DIMEX, and original license. Migración is notorious for erratic time slots and sudden document rejections for minute formatting errors. Banco Central handles some financial verifications and tax processes, and while online systems exist, they're not always intuitive for non-Spanish speakers. When in doubt, bring a gestor, a local facilitator who knows the tricks, for a fee of ₡30,000–₡50,000.

One of the least predictable aspects of life in Costa Rica isn't the paperwork, it's the cultural code. "Tico time" is not a joke. It's a temporal logic built on context, relationships, and unspoken expectations. Arriving ten minutes late is often early. Confirming three times before someone actually shows up is normal. The communication style leans toward indirectness, "vamos a ver" (we'll see) often means no, and "claro" may mean maybe. Direct confrontation, even when polite, can be perceived as rude. Hierarchies are subtle but present. Titles matter in professional contexts, and deference to age or role is expected in formal settings. Among friends, things are looser, but the emotional tone stays gentle, non-combative, and laced with pleasantries.

Then come the hidden costs. Renting a flat requires not just one month's rent up front but often one or two months of deposit, and sometimes agency commissions of 5%. Lease agreements may need notarization, which costs ₡20,000–₡30,000 depending on the office. Mandatory liability insurance for certain rentals, especially furnished ones or apartments with shared spaces, can be another ₡10,000/month. Legal documents like power of attorney or immigration statements must often be reviewed or drafted by a lawyer, and these professionals rarely work for under ₡75,000–₡100,000/hour.

Integration into local circles follows no guaranteed timeline. You might find yourself chatting with neighbors in the first week, or still eating alone six months in. Joining community classes, volunteering, or attending language exchanges accelerates the process. Spanish fluency at a basic level (A2–B1) can be achieved in 6 to 9 months with regular classes or tandem partners. But making real friends, being invited to weddings or birthday gatherings, or being seen as more than a “gringo” requires deeper effort. Ticos are warm, but private. Trust builds slowly, and flakiness, both yours and theirs, can stretch timelines indefinitely. That said, once you're in, you're in.

There's no universal blueprint for integration. Some expats blend seamlessly into local co-ops, municipal sports leagues, or neighborhood cleanups. Others remain in a language-bubble, socializing only with other expats, trading weather reports and landlord complaints over iced coffee. What you choose determines not only your satisfaction, but your legitimacy. Costa Rica doesn't need you to become Tico. But it does reward those who listen, who adapt, and who let go of the idea that everything should “work” the way it did back home.

So what should you expect in practice? Expect to wait longer than you'd like. Expect to learn more than you planned. Expect to pay more at first, and then slowly spend less as you understand how things really work. Expect to be frustrated by a process on Monday and invited to a backyard barbecue on Saturday. Expect that integration will not feel linear, but that one day, without noticing, you'll realize you know your neighbor's dog's name, you've memorized the bus schedule, and you've stopped needing to check the exchange rate every time you pay for groceries. That's when you'll know you've crossed over, not just legally, but mentally. Bienvenido.

1.3 Quick cultural overview

Title: The Costa Rican Compass – Values, Voices, and the Pulse of Everyday Life

To understand Costa Rica, you need more than legal paperwork or climate charts. You need to tune into the invisible threads that hold daily life together, the tone in a conversation, the rhythm of a handshake, the way a stranger says “con mucho gusto” with enough warmth to make you question whether you’ve met before. The cultural landscape here isn’t just friendly, it’s woven with a type of resilience masked as lightness. At the heart of it all stands the phrase that foreigners often mistake for a slogan: pura vida. But it isn’t branding, it’s philosophy. It’s both a greeting and a refusal to rush. A nod to gratitude and a quiet rebellion against overcomplication. “Pura vida” isn’t naïve optimism, it’s a practical serenity rooted in centuries of adapting without breaking.

This optimism feeds a broader sense of collectivism. In rural areas especially, community still functions as a safety net. Neighbors help each other without clocking favors, and social gatherings, whether religious, festive, or spontaneous, are a glue that makes bureaucracy tolerable. Urban Costa Rica has absorbed more individualism, especially in San José’s growing middle class, but even there, relationships are prized over status. It’s not what you earn, but how you show up for your people. Independence exists, but it is rarely celebrated at the cost of belonging. In crises, floods, blackouts, or bureaucratic madness, it’s not uncommon for entire neighborhoods to step in, unasked.

Environmental stewardship isn’t just a policy, it’s embedded in how people talk and act. Costa Rica may be a developing country by some measures, but its ecological consciousness rivals or surpasses most of the industrialized world. Recycling campaigns, plastic bans, and water conservation norms exist alongside more grassroots efforts: tree-planting drives, school-led beach cleanups, and family farms that teach kids composting before they can write in cursive. This is the only country in the world to have constitutionally disbanded its military in favor of education and health. That same logic bleeds into its protection of natural life. The national parks aren’t just attractions, they’re sacred. And that reverence for the land shows up in everyday actions: refusing plastic straws, preserving water during dry spells, and teaching kids to name birds before they know the capital of France.

The way Costa Ricans communicate is equally gentle, but not vague. Conversations often unfold in a spiral, not a straight line. Criticism is wrapped in compliments or implications, and “no” is rarely said directly. Instead, you’ll hear “vamos a ver” (we’ll see), “quizás” (maybe), or a warm smile that means “this conversation is over.” This doesn’t mean people are dishonest, it means they’re invested in harmony.

Confrontation is avoided not out of fear but out of respect. Even in disagreement, people will soften their tone, change the subject, or lean into humor. Phrases like “con mucho gusto” (with great pleasure), “a la orden” (at your service), and “que le vaya bien” (may it go well for you) are not transactional. They reflect a desire to keep dignity intact, for both speaker and listener. The culture rewards tact over bluntness, suggestion over command.

Family norms reveal a fascinating mix of tradition and evolution. While the country is officially Catholic, and Sunday mass still structures many rural routines, family life often centers around strong maternal figures. Grandmothers rule the house, mothers manage the emotional climate, and daughters carry inherited authority that doesn’t always reflect in legal terms, but holds weight in decision-making. At the same time, Costa Rica has enacted some of the most progressive laws on gender equality in Latin America. Same-sex marriage is legal, workplace discrimination is penalized, and women’s access to education and public leadership continues to grow. Yet paradoxically, traditional gender roles still hold sway in many households, especially outside metropolitan areas. It’s not uncommon for women to manage both careers and domestic responsibilities, or for fathers to be seen as moral anchors despite limited day-to-day involvement.

Urban and rural mindsets diverge significantly. In San José, you’ll find cosmopolitan cafés, coworking spaces, and a generation of young professionals who follow international news, experiment with veganism, and code-switch between Spanish and English without blinking. Guanacaste, in contrast, leans conservative, shaped by ranching culture, tight-knit religious communities, and a slower tempo. Time stretches longer. Roles are clearer. Change comes more gradually. These contrasts aren’t hierarchical, one isn’t more evolved than the other, they simply represent different calibrations of risk, speed, and cultural openness. Expats often struggle to adjust when moving between zones, expecting uniformity across a country the size of Denmark. They don’t find it. Instead, they learn that adaptation is regional.

Cultural markers here are proudly visible and often tied to the calendar. The Fiestas de Zapote, a boisterous December celebration outside San José, feature rodeos, carnivals, and an explosion of food stalls that pulse with reggaeton and marimba. In contrast, the Día de los Boyeros (Oxcart Day) in March celebrates agricultural heritage in slow, symbolic parades where elaborately painted carts pull homage to farming roots. Football is a national obsession, and La Sele (the national team) inspires collective euphoria or depression with every qualifying match. Surfing culture dominates the Pacific coast, where boards are strapped to bikes and kids learn wave etiquette before algebra.

National symbols aren't abstract: the white-tailed deer, the guanacaste tree, and even the blue morpho butterfly are seen not just as fauna but as part of a cultural inheritance. The result is a cultural mosaic that resists caricature. You'll find a Catholic nun running an NGO that supports trans youth. You'll find a farmer who speaks better English than the average expat, but never uses it unless necessary. You'll meet a waiter in Jacó who surfs at sunrise and meditates before his shift. Costa Rica doesn't flatten people into types. It holds space for contradiction.

Adapting here means learning to read subtext and to honor nuance. It means listening more than talking, smiling before asking, and resisting the urge to label what you don't immediately understand. It means knowing that a delay isn't always an error, that a formality often masks genuine hospitality, and that behind every "tranquilo" is a deeper belief that life is more livable when we stop trying to optimize every second.

Culture in Costa Rica isn't static, it's porous. Influences from Nicaragua, the Caribbean, the U.S., and Colombia swirl through its language, its food, and its politics. But there is a center. A gravitational pull toward balance. It may take months before you feel it. But once you do, the place starts making sense, not because it imitates what you knew, but because it teaches you to move differently. Less like a guest, more like a current in the tide.

1.4 Political environment & freedoms

Behind the Curtain – Democracy, Justice, and Freedoms in Costa Rica

Costa Rica's political landscape often surprises those arriving from more volatile parts of the world. It doesn't roar, it hums, quietly, persistently, and with a rare degree of balance for a Latin American nation. The country has operated as a multi-party democracy since 1949, following a brief civil war that ended with a radical, yet lasting decision: the total abolition of its military. That founding moment still shapes its civic DNA. Power lies not in tanks or generals, but in institutions. The presidency is limited to a single four-year term, with no immediate re-election allowed. This forces leadership turnover and dampens personality cults, though it sometimes disrupts policy continuity. The president governs alongside a unicameral Legislative Assembly, whose members are also elected every four years. Coalitions are the norm, not the exception, resulting in slower reforms but also fewer authoritarian detours.

The judicial branch enjoys a level of independence that's rare in the region. At the top sits the Corte Suprema de Justicia, a body that is not merely symbolic. Its constitutional chamber, Sala IV, has blocked executive overreach on multiple occasions, including cases involving environmental protections and labor rights. While legal delays are common, the average civil case can take 12 to 24 months, the process itself is largely seen as fair. Criminal trials move faster, often reaching sentencing within 6 to 12 months, though backlogs do exist in lower courts. Access to justice isn't limited to the elite: Costa Rica maintains a public legal aid system, especially for low-income citizens in family or labor law disputes. Quality varies by region, and many expats opt for private counsel, but the structure itself reflects a commitment to equity rather than just legality. When it comes to civil liberties, the country performs well above regional averages.

Freedom of the press is constitutionally protected and actively exercised. In 2024, Costa Rica ranked consistently in the top 10 of the World Press Freedom Index, alongside European democracies. Demonstrations are frequent, often organized by unions, environmental groups, or indigenous activists. The right to assemble is respected, and protest permits are rarely denied unless they directly conflict with security operations. The government has even been known to negotiate policy amendments in response to large public pressure, proof that protest isn't performative here, it's often effective

Digital rights have also entered the legislative domain. The Ley de Protección de la Persona frente al Tratamiento de sus Datos Personales, a mouthful, but vital, governs data privacy. It prohibits companies from collecting, storing, or sharing sensitive personal information without consent, aligning local regulations with global privacy trends. Enforcement mechanisms are still maturing, but the intent is clear: Costa Rica understands that liberty must now include the virtual realm. Surveillance is minimal, metadata retention exists for ISPs (up to six months), but there is no systematic monitoring of private communications. VPNs are legal and widely used, especially among digital workers or politically active youth.

The media landscape is diverse, though concentrated. La Nación, the oldest and most widely read newspaper, mixes serious journalism with center-right editorial leanings. Tico Times, an English-language outlet, caters to both expats and international observers with strong human rights coverage. There's also La República, more business-focused, and a robust system of community radio stations broadcasting in indigenous languages or hyper-local dialects. Importantly, there is no government censorship of the Internet. Online platforms remain open, accessible, and largely free from political manipulation, though misinformation is, like everywhere, an emerging concern.

That said, Costa Rica is not immune to corruption. It doesn't rot the system, but it stains it in pockets. Public works contracts, municipal permits, and customs inspections are the most commonly flagged areas. The government's response has been to strengthen watchdog institutions. The CICIÉS (Comisión Internacional Contra la Impunidad en Centroamérica), while primarily focused on coordination, now works in tandem with the Organismo de Investigación Judicial (OIJ) to pursue complex corruption cases. Whistleblower protections are in place under Law 9524, and several public officials have been forced to resign in the last five years due to misappropriation of funds or illicit enrichment. Investigations are slow, but they happen, and they matter.

Enforcement examples provide concrete proof. In 2021, a major scandal dubbed "Cochinilla" uncovered a network of construction companies bribing transport officials to secure inflated contracts. Arrests followed, not just in the private sector, but among mid-level bureaucrats and procurement managers. It didn't topple the government, but it reminded everyone that even in a seemingly placid democracy, power still needs to be watched.

Political participation remains strong. Voter turnout in presidential elections typically exceeds 65%, and campaigns are publicly financed to avoid corporate dominance. Citizens routinely challenge policies through referendums, appeals to the constitutional court, or simply by marching through Avenida Central. Political parties range from traditional centrists to progressives and environmentalists, with an increasing presence of candidates from outside the capital.

Expats rarely face political scrutiny unless they actively intervene in domestic disputes. However, participating in protests, while legal, should be done with awareness. Residency status may be checked at demonstrations, and photographing police officers without permission can lead to temporary detainment, not as a crackdown, but as a cautionary gesture. Embassies, particularly from the EU and North America, regularly publish updates and advisories during politically sensitive periods.

So, what does it mean to live in a place like this, where democracy is not loud but lived, where institutions function more like patient caretakers than heroic defenders? It means the rules mostly hold. It means you're not likely to be shaken down by police, censored by the state, or dragged into a legal maze without recourse. It also means that your own habits, how you speak, how you organize, how you protest, may need tuning. Because here, freedom doesn't wear a flag or shout from a podium. It's quieter. But it's real.

1.5 Social fractures & tensions

Cracks Beneath the Pura Vida – Social Fault Lines in Costa Rica

Costa Rica presents itself, often justifiably, as a beacon of stability in a region historically battered by coups, dictatorships, and armed conflict. But even this relative oasis isn't immune to the deeper fractures that split a society over time. Scratch beneath the green gloss of sustainability slogans and polite smiles, and you'll find tensions rooted in geography, ethnicity, faith, memory, and class. These aren't always loud, they don't explode into civil war or erupt in weekly protests, but they hum in the background of daily life, shaping access, perception, and power.

Start with geography. The Central Valley, encompassing San José, Heredia, Alajuela, and Cartago, is Costa Rica's economic and political core. It houses most of the population, the infrastructure, the services, and the jobs. Public hospitals are better equipped here, public schools better funded, and public transport, while imperfect, at least exists. But head east to Limón province, and the disparities become hard to ignore. Roads degrade. Hospital wait times stretch. Investment slows to a trickle. Even the tax burden feels different, special economic zones in the Central Valley benefit from lower tariffs and better logistics, while peripheral regions like Limón, Puntarenas, or the Southern Zone carry higher operational costs and fewer state incentives. For many Limonenses, the message is clear: they are part of the country, but not part of the priority.

Layered atop this regional gap are Costa Rica's often-ignored ethnic minorities. The Afro-Caribbean population in Limón, descended from Jamaican laborers brought in for railroad construction and banana plantations, has long battled systemic neglect. Despite their cultural contributions, language, music, cuisine, resistance, they face disproportionate unemployment, underrepresentation, and policing. Spanish is not always their first language. English patois remains alive in pockets, but is often dismissed or mocked in official contexts. The tourism industry now profits from their aesthetic, reggae, coconut rice, vibrant murals, but gives little back in real power or opportunity.

The Indigenous populations, including the Bribri, Cabécar, Maleku, and Boruca, face a more silent form of erasure. Their territories are protected on paper but contested in practice. Illegal land seizures by cattle ranchers or settlers go unpunished for years. Government enforcement is tepid, and violence occasionally flares up when Indigenous leaders attempt to reclaim ancestral lands. The Bribri, who inhabit both Costa Rican and Panamanian territories, maintain their language and governance structures, but are often excluded from national conversations on development. Infrastructure in these zones is rudimentary; healthcare access is seasonal at best, and educational materials rarely reflect Indigenous worldviews. Integration isn't the goal here, survival is.

Meanwhile, the urbanization wave that's lifted parts of San José into middle-class modernity has also deepened the housing crisis. As rural residents flee toward opportunity, they find a city choked by congestion, high rents, and *cimientos sociales*, informal settlements rising in flood-prone zones, under power lines, or on unstable hillsides. These are not marginal cases: tens of thousands live without proper sewage, legal electricity, or official addresses. San José's traffic gridlock has become legendary, with daily commutes stretching over two hours from the suburbs. And yet the alternative, rural stagnation, feels worse. Farms yield less. Tourism is fickle. Government programs for decentralization remain pilot-stage or buried in paperwork.

Religion, once a unifying force, now reveals another line of tension. Catholicism remains the official religion, enshrined in the constitution, with the state funding clergy salaries and religious education in public schools. Yet the evangelical movement has surged, especially in rural and working-class communities. Evangelical leaders now hold seats in the Legislative Assembly, shaping debates on LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive policy, and secularism. In public schools, there is a legal obligation to provide non-religious alternatives, but in practice, many teachers default to Catholic instruction. The cultural battle is not between belief and atheism, but between an old order backed by tradition and a new wave driven by emotion, conservatism, and populist rhetoric.

Memory is a contested space, too. Costa Rica's short civil war in 1948 lasted just 44 days, but its consequences were foundational: military abolition, democratic reforms, and the rise of the National Liberation Party. Still, this sanitized version omits the grief. Families displaced, lives shattered, property confiscated. The Museo de la Paz, housed in what was once a military barracks, attempts to preserve that history, but many Ticos have never visited. The trauma was buried in favor of a triumphalist narrative.

Reconciliation, when discussed, focuses on progress rather than justice. That strategy worked for decades, but now, younger generations demand a fuller accounting. They ask: who paid for this peace? Who was silenced so the story could seem clean?

Tensions in Costa Rica do not announce themselves with violence. They announce themselves in differential access. In the uneven paving of roads. In the language spoken at the front desk. In which neighborhood gets the new bus line, and which one gets more police. These fractures are subtle, but they shape destinies. The child born in a Limón barrio may live in the same republic as the child born in Escazú, but their lifelines will diverge from birth. Not because of malice. Because of inertia.

To live here as an expat is to float above some of these cracks, at least at first. But long-term residents see them clearly. They see how power is distributed, how resources flow, how visibility equals leverage. And they also see resilience: in Indigenous schools painted with ancestral glyphs, in Afro-Caribbean festivals where resistance sounds like calypso, in urban collectives that organize housing from the ground up. The fractures are real. But so is the strength of those living across them.

Costa Rica doesn't ask you to solve these tensions. But it does invite you to notice them. To understand that the "pura vida" ethos isn't denial, it's endurance. It's what happens when a society chooses grace over grievance, not because it's blind, but because it's still healing. Still choosing peace. Every day.