

## Things Your Travel Agent Forgot to Tell You!

Travel agents are generally nice folks, but they sometimes do not tell you what you need to know.

Why don't they? This may be because many have never personally visited the countries they sell. This is not necessarily bad as there are a lot of countries and travel is not cheap, even for them. I also have a feeling there are attorneys lurking somewhere in the background telling them to be over-cautious, but I don't know this for sure.

What I DO know for sure is that many travel agents tell people who are visiting Costa Rica a whole lotta bunk on many subjects... and they FAIL to tell folks about the stuff they NEED to know. So I decided to put up a few things that are really important to know when visiting Costa Rica. If YOUR travel agent told you all this, then patronize them again and again as they are probably knowledgeable in other areas of travel.

These are brief, but I hope clear.

- The water here IS safe to drink! Exceptions may be in VERY remote or rural areas, but unless you are way out in the boonies, you're OK.

Recently however, (Spring, 2005) a University of Costa Rica study indicated problems with the water in San José and parts of Heredia. Of course the water department said that is nonsense. I personally do not drink the water when I am in San José, but it has nothing to do with worries about safety. I don't drink it because they put enough chlorine in it to kill a cow, and it tastes really terrible. Your call.

- You do NOT need typhoid, malaria or any other shots when you visit Costa Rica. That is just silly, but I constantly meet folks who get a bunch of inoculations before visiting. They were told to do this by their travel agents or even by US government web sites. A tetanus shot or booster is of course always a good idea. See your doctor.
- DO be concerned about is Dengue Fever! (Read here and below about dengue fever!) For an 2007 update, click here.
- The sun here is NASTY. We are only ten degrees North of the Equator, so bring sunscreen and use it. You can burn to a crisp in 30 minutes if you run around unprotected. The UV factor here is at least double that of Florida or Arizona. A wonderful vacation can be made not so wonderful if you are in pain.
- If you rent a car here, remember there are FEW or NO street signs here. There are also no street addresses. The BIG highways are marked, but as soon as you leave them, you're toast. Read about driving in Costa Rica.

- Costa Ricans are... ummm. creative drivers and often pay little or no attention to traffic laws. Be very careful. See below!!
- If you have an accident here, you **MUST** remain at the site without moving the vehicles until **BOTH** the police **AND** the insurance agent show up. If you don't, you're guilty and you may have no insurance.
- Many traffic laws are different here, like handling traffic circles (rotundas). Lanes often end without notice. Many bridges are narrow and one way (alternating). The potholes here are **DEEP** and **DANGEROUS**. Manhole covers are optional (not really, but it may take months to get a new cover). Occasionally, trees grow in the streets. Do **NOT** drive at night until you thoroughly know what you are doing. Read about Driving in Costa Rica.
- In general, do **NOT** shop at stores or restaurants that either A. have no prices marked and/or B. the prices are in dollars. In both cases, you are just asking to get taken. This is especially true in any area that caters to the tourist trade.
- Credit Cards. Use your credit card as much as possible for purchases as you will always get the correct exchange rate. Use your ATM card if you need cash funds in colones. Don't do a cash advance thing unless you wanna pay silly interest rates. Now saying that... I have traveled extensively, and I believe Costa Rica is about the **ONLY** country that does not extort money when you exchange foreign currencies. There are exceptions (like at the San Jose airport!), but in general, you will be treated fairly. Finally, and **VERY** important, **TELL YOUR BANK** you are going to CR. Tell your credit card companies too. Many will block your credit cards, especially for cash withdrawals. Also, set a realistic daily withdrawal limit that fits your needs.
- Be very careful of petty theft like pickpockets, grab and run... etc. You are very unlikely to be the subject of a violent crime in Costa Rica, but you are always at risk for the small stuff. Don't carry your passport. Have a copy made of your front (picture) page and the entry stamp. The police here are cordial to tourists and unless you act like a jerk, all will accept that as a valid ID.
- Never act like a jerk in Costa Rica. You are a guest here. Relax. Enjoy this wonderful country and remember always you are a guest. Things are different here, and not always the way you want them. Foreign travel **IS** foreign and the Costa Rican culture is wonderful, but is very different from your home country.
- You can eat the food here. It is quite good and some of the best spots are the little roadside restaurants and 'sodas'. There is often some little old abuelita (grandmother) working in the kitchen and she likely makes a truly excellent meal. My **WORST** Tico meals are at the the big roadside restaurants that cater to tourists and advertise genuine Costa Rican cooking.

- **You can legally drink alcohol and drive in Costa Rica, and that means you can drink while you are driving.** Remember, this law (or lack of) applies to everyone else as well! Don't do it, and believe in your heart that everyone else IS merrily drinking and drive your car accordingly. While you can drink and drive, you CANNOT be intoxicated and drive. If you do not yet know the difference, please advise me when you will be in Costa Rica and provide your itinerary.
- While you do not need to worry about malaria or typhoid, you DO need to worry about Dengue Fever. This is especially true if you visit the tropical areas, rainforests or beaches. However, it also affects the Central Valley. Dengue comes in two varieties. The first causes flu-like symptoms and though you are uncomfortable, you are not dead. The second is NASTY and extremely painful and makes you wish you WERE dead... which you can be without treatment. The good news is that this is easily avoidable. Bring bug repellent or buy some here. Use it especially during the daytime hours (dengue is spread by a mosquito that ONLY bites in the daytime!) Read this!
- You DO need a passport to enter Costa Rica. It also must not expire in less than six months. You cannot enter with a driver's license or a birth certificate. Read this.
- Distances here are weird. Folks look at a map and say things like, "We can drive that in an hour, honey!". No... you can't.
- There are mountains, traffic, accidents, bad roads... and of course, as there are no street signs nor addresses, you will likely get lost. If you can possibly be delayed, you will be. The general rule I use is that I will average 20-30 MPH (30 KPH - 45 KPH) for travel around the country. So for example, if you see a place that is 100KM away (about 66 miles), plan on two hours to three + hours to get there.
- "Oh, they accept dollars and credit cards everywhere in Costa Rica". No, they do NOT. Hotels and many restaurants take credit cards of course, and many will accept dollars, but there are MANY places especially outside the Central Valley where nothing is accepted except the colón. This includes some fine restaurants. And here is a hint... some of the best stuff you can buy at great prices is in the more remote areas... and they will happily accept colones, but will never take credit cards or dollars. The good news is that CR is full of ATM's where you can use your bank card to get some colones at the proper exchange rate. Also many places will not accept travelers checks as they can take merchants up to two months to receive the funds.
- When you leave Costa Rica, you will need an exit visa... \$26.00 per person. You get them inside the airports or at the immigration buildings at the frontiers if you are driving or taking a bus. They accept dollars, VISA (only) or colones. Great way to get rid of the extra colones as you leave.

- When renting a car here, HUGE deposits get pre authorized on your credit card. This freezes your available funds. If you do not have a large credit limit, you can find yourself unable to use your credit card. I see it every month! Organize your credit and cash needs before you come. Read above.
- Check your bills at restaurants. While almost all restaurants are honest folk, I have had 'errors' on maybe as many as ten percent of my bills. Check for 'extra items'.

I have traveled extensively and Costa Rica is was the only place I know where you will not get screwed exchanging dollars for colones... even at hotels. Sadly... this is changing as businesses here are now catching on that most tourists have no clue how to covert currency "on the fly". Thus, I must caution you to learn how to do these conversions before you arrive in order to avoid getting taken.