

## A Survival Guide to Driving in Costa Rica – 2020

### Transportation Infrastructure Observations:

1. Costa Rica is a small country about the size of Rhode Island with an estimated population of just over five-million; most roads are narrow and most are of the two-lane variety (even on many major highways); most roads wind about following the crest of ridges or are cut along the sides of ridges and hillsides; and throughways are shared by all types of traffic (buses of every size, 18-wheelers, delivery trucks, motorcycles, bicycles, tractors, passenger vehicles, and pedestrians);
2. The addition of new roads is uncommon, because they are difficult and expensive to build within Costa Rica's rugged terrain, but in the last five or six years, the number of passenger vehicles and motorcycles has probably doubled;
3. 15 years ago, only about half of the roads were paved—today, over 80% are paved; the paving is often not great and there are generally many potholes and patches; plus “reducers” (speed bumps) across the road. Sometimes reducers are even painted yellow. (It can be quite an exciting surprise when unpainted reducers are encountered.)
4. Except in the larger cities, there are no street numbers. In fact in many towns, both large and small, there is no posted street name signage. (Because of this, many of us use GPS-based Waze or Google Maps on our cellphones to find our way around the country.)
5. Costa Rica gets, on average, 77-inches of rain a year. It is a country of mountains, hills, forests, jungles, valleys and many, many rivers that flow year round. Going back to the days of ox-cart transport taking agricultural products to both coasts, these many rivers needed to be crossed by the ox carts. Bridges were built across every river and large stream—all of them just wide enough to get the carts across. Later when real roads were constructed and paved, these crossings became one-lane bridges, and most remain that way today serving two-way traffic.
6. Costa Ricans (Ticos) are generally some of the kindest, happiest and most-helpful people in the world, but put them behind the wheel and they turn into *Fast and Furious* movie stunt doubles. This gets combined with the facts that: most are first generation drivers without older family or friends to teach them good-driving habits; it is estimated that a very high percentage of drivers don't have licenses at all; add the observation that being mostly unfamiliar with driving, most Ticos don't have common sense when it comes to road safety and road courtesy; and they also seem to possess an attitude that traffic laws, if known, are merely suggestions.
7. The factors in #1 through #6 above combine to make travel throughout the country very slow and just a little bit stressful.

Here Are Four Rules of the Road Drivers Need to Know. (There are few actual rules, but here are the four that seem to be universal in C.R.):

1. Rule 1: Ticos will stop (and sometimes park) without signaling and without warning just about anywhere, plus buses stop to take on or drop off passengers on our many narrow

roads—this is exacerbated by the fact that most of these narrow roads are without shoulders. If the route ahead is blocked on your side of the road by a stopped, parked or disabled vehicle or pedestrians, sometimes walking two or three abreast, pull as far to the right as possible and yield to oncoming traffic.

2. Rule 2: If traffic on the roadway ahead suddenly slows or stops, the last car in line turns on its flashing lights to alert the cars behind until the next car behind arrives.
3. Rule 3: Oncoming traffic will yield the right of way to you by double flashing their headlights (day or night). This often happens at intersections, on narrow roads, turning or merging into heavy traffic, where there is an obstruction or at bridges and even when the driver has the right of way. (double blinking eliminates doubt about what their intentions are or who should be on the move.) Courtesy dictates, if appropriate, that once your maneuver is complete you acknowledge their courtesy with a couple of blinks of your flasher.
4. Rule 4: When merging from a lane that is ending, Ticos dispense with the use of turn signals. Instead either the driver or the passenger will extend their arm out the window and wave it in a vertical downward motion. (I know it sounds silly, but it usually gets the desired result.)

Road Signs (don't trust drivers to observe road sign commands) and Other Observations (don't trust drivers to have knowledge of rules of the road, to use their turn signals, rearview mirrors or to make safe maneuvers in traffic):

1. CEDA or CEDA El Paso = Yield to oncoming traffic (usually at one-lane bridges or where the road narrows from two-lanes to one); ALTO = Stop; "Camiones Usan Carril Derecho" (or similar) = trucks use right lane (it's a joke—all slow traffic stays in the "fast lane" and other traffic passes from the right lane); XX Maxima or XX Maxima Velocidad = XX maximum speed (in kilometers per hour); a rectangular yellow block (with or without letters) painted on the asphalt at the side of the road = bus stop (we also have covered bus stops); sign with a picture of a car going over a bump = speed bump ahead (at schools, there are usually speed bumps before and after the school and speeds are reduced in the school zone); Una Via = one way; No Hay Paso = no entry (wrong way); La Izquierda = left, El Derecho = right; in addition, signs here also use most of the international traffic symbols.
2. Pedestrian nighttime road walking rules: 1. wear the very darkest clothing you own to become virtually invisible; 2. if walking in the company of friends/family walk abreast, not single-file; and 3. walk on the side of the road, do not use the sidewalk if there is one.
3. Be very aware of: 1. vehicles backing out of driveways; 2. cars pulling out right in front of you when there is no traffic behind you for ½ a kilometer, and then going slow or turning in left or right 50 meters ahead; 3. parked or stopped cars opening doors without checking traffic; and 4. oncoming vehicles with their bright lights on.
4. At a roundabout ("radial") Ticos will come to a dead stop instead of merging with the flow of traffic. Often this also applies when there is a merging lane onto a larger roadway.

5. Motorcyclists, by and large, have a death wish. Road rules, traffic laws, road safety and road speed are ignored. They will pass on the left or the right and often at high rates of speed. Many (maybe most) are unlicensed and they have an annual high rate of mortality.
6. Generally, police (“Policia—dressed in black and driving white trucks, white cars or motorcycles) pay no attention to driver’s bad driving habits and do not issue tickets. Traffic policing is left to El Transito Policia (wearing white shirts and “POLICIA” vests on motorcycles or driving dark blue and yellow trucks marked TRANSITO).
7. I think, that because there is often no road shoulder, drivers are not required to yield to “POLICIA” or “AMBULANCIA” with their lights flashing. Pulling over and stopping can actually be dangerous, especially, in traffic. If emergency vehicles have their sirens going, they are serious (a real emergency and not just a churro run), it’s helpful to slow and pull over to let them by, if you can.
8. When the road narrows from two lanes to one, drivers cheat and try to extend the “CEDA” (merge left or merge right) lane or even create a third lane if there’s a shoulder.
9. Try to never leave the paved roadway to pass on the right. There’s an excellent chance of picking up a nail or a screw in your tire.
10. A habit, unique in my observations, is the habit of drivers pulling over to the right to turn left or pulling out to the left to turn right. Much of the time, it is to wait for their electric gate to open, but it still causes me some confusion driving behind someone undertaking this maneuver.
11. Similarly, many Ticos will pull to the right at an intersection and actually make a left-hand turn (don’t look for their signal). The very wide turning arc created is definitely overkill and can confuse someone expecting the vehicle in front of them to be making a right-hand turn.
12. On a two-lane one-way street, always be prepared for the possibility of vehicles in front of or beside you to cut across your bow to make a left or right-hand turn from the farthest lane away.
13. Most C.R. traffic stoplights are a bit different. First, they are green; then, they blink green; before they briefly change to yellow; and then, quickly turn to red. By the time the light is red, you’ve had plenty of forewarning to stop, and there is little excuse to be caught running a red light. (Of course, it is done, but if cited your excuse for being in the intersection on red had better be a good one.)
14. In Costa Rica, cellphone use while driving is illegal, but that does not seem to stop drivers, even bus drivers, from talking and texting while driving. This is a chronic problem worldwide, but Ticos seem to take it to a new level.
15. The law has recently been modified, but not moving involved vehicles in any way at the scene of an accident (even moving them off the road and out of traffic) is illegal in the case of major fender benders or worse. You are required to call your insurance carrier and the TRANSITO police and wait for their arrival.
16. Beware, the Transito Policia use speed radar and traffic cameras. You may get your ticket via email. And, you can’t renew your driver’s license without all outstanding tickets and parking violations being paid.

17. Traffic tickets here can be very expensive. It's best just not to get one.
18. Note: there are not nearly as many road signs or street lights as you are used to in North America. Streets are darker at night and destinations are harder to find the first time.

These aren't all of the unique aspects of driving in Costa Rica, but they are either the most-important or most-frequent things that I can recommend to know and remember.