

Renewing Your Cedula

I'm going to cover the current process (as of 17/05/16) that we experienced in renewing our cedula here as "pensionados". Your experience may be different, but I'm going to relate it to you as we have experienced it to date. We're U.S. citizens, but if you are Canadian or other, your process should be the same except that your embassy interface will be different. (For other categories of resident aliens in Costa Rica, the process will be similar, but the specific requirements will vary.) There are several items to cover even before we have our scheduled appointment in late May at BCR. Here is what I've learned so far:

1. Check your cedula's expiration date. Our expiration date sort of sneaked up on us. Plan to do the renewal yourself through a government representative assigned to certain branches of the Banco de Costa Rica. Going yourself is much cheaper than hiring a lawyer and not that difficult. (Or, plan to take along a Spanish speaker if you are severely Spanish-language challenged.) Renewal appointments are running, at least, 30 days out at BCR branches that handle renewals. We took an appointment at BCR San Ramon in 30 days, because appointments at the Grecia branch were running even farther out. Appointments for you and your spouse can be made together, but each person renewing their cedula must have a separate appointment time. (We have been told that it takes "about" three weeks to get your new cedulas, which will be sent to your Costa Rican mailing address. However, we've also been told that world won't stop spinning if your cedula's expiration date comes prior to receipt of the new card.)

Folks have told us that it took up to ten different tries using 10 different phones/phone numbers to find a phone service that could connect to BCR's appointment toll number, 900 0034 639 (yes, there are only seven digits in this reservation phone number). I guess we were lucky, because we got connected on the first try using our landline home phone. Wade through the choices after the recorded message. When you do get connected to a real person, just ask for an agent that speaks English if you are uncomfortable attempting to make the appointment in Spanish (or you can have a Spanish speaker assist with making your appointment).

2. We made an appointment for me and one 15 minutes later for my wife. BCR's appointment agent told us to arrive at the bank, at least, 15 minutes ahead of our appointments (which should be easy for my wife since she'd already be with me). Also, wear a nice shirt or blouse to your appointment as your photo will be taken. The agent said we would need to bring:

- A. our original cedulas plus a copy of both sides of each (we'll probably take two copies of each just in case and while they weren't listed as a requirement, we'll be taking our passports, as well);

- B. since we're U.S. citizens, a letter from Social Security attesting to the fact that I, as the "primary retired breadwinner," am still receiving monthly Social Security benefits. (This document should be pretty recent and will show the monthly amount I am receiving. It used to be necessary that you make an appointment at the Embassy to receive this document, but beginning this month the U.S. Embassy has an agreement with Costa Rica to accept a document you can request online through the Embassy website. The online requested document comes without the official raised stamp, but Costa

Rica has agreed to accept it--"the good": this saves a trip to the Embassy; "the bad": you take the chance that the guy a BCR hasn't been clued into the new online program;

C. a copy of your "up-to-date CAJA payment" receipt. We're going to play it safe and bring copies of all five of our 2016 CAJA payments. (Best bring two copies: one to show your payments and one to show payments made for your spouse.)

D. a letter from your bank stating that you have faithfully been making the equivalent deposits of \$1,000 minimum (either automatic Social Security since you were granted your original residency and converting it into colones. This letter needs to be official and not too old. It will probably take your bank two days to two weeks to provide it to you. So, check with your bank ahead to be sure that you have been a good scout and qualify and time your request to have it in time for your BCR appointment. (Our bank charged us 10-mil colones each to produce our letters and it took three days to prepare them.)

Do not assume that your bank knows what you are requesting or knows how to properly address the letter or even include the required information. We found numerous errors in the first letter they provided, including: addressing the letter to the U.S. Embassy and not to Migracion y Extranjeros; using my wife's expired U.S. Passport number and not her cedula number; and not including our monthly Costa Rican bank credit card statements (the card is used to pay four monthly Costa Rican utility bills).

E. it is possible that you might want to consider taking along other documents, such as a copy of you apostilized wedding certificate, just in case someone asks or wants to see it. We were a little uncertain whether our financial documentation clearly showed that we had satisfied Costa Rica's monthly \$1,000 in/equivalent colones out requirement. If in doubt, overwhelm your cedula interview agent with paper and documents showing your U.S. or Canadian ATM and credit card activity in Costa Rica. (My attitude is, taking more is better than not enough.)

F. a processing fee equivalent to \$138, but in colones, for each person renewing their cedula.

Note: Keep making your monthly CAJA payments, but wait until you receive your new cedula carnet before heading to your local CAJA clinic or office to attempt to renew your CAJA carnet and don't bother trying to renew the CAJA carnet ahead of: 1) its expiration date; or 2) the receipt of your renewed cedula carnets.

We are posting this information as a singular experience , but rules, procedures and requirements tend to change often. So, it's best to use this information as your starting point only. Also, your renewal experience may vary. Remember that in Costa Rica, standard operating rules and procedures are not always standardized or operationally practiced in the same way by all government employees. Many things are subject to interpretation. Stated in a positive way, "variety is the spice of life." Pura vida.