

Studying in Costa Rica

A guide for international students & families — how Costa Rican higher education works, the student visa, affordable tuition, Spanish & English study, and a sustainability focus.

ABOUT K12 ACADEMICS

The world's largest education resource.

Online since 2004, K12 Academics has helped millions of families, students and educators **find the right school, college, camp, business and program in their community** — for every kind of learner.

AFFORDABLE, SAFE, A WORLD LEADER IN SUSTAINABILITY

Costa Rica offers **affordable, quality higher education** — led by the University of Costa Rica (UCR) and four other public universities, plus private options — in a famously safe, stable, and eco-focused country. It's a world leader in **environmental science and sustainability**, with Spanish immersion and some English-taught programs (e.g., at Universidad Veritas). Students get a **Special Category student visa**. This guide walks it in **ten steps**.

General guidance, not legal or immigration advice. Costa Rican rules, tuition, and the funds requirement change. The details here are recent examples and **must be confirmed with the Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería, your university, and the Costa Rican consulate.**

Understand Why Students Choose Costa Rica

WHAT TO KNOW

Costa Rica offers **affordable tuition, respected universities, a world-leading focus on sustainability and the environment, immersive Spanish (plus some English-taught programs), and a safe, stable, welcoming country** — the “Pura Vida” lifestyle.

BY THE NUMBERS

Affordable

+ respected universities

Sustainability

a global leader

Spanish

+ some English

HOW TO HELP

Weigh Costa Rica’s **affordability, safety, and eco-focus** against a mostly Spanish-taught public system — for environmental study or Spanish immersion, it’s outstanding.

GOOD TO KNOW

Costa Rica is a **global leader in sustainability and environmental science** — a distinctive strength, alongside excellent Spanish immersion.

Understand the System

WHAT TO KNOW

There are **five public universities** — the University of Costa Rica (UCR — the flagship), Tecnológico de Costa Rica (TEC), Universidad Nacional (UNA), UNED, and UTN — plus **private universities** like Universidad Latina, Universidad Hispanoamericana, Universidad Veritas (art/design; many English courses), and the top-ranked **INCAE Business School**.

BY THE NUMBERS

Public

UCR, TEC, UNA, UNED, UTN

Private

Latina, Veritas, INCAE

UCR

the flagship

HOW TO HELP

Choose a **public university** (UCR and others — affordable, mostly Spanish) or a **private university** (Veritas for English courses; INCAE for business) by field and language.

GOOD TO KNOW

Universidad Veritas offers **many English-taught courses** (art, business, science, health, and more) — useful if your Spanish is still developing.

Get the Student Visa & Cédula

WHAT TO KNOW

For programs over 90 days you need a **Special Category (provisional) student visa**, applied for via a Costa Rican consulate with an acceptance letter, proof of funds, insurance, a background check, and a passport valid 6+ months (documents translated/legalized). After arriving, apply for a **residence permit (cédula de residencia)** via Migración.

BY THE NUMBERS

Special Category visa

for >90 days

+ background check

& insurance

Cédula

residence permit

HOW TO HELP

Apply for the **Special Category student visa** with your acceptance letter, funds, insurance, and background check, then get your **cédula de residencia** after arrival.

GOOD TO KNOW

Programs **shorter than 90 days** generally don't need a student visa — for longer study, apply early (processing takes weeks to months).

Apply to Universities

WHAT TO KNOW

Apply **directly to each university**. Public universities (UCR) are competitive and mostly Spanish-taught; private universities (Veritas) have flexible admissions and English options. You'll need **academic transcripts, an acceptance letter, and Spanish or English proof**; foreign documents need translation and legalization.

BY THE NUMBERS

Apply directly

to each

Public

competitive, Spanish

Private

flexible, some English

HOW TO HELP

Apply **directly** to your chosen university, with transcripts and language proof — public universities are competitive and Spanish-taught; private ones (Veritas) offer English options.

GOOD TO KNOW

Get foreign documents **translated and legalized/apostilled** early — they're needed for admission and the visa.

Plan for Tuition & Scholarships

WHAT TO KNOW

Public universities are very affordable (UCR tuition averages ~\$1,150/year; overall roughly \$1,150–8,000 for internationals). **Private universities** run higher (~\$4,400–12,000/year). Universities and external organizations offer **scholarships and financial aid** — ask each institution.

BY THE NUMBERS

Public

~\$1,150–8,000/yr

Private

~\$4,400–12,000/yr

Scholarships

university & external

HOW TO HELP

Budget the tuition (public very affordable; private higher) plus living costs, and pursue university and external scholarships.

GOOD TO KNOW

Exchange students at a partner university **may pay no tuition** to UCR (a small mandatory fee applies) — check for exchange agreements.

Meet the Financial Requirement

WHAT TO KNOW

For the visa you show **proof of sufficient funds** (bank statements or a scholarship), **health insurance**, a **background check**, and a valid passport. Living costs run **\$600–1,200/month**. All non-Spanish documents need certified translation and legalization. Confirm requirements with your consulate.

BY THE NUMBERS

Funds

bank statements/scholarship

+ insurance

& background check

Living

\$600–1,200/month

HOW TO HELP

Prepare **proof of funds, insurance, a background check**, and a valid passport, with translated/legalized documents — confirm specifics with the Costa Rican consulate.

GOOD TO KNOW

Requirements ensure you can **support yourself without working** — follow the consulate's official checklist.



Meet Language Requirements

WHAT TO KNOW

Most public-university programs are in **Spanish** (proficiency required); **Universidad Veritas and some private universities offer many English-taught courses**. Costa Rica emphasizes **bilingual education**, and universities often provide Spanish support courses. Spanish immersion is a major benefit.

BY THE NUMBERS

Spanish

most public programs

English

Veritas & some private

Support

Spanish courses

HOW TO HELP

Confirm your program's language — choose **Spanish** (with support courses) or **English-taught** options at Veritas — and use Costa Rica's immersive setting to build Spanish.

GOOD TO KNOW

Costa Rica's strong **bilingual focus** and Veritas's English courses ease the transition for non-Spanish speakers.

Prepare for the Move

WHAT TO KNOW

After arriving, obtain your **cédula**, **arrange housing**, and **set up banking and insurance**. Many students live with **host families** (great for Spanish); note that UCR doesn't have residences for exchange students. Most students are based in **San José**; the country is safe, with easy access to volcanoes and rainforests.

BY THE NUMBERS

Cédula + housing

first tasks

Host families

great for Spanish

Based

in San José

HOW TO HELP

Handle arrival admin — **cédula, housing (host families are popular), banking, insurance** — in safe San José, with volcanoes and rainforests close by.

GOOD TO KNOW

Living with a **host family** is a popular, affordable option — and excellent for Spanish immersion; many universities lack residences.

Explore Fields & Strengths

WHAT TO KNOW

Costa Rica excels in **environmental science, sustainability, and conservation** (a global reference point), as well as **business (INCAE)** and Spanish/Latin American studies. Its ecological diversity makes it ideal for **field-based environmental research** and sustainability programs.

BY THE NUMBERS

Environment

sustainability leader

Business

INCAE

Field research

biodiversity

HOW TO HELP

Play to Costa Rica's strengths — **environmental science and sustainability**, business (INCAE), and Spanish studies — and use its biodiversity for field-based research.

GOOD TO KNOW

For **sustainability and conservation**, Costa Rica is a world-leading study destination — a distinctive, hard-to-match strength.

Thrive & After Study

WHAT TO KNOW

Costa Rica's **sustainability, tech, and eco-tourism sectors**, plus your **Spanish skills**, open regional opportunities. Confirm the current post-study visa/residency pathway if you want to stay, and use your Costa Rican and Latin American networks.

BY THE NUMBERS

Sectors

sustainability, tech, eco-tourism

Spanish

regional opportunities

Post-study

confirm pathway

HOW TO HELP

Leverage Costa Rica's **sustainability and eco sectors** and your Spanish for regional opportunities, and confirm the current post-study visa/residency pathway if you want to stay.

GOOD TO KNOW

Confirm the **current post-study options** — they can change, and vary by field and situation.

Studying in Costa Rica: The Essentials

A snapshot — figures change, so confirm with immigration, your university, and the Costa Rican consulate.

The system

Five public universities (UCR — the flagship — TEC, UNA, UNED, UTN; affordable, mostly Spanish) plus private universities (Universidad Latina, Universidad Veritas — many English courses — and INCAE Business School).

Visa & cédula

Programs over 90 days need a Special Category student visa (via a consulate; acceptance letter, funds, insurance, background check, passport 6+ months, translated/legalized documents); apply for a cédula de residencia after arrival.

Tuition & scholarships

Public universities very affordable (UCR ~\$1,150/year; ~\$1,150–8,000 for internationals); private universities ~\$4,400–12,000/year; university and external scholarships; living \$600–1,200/month.

Money & language

Show proof of funds, insurance, and a background check; most public programs are in Spanish (Veritas offers English), with Spanish support courses; excellent for Spanish immersion.

Strengths & after

A world leader in environmental science and sustainability (plus business at INCAE and Spanish studies); sustainability/eco-tourism sectors and Spanish open regional careers — confirm the post-study pathway.

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