

Costa Rican Customs

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Costa Ricans, who refer to themselves as “Ticos,” are culturally unique amongst Latin Americans. Proud of their democratic heritage, they value humanitarian ideals, which results in non-confrontational behavior. All the same, Ticos have very strong beliefs and are not easily persuaded to another’s point of view (Morrison, Conaway et al. 1994). Facts are usually interpreted through subjective feelings. Criticism is rare. In fact, decision-making “a la tica” means to bargain in order to avoid conflict. “Emphasis on dignity and courtesy often takes the form of saving face for others as well as oneself.”(Biesanz, Biesanz et al. 1999)

The identity of the individual is central to the culture, but family is extremely important. Favored treatment is given to relatives. Costa Ricans have a strong self image but do not tolerate arrogance and expect people in high places to be humble. They place a high value on education – as both a means to achieve material success and as a condition of democracy(Biesanz, Biesanz et al. 1999). There is a strong work ethic but progress towards completion of the project is not as important as working on the project. Costa Ricans prefer to think small, go slowly and avoid risks, anxiety, or overwork(Morrison, Conaway et al. 1994). Ticos generally try to avoid commitments, although they may make them verbally to avoid hurting your feelings.

Costa Ricans believe strongly in the philosophy of equality more so than any other Latin Americans. Wealth and family lineage are the primary determinants of social position. However, there is a strong emphasis on the quality and dignity of work regardless of social class. Business takes place on a personal level in Costa Rica. In addition, there is a strong sense of personal honor and social equality amongst Ticos. More so than anywhere else in Central America, every person is assumed it to have value in dignity. Therefore, avoid any behavior that would demean or embarrass another person, especially in public.

Decisions are made by consensus of all involved, not just by top administrators. This may slow the decision-making process down; so, avoid showing impatience. Impatience lowers your credibility. Because people at all levels of an organization have input, remember to be polite to everyone you meet. Contacts are very important to doing business, and the interpersonal relationship between people is the most important priority(Morrison, Conaway et al. 1994). Time estimates and deadlines may be flexible. Be tolerant of delays and remember that time is less important than courtesy and enjoyment.

Men will greet other men with a handshake. Women will often pat each other on the right forearm or shoulder instead of shaking hands. Women who are close friends may hug or kiss each other on the cheek. However, Costa Rican men do not usually hug other men. The hearty male *abrazo* (backslapping embrace) seen in other Latin American countries is rare in Costa Rica. In rural areas some men will touch their hat and nod

instead of shaking hands. Costa Ricans who are used to greeting North Americans may offer a firm handshake, but others' handshakes will tend to be limp with a loose grip. Adjust your grip to the other person's handshake. (Morrison, Conaway et al. 1994)

Most people you meet should be addressed with a title and their last name. Only children, family members, and close friends address each other by their first names. People who do not have professional titles should be addressed as Mr. (Señor), Mrs. (Señora), or Miss (Señorita), plus their last name. For Ticos, the double last name indicates the family history, and provides an indication of the family's social status – much like North Americans' occupations.

Final notes of caution: Making a fist with the thumb sticking out between the middle and index fingers is considered obscene. This gesture is known as the “fig”. Most North American gestures will be understood in Costa Rica. Don't rest feet on any furniture except footstools. If you are invited to a home for dinner, bring flowers, chocolates, scotch, or wine. Do not bring calla lilies; they are associated with funerals. Generally, shorts are worn only on the beach. Revealing clothing for women is not acceptable.

References

Biesanz, M. H., R. Biesanz, et al. (1999). The Ticos: Culture and Social Change in Costa Rica. Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Morrison, T., W. A. Conaway, et al. (1994). Kiss, Bow or Shake Hands: How to Do Business in Sixty Countries. Holbrook, MA, Adams Media Corporation.