

# Reopening Costa Rica: Hotel Recovery in the New Normal

Costa Rica Tourism Board + Skift

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Supported by a WTTC Safe Travel Stamp, Costa Rica's borders have slowly re-opened to international tourism. We chat to hotel operators on the ground about the fresh protocols, and the path to recovery.

— *Costa Rica Tourism Board*

As the Covid-19 health crisis continues to impact the world, the question of how to re-open borders to international visitors remains the pressing focus for the global tourism sector.

While many nations are still facing lockdowns and restrictions, some have begun to re-open their borders following successful quarantine periods.

Together with its Latin American neighbors, Costa Rica was forced to temporarily close its borders back in March this year.

As a trending international destination – increasingly popular for its vibrant culture, tropical Pacific and Caribbean coastlines, and innovative approach to sustainable tourism – Costa Rica's local industry felt the lockdown acutely, not least of all its hotel operators.

Thankfully, supported by a range of new health and safety protocols, Costa Rica is slowly welcoming back its international visitors. The nation recently received a World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) **Safe Travel Stamp**, which covers over 16 new industry-wide safety protocols.

In July, Tourism Minister Gustavo Segura Sancho announced a phased re-opening to international air traffic, with flights initially from the EU, UK and Canada permitted to return as of August 1.

On August 19, this list was expanded to include Oceania (Australia and New Zealand), South America (Uruguay), and Asia (citizens and residents of Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Singapore, and the People's Republic of China).

As of September 1, residents of nine US states – Connecticut, Maine, Maryland, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington D.C. – were permitted to enter Costa Rica. On September 15, residents of three more states – Colorado, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania – will be added to the list.

Travelers to Costa Rica are also now able to arrive on international health insurance policies (as well as two local options), provided they cover sufficiently for Covid-19. Encouraging news for travelers, and a promising sign of things to come for the local industry.

## **THE NEW REALITY**

And though an impending arrival of English, European and Canadian visitors this month and beyond marks a promising addition, hotel operators are viewing the August 1 lift as the first of many 'baby steps' towards pre-Covid occupancy levels.

"Right now, national tourism is rising rapidly," says Montserrat Quesada, Marketing Coordinator at Costa Rica's El Mangrove Hotel on Panama Beach.

"On the other hand, international tourism will probably take longer, since there is still lots of uncertainty."

According to General Manager of The Intercontinental Hotel Costa Rica, Ricardo Menendez, the prompt re-opening of key flight corridors in the region – particularly with the U.S. – is the next vital step for the industry's resurgence.

Costa Rica saw 3.14 million visitors in 2019, with 53 percent coming from the U.S.

"For demand to reactivate it's important that the borders with the United States and Latin America are opened, since they are our main markets," says Menendez.

“These have been very challenging months,” he adds, “with a new reality.”

## **CONFIDENCE THROUGH SAFETY**

In this new reality safety comes first. Hotel health and safety protocols have become central to rebuilding the industry, keeping guests healthy and safe while bolstering consumer confidence.

Hotels like El Mangroove and The Intercontinental continue to work energetically alongside the government, Costa Rica Tourism Board and Ministry of Health on every mandated rule and regulation in preparation for the foreign visitors to come.

“During the past few months, while the hotel was closed, our team worked rigorously to implement all safety protocols, make all necessary changes, and train staff to be ready to welcome guests back,” says Quesada.

“We’ve implemented measures such as temperature checks at check in, luggage disinfection, sanitizing stations throughout the properties, social distancing measures at restaurants and event spaces, and deep cleaning of every room.”

Investing in technology and supplies to guarantee the wellbeing of its future guests, The Intercontinental has installed thermographic cameras for taking temperature, alcohol dispensers in all areas including entrances, restaurants, lounges and elevators, and implemented thorough staff training sessions, supported by the Cleveland Clinic and Ecolab.

Along with mandated facemask usage, and clear social distancing signage, both operators see this raft of measures as something that’ll likely exist for the long haul.

Meanwhile, local airports are doing their part to maintain vigilance against the spread, with San José’s Juan Santamaría International (SJO) and Liberia’s Daniel Oduber (LIR) airports, continuing to follow strict safety and cleaning protocols.

## **SPECIFIC PROTOCOL FOR THE TOURISM SECTOR**

The fresh industry protocols mark a significant shift for the sector, all underscored and according to a recent paper by Costa Rica Tourism and the Ministry of Health.

As well as general guest regulation, the protocols highlight specific rules for venues, PCOs, vendors and suppliers as well as hotels with meeting spaces – while events can happen again as per the pre-Covid era, enhanced procedures will be in place to ensure the safety of attending guests, including a

range of social distancing measures for venue seating configurations and all banquet-style sit-down setups.

Trade fairs will again be able to take place, but with a format allowing for one person at a time, by appointment, and a maximum of two exhibitors at each booth.

While it's great news that conferences and meetings will again be welcome back at Costa Rica's hotels, there's a good chance this transition back from 'virtual to tangible' is going to eventuate over an extended period, with Zoom-style formats likely to last the distance, regardless of loosened Covid regulations.

Quesada agrees: "We think that virtual and hybrid events will keep standing out for large meetings, adding that 'measures such as deep cleaning, sanitizing and disinfection procedures and the use of personal protection equipment will be kept in the long run.'"

In the event that guests or staff are exposed to the virus – or suspected to have been exposed during their stay at the hotel – they'll be required to undergo a medical assessment through, and comply with the broader directives of the Costa Rican Ministry of Health.

## **PROJECTING INTO THE FUTURE**

Though it might still be closed to vital markets, the August 1 re-opening can only be seen as a promising step in the right direction.

"We hope to see an increase in international travel towards the end of the year, and hopefully a reactivation on the groups and incentives business for the second half of 2021," says Quesada.

"U.S. travelers have always been one of our top visitors, so in a post-Covid environment we expect to see them traveling to Costa Rica, hopefully as much as before Covid," adds Menendez.

As for the travelers' end, visitors permitted to enter Costa Rica will need to provide a negative PCR test upon arrival, as well as a completed online Health Pass. In a fluid situation, against a shifting backdrop, Costa Rica is leading the way to recovery in the post-pandemic world: a template for others in the region to follow.

"We are striving to ensure guest safety and tranquility," says Quesada, "and we are thrilled to see guests coming back."

***This content was created collaboratively by Costa Rica Tourism and Skift's branded content studio, SkiftX.***

*\*The list of countries authorized for visiting Costa Rica is constantly being updated. Please see [Visit Costa Rica's entry requirements page](#) for the latest travel news.*