

Moving to Costa Rica Checklist

FOR CANADIANS & AMERICANS — 2026 OFFICIAL RELOCATION & REAL ESTATE GUIDE

A comprehensive, fact-checked planning guide by Yossi Kaplan, MBA — Realtor & Relocation Specialist (playalagartorealestate.com).

1. 12-Month Relocation Timeline

Timeframe	Action Items & Essential Planning Steps
Months 12–9 Research & Strategy	• Select target regions (e.g. Guanacaste: Playa Lagarto, Tamarindo, Nosara). • Consult cross-border tax specialist regarding CRA departure tax / IRS FEIE & FBAR rules. • Check passport expiration dates (must have at least 6 months validity remaining). • Evaluate residency visa pathways (Pensionado, Rentista, Inversionista, Digital Nomad).
Months 8–6 Documents & Legal	• Apply for official FBI criminal record check (US) or RCMP background check (Canada). • Request long-form birth certificates and marriage certificates for all family members. • Obtain official Apostilles (US State Dept / Secretary of State or Global Affairs Canada). • Translate all apostilled documents into Spanish via certified Costa Rican official translator.
Months 5–3 Healthcare & Pets	• Schedule vet visits for pets (SENASA requirement: rabies vaccine 30d–12m prior, health certificate within 14d of flight, USDA or CFIA government endorsement). • Plan health coverage (Canadian provincial coverage lapses after 182–212 days outside Canada; US Medicare does NOT cover care abroad; evaluate private INS/CIMA insurance vs CCSS). • Notify Canadian/US banks and credit cards of upcoming international travel.
Months 2–1 Logistics & Booking	• Book outbound flight ticket (entry requires proof of onward travel within 180 days). • Finalize temporary rental or property purchase in Costa Rica. • Plan vehicle import or local purchase (import taxes equal 50%–80%+ of Valor Hacienda unless tax-exempt under Law 9996). • Organize physical apostilled documents, medical records, and cloud backups.
Arrival & Month 1+ Settling In	• Entry visa stamp granted up to 180 days (Group 1 US/Canada). Foreign driver's license valid for duration of entry stamp. • File residency application with DGME (\$50 fee + \$200 change-of-status if applying in CR). • Complete mandatory CCSS (Caja) healthcare enrolment upon residency approval. • Open Costa Rican bank account (BAC Credomatic / Banco Nacional) with active DIMEX or S.A.

2. Costa Rica Residency Categories (2026 Rules)

Category	Income / Investment Requirement	Key Benefits & Duration	Filing Fees & Requirements
Pensionado (Retiree)	• \$1,000 USD / month lifetime guaranteed pension (government/provincial or certified private).	• Temporary residency. • Duty-free household goods import. • Duty-free import of up to 2 personal vehicles under Law 9996.	• DGME fee \$50 + \$200 change-of-status. • Repatriation deposit (\$300–\$500). • Mandatory CCSS (Caja) enrolment. • Apostilled FBI/RCMP background check.
Rentista (Income)	• \$2,500 USD / month guaranteed unearned income for 2 years (\$60,000 USD total in CR bank/trust).	• Temporary residency for 2 years (renewable). • Covers applicant & dependents. • Law 9996 import tax benefits.	• Bank certificate / trust guarantee. • Mandatory CCSS (Caja) enrolment. • Apostilled background check & civil docs.
Inversionista (Investor)	• \$150,000 USD minimum investment in Costa Rica real estate, active business, or funds.	• Temporary residency for investor & family. • Property title counts directly. • Law 9996 tax & vehicle perks.	• Property registry excerpt / audit. • Mandatory CCSS (Caja) enrolment. • Full legal & notary verification.
Digital Nomad (Law 10008)	• \$3,000 USD / mo (single) • \$4,000 USD / mo (family) - foreign remote earnings.	• 1 year estancia (+1 yr renewal if 180 days stayed). • 100% exempt from Costa Rican income tax. • Duty-free telework equipment.	• Foreign bank statements / remote contract. • Private health insurance required. • Exempt from mandatory CCSS (Caja).

3. Canada & US Tax & Health Checklists

Canada Checklist (CRA & Health)	USA Checklist (IRS & Healthcare)
• CRA Non-Residency Criteria: Sever primary ties (dwelling, spouse/dependents in Canada) to establish non-resident status for tax purposes. • Form NR73 Caution: Optional determination form; tax specialists note filing often triggers unnecessary CRA scrutiny if ties are clearly severed. • Departure Tax (Sec 128.1 ITA): Deemed disposition of worldwide capital assets (investments, stocks) at Fair Market Value upon exit. Canadian real estate, RRSPs, RRIFs, TFSA's exempt. • Provincial Health Loss: OHIP/MSP/AHCIP/RAMQ coverage lapses after 182–212 days outside Canada in a 12-month period. • OAS & CPP Payments Abroad: CPP payable worldwide regardless of residence. OAS requires 20+ years Canadian residence post-age 18. Default 25% non-resident withholding tax applies unless treaty-reduced. • CRA Foreign Property: Form T1135 required annually if specified foreign property exceeds \$100,000 CAD while a Canadian tax resident.	• Citizenship Taxation: US citizens/green card holders must file annual IRS returns on worldwide income regardless of foreign residence. • Foreign Earned Income Exclusion (FEIE - Form 2555): Exclude up to ~\$132,900 USD (2026) of foreign <i>earned</i> income. Requires 330 physical days abroad or bona fide residence. Passive income (rentals, pensions, gains) excluded. • FBAR (FinCEN Form 114): Mandatory annual report if aggregate foreign accounts exceed \$10,000 USD at any point during the calendar year (due April 15 / Oct 15). • FATCA (Form 8938): Filed with Form 1040 if foreign assets exceed \$200k (single) / \$400k (married) for foreign residents. • Social Security & Medicare: Social Security direct-deposits to US or CR banks. Medicare does NOT cover foreign medical care; private insurance or CCSS required.

4. Guanacaste Cost-of-Living Snapshot (2026)

Target Monthly Budgets: Single Person: \$1,500 – \$2,500 USD | Couple: \$2,500 – \$4,500 USD

Expense Category	Monthly Range (USD)	Details & Pro Tips
Housing / Rent	\$800 – \$2,200	1–2 bed condo or villa. Long-term (12 mo) leases are 30%–50% cheaper than short-term rentals.
Utilities & Electric	\$150 – \$350	Coastal electricity is high due to air conditioning. Solar installations lower costs significantly.
Internet & Mobile	\$50 – \$80	High-speed fiber optic & Starlink satellite internet widely available across Guanacaste.
Groceries & Food	\$400 – \$800	Save 40% by shopping local <i>ferias</i> (farmers markets) vs imported US/Canadian supermarket items.
Dining Out	\$300 – \$600	Local <i>sodas</i> offer traditional meals for \$6–\$9 USD; upscale tourist restaurants \$25–\$50 USD/person.
Healthcare (CCSS/Private)	\$70 – \$250	CCSS public system is ~7%–15% of declared income. Private doctor consultations cost \$50–\$150 USD.
Transportation / Fuel	\$150 – \$400	Public buses \$2/ride; 4x4 vehicle fuel, maintenance, and annual Marchamo road tax.

5. Buying Your Home in Costa Rica

- **Equal Ownership Rights (Art. 19 Constitution):** Foreigners enjoy identical property ownership rights as Costa Rican citizens. Title can be held directly in your personal name or via a Costa Rican corporate entity (S.A. or S.R.L.).
- **Maritime Zone (ZMT Law 6043):** The first 50 meters from high tide is public domain. The next 150 meters is concession/leasehold land requiring 5 years of legal residency OR 51%+ Costa Rican corporate ownership.
- **Property Transfer Tax:** Government transfer tax is **1.5%** of the registered purchase price.
- **Total Closing Costs:** Typically **3.5% – 4.0%** total (Transfer tax 1.5%, registry stamps ~0.82%–1%, legal/notary fee 1%–1.5% + 13% VAT, escrow 0.25%–0.5%).
- **Annual Property Tax (Impuesto Territorial):** Low **0.25%** of registered value paid annually to the local municipality.
- **Luxury Home Tax (Impuesto Solidario):** Applies to residential properties where construction value exceeds CRC 143,000,000 (~\$280,000 USD) for 2026 at a 0.25%–0.55% progressive scale.

Ready to Find Your Home in Costa Rica? Contact Yossi Kaplan, MBA

Yossi Kaplan, MBA is a licensed Realtor and Guanacaste relocation specialist helping Canadian and American buyers find villas, gated community homes, and investment properties in Playa Lagarto, Tamarindo, and Nosara.

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