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Costa Rica simply is not a foreign worker's paradise

By Garland M. Baker
Special to A.M. Costa Rica

Costa Rica is labeled a paradise by many sources on the Internet: By visitors who describe their great trips in online blogs, by travel Web sites trying to entice tourists to visit and Web sites offering general information about Costa Rica's nature, history, culture, and the like.

Too many — especially young people — take the bait and move to Costa Rica thinking they're going to earn big bucks teaching or by working in call centers. Only they get trapped earning very little and what they do receive is easily consumed by living expenses.

Surprisingly — if not suspiciously — bad reviews about this so-called Central American Switzerland are sometimes hard to find, but digging deeper into the Internet pays off to get the true story. Most sources offering a realistic — and far from paradise — view of Costa Rica are foreigners who felt tricked into believing all the heavenly reports about a country that basically hit them with a harsh reality once they had already moved in.

It turns out that the most wonderful features of Costa Rica can only be enjoyed by tourists. Except for jobs offered in beaches — which all got perfect reviews — foreigners interested in trading their own country for a San José way of living have a much less idyllic view of their surroundings.



Besides tourism, Costa Rica is increasingly becoming an employment attraction, especially for college students who want to spend a couple of months abroad while making some money. The two main industries employing foreigners are English language schools and call centers.

Most people looking for a change of scenery get lured with all they read in the Internet, given that there are virtually no bad testimonies online about living or working in Costa Rica. Most Web sites

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on those topics say things like, "...there are plenty of jobs in Costa Rica for Westerners . . ." or "... if you are fluent in Spanish and English, then you can obtain many more jobs." In reality, while there are some jobs, there are not plenty like the Web claims.

Although language schools are always looking for foreigners, most of them require teachers to have teaching certificates such as TESOL, ESL, TEFL or CELTA, which are an expensive investment, costing \$2,000 if obtained in Costa Rica. Moreover, luck plays an important role in finding a school that will pay and treat an employee well. Most schools paint a prettier picture than what they actually offer. Some of their employment ads read "highly competitive hourly wages and full-time salary positions" when they actually pay no more than \$8 an hour. They say "free private transportation to out-of-office locations" when it is free only from the teaching location back to the language school, not to the teacher's residence. Some charge a fee for that extra service after late-night classes.

Some schools also offer "flexible hours up to 40 per week" only for teachers to find out that they only can get up to 20 hours a week. It is common to find schools that hire more teachers than they need in case some decide to leave. So a lot of teachers are left with a fraction of the time they were offered in the interview or training. There is even a school that claims the most hours teachers can aim for is between 8 and 12 hours a week: "Not one English school can give you a guarantee of more than that. If they do, they are lying to you."

One Web posting says "if we don't have your schedule filled to at least 12 hours, then we don't blame you if you look for a second company/school to help with your income!"

That is an aspect never mentioned in any of the school sites. Working for at least two language schools is a really difficult task. Most schools offer classes at similar hours because students tend to schedule them between 4 and 6 p.m. Teachers must take into account that language schools are not within walking of each other. Some trips even require taking two buses and spending an hour, depending on traffic jams. Or a teacher can take a taxi with a \$5 to \$7 cab fare, equaling an hour of payment in most schools.

Foreigners will find it too complicated and sometimes impossible to juggle two schools at a time. Yet due to necessity, some eventually get into crazy schedules such as teaching at 7 a.m. (when they are lucky to find schools offering those schedules) and then teaching again in the evening on weekdays, plus all day Saturdays. This type of daily commitment leaves no time and very little money to explore Costa Rica.

Financially speaking, at least one school Web site was honest about this matter, saying that Costa Rica is "not a great place for a person trying to make a lot of money teaching." Teachers can expect to earn from \$400 to \$700 a month, but there some rare exceptions of full-timers who find a good place and can earn up to \$1,500.

Since most schools employ teachers under the table, they pay in cash or have an agreement with private banks to open accounts for their employees to deposit their salaries. Some schools have a deal with immigration authorities to let their employees work while providing them with free Spanish lessons. Others promise a temporary work permit that must be renewed every year. That costs \$250, which is covered by the schools, but if the teacher quits or gets fired before the contract term ends, they frequently have to reimburse the schools the permit fee.

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Another aspect to consider is that many foreigners end up quitting after a short time of being employed because they want to travel or get discouraged. For this reason, many schools are now requiring between four and 12 months of commitment, which can be inconvenient for teachers who feel tricked into taking a job at a school that does not honor its promises.

In sections for frequently-asked questions of some language schools, when asking why they would want to come and get a teaching job, there are responses like “highly motivated students, the fantastic climate, and beautiful places to explore” or “Safety of a foreign government that has no military.” The statements are highly misleading.

First, local students are rarely motivated to work hard at learning a language. Most think that by paying for lessons, their teacher will somehow telepathically transfer them language fluency and vocabulary. Thus, a lot of teachers lose motivation because the lack of effort from students makes class flow virtually impossible, and they end up going over the same mistakes to only be blamed for failing students at the end of the term.

Second, it rains copiously almost every afternoon and evening from May to December, making it very uncomfortable for anybody who is commuting between buses. They get at least their feet soaked and have to teach wet until they get home, making them prone to getting sick.

Third, a country with no military does not equal a safer country but a system with less control or accountability. The crime rate goes higher by the day in Costa Rica, and as an expat expressed it, “You will never see so many security bars around houses and guards outside stores and banks with loaded shotguns in any other country.” Foreigners are walking wallets to local criminals, which makes them a favorite target.

For a good list of language schools, visit the [eslbase.com Web site](http://eslbase.com).

International workers have more chances of getting a lousy teaching job than getting one at a call center, unless it is in a sportsbook or casino. There is limited access to the call center industry, especially now that immigration authorities have a more strict surveillance of the operations. Some places are accepting only foreigners with residency, giving more job opportunities to Ticos.

A Web site stated that “. . . the most popular and best paid jobs in Costa Rica for English speakers can be found in call centers.” However, in reality call centers used to pay really high salaries, but due to the increase of English-speaking Ticos, monthly salaries now range between \$600 and \$1000. Only a few poker places or sportsbooks are still paying over \$1,000. They pay in cash or through opening a bank account through them, but many foreigners complain about payment delays with lame excuses given by managers, and lack of professionalism in the workplace.

Call centers seem to offer more convenient schedules, although many operate on weekends and allow only one day off, making it impossible for foreigners to travel around Costa Rica. Some are flexible for requesting time off, but it depends on the place. Jobs in tourism are not in high demand, and they require foreigners to speak fluent Spanish. Plus, salaries are not great, ranging from \$600 to \$1,200. The same is true for real estate positions, which mostly work on commission and require employees to own a car.

Expense consideration is crucial when deciding to take a job in Costa Rica. The cost of living can amount up to \$1,000 a month for one person. Rent is no less than \$300 (unless shared with one or two roommates) for a livable apartment, but it can go up to \$600 for a decent place, plus \$100 in utilities. Food and groceries are really expensive

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due to importing taxes, since there are only some locally produced items. The cost of groceries can be as high as \$500 a month for 2 people, and restaurant meals are no cheaper than \$3. Transportation by bus is approximately \$20 a month, and cab fares are no less than \$1 a ride. Appliances, clothes and accessories are all taxed, but clothing can be found on sale often.

Culturally speaking, Costa Rica does not offer many options in terms of nightlife or daytime entertainment. Foreigners who like urban excitement will not find it in this country.

Of course there is the occasional dream story of people who came here to visit, found their niche, partnered or built a business and became prosperous, making them permanent and happy residents. But those people usually live by the beach and got really lucky. These cases are the exception, not the rule.

The ugly truth is most foreigners moving to Costa Rica to work find it hard to make a living here and wish they would have stayed home.

Garland M. Baker is a 38-year resident and naturalized citizen of Costa Rica who provides multidisciplinary professional services to the international community. Reach him at info@crexpertise.com. Baker has undertaken the research leading to these series of articles in conjunction with A.M. Costa Rica. Find the collection at <http://crexpertise.info>, a complimentary reprint is available at the end of each article. Copyright 2010, use without permission prohibited.

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