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# Driving in Costa Rica: The rules of the road

STEVEN FERRIS | 1 DAY AGO



Lindy Drew/The Tico Times

*Fourth in a series of columns by Steven Ferris, a Costa Rican attorney with extensive, direct experience in the Costa Rican judicial system, now in private practice.*

As a tourist in Costa Rica, if you have a valid driver's license, you are legal to drive here during your stay. Nonetheless, this is contingent upon your immigration status. Your

ability to use a foreign license only applies within the time period you have been allowed to stay.

For example, if your tourist visa (stamped in your passport with the number of days written in) is for 30 days, you can only use that license within that time period. If for some reason you remain in the country beyond your visa limitation, not only are you in violation of your immigration status, but also your ability to drive legally is null and void. If you were to have an accident, you will go to court as if you were driving without a license.

The Traffic Police (*Policia de Tránsito*) are known to conduct routine stops to check documentation. If you show them your foreign license and passport, they will check to see if you're driving within the time limit of your visa.

It is often recommended that you not travel around the country with your official passport, and carry a copy of the pertinent pages instead. Recent police policy instructs officers to accept a legible copy of passports. However, it is still up to the individual officer whether to accept the copy or not. If he or she, for some reason, decides the copy isn't acceptable, you may have to go to your hotel or wherever you're staying, with the police officer. In almost every case this isn't necessary, and passport copies are acceptable during routine traffic stops.

It's also important to keep in mind what the proper procedure is if you have an accident. In Costa Rica, when involved in an accident, you are encouraged to not allow any of the vehicles involved to be moved. They're supposed to stay on the scene, without being moved, no matter what disruption you may be causing to others trying to pass. You may very well have experienced this phenomenon wherein a simple fender bender results in two or more stationary cars in the middle of the road.

As soon as the accident occurs, you should call the Transit Authority at 911, as well as your insurance carrier. If you're renting, your rental agency will probably spell all this out for you, and your insurance documents are probably in the glove compartment. You will be asked (by phone) where the accident took place and if there are any injuries. An officer will be sent, but this may take a while depending on where you are. Waits of 45 minutes to two hours are not uncommon.

While waiting, you should consider writing down some information, such as the other

driver's license plate numbers, taking pictures, and getting everyone's phone number. This could be invaluable later on.

When the Traffic Inspector finally shows up, your job is to give your version of events. He or she will write everything down, including your story and all vehicle information, and ask you to sign it.

You are not obligated to sign, but if everything appears to be in order you certainly should. You'll be given a copy that you will be required to present in Traffic Court within 10 days.

As far as the insurance company is concerned, their agent is supposed to show up at the accident scene. Your declaration of what happened will be documented and you'll be asked to sign that as well. That signature is obligatory if you want your claim to be honored. If it's a rental car, you should probably call the rental agency as soon as possible, and they'll likely help you through the whole process.

Overall, what you need to do in the case of an accident is pretty much the same as anywhere else. The one difference, depending on where you're from, is that you're not supposed to move your car until an officer of the law tells you to do so.

No big deal! Happy driving!

*Steven Ferris is a member of the board of directors of The Tico Times' parent company.*

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**DON BLAKE** | 14 HOURS AGO

The most stupid rule I have ever come across!.....so after 3 months you can't drive...but hey you can apply for residency and then you can drive once you are a resident.....well yeah, except it takes over a year to get your residency approved, so after your initial 3 months is up, and until you get your residency approved, for 9 months or longer you are stuffed, and have to pay for taxis or buses to get around!...insane! And the government says it wants more businesses and foreign investment to come over and start up in Costa Rica....really???.

what business owner is going to come here open a business, and then be treated like an illegal immigrant and catch buses and taxis for a year!!!.....stupid or what??? Compare the process in Costa Rica to other countries.....where you get off the plane, within a month you have a 3 year residency and work permit, and can receive a driving licence within a week!.....Costa Rica doesn't really want foreigners to invest here....as if they did, why would they have such unfriendly and unwelcoming backward rules such as this, and many others for foreigners??? Get your act together, it's a joke!

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**KEN MORRIS** | 14 HOURS AGO

Written like a lawyer, by which I mean that it doesn't necessarily work this way.

Mainly, I strongly recommend not calling 911 or the insurance company after a fender-bender, but rather handling it right there in the street. This is the way Ticos do it, and there are reasons.

As soon as there is an official citation, unless both parties agree, both vehicles can be tied up in the legal process for years. That is, you are forbidden from selling a car that has been involved in an accident, whether you are at fault or the victim, until the court clears the ticket. Don't count on the court acting fast either. The wait can drag on a long time, and you'll get really tired of making multiple trips to the court to try to speed it along. Meanwhile, your marchamos still have to be paid.

With respect to insurance, at least INS, don't count on that being an agreeable process. INS doesn't believe in competitive bidding for repairs, but rather sends the damaged vehicles to its own approved repair shops. If you are at fault in a fender bender, as I was, plan on the approved repair shop fixing everything it can find wrong with the other person's vehicle bumper to bumper and charging about three times as much as the mechanic on the corner. There may well be an appeals process, but like most

things that lumber through the bureaucracy, you're usually better off just paying the inflated amount than you are fighting it—at least if you don't feel like spending another year or more traipsing back and forth to the court.

Ticos know all this, and for this reason handle anything small informally in the street. If you crush someone's fender, or they yours, a cash offer of \$500, maybe only \$200 depending upon the car and the damage, will probably leave you both happier. Going through the official channels will surely cost the guilty party more, and it won't be a cakewalk for the innocent party.

Of course, in a bad crash you have no choice but to go through the official process, and in a less bad crash you can always end up dealing with someone who won't settle right there on the street. But most will, because they know the horrors that await them in the legal process.

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[FREYR](#) | 10 HOURS AGO

Haha, when a tico staged a fender bender to shake down my daughter, she insisted on reporting to police as we do in the north....

The tico ended up making a dash for cover when the policia happened by just up the block.

The rental car was insured, so the lesson was cheap and funny.

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