

Costa Rican Slang: 21 Must-Know Expressions



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Introduction

When visiting a country, there's so much more to the experience than just checking off the must-see sights. The best trips are those where you truly connect with the culture—where you go beyond the surface and immerse yourself in the local way of life. Culture can be experienced in many ways: through food, traditions, music, and, most importantly, through language. There's something magical about sitting down with locals, sharing stories, and understanding their world through their own words.

In Costa Rica, language is more than just a way to communicate—it's a window into the **pura vida** lifestyle. From the warm greetings of "**¡Pura vida!**" to the playful slang that fills everyday conversations, **Costa Rican Spanish** is vibrant, unique, and full of personality. However, with **gentrification** increasingly affecting the country, it's crucial that visitors and new residents **adapt to the culture** rather than change it. Through this initiative of Costa Rican Spanish, we hope to help you connect more authentically with locals and preserve the essence of this beautiful culture.

This ebook, *"21 Slang Phrases Costa Ricans Use the Most,"* is your key to unlocking those connections. Here's why learning Costa Rican slang matters:

- **Connect with Locals:** Speaking the local language builds stronger relationships and allows you to experience the true spirit of Costa Rica.
- **Understand the Culture:** Slang reveals the heart and humor of Costa Rican life—through these phrases, you'll gain a deeper understanding of the culture.
- **Enhance Your Travel Experience:** From navigating public transport to engaging in casual conversations, these phrases will make your trip smoother and more enjoyable.
- **Stand Out from Other Tourists:** Most tourists stick to textbook Spanish. By learning local expressions, you'll stand out and leave a lasting impression.

What's Inside?

This ebook is packed with the **21 most essential phrases** used by Costa Ricans every day. Each phrase comes with:

- **Clear explanations** of what it means and how to use it.
- **Real-life examples** to help you practice in context.
- **Cultural tips** to deepen your understanding of Costa Rican life.

Whether you're planning a short trip, considering a move to Costa Rica, or simply want to impress your tico friends, this ebook is your ultimate guide to speaking Spanish **like a local**.

How to Use This Guide

This guide is designed to be your go-to resource for mastering the most essential and commonly used Costa Rican phrases. Whether you're a complete beginner or already have some Spanish knowledge, this guide will help you navigate conversations with ease and confidence. Here's how to make the most out of it:

1. Start with the Basics

Each phrase is broken down into easy-to-understand explanations. Begin by reading through the phrases and their meanings to get familiar with them. Don't worry about memorizing everything right away—focus on learning a few phrases at a time.

2. Practice in Context

We've included real-life examples to show you how each phrase is used in everyday conversations. Pay attention to the context and try to picture yourself in those situations. This will help you not only memorize the phrases but also understand how to use them naturally.

3. Use the Cultural Tips

Language is deeply connected to culture, and the cultural insights provided in this guide will help you understand the true meaning behind each phrase. Costa Rican slang, for example, often carries humor, warmth, and familiarity. By embracing the cultural context, you'll sound more like a local and less like a tourist.

4. Practice with Locals

The best way to learn is by practicing! Don't be afraid to use the phrases with locals during your trip. Costa Ricans appreciate when visitors make an effort to speak their language, and they'll be excited to hear you use their slang. Plus, you'll likely pick up more expressions as you engage in conversations.

5. Keep It Handy

Carry this guide with you during your travels. Whether you're at a café, chatting with a shopkeeper, or on a bus ride, having these phrases at your fingertips will help you respond quickly and confidently. Over time, you'll start to remember them and use them more naturally.

6. Revisit and Expand Your Knowledge

While this guide introduces you to the 25 most important phrases, don't stop here! Language is constantly evolving, and there are always new words and expressions to learn. Revisit this guide anytime you want to refresh your memory or learn more about the Costa Rican way of speaking.

25 Most Common Phrases Used by Costa Ricans

1. Pura vida (POO-rah VEE-dah)



Meaning

Pura vida is a quintessential Costa Rican expression that translates literally to "pure life." However, its meaning goes beyond a direct translation. It embodies a positive, laid-back, and grateful attitude towards life.

Origin

The origins of "pura vida" can be traced back to the 1956 Mexican film "Pura Vida!" starring Antonio Espino, a famous Mexican comedian known as "Clavillazo." The film's cheerful and optimistic message resonated deeply with Costa Ricans, and the phrase quickly caught on. Over time, it evolved from a catchy movie title to a national motto, embodying the laid-back, positive, and grateful attitude that defines Costa Rican culture.

Uses

- **Greeting**

In Costa Rica, "pura vida" can be used as a greeting. Instead of asking "**¿Cómo estás?**" (How are you?), someone might say "**¿Pura vida?**" to check in. When you respond with "¡Pura vida!", you're not just saying "I'm fine"—you're implying that everything is going very well.

Example

Manuel: Hola Diego ¿cómo estás?

Diego: ¿Pura vida, vos?

Manuel: ¡Pura vida!

- **Gratitude**

Pura vida is also a way to express gratitude when someone does something kind for you or says something nice. It's a warm, informal way of showing appreciation, reflecting the friendly and positive spirit of Costa Rican culture.

Example

Emilia: ¡Vale qué bonita blusa!

Valeria: Pura vida ahi la tenes

- **Approval**

Pura vida is also used to express approval, signaling that something is great or that you enjoyed it. It's a positive and enthusiastic way to show appreciation.

Example

Emilia: ¿Cómo estuvo la fiesta?

Valeria: Estuvo pura vida

Dialogue

Juan ¡Hola, Carlos! ¿Cómo estás?

Carlos ¡Pura vida, Juan! Todo bien, ¿y vos?

Juan ¡Pura vida! Gracias por ayudarme con el proyecto ayer.

Carlos ¡Con gusto! Me alegra que te haya servido.

Juan Sí, estuvo excelente.

Carlos ¡Qué bueno escuchar eso! ¡Me alegra que te haya gustado!

Juan Hi, Carlos! How are you?

Carlos *Pura vida*, Juan! Everything's good, and you?

Juan *Pura vida*! Thanks for helping me with the project yesterday.

Carlos No problem! I'm glad it helped.

Juan Yes, it was excellent.

Carlos So glad to hear that! I'm happy you liked it!

2. Mae (MAH-eh)



Meaning

Mae is a versatile word with several uses, but it is primarily used as a term for "guy" or "dude." It can refer to anyone, regardless of gender, though it's most commonly used to refer to men. It is often used to address friends or even people you don't know well in an informal and friendly way.

Origin

The word *mae* is believed to have evolved from the Spanish word *maestro*, which originally meant "teacher" or "master." Over time, *maestro* was shortened and transformed into *mae* in informal speech. In Costa Rica, it became a colloquial term used to refer to a friend, acquaintance, or even a stranger in a casual and familiar way. It's similar to how English speakers might use "dude" or "buddy."

Dialogue

Andrés: Hola, Diego. ¿Cómo has estado?

Diego: Todo bien, ¿vos?

Andrés: Bien también. ¿Qué planes tenés para el fin de semana?

Diego: Tal vez vaya a la montaña con unos amigos. Necesito un descanso de la ciudad.

Andrés: Qué bien, mae. Hace rato no voy al bosque.

Diego: Pues si te apuntás, podés venir.

Andrés: Suena bien. Te confirmo mañana.

Andrés: Hey, Diego. How have you been?

Diego: All good. You?

Andrés: Doing well too. Any plans for the weekend?

Diego: I might go to the mountains with some friends. I need a break from the city.

Andrés: That sounds great, bro. I haven't been to the forest in a while.

Diego: Well, if you're up for it, you can come.

Andrés: Sounds good. I'll let you know tomorrow.

3. Tuanis (TWAH-nees)



Meaning

The Costa Rican slang word "tuanis" means "cool," "great," or "awesome." It is commonly used to describe something positive, enjoyable, or of good quality. For example, if someone says, "Ese lugar es muy tuanis," it means, "That place is really cool." The word is widely used in informal conversations and reflects the relaxed and friendly nature of Costa Rican culture.

Origin

The origin of "**tuanis**" is believed to come from the English phrase "**too nice**." Over time, this phrase was adapted into Costa Rican Spanish, changing in pronunciation and spelling. While its exact history remains uncertain, it has become a distinctive and widely recognized part of Costa Rican slang.

Dialogue

Mariana: Diay, Pablo. Hace tiempo que no te veo.

Pablo: Todo bien, Mariana. ¿Y vos?

Mariana: Pura vida. Me contaron que fuiste a la playa el fin de semana. ¿Qué tal estuvo?

Pablo: ¡Muy tuanis, la verdad! El clima estuvo perfecto y las olas buenísimas para surfear.

Mariana: Qué bueno. Yo necesito un descanso. Tal vez me anime a ir la próxima vez.

Pablo: ¡De fijo! Nos organizamos y hacemos un viaje tuanis.

Mariana: Me parece una excelente idea. Avísame cuando tengan fecha.

Mariana: Hey, Pablo. It's been a while since I last saw you.

Pablo: All good, Mariana. How about you?

Mariana: Doing great. I heard you went to the beach last weekend. How was it?

Pablo: Super cool, honestly! The weather was perfect, and the waves were great for surfing.

Mariana: That's great. I need a break. Maybe I'll join next time.

Pablo: For sure! Let's plan it and make it a great trip.

Mariana: Sounds like an excellent idea. Let me know when you have a date.

4. ¡Qué chiva! (*Alternative Qué chuzo*) (KEH CHEE-vah)



Meaning

The Costa Rican phrase "¡Qué chiva!" is used to express excitement or admiration, similar to saying "How cool!" or "That's awesome!" in English. It can describe something impressive, fun, or visually appealing. For example, if someone sees a beautiful painting, they might say, "¡Qué chiva ese cuadro!" meaning "That painting is so cool!"

Origin

Although the word "chiva" originally means "goat" in Spanish, in Costa Rica, it has acquired multiple meanings. For example, it can refer to a small beard (goatee) or describe a person's state of anger. While its exact origin is uncertain, it has been widely used for generations in informal speech.

Dialogue

Ana: ¿Supiste que abrieron un nuevo restaurante con mirador en la montaña?

José: No, no sabía. ¿Ya fuiste? ¿Qué tal está?

Ana: ¡Chivísima! Tiene senderos y puentes colgantes.

José: Uy qué chiva. Voy a ver si voy con unos compas un día de estos.

Ana: ¡Claro! Les va a encantar.

Ana: Did you hear they opened a new restaurant with a lookout in the mountain ?

José: No, I didn't know. Have you been there? How is it?

Ana: Super cool! It has trails and hanging bridges.

José: Oh, that's awesome. I'll see if I can go with some friends sometime.

Ana: Of course! You'll love it.

5. **Jale** (*HAH-leh*)



Meaning

In Costa Rican slang, "jale" is commonly used to mean "pull" or "invite" someone to join an activity, especially in the context of going out or having fun. It can be used to suggest doing something together, like going to a party or hanging out. For example, if someone says, "Jale a la playa este fin de semana" it means, "Let's go to the beach this weekend".

Origin

The word "jale" comes from the verb "jalar," which in Costa Rican Spanish means "to pull" or "to drag." Over time, it evolved into a slang expression meaning "to invite" or "to go along with." It's used informally and often refers to social activities where people are invited to join in or participate in a plan or outing.

Dialogue

Carlos: ¡Mae, qué fin de semana más aburrido!

Juan: Diay, jale a hacer rafting. Tengo un compa que cobra barato.

Carlos: ¡Qué buena idea! ¿A qué hora nos encontramos?

Juan: ¿A las 7? Yo paso por vos.

Carlos: ¡Tuanis! Acá te espero.

Carlos: Dude, what a boring weekend!

Juan: Well, how about we **go rafting**? I have a friend who charges cheap.

Carlos: Great idea! What time should we meet?

Juan: How about 7? I'll pick you up.

Carlos: Awesome! I'll be waiting for you

6. ¡Diay! (DEE-eye)



Meaning

In Costa Rican Spanish, "**diay**" is an interjection used to express surprise, agreement, or a reaction to something. It can be used in many contexts and is similar to saying "**well**", "**so**", or "**really**" in English, depending on the tone and situation. For example, if someone shares news, you might say "**diay**" as a way of acknowledging the information or showing surprise.

Origin

The origin of "**diay**" is unclear, but it is believed to have evolved from the word "**ya**", which is used to express emphasis or agreement in many Spanish-speaking countries. Over time, "**diay**" became a unique expression in Costa Rican Spanish, commonly used in daily conversations to convey emotions or reactions.

Dialogue

Luis: ¿Vas a la fiesta de mañana?

Ana: ¡Díay, no sé. No estoy segura si voy.

Luis: ¡Tenés que ir! Va a estar buenísima.

Ana: Tal vez, pero aún no estoy decidida.

Luis: Are you going to the party tomorrow?

Ana: Well, I don't know. I'm not sure if I'll go.

Luis: You should go! It's going to be awesome.

Ana: Maybe, but I'm still undecided.

7. La vara (*lah VAH-rah*)



Meaning

In Costa Rican slang, the expression "**la vara**" or "**varas**" can have several meanings depending on the context. Generally, it is used to refer to **a thing** or **situation**. It is similar to how someone in English might say "**the deal**", "**the thing**", or "**what's going on**". For example, "**¿Cuál es la vara?**" means "**What's the deal?**" or "**What's going on?**"

Additionally, "**la vara**" can also refer to a **problem** or **difficult situation**. In this case, "**varas**" would be used to describe something tricky or challenging. For example, "**¿Qué varas!**" can be used to express surprise or frustration about a situation.

Origin

The expression "**la vara**" is thought to have originated from the "**varas**" (or "**sticks**") that were traditionally used by Costa Rican farmers and workers. In this context, "**varas**" were practical tools or instruments for various tasks, but over time, the term evolved into slang. It started being

used figuratively to refer to anything in general, and later expanded to represent a situation or problem.

Extra

Meaning of "La Vara" or "Varas" in Costa Rica (as a Unit of Measure)

In addition to its modern slang meaning, "**vara**" also refers to a traditional unit of measurement used in Costa Rica, especially by older generations. In this context, a "**vara**" is approximately **0.84 meters** (or around **33 inches**). It was historically used to measure distance, particularly in rural areas and during the time when land was commonly measured in this way. For example, if someone says "**está a unas cinco varas de aquí**", they mean "**it's about five varas from here**" or "**it's about 4.2 meters away**." Though this unit of measure is less commonly used today, it remains a part of the cultural heritage, especially in rural communities or when talking to older people.

Origin of "La Vara" or "Varas" (Unit of Measure)

The use of "**vara**" as a unit of measure dates back to Spanish colonial times. It was originally based on the length of a wooden rod, which was often used for surveying land or marking boundaries. Over time, the unit became standardized, and it continued to be used in Costa Rica long after other measurement systems were adopted. Despite its decline in everyday use, the term "**vara**" is still occasionally used **by the older generation**, particularly in rural areas, when discussing distances or land sizes.

Dialogue

Luis: ¡Díay, ¿qué pasó con la fiesta de anoche?

Juan: ¡No sé, mae! ¡Qué vara más rara! Nadie sabía qué estaba pasando.

Luis: ¡Varas! ¿Qué hiciste al final?

Juan: Nos fuimos a otro lugar, pero estuvo todo muy raro.

Luis: Well, what happened with the party last night?

Juan: I don't know, dude! What a weird situation! Nobody knew what was going on.

Luis: What a thing! What did you do in the end?

Juan: We went to another place, but everything was just so strange.

8. Güila (*WEE-lah*)



Meaning

In Costa Rican Spanish, the word **"güila"** has several meanings depending on the context. It is most commonly used to refer to a **child** or **kid**, typically a younger one. The term is generally informal and affectionate.

- **For kids:** When referring to children, **"güila"** is often used to describe a young boy or girl, though it can sometimes carry a playful or endearing tone.
- **For girls:** **"Güila"** can also specifically refer to a young girl, similar to how one might say **"chiquita"** or **"nena"** in other Spanish-speaking countries.
- **"Mi güila" as a girlfriend:** In certain contexts, particularly in slang, **"mi güila"** can refer to one's **girlfriend**. It's often used in a playful, affectionate, or even possessive way, much like how English speakers might use "my girl" for a girlfriend.

Origin

The term "**güila**" likely originated from "**huéla**", which was a diminutive or colloquial form of "hija" (daughter) used in rural or informal speech. Over time, this term became more commonly used to refer to young children in general. The use of "**güila**" for a girlfriend is a more modern development in Costa Rican slang, stemming from the affectionate tone often used for young kids.

Dialogue

María: ¡Qué bueno que Amanda se porte tan bien! Siempre la veo tan tranquila.

Ana: Normalmente sí, pero **esa güila** se portó mal en el doctor otra vez.

María: ¡Qué bárbara! ¿Qué hizo ahora?

Ana: No quería sentarse, estaba gritando y no paraba de moverse.

María: ¡Qué madre! ¿Y qué pasó?

Ana: El doctor me ayudó a calmarla pero vieras que vergüenza.

María: It's so great that Amanda behaves so well! I always see her so calm.

Ana: Normally, yes, but **that kid** misbehaved at the doctor again.

María: Oh my gosh! What did she do this time?

Ana: She didn't want to sit, she was screaming, and kept moving around.

María: What a shame! What happened?

Ana: The doctor helped me calm her down, but you wouldn't believe how embarrassing it was.

Note: In Mexican Spanish **güila** means prostitute.

9. De fijo (*Deh FEE-ho*)



Meaning

In Costa Rican Spanish, "de fijo" is used to express certainty or high probability about something. It's similar to saying "for sure," "definitely," or "no doubt about it" in English. It can refer to future events, current facts, or strong personal beliefs.

- **Confirming something:**

De fijo viene mañana, me lo confirmó.

(For sure he's coming tomorrow, he confirmed it to me.)

- **Making a confident assumption:**

Si hay promoción en ese restaurante, de fijo va a estar lleno.

(If there's a promotion at that restaurant, it's definitely going to be full.)

Origin

The phrase "de fijo" originates from the Spanish adjective "fijo", which means "fixed", "certain", or "sure". While "fijo" is used across the Spanish-speaking world in a more standard way (e.g., "*un trabajo fijo*" meaning "a stable job"), Costa Ricans adapted it into a standalone phrase by adding "de" in front, forming "de fijo." This construction likely developed through informal speech patterns, where speakers emphasized certainty by saying something was "fixed" or "certain" in a colloquial way.

Dialogue

Carlos: ¿Andre, vas a la playa este fin de semana?

Andrea: Sí, de fijo. Ya tengo todo listo.

Carlos: ¡Buenísimo! Entonces, nos vemos allá.

Andrea: Sí, y de fijo llevamos algo para hacer un picnic.

Carlos: Andre, are you going to the beach this weekend?

Andrea: Yes, for sure. I already have everything ready.

Carlos: Awesome! Then, I'll see you there.

Andrea: Yeah, and we'll definitely bring something for a picnic.

10. Bretear (*BREH-teh-ar*)



Meaning

In Costa Rican Spanish, "bretear" is a casual and widely used synonym for "trabajar" (to work). The noun "brete" refers to a job or work, making these two words essential in everyday conversations about employment and effort.

Origin

The Costa Rican verb "bretear" comes from the Spanish noun "brete", which originally meant a difficult or laborious task. The term has roots in old Spanish, where "brete" referred to a tight or difficult situation (similar to saying "a tough spot" in English). Over time, in Costa Rica and some other Latin American countries, "brete" evolved to mean "work" or "job."

Dialogue

Sofía: ¡Hola, mae! ¿Cómo te ha ido?

Luis: Todo bien, pero con demasiado brete. He estado breteando hasta tarde todos los días.

Sofía: ¡Qué pereza! ¿Y en qué estás breteando ahora?

Luis: En un nuevo proyecto en la oficina. Mucho trabajo, pero al menos el brete está interesante.

Sofía: Bueno, ojalá que no te exploten tanto. Hay que tener tiempo para relajarse también.

Luis: Sí, de fijo. Este finde me voy a la playa para desconectar un rato.

Sofía: Hey, dude! How's it going?

Luis: All good, but way too much work. I've been working late every day.

Sofía: Ugh, that sucks! And what are you working on now?

Luis: A new project at the office. A lot of work, but at least the job is interesting.

Sofía: Well, I hope they don't overwork you too much. You need time to relax too.

Luis: Yeah, for sure. This weekend I'm heading to the beach to unplug for a bit.

11. ¡Pura paja! (POO-rah PAH-hah)



Meaning

In Costa Rican slang, "pura paja" is used to call out when someone is lying, exaggerating, or making excuses. It implies that what was said has no real value or truth behind it.

- **Calling out a lie**

Dice que corrió 10 kilómetros en media hora, pero eso es pura paja.

(He says he ran 10 kilometers in half an hour, but that's pure nonsense.)

- **Saying someone is all talk:**

Siempre dice que va a empezar a hacer ejercicio, pero es pura paja.

(He always says he's going to start exercising, but it's all talk.)

- **Reacting to an excuse:**

No vino porque dice que estaba ocupado... ¡pura paja!

(He didn't come because he says he was busy... yeah, right!)

Origin

The phrase "pura paja" likely evolved from rural speech, where straw (*paja*) was commonly associated with something lightweight, disposable, and lacking real substance. Over time, in Costa Rican Spanish, "pura paja" emerged as a way to emphasize when someone is speaking falsely, exaggerating, or making empty promises

Dialogue

Luis: Mae, este fin de semana de fijo voy a ir al gimnasio, ya lo decidí.

Carlos: ¿De fijo? La vez pasada dijiste lo mismo y no fuiste.

Luis: ¡Este fin de semana sí! Ya tengo todo planeado.

Carlos: ¡Pura paja! Sabes que nunca vas.

Luis: ¡Nah, ahora sí en serio! Voy a ir.

Carlos: Mmm, cuando lo vea, te lo creo.

Luis: Dude, this weekend I'm definitely going to the gym, I've decided.

Carlos: Definitely? Last time you said the same thing and didn't go.

Luis: This weekend for sure! I have everything planned.

Carlos: Yeah, right! You never go.

Luis: Nah, I'm serious this time! I'm going.

Carlos: Hmm, I'll believe it when I see it.

12. ¡Qué madre! (*KEH MAH-dreh*)



Meaning

In Costa Rican Spanish, "¡Qué madre!" is an informal expression used to convey frustration, annoyance, or disappointment. It is similar to saying "What a mess!", "That sucks!", or "What a pain!" in English.

Origin

The exact origin of the Costa Rican expression "qué madre" is a bit elusive, as it stems from the broader use of the word "madre" (mother) in Spanish slang, which has been used for centuries in various contexts across Latin America.

Dialogue

Alex: Oí que el partido de fútbol se canceló por la lluvia.

Emi: ¡Qué madre! Ya tenía todo listo para ir. Había comprado las entradas hace semanas y hasta invité a unos amigos.

Alex: Sí que lástima. Pero bueno, el clima no se puede controlar. ¿Qué van a hacer ahora?

Emi: Ni idea. Tal vez nos quedemos en la casa viendo una película o algo así.

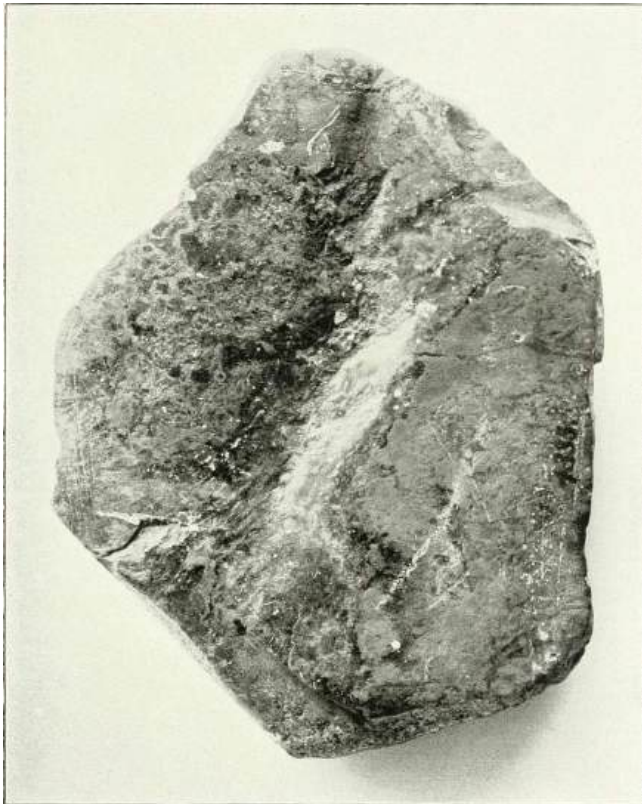
Alex: I heard the soccer game got canceled because of the rain.

Emi: What a bummer! I was all ready to go. I bought the tickets weeks ago and even invited some friends.

Alex: Yeah, what a shame. But hey, you can't control the weather. What are you guys going to do now?

Emi: No idea. Maybe we'll just stay home and watch a movie or something.

13. Plata (PLAH-tah)



Meaning

In Costa Rica (and many other Spanish-speaking countries), "plata" is a colloquial term for money. While the formal word for money in Spanish is "dinero," "plata" is widely used in everyday conversation. It's a casual and friendly way to talk about cash, funds, or wealth.

Origin

The word "plata" literally means "silver" in Spanish. Its use as a synonym for money dates back to colonial times in Latin America, when silver was one of the primary materials used for coins and currency.

Dialogue

Carlos: Mae, ¿vas a ir al concierto de Malpaís este fin de semana?

Javier: No sé, mae. La entrada cuesta un montón de plata.

Carlos: ¿A cuánto están?

Javier: Como 15 rojos y yo ando corto de plata este mes.

Carlos: Ah, qué madre. ¿Y si pedís prestado?

Javier: No sé, mae. No me gusta deber plata. Además, tengo que ahorrar para el carro.

Carlos: Bueno, si te animás, avisame. Tal vez conseguimos un descuento.

Javier: ¡Pura vida, mae! Si sale algo, me apunto.

Carlos: Dude, are you going to the Malpaís concert this weekend?

Javier: I don't know, man. The ticket costs a ton of money.

Carlos: How much are they?

Javier: Like 15 bucks, and I'm short on cash this month.

Carlos: Oh, what a bummer. What if you borrow some?

Javier: I don't know, man. I don't like owing money. Plus, I'm saving up for a car.

Carlos: Well, if you change your mind, let me know. Maybe we can find a discount.

Javier: Thanks, man! If something comes up, count me in.

14. **Chinear** (*chee-neh-ARR*)



Meaning

The Costa Rican expression "**chinear**" means to pamper, spoil, or take care of someone with affection. It is commonly used when referring to treating someone with special care, whether it's a child, a pet, or even an adult.

Origin

There is an alternative theory that "**chinear**" comes from the presence of Chinese immigrants in Costa Rica, who were known for working in domestic service and childcare. According to this theory, the verb "chinear" could have originated from the association between Chinese caregivers and the act of pampering or taking care of children.

This explanation aligns with other Latin American linguistic patterns where words related to Chinese people ("chino") were associated with servitude or caregiving roles.

Dialogue

Ana: ¿Dónde está María?

Carlos: Está chineando al bebé en la sala. Se quedó dormidito en sus brazos.

Ana: ¡Qué cosi! A ella le encanta chinear a los bebés.

Ana: Where is María?

Carlos: She's pampering the baby in the living room. He fell asleep in her arms.

Ana: How sweet! She loves to take care of babies.

15. **Pulsearla** (*pool-seh-AR-lah*)



Meaning

In Costa Rican slang, “pulsearla” is used to describe working hard or putting in a great deal of effort. When someone says they are “pulseándola,” it implies they're hustling, grinding, or dedicating themselves fully to a task.

Origin

The expression likely evolved from the verb “pulsar” (to press or push). The idea is that just as pressing something repeatedly requires sustained physical effort, “pulsearla” metaphorically reflects the persistent, vigorous work one puts into achieving a goal. Over time, this literal action transformed into a colloquial way to signify hard work in everyday conversation.

Dialogue

Andrés: Oye, Laura, ¿cómo va ese proyecto que te tienen asignado?

Laura: La verdad es que la estoy pulseando, trabajando sin parar para terminarlo a tiempo.

Andrés: Se nota que le estás poniendo muchas ganas.

Laura: Sí, a veces hay que pulsearla fuerte para lograr lo que uno se propone.

Andrés: Hey, Laura, how's that project you've been assigned coming along?

Laura: Honestly, I'm working really hard on it, non-stop to get it done on time.

Andrés: It shows you're really giving it your all.

Laura: Yes, sometimes you just have to work hard to achieve what you set out to do.

16. ¡Qué rajado! (*KEH ra-HAH-doh!*)



Meaning

In Costa Rican slang, “que rajado” is an exclamation used to express admiration, astonishment, or approval. It’s akin to saying “how awesome!” or “that’s incredible!” in English. The phrase is typically used in informal settings when reacting to something impressive or daring.

Origin

One theory links it to the local use of the verb “**rajar**,” which in some contexts can imply acting boldly or standing out. Over time, the term evolved in Costa Rican vernacular to highlight something or someone as exceptionally cool or impressive.

Dialogue

Andrés: ¿Viste el partido anoche?

Laura: Sí, ¡qué rajado estuvo!.

Andrés: Por dicha al final ganamos

Laura: Si por dicha aunque la vimos fea.

Andrés: Did you see the match last night?

Laura: Yes, it was awesome!

Andrés: Luckily, we won in the end.

Laura: Yes, luckily, even though we barely make it.

17. ¡Qué guava! (KEH GWAH-vah!)



Meaning

In Costa Rican slang, "¡qué guava!" is an expression used to indicate luck or good fortune. It's similar to saying "What luck!" or "How fortunate!" in English. Costa Ricans typically use this phrase when something turns out well for someone, especially in an unexpected or effortless way.

Origin

The exact origin of **"guava"** in this context is unclear, but one theory is that it comes from the **guava fruit ("guayaba")**, which is soft and easy to eat, symbolizing something effortless or fortunate. Over time, **"guayaba"** may have been shortened to **"guava"** in Costa Rican slang, evolving into an expression of luck.

Dialogue

Juan: Mae, vieras qué guava, salí tarde, pero el bus seguía ahí y lo agarré.

Carlos: ¡Qué bueno, mae! Porque si no, te hubiera tocado la presa.

Juan: Sí, por dicha

Juan: Dude, what luck, I was late, but the bus was still there and I caught it.

Carlos: That's awesome, man! Because if not, you would've been stuck in traffic.

Juan: Yeah, luckily I got lucky!

18. Me regala (*Meh reh-GAH-lah*)



Meaning

The Costa Rican expression "¿Me regala...?" is a polite way to ask for something, but it doesn't literally mean "Can you gift me...?" as it would in other Spanish-speaking countries. Instead, in Costa Rica, "me regala" is commonly used to mean "Can you give me...?" or "Can I have...?" when requesting an item or service.

Origin

This phrase is rooted in **Costa Rican politeness and indirect speech**, which is a cultural norm. Costa Ricans (or *Ticos*) tend to soften requests to sound more courteous, avoiding direct commands.

Dialogue

Mesero: ¡Buenas! Bienvenidos. ¿Qué les gustaría pedir?

Cliente: Buenas, ¿me regala un casado con pollo y fresco de tamarindo, por favor?

Mesero: Claro con gusto, ¿el pollo lo quiere a la plancha o frito?

Cliente: A la plancha, por favor.

Mesero: Perfecto. ¿Algo más?

Cliente: No, solamente. ¡Muchas gracias!

Mesero: Con mucho gusto, ya se lo traigo.

Waiter: Hello! Welcome. What would you like to order?

Customer: Hi, can you give me a *casado* with chicken and a tamarind juice, please?

Waiter: Of course, with pleasure. Would you like the chicken grilled or fried?

Customer: Grilled, please.

Waiter: Perfect. Anything else?

Customer: No, that's all. Thank you very much!

Waiter: My pleasure! I'll bring it right out.

19. ¡Qué tигра! (KEH TEE-grah!)



Meaning

The Costa Rican expression "¡Qué tигра!" is a colloquial way of saying "How lazy!" or "What a hassle!" It is used when someone feels too tired, unmotivated, or unwilling to do something.

Origin

The word "**tигра**" comes from *tigresa* (tigress), but in Costa Rican slang, it has nothing to do with the animal. Instead, it conveys a **strong sense of laziness or reluctance** to do something. It is similar to saying "¡Qué pereza!" (What laziness!).

Dialogue

Carlos: Mañana tenemos que estar en la U a las 7 para la reunión del grupo.

Sofía: ¡Uff, qué tigre! ¡Qué pereza levantarse tan temprano!

Carlos: Sí, yo también tengo pereza, pero si no vamos, el profe se enoja.

Sofía: Bueno, ni modo... ahí nos vemos.

Carlos: Tomorrow we have to be at the U at 7 a.m. for the group meeting.

Sofía: Ugh, what a hassle! What a pain getting up so early!

Carlos: Yeah, me too, but if we don't go, the professor will get mad.

Sofía: Well, no choice... see you there.

20. ¡Qué gato(a)! (*KEH GAH-toh(ah)*)



Meaning

The phrase "¡Qué gato!" is used to express admiration for someone's exceptional skill, ability, or talent. It is a form of praise and is often used when someone performs an impressive action, such as executing something difficult or handling a situation with great skill.

Origin

The origin of "¡Qué gato!" in this sense is not entirely clear, but it likely comes from the agility and cleverness of cats. In Costa Rican slang, "gato" is associated with someone who is quick, sharp, or skilled—much like a cat that moves gracefully and lands on its feet.

Dialogue

Carlos: ¡Vieras el golazo que metí hoy en el partido! ¡Lo hice desde fuera del área!

Javier: ¡No me digas! ¡Qué gato, Carlos! ¡Esa jugada estuvo brutal!

Carlos: ¡Gracias, mae! ¡La verdad es que me salió de suerte!

Javier: ¡Nada de suerte! Eso es pura habilidad.

Carlos: You should've seen the amazing goal I scored today in the game! I made it from outside the box!

Javier: No way! Wow, you're amazing, Carlos! That move was brutal!

Carlos: Thanks, dude! Honestly, it was a bit of luck!

Javier: No way, that was pure skill.

21. ¡Al chile! (AHL CHEE-leh!)



Meaning

"Al chile" is commonly used to indicate that someone is speaking directly and truthfully, without holding back or sugar-coating anything. It's similar to saying "honestly", "seriously", or "for real" in English. It can be used to express a strong opinion or to show that what you're saying is genuine.

Origin

Chili Pepper Connection: Some believe it may come from the idea that chile (spicy pepper) adds heat or intensity to something. When used in a conversation, "al chile" emphasizes the intensity or seriousness of the statement, just as chili peppers add intensity to food.

Dialogue

María: ¡Mae, ayer hice un arroz con pollo que quedó delicioso!

José: ¿Al chile? ¡Contame cómo lo hiciste!

María: Le eché todo lo que tenía en la casa, pero lo más importante fue que lo cociné a fuego lento y con mucho amor.

José: ¡Qué gata! Fjo quedó buenísimo.

María: ¡Sí, mae! ¡La verdad es que estaba de muerte lenta!

José: ¡Al chile, ya me está dando hambre!

María: Dude, yesterday I made a chicken and rice dish that turned out delicious!

José: Really? Tell me how you did it!

María: I just used everything I had at home, but the most important thing was cooking it on low heat with lots of love.

José: Wow, you're amazing! That must've tasted incredible.

María: Yeah, dude! Honestly, it was to die for!

José: Seriously, you're making me hungry now!

More resources

Thank you for exploring Costa Rican slang with me! If you're looking to deepen your understanding of Costa Rican Spanish or plan your next adventure in Costa Rica, I have more resources available to help you:

- **Personalized Spanish Lessons**

Improve your Spanish skills with one-on-one lessons designed to meet your needs, whether you're a beginner or want to master local expressions.

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