
A FIELD GUIDE FOR INTERNATIONAL BUYERS

Build in *Costa Rica.*

*Everything you need to know about turning land
into a home — before you sign anything.*



Neo Architects project · The Pacific coast, Costa Rica

PREPARED _____

FOR: _____

COURTESY OF: _____

BUYER'S NAME · AGENT & AGENCY

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This guide is offered without obligation. The information herein reflects the Costa Rica construction market as of May 2026 and is meant to help you ask better questions — not to replace professional legal or architectural advice.

Should you *build, or buy?*

Every buyer arrives at Costa Rica with the same first question — and the answer is almost never simple. There is a turnkey villa in a Guanacaste gated community ready for keys on closing. There is a hillside lot in the Osa Peninsula that could become exactly the home you imagined. Both are valid. Neither is universally right. The choice depends on three things: **how much time you have, how specific your vision is, and how much you value capturing equity.**

When buying makes more sense

Buying an existing home is the right choice when you need to be in Costa Rica within 6 months, when your needs are conventional (resort-style, gated, fully serviced), when you don't have the temperament for a long-distance project, or when the lifestyle factor matters more than the financial one. A finished home in Tamarindo, Reserva Conchal, or Hacienda Pinilla can be lived in this season — and there are good ones available.

When building makes more sense

Building is the right choice when you want a home that doesn't yet exist — specific orientation, specific materials, the right relationship between site and structure. Building is also the right financial choice when you can capture the gap between construction cost and market value. In 2026, a custom build still typically delivers 15–25% better value per square meter than buying an equivalent finished property — provided you can wait the 12 to 18 months it takes, and provided you have a team you trust.

At a glance

Factor	Buying turnkey	Building custom
Time to move in	0–3 months	12–18 months (sometimes 24)
Customization	What's on the market	Anything you can imagine
Capital efficiency	Pay market premium	15–25% better \$/m ² typically
Risk profile	Low — what you see is what you get	Higher — execution risk over 12+ months
Emotional ride	Smooth	Long; rewarding if managed well

"Whether to build or buy is rarely a financial decision in isolation. It is a question of how you want to spend the next 18 months — and what kind of home you want at the end of them."

Three buyer profiles

The Visionary

Has clear ideas about how they want to live — indoor/outdoor flow, specific materials, response to a particular site. Building is almost always right; no finished home will match what's in their head.

The Investor

Sees Costa Rica as a financial position, not just a lifestyle. The 15–25% build-vs-buy spread matters. The 12–18 month wait is acceptable in exchange for immediate equity capture and modern construction with lower long-term operating costs.

The Relocator

Selling a primary residence elsewhere and moving full-time. Often best served by a hybrid path: buy a turnkey property to live in, build a second/replacement home over the following 18–24 months once they understand the country.

A simple decision frame

If you can answer **yes** to four or more of these, building is likely right for you:

- I have at least 12 months before I need to be in the home.
- I have a specific vision that no finished property matches.
- I value capturing the build-vs-buy financial spread.
- I can tolerate a longer, more involved process for a better outcome.
- I have, or can hire, a team I trust to manage the project at a distance.
- I have access to a reasonable contingency budget (10–15%).
- I care about sustainability and long-term operating cost.

A NOTE FROM US

We have helped clients on both sides of this decision. If after reading this guide you are still uncertain, we offer a free 30-minute conversation — no obligation, no sales pitch — to think it through with you. Sometimes the answer is "buy now, build in three years." Sometimes it is "build, but on a different lot than the one you are looking at." We will say so honestly.

What it actually *costs in 2026*

Almost every conversation about building in Costa Rica starts with the wrong question: *what is the cost per square meter?* The honest answer is that the per-square-meter rate is only one of six cost categories. Buyers who plan for the rate alone consistently run 30–40% over budget. Buyers who plan for all six categories rarely surprise themselves.

\$1,650 /m ² MID-QUALITY BUILD (ENTRY)	\$2,800 /m ² LUXURY CUSTOM (TOP END)	10-12% ARCHITECTURAL FEES (CFIA)
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The six cost categories

01 Construction (per m²)

\$1,650–\$2,800/m² for mid-to-luxury custom. Includes structural, electromechanical, finishes, fixtures, and labor. Does *not* include outdoor areas, pools, or garages unless specified.

02 Professional fees (CFIA)

10.5–12% of construction cost. Includes architectural design (4%), technical direction (5%), and inspection (3%). Mandatory and regulated by the College of Engineers and Architects (CFIA).

03 Permits and taxes

Approximately 4.5% of construction cost. CFIA registration (0.025–1%), municipal construction permit (~1%), INS workers' comp insurance (~3.75%, mandatory).

04 Preliminary studies

\$2,000–\$4,000. Soil boring, topographic survey, infiltration study (required for Ministry of Health approval), slope stability analysis (mandatory for >30% slopes).

05 Water and infrastructure

Water storage and pumping system: \$3,000–\$7,000. Well drilling (if no AyA letter): \$5,000–\$15,000. Driveway, retaining walls, septic — variable.

06 Contingency

10–15% of total project cost. Not optional. Coastal logistics, weather delays, and currency movement consistently surprise unfamiliar buyers.

A worked example

Consider a 300m² custom home on a hillside lot in the Osa Peninsula, mid-to-luxury finishes, off-grid water (well required). Here is what your real budget looks like:

Line item	Calculation	Amount (USD)
Construction	300m ² × \$2,200/m ² (mid-luxury)	\$660,000
Architectural fees	11% × \$660,000	\$72,600
Permits + INS	4.75% × \$660,000	\$31,350
Preliminary studies	Soil, infiltration, slope	\$3,500
Water + storage	Well + pumping system	\$15,000
Contingency	12% of subtotal	\$93,800
TOTAL ESTIMATED		\$876,250

What this number doesn't include: land cost, landscape design, interior furnishings, art, appliances beyond the building specification, or financing costs if applicable. Land in our typical project regions ranges from \$25/m² (raw rural Osa) to \$400/m² (premium Guanacaste oceanfront). For the example above, add \$80,000–\$300,000 in land cost depending on location.

What you should ask any architect quoting a price

- › Does your m² rate include outdoor areas, pools, and garages? (In Costa Rica these are often counted in the same way as interior space — yours should be too.)
- › Are construction permits included in your professional fees? (Usually they are not. Confirm.)
- › What is the contingency you recommend, and what does it cover?
- › What is the payment schedule, and what triggers each payment?
- › Are preliminary studies included or extra?
- › What is your firm's policy on cost overruns above 5%?

The five regions *of Costa Rica*

Costa Rica is small — 51,100 km² — but contains twelve distinct climatic zones. The decision of *where* to build is almost as important as the decision of *what* to build. A wrong-region choice can quietly add 30% to construction cost (through material logistics), 6 months to your timeline (through permit complexity), or undermine the home's long-term enjoyment (through climate mismatch). Here are the five regions where international buyers most often build.

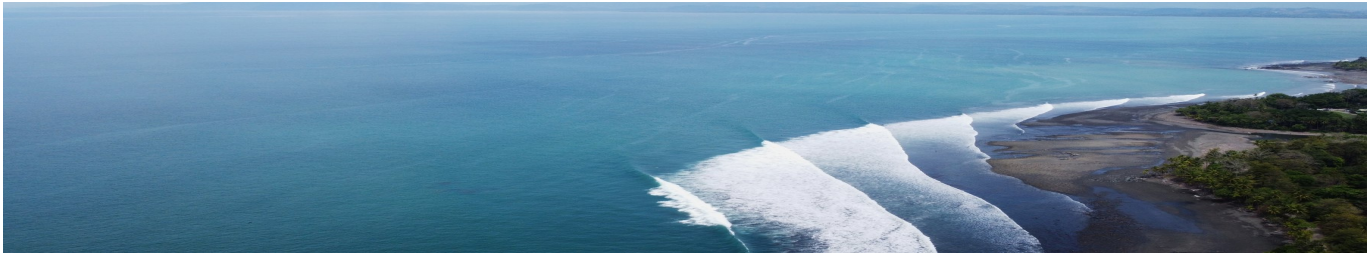


RAINFOREST · OFF-GRID

Osa Peninsula

Where we are based.

The most biodiverse region on earth — Corcovado National Park alone contains 2.5% of the world's biodiversity. Building here is fundamentally different: sites are often off-grid (no public water or electricity), access is by 4WD road or boat, materials must be staged days in advance. Construction logistics typically add 15–25% to per-m² costs. But: privacy, climate, and views are unmatched. Best for clients who want rainforest immersion and have the temperament for a longer build.



SOUTH PACIFIC

Pavones & Golfito

South Pacific coast.

South of the Osa, on the Golfo Dulce — surf country, with a five-month wet season (May–October) and a five-month dry season (December–April). Less remote than Osa, more remote than Guanacaste. Pavones has one of the world's longest left-hand surf waves; this is the principal cultural anchor. Mid-priced land, growing community of long-term expat residents. Good fit for second homes and surf-oriented buyers.

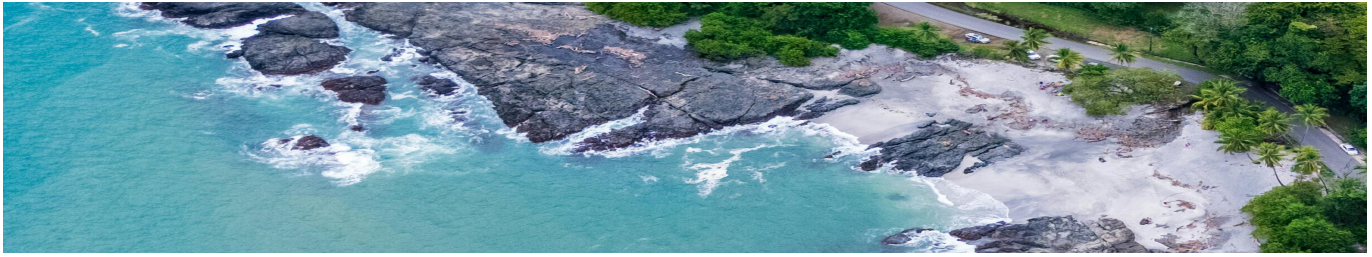


DRY TROPICAL

Guanacaste Pacific

Tamarindo, Nosara, Santa Teresa, Liberia.

The most developed Costa Rica region for international buyers. Liberia airport (LIR) handles direct flights from many US cities; rental and resale markets are the country's most liquid. Dry tropical climate (less rain, more sun than the rest of the country). Land is the most expensive — premium oceanfront \$300–\$400/m² — but infrastructure is excellent and construction is comparatively easy. Best for clients who value liquidity, rental income, and a more established community.



TRANSITIONAL

Central Pacific

Jacó, Manuel Antonio, Dominical, Uvita.

Closer to San José (SJO) than Guanacaste. More variable climate. Manuel Antonio National Park brings tourism; Dominical and Uvita are quieter. Mid-priced. Often a good entry point for first-time Costa Rica buyers — close enough to the capital for easy access, far enough for tropical lifestyle.



WET TROPICAL

Caribbean Coast

Puerto Viejo, Cahuita, Manzanillo.

Lower prices, distinct Afro-Caribbean culture, English widely spoken. Wetter than the Pacific year-round. Water availability infrastructure is less developed — water letters from AyA are still not universally required in some Caribbean municipalities, which is both convenience and risk. Beautiful but requires the right team for the climate.

Chapter Four

Land due diligence — *what kills deals*

Most international buyers learn the hard way that owning land in Costa Rica is not the same as owning land in the United States or Europe. Boundaries can be disputed. Water rights can be impossible to obtain. Coastal restrictions can mean you cannot build at all. The seven checks below are non-negotiable. Do not transfer money until every one of them comes back clean.

01 Title verification (Folio Real)

Confirm the seller is the registered owner at the National Registry. Look for liens, mortgages, easements, or pending litigation. Use a Costa Rica real estate attorney — never the seller's attorney, and never an attorney introduced by the seller.

02 Plano Catastrado (registered survey)

A formal survey registered with the National Registry. Without this, the property boundaries are theoretical. Many older properties have outdated planos that no longer match physical reality — confirm a current one exists.

03 Maritime Zone status (200m from coast)

Costa Rica law: the first 50m from the high-tide line is public; the next 150m is concession territory requiring government approval with renewable leases. If your property is within 200m of the ocean, confirm the concession status before buying — many properties marketed as 'oceanfront' are actually concession land.

04 Water availability letter (carta de agua)

Required for any building permit. Issued by AyA (national water utility) or local ASADA. Currently 3–6 months to obtain, valid for 36 months. **The single biggest killer of Costa Rica build deals in 2026 is failed or delayed water letters.** More on this in Chapter 5.

05 Zoning (uso de suelo)

Issued by the municipality. Defines what you can build: residential vs. commercial, maximum density, height restrictions, required setbacks. Some lots are zoned in ways that prevent the kind of home you imagined.

06 Slope analysis (>30% slope)

Costa Rica law requires a slope stability analysis on any lot with terrain steeper than 30%. Common in the Osa, Pavones, hills above Tamarindo. Without it, no permit. Cost: \$1,000–\$3,000.

07 Tax status

Confirm property taxes are paid and current with the municipality. Outstanding tax obligations transfer to the new owner. Easy to check, often overlooked.

The water question

(2026's biggest issue)

More Costa Rica build projects fail in 2026 over water issues than over money, permits, or contractors combined. If you take only one warning from this guide, let it be this: **do not buy a lot without a current, valid water availability letter — or a documented, professional plan to secure water through a private well.**

What's changed in 2026

Costa Rica's water utility, AyA, and its regional cooperatives (ASADAs) are now taking between three and six months to issue a Water Availability Letter (Carta de Disponibilidad de Agua). In some coastal zones — particularly Guanacaste and parts of the Osa — the answer is currently a flat *no* due to aquifer capacity. Letters that are issued are valid for 36 months. If your construction permit application is delayed and your letter expires, you start the application process over.

The four water situations

Situation	What it means	Action
AyA letter granted	Public water available, letter valid	Proceed. Verify expiry date.
AyA letter denied	No municipal water; you'll need a private well	Get geological survey; budget \$5K–\$15K for well
AyA letter pending (3–6 months)	Application in process; outcome unknown	Negotiate purchase contingent on letter
No application started	Seller hasn't initiated process	Do not buy without a contingency clause

Water storage — required in most municipalities

Many municipalities now require a water storage and pumping system as a condition of permit approval. Budget **\$3,000–\$7,000** from the start. Even if not strictly required, a storage system is essential — Costa Rica's coastal grids experience frequent outages, and the dry-season demand often exceeds supply.

"Buying a beautiful lot without water is like buying a beautiful car without an engine. The asset is theoretical until the water is real."

Permits —

the two layers

For a typical custom residential home in Costa Rica, two institutions must approve your project before construction can legally begin: **CFIA** (College of Engineers and Architects) and the **Municipality** in which the land sits. Neither communicates with the other automatically. Your architect's job — among others — is to keep both moving in parallel.

CFIA. *Technical review.*

The College of Engineers and Architects reviews and approves your construction drawings, structural calculations, and electromechanical specifications. Costs 0.025–1% of project value. Now fully digital as of 2026 — review time has improved to 2–6 weeks for clean submissions.

Municipality. *Local construction permit.*

Issued by the municipality where the property sits. Requires CFIA approval, a valid water letter, property tax status, and INS Workers' Compensation policy. Cost: ~1% of project value. Review time: 1–3 months, varies dramatically by municipality. Guanacaste municipalities are generally faster than Osa or Caribbean.

Realistic permit timeline (2026)

Phase	Time
Plans prepared and CFIA submission	Months 1–2
CFIA technical review	Months 2–3
Water letter (in parallel)	Months 1–6
Municipal permit review	Months 3–6
INS workers' comp + final issuance	Month 6
Total realistic	5–8 months

A NOTE ON LARGER PROJECTS

For homes exceeding 500m² of construction, a third permit layer — environmental viability through SETENA — also applies. This is uncommon for custom residential projects but worth knowing if you are planning a particularly large home, a compound, or a small hospitality project. Your architect will confirm whether it applies to your specific case.

Choosing *your team*

The single biggest decision you will make about your Costa Rica home — bigger than the land, bigger than the design — is who you build it with. The right team makes a long-distance project feel manageable. The wrong team makes a beautiful site feel like a burden.

There are three structures you will encounter when shopping for an architect and builder in Costa Rica: separate architect and builder, design-build (one firm handles both), and developer-led buy-and-build packages inside gated communities. Each has trade-offs. For international clients who are not on site every week, the single-team design-build approach removes the most friction — one contract, one team, one accountable party from first sketch to final keys.

Whichever structure you choose, three things matter more than fees, prestige, or portfolio polish: **experience in your specific region, honest communication, and a clear written process.** Costa Rica's climate, logistics, and permitting environment vary dramatically between Osa, Guanacaste, and the Caribbean. A firm that has only worked in Tamarindo will struggle in the Osa rainforest, and vice versa. Ask to see recent completed projects in the region you are considering. Ask to speak to clients. Pay attention to how quickly and clearly your initial inquiries are answered — that is the cadence you will live with for eighteen months.

"Hire the team whose first thirty days of work you would happily repeat for eighteen months."

Timeline — what *realistic looks like*

The most common surprise for international buyers is not the cost — it is the duration. A 300m² custom home in Costa Rica realistically takes 18 to 24 months from first sketch to occupancy. Builders who promise 12 are either inexperienced or selling. Here is the honest sequence.



Discovery (months 1–2)

Site evaluation, soil tests, infiltration study, slope analysis, water availability confirmation, environmental classification. Often overlapped with land purchase due diligence.

Design (months 3–5)

Concept design, schematic design, design development, construction drawings. Three to four formal client review milestones; expect 2–3 rounds of revisions on each. Final CFIA-ready package at the end.

Permits (months 3–7)

CFIA, municipal, INS workers' comp. Runs in parallel with later design phases. Can stretch to month 9 in slower municipalities.

Build (months 8–22)

Foundation, structure, envelope, electromechanical, finishes, landscape. Weather dependent — wet-season pours and finishes are harder. 14 months is typical for 300m² mid-luxury; 16–18 for off-grid or remote Osa.

Keys (month 22+)

Final inspection, municipal habitability certificate, utility connections, occupancy. Plan a 2–4 week buffer here for inevitable punch list items.

Plan for 18–24 months total. If your project finishes faster, you got lucky. If it finishes in 18, you ran a tight project. If it takes 24, that is normal — especially for off-grid or coastal logistics. Beware anyone who promises

less without backing it up with recent comparable completions.

Eight *expensive mistakes* — and how to avoid them

01 Buying land without a water letter

Costs: months of delay, sometimes the entire project. Never transferable money without a valid letter or a documented well plan.

02 Underestimating the contingency

10% is the minimum. 15% is realistic for coastal or remote projects. Costs that appear during construction always exist — the question is whether you planned for them.

03 Hiring an architect who doesn't pull permits

Many freelancers exclude permits from their fees. You then have to manage CFIA and the municipality yourself from abroad. Confirm permits are included.

04 Skipping the soil study

\$800–\$1,500 saves \$50,000+ in foundation surprises. Always do it before final design.

05 Trusting verbal cost estimates

Insist on itemized written quotes. Per-m² rates without specification are marketing, not pricing. Quotes that aren't broken down line by line are not real quotes.

06 Ignoring the dry-season vs. wet-season calendar

Concrete pours, exterior finishes, and roofing should land in dry season (December–April). Wet-season construction is slower and lower quality.

07 Choosing a builder based only on price

The lowest bid almost always wins on price and loses on quality. Verify three recent completed projects in person if possible.

08 Not visiting the site during construction

Once a quarter minimum. The video tours are useful but no substitute. Things look different in person — for better and worse.

Questions to ask

before you sign

A printable checklist for one of the most consequential moments in your build journey: the land purchase. Run through these before signing. If you cannot answer any of them with confidence, the answer is to wait.

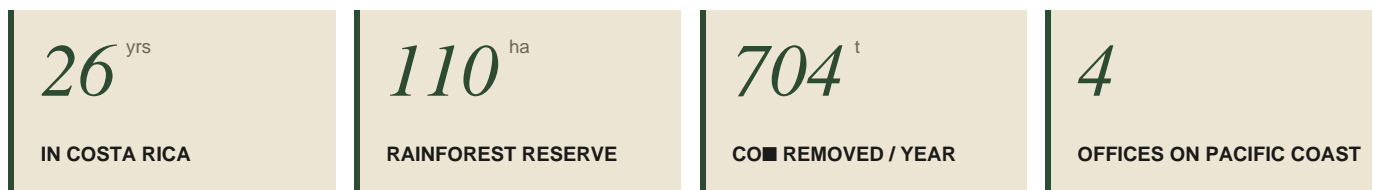
On the land

- Folio Real verified at National Registry — clean of liens and disputes?
- Plano Catastrado current and matching physical boundaries?
- Water availability letter issued and valid for at least the next 24 months?
- Zoning permits the type of home I intend to build?
- Slope analysis if terrain exceeds 30%?
- Maritime Zone status confirmed if within 200m of coast?
- Property taxes paid and current?

About

Neo Architects

Neo Architects has designed sustainable, modern homes in Costa Rica for 26 years. We work across the Pacific coast — Osa Peninsula, Pavones, Golfito, Puerto Jiménez, and Guanacaste — for international clients building primary residences, second homes, retirement homes, and family compounds.



What makes us different

We are the only Costa Rica architecture firm operating Co₂-neutral by maintaining a 110-hectare private rainforest reserve in the Osa Peninsula — removing 704 tons of carbon from the atmosphere every year. Every project we deliver is fully offset by default, with independently verifiable carbon accounting.

We operate as an Open Source Architecture studio — a globally distributed team across Costa Rica, Europe, and the Americas — pooling craft and knowledge for every project. We design, engineer, permit, and (for select projects) build, from a single accountable team.

How we work with real estate partners

Many of our projects begin with a real estate agent's introduction. We offer free 30-minute site consultations for any qualified buyer your agent introduces — no obligation, no commitment, no sales pitch. Often it is the conversation that moves a buyer from 'I like this land' to 'I'll take it'.

"Most architects talk about sustainability. We can show clients the forest."

TO BEGIN A CONVERSATION

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OUR OFFICES

Golfito Main office

Pavones Beach studio

Puerto Jiménez Osa office

Liberia North coast

Site visits by appointment, anywhere on the Pacific coast.

This guide is offered without obligation. It reflects market conditions in Costa Rica as of May 2026 and is intended as a starting point for informed decision-making. It does not replace professional legal, financial, or architectural advice.

PREPARED BY NEO ARCHITECTS, COSTA RICA

SHARED WITH YOU BY: _____