

## Costa Rica, Nov. 20-26, 2011

For years, Nancy and I have been trying to schedule a visit to the nation sometimes called the “Switzerland of the Americas.” Ecologically, Costa Rica reminds me of the Hawaiian Island of Kauai; perhaps a better comparison would be Jamaica or Puerto Rico. But Costa Rica has more lush foliage and tall forests than any place I can remember. (See photos 1 & 2.) The trees grow so fast that many roads look like tunnels through the trees. Along some roads, they routinely trim the trees at about 6-ft so that they don’t grow into the road blocking traffic and interfere with utility lines.

In an effort to preserve much of Costa Rica’s natural beauty and surroundings, 25% of the country’s land has been set aside and turned into protective parks and forest preserves safeguarding the beautiful and lush environment from deforestation, logging and other types of destruction. What distinguishes Costa Rica is that it has not just one national park but 27; not just one active volcano but 100. It also is graced by beautiful beaches and a biological wealth of unique species of plants, birds, animals, and insects. It is no wonder that some liken Costa Rica to a “living Eden.”

### La Paz Water Falls and Rainforest

Our first adventure after arriving in Costa Rica was a tour to the La Paz Water Falls (See photo 3.) in the rainforest about 50 miles north of San Jose, near the town of Cinchona. The La Paz Water Falls rests on the edge of the Braulio Carrillo National Park in central Costa Rica. The little bus took us along very rough, winding roads past

the continental divide to the Atlantic side of the mountains where at about 5,000 feet it rains every day. Upon arrival at the private nature preserve, we descended the mountain along narrow trails with at least 500 steps of all sizes and shapes to a series of splendid water falls. As it was raining, we bought green capes to keep us dry. Of course, we took pictures of each other in our capes, as you can see in the photos (9 & 10). Along the descent were a number of wildlife areas, giving us opportunity to exercise our cameras. By the time we got to the hummingbird feeding area, it became obvious that the rainforest habitat was very similar to Jamaica. But we did learn something new about hummingbirds: their only habitat is in North, Central and South America. (See photos 14 to 16.)

With thousands of wildlife species, Costa Rica sits atop of the list of the most bio-diverse regions of the world. It is home to an incredible number of exotic and tropical flora and fauna. (See photos 6, 7, 8, 11, 13, 17, 18, & 19.) This tiny Latin American country houses an estimated 5 to 10% of the world’s unique species.

### Driving in Costa Rica

After spending two days based in San Jose and touring the central region, we moved to the Pacific Ocean area about 60 miles distance and a much lower elevation. As shuttle buses were not available to travel to our ocean destination, we rented a car. Our drive to the ocean turned out to be an interesting cultural experience. (See photo 20.) We were warned that a

speeding ticket could cost \$700, so looked out for all of the speed limit signs. The first half of the drive took us on a brand new toll road. Unlike freeways in the USA, this one vacillated between 4 and 2 traffic lanes. And unlike highways in Colorado, steep cliffs of dirt lined the road. Road repair teams were common as boulders and dirt often slide down on the road. Obviously, the government does not have a large budget for roads, and it is one sign that the country's infrastructure is not keeping up with the growth of population and traffic.

The second half of the drive was over narrow roads with pot-holes, giving us a glimpse of the lifestyles of the native population. In the country and small towns, many people ride bicycles and some of the roads have shoulder markers for the bicyclists. When we drove to the grocery store, the rain came down in torrents but we still passed dozens of bicyclists, most without rain gear. And we didn't see scowls on their faces either.

On the return trip, we took mostly side roads which gave us a glimpse of the poorer neighborhoods in the San Jose suburbs. The roads were very narrow and filled with deep pot-holes. We took several dozen different roads and never saw a street sign. It would have been totally impossible to navigate the Costa Rican roads without a GPS. The innovation of GPS devices for rental cars may have advanced world traveling similar to the addition of radar to airplanes.

Our 2<sup>nd</sup> hotel sat near the ocean about 15 miles south of the Carara National Park, where we took our second

rainforest tour. From our hotel in the tiny town of Harradura, we drove four miles south to the old town of Joco, which is large enough to appear on most maps of the Country. Our hotel was adjacent to a huge townhouse development and sport fishing harbor where dozens of large, expensive fishing boats took would-be fishermen out to sea every day. The harbor gave us a walking destination and along the way was a trail with a naturally covered tree canopy. Obviously, the trees had been planted and were trimmed but as you can see from the photographs, it provided a romantic walk for several hundred meters, providing protection from the hot sun. (See photo 26.)

## **Ecotourism**

Ecotourism is one of Costa Rica's crowning achievements. This is the only place in the 75 countries I have visited where the hotel rooms have recycling containers built into the waste baskets. Tourism is Costa Rica's major source of income, but people come to learn, not just to be entertained.

Our tour of Carara National Park tour on the Pacific Coast near Jaco became an experience in eco-tourism. Our guide had majored in ornithology and bird-watching was his hobby. He also had a gift in explaining scientific facts and ideas to non-specialists. He carried a powerful telescope that he set up on a tripod for us to see birds, bats, and little animals deep in the jungle. (See photos 21 & 24.) Carara Nat'l Park has a mix of rainforest trees and dry-forest trees; we could tell when we approached the rainforest trees because the light dimmed from the greater density in tree cover.

What I found most interesting about the forest life as explained by our guide was the symbiotic interrelationships of many different species. For example, the termites build nests the size of beach balls on tree branches. Eventually, they abandon their nests, and then the bees take over and rebuild the nest, but when the queen bee dies, the bees abandon the nest and birds use it for their nesting. An even better example is the species of ants that live in hollow, V-shaped pods on tree branches, which you can see in the photo. (See photo 22)The ants chase off other insects that would harm the tree.

A third example of symbiosis is the leaf-cutter ant and its fungi. (See photo 23.) The fungi need leaves to live on, and the ants feed on fungi. So the ants organize a massive operation to bring leaves to the fungi. They march off into the forest to cut a piece of leaf the size of a dime, and carry it back 100s of feet to their nest. You can see this gigantic team effort in the photo. Under each piece of leaf is an ant, and as they all move down the path together it looks like an expressway at rush hour. The strangest part of the story is that the ants are blind. They have sensors that detect scents left by ants specializing in trail-blazing. Not only are there ant specialists for cutting, carrying, and trailblazing, but others specialize in mulching the leaves for the fungi. A typical ant colony might have millions of ants living in peaceful teamwork. Maybe if humans were blind, they would be better at cooperation.

## Demographics and Overall Impressions

Costa Rica, with a population of only 4.5 million, attracts over a 1.5 million tourists a year and 35,000 U.S. citizens have taken up residence. The country has made amazing progress socio-economically. While the average income is only about a fourth of the USA, the cost of living is much lower also. Life expectancy here is equivalent to the United States at nearly 80 years. The health system has an excellent reputation and people arrive here from all over the world for dental and medical care, enticed by the low cost. I think a better comparison might be West Virginia as the average annual income is only about \$11,000, which is about 40% of West Virginia's. Costa Rica's official poverty rate is 14% and inequality is very high, but the standard of living is two to three times that of neighboring countries like Nicaragua and Panama.

Costa Ricans pride themselves on their educational system and the fact that their literacy rate is over 95%. Their investment in education has paid off as many high-tech companies have moved plants here. Intel built two large assembly plants in San Jose, the nation's capital, and Intel alone accounts for 20% of Costa Rica's exports, even though their exports of coffee, bananas, and pineapples are huge.

Costa Rica is known as a peaceful country as it lacks an army and for 100 years has stayed out of any wars. Costa Rica's human rights record is far better than the United States. While its crime rate is substantially lower than Mexico,

we heard a lot of advice about not leaving valuables in your car and told not to walk certain places at night. All hotels and housing developments have guards and even many shabby houses had iron fences and gates. On Black Friday in downtown San Jose, we observed policemen standing on 5-meter platforms watching the hordes of shoppers to try to detect pick-pockets and other terrorists. The police platform in the photo was right outside of a crowded McDonald's restaurant. (See photos 27 & 28.) Even though the downtown area is very congested, it is filled with museums, parks, huge cathedrals and most famous of all, the National Theatre, with an amazing interior built in 1890.

What I found most amazing of all was the huge stone balls called spheres. You can see a picture of one (photo 29) in front of the National Museum. It is at least 4-feet in diameter and like hundreds of them in south Costa Rica, perfectly round. And yet no one knows their origin or how they were made. One theory is that they were made from a glacier-like giant pit, but most experts speculate that they were man-made hundreds of years ago and had some religious significance.

Compared to Mexico, the representatives of hotels and businesses were much more professional and service oriented. Not only did we find that they speak English better, but they seemed more organized and less carefree about carrying out their duties. While Costa Rica is not corruption free, it is much freer than

Mexico. The Corruption-free Index of countries gives a 9 to Nordic countries, 7 to the USA, 5 to Costa Rica, 3 to Mexico and 1 to Somalia. (Incidentally, Iraq and Afghanistan at 1.5 are not much above Somalia. At least Costa Rica does not have the violent gang problem that Mexico does.

From what I had read about the rapid economic growth and improved health of Costa Rica, I was expecting San Jose to be a pristine, charming city like Cusco, Peru, but instead it seemed more comparable to Mexico City, including its poor neighborhoods. Inequality is a serious problem for Costa Rica, but of course as Americans, we do not dare to give them advice on that score.

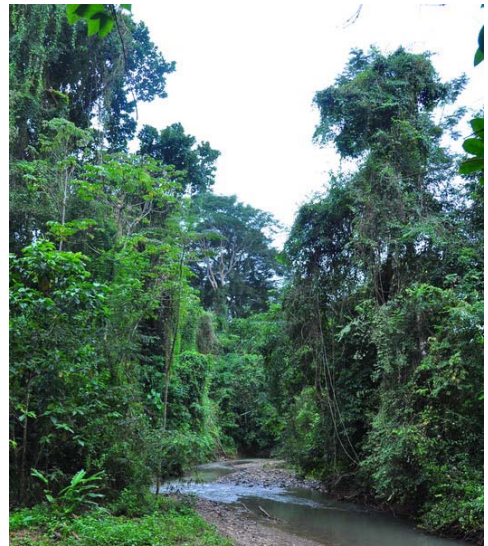
Costa Rica is a great place to visit, especially its rain forests, but it still does not seem to us like a good destination for retirement, at least not yet. The weather in the central region is ideal but the traffic congestion in San Jose makes driving very time consuming and tedious with all the pot holes.

Our coastal hotel was located in an area called "Los Suenos," which means dreams. The town houses of Los Suenos were almost all empty, probably only used for a few weeks of the year by those who came down for deep sea fishing or golfing. (See photo 30.) But with most of the Costa Ricans in that area living in tiny, shack-like houses, it is not my idea of a dreamland. Nonetheless, Costa Rica is a great place to visit and deserves at least several weeks to see the many exotic places.

Costa Rica Trip Photos, Nov. 2011



01 Clouds in Rainforest



02 Huge 50-meter trees in Natl Park



03 Temple water falls costa rica



04 White-nosed Coati



05 water-catching bromeliad with tadpoles



06 Butterfly

Costa Rica Trip Photos, Nov. 2011



07 morpho butterflies folded wings



08 Morpho butterfly



09 Nancy and giant leaf



10 Ron in rain



11 Red Ginger



13 Turquoise browed Motmot - a CR native

Costa Rica Trip Photos, Nov. 2011



14 Costa Rican Hummingbird



15 Nancy s hummingbird on poro tree



15 Giant Bromelaid



16 Sabre-wing hummingbird



17 Friendly Toucan



18 iguana costa rica

Costa Rica Trip Photos, Nov. 2011



19 Caring Mccaws



20 Winding road up mountain



21 Bird Watching Guide



22 Pods of Tree-Protector Ants



23 Leaf-cutter Ants



24 Tree suffocating another tree



Costa Rica Trip Photos, Nov. 2011



25 ron shopping for turkey in costa rica



26 Nancy in Tree tunnel



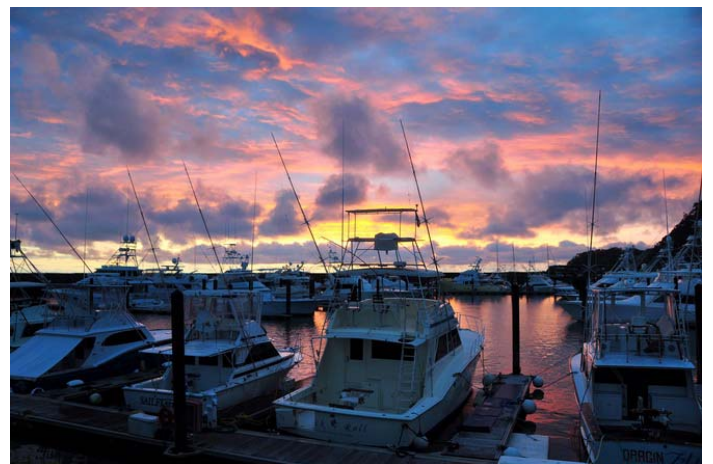
27 police stand in san jose CR



28 National Theatre on Black Friday



29 4-ft Mysterious Sone Sphere



30 Sunset over Los Suenos Fishing Harbor