

Rainbow Nation

By Christine Potter

But Costa Rica Is Mainly Green

Costa Rica is a country of many colours, with as many ways to promote it to clients. The vivid hues of exotic plants, jewel coloured birds flashing among the tree canopy, and brightly painted roadside cafés (*sodas* in the vernacular) all contribute to its cheery ambience.

But the predominant hue is, not surprisingly, green. Add “sustainable” and “eco” and you have the driving philosophies behind this nation’s appeal, where more than 25 per cent of its land is dedicated as national park and biological preserve.

More than two million visitors arrive each year for adventure, ranging from soft to extreme, for exotic flora and fauna, for unparalleled bird watching and – to a lesser degree – for its beautiful beaches.

On a recent visit, I also discovered great locales for romance, from full service wedding and honeymoon packages to luxury rainforest getaways. It’s a value-packed destination for meetings,

incentives, and team-building opportunities, it yields numerous topics for special interest groups, and most recently, has entered into the Medical Tourism field.

Green & Sustainable

So do green and sustainable products make a difference to clients choosing a vacation?

“It seems so, and concern is growing,” I was told by Alfredo Oporto, executive director of the Costa Rica Convention Bureau. “Increasingly, vacationers want assurance of measures taken to reduce our carbon footprints, especially in the adventure travel

Hacienda Tayutic boasts a Catholic church, top-notch cuisine and a traditional oxcart for wedding photos.





market. And many companies looking for a place to hold meetings insist on sustainability.”

How does that work?

“We aim to be Carbon Neutral by 2021, balancing unavoidable carbon emissions, such as those from air and road traffic, with an equivalent number of “points” garnered through eco-tourism, tree planting, park preservation, and so on. This year’s goal, well on its way to being met, is to plant seven million trees.”

The country launched its Certification for Sustainable Tourism program (CST) in 1999, and it has since been hailed by the UN World Tourism Organization as *the* model for Latin America.

To date, more than 100 hotels and tour operators are certified under the CST, and the program has been adopted by rental car companies such as Mapache (mapache.com) and Hola (hola.net) – both of which focus on reforestation to compensate for carbon emissions. So far no airlines have achieved a CST award, but poised to do so is Nature Air, a regional carrier whose founder and CEO Alex Khajavi boasts that his airline is the world’s first to completely compensate for its carbon emissions. (This year Nature Air received the Tourism for Tomorrow Award from the World Travel and Tourism Council and in 2008 it was awarded the Top Sustainable Award from the Rainforest Alliance.)

Adventure Travel

Adventure travel products are Costa Rica’s biggest draw, but not everybody wants Extreme, and the country offers something for all levels. I’m not adventurous but enjoyed ziplining through the canopy and over the valleys at Turu Ba Ri Park near the capital, San Jose.

Within Turu Ba Ri’s 142 hectares, an extensive zipline network stretches over 12 platforms and takes 90 minutes to complete. Visitors whiz through the jungle and over 75-metre-deep chasms, along cables stretching as far as 1.2 kilometres. Considerate staff members make the adventure easy, sometimes taking Nervous Nellies like me in tandem. Other rides include Sensational Cable where users stretch out like Superman to fly over jungle hills and valleys, a Tarzan swing (an enormous bungee) bouncing riders into tree tops above a crocodile-inhabited river, a rappelling adventure down 100-metre-high cliffs, and the more sedate aerial tram, horseback riding, and hikes to view the plant and bird life.

It currently takes about 90 minutes to reach Turu Ba Ri from San Jose, and an hour from the Pacific coast, where Puntarenas and Caldera are the two main ports. But once the new road between the

Seeing San Jose

If your clients plan to stay in the capital, check out the Aurola Holiday Inn, central and reasonably priced. (www.aurolahotels.com)

For something unique, the 37-room Grano de Oro is converted from a Victorian mansion and hard to beat for its distinctive ambience (www.hotelgranodeoro.com)

Conferences and business meetings are well catered to in Ramada Plaza in Herradura, near the airport on the outskirts of Costa Rica. The property has won multiple ecological awards. (www.ramadaherradura.com)



National Theatre, San Jose.

Among San Jose “must see” sites are the elegant 19th-century National Theatre, the Gold Museum in a former bank building, and the Central Market for a view of every day life in the capital. Costa Rica is a favourite source among stamp collectors and the Stamp Museum (in the elegant, early 20th-century Post Office) tells the history of these miniature artworks.

capital and Caldera is complete (in late 2010) travel time will be chopped in half. (www.turubari.com)

Cloud Forests & Volcanoes

Costa Rica is not a large country and many attractions are accessible from the capital, including the Poas Volcano – about two hours’ drive north into the Central Valley along forest-hemmed roads and through tiny communities.

Poas’ crater (still active) is said to be the world’s second largest in diameter at just over two kilometres. On a clear day, the view is spectacular at this altitude of 2,708 metres. But this *is* cloud forest and so named for good reason. Clouds were dense during my visit so we didn’t sight the promised white-nosed squattie (a type

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Costa Rica

of squirrel), nor the more exciting ocelot, or tapir – all of which can be seen in this area.

The nearest major town is Alajuela (in the province of the same name) and a statue of Costa Rica's hero, Juan Santa Maria, adorns its centre. Why is he the hero?



Coffee beans in various stages. Coffee, cocoa and macadamia plantations offer tours.

“Because he defended Costa Rica from William Walker, head of the Filibusters who tried to conquer all of Central America for the USA,” says our guide Oscar. Alajuela is nicknamed Mango City, and the many trees are heavy with fruit as we pass through.

An oxcart painted in traditional bright colours, something once seen frequently on Costa Rica's roads, waits by the roadside for tourists. For US \$1 you can take photos and climb in the cart. I pay up willingly – this is probably the only time I'll see one, I think. But I find them in every coffee plantation and farm we visit.

Traditional & Sustainable

Few visitors leave Costa Rica without touring a coffee or cocoa plantation, several of which have their sustainability certificates, like the family-run Traditional Farm Tour (www.traditionalfarmtour.com).

This was one of the best examples I saw of sustainable tourism. Paths are paved with shells from harvested macadamia nuts and freshwater springs supply water to the farm and the village, from where the workers are hired. Education is a big part of the process.

“We built water tanks, but we had to teach the 200-member community how to care for them. For example, one time they decided to clean the tanks with detergent... it was a disaster. The ground was covered in suds. It looked like snow!”

Sustainable here means they use everything: nut shells become fuel to roast coffee beans, and are used along pathways. Sugar cane leaves wrap blocks of sugar. Oil from

rejected macadamia nuts is mixed with diesel to run the cars.

“It burns cleaner and lubricates the engine,” says a family member. “And we could have bought a \$50,000 machine to pick out the bad nuts, but why not employ a woman from the village who can pick them out?”

The word “sustainable” has been corrupted, she admits. “But I believe we are as close as anyone can be to the essence of the idea.”

Accommodations (basic) include seven rooms in the house, and three rooms in the hills.

Romance

If you have clients planning a wedding, honeymoon, or romantic getaway, Costa Rica is not short of destinations.

Rustic, rural, and away from it all, Heliconia Island is a rain forest lodge in Serapaquí, run by Henk and Carolien Peters van Duijnhoven. The tiny river island is covered in exotic plants, and a decked footbridge reaches it from the parking area. It draws bird watchers and hikers, and those who love seclusion (www.heliconiaisland.com).

More traditional for a gracious honeymoon (and near plenty of optional adventures) is Casa Turire in Turrialba (www.hotelcasaturire.com) recalling a Spanish Colonial plantation house in a resort environment. Topping the luxury scale is Hacienda Tayutic converted from a family estate home with its own historic church for Roman Catholic weddings and, for non-RC ceremonies, a pavilion with an unparalleled view (www.tayutic.com). Cuisine is top-notch, the house is filled with art, and spa treatments are available.

These and other properties all offer a selection of tours from river rafting to nature hikes.

More Costa Rica

For more information, visit Costa Rica's website: www.visitcostarica.com. ✈



A roadside oxcart waits for tourists willing to pay US \$1 to take photos.