

## HISTORY IN BRIEF: ECOTOURISM IN COSTA RICA

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Costa Rica tourism began as an oasis for essentially three types of travelers; bird watchers, adventure seekers (including rafting the many wild rivers, surfing and hiking into the ample jungles) and those looking for alternatives to the traditional, cookie cutter hotel oriented countries in Latin America such as Mexico, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and others. Furthermore, Costa Rica was a progressive and democratically stable country, having abandoned its army in 1948 and dedicating all the funds that had been used for the armed forces into creating a strong educational and culture component of the society. Additionally, one of the country's best known facts was that almost 6% of all the species on the planet could be found in Costa Rica, which made it a destination for those interested in unexploited areas and authenticity.

The adventurous Costa Rican citizens and residents (Ticos as they like to call themselves) were proud of their peaceful image and particularly in the abundant biodiversity in their country and were intrigued and lured to delve into the various areas and sub climates that can be found in Costa Rica. In 1974, the National Park system was created which converted 25% of the national terrain into National Parks, inalienable and public, which also created a new frontier for the Costa Ricans and adventurous worldly travelers to discover.

The evolution of this environmental pride fomented a deep interest among the Costa Ricans as well as worldly adventures and as a result, many small farms or rural area homes opened small bed and breakfast rentals or inns which created a strong national audience of city dwellers seeking to escape the cacophony of the city life. With a full understanding and temptation that they could find adventure, solace or escape in the mountains or at the beaches on the coasts, many such places opened their homes or created very rustic dwellings in these areas of interest close to jungles, National Parks, beaches and other attractive environmental areas.

Simultaneously, Costa Rica reached a tremendous international audience in the late 1980s when the President, Oscar Arias Sanchez brokered the lasting peace between the Sandinista forces and a militia, known as the Contras , which was formed in 1981 to overthrow the Sandinista government and was funded and trained by the US Central Intelligence Agency . This mediating led to President Arias winning the Nobel Peace prize which ignited the attention of the international community and particularly the press, who came in droves to learn more about this small country with such a peaceful and evolved way of life.

During this period there were many Costa Ricans and foreigners alike who wanted to be part of this image and to create businesses that would not only take advantage of this potential touristic interest in the biodiversity and stability of the country as a whole, but also wanted to create a symbiosis with this kind of attraction through good practices of minimizing their impact, educating the client and marketing the astounding environmental gifts of Costa Rica. One of the first to do this on a level that became well known

and creatively balanced ecologically was the Savegre Lodge, still run by the Chacón family, located in the high mountainous areas of the Central Range, where Quetzals can be found in abundant numbers, and in the lush tropical jungles of the Caribbean side of this range at Rara Avi Ecolodge, founded and developed by Amos Bien, an American naturalist in Sarapiquí de Heredia who started in 1983. Simultaneously, Finca Rosa Blanca, founded in 1985 and still owned by Glenn and Teri Jampol, was opened in the Heredia Coffee Highlands of the Central Valley about 45 minutes from San Jose the capital, with the same desire to minimize their impact, create a socioeconomic relationship in their community and offer a very personalized and comfortable lodging based on art and cultural, extremely personalized service and the possible nearby authentic experiences of volcanoes, coffee and small town life. Shortly thereafter, in the early 90s in the jungles of the Osa Peninsula, the most bio diverse area on the planet, two ex- Peace Corps volunteers, John and Karen Lewis began to build the now renown Lapa Rios Ecolodge in the center of the dense jungle offering the adventurer, bird watcher and eco-tourist an extremely comfortable yet an unexploited area in which to participate hand in hand with the undisturbed nature surrounding them. There were many other Costa Ricans and foreigners alike who began to use this model for quality lodgings with a strong sustainable emphasis and the model for Costa Rican tourism evolved using this as the template. In fact even today, 80% of the hotels in Costa Rica have 20 rooms or less, an interesting and notable statistic which is probably not found anywhere else in the world.

By 1994, Costa Rica had begun to ignite the interest of adventurous travelers everywhere and after much study, diagnosis and even via the results of two contracted consulting firms, the government was informed and realized that Costa Rica's future lay in sustainable tourism. As a result, a group of environmentalists, biologists, hotel owners and the tourism board (who sponsored this activity) decided to create a "certification for sustainability in tourism" that would help bring Costa Rica to the forefront of this niche. in 1996, depending greatly on a sense of pride, ownership and forward-thinking, the Costa Rica Tourist Board created the final draft for the Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST) program, which in 1998 began its first inspections and then issued certifications. It is today considered by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and most experts in this realm to be the model for sustainable tourism in Latin America and the world.

Through the use of four main pillars of sustainable practices; Socio economic, service to the client, biological and educational/training the CST not only demands environmental conservation and good practices, it also requires a strong community relationship, a fluid and consistent interpretation and training not only to the clients but also to the guests and the community in which they are located and depends on a quality product for it all to be considered sustainable. The lowest score earned in the inspections of each of these categories becomes the final score, which forces the business to focus equally on all four pillars thus creating a strong and even keeled model for sustainability.

Currently more than 300 companies participate in the program which is voluntary and free of charge, as it is run and funded by the Tourism Board (ICT). Over the last 15 years, it has added tour operators, recreational parks, rent-a cars and now marinas and culinary business to the certification program.

Almost 100 percent of the properties in Costa Rica operate with some form of sustainable initiative at hand. In turn, it has made the country's tourism industry the most recognized in the world for sustainable

initiatives and has positioned Costa Rica as the only destination recognized as a green brand among eco-minded travelers. Moreover, in 2008, the UNWTO named Costa Rica as the head of its Executive Council citing its commitment to sustainable tourism practices, the first country in the Americas to do so.

By far, the greatest contribution Costa Rican entrepreneurs have made to environmental conservation is its innovative and creative approach to linking environmental passion and conservation to the future of tourism while insuring that this model is financially viable. Costa Rica is renowned as the leader in environmental conservation and has inspired a global following. Costa Ricans will tell you that this could not have evolved without the pioneer's and Costa Rican creativity and innovation. They have designed and built a bridge from environmental concepts into a workable, responsible and financially sustainable model for tourism.

*The author, Glenn Jampol, is the owner of the award-winning boutique hotel Finca Rosa Blanca Coffee Plantation Resort has been audited/evaluated by Costa Rica's CST program earning five levels and a 100% score.*