

Central America's gem

SAN JOSE — For the past few days I've been laboring to find a few bad things to say about Costa Rica — it's called balanced reporting.

So far, my best efforts have failed. All the reports one hears praising this little nation of 2.7 million are true: Costa Rica is a delight. And the only unpleasant person I have so far met here happens to be myself, and even I've had to bow to pressure and start smiling and acting friendly.

This is, quite simply, a civilized country of ladies and gentlemen. From the well-dressed man who left his family to help me get a taxi at the airport to the nation's president, every Costa Rican I've met has made me feel welcome. Being cordial just comes naturally here.

Examples: I arrived late in San Jose to find that Lawson Travel had fouled up my reservations. The capital was packed with visitors, every room was booked. Somehow, a young Costa Rican hotel worker managed to find me a room — and a rather good one at that. The next day, Senor Munoz of Blanco Travel spent half a day on the phone finding me a car and lodging on the over-booked north coast. Soon after my arrival there, Munoz, a prince among travel agents, even called long distance to see if I was happily accommodated.

A few additional notes for visitors (I'm not going into competition with the *Sun* travel section yet). Book early, the secret about Costa Rica is getting out. Prices are low, the weather boiling hot, and the food excellent.

Females tend to be long-legged, wonderfully slim, perky and exceptionally beautiful. Mature men, I'm pleased to report, are much in demand.

In fact, if Costa Rica only had more political problems, I could stay longer. Happily for the "Ticos" their country is a model of what all Central America could be but, sadly, is not.

A gentle history and a population of European descent (unlike uptight Canadians, Ticos have no qualms about being proud of their European background) have combined to make Costa Rica into

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an island of peace and prosperity among its troubled neighbors. In many ways, Costa Rica reminds me of what some of the lovelier South Sea islands must have been like when first "discovered" by European ships: Full of smiling, friendly inhabitants eager to please. Like the islands, I wonder how much longer Costa Rica will remain open before the world starts taking advantage of its innocent nature.

But there is trouble brewing, even in paradise. Or, more accurately, next to paradise. To the north is Marxist Nicaragua with an 80,000-man army and an arsenal of Soviet weapons. Costa Rica, by contrast, does not even have an army: It was formally banned in the constitution.

In spite of the recent flurry of peace activity in Central America, many Costa Ricans worry deeply that Nicaragua and its mentor, Cuba, are still determined to spread Marxism throughout Central America. Unable to defend itself, Costa Rica has to rely for security on nimble diplomacy and, if all else fails, the hope that the U.S. will come to the rescue with military support. With the Democrats now running Congress, Costa Rica cannot be assured that the U.S. will react quickly and decisively to a threat from Nicaragua — even though Ticos eminently deserve both U.S. and Canadian protection.

To the south, is General Noriega's Panama. I have been told by the highest sources here that Noriega is truly up to his gold-braided hat in illicit activities. For once, the North American press has not exaggerated. Panama is growing increasingly shaky. Noriega could be overthrown in the near future — most likely by a coup from the national guard. But the result might also be another Sandinista-style regime, backed by Cuba. Or a right-wing regime.

Costa Rica has the region's only democracy — a genuine, full-blooded democracy based on a solid foundation of free enterprise and respect for law. As such, Costa Rica is a constant challenge and affront to Nicaragua and Cuba, both of which, all the fancy romantic rhetoric aside, are no more than military-police state dictatorships.

Costa Rica also shows up Latin America's other democracies like funny-money Argentina, quasi ones like Brazil, and phony ones like Mexico.

Not surprisingly, Cuba's Castro and Nicaragua's rulers, the Ortega brothers, hate Costa Rica. This is a fact not lost on people here.

While nervously watching its troubled neighbors, Costa Rica will go on being the Switzerland of Central America — as it is routinely called by every guide book. Like Switzerland, Costa Rica is beautiful, clean, prudent and democratic. Unlike the Swiss, however, the Ticos are friendly and fun. They have managed just the right balance of European decorum and Latin hot pepper.

Punch

