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The Land and the People

Costa Ricans are proud of their special country. In 1949 it became the first in the mainland Americas to abolish its army—a fact that many Ticos, as Costa Ricans call themselves, attribute to their tendency to settle disagreements peacefully through dialogue and compromise. They boast of 93 percent literacy and, when they had an army, liked to tell visitors, “We have more teachers than soldiers.” Their life expectancy is the highest in Latin America thanks to years of government spending on clean piped water, vaccinations, nutrition, and health education as well as to a health insurance program that covers almost everyone.

For half a century Costa Rica’s presidents have come to office through honest elections. The incumbent party rarely wins—largely a consequence of Ticos’ reluctance to let any one person, party, or other group become too powerful.

Costa Rica’s long history of peace, stability, and emphasis on education has attracted numerous foreign investors. This reputation, along with the country’s great natural beauty, also attracts over half a million tourists each year. Those who stay for more than a few weeks will find that much of its reputation is well deserved. They may also learn about the country’s problems, for Ticos do not hesitate to complain as well as boast to a trusted listener.

The third smallest country in the mainland Americas, Costa Rica has an area of 51,000 square kilometers (20,000 square miles), or twice the size of Vermont. It is located in the narrow isthmus of southern Central America between Nicaragua and Panama. Its maximum length from northwest to southeast is 484 kilometers; its minimum width from the Pacific Ocean to the Caribbean Sea, 119 kilometers.

Despite its small size, Costa Rica has an enormous range of topography and climates. Though it lies only ten degrees north of the equator, temperatures vary greatly from sultry lowlands to cold mountaintops. Rainfall and humidity vary with nearness to the coasts as well as altitude and the direction
of prevailing winds. These climatic variations help explain the great diversity of Costa Rica's flora and fauna. So does its "strategic position near the junction of two great continents, biologically quite different, from each of which it has received large contributions."

Mountain ranges run the length of the country like a backbone. One volcanic range, the Cordillera de Guanacaste, begins in the Northwest near Nicaragua and connects with another, the Cordillera de Tilarán. This range runs southeastward and meets the volcanic Cordillera Central, which ends near the center of the country. Five of the 112 volcanoes in these ranges were active in 1998. A higher nonvolcanic range, the Cordillera de Talamanca, runs from the country's center to its southeastern border and on into Panama and Colombia. Much of it is still covered with virgin cloud forests of live oaks up to 600 years old. Its highest parts, treeless, tundra-like paramo, have frost but no snow.

As in all of Central America, the Caribbean slope (or Atlantic slope, as Ticos call it) is mostly gradual and gentle, the Pacific slope mostly steep and hilly. In the Northeast near the Caribbean and in the southwestern lowlands are some of the primary forests that still cover about a quarter of the country's area despite extensive clearing for pasture and farming. A few patches of tropical dry forest remain on hills in the Northwest; there are also flat areas covered with great expanses of cotton and dry rice fields and cattle pasture—forested until a century ago.

Two out of three Ticos live in the Valle Central, or Central Valley; they are especially concentrated in the relatively flat Meseta Central, or Central Plateau. The Central Valley is formed where the two chief mountain ranges, the Cordillera Central and the Cordillera de Talamanca, nearly meet. Altitudes on the valley floors range from about 600 to 1,500 meters.

The Valle Central is not, strictly speaking, a valley any more than the Meseta Central is a plateau, but both terms are traditional and, in everyday speech, interchangeable. The Meseta is actually two small sections of the Central Valley roughly between Alajuela on the western side of the mountains and Cartago to the east. In and near the Central Valley, as well as in the valley of El General to the southeast, the rugged and fragmented terrain strongly affects who interacts with whom. The slopes are a patchwork of forest, cropland, and pasture; the lush green valleys are laced with streams.

Located at the juncture of two tectonic plates, Costa Rica experiences frequent earth tremors, which range from imperceptible shivers through sacudidos (shakings-up) and temblores (tremblings) to full-blown terremotos (serious quakes). Although the National University's seismograph detected 1,000 tremors in 1991, residents felt very few; only one was a terremoto it caused serious damage along the Caribbean coast.

Weather varies with altitude, time of year, and exposure to ocean winds. Daytime temperatures in the Central Valley range from 60° to 85°F, averaging about 75° (23°C), and tourism promoters rhapsodize about "the land of ever-
nal spring.” But it is sometimes so chilly, especially in the evening, that sweaters and blankets are welcome.

Costa Rica has a modified version of a monsoon climate. In most regions there are two fairly distinct seasons, called invierno and verano, whose usual English translations as “winter” and “summer” are misleading. Rainfall varies greatly from the constantly humid Caribbean slopes to Guanacaste with its long and severe dry season. In much of the country invierno, the rainy season, lasts from May to November. Sunny mornings are usually followed by overcast skies and a brief downpour, or perhaps by a thunderstorm or rain that may continue all afternoon.

About mid-November strong north winds usher in the dry verano for the Central Valley and the Pacific slope but bring more rainy spells to the Caribbean side of the mountain watershed. Most wooded areas stay green all year, but during verano pastures turn brown, dust blows from fields and dirt roads in central and western Costa Rica, and smoke fills the air as farmers burn stubble and brush. Although many prefer the dry season, during its final warm months they grow as eager for the first downpour as the parakeets flying overhead in screeching flocks—pleading, say the Ticos, for the rains to begin.

Rain is so much a part of Costa Rican life that Ticos use at least eight words to distinguish various types, from pelo de gato (misty “cat’s fur”) and garua (drizzle) to an aguacero (downpour) and a temporal (steady rain lasting several days, most common in September and October). Rain replenishes the water supply, irrigates crops, feeds the rivers that supply hydroelectric energy and in a few areas are the only travel routes, and frequently results in destructive flooding.

Costa Rica has long been a botanist’s paradise. There are more varieties of plants in this tiny land than in all of the United States east of the Mississippi; over 1,500 distinct species of trees and over 6,000 kinds of flowering plants, including 1,000 species of orchids. Animal life is also profuse. Some 830 species of birds have been identified, more than in all of North America north of Mexico. The National Biodiversity Institute estimates that Costa Rica is home to 350,000 species of insects. Acre for acre the lowland rain forests support a greater variety of animal and vegetable life than any other area of the earth’s surface.

Naturalists lament that Costa Rica is no longer the paradise of a few decades ago. Nearly a third of the nation’s territory is protected—at least on paper—in public and private parks and reserves. But many forests have been reduced to shreds and patches; giant trees have been felled and burned to make pasture and banana plantations; and in hilly areas, soil erosion has soon followed. Bird and animal populations have dwindled along with their shelter. Twenty-six species of animals were on the endangered list in 1996. During the 1980s one species, the famous golden toad of Monteverde’s cloud forests, vanished from the area and is now reportedly extinct.

Destruction of much of the land’s original beauty and ecological balance is only one of many problems Costa Rica shares with other so-called third world countries. Arable land is inequitably distributed and inefficiently used. The population grows faster than economic resources, and this growth places a tremendous strain on the environment. Despite a much lower birth rate than that of most developing countries, Costa Rica tripled in population between 1950 and 1985 thanks to a sharply falling infant mortality rate and by 1998 had 3.5 million inhabitants.

Like many of its neighbors, Costa Rica long depended on world markets for a few agricultural products (chiefly coffee and bananas) and has had little power to influence the terms of that trade. Like them, Costa Rica piled up huge foreign debts by defaulting on soft loans from international financial organizations. And like them, soon after a world economic crisis became acute in 1980, it had to bow to the dictates of these creditors to save its credit rating and remain eligible for further loans.

The budget cuts and reforms demanded by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Inter-American Development Bank have been wrenching and controversial. On the one hand, the economic growth rate climbed steadily for some years, thanks in part to the wider variety of exports demanded by these lenders. On the other hand, the wealthiest 10 percent have benefited most from this growth. Cutbacks have been deepest in health, education, and welfare programs.

Although many Ticos now complain of pervasive unease and anxiety, Costa Rica is still noted for its remarkable stability. It is a peace-loving nation with honest elections and a comparatively high quality of life. This stability is often attributed to the relative cultural homogeneity of its people.

Since 1990, when the United Nations began to compare more than 150 nations by various human development indices, Costa Rica has ranked consistently high. In 1995 it was judged to have the highest quality of life in Latin America and ranked twenty-eighth in the world in terms of life expectancy at birth (seventy-eight years for women, seventy-four for men), educational level, and real per capita income.

In comparison with most other Latin Americans, the majority of Costa Ricans are physically and culturally very much alike. Most are descendants of both Spanish colonists and indigenous peoples; many also have some African ancestry. Most would be called mestizos in, say, Mexico. But few Ticos use this or any other term that acknowledges their mixed ancestry; most see themselves as white.

Regardless of social class and other differences, such as the greater extraversion of lowlanders compared to their Central Valley cousins, most Ticos share similar ways of thinking, acting, and feeling. Roman Catholicism is the official religion and, to varying degrees, that of eight Ticos out of ten. Although the Roman Catholic Church enjoys a constitutional position as the
state religion, the Catholic majority is proud of its lack of fanaticism. Almost everyone speaks a non-Castilian Spanish rich in archaic expressions and words as well as words adopted long ago from the various Indian languages.

The capital, San José, and the national government dominate almost all aspects of life even in remote areas: education, health services, the mass media, political administration, religion, the fine arts, provisions for water and electricity, and commerce. This centralization also fosters homogeneity.

But the boundaries of Costa Rica have never been closed to outside influences. Since the early nineteenth century, people of many nationalities have come as immigrants or permanent residents—particularly Chinese, West Indians, Nicaraguans, Germans, and Italians. From 1870 to 1920, between 20 and 25 percent of the population growth could be attributed to immigration; after 1920 its effect was minor. Then in the 1980s many thousands of refugees from Nicaragua and El Salvador entered Costa Rica, and many have remained.

When we refer to “Ticos” or “most Ticos,” we generally have in mind the politically and culturally dominant mestizo (in Ticos’ own eyes, white) majority. Ticos of all classes, political parties, and regions share a sense of national identity. They believe they have a unique way of life and a distinctive national character. They may explain an action by saying, “We Latinos are like that” but are far likelier to say, “We Ticos are like that.” They feel set apart from (and superior to) their Central American neighbors not only because of the lighter skin of the average Costa Rican but also because of cultural differences. They often say something is muy tico—very Costa Rican—and assert proudly, “I’m as Tico as gallo pinto,” referring to a favorite dish of rice and beans. They constantly measure proposed—or even accomplished—changes according to how well they fit their “idiosyncrasy” and “the national reality.” Decisions must be made “a la tica.” This means, above all, that they must not violate their most cherished values: democracy, peace, the family, and education.

Surrounded as they have been by military dictatorships, Ticos are keenly aware of and apprehensive of threats to their democratic tradition. They often mention freedom as their greatest blessing. They also profess the essential equality and dignity of all human beings. Ticos loathe arrogance and expect people in high places to act humilde (humble). A public speaker citing his own accomplishments may refer to himself as “this servant” rather than “I.” There is an easy give-and-take between boss and employee. Except when the occasion clearly calls for coat and tie, presidents typically go about in sports clothes or shirtsleeves and are addressed by their first names or nicknames, preceded by the respectful title don.

The values of liberty, dignity, and equality include an insistence that Costa Rica, though small, is a sovereign nation with the right to make its own decisions. Ticos express great concern for the nation’s image abroad. They were exuberant when President Oscar Arias won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987 for his efforts to promote peace in Central America and when the Costa Rican soccer team defeated Scotland in the 1990 World Cup. When swimmers Sylvia and Claudia Pelli won Olympic and other international medals and when Costa Rican-born astronaut Franklin Chang makes still another space flight, Ticos no longer feel that they live in a forgotten backwater.

Costa Ricans have long considered their country a peaceful haven in a violent world. They speak of their Nicaraguan neighbors as prone to violence and boast that even today their own president can mingle freely with a crowd. School children rather than soldiers parade on patriotic holidays and line the streets to welcome visiting dignitaries.

The constitution declares that the family is the natural base of the society and it is the duty of the state to give it special protection. Most Ticos prize family ties, and many confine intimate friendship to relatives.

Costa Ricans see formal education not only as the best means of achieving material progress but also as a condition of democracy. Framed school diplomas adorn humble homes, and parents urge children to show visitors their school notebooks. University graduates with professional degrees often introduce themselves by using their own graduate titles and address others by their titles. Many Ticos distinguish, however, between formal training in skills and knowledge on the one hand and actual behavior on the other. They consider a rude or graceless person mal educado no matter how much schooling he or she may have had.

These dominant values guide behavior. The value of peace, for example, is expressed in various ways. Raised voices are seldom heard, fights rarely seen, and Ticos will nod or say “sí” even when they don’t mean it simply to avoid conflict. Few Ticos express great hatreds or passions. Anthropologist María Bozzoli considers her typical compatriot a fence-sitter. “He says, ‘Quién sabe?’ (Who knows?), ‘Tal vez’ (Maybe), ‘Mas o menos’ (More or less). He doesn’t want to commit himself.” Playwright Melvin Méndez agrees: “People in other countries can be categorical. Not Ticos. We beat around the bush to avoid saying ‘No,’ a syllable which seems almost rude to us, and rather than hurt someone, we say one thing and do another.” A young Cuban immigrant comments, “Ticos are so polite, but rarely open or sincere.”

This sí pero no (yes but no) attitude allows Ticos to find ways out of difficult situations by means of compromise. Decisionmaking a la tica means constant bargaining in an effort to avoid conflict, even though the problem may not really be resolved. Decisions are postponed indefinitely and, once made, may never be implemented. Some Ticos scorn this behavior as palangrear, evoking an image of riding the waves unsteadily in a palangana, or boat, tilting from side to side, getting nowhere. Others call it achieving consensus.
The saying "Each in his own house and God in all" indicates the high value Ticos place on convivencia or peaceful coexistence. They often refer to their nation as a family. In their relations with others, Ticos want above all to quedaro bien (pronounced kay-DAR bee-EN), to get along and make a good impression in an encounter, to appear amiable. Their use of diminutives is often an attempt to quedaro bien by expressing affection or softening a word or assertion. "I will get your factura [little bill]," says a salesperson. The desire to quedaro bien often wins out over other values, such as keeping one's word. (A university professor told us, "You North Americans are insulted when someone calls you a liar. We Ticos are not.") It is easier to promise to do something ahora (in a little while) or mañana and thus avoid possible friction at the moment than it is to tell someone that it cannot be done soon or perhaps ever.

The masked gunmen who trapped Supreme Court magistrates in the court building for several days in 1993, demanding ransom, were assumed at first to be Colombians involved in narcotics traffic. When their behavior betrayed them to be Ticos, wrote Dery Dyer, editor of the Ticoy Times,

"we suspected the jig would soon be up... It's one thing to be up against an unknown, unpredictable menace represented by anonymous masked men of undetermined nationality; it's quite another when you know you're dealing with a couple of mafias [ordinary guys] from Tres Ríos... Costa Rican cultural idiiosyncrasias is so strong, it... supplied the government with its most powerful weapon to use against them. Once unmasked, [the kidnappers] de-flated like leaky balloons, reverting almost immediately to their Tico selves..."

The members of the "Death Commando" were real terrorists as long as nobody knew who they were. Once their identities were revealed... the kidnappers found themselves facing the dreaded disapproval of family, friends and countrymen. They wrote a letter pleading for understanding: Guillerme, they explained, was desperate to get a liver transplant he believed he needed, but they would never have hurt their hostages. They pleaded for their families', friends' and society's forgiveness and apparently felt they had regained the right to re-enter its loving embrace: outcasts no longer, they were Ticos among Ticos, civilized, peaceful and gentlemanly. So thoroughly had they slipped back from terrorist into Tico mode that they ended up trustingly laying down their weapons and walking wide-eyed into a police trap.

And how did they acquire those weapons? By convincing the local police chief—a friend and neighbor—that they wanted to practice target shooting and maybe do a bit of hunting. If it occurred to the police officer that the guns they asked for were a bit heavy, he handed them over anyway—because he, too, wanted to quedaro bien.

Rituals such as the proper ways of greeting and leave-taking govern much interaction. Men shake hands, pat shoulders, and perhaps embrace; women, or a man and a woman, embrace and pat shoulders, perhaps touch cheeks and kiss the air. They ask after one's health and that of the entire family. Similar queries and salutations begin and end phone conversations.

There is something specific to say in almost every situation. Upon first seeing another member of the household in the day, the standard question is "¿Cómo amaneció?" (How did you awaken?) and the standard reply—even when untrue—is "Bien, por dicha" (Well, fortunately). The visitor approaching an isolated rural house shouts "Upe!" from a distance. Upon entering a house, the visitor asks permission—"Con permiso." Whether leaving for Miami or the supermarket, one is wished a good journey accompanied by God. Flowery language and compliments are common even in business letters. (When Richard wrote a letter to a University of Costa Rica dean requesting a library card, a Tico friend, finding it overly curt, rewrote it with the proper compliments, thus tripling its length.) These rituals ease interaction and give Ticos their reputation for politeness and friendliness.

Properly followed, social rituals take time. In Costa Rica, time takes a backseat to courtesy and enjoyment. Despite the clockbound programming of TV programs, school sessions, and working hours, many Ticos still have a rural sense of time.

Emphasis on dignity and courtesy often takes the form of saving face for others as well as oneself. Ticos rarely accept blame for mistakes and usually take care not to embarrass others, especially in public.5

Though fond of jokes about national shortcomings, Ticos very seldom tell jokes on themselves as individuals. They are delicaos—easily offended. The criminal code provides a prison sentence of ten to fifty days for one who by word or deed offends a person's "dignity or honor." Face-saving is so important that the sentence is far heavier if the slander is committed in public.

When one Costa Rican feels insulted by another, the desires for face-saving and for peaceful coexistence may be at odds. Fifty years ago, a man might have challenged the offender to a duel—with fists, not guns or swords—on a date months in the future. "By the appointed time," says a small-town dentist, "temper would have long since cooled, and the two would meet and shake hands. If both simply showed up, the honor of both was preserved." In today's rapidly changing society, customary solutions to such dilemmas are fewer.

A Swiss-born psychologist sees his adopted country as underdeveloped not solely because of dependency and exploitation by richer and more powerful countries but also because of the prevailing "culture of the pobrecito" (the poor little thing). In this paternalistic culture, says Pierre Thomas Claudet, people seldom develop assertive, autonomous personalities. They are pitied much like helpless children simply because they are expected to accept responsibility and cope with the normal problems of life. In many conversations one hears the word pobrecito applied
whether the person is sick, pregnant, hung over, suffering unrequited love, tired, working at a job, studying . . . or because this person must study, work, get up early, walk, cook, take an exam, do a task; or because he or she got a bad grade, was punished, was scolded. . . . Not only is the person a po-brecito but also salado (unlucky) because he didn’t get away with ignoring the rules; he is caught copying, fined for driving drunk, got the current cut off for not paying the electric bill, arrived late, overslept, lost a job, had to do extra work.

[People brought up in the culture of paternalism and commiseration] are invited to perceive themselves and others as “victims” of their situations, duties and obligations. Furthermore, this phenomenon serves as a shield to justify not assuming the responsibility and discipline of vital personal, family, social and work situations.6

Claudet may be too sweeping in his judgments; nonetheless the term po-brecito is often used in much the way he describes it, as we saw in the story of the Supreme Court kidnapping. When we confronted an attorney who had defrauded us, he told us that his judgment had been impaired by a recently discovered brain tumor. Another attorney to whom we mentioned this howled with laughter. “That’s a classic excuse—that and ‘My mother is dying.’ He wants you to think he’s a po-brecito.”

Ticos greatly value individual liberty. Some note a “negative attitude toward all forms of association and collective enterprise” except for the circumspect aspect of politics and the similarly superficial emotions aroused by soccer. And even so, “the Tico is such an individualist that he plays soccer only by a miracle.”3 Individualism, say social critics, often means selfish concentration on personal and family affairs and an unwillingness to cooperate or to sacrifice for the common good. In recent years the phrase “Mmmmmimporta a mi” has entered common parlance. “What does it matter to me?” shrugs off responsibility and justifies lack of involvement. A strong strain of resistance to law goes along with the belief in individual liberty. This tendency is especially evident on streets and highways. Anonymous behind the wheel, free of pressure to quedar bien, many Ticos drive recklessly, both fatalistic and confident that they can get away with breaking laws. Either padrinos (patrons in high positions) or a charming smile will work, especially if one is clearly of high social standing. Traffic cops, many hope, can also be bribed to overlook infractions.

One of the strongest social controls among Costa Ricans is fear of what others will say. They are quick to gossip about others, especially if they are different in some respect, but are afraid to become subjects of gossip. It is safer, therefore, not to make friends because your confidences may be repeated. Signs in some public buildings ask people to avoid malicious gossip; clergymen preach against it.

Choteo—mockery—keeps people in line without confrontation or violence. “We don’t chop off a person’s head,” Ticos say; “we lower the floor he is standing on.” Cartoons often depict a smiling speaker quite unaware that a saw is cutting a circle around his feet and that any moment his pride will suffer a fall. Young men ridicule others’ blunders with choruses of falsetto hooting.

Choteo ranges from friendly irony to rancorous attacks. If it is done with humor it is very effective and may even be appreciated by its targets. It may also discourage ambition and imagination. Costa Ricans, say some social critics, want to keep everyone on the same mediocre level; they envy someone who excels and pity anyone who falls below the common level as a po-brecito.

Along with conformity go conservatism and caution. Not only are Ticos reluctant to accept change but they are suspicious of large-scale organized planning. Columnist Julio Rodríguez often writes that doing things a la tica means “little by little, now and then, and half way.”

Such conformity and conservatism are supported by fatalism. Many Ticos believe they must be resigned to the will of God and habitually add the phrase “si Dios quiere” (God willing) to any mention of plans, even something as simple as “I’ll see you tomorrow.” Death, they believe, comes only at the preordained moment, and therefore one must be accepting and resigned.

One is born either lucky or unlucky. But one can help one’s luck by making the right connections—with God and the saints through prayer, with good witches who help thwart evil doers, and especially with relatives and “godfathers” who have wealth or political clout. In a small society where “everyone is everyone else’s cousin,” personal contacts are often more important than merit.

Costa Ricans tend to be formalistic and legalistic as well as conservative. They pass laws, create agencies and institutes, and hold meetings and symposiums to “solve” problems—often only symbolically. “Saying is more important than doing, announcing than acting,” says writer Carmen Narango.6

Although these generalizations about Costa Ricans are subject to many qualifications and exceptions, we see these common values and norms reflected in such institutions as the family, education, government, and religion, as well as in the class system.

Many deep-seated cultural patterns clash with what some Ticos see as the traits of a developed society. In the minds of other, more tradition-oriented Ticos, moral and spiritual values are eroding as cars, VCRs, and trips to Disney World become the measures of people’s worth. Individualism and liberty, they add, are threatened by the tyranny of the job and the clock. (Hora tu tu means perhaps an hour or two after the appointed time; hora americana or hora exacta means punctually.) Some observers also see a far greater emphasis on work, planning, and enterprise, especially among the middle class, since the 1940s. And cooperation is evident in many associations and community projects as well as in the growth of arts demanding teamwork such as
dance, symphonic music, and theater. As the society grows more complex and new subcultures emerge, old social rituals no longer apply in many situations, and confusion and anxiety follow.

Despite all the changes of the past half-century, numerous observations made in the 1940s—and even in the 1850s—still apply today. In Chapter 2 we discuss the origins of today’s Costa Rican society and culture, tracing both changes and continuities with the past.

Notes


2. Familiar with both Arabic and Costa Rican cultures, Arabist Margaret K. Nydell described their many similarities to us (personal communications, 1984–1986). Many colonists came to Costa Rica from southern Spain, dominated by Arabs for centuries. Among the common values of the two cultures are emphasis on dignity, honor, and reputation; the desire to create a good impression on others; loyalty to one’s family; dislike of solitude; sensitivity to criticism; the tradition of personal appeal to authorities for exceptions to rules; and fatalism. See her Understanding Arabs: A Guide for Westerners, 2nd ed. (Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, 1997).


