

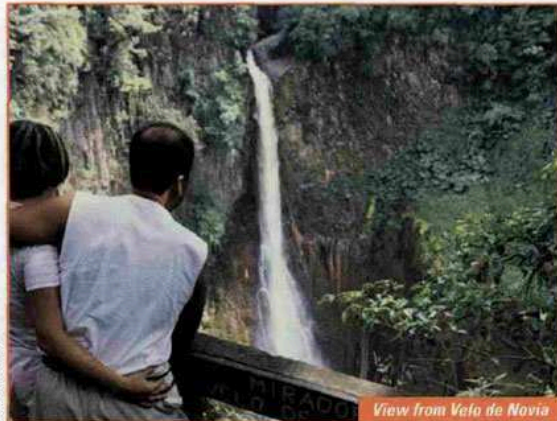
SOUTH & CENTRAL AMERICA

Costa Rica's Natural Wealth

By Dannielle Hayes

Columbus and the Spanish Conquistadors who followed him were seeking gold on this "rich coast," but Costa Rica's real wealth lies in the richness of its volcanoes, its beaches and its rainforests. Now the country is dependent on its sustainable tourism practices to protect all this natural wealth. At the May EXPOTUR Travel Market in San Jose, Costa Rica's Minister of Tourism, Carlos Ricardo Benavides, put it very simply: "Sustainability is an obligation for all of us on this planet." For travel agents and tour operators selling Costa Rica, this is an urgent responsibility not only to their clients, but also to the whole travel industry.

In 1995, the Costa Rica Tourism Board set up the Certificate of Sustainable Tourism or CST (www.sustainable-tourism.co.cr). A voluntary accreditation program open to lodgings, tour operators, airlines and car rental agencies within Costa Rica, the CST works on a 0-5 green leaf system, the 5 green leaves status being the model of sustainability.



"The CST guidelines are very strict", said Glenn Jampol, President of the National Ecotourism Society or Camara Nacional de Ecoturismo (CANAECO). Glenn was on the original committee that set up the CST guidelines and was in New York City in May to accept an award from the Rainforest Alliance, (www.rainforest-alliance.org). "Every set of questions, and there are about 1,000 of them, have to be backed up by evidence," continued Jampol in a private interview. "Our guests evaluate their experience during their stay and now 12-15% choose sustainability as the most important element of their trip. Sustainability is about saving money too, and that's good business. Our goal at the National Ecotourism Society is that we won't need the society anymore, because everything will be sustainable".

Glenn and his wife Teresa Jampol own two of Costa Rica's top sustainable properties, namely the Finca Rosa Blanca Coffee Plantation and Country Inn and the new Arenas del Mar Beach and Nature Resort (www.arenasdelmar.com). The Finca Rosa Blanca (www.fincarosablanca.com) is just 20 minutes from San Jose's International Airport above the Central Valley and one of the country's most exclusive hideaways. Surrounded by 30 acres of an organic coffee plantation, this beautiful boutique property focuses on coffee culture, comfort, art and design. The Inn offers 13 elegant suites, a restaurant and bar with magnificent views, a full-service spa, an infinity chemical-free swimming pool and Jacuzzi hot tub. Guests enjoy touring the coffee plantation as well as guided volcano tours, bird watching, nature walks and horseback riding. Finca Rosa Blanca continues to achieve the highest 5 leaves CST status.

The Arenas del Mar Beach and Nature Resort on the central Pacific coast of Costa Rica is the first hotel to be built according to the strict CST standards. This stunning 38-room resort with spectacular views of the Manuel Antonio National Park is nestled in eleven acres of rainforest above two tree-shaded white sand beaches. The resort's guest rooms, apartments and suites, two elegant restaurants, two fresh-water swimming pools and spa, all share incredible views of the ocean and National Park. A perfect model of sustainability, the Arenas del Mar scores 5 leaves.

Lapa Rios Eco-Lodge (www.laparos.com) on the beautiful Osa Peninsula (soon to be named a UNESCO World Heritage Site) is another excellent green choice. Lapa Rios is an upscale 16-bungalow eco-lodge protecting over 1,000 acres of preserved rainforest prized for its biodiversity. The 60-plus staff



members are from the local isolated area, and environmental education is fundamental to the employees and international guests' experiences. The development of the local primary school is mostly funded by the lodge's Traveler's Philanthropic outreach. Consistently voted one of Latin America's top resorts, Lapa Rios has the full 5 leaves CST status.

ICT has also been encouraging the reclamation of rural areas that had been cleared years ago for cattle and dairy farms. A good example of this is Rancho Margot (fsostheim@ranchomargot.org) started about 6 years ago by Juan Sostheim and his family. "It was 400 acres with no trees, but I saw it for what it could be," said Sostheim, a former chemist. "My goal was to create a self-sufficient ranch integral to the community. With education, tourism and production we work with students and tourists to experience agro-tourism in a sustainable way. We produce our own energy using bio-digesters and we use kitchen waste oil to make soaps and bio-diesel fuel. We also have an extensive Spanish language program and yoga teacher training. We are totally sustainable."

Another successful family-run sustainable property is the beautiful **Savegre Hotel, Natural Reserve and Spa** (www.savegre.co.cr) on the slopes of San Gerardo de Dota, in the Talamanca Mountains. Owner Efran Chacon first saw the property in the late 1950's when he was hunting tapir with his brother in the primary tropical cloud forest. From a simple family farm, the Savegre has grown to a five-star property with a 4 leaves CST status. The Savegre offers 20 suite rooms and 20 standard rooms surrounded by lush gardens, a restaurant specializing in fresh-caught Savegre River trout, a bar and café with internet and the lovely new Rio Spa. The Savegre's 1,000-acre Private Reserve property is neighbor to Los Quetzales National Park, Costa Rica's newest and the best place to sight the Resplendent Quetzale. (Call 866-549-1178).

There are a number of tour operators that have gained top CST status, namely **Actuar Rural Adventures**, **Horizontes Nature Tours** and **Simbiosis Tours**. Actuar (www.actuarcostarica.com) helps travelers plan adventurous, enjoyable and educational trips with sustainable, safe and friendly tourism businesses. Horizontes (www.horizontes.com) has been designing travel programs to Costa Rica's biodiversity-rich destinations since 1984, including tours to see the Bri-Bri Indigenous people. Simbiosis Tours (www.turismoruralcr.com) specializes in sustainable rural tourism.

Both of the country's domestic airlines, **Nature Air** (www.natureair.com) and **SANSA** (www.flysansa.com) are carbon neutral and use bio-diesel fuel in their trucks. Nature Air along with the Rainforest Alliance helps provide information on eco-friendly lodgings for conservation-minded travelers. (www.eco-indextourism.org)

Costa Rica has just announced a joint effort with France, the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), the **United Nations World Tourism Organization** (UNWTO) and other U.N. agencies, the creation of the U.N. Global Partnership for Sustainable Tourism. This organization has been formed to help governments and businesses make all tourism, everywhere, become more environmentally, socially and economically sustainable.

For more information visit the **Costa Rica Tourism Board** at www.visitcostarica.com