

## Letter From Costa Rica

by Geoffrey Wagner

### America in Spanish?

American Airlines flies you down to San José daily, all announcements in English. Indeed, almost everyone in the Costa Rican capital seems able to speak excellent English, prompting the irony of local kids all studying the language hard, to be impeded from practicing it should they reach compulsorily bilingual schools in America. As a matter of fact, on Costa Rica's Caribbean coast, or Wild East as it has been called, a Jamaican patois still exists, relic of past importations from the British West Indies. Payment in dollars is ubiquitous. The day's *Miami Herald* lies on one's breakfast table and Dan Rather's latest toupee invades one's evening room. CNN runs around the clock and Larry King comes on earlier than Stateside. Hotel Cable Guide introduces one to Donald Duck, Danahue, Whell of Fortune, and Cober Girl (all *sic*). It is hardly Costa Rica's fault that it's impossible to close one's eyes and ears today to the Pax Americana. The recent tourist influx is almost entirely American, but in the Northeast I crossed via the Puntarenas ferry to the Nicoyan peninsula and saw not a single tourist, either on the ferry or in the three remotely placed hotels I visited there.

In any case, there is no evidence that Costa Ricans want to change the stance symbolized by Oscar Arias, who left office hailed as a moral beacon, architect of a peace plan signed by Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, in all of which there are bellicose antidemocratic elements. "In Europe they're shooting dictators," Arias is reported to have said. "Here we're trying to replace them through elections."

Bordering Nicaragua, Costa Rica has been living on the lip of one of the most brutal Marxist dictatorships of the

region, one that may not have played itself out as yet. Everything about the country, from its charming capital to its black enclaves, seems to suggest: we are part of Western culture and wish to remain so. We are on the side of all that Jesse Jackson wants to tear down. There are no Aztec or Mayan remains, no sense of an Indian terror-past to take forward revolutionary pretensions, as in Mexico. For the native originals—the Borucas and Corobicís—do not seem to have been as brutal as their Carib colleagues, and Columbus, when he landed in 1502, established friendly relations with the indigenes; at least Spanish subjugations appear to have been relatively benign, since they regarded the place as an impoverished backwater, and the first governor Spain appointed, Juan Vasquez de Coronado, established what has been termed the most humane colonization in the region. So there are no Diego Rivera murals around, nor museums full of slave chains, and Costa Rica has now created an international presence as a sturdy democracy, a model to its neighbors who send across their criminals and politicians. *Floreat*.

The result has been that Americans are flocking to this prosperous tourist haven and retirement center. The country's spread of protected wildlife parks, and official emphasis on ecology, have coincided with American interests and brought in a Mom-and-Pop tourism of the better kind. I was repeatedly in awe of the tenacity of our senior citizens on such tours, up at 5 A.M. to follow rare bird and animal trails, to bed down later in some primitive jungle lodge for more of the same in an open boat the next morning. After some turtle watching at Tortuguero, not far from the Nicaraguan border, I said goodbye to an American lady of nearly 80 who was spurning the normal mode of access to the park, by Piper plane, and taking an eight-hour ride down to Limón in a boat like the *African Queen*. I was brought up to respect British travelers of this ilk, from Freya Stark to Rose Macaulay (who once waded round the border into

Yugoslavia); Aldous Huxley's treks across Guatemala showed extraordinary fortitude in a half-blind man, while Evelyn Waugh's penurious journey on horseback from Iquitos down the banks of the Amazon amazes me today. But possibly the scepter has passed to America in this domain. More than one septugenarian Mrs. Front Porch I met went on four such grueling tours a year.

As for retirees, so valuable to a restricted economy, Costa Rica has captured ours in abundance thanks not only to political and social stability, but also to the high standards of medical and dental services, so vital to the oldster. I suspect it is not widely known that American union and pension groups and the like constantly case out, via scouting committees, foreign countries as well as our own States for their congeniality to retirees (costs, services, sympathies). My own union has more than one such Chapter, reporting regularly. In these rankings Costa Rica has been rated high, taking the place of Mexico in the past. After all, ecology is apolitical, or should be. It attracts the hippie and the oldster alike. The Greens know no age groups, nor shades.

But, basically, Costa Rica's glory lies in its national parks, their jungles and waterways. The wildlife to be seen is generally small—I never met anyone who had seen the vaunted local jaguar—but no less treasured for that. Monkeys abound, as do iguana and armadillo (called *tatou* in the West Indies where, to my shame, I have eaten all three). It will be a sad day if these centers spawn protection for another sort of animal, the drug addict and gender traitor. It has happened at Panajachel, which has disfigured the glorious shore of Guatemala's Lake Atitlán, and near Quepos, on Costa Rica's Pacific Coast, the magnificent beaches of the Manuel Antonio National Park seem to have attracted the more boorish and contemptuous of our homosexuals, bisexuals, and trisexuals (as in *I'll Try Anything*). Visit the famed Mariposa hotel in the vicinity

for a sample. Apart from such inevitable glitches, however, Costa Rica's tourism thrust is exemplary and commendable. What's the hope that in a few years' time Mom and Pop will be displacing the backpackers to Nicaragua?

*Geoffrey Wagner's latest book is The Red Crab, a novelized version of the Cuban takeover in Grenada.*

## Letter From the Heartland

by Jane Greer

### Highway Robbery



On our Disneyland day, the first time for all of us, we rose at 6 A.M. to be sure to get there early, as we'd been warned to do. We showered, dressed, wolfed a donut in the Comfort Inn lobby, and proceeded to our Hyundai, parked in back.

The right rear window was shattered. The front passenger door was open. Upon first inspection, we discovered that the ignition switch and all of our good hanging clothes were missing.

Most people would have understood immediately that they'd been ripped off.

But we're small-city Midwesterners. And for several seconds, a dozen explanations went through our minds (hit-and-run accident, in-car explosion of a soft-drink can, heat explosion, typhoon) before we were ready to admit even the *possibility* that we'd simply been robbed. (Eighteen hundred dollars' worth, to be precise, and \$350 in damage to the car.)

In fact, in our shock, my husband and I spent a good hour berating ourselves for having been so *stupid*: leaving hanging clothes in the car was an "open invitation," we moaned, as was not parking under a streetlight. It was only on our fifth or sixth time around the subject that he stopped dead in the middle of our delicious little dirge and asked, "What's wrong with this picture? We didn't rob us. Somebody *else* robbed us." Our ten-year-old son nodded in complete agreement.

A friend of mine here in Bismarck

came home to a houseful of muddy shoe prints several months ago. A little while later, her husband phoned. She chewed him out, and then mentioned the window screen he'd removed at noon and clumsily flung into the yard. Finally he got a chance to tell her that he was calling from out of town and hadn't been home all day. Together, it took them five reluctant minutes to figure out that their home had been broken into. If he hadn't called, she would probably have cleaned up the mess without ever attributing it to a stranger. Husbands do inexplicable things all the time, but robberies don't happen every day around here.

Around here, people who speed through residential sections of town can still catch a hoseful of water in the face or run the risk of their license number being recorded. (And if the police are called, they'll actually look into the matter and talk to the culprit.) We don't ordinarily lock our pickups unless our guns are in the rack. Many of us don't even lock our doors at night, or at least don't lose any sleep if we can't remember whether we locked them. We read in "Nubs of the News" once a week about the handful of burglaries that occur. Juvenile crime, around here, amounts to a lot of toilet paper in a lot of trees near Halloween, some loud parties, an occasional stolen bike, and an open container or two as the kids cruise Main.

This is not to say that there's no crime problem in God's country, only that it exists in pockets that it's easy (at least so far) to stay out of. And until I visited Anaheim, home of "The happiest place on earth" (and Disneyland really is all the good things you've read about it), I had been able to stay out of harm's way. I travel to Minneapolis sometimes, and could just as easily have been the victim of someone there, but it was in Anaheim that I lost, so to speak, my virginity.

And the analogy is apt. After the car had been repaired and cleaned, we had to drive it. I told my husband that sitting in it made me feel as if I'd been assaulted. The worst part was that of course we didn't know who had done the foul deed; all day I wondered if they were watching us, laughing. At four that afternoon it occurred to us that they might return. (They had probably been inexperienced kids, the police told us,

because even though Hyundais are easy to steal—which was news to us—and they had tried to steal it, they had botched the job.) At this thought we toyed with the idea of packing up and moving to a different motel. It was after check-out time by then, though, and we didn't feel like packing up and moving, so we simply parked the car near the street under a streetlight. I listened for strange noises all night. What I would have done had I heard them, I don't know. And hour by hour, day by day, we keep discovering things they stole from us, not counting sleep, peace of mind, and innocence.

Yes, innocence—*mine*. It's one thing to read about crime, and another to become part of that murky soup "out there." I'm sure there are very nice people living in dangerous parts of the country who would laugh until they cried to hear me carry on about this one little episode. Our car didn't get stolen, and no one threatened us physically. We were lucky. Well, we know that. But still, those punks had no right to do what they did. *No right*. And I want someone to tell them that. The heck with law enforcement—did their parents know where these kids were?

Thanks to a kind, competent, nearby auto-repair shop manager, we managed to spend most of our day and evening at Disneyland in spite of our bad start that morning. We were so discouraged that we talked about packing it in and just going home, but decided that then the punks would have stolen our vacation along with everything else. My ten-year-old, though, was in a state of disbelief for days. He drove us crazy; the robbery was all he would talk about. I did my best to bend the event into one of those magic "teaching moments" responsible parents dream about but so seldom get, and my efforts paid off. Our concrete-minded son boiled my sage ramblings into something that seemed to satisfy him, and that more than satisfied me: "At night, the good people go to bed and the bad people come out." Robbie, remember that when you're 16 and your mom and dad demand to know why you've been out so late.

*Jane Greer writes from the safety of Bismarck, North Dakota.*