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A Week in a (Sort of) Libertarian Country, Part 2

by Scott McPherson

The Republic of Costa Rica has no army. The country, roughly the size of West Virginia and with a population of around 4 million people (including 50,000 North American expatriates), is proudly neutral. Its constitution dates to 1949, following a brief civil war and adoption of many democratic reforms.

By Latin American standards, Costa Rica is extremely stable and wealthy, with the average annual income around \$9,000. Like our own country, Costa Rica struggles with immigration concerns, as many poor Nicaraguans cross the border in search of work or a free ride on the relatively extensive welfare state.

By 8 A.M. on the second day of our visit, we were in a cab, on our way to the nearby bus terminal to catch public transportation north to La Fortuna, a tourist town near Volcan Arenal, a 7,000-year-old volcano that has exploded twice in recorded history — first in 1968, killing about 80 people, and then again in 1993. We wanted to hike through the Arenal National Park at the base of the volcano, bathe in the thermal springs that run off the mountain, visit the renowned La Fortuna waterfall, and view wildlife in one of Costa Rica's private nature preserves. The ride would take about five hours at a cost of just \$3 each.

The streets and sidewalks of San Jose were already crowded, and I had a chance to see more of Costa Rica's free-enterprise mentality. A couple of middle-aged Ticos were standing next to an old shopping cart full of various types of fruit. They had mounted a juicer on the top and were selling cups of fresh juice to passersby on the sunny streets. It was another beautiful, springlike day, and I felt the tension and excitement of people in search of opportunity ("focus is sharp in the city," Neil Peart wrote 25 years ago).

From San Jose to La Fortuna

The bus terminal was tidy and clean, but the driver suggested keeping a close eye on our bags. We pulled away punctually at 8:40 and wound north out of the city. San Jose is surrounded

by mountains, and we climbed steadily up and away from the city, mesmerized by many beautiful shades of green and the lovely panoramic views.

At a few of the stops, men got on the bus just to sell fruit and water to the passengers and then got off at the next stop, likely to repeat their venture going back the other way. I marveled at this, sad that a deadly combination of liability concerns and overregulation have made this kind of entrepreneurial activity rarely seen in the United States. But people in poor countries tend to have little patience for such obstacles; what they can't ignore they try to work around. Along the way my wife, Charlotte, noticed a distinct Movimiento Libertario (ML) campaign poster in one of the villages — a white flying bird in a red circle.

In La Fortuna, we grabbed lunch in a café (called a “soda”) with an American girl we'd met on the bus. We hadn't made any arrangements for accommodations, so we telephoned where she was staying to see if they had space. The voice that answered was extremely friendly and told me that my wife and I could have a room to ourselves with a private bath for \$30 per night. “I am Miguel,” he said. “I will come to pick you up.”

True to his word, our host was there in 15 minutes and drove us to his place, the Cerro Chato Lodge, just outside town. It was a beautiful piece of ground covered by several small cabins and open-air canopies for taking breakfast in the fresh morning air, all within site of the volcano. A sign at the driveway entrance boasted, “All You Need Is Here.”

We were in the Arenal area for two days, and Miguel proved himself invaluable. He answered our innumerable questions, ran our errands, provided a broad history of the region (he grew up in La Fortuna), made inquiries on our behalf, and even ferried us around to the various tourist sites for a fee considerably less than what we would have paid using the “official” taxi service, stopping regularly to point out rare birds, monkeys, and other wildlife. Here was one of the many hard-working, small businessmen that Otto Guevara and Movimiento Libertario are trying to protect from the government. I was tempted to encourage Miguel to vote ML in the next election, but didn't want to risk arguing politics with the man who made my breakfast.

Our plan was to continue by cheap public transport to a reputed “hippy haven” called Montezuma on the southern tip of the Nicoya Peninsula, where we could lounge on beautiful Pacific beaches for a few days before returning to San Jose and home. Unfortunately, we learned that doing this would mean going all the way back to San Jose that day and catching a bus west the next morning, losing two whole days in the process.

Those with faith in the resilience of supply and demand can see an excellent demonstration in Costa Rica. No sooner had we discovered the limitations inherent in public transport than we were made aware of another growing service in a country increasingly used to dealing with tourists: private transportation. A company called Interbus is running shuttle services all over the country, and offers a direct route from La Fortuna to Montezuma for only \$38 per person.

Heading to Montezuma

We caught the shuttle, a minivan, at 8 A.M. on our fourth day in Costa Rica. Driving into the mountains outside of La Fortuna, we spotted another ML sign. It was three hours to the ferry at Puntarenas, a filthy port city, where we would make a 90-minute crossing to Paquera, and then another 30 minutes by bus to our final destination. We settled in for a long bumpy ride over rough roads.

There were four other people on the bus, two elderly couples traveling together from Switzerland. My wife wanted to practice her German by speaking with the ladies, but I quickly moved up front to talk to the men. Charlotte grinned at me. She knew what I was up to.

For years I've been fascinated by the Swiss militia system, both as a means for national defense and as a cultural expression. While its compulsory feature is inconsistent with libertarian principles, the government is so gun-friendly, actually requiring many citizens to own an assault rifle, that I wanted to talk to someone who had experienced the militia system firsthand.

"Did you serve in the militia?" I asked one of the men, hopefully. It was obvious right away that I'd found a kindred spirit; his eyes lit up when I mentioned the militia. He told me that he had been in the militia for two years when he was injured and discharged, but that one of the highlights of his service was taking part in maneuvers observed by Gen. William Westmoreland. "Was he impressed with your militia?" I asked. "Oh, yes," he said, proudly.

"And many people own guns, just as in the United States?" I inquired. It turned out that he was a competition pistol shooter by hobby. "I have lots of guns," said my new Swiss friend, smiling. "Big, American guns." He spoke fondly of Stephen Halbrook's work on Swiss "armed neutrality," and we spent an hour talking about guns, politics, American foreign policy, and "those people on the Left," as he described them. He criticized those among his countrymen who did not appreciate the militia, preferring instead to depend on professional soldiers and a powerful air force. It was clear that he saw the decline of the militia and attempts to tighten Switzerland's gun laws as signs of cultural decay. "Guns mean freedom," he said, seriously. "A man without a gun is not a man."

I told him that libertarians and conservatives in Virginia were having some success in reversing the trend against guns. Tapping his forehead, he said, "I am an American." Tapping my own forehead, I said, "And I am a Swiss." We had a good laugh and shook hands on that.

What was supposed to be a five-hour trip to Montezuma actually took more than seven hours. We waited for more than an hour in Puntarenas, and the roads south from Paquera were worse than expected. But we made it by half past three and considered ourselves lucky.

We had expected Montezuma to be a tacky tourist hangout full of American surfers, but instead we found a quaint little village full of Canadian and European visitors (the surfers all go to Mal Pais and Santa Teresa). It was a pleasant surprise to see that a large part of the town's

population were Ticos; clearly they weren't giving this place up to us gringos. The businesses looked to be almost exclusively Tico-owned.

We hadn't made any reservations but found a hotel with one room left, but we couldn't understand why the concierge kept laughing the whole time we were registering. We found out that night: right outside our window was the loudest and latest-closing bar in town. All three nights in Montezuma we wouldn't get to bed before 2 A.M. Still, it was nice just to have a place to lock up our belongings.

The weather on the Nicoya Peninsula is superb. During the day it's a balmy 85 degrees and the sun shines bright and hot from 6 A.M. to 6 P.M. The town wakes up at 8 A.M. and maintains the steady buzz of gainful employment. The shops stay open all day and late into the evening, selling souvenirs, groceries, clothes, and Internet access. Vendors line both sides of the two main streets selling cheaper versions of everything found in the stores. Everyone seemed genuinely friendly. People openly smoke marijuana in the streets and routinely offer it for sale. "Don't worry about the police," one local told me. I wasn't worried — I hadn't seen any since we left San Jose.

Three days we were in Montezuma, relaxing on the many beaches, hiking to two waterfalls (and jumping 40 feet from one of them), visiting Cabo Blanco (Costa Rica's first national park, a land-preservation project established to counter the government's earlier, destructive land-clearing project), watching monkeys from a restaurant patio, eating casados (Costa Rica's most typical dish), drinking large amounts of Imperial (Costa Rica's most popular beer), taking late-night strolls, staring at a night sky almost fluorescent in its brightness . . . and generally forgetting that there was a world outside this little piece of paradise.

With heavy hearts, we left on Interbus, the private bus line, to return to San Jose. It was an eight-hour drive. A few miles outside town we saw another ML campaign sign.

Back in San Jose

Back in the city, I was again taken with its steady buzz. After checking into our hotel, we walked 10 minutes to downtown. The evening was cool and clear, and it seemed that all of San Jose's two million residents were out in the streets. The many department stores along Avenida Central were open until 6 P.M., and the pedestrian district was packed with vendors and young people. I was going to miss this place.

"I am absolutely convinced that we will control the government by 2010," Otto Guevara had told me a week before. Perhaps that was only wishful thinking; Costa Ricans are quite proud of their national health service, public-school system, and "eco-friendliness." Taxes are high, political corruption is rampant, crime is terrible (a tourist from our hotel had been mugged at gunpoint the night before), and Costa Ricans have swallowed the gun-control arguments (apparently with as little success as everywhere else).

Yet libertarianism will very likely take root. It's been said that politics follows culture, and the sense of life here is highly consistent with a free-market mindset. "Pura Vida!" they say. It means, literally, "Pure Life."

For Costa Ricans, living pure means living well. Everywhere there are signs of industry and development; the roads are improving, and the cars on them are all new or like new; people wear nice clothes; the stores are stocked with the latest hi-tech appliances; and the government welcomes both foreign and domestic investment. Tourism is now the single largest source of income in Costa Rica, pouring hundreds of millions of dollars a year into the economy. Businesses are expanding to meet demand and taking steps to protect their investments, as evidenced by extensive private security measures.

There is optimism in people's faces and in their actions, and a feeling of possibility is in the air. Change is definitely coming. My prediction is that within a generation this country will be transformed, provided the political environment remains favorable to business, private property, and the rule of law.

I see no reason to believe this won't be the case. Movimiento Libertario's representatives are successfully articulating the message of limited government, entrepreneurialism, and competition, and its policies provide concrete direction for those wishing to live in a freer society. Like America 200 hundred years ago, Costa Rica is brimming with natural resources, cheap labor, and ambition, and its citizens are poised to enjoy the spoils of a capitalist world. Many libertarians are looking north, to New Hampshire, for liberty in our lifetime, but Galt's Gulch might just be in Costa Rica.

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