



COSTA RICA



Arriving in Costa Rica I was both excited and nervous as I didn't speak any word of Spanish. At that time I didn't know that at least during the first week in this country that wouldn't matter!

In San José, the capital city, I first tried to get information about interesting places and bus connections. San José was a lively and maybe not very safe city and I felt that the strange language and the mentality were a little more than I could handle at the beginning.

So I exchanged city life for beach life and travelled to the Pacific coast to spend some days in a village which was said to be still a secret, quiet place with hardly any tourism. Well, it wasn't, at least among US-American surfers it seemed to be quite a well-known place. Of course, the beach was beautiful, the surf was great and I shared my campsite with geckos, iguanas, squirrels and, of course, some Americans. But within a week I hardly heard a word in Spanish and my search for a genuine Costa Rican place was in vain as most pubs and cafés had at least English names and staff.



Guayabo

So I moved on, looking for a truly hidden place which I found in “Guayabo”, a village in the mountains close to the Nicaraguan border. The area was very fertile due to the surrounding volcanoes, and everywhere there were farms or “fincas”, as they are called in Spanish, lush green forests, cattle, sheep and horses. I had been thinking about horse trekking for quite some time and this seemed to be *the* place!

Just off the bus I met some playing children who started asking me questions and I tried to communicate in the little broken Spanish I had achieved until then. After some minutes the mothers of the children who all belonged to one big family joined us and I found myself again having coffee in their garden. Soon I was offered a room in their house which I gratefully rented. Finally at dinner time I met the rest of this huge family, I counted 15 mouths which wanted to be fed. Before eating they said a prayer and I realized that the Spanish conquerors had left their traces in form of religion.

One man called Daniel turned out to be a horse guide and the next morning we left for his finca.

His horses were maybe not real beauties but probably the most skilful animals. They usually lived in the wilderness of the bush, being used to any kind of climate, weather, terrain and dangerous animals. While I was



figuring out how the ropes were transformed into headgear, Daniel was trying to find and catch two horses. My knowledge about riding and horses in general was quite humble but apparently the horses knew exactly what to do. Due to frequent rainfalls, the ground was slippery and the rivers were swollen. There was nothing I could do but develop deep trust in my horse managing the trek. Sometimes it just sat back on its bottom and slid down a hill and it even swam through some rivers we had to cross.

This trip which was actually meant to be a daytrip turned out to be very challenging but none the less entertaining for everybody involved, the horses had to be strong, I forced myself to forget about my sore butt, and the quality of our rainproof clothes was being tested. Thinking about the little children who seemed to grow up on the backs of their horses made me feel respect for those little gauchos. It was raining heavily when we decided to head back and the horses were becoming tired. Finally a stream that had become a big river in the meantime forced us to turn around, ride back the way we had just come and spend the night in a finca of Daniel's friends. Early next morning we rose, happy to see that the rain was giving us a break. Some hours later we came back to Daniel's house where his wife Mery Luz was already waiting, praying for our safe return.

After a week with the family I was invited to accompany them to a wedding and I began to feel like a member of the family. Naturally that also meant that I had to do my share, I took care of the children, helped in the household and learned a lot about Costa Rican cooking. I got along really well with everyone and was happy about my Spanish improving every day.

One day a group of US-missionaries visited Guayabo for two weeks to teach in the schools and help renovate some houses. Mery Luz offered to cook for them and so we ended up having about twenty guests for lunch every day. That meant getting up really early and spend the mornings in the kitchen together with other helpers, being serenaded by a radio channel which played religious pop songs. I usually felt quite exhausted in the afternoons and was looking forward to a *siesta* but got a *fiesta* instead: working didn't spare me from attending church with the family at least two nights a week.

The mass turned out to be a party! The protestant priests, a man and a woman ran around with microphones in their hands, preaching furiously, stirring up the raging community, confirmed by people shouting "Sí, amén! Gracias a Diós!" from time to time. The whole thing went on for three hours; the dramaturgy was really clever and captivating: when the emotions got too high, a band with a female singer started playing songs sounding like a fusion of the European Song Contest and Celine Dion songs. Then everybody calmed down, started to sway slowly with eyes closed until the music reached another climax, while the people were dancing, the younger generations banging their heads. When the celebrations ended finally, everybody went home totally exhausted but happy.



My family owned a café, a "soda" as they called it. In order to escape from the influence of the US missionaries I offered my help there and it was gratefully accepted. I loved my job immediately because the whole scene was far more relaxed than in Mery Luz' kitchen and I offered my guests some examples of the Austrian cuisine, including *Sachertorte*, *Strudel* and *Gefülltes Hendl*. They loved my food, I loved their company and constantly trying to improve my Spanish I could've stayed in Guayabo forever.

But time went by quickly and suddenly I had spent a month in Guayabo. One day I decided to leave for Panama, I had less than two weeks before I should move on to South America. Mery Luz

organized a farewell party for me and we celebrated something like the last supper with music, dances and games and some tears.

PANAMA

As I felt ready to experience a totally different life I went to the Caribbean Coast.

The bus went through endless banana plantations and finally stopped somewhere in the jungle at the border checkpoint. I had to fill in some forms, got a stamp in my passport and then walked across the bridge which connected the two shores of the river Sixaola. In the middle of the bridge there was a sign announcing "Costa Rica - Panamá". I really loved that situation as indeed I physically crossed a border and it felt much better to me than arriving by plane.

Anyway, Panama wasn't different at all; again I had to fill in papers and got a new stamp in my passport, then took another bus and saw more banana plantations.

Eventually we reached the coast and I exchanged the bus for a small boat.

Now I felt like in an "Indiana Jones" – movie, the boat was gliding on small river ways, bush and jungle surrounding us, once I swear I saw a little crocodile. Every now and then small houses made of wood and leaves appeared which were inhabited by families, there were playing children and animals around, laundry was drying on clotheslines in the sun.

I wanted to go to a small island in the province of Bocas del Toro. When I arrived in Bocas, the main village in the area, I couldn't help being disappointed: Bocas seemed to consist of youth hostels and tourist bars only and there were quite many tourists. Lacking a plan, I chose to explore if there was anything of interest and found a diving school. I went in and asked for different information. When I came out again, I had booked two dives for one of the next days and a plan how to go on. Back at the jetty where I had landed I took a taxi boat to a small island called Bastimentos, 15 minutes offshore.



Bastimentos

Bastimentos had everything I was dreaming of: it was a little settlement of mainly fishing men and rastafari, children were playing outside, women sitting on the balconies taking it easy, reggae music everywhere. There were no cars at all, just one dusty road that ended somewhere in the almost inaccessible jungle. I found a nice place to stay and went to look for the beach. In order to get there I had to cross the island via a small path which led over a hill through rainforest. I was surrounded by giant trees, parrots and other exotic birds, watched a woodpecker, heard monkeys, saw the most

beautiful flowers, got to know more fruits and felt like in the Garden Eden. On the other side of the hill the wood got lighter - and there was the beach, *my* beach!

Exploring the beach I met three little boys whose father owned a small pub hidden in the jungle. Talking to them was quite interesting because they spoke a Caribbean dialect which I practically didn't understand. Only the oldest boy who already went to school knew some Spanish and invited me to live on the beach.

Feeling excited and happy I went back to the village and met a young guy who handed out flyers announcing a "full moon" party. Of course I went there because I had always been interested in the reggae culture. I enjoyed the night, loving the music and the dancing, meeting more locals and two other travellers. The next day I packed my backpack again and exchanged my room for the beach. I spent a great time there, relaxing on the beach with a good book while listening to the sound of the waves, going swimming, listening to the never ending reggae, going snorkelling and diving, taking boat trips, hiking through the jungle, enjoying local food and fresh fish, feeling totally free and close to nature.

Panama City

But everything has an ending and again I had to leave. Usually I enjoyed moving on, but this time I packed my bag sadly and travelled on to Panama City. Once I got there, I felt I had no time for sadness because life in this city was busy and somehow crazy. To me it seemed as if there was a little bit of everything, Latin American flair, Indians, US-Americans and many tourists, a mix of cultures. When the Canal was built, a lot of US-Americans moved to Panama City and this canal really is a technical masterpiece! In the city centre there were colonial buildings next to modern houses and shabby huts, big American cars racing with mopeds, brightly coloured buses, horse cars and mopeds, rich people passing beggars, Kuna Indians in their traditional, artistically made outfit walking side by side with business men in black suits.



I just had time to collect some impressions because I had extended my stay in Bastimentos as long as possible. Anyway, I caught enough to say that Panama City is a crazy city and I liked it!

Questions on the text

- *What is Guayabo and where can you find it?*
- *How many times a week does Daniel's family at least go to church and what is their confession?*
- *What's the name of the river that separates Costa Rica from Panama?*
- *What's the capital of Costa Rica?*

Discussion Topics

The famous Channel of Panama was built by the USA in order to take control over this important connection between the Atlantic and the Pacific Ocean. Thinking about the younger US history – are there any more examples for the US´ trying to strengthen their impact on regions outside of their territory?

Reggae with its typical rhythm is closely connected to the famous Bob Marley who used his music to make social problems and the political incorrectness in his native country Jamaica evident. Reggae still is a very well known musical style not only in the Caribbean but all over the world. Is this because the melodies and the rhythms are so easy to remember or is it because the lyrics are still of immediate interest? Are there any other musicians that treat social issues and nuisances in their environment? What function does music have in general and in this special case?

Essay writing

The Central American states of today were mostly Spanish colonies in former times. The colonialists took over fertile land and started growing plants like bananas, coffee, tea and sugarcane. There was a need for cheap workers and so people from the African continent were imported to work for little or no money on the plantations. What do you know about the import of these workers? How was their situation in the colonies like and how did they cope with their fate?