

Travelling in Costa Rica and Nicaragua by Bike Part 1

ZENO KOLLER – IN DESPERATE NEED OF A VACATION

In 2012, my father and I travelled Costa Rica and Nicaragua by bicycle for five weeks. Not having had such a long vacation for two years because of my studies at ETH, delving into memories while writing this article feels bitter-sweet. Despite that, I'd like to introduce you to these two countries of Middle America that are not so alike, despite being next to each other.

Our journey consisted of a round trip of Costa Rica and Nicaragua with plenty of detours. We started in Alajuela, the location of Costa Rica's international airport, heading north to the east of the country until crossing the border to Nicaragua. From there, we took the ferry across the Lake Nicaragua (the big blue spot in the middle of the map) to Granada. From there, we cycled back south to Costa Rica on the famous Pan-American Highway, which spans from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego. We didn't quite accomplish the anticipated Eulerian tour, we did not go down all the way to Panama, as planned. Instead, we left our bikes in Alajuela after some 4 weeks of pedaling and took the bus for the remaining week, to see more mountains and beaches. This issue's article will be about the Costa Rican part of the trip.

Overview

Before getting into some of the highlights of our journey, let me give you a little run-down of Costa Rica. Many guidebooks consider Costa Rica the 'Switzerland of Latin America'. Fair enough, the name says it all! It's relatively

wealthy compared to neighbouring countries and, being a democracy since before the 1950s, it's very stable politically. Area and population are comparable to Switzerland's, and yes, there are some mountains too!

Costa Rica is well-known for its progressive environmental and educational policies, which reflects in the relatively high rankings in the human development index compared to countries of similar income. It's also one of the few countries having no armed forces.²

Costa Rica is a habitat to a large number of different plants and animals. This is due to it having a wide variety of microclimates: There are rain forests, dry grasslands and even mangroves. In fact, 5 % of the world's species live in Costa Rica, despite it having only 0.1 % of the world's landmass. A quarter of it is either a protected national park or some other protected zone. This is partly motivated by ecotourism being an integral part of the countries economy. But this also holds true for agriculture. →

Planting bananas and herding cattle consumes land and in turn substantial area falls victim to deforestation each year.

The current major export product, surprisingly, is computer chips. Intel's Costa Rica plant has been producing processors since 1997. Even more important for computer scientists is another of Costa Rica's exports: Coffee.

Why cycle?

Some of these facts, along with the tropical climate, contributed to our decision to travel in Costa Rica (and Nicaragua). But while most tourists rely on rental cars or buses for transportation from sandy beach A to volcano B, we chose the bicycle instead. The reason for this is simple: Being motorized means not experiencing much of one's surroundings between stops, but hiking is not exactly an efficient way of covering long distances. Cycling, however, lies just at the sweet spot in between.

There are also some other aspects to traveling by bike. Ticos – what the Costa Ricans call themselves – are very friendly and outgoing. This only gets amplified by us being cyclists. Even in the tourist-ridden Costa Rica, two Eu-

ropeans on bikes are not an everyday sight: We had chats with locals about our journey time and time again. Memorable events also seem to occur more often when travelling on two wheels.

The first of these experiences happened just after our arrival to Costa Rica. We opted for bringing our own bikes, which we were already accustomed to and for which we had the right spares. This meant having to build up the partially disassembled vehicles in the entrance hall of the airport at 10 in the night. The taxi drivers there seemed to find this particularly interesting, which was to our luck. It occurred to us that we'd need to somehow bring the cardboard boxes with us to the hotel, where we'd store them until we'd go back home. How could we possibly carry them while cycling? We did not to have to think this over for long, as soon one of the taxi drivers offered to take the boxes for us. Not only that, he also provided escort through the late-night metropolitan traffic. We could just follow him on his way to the hotel.

Most of the days, we would cycle some 50 kilometres in the morning to reach the next town, search for accommodation and spend the rest of the day exploring the place. We'd almost exclusively sleep in hostels, so we carried the tent we initially bought as a backup in vain. Every few days, we had at least a day of rest to discover the various nature reserves, waterfalls and volcanoes. The greatest thing to do in Costa Rica, in my opinion, is swimming in natural pools in the forest. These can be found almost anywhere, except in the dry grasslands. The re-





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freshing qualities of a quick dive were needed often, as cycling in hilly Costa Rica is rather exhausting, even if you're accustomed to cycling in the Alps. The condition of the roads is similar to Switzerland's, but the way they're laid out seemed not exactly ideal for us: It just always goes up and down in an infinite loop.

From top to bottom

Costa Rica certainly has its geographical extremes: There's something for everyone. Exemplary is the last week of our travels: To top off the trip, we decided to climb Middle America's highest mountain, the Chirripó. From its peak at 3800 meters, you can see the Pacific as well as the Atlantic Oceans, if there are no clouds, that is. Equally impressive is the diverse and ever-changing scenery on the 15 kilometre hike to the top. It may be exhausting, but I recommend

doing this to anyone visiting Costa Rica. The next day, it was only a few hours of bus driving to get to sea level, where we could relax lying in the shade of palm trees at a Pacific beach.

What I remember most about Costa Rica after two years' time are the people. They're very charming and easy to get in touch with, if you know a bit of Spanish; Travelling by bike also helps. The one thing I miss most is the great variety of fresh fruit. Bananas, pineapples, mangos and papayas are available just about anywhere in quantity and quality you can't imagine if you're accustomed to Swiss standards.

Stay tuned for the next issue of Visionen, where I'll talk about Nicaragua and give you some pointers on travelling in the two countries. In the meantime, if you're interested, you may check out the blog we wrote on the go.³ 🌐



Footnotes

[1] Costa Rica means 'Rich Coast'

[2] This fact is to be taken with a grain of salt. There's no military, but the police force is actually armed to the teeth.

[3] <http://velokoller.blogspot.ch/>