

TRAVEL



San José's many charms can lure non-adventurous

By Angela Bianchi

For The Financial Post

THE BEST part of travelling in Costa Rica, especially for non-adventurers, is the capital, San José.

Typical of Latin American cities, it's not especially clean or impressive with large cathedrals or historic monuments, but it has its charms, most notably the four-block historical centre.

At its centre is the outside café of the Gran Hotel Costa Ricais. It's an old, three-star, whitewashed establishment — the perfect setting for a Somerset Maugham novel.

It's la dolce vita indeed as you relax, sipping the strong-smelling Costa Rican coffee and glancing at the morning *Tico Times*. With the morning sun kissing your face, you can catch the conversation at the next table, where an impressive group of Dutch film-makers is discussing a possible movie to be shot in Costa Rica.

Immediately south of the Gran Hotel is the Plaza de la Cultura, the main city square. It bustles with shoppers, children, dogs and the occasional hustler armed with a variety of black-market goods and information on the city's less conservative night spots.

A stone's throw away is San José's largest outdoor market, Mercado Central, where you can buy everything from clothing and crafts to this evening's dinner. The prices are affordable, but the goods are mediocre.

For a taste of culture, San José provides a variety of museums and theatres, the most famous being the National Theatre, an architectural jewel built on the tax proceeds of coffee exports 100 years ago. It's home to the city's opera, ballet and main theatre companies.

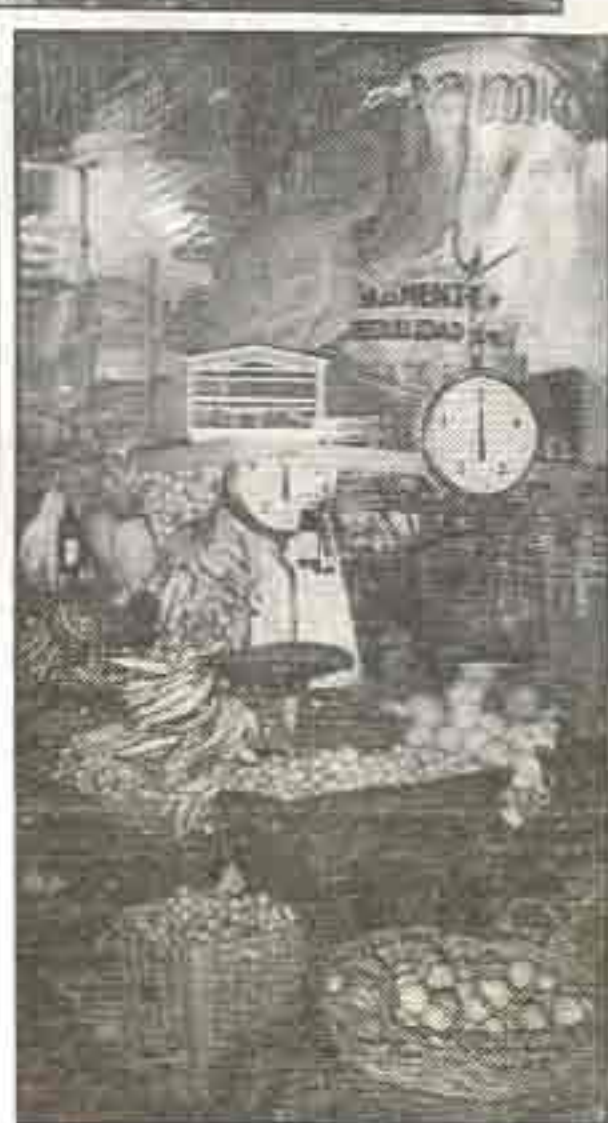
The 16-year-old Museum of Costa Rican Art displays the works of artists from the 19th and 20th centuries; the National Museum houses a vast collection of archaeological artifacts and historical works; the Gold Museum maintains a permanent exhibit of more than 20,000 troy ounces of pre-Columbian gold figures.

While you can walk through San José's historical centre in a couple of hours, the city tour bus is also a good way to explore the area. It stops at the cathedral, the national theatre, several city parks and the Moravia shopping district. Excursions that are rarely part of a tour itinerary are the appointment-only visits to the numerous cosmetic surgery clinics catering to bargain hunters. Plastic surgery literature and free-consultation coupons litter every hotel. Some sample prices: face-lifts, US\$2,000 to US\$3,000; breast reduction, US\$800 to US\$1,500; nose reconstruction, from US\$1,600. For more affordable rejuvenation, try a US\$40 shiatsu massage at one of the better hotels.

You can spend a day visiting the capital's main attractions and still have time to shop for souvenirs. The best place to buy Costa Rica's traditional hand-painted oxcarts is the Sarchi Oxcart Factory, a short drive north of San José.

There's also the ultimate shopping mall, El Pueblo — San José's top tourist attraction. Built in 1977, this replica of a colonial village is crammed with boutiques, restaurants and night clubs. The shops have whitewashed walls, red-tiled roofs and balconies full of flowers overlooking narrow, stone-paved streets.

Here you'll find one of San José's best restaurants, La Cocina de Lena (The Wood Stove), built to resemble a rural



The National Museum (top) houses archeological artifacts and historical works; a corner of one of the city's popular food markets.

farmhouse kitchen. It serves authentic Costa Rican fare like tamales and steamed cornmeal.

Olla de carne (beef stew) is another specialty. Be warned, though, that Costa Ricans love coriander. Chiverre, a spaghetti squash, is served for dessert — cooked with brown sugar, cinnamon and cloves.

For more Mediterranean tastes, La Piazzetta is a five-star favorite with the local business community and politicians. It offers affordable prices, generous portions and great service.

Tourists tend to return to El Pueblo for a "safe" night of dancing at nightclubs like the Cocoloco. It's populated by well-dressed businesspeople, dancing to everything from rap to hot Latin salsa.

The alternative night-scene is truly Latino-bohemian. El Cuartel de la Boca del Monte is a trendy hangout popular with both locals and tourists who want some great jazz and blues. The bar is overcrowded and seating is limited; the dance area is nothing more than a 10 x 10-square-foot gravel floor. It's jam-packed by 9 p.m. and the cover charge is a mere \$3.

If all roads lead to Rome, then all San José's calles lead to the Gran Hotel Costa Rica, where the food is always cooking, the blackjack table is in constant action and the café is filled with midnight coffee drinkers. The Dutch film-makers, still seated at the same table, which is now littered with coffee cups and cigarette ashes, are nowhere close to calling it a day.