

# The Tico Times reviews *Explore Costa Rica*

## Guidebook Offers Unique Information



**Kenneth D. MacHarg**

**H**ow can one judge a new travel book from a publisher that is generally unknown? How can one know if it is accurate, reliable, easy to use or useful?

That decision is somewhat difficult when you are standing in the travel book section of your favorite bookstore, looking for a guide that will be helpful on your next trip.

One solution is to check out a publication from the same publisher about a place that you have been and know fairly well. If it is a good reflection of your experience, then there is a good chance the unknown publisher and its guidebooks can be counted on to be credible.

So, when I received Harry S. Pariser's "Explore Costa Rica," I immediately turned to page 564 to check out Cahuita, on the southern Caribbean coast (the closest earthly location to paradise in my opinion), and to the section on San José where I lived for several years.

Yep, it's right on target, and with one of the longest, most complete listings of accommodations, restaurants and other information that the novice tourist would need to stay comfortably. Not only that, the author takes some time to add information about local culture, political issues and governmental controversies to make the tourist more sensitive to the local area.

For example, Pariser offers a fascinating presentation concerning the conflict between

residents and the national government that stems from the creation of Cahuita National Park in 1970. The long-simmering dispute about land use and whether the government reimbursed landowners

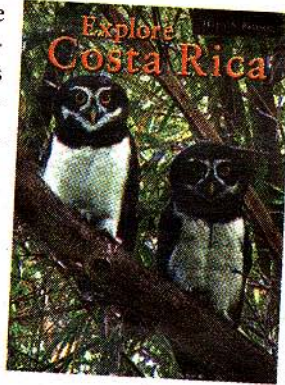
adequately for the property taken for the facility led to an uprising in 1994, when the administration wanted to raise entrance fees. The result was an occupation of park property by local residents who continue to control the northern entrance today. The national park service controls the southern entrance at Puerto Vargas. Thus, the wide difference in entrance fees between the two entrances.

Now, that is information the casual traveler would not find anywhere else.

On to the San José section, which offers amazingly complete information, providing not only a suggestion of top places to visit, but also information on the history or cultural significance of buildings, communities and customs.

In addition to highlighting the usual tourist attractions such as the National Cathedral, National Theater and National Museum, the guide also provides information on less-known but nonetheless interesting attractions.

When I studied Spanish in San José in



1990, I frequently passed a printing museum but never had the time to pay a visit. When we returned in 2004, I looked for it and inquired about its status, but no one seemed to know where it was or even if it still existed. I wish I had been able to access Pariser's book. There on page 182, I found, "You might also wish to visit the Museum of Printing in the Imprenta Nacional in suburban La Uruca (open Mon. to Fri. from 9 a.m.-3:30 p.m.)." If only I had known!

"Explore Costa Rica" is more than just a tourist guide. It is also an introduction to the geography, flora and fauna, history, economy, food and people of Costa Rica. It encourages the visitor to get off of the main highways, visit the little-known towns and out-of-the-way communities and interact with the local folk as a way to really get to know the country.

It offers suggestions on offbeat lodging, alternative eating establishments and neighborhoods generally overlooked by the average visitor.

As with other guides, this book has its own viewpoint on the world. On the upside, its emphasis on the environment and ecologically responsible tourism is commendable and provides an excellent education for those wishing to learn more about one of the world's most environmentally conscious countries. In addition, its insights into people and culture and suggestions of ways to connect with Costa Ricans set it apart from other publications.

On the downside, it seems at times to go overboard in offering opinion, such as when it refers to the country's respected daily newspaper La Nación as "a horrifically propagandistic right-wing tabloid said to be manipulated by U.S. interests."

At 622 pages, "Explore Costa Rica" is chock-full of information for the novice or experienced traveler in Costa Rica. But, weighing in at just over a pound, it might be a bit cumbersome for those who already suffer under the weight of their backpack.

Nevertheless, it's great reading for those who really want to know the country from the inside out and leave with experiences and understanding of this charming nation. ■

**Explore Costa Rica** may be ordered from Manatee Press (see link below) for \$22.95 plus shipping, from your local bookstore (ask them to special order if necessary), and also by mail from Manatee Press for the special price of US\$19 (media mail shipping) by sending a check or money order (payable to Harry S. Pariser) to Manatee Press, PO Box 225001, SF, CA 94122-5001. Orders to Canada and elsewhere are US\$30 including shipping (international priority mail).

For more information, e-mail [internetmail@savethemanatee.com](mailto:internetmail@savethemanatee.com), or call (415) 665-4829. Copies may be ordered with a credit card at 800-729-6423.

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