


TOUR REVIEW THE RICH COAST

Riding adventure in Costa Rica and Nicaragua with Edelweiss Bike Travel



Main: Though the crater looks quite peaceful, the Irazú Volcano is still listed as active; the last time it belched massive quantities of fire, lava and rock was a mere 50 years ago, so I kept the ignition key in my hand. Inset: Our Estonian companion is riding along the shore of Lake Nicaragua, with volcanic islands in the background.

At 11 a.m. we were parked 10,000 feet up at a small restaurant on the two-lane Pan-American Highway, sipping excellent coffee and putting on an extra layer of clothing in the cool air. Hummingbirds hummed around the feeders outside the view window. We had just passed the cloud-shrouded 11,450-foot Cerro de la Muerte (Hill of Death). An hour later we were close to sea level, stopping for lunch at a countryside establishment and taking off all the layers we had put on, because in 60 miles the temperature had risen some 35 degrees.

Exhilarating, to say the very least. We were in the relatively prosperous country of Costa Rica—roughly 20,000 square miles, about the size of Vermont and New Hampshire combined—that lies between the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean, with three mountain ranges separating the beaches. The population is about 4.5 million, and Spanish the official language—though English is spoken on the Caribbean coast and by everybody in the tourist business.



Eleven of us had flown into the San Jose (the capitol) airport at various times, taking taxis to the Intercontinental Hotel—a very elegant way to begin the tour. We were two couples from Germany, three cheerful fellows from South Africa, three Americans and an Estonian. With our guide, Alex, from Spain, and van driver, Henry, from Costa Rica. Fortunately everyone spoke English, as my

Estonian is a little weak.

Signing up for an organized motorcycle tour (OMT) in far-off lands is always a bit nervous-making. At least for me. How are the roads, the food, the hotels and the weather going to be? And what about all those strangers who will be along?

Edelweiss has been doing tours since 1980 and has an excellent reputation, so chances are they had properly prepped the scene and things would go well. As partial proof of this, one of the things at which the company succeeds is getting repeat business...nine of the 11 people on the tour had done multiple Edelweiss trips before. And here was a new opportunity to



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ride through two Central American republics—bringing fresh tours into the catalog is definitely a good way to get repeat business, as motorcycle travelers always like to add another country or two to their list.

Then there is that “adventure” cachet. An adventure tour is one for experienced riders, as it usually means some delightfully bad roads are in the offing, so best to read about the tour carefully. Edelweiss rates its tours according to difficulty, and the “intermediate” rating on this trip meant there would be some lovely twisty stretches of asphalt and some dirt. On the 1,300 official miles of the tour—plus whatever unofficial miles one wished to ride—less than 10 percent were unpaved and all were easily rideable.

Late that first afternoon of our arrival, according to instructions, we met with Alex and Henry and had the mandatory briefing, followed by an introduction to the motorcycles. These were all BMW GS models, with one 650 Sertão single, the rest

Our group is on the 11,000-foot rim of the Irazú Volcano, and there are five nationalities in the photo—a sixth, our Costa Rican van driver, is taking the picture.



800 and 1200 twins. The BMW shop in San Jose provided the bikes, and since we would never be far from the city in this small country, no spare was carried in the van. We had only one minor glitch on the trip, and a BMW employee rode down from San Jose and fixed it. All the bikes had either a top box or saddlebags to carry some gear, since temperatures could change quite rapidly and there could be rain at the higher altitudes. This was Costa Rica’s dry season, and the weather was wonderful...although the five from northern Europe found the beach temperatures a trifle warm.

Introductions over, we reconvened for an Italian dinner at one of the half-dozen restaurants in the hotel. A few bottles of wine and beer and soon we were all becoming well acquainted. Alcohol consumption was not included in the trip price, but could easily be charged to one’s room.

Morning, and we began our adventure. This was Sunday, so San Jose traffic was light as we headed southeast for the Irazú Volcano National Park. Costa Rica has many volcanoes, few of them active, but they make great destinations. A well-paved road ran up to the 11,000-foot rim of the moribund



Above: The 5,400-foot peak of Arenal Volcano, dormant since 2010, remained shrouded in clouds during our visit—but the view was still beautiful. Left: This happy child, at a fishing camp on the shore of the Gulf of Nicoya, is thoroughly enjoying being bathed.

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Irazú, which was miraculously clear of clouds. The ride was great fun, as the final stretch to the top was about 15 curvy miles of dead-end road, so we had an equally entertaining time going down.

Clouds shrouded the next volcano, so we gave that a miss. After lunch, the clouds were down to road level and the braver half went on to a national park commemorating the pre-Columbian residents of the area, while the rest went on to our country hotel, where we sat around the pool drinking Cuba libres. Edelweiss said the hotels would be “comfortable middle-class,” but I would rate at least half of them as upper class.

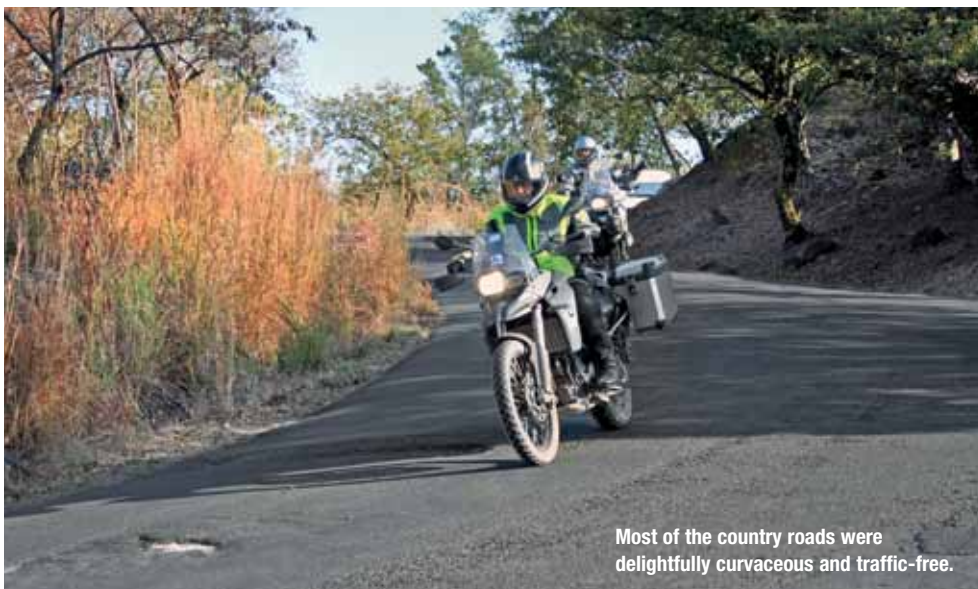


There are lots of unbelligerent wild critters in Costa Rica; this capuchin monkey is sifting the trash at the Manuel Antonio National Park.

Next day was the ride past the Cerro de la Muerte; the Pan-Am Highway runs some twisty 400 miles from Nicaragua to Panama, and 90 percent is two lanes. There was often a good deal of traffic, so creative overtaking was in order. No need to worry about the double-yellow line when the truck in front was lumbering up the hill at six or seven mph. Our group all had similar riding experience,

so we stayed together as much as we wished. Anyone wanting to dash on ahead could tell Alex and he would say where to wait, or to meet at the next hotel. Or lag behind and take photos. This was not regimented riding, although we often rode in a strung-out group.

From the mountains, we descended to a luxurious resort on the Pacific shore, next to a national park. We had a day off... which you could either spend on your own or take advantage of the Edelweiss plan. The luggage van could seat all 13 of us, and Edelweiss had every spare minute of non-riding time accounted for, from zip lining to petting crocodiles, caving to boat trips. Anyone wanting to get the full Costa Rican experience signed up for these sightseeing excursions, costing from \$10 to \$45.



Most of the country roads were delightfully curvaceous and traffic-free.



That ugly fellow is covered in warm volcanic mud which is supposed to make a person more beautiful; it did not work with him.



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From the beach we went back to the mountains, with two nights up at the base of the Arenal Volcano, Costa Rica's best-known destination. For 40 years, Arenal kept visitors entranced with nightly shows of fireworks, but abruptly quit in 2010. The tourist industry that had sprung up around the volcanic activity was not deterred, and the area is now known for its hot springs and semi-ecological attractions—everything from horseback riding to hikes through the canopied forests. As well as windsurfing on Lake Arenal.



Our guide knew wonderful places to cool off, like here at a waterfall a couple of miles off the Pan-Am Highway.

I use the term “ecological” in a very positive sense. Costa Rica understands that its mountains and beaches are a major tourist attraction, and works hard to preserve the locales rather than let them get overrun with tourism. A quarter of the country is dedicated to national parks and nature preserves. And the “green” concept is quite valid—more than 90 percent of the country’s energy needs are met with renewable activity, such as windmills, solar power and the hydroelectric



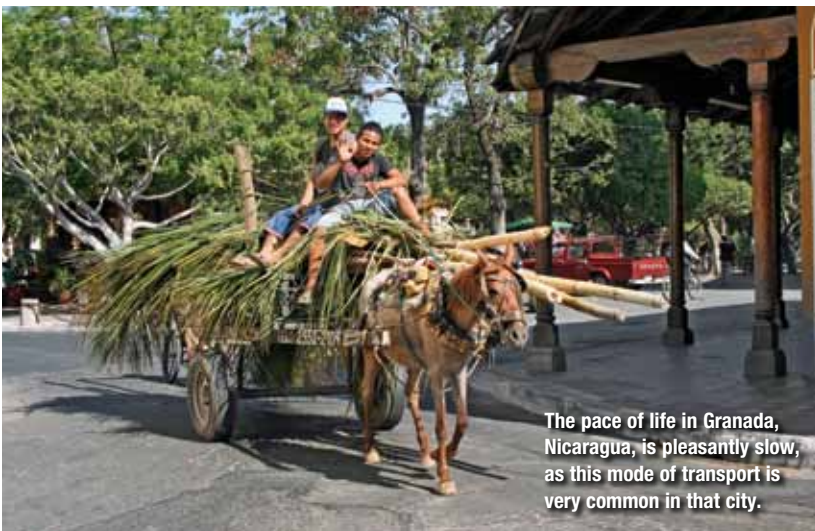
We all rode GS models, and about 10 percent of the ride was on dirt roads, with occasional stream crossings to wash the wheels.

dam on Lake Arenal.

We were headed north now, toward Nicaragua—a very different country from Costa Rica, being the poorest in Central America. We arose early in order to get to the border before the buses arrived, and managed to breeze through in about an hour, with five bureaucratic stops on the Costa Rican side, 11 on the Nicaraguan. Customs and immigration offices on both sides of the border do employ a lot of people....

Nicaragua attempted to create a viable socialist economy back in the 1980s, which did not work well at all and still doesn't today. Upwards of a million Nicaraguans have migrated to Costa Rica in search of work. Most of the imports to Nicaragua come from China, with thousands of small, Chinese-made motorcycles zipping around. And the police drive aged Russian-made Lada cars, when they are driveable; these cars were never noted for reliability, even when new.

But the country does have magnificent scenery, with volcanic islands in the middle of Lake Nicaragua, the biggest lake in Central America. And good history, especially in the city of Granada where we stayed for two nights. The Spaniards founded the city in 1524, and though earthquakes, fires and buccaneers have destroyed much of the original city over the centuries, much remains and much has been rebuilt. The city abuts the lake, where an ancient volcanic explosion created an archipelago of over 300 islands right off the



The pace of life in Granada, Nicaragua, is pleasantly slow, as this mode of transport is very common in that city.



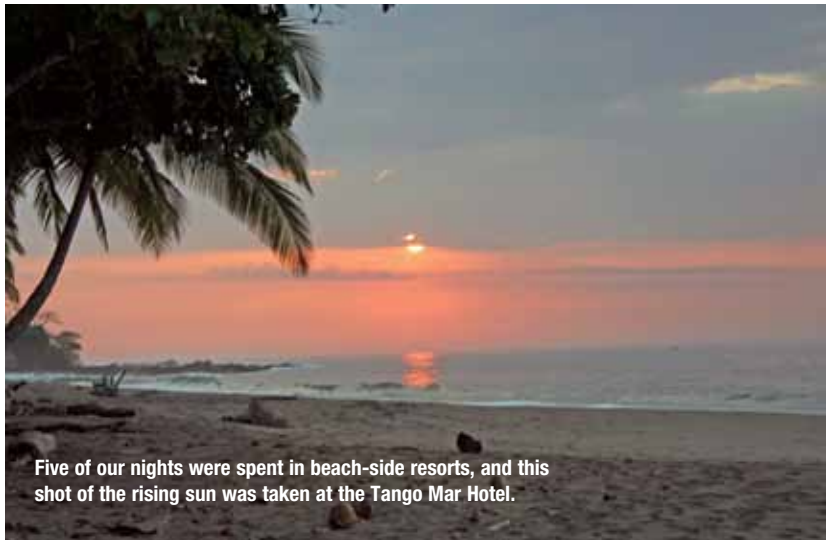
The border bureaucracy was a necessary part of the trip, but we went through with reasonable efficiency.

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shore, through and around which we took an absolutely enchanting boat ride. I thought I'd be a bit bored, but with the wonderful scenery and bird-life everywhere, I was truly sorry when it was over.

Back to Costa Rica with the border formalities shorter going south, taking only about 45 minutes, and heading for the famous beaches of the Nicoya peninsula—and the famous resorts. I presume the people building the resorts have good business plans, because a lot of money has been invested here. All the places in which we stayed appeared to be thriving and the service was excellent. Tourism is becoming more important, with vacationing foreigners bringing well over two billion dollars into the country every year. The recent recession did take a whack out of the business, but everything seems to be recovering nicely.

Costa Rica was long an agriculturally based economy, and still grows most of its own food. The national dish is beans and rice,




Five of our nights were spent in beach-side resorts, and this shot of the rising sun was taken at the Tango Mar Hotel.

occasionally varied with rice and beans, which is eaten three times a day along with much fish and excellent home-grown pork and beef. The cattle are all pasture fed, rather than this corn-based food used in the U.S., and I consistently found the beef dishes to be some of the tastiest I have ever had the pleasure of eating.

The last two nights on the road were altitude opposites. One day we rode up into the mountains to a mile-high town called Monteverde (Green Mountain), a place settled by Quakers back in the 1950s and today an eco-mecca. Next day was quite different, down to the beach town of Jaco, which has the reputation as being one of the best surf spots in Central America. Which means the town is pretty boisterous after the sun has set, with nightclubs and bars doing a thriving business.

Finally it was back to San Jose on a Friday afternoon. There was some horrendous traffic as we got close to the Intercontinental, but we breezed through with a good deal of lane splitting. And if the conversation at dinnertime was to be believed, everybody loved the trip.

For more information, see edelweissbike.com. 



Above: The green iguanas can grow to six feet—but don't worry, they are strictly vegetarian. Left: Our Lady of the Angels basilica, finished in 1924, is the most notable religious shrine in Costa Rica, and several million faithful come here at the beginning of August.