The Stony Side of Costa Rica

In a country where forests and beaches get most of the attention, the small cities of the valle central come as a rewarding surprise

Len Kaufman

ABOVE The Byzantine Basilica de Nuestra Señora de los Ángeles, in Cartago, where a miracle is said to have taken place, draws pilgrims from all over the country. RIGHT Main church in Barva de Heredia.

By ANTHONY W. ROBINS

ON a warm February day, walking down a street of small wooden houses with metal roofs, I stop to look out at the surrounding ring of mountains under clear blue skies. Around the corner, I might find an adobe building with a Spanish-tile roof — but more likely there will be an Art Nouveau house or an Italianate post office or even a turn-of-the-century cast-iron Gothic church imported from Belgium.

Such are the unexpected juxtapositions of the old cities of Costa Rica — a nation known as the Switzerland of Central America, with a long democratic tradition, no army, perhaps the highest literacy rate in the Americas and a booming tourist trade. Since most visitors go to Costa Rica to see its natural wonders — cloud forests, volcanoes, sanctuaries for giant tortoises, Pacific beaches — they often miss some of the country's great delights: the cities of the central valley.

Costa Rica is small, the size of West Virginia, with a population of roughly three million. Its people have had to build their lives and their towns around the enormous forces of nature that rule the country. To escape the tropical heat of the coasts, three-quarters of the population lives high in the mountains, in the temperate valle central, where four of the country's seven provincial capitals — San José, Cartago, Heredia and Alajuela — are no more than 15 miles (a 50-cent half-hour bus ride) from one another. (According to one legend, they were founded a day's mule ride apart.) Here, even the fanciest houses rely on corrugated metal roofs for protection from the aguaceros, or downpours, of the rainy season: the drumming of rain on metal roofs is one of the most typical — and beautiful — sounds of Costa Rica. There is not much to be done about the uncertainty of volcanoes (Cartago sits at the foot of Irazú, and Alajuela is not far from Poás), or the ever-present threat of earthquakes, which have left little intact from the country's earliest times.

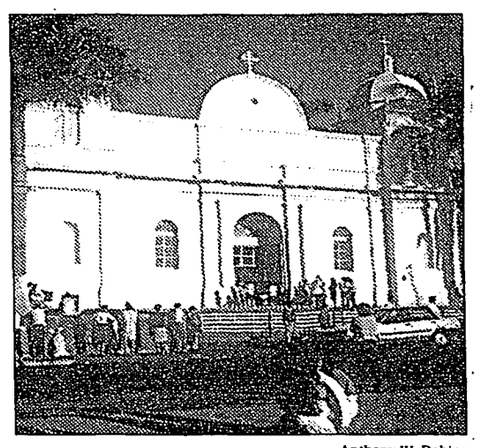
When compared with San José, the national capital and a growing metropolis, the other three cities seem small and informal — so informal that they still have no generally used street names (despite recent efforts to publicize their official grids of numbered streets and avenues). Instead, a typical address is "50 yards south of the cemetery" or, more up to date, "50 yards south of Kentucky Fried" or, with redevelopment, "50 yards south of where Kentucky Fried used to be."

The valley's vernacular architecture runs from a few surviving colonial-era adobe houses to more resilient wooden Victorian houses. Because Costa Rica had no public university until 1940, commissions for important buildings traditionally went to foreign-trained architects, often immigrants. Today the influence is heavily American, but before World War II Costa Rica had much closer ties with European countries. A surprising amount of the architecture reflects the influence of Italy, Belgium, France, Germany and England — and, of course, Spain.

The oldest and most traditional of Costa Rica's cities is Cartago, 14 miles south of San José. The former national capital, it was founded in 1563 by Juan Vásquez de Coronado. Badly damaged by earthquakes over the centuries — including two, in 1841 and 1910, that leveled it almost completely — Cartago today has virtually no buildings over a hundred years old, yet it manages to maintain the aura of an old city.

Visitors arriving by train from San José emerge at the end of town by Cartago's central covered market, which was built by an English company after the 1910 earthquake. Avenida 2, leading to the town center, passes the French neo-classical-inspired Pirie Building at the corner of Calle 5. It is one of Cartago's very few surviving pre-1910 structures, with elegant windows with iron balconies. Two blocks down is the Club Social de Cartago, also from early in the century; its porte-cochere and iron torchères suggest the conservative formality of the city's residents.

Avenida 2 opens onto the parque central, site of the impressive ruinas de la parroquia (parish church ruins). The church, founded in the 1570's, suffered continual earthquake damage before being completely destroyed in 1841. In 1862, a new, lofty Romanesque revival replacement, perhaps the only one of its kind in Costa Rica, was designed by the German-born architect Francisco Kurtze, and built with the help of Italian stone masons. Earthquakes interrupted construction over and over again until 1910, when the building crumbled almost completely. Legend ascribes the problem to a curse brought on by a priest, Padre Sandoval, who killed his own brother in the church (some say over a woman). Whatever the cause, the town gave up on the project. Today its ruins, with heavy stone arches and piers, are maintained as a public garden.



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Avenida 2 leads to the Basilica de Nuestra Señora de los Ángeles, a pilgrimage site that makes Cartago the Lourdes of Costa Rica. The church marks the spot where, on Aug. 2, 1635, according to legend, a peasant girl collecting firewood came across a wooden image of a Madonna and Child. The parish priest, Don Baltazar de Grado, had a small church built on the site of the miracle. A century later, Aug. 2 was declared a festival day, and since then pilgrims descend on Cartago from all over Costa Rica in observance of the occasion.

The enormous basilica that now marks the place was begun in 1912 by Luis Llach, a Barcelona-trained architect. Its picturesque facade, designed by José Fabio Garnier, with Moorish arches and Baroque, Gothic and Byzantine details, supports tall statues of angels outlined against the sky. A deep relief over the portal shows Juana Pereira in the forest, a bundle of firewood in her arms, coming across the miraculous image. Inside the church, pilgrims proceed down the aisle on their knees under a remarkable series of painted wooden arches. A shrine contains the statue of La Negrita (Black Virgin). A display case overflows with ex-votos — gold and silver models of healed body parts sent by the grateful.

Younger than Cartago but less damaged

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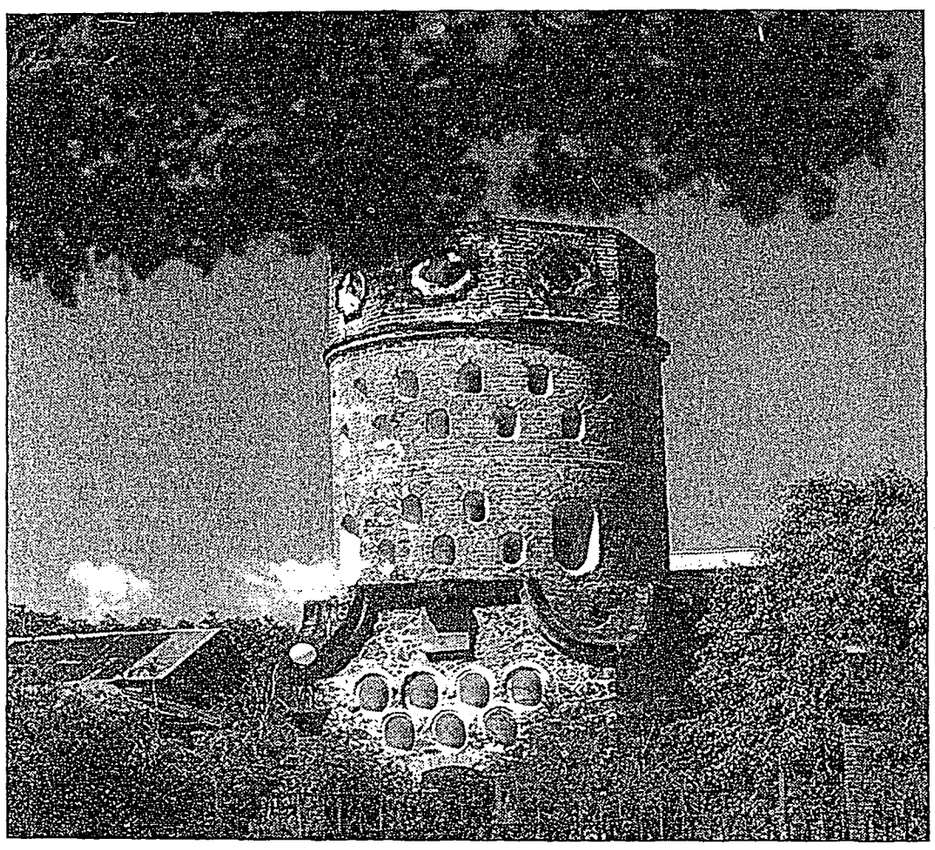

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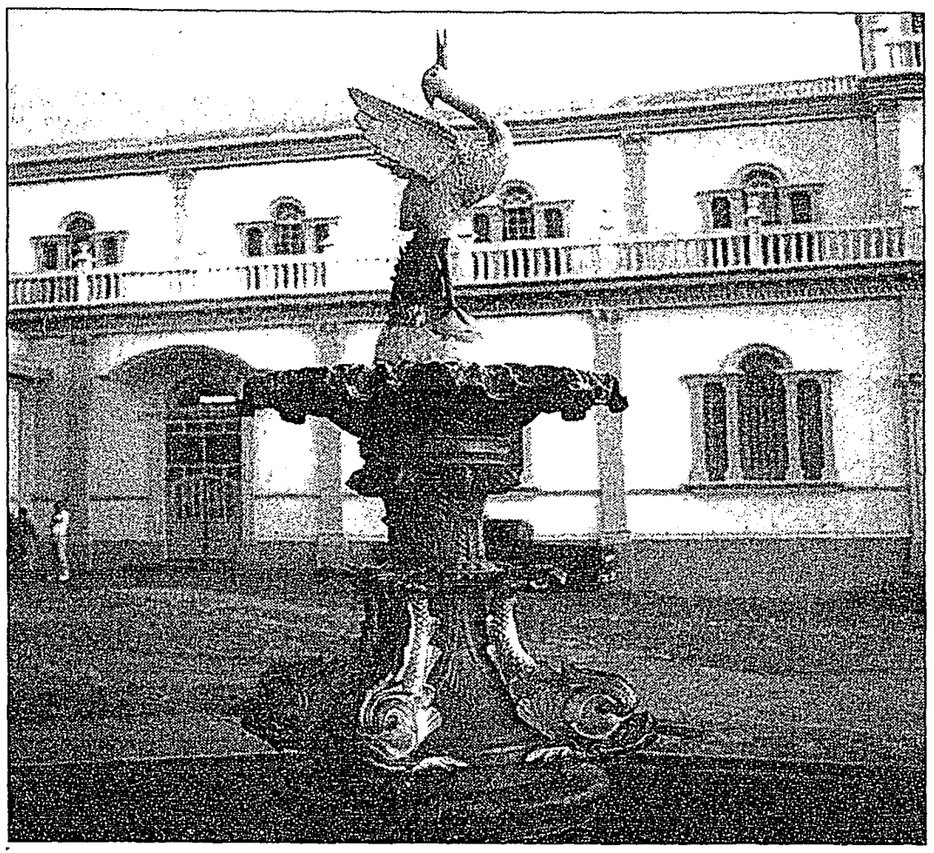

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LEFT Fountain by Cristo de la Agonía church, in Alajuela.
FAR LEFT Tower designed by the sculptor-turned-governor Don Fadrique Gutierrez, in Heredia.

by earthquakes is Heredia, founded in the early 18th century on a site six miles north of San José. Much of its old architecture survives, most notably the town's main church, built in 1797, one of the country's most impressive colonial buildings, with a classical temple front; its massive flanking towers were moved back during a remodeling after the earthquake in 1851.

The parque central in front of the church, with trees, benches and cast-iron lampposts, is dominated by an unusual three-tiered cast-iron fountain imported from England in 1879. Opposite the park's far corner is the Republica Argentina School. Originally a cuartel, or military headquarters, it was built in 1888 by the French engineer Léon Tessier. Across the street, beyond the neoclassical post office inscribed with the date 1915, is a second cuartel, an exposed brick structure with a wooden porch. The passageway that leads to a small garden inside was originally used to conduct prisoners to their cells.

It was to protect this cuartel that the idiosyncratic fortified tower, called the fortín, was built. One of 19th-century Costa Rica's more eccentric military officers, Don Fadrique Gutierrez, designed the structure. Don Fadrique had been a sculptor and later a photographer before joining the military and rising to be Governor of Heredia. The oddly designed round brick tower is perforated with openings for guns that are wider on the exterior, rather than the interior. These apertures are very sculptural, but not terribly useful from a military point of view. The fortín, now the town's symbol, occupies a small park named for Don Fadrique, with a statue of the general hard at work, on a sculpture.

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Across from the fortín stand two colonial-style houses. The nearer one serves as Heredia's Casa de Cultura, a center for theater, music and art. Each house has an old-fashioned roof of Spanish tiles, which owe their rounded shape to their original means of production: hand-molding over the maker's thigh. Farther down the street, past the church, is the handsome neo-classical Liceo, built in 1915-17 as a teachers' institute. The great hall, once the country's second-largest auditorium, has been restored to its original polychromatic splendor.

JUST a few miles from Heredia (10 minutes by bus) is the tiny town of Barva de Heredia. One of Costa Rica's oldest settlements, Barva was founded in 1583 on the site of an even older pueblo. Its central square still looks much the way Costa Rica's earliest town squares must have: on one side, a church flanked by palm trees; on the other three sides, one-story adobe houses with Spanish-tile roofs. Though Barva looks pristine, earthquakes have not spared it — the town has been destroyed and rebuilt over the centuries. Barva's houses probably date back no more than a hundred years, but are constructed with bits and pieces of adobe salvaged from earlier buildings.

Alajuela, 12 miles north of San José, is more of a farmer's and rancher's town, less formal than Heredia or Cartago. Alajuelans know one another by their apodos, or nicknames — one of the richest men in town is known to one and all as pollo macho, which in local usage means "blond chicken."

Alajuela's tropical parque central remains one of the best preserved and most picturesque in the country; it is dominated by a white stucco neo-classical cathedral and ringed by turn-of-the-century civic buildings, which make it somewhat suggestive of a provincial Italian town. In fact, both cathedral and square were designed in the late 19th century with the help of Italians. Rogelio Bernini laid out the square, a formal park whose paths wind among tall mango and palm trees. (The latter are home to three-toed sloths.) Its center is marked by a decorative cast-iron fountain imported from Glasgow. The cathedral's striking red dome was designed by the architect Gustavo Casarini.

On the northern flank of the square sits a massive cuartel, built in 1888 of stone and stucco in a heavy fortress style with corner turrets. The former jail at its rear, with a small courtyard, now houses a museum dedicated to Costa Rica's national hero, Juan Santamaría, the young soldier who gave his life in 1856 fighting off the invasion of the infamous American adventurer William Walker.

Across from the cuartel is an imposing two-story post office. Now, sadly, closed by earthquake damage, it is an Italianate palace that hides a lovely landscaped courtyard, a tile floor and an inner balcony supported by slender cast-iron columns.

Farther down the block is the National Bank of Costa Rica, which has interior murals of rural life emblazoned with the refrain from the national anthem: "Under the limpid blue of your skies, long live work and peace." Nearby one can visit Cafe Soda Torcaz, an old-fashioned Costa Rican "soda" restaurant with a large, airy interior under a skylight. It specializes in batidos, tropical fruit milkshakes. (It also has sweets and sandwiches in the $2 range.) On the square's fourth side is the former Instituto de Alajuela, a late-19th-century white stucco school building with cast-iron balconies from which students can look out on the plaza and dream. Up the block is the Cine Milan, a quirky Art Moderne movie theater that opened in 1940.

Other sites worth a visit in Alajuela include the grand arcaded church of Cristo de La Agonía, four blocks past the cathedral; it has a tall, graceful clock tower and a cloistered garden with palm trees. A walk in the opposite direction leads to Alajuela's monumental cemetery, designed by Casarini, with row upon row of white stone monuments and views of the mountains ringing the town.

THERE are several smaller towns near Alajuela, which can easily be combined in a day trip from San José. Zarcero is known in particular for its tropically colored church with a beautiful interior of painted wood, for its meticulously maintained topiary garden in front of the church and also for the best cheese in Costa Rica.

Sarchí, a crafts center, turns out Costa Rica's ubiquitous brightly painted ox carts — the country's tourist trademark. The town's church, built in 1950, is appropriately covered with intricately colored angels and ornaments whose styles are drawn from traditional ox-cart decoration.

Grecia is home to a prefabricated iron Gothic church imported from Belgium in the 1890's. The town turned to the newly fashionable material in frustration after fire and earthquakes had destroyed earlier buildings. The large sheets of iron, shipped from Antwerp, arrived at the Atlantic port of Limón, then traveled by train to Alajuela and by ox cart to Grecia, where they languished in the central park for several years before construction could be completed.

Because Heredia, Cartago and Alajuela are so close to San José, some predict that the swiftly growing capital will eventually engulf them in a Costa Rican megalopolis. For now, however, the old cities survive as attractive places with great individual character, eminently worth visiting en route to the cloud forest or the beach. ■