



Center for Responsible Travel

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*Transforming the Way the World Travels*

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### **Voices from the Pandemic: Costa Rican Tourism in an Age of Coronavirus and Climate Change**

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially recognized the spread of the COVID-19 virus as a pandemic,<sup>i</sup> which halted the normal rhythm of most economic sectors and forced dramatic societal and economic shifts and heartbreaking tragedy. In Costa Rica alone, as of October 20, COVID-19 cases continue to increase, and according to the country's Ministry of Health, there have been 97,922 cases of the virus and 1,222 deaths (1.3% of total cases).<sup>ii</sup>

As a result of the pandemic, tourism has been one of the most affected global sectors. Around the globe, airports and land borders have closed, travel has been reduced to historic lows,<sup>iii</sup> and health systems have been on the brink of collapse. The COVID-19 crisis has left us with many questions as to how the tourism sector will address today's health and safety concerns, while also striving for positive environmental impact – and nowhere is this more prevalent than Costa Rica, a country whose sustainable tourism ethos has been a paradigm for decades, and a country that is heavily reliant on international tourism.

In 2019, the Central American country received more than 3.1 million tourists, a growth of 4.1% compared to 2018,<sup>iv</sup> and both the government and industry anticipated favorable forecasts for 2020. However, as is now quite clear, the current situation has halted the trajectory of this growth. This has impacted the Costa Rican tourism ecosystem at every level and has forced those working in the industry to adapt to “the new normal.”<sup>v</sup>

Through this human-interest piece, the Center for Responsible Travel (CREST) explores what this “new normal” means to many in the face of two existential crises—COVID-19 and climate change. Having explored the interconnectedness between these two topics since the start of the pandemic, CREST has found that discourse and research often stall at the national level. To shed light on the current situation from voices on the ground and fill this critical gap in knowledge, we have gathered personal interviews from individuals working within the Costa Rican tourism sector in hopes of capturing the thoughts and perspectives around COVID-19, climate change, and the future recovery of the country's tourism industry. Through their anecdotal details, the ten interviewees inspire us with hope about human resiliency and how individuals have been coping with the changes that have occurred in 2020.

#### **Economic and Labor Adaptation in Costa Rica**

Costa Rica's economy is highly dependent on tourism. According to its Central Bank (BCCR) data, the sector contributes 6.1% to the national GDP and generates more than 200,000 total

jobs, equivalent to 8.8% of the country's employment. Tourism is the largest contributing sector to the national economy, surpassing both computer services and banana production. The impressive economic figures are mostly thanks to international tourist arrivals from the United States as its largest source market, followed respectively by Canada, Mexico, and several European countries. According to the Costa Rican Institute of Tourism (ICT), accommodation makes up the largest portion of the sector, followed by food and beverage services, road transport, and medical tourism. These services, as well as the individuals working within them, have all felt the direct blow of COVID-19 and the subsequent health, safety, and travel policies that the country has put into place.

One such example of job adaptation during these difficult economic times is the case of **Gerson Cedeño**, a certified naturalist guide who lives in Puerto Jiménez de Golfito on the southern Pacific coast and has been unemployed since March 23<sup>rd</sup> because of the pandemic. Under normal circumstances, Cedeño worked exhaustive hours in high season, with no days off due to the intense, but temporary nature of the sector. Cedeño has had to pivot the way he receives income and because of his education level, is now an ecology instructor through virtual classes. He acknowledges that everyone is experiencing difficult times and that thanks to his training he has been lucky in his ability to reinvent himself. Through his education, Cedeño saw the opportunity to train others on ecology and believes that “now is the time to develop these [environmentally-focused] programs and projects.” In a more general sense, he mentions one positive of the current situation which is the time that this has given all sectors to reinvent themselves and better consider their strategies.

However, not all naturalists and ecotourism workers have had the same luck in pivoting their job opportunities, with many still struggling to survive economically. Due to the current crisis, some former naturalists and ecotourism colleagues of Cedeño, who once protected Costa Rica's rich landscapes and biodiversity through experiential activities, have since resorted to illegal extractive activities, like gold mining, to make ends meet. Though Costa Rica has prohibited open-pit gold mining by presidential decree, cases of money laundering and the destructive extraction of gold in the Corcovado National Park area are currently being investigated.<sup>vi</sup>

Even companies indirectly part of the tourism supply chain have had to adapt their businesses to this new situation. An example of this has been reflected at the fuel company at which **Andrea Olaya** works. As a sales executive, she tells us that the transport business has changed its market significantly. Before, its largest customers were tourism transport businesses, but during the pandemic fueling needs shifted towards food companies, which needed to increase delivery routes to reach their customers.

However, other entrepreneurs working in transport have suffered deeper impacts from the pandemic, such as **Alex Montero**, a transport carrier based in the airport hub of Liberia, who before the pandemic had 15 employees and 18 coach buses. Today Montero's business has entirely halted due to the lack of international tourists and an inability to diversify his business due to the high competition within the transport sector. For this reason, he is forced to wait for tourism to open again.

To mitigate the impacts of this crisis, the Costa Rican government has been trying to foster tourism recovery by reopening airports to receive international visitors from certain countries since August 1<sup>st</sup>.<sup>vii</sup> Moreover, the Minister of Tourism **Gustavo Segura** announced in October 2020 that starting the following month, borders would open to all countries. The ICT and airline companies have renegotiated a joint initiative planned for 2020, updating the country's sanitary protocols for entry and exit and reevaluating other necessary processes, such as operating costs and aircraft fuel prices, in order to remain competitive.<sup>viii</sup> Another major move taken by the government was the launch of a national campaign to stimulate domestic tourism, which could revitalize the economy and help many tourism businesses survive. As recognized by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), this new strategy has brought movement to a sector that has been hit hard and that now needs to reinvent itself to survive. As a result, it will be necessary for businesses and individuals to adjust to the changes that may arise, such as adapting tourism offerings and promotions that fit within both the “new normal” and national regulations.<sup>ix</sup>

### **Sustainability and Competitiveness**

The Costa Rican tourism sector has long aligned conceptually with the three axes of sustainability-- people, planet, and profit.<sup>x</sup> The sustainability focus has existed for some time in the country, but the challenge moving forward is how to revamp marketing strategies to attract international visitors again while continuing to maintain this ethos of responsible tourism-- a responsibility which rests not only on the shoulders of business owners, but also on travelers. This is mentioned by **José Guevara**, president of Ethnotourism.org, a digital platform that seeks to promote, help and support tourist destinations in indigenous and ethnic territories in Costa Rica. He also points out that "tourism companies are not the only ones who are responsible for change, but also tourists, who can relearn how to travel and decide to spend their holidays in sustainable destinations." Sustainability must have a stronger emphasis now, so that despite the struggles of “survival mode”, future recovery scenarios continue to follow the path of responsible tourism in Costa Rica.

This is consistent with **Juan Amighetti's** opinion, president of the Sarapiquí Chamber of Tourism. He tells us that, even prior to the pandemic, Sarapiquí had received mainly domestic visitors. Amighetti then adds that “the chamber has reinvented itself to include even more measures that favor the environment. [We] have seen it as an opportunity for market differentiation, thanks to the great reception of sustainable tourism. In addition, the current [pandemic] has strengthened the [nature-based tourism] sector because people are looking to visit nature even more.” The Chamber of Tourism develops different projects to further steward their destination, including safeguarding the Sarapiquí River through a comprehensive management plan for the iconic river basin, establishing environmental alliances to strengthen the tourism sector, and carrying out the German TourCert certification for sustainable destinations, in addition to the national certification, to help adequately plan for and manage waste, water, security, and emergencies. In other words, Amighetti acknowledges that tourism recovery in the area will be slow, but he affirms that their path will remain constant, as the current crisis reflects the need to continue to promote sustainable practice and fight against climate change.

The opinions of Guevara and Amighetti are not far from the global forecasts on the progressive recovery of tourism. These forecasts indicate that destinations such as Costa Rica, where tourism is oriented towards sustainability and harmony with the environment, will have a greater initial capacity to recover demand since they have a consumer perception of being “lower risk” destinations in the current context.<sup>xi</sup> However, as we will likely continue to see reductions in long-distance travel for 2021 and beyond, Costa Rica must continue to swiftly and safely reactivate domestic tourism and implement the necessary sustainable measures to attract and maintain it.

## **Recovery Challenges**

Costa Rica’s tourism recovery plans do not come without a fair share of complexities. Apart from the health and safety concerns surrounding travel, economic strife further reduces the time and financial opportunities to enjoy a moment of leisure. Domestic tourism will play an important role in filling this gap, though the opportunity to rediscover one’s country again must come at an affordable price. Prior to the pandemic, Costa Rica’s tourism sector mainly priced service offerings to cater to international tourists, whose income typically fall well above national averages. **Luis Brenes**, owner of Historias Lodge Hotel, at the time of discussion, was operating at 20% capacity, while simultaneously having to lower the usual price per room by 35%. He says that he has had to adapt to the demand while the situation returns to normal. “I think that tourism recovery will escalate [slowly], and it may be at least five years before we see its return to what it was previously.” Brenes is just one of many entrepreneurs who have had to adapt to changing traveler demographic and adjust the price of their services to the domestic tourism market.

**Julio Alvarado**, president of Comprehensive Risk and Security Management (GIRS), and member of the board of directors of the National Chamber of Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism of Costa Rica (CANAECO), explained that prior to COVID-19, “Many companies highlighted the high quality and safety of the infrastructure and health services that they offered to guests. However, internally, the staff on many occasions suffered unfavorable conditions in their work environment, such as [inadequate changing rooms and areas to take meal breaks], among others.” From the point of view of the GIRS president, the health and safety crisis has forced many owners to look inward and change the general conditions in which employees work. Now, quality infrastructure and security must not only be guaranteed for the tourist, but for each employee as well. Alvarado’s insight expresses the challenges to which tourism entrepreneurs have had to adapt, but which at the same time represented a necessary change for improved employee wellbeing.

While many changes have been made to address short-term health and safety, the pandemic has brought another challenge with long-term implications for the wellbeing of people and planet: the affordability and accessibility of environmentally-friendly products and services. **Ifigenia Garita**, the founder of Osa Wild Travel Agency based in Puntarenas, reflects on this issue, saying that the crisis has caused an obvious spike in the need for cleaning supplies and

disinfectants, but many cannot afford or are unwilling to invest in eco-friendly, biodegradable products. A common phenomenon, social and economic strife often comes with environmental cost.

Recovery that accounts for both people and planet will be critical, though not simple. When asked how to confront this dual threat of COVID-19 and climate change, several interviewees agree that the general population needs more education on environmental and climate change issues, and this hiatus in travel should be utilized as an opportunity for more training to understand the consequences that the planet faces if adequate measures are not implemented.

### **Climate change, a topic of interest**

**Dr. Gregory Miller**, CREST Executive Director, noted in *The Case for Responsible Travel: Trends & Statistics 2020*, “Post COVID, there will be a profound shift in the competitive landscape in the travel and tourism sector, with preparation and effective risk management, adaptation and resilience, and decarbonization being fundamental to future competitiveness and relevance.”<sup>xii</sup> An equally dramatic and sustained shift in behavior that we have witnessed as a result of COVID-19 is also needed to prevent irreversible damage to human society as a result of climate change.<sup>xiii</sup>

Every actor in the tourism ecosystem has a role to play in this paradigm shift. As a responsible tour operator, **Ifigenia Garita** advocates that “the tourism industry should try to mitigate the effects of climate change as much as possible. Throughout its entire operation, [a tourism business] should let the traveler know that we are all responsible and can contribute to the improvement process.” She currently works to reduce climate impact through the implementation of several projects at the Osa Wild Travel Agency. Among the initiatives that her association leads are a solid waste collection program on Corcovado beach, a social responsibility project, and a project to offset and mitigate climate change. Osa Wild Travel Agency is just one of many businesses that is trying to do their part for the collective good of people and planet.

Furthermore, as we look towards recovery, it is important to remember that there is a connection between climate change and the permanence of the tourism economic system. There is now more awareness of climate change’s impact on businesses since owners and employees have now felt first-hand the direct consequences of an industry under existential threat. As **Julio Alvarado** of GIRS mentioned to us, “The Costa Rica tourism sector has always generated profitability, and the urgency with which it must face climate change is a top priority. All businesses must include climate actions in their strategic business plans, not only because [it will be critical to maintain and generate future demand], but also because of the long-term good it can bring to many.”

**Michael Siegfried**, businessman and owner of Costa Rica Exotica Natural, agrees with this. Siegfried is aware of the current climate change situation, and from his point of view, “In order to be successful in developing a [business recovery] strategy, it is very important to consider the economic linkage [of climate change and industries], in that poor management of climate change implies economic losses. It will be [with this understanding that] there can really be a

profound transformation of the different sectors responsible, and if there is no in-depth reflection after the coronavirus, everything will be the same again. For this reason, the economic link with climate change must be necessary, direct, and forceful.” Likewise, Siegfried warns that climate change is not only the responsibility of tourism but of several sectors. However, he recognizes that the tourism sector has a very important role in being able to influence other sectors by example.

## Final Thoughts

The fallout from COVID-19 has simultaneously revealed the interconnectedness between global human movement and environment. We have seen this proof via the NASA imagery, taken during periods of large-scale COVID-19 isolation, which show a decrease in air pollution and a reduction in the level of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in cities across the globe.<sup>xiv</sup> Unfortunately, these improvements proved to be only temporary. While greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions slowed, the concentration of GHGs in our atmosphere did not decrease.<sup>xv</sup> Little by little, the pace of emissions have already been recovered,<sup>xvi</sup> and plastic consumption has increased even further. While at first, we watched as the planet took a break and recuperated from humanity, we are now noticing the negative environmental consequences of COVID-19.<sup>xvii</sup> and grappling with the harsh conclusion that not only do we need to decarbonize the tourism economy, but we need to begin carbon capture at scale. To do so, we will need a unified front from state administrations, businesses, and individuals to take on a critical role as change-agents to address the climate crisis.

Through these ten conversations, we have glimpsed challenges, successes, and nuances as the tourism industry battles two concurrent crises. The majority of interviewees agree that improved training of tourism practitioners on environmental matters is critical, and although Costa Rica is a country that has worked hard to position itself among the most sustainable destinations in the world, it still needs to take important measures to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 and climate change and be an exemplary destination in its entirety. To these thoughtful individuals, the crisis has further revealed the value of caring for the environment in order to uphold the permanence of the sector, the people, and the planet. Through all the heartbreak and strife the COVID-19 crisis has inflicted on the tourism sector—both individuals and businesses—there has been one small plus—the opportunity to reflect on how they can improve and take appropriate measures to prevent the spread of the virus and mitigate climate.

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