

San José: A City of Cultural Celebration

By Sierra Tribbett-Collins

From the quiet countryside to the pulsating city, Costa Rica's magnificence lies in its blurring of the lines between the indoor and the outdoor. Booths at the city market weave in and out of spacious granite buildings--herbs and spices are tucked in a corner, beckoning visitors with a smell that is as intoxicating as it is forgettable after a few footsteps out to the return of summer heat. Hotel lobbies lack overhead ceilings and have hot tubs now chilled from the evening air, a bizarre concoction of safe confinement and starry limitlessness above. Animals seem to recognize this feat too, appearing to count themselves lucky not to be caged in the pet store they could just as easily wander to and from, and stray cats circle busy neighborhoods on the lookout for tourist suckers.

This beautiful duality is only the beginning of what makes San José unlike any other capital. Perhaps a spitting image of what a city could achieve without commodified bulldozing, clustered fast-food swamps, or the general curse of sterile and colorless modern architecture, San José leaves a lasting impression on a visitor of any background. Cobblestone streets and grandiose Catholic churches center its grim history of European colonization. Bright yellow arches and animated kings lean into American interest as a lingerie store blasts Donna Summer's "Hot Stuff" from an outdoor speaker. Astoundingly pink and purple sunsets prove its uniqueness above a cultural moshpit, reminding you just how close to the Equator you are.

A particularly important note of accomplishment is the variation of cuisine offered along city streets: quaint pasta and wine with a balcony view of the city; stuffed crust that doesn't leave you feeling nearly as greasy as expected; even a take on Chinese-American food provided with wildly large portions of egg rolls. Mexican-style tacos and street corn are served in the backyard of a family-owned restaurant, complete with a charming tire swing and children's plastic cars. Of course, Costa Rican specialities are hard to beat, though not as prevalent in the city as its more rural counterparts. Arguably most popular is the *casado* dish, a meal often served at lunch that consists of white rice, black beans, cooked vegetables, a choice of protein such as chicken or fish, a side of cooked plantains, and a popular sauce served on the side, the brown savory Lizano sauce.

Locals are all too familiar with their abundance of summer tourists, expecting clunky and broken Spanish from their customers. In a country with a tourism-based economy, Costa Ricans (also known as Ticos), particularly those who reside in the bustling environment of San José, recognize the amount of white visitors who may take for granted the beachy and beautiful vacation of choice. Shops are stocked full with "Pura Vida" merchandise, rich chocolate and coffee beans, and beach towels adorned with vibrant art of frogs or local insects. Like in any other city, vendors have their way of grabbing unsuspecting visitors' attention, particularly Americans who expect to navigate a country with little understanding of the language. It may serve as a reminder that while these locals

acknowledge their role in the tourist experience, they are not here to cater to or baby the ignorant American; they are merely making a living in the city, and have a life outside of showing a tourist to the nearest beach.

San José exists as a celebration of culture--museums, planetariums, markets, restaurants, and animal sanctuaries only begin the list of sights to see when paying a visit. The city is lively, packed with everyday working people and excited visitors from across the globe. Its true beauty is in fact its pure uniqueness; there are few other places in the world that can feel like home and like nothing ever seen before at the same time. It stays true to its natural origins, allowing vibrant shrubbery and flowering trees to continue their growth, but it also continues to grow itself, adapting and changing with cultural trends. It feels bountiful and abundant without a heavy, indulgent aftermath. Above else, San José provides an unforgettable experience for anyone eager to visit, an active and sweaty city lifestyle that still manages to keep its fresh, natural essence intact.



Rooftop view of the Hotel Cacts overlooking San José.



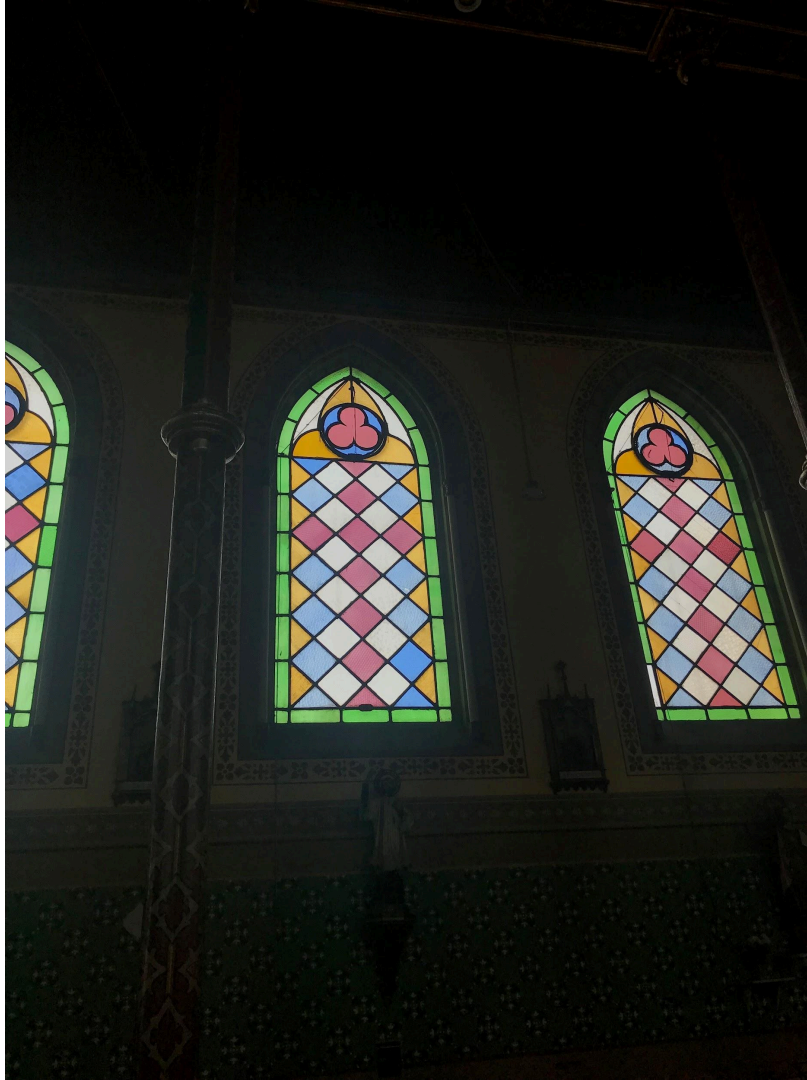
Overgrown foliage engulfing the outside of a hotel room window.



Graffiti written along a building in central San José: “Mi cuerpo no quiere tu opinión,” or, “My body does not want your opinion.”



The massive exterior of the Catholic church Parroquia Nuestra Señora de La Merced.



Beautiful stained glass windows reminiscent of their European influence inside the Catholic church Parroquia Nuestra Señora de La Merced.



Flocked by pigeons in the center of San José, a clever tourist trap to charge for pictures with the birds.



The sun setting across the walk through a neighborhood nearby the hotel.



A local cat lounging on a quiet storefront walkway, used to the adoration of tourists.