

While there is debate about the number of indigenous people in Costa Rica prior to the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1502, few survived contact with Europeans. Today, the country's indigenous population makes up less than 2 percent of the total population. For nearly three centuries, Spain administered what is now Costa Rica as part of the Captaincy General of Guatemala, under a military government. The Spanish optimistically called the country Rich Coast. Finding little gold or other valuable minerals in Costa Rica, however, the Spanish turned to agriculture. The small landowners' relative poverty, the lack of a large indigenous labor force, the population's ethnic and linguistic homogeneity, and Costa Rica's isolation from the Spanish colonial centers in Mexico and the Andes contributed to the development of a relatively autonomous, individualistic, and egalitarian agrarian society. This tradition survived the widened class distinctions brought on by the introduction of banana and coffee cultivation in the 19th century and the subsequent accumulation of local wealth. Costa Rica joined other Central American provinces in 1821 in a joint declaration of independence from Spain. In 1838, long after the Central American Federation ceased to function in practice, Costa Rica formally withdrew and proclaimed itself a sovereign nation. An era of peaceful democracy in Costa Rica began in 1899, and has continued through today with only two lapses: 1917-19, when Federico Tinoco ruled as a dictator, and 1948, when Jose Figueres led an armed uprising in the wake of a disputed presidential election. The victorious junta from this 44-day civil war drafted a constitution guaranteeing free elections with universal suffrage and the abolition of the military. Figueres became a national hero, winning the first election under the new constitution in 1953. The lack of a military continues to be a source of great national pride, and Costa Rica is presently conducting an international public relations campaign to encourage other nations to follow suit for the purpose of global peace. The Costa Rican government has been very involved in managing the economy since the 1948 revolution. The government operates many state monopolies, including banking, insurance, and telecommunications (recently deregulated and now open to competition); controls the prices of a number of goods and services; and maintains protectionist trade laws. Government policy in the 1960s and 1970s focused on making Costa Rica more self-sufficient, and the nation has enjoyed a gradual upward economic trend. However, with the increase in oil prices in the 1970s and sharp decreases in international coffee, banana, and sugar prices, Costa Rica's economy collapsed in 1980. Warfare in neighboring countries in the 1980s also affected the Costa Rican economy and society, shattering regional trade and bringing a large number of refugees and illegal aliens, particularly from Nicaragua, to the country. To quell the regional violence, President Oscar Arias Sanchez (1986-90) promoted a successful regional peace plan that resulted in his receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987. Since 1948, Costa Rica has held 12 successive democratic presidential elections, more than any other Latin American country.

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OC Contributing Editor Arnold Hano's In Retrospect column is published have lived in Costa Rica since July ; both are two-year Peace Corps volunteers. Peace Corps Volunteers meet at Turrialba Center Fifteen Peace Corps Volunteers working on basic grains in Costa Rica held a mid-term conference at ACTIVITIES AT TURRIALBA is published quarterly both in Spanish and English by the.

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