

—A VERY IMPORTANT MESSAGE FOR THOSE PLANNING TO TRAVEL TO COSTA RICA

by R.J. Cavender & Boyd E. Harris

As the Daihatsu Terios rumbles and growls to climb the misshapen road toward Volcan Poas, the rich San Jose street exhaust gives way to the cleaner smell of damp mountain air, and you suck in deep breaths of satisfaction.

The day is bright. While it is cool with patches of fog lingering in the last of Alajuela's side streets, you break into open country, which boasts endless kilometers of rolling hills filled with coffee plantations, one on top of another. The plush rows of trees hug the hills from the edge of the road expanding to both horizons. The sun is rising, and you feel some warmth through the windshield. While it is looking to be a promising day at Volcan Poas, you hope it will hold.

There is no shoulder. You've run the tires over the edge of the narrow road several times to avoid transport trucks and passenger buses rumbling downhill, and there is little room to maneuver, but it doesn't slow you. The higher you climb, the more clouds roll into the plantations and spill into the roads, obstructing your view, and the midday rains begin. The visibility erodes and yet oncoming traffic keeps stampeding past you.

Things are tricky, but that doesn't slow you.

Most women wouldn't travel alone in a third world country. "Too many things can happen," your family would tell you. "Who's going to help you when your rental car breaks down?" they might add. Yours gave up that nonsense long ago. You've backpacked Europe, road-biked through Nova Scotia, hiked Machu Picchu. You usually rent a car in Costa Rica so you can see more of its vast beauty in the time you have. You usually go alone, and that by choice.

You've never been to Poas. You've heard of the lush green landscapes and rainforests that cake the slopes leading to this ancient mid-earth pressure release valve. Unfortunately it won't happen today. About halfway up heavy rain forces you to search for a place to pull over. You see a restaurant or hotel through the sheets of rain pelting your windshield, and you turn off onto a gravel drive that leads to several empty parking spaces hugging the entrance. A man wearing a white jacket, a common uniform in Central America, rushes out with an umbrella and opens it over

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your car door.

You step out and almost forget to lock the door but turn back and push the electric button near the inside handle. You recall the Tico Rentals representative at the San Jose airport trying to guide you away from this area, holding a map in front of you. You remember his exact words.

“Ms. Quincy, it’s just that some places up there are not as good as others. We had some problems up there with the cars. We had some thieves breaking in and some cars stolen. May I recommend another volcano for you to visit?”

You remember his expression, and that along with the misty breeze gives you a chill. There had been more than concern for his rental car on his face, but you had brushed him off, and here you are, almost forgetting to lock up.

The waiter walks you in, directs you through the rustic restaurant and seats you at a front window table. You peer through the ancient, warped glass at the torrential downpour. The sloped streets are under siege with milky-red runoff water colored from the volcanic soil. Through the foggy window there is a sign in the road that reads, “Volcan Poas. . .13.” You remember that you are now dealing with kilometers, and you comfort yourself in the thought that it is not much farther.

After lunch, you decide to rent a cabin behind the restaurant. The nice waiter hands you a key and checks you in from your table.

Later, you go into the bar and order a Cerveza Imperial. They serve it in a glass with a few rocks of ice, a traditional thing here. The bartender seems nice, like everyone else, but your Spanish is rusty, and you are too tired to try conversation.

This is as alone as it gets. No one back home has any idea where you are, and to find you someone would have to know to visit Eduardo at the car rental office, which is one of about eight or nine agencies. And then they would need perfect timing to stop into this particular restaurant when they know you could have gone in five or six directions leading out from San Jose. Being this isolated from your life is very comforting.

Last week you walked away from another relationship. You loved him, but it just wasn’t right and both of you knew it. You’d never been the marrying type, and he wanted kids. You are happier sitting alone in this bar around strangers than you will ever be at any point in marriage. It is unsettling, but such is life.

After a while the bar takes on some new guests. A French couple, some Eastern European backpackers, an American banker and his wife that are a little too loud for this quiet place. A clean cut, friendly looking man comes over and sits, poised for conversation. He smiles and says, “Hello, friend. Do you like de beautiful weather we have here en August?”

You chuckle and he grins, the ice broken. Then he introduces himself. “I’m Hector, from Nicaragua”.

You say, “Hola, Hector, I’m Joan. The weather is wonderful compared to Houston this time of year.”

He nods. “Ah, yes. Houston. Humid like this, but also hot. Are you here for fun? To fiesta. You know, to party?” He holds his palms out and while still sitting, does a little lower body shuffle, and to accent the cutesy Latino flirt, he winks.

He has a charming way about him. He appears to be in his early forties, and he keeps good looks for his age. He’s dressed in an ironed, fashionable button-down and