

The Peaceful Paradise With The Secret To Happiness

In January 2017, the President of Costa Rica at the time, Luis Guillermo Solís, visited the U.A.E. His visit strengthened the investment ties between the region and central America. And it seems that Costa Rica has a few things to teach when it comes to embracing renewable energy and happiness.

As the U.A.E. makes sustainability and happiness two of its key objectives for the coming years, the small Latin American country of Costa Rica is showing the world how it should be done. Last year the Happy Planet Index named the nation the happiest country in the world for a third time. President Luis Guillermo Solis believes this is largely thanks to peace and security.

“I think it’s a combination of things,” he explains. “Humans and animals are happy when they are not fearful. So, if you’re reasonably fit, reasonably sheltered, if you don’t have the threat of being killed, then you tend to live happy. And Costa Ricans, if we are the happiest people in the world—and I hope we are—it’s probably because we have been able to overcome some of those fears through public policy. We have social security, public education, a state where the rule of law prevails and women have access to programs to empower them economically and socially. Fear has a very small space to develop. We are stable, we have learned that nature and production are not contradictory, and we put all of that to work in ensuring a strong democratic institution.”

The president tells me that spending in sectors such as education, health and housing have been boosted since 1949, when Costa Rica abolished its army. After that it was able to allocate its wealth to improving life for its people. Wealth earned largely through agriculture, exporting goods such as coffee and fruit, and a growing tourism industry.

Having recovered from a dip post-2008, tourism is once again on the up for this destination. Spanning just 200 miles from the Pacific Ocean to the Caribbean Sea, Costa Rica is now welcoming annual visitors equal to over 60% of its population. Good news for farmers, retailers and other surrounding hospitality services. “Tourism is very quickly becoming the most important source of revenue for the country, much more so than industrial production or anything else,” says the President. “Last year we received three million visitors—in a country of 4.5 million that’s quite remarkable.

“Ecotourism has become very important, not only in terms of the diversified market that Costa Rica offers, but it has also helped the country and people living in environmentally attractive areas to protect those areas. It has a virtuous impact, because people involved in ecological tourism want to take care of their farms and of their forests. They’re almost social controllers.”

The impact of millions of people walking through national parks and reserves has the potential to be devastating in terms of litter, noise and the destruction of natural habitats

for native plants and animals. Costa Rica has recognized this and is taking control by putting limitations in place—even closing some of its parks to restrict the number of people that can get in. The key is balance, and Costa Rica takes the protection of its environment very seriously.

For the last two years, it has succeeded in producing over 98% of its electricity from renewable energy. For 271 days in 2015 and 270 in 2016, with hydroelectricity representing 75% of its matrix. “I think it has proven that sustainability works, and it can become a very successful trend throughout the world,” the President explains—although he admits that the fossil fuel requirement of the nation’s cars remains a problem. “It is a reality, we can’t just do away with it. There’s a gradual process to eliminate, substitute or compliment the fleet with either more friendly fuels, or with electric cars, or with a network of trains and renewable energy vehicles that can be used to transport people.

“We have to keep on moving in the direction of renewables. We are being very forceful in continuing to provide support to the Paris Agreements, and pushing ahead with our Green Hub: a platform where good practices and experiences can be shared by users in terms of forestry and environmental management.”

With both Emirates and Etihad offering direct flights to the U.S. and an agreement now in place with Costa Rica to suppress its visa requirements for Emirati visitors, the idyllic getaway is more accessible than ever for Gulf travelers. And with clean, green surroundings and a vibrant community of some of the happiest people on earth, it may be the perfect time to discover this tropical sanctuary.

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