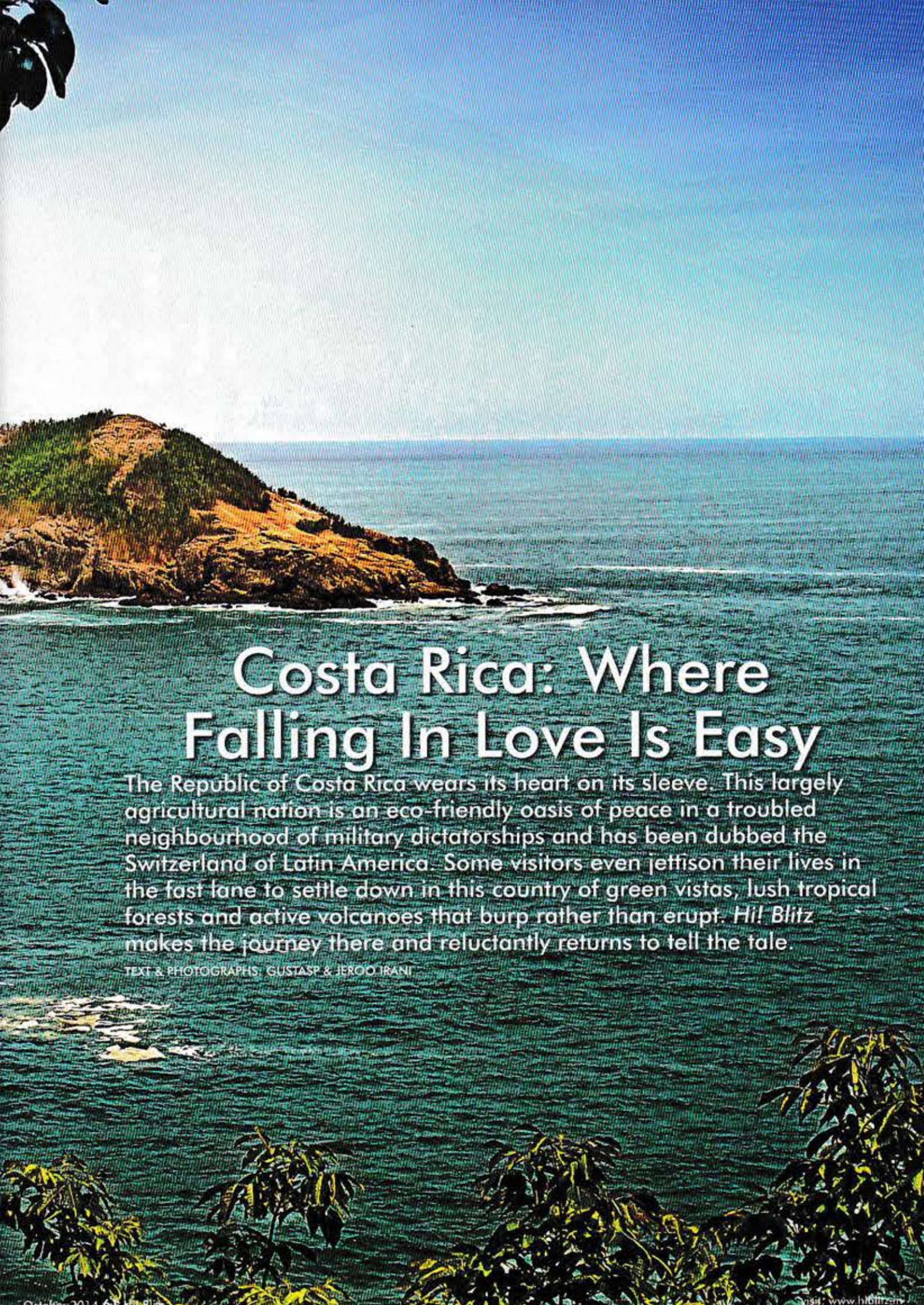




Costa Rica: Where Falling In Love Is Easy

The Republic of Costa Rica wears its heart on its sleeve. This largely agricultural nation is an eco-friendly oasis of peace in a troubled neighbourhood of military dictatorships and has been dubbed the Switzerland of Latin America. Some visitors even jettison their lives in the fast lane to settle down in this country of green vistas, lush tropical forests and active volcanoes that burp rather than erupt. *Hil Blitz* makes the journey there and reluctantly returns to tell the tale.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS: GUSTAF & JEROOIRANI



El Avion bar-restaurant at the Manuel Antonio National Park



Tiny shops flared with the colour of splashy sarongs & the gleam of local jewellery...

This tiny Central American country fought like a mighty pugilist, defeated Greece and made it to the quarter finals of the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil. And the minuscule nation exploded in celebration! We were at the Manuel Antonio National Park (said to be amongst the 12 most beautiful national parks in the world) in Costa Rica when it happened. A local shopkeeper whose boutique was sandwiched between atmospheric cafés that lined the beachfront cried: "Look at my eyes; they are red. I was awake all night, dancing in the streets; there were impromptu parties everywhere!"

Another vendor on the sandy expanse of the beach where we lay on a lounge came up to us, thumped his chest and shouted: "COSTA RICA! I love my country." All he wanted was a thumbs-up sign from us that we loved it too; that day he wasn't interested in selling his sunglasses and hats. No one was; not even the vendor in a Panama hat selling Cuban cigars. And the winning goal was obsessively replayed on TV screens in restaurants and hotels to lusty cheers and whoops of joy. So much so, a news anchor commented on TV that Costa Rica was ripe for an invasion—the country had disbanded its army way back in 1948 and its people were too busy celebrating to look after its borders!

After a few days, Costa Rica seemed to slip into its habitual state of Latin languor, its fiery passion spent for the moment, but not its sense of fun. "Catholicism and soccer are our two main religions," joked a local. "Every village will have a church, school, soccer field and bar. We are passionate people like the rest of the Latinos; life for us is a gift and we revel in it."



The Manuel Antonio National Park is home to a variety of animals including raccoons & armadillos



Costa Rica, where everything is a vivid green and blue like the iridescent slashes on a toucan... And one wakes up each morning to fresh mountain views where a see-through mist hangs low like a bride's veil. It parts to reveal a land not ravaged by time or the elements and where the living is easy.

of commerce yet there was no hard sell, just a friendly exchange. "Want lessons in surfing?" one would ask. "Would you like a massage?" another voice would trill. When we would decline, some would give us a high five, others would sit on the sand with us to discuss the football match or just talk about life in general.

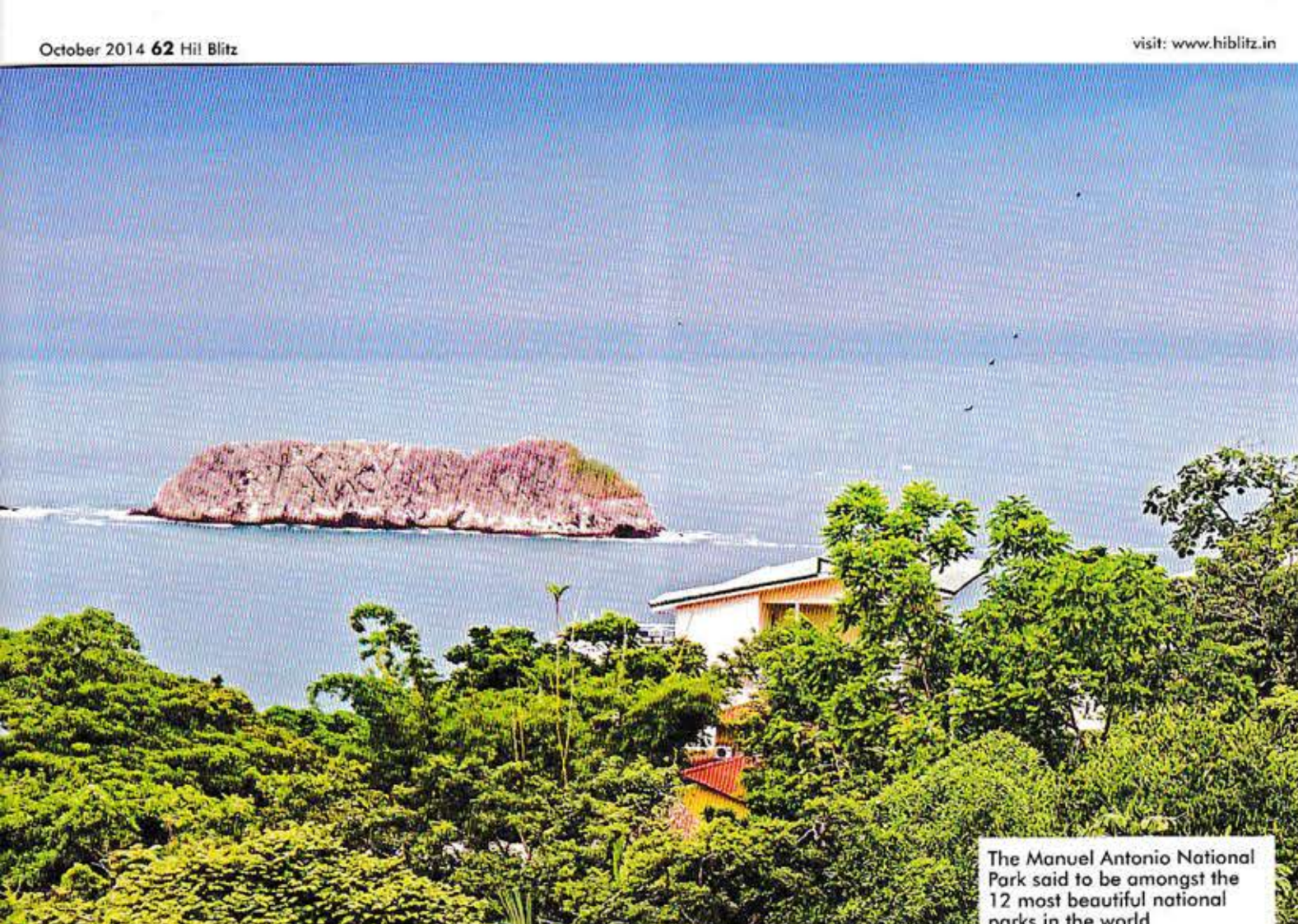
Early one morning, it rained briefly as every leaf glistened with raindrops as we sat in the open-sided restaurant of our lodge, revelling in a landscape that looked as fresh as a new dawn... The rain had in no way dampened anyone's spirits and we too hopped onto a local bus and headed for the national park where, after a short walk from the entrance, we arrived at the main beach—a curved golden scimitar rimmed by green mountains that sloped down almost to the water's edge. (This national park has four beaches, said to be the finest in the country.)

Vacationers swam or sunbathed on the honey-gold sand and we wondered if we had strayed onto the sets of a Hollywood

TV serial. Elsewhere, families picnicked under shady trees, wary of raccoons (mongoose-like rodents) that launched raids on picnic baskets wherever they could. We decided instead to embark on a hike on the trail leading to Cathedral Point, huffing and puffing up steps laid in the forest floor, while small white-faced monkeys seemed to mock our efforts as they swung easily from tree branch to tree branch; the more adventurous hung upside down by their long tails.

The forest rustled and resonated with the call of unseen birds and briefly we saw a curved-beaked toucan winging its way across the green canopy, while shy, tiny hummingbirds alighted briefly on a flower and then flew away, wings whirring furiously like tiny helicopter blades. (Did you know a hummingbird's wings beat 60 times a second?)

Unfortunately, we did not hear the call of the howler monkey (said to be louder than any human or mechanical sound). Our guide told us later that the simians are heard only at day break when the



The Manuel Antonio National Park said to be amongst the 12 most beautiful national parks in the world



Interiors of the unforgettable airplane bar-restaurant, El Avion

like pagan totem poles towards a blue sky, their trunks cloaked in green moss and insistent creepers that wrapped them in a bear hug.

The cheery manager who also doubled as wait-staff served us breakfast and said with typical refreshing innocence, "We will miss you out here. Tell you what, why don't you buy land here and retire in Costa Rica? It's the best place to be!"

We laughed at his naïveté and loved him for his generosity—wanting to share the abundant fecundity of his land, where everything is a vivid green and blue like the iridescent slashes on a toucan... And one wakes up each morning to fresh mountain views where a see-through mist hangs low like a bride's veil. It parts to reveal a land not ravaged by time or the elements and where the living is easy.

alpha male indicates to the troop to rise and shine or late afternoon when the troop moves on to find a place to sleep. Other residents like the endangered squirrel monkey and the two-toed sloth were elusive and hid in the dense vegetation.

We sweated it out on the trail and every drop of brine we felt was worth the effort as several vantage points opened up to scenic vistas of frilly surf lapping talcum-powder sands and occasionally angry breakers crashing on to huge rocks on the beach.

We soldiered on, and arrived at a sandy stretch so pristine and untouched that we were tempted to lie there all day on the sand, under a palm tree in easy contemplation of a world that was achingly beautiful.

But after a while, we decided to amble back to the exit and the happening beachfront outside the national park. We plugged into the lively Costa Rican beat—a stark contrast to the serenity within the park precincts. Local Ticos swilled beer in cheery cafés, tourists ambled along the main promenade looking for a restaurant or sidewalk café with a view. Some hauled surf boards on their shoulders, others sported freshly done tattoos on their arms and legs.

On our last day in paradise, we awoke in our room in a hotel which was virtually embedded in the rainforest. Trees soared



The beach outside the national park was a trifle crowded with bikini-clad voluptuous beauties

Living in a rustic lodge outside Manuel Antonio National Park, we too had fallen in love with this country and its ever-smiling people called Ticos. Picturesque beaches wound around forested mountains, within and on the fringe of the national park. Outside the park, happy laughter and music trailed out of sidewalk cafés; street musicians strummed guitars. The overall mood of the country it seems is always upbeat.



Quirky handicrafts outside a souvenir shop



Costa Rica is much loved by North Americans & West Europeans who flock there for pura vida, which means 'pure life'

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Monkeys hanging upside down by their long tails on the trail leading to Cathedral Point

Fact File

- Costa Rica bounded by the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea is a small country that can be traversed from coast to coast in just three hours by car and 45 minutes by plane.
- San José, the capital, is well-connected by air with cities in the United States and Latin America.
- You do not need a visa to enter Costa Rica if you have a valid US or Schengen visa.
- Manuel Antonio National Park, one of the country's most popular parks, lies 132km from San José, the rather frayed-at-the-edges capital and 7km south of the town of Quepos near the Pacific coast. To enter, one has to pay a fee. However, there is no charge for wiling the day away at the lively little town and beach outside the park. There are a number of things one can do in the area such as parasailing, kayaking, fishing, horse-back riding, etc.
- While the dry season runs from December to March, the rest of the year sees sporadic rains which lend a glistening quality to the landscape.
- Manuel Antonio has a good selection of hotels outside the park. But in a destination that is largely unfamiliar to Indians and where Spanish is the national language (English is spoken in the tourist areas), it is best to book your holiday through a local tour operator like Gray Line Tours (www.graylinelatnamerica.com).
- For more information, log on to www.visitcostarica.com