

ECO-GRINGO ON THE RUN

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By now you have heard the reports that the entire Costa Rican Army is after me. I realize it is common for journalists to be on the outs with a certain type of government, like that of the old Zaire or the new United States. But when most reporters say a government does not care for them, they mean a small unit of the Ministry of Internal Security. Maybe a cabinet secretary has it in for them, a dictator at best. Me, I've got the entire Costa Rican Army.

Pay no attention to those who say the entire Costa Rican Army is a guy named Jorge who launders uniforms for a high school marching band that plays when Bill Gates or other heads of state visit. These literalists are wont to call the downsizing of 1949 "the abolition of the armed forces." Moreover, they do not appreciate the assaultive power of an off-key drum major in badly pressed trousers.

The reason the entire Costa Rican Army has vowed to track me to my Montana home, even if that means buying winter clothing, is not, as one critic has suggested, retribution for taking my wife and our fetus to the cholera climes for a second-trimester getaway. That critic happened to be my wife, who has a heightened sense of the dramatic these days and should not be taken literally. No, the entire Costa Rican Army is after me because they feel I have visited an unkindness upon their national honor. It is, I am told, as though I had gone to Provence and said the foie gras tasted a lot like what I got back home at the Testicle Festival, whose motto, "Have a ball at the Testicle Festival," is espoused by a cartoon bull who is, I confess, perhaps too cheerful under the circumstances. Still, overlooking the bull's faux joie de vivre, I do not see how comparison to the Testicle Festival could upset anyone. Which might explain the unfortunate misunderstanding with the entire Costa Rican Army. They believe I have sullied their country's environmental credentials.

Environmental credentials, I have asked the Army to remember, are not all they're cracked up to be. Ask Ralph Nader. "Amigos," I recall saying, "is not Vice-Governor Cheney proof that environmental credentials are majorly out?" And anyway, I do not believe I have hurt Costa Rica's environmental credentials. In fact, I

meant the comparison to Detroit's as a compliment. This is what happens when you try to help people.

I had thought the environmental credentials of Costa Rica were well known until my wife told me some people do not switch their long-distance company hourly and so do not have the frequent flier miles to travel there. My wife also said something about being cheap, which I attribute to her obstetrical state and is not important to our story anyway. The environmental credentials of Costa Rica are as follows. Uno: One-quarter of the country is protected as national park, which is like protecting two booths and the men's room at a prosperous Chinese restaurant in Missoula. (I josh a little, Jorge. It is a fine accomplishment, really.) Dos: The country's entire shoreline is public property, which is so much more First World than shooting Realtors but has the same felicitous effect. Tres: Costa Rica is Ecological Paradise, which I know is true because the government said so on my immigration form and all the guidebooks agree. To those who say the government and guidebooks have an interest in agreeing, I say you are churlish, and probably liberal.

Costa Rica's environmental credentials come with an unfortunate rash of social credentials, like universal health care, economic credentials (lack of extreme poverty), and military credentials (the short-staffed gendarme), which Costa Rica's Avenida Madisón has amalgamated in the motto "The Switzerland of Central America." The guidebooks like this phrase a lot. I categorically deny saying that the Salinas brothers, the contras, and the CIA were not much competition. I admit only to the harmless question, "Isn't that like being the Switzerland of New Jersey?"

The claims that I am nursing a grudge over the friendliness business have also been blown out of proportion. I have always said it was not Costa Rica's fault that the guidebooks describe it as an Alabama family reunion, the kind where everyone calls you Hon and pushes irresponsible quantities of okra on you and you want to leave before you arrive, which, were it true, would be a clever defense for a place with an underappreciated army. Further, I did not say, after enjoying our

seventeenth NHL-quality body-check—the Costa Rican variant of which is admirably reserved for people boarding buses, walking on sidewalks, standing, sitting, sleeping, or gestating offspring—I did not say, “What’s with this country?” but instead “Who writes these guidebooks?” We looked. Ours was by a guy from New York. That cleared up the friendliness confusion and left my love for Ecological Paradise unmarred.

“Do you think it’s odd,” my bride said on our first day at the Costa Rican beach, “that a Ford Pinto whose fenders are about to fall off has driven back and forth all day four inches from my big toe?”

“You’re quite right,” I said. “I thought they had a recall on those fenders in ’72.”

“I mean that four inches seems close.”

“I have to agree. The bulldozers have maintained a very gracious six-inch big-toe clearance. I don’t see why the Pintos can’t be more courteous.”

She sighed in that way that oddly suggests the rock on her engagement band is not big enough for some of life’s trials. Clearly she was taking the Pinto hard.

“I mean,” she said, “how does a stream of traffic right on the beach square with Ecological Paradise?”

My wife, not knowing Spanish, had not understood the ‘No Vehículos en la Playa’ sign, so I translated for her. “It says, ‘Please Drive on the Beach.’”

“Oh,” she said, and was silent for a while. “But why?”

“It is clearly a culturally appropriate technology for controlling beach population. Just like the emissions test.”

“I thought our innkeeper said most people bribe their way out of emissions tests.”

“Not with beach vehicles, which are more strictly policed. They have to fell an iguana at 100 meters or get pushed into the ocean with the oil cans and syringes that wash up with the tide,” which, I was about to add, were also sensible technologies for controlling the beach population, but my wife interrupted.

“You just make these things up.”

“Absolutely not. It’s in the guidebook.”

“What guidebook?”

“The one I’m writing.”

Here is an entry from my guidebook:

Costa Rica’s public-private wildlife program is not, as has been claimed elsewhere, limited to bioregions that accept Visa. The Swiss Café in Montezuma, where tourists distribute bananas to needy monkeys, accepts Air Jordans, and the Ecological Farm in Santa Elena takes gold teeth. The Ecological Farm advertises hand-fed wild tapirs--

—“How can they be hand-fed and wild?” my wife said when she read this.

“It’s not the kind of thing you’d understand. As I recall, you didn’t understand Compassionate Conservatism or Better Living Through Chemistry either.”

“I understand alright. This is why half of Costa Rica’s animals have forgotten how to find their own food.”

“Not to worry. The government is taking care of that by building more hand-feeding stations.”

My wife, who is hard to keep on topic, pointed out that this was the same government that could not build a road with switchbacks. “They shoot straight up the mountains,” she said, “and run rivers of mud every time it rains, which, I might add, is not infrequent in the rain-forest.” My wife had not considered that the government might want its rainforests washed off the mountains and onto the beaches. After all, an elevated coastline will be advantageous once U.S. greenhouse gases melt Canada. Also, if Americans will travel to Utah to play on rocks, then the potential for tourism in a post-rain-forest moonscape where gin is not banned at breakfast must be outstanding. “Although it is true,” I allowed, “that Utah offers the chance for multiple espousal.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” my wife said, “since prostitution is legal in Costa Rica too.”

As I say, it is hard to keep my wife on topic.

Which brings me to how the entire Costa Rican Army took an unhealthy interest in me. We were touring a

cloud forest with a guide who was telling us about the last golden toad. The golden toad is (well, was) an iridescent orange fellow that looks, as the leader of the free world would say, nukular; its entry in the Encyclopaedia Britannica is cross-referenced under "Wow." Once a year all of the golden toads in Costa Rica used to rendezvous at the same place for what can only be described as one heck of an orgy. "Have a ball at the Golden Toad Festival," I imagine the little guys used to say (and with ardeur considerably more convincing than that of the Testicle Festival bull). After several days of selflessly ensuring the propagation of the species, the toads would slip wearily off into the forest, and nobody saw them until they came back next year by the thousands. Then a few years back, only two showed up--both boys. One guesses they were a little confused. The next year only one came--the last golden toad. He came again the next year, and the next, then he stopped. That's the last anyone has seen of the golden toad. The cause, the guide told us, was global warming.

Meaning to be helpful, an American gentleman broke the silence by suggesting that if only Costa Rica had better controls on auto emissions, maybe the golden toad would have been saved. That a part of the gentleman's 401(k) was at that moment being siphoned to a Third World country with the foresight to declare itself Ecological Paradise somehow seemed cosmically correct. In fact, I regretted the Third World had so few Ecological Paradises for my compatriot's nest egg. I made the fateful connection with Detroit when he and his wife drove off in a rented sport utility vehicle. Here, I thought, are the people who give Detroit the GNP of Monaco for an armored personnel carrier because it feels so environmental to drive to Wal-Mart for more Weed-B-Gon at six gallons per mile in something that is called an Excursion and is forever charging up eroding mountainsides on TV. In retrospect, I am sure I was overheard by a snitch for the Costa Rican Army, who may or may not have been enjoying a memorable run of morning sickness that evening, when I said, "Why, Costa Rica is just Detroit with mosquitoes." I am still not sure why the entire Costa Rican Army does not appreciate the compliment.