

A special view from San José

By **TOM KENNEDY LVO**

UK AMBASSADOR TO COSTA RICA AND NICARAGUA



TOM KENNEDY has been the British Ambassador to Costa Rica and Nicaragua, resident in San José, since 2006. A graduate of UMIST in Manchester, he was originally an Executive with Bata Shoes, serving in Africa. Since joining the diplomatic service, he headed up Departments dealing with the Eastern Mediterranean and arms control, and has served in Buenos Aires. He was previously Consul-General in Bordeaux.

There are many remarkable things about Costa Rica, a small country – only a fifth the size of the UK – that packs a large punch. It enjoys a robust democratic tradition and political stability that often sees it referred to as Latin America's oldest democracy. Its pacifism – having abolished its armed forces sixty years ago – is inspirational across the world. It pursues enviably high ethical positions on human rights, security issues, disarmament and the environment. It acts as a key player in international initiatives such as the Arms Trade Treaty, the Protocol on Torture and the International Criminal Court. The urgency with which Costa Rica assumed the responsibilities of its seat on the UN Security Council for 2008-09 spoke volumes for its commitment to international affairs. Talk about countries that punch above their weight is commonplace but in Costa Rica's case it's true. This is one of the developing world's most determined countries in its desire to play a responsible and principled role – including by proposing initiatives – on matters of global importance. It is a fine example to others.

Costa Ricans enjoy one of the highest life expectancy levels in the Western Hemisphere, and some of the highest health, living and educational standards in the developing world – dividends of their political stability and decision to forego military expenditure. They are a remarkably tolerant nation – huge numbers of economic immigrants work in the economy and it is a destination of choice for many refugees.

The whole world looks up to Costa Rica for its green credentials. Five per cent of the planet's biodiversity is found there – the world's greatest per capita concentration – with new species still being discovered. It is home to a stunning profusion of flora and fauna and National Geographic describes Corcovado National Park as "the most biologically intense place on Earth".

Great Britain was the first European country to sign up to diplomatic relations with Costa Rica. We continue to enjoy a very warm bilateral relationship. The country's decision-makers and opinion formers know the UK well, including many who have lived and studied here. Our countries share closely parallel concerns on the major international issues of the day. We co-operated intensely in a small group of countries to initiate – against the odds – the current UN process

on an International Arms Trade Treaty (which can be traced back to an initiative launched by President Arias and other Peace Prize Laureates in 1997). How could a country with one of the world's biggest defence industries and a country conscientiously opposed to military force find such synergy on the idea of regulating the arms trade? Because we share respect for UN positions on defence issues and deep concern for the human misery that results when arms fall into the wrong hands.

We share a close working relationship on the UN Security Council, where Costa Rica has a seat for 2008-09. The government has said it considers the UK the most "user-friendly" of the permanent five Security Council members. Costa Rica has impressed to date with its activism on the Security Council, especially on Sudan and the International Criminal Court. It was the first country to recognise the independent state of Kosovo.

UK commercial interests in Costa Rica have existed ever since we received the country's first ever coffee exports, and are increasing dramatically. UK exports rose by a third in the year to 2007 with the main sectors being vehicles, industrial machinery and beverages. Costa Rica was in the top three markets world-wide last year for the rate of growth in British companies investing in research about the market. And after just a third of this current financial year that record level of activity has already been overtaken. So the word is out about Costa Rica and its attractions. The trade balance is overall in Costa Rica's favour – due to Britain's appetite for microprocessor chips from Costa Rica's new flagship industry – which illustrates perfectly that this is a Central American country with a difference.

That trade relationship can only benefit from the Association Agreement currently being negotiated between Costa Rica and its Central American regional partners with the European Union (Costa Rica accounts for two thirds of Central American trade with the EU). Both sides are confident this will conclude in 2009. And British companies already with operations in Costa Rica are set to benefit when the new free-trade agreement with the US kicks in later this year.

UK tourism to Costa Rica is growing and approaching 50,000 visitors annually. The latest full year figures (for 2006) showed the UK as almost the number one European source of visitors to Costa Rica. And in 2007 direct charter flights started up

between London Gatwick and the northern airport of Liberia. Research shows that most British visitors are attracted by the green, environmentally-friendly image that Costa Rica projects. There is a resident British population present too, about 2,000 strong, which forms a vibrant group contributing strongly in areas like business, tourism and culture. And speaking of culture, Costa Rica has a healthy appetite for British work, as shown, for example, by recent visits by the TNT Theatre group with Shakespearean plays and rock concerts by Duran Duran and Iron Maiden.

Whatever else it is known for, Costa Rica is most famous for its environmental credentials, at a time when mankind has never been more aware of the fragility of its relationship with the planet. The Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change, commissioned by the British government and published 18 months ago, proved a catalytic wake-up call to the international community. To its credit Costa Rica – host to some of the world's greatest expertise on climate issues, both inside government and in its NGO and academic community – seized immediately on the importance of the study.

From our very different starting positions – Costa Rica as a small, tropical, developing world country and the UK as a much bigger, post-industrial, developed, European country – we have become leading protagonists in the global debate to get a post-Kyoto arrangement in place by the Copenhagen meeting in 2009. We have both led by example with ambitious internal objectives. From day one the UK supported *Peace with Nature*, which sets out the comprehensive domestic action Costa Rica needs to take to address climate change, and a call for action along the same lines by other countries.

Costa Rica has a unique role to play in the drive for global unity in tackling climate change. It represents an outspoken developing world voice calling on countries to take their share of responsibility for saving the planet. And it has the political drive to act. Costa Rica has doubled its forested land area over the last 25 years, and is planting 7 million trees in 2008 (the equivalent of the UK planting 100 million!). With the launch of *Peace with Nature* last year Costa Rica became the first developing country in the world to aim for carbon neutrality, by 2021. It initiated the Climate Neutral group of countries at the United Nations, all of whom aim at carbon neutrality (but remains the only developing world country in that group). Together with Papua New Guinea, Costa Rica is leading the 'Coalition of Rainforest Nations' with an initiative on 'Avoided Deforestation' for consideration in the approach to Kyoto II.

Costa Rica has a vital regional role too. Central America is among the most vulnerable areas of the world to natural disaster through hurricanes, earthquakes and landslides. And few other places have this region's range

of natural beauty and bio-diversity, all endangered if global temperatures continue to rise. The Central Americans showed a political lead with the decision of the recent climate change summit in San Pedro Sula, Honduras to tackle the issue together. The summit rightly paid tribute to the *Peace with Nature* programme. Costa Rica is uniquely placed to help drive action forward. The United Kingdom wants to accompany this effort. We have put in US\$1m to fund a regional Economics of Climate Change and Impact Study for Central America, that will provide a blueprint to inform formulation of regional climate change strategy.

It is a privilege to work in a country that is so focused on this most important of problems – climate change – that will have devastating impact on life on this planet if we do not take prompt, internationally co-ordinated action. The United Kingdom is determined and committed to working with the government, the region and globally against the existential threat posed to our future by climate change.

More generally, it is a privilege for me to represent the United Kingdom in such a beautiful country and one that takes such a principled and activist approach to the major issues of the day. I am delighted that President Arias is visiting Britain and look forward to the boost this visit will give to our two countries' warm, co-operative and open bilateral relationship. 

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La Paz waterfall gardens, Vara Blanca

