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In a Corner of Costa Rica, a Beachhead for Luxury



Photographs by Adriana Zebrauskas for The New York Times

HORSE COUNTRY A winter ride near Hacienda Pinilla in Guanacaste province in Costa Rica, where condos and villas are springing up on cattle ranches and virgin Pacific beaches.

BY JANELLE BROWN

THE Liberia airport, Costa Rica's new international hub, is not precisely a beacon of modern transportation. The terminal consists of an open-air warehouse with a corrugated tin roof, cooled by an enormous fan whose main effect is to stir the grasshoppers into a frenzy. In the line for customs, visitors are kept company by butterflies and the occasional blasé frog.

Before visitors even leave the tarmac, though, smiling representatives from the local Chamber of Tourism are there to greet their out-of-town guests, most of whom have just arrived on the new direct three-hour flights from Atlanta, Miami and Houston. They press the real estate guide "Costa Rica Traveler" into newcomers' hands. In its pages, American visitors can find ads for dozens of different developments that

will happily sell them a villa with an ocean view.

For decades the remote Pacific Coast of northern Costa Rica — the Guanacaste province — was the domain of die-hard surfers and backpackers, with other visitors deterred by the grueling five-hour drive from the country's main airport in San José. But in the last few years, Guanacaste has been transformed by a collection of hotels and real estate developments aimed at America's affluent baby boomers.

All up and down the coast, bulldozers are at work. Three major developments, including a project anchored by a Four Seasons hotel, are already selling luxury condominiums for \$500,000 and up, and hundreds of smaller, more speculative endeavors are also breaking ground. The airport in Liberia, the capital of Guanacaste, is at the center of the transformation. Three years ago, when the first direct flights from the United States landed, only 50,000 people a year arrived there. In 2005, 300,000 did.



SNOWBIRDS Jean and Tony Capezza of Massachusetts have a home at Reserva Conchal.

In the airport lines, Americans talk in urgent tones about the money to be made, about "Wild West" opportunities. Never mind that Guanacaste is still a region of cattle ranchers and rutted roads. The new homesteaders envision a beach, golf and spa destination equal to the Puerto Vallarta corridor in Mexico or Wailea Beach on Maui — without, so far at least, the high-rise blight. The area's promoters have taken to calling it the new Gold Coast.

"It's hard for me to look at all this change — you're used to how uncluttered it was," said Chris Mailloux, a ReMax agent whose family has been selling real estate in the area for 13 years. In one abbreviated block near his office, in the tiny fishing village of Playa Hermosa, eight developments of at least 20 homes each are under construction. "Lots that were once \$50,000 are now \$500,000," he said. "There's not a

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