

SAN JOSÉ'S SIGHTS IN STONE

In their rush to tour the beaches and parks of Costa Rica, visitors often overlook the Beaux-Arts buildings of the country's capital

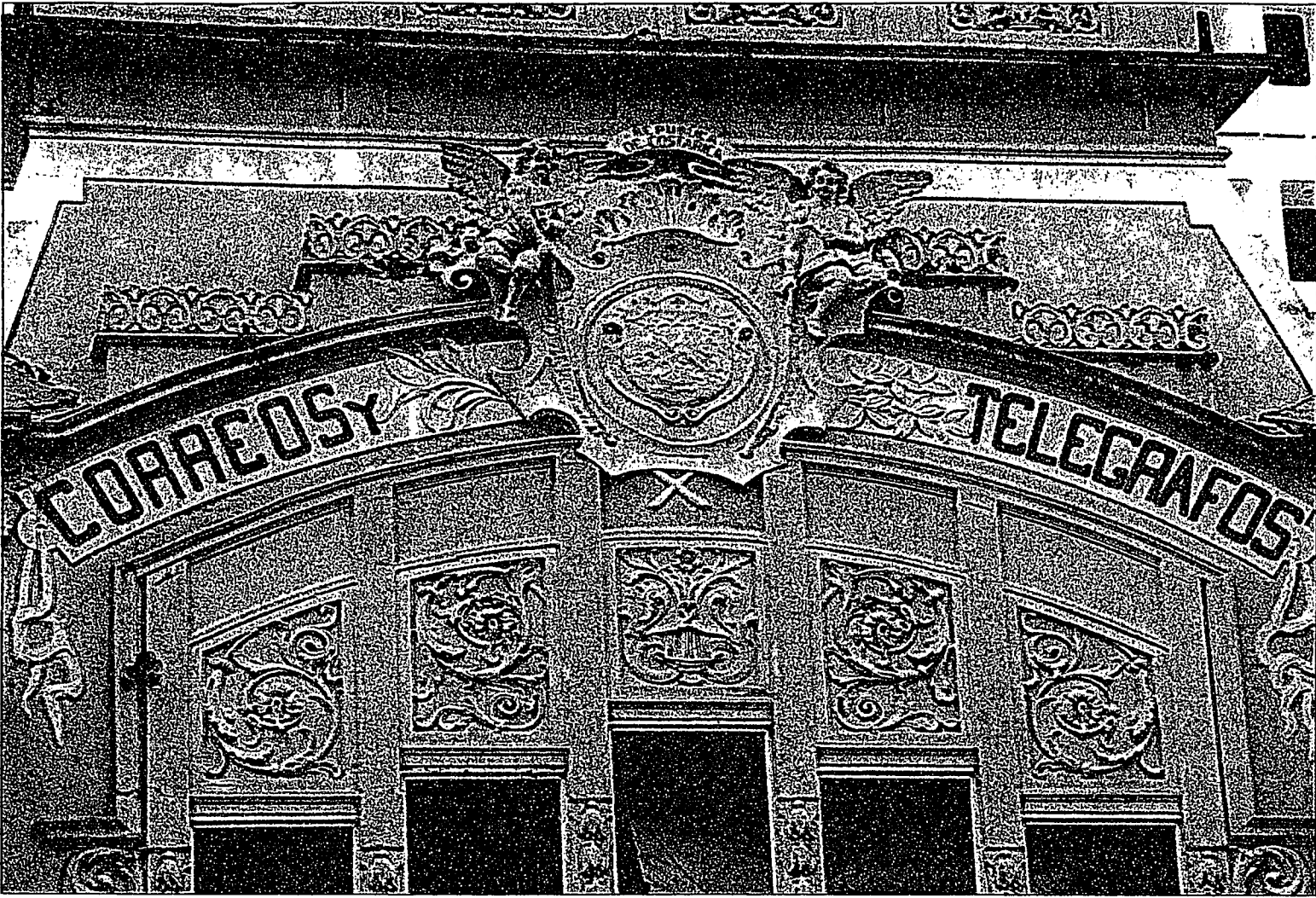
By ANTHONY ROBINS

EACH year, Americans pour into Costa Rica to visit its cloud forests, national parks and beaches, passing through San José on their way. Few, unfortunately, stay to look around the country's capital, with its gracious turn-of-the-century architectural treasures.

Founded by Spanish settlers in 1737 in Costa Rica's central valley, high in the mountains, San José became the capital in 1823, just in time for the burgeoning coffee industry to bring it prosperity. That prosperity transformed the dusty town into an elegant, up-to-the-minute Latin American capital. In the mid-1880's, San José was one of the first cities in the world to install electric street lights.

While much has changed in the past half-century — the city center now boasts some remarkably unattractive contemporary development — San José still retains elements of its tropical Beaux-Arts elegance. Before heading for the beach or the rain forest, visitors will find it rewarding to take a half day to walk around and discover its delights. The condition of the 19th-century public buildings that remain ranges from fair (the Atlantic Train Station) to excellent (the Teatro Nacional), with most in very good shape.

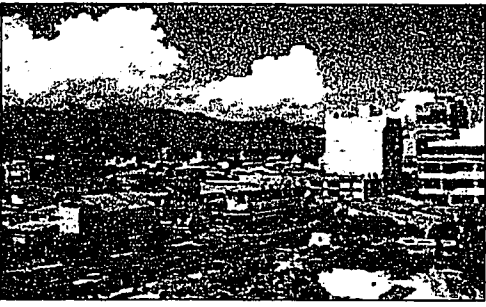
The palm-lined Parque Central at Calle Central (Central Street) between Avenidas 2 and 4 is one of the best places to begin. The park — dominated by the recently restored, severely neo-classical Catedral Metropolitana — is the capital's heart, and an island of green in the middle of its ever increasing urban cacophony. The large 1940's gazebo in the park's center is brightly painted in tropi-



Photographs by Marco T. Saborio for The New York Times



ABOVE Casa Amarilla, or Yellow House, home of Costa Rica's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
BELOW Aerial view of San José.



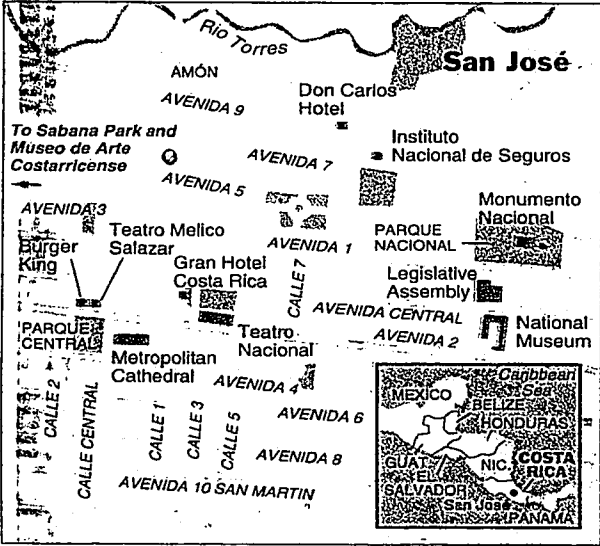
The exquisite neo-classical, 1,000-seat opera house, a source of national pride, has been meticulously restored and maintained. The national Government built it under pressure from a group of coffee barons who were mortified when, in 1890, the great diva Adelina Patti, performing with an opera company in Guatemala, wouldn't appear in San José for lack of an adequate theater.

Reflecting the enormous prestige of European designers and technicians at the time, the theater was designed by Belgian architects, assembled on site by German architects and furnished with Italian pieces — the Costa Rican minister in Paris was dispatched to Italy to order suitable ornaments and furniture. Visitors can tour the opulent interior to admire its gilt carvings, crystal candelabra, Carrara marble columns — and a huge mural by the Milanese painter Aleardo Villa illustrating the production of bananas and coffee.

Most of San José's older buildings rise no more than one or two stories. For decades, its tallest building — with the city's only elevator — was the early 20th-century Gran Hotel Costa Rica across from the Teatro Nacional, originally four stories high with a roof garden on the fifth floor. The sedate, mango-yellow hotel once served an international clientele who arrived on the United Fruit Company banana boats docking at the Atlantic port of Limón. President Kennedy stayed there in 1960 in what is now called the Presidential Suite. The beautifully tiled veranda restaurant on the plaza is one of the best places to take in the city scene.

Civic pride was behind the 1908 rebuilding of the Atlantic Train Station, some 10 blocks away on Avenida 3. The handsome Beaux-Arts station, which originally served the rail line bringing exported coffee to Limón, was the elegant grand entrance to the capital, with twin mansard roof peaks, an elaborate centerpiece over the entrance and sculpted figures at the roofline repre-

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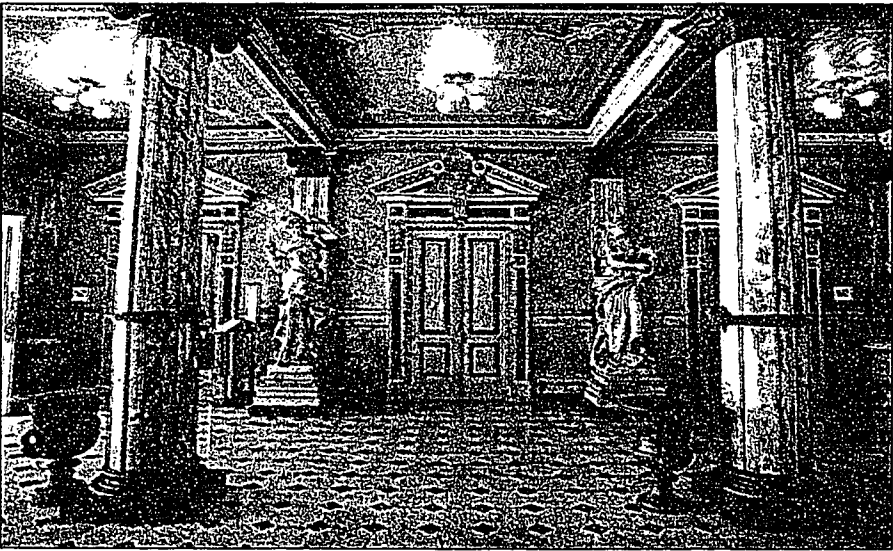


The New York Times

cal colors with Art Deco zig-zags.

Across Avenida 2, you can find a block-long collection of European-inspired buildings. At the corner of Calle Central stands the 2,250-seat Teatro Melico Salazar, a handsome Beaux-Arts fantasy built in 1928, designed for opera and drama by the Italian immigrant José Fabio Garnier. With its arches, balconies and fluted Corinthian col-

ANTHONY ROBINS is an author and historian who visits Costa Rica frequently.



umns, it could have been lifted off the boulevards of Paris.

Next door, what is now an Art Moderne Burger King once reigned as the posh Cine Palace, Costa Rica's first cinema, designed in 1935 by the architect Paul Ehrenberg, a German immigrant who brought modernism to the capital. The matching round-cornered building beside it, also by Ehrenberg, was designed as an elegant store, but long ago became the Soda Palace. A "soda" is a typically Costa Rican restaurant selling sodas and batidos (shakes made with man-

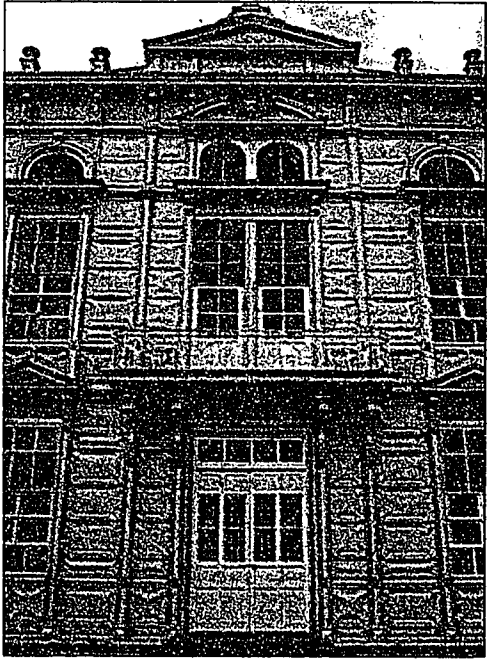
go, papaya and other tropical fruits); this one may be the most famous soda in the country, with a reputation as a literary and political hangout.

San José boasts several other theaters, including the 1891 Teatro Variedades (Variety Theater) at the corner of Calle 5 and Avenida Central, whose Beaux-Arts facade is adorned with angels, dragons and wreaths of flowers. But best known is the Teatro Nacional, just a few blocks east of the Parque Central, exemplifying the turn-of-the-century culture that built the capital.

ABOVE The Art Nouveau Post Office.

LEFT The Teatro Nacional.

BELOW The Edificio Metálico, a school built of ornamental iron plates made in Belgium.



Anthony Robins

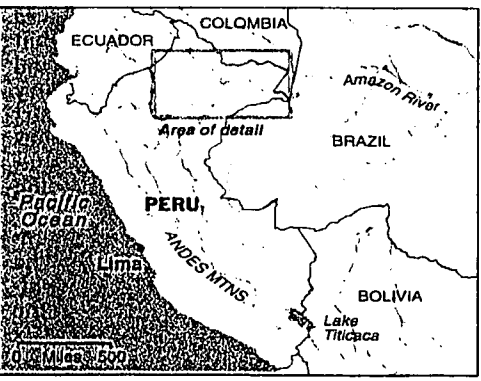
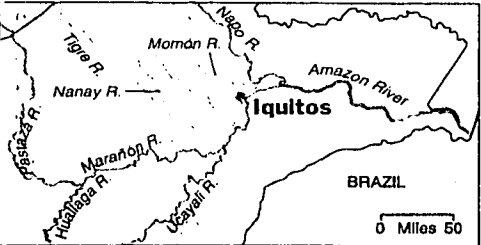
GOING WITH THE AMAZON'S FLOW

Iquitos, accessible only by plane or boat, is the consummate river town in the Peruvian jungle

By SARA GAY DAMMANN

IN times of high water, the Amazon overflows its grassy banks until it laps against the city wall along the Malecón, Iquitos's broad waterfront pedestrian boulevard. When the tropical sun sets, Iquitos, in northeastern Peru, turns to the river. Waiters at waterfront bars and restaurants prepare their tables for customers, artisans spread blankets laden with wood carvings and beaded jewelry, and musicians assemble.

SARA GAY DAMMANN is a free-lance writer who lives in Charlevoix, Mich.



The New York Times



Nancy Dammann

Steadily the Malecón fills with people. Families stroll. Pairs of Shipibo women walk barefoot among the crowd, displaying their hand-woven cloth and seed necklaces. Clowns draw laughing children to the mini-amphitheater in the center of the broad walkway, while 10-year-old peanut vendors work the crowd's edges, and shoeshine boys pester diners.

There are no roads across the vast Amazonian selva (jungle) surrounding Iquitos, which claims to be the world's largest city approachable only by air or water. With an

official population of 400,000 and growing, Iquitos has had a history of booms and busts in its brief 200-year history. Yet this island city is known to most travelers only as a jumping-off point for Amazon eco-tours.

Iquitos is the Amazon's most westerly major port, an important spot on a river navigable by oceangoing freighters for its entire 2,300 miles from the city across northern Peru and Brazil to the Atlantic.

And when the floods make life in the jungle particularly difficult, as they did this year, more people come to the city, putting

up makeshift dwellings around the periphery.

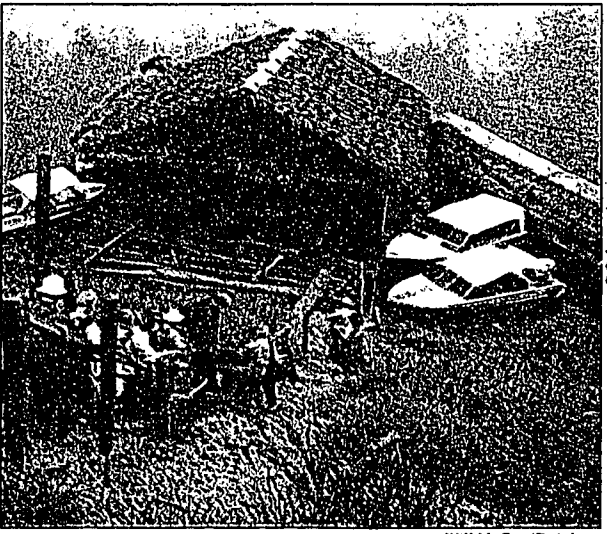
For my husband, Tom, and me, Iquitos was a base from which to travel upriver to a small village on the Ucayali where our daughter Nancy studies community-based conservation efforts. At her urging, we allowed extra days for Iquitos, both at the beginning of our trip in late April and after we returned from the jungle near the end of May.

Our two-hour flight from Lima followed the eastern slopes of the Andes. Through

cloud breaks, we traced the brown fingers of silt-filled streams gathering strength, joining and disappearing into the endless green at the foot of the mountains. As the plane banked eastward, crossing where the Ucayali and Marañón Rivers meet to form the Amazon, the island city spread before us.

After settling in at the home of some young friends of our daughter's, we began our exploration in the maze of the Belén market, where we outfitted ourselves for

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Will McCoy/Rainbow

LEFT The Belén market, a swirl of sounds and colors, is the place to go for supplies for a trip into the jungle.

ABOVE A departure dock for one of the many boat tours along the Amazon and other rivers around Iquitos.

San José Architecture

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sending Mercury, patron of travelers, and Venus, his lover.

Another European immigrant, the Catalan-born architect Luis Llach Llagostera, designed the Correos y Telegrafos, the national Post Office, a few blocks from the Parque Central, in 1914. With its elaborate arches, balustrades, urns and flowery detail, the Art Nouveau gem is considered his finest work.

San José's other great Art Nouveau building, the former Jimenez de La Guardia house across town on Calle 5 at Avenida 1, was also designed by an immigrant, Francisco Tenca, an Italian architect, who created a voluptuous mansion with oval windows, a fanciful roofline, curvaceous wrought-iron gates and deeply carved reliefs. No longer a residence, it is not open for visits, but can be seen from the street.

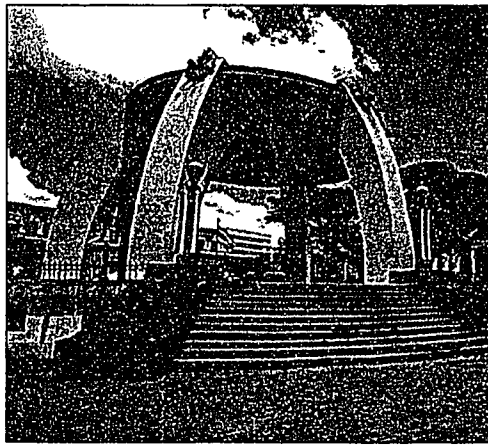
If importing an architect wasn't possible, San José's civic leaders didn't shrink from importing an entire building, as in the case of a yellow and blue-gray school on Avenida 5 constructed of ornamental iron plates. Part of an effort both to improve education in the rapidly growing capital and to beautify the city, the building, called the Edificio

Metálico, was fabricated in Belgium in 1890, shipped to Costa Rica in 1892 and assembled in 1896.

Though local legend has it that the school was designed by Eiffel, its architect was in fact Charles Thirio, a Belgian. The authorities chose iron hoping it could resist earthquakes like the then-recent one of 1888, and during the disastrous 1910 earthquake the metal building held up so well it functioned as a temporary hospital for the injured.

Across from the school, Parque Morazán is adorned by a beautiful domed, classical gazebo designed as a "Templo de la Música" in 1920 by the American-trained Costa Rican architect José Francisco Salazar Quesada. Built in a record 39 days, it was the first dome in the country done in reinforced concrete.

Several of San José's older buildings have found new uses. When Costa Rica abolished its army after its 1948 civil war, military buildings around the country became redundant, among them San José's 1917 Bellavista military barracks, with battlements, towers and high thick walls. Ceremonially decommissioned in 1948, the building, atop a hill at Calle 17 and Avenida 2, was reborn as the National Museum of Costa Rica, with collections ranging from pre-Columbian



gold to 19th-century furnishings.

Another museum in a converted building is the Museo de Arte Costarricense, in the Sabana park, housing a fine collection of 19th and 20th century Costa Rican painting and sculpture. The graceful Spanish Colonial tower with wrought-iron balconies was built in 1940 as the main terminal of Costa Rica's first international airport. The museum took over the building in 1978, turning the central tower into a restoration and conservation studio. Inside the main room is a grand ornamental plaster frieze, by the French artist Louis Féron, illustrating the history of Costa Rica.

PERHAPS the most appropriate conversion is the former Fábrica Nacional de Licores (National Liquor Factory), opposite Parque España. The long, low mid-19th-century building with stucco walls, stone-faced central entrance, ornamental clock and iron gates has one of the capital's few surviving Spanish-tile roofs and an interior patio. Said to be San José's oldest building, it houses the ministry that protects the nation's historic landmarks.

Across the street stands the Casa Amarilla (Yellow House), with a wildly exuberant Baroque-inspired entrance. Built in 1916 with money donated by Andrew Carnegie, for use by the Central American Court of Justice, today it houses the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

If you have a little more time, walk up the hill behind the Casa Amarilla to Barrio Amón, a neighborhood of elegant old houses in wood and stucco. Beautifully maintained, it has long been home to notables including many of the country's presidents. The turn-of-the-century houses along its spine, Avenida 9, reflect all the varied styles of the capital, from Spanish Colonial to a picturesque Moorish-inspired house with an intricately carved window and ogee-arch door.

Many houses have been converted into pleasant pensions, chief among them the Don Carlos Hotel, named for founder Don

The Museo de Oro (Gold Museum), beneath the plaza adjoining the National Theater, (506) 223-0528, has an unrivaled display of Costa Rica's pre-Columbian gold artifacts, dating from 500 B.C. Open Tuesday to Sunday, 10 A.M. to 5 P.M. Admission \$5.20.

Hotels

Among the nicest places to stay in the center of the capital are these:

Gran Hotel Costa Rica, Avenida 2, in front of the National Theater; (506) 221-4000 or (800) 949-0592, fax (506) 221-3501.

Public spaces have a subdued luxury; guest rooms are comfortable, with modern furnishings, and many look out onto the mountains. The patio is a pleasant place for a drink or something to eat, serving sandwiches and local fare; a light meal costs around \$6 a person. Double rooms \$40 to \$70, suites \$100 to \$150.

Hotel Don Carlos, Barrio Amón, (506) 221-6707, fax (506) 255-0828, on the Internet www.doncarlos.co.cr. A colorful and artistic upscale pension in several buildings (the oldest from the early 20th century), with 33 comfortable rooms, all with private bath. Double rates range from \$60 to \$70, including Continental breakfast.

ANTHONY ROBINS

Taking the 19th-century tour

Logistics

The city's streets are numbered Second, Fourth, Sixth and so on on one side of Calle Central, and First, Third and Fifth on the other. Avenues are similarly numbered on either side of Avenida Central.

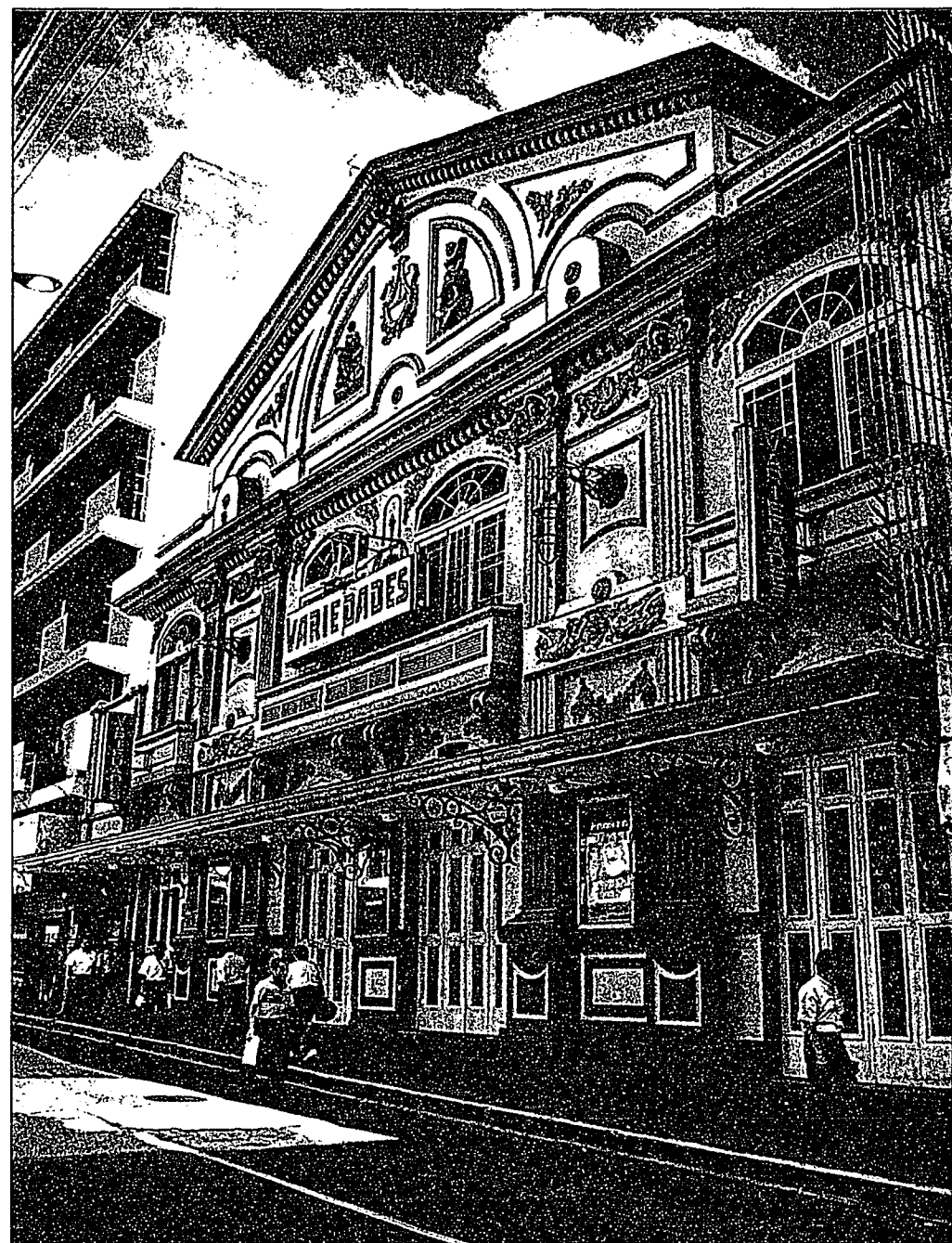
Museums

National Museum, Calle 17, between Avenidas Central and 2; (506) 221-4429, fax (506) 233-7427. Open Tuesday to Saturday, 8:30 A.M. to 4:30 P.M.; Sundays and holidays, 9 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. Admission 70 cents, at 290 colones to the dollar.

Costa Rican Museum of Art, Paseo Colón and Calle 42; (506) 222-7734, fax (506) 222-7247. Open Tuesday to Sunday 10 A.M. to 4 P.M. Admission \$1.40.

Jade Museum, Avenida 7 between Calles 9 and 11; (506) 287-6034, extension 2584, fax (506) 255-3456. The world's largest collection of pre-Columbian American jade, including pieces dating to the 9th century. Monday to Friday, 8:30 A.M. to 3 P.M. Admission \$1.70.

Tours of the **National Theater**, Avenida 2 between Calles 3 and 5, (506) 233 6354, are available Monday to Friday, 9 A.M. to 5 P.M., Saturday 9 to noon and 1 to 5 P.M. Closed Sunday. Tickets (\$2.10) can be bought at the theater.



Photographs by Marco T. Saborio for The New York Times

ABOVE LEFT The gazebo in the center of Parque Central.

ABOVE The Teatro Variedades has an elaborate Beaux-Arts facade.

Carlos Balser, a European immigrant of the early 1920's. Don Carlos became an authority on pre-Columbian gold and jade, and his 250-piece jade collection now forms part of the nearby Jade Museum (on the 11th floor of the Instituto Nacional de Seguros — the National Institute of Insurance — next door to the Casa Amarilla). One wall in the hotel's interior patio is lined with an illustration, done in 272 hand-painted tiles, of San José at the turn of the century.

The city's most famous monument must be the Monumento Nacional, in the Parque Nacional, opposite the Legislative Assembly

and the former Presidential Residence. Dating from the 1880's, the large allegorical statuary group represents the Central American nations in 1856 fighting off the invading forces of the American President of Nicaragua, William Walker — a piece of history known to every Costa Rican child, but to few Americans. Juan Santamaría, a young Costa Rican killed in the invasion, is the country's national hero.

And now, armed with a little insight into Costa Rica's capital, its history, and its people, you can head off to the rain forest.

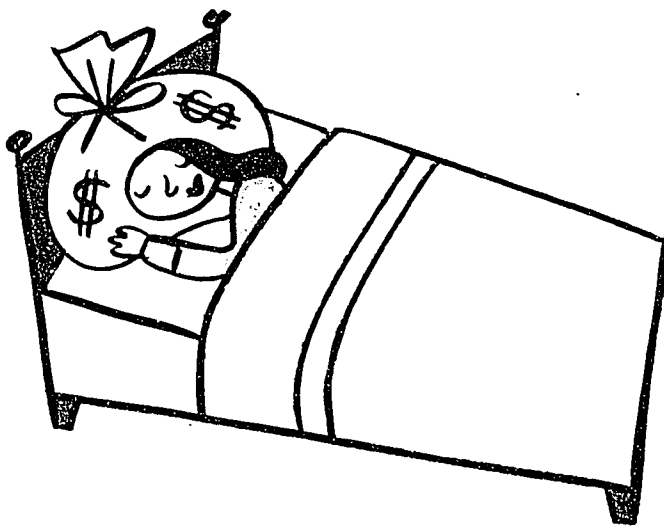
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