



Vol. 1 No. 3 November 2007

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## Reflections

One of the favorite things about my job is creating a new tour — a travel experience that previously never existed. How much fun is this? Actually, a lot.

Recently I journeyed to exotic Easter Island to prepare for the 2010 total solar eclipse. Joining me on this investigative excursion was Jay Anderson, my pal and eclipse-meteorologist extraordinaire, as well as Paul Swart and Cesar Higuera. (They led our Libya eclipse trip in 2006.)

On Easter Island (called Isla de Pascua in Spanish and known as Rapa Nui to the indigenous people) I was struck by how simple life is on this remote isle. For instance, horses are as much a mode of transport as are cars and scooters. Hotels are clean and simple — no Hiltons or Holiday Inns here. I was also surprised by the abundance of unpaved roads (in other words, muddy) and the presence of archeological sites that lack even basic facilities. After viewing the famous Moai faces sprinkled around the perimeter of the island, it struck me that these stone statues, along with the pyramids of early Egypt and the cave art of prehistoric Europe, are the most amazing man-made structures from ancient times that I have ever had the privilege of seeing.

My job here at TravelQuest is about discovery and sharing. During these exploratory trips, I get to do my own personal discovery of new places. Then, when I travel with you on a TQ tour, I get to share!

Regards . . .





Unless otherwise noted, all images courtesy Gary Seronik.

## Costa Rica: the Rich Coast

When Christopher Columbus landed in 1502 on the eastern coast of Central America near the present-day town of Puerto Limón, natives wearing numerous gold ornaments greeted him. Twenty years later, a Spanish expedition, led by Gil Gonzalez Davila, marched north from Panama and found so much gold in the same region that it's said he called the area "Costa Rica" — the rich coast (a name sometimes credited to Columbus). The riches of gold were illusionary, but the country has other wealth including amazing wildlife and beautiful scenery.

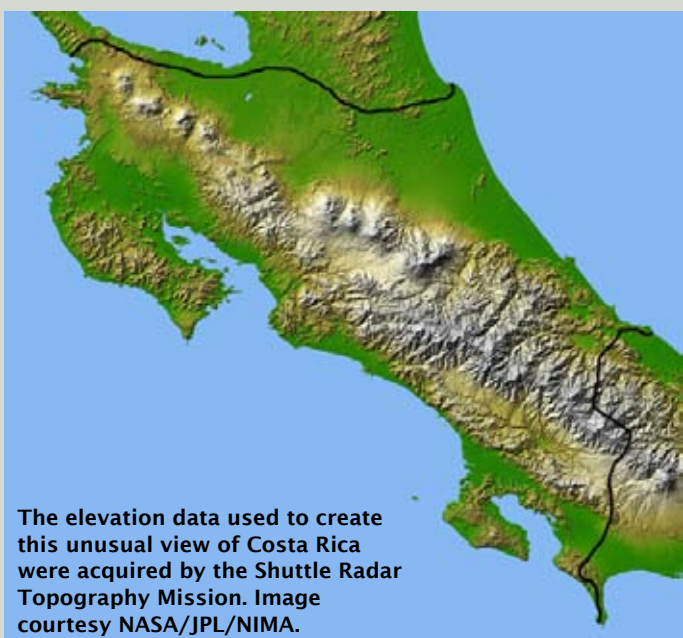
### A Little Background

Costa Rica is a narrow land, divided into eastern and western coastal plains by a range of mountains and volcanoes that runs down its spine from Nicaragua in the north to Panama in the south. With water to its east (the Caribbean) and west (the Pacific Ocean), the country is a mere 19,730 sq. miles (51,100 sq. kilometers) in area — roughly the size of New Hampshire and Massachusetts combined. Its population, about 4.3 million, is less than that of the greater Boston area.

The climate is temperate in the central highlands, but tropical in the coastal areas. Seasonal differences are measured by rainfall rather than temperature. The dry season (sometimes nicknamed the "less-rainy season") runs from December to April; the actual rainy season is from May to November. The Caribbean side of Costa Rica is generally moister than its Pacific-coast counterpart.

Nearly 75% of the country's population lives in the fertile Meseta Central (Central Plateau), a high-altitude region that includes the largest city, San José. Founded in 1737, San José became the capital in 1823 and was the first city in the world to have public electric lighting.

Coffee, introduced from Cuba in the late 1700s, rapidly became Costa Rica's "gold." In terms of income generated, it's now the country's third main export



The elevation data used to create this unusual view of Costa Rica were acquired by the Shuttle Radar Topography Mission. Image courtesy NASA/JPL/NIMA.

behind bananas and pineapples. But what's helping fuel Costa Rica's economy these days is the rise of eco-tourism, a direct result of the region's incredible array of flora and fauna.



### Biodiversity

Costa Rica is one of the most biologically diverse countries on our planet, largely due to its location on the land bridge between North and South America. Despite having a mere 0.01% of the world's total land mass, Costa Rica is home to more than 4% of Earth's plant and animal life. This wealth includes some 10,000 species of plants, 850 species of birds, 800 different types of butterflies, and more than 500 species of mammals, reptiles, and amphibians.

This biodiversity flourishes thanks to a variety of ecosystems, from mountaintops to cloud forests, rainforests, and coastal plains. Some 27% of Costa Rica's land area consists of National Parks and wildlife refuges, but loss of habitat due to deforestation outside these protected regions is an issue.

### Ring of Fire

Costa Rica is part of the "Ring of Fire," a zone of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions that almost completely encompasses the rim of the Pacific Ocean. The country hosts 10 major volcanoes, of which at least six (according to the Smithsonian's [Global Volcanism Program](#)) have been active during historical and/or modern times.

Of all the volcanoes in Costa Rica, [Arenal](#) garners the most attention, likely because of its classic shape (see the photo at the top of the previous page) and ongoing eruptions. Arenal's recent activity began with a major blast in 1968, and it's now considered to be one of the world's most active volcanoes.

Another volcano that has recently erupted is [Poas](#) (*below*). Although Arenal gets most of the attention, Poas is actually higher and larger than its better-known companion.

Discover Costa Rica for yourself! Join TravelQuest on one (or both) of our upcoming trips: [Southern Skies Fiesta](#) and [Volcanoes and Rainforests](#).



### For More Information About Costa Rica . . .

**All about Costa Rica:** [www.visitcostarica.com](http://www.visitcostarica.com)

**History:** <http://centralamerica.com/cr/moon/mohistory.htm>

**Tico Times (a weekly newspaper):** <http://ticotimes.net>

**Arenal volcano gallery:** [www.arenal.net/photo-gallery.htm](http://www.arenal.net/photo-gallery.htm)

## Making Memories

Whether your trip next is with a group or on your own, don't succumb to the lure of cutting-edge technology and buy a new camera *just* before you leave. Such a purchase can be tempting, especially if you're with a group. Assuming that you do have camera trouble, surely there'll be somebody on the bus who knows photography and can help.

Don't push your luck. Your camera may be so new that no one can figure out how to operate it, let alone diagnose what's wrong. And frankly, nobody wants to spend their time examining your camera while missing the sights they paid to see.

That said, there *are* plenty of reasons to hit the camera store prior to a vacation, including the untimely demise of your beloved 20-year-old film camera! But if you do buy new gear, get it well ahead of your departure and be sure to try it out before the trip. Become familiar with how the camera feels, and figure out what all the basic settings do.

One thing you may discover is that the factory defaults on a new camera cause it to slightly over-expose some scenes. You'll want to find this out, and adjust for it, before leaving on your trip.

Finally, bring the instructions. If the manual is a PDF document, print at least the trouble-shooting section and the summary pages that show what every button and switch does.



# Profile:

## Gary Seronik



Courtesy Gary Seronik

Gary Seronik has always been in love with the night sky, and growing up on an orchard in British Columbia's desert interior certainly helped. As he says, "I can't remember a time when I wasn't interested in the night sky. To me, it was just as much a part of nature as the birds and the trees in our orchard. At night I could see the Milky Way and thousands of stars — sadly, that's something few people have out their back doors these days."

As an adult, Gary's affection for nature's 'dark side' remained strong and guided him to a career as an astronomy writer, with a few diversions along the way — such as the years spent fronting a rock band! The music business eventually pulled him to Vancouver where, in 1991, he landed a job at the H.R. MacMillan Space Centre presenting planetarium shows. The experience proved invaluable. "That's when I really learned how to talk to the average person about

astronomy — to convey the excitement I felt about what was going on 'up there' to people who were often encountering this information for the first time. Talking with audience members face to face, you knew right away if they were getting it or not," he recalls.

Show presenting led to writing and producing planetarium shows, which in turn led to writing articles for popular-level astronomy publications such as the Canadian magazine *SkyNews* and the large-circulation American magazine, *Sky & Telescope* (*S&T*). Having amassed an impressive list of writing credits, Gary was offered the opportunity to work full time for *S&T* in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

"This was my dream job — the big leagues. I'd been reading the magazine since I was 12 years old, so in 1998 I jumped at the chance."

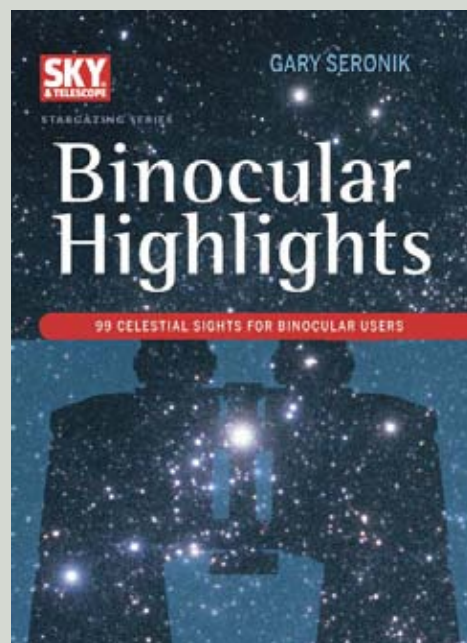
Gary remains a contributing editor at *S&T* even though he returned to British Columbia last year. "I'm doing pretty much the same stuff as always, only now, I'm at the end of a 3,000-mile-long wire instead of being in the building." The 'stuff' includes editing and a good deal of writing. A self-confessed equipment nut, Gary regularly contributes telescope reviews and writes about the pleasure and pain of making your own gear in his monthly Telescope Workshop column. He will also admit to being something of a lunatic when it comes to Earth's nearest neighbor, the Moon. Gary edited Charles A. Wood's *The Modern Moon* and Antonín Růkl's acclaimed *Atlas of the Moon*.

In spite of spending so much time on the Moon, Gary is best known by many *S&T* readers for his monthly

Binocular Highlight column, in which he describes the wonders of the night sky visible in ordinary binoculars. A collection of his writing drawn from nearly a decade's worth of columns has recently been compiled into the book *Binocular Highlights: 99 Celestial Sights for Binocular Users* (available through [Sky Publishing](#)).

These days Gary continues to enjoy the night sky from his home in Victoria and looks forward to his annual TravelQuest trip to Costa Rica to view the southern skies. Even though he's a veteran star gazer, much of the southern sky was unfamiliar to him. "For me, Costa Rica is a lot like being back at the orchard and experiencing the night sky for the first time all over again. Only this time, I know more and can better appreciate the things I'm seeing."

As a bonus, he gets to share his enthusiasm for the night sky with TravelQuest tour members. "That part of the tour is like being back in the planetarium. And I have to say, it's wonderful being face to face with an audience again."



# A Festival of Lights

Story and Images by Bob Stephens

Every solar eclipse tour is unique and creates special memories of exotic places visited with good friends. The trip to see the October 24, 1995, total eclipse of the Sun was no exception. Organized by TravelBug (the predecessor of TravelQuest), this quest took us to many of India's most fascinating places at a perfect time of year.



Led by Jay Anderson and Steve Edberg, we reached India on the eve of Diwali, the "Festival of Lights" (*above*). Our arrival in Jaipur was greeted, coincidentally, by blazing lights, fireworks, a multitude of people dressed in colorful clothing, and sitar music that continued well into the night. The whole city had turned out for this celebration of the victory of good over evil.

No astronomy-themed trip is complete without a tour of the local observatories. India offers some of the most unusual astronomy sites, including the stone observatories of New Delhi and Jaipur. Both have large sundials and various instruments used to measure the altitude and azimuth of astronomical objects. In fact, Jaipur's stone observatory contains the world's largest sundial (*right*). Given the number of eclipse tours in India, we thought it only a mild coincidence that we met fellow eclipse chasers Fred Espenak and Ken Wilcox on top of the great sundial.

The next day we were off to our viewing site: a rustic lodge at a desert camp near Mandawa Castle. It is always difficult finding sleep the night before an eclipse. We woke at 4:30 am to sound of sitars and rose to watch the dawn swallow the zodiacal light. What a true Festival of Lights this was turning out to be.

While waiters served us proper English tea, we eagerly awaited the arrival of our morning eclipse. Finally, it was upon us. I watched intently as first the



diamond ring and then Bailey's Beads appeared along the bottom of the Moon's limb, while others concentrated on the approaching shadow or the prominences. We all took in the corona. At our location this was a very short eclipse; totality lasted less than a minute. So it seemed that a mere instant after darkness fell, Bailey's Beads reappeared, and the spectacular show was over.

After a celebratory dinner in Jaipur, our tour continued. We stopped at Keoladeo Ghana National Park (a world-famous bird sanctuary), Amber Fort, Fatehpur Sikri (City of Victory), the Red Fort, and the Taj Mahal. Experiencing the sunset at the Taj Mahal was the crowning glory to our very own Festival of Lights tour.



# On the Road

Travel vacations are great. Too bad the getting-ready-to-go part is often so stressful. Here are a few ideas that should help minimize some of that pre-trip tension.

As you're packing for your next adventure, create a list of everything you're taking (from socks to passports and all things in between). Then make a second list of all the tasks you have to do prior to departure (cancel the paper, hold the mail, copy travel documents, set timers for lights, and so on). Okay, so it sounds like a lot of work and it is — the first time.

## Ramblings

As the editor of *Travel Quest*, I've been asked a few times about reader contributions. If you'd like to write a little something for this e-zine, here's what you need to know.

Travel tips for "On the Road" and photo hints for "Making Memories" are easy to submit. Just jot them down and fire them off to me at the e-mail address below.

If you have a memorable travel tale to tell, try to keep it to about 600 words in length. Write it up as a Word document, include one or more photos, and send the story and images to me as e-mail attachments.

Your tips, hints, travel tales, and any comments you have about *Travel Quest* will reach me at: [editor@TQ-International.com](mailto:editor@TQ-International.com)  
I look forward to hearing from you!

*Paul Deans*

But here's the key. When you get back, go through the list and note what you did and didn't use or do, and — most important — add anything you forgot. If you didn't use something this time, do you really need it next time? Now you have a reference list that'll make preparing for your next trip a whole lot easier.

If you travel a lot, you might consider creating sublists: one for business trips, one for TravelQuest tours, one for vacations, and so on.

### Travel Insurance

If you decide to take travel insurance, and if it includes Baggage Coverage, TravelQuest's Pamela Moodie has some suggestions in case a claim has to be filed for lost or stolen bags.

When packing, lay out the contents of each bag and take a picture. So if you need to fill out the claim form, you'll have a visual reminder (to go with the list you created) of everything that was lost. And since you probably don't have receipts for the items that were in your luggage, you can go to the Internet, find "like items," and submit copies of those items (and their prices) with your claim.

Finally, here's something you may not know. When you make travel plans with friends, your travel insurance might cover all of you if one party must cancel for a covered reason. It's called Cancellation Coverage for Traveling Companions. Be sure to ask if this type of coverage is included in your travel-insurance policy.

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## Upcoming Adventures

### Gray Whales and Wildlife

#### **Just Announced!**

Join a "Sea of Cortez Whale Watching Experience" aboard the 138-passenger expedition ship the Spirit of Yorktown. Spend seven days experiencing gray whales and wildlife in a region that Jacques Cousteau once called the "Aquarium of the World."

***December 2007 through March 2008.***

### Costa Rica: Volcanoes & Rainforests

We have teamed up with world-renowned author and volcano expert Stephen James O'Meara for a tour of this amazing country that includes lush tropical rainforests and active volcanoes. ***February 9 - 15, 2008.***

#### **Eclipse 2008**

On August 1, 2008, a total eclipse of the Sun will sweep past the North Pole (intercept the path of totality *and* see the pole by [air](#) or [sea](#)), plunge south through Siberia in [Russia](#), and end in north-central [China](#). TravelQuest is pleased to offer eight different eclipse-viewing tours; click on the hot links above to view our various options.

Visit our web site for more about our tours: [www.OnlineTravelQuest.com](http://www.OnlineTravelQuest.com).