8-2008

Using Tourist Travel Habits and Preferences to Assess Strategic Destination Positioning: The Case of Costa Rica

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Abstract
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Keywords
ecotourism, Plog destination life cycle, Costa Rica, destination management, strategic planning

Disciplines
Hospitality Administration and Management

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Using Tourist Travel Habits and Preferences to Assess Strategic Destination Positioning

The Case of Costa Rica

by ZHAOPING LIU, JUDY A. SIGUAW, and CATHY A. ENZ

A study of 118 U.S. travelers to Costa Rica is analyzed to highlight how consumer preferences and patterns of consumption can be used to reveal the status of a particular destination in its life cycle. Using a model for destinations’ psychographics developed by S. C. Plog, the analysis shows that Costa Rica may be increasingly appealing to the middle of the psychographic distribution. While this trend is not inherently bad, it challenges Costa Rica’s destination managers to consider carefully what type of further development they will allow. This research illustrates the means by which other destinations can assess their own positioning to ensure that they are using strategies to attract the most profitable tourist segments.

Keywords: ecotourism; Plog destination life cycle; Costa Rica; destination management; strategic planning
Heightened environmental awareness and growing interest in ecotourism make it important for exotic locations to use measured destination planning and promotion that protect the venue’s natural resources. The challenge underlying ecotourism is for a destination’s planners to effectively manage the sometimes conflicting demands of sustainability and economic growth. While evidence exists to suggest that planning has failed or been absent in many destinations, with frequent reference to short-term exploitation of natural resources to accomplish economic gain, most conversations continue to focus on the harm to the environmental resources (Swarbrooke 1999, 6). While the ecosystem is certainly a matter of concern, here we are examining market forces. The study described in this article considers the harm that might come to the long-term desirability of the destination as the type of tourist interested in the destination shifts from those travelers who are relatively high spenders and who celebrate the location’s exotic charms to those groups who “buy the T-shirt” and seek comfort in a location populated by familiar hotel and restaurant brands. The purpose of this study is to explore how tourist bureaus and destinations might use readily obtained data on the current travel habits and preferences of tourists to determine the status of their destination.

According to Stanley Plog, a pioneer in the psychographics of travelers, destinations experience a life cycle. Plog (2001) has suggested that the type of tourist a destination attracts is indicative of the destination’s position in that cycle. In turn, the level of development needed to attract a particular type of traveler predicts the rise and fall of destinations. Near the end of the cycle, for instance, a destination that has been built up so that it appeals to mass market tourists faces the serious likelihood of decline. Because of the inherit tensions between protecting natural resources and promoting tourism to provide economic benefits to local populations, shifts in the dominant type of tourist arrival are important issues for destination planning and may also serve as an early warning signal for a destination’s position in the life cycle.

One fundamental tool for the success and survival of a tourist destination is strategic planning, which improves market performance and encourages the calculated thinking necessary to respond to competitive changes (see, for example, Knowles and Curtis 1999). Before a plan for the future can be undertaken, however, groundwork is required to understand a destination’s current position. We chose to investigate Costa Rica because of its positioning as an ecotourism destination. Bordered on the east by the Caribbean Sea and on the southwest and west by the Pacific Ocean, Costa Rica has one of the most extensive and well-developed national park systems in Latin America (Gall 2004). One of the most visited private tourist attractions in Costa Rica is an aerial tram (second only to the national park system in total visitors), which allows visitors to travel by cable car through the canopy of the rain forest (Enz, Inman, and Lankau 2000). The nation’s beauty, along with its ecotourism facilities, has made Costa Rica one of the most popular tourism destinations among Central America countries. Indeed, it hosts far more international visitors than do the neighboring Central American nations (i.e., Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama) (World Tourism Organization 2005). Most international tourists to Costa Rica come from North America and Central America, with the United States being the dominant source market.

Costa Rica began developing a global reputation as a tourist destination during the 1980s, particularly after the nation’s
president won the Nobel Peace Prize. Prior to this period, the nation’s hotel industry was relatively small, but as demand grew, many Costa Ricans decided to enter the hotel business. Most of the new hotels were owned and managed by inexperienced investors who learned the business by trial and error, while a small group of hotels was run by multinational chains that operated in Costa Rica using expatriate staff and management from their global operations. After that beginning, local investors asked foreign hotel operators such as Marriott to work with them as joint-venture partners. This model has worked so well in Costa Rica that it has been replicated in other countries in the region, including Guatemala, El Salvador, and Panama—each with majority local shareholders, a minority stake by an international chain, and a strong training and development component.

With Costa Rica’s current success, we wanted to determine where it stands on the psychographic destination life cycle. More to the point, we wanted to analyze whether the level of development in Costa Rica has reached the point of attracting mass-market travelers, which is indicative of decline if development goes unchecked (Plog 2001). To extend its life cycle, Costa Rica, like similar holiday locations, must have greater knowledge of its international visitors, the group primarily responsible for the destination’s arrivals.

The Destination Life Cycle and the Changing Traveler Profile

This study relies on Plog’s categorization of travelers based on personality types and his corresponding categorization of a destination’s position on the life cycle continuum. Plog (2001) identified five personality types, based on the level of comfort they desire and how intrepid their travel preferences. The personality types range from Dependables on one end of the travel continuum through Near-Dependables, Mid-Centrics, and Near-Venturers to Venturers on the extreme end (see Exhibit 1). Based on Plog’s research, Dependables typically limit themselves in their intellectual sources and contacts; are unadventurous, cautious, and conservative in their thinking and spending habits; prefer popular brands and locations; desire little activity; and favor emulating the choices and behaviors of others rather than making an original choice. Consequently, Dependables prefer comfortable, familiar brand names for lodging and food and beverage. If they travel at all, they are largely happiest when everything is just like home with perhaps the exception of the scenery. The presence of a large percentage of Dependables at a tourist destination corresponds to its decline stage. Based on an analysis of a national United States sample, 2.5 percent of the population belongs to the Dependables category. The next category on the continuum, Near-Dependables, who are similar in attitudes to but not so timorous as the Dependables, comprise 16 percent of the United States population (Plog 2002). See Appendix A for a profile of survey respondents with comparisons to the United States census data where available.

At the other extreme, Venturers travel frequently so that they can explore the world around them; take relatively long trips; spend more per day than the average traveler; prefer unusual, undeveloped destinations; avoid crowded, touristy places; accept unconventional accommodations; enjoy participating in local customs and habits, but dislike events staged for tourists; prefer free, independent travel; enjoy activity when traveling; prefer authentic local arts and crafts; and seek new travel experiences each year (Plog 2001). The presence of Venturers as a dominant percentage of tourists in a particular location indicates
that the destination is in the introductory stage of the life cycle. Venturers comprise approximately 4 percent of the United States population (Plog 2002).

Similarly, Near-Venturers, who encompass 16 percent of the U.S. population (Plog 2002), are also excited about the new destinations that they learn of from their Venturer friends but prefer greater comfort when they travel. As a result, they initiate the development of the area because they ask for more services, such as hotels, restaurants, shops, and other services (Plog 2001). The presence of an appreciable number of Near-Venturers indicates the exploratory stage of the destination life cycle.

The vast center of the travel market comprises people who like to travel and explore, but with limitations not found in the Venturer types. The travel tales of Near-Venturers encourage Mid-Centric friends who have some Venturer leanings to visit the new destination. Because the location now has a reasonable infrastructure that was built to meet the needs of the Near-Venturers, Mid-Centrics are willing to visit. Because there are far more Centrics than Near-Venturers (Mid-Centrics constitute approximately 62 percent of the U.S. population; Plog 2002), destination arrivals increase dramatically. Large numbers of Mid-Centrics indicate that the destination has moved into the mature phase of the life cycle.

Exhibit 1: Psychographic Personality Types

As Plog (2001, 19) noted, “Up to this point, everyone seems happy at the destination. Tourism growth continues unabated, property values rise as hotels continue to pop up, more local residents have jobs, tax receipts have increased, some rundown areas have been cleaned up, and most residents believe that they have discovered the perfect industry. Local politicians and tourism officials congratulate themselves because they think they are pretty smart to have attracted or created what appears to be a never-ending, expanding business.” At this point, however, the Venturers have moved on to other, less developed destinations, and the Near-Venturers and Mid-Centrics, in turn, will soon follow.

Development at the destination continues with more hotels, tourist shops, fast-food chains, video arcades, movie theaters, and other entertainment venues being added. Soon the destination has lost its distinctiveness and has the same appearance as every other tourist town. The popularity and commonality of the destination begins attracting the Near-Dependables and the Dependables, who travel less, stay for only a short time, arrive on package tours when they do travel, and spend little money. The Dependables are a smaller percentage of the population, so soon the base of potential tourists has become substantially smaller and the destination is populated with a less desirable type of traveler (from a revenue standpoint). Over time, fewer visitors arrive at the destination each year and those who do visit spend less money during the time they are there (Plog 2002).

Plog’s research on the life cycle of a destination is a classic in most tourism textbooks and has been substantiated by other studies (Griffith and Albanese 1996). We must point out, however, that some observers dispute the validity of his life cycle model (McKercher 2006; Smith 1990). We do not answer those criticisms but merely point out that they do not interfere with this study. One criticism of Plog’s model is that it was designed for U.S. travelers, a concern that does not affect our study because we also focus on American travelers (Smith 1990). Another concern of the model is that it places travelers in a “single simple category,” which again does not influence the viability of the framework for this study because of our focus on travel behavior to the specific location of Costa Rica, rather than to any location (Lowyck, Van Langenhove, and Bolaert 1993). Although Plog’s life cycle theory is not without controversy, it does provide a useful framework for analysis. In particular, a recent study noted that the model provides a particularly viable framework for suggesting where people would like to visit (Litvin 2006).

It is important to point out that other models of tourist destination life cycles exist. Most notably, Butler (1980) developed a model that has been heavily used in tourism development research. Butler also sees destinations in a life cycle, but he suggested that tourist demand for resort destinations will follow a life cycle course resembling a logistic S-curve demarcated by six stages, consisting of exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, and then either decline or rejuvenation. In a recent study using this framework, Putra and Hitchcock (2006) reported that the resurgence in international arrivals in Bali after the bombings was due to the destination not yet reaching the consolidation stage. Regardless of whether one uses the Butler curve or the Plog model, the major point of both frameworks is the notion that a destination experiences

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predictable phases over time unless proactive plans are undertaken to avoid the slide toward decline. Another approach, taken by Enz, Inman, and Lankau (2000), explored the life cycle of strategic partnership. That framework considers the longitudinal relationship between the business operating orientation of foreign companies (usually multinational organizations that enter into an emerging nation) and the economic development orientation of a country (i.e., outside push versus inside pull for development). Four different models for building strategic partnerships emerge from this framework, namely, contractual exchange, joint partnerships, limited social covenants, and integrated social covenants. This framework is based on how tourism projects are developed to address ownership and management transitions rather than consumer behaviors. That framework is based on development models and was not used in this study because it does not address consumer actions. In summary, while these other life cycle frameworks can help inform various aspects of strategic planning, Plog’s life cycle focuses on changing market demand and hence, for the purposes of this study, appears more relevant for examining the predominant type of traveler journeying to the destination.

In the study reported here, we explore the validity of Plog’s (2001, 2004) research findings, using survey results of the travel habits and preferences of a sample of United States travelers to Costa Rica. After examining the sample as a whole, we subdivide a subset of travelers into two contrasting consumption groups and compare their behaviors. From these results, we can infer certain trends regarding Costa Rica’s position on the destination life cycle. Plog assigned Costa Rica to the Near-Venturer psychographic position in 2001 and 2004. Given Costa Rica’s increasing notoriety as a destination, we think it is important to determine how this positioning might be changing. In addition, using consumer data we can explore whether shifts in market demand make it necessary for Costa Rica’s destination managers to rethink strategic planning to counter undesirable changes in the destination’s position. This research not only investigates consumer options about travel to Costa Rica but seeks to determine whether and how travelers’ profiles may have changed with time.

The Costa Rica Study

This study was conducted with the support of the Cornell Center for Hospitality Research and the Costa Rican Hotel Association. Self-administered surveys were sent to 1,382 American travelers to Costa Rica whose e-mail addresses were obtained from the Costa Rican Hotel Association and some of its affiliated hotels. Responses were received from 122 participants. However, given that typically 15 to 30 percent of a hotel chain’s database is incomplete or inaccurate (Butscher 1997), a conservative estimate of the surveys that actually reached the intended target would be 1,121, yielding a response rate of 10.9 percent. We also note that internet surveys generally report low response rates (see, for example, Couper 2000).

Of the 122 respondents, 84 percent traveled to Costa Rica for leisure on their last visit, 3 percent traveled for business, and 11 percent for both. In light of the predominately leisure travelers captured in this study, we dropped the respondents who were traveling solely for business and the 2 respondents who failed to answer the travel purpose question. The remaining 116 respondents were either exclusively leisure travelers (103) or both leisure and business travelers (13) on their most recent visit to Costa Rica. Appendix A provides a summary profile of the respondents.
Given Plog’s classification of Costa Rica as a destination for Near-Venturers, we would expect to find that travelers to Costa Rica are relatively well educated, spend more of their discretionary income on travel, are adventurous with their choices of activities and accommodations, eschew the use of travel agents and tours, take long trips, and travel alone largely by automobile within the area of the destination. In the following, we describe our findings and identify whether these results are consistent with the Near-Venturer personality type.

The Traveler Profile

The tourists participating in our survey are affluent, college-educated, generally of middle age, and married without children living at home. Both education level and income of American leisure travelers surveyed skewed toward the high end. More than 90 percent of the respondents have a bachelor’s degree or graduate degree. Exhibit 2 shows that the proportion of U.S. travelers to Costa Rica with graduate degrees is significantly greater than that of the general population of Americans. This result is consistent with Plog’s Venturers (and Near-Venturers), who are viewed as intellectually curious (Plog 2001).

More than 80 percent of those surveyed have an annual household income of more than $100,000, and among these, more than half have an annual income greater than $200,000. Exhibit 3 indicates that the median household income of respondents in this study is between $150,000 and $200,000. This sample is clearly an affluent group of travelers with incomes higher than both average Americans and typical U.S. overseas leisure travelers (U.S. Census Bureau n.d.; U.S. Department of Commerce n.d.). Plog (2001) reported that a heavier proportion of Venturers are found at the upper end of the income continuum. The reason is that their “strong sense of self-confidence leads them to be relatively successful.” (Plog 2002, 246) Our high-income finding is consistent with Plog’s Near-Venturer psychographic positioning of Costa Rica.

Travel Preference

People with adventuresome personalities want to explore the world in all of its diversity, and they feel comfortable in cultures where they do not speak the language (Plog 2002). The travelers’ responses to the travel preference questions in our study suggest that the respondents are comfortable with traveling in countries with different languages or cultures (see Appendix B for additional travel preference data). Following their general travel pattern, 99 percent of respondents do not mind traveling to countries with different ethnic groups (see Exhibit 4). Exhibit 5 shows that 87

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**Exhibit 2:**
Educational Attainment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage, U.S. Census Data (Year 2000)</th>
<th>Percentage, U.S. Travelers to Costa Rica</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High school diploma and lower</td>
<td>48.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college, associate’s</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>degree, or bachelor’s degree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.)*
percent of those surveyed do not care about language differences between their native country and the destination. This finding is congruent with Plog’s (2001) description of Venturer and Near-Venturer travelers.

Exhibit 6 suggests that about 70 percent of those surveyed do not prefer a guided tour. This finding is in accordance with adventuresome travelers’ predilection to rely on their own judgment when making choices and to demonstrate a strong preference for free independent travel (Plog 2001). However, only 29 percent of the survey respondents preferred to travel with no preplanned or definite timetables, while almost 40 percent of the survey respondents indicated that they would prefer a timetable for their trip. This latter finding contradicts Plog’s positioning of Costa Rica as a Near-Venturer destination and indicates that Costa Rica may now be favored as a Centric destination.

**Trend of Market Growth**

In Plog’s national samples, the dimension of the five psychographic types closely followed a normal distribution (Plog 2002). Plog’s model also suggests that as a destination follows the general trend of shifting from attracting Near-Venturer to Mid-Centrics, more travelers will visit the destination because there are more Mid-Centrics in the psychographic curve. Statistics in Exhibit 7 reveal an increase in the number of U.S. travelers to Costa Rica. Despite the effects of the 9/11 terrorism attack, the number of U.S. tourists to Costa Rica increased 30 percent from 1999 to 2003. The U.S. market is not only expanding as a percentage of Costa Rica’s arrivals, but it is growing at a much greater rate than other source markets (30.11 percent). As a result, the market share of the U.S. traveler as a proportion of the total travelers to Costa Rica also grew between 1999 and 2003. Because Venturers and Near-Venturers compose only 20 percent of the United States population (Plog 2002), the large numbers of U.S. tourists journeying to Costa Rica would indicate that Costa Rica is becoming a destination for Centrics with Venturer leanings.

**General Travel Patterns**

Exhibit 8 indicates that a large proportion of those surveyed are frequent travelers. Almost half of them travel three to five times domestically per year, and nearly 30 percent of them travel more than that. Three-fourths of the respondents report traveling internationally once or twice per year. More than one-fifth of those surveyed travel internationally more than twice a year. The frequency of travel would indicate that the travelers to Costa Rica may be identified as Near-Venturers.

When traveling internationally, the respondents usually go with other people instead of traveling alone. Almost 90 percent of those who completed our survey

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**Exhibit 3: Median Household Income**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>U.S. Census Data</th>
<th>U.S. Overseas Leisure Travelers</th>
<th>U.S. Travelers to Costa Rica</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$35,000-$49,999</td>
<td>$91,900</td>
<td>$150,000-$200,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.); U.S. Department of Commerce (n.d.).*
Exhibit 4:
Prefer to Travel to Countries Where the People Belong to My Ethnic Group?

Exhibit 5:
Prefer to Visit a Location Where the Spoken Language Is the Same as My Native Language?
choose to travel with their spouses, partners, friends, children, or business associates. Traveling with spouses or partners is the dominant pattern, as reported by 75 percent of the sample. Traveling with others, such as family members, is consistent with the travel patterns of Centrics with Venturer tendencies and Near-Venturers (Plog 2001). The top three most often visited international regions among the respondents are Western Europe (39.5 percent), Central America (23.9 percent), and the Caribbean (17.4 percent). The least visited places are Oceania (0.9 percent), the Pacific Rim (0.9 percent), Eastern Europe (0.0 percent), and Antarctica or the Artic (0.0 percent). These heavily visited locations are consistent with the Centric psychographic positioning (Plog 2001).

As noted in Exhibit 8, about 80 percent of the respondents are willing to spend more than $2,500 for an international

**Exhibit 6:**
Prefer to Be on a Guided Tour When Traveling in a Foreign Country?

![Bar chart showing preferences for guided tours.]

**Exhibit 7:**
U.S. Tourists to Costa Rica

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total nonresident tourists to Costa Rica</td>
<td>1,031,585</td>
<td>1,238,692</td>
<td>20.08</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. tourists to Costa Rica</td>
<td>392,556</td>
<td>510,751</td>
<td>30.11</td>
<td>38.05%</td>
<td>41.23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* U.S. Department of Commerce (n.d.)
leisure trip, and about 25 percent of the respondents intend to spend more than $7,500 for such a trip. A willingness to spend large sums of discretionary income on travel is consistent with venturesome travelers, but we judge that the amount spent by the vast majority of the survey respondents was relatively low when considering that it included everything for a week-long trip, including airfare, lodging, meals, activities, and ground transportation. This result is further evidence that Costa Rica is increasingly a destination for the mainstream or Centric traveler.

**Exhibit 8:**
General Travel Patterns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patterns</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General travel purpose</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leisure</td>
<td>69.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equal amounts</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequencies of travel domestic per year</td>
<td>Less than 3 times</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3-5 times</td>
<td>48.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6-10 times</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11-20 times</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More than 20 times</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequencies of international travel per year</td>
<td>Never</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1-2 times</td>
<td>75.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3-5 times</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More than 5 times</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel alone for internal travel?</td>
<td>Alone</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>With business associates</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>With spouse/partner</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>With friends</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>With children</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most visited international regions</td>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Caribbean</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Western Europe</td>
<td>39.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Antarctica/Artic</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Central America</td>
<td>23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>North America</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>South America</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oceania</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Eastern Europe</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pacific Rim</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of money willing to spend on an international leisure trip</td>
<td>Less than $1,000</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$1,000-$2,499</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$2,500-$4,999</td>
<td>40.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$5,000-$7,499</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$7,500+</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The majority of the travelers sampled are first-time visitors to Costa Rica, and they like Costa Rica more than any other Latin American destination for their leisure trips. The respondents chose Costa Rica mainly for ecotourism and its unspoiled environment (see Appendix C for additional information on the Costa Rican travel experience). The primary activities of those travelers are ecotourism, tourism and sightseeing, and beach and waterfront activities—generally consistent with Mid-Centric travelers’ profiles.

Exhibit 9 depicts the length of stay in Costa Rica among the U.S. travelers who completed our survey. Based on the statistics of all international tourists to Costa Rica in 2002, a tourist’s average length of stay in Costa Rica was eleven days. Our survey respondents seem to follow the general pattern. Although these travelers may stay in Costa Rica for as few as three days or as long as ninety days, over half (63 percent) of them stay between seven and ten days. Seventeen percent choose to stay for eleven to twenty days, while 14 percent stay in Costa Rica for less than a week. Only 6 percent will spend more than three weeks in the country. Thus, we see that not only are respondents’ primary activities typical of Centric travelers rather than Venturer or Near-Venturers, but so is the length of their trips.

Frequency of Visits to Costa Rica

Exhibit 10 shows the number of trips the respondents have made to Costa Rica. As we indicated above, 70 percent report traveling to Costa Rica for the first time. Travelers who have visited Costa Rica two or more times consist of less than 15 percent of the total sample. The fact that few travelers have been to Costa Rica more
than once is more in line with the Near-Venturer destination positioning than with Centric destinations, as Plog (2001) noted that adventurous travelers rarely return to the same location. However, if Costa Rica now appeals to the large population of Mid-Centrics, many would be taking their first trip there. In that scenario, the number of first-time visitors would also comprise a high percentage. Hence, this indicator cannot be viewed as conclusively representative of either group.

**Rank of Latin American Countries**

Given Costa Rica’s overall standing with U.S. travelers, it is not surprising that our respondents ranked it the number-one destination among Latin American countries for leisure travel. The Caribbean islands are the number-two choice, while Mexico is the third. Belize ranks fourth on the list, followed distantly by El Salvador and Honduras. Both the Caribbean islands and Mexico are ranked as Mid-Centric destinations, leading one to conclude that Costa Rica’s grouping with these two destinations is evidence of Costa Rica’s shift to a Mid-Centric positioning (Plog 2001).

**Booking and Transportation in Costa Rica**

Booking patterns were about evenly split between self-booking and travel agents. Nearly half of the self-booking respondents book directly with the hotel (44 percent) and one-third did so with the airline (33 percent), while 39 percent of those who used travel agents did so for the hotel and 40 percent for transportation booking. An interesting phenomenon is that travel agents play important roles in lodging and air bookings, but they are not considered an important information resource by tourists. Only 6 percent of respondents ranked travel agents as the strongest influential information resource.
Instead, the most influential information resources are recommendations from friends or family. The utilization of travel agents and reliance on recommendations from acquaintances is more common for Centric travelers than for adventurous travelers, as the latter prefer to rely on their own judgments for travel.

**Transportation**

The four principal forms of ground transportation used by the tourists are tour bus or van (25.9 percent), rental car (25.9 percent), taxi (22.4 percent), and private vehicle (15.5 percent). Only around 10 percent of the respondents choose local transit buses, other ground transportation, or walking. Plog (2001) specifically noted that Venturers preferred to obtain a car at the destination and make their own way around. However, the largest portion of the respondents preferred tour buses or taxis indicating that adventurous travelers are shifting away from Costa Rica.

**Intent to Return**

Most of the American tourists in the sample would like to return to Costa Rica. Using a 7-point Likert scale, the average score for intention to return is 6.50 (with more than 70 percent saying that they will definitely return). As previously noted, Venturers rarely return to the same destination. Such a large group of respondents who intend to return to Costa Rica provides evidence that its travelers’ psychographics are aligned with those of a Mid-Centric traveler.

**Forecasting Future Travel Patterns by Subgroup Analysis**

The preceding information indicates that this sample of U.S. leisure travelers to Costa Rica appears to comprise a mix of Mid-Centrics and Near-Venturers. To refine our analysis, we divided our respondents into those two psychographic groups on the basis of their answers to three preference questions. Respondents who prefer to travel to destinations with different ethnic groups, prefer destinations with different languages, and dislike guided tours (showing more characteristics of venturous travelers) are called “Pro-Venturers.” In contrast, we termed respondents “Pro-Centric” if they preferred guided tours in countries where people belonged to their own ethnic group or spoke the same native language. We were able to classify a total of eighty-six respondents based on those criteria. Respondents who did not fit these psychographic position preferences were excluded from the subgroup analyses.

Plog’s model predicted that an increasing number of travelers will display Mid-Centric preferences as the destination loses its cachet among Near-Venturers (Plog 2001). In our subgroup analysis, as the chief psychographic type of tourists changes from the Near-Venturer to the Mid-Centric, more tourists will follow the consumption patterns of the Pro-Centric subgroup.

Plog’s model predicted that people with Dependable personality traits tend to “spend less per capita at a destination” (Plog 2001, 17). Our survey results in Exhibit 11 show that Pro-Centrics (who exhibit more Dependable characteristics than do Pro-Venturers) intend to spend less on leisure travel than do Pro-Venturers. The percentage of Pro-Centrics who intend to spend more than $7,500 on an international leisure trip is only 20 percent—much lower than that of Pro-Venturers (33.33 percent). Also in our study, more Pro-Centrics book their lodging and transportation through travel agents. About 65 percent of the Pro-Centrics book their primary lodging through travel agents, while only 30 percent of the Pro-Venturers do so. A higher
percentage of Pro-Venturers (60 percent) book directly through hotels or airlines than do Pro-Centrics (24 percent). Plog (2001, 15) suggested that Dependables “often look to authority figures for guidance and direction in their life.” Since the Pro-Centrics generally express stronger Dependable tendencies than Pro-Venturers do, Centrics are more inclined to take the “safe” choice and book through travel agents. A chi-square test of differences between these two groups revealed statistically significant differences in booking channels between these two groups of travelers (chi-square = 10.72, \( p < .005 \); see Exhibit 12).

In Plog’s characterization, venturesome people “prefer to be on their own on international trips” and they like using private vehicles so that they have greater mobility and freedom of choice (Plog 2001, 15). Our study presents a similar result. The proportion of Pro-Venturers who rented cars is nearly three times that of Pro-Venturers. Again, testing for differences between these two groups revealed statistically significant differences in their mode of ground transportation (chi-square = 8.60, \( p < .04 \); see Exhibit 13).

When asked to rank the influence of various information sources on travel and sightseeing decisions, Pro-Centrics listed more types of key information sources than Pro-Venturers used. In addition to the three categories (friends and family, books, travel agent) selected by both groups, Pro-Centrics also consulted newspaper articles, promotional brochures, the internet, and film. One possible reason for this difference is that a mature destination will get wider media coverage, and therefore, travelers will be influenced by a greater number of information resources.

**Conclusions**

Utilizing Plog’s psychographic model as an indicator of Costa Rica’s life cycle position, we see a number of important findings can be drawn from general tourist...
### Exhibit 12:
Difference in Booking Channels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Internet Travel Discount Website (e.g., Expedia.com)</th>
<th>Travel Agent</th>
<th>Directly Through Hotel</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pro-Venturers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-Centrics</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.19</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>31.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10.39</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>46.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Booking options with less than four responses per cell were deleted.
**Exhibit 13:**
Differences in Choice of Ground Transportation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Taxi</th>
<th></th>
<th>Tour Bus/Van</th>
<th></th>
<th>Rental Car</th>
<th></th>
<th>Private Vehicle</th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
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<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-Venturers</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11.69</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.09</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19.48</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.09</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>49.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-Centrics</td>
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<td>12.99</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>23.38</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.09</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.19</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>50.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>24.68</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>32.47</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28.57</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14.29</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Ground transportation options with less than four responses per cell were deleted.
data. This information can be used to identify current positioning, leading to the development of appropriate strategies to remain a vital tourist destination. While this study focuses on Costa Rica, the implications of the research extend to any number of emerging countries and locals focused on sustainable development.

By analyzing the travelers’ behaviors and preferences in this study, Costa Rica’s position is shown to be evolving from being a destination for Near-Venturers to one that attracts Mid-Centrics. We infer from these data that the nation has built up its travel infrastructure to the point that Venturers are put off and Mid-Centrics are attracted. While Costa Rica’s destination managers may welcome this shift and may even have encouraged it, we must warn Costa Rican officials of the likelihood of further slippage on Plog’s continuum. Moreover, we wish to alert other destination planners who may recognize their own venues in our data. Plog (2001, 20) noted that “the ideal psychographic positioning for most destinations lies somewhere in the middle of the Near-Venturer segment. A destination at this point has the broadest positioning appeal possible because it covers the largest portion of the psychographic curve.” Costa Rica may still be in this prime position, but given our study we believe it has shifted away from this “sweet spot” in the market. If so, its destination managers should consider taking proactive steps to review its destination planning and development initiatives.

Strategically, because Costa Rica’s positioning is as an ecotourism destination, it might focus on how to ensure resource preservation and promote efforts to maintain the integrity of ecosystems. Its tourism officials could apply Green Globe standards for benchmarking sustainable activities and practices. Furthermore, pains must be taken to demonstrate the long-term monetary value of conservation, promote conservation education among the population, recruit citizen involvement, and institute effective environmental legislation. Costa Rica has taken great strides in this realm by appointing a minister of environment and energy to serve as an environmental champion, placing almost 25 percent of the country’s land mass under national protection (Kuri and Ramírez 2007), and promoting the extensive use of renewable energy sources (Nandwani 2005).

Other nations in Central America are seeking to emulate Costa Rica’s tourism success. Nicaragua, Honduras, and Belize are among those pursuing rapid tourism development modeled after Costa Rica. For these countries, governmental agencies might look to preserve the natural environment via land use planning, funding and fiscal incentives for sustainable projects, and the designation of particular areas for special protection. We believe that many parts of Asia—China, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand, for example—are rushing into a phase of development that is poorly planned, based on the Plog analysis. Countries seeking to attract tourists should undertake their own tourist personality profiles to identify and track their positioning on Plog’s destination life cycle. These efforts not only direct public and private development initiatives but inform how best to market to various travelers.

Among the research findings yielded by this study, the following stand out as being valuable and informative. First, a large proportion of U.S. travelers surveyed visited Costa Rica for ecotourism or its unspoiled environment. Their major activities also focused on ecotourism, sightseeing, and beach and waterfront activities. The travel

2. Green Globe is the worldwide social and environmental benchmarking and certification program for the travel and tourism industry. See http://www.greenglobe21.com for additional information.
pattern indicates that marketing toward U.S. ecotourists may be a more productive strategy for Costa Rica than targeting the mass travel market. Alternatively, as recommended by others, those marketing to Mid-Centrics can focus on encouraging them to be a bit more venturesome in the future (Litvin 2006, 251). However, this latter strategy will require overcoming ingrained attitudes and beliefs.

Another valuable point is that a large number of U.S. tourists will benefit from the enrichment and improvement of ecotourism products. Tourist interest in and emphasis on enjoying the unspoiled environment means Costa Rica should take to heart Plog’s (2001, 24) warning that “most destinations’ managers don’t understand that they continue to shoot themselves in the foot by allowing unfocused development to trample the once-beautiful areas that so delighted the Venturer-type travelers.” Thus, mandates for controlled growth should be legislated now to avoid the overdevelopment that drives the most profitable tourists to seek other destinations.

Some mandates for consideration include the enhanced protection of extensive natural areas that will continue to attract new ranks of Ventures and Near-Venturers. Currently, the Costa Rican government allows the creation of private protected areas, meaning owners can choose to convert their lands into nature preserves over which the government has little control. This legal option is largely responsible for the high percentage of protected land for which Costa Rica is renowned. However, the other side of that coin is that private protected areas can be developed for tourism, and many of these areas contain tourist accommodations (Langholz and Lassoie 2001). Strengthening government control over such areas would ensure that overdevelopment does not occur. Second, Costa Rica should promote the physically demanding activities that it can offer the profitable Venturer-type tourists. When consumers are ready to experience ecotourism, Costa Rica should be the place they dream of visiting. We foresee marketing messages focusing on the country’s exotic and special features. Such marketing communication would help ensure that the most desirable tourist segment develop and maintain the right perceptions about the destination.

Limitations of the Study

The focus on U.S. travelers may hamper the generalizability of these findings to travelers of other nationalities, although recent studies in Singapore offer comparable conclusions (Litvin 2006). Because our analysis is based on a small number of respondents, the result may not be representative of all U.S. leisure travelers to Costa Rica. In addition, the respondents appeared biased toward upscale hotels and resorts, indicating the potential existence of sample bias. Nevertheless, the study may provide valuable information regarding U.S. tourists’ preferences and spending habits in Costa Rica and reveal effective marketing strategies to the Costa Rican travel industry.

In conclusion, this survey of leisure tourists to Costa Rica has revealed how a general sample of attitudes and beliefs can expose a potential shift in the psychographic profile of current travelers to a destination. With a framework such as that provided by Plog, a destination’s strategic planners can identify whether changing market demand will diminish a destination’s competitiveness. If a destination such as Costa Rica has already positioned itself as an ecological destination, then its future development planning should stress attracting venturous travelers, while also persuading the Mid-Centric travelers that this destination, though exotic, has sufficient development to
support their needs. Furthermore, the use of traveler behavior data and simple descriptive analysis permits a destination to design marketing strategies to accommodate a shifting consumer base.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

We already noted the controversy regarding the validity of Plog’s life cycle. To assist in resolving this controversy and to facilitate more empirical work on destination planning, we suggest that this study be replicated so as to test the Butler (1980) life cycle, thereby allowing a comparison between the two frameworks. Such a comparison would assist tourism organizations in making more informed choices about assessing their own point in the destination life cycle.

Researchers may also want to conduct a broader study to ascertain whether different locations generate the same reactions from these types of travelers. Such information would allow destinations to use the information to create experiences for each type.³

Using readily available consumer data, we were able to apply the simple and straightforward model devised by Plog to discern possible implications for destination planning and marketing in Costa Rica. We strongly encourage others to consider incorporating this type of data and a destination life cycle framework into their strategic planning processes. The typical approach to strategic planning begins with an analysis of the current situation, and the approach revealed in this study of Costa Rica should serve as a replicable example for those undertaking the early stages of a situation analysis.

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³ We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.
### Appendix A

#### Survey Respondents Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td><strong>U.S. Population</strong>a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>1. 18-25</td>
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<td>1. Under 20 years</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. 26-35</td>
<td>23.21</td>
<td>2. 20-24</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. 36-45</td>
<td>15.18</td>
<td>3. 25-34</td>
<td>14.2</td>
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<td>4. 46-55</td>
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<td>5. 56-65</td>
<td>20.54</td>
<td>5. 45-54</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
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<td>6. 66+</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>6. 55-64</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7. 65+</td>
<td>12.4</td>
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<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>U.S. Population</strong>a</td>
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</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>50.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Married</td>
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<td>3. Divorced</td>
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<td>9.7</td>
<td></td>
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<td>4. Widowed</td>
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<td>6.6</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. White</td>
<td>93.75</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Black</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Hispanic</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Asian</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Native American</td>
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<td>6. Other</td>
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<td>3. Two</td>
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<td>4. Three</td>
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<td>5. Four</td>
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<td>6. Six</td>
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<td></td>
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<td><strong>Educational attainment</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
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<td>1. Less than high school diploma</td>
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<td>2. High school diploma</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Some college</td>
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<td>21.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Associate’s degree</td>
<td>0.91</td>
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<td>5. Bachelor’s degree</td>
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<td>6. Graduate degree</td>
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<td>8. $150,000-200,000</td>
<td>19.59</td>
<td>7. $150,000-199,999</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Over $200,000</td>
<td>43.30</td>
<td>8. Over $200,000</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.).
Appendix B

Survey Respondents Travel Preferences and Habits (in Percentages)

I'd prefer to start the trip with no preplanned or definite timetables so I can make my own decisions.
1. Strongly agree 6.09
2. Agree 22.61
3. Neutral 31.30
4. Disagree 28.70
5. Strongly disagree 11.30

Since September 11, 2001, I feel insecure when traveling internationally.
1. Strongly agree 4.35
2. Agree 15.65
3. Neutral 20.00
4. Disagree 40.00
5. Strongly disagree 20.00

When traveling for leisure, in general are you most interested in:
1. Adventure sports 11.35
2. Beach/waterfront 22.70
3. Ecotourism 22.70
4. Night life 0.71
5. Touring/sightseeing 31.21
6. Visiting friends 6.38
7. Other 4.96

What are your primary concerns regarding international travel? (Select all that apply.)
1. Aggressive panhandlers/beggars 32.41
2. Acts of terrorism 49.07
3. Dishonest merchants 11.11
4. Unsanitary water/food preparation 66.67
5. Communication difficulties 17.59
6. Poor medical facilities 28.70
7. Petty crime (e.g., theft) 33.33
8. Physical violence 25.00
9. Other 3.70

What region(s) of the world have you traveled to in the past that you are reluctant to travel to since September 11, 2001? (Check all that apply.)
1. Africa 14.02
2. Caribbean 0.93
3. Western Europe 10.28
4. Oceania 0.93
5. Antarctica/Artic 0.93
6. Central America 2.80
7. Middle East 37.38
8. Pacific Rim 1.87
9. Asia 9.35
10. Eastern Europe 8.41
11. North America 0.00
12. South America 1.87
13. None 49.53
14. Other 0.93
Appendix C

Survey Respondents’ Costa Rican Travel Experiences

Why did you choose to visit Costa Rica? (Select all that apply.) (%)
1. No choice—business trip 5.22
2. Attractions 20.00
3. Beaches 28.70
4. Ecotourism 73.04
5. Location 27.83
6. Price 20.00
7. Package deal 5.22
8. Recommendation 40.87
9. Safe environment 26.96
10. Unspoiled environment 46.96
11. Other 5.22

What were your primary activities during your visit? (Select all that apply.) (%)
1. Beach/waterfront 54.78
2. Touring/sightseeing 55.65
3. Night life 6.09
4. Ecotourism 86.96
5. Visiting friends 8.70
6. Adventure sports 31.30
7. Business meeting 4.35
8. Other 1.74

What area needs the greatest improvement? (multiple responses) (%)
1. Accommodations 5.43
2. Airports 11.96
3. Attractions 2.17
4. Cleanliness 2.17
5. Criminal activity 8.70
6. Ground transportation 17.39
7. Night life 3.26
8. Roads 70.65
9. Restaurants 3.26
10. Safety 3.26
11. Tourist information 4.35
12. Other 0.00

Overall, rate your accommodations. Poor (1) to excellent (7) Mean = 6.3, SD = 0.86
Was your travel experience consistent with your image/perception of the country? Definitely not (1) to definitely yes (7) Mean = 6.0, SD = 1.3
Overall, how satisfactory was your trip? Very unsatisfactory (1) to very satisfactory (7) Mean = 6.6, SD = 0.8
Would you return to Costa Rica? Definitely not (1) to definitely yes (7) Mean = 6.5, SD = 1.0
If visiting Costa Rica in the future, would you be interested in visiting other Central American countries? Definitely not (1) to definitely yes (7) Mean = 6.0, SD = 1.4
Would you recommend Costa Rica to a friend? Definitely not (1) to definitely yes (7) Mean = 6.7, SD = 0.9
Please rate the degree to which you feel travel to Costa Rica offers value. Very poor value (1) to very good value (7) Mean = 6.1, SD = 1.2
Would the addition of a $15 arrival tax have any affect on your decision to travel to Costa Rica versus some other country? Definitely not (1) to definitely yes (7) Mean = 1.7, SD = 1.4
What is your satisfaction level with the current $23 departure tax when leaving Costa Rica? Very unsatisfactory (1 ) to very satisfactory (7) Mean = 4.3, SD = 1.8
References


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