

Jaco region experiences major growth



The main road through Jaco bustles with car, bicycle and pedestrian traffic – as well as commercial signage related to the surge in development of the area. A comprehensive development plan is under study that would include zoning of industrial, commercial and residential areas.

By JOHANNA SEVIER

The sound of electric saws and hammers can be heard amid the crashing of the surf in Jaco.

Along the main beach, high rise condominiums and hotels seem to sprout up overnight, signifying Jaco's rapid transforming from a quiet surfer town to a worldwide tourism destination.

Significant investment in the region began in 1999 and then fell after the September 11 attacks in 2001. Interest in the region resurged in the latter half of 2002, principally by visitors from the United States and Canada.

Jaco's growing reputation as a tourism base spurs its development, with visitors coming to enjoy not only the beach but also further destinations such as volcanoes and national parks. Also, droves of "baby-boomers" increasingly choose Jaco as a place to retire, facilitated by the zone's proximity to San Jose.

Although frequently debated, interest in the Jaco region is unlikely to end anytime in the near future, said Frank Vargas, architect for the Jaco municipality. As he explained, development will further increase after the completion of a new portion of the coastal highway.

After two decades of planning, the path for the highway was recently cleared and will reduce travel time from the nation's capital to Jaco by at least a half hour. It is hoped that the highway will be officially open to road traffic by the beginning of 2008, after asphalt is laid and road signs are added, said Vargas.

"The road will be less dangerous than the current road. Travelers can visit with greater ease," said Roy Castellon Sossa, geographic coordinator for the Jaco municipality.

Due to growing interest in the region, the price of land has shot up. With significant funds required to invest in the area, each new hotel and condominium development must be significantly high in value to recoup the initial investment, explained Vargas.

"Each investment must be better and more beautiful than the one before. They are very well-thought out," he said.

Marinas constitute another important type of new development in the area, the first being Marina de Los Suenos. With condominiums, hotels, and areas for private boats to dock, this marina serves as a "site of rest" for the affluent, said Vargas.

"This was the first project that opened the doors to more investment," he said, explaining the marina's importance.

Emulating Marina de Los Suenos, a new marina is in the planning stages at Playa Aguas.

"It is very probable that it will be a very similar and very fashionable situation," said Castellon.

The boom in residency by foreigners at locations such as Marina de Los Suenos breeds a new form of commerce in the zone, with megamalls reducing the importance of traditional commercial sites.

The \$4-million Plaza Coral Jaco recently opened in Jaco, with 5,131 square meters of space and parking for 100 cars. With movie theaters, international fast-food chains, and a Megasuper, it is estimated that commerce at this mall will create 400 direct jobs and 300 indirect jobs.

The Centro Comercial del Pacifico, located between El Roble and Barranca, is set to open in December. Investment in the project's first stage reached \$6.5 million, with 7,000 square meters of construction and parking for 300 cars. The center will include a supermarket, a fast-food area, movie theaters and space for 44 other stores.

Yet another mall will open soon in Herradura, with an Automercado, fast-food outlets, and spaces for other businesses.

With such significant growth, Jaco is the center for new job opportunities throughout the Garabito canton.

"The zone is elevated to a more attractive level," said Vargas.

Amid the many benefits, the substantial development and investment also brings rampant and often unwanted changes to the region.

"If you live in a place where people come from all over the world, the prices are obviously going to increase," said Vargas.

Many locals are selling their land for increasingly high prices and moving to more affordable areas, he explained.

Another issue of concern to both locals and foreigners includes the lack of infrastructure to handle the region's growth.

"Obviously, all of the development creates a collapse in the infrastructure of Garabito," said Castellon.

Approximately 316 square kilometers, the canton of Garabito includes popular beach destinations such as Playa Jaco, Playa Herradura and Playa Hermosa, as well as famed inland destinations such as the Tarcoles River and Parque Nacional Carrerra.

To cope with the regional transformation, Garabito is creating a development plan, akin to zoning regulations in other countries.

"We are trying to better administer a place with rapid growth. To control the situation, the



High-rise condominiums line much of the beachfront in Jaco. The population growth has fueled the construction of major commercial centers in the area; one just opened and two more are under construction.

municipality has to adapt to this principally with the development plan," said Vargas.

"The plan tries to regulate the form of chaos that began in 2002," added Castellon.

Though created by the Garabito canton, the development plan will focus specifically on Jaco, Herradura, Guacalillo, and Tarcoles.

A wide range of decisions are required to create this comprehensive plan. For instance,

zoning is needed for industrial, commercial and residential areas. The plan also will include regulations for building heights and street widths.

Still in the preliminary stages, the development plan is being studied by a consulting firm. Officials hope to revise the plan and make it official by early next year.

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Hotelier couple build new life, family in Jaco

By JOHANNA SEVIER

Tom Odom dreamed of moving to Costa Rica to carry on the memory of his father, who died in Costa Rica a few years earlier.

One week before September 11, 2001, he and his fiancée Chrissy quit their jobs and negotiated a verbal contract to buy property in Jaco. After the terrorist attacks, they seriously reconsidered their plan.

"Now, it doesn't seem like such a big deal. But at the time, the world stopped. No one knew what to do for a few weeks," he said.

As they debated their future, the price of the property fell and the terms of negotiation changed in their favor. Ultimately, they decided not to "chicken-out."

"People told us, 'The terrorists will win if you don't do it,'" said Odom.

Five years later, Tom and Chrissy manage Hotel Poseidon, one of Jaco's most popular hotels and restaurants. They have also established a new family, marking the third generation of Odoms to reside in Costa Rica.

The couple married shortly after moving to Jaco. Given their new roles as hotel owners, the wedding was no holiday for Tom and Chrissy.

"We worked our asses off at the wedding," said Odom, explaining the difficulties in hosting over 80 invited guests from the United States.

The wedding was further complicated by an electrical fire at the hotel, which Odom attributes to "fourteen rooms of gringos."

"The electricity had been done by someone who didn't realize gringos would be using hair driers and curling irons simultaneously," he said.

Overall, the fire was just one of many challenges the couple faced during their first year in Costa Rica, which Odom describes as "miserable." They worked 18 to 20 hours a day, facing the array of challenges stemming from adjusting to a new culture and opening a new business.

"We didn't speak Spanish. That was pretty stupid. We had no knowledge of anything except how to be nice to customers," said Odom.

Though the Odoms received frequent emails of support from friends and family, their



Hotel Poseidon is a boutique operation that sees many return visitors because of its unique location and amenities.

financial situation served as the true inspiration in overcoming the unforeseen hurdles.

"Every penny we ever thought we had in our life was sucked into this project. That was the best determination right there," said Odom.

The birth of their first-born son also "changed everything," said Odom, who explained that raising a child shifted their focus away from missing the folks back home.

According to him, the couple now considers the prospect of raising a child in Costa Rica as one of the best reasons to stay.

"That kid is going to be teaching me Spanish for the rest of my life," said Odom.

Also, the Odom's happy marriage is a significant factor in their ability to face the many challenges of life abroad. According to Odom, marital bliss is rare between couples who move to Costa Rica together.

Hotel improvements signify Tom and Chrissy's hard work as a couple; they've transformed Hotel Poseidon from a network of cabins with 2 maids to a fully staffed hotel and

restaurant with 25 employees.

The hotel includes 14 "luxury" rooms with air-conditioning, cable television and stocked mini-bars. The couple recently spent \$4,000 to revamp each room on the bottom floor. In this extensive project, they hired a decorator, refinished the walls and tiled the bathrooms.

Free wireless internet, a swimming pool, a restaurant, two regular bars and one swim-up bar also can be found at Hotel Poseidon.

Referring to itself as a "boutique style hotel," Hotel Poseidon receives many return visitors.

"Folks who don't like chains are going to find us," he said, explaining that the hotel's strives to reach the benchmark set by nearby luxury hotels such as Best Western.

Current projects include the expansion of the "sky-lounge" for air-conditioned dining, taking advantage of the fact that few such places exist in Jaco. The couple used to live in the sky-lounge, but now can afford to live outside their place of work.

In the future, the Odoms hope to build a deck atop the sky-lounge, affording customers views of the town and beach.

Odom is particularly pleased with the success of the restaurant.

"The biggest surprise was the restaurant. If you were in the U.S. and said to anyone in the hotel industry that you were going to build a hotel around a restaurant, they would say you were crazy," he said.

He attributes the restaurant's success to Patricia Ferguson, a good friend of Chrissy's who moved to Costa Rica after the Odoms begged and pleaded for her cooking skills.

Her dishes rotate frequently, with sample menus including "Asian infused" cuisine such as "nori-wrapped yellow fin tuna with citrus soy" and "beef tenderloin tips with peppercorn oyster sauce and shitake mushrooms."

"Without her food, we wouldn't be what we are," said Odom.

He also attributes the popularity of the restaurant to the friendly wait-staff.

"You walk in the restaurant and you will get good service. If you don't, I want to know about it," he said.

In the process of creating a successful restaurant and hotel, the Odoms have learned many lessons.

"This is not our country. The second you forget that is the day you have one foot out the door," he said.

He believes respect for cultural norms is fundamental for successfully manage a business in Costa Rica. In particular, deference for employees' families and national holidays is of utmost importance.

"Down here, you just can't be harsh," he said.

In his recent return to Colorado, he was shocked to see how much things have changed. He refers to the United States as a "much more serious place."

"I think Americans are becoming aware that we are not liked," said Odom.

"A small part ex-pats can play is being honest with the Costa Ricans we deal with," he continued, offering his suggestion for improving international relations.

Children's center planned for Jaco

By JOHANNA SEVIER

Bemoaning the lack of activities for local children, concerned parents are leading the drive to establish a youth center in Jaco.

To be known as Centro Juvenil, the youth center is already backed by \$25,000 in funding and architectural blueprints. Design plans include a library, classrooms, an auditorium, a sports center and a swimming pool.

Federico Ferraro, director of the project, hopes local children will have a safe alternative to life in the streets within a few years.

Originally from San Jose, Ferraro aspires to remain in the Jaco region. However, this plan is contingent upon the opportunities and resources available for his son.

Ferraro believes Centro Juvenil

will serve as the key to providing his son a better future.

"Jaco is growing with investments, hotels, apartments. But it doesn't have a recreation center, a park or social club," said Ferraro.

Centro Juvenil will give children the opportunity to develop their skills and receive a cultural education, Ferraro explained. Plans for activities at the center include English and computer classes as well as a list of invited speakers to inspire local youth.

"We want to offer a chance to develop human and social resources," said Ferraro, explaining his urge to combat disadvantages wrought by tourism.

Ferraro is excited about Jaco's rapid development and the corresponding wealth, believing it brings advantages for the future.

However, he believes part of

this wealth must be channeled into projects benefiting the community. The Centro Juvenil will enable those who have benefited from Jaco's growth to "give back."

"The center will fill the empty space — the big social needs that the town has," said Vargas.

Jorge Garrido, a local involved with the project, believes the center will serve as a positive alternative to other activities.

"Hopefully, kids will come to the center after saying to themselves, 'I'd rather be eating ice cream at the center than doing drugs in the street,'" said Garrido.

In spite of the excitement about such possibilities, plans for Centro Juvenil remain preliminary.

To give the project a more official status, Ferraro and others have

worked to establish a foundation to coordinate fundraising efforts. Known as Fundacion Mango Playa para la Juventud, the foundation will be designated as a non-profit organization under Costa Rican law.

The next step includes obtaining a site for project development.

"It's very difficult to get support from people because we don't have the site yet, only the logistics," said Ferraro, discussing the difficulties wrought by the high price of land in the area.

He hopes the foundation will receive help in finding a site, generating ideas and, of course, fundraising.

"If we can touch people, that is what is going to make a difference," he said.

Already, several local businesses have pledged financial support to the

future center. For example, Canopy Adventure Tours will donate 50 cents from each visitor while Mango Playa Hotel will donate \$1 from every customer.

Other firms have offered assistance through non-monetary means. Marco Gonzalez, an architect in San Jose, developed the architectural design.

Empresas del Pacifico, a print shop based in Jaco, created the foundation's logo and business cards, which consists of a boy and girl holding hand beneath a globe and a peace dove.

Although the center will be located in Jaco, it will be open to children from throughout the region, said Ferraro.

For more information, please call 637-8686 or write to centrojuvenilgarabito@yahoo.com

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