



MAIN PIC: Stunning coffee growing country outside Monteverde

ESPRESSO!

Despite its high price, the unmistakable benefits of the Land Rover revolutionised the coffee trade in 1950s Costa Rica

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Costa Rica grew and prospered on the back of thousands of Land Rovers. Hardy enough to handle the constant humidity, powerful enough to traverse the treacherous mountains under heavy load but just narrow enough to move between the countless rows of coffee beans, the Land Rover is a revered mechanical workhorse over there, one that helped shape the economy of an entire nation.

Located between Nicaragua and Panama in Central America, Christopher Columbus discovered Costa Rica on 18 September, 1502. The new country was named Costa Rica, Spanish for 'rich coast', as Columbus thought there must be gold in the distant mountains after noticing a few natives wearing gold jewellery. As it turned out, there was no gold, but the mountains did provide the

ideal conditions to grow liquid gold, in the form of coffee.

Like most of Central America during the 18th Century, Costa Rica was a mere blip in the world economy. In 1779, coffee bushes from Jamaica, the chief coffee growing nation at the time, were introduced as a cash crop and by the 1820s were the country's top export good. The rich volcanic soil of the central highlands surrounding the present day capital of San José (the Meseta Central area) met the necessary requirements for growing some of the world's best coffee beans – as it had a consistent temperature, high elevation, and predictable rainfall.

For nearly two centuries, after workers handpicked and loaded the beans onto carts, the harvest travelled slowly by ox team to a beneficio, or processing plant,

in a nearby village. Due to the heat, humidity and steep terrain, an ox and cart would average two trips a day – keeping the price of coffee high and the pickers' pay low.

SUITABLE VEHICLE

A variety of utility vehicles were tested in the coffee fields. They either failed to match the stamina of the ox and cart or they were too wide to fit between the rows of coffee and, as a result, valuable bushes would have been sacrificed in order for them to fit between.

In 1949, after seeing a magazine advertisement for the new Land Rover, John Schofield recognised the potential of the robust, yet compact all-terrain vehicle. John and his wife, Nora, travelled to England to see the Series I for themselves and soon became the first Land Rover dealers in Central America. With only a single Rover as a demonstrator, they sold 12 Series Is in their first year. They were shipped for distribution from the Solihull factory to the Schofields in Costa Rica after the transfer of funds to the UK was



ABOVE: Td5 in Quepos, near Manuel Antonio
LEFT: Series IIIs can be frequently found parked up on the streets of La Fortuna



ABOVE LEFT: Land Rover is 'a revered mechanical workhorse' in Costa Rica **ABOVE:** The only LR in the scrapyard, located outside Guancaste **LEFT:** With its bright blue paintwork, you can't miss this one **BELOW LEFT:** Numberplate has seen better days **BELOW:** LRs are proudly passed on from generation to generation here



complete. The partnership between the versatile Land Rover and the Grano de Oro had begun.

CLOSURE

Sales continued to grow alongside the burgeoning importance of the Land Rover to both the coffee barons (cafeteleros), and the small producers. With more trips possible per day to the beneficios, no beans were wasted during the short harvest season and profits grew each year. The long-term benefits to the economy were highly significant and the trickle-down effect eventually reached the pickers' pay.

In 1963, the government lowered the taxes on locally produced vehicles in an attempt to slow the import of foreign-built automobiles and further bolster the local economy. The Schofields built the Ensambladora Automotriz S.A. (automotive assembly) and all Land Rovers were imported as kits which would be assembled locally. This was done by hand until the necessary tools and equipment arrived from the UK.

In the late 1970s, the Schofields experienced two major setbacks that resulted in the closure of the factory and, more importantly, the end of a Land Rover dealership in Costa Rica for more than a decade.

The first major blow came from British Leyland and included an end to kits being sent from Solihull for

COSTA RICA Coffee truck



ABOVE: Top-heavy: loaded up for a white-water rafting trip **ABOVE RIGHT:** Battered-looking spare stored on roof **TOP RIGHT:** Series III with bull bar, unusually-shaped wheelarches and shades for the windows **RIGHT:** Ready and waiting to transport some furniture after some serious shopping

FAST FACTS

- John and Nora Schofield opened the Land Rover dealership in Costa Rica in 1949 – the first one in the whole of Central America
- Nobody knows for certain how many Land Rovers have been sold in Costa Rica. An estimate for Land Rover sales from 1949 until the late-1970s (when the Schofields were in business) is 4000 Series Land Rovers and 1000 Range Rovers. Top sales at this time saw over 100 Rovers sold a month with a total of 800 employees working in the Ensambladora Automotriz S.A. plant
- Nearly all of these heritage Land Rovers are still used on a daily basis and it is estimated that there are 1000 heritage Land Rovers still working in the fields and between the coffee rows
- Since 1992, when Oscar Echeverria officially opened Motores Britanicos of Costa Rica, 1400 Land Rovers have driven off the lot with sales increasing each year. The majority of vehicles sold are Discoverys
- The average income for a Tico – a Costa Rican – is approximately \$8500 US (£5300) per annum. This was a dramatic increase due to the boom in tourism from 1998 where \$3100 US a year was average
- There are 3.5 million people living in Costa Rica with 60 per cent in the Meseta Central area. Considering who their neighbours are, it is not surprising that Costa Rica is considered the Switzerland of Central America. Except for a short period between 1940 and 1944, Costa Rica has had a democratic republic government since 1889 and no army for over 50 years



LEFT: Another unusually painted working vehicle snapped in the area of Monteverde, the ultimate 4x4 town

assembly in the Ensambladora Automotriz S.A. and the import of lesser quality Spanish-built Santana Land Rovers. Before the dealership could fully recover, a devastating presidential decree put an outrageous 300 per cent tax on imported automobiles that had the effect of shutting down the Costa Rican automotive industry overnight.

NEW OWNER

It took a while but Land Rover is now back to stay in Costa Rica with a new owner behind the wheel. Oscar Echeverria grew up riding with his

father in his 1972 Range Rover. When he visited a Land Rover demonstration in Panama in the early-1990s, he was very impressed with the new look and feel of the classic. He worked from his home and began in the same way as his predecessors, with a single vehicle as a demonstrator.

The 300 per cent tax was still in place when Echeverria sold his first vehicle to a foreign diplomat – the only people exempt from the outrageous imposition. Soon after, the tax was reduced to a mere 100 per cent and sales took-off. With the local attachment for the heritage of Land Rover, Oscar merely had to demonstrate that the new vehicles were every bit as tough as the originals. He opened Motores Britanicos of Costa Rica in 1992 and has not glanced in his rearview mirror since.



ABOVE: Camel Trophy wannabe scaling the streets of Liberia, Guanacaste ABOVE RIGHT: Costa Rican families like to look after their LR's... TOP RIGHT: ... but this Td5 could do with a dust RIGHT: Where's the spare gone? BELOW: Defender Tdi used as a rental/4x4 tour vehicle in Manuel Antonio



Costa Rica is a country famous for its friendly people, abundant wildlife and spectacular scenery. Tourism is at an all-time high and, for the first time, a handful of world-renowned resorts are opening up. The main attraction, though, will always be the eco-tourism. Costa Rica offers more in adventure travel than just about any other country in the world. Every guidebook contains amazing photographs of white-water rafting, bathing in mud baths in the shadow of an active volcano, zipping through the treetops while harnessed to a cable on a canopy tour; the list goes on. What you will not find in any of the guidebooks are the Land Rovers.

HEAVEN

For a Land Rover fan the country is pure heaven. Most of the Land Rovers sold by John and Nora Schofield are still in daily use, either on the streets or in the field. With the cost of the vehicle high in relation to the average yearly

income of a local Tico, Land Rovers are kept in pristine condition. Families take great pride in owning a Land Rover and they are passed from generation to generation. Try to find an old Land Rover for sale and you will soon give up in utter frustration. Most run better than their modern contemporaries, yet a look

under the bonnet will show the rainbow of colours they have worn through their many decades of service.

It is difficult to believe that a single vehicle could have such a profound impact on the economy of a country. But, then again, what else would you expect from Land Rover? ■

LAND ROVER CAFÉ

'Land Rover Café is high altitude grown select coffee harvested solely in the region of Naranjo in the Central Valley of Costa Rica,' says Rodolfo Echeverria of Land Rover Café.

'It is one of the best areas for coffee growing because of its rich deep volcanic soils and high altitudes (1200-1500m), where only the highest quality "strictly hard beans" are grown. Its superiority derives from the combination of the plant, soil, climate and, of course, the altitude. The higher the altitude, the longer it takes the bean to ripen

and the slower the ripening process, the greater the aroma and flavour of the coffee will be.'

For every bag of Land Rover Café sold, the producers receive 40 per cent more money than the norm by removing the distributor and that profit is shared among the workers. As eco-tourism has taken over as the top revenue producer for Costa Rica, a contribution is also made from the sale of the coffee to the many biodiversity organisations to help support the country's natural resources.