

Local Costa Ricans, small in number, prepare big welcome for national soccer team

By: **Patrick M. O'Connell** Chicago Tribune June 6, 2016 5:05 AM



As Enrique "Tico" Fernandez and Norman White pondered their lunch choices, munching on tortilla chips and ChiFrijos — a concoction of rice, black beans, pico de gallo, chicharron, avocado and lizano salsa — talk turned to the first time they set foot in America.

"It was snowing and it was cold, and I only had on a light sports jacket," Fernandez said. "I wanted to turn around and head back home. I was so homesick."

Fernandez's father handed him a heavier coat and, after some adjustments, he settled in to a routine in the United States, graduating from Senn High School and eventually becoming a real estate salesman and radio broadcaster along the way.

Fernandez and White, friends and Spanish-language soccer announcing partners for an online station, are among a small group of immigrants from Costa Rica who have settled in Chicago. Although more than a quarter of Chicagoans are of Hispanic or Latino heritage, the number of

Costa Ricans living here is tiny. But with the Costa Rica men's national soccer team headed to Soldier Field on Tuesday night for a match in the Copa America international tournament against the United States, Chicago will experience a temporary surge in numbers.

Less than 1,000 people from the mountainous Central American nation are scattered across the city and suburbs, according to U.S. Census data, a particularly small number when compared with the largest groups: an estimated 587,000 Mexicans and 105,000 Puerto Ricans call Chicago home. Javier Rojas Viquez, of the

Costa Rican consulate in Chicago, says about 800 people have registered with the office, and the exact number of residents in Illinois and the Midwest is unknown.

Fans of the Ticos, as the team is called, will descend on the stadium for the game, joining family members who have flown from back home and potential busloads from the New York area to cheer for their soccer squad.

Waves of red-shirted supporters, flapping Costa Rican flags and cheers of "Pura Vida!," a national slogan which translates to "pure life" and denotes a carefree spirit, are expected as fans turn the lakefront into a temporary tailgating party.

"Some have described soccer as Costa Ricans' second religion," said Carmen Kordick, assistant professor of history at Roosevelt University who specializes in Costa Rican migration patterns. "Football — soccer — can make everything seem just a little bit better."

The Copa America match will be an opportunity for the small local community to come together.

We take pride in where we come from and our national heritage, and when we are together we are nuts. It's like sweet nectar. It brings out the nostalgia.— Enrique "Tico" Fernandez

"We take pride in where we come from and our national heritage, and when we are together we are nuts," Fernandez said. "It's like sweet nectar. It brings out the nostalgia. ... It'll be just like a beach atmosphere. I can't wait."

With its lush rain forests, picturesque coastlines and relatively stable government, the Central American country about the size of West Virginia has become a popular vacation and retirement destination for Americans for years. But the reverse is not as common.

Costa Rica has not experienced large patterns of emigration like its neighbors, and the small population in Chicago fits the trend — or lack thereof — across the country.

Nationwide, less than 1 percent of the U.S. population of Hispanic or Latino origin hails from Costa Rica, according to census data. About 126,418 Costa Ricans were living in the U.S. as of the [2010 census](#), the lowest total of all Central American nations.

While the country has had its share of problems, it has created better social and economic conditions than nearby Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, countries plagued by crime and violent struggles for control of the government. Costa Rica, by contrast, abolished its military in 1948 and has a highly literate population. It is often a haven for immigrants from surrounding Central American nations, with a poverty rate lower than most Latin American countries, according to the CIA's World Factbook.

Because of the stability, Costa Ricans have tended to stay put. And because migration often is a chain reaction — someone leaves, tells their family about the opportunities abroad prompting others to join them — the numbers have remained low, Kordick said.

"Overall, Costa Ricans have not emigrated in the same numbers as others in the region," said Kordick, whose mother is Costa Rican. Her parents met in the country in the 1970s, and she spent about a third of her childhood there. "It's a very limited Costa Rican community in the Midwest."

The largest community of Costa Ricans in the U.S. is in Paterson, N.J., Kordick said.

"When you see someone with a Costa Rican shirt or you see the flag, you get so excited," said Melissa Arias, who came to the U.S. about 10 years ago from Costa Rica. "And you say, 'Oh my gosh, where are you from?' "

Costa Ricans are scattered throughout the city and suburbs. Arias lives in Schaumburg, White in the city, Fernandez in Bellwood.

There is a popular Costa Rican restaurant, Irazu, in Bucktown, where Fernandez and White met for lunch last week, but there are no community enclaves such as Pilsen or Little Village. Because they tend to be a rarity, local Costa Ricans gravitate toward other natives. Spotting each other randomly at the market or on the street, outside an annual community picnic or organized group event, often is a thrill.

Fernandez said he's frequently disappointed when it turns out the person wearing the gear simply visited Costa Rica on vacation.

But when Costa Ricans find those connections, it can lead to a lasting friendship anchored in a love of country. Costa Rica has pockets of poverty, but many, like White and Arias, headed to the U.S. for chances at a better education or careers, not to escape oppression, crime or poor conditions back home.

Arias, who is planning a tailgate party for the Copa America match, is part of a local group of Costa Ricans in the Chicago area called "Barra Tica," a small assembly of people with roots in the Central American nation who meet to celebrate cultural traditions.

The group has a Facebook page and meets informally several times a year, including an annual picnic at an area forest preserve in August. Attendees cook traditional Costa Rican food: empanadas, arroz con pollo and tres leches. They play bingo and dance, usually decked out in red outfits.

Arias moved to the United States with her husband in search of better educational and job opportunities. She decided on Chicago because she had friends living here, and her father had previously visited to run the Chicago marathon, returning home with stories about the city's beauty.

Arias, a lifelong soccer fan since attending matches as a child, will be toting a grill to the Soldier Field parking lots for the game, against the U.S. team.

Soccer, she said, "is very traditional, it's very natural for us. It's kind of like it's in our blood."

White, the child of a Panamanian father and Costa Rican mother, said it often takes people a few takes and attempts to realize he's fluent in Spanish and of Latino heritage.

"I'll go to one of the markets and I'll ask a question in Spanish, and they'll respond in English," White said. "Then I'll say something again in Spanish and they'll look at me, and then finally they'll realize. ... Most people, when they think Latino, they're thinking about someone who looks Mexican. When I go to Little Village to get beans and tortillas and I start speaking Spanish, people freak out."

White's grandfather, Alex Curling, was a prominent Costa Rican congressman. White was born in Costa Rica and came to the U.S. permanently in high school, graduating from Willowbrook High School, then heading off to Michigan State University. He lived in Michigan and Washington, D.C., before returning to the Chicago area, where he works as a hate-crime victim advocate for the Chicago Commission on Human Relations.

White ended up in Chicago because of his uncle and cousins, after spending time in New York City with his father after his parents divorced. His mother is flying from Costa Rica to attend the Copa America match.

He also plans to be at Soldier Field on Tuesday supporting the Ticos, although he said his allegiances are split between his boyhood home and the country where he has lived for more than three decades. White's son plans to wear a Costa Rican shirt with an American flag wrapped around himself for the match.

"We're kind of caught in the middle here," White said.

Fernandez, however, is not conflicted.

"I'm Costa Rican first and American second," Fernandez said. He still harbors a bit of animosity toward the U.S. squad for the much-debated decision to play a World Cup qualifying match in a snowstorm in Colorado in 2013, a game the Americans won.

Still, he expects the atmosphere outside Soldier Field to be congenial.

"When you're tailgating, there'll be U.S. fans there in the crowd next to you, and of course we'll invite them over," Fernandez said. "It'll be like a party. It won't be like, 'Grrrrrrrr!' It's just a game. It's just sports. It's not a war."

The Costa Rican squad surprised many fans by emerging from one of the toughest groups in the 2014 World Cup, defeating Uruguay and Italy on the way to the quarterfinals. Fervor among supporters is sky high, although spirits have dampened somewhat when it was announced that star goalkeeper Keylor Navas, who plays for Real Madrid, will not be playing in the tournament.

Like the World Cup format, the top two teams from each group will advance to the knockout stage, with matches taking place across the country. Colombia, ranked fourth in the world, is also in the group with the U.S. and the Ticos, so the game along the lakefront takes on added importance.

"When you talk about soccer," Arias said. "Every heart of a Costa Rican person is with them."

poconnell@tribpub.com

Twitter @pmocwriter

Copyright © 2016, [Chicago Tribune](#)

