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# Costa Rica's Newly Rich Love to Flaunt It

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SAN JOSE, Costa Rica — A new crop of high-end shops is sprouting up in a leafy San Jose suburb, signaling a new trend in luxury shopping here, and raising brows about the habits of Costa Rica's emerging "nouveau riche."

Jewels by Tiffany, threads by Armani and shoes by Ferragamo are among the posh apparel that will adorn store windows in the sparkling new wing of the Multiplaza Escazu mall.

With some of the 86 businesses still waiting to open, the luxury wing — which was unveiled in December with much fanfare, including the attendance of President Oscar Arias — is already a sight to behold. Designed by top-notch U.S. architects RTKL, it is 90,000 square meters of airy, modern retail and dining spaces. Natural ambient sounds play over speakers. It's Costa Rica chic.

The incoming brands include Burberry, Lacoste, Cartier and a host of others that previously Ticos might have had to travel abroad to find. The mall's owner, Grupo Roble, touts the new wing as a "fashion paradise" that will enable residents to shop with just their pocketbook or wallet, and not a suitcase and plane ticket, too.

Granted, many of the Multiplaza's prospective customers are foreigners, whether here on holiday or a business conference. The foreign draw is bolstered by the plaza's concept: not just a mall, but a "mix-use complex" that bridges the shopping center with the Intercontinental Real hotel and corporate offices whose tenants include multinational businesses like Cisco Systems.

Since the mall opened in 1993, other businesses have followed, including a state-of-the-art private hospital and recently an IMAX movie theater, said Elisa Rojas, marketing manager for Grupo Roble. Private homes and condos have grown and grown in the surrounding areas. Signs of wealth are emerging too in the number of luxury cars that cruise the streets.

Sports cars, big houses and high fashion are part of a trend toward conspicuous wealth in Costa Rica, said Miguel Gutierrez, director of nongovernmental research group State of the Nation.

Members of the upper class began to consolidate their wealth in the 19th century when coffee production and exports brought significant riches, Gutierrez said. "However, these sectors have never, until recently, been ostentatious about their wealth.

"Now you find high-income segments of the population with cars that are very ostentatious, with homes that are huge and generally consume status products and wear certain brands that convey social status," Gutierrez said.

Across town, in the eastern San Jose district of Curridabat, Jose Francisco Oreamuno makes heads turn as he pulls his silver Porsche Carrera into a Jose parking lot. He's the president of the Porsche Club

Costa Rica, a group that has about 40 members, more than half of them Costa Rican. Oreamuno estimates there are at least 75 Porsche owners throughout the country.

Never before have riches in Costa Rica been so concentrated. The State of the Nation found that from the mid-1980s to the present Costa Rica's wealthiest segment has nearly doubled its wealth, while other sectors have risen much more moderately. (Last year's poverty rate went up one percentage point to 18.5 percent.)

Gutierrez acknowledged the glitz trend that has occurred all over, with a lot of help from consumer globalization through televisions, billboards and the internet. Gutierrez reckons Costa Rica's neighbors have had a stronger tradition of super wealthy, and flashy, elites. More than 30 Latin Americans made it to Forbes recently published list of the World's Billionaires, and one Latino, Mexico's Carlos Slim, even took first place. However, no one on the list was Costa Rican.

"Here it's practically unheard of to have a jet — you hear of two or three people with one," he said.

Nevertheless, for the past 20 years, Costa Rica has witnessed what Gutierrez describes as an increasingly marked class divide that was never characteristic of the country, which prides itself on social equality and a relatively robust middle class.

When planning the Escazu mall, according to Rojas, Grupo Roble had to tone down its portfolio somewhat from the likes of the Panama Multiplaza's star-studded lineup — which boasts Louis Vuitton and Chanel — to suit a Costa Rican market.

Customers are slowly turning up to explore the latest addition to the Escazu mall. On a recent weekday, a few young mothers sat in the new wing and kibitzed as their small children climbed all over the mall's indoor jungle gym. Said Rojas: "We know there's a market and we know it will be growing."

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