

ATENAS TODAY



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***ATENAS TODAY** is a free English language newsletter for the residents and potential residents of Atenas, Costa Rica. It contains informative articles and creative compositions submitted by our readers, and is distributed via email approximately once a month to over 350 email addresses. To get on the distribution list or to submit material, please send an email to Fred Macdonald at fredmac222@yahoo.com.*

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Atenas Today Interviews Bernhard Hertkorn

Building Contractor in Atenas

AT: I know you came to Costa Rica from Germany. Where and when were you born?

Bernhard: I was born in 1954 in a small 17th century town named Ravensburg, in the south of Germany, not far from Munich.

AT: Did you grow up and go to school in this town?

Bernhard: Yes. I lived there until I moved to Costa Rica in 1994.

AT: What was it like there?

Bernhard: It is a wonderful place. There is a large lake nearby, and you are within a couple of hours of great skiing in Austria. You can also easily drive to Italy or France. I loved the outdoor sports in the area—hiking, sailing, skiing, and biking.

AT: Did you attend school there?

Bernhard: I went through 9 years of primary school, and then, at age 14, I went to work for my father in his painting business. He painted houses and did restoration work on old buildings and churches.

AT: What about high school? Did you study English?

Bernhard: When I was 17 and still working for my father, I started going one day a week to a technical high school, working toward a high school diploma and a craftsman's license in painting. After two years of this, I stopped working and went to school full time for a year, until I graduated. We had intensive lessons in learning to read and speak English. Then I took some advanced courses in Stuttgart to get my masters and teaching certificate in painting houses and cars, and in furniture finishing.

AT: So now you are about 20 years old, and the year is 1974. What was it like in Germany at that time?

Bernhard: Things were booming. West Germany had recovered from the war and the economy was strong. Italians and Yugoslavs were coming to Germany in large numbers to meet the demand for labor.

AT: Did you have any family or contacts in East Germany?

Bernhard: None. East Germany was like a white place on the map—a separate country.

AT: What happened next?

Bernhard: I continued working with my father for a year, and then one day a teacher from the technical school called me and offered me a job as an instructor. For the next almost 20 years, I was a teacher. I was mainly still in the school in Ravensburg, but after the reunification of Germany, I spent some time in a town in East Germany helping them set up a technical school based on our model.

AT: You must have enjoyed teaching.

Bernhard: It was a good life. It paid well, and I had lots of time off to enjoy my hobbies and sports. In Germany teachers have guaranteed life time employment, and when they retire, they continue to receive 75% of their pay.

AT: What were your hobbies?

Bernhard: I dabbled in lots of things. I took art classes in painting, had my own photography studio, played the classical guitar, and worked on fixing up houses.

AT: So why did you leave all of that at age 40 to move to Costa Rica?

Bernhard: What does the song say? *It's still the same old story, the fight for love and glory..* When I was 23 I met a girl named Monica, who was living on an old farm about an hour from Ravensburg. She was running a bookstore. For the next 17 years we were together as much as possible, and I helped her restore some buildings on her property. In 1993 she discovered that she had a health problem that required her to live in a warm climate.

AT: What kind of problem did she have?

Bernhard: Monica was born in a basement bomb shelter in Stuttgart during the war. The medical facilities were minimal, and the doctors did not detect that her hip joint had not formed properly. This condition is not uncommon, and today babies can be treated so that this joint grows properly. In Monica's case, when the problem became apparent her choice was either to undergo radical and risky surgery, or to move to a warm place where she could swim every day. She decided to move, and I decided to go with her.

AT: What places did you consider?

Bernhard: We did a lot of research. In addition to being warm, the country had to be open to immigrants and had to have a low cost of living. We did not have a lot of money saved. Also, we wanted a country that was second world, not third world. The final choice came down to Cyprus or Costa Rica.

AT: What made you decide on Costa Rica?

Bernhard: At the time there was a lot of political turmoil in Lebanon and Cyprus. Also, Costa Rica, being further away, seemed more exciting.

AT: Did you know anyone in Costa Rica?

Bernhard: We had one contact, a customer of Monica's in the bookstore knew the brother of Tommy, who owned Apartamentos Atenas. In 1992 we spent four weeks at the Apartamentos and toured the country. Like many people, we concluded that Atenas was the best place to live in the whole country.

AT: When did you actually move?

Bernhard: In 1994 we bought an old farm property outside of Atenas and left Germany. At that time living costs here were really low, and I was able to fix up the buildings while I was learning "construction Spanish". A few years later, Monica's brother, who is a successful doctor in Germany, decided to build a second home in Costa Rica, and together we purchased a second property nearby, where I built houses for him and for us.

AT: Was that the point at which you got into the contracting business?

Bernhard: Yes. My first project was at Colinas del Sol, building two guest houses. Then I did a house in Rio Grande, followed by a house and large swimming pool in Los Angeles. Since then I have built four or five more houses, and I'm working on a large project right now in Barrio Mercedes.

AT: What kind of projects do you like?

Bernhard: I enjoy working on buildings that are different and present construction challenges where I can take advantage of my experience and interest in design. Also, I tend to be conservative in my approach in terms of quality, so I don't like to work on spec houses or under fixed price contracts where cost is the main factor.

AT: Do you intend to keep working as a contractor well into the future?

Bernhard: For sure. Living in Costa Rica is no longer cheap.

AT: When might you be available to take on a new job?

Bernhard: I would like to have a new job lined up to start about a year from now.

AT: Do you expect to spend the rest of your life in Costa Rica?

Bernhard: Absolutely. I love it here for all the reasons most of us do—the easy-going attitude of the people, the natural beauty, the beaches, the food, white water rafting, hiking, etc.

AT: As a business person, don't you get frustrated with the pace of things?

Bernhard: Sure, but I have gotten used to it. I think one of the reasons North Americans and Europeans have a hard time adjusting is that the Costa Ricans look like Europeans, so initially we expect them to act like Europeans. I have learned to accept that they are different, and I'm glad they are.

AT: What do you miss most about Germany?

Bernhard: My friends, and believe it or not, the sometimes beautiful winter days.

Malnutrition? In Atenas?

A special report by Chris Winsett

I met Lorena at a talk on composting and hydroponics. We all introduced ourselves and she said she was the teacher at the Center for Nutrition and Education, arousing my curiosity. We talked during the coffee break and it turned out that I had walked past the center many times, right at the corner turning into the Guisaro, by the Red Cross, some faded plastic playground things behind a chainlink fence, a once pretty building with the paint peeling.

Lorena spoke passionately about the center and its problems and invited me over to have a closer look and ask her lots of questions. I was welcomed into a brightly painted room that serves as a dining room. It is holiday time, the school year starts end of February so the little tables and chairs were piled up on one side, waiting for the children between 3 and 5 years of age who get food here and some kindergarden education. They come from very low income families that cannot feed their children well or do not know how to feed them properly and sometimes there are difficult circumstances in the families also, like alcoholism or domestic violence.

The children are admitted to the program depending on their state of malnutrition and the income of the head of family that must not be higher than 54.000 Colones a month. Social risk and psychological factors are also evaluated in the admission process. They come from all parts of Atenas, not just the more depressed areas of Fatima or el Boqueron (close to Roca Verde) for example. Nicaraguan children can also participate in the program and sometimes they are majority.

Last year they had 40 children, the year before 50. There are 2 turns: One group comes in the morning from 7 to 11, they get breakfast and are sent home after lunch. The second group comes at 11.30 and has lunch and an afternoon snack. Carmen, one of Lorena's two assistants, shows me proudly around the kitchen. It is so small that the refrigerator is in the bodega and the oven in Lorena's office but it is sparkling clean, and she reports that they have to wear hairnets and aprons when they are cooking and attending the children. On the wall are 5 daily menus, elaborated by a nutritionist for balance, which they have to follow week after week.

The center depends on the Ministry of Health that provides a nutritionist, a psychologist and language therapist and supplies the food for the children. However, it does not meet all the other needs that the center has. They should be provided by the community and the parents' association that tries to raise money through raffles etc. But of course there is never enough for anything and the wish list is long.

As Lorena shows me around the building she points out places that need attention. The house was built in 1972 and between the climate and the lack of resources wood parts have rotted away so that mice come into the storage room, there is only one toilet for all the children, the paint is peeling everywhere, the wood on the little tables and chairs is cracked, little hands are in danger and the plastic playground equipment is faded and broken and will not be usable much longer

A young man rings the bell. He is a painter and has brought paint samples to choose from. A large company has just donated the paint that is so badly needed. They also want to send a carpenter over to fix a few windows. But who is going to paint? Or who is going to pay a painter?

A family arrives. Lorena disappears with them into her office, comes out once to measure the little boy on a tape stuck to the wall.

Meanwhile, Carmen the assistant sings Lorena's praise. She has been working at the center for a year and a half and has done a lot. She prepares the classes for the little ones, monthly themes and activities like for example about paper and recycling or about the wind. She sees to the kids developing healthy habits like brushing their teeth at the sinks in the dining room and gives talks to the parents when they come to receive the 2 cartons of milk that they get for free per month. She just wishes she had a few more carpets to sit the children on for their classes.

Lorena is going to have surgery the next day. I wish her all the best and know I will be back to the center when the school year starts. With a check in hand.

What I am hoping for by sharing this information with you is to get a group of people involved and help solve some of the center's immediate needs. If you would like to participate or have any ideas for how we could help, please e-mail me at cwinsett@yahoo.com, I'd love to hear from you.

A little money goes a long way for these children, and it's so easy to help. Simply go on line and transfer a donation to Banco Nacional Account Number 100-01-021-0002545-7, in the name of Assoc de Desorolla Especifico Pro Cen-Cinai de Atenas.

Don't Let the Moon Phase You

by Richard Sheppard

The new moon rises with the sun and sets with the sun. It is in the sky during the daytime. So we have a couple of moonless nights at the beginning of the lunar month.

For the first half of the month the moon is already up at sunset. During this part of the month, you don't see the moon rise. It rises during the daytime and as the sun sets you look up and there it is. Let's say it's a half moon. Here's the thing. That half moon will be half way up the sky at sunset.

Since it sets in the west, that half-moon has to travel across half the sky to reach the western horizon. That takes half the night. So, at sunset, the beginning of the night, a half-moon will stay in the sky for half the nighttime.

It works for any size moon. An $1/8^{\text{th}}$ moon will be $1/8^{\text{th}}$ the way up the sky at sunset and remain in the sky $1/8^{\text{th}}$ of the night.

Moonshine is reflected sunshine. The sun that just set in the west illuminates a moon we see at sunset. So the moon seen at sunset is lit from the west.

As the month proceeds, each night at sunset, the moon appears fuller and higher above the western horizon at sunset. For instance a $3/4$ moon will be $3/4$ of the way from the western to eastern horizon.

The full moon rises in the east as the sun sets in the west. This is the first moon we see rise and it is in the sky all night long. Only the full moon can be seen at any time of the night. The other phases are in the sky only a fraction of the night. So at any arbitrary time of night during the month, there is only a 50% chance of seeing the moon at all.

For the second half of the month the moon is up at sunrise. It rose during the night. So now we consider the moon at sunrise. It's the same formula as before except now we view the size of the moon at sunrise instead of sunset and how high it is above the eastern horizon instead of the western horizon. It is now illuminated from the east side.

As the month progresses, the size of the moon each night at sunrise steadily decreases, its height above the eastern horizon decreases by the same fraction, as does the time it is visible in the nighttime sky.

So a day or so after the full moon, at sunrise you see a nearly full moon almost at the western horizon that has been in the sky most of the night. By the end of the month, at sunrise, you see a sliver of a moon just above the eastern horizon that the sun will snuff out shortly.