

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.*

Compositions from back issues are archived by category on the Atenas Chamber of Tourism and Commerce website, www.atenascatuca.com. Click on the English version and then [Atenas Today](#) on the business page.

Atenas Today Interviews Vera Fouriau

Owner of Vista Atenas B & B

AT: Here we are in this beautiful spot, high on the Vista Atenas mountain, looking out over the green valley on a beautiful sunny day. You must love it here.

Vera: Yes I do, I am so happy waking up every day in my paradise!

AT: Where did you come from?

Vera: I was born in 1958 in a small village in the northern part of Belgium and spent the first 23 years of my life over there.

AT: Is this the Flemish part of Belgium?

Vera: Yes. Even though Belgium is a small country there are two distinct parts, each with its own language and culture. In the north we speak Flemish, or Dutch spoken with a different accent than in the Netherlands. In the south we speak French.

My husband Jean is from the southern part, and I lived there with him for 24 years, until I moved over here almost three years ago.

AT: I know you speak French and Flemish, as well as perfect English. How is your Spanish?

Vera: I started to study Spanish when I arrived here, and I'm getting along pretty well.

AT: What did you do in Belgium before coming to Costa Rica?

Vera: I studied language and education at the University and was a junior high school teacher for three years until I got married. In that time my diploma was not recognized in the French part, so I couldn't continue teaching. Then I worked with Jean in his law business.

AT: Do you have children?

Vera: A boy Dan, 18 years old, and a girl Lynn, 20 years old. They are now in the University in Belgium.

AT: Are you here in Costa Rica alone?

Vera: My manager is living here, and then there are my adopted cat and dog, Athena and Achilles. Jean is still working in Belgium. He comes with the children on school holidays. From next year on, he will be able to stay for longer periods. Before he can retire, he has to work for five more years.

AT: So what made you leave your familiar and traditional life in Belgium and move to Costa Rica?

Vera: It was a series of serendipitous events. My children were more and more getting ready to enter into their adult life. And I was getting more and more the feeling that I was ready to do something different in my life.

Jean was dreaming about retiring to southern France and running a small bed and breakfast. He drove down there several times looking for the perfect spot, but for some reason I didn't like the places he showed me; it didn't feel right. I said to him: "I like my house, I like Belgium, I don't want to live anywhere else, but if that's what you really want, then do it and I'll come to visit you from time to time!"

AT: What happened?

Vera: One day I was attending a routine conference in Brussels about the Mayan culture in Central America and their concept of time. After the conference I went to talk

to the speaker, a Frenchman living partly in Spain, and partly in Costa Rica. The more he talked about this country, the more I was certain that I had to go there. He said he could help me with finding a house to rent for some weeks.

AT: How did your husband feel about you leaving?

Until then, I had been living a very protected life. Jean was always there to take care of everything and I had never been one day of my life on my own. I liked the challenge of travelling for once without them.

Jean, Lynn and Dan were great. To my surprise they encouraged me to do what I felt I had to do. This was three and half years ago.

AT: Where did you stay in Costa Rica?

Vera: Right here in Atenas, I rented a house in Los Angeles for three weeks.

AT: Did you speak Spanish then?

Vera: Not a word.

AT: What was it like ?

Vera: As soon as I stepped out of the airplane, I knew I liked this country, as if I had been here before. I never expected to meet people like the people in Atenas. My neighbors were great, they were at my door to make sure I was okay and got whatever help I needed. We established basic communication using a mixture of the language of the heart and some easy words that I learned from them, and that was all it took to be a part of their community. I still have contact with them now.

AT: We all have had that experience with the Ticos. It's what made us move to Costa Rica also.

Vera: I had many great adventures during those first few weeks. One in particular had a big effect on me. I had rented a car and was driving around without any map, having no idea where I was, when the car broke down. It just quit. The man in the car behind pulled up in front of me and came to my window to offer his assistance. In English I told him it was a rental car but I did not know how to call (because my mobile from Europe was not working here) or what to do. He took the papers, looked at the motor, called the rental company, explained the situation in Spanish, and arranged for the company to bring me another car and pushed my car off the road. While I was waiting for the new car to come, people in the house by the road came out and insisted that I wait on their porch, where they gave me refreshments. In Belgium you might have to wait for a long time, while people would just watch you passing by in their cars.

AT: Do you know now where it was that you broke down?

Vera: Coming from La Garita towards Atenas, it was right before the intersection where the road goes off to Rio Grande. I think about that experience every time I pass there.

AT: What led you to the Vista Atenas B&B?

Vera: At the end of my three weeks rental, I asked the person I met in Brussels where was he staying before he bought his house here in Costa Rica, and he said he stayed at the bed & breakfast up there. I immediately went to see this place. And as soon as I arrived here, I felt 'home'! There were signs all over that made me feel even stronger that this was to be my home. There was a French Canadian guest who had her books on a table outside her room, and they were the same books I was reading. Then there was the owner, Jose, from Belgium who was speaking my own language. His place was for sale and he was hoping to pass on Vista Atenas to another Belgian. And it was a small B&B, just like my husband wanted to buy in France. And the view was fantastic.

AT: **But you were going back to Belgium in a week.**

Vera: I stayed there for a few nights, and then I had to leave because the rest of the week was fully booked, but I didn't want to go to another hotel for my last nights in Costa Rica. The French Canadian lady said she had an extra bed in her room and would be happy to share it with me. This was the first time I accepted an offer like that by a person I'd only met some days ago. This lady has become a very good friend; she comes back here every year for 3 months. She even came to visit me during my last stay in Belgium!

AT: **I'll bet your husband was surprised when you told him you wanted to buy a B&B in Costa Rica.**

Vera: Oh yes, he was. I told him I had found the place he was dreaming of, it was just a little bit further than France. And I said I was sure I could live there.
(The strange thing is that now he is the one who is coming to visit me from time to time!)

AT: **Did he come right away to see it?**

Vera: Four weeks later I was back here, with him. By the end of the week Jose had agreed with us on the terms of the sale.

We came back with Lynn and Dan during the school holidays. In the beginning they were not too enthusiastic about this big change, but after a while they have learned to love Costa Rica and Atenas.

Jean has started studying Spanish, and although he has never been passionate about languages, he's making big progress.

AT: **How have you found being a hotel owner?**

Vera: It is all completely new to me. I'm still learning all the time. But I love all of it. I wish to really integrate here, and work with the Costa Ricans. I am getting a lot of satisfaction from the challenge. I like people and I like to listen to their stories. I like to do gardening and had a lot of pleasure redecorating the place.

AT: **How is business?**

Vera: For the first two years the high season was very busy. We had lots of repeat customers. But this year has been slow. The weak economy in the U.S. has affected business in Costa Rica.

AT: **How many rooms to you have?**

Vera: We have 9 rooms, (beds for 22 people). All the rooms have private baths, and the two cabins and the villa have kitchens.

AT: **Do you serve food?**

Vera: Only breakfast. There is a big kitchen in the main building. Sometimes large groups will rent the whole place and bring their own cook.

AT: **What are you rates?**

Vera: Our basic rate is \$70 a night for a room for two people. For longer stays we offer discounts. For example a cabin with kitchen is \$800 a month, and the villa is \$900 a month. In addition there is a 10% discount in the low season.

AT: **What kind of amenities and services are included?**

Vera: We provide breakfast, a sparkling clean pool and sundeck, private terraces, high speed wireless internet, tranquility, and fantastic views of the valley and the heavens. We can also have a rental car to be brought to you at the hotel and send a taxi to meet you at the airport, which is only 40 minutes away.

Our location is perfect for people planning to drive to the Pacific beaches, or wanting to visit the Central Valley.

AT: Sounds very appealing. What kind of marketing are you doing to let people know about this?

Vera: We have just begun a very interesting marketing project. We have a new logo and
w business cards and at the end of this week, our revamped website www.vistaatenas.com, should be on the net. The new brochures are being printed right now.

AT: Well I wish you luck. Your beautiful hotel is a real Atenas resource.

Vera: Thank you.

I Wonder What the Poor People Are Doing?

by Martin Lively

My Dad said a lot of memorable things. But his way of saying, “What can be better than this?” was to exclaim, “I wonder what the poor people are doing?”

It took me some time to understand. We were the poor people; we lived in a walk up apartment in the Mission District of San Francisco, we had no car, I had three pair of shoes (Buster Brown brown leather for school and church, good tennis shoes and playtime tennis shoes), and we seldom took a summer vacation.

Dad usually asked this question when the entire family was around the dinner table and we had just finished one of Grandma Rose’s plain but hearty Irish meals. The “poor” people were those who were just like us but who did not realize the blessings bestowed on them. The war was over, most of the boys came home, and everyone had a job. Life was good.

Twenty years later when we assembled around a larger table at his summer home in Sonoma, now with spouses and grandchildren added, he would wait for a lull in the conversation and call out “I wonder what the poor people are doing?” Those who were not there to hear it long ago thought he really meant poor-people. He had two homes, two cars and ran five printing plants. I too was a homeowner and two car family. Everybody had many more than three pair of shoes. But he meant the same thing and I knew it and he knew I knew it and neither of us explained it – all would “get it” over time.

Now, sixty years later, from the patio of Casi el Cielo on Calle Zacatal en San Isidro de Atenas guests hear me ask “I wonder what the poor people are doing?, although more often now it is pronounced PURA VIDA!