

Business Real Estate

New Dutch Envoy Promotes Trade, Integration

Holland third-biggest destination for goods from Costa Rica

By Jeffrey Van Fleet
Special to The Tico Times

It's a homecoming of sorts for the new ambassador from the Netherlands, Matthijs Van Bonzel.

The 51-year-old veteran diplomat arrived in San José in August with Colombian-born wife Cristina and son Eduard, 16. Their older son, Matthijs Jr., was born in Costa Rica during Van Bonzel's first tenure here as the Dutch secretary for development cooperation (1985-1989).

Much has changed in the intervening two decades, says the ambassador, who began his career in the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1982 working on NATO affairs.

"It went from a cold war to a rather hot war here in the 1980s," he remembers, "and now to a region at peace."

Van Bonzel has seen Costa Rica's exports to his country move from traditional products such as coffee and bananas - which he points out are "still needed, still appreciated" - to microprocessors and ornamental plants.

Costa Rican exports to Europe, via the Netherlands, total \$1.8 billion annually. Most pass through Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport or the port of Rotterdam, the continent's largest.

The post is one of Costa Rica's longest standing diplomatic relationships, dating from 1852, and serves also as the embassy for El Salvador, Honduras and Panama.

Van Bonzel replaces recently departed Susan Blankhart, now the Netherlands' ambassador to Egypt.

Other than his most recent posting in Japan, Van Bonzel has spent most of his career in Europe, working in the heady days of European Union integration, the establishment of the common euro currency, and



Lindy Drew | Tico Times

The Dutch Connection:
Matthijs Van Bonzel, the Netherlands' new ambassador to Costa Rica, brings a wealth of experience to the job, including a previous stint here in the 1980s at his country's secretary for development cooperation.

the gradual reduction of border controls among countries. He brings that interest in regional integration to his job here, his first as an ambassador.

Van Bonzel spoke with The Tico Times this week at his office in the embassy in the Sabana Sur neighborhood on San José's west side:

TT: How do you gauge relations between the Netherlands and Costa Rica and Central America as you assume your post here?

MVB: I think we've had a very intensive relationship, first through development cooperation and, now, mainly an economic relationship. I see that as progress. From giving aid, from a relation of donor to recipient, we came into a more balanced relationship in which Holland is the third most important destination for Costa Rican products. That is quite an achievement. Costa Rica is producing a substantial amount of products that Europe needs. The main port of entry to

this European market is the Netherlands.

Panama has an enormous amount of development. It is very eager to attract foreign investment, and they're doing very well. They do not have the complexities of the system that Costa Rica has. They compete with Costa Rica on the point of doing things rapidly. Costa Rica sees this and realizes there is competition in the region. It's beneficial for both countries.

This is how we also function in Europe.

That's how you keep your economies efficient: work together where you can; compete where you have to.

Where does economic integration between Central America and the European Union stand?

The easy parts have been finished, but on both sides there are sensitive issues being negotiated in Guatemala this week.

One famous issue is bananas, and there is disagreement within Europe how to proceed. The Dutch and Germans like good bananas for lower prices. We have no interest in keeping special access to Europe's markets. It's a story of other (European countries') past colonial relations and special access for those countries.

Another problem is the International Criminal Court (in The Hague). Costa Rica and the Netherlands have promoted development of international law through the International Criminal Court. Other Central American countries don't share the same view.

What does the current world financial turmoil mean for small countries like the Netherlands and Costa Rica?

We should always try to find our winning points. Where are we strong? You have to develop that. Costa Rica's more sophisticated, intellectual tourism will keep people's interest more than that of big charter flights or big real estate development. If it keeps up its environmental policies and stays ahead in the development of sustainable energy, the country will survive. ■

Economic Indicators

OCT. 2 - OCT. 9 | Current Values and Percentage Changes

U.S. DOLLAR EXCHANGE RATE*

BUY: ₡549.83
SELL: ₡559.47

*Wednesday's Central Bank reference rate.

See www.ticotimes.net for daily updates.

MOST ACTIVE STOCKS

Stock	Volume	Last Price	Change
Florida Ice & Farm Co. (common)	\$149,832.82	₡1,257.99	-3.23%
Grupo Improsa (preferred)	\$108,482.00	\$98.62	0.63%
Holcim Costa Rica (common)	\$234,914.81	₡35.99	0%
La Nación Group (common)	\$65,584.42	₡9.50	9.44%

INFLATION

SEPTEMBER	LAST 12 MONTHS	ACCRUED '08
0.95%	15.77%	11.83%

AVERAGE LOAN INTEREST RATE

COLONES 18.30%
DOLLARS 10.59%

SOURCES: Central Bank (www.bccr.fi.cr) & Bolsa Nacional de Valores (www.bolsacr.com)

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