Principes, 28(3), 1984, pp. 127–131

Palm Adventures in Costa Rica

HORACE O. HOBBS, JR.
6957 Rook Rd., Houston, TX 77087

I had thought about a trip to the "land of the stilt palms" for sometime but found myself continually putting it off. Finally, at the urging of Chester Skotak, a long time friend and plant collector who had recently moved down there, my wife Cynthia and I scraped up the necessary funds to spend our 1982 Christmas break in the Costa Rican rain forest.

Upon our afternoon arrival in San José, we were seconds away from our first palms. The city was filled with *Chamaedorea costaricana*, both indoors and out. We spent the first night in San José sampling the night life of the town. Our guide, Chester, seemed quite adept at locating all the bars with nice palm plantings in view.

We awoke the next morning to begin a more serious palm hunt, starting at the town square. At the corners of the square were very old and towering *Roystonea*, with *Phoenix* and *Elaeis* planted below. After a quick look around and a tour of the magnificent National Theatre, we walked through the city to the National Zoological Gardens. We could see the tall fan palms of the gardens from quite a good distance, which hurried our pace considerably. At the gate of the zoo, we paid our 10¢ entrance fee and began wandering down the paths lined with tropical plants and animals.

Introduced species of palms in the zoo include *Livistona saribus*, *Arecastrum romanzoffianum*, *Chrysalidocarpus madagascariensis* and *Trachycarpus fortunei*. We were most excited about the Costa Rican species planted here: large *Euterpe*, hedges of bright green *Chamaedorea* and beautiful specimens of *Synechanthus warscewiczianus* loaded with red and orange fruit clusters. After a long tour through the zoo's interesting collection of Costa Rican animals, we returned to a more conventional line of sightseeing in San José.

Our second morning in San José, we rose at 4:00 a.m. for an all day bus ride through the mountains toward Panama. The bus left San José just as the sun was topping the volcanoes ahead in the distance. We rose steadily in elevation for about two hours and the flora changed as rapidly as the altitude. These high mountains were almost palmless, so we focused our attention on the magnificent tree ferns, cyclanths and bright red bromeliads. As we approached the top of the Cordillera de Talamanca, we were able to see both the Pacific and the Caribbean through our bus windows. This unbelievable sight was typical of the beautiful scenery we encountered all along the route. The sights more than justified the high speed, daredevil driving and less than comfortable seating arrangements on the bus.

Before we knew it we had careened down out of the mountains and back into palm country. At about the halfway point of our trip, we entered San Isidro, a beautiful town which marked the real beginning of our excitement as we saw palms in every direction. The coconut palms of San Isidro are quite distinct and interesting, with many upright leaves held at an angle of about 45° from the trunk.

As soon as we left the town proper, we passed dozens of roadside homes with yards completely filled with palms. Each yard had a few coconuts, a clump of peach

1. *Astrocaryum standleyanum* on the banks of Rio Terraba at Paso Real.

palms (*Bactris gasipaes*) and an oil palm or two. It was a thrill for us to see people actually using palms for their livelihood rather than for landscaping their boulevards. For the next few hours the palm scenery remained unchanged as we continued southeast on the Pan-American Highway.

At the three-quarter mark in the trip, just after noon, we turned off the main highway at Paso Real and headed toward San Vito de Jaba. From this point on, the roads were dirt, but the palm scenery was fantastic! We dropped slightly in elevation as we entered the river valley of the Rio Grande de Terraba. We took a primitive ferry across the river and waiting on the other bank were several nice stands of *Astrocaryum standleyanum*. As there was no time to collect seed, we had to settle for photos. The *Astrocaryum* lined the road until we climbed out of the river valley. We gradually ascended into rolling hills, about 500 meters in elevation, and began to see an occasional *Scheelea rostrata*. As we climbed higher, they became more frequent, and near the town of Sabanilla, the groves of the massive *Scheelea* completely covered the hills. Between Sabanilla and San Vito, we rose

2. *Asterogyne martiana* at Finca Las Cruces.

3. *Euterpe macrospadix* at Finca Las Cruces.

4. *Hyophorbe indica* at Finca Las Cruces. Photo by Cynthia Ford.

further in elevation and saw an occasional patch of montane rain forest which had yet to be cleared for agriculture. Out of the tops of these forest patches, sprang tall *Iriartea gigantea* and *Euterpe macrospadix*. Seeing the *Iriartea* for the first time made all the bruises of the bus trip worthwhile. The stilt palms are certainly among the most magnificent of all Neotropical plants. They were distinct from quite a distance as they towered above the low forest canopy. Soon the road started dropping in elevation, leaving the forest patches behind for a more arid landscape. Eight hours after our departure from San José, we pulled into San Vito de Jaba, a small town only a few miles from Panama.

We quickly bought the necessary supplies and headed out of San Vito. We hired a land cruiser and drove due south, right up the side of the mountains towards Panama. After forty-five minutes of climbing the rock road, we returned to the montane forests and cooler elevations. The driver dropped us off at the entrance of Finca Sal Si Puedes, Chester Skotak's Costa Rican home. After a short tour of the house and gardens, we walked through virgin rain forests to Finca Las Cruces, the home of long time plant enthusiasts, Bob and Catherine Wilson.

The building and development of Las Cruces Tropical Botanical Garden has been previously documented in *Principes* by W. H. Hodge. In the short time since his visit, the palm collection has grown considerably. It now consists of about 700 species planted throughout the acreage and contains not only the choicest of Central American rain forest palms, but also a good selection of Oriental rarities as well. Many of the palms grown at Las Cruces are very rare in cultivation and several species are as yet undescribed.

The American palms growing at Las

5. Young *Socratea durissima* and author. Photo by Cynthia Ford.

Cruces include extensive collections of *Chamaedorea* and *Geonoma* as well as Costa Rican and Panamanian species of *Asterogyne*, *Oenocarpus*, *Raphia*, *Sabal*, *Bactris*, *Euterpe*, *Prestoea*, *Reinhardtia*, *Neonicholsonia*, *Calyptrogyne*, *Iriartea*, *Socratea*, *Synechanthus* and others.

Among the palms from the Eastern tropics cultivated at Las Cruces, are species of *Nenga*, *Basselinia*, *Dictyosperma*, *Hyophorbe*, *Licuala*, *Pinanga*, *Ptychosperma*, *Neodypsis*, *Chrysalidocarpus*, *Trachycarpus*, *Daemonorops*, *Normanbya*, *Pigafetta*, *Rhapis*, *Areca*, *Corypha* and *Caryota*.

The altitude of the garden allows cultivation of many palm species that do not survive the summer temperatures of southern Florida, Texas or California. Las Cruces is ideally suited to grow many of the New Caledonian and New Guinean species which will probably never be successfully grown outdoors in the U.S. As Bob Wilson and his assistants are actively engaged in the expansion of the palm collection, Finca Las Cruces should soon become the premier location for palm study in this hemisphere.

Our plans allowed us only four days at Las Cruces, but palmwise they were by far the most exciting. The hospitality of the Wilsons made the stay even more enjoyable. All too soon we were back on the bus to San José, but not before we had made plans for several return trips.

Literature Cited

ALLEN, PAUL H. 1977. The Rain Forests of Golfo Dulce. Stanford University Press.

HODGE, W. H. 1981. Finca Las Cruces, a Costa Rican Garden. Principes 25: 47–53.

Know Your Palms

A. *Moratia cerifera*; B. *Eugeissona utilis*; C. *Pigafetta filaris*; D. *Schippia concolor*.