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The Rediscovery of Nicaragua

By GREGORY DICUM

Correction Appended

LOLL in one of the pools at Pelican Eyes, a new development above the town of San Juan del Sur, on Nicaragua's Pacific Coast: a tranquil breeze blows up the hillside from the perfect bay below, the pool's disappearing edge merges with sea and sky, and the only sound is the rhythmic tapping of the bricklayers who are building the place — a compound of whitewashed, tile-roofed houses amid lush greenery and looking out to perfect sunset views. At the bottom is an airy palm-thatched restaurant, where cheerful waiters serve strong drinks and the patrons sit in the warm night air and talk about real estate.

This is Nicaragua as the Next [Costa Rica](#), the sort of hopeful real estate appellation signaling that gentrification may now begin in earnest. In the last few years, as Americans on the prowl for second homes, or just an investment, have found places like the Last Costa Rica already overrun by their own kind, a boom has started in the country just to its north.

Nicaragua is no stranger to American visitors with grandiose plans. That perfect bay at San Juan del Sur was the place Forty-Niners on their way to [California](#) from New England embarked upon the Pacific after a journey across Nicaragua. William Walker, a freelance American colonialist, made landfall here in 1855 to undertake a bloody, tragicomic campaign to introduce democracy, railroads and slavery.

Before facing a firing squad, Walker was briefly the president of Nicaragua, an episode that, perhaps even more than the quarter-century occupation by the United States Marines at the start of the 20th century, and even the Contra war of the 1980s, informs a Nicaraguan wariness of American enthusiasms.

So for now, this is still Nicaragua. If you descend the hill from Pelican Eyes and pass its guardhouse at the foot of the drive, the road is pocked and broken. Shanties cluster at its side. Yet toward the water, San Juan del Sur retains an attractive character. It's a mellow seaside town where blond surfers stroll obliviously past a Sandinista rally, with loudspeakers blaring revolutionary songs.

This town of brightly painted wooden houses with red metal roofs is fronted by a wide, pretty beach. At the open-air restaurants there, you can relax with a setup that includes a bottle of fine, clean Flor de Caña rum, a bucket of ice, a few bottles of Coke and a dish of limes.



Hiking Nicaragua's Volcanoes

You can walk out for a dip in the warm, shallow water from time to time, then return to the restaurant and snack on salty fried cheese and sweet maduros (fried ripe bananas) as you watch kids play soccer on the beach. Boats bob just behind the soft, curling surf.

I visited in August, with the photographer Morgan Stetler and his fiancée, Anne-Lise Reusswig. In preparation for the elections that took place at the beginning of November, all around us were the workings of the democracy that has emerged from Nicaragua's troubled past. This was the fourth consecutive free

election in the 16 years of peace since the end of the Marxist regime of Daniel Ortega.

The Sandinistas won, making Mr. Ortega, their longtime leader, president once again. But he is president of a different Nicaragua, and there seems little chance that the Sandinista victory will lead back to the chaos of the past.

The news in August was of campaigns, scandal and, more pertinent to the visitor, the rolling blackouts born of high oil prices and botched energy privatization. “No hay luz” — “There is no light” — was an apologetic refrain we heard throughout the country, and we found that a generator had become the most important hotel amenity.

In Granada, we stayed at the newly remodeled Gran Francia. Besides being a well-lighted beacon in the darkened city, it was comfortable and well placed, on the corner of the central plaza, right next to the freshly painted mustard yellow cathedral.

In the plaza, the city's annual weeklong festival for its patron saint, the Virgin of the Assumption, was in full swing. It featured a cacophony of school drum corps, church bells and booming fireworks at seemingly random times (like just before dawn).

The afternoon we arrived, an endearingly bad mariachi band played sad songs of lost loves as the singer hobbled about the plaza's band shell with one leg drastically shorter than the other.

Vendors sold wooden toys and fire-roasted cashews around the plaza, and a breeze brought the sweet smell of the countryside into the city.

Horse-drawn carriages, which serve as taxis — and not just for tourists — lined one side of the plaza, while families sat under spreading flame trees drinking pitaya, a cool and tangy juice of cactus fruit and lime with a stunning fuchsia color that glowed radiantly against the turquoise-painted tables. Old grandmothers sat on park benches watching beneficently as boys fiddled with their cellphones, too shy to flirt more directly with the clusters of laughing girls. It was hot, and everyone wished it would rain.

When the band was done and night had fallen, a town booster took the microphone in the elegant salmon-colored band shell to make a speech about Granada's sunny future, saying "We're now the 25th most visited city in Latin America!" When he was done, the power went out.

Granada was founded in 1524, and it was laid waste by William Walker as he abandoned it after losing his grip on power. When we took a tour of the city, our guide introduced nearly every building with a variation of "this church was burned by William Walker, the American filibuster."

Everywhere, new cobblestones were going in, and new streetlights. Fresh paint in vivid yellow, pink and blue shone on magnificently restored post-Walker 19th-century churches. Visitors — European tour groups, Latin American families, Australian backpackers — wandered about the central part of the town, soaking up the evanescent atmosphere of more than a hundred years of solitude.

Like every city in Nicaragua, Granada is in a spectacular location. A richly forested volcano overlooks the city, which is perched at the edge of Lake Nicaragua. At the foot of the city, an enchanting archipelago of tiny, close-set islands beckons: Las Isletas are heaps of rock that were spewed out of the volcano and are now covered in big, leafy tropical vegetation. Some are private estates, opulent getaways for captains of Nicaraguan industry. Others are modest, primordial knobs concealing rustic cottages.

We took a boat through the islands, marveling at the beauty of such a setting — the white egrets wolfing down sardines, and the laconic fishermen in brightly painted rowboats on the calm water. Here and there "For Sale" signs in English hung low over the water from stout tree branches. They were beseeching, attached to improbable personal tropical paradises that could be had by any American sitting on a chunk of home equity.

But Lake Nicaragua seems too majestic a place for such thoughts. It's a near-mythical tropical lake, one of the largest in the world, ringed by volcanoes and forest. Its waters are home to strange beasts — including freshwater sharks and sawfish, both sadly in decline — and moving legend: it is said to have been an Eden that was drowned after a Romeo and Juliet tragedy. It is shallow, and turbid from volcanic ash, but it is warm, and clean, lending a freshness to the air along its shores. Toward its southern end is an unexpected gem: the island of Ometepe.

Ometepe, composed of twin volcanoes rising from the lake, is like a magical little freshwater [Hawaii](#). It is a true backwater — the rough road around the island was finished just 15 years ago, and the only access is by ferry — with the feel of a place where nothing ever happens, in the best sense.

As though by providence, the island was spared the centuries of violence that unfolded all around it. Ancient pre-Colombian petroglyphs and sculptures dot the volcanoes' flanks. Above the plantings of plantains, sugar cane and sesame, the mountains' upper reaches remain as they have always been.

With the aid of a guide, Leonel Barrios, who had grown up on its shoulder, we attempted to climb Volcán Maderas, the more southerly peak. The trail wound up past fields of rice and corn accessible only on foot or horseback. Then it passed pasture and entered the cloud forest, where howler monkeys roared at us from above.

But as we climbed, the clouds closed in. Halfway up, we were forced off the steep mountain trails by driving rain.

At least we had the beach to console us that afternoon, once the rain stopped. The fresh water was warm, with wind-blown waves rolling onto a long stretch of sand empty but for a few horses. I sat on a beach chair in front of the modest Hotel Villa Paraíso and listened to the clatter of coconut fronds. A boy ran up the beach to the hotel, carrying the day's catch in a bucket.

Nicaraguan food has a hearty simplicity: a local fish, with tostones (medallions of fried plantains) and gallo pinto, or red beans and rice, washed down with a Toña, a classic tropical lager. Local specialties like vigorón (fried pork skin and yuca, a popular roadside meal around Granada) and nacatamales (corn tamales stuffed with meat and wrapped in banana leaves) are worth trying as well.

If Nicaraguan food tends toward sweetness, especially in its sauces, it is perhaps a symptom of its being a sugar-producing country. Regardless, in such a small country with so much

agriculture and so many climate zones, virtually everything is fresh and holds up well to simple preparation.

After Ometepe, volcano fever seized us. Central America is one of the world's most vigorous volcanic zones, and Nicaragua alone has 19 active volcanoes. And they are very accessible — there are one or two outside every city. Most are protected as parkland and make popular excursions, but even so, on many volcanoes you'll find yourself alone with nature at its most potent.

Volcán Masaya, between Granada and Managua, is a huge heap of geology, with a road that lets visitors drive right to its lip. Past the parking area, right over a distressingly low wall, one stares directly into Hell. Sheer walls drop nearly 1,000 feet into a rumbling, smoldering hole a third of a mile across; fumes rise up in an ominously dirty-looking cloud. When wisps float by, the effect is like being tear-gassed.

Incredibly, a flock of specially adapted green parrots lives in the crater walls, safe from predators and mocking our coughs with their bright squeaks.

Masaya is at the center of a well-organized park that features guided tours through volcanic caves, a visitor center with a thorough explanation of the geology, history and ecology of the area, and trails that let you wander around the cone. Next to where our car was parked, a sign recommended we back in, in case we had to make a quick getaway, and warned, "In case of expulsions of rocks, protect yourself under the car."

This kind of casual at-your-own-risk approach is refreshing if you've ever felt infantilized by the signs, guides and boardwalks at places like Yellowstone. Near the village of San Jacinto, outside León, we visited a field of bubbling mud and hissing fumaroles. There was a half-completed and abandoned overlook, built by an American volunteer during the 1980s, and a few concrete footings built by Soviet engineers who had planned a geothermal plant here. And there was a trail down into the shifting, boiling inferno.

The only safety measure — but a very effective one — was provided by a handful of local kids who shouted "No, No! Peligro!" ("Danger!") whenever we were on the verge of a false step. From time to time, pigs fall in and are cooked alive.

Nearby is Cerro Negro, a big, black cinder cone that began erupting only in 1850, and quickly grew to more than 2,300 feet. I was eager to visit since, as a boy, I had been entranced by stories of this magical mountain.

The climb is a hot slog over crunchy lava on which absolutely nothing grows. The trail leads over the lip and directly into the crater, where smoking fumaroles emit noxious gas, coating the surrounding rocks with sulfur. The ground there is too hot to touch; all reminders of a habitable world are gone. There is nothing but heat and fumes and the sharpest, blackest rock: a visit to our planet before it was ours.

But from the high point of the rim above the crater, Nicaragua spreads out in all its glory. A line of big volcanoes extends north and south, with the green coastal plain below. León's tight cluster marks the center of the area, and beyond it the Pacific shines in the west.

We visited Cerro Negro with Mario Munguia, a leader in a tourism cooperative based in León. The cooperative movement has been strong in Nicaragua since the Sandinista revolution and includes businesses from coffee farms to ice cream factories. A nationwide network of co-ops was founded in 2004 to help spread the benefits of the country's boom.

As recently as five years ago, almost no facilities existed for foreign visitors, yet now development is brisk. Social development projects like the tourism co-ops and a scholarship and job training program associated with Pelican Eyes, as well as many others, tie the growing sector to society more broadly, as rarely happens elsewhere in Central America. As a visitor, there is the refreshing feeling that how it all turns out is, in part, up to you.

AFTER Cerro Negro, we stopped at Mario's small farm by a sandy road in the woods. We met his son and his wife, who teaches at the village school. We saw his horses and the grapefruit trees he had planted and felt, for a moment, the slow pace of country life. Mario, of the generation that had lived — and fought — through the revolution, has an earnest and intense patriotism.

"I could have left here," he told us, waving his hand across his home, "and gone to the United States, but this is my country."

From there, we went on to nearby León. We stayed at the Hotel el Convento, a gorgeously converted 17th-century convent in the center of town. Surrounding a perfectly manicured courtyard and fountain, high wooden cloisters are decorated with enough religious artifacts to resemble a museum (including an entire golden altar in the expansive open-air lobby).

Not so recently destroyed, León seems older than Granada. And not so recently restored, it has a more lived-in feel. Historically the liberal city, in opposition to the conservative pole of Granada, León is today the Sandinista Party's stronghold. The city was draped in Sandinista black and red in anticipation of the election season and there was an expectant bustle on the

sidewalks, which teemed with students from the university in the center of town.

León bears the weight of its history with cultured if slightly shabby ease. It is a repository of folkloric tradition but is strongly influenced by classical European forms. The city cherishes its inheritance, on display in its newly restored theater and in its art galleries and poetry museums.

Indeed, poetry seems ideally suited to the Nicaraguan disposition. The daily papers include poems, along with cartoons and news. Nicaragua has produced poet-heroes like Rubén Darío, the 19th-century diplomat and journalist whose seminal influence on Spanish-language poetry has been likened to Whitman's on English.

In León, Darío is buried to the side of the altar in the hulking Basílica de la Asunción, said to be the largest church in Central America. His words are carved in the marble, but like history itself, they live on all around Nicaragua.

One night on the beach at San Juan del Sur — the same beach where thousands of Americans once decamped for the gold rush, and where others are, maybe, rushing back again — I met John Oliver, a poet from Nicaragua's eastern coast. He recited a poem of his, in his rich [Caribbean](#) English.

Then he switched to Spanish, and Darío's heartbreaking "Melancolía." His strong voice blended into the soft surf as he hit the last line: "¿No oyes caer las gotas de mi melancolía?" ("Can't you hear the drops of my sadness falling?")

VISITOR INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

American, Delta and Continental all fly to Managua, usually with one stop from New York. Recent online round-trip fares from New York for mid-January started around \$680.

GETTING AROUND

Highways between the main cities in Nicaragua are in good shape: both Granada and León are each a little more than an hour from Managua, but in opposite directions. Navigating is not difficult, although it is reassuring to know at least some Spanish. When Nicaraguans do speak English, it is often excellent — many have spent time in the United States.

Many establishments will accept U.S. dollars rather than cordobas.

Budget Rent A Car (800-472-3325; www.budget.com) has four locations in Managua, including the airport. In January, the rate for an economy car will be \$11 a day plus taxes and fees; a small four-wheel-drive S.U.V., \$35 a day. When I rented, I was offered a free cellphone, too.

The other alternative is to hire a car with a driver. Any hotel or tour operator can arrange this for about \$60 a day. Taxis within cities are cheap and easy to find — within central Managua, shared taxi rides can be had for as little as 30 cents.

WHERE TO STAY

In San Juan del Sur, consider Pelican Eyes (De la Parroquia 1½ cuerdas al este; 866-350-0555 or 505-568-2110; www.piedrasyolas.com). In 2007, room rates will start at \$120, double occupancy. A house that sleeps six, with an ocean view and terrace, will start at \$225. All have air-conditioning, Wi-Fi, satellite TV and purified water. Prices are a good deal higher around Christmas, New Year's and Easter.

The area is filled with other options, including developments in the nearby hills and at nearby beaches, and smaller, family-run hotels in town that are friendly and clean, if less spectacular. Some can be found at www.sanjuandelsur.org.ni.

La Gran Francia is next to the cathedral in Granada (Esquina Sureste del Parque Central; 505-552-6000; www.lagranfrancia.com). It is in a carefully restored colonial building, with high ceilings and imposing dark wood furniture on cool floors of old tile. Its restaurant, in a similarly restored building across a quiet street, serves slightly more sophisticated versions of classic Nicaraguan and Cuban dishes. Service is gracious and obliging. And there is a generator. The 21 air-conditioned rooms with private bath start at \$100 double occupancy.

Villa Paraíso, at Playa Santo Domingo on the isthmus in the middle of Isla Ometepe (505-453-4675; vparaiso@ibw.com.ni), is a little compound of small but comfortable rooms and cabanas right above the beach that start under \$20. It resembles the kind of travelers' haunt you'd find on one of the Caribbean islands in [Belize](#), and it fills up fast. The row of imitators next to it fails to reach quite the same standard.

Other than the quiet serenity in a beautiful building, little else at Hotel El Convento next to [San Francisco](#) Church in León (505-311-7053, www.hotelesconvento.com.ni) is reminiscent of the cloistered life. Rooms, starting at \$95 including tax and breakfast, are spacious, the staff is attentive, and the restaurant is refined. Rooms can be a bit dark, a defense against the tropical sun before air-conditioning was added, but they are well appointed and restful.

GUIDES

In León, Las Pilas-El Hoyo Rural Tourism Cooperative can arrange volcano treks of varying lengths and levels of difficulty for \$15 to \$25 a day. Call the co-op at 505-878-0238 (Spanish only) or send an e-mail in English or Spanish to laspilaselhoyoleon@yahoo.com. English-speaking guides are available.

Richard Leonardi, an American (and author of the Footprint Nicaragua guidebook), is the general manager at Tours Nicaragua (Plaza [Barcelona](#), Módulo 5, Reparto Serrano, Managua; 505-270-8417; www.toursnicaragua.com), which can arrange any kind of excursion in the country.

WHEN TO GO

The best time is December and January, when the rains have stopped but the country has not yet dried to hot dust. The seasons are less pronounced on the Caribbean coast.

GREGORY DICUM is the author of "Window Seat Europe," about reading the landscape from 35,000 feet in the air, published by Chronicle Books.

Correction: December 24, 2006

An article on Dec. 17 about the emergence of tourism in Nicaragua provided an incorrect phone number for a guide in León who leads volcano treks. The number for the guide, Mario Munguia, who is a member of Las Pilas-El Hoyo Rural Tourism Cooperative, is 505-6967-381.

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