

# My Nicaragua

As the world begins to discover her home country, she returns to discover a few things, too.

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Maybe it was the too-quickly setting sun.

Or the unusual, almost hushed silence that surrounded us as we hurried down the narrow forest trail, trying to make the half-hour trek back to the hotel grounds before dusk turned into complete darkness.

Or the strange, guttural hoots that echoed around my boyfriend, Rob, and me, then faded away.

But clambering past thick-trunked trees and plant leaves as broad as coffee tables, I couldn't keep it out of my head that, 20 years ago, these mountains had been filled with guerrillas.

Rob and I were in Nicaragua, where I grew up until my parents, in 1979, sent me north to the United States to escape the civil war. At the time I left, sunset signaled curfew -- going outside, where the National Guard and the leftist Sandinistas were shooting it out, was too dangerous. And among the most troubled regions of the country was the mountainous central district of Jinotega, where Rob and I now found ourselves scrambling through a patch of cloud forest 26 years later, climbing over gnarled roots, balancing on wooden planks spanning creek beds.

Feeling, all the while, as if we were being watched.

"Maybe I should find a stick," Rob said nervously, as we came down a small rise and into a clearing. Overhead, a branch snapped, and we looked up.

About 20 feet above us were six or seven sets of dark eyes.

It was a troupe, all right. And yes, they looked a little miffed.

Howler monkeys, hanging onto swaying branches and checking us out.

My Nicaragua, 26 years later.

## Slow Road Back

When most Americans think about Nicaragua, they tend to remember it as it first entered their consciousness in the late 1970s -- as TV news footage of a bloody civil war. The conflict ended with the Sandinistas' 1979 overthrow of the Somoza family's corrupt, four-decades-long regime. Then came the 12 or so years of postwar fighting as the American-

backed contra rebels -- with the help of a U.S. embargo -- tried to push the Sandinista Front of National Liberation out of power.

In those years, virtually the only North American tourists visiting Nicaragua were cash-strapped revolution sympathizers, nicknamed "sandalistas" for their customary footwear. Just as well: Hampered by the embargo, the country grew short of staples, much less tourism's luxuries. In Managua, the McDonald's had to change its name after hamburger headquarters discovered there were no all-beef patties in its Big Macs.

The embargo was lifted after the Sandinistas lost the 1990 presidential election. Investment started coming back, as did some of those who had fled. In 1994, the summer I made my first trip back home since the war, one of the cool teen hangouts was a new, enormous highway-side gas station, brightly lit and alien as a spaceship. Another was a bar started by two twentysomethings just back from Miami.

In the years since, the number of people visiting Nicaragua has grown more or less steadily. The country hosted more than 600,000 tourists in 2004, twice as many as had graced the "land of lakes and volcanoes" nine years before. The number of visitors from North America alone has jumped more than 50 percent since 2001.

Of course, Nicaragua's numbers don't come close to those of Costa Rica, the eco-tourism powerhouse next door that saw more than 1.4 million visitors last year.

But for many of those choosing to come, that's exactly the point.

"Costa Rica's beautiful, but it's been a victim of mass tourism," says Raj Sanghrajka, a principal in Florida-based Big Five Tours & Expeditions. The company, which specializes in custom vacations, added Nicaragua to its roster last year. "Every Tom, Dick and Harry offers a trip [to Costa Rica]. And as it gets commercialized, it gets less appealing," Sanghrajka says.

Nicaragua's beauty, he adds, is that "anything that any other Central American country has, Nicaragua has a little bit of it. People go to Guatemala, for example, for archaeology and history. Costa Rica is rain forest, Belize is beach resorts. Nicaragua has all that, and it's less traveled."

For how long is the question. Nicaragua now has more than 30 tour operators, who can whisk you anywhere from an all-inclusive, lie-on-the-beach resort such as Montelimar (a former Somoza retreat); the posh new Pacific coast eco-lodge of Morgan's Rock; or more untrammelled destinations such as the biological reserves near the Rio San Juan, on the border with Costa Rica.

Of course, the country also still offers challenges. Nicaragua is now the second-poorest country in the hemisphere, after Haiti. And in mid-April, the U.S. State Department warned travelers to "remain vigilant" after protests over a public transportation fare hike resulted in numerous arrests, injuries and property damage. (The government has since agreed to temporarily subsidize the hike.)

Rob and I, though, wanted to avoid anything prepackaged, no matter how sophisticated or smartly done. We also didn't want any hotel so luxe that it would shake our waning belief in ourselves as intrepid adventurers (though Rob insisted on electrical outlets so he could charge his digital cameras).

What I wanted, as much as possible, was to show my American boyfriend the Nicaragua I grew up in: wild, deserted Pacific beaches; active volcanoes; colonial cities; coffee plantations; verdant mountains. Engagement. Discovery. Freedom. With a recent U.N. report citing Nicaragua as one of the safest countries in Central America, the time seemed right for a road trip.

### **An Unsettled Capital**

Most guidebooks to Nicaragua (you need to look hard for them, but they do exist) urge you to leave the capital, Managua, as soon as you can -- not because it's particularly dangerous but because it compares poorly with the rest of the country.

Good advice, overall. Managua was a modern skyscraper city when an earthquake leveled it in 1972. It never fully recovered. (The wholesale theft of relief aid by Somoza and his cronies didn't help.) Lacking a downtown core, it's less a city and more like a patchwork of neighborhoods alongside polluted Lake Managua.

Nonetheless, the capital does have its attractions. Just outside the city limits, the Masaya volcano is one of only four in the world that keeps a constant pool of lava in its crater. Another site, the Huellas de Acahualinca (Footprints of Acahualinca), has 6,000-year-old human footprints that were pressed into volcanic mud before the Great Wall of China or the Egyptian pyramids were built.

At the Plaza of the Republic, the crumbling gray ruins of the Old Cathedral are an eerie testament to two major earthquakes: in 1931, shortly after the cathedral was completed, and the one in 1972. Looking through the upper windows, we could see angels still going about their heavenly business, dappled in sunlight by the holey roof.

And standing in the nearby National Palace of Culture the day after our arrival, Rob and I listened as a guide related how this pastel building -- which holds a motley collection of pottery shards, geothermal models and taxidermy specimens -- once housed the national assembly.

"A group of 24 Sandinistas dressed as National Guardsmen infiltrated on Aug. 22, 1978," the guide said. "They took everyone hostage, including the entire congress."

I didn't tell the guide that on that day, my mother, a secretary, was one of those hostages. When I was old enough, she told me that until she was released two days later, she was sure that she was going to die there.

## **Pacific Tides**

If you want to stay near Nicaragua's populated Pacific coast (the east, an experience itself, is still mostly undeveloped), the colonial city of Granada is a better home base than Managua. Spread out in the shadow of the majestic Mombacho Volcano (now a beautiful cloud forest reserve), it was a Chorotega Indian settlement when the Spanish settled there in 1524, establishing it as one of the oldest cities in the Americas.

Thankfully, Granada was spared the worst of the fighting during the civil war. Its colonial architecture is striking and in recent years has been spruced up. In the town square, horse-drawn buggies offer rides by the neighborhood's pastel-painted houses, many with Spanish-style central courtyard patios. Wooden rockers beckon from covered walkways, and at night, restaurants are filled with the sound of wandering mariachis. The city has also become a center for night life, with people driving the 45 minutes from Managua for a good meal, drinks and maybe a late night at one of its discos.

It has also, controversially, become a hot real estate market for international buyers, most notably of the small volcanic islands that sit off Granada's shore in Lake Nicaragua.

"I think it's a little bit scary to go to Granada and see foreigners all over the place," says Richard Leonardi, who started a local tour company (since sold) in 1996. "You can destroy paradise pretty easily. But not everyone feels that way. And they haven't paved it for a parking lot quite yet."

For me, worries about overdevelopment jostled against happiness at the comfort of our hotel room, with its balcony on the main plaza, and pride at how beautiful the city looked. At dinner that night, two mariachis in maroon suits found willing listeners at our table.

"A romantic song, 'Besame Mucho,' " the younger one kept suggesting. But I wanted to hear Nicaraguan classics such as "Cristo Ya Nacio en Palacaguina," a revolution-era song imagining Jesus being born in Nicaragua. I cried when I got them. It was good to be home.

## **Alone on the Beach**

When I moved to the United States, one of the surprises in my shiny new American life was finding out that not every beach was isolated, pristine oceanfront. As a kid, that's all I'd seen: beaches you needed to ford streams to get to, where you could dine on what you caught.

Where, I asked in Managua, could we go for that? Outside of San Juan del Sur, relatives recommended.

Geographically blessed San Juan del Sur, set snugly in a bay between two high rock cliffs, has been a vacation haven for Nicaraguans since my parents discovered the Beatles. Over the past decade, surf-mad backpackers discovered it, too. Then in 1998, several of the Holland America Line's cruises started making stops there.

Knowing this made me wonder whether the sleepy town would now be another Puerto Vallarta, drenched in light-skinned tourists turning hot pink as they clutched pina coladas.

To get there, we drove four hours in the shabbiest rental either of us had ever seen: a dented white car with tinted windows and no hubcaps -- which fit in perfectly with the overloaded trucks and crowded buses barreling past us. The fact that, ironically, the gap between wealthy Nicaraguans and poor ones had widened since the revolution was brought home every time a blinged-out SUV swooped by like a luxury yacht.

As we pulled into town, though, we knew the travel had been worth it. On the main beachfront drag, lined entirely with open-air bars and restaurants, clumps of old men in guayaberas stood chatting quietly with younger ones wearing Tommy Hilfiger knockoffs. A gray monkey, roped to a fence, morosely rattled a plastic cup. A dreadlocked couple, burned nut-brown by the sun, wandered down the street in board shorts and sarongs.

That night, after a few muscle-loosening *Nica Libres* (the native Flor de Caña rum, Coke and a lime) at Ricardo's surfside restaurant bar, we chatted up a group of American twentysomethings who worked in a local surf shop. One of them drew me a map of the nearby beaches on a notebook page and related his own adventures.

"Going to Popoyo once, we almost got stuck in a river. We had to have people climb on the hood for ballast," he said. "But this is the dry season."

The next day, we took his advice and headed out from San Juan del Sur. A half-hour cab ride along a bumpy, unpaved road took us to the top of a treacherously steep, dusty incline that the cabbie refused to take on.

At the bottom: a thatched-roof backpacker bed-and-breakfast serving cold beer and fresh-caught fish -- and the beach I'd been looking for: a wide expanse of sandy bay dotted with boulders of volcanic rock. The plentiful tide pools held crabs, tiny fish and waving anemones.

By walking about a quarter-mile farther down, Rob and I found an inlet where we could snorkel and bodysurf all by ourselves. Before leaving, we walked back to the B&B for a celebratory meal: a giant 10-pound lobster, caught that day -- ours for \$10.

## **Interior Views**

Because Rob's background is German -- and he literally has stock in Starbucks -- I planned one more major stop in our itinerary: Selva Negra, an eco-resort and coffee plantation high in the mountains of the Jinotega district.

Selva Negra opened as a resort in the 1970s -- I saw my first squirrel ever there. The name, which translates as Black Forest, is rooted in history: In the 1880s, Nicaragua offered money and land to German immigrants willing to come farm coffee. Selva Negra is run by two of their descendants.

During the contra war, Selva Negra's owners had run-ins with both sides of the combat. One even left for a while. Yet, in the end, they prevailed.

The resort is centered on a large wood-beamed hall at the edge of a gorgeous mountain lagoon. Around it are several small guest chalets (charmingly, the decor in ours included several close-ups of reposing dachshunds). But the real draw is in the surrounding land: almost 300 acres of thick, never-cultivated woodland, home to sloths, howler monkeys, toucans and quetzals. Fourteen hiking trails, ranked easy, medium or difficult, crisscross it. It was on the "Indiana Jones" trail that we ran into our monkeys.

The lodge's kraut and schnitzel was fair at best, so on the last full day of our visit, we headed north to Jinotega, a town I'd never visited, to eat.

It turned out to be the most delightful discovery of the trip.

Though Jinotega is the district capital, the town doesn't get many foreign visitors. Its typical hotel guest is much more likely to be a farmer or rancher looking to pick up provisions, get a pair of boots made or sell some cattle. Its tidy streets convey a sense of purpose: Through open doorways, you can see lawyers drawing up contracts as clients wait on wooden chairs, or cowboy-hatted farmers weighing bags of coffee.

Had we had more time, we would have sampled more of what Jinotega had to offer.

### **Greeting the Evolution**

Whenever I leave Managua, I always think back to flying out during the war. Back then, soldiers guarded the departure lounges and chaotic mobs pressed up against the doors. This time, though, all traces of that era were gone: Since my last visit two years ago, the airport has been remodeled. It's now as smooth and bland as airports everywhere, with the requisite duty-free shops and tall windows.

In the next few years, as Nicaragua stretches to build a reputation beyond its traumatic history, that's bound to happen to more and more of the markers of my wartime memory; they'll be elided, erased. That's good, I think. But all the same, I'm glad I made it back when the country was still evolving -- on the way to becoming, rather than all the way, changed.

-- *Sandy M. Fernandez*