

Nicaragua Dreamin'

By Matt Morley

Nicaragua, somewhere in Central America right? Isn't that where the Sandinistas came from?

Right both times. Clearly, scoring off-the-beaten track holiday points was never going to be a problem with this trip.

Today, the Sandinistas may have fizzled off the world's political radar but the real story here starts with a simple piece of geography. As the Nicaraguan tourism authority may or not point out, their fortunes are about to turn as a result of 'the Costa Rican experiment'.

Lying just a few clicks of the compass south, Nicaragua's over-achieving neighbour has been involved in a high-speed romp along the tourism treadmill over recent years, with mixed effects.

In the early-nineties, Costa Rica's plush coastline and investor-friendly government combined to attract the attentions of Baby Boomer USA. The ensuing middle American invasion of middle income, middle aged, middle Americans swept along the Pacific coastline leaving a trail of upscale condos, adventure camps and beachfront high-rises in its wake. No matter how remote or eco-friendly all those new beds were, for some, the veneer of recent discovery was already wearing off.

It may be a short hop, skip and pothole jump away, but travelling north from 'Rica' to 'Nica' is like going back twenty years in development terms. Tourism is admittedly still embryonic but initial signs are encouraging, with the early arrivals keeping their size small, their ownership independent and their profile remarkably low-key. So, The Economist has given the place a tentative green light, the surf mags are proclaiming it the next big thing and your worried relatives are checking their emails every five minutes to see if you are still alive. All set.

Touching down in the capital Managua however, is enough to make even the hardest traveller question their original enthusiasm. If you do have to overnight here, do yourself a favour and check in to Hotel Los Robles (www.hotellosrobles.com), camp out poolside and revel in the fact that you have arguably found the single redeeming feature of the entire city.

Luckily, the lure of nearby Granada is a more than adequate excuse for leaving the city almost before you arrive. Just under an hour's drive away, this town of 62 000 inhabitants is bursting with colonial architecture, faded grandeur and write-to-tell-your-friends day-trip potential. Ideal for a 3-day stopover.

Life here centres around the main plaza, where locals and tourists alike gather to watch each

other doing conspicuously little. Apparently a national pastime here, such mindless clock watching reflects just how bad unemployment rates are.

Make no mistake about it, Nicaragua is a seriously poor country and tourism can quite literally represent one of the few lifelines available for many families. A sobering thought, even if people do go about their business (or lack of) with a relentlessly cheery insouciance.

The pace then, is generally rather slow, but you will still need to plan your days properly to catch all of Granada's highlights. If time is tight, the best bet is to hire a guide, preferably one of the librarian-like locals from the top hotel in town, La Gran Francia.

Located in the south-eastern corner of the square, this understated destination is housed in two beautifully restored 16th century buildings that have shown the way forward for other architectural spruce-ups in the area.

Exposed wooden beams, Spanish terracotta-tile roofing and a balcony bar neatly set back from the main street make for an atmosphere so welcoming and refined it is likely to catch you off guard at first. Even here though, in the most impressive hotel operation around, there is little room for pretensions.

Tourists and local tradesmen alike can still be found using horse-drawn carriages to move from A to B and there is no mistaking the developing world backdrop, but the country undoubtedly has massive tourism potential.

Lying between the second largest lake in the world and an outbreak of largely benevolent volcanoes, Granada is the perfect base from which to explore Nica's spectacular Pacific coastline.

Put on some decent walking shoes, head up the active Vulcan Masaya to marvel at its sulphurous crater and you will be asked to leave your Land Cruiser facing away from the volcano with the doors unlocked, "just in case"!



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Or hire a boat and cruise around Granada's 400+ volcanic islets, with their abundant birdlife and sub- US\$10000 price tags. For a glimpse of daily life in a dedicated handicraft community, head to the Pueblos Blancos near Masaya for artisans, ceramicists, and impressive street-side flower displays.

Granada's six churches are also worth a visit, as is the artistic Casa de Cultura just back from the square. Be sure to sample French chef Jean Paul's cooking at La Gran Francia's restaurant too; his Nicaraguan-with-a-European-twist menu could easily hold its own in a progressive Parisian bistro. Eating here will also mean avoiding that culinary equivalent of a 2CV so prevalent in Nicaraguan kitchens: the ubiquitous rice, beans and chicken combo. Just about every roadside shack, enterprising grandmother and market stall hustles this dish. Cheap, easy to produce and vaguely endearing for a while, it is best consumed with fresh lime or chilli sauce if you expect your taste buds to stay awake while you eat.

Locating these small pockets of development then, is the challenge presented by a trip to Nicaragua in 2006. Once you have found them of course, actually getting there can be a Herculean task in itself.

Morgan's Rock, an isolated barefoot luxury eco-resort on Nicaragua's southern coast provides a pick-up service that guests decline at their peril. The 20-minute drive from front gate to reception area alone entails passing howling monkeys, roaming cattle and several deeper-than-they-look river crossings. All part of the experience.

An expansive 1800 hectares of dry forest, private beach and nature reserve house just 15 guest

bungalows, apparently the maximum number possible without damaging the local eco-system. The entire complex has duly been constructed using nothing but renewable materials and guests are invited to learn about the food, wildlife and indigenous communities around them during their stay.

Over 90% of the food served in the restaurant for example, is produced on the Morgan's Rock hacienda. Coffee comes from the owner's private plantation; milk, eggs and meat from their hand-reared animals and even water is collected in purpose-built wells. Daily Vit.C rations are plucked from the mango and citrus groves, while roughage is wrenched from the veggie patch just minutes before meal times. For jaded urbanites and bio-conscious hypochondriacs alike, it doesn't get much better than this.

A 110m long suspension bridge cuts through the jungle to connect the communal areas with the guest accommodations. Walking this impressive plank can be vaguely thrilling by day, somewhat daunting at night. But if you are not on at least talking terms with big Mother Nature, Morgan's Rock simply may not be for you.

A rag-tag group of savvy Bostonians, adventurous Europeans and wealthy Latin Americans mingled with the affable staff each evening during my stay though, making for some entertaining dinner discussions, so perhaps this self-screening has its plus points too.

As the bedrooms are exposed to the elements on three sides, with nothing but a mozzly net between you and your Sea View, a night here is a genuine communion with nature (without leaving the comfort of your 300dpi cotton sheets of course). Breaking waves, boisterous bird-calling and those damn howler monkeys again will all ensure that you rise with the sun, leaving plenty of time



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to slot in a kayaking trip, horseback ride or butterfly farm tour.

That's the theory at least, the reality is that most people spend their time in a beachside ranchito working their way through the selection of complementary local beers and doing things that lovers do in isolated beach huts. Apparently.

Whichever way you choose to play it though, Morgan's Rock is a truly unique experience that oozes genuine positivity, humanity and humility. No small selling point for those of us living the 21st century lifestyle to the full. The overall ambiance is admittedly rather laid back though. For those seeking something a little more upbeat, head to the nearby party town of Sun Juan del Sur.

Nica's surfing mecca acts as the hub for getting to and from the many nearby beaches, and doubles as a general surfer hangout at night. Hard to access bays will again test the determination of the visitor, but endless swells and barrelling waves more than make up for the minor inconvenience of having to pay for taxis each day.

If travelling with a youthful group of friends, the Buena Vista Surf Club is a beachside villa with possibly the world's most excessive balcony protruding rudely out over the cliff face. Run by an ex-marketing director of O'Neill Europe, it is an dedicated party pad designed with sunset socialising in mind and has a plethora of surfboards for guest use too. The country's tourism offering may yet be little more than bourgeoning then, but it is flicking all the right switches so far, whether you are looking for history, culture, eco-tourism or just the next big wave.

Arguably the most encouraging sign of all though is that the sharp eyed buyers currently snapping up plots of Nica land as you read this are all young, hip Californians, the antithesis of



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