

## Nicaragua's Update – November and December 2002

### Cobb's Family Nicaraguan Stories

These life updates are just that. Stories of our transition to living here and they were intended originally for friends and family. You are welcome to enjoy them too. I'll also be sending out some other reports from time to time that will have more country and business stuff. I will preface each type so you can pick and choose what you want to read. Enjoy. Mike

Here's a report to catch you up since the mid-November update. Carol, Amanda, and I enjoyed a brief interlude to the States for Thanksgiving and visited my folks vacationing in Florida. We witnessed a night launch of the Space Shuttle. It was spectacular. Amanda enjoyed spending time with her Cousin Alyssa, my sister's daughter. They became thick as thieves as Amanda worshiped the ground 8-year-old Alyssa walked on.

Back in Nicaragua, we geared up for the holiday season. Beginning in early December, the mood swings towards the celebration of the Virgin Mary and the birth of Jesus. There is no political correctness here (thank goodness) and the manger scenes appear in median strips, Angels adorned light posts and a big Christmas tree is put up in a vacant lot to mark the place for the nightly celebration of Christmas. No one is forcing anyone to believe or celebrate anything, but no one is prohibiting the celebrations of Christmas either. It's nice. It's reasonable.

Purísima is a Nicaraguan custom celebrated nowhere else to my knowledge. It is a celebration of the Virgin and lasts for 9 days. Each day a person prays, and then on the 9th day, a celebration to honor the Virgin is held in the home. Close friends and family are invited to come together to sing songs, say prayers, and make noise. We were invited by Enrique Zamora to attend the Purísima at his parent's home.

We arrived to about 25 people. A microphone was passed to various family members who read passages and led songs. One song was sung over and over again (in Spanish of course), and by the end, I almost knew the words. As this song was sung, HUGE bottle rockets were set off with twin M-80 size reports in the sky. Mariachis and another kind of noisemaker were distributed upon arrival and each person played their chosen "instrument" to this one song.

A priest got up and delivered a message followed by more family member prayers and singing. Roughly an hour later, a series of treats are handed out. The first is a white drink that looks like thick milk made from some almost inedible fruit. But the juice is delightful and tastes just like bubblegum. They then give you a piece of sugarcane, a piece of the almost inedible fruit, a couple kinds of candy, some fruits that have been fermented in a syrup, and a couple other sweet treats of various natures. Then it's over.

We look around to see that everyone is pulling plastic grocery bags out of their pockets or purses in which to carry their treats home. We, however, being totally new to this event,

had none. Upon seeing us trying to balance plastic containers and baggies of all shapes and sizes and control a 2 year old “high” on sugar, our hosts graciously produced bags and we headed home.

The Zamora Parisima occurs before the “official Parisima night” of December 14th. On that night, we were invited to go to Granada, a colonial city on the shores of Lake Nicaragua for dinner and to witness the Parisima there. Granada is similar to a European Spanish city in that it is a walking town. There is a central Plaza with a majestic Cathedral surrounded by hotels, shops, and restaurants. The city is old, first established in the 1500's. The architecture is spectacular and many wealthy Nicaraguans and foreigners are buying the old homes and remodeling them.

We enjoyed a great dinner and bowed out early to drive back to Managua where the celebration was just ramping up. Upon dropping our friend Tony off at his hotel, we arrived home at 11:45pm. The fireworks were in full steam, or so we thought. At midnight every single person in Managua was setting off bricks of firecrackers and these huge bottle rockets. It was loud, really loud and totally non-stop. Many people also had purchased “real” fireworks and the sky was ablaze with colorful explosions. It was unreal and continued for about 30 minutes before it dwindled down to a steady roar at which point we drifted off to sleep.

The manger scenes everywhere are not complete, so our 2 year old kept telling me. I must admit I'm a little dense but she kept inspecting mangers in stores, people's homes, by the school, and with Tony at a restaurant. “Where is baby Jesus?” she kept asking. I didn't pick up on it until upon closer inspection saw in fact that Baby Jesus was missing from all the manger scenes. I then had the answer to the recurring question from Amanda. He hasn't been born yet. Carol purchased a manger scene for the house and Amanda checked it every day to see if Baby Jesus was there yet. We were also able to find a live Christmas tree as I promised Carol before we came. Keeping my promise was easier than I thought as they sell the trees in the parking lot of the French Bakery near our house.

Christmas Eve is the night people get together here. Nicaraguans get together late, go to midnight mass, and then have dinner that lasts into the morning. We aren't quite into that routine yet. Carol, who is making friends with other international families with small children, received an invitation for us to attend a Christmas party on a Gringo time schedule. One of the families hosted this wonderful event with about 50 people attending, half were kids and 8 countries were represented. Each family brought a dish and a present for Santa to give out. After a great smorgasbord, who should arrive but Santa? Gifts were given to the kids who reveled in delight. Amanda was still going strong at midnight when we called it quits. Home to bed for her, and then more work for Santa and Mrs. Clause.

On Christmas morning Amanda raced past the tree with presents to the manger to see if Baby Jesus had been born. Indeed he had. Amanda was delighted. She then moved to the presents and she surely must have been good last year. She cleaned up.

After opening gifts, reading new books, playing with games and toys we headed out to the Gran Pacifica property for an afternoon BBQ followed by star gazing on the pitch black beach. Lots of shooting stars. We packed up when the encroaching tide nearly soaked us. Last night, New Years Eve, we repeated the BBQ on the beach and were treated to the sounds of crashing waves while satellites high over head caught the reflection of the sun and gave away their presence to us.

There have been a couple funny incidents that are worth mentioning. One is that our maid, Clema, speaks no English and we speak next to no Spanish. Clema comes to us by way of the Zamora's, Sandra actually. Clema's mom was Sandra's mother's maid and Clema was Sandra's nanny. One Sunday breakfast with the Zamora's at our favorite nacatamale spot, Sandra tells us Clema's great coping skill with the language barrier. Sandra tells of Clema saying to her, "Doña Carol comes up to me and tells me a whole bunch of things. I can't understand a word she is saying. So I just say, 'Si, Si, Si'" We have to laugh, and it sure does explain a lot.

The other incident is not so funny as it is sad. Ruben, alas, is no longer our driver. Both Carol and I had significant problems with Ruben, not the least of which was that he was a bad driver. But we wanted to try and see if we could make it work for him. For him. He didn't return change from the gas station once, but upon being asked, did so. A little fishy, but not in and of itself conclusive. However, one day, actually the day I paid him his 13th month (a bonus forced upon the employer of 1 months pay at Christmas) Carol needed him to drive her to the health club so she and Amanda could go swimming. Carol normally stays for over an hour, but on this particular day, had a playgroup scheduled. She came out of the gym after 30 minutes to find, no Ruben and no car. She waited another 15 minutes and saw Ruben drive in and park the car. She approached the car, put Amanda in, climbed in the drivers seat and drove off leaving Ruben at the pool. He had gone shopping. Later when he came by the house and asked me "Work finished?" I simply replied "Si."

Right now we are without as driver, but I interviewed someone yesterday. We can get by for the basic stuff. But as there are no street signs in Managua and directions can include the following statement, "Take a left where the church that burned down 2 years ago used to be," the need for a driver becomes obvious.

We continue to find great restaurants and interesting things to do. Carol and I have a date night every week and go out on the hunt. We have seen several movies, including Lord of the Rings part 2 in English Dec 20th, only 2 days after its release in the States. We are going to see Die Another Day tomorrow. Food is great. There is a Brazilian steak house we have tried a couple times now and love. We keep meaning to go to one of the 20+ Italian places, Argentinean steak house, or Mexican spots, but always seem to end up back at one of 3 or 4 favorites. We went swimming in a volcano a couple weeks ago and that was a lot of fun. The longer we are here, the more we find to do and see.

A very Happy New Year to all, and remember to write if you cant visit.  
Mike, Carol, and Amanda