

February 2006

Mike Cobb's Gringo Life

Dear Friends,

If you have one, take a minute and imagine standing by the shimmering Pacific Ocean at midnight, a gentle breeze coming out of the mountains, and a full moon creating moon shadows of you (and your kids if you have them) on the wet sand. Now add hundreds of baby turtles making a mad dash from their eggs in the dunes to the sea a hundred yards away. There are few things in life that can compare to this.

Sometimes I find myself sailing through the tree tops in a cloud forest, past flowering orchids and bromeliad clusters, looking at the Pacific ocean 40 miles off in the distance and realize that I'm thinking about something else. Sure it's the 15th time on the canopy tour, but this is the stuff fantasies are made of, and I have the extreme good fortune to be living this experience all the time. Carol and I feel so blessed to be in Nicaragua where what we now accept as ordinary is actually quite extraordinary and where we live these kinds of experiences with regular frequency. It is incredible that I can almost take them for granted now.

Thank goodness we have visitors come and remind us of the magic moments surrounding us here. Our friends Mike and Kathy from Shepherdstown, WV did last year, right before Christmas. And oh yea, they brought 5 year old son Ethan and their 7-month old twins too.

Come visit sometime and see for yourself what is going on here. Just like they did, you'll find a safe, peaceful, and easy country, full of life and soft adventure. Trust me; your friends will think you are crazy or silly when you say you are coming to Nicaragua. Live a little and show them they're right.

The Cobb's continue to explore new parts of the country and when Carol's folks were here we traveled to the rugged mountains of the north to hike the awesome Somoto Canyon. Details below. Enjoy, and as always, be in touch with your thoughts and comments.

Mike Cobb

Family Update

Well it finally happened. After almost 3 years we had our first non-family, non-business friends come to visit. I would have been hard pressed to imagine that it would take over 3 years to see friends here, but it did. We had a blast. We went and looked at baby turtles hatching out of eggs on the beach, we rode OX carts through the rain forest, stood at the top of smoking volcanoes and had lunch overlooking deep, rich blue crater lakes. It was great to show Mike, Kathy and their kids around our new home and they had a great time. For anyone worrying about a visit here, they brought their 7-month old twins. I repeat, 7-month old twins. Forget what you think you know and buy some plane tickets. You'll be glad you did.

One of our favorite family things to do is to go to Coco Beach south of San Juan del Sur and rent a house there for a weekend, so we arranged to take Mike, Kathy and family there as part of their

visit. This small resort complex is almost always full and this time was no exception. People like to be around other people and this cute collection of 20 houses, a convenience store, and restaurant is wonderful, in fact so wonderful, that when we arrived at 10:00pm on Friday night, they had given away "our" house. I had visions of all 9 of us sleeping in a van. Luckily they had one house left, and we gladly accepted it and checked in. Then it was off to La Flor, the next cove south, to see one of the miracles of nature happen before our eyes.

Every year mother turtles find their way back from across thousands of miles of ocean to a tiny stretch of beach where they were born to come and lay eggs and continue this incredible cycle of life. We arranged to arrive on a night 45 days after the eggs are laid into the sand. When the eggs hatch, the 2-inch long baby turtles dig their way to the surface and begin their mad dash from the dunes to the sea. It is quite a site to see and with the midnight full moon as your light source it is unbelievably spectacular.

The following day, we enjoyed a 2 mile ox cart ride in the rain forest to a farm in the hills. We had arranged to ride horses at the farm, but only Amanda and Ethan wanted to at that point. So when we arrived at the farm, Amanda Cobb (age 5) and Ethan (age 5 and the first time on a horse) took off with 2 Nicaraguan boys (both under age 10) each on their own horse up the hill, out of site, and gone.

Something like this might be alarming to most folks, but Mike and Kathy took it in stride and after hiking up the hill, we caught up with the kids at a tree house. Amanda and Ethan's guides had everything under control and everyone was having a good time. I imagine this is what it used to be like in the states 50 or 100 years ago when we let our kids run free without the worries imposed by modern society. I feel blessed that we are able to have this kind of richness here and that our kids get to experience life to its fullest.

Speaking of life to its fullest, Nicaraguans take Christmas very, very seriously. Proof is that they see no problem in shutting down the main axis of travel all evening between Managua and all points south and west for the lighting of the Coca Cola Christmas tree. No problem for us as we planned on being there and enjoyed Christmas music and dancing in the street and rotunda. However traffic was snarled all over Managua and it took us almost an hour to drive home less than a mile. We'll walk next year.

The love of Christmas doesn't stop there. Christmas Eve is the night of celebration here. Families get together and have dinner and then go to church at midnight. I'm not sure how the priest can be heard over the fireworks though. It is incredible. Starting at about 5 minutes until midnight, people begin to light off firecrackers, bottle rockets and "real" fireworks that put anything we do in the States to shame. By midnight the sound is a general roar. The sky is lit by thousands of simultaneous colorful bursts and brilliant sparks gently falling earthward. Literally hundreds of thousands of people across the Managua valley are setting off fireworks at the same time. It's an awesome experience.

Another wonderful experience was the New Years Eve afternoon wedding of our maid's daughter, Erika. It was a simple, yet elegant affair. She was married at the evangelical church next near their home and the reception was back at their house where I counted over 50 people in attendance, about 1/2 of them kids. Amanda was one of the flower girls and relished her role in the festivities. Carol enjoyed it even more, especially during the actual marriage ceremony when the minister said that "A woman is nothing without her husband." Or maybe it was me who enjoyed that part. I poked Carol to make sure she was paying attention. Good thing backhands are impolite at weddings.

Carol's folks visited in January again this year. This was their 4th trip, and each year we find a new adventure to explore together. The Somoto canyon in the northern mountains was recently

“discovered” and widely publicized in the local press. The pictures were fantastic and Carol and I both couldn’t wait to visit. So when her folks arrived, we packed up the car and headed north.

The route takes you along the Pan-American Highway, through the Sebaco valley rich in agriculture, past the restaurant where Amanda and I had boa constrictor for my birthday lunch 2 years ago, through Esteli, home of the famous Padron Cigars and into the mountainous north. We drove to within 2 miles of Honduras, realized we had missed a turn somewhere, then retraced our steps back a few miles, found the well marked turn, and spent the night in Ocotal, a small coffee and tobacco town. Carol’s folks inquired about local restaurants at the gas station and we ended up at a small restaurant bar that was showing rodeo and bull fighting on big screen TV’s. Cowboy country all the way.

Back at the hotel, we were glad to have the blankets as the temperature “plunged” into the low 60’s. After a nice rest and a hearty breakfast that included fried cheese and gallo pinto, we headed over to the town of Somoto to get our guide and discover the canyon for ourselves. A tiny homemade sign saying “canyon” marks the turn off the paved road and onto rutted dirt road, then into the river bed, then along the river on a 2 tire track trail, across the river in a boulder field ford, and finally to what is obviously the end of the road. From there on, you walk.

It’s a nice hike along and across the river to the mouth of the canyon. It really doesn’t look like much until you are actually about to enter it. The mountains on either side are steep, but the feel is open and wide. Rounding the final turn, the true beauty and uniqueness of the canyon is quickly apparent. 600 foot straight up walls that are only 100 feet or less apart from each other. It’s an incredible sight.

At this point, you can either walk a ridge trail or hire a local boatsman to row you into the canyon. Our guide suggested the boat and so we piled into the leaking craft as the captain bailed out the standing water. The short trip is pleasant and allows an interesting vantage point from the center of the canyon. Exiting the boat, we hiked up the side walls along a “path,” down a water sculpted cliff, to the edge of the water.

At this point, we had reached the end of the walking road, almost. The only way to progress further is to swim. Having not brought swim wear, we rested there and enjoyed the fabulous scenery of sheer walls going straight up over 600 feet. I say “almost” because there is a log across the Rio Coco at this point and then a climb up to a rock shelf and a place to throw rocks into the pools below. Amanda and I crossed the log and enjoyed some rock throwing on the other side. Next time we’ll bring our suits to explore some or all of the next 4km of canyon.

Many of you know that I like parties and we had a big one here in January. We were honored that over 160 Gran Pacifica shareholders, property owners, and friends flew down for our annual meeting and activities which included city tours of Granada, Leon, Managua, zip lines in the tree tops, and an afternoon on a private island in Lake Nicaragua. Friday the 13th of January was a great day as over 300 folks, dignitaries, and the press celebrated the groundbreaking of the golf course followed by a day at the Gran Pacifica beach filled with swimming, horseback riding and a traditional Nicaraguan BBQ of caballo bayo. This was a great 3-day party. Next year should be even better. If you like big parties, mark your calendars for January 12th, 2007.

162 of your new neighbors

Golf Course Ground Breaking

Yes, Nicaragua is an incredible place. Those folks who have visited have gone away telling us how sweet we have it. It's not the next thing closest to hell as some of our friends back home think. The tourism numbers continue to grow-- over 112,000 people from the US visited last year— and the **NBC Today Show** had this to say, "From a political hotbed to a tourism hot spot — this Central American destination between Costa Rica and Honduras is one of the newest and safest, yes, safest spots on the map for travelers. It's "contra" to everything you might think." <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10249759/>

It's a nice secret, but I'm afraid the word is getting out. We aren't really roughing it. It's actually pretty sweet here. Come find out for yourself.

New Gringos in Nicaragua. Words of wisdom from Kurt and Peggy Long

We have found some restaurants where if you buy a small bottle of rum, your meal is free.

When someone says they speak English – it may be a relative term, kind of like when you say you speak Spanish.

Finding an alarm clock for the table by the bed has proven to be a challenge – which might explain about the start times of meetings.

When someone says they will be there at 2pm – be aware that they probably didn't say which day.

If you can't find your clothes that you put in the laundry, check your drawers and closets. The maid probably put them away.

When a bus driver says "don't drive there" – don't drive there.

Some roads double as rivers.