

## Nicaragua's Update – June 2003

### Cobb's Family Nicaraguan Stories

Its been a while since the last update and since Carol is already back in the States and I leave tomorrow, I figured I'd better get something off. We have been here 8 months now and are really settled into life's routines. We all go to school each morning, me first at 7:00 then Amanda, then Carol. Our maid Cleme comes in at 7:45 each day and is finally calling me Mike not "Max." Carol is probably still the best Spanish speaker of the house, but soon to be overtaken by Amanda. Dad is the slow poke.

I am amazed at the way each of us learns Spanish. Amanda gets a new word and says it over and over, maybe 50 times in 20 minutes. After that she owns it. I can't imagine running around all day saying the same word 50 times, but it definitely works. Carol is using the conversation method and she really speaks some good Spanish. If she understands most of a conversation that works for her and consequently, she is picking up quite a bit. There is a lot of verb conjugation and she is learning them nicely. I on the other hand, live mostly in the world of English and am struggling to stay in the game. I have my hour lesson and then go into the office and speak and write English all day. I try to speak Spanish only at my Rotary meetings and other social events in the evening, but its just not enough time speaking Spanish to really learn it.

I have a lot of trouble letting go and assuming I understand the conversation. At a party a while back, the hostess came out and started saying something about plates. Not knowing many of the rapidly spoken words, I usually look for body language and other non-verbal cues to help out. She said the word plate several times and had a concerned look on her face. I leaned over to Carol and said, "I don't think she has enough plates." Carol looked at me and said that that is not what she heard at all. Indeed there were plates a plenty. I think it will be a while before I trust myself to let go and go with the flow.

We have been invited to some great parties. Dennis Martinez, the baseball player, is Nicaraguan and has refurbished a resort on Lake Nicaragua. It is an incredible place, with the twin volcanoes Concepcion and Madera sitting in the middle of the lake as a backdrop. His party was the furthest south we have been in the country, just 15 miles from Costa Rica. Our friend Enrique Zamora has his annual birthday bash on his island and had a whole pig roast. It's nice to meet new people and we are certainly getting to do a lot of that. Enrique actually has his own money now. Well almost, his island resort is featured on the back of the \$10 Cordoba note. He's pretty excited about that.

Amanda loves going to Enrique's island playing with his daughters Monica and Carolina. The day of the party was a lot of fun for her. Once she finished playing, swimming and eating, she got up and danced for over an hour with the adults. She is really becoming quite the little Latin dancer. Dad is not sure if he likes that or not. Amanda actually takes a dance class once a week but I think it's the babysitter that spends the most time dancing with her.

Speaking of babysitting, Carol and I still enjoy our date night once a week. We see a lot of movies and eat most often at our favorite restaurants. Occasionally we try something new, but we have 8-10 places we really like and are going there most often now. We have a comfort level with things here and are ordering the cervechis, smoked marlin, and other local favorites.

But back to babysitting, while we were out one night, Amanda decided to experiment with scissors. We now have a baggy of hair from our little girl's first haircut. I thought the work looked stylish, in a NYC kind of way, but Carol whisked her off the next day for a new hairdo from the professionals at the hair salon.

We have done a little more exploring of the country here. We traveled to San Juan del Sur in the very south of the country with some visiting Rotarians and stayed the night at the beach there. San Juan del Sur is the local beach town. Its about 2 ½ hours away from Managua and is where a lot of people have beach homes. There are a lot of small hotels that cater to tourists and locals alike. Cruise ships now stop 2-3 times per week as well. It's a nice town, but not our cup of tea really.

While we were in that part of the country, Enrique Zamora and his family suggested we accompany them over to the island of Ometepe in Lake Nicaragua that is formed by the two Volcanoes Concepcion and Madera. We took the Ferry, which is an overcrowded, 1000-year-old boat for an hour to the island. Interesting experience. It would have been better if we had known to get there early, because when we arrived 15 minutes before cast off, there was standing room only. It's only an hour and the view is spectacular. Concepcion is a perfect cone shaped volcano that rises out of the lake to a height of a little over a mile. Its sister volcano, Madera is about half as high and forms the other half of the island Ometepe. Although only 10 miles separates them, the climates are totally different. Madera has a crater lake in the top and is covered with rainforests and waterfalls. You can hike to the top of both and we will go back and do it someday when we have more time.

By April, the daytime temps here reach the high 90's and low 100's. So for Easter we decided to go back to Selva Negra and escape the heat. Hiking around the coffee plantations and the rain forests of the mountains was perfect. Amanda did more riding on Dad's shoulders than hiking, be she got to do some horseback riding, and hear the monkeys. Still have not seen them yet. We did however see elephant cows. These cows had ears like elephants, well almost. They were about 8-10 inches wide and 15-20 inches long. Never seen anything like it and Amanda got a kick out of it.

Easter is also the time of festivals. Very similar to Christmas with lots of fireworks, parades, and processions. Just before Easter, we decided to go to a Marti Gras type parade here in Managua. The signs for the parade said it started at 4:00. We arrived at 4:00 knowing it wouldn't start then, but figured we could get close parking if we were early. By five, some folks were there, by 6 it was crowded, and by seven the parade had just started. But by started I don't mean started like in the US. The mayor rode by waving from a car. Then nothing for 20 minutes. Then a procession of fire trucks and

police cars throwing candy. Then nothing for 10 minutes. Then a small band called a chinchero that consists of a base drum, trumpet, snare drum, a tuba and an accordion. You see them all over the place here. Whenever there is a procession, you usually have a chinchero leading the way. Then nothing for 15 minutes. By 8 Amanda had had enough of the parade and we came home. I guess it really picked up after we left. The pictures in the paper the next day showed quite a parade. Next time we go to a parade that starts at 4:00 we'll go at 7:00.

Our VP of Construction, Ray Steeb, brought his 14-year-old daughter with him last trip and on the weekend we took them to the Mombacho volcano to hike in the cloud forest and try the canopy tour. The canopy tour is where you hook up to a cable and slide from treetop to treetop. Amanda got to ride with one of the guides and loved it. There were two parts where she had to go it alone. One was a Tarzan swing from one treetop to another. I told her she had to give a Tarzan yell and she did. At the end is a 100-foot rappel, which is also solo. She enjoyed that as well. The canopy tour is a real winner and we will be going back to do that again soon.

On a non-Nicaragua note, one of our investors was here a couple weeks ago and he wanted to also go to Panama and see our teak plantation. I had not been there in almost a year and was blown away by how much the trees have grown. The trees are less than 4 years old and we have some that are 45 feet tall and 8 inches in diameter. I knew that this is how fast they grow, but to see it is incredible. The other nice thing is that the 100 miles of dirt road to the site is 80 miles paved now. Huge difference. Used to take 4 hours to get there. Now 2. I almost forget the many long days, multiple flat tires and other adventures that went into getting this plantation going. Seeing the trees is very rewarding.

Here in Nicaragua, we have concentrated on the paper side of the project for a long, long time, almost 3 years. But we now have a physical improvement on the property. We built our temporary bridge over the river. It's nice to see "real" work starting on the project. Schedules are always being pushed back but there is finally something to see.

Carol and I are looking forward to being back in the States. It's a reverse culture shock to drive on the great roads, see hundreds of new tall, glass buildings, and walk on sidewalks. I can't wait to eat Greek food and real sushi. I know Amanda was craving the strawberries and raspberries in Baba's garden. Carol is going to enjoy spending time with family and friends while I do my road show.

It will be nice to be back in the States, see family and friends, but Nicaragua is home now. Some things you only know in retrospect and that is one of them. The process slips up on you and one day you know. Was it home a week ago, a month ago, 2 months ago? Not sure, but it is today. I hope that some of you will come visit us in our new home. We keep finding new sites to see and things to experience. Below is a project update for anyone interested. I have also attached a photo of the bridge. Be well and stay in touch.

Mike, Carol and Amanda