



NICA NEWSLETTER

September 2007

Issue: 2007 - 8

Dear Friends,

Nicaragua made headlines this month with Hurricane Felix, and many of you have probably already received the e-mail detailing the impact and how you can make a tax-deductible donation specifically to the relief effort if you desire to do so. With the devastation brought on by Hurricane Felix, this country was once again in the spotlight as a locale of natural disasters and poverty combining to create tragic results of homes lost and families torn apart.

The Northeast coast was hit hard, with a hospital, an airport, and thousands of homes suffering severe damage or total destruction. More than one hundred people died and the region was left largely without power and with limited food and water. For aid to reach to victims, it had to arrive by water or air for the most part, as land routes are just now becoming accessible.

However, these events also speak volumes about the human spirit of cooperation and joint effort to do everything possible to help those less fortunate. The true goodwill of the Nicaraguan people becomes even more obvious in the face of disaster: people of every background come together to donate clothing, food, time, supplies, and all sorts of necessary goods that are far from available right now in the areas hardest hit. Our own Gran Pacifica team donated clothing and money to the cause, participating in the national effort to help victims.

However, Nicaragua has also had its fair share of positive mentions in the press, with several countries donating money to help pull her people out of poverty, as well as people continually discovering that this is indeed a fantastic place to vacation and do something completely different. Add the unfaltering generosity and graciousness of Nicaragua's people, and it is a country always rising in outside opinion, even in the face of extreme adversity.

Finally, we are proud to announce that our new President and COO, Martin Roberts, started working in our Managua offices the first week of September. He brings with him decades of experience running large-scale construction companies like Centex and KB Homes. He promises to be quite an asset to our team. For a full bio on Mr. Roberts, [click here](#).

Included in this newsletter are the usual sections on the economy, business investment, tourism, humanitarian efforts, and several recent press articles talking about Nicaragua. There is, as usual, a great deal of good news to report and I hope that you'll take a few minutes to scan down through the newsletter to see what interests you.

Despite the hardships facing this country, it thrives again in the face of misfortune. The people here are always ready to help each other pick up and start over. That is a big part of why we call this wonderful country home.

Until next time, keep in touch,

Mike Cobb
Chief Executive Officer and Co-founder
Gran Pacifica



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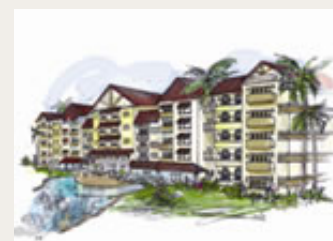
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Give your help now to families affected by Hurricane Felix on the Nicaraguan Atlantic Coast. As little as US \$50 can make a huge difference for these people in their time of need. [Click here to send your help now.](#)

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Business News and Economy

Gran Pacifica Hires New President and COO

Mentioned in the Pittsburgh Tribune:

A band of Pittsburghers developing resorts and residences in Nicaragua hired veteran construction manager Martin Roberts to be president and chief operating officer. ECI Development Inc. co-founder Michael Cobb remains chairman and CEO, while co-founder Joel Nagel remains chief financial officer. Roberts, who has 35 years experience in Florida and elsewhere, will manage day-to-day operations of the group's Gran Pacifica Resort property on the west coast of Nicaragua. So far, the group has invested \$8 million in infrastructure for Gran



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Pacifica. ECI also plans to develop homes, resorts, hotels and spas in Costa Rica, Belize, and elsewhere in Central America.

Mr. Roberts' experience includes 10 years with Centex Home Corporation as Divisional President and COO of Florida and the East Coast Division. As the Divisional President in Florida, Roberts directed construction and marketing of two 24-story condominium complexes on Miami Beach, and increased sales of homes to over 1,000 per year.

Following Centex, Mr. Roberts built retirement communities in Florida for U.S. Homes Corporation as Divisional President of the Retirement Division. There he directed day-to-day supervision of homebuilding projects in all regions in the division and constructed complete recreational packages, including golf courses, clubhouses, tennis courts, and recreational facilities necessary to service a large scale retirement community of 5,000 homes or more.

Mr. Roberts was hired away from US Homes to become Division President and COO for KB Homes, Southern California Division. He managed a \$250 Million per year division with 1,500 annual closings in the Los Angeles and San Diego areas. He later became the Senior Vice President and COO for First City Properties in Beverly Hills, California. There he ran three building divisions, California, Nevada and Arizona, as well as an apartment construction division, a land division which included acquisition, master planning and development. His responsibility included full profit and loss for a \$300 million per-year company with over 2,000 closings per year.

For complete biographical information, [click here](#).

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Investment Comentary: September 2007

By Javier Morales

After completing the first 9 months of government, the economy remains healthy showing deceleration as a result of the adverse international effect of the sub prime lending problem in the US, the severe domestic energy crisis and a recent surge in world oil prices.

On the positive side: the approval of the IMF Monetary program expected to take place during the next board meeting of October 4th and the almost sure reduction in the "encaje legal" by the monetary authorities, a mandatory banks deposits that every bank should keep in the Central Bank, will give the macro economy a very serious base for macro economic stability.

On the negative side: the conflict with Exxon Corporation that emerged over a dispute on the use of fuel deposits and illegal actions taken by the government to force the oil company to receive Venezuelan fuel, sparked a series of concerns regarding the real intention of the government of maintaining a positive investment climate.

At present, international reserves at the Central Bank are \$ 1019.7 million, dated August 31st, a reduction of \$8 million with respect to the level observed on July 31th. Deposits in the financial systems are at the \$2,297 millions level. Inflation during the month of August growth at 0.27% and cumulative inflation for the year 2007 reached 7.26 % which is higher than the previous year of 2006 that was 6.86%. Exports are growing at 20% rate as well as imports propelled by the oil prices that is now at \$78 dollars per barrel.

Continuous increase in oil prices will have a negative impact on production, reducing GDP of 1% for every \$10 dollars of increases in oil price level. Consumption will have a reduction of 2.17% and private investment will be reduced by 3.45 % as a result of the oil price shock as was estimated by a macroeconomic model developed by the Central Bank. Just the impact of the current energy crisis and the high level of oil prices, the Central Bank has reduced the GDP growth forecast of 2007 from 4.5% to 3.5% and some independent economist estimate the growth

level at 2.8 % by the end of 2007.

On the other hand, the above-mentioned reduction of the “encaje legal” will lower domestic credit rate that will have a positive effect of agricultural credit; it will reduce international reserves by an estimate of \$70 million dollars; however it will have almost no impact on production and the level of inflation. But most important, this policy decision will send a positive signal to the financial system and the general public that the Central bank is fully committed with the country macro economic stability.

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Adiak Barahona, Gran Pacifica Director of Public Affairs Becomes a Rotarian at the Managua Tiscapa Rotary Club

We would like to congratulate Adiak Barahona for becoming a Rotarian last September 27th at the official ceremony of the Managua Tiscapa Rotary Club. After being a Rotaract (Rotary Youth Institution) at the local Rotaract Managua Tiscapa Club, Adiak was ready to make the important transition into the Rotarians. Presently, Adiak Barahona is in charge of supervising the execution of the tourism/sustainability business model of Gran Pacifica Resort in the local community. The Managua Rotary Club will enhance the capability of Adiak and Gran Pacifica to better contribute with humanitarian and sustainability efforts in the local community.

At the Ceremony, the 4240 District Governor Dr. Raul Jarquín expressed, it was the first time that the Rotaract Club was generating a Rotarian for the Managua Tiscapa Club, this shows the importance of the Rotaract Club as a nursery for future members in our organization. Also the President of the Managua Tiscapa Rotary Club, Mr. Eduard Zeledon received a special recognition for bringing new younger members into this prestigious humanitarian organization. In the Nicaraguan Rotary movement, the insertion of the new generation is essential for growing our Rotarian philosophy, stated Mr. Eduard Zeledon.



Dr. Raul Jarquin and Adiak Barahona (right to left).
(Click Photo to enlarge)



Rotary Oath Ceremony
(Click Photo to enlarge)



Managua Tiscapa Rotary Club board and as special guest the Past President, Dr. Jarquin (Father of Raul Jarquin).
(Click Photo to enlarge)

At this Rotary meeting, the local Rotary Club also urged its members and international friends to start a campaign to collect **metal (zinc) roofs** for **5,000 families** that lost their homes in the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua due to the Hurricane Felix consequences. **You can also contribute to these efforts, [click here for more information](#).**

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Tourism News

Volunteer in Nicaragua, From \$850

Live and work with Nicaraguan coffee farmers for a week as part of a delegation organized by the human rights organization Global Exchange.

Monday, August 13, 2007;

The Real Deal: Eight nights' accommodations, all meals, sightseeing excursions, the services of a translator, and local transportation by bus, from \$850 per person.

When: Dec. 14-23, 2007.

The Fine Print: The group is limited to about 15 or 20 participants. Transportation is by private (not necessarily air-conditioned) bus. Note that there is a translator for the group, but that basic knowledge of Spanish is a trip requirement. Airfare and tips are not included. Read these guidelines before you book any Real Deal.

Book By: Book at least 45 days before departure; based on availability.

Contact: Global Exchange, 800/497-1994 ext. 221, globalexchange.org.

Why It's a Deal: First, consider the fact that Global Exchange is coordinating an experience that would be very difficult, if not impossible, to arrange on your own. Second, do the math: the trip breaks down to about \$106 per person per night, and includes eight nights' accommodations, transportation by private bus, all meals, excursions, and the services of a translator and group leader.

Trip Details: Let's start by admitting that while we do feature volunteer experiences every so often, the Nicaragua Fair Harvest Exchange program is not your typical Real Deal. The fact that Global Exchange refers to its trips as delegations should tip you off to its socially conscious, politically aware approach.

This Nicaragua delegation calls for healthy participants with a pitch-in attitude, a readiness to rough it, and an interest in learning about the lives of coffee farmers and the fair trade movement. Groups tend to average 15 to 20 people, who run the gamut from youths to college or grad students to retirees. A translator accompanies the group, but you're expected to have a basic knowledge of Spanish because of the homestay.

If you *are* curious enough about the lives of Nicaraguan coffee farmers and issues surrounding the Fair Trade movement to join the delegation, you'll begin by arriving in the capital city of Managua, where you'll be met by a Global Exchange leader. The coffee farm is located about two hours away in Matagalpa, which will be your base for the trip.

For most of the eight nights, you'll be staying with one or two other participants at the house of a local family. The homes are very modest; don't expect a bedroom all to yourself.

Most days will be divided between working on the coffee farm--with a very early start--and going on excursions in the afternoon, such as a visit to the Yasica waterfall and a hike along the Poza Bruja trail.

You're free to extend the trip by arriving early or departing late, though you'll have to make those plans independently.

Getting There: Trip leaders pick up and drop off participants at the airport in Managua. A recent search on Kayak yielded these lowest round-trip fares for mid-December travel: \$218 from Miami (American), \$348 from New York City (multiple carriers), \$464 for Chicago (multiple carriers), \$487 from D.C. (multiple carriers), \$547 from Houston (multiple carriers), and \$650 from San Francisco (multiple carriers).

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Nicaraguan Coffee a Hit in Atlanta

Coffee from Selva Negra, a coffee plantation and eco-resort in the mountains of Matagalpa, Nicaragua, was voted the Best Coffee of 2007 in Atlanta, GA.

JavaVino, a coffee and wine house, is a small independently family owned business by Heddy Kühl and Steve Franklin, a husband & wife team. Parents of two boys, Heddy & Steve run a true mom and pop shop.

Steve Franklin, originally from Bloomington, Indiana has made Atlanta his new home. His initial career was in Information Technology consulting where 90% travel called for a lot of late nights on the road. On these occasions, he often went in search of the perfect hangout where he could relax, work on his projects and still enjoy a nice evening out, without feeling he was so far away from home. It is these experiences that helped form the JavaVino concept.

Heddy Kühl, a native of Nicaragua, has also made a profession of the Information Technology industry, which explains how Steve and Heddy met. Heddy's parents, Eddy Kühl and Mausi Hayn, come from a long line of coffee. With the start of JavaVino, Heddy is proudly sixth generation in the coffee business. Her knowledge of the industry and her unique creative vision gives JavaVino that extra touch that makes all the difference.



The Kühl Family is part of a long history of coffee producers, dating back to the late 1880's. This time honored tradition goes back six generations in the cultivation of coffee. The tradition continues to this day, Eddy and Mausi Kühl have strived to achieve the ideals of sustainability at their estate, Selva Negra Estate Coffee in the highlands of Nicaragua. This year Selva Negra was awarded the 2007 Sustainability Award by the Specialty Coffee Association of America.

The picture above, from the late 1800's, of the three Baldizon sisters, demonstrates the long tradition of coffee within the Kühl-Hayn Family. Left to right, Demetria Baldizon (Eddy's grandmother) married Otto Kühl. Rosenda Baldizon holding her daughter, Meta Baldizon, Rosenda married Alberto Vogl. Pina Baldizon married the gentleman to her side Transito Chaves. The three Baldizon sisters were the daughters of the former Governor of the Province of Matagalpa, Matias Baldizon. Matias who was one of the first Nicaraguan coffee growers in Matagalpa, registered in 1883.

Steve & Heddy import Selva Negra Estate Coffee from Heddy's folks in Nicaragua. The coffee is grown and processed by the Kühl Family, they then export the coffee to their daughter Heddy through New Orleans into Atlanta. Heddy & Steve then warehouse and serve as green bean brokers of Selva Negra Estate Coffee. Most of it stays here in Atlanta though where they roast at JavaVino and sell either by the pound or as drip-coffee at JavaVino.

Offering the true seed-to-cup experience is quite hard, as coffee goes through so many

processes and so many hands before reaching us. At JavaVino, we pride ourselves in being able to offer to you the entire life cycle of coffee. To read more about this process, visit http://www.javavino.com/wholesale_seedtocup.html.

To buy your own Nicaraguan Selva Negra coffee, visit the JavaVino site at http://www.javavino.com/our_store/house_coffee.html.

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Humanitarian News

Gran Pacifica Donates C\$ 50,000 to Relief Effort

Gran Pacifica proudly donated almost \$3,000.00 to aid the victims on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast, where the people were left with nothing when torrential winds and rains tore apart their communities, and in many cases their families. The staff of Gran Pacifica all brought clothes, shoes, and other supplies to give to the people of the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN), in addition to the funds.

In Nicaragua, when devastating events like this occur, people of all different walks of life band together to help those in need, and resulting from Felix was no different. In general, they have what is called a Telehablaton, which is basically a televised talkathon in which people and companies and organizations come and donate all sorts of things to the effort at hand, people perform, and the whole thing is televised to raise awareness and promote support from everyone. The GP staff went to the event to present a large cardboard check, and they appeared on the news all over the country. In addition, private companies donated several thousand gallons of water and oil, as well as foodstuffs such as rice and beans, to give to the people who need these things so desperately.

The havoc wreaked by Hurricane Felix is estimated to be around \$30 million in damages; for a region as poor as the Northeast of Nicaragua, that is an unimaginable sum of money. Funds collected have not been announced, but by the looks of the event, the RAAN is on its way to getting what it needs, and hopefully, it will be able to rebuild and improve the lives of its residents, and prepare them for what is inevitably a part of life, but that doesn't need to destroy it.

To donate to the cause and help the people affected by Hurricane Felix on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua, [click here](#).

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Switzerland to grant U\$85 million to combat poverty

The cooperation Hill focus on small and medium businesses, public governability and public finances, and infrastructure and local services

El Nuevo Diario
31 August 2007

The Swiss government will grant Nicaragua nearly \$85 million to battle poverty between 2007 and 2012.

The resident director of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (COSUDE), Peter

Bischof, said that these resources will be given to the governments during Ortega's administration (2007-2012) so that they can be implemented in the fight against poverty and other social demands.

Poverty in Nicaragua affects 64% of a population of 5.14 million inhabitants, according to official figures. Bischof indicated that Nicaragua will receive \$17 million annually as an average over the next five years, two million dollars more than were donated in 2006.

The cooperative will focus on three main areas: small and medium businesses, public finances and governability, and local services and infrastructure. The diplomat announced that in 2011, COSUDE will analyze what the impact of the cooperative has been, and these results will act as a base upon which they can decide how Switzerland will help this country in the future.

Bischof explained that the cooperative announced for Nicaragua forms part of a strategy of Swiss collaboration for Latin America. In Central America, the cooperative will concentrate on Nicaragua and Honduras, specifically.

Switzerland belongs to the Budgetary Support Group, which includes Germany, Norway, Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the World Bank, and the European Commission. Switzerland granted \$5.2 million for Nicaragua's general proposal this year.

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Japanese bring potable water to Villa El Carmen

Takashi Fuchigami, Counselor to the Japanese Diplomatic Mission, inaugurated a water improvement system for potable water in the rural area of Villa El Carmen, the municipality surrounding Gran Pacifica], for which the embassy designated \$84,756 from their fund for community service and humanitarian projects.

Fuchigami presented the system at an inauguration that was attended by many residents of the area, and explained that the project includes the drilling of six wells, acquisition of nine manual pumps and one submersible pump, construction of nine units equipped with bathrooms and public washrooms, as well as construction of a storage tank with a capacity of 5,000 gallons of water.

This will benefit more than 1,000 inhabitants in the rural communities of El Muñoz, EL Brasil, and La Aduana 1, all within Villa El Carmen, who will be able to take advantage of the permanent service for potable water.

At the event, the director of the Institute for Social Action "Juan XXIII", Edwin Novoa Martinez, thanked the embassy for its support.

"The embassy of Japan reiterates the strong will of the Japanese people and government to continue supporting social and economic development in Nicaragua, and in this way to keep strengthening the bonds of friendship and cooperation between both countries", declared and official statement.

El Nuevo Diario, 31 July 2007



CORTESÍA / END.- Takashi Fuchigami with residents of Villa El Carmen, at the inauguration of the new potable water system.

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US Congratulates Nicaraguan Army

The North American country thanked the Nicaraguan armed forces for their support

Consuelo Sandoval
El Nuevo Diario
31 August, 2007



Today the United States congratulated the Army of Nicaragua on the 28th anniversary of its formation, which will be celebrated this Sunday, the second of September. The US reaffirmed in a letter that they will continue with their support, friendship, and cooperation.

“We are very satisfied with the close and positive working relationship that we have built with the armed forces over the years,” stated the missive from the diplomatic seat.

It also ensures that in the last year, the people of the United States have donated nearly \$5 million in materials and humanitarian aid, by way of Comando Sur.

“We thank the Armed Forces of Nicaragua for their support, without which we would not have been able to carry out the aid missions of 2007, which included: New Horizons 2007—“Together We Can” in Carazo; the HSV2 Swift’s visit to Puerto Cabezas; the USNS Comfort visit to Corinto (see following article) **LINK TO NEXT ARTICLE ABOUT USNS COMFORT HERE— PREGUNTAME PARA ACLARAR SI NO ENTENDES** ; the Medican Brigade that attended to the populations located on the borders of El Rama; and the USS Pearl Harbor’s visit to Corinto.”

He adds, “this close collaboration between the Armed Forces of the US and of Nicaragua has allowed us to bring medical attention to more than 30,000 Nicaraguans, by means of the medical brigades that worked in Carazo, the South Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAS), and Corinto.

He mentions that it also made possible the construction of two schools, three medical clinics, and two potable water wells.

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Comfort Arrives in Nicaragua, Continues Mission



7/18/2007

By Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Kelly E. Barnes, USNS Comfort Public Affairs

CORINTO, Nicaragua (NNS) -- After caring for more than 55,000 patients in Belize, Guatemala and Panama, hospital ship USNS Comfort (T-AH 20) arrived in Corinto on July 18, continuing its four-month humanitarian assistance deployment.

U.S. Navy, Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, U.S. Public Health Service, Canadian Forces, and Operation Smile and Project Hope personnel will continue providing the people of Latin America and the Caribbean with no-cost health care services, including adult and pediatric primary care, dental care, optometry and other services while in Nicaragua.

More than 30 "Operation Smile" personnel will board the ship here to conduct cleft lip and cleft palate operations aboard Comfort.

Comfort will remain in Corinto for nearly a week conducting operations at various locations, including Corinto Hospital Jose Shendell, Centro de Salud, el Realejo and Villa de Julio Centro de Salud.

"The crew has done so much and worked so hard for the people we've helped so far," said mission commander Capt. Bob Kapcio. "When it comes to helping people in need, there's almost no stopping our Comfort team."

Comfort is on a 120-day humanitarian assistance deployment to Latin America and the Caribbean providing medical assistance to patients in more than a dozen countries. While deployed, Comfort is under the operational control of U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command and tactical control of Destroyer Squadron 24.

For more news from USNS Comfort, visit www.news.navy.mil/local/tah20/.

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Press Articles

washingtonpost.com

Nicaragua's Turf Beside the Surf

By John Briley
Special to The Washington Post
Sunday, August 12, 2007; P01

Fourteen years ago, on my first trip to Costa Rica, I agreed to check out some land a Canadian expat was selling. Zancudo Peninsula. One lot back from a rustic beach. Lush hills. Thirty grand -- or, about \$29,500 more than I had. I excused myself to catch some waves, and ever since have tried very hard not to dwell on how much that parcel must have appreciated.

When I first heard "Nicaragua" and "tourism" in the same sentence about four years ago, I pictured lawless country, bombed-out roads, bandits and a gastrointestinal hit job. But the country, specifically the southern Pacific coast, kept popping up in magazines with reports of stunning beaches, surf camps, eco-lodges and even a high-end hotel with an infinity pool. Oh, and the land prices. "It's the next Costa Rica," the advance party whispered. "Get in now and you won't regret it."

To me, that sounded like a rare second chance. Yes, Nicaragua carries risk: It's the second-poorest country in the region, behind Haiti, and has a corrupt government run by the loosely hinged Daniel Ortega. But with all the natural charms of Costa Rica and an established band of expats, it seemed like a can't-miss proposition.

Over the past five years, real estate sales to foreigners have exploded along Nicaragua's southwest Pacific coast, with oceanside lots starting at about \$70,000, up from \$20,000 a few years ago. By comparison, similar properties in Costa Rica cost more than four times as much. Numerous American real estate firms, such as Re/Max and Century 21, operate in Nicaragua, making it easy to buy with confidence -- though scams and rip-offs occur. I swore to be diligent and slightly skeptical.

Driving out of Managua in late May, I saw a weary country. The six-month dry season had rendered the land brown and dusty. Emaciated livestock picked at shriveled weeds, shanties dotted the roadside, and desperate residents shoveled dirt into potholes, then stuck their hands out to passing cars. That Third World smell -- high-particulate exhaust blended with garbage and a whiff of sewage -- sullied the air. But farther from the capital, things looked up: children in tidy navy-and-white school uniforms skipping home for lunch; locals cruising to market by bicycle, pickup or oxcart; concrete-and-terra-cotta homes laced with bougainvillea. And the familiar Central American landscape of hills, volcanoes, streams and lakes.

San Juan del Sur, the epicenter of the real estate boom, sits on a Pacific bay at the bottom of a long hill about three hours southwest of Managua. Often described as a sleepy fishing village with an expat surfing scene, San Juan (population 13,000) was hardly dozing: It was noisy and busy, a mishmash of brightly painted homes, Internet cafes, surf shops, hotels, restaurants and *pulperias* (general stores) squeezed along a grid of cobblestone streets. Then, on the western edge of town, I saw the main attraction: a mile-long arc of gently sloping sand tucked between rocky bluffs and fronted by open-air, thatch-roofed restaurants. But as the old saying goes: Never buy land on an empty stomach.

* * *

After a lunch of grilled fish overlooking the near-empty beach, I dropped into the Century 21 office, a block from the center of town. David Brownlee, an agent from California, pulled up a map and pictures of Costa Dulce, a development on 55 acres of land a half-hour from San Juan.

Brownlee was personable and, at 35 years old, still young enough to be demonstrably bullish on Nicaragua without arousing suspicion. But, as if to underline the risk of Third World real estate speculation, the electricity went out in the middle of his pitch, leaving us to chat in the darkness of an afternoon thunderstorm while waiting for the generator to kick in.

"These lots are incredibly popular," he told me when the power returned. "I had a few guys from San Diego interested in one, and by the time we got back to the office it had sold." It was hard to tell what I was looking at (the color-coded master plan was vague) and even harder to tell if I was being had. (I hadn't discounted the possibility of a ruse, especially after that San Diego anecdote.) Yet, I made an appointment nonetheless to see Costa Dulce.

As I whiled away the day in town, San Juan -- and its residents -- began to grow on me. I found Brent, a 30-ish Floridian with a buzz cut, standing inside the doorway of the Arenas Caliente surf shop.

"This place rocks," said the skinny, shirtless expat. "Came down here three years ago. The only thing I really miss is my dog. We had a hurricane last year, filled the streets with water. That's when I got dengue. Lost 15 pounds. I was scared, man. My girlfriend's grandmother was next to my bed praying over me. I thought I might die. But this place rocks."

The next day, it was back to business. My pre-trip research had steered me to a development called Las Fincas, promoted as "Nicaragua's premium eco-friendly community," with 400 acres of protected tropical dry forest, a solar power system with each lot and "no clubhouses, community pools or putting greens . . . just nature the way it was intended." My kind of place.

Juan Manuel Caldera, a developer clad in jeans, a military-green T-shirt and a Panama hat, was waiting in the foyer of my hotel. He had surfboards strapped atop his SUV, on the hope that we might grab a few waves after touring Las Fincas.

Caldera grew up in Managua and after college worked as a sound man for an NBC news crew covering the contra-Sandinista war in the late 1980s. "My first week I was shot at and captured. I loved it," he said. "I got caught in a firefight between the contras and Sandinistas. I thought the car was going to explode, like in the movies, so I kept diving from one side to the other. Finally I got out by waving a white flag. The Sandinistas wanted the car to transport their wounded."

We drove south along a dirt road, through a borough called Las Delicias, where kids played by the road, goats and horses fed beneath the trees, and the aroma of rice and beans drifted from small homes. Soon we were in undeveloped hills, beautiful and densely forested. We took a ridge-top road into Las Fincas, with the Pacific flashing between jungly hillsides.

Construction had not begun. Caldera showed me a sloping acre, listed at \$75,000, from where I had a pie-slice view of the ocean between two distant hills. Caldera nodded to a peninsula on the horizon: "Costa Rica," he said perfunctorily.

Nicaraguan land hawkers play up the proximity to their southern neighbor, but also issue side-of-the-mouth invectives. Caldera called it "the dark side," and Brownlee pointedly mentioned Costa Rica's high land prices and growing crime problem.

"Look," Caldera said, "the Liberia [Costa Rica] airport is only two hours away, and that's great. But they have Madonna staying at the Four Seasons [in nearby Papagayo] and all their resorts and condos and overdevelopment, and I don't think we want that here. We have a chance to do this right."

We viewed a few more lots, stumbled upon howler monkeys frolicking in the trees, and drove over a rough dirt road to Playa El Yanke, an empty caramel-colored beach. The surf was blown out, so we settled for a swim in the warm water, the hills of Costa Rica barely visible to the south.

* * *

That afternoon I met Brownlee for a tour. Of all the for-sale land I saw, Costa Dulce was the most intoxicating: a collection of lots (also undeveloped), about a quarter-acre each, occupying a moderately treed bluff between two stunning surfing beaches. Suddenly, I pictured it all: sunset surf sessions melting into cocktails in my tastefully understated home, the moon rising over the Pacific.

"Nice views, huh?" Brownlee asked. "The captain of the French junior national surfing team bought this lot right here." He was sensing the close. "He and his buddies were out here surfing a few weeks ago -- really put on a show."

The ridge-top lots with the broadest views were sold, but two attractive lots remained, and I clicked off some photos; checked the soil; asked about water, septic and cell reception; and otherwise tried to project a serious yet skeptical air.

I called Brownlee as soon as I returned to the States. "Lot 8 sold yesterday," he told me, "but Lot 10 is still available." Price? Ninety grand.

I offered less; he nudged down to \$88,000. That was about \$86,500 more than I had in my checking account, but doable. I could take out a home equity loan. Join a few clinical trials. Sell my neighbor's house on eBay.

The next day I wired \$1,000 to the Century 21 escrow department, care of the Central Bank of Nicaragua. I then spent the ensuing week vacillating between glee and terror. Ultimately, the cooler head prevailed. Brownlee wired back my money.

I have no doubt that Nicaragua's land prices will climb steadily, and even less doubt that someone has snatched up Lot 10 and is, right now, lost in his own surf paradise daydream. Me? I'm squirreling away cash so I'll really be ready for when the "next Nicaragua" pops up on the map.

John Briley last wrote for Travel about the Big Island of Hawaii.

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Travel outside the box — unique destinations

TODAY Travel editor Peter Greenberg on places you might have overlooked

By Peter Greenberg
TODAYShow.com contributor
July 19, 2007

I always laugh when I tell people where I've been, because of their almost inevitable response. Almost always, it's: "Really? That's not on my list."

Not on my list? Not on your list? Who publishes this list? Do unevolved travelers actually get together early each morning and synchronize their lists?

And what's on the lists? The usual suspects: France, Italy, Spain. Why? I'm convinced the listmakers are all failed art history majors who figured they had studied the artwork in college, so they might as well go see it, at least once.

Based on the most recent accounting, there are 314 countries and distinct destinations around the world. I've been lucky enough to have visited 146 of them — or about 145 more than most Americans. (Remember, only about 24 percent of U.S. citizens have passports!)

So what's on my list? Every destination that I've never visited!

Of course, it goes without saying that some places are easier to get to than others. But when I can finesse the logistics, I always figure out a way to go. And so should you.

So here are three of those countries/destinations that are probably NOT ON YOUR LIST. But should be. They certainly qualify on my own new list: the next great places.

Nicaragua

Nicaragua is the Bahamas before it went upscale. It's St. Barts without the attitude. And it's lots of Americans vacationing — even buying second homes — without the Sandinistas. Yes, Daniel Ortega is back in power, but with a new vision — perhaps a shocking one to those who remember his former regime — but not surprising to those who realize the key to saving and improving the economy of the largest country in Central America is by focusing on travel and tourism.

No Starbucks yet. No over-the-top spas. But great beaches. One of the other reasons Nicaragua is so attractive now is that it remains the least densely populated country in Central America with

a population in size to its smaller neighbors. The country is bordered on the north by Honduras and on the south by Costa Rica. Its western coastline is on the Pacific Ocean, while the east side of the country is on the Caribbean Sea.

About 60,000 Americans visit Nicaragua each year, attracted by the beaches, jungles, history and culture. Although Nicaragua has been largely peaceful since the election of the first democratically-elected female president in Latin America, Violeta Chamorro, in 1990, the country still bears some scars from the decade-long civil war.

But the country is well on its way to recovery. Since Nicaragua is less developed, it's often mentioned as a cheaper alternative to its richer and more developed neighbor, Costa Rica. Ecotourism, volcano walks and nature activities are a rapidly growing sector of the tourism industry. Nicaragua has 78 nature parks that draw in visitors each year.

León Viejo, the old village of Leon, is viewed to be one of the oldest and the most well-developed historical Spanish settlements, giving it important archaeological value. Leon Viejo was abandoned in 1610 after almost 100 years of habitation when the Momotombo volcano erupted. The ruins have now been largely excavated and have been a UNESCO site since 2000.

The Island of Ometepe is formed by two volcanoes that rise out of Lake Nicaragua. Much of the island is now a nature preserve (farms cover much of the rest) with unique rainforest environments in the shadow of the volcano.

Granada is considered to be one of the most beautiful towns in Nicaragua, with its nostalgic atmosphere and colonial architecture. It's also the second-oldest city founded by Europeans in the Americas, founded in 1524. Many of the town's old buildings are now being refurbished after years of neglect in the conflict-ridden 1980s and the poverty-filled 1990s. Granada also attracts visitors to its beaches on the shores of Lake Nicaragua, which is also home to a large number of freshwater bull sharks.

Wildlife attractions

Filled with all kinds of interesting animals, birds, fish, insects and plants, an animal lover will find Nicaragua a virtual paradise. Of course, not all these delightful creatures are within easy access to the public. Much of Nicaragua's wildlife live protected lives in wildlife reserves and have made their homes in rainforests, lakes, mountains and volcanoes.

Each year thousands of sea turtles make the journey from the sea to the beach, where they spend the entire night digging a nest and laying their eggs before returning to the water. The event can be fascinating to watch — as are the hatchings of these precious little creatures. Birdwatchers will rejoice in the wide variety of beautiful birds that have made their home in Nicaragua. Nicaragua has several wild cat species, including the puma, the cougar, the jaguarondi, the margay and the ocelot.

Selva Negra Coffee Estate

The organic coffee estate of Selva Negra is an eco-friendly, sustainable farm located in the Selva Negra Cloud Forest Reserve. You can explore the forest on walking trails and on horseback, tour the coffee plantation and an extensive greenhouse.

Tours

Exito Travel offers an interesting "San Juan Experience" — a boating experience that travels from Lake Nicaragua to the Caribbean via the San Juan River. Though no boating experience is required for the minimally-exhaustive trip, the waters will take you through the heart of the country's best-preserved rainforests and rivers. The cost for this eight-day tour is \$2,469 per person, and does not include international flights.

Brendan Tours features the "Best of Nicaragua" on an eight-day tour. The tour's highlights

include a few days in Granada and Managua along with plenty of visits to the Pacific shore. Prices start at \$1198 per person, and include guides, transport within Nicaragua, lodging, and some meals, and do not include international flights.

For nature lovers, Tours Nicaragua has the 14-day, 13-night "Nicaragua Natural History Expedition." This 14-day tour covers six distinct ecosystems and nine nature reserves, from cloud forests to coastal mangrove swamps. Included are plenty of boat tours and private wilderness guides to give you a truer view of Nicaragua's nature.

Peter Greenberg is TODAY's travel editor. His column appears weekly on TODAYshow.com.

Visit his Web site at PeterGreenberg.com.

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Travel and Adventure: Nicaragua is ideal for intriguing, offbeat vacations

Aug 10,2007 00:00 by Robert Selwitz

It's not a cliché to state that Nicaragua is a most volcanic country. Bisected by the eastern portion of the Pacific Rim of Fire, eruptions and related earthquakes have constantly played decisive roles in the country's history.

But beyond lava and perpetual steam, volcanic also describes the nation's history and politics. From its first encounters with Spanish conquistadors to a constant flow of unstable or kleptocratic leaders, Nicaragua has suffered as much from human frailty as natural powers.

Nevertheless, visitors need have no fears about visiting this fascinating land. Warm Nicaraguan welcomes are virtually assured wherever one ventures. And the variety of appealing destinations is tremendous.

The Pacific side is home to most of the population, major cities and prime tourist attractions. The territory stretching east of the volcanoes to the Caribbean coast is primarily a vast rain forest. Increasingly it is visited by the ecologically focused or serious seekers of solitude.

Granada is Nicaragua's most appealing city for tourists. Founded in 1524, it's the oldest continuously occupied town in the Western Hemisphere. The heart of the action is the central plaza, complete with a gazebo, musicians, candy and souvenir sellers, shoeshine dispensers and crowds of mingling and socializing locals. Facing the plaza are the city council building, La Casa de los Leones and the cathedral that was rebuilt after having been burned - like much of the rest of Granada - by the notorious William Walker.

Walker was the most infamous 19th century U.S. practitioner of filibustering - causing insurrections, usually in underdeveloped countries. In 1856, refusing to withdraw gracefully following his overthrow, Walker ordered the town destroyed. The original cathedral was burned to the ground, and many other buildings still bear scorch marks from Walker's conflagration.

Nearby is the Iglesia de San Francisco, founded in the 16th century, and the adjacent convent featuring an impressive collection of pre-Columbian statuary, ceramics, examples of corn-grinding millstones and exhibits depicting Indian religious ceremonial and daily life. There are also dozens of photographs, many depicting 19th century political leaders and ordinary citizens.

Artistically speaking, even more impressive is the relatively new Mi Museo Coleccion Granada on Atravezada Street in front of Bancentro. Danish owner Peder Kolind operates this amazingly extensive collection of beautifully displayed ancient pottery. Indeed, there are more than 5,000 pieces, allowing one to perceive the subtle design differences that evolved over centuries of work. Located in what was once a colonial home, it is open Monday through Friday 8 to 5, and 8 to noon on Saturdays.

With the largest city on the hemisphere's second-largest lake, Lake Nicaragua (Lake Titicaca bordering Bolivia and Peru is first), Granada visitors also enjoy a number of pleasurable water options.

Most popular are one-hour tours that wend through hundreds of islets, quite close to the city shoreline. Patrolling mangroves and swamps, boaters see dozens of egrets, plus herons, cormorants and other bird life on display. Many of the tiny islands are privately owned with palatial homes, while others are sites for restaurants and a hotel. One is populated by spider monkeys, descendants of pets of a child whose parents could no longer cope with them.

Between Granada and the capital Managua lies the constantly smoldering Masaya volcano. When its noxious fumes or flying rocks aren't deemed dangerous, visitors can drive quite close to an overlook. This is a new location, away from the previous viewing spot where, during the 1990s, you could glance down at fiery molten lava.

Nevertheless, what you still can see is quite impressive, just as it's been for centuries. In fact, prior to the Spanish invasion, indigenous people tried to keep the volcano quiet by throwing virgins into its mouth. Spanish priests - convinced this is the front porch of hell where the devil lives - erected a giant cross at the volcano's mouth to keep him at bay. Subsequently, neither effort has proven to be very successful.

Also founded in 1524, Leon - which for centuries competed with Granada for dominance in Nicaragua - began life about an hour from today's modern namesake. Archaeological remnants of this great city are still visible, and the layout of grand avenues and bits and pieces of churches, commercial structures and homes indicate this was meant to be a major center for Spain's American efforts.

However, there was one critical problem: The rumbling, nearby Momotombo volcano seemed to be always on the verge of a massive eruption. Acting before it ultimately happened in 1610 (burying the site for three and half centuries until its rediscovery during the 1960s), the town was moved 20 miles to the west. Today, like an extraordinary Roman ruin (think of Ostia Antica, once Rome's prime port), visitors can easily spend an hour or more exploring this U.N. World Heritage-protected site.

En route to modern Leon lies the hot springs of San Jacinto. Walk carefully through the unfenced area where gurgling brown springs at well-above-roasting temperatures are the result of a nearby volcano venting its heat on the ground rather than via eruptions. Leon today is a bustling commercial city with much less charm than Granada. However, its churches - particularly their interiors - are much more grand.

First and foremost is the cathedral, Central America's largest. Inside, stately columns, expansive areas and the lovely lion-bedecked tomb of Nicaragua's favorite poet, Ruben Dario (1865-1916), are standouts. And it's definitely worthwhile climbing several flights of narrow stairs to the Cathedral roof for an extraordinary town view.

Other major churches include La Recolection, La Merced and San Francisco. Also worth exploring are the house where Ruben Dario spent his childhood, a simple Spanish colonial structure with

some original furniture, personal belongings, photographs and memorabilia of his life, career and travels.

And quite nearby are the Museum Casa de Cultura and the Centro de Arta Fundacion Ortiz-Guardian. Spread over two structures, they house impressive collections of pre-Columbian and Spanish colonial art, two rooms with small Rembrandt etchings, and a broad collection of Central American contemporary work.

Almost 60 miles to the south lies Managua, Nicaragua's capital. It's still recovering from the devastating 1972 earthquake that flattened vast swaths of the city. Indeed, many portions remain unrebuilt, since architects have determined that these sites remain unstable.

Managua's prime visitor attractions include the remnants of the old cathedral, which can be viewed from the outside but not entered; its modern-day, futuristic-appearing replacement; the attractive and lively Ruben Dario arts center, Nicaragua's leading venue for opera, concerts and exciting Nicaraguan folk dance troupes; the former presidential palace, now the national museum, worth at least an hour's look; and the new, much more modest presidential palace (no visitors allowed).

Incidentally, Managua was founded in 1851 as a compromise solution about where to site Nicaragua's capital, since neither Granada nor Leon would let the other take the prize.

The InterContinental Metrocenter is Managua's best hotel. And its location next to a sizable shopping center complete with an appeal coffee shop, a multiplex cinema, and an El Churrasco steakhouse makes it an ideal base for an overnight visit.

IF YOU GO

Nicaragua Tourism information: www.visit-nicaragua.com. Call toll-free 888-733-6422.

Robert Selwitz is a freelance travel writer.

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The New York Times

Traveling With a Birds-Eye View

By Matthew Brown
New York Times Sports Magazine
August 30, 2007

To see nature with a dose of adrenaline, consider a zip-line canopy tour, an increasingly popular adventure activity held at tree-top heights. From Africa to Alaska, thrill-seekers harness themselves to cables and slide from one tree stand to another, often for less than 20 seconds between stops, braking with a gloved hand. An entire canopy tour, sometimes coupled with hiking or other activities, can last up to four hours. Now with global appeal, canopy tours got their commercial foothold in Costa Rica, where it's estimated that 25 percent of visitors see the rainforest hanging from zip lines. More than 1 million people have participated in the Original Canopy Tour, a Costa Rica-based outfitter that also has operations in Belize, Nicaragua, and Mexico, among other places. Injuries are rare, and prices are usually less than \$100 even in the most exotic locales, so set aside your fear of heights and view forests in a whole new way.



Steamy Surfing

Adventurers go to Nicaraguan volcano for tropical version of snowboarding

By Kristin Jackson, SEATTLE TIMES

Inside Bay Area
September 16 2007
LEON, Nicaragua

WITH A GRIN and quick pace, guide Rigo Sampson led a small group of hikers up a steep trail to the top of Cerro Negro, a stark 1,300-foot-tall volcano of black cinders, sulphur-stained rock and steaming vents.

The dark volcanic cone thrusts ominously, without a speck of vegetation, out of the lush Nicaraguan plains near the city of Leon.

In this Central American country laced with dozens of volcanoes, it's one of the most active: The fierce, small volcano erupted in the 1990s, spewing rocks, ash and lava and sending farmers fleeing from nearby villages and fields.

These days, Cerro Negro has become an offbeat destination for adventurous hikers who take a steep trail to the top and then "volcano-surf" to the bottom, leaping and sliding on their feet down a very steep side of the volcano.

(Note: Cerro Negro is about 18 miles from the city of Leon on the country's western — Pacific Ocean — coast. Recent devastation from hurricane Felix was in the country's remote northeast — Caribbean Sea — corner, an isolated and swampy jungle.)

Standing at the summit and peering down what seemed like an almost vertical slope, I was among eight hikers who took off, one by one, to surf on our feet through the small black cinders. "Lean back, lean back," hollered Sampson as we struggled at first to find our balance, sometimes sinking shin-deep in the cinders in what felt like a wacky, tropical version of snowboarding.

It had taken us an hour to hike up to the crater's barren, windswept summit; in 10 minutes of exhilarating volcano-surfing we bounded and slid back to the bottom. Sampson, a 38-year-old avid outdoorsman (and medical doctor, handy when one "surfer" tumbled and scraped her leg), zoomed down in less than five minutes.

"Volcano-surfing" isn't what most Americans associate with Nicaragua.

Instead, what lingers are images of poverty and civil war, and of the left-wing Sandinistas battling the U.S.-funded Contra insurgents in the 1980s.

Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega, who led Nicaragua through the overthrow of the Somoza military dictatorship and the war against the Contras, is back in power, elected last year as president. He's now 61 and much less of a revolutionary Marxist: Since a 1990 peace deal, impoverished Nicaragua has opened its doors to capitalism, foreign investment and tourism, spurring economic development that Ortega doesn't want to lose.

Tourism is growing fast, thanks to Nicaragua's dramatic landscape of verdant jungle, steaming volcanoes, white-sand beaches and Spanish-colonial cities dotted with centuries-old churches.

With the neighboring, and prosperous, country of Costa Rica an example of how lucrative eco-tourism can be, Nicaragua is trying hard to protect its natural beauty, creating national parks and nature reserves and struggling to curb the logging of tropical forests.

Latin Americans and Western Europeans have been visiting Nicaragua for years, lured by a more-adventurous and less-touristy experience than Costa Rica. Americans were slower to arrive, but about 60,000 now visit each year, according to the U.S. State Department.

U.S. investors are snapping up beachfront land on Pacific beaches and colonial-style homes in the cities of Granada and Leon.

It's tourism in the rough, however, outside the major cities and the sun-and-rum beach town of San Juan del Sur. Nicaragua, one of the poorer countries in the Western Hemisphere, doesn't have the efficient infrastructure of Costa Rica, its southern neighbor and Central America's tourism giant.

Roads, with the exception of the relatively well-maintained Pan-American Highway that traverses Nicaragua, can be riddled with axle-busting potholes and wandering livestock. Oxen, pigs, horses and chickens saunter among cars and the tiny tin-roofed, dirt-floored homes that edge the roads.

Electrical blackouts are common because of the desperately overloaded power grid; on my 10-day July visit, the power went out almost every other day, sometimes for hours (some hotels and restaurants have their own generators). Public transport is on jammed, rattling buses, most of them old American school buses, still the familiar bright yellow, but with religious sayings — "God is with us" — and portraits of the Virgin Mary emblazoned on the windshields. Only a foolhardy tourist would drink the tap water.

The upside? As long as you bring your patience, a sense of humor and a good flashlight, Nicaragua is an enticing place to travel, with remarkably courteous locals who aren't yet jaded by too many tourists. And it's inexpensive. A (very basic) room can be found for \$10-\$15 a night almost anywhere. A comfortable beachside cabin on the idyllic island of Ometepe is \$50. A sprawling, luxurious two-bedroom vacation house (with giant TVs, American-style kitchen, icy air conditioning and pools and gardens all around) at the Piedras y Olas resort in San Juan del Sur starts at about \$170 a night. The San Juan del Sur area is where the Americans are; glorious Pacific beaches lure surfers, retirees and property investors, with for-sale real-estate signs everywhere.

Hot and dusty after surfing down Cerro Negro volcano, we would have welcomed a cold shower. Instead, we drove deserted, rutted dirt roads, passing a few tiny farms and men on horseback, and hiked for a half-hour to something far better — a hidden, tranquil lake in the crater of another volcano.

Called Laguna de Asososca, the bathtub-warm lake sits hundreds of feet down in a crater, encircled by steep slopes cloaked in trees. There wasn't a building for miles or a sound except our laughter as we swam in the half-mile-wide lake, nicknamed Laguna del Tigre after the jaguars that once prowled its shores. Another volcano loomed above, vapor drifting from a rift high on its greenery-coated flank.

"It's beautiful. I swam about halfway across and just floated around in the middle with no one around me," said Andrea Dudek, a 40-year-old hiker from Austin, Texas.

Sampson, our guide, has been coming to the lake since he was a child. His father was born on a small farm in the area; the family sheltered there at times when fierce fighting between Sandinistas and the Somoza regime racked the streets of their hometown Leon. "I remember 1978 in Leon, the sound of bombs and heavy machine guns, barricades in every street," said Sampson, a man for all seasons who's an outdoors guide, a medical doctor and is running for the Leon City Council.

Leon is peaceful now, a city of almost 200,000 with a university, colleges and a centuries-long tradition of liberal politics, including support of the Sandinistas. It was home to Ruben Dario, a

beloved 19th-century poet who's a national hero in literary-minded Nicaragua.

Small museums and murals in Leon honor the Sandinistas and the poet Dario. But one of the true pleasures of the city is to wander the narrow streets or sit in the square in front of the ornate 18th-century cathedral, the largest in Central America, after the torrid heat of the day passes. High up in the church tower, a cassocked bell ringer tugs on a rope, clanging the massive bell for Mass. Down in the square, an ice-cream vendor slowly pedals his bicycle cart among the local families, ringing his tiny handlebar bell. Kids clamor for ice cream; their mothers sip another street vendor's product, fresh-squeezed fruit juice and ice served in a plastic bag with a straw.

As night falls over the back streets, elderly ladies drag their wooden rocking chairs out of their one-story houses onto the sidewalk. They sit, rocking and talking in the inky, warm darkness and kindly giving lost foreigners, like me and my daughter, directions to a restaurant.

As we walked back after our dinner, the ladies were still there, rocking away as a TV soap opera blared from their house and swaggering teenagers kicked a soccer ball down the street. "Did you eat well?" asked the ladies. Yes, we nodded, and chatted about where we were from, where we were going. As we left, they called out "Buen viaje" — have a good trip. That was easy in Nicaragua.

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