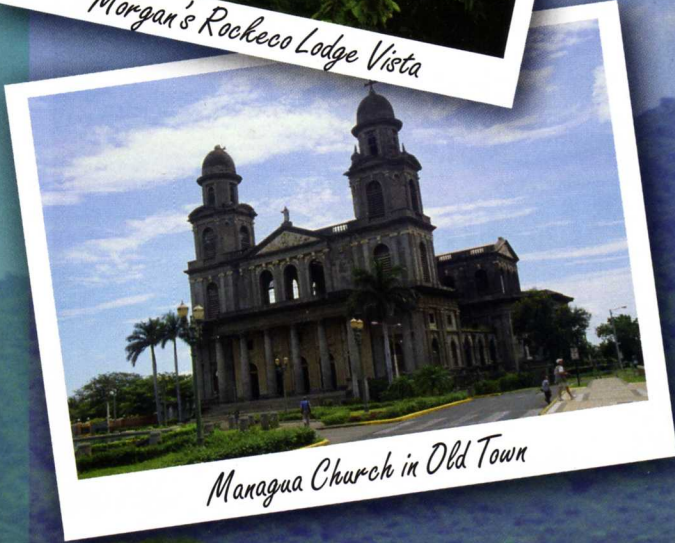


Morgan's Rockeco Lodge Vista



Managua Church in Old Town



NICARAGUA

Dispatch from Nicaragua—

While traveling cross-country on a rickety rural mountain road near Matagalpa, we repeatedly encountered youngsters (often as young as four or five) filling potholes in the road with petite shovels full of gravel from their homegrown wheel barrels. You'd see them up ahead pitching gravel and they'd jump to the side of the road as we approached, with beaming smiles and outstretched palms, hoping for a Cordoba or two (ten to twenty cents) for their efforts.

“a country
with heart”

The Nicaraguan Ministry of Tourism dubs their land “a country with heart.” And this is a case where a marketing slogan is also a truth. If the Ministry had not come up with the moniker, I certainly would have. Virtually every Nicaraguan we encountered was big-hearted, warm, and welcoming with compassionate concern.

Compared to Costa Rica, Nicaragua is in its tourism infancy, but it does have a handful of luxury hotels such as the Intercontinental and upscale inns like the Hotel Los Robles in Managua with a smattering of eco-lodges in the mountains. According to Maria Rivas, Nicaragua’s Minister of Tourism, approximately 91,000 American tourists annually visit the New York State-sized country (a paltry 250 Americans in-country on any given day).

It is a rare opportunity to visit colorful towns and villages that have not been despoiled by a dependency on tourism. Accordingly, I found myself excited to return home to tell friends and acquaintances about the sweet and friendly Nicaraguan people, the lush countryside, and the alluring 15th-century Spanish colonial cities such as Granada and Leon (respectively, the oldest and second oldest colonial cities in Central America). The historic towns and villages, colorful mercados, extraordinary restaurants, and strolling marimba-playing musicians thrive on a local and regional trade and are not dependent upon an international tourist industry.

Nicaragua is a poor country where some people earn less than five dollars a day, yet they readily smile, sing, and dance – and gladly share what they have. Most Nicaraguans are highly motivated to develop and increase their tourism industry, but the risk to doing so is the potential loss of fragile elements that make the country so enticing. Unlike my experiences in Nassau, Jamaica, and other destinations that have long ago lost their innocence and have become jaded by the temptation of the dollar, I never once encountered a person who begged for a handout. Everyone at least offered to do or sell *something* in exchange for his or her keep.

Nicaragua’s natural attractions rival the best of Costa Rica’s ecological wonders (80 percent of the country



is undeveloped). The eastern half of the country (Mosquito Coast) is the realm of unexplored rainforests and indigenous Indians while the mountainous region in the north is home to coffee plantations and enticing but very unpretentious eco-lodges such as Finca Esperanza Verde and Selva Negra near Matagalpa. Finca Esperanza, with its butterfly farm and jungle hikes through howler monkey country, was named *Smithsonian* magazine’s Best Socially Responsible Tourism Project in 2004.

Selva Negra, with its Black Forest architectural motifs, offers nature hikes to the peaks of the surrounding 5,000-foot-tall mountains, horseback trail rides, farm tours, and more. Selva Negra is a working coffee plantation and farm that has been owned by the same family since the 1890s, when they emigrated from Germany. Proprietor Eddy Kuhl exports his organic (Rainforest Alliance Certified) coffee to the United States through his daughter’s import company in Atlanta (www.javavino.com).

Known as the land of lakes and volcanoes, Nicaragua has so much to see and do that it would take two weeks just to skim the surface. There are 20 volcanoes, seven of which are active. Less than an hour from Managua is



Masaya Volcano National Park, where you can drive to the rim of the steaming and hissing Santiago Volcano. Not too far away is legendary island of Omotepe. Rising from the midst of Lake Nicaragua, its two picture perfect cones, Maderas and Concepción belch benign steam clouds into the sky.

Surfing is hot stuff down here. The San Juan del Sur region (with 37 miles of beach) on the Southern Pacific Coast, was recently touted by *Surfer Magazine* and the *New York Times* as one of Central America's premier surf spots. Popoyo Beach, with its 18 to 30-foot point break was a best-kept secret. Not anymore. The day we visited, surfer energy from around the world was palpable, as was the buzz about ascending real estate prices in this once sleepy little village.

From canopy tours in the rain forests to deep-sea fishing to superb shopping deals in the folkloric mercados, or even motoring on 100-mile-long Lake Nicaragua (the largest lake in Central America), there's something for everyone down here.

Before I departed for Nicaragua, numerous friends and acquaintances voiced their concern for my safety. "Are you sure it's safe? Isn't there guerrilla warfare going on



