

You've come a long way, baby

Once known for violence, Nicaragua is slowly becoming a tourist hot spot

By JONATHAN FINER
The Washington Post

It was pitch-black and pushing past midnight on a desolate beach when I more or less gave up on spotting a sea turtle.

My two brothers and I had braved a bumpy hour crammed in the back of an old Jeep as it rumbled across gravel and muck to La Flor, a wildlife sanctuary on Nicaragua's Pacific coast. The week before, we were told, more than 10,000 of the suitcase-size reptiles had landed in the darkness to lay eggs, the turtle equivalent of the Normandy invasion.

But for two futile hours, we had crisscrossed the shore in sweltering heat, flashlights drawn, with nothing to show for it. Even so, we had few complaints.

It was 30 degrees warmer than the brisk New England fall we'd left behind two days earlier.

Not a single structure was visible anywhere along the pristine, mile-long crescent of sand. And on a moonless night, flashes of lightning on the horizon shone bright enough for us to make out boulders jutting from the sea, washed by the gently breaking waves.

Then some of the boulders began to move.

"Is that one?" my brother Ben asked our guide, a young woman from the nearby town of San Juan del Sur. What else could it be? At the plodding pace one might expect after a journey from as far away as Alaska, the turtle ambled toward the palms that lined the beach, then stopped to dig its nest. As about a dozen other turtles made landfall all around us, the first one unloaded more than 100 eggs into the pit, buried its treasure with frenzied feet and returned to the sea, as slowly as it had come.

It was the rare sort of scene for which travelers have long ventured to better-known destinations in Mexico or, more recently, Costa Rica, Nicaragua's southern neighbor.

For centuries, most foreign visitors to Nicaragua came to meddle in its politics, including the American military advisers who worked with contra guerrillas during the 1980s civil war. But in recent years, waves of tourists have discovered that the beautiful country has treasures to offer and is working to bury its troubled past.

The Western Hemisphere's second-poorest nation, Nicaragua is at something of a crossroads.

In a pivotal presidential election last month, its voters backed Daniel Ortega, leader of the Sandinista Front, which controlled the government during

the civil war.

U.S. officials, along with foreign investors in Nicaragua, whose numbers have surged in recent years, are concerned that Ortega, who was backed by the Soviet Union during the Cold War and remains close to Cuba's Fidel Castro, will impose market-unfriendly policies.

"Tourism and foreign investment are what is driving this part of the country," said Jon Thompson, who moved to Nicaragua from California in 1998 and last year founded a bilingual magazine called *El Puente* (The Bridge) that covers the country's burgeoning industries. "There are a lot of people worried that Ortega will undo all of this, and there is no Plan B."

Those worries were dismissed in San Juan del Sur, about 15



The basics

► **GETTING AROUND:** Frequent buses ply the bumpy roads linking Managua and most major cities and towns, including San Juan del Sur. The town is three hours south of Managua. Some of the nicer beach hotels will send a car to pick you up for \$85 one way. You can also rent a car at Managua International Airport for about \$30 a day, or a four-wheel-drive SUV, which you'll need to get to certain beaches, for about \$90. A taxi from the airport costs \$50 to \$60.

► **WHERE TO STAY:** Piedras y Olas (telephone 011-505-568-2110, www.piedrasyolas.com) is a gorgeously landscaped hillside hotel overlooking the harbor in San Juan del Sur with WiFi Internet access and a poolside bar. Spacious rooms, each with a sitting porch, range from \$120 per night for two double beds to more than \$200 for a multi-room villa.

Villa Isabella (011-505-568-2568), a small, clean and charming inn in downtown San Juan del Sur, has a library and business center. Rates begin at \$50 per night double. There are several clean, spartan and all-but-indistinguishable hostels in downtown San Juan del Sur where rooms can be had for less than \$10. One of the best is the Casa el Oro Youth Hostel (one block from the beach on Church Street, 011-505-568-2415, www.casaeloro.com/casaeloro/ingles/index.html). There is also a small bungalow-style hostel directly on Madera Beach that is popular with surfers and costs only \$5 per night (no address, but stays can be arranged through local surf shops).

► **WHERE TO EAT:** La Cascada, in the main building at Piedras y Olas, has seating both on the poolside patio and under its soaring, straw-lined roof. There's a mix of Nicaraguan and American entrees, and an extensive list of wines and Scotch. Dinner runs about \$30 per person. Big Wave Dave's, one block from the beach, serves the best burgers and biggest, freshest salads, along with typical bar fare such as nachos, for less than \$5. El Timon, on the waterfront, serves a range of grilled Nicaraguan-style seafood dishes for about \$12. El Gato Negro, a charming downtown bookstore and cafe one block east of El Timon, serves hearty breakfasts and an array of grilled or wrap sandwiches for about \$5 each. The Open Air Mercado downtown has dozens of stalls selling local, short-order delicacies for a few dollars or less.

► **WHAT TO DO:** Turtle-spotting at La Flor Beach begins in August, and October through December are the primary egg-laying months. Nighttime trips can be booked from Casa el Oro for roughly \$80 for a group of six, including round-trip transportation and a local guide. Arena Caliente runs surfing day trips to Madera Beach for \$35, including a lesson, transportation and a board rental, or \$10 for round-trip transportation only. The beautifully preserved Spanish colonial city of Granada is easily accessible by bus (three hours each way, less than \$10 round trip) or taxi (2½ hours each way, \$80 round trip).

► **INFORMATION:** San Juan del Sur, www.sanjuandelsur.org.ni.

miles up the coast from La Flor, where I spent a week this fall.

The charming, Sandinista-run village has long been a point of entry for those exploring Nicaragua. Of arriving in San Juan del Sur by sea in 1886, Mark Twain wrote that "bright green hills never looked so welcome, so enchanting, so altogether lovely." Simple homes now sprawl up those hillsides, and the exquisitely manicured grounds of the Piedras y Olas (Stones and Waves), the town's first luxury hotel, overlook dozens of fishing boats that bob on its half-moon bay.

San Juan del Sur has undergone a dramatic transformation since surfers began arriving in the mid-1990s.

Initially the surfing scene was dominated by transplanted Cali-

fornians and Hawaiians who relied on local kids to help them find beaches with the best-breaking waves. But after a while, many of those kids picked up surfing themselves, and now more than half of the dozen or so surf shops in town are run entirely by locals.

Slowly, the town has been reborn as the country's hottest travel destination, popular with Nicaraguan vacationers during Easter and home to growing numbers of foreign tourists year-round.

"When I was a kid, there was basically nothing here," said Gaspar Guadamuz, 23, who works at the local branch office of American real estate company Century 21, one of several U.S. firms with a presence in town. "Land values have gone up 20 to 40 percent just in the last year, and 500 percent in five years. It started with the surfers. I remember them coming to town and wondering what were the long things they were carrying."

Riding a wave of interest

My brothers, an artist and a college student, and I wanted to give surfing a try, though we knew it wouldn't be easy. Born and raised in Vermont, the closest we'd gotten to water sports was the frozen kind: skiing and ice hockey.

A company called Arena Caliente (Hot Sand) offered lessons, board rentals and transportation to and from a renowned nearby beach called Madera for \$35.

We heard the busted muffler on its dilapidated white van coming about a minute before it arrived, just after 10 o'clock one morning. We piled into the back and went barreling through town with the windows down and the radio blaring reggaeton, a Latin American fusion of rap, rock and reggae. The driver, a 19-year-old with flowing bleach-blond locks, initially introduced himself only as Don Bigote, "Sir Mustache." (We later learned his name was Kelvin).

With the surfboards stacked on top, we cruised along back roads to a hilltop above Madera and walked the last half-mile with our boards because Kelvin was worried the Jeep wouldn't be able to make the ascent if we got hit by an afternoon rainstorm. Because of the country's decrepit infrastructure, Madera, like most of Nicaragua's best beaches, is only barely accessible over land. Most surfers comb the coast by boat to determine where the waves are breaking.

While the setting was post-

TRAVEL

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Nicaragua is at a turning point in its history

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card-perfect — the only building nearby was a beachfront bungalow, which serves tasty snacks and rents a few spartan rooms for less than \$5 a night — the surfing was a bit of a struggle.

We started small, steering well clear of the giant pipelines curling a quarter-mile out from shore. We lay flat on the boards as the waves came in, paddled furiously with our arms as they passed under us, and tried to propel ourselves to our feet in one motion, as the board started to charge toward shore with the rushing water.

Most of the time, we wiped out within seconds. Despite our failings, the instructors were tireless and good-natured, offering advice or well-deserved ribbing. “Proximo,” Kelvim kept saying with a smile. “Almost.” But as with beginning golfers who spend most of their time in the rough but go home crowing about one great drive, we agreed at the end of the day that the few times we coasted smoothly along the surface made us want to try surfing again later in the week.

An unspoiled gem

For travelers, San Juan del Sur is a cheaper alternative to Costa Rica, but it also offers a

more authentic Central American experience, locals say. “It’s hard to find Costa Ricans in some of those Costa Rican resort towns,” said Thompson, the magazine founder. “Here people look at you for who you are, rather than seeing you as just another tourist.”

But the rise of foreign tourism has led to a string of new and surprisingly tasty and affordable American-style restaurants, including Big Wave Dave’s, which boasts the best burgers in town, and the Canadian-owned Pizzeria San Juan. The town’s first English-language bookshop and cafe, El Gato Negro (The Black Cat), opened this year and maintains a vast collection of books on Nicaraguan history and culture, along with the standard set of bestsellers. A Subway restaurant opened there this fall.

There is concern that all the development could upset a delicate balance. “All the money coming into town has a positive side and a negative side,” said the Rev. Roberto Alvarez, 32, one of two priests who run the town’s large Catholic church. “It means better jobs for many people, but a lot of people are selling their land and moving into the rural areas. We have to make sure we hold on to our culture.”

Veterans catch a break at the Magic Kingdom

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Kingdom, Delacey says that an elderly woman told Delacey about her husband’s deployment during World War II. “I figured that if she could do it for three years, I could do it one.” Both Rileys are

him, even though the connection wasn’t fast enough to allow him to be heard as well as seen. Meanwhile, Delacey regularly videotaped Liam and sent footage to Taylor.

“I watched Liam growing up on film,” Taylor says.



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UNSPOILED — Visitors to San Juan del Sur come for an authentic Central American experience though U.S. influences are growing.

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