

EXPLORING NICARAGUA

Clifftop Hotel Highlights Quiet Side of San Juan

By Blake Schmidt

Nica Times Staff

SAN JUAN DEL SUR – Just on the other side of the cliff that separates San Juan Bay from the quiet Nacascolo Bay to the north, the noise from the booming southern Pacific surf town seems like a world away.

The breeze is stronger, the howler monkeys audible, and migratory birds glide by overhead. On the rare occasion, a guest at the new luxury hideaway Casa Del Soul, perched up in the hills above Nacascolo Bay, will spot a whale out in the bay below.

Guests here leave the heat and concrete behind for an experience amid rich tropical forest unique in San Juan del Sur.

“It gets almost chilly some mornings,” says owner Randy Harvey, the 54-year-old Illinois-born real estate investor who got out of the Los Angeles real estate market just before the bubble started to burst.

Having read about Nicaragua in his adventure magazines as the next hot spot for expat investors, the fast-talking world traveler has settled down here, at least somewhat. He has spent the past four years building his luxury oceanview resort from scratch. Everything was imported, from the iHome sound system in each room to the building materials.

Between photographing highly endangered silverback mountain gorillas in Uganda, hiking in the Himalayas and scuba diving the Great Barrier Reef, Harvey found enough time to manage a hotel near Acapulco, Mexico, during the 1980s and '90s.



Secluded: Casa Del Soul, left, is near San Juan del Sur yet feels worlds removed, providing stunning, uninterrupted views of the neighboring bay, right.



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He's now brought a bit of that luxury of the Mexican Pacific coast to Nicaragua, albeit on a smaller scale. His three-room hotel features a swimming pool overlooking the bay, coupled with a 400-square-foot thatched-roofed palapa lined with hammocks.

Both of the two luxury rooms have a DVD player, a balcony and stunning views

of the bay. The premiere guest room, which goes for \$119 a night, has a 270-degree view of calm Nacascolo Bay – whose untouched beaches are just a short walk along a ravine from the hotel.

Despite the occasional fisherman and the rare Nicaraguan naval exercise, the bay is empty year-round, says Harvey. It's hard to

believe that just around the cliff to the south is the renowned, boat-filled San Juan Bay, where partygoers from Managua and abroad descend for raucous partying during Semana Santa vacations and on the weekend.

Harvey says even during the Semana Santa craziness, his bay stays chilled out.

“I don't get any noise. Now the houses on the other side get all that noise. But on my side I don't get anything,” says Harvey, who schmoozes guests with stories of his worldly adventures.

The morning view makes for a great setting in which to enjoy the lodge's hearty breakfasts and an elegant backdrop for an afternoon cocktail at the bar and dining area next to the full kitchen downstairs. Rooms start at \$79. For more info, see www.casadel soul.info.



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