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Many of you asked, "Nicaragua? Why would you want to go there? It's not safe, is it?"

We flew from Detroit to Atlanta and then four more hours to Managua. We checked into the very pleasant Intercontinental Hotel and took a taxi to the "downtown waterfront." Managua, with its population of almost two million, is the only capital city that we've ever seen that doesn't really have a downtown. It was at the epicenter of a huge earthquake in 1972 and there hasn't been much appetite for rebuilding on such shaky ground. The ruined cathedral is little more than a facade, and there are several empty blocks surrounding the presidential palace. We had some ice-cold sixty cent beers at a lakefront bar before returning to our hotel and the neighboring modern shopping mall. We joined hundreds of locals for dinner at the food court.

The next morning we headed to the former capital of Leon. Our guide Robert gave us a lesson in 20th century Nicaraguan history along the way. In 1979, Robert was seven years old and the son of a coffee plantation owner. His father had 1500 acres of coffee trees and cattle. The country had been formerly run by a series of very corrupt dictators who were overthrown by the Sandinistas. The Sandinistas installed a Marxist government and took his father's land and turned it into a collective farm for twenty families. In fear of his life, Robert's father fled with his young family to the US for twelve years. Robert's uncle stayed to fight and lost nine sons and nephews over the ensuing decade. The US was none too happy with the Sandinistas and supported the Contras in their guerilla war. Most Americans only vaguely remember the arms for hostages deal with Oliver North shredding documents and his secretary Fawn Hall smuggling paperwork out of the White House in her underwear. Democracy won out in 1990, and Robert and his family gave up their green cards to return and reclaim their land. Violeta Chamorra was the new president and did a deft job of reuniting the country. She bought up and destroyed the AK-47's from both sides. After that, the struggling, impoverished government couldn't afford to pay off the new "owners" of the coffee plantation, so Robert's father spent the next fifteen years embroiled in bureaucracy, trying unsuccessfully to reclaim his land. He passed away last year. The fight is over and the land is gone. Robert's uncle who stayed still has his land, but not his sons.

The Nicaraguan tourist industry is just starting to grow. We met a few American speculators grabbing up beachfront land in hopes of capitalizing on future developments. Things have been relatively stable for several years now and some foreign investment is starting to flow in. Future stability still seems pretty high risk to us. There are twenty-five volcanoes with six currently active and scores of earthquakes each year. In 1998, Hurricane Mitch trashed the country. Nevertheless, a recent United Nations survey found Nicaragua to be the safest country in Central America. We think that they also have the most conservative drivers. I suppose that a few decades of fear of the government can instill a healthy respect for its traffic laws. There were police roadblocks everywhere where paperwork is checked at random and the driver's breath is sniffed. Road signs were sparse, and we were happy to have hired a professional driver. Our arrangements were made by Pierre at www.nica-adventures.com, and we could recommend them highly. Ask for Robert to be your guide.

We strolled very slowly around the city center in Leon as the afternoon temperature was over 100 degrees. We were greeted by an informal guide at a war monument. Every story has two sides and he showed us pictures of himself fighting in the revolution with a grenade launcher in 1979. He was very proud of what the Sandinistas had accomplished. Prior to the war, Somoza, the corrupt dictator and his buddies controlled 65% of the gross domestic product and 50% of the land. Sounds remarkably similar to what happened in Cuba, but without Castro.

One thing that corruption, socialism and instability do not bring is wealth. Nicaragua is the poorest country in Central America. Doctors make \$400 per month. The annual per capita income is \$763 and the spending on education is \$83 per student per year. Neighboring Costa Rica spends \$700 per student per year. Only 5% of Nicaraguans have cars, so traffic is light and

parking is relatively easy. The middle class has bicycles or a horse-drawn cart. The poor have rickety hand carts. An article in the paper said that they were considering requiring licenses for the horse-drawn carts. Hotels cost anywhere from \$4 to \$400, and several of our rooms cost more than a teacher makes in a month. \$4 is more than a day's pay in the Korean-owned wiring harness factory on the outskirts of Leon.

In the morning we went to climb Nicaragua's newest active volcano, Cerro Negro. The path on which we ascended was full of sharp black stones with no vegetation. The climb to the top took less than an hour and we got a whiff of the steaming cloud of sulfuric gasses emanating from the crater. We slid down on the loose sand and pebbles on the opposite side of the mountain. Some people bring old skis for an unforgettable experience.

That afternoon we rode to Ometepe Island, which is the largest Island in the immense fresh-water Lake Nicaragua. Along the way were several Auto Motels. You pull into a carport and an attendant rushes out to pull the curtains to hide your car for the duration of your stay. Three hours is standard. The unfortunate side effect seems to be a high rate of out-of-wedlock childbirth. Two of our three guides were unwed fathers.

We pushed our way onto the rickety third-world ferry for the one-hour ride to Ometepe Island. Ometepe Island is basically two large volcanoes in a figure-8 shape. We were up at four the next morning for the tough climb up Concepcion, a 5400 foot active volcano. We made good time and reached the summit in less than four hours. We were in a cloud and the wind was over forty miles per hour, so we did not linger for long at the summit. It used to be a popular place to sacrifice virgins, but we forgot to bring one. The loose rocks and boulders made the descent very difficult and slippery. It took longer than the climb. Rich slipped twice and sacrificed a small amount of blood to appease the mountain. We were whipped when we got back. The next day we climbed to a lookout on the relatively dormant Maderas Volcano. We watched some local TV on the ferry on the way back to the mainland. They have a show called "Laura". It's sort of like Jerry Springer, except they hold the arms of the villains behind their backs and let the victims get in a few good whacks before they separate them.

We spent two nights in Granada. Granada is the oldest city in the North American continent. It has Spanish colonial style, and we enjoyed our balcony and its view of the cathedral and main square. Our visit coincided with Semana Santa or Easter Week. At all hours, there were processions of people carry religious statuary through the streets. We took a couple of day trips to nearby volcanoes and hiked up to and around the craters.

Our last stop was at a luxury "eco-resort" on the Pacific coast. We had a screened bungalow on a steep hillside. We were awakened by monkeys swinging in the trees outside our windows and scurrying four-foot iguanas in our courtyard. There were countless species of colorful tropical birds. The beach and pool were a wonderful way to relax and celebrate the end of a fine adventure. This was probably too "soft" for Rich and Cheryll. We were getting a little stir-crazy. Well on our way into our happy-hour, we named the lizard on our deck "Lizzie" and the monkey hanging by its tail in our trees "Molly."

We found the country to be safe and pleasant, albeit hot with temperatures well into the 90's every day. The people seemed happy and well-fed, although most women seemed to be suffering the effects of stuffing themselves into pants that are three sizes too small. We were healthy throughout the trip. Our high level of precautions included walking out of a couple of otherwise nice restaurants after discovering that they didn't have running water.

On our way to the airport, we stopped at Managua's "Peace Park." This is where the arms from the past civil war are buried in concrete. There's an old tank with a palm growing out of the turret and hundreds of rifles with just the muzzles sticking out of their concrete tombs. The park was dilapidated and deserted. The war is over, but most everyone has gotten over it, and there was not much interest in the reminders. The Nicaraguans are getting on with their lives. They

maintain their love of country despite the poverty, hurricanes, volcanoes and earthquakes. It made our concerns about the current difficulties at General Motors seem trivial.

Our employment concerns were realized when we returned home. Cheryll's paycheck was in the mail. Active GM salaried employees receive them electronically. Cheryll is now planning to use part of her early retirement to plan even more trips.

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