

Nicaragua: Undiscovered Paradise



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While **Nicaragua** is still refining its tourism infrastructure and service, it is poised to re-introduce itself and share its natural treasures with the world.

Recovering from years of civil war and a major earthquake in 1972 that caused widespread damage in Managua, Nicaragua has seen its share of toil. Now, however, with concerted help from the government and private sectors, the country is emerging as an affordable and diverse tourist destination. In fact, many would call this Central American destination and undiscovered vacation paradise.

Sandwiched between Honduras to the north and Costa Rica to the south, Nicaragua is bordered by two oceans: the Pacific to the west and Caribbean to the east. With more than 6 million inhabitants, it is the largest country in the Central American Isthmus and easily accessible from most major airports.

This was my first visit and **American Airlines** offers convenient flights that connect through Miami for a short two-hour hop to the capital, Managua. Americans flying into the country don't need a visa but do need to pay \$10 for a tourist card.

Tourism has been on the increase in recent years and in 2010, Nicaragua received over one million foreign visitors. It's not hard to see why. With an abundance of sunshine and natural beauty, there are many areas to see and explore that offer travelers an alternative to the usual high-priced destinations.

By far, the most popular city for visitors is Granada, located on the shores of Lake Nicaragua, the 19th largest lake in the world. This locale was founded in 1524 by Francisco Hernandez de Cordoba, and the country's currency is named in his honor.

Remnants of this colonial city are clearly seen in the colorful homes (many with flower-laden interior courts) and storefronts that radiate out from the cathedral and central park area. At night and especially on weekends, these areas as well as those along the popular Calle la Calzada come alive with activity as tourists enjoy eating at the many sidewalk cafes and restaurants, strolling or listening to local music.

Finding hidden gems and local flavor is what gets me excited about travel as you never know what you might find around each corner or bend in the road. One such spot in Granada is Dona Elba Cigars on Calle Real Xalteva #515. After I entered through the sky blue façade, owner Silvio Reyes greeted me and showed me around his cigar factory complete with plants, a drying room and his simple work station where he rolls some of the world's finest cigars. He invited me to sample one while sitting in an oversized rattan rocker wafting in the fragrant tobacco and taking in some of the best culture in Nicaragua.

After spending some time in Granada, I headed back to the airport and a small plane took me to the south of the country to Rio San Juan, a river discovered by the Spanish conquistadors in 1525. After boarding a high-speed riverboat in the town of San Carlos, I was whisked past wetlands and an abundance of birds lounging on the banks to the small town of El Castillo.

Stepping off the boat in El Castillo is truly like going back in time and it reminded me of a Twilight Zone episode where the guy gets off the train to a peaceful throwback-in-time called Willoughby. Here, as in El Castillo, people are friendly, kids roam the narrow streets saying hello and friends and family congregate in doorways or in restaurants overlooking the river to share a meal. A major tarpon fishing event is held here each year.

Located prominently on a hill is the Fortress of Immaculate Conception (El Morro). These types of fortifications were built by the Spanish to defend against raiding pirates and other threats. You can tour the fort today (small fee to enter) and the top offers a commanding view of the Rio San Juan and the colorful red tin rooftops of the many homes in the area.

Most of the food that I tried while in Nicaragua consisted of staples like rice and beans, fried plantains and usually an offer of fish, beef or chicken. In the outlying areas, you can get a complete meal such as steak with all the trimmings for less than \$15. They also have a national drink called pinol made from roasted corn, cocoa beans and a little cinnamon. They grind the ingredients to a powder and mix in a little water and sugar. Que bueno!

There are many other areas to explore, of course, including Ometepe Island. Spending time here is worth the effort as one can visit its volcanoes, Concepcion and Maderas, or the many beaches that dot the coastline.

Things to know before you go:

1. Bring a hat, sunscreen, insect repellent, comfortable shoes, and any medications.
2. They use 110 volt current. (No need for converters from the U.S.)
3. Most places accept U.S. dollars although your change will be in local currency.
4. 1 American dollar = 22.34 córdobas (at time of writing).
5. 23 córdobas buys you a Coke, a bottle of water or a pack of gum.
6. Water quality in many hotels may be safe but to be cautious, use bottled.
7. Carry your passport with you. (Make copies in case of loss.)
8. Bring a camera with extra batteries. You will be glad you did.