

Volcano Boarding on Cerro Negro

Associate Editor Skye Mayring tries volcano boarding down Nicaragua's Cerro Negro

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Volcano boarding down Cerro Negro involves a scenic and challenging 1½-hour hike. // © 2011 Skye Mayring

I've jumped out of a perfectly good airplane several times and bungee jumped twice but, volcano boarding down Nicaragua's Cerro Negro was, by far, the scariest thing I've ever done. When I first watched footage of volcano boarding, I instinctively added it to my ever-growing must-do list, which meant that I had to make my way to Nicaragua — the Central American country that started the craze — as soon as possible (primarily, so that I wouldn't be able to talk myself out of it).

Volcano boarding is a sport similar to sand boarding but, rather than riding down a sand dune, thrill-seekers in Nicaragua strap on modified snowboards and slide down the rocky side of an active volcano. Cerro Negro, named for its dark black color, could erupt at any time, which makes this emerging sport all the more daring.

"We don't know when the volcano will erupt," said my guide, Wilbur, who has been operating volcano tours over the last five years with Va Pues Tours. "We actually expected it to erupt two years ago."

Wilbur imparted this information to our group during the hour-long drive from our hotel in Leon to the base of the volcano. He also broke the news to us that we would be hiking up to the 2,200-foot summit of Cerro Negro, for about an hour and a half, and would be responsible for hauling our own boards, weighing roughly 15 pounds each, the entire way. Everyone in our group looked a bit shocked — obviously, we hadn't done our homework on the excursion, and some of us felt that we were far too out of shape for such an athletic feat.

One person in our group decided to slide down on a less cumbersome and lighter wooden "sled" provided by the tour operator while another chose to simply walk down the volcano after

she reached the top — both perfectly acceptable and quite common ways for first-time visitors. Since I came to Nicaragua with a purpose, I had to stick to the plan. You can imagine my surprise when I realized that volcano boarding itself isn't the most frightening part of the excursion.

Because we were a group of journalists with a very packed schedule, we began our journey in the late afternoon, several hours later than typical volcano tours would depart. This meant that we had to race against time to arrive at the top of the volcano before sunset, so that we wouldn't be boarding in pitch-black darkness.

Aspects of the hike were truly remarkable from the expansive views of the Pacific Ocean and Nicaragua's tallest volcano, San Cristobal, to Cerro Negro's barren moonscape and the pungent sulfur smell permeating from its crater — an ever-present reminder of the 1,300-degree magma churning below.

The fear began to brew when we reached a steep section, punctuated with small and loosely arranged volcanic rocks. Every carefully placed step would agitate the pile of rocks beneath it, hurling pebbles and dirt downward like an avalanche. We all breathed a collective sigh of relief after navigating this hairy stretch of the trail, but the hike was about to get even more challenging.

Wilbur warned us that we were approaching the windy side of the volcano and that, if the gusts of wind were too strong, we should crouch down and wait for it to die down. We spent a good amount of time huddled up and, at times, the wind was so strong, it would swing our boards to one side, throwing us off balance and giving us a slight tug closer to the steep edge of the trail.

We reached the top as the sun began to set, and Wilbur instructed us about our equipment and techniques for boarding, sledding or walking down the face of the volcano. (Thankfully, this side of Cerro Negro wasn't windy at all.) As an experienced snowboarder, I expected to execute a few strategic carves to slow myself down along the way, but those skills weren't of use here.

"This is nothing like snowboarding," informed our guide. "You will not be making any turns whatsoever. The only way down is straight down."

Boarding down, I found, was actually a piece of cake. Loose rocks and dirt work together to slow the pace, and there was really no need for training or a trial run as the only real skill required of me was shifting my weight to my back leg. Going faster took a little more agility. Wearing the thick leather gloves provided, I bent down and used both hands like paddles on either side of the board, gaining just a little more momentum with each push.

Everyone made it to the bottom safely and, perhaps, with a sense of achievement.

We were now among the few that can say they've boarded down an active volcano at nightfall.

When we hopped back into the van, our driver had a special treat for us: He blasted Queen's stadium rock song, "We Are the Champions" from the speakers, singing all the words to us in a congratulatory manner. We giggled and joined in the chorus. We then made a pit stop for a La Victoria beer — we had, after all, most certainly earned it.