

HOTELS

Mukul: Nicaragua's Amazing New Beach Resort

BY JULIAN RUBINSTEIN | POSTED JANUARY 11, 2014 AT 10:00AM EST



Nicaragua's Mukul resort offers miles of beach near the fishing and surfing village Gigante. Photo © Ken Koehn

Carlos Pellas, the richest man in Nicaragua, has created a spare-no-expense beach resort that's a relative bargain. Will it put this country on the world travel map? Writer Julian Rubinstein heads there to find out. But first—a serious rum detour.

Nicaragua has the shape of an ancient teakettle, and upon arriving at its inner handle, the capital Managua, I began having a vision of a beverage—only it wasn't tea. Displayed on the side of the customs booth, plastered on roadside billboards and now staring at me from the wall of the Managua bar into which I'd stumbled was a poster showing a generous pour of rum from the Nicaraguan distiller Flor de Caña.

It seemed an odd coincidence, as I'd booked my trip with the notion of visiting a place a few hours south on the Pacific coast, a luxurious new resort called Mukul, recently opened by the same family that owns Flor de Caña. As disco music thumped in the distance, I seated myself at a table at the outdoor bar. A waiter informed me he knew what I needed, and returned with a Toña, the national lager, which, frankly, was great. But I was still thinking about the rum. So in the morning, despite a forecast of driving rain and my plans to get to Mukul that afternoon, I phoned the airport and requested a direct helicopter flight to the Flor de Caña distillery.

An hour later, a former military pilot in an ironed white shirt with epaulets met me on the concourse and explained we were going 100 miles north, nowhere near the ocean, or Mukul. The sky was cloudless; below, wild green fields gleamed and, to our right, the immense blue Lago de Nicaragua—so wide it takes 15 hours to cross in a ferry—was outlined by purple volcanoes. We couldn't land at the distillery, my pilot announced in Spanish over my headset, but he knew a landing pad in the adjacent town, Chichigalpa, which was, he added, "the national capital of rum and sugar."

I wouldn't have taken the place to be the capital of anything. We touched down in a mud field and drove through ramshackle streets that were not without their ramshackle charm: broken trucks and people going about their lives despite what the world had delivered. On the other side of town, a wooden gate parted and I entered what could pass for an empty Hollywood studio lot: palm trees and soundstage-like hangars, all viewed from my golf cart.

Flor de Caña has been slowly gaining international recognition for decades, partly because of its unique aging process in oak barrels, which can take up to 25 years. Other than water, the only ingredient in the rum is pure sugar cane, which comes from a massive sugar plant a few minutes away. Like Flor de Caña, the plant is owned by the Pellas family, which emigrated from Italy in 1875 and capitalized on a good idea. Carlos Pellas, at 61 the fifth generation of Pellas in the country, now presides over a \$5 billion family business, making him reportedly the richest man in Nicaragua.

Inside the open-air production facility, bottles clinked past on conveyor belts and a man in a white hard hat and jeans appeared lost. It was Tomas Cano, the general manager, who was born in Chichigalpa. A chemical engineer and former professor, he started working at the plant 27 years ago during the civil war that claimed six of his family members. Except for special occasions, he doesn't drink—"I feel like I eat the rum every day," he said—but he walked with me past six towering white silos, each containing a million gallons of molasses. After five rounds of distillation, the molasses is mixed with water and poured into oak barrels. Not just any barrels, but American white oak barrels purchased from Kentucky whiskey distilleries that use them for one year, precisely the time needed to develop a specialized enzyme responsible for turning molasses into rum. We stopped at the wood shop, where workers stripped each oak barrel then put it back together using plantain fiber as a natural sealant. "The color, aroma, taste—everything comes from the wood," Cano said.

At last, I arrived at a cool, cellar-like room, where five goblets awaited me, each with a pour of Flor de Caña's varieties. Ranging from four to 25 years in oak, each rum had its own taste. The seven-year Gran Reserva had a slight spice; the 18-year Centenario was caramelly and smooth with a sweet aroma Cano called *el impuestos de los angeles*, or "the tax of the angels," the offering expected by the immortals above in exchange for the privilege of making the stuff.

After lunch, I found my pilot waiting in the mud field and, clouds to the south, we lifted off toward the Pacific, turning left at the coast and zooming along just 200 feet above kids waving to us from the surf and chickens racing for cover in farm shacks. As Costa Rica's mountains became visible in the distance, we rose higher, over steep green hills, and landed on a painted cement helicopter pad.

By car, I passed through another automated gate and plunged into a rotary. Walking through a sun-drenched courtyard, I approached a halo-like chandelier made from locally woven baskets hanging in a thatched bamboo palapa, supported by 50-foot tree stanchions. Wide cushioned chairs looked out at an infinity pool and, beyond it, the rolling Pacific. If Pellas wasn't here, he'd better have a good excuse. I myself was planning to stay a while.

My personal butler, Lewis, wearing a pressed all-white suit, introduced himself; he was on call to take me to the spa, the golf course, make my dinner reservations, anything I wanted. Mukul was both gigantic—encompassing 1,700 acres of land and miles of beaches—and boutiquey, with only 37 rooms and suites. Mine was a stand-alone stucco villa with a vaulted ceiling, outdoor shower, garden with hammock and my own pool, about 20 steps from the beach. It also came with Carlos Pellas, on the television. A garrulous man with a ruddy complexion and a beard, he was enthusiastically recalling in Spanish a story of carefully relocating the region's biggest tree while building Mukul. His vision for the \$250 million project was simple: "Put our country on the world tourism map."

Had he? The question overwhelmed me and I fell asleep on a stretch of beach, empty as far as my eye could see. When I awoke, I walked back to the lobby and ended up on an ocean-view terrace with a menu in my hand. Mukul's two restaurants serve what chef Cupertino Ortiz is calling "Cocina Nikul"—where Nicaraguan meets Mukul—with both global (Mexican, French, Italian) and local influences. A traditional Nicaraguan squash-and-tomato soup was light and smooth, dotted with cheese dumplings the consistency of polenta. I was eating a fresh, citrusy salad of jumbo shrimp and avocado when Ortiz appeared.

A round-shouldered, energetic man of 36, Ortiz told me he'd been frustrated in the Caribbean by the local fishermen's lack of industriousness; their meager output left Ortiz having to buy frozen fish. "I was suffering," he said. The first thing he did upon arriving at Mukul was drive around to nearby villages, seeking the best fishermen.

Ortiz invited me to make his daily rounds and we hopped into a car, heading first to the nearby field where he had planted acres of produce. "Look at this," he said, walking through gardens of peppers, heirloom tomatoes, plantains and papaya. "I'm very lucky."

We continued down a dirt road to Gigante, or "Giant," an odd name for a village consisting of a few surf shacks, a hostel and two open-air chow halls serving overly sweet coffee. Down a bumpy road, a collection of local fishermen stood next to tiny canoe-like boats lined in rows on the beach. Ortiz's man, Cundo, who looked 25, climbed into his boat and opened a giant cooler filled with the fish he'd caught two hours ago, using nets set three miles offshore: foot-long sea bream, red and yellowtail snappers, mahimahi, lobsters that required him to dive 50 meters deep to snatch, and a Loch Ness monster-like eel, headless. "It was biting," Cundo explained. Ortiz examined each fish and then paid Cundo.

A few hours later, as I sat in a meditative glow from a shiatsu spa treatment, I watched as those familiar fish appeared on the dinner table: First came a succulent raw eel *tataki* with black sesame seeds, dragonfruit jelly, avocado and cured onions. A delicious black olive-crusting grilled sea bream over yellow squash fondue followed, alongside steamed yucca with garlic and parsley, tomato confit and dragonfruit foam. I ordered the 18-year Flor de Caña Centenario, on the rocks, and while sipping it in the relaxing ocean breeze, I thought about Carlos Pellas and his grand ambition. In that moment, it felt like he'd succeeded.

Nicaragua Luxe

The new Mukul resort is Nicaragua's most luxurious property. The \$550 rate for doubles includes breakfast, lunch and drinks (including aged rum from the owner's famous distillery, Flor de Caña). The thatched-roof spa offers Ayurvedic treatments or Indonesian barefoot massage. The staff will arrange day trips, including a helicopter ride to Flor de Caña. mukulresort.com

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Julian Rubinstein wrote *Ballad of the Whiskey Robber*. *His work has appeared in the New Yorker, the New York Times Magazine and Travel + Leisure.*

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