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Taking the Kids – to a new eco hotspot, Nicaragua

By Eileen Ogintz / Published January 10, 2014 / FoxNews.com



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I'm talking to my daughter.

Even better, she doesn't have that annoyed don't-nag-me-mom tone in her voice. It's one of those vacation afternoons I wish would last forever -- sunny skies, no place to be, no arguing and best of all, my youngest daughter all to myself.

That hasn't happened in the months since Melanie graduated from college. In fact, this is the first talk (beyond Skype) we've had since she came to [Nicaragua](#) for an internship -- building an organic garden at [Morgan's Rock](#), the eco resort that launched this country as an eco destination a decade ago. (More about that in another column.)

After years of Taking the Kids, on this trip we've followed our 22-year-old daughter Melanie here to Nicaragua, which many say is fast becoming the next eco tourist's must-see destination, offering volcanoes, cloud forests, rain forests, pristine beaches and a growing number of eco resorts like [Jicaro Island Ecological](#) with just nine casitas on a private island, ideal for a visit with older kids, as long as they're over 12, and kid-friendly Morgan's Rock, situated on one of the most beautiful beaches I've ever seen. (Think treetop casitas with swinging hammocks on the decks that kids told me made them feel like they were staying in a treehouse.)

Nicaragua, considered the safest country in Central America, is, many say, where Costa Rica was two decades ago -- pristine, with lots of beautiful beaches, friendly people and plenty of adventures to be had exploring volcanoes, (sandboard down the Cerro Negro -- after you climb to the top), zip-lining, fishing, bird-watching (there are more than 750 species, including Nicaragua's national bird, the "Turquoise-browed Motmot" (Guardabarranco in Spanish), and surfing (Sleepy San Juan del Sur is famous for its 37-mile stretch of beaches.)

I found Lonely Planet's Nicaragua guide very useful in our planning. Nicaragua, we learned, is known as the country of lakes and volcanoes because of its chain of 50 volcanoes. One morning, we took a four-wheel drive up to the top the Mombacho Volcano -- some 3,600 feet (some opt to hike the entire way) and walked around the crater -- some 700 steps, more uphill than down with a guide pointing out a howler monkey in the tree, a two-toed sloth and all varieties of flowers and plants -- orchids, birds of paradise, poisonous plants and others used to cure headaches and tooth pain. We peered into steaming fumaroles and a tiny canyon and then stopped at a coffee plantation on the road down.

Nicaragua, is a little rough around the edges -- hardly anyone speaks English, though U.S. dollars are accepted everywhere, and you won't find any major beachfront resorts. You'll wish some of the roads were better. Service can be slow. That just makes it all more of an adventure. (Read my [trip diaries](#) from our Nicaraguan adventure.)

"Nicaragua. It's still virgin, less touristy and much less expensive than Costa Rica," offered Remo Pere, the Swiss manager of the 36-room [Hotel Colonial](#) that was built in the style of traditional houses here in the oldest colonial city in the new world about an hour's drive from Managua where we landed.

Rooms at Pere's hotel -- considered one of the best in the city -- start at less than \$100 a night.

Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega says he wants to use tourism to combat poverty and today tourism is the country's second largest industry, with the country now welcoming more than a million tourists annually. This is a far cry from the 1980s during the Nicaraguan Revolution when Nicaragua was considered a place to stay away from with locals leaving for the United States and Costa Rica.

On this sunny day, after touring Granada with its picturesque buildings and square and stonewalled street where bulls race down to Lake Nicaragua during the famous August festival, we're on a floating dock in Lake Nicaragua, the second-largest lake in Latin America, at Jicaro Island Ecological, a short boat ride offshore from the colonial city of Granada. Many famous sites -- the Masaya Craft Markets, the Mombacho Volcano -- are just a short distance away. "I can't think of another place like this that is so remote and so easy to see so much," said Neil Agran, visiting with his wife Erica from Chicago.

Jicaro's owner, Karen Emanuel, a successful London executive, came to Nicaragua to Morgan's Rock on vacation in 2006 and went home with an island and an idea to build an eco lodge with the little luxuries she appreciated on vacation -- good food, a good bar, bathrobes, yoga classes -- and just as important, the sustainable practices she believed in, from locally sourced food to supporting a local school and those who create handicrafts.

"The few things that aren't local are the yoga mats and the tea, which is from England," Emanuel says.

It's been a while since I've seen so many things on a menu I want to eat -- gazpacho or pulled chicken sandwich for lunch? Chimichurri steak, fresh fish with orange sauce or chicken cooked with local rum for dinner. There are freshly fried plantain chips; the salads with local organic cheese.

Forty percent of people in Nicaragua live in poverty, and Emanuel hopes she is doing her part, not only by employing her 30-person staff and supporting local farmers but also doing what she can to change people's perceptions about this country.

When she first told friends about Nicaragua, Emanuel said, "People would say they thought it was dangerous...Now people say, "I've always wanted to go there."

I'm certainly glad we did, following the kids for a change.

Eileen Ogintz is a nationally syndicated columnist and creator of [TakingtheKids.com](#). Her new Kids Guide to LA is available online and from major booksellers, along with the Kids Guides to NYC, Washington, DC, Orlando and coming in December, Chicago.

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