

New Access to a Nicaraguan Island

By [DAVE SEMINARA](#)

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Dave Seminara The runway and tower at the airport on Ometepe.

The government of Nicaragua is betting that a new \$10 million airport will boost tourism on Ometepe Island, a Unesco Biosphere Reserve known for its towering twin volcanoes.

When Mark Twain [chugged by](#) the twin peaks, one active, one dormant, on a steamboat journey across Lake Nicaragua in 1866, he marveled that they looked like two “magnificent pyramids.”

But the ship bypassed Ometepe, and Twain never set foot on the island. Fifty years later, the Panama Canal opened, making the old shortcut through the lake to get from the Pacific to the Caribbean Sea obsolete.

The island has had ferry service for decades, but it has never been a particularly convenient place to get to. Most travelers arrive via a one-hour ferry ride that leaves from San Jorge, a port town about a 90-minute drive from Managua, or a half-hour from San Juan del Sur, a popular beach town on the Pacific. (There is also a much more infrequent ferry that departs from Granada.)

Nicaragua’s national carrier, [La Costeña](#), has begun flying round trip to Ometepe on Thursdays and Sundays on puddle jumpers that seat 12 passengers, with fares starting at \$50 each way.

The airport, essentially a 1,500-meter airstrip with a small customs building, was due to open more than a year ago, and hopes that other regional airlines like Taca and Nature Air would offer service to the island haven't materialized.

La Prensa, a Nicaraguan newspaper, [reported in 2012](#) that a local family sued the government after it expropriated 21 acres of their land to build the airport at a price they claimed was below market value.

Nicaragua's Constitutional Court ruled in the government's favor, allowing construction of the airport to proceed. A spokesperson at the Nicaraguan Embassy in Washington would not confirm if the delay was connected to the land dispute.

The reality television program "Survivor" filmed its "Redemption Island" season on Ometepe in 2011 and in recent years it has become an increasingly popular destination for backpackers and hikers who come to hike up the 5,100-foot Concepción and 4,500-foot Maderas volcanoes.

As in any emerging destination, there are concerns about how Ometepe can develop its tourist infrastructure and maintain its natural beauty and low-key charm. Limited flight service from Managua is unlikely to have much of an immediate impact on Ometepe's reputation as a lush, natural haven for kayaking, hiking and bird-watching.

Sam Bauer, a real estate agent from Portland, Ore., who has lived on Ometepe for seven years, said that last winter was the best ever for the island's tourism industry. But he insisted that most residents aren't worried about the pace of development.

"This isn't Costa Rica," he said. "Nothing happens very fast here. There are a few grouches who don't want any changes, but most of us want to see some new faces here."