Mark Twain’s 1866 journey inspires a modern-day writer

Scampering across Nicaragua

Mark Twain bypassed Ometepe Island and the volcano Concepcion in his journey across Nicaragua Lake. Today the ferry stops on the island.
No ‘unpeopled paradise,’ but Nicaragua retains its charm

BY JULIAN SMITH
Special to The Washington Post

In the early morning, San Juan del Sur still looks like a sleepy fishing village. Green hills swell above a crescent bay where fishing boats bob at anchor. On the beach, two men are busy untangling a nylon net.

The rising sun reveals another side of this Nicaraguan town. I walk down the main drag, past surf shops, cafes, clothing boutiques and tanned, bored-looking foreigners. Shiny motorcycles and beach cruiser bicycles start to roll down clean-swept streets.

On the hillsides, luxury hotels and gated commu-

nities overlook the beach, where a boat bristling with surfboards is pulling out into the water.

Things have improved in the nearly century and a half since Mark Twain arrived here by steamship, forced to spend an extra night on board because of a cholera epidemic onboard.

I’ve arrived 100 years after the great American writer’s death to retrace one of his lesser-known journeys. In 1866, Twain crossed Nicaragua on his way from California to New York. He was fresh off his first lecture tour, and his writing career was just starting to take off. He was still bask ing in the praise that his story “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of

NICARAGUA CONTINUED ON F4

Calaveras County” had earned the previous year.

He didn’t know what the future held, but at 31, he had high hopes.

I want to see how much this part of Nicaragua has changed since he was here. Even more, since I have a first book of my own coming out soon, I want to share his excitement — and perhaps some of his good fortune.

I’ve brought along Twain’s account of the trip, a series of letters published in the San Francisco Alta California newspaper.

At the time of his crossing, Nicaragua was torn by civil war. The route he followed was a trail of pirates, forty-niners and counterrevolutionaries, the path of a planned transoceanic canal that never came into being — but probably should have.

Today, the route he took runs through a country not in revolution, but in evolution. Tourism is growing faster in Nicaragua than anywhere else in Central America; safety-wise, it’s second only to its tourist-magnet neighbor, Costa Rica.

Heading lakeward

Twain arrived in San Juan del Sur, on the west coast of Nicaragua, on Dec. 29, 1866, to find “a few tumble-down frame shanties — they call them hotels — nestling among green verdure.” Shirtless locals packing two-foot Bowie knives milled around the landing. Mules, horses and “ambulances,” or wagons, waited to carry the 400-odd passengers across the 12-mile isthmus to Lake Nicaragua, the largest lake in Central America.

From there they would descend the San Juan River to the Caribbean Sea and board another steamer for New York, saving weeks, if not months, off a cross-country journey.

Because of its dazzling seaside settings and relatively affordable — by gringo standards — real estate, San Juan del Sur has recently become one of Nicaragua’s most popular destinations.

The country’s southern Pacific beaches were also one of the main draws for the town’s most recent arrivals: the cast and crew of “Survivor: Nicaragua,” which started filming nearby in June.

The show is expected to infuse more than $6 million into the local economy, including work for 200 locals.
A poison dart frog in the forests along the lower San Juan River.

A poison dart frog is present in the forests along the lower San Juan River.

**DETAILS**

**GETTING THERE**
Continental has one-stop flights from Dulles to Managua, with fares starting at $688 round trip.

**WHERE TO STAY**
Hotel Villa Paraiso
San Jose Del Norte
Ometepe Island
011-505-2583-9019
vcohotel@yahoo.com
Clean rooms with mosquito nets for $15.

**WHAT TO DO**
Ometepe Guanite Union
Mayogayola, Ometepe Island
011-505-927-7714
www.OMETEPE.COM
A cooperative of independent local tour guides, most of whom speak English. Half-day tours are $25-$55 per person. 

**END OF THE ROAD**
Another three hours brings me to San Juan del Norte, a small, quiet town near the mouth of the river. It started a few miles away as the busy British port of Greytown, the southern terminus of Twain's route.

He arrived on New Year's Eve to find Antigua, Guatamala, Spaniards, Germans, English, Jamaicans and Native Missions. Red dirt costs a dollar a night.

It wasn't much to look at, but the local government was greatly enhanced, I said I was going to rendereous, by the cluster of fancy steamboats at the waterfront.

After being repeatedly flattened by hurricanes, the river, the country and the US Navy, Greytown was renamed. (It was officially re-named San Juan de Nicaragua in 1905, but locals still call it Greytown). All that remained of the original settlement was a cementery, where time and the jungle are slowly digesting 150-year-old headstones. The old masonry is now a grass-covered landing strip.

The maze of lanes nearby is half a dozen half-hidden Sandy Beaches, and the 100-foot tower of a decommissioned Amorose, rusting into art. Then the brawly waves of the Caribbean.

Twain embarked for New York on the first day of 1867, bound for Garcia. That year he published his "Climbing and Conquering" for which the American government was the publisher.

I find a seat on a panga, one of the long, narrow motorized canoes that serve as public buses on the river. I'm wedged between a pair of nuns and a man in the blue uniform of the national police, whose presence I trust to ward off disaster and hijacking.

We put down the collected flow, past farmhouses on stilts and trees full of corncobs drying stubby wings in the sun. Twain's description of the scene still holds true. The shadowed canoes and figures of architecture, wrought in the shining sun, and, together in rockless, enchanting confusion.

Fortress by the river

It takes three hours to reach El Castillo, a small town next to one of the biggest sets of rapids on the river. They're more ripples than white water, but they are big enough to slow down pirates and enemy ships on their way to sack Panama. In fact, the colonial authorities built El Castillo de la Inmaculada Concepcion on a hilltop above town in 1675.

I trudge up to the fort, whose restored ruins are still imposing, with massive walls of dark stone and a chapel as large as the barrack.

According to the museum, in 1672, the 19-year-old daughter of a London merchant over when her father was wounded and successfully repelled a British fleet, all while in her nightgown. A young Horatio Nelson captured the fort 19 years later.

I need a boat after the walk, so I find a coffee shop on the main plaza. The owner, 29-year-old Yamil Oseguera Bustos, peeks out from behind the perfect cappuccino and tells me about his struggle to open Boricua Coffee.

As an openly gay man, he faced hostility and harassment from police and residents, he told. He hired a lawyer and won what turned out to be a landmark case for gay rights in the country.

El Castillo is cute and carless - the only access is by boat and I may be the only tourist there.

Twain's group had to disembark, walk around the rapids and then board a large ship. Police continued downstream. They tied up for the night 30 miles from the coast where they lived. "Those who had wanted to smoke me out, those who had chased me in their boats," Twain wrote.

**END OF THE ROAD**

AWARDS 1997-1998

Smith is the author of "Crossing the Heart of Africa," coming in December from Harper Perennial.

Transportation:

travel@wsj.com