Travel and Adventure:Nicaragua - A hidden gem in Central America tempts tourists

by Richard Carroll

GRANADA, Nicaragua - Tucked away in the tropics of Central America, Nicaragua is suggestive of a gifted diva patiently waiting offstage to be discovered by the world, like a dazzling diamond in the rough, simply overlooked by the masses, sometimes trampled on, but surviving with pride and honor.

Overshadowed by Costa Rica, Honduras, Panama and Guatemala, all high-profile and impressive neighbors, Nicaragua has been stranded in time, lost amid the jumble of North and Central America tourism, mercifully devoid of transparent 21st century commercialism, remaining throughout the years authentic, unassuming and unpretentious.

The gentle, peace-loving Nicas, as they are affectionately called, have tolerantly lived their lives, tending their crops, fishing the Caribbean and mighty Pacific, producing some of the planet's best coffee in the central highlands and a range of unique handicrafts, along with fine cigars for the discriminating, but always looking to the future, eager to share their uncrowded land with the world.

Celebrated as a safe country, and now favorably suggested as a retirement choice for Americans, Nicaragua, bursting with opportunity, is on the move with a big, splashy smile and a fervent guitar strum heard across the land. The days of civil discord are long gone; the election, an entertaining but important flag-waving festivity, was the essence of a democratic system, strongly urging this proud country to showcase the virtually undiscovered gemstones that lay waiting for those who wish to partake.

The largest country in Central America - about the size of New York state, but without the jostle and shove - has the largest expanse of tropical rain forest north of the Amazon, is laced with 85 rivers, five enormous crater lakes and 13 or so cloud-draped volcanoes, many towering on the horizon like earthly cathedrals attempting to stroke the heavens.

DARIO'S FINAL RESTING PLACE - Famous Cathedral Leon, circa 1747, in the heart of the colonial city of Leon. Noted as the burial place of the renowned Nicaraguan poet Ruben Dario, and also one of the finest colonial buildings in Central America, with fresco-decorated walls. CNS Photo by Laura Weston.
HEADING TO MARKET - Vendors on their way to the central marketplace near Masaya, a farming village.

CNS Photo by Laura Weston. NICARAGUA'S OTHER COLONIAL CITY - The Church of the Recoleccion in Leon, a colonial city dating to 1524. CNS Photo by Laura Weston. SHROUDED IN MYSTERY - Towering Volcano Concepcion on Ometepe Island, the largest fresh-water island in the world. Concepcion and another small volcano, Maderas, formed Ometepe in Lake Nicaragua. CNS Photo by Laura Weston.Noted as the ubiquitous skyscrapers of Central America, they effortlessly create their own weather, astounding the eye with nuances of ever-changing color and impulsive and erratic clouds that toss shadows about like a potter throwing clay. Nicas say the strength and energy of the volcanoes can be felt while sipping a cup of Nicaraguan coffee. Perhaps so - the volcanic ash has fashioned a rich and fertile earth for the hard-working people, including some gorgeous black, uncrowded sandy beaches and some of the tastiest market crops in all Central America.

Visitors fly to the capital city, Managua, overlooking Lake Managua, which appears like a large rippling sea, and book into the Crown Plaza, Hilton or Holiday Inn. Endearingly, Managua has few street names - turn left at the tree and go three blocks to a red building - so an easy out for first-time visitors is an articulate Gray Line guide, spending a day visiting the plazas, cathedrals, parks, old downtown and the central marketplace.

A short drive southeast of Managua toward the colonial city of Granada leads to the Masaya Volcano National Park, where the road slices through an electrifying landscape of lava fields and huge piles of volcanic rocks, to the rim of the smoky Masaya Volcano. Once used for human sacrifices, and believed by the ancients to be "the door to hell," the volcano is aptly named, as far below one can hear lava boiling about in a chaotic stew.

A spectacular hike leads along the rim of the San Fernando Crater, home to blazing-green flora, deer, ocelots, coyotes and bird life, to the Masaya Lagoon Lookout and dramatic views of the lagoon, valley and the lofty Mombacho Volcano, daring climbers to give it a try.

Nearby, the farming village of Masaya is buzzing with bicycles, street-weary horse-drawn carriages and the eminent Hamacas Vicente Suazo, a distinguished, 60-year-old, family-owned, award-winning hammock business. Down the road, the village's sparkling-clean marketplace, converted from an 1891 Spanish fort, is home to 126 handicraft stores, fine ceramics from the artisan village of San Juan de Oriente, detailed woodcarvings, more hammocks and enough vibrant weavings to clothe an army.

Colonial Granada - the oldest Spanish colonial city in Central America, a short hop from Masaya and a

one-hour drive from Managua - is an exhilarating window into the past and a fascinating step back to the 18th century. A declared UNESCO World Heritage City, similar to Antiqua in Guatemala, Granada's Central Park, a tree-lined plaza and the heart and soul of the city, is packed with brightly painted, thick-walled colonial buildings, lofty arches and impressive tile that sweeps down walkways in a swirling maze of color.

As earthy as it gets in Central America, Granada is the essence of village life within a city, and where almost every home has one or two rocking chairs - maybe to keep cool or just to feel the relaxing city cadence.

Sad-eyed burros clop along one-way streets, dodging honking cabs manned by drivers with drops of humidity glistening on their mustaches. Bicycles flip by with smiling ladies perched on the handlebars, while vendors balance their goods atop their heads, some with enough expertise to showcase a Las Vegas floor show.

Horse-drawn carriages carry visitors past the plaza, hoofs creating a marimba beat heard in the festive late-night clubs. Edgar, with his signed pottery works the plaza complete with his own business cards, while a small girl selling $1 bead bracelets becomes everyone's best friend, if only for a moment. Armando sets up his shoeshine stand; jangling ice cream carts are wheeled by as rickety stands filled with handmade jewelry pop up like rampaging wildflowers.

Dreamy lovers sit on a bench lost in thought, while a trail of young students march by the cathedral led by a solemn teacher thinking about reading, writing and arithmetic. Walter and Luis, musicians extraordinaire, stroll across the plaza carrying their precious 30-year-old Nicaraguan guitars, but with no CDs to sell. With fine dining, live music and nearby islands to explore, a week's stay is never enough.

Not to be overshadowed, Leon, Nicaragua's other colonial city, founded in 1524 at the edge of Lake Nicaragua, three hours from Managua, is home to the Cathedral of Leon, considered among the most important colonial buildings in Central America, with fresco-decorated walls and the burial place of Ruben Dario, the great Nicaraguan poet.

Best left for last is the ferryboat ride on Lake Nicaragua to the volcanic island of Ometepe, the largest freshwater island in the world, dominated by two volcanoes, a colorful village, fields of sugar cane and eco-tours to freshwater lagoons where howler monkeys hang out and on steep volcano hikes for those with strong legs and shoes up for a challenge. The island residents smilingly say, "If the volcanoes blow, jump in a kayak and paddle like heck."

Nicaragua is where visitors connect with the people. A bit of Spanish is helpful, but a smile and a handshake works every time.

IF YOU GO

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