

Travel and Adventure: Nicaragua is ideal for intriguing, offbeat vacations

by Robert Selwitz

It's not a cliché to state that Nicaragua is a most volcanic country. Bisected by the eastern portion of the Pacific Rim of Fire, eruptions and related earthquakes have constantly played decisive roles in the country's history.

VISIT NICARAGUA - Iglesia La Recolecta is one of Leon's great churches, including La Merced and San Francisco. CNS Photo by Barbara Selwitz. OLDEST TOWN - Hiring a flower-bedecked horse and carriage is a relaxing way to sightsee in Granada. CNS Photo by Barbara Selwitz. BEAUTIFUL CATHEDRAL - Deemed unstable following the 1972 earthquake, the old Managua cathedral can be viewed from the outside but not entered. CNS Photo by Barbara Selwitz. But beyond lava and perpetual steam, volcanic also describes the nation's history and politics. From its first encounters with Spanish conquistadors to a constant flow of unstable or kleptocratic leaders, Nicaragua has suffered as much from human frailty as natural powers.

Nevertheless, visitors need have no fears about visiting this fascinating land. Warm Nicaraguan welcomes are virtually assured wherever one ventures. And the variety of appealing destinations is tremendous.

The Pacific side is home to most of the population, major cities and prime tourist attractions. The territory stretching east of the volcanoes to the Caribbean coast is primarily a vast rain forest. Increasingly it is visited by the ecologically focused or serious seekers of solitude.

Granada is Nicaragua's most appealing city for tourists. Founded in 1524, it's the oldest continuously occupied town in the Western Hemisphere. The heart of the action is the central plaza, complete with a gazebo, musicians, candy and souvenir sellers, shoeshine dispensers and crowds of mingling and socializing locals. Facing the plaza are the city council building, La Casa de los Leones and the cathedral that was rebuilt after having been burned - like much of the rest of Granada - by the notorious William Walker.

Walker was the most infamous 19th century U.S. practitioner of filibustering - causing insurrections, usually in underdeveloped countries. In 1856, refusing to withdraw gracefully following his overthrow, Walker ordered the town destroyed. The original cathedral was burned to the ground, and many other buildings still

bear scorch marks from Walker's conflagration.

Nearby is the Iglesia de San Francisco, founded in the 16th century, and the adjacent convent featuring an impressive collection of pre-Columbian statuary, ceramics, examples of corn-grinding millstones and exhibits depicting Indian religious ceremonial and daily life. There are also dozens of photographs, many depicting 19th century political leaders and ordinary citizens.

Artistically speaking, even more impressive is the relatively new Mi Museo Coleccion Granada on Atravezada Street in front of Bancentro. Danish owner Peder Kolind operates this amazingly extensive collection of beautifully displayed ancient pottery. Indeed, there are more than 5,000 pieces, allowing one to perceive the subtle design differences that evolved over centuries of work. Located in what was once a colonial home, it is open Monday through Friday 8 to 5, and 8 to noon on Saturdays.

With the largest city on the hemisphere's second-largest lake, Lake Nicaragua (Lake Titicaca bordering Bolivia and Peru is first), Granada visitors also enjoy a number of pleasurable water options.

Most popular are one-hour tours that wend through hundreds of islets, quite close to the city shoreline. Patrolling mangroves and swamps, boaters see dozens of egrets, plus herons, cormorants and other bird life on display. Many of the tiny islands are privately owned with palatial homes, while others are sites for restaurants and a hotel. One is populated by spider monkeys, descendants of pets of a child whose parents could no longer cope with them.

Between Granada and the capital Managua lies the constantly smoldering Masaya volcano. When its noxious fumes or flying rocks aren't deemed dangerous, visitors can drive quite close to an overlook. This is a new location, away from the previous viewing spot where, during the 1990s, you could glance down at fiery molten lava.

Nevertheless, what you still can see is quite impressive, just as it's been for centuries. In fact, prior to the Spanish invasion, indigenous people tried to keep the volcano quiet by throwing virgins into its mouth.

Spanish priests - convinced this is the front porch of hell where the devil lives - erected a giant cross at the volcano's mouth to keep him at bay. Subsequently, neither effort has proven to be very successful.

Also founded in 1524, Leon - which for centuries competed with Granada for dominance in Nicaragua - began life about an hour from today's modern namesake. Archaeological remnants of this great city are still visible, and the layout of grand avenues and bits and pieces of churches, commercial structures and homes indicate this was meant to be a major center for Spain's American efforts.

However, there was one critical problem: The rumbling, nearby Momotombo volcano seemed to be always on the verge of a massive eruption. Acting before it ultimately happened in 1610 (burying the site for three and half centuries until its rediscovery during the 1960s), the town was moved 20 miles to the west. Today, like an extraordinary Roman ruin (think of Ostia Antica, once Rome's prime port), visitors can easily spend an hour or more exploring this U.N. World Heritage-protected site.

En route to modern Leon lies the hot springs of San Jacinto. Walk carefully through the unfenced area where gurgling brown springs at well-above-roasting temperatures are the result of a nearby volcano venting its heat on the ground rather than via eruptions. Leon today is a bustling commercial city with much less charm than Granada. However, its churches - particularly their interiors - are much more grand.

First and foremost is the cathedral, Central America's largest. Inside, stately columns, expansive areas and the lovely lion-bedecked tomb of Nicaragua's favorite poet, Ruben Dario (1865-1916), are standouts. And it's definitely worthwhile climbing several flights of narrow stairs to the Cathedral roof for an extraordinary town view.

Other major churches include La Releccion, La Merced and San Francisco. Also worth exploring are the house where Ruben Dario spent his childhood, a simple Spanish colonial structure with some original furniture, personal belongings, photographs and memorabilia of his life, career and travels.

And quite nearby are the Museum Casa de Cultura and the Centro de Arta Fundacion Ortiz-Guardian. Spread

over two structures, they house impressive collections of pre-Columbian and Spanish colonial art, two rooms with small Rembrandt etchings, and a broad collection of Central American contemporary work.

Almost 60 miles to the south lies Managua, Nicaragua's capital. It's still recovering from the devastating 1972 earthquake that flattened vast swaths of the city. Indeed, many portions remain unrebuilt, since architects have determined that these sites remain unstable.

Managua's prime visitor attractions include the remnants of the old cathedral, which can be viewed from the outside but not entered; its modern-day, futuristic-appearing replacement; the attractive and lively Ruben Dario arts center, Nicaragua's leading venue for opera, concerts and exciting Nicaraguan folk dance troupes; the former presidential palace, now the national museum, worth at least an hour's look; and the new, much more modest presidential palace (no visitors allowed).

Incidentally, Managua was founded in 1851 as a compromise solution about where to site Nicaragua's capital, since neither Granada nor Leon would let the other take the prize.

The InterContinental Metrocenter is Managua's best hotel. And its location next to a sizable shopping center complete with an appeal coffee shop, a multiplex cinema, and an El Churrasco steakhouse makes it an ideal base for an overnight visit.

IF YOU GO

Nicaragua Tourism information: www.visit-nicaragua.com. Call toll-free 888-733-6422.

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