

Two Mochileros in Nicaragua, January 2018



This place was considered “off the map” for travellers through many years because of the brutal dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza, the consequent dire poverty and oppression and the prolonged civil war that ended it all.

That was then; this is now, though Nicaragua hasn’t yet become a place for mass tourism. It’s still Central America, with heat, dust, litter, noise, but also with a gracious and welcoming population and low costs. I called my son Peter, to see if he would like to come along. Before we finished this brief call, he told me his backpack (*mochila*) was already packed and waiting at the door.

We land into Managua. Like all of the Central American capitals, it’s a big city that you have to pass through, but not a place where you want to hang around. It’s not an old and historic city, just an ancient pre-columbian fishing village. After the Spanish were kicked out in mid-nineteenth century, it was chosen as the compromise capital, situated like Ottawa between two more important centres that contended for that honour. Nearly everything old and historic has been destroyed by the earthquakes that return now and then. The city has been hastily re-built many times and in recent years it has grown too fast; the population now exceeds a million.

They haven’t yet got around to posting signs with the names of the streets and the houses don’t yet have numbers. Major streets present just the most banal utilitarian architecture and the air is fouled with the smoke from thousands of clapped out engines. Visitors are advised to not be walking about after dark.

Postscript: Just weeks after we left Nicaragua, a peaceful demonstration against a government policy was put down with lethal gunfire. The protests have grown and may yet become another civil war. Why is it that revolutionary heroes like Ortega nearly always turn into bloody dictators? Lenin, Castro, Mugabe, Chavez My optimism about Nicaragua may be premature.



We negotiate a reasonable fare with a *taxista* just outside the terminal, for a direct run to Granada.

Having no idea where to go in Granada, we ask our driver to drop us in *Parque Central*. The standard layout in any Latin American city from the imperial Spanish period has a central square with the authorities (church and government) on one side and business on the other side. In the middle there is likely to be a bandstand and trees to give shelter from the tropical sun. From there we walk out and find a small *hostal* one minute away from the cathedral.



Granada is a well-preserved and quite charming small city from the colonial period, for poverty is a wonderful preserver of old things. This, rather than the capital, seems likely to become a magnet for tourism, the kind of place where world-weary gringos and gringas could set up winter homes and find comfort, warmth and idleness. Early to bed; this is a good place to rest and recover after our gruelling red-eye flight from Montreal.

The essential quality of Granada, indeed as in all of Latin America, is in its people. They are gracious, welcoming and helpful. You only need to go there with a respectful attitude, and it's very helpful though not necessary to have some Spanish language.



Not much to do in Granada; it just sits there, looking pretty. On day two we explore it all on foot and we take a motorboat tour on the big lake. On day three we will move on to San Juan del Sur.





Morning, we walk through the chaotic alleys of the market to find the bus terminal. The chicken buses always arrive and depart from the market, in every town. There is no schedule here; it's a load-and-go operation. We wait on-board for over an hour until the bus is filled up.



The bus takes us to Rivas, a market town on the way. From there a shorter ride in a taxi to San Juan del Sur. Saturday to-day, all of Nicaragua has come to this beach town for the weekend; we find lodging in a windowless box, maybe the last room in town. Sunday morning the hotel situation is much improved; we move to Hotel Esperanza, facing the beach, a place with an interior patio, hammocks and comfy chairs, a good place to hang out. All this for 35USD, brekkies included.





This is Nica's main beach town and a stopping place for cruise ships. It's big enough to have a fund of hotels and restaurants and to attract the weekend crowds. At both ends of the beach, luxury condo's are being constructed and they are being promoted in the States for prosperous Americanos who want to retire to a warm place.



Morning, we're in a beachside palapa restaurant; the gringa in the picture is seen walking into our frame, apparently from the condo's. She has a yoga mat, a drink in a coconut and some food. We have our caffeine fix while we watch her doing her yoga exercises and saluting the sun. Then we see the enlightened one roll up her mat and walk away, leaving her garbage on the beach.

After two full days at San Juan we're quite blissed out but keen for some new adventure; a tourist shuttle offers a direct ride next morning to León without having to deal with a bus change in Managua.

Our home in León will be Hostal Sonati, operated by a volunteer organization in support of environmental projects. (www.sonati.org)

Leon is a small university city (think of Kingston, Ontario), big enough to have all the urban amenities, small enough to be walkable, not plagued with traffic and bad air. This would be my favourite place to hang out in Nicaragua. The university students made it a centre of resistance to the fascistic Somoza regime and later the American-sponsored Contras who continued the violence long after the revolution had been won.

The victorious Sandinistas did not follow the Marxist way of Cuba and Venezuela, the way that leads to economic stagnation and dictatorship. Nicaragua has a stable capitalist economy and democracy, managed by a government whose socialism is more like Canada's NDP.



The guides in the *Museo de la Revolución* are all volunteers, veterans of the armed struggle. Our guide is Benito, named after the much loved Benito Juarez, a nineteenth century liberal president of Mexico. He takes us through all the exhibits and tells us the stories behind the many photographs.



Peter and Benito take up the museum's bazookas for the camera. In the background, pictures of President Daniel Ortega and Ché Guevara. The rhetoric of Socialism is here, but no indication of the government trying to micro-manage the economy or establish a Communist dictatorship. One photo that he points to with pride, shows the young Benito with a squad of armed fighters.





Also, I note this positive sign: unlike many Latin American places, there are not any little boys begging to shine my shoes in the streets or any little girls trying to sell me Chiclets in the restaurants. Everywhere except Nicaragua and Cuba I have seen those exploited children.



We visit the Prisión 21 which was a notorious place of torture and death under Somoza. And *La Tanqueta*, a light tank that was captured by the Sandinista fighters. This allowed the guerrillas to attack the *Prisión* and it was a turning point in the battle for León.

Volcán Telica is an active volcano, a stinking, boiling cauldron of lava that you can visit if you don't mind a chicken bus ride, a three-hour walk, all uphill, and a night in a small tent, no facilities. The camping gear is provided, but you have to carry it, and your share of food and water on your back. This outing is organized by Quetzaltrekkers (<http://leon.quentzaltrekkers.org>) a charitable group in aid of Nicaragua's children. It's a severe test for my 76 year old legs.



The trail begins in the village of San Jacinto where a footbridge crosses over a river of boiling mud. The troll at the bridge is telling stories in a rapid, toothless Spanish that I can't understand.



The other hikers in our group are all much younger, appear to be in their twenties, two other Canadians from Trois Rivières, two Swiss, two Germans and one Australian.. We don't keep up with them, but we do make it all the way to the top. The trail is a mess of volcanic dust and loose basaltic rock that has been thrown out by the volcano. An exhausting climb of 1100 metres vertically over a distance of 6 kilometres.

At the top, you look down 120 metres into the entrance to Hell. You can hear the lava boiling through a cloud of sulphurous smoke that gets up your nose and burns your eyes. Careful now, there's no guard rail and there's a gusty wind that can knock you off your feet. Telica explodes from time to time, throwing out ash and boulders, most recently in 2015. The ground all around is barren and littered with these so-called ballistics that make it look like those pictures we have seen from Mars.





We have arrived with just enough time to set up our tent and hike again up to the cone in the dark, the better to see the glowing lava. Supper to-night is a big pot of pasta, prepared this morning in León and re-heated over our fire. Hunger is good sauce.

An enterprising local has climbed the mountain with a cooler full of beer that he sells for two dollars.



Morning, our packs are much lighter, no food and only a bit of water left and it's all downhill. Our group jumps into a chicken bus that takes us to the market at the eastern edge of León. Peter and I catch a *triciclo* to haul us back to the Quetzaltrekkers office. Enough of walking for now. It's weekend again; Hostal Sonati has no room for us. But we have reserved a place in Hostal Monkey House which, in spite of its discouraging name, offers a quiet room in an interior patio.





Las Peñitas is a strip of ramshackle hostels, bars and restaurants facing a beautiful sandy beach, with some rocks here and there to make the surfing more interesting. It's just down the street from León. The hedonist in me needs to go there to finish my vacation, especially now after the exhausting volcano trek.

Fresh-faced young backpackers on their early adventures, piratical-looking surfer dudes, nubile young maidens in their bikini thongs, grizzled old world-travellers, music by Bob Marley, this is the Las Peñitas scene.





Across the street behind our *Hostal* we have found a bar-restaurant called “Mono Loco” (Crazy Monkey) that serves a really good hamburger and beers. It’s run by a couple of crazed Australians and the “Canadiens Boulevard” sign is a magnet for Peter, a big Habs fan.

Instant friendships; Peter has found his people. He’s talking about a part-time position in the kitchen. Am I going back to Canada alone?

Next day is a travel day and Peter decides he will come with me after all. The Mono Loco situation was just a temporary, though charming, fantasy.



We take the bus to León, walk to the market and catch a chicken bus to the Mercado Lewites in Managua. Then a long walk to Hostal Dulce Sueño (Sweet Dream) in Barrio Quezada near the centre of the big city. We fly tomorrow morning.

Our hotel has a dozen or so rooms around a central patio with some tables and chairs. In one corner a small kitchen is provided for the use of guests. The hotel's only guest is there cooking up some food; an egg and beans, seasoned with anger and bitterness. He greets me in English.

Having no Spanish, he is starved for conversation, can't stop talking. Talking about the current mess of his own country, the United States of America. Too much taxes, too many rules, too many immigrants, especially Latinos flooding across the southern border. President Trump will fix it all; in the meantime he has chosen exile in this poor, corrupted and chaotic little country.

I had anticipated a quiet and restful evening in the patio for this our last night in Nica, and just a little walk out for a supper in a restaurant. Just now, this guy is the fly in my soup.

Replying to his question about the immigrant problem in Canada, I tell him that we are considering the construction of a wall along our southern border. He throws me a puzzled look and starts to question . . . "but . . ."

"And we're going to make the Americans pay for it."

"Bah!" He picks up his plate of beans and enters his room, slamming the door.





Oh, Canada