

TRAVEL

Nicaragua rich in natural and historic treasures

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

The looming peak of Telica volcano gradually got closer as our Land Cruiser bumped along the rough trail. At road's end, we hiked up the steep hillside, huffing and puffing as steam belched from Telica's gaping crater.

We reached the top just before sunset, when the sun and clouds co-operated in a dazzling show, and it felt like we were on top of the world looking over peaks and volcano cones dotting the countryside. The real show came after dark.

Our guide led us slowly and carefully to the lip of the crater, flashlights in hand, and crawling on hands and knees the last few metres so as not to inadvertently step over the brink. Peering over the edge into the abyss, we could see the mesmerizing sight of molten-hot red lava swirling far below.

It was the lure of seeing volcanoes that first piqued our interest in Nicaragua but we found a lot more, including a mix of spectacular natural attractions and historic colonial treasures, combined with friendly people and moderate costs.

As a bonus, it's considered one of the safer countries in the region to visit.

The capital Managua is a sprawling urban jungle with no redeeming features. Like many visitors, we headed straight from the airport to the nearby pleasant historic city of Granada.

Founded in 1524 on the shores of Lake Nicaragua, it's considered the oldest European city on mainland America and is known for its many well-preserved colonial buildings.

The city of Leon is similarly endowed with colonial treasures, its centrepiece being the colossal 18th century cathedral. It's the largest in Central America and a UNESCO world heritage site.

Revolutionary history is especially prevalent in Leon, where monuments galore celebrate the Sandinista overthrow of dictator Anastasio Somoza in the late 1970s.

Both cities make great bases for exploring the countryside. We did our Telica trip from Leon, while from Granada, we visited Mombacho volcano, almost perpetually encased in a moist cloud forest, and Masaya volcano, one of few active volcanoes in the world to have a road right up to the crater rim.

Just next to Masaya's parking lot, we peered over the edge into the massive boiling cauldron. When Spanish conquistadors first saw this sight, they dubbed it the mouth of hell.

Besides volcanoes, Nicaragua's defining natural feature is massive Lake Nicaragua. We took a ferry to the largest island, Ometepe, which is hour glass shaped and dominated by two towering volcanoes.

Lightly populated, the island is a Biosphere Reserve, its natural forests home to monkeys and other creatures, black sand beaches and the unique Eye of the Water Spring,



where crystal clear water forms a natural swimming pool, surrounded by jungle greenery.

Mostly, the island remains a pleasant getaway where life moves a bit slower.

One highlight of our visit wasn't planned. We heard reports that Olive Ridley turtles were coming ashore by the thousands to nest, so we headed to San Juan del Sur on the Pacific coast. Most famous as a beach resort, the town is also close

to a turtle sanctuary.

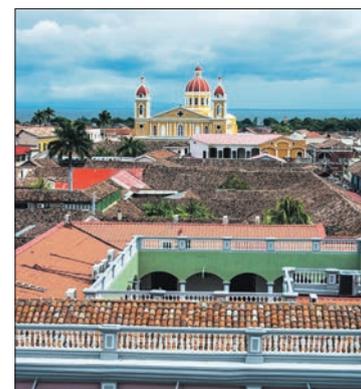
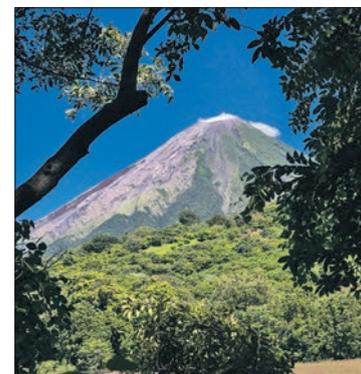
During nesting season, late-night guided tours are offered. We were only allowed flashlights with a dim red light that doesn't disturb the turtles.

As each wave washed up onto the beach, more turtles would suddenly appear in the moonlight. The narrow beach soon became crowded with turtles trying to find the ideal spot to dig their nest. It wasn't unusual for a nearly

metre-long giant to silently appear at our feet, totally oblivious to us. Laboriously, she scooped away the sand with her hind flippers and started laying eggs. She then covered the eggs with sand and headed back to sea.

It was a privilege to be in the midst of one of nature's age-old rituals.

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Leon's massive cathedral is a popular tourist attraction.

Concepcion volcano is one of two volcanoes on the hour glass-shaped Ometepe Island.

Spider monkeys frolic in the trees near Lake Nicaragua.

A view of the colonial buildings of Granada, one of the oldest European cities in South America.

This is the lookout over Masaya volcano.

A fisherman casts his net early in the morning at Lake Nicaragua.

The beach resort of San Juan del Sur is close to a turtle sanctuary and offers late-night guided tours.

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