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Nicaragua: A don't-go spot of the '80s goes boom

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GRANADA, Nicaragua

Boomtown fever is often followed by nostalgia for the way of life that just disappeared. Rapid change usually means rapid loss of charm.

Tourism boomtowns are, of course, no exception, and the world brims with overbuilt locations where it's now



impossible to find what led folks to flock there in the first place. (Cabo, can you hear me?)

Nicaragua's colonial gem of Granada, and its lakeside cobblestone streets, has thankfully not yet lost its character, but it doesn't take long here to see that nearly every block features a new hotel or a building for sale. If you weren't familiar with American real estate, you could easily presume that the countless signs around town heralded an upcoming election between two candidates: Re/Max and Coldwell Banker.

In short, come here now—this instant, no delay—before it's too late.

Astonishingly, it wasn't that long ago that the travel world considered Central America's largest country either too dangerous or too underdeveloped to include on any must-see list.

Now, after 20 years of relative stability, it's hard to find any "hot destinations" guide that omits Nicaragua's two coasts, volcanoes and lush jungles.

Yet everyone's first question still remains: Just how safe is it?

Similar to the assessments of other guidebooks, Lonely Planet asserts that Nicaragua "has the lowest crime rate in Central America," even though it's the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere after Haiti. Such a statement could be correct, but there don't seem to be truly reliable numbers to back it

up. In truth, safety in Nicaragua, like most everywhere else, depends largely on common sense and where you travel.

Like most tourists I began my eight-day trip in Managua, the nation's capital, which contains about 30 percent of Nicaragua's estimated 5.7 million people and accounts for the lion's share of the country's crime. Deep poverty, street gangs and lingering problems from the 1972 earthquake, which destroyed much of the city, make Managua dicey after dark, and potentially unsafe during the day in several spots.

Saying that, tourists often skip Managua anyway and rarely witness much of the city except when exiting the airport for points beyond. It's often said that the best thing about Managua is leaving it, and it's a conclusion I came to agree with after spending a couple days there with a local guide. Apart from a handful of decent restaurants, the crumbling (closed) cathedral and the parrots and iguanas you can buy—primarily as pets—at intersections, it held little appeal.

Once outside of Managua I headed toward Leon, about 90 minutes away, and thankfully found there what I hoped Nicaragua would be. Leon's central square features everything you imagine a former colonial capital would contain: strolling families, shaded benches, food vendors and a stunning church, in this case the Basilica de la Asuncion, Central America's largest cathedral and one of its most beautiful.

Its white exterior is a bit grimy—but, hey, don't be too judgmental; consider that construction began when George Washington was just a teenager.

The basilica is only one of a half dozen or so awe-inspiring churches in Leon. And even in the city's notorious heat—Leon is usually the hottest and driest major Nicaraguan city—the time spent on a self-guided walking tour from church to church proves rewarding and relaxing.

For those not that into navel gazing, check out the nearby beaches to the west, or volcanoes to the east. The swimming spots at the Pacific beaches vary, but some surfers consider the rides the best until you reach Hawaii. Anyone interested in surfing without the waves can take one of several area tours that allow you to slide down one of the volcanoes on a piece of plastic or metal at about 30 m.p.h.—or what feels closer to Mach 3.

Finding an English speaker in Leon is a bit of a challenge, so if you're without even basic Spanish skills then Granada, my third stop, might be easier to navigate. It, too, brims with authentic experiences and raw vigor—Granada nightclubs are Nicaragua's most jumping—and for better or worse it is certainly more tourist friendly than its rival Leon, about two hours away.

Once you arrive in Granada you'll see that the city seemingly revolves around liquids, whether it's the water lapping the adjacent shore of Lake Nicaragua or the numerous drinks idling on tables across town. There's *pinol* and *chicha*, both corn-based and beloved or despised, depending on one's taste. (Find them for sale in the central square.) There's also the country's refreshing Pilseners and smooth Flor de Cana rum, enjoyed with cola, limes and ice—*servicio completo*—and local cigars.

I recommend trying all of them at least once, and the rum many times over. (A bottle of Flor de Cana is the only item I brought back from the country.)

Unfortunately, Nicaraguans have few local dishes to match the flare of their drinks, a point many locals not only admit but bemoan. Frankly, the country features some of the blandest, least inspiring food on the planet—just imagine Mexican cuisine prepared in the spice-less England of yesteryear.

In fact the best meals I had in the entire country were prepared by the American chef at Pelican Eyes Piedras y Olas Hotel & Resort in San Juan del Sur, on the Pacific Coast, my last stop. The meal wasn't complicated, but the hotel, one of the most popular in the country, figured out how to combine fresh local ingredients with seasoning and spice to create rich flavors.

San Juan itself contains a mix of fishermen, American retirees and backpackers, and the prices of hotel rooms—from \$5 to \$300 a night—reflect the range of traveler than can be found here. Although it's a world away, visitors say the same about Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast (which I didn't visit), whose people, culture and language are more Caribbean and English influenced.

No matter the differences in the regions, both the Pacific Coast and the Atlantic Coast represent the places in Nicaragua most changed by recent American and Canadian development, and the sound of construction rumbles and roars from sundown to sunset.

Still, the charm of these places—as well as Nicaragua as a whole—awaits.

For now.

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