



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: DINING ALFRESCO AT ZUVINE; THE WHITE SAND OF BASTAD; A VIEW OF THE SPIT FROM NIDA



Un été semé de motifs fleuris  
T-shirt en jersey de coton, tissée et  
Paule Kal, et  
ailiot en coton  
y). Tonges  
pour Liwan).

## HOT TRAVEL

# hot new surf spot

Nicaragua has some of the best surf breaks in Central America, and where surfers lead, cool tourists follow. Lydia

I am sitting in Ricardo's Bar at San Juan del Sur on Nicaragua's Pacific coast, sipping a cool Nica Libre (local Flor de Caña rum, coke and a lime) and watching the waves. My boyfriend, Red, is scribbling directions on a coaster, as a guy with the toned, tanned body of an occupational surfer, fills him in on the best reef breaks in the area.

San Juan's curved bay is dotted with rickety fishing boats and lined with thatched bars, reminiscent of coastal villages in Baja California, but with far fewer 'NorteAmericanos'. Old men in guayaberas (pleated shirts) sit out the hot afternoons under the trees, and local teenagers in Yankees caps make a few Córdoba (the local currency) selling chilled bottles of coke to the few, mostly surfer, gringos.

In the surfing world, Costa Rica, with its world-class breaks, is 'done', as is

Mexico, so those in search of new waves are heading to Nicaragua's Pacific coast. With the offshore trade winds creating ideal surfing conditions 300 days of the year the neighbouring regions of San Juan, and Popoyo, are fast becoming the hottest surf spots in Central America.

Where the surfers go, others follow – drawn by the lifestyle even if they never set foot on a board. Now eco travellers and lovers of wild, unspoiled beaches are hot on the trail.

Despite its natural beauty, the land of lakes and volcanoes, as Nicaragua is known, is fairly new on the tourist trail. It has taken a long time to shake off its lawless image, even though the civil war, which made Nicaragua virtually

## EAT/DRINK

**SAN JUAN** A bottle of chilled Toña is £1 at Ricardo's Bar, Paseo Marítimo. Enq sanjuandelosur.org.ni/ricardosbar, NO TEL. Mondays and Thursdays are movie night, ask Julio what's on.

At El Timon, on the Bahía de San Juan del Sur, Rene and Else cook up the best fish in town. De la Cabana 11 cuadra al mar. Enq +505 568 2243. From £2 for lunch.

Big Wave Dave's (San Juan del Sur bay; enq (00 505) 568 2151), is great home cooking in a shady green oasis. Try the chicken pot pie or local catch. Lunch from £2.

For Mexican, try Zapata's (in front of Hotel Puerto, 50 metres north of the Mercado). Open for late lunch or early dinner. Closed on Tuesdays. (NO



PHOTOGRAPHS ALAMY, CORBIS, LONELY PLANET IMAGES, PHOTOSHOT, SYLVIE LANCRENON

inaccessible to all but the most daring backpackers, ended in the eighties. Crime-wise it is now one of the safest countries in Latin America. The infrastructure is still way behind that of its neighbouring Costa Rica and Honduras, but that's all part of the appeal.

We opted to rent a car, a deliciously redneck Toyota Hilux. Road travel is a bit rough and bumpy but it's totally safe and well signposted, as well as cheap – petrol is half the price of the UK.

Alternatively, you can always take the local 'chicken bus', squeezing in among local passengers, market-bound chickens, goats and other livestock as you travel from place to place.

During the bumpy three-hour drive south to San Juan from Managua Airport, we overtook a few canary yellow buses, retired American school fleet from the Sixties, adorned with images of the Virgin Mary, which are now used as public transport. People jam the insides till they're pressed against the windows, and when no-one else can fit in they hang on to the 'safety' bars at the back.

Along the roadside, rocks and telephone poles are daubed in the Red and Black of the Sandinista

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## WHERE TO STAY

**CARIBBEAN COAST** Stay At Casa Iguana, Little Corn Island. Enq casaiguana.net, NO TEL) A cluster of brightly painted stilt cabins in the palm fronds, opening right onto the beach. Economy cabins (sleep two) start from £12 per night. Breakfast is £2.50. Dinner is £5 unless they catch lobster, then it's £7.

**GRANADA** The Gran Franca is colonial, chic and simple, with a cool pool and elegant courtyard. Its restaurant, El Arcángel, serves the best fusion food in town. Address xxxxxxxxxx. Enq (00 505) 552 6000; lagranfrancia.com. Doubles from £50, Dinner from £20.

El Club has simple, chic rooms and a lively bar scene. Calle de la Libertad. Enq (00 505) 552 4245; elclub-nicaragua.com. Rooms from £17, cocktails from £2.

## SAN JUAN RIVER

Sabalos Lodge. Rustic eco adventure lodge on the San Juan River. Enq (00 505) 5830046; sabaloslodge.com. Cabins start at £17.



National Liberation Front and Coca-Cola billboards are hand-painted on the sides of schools and churches.

We pass through Rivas, the small town that is the centre of commerce for the region, a crowded intersection full of buses, bicycles and taxis, pick-ups crammed full of families, or loaded high with bananas or plantains.

We finally we reach Popoyo in Las Salinas, a rocky beach at the end of a dirt road, which is home to the country's most famous reef-break. As its popularity has increased, a shantytown of £3-a-night hotels has sprung up. You'll always find a bed for the night if you rock up, but standards vary wildly, so look around to find the best. And if you're really on a budget, according to José, a young Nica boy who sells bottled water on the beach, you can rent a hammock here for as little as 50p a night.

But we're treating ourselves this time. We check into Morgan's Rock Eco Lodge, the country's first world-class chic retreat. Our cabana, up at tree canopy level, looks out over the private Pacific bay, and is unexpectedly luxurious. The vast bed is covered in crisp linen, and another double-bed hangs from ropes on





**WHERE TO STAY**

**PACIFIC** High end: Morgan's Rock Eco Lodge, San Juan del Sur. Enq [morgansrock.com](http://morgansrock.com), +505 270 6824. Doubles from £100pp, all inclusive.

**MID RANGE** Hotel Punta Teonoste, a few miles north of Las Salinas, is a new property with an untouched private beach. Thatched cabanas 100 yards from the water have brick floors; log rafters and outdoor bathrooms, where a carved wooden turtle spins to trigger a cascade of water. Enq +5052673008, [hotellosrobles.com/en/playa](http://hotellosrobles.com/en/playa). Rooms from £65, all inclusive.

**BUDGET** La Tica, Las Salinas. This shabby chic surf shack is all hammocks and bare light bulbs, corrugated tin roof and a dirt-floor cantina. At night the bar is packed with sun-kissed surfers, the jukebox knocks out classic beach tunes, and the serve-yourself beer fridge is always full. (NO TEL/WEB) Hammocks from £2.50, including gallo pinto (rice and beans – the national dish). (Las Salinas, San Juan Del Sur province, roughly 2 1/2 hours from Managua along the Pan American Highway). OR share a room in the vivid blue, charming if slightly run down Hotel Estrella, Paseo Marítimo, on the main drag, and you could end up with a second-floor beach-front balcony for as little as £2.50 pp a night. Enq +505 4583310.

the terrace. Subdued lighting gives the cabins a warm glow at night, when the jungle seems to envelop the whole estate.

We spend our time here swimming in the Pacific, or swinging in our shaded hammock as we sip Toña, the local beer, surrounded by the abundant wildlife. Green iguanas meditate on the veranda ignoring the hums of cicadas and frogs and the cries of the Howler Monkeys. Crabs flash electric orange and purple with every step on the pathway.

Two days of this bliss leaves us almost catatonic but Granada, two-and-a-half hours north, beckons. The city sits at the edge of Lake Nicaragua, with Mombacho volcano looming nearby. The oldest colonial city in the Americas is now being souped-up, the tourist dollar transforming it from sleepy to sultry, with smart bars and chic hotels on every corner.



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**SHOP**

**THE MERCADO DE ARTESANÍAS** in Masaya, 14kms north of Granada, is the country's largest handicraft market. Pick up a necklace made from volcanic rock and coral for £10, leather boots for £20 and carved wood chunky bangles from £1. Centro Cultural Antiguo Mercado de Masaya.

In the pretty **PUEBLOS BLANCOS** or 'White Towns' near Masaya you'll find craft workshops and small, family-run stores selling pottery, wooden furniture and sculptures. Diría, **SAN JUAN DE ORIENTE** and **CATARINA** have the best pottery and jewellery.

Pick up hammocks at the **HAMACAS ESPERANZA FACTORY**, 4 Esquinas 1c. al Sur 2 C. arriba y 20 vrs. al Sur. Enq +505 522 6082. Masaya José Humberto Namendy Lopez makes colourful double hammocks from \$30.

Ball Bagus is a private house turned exotic shop with beautiful fabrics and exotic interiors pieces from £2. Calle Atravesada frente al Banco Bancercentro, Granada. Enq +505 5522844.



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Exquisite colonial mansions are freshly painted in vivid pinks, purples and blues. An occasional balcony, still peppered with machine gun holes, is a reminder of the country's turbulent past. But life is relaxed here now; people walk in off the street into each other's kitchens to swap gossip and buy Nacatamales, the Nicaraguan tamale wrapped with giant green plantain leaves and filled with pork. Ice cream vendors nip among the cars on three-wheeled bikes, ringing the bells on their handlebars. Kids dash between us, "Wash your windows? Watch your car? Bring you a Coke?" but no one begs or asks for money. It's like Fifties' America, only with internet cafés.

From Granada we take a terrifying plane ride, in an ancient 12-seater, down to the San Juan River, which follows the Costa Rican border, connecting Lake Nicaragua to the Caribbean. Here, the seven thatched cabanas of rustic Sabalos Lodge perch over the swollen river. Rain hammers the thatch and lightening ricochets off the water. It's like another world. Apart from the fluorescent yellow

kayaks, everything you can see and hear is pure, unadulterated nature. There are hammocks on balconies, and when the rain stops, you can kayak, fish, horse-ride or even go alligator spotting.

Along with the rain, it is the string of smoky-tipped volcanoes that are the source of the deep greens of Nicaragua's lush rain forest. And it's ridiculous how quickly you get used to seeing the peaks of craters, blanketed in cloud. There are 40 of them dotted around the country, six of them active, and they have become big business: adrenaline junkies can even 'ash board' down them (think snowboarding, but on powdery lava rock).

And if surfing and volcanoes aren't your thing, over on the Caribbean coast, Big and Little Corn Island are the dream tropical desert islands, with little to do except swim and snorkel off the white sand beaches and dive unexplored coral reefs.

In fact, between the wild Pacific beaches, almost deserted Caribbean islands, rich colonial cities, mountains, dense jungle, and perfect reef breaks,

**WHEN TO GO**

- There are three major geographic areas: the Pacific lowlands, the north-central mountains, and the Caribbean lowlands. There are only two seasons in Nicaragua, a rainy season that spans from May to November and a dry season from December to April. The Caribbean coast is hot and wet; it can rain heavily even during the brief dry season (March to May).
- Most Nicaraguans spend the holy week of Semana Santa (around Easter) at the beach; all rooms will be sold out weeks or even months in advance.
- Black Tomato offers nine nights in Nicaragua from £2,399 per person, including flights, transfers, guides and accommodation. Enq (020) 7610 9008; [blacktomato.co.uk](http://blacktomato.co.uk).
- Return flights from London start from around £485. Enq [cheapflights.co.uk](http://cheapflights.co.uk).
- Budget Rent-a-Car offers seven days'



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