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Costa Rica?

This formerly war-torn country has acres of virgin rain forest, miles of pristine beaches, and biodiversity galore...as well as deep-seated poverty.

Can eco-tourism lend a helping hand?

By Lisa Selin Davis

UNDEVELOPED—AND UNSPOILED: Much of the Nicaraguan countryside remains in its natural state (left); meanwhile, real estate developments like Rancho Santana are sprouting up around the country (above).

IN 1978, a river guide named Michael Kaye, discouraged by the damming of the Stanislaus in California, took a trip to Costa Rica and found an untapped treasure: From a train window, he saw the Class III rapids of the Reventazon River bubbling through the Turrialba Valley, and knew he had to run it. At that time, only the most intrepid of tourists made their way to Costa Rica, but Kaye knew there were others like him, who would revel in the country's wealth of natural resources while respecting them. In 1978, he founded Costa Rica Expeditions, starting a landslide of environmentally friendly travel that boosted the country's economy and standard of living and established the brand-new genre of travel we now call eco-tourism. Thirty years later, Costa Rica remains eco-tourism's capital, with over a billion tourism dollars spent in 2000.

Meanwhile, right next door, Nicaragua, with its active volcanoes, virgin rainforest, and seven percent of the world's plant and animal species, has seen almost none of this action. Its history of violence and corruption kept most visitors away—until now. In 2005, positioning itself as the next Costa Rica, Nicaragua attracted \$150 million in tourist dollars.

But the world is a different place 30 years after the “discovery” of Costa Rica. These days, environmentalism is a marketing strategy as much as a movement—slap the word sustainable on something and you can charge three times as much. So while Costa Rica sort of happened into eco-tourism, Nicaragua is strategically embracing it. But though eco-friendly travel here is on the rise, the country has a relatively large population of over 5 million and has plenty of competition from other countries who have noticed Costa Rica's success. Many observers wonder whether eco-tourism will be able to make a strong impact here.

Nicaragua's long history of violence reaches back to the 1500s, when Spanish conquerors first grabbed the land from indigenous people. Beginning in the mid-1850s, America has consistently intervened in an effort to gain control of its strategic location (it was the first chosen site for the canal which eventually ended up in Panama). Civil war scarred the country in many forms—liberals versus conservatives, communists versus capitalists—right up until 1979, when the communist-backed Sandinistas seized the government from a four-decade rule by the corrupt Somoza family. Another bloody civil war ensued, with America attempting to oust the Sandinistas' elected president, Daniel Ortega, by way of what became the Iran-Contra scandal.

In 1990, amid international pressure, the Sandinistas agreed to national elections, and the independent Violeta Barrios de Chamorro—a.k.a. Doña Violeta—took office. Since then, three peaceful presidential elections have occurred. Once the politics calmed down, though, Mother Nature boiled up: Hurricane Mitch ravaged Nicaragua in 1998, leaving in its wake reconstruction costs totaling nearly \$1 billion. Since 1990, four volcanic eruptions have struck, along with a tsunami, a major earthquake, and a long drought.

Thus, Nicaragua is still in relatively rough shape. Of course, that's part of its appeal as an eco-destination. Eighty percent of its 50,000 square miles—an area roughly the size of New York State—remains undeveloped. Since 2002, the Nicaraguan government has created 76 protected areas; the country has the largest area of primary-growth rainforest north of the Amazon, hundreds of beaches, lots of surfing along the Pacific coast, two million turtles hatching on Playa La Flor, and fishing on the Rio San Juan. There are 8,000 types of plants; 50 types of coral; 200 species of mammals (including spider monkeys, margays, and two-toed sloths); 350 species of reptiles and amphibians (iguanas, spiny lizards, and red-eared sliders); and 3,000 bird species (grebes, owls, and nightjars among them). Twenty-two percent of the country is private nature reserves. Veteran travelers often remark that Nicaragua looks like Costa Rica before the tourism explosion: lots of natural beauty, with a fraction of the tourists and just a tinge of infrastructure.

At the same time, the country is still working to pull itself out of deep-seated poverty. With a population of 5.57 million people, its annual growth rate is only four percent (compared to the seven or eight percent often found in China), its GDP is \$16 billion (the United States is \$12 trillion), and the country retains over \$4 billion of debt. In other words, Nicaragua has its work cut out:

change its rough image, strike a balance between economic development and sustainability, and replace its troubled past with a bright future. Hence, the ongoing image makeover.

The slogan of the Nicaraguan tourist board, "A country with a heart," is meant to draw attention away from its infamous violence and toward its warm-hearted people, its cultural offerings, and, of course, its natural beauty—things that have been there all along, just under the radar. "We haven't reinvented ourselves," explains Maria Rivas, the Minister of Tourism. "We're reinventing the way we portray ourselves." Rivas herself represents this new Nicaragua—born there, educated at Harvard, and returned to redefine the world she came from. "It made a lot of sense to start promoting Nicaragua as an eco-friendly destination." Tourism here also benefits from what one travel writer called the "low expectation factor," meaning that its tranquil beauty comes as a pleasant surprise, considering its ominous reputation. Still, visitors who are most impressed tend to be the ones who like to go off the beaten path.

"You really need to be a traveler, not a tourist," says William MacKenzie, a retired police chief from Wenham, Massachusetts, who has visited the country twice. "If you're expecting to go and have everything perfect, the infrastructure isn't there yet. When that happens, it becomes another Costa Rica." MacKenzie first came to Nicaragua on an 11-day package tour set up by Michael Kaye, who has launched an offshoot of his Costa Rican adventure travel empire called Nicaragua Expeditions. Kaye's plan for his newer business is to promote the same values of mutually beneficial travel that made him the "godfather" of Costa Rican eco-tourism by using naturalists, artists, and political scientists as guides to help with awareness and education.

Business in Nicaragua is trickling in. Kaye says he gets three or four bookings a month, whereas he can get as many as 800 in Costa Rica. MacKenzie was able to visit villages tourism hadn't reached, unmarred trails, and islands where he was the sole American visitor. "It was like stepping back in time," he says.

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