

NICARAGUA

Nicaragua is one of Latin America's fastest growing destinations. Nicaragua has much to offer intrepid travelers in search of new horizons. Here is some general information, and practical advice for clients traveling to this Central American country:

General: Nicaragua is Central America's largest country, about the size of the state of New York. Compared to Costa Rica and Panama, the country is poorer and less developed than its neighbors to the East. Nicaragua has had a tumultuous history, including centuries of pre-Columbian Indian settlements, 300-odd years of Spanish colonial rule, years of political turmoil and a number of US occupations since independence in 1821. In the last century, the country went through 30+ years of dictatorship under the Somoza dynasty, the Sandinista revolution and its aftermath starting in 1979, and the more recent elections that have brought about a measure of stability to this troubled country in the last two decades. Despite all of this turmoil, Nicaragua has been at peace for some time, and the country is making an effort to develop its tourism sector. Although tourism arrivals are growing, you will find far fewer travelers here than, say, Costa Rica, making a visit to Nicaragua that more special and authentic.

Money Matters: The national currency is the Nicaraguan Cordoba, about 24 Cordobas to 1 dollar. Dollars are widely accepted. Since you cannot take Cordobas out of the country, my advice is not to buy Cordobas and instead bring some USD cash with you, including enough \$1 and \$5 bills for tips and small charges. In some places dollars are accepted but you will be given change in Cordobas, so all the more reason to have some US currency with you always. Credit cards are accepted at the better establishments, hotels, and shops - but - there are still plenty of places that take cash only.

Weather: Nicaragua has 2 seasons, a dry season (verano) which tends to be sunnier, from November to April, followed by a "wet" season (invierno) from May to October. The SW of the country, where most of the tourist attractions are, does not get rain all day in the 'wet' season - it typically rains for 1 hour or so, and then the sun comes out. The heaviest rain usually falls in August and September, although with global warming, patterns are changing. The hottest time to visit is April and May, before the first rains arrive and the country is very dry.

Health matters: Health standards are improving, but to be safe, drink bottled water always and stay away from ice, especially if not at a good restaurant/hotel where the water is safe to drink. The sun is very strong, so a hat is essential.

What to bring: Sunscreen, as it is hard to find and very expensive. Insect repellent (look for a DEET spray, which is most effective protection). Any medicines you might need, as finding a drugstore outside the main Managua hub is not always possible. The jury is out on whether or not to take Malaria protection. The CDC says definitely if visiting the Caribbean lowlands (very dense jungle and forest) and not mandatory if visiting the Pacific and mountain region (fewer mosquitoes and drier in general). Handy wipes are great, especially to navigate bathrooms in the countryside. I would also recommend good walking shoes (preferably waterproof or water resistant) . Power bars come in handy between meals when you are in the middle of nowhere (on a hike, in the middle of Lake Nicaragua, etc).

Getting Around: Managua is the capital and main airport. MGA is served nonstop by American (via Miami), Delta (via Atlanta) or United (via Houston). The other great option is TACA, via San Salvador, which has nonstop service from LAX, ORD, JFK and more US gateways, then a short connecting flight from San Salvador to Managua. Within Nicaragua, the only airline is La Costena (www.lacostena.com.ni) if you are flying East to the Caribbean coast and the Corn Islands in the Caribbean. Otherwise, the best way to travel is by car. Good hotels (such as Mukul, our Signature Property) can arrange cars and drivers to get you everywhere to/from Managua, and this will probably be your best bet to get around.

Other information: On arrival, there is a \$10 charge for the tourist landing card, and it helps to have exact change or a \$10 bill.

Next: A report on Mukul, our Prestige Travel Signature partner hotel, on the Pacific Coast.

Mukul resort, a member of SLH and a Prestige Travel Signature property on Nicaragua's Pacific coast, has put Nicaragua on the map of sophisticated travelers since opening earlier this year.

Background: The resort is the legacy of Carlos Pellas, Nicaragua's most successful businessman and one of Latin America's most influential people. Mr. Pellas purchased a 1,670 acre farm on the Pacific years ago, and has transformed it into an upscale development called Guacalito de la Isla, in which Mukul is situated. Mr. Pellas' vision was to create a sustainable, eco-friendly, socially responsible, world-class resort, and by all measures he has succeeded. It took 2,000 people almost two years to create and launch Mukul, from scratch, a labor of love. Every effort was made to use local materials and artisans, and the property represents the best of Nicaraguan design, craft, and labor. For example, the vast majority of all the furniture was made in Nicaragua, so that thousands of artisans in the country could showcase their work at Mukul. About 90% of the staff is from Nicaragua, and they could not be more warm or welcoming. The property is authentic through and through.

Overview: Mukul is set in a vast estate facing the Pacific. There is a main private beach which is over 1 mile long, and another (smaller) beach a 5 minute ride away by car, where you can sunbathe or have a picnic set up for you. You arrive at the main building, with a high palapa and open air views of the pools and the ocean. Mukul's architect is the same team that designed Las Ventanas and O&O Palmilla, so you have these enormous open spaces, white walls, wide views of the sea and the vegetation on property. There are two restaurants, one serving all day dining in an open terrace, and a fine dining restaurant serving more gourmet fare and tasting menus. You have 24 hour in-room dining as a 3rd option. Dining is delicious, offering fresh fish, and excellent Nicaraguan beef, excellent produce, loads of tropical fruits and vegetables, and delicious desserts. The concierge team is exceptional. Verona (chef concierge) looked after me when I was on property, and she was excellent - helpful, resourceful, and very guest-focused. The concierges can make any arrangements you need. The staff on property make you feel you are staying at someone's home. Because the hotel is so small (only 36 rooms and villas) everyone gets to know you in no time.

Accommodations: You have 3 main options. The lead rates are in the Bohios, which are glass enclosed bungalows, on a hill, overlooking the Pacific (below you) and the estate. Bohios are perfect if you want seclusion and want to feel one million miles from the rest of the world. All Bohios have terraces, plunge pools, spacious bathrooms and living areas, and offer 800 square feet of space. You go to/from your Bohio using the hotel's golf carts, which will take you up/down the hill when needed. If you want to be on the ocean and closer to the main building, book either an oceanview villa or Beachfront villa. The villas are very spacious, offering 1,800 square feet of space, large indoor/outdoor shower, large living area, terrace (shaded and sunny areas) and a larger private pool. If you have a family or a small group, book the Casona Don Carlos, a large beachfront villa with connecting 2 bedroom suite, which can accommodate up to 16 under 1 roof. My favorite Bohios were the ones facing the ocean, with unobstructed views of the sea, through the trees and vegetation.

Getting here: The drive from Managua MGA airport takes about 2 hours. The road runs through the countryside, with views of mountains, volcanoes, and local villages. It is mostly paved, except for a short (3 miles or so) that is currently being worked on. The road will be fully paved by NOV/DEC of this year (2013). If you want a faster option, suggest a helicopter transfer, which costs \$1,150 for up to 5. If you have 2 couples or a family of 4, it's \$288 per person for a 20 minute breathtaking flight over Nicaragua's SW region to the resort's heliport.

The value proposition: Mukul offers excellent value for money, in a unique setting. Room rates include breakfast and lunch for 2 daily, soft drinks and drinks until 5pm, and airport transfers with stays of 3 nights or longer.

What is so special? Mukul is without peer in the region. The sense of space and privacy (think about it, 36 rooms within a 1,670 acre estate), exceptional service (200 staff), a private mile-long beach (there will be times when you are the only person in the ocean), spacious accommodations with every comfort, a wide range of activities on property (18 holes of golf, surfing classes, hiking, fishing trips from the property, yoga, stand up paddle board, and more). The dining is first rate. Do not miss the Spa! This is one of the world's 'ultimate' spas, on the highest hill, with views of the ocean and the property, and I promise it will take your breath away. Each treatment 'pavilion' is over 1000 square feet and has a different theme. Tip: visit the spa on arrival, so you can choose the space that suits you best. Do not miss the Crystal Pavilion, which is over the top - complete with terrace, plunge pool, and giant glass chandelier and super views of the Pacific. Most of all what makes Mukul so special are the staff, who make you feel as if you were the only person on property. Federico Spada (GM) works night and day to ensure that every guest feels special. Rest assured that you will long remember your stay at Mukul.

What's next for Mukul? A total of 28 new private villas will open this fall near the main gate of the estate, 10 of which will be available for you to sell under Mukul's inventory. These will be state-of-the-art 4 bedroom villas with pools. In addition, there are plans to build a runway near the hotel, for air service to/from Liberia airport (15min flight from Costa Rica). The hotel is also planning to open a beach club and tennis courts, to open after the New Year, so stay tuned!.



Mukul Beach, Golf & Spa



Mukul Bohio



Mukul Bohio



Mukul Beach Villa



Mukul Beach Villa



Mukul Casa Don Carlos Presidential Suite



Mukul Casa Don Carlos Presidential Suite



Mukul Casa Don Carlos Presidential Suite

SIGHTSEEING:

In general, Nicaragua's infrastructure is not as well- developed as Costa Rica, the neighboring country to the SE. Nicaragua does have a great deal to offer, including beautiful landscapes, colonial cities, outdoor activities, and a rich cultural heritage. Here are some highlights for your clients to consider:

Granada is, by far, Nicaragua's top attraction. This charming colonial city, located on the shores of Lake Cocibolca (also known as Lake Nicaragua), has almost 500 years of history. Granada is easily visited in one day. Start with a visit to the Iglesia La Merced, and a climb to the top of the bell tower, for the best views of Granada's colonial center. From here, visit the Central Plaza and surrounding area, to get a feel for the city. Do not miss a visit to the Antiguo Convento San Francisco, to see the courtyard and the museum housed within, with impressive pre-Columbian statues. Granada has a number of great restaurants. Two recommendations are El Zaguan and La Claraboya, near the cathedral.

From Granada, you have several options. The first is a visit to the 300+ islands on the Western part of Lake Cocibolca, **the Isletas**, which can be visited in a full /half day, or with an overnight stay. Some of the islands are wild and uninhabited, and others feature vacation homes. If you wish to overnight, the best place to stay is the Jicaró Lodge (www.jicarolodge.com), a rustic retreat with 9 free standing cabins. Your other option is to explore the **Mombacho Volcano**, which is about a 30 minute drive from Granada. The two main attractions here are the hikes and the zip lines. Of the hikes, I recommend trail # 1 (least strenuous with good overview of the site and rain forest), or trail #3 (El Puma trail) for those in search of a serious workout. Of the Zip lines, I recommend Las Flores, located within a coffee plantation. You zip through various lines over the coffee trees, which is a lot of fun. The most fun parts are walking on a tightrope between two trees, the 'Tarzan' jump, and the rappel down the last platform.

Another option near Granada is to visit the town of **Masaya**, and the volcano above the town of the same name. Masaya is a center for arts and crafts, so the highlight here is the Mercado Viejo craft market. From here, visit the Volcano Masaya National Park, with a breathtaking drive to the crater's edge. This is

an active volcano, so expect to see a plume of gas, smoke, and ash, sometimes visible all the way to Managua's airport. At the top of the volcano there are various trails which are worth exploring. Note: the volcano is very hot, there is no shade, so sunscreen, a hat and loads of water a must.

Beyond Granada: For outdoor enthusiasts, visit **Ometepe Island**, the largest island within Lake Cocibolca, to hike to the top of Volcan Maderas or swim in the spring-fed waters of the Ojo de Agua. For those interested in history and heritage, visit the city of **Leon**, in the Northwest of Nicaragua. Leon was Granada's main rival city for many years, and also worth visiting for its rich colonial architecture, dining, and unique atmosphere. For surfers, the best surfing in Nicaragua is near the town of **San Juan del Sur**, near the border with Costa Rica. For divers, the best diving in Nicaragua is off the Caribbean coast, near the **Corn Islands**. You fly to Big Corn Island on La Costena airlines from Managua, then take a small motorboat (called panga) to Little Corn Island. Note – this is Robinson Crusoe country – facilities are very basic, accommodations very rustic, but – the experience is very unique and unlike any other island in the Caribbean.

Extreme adventure: If you are looking for an adrenaline rush, one of the wildest options in Nicaragua is to ride a 'sandboard' down the black sands of **Cerro Negro Volcano**, near Leon. You climb this 1,500 ft high volcano, which takes about an hour, then descend in about 50 seconds or so, at speeds of over 40mph. Wear sturdy shoes, long pants, and long sleeves. Local outfitters provide you with all the equipment.



Antiguo Convento de San Francisco



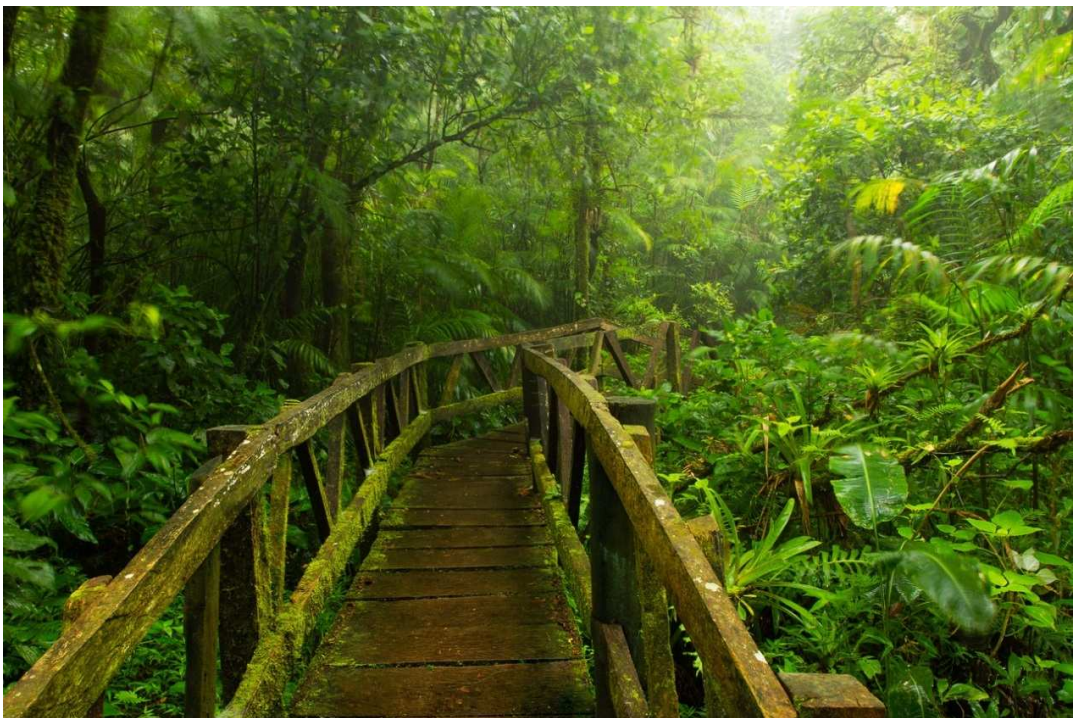
Catedral de Granada



Las Isletas



Ometepe Island



Mombacho Volcano



Las Flores Zip Lining



Masaya Volcano



Ash Boarding