



Sunset over a fuming Volcán Concepción, as seen from Finca Magdalena on the Isla de Ometepe

HAVE IT YOUR ECO-WAY

Travel Nicaragua before it's the next Costa Rica

Story & photos by Chuck Adams

I just sort of started drinking the water. From the tap, unboiled and unbot-tled. It was a perilous choice to make in Central America, one with consequences of the most uncomfortable kind. But I had had enough. The plastic bottles of *agua purificada* I had been buying in Nicaragua for the past week to refill my Nalgene were destined for a local river-bank or in the drainage ditch beside the road. In a country where children learn to ask gringos for one peso (as if foreigners are visiting grandparents) and have been taught that any open window is a perfectly functional garbage can, setting a good example by drinking the local water supply was the least I could do. It didn't hurt that some of the places I stayed encouraged this practice. Finca Magdalena, on the Isla de Ometepe, has a big sign that reads "Help Stop the Privatization of Water — Drink our Tap!" It's a hopeful sign for this country of belching volcanoes, cloud forests, rain forests, freshwater lakes, countless rivers and genuinely friendly people.

Nicaragua is *hot* right now, and not just in degrees Celsius. It's being touted as an underdeveloped dreamland for real estate speculators and a touristic paradise with more square miles of virgin forest than Costa Rica. Oh, and don't forget to mention that it's *dirt cheap*! Well, that's because the people are *dirt poor*, earning about a dollar a day. With budgets so tight,

it's no wonder that mini-buses won't depart until they are 99 percent full; that the country's per-capita energy consumption is the lowest of any Central American country; that pesticides are rarely used on crops simply because they're too expensive.

Good or bad, it is because of this poverty (which is low-impact simply by design) that Nicaragua is fast becoming the de facto eco-haven for all your eco-tourism needs. It also still retains most of its rough edges and cultural purity — big boons to the traveling backpacker in search of adventure travel without all the comforts of home. Last month, I visited a destination in Nicaragua that still falls in that rarefied zone of authentic culture mixed with ecologically rich lands: Isla de Ometepe.

Ometepe is a close-knit island community that continues to live at its own pace. Similar to Italy's Sicily or Sardinia in the Mediterranean, Ometepe's traditions and customs are preserved by water, in this case the largest lake in Central America: Lago de Nicaragua. To give you an idea: The Internet has only been available in the past few years, oil barrels are still shipped by small, single-engine skiffs and electricity brownouts are a daily hassle. The best lodging

(and dining) on the island come from two organic farms spread out over the eastern slopes of the dormant, cloud-capped Volcán Maderas.

Finca Magdalena, one of the farms, contains a huge, 120-year-old barn converted to simple dorms and single rooms, where lodging is under two bucks a night (try to reserve one of their four hammocks; the cots are stiff). Twenty-four families cooperatively run this gigantic farm in a spirit of community. Food and drink are farm-fresh and delicious. The main draw at Magdalena, however, is the 5 km trail that climbs up the volcano, passing under shade-grown coffee and cocoa plantations (go to www.bosia.org to buy some for yourself), side-stepping ancient petroglyphs and topping out in an amazing, "mist"-ical cloud forest with an eerie crater lake.

For an even more rustic setting, about one mile down the road is El Zopilote Finca Ecológica, a practicing permaculture farm and campground managed by an Italian expatriate guru who lives and breathes Slow Food. The boon here is his wood-fired oven, serving up fresh-baked bread and occasionally pizza (if you order at least eight pies one day in advance). The homemade food here is so good that rumors of a pizza party spread quickly around the island; late one night, a band of Brazilian fire dancers arrived, hungry and restless. As the evening matured from twilight serenades to midnight philosophical rants, all nationalities and subcultures were present: French hippies, dreadlocked Aussies, astute Swiss, austere Finns, frenetic Brazilians, clueless Swedes, note-taking Americans. Out of this swirling madness came two thoughts: One, that sometimes travel can be more character-driven than destination-driven, and two, that when given the choice of sporadic banter with an international hodgepodge of miscreants or riding an ATV vehicle through the last remaining stand of virgin rainforest in Costa Rica, I know which I'd choose. As for my choice to drink the water: Two weeks on, I still have no regrets. **EW**



Permaculture, grass huts and Volcán Maderas at El Zopilote — eco-tourism at its best



Celebrating Our 15th Year

Free yourself of your dependence on glasses and contact lenses.

Anniversary Special

Lasik
\$495-\$999*

Hurry! Limited Time Offer

* Nidek laser only. Restrictions apply. Not available with any other discounts.

Why Crews Laser Center

- Dr. Crews has performed over 18,000 surgeries since 1993.
- Only Dr. Crews will give you personalized care before, during and after your surgery.
- Dr. Crews is a Lifetime Board Certified Ophthalmologist.
- Dr. Crews utilizes the latest in advanced laser vision correction technologies including Visx CustomVue.
- Dr. Crews has an outstanding reputation in the Pacific Northwest.

Call now for a complimentary screening and see for yourself what Crews Laser Centers can do for you!



CREWS LASER CENTER



Stanley L. Crews, MD

www.crewslasercenter.com

541-743-8035
2650 Suzanne Way-Suite 10
Eugene, Oregon

Nicaragua online resources:

Informative travel guide: www.vianica.com

Finca Magdalena: www.fincamagdalena.com

El Zopilote Finca Ecológica: www.ometepezopilote.com