

Travelling in Costa Rica and Nicaragua by Bike – Part 2

ZENO KOLLER – HAS NOT BEEN EATEN BY A SHARK

Two years ago, my father and I travelled by bike around Costa Rica and Nicaragua for five weeks. Part 1 of this article was about Costa Rica. In the second instalment, I will tell you about the Nicaraguan part of our journey and close with some hints on travelling in the two countries.

About Nicaragua

Again, let me begin with some information about Nicaragua. Like its southern neighbour, it is a tropical country with different climatic zones and is thus a biodiversity hotspot; anteaters, jaguars and man-eating sweet-water sharks witness this. A stunning curious looking bird, the Blue-crowned Motmot, is Nicaragua's national bird (Google Image it!). Among the nota-

Since its independence from Spain in 1821, Nicaragua has gone through periods of political unrest. It experienced several military dictatorships and a fiscal crisis, which led to the Nicaraguan revolution (1978-1990). It is due to this civil war and the corrupt government that Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.

Despite that, people we met were always very friendly and cheerful, maybe even more so than in Costa Rica.

Crossing the Border

As you may – or may not – recall, our journey was a round trip with the Nicaraguan part in the middle. After ten days of cycling up north in the hot and humid Caribbean lowlands, we reached the eastern part of the Costa Rican-Nicaraguan border, where the road ends. From here, it is only miles and miles of impenetrable jungle parted by a river;^[1] to move around, the locals use the available ferryboat frequently, so we followed their lead. After buying the ticket, we strapped our bikes to the roof of the ferryboat.



The colorful streets of San Carlos

ble geographical features are the 40 volcanoes sprinkled along the edge of the Caribbean plate. Some of them are still active and cause regular earthquakes: Managua, Nicaragua's capital, has been hit more than once.



Pura vida!

With 45 minutes on the river, we stopped only once midway at a ramshackle border check-point. Upon arrival, we unloaded our luggage, almost dropping our bikes into the river in the process. We were in San Carlos, a small fisher's town on the coast of Lake Nicaragua.

The first glance reveals the differences to Costa Rica. Small homes built next to each other seem archaic in comparison to the middle-class-American-suburb-style homes of Costa Rica. Small corner stores replace supermarket chains. The prices of products are about the half of what we had been used to so far. But despite the obviously much humbler way of life, it does not feel run-down. The houses are freshly painted in strong colours, sometimes with nice decorations. The bus terminal and the adjoining market are bustling with people and are full of life.

Ancient Forts, Pirates and a Canal

Along the river San Juan that connects the Lake to the Caribbean Sea, we explore the ruins of Spanish forts built in the 16th century. Their purpose was to protect the river from pirates attacking the Spanish settlements. As early as that and ever since, there has been hope of building a waterway between the oceans here. With the construction of the Panama Canal, the idea was abandoned. But the steady rise in global

shipping made the venture profitable again: a China-backed project is currently in its initial stages. Construction should begin this December, and it will involve digging a 100 km long, 30 meter deep trench through the wetlands. While giving Nicaragua's destitute economy a boost, the ecological implications of this project are hair rising.^[2] With some fatalism, I can only say that I am glad to have seen the environment of Lake Nicaragua still intact.

Granada: the Ancient City

From San Carlos, we crossed the Lake Nicaragua by ferry. Our goal is Granada, one of Nicaragua's larger cities. Founded in 1524 by the Spanish, it is the first European city on mainland America. As the ship arrived at five o'clock in the



Sun is setting on Lake Nicaragua

morning, we get a glimpse of the colonial architecture wandering through the dark, empty streets as we're looking for a place to sleep.

After some napping, I had probably the greatest breakfast of my life^[3] in the Museo & Café Choco. They offer an opulent choice of all kinds of mouth-watering dishes and treats, most of which contain organically farmed cocoa. In case you make it to Granada, make sure you visit this place.





Tropical breakfast

The next day brought another moment that I am glad I experienced. You don't need to stray far from the uniform street grid of Granada to get to the more run-down areas of town, and soon enough, we found ourselves in a kind of place I'd only known from movies. Here, the dirt roads are lined with makeshift shacks and chickens running around between crooked trees. You'd expect it to be smelly here, with kids chasing you throwing stones. But it was not like that at all. There was no feeling of hostility towards us Europeans. The people had a natural dignity despite of their poverty and minded their own business. Even there, the atmosphere was entirely positive.

More Nicaraguan Highlights

We spent the next few days in expeditions to interesting landmarks. First, we cycled to the top of the nearby volcano Masaya. The gaping crater is constantly spewing out sulphur dioxide clouds and looks like the entrance to hell. That's actually what the 16th century's conquistadores believed: they sent a monk to the bottom in search of liquid gold, but all he encountered was lava.

Next, we explored Ometepe, a two-peaked volcanic island in Lake Nicaragua.

Lastly, we visited the quasi-American surf town San Juan del Sur. After several days of hiking and biking at 35°C, the expat shops and night clubs did not offer the relaxation we were looking for, so we soon left and made our way towards the border to get back to Costa Rica.

There, we had about 2 weeks left to explore^[4] before heading back to freezing Switzerland.^[5] What I took home from Nicaragua, besides precious memories, was the impact of seeing the way common Nicaraguan people live. You don't need much to be happy – a roof over one's head goes a long way – and if you have the luck to live under better circumstances, you may as well appreciate it.



Smell the fumes?

Some Travelling Tips

- If you've become interested in exploring Costa Rica or Nicaragua yourself, let me give you some tips:
- Costa Rica is relatively easy to travel, if you are accustomed to travelling around Europe. On the other hand, I would recommend Nicaragua only to more experienced travellers.
- When to go: the best time to travel is during the dry season (also known as summer), which is from December to April. The rest of the year is considered rainy season, which isn't that bad – it may just be hard to get to some remote places as the roads are muddy. As a trade-off, the prices are lower during that time.
- Getting around: if you don't want to cycle, buses are the way to go: tickets are cheap, they take you almost everywhere, usually very comfortably.
- Sleeping & Eating: in the tourist spots, there are plenty of upmarket hotels, but there is always a good selection of hostels with fair prices. Eating out is usually cheap and great, unless you are vegetarian. Food in supermarkets/street markets is cheap and good, also if you are vegetarian.
- Language: some basic Spanish knowledge is recommended.
- Internet: free WiFi is available in hostels and many cafés.



The fruit lady also sells piñatas

References

- [1] Historical trivia: this is one of the places where the CIA-supported contra rebels operated from to fight the Sandinista government in the 1980s.
- [2] <http://www.wired.com/2014/02/nicaragua-canal/>
- [3] The VIS Weihnachtsbrunch is a serious contender, though.
- [4] See last Visionen issue for details.
- [5] At one point, the temperature difference between Switzerland and Nicaragua was close to 50°C.