

Road less traveled: Nicaragua

Unspoiled beauty eclipses Central American country's scandalous past

By [Robb Todd](#)
Daily News Writer

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Surfing off Nicaragua's coast is one of the country's best cheap thrills.

No one will ever confuse [Nicaragua](#) with being a tourist trap. For starters, there aren't many tourists.

Part of the reason is the country's image problem. Something awful went down there with [Oliver North](#) and [Iran](#) in the 1980s, but most people really don't understand what. Whatever it was, it was bad. Hand grenades, AK-47s and congressional testimony are not top tourist attractions.

But a trip along the country's Pacific Coast will challenge perceptions about the past and many other things. This is a land of volcanoes and poets, where people believe you're only poor from the mind and that every single day is a day to start over.

By the time you are sipping a sweet corn concoction called chicha in [Granada](#), a beautiful town dating to the 1520s with horse-drawn carriages and plenty of shade from the equatorial sun, who would care that a [Sandinista](#) is the democratically elected president of the country?

Granada offers friendly locals and hot walks through colorful streets. The [Colonial Era-themed Hotel La Gran Francia](#) will transport you – and the pool will keep you cool. The hotel, which features 21 air-conditioned rooms, is also near shopping, museums, nightlife and historical sites.

In [San Juan del Sur](#), Pelican Eyes offers breathtaking views of the bay, which are not to be missed at sunset. There are also several pools to choose from at the end of a long day - or in the middle of one, with a poolside beverage.

The higher-end ecotourism includes deep-sea fishing, sustainable farming, yoga and beautiful accommodations at resorts such as Jicaro Ecolodge, Auqua Resort or Morgan's Rock, where you find zen on a mat with plenty of Om, or ceviche on a boat with plenty of beer.

For a lower-priced escapade, there is the island of Ometepe, zip-lining in the Mombocho Volcano canopy, surfing in the villages of Gigante and San Juan del Sur, and kayaking on [Lake Nicaragua](#).

A visit to Gigante is a must. Stay in any of the cheap rooms, available for about \$25 a night during the off-season. All there is to do is fish, surf and lounge in hammocks with a beer. That's enough, right?

And for a stop between [Managua](#) and the waves, pull over at the tiny town of Catarina for a spectacular view of a crater lake called Apoyo. Nicaraguans go here on the weekends to shop for crafts, eat and dance to the songs of roaming musicians in the market.

Nicaragua is well-suited for most types of travelers, except those who cannot overcome 30-year-old stereotypes and hold misconceptions about poverty. The country has changed since the '80s.

If you want a vacation in [Central America](#) without having to really experience Central America, you have many options. But if you want to experience something different, not untouched but less touched, then the burgeoning Pacific Coast of Nicaragua offers everything from low-price adventure to high-end ecotourism.

Just brush up on your Spanish - and your history - before you go.