



# RETURN TO NICARAGUA

Once its political and military struggles dominated global headlines, but now this Central American country is making an impressive comeback. **Fiona Neill** last visited as a student and now returns to this ‘earthly paradise’ with a guide called Lenin (naturally)

It’s taken a while to find. It’s a long time since I was last in Managua and some things haven’t changed. The buses are still Russian, former guerilla leader Daniel Ortega is still in power and there are no signposts or street names. Addresses are derived from landmarks, so I am searching for a house ‘250m north of the church of the Nazarene Mission’.

When I discover that the house numbers obey no logical system our indispensable Green Pathways guide, Lenin Obando (his parents were supporters of the 1979 Sandinista revolution) suggests an even less scientific method involving asking passers by if they know a Costa Rican called Lucho, the original owner of the house where I lived for a couple of months with my then-boyfriend a quarter of a century ago. By this time the heat and humidity are so oppressive that our children, 15, 13 and 11, can’t even muster an eye roll.

The word goes out and within minutes, Lucho is found and my old boyfriend – now my husband – and I find ourselves standing back in our old sitting room with our children. Everything is so familiar: the

red and white floor tiles, the noise of the ceiling fan, the view from the window. Lucho asks about Paul Laverty, a Scottish human-rights lawyer, who put us up. He wants to know if we have seen *Carla’s Song*, one of eight Ken Loach films Paul subsequently penned. We talk about old times until the air is thick with nostalgia.

When I arrived in Nicaragua in 1988 in my year out from Bristol University (the Spanish Department had recommended we avoid the country which seemed a good reason to visit), it had become an unlikely proxy battleground of the Cold War.

Although it seems absurd now, President Ronald Reagan was convinced that the Sandinista Revolution that ended almost 50 years of brutal dictatorship by the Somoza family was a major threat to the security of the United States. The USA imposed a crippling embargo and channelled funds through the CIA to contra rebels who turned the north and south of the country into war zones.

Inflation was running at 14,000 per cent. There were daily electricity blackouts, intermittent running water and bare



**Grass roots**  
People gather (top)  
in Managua’s central  
plaza, 1979, which was  
renamed Plaza de la  
Revolución; a volcano  
looms over Leon

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supermarket shelves. I remember someone trying to sell me a baby ocelot at a traffic light, as I headed one day to the Hotel Intercontinental to order a plate of steamed carrots to satisfy my craving for vegetables.

The country was a global hub for idealistic left-leaning sympathisers who wanted to show support for Nicaragua in its David and Goliath struggle. Thousands came to pick coffee and work on co-operatives. There were Cuban doctors, Scandinavian agronomists, American Peace Corps volunteers. I ended up painting handicrafts with a group of Salvadorean refugees.

Nicaragua's turbulent past might now provide the best guarantee of its future. It has become one of Central America's safest countries having largely escaped the drug war and gang violence that plague its northern neighbours Guatemala and Honduras. The day we arrive the headline on one of the biggest circulation newspapers, *El Nuevo Diario*, is about cruelty to circus animals.

The optimism of the 80s has been replaced with disillusion with the Sandinistas and Ortega, but the legacy of an army and police force set up to serve its people rather than repress them has endured and most people believe their future lies here. 'Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the western hemisphere but the tenth happiest in the world,' says Lenin, as we approach his hometown, Leon.

The last time we visited Leon it took us half a day on a bus so packed with people and animals that I couldn't see my feet let alone the view from the window. It lurched across the Pan-American Highway avoiding potholes at every turn. Now the journey takes an hour and 20 minutes. As we speed past fields of peanuts, maize and sugar cane, my husband and I discuss the huge changes since we were last here: the eco-tourism lodges and surf schools on the stunning Pacific coast, the new restaurants, the shopping malls and smoothie stands. But it is the improvement in communications that impacts most. The smooth road network is unrecognisable. On a two-week trip you could manage to take in exquisite colonial cities, pristine cloud and rainforests, with a few days to spare at the end to soak up the laid-back surfer vibe and beautiful beaches in San Juan del Sur. It is a country of extraordinary natural beauty that is now very accessible.

Leon was the intellectual heartland of the 1979 revolution, the scene of fierce gun battles between Somoza's National Guard and the Sandinistas. If you look hard enough you can see bullet holes in the walls. The fantastically quirky Museum of Myths and Legends, filled with giant spooky papier-mâché figures representing local myths is also the site of the former headquarters of the National Guard and there are murals depicting their torture techniques. But it is Leon's volcanoes with their perfectly formed cones that capture our attention. There are 28 volcanoes in Nicaragua and seven are here. We hike up the young, small volcano of Cerro Negro and board down the slippery black volcanic sand the other side. The ride is so terrifyingly exhilarating that I momentarily forget I'm on an active volcano. Less easy when we hike at dusk to the top of Telica and lie face down to peer



WE BOARD DOWN THE SLIPPERY BLACK VOLCANIC SAND. THE RIDE IS SO TERRIFYINGLY EXHILARATING THAT I FORGET I'M ON AN ACTIVE VOLCANO



into the angry orange cauldron of lava bubbling below.

Leon's only real competition for colonial charm and beauty is Granada, perched on the edge of majestic Lake Nicaragua, the second largest fresh-water lake in the Americas and still home to fresh-water sharks. There has always been rivalry between the two cities. After independence from Spain, the Nicaraguan capital switched between the two depending on whether the Conservatives or Liberals were in power. Granada, founded in 1524, was notoriously the only city that didn't rise against Somoza, a decision that means its spectacular buildings are remarkably well preserved.

We stayed in Managua for nostalgic reasons but visitors often bypass its unruly urban sprawl and make Granada their base. The city has undergone a major face-lift since we were last here and now rivals Colombia's Cartagena for picture-postcard perfection.

The coffee co-operative in the nearby Mombacho

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Volcano cloud forest, which produces some of Nicaragua's finest coffee, has become a major eco-tourism centre with hiking trails past fumaroles that spew sulphurous gas. A 1,500m zip wire with 17 platforms, the last one some 30m up a 250-year-old ceiba tree means you can hurtle through the cloud forest canopy competing with the shrieks of the spider monkeys.

In 1988 we were desperate to reach Ometepe, an exquisitely beautiful island formed by two huge volcanoes rising from Lake Nicaragua, but were thwarted by Hurricane Joan. There are now regular ferries from Rivas where you can watch smoke rise from Concepción, the country's most active volcano.

The island, a Unesco biosphere reserve, retains the air of a land that time forgot. Its geographic isolation means it has barely known any conflict since its first inhabitants, the Nahual, thought they had discovered the Promised Land in around 1,500BC. The island's



Clockwise from this picture Granada's Xalteva Church; a banner proclaims 'We fight to win! They won't come through!' – the motto of the People's Militia; children play on Lake Nicaragua, the cloud-tipped Concepción volcano in the background



only road is just 15 years old. When we fail to reach the top of the Maderas volcano, defeated by the mud and humidity, having been pelted with excrement by a tribe of howler monkeys, our excellent guide, Eric Enriquez, takes us down past pre-Columbian petroglyphs.

As we later recover with a swim in the warm waters of Lake Nicaragua, watching fishermen catch fish with hand-held nets and turtles emerge from the water beside us, it is difficult to escape the sensation that we have arrived in paradise. Even when our eldest son sits on a baby boa constrictor on the hotel terrace.

An airport has just opened on Ometepe. A 12-seater Cessna can get you to San Carlos, a ramshackle town at the mouth of the San Juan River within 20 minutes. The breathtaking flight snakes around the Maderas volcano, across Lake Nicaragua to the largest remaining lowland rainforest north of the Amazon. The rainforest that covers a fifth of southeast Nicaragua along the Rio San Juan was a war zone when we were last here, off limits to foreigners, but more significantly to loggers and poachers. As a consequence there is still a remarkable array of wildlife in its 19 ecosystems.

From San Carlos it's a two-hour boat ride to El Castillo, a charming riverfront town where the houses are on stilts and dinner at the Victoria Hotel is interrupted by sightings of an alligator in the water beneath the terrace. The town is located in the shadow of a 16th-century fortress built by the Spanish after English pirates had ransacked Granada three times. Its most famous assailant was Horatio Nelson, who in 1780 launched an expedition down

the San Juan from the Atlantic to seize the castle. After four weeks all but ten of his men had died, mostly from tropical illnesses.

And so we find ourselves canoeing down the San Juan River deep into the rainforest with Lenin, a biologist, local guide Darwin Ruiz Aleman (named after a literacy teacher who taught his father to read during the revolution) and Christian Piña, a fisherman and night spotter of alligators.

We know there are alligators before we head out because when we stop the canoe to walk on a rainforest trail, our daughter forgets the instruction to keep her hands in the boat, grabs some reeds only for an alligator to snap at her hand.

We hike into the grotto-like undergrowth of the rainforest along a trail. Darwin finds a bullet ant with enormous pincers that locals used to use to seal cuts. He identifies amazing flowers, dragon fruits that are fertilised by bats and bloom just for one night, birds of paradise, enormous intricate spider webs built by gold orb spiders to catch hummingbirds. We spot howler monkeys, spider monkeys, a giant sloth, toucans, lizards, iguanas and opossums. It is truly magical, 'an earthly paradise,' as Mark Twain wrote.

After a dinner of fish caught in the river, we go on a night tour in search of wildlife. Christian plucks animals from the river including a 3ft baby crocodile, an alligator, green frog and Jesus Christ lizard. We camp on an island where Darwin shows us the rusty remains of a paddle from a steamboat belonging to Cornelius Vanderbilt that dates back to the gold rush when it was so difficult to cross the US to reach San Francisco that prospectors preferred to come up the Rio San Juan, cross lake Nicaragua to Granada and then travel overland by mule to the Pacific Ocean.

The past and present bump together comfortably in Nicaragua. As we fall asleep to the noise of the river, a dramatic tropical downpour and jungle animals, I hope the country's incipient eco-tourism revolution delivers Nicaragua the future it deserves. *Green Pathways offers sustainable adventure tours across Nicaragua catering for all budgets (greenpathways.com, +505 8917 8832). Fiona Neill's new novel Look Away (£14.99, Michael Joseph) is published in April.*

## VICTORIA HOTEL, EL CASTILLO

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