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Contra to expectations...

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Nicaragua, a country best known for coffee, natural catastrophes and revolutionary politics, is turning to tourism as a way out of poverty. But what's the draw for potential visitors? Michael Kerr went to see.

On my second morning in Nicaragua I was held up at a roadblock and came face to face with the devil.

The roadblock was in the northern town of San Rafael del Norte. It was mounted not by soldiers in fatigues but by grinning schoolchildren in the national uniform of navy and white, taking part in a telethon.

They drew a rope across the bonnet of our car, jingled their buckets, gratefully accepted a few córdobas and then waved my guide and me on our way.



León's massive cathedral; a grieving lion guards the tomb of Rubén Darío

And the devil? He was in the church, a magnificent structure for a town of 15,000, with an altar of rocks made from the solidified lava flow of a volcano.

On the left of the entrance is a depiction of the temptation of Christ, in which the devil has a strangely familiar face, a face we had seen on several roadside billboards. That virile moustache, the piercing eyes, the beaky nose - it was the spitting image of José Daniel Ortega Saavedra, the president of Nicaragua.

Daniel Ortega is used to being demonised - but by the United States. He was a leader of the Sandinista Revolution of 1978-79 that ended 40 years of dictatorship by the Somoza family, a dynasty which, it is said, owned only one farm but that farm was Nicaragua.

If the Sandinistas' swift spreading of literacy was miraculous, Ortega's first spell as president, between 1985 and 1990, was closer to disastrous. He encountered growing

opposition at home - particularly for his censorship of the press - an economic embargo from the United States and armed rebellion by the US-backed counter-revolutionaries, or Contras.

Since being elected again last November, he has sold himself as a changed man. Nicaragua, the second poorest country in the hemisphere after Haiti (nearly half her 5.4 million people subsist on less than a dollar a day), desperately needs jobs, electricity and infrastructure, and Ortega sees tourism as the means of providing them.

He hopes to accelerate a boom that has seen backpackers, surfers and second-home buyers descend on the Pacific coast and colonial cities since the Contra war ended in 1990.

Tourism has already overtaken coffee as the country's main source of earnings. Visitor numbers reached 770,000 last year, representing an increase of 11 per cent in the past six years, and revenue totalled US\$230 million.

Among those 770,000 were 15,000 from Britain, a market Nicaragua hopes to nurture. For the moment, though, most visitors are from the US, whose citizens - those who have noticed the Contra war is over - see Nicaragua as "a new Costa Rica".

Nicaragua is bordered to the north by Honduras, to the south by the original Costa Rica, to the east by the Caribbean and to the west by the Pacific. Its geography is dominated by two lakes, Nicaragua and Managua, and more than 50 volcanoes.

It's the biggest but least populated country in Central America, a region characterised by the poet Rubén Darío as "esa América que tiembla de huracanes y que vive de Amor" - "that America that trembles from its hurricanes and survives on its Love".

Colonialists and natural catastrophes have both left their mark, but to the newly arrived visitor the legacy of the latter is more obvious. From my hotel room I looked out on a capital that has fewer buildings than trees. Managua, levelled in minutes by an earthquake in 1972 in which 10,000 people died, has never quite recovered.

There has been rebuilding, and in its Metrocentro it has a pink-and-cream mall as shinely superfluous as anything in Miami, but it remains a city with a hole at its heart.

I couldn't make sense of its layout until I was driven to one of its heights, in the Loma de Tiscapa National Park. There I looked down on it alongside a giant image of the man from whom the Sandinistas took their name: Augusto César Sandino.

Sandino (1893-1934) was Nicaragua's Che, a fighter against both US imperialism and home-grown despots. Like Che, he was assassinated but never died.

As with Che, too, his silhouette - or even just his hat - is enough to stand for the man. Throughout my 10 days he was a constant presence: on posters in the countryside, on murals in the cities, in sculptures and paintings in galleries, and in the briefings with which my guide, Juan Carlos Mendoza, illuminated my viaje de relampago, or lightning tour.

Juan Carlos, 46, had a less illustrious military career than Sandino. In his teens he was sent to live with a relative in California, where American food and American football made him a bigger than average specimen of Nicaraguan manhood. When he returned, he was conscripted. Expecting that his size would mark him out for early action, he found himself assigned, instead, to a ceremonial guard in Managua.

He lives there still and, with tourism picking up, expects to have less time with his family. For the moment, though, he reckons numbers haven't reached the levels of the 1980s, when academics by the busload "came to see what a revolution looked like".

Nicaragua's outdated image is the problem. In reality, he said, it is one of the safest countries in Latin America, with 12 crimes for every 100,000 citizens, compared with an average of 24.

He attributed this to the intelligence-gathering the Sandinistas developed when fighting Somoza: "They know how criminals work - they used to conspire against the system in the old days."

The British Foreign Office broadly agrees. Its website says: "Road safety, or lack of it, is probably the biggest single hazard to travellers in Nicaragua." I found myself seconding that as we drove north to the coffee-growing country, with its fresh mountain air, then to two places that are hotter both in temperature and as tourist destinations: the colonial cities of León and Granada.

We encountered riderless ponies, stately oxen, drunken pedestrians and families of four wobbling along on one bike. New roads were everywhere being built and old ones mended, but there were also craters and unmarked sleeping policemen that severely tested our Toyota saloon.

Students were a presence in both cities. In León they were Nicaraguan, gathered in groups of four or five, sharing a litre bottle of the local beer, Victoria, at circular tables; in Granada they were American, in ones and twos, tapping emails into MacBooks over caffè lattes.

Granada, with horse-drawn carts that give it a distinctive sound and smell, is more immediately appealing. It's shadier, too. León is a place of stifling heat, where, according to one chronicler of the Sandinista struggle, even the dogs go round with their tongues hanging out. But it has a soul that hasn't yet been mortgaged to tourism.

After León's massive cathedral, where a grieving lion guards the tomb of Rubén Darío, I had been keenest to see Darío's house.

Much more affecting, however, was a place I had written off in advance: the Museum of Legends and Traditions. I had assumed it would be a collection of kitsch. It is. But it gains power from its setting - one of Somoza's jails.

In former cells, the floors of which are painted the colour of dried blood, mannequins representing nursery rhyme and nightmare are posed in front of walls painted with scenes of actual torture: a man being kicked by a soldier, another having his teeth filed, a third being dangled from a mango tree. A notice about the mannequins, "No tocar los personajes" (Don't touch the figures), takes on unbearable poignancy.

Dictatorship and revolution, one suspects, aren't subjects mentioned often in the Granada office of Snider's Realty. A board in its window advertised "Beachfront Condos on Iguana Beach: 2 bedrooms, 1 bath, fully furnished with A/Cs, 915 sq ft, Private Gated Community."

Americans have also been snapping up real estate among Las Isletas, the 300 or so little islands formed 2,000 years ago when Mombacho volcano blew its top into Lake Nicaragua.

We took a boat trip through this refuge for weekenders and wildlife. Within half an hour we had seen three types of egret - great, little and snowy - a green-backed heron, a white-throated magpie jay, a family of spider monkeys, and a great kiskadee flycatcher, guarding its nest on a tipsy navigation marker.

"And that," said Juan Carlos, pointing to a marsh bird about the size of a chicken with blue and green feathers and long yellow legs, "is a purple gallinule. "We're lucky. It's difficult to see because it's kind of shy."

That evening, I walked at spider monkey height at Morgan's Rock, a 4,000-acre private reserve with views over a semi-circular beach and the Pacific. A suspension bridge links its rooms - or, rather bungalows - with its restaurant.

Going down to dinner, I found myself eye to eye with a juvenile howler monkey and, coming back - thank God for the wind-up torch guests are given - came closer still to stepping on a skunk.

In my bungalow, with its king-size bed, sofa bed, solar-heated shower and fussily sculpted taps, I was a prince, albeit an awkwardly solitary one, for Morgan's is most popular with honeymooners.

It's a retreat in more ways than one: as in those "gated communities", the only Nicaraguans you are likely to encounter will be the staff.

The Victoria Hotel in El Castillo was more modest, beyond the reach of interior designers, but compensating in the warmth of its manager, Magdalena, for anything it lacked in frills.

From Managua, El Castillo is a 45-minute flight to the grass airstrip of San Carlos, followed by a five-minute taxi ride, followed by a three-hour boat trip along the Río San Juan, which forms the border with Costa Rica.

I sat on the right behind the co-pilot, close enough to see the sweat on his colleague's face, and perfectly placed to snap the volcanoes of Ometepe Island, Concepción and Maderas, shouldering through cotton-wool clouds.

On the San Juan, we had a local guide, Efraín. He was softly spoken, his Spanish often drowned by the boat's engine, but together he and Juan Carlos ensured that I missed little of riverine life.

One moment they would be explaining that the farmer tumbling a cane over and over was measuring his field; the next they would be alerting me to look over there, for the heart-stopping swoop of an osprey.

El Castillo, a settlement of stilted houses with tin roofs, is named for its fort, which was once captured by Nelson. On its ramparts in late afternoon I was transfixed by an osprey's eye view of the river, a mini Amazon snaking sparkling through the green. I tore myself away only for a feast of river shrimps, which were as big and as succulent as promised.

On a night mad with stars, Juan Carlos and I stepped into a boat, fastened our lifejackets in the dark, and went off in search of cayman. The boatman in the bow, Hernando, swept a searchlight across the water and directed his companion to take us where the yellow eyes glinted back.

We saw a fish-eating bat and a Jesus Christ lizard - so called because it seems to walk on water. We puttered in under trees where kingfishers, flycatchers and a purple gallinule were fast asleep.

And we - or at least Hernando - jumped on to a bank, hauled a cayman out of its nest and held it up so we could get a good look at its teeth. It was only about 18 inches long, and two years old.

Juan Carlos had told me that the mothers stopped guarding their offspring after a year. But what if he were wrong? And how could those canoeists who had slipped passed us without even a torch possibly see where they were going? "They have eyes like the cayman," Hernando said.

We headed next for the Solentiname Archipelago, in the south-east of Lake Nicaragua, an area whose lush vegetation and bird life are wonderfully captured on canvas.

On arriving there in the 1960s, Ernesto Cardenal, priest, poet and minister of culture under the revolution, saw some cups that had been engraved and painted by a peasant; he decided the man had a gift worth developing. So began a movement in which schooling and talent have been passed down generations.

On La Venada island, we met two of its graduates, Rodolfo Arellano, 66, and his 20-year-old grandson, Julio. I bought one of Julio's paintings, reminiscent of the landscapes of Rousseau but brighter, lighter, its trees teeming with wildlife, from monkeys to deer to the purple gallinule that, by this stage, despite its shyness and without my resorting to binoculars, I had managed to see in the wild on three occasions.

For that and other experiences, I felt privileged to have visited Nicaragua. I felt apprehensive, too, on its behalf.

It is a beautiful and well preserved country partly because it is a poor and underdeveloped one. You can see how needed tourists dollars are, but also the damage that might be done in pursuit of them. Already, on the Pacific coast, ecologically minded hoteliers are complaining that ugly apartment blocks are popping up like toast.

In Solentiname, tourism is still low-key. On San Fernando island, Juan Carlos and I ordered dinner for seven o'clock. An hour later we were still waiting, for all hands were at the pump. To ensure we could shower, a pipeline into the lake was being extended - in the dark.

Next morning, low water was again a problem: as we returned from an outing our boat got stuck in the lake's shallows and we had to get out and push. But no one minded, for the outing had been Julio's painting come to life.

Eduardo Mairena, whose family owns the cabins we stayed in, had taken us into the Río Papaturro, a narrow rush-lined river in the Los Guatuzos Wildlife Reserve.

With us were two American women, who had been volunteering as English teachers. Eduardo had promised them lunch in San Carlos - a change from their usual beans and rice - and great wildlife-watching. He certainly delivered.

In a couple of hours we saw howler monkeys, turtles, cayman, Jesus Christ lizards and iguana, several species of heron and kingfisher, and - half a dozen times - a blackbird that, because of the bright red chevron on its wing, is known as the sargento or sergeant.

"Many sergeants," Eduardo joked. "The army is on the river now." It's the sort of army for which, I hope, Nicaragua will soon be better known.

Nicaragua basics

- Michael Kerr's flight with American Airlines (www.aa.com) from London to Managua via Miami was booked by STA Travel (0871 230 0040, www.statravel.co.uk). His tour was organised by Journey Latin America (020 8622 8491 or 0161 832 1441, www.journeylatinamerica.co.uk).
- A 10-night trip identical to the author's, visiting León, Granada, El Castillo and Solentiname, with a stay at Morgan's Rock, costs from £1,706 per person based on two sharing. That includes road and boat transfers and internal flights, all guided excursions, breakfast daily and some nights' full board.
- **Further information** Central America Tourism Agency (www.visitcentroamerica.com – click on "Idioma" for English); Nicaraguan tourist board (www.intur.gob.ni – in Spanish); Latin American Network Information Centre (<http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/ca/nicaragua>); Marena – in Spanish – the official body for protected areas (www.marena.gob.ni); the Latin American Travel Association (020 8715 2913, www.lata.org)
- **Guidebook choice** Footprint Nicaragua (£14.99).
- Michael Kerr blogs at www.kerraway.com

