

Nicaragua Retreats and Revelations

For Travel+Leisure

By Kate Joynes-Burgess, in and around Granada

Characters: 14,880 including spaces

Gazing at the tropical sun setting over Nicaragua's largest crater lake - la Laguna de Apoyo – I watched the mineral-rich water, dappled with gold, turn a deep midnight blue as the light faded. This is a place to lose track of time. Sun-soaked days fade into star-studded nights made more brilliant by the lack of light pollution. It's a real retreat. As I sipped a malty Toña beer, letting the warm air dry my swimsuit after an evening dip, I wondered how long this little piece of paradise could remain unspoilt. The resplendent lake is located only 25 minutes drive from grandiose Granada, the centre of Nicaragua's nascent tourist industry. Among the Americas' most celebrated colonial cities, competing openly with Chiapas' San Cristobal de las Casas, Granada is an ideal base for exploring Nicaragua's unique natural beauty.

The Laguna de Apoyo is one of many breathtaking destinations near Nicaragua's old capital. It was the perfect spot for unwinding at the start of my trip. The lake and surrounding forest – inhabited by a world of wildlife including howler and white-faced Capuchin– has enjoyed national park status since 1991. So far, shore-side development has been mostly small-scale and sympathetic like the San Simian Eco Lodge, where I rented a rustic cabaña. Local environmentalists continue to express concern about creeping development of the zone, particularly private houses. Yet the government agency charged with protecting the national park – el Ministerio del Ambiente y los Recursos Naturales (MARENA) – has an unlikely reputation for rigorousness in a country where respect for rule of law is low. No development is permitted within 30 metres of the shoreline and new construction is rarely allowed.

The evidence speaks for itself. San Simian is perched on a remote spot overlooking the volcanic lake just moments from its inviting waters, warmed by thermal currents. Accessible only by unpaved road, kayak or sailboat, you're unlikely to see another living

soul apart from the hotel's small staff and guests. A few other settlements are visible in the distance but none distract from the area's cobalt blue centrepiece. With only five cabañas, San Simian never gets too busy. Book ahead, because, once you get there, you won't want to leave. Cabañas consist of honey-coloured wicker walls and palapa roofs. Brightly decorated inside, they are equipped with mosquito nets and screens. Bring insect repellent anyway to avoid bites when you are out and about. Private en suite bathrooms - inspired by Balinese boutique hotels - are open to the elements, inviting guests to contemplate the sky as they shower, standing on smooth grey pebbles collected from the lake. If your time is short or the cabañas are occupied, you can use the facilities during the day in exchange for a small fee (US\$5 per person). I spent hours bathing in the pristine, therapeutic water while others hired catamarans and kayaks to navigate the lake. Hammocks slung between shady trees encourage a siesta after swimming or simply eating too much delicious local food. The little restaurant-bar serves breakfast, lunch and dinner plus fresh juices, cocktails and Nicaraguan beer. Visitors who can't live without all mod cons should opt for the Norome Resort and Villas. It is the largest, most lavish lakeside hotel but you sacrifice the magic of being close to nature in exchange for luxury.

The Call of the City

Once I had fully recharged my batteries at the water's edge, I was ready to reconnect with urban life. Hotel staff called me a cab into town and my driver battled the off-road conditions in his aging saloon car. After a short scenic drive and a revealing chat with trained economist Cesar, who, like many of the country's professionals is working as a taxi driver, we arrived at the stunning colonial city framed by volcanoes. I stayed at the Bohemian Paradise. Its classic colonial courtyard is furnished with rows of rocking chairs, the trademark addition to every *granadina* veranda. The hotel is being extended into the neighbouring building to include a swimming pool. Whitewashed rooms include hardwood furniture made by a local carpenter and comfortable beds with crisp cotton linen and artisan bedspreads. Manager "Doña" Lucy Bartlett - a stern American with a strong Spanish accent perfected over years of living in Madrid - employs local staff and uses a women's cooperative to supply handmade soaps and other extra touches to the

rooms. She keeps guests hydrated and healthy with free-flowing fresh juices and an unending supply of seasonal fruits. Granada's glut of hotels is distributed around the historic centre, which is expected to be named a UNESCO World Heritage Site before the end of 2008. Hotel La Gran Francia, a majestic *casona* dating back to the 16th century, is the best upmarket option. This sensitively-restored building maintains magnificent original features including traditional tiled floors. I sampled Nicaragua's national cocktail – el Macuá (iced white rum, guava and lime juice) - from the balcony of its bar, overlooking the candy-coloured cathedral and Parque Central (equivalent to el Zócalo). Late-night drinking places line the recently-renovated Calle la Calzada.

Even in Nicaragua's third city, the pace of life is delightfully slow. The tourist-friendly area is compact but not overly crowded. Not only is Nicaragua considered Central America's safest country – sometimes tied with Costa Rica – it is renowned as a land of lakes and volcanoes. Celebrated as a “nation of poets, Granada is the capital of the country's cultural scene. Important arts centres include the soaring 17th century Convento de San Francisco (Calle Cervantes con el Arsenal, +505 552 5535) with its permanent collection of regional archaeological artefacts plus visiting exhibitions. The Fundación Casa de los Tres Mundos (www.c3mundos.org) provides studio spaces to Nicaraguan artists and hosts important events from its base in the Casa de los Leones. These include the Central America Film Festival (August) and the International Poetry Festival (February - www.festivalpoesianicaragua.org.ni/).

Everyone is an artist or an art lover in Granada, creating an unmistakably Bohemian atmosphere. Many hotels and restaurants are run by liberal Americans who fell in love with Nicaragua while volunteering there in the post-war 1990s. Some, like Californian film-maker and chef Thalia Drori, who owns the vegetarian Café Melba, are providing creative opportunities to local residents. Her project *Cineastas de Granada* trains *granadina* girls in cinematography and production (www.cinegranada.com). Such activities are easing strained relations between *Nicas* and *Gringos* at local level after the disputed U.S intervention in the civil conflict. Arts-based projects run in tandem with

poverty reduction programmes in the hemisphere's second poorest country after Haiti.

Ciudad de Filantropia

Poverty is thinly hidden in Granada. Quaintly cobbled streets tidied up for tourists swiftly give way to impoverished *barrios* where children stave off hunger with solvent abuse. Carriage rides around the *centro* are drawn by emaciated horses, indicating their owners' inadequate resources. U.S.-based Building New Hope (BNH - www.buildingnewhope.org) runs a horse drivers' cooperative addressing equine health problems from the perspective that a healthy steed makes for a healthy business and better nourished family. You can make a difference during your stay, even if animals aren't your thing, through BNH's range of sustainable development projects. There are teaching opportunities at two *barrio* schools, Quinta Los Chavalos and Escuelita Yo Puedo. They welcome Spanish-speaking classroom assistants and specialists in subjects not available in public schools like music, earth sciences and computer literacy. Volunteers gain access to affordable accommodation to help them offer their services for a longer stint.

Sorpresas Epicurias

CafeChavalos is a BNH project that anyone can enjoy without lifting more than a knife and fork. Former street kids and *expandilleros* run an elegant but relaxed restaurant with an international repertoire, thanks to training from Mexican, Californian and even Liberian chefs. The *chavalos* (chavos) earn a wage and receive subsidised education to complete their studies. The café is just one of Granada's many gastronomic gems. For a romantic dinner, try El Zaguán serving chargrilled steaks and sophisticated versions of Nicaraguan dishes like the zesty – *Vigorón Granadino* – a yucca and cabbage salad. Las Colinas del Sur is a must for any visitor. A five-minute taxi ride from the *centro*, this unpretentious fish restaurant is *muy del barrio* with dirt floors and no frills. Start off with the Nicaraguan beer snack *los tostones*: thick slices of fried green plantain topped with salty local cheese and *pico de gallo*. *Guapote* (rainbow bass fished from Lake Nicaragua)

is their classic maincourse, which is perfectly pan-fried with onions and spices. Ask for it with *gallo pinto* (rice and beans) so you don't overdose on plantain. Back in the centre, Imagine Café-Bar serves home-grown and organic food often with an Asian slant. Its chef and founder Kevin Leigh Cohen also offers atypical tours - fishing, hiking and waterskiing – to some of the area's lesser-known attractions.

The Call of the Wild

Ecological wonders are close at hand. Mombacho Volcano, looming over Granada, is just 10 km away. You can visit the summit and organic coffee plantations on its slopes through local tour operators. I chose a daytrip to the Masaya Volcano National Park, which included a hike around its smoking and dormant craters. Back in Granada, the heat and humidity left me yearning to be on the water again. A trip round Lake Nicaragua's archipelago - las Isletas - was just the thing for the following day. Some of these 350 tiny islands are home to the rich and famous while others are nature sanctuaries. I caught a cab to La Cabaña Amarilla (10 cordoba per person) where a leisurely tour of the islands (2-3 hours) by lancha, with room for six passengers, set me back about US\$30. I went mid-week when there are fewer tourists and ate at the simple Restaurante Doña Justa on the Isla Correviento, which serves the prerequisite *guapote*. It is the only eating option because most islands are not publicly accessible. Swimming is permitted off Correviento but the water is cleaner further out.

Lake Nicaragua harbours even more idyllic destinations if you can spare a couple of weeks. Among them is Isla Zapatera, the largest island of the same archipelago and a national park. Travelling by public ferry, from Granada's other embarcadero at the east end of Calle la Calzada, takes three hours (check locally as timetables are unpredictable). By motorboat you can be there in two. The island's Sonzapote community offers overnight stays in dormitorios or tiendas de campaña (US\$5). Alternatively, sleep in a hammock or bring your own tent (US\$3). Four hours from Granada is the mystical Isla de Ometepe. An imposing isle (measuring 279km²), forged by twin volcanoes Concepción and Maderas rising out of Lake Nicaragua, it is great for hiking and beach fiends who

want to escape the crowds. Ometepe is locally renowned for its nature trails and playas vírgenes, particularly at Punta Jesús. It promises days of relaxation and outdoor activities if you could only spare the time. Don't wait too long. Soon the rest of the world will realise what this overlooked Central American nation has to offer. Maybe volunteering is the way forward.

Guía de Granada y sus areas de belleza natural

Cuándo ir

Granada's rainy season runs from May to November. Travel is best between December and March when the landscape is still verdant from the rains.

Como llegar

Aeroméxico flies direct to Managua (Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday), US\$299 return. Ask your hotel to arrange airport pickup in advance, US\$30-40; Shuttle bus costs US\$15 per person (+505 552 8291 / +505 831 9879 / reservas@paxeos.com). The journey takes around 45 minutes.

Donde quedarse

Laguna de Apoyo

San Simian Eco-Resort

Laguna de Apoyo; +505 813-6866 / +505 850-8101 / Cel.552-0313 / Fax +505 552-0407 / www.sansimian.com; una cabaña con cama matrimonial US\$45 (para una persona) US\$50 (para dos personas). Todos los precios incluyen impuestos y un gran desayuno.

Norome Villas and Resorts

Laguna de Apoyo; +505 270 7154 / +505 270 7155 / www.noromevillas.com; double room from US\$70-90 including breakfast (15% tax not included).

Granada

Hotel La Gran Francia

Esquina Sureste del Parque Central / +505 552 6002 / +505 552 6007 / Fax +505 552-6001 / reservaciones@lagranfrancia.com / www.lagranfrancia.com / Double room from US\$110.

Bohemian Paradise

Calle Coral con Martirio; +505 552 0286 / fax +505 552 0267 / cel

++505 649 2404 / www.seecentralamerica.com/hotel-nicaragua/index.php

/ double room from US\$50.

The Little Hilton (volunteer house)

Calle Santa Lucia y Calle Martirio; Contact Lilly Filipow +505 552 0239 /

+505 833 4352 / santaluciasocialclub@yahoo.com

Donde comer

Granada

Café Melba

Vegetarian restaurant serving international, often French-inspired food, including tasty breakfasts. *Calle El Martirio, +505 645 5479*

Café Chavalos

Usually open for dinner Friday to Monday but call ahead to avoid disappointment.

Calle El Arsenal, esquina con El Martirio / +505 852 0210 / +505 833 4352

Café-Bar Imagine

Calle La Libertad, una cuadra del Parque Central al lago / +505 552 4672 /

zapateratours@yahoo.com

Las Colinas

Open for lunch and early dinners.

Calle Atravesada, south of the city, passing the Mercado Municipal / +505 552 3492

El Zaguán

Calle El Arsenal, el costado este de la catedral / +505-552-6451

Como hacer el recorrido

Taxi

Ask your hotel to book you a taxi *de confianza*. They can often negotiate a better rate. Drivers often double as informed tour guides, enthusiastically sharing their local knowledge with foreign visitors. You can also ring this company direct.

Servicio de Taxi Expreso:

Mario Rocha M Cel. 838 1210

Franciso Miguel M Cel. 931 1888

Guided tour

CAST

We chose this Central American company's Tour Clásico Masaya (US\$60 per person including lunch), which takes in the pretty hillside "pueblos blancos" including a potter's workshop at San Juan de Oriente, creating sophisticated ceramic designs that are unique to the pueblo.

Calle la Calzada (Frente a la Casa de la Mujer) / +505 552 8302.

Zapatera Tours

Tailor-made tours of Zapatera and Ometepe islands.

+505 842 2587 / zapateratours@yahoo.com / Or enquire at Imagine Café

Turismo Rural Comunitario Sonzapote;

Community development project giving visitors access to local guides, fishing trips and rustic accommodation. +505 899 2927 / +505 941 2584 /

info@sonzapote.org