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DRIVE-IN

PLUS: MEET JASON BAKER

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Catarina Mirador view of Laguna de Apoya

SHOCK AND AWE: NICARAGUA

BY ROBERTA SOTONOFF

The night is black as coal. Gioconda Cabrera, dressed as a 19th-century señorita, leads our horse and carriage tour—to a graveyard. With only a penlight for illumination, we walk the main path. Marble tombs and a huge chapel stand like giant apparitions. Cabrera stops. At the tombstone of Fruta Chamorro Pérez, the first president of Nicaragua, Gioconda breaks into a haunting aria. I can only imagine how spooked a passerby would be.

Operatic singing in a cemetery in the dead of night can be a bit shocking. But Nicaragua is full of shock and awe. The interesting kind of shock, that is. Steam-spewing volcanoes, quaint colonial and resort towns, an ecolodge where you pick your breakfast eggs from a henhouse, plus mouthwatering cuisine. It's reasonable, friendly and safe. Nicaragua, Costa Rica's northern neighbor, is a pleasant surprise.

Short on attractions and long on fast food restaurants, Managua isn't awesome. So, we hit the road. Bumpy streets are often shared with chickens, dogs, horsecarriage, pigs, goats and umpteen Toyotas.

First stop: Parque Nacional Volcán Masaya. In 1529, when the Spanish smelled its sulphur and saw steam-spewing volcanoes, they thought this was the "mouth of Hell." To save themselves, they erected a giant cross. One still remains.

Nicaragua's volcanoes blow me away. Volcán Concepción and Volcán Maderas soar thousands of feet from Ometepe Island on the windy Lake Nicaragua (Lago Cocibolca).

Sometimes I prefer browsing crafts instead of craters. Nearby El Masaya Mercado Viejo Craft Market is a pleasant shock; vendors don't hassle tourists. Their chockablock of stalls sell vibrant artwork, brass, leather, pottery and chochkes. We purchase two handcrafted hammocks for \$24.

A bit farther south in Catarina, streets are lined with wood carvers, flower vendors and basket makers. Just up the hill, Catarina Mirador clings to a cliff above the Laguna de Apoya. The red tile roofs of Granada, founded in 1524, dot the spectacular panorama.

We visit Granada during the Artists and Poets Festival (February). Colorful paraders like Spanish dancers, mariachi-type bands and grim reapers halt traffic for hours.

Our digs, Hotel Gran Francia, has a restaurant that was once home to a phony French Duke, Georges Choisseul Praslin. The bar's bizarre décor (like handcuffs and guns) doesn't stop us from enjoying the local beer, Victoria.

On our morning plaza tour, Gioconda warbles her way past monuments, markets and historic, pastel-colored buildings. Inside the grand, Spanish-styled, yellow cathedral, she lets

loose with a beautiful aria that resonates against Granada's crown jewel walls. Then her phone rings. To retrieve it and a notepad, she stuns us by hoisting up her dress. From Capri pants pockets underneath her skirt, she conducts her business call.

We pay Gioconda (\$5, plus tip) and head for Mombacho, Nicaragua's most prominent volcano. Navigating 17 ziplines and two suspended bridges over Mombacho's banana trees and through lush cloudforest at Canopy Tour MiraValle gives me an ultimate rush.

Next stop is San Juan Del Sur, a popular surfing, fishing and beach destination. Like the one in Rio de Janeiro, there is a large statue of Christ atop one of the mountains.

Perched upon another hill, overlooking the town and the sea is Pelican Eyes. Like most places in Nicaragua, this hotel is not geared for the faint of heart. It shocks my lungs to climb the 61 steps to our room. But from up here, the sunset is breathtaking.

Down in the village, restaurants and T-shirt vendors border the beach. It surprises me that the most popular items are Fidel Castro and Ché Guavara T-shirts. Then again, Nicaragua's closest trading partner is Cuba.

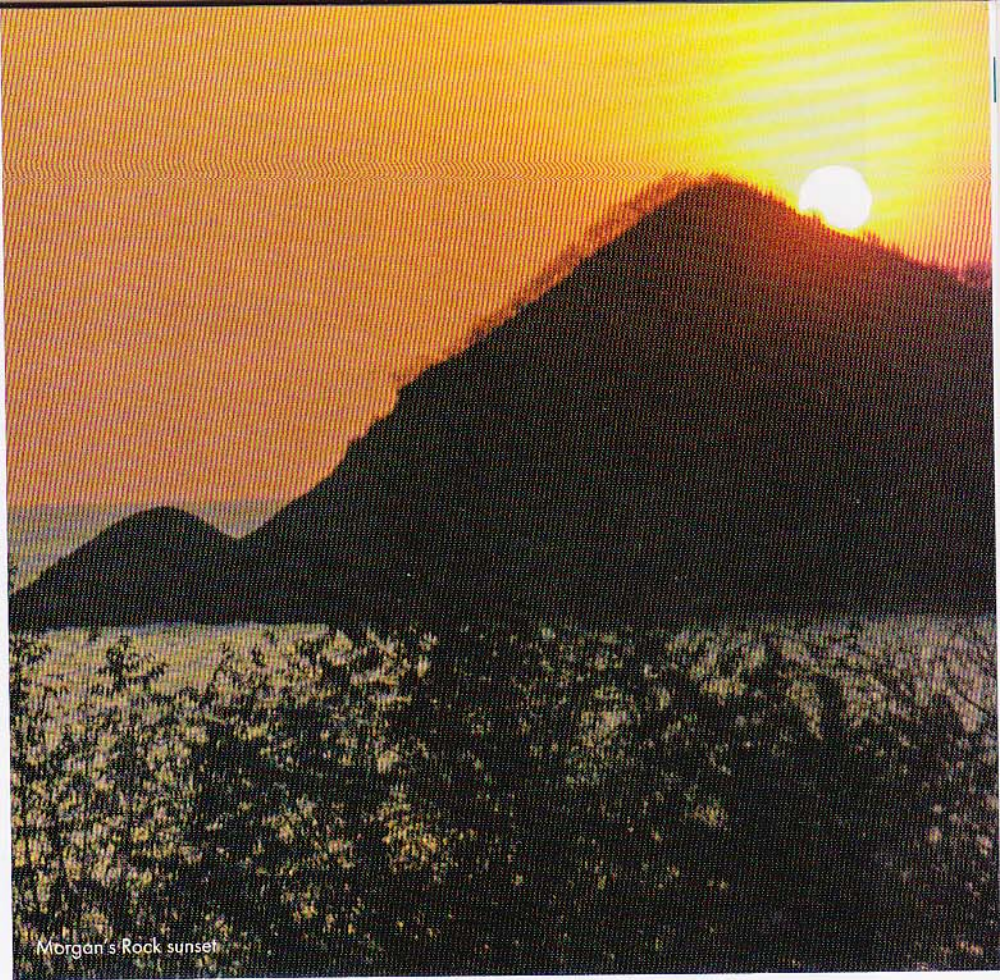
At El Calibri, the flamboyant Britt owner is only outdone by the restaurant's eclectic decorations—Indian, Asian, and African. Chicken Supreme, a breast stuffed with nuts and raisins, is delicious and reasonably priced—about \$30 for two, including wine.

But the time has come to traverse the bumpy road south to Morgan's Rock Ecolodge. Wedged within a crescent-shaped bay is its secluded, brown-sand beach. The gentle sound of the sea is never far away from the thatch-roofed bungalows that dot the hillside. Each has ultra-cool, curly-cue copper piping that serves as bathroom sink spouts and huge lounge-like hammocks on the deck—perfect for that afternoon nap.

Morgan's Rock's 7,000-square-acre wilderness is accessed by trucks, foot, mountain bike and kayak. During a hike, holler monkeys scamper across the trees. Birds and lily ponds fill the lagoon on our kayaking trip.

The cuisine is amazing. Just thinking about their cashew and coconut pancakes makes me salivate. At "Breakfast at the Farm," we milk cows, pluck the raw material the hens have laid for our breakfast and make tortillas. The meal is fresh and delicious!

Nicaragua is awesome. I can't wait to return. 🇳🇮



Morgan's Rock sunset



Catrina flower vendors

INFORMATION

Nicaragua Tourist Board: visit-nicaragua.com
Nicaragua is difficult for physically challenged visitors. Unless you speak Spanish, get a driver.