

Passport Newsletter

Celebrating Our 46th Year

June 2010



Armin C. Hansen, Men of the Sea, 1920, oil on canvas, gift of Jane and Justin Dart, collection of the Monterey Museum of Art.



In the June Issue:

Monterey

Botswana

Nicaragua

Wales

and much more

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NICARAGUA

Jungle Gym for Travelers

Although a great many American travelers have visited Costa Rica and raved about its gorgeous scenery, exotic wildlife, fine hotels, excellent restaurants and friendly people, very few of those who travel to Santa Rosa or Gunacaste National Park or Silvestre Wildlife Refuge realize that they are only a few miles from the Nicaraguan border and from the delights of this largely ignored country.

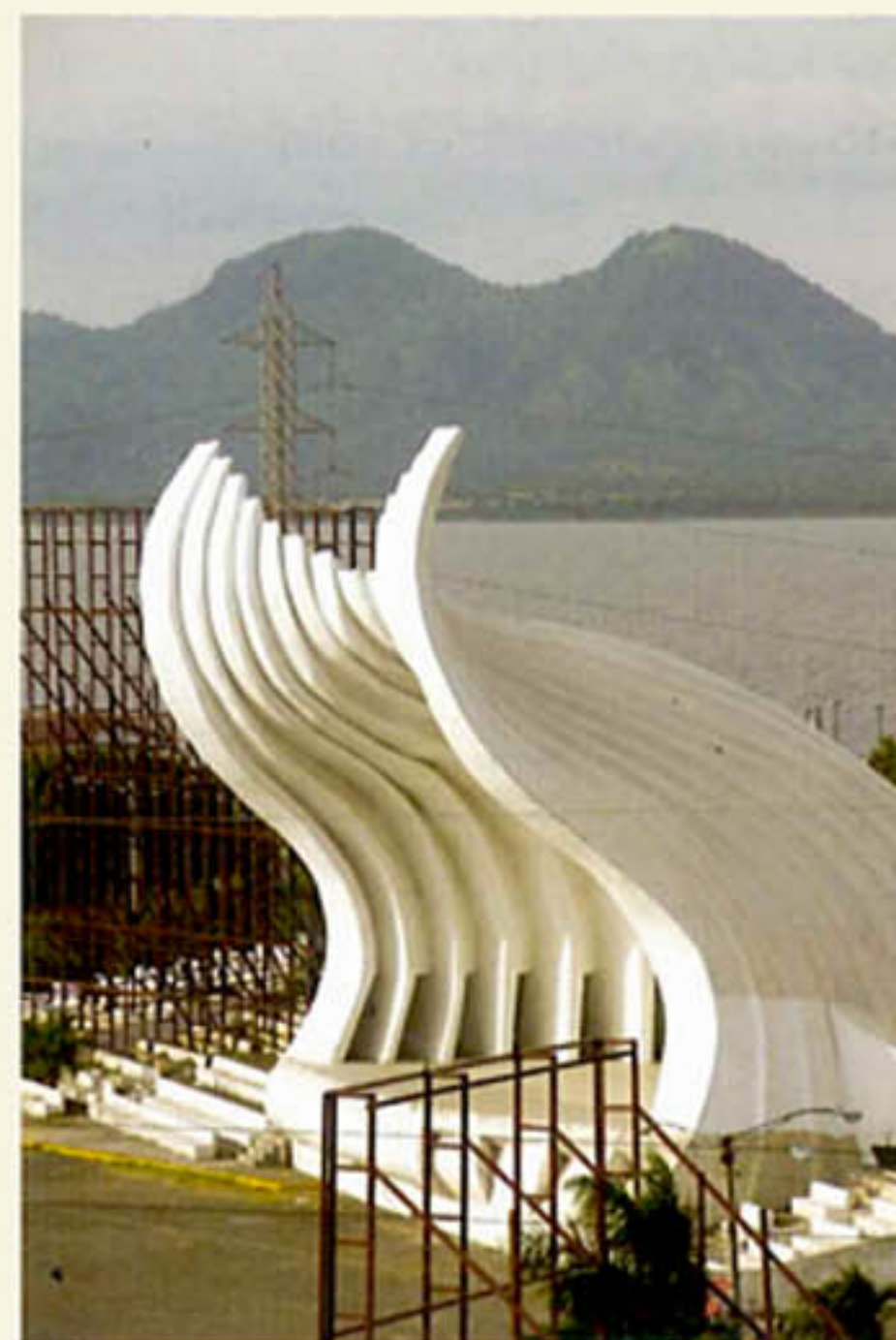
Nicaragua can be compared with the Costa Rica of about 25 years ago, before its tourism facilities were fully developed. Much like its neighbor to the south, Nicaragua offers breathtaking volcanoes rising above Lakes Nicaragua and Managua, quaint colonial towns, delicious food, succulent fruit, rich coffee, and craft markets where vendors won't hassle you. It's affordable, safe and not yet overrun by hordes of tourists.

Managua, the capital and site of the country's only international airport, has little to offer. If you need a hotel to overnight before or after setting out into the country, the **Contempo Hotel**, near the airport, is satisfactory. All 18 rooms have iPod dockers, plasma TV and

Internet; some have Jacuzzi tubs and multi-head showers. (One room has a sunken Jacuzzi that could be difficult for getting in and out.) The staff is friendly, and there's a free shuttle from the airport. Doubles from about \$120. Km.11 Carretera Masaya. Tel: 505-2279-9226. www.contempohb.com.

Leaving Managua, it's best to hire a car and driver as many of Nicaragua's roads are poorly marked and in need of repair. With your driver/guide, go about eight miles to Masaya National Park, where the principal attractions are steam-spewing volcanoes. Nearby, at El Mercado Viejo, you'll find stalls selling vibrant artwork, brass, leather and pottery. Prices are very reasonable; a handcrafted hammock goes for about \$15.

Further on, at the village of Catarina, wood carvers, flower growers and basket makers line the streets. The sweeping view from the Catarina mirador (highest viewpoint) takes in the Apoyo Lagoon as well as Lake Nicaragua with the Mombacho volcano on its far shore and, beyond that, the town of Granada. Food stalls on the mirador serve tasty local dishes.



La Concha Acustica (left) is the acoustic shell of the music stadium on Lake Managua. In Granada, the city center is punctuated by the bright yellow Granada Cathedral.

At Granada, **La Gran Francia Colonial Boutique Hotel**, just off of the main plaza, is thought to have been built in the 16th century. It was once the home of the notorious French Duke Georges Choiseul-Praslin, who escaped from Paris in 1847 after murdering his wife. (She had discovered he was having an affair with the governess.)

La Gran Francia is Granada's oldest hotel; but restored in the 1990s, it offers modern amenities, including free Wi-Fi, air conditioning, TV and mini-bars in each of its 21 rooms. Hand-painted city scenes accent the bathroom sinks.

The hotel's restaurant, across the street, has a lovely courtyard and, more than that, the food is quite good. Doubles from about \$100, including breakfast. Tel: 505-2552-6002. Fax: 505-2552-6001. www.lagranfrancia.com.

Next, head south to the Pacific seaside town of San Juan del Sur, which gets a fair number of visitors who come for the beaches, sailing, fishing, and surfing. Overlooking the village is **Pelican Eyes Resort**, one of the country's most luxurious properties. Its 72 accommodations include rooms in the main building as well as several types of free-

standing casas and casitas.

The décor features white stucco walls, high beamed ceilings, and arched doors. All rooms have Wi-Fi, DVD players, flat screen TV, and kitchen facilities; large units have fully equipped kitchens and dining areas, and some of the larger units have private pools. The hilly landscape requires robust hiking between rooms and restaurants.

The menu at La Cascada Restaurant offers both Nicaraguan specialties and international dishes, all quite well prepared. Lunch can also be taken at Bistro La Canoa, which is beautifully sited amidst lush bougainvillea plantings. Doubles from about \$325, including breakfast. Tel: 505-2563-7000. Fax: 505-2568-2592. www.piedrasyolas.com.

About 20 minutes from San Juan del Sur, **Orquidea del Sur** is a luxury B&B overlooking Yankee Beach, one of the country's best surfing venues, attracting advanced surfers from around the world.

Each of the five rooms has hand-carved furniture and vivid artwork, and the whole place was designed by an American couple who wanted to create a restful getaway. Here, their guests can unwind and enjoy the natural surroundings as well as facilities for hiking, riding, fishing, snorkeling, and ecological study trips. Doubles from about \$180, including breakfast. Three night minimum stay. Km. 12 Ostinal

Road, Playa Yankee.

www.orquideadelsur.com.

Less than an hour south of San Juan del Sur, off a bumpy side road, lies **Morgan's Rock Ecolodge**, situated on a pretty, crescent-shaped bay. Its 15 natural wood, thatched-roof bungalows have no interior walls, but each is surrounded by forest, and privacy is not a problem. Each is well appointed with a king-size bed and queen-size sofa, indoor and outdoor showers, functional bathrooms, and private decks with bed-shaped hammocks.

Guests are encouraged to participate in nature walks – both day and night – with a trained guide. In addition, there are opportunities for ocean fishing, mountain biking, surfing and horseback riding. Therapeutic massages are also available. Guests get from the bungalows to the dining room by crossing a 325-foot wooden bridge that hangs over a forested canyon.

Because Morgan's Rock is a working farm, much of the food is produced on site. Fish is same-day fresh, and there is always a bountiful selection of fruits and vegetables; chicken and meat are also served. We were quite taken with the cashew/coconut pancakes at breakfast. Doubles from about \$250 per person, including all meals, hiking and biking. Tel: 505-8670-7676.

www.morgansrock.com. 