

Intrepid types hike the crater rim of Cerro Negro volcano, then surf down the slope; swimmers bask in Laguna del Tigre.



KRISTIN JACKSON / SEATTLE TIMES / JCT

Don't fall on your ashes

'VOLCANO-SURFING'

Nicaragua eyes success of Costa Rica

By KRISTIN JACKSON

With a grin and a sprightly pace, Rigo Sampson led us on a steep trail up the face of Cerro Negro, a stark 400-metre volcano. Through black cinders we trudged, past sulphur-stained rock and steaming vents to the dark volcanic cone that thrusts ominously out of the lush Nicaraguan plains near the city of León. In this Central American country laced with dozens of volcanoes, Cerro Negro is one of the most active. In the 1990s, a fierce eruption spewed rocks, ash and lava and sent farmers fleeing from nearby villages and fields.

These days, Cerro Negro is an offbeat destination for adventurous hikers who take one of the steep trails to the top and then "volcano-surf" to the bottom, leaping and sliding on their feet down the side. Standing at the summit and peering down what seemed like an almost vertical slope, I was among eight hikers who took off, one by one, to surf on our feet through the small black cinders. "Lean back, lean back," Sampson hollered as we struggled at first to find our balance, sometimes sinking shin-deep in ash.

It had taken us an hour to hike up to the crater's barren, windswept summit, in 10 minutes of exhilarating volcano-surfing we were back at the bottom. Sampson, 38, who leads tours of the region, zoomed down in less than five minutes.

Volcano-surfing isn't what many of us associate with Nicaragua. Instead, what lingers is images of poverty and civil war, and of the left-wing Sandinistas battling the U.S.-funded Contra insurgents in the 1980s. Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega, who led Nicaragua through the overthrow of the Somoza military dictatorship

and the war against the Contras, is back in power, elected last year as president. He's 61 now, his revolutionary Marxism pretty much spent. Since a 1990 peace deal, impoverished Nicaragua has opened its doors to capitalism, foreign investment and tourism, spurring economic development that Ortega doesn't want to lose.

Tourism is growing fast, thanks to Nicaragua's dramatic landscape of lush rain forest, steaming volcanoes, white-sand beaches and Spanish-colonial cities dotted with centuries-old churches. With neighbouring, prosperous Costa Rica serving as an example of how lucrative eco-tourism can be, Nicaragua is trying hard to protect its natural beauty, creating national parks and nature preserves and struggling to curb logging.

Latin Americans and Western Europeans have been visiting Nicaragua for years, lured by a more-adventurous and less-touristy experience than Costa Rica. It's tourism in the rough, though, outside the major cities and the sun-and-run beach town of San Juan del Sur.

Roads, with the exception of the relatively well-maintained Pan-American Highway that traverses Nicaragua, can be riddled with axle-busting potholes and wandering livestock. Oxen, pigs, horses and chickens saunter among cars and the tiny tin-roofed, dirt-floored homes that edge the roads.

Electrical blackouts are common (some hotels and restaurants have their own generators), and public transport

consists of jammed, rattling buses, most of them old school buses, still the familiar bright yellow. Only a foolhardy tourist would drink the tap water.

The upside? As long as you bring your patience, a sense of humour and a good flashlight, Nicaragua is an enticing place to travel, with remarkably courteous locals who aren't yet jaded by too many tourists. And it's inexpensive. A (very basic) room can be found for \$10 to \$15 a night almost anywhere. A comfortable beach-side cabin on the idyllic island of Omotepe is \$50. A sprawling two-bedroom vacation house (with giant TVs, kitchen, icy air conditioning and pools and gardens all around) at the Pedras y Olas resort in San Juan del Sur starts at about \$170 a night. Hot and dusty after surfing down Cerro Negro volcano, we would have welcomed a cold shower. Instead, we drove deserted, rutted dirt roads, passing a few tiny farms and men on horseback, and hiked for a half-hour to something far better: a hidden lake in the crater of another volcano.

The bathtub-warm Laguna de Asososca sits hundreds of metres down in a crater, encircled by steep slopes cloaked in trees. There wasn't a building for miles, nor a sound, save for our laughter as we swam and floated in the lake, nicknamed Laguna del Tigre after the jaguars that once prowled its shores. Another volcano loomed above, its slopes covered in greenery, vapour drifting from a rift high on its flank.

Rigo Sampson has been com-

■ Consult a travel agent or a tour company such as Sunquest Vacations (sunquest.ca), Air Canada Vacations (aircanada.vacations.com) or Carlson Wagonlit (cwtvacations.com) for information on airfare and packages to Nicaragua.

■ Cerro Negro volcano is about 30 km from León, much of it on dirt roads. A high-clearance vehicle is useful, and it's best to have a guide to explore it and Laguna del Tigre (reached via private farmland).

GUIDES

■ León-based guide Rigo Sampson works with local and foreign tour companies. Among the companies offering Cerro Negro hikes:

■ Tours Nicaragua is a Managua-based company that offers multi-day tours throughout the country. toursnicaragua.com.
 ■ Quetzaltrекkers is a nonprofit group based in León that offers day hikes of Cerro Negro and other volcanoes; its earnings support street kids. quetzaltrекkers.com/nichome.html.
 ■ Las Plías-El Hoyo Rural Tourism Co-operative manages the Cerro Negro natural reserve. With advance notice, guided hikes and horseback trips can be arranged through the group. E-mail: laspliaselhoyleon@yahoo.com.

WHERE TO STAY

■ In León, lodging ranges from backpacker hostels to hotels in

restored colonial buildings. One of the nicest of these is El Convento, a reconstruction of a former convent that adorns a 17th-century church. A double room is about \$85 a night, including breakfast in the patio restaurant. hotelconvento.com.ni/english.

TRAVELLERS' TIPS

■ The official currency is the cordoba, though the U.S. dollar is also widely used.

■ A valid passport is required to enter the country.

■ Travellers should take precautions against mosquitoes, which can transmit malaria.
 ■ Though the crime rate is low compared to nearby El Salvador, travellers should beware of street crime in the capital, Managua, particularly in markets and aboard crowded buses.

WHEN TO GO

■ Nicaragua is a tropical climate and hot year-round. Temperatures along the Pacific side, where the major cities and popular beaches are located, are in the high 20s and low 30s. The rainy season ("winter" in Nicaragua) goes from roughly May to October; the dry summer season is November to April.

MORE INFORMATION

■ Vianica.com, run in cooperation with Nicaraguan tourism offices, has extensive information on visiting the country.

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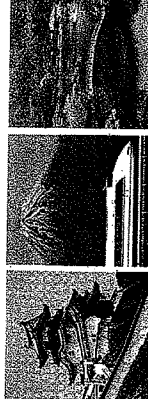
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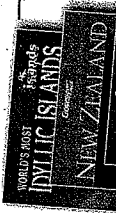
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