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LESS OF A WELL-KEPT SECRET, MORE A SLOWLY AWAKENING GIANT, NICARAGUA DRAWS ON ITS TUMULTUOUS HISTORY TO OFFER A UNIQUE VISION OF CENTRAL AMERICA

WORDS & IMAGES:
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It's been more than 500 years since anyone was thrown into the crater of a volcano in Nicaragua, a fact that gives me some comfort as I lace up my hiking boots and set off for the summit of Volcán Maderas, one of two ruptures that protrude through the mineral-rich waters of Lake Nicaragua to form Ometepe Island.

But it's a small comfort. Two days previously, Volcán Telica erupted 200 kilometres away in northern Nicaragua, covering local towns and villages in ash. It was only a minor rumble by Nicaraguan standards, but it doesn't seem like an opportune time to start dabbling in volcanic exploration.

If there is one thing that Nicaragua is not short of, it's volcanoes. The Central American republic is dotted with 40 of them, curving in a vast arc along the Pacific side of the country.

It was because of seismic activity below the Nicaraguan soil that plans to build a canal connecting the Atlantic and Pacific oceans were abandoned a century ago. Instead, the Herculean task was carried out in Panama, which is now the wealthiest country in Central America – a source of some bitterness for Nicaragua.

Successive Nicaraguan governments, both democratically elected and those established by military force, have revisited the idea, but it has never materialised. Now, after more than a century of deliberation, the dream appears to be becoming a reality.

In June 2013, Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega announced that a 50-year concession to construct the canal and various sub-projects, including ports, a free trade zone, hotels and an international



airport, had been awarded to HKND, a Hong Kong-based holding company led by Chinese telecom billionaire Wang Jin.

If you haven't heard much about the Nicaraguan Inter-oceanic Grand Canal, you're not alone; very little is known about the project, other than the party line that it will create thousands of jobs, and the proposed route, which has caused some consternation among land owners and environmentalists.

The 260-kilometre canal will run from the Atlantic coast to Lake Nicaragua

– the largest lake in Central America. From there it will continue to the Pacific, loosely following the path of the Brito River, meeting the ocean less than five kilometres from the gleaming greens and prime real estate of Guacalito de la Isla: Nicaragua's first purpose-built community for the super-rich.

Carlos Pellas is one of Central America's richest men, with a business empire that includes banking, insurance, real estate, media and sugar, as well as the wildly popular Flor de Caña rum company.



This entire stretch of southern Nicaragua is an intrepid traveller's adventure playground. The laid-back surfer haven of San Juan del Sur is just 20 kilometres to the south, and a collection of picturesque beaches and boho boutique hotels is strung all along the coast, from sleepy Playa El Gigante down to the Costa Rican border.

But the canal plans don't seem to have dampened the enthusiasm for developing Nicaragua's tourism credentials – quite the contrary. In mid-May, it was announced that Asia's eco-chic Six Senses hotel company would take over Aqua Wellness Resort – a sustainable eco-lodge a few kilometres up the coast from Mukul – and open up to five more resorts in Nicaragua with local partner Lionheart Nica.

Trevor Barran, who founded Aqua in 2010 and now heads up Lionheart Nica,

After a lifetime spent building up his family business, the philanthropic billionaire opened, in 2013, what he calls his "legacy project", Mukul Beach, Golf & Spa.

The 37 ocean-facing villas of Mukul form the backbone of Guacalito de la Isla, which is Nicaragua's first mixed-use luxury hospitality and residential development. Inland, an 18-hole David McLay Kidd-designed golf course and 600 luxury residential villas will eventually become the nation's most exclusive community, complete with a beach club,

private security and a fleet of golf carts to whisk residents and guests around.

Watching the sun drop below the horizon from Mukul's infinity pool, the monstrous roar of the Pacific in the background, it seems unfeasible that the skyline might soon be dotted with the world's largest container vessels. The 1.2-kilometre beach in front of the resort is one of the best spots in Central America for surfing and sport fishing, and the rugged cliffs against which the six-foot waves explode beckon hikers and mountain bikers.

doesn't seem worried about the canal, "There have been something like 70-plus plans to build a canal in Nicaragua's history, so we're not really thinking seriously about what the new plans for a canal will bring," he says from his Managua office. "If and when it does move forward, it will certainly be good for the tourism and economy of Nicaragua."

As well as the Pacific Coast, he says Six Senses hotels will appear in the colonial city of Granada and on the volcanic slopes of Ometepe Island, where I was about to climb a volcano.

Walking through the foothills of Volcán Maderas, a wealth of bird and animal life makes its presence known: white-throated magpie jays and blue-crowned motmots sing overhead as iguanas and lizards scurry about. My guide spots a brown vine snake camouflaged on a branch, and I disturb a red and black banded false coral snake, which slithers over the toe of a boot and into the twisted roots of a ficus tree.

Howler monkeys exchange throaty roars in the treetops and a lone white-faced capuchin scampers nervously across a branch as we reach the edge of the crater rim. The path descends into a lush green bowl half-filled with a crystal clear

volcanic lake; it's like a scene from *The Lost World* and I wouldn't be surprised to see a dinosaur crash through the undergrowth.

On the way back down, we're treated to an epic panorama of Volcán Concepcion, the larger of the two on the island, framed by the silver Lake Nicaragua. Off to the right, somewhere over the misty horizon, the dry land of western Nicaragua gives way to the jungle-covered interior, and a few hundred kilometres beyond, the coconut-strewn shores of the Caribbean coast.

A one-hour flight from Managua, the Corn Islands are like another world. Here, palm trees bend lethargically over buttery yellow beaches, reflected in water that dazzles in shades of jade and turquoise. Locals shimmy up trees to cut down fresh coconuts and call out to each other in a lilting Creole dialect, while beachside restaurants serve platters of hand-caught lobster tails dripping in butter and garlic sauce, all to the soundtrack of reggae music.

At Yemaya Island Hideaway, an eco-retreat on the north coast of Little Corn, private cabins are dotted along the palm-lined beach, a few steps from the lapping waves of the Caribbean. There are no roads on Little Corn, so guests



are plunged feet-first into island life when they jump off the back of the skiff, Miss Yemaya, and wade on to the beach. It's barefoot luxury at its rustic best.

Daily yoga and meditation sessions on a beachfront deck, as well as free use of kayaks, snorkelling gear and SUPs make Yemaya a hit among fans of healthy living, but it's just as inviting for those who like their travel to involve spa treatments and long afternoons sipping fresh coconut juice while lolling in a hammock.

Here, no one seems too concerned about the canal. Locals spend their days fishing, playing baseball or making lobster pots, while many of the foreigners who own dive shops, hotels and lodges on the island consider it too far-fetched to worry about.

"We all hope that the growing pains of a poor country and the influx of foreign money into projects like the proposed canal will not undermine the thriving tourist economy," says Adam Clarke, who runs Dolphin Dive Little Corn, one of two PADI-licensed dive shops on the island.

Change is evidently underway on the Caribbean coast: from where we sit on the terrace of Tranquilo Café, illuminated by the screens of at least a dozen laptops, tablets and other devices, the crowd presents a cosmopolitan mixture of backpackers, divers, affluent travellers and bright-eyed young things in yoga gear.

The Corn Islands feel like their own secret world, more Caribbean than

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Nicaraguan, but judging by the extensive development, with new hotels and expatriate homes sprouting all over, everyone wants a slice of island life.

In the early afternoon, when bright sunlight pools in every corner of the city and only fools and tourists leave their shaded hammocks, the sound of a brass band cuts through the thick still air of Granada.

The charming colonial city slopes from west to east down to the shores of Lake Nicaragua, its grid-patterned streets bursting with architecture in the style of its Spanish namesake: ancient convents, magnificent churches and leafy parks that provide some shade from the afternoon heat.

From the bell-tower of Granada's Iglesia de la Merced, I soak in the 360-degree views: Lake Nicaragua shimmies to the east; Volcán Mombacho rises to the south; and Volcán Masaya and the picturesque Laguna de Apoyo beckon to the west.

Two hundred kilometres away in León, Granada's long-term rival, it's a similar story, but the characters are different. Volcán Telica has stopped erupting by the time I arrive, but its dome is clearly visible from the roof of Asuncion Cathedral, a baroque masterpiece that looms over the ice cream vendors and souvenir stalls of the city's Central Park.

León is the liberal counterweight to conservative Granada; it was here that student protests and radical opposition groups stood up to the dictatorship of



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the US-backed Somoza family, who lorded over Nicaragua for 43 years.

In the Museum Of Heroes And Martyrs, dedicated to those killed during the struggle for independence and the civil war that followed, my guide, who identifies himself only by his former *nom de guerre*, Juanito, explains the whole bloody history of 20th century Nicaraguan politics. In between the rhetoric, Juanito shows me how to operate a shoulder-fired anti-tank missile, and explains the risks of using Molotov cocktails in a combat situation. It's gritty stuff.

Nicaraguan history is so recent that its after-effects are tangible in León, where political slogans are inscribed on almost every wall, and murals depicting Nicaraguan and foreign revolutionaries such as Che Guevara, Simon Bolivar and Emiliano Zapata appear all over town.

Revolutionaries and rocket-launchers aren't the only explosive things in León. It's been 12 days since Volcán Telica erupted, but it's still on red alert and overnight tours to the upper slopes of its cone won't resume for some time, so I opt for the next best thing.



Volcán Cerro Negro, the youngest and most active volcano in Nicaragua, is a stone's throw from Telica. From the summit of the former, you can clearly see its restive neighbour, but Cerro Negro's two gaping craters, each speckled with yellow and red sulphurous rocks that ooze eggy gas, are far more immediate.

At the north face, the black scree slope pours away from the ridge at a 40-degree angle that seems extremely steep from where I'm standing, dressed in a green boiler suit and clutching a rudimentary sledge. "Just lean back and keep your feet in the air," says the guide, before disappearing over the rim.

I briefly reflect on the liberal approach to health and safety in Nicaragua and wonder for a split-second what impact the Grand Canal will have on León and its tourism industry, then take a deep breath, shuffle forward and look to the sky.

Nicaragua is no untouched wilderness by any stretch of the imagination. It's a country that has emerged battered and bruised from years of civil strife, reeling with PTSD and stricken with poverty. But it's that historical baggage that makes the nation so compelling – that and its Dante-esque topography and a predilection for the spectacular. Whatever its appeal, the secret's out and Nicaragua is marching towards a future that seems, from where I'm sitting at least – on top of a volcano – to be brighter than it has been for the last five centuries.



Emirates offers daily passenger flights from Dubai to three destinations in South America including Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires. In addition, Emirates SkyCargo operates freighter service to Quito in Ecuador and Campinas in Brazil.