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# DEPARTURES

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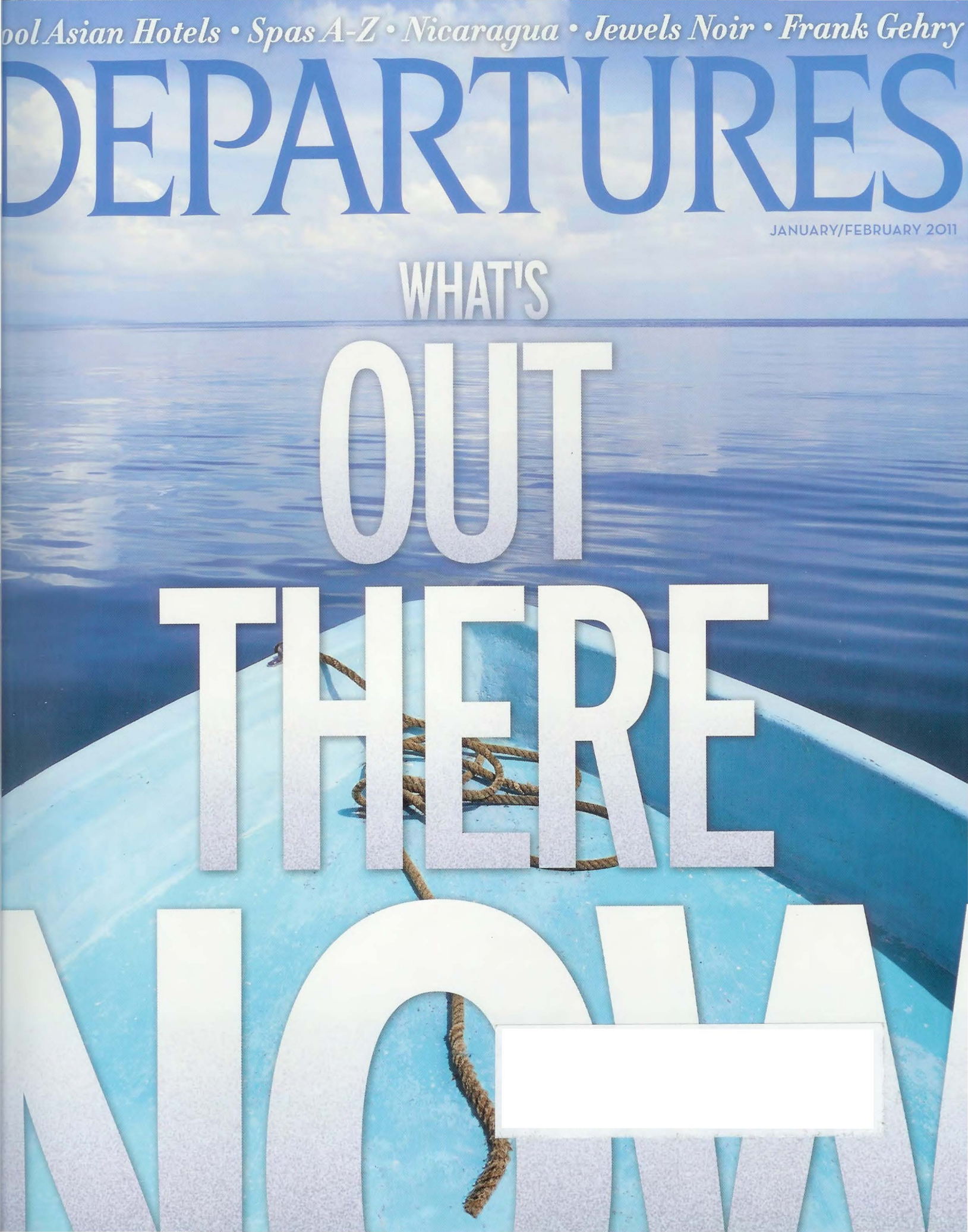
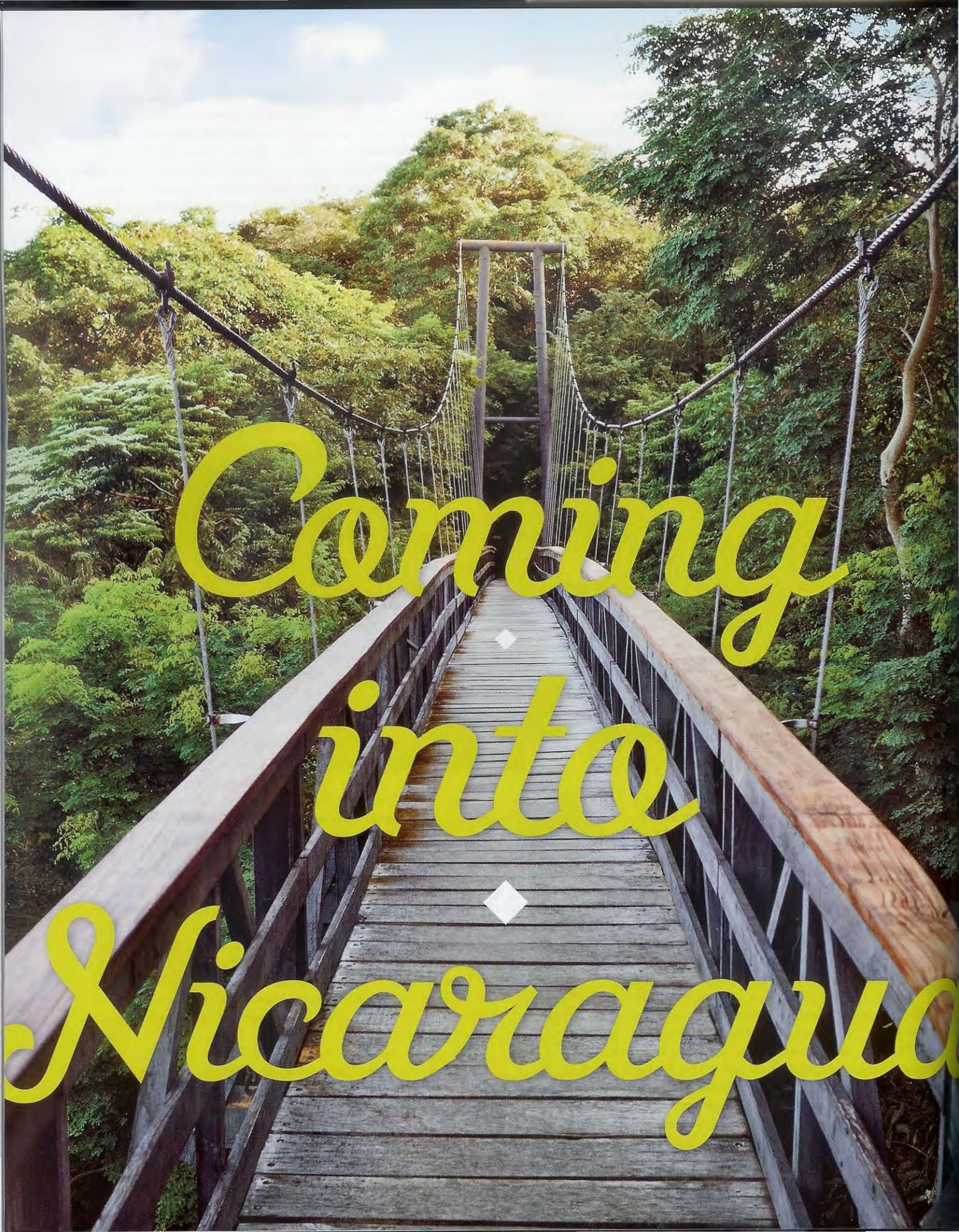
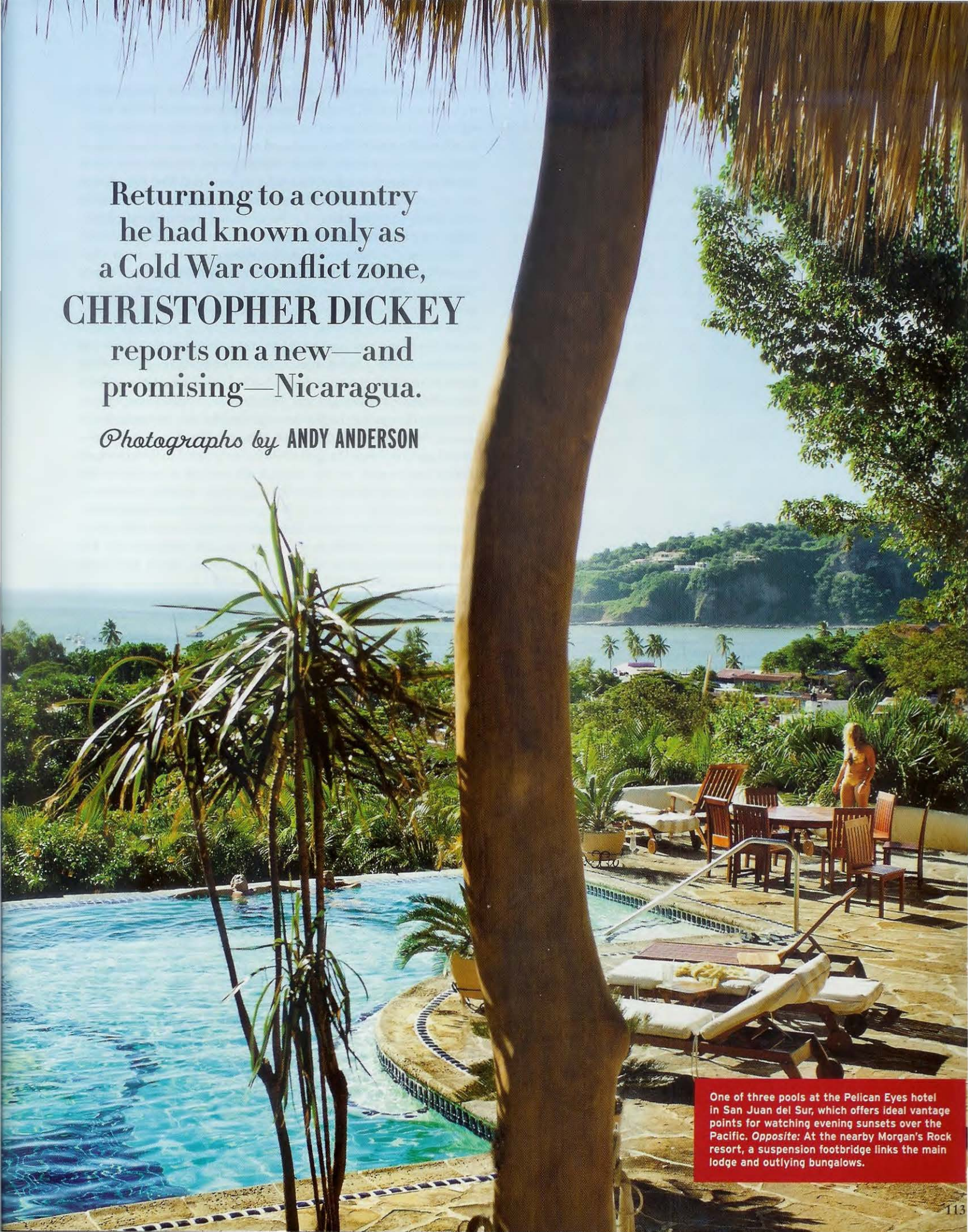


## WHAT'S OUT THERE NOW


Coming
into
Nicaragua

Returning to a country he had known only as a Cold War conflict zone, CHRISTOPHER DICKEY reports on a new—and promising—Nicaragua.

*Photographs by* ANDY ANDERSON



One of three pools at the Pelican Eyes hotel in San Juan del Sur, which offers ideal vantage points for watching evening sunsets over the Pacific. *Opposite:* At the nearby Morgan's Rock resort, a suspension footbridge links the main lodge and outlying bungalows.

A LITTLE OVER A QUARTER-CENTURY AGO I traveled in Nicaragua during a time of war, and I'd often wondered if I would love it as much in times of peace. As a young *Washington Post* correspondent in the early 1980s, I covered combat and conspiracies throughout Central America. I wrote a 1985 book called *With the Contras: A Reporter in the Wilds of Nicaragua,* and those had been wild days indeed. I'd almost died there, in the mountains near the Honduran border. Now I was going back for the first time.

The French might call this *nostalgie de guerre,* that longing for the intensity of risk and the crazy bravery of combat. But what I was looking for was more subtle, the kind of place that Joseph Conrad or Graham Greene or Ernest Hemingway sought out. I mean those wildly exotic settings populated by self-selected castaways and wise but weary locals, lands that seduce not only with their luxuriance but also their edginess. I'd always thought of Nicaragua as one of those destinations for people who are, if not on the run, looking to make a getaway, and though I wasn't ready to drop out just yet, I couldn't resist the idea of blending into that world of hot sun and sweet rum, cigar smoke, spectacular landscapes and welcoming people.

What I recalled from my years in Nicaragua were images glimpsed in passing of vast lakes and volcanoes looming on the horizon and the great cowboy romanticism of the countryside. Every so often you had to stop your car to let drovers on horseback march their longhorned steers across the road, and the stucco-walled, single-story towns seemed, particularly upon reflection, like the kind of places where you could hide out forever. But when I was there, living through the grinding chaos of war, that scenery was just a backdrop to my stories, and I never could stop and breathe it all in. There were too many *comandantes* and Contras to write about.

For most of the eight years that Ronald Reagan was in the White House, the backwaters of Central America felt like the center of the whole troubled world, the front lines of the vast Cold War. The Cuban-inspired, Communist-backed Sandinista rebels had overthrown the American-installed Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua in 1979, and revolutionary fervor, along with brutal counterrevolutionary repression, was spreading north through El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. The CIA's answer was to back the Contra rebels trying to overthrow the Sandinistas.

In those old days, in the middle of everything and trying to make sense of it all, I used to hole up with friends in hotel rooms where TV news crews set up their editing gear. We'd watch pirated films that reflected the madness we were living. I can't tell you how many times I saw Woody Allen's classic *Bananas,* a send-up of every revolution Latin America ever had, and Mel Gibson and Sigourney Weaver in *The Year of Living Dangerously,* which was set in Indonesia but had lots of palm trees and just the kind of fearsome weirdness that surrounded us in Central America.

Then the Cold War ended, and so did the revolutions and counterrevolutions. In the words of a friend and former Peace Corps volunteer who came and liked what he saw and stayed, "Nicaragua sort of fell off the map." Indeed, it had fallen off mine.

So my returning was, I confess, partly to reminisce about those days long past, and to celebrate surviving them. But it was also about seeing what the country had become and looking for a notion of its future. As I boarded my Delta Airlines flight from Atlanta to Managua, the Nicaraguan capital, I was vaguely worried that peace might have denatured the country, that it would be filled with low-rent tourists who for some reason didn't go to Costa Rica. But as far as I could tell, there were almost no tourists on the plane at all. Instead, I was surrounded by a church group from Missouri on a weeklong outing to do mission work in remote villages. Some were a little giddy, even raucous. "Watch out," shouted one of the men. "We've got Baptists back here! We're going to start throwing water!" The part-time missionaries dissolved in laughter, and I knew that whatever Nicaragua was about to be for me, it would not be about package tourism.

The Managua airport, recently rebuilt and expanded, gleamed with glass and steel and the gadget shops and coffee bars that make up the global culture of air terminal twilight zones. But outside the little parking lot, the Pan-American Highway was lined with the same ramshackle food stands that had always been there. The only apparent difference was that some now bore fresh red and white paint, courtesy of Coca-Cola. The taxi driver opened the car windows to the gentle night air. With it came the smell of corn tortillas and the smoke of cooking stoves as we made our way into the strangely vacant cityscape.

The center of Managua, devastated by an earthquake in 1972, was never entirely rebuilt, and the specter of that long-ago shock lingers in the way people give directions. Instead of using street names and numbers, they cite local landmarks, some of which have sprung up recently, some of which have long since disappeared: Go to where such-and-such used to be, people tell you, or go to the fast-food joint that was never there before. Those were the sort of instructions I had to give the driver on the way to my hotel. As he drove, I started to settle into the quotidian surrealism of Latin American life that Gabriel García Márquez, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* called "an intricate stew of truths and mirages."

**I couldn't resist the idea of blending into that world of hot sun and sweet rum, cigar smoke and spectacular landscapes.**

Time froze in the half-lit streets of a working-class neighborhood. Freshly scrawled graffiti proclaimed *"Viva el FSLN"*—long live the Sandinista National Liberation Front—the same slogan you saw 30 years ago, perhaps even limned by the same hand. But now, I knew, bearded revolutionaries had become tycoons, and erstwhile communists had declared themselves born-again Christians. Thus the living anachronism Daniel Ortega, the Sandinista president in the eighties, has returned to power in a country that wants to be famous not for ideology but for idylls. "We fight against the *yanquí,* enemy of humanity," they used to sing. Now they summon travelers to their "eco-amazing" shores to surf and swim, to hike their jungle trails, to snowboard on the black sands of their volcanoes.

Managua has a few pretty good international hotels these days: the Hilton, the InterContinental and the pyramid-shaped Crowne Plaza (the former InterContinental), where eccentric billionaire Howard Hughes hid out in the early 1970s and where I spent my first days in Nicaragua. The old Intercon was the center of Managua's social and diplomatic life back then. You'd come across Filipino revolutionaries and Libyan functionaries, Italian communists and American human rights activists. Bianca Jagger hung out by the pool in the afternoons, then went to dusty roadside restaurants wearing Halston to eat steaks, drink Coke and talk politics late into the night.

Being there now, I decided the new hotels were too new and the old ones had, really, too many memories. So I bunked that first night at the little Casa Naranja, a bed-and-breakfast with the air of a boutique hotel. I ordered a Flor de Caña rum with Coca-Cola as a nightcap, smooth sweetness on top of sweetness, with a little bite. In my room, a gecko crawled across the ceiling, defying gravity. The fan whirred gently, hypnotically. I slept easily. In the morning, after a breakfast of scrambled eggs mixed with chorizo, rice and beans, tortillas and guava jelly spread across the extraordinarily airy bread called *pan de agua,* I was fortified for a journey into the country's history as well as my own.

GETTING AROUND NICARAGUA BY CAR, AT LEAST IN THE most frequently touristed areas in the western part of the country, is fairly easy—and safe—thanks to the brand-new highways that now lace together the major towns and cities. Rather than renting a car, I hired a driver for around a hundred bucks a day and traveled comfortably to my first stop, Granada, about an hour's drive south of Managua. Built in the 1500s, then sacked by British pirates, rebuilt, then burned to the ground by American adventurers who briefly conquered the country in the 1850s, Granada now gleams, restored, like a collection of rough-cut jewels near the shores of a vast inland sea that has many names but is best known as Lake Nicaragua. Horse-drawn carriages still meander through the pastel streets, past the ancient convent and the cathedral. Locals gossip, sip soft drinks and play with their babies around the fountain and trees of Plaza Colón. In the shade of columned porticoes from colonial times, Americans and Brits, Germans and French, who are sunburned pink and shining with sweat, stroke the cool dew on the sides of their Victoria beers. Granada, I thought, would be the ideal getaway—if so many others had not had the same idea.

Over the last 20 years, the old city has become the expatriate capital of the country, a society of transients who never quite leave. On the side streets, Internet cafés and hostels, bars and

**The scenic coast near Morgan's Rock (above); a dish of *guapote* fish from Las Colinas del Sur, in Granada.**

Rodeo bar, in Granada, where locals and expats sip cool drinks in the shade of columned porticoes from colonial times.

little restaurants attract a steady flow of backpackers, adventurers, retirees and real estate speculators. Tour companies organize excursions onto the lake or into the cloud forests on the Mombacho volcano, which looms over Granada like Vesuvius towering over Naples, only closer. There's an elegant and unobtrusive hotel, La Gran Francia, just off Plaza Colón, with 21 rooms and an atrium surrounding a small pool that feels like a world all its own. Granada no longer seems so deliciously anachronistic as it once did. And yet, if it was not the wilds of Nicaragua, it still gave a good first taste of that delicious, slightly unpredictable and utterly unpackaged otherness I was seeking.

A SHORT BOAT RIDE FROM GRANADA, ON A TINY private island out in the lake, sits the Jícaro Island Ecolodge. Beautifully situated, it's a recent example of just the sort of ecotourism Nicaragua is promoting. On the way there I watched ospreys hunting and cormorants diving. Mombacho loomed in the background, with the only clouds in an otherwise clear sky hovering just above its crater. There were a handful of guests in the Jícaro bungalows that day, and over lunch with the hotel manager and a couple of tour operators, the conversation soon turned to the history that many people trying to build Nicaragua's travel industry see as the country's curse.

Nicaragua is in fact one of the safest places—maybe the safest place—in Central America. The wars are long over, even if contentious politics remain. The police force is respected and effective, and there's almost none of the gang-related crime that has given Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras some of the highest murder rates in the world. Yet it is Nicaragua's image from those long-ago war years that lingers in the global imagination. "If we had none of that history, like Costa Rica, it would be a different story here," said Pierre Gédéon, the director of Nicaragua Adventures, a local company that provides transportation and tours, often for clients of Leigh Ann Cloutier, whose Austin company Rico Tours specializes in travel to Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

**Even if contentious politics remain, the wars are long over. Nicaragua is now one of the safest places in Central America.**

In the afternoon, my driver and I set out for San Juan del Sur on the Pacific Coast, taking roads built in the 1850s by the American tycoon Cornelius Vanderbilt. Now *that* was a travel industry. At the height of the California Gold Rush, hundreds of thousands of people on the East Coast of the United States suddenly wanted to be on the West Coast, but the transcontinental railroad was still just a dream. Wagon trains crossing the United States could take months, and it would be another 63 years before the Panama Canal was built. But Vanderbilt managed to organize a route that would take you from New York to San Francisco in 20 days by crossing Nicaragua. His ocean liners put you on the Caribbean coast at the mouth of the San Juan River; specially built iron-hulled riverboats ran upstream through the jungle and over the rapids to Lake Nicaragua; another steamer took you across to a spot south of Granada; and then all that separated you from the Pacific was an easy transit of about 12 miles to San Juan del Sur, where another ocean liner picked you up for the final leg of the voyage to San Francisco.

All that ended later in the century, as railroads joined one coast of the United States to the other and then the Panama Canal joined the seas. By the time I first visited San Juan del Sur in the 1980s, more stray dogs than people wandered the streets. But the town has been repopulated in recent years by surfers and sun-seekers, backpackers and retirees, whose languorous days are interrupted every so often in the winter months by brief invasions of cruise-ship tourists.

Where to hide out? A top American diplomat in Central America, an old friend from the war years, recommended a resort that's called Pelican Eyes in English and Piedras y Olas (Stones and Waves) in Spanish. Built on a steep hillside at the back of town, it offers one spectacular view after another from its restaurants and rooms and from three swimming pools, each at a different altitude. The bay during the day is beautiful, but Pelican Eyes is focused above all else on the evening spectacle of the sun settling beneath the far edge of the Pacific. Whether over a drink or lying by the pool, or both, it's easy to slip into that tropical reverie that shows you, at last, the green flash.

In the end, though, I went a few miles up the coast to Morgan's Rock, another ecolodge and probably the most famous in Nicaragua. The property is a curious mix of the primitive and the sophisticated, and staying there is a little like an upscale safari. The 15 gracefully designed bungalows are perched on a hill above the sea, accessible from the main buildings only by crossing a long wooden suspension bridge, then hiking up a short trail that seems to grow steeper later in the day. There are no televisions in the bungalows, no telephones or WiFi, and the coverage for iPhones and Blackberries is spotty. There's just the gentle rhythm of the sea and, every now and again, animals calling out in the forest. The beach, down another winding trail, is wide and white and utterly deserted except for the few people who venture onto it from the hotel.

IN THE EVENING, AFTER WATCHING THE SUN SET AND BEING summoned by the Morgan's Rock staff to see newly hatched baby turtles scrambling across the sand to the water, I had a subtly spiced dish of lobster and fish as fresh as it is possible for lobster and fish to be. At the bar I listened to an engineer from Chicago talking about his expertise in guns and beers, an interlude that lent a certain Graham Greene–like aura to the evening. In the morning, a member of the staff delivered coffee through an opening in the door of my little compound. I rinsed off in the outdoor shower, then went for a ride on horseback through miles of forest trails on the hotel's property.

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The wrangler and guide, a long-faced man in his fifties who'd tried farming and couldn't make a go of it (he also said he'd tried marriage and it didn't work either), was one of the few people I'd met who remembered the war firsthand in this country, where the median age of the population is only 22. "We were running from the dictator," he said. "We were running from the Sandinistas. We were running all the time." Ambling through the forest, we spotted howler monkeys and three-toed sloths among the flowering branches overhead. A little over an hour later, we emerged onto an expanse of beach and loped back toward the lodge. I was settling into a rhythm of something like pure relaxation. And yet this was not quite what I was looking for. It was all too organized, a little too perfect.

It was time to head north, to less-frequented towns, less-traveled roads, to the mountains I once thought I'd never escape.

FOR THIS PART OF THE JOURNEY, I HAD FAMILIAR COMpany. My friends Alejandro Benes from Miami and Robert Rivard from Texas, journalist veterans of the old wars, flew into Managua a couple of days after I got there, and we arranged to meet in Estelí, about a hundred miles up the Pan-American Highway. The choice of venue was calculated for a reunion of our old boys' club: Estelí is the center of the country's cigar industry, the site of the Joya de Nicaragua factory (founded in 1968) and Padrón cigars (founded in 1970) as well as makers of less-famous brands.

Don Orlando Padrón and his son Jorge are good friends of Alejandro's, and with accommodations in Estelí being sparse, we accepted an invitation to stay in their home, next to the factory. I don't smoke often, but when I do, I like to smoke well, and in Estelí (where Don Orlando lights up first thing in the morning), I was looking at the world through a redolent fog of the finest tobacco.

During the revolution Estelí was a battleground, and Don Orlando, who had earlier escaped the coming of Fidel Castro in his native Cuba, still keeps a picture on the wall of his factory as it looked in May 1978, when the Sandinistas burned it down. On the streets outside, his buildings are freshly painted, but Don Orlando has never allowed workmen to plaster over the bullet holes. Don Orlando knew the man, a local doctor, who led the Sandinista forces in Estelí. "They named a hospital after him," he said, drawing on his *puro* and squinting through the smoke with the quiet indignation of an octogenarian who has a long memory.

In fact, peace has long since been made in this town of farmers, cattlemen and cigars. It's what sets Nicaragua apart from the other, more troubled, countries around it.

"I will tell you about the revolution," said Antonia Cruz Molina, who sells produce in Estelí's outdoor market. Now in her 40s, she was in her teens at the time of the CONTINUED ON PAGE 120»

## The DETAILS

**With its civil war years well behind it, Nicaragua is now one of the safest nations in Central America, largely free of the drug trafficking and organized crime that plague neighboring Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. Which is great news for travelers drawn to this country of tropical forests, undeveloped beaches, soaring volcanoes and world-class coffee, rum and cigars. Its history reads like a surreal *telenovela*—part dark comedy, part lyrical tragedy. Indeed, this patch of Pablo Neruda's "sweet waist of the Americas" never fails to provide great stories.**

**That said, Nicaragua is best avoided by those expecting elite hotels and Michelin stars. For more adventurous travelers, Rico Tours in Austin, headed by Nicaragua-Costa Rica specialist Leigh Ann Cloutier** *(512-303-0001; ricotours.com),* **helps create customized itineraries, working closely with the local guide Pierre Gédéon and his Granada tour company, Nicaragua Adventures** *(505-8/988-8127; nicaadventures.com).* **Delta has direct flights to Managua from Atlanta, American flies from Miami, and Continental from Houston. There is an Alamo car rental at the Managua airport** *(505-2/277-1117; alamonicaragua.com),* **and despite some poor signage, it's entirely possible to drive yourself in Nicaragua and not get too lost. Here, some suggestions for staying on track.**

### MANAGUA

**Low-key, frayed at the edges and not at all shy about it, the Nicaraguan capital isn't trying to keep up with the Joneses, and it suits this authentic city just fine. Big hotel chains are here—Hilton, InterContinental, Crowne Plaza—but one of the few places with real charm is Hotel Los Robles, a comfortable, well-located 14-room inn in a traditional Nicaraguan house with a lovely central patio, garden and fountain** *(rooms, from $102; 505-2/267-3008; hotellosrobles.com).* **At La Casa de los Nogueras, Spanish chef Jean-François Noguera Bussalleu serves up excellent Mediterranean-inspired dishes** *(dinner, $25; 505-2/278-2506).* **Perhaps the best design shop in all of Nicaragua is Simplemente Madera, which pioneered responsible use of Forest Stewardship Council–certified hardwoods in its elegant furniture** *(505-2/278-1478; simplementemadera.com).*

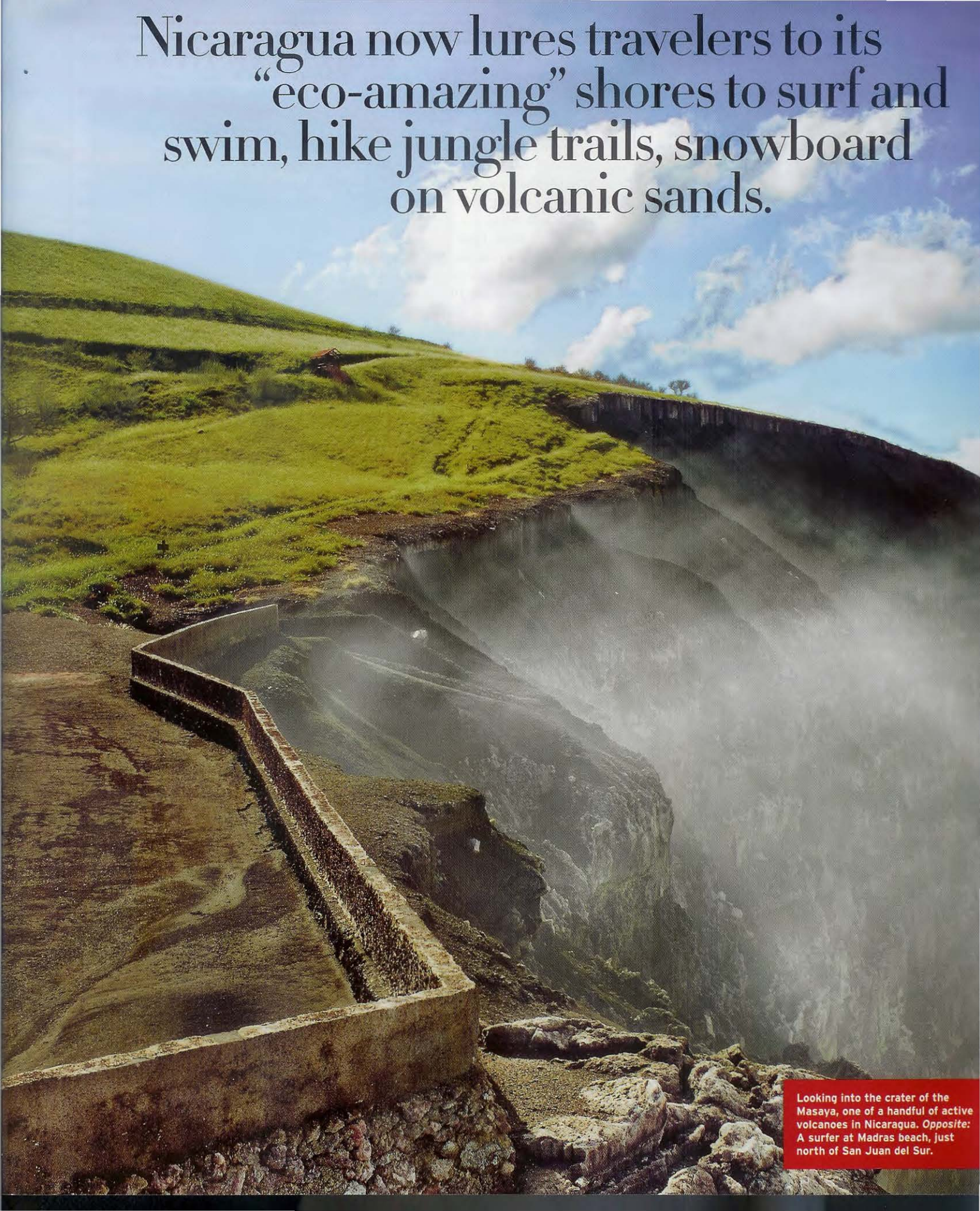
### GRANADA

**An hour's drive south of Managua, Granada nearly feels like a movie set, where robin's-egg blue, mint, salmon and fuchsia buildings act as a backdrop for salsa dancing, rum drinking and very professional strolling. Lake Nicaragua is perfect for boat trips to the *islets,* an archipelago formed by the Mombacho Volcano, while zip lines give visitors access to nearby tropical forest canopies. In town, the lovely eight-room Hotel La Bocona** *(rooms, from $90; 505-2/552-2888; hotellabocona.com)* **occupies a renovated 19th-century mansion, as does La Gran Francia (named after an infamous French duke), which has 21 comfortable rooms and a pool** *(rooms, from $100; 505-2/552-6002; lagranfrancia.com).* **Just behind the cathedral, El Zaguán serves superb local cuisine, especially grilled meats** *(dinner, $20; 505-2/552-2522).* **The new Mombacho Cigar Bar** *(505-8/775-9137; mombachocigars.com)* **on the Calzada offers smokers a handsome setting for sampling Nicaragua's finest. Out on the lake, the Jicaro Island Ecolodge** *(rooms, from $380, meals and boat transport included; 505-2/552-6353; jicarolodge.com)* **is a charming island hideaway that offers yoga and hiking and a perfect place for pure relaxation.**

### SAN JUAN DEL SUR

**The coast around San Juan del Sur, about two hours southwest of Managua, offers year-round warmth, scalloped blond sand beaches, throbbing waves and welcoming locals—though the town itself is in danger of becoming gringoland-ized. Visitors can sail the stunning Pacific in *Pelican Eyes,* a 40-foot sloop, or stay at the eponymous resort** *(rooms, from $210; 505-2/563-7000; pelicaneyesresort.com).* **Nearby Morgan's Rock** *(rooms, from $90, meals included; 505-8/670-7676; morgansrock.com)* **has 15 handsome hardwood cottages overlooking a private beach on 4,400 acres, including an organic farm that supplies produce for the resort's very good restaurant, serving a unique blend of Nicaraguan, French and Asian cuisines.** —CATHERINE DOCTER

# Nicaragua now lures travelers to its "eco-amazing" shores to surf and swim, hike jungle trails, snowboard on volcanic sands.



Looking into the crater of the Masaya, one of a handful of active volcanoes in Nicaragua. *Opposite:* A surfer at Madras beach, just north of San Juan del Sur.

## COMING INTO NICARAGUA

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fighting. "I'm 100 percent Nicaraguan and 100 percent *campesina*," a woman of the land. "I've raised six children," she said, "and the history of the revolution is the history of our children. All of them have better prospects in life than we did."

Early in the morning, after a late night of rum, cigars and dominoes (a Cuban obsession), we headed with Don Orlando and Jorge up into the hills near Jalapa, where the best tobacco is raised. I was there when the town was under siege in the 1980s, first with the CIA-backed rebels in the mountains, then with the Sandinistas in the valley.

For the occasion, I'd brought a copy of *With the Contras* but was reluctant to open it. Some adventures are not so easy to relive. As we rolled north on the highway, I looked for the passages about the way I pushed myself beyond my physical limits and broke down, endangering everyone with me. I thought I must have written many pages about it. In fact, there were only a few paragraphs.

After days of marching in the mountains and sometimes running or crawling under fire, I'd become terribly dehydrated. I drank water, lots of water, but all the salt and electrolytes had been flushed out of my body. Through one long night I was delirious, and my friend and journalist companion on the march, James LeMoyne, said afterward that he thought he was going to lose me. But the most critical moment came the next day, as we tried to slip back out of Nicaragua into Honduras, where the CIA-backed Contras had secret base camps. Feeling almost safe, we stopped to bathe in the Poteca River that marked the border. Then the shooting started.

"The Sandinistas had followed us," I wrote. "I remember glimpsing Krill [the platoon commander] with a FAL [automatic rifle] he had grabbed up, standing naked spraying bullets across the hillside as I tried desperately to make it up the mountain into Honduras. I couldn't do it. Halfway up, everything quit. I had found a refuge behind a little dip in the ground near a deserted shack."

James tried to get me into the cover of trees. "I couldn't make it," I wrote. "The shooting was still going on and I lay down totally exposed, unable to go farther, in the ash of a burned garden plot. My only thought was the rhythm of my labored breathing and the expectation of the shot that would kill me."

But no shot came. "The Sandinistas never crossed the border," I wrote. "They fell back and stopped firing...."

Now we were driving to the vicinity of that incident in our self-contained thunderhead of cigar smoke. I closed the book. The last stretch of road before Jalapa used to be all potholes, ruts and ambushes. No longer. We cruised past tobacco barns and wide fields lush with thick green leaves. Hills rose all around us, and now that I didn't have to climb them, now that I didn't feel the hair on the back of my neck rising the way it does when you think you're about to come under fire, the hills didn't look so high. The forests, meanwhile, had grown sparser, as if age had thinned them. The sun shone brightly, the air was fresh and clean, and the Jalapeños, as the residents are called, were laconically amiable. For a brief instant I thought about taking a room there for a few days. Jalapa is truly in the middle of nowhere, which is where I'd thought I might want to be when this trip began. But the town had slipped back into the agricultural torpor of a place where people set their clocks by the calendar of the seasons. It was further behind the back of beyond than I cared to be.

I LEFT NICARAGUA RELUCTANTLY, AFTER a long ten days that had not been long enough. I am hoping to go back soon. I'll still be looking for history but not so much for memories, and maybe the place I want is somewhere on the edge of the jungle along the old Vanderbilt route, or perhaps near Cerro Grande, reputedly the world's most active volcano. There's the Hotel Victoriano in San Juan del Sur, a pure gingerbread confection built by an Englishman as his residence in the late 19th century that struck me as a place where the young Mel Gibson and Sigourney Weaver could have lived dangerously. Or maybe I'll try to get the old Howard Hughes suite at the Crowne Plaza in Managua (long since remodeled). Or maybe the greatest escape is just to keep exploring.

Graham Greene once wrote that he'd "often been accused of inventing a country called Greeneland, but this world of tin roofs, of vultures clanging down, of laterite paths turning rose in the evening light does exist." Why do such places seem so magical? I guess you either have a feel for them or you don't. But most of us who have lived close to the edge in different corners of the world have our own Greenelands. Nicaragua was, and still is, mine.