

## The Great Sultan

The cities of Granada and Leon have been Nicaragua's historical foundations of power. The more liberal Leon requested the help of American William Walker in crushing conservative Granada, which he did in 1855. He then attempted to take over the rest of Central America before being killed in 1860. This set the tone for an often antagonist relationship between America and Nicaragua. This reached the apex in the 1980's with the America mining of Nicaraguan harbors in an attempt to oust President Ortega (Ortega is no longer president as he failed to win presidential elections in 1990, 1996 and 2001). The American-Nicaraguan relationship has improved in recent years, which makes Nicaragua a welcoming country as visitors staying away from the remote north of the country should encounter little animosity.

The capital of Nicaragua is Managua, which is eerily quite for a city of over one million people. A more attractive nearby city is Granada to the south of Managua. The city is nicknamed 'the Great Sultan', referring to its Moorish namesake of Granada, Spain. Several buildings that were burnt by Walker in Granada have been rebuilt. The Casa de los Leones was rebuilt in 1920 and now serves as an art building for international students. In addition to viewing works of art, one can observe the students and their thought process behind the work. Another restored building is the Iglesia de San Francisco, which houses mostly religious art. Further, it contains carvings created by the inhabitants of the nearby Zapatera Island dating from 800AD.

Near Granada is Las Isletas, a group of 365 islands formed 10,000 years ago by the explosion of Volcan Mombacho. Some of the islands are uninhabited but wealthy Nicars or foreigners own many of the islands and build elaborate houses on them,



maintained by servants. The Samoza regime had owned an island where they took political prisoners to sea and pushed them into the water, where they would eventually drown. Many islands are for sale and some of the small ones can be bought for as little 10,000 dollars. These islands are very small and could house just a small shack. (Actually customers don't own the islands; they are leased for 99 years from the government.)

Another activity is a canopy tour, in which it is possible to swing among the trees via clips, ropes, and harnesses. I would suggest a tour with guides that can speak English well. According to the marketing scheme, tourists will see many animals in the treetops that they would not normally see from the ground. That's probably not entirely true, but it's fun to swing from the tress. The tree stands range from 60 to 200 feet above the ground.

The first part of the canopy tour is usually watching a movie, which describes the merits of the canopy tour. Then a contract must be signed, which basically waves your legal rights. Next a harness and crash helmet is fastened, before walking into the jungle where the ropes to swing from and the stands on which to land are located.

The guides describe what to do in order to swing from the trees. Most guides are deliberate and make sure everyone is clipped on to a rope. A set of gloves, which are necessary to avoid burns from the rope, should be worn. The process to follow after jumping off the stand is to kick your feet out, hold the harness with the left hand, and then loosely hold onto the rope with the right hand. To brake, grab the rope with the right hand. It is also necessary to keep the right hand back on the rope as getting too close to the pulley might result in going sideways.



One of the guides will go first and then it is the visitors turn. While flying on the rope the guide will make one of three motions. The first motion is with the back of his hands toward you with his fingers bent in to indicate don't brake as much. The second motion is one hand out like a traffic cop, indicating to begin braking. The last motion is both hands out in the stop position with a look of terror, which indicates brake immediately.

There are several other entertainment possibilities in Granada. A festival on the east side of Parque Colon in the city center occurs every Saturday night. The festival brings together a variety of ages, including many young children who sell everything from Chiclets to cigarettes. The festival is outdoors and is similar to a block party, as there is music, refreshments and dancing. Clubs such as The Volcano are a place to dance and a good indication of how young Nicars spend their Friday night. The city is also located next to Lago de Nicaragua but the water is polluted here and the beaches are just average.

A good day trip from Granada is the city of Masaya, just ten miles north. Masaya is a city that is known for artisans and attracts many visitors to its markets. The city is recovering from a July 2000 earthquake that killed 30 and destroyed many of the old buildings. One restored area is the Mercado Viejo which is the main crafts market in the city. This particular market is very clean and has more of the upscale artwork. Much bigger and dirtier is the municipal market, which is less artsy but has a wide variety of goods. This market is usually very crowded and can get to be extremely hot.



In addition to the markets, there are other sights in Masaya. Climbing up a hill to the north of the city is the century-old fortress called Coyotepe. This was also used as a prison at one time and due to its lack of sunlight and dreary appearance, it would be an unappealing residence. Roberto Clemente Stadium is in western Masaya. Clemente is popular here even though he was actually born in Puerto Rico. While playing for the Pittsburgh Pirates he collected his 3,000th hit on the final day of the baseball season in 1972, but tragically died in a plane crash on December 31, 1972. However, some

Nicaraguans such as Dennis Martinez have made it to the big leagues. Baseball is a popular sport in Nicaragua and visitors will see many games in all cities big or small.

Nicaragua, especially Granada, is becoming a popular place for foreigners to buy retirement property. Costa Rica was the hot spot in the 1990's, but with housing and property costs rising the focus has shifted to Nicaragua. The cheaper and better alternative to going through real estate agents is to buy property directly from the locals, where buying a house for 7,000 dollars with closing costs less than 100 dollars is possible. For those who would like to just visit, Granada is a pleasant, quite city.