

[The Washington Post]

Travel



P
Shoot, it's
photo contest
time again.
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SUNDAY, MAY 29, 2005

COMING AND GOING

SCAM WATCH

Tickets to Nowhere

Steve Jackson of Alexandria noticed an ad in The Post Travel section last month for New York's **Galaxy Tours and Travel** and was pleased with the price he was promised — just over **\$8,000 for 10 round-trip tickets on United to London.**

He began to worry when a couple of weeks passed and company reps had different **excuses for why the promised tickets hadn't arrived.** A week after that, company phones weren't being answered. Jackson called United and found Galaxy had reserved five seats — not 10 — and hadn't paid for the five.

"I feel like such a [dope]," said Jackson. But actually, he did one thing right: He **paid by credit card.** American Express has credited his account for the lost funds, he said, and has launched a fraud investigation.

Paying by credit card is the first rule of business, says Mitchell Katz of the Federal Trade Commission. "You can negotiate fraudulent charges," he said. **"If you pay by cash or debit card, the money is gone,** and you'll never see it again."

Washington Post spokesman Eric Grant said, "The Post does not knowingly publish false or misleading ads, and takes all allegations of possible fraudulent advertising seriously. In the case of Galaxy Tours and Travel based in New York City, we have received several complaints from our readers, which we are currently looking into. While our review is pending, we will not accept any further ads from this advertiser."

But how to avoid trouble to begin with?

■ **Before putting money down, search the company name** with the Better Business Bureau at www.bbb.com to see if any complaints have been filed. At press time, the BBB had a sort-of red flag on Galaxy: "This business recently came to our attention. We are attempting to gather info on the business."

■ **Ask travel providers what professional organizations they belong to.** Consider a lack of membership a red flag. If a company claims membership, check it out. The National Tour Association (www.ntaonline.com) and the United States Tour Operators Association (www.ustoa.com) list members on their Web sites. Additionally, the American Society of Travel Agents can tell you if a company is a member and whether any complaints have been lodged against the company, whether a member or not. For this free service, call 703-739-2782. Both the NTA and ASTA have a list of tips for avoiding fraud on their Web sites. (For ASTA, go to www.travelsense.org.)

■ **If you've been duped,** help the next guy by alerting the BBB (see above) and filing a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission at 877-FTC-HELP or www.ftc.gov. Contact local law enforcement authorities to pursue a fraud claim.

ROOM KEYS

Moscow Marriotts, Cont'd

Earlier this month, CoGo reported about a guest at **Marriott's Tverskaya hotel in Moscow** who was **charged a higher room rate upon checkout than she was quoted** when she reserved on the company's Web site (\$208 vs. \$175 per night). Now comes the news that the practice may have affected thousands of other guests at Marriott properties throughout Russia.

Last week Washington's Cullen Law Firm filed a suit alleging that at all six of its hotels in Russia, Marriott routinely charged **guests 18 percent more when they checked out than the prices quoted online.** The complaint alleges that Marriott made deceptive and misleading representations on its Internet reservation system. "Hundreds of thousands of Marriott patrons may have been affected," the filing said. The suit seeks \$1,500 in damages for each alleged violation.

In addition to the Tverskaya, the Marriott chain in Russia includes the Royal Aurora, Grand and Renaissance hotels in Moscow and Renaissance hotels in St. Petersburg and Samara.

Marriott **denies the charges.** "We believe [the suit is] without merit," said spokesman Tom Marder. "We will protest it vigorously." He declined further comment, saying it is company policy not to discuss ongoing legal cases.

BARGAIN OF THE WEEK

Jamaica Winter Plans?

Fly to Jamaica this winter for **\$436 round trip**, including taxes. Details: What's the Deal?, Page P3.

Reporting: GARY LEE, CINDY LOOSE.

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PLANTATION PHOTO BY JOSE FRANCISCO KUHIL LOPEZ/SELVA NEGRA; GRANADA AND SUNSET PHOTOS BY RICHARD LEONARDI / TOURS NICARAGUA

My Nicaragua

As the world begins to discover her home country, she returns to discover a few things, too.

By SANDY M. FERNANDEZ
Washington Post Staff Writer

Maybe it was the too-quickly setting sun. Or the unusual, almost hushed silence that surrounded us as we hurried down the narrow forest trail, trying to make the half-hour trek back to the hotel grounds before dusk turned into complete darkness. Or the strange, guttural hoots that echoed around my boyfriend, Rob, and me, then faded away.

But clambering past thick-trunked trees and plant

leaves as broad as coffee tables, I couldn't keep it out of my head that, 20 years ago, these mountains had been filled with guerrillas.

Rob and I were in Nicaragua, where I grew up until my parents, in 1979, sent me north to the United States to escape the civil war. At the time I left, sunset signaled curfew — going outside, where the National Guard and the leftist Sandinistas were shooting it out, was too dangerous. And among the most troubled regions of the country was the mountainous central district of Jinotega, where Rob and I now found ourselves scrambling through a patch of cloud forest 26 years

later, climbing over gnarled roots, balancing on wooden planks spanning creek beds.

Feeling, all the while, as if we were being watched. "Maybe I should find a stick," Rob said nervously, as we came down a small rise and into a clearing. Overhead, a branch snapped, and we looked up.

About 20 feet above us were six or seven sets of dark eyes.

It was a troupe, all right. And yes, they looked a little miffed.

See NICARAGUA, P6, Col. 1

In the years since Nicaragua's civil war and subsequent U.S. embargo, tourism has increased dramatically. The country's attractions include, from left: Granada, the oldest European settlement in Central America; Selva Negra, an eco-resort and coffee plantation in the Jinotega district; and the bay of San Juan del Sur.



Nashville Stars, Ripe for the Pickin'

By NICOLE COTRONEO
Special to The Washington Post

A mandolin player with an instrument case open at his feet holds court outside Robert's Western World, a bar in downtown Nashville, and flashes a toothless smile when a young, curly-haired man approaches with a warm greeting. It's daytime, yet passing tourists don't notice the two — or they clutch their change and avert their eyes.

The unruly crown of curls usually gives him away, but this time platinum country artist Dierks Bentley escapes detection as he stops in the middle of the busy Lower Broadway area to address a friend. "Hey, it's Mandolin Mike!" Bentley says, offering the musician his hand.

"Dierks," the player replies, "how ya been, man?"

Before Bentley, 29, landed a recording contract with Capitol Records in 2002, he performed for five years in the smoky bars with the lower address numbers on Broadway, where Mandolin Mike also picked — still picks — for tips. While Bentley now lives a nomadic



MUSICIANS SUCH AS DIERKS BENTLEY, ABOVE, CAN BE SPOTTED EATING AND PLAYING IN NASHVILLE. LEFT, A GUITAR SIGN AT THE PANCAKE PANTRY.

existence touring the country, he can still be found around town, keeping it real with the people in the places that gave him his musical education.

This may be strange outside Nashville. You don't find J. Lo shoe-shopping in the Bronx, or see Will Smith shooting hoops on an urban court in Philly. Unless you have a fat wallet or know someone who knows someone, you usually can't get near a celebrity in Los

See NASHVILLE, P5, Col. 1

TRAVEL TECH

Airline Web Sites, Poised For Takeoff?

By CAROL SOTTILI
Washington Post Staff Writer

Looking to book an airline ticket on the Internet? Chances are you'll first head to Travelocity, Orbitz or Expedia. With state-of-the-art technology and access to a wide range of flights on competing airlines, the well-funded Big Three, along with smaller rivals such as OneTravel and CheapTickets, have been able to take a considerable chunk of the action from the airlines' own sites.

But the power may be shifting as financially strapped airlines try to control a bigger share of their inventories. In recent months, the airlines have fought back with steps designed to attract more customers to their sites:

■ Many carriers have started offering

See TRAVEL TECH, P4, Col. 1

Nicaragua: You Can Go Home Again

NICARAGUA, From P1

Howler monkeys, hanging onto swaying branches and checking us out.

My Nicaragua, 26 years later.

Slow Road Back

When most Americans think about Nicaragua, they tend to remember it as it first entered their consciousness in the late 1970s — as TV news footage of a bloody civil war. The conflict ended with the Sandinistas' 1979 overthrow of the Somoza family's corrupt, four-decades-long regime. Then came the 12 or so years of postwar fighting as the American-backed contra rebels — with the help of a U.S. embargo — tried to push the Sandinista Front of National Liberation out of power.

In those years, virtually the only North American tourists visiting Nicaragua were cash-strapped revolution sympathizers, nicknamed "sandistas" for their customary footwear. Just as well: Hampered by the embargo, the country grew short of staples, much less tourism's luxuries. In Managua, the McDonald's had to change its name after hamburger headquarters discovered there were no all-beef patties in its Big Macs.

The embargo was lifted after the Sandinistas lost the 1990 presidential election. Investment started coming back, as did some of those who had fled. In 1994, the summer I made my first trip back home since the war, one of the cool teen hangouts was a new, enormous highway-side gas station, brightly lit and alien as a spaceship. Another was a bar started by two twentysomethings just back from Miami.

In the years since, the number of people visiting Nicaragua has grown more or less steadily. The country hosted more than 600,000 tourists in 2004, twice as many as had graced the "land of lakes and volcanoes" nine years before. The number of visitors from North America alone has jumped more than 50 percent since 2001.

Of course, Nicaragua's numbers don't come close to those of Costa Rica, the eco-tourism powerhouse next door that saw more than 1.4 million visitors last year.

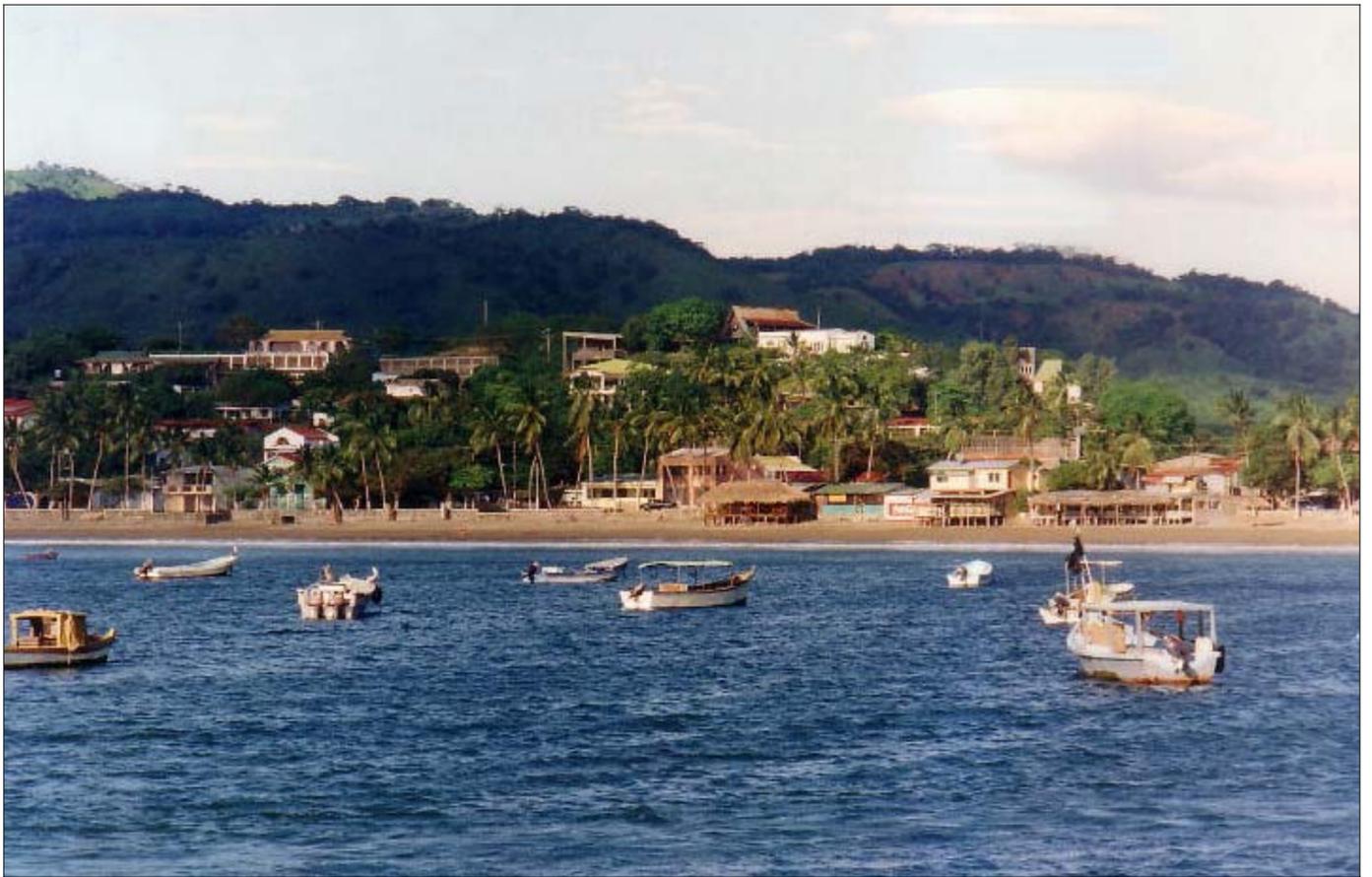
But for many of those choosing to come, that's exactly the point.

"Costa Rica's beautiful, but it's been a victim of mass tourism," says Raj Sanghrajka, a principal in Florida-based Big Five Tours & Expeditions. The company, which specializes in custom vacations, added Nicaragua to its roster last year. "Every Tom, Dick and Harry offers a trip [to Costa Rica]. And as it gets commercialized, it gets less appealing," Sanghrajka says.

Nicaragua's beauty, he adds, is that "anything that any other Central American country has, Nicaragua has a little bit of it. People go to Guatemala, for example, for archaeology and history. Costa Rica is rain forest, Belize is beach resorts. Nicaragua has all that, and it's less traveled."

For how long is the question. Nicaragua now has more than 30 tour operators, who can whisk you anywhere from an all-inclusive, lie-on-the-beach resort such as Montelimir (a former Somoza retreat); the posh new Pacific coast eco-lodge of Morgan's Rock; or more untrammeled destinations such as the biological reserves near the Rio San Juan, on the border with Costa Rica.

Of course, the country also still offers challenges. Nicaragua is now the second-poorest country in the hemisphere, after Haiti. And in mid-April, the U.S. State Department warned travelers to "remain vigilant" after protests over a public transportation fare hike resulted in numerous arrests, injuries and property damage. (The government has since agreed to temporarily subsidize the hike.)



San Juan del Sur, a popular vacation spot in Nicaragua for many decades, has recently begun to attract surfing backpackers and cruise ships.

BY RICHARD LEONARDI/TOURS NICARAGUA



A howler monkey swings through the trees at the cloud forest reserve at Selva Negra Mountain Resort.

Rob and I, though, wanted to avoid anything prepackaged, no matter how sophisticated or smartly done. We also didn't want any hotel so luxe that it would shake our waning belief in ourselves as intrepid adventurers (though Rob insisted on electrical outlets so he could charge his digital cameras).

What I wanted, as much as possible, was to show my American boyfriend the Nicaragua I grew up in: wild, deserted Pacific beaches; active volcanoes; colonial cities; coffee plantations; verdant mountains. Engagement. Discovery. Freedom. With a recent U.N. report citing Nicaragua as one of the best countries in Central America, the time seemed right for a road trip.

An Unsettled Capital

Most guidebooks to Nicaragua (you need to look hard for them, but they do exist) urge you to leave the capital, Managua, as soon as you can — not because it's particularly dangerous but because it compares poorly with the rest of the country.

Good advice, overall. Managua was a modern skyscraper city when an earthquake leveled it in 1972. It never fully recovered. (The wholesale theft of relief aid by Somoza and his cronies didn't help.) Lacking a downtown core, it's less a city and more like a patchwork of neighborhoods alongside polluted Lake Managua.

Nonetheless, the capital does have



In Granada, horse-drawn buggies line up along the main plaza, waiting to give visitors a tour of the colonial city.

BY ROB HOLTDRIF

its attractions. Just outside the city limits, the Masaya volcano is one of only four in the world that keeps a constant pool of lava in its crater. Another site, the Huellas de Acahualinca (Footprints of Acahualinca), has 6,000-year-old human footprints that were pressed into volcanic mud before the Great Wall of China or the Egyptian pyramids were built.

At the Plaza of the Republic, the

crumbling gray ruins of the Old Cathedral are an eerie testament to two major earthquakes: in 1931, shortly after the cathedral was completed, and the one in 1972. Looking through the upper windows, we could see angels still going about their heavenly business, dappled in sunlight by the holy roof.

And standing in the nearby National Palace of Culture the day after our

arrival, Rob and I listened as a guide related how this pastel building — which holds a motley collection of pottery shards, geothermal models and taxidermy specimens — once housed the national assembly.

"A group of 24 Sandinistas dressed as National Guardsmen infiltrated on Aug. 22, 1978," the guide said. "They took everyone hostage, including the entire congress."

I didn't tell the guide that on that day, my mother, a secretary, was one of those hostages. When I was old enough, she told me that until she was released two days later, she was sure that she was going to die there.

Pacific Tides

If you want to stay near Nicaragua's populated Pacific coast (the east, an experience itself, is still mostly undeveloped), the colonial city of Granada is a better home base than Managua. Spread out in the shadow of the majestic Mombacho Volcano (now a beautiful cloud forest reserve), it was a Chorotega Indian settlement when the Spanish settled there in 1524, establishing it as one of the oldest cities in the Americas.

Thankfully, Granada was spared the worst of the fighting during the civil war. Its colonial architecture is striking and in recent years has been spruced up. In the town square, horse-drawn buggies offer rides in the neighborhood's pastel-painted houses, many with Spanish-style central courtyard patios. Wooden rockers beckon from covered walkways, and at night, restaurants are filled with the sound of wandering mariachis. The city has also become a center for people driving the 45 minutes from Managua for a good meal, drinks and maybe a late night at one of its discos.

It has also, controversially, become a hot real estate market for international buyers, most notably of the small volcanic islands that sit off Granada's shore in Lake Nicaragua.

"I think it's a little bit scary to go to Granada and see foreigners all over the place," says Richard Leonardi, who started a local tour company (since sold) in 1996. "You can destroy paradise pretty easily. But not everyone feels that way. And they haven't paved it for a parking lot quite yet."

For me, worries about overdevelop-

ment jostled against happiness at the comfort of our hotel room, with its balcony on the main plaza, and pride at how beautiful the city looked. At dinner that night, two mariachis in maroon suits found willing listeners at our table.

"A romantic song, 'Besame Mucho,' the younger one kept suggesting. But I wanted to hear Nicaraguan classics such as 'Cristo Ya Nacio en Palacaguina,' a revolution-era song imagining Jesus being born in Nicaragua. I cried when I got them. It was good to be home."

Alone on the Beach

When I moved to the United States, one of the surprises in my shiny new American life was finding out that not every beach was isolated, pristine oceanfront. As a kid, that's all I'd seen: beaches you needed to ford streams to get to, where you could dine on what you caught.

Where, I asked in Managua, could we go for that? Outside of San Juan del Sur, relatives recommended.

Geographically blessed San Juan del Sur, set snugly in a bay between two high rock cliffs, has been a vacation haven for Nicaraguans since my parents discovered the Beatles. Over the past decade, surf-mad backpackers discovered it, too. Then in 1998, several of the Holland America Line's cruises started making stops there.

Knowing this made me wonder whether the sleepy town would now be another Puerto Vallarta, drenched in light-skinned tourists turning hot pink as they clutched pina colodas.

To get there, we drove four hours in the shabbiest rental either of us had ever seen: a dented white car with tinted windows and no hubcaps — which fit in perfectly with the overloaded trucks and crowded buses barreling past us. The fact that, ironically, the gap between wealthy Nicaraguans and poor ones had widened since the revolution was brought home every time a blinged-out SUV swooped by like a luxury yacht.

As we pulled into town, though, we knew the travel had been worth it. On the main beachfront drag, lined entirely with open-air bars and restaurants, clumps of old men in guayaberas stood chatting quietly with

See NICARAGUA, P7, Col. 1

DETAILS ● Nicaragua

GETTING THERE: Several airlines fly into Managua from the Washington area, including American, Northwest and Continental. We flew the Central American airline TACA (www.taca.com) from Dulles for \$550 round trip, but ticket prices currently start at \$650.

GETTING AROUND: On local buses in Managua, the crowding and pickpocketing are legendary. City-to-city, though, buses are safe and, especially if you pay extra for the express, comfortable. From the market, Mercado Roberto Huembes (pronounced "WHEM-base"), the express bus to Granada costs less than \$1 for the 30-mile trip; to San Juan del Sur, 65 miles away, less than \$3.

Car rentals are available in major cities: Managua, Granada and Rivas, among others. If you book online, though, make sure you're aware of all the charges: Our rate of \$90 per week turned into \$228 after the agency added a previously undisclosed, but obligatory, insurance fee.

WHERE TO STAY:

■ **Managua:** For a splurge, try the new **InterContinental**, a peach-colored, five-star behemoth

in front of the Metrocentro shopping mall (Costada Sur Centro Comercial Metrocentro, 011-505-2-784545, www.icmanagua.gruporeal.com; doubles start at \$115 per night). Or, for history's sake, the iconic, pyramid-shaped InterContinental (now officially a **Crowne Plaza**), where American journalists bivouacked during the civil war (101 Octava Calle Sur Oeste, 011-505-2-283530, www.ichotelgroup.com/ny/d/cp/1/en/hd/MGAAH; \$84). A clean, comfy, cheaper alternative is the **Hotel Los Robles de San Juan** (Galería Casa de los Tres Mundos 1c abajo No. 238, 011-505-270-2114, www.brandsthotel.com.ni), which doubles from \$35 a night. Those seeking \$10-a-night beds should look in the backpacker-heavy **Martha Quezada** neighborhood.

■ **Granada:** We stayed in the stylish, gorgeously renovated **Hotel Alhambra** (Costado Oeste del Parque Central; 011-505-552-4486, www.hotelalhambra.com), on the town plaza. The huge doubles start at \$50 a night; ours, with a balcony and endless hot water, was a well-worth-it \$75.

■ **San Juan del Sur:** The blocky **Hotel Casablanca** (Paseo Marítimo, 011-505-568-2135, www.sanjuandelsur.org.ni/casablanca) isn't loaded with

cham, but it's beachfront and offers both secure parking and an ATM. Doubles start at \$50 a night; ask for the top floor. Locals recommend the cozy, B&B-ish **Hotel Villa Isabella** (Diagonal Norte Iglesias Católica, 011-505-568-2568, www.sanjuandelsur.org.ni/isabella), which has cable, a pool and Internet access; rooms are \$50 with a shared bath, \$65 and up with a private one. On the other hand, share a room in the Meanie-blue (but slightly run down) **Hotel Estrella** (Paseo Marítimo, 011-505-458-3310), on the main drag, and you could end up with a second-floor beachfront balcony for as little as \$5 a night.

■ **Selva Negra Mountain Resort:** The resort (Km 140 Hwy. Matagalpa-Jinotega; 011-505-772-3883; www.selvanegra.com) offers a range of choices, from \$10 for a bunk in a dorm-style hostel to \$30 for a hotel room, to \$50 for a private bungalow.

WHERE TO EAT: In Managua, we sought out traditional Nicaraguan food at the **Cocina de Doña Haydee** (three locations in central Managua; www.lacocina.com.ni/portada.html), where entrees are under \$10.

In Granada, **El Zaguán** (011-505-552-2522), behind the cathedral, grilled a mean filet mignon; dinner

and drinks for two ran about \$24. We also had our best breakfast of the trip, for about \$3 each, at the expat-heavy **Nica Buffet**, on Calle Morazan just one block over from the park.

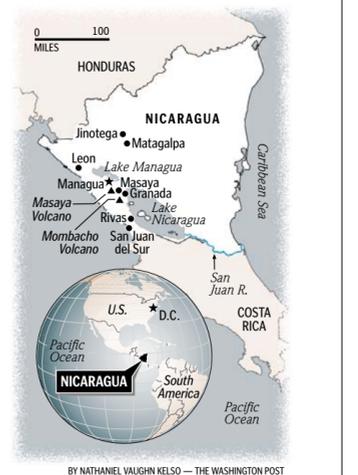
In San Juan del Sur, **Ricardo's Bar** (Paseo Marítimo, www.sanjuandelsur.org.ni/ricardosbar/main.htm) is the place to go to get boozily with other travelers (drinks are under \$2), borrow a book or watch a movie on Mondays.

In Jinotega, **La Colmena** (011-505-632-2017), a block east of the main plaza, may look plain, but its green tablecloths signal the nicest restaurant in town. Lunch for two ran \$16.

INFORMATION: Guides dedicated to Nicaragua can be hard to find in local bookstores, so you might want to go online. The Footprint and Moon Handbook guides are a couple of years old, but for the most part accurate.

The **Nicaraguan Tourism Institute** (NTUR), www.intur.gob.ni, has offices in several cities in Nicaragua, including Managua and Granada. Its Web site lists several tour operators. Another site worth checking out for its innovative programs is **Tours Nicaragua** (www.toursnicaragua.com).

— Sandy M. Fernandez



BY NATHANIEL VAUGHN KELSEY — THE WASHINGTON POST



PHOTOS BY RICHARD LEONARDI / TOURS NICARAGUA

Outside the capital of Nicaragua, the Masaya volcano holds a constant pool of lava in its crater.



Overlooking the lake, Managua's single high-rise stands near the bullet-ridden cathedral, lingering evidence of the country's volatile past.

NICARAGUA. From P6

younger ones wearing Tommy Hilfiger knockoffs. A gray monkey, roped to a fence, morosely rattled a plastic cup. A dreadlocked couple, burned nut-brown by the sun, wandered down the street in board shorts and sarongs.

That night, after a few muscle-loosening *Nica Libres* (the native Flor de Caña rum, Coke and a lime) at Ricardo's surfside restaurant bar, we chatted up a group of American twentysomethings who worked in a local surf shop. One of them drew me a map of the nearby beaches on a notebook page and related his own adventures.

"Going to Popoyo once, we almost got stuck in a river. We had to have people climb on the hood for ballast," he said. "But this is the dry season."

The next day, we took his advice and headed out from San Juan del Sur. A half-hour cab ride along a bumpy, unpaved road took us to the top of a treacherously steep, dusty in-

cline that the cabbie refused to take on.

At the bottom: a thatched-roof backpacker bed-and-breakfast serving cold beer and fresh-caught fish — and the beach I'd been looking for: a wide expanse of sandy bay dotted with boulders of volcanic rock. The plentiful tide pools held crabs, tiny fish and waving anemones.

By walking about a quarter-mile farther down, Rob and I found an inlet where we could snorkel and bodysurf all by ourselves. Before leaving, we walked back to the B&B for a celebratory meal: a giant 10-pound lobster, caught that day — ours for \$10.

Interior Views

Because Rob's background is German — and he literally has stock in Starbucks — I planned one more major stop in our itinerary: Selva Negra, an eco-resort and coffee plantation high in the mountains of the Jinotega district.

Selva Negra opened as a resort in

the 1970s — I saw my first squirrel ever there. The name, which translates as Black Forest, is rooted in history: In the 1880s, Nicaragua offered money and land to German immigrants willing to come farm coffee. Selva Negra is run by two of their descendants.

During the contra war, Selva Negra's owners had run-ins with both sides of the combat. One even left for a while. Yet, in the end, they prevailed.

The resort is centered on a large wood-beamed hall at the edge of a gorgeous mountain lagoon. Around it are several small guest chalets (charmingly, the decor in ours included several close-ups of reposing dachshunds). But the real draw is in the surrounding land: almost 300 acres of thick, never-cultivated woodland, home to sloths, howler monkeys, toucans and quetzals. Fourteen hiking trails, ranked easy, medium or difficult, crisscross it. It was on the "Indiana Jones" trail that we ran into our monkeys.

The lodge's kraut and schnitzel was fair at best, so on the last full day of our visit, we headed north to Jinotega, a town I'd never visited, to eat.

It turned out to be the most delightful discovery of the trip.

Though Jinotega is the district capital, the town doesn't get many foreign visitors. Its typical hotel guest is much more likely to be a farmer or rancher looking to pick up provisions, get a pair of boots made or sell some cattle. Its tidy streets convey a sense of purpose: Through open doorways, you can see lawyers drawing up contracts as clients wait on wooden chairs, or cowboy-hatted farmers weighing bags of coffee.

Had we had more time, we would have sampled more of what Jinotega had to offer.

Greeting the Evolution

Whenever I leave Managua, I always think back to flying out during the war. Back then, soldiers guarded the departure lounges and chaotic mobs pressed up against the doors. This time, though, all traces of that era were gone: Since my last visit two years ago, the airport has been remodeled. It's now as smooth and bland as airports everywhere, with the requisite duty-free shops and tall windows.

In the next few years, as Nicaragua stretches to build a reputation beyond its traumatic history, that's bound to happen to more and more of the markers of my wartime memory; they'll be elided, erased. That's good, I think. But all the same, I'm glad I made it back when the country was still evolving — on the way to becoming, rather than all the way, changed.

| EXHIBIT A |

In Italy, Right in the Kisser

Think what might have happened if Baci chocolates had kept their original name, *cazzotti*. Instead of giving your true love a "kiss" (in Italian, *bacio*), you'd give him or her a "punch" — as in punch in the mouth.

We learned this and other historical tidbits about Italy's famous bonbon at the Perugia factory and museum in San Sisto, about a two hours' drive north of Rome in the Umbria region. The facility is in a light industrial area (which in Italy means that there still are vineyards between the factory buildings) a few miles west of Perugia, the city where the candy was born and from which the company takes its name.

A guide shared the history of the treat: In 1907, pastamaker Francesco Buitoni and his partners started a venture to make "confetti" (sugar-coated almonds) and other confections. One day in 1922, Louisa Spagnoli, wife of one of the co-venturers, blended some leftover chopped hazelnuts with chocolate rather than waste them. She formed the mixture into cylinders, topped them with whole hazelnuts and bathed her creations in dark chocolate. Thus was born the *cazzotto* — about the size of a small fist. Fortunately, wiser marketing minds decided that the candies might sell better if reduced in size and given a name that didn't denote assault and battery.

The company, now owned by international food giant Nestle, produces about 1.5 million of them a day. Its San Sisto museum displays early cocoa mills, elegant antique candy packages and the BaciOne (big kiss), the largest Baci ever, which weighed in at 13,1583 pounds for a 2003 Guinness record.

Marketing missteps are acknowledged, too: In the 1960s, inspired by the advance of space exploration, Perugia produced green pistachio-flavored Baci, touted as "the taste of tomorrow." Earthlings weren't ready. But neither did the rip-offs by some of their competitors endure — Carezze (caresses), Bacio Ardente (hot kiss) and, for some reason, Bacio Fascista



BY JERRY V. HAINES

At Italy's Museo Storico Nestle Perugia, the biggest of the Baci's.

(Fascist kiss).

Perugia's advertising, also on display in the museum, included filmed testimonials from Frank Sinatra, but my favorite gimmick was a 1930s trading card campaign. The cards, with likenesses of celebrities and literary figures, were included in Baci and Buitoni pasta boxes and could be collected in albums. The albums each held 150 cards and could be redeemed for merchandise — for example, 150 albums would get you a Fiat 500. One wonders how many people tried eating their way to automobile ownership.

In the factory, we watched the manufacturing process from a series of glass-enclosed walkways. An intense cocoa smell permeated everywhere. Battalions of Baci marched out of the machines where they were formed. They were showered three times in dark chocolate, then sent back and forth across the factory on conveyor belts, first naked and shiny, then dressed in their distinctive silver-and-blue suits by little mechanical hands.

An essential part of the wrapping, of course, is the insertion of fortune cookie-like messages with observations on love. The love notes have been a Baci feature since their creation, although at first they were writ-

ten only in Italian. Now they are multilingual (up to four translations per note). The languages chosen vary, depending on the batch's destination.

The plant is highly automated, employing only about 800 people year-round, more for holiday production. Quality control workers smiled up at us as they kicked out less-than-perfect Baci ("We'll take them," we mouthed) and packed the rest into boxes, cylinders or holiday packaging.

The most popular part of the tour came at the end, when a basket of fresh, free samples was placed on the counter. Basic Baci were there, as well as a spicy, cinnamon-flavored dark chocolate or Baci filled with strawberry or limoncello cream, as well as other non-Baci confections produced at the plant.

And if you eat too many? Well, Assisi isn't far away — a great place to go to confession.

— Jerry V. Haines

The Museo Storico Nestle Perugia in San Sisto is open Monday through Friday (check with the museum or tourist information offices in Perugia about special weekend hours). The factory may be toured by reservation only; reservations are only by telephone (011-39-075-527-6796). Tours are free. Perugia also hosts Eurochocolate, an annual chocolate festival and exposition in October.

Volunteers Needed for Jet Lag Study 05-CH-0037

NIH researchers are looking for travelers going east 6-8 time zones to study the effects of replacing hormones disrupted by jet travel.

Participants will take a study medication (hydrocortisone, melatonin, or placebo), fill out questionnaires and obtain salivary samples. Travel stay of 4-10 days at destination required. Time involved will include one screening visit, blood work, and one follow-up visit.

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