



style

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 ACURA

MY OWN PRIVATE ECO-TOUR

EXPLORING NICARAGUA:
A COUNTRY OF COFFEE
AND COASTS

On the first day of the new year, I journeyed up a mountain to pick a cup of coffee.

Why not? Next to water, coffee is *the* most widely consumed beverage in the world, the second-most traded commodity (after petroleum) and the largest U.S. food import.

I picked a remote plantation in rural Nicaragua. My private guide is Reynaldo; his kingdom—800 acres of mountain foliage in the northwest, a vulture's swoosh from Honduras.

Reynaldo Fiallos is indeed the "King of Coffee." Coffee runs in his family (four generations and counting) and most certainly, in his veins. In 1922, his father planted some two-and-a-half acres of Arabica Typica beans. Soon he had an entire plantation some 5,000 feet above the sea.



Fed by rich volcanic soil, watered by abundant rains and ripened under the tree-filtered Nicaraguan sun, the conditions at *La Unión* farm proved perfect. Experts now describe *La Unión* coffee as “deep toned, with big body, rich, cabernet-like acidity and a black-cherry fruit that saturates from the bottom notes to top.” Reynaldo’s company, *Aroma Nica*, exports these wonderful beans to aficionados in North America.

I arrive at the Fiallos’ farm, wedged between two others in the backseat of a pickup. Three hours north of Managua, I bump my way high into the hills toward Las Sabanas. As night falls, the road

“COFFEE MUST BE HOT AS HELL, BLACK AS THE DEVIL, PURE AS AN ANGEL AND SWEET AS LOVE” — FRENCH SAYING

degrades from pavement to potholes. More sensible citizens plod past on horseback and ox carts. (See “getting around” pg. 46)

During harvest in January and February, the highlands are windy and the nights cool. An over-eager rooster heralds the next day before dawn. I lie bundled in blankets. The aroma of fresh coffee beckons me from bed.

When I say fresh, I mean fresh. The coffee picked earlier has been husked, washed, and sun-dried on patios. The beans are then pan-roasted over a wood fire. The only nods to modern-day convenience are the electric grinder and coffee maker. Reynaldo makes the first pot. The 64-year-old veterinarian/sales rep cum coffee grower/exporter likes his java strong and black.

I need milk to soften the impact. I accompany Graciela, Reynaldo’s devoted wife, outside to the corral. She fills a pot with

frothy liquid, still warm from the cow, and heads back to the kitchen. The space is small and dark, lit mostly by the glow of the fire. It smells of smoke and the best breakfast this side of the Americas—corn tortillas, eggs, fried plantain, and, of course, *gallo pinto*—the traditional mixture of beans and rice. Top that with a second cup of joy-inducing joe, and I’m good to go for my foray into the coffee patch.

I tuck my pant legs into my socks and spray repellent to deter the mosquitoes, ticks and small ants that bite big. Next, I’m fitted with a *canasta*, a woven basket that hangs waist-height from twine.

Finally, I’m introduced to my coffee coach, 30-year-veteran, Enma Antonia Perez. At 53, she is the consummate instructor. A woman of interminable stamina, nimble fingers, few teeth and even fewer words, Enma teaches by example.

She guides me to a plant laden with ripe ruby berries. It stands about six feet tall, while some can reach up to 25.



coffee legacy

Aroma Nica, the Fiallos family company, grows and exports some 37,000 pounds of premium coffee to North America each year. Two of Reynaldo's four daughters, Maria and Valeria, run *Las Chicas del Café*, importing and roasting their father's home-grown beans. The Fiallos' charitable initiative, *Los Frutos del Café*, benefits communities in Nicaragua

The branches hold clusters of coffee cherries, each about the size of a cranberry; inside the outer husk are two pale green coffee beans coupled in a slimy sweet goo.

Picking looks easy. But like everything associated with the complex task of making the ultimate cup of coffee, the slightest mistake can lead to disaster.

One bad bean can, in fact, spoil the whole batch.

If picked green, the resultant coffee takes on a bitter flavor. If picked too ripe, the coffee tastes fermented. If pulled off the branch without adding a delicate twist, mid-harvesting destroys the bud bearing next season's fruit. If dropped, a stray bean will attract a coffee beetle, which, if unchecked, can ruin an entire crop.

Undaunted, I pick on, challenged by the fact that a deft worker can pick up to 12 baskets in a day. Enma stops to peruse the contents of my canasta. "Bonito," she says, with a nod.

Bonito is good—bonito means pretty. Pretty berries mean good work. I allow a split second to bask in my not-quite-full basket; wondering how my haul compares with the 40 other pickers.

Then suddenly (thankfully), it's time for lunch. I ask Enma what she's packed for me to eat. She laughs. We both know that the *gringa turista* will be fed in *la casa*. She will remain amongst the plants, and snack on tortillas and beans. It will be four more hours before it's time to haul her sack brimming with red berries back to the barn, to line up with the others and have the day's work measured and noted for payday in two weeks' time.

With sore shoulders and a bothersome back, I surrender my bounty to my morning mentor and gloat in a guilty pleasure, knowing a massage awaits half a day's journey away.

LA RUTA DEL CAFÉ



The Tourism Institute of Nicaragua (INTUR) has initiated a four-year project aimed at increasing tourism to the country's northern coffee-producing regions. Here are some popular places to satisfy your coffee craving.

Finca Esperanza Verde, San Ramón, Matagalpa:

Award-winning sustainable tourism eco lodge and fair trade coffee farm.

Activities include: coffee tours, butterfly farm, guided walks, cooking classes

Web site: www.fincaesperanzaverde.org

Email: fincaesperanzaverde@gmail.com

Tel: 011 505 772 5003

Selva Negra Mountain Resort and Coffee Estate, Matagalpa:

Sustainable coffee plantation with lakeside restaurant and varied accommodation (bungalows, chalets, hotel and hostel rooms).

Activities include: coffee tours, horseback riding, hiking, greenhouse tour

Web site: www.selvanegra.com

Email: resortinfo@selvanegra.com / coffeeinfo@selvanegra.com

Tel: 011 505 772 3883

Jaguar Organic Farm & Private Reserve, Jinotega:

Organic coffee farm and cloud forest lodging.

Activities include: coffee tours, trekking, bird-watching

Web site: www.jaguarreserve.org

Email: jaguarinfo@cablenet.com.ni / orion@cablenet.com.ni

Tel: 011 505 279 9219 / 011 505 886 1016

CECOCAFEN, San Ramón, Matagalpa:

Organization of coffee cooperatives providing training to children of coffee growers who, in turn, act as tour guides and offer community homestays.

Activities include: coffee tours, tastings and fair trade workshops

Email: turismo@cecocafen.com

Telephone: 011 505 772 4067

Also see: www.responsibletravel.com / www.equalexchange.com



getting around

When traveling in Nicaragua, it's best to be equipped with an open mind, a solid spine, lots of time, and a stomach for passing blind. The roads are replete with speed bumps, potholes, inebriated cyclists, and beasts of burden. It's possible to rent a car, but perhaps wiser to hire a local driver to negotiate the humps and hollows. On the dirt track leading to the popular beach community of San Juan del Sur, for example, our driver used *all* sides of the road—including both the right and oncoming left lanes *and* both shoulders!

The other, much cheaper option is to take the bus. My two-dollar, three-hour ride was aboard the non-Expreso from Estelí to Managua. It took me back to my school

days, when we played truth-or-dare in the back of the Bluebird. This time the dare was having the courage to sit in the front row and actually watch the road (Nicaraguan drivers have a penchant for passing on hills), the flexibility to sit with one's knees crammed into one's chin, and the patience to put up with all the stops at every country lane, and even, in the middle of nowhere, where inevitably a guy in a pressed shirt, carrying a rooster, climbs aboard. The driver's eclectic musical tastes added to the ambience. From Abba to Saturday Night Fever, interspersed with sizzling Latin salsa, the soundtrack of our sojourn was everything you'd expect on a bizarre bus bound for the heart of Central America.



Morgan's Rock Hacienda and Ecolodge overlooks the Pacific Ocean, near the southern community of San Juan del Sur. Set amongst some four-and-a-half thousand acres of private forest, it is the most expensive hotel in Nicaragua. At nearly \$250 per person per night (double, including meals), one expects exceptional service amongst extraordinary surroundings. Morgan's Rock delivers that and more.

They call it "barefoot luxury." Modeled after Lapa Rios in Costa Rica, the resort consists of 15 bungalows built solely of native woods (including eucalyptus, almond, teak and mahogany), volcanic stone and palm thatch roofs. The back of each unit faces west, ensuring spectacular sunsets surveyed from a private balcony surrounded by tropical trees.

After a dusty journey, I'm greeted by a waiter bearing chilled juice on a silver tray. This is followed by lunch with a view;

gorgeous gazpacho, chicken caesar salad, and Kahlúa flan, all devoured while gazing across the infinity pool to the private beach below. Every meal is tasty and fresh—the fish, the fruit, even the sugar is milled on the property. Better still, the "anything is possible" attitude of the staff. Feel like two soups? Of course. Prefer cappuccino? Why not? By breakfast time, they call me by name.

Next comes the exhausting list of tours—horseback riding, nature walks, estuary kayaking, mountain biking, night hike. I stop when I hear the words "therapeutic massage." What better way to knead the knots from coffee picking than a late afternoon session with Yamileth the masseuse? From the hut atop the hill, she works her magic. Occasionally, deep-throated hoots of howler monkeys bellow over the distant crescendo of breaking waves. Ahhhh.

The next day at dawn, more sounds—exotic birdsong, the trill of insects, and then, the one I've been waiting for—the clink of the coffee thermos being placed on the shelf in my front door. That is the height of luxury—hot "joe" in the jungle. I realize now why I came—Nicaragua is a place where you can go to the coffee and have it delivered directly to your door. My kind of country! ☺

slow lane

Morgan's Rock coffee jugs await guests (far left); plank bridge leads to jungle stroll (left); the burnished woods of a Morgan's Rock bedroom (below), within earshot of the waves lapping the private beach (right)



THE HIGHLAND
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WEND SOUTHWARD
TO THE CALM OF
MORGAN'S ROCK