

NICARAGUA ROWENA CARR-ALLINSON TRAVELS TO CENTRAL AMERICA, NOT IN SEARCH OF REVOLUTION BUT UNSPOILT PARADISE

Eco-resort is a real coup



FIVE OTHER THINGS TO DO

1. Tour the **Cutirre Farm** coffee plantations high on the slopes of the Mombacho Volcano. (They also offer a treetop canopy tour.)
2. Hike around the largest island in **Lake Nicaragua, Ometepe**, including its two volcanoes Concepción and Madera.
3. See **Granada**, the oldest city in the Americas. Baroque and Renaissance buildings dating back to 1524 have retained their colourful charm despite years of neglect.
4. Take a **kayak tour** of the hundreds of lava "islets" that surround Granada. The islands are home to thousands of species of waterbird.
5. Hop over the border. Morgan's Rock is just 40km from the frontier of **Costa Rica**.

Highlight of the day: Watching the sun go down is a must at Morgan's Rock

Pictures: Mowgli Films

A stocky customs officer clutching a machine gun stares at me blankly. The rustic landing strip in Granada was a welcome sight after my nine-hour journey but, despite the incongruous fake FBI cap, this guy does not look happy. His businesslike stance reminds me I've arrived in volatile Central America. He lets me in anyway and there are only two hours ahead of being jolted around on dirt roads until I arrive at Nicaragua's latest eco-resort, Morgan's Rock.

Immaculate taste

On the way, we drive past Lake Nicaragua, with its impressive twin volcanoes on Ometepe island. It's the kind of sight the Nicaraguan tourist board is trying to promote as the country attempts to revive a dire economy by luring travellers from neighbouring Costa Rica.

The poverty is striking: thin-as-a-rake dogs and barefoot children roam on pot-holed roads. Bony cattle meander freely; farmers tend their fields as colourful, overloaded buses whizz past. With 50 per cent unemployment, it's no wonder the San Juan del Sur community welcomes the

hundreds of jobs that Morgan's Rock created.

Arriving at the lodge is like stepping into a Garden of Eden: giant butterflies flutter in the lush and overpowering tropical forest. The 14-cottage lodge aims to attract high-end tourism in exchange for a taste of nature and nurture. Ecology



BARE ESSENTIALS

Nicaragua in Central America, once synonymous with guerilla warfare, is now opening its doors to tourism. Morgan's Rock lodge, wedged between the Pacific coast and Lake Nicaragua, is pioneering eco-tourism in the country

Currency: £1 = 28 Nicaraguan Gold Cordoba
Language: Spanish

and sustainability is the priority: 70 per cent of the food is produced organically onsite, including shrimps and even cheese; thousands of plants have been laid out and, of course, everything is recycled and water is heated by solar panels.

It may sound like a hippy retreat but immaculate taste and sophisticated standards reign. Complex meals are served on

designer crockery by staff who are genuinely pleased to work there. Battling my fear of heights, I get used to the hanging bridge suspended 22m over the canopy to reach my cabin. The eucalyptus pillars, hanging daybeds and netting for walls reinforce the tree-house feel.

The sound of the Pacific is overwhelming but it takes just a day to adapt to the daylight rhythms. The 6am coffee is surprisingly welcome before I head out to watch turtle hatchlings scarp from the beach into the surf. I'm alone on the beach as the tiny creatures follow their instincts and launch themselves into the ocean for the first time.

There's more wildlife in the rainforest. During a horseriding trek with Jesus, a weathered animal whisperer, I spot howler monkeys, parrots and white-tailed deer. At twilight, we hit the beach, where the horses' hooves sink deep into the sand.

Simple seafood

San Juan del Sur, a traditional fishing community, has a handful of B&Bs catering for backpackers and surfers drawn to the secluded coves at Marsella Beach and Los Playones. In the village, where watching the sunset is the highlight of the day, snack shacks serve simple seafood dishes. If I could get that customs guy down here, I'm sure I'd get a smile out of him.

Rowena travelled to Granada, Nicaragua with American Airlines. Return fares start from £551. Tel: 08457 789 789 or visit www.americanairlines.co.uk Double rooms at Morgan's Rock start from £78 per person per day, including meals and drinks. Tel: 00506 298 9442 or visit www.morganrock.com



Chaos: Overloaded, brightly coloured buses are a common sight

travel@ukmetro.co.uk

Come and see Australia's true colours

Fly with Qantas from only £535

Book now. Call Qantas on 0800 169 1030 visit www.australia.com/offers or see your travel agent for details.

QANTAS

The fare shown is seasonal and is inclusive of airport taxes and fees. This offer is subject to availability and is for sale until 15th May 2005. The featured fare is an example of London/Paris/London departing the UK between 28 March and 15 June 2005 and is correct at the time of going to press. Alternative fares are available for other destinations and travel periods. Additional airport taxes and fees may be required for additional stopovers and/or alternative routings.