

## NICARAGUA

### TRAVELOGUE

Beth, Mark, and The Jeffs

24 December 2013 – 1 January 2014

#### **Tuesday, 24 December 2013**

Imagine our delight when Mark and I boarded the airport tram after arriving in Miami to find The Jeffs! We had an uneventful flight to Managua and were met by a driver with a pick up to take us to Leon, the first city of the Revolution. Although the driver had trouble finding it, the Best Western Las Mercedes was centrally located and comfortable. Crowds filled the Central Plaza near the Cathedral for Christmas Eve, the streets were lined with tables selling fruits, toys, clothes, and many other items, and music played from the band shell. A tall puppet of an Indio goddess towered over the crowd, while other dancers did their routine.



We ate dinner at Taquezal, just off the plaza. I had white sea bass (curvita) with orange peanut butter sauce and a natural juice (which might have been pitahaya – dragon fruit). We visited the Cathedral and saw the nativity scene, missing Baby Jesus (because he wasn't yet born?) People were friendly and curious, as we all were a good head and shoulders taller than the rest of the crowd.

#### **Wednesday, 25 December 2013**



As promised, but still startling, the Leon siren went off at seven AM and we had an adequate breakfast of eggs, tang, toast, and gallo pinto. We checked out the Cathedral and were relieved to catch sight of baby Jesus being taken away for a new set of clothing before returning to his cradle. We visited a number of churches around town, including bombed out San Sebastian. Across the street, the Museum of Legends and Traditions (<http://www.museoleyendasytradiciones.com/eng/index.html>) was closed, but the guard let us and a few others inside, where

we got an interesting mix of revolutionary history and old time lore.

We had lunch at YaVoy, where I ate a chicken and sauce platter and a natural juice. We then walked around the city some more, stopped at a nearby bar/restaurant for drinks/ice cream. We went up and down the streets again and bought a tasty dinner from the sidewalk vendors, including plantains with fried cheese and grilled meats.



### **Thursday, 26 December 2013**

After breakfast, we took a taxi (sedan, a tight fit for all of us) to Leon Viejo, a world heritage site. A bilingual tour guide showed us the area, which had been the first capital of Nicaragua and abandoned prior to eruption of Momotombo. It was a site of interaction between the native Indians and Spanish; the Catholic church and local politics.



After a quick stop at the hotel, we then went down to the beach, Las Penitas. We had lunch at Suyapa Resort, which included a large grilled fish (guapote) with various sauces. We had some time to play in the surf and catch some sun before heading back to Leon. We took a quick stop at Poneloya, another beach town on the edge of a lagoon.

Back in town, we looked around the plaza again and went into the Museum of the Revolution. Our enthusiastic tour guide spoke no English, but, as a veteran of the Sandinista revolution, was very enthusiastic with his gestures and took us on a special tour upstairs and out on the roof (with the option to return in the morning to see better, as it was dark by the time we got up there). Very poignant history, rudimentary exhibits, but lots of passion.

We ate dinner at Al Carbon; tables were under cover around an open courtyard (as was YaVoy's lunch yesterday). I had carne assada, which was tasty and tender beef.

### **Friday, 27 December 2013**

We hired an SUV from Leon to Granada where the driver found Hotel La Mar Dulce in a neighborhood a few blocks from the Plaza. After checking in, we walked downtown and around the market area. Locals were much more attune to tourists, trying to sell products or provide carriage rides. After walking through the crowded market where all types of produce were for sale, we ate lunch at Blue Café. We then went back to the central square and met with two tour operators to plan the rest of our time in Granada.

We spent the evening watching baseball, the Granada Sharks (Los Tiburones), at El Estadio Roque T Zavala, a short walk from our hotel. The home team won, we had interesting meals served on banana leaves from women vendors, and were cheered on by a mariachi-type band in the stands. We stopped at the local supermarket on the way home to check out local offerings.

### **Saturday, 28 December 2013-**



Breakfast was served on small tables outside the rooms, around the pool and included a choice of Nicaraguan or other. Their eggs, gallo pinto, juice, and fruit was lovely, all fresh and nicely presented. Our local tour guide, Wilfredo (8970 5153), met us in the morning to take us to Las Isletas in Lago de Nicaragua. His nephew Freddie provided the boat and we spent an enjoyable morning touring the 365 islands. Wilfredo grew up on these islands with his grandparents and we were fortunate that Lucy, one of the released monkeys

on Mono Island, knew the family. She joined our boat, ate bananas, sat on Mark's lap, and entertained us during her visit. We also saw birds (egrets, rails, osprey, oropendolas) and enjoyed the range of island dwellings (shacks to mansions), in addition to a stop at a fortress designed to deter pirates (it didn't work).

After a change in drivers ([Leonelcruzmatamoros@gmail.com](mailto:Leonelcruzmatamoros@gmail.com)), we got into a pick up (with Wilfredo and Mark in the back) and drove to Volcan Masaya National Park: most unusual in the Americas. We had a great view and smell of an active volcano from here and a nice information center that provided excellent background.



We then drove to Laguna de Apoyo for lunch, a swim in a volcanic crater, and a short kayak. Although the sun wasn't out, it was a relaxing afternoon, before returning to Granada. There, we walked around downtown, saw the Party Bus (a school bus filled with people and playing loud music), and ate an excellent dinner at a Mediterranean restaurant, along with jocote fruit punch, before returning to the hotel.

### **Sunday, 29 December 2013**



We began the day with a climb to the bell tower of Iglesia de la Merced, Granada's most beautiful church. We then spent a long, hot, and interesting hour walking to the Nicaragua Butterfly Reserve. We saw a funeral procession along the dirt road to the reserve, along with shacks made from tin and wood slabs. People were friendly, with children calling out 'hola' from almost every house. Julio was our butterfly guide and we also had a tour of his reforestation project. We lunched at Esspressionista Coffee bar and Restaurant. The food was a mix of local fare and

New York expressions (the owner lived in NYC). We ate well and the bill reflected that!

We returned to the hotel for a swim in the pool and an outdoor dinner along the main drag. We enjoyed looking at the offerings of local artisans along the street (with an earring purchase!).

### **Monday, 30 December 2013**

After breakfast, we toured the Convent and enjoyed their exhibits and model of the city. We then split up: Mark and I toured the market again, enthralled by the array of beans and chicken, cheese, eggs, and you-name-it. We then walked to the Dona Elba cigar factory, where Mark made a purchase. Then to Café de las Sonrisas, where we watched them make hammocks, tried one out, and purchased one.

We met up with the Jeffs at Café La Isabelle and enjoyed a lunch (chicken burrito) on the front porch. We then returned to the hotel for a brief swim and our trip to Managua.

There, we checked into Hotel Los Pinos, which had a beautiful courtyard and pool (if the rooms were lacking in style and cleanliness). Two fellow hotel dwellers entertained us with stories of their travels and enterprises, including investments in moringa, which we sampled. At Jose's suggestion, we ate a pleasant Nica dinner at El Garabato (chicken fajita, corn drink).

## **Tuesday, 31 December 2013**



After a scant breakfast of eggs and a piece of toast, we hired a driver to take us around Managua for the day. We started at Huellas de Acahualinca: lava footprints made by humans 6,000 years ago. They also had a display of more recent pottery and a skeleton found in the area.

We then went to Malecon, the reconstructed waterfront. All this area was destroyed in the earthquake and by civil war, so there is an effort to develop local pride and unity. Lake Managua itself

is very polluted (no fish eating) but its quality is improving. Mark got a mask here from Masaya (\$5) and we then headed to the Plaza of the Revolution. Here the eternal flame honored heroes from the revolution, while the Cathedral skeleton was a tribute to the earthquake. We also went to the highest spot in Managua, the former Presidential Palace, where Somoza signed peace agreement with Sandino and then had him (and his colleagues) assassinated. After a stop at the new cathedral, we then toured the local market (where several purchases were made) and returned to the hotel after 2pm.



Our arduous search for lunch ended at Pane y Vino and then we returned to sit by the pool. Although The Jeffs decided they had had enough, Mark and I ate a special holiday dinner at El Tercer Ojo (Caesar salad with shrimp, beef over veggies and yucca, pureed fruit dessert), returned to the hotel to watch the ball drop (11PM Nicaragua time) in Times Square and stood out at the pool to listen to and watch a continuous fireworks display (these people really must like the sound of explosions!). And Happy New Year!

## **Wednesday, 1 January 2014**

We ate breakfast at the hotel, sat around the pool and read and eventually headed to the airport for our departure to Miami. Lunch at the airport café kept the Nicaraguan flavor, until we reached the US. Customs lines were long and crazy, but we all made our connections and returned home. True confessions: the snow and cold were not a pleasant welcome!