



Nicaragua

Mapping Nicaragua

As days turned to weeks of monotonous riding in Central America, Nicaragua threw the author a few twists that made for a memorable ride

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Taking a break along Nicaragua's Pacific coast. (above)
La Reina cattle, a Nicaraguan breed commonly spotted along the road. (left)



The author receiving stitches at Hospital Héroes y Mártires de Ometepe.



FAST FACTS

UNTOLD RICHES

Nicaragua's San Juan River winds its way from Lake Cocibolca (a.k.a. Lake Nicaragua or Lake Granada), which butts up against the central mountains, to the Caribbean Sea, some 190 km to the east. Sixteenth-century pirates would challenge rapids in the river to plunder Spanish riches in the trading town of Granada, on the lake's northwestern shore.

NICE PLACE TO VISIT

Nicaragua is the largest of the Central American republics and is the only country in Latin America to be colonized by both the Spanish and the British. The western side of the country is the economic hub and the location of most of the country's settlements. Nicaragua is the second-poorest county in the Americas, next to Haiti, yet has a very low crime rate, making it inexpensive and safe to visit.

ONE DANGEROUS, ONE SAFE

Ometepe Island is the largest island in Cocibolca Lake and consists of two volcanoes - Concepción and Maderas - joined by a low isthmus about 3 km wide. While Maderas is dormant, Concepción last erupted in 2010 and is the larger of the two, at 1,610 metres high and with a diameter of about 14 km.

THE EASTERLIES BLOWING OFF LAKE COCIBOLCA WERE STRONG ENOUGH TO FORCE ME TO CORRECT MY SLOPPY RIDING

Stare at any map long enough, and a visual trick can occur between the countries therein and the traveller. Take Central America. After six weeks of folding and refolding my map, I began to see in the narrow, curving strip of land a tired, withered limb. Guatemala was the thigh, Honduras the meat on El Salvador's femur, and Costa Rica the bony shin. At the southern end, the skinny foot of the Panamanian isthmus, wasted almost to nothing, barely manages a toehold on Colombia.

This imaginary image came to me during a stop in the hot and dusty uplands of Nicaragua. Long days in the saddle through Central America had become a monotonous, hypnotic cycle.

Déjà Vu

Each small town dotting the landscape had begun to blend seamlessly into the next. Every time I entered yet another collection of squat cement houses, "I've been here before" easily came to mind. I felt I'd eaten enough pig's head stew, sweated through enough flat desert and waved away enough peddlers.

Riding inattentively, my memories had begun to slip. This was a case of the travel doldrums, the worst of all travelling illnesses; under its haze, everything begins to fuse into one ill-defined moment and distinguishing one event from the next becomes almost impossible. It was already happening to me: I had been in Honduras the week before, but what

Nicaragua

did I remember of it? There was that bar – no, wait, that was in Guatemala. And that back road with the banana palms – perhaps that was El Salvador? I needed a change of scene to refocus my mind; to plant me in the present.

Nicaragua; a country blessed with topographical variety that its neighbours lack, helped. Here, the Pan-American Highway is squeezed onto the narrow tendon of land along the Pacific as the land is riven in two by the behemoth of Lake Cocibolca. On the shrunken leg of my map, I decided this was the hough, the soft indentation at the back of the knee, where a well-directed knock will crumple an unsuspecting person.

The knock, when it came, arrived as a powerful gust. The easterlies blowing off Lake Cocibolca (also known as Lake Nicaragua) were strong enough to force me to correct my sloppy riding. The cool breeze lifted a corner of the humid blanket weighing me down. Enticed, I turned at a sign directing me to the lakeshore.

Cocibolca is one of the epic lakes of the Americas. South of the Great Lakes, there is almost nothing like it. Cocibolca is twice the size of Utah's Great Salt Lake and covers an area equivalent to Bolivia's Lake Titicaca, which is South America's only sizable body of water. There is certainly nothing comparable



to Cocibolca in Central America – Guatemala's beautiful Lake Atitlan is only a speck in comparison.

Of Spanish Gold and Dictators

Despite Cocibolca no longer drawing international attention, the lake's size and access to the Caribbean once made it a common destination for pirates and buccaneers, who made frequent trips up the San Juan River to sack colonial Spanish cities for their gold.

The lakeside city of Granada, the first colonial city on the American mainland and Central America's main port city during the colonial era, was a particularly hot place during this period. It survived countless assaults, only to be chosen by aspiring American despot William Walker as the focal point for his takeover of the Nicaraguan government in 1856.

After Walker led revolts in California

and Mexico, he was able to cling to power as president of Nicaragua for almost a year, basing his banana republic in Granada. When he was finally ousted by an alliance of Central American armies, he burned the city as he fled. Nicaraguans received their justice only after Walker was extradited from the U.S. to Honduras and executed four years later.

As I rode along the shoreline, feeling cool and fresh under a brilliant bluebird day, the dual volcanic peaks of Ometepe Island slowly rose along the horizon like the ascending skull of a crocodile. Of the two volcanoes, only Maderas is dead and safe; Concepción last erupted in 2010. The pirate Edward Hume, passing this way after providing Granada (naturally) with its latest sacking, proclaimed the sight of Concepción, the higher of the two peaks, was greater than all the riches he had just plundered.



Freshwater Sharks

Near the town of Rivas, an Ometepe-bound ferry idled at the lakeside. I decided to join the embarking busload of tourists, and explore the island. While the stationmaster wrote out my ticket, I admired the collection of wide shark jaws mounted on the wall of the ferry terminal. I assumed they were trophies from some deep-sea fishing expedition. But no. The stationmaster assured me they were from sharks pulled from the lake just yonder.

Sensing my doubt, he produced from his desk drawer a picture of four widely grinning men standing shoulder to shoulder. In their outstretched arms lay a bull shark, its skin glossy with blood. The sharks are euryhaline (able to live in both fresh and saltwater) and make the journey to Cocibolca from the

Caribbean Sea by jumping the rapids of the San Juan River salmonlike.

Once on the water, the ferry pitched hard over the froth whipped up by the wind. Gripping the gunwale of the boat, I was glad for the ratchet straps, lying unclaimed on the ferry deck, with which I'd lashed down my motorcycle. The water was empty – the only other traffic was another ferry making the reverse island-to-mainland trip.

Before the Panama Canal

At one time, such tranquility was unheard-of on these waters. During the 19th century, Cocibolca lay at the centre of one of the principal transport routes connecting the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Before transcontinental roads and railways made a land crossing of North America possible, ships would travel south from North America to the thin land bridges of Latin America to make the journey between the east and west coasts. Because of Cocibolca large size and ease of access, the lake was the perfect location to connect the two oceans.

Following the lead of the pirates as much as the bull sharks, ships would

chunter up the San Juan from the Atlantic and Caribbean and across the lake to the ports on the western side of the lake. From there, goods and passengers were transported by stagecoach to waiting ships in the Pacific – and vice versa.

Although the California gold rush ensured a steady supply of customers for Cocibolca, interest in the long and humid journey through the tropics fell away once the final spike was hammered into the transcontinental railway. Schemes to build a canal and reinstate Nicaragua as a giant in the transport industry continued into the early 20th century, but were sidelined again when Panama was chosen as the site for the inter-oceanic canal. Although proposals for a Nicaraguan Canal still occasionally resurface, dithering foreign investment and ambivalent national interest means

concrete action has stuttered and stalled for more than two decades.

The people of Ometepe seem little concerned that their island has slipped out of global use as a transportation hub. The island is a visitor's paradise. Under the refuge of large palms, old men lounge in wicker chairs, safe from the wicked noontime sun. Banana and coffee plantations mix with ecotourism and tiki bars serving cold beer. I took the time to peruse the beaches, where bushes of pink flowers bloomed among the dunes and long-necked egrets spearfished in the lapping waves.

Tough Riding

However, riding on the island was less than paradisaical. Unlike Nicaragua's mainland, where roads are even and smooth, the roads of Ometepe were



The jaws of freshwater bull sharks with the nose of a sawfish, hanging as trophies in the San Jorge ferry terminal.

The sunsets are outstanding on the Nicaraguan Pacific coastline.



Nicaragua



Empanadas and a pot of *pozole*, a stew made with pig's jowls, at a roadside *fritanga*

more like trails roughly gouged out of the dusty earth, strewn with rocks as large as the four-cylinder engine of my 1980 Yamaha XJ650. While manoeuvring around these stones is easily done on the light dirt bikes favoured by the locals, given the exhaust of my Yamaha hovered only a few centimetres above the ground, I was reduced to a pan-shattering crawl.

Inevitably, a large, sloping rock launched me into a deep rut. It was not a crash so much as a slide into a gully and I found myself wedged firmly against the dirt. Jammed into the hard earth, I struggled to free my left leg from between the wall of the runnel and the hot bike. I succeeded only after using a combination of heavy tugging and rocking, then more to-ing and fro-ing eventually forced the heavy Yamaha back up onto the road.

Thankfully, there was no damage to the bike. However, as I moved to remount, I felt a sharp tug in my left knee. Looking down, I was shocked to find a deep hole of red jelly topped with strands of blue-white denim showing through a cut in my jeans. Lost in the act of crashing, I'd failed to feel my knee jam against some sharp rock in the road. There was nothing to be done for it now – even my layman's eye could see the cut needed stitches.

A painful search of the island led me to a small hospital. I was worried about insurance – did I have it? – but already my leg was stiffening and riding was difficult. Avoiding injury off-roading while riding an XJ650 is all but impossible, and the slow and measured manner of my accident made it seem foolish. Comparing my injury against the



Frail bridges such as this one are common in the Nicaraguan countryside.

posters inside the clinic, which warned against dengue fever and Zika virus, I felt even more abashed.

Cheap at Twice the Price

The doctor, for his part, ignored me while I blustered about price while seated on the examination table as he focused instead on the phone pinned between his cheek and shoulder. Snipping through my sock, now gummed with dark lifeblood, he jabbed my knee with a syringe of anesthetic and laced the wound while still talking on the phone, occasionally sewing with one hand as he discussed another patient's gout, pausing occasionally to let an onlooker squirt iodine on my leg.

With my knee newly stitched and wrapped in bright white putty, I waited for the presentation of the bill. The locals of Ometepe were no doubt tired of being plundered by travelling brigands; here they had one caught, and could reclaim some of that long-lost pirated gold. But there was nothing. I was free to go.

"Nothing?" I asked the doctor.

"A little something," he said. I held my breath, wondering if I would be

able to run with my knee so tightly bandaged. With his thumb pointed toward his mouth, he said, "Gatorade! It's too hot outside!"

There is no relief like the relief felt in a hospital. Clinic visits on Ometepe are free, the good doctor said. For his handiwork, so quickly and expertly done, I wouldn't pay a cent. Feeling so lucky felt so unlikely. At a nearby *fritanga*, a pot of fleshy pink *pozole* (pig's head stew) bubbled away. After the antiseptic pong of the clinic, the smell of the stew kindled my appetite. I bought the doctor his Gatorade, plus one for myself, and two *pozoles*, then returned to the clinic to cheer the rewards of universal health care.

Standing outside the hospital, I again considered my map. Central America still had the look of a withered leg – nothing could shake the image from my head – but Nicaragua had taken on a curious new bend. It was the same as my bandaged knee; it was the bend of memory. **MM**



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