



PARADISE Found Playa Maderas, a popular surfing destination in San Juan del Sur. OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Shade-grown coffee plants at Selva Negra. The author, Margot Dougherty, in a crater lake in the Apoyo Lagoon Nature Reserve. Pelican Eyes Hotel & Resort in San Juan del Sur. Surfers at Playa Maderas. The mountain town of Matagalpa. A view of Granada from La Merced tower. Dougherty (right) perfects her backbend. The lush (and wildlife-rich) beachfront resort Morgan's Rock.



YOU CAN GO *Om* AGAIN

ON HER LAST VISIT, IN THE '80S, NICARAGUA WAS WAR TORN AND DANGEROUS; NOW IT'S A LUXURY VACATION SPOT. IF THE COUNTRY COULD REINVENT ITSELF, THOUGHT **MARGOT DOUGHERTY**, NEWLY LAID OFF, MAYBE I CAN GO THERE ON A YOGA RETREAT AND DO THE SAME



HISTORICALLY, *Nicaragua*

has had it rough. In the natural-disaster category, it's a blue-ribbon winner: Earthquakes, hurricanes and volcanoes have taken turns ravaging this Central American country, and its politics have been equally turbulent. Recent times alone include a dynasty of torture-prone dictators toppled by socialist Sandinista insurgents who subsequently found themselves engaged in a civil war with contras bolstered by U.S. weapons sales to Iran.

On my first visit, in 1983, I was on assignment for *Life* magazine, accompanied by a photographer. The Sandinistas were running the country, the contra conflict was escalating, and there was a subliminal sense of danger in the capital city, Managua. Many prominent families had decamped for Miami, and those who stayed behind were warily hanging on to land, businesses and homes that the Sandinista top brass had shown an appetite for appropriating. Military service was mandatory, and the streets were filled with camouflage. I spent time with baby-faced soldiers, not much taller than their Russian-issue Kalashnikov rifles, who wore trash bags as raincoats. A young boy returning from the battlefield on the back of a horse-drawn cart made an indelible impression: The flesh of one shin was peeled back like petals on a tulip, the result of a grenade. My hotel room was pawed through; our car was tailed; story subjects, afraid their phones were bugged, pretended not to know me when I called them after an interview. Before I met with a highly placed Sandinista minister, my bags, containing all my notebooks and tapes, were confiscated. Back in his inner sanctum of an office, he propositioned me while brandishing an unsheathed sword. I spoke enough Spanish to convey politely that an affair would be unprofessional—on my part—and he was probably too amused to be insulted.

I returned to New York three weeks later, just in time for the Fourth of July, and I choked up watching the fireworks from an apartment rooftop. It was a Michelle Obama moment: For the first time, I was consciously grateful for my country. Nicaragua had made me a patriot.

Cut to a yoga class in Santa Monica, 2009. As we rolled up our mats, the teacher, Sara Ivanhoe, announced she was leading a retreat at a five-star ecolodge on Nicaragua's Pacific coast. It didn't seem that long ago that I'd signed a form promising not to hold Time Inc. responsible if I were blown to bits or otherwise inconvenienced during my assignment there. Who goes to Nicaragua on *vacation*? Well, as it happens, close to a million tourists did last year, and the government hopes to raise the figures exponentially. The same PR company that reps the upscale Peninsula Hotels has been hired to promote the country as an undiscovered destination. It's "the

new Costa Rica," with resorts ranging from swanky to simple, and natural wonders abound: turtle migrations, sustainable coffee plantations, rain forests chockablock with exotic birds, monkeys and flora. The position of two large freshwater lakes in the middle of the country makes the surfing spectacular. Winds from the Caribbean coast blow uninterrupted to the Pacific, creating ideal wave conditions year-round.

So I signed up for the retreat, six days at Morgan's Rock, the country's most exclusive resort. Ivanhoe worked out the itinerary with Nicaragua-based Adrienne Ward, an ex-New Yorker and the founder of BigWorld-SmallPlanet, a business that arranges Central American yoga retreats. We'd have two yoga classes a day, unlimited hammock swaying, no TVs or newspapers and various cultural sightseeing ops. I'd recently been let go from my magazine job—one of thousands of journalists pink-slipped that year—and it was time to figure out the next step. If Nicaragua could repurpose itself as a high-end tourist destination, surely I could conjure a second act, too.

Ours turned out to be a small group—eight women—and we straggled into the country piecemeal, making the bumpy three-hour van trip from Managua airport to Morgan's Rock in clumps of twos and threes. Set within 4,500 acres of a reforestation project, the grounds of the beachfront resort are stunning. Using hardwoods from the property, British architect Matthew Falkiner



For tips on planning your own yoga-filled trip to Nicaragua, go to more.com/nicaragua.

designed 15 rustic-elegant bungalows with structural beams made of polished tree trunks, outdoor showers and suspended queen-size daybeds that sway over patios facing the ocean. Wi-Fi is limited to a small area in the main lodge, in my case a 15-minute hike down a steep dirt path to a suspension bridge draped over a canyon lush with foliage.

In August, Nicaragua's weather is hot and exceedingly humid—I was pretty much drenched the entire trip, and my laptop expired from heat exhaustion one day in the back of a van—but a sea breeze moved the air at the resort's open-sided restaurant and lounge, and that's where the yoga crew first met. As bartenders concocted fruit *batidas* made of white pineapple and bananas, a *kirtan* of howler monkeys—15-pound simians whose prehistoric calls seem to emanate from dinosaur-size diaphragms—resonated in the distance.

On that first afternoon, we filed down to a pair of thatch-roofed yoga platforms set up at the beach. The sand was a crustacean circus. Purple land crabs with orange eyebrows scuttled sideways and waved Day-Glo claws, like cartoon characters escaping giant aliens. Other pincered creatures popped in and out of more subtly colored shells, and tiny specks of who knows what hopped spastically through the melee. Sanskrit chants by Krishna Das wafted from portable speakers as unhurried waves rolled to shore and a pair of worn fishing boats bobbed like an old couple in the mid-distance. I've done yoga in some remarkable settings—the incense-stained basement of Pattabhi Jois's home in India, a rain forest in Brazil, a former palace in Bhutan—but a remote beach at twilight with an uninterrupted horizon and softly whirling body-temperature air was a new kind of magic. The ocean swallowed an enormous orange globe of a sun as the class ended, and our final collective *om* was pitch-perfect.

A job layoff can inflict an abrupt and disorienting loneliness. I wasn't



blindsided—colleagues were let go before me, and my salary made me a likely candidate—but I'd enjoyed the daytime social life of an office for 30 years. Suddenly I was talking, a lot, in thoughtfully constructed complex sentences, to my dogs. Astute observations, idle musings, clever asides or merciless cracks were inevitably met by the same triptych of responses: a doleful stare from my baset hound, spontaneous rollovers from my terrier mix and misplaced excitement from my Chihuahua ("We're going on a walk?!"). As an employee, I'd done my share of grumbling about the 30-minute commute, but I was starting to miss brushing up against humans, dissecting last night's episode of *30 Rock* or *Glee*. There's a perverse kind of peace to be found in the midst of deadline-ravaged coworkers. Watching the sun drop on the Morgan's Rock beach, I felt a similar sense of purposeful calm. It began to dawn on me that I am a writer by nature, not simply by job description. This thing I've been doing for decades is not, it turns out, just a career. It's who I am. So while I'd become a lone agent on a professional level, in other parts of my life I was connecting, finding opportunities I wouldn't likely have noticed, or taken, while drawing a steady paycheck.

The first few days were free-form—reading, swimming, yoga. Sara, our instructor, organized each practice around one of the five elements: air (*vayu*), fire (*agni*), water (*apas*), earth (*prithvi*) and spirit (*akasha*). Without the usual distractions of quotidian living, I found myself finally absorbing age-old instructions. By moving my hands closer to my waist for up dog, I really *could* open my chest without crunching my lower back! One morning at the resort's storybook farm, a few of us tried milking a cow (there's something creepy about yanking on an animal's teat) and slipped warm eggs from roosting hens (who couldn't have cared less). Doña Candida, the farm's proprietress, scrambled the *huevos* and served a feast—

Nicaragua's national dish of *gallo pinto* (rice sautéed with red beans), homemade feta-style cheese, fresh fruit, sliced avocado, *pico de gallo* and tortillas we'd patted out under her supervision. After we'd stuffed ourselves, we

CONTINUED ON PAGE 152

OPPOSITE PAGE **Blue LAGOON** One of the many privately owned island homes on Lake Nicaragua. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Vibrant dragon fruit grows in the town of Sébaco. A balloon vendor at a Granada street festival. The Jesus statue overlooking San Juan del Sur. Another view of San Juan del Sur.

begged to put off our morning yoga session, but Sara asked to meet at the beach in an hour.

Trouble in paradise. I was getting a kick out of finding critters all over my bungalow. Those tiny purple crabs lodged in the rivets of sliding doors. A giant black spider I named Ben (as in Big), a good two inches across, that clung to my shower wall each morning, discreetly disappearing when I turned on the water. But other yoginis weren't feeling the love. Shauna, a jazz singer on the trip, came back from dinner one night to find her bathroom floor obscured by an infestation of ants. Marilyn, our resident life coach, was kept awake by a howler monkey hanging upside down and peering in her window. Others encountered snakes and scorpions. The collective lack of sleep was taking a toll. As we sat in a circle on the yoga platform, Sara proposed moving to a new hotel in the nearby town of San Juan del Sur. We'd still be near the beach, but we'd be able to walk to shops and restaurants, and the rooms had telephones, flat-screen TVs and air conditioning. Plug-in appliances weren't exactly what I'd been hankering for, but group serenity was at stake. We agreed to the move and left to pack up.

By lunchtime, we were seated under a canvas awning at Pelican Eyes Hotel & Resort, a village of white stucco casitas and tiered infinity pools cut into the hills above San Juan's tranquil bay. One of the world's largest statues of Jesus—known as Jesus of Divine Mercy—extended an arm to us from a distant cliff. While I was happy to get out of the Morgan's Rock cocoon, our spread of lobster BLTs, Greek salads, cheeseburgers and Chilean sauvignon blanc made me feel as if I were at a ladies' lunch on Sunset Boulevard. Where was the spirit of the Nicaragua I'd encountered on my last trip, a country fighting for its identity and against bourgeois smugness? All smooth, comfortable curves where I wanted an edge, this resort felt less Latin than Miami.

We were paired up in two-bedroom, two-story casitas with super-equipped kitchens, and balconies upstairs and down. Amy, a well-traveled lawyer and

a hoot to be with, was my casita mate. (Perhaps predestined: We'd brought identical Tommy Bahama bikinis.) After lunch we took a stroll through town, a sleepy grid of cobblestone streets and simple buildings painted in sun-faded shades of aqua, yellow, rose and cerulean. Families lounged on folding chairs in front of unlit shops selling woven wallets and headbands, rayon pants and tops, carved turtles, etched pottery. A board-shorts and flip-flops crowd filled the open-air bars and restaurants.

San Juan del Sur, it turns out, is a surfing mecca. The next day, five of us crammed into a beaten-down Toyota Land Cruiser with a FUCK WORK sticker (how appropriate) on the rear window and a rack of boards on the roof, and we bumped along a narrow dirt road to Remanso Beach (more advanced surfers go to Popoyo and Playa Maderas). Dwight, an American with crispy blond hair and a Dentyne smile, was our instructor. After we planted the boards in the sand, he took us through the basics: how to paddle, how to jump from our bellies to a crouch, where to direct our knees, shoulders and eyes. Then he attached our ankle straps, the tethers connecting surfer and board. I don't want to look at this too deeply—meaning, probably I should—but I'm not wild about being tethered to anything. Maybe it started with my older brother handcuffing me to a tree while he and his seven-year-old buddies set out on an expedition to the penny candy store. The concept of being “stuck” makes my breath go short and shallow. Immediately after a breakup, the sadness of losing a boyfriend is generally countered by the percolation of relief: I'm free! When I was let go from my job, the panic of not having a salary was ameliorated by the delight of reporting to no one. That said, I'm not a recluse, so the trick was to figure out how to retain a sense of independence without feeling isolated. Not just in work but in life. And right now, on a surfboard.

Despite living 10 minutes from the ocean in Los Angeles, I've never surfed. I tried to stay cool as we paddled out, and the ocean was embarrassingly calm. Nevertheless, at about waist deep,

I had a change of heart. “You know what, Dwight?” I said. “I'm just going to watch from the beach.”

“No, you're not,” he answered with that big white smile, as cool as a central casting surfing dude. Alrighty then. Dwight says there's no turning back. Not a bad life lesson for the chapter I find myself in. Time to look forward. I continued to paddle, and when the right wave came, Dwight gave me a push. “Stand up!” he shouted. Lo and behold, I did. I was surfing! The second the realization hit, I fell—or did I leap?—and when I came up, the board was bobbing next to me like a Labrador retriever. That ankle strap was messing with my core belief; apparently attachment and freedom are not mutually exclusive. This may be obvious to all those enviably balanced women who don't lose an iota of themselves within the construct of a relationship, but it came as an epiphany to me. The freelance thing may be ideal: I can get involved on a project-by-project basis, with interludes of freedom.

After a few days in San Juan del Sur, we'd seen the sights, eaten in a bistro owned by ex-Angelenos and taken a day cruise in pouring rain to a tiny private beach near the Costa Rican border. The yoga retreat was ending, but I wanted to explore more of the country. Amy was game, too, so after joining in a final *om* on the yoga deck, we hugged our beloved yoginis good-bye and gave a nod to Giant Jesus. Our gear strapped into a truck, we headed north with our driver, Cristobal. First stop: Jinotepe, for a date with a shaman named Eliseo.

Fields of corn, soybeans, watermelon and mangoes blurred past on Highway 1, a ribbon of macadam that runs from Guatemala to Mexico. So did signs for the ubiquitous “autohotels” where couples go to have sex with people they don't want other people to know they're having sex with. We passed through Rivas, a wooden-furniture-making hub. Tables, beds, dining and patio chairs lined the sidewalks, and men wearing wife beaters and sandals idled in majestic hand-carved rockers in packed dirt yards while chickens pecked for food at their feet. Eventually we turned into an unpaved driveway that opened

onto a compound of sorts: a rambling home with a porch shading myriad plants and two fat pit bulls, a blue cement building with the look of a Third World medical clinic, and an enormous Buddha smiling from a tiered altar in a clearing.

I have a weak spot for fortune tellers. None of them are 100 percent accurate, granted, but most manage to say something that rings bizarrely true, either by inspiration or by accident. And there's no better time to hear a clairvoyant's vision of what life has in store than when your status quo has blown up like a flame-torched munitions factory. Would I get a new job, would I survive as a writer, or would the oracle just ask me to leave, my prospects so dim he couldn't bring himself to relay them?

Eliseo was seated below a heavy wooden crucifix flanked by a pair of carved angels, at a red Lucite desk with a plug-in rotating crystal prism. A thick chain with a silver cross dangled over his gray T-shirt, and his rumble of a laugh made me think he'd be fun to have a beer with. I didn't do much talking; Eliseo just started in, and an interpreter helped with the translation. I'm not entirely confident I got the whole story, but he said I should always have dogs around because they give me solace; I could do with more pink in my bedroom; I will travel (somewhere with horses); and next year I'll hit the jackpot in terms of love, money and career. (It does always tend to be next year with these guys.) Eliseo has a bemused certitude, and I take this \$15 future and claim it as my own. Intention can create reality, right?

Amy and I rented a car and, with an exceptional 28-year-old guide named Eduardo, toured for the next few days. In Granada, a city of beautiful stone churches set on the shores of Lake Nicaragua, we had lunch at an outdoor wine bar and watched a festival. Costumed characters and horses festooned with ribbons wound through streets vibrating with music. A giant puppet of a Spanish *dama*, operated by a boy on stilts beneath her gown, sashayed by with a sullen transvestite in a midriff

top and miniskirt waving a flat, worn pocketbook and stopping occasionally to break into a nasty little dance. Nobody seemed able to explain the symbolism. In nearby Masaya, we climbed to the gaping maw of an active volcano where vultures swooped in and out of undulating waves of smoke. We swam in a gorgeous crater lake and ate delicious vegetarian meals at roadside cafeterias. I took a boat taxi to a new hotel, Jicaro, built on one of hundreds of *isletas*, the tiny islands in Lake Nicaragua believed to be remnants of a volcanic eruption. I finally felt as if we were seeing Nicaragua for real.

For our finale, we went to the northern mountains of Matagalpa and the eccentric Selva Negra (Black Forest), a 1,470-acre resort and working farm run by third-generation German Nicaraguans. Along with hiking trails, bird watching and Hansel-and-Gretel cottages with ferns and bromeliads sprouting from their roofs, Selva Negra is known for its shade-grown coffee. Whole Foods sells its beans. Mausi Kühl, a sustainability expert who owns Selva Negra with her husband, Eddy, drove us through the lush, muddy property, showing us the thousands of water bottles repurposed as insect catchers, the army of imported worms turning troughs of coffee bean detritus into rich humus, the tires repurposed as pathways, the school she runs for her farmworkers' children. It was impossible not to be stunned by her capacity to make a remote, primitive environment so productive.

Selva Negra, like Nicaragua, like all of us, is constantly in transition. My two weeks in the country gave me a chance to remember myself as a neophyte reporter on my first trip. I'd never have known what the intervening decades would bring, and I can't know now what the next block of time has in store. But life has a way of laying groundwork for surprises; the past and the present conspire to prepare us for the future. With luck and a little faith, we find the tools to get from one to the other with a modicum of grace. Even if it means using a basset hound as a sounding board. 🐕