

A Roving Exchange



Our bikes were loosely tied together atop bags of grain on a ferry, headed for two volcanoes rising out of the largest lake in Central America. Late-afternoon sun flooded across the scene. The rocking waves lulled us to contentment after a sweaty, humid Nicaraguan day cycling through pastoral countrysides dotted with schoolchildren, cattle carts, roadside garbage

in Central America

Story and photos by Blake Gordon



dumps, and a German cyclist heading north. With seven days of cycling Nicaragua behind us, we looked forward to a bikefree adventure and relaxation ahead of us before departing the country.

Four of us were headed across Lago de Nicaragua for a break from our demanding 100-kilometer-a-day pace. A fifth, the do-it-yourself Belgian named Walter, lingered in the aging colonial town of Granada to create his own trailer. I remember running into Nate, our videographer, in Granada's loosely gridded streets.

"Where's Walter?" I asked.

"He's trying to construct a trailer out of a huge pile of bikes in someone's house."

Envious of our own manufactured trailers, Walter was consumed by his task. We would meet up with him later on the Costa Rican coast, mumbling about the peculiarities of his semi-successful creation.

Across the lake, Volcán Concepción, which last erupted in 1957, had created the larger portion of Isla de Ometepe, meaning "between two hills" in Nahuatl, an Aztec language adopted by the local indigenous cultures. Although there are 400 islands in the lake, Isla de Ometepe is by far the largest, and from its heights, glimpses reach across a narrow swath of western land to the Pacific Ocean. Sitting at a scant 105 feet above sea level, forty-five rivers flow into the enormous lake, yet only one drains it. Emptying from the southeast corner into the Caribbean Sea, Mark Twain called the famed Rio San Juan "an earthly paradise." The river was the backbone of a formidable trade route across the continent before the Panama Canal. Bullsharks used the river as a route to immigrate into the lake.

In exodus southward from Olmecs in Mexico, oracles told the indigenous Chorotegas and Nahuatl they would find this land and settle it. Ancient stone statues and petroglyphs dot the island. With only a very basic tourism infrastructure set amid enticing natural wonder, it exemplifies the reason I joined two ex-roommates and a growing number of their followers cycling in Central America.

By midmorning the next day, we were hiking halfway up the volcano, encrusted in our own sweat and the thick jungle humidity. We were following the brisk lead of our

overly self-confident guide whom we met the night before at our lakeside campsite. He fondly referred to any of us as "guy", and we knew him simply as "the guide." He entertained us with the story of another guide who instantly abandoned his group at the top in a full downhill sprint the moment he felt the earth tremble. We weren't sure whether to think better of him, or be concerned about the quality of guides on this volcano.

"I guide this volcano four or five days a

week," he said.

Conversation drifted to other topics, and we moved above the tree line into a cool thick fog of muted grays pierced by steady rain. When he started to look for a white plastic bag that marked the crossing point of a rocky crevasse, we heard: "It's right around here, but the last time I climbed this thing was six months ago."

Our confidence waned as the rain thickened. Farther up, vaguely near the top of the 5,282-foot volcano, we abandoned our



A plethora of parts. Walter, the Belgian trailer maker, wades through the inventory.

lighthearted wonder when rain instantly intensified, sending dark brown channels of runoff underneath us. The water in a nearby chute sounded like a train and I peered precariously over the edge to glimpse the most violent stretch of water I'd seen in my life. Nearly black and moving in every direction possible, if it had been given the chance, its force would surely have ripped us apart against the sharp volcanic rock.

Earlier we had mentioned this possibility, and regardless of our hunger for the summit, we decided that now would be an appropriate time to head back down — slowly. As slow as ascending was, it was nothing compared with descending the loose pyroclastic hillside.

“Rock!”

We move at a snail's pace, ever so careful not to dislodge the rocks that occasionally careened chaotically down the volcano or slipped and fell into the scar-inducing volcanic rock. Although he tried to conceal it, worry showed on the searching face of the guide as he looked unsuccessfully for the official white bags. Trying to dismiss thoughts of being air-rescued two days later, John and I exchanged smiles at each other. After too many slow, concerned steps downward, white bags appeared in the monsoonlike rain. Relieved, we continued our decent as gaps in the clouds briefly revealed sun-drenched jungle and the pastures below surrounded by Lago de Nicaragua.

At the base of the volcano, away from steep pitches, torrential rain, and important decisions, we ambled through the jungle with sounds of spider monkeys and urracas (blue-throated magpie jays) filling the thick, towering canopy. Howler monkey calls wrapped around our ears like wind from a passing train. Our tip for the guide's leadership and entertainment was a promise to send him pictures of the four-foot boa constrictor he grabbed and put on display around his neck. Satisfied with our heavy hike on foot, tomorrow would be time to return to the bikes and pedal farther south along the final stretches of Nicaragua.

As we prepared for the next morning's departure, we came across an enormous four-person economy tent. It belonged solely to Harold Mueller, an endearing jean-wearing German who quit his job as a com-



munications engineer in Stuttgart to cycle from Alaska to Argentina. Although cycling from Alaska to Argentina is not uncommon, we thought that Harold was probably one of the few to attempt to do so in Levi's. When he joined us farther south in Costa Rica, we tried unsuccessfully to convince him that biking in ninety-degree heat and occasional rains would be more comfortable in shorts. Harold, however, thought keeping his shorts clean took priority over riding in comfort.

John heard about this Harold long before we crossed paths with him on Isla de Ometepe. A pair of cyclists John and Mike had met in Alaska had ridden with Harold through parts of Canada. John relayed sto-

ries that they told about this memorable character.

In the middle of nowhere Canada, John said, “Harold came across a discarded portable phone on the side of the road, resuscitated it, and then, using his electrical engineering background, he was able to wire it up to a phone jack or electrical outlet on the telephone poles. He immediately started making calls as the others stared in disbelief.”

Our roving bicycle troupe had started with two brothers and the Arctic Ocean. Seven months ago, Mike and John Logsdon had left Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, with their sights on Ushuaia, Argentina, the southernmost town in the world. Video camera in hand, Nate became firmly attached to them in Baja on a stylishly dated red Univega. Farther south, in Puerto Escondido, the three crossed paths with Walter cycling alone on a basic mountain bike with homemade panniers.

Walter remembered talking to the hotel manager the night before about my wish to meet some fellow cyclists. “When I went back to the hotel in the afternoon the next

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day, I saw that my bike was flanked by three others,” he said.

Having wandered by bicycle on his own through Ireland, Mike related to their longing for companionship and laughs, so of course there was an open invitation. Although their group was originally supposed to be short-lived, it was the beginning of a 2,000-mile relationship.

“He kept telling us that he would only be with us for a day or two because he wouldn’t be able to keep up,” Mike laughed. “However, he left us in the dust for most of that first week.” I joined Nate in Guatemala City, where he was tackling computer problems, and met up with the other three in El Salvador.

Seven days before our daring volcano hike, all five of us arced with the sunset at the

countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras in the north, and the more modern ecotourist-besieged lands of Costa Rica and Panama to the south. A wide variety of life was evident within its boundaries, from poor children who lined the road chanting *Gringo!* in the north to the Pacific coast beach of San Juan del Sur in the south, overrun with ex-pats from Europe and North America. In between lay stretches of natural beauty amid volcanoes, aging colonial grandeur, gritty modern life, and an abundance of almost anything else in between.

The hot Pacific lowlands we crossed to get to León constantly sucked water from our bodies. Because most water was not safe to drink, we loaded up with huge, thick, blue plastic jugs. Taken off industrial shelves outside gas stations and roadside stores, the

pulling over without knowing why, then realizing that it’s the perfect time to grab some fresh fruit for pennies. *Juegos*, fresh fruit juices including papaya, melon, pineapple, bananas, guayabana, and many more, were available everywhere. Later, in Panama, I made the mistake of getting a dollar’s worth of bananas. In a plastic bag hanging from my handlebars, I swerved toward our hostel with ten pounds of bananas for a smoothie fiesta. We blended ourselves sick.

Situated near the middle of the country, Managua rose from obscurity when a controversial compromise declared it the capital of Nicaragua in 1857 to appease the feuding cities of León and Granada. Unfortunately, after a 1972 earthquake leveled much of the city (again), geologists found the city’s bedrock riddled with faults. A decision was made to abandon the older buildings, and now the city is fully realizing its potential as an intimidating decentralized mass of uninspiring modern life.

Here, Nate wrestled with the logic of the world as we went on a wild goose chase for video-camera products in the second poorest nation of the Western Hemisphere, where seventy percent of the country’s population lives beneath the poverty level. An entire day disappeared pedaling from one store to the next — to one place that vaguely looked like its proprietors might possibly know about video cameras, back to a store whose inventory and service made us wonder if we had missed the “everything must go” sign. Fortunately, salvation came late in the day in the form of a gleaming white shopping mall that drew most of its crowd with sub-freezing air conditioning.

Onward to Grenada, the dueling brother of León. Like León, we were enticed into a lengthier stop to wander the loosely gridded streets. Both towns were founded by Fernandez de Cordoba during his exploration of the region in 1524, just two years after the first Spanish exploratory mission of Nicaragua. They have been opposed politically ever since. León established itself as a theological center and the capital, whereas Granada grew as a center of commerce, fostering a trade route from the Caribbean to the Pacific.

This is where we left Walter to head for Isla de Ometepe. On our last day in the



A sunny interlude. A slight break in the clouds reveals the jungle below Volcán Concepción.

northern Honduran border over a concrete bridge kindly donated by the Japanese. Adding to an already struggling economy, the country is still recovering from the heavy blow dealt by Hurricane Mitch in 1998. Although the the hurricane did not pass directly into Nicaragua, its massive reach dumped up to fifty inches of rain over a tumultuous forty-eight hour period, affecting over a third of the population. Heavy rains triggered mudslides and other damage that left seventy percent of the roads unusable and seventy-one bridges heavily damaged or destroyed. We would cross several more Japanese bridges in the following days.

Moving southward through the county, we transitioned from the civil war-scarred

water’s balmy temperature echoed the weather. We all became accustomed to the super-heated water from our plastic bottles, and long stretches went by without enjoying the luxuries of ice water.

In the early morning of a León weekday, I studied the riding style of Latin Americans en route to Catholic school. Two small girls sat smiling across the bike’s top tube, safely caged in by their father’s guiding arms as he pedaled them to school. Kids doing the same cut across the plaza flanked by the Cathedral de León, Central America’s largest cathedral. The national poet of Nicaragua, Ruben Dario, rests inside.

In the countryside are mythical oases along hot, grimy roads. You find yourself




Onward to Ometepe. Both locals and travelers cross the waves of Lago de Nicaragua on the hour-long ferry ride to Isla de Ometepe.

country, we decided to stock up on *nacatamales*, a Nicaraguan dish of cornmeal, meat, vegetables, and herbs wrapped in steamed banana leaves. Traditionally served on weekends, its taste had evaded us since León.

This time we were not so lucky. Instead of the richly rewarding *nacatamale* meal we had enjoyed previously, we were left picking bone shards from some undesirable pork out of our teeth. The sweet taste of cornmeal was overpowered by grease, and John immediately looked for a trash can where we placed our to-go orders. Despite the unbearable taste of our last Nicaraguan meal, we

were thankful for the land and people behind us.

The country is a raw land blanketed in heat and humidity. There is often just a thin facade between tourist amenities and the realities of daily life. My dog-eared guide book promised, "Travel here isn't easy. Journeys along pockmarked roads are both arduous and time consuming. But your rewards will be proportionate, and you're likely to leave Nicaragua more enriched than you had ever imagined." With heavily praised Costa Rica and the official addition of Harold to our group looming on the south-

ern horizon, each of us silently agreed that the people and land of Nicaragua had been as pleasantly surprising as any Central American country. I left satisfied I had had an honest glimpse into the heart of Central America and had gained three new bicycle-traveling friends. 

Blake Gordon is a photographer/writer/adventurer/wanderer. Among other things, bicycling makes him happy. For more about him and his work, visit www.blakegordon.com.



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