

WORDS & PHOTOS: THOMPSON & SONS BUILDERS MERCHANTS

BEYOND THE MOSQUITO COAST

WE COULD FIND HARDLY ANY INFORMATION ABOUT KITESURFING IN NICARAGUA. Owing to a combination of natural disasters, a bloody civil uprising and the intervention of the Reagan Administration and the brutal Contra Wars, tourism itself has been slow getting a foothold here. This is the largest country in Central America, with the least population density. The people had had it very hard here for a long time. All we had to go on was a prediction that the NE trades would blow onshore on the Atlantic Coast and offshore on the Pacific Coast. Even Google Earth was struggling to provide answers. ●



“HE TOLD US THE WIND WHISTLED UP THIS DESERTED BEACH. WE LEGGED IT BACK TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE ISLAND, GRABBED OUR STUFF (COMBINED WEIGHT OF ABOUT 80KG) AND TREKKED FOR AN HOUR SWEATING THROUGH THE JUNGLE BACK THERE TO STAY THE NIGHT”

The journey out there was arduous, the most interesting thing was our plane being stuck in a holding pattern before we could land to transfer in New York. For a whole hour, in the worst turbulence I have ever known. I've got a strong stomach but three sick bags full later sir and I felt like I'd smoked a packet of 20 Marlboro Reds all in one go. Two more flights and we finally made it to the capital city of Managua to find that American Airlines had lost our bags. This meant an overnight stop in a town that we had no intention of staying in; Big Bad Managua is a low rise, sprawling growth and home to quarter of Nicaragua's population of 4 million. Levelled by a massive earthquake in 1972, nothing of historical importance remains but if the city didn't introduce us to the beauty of Nicaragua it surely showed us the generous spirit her people. We stopped in a tidy family run guest house with three rooms and a reception area in the main living space. The son, a young guy called David, walked us to a restaurant when we asked where we could eat, he even waited with us (he wasn't hungry so we shouted him a couple of lagers) and then accompanied us back again through the dark suburbs. The next morning, he and his dad arranged a rental car for us; the car arrived and realising we had no roof straps for our boards, David went inside to look for some rope. The other half followed him in and was aghast to see him taking down their washing line which they gave to us, we had to practically thrust the \$5 into his pocket before he accepted. The family stood and waved us off as we drove way towards the unknown and though they'd only known us for one night they couldn't do enough for us. This would typify the nature of the people we met along our way.

THE LAKE

We were hot, sticky, and craving some salt water cleansing; the closest ocean to us was the Pacific and the surf town of San Juan Del Sur. Although the winds would be offshore, a thin strip of land some 15km wide was all that separated the west facing shore of San Juan from the east facing shore of the impressively massive lake, the Lago De Nicaragua; home of the worlds largest inland volcanic island. We guessed we could surf in the morning, jump in the car, speed off to the lake and grab a kite session in the afternoon. San Juan could only loosely be described a surf town; it has about five surf shops and a few cool hotels but it is a pretty little town supported mainly by fishing and light tourism. Everywhere was shut by 10pm, and this was the busiest tourist destination in the whole country. The beaches just north of town kept us entertained with punch sucky barrels but we were getting skunked for wind on the western shore of the lake. In the distance we could see the twin peaks of the volcanic island, Omotepe, and predicting it would be windier there (since it was closer to the source of the wind – what logic!) we drove north, hopped on the ferry, grabbed an island taxi and walked the final 20 yards to a hotel right on the freshwater beach of Playa Domingo. For three days we scored good early morning winds with the only setback wrapping the Pulse 2 round the beach volleyball net. This kite belongs to Armin, the boss of Flysurfer and I'd like to say now that it was fine when I sent it back to you guys.

THE PACIFIC

Kiting in the lake was nice, it was an easy set up, but we'd came to Nicaragua for vast blue oceans, coral

Another empty Pacific barrel cracks over the sandbar



fringed beaches and swell. From where we were, the swell was the closest option, so back onto the mainland and a solid drive further up the Pacific Coast through bouncy jungle tracks and we arrived at the fabled Popoyo. Popoyo is rumoured to be the next big thing in Nicaraguan surfing but that is a relative term. This was pure surfing country though; deep blue Pacific, empty points, dormant outer bombores, perfect a frame peaks and miles of unsurfed beach breaks. What locals there were shredded, but they wanted to talk and share their spots with us. Despite our lack of knowledge of each others language, communication seemed to flow easily with these guys; that's the international language of surfing I suppose. Popoyo had one restaurant, which was empty save us and two squawking parrots that terrorised the place. The entire set up was right on the beach, and with zero light pollution we were getting used to counting stars and listening to the crashing surf heralding another dawn session. Through our couple of days there and the long drive up, we'd learned a few constants about Nicaragua: the food is plentiful and cheap, the service is second to none since the people take an obvious pride in their work, and lastly, if you ever need help, don't be afraid to ask. Scams and dishonesty are incredibly rare; this is the safest country in Central America.

The surf may have been great but the wind was gusting offshore over the huge cliffs. We'd scoured our little guide book (maps are scarce) and spotted a couple of small islands way off Nicaragua's Mosquito Coast, or Caribbean side. We'd been out here for about a week now but hadn't seen or heard of any other kitesurfers; the people back at the hotel by the lake hadn't seen a kite until we got there. The eastern seaboard surely held potential but even the Lonely Planet was falling way short on info, even about getting there. It seemed the central part of Nicaragua was impassable except by plane. It looked like we could get to the islands and find places to stay out there, and out in the sea and by my logic, closer to the wind (!) the islands might hold good potential for the kite. Coral fringed, white sand, laid back, said the guidebook. Well if we got skunked there at least we could laze about drinking the local Flora De Cana rum and eat coconuts and lobster.

THE CORN ISLANDS

So back to the capital of Managua and an overnight stop at the Best Western right outside the airport to rest up and use the pool. The next day we were in a tiny plane sputtering over Nicaragua on our way to the islands, out of the window below the interior was an unbroken carpet of trees.



Along the jungle trail



Three hours of this and the rental will be creaking



Sustainable transport

Put a caption here. Do not print this



The puddle jumper

We were flying over the North Atlantic Autonomous region; down there they didn't speak Spanish.

It was home to the Miskito Indians who were settled there way, way before the colonials turned up. Who knew what rituals and customs were going on below the canopy layer. We touched down at the tiny airport on the bigger island and couldn't believe what we were hearing: English. English spoken everywhere, in the strongest Caribbean accents. The whole atmosphere was totally different to the mainland; colourful huts, reggae pumping out of tinted old cars, it was like a Lilt advert cliché of the Caribbean. We grabbed a taxi (for 35p they take you anywhere on the island) and headed for the northern shore where we thought the trades would hit cross onshore. Rounding the final bend paradise opened up before us: the small yellow cabina we had arranged sat nestled at the foot of a small palm covered hillock, with the brightest blue ocean washing up on a palm fringed white beach just yards in front. Our host Dorcey, a sprightly islander of indeterminate age greeted us warmly and the cabina had everything we needed. Dorcey cut down coconuts and bananas for us. The trades were pumping so I grabbed the Pulse and hit the beach to find the typical Caribbean kite set up: cross onshore winds from the right, an outer reef with waves and a flatter lagoon to play on.



Unlike Cabarete though the water in the lagoon was the colour of Aquafresh and as for other kites, we learned that the whole island had probably never seen a kite being flown. The next day we sailed again and I was so stoked to be kiting somewhere so virgin that I lost concentration and crashed Armin's Pulse into the palms on the shore. It took bloody ages to get it out and thank god Dorcey was nearby to help extricate the bridles from the palm fonds. Again I am sorry Armin but I promise the kite is fine.

Our beach was held great freeride potential and we could have stayed there in the lap of Caribbean contentment with the bananas, rum and coconuts and lobster, but at night on the horizon the smaller island twinkled amid the stars. We knew we had to go further still; that island was even closer to the wind! The next day we bid our farewells and hopped on a boat to the small island. We arrived and realised here they didn't even have roads, just paths around the island and blokes with wheelbarrows moving things about. We befriended a local on the beach who led us through the interior jungle to the eastern side (about a 20 minute walk) where two miles of white sand stretched off in either direction. Again the coral reef sat offshore, and the trades were grooming the palms just behind us. We found an amazing eco lodge resort at the south end of the beach, up on a bluff.

The place had amazing views over the reef and after a fully organic breakfast we legged it down to the beach for a blast in the lagoon. Sadly the wind was a little light and too onshore; it seemed my hopes for this island may have been misplaced. Our mild disappointment at the wind was offset that evening by one of the most memorable evenings on the whole trip. At 7pm, the whole eco lodge met for dinner and the best way I can describe the atmosphere is to say it was like a scene from The Beach, before it all went bad and the guy got attacked by the shark. That happened in the film, not at the lodge by the way.

STARDECK BEACH

We were down to our last two days on the little island and having resigned ourselves to a no wind finale set about strolling the coastline all the way round. Just around the northern most point of the island we found a small white beach with an outer reef set up. The mild breeze was brushing pure cross shore even though it was light. Tucked away in the trees were a couple of wooden cabinas on stilts; we decided to look around. The owner, a German ex-pat Buddhist, came out to greet us. He showed us inside one of the cabinas and said to take care when opening the door, as the hinges had become weak from the wind catching it. ☹

Lago De Nicaragua



Playa Domingo shoreline



Oh really? Why yes, the wind whistles up this beach most days. That was it. We legged it back to the eco lodge, grabbed our stuff (combined weight of about 80kg) and trekked for an hour sweating through the jungle back to the huts and checked in.

That night we made a final rum sacrifice in the complete solitude of the deck of our cabin. Star and moonlight flooded the forest around us, the wind picked up and we drifted off. We awoke to a shrieking 25knots trade wind blowing directly cross shore along the beach. The upwind end was protected by a low rock breakwater creating the flattest lagoon we had seen yet. A huge reef loomed way outside; but to drop the kite out there would mean a trip back to mainland Nicaragua (some 80 miles distant) for you would surely miss the end of the island before you made landfall. Again we discovered from the owner of the huts that no kites had been seen on this island; we were beaten from being the first to sail here though by two Dutch windsurfers back in the early 90's. Still, we didn't see any flag! The lagoon was perfect, shoulder depth, sandy and clear. I found that a smaller, shallow reef protected the lagoon about 250m out, before the ocean got deeper and run out to the larger reef. Some local kids came out of the trees to watch what was happening. It must have looked like we were trying to draw down the devil or something; they looked on with worried expressions at the metaphysical pale people skimming over the lagoon.

Once again we were back in the capital city Managua. All our energy was spent; we were burnt, dehydrated, exhausted, aching but exalted. We'd stopped in ten places in two weeks looking for surf and wind and scored well. Dragging our bags across the hotel forecourt we were approached by a man in a baseball cap. It started with the usual: "Hello my friend, where you from? American?" the intro of hustlers everywhere. "English" I replied. "Ah! English! Very good. First time in Nicaragua?" Yes, I recognised this drill, standby and wait for the pitch; still one scammer in two weeks isn't bad. "Yes first time" I replied. A smile broke over his face and he just said "welcome to Nicaragua, I hope you enjoy". Then he turned on his heel and walked off.

KITE SPOTS

We kited three main locations. The first was on the Island of Omotepe in the Lago De Nicaragua. We stayed right on the beach of Playa Domingo at the Finca Playa Domingo hotel. The islands in the Caribbean we kited are known as the Corn Islands. On Big Corn we stayed with Dorcey at his Yellow Tail Cabina, located up near Sally Peachy Mountain on the north of the island. Dorcey lives next door and is on hand for anything you need. The kite beach, Sevas, is right out front. On Little Corn we stayed at the amazing Casa Iguana eco lodge. It is not to be missed if you get to Little Corn. Stardeck Beach where we kited last is located on the northern tip of Little Corn. We spent the night at Casa Sunrise.

WIND AND SEA

I would describe Nicaragua as having truly world class wind and waves. The sea surface can get choppy on the Caribbean side but the surf potential along the pacific coast is immense and the trades hit the windward islands clean and strong. We were there in February and were kiting four days out of five on 8m and 10m kites. If you took a 14m you'd be riding that fifth day. We learned that November and December it blows 40knots for days on end. You'll be doing well if you find another kitesurfer in the entire country to share a session with, we found no one. The surf we found was head high and plus, barrelling and lined up. The primo surf season though is around October to November. Most of the waves lend themselves better to shortboards as they are quite fast. Tow in surfing is developing around the bomboras near Popoyo. As always, treat the locals with dignity and you'll be rewarded with a bunch of new surf pals.

GETTING AROUND

On the mainland there are buses, but you'll be waiting a while to get to the far off spots. Car rental is the best way, prices are pretty much inline with the rest of the world. Petrol is less than half UK prices. The driving is sedate; the roads are very quiet outside of Managua. During the dry season (our winter) most roads are passable with a regular 2wd. If you go in wet season, you'll need 4wd to get to the beaches on the Pacific Coast. Maps are scarce, but if you get stuck, ask anybody. We were lost in the middle of Rivas, getting confused with all the diversions from a local market in town. We asked a chap on a pushbike how to get out. He rode ahead of us for about 5 minutes, pointing the way, then went on his own way.

HAZARDS

Your biggest worry is impaling yourself on a reef or drifting out to sea past the landfall on the islands. Along the Pacific it will be getting slammed by a closeout barrel. Scammers and touts are rare, but do occur in Managua. The locals will invariably be poorer than you, but would rather go out and work than hassle tourists for chump change. By and large the people are clued up and aware.

EATING AND SLEEPING

The currency out there is Cordobas. You get 19 to the pound. £10 gets you a decent room with ensuite. Cleanliness is next to godliness out there, if you don't like what you see then try down the road. Lobster costs about £5, rum is cheap, Tona beer is 50p a bottle and delicious. The service in the restaurants, guest houses and hotels is amazing; the Nicaraguans know how to look after their tourists.

THE CONTRA WARS AND CRACK COCAINE.

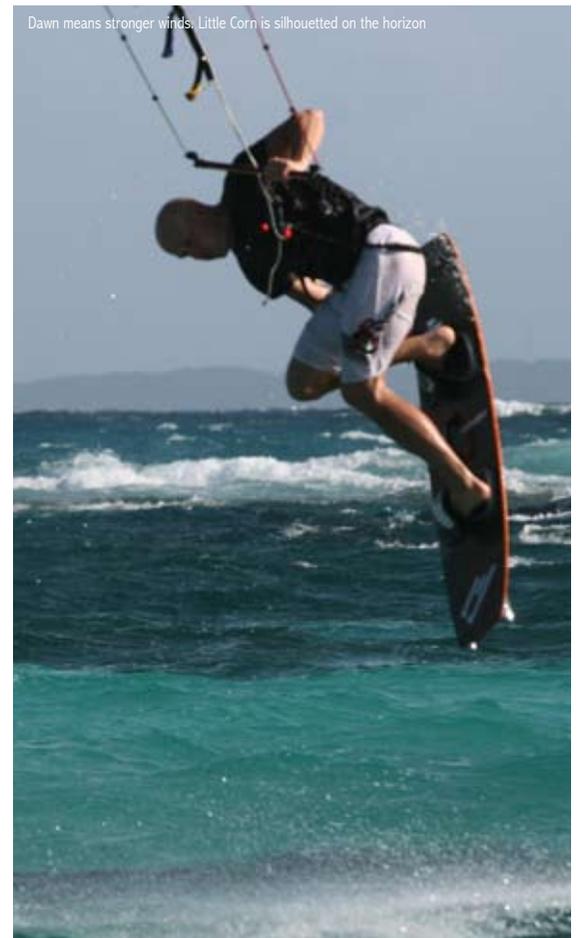
Nicaragua was stifled under the oppressive Somoza Regime through much of the 20th Century. The relief funds for the huge 1972 earthquake were pissed up the wall, and by the time the Somozas were overthrown by popular uprising, 50,000 were dead from the fighting and 600,000 were left homeless. The Sandanistas that took over the country in 1980 also inherited the £1.6billion national debt. The Sandanistas fell inline with Cuba and the Marxist communism theory, more for a way to try and function as a country than anything else. However, in 1981 Reagan came to power and didn't like the Nicaraguans subscription to communism. He thus began the funding of Contra Troops to overthrow the newly formed government the people had chosen, kicking off the Contra Wars. When funding for Reagan's war dried up, he and his office brokered a deal with Iran to sell them missiles in exchange for the release of US hostages held in Iran. 1,500 missiles later, only 1 hostage was released. The money generated was poured into funding the Contras to fight the Nicaraguans. Senator John Kerry told in a report in 1988 that he believed the introduction of crack cocaine into California was another cash cow dreamt up by the Reagan administration to fund the bloody Contra Wars. Today in Nicaragua, little evidence remains of the War. The people have made a determined effort to move on and not be victims any longer.

THE FUTURE FOR NICARAGUA

Nicaragua knows that tourism can mean a bright future for them. They are also aware of the impact of badly managed tourism; to this end, the government has set aside huge swathes of land as natural parks. If you visit one during your stay, you'll help support this system. They are really keen to put their best foot forward and clearly are very proud and aware of what they have and want you to experience the best of it. Large resorts are starting to be built around San Juan Del Sur, but the overriding theme is one of conservation not exploitation. Let's hope Nicaragua can thrive as an unspoilt wilderness for generations to come. ●



Dawn means stronger winds. Little Corn is silhouetted on the horizon



Write something funny about the Macaws in Popoyo. Do not print this

