

NICARAGUA, AN UNPLANNED SURPRISE; borne by the vagaries of the wind

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SV ARGONAUTA I

Heather, a former Burgh resident and Crichton teacher was persuaded by her husband to go sailing upon retirement. Her last article in the April 2008 issue of the NEN described a sabbatical in Panama where she studied Spanish and did heavy research on Panamanian cuisine. Unfortunately a sailor can never count on exact plans and Heather explains how circumstances brought the pair to Nicaragua.

Postcards from Panama:

March 14 2008

*Returned to marina to help provision and transit Canal. Learned that there is a month delay (Labour disputes) Crew person got better offer and left. Hugh declares he will skip Galapagos and go non stop to Hawaii: 40 days...alone. Guilt complex of Ex-Catholic has overcome my resolve. I have agreed to accompany him. **Sabbatical abandoned.***

April 13 2008

Transit completed: a surreal experience. Sailboats are now taken through at night. Rafted up to another boat, circled in the dark for an hour, then told to untie and join third boat. Hairy experience! Transited three locks in nest of three. Much coordination needed to avoid wash from freighter ahead. Reached Gatun Lake at 1 A.M. and tied to enormous mooring buoy. Celebrated with Kiwi and Alaskan linehandlers. Downlocked next day and took mooring in Balboa. Off to Hawaii next week.

April 22 2008 enroute

*Getting used to Night Watches (one person always on deck for about 5 hours) No "mal de mer" yet. Glad I stockpiled lots of good books. Eating quite magnificently; provisioned for 40 days. **Daube de boeuf** tonight.*

April 25 2008

Today we learned, via radio "guru" that there is no wind for 1000 miles. We have fuel for 500 miles. After much soul searching Hugh decided to ABORT THE TRIP Heading for COSTA RICA.

May 1 2008

HALLELUHAH!!!

*There is a freighter that delivers boats from Costa Rica to Nanaimo, B.C.
There is space for ARGONAUTA !! She is booked for June!!*

May 7 2008

*We misread the date. The delivery goes north in DECEMBER!
Tears were shed, teeth gnashed.*

May 8 2008

*O.K. December is fine. We will leave AI in Costa Rica and go home, returning in
November. Staying here long enough to cruise a little and eat most of the provisions!*

Well, nothing is ever simple. Stringent regulations required the Skipper to return to Costa Rica in person to renew the visa. Then we learned that an extension was no longer possible; we must “get out of Dodge” by July 30. Hugh decided to take the boat to Nicaragua where there is a secure facility, leave it there until October then return to Costa Rica and make our way to Golfito from whence it would travel to Canada. The fact that this is the rainy season, interspersed with hurricanes, made this a slightly daunting prospect.

Would we make the July 30 deadline or have the boat impounded? Would we go aground in the narrow passage from the marina? Most fears were unrealised, but I had a very frightening experience one night when I almost collided with a fishing boat on a sea anchor. It was my fault entirely: perceptual problems and too tactful to wake Hugh. On the plus side, we had multiple sightings of whales and dolphins. The squid which sailed through the bathroom window and gave me a morning surprise was on the “interesting” side.

Arrival in Nicaragua

It was a joy to arrive at a marina reminiscent of a photo spread in CONDE NAST. A *panga* met us and guided us up a well marked estuary into a fully protected mangrove lined lagoon. The dock facilities were world class. Nicaragua is an undiscovered treasure. We dined on the best fish *ceviche* I have eaten and, of course, did boat chores. It does take the edge off hedonism when you are scrubbing away mildew in 90% humidity.

I knew that the halcyon impression we had had when we arrived was not a true glimpse of this country. I knew we had to spend a few days at least exploring Nicaragua “outside the gates”.

Since time was limited we arranged for a tour to include transportation, guide and hotels. We took a taxi to LEON where we were booked into a magnificently appointed colonial hotel and met by JULIO, a bilingual guide. He was a gem. Like many Nicaraguans he has a passion for his country and a burning desire to educate tourists about its history. And what a tragic history it is! Julio stood before the murals of Leon and made history come alive. He took us to the spot where the first Somoza was assassinated and to the statues erected in reverence to that assassin. He took us to the site of the jail where he was imprisoned at the age of 13 because the Guardia mistook him

for a Sandinista. He was released through the auspices of the CANADIAN RED CROSS, to whom he is forever grateful. Leon is steeped in the history of the Contra-Sandinista war. It is also rich in cultural treasures. We visited a museum of art which had one of the most varied and attractive displays I have seen in some time. They were housed in a colonial home with a lushly landscaped interior courtyard.

We were picked up the following day to travel to MANAGUA, the capital, and to GRANADA. We travelled through lush green countryside, the volcanic soil rendering it the most fertile valley in Central America. There were magnificent views of the many volcanos. Later we stood on the lip of MOMBACHO, the closest I have come to the steaming interior of an active volcano since Vanuatu. The outskirts of Managua were shabby, littered and primitive. Rural villages, although simple, were tidy, well kept and seemed agriculturally self sufficient. There were frequent wells and good water is accessible in Nicaragua. But the capital city, as many in Central America, gave us a taste of urban poverty. However we were privileged to see the other side of society too. A family we had met at the marina live in an architecturally designed home in the hills. They own a restaurant where we had a great meal in the South American parilla style. (heavy on cholesterol, but delicious!!) We spent the second night in GRANADA an animated and charming town. Our hotel was in the Spanish style with interior courtyards, two small swimming pools open to the sky, balconies, balustrades and a rich assortment of native paintings, sculptures and artefacts. Once again we had a knowledgeable and enthusiastic guide. HARRY took us to several churches and historical sites and further entrenched our knowledge of Contra/Sandinista times.

Nicaragua seems to inspire altruism on the part of visitors, ex pats and former citizens. I encountered several people working with street kids, pre-schoolers, or local women. A former Peace Corps worker, Dona, has lived in Granada for 14 years. One of her projects is a restaurant where street kids work (a concept she developed before Jamie Kennedy!) I also ran into a woman from San Francisco in a hotel lobby who makes frequent trips to a centre for small children in Leon. An American circumnavigator at the marina gives English classes to employees' children and kids from the local area. I want to go back with a lot of travel picture books, kiddy lit, lego and modelling clay. I hope to arrange to return and volunteer for a useful period of time. It is so easy to become involved and so much more satisfying than simply taking a cursory tour.

Throughout the country we sampled excellent food. The ubiquitous GALLO PINTO (rice and beans) is right on the leading edge of our current preoccupation with fibre! We felt that the Nicaraguan people were particularly friendly and forthcoming. They have survived a devastating civil war, hurricanes, earthquakes, a landslide which buried thousands, and aggressive foreign interference. Yet they still smile and offer hospitality. The scenery was spectacular. We were exposed to rich examples of literary and artistic culture. First class hotels cost about \$75; we could have stayed in most comfortable ones for a third of the price. So, my message: Don't be afraid of Nicaragua. It is a country that merits a visit.

For our part we must return in October, carefully monitor weather conditions and deliver ARGONAUTA I to Golfito, Costa Rica in preparation for her first "cruise" aboard a large vessel to her a "pied-a-terre" in B.C.