

TQA

“Lancha?” Lancha?

These are the cries of the boatmen on Lake Nicaragua attempting to interest people in buying their services to go on a trip to one of the *isletas*—the tiny islands that cropped up in a volcanic eruption some 20,000 years ago and remain as romantic reminders of the phenomenon.

Lake Nicaragua

By Barbara Ann Rosenberg





Convento San Francisco, founded in 1524, now a museum of Lake Nicaragua and Granada artifacts.

So, why take a small, covered launch out to one of these little outcroppings? Actually, there are several reasons. It's an opportunity to see what might be a miniature tropical paradise, complete with luxurious vegetation, and perhaps an occasional monkey or other creature that inhabits the space.

Or better yet, several of the islands have been purchased by entrepreneurs who have set up modest eateries where they prepare a fish called *guapote* (wah-pote). It's a trifle scary looking (but exquisitely delicious) specimen with needle-sharp teeth that make it look somewhat as if it comes from prehistoric times. However, the flesh of the critter is very much of today, snow white and flaky, just the kind of fish the culinary world has embraced as an ideal meal.

So, hire a launch from the recently organized group that has banded together

at the Marina Cocibolca with Rolando Cruz Salablanca as the proprietor/manager, and strike a deal with the boatman to take a trip to one of the isletas that supports one of these little "restaurants." You won't regret it.

What else is interesting about Lake Nicaragua (*Lago Cocibolca*)? Well, it's one of the largest lakes in the Western Hemisphere—right behind our Great Lakes, but much more interesting with its reputation for supporting fresh water sharks. No one seems to have spotted one of these bull sharks recently. So their existence today may be just a romantic tale from days past, residing in the minds of people who heard that sharks used to swim up the San Juan River and then become trapped.

In any event, Lake Nicaragua with the town of Granada on its shore is a source of

interest and lots of history. And Granada is well worth a visit, perhaps even without the enormous lake next door. Picture a community with a growing population of about 95,000, a history dating from 1524, and an ambiance that recalls its background with street after street of pastel colored houses that hide their interiors behind elaborate doorways.

Oddly enough, the pastels are represented heavily in tones of yellow. Pale shades of lemon segue into warmer hues, perhaps looking more like egg yolk, and on into the deeper colors evoking saffron—all happily co-existing and interspersed with soft shades of pink, or blue, or green. There's not a single discordant color among them.

Many of the historic homes include one or more interior patio gardens with plants growing and flowering, depending on the



Hotel Alhambra on Granada's Central Park.

amount of light and sunshine available to the location. And it is possible occasionally to rent one of these lovely homes and become imbued with the serenity of living in a delightful, thoroughly Nicaraguan community.

If living in a home, perhaps complete with a domestic staff to wash and clean and maybe even to cook, is not one's preferred style of vacationing, other options are available in Granada. There are hotels, mostly small and intimate, such as the Hotel Alhambra with its 27 rooms and all manner of amenities, including private baths, a smallish swimming pool, and conference facilities. The front porch overlooks the central park and the colorful trotting horses and carriages that line up to take locals shopping and tourists on tours of the city.

Then there is a somewhat quirky little

hotel, Casa San Francisco, owned by two Peace Corps volunteers who fell in love with Granada and decided to try to earn a living there. The rooms (all different) include a continental breakfast in the modest price. For a few dollars more you can upgrade to a full meal with fruit, juice, and unusual entrees such as potato pancakes with local sour cream and homemade apple sauce.

If the rooms at the Casa are full, as they frequently are since there are many repeat visitors and guests have a way of telling their friends how to snare a reservation, co-owner Terry Leary might invite the disappointed would-be guest to share her folk-art filled home around the corner. An amazing "extra" there is the huge infinity swimming pool that occupies the central core of the house--an almost unheard of luxury in this or any other Nicaraguan town.

Another unusual place to stay is the Hospidaje Italiano where a young man from Rome set up his own gelato stand with flavors rarely tasted outside of Italy. The anise is a particular favorite of the owner of the Casa Vivaldi, an unusual restaurant with a large swimming pool that will occupy the center area of a senior citizen complex that is in the process of being erected.

In the interim, however, people from the city show up to swim, particularly on weekends, and will presumably continue to do so when the thoroughly Italian people who own the place finish building their dream concept of housing for older people. And the locals also scarf up mountains of risotto and homemade pasta, including a well publicized rendition made with dried and fresh mushrooms, quite unique in Granada.

Perhaps it is because of its proximity to Lake Nicaragua that Granada attracts a

Lake Nicaragua

lush garden. Their cocktail of local lobster is plentiful, tender and as tasty as any from the waters off New England. The staff is willing to accommodate those who prefer different condiments than the tomato based "cocktail" sauce routinely served with various shellfish dishes. In fact, there is a mayonnaise based sauce that complements the delicate lobster flesh perfectly and results in a more exotic rendition than any of the dishes commonly known as "cocktails."

Located in a romantic, historic building called La Gran Francia, there is a restaurant and a hotel with all manner of rooms and suites. The more formal restaurant, called The Archangel, is beautifully appointed with conventional European tableware and the servers take their role seriously in maintaining La Gran Francia's role as a showplace of the area.

Less formal and more representative of the Granada of today is Dona Conchis, a well-appointed corner restaurant that serves a variety of pasta dishes concocted by the genial owner/chef who prides herself on the quality of her ingredients and their innovative pairings. The proprietor is happy to share her native Spanish dishes, and repeat business allows for a certain informality among the guests who frequently recall having met in the restaurant previously and continue sharing experiences around town.

Mediterraneo is another primarily Spanish establishment in town with mother and daughter owners who turn out dishes such as paella, said to be the only authentic rendition in the country. Desserts frequently come to the table in the form of delicate, homemade crepes, either traditional Suzette or rich chocolate

with luscious chocolate sauce. Mediterraneo is a favorite of the diplomatic crew from Managua whose vehicles are often parked outside the restaurant for hour upon hour of merriment.

So, for the pleasures afforded by Lake Nicaragua and its environs, particularly as they are presented in Granada, the area is becoming more and more of a pleasant tourist destination for North Americans and Europeans. It has become our favorite winter watering hole. I can't wait to return.



Barbara Ann Rosenberg is a Ph.D. psychologist and travel writer. When not writing, she says, she spends her time with her family and friends.

Volcán Mombacho, whose eruption 20,000 years ago created 365 isletas in Lake Nicaragua.



photos by R. Rosenberg

Lake Nicaragua is located in the Southwestern region of Nicaragua in Central America.

Left: One of the Lanchas for transport to the isletas in Lake Nicaragua.

www.fervormagazine.com

fervor magazine 21