

*For many years, there wasn't much to lure a traveler to Nicaragua beyond crumbling (if beautiful) colonial cities and a handful of backpacker lodges on the beach. But recently a few pioneers—local upstarts and expat entrepreneurs alike—have opened new hotels and restaurants in the charming town of Granada and the fishing villages of San Juan del Sur. **Maura Egan** finds a paradise poised for discovery.*



Photographs by Julien Capmeil

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Y **VAN CUSSIGH** came to Nicaragua in the most circuitous way—after fantasizing about Costa Rica for 25 years. As a young man, he'd been given a Costa Rican five-colón note by a friend and was captivated by the bill's bucolic scene of farmers and fishermen—as if Brueghel had painted in the tropics. “It was so beautiful, and I thought, one day I'm going to go there,” explains the Italian-born, Swiss-raised Cussigh as he fishes out the sacred talisman from his wallet to show me.

After that, Cussigh, who ran New York City nightlife spots such as Bar d'O and the rooftop bar at 60 Thompson, spent years vacationing in Costa Rica. During one torrential visit in 2008, he asked his travel agent to book him a cheap ticket to somewhere dry, and soon enough he found himself in Nicaragua, in the picturesque, if slightly faded, colonial town of Granada. Its old-world charms—tree-filled plazas, cobblestoned streets, prominent churches, a promenade overlooking Lake Nicaragua, the country's biggest lake—enchanted him immediately. “It wasn't just the perfectly painted pastel houses,” he says. “It was the old ladies who'd pull their rocking chairs onto the sidewalk and watch the street life. It reminded me of my own grandmother back in Italy.”

Not only was Cussigh inspired to put down roots, he wanted to build something. And so he called his childhood friend Jean-Marc Houmard, owner of some of downtown Manhattan's buzziest spots, including Acme, Bond Street, and fashion-world favorite Indochine. “Having a small hotel in an exotic land was always on my mind,” Houmard says. “Part of the appeal of Nicaragua is that it's not overdone or too perfect. There's a sense of discovery.”

Last winter, Cussigh and Houmard found a spot for their new hotel, the Tribal, in a building in the center of Granada that was once an artisan cop. At first, they tried to renovate the structure, but “nothing was salvageable,” says Houmard. They would have to build from the ground up—no easy task. “I thought my Spanish was decent,” Cussigh tells me, “but then I realized that I didn't know the words for *septic tank*.” Still, starting from scratch

allowed them to get creative: Instead of a traditional colonial look, which Houmard says can be “a bit austere,” they created a hybrid of a colonial house, a country farm, and a mini urban resort.

The resulting hotel is an elegant pastiche of global influences: The white-washed walls are inspired by the oldest house in Granada, and the black-and-white pattern on the stairs is modeled on fabric brought back from Kenya. The pool's floor takes its cue from Roberto Burle Marx's swirling mosaics that line Rio's Copacabana, while the terraces are decorated with kilims from Turkey. There are touches of New York, too: The enormous painting in the lobby, for instance, is a Basquiat-like collage of downtown Manhattan that once hung in 60 Thompson. “Jean-Marc took it off the frame, rolled it up in a surfboard bag, and brought it down,” Cussigh explains. Before each visit to Granada, Houmard would fill his bag with fabrics for banquettes and beds.

CUSSIGH AND Houmard are hardly the only ones to discover a sense of possibility in Nicaragua. A growing number of entrepreneurs—natives and expats, savvy businessmen and small-scale dreamers—have started making investments across the country, particularly in Granada and points south, along Lake Nicaragua and down the coast to the fishing villages of San Juan del Sur. They're restoring crumbling haciendas, opening high-end ecolodges, setting up boho-chic surf shacks, and in the process paving the way for a new kind of Nicaraguan traveler.

For a long time after the Sandinista revolution and ten-year civil war against the Contras ended in 1990, the majority of foreign tourists were adventurous surfers and European backpackers who weren't bothered by a little danger and a lack of modern amenities. Now, visitors are finding a country that's on the rise as a tourist destination—that sweet spot where there's little large-scale development yet a high level of style and comfort, not to mention stability (Nicaragua is among the safest countries in the region today). It's the kind of perfect mix that moved Carlos Pellas, one of the country's wealthiest industrialists, to open the luxury resort Mukul on the Pacific coast north of San Juan

del Sur in 2013. The \$250 million project includes luxurious villas (each with its own plunge pool), six spas, a world-class golf course, and a future airstrip.

ON A day-trip from Granada, I head 60 miles south to Maderas Village, a beachside surf lodge near San Juan del Sur. (Most travelers spend time in both Granada and San Juan del Sur.) Here I meet Dave Grossman, a 31-year-old former Manhattan lawyer who opened the 20-room hotel in 2011 with Toronto transplant Matt “Dickie” Dickinson, also 31. “Over three bottles of rum and 100 hours of conversation, we realized that our goals aligned,” recalls Grossman. They scraped together seed money, found a third partner with experience in construction, and built their first palapas.

Dickinson shows me the yoga pavilion—which feels more mid-century modern than hippie grass shack—ticking off the different indigenous woods they used throughout the property: ipe, eucalyptus, jatoba, pachote. (Hoteliers in Nicaragua discuss woods in the same hushed tones that French vintners discuss *terroir*.) The communal area, which doubles as the dining hall, is filled with hammocks and couches where some very tan surfers have sacked out. On the tables are a few laptops and a stray acoustic guitar—the owners have just broken ground on a recording studio at the top of their property. A couple of pretty young things lug surfboards up from the beach while another idles on a dirt bike nearby. It all feels very Topanga Canyon, and Grossman and Dickinson see their property as more of an ideas incubator, a kind of hipster think tank. “A lot of people come down here and change their trajectory in life. We have these communal dinners where everyone sits around, debates, and workshops ideas,” Grossman says.

Previous page, from left: Fresh mango; a cool tropical vibe runs through the lobby of the Tribal Hotel in Granada.

Right, clockwise from top left: Tribal Hotel's Jean-Marc Houmard; a fruit vendor on Granada's Calle Real Xalteva; the Espressionista café's Andrés Lazar; and children at the Masaya market.







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Previous page, from left: Fruit basket at the Tribal Hotel; a pastel Granada storefront. **Left:** A graphic bedroom at the Tribal. **Right:** Tio Antonio's Granada hammock shop; the Niçoise salad at Espressionista.



One recent collaboration was born during a visit from New York-based designers Evan and Oliver Haslegrave, which resulted in Grossman and Dickinson making furniture for hOmE, the Haslegraves' company known for creating the cozy, old-timey aesthetic of Brooklyn restaurants like Alameda and Manhattan Inn. In 2011, Grossman and Dickinson also established the Maderas Collective, a 10,000-square-foot design studio in Managua where they employ 20 full-time local woodworkers.

WHAT HAPPENS on the beaches of San Juan del Sur often echoes what's happening inland in Granada, which is humming with creative energy. And if San Juan feels like vintage Tulum, then Granada is sprucing up to be the next Cartagena. On my visit, it is glistening, not just from the sweltering summer heat but from all the houses freshly painted in pastels. "People might not have a lot of money here, but they take real pride in their homes," says Cussigh as we walk the cobblestoned streets, jostling for space amid the horse-drawn carriages and ox-drawn carts. We're headed to the neatly manicured main plaza, where vendors sell

straw hats and sliced mango. Just opposite stands the Catedral de Granada, a neoclassical confection that's one of half a dozen churches in this tiny town. You can see why everyone in Nica, as expats call it, says that Granada is its prettiest city as well as its most culturally rich: Known as Nicaragua's colonial jewel, the nearly 500-year-old city is a maze of narrow streets lined with mango trees and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Spanish mansions with red-tiled roofs. Strolling through the historic quarter on most Sundays, you're likely to bump into some kind of traditional festival: a horse pageant, a running of the bulls, a poetry reading, or even an opera.

I catch a glimpse of an ocher-colored house's interior courtyard, filled with giant ferns and fruit trees and Nicaraguan wood-and-cane rockers. I'm told you can buy a fixer-upper here for a song, and for a moment I swoon with thoughts of cashing it all in to renovate a whole block of these gems. Cheap real estate is one thing that has made this place so attractive to foreigners. (Nicaragua is still the second-poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, after Haiti; the average annual income

is just over \$1,000.) But starting a business here requires more can-do spirit than cold hard cash.

Take, for example, Granada's culinary boomlet. The Asian-style restaurant El Tercer Ojo ("The Third Eye") was a pioneer when it opened in 2001—and was such a success that it now has a sister outpost in Managua. "When I came, it was slim pickings on La Calzada," owner Glem Castro tells me, referring to the city's pedestrian boulevard, which is now lined with restaurants, cafés, and bars whose crowds spill into the street. Those include the artisan brick-oven bakery Pan de Vida, opened by a Canadian-Venezuelan couple after the success of its first location in San Juan

STAY

Maderas Village
PLAYA MADERAS,
SAN JUAN DEL SUR;
505-8796-7243;
doubles from \$70.

Morgan's Rock Hacienda and Ecodge
PLAYA OCOTAL, SAN JUAN DEL SUR; 505-8670-7676; morgansrock.com; doubles from \$165.

Mukul Resort
PLAYA MANZANILLO,
GUACALITO DE LA ISLA; 505-2563-7161; mukulresort.com; doubles from \$500.

Tribal Hotel
CALLE CUISCOMA,
GRANADA; 505-2552-0037; tribal-hotel.com; doubles from \$95.



Left: The dragon fruit parfait at *Espressionista*; a capuchin monkey on Lake Nicaragua. **Right:** The castle-like walls of *El Viejo Mercado*, or the Old Market, in Masaya.

del Sur, as well as the beloved seafood joint *Las Colinas del Sur*.

One of the new standouts is *Espressionista*, a café that draws both expats and rich Managuans down from the capital for a weekend in Granada. Locals might not have an appetite or budget for its sophisticated cuisine, but they welcome the addition to the neighborhood—even if they were skeptical at first. “People told us the place wouldn’t last more than three months,” recalls Andrés Lazar, who was born in nearby Rivas and opened the restaurant last

year with his Hungarian partner, Zoltán Puzsár. The duo, who met in London in 2008, have covered the hospitality gamut: Between the two, they’ve worked at the London Four Seasons, Chateau Marmont in L.A., and *Pastis* in Manhattan. (Lazar even waited tables at *Howard’s Bond Street*.) Now, while Lazar works the front of the house at *Espressionista*, Puzsár runs the kitchen, where he’s currently giving an eager group of Nicaraguan women a lesson in the art of the perfect pastry.

The light-filled restaurant feels casual, but the menu is ambitious: a cheese plate that wouldn’t be out of place in a Paris restaurant; tender osso buco over handmade tagliatelle; ice cream made from fresh basil, orange peel, and Nicaraguan dark chocolate. Lazar explains that the country’s abundance of farmland makes it easy to keep the ingredients fresh and local.

Over *ajo blanco*, Lazar helps me understand just how much change has come to his country in recent years, that this is not the Nicaragua he left behind. “The night we opened, there was a blackout,” he recalls. Memories of dark days during the civil war came flooding back. “I thought, we’re in trouble. But

then I saw all our neighbors on the street looking out for one another.” He pauses. “For many years, this was a hacienda state”—all the wealth in the hands of a few—“but now there’s this wave coming. We’re waiting for the crest.”

They may not have long to wait. On my last night in Nicaragua, a group of American ladies appear at the gates of the Tribal Hotel. They heard about the place and have come to check it out. As they ooh and aah over the tropical ambience—the flickering Moroccan lanterns, the swaying canopy of ferns—I begin asking them for their stories. All of them moved down here over the last decade: One runs a small hotel, another is a real estate broker (note to self: Get her card!). A fiftysomething woman from Martha’s Vineyard tells me that not long ago she found Granada a little too low-key—mostly foreigners trying to retire on the cheap. “I was ready to move to Panama City, but then these younger people started moving in and doing things,” she says, sipping her mojito. “I think I’m going to stick around.” ♦

For more photos of Granada and San Juan del Sur, download our digital edition or visit cntraveler.com.

EAT & DRINK

El Tercer Ojo
CALLE EL ARSENAL,
GRANADA; 505-2552-
6451; eltercer ojo.com.ni

Espressionista Specialty Coffeebar and Restaurant
CALLE REAL
XALTEVA 609,
GRANADA;
505-2552-4325;
espressionista-granada.com

Las Colinas del Sur
SHELL PALMIRA,
GRANADA;
505-2552-3492.

Pan de Vida
CALLE EL ARSENAL
305, GRANADA;
505-8186-0719.

DO

Catedral de Granada
AV. GUZMÁN,
GRANADA.

El Mercado Viejo Craft Market
AV. EL PROGRESO,
MASAYA.

