

Accessible Nicaragua – Inclusive Travel in Central America



Ben Owen-Jones outside the Cathedral at Leon.

One of the reasons I moved to Barcelona six years ago was so that I could learn Spanish and travel with confidence throughout Latin America, which has always been one of my dreams. After setting up AccessibleBarcelona, which has given me a great insight into travel for people with all types of disability, I decided it was time for a change of scenery. I left AccessibleBarcelona in the capable hands of my brother and his wife and moved to Nicaragua, Central America, in late September 2007.

Arriving in Matagalpa, Nicaragua was a bit of a culture shock, but my partner had already found us a house and done some basic adaptations, such as installing a ramp at the front door. After a couple of weeks I had settled in and began researching the possibilities of establishing inclusive travel in a very inaccessible part of the world. I began locally within the Department of Matagalpa, looking at activities and accommodation that are suitable for disabled people and I soon realised that

my rather ambitious project might actually be achievable, even if a little rough and ready for some people.

After travelling around the country a bit myself I invited a friend, Ben Owen-Jones SIA's Peer Support Co-ordinator for the South of the UK, to come to Nicaragua and try out the routes. We started off in Matagalpa, where I live, and went to a local village called San Ramón to get a taste of the local culture and see some of the beautiful scenery in the

mountainous coffee region of Nicaragua. We also visited "La Selva Negra" (The Black Forest) in this region, which is a private reservation owned by a German Family, where, if you are lucky, you may even see Howler Monkeys.

After the coffee district of Matagalpa we headed to the University City of León for the Catholic Festival of "La Purísima" (8 December) which is the celebration of The Virgin Mary's

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The Santiago Crater at Masaya Volcano.



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Immaculate Conception. The main Cathedral Square of León is very accessible for wheelchair users and with a bit of a push up two very steep ramps you can also get into the Cathedral. We had great fun looking at the architecture, relaxing and joining in the celebrations before heading off again on our journey to one of Nicaragua's most important colonial cities, Granada.

On the road to Granada we stopped off at an Artisan Market Town called Masaya to shop for souvenirs and Christmas presents. The market is full of artisan crafts such as wood crafts, clothing, leather products, instruments and pottery. We spent a good four hours there and only covered about a quarter of the market. We bought lots of goodies for family, friends and of course ourselves. Masaya also hosts one of Nicaragua's live volcanoes and we couldn't resist taking a peek from the peak! The live crater of Santiago was spectacular, churning out gases

and smouldering away. It reminds me of just how fragile we are and how powerful Nature is.

From Masaya Volcano there are fantastic views of Lake Nicaragua and another live volcano, Concepción. This is the volcano that the team climbed in the first series of the BBC's *Beyond Boundaries*. We could also see the dormant volcano of Granada, Mombacho. We wandered around the Visitors Centre at Masaya, which was accessible (apart from the toilets), to learn more about the volcanic process in general and about Nicaragua's volcanic history.



Ben at Masaya Volcano.

After our *Beyond Boundaries*-style adventure we took time to relax in Granada which has a European feel to it, due to its colonial history, pavement cafés and prices! Situated on the shores of Lake Nicaragua (the world's second largest fresh water lake), and in the shadow of the dormant volcano, Mombacho, a wonderful place to rest weary wheels and bodies. In Lake Nicaragua there are several small islands known as *Las Isletas* where you can take a boat trip and get away from it all. The boats are totally inaccessible but with a little help everything is possible and it's well worth the hassle, the tranquillity on the lake is second to none after travelling for several days.



Ceramics in Los Pueblos Blancos.

Also, close to Granada are *Los Pueblos Blancos* (The White Villages), which are small artisan villages specialising in ceramics. We went to one artisan shop and got a full tour of the ceramics process, which I translated for Ben. For me, this was one of the highlights of the trip, to be invited into the back of the shop to see the process, the oven and the home of the proprietors.

As the day pushed on we decided to go for lunch at a place close by called *Mirador de Catarina*. The Mirador has views of Lagoon Apoyo, Granada, Mombacho and Lake Nicaragua. What better place in the world is there to stop for lunch?



At the top of the Volcano.

The trip with Ben was a great success and showed me that other wheelchair users can enjoy visiting this small Central American country as much as I do. In Ben's words, *"Disabled access really isn't the first thing that springs to mind when visiting the poorer countries in Central America. In fact if you aren't used to lengthy plane journeys, airport layovers, precarious transfers, extreme pot-holed roads or you are put off by having a sketchy grasp of Spanish, then I wouldn't recommend Nicaragua to you."*

On the other hand, if you like the sound of attacking jungles in a wheelchair, visiting tropical lagoons, seeing real coffee plantations, ascending live volcanoes, marvelling at 17th Century Spanish colonial architecture, haggling for local arts and crafts in broken Spanglish or seeing first hand a very poor country post-revolution, then I recommend you give Nicaragua a try.

Of course it isn't without its dangers, like dodging crazy Nicas running around inside wooden saw-horses while shooting rockets into the crowd, for example.

But if that doesn't put you off then it is nice to know that there are people out there who are on



Craig on the ceramics tour at Los Pueblos Blancos.

hand to help plan tours of the country, for those of us with specific accessibility needs. I had a great time out there and will certainly be going back. What's that Helen Keller quote?

"Life is a daring adventure, or nothing. Security is a superstition, it doesn't exist in nature"

The tours I am organising in Nicaragua will be based on one-

or two-week visits at the beginning and, as with the philosophy of AccessibleBarcelona, I will try to make them as flexible as possible and give advice on what is realistic from a wheelchair user's position, depending on the individual's needs.

Craig Grimes, T6

For further information about accessible holidays in Barcelona and Nicaragua please visit the following websites:

Barcelona: www.accessiblebarcelona.com

Nicaragua: www.craiggrimes.com/accessiblenicaragua

Blog: www.craiggrimes.com

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