

THE NICA TIMES

TOURISM SUPPLEMENT

Tourism Showing Slow Signs of Recovery

By Tim Rogers

Nica Times Staff

MANAGUA – Following a year of political and economic instability, Nicaragua's tourism industry is starting to show signs of recovery this year, with tourism up 8.4 percent during the first quarter of 2008.

After getting off to a slow start last year, the government of Daniel Ortega has since worked to establish positive relations and permanent dialogue with the tourism sector, and Tourism Minister Mario Salinas continues to receive high marks from private sector leaders for his behind-the-scenes lobbying on behalf of Nicaragua.

Important advances, such as the long awaited Coastal Highway – scheduled to break ground in the coming months – and the forthcoming ratification of the Coastal Law, expected to be approved by the National Assembly in the coming weeks, will have tremendous impacts on the country's climate for tourism investment.

Last year, the tourism sector generated \$255 million – an annual earning that the government hopes to double by 2012.

The \$120 million Coastal Highway project, which will unite Nicaragua's Pacific beaches to the Costa Rican border, is expected to attract about \$700 million in tourism investment alone, as well as dramatically increase the number of tourists visiting from Costa Rica, according to Minister Salinas (NT, March 28).

The Coastal Law, meanwhile, will finally establish clear rules to owning and building along the coastline, and is expected to signal a green light to many investors who have anxiously awaited the law for years.

President Ortega has identified tourism as a priority for his government's economic development and poverty reduction plan.

"Tourism is very important because it generates income quickly and it allows Nicaraguan families to offer services," Ortega said. "The more families that offer these tourism services, the more people benefit."

Salinas, for his part, says tourism is "a very efficient way to fight poverty."

The tourism minister notes that tourism



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Checking out the Sights: Tourists, such as this one marveling at Ometepe Island's Concepción Volcano, are starting to return to Nicaragua after a shaky 2007.

activity stimulates all sectors of the local economy, from transportation and agriculture to the service industry and small businesses. It also helps create jobs in all lines of work, employing men, women and youth in

a variety of activities that support tourism, Salinas said.

"(Tourism) creates opportunities for all business, both in the formal and informal economy," Salinas said. "One doesn't need a

lot of investment to become part of the tourism economy."

Big Tourism vs. Small

While the Sandinista government recognizes the importance of tourism for poverty reduction, and has insisted that tourism-development projects respect the culture and give back to the community through social programs, President Ortega has – at times – sent mixed messages about the type of tourism he wants for Nicaragua.

Despite a mighty push by the private sector to get Ortega to support the Tourism Investment Bonds (BIT) Law, an initiative that developers argued was necessary to attract major tourism investment, the bill wasn't supported by Ortega and ultimately died in the National Assembly last year.

At other times, Ortega has appeared very nationalistic when it comes to tourism, celebrating Nicaraguan projects while warning against foreign brand-name tourism, such as that which has been attracted to Costa Rica.

During a speech last February, Ortega said "We don't win anything by handing over our tourism to transnationals that build giant buildings and do their own business."

On the other hand, Ortega applauded the Guacalito beach tourism development project that's being developed by Nicaraguan business mogul Carlos Pellas.

"Look at the name of this project," Ortega said. "It's called 'Guacalito.' It's not a Hilton project. No, not that! It's not one of these great big brand-name tourist projects; it's not a Sheraton with a 10-floor building blocking the ocean view."

Ortega also remembered some advice that former Costa Rican President Rodrigo Carazo allegedly gave him: "He said, you (Nicaraguans) who haven't yet developed tourism, go to Costa Rica, send a mission, to learn how not to commit the errors that we made in Costa Rica – and continue to make."

Instead of big brand-name developments, Ortega has called for a tourism that reflects Nicaraguan culture, tradition and heritage.

"Tourists from the United States and

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Pioneer Traveler Introduces 'Inclusive Tourism'

By Blake Schmidt

Nica Times Staff

MATAGALPA – Craig Grimes had checked and double-checked with the Paris hotel to make sure he could get to his room. He even sent the measurements of his wheelchair. When he arrived, however, he encountered two stairs leading up to the lift – which wasn't big enough to fit his wheelchair.

"That's the kind of thing that pushed me," said Grimes, 32.

It's been two years since the Paris incident – one of many snags he's run into as a wheelchair traveler. Such experiences have pushed the former rock climber to scale his way to the top of the burgeoning tourism market for travelers with disabilities.

With more than 150 million disabled people in the developing world alone, to call the market a niche is an understatement, says the British native, who now lives in the hilly city of Matagalpa, in northern Nicaragua.

Seven years after his life-interrupting fall from a tree that left both legs paralyzed, Grimes began writing online reviews of hotels in Spain from the point of view of a guy in a wheelchair. The travel junkie's online writing has since become a full-time gig.

He single-handedly authored and designed a Lonely Planet-style Web site for disabled visitors to Barcelona, Spain. Then he did a site for cruise tours for the disabled. Now, he's designing another site for disabled travelers in

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Photo courtesy of Craig Grimes

Trail Blazer: Craig Grimes is changing tourism.