

Wheelchair Tourist Breaking Boundaries for Others

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Nicaragua, where he resides with his girlfriend.

His Web sites, which have expanded to include everything from wheelchair equipment rentals to prearranged pickup for disabled travelers at cruise-ship ports of call, have recently won him a nomination for National Geographic's Geotourism Challenge, a global competition to showcase innovative tourism solutions.

And last month, he sealed a year-long contract with the travel group World Hotel Link to update the Web site's information on Central America and make the site friendly for disabled travelers.

"It's nice to be taken seriously," said Grimes, who can now be seen dodging buses and taxis and popping wheelies to traverse Matagalpa's potholed streets and battered sidewalks.

He says his latest Web site and the project with the Hotel Link will help turn impoverished Nicaragua into a pioneer for what he calls "inclusive travel," or tourism for people

with disabilities.

The World Bank-funded Web site hooks travelers up with destinations where a friendly face is there to help in case the traveler needs assistance. Grimes is their man in Matagalpa, which will be the location for the Web site's pilot project in Central America.

Grimes says the pilot project will mean a lot of publicity for this mountainous coffee town.

At the local level, Grimes has been working closely with Nicaraguans with disabilities offering important help in a country where 500,000 are disabled. He says he has watched as peoples' attitudes towards those with disabilities change when they come across a foreigner in a wheelchair.

"It's a shame that it takes a foreigner in a wheelchair to come here and make changes when there are so many people here with disabilities," Grimes said.

Grimes has been working with the Matagalpa group "Familias Especiales" to show locals with disabilities how to become more mobile in their hometown. And he has plans to make new tourism businesses, such

as the Hotel con Corazón being built in Granada, become wheelchair accessible.

But some changes have been less formal. For instance, at his favorite Matagalpa bar, Los Artesanos, Grimes talked with the owner to make the bathroom more accessible. Before, he had to be carried down three stairs then up three more to access the bathroom, which was located on the other side of a small dividing wall. Now, thanks to a newly installed ramp and a rearranged entrance to the bathroom, he can access the men's room with ease.

"That kind of generosity is amazing," he said. ■



Photo Courtesy of Craig Grimes

The Traveler: Craig Grimes at the Laguna de Apoyo.

On the Web

Check out Grimes' Web site on Nicaragua at www.accessiblenicaragua.com, also, see Grimes' work at www.accessiblebarcelona.com and www.accessiblecruisetours.com

To vote for Grimes in the National Geographic Geotourism Challenge, visit www.changemakers.net.

Ecotourism Taking Root Here

By Blake Schmidt

Nica Times Staff

Xavier Largaespada doesn't want Nicaragua to become "the next Costa Rica" – a title the international media has given this tropical country in reference to its up-and-coming ecotourism potential.

"Nicaraguans can't accept being a second Costa Rica," said Largaespada, manager of the \$350 million Marina de Guacalito resort being designed on the southern Pacific coast.

The resort, which is being funded by Grupo Pellas, will be built on nearly seven kilometers of pristine, white-sand beachfront on the cloverleaf-shaped Guacalito Bay, south of San Juan del Sur.

Expected to rival "eco-luxurious" resorts that have become the mark of Costa Rica's bountiful tourism industry, the resort is one of a handful in Nicaragua that is giving this country a name for doing ecotourism right.

"In Costa Rica, there's something that you can't deny – they really do good marketing," Largaespada conceded. "But I don't think it's as ecological as they say (it is)."

One of the advantages Nicaragua's ecotourism sector has is that it can learn from its neighbor Costa Rica, where overdevelop-

ment and so-called "Americanization" is beginning to take away from the experience for some travelers.

Largaespada pointed out a recent article in USA Today that highlighted Costa Rica's battle with rampant development in the northern province of Guanacaste as something that Nicaragua can avoid.

With more protected area than Costa Rica, and the largest swath of primary rain-forest north of the Amazon – home to some 7 percent of the world's biodiversity – Nicaragua is set to give its neighbor to the south a run for its tourism money, of which Costa Rica nets \$1.6 billion a year, or more than six times what Nicaragua grosses.

"What I know is everywhere I go, I'm seeing more and more visitors (in Nicaragua) from foreign countries. It has potential. If being green can make money, it can make money for a lot of people here," said Susan Kinne, who directs the alternative energies program at the National Engineering University (UNI).

In a country with spotty infrastructure and rising energy costs, green business practices also make good business sense.

One of the hottest items for alternative energy company ECAMI is solar-powered



Tim Rogers | Nica Times

Unspoiled Sands: Guacalito Bay and much of the Pacific are still untouched.

water heaters for hotels – Los Mercedes in Managua heats the showers in 180 rooms using solar heaters. The famous eco-resort Morgan's Rock and Hotel Las Estrellas are also clients.

The company also sells solar-powered pumps and refrigerators, popular with Nicaraguan hotels. Many foreign investors on the Pacific have bought into the company's wind system or hybrid systems, according to ECAMI engineer Henry Ruiz.

In a country with abundant natural resources, low-impact development is a must, says Largaespada.

"It forms part of the Mesoamerican biological corridor. We have to do tourism that

doesn't affect the environment," he said.

Grupo Pellas has contracted Kevin Whiteman, a former environmental aide for the renowned Pelican Eyes resort near San Juan del Sur, to manage the development's agro-forestry practices. The development, which has secured a \$9 million loan from the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI), is considering building a desalination plant, among other sustainable projects.

"The best is to not touch nature, but then you don't have development," Largaespada said. "The tourism sector should protect the environment. We're doing it and we're going to do it." ■

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•Tel. (505) 552-6316 •Fax (505) 552-2035 •West side of Granada Central Park. Granada, Nicaragua, Central America
E-mail: hotalam@tmx.com.ni www.hotelalhambra.com.ni