

001 Hiking the Volcanoes of Nicaragua podcast Transcript – Released September 27, 2017

00:00 Yikes! I've made it to the top of Cerro Negro. One of Nicaragua's youngest the most active volcanoes and now I'm staring down 2200 feet to my Jeep which looks so tiny it could have been a kid's Matchbox toy. This volcano was completely covered in skree. Those jagged little lava pellets and looked to be a steep 45 degree angle down

---and I'm supposed to sit on top of the skipping little board and slide down this mountain. Welcome to the very first episode of the active travel ventures podcast. I'm your host Kit Parks.

00:29 Today we're hiking volcanoes Nicaragua. Know I Know You think it's Sandinistas. Don't worry folks I was over two decades ago. Today Nicaragua is a peaceful undiscovered democratic republic much like Costa Rica was back in the 90s.

Tune in to learn why Nicaragua should now be added to your bucket list.

Nicaragua is like Costa Rica was decades ago before the tourist discovered it. As Costa Rica's northern neighbor, they both share similar flora and fauna. They have fabulous beaches and surfing opportunities AND they have volcanoes.

01:08 However Nicaragua boasts more biodiversity than Costa Rica and has many more unique ecosystems. About 20 percent of its country is protected land.

Nicaragua has over 200 kinds of mammals, 700 kinds of birds, 640 kinds of fish, and almost fifty eight hundred plant species. It is a biodiversity Mecca! Being close to the Pacific provides near constant balmy temperatures of about 85 degrees Fahrenheit.

YOU can get all the nitty gritty details to plan this Nicaraguan adventure at active travel adventures dotcom. Just click the Cheat Sheet button on the Show Notes page.

01:34 But for now it's time for some fun!

Most of my trip in Nicaragua I would be camping and hiking the active volcanoes. However we did start the trip in the colonial city of Granada -- a beautiful city that sits on Lake Nicaragua which happens to be Central America's largest freshwater lake.

In Granada, I wandered around downtown and then BOOM! Wardrobe malfunction. My favorite walking sandals decided today is a good day to die. The glue became loose and the top started flopping away from the sole so I wandered around flopping like a fish out of water.

I remembered the market was maybe half a mile away so I hobbled my way back there in hopes of finding some sneakers. I did find a pair, but they were a little snug. Now I needed to find some socks because I didn't want blisters to dampen my hiking adventure. I wandered around the market a little bit and then I met Rosa.

02:19 Rosa's stall had an assortment of items for sale. I couldn't remember the Spanish word for socks so I use pantomime to convey my needs. Rosa spoke no English and my Spanish is butchered, so we laughed as we worked out our way through the transaction.

Rosa was curious about me as tourists still aren't overly common in Nicaragua. So we did our best to have a conversation. I explained to her that I was from the US and was here to see her beautiful country and to hike some of its volcanoes. After a while she poked her head behind a sheet curtain partition for her husband to come out. After we were introduced I did remember the Spanish word for handsome: I told Rosa that her husband was muy guapo. She giggled and then brought out her children for me to meet. It may have only been a 20 minute exchange but it always brings a smile when I think of Granada. Before I left Rosa I asked her for a recommendation as to where to eat lunch. She pointed me to an alleyway between these covered stalls.

03:14 I couldn't believe that anything could be back there but Rosa was quite insistent that this is where I should go. Sure enough she had directed me to a small kitchen area where an older woman manned a portable grill to serve people rice and beans with chicken, the ubiquitous dish of Latin America. I ordered a platter and the old woman immediately left the area, and me puzzled. I just sat there and within a few minutes she returned carrying a china plate to serve me my lunch instead on the paper plates everyone else had. I was touched that she wanted to honor a visitor to her country.

Now sated and with Happy Feet, I headed back to the hotel a few blocks from the historic downtown area. However, before I reached my block I heard live music starting up behind me. I made a U-turn and followed the sound. A small band had set up outside an Café with covered patio tables.

03:59 So I grabbed a table and ordered a drink. Next to me was a table with four men in their late 70s – early 80's. They smiled at me and I smiled back. One man spoke a little English and he asked me where I was from. After a couple of minutes of our broken Spanish/English conversation, I was invited to their table.

During our conversation they kept telling me that I must say Messiah I must see Messiah because it is so beautiful. I asked them where to find this church and they said it wasn't a church. I just couldn't get what they're trying to tell me. Remember that word messiah as it will come up later in the program.

04:33 An hour later. I bid my goodbyes to the gentleman and headed back to the hotel. After a rest, I went out to the lobby met Jamie, a 39 year old Scot who turned out to be in my hiking group.

Jamie was heading to town so I said I'd join him. When we reached the square -- and all Latin American towns have a central square where the locals meet to socialize-- there was now a

large band playing. Families had brought their lawn chairs... the kids were running aroundand couples were dancing.

Jamie and I didn't have lawn chairs but we did have feet so we joined the party and hit the dance floor. It wasn't long before a young local man in his 20s cut in and asked me to dance.

Then a young woman did the same with Jamie. Jamie and I may not have had their moves and we didn't share a language but laughter is universal. We all had a ball.

A few partners later Jamie and I needed a rest so we bade our goodbyes.

05:22 I start with these stories because the cultural interactions are super important part of travel for me. It adds a deeper layer to your travels. Sometimes you feel a little silly. I'm often doing silly things but those often end up being some of my favorite memories. I might have to draw a picture or pantomime or just mangle the language to communicate. I think sometimes it's more fun when you don't speak the language. I just love it when the light bulb finally goes off for the person that you're trying to communicate with.

It's so much fun for me! I don't recall any trip I've ever taken where a local was anything but gracious, kind and helpful in trying to help me figure out whatever my issue was.

Just smile and do the best you can and try to speak the language, even if it's only please and thank you. They know you can't speak it as soon as you open your mouth. You're going to butcher it but most of the time the locals do appreciate you making the effort to try.

06:09 Lake Nicaragua is cool not just because it's so big but also, just off the shoreline is called Las Isletas, the little islands. There are 365 volcanic islands, some of which have cute homes on them. In their trees you'll see monkeys scampering about watching you quizzically. You can take a boat tour out around the islands and even take a dip in the lake which I did with some fellow hikers.

I had heard about a freshwater shark a bull shark that was in the lake but I didn't really do any research on it. Come to find out they DO attack humans sometimes. I did not know that. There's a fort that you stop on at the on the boat tour. While there, you'll see a bull shark's jaw bone with the teeth still in it. It is quite a large shark. Swimming was probably not my smartest move. Sadly, these sharks are on the decline so the risk I'm sure was minimal.

06:57 Mystery is solved! Guess what those gentleman were trying to tell me: it wasn't messiah. M E S S I A H, it was MA SA YAH, M A S A Y A, which is the name of Nicaragua's largest national park and a nearby village.

The Parks has a fabulous exhibit which explains how volcanoes are formed. At Masaya, you can stare down the aptly named 'mouth of hell' and smell it's pungent sulfur gases. You can see

lava boiling down inside the crater. Nearby, you can swim in a dormant crater lake and climb Volcom Fernando.

07:32 Up next 'The Hole', a perfect name for this volcano.

Unlike the other volcanoes that we climbed which had ragged edges from the volcanic explosions, the volcano called The Hole looks like God just took an ice cream scoop and decided to make himself an ice cream sundae.

The crater hole is a perfect circle! Very cool to see.

07:51 I'm super excited about the next volcano Cerro Negro: you climb up and then you get to slide back down.

This volcano is the youngest in Nicaragua. Cerro Negro was born in 1850, and it's erupted 23 times in its history, the last time being in 1999. Because it erupted so recently, the vegetation hasn't had a chance to grow back yet.

So on the side that the lava flowed down, all that's on the mountain side is black volcanic scree: these little lava pebbles. So that's why you can slide down without hitting any vegetation. First you climb up and look at the activity of the volcano, which was cool in and of itself. And then if you paid a nominal extra fee and carry the board up, you can slide down on this little wooden sled. It's a skinny little board maybe 15 inches wide.

You use a rope as your steering wheel and your feet as your brakes and you slide down almost a half a mile over the scree. It is such a hoot!

The guides will give you a little safety instruction. Then they'll give you a canvas jumpsuit, goggles, and heavy duty canvas gloves because should you fall off it, can be a little bit sharp. Nobody in our group fell off, and as long as you don't go crazy fast, I found it to be very safe and super fun!

If you don't want to do the sled, you can run down. And our guide Alex who does this trip perhaps once a week or so, when he runs down he clocks about 10 feet per step.

It's just remarkable! I do have some photos of it, but it doesn't do it justice.

09:18 This will definitely be one of your highlights of the whole adventure! I highly recommend you go to the Active Travel Adventures. Com web site and check out the ridiculous picture of me in my safety gear up and to also watch the short video. It's just a riot.

09:28 For those of you unfamiliar with Spanish the word Negro in Spanish means black. And that's what I look like at the end of that sleigh ride. I was just covered in lava dust and I cleaned up as best I could with baby wipes that night but I was really looking forward to heading to the

colonial city of Leon where I got a chance to get a proper shower wash my clothes and explore a fabulous city.

09:48 One of my absolute favorite hikes of the entire trip was Volcan Telica. This wasn't a particularly challenging hike but it was spectacular. It was an easy hike up to our base camp which was a covered shelter that we could put our tents in. There is a little village or community nearby so we were also able to purchase dinner from the locals who came up to our base camp and made us a delicious -- you'll never guess : rice and beans and chicken. Delicious though . A really really nice meal. Afterwards before the sun set we climbed up Telica. It's not too hard of a hike to witness one of the most active volcanoes of your trip.

10:24 Telica it's always spewing something. Unfortunately, the winds were not in our favor to see the lava but we got to see lots of plumes of smoke. It was quite quite interesting plus all of the particulates made the haze in the background quite pretty.

Like wildfires will make the sunset so glorious is very similar around volcanoes. Remember how I said there's a community nearby that was able to feed us dinner. A very industrious guy climbed up that volcano with a huge cooler full of soda and beer all iced down for us.

I didn't want to have a beer while I was hiking on the up, but I did promise to buy two on the way down if he was still there when I got back after staring down the crater for a while.

Our guide hollered over to us 'Hey I want to show you something'. So we followed him down this little ridge between the mountains and into a cave. And not just any cave.

11:10 It was the bat cave. Hundreds and hundreds of bats fluttering about. Oh my gosh that was so exciting and such a surprise because he didn't tell us what we're going to see. What a thrill!

Then we hiked up further up to a taller peak to witness the sun setting on the Pacific Ocean. From where we sat, could see not 360 but certainly a 280 degree panoramic view. And it was clear enough to see not only the Pacific but also Honduras and El Salvador. Just spectacular! Oh my gosh it was just mesmerizing.

Our group of about 15 had kind of spread out to separated private rocks so we could privately sit and drink in the magic of witnessing Mother Nature at her finest.

And all of a sudden: here comes the beer man! He may have broken the reverie, but we were thrilled.

Since we had finished climbing the uphill, we were all ready to buy a soda or a beer. So we toasted our drinks then went back to our private rocks to watch the sun dip down over the ocean. It was magical folks. I just wish you could have been there.

12:12 We saved the tallest volcano in Nicaragua for last : San Cristobal, which stands at 5725 feet. We had to head out at five o'clock in the morning to try to get a head start against the heat because so much of this volcano is exposed.

You start off in the forest but after an hour or so you're out and there's not a stitch of vegetation because the volcano wiped it all out when it erupted.

So we are climbing up everything's going great until we get to the scree field. Remember me talking about skree earlier on? We first encountered skree on the Cerro Negro, the volcano that I slid down. Climbing the skree field of San Cristobal was a two steps forward and one step back climb as we slid down every other step.

12:49 San Cristobal was the most challenging hike of of the whole trip simply because you do all this work and slide right back down so many times. I got a little clever though. Remember Jamie my dancing partner in Granada? He's a very tall man so made a very big footprint. I got smart and I started falling behind his footsteps because often I could use his catch holes. It helped quite a bit. And despite their muttering of my fellow hikers, when we got to the top ,no more complaints. You get to enjoy an absolutely spectacular scenery with 360 view. I posted a video on the summit out on the ATA web site. Coming down of course is kind of easy because you're almost running on the skree because it's steep. I slid on my bum at least a half a dozen times, of course, I'm the clutziest of the group. And so coming now as was quite quick.

I took a nap at the end when we got back. I noticed that I was irritating some bugs under the edge of my tent so from inside my tent, I kept lifting up the edge in hopes that the buzzing sound would stop interrupting my nap. I just lifted it up let the bugs out not thinking too much about it.

13:45 That night we had our farewell dinner for our guides.

In the morning, I'm packing up my tent and said, " What on earth are all those holes in my tent?" And I said, "Oh my gosh!" I go out and look and the leaf cutter ants had eaten my tent!

It was the bugs I was listening to during naptime the day before. They had eaten seven holes the size of dimes and quarters on the edge of my tent where water could come. Gratefully it didn't rain that night! And I was like you little buggers. I do have a video on the website of those guys as well because they're kind of cool. Leaf cutter ants go into the trees and bite out dime size pieces of leaf that they bring back to the nest. The leaf shreds decompose, and the ants eat the mold from the decomposition. They are fascinating to watch: they make a long line heading back and forth from the nest to the tree they are tearing the leaf pieces off of. How did I miss their the assembly line? Must've been too pooped from climbing Cristobal.

But anyhow I either ticked them off clipping their line when I set up my tent, or they thought my green tent was a leaf. I don't know but it was kind of comical how they had wrecked my

almost new fancy Big Agnes tent. A big shout out to Big Agnes because they only charged me 20 bucks to fix it, which I thought was quite reasonable.

14:53 Anyhow so we finished up our volcano climbs and now it's time for a little true R and R. Off to the Redwood Beach Resort.

This resort is in the middle of nowhere. I think the owners said it was like 21 miles from another hotel. There is a little village if that's what you want to call it... There's a small little store for basic necessities and a church. I'm sure there must be a school there somewhere, or it's in the church. Other than that, there are a few houses and some farms. But mainly the people seem to subsist on fishing. Their fishing boats looked to be about four times the size of a Boston Whaler. And they would take them out over these massive waves to get out to sea. It was always very exciting to see them go out and come in with their catch.

While you're at the resort, they offer all sorts of day trips. You can either relax as I did most of the time, or you could kayak through the mangroves out onto a river, which I did one day. You can go out deep sea fishing on one of those fishing boats, which I heard was a thrill! You can also go hiking and horseback riding.

15:53 I also was introduced to the sport of pickle ball. There was an old tennis court so the owner taught us to play Pickle Ball which unbeknownst to me is the fastest growing sport in the world. It was so much fun! Think a combination of tennis, badminton and ping pong. So you've got this wiffle ball that you hit with a modified ping pong paddle on a shortened tennis court. It's a riot. It's a doubles game and all we did was laugh.

One thing I like about this resort, because I'm so fair skinned, is the trees are right on the beach so you can sit under a hammock by the ocean but still be in the shade. Redwood also has a really nice big tiki hut and a massive communal outdoor covered dining and community area. Because it's so remote, they provide all the food, which I must say is outstanding.

16:40 One night we even caught our own! When the owners were starting the resort, a homeless man living on the beach came up looking for work. He was hired, and the owners asked him how did he feed himself. And he said he was catching ghost crabs and making a soup. And if you know anything about ghost crabs they're quite small so there's hardly any meat on them. But what he was doing and what he showed the owner to do was to catch the crabs and then boil to extract the essence and the flavor of the crab from which to make the ghost crab soup.

Intrigued, the owner tinkered around with it, and with her culinary skills, she devised a delicious and fun soup. So one night we went out with our headlamps we caught ghost crabs.

17:21 Ghost crabs live on the beach not in the surf. And they have little holes that they live down in. At night, they come out looking for their own prey. We are doing our best to chase them down and catch them before they would run down their holes. We would run run run

and then cup our hand over them to trap them. And then as fast as we could, we'd pop them into a bucket before they could pinch us and they would pinch us sometimes.

And so anyway so after catching I don't know how many ghost crabs we brought a bucket full back. The next day, we had delicious ghost crab soup for lunch. You've got to check out the picture of that in the on the web site.

17:54 I should mention that the Redwood Beach Resort is not a resort in the way that I normally think of the word resort. Most of the cabins don't have hot water or air conditioning. So make sure that you book a cabin that does have those facilities if that's important to you. I will tell you that the food was outstanding, and the location Swiss Family Robinesque. They used only whatever is local and fresh available that day often right off the fishing boats. This made for a very very relaxing part of our vacation.

When I first saw the itinerary I almost was going to skip to this part of the tour simply because I live by the ocean. I am so glad I went.

18:27 Nicaragua was a pleasant surprise. Like most of you, I had images of the Sandinistas and all that.

I found the people to be loving kind so glad that we were there to appreciate their country appreciate the beauty to appreciate their volcanoes. The food is very tasty although you will eat a whole lot of chicken with rice and beans. It superb if you like to camp and hike and love to explore new cultures. I loved Nicaragua! It's fun. It's pretty. It's affordable and the people are fabulous.

Right now is a great time to visit Nicaragua because it's not all that touristy. Plus it's very economical. However unlike Costa Rica It doesn't yet have a large tourist infrastructure in place which makes it harder for you to plan your own adventure or to move yourself and luggage around.

If you're going camping etc I recommend hiring a small tour company to arrange your trip even if you're just going as a group of one or two. It's not all that expensive and you get the added bonus of a cultural exchange with your guide. Currently there aren't many tour companies with preplan multi-day adventure trips so the tour companies currently just custom tailor your adventure to your specifications which is kind of cool. Nicaragua is still figuring out this whole new tourism industry.

19:33 A little more than two weeks after I arrived in Managua it was time to head home.

Looking back,I would say that this is a great adventure for somebody that doesn't mind roughing it a little bit because like I said the infrastructure is not quite there if you're going to do the hiking trip without camping unless you want to spend a lot of time in a car. I recommend

you rotate between camping and then heading to a city to get cleaned up a little bit and go back to camping and so forth.

19:59 You can download the free printer friendly Nicaragua cheat sheet and see the complete show notes at the Active Travel Adventures.com website. Enter Nicaragua in the search box, or click on the Podcast episodes link. This is episode 1. Be sure to check out my pictures and video, especially the ridiculous one of me getting ready to slide down the Cerro Negro volcano,

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