

University of Denver

Digital Commons @ DU

---

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Graduate Studies

---

6-15-2024

## Paradoxes and Potential of Tourism Development in Nicaragua

Cody J. Silveira

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd>



Part of the [Central American Studies Commons](#), [Human Geography Commons](#), and the [Tourism Commons](#)



All Rights Reserved.

---

# Paradoxes and Potential of Tourism Development in Nicaragua

## Abstract

This dissertation research evaluates the successes and challenges of tourism integration and expansion as both a broad human development strategy and a catalyst for local populations to achieve greater economic and social opportunities. The country of Nicaragua serves as the primary case study for such an evaluation due to its relatively recent promotion and expansion of tourism through government led incentives and oversight. As a case study, Nicaragua is a country whose tourism industry remains nascent, yet commands great economic potential and influence, which can serve as an example for future tourism development initiatives for developing countries in the region and elsewhere. Unlike its neighbors, tourism emerged here in the 1990's alongside structural adjustment policies implemented by the International Monetary Fund and administered by the United States Agency for International Development, which favored privatization and severely reduced state control over businesses and citizen welfare (Babb 2004, Reyes 2011). This dissertation argues that while successful policies have taken place to encourage tourism development in the country, overt authoritarian control has resulted in narrow marketing initiatives and a failure to expand tourism beyond the Pacific coast. Furthermore, international isolation, negative publicity, and shortcomings within the actual building of tourism infrastructure further complicates Nicaragua's potential success in becoming a tourism destination. Therefore, development through a tourism lens remains at best haphazard and erratic while both national and foreign developers suffer from poorly executed and articulated tourism planning. By examining Nicaragua's tourism sector and investigating the realities of those with direct and indirect stakes in the tourism industry across all Nicaraguan society, we can understand the challenges and potential which tourism poses as an economic and social strategy to uplift poorer countries around the world.

## Document Type

Dissertation

## Degree Name

Ph.D.

## First Advisor

Matthew Taylor

## Keywords

Development, Latin America, Tourism

## Subject Categories

Central American Studies | Geography | Human Geography | Social and Behavioral Sciences | Tourism

## Publication Statement

Copyright is held by the author. User is responsible for all copyright compliance.

Paradoxes and Potential of Tourism Development in Nicaragua

---

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics

University of Denver

---

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

---

by

Cody J. Silveira

June 2024

Advisor: Dr. Matthew Taylor

©Copyright by Cody J. Silveira 2024

All Rights Reserved

Author: Cody J. Silveira  
Title: Paradoxes and Potential of Tourism Development in Nicaragua  
Advisor: Matthew Taylor  
Degree Date: June 2024

## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation research evaluates the successes and challenges of tourism integration and expansion as both a broad human development strategy and a catalyst for local populations to achieve greater economic and social opportunities. The country of Nicaragua serves as the primary case study for such an evaluation due to its relatively recent promotion and expansion of tourism through government led incentives and oversight. As a case study, Nicaragua is a country whose tourism industry remains nascent, yet commands great economic potential and influence, which can serve as an example for future tourism development initiatives for developing countries in the region and elsewhere. Unlike its neighbors, tourism emerged here in the 1990's alongside structural adjustment policies implemented by the International Monetary Fund and administered by the United States Agency for International Development, which favored privatization and severely reduced state control over businesses and citizen welfare (Babb 2004, Reyes 2011). This dissertation argues that while successful policies have taken place to encourage tourism development in the country, overt authoritarian control has resulted in narrow marketing initiatives and a failure to expand tourism beyond the Pacific coast. Furthermore, international isolation, negative publicity, and shortcomings within the actual building of tourism infrastructure further complicates Nicaragua's potential success in becoming a tourism destination. Therefore, development through a

tourism lens remains at best haphazard and erratic while both national and foreign developers suffer from poorly executed and articulated tourism planning. By examining Nicaragua's tourism sector and investigating the realities of those with direct and indirect stakes in the tourism industry across all Nicaraguan society, we can understand the challenges and potential which tourism poses as an economic and social strategy to uplift poorer countries around the world.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	vi
PREFACE.....	1
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .....	3
Conceptual Framework.....	5
Research Methodologies.....	6
Research Methods .....	7
Recording and Transposing Data .....	13
Key Contributions to Tourism Research .....	17
Organizational Framework .....	19
CHAPTER TWO: CONDUCTING FIELD WORK IN AN AUTHORITARIAN COUNTRY .....	26
Getting a Foot in the Door .....	27
Overcoming Initial Tensions.....	29
Maintaining Open Dialogue and Hindering Opinions.....	32
Nicaraguan Tourism in Stagnation.....	34
The Erosion of Civil Liberties and Its Impacts on My Research .....	36
Perceptions and Realities of Traveling Safely in Nicaragua.....	40
Finding Success in Conducting Research in an Authoritarian Country ..	42
CHAPTER THREE: TOURISM POLICIES AND MARKETING STRATEGIES IN NICARAGUA: SETBACKS AND POSSIBLE INNOVATIONS.....	45
High Taxes and Bureaucracy .....	48
Necessity for Broader Marketing and Partnerships.....	52
Private Sector Responses to Improving Marketing Strategies.....	56
Conclusions.....	60
CHAPTER FOUR: TOURIST ACCESIBILITY IN NICARAGUA AND INFRASTRUCTURAL INVESTMENT ALONG THE PACIFIC COAST .....	64
COVID 19’s Legacy on International Accessibility to Nicaragua.....	65
Current Tourism Trends.....	68

The Pacific Coastal Road and the Esmerelda Airport: Potential Avenues for Increasing Tourism and Improving Economic Development.....	71
Expanding Accessibility to Nicaragua.....	77
CHAPTER FIVE: THEORIES OF DEVELOPMENT, LAND RIGHTS, AND NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT THROUGH THE LENS OF TOURISM... 80	
The Successes and Shortcomings of Ecotourism in Nicaragua .....	84
Nicaragua’s Conservation Strategies: Parks and Protected Areas .....	87
Surfing: Nicaragua’s Reliable Ecotour Activity .....	93
Potential for other Ecotour Destinations in Nicaragua.....	96
Issues of Land Rights and Increased Development.....	97
Competing Views of Natural Resources and Tourism Development ....	101
Nicaragua’s Waste Management Problem.....	106
Conclusions.....	110
CHAPTER SIX: TOURISM AS A MEANS OF IMPROVING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL BENEFITS FOR NICARAGUANS.....	113
Incentives for Nicaraguans to Work in Tourism .....	115
Daily Life for Nicaraguans: Emigrate or Stick Around .....	119
Limitations of the Labor Force Within the Tourism Sector .....	123
Costs, Risks, and Strategies of Running a Business.....	128
Conclusions.....	138
FINAL DISCUSSION .....	140
REFERENCES.....	147



## LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER ONE.....	3
Figure 1.1 Table showing number of interview participants and topics discussed.....	11-12
CHAPTER TWO.....	26
Figure 2.1 Government office building adorned with FSLN flags.....	27
Figure 2.2 Former hotel for sale... ..	36
Figure 2.3 Friday night in Granada. Main street empty, little business.....	36
CHAPTER FOUR .....	64
Figure 4.1 Map of the Entire Proposed Pacific Coastal Road Project... ..	75
Figures 4.2 and 4.3 Construction site of the Pacific Coastal Road Phase 3 Project North of El Gigante.....	76
CHAPTER FIVE.....	80
Figure 5.1 Nuclear Zone of Volcan Mombacho Natural Reserve... ..	92
Figure 5.2 Cloud Forest in Volcan Mombacho Natural Reserve... ..	92
Figure 5.3 Playa Amarillo with one lone surfer in the lineup... ..	95
Figure 5.4 Discarded sail of <i>Istiophorus platypterus</i> , a species under regulation for catch and release only in many parts of the world... ..	104
Figure 5.5 Lack of proper waste management like here in El Gigante has dirtied many beaches and public areas utilized by both tourists and locals alike.....	106
Figure 5.6 Examples of trashed public beach.....	110
Figure 5.7 Example of a clean hotel day use beach.....	110
CHAPTER SIX .....	113
Figure 6.1 Examples of a lot for sale in Popoyo.....	130
Figure 6.2 Several lots for sale in front of Ojo de Agua... ..	130

## PREFACE

Due to the precarious political situation underway in Nicaragua, all names in this dissertation are retracted. Additionally, all business and company names will be withheld to prevent possible closure, fines, and other more serious repercussions from being incurred by the managers, owners, and workers whose financial stability, work experience, and connections depend on a maintained level of cooperation and compliance with the Nicaraguan government's jurisdiction and policies in relation to tourism. Although tourism is not a considered a politically polarizing facet of society at the surface level of discernment, as greater amounts of information were gathered and observations were made, it became abundantly clear, the overwhelming role that the Nicaraguan government maintains over tourism. From how the industry is marketed, what taxes are levied over those who participate in tourism, and what laws and regulations define the current paradigms, government planning and decisions ultimately determine the impacts and direction which tourism enacts within the country. Many whom I have interviewed often expressed impatience, dissatisfaction, and at times outright abhorrence for Daniel Ortega's regime, its growing control, and the lack of direction that regime possessed in relation to tourism planning and development. I express the upmost gratitude and appreciation for their contributions to this research as

well as the risks they took to provide the necessary knowledge and insight to make this project possible.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970's, international tourism has become a popular, growing industry undertaken by a coalition of national governments, multi-billion-dollar corporations and international development agencies to capitalize upon a widespread service sector industry that remains increasingly lucrative and ever changing. These coalitions market tourism to populations from developed nations who possess higher salaries, longer vacation times, and greater access to the world via innovations within the global airline industry. Never before in the history of humanity does a world population possess the necessary capital, time, and information, to consistently travel within their own countries and abroad for extended and more frequent periods of time (Mowforth and Munt 1998, McLaren 2003, Fletcher 2014). To this day, much of conventional tourism is primarily driven by resorts, theme parks, and cruise tourism, as a means of providing the all-inclusive comforts and amenities which tourists expect while staging the operation in a foreign country that is deemed exotic or unique by the perceptions of those from the developed world (Mowforth and Munt 1998, MacCannell 1976). Meanwhile, tourists often remain unaware of the problems which tourism ventures have caused throughout the developing world including growing economic inequality, a dependence of local

livelihoods to low skill, unreliable wage labor, and rare and endemic ecosystems being increasingly threatened as environmental problems related to water and waste management are exacerbated by tourism growth (Mowforth and Munt 1998, Sharpley 2000; Fletcher 2014, Devine 2017). These large scale, traditional tourism planning narratives can best be described by Dean MacCannell (1976) as: “Produced representations that characterize a warped sense of reality in which tourists remain in privileged isolation, alienated from both local populations and the social ills that exist within foreign places.”

Beginning in the 1980’s and 1990’s, international agencies such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations, and United States Agency for International Development became acutely aware of conventional tourism’s negative environmental impacts and failures to alleviate poverty. During this time, an emerging focus on sustainable development through state agencies and international donors identified alternative and ecotourism venture styles which emphasized local community involvement, greater cross cultural interactions, conservation initiatives, and equitable land rights as avenues to combat the economic and environmental challenges facing many developing countries (Davis 1994, Mowforth and Munt 1998, Sharpley 2000, McLaren 2003, Smith 2003, Lawson 2007, Fletcher 2014). Despite an increased emphasis on conservation and poverty alleviation, ecotourism and other alternative tourism models remain ill-defined with best practices and key aspects being contested. Furthermore, many tourism operations put forth a façade of environmental conscientiousness and local participation to attract more tourists and appear more eco-

friendly (Mowforth and Munt 1998, McLaren 2003, Dorsey and Porras 2004, Donohoe and Needham 2006, Fletcher 2014). By pursuing investments in policies that utilize, encourage, and uplift local communities to plan, oversee, and benefit from tourism, the rapidly growing service sector industry has the ability to greatly improve personal incomes while generating greater revenues for community development, improved infrastructure, and higher standards of living (Mowforth and Munt 1998, Sharpley 2000, Mohan and Stokke 2000, Finger-Stitch 2003, McLaren 2003, West et al. 2006, Haller and Galvin 2008, Fletcher 2014, Hunt et al. 2016).

### **Conceptual Framework**

The two research questions below provide the conceptual framework for my research and guide my conceptualizations of the interrelations between tourism and human development.

1. What are the policies, initiatives, and incentives which encourage or dissuade current tourism development and growth?
2. What are the benefits and drawbacks of tourism development for expatriates, the Nicaraguan government, and local populations within Nicaragua?

To answer these questions, exploratory research was undertaken in the form of in-depth interviews, participatory observation evaluations, and descriptive analyses of the country and its tourism potential. While Nicaragua's development of its tourism sector is recent, the fact that this development is largely absent from outside international donors or international development agencies, relying instead on its facilitation through government action, makes Nicaragua a unique case study. Unlike other developing

countries who sought guidance, funding, and partnerships with the developed world, Nicaragua's isolation and specific control over their own tourism sector represents an exception to the rule of broad scale international tourism development. This crucial distinction means Nicaragua should be analyzed and evaluated alongside other development strategies and tourism initiatives throughout Latin America, as well as other developing countries, to gauge the positive and negative impacts and implications which tourism development can bring if left to the control of a single entity or to multiple international stakeholders.

### **Research Methodologies**

During July and August of 2023, five locales, each experiencing different forms of tourism development, were evaluated which include the coastal communities of San Juan del Sur and El Gigante as well as the inland communities of Masaya, Granada, and Isla Ometepe. The reason for selecting the communities on the coast is due to the Nicaraguan government's increased investment and tourism expansion in sun, sex, and sand tourism particularly along this southwest corridor of the country between the capital Managua and Costa Rica (Hunt 2011). Meanwhile, the inland communities of Masaya, Granada, and Isla Ometepe serve as some of the earliest communities where tourism and conservation led projects (Babb 2004, Croucher 2018). The patterns and data collected primarily draw upon qualitative research while additional elements of political ecology as they relate to nature-based tourism and natural resource management are described in *CHAPTER FIVE: THEORIES OF DEVELOPMENT, LAND RIGHTS, AND NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT THROUGH THE LENS OF TOURISM*. By drawing from a broad

qualitative methodological approach, I focus on the interrelations between historical narratives, politics, economics, and development strategies within a tourism framework (Seaton 2002, Rantala 2011, Douglas 2014, Wang et al. 2016, Rosmery 2018).

As a researcher it is crucial that I interpret the meanings, interactions, and perceptions of various individuals in order to understand their involvement in tourism, and how they perceive and engage with tourism while weighing the distinct viewpoints and observations against one other to understand tourism more comprehensively as a development strategy and means of achieving greater social and economic benefits (Escobar 1996, Escobar 2008, Douglas 2014). Furthermore, it is crucial that I also juxtapose their responses with the perceptions and potential which exists in the tourism locales that these individuals work and live in as direct or indirect beneficiaries of the tourism sector. When engaged with qualitative methodologies in regard to tourism research, a more thorough evaluation regarding the interrelations between historical and current narratives, stakeholder relations, and portrayals or reproductions of place in combination with the politics and laws that facilitate or discourage tourism can then be interpreted and evaluated against the realities which exist within a country pursuing tourism development (Seaton 2002, Dorsey et al. 2004, Rantala 2011, Douglas 2014, Mathis and Rose 2016, Wang et al. 2016, Rosmery 2018).

### **Research Methods**

To answer my research questions: 1) What are the policies, initiatives, and incentives which encourage or dissuade current tourism development and growth? and 2) What are the benefits and drawbacks of tourism development for expatriates, the Nicaraguan



government, and local populations within Nicaragua?, I primarily employ qualitative methods and to a lesser extent, a political ecology framework, which focuses on the partnerships, policies, strategies, benefits, and drawbacks of current tourism policy within Nicaragua. These frameworks aim to reveal the positive and negative changes enacted on communities impacted by tourism while also seeking to understand the interrelations between larger political and economic decisions and the impacts those decisions have on local livelihoods, development initiatives, and tourism marketing. The first method of gathering data to answer my research questions included semi-structured informal interviews of both local and foreign populations within Nicaragua. Across the five case studies, 45 interviews were recorded and based on stakeholder and beneficiary perspectives regarding the realities and potential of increasing tourism development as well as the policies, laws, and perceptions which the Nicaraguan government formulates and enacts that ultimately impacts tourism industries. These multiple perspectives include: (1. the tourist service provider perspective (government and NGO guides and employees), (2. the private company perspective, (3. the tourism mediator perspective (NGO and government officials), (4. the hospitality perspective (hotel/ restaurant employees and operators), and (5. the tourist and expatriate perspective (See Figure 1.1). A total of ten interviews were gathered from every perspective except for the tourist service provider perspective (See Figure 1.1). This is due predominantly to the fact that ten interviews became an achievable goal for short periods of time in each tourism locale and that complete data saturation was finally reached when ten interviews were acquired.

Regarding the lack of tourist service provider perspectives, which amounted to just five interviews, this was attributable to the fact that data saturation was reached much more quickly with employed government officials who maintained strict adherence to self-censorship and government protocol during all interactions. Additionally, the fact that most of Nicaragua's NGOs have been expelled from the country for political dissent, or failure to adhere to government standards and legal protocol, severely limited the number of possible interview participants to just one NGO employee. Consequently, when interviewing the two formal government employees, they were much more outspoken about their dissatisfaction with Nicaragua's highly controlled tourism sector. From their experiences working directly under several regimes, they were able to convey findings which contradicted previous information provided to me by current government employees thus revealing nuances in the viability of tourism development in Nicaragua.

In addition to semi-structured informal interviews, I also manually recorded observations of tourism activities, business operations, the lifestyles and cultures of resident and foreign populations, and personal experiences I encountered playing the part of both tourist and researcher. These methods proved crucial to understand the realities, marketing, planning, and activities of each case study and the tourism services provided there. Observations were recorded after interviews where business owners and tourism workers would provide tours of the ventures they worked on as well as construction sites of new businesses. Other observations included manually recording the procedures and operations of several tours across all locales as well as the daily life and culture of those locales and the people who were directly or indirectly impacted by the tourism sector.

Recording observations proved crucial in providing context to interviews, while also revealing distinctions and complexities associated with the ideals for tourism development versus the complicated realities which impact achieving those ideals.

The reason for employing observations, is that as a researcher, it is imperative that I situate myself into a larger context of discussion and knowledge, regarding the phenomena that I am studying to interrelate the ideas and findings that emerge from my observations alongside information gained from my interview participants (Harding 1991, Hill Collins 2000, Torres 2018). My involvement within actual tourism experiences assisted with me gaining situated, embodied knowledge regarding the management, services, realities, successes, and drawbacks regarding conservation and tourism ventures (Seaton 2002, Rantala 2011). Such observations served as an effective strategy to increase the body of knowledge gained through interviews which were limited by time constraints and varying degrees of participant's involvement, knowledge, and relations to tourism and development strategies more broadly (Seaton 2002, Rantala 2011).

Source	Topics
<p>5 Tourism Mediator Interviews (Includes 2 Instituto Nicaragüense de Turismo (INTUR), 1 Former Government Employee under Violet Chamorro (Nicaraguan president 1990-1997), 1 NGO Employee, and 1 Former MARENA Employee (Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources))</p>	<p>Attitudes towards large scale tourism and conservation, benefits and drawbacks of tourism, marketing strategies both past and present, political and security concerns, community engagement, potential of future tourism development, transportation and accessibility logistics</p>
<p>10 Nicaraguan National Private Company Interviews (Includes business owners and managers, operators, and self-employed operator)</p>	<p>Attitudes towards large scale tourism and conservation, incentives for tourism investment, taxes and bureaucracy, cultural differences, potential for tourism, operational logistics and costs, marketing strategies both past and present, benefits and drawbacks of tourism, tours and services provided, community engagement, transportation and accessibility logistics, political and security concerns, potential of future tourism development</p>
<p>10 Expatriate Interviews (Includes business owners and managers, operators, and self-employed operator)</p>	<p>Attitudes towards large scale tourism and conservation, incentives for tourism investment, taxes and bureaucracy, cultural differences, potential for tourism, operational logistics and costs, marketing strategies both past and present, benefits and drawbacks of tourism, tours and services provided, community engagement, transportation and accessibility logistics, political and security concerns, potential of future tourism development</p>
<p>10 Entry Level Hospitality Worker Interviews (Includes Receptionists, Waiters,</p>	<p>Hotel and Restaurant Manager/ Worker Perspective: Attitudes towards large scale tourism and conservation, benefits and drawbacks of working in tourism, marketing strategies both past</p>

Bar Tenders, Nature Tour Guides)	and present, length of employment, overview of accommodations and services, political and security concerns, potential of future tourism development
10 Tourist Interviews (National and International Tourists)	Attitudes towards large scale tourism and conservation, why they chose Nicaragua, places in Nicaragua they visited, transportation and accessibility logistics, how they heard about Nicaragua, improvements to tourism services, length of stay, trip highlights, country of origin, positive and negative aspects of Nicaragua, political and security concerns

Figure 1.1 Table showing number of interview participants and topics discussed. Source: Cody Silveira,

2024

The third method I incorporated within my research is a content analysis of physical and online tourism materials including brochures and web pages. However, the implementation of this method is limited due to the lack of physical copies and the fact that most tourism operators did not possess an online presence for their businesses. I was unfortunately only able to analyze three print brochures, two being government issued tourism brochures for the city of Granada and Nicaragua as a whole while the other one was issued from a hotel I stayed in during my field work. Regarding online media sources, I was able to analyze one national government tourism directory website and four Instagram accounts managed by foreign hostel and guest house workers residing along the Pacific coast.

The lack of data from content analyses was also attributable to physical information regarding tourism being largely controlled, issued, and distributed by the government who has neglected to update, improve, or make widely available useful tourism marketing materials for tourists. Meanwhile, the online tourism media, possessed by just a few private businesses, highlighted information regarding amenities, events, and activities available at the accommodations as well as short, online videos showcasing those services, or the natural surroundings where their operations were located. Despite the absence of widely available print and online mediums necessary for a more comprehensive content analysis, the materials did shed light on the government's neglect for providing more concentrated marketing campaigns and information. The tourism materials also revealed how private businesses promote themselves and a shift towards utilizing the Internet as an innovative marketing space which allows them to reach a wider audience. Due to the limitations of possessing physical and online tourism materials, observations and semi structured interviews formed the bulk of data gathered which assisted me with understanding the realities, potential, and problems associated with tourism development within Nicaragua.

### **Recording and Transposing Data**

Regarding how I recorded and transposed my data, I relied on two manually written notebooks for both interviews and observations. Originally, I had planned to utilize a small audio recorder capable of clearly transmitting interviews to a USB drive for archiving and preserving data and later coding it, however I instead opted to manually record all my interviews. When conducting field research in an authoritarian country, audio recorders, USB drives, and laptops possessed by foreigners have a high likelihood

of arousing suspicion and possible searches and seizures from authorities. Furthermore, the possibility for participants during audio recorded interviews to suddenly becoming hesitant, non-compliant, or skeptical of providing their insights and opinions due to fear of repercussions from the government if their information is revealed, could jeopardize the rigor, accuracy, and legitimacy of the entire dissertation research. To gain participant compliance and honest engagement across interviews, I assured them that their conversations with me would remain anonymous and that their names and the names of their businesses would be withheld in this final dissertation.

Alongside interviews, I manually recorded observations in a separate journal, involving the day-to-day business operations of both private and government businesses, the quality of various tourism activities, the cultural differences between both foreigners and Nicaraguan nationals, and the complexities of tourism development upon the daily lives of individuals within the five different tourism locales. Additionally, during my time in the field, I recorded daily entries of my time abroad taking note of experiences or activities that I derived meaning from as well as interactions with people I met with even if they were not specifically chosen interview subjects. These personal writings assisted in triggering memories of specific individual experiences which assisted me after leaving the field to recall any temporarily missed or forgotten information and compare it to other manually gathered data. Through engagement and observations with actual tourism experiences, embodied knowledge was gained, regarding the successes and drawbacks of tourism ventures while the information gained through interviews was enhanced, expanded, and ultimately interconnected with these observations to confirm or deny realities of tourism development within Nicaragua.

Regarding semi structured interviews, only interviews that were consensually agreed upon, scheduled, and possessed a length of a half hour or more in duration were considered as data for the research. This method proved crucial to understand the coordination, planning, and expanding of tourism services as well as comprehend the various goals, policies, intentions, and desires of various tourism stakeholders. The key to successful interviews is first gaining consent from the interview subject and organizing a time, date, and setting when the subject feels comfortable meeting. Prior to the interview, I possessed a list of eight to twelve questions for each stakeholder to guide the conversation (Romano 2006, Hertel et al. 2009, Hennink 2020). Many times, conversations did not rigidly follow a prescribed plan for every interview subject, however, a pre prepared list of questions helped articulate the research goals early while the participant's responses to the questions gauged whether the interview needs to be modified or other questions addressed. Interviewing is a process, one that must be crafted through practice, flexibility, and attention to detail. The diversity of interview subjects combined with a snowball strategy of gaining contacts helped to fill any gaps in information while also giving rise to new information and questions to be addressed with later participants.

After returning from Nicaragua, open coding methods with the data gathered from interviews, the field journal, and observations were undertaken. Open coding is a form of inductive research methodologies that strives not to focus on one problem or factor associated with the data, but rather evaluates and organizes the data into categories and patterns that are uncovered and interrelated throughout the data sources (Timulak and Elliot 2005, Cope 2010, Ryan and Bernard 2016). To distinguish patterns within the



codes, I looked for words or phrases that repeat themselves across the interview subjects, emphasized distinct answers present in each specific interview question, noted changes in tone of voice, and took note of body language and social cues during each interview. From there, I uncovered similarities and differences in how distinct groups or individual subjects answered certain research questions, took note of any metaphors or analogies that arose when looking at the data as a whole, and recognized missing information that may not have been observed or recorded in one data source, yet present in another (Strauss and Corbin 1998, Timulak and Elliot 2005, Charmaz 2008, Ryan and Bernard 2016). Once particular codes are organized based on research question and interview subjects, grounded theory was formulated which is another method of empirical scrutiny and precision that analyzes patterns which are prevalent and interconnected throughout the entire data set (Strauss and Corbin 1998, Timulak and Elliot 2005, Charmaz 2008).

Next, data was extrapolated from a total of eight tourism media materials including printed brochures, social media accounts, and a single government webpage through the utilization of a content analysis that ultimately assisted in creating intersectionality and overlap for data inquiry and analysis. In person interviews and participatory observations encompass the physical and written aspects of such research methodologies while a content analysis encompassed the textual analyzation process (Dorsey et al. 2004, Elliot and Timulak 2005, Rantala 2011). A content analysis sought to emphasize the similarities and differences of concepts present in the gathered media sources to identify categories of information, thematic relationships, and the frequency of specific themes (Elliot and Timulak 2005, Rantala 2011). After a content analysis was utilized for the media, grounded theory was then implemented once again to reveal

patterns of marketing strategies pursued by both government and private stakeholders. Through an implementation of open coding and grounded theory gathered from predominantly field notes and interviews, unforeseeable and often overlooked challenges and aspects of tourism development, promotion, and priorities became apparent while the methods of data analysis also further enabled overall consensus regarding the historical patterns of tourism, their current, most marketable products and services, and the benefits or shortfalls that tourism ultimately brings to a particular place when it is pursued as an economic strategy.

### **Key Contributions to Tourism Research Projects**

The key theoretical contributions a tourism research project can bring to the field of political ecology include an expansion of increased holistic comprehension regarding how continued discrepancies and inconsistencies within tourism can create discontent, disillusion, defiance, and mistrust of the industry as a development strategy.

Furthermore, the research can also highlight how and why international and national stakeholders within a rapidly growing industry often remain detached from local input and participation which in turn undermines the intended goals of using tourism and its alternative, pro-environment ventures, to expand and fulfill successful development strategies meant to uplift populations throughout much of the developing world.

Tourism scholarship within the geographic discipline has evolved extensively from its initial descriptions of place and geographic patterns, physical or human, that shape and distinguish one place from another to research dedicated to understanding how culture, heritage, environmental impacts, migration and logistics as well as transportation influence tourism (Nepal 2009, Crouch 2017, Timothy 2017). Given tourism's changing

policies, goals, and the places where new forms of tourism are integrated, the discipline of geography encompasses a particular knowledge of how time and space inform and influence one another, allowing to not only analyze and critique tourism effectively, but also to analyze tourism holistically, given its multi-faceted participants and facilitators as well as its increasing emphasis on development amidst complex human and global interrelations (Stronza and Gordillo 2008, Nepal 2009, Douglas 2014, Crouch 2017, Timothy 2017). Despite such promise in elevating tourism to a worthwhile global development initiative that seeks to secure land use and land ownership rights, facilitate cross cultural interaction, impart broader geopolitical knowledge in tourists, and achieve various social and economic benefits, there are critics who deem tourism scholarship, whether through the lens of political ecology, or broader qualitative research methodologies as unempirical or not rigorous. Additionally, these critics argue that tourism as an industry of development and environmental conservation fails to achieve these goals due to its tendency towards commodification and profit combined with its seasonal nature and predication on growth through the constant catering of shifting tourism preferences which are often at odds with environmental stewardship, long term economic and social development, local livelihoods, and local perceptions of resource management (MacCannell 1976, McLaren 1998, Honey 1999, Buckley 2000, Brockington 2002, Hart 2004, Wilson 2008, Douglas 2014, Fletcher 2014). I argue that for tourism research to be rigorous and empirical, it is crucial to gather as much qualitative data, through a combination of semi-structured interviews, observations within tourism locations, and content analyses of tourism media during the all too often short time frames which are granted to researchers to gather their data. Furthermore, as a

researcher, one must be self-reflective in how their assumptions and quest for perfection must be tempered while also possessing a critical eye and ear for particulars so that they can contextualize their data and interactions to uncover meaningful patterns, interrelations, and behaviors which reveal a truth as close to the whole phenomenon as possible with the time and resources they are given.

Tourism is a complex, ever evolving industry, always seeking new frontiers and new markets while additionally seeking to justify its integration and adoption through the lens of development, economic and social uplift, and environmental protection (Baxter and Eyles 1996, Mowforth and Munt 1998, Honey 1999, McLaren 1998, Lawson 2007, Nepal 2009, Wilson 2008, Fletcher 2014). To further engage in tourism discourse using political ecology and qualitative methodologies, it is imperative that the researcher broadens their scope to center tourism within modern issues of resource management, globalization, changes in rural livelihoods, alterations of cultures and customs, and broader environmental impacts (Mowforth and Munt 1998; McLaren Honey 1999 Sharpley 2000, Macleod 2001, Nepal 2009, Fletcher 2014, LaVanchy and Taylor 2015, Devine 2017). Given the nature of political ecology and broad qualitative approaches to tourism, a robust analysis of local and even regional development through a particular case study can then lend itself to similar interrelated problems and issues directly or indirectly related to tourism integration and expansion in other parts of the world that are seemingly distinct or separate from the original analysis.

### **Organizational Framework**

Since the methods described above were utilized across the entire research project to varying degrees, I have neglected to add specific sections titled *Results and Discussion*

within the chapters. Instead, I have opted to weave my results throughout the different sections of chapters where key findings were made with regards to answering my two research questions 1) What are the policies, initiatives, and incentives which encourage or dissuade current tourism development and growth? and 2) What are the benefits and drawbacks of tourism development for expatriates, the Nicaraguan government, and local populations within Nicaragua? The key results and findings are bolded as sub sections in each chapter and represent sections of distinct information which relate back to the original research questions.

The research findings begin officially with *Chapter TWO: CONDUCTING FIELD WORK IN AN AUTHORITARIAN COUNTRY* which serves as an introductory chapter that helps explain the difficulties, adaptations, and solutions I was required to implement to successfully gather factual and worthwhile information in Nicaragua. The specific strategies I implemented while conducting a worthwhile qualitative research project in a country like Nicaragua are described in sub sections such as *Getting a Foot in the Door, Overcoming Initial Tensions, and Maintaining Open Dialogue and Hindering Opinions*. Next, the impacts of authoritarianism on Nicaragua's tourism industry and the Nicaraguan populace in general are further described in sections entitled *Nicaraguan Tourism in Stagnation, The Erosion of Civil Liberties and Its Impacts on My Research, and Perceptions and Realities of Traveling Safely in Nicaragua*. Chapter Two ultimately concludes with *Finding Success in Conducting Research in an Authoritarian Country*, which represents a summation of insights and advice that other academic researchers who conduct field work in authoritarian countries can utilize to gain worthwhile results for their own projects.

*CHAPTER THREE: TOURISM POLICIES AND MARKETING STRATEGIES IN NICARAGUA: SETBACKS AND POSSIBLE INNOVATIONS* investigates past and present strategies implemented by both the Nicaraguan government as well as private developers, both foreign and national, in promoting tourism as a whole and for individual enterprises. The initial sub section begins with a brief history of the first tourists arriving in Nicaragua who were predominantly humanitarians eager to participate in the Sandinista government social programs. The chapter then proceeds to explain the first pro tourism laws and policies which helped invigorate the industry in the 1990's before describing President Daniel Ortega's 2007 programs and tourism initiatives which have aimed at making tourism a highly lucrative, widespread service sector industry. However, as the chapter continues with *High Taxes and Bureaucracy* and *Necessity for Broader Marketing and Partnerships*, it becomes clear that overarching government control over the entire tourism sector has made it difficult for many to start businesses of their own and attract steady clientele. Despite these shortcomings, in the section titled *Private Sector Responses to Improving Marketing Strategies*, there remains possibilities for both foreign and locally owned businesses to overcome and adapt to government shortsightedness by maintaining a strong online presence while also working together to decide and define how tourism will be managed, promoted, and expanded in their own specific tourism locales. The chapter ends with *Conclusions* which states that ultimately, the Nicaraguan government will need to create a more favorable business climate to attract investment while also broadening tourism promotion and initiatives nationally as well as regionally if they wish to expand the industry to mass tourism levels.

*CHAPTER FOUR: TOURIST ACCESSIBILITY IN NICARAGUA AND INFRASTRUCTURAL INVESTMENT ALONG THE PACIFIC COAST* begins with an introduction describing how foreign tourists arrive in Nicaragua before moving onto *COVID 19's Legacy on International Accessibility to Nicaragua* which analyzes how long-term airline closures during the COVID 19 pandemic combined with airline monopolization over the Central American market, have resulted in limited flight options and very high prices for airline travel to the country. The next section, *Current Tourism Trends*, further describes why foreign Western tourism numbers remain low while the industry has predominantly been dominated by Nicaraguan citizens and Costa Rican visitors. Meanwhile, the section entitled *The Pacific Coastal Road and the Esmerelda Airport: Potential Avenues for Increasing Tourism and Improving Economic Development*, details two of the Nicaraguan government's most ambitious projects to increase foreign investment while also interconnecting the Pacific coast of Central American through a broad strategy of greater economic integration which includes tourism as a key component. However, as the chapter concludes with *Expanding Accessibility to Nicaragua*, the justification for constructing this massive building projects will only be realized if a broader marketing and tourism plan also coincides with its completion.

*CHAPTER FIVE: THEORIES OF DEVELOPMENT, LAND RIGHTS, AND NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT THROUGH THE LENS OF TOURISM* discusses ecotourism and conservation in Nicaragua. The first section *The Successes and Shortcomings of Ecotourism in Nicaragua* describes how unlike other Central American countries who bolstered their ecotourism industries through extensive partnerships with

foreign scientists and conservationists, Nicaragua manages its parks and natural areas exclusively through one entity, the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (MARENA). To date, the government agency remains understaffed, underfunded, and severely lacking in broad international or even private sector partnerships to integrate conservation-based tourism initiatives. However, in the next section, *Nicaragua's Conservation Strategies: Parks and Protected Areas*, three current ecotourism destinations are discussed alongside what makes them attractive to tourists and ultimately successful in preserving natural amenities and resources. Afterwards, in the sections *Surfing: Nicaragua's Reliable Ecotour Activity* and *Potential for other Ecotour Destinations in Nicaragua*, the highly lucrative water sport is analyzed as Nicaragua's most popular activity, one that has drawn much of the foreign clientele to the Pacific coast since the 1990's, while the possibilities of other tourism locales and ventures beyond the Pacific Coast corridor are explored. Despite immense potential to develop tourism nationally, the section *Issues of Land Rights and Increased Development*, describes a lack of official land ownership combined with rising costs of living and property values as being significant threats to Nicaraguan financial stability which in turn undermines the economic and social benefits which tourism seeks to provide to local populations. Simultaneously as explained in *Competing Views of Natural Resources and Tourism Development* and *Nicaragua's Waste Management Problem*, it is revealed that Nicaragua suffers from natural resource degradation in the form of water and fisheries management while an ongoing waste management problem throughout the country questions the health and integrity of tourism locales. The chapter concludes that ecotourism and conservation are not as highly valued by the Nicaraguan government as



mass tourism, yet if the push for mass tourism continues along its current trajectory, natural resources and landscapes will suffer increased degradation and overexploitation, unless strategies are implemented to encourage greater oversight, management, and cooperation between local and foreign tourism developers.

The final chapter, *CHAPTER SIX: TOURISM AS A MEANS OF IMPROVING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL BENEFITS FOR NICARAGUANS* deals with an often-overlooked aspect of tourism planning and expansion in the developing world which concerns the costs, utilities, logistics, and positive as well as negative aspects which developers face when having to rely on a predominantly uneducated workforce to construct their enterprises. The first section of the chapter, *Incentives for Nicaraguans to Work in Tourism*, not only justifies tourism as a highly lucrative job opportunity for Nicaraguans, but also reveals that English proficiency, technological experience, and other transferable skills are equally important outcomes derived from working in a rapidly growing service sector industry. The difficult circumstances, poverty, and predicaments of many Nicaraguans are further explained in the section titled *Daily Life for Nicaraguans: Emigrate or Stick Around*, which details the reasons why many Nicaraguans are looking to tourism as an alternative way to improve their livelihoods or leaving their country all together for better lives elsewhere. However, despite initial enthusiasm and the promise of jobs, the section titled *Limitations of the Labor Force Within the Tourism Sector* details trends throughout Nicaraguan society such as a lack of education and experience, as well as longstanding cultural outlooks on financial responsibility which threatens the future stability, efficiency, and expansion of tourism infrastructure and services throughout the country. Additionally, in the section *Costs*,

*Risks, and Strategies of Running a Business*, developers also face challenges with the long-term viability in tourism which range from reliable and costly utilities to meeting deadlines and affording building materials. The chapter ends by recognizing that tourism development within Nicaragua should be viewed as a long-term investment, one that is planned accordingly to deal with setbacks while also balancing the goals of financial success with providing opportunities and transferable skills to local populations.

## **CHAPTER TWO: CONDUCTING FIELD WORK IN AN AUTHORITARIAN COUNTRY**

After a failed attempt at some much-needed sleep on the three-hour final commute from Houston, Texas, my plane finally touched down in Managua at 12:30 PM. The first requirement of entry into Nicaragua, if arriving by air, is filling out a customs form and paying a \$10 entry fee for a tourist card allowing 3 months of visa free travel within the country. Next is clearing your luggage through customs, which in this case, is a tiny one lane security belt staffed by just a few airport attendants and representing nothing more than a formality. The officials lack any sort of advanced screening computers or other technology and seem more concerned with shepherding people through security as quickly as possible. After breezing through this minor inconvenience and stepping through the automatic doors and out onto the tarmac, two things become acutely relevant: the sweltering tropical heat and the fluttering of black and red Sandinista (FSLN) party flags adorning the rafters overhead. The midday sun hangs high over the concrete and swirling mass of advancing and retreating humans while the automobile exhaust adds an extra layer of radiating heat to the surrounding climate. Everywhere I traveled throughout Nicaragua, the humidity and the subtle government presence never left me. Portraits of Daniel Ortega or the FSLN flags flying over government offices, in town squares, and throughout city streets, served as symbols of

anti-western imperialism while also reminding all those who enter the country just exactly who is in charge (See Figure 2.1). Never did I witness the national blue and white flag throughout my journey, the party of revolution and socialism reigns supreme here.



Figure 2.1 Government office building adorned with FSLN flags. Source: Cody Silveira 2023

### **Getting a Foot in the Door**

When conducting research in an authoritarian country, several challenges present themselves which differentiate levels of risk, researcher/subject trust, and quality of the information from other forms of research in more stable locations. To begin with, most researchers undertaking any field work abroad are from either North America or Europe. For the research participants who participate in academic field work, our foreign identities can lead to distrust and skepticism from those we interact with, or sometimes outright hostility depending on current and past foreign relations that our mutual countries of origin have harbored towards one another (Clark, 2006, Romano 2006, Hertel et al. 2009, Janenova 2019). It is therefore crucial to build trust early on with

those we interact with while being honest about the purpose of our research, what we seek to answer in our lines of questioning, and that our findings will be shared with research participants once a final analysis is complete.

To overcome initial levels of distrust and skepticism from those you interview, the most useful tips include knowing the language of your subjects fluently and relying on an individual who you are in constant contact with before, during, and after your field work who either knows your interview subjects closely, or can recommend others who wish to partake in your study (Romano 2006, Clark 2006, Hertel et al. 2009, Morgenbesser and Weiss 2018). Known colloquially as a gatekeeper, this individual helps kickstart your interviews and points you in the right direction regarding who would have the most knowledge and experience concerning your research topic. Gatekeepers are often those with direct ties to officials or people of interest regarding your research topic and have either built careers around interests shared with the reader or are researchers themselves who frequently visit the researcher's case study and have established long standing ties with several communities of people (Romano 2006, Hertel et al. 2009, Morgenbesser and Weiss 2018). For me, my gatekeeper was my research advisor who has been traveling to Nicaragua for nearly twenty years. Through his time in the country, he was connected to several formal government employees and influential families while also possessing close ties to the communities of El Gigante and Popoyo where he resides during different times of the year. Through his introductions and connections, I was able not only quickly and efficiently build trust with my interview subjects, but also gain insights and knowledge that may have been omitted for fear of political repercussions.

## **Overcoming Initial Tensions**

As I traveled throughout Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega and his new Sandinista regime became frequently mentioned in interviews surrounding tourism and development. His face, always alongside his wife and always next to some image of hope and progress in the future, was plastered everywhere: in parks, schools, government offices, on street corners, and in front of vacant lots awaiting an eager investor. From the major cities to quiet rural towns, I could not help but feel watched or closely monitored. Regardless of whether this was true, the level of hesitancy and caution I experienced during several interviews with people who possessed varying stakes in the industry, served as a reminder of the complexities of conducting research as a foreigner. Thankfully, tourism, although not without its controversies, was seen by many as a less divisive and more easily discussed topic than blatant politics, authoritarianism, or the erosion of civil liberties within Nicaragua.

One of my initial interviews with a hotel owner in Granada would serve as the sudden realization that is inherent in the dangers and risks associated with any discussion or critique of the government's role and influence in Nicaraguan society. From running a small business and living in the country for nearly 17 years now, the hotel owner was very much aware of the political tensions and recent uprisings which have since divided the country and forced many to flee or be subjected to disappearances, imprisonment, and harassment. As our discussion shifted towards problems of tourism, government bureaucracy and oversight emerged as a prevalent impediment to growth. In the middle of this inquiry, he became serious and interjected my questioning saying, "Just to be clear, you're not with the CIA are you"? Taken aback momentarily, I quickly replied

“Yeah actually, I’m here to assist with driving Ortega out of power and replacing him with one of our guys”. We both laugh off the tense moment and a level of rapport is built which helped conclude the interview on an amicable note. He then bids me farewell with some ominous advice “In all seriousness though, the government has spies and supporters everywhere. It would be unwise to have a conversation like this outside these walls”.

Across Nicaragua, I also became acutely aware of the class differences as well as the tensions exhibited by tourism workers who are increasingly interacting with growing numbers of wealthy Nicaragua nationals who, during COVID 19, began touring their own countries and buying up properties in coastal regions. The starkest example of this came during one interview I had at a beach bar with a member of a prominent land-owning family. He was impatient and belittled our waiter; often whistling and beckoning with his finger to attend to us immediately and appearing annoyed by the time the waiter arrived at our table. I witnessed this behavior in other establishments, noticing that many upper class, vacationing Nicaraguans exhibited similar dismissive behavior towards bell hops, street vendors, bar tenders, waiters, and hotel concierges. Not once did the workers speak out against this treatment or involve managers to speak on their behalf with the customers. Always, they embodied a passive, apologetic attitude, quickly attending to the customer’s concerns and always exhibiting patience and courteousness. In fact, upon first interacting with many service workers, one notices that they often appear weary and tense, their movements, and manners strictly regimented. One employee at a popular beach bar in San Juan del Sur stated, “The reason many of us seem serious and able to take insults is that it is a much safer choice than to speak out against someone who may have connections to have you fired or worse”. A concierge at a hotel in Laguna de

Apoyo further remarked “I much prefer helping gringos and tourists. They provide more tips, they are more patient, and they often ask me how my day is going. Some also ask me to recommend activities and places to visit during their stay in my country”.

Previously, other researchers, notably Romano (2006) who has explored conflict zones throughout the Middle East, Roberts (2012) who has conducted extensive field work in the Russian Federation, and Morgenbesser and Weiss (2018) who investigated authoritarian regimes throughout Southeast Asia, offer advice for gaining rapport with subjects. From their findings, it is crucial to gain informed consent, clarify early on what will be discussed and the risks involved with participating in your research, and undertake any interviews and observations in a place where the subject feels relaxed and where it is just the researcher and participant present. Before scheduling each interview, I prefaced that everyone would remain anonymous while also encouraging those that I spoke with to pick a time and place, be it their homes or a corner table tucked away in a bar or restaurant, where we could have an honest conversation that would not make them anxious, or fearful that their businesses or lives were in danger. Not only did this strategy prove beneficial for all my interviews, but upon discovering that I was undertaking a research project aimed at understanding the problems and potential of tourism development in Nicaragua, many of my research subjects were enthusiastic to discuss their thoughts and experiences with the industry. I believe that my initial assurances, combined with my topic of research, helped to put people at ease since tourism is an exciting, relatively new development within Nicaragua and one that many are eager to capitalize on given the country’s rapidly expanding real estate market and the government’s encouragement of rapid tourism development. In fact, many of my initial



interviews within the several case studies I visited would lead to introductions and contact information for friends, family, and acquaintances of the person I was interviewing. This snowball approach to gathering interview subjects is often heralded as the most efficient, conspicuous, and trustworthy method of finding information in a country with high levels of surveillance, paranoia, mistrust, and threats of persecution (Romano 2006, Clark 2006, Hertel et al. 2009, Roberts 2012, Morgenbesser and Weiss 2018, Janenova 2019).

### **Maintaining Open Dialogue and Hindering Opinions**

According to Romano (2006) and Hertel et al. (2009), one should approach each interview with a list of prescribed questions, but these questions should only serve to keep the interviewer organized and to help steer the conversation towards answering the broader research questions. What both authors have noted is that open dialogue where the researcher and subject merely have a conversation about the topics of interest is the best way of gathering information since it is most likely to put subjects at ease while also allowing for greater inquiry and richer conversations (Romano 2006 and Hertel et al. 2009). Additionally, they recommend that the researcher should remain truthful, polite, and patient throughout the interview regardless of the time length (Romano 2006 and Hertel et al. 2009). As a rule of thumb, the researcher should approach each interview with an inquisitive demeanor and not try to change the opinions of their subjects or filter the interview with their own opinions on the subject. It is far more beneficial for the researcher to learn more about the thoughts of others, ask why certain opinions exist, and to understand the dynamics of the research questions they seek to answer (Romano 2006). By remaining humble and as unbiased as possible, the researcher can avoid any

scenarios of silence or rehearsed answers while also keeping the conversation flowing in a rich, interesting fashion (Romano 2006, Clark 2006, Hertel et al. 2009, Roberts 2012).

Adhering to keeping open discussions while also being truthful up front about the nature of my research helped to overcome many of the initial hesitations that I had with building rapport with those whom I interviewed in the cities of Granada, Masaya, and San Juan del Sur. Most of the subjects in these urban settings needed explicit consent and several assurances of anonymity that my study was indeed only focusing on tourism before conversing with me. Even after these assurances, several participants provided vague criticisms and statements regarding the government's overarching control over tourism and its failures in advancing tourism interests. This initially caused frustration and bewilderment until I was able to compare and interpret their responses with observations across my five locales as well as against statements from people who were more outspoken. One strategy that helped build trust with these subjects was the fact that I manually recorded all of my notes, maintained consistent eye contact with my subjects, and also asked follow up questions pertinent to the immediate discussion rather than interject with comments or questions that pertained exclusively to my research. In rural locations that were spared much of the violence, destruction, and crackdowns resulting from the uprisings of 2018 (places such as Isla Ometepe, El Gigante, and Laguna de Apoyo), I noticed that people were much more willing to voice their opinions. Most subjects in these locations needed less assurances and were predominantly critical of what they viewed as top-down oversight and ineptitude on the part of their government in fostering a thriving tourism industry. Regardless of the setting, manual note taking

combined with open discussions allowed for more inciteful conversation and richer data to be uncovered while also helping to build trust with the various people I interviewed.

Despite the success of open dialogue with most research participants, the two interviews conducted with currently employed government officials lacked context or were purposefully vague. This was especially true whenever topics regarding the problems associated with tourism, including how government can improve promoting tourism, or the limitations of bureaucracy and high taxes on the tourism industry, were mentioned. A common answer that was voiced to move on from the subject, or appear as neutral as possible, would be that the country ultimately suffers from bad publicity abroad. Unsurprisingly, all the employees remained baffled as to why tourism in Nicaragua has not exploded and could not definitively provide any context as to what needed to be improved, altered, or updated within their marketing tactics, incentives, tax codes, or policies for tourism to be a defining facet of the country's economy. It is worth mentioning that both interviews took place in a government building with other employees and that the office itself could have been wire tapped. To salvage the interview and extract any necessary data, I still adhered to open ended dialogue while self-censoring my biases of government policy, while later drawing upon data gathered from other interviews and observations to read between the lines and understand the current government paradigms which dissuade many from speaking out or offering solutions to improving the tourism sector.

### **Nicaraguan Tourism in Stagnation**

While maintaining contact with a gatekeeper, possessing an open mind for rich discussion, relying on snowball sampling, manually recording my notes, and remaining

unbiased proved highly useful in attaining a wide variety of interview subjects, it soon became apparent that the 2018 political crisis combined with the 2020 COVID 19 pandemic have stagnated Nicaragua's tourism industry and the larger national economy. In places such as Granada, Masaya, Isla Ometepe, and San Juan del Sur, hotels, restaurants, and tour companies that appeared in my guidebook and on Google Maps were permanently closed, abandoned, up for lease or sale, or replaced by other businesses. When setting out to embark on several impromptu interviews, I would soon discover that while economic hard times resulting from the COVID 19 pandemic dealt the final economic blow to these businesses, many employees and owners were forced to flee the country entirely prior to COVID 19. The primary cause for this mass exodus was the 2018 political riots and demonstrations which left hundreds of people dead, injured, or imprisoned while forcing many other to flee the country for fear of political persecution, incarceration for their political allegiances, or having their businesses and assets seized by the government. Everywhere I traveled, city streets remained virtually empty during both the day and night with little tourists or locals patronizing what few restaurants, bars, and tour companies were still left (See Figures 2.2 and 2.3). One self-employed tour guide in Granada remarked "2017 was the best year in tourism. I had so many customers, I had to turn several away. There were gringos everywhere down here." Still, in 2023, many remain hopeful that it is only a matter of time before tourism returns to its pre COVID 19 levels, however others fear that too much damage has been done to the industry already and that some serious political and economic changes must be implemented before tourism and the Nicaraguan economy can rebound back to pre-2018 levels of success and growth.



Figure 2.2 Former hotel for sale. Source: Cody Silveira 2023.



Figure 2.3 Quiet Friday night in Granada. Main street empty, little business. Source: Cody Silveira 2023.

### **The Erosion of Civil Liberties and Its Impacts on My Research**

Three further complications that directly and indirectly shaped my research involved the nationwide government dissolution of over 3,500 non-governmental organizations, the suppression of the Catholic Church, and the closure of 27 private universities, one of which occurred while I was in Nicaragua (The Guardian 2022, Redacción Confidencial September 2023, Tico Times 2023). At first, the Ortega regime was solely targeting NGOS who opposed government control and influence, specifically

those that provided funds to or were directly associated with the 2018 protest organizations. In 2023, however, the Ministry of Governance has shifted its justifications for this ongoing nationwide crackdown to NGOs failing to fulfill the legally required financial reporting obligations. Now with these organizations stripped of their status, all their assets have become government property. (The Guardian 2022, Tico Times 2023). NGOs such as the Red Cross, the Cocibolca Equestrian Center, the Society of Pediatrics, the Nicaraguan Development Institute, the Confederation of Nicaraguan Professional Associations, and the Nicaragua Internet Association are just a handful of organizations that are now dissolved or have left the country entirely (The Guardian 2022). Due to the absence of NGOs throughout Nicaragua, I only managed to interview the employee of one NGO, which miraculously remained open, despite increasing government pressure and an ever-changing system of regulations and financial obligations. When asked in an interview of how this NGO managed to stay open, despite the obvious complications and setbacks, he stated, “Well, we have a highly skilled and dedicated legal team and we firmly remain neutral on any current politics and refrain from speaking out publicly against the government in general.” The employee also stated that despite legal and financial planning fees taking up large sums of the annual budget, the benefits of remaining open and assisting local Nicaraguans with job skills and financial planning outweighs the costs. Nevertheless, with the government now seizing any legal or justifiable opportunity to shut down any institution outside of its control, the legal status and success of this NGO remains in a precarious balance with an uncertain future.

Regarding the Catholic Church, I became acutely aware of its subjugated role in Nicaraguan society during my trip to the vibrant cultural center of Masaya. Consulting

my guidebook and also confirming with both my hotel owner and the local government office, my five days stay in the city coincided with the July 26 Festival of Santa Ana, the local patron saint, in the nearby town of Niquinohomo. However, while gathering interviews from hotel owners there and in the neighboring town of Catarina, my hopes of witnessing a large Catholic festival, and gathering interviews from festival goers, were quickly extinguished as the town remained quiet with only a small procession of turning out at the local Church turning to honor the saint. Beginning in 2022, Daniel Ortega has openly condemned the Catholic Church as criminals, killers, and coup plotters working on behalf of American imperialism. To date, over 11 clergy have been arrested with over 200 more clergy and laity in exile, while the government has banned public church celebrations, withheld tax exemptions, revoked TV and radio licenses of ten Church radio stations, and harassed both clergy and laity within the country using death threats and arbitrary investigations that utilize little to no evidence of wrongdoings (United States Department of State 2022, Zengarini 2023). Meanwhile, on July 19, while I was in Granada, I witnessed the 43<sup>rd</sup> annual celebration of Sandinista Revolution Day which commemorates the Sandinista victory over the Somoza regime and the FSLN rise to power over Nicaragua. Hundreds of people, many not sober, attended what amounted to a large street carnival of solidarity marches, live music, and speeches celebrating the Sandinistas and President Daniel Ortega's achievements in office. Everywhere was emblazoned with the party colors of red and black while the crowds occupied the entire *zocalo* plaza, spilling into the neighboring side streets and alleys. The festival was yet another reminder that despite past uprisings and continued opposition, the Sandinista government still exacts a tight grip over the country and possesses large swathes of avid

supporters ready to mobilize on behalf of the current president, despite his slow descent into authoritarianism.

While in El Gigante, and near the end of my field research, I heard news that the prestigious 67-year-old Jesuit run Central American University (UCA) in Managua closed all its campuses. In 2018, UCA students participated in protests that called for Daniel Ortega's resignation while the university campus housed protesters fleeing police and paramilitaries (Clarke 2023). In response, the Nicaraguan government which accounted for nearly half of the university's \$16 million annual budget, cut all its funding and withheld the university's operating license resulting in large scale staff downsizing and rising tuition fees for students (Karáth 2023). For a time, the university operated with no legality and waning funds, until on August 9, 2023, all university bank accounts were frozen followed by a criminal court justice in Managua ordering all university properties confiscated leading to the university's closure on August 16. Meanwhile, the Public Ministry of Nicaragua accused the university of harboring terrorists while the Society of Jesus was quick to point out that Daniel Ortega and three of his children once attended the university and that "these unjustified attacks against the Nicaraguan population and other educational and social institutions of civil society are generating a climate of violence and insecurity and exacerbating the country's sociopolitical crisis" (Clarke 2023, Redacción Confidencial September 2023). UCA was considered one of the top private universities throughout Central America offering a wide range of research and debates across liberal arts and sciences alike and is just the most recent example of a two-year systematic shut down of now 27 private universities across Nicaragua (Clarke 2023, Redacción Confidencial September 2023, Karáth 2023). Now, many fear that with the



closure of much of the private universities in the country, the government has free reign to impose its ideology within the public university system, thus cultivating centers of indoctrination that limit research opportunities, knowledge, freedom of thought, and freedom of speech (Confidenical 2023). As a student myself, I was alarmed at the closure of the university while I was in the country and the regressive implications it would have on future Nicaraguan society. However, thanks to my research topic and assurances of anonymity, I was able to keep a low profile and frame interview discussions around the current tourism industry in Nicaragua which allowed my findings and information to not be compromised despite a growing shadow of crackdown and control.

### **Perceptions and Realities of Traveling Safely in Nicaragua**

While many would argue that there is no such thing as bad publicity, for Nicaragua, bad publicity in recent years has been a driving factor in deterring investment and international visitors. While many of Nicaragua's neighbors are more informed of the political situation and less apprehensive to travel to the country, Europe, Canada, and the United States depict Nicaragua as a country where tourists should highly reconsider travel. For example, on the United States Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs International Travel Website, Nicaragua is issued a Classification 3 out of 4 (4 being equivalent to conflict zone) travel advisory. The summary of the advisory begins by stating "Reconsider travel to Nicaragua due to arbitrary enforcement of laws, the risk of wrongful detention, and limited healthcare availability. Exercise increased caution in Nicaragua due to crime." (U.S. Department of State Consular Affairs 2024). The report continues:

“The Nicaraguan government and its affiliated groups may: 1) Arbitrarily prevent individuals from entering or departing Nicaragua by air or land for perceived associations, 2) Search personal phones, computers, and documents for anti-government content, limit photography of government property, and sometimes seize devices 3) Systematically target individuals for political reasons, regardless of nationality, including former allies, political activists, business representatives, clergy, human rights advocates, civil society leaders, academics, and members of the press, 4) Arbitrarily target pro-democracy advocates and their family members, 5) Confiscate privately-owned land, residences, financial assets, and personal property without warning or due process, and 6) Arbitrarily detain, accuse, and charge individuals with terrorism, money laundering, and organized crime offenses for political reasons without respect for fair trial guarantees” (U.S. Department of State Consular Affairs 2024)

As evidenced by the government suppression of the Catholic Church, universities, and public opposition, Nicaragua is not a democratic country and its citizens do not possess the freedoms of speech, the press, equality before the law, peaceful protest, or other safeguards from political tyranny. For many, the risk of speaking out negatively against the Ortega administration, reporting on politics, or holding views contrary to the current regime often leads to incarceration, the seizure of property, intimidation, and detention followed by interrogations. Despite the tension within the country, tourists in Nicaragua remain dismissive and wholly unaware of the current political situation. For example, one tourist in El Gigante remarked “I’m honestly down here to surf and chill on a beach. Whatever is going on politically doesn’t interest me unless I am in danger”. A foreign business and real estate developer also explained “Nicaragua is a very safe country. Compared to Costa Rica, which everyone raves about, Nicaragua has much lower violent and petty crime rate, yet Costa Rica sees much higher tourism numbers”. While this claim is assuring if looking at overall crime rate levels, the low levels of crime are largely attributable to the fact that many live in widespread fear of the government and its control over every aspect of civilian life. Severe repercussions are enacted by

national law enforcement, military, spies, and supporters when any form of civil unrest, crime, or dissent is witnessed and reported. The political crisis of 2018 looms to this day in the minds of many foreigners who have yet to travel to Nicaragua since the violence, riots, and long-term unrest during that year was the only news that was broadcasted to international audiences and the only time, outside of perhaps a history or foreign relations class, where Nicaragua was discussed at length. For most tourists visiting the country, they are unlikely to witness or be the victim of such government hostilities as long as they steer clear of discussing politics, participating in large political gatherings, and breaking any laws in the country while also practicing common sense precautions such as being aware of your surroundings, avoiding dimly lit areas at night, and keeping valuables close at hand or stowed away safely.

### **Finding Success in Conducting Research in an Authoritarian Country**

As one ornithologist and businessmen whom I interviewed put it “Nicaragua is a society on a pendulum that always craves a crisis”. As researchers, it is often in these places of continual instability, where we find endless questions and critiques to satisfy our broad inquiries into the issues that impact societies around the world and render their futures uncertain. Indeed, before I first embarked to the country in March of 2023, what news and information available regarding Nicaragua online, or in the very few news headlines it garnered internationally, centered around protests, violence, and the erosion of civil liberties. I was initially weary and skeptical of the success of my findings or of my overall safety when travelling to Nicaragua and was prepared for the possibility of my study being compromised, or the possibility of being questioned or detained.

While in Nicaragua, focusing on my work helped immerse me within the pulse and pace of a society far different from my own. From this experience, the best advice I have learned in navigating the tense and complex conversations regarding politics and government policy in relation to tourism research, came from interacting with citizens and my interview participants themselves. While abroad, many who witness atrocities and abuses become possessed with the idea that they must speak out immediately and do everything they can to change the hearts and minds of those they interact with. However, these same outspoken foreigners fail to realize that real change takes time and that short-term visits will not topple a regime overnight, nor convince everyone that their ideas and customs are best. It is important then as researchers that we remain adaptable and deeply observant while always listening to and taking heed of the suggestions, insights, and advice given to us by the people who live full time in the destinations that we visit so that we can frame or alter our questions and ideas accordingly.

What I often discovered during my time in Nicaragua was that if I approached each interview with initial assurances of anonymity and was direct with how I described my aspirations and intentions for the outcome of the research, my interview subjects were eager to provide a wealth of inciteful, helpful, and worthwhile information. I also learned that by handwriting my notes and speaking Spanish fluently, I was able to be much less conspicuous and better able to put people at ease, relate to them on a more personal level, and gain suggestions from them regarding who else would be interested in providing information for my study. While my topic of research was not wholly associated with Nicaragua's political situation or the FSLN party's tightening grip of control over its citizens, the policies, laws, taxes, and marketing strategies implemented by that same

government all played an important and crucial role in determining the success of the industry, which many felt was being constantly undermined and stagnated due to their government's overt and ever-growing control. While conducting field work in an authoritarian country had its challenges and concerns, the advice that emerged from those I interviewed, the practical precautions that I followed, and how I conveyed my research to my interview subjects all played decisive roles in not only determining the successful outcome of the data I uncovered, but also allowed for an enlightening and rich investigation into a lucrative, ever growing industry that has both positive and negative impacts across all aspects of society.

## **CHAPTER THREE: TOURISM POLICIES AND MARKETING STRATEGIES IN NICARAGUA: SETBACKS AND POSSIBLE INNOVATIONS**

On July 20, 1979, after an estimated 25,000 to 50,000 casualties, the country virtually in ruins, and a combined homeless and refugee population of three quarters of a million people, the Sandinistas, who encompassed a loose collection of students, peasants, and Marxist revolutionaries, business owners, and Catholic church members overthrew the Somoza regime and ushered in a new socialist style government in Central America (Spalding 1994, Courtois et al. 1999, Walker and Wade 2011, Wilm 2011, Close and Puig 2012, Puig 2012). Soon after, Nicaragua's first tourists including journalists, artists, writers, and activists, traveled to Nicaragua in hopes of witnessing a glimpse of a socialist revolutionary society in action and remained for several years, contributing to the various social programs, such as the Literacy Campaign (Babb 2004, Fisher 2016, Walker and Wade 2011). Many of these writers and journalists wrote guidebooks for international activists, emphasizing the historical and cultural backgrounds of the country while also highlighting Sandinista policies and programs enacted during the 1980s. These books were also the first printed materials to include the best places to find inexpensive lodging and meals while also providing contact information to connect with national and international solidarity workers within the country (Babb 2004, Fisher 2016).

Despite small influxes of foreigners visiting Nicaragua during Sandinista rule, it would not be until the ending of the proxy Contra War and subsequent election of the Constitutionalist Liberal Party (PLC) in 1997 when specific laws and policies were enacted to promote tourism expansion, attract foreign investment, alleviate poverty, and implement economic incentives and tax breaks. These laws were directly tied to bolstering tourism and included the 1999 Incentive Law 306 for the Tourism Industry, and later the 2004 General Tourism Law 495 (Hunt 2011, LaVanchy et al. 2020). Within these laws, tourism developers and operators were completely exonerated from importation, sales, materials, equipment, vehicle, and property taxes for both foreign and Nicaraguan owned businesses involved in tourism-related activities (Hunt 2011, Croucher 2018). It was specifically these political reforms which helped spur growing numbers of international tourism arrivals including visitors from other Central American countries as well as backpacker/budget travelers from North America and Europe (LaVanchy et al., 2020).

Following the reelection of former Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega in 2007, mass marketing and advertising campaigns aimed at expanding tourism were formulated to attract greater numbers of national tourists, particularly those from the cities who were interested in purchasing secondary vacation homes along Nicaragua's southwest Pacific coast (Matteucci et al. 2008, LaVanchy and Taylor 2015, LaVanchy et al., 2020). These campaigns have been described as a series of plans to reshape Nicaragua's image and included the 2007–2011 Strategic Vision for the Tourism Sector in Nicaragua, the 2009-2011 National Human Development Plan (PNDH), a second 2012-2016 PNDH, the Buen Vivir Project of 2013, and the 2011-2020 National Plan for the Development of

Sustainable Tourism (Fisher 2019). The focus for much of these plans involved improving quality standards, allowing greater start up ease, and improving marketing strategies for small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), which included small scale ecotourism projects (Fisher 2019).

Despite these laws providing the equipment, financial incentives, and impetus to spur rapid tourism development within Nicaragua, they often appeal to and benefit foreign development projects over those owned and operated by Nicaraguan citizens. Similar to countries such as Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama, it is often young, forward thinking outsiders who first witness the potential in developing tourism ventures which highlight experiences that denounce consumerism, seek cultures and societies not yet directly influenced by commercialization, and emphasize a closer connection to simple and more nature oriented lifestyles (Kull et al. 2007, Ferguson 2011, Hunt et al. 2015, Jones and Spadafora 2016, Fletcher 2020). In Nicaragua as well as its neighbors, prevalent government investment within the broader large-scale tourism industry, specifically in coastal areas along the Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Sea, attracted a new expatriate class which would constitute the base level ownership and management in an expanding tourism sector. Unlike much of the local populations which were impoverished, largely uneducated, and lacked private business experience, the expatriates who came to Central America possessed the business savvy, marketing initiatives, and broad global connections which allowed them to promote their ventures to vast numbers of American and European patrons who were passionate about witnessing rural, rustic cultures, experiencing greater proximity to natural surroundings and wildlife, and seeking



inexpensive and accessible tropical destinations (Kull et al. 2007, Ferguson 2011, Hunt et al. 2015, Jones and Spadafora 2016, Fletcher 2020).

### **High Taxes and Bureaucracy**

Tourism under the Ortega regime has strong parallels to tourism in Cuba under Fulgencio Batista's rule. Like the Batista regime, the Ortega regime seeks to capitalize on massive financial gains from large-scale development projects focusing on tourism, however, unlike tourism in Cuba, tourism in Nicaragua remains largely absent from international donors, development agencies, or the United States to fund, promote, or develop its national tourism industry. Due in large part to Daniel Ortega's experience as a leader against the U.S. backed contras during the 1980's Contra War, combined with strict sanctions from the United States and an end of foreign aid, the current regime seeks to maintain direct control over the tourism industry and limit outside influence (Walker and Wade 2011, Wilm 2011, Close 2012, Close and Puig 2012). Additionally, Nicaragua has established long standing ties with Cuba and has witnessed the corruption, economic dependency, and erosion of cultural identity and economic stability at the hands of Batista's U.S. backed regime (Merrill 1999). Unfortunately, for Cuba, corruption, inequality, the stifling of economic and social freedoms, and rising consumerism brought on by tourism would serve as a catalyst for a successful Marxist takeover of the island resulting in the downfall of all economic and political ties between Cuba and the United States, which only since the 2010's, have slightly improved (Victor-Bulmer and Dunkerley 1999, Merrill 2009).

The Ortega regime in Nicaragua views expatriate businesses as highly sought after investors which can employ large numbers of people and develop tourism locales

popular with international and local populations alike. However, throughout the data I gathered from interviews of foreign owned businesses that were established before COVID 19 in places such as Granada and Masaya, many believe that the Nicaraguan government's sole control of the tourism industry is meant to limit partnerships and international influence. While some would dispute these claims as reactionary or conspiratorial, it is worth pointing out that the United States has throughout history intervened in Nicaraguan affairs through past proxy wars, embargos, filibusters, and occupations meant to protect economic interests, or to enact and maintain regimes closely aligned with United States political interests in Central America. This sense of top-down government control and deterrence of foreign intervention in tourism was most often expressed in interviews with long established foreign businesses, who believed uneven tax laws which disproportionately impact foreign developers, while simultaneously benefitting those owned by Nicaraguan nationals. Currently under Nicaraguan law, locally owned and registered businesses pay \$30 a month in taxes and can receive tax exclusions from the nationally imposed IVA resulting in many businesses being registered and owned under Nicaraguan names. IVA, or income value added tax, is a tax levied over goods, rendering of services, grant of use of assets, and import of goods for all businesses operating in the country. However, for both foreign and nationally owned operations, they must have \$100,000 investment up front and are obligated to pay 15% of their earnings to the government through IVA on all credit card sales which must be filed monthly. For many of the small and medium sized businesses, which the government has focused on for its initial tourism expansion campaigns, this tax can effectively deter many

from emerging in tourism especially during low travel seasons or when tourism numbers are low throughout the country as they are now in 2023.

Many foreign businesses bypass the IVA by handling cash in the form of U.S. dollars for all their sales which keeps more money in the pockets of both managers and their employees, and less money paid towards taxes. Meanwhile, those foreigners who manage their businesses legitimately and seek to attain the tax-free incentives established under the 1999 Incentive Law 306 for the Tourism Industry and the 2004 General Tourism Law 495, expressed frustration with ever changing policies buried in bureaucracy. A hotel owner in Granada complained “The initial paperwork was complicated and always came from orders from Managua. They focused on trivial mistakes and many times would not inform me of missing forms or documents they needed until after I submitted my requests”. Additionally, as I learned from interviews gathered from newer businesses in El Gigante and San Juan del Sur which were owned by Nicaraguans, their small to medium operations are required to prove that they possess worthy funds and capital to start a business of their own. Many believed that this makes it extremely difficult for most first time Nicaraguan tourism entrepreneurs, who lack significant start-up costs, to become successful in the long term. A hostel owner in El Gigante, while not completely opposed towards government taxes, suggested “Look I am all ok with paying taxes. This money is necessary to run social services and programs for the poor. However, I believe a progressive tax starting at 5% taken out each month for the first several years followed by increases to the 15% current rate as revenues improve makes more sense. Doing this would not cripple new tourism businesses from the start who already must come up with proof of funds to open”. For now, the overwhelming

bureaucracy, high taxes, and overall questionable business climate and political stability of Nicaragua are keeping many countries from investing their capital and taking a risk in entering a tourism market which is currently witnessing little promotional recognition, low numbers, and limited accommodations and services.

While high taxes and bureaucracy impact tourism related businesses across Nicaragua, the perceived negative implications of these government policies upon the tourism industry vary depending on whether the business is long established or relatively new, or if the business is foreign or locally owned. For foreign owned businesses that were long established in some of the first tourism locales, such as Granada and Masaya, it appeared that their discrepancies stemmed from the high flat IVA tax rates which they either must pay on all their business costs and services or can choose to ignore by taking cash only payments. Additionally, many foreign owned businesses were registered under local Nicaraguan names to receive tax exclusions and lower monthly tax statements. Regarding the tax exclusions already promised towards all businesses involved in tourism, these same long-established businesses expressed frustration and contempt for consistent discrepancies, convoluted paperwork, and policies that were always changing and never clear. Meanwhile, however, newer businesses, both foreign and locally owned, especially in El Gigante and San Juan del Sur, did not voice complaints over the initial processes and paperwork, but rather the start-up costs which they felt could diminish innovation and growth for many businesses. These businesses often expressed preferences for gradual increases in taxes alongside profit margins in combination with government proof of lower startup costs to effectively manage a business in its initial stages.

The overwhelming control at the hands of government has resulted in short sightedness and ineptitude in advancing tourism interests at a time when Nicaragua is experiencing a widespread economic recession amidst an overall hesitancy to pursue large-scale investment in the country. Although the government's own Nicaraguan Institute of Tourism (INTUR) has historically supported and incentivized tourism for small to medium businesses operations, many of these businesses remain financially burdened from the onset of opening and often take illegitimate measures to avoid paying what they see as high taxes unevenly imposed across the entire industry. Meanwhile, the focus on tax incentives for small and medium sized enterprises undermines the establishment of larger scale operations which are better equipped to handle the mass influxes and high volumes of tourists which the government is seeking to attract. To appeal to greater investment opportunities and promote greater ease for businesses to start up and navigate Nicaragua's business laws and regulations, the Nicaraguan government will have to reduce its startup costs and impose a revised IVA tax that is either a reduced flat rate or a gradual rate that increases proportionally with business success and earnings.

### **Necessity for Broader Marketing and Partnerships**

Internationally, across the United States, Canada, Italy, China, and other countries, the Ortega regime has persisted in carrying out several marketing and promotional campaigns aimed at bolstering Nicaragua's tourism industry. However, these campaigns are small events and meetings at conferences that have ultimately failed in garnering mass numbers with tourism experiencing its lowest numbers since 2017 (Redacción Confidencial August 2023). Additionally, government claims of potential partnerships with airlines for advertisement campaigns and increased marketing

campaigns through printed and online magazines have yet to come to fruition as evidenced by just 873,000 tourists visiting Nicaragua in 2023, a fraction of INTUR's expectation of at least 1.82 million arrivals (Redacción Confidencial August 2023). Many believe that the recent downturn in tourism can be attributed to expensive flights, fear of Nicaragua's authoritarian government, subsequent bad publicity, a lack of international awareness within the travel industry, and a depreciating economy with fewer businesses to accommodate new arrivals of tourists (Redacción Confidencial August 2023). Meanwhile, the small numbers of international tourists who are arriving in Nicaragua are staying for short time periods primarily on the Pacific coast and for a few days in Granada or Leon (Redacción Confidencial August 2023).

Within the country, admittedly, hard copy tourism brochures for specific locales were difficult to acquire. I did, however, procure two brochures from an INTUR office in Masaya which described Granada and Nicaragua as a whole. Other than being guides with practical information including contact information for international flights, public transit buses, car rentals, and banks throughout the country, both brochures possessed colorful images of colonial cities, volcanoes, and large natural lakes while the blurbs of information associated with these images emphasized nature activities, authentic cultures, rich history, and delectable gastronomy. The tourism guide I procured which outlined the various locales throughout Nicaragua opens with "To visit and then return to Nicaragua will be a truly unique experience for you. The beauty, natural and cultural variety of the country in the center of the continent, combined with the hospitality of its people and their history will move and inspire you." While pouring through these guides might indeed inspire some day trips or visits to specific places, the fact that these guides

remained rare while failing to offer any travel maps, business directories, or hotel/ accommodation information meant that INTUR has largely shifted towards providing this information online through its own government websites.

When interviewing two INTUR officials within Masaya and Catarina, I inquired about the lack of marketing or promotional materials for tourists to access and learn about Nicaragua. They were quick to point out that their agency now provides several websites detailing a plethora of information regarding travel within Nicaragua. The primary website they utilize, which can provide links that access other sites associated with tourism in Nicaragua, is *VisitaNicaragua.com*. Representing a much more expansive version of what a physical brochure could offer, the website possesses hundreds of articles on Nicaraguan food, history, festivals, destinations, and activities to do in the country. Additionally, it also provides a full directory of all the hotels, restaurants, and tour guide agencies in the country as well as a web page that details popular activities by municipality. While this site represented a dramatic expansion of information and assistance for tourists to consult and read over, the INTUR articles and listings amounted to hundreds of web pages in no order with information, addresses, and contact information that resembled more of an online yellow pages or broad online magazine with little indication of recent updates amidst the widespread shutdowns and closure of businesses across the country.

When discussing INTUR and its national tourism marketing plans with a contact in Catarina, he forthrightly stated “The government has no future plan. They don’t want to invest in small businesses or expand into other forms of tourism such as rural and natural tourism. They want to continue the same trajectory and invest in larger, more

money-making operations and real estate projects on the coast to maximize taxes from them. Central control over tourism is not efficient.” In Nicaragua, there is a lack of investment in tourism infrastructure either from the government or abroad in expanding restaurants, hotel options, and other tourism activities. Several long-term hotel owners as well as a former government employee under Violet Chamorro, alluded that the Ortega regime’s policies and control over the entire tourism industry represent one aspect of an overarching bureaucracy defined by a lack of innovation and diversified investment which ultimately limits growth to certain areas and stagnates the national economy. If Nicaragua desires to witness real economic gains and development from tourism, the government will need to work more closely with tourism locales and private businesses to create more concentrated marketing initiatives while also promoting a favorable business climate that attracts investment and is less bureaucratically stringent for those wishing to invest in and expand tourism operations.

Another aspect detailed by a former government worker, an NGO operator, and several long-established hotels in Masaya and Granada was the government’s unwillingness to implement revitalized tourism marketing initiatives since the vast majority of INTUR consists of bureaucrats and government officials who often earned their positions through political favors, nepotism, or because they are direct supporters of Ortega’s regime. Many whom I interviewed who have dealt personally with these officials either through working alongside them or filling out tax forms and other legal paperwork to advance their businesses, alluded to many of these officials as being inexperienced in managing businesses, economics, marketing, or understanding tourism trends and are unwilling to implement any changes to current tourism policy.



Additionally, the NGO employee stated, “Government salaries in the country are often fixed, so many who work in the public sector don’t receive bonuses which disincentivizes those in INTUR from changing the current tourism rhetoric”. A hotel manager in Granada further remarked “I believe that while the government wants the money and revenue from tourism, they also don’t want too many people coming to Nicaragua. I think the government is fearful of cross-cultural interaction and knowledge being shared between Nicaraguans and gringos regarding freedom, courage, and experience”. One example of this skepticism made its way into national law in January of 2023 when Nicaragua customs announced that travelers could no longer enter the country with photographic cameras, video cameras, or binoculars without having an endorsement from the government. These measures were soon revoked when large numbers of travelers revoked their airline tickets to the country in response to such measures. Nevertheless, as relayed to me by the former government employee under Violet Chamorro as well as one long time hotel owner in Granada, because of the government’s desire to possess control over tourism planning and the transmission of ideas, many within INTUR are also hesitant to implement innovative strategies that would diversify, update, and improve tourism within Nicaragua for fear of being deemed outspoken or at odds with the current regime.

### **Private Sector Responses to Improving Marketing Strategies**

For the past several years following the 2018 political crisis and subsequent COVID 19 pandemic, Nicaragua’s economy has deteriorated resulting in the widespread closure of businesses and minor changes on the part of the government to provide relief or lessen the financial burden on these businesses. To improve and expand tourism

services moving forward, it is crucial that private businesses in Nicaragua work together and communicate effective strategies and outlooks for specific tourism locales which will ultimately benefit everyone working in tourism. This strategy of private/public partnerships within tourism development has been successfully implemented in places such as the Okavango Delta of Botswana, where members of several indigenous communities network with the government and private tour companies through joint venture projects to provide alternative income opportunities through tourism while foregoing livestock herding, hunting, and gathering practices (Mbaiwa and Stronza). Overall, the program has witnessed a dramatic increase in income generation for participants in this program while additional funds have been dedicated to refining water supply and distribution systems, establishing educational scholarships, improving transportation services, and providing business/ job training courses (Mbaiwa and Stronza 2010). If the Nicaraguan government wants to seize upon the opportunities and potential for tourism growth, they will have to expand or reconfigure their incentives to encompass not only small to medium enterprise tourism infrastructure, but also mass tourism while also strengthening partnerships and communication with the private sector with regards to marketing and tourism sector needs.

Currently in 2023, Nicaragua is witnessing a low impact tourism market that is largely bolstered by Nicaraguan nationals and Central Americans. For many Nicaraguan owned hotels that are still open, this typically means charging discounted rates, since patrons have less capital than foreigners, but since the volume is typically more consistent, many businesses can make ends meet. Often these businesses rely on word-of-mouth promotion from repeated customers and do not possess an online presence,

instead relying on direct bookings which cuts out the 10% initial fee which many websites charge to utilize their services. Meanwhile, according to several expatriate owned hotels and accommodations in El Gigante, Granada, and San Juan del Sur, they are currently relying on consistent return rates from Nicaraguan nationals and repeat customers, while also catering to younger, intrepid backpacker crowds to make ends meet. These return rates are only possible because many expatriates maintain connections with their places of origin and possess the savvy and capital to promote themselves through brand partnerships, vacations getaway raffles, and promotional events in the United States, Europe, and Canada. Nevertheless, for long established businesses, they have weathered the economic downturns because of a maintained standard of excellence, steadily growing, dependable clientele, and possess an international reputation which distinguishes them from other businesses. Several of these operations cater to upper class foreigners and Nicaraguan citizens alike who pay more for accommodations and are provided a variety of activities and amenities including on site hiking trails, access to several beaches and surf breaks, equestrian centers, spas, surf clubs, tennis courts, and four restaurants.

In addition to marketing themselves abroad, some expatriate owned businesses also maintain a social media presence on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter while also having enough capital to absorb the relatively high use fees charged by Hostel World, Bookings.com, and Airbnb to book their accommodations. To remain relevant and competitive, these businesses hire a volunteer with digital marketing skills to update business and promotional content daily which allows the business to be more easily searchable on Google and more likely to appear on the first page of a web search.

The content includes videos and pictures of sunsets and beach life as well as clients in the ocean catching or participating in activities such as horseback riding or scouring the coast in *panga* boats searching for surfable waves. Other content on these accounts includes promotional material that is meant to advertise community events, yoga retreats, or specific daily food/drink specials. Expanding to marketing platforms via the Internet is a promotional strategy that many Nicaraguan owned businesses have expressed interest in utilizing, however, many business owners do not possess the capital, time, contacts, or knowledge to hire a digital media savant or teach themselves how to effectively expand their online presence effectively.

Another possible strategy for private businesses to market themselves, attract more tourists, and achieve greater earnings which was expressed by several newly established small to medium enterprises in El Gigante and Laguna de Apoyo was to band together and increase dialogue between one another to learn about the current tourism market and maintain tourist standards alongside quality control. Establishing community partnerships across both locally owned and expatriate owned businesses is especially important for many smaller communities in Nicaragua who want to maintain some level of mitigation to prevent their communities from being overwhelmed, their natural amenities and resources from being overused, and their business standards and quality of services from deteriorating amidst possible large scale tourist influxes. In El Gigante, for example, many business owners, were grateful of the massive numbers of tourists that visited in 2016 and 2017, however they frequently cited that such levels were difficult to manage properly with complaints, inconsistencies, and problems being frequent occurrences. One future solution to combatting crowd control while maintaining

community integrity as suggested by a hostel owner in El Gigante, would be to raise prices slightly, yet still provide the same services and accommodations. For many of these small towns, gradual, well-maintained growth is necessary to adequately assess and overcome future challenges of tourism which can result in local populations being priced out and local cultures being rapidly and permanently altered resulting in a loss of character and essence of place for a tourism locale. To survive and benefit from such drastic changes some level of community organization, whether through frequent meetings or an online group chat, will prove beneficial in the long term in quelling potential commercialization and adapting to the rapid changes that mass tourism always eventually brings to communities seeking to capitalize on it.

## **Conclusions**

The Nicaraguan government has made great strides in tourism development by enacting laws such as the 1999 Incentive Law 306 for the Tourism Industry, and later the 2004 General Tourism Law 495 which waive or cover many upfront costs and help streamline businesses being established in the tourism sector. Additionally, INTUR has shifted away from hard copies and brochures to websites aimed at providing tourists with a wealth of information detailing nearly every facet of Nicaragua's amenities and attractions. However, the government imposed financial incentives seem to cater towards those with large amounts of capital who can bear the heavy tax burden while many small and medium enterprises, owned and operated by both Nicaraguan citizens and expatriates alike, are left financially compromised from early on when trying to start a business in tourism. Meanwhile, INTUR's marketing plans in international tourism conferences have failed to garner any success due to Nicaragua's continued negative publicity abroad

and an overall high-risk perception of conducting business within the country. While the recent shift towards providing marketing materials to the public is a crucial step in allowing greater access to information for tourists, INTUR's broad marketing plan, like its new websites, remains unorganized, haphazard, and poorly executed.

If the Ortega regime wishes to further seize upon the immense investment potential brought about by its tourism laws for further tourism development throughout the country, it will have to consider reevaluating its tax codes on businesses as well as clarifying the policies and procedures necessary to enter the tourism sector. If the business climate remains convoluted, risky, and too cost burdened from the start, many foreign and national entrepreneurs will seek to do business elsewhere or eventually falter and struggle to become successful. Additionally, the Nicaraguan government must decide whether it wants to maintain the current trajectory of a stagnating tourism sector predicated upon regional and Nicaraguan national tourists, or extend its generous incentives, and alter the IVA tax codes, to encourage a greater abundance of large-scale operations which attract greater tourism numbers and attract a more affluent, international clientele.

Currently, Nicaragua is primarily concerned with short term immense financial gains rather than considering long term strategies that will result in more consistent earnings and greater economic success for businesses across the entire sector. An often overlooked, yet immensely profitable strategy for garnering mass tourism in the long term, one that builds upon international partnerships in investment and planning, would be for Nicaragua to collaborate with a regional cohort of Central American neighbors also wishing to expand their tourism sectors. Despite the Pan Americana, the Central

American Integration System (SICA), and the Central America-4 Border Control Agreement linking Nicaragua with much of Central America through a free-flowing movement of people, goods, and services, tourism throughout the region remains nationally centralized and defined by near sighted planning and long-term stagnation. This lack of regional growth is further complicated by an absence of information access, information sharing, and cross-country promotional campaigns between governments. In Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, many of the tourists that I encountered are visiting multiple countries at a time and spending a week to ten days in each place which amounts to approximately a month in the region. What the governments and tourism planning agencies of much of Central America fail to realize is that due to the region's small size, each country possesses affordable and readily available accessibility between one another. A Central American tourism plan that unites the countries of the region and works to promote one another's tourism sector has the potential to form and market tourism routes and itineraries that highlight the best sites and locales each country has to offer while also resulting in a more structured, integrative, and lucrative tourism plan that will benefit each country involved for years to come.

For Nicaragua to witness long term, consistent financial gains in its tourism sector, the country must clean up its present image by creating a favorable business climate which incentivizes both national and international investment in new business opportunities throughout the country which are necessary for job growth and much needed tax revenues. This will ultimately come to fruition through expanded marketing campaigns that work more closely with private business interests that are both locally and internationally operated to craft a highly focused branding of the sites, amenities, and

experiences that make Nicaragua unique among its neighbors and desirable to a variety of tourist preferences. Many I have talked to in Nicaragua have witnessed firsthand the real and potential opportunities which tourism has achieved for them in the years leading up to 2018 political uprising and the COVID 19 crisis. They share equal optimism and believe tourism can and will recover in time. However, their optimism can only be realized if the government is willing to capitalize on the country's new and current potential by restructuring its tax policies, severely limiting its bureaucracy, and reducing the roadblocks for businesses to start up. Furthermore, Nicaragua must move out of isolationism and recognize the larger tourism potential which exists both within and beyond its borders through cross collaborative tourism marketing plans with its own private sector as well as other countries.



## **CHAPTER FOUR: TOURIST ACCESSABILITY IN NICARAGUA AND INFRASTRUCTURAL INVESTMENT ALONG THE PACIFIC COAST**

Although far from being inaccessible, Nicaragua is often overlooked for other regional destinations by foreign travelers. Owing to Nicaragua's political and international isolation as well as past measures implemented during the COVID 19 pandemic, traveling to the country is a difficult ordeal. Due to the monopolization of flight traffic in Central America, flights to and from the country remain limited and expensive while many airline companies are hesitant to increase flight options. Despite this difficult accessibility, Nicaragua's tourism industry is currently bolstered by other Central American as well as Nicaraguan nationals who began accessing the country during COVID 19. Conversely, most international tourists arrive in Nicaragua by word-of-mouth recommendations via well-worn overland routes from Costa Rica or through the airport of Liberia. Others also make Nicaragua just one of many stops along a much broader Central/South American backpacking trip. To capitalize on the steady streams of international tourists arriving from its southern neighbor, the Nicaraguan government has expanded access along the Pacific coast via a massive highway project meant to spur development and interlink coastal communities both within the country and with Costa Rica. Additionally, the government is currently deliberating on reopening the private Costa Esmerelda airport in Tola which would provide greater flight traffic from Costa

Rica and Managua and help create greater accessibility from Managua and Costa Rica. While the coastal road has been a project 80 years in the making, many are skeptical as if the project will finish and whether the government has the capacity, savvy, and willingness to capitalize on this massive infrastructure asset and attract greater investment and tourism opportunities to the Pacific coast.

### **COVID 19's Legacy on International Accessibility to Nicaragua**

While most of the tourism destinations in Nicaragua are all within a two- and half-hour driving commute from one another, arriving to Nicaragua itself is expensive and often difficult thanks to measure undertaken by the government during the COVID 19 pandemic. From 2020 until 2022, Nicaragua enacted some of the strictest international entry policies of any country. If one was not fully vaccinated (i.e. 3 separate vaccination shots) or could not provide physical or digital proof of their vaccination status, they were required to present a negative COVID 19 test within 72 hours prior to entering and exiting the country (U.S. Embassy in Nicaragua, 2022). For many entering Nicaragua, especially after the release of approved vaccinations, this step was more of an inconvenience rather than a full setback for entering the country. However, for partially or completely unvaccinated individuals already in Nicaragua, they were required to schedule an online appointment through the government-controlled Ministry of Health and pay \$150 for a COVID 19 test appointment. Those without Internet connection or skeptical of their information and COVID 19 status being displayed in an authoritarian government-controlled database, were alternatively recommended to go to the nearest Banco de la Producción (BANPRO) bank, deposit the appointment fee, and receive a deposit slip. From there, all appointments could only be scheduled Monday through

Saturday from 7:00 AM to 11:00 AM at the Ministry of Health's Central Office in Managua. Several colleagues of mine conducting research in Nicaragua, as well as long time foreign residents of the country, all cited difficulties with finding appointments due to the short scheduling time frame in only one location (Redacción Confidencial 2020). Additionally, the website often crashed while many who were trying to leave Nicaragua faced significant logistical concerns in planning a final visit to Managua for such a short period of time (Redacción Confidencial 2020). These strict COVID 19 compliance policies, combined with all airlines suspending operations to Managua airport for six months in 2020, deterred many foreign tourists from traveling to Nicaragua, a trend which continues to this day.

Due to the half year suspension of flights combined with LATAM and Avianca Airlines holding a monopoly over Central America's air traffic, flight options to Nicaragua remain limited with prices being some of the highest in the region (Olivares 2023). For United States and Canadian citizens, the only direct flights to Managua are from Houston and Los Angeles with two flights a day, or Miami which offers four flights a day. Even companies like United and American Airlines, who offer many passengers one or two stop flights before reaching Managua have no incentive to reduce prices since Nicaragua is not a well sought after destination and there is little competition to induce these companies to offer discounted fares (Olivares 2022). By the time visitors purchase their flight tickets, they are shocked to discover that the average price is between \$1200 and \$1300. Time again when asking international travelers how they arrived in Nicaragua, nearly everyone elected to travel to Costa Rica first. Flying to Liberia, Costa Rica's international airport is half the price of flying directly to Managua while the

airport accommodates several direct flights a day between multiple North American destinations. One tourist stated, “Yeah it might take an entire day crossing the Costa Rica border after you first fly there, but the cost is cheaper, and I had more options on layovers and flight times”.

For Nicaragua to capture a larger share of the international flight market, airlines will need to offer more flight options as well as open direct flight access from other major North American hubs including Atlanta, Dallas, and New York City. Flight options and the airlines themselves are, however, linked with bed availability and number of hotel options within a country, which Nicaragua lacks and has been unable to expand. Furthermore, former president of the Nicaraguan Association of Tour Operators (ANTUR), Alfredo Gutiérrez, stated that “The hotel industry has not been able to fill pre 2018 occupancy levels of 70% to 73% and currently, occupancy levels in Nicaragua are between 40% and 42%” (Redacción Confidencial August 2023). For international visitors, investors, and airline companies, large hotel and resort chains offer more options, reputable standards, and greater room availability which smaller private hotels, hostels, and guesthouses cannot provide. As the CEO of a prominent hotel in Popoyo put it “These well-known international companies represent stability, comfort, and relief for investors and developers. If these companies are visible then that tells developers, hey investment here is a safe bet”. Nicaragua, lacks these recognizable hotel and resort chains throughout the country, resulting in many to hesitate on whether to do business in the country resulting in Nicaragua being overlooked all together for other more stable destinations to expand tourism services.

## **Current Tourism Trends**

Currently in Nicaragua, the entire tourism industry is experiencing stagnation due to low overall visitation numbers, an economic recession, and a lack of accommodations and tourism services. Following the COVID 19 pandemic, the entire industry has been defined by steady numbers of visitors from Central America and Nicaraguans who either live abroad or are citizens residing within the country. Despite a tourism market that is not expanding, a municipal tourism employee at the Catarina INTUR office was frank when he stated “We are perfectly content here in Catarina and in other small communities with maintaining low numbers and slow growth focused on attracting Nicaraguan citizens and other Central American nationals. Unlike international tourists, they remain constant visitors to our country”. For many Nicaraguans who began exploring their own country during the COVID 19 pandemic, they had little choice since flights were suspended for extended periods of time making international travel extremely difficult (Olivares 2022). During this time, Nicaraguan citizens would embark on long weekend or day trips from Managua and Rivas to Granada, San Juan del Sur, the Masaya markets, the Pacific beaches, and to Laguna de Apoyo with their families. Despite the readily available customer base, a concierge at a restaurant in Laguna de Apoyo stated, “Nicaraguans don’t spend or tip as much as foreigners while still many others are here for less than ten days to reunite with family members they were separated from during the political crisis and COVID.”

Beginning during the pandemic, Nicaragua also witnessed an influx of Costa Ricans travelling to Nicaragua by automobile and eventually by air. For many, Nicaragua has much of the same natural amenities at a third of the cost while

commercialization, an influx of foreign home ownership, and a rising cost of living have led many Costa Rican citizens to be priced out of their homes and unable to afford vacations in their own country. According to the managers of several tour companies I interviewed, most stay less than a week and can often be seen at marketplaces and shopping centers purchasing clothes, furniture, and home goods which are significantly cheaper before bringing them back to Costa Rica. Meanwhile, Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans have increasingly been frequenting Nicaragua for its low prices and reduced crowd pressure, often spending one to two weeks in the country and benefitting from the widely available, direct flight options between their countries of origin and Managua. Costa Ricans, nationals from elsewhere in Central America, and Nicaraguans themselves continue to constitute the bulk of the tourism population within the country resulting in an industry that is stable, but not expanding towards attracting broader international visitors.

Outside of Central America, what small number of Europeans, Canadians, Australians, Israelis, and South Americans who visited Nicaragua often did so either through travel agencies, or as backpackers stopping in Nicaragua along an extensive Central American route which followed the Pan American highway. Other backpackers as well as families, entered Nicaragua from Costa Rica and spent short week-long vacations in the country. One Canadian I interviewed stated “I was not planning on visiting Nicaragua, but I overheard from other backpackers that I had to go. They described it to me as beautiful, not touristy, and above all cheap. I actually saved money by spending my last week here instead of Costa Rica where it is much more expensive”. Another Australian surfer and backpacker revealed “I’m on a long holiday right now

traveling down from Mexico. Nicaragua has a well-defined route with stops fairly close to one another such as San Juan del Sur, Granada, and Isla Ometepe. I'm only here for a week or so before I head further south". All of them stated that they were drawn to Nicaragua based on descriptions of a less developed, less expensive version of Costa Rica, one with fewer crowds, excellent beaches, and a similar tropical atmosphere.

While international travelers from Western countries constitute significantly small numbers of tourists in Nicaragua, many more eastern Europeans as well as Cubans, Haitians, Venezuelans, Indians, and Africans have utilized the country as a transit point for further travel to the United States. Hundreds of charter flights daily from Europe and the Caribbean costing between \$2,000 and \$5,000 USD have allowed many to take advantage of Nicaragua's accessibility and open border policies (France-Pressé 2023, AFP 2023, Zea 2024). In fact, social media platforms have been utilized to advertise all-inclusive packages targeting migrants across multiple languages. The packages include flights to Managua, transportation through Mexico via illegal coyotes, meals, lodging, and advice regarding how to apply for asylum through the United States government's designated customs and immigration app CBP One (Zea 2024). Currently, Nicaragua's government has remained silent on the issue, despite pressure from the United States, since it economically benefits from the cost of visas and tourist cards, as well as airport landing taxes. Furthermore, Nicaragua continues to view the United States as an international rival while the United States government sees Nicaragua's open border policy as a deliberate attempt to overwhelm its immigration services (France-Pressé 2023, AFP 2023).

## **The Pacific Coastal Road and the Esmerelda Airport: Potential Avenues for Increasing Tourism and Improving Economic Development**

Regardless of international flight access remaining expensive and a continued lack of international arrivals from Western countries, the Nicaraguan government remains committed to improving infrastructure along the Rivas coast, often dubbed the Costa Esmerelda, amidst a real estate speculation boom and a growing surf tourism industry (Matteucci et al. 2008, LaVanchy and Taylor 2015, O'Brien and Muniz 2015, LaVanchy et al., 2020, Old 2023). This massive road project is meant to improve trade, provide better accessibility, and grow economic relations between Pacific coastal communities for both Nicaragua and Costa Rica. This project came to fruition during the Alemán administration of the late 1990's through Laws 298, 306, and 344 which made the purchase of rural real estate near world class waves more feasible, thus enticing foreigners and spurring large scale real estate speculation (Old 2023). The most crucial of the Alemán infrastructure projects for launching this coastal development was a multilevel initiative that constructed a bridge over the Río Nahualapa connecting Las Salinas to Playa Guasacate which was instrumental to the development of the surf tourism industry. Guasacate and nearby Astillero, which are renowned for their close access to world class breaks now became accessible year-round and possessed direct passage to Managua (Old 2023). After the opening of Guasacate, Popoyo, and Astillero, Ronald Urroz, a first-generation surfer since the early 1980s, submitted a proposal to the Tola Municipal government in 2001 requesting a massive development project in Playa Guasacate. Approved by INTUR that same year, the project capitalized on the initiatives of Law 306, and soon surf camps, hostels, and lodges began emerging along the Emerald



coast catering to an intrepid crowd of surfers, sun worshippers, and backpackers (Old 2023).

Despite the economic promise of increased access and exciting new developments, the road project was not without its controversies. To begin with, President Alemán came under intense scrutiny in 2002, since Guasacate was the location where Alemán, his deputy, and the former director of the Rural Development Institute built their summer houses, which were undeclared as property and thus void of paying any taxes. Alemán would also later be prosecuted for stealing over \$100 million in state funds and tax money to finance personal vacations and lavish shopping sprees (Sullivan 2002). A year later, he was sentenced to 20 years in prison for tax evasion and laundering money through Panama, Miami, and Luxembourg into his personal accounts and several properties. Additionally, the new road built during Alemán's regime permanently destroyed several mangroves which are crucial to intercoastal life and storm surge mitigation as vacation homes, condominiums, and other developments sprawled into the surrounding hill sides along with additional road projects interconnecting the foreign owned settlements (Old 2023).

In 2017, under the Ortega administration, the Nicaraguan government launched a five-phase multiyear long road improvement project constituting 131 kilometers of paved highway and river crossings along the Pacific coast stretching from Las Salina to El Naranjo on the Costa Rican border (See Figure 4.1) (Rodriguez 2017). The highway is meant to connect main tourist locales including beach resorts and fishing villages and spur the largest real estate speculation and tourism development initiative in Nicaragua's history. At the time, the estimated investment for the project was \$200 million USD,

however in October of 2017, after the national congress approved a law to regulate public-private partnership contracts, the government then presented a list of projects worth \$5.2 billion USD to local and international investors, foreign governments, and financial institutions (Rodriguez 2017). However, funding from multiple backers was delayed in 2018 amidst security and investment concerns following the national protests. In 2019, after the FSLN government regained control of cities and put an end to the civil unrest, they proceeded with several infrastructure projects that included the completion of a paved road connecting Tola to the Pan-American Highway (Old 2023). In 2020, another completion of paved road linking the Pan American highway at Ochomogo to the town of Salinas was also completed and replaced the decades long, poorly maintained dirt road.

Beginning in February of 2023 after several years of delays, the Nicaraguan government finally began its first two official phases of this massive project. According to a press release, the initial phases include the construction of 58 new kilometers of highway, 29 bridges and bridge boxes, and 264 reinforced concrete culverts, cycle paths, pedestrian platforms, and road safety works from El Naranjo to Playa El Remanso near San Juan del Sur (Phase 1, See Figure 4.1) followed by another section linking Playa El Remanso to the road intersection of Empalme at El Coyol (Phase 2, See Figure 4.1) (Nica Biz 2023, Gobierno de Reconciliación y Unidad Nacional February 2023). Meanwhile, while I was conducting my field work in August of 2023, I got word from a prominent resort manager that the Nicaraguan government began Phase 3 of the project which entailed 30 kilometers of new paved highway, 5 bridges, and 9 bridge boxes linking Empalme at El Coyol with El Astillero (See Figure 4.1) (Nica Biz 2023, Gobierno de

Reconciliación y Unidad Nacional August 2023). The government justifies these new roads as more direct avenues meant to promote greater efficiency in the national fishing and agricultural industries, facilitate greater export capabilities between other Pacific coast ports, improve connectivity with Costa Rica and Panama, and spur national and international tourism in beach communities throughout the southern Pacific coast (Gobierno de Reconciliación y Unidad Nacional 2023, Gobierno de Reconciliación y Unidad Nacional 2023).

Despite the promise of such an extensive project, several foreign tourism employees as well as business owners I talked to were skeptical of the timely completion and future of the south Pacific coast. Nicaragua has largely funded its coastal road endeavors from loans issued by the Central American bank which has been under scrutiny by many Central American countries for preferentially favoring Nicaragua's interests over their own. Many believe corruption is at work and that significant portions of those funds will freeze before the final phases are complete, leading to a massive investigation that will delay the project even further. Meanwhile others question the necessity of a coastal highway. One business operator in Popoyo stated forthrightly "I don't really understand the investment and focus on a coastal road. We already have the Pan American highway which links all Central America. Why not focus investment and tourism efforts along that road"?



Figure 4.1 Map of the Entire Proposed Pacific Coastal Road Project. Source: Remax Coastal Properties 2017.

Even further complicating the efficacy and completion of the coastal highway is the fact that Nicaragua and Costa Rica lack an open border crossing and have historically exhibited tense relations towards one another, not the least owing to a recent growth of Nicaraguan migrants emigrating to its neighbor which has strained economic resources and tax revenues for social services. Additionally, massive government construction zones have purchased land occupied by houses which abut the new road without any established compensation, while a lack of proper road drainage has the potential to cause major flooding along the route (See Figures 4.2 and 4.3). After an interview with a

business owner and real estate speculator, we traveled to a hardware store to pick up some tools and supplies for one of his projects. Driving past different work sites along the coastal road between immense concrete cylinders and heaps of rebar, I saw families hastily gutting their houses for scrap piping and anything else they could salvage before their slapdash eviction. With four phases underway, and only one phase left in the completion of the coastal road, it seems the Nicaragua government is determined to finish the project at whatever costs.



Figures 4.2 and 4.3 Construction site of the Pacific Coastal Road Phase 3 Project North of El Gigante.

Source: Anonymous Hotel Owner in El Gigante 2024.

Along with finishing the coastal road and improving relations with Costa Rica, the Nicaragua government must consider reopening the Tola airport. Known colloquially as the Costa Esmeralda Airport, it was first opened in November of 2015 and began its initial service with international private jets and commercial flights between Managua's Augusto C. Sandino International Airport and Costa Rica's Liberia International Airport (Nadalet 2015, O'Brien and Muniz 2015). The airport was developed in conjunction with the Nicaraguan government's Tourism Board and Nicaraguan entrepreneur and philanthropist Don Carlos Pellas, following his most recent investment in Guacalito de la

Isla, a \$250-million, 1,670-acre private beach community that exists 15 minutes away. The single terminal airport boasted a duty-free shop, Customs Department, and 5,000-foot runway which has the capacity to accommodate multiple 30-minute flights between Managua and Liberia (Nadalet 2015, O'Brien and Muniz 2015). For both Don Carlos Pellas and the Nicaraguan government, the opening of the airport was a mutual benefit aimed at spurring tourism and real estate in what was once a remote, difficult to access region of Nicaragua. The promise of such development soon diminished with the closing of the airport in 2020 amidst the COVID 19 pandemic. Three years later, with COVID 19 under control, the airport remains closed. Many believe that this measure is punishment for Don Carlos Pellas urging greater dialogue between farmers, activists, students, and the Council for Private Enterprise (COSEP), which Ortega and his government believes is inciting insurrection and further unrest (Lopez 2019).

### **Expanding Accessibility to Nicaragua**

To prevent the spread of the COVID 19 pandemic, the Nicaraguan government-imposed measures that severely reduced national and international travel within the country. While these measures may have been necessary in reducing civilian deaths, the long-term closure of Managua's airport combined with Nicaragua being the last country on Earth to impose vaccination and negative PCR tests for entry, has deterred many from making Nicaragua their sole travel destination due to high costs and limited flight options. Meanwhile, the country's entire tourism economy is being bolstered by Central Americans and Nicaraguans who have greater access to the country and are more informed on the Nicaragua's political situation and entry requirements. Despite these hindrances, the Nicaraguan government is determined to complete the massive coastal

road project which will link the communities along the Pacific Ocean and hopefully attract large scale foreign investment and tourism development. However, regardless of the purported trade and economic benefits of this massive project, Nicaragua's international reputation combined with a poor investment climate, has led many to question whether an absence of well executed marketing initiatives, meant to coincide with the road's completion, will undermine the funding and scope of this infrastructural colossus.

When analyzing the success of new infrastructural initiatives aimed at funneling tourists towards specific regions of a country, Mexico can be viewed as a model of success and emulation. In 1935, coinciding with its successful completion of the 766-mile Pan American highway, easier entry and exit regulations coincided with a sharp increase in roadside hotels and restaurants for automobile tourists. The success of this road project was attributable to the Mexican Automobile Association, the new Mexican Aviation Company, the National Railway of Mexico, Wells Fargo, the Mexican and American chambers of commerce, the Mexican Railway, the Missouri Pacific Railway, and numerous hotel and other international firms forming the National Tourism Committee which was tasked to generate tourism dollars through the promotion of an authentic, more indigenous Mexico to travelers (Merrill 2009). This coalition launched an effective and frugal promotional campaign which sponsored low budget films in the United States, invited travel agencies and writers to journey to Mexico, and opened a tourism agency in New York City (Merrill 2009). This was then followed by the creation of the Mexican Tourist Association, another private/public collaboration of transnational hotel firms, rail companies, auto clubs, and travel agencies which received donations

from private firms and government agencies to produce pamphlets, posters, and press releases to conduct a full-fledged marketing campaign that highlighted Mexico's pre-Columbian cities, colonial architecture, pristine beaches, and modern, newly upgraded travel infrastructure (Merrill 2009).

If Nicaragua wishes to expand its tourism sector, attract new businesses, and foster greater tourism initiatives, the government will have to capitalize on the continued expansion of transportation projects such as the coastal road by reopening the Esmerelda airport and providing more flight options as well as greater accessibility to the coast. While new developments in the completion of the coastal road have immense potential to spur future economic development within the country, the millions of dollars in planning and construction costs will be all for nothing if the government fails to attract investment in large scale hotels and other tourist ventures along its route once the project is complete. Furthermore, to provide an impetus for more flight options, which will help to reduce flight costs and increase international arrivals, the government will have to attract investment from hotel chains and larger, more renowned operations, thus signaling to airline companies that expanding service to Nicaragua is worthwhile since the country can accommodate mass tourism numbers. To capitalize on new infrastructural projects and entice greater international tourist numbers, it is in the government's best interest to move away from overt control over its tourism marketing and development plans. This will be achieved through extensive partnerships with foreign and national investors alike to concoct widespread campaigns that seek to influence long-term tourism development which is extensive in scope and influence.



## **CHAPTER FIVE: THEORIES OF DEVELOPMENT, LAND RIGHTS, AND NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT THROUGH THE LENS OF TOURISM**

Critics have argued that the United States' current relationship with Latin America has evolved into a new form of indirect neo colonialism which has resulted in uneven economic power dynamics that largely benefit people from Western capitalist countries; of which the bulk of the globe's tourists originate (Said 1979, Dorsey et al. 2004, Klak 2007, Lozanski 2010, Fletcher 2014). Following World War II, these Latin American countries are now viewed as being locked in a state of dependency on western capitalist nations for investment, trade, funding, and military support with many being categorized by high levels of debt to the International Money Fund or the World Bank (of which the United States holds immense influence) based on structural adjustment loans which require trade liberalization, privatization, and deregulation of businesses (Mowforth and Munt 1998, McLaren 1998, Life and Debt 2001, Dorsey et al. 2004, Klak 2007, Lawson 2007, Wilson 2008, Wilson 2008, Fletcher 2014). Meanwhile, as tourists are busy distracted by their itineraries abroad, the beautiful scenery, and the initial culture shock, they remain unaware and uninterested in the predicaments which face the countries they recreate in and visit. For many, the surroundings that lay beyond their accommodations and tourist enclaves are characterized as dangerous slums where desperate individuals flock to low wage paying jobs all the while unable to afford adequate education, health care, and housing (Mowforth and Munt 1998, McLaren 1998,

MacCannell 1976, Life and Debt 2001, Dorsey et al. 2004, Klak 2007, Wilson 2008, Wilson 2008). Simultaneously, governments within developing countries have undertaken massive publicity campaigns to convince local populations that appealing to tourism's desires for cultural commodification, exotic experiences, and environmental sustainability are meant to fulfill their structural adjustment policy goals while simultaneously uplifting the masses from their downtrodden plight (Said 1979, Mowforth and Munt 1998, McLaren 1998, MacCannell 1976, Life and Debt 2001, Dorsey et al. 2004, Klak 2007). Ultimately, the perceptions and expectations of tourists when they visit foreign countries are often predicated upon what Edward Said (1979) deemed orientalism or the distinction between Western societies and other cultures upon the belief that other civilizations were backwards, strange, and dangerous while Western societies were superior and should seek control and change those societies, so they are integrated into a modern, capitalist and increasingly globalized world. (Said 1979, Mowforth and Munt 1998, McLaren 1998, MacCannell 1976, Dorsey et al. 2004, Lozanski 2010, Vrasti 2017). Although these theories of orientalism, post colonialism, and dependency have been applied to Latin America to explain the region's modernization and its ties to the United States, the reality of the United States and its relationship with its southern neighbors is not as stagnant or clear cut as these theories would make these processes seem to be (Rostow 1959, Gunder Frank 1969, Cardoso and Faletto 1979, Grosfoguel 2000, Knuttson 2009). For example, modernization theory as purported by Rostow (1959) and Gunder Frank (1969) assumes that all countries move through distinct stages of agrarian development, manufacturing, heavy industrialization, technological innovation, and finally high mass consumption, but this process is based

solely from the development of United States and Europe and as history has proven is not uniform or always an upward trajectory in every country on Earth. Additionally, modernization theory does not consider colonization, civil unrest, disease, natural disasters, totalitarian control, or resource scarcities within many developing countries which can also be attributed to their lack of upward mobility and economic development. Regarding development theory, I agree with Cardozo and Faletto (1979) more so than Frank (1969) in that dependency is often complex and ever changing and predicated not solely on imperialism and capitalist integration of Latin America, but by the partnerships and alliances between local and international actors who ultimately negotiate and influence how modernization and development take place. As for orientalism within tourism specifically, these processes are often perpetuated by both the countries that tourists visit as well as the countries from which they originate, to market to tourists a culture that is new, exciting, and different. These marketing campaigns change throughout time, while the first waves of tourists who show up to a place and document their experiences often bring their prejudices, stereotypes, assumptions, and preconceived notions with them. Eventually, through continued travel to a place, many tourists become attuned to and aware of the problems facing developing countries. These same tourists, as well as developers, have increasingly advocated for redefining and rethinking modern tourism through new initiatives including ecotourism, community tourism, and other alternative tourism models, which seek to incorporate local populations within the integration and management processes while also helping to foster conservation and environmentalism (Said 1979, Mowforth and Munt 1998, McLaren 1998, MacCannell 1976, Dorsey et al. 2004, Lozanski 2010, Vrasti 2017).

Nicaragua is unique among its Latin American neighbors in its staunch efforts to reject outside influence and broad international partnerships in shaping the marketing, decisions, and policies which define its tourism sector. While the country has endured revolutions, dictatorships, and occupations, many of which perpetuated by the United States, the Nicaraguan government has instead relied on attracting foreign investment through wide ranging incentives that favor small to medium enterprises engaged in tourism to bolster its the industry and eventually encourage mass numbers of people to travel to the country. However, Nicaragua remains overlooked along the tourism trail due in large part to its unorganized and absent branding as well as its current instability and political oppression. Across the social media accounts as well as the two government issued tourism brochures for Granada and the country as a whole, la naturaleza ( the natural world) complete with pictures and videos of volcanoes, large freshwater lakes, and pristine beaches occupies a significant portion of the advertising medium and seems to strongly emphasize Nicaragua's constant proximity to nature can be experienced firsthand through a variety of activities from hiking to boat rides or simply relaxation in a tropical setting. However, despite the government's insistence on an abundance of natural spaces to partake in alternative tourism ventures, its designation and conservation of natural areas remains underfunded and poorly managed leaving many private, often foreign owned businesses, to promote their own ventures through self-advertising what they define as ecotourism.

Although there are some exceptions to successful joint conservation minded tourism ventures and activities along the coast and in parts of Nicaragua's interior, other locales and ecotour activities remain undervalued and underpromoted resulting in

ecotourism to be an exception to the rule of overall tourism development in Nicaragua. Meanwhile, like other Latin American countries, a lack of land tenure and title combined with increased foreign development and land purchases results in higher costs of living and the outpricing of local populations whose communities are witnessing rapid, drastic change to their livelihoods and local cultures. Additionally, the country remains plagued by issues of natural resource management including proper waste management and dwindling saltwater fish stocks. If tourism is expected to experience massive growth in the coming years, exacerbation of these problems will only worsen with the onset of larger, newer developments that seek to provide tourists with modern comforts while also promoting Nicaragua as a paradise.

### **The Successes and Shortcomings of Ecotourism in Nicaragua**

Unlike its neighbor Costa Rica, Nicaragua has difficulty branding itself despite its unique natural features, excellent cuisine, vibrant tourism marketplaces, and rustic, rural culture. Like Costa Rica's initial inception of tourism, Nicaragua is drawing in small waves of regional, national, and international tourists, but there are not enough adequate lodging facilities to house clients (Jones and Spadafora 2016). Costa Rica turned a growing tourism population into an opportunity with business owners creating ecolodges and private reserves that would house more clientele while also providing them access to the country's growing national parks system (Jones and Spadafora 2016). The expansion of ecolodges, hotels, tour guide operators, and ecolodge owners, who were largely expatriate, in essence fostered ideas of ecological stewardess, conservation, and ecotourism while also working alongside fellow Costa Rican biologists, environmentalists, and government officials to instill these ideas within a larger audience

in the country, thus solidifying Costa Rica as a model in ecological conservation and tourism (Kull et al. 2007, Ferguson 2011, Hunt et al. 2015, Jones and Spadafora 2016, Fletcher 2020). Along with greater numbers of tours and accommodations, most of these reserves serve as crucial conservation buffer zones between areas of rapid development and national parks, thus ensuring some level of environmental protection and stewardship (Jones and Spadafora 2016). Without initial expatriate investment and entrepreneurship, as well as cooperation and consultation from likeminded Costa Rican officials and scientists, the establishment of such reserves, along with the funds necessary to create a national parks system within Costa Rica, would have never come to fruition as the government at the time did not possess the funds necessary to invest within such initiatives (Kull et al. 2007, Ferguson 2011, Hunt et al. 2015, Jones and Spadafora 2016, Fletcher 2020).

Similarly in Belize, tourism initially began along the country's coast, with increasing numbers of both expatriates and short-term tourists travelling into the interior to search for travel experiences that are different from the typical sun and beach tourism which characterizes both countries (Allender 1995). Originally, many from the coast would make day trips, but due to a lack of overnight accommodations, they did not reside there for long periods of time despite the completion of the all-weather Western highway in the 1950's (Allender 1995). However, during the 1970's and 1980's, the Belizean government began several initiatives, and later appealed to the private sector, to develop and promote the inland tourism industry to relieve development and population pressures on its coastal hotels and resorts (Allender 1995). The stories of how the owners came to possess their properties in Belize follows similar trajectories evident in other Central

American countries where expatriates capitalized on a steady growth in the country by constructing several lodges which accommodated adventurous backpackers and budget tourists (Allender 1995). Most of these future expatriates tried their luck in ranching and farming with little success but were able to provide lodging and basic meals to several small groups of intrepid travelers that were beginning to explore the interior of the country around the time the Belizean government was expanding tourism operations there (Allender 1995). As their farms' popularity grew by word of mouth, the hoteliers invested greater capital into structural improvements and amenities until the farms evolved into full-fledged resorts that often see 100 percent capacity during much of the year (Allender 1995). In addition to expatriates being involved in the hotel and accommodations industry, many have also founded professional guiding and ecotour companies which have come to generate more business than the original lodges (Allender 1995).

Although a focus on small and medium scale ecotourism projects has expanded the capacity to accommodate erratic influxes of international tourists, a lack of government financing, regulation, and management of Nicaragua's protected areas remains commonplace with only 7 out of 76 of the National System of Protected Areas (SINAP) being fully staffed and managed and 11 out of the 76 parks possessing minimal management and infrastructure (Barany et al. 2001). To increase management, improve standards, and adequately provide for tourists, Nicaragua's government has made efforts to increase the capacity and oversight of the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (MARENA) through the hiring of private, scientific, and conservation minded individuals (Baranay et al. 2001). Additionally, new reserves have access to both

national and international financing sources, mostly from NGOs, as well as exemptions from retail sales taxes, property taxes, and access to environmental services (Baranay et al. 2001). These reserves also rely on rural communities to justify specific criteria for each private nature reserve to be formed, which includes community education on conservation as well as community development initiatives, thus giving these populations a direct stake and direct involvement in the profitability, oversight, and creation of such reserves (Baranay et al. 2001 Artal-Tur et al. 2019). It is worth noting that private reserves are more financially efficient, offer lower costs, and are better able to respond to market changes and shocks, but in the case of Nicaragua, for them to truly be successful, the government must expand its partnerships with private aspirations, reduce barriers of entry, and adhere to regulations and contracts established for the promotion and adoption of these preserves so they do not become greenwashed or fade into obscurity and mismanagement (Baranay et al. 2001, Hunt and Stronza 2011, Artal-Tur et al. 2019).

### **Nicaragua's Conservation Strategies: Parks and Protected Areas**

Often, in the developing world, the exclusion of local populations from national parks and game preserves is predicated upon what Brockington (2002) referred to as fortress conservation: an illusion of pristine wilderness spaces that are entirely and historically devoid of people. This concept of fortress conservation was used to justify violent land evictions and restrictive land use policies in and around these newly developed parks and reserves to justify the preservation of exotic animal species and environmentally sensitive ecosystems (Neumann, 2001, Brockington 2002, Goldman 2003, Charnley 2005, Haller and Galvin 2008, Goldman 2011, Butt 2012, Benjaminsen, Tor A. et al. 2013). Additionally, land evictions and the diminishing of land use rights



are often implemented by national governments to make way for large scale tourism development or the preservation of natural spaces, while the absence of human settlement and traditional livelihoods is often at odds with local perceptions of land use and conservation (Haller and Galvin 2008, Devine 2016, Devine 2017, Clipston 2020). In British sub-Saharan Africa, after World War II, the National Parks ordinance was established alongside the implementation of British indirect rule in its colonies with both measures seeking to implement capitalist development throughout the continent. Despite this ordinance paving the way for Nairobi, Tsavo, Amboseli, and Mount Kenya national parks, thousands of pastoralist communities were relocated, traditional cattle herding was sharply curtailed, and specific land use activities such as farming, hunting, and settlement in an around park boundaries were banned (Neumann 2002, Jackson 2011). Through these policies, centuries old traditions of livestock raising and gathering food were supplanted with a false reality of pristineness that could only be propagated through extensive landscape purging of humans and constant intervention by park managers and rangers to manage game populations and clear land (Neumann 2001, Neumann 2002, Jackson 2011).

Despite a lack of funding and a focus on promoting conservation through the private sector, MARENA has made great strides in fostering ecotourism in three of the country's most well sought after destinations: Reserva Natural Laguna de Apoyo, Isla Ometepe, and Volcan Mombacho. Unlike examples of historic displacement and lands rights discrepancies which exist in many regions across sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, MARENA, has elected to work alongside private businesses and local landowners to preserve and jointly manage large swathes of endemic ecosystems to

promote more conservation minded tourism ventures. Similar programs in Namibia and Mozambique, have also been implemented along the lines of integrated conservation programs (ICDPs), which allow communities to establish local conservancies that define legally demarcated boundaries as well as specific land rights while being able to profit from wildlife management programs (Silva and Khatiwada 2014). Many of the ICDPS organize themselves along government-imposed buffer zones with certain, selected communities able to participate within the ICDPs, specifically those that inhabit said buffer zones (Silva and Khatiwada 2014). However, rural integration into the global economy through tourism is not without problems and often brings increased competition for tourism dollars, disproportionate financial support from potential donors and investors, inequitable distribution of benefits and earnings, and increased emphasis on environmental preservation which is often at odds with traditional livelihoods, local perceptions, and historical relationships towards the environment (Mowforth and Munt 1998, Sharpley 2000, Chok et al. 2008, Fletcher 2014).

In Laguna de Apoyo, clear buffer zones and national park boundaries delineate where development can take place and where tourists can partake in low impact ecotourism activities such as hiking, birdwatching, and scuba diving. Just a half hour from Masaya and Granada, and only an hour from Managua, Laguna de Apoyo is a 3.5-mile-wide crater lake that was formed from a massive volcanic explosion some 23,000 years ago and is more than 1,000 feet deep. The lake is constantly heated by thermal vents and is rich in minerals resulting in warm, clean fresh water year-round. Although development has come in the form of eco resorts in the last twenty years, there are less than 200 people in a 3-mile radius on the west side of the lake, spread out along a small

strip of hotels, hostels, and vacation homes. The eastern half of the lake is protected and bans all forms of commercial development and is only accessible by foot or boat. Laguna de Apoyo represents an exception of successful park implementation in Nicaragua, one that united government efforts to designate conservation boundaries and buffer zones with private business efforts to respect those boundaries while managing and benefiting from natural amenities by providing tours, beach access, and a tranquil tropical atmosphere to tourists.

On Isla Ometepe, MARENA possesses two small nature parks and a larger preserve which divides the island in two. Charco Verde is a butterfly sanctuary that offers a two-mile hike through rain forests, a small pond, and a remote beach which offers views of Volcan Maderas while Ojo de Agua is a natural spring formed from an underground river that is constantly filled with cool, clear water. Meanwhile, the Río Istián Preserve, which is only accessible by boat, offers guided tours of a riparian wetlands habitat populated by turtles, iguanas, multiple bird species, and caimans. The ecosystem is abutted by rice farms on either side which are under strict regulation and oversight by MARENA not to expand into the wetlands area, allowing tourists a rare glimpse into a biome that is becoming increasingly rare around the world as large-scale agriculture, residential developments, and pollution threaten their existence. It appears, that both the Nicaraguan government and the residents of Isla Ometepe have seen the value in its several small parks and have effectively taken steps together to manage the area effectively, keep it pristine, and derive value, tangible and otherwise, from the rare, often overlooked natural amenities which abound throughout the island.

At over 4,200 feet above sea level, Volcan Mombacho offers several hiking trails through distinct microclimates demarcated by specific land designations which allows for both recreational and agricultural activities. For example, a belt of coffee plantations extends from 900 to 1,900 feet in elevation, effectively creating a buffer zone that allows for farmers to utilize the rich soil, vast slopes, and canopy shade to grow their crops. Meanwhile, the coffee plantations also serve as wildlife corridors and shaded relief, while also providing both breeding and foraging grounds for avian species as well as mantled howler monkeys (McCann et al. 2003). From 300 to 900 feet of elevation, the area is used almost exclusively for cattle ranching, banana plantations, and cacao production, yet these operations are located the furthest away from crucial cloud forest and other unique ecosystems (See Figure 5.2) (McCann et al. 2003). Cattle ranching specifically in Latin America has recently been criticized as an ever-expanding industry which threatens vital ecosystems, drastically alters the landscape, and is increasingly utilized as a front for money laundering by drug cartels. Here in the Volcan Mombacho Reserve, funding and oversight from MARENA combined with management plans that involve community-based conservation programs, have allowed for a balance to be reached, benefiting tourists, farmers, and researchers alike. It is important to note, however, that buffer zones, and the negotiations outlined within their legislation, are relatively new concepts in national parks and reserves outside of the United States (See Figure 5.1) As I have further observed in Nicaragua, and also witnessed in other countries, such as Costa Rica and Guatemala, these buffer zones appear to be successfully managed in volcanic or mountainous parks, since the elevation ranges where agricultural activities exist there constitute the furthest extent to which these industries can be efficient, still assume little

risk, and also gain profitable yields. Meanwhile, outside of these buffer areas, a core zone of either strictly managed recreation activities and obligatory hiring of rangers or guides by tourists (as in Volcan Mombacho), or an area that is completely closed off to the public (except for scientists and government personnel), exists to protect vital natural resources.



Figure 5.1 Nuclear Zone of Volcan Mombacho Natural Reserve. Source: Cody Silveira, 2023.

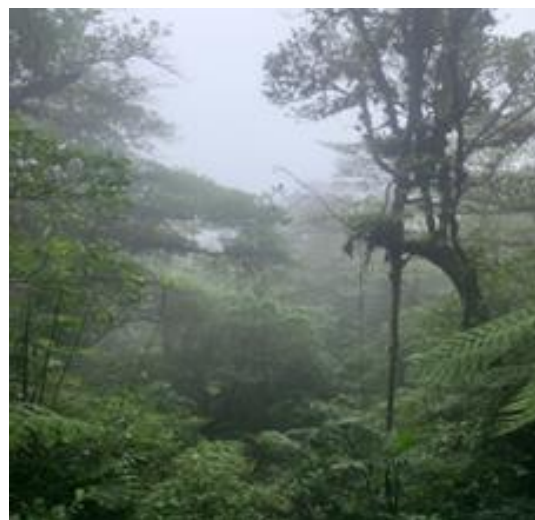


Figure 5.2 Cloud Forest in Volcan Mombacho Natural Reserve. Source: Cody Silveira, 2023.

Despite the inadequacies and lack of funding, Nicaragua has been able to successfully conserve several large natural areas within the country while also expanding tourism activities within those places. Laguna de Apoyo, Isla Ometepe, and Volcan Mombacho all possess clearly marked protected areas as well as established buffer zones to accommodate those working in tourism or in primary sector livelihoods. The success of these places, and why they remain popular destinations for tourists visiting Nicaragua is that their natural amenities and beauty can be explored through tour guide companies or hotels that abut them while large areas within the parks remain largely inaccessible and protected from further development. The combination of both private and public interests, while not in direct cooperation with one another and lacking clear goals, allows for the potential to market specific activities and experiences while also recognizing the need for certain zones to be established which protect natural resources and allow for development that does not undermine conservation or ecotourism interests.

### **Surfing: Nicaragua's Reliable Ecotour Activity**

Across my interviews and observations in Nicaragua, conservation and ecotourism initiatives remain ill-defined and represent secondary priorities, or coincidences for many new and well-established private businesses to exploit and promote. For example, some businesses notified guests in person or on social media accounts that their properties have adopted food forests or showcase through videos and daily posts that their lots were purchased on land with forest cover or beach access. This was meant largely to appeal to tourist desires for natural settings and control food supply at reduced costs while maintaining standards of organic, local, farm to table fare at

reasonable prices. Despite the lack of direction and focus within expanding conservation and ecotourism ventures along the Pacific coast, the primary ecotourism activity which continues to generate steady streams of international backpackers and regional as well as national tourists is surfing. In El Gigante itself, I ran into several backpackers and families who flew directly to Managua before arriving in El Gigante via taxi or airport shuttle. One was a surfer from the East Coast who remarked “It was a bit of a hassle to get here, but I’m glad I did. The waves are perfect and there are empty lineups all along the coast. It’s like an untapped gem.” For these tourists, the small fishing village was their central base of operations for a weeklong surfing excursion with several hotels and hostels catering to this intrepid crowd and providing affordable surfing excursions and experiences. Unlike many other beach destinations I have visited around the world, I would concur with these tourists that Nicaragua’s southwest Pacific coast has a rugged, wild feel to it. Rocky headlands and high cliffs punctuate the coast where a mix of small intimate fishing villages, seemingly stuck in a previous time beckon the intrepid adventurer.

Surfers in Nicaragua have always been a reliable clientele to the sleepy villages along the Pacific coast dating back to the 1990’s. For them, the country is blessed by year-round offshore winds, courtesy of the coast’s twelve-mile proximity to Lake Nicaragua. These constant offshore winds allow for wave riding experiences which are diverse, readily accessible, and do not suffer from large crowds or localism thanks to the isolation and absence of large-scale development (See Figure 5.3). In fact, many surfers, often comment at the patience and leniency that many Nicaraguan surfers exhibit towards foreigners with wave sharing, guidance, and overall stoke being the norm here. The

entire coast boasts a variety of rocky reefs, points, beach breaks, river mouths, and offshore slabs that channel waves into the many small beach communities offering a variety of breaks for beginner and advanced surfers alike. This rise in surfing reputation has resulted in both consistent and ever-increasing tourists venturing from San Juan del Sur, Costa Rica, and from around the world via word-of-mouth rumors of the isolated, world class waves that await them in this little ventured part of the world. As one prominent surfer and free-lance developer summed it up “Be it in times of war or times of peace, as long as the waves are breaking, the surfers will come”.



Figure 5.3 Playa Amarillo with one lone surfer in the lineup. Source: Cody Silveira, 2023.



## **Potential for other Ecotour Destinations in Nicaragua**

For small and medium enterprises related to tourism development, the government has primarily focused its advertisement and investment campaigns along the rural southwest Pacific coast, where the Pan American highway connects Nicaragua to Costa Rica (Barany et al. 2001, Fisher 2019). Despite potential for other tourism locales to exist in many other regions of Nicaragua, such as the interior Highlands and Caribbean coast, there remains an overall absence of promoting and encouraging creative, unique tourism experiences which both foreign and local tourism providers could capitalize on. According to several discussions I have had with several tour companies based out of Granada and Catarina, coffee tourism in Nicaragua remains an untapped, tourism venture which many visitors to Nicaragua would be eager to engage in. For rural populations still engaged heavily in subsistence agriculture, homestays and farm tours can not only offer a significant source of income during drought years, low yields, and off-season unemployment, but also give tourists unique glimpses into rural life that many view as rare experiences. Additionally in Laguna de Apoyo, nature walks as well as bird watching tours remain largely undeveloped despite the area's high concentration of animal life while petroglyphs and artifacts found in the large nature preserve on the northern half of the lake could provide archaeological tourism. Meanwhile in Lake Nicaragua, the opportunity for freshwater fishing charters targeting tarpon, snook, bull shark, peacock bass, and guapote remain in their infancy while surf fishing guides on the Pacific Coast are virtually nonexistent.

If successfully marketed, explored, and invested in by foreign developers and local Nicaraguan tourism providers alike, these new tours can successfully link the

interests of conservation and tourism initiatives. Nicaragua remains in an exceptional position to model how these tours and activities are managed and should look towards advocating and encouraging tour companies and specific locales to investigate and offer these tours to their clientele. Based on interviews with tourists, as well as increasing trends within global tourism overall, many are seeking alternative activities that allow for greater immersion within local culture while also providing experiences that are educational and distinctive. Not only can businesses involved in tourism increase their profit margins by offering more activities which remain undermarketed, but these experiences can also serve as catalysts which allow both developers and tourists to engage with local populations more directly while offering alternative tourism ventures which balance conservation initiatives, natural resource management, and tourism interests.

### **Issues of Land Rights and Increased Development**

As Ortega's government has committed fully to rapid tourism development and integration across Nicaragua, local populations have become displaced due to an influx of foreign and urban elite property ownership. Within Nicaragua, land titles and property rights favor the wealthy who can navigate the costly, and often contradictory, legal process of attaining ownership, while general distrust of formal legal systems for attaining such land ownership leads most people to avoid engaging in the entire process altogether (Martinez 1999, Matteucci et al. 2008, Broegaard 2009, Hunt 2011). For many without financial means or pathways, their hesitancy and distrust are not unfounded given that politically connected public officials such as judges or mayors will use their positions to force through land transactions or seize land from people wishing to title or

sell their properties often at vastly undervalued prices. These corrupted officials may also purchase the properties for themselves or give it away to powerful interests, which sometimes include large scale tourism operators (Martinez 1999, Matteucci et al. 2008, Broegaard 2009). A subsequent land scarcity problem is now commonplace along coastal areas and within the rural countryside as land accumulation among wealthy interests leaves residents little option but to remain landless and work in tourism or migrate in hopes of finding work (Hunt 2011). Meanwhile, a combination of national urban elite secondary home ownership as well as foreign holiday home ownership has exploded within coastal areas as many once former residents are lured by foreign real estate agents into earning huge profits from selling off their land. Unfortunately, many Nicaraguans are assured that they can still live on their plot and continue farming or fishing, but soon realize that their lands were converted into luxury resorts and golf courses under the guise of tourism development (Martinez 1999, Matteucci et al. 2008, Broegaard 2009, LaVanchy et al. 2020).

Not long after tourism becomes entrenched in area, an influx of foreign residents and wealthy nationals follows, resulting in a rising cost of living and housing, especially in coastal regions. (Massam and Everitt et al. 2001, Matteucci et al. 2008, Montero 2011, Irazábal 2018). Significant real estate booms in Mexico and Central America predominantly occurred in the 1990's and 2000's when Mexico lifted its ban on foreign land ownership while Belize, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua witnessed large scale real estate speculation for tourism, recreation, and hospitality purposes during that same time (Massam and Everitt et al. 2001, Matteucci et al. 2008, Croucher 2018, Irazábal 2018). Initially cheap and widely available properties attracted many potential clients and

professional realtors, but soon the influx of foreign real estate interests drove up the price of homes as millions of dollars were poured into once quiet and small communities, transforming them into tourism hubs (Massam and Everitt et al. 2001, Matteucci et al. 2008, Wilson 2008, Wilson 2008, Croucher 2018, Irazábal 2018). In Belize for example, American investors have greatly expanded land ownership within the country to where approximately 80 percent of all private land in the country is currently owned by U.S. citizens (Allender 1995). Eventually, high prices and rapid turnover rates become the norm as chaotic growth coincides with many locals being priced out and forced to move elsewhere (Wilson 2008, Wilson 2008, Irazabal 2018).

Alongside an increase of foreign development in Nicaragua which began in the early 2000's, greater erosion and landslides have become more prevalent around Laguna de Apoyo and Isla Ometepe while concerns have risen regarding the legality and environmental efficacy of such developments. According to several longtime residents in both locales, many of the new housing and resort projects have encroached along hillsides and altered the natural vegetation of the landscape as foreign developers clear trees, so that they may possess a lakeside view. In Laguna de Apoyo, after an interview with a former MARENA worker, we toured a construction site for a new foreign owned property set against a million-dollar backdrop of the deep lake. Upon closer inspection of the surrounding vegetation, most of the plants were food crops interspersed by substantial amounts of exposed volcanic rock. The worker explained to me that developers tend to prefer planting large food forests to save money on produce, but these vegetation types possess less extensive root systems, hold less water, and do not stabilize soil as efficiently as large tropical trees and other natural vegetation which results in greater runoff and soil

degradation. While legal restrictions on development within certain locales remain prevalent, many long time Nicaragua residents, including the former MARENA worker, believe foreign development sometimes coincides with nefarious means through bribing government officials who disregard the policies they enact in favor of expanding tourism and collecting the tax revenues from increased development.

Rising costs of living combined with alterations to the landscape are two of the most serious negative implications which tourism can have on locales who are not equipped to handle mass influxes of people and development projects. Nicaragua is no stranger to these negative impacts and, as voiced by longtime residents and former government workers alike, the government is often implicit in neglecting conservation and natural resource management efforts in favor of growing the tourism sector at all costs. Unfortunately, when unregulated tourism is enacted on a landscape, it coincides with unfettered development that overwhelms local populations who are the first ones to experience their natural resources being depleted, the costs of living to far exceed their wages, and the cost of housing to become unaffordable. Many will sell their lots to interested tourism developers before moving on elsewhere to find better work, but for others who do not have that option, they either embrace that which displaces them by working in it or hold out as a form of resistance. Governments, developers, and local populations must work together to envision a tourism plan that allows for economic development, but more importantly gives local populations the opportunity to advocate for measures that limit haphazard, rapid tourism expansion while also allowing for developers and government to work out plans that promote resource management and avoids disenfranchising local populations.

## **Competing Views of Natural Resources and Tourism Development**

With regards to the tourism sector, Nicaraguan citizens, foreign expatriates, and developers share competing ideas and opinions regarding the outcomes which tourism ultimately brings to specific places. In Nicaragua, the fishing industry represents a longstanding rural source of employment which is currently suffering from decreasing fish stocks, few regulations, high equipment and gasoline prices, and a lack of tourism charters which can diversify the industry and generate more wealth for artisanal fisherman and foreign managed charters alike (LaVanchy 2020). Meanwhile, as observed in several locations in places such as El Gigante, San Juan del Sur, and Laguna de Apoyo an influx of tourism has resulted in increased land degradation while longstanding unresolved issues of pollution threaten the health and natural aesthetics of areas sought by both tourists and local populations. As tourism takes hold in many locations around the country, ways of life are altered, previous customs and views are challenged, and both foreigners and locals adapt to the changes in their own unique ways (Fisher 2016, Fisher 2019, LaVanchy 2020).

One longstanding industry that possesses immense potential to attract tourism is fishing. Throughout Nicaragua, many coastal communities have historically relied on small scale artisanal fishing industries for food, as well as income, derived from supplying global demands for fresh fish and lobster (LaVanchy 2020). The money gained from fishing is often used for products to assist them with other forms of subsistence economic activities while everything caught is sold, eaten, or given away leaving little waste left behind (LaVanchy 2020). However, despite the lack of waste, many locals will chum reefs with their boats, or use hand lines from shore and keep everything they catch

regardless of size, quality, or protection status (See Figure 5.4). Many longtime community fishermen, state there was greater abundance in the past with meager catches and less sizeable fish being commonplace today. Meanwhile, others argue good and bad seasons have always existed and the coast is currently experiencing a difficult season (LaVanchy 2020). In fact, I was in Nicaragua during an El Niño year where several fishermen, both foreign and local, explained to me that there have been abnormally high winds and a 1-1.5-degree difference in water temperature resulting in much more difficult conditions that cause game and food fish, along with bait, to spread out farther from shore. Nevertheless, government authorities and tourism stakeholders blame the lack of productivity and difficult conditions in recent years to artisanal fishing practices, while locals blame industrial shrimping boats who have overharvested entire populations of shrimp, a crucial bait source, resulting in plummeting catches overall (LaVanchy 2020). Due to the absence and lack of funding for proper fish management and regulatory agencies, as well as the efficacy of artisanal fishing, a variety of perceptions and opinions exist as to why fish stocks remain low, while fishing continues to remain difficult for everyone.

For many who rely on fishing as their primary source of sustenance and guaranteed income, completely restricting their activities or imposing regulations without necessary education of resource management will ultimately lead to disregard for the law, or an increase in illicit methods. Currently, many coastal fishermen sell fish caught in protected waters in Costa Rica to supplement their wages amidst fish shortages. In El Gigante for example, several developers and even locals view the *acopio* (informal gathering) market as fueling illegal harvesting practices and a well-known drug and

prostitution ring there. Many of the fishermen who occupy the *acopio* are squatters, who own the boats and currently have access to the ocean and interact with hundreds of artisanal fishermen each day. One developer has purchased the adjacent land and plans to convert it to a new hotel complete with casitas, a general store, and a regulated formal fish market.

One day while walking along the road in El Gigante to conduct an interview, I witnessed several unmarked cars pull up to the *acopio* as several *pangas* unloaded hundreds of pounds of shrimp and lobster on the adjacent beach. A shadowy, dark sunglasses wearing figure in jeans and a collared shirt paid each deliverer an untold amount of U.S. cash from a large wad held tightly in his hand before him and his entourage of cars left the scene. The quickness of the deal, along with the sheer number of fish purchased in a matter of minutes, using only U.S. greenbacks, convinced me that something nefarious went down that day. With the purchase and conversion of the land to a new tourism development project, the *acopio* inhabitants will be evicted and hopefully illegal activities will cease. However, with the disappearance of this informal market, where will the fisherman go once the land is developed, will they still have access to the ocean, will the long-standing artisanal fishing industry survive, and will the character of the community of El Gigante still exist or forever be altered?





Figure 5.4 Discarded sail of a Pacific Sailfish, *Istiophorus platypterus*, a species under regulation for catch and release only in many parts of the world. Source: Cody Silveira, 2023

For locals and foreigners alike, who wish to tailor their fishing skills to the tourism sector and earn greater incomes, other complications arise. While panga fishermen can take both surfers and tourists to far off breaks and provide sport fishing expeditions, they need investment from foreign partners who often work with hotel operations that own all the equipment, schedule the bookings, and collect a lion's share of the price that tourists pay, leaving little money for the actual guides and fishermen. Meanwhile, tourists also view the independent fishermen as poor with limited tackle and knowledge, and instead opt to take a risk paying for more expensive charters either through hotel services or the *acopios* (LaVanchy 2020). The *acopios* appeal to tourists since they can provide fishing rods as well as refreshments, while most of the artisanal fishermen do not possess the capital to buy better tackle and gas expenditures necessary

for offshore or long days catering to tourists (LaVanchy 2020). Due to the limitations on supplies, negative perceptions from tourists, and overall depreciation of fish catches, it remains to be seen whether artisanal, locally hired fishing tourism will emerge as an alternative source of higher wages and more frequent form of employment for coastal communities like El Gigante.

In the absence of artisanal fishing charters, I spoke with a foreign outfitter operated by two Americans who seek to capitalize on the open water and limited competition, but they too have also run into problems of their own. According to one of the men “It is so corrupt here. We must pay the Nicaraguan navy who demands \$500 a month in bribes while also paying for an annual boat ownership license, and a monthly operating license. On top of this, supply issues delayed our boat being built for about 6 months, while registering the boat took over a year even though we paid a lawyer \$200 to expedite the processes”. At the time of interviewing them, they had just received their fishing licenses and could now operate with full legality, but as mentioned before, the El Niño season combined with overfishing, has proved difficult in finding target species such as sailfish, roosterfish, and marlin. While they have successfully caught crevalle jacks (*Caranx hippos*) and mahi mahis (*Coryphaena hippurus*), the numbers remain low while the physical conditions remain unfavorable. “We drive 10-15 miles offshore in a 30-foot panga with a 72-gallon gasoline tank. At around 15 miles, the sea becomes too rough and windy to go out further. The vast continental shelf, which runs along Central and South America, is where large upwellings of bait and big fish are, but its 40 miles offshore making it costly for us to reach it”. Their business has been primarily supported by friends and family making bookings while they have constructed artificial habitats

known as fads to attract fish, but this can take over a month to see results. Like the artisanal fisherman, the future of seeing consistent success and increased clientele remains uncertain as fishing conditions remain difficult while gasoline prices remain costly.



Figure 5.5 Lack of proper waste management, such as here in El Gigante, has dirtied many beaches and public areas utilized by both tourists and locals alike. Source Cody Silveira, 2023.

### **Nicaragua's Waste Management Problem**

Throughout Nicaragua, land degradation and pollution at the hands of both foreigners and locals remain key issues that will ultimately impact the public health, tourism perceptions, and natural resource management of the entire country. In 2013, the Ortega regime implemented the Buen Vivir Project to make Nicaragua a physically attractive destination for tourists and local Nicaraguans (Fisher 2016, Fisher 2019). What began initially in Managua, as a city-wide project to cover up bullet ridden buildings and murals painted by revolutionaries, soon evolved into a country wide beautification and

trash management program that united the Ministry of Education and Sandinista Youth organizations (Fisher 2016, Fisher 2019). The project followed increased foreign investment which resulted in favorable structural adjustment policies that led to the importation of cheap, plastic wrapped food products which the country was unable to manage properly (Fisher 2016, Fisher 2019). Soon, the entire city of Managua began installing garbage dump stations and collection sites to mitigate trash build up and commit to better waste management (Hartmann 2012, Fisher 2016, Fisher 2019). With new garbage trucks donated from Italy and a new partnership with the NGO, *Manos Unidas*, municipal garbage collectors as well as horse drawn trash collectors were now incentivized to pick up waste from both gated rich communities and unpaved, narrow roads which characterized the slums of Managua (Hartmann 2012, Fisher 2016, Fisher 2019). Additionally, Managua City Council also passed a municipal ordinance that would fine citizens for illegal dumping, excessive noise, or visual pollution (Hartmann 2012, Fisher 2016, Fisher 2019). Within schools across the country, from preschool to university, the Ministry of Education has taken an active role in educating students about recycling programs and living healthier lifestyles while also organizing clean up days at parks or illegal dump sites (Hartmann 2012, Fisher 2016, Fisher 2019). These new education initiatives also coincide with large scale decentralization as parental choice, local fund raising, financial incentives for school attendance, programs that allow for cost sharing, and a wholesale budget allocation increase of 17 percent have led to improved educational quality and pupil retention (Walker and Wade 2011, Wilm 2011) The reduction in fees combined with budget reallocations have also contributed to more

parents being able to cover costs for transportation, clothing, and textbooks (Walker and Wade 2011, Wilm 2011).

In the past, the efforts of Buen Vivir and the implementation of trash receptacles, clean up initiatives, and pollution education at grade school levels across the country have successfully closed the largest open-air dump in Latin America while giving Nicaraguan citizens the tools to educate themselves on proper waste management. These initiatives not only improve the landscape and make locales more desirable for tourists, but also instill in residents a necessity to keep their homes and surroundings clean and to advocate for greater, more conscientious waste disposal. However, despite early efforts to tackle Nicaragua's trash problem, when one spends time on the beaches, lakesides, and public parks across the country, they notice that there is an increasing overabundance of plastic trash and other refuse which collects on shorelines and is washed into bodies of water during rainstorms. Additionally, many trash receptacles which have been previously donated to many local communities have been repurposed as chicken coops or storage facilities, while no formal trash pickup programs exist in rural communities along the Pacific coast.

In El Gigante, local surfers have taken matters into their own hands and organized the *Brigada de Limpieza de Gigante* (The Cleaning Brigade of Gigante) to minimize littering and beach pollution in town. Every two weeks, they partner with children from local schools to pick up trash and then reward the youth with ice cream and swimming lessons in a nearby hotel pool. Other similar trash pickup programs in Laguna de Apoyo and Isla Ometepe have been attempted, however, according to a seasoned ornithologist and several hotel operators in both locales, the overwhelming amount of

trash combined with a lack of incentive and enthusiasm makes organizing these cleanup projects inconsistent. Meanwhile, as evidenced by interviews with residents of beach communities and in rural towns throughout Isla Ometepe, many believe that trash eventually becomes absorbed back into the environment. Still throughout the country, I witnessed individuals of all ages taking advantage of the country's generous recycling program and picking through trash for recyclables and other valuables to earn money. Despite the best efforts of previous government campaigns to mitigate trash in the country, the success of these programs remains mixed especially in rural communities where education and trash pickup efforts remain scant, while some still rely on refuse to supplement their incomes.

Despite the Nicaraguan government's efforts to develop the Pacific coast as a thriving beach destination for national and international tourists, many public beaches, especially ones that receive a high volume of tourists, are often dirty (See Figures 5.6 and 5.7). Talking with international tourists, several are shocked to see Nicaragua marketed to them as a tropical natural paradise and then witness many of the places they visit covered in trash. Meanwhile, Nicaraguan tourists, agree that something should be done to clean up the beaches, but are nevertheless content that public beaches remain accessible to them and that they have opportunities during weekends and their vacations to utilize a beautiful natural amenity. To appeal to both national and international tourist preferences, hotels, surf camps, and hostels advertise trips to other more secluded beaches that can be at least a 40-minute taxi ride away and cost day use fees to recreate in. Meanwhile lakefront hotels in Laguna de Apoyo hire cleaners to routinely pick up trash and keep their privately owned beach free of refuse while also charging day use fees

to those who are not patronizing their accommodations (See Figures 5.6 and 5.7). While many international tourists will pay the extra fees to visit beaches that are better maintained and cleaned, several Nicaraguans preferred advocating for community beach cleanup programs, or measures to actively engage locals to take care of waste management themselves rather than charging access to natural spaces which under Nicaraguan law, all citizens have the right to access and enjoy (LaVanchy 2020, Old 2023).



Figures 5.6 and 5.7 Examples of a trashed public beach (left) and a clean hotel day use beach (right)

## **Conclusions**

Unlike other countries such as Namibia, Mozambique, Belize, and Costa Rica, Nicaragua lacks the funding, international support, and broad collaborations necessary to facilitate large scale conservation minded ecotourism ventures. Although areas such as Laguna de Apoyo, Isla Ometepe, and Volcan Mombacho have been effectively managed by MARENA alongside partnerships with local agricultural workers and developers,

these preserves remain exceptions to the overall trend of tourism development. This leaves ecotourism and conservation dependent on the hands of private developers which the Nicaraguan government is eager to attract in larger numbers. However, increasing tourism investment and encouraging more ecotourism ventures remains limited due a lack of marketing and large tourism numbers all together resulting in many private businesses to instead adopt their own notions of ecotourism which typically translates to possessing property with natural or green aesthetics that cater to tourist preferences. Nevertheless, surfing, one of the most lucrative ecotour activities on the planet, remains a constant draw for many to the Pacific coast due to the abundance of empty lineups, year-round swells, warm water, and variety of breaks. Due to popularity of surfing and its association with a variety of tourist clientele from intrepid globe trotters to families and first timers, the Nicaraguan government sees immense potential in focusing its investment efforts, marketing, and new infrastructure projects on expanding surf tourism in the Pacific coast where much of the efforts of tourism development in the entire country have already taken place (Babb 2004, LaVanchy et al. 2020, Old 2023)

Throughout the country in places near large water sources such as Laguna de Apoyo, Isla Ometepe, and the Pacific coast, many local Nicaraguans are witnessing higher costs of living accompanied by increasing foreign real estate ownership and the pricing out of residents. While many have yet to leave, possessing actual land title remains uncommon, leaving those without formal ownership abandon their property, squat on it, or sell their lots altogether as the cost-of-living increases. Meanwhile landscapes and cultures are quickly being altered, while long standing issues of pollution, evident throughout many rural parts of the country, remain neglected and normalized as



trash continues to infiltrate popular tourism locales, especially ones in coastal areas. Additionally, adequate management of saltwater fisheries in Nicaragua have led to decreased stocks thus threatening an important local livelihood for many coastal communities. While the possibility of offering tourism charters and earning higher wages is an option, tourism numbers remain limited while many tourists view artisanal fishermen as ill equipped and lacking proper knowledge to find fish and provide a worthwhile experience. For alternative tourism ventures dedicated to proper resource management and conservation to be successful in developing countries, locals must be involved and incentivized to participate in important decision-making rhetoric that strikes a balance between sustaining the ecosystems where they make their livelihoods while also allowing them to participate in and achieve economic and social benefits from tourism.

## **CHAPTER SIX: TOURISM AS A MEANS OF IMPROVING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL BENEFITS FOR NICARAGUAN NATIONALS**

Once large-scale tourism development in Mexico and Central America began in the 1970's and 1980's, the sector transformed into the primary economic activity for many regions and communities (McLaren 1998, Mowforth and Munt 1998, Everitt et al. 2008, Wilson 2008, Wilson 2008, Bantman-Masum 2011). In response to new opportunities, as well as newly imposed land use limits and regulations meant to encourage and firmly establish conservation practices, many locals have resorted to open small businesses which cater to tourists or work in restaurants, hotels, and bars (Everitt et al. 2008, Matteucci et. al ,2008, Wilson 2008, Bantman-Masum 2011). Most of these occupations do not pay well, given that in Mexico and other Central American countries, minimum wage requirements are ignored or not enacted, while the seasonal nature of tourism employment is often unreliable with many being laid off after a few months (Mowforth and Munt 1998, Chok et al. 2008, Everitt et al. 2008, Stronza and Gordillo 2008, Wilson 2008, Bantman-Masum 2011).

Despite these challenges in tourism locales, national residents, who find employment within tourism ventures amidst such abrupt changes, often respond positively to new, expanded economic opportunities, social services, and revitalized economic sectors, especially in remote areas (Stronza and Gordillo 2008, Wilson 2008,

Wilson 2008, Horton 2009, Mbaiwa and Stronza 2010, Hunt et al. 2015, Silva and Khatiwada 2014). For example, in the Osa Peninsula of Costa Rica, one third of ecolodges within the communities of Puerto Jimenez and Drake's Bay are locally owned. Furthermore, residents are frequently sought for labor in these ecolodges, and the vast majority earned monthly salaries that were significantly higher than other employment opportunities, such as mining, cattle ranching, fishing, and agriculture, (Mbaiwa & Stronza 2010; Horton 2009, Hunt et al. 2015). Additionally, in Stronza and Gordillo's 2008 study of three ecotourism projects located in the Peruvian, Ecuadorian, and Bolivian Amazon, positive economic benefits, as well as improved social organization and cohesion, were viewed as incentives for improving long term resource conservation within the Amazon basin. Both studies reveal that most respondents believe direct employment in tourism not only raised their incomes, but also allows access to new opportunities elsewhere. Other equally shared positive outcomes from working in tourism also include access to greater health care, transportation, educational, and potable water services as well as new opportunities to interact with and learn from tourist clientele (Stronza and Gordillo 2008, Hunt et al. 2015, Mathis and Rose 2016).

Throughout Nicaragua, tourism represents an exciting, new service sector industry which gives Nicaraguan nationals opportunities to highlight their country, learn transferable skills, and enjoy both financial and social benefits that many were did not earn from working in primary sector industries such as agriculture, factory work, or textile production. Through government incentives, many Nicaraguans are either choosing to open businesses of their own, which directly cater to tourists, or are working in the construction of tourism infrastructure as well as in the new service jobs which

tourism developments provide. While the labor force remains eager and ever available to work for developers, a lack of previous experience and education in service sector employment as well as formal construction work has resulted in frustration, delays, and insufficient completion of projects. Meanwhile, water scarcity combined with high electricity and fuel costs complicate operating a business within tourism, given that these three utilities are the most desired conveniences which tourists expect when traveling abroad. To operate a business in Nicaragua's tourism sector requires a certain level of patience and adaptability for developers who must see their projects as long term financial and social investments for themselves and the people they employ.

### **Incentives for Nicaraguans to Work in Tourism**

For Nicaraguan citizens and foreigners alike, tourism has now become the most lucrative and largest sector of the country's economy. To start a business in Nicaragua, one must provide INTUR with a loan application, a business plan, either rent or own the land that their business will occupy and provide proof of funds to receive a loan. Meanwhile, for businesses that are locally owned, either legitimately or on paper, owners only pay \$30 dollars a month in tax revenue which allows for greater investment into the business itself either through renovations or expanding their marketing via new avenues over the Internet. Not only can those with business skills and savvy benefit from these easy startup costs, lucrative tax exonerations, and government marketing initiatives aimed at assisting small and medium sized businesses, but business owners also benefit from a sizeable, cheap labor force that is increasingly eager to gain skills and consistent wages from working in an exciting new industry. A real estate speculator and hotel developer in El Gigante described Nicaraguans saying, "Many are industrious out of necessity and

highly self-sufficient with experience in construction and cooking from living in makeshift houses with large families”. For many, tourism represents the most viable economic option, one that allows them to not only hone their current skills, but also to attain transferable ones that can be applied to other sectors of the economy or allow them to start businesses of their own.

Throughout Latin American, adapting to changing economies within many new tourist centers means that large elements of local populations must either abandon or supplement their current employment and work in jobs that cater to tourists and expatriates (Mowforth and Munt 1998, Everitt et al 2008, Wilson 2008, Bantman-Masum 2011). Many locals have begun to work as street or beach vendors or as scouts for small businesses in hopes of enticing foreigners to purchase commodities such as textiles, woodcarvings, jewelry, and other goods that are either fabricated commercially or with traditional techniques (Mowforth and Munt 1998, Everitt et al. 2008, Wilson 2008, Bantman-Masum 2011). Other groups with less education and opportunities, work as taxi drivers, construction workers and in restaurants, hotels and bars which depending on exchange rates, tips, and hours, can be a financially lucrative alternative to unreliable, seasonal primary sector employment (Mowforth and Munt 1998, Everitt et al. 2008, Wilson 2008, Bantman-Masum 2011).

In Nicaragua, tourism is often lauded as the most profitable financial option for many entrepreneurs and private business owners. For example, in Granada, a horse carriage operator, or boat tour driver, can earn up to \$300 a day which is significantly higher than the national average, while also having a steady flow of customers. In fact, for most low-level tourism jobs, workers employed in concierge services, bar hopping,

cleaning services, cooking, and transportation, can earn up to \$500 USD through salaries and tips. This gives a significant cash injection of under the table, untaxable income to many Nicaraguan citizens who rely on the low value cordoba which lends a far inferior purchasing power parity for goods and services. Another industry that is indirectly related to tourism development and employs large numbers of Nicaraguans is the construction industry, which for several years now, has contributed to a greater network of paved roads as well as bridges, large scale hotel and resort developments, and secondary homes for foreigners and wealthy Nicaraguan citizens alike. For most hotel and home construction workers, they are contracted between \$20 and \$50 a day, work 6 days a week, and are paid by the job instead of the hour. For many, construction is seen as a dependable, always available source of employment with many in the country well experienced in basic electricity, plumbing, landscaping, carpentry, and stone masonry skills from past experiences in renovating, repairing, and updating their own homes and the homes of their friends and neighbors.

Despite tourism's perceived widespread and inevitable economic benefits for local populations who work in tourism ventures, Hunt and Stronza's (2011) analysis revealed that incomes among tourism workers at Morgan's Rock Hacienda and Ecolodge in Nicaragua were not only stagnant, but that most employees were hired from outside the community. Unfortunately, many of the local fisherman, farmers, and community members who lived around the ecolodge were excluded from working in or participating in the conservation and employment efforts which the ecolodge claimed to uphold and pursue. Additionally, Morgan's Rock also denied improved electrical or medical services to surrounding communities with many expressing that their livelihoods were suddenly

outlawed in the name of environmental protection and conservation practices. In Morgan's Rock, local populations were excluded from working in tourism, pursuing their primary livelihoods, and engaging in negotiations or constructive discussions with ecotourism managers to reach consensus over mitigating or altering destructive activities such as slash and burn agriculture, wood harvesting, or illegal hunting (Hunt and Stronza 2011). For conservation efforts to be realized, it is crucial that operations like Morgan's Rock seek the employment and input from local populations regarding how best to implement these policies, while also extending services to the surrounding community to foster greater partnerships and cooperation in attaining both tourism and development minded goals.

While tourism garners mixed views of actual economic benefits, many Nicaraguans believed that even greater long-term value from working in the tourism industry is derived from learned transferable skills on the job and increased interaction with foreigners. For those employed in tourism, having a steady job forces them to develop time management and personal planning skills which are crucial in being employable in other industries and are valuable off the job as well. Additionally, tourism workers are also exposed to familiarity with point of sales systems and computer technology, which are absent from most households in the country. In several cases where businesses were owned by foreigners, workers who learned quickly, excelled in their jobs, and helped to improve the quality of the business were promoted quickly, or transferred their gained skills and experience to opening their own businesses both inside and outside of the tourism sector. Many workers I talked to were also enthusiastic to interact with a variety of foreigners who often engaged them in conversation and shared

new ideas with their Nicaraguan counterparts. In a country like Nicaragua, tourism can be utilized as a cross-cultural vector for improving relations, sharing knowledge, and gaining valuable insight into other ways of life which until recently have been absent from Nicaraguan thought and society and to a degree remains undermined and controlled by an increasingly authoritarian regime.

### **Daily Life for Nicaraguans: Emigrate or Stick Around**

For many of Nicaragua's citizens, life is an everyday struggle. Approximately 30 percent of the population live below the poverty line and earn less than \$3.65 a day (World Bank 2023). Additionally, half of the country lives in rural areas with subsistence agriculture and local labor markets in construction being the only sources of income. Land is typically inherited within families, yet official ownership remains questionable, while the homes themselves are quickly constructed from what little income is earned from selling excess crops at local markets, or from wages earned in local industries. Fortunately for many in rural communities, selling out of their houses, or off the street, is very efficient with the government only charging \$10 a month in taxes for this type of business. The houses often resemble shacks built from scavenged materials such as abandoned construction debris, old wooden boards, and scrap metal which are then adorned with tin roofs and dirt floors. Due to strong family ties, many homes and neighborhoods are occupied by several generations, however there is often an absence of a male head of household. Despite strong Catholic taboos against birth control and abortion in the country, infidelity is rampant with children spread among multiple partners while high rates of pregnancy among 10- to 14-year-old girls represent troubling cycles within many communities.



A transition to tourism-based markets and services results in increased female migration and service sector employment within many tourism hubs across Mexico and Central America (Chant 1997, Everitt et al. 2001, Everitt et al. 2008, Wilson 2008, Hunt et al. 2015, Jones and Spadafora 2016). However, the opportunities given to these women are maid services in hotels and resorts where they do not directly interact with foreign clientele (Chant 1997, Everitt et al. 2001, Everitt et al. 2008, Hunt et al. 2015). Within Nicaragua, many women take on important responsibilities from an early age by overseeing the household, looking after children and elderly relatives, and running small businesses that are operated out of their homes or in street stalls. As a result of this dedication, many of these women oversee the major family financial decisions while possessing their own disposable incomes that are free from the oversight and control of their male partners and family members. While women overseeing the house and holding independent jobs in a largely unregulated, informal economy is not uncommon in Latin America, the control of their own income combined with their historical presence as leaders and soldiers in past revolutions, civil wars, and uprisings has given the women in Nicaragua greater independence, confidence, and candor that is uncommon in other countries in the region. This was often witnessed during the interviews I had with women who were eager, enthusiastic, and passionately outspoken regarding tourism, government inadequacies, and the future of their country. Despite this independence and attitude, low, stagnating wages and limited work hamper incomes meant to take care of large families resulting in many women to take up prostitution, which is legal in Nicaragua, or to leave the country all together for greater wages and job opportunities elsewhere.

While many stayed behind, at least 200,000 Nicaraguans have fled to the United States and Costa Rica since 2018 citing political unrest, religious persecution, and economic opportunities as the primary drives for their mass exodus. Much of those who have fled are exiled political leaders and journalists as well as educated professionals, academics, researchers, and those with the financial means to escape amidst an increasing climate of paranoia and suspicion against those the government deems as a possible threat to their growing control over the country (Ripley III, 2023). From their new homes abroad, Nicaraguan foreign nationals have funneled \$4.24 billion in remittances in 2023 back to their families with 60% of those receipts coming from the United States, 20% coming from Costa Rica, and the rest coming from places like Mexico and Europe (Lopez 2023). This staggering number accounts for 20% of the Nicaraguan economy which is witnessing a three-year recession coupled with widespread wage stagnation, decreased GDP, unemployment, and a widespread shortage of working age individuals (Ripley III 2023, Castellanos-Canales 2023). While this amount of money has the potential to grow the tourism economy, especially within the restaurant and hotel sectors, the money is primarily used for everyday expenses, utilities, and in many cases to fund one's eventual departure from Nicaragua. Meanwhile, the United States, Nicaragua's largest trading partner, has imposed sanctions on Nicaragua's state-run gold mining industry, which is the country's most lucrative export, and has also severely restricted trade and investment while freezing the bank accounts and visas for both former and current government employees believed to be associated with subverting democracy and supporting the Ortega regime (Congressional Research Service 2023). To add further impetus for Nicaraguans to leave their country, in 2020, Hurricanes Eta and Iota, the

former a category 4 and the latter a category 5 storm, struck Nicaragua within two weeks of each other and devastated over 3 million citizens' access to housing, drinking water, electricity, health services, and educational facilities (Castellanos-Canales 2023).

With Costa Rica being the closest destination for Nicaraguans to visit, and historically the most sought destination for Nicaraguan immigrants, over 11,000 refugees have fled to Costa Rica since 2018 (Ripley III 2023). Costa Rican businesses frequently release advertisements to entice Nicaraguan low-wage workers with little education to immigrate to the country on temporary work visas in construction, domestic services, low level tourism sector jobs, and agriculture. However, since 2018, political unrest within Nicaragua has influenced greater numbers of educated and politically active asylum seekers to travel across the border (Ripley 2023). Costa Rica with a population of five million citizens, received the fourth largest number of asylum applications globally in 2021, an influx that has strained the country's immigration services (Ripley III 2023). Long processing backlogs have stagnated asylum requests while many throughout the Costa Rican government suspect that many asylum seekers and refugees are solely seeking economic opportunities and better pay rather than fleeing because of the risk of danger in their country (Ripley III 2023). To address a larger influx of Nicaraguan refugees and asylum seekers, the Costa Rican government, in 2022, enacted greater restrictions on what was once widely regarded as streamlined and open immigration policies by mandating that new applicants seeking refugee or asylum status register their case within a month of arrival and enroll in the national social security system. This effectively eliminates past expedited work permits that Nicaraguan nationals could easily

procure, forcing many to drop their asylum cases and instead attempt to earn eligibility for temporary work permits (Ripley III 2023).

Tourism has the potential to increase both economic and social opportunities for Nicaraguan nationals who remain some of the poorest individuals in the Western Hemisphere. While higher incomes and more reliable labor sources are the most discernible results from locals participating in tourism economies, sometimes local populations are not sought after to work in these operations and can be neglected from reaping the benefits which tourism seeks to bring. However, many Nicaraguans believe that tourism has equally tangible benefits including instilling greater job and time management skills while also allowing for greater participation from women. However, due to the tense political situation and the fact that tourism investment and opportunities remain limited in the country, the labor force remains underutilized within tourism ventures while many others are seeking employment outside of Nicaragua. A deterrent to both tourism investment and job growth, the continual erosion of civil liberties, combined with rising costs of living and stagnating economy, will force many people to abandon the country all together and seek greater opportunities in more stable political climates, as tourism in Nicaragua continues to stagnate along an unpredictable trajectory.

### **Limitations of the Labor Force Within the Tourism Sector**

For Nicaraguans who continue to live within their home country, they are lauded by developers as being hardworking, industrious, and readily available at inexpensive rates. However, given that Nicaragua is a developing country characterized by few job opportunities, few education services, and widespread poverty, personal security concerns and widespread drug abuse remain prevalent. Additionally, much of

Nicaragua's rural dwelling, primary sector workforce lacks experience and extensive training in a service sector industry that is relatively new to the country and radically different from the work that many are used to. Due to the lack of experience working in tourism, problems also arise in worker reliability throughout the year, given the seasonal nature of tourism work, while adherence to standards in construction and services must be reinforced and retaught constantly to instill consistency and accuracy. For developers, these challenges can be daunting and contribute to inconsistencies, delays, decreased standards, and constant management, however it is important to realize that when investing in a business such as tourism, you are ultimately investing in the betterment of a community by providing tangible skills and knowledge which is transferable to other jobs and can be applied to the daily lives of individual employees.

Several foreign operations cite that economic divides and desperation force many to invest significant funds towards personal security, the construction of high walls, and surveillance cameras. Many Nicaraguan civilians often view foreigners as endlessly wealthy with large houses and hotels filled with amenities like running water, floors, refrigerators, air conditioning, and multiple rooms which many have never witnessed before in their lifetime. It is advisable that foreign homeowners and hotel operators limit the number of Nicaraguan guests who visit their accommodations while also not hosting open houses to the public for promotional parties or events. While many foreigners will build trustful long-term relationships with Nicaraguans from residing within the country, and the fact that they rely on local populations out of necessity for work, the possibility of breaks ins and burglaries remains high in many communities. The owner of a small hotel and retreat in Nicaragua commented "It's not your friends, or those who work for

you that you should be weary of. It's the associates and friends who hear stories from builders and tourism workers talking about the wealth and amenities in foreign properties. Many times, it's those desperate and untrustworthy locals who rob gringo hotels and cause crime". Despite the growing mutual dependence between foreigners and Nicaraguans associated with tourism development, there remains an economic divide between the two classes of people that has yet to be bridged, while underlying levels of distrust and economic divides remain prevalent.

Another major problem, brought on by an influx of tourism, and one that I witnessed firsthand among Nicaraguans as well as tourists, is pervasive drug use particularly in the form of cocaine and crack cocaine. In Nicaragua, all drugs are classified equally meaning no matter the drug, the same charges and jail sentences apply. This has resulted in a massive influx of crack and crack cocaine being sold to tourists, and locals alike, due to its higher price, equal risk of punishment, and the fact that cocaine can be cooked into crack easily by allowing the powder to solidify and be broken down into individual crystals which are then distributed in higher quantities. Bundles of money and cocaine are sometimes found on beaches and in abandoned boats along the coast while an influx of tourism has also coincided with drug problems in many popular tourist locales. Drug sales and abuse have skyrocketed following the 2018 political crisis and COVID 19 pandemic as few job opportunities have led many to sell drugs, while other resort to pickpocketing and stealing money to feed their addictions. The drug epidemic, like elsewhere, is difficult to solve and unfortunately is seen by many as the only option to make some semblance of a living, or to endure continued hardships and trauma.

Prior to the onset of increased road access which coincided with tourism development, many Nicaraguans were remarkably self-sufficient out of necessity due to rural isolation and a lack of services. As a result of this self-sufficiency, many have learned valuable handy man skills such as plumbing, electrical work, cooking, renovating, and carpentry while working on their own homes or helping their neighbors whenever issues may arise. Although these skills are highly transferrable and sought after by developers, most Nicaraguans market themselves as jacks of all trades that can do any manual work. While this is true, many are not adept in a specific discipline, lack proper certifications, are unaware of building codes, rely on faulty techniques, and do not adhere to specificities necessary for successfully completing building projects. As a result, workers, because of their lack of training and experience, are prone to cutting corners and doing shotty work which in their eyes is seen as being more efficient with time and resources, however this leads to jerry rigged projects that can result in repeated maintenance and repair issues or accidents such as fires and indoor flooding. A strategy of providing the necessary resources and training to facilitate more reliability in the workforce and improve the quality of developer projects is to provide opportunities for Nicaraguans to educate themselves and then use the skills they learn in services and jobs that are always available. In Popoyo, one of the few NGOs that remains open, thanks largely to its strong legal team and funding from a prominent nearby resort, specializes in offering classes, training, and certifications from the Nicaraguan National Trade Office in a variety of disciplines such as computer science, accounting, electrical work, welding, plumbing, inventory, massage therapy, and air conditioning maintenance. By providing the tools necessary for local populations to educate themselves, they can then develop the

proper training and skills which will make them knowledgeable, reliable, and highly sought after by a variety of developers and tourism services that need local labor to help start their business and upkeep them once everything is running smoothly.

In addition to possessing little specific expertise and experience in particular trades, many Nicaraguans also lack financial education and rely on short term dispensable incomes. As an employee in the NGO states, “When Nicaraguans have money, they spend it and when they don’t have money, then God will provide.” For the Nicaraguan people who have endured poverty, natural disasters, revolution, war, and civil unrest, the future always remains uncertain leading many to accept their lot, live in the moment, and lack any future ambitions or long-term planning. In fact, a common occurrence among workers who are paid on the 1st and 15th of month is to spend their entire paycheck partying and drinking while not showing up to work the next day. This short-term mindset is also evident in the fact that many do not have established credit or savings accounts and possess weak financial planning skills. Although developers will learn to appreciate the hammock culture lifestyle of needing little and appreciating what you have, it is essential to instill within their workforce a sense of future planning, saving, and financial responsibility so they can better provide for themselves and their families while also being able to better withstand economic downturns and low seasons within the tourism sector.

To improve the standards and skills of Nicaraguan workers, developers in tourism must realize that training and educating their staff is a process. While the jobs in tourism command a higher dollar amount in wages and allow for ease of rising through the ranks all while learning transferable skills and experience, habits indicative of a successful



worker such as process orientation, time management, and personal planning need to be encouraged and instilled consistently early on to ensure success. Furthermore, many Nicaraguans come from poorer backgrounds and have not dined in restaurants or lived in houses with flooring, so diligent training and patience must be adhered to when aiming to instill values of customer service and quality standards within an operation. Additionally, English language, point of sales system, bar backing, and food service training are also lacking within much of the workforce, so time and devotion towards improving these skills in one's workforce should also garner significant investment. Nicaraguans are a hardworking population whose passion and eagerness to be employed in tourism is a rare and overlooked quality in a workforce. To capitalize on the positive aspects which Nicaraguans offer to their managers and tourism developers, it is necessary to provide them with opportunities to improve and hone their skills while also instilling fluid work processes so that mistakes are not continually made, positive habits are integrated, and workers gain the necessary knowledge and experience to work in a variety of settings.

### **Costs, Risks, and Strategies of Running a Business**

For those with the patience and capital necessary in overcoming Nicaragua's bureaucracy and political climate to open a business of their own, several challenges become apparent which threaten the long-term success and stability of their venture. Being that Nicaragua is a poor country, it often lacks the necessary manufacturing and energy sectors to be self-sufficient, meaning that the country must import vast amounts of building products and gasoline. Currently, the United States maintains high tariffs over these imports to Nicaragua resulting in exorbitantly high construction and fuel costs for everyday citizens. Additionally, electricity costs are the highest in Central America

resulting in many illegal hookups which causes widespread frequent blackouts while access to water is becoming ever complicated by increasing development and an influx of tourism infrastructure. For businesses in Nicaragua's tourism sector to survive amidst these challenging circumstances, they must uphold a level of self-reliance and efficiency while maintaining close connections with the communities they establish themselves in so they can better weather the economic downturns to become a long-term success.

Within Nicaragua, previously built hotels, restaurants, and other forms of tourism infrastructure are both scarce and costly to renovate resulting in a surplus of lots and land for sale especially in Isla Ometepe, Laguna de Apoyo, and the Pacific Coast (See Figures 6.1 and 6.2). Foreigners and wealthy Nicaraguans are initially drawn to these lots not just for their million-dollar views and water access, but also for the fact that many of them cost less than \$400,000 due in large part to the fact that inflation has not hit the housing markets too drastically resulting in an exploding real estate boom. Once land ownership and tax documents are finalized, a process which has been described as smooth and painless overall, the next problem which arises is finding an efficient and dependable contractor to complete the construction of any new business. One recent hotel owner in El Gigante stated "I had to go through three different contractors during the building process and the expectation was that I was going to be over budget by the time everything was done." The best contractor is often the one hired based on word-of-mouth recommendations from other established tourism ventures, yet in some instances, information and knowledge is withheld since contractors remain scarce in many areas and each tourism venture wants to retain the best ones for themselves. Meanwhile, knowledgeable contractors who possess extensive connections and work experience

know that they are in short supply and highly sought after, so they often negotiate exuberant prices which developers and new landowner have no choice but to acquiesce.



Figure 6.1 Example of a lot for sale in Popoyo (left) and Figure 6.2 Several lots for sale in front of Ojo de Agua (right): Source: Cody Silveira

Once hired, contractors pay their laborers minimum wage which amounts to \$20 a day for a completed job or task. Due to the low pay, desertion, and lackadaisical effort in completing a job prolonged deadlines are commonplace. To motivate workers and to make sure the work is being completed, most owners of new tourism infrastructure and accommodations supervise the job site every day and personally instruct the workers how to properly complete tasks and adhere to foreign expectations and building codes. An example of this was observed during a tour of a newly constructed hotel in El Gigante. Accompanied by the construction manager, we went to the back patio where he

adamantly reprimanded a group of bricklayers hard at work building the terrace for his new venture. From the brief interaction it seems that this was not the first time he was teaching the men to evenly space the bricks diagonally apart so enough concrete mortar can join them together. The men looked at him puzzled, nodded their heads, and proceeded to resume the job at hand. Their confused expressions and quick glances towards one another revealed to me that they would still need greater guidance and oversight to complete the job properly.

Other owners, meanwhile, will increase the pay to \$50 USD a day or more while requesting that contractors employ from local populations who reside in the places where the operation is set to open. By doing this, the owner rationalizes that the increased incentive will motivate their contracted labor not to quit a job early and to work harder for them in an industry defined by low pay and long hour shifts six days a week. Many may be reluctant at first to invest more money into paying contracted workers, however, by hiring locally, regularly overseeing the work, and ensuring a higher wage, the owner is able to establish a reliable maintenance team, build trustful relationships within local communities, and have much more direct control in the construction of their business.

As construction is underway, another expensive dilemma which adds to the total cost is the inflated price of building materials. In Nicaragua, there is a 30% import tax on concrete, wiring, electrical machinery, metal, and glass which are exclusively brought in from the United States, Nicaragua's largest trade partner, whose imposed sanctions and high tariffs are a form of retaliation against the Ortega regime. With the initial building and future maintenance upkeep costs being high, chain hotels and investors are often turned away from developing in Nicaragua and look at the risks and adjusted return on

investment of any venture in the country as being too high of a liability, given the current stagnation in Nicaragua's overall tourism market. Many businesspeople I have talked with who have successfully opened their hotels, restaurants, and other tourism services claim they are able to save on labor costs by going through recommended contractors and can save on building costs by constructing with brick, tile, and hardwood which is locally sourced. However, they attribute their success to strong financial backing, savvy, risk aversion, and patience knowing that their businesses are not short-term financial schemes. Despite the initial hardships and questionable success, every businessperson I talked to also stated that once everything is up and running, there is a relative ease of doing business and a level of freedom, at an incredibly low cost, to own a tropical dream property or open a unique, innovative businesses venture. The ones who contribute to the high turnover rates within the tourism industry are often those who are overzealous and cut corners believing that since Nicaragua is an inexpensive destination that they should not have to pay anything extra for guaranteed quality. However, according to an NGO employee based out of Popoyo, "Those with common sense, who take sensible precautions initially, and invest more up front will witness a quality product in the end".

Regarding the general upkeep associated with running a business, several complications arise over the reliability, cost, and efficiency of utilities, specifically, electricity, fuel, and water. When operating a hotel or other business in Nicaragua, electricity is the highest of any utility at \$0.24 per kilowatt/hour which is also the highest electrical costs in Central America (World Bank 2023). During months of high tourism volume, overuse can overload entire electrical grids and render electricity unreliable. Many smaller businesses have adopted strategies of energy conservation such as charging

extra fees per room to provide air conditioning, cutting electricity use during certain times of the day, or not providing electricity to their guests during low seasons, low capacity, or economic downturns. For example, the brochure provided to me by my hotel in Laguna de Apoyo included a paragraph explaining to guests that electricity is an expensive commodity within the country while strongly advising that guests turn off all lights and fans when not in the room. Additionally, the brochure notified guests that an air-conditioned room is an additional \$10 a night. Meanwhile, to avoid paying for costly electricity, 97% of the Nicaraguan population rigs illegal hook ups to the power grid through faulty wiring which results in blackouts, electrical fires, and electrical surges. In many parts of Nicaragua, momentary blackouts are a common occurrence, and as I was informed from several business owners in all tourism destinations I visited, during the country's busiest year for tourism in 2017, many were without power for 6-8 hours nearly every day. Developers and those in tourism who are mandated by the government to pay for electricity costs through legal hook ups, are forced to invest in surge protectors to ensure reliable electricity which is essential for refrigeration, air conditioning, fans, and lights, four highly sought-after amenities which international guests generally expect whenever they are staying in a foreign country.

Despite Nicaragua being heavily reliant on oil products and having an electrical system that is overburdened, costly, and lacking enough power lines to fulfill national needs, the country does possess immense potential for renewable energy through wind, geothermal, and solar sources (EUCA\_Trade 2023). Since 2006, Nicaragua has opened private investment within geothermal and wind energy resulting in renewables accounting for 45% of the country's generation in 2021 (EUCA\_Trade 2023). While Nicaragua

possesses the potential for approximately 4,500 megawatts of energy generation from renewable sources and has granted a number of tax breaks including import duties, value-added taxes, and income taxes to companies willing to expand these industries, transparency regarding whether the government or the private sector actually owns electrical assets in Nicaragua has largely deterred widescale, foreign renewable energy investment. Meanwhile, expensive installation costs, combined with a large sector of the population unable to directly access the national power grid, has deterred rapid, widespread national expansion of Nicaragua's renewable energy sector (EUCA\_Trade 2023). Another form of renewable energy, solar power, which accounts for just 0.5% of energy generation in the country, is often viewed by larger scale, affluent tourism developers as the most worthwhile renewable energy investment given Nicaragua's abundant sunshine, and the fact that panels are directly installed on site offering businesses direct control of their specific energy needs (EUCA\_Trade 2023). One massive resort operation on the Pacific Coast possessed an entire solar farm which was utilized between 5 PM and 7 AM everyday while during peak times, relied on the electrical grid thus allowing their solar batteries to charge. Still, the CEO of the hotel stated that more substations, battery components, and better storage capacity are needed for the massive operation to run smoothly and efficiently amidst an already unreliable electrical grid which causes as many as twenty short term blackouts a day when in use.

While traveling around Nicaragua, tourists and developers alike become quickly attuned to the high expense of fuel and transportation within the country. Taxi rides in and around Nicaragua can exceed \$60 one way while gas prices cost six dollars a gallon or more, making gas like electricity, the highest in Central America. Despite Nicaragua

attempting to diversify its oil imports from countries such as Mexico and the United States by purchasing smaller quantities from Italy and Estonia, the price of fuel is under monopoly control (Olivares 2017). Nicaragua's fuel distribution company, Edificio DNP, was nationalized in 2019 several days after the United States imposed strict sanctions on the firm. The United States claims that the company is a front used by President Daniel Ortega's family to launder non-competitive contracts with government institutions and increase Ortega's wealth (Selser 2019). Despite denying such claims, the Ortega government has made attempts to maintain political allegiances by subsidizing 30 gallons a month in tax free gas along with outboard engines for 25-foot *panga* fishing boats tied to artisanal inshore fishermen (LaVanchy 2020). Due to the unavailability of gasoline in places like El Gigante, fisherman often buy gas through the *acopios*, at discounted prices relative to their daily catch. These *acopios* function as intermediaries between the artisanal fisherman and the exporting fishing firms based in Managua and charge expensive prices for supplies, thus keeping fisherman constantly in debt. To make ends meet and eliminate or reduce their debt, many will sell the government provided gasoline (LaVanchy 2020).

Another highly precarious resource essential for everyday life in Nicaragua is potable water. In 2007, the General Water Law, Law 620, defined water as a public good which categorizes the resource within a sustainable and equitable framework when granting concession, permits and licenses for water use (LaVanchy et al. 2020).

Although this may sound progressive, the government lacks guiding data, oversight, or knowledge regarding national groundwater quantities, distribution, and recharge rates while simultaneously failing to implement any directives or management regulations on



water extraction (LaVanchy et al. 2020). Meanwhile, along the Pacific coast, tourism has become the region's fastest growing industry, one that demands high volumes of water necessary for landscaping, swimming pools, golf courses, personal use, and cooking facilities (LaVanchy et al. 2020). As more people are drawn to the coast for its low population density, empty surfing lineups, and low property costs, a rise in gated communities and tourism ventures is likely to increase the strains on water needs in an environment subject to uneven rainfall distributions and a constantly shifting wet and dry seasons (LaVanchy et al. 2020).

Along the Pacific coast, most of the water is either gathered and stored from the infrequent rains or is extracted from groundwater resources. Over pumping of existing wells leads to saltwater intrusion, or exceeds recharge rates, both of which are attributable to a lack of knowledge by tourism developers who extract water for their needs without knowing the actual yields of underlying aquifers. This threatens the future development of tourism while also leading to depleted and contaminated wells for locals, who bear the highest costs of water deficits and are typically the first people whose wells run dry (LaVanchy et al. 2020). Meanwhile, adequate recharge of aquifers is limited due to the low permeability of surface rock resulting in excessive runoff to the ocean. Combined with widespread drought throughout the country, much of the Pacific coast is experiencing a lowered water table which forces locals and foreigners alike to dig deeper wells for less water (LaVanchy et al. 2020). In response to the dwindling water availability, general lack of oversight, and proper management, residents in places like El Gigante, where 50% of the town's water needs rely on a community well, determine whether new businesses and residents can hook up to the town well based on the size and

desired water needs of that business. To avoid reliance on the town well, many businesses in El Gigante seek out lots with personal wells or collect rainwater using large catchment containers. For the near future, water will be a contested resource for locals, developers, and tourists alike who are all at the mercy of prolonged drought, uncooperative underlying bedrock, and a lack of proper management, foresight, and knowledge regarding the actual quantity and reliability of limited resources amidst increasing needs.

A prime example of the erosion of community independence, in relation to water rights amidst recent tourism developments, is the Guacalito de la Isla water agreement. Just a few years after Don Carlos Pellas' massive resort project was completed and fully functioning, local wells adjacent to the property dried up as a direct result of the hotel's massive pumphouse extracting seven liters of water a minute to supply its vacation rentals, golf course, and guest houses with constantly running water. In response, local populations who lacked any water reserves mobilized and settled in court that the resort must provide them with water rations once a week to fill their water tanks. An additional concession was also made which allowed locals to have direct access to the power lines and electrical facilities which Guacalito de la Isla has constructed along the roadside where both parties dwell. Although this was seen as a victory with the population now having electricity and water security, they are now dependent on this massive operation remaining open and honorable of their arrangement for all their water and electrical needs. As foreign developments and local populations continue to interact with one another through tourism influxes, a continual competition of resources and amenities must be settled through mutual agreements, resolutions, and reliance to balance the needs of developers and local populations alike.

## **Conclusions**

For Nicaraguans the promise of work and higher wages within tourism entices many of them to work either directly in establishments or to provide the manual labor for building and upkeeping the infrastructure which tourism needs. While gaining experience and working for these companies, Nicaraguans also learn vital transferable job and time management skills, as well as English, thus making them highly sought after in a variety of jobs. Employers must recognize the value in drawing from local, hardworking labor sources and provide direction and opportunities for them to earn greater incomes and job skills. To help them achieve their goals, many businesses and developers have sought to instill in those they employ the necessary skills, intelligence, and habits to make them viable members of the workforce and allow them to open their own businesses and gain worthwhile work experience. Patience, due diligence, and the close, constant, monitoring of one's venture and workers, while being proactive in teaching workers how exactly one wants their project completed, will go a long way in making a venture successful.

While many of the issues that plague the expansion and development of Nicaragua's tourism sector exist in other developing countries both regionally and around the world, developers are drawn to Nicaragua for its abundance of undervalued lots throughout the country as a result from widespread land sales and local displacement. However, costly building materials result in projects coming in over budget and several months behind schedule, remain the norm which has largely deterred large scale tourism development. Additionally, the future of increasing development in Nicaragua remains questionable when one considers the exceptional strains it would have on already

depleting water resources which are not managed adequately. Meanwhile overburdened and expensive electricity, combined with widespread illegal hookups, have rendered the resource unreliable, thus threatening the success and viability of large-scale development projects.

Consequently, the risks and costs associated with owning and operating a tourism venture in Nicaragua, will continue to negatively impact any worthwhile investment in tourism while the stability of Nicaragua remains questionable. Due to the increasing political tension combined with economic downturns, substantial portions of the Nicaraguan labor are seeking employment elsewhere in Costa Rica and the United States. For Nicaraguans who stay behind, the lack of opportunities and overall dismay with the current national predicament have left many to turn to drugs and alcohol while others possess no willingness to invest in their future. There also remains vast cultural and economic gaps between expatriates and Nicaraguan nationals which can foster distrust and undermine long term tourism goals and sources of employment for operations within tourism locales. As long as this divide remains prevalent, and the political situation continues to slide deeper into authoritarian rule, international investment interests will continue to view Nicaragua as a liability for conducting business and a destination that remains plagued by limited tourism numbers, costly, unreliable utilities, an uneasy political climate, and a workforce that would rather live and work elsewhere.

## FINAL DISCUSSION

The objective of this dissertation project has been to evaluate the successes and challenges of tourism development as both a broad human development strategy and a catalyst for local populations to achieve greater economic and social opportunities. The research has focused on the nation of Nicaragua, which remains an infrequent travel destination with an emerging tourism industry, to outline the successes and drawbacks of tourism in achieving these goals. From this study it is determined that Nicaragua possesses unique natural features, an exploding real estate boom, and remains inexpensive compared to other countries in the region which allows the country to stand apart from its neighbors and gives it immense potential in developing its tourism sector further. The national government of Nicaragua, meanwhile, has been eager to expand and attract increased tourism through generous tax cuts and incentives while investing millions of dollars in an intercoastal highway which seeks to link communities along the Pacific coast and spur increased development. Nevertheless, as this research reveals, Nicaragua remains isolated, possesses some of the highest utility and building costs in Central America, and lacks the foresight and connections necessary to attract international investment. Additionally, Nicaragua is led by an authoritarian government which has curtailed civil liberties, cracked down on protests and forced large portions of the Nicaraguan populace to flee the country, despite the promise of increased social and economic benefits which coincide with slow tourism development. The current regime

has in effect been inadequate in developing large-scale marketing plans to attract greater numbers of tourists while creating barriers that make it both risky and difficult for individuals to start and maintain a business in tourism. Due to government inadequacies and overt control over an industry which is predicated upon innovation, international partnerships, and national growth, tourism will continue to stagnate throughout the country, thus delaying Nicaragua from becoming an up-and-coming tourism destination.

In other examples of tourism development across Latin America, such as Costa Rica, Belize, and Mexico, both national and international private and public coalitions have spearheaded the tourism industry, where to this day it remains an immensely influential sector within those nation's economies. Often, it is expatriates who possess the knowledge, contacts, and business savvy to recognize the potential in new tourism locales and work with public sector interests to formulate broad, highly focused marketing campaigns that outline a country's best features and attractions. While expatriates certainly are present in Nicaragua's tourism industry, the Nicaraguan government's high startup costs and taxes combined with expensive building materials and unreliable utilities have resulted in rapid turnover rates for tourism businesses while dissuading many foreigners from starting a venture in the country. Furthermore, Nicaragua, unlike its neighbors, is politically isolated, meaning that the national government maintains exclusive control over how tourism is marketed, funded, and managed. This lack of trans international partnerships has resulted in marketing initiatives that are predominantly focused towards promoting the southwestern region of the country, where tourism has been the most lucrative and existed the longest, while

broad, national promotional campaigns remain unorganized, inefficient, and lacking any initiative.

From discussions with both foreign and expatriate workers, business owners, and former government employees, many believe that those working within INTUR are reluctant to provide any updates or changes to the current tourism paradigm which has resulted in a stagnating industry. This aversion to speaking out against the government has also transcended the local populace who are fearful of the increased erosion of civil liberties and while the Nicaraguan government continues to curtail extensive outside influence within the country. Many Nicaraguans have left the country for more reliable work and to escape political persecution which has resulted in workforce shortages and a subsequent massive real estate boom within the country. Following this exodus, an influx of foreigners, drawn to Nicaragua for its affordability and natural beauty, have begun purchasing these properties, unaware of the high costs of living, absence of formal property ownership, political persecution, and economic recession which has resulted in an abundance of land for sale. This study reveals that Nicaragua, like its neighbors is undergoing the same processes of foreign land ownership transfer that resulted from a rise in tourism, however due to the political climate and low tourism numbers, this growth has been primarily focused on vacation homes and small to medium sized tourism businesses in areas that are near water bodies such as the Pacific coast, Laguna de Apoyo, and Isla Ometepe.

To increase international investment and spur mass tourism along the Pacific coast, the Nicaraguan government has successfully garnered funding and support for a massive coastal road project. The road is halfway complete at the time of this writing

and although ambitious, the purported investment explosion and tourism expansion, which is anticipated to coincide with its completion, remains tentative. This is attributable not only to a lack of marketing initiatives meant to coincide with the road's completion, but also to the fact that widespread investment in Nicaragua is scant to begin with, due to Nicaragua's unpredictable political and business climate. This in turn creates distrust and hesitancy from international investment since many companies view an absence of international tourism chains and brand name companies as a sign that it is far too risky to open any large-scale operations there. Regardless of the size and scope of this massive infrastructural project, the coastal road will fail to garner mass tourism as long as the government remains committed to maintaining its authoritarian hold on power while failing to incorporate any strategies or planning that would attract and incentivize businesses to open operations in a country where tourism numbers remain low, growth in the sector has stagnated, and the political as well as economic climate remains unpredictable.

When analyzing the social and economic benefits of tourism regarding local populations, this dissertation proves that in an extremely poor countries, like Nicaragua, increased incomes and job opportunities remain the most sought-after reasons for Nicaraguans to work in tourism. However, social benefits which encompass transferable skills such as English language proficiency, better time management, familiarity with point of sales systems and other computer technologies, and real job experience within the service sector have allowed many Nicaraguan citizens to attain new skills and knowledge necessary to manage their own businesses as well as excel in their current workplace to become copartners in tourism industries. Nevertheless, developers who



must rely on this eager workforce realize that many of their employees are uneducated and unskilled resulting in a necessity for greater diligence, investment, and patience to ensure long term success. The businesses which succeed are the ones which look to their operations as opportunities to provide both economic and social benefits for local populations, which coincides with long term community investment.

When analyzing conservation and natural resource management as facets of tourism development, much of the literature suggests that like mass tourism, a collaboration between foreign as well as national interests is crucial to foster successful initiatives and create the necessary designated areas to facilitate alternative tourism growth. While Nicaragua does possess several examples of ecotour destinations including Laguna de Apoyo, Volcan Mombacho, and several small preserves on Isla Ometepe, the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (MARENA) lacks the funding, foresight, and broad international partnerships necessary to expand such ideals while foreign tourism developers in Nicaragua, who are more familiar with alternative ventures, define ecotourism along aesthetics and marketable scenery in order to attract tourists to their own personal ventures. Unfortunately, due to a lack of planning and foresight, ecotourism in Nicaragua remains, like in many places around the world, a niche industry with preference and incentives being dedicated to increasing greater mass tourism developments, specifically along the Pacific coast.

Regardless of whichever tourism venture is expanded and invested in, the viability and future of the sector, as a development strategy in Nicaragua, remains precarious. While many of the problems discussed in this dissertation have viable solutions, the Nicaraguan government is the catalyst and impediment to enacting changes

which will increase tourism numbers and investment. Due to the past uprising in 2018, as well as the current political climate, Nicaragua's international image is associated with instability and civil unrest. The national government's strategy for tourism development in the country is predicated short term financial gains from small to medium sized tourism ventures and real estate development occurring along the Pacific coast. Despite widespread anticipation in new large scale tourism developments emanating from the completion of the Pacific Coastal road, other campaigns aimed at diversifying tourism locales throughout the country, or even beyond its own borders, through large scale regional tourism plans, remain neglected in favor of nationally controlled monopolies which seek to hoard respective tourism numbers and withhold initiatives and knowledge which can expand tourism regionally. As the Nicaraguan government exacts greater control over political and economic life, the country will only deteriorate thus further dissuading foreign investment and forcing even greater numbers of Nicaraguans to leave the country to seek greater freedom and employment opportunities elsewhere. For tourism to thrive in Nicaragua, the government must expand partnerships and dialogue with local populations and private developers alike to craft plans that successfully promote Nicaragua's unique assets. Additionally, the country must reduce the barriers which make starting and running a business difficult for everyone and cultivate a much less risk averse business climate that attracts investment opportunities. Furthermore, the country will also need to expand tourism marketing campaigns that invigorate tourism nationally which will diversify the industry, attract worthwhile investment, and create new, expansive opportunities across the entire tourism sector. However, with the future of Nicaragua remaining uncertain, tourism will continue to be a development strategy

predicated upon potential and possibilities that will only continue to be undermined by an overt rise in authoritarian control.

## REFERENCES

- AFP. (2024, January 5). African, Asian Migrants Use Nicaragua as New Path to U.S. *Tico Times*. <https://ticotimes.net/2023/12/30/african-asian-migrants-use-nicaragua-as-new-path-to-u-s>
- Allender J. Darrel (1995) “The Impact of Expatriates on the Development of Resorts in Western Cayo District, Belize.” *Yearbook (Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers)* 21:1995, 67-75, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25765813>
- Artal-Tur, Andrés & Peñalver, Antonio & Conesa, J.A. & Martínez-Salgado, Oscar. (2019). Rural community tourism and sustainable advantages in Nicaragua. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*. ahead-of-print. 10.1108/IJCHM-05-2018-0429
- Associated Press. (2018 April 23). Thousands protest against Nicaragua government, urge calm. *ABC News*. Retrieved from <http://web.archive.org/web/20180424202935/https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/thousands-protest-nicaragua-government-urge-calm-54676692>
- Babb E. Florence. (2004) Recycled Sandinistas: From Revolution to Resorts in the New Nicaragua. *American Anthropologist* 106(3), 541-555. DOI <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2004.106.3.541>
- Bantman-Masum, Eve (2011) “You Need to Come Here...to See What Living Is Really About: Staging North American Expatriation in Merida (Mexico).” *Miranda*, Volume 5, DOI: 10.4000/miranda.2494
- Barany .E., A.L. Hammett, L.J. Shillington & B.R. Murphy (2001) The Role of Private Wildlife Reserves in Nicaragua's Emerging Ecotourism Industry, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 9:2, 95-110, DOI: 10.1080/09669580108667392
- Baxter, J.S., & Eyles, J. (2004). Evaluating Qualitative Research in Social Geography: Establishing ‘Rigour’ in Interview Analysis. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 22, 505-525. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0020-2754.1997.00505.x>
- Black, Stephanie. (Director). (2001). *Life and Debt* [Film]. New Yorker Films
- Brockington, D. Dan. *Fortress Conservation: The Preservation of the Mkomazi Game Reserve*. Bloomington Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 2002
- Broegaard, Rikke B. “Land Access and Titling in Nicaragua.” *Development and change* 40.1 (2009): 149–169. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-7660.2009.01509.x
- Buckley, Ralf, and Peter Mason. (2000) Neat Trends: Current Issues in Nature, Eco- and Adventure Tourism. *International Journal of Tourism Research* 2(6), 437-444.

<http://eds.b.ebscohost.com.libproxy.txstate.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=4&sid=1c38d87b-03c6-4c55-8fb8-0382d60524c9%40sessionmgr104>

- Bull, Benedicte & Castellacci, Fulvio & Kasahara, Yuri. (2014). *Business Groups and Transnational Capitalism in Central America: political and economic strategies*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014
- Butt, Bilal. (2012). "Commoditizing the Safari and Making Space for Conflict: Place, Identity and Parks in East Africa." *Political Geography*, 31(2), 104-113. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2011.11.002>
- Cardoso, F. and Enzo Falleto. 1979. *Dependency and Development in Latin America*. Berkeley: University of California Press
- Castellanos-Canales, Arturo. *The Reasons Behind the Increased Migration from Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua*. (2023, February 9) <https://immigrationforum.org/article/the-reasons-behind-the-increased-migration-from-venezuela-cuba-and-nicaragua/#:~:text=As%20a%20consequence%20of%20the,High%20Commissioner%20for%20Refugees>
- Chant, Sylvia (1997). "Women-Headed Households: Poorest of the Poor?: Perspectives from Mexico, Costa Rica and the Philippines." *IDS bulletin (Brighton)*. 1984) 28.3, 26–48, DOI: 10.1111/j.1759-5436.1997.mp28003003.x
- Charmaz, K. (2008). "Grounded theory methods in social justice research." In S. N. Hesse-Biber & P. Leavy (Eds), *Handbook of Emergent Methods*., New York: pp. 155-172.
- Charnley, Susan. (2005). "From Nature Tourism to Ecotourism? The Case of the Ngorongoro Conservation Area, Tanzania." *Human Organization*, 64(1), 251-277. <https://www.jstor.org/du.idm.oclc.org/stable/pdf/44127006.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A31fcf4503f553603fd0950ff147b6042>
- Chok, Stephanie & Macbeth, Jim & Warren, Carol. (2007). Tourism as a Tool for Poverty Alleviation: A Critical Analysis of 'Pro-Poor Tourism' and Implications for Sustainability. *Current Issues in Tourism*. 10. 144-165. 10.2167/cit303
- Clark, J. A. (2006). Field Research Methods in the Middle East. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 39(3), 417–423. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20451776>
- Clarke Kevin. (2023, August 16). Jesuit university in Nicaragua shut down by Ortega government. *America the Jesuit Review*. <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2023/08/16/jesuit-university-managua-nicaragua-ortega-murillo-government-245882>
- Clipston, Teena. JUNGLE THEME PARK THREATENS CONSERVATION EFFORTS Forestry Concessions vs. the Wilderness Area proposal. October 26, 2019. Maya

- Biosphere Watch. <https://mayabiospherewatch.com/jungle-theme-park-threatensconservation-efforts/>
- Clipston, Teena. The Emperor has no clothes: Archaeologist Richard D. Hansen and what they don't know in Washington. February 2, 2020. TeenaClipston.com. <https://teenaclipston.com/richard-d-hansen-and-what-they-dont-know-inwashington/>
- Close David. (2012). The Politics of Opposition. In David Close, Salvador Martí I Puig, and Shelley A. McConnell *The Sandinistas and Nicaragua Since 1979* (45-65). Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc
- Close David and Salvador Martí I Puig. (2012). The Sandinistas and Nicaragua Since 1979. In David Close, Salvador Martí I Puig, and Shelley A. McConnell *The Sandinistas and Nicaragua Since 1979* (1-21). Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc.
- Congressional Research Service. *Nicaragua*. (2023, April 5). <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12247>
- Cope, M. (2010). "Coding transcripts and diaries," in N. Clifford, S. French, and G. Valentine, eds. *Key Methods in Geography*, 2nd ed., London: Sage, pp. 440- 452
- Courtois Stéphane, Karel Bartošek, Joachim Gauck, Jean-Louis Margolin, Ehrhart Neubert, Andrzej Paczkowski, Jean-Louis Panné, and Nicolas Werth. (1999). Nicaragua: The Failure of a Totalitarian Project. In *Black Book of Communism* (pp. 665-675). Harvard University Press
- Crouch, G. I. (2011). Destination Competitiveness: An Analysis of Determinant Attributes. *Journal of Travel Research*, 50(1), 27-45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287510362776>
- Croucher Sheila (2018). "Rooted in relative privilege: US 'expats' in Granada, Nicaragua." *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 25:4, 436-455, DOI: 10.1080/1070289X.2016.1260022
- Davis Alicia and Mara J. Goldman. (2019). "Beyond Payments for Ecosystem Services: Considerations of Trust, Livelihoods and Tenure Security in Community-Based Conservation Projects." *Oryx*, 53(3), 491-496. DOI: 10.1017/S0030605317000898
- Davis, Shelton & Wali, Alaka. (1994). Indigenous Land Tenure and Tropical Forest Management in Latin America. *Ambio*. 23
- De Mente Lafayette Boyé. *There's a Word for It in Mexico*. Chicago: NTC Publishing, 1996
- Devine, Jennifer. (2016). "Colonizing Space and Commodifying Place: Tourism's Violent Geographies." *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 1-18, DOI: 10.1080/09669582.2016.1226849

- Devine, Jennifer A. (2017). "Politics of Post-War Tourism in Guatemala: Contested Identities, Histories, and Futures." *L'Espace Politique* 1(28): 1-21  
<https://journals.openedition.org/espacepolitique/3723>.
- Donohoe, H. M., and R. D. Needham. "Ecotourism: The Evolving Contemporary Definition." *Journal of Ecotourism*, 5, no. 3 (2006): 192-210
- Dorsey, E. R., Steeves, H. L., & Porras, L. E. (2004). Advertising ecotourism on the internet: commodifying environment and culture. *New Media & Society*, 5. 753-779
- Douglas, A. Jason (2014) What's political ecology got to do with tourism? *Tourism Geographies*, 16:1, 8-13, DOI: 10.1080/14616688.2013.864324
- Dutt S. Christopher, William S. Harvey, Gareth Shaw (2018). "The missing voices in the perceptions of tourism: The neglect of expatriates." *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 26, 193-202, DOI: 10.1016/j.tmp.2017.10.004
- Escobar, Arturo. (1996). Construction Nature: Elements for a Post-Structuralist Political Ecology. *Futures*, 28, 325-343. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0016-3287\(96\)00011-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/0016-3287(96)00011-0)
- Escobar, Arturo. (1998). Whose Knowledge, Whose nature? Biodiversity, Conservation, and the Political Ecology of Social Movements. *Journal of Political Ecology*. 5. 53-82. 10.2458/v5i1.21397
- EUCA\_Trade 2023: EU Central America Association Agreement (2023 June).  
<https://trade.ec.europa.eu/access-to-markets/en/country-assets/Sector%20Fiche%20Nicaragua%20Renewable%20Energy%20fv.pdf>
- Everitt, J. C., R. Chavez- Dagostino, L. C. Cortés, A. Cupul-Magana, R. Sanchez Espinosa, L. Gonzalez-Guevara Fernando, L Garcia de Quemado-Machain, and A.R. Raymundo- Huizar (2001) "Viva Vallarta! Impacts of the re-definition of a tourist resort in Jalisco/Nayarit, Mexico." *Prairie Perspectives: Geographical Essays* 4(1), 186–204.  
<https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.467.5201&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- Everitt, John & Massam Bryan, Rosa M.Chávez-Dagostino, Rodrigo Espinosa Sánchez, Andrade Edmundo Andrade Romo (2008) "The imprints of tourism on Puerto Vallarta, Jalisco, Mexico. Canadian Geographer." *Le Géographe canadien*. 52 (1), 83 - 104. DOI: 10.1111/j.1541-0064.2008.00202.x
- Ferguson Lucy (2011) "Tourism, Consumption and Inequality in Central America." *New Political Economy*, 16:3, 347-371, DOI: 10.1080/13563467.2010.500721
- Fisher Josh. (2016). Cleaning up the streets, Sandinista style: The aesthetics of garbage and the urban political ecology of tourism development in Nicaragua. In Mary Mostafanezhad, Roger Norum, Eric J. Shelton and Anna Thompson-Carr (Eds.), *Political Ecology of Tourism: Community, Power and the environment* (pp. 231-246). Routledge

- Fisher, Josh. (2019) Nicaragua's Buen Vivir: a Strategy for Tourism Development? *Journal of sustainable tourism* 27.4: 452–471. Web
- Fletcher, Robert. *Romancing the Wild: Cultural Dimensions of Ecotourism*. Duke, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2014.
- Fletcher, Robert. *The Ecolaboratory: Environmental Governance and Economic Development in Costa Rica*. Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2020
- France-Press Agence. (2023, December 9) African, Asian Migrants Seek Nicaragua Shortcut to US. *VOA*. <https://www.voanews.com/a/african-asian-migrants-seek-nicaragua-shortcut-to-us-/7418273.html>
- Gallant Paul. *The Story Behind Flor de Caña: the Fair Trade and Sustainable Rum from Nicaragua*. (2021, January 22). <https://boldtraveller.ca/food-drinks/cocktails-and-spirits/the-story-behind-flor-de-cana-the-fair-trade-and-sustainable-rum-from-nicaragua/>
- Gallón, Natalie. (2018 September, 4). After months of protests, Nicaragua's government says life has 'normalized.' Many citizens say life is far from normal. *CNN*. Retrieved from <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/09/03/americas/nicaragua-months-of-turmoil/index.html>.
- Gobierno de Reconciliación y Unidad Nacional. *Nota de Presa: Avanza Licitación Para Construir Carretera Costanera*. (2023, February 14). <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12247>
- Gobierno de Reconciliación y Unidad Nacional. *Nota de Presa: Avanza Licitación Para Construir Carretera Costanera*. (2023, August 10). <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12247>
- Goldman, M. (2003). Partitioned nature, Privileged knowledge: community-based conservation in Tanzania. *Development and Change*. 34 (5): 833-862
- Goldman, Mara J (2011). “Strangers in Their Own Land: Maasai and Wildlife Conservation in Northern Tanzania.” *Conservation and Society* 9, no. 1 (2011): 65–79. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26393126>
- Grosfoguel, R. (2000). “Developmentalism, Modernity and Dependency Theory in Latin America.” In *Nepantla: Views from South*, edited by Walter D. Mignolo. Durham: Duke University Press
- Gunder Frank, A. 1969. “The Sociology of Development and the Underdevelopment of Sociology.” *Catalyst* 3:20-73
- Haller, T., Galvin, M., Meroka, P., Alca, J., & Alvarez, A. (2008). “Who Gains From Community Conservation? Intended and Unintended Costs and Benefits of Participative Approaches in Peru and Tanzania.” *The Journal of Environment & Development*, 17(2), 118–144. DOI: 10.1177/1070496508316853



- Harding, S. (1991). "Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women's Lives". Ithaca, New York: *Cornell University Press*. Retrieved February 21, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt1hhfnmg>.
- Hartmann, C. D. (2012). Uneven Urban Spaces: Accessing Trash in Managua, Nicaragua. *Journal of Latin American Geography*, 11(1), 143–163. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41442128>
- Hennink M. Monique, Inge Hutter and Ajay Bailey *Qualitative research methods*. London: SAGE Publications, 2020
- Hertel, S., Singer, M. M., & Van Cott, D. L. (2009). Field Research in Developing Countries: Hitting the Road Running. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 42(2), 305–309. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40647531>
- Hill Collins, P. (2000). "Black Feminist Epistemology," *Black Feminist Thought*. New York, Routledge: pp. 251- 271
- Honey, Martha. *Ecotourism and sustainable development. Who owns paradise?* Washington D.C.: Island press, 1999
- Horton, L. R. (2009). Buying Up Nature: Economic and Social Impacts of Costa Rica's Ecotourism Boom. *Latin American Perspectives*, 36(3), 93–107. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X09334299>
- House of Horvath. *The Rise Of The Nicaraguan Cigar* (2024). <https://www.hofhcanada.com/the-rise-of-the-nicaraguan-cigar/>
- Human Rights Watch. (2020 December 22). Nicaragua: Law Threatens Free, Fair Elections Government Could Bar Opponents from Running for Office. *Human Rights WAthc*. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/22/nicaragua-law-threatens-free-fair-elections>
- Hunt, Carter. (2011). "Passport to Development? Local Perceptions of the Outcomes of Post Socialist Tourism Policy and Growth in Nicaragua". *Tourism Planning & Development*, 8 (3) 265–279. [https://sites.psu.edu/carterahunt/wpcontent/uploads/sites/13788/2013/02/Hunt\\_Passport-to-Development-Nicaragua\\_2011.pdf](https://sites.psu.edu/carterahunt/wpcontent/uploads/sites/13788/2013/02/Hunt_Passport-to-Development-Nicaragua_2011.pdf)
- Hunt, A. Carter and Stronza L. Amanda (2011) "Missing the Forest for the Trees? Incongruous Local Perspectives on Ecotourism in Nicaragua Converge on Ethical Issues" *Human Organization*, 70:4 [https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.psu.edu/dist/b/13788/files/2013/02/Hunt-Stronza\\_Ethical-Issues\\_2011.pdf](https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.psu.edu/dist/b/13788/files/2013/02/Hunt-Stronza_Ethical-Issues_2011.pdf)
- Irazábal Clara (2018). "COASTAL URBAN PLANNING IN THE 'GREEN REPUBLIC': Tourism Development and the Nature–Infrastructure Paradox in Costa Rica." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 42:4, 882-913, DOI:10.1111/1468-2427.12654

- Jackson, Will. (2011). "White Man's Country: Kenya Colony and the Making of a Myth." *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5:2, 344-368. DOI: 10.1080/17531055.2011.571393
- Janenova, S. (2019). The Boundaries of Research in an Authoritarian State. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919876469>
- Jones Geoffrey and Andrew Spadafora (2016) "Creating Ecotourism in Costa Rica, 1970–2000." *Enterprise & Society*, 18:1, 146-183. doi:10.1017/eso.2016.50
- Karáth, Kata. (2023, August 25). Government seizure of Nicaraguan university a blow to science, researchers say. *Science*. <https://www.science.org/content/article/government-seizure-nicaraguan-university-blow-science-researchers-say>
- Klak, Thomas. (2007). Sustainable Ecotourism Development in Central America and the Caribbean: Review of Debates and Conceptual Reformulation. *Geography Compass*. 1. 1037 - 1057. 10.1111/j.1749-8198.2007.00055.x
- Knuttsen, B. "The Intellectual History of Development: Towards a Widening Potential Repertoire." *Perspectives* 13: 1-46.
- Kull A. Christian, Camellia K. Ibrahim & Thomas C. Meredith (2007) "Tropical Forest Transitions and Globalization: Neo-Liberalism, Migration, Tourism, and International Conservation Agendas." *Society and Natural Resources*, 20:8, 723-737, DOI: 10.1080/08941920701329702
- LaVanchy G. Thomas & Matthew J. Taylor (2015) Tourism as tragedy? Common problems with water in post-revolutionary Nicaragua, *International Journal of Water Resources Development*, 31:4, 765-779, DOI: 10.1080/07900627.2014.985819
- LaVanchy, G. Thomas & Matthew Taylor & Alvarado, Nikolai & Sveinsdóttir, Anna & Støen, Mariel. (2020). Tourism Along Nicaragua's Pacific Coast: Context and Dilemmas. 10.1007/978-3-030-55632-7\_1
- Lawson, Victoria. *Making Development Geography*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007
- Lee Morgenbesser & Meredith L. Weiss (2018) Survive and Thrive: Field Research in Authoritarian Southeast Asia, *Asian Studies Review*, 42:3, 385-403, DOI: 10.1080/10357823.2018.1472210
- Lopez, Ismael. (2023, December 27). Remittances from Nicaraguan migrants mark new record, passing \$4 billion. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/remittances-nicaraguan-migrants-mark-new-record-passing-4-billion-2023-12-27/>
- Lozanski, K. (2011). Independent travel: Colonialism, liberalism and the self. *Critical Sociology*, 37(4), 465-482

- MacCannell, Dean. *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition. Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1976
- Macleod, D. V. L. 2001. "Parks or People? National Parks and the Case of Del Este, Dominican Republic." *Progress in Development Studies* 1 (3): 221-235. doi:10.1191/146499301701571462. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/218138983>.
- Martinez, Mario *Property as an Instrument of Power in Nicaragua*, 53 U. MIA L. Rev. 907 (1999) <https://repository.law.miami.edu/umlr/vol53/iss4/17>
- Massam, B.H. & Everitt, John. (2001). What the people say: A study of quality of life in three towns in Jalisco, Mexico. *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*. 10. 293-316
- Mathis Adrienne and Jeff Rose (2016) Balancing tourism, conservation, and development: a political ecology of ecotourism on the Galapagos Islands, *Journal of Ecotourism*, 15:1, 64-77, DOI: 10.1080/14724049.2015.1131283
- Matteucci, Xavier & Lund-Durlacher, Dagmar & Beyer, Matthias. *The Socio-economic and Environmental Impacts of Second Home Tourism: The South Pacific Coast of Nicaragua Example*. Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag GmbH & Co., 2008
- Mbaiwa E. Joseph & Amanda L. Stronza. 2010. "The effects of tourism development on rural livelihoods in the Okavango Delta, Botswana." *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 18:5, 635-656, DOI: 10.1080/09669581003653500
- McCann, C., Williams-Guillen, K., Koontz, F., Espinoza, A. A. R., Martinez Sanches, J. C., & Koontz, C. (2003). Shade coffee plantations as wildlife refuge for mantled howler monkeys (*Alouatta palliata*) in Nicaragua. In L. K. Marsh (Ed.), *Primates in fragments: Ecology and conservation* (pp. 321–341). New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Zengarini, Lisa. *Nicaraguan president bans Easter processions and attacks bishops*. (2023, February 27)
- McLaren Deborah. *Rethinking Tourism and Ecotravel*. Bloomfield, Connecticut: Kumarian Press, 2003.
- Merrill, Dennis. *Negotiating Paradise U.S. Tourism and Empire in Twentieth-Century Latin America*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: UNC Press, 2009
- Mohan, Giles and Kristian Stokke. 2000. " Participatory Development and Empowerment: The Dangers of Localism." *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 2 247-268. <https://www-jstororg.libproxy.txstate.edu/stable/pdf/3993419.pdf?refreqid%3Dexcelsior%253A5acddc89a51104adcef4e8250879330a>
- Montero Guerrón Carla (2011). "On Tourism and the Constructions of 'Paradise Islands' in Central America and the Caribbean." *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 30:1, 21–34, DOI:10.1111/j.1470-9856.2010.00453.x

- Mowforth, Martin and Ian Munt. *Tourism and Sustainability: Development and New Tourism in the Third World*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. New York: Routledge, 1998
- Nadalet Ivan. *Costa Esmeralda, Nicaragua opens to commercial traffic*. (2015, December 7). <https://www.ch-aviation.com/news/42320-costa-esmeralda-nicaragua-opens-to-commercial-traffic>
- Nepal K. Sanjay (2009) Traditions and Trends: A Review of Geographical Scholarship in Tourism, *Tourism Geographies*, 11:1, 2-22, DOI: 10.1080/14616680802643219
- Neto, Frederico. 2003. "A new approach to sustainable tourism development: Moving Beyond Environmental Protection." *Natural Resources Forum*. 27. 212 - 222. 10.1111/1477-8947.00056
- Neumann, P. Robert. (2001). "Africa's 'Last Wilderness': Reordering Space for Political and Economic Control in Colonial Tanzania." *Africa*, 71(4), 641-665. <https://doi-org.du.idm.oclc.org/10.3366/afr.2001.71.4.641>
- Neumann, P. Robert. (2002). "The Postwar Conservation Boom in British Colonial Africa." *Environmental History*, 7(1), 22-47. <https://doi-org.du.idm.oclc.org/10.2307/3985451>
- Nica Biz. *Pacific Coastal Highway – Work to start on Carazo Section*. (2023, September 20). <https://nica-biz.com/pacific-coastal-highway-work-to-start-on-carazo-section/>
- O'Brien Murphy and Rosa Muniz. *New Costa Esmeralda Airport to Open November 2015, Supporting Flourishing Tourism and Increasing Accessibility to Nicaragua*. (2015). <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20150804005477/en/New-Costa-Esmeralda-Airport-to-Open-November-2015-Supporting-Flourishing-Tourism-and-Increasing-Accessibility-to-Nicaragua>
- Old, Jason R., "The Politics of Waves: A Transnational and Cultural Surfing History of Popoyo, Nicaragua" (2023). *USF Tampa Graduate Theses and Dissertations*. <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/etd/9913>
- Olivares Iván. (2017, August 3) The US is now Nicaragua's Principal Oil Supplier. *Redacción Confidencial*. <https://confidencial.digital/english/the-us-is-now-nicaraguas-principal-oil-supplier/>
- Olivares Iván. (2022, April 30) Urgen eliminar restricciones a las aerolíneas para levantar el turismo. *Redacción Confidencial*. <https://confidencial.digital/economia/urgente-eliminar-restricciones-a-las-aerolineas-para-levantar-el-turismo/>
- Olivares, Vidal J. (2023), "The Economic History of Airline Development in Latin America", Button, K. (Ed.) *Airlines and Developing Countries (Advances in Airline Economics, Vol. 10)*, Emerald Publishing Limited, Leeds, pp. 33-49. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S2212-160920230000010003>
- Pasquini, Lorena, James A. Fitzsimons, Stuart Cowell, Katrina Brandon and Geoff Wescott (2011). "The establishment of large private nature reserves by

- conservation NGOs: key factors for successful implementation.” *Oryx*, 45(3), 373–380. doi:10.1017/S0030605310000876
- Perla Jr., Hector. (2012). FSLN and International Solidarity. In David Close, Salvador Martí I Puig, and Shelley A. McConnell *The Sandinistas and Nicaragua Since 1979* (269-287). Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc
- Puig, Martí I Salvador. (2012). The FSLN and Sandinismo. In David Close, Salvador Martí I Puig, and Shelley A. McConnell *The Sandinistas and Nicaragua Since 1979* (21-45). Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc
- Rantala, Outi (2011) An Ethnographic Approach to Nature-based Tourism, *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 11:2, 150-165, DOI: 10.1080/15022250.2011.576829
- Redacción Confidencial. (2020, July 26). Airlines Push Back Resumption of Flights to Nicaragua *Redacción Confidencial*. <https://confidencial.digital/english/airlines-push-back-resumption-of-flights-to-nicaragua/>
- Redacción Confidencial. (2023, August 16). “*Campañas turísticas*” del régimen no atraen visitantes a Nicaragua. *Redacción Confidencial*. <https://confidencial.digital/economia/campanas-turisticas-del-regimen-no-atraen-visitantes-a-nicaragua/>
- Redacción Confidencial. (2023, September 17). Nicaragua’s State Universities Impose the “Ortega Truth.” *Redacción Confidencial*. <https://confidencial.digital/english/nicaraguas-state-universities-impose-the-ortega-truth/>
- Remax Coastal Properties. *Nicaragua Revives Costanera Highway Project*. (2017). <https://property-nicaragua.com/nicaragua-revives-costanera-highway-project/>
- Ripley III, G. Charles. *Crisis Prompts Record Emigration from Nicaragua, Surpassing Cold War Era*. (2023, March 7). <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/record-emigration-nicaragua-crisis>
- Roberts, S. P. (2013). Research in challenging environments: the case of Russia’s ‘managed democracy’. *Qualitative Research*, 13(3), 337-351. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112451039>
- Romano, D. (2006). Conducting Research in the Middle East’s Conflict Zones. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 39(3), 439–441. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20451780>
- Romero-Brito TP, Buckley RC, Byrne J. (2016). “NGO Partnerships in Using Ecotourism for Conservation: Systematic Review and MetaAnalysis.” *PLOS ONE*, 11(11), 1-19. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0166919
- Rosmary Dan and Husnul Isa Harahap (2018) The approach of political ecology as an alternative method to overcome socio-economic problems, *E3S Web of Conferences* 52, 00020, 1-4, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/20185200020>

- Rostow, W. 1959. "The Stages of Economic Growth." *The New Economic Review*, 12(1): 1-16
- Ryan, G. W., & Bernard, H. R. (2003). Techniques to Identify Themes. *Field Methods*, 15(1), 85–109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X02239569>
- Saarinen Jarkko. (2016). Political ecologies and economies of tourism development in Kaokoland, north-west Namibia. In Mary Mostafanezhad, Roger Norum, Eric J. Shelton and Anna Thompson-Carr (Eds.), *Political Ecology of Tourism: Community, Power and the environment* (pp. 231-246). Routledge
- Said, E. W. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1979
- Seaton, A. V. (2002). Observing conducted tours: The ethnographic context in tourist research. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 8(4), 309-319. Retrieved from <https://du.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.du.idm.oclc.org/scholarly-journals/observing-conducted-tours-ethnographic-context/docview/195809465/se-2?accountid=14608>
- Selser, Gabriella. (2019, December 14) Nicaragua nationalizes fuel firm 2 days after US sanctions. *AP News*. <https://apnews.com/general-news-04293c07568cc2d3e3cf527dabe3faa7>
- Sharpley, Richard. (2000) "Tourism and Sustainable Development: Exploring the Theoretical Divide, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*." 8:1, 1-19, DOI: 10.1080/09669580008667346
- Silva Julie and Lila K. Khatiwada. (2014). "Transforming Conservation into Cash? Nature Tourism in Southern Africa." *Africa Today*, 61(1), 17-45. doi:10.2979/africatoday.61.1.17
- Smith K. Melanie. *Issues in Cultural Tourism Studies*. London, Routledge, 2003
- Spalding J. Rose. *Capitalists and Revolution in Nicaragua: Opposition and Accommodation, 1979-1993*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: UNC Press, 1994.
- Spalding, Rose J. (2012). Poverty Politics. In David Close, Salvador Martí I Puig, and Shelley A. McConnell. *The Sandinistas and Nicaragua Since 1979* (215-245). Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications, Inc
- Stronza, Amanda & Gordillo, Javier. (2008). Community views of ecotourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*. 35. 448-468. 10.1016/j.annals.2008.01.002
- Sullivan, Kevin. (2002 September 12) Former President's 'Hidden Treasure' Appalls Nicaragua. *Washington Post*. <https://theworld.org/stories/2024-01-05/nicaragua-helping-tens-thousands-migrants-reach-us>

- The Guardian. (2022, June 2) Nicaragua cancels nearly 200 NGOs in sweeping purge of civil society. *The Guardian*.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/02/nicaragua-cancels-non-governmental-organizations-civil-society#:~:text=Nicaragua's%20Sandinista%2Dcontrolled%20congress%20has,eliminate%20the%20country's%20civil%20society>
- Thompson-Carr Anna, *Political Ecology of Tourism: Community, Power and the environment* (pp. 213-225). Milton Park, UK: Routledge. 2006
- Tico Times. (2023, November 6). Nicaragua Targets 25 More NGOs in Crackdown. *Tico Times*. <https://ticotimes.net/2023/11/06/nicaragua-targets-25-more-ngos-in-crackdown>
- Timothy J. Dallen, *Cultural Heritage and Tourism: An Introduction (Aspects of Tourism Texts)* Bristol, UK: Routledge. 2011
- Timulak, L. and Elliott, R. *Descriptive and Interpretive Approaches to Qualitative Research*. Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association;, 2005
- Tor A. Benjaminsen, Mara J. Goldman, Maya Y. Minwary, Faustin P. Maganga. (2013). "Wildlife Management in Tanzania: State Control, Rent Seeking and Community Resistance." *Development and Change*, 44(5), 1087-1109.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12055>
- Torres Maria Rebecca (2018) A crisis of rights and responsibility: feminist geopolitical perspectives on Latin American refugees and migrants, *Gender, Place & Culture*, 25:1, 13-36, DOI: 10.1080/0966369X.2017.1414036
- United Nations Environment Program. (2020 September 7). In Latin America and the Caribbean, the closure of ageing dumps is helping to clear the air. *United Nations*. Retrieved from <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/latin-america-and-caribbean-closure-ageing-dumps-helping-clear-air>
- U.S. Department of State: Consular Affairs. *Nicaragua Travel Advisory (2024, January 11)*.  
<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/nicaragua-a-travel-advisory.html>
- United States Department of State: Office of International Religious Freedom. *2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Nicaragua*. (2022)  
<https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/nicaragua/>
- U.S. Embassy in Nicaragua. *ALERT: UPDATED ENTRY REQUIREMENTS FOR NICARAGUA*. (2022, June 22 <https://ni.usembassy.gov/alert-updated-entry-requirements-for-nicaragua/>)
- Usher, L.E. and Kerstetter, D. (2014) Residents' Perceptions of Quality of Life in a Surf Tourism Destination: A Case Study of Las Salinas, Nicaragua. *Progress in*

*Development Studies*, 14, 321-333.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1464993414521525>

- Victor Bulmer-Thomas and James Dunkerley. *The United States and Latin America: The New Agenda*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999
- Vrasti, Wanda. (2017). Chapter 3: Multicultural Sensibilities in Guatemala. *In Volunteer Tourism in the Global South: Giving Back in Neoliberal Times*. (pp. 56-84). Routledge
- Walker W. Thomas and Christine J. Wade. *Nicaragua: Living in the Shadow of the Eagle*, 5th Edition. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2011
- Wang Chin, Carl Cater, and Tiffany Low. (2016). " Political challenges in community-based ecotourism." *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 24(11), 1555-1568. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2015.1125908>
- Wilm, Johannes. *Nicaragua, Back from the Dead? An Anthropological View of the Sandinista Movement in the early 21st Century*. New York City: Next Left Notes, 2011
- Wilson, Park. *7 of the Top Places U.S. Expats Are Living in Latin America (and Why)*. Viva Tropical, 2014. <https://vivatropical.com/nicaragua/where-expats-live-in-central-america/>.
- Wilson Tamar (2008). Economic and Social Impacts of Tourism in Mexico. *Latin American Perspectives*, 35:3, 37-52, DOI: 10.1177/0094582X08315758
- Wilson, Tamar. (2008). Introduction: The Impacts of Tourism in Latin America. *Latin American Perspectives* 35(3), 1-20. 10.1177/0094582X08315760
- World Bank. *Poverty & Equity Brief: Latin America & the Caribbean: Nicaragua*. (2023 April). [https://databankfiles.worldbank.org/public/ddpext\\_download/poverty/987B9C90-CB9F-4D93-AE8C-750588BF00QA/current/Global\\_POVEQ\\_NIC.pdf](https://databankfiles.worldbank.org/public/ddpext_download/poverty/987B9C90-CB9F-4D93-AE8C-750588BF00QA/current/Global_POVEQ_NIC.pdf)
- World Travel and Tourism Council. *Economic Impact Report 2020 Country/Region DATA: World Travel and Tourism Council (2020)*. <https://wttc.org/enus/Research/Economic-Impact>
- Zea, Tibisay. (2024, January 5) Nicaragua is helping tens of thousands of migrants reach the US. *The World*. <https://theworld.org/stories/2024-01-05/nicaragua-helping-tens-thousands-migrants-reach-us>
- Zengarini, Lisa. (2023, February 27) Nicaraguan president bans Easter processions and attacks bishops. *Vatican News*. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2023-02/nicaragua-ortega-bans-easter-processions-and-attacks-bishops.html>