

SURF'S UP

Forget snowboarding, sand boarding or wakeboarding. Want real adrenaline-pumped adventure? Try volcano boarding in Nicaragua

WORDS MIKE MACEACHERAN



Cerro Negro

NICARAGUA

Is there anything more adventurous than balancing on the edge of a volcano crater in preparation to race down a lava bed slope of molten rock on a bit of wood? Apparently there is – someone did it backwards once.

In the city of León, 100km north of Nicaragua's capital Managua, a couple of Australians have come up with something no other country on Earth would have been crazy enough to try – well not sober anyway. Despite the obvious lack of a Krakatoa or Mount Vesuvius outside of Wagga Wagga, Darryn Webb and his partner Kim, two adrenaline-hungry tour guides, have pioneered volcano boarding, a stomach-emptying, trouser-filling adventure sport.

"When we saw the volcano, we just had to do it," Kim tells me enthusiastically. "How could we resist?"

The afternoon I join the tour. Excitement is in the air, the sun is shining and the group I am part of is in a confident muscle-flexing mood.

THE NERVES KICK IN

Cerro Negro, the volcano we are to climb, is the youngest in Central America, and also one of the most active. Nestled in the Maribios Range, Cerro Negro forms part of a chain of smoking volcanoes, which light up northern Nicaragua

“The devil's favourite sport is volcano boarding”

like stubbed-out cigars. Although it hasn't erupted since 1999, the possibility – no matter how remote – only adds to the excitement.

Admittedly, I'm already feeling nervous and, as we swap the city highway for a remote sand track on the back of the Bigfoot Hostel's open-top 4x4, I start to regret my Cuba Libre-fuelled decision the night before.

"Normally the girls are better," warns Kim from behind the steering wheel. "They have more balance so the boys fall off more often."

More important to me, however, is that a blacker-than-death volcano is starting to loom into view, just like the Death Star at the end of Star Wars. I'm sure someone, somewhere says, "Look at the size of that thing," but my mind is elsewhere considering smashed testicles, broken egos and days in a Managuan hospital.

Up close, the volcano is the real deal: it's shaped like a mountain made of black Lego bricks sculpted by nasty chisels and even-scarier chainsaws. I guess if the devil had

NEED TO KNOW

WHEN TO GO Nicaragua's dry season runs from November to May and is generally the best time to visit for adventure activities.

GETTING THERE León can be easily reached by public transport. British Airways flies daily to Managua from London via Miami.

GETTING AROUND The public bus is one of the joys of travelling though Nicaragua. You never quite know what you're going to get, how long it's going to take or who or what you're going to sit next to, but that's half the fun, isn't it?

VISAS Aussies, Kiwis and South Africans can visit Nicaragua for up to three months without a visa.

CURRENCY Córdobas. 1 GBP = 33.89 NIO. US dollars are accepted and can be more practical when paying for tours and accommodation.

LANGUAGE Spanish.

GOING OUT A bottle of Victoria - the country's best homebrew - is about US\$1 (20 NIO).

ACCOMMODATION It costs US\$6 for a dorm room or US\$13 for a private room at the Bigfoot Hostel (bigfootnicaragua.com). Volcano boarding costs US\$28 and is run by the hostel's affiliated tour company Green Pathways (greenpathways.com).

tntonline

For a full travel guide on visiting Nicaragua log on to tntonline.co.uk/travel

weather AVERAGES FOR MANAGUA

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
HOURS OF DAYLIGHT	12	12	12	12	13	13	13	13	12	12	12	11
MAX	30	31	32	33	32	30	30	30	30	30	29	29
MIN	19	20	21	22	23	21	21	21	21	21	20	20
AVERAGE RAINFALL (mm)	7	4	4	16	154	212	140	149	233	237	54	16

KEY: Hours of daylight Average rainfall (mm) *Statistics based on monthly averages
Weather information provided by weather2travel.com



Getting down will be quicker

a favourite sport, it would be volcano boarding.

Stopping at its base, we unload our sled-style boards made of metal and reinforced plywood, and begin our ascent.

At altitude, it is a slow 45-minute climb, during which I contemplate the lunacy of what I'm about to do. To date, my closest encounter with volcano boarding was a failed attempt to slide down a sand dune in a bin bag on Australia's Fraser Island.

NO WAY BACK

At the top, Kim points to a bundle of luminous orange suits, a pile of chemistry set goggles and the devilish slope. I'm terrified, but there's no way back now. Apparently, the fastest way down a volcano is to sit feet first, lean back on



Cerra Negro looms large

the board and, crucially, switch off your brain for five minutes. The current speed record is held by a German traveller who hit the lava-strewn boulder field at a rate of 68km/h.

Five minutes later, Kim is persuading one of us to go first. "Don't worry," she says, sensing that the machismo has disappeared. "This will be the most fun you'll have all year, I promise."

Andy from Dundee has no qualms and, volunteers immediately. Within seconds he disappears over the volcano lip in a comic book sketch of scrawled dust, and flailing limbs, and with a "fucking hell!" we see him no more.

SULPHURIC FUMES

Despite the adrenaline-fuelled urge to scream expletives while bouncing towards the ends of the earth, Kim reminds us to keep our mouths closed during the ride or be left picking rocks from between our teeth. Bizarrely, I find out later that Andy is an out-of-work dentist.

With sulphuric fumes blowing into my sweaty face, I get myself into position. At about 30km/h, I project myself down the slope into the unknown, blinded by wind, sun and dust. I'm riding a board down a volcano and, with AC/DC's *Highway To Hell* in my head, I'm cool for the first time in my life.

I career past waves of rock belching out smoke and debris down into a quarry of dark dust and debris, under a burning plate of aquamarine sky. There is no doubt the view would be intensely beautiful but beneath my mad professor goggles all I can see is a ski-jump drop before me. I close my eyes and glide straight over it.

I crashland at the bottom like a drunken swan on roller-skates with enough volcanic debris in my underpants to build a small summer barbecue, but my smile is as long as the road that stretches out back to León, where there is a victory mojito waiting for me. It'll make the perfect bar story and I can already hear it now: "So there I was, looking death right in the eye. I nearly lost a limb, you know ..."

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AND WHILE IN NICARAGUA ...

ISLAND LIFE

Isla de Ometepe is the kind of place where Frodo Baggins would go on holiday. Straight out of Middle Earth, it's the world's most perfect volcanic island and is made up of two pert cones joined together by a thin strap of sand and beach.

Crossing Lago de Nicaragua to reach Ometepe from San Jorge is an adventure in itself, thanks to the rickety double-decker boat used to ferry passengers, but it's well worth it for the hybrid of dense jungle and squeaky-clean sands.

Swim in the San Ramon waterfall, climb to the lagoon of Volcan Madera or kayak to the offshore Monkey Islands. Watch out for the monkeys though, who have been known to jump onto the kayaks from great heights, steal the odd paddle and even chase intruders from their island.

COASTAL ESCAPE

On the Pacific coast, Nicaragua's surfing capital San Juan del Sur has become a Mecca for hedonists seeking out the perfect piece of Central American paradise.

Its palm tree-fringed beach, which curves like a drunken smile into the crashing waves, is a miniature Copacabana and can easily turn into the venue for an impromptu beach party or mass soccer tournament.

Playa Maderas and Playa Yankee are the places to go on a surfing safari, but the town's fishing, canopy tours and scuba diving provide enough reasons to tie up a hammock and enjoy the sunset for any number of days.

A Monkey Island resident



INTUP, Getty Images, TNT Images

Mike MacEachern



Juayua waterfall in El Salvador



BORDER CROSSING

TAKE A TRIP TO EL SALVADOR

Head up to Tacuba on the Ruta de Las Flores for adventure post-civil war style. The infamous machete-wielding Manolo Gonzalez, an ex-freedom fighter during the civil war, offers erratic and slightly crazy canyoning, hiking and biking excursions, the highlight of which is the La Cascadas tour into the implausibly named Parque Nacional El Imposible.

At a more refined pace, two hours south in Juayua, Cesar and his girlfriend Jane offer horse riding tours to the surrounding waterfalls from the Hotel Anahuac. The town caters for adventurous eaters with a weekly food fair in the central square, which includes barbecued iguana and grilled snake.

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