

## Nicaragua

The United States took a keen interest in post-colonial Nicaragua, and in 1912, sent forces to occupy the country and install a new government. A succession of compliant dictators followed, including Anastasio Somoza, who took power in 1935. Somoza ruled with ruthless self-interest. He appropriated most of Nicaragua's wealth for himself, and during his tenure Nicaraguans were consistently ranked as having the worst quality of life in the Western Hemisphere. Through it all, he enjoyed the unwavering support of the United States government, including President Franklin Roosevelt, who summarized American foreign policy with the remark, *"He may be a son of a bitch, but he's our son of a bitch."* The Somoza dynasty (eventually passing from father to son), proved consistent in its brutality. In 1972, an earthquake leveled the capitol city of Managua, leaving 300,000 people homeless, and when international relief poured in, Somoza junior pocketed the money.

It was from this context that a group calling itself the Sandanista National Liberation Front (or Sandanistas) first appeared, rousing Nicaraguans to overthrow the dictatorship. Somoza responded with assassinations and the indiscriminate bombing of cities- moves that quickly alienated him from even his closest allies. In 1979, after a bloody campaign of guerrilla insurgency, and with the entire nation now fully behind them, the Sandanistas marched victoriously into Managua and took their country back. Somoza fled to Miami, taking with him the entire national treasury.

The Sandanistas began to rebuild, improving health care and education, and reorganizing the economy to better serve the needs of the people. Their early successes triggered additional support from countries around the world, among them, the Soviet Union. U.S. President Ronald Regan, certain that this relationship foreshadowed the spread Communism throughout the Western Hemisphere, formed a guerrilla army of his own to fight the Sandanistas from bases in Honduras. Over the next decade, Regan's Contras assisted in the senseless deaths of 30,000 Nicaraguans, a development the U.S. Congress eventually declared illegal, cutting funding. But Regan stood resolute. Acting in secret, he plotted a scheme whereby the Contras would receive money generated by selling weapons to Iran (thus arming a sworn enemy of the United States). When the 'Iran-Contra affair' became public in 1986, Regan faced the country's worst political scandal since Watergate. Nevertheless, U.S. support for the Contra war continued. It soon became clear to Nicaraguans that the harassment would end only with the Sandanistas removed from power, a perception confirmed by Regan's successor, President George Bush. With their country in ruin, their dreams throttled, and their backs to the wall, Nicaraguans expelled the Sandanistas themselves, in a 'free and open' election in 1990. Sadly, there are few optimistic conclusions to draw at the end of all this, unless you count the fact that today Nicaragua is no longer the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. It is the second poorest.

In 1998 Hurricane Mitch, one of the strongest storms of the 20th Century, inflicted final devastation on poor, hopelessly unlucky Nicaragua. If there is a bright spot to be found anywhere here, it is that international relief came pouring in once again, and Nicaragua now has some of the finest, widest, most outrageously under used roads we've ever seen. The sight of mules pulling a car with no motor over beautiful sheets of brand-new blacktop is a fine one indeed. For sheer cycling pleasure, this is a wonderful country.

Add a trip through neighboring Honduras, and it is possible to cycle a complete cross-section of the continent, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, in only about a week. To anyone who has ever cycled extensively in Canada, this comes as an astounding novelty and is immensely gratifying, given that back home the equivalent crossing takes a almost a full summer. There are many such possibilities in Central America, but we remember the ride through Nicaragua with a special fondness, largely owing to one particular moment along the way.

The rainy season was upon us now, and as we pushed for the coast on our final day, a powerful storm had gathered over the Pacific, drawing every breath of wind from the mountains in an exhilarating rush. Understand that Nicaragua is a screaming hot country, and we were grateful, not just for being pushed so briskly along, but also because we were about to get thoroughly and monumentally soaked. In a change of scenery as dramatic as any, we plunged out of the mountains and into open air, hovering at the edge of an expansive coastal lowland. The view here was of the sort normally available only from airplanes, where one sees the world reduced to a neat tableau of pure and simple elements. Lagos Nicaragua and Managua stood out prominently, like oblong mirrors lying across a flat, pewter table; surrounded in close attendance by three perfect cinder cones, black and severe, two of them smoking. A dark swell of thundercloud advanced over the land, flashing wildly with electrical charge; and far out to sea, beyond the storm, a streak of blinding white light etched its way across the horizon. The whole was filled with a profound silence, save for the occasional long roll of thunder. It could have been a scene from prehistory- biblical in its composition and suggestion of pending environmental fury. And then it began to dissolve, little by little, under gentle veils of rain. And we did get soaked. And that was great too.

As we made our way across the Nicaraguan countryside, we passed mud huts painted with the ubiquitous logos of *Coca-Cola*, *Budweiser*, and *Lucky Strike*. We passed barefoot children in secondhand t-shirts, promoting *Ft Lauderdale Spring Break 1987* and *Lincoln County Skidoo Champions*. And we passed groups of people huddled in the dirt around blurry televisions, watching *Friends*, *MTV*, and *the Simpsons*. The infiltrations of American enterprise are everywhere, and the juxtapositions they create could not be more poignant, or absurd. Most of these people are poor, illiterate and uneducated. They live in a world of earth and sticks, and many would be challenged to locate themselves on a map. But they are familiar with the interiors of New York apartments, J-Lo, and the odd tribulations of suburban middle-class cartoon families; all presented through the avenues of mass media and advertising. Given the oceans of difference here, one has to wonder how much they could possibly relate to, or, like objects from outer space washed-up on the beach, how much is just a novel curiosity. Watching them struggle with these juxtapositions would be amusing, but the piece that does not exist for them- the enormous piece, between having nothing and being seduced by another culture's decadence- includes education, health care, and the basic fundamentals of a society. Nicaraguans have long dreamt of bettering their lives- a dream that once included a vision for their own country, founded in their traditions and values, their concepts of family and religion. Now, many dream of traveling to the United States, and will tell you, with a look of faraway admiration, the story of a cousin or a friend who hasn't been home for years; vacuuming office buildings somewhere in the promised land. Useless scraps from an unknown land fill the space they leave behind; a constant reminder that the dream they now pursue is one so conspicuously not their own.

## Costa Rica

There are moments in Costa Rica when you feel like you've unwittingly stepped into an enormous theme park, perhaps with a name something along the lines of *Eco-Tour-Adventure-World*.

Want to bungee-jump through a waterfall? *"Welcome aboard!"*

Rappel over snapping crocodiles? *"Right this way!"*

A little hydroponic hackey-sack rain forest bongo-drumming? *"Jeep leaves in 5 minutes!"*

There are other moments in Costa Rica when you feel like you've unwittingly stepped into an *Eco-Tour-Adventure-World* infomercial.

Friendly Costa Rican: *"How are you enjoying our prosperous, clean country?"*

You: "Well, it's-"

Friendly Costa Rican: "And how about all this unspoiled Natural beauty?"

You: "Yes, it's very-"

Friendly Costa Rican: "Did you know that these features have claimed the hearts of thousands of travelers from around the world?"

You: "Uh-"

Friendly Costa Rican: "Yes! In fact, could anyone possibly not love Costa Rica? Wait- before you answer- take a look at this!"

Indeed, the Costa Ricans are a proud, gregarious people. They insist rather cutely that they are *Ticos*, not Costa Ricans, and distance themselves even further from their neighbors with a number of upbeat colloquial expressions, the most *Tico* of them all being '*Pura Vida!*' (Pure Life!), used like '*Excellent!*' or '*Fantastic!*', and heard all the time. You may pause to ask yourself- before leaping from a cliff edge bound to a giant rubber band- what any of this has to do with so much flaunted 'eco-this' and 'eco-that'; and you may experience a moment of confusion. Nevertheless, one has to complement the *Ticos* for putting together such a cheerful, winning package.

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A little-known fact about Costa Rica is that many of the country's fire stations offer free accommodation to touring cyclists, and it is quite possible to travel all the way from Nicaragua to Panama without ever having to stay anywhere else. With this in mind, we arrived, at the end of a long day, in the driveway of the Liberia *Cuerpo de Bomberos*, the first such fire station eastbound along the Panamericana highway.

Anyone who has ever spent a day in a fire station can tell you that the men spend 90% of their time dutifully polishing the pumper, and this was exactly how we found them, in the middle of vigorous lathering. One by one they paused in silence, and for a few awkward moments it seemed that maybe we'd made a mistake; that we had rudely intruded upon their fastidious world of lustrous chrome bells and whistles. So imagine our surprise when they dropped their sponges and welcomed us warmly; and we were ushered inside, upstairs, and into a private room, clean and spacious, with comfortable beds, hot showers and air conditioning. Furthermore, there was a full kitchen at our disposal, a pool table, satellite television... even HBO! How this tradition began we have no idea; why it extends only to cyclists remains a mystery; and while all of this may sound less than spectacular to anyone who normally sleeps in a bed, given our usual accommodations, we assure you, this was *Pura Vida!* On our map we plotted the full constellation of fire stations clear across the country and off we went- connecting the dots, savoring the air-conditioned hospitality of our new best friends- the *Bomberos* of Costa Rica.

After a few successive nights it seemed our good times might last forever. But adventure was not long in calling. With an everlasting itch for things wild and forbidden, we said our farewells to the beaten path of the Panamericana, and pushed off toward distant, uncharted fire stations, where we discovered, to our astonishment, men who knew nothing of this wonderful tradition. To assist in their cultivation, and for the sake of those who might follow, it became our mission to spread the good word. They always treated us gently, with slow movements and lots of agreeable nodding (perhaps suspecting some sort of mental impairment), and they *always* invited us to stay. And the two times that *these* fire stations didn't have any room, they directed us around the corner to the ambulance station, where *they* invited us to stay. And the one time the ambulance station didn't have enough room, two paramedics insisted that we take their beds for the night, choosing to sleep on the floor instead. All told, we spent every night but one in the company of Costa Rica's emergency service personnel, and it says a lot about *Tico* hospitality that all of this was achieved by doing nothing more than showing up, announcing that we had cycled here from Canada and were looking for a place to sleep, and then standing there- sometimes for a long while- grinning our most ingratiating grins. In a desperate bid to keep

a good thing going, we arrived at the first fire station in Panama and asked if perhaps we could stay with them too. We were told politely but firmly, “No”.

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In the great story of ancient continents lumbering through the oceans that is the geological history of our planet, Central America occupies just a few lines at the end of the last chapter. A land mass still in its infancy, Central America arrived on the scene in a flourish of fire and molten rock only 3 million years ago- the blink of an eye, geologically speaking. That human beings lack the visual and temporal perspective needed to appreciate such an event firsthand is disappointing, though even at our inferior scale of things, it's still a pretty good show. Volcanos pepper the region, and looming high in the mountains of central Costa Rica is one of the most active in the world- Volcan Arenal.

Arenal is surrounded by quintessential tropical jungle- the kind you first saw in illustrated storybooks when you were a child. Lavish bouquets of big, thick, rubbery leaves and big, thick, rubbery flowers tower on every side; so dark and impenetrable that with just one step, you could vanish altogether. And the sounds! Imagine thousands upon thousands of squeek-toys playing at random:

*whee-hew!, whee-hew!, tweek-tweek-tweek, whee-hew!...*

Above a slow, chanting rattle:

*chhhhhh--chhhhhh--chhhhhh--chhhhhh...*

The atmosphere is delightful, though the road is hellish- rough and muddy, with several washouts, and very slow going on a bicycle. By late afternoon we still had a long way to go, and in the falling light, with no camping prospects, we had little choice but to resign ourselves to a nighttime jungle bike ride.

We rode in complete darkness for a long time, eyes fully dilated, unable to see much at all, including the road. I bounced over something that made a shriek and a loud *crunch!* (so sorry about that, whatever you were), and a moment later, as though somehow connected with this unhappy accident, a sudden, heart-stopping roar boomed through the darkness. We swerved reflexively, skidding through loose gravel, and came to rest face to face, blind and bristling, wishing for all the world that we were *anywhere* other than lost in the middle of this big, stupid (though lightly groomed with starlight and admittedly still quite beautiful) jungle. For a long moment everything went quiet, and then it came again. We had never heard anything like this before. Definitely environmental; huge and rumbling, like thunder, but drawn out for a *very* long time- drawn out for a *fearfully* long time. This was, we soon realized, nothing less than the voice of the Earth itself- a bellowing groan from deep within the mantle. We were close.

And then it appeared- a starless shadow piercing the night sky, cigarette tipped. We arrived at a lonely roadside police kiosk, where the attending officer invited us to camp, and the three of us sat together in the grass, watching it smolder. About once a year, he told us, Arenal really blows, hurling fire and ash for miles, but most of the time it is ‘tranquilo’, just as we saw that night. Every now and then it would cough-up a few incandescent boulders, followed by a long stream of fiery drool. And every now and then it would roar that sublime, ominous roar. It was an awesome sight, though not exactly the image of hell-boiling-over one might apply to continent building at its most furious. It stretches the imagination to consider how big the pile has gotten already, and one can only guess at how much bigger it aspires to become. Another hiccup, another boulder. Such is the unfathomable genius of it all.

## Panama

Unfortunately, it wasn't very interesting to see Panama from the seat of a bicycle. This isn't to say that Panama has less to offer than other countries in the region, but as a cross-country cyclist, you have little choice but to spend a good chunk of your time on the Interamericana highway- a long stretch of mostly rolling grassland, a little too far from the sea and a little too far from the mountains, with a strong, persistent wind in your face. It's about as dull as it sounds, so we put our heads down and crossed Panama in only five days. Nevertheless, what Panama lacks in its crossing, it more than makes up for when you finally arrive at the finish line. Among the images of friends and family that will flash before my eyes in the moment of death, will be that unforgettable scene when the tall grasses finally parted: There stood the Bridge of the Americas, arcing gracefully between two continents. Below us, a parade of ships from faraway seas lined the Panama Canal. And stretched out behind it all, the Pacific Ocean, with which we have enjoyed such a long, protracted love affair on this trip, sang into view once again, sparkling brightly, just for us. It was a tremendous moment. I do believe our hollering could be heard as far away as southern Mexico.

Several times during the last century, it was announced that war would be necessary to fight 'immoral rebels' and 'evil regimes' that had infiltrated certain countries in Central America. Small as these countries were- teeny-weeny, piddling little shoeless peasant countries, in fact- we were assured nonetheless that their insane, evil ways threatened to topple the great pillars of democracy and bring ruin upon the entire civilized world. Our televisions confirmed all this. All we ever saw were carefully edited samples of their violent outrage. And everyone thought: "*My God! Those people down there are all ruthless barbarians!*"

One thing we have discovered, is that anyone searching for evidence of unspeakable brutality committed in the names of wealth and power need not travel very far in this world. The powers that be have consistently thwarted steps toward democracy in Central America, because democracy stands in the way of their true best interests. And while other western nations may exercise their moral superiority by not participating in the violence, perhaps even raising a timid objection from time to time, we are all bound to the same economic machinery, and as such, we are all deeply involved (Canadians enjoyed cheap U.S. imports of Guatemalan fruit very much during the 1980's). Yesterday, 'the threat of Communism' lent governments the excuses they needed to intervene in the world with violence and impunity. Today, 'the fight against terror' serves that same purpose. With our considerable ignorance, we demonize our victims and declare ourselves virtuous. With the power we yield, we deny them their right to life, and take from them what isn't rightfully ours.

These are wonderful, gentle people!

While cycling in Central America, we were surprised time and again by the *real* differences between 'us' and 'them'. Generally speaking, they are *friendlier* than we are. They are more *compassionate* than we are. More *generous*, both with their time and with the few possessions they have. They *smile* more than we do. You may look around at the rubble and poverty and ask yourself, "What could these people possibly have to smile about?" But decades of war have come to an end, they have modest needs and wants, and are working hard to better their lives. By no means are we held to strictly romantic notions about them; most know nothing of the freedoms and opportunities we take so much for granted, and some live truly wretched lives; but still, time and time again, one finds humor where humor is least expected, tenderness in the aftermath of unimaginable violence, and it is rare, even in the most desperate of circumstances, that one comes face to face with the blank stare of hopelessness.

Somehow, the Central Americans endure. They are a testament to the amazing resiliency of people and the incredible strength of the human spirit. They deserve our deepest respect, our sympathies, and wherever possible, a helping hand.