



LEFT Volcan
Madera seen from
Ometepe Island.

Gentle splashes of fresh water sprinkle over the bow, reviving us as we breeze through islets—more like dollops of jungle spooned from a batter of rainforest than beachy outcroppings. Egrets soar past our path and skid into landing, loons drag their knuckles on the placid waves, and somewhere beneath, bull sharks silently drift along, having adapted to the lack of salt water over thousands of years. It's a scene not dissimilar to one that could have been witnessed by some of our San Franciscan ancestors—Gold Rushers from New York crossed this very lake after landing on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast and braving a harrowing trip down the San Juan River. One of the most popular tourist destinations in Nicaragua, it pales in comparison to the rest of a country drunk with beauty, from the historical charm of colonial Granada to the majesty of Masaya Volcano's fuming crater to Carlos Pellas' recently opened Mukul Resort—a modern splendor putting Nica on the map for global travelers in search of awesome luxury.

In a country that has weathered waves of promise and destruction, from its interoceanic heyday before the Panama Canal stole its thunder to its more recent damage nearly a decade of civil war, hope radiates out of every devastating vista. And no longer calling solely to ramblers and adventure seekers, though they'll find plentiful options. Nica's broad appeal—to the surfers, history buffs, eco conscious, cigar aficionados, jungle trekkers, and sybarites—has been here all along. It just wasn't being offered on the right kind of plate. Why now? Because Carlos Pellas is in the kitchen.

It is to his credit that I'm here—Mukul's February opening and the development at Guacalito de la Isla on Nica's Emerald Coast are, mildly put, drawing attention. But this New York state-sized country is far greater on Nica's than one man's Pacific coast playground for the privileged. It's a country only beginning to realize its potential.

The drive from the capital city of Managua to Granada offers 45 minutes of lush scenery down highway Carretera a Masaya, past the smoldering rim of the Masaya volcano and ocean. It's not a leisurely drive, with sporadic, bleating