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TRAVEL & LIFE

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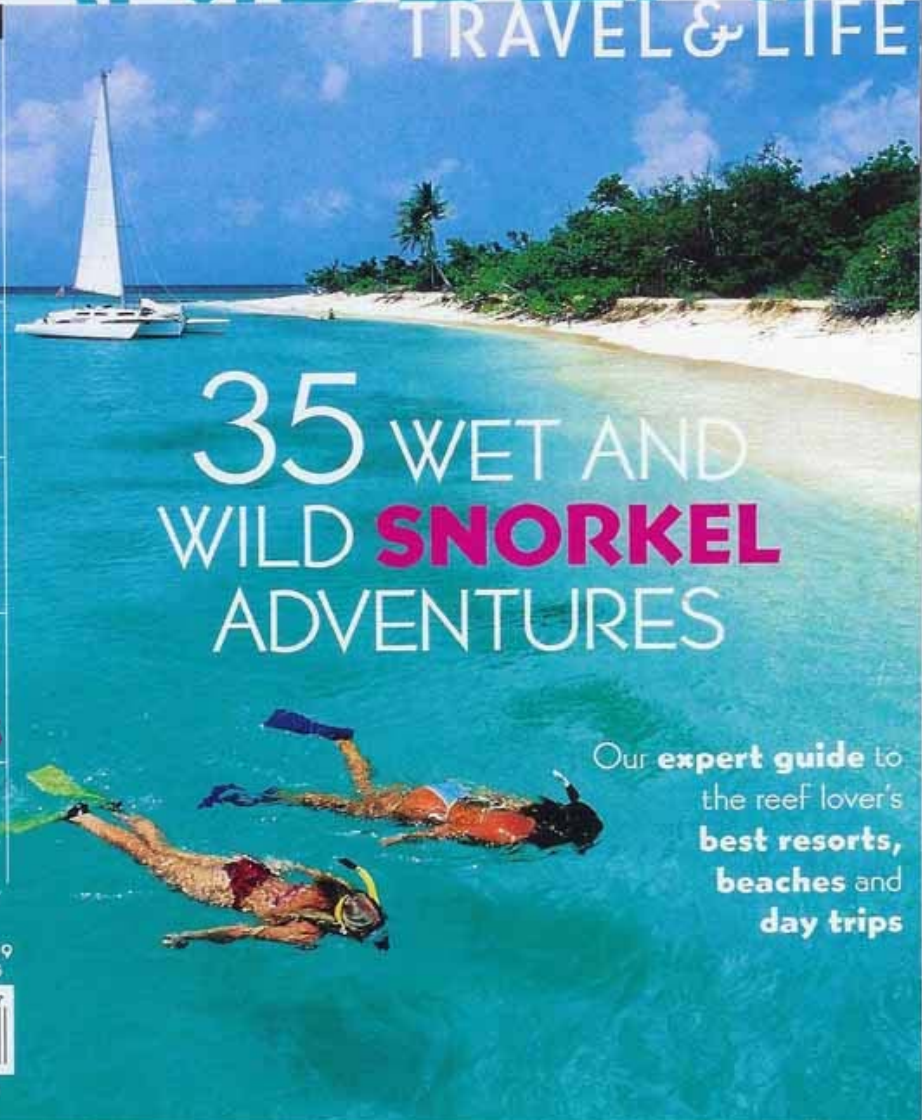
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ISLAND

JOURNEY, ENGAGE, INDULGE

JUST BACK NICARAGUA

The Next "Next Costa Rica"

The east coast of Nicaragua — 285 miles of white-sand cays, forested rivers and pristine lagoons — is one of the Caribbean's most isolated frontiers. Known as the Miskito Coast (named after indigenous Indians, not the insect),

it's a place so remote that land access from the country's capital city, Managua, is cut off each rainy season — May to October — when the single dirt road becomes impassable.

Adventure travelers listen up, though: The region's natural beauty and rich cultural diversity are slated to become more accessible over the next five years thanks to a \$41 million economic development plan financed by the Inter-American Development Bank. A \$15 million chunk is earmarked for travel and tourism infrastructure, including a new airstrip at San Juan del Norte, which will allow Nicaragua to compete with Costa Rica, its flourishing neighbor to the south.

■ **GOING NATIVE** Leading the ecotourism charge is the **Río Indio Adventure Lodge** (866-593-3176; rioiindiolodge.com), an upscale jungle retreat (from \$200 per person) that offers sport fishing, kayak trips and safaris led by Rama Indian guides. Until the airport at San Juan del Norte is built, access is via the small airstrip at Barra del Colorado, Costa Rica, or

by boat down Río San Juan from Lake Nicaragua, passing a storied fort and forests teeming with wildlife.

■ **POLE DANCING** A bit farther north, Bluefields is a bustling town of 45,000 people of mostly African and Mesoamerican Indian heritage. Find Bluefields at its best in May during Palo de Mayo (Maypole), a carnival with Euro-pagan roots that was imported by Jamaican immigrants. While contemporary maypole dancing is racy, the traditional interpretation — with colored ribbons wrapped around a pole — is staging a comeback, and the month-long celebration features almost nightly dance contests. Recently opened in the heart of Bluefields, **Oasis Hotel and Casino**

(011-505-572-2812; oasishotelcasino.com) has 14 well-appointed rooms starting at \$75 for a double.

■ **NOW EAR THIS** The Corn Islands, a pair of volcanic outcrops 45 miles off the coast, are Nicaragua's



JUNGLE LOVE

Nicaragua is home to the largest remaining rainforests in Central America, and the 640,000-acre Indio-Maíz Biological Reserve in the south is the domain of jaguars, crocodiles, three species of primates and more than 600 kinds of birds. As you head inland from the coast, the forest grows progressively taller and denser, with thick stands of bamboo and bright-blue butterflies fluttering around massive cottonwood trees garlanded by orchids. The spider webs are sturdy enough to catch birds, and the small neon frogs are of the variety used to poison darts. Tours of the reserve are offered through **Nicaragua Adventures** (011-505-883-7161; nica-adventures.com) and **Tours Nicaragua** (011-505-270-8417; toursnicaragua.com).

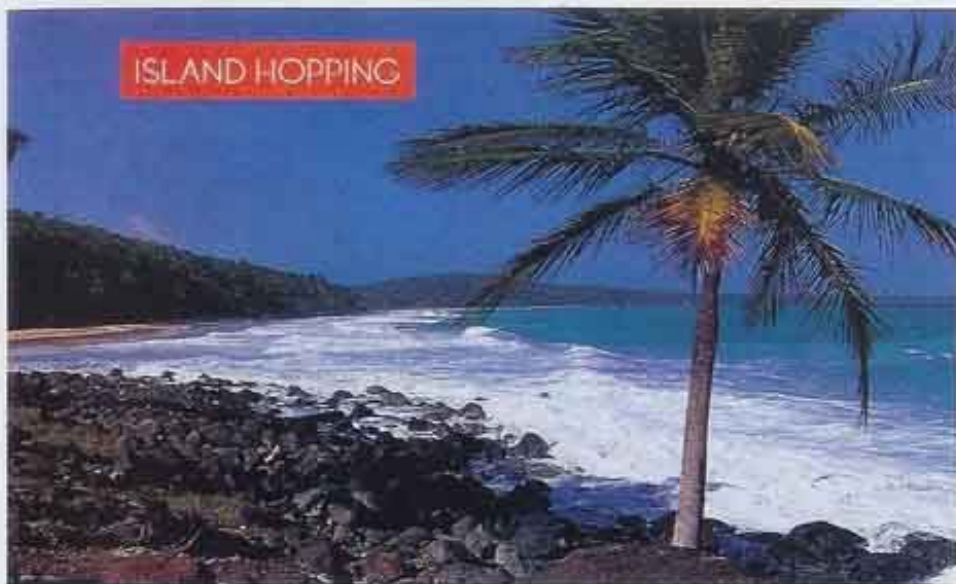
Cropping up on Big Corn Island; clockwise from top left: Pool daze at Casa Canada; Don Cesar Beach Hotel; Casa Canada hang-out; biking the six-mile loop.

HOPPING

UNWIND, DISCOVER AND PLAY



ISLAND HOPPING



answer to traditional Caribbean sun-bleached, beachy tourism, and their appeal is fast evolving beyond the budget-backpacker set. Five-square-mile Big Corn is reached several times a day by La Costeña (505-263-1228; flycostena.com), a Managua-based airline. A new brick road

rings the island, and a taxi anywhere is a buck, but bikes are still the best way to explore. Nautilus Eco Adventures (011-505-575-5077; divebigcorn.com) takes divers to Blowing Rock, a series of lava pinnacles that support a healthy population of spotted eagle rays and sea turtles. Nautilus also operates a guest house (from \$10) and convivial restaurant.

Nicaragua's Caribbean side offers adventures in Miskito Coast jungles and escapes to the Corn Islands (top).



Nicaragua's Caribbean side offers adventures in Miskito Coast jungles and escapes to the Corn Islands (top).

■ FOREIGN ACCENTS The 20-room *Casa Canada* (011-514-448-8339; casa-canada.com) opened earlier this year and quickly established itself as Big Corn's

most comfortable lodging, with king-size beds, air conditioning, a restaurant and 24-hour electricity (the government power runs only noon to midnight). All rooms have a sea view, and the infinity-edge pool compensates for the lack of a



beach. Doubles are \$75. You can find beachfront rooms from \$50 at Italian-owned *Don Cesar Beach Hotel* (011-505-575-5223; cesarbeachhotel.com). On request, the restaurant prepares rundown — a stew of coconut milk, lobster, fish, shrimp, cassava and plantain — cooked over a fire in a kettle on the beach.

■ BABY CORN There's no airport on 900-acre Little Corn; a motorized skiff makes the eight-mile trip from Big Corn once or twice a day, seas permitting. The south end of the island shelters Little Corn's premier inn, 11-cabin *Casa Iguana* (from \$25; casaiguana.net), and PADI scuba center *Dive Little Corn* (divelittlecorn.com). *Farm Peace and Love* (farmpeaceandlove.com) on the north end is an improbable trattoria serving delicious pasta, onion pie and desserts.

— David Swanson

CT&L REPORT *Hibiscus Spa, Westin Casuarina Resort*

Who needs Botox when caviar can accomplish similar results? The Caviar Facial — a blend of fish roe extract, shea butter and vitamins — at the Asian-chic Hibiscus Spa on Grand Cayman is the latest treatment for replenishing the skin and strengthening the elasticity of the face. The rest of the spa menu varies from traditional therapies like Swedish massage and Papaya Body Scrub to the more contemporary Body Bronzing, a soft skin scrub followed by an application of chemical-free self-tanning lotion. The popular Hibiscus Awakening package involves an aloe body wrap, a 50-minute massage, a manicure and a pedicure. And for pairs that can't bear to be apart, the Couples Only package includes a shared massage room and a private hot tub. Contact: 345-945-3800; westincasuarina.com — Emily Kruckemyer

