



View from top of volcano before sledding down



Top of the volcano, the yogis take a leap!

# Off the beaten track in Nicaragua

By Danielle Leonard

When I began my search for the perfect beach vacation, I had a few requirements. As a solo female traveller in her mid-forties, it was essential that I was part of a larger group for safety and companionship. Secondly, the trip had to offer a daily itinerary to stave off boredom of said lone female traveller. And, thirdly, I wanted an authentic experience that combined cul-

ture, community service and adventure. A sunny destination that transplanted North American luxuries in a third world country (behind security gates) would not suffice. I wanted a meaningful experience, dare I say, even life-changing, if possible. Nicaragua, it turned out, was the perfect choice.

While a Costa Rica vacation had been my initial choice, the hefty price tag led me to its Central American neighbour, Ni-

caragua. I joined a yoga retreat offered by 50-year-old John Fortin who is a Toronto power yoga studio owner and teacher. His company, Buddha Offroading, promised regular yoga practice with off-site adventures and community service against the backdrop of an oceanfront resort. All on a manageable budget. It seemed too perfect to pass up.

Any lingering doubts I may have had about the authenticity of the trip were

dissolved during the three-hour shuttle from Managua airport to Jiquillilo (pronounced hee-colee-o), the remote village on the west coast of the country, where the resort was located. A few scattered lamp posts along a darkened pothole-ridden road comprised the final leg of the ride. Staying off the beaten track, although not one of my requirements, was certainly a bonus. Eight of us arrived by shuttle around midnight (12 hours after leaving Toronto) to a boisterous welcome at Monty's Beach Lodge thanks to a friendly gathering of guests at the outdoor bar. I soon discovered, in fact, that all of Monty's is outdoors save the accommodations which are a mix of beachfront and poolside cabanas.

Monty's is eponymously named after its founder, Donald Montgomery, a high school teacher from Kamloops, B.C. who opened the resort in 2008 and now operates it with partner Gerry Caceres. Since its inception, Monty's mission has been twofold: to provide tourists an amazing beach vacation and to support the surrounding impoverished communities. More often than not, its visitors are eager to participate in any number of opportunities to serve the latter part of the mission. However, as Montgomery insists, the simple act of staying at the resort supports the locals since a portion of all profits are diverted toward community projects.

It's important for potential visitors to appreciate this philanthropic philosophy before booking accommodations at Monty's. The boutique style resort, after all, must forgo a few luxuries typical of North American-style resorts, to achieve its goal.

Air conditioning in the rooms is replaced with a ceiling fan, and a sign that reads keep lights and fan off when not in room strategically placed above the switch. With a daily temperature of above 30C, strategically seeking shade, drinking water and taking dips in the ocean are ideal ways to stay cool. There are no screens on the windows, so mosquito netting tucked around each corner of the bed is a nightly necessity. The toughest one for me is the toilet paper. It has to be tossed into the wastebasket – this is not uncommon for many South American destinations I've since learned. I eventually get used to it, but that was the one luxury for which I was most



The path in Monty's from the dining area to the cabins and ocean



Monty's Beach Resort

grateful when I returned home. The rooms are comfortable and clean. However, if spending hours inside a hotel room is part of your dream vacation, Monty's may not be the place for you. This is a destination to embrace the outdoors, whether on the premises, sleeping in a hammock, surfing the waves, or enjoying the multitude of excursions.

The resort's setting is breathtaking. The Pacific Ocean is located approximately 40 feet from my doorstep; the sound of crashing waves is ever present and sunsets are unmatched, particularly when observed perched on the boulders that overlook the receding tide. If you're lucky, you may catch a local travelling by horse and carriage along the darkening beach.

The sense of community at Monty's is ever present. With meals freshly cooked and served at set times, all guests eat together, *al fresco*, along wooden tables. Whether you come as part of a group or as a couple, making new friends and sharing stories is an inevitability.

Our yoga classes take place overlooking the ocean on a raised wooden platform that you reach via a set of stairs. Hammocks hang below the platform's floor for those preferring the art of meditation (read: naps). Practicing flow as the sun sets over the Pacific redefined my definition of Zen and had me wondering if I could ever truly enjoy practicing within the four walls of a studio again.

Yoga practice, however, only made up a fraction of my activities. Buddha Offroading included excursions almost daily that took us off the resort premises and into the local community and culture. In fact, getting off the resort should be an essential part of any trip to Monty's. Montgomery is at his most effervescent when leading excursions, sharing a knowledge of the area that rivals any Frommer's guide.

Volcano boarding at Cerro Negro is a must for every adventurer. The hike up the side of the volcano is no easy feat, particularly under the blazing sun with a wooden board fastened onto your back, but our group of yogis broke Monty's record for fastest time to reach the top. Not bad for a group of bleeding hearts ranging in age from early 20s to mid-50s. Yogis are tougher than they look. After practicing a few yoga poses and shooting selfies, it was time to sled down the 728 metre slope.

I volunteered to ride second since I knew the longer I waited, the more nervous I would become. We are given a three-minute tutorial on how to ride down without killing ourselves – the trick is in the heels. Dig them into the sand on either side of the sled to prevent yourself from careening uncontrollably to the bottom. It's extreme tobogganing, without the snow or the cold. Thankfully, each of us is required to don a full body jumpsuit and goggles to minimize the amount of dirt that adheres to our skin and clothing. It's a thrilling ride

that any true blood Canadian with a childhood's worth of tobogganing experience can handily complete.

The next morning, I set out at 5 a.m. to paddleboard. No surprise, Montgomery is already waiting when we show up, bleary eyed, to drive us to the Estero Padre Ramos Nature Reserve – one of the largest mangrove estuaries left in Central America. The sun rises as we glide across the glassy surface. With nothing but the sound of our oars dipping into the water and singing birds, the experience feels surreal. It's a living postcard of the perfect morning that I wish I could capture in a bottle and bring back home with me to sustain me through the cold winters.

Community service is as much a part of the Monty's experience as surfing. Whether it's building homes, working with women, wildlife conservation or helping organize sports, there is no shortage of opportunity for visitors to immerse themselves in the community.

"We've got enough to suit most people's needs," explains Montgomery. "Monty's is always looking for people interested in international community development, particularly groups looking for this type of opportunity."

Our yoga group prepared and served a meal in El Limonal – an impoverished community where many of the residents scrape out a living roaming the garbage dump beside which it is built, in search of recyclables. Dozens of young children run circles around us as we prepare a hearty

stew in the outdoor kitchen. It's an uplifting reminder of the ability of children to live joyfully in most any circumstances, as well as a sobering reminder that as Canadians, we live in abundance while other parts of the world lack the basics we so easily take for granted.

With conservation an integral part of Monty's mission to support the Nicaraguan community, it's no surprise that the resort has joined the local efforts to protect the endangered sea turtles. It maintains a turtle hatchery on its property and, depending on the time of year, invites visitors to take part in regular releases of baby turtles into the ocean. I joined in a release one evening as the sun was setting. Almost 100 baby sea turtles flapped their toonie-size shells across the white sand and into the sea. We wished them bon voyage and good luck.

Although my stay at Monty's is only one week, the transformation of body and spirit was obvious. When one of the women I met at the airport enroute to Nicaragua pulls up a selfie group photo we took at Pearson International Airport, I marvel at the difference between then and now. My coiffed, perfectly made up look is gone. I look and feel more spirited – wild hair, brighter eyes, softer smile. I'm more relaxed, maybe a little more aware of the world outside my Oakville bubble and just a touch more open to letting go of the need to control every aspect of my life. I like the transformation, however small it may be and however brief it may last.



Practising yoga in the outdoor studio overlooking the ocean.