

Nicaragua is listed as the second most impoverished country in the western hemisphere with less than US\$430 per capita income annually. Devastated by hurricanes, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, the landscape is rugged, rough and untamed. Enslaved by Columbus, ravaged by Somoza and no fewer than three times used as political pawns through US-backed corrupt governments, Nicaragua is a nation of survivors who have learned to be weary of governments and to depend upon extended families they can see, feel and trust. For this reason, as we set out on our journey to research field-based sustainable development and aid organizations, Nicaragua was high on our radar. It faces all of the fundamental elements of poverty and the needs for sustainable development and educational and governmental reform, in a scale that is more accessible than the high-population poverty centers of Africa, Asia and the Middle East and would serve as a good first case-study for our young family.

The objective of our research trips is to explore and understand what organizations are doing to combat poverty and environmental misuse in the field. What are people doing to help? Which models are most effective and efficient? Which models resonate with our family values and passions? And ultimately, which models seem to create sustainable economic and environmental stability and opportunity for the people with the most need.

A second, equally important objective is to broaden our personal awareness and experience of the human condition and to ensure that our children (ages 9 and 11) gain a deep sensitivity to life on planet earth as it really is.

To this end, we were introduced to Don Hammond and Rusty Pederson, executive and associate executive Directors of Bridges to Community, a non-profit aid group which has been operating in Nicaragua since 1992. After a bit of making sure we knew what we were getting into (yes, we know there aren't hot tubs in the room; yes, the kids really can do a 10-mile hike; yes, we are OK with no AC, no hot water and no especially TV...), they graciously agreed to arrange a visit to their projects in and around Nicaragua's capital, Managua, as well as several visits with other aid groups in the area. In the end, we would visit eight different aid organizations, as well as get direct commentary from ex-Somoza and current Sandinista government officials in a tour covering a little less than two weeks.

These notes include the daily email transcripts (chronicled to my father via Blackberry). I have not changed these emails other than to correct a typo or two, or add a name to offer a little more context and logistical detail. Full contact details for each organization can be found at the end of this posting.

While too early in our research process to offer any detailed conclusions, we are deeply thankful to everyone who welcomed us so thoughtfully into their worlds and made this a

fantastic and moving trip. We are neophytes in this journey, so please forgive me for and let me know about any oversights, generalizations or blatant misconceptions.

Day 0 – December 26, 2007 – Washington, DC to Managua

Our trip began with a relatively uneventful (rare in our experience) flight to Managua via connection in Miami. Don Hammond, executive director of Bridges to Community and our host for the first half of the trip, joined us in Miami. The overall travel time was about five hours.

On arrival, we were collected by Miranda Jennings (Nicaragua coordinator for Bridges), and shuttled to [Hotel El Raizon](#), a simple roadside hotel where most of the Bridges volunteer groups assemble before heading out to their field assignments. El Raizon is a clean, family-style hotel with ample-sized rooms and an open-air breezeway in a country/hacienda atmosphere.

We had a quick, tasty, traditional Nica meal and headed off to our room where we encountered another Nica tradition that we were not so sure about: the Lorenzetti Maxi Duch, otherwise known as the “Suicide Shower.” These bulky plastic shower heads look somewhat like a fancy shower massage unit, except they have electrical wires coming out of them and they don’t give you a massage. The wires are generally haphazardly attached to other electrical wires splaying out of the wall above the water pipe. This is what gives the Maxi Duch its “instant-on” heating capability (when it works) and it is also what makes most unfamiliar visitors “freak.” Suffice it to say that we did not have a fatal encounter with one of these – and we didn’t even get a hot shower that first night anyway (brrrr, even with 90-degrees outside), but the occasional sparks do get the blood flowing and we did observe a few reasonable cautions, like not touching the shower head itself while wet ...



Day 1 – December 27, 2008 – Managua to Ticuantepe

At daybreak, the kids roamed about the hotel complex, which is really more of a lodge and conference center. It has several outdoor areas for groups to meet and several different types of accommodations. Scurrying throughout are several rather large rabbits, chickens, and even a couple of parrots – lots of fun for the kids to explore.

With a hearty breakfast in us, we set off to visit some local sights before our scheduled lunch with political icon and social thought leader, Alejandro Martinez Cuenca. The first of these was [Coyotepe](#) ('tepe' comes from the now mostly extinct Nahuatl word 'tepetl,' meaning mountain). Situated overlooking the hills of Masaya and overseen by the Boy Scouts, the fortress of Coyotepe has a rich (but tragic) history with many interesting passages and chambers but it is now in need of a significant



amount of work to restore it to its original majesty. Although originally built as a military fortress, its more recent incarnation was as an especially brutal prison run by the Somoza government.

[Masaya Volcano National Park](#) is a short drive from Coyotepe. The main attraction is the active Masaya caldera smoldering and smoking continuously. The park also has a great exhibit on volcanoes and geology, so leave some time for that. There was no lava to be seen when we were there, but the power of the volcano and its extent is clear.

Time for lunch with Alejandro Martinez Cuenca and his daughter, Claudia. Alejandro is a dedicated and outspoken political figure in Nicaragua and one of the brightest voices of change in Central America, perhaps second only to his daughter, Claudia. Currently finishing her cardiology residency in Miami and then New York City later this year, Claudia has inherited her parents' spirit and one-upped them in energy. She has a compelling view of the future of Nicaragua and the magnetism to have many follow in her ways. She plans to start a clinic in Managua when she finishes her studies. We got a wonderful introduction into the broader political and social issues of Nicaragua, its legacy of international interference, economic roller-coasters and a few notions of the future of commerce and aid in the country. More on this in a later note.

After lunch, we headed out to a Bridges village project in Masaya. At this site, the community – with Bridges' assistance – decided that their next major need was a community center from which to run their burgeoning sewing cooperative. The two-storey center has a meeting and working area, as well as a kitchen and sleeping area for visitors and those in need. The ladies (and children – a theme that will continue) greeted us with huge smiles and showed us around. They hope to create enough commerce that they will be able to free more of their children from the fields and factories to continue their education.



Our final stop for the day was at the Palo de Leche community of Francia 1 village in a town called Ticuantepe, south of Managua (km 25 Carretera Managua a la Concepcion – if you really want to know). Needless to say, these designations speak to a broader issue in Nicaragua: the lack of urban planning, signage, etc. This visit will show us the process and results of the main work that Bridges to Community has been undertaking. We will see the villagers in their old and new homes and we will work alongside them on a project. I discuss this and the rest of the trip in my Blackberry notes that follow...

-----Original Message-----

From: Gregor Bailar
Sent: Sunday, December 30, 2007 10:00 AM
Subject: Trip report 2

Since my last note, we have continued getting deeper into Nicaragua and learning about its people. After our lunch with Alejandro, probably the second-most prominent political figure in Nicaragua and an amazingly warm and open person, we headed into the hills to a community called Ticuantepe and met with a group of women who have formed a sewing cooperative in a community building built by Bridges (the aid group who arranged our trip).

Then we went further into the hills to a village called Palo de Leche where Bridges is helping to build and finance homes and community infrastructure. We met with the village leadership, got settled in the 7x9 foot bunk room (double-decker cot bunks outfitted with mosquito nets) and went out on a village tour. The tour took us down from the roadway into the beautifully terraced (and steep!) pineapple and pitaya (a sweet fuchsia cactus fruit) fields and into various villagers' homes. The "homes" are makeshift huts with corrugated siding, metal scraps and whatever else can be found to cover a mud floor. The kids and moms stared at us as we at them. Of course, then the kids came out to investigate.



We toured the ridges and the valleys of this agrarian town and then headed back to the lead elder's home for dinner and child's play (literally). The night was lumpy to say the least. Situated directly at the roadside, every truck (and there are many) rattles the building. The cocks here do not observe the time-honored tradition of wake-up crowing only, but prefer to hound their potential mates all night long, cockle-doodle-do-ing constantly.

At breakfast we head out to help "pour" the foundation of a house for a local villager. Pouring turns out to include rebar wiring, mixing the gravel and sand in a huge pile on a mud floor and shuttling about a hundred buckets of cement around the footers. It was great. Hard work but nothing like seeing the owner-to-be (Señor Francisco) and the pride



in his eyes as we all worked on the home he had worked so hard to secure. All Bridges benefactors will repay a third of the cost of the house and must own the land, and the land must be titled in the wife's name exclusively. The repayment is then returned directly to the community for other projects, such as a community center or schools.

We then went down to Señor Francisco's fields and helped clear weeds from his pitaya cactuses. We had lunch back at the leader's home and then a goodbye party with all the village preschoolers and their mothers etc. The village hopes to be able to build a preschool building in the next year. It was quite a send-off with games and food and speeches.



We ended the day at a waterside lodge at the base of the inside lip of an enormous (miles around) crater lake formed from the now mostly extinct Volcan de Apoyo. Dinner was with several other foreign aid workers from the local Bridges office and was quite interesting. Not to mention the dozens of bats fishing for minnows on the top of the lake.

Sent via BlackBerry by AT&T

-----Original Message-----

From: Gregor Bailar
Sent: Sunday, December 30, 2007 1:03 PM
Subject: Trip report 3

Saturday began at Laguna de Apoyo, southeast of Managua with a walk around the lodge and a swim for the kids. We then headed to a farming village inside an off-the-path part of Masaya, one of the three cities that circle the capital. The Bridges leaders there have been in Nica since 1992 and have helped with everything from clean water, schools, clinics, to houses and community organization. We met with them at their home cum boarding house cum office and then went walking in the village. Kids ran to Bonnie and Jim wherever we went. Jim, a past Presbyterian pastor, and Bonnie, a youth minister, are icons in the area. We went with them to a computer lab school they have established and met with the students there. It was surreal



seeing the computers in the central square of a village of mostly mud huts and a smattering of Bridges' cement block homes.

From there we went to "downtown" Masaya to an art project that takes kids off the street to teach them crafts to sell. The lead kid was a crack, glue, alcohol addict who pulled himself out of the gutter upon meeting some of the Bridges folks a few years ago. He is now destined for college and quite an accomplished artist. The building serves as both home and gallery and the crafts are available for sale at fair-market prices.

Next we went on to the majestic city of Granada for lunch. It is a grand old colonial city with a wide busy town square, ringed with vendors surrounded by beautiful high ceilinged Spanish-colonial buildings lining narrow streets.

We walked about, bought a machete for US\$4.50 and got our daughter a Nica haircut (she was dying to be able to attest to the fact). Needless to say, Terry had to do a bit of doctoring on the haircut – especially since no matter how many times we said so in perfect Spanish, they never believed Schuyler was a girl with her hair already so short.



Next we boarded our van and bounced around the back streets of the barrios to a plot of land a kids' group has recently acquired to continue their cause. The group, ESCUELA DE LA COMEDIA Y EL MIMO – run by an ex-pat Venezuelan, Diego Gené – rehabs street kids by teaching them circus and street performance. They have travelled the world and many of them are headed for college. They were phenomenal – talented in their skills and animated in their acting. It was a treat.



Dinner was at CaféChavalos, a restaurant run by another group of street kids who again were junkies until the volunteer coordinator cum street grandma from Building New Hope pulled them into her café. Donna Tabor arrived from Pittsburgh as a Peace Corps volunteer over a year ago and never left. With Donna at the helm, the kids run a mainstream restaurant and are sending themselves to college. The food was great and we had wonderful service, as well. The Bridges team joined us and ended the day with a wonderful send-off with gifts and speeches since this was our last night with them.

Another amazing day.

Back to Apoyo for sleep with an early start to Lake Nicaragua and the Ometepe Biological Station. Back at the room we had a brief visit from a scorpion in Schuyler and Terry's room, reminiscent of the 6-inch tarantula I had encountered on the pathway the night before.

Sent via BlackBerry by AT&T

-----Original Message-----

From: Gregor Bailar
Sent: Wednesday, January 02, 2008 7:25 AM
Subject: Trip report 4

Sunday was a Planes, Trains and Automobiles transport day. Our destination: Ometepe Biological Station, about 8 miles off the coast of Rivas, in Lago Nicaragua, and only accessible by ferry.

The day began with a private van ride to the lakeside port town of St. Jorge, near Rivas. The roads were so bad that cars have to weave drunkenly around gaping potholes, trying to avoid the fate of at least one truck we saw with a broken axle. Along the way, we passed through Granada again, now sleepy and almost deserted. We also passed through great fields of cattle and hay for a while before the traditional crops of plantains, papaya and palms returned.

We arrived in St. Jorge around 9am after our 90-minute bounce from Laguna de Apoyo. The day was bright and clear but the wind coming off the lake was near gale force. It was like the worst New England Nor'easter, only warm and smelling of fresh water. The lake was roiling with 3'-5' waves crashing into the shore and white tops as far as you can see. We dropped our luggage in a nicely appointed glass-walled waiting cabana, paid our 5 Córdobas (25 cents) to use the bathroom and watched the crowd assemble for the 10:30 ferry. They came with luggage, backpacks, 50-lb sacks of rice on their heads, bicycle parts hanging from their necks, nuns, and kids heading out for New Year's with libations already flowing. It was the crosscut of just about everyone in Nicaragua.



By the time the Ferry arrived, we were standing in a thick crowd, butt-to-bags packed into the ramp area for the cars and trucks to load. The ferry arrived with two enormous truckloads of plantains dominating the vehicle platform. Needless to say it took a while for the trucks to debark but that did not stop people tumbling out around the rumbling behemoths as they navigated the teetering exit ramps.



We were herded aboard ourselves eventually and separated by the force of the flow - with Terry and the kids ending up on the lower bow and me eventually making it to the second floor bow after securing our luggage in a two-storey heap that emerged behind and against the cars and trucks loading in the stern. It was packed with people literally hanging off railings to get some air space - including both Schuyler and myself.

The highest mountain of Ometepe, the twin-volcano island, stood majestically capped with a misty sombrero atop its perfectly symmetrical conical shape. We arrived at the island about 90 minutes later, pouring into a sea of humanity. On the port, we met the owner of the Biological Station and took a microbus bounding through cattle crowded streets and drove an hour to the other side of the island.



Finally arriving at the station at 3pm, we dropped our luggage in our cabana and grabbed lunch in the main lodge. The owner's family and kids were all visiting for the holidays and Schuyler and Jinwon instantly began playing with the kids. There was a group studying primate skeletons and another studying primate behavior whom we also met. We then took a swim in the lake and called it a day.

The station sits at the base of the volcano Madera (the extinct of the two volcanoes of the island). It has cabins for students and, in our case, private dorm-like rooms for families, a classroom for lectures and a main dining/meeting lodge. The wind whips down the volcano in a steady 10mph flow and gusts to 30mph every so often - keeping it nice and cool most of the time. The owners are very warm to us treating us more as personal guests than customers.



-----Original Message-----

From: Gregor Bailar
Sent: Wednesday, January 02, 2008 9:50 PM
Subject: Trip report 5

After breakfast on Monday, we headed up the volcano on a trail to the San Ramon waterfall. The trail starts at the back of the Biological Station and winds through the agricultural groves the center has planted for its own sustenance - citrus, pineapple, banana, plantains, vegetables, etc. The trail follows the river that extends from the waterfall and passes by the water filtration plant where the center produces its own pure water. They also grow their own lumber, beef and poultry and make their own cheese.

The trail takes about 90 minutes and ends at the face of a sheer vertical wall some 50-yards wide and nearly 200 yards high. Water courses over it spraying mist everywhere but because of the width, the kids can actually go to the base and touch the wall. The kids run off and play with the other children when we return and Terry and I grab our assigned mountain bikes for a ride through the local villages.

The evening ends with a New Year's Eve party on the dock of the lake with the primatology students, local neighbors and the extended Molina family who owns the center. As we roasted marshmallows, sudden gusts of 30mph winds created our own fireworks show.

A great way to end the day and say goodbye to 2007.

Sent via BlackBerry by AT&T



-----Original Message-----

From: Gregor Bailar
Sent: Thursday, January 03, 2008 8:26 AM
Subject: Trip report 6

Tuesday. The hike of the heavens. We left the research station at 7:30am, headed for the small village of Merida where the trailhead for Volcano Madera is located. Alvaro Molina, our host, also runs the Hacienda Merida, an eco-friendly \$3-5 per night backpackers' hostel there. It was a cloudy day - more so

than the usual morning fog burn off. In fact, it had rained a few times during the night. This is the "dry" season so that was a bit out of the ordinary.

We headed up the trail at 8:15 with Alvaro's sister, Liliana, and her 10-year-old daughter, Isa, in tow. Although both have been to the Molina properties many times with Liliana having been born here, neither has ever climbed the volcano. "Only lunatics and unbelievers" climb the volcanoes, the locals say.

The path winds through a similar stretch of agricultural land as the waterfall path did for the first mile. Rain breaks out as we cross from the mild slopes and into the overgrown coffee plantings confiscated by the Somozas and left to be overgrown as revolution emerged in the '70s. Ometepe was a place of refuge during the revolutions. No battles were fought here in either the Sandinista revolution or the contra war. But neither was any coffee exported so the plantations fell to the unforgiving embrace of the encroaching rainforest.

The town below captures water from one of the waterfalls along the path for their daily use so we walk for a while along the pipe route. Occasionally, an exposed pipe emerges, the result of erosion or pin-prick leaks that under the pressure spew fountains of hissing water into the forest. As we cross the last of the agricultural fields, rain breaks out in force. The force of the wind blows the rain sideways - an omen to don rain gear we would later wish we had heeded.

The two youngest kids, Jinwon (9) and Alvaro's niece, Isa (10), stage a coup at around 9:15. We are barely climbing at this point, but the guides are not helpful. They have never taken someone under 13 on the volcano and have been sent *en masse* (we have three guides for our 6-person party) to allow for defections as needed. They readily offer to take the kids down. We decline. Somewhere it is agreed that we will re-evaluate in 30 minutes as we hit the increased incline. Jinwon commences a running "this is boring" commentary. We stop for water and the grade increases and the guides now advise that if the children are to return, they must do so now and they must do so together - otherwise later (when the other children defect?) the remaining party would only have one guide for the ascent and that would not be acceptable. Their plan has been to take the kids down early the whole time.

We assess Jinwon as neither tired nor unable at this point - merely desiring a little more action so we push him to continue,

knowing he will enjoy the climb as it turns more to a scramble versus a walk. Isa and her mother, Liliana, a well-groomed divorcee from Miami whose experience in hiking is limited to getting gear from the parking lot to the beach, agree to continue.

The grade starts to increase more rapidly now. I count out our ascent every 200 feet using my GPS. We have agreed to eat our lunch at the vertical halfway point - around 2200 feet. It is now raining almost continuously. Every 20 minutes or so, a torrent unlike any I have experienced elsewhere literally floods us. We are now soaked through and have gotten out our raingear. At least those who brought it. Eventually Liliana and Isa are wearing my and Schuyler's windbreakers respectively because they brought none of their own. We hit 2200 feet and stop for "lunch." It is about 10:30. We can hear the waterfall which is the town's water source off to the west but we can see nothing. The volcano is thickly covered in mist and rain. It is as if we are climbing in a steam room - minus any heat.



We eat our pre-packed nachos and sandwiches and the kids are rejuvenated. Isa strikes out in the lead. The path is very steep by any standard at this point and the mud is starting to get mushy in the holes. Two other climbers passed us earlier but no one else is on the volcano.

The kids trade off leading now and are over the hump of discontent. The trees have enveloped us with a narrow muddy path between. As we near 3000 feet of elevation we have travelled almost 6 miles. That is the GPS reading for our track and is a minimum since satellite reception keeps obscuring due to the denseness of the forest. We commit to hitting the summit by noon which seems a reasonable hour away.

The scene is surreal. The mosses on the trees grow like beards. We use them to clean our hands between muddy grasps and the occasional slips. The rains have created a constant flow of water down the path now and the path is actually more of an array of branches, roots and muddy holes.

The temperature has dropped significantly and since we are all soaked, we try to avoid



stopping. The fierce wind and rain chills quickly without movement.

The trail has faded into an enchanted malaise of tree structure and we are forced to do what I christen "laddering." Climbing hand-to-foot on branches and exposed roots, we are now climbing in the clouds. The steps in the trail below are deep and muddy. Schuyler loses a shoe below the muck before Terry can rescue it. Schuyler, Terry and Jinwon (trailed by one of the guides) lead the pack now with me helping Isa and her mother and being trailed by the two remaining guides.

Our bilingual "personal" guide, Naftali - assigned to us for the duration of our Ometepe stay - has lost his usual non-stop commentary in favor of breathing - a small respite for me. When the guides do talk, they are debating when to turn back. They are dubious of our original plan to hit the summit on this side, descend into the summit lagoon and then descend the northern trail on the other side. They believe the northern trail will be too slick given the rain and the less thickly overgrown trail conditions. Without the roots and branches, a descent would be treacherous.

Almost to their delight, the group that had passed us earlier passes us coming down as we near the top. Their guide advises returning on the same route as well. The top is too wet and the northern trails are decidedly impassable. The hikers tell us they could not tell that they had reached the top because they could see nothing. We move on up.

At this point Isa has developed chills so we take one of the guide's sweatshirts and add it to the windbreaker she is already wearing. My group is about 30 minutes behind Terry and the kids as I literally tow Isa up the trees, she holding the axe loop of my backpack as I lead. When we catch up, it is agreed we will summit and then descend on this side. We do so in about 20 minutes. It is a little after 1pm as we look down into what the guides say is the lagoon. The GPS shows 4289 feet and almost 7 miles. We pause to rest and eat while Terry's team heads down. They are freezing in the wet, sub-60 degree windy weather.



The trip down turns out to be almost more difficult in the early stages. Coming up, "laddering" is easier. You can see the next

"rung" and can gauge the dependability of your footing before transferring weight. You can do neither going down. We slip and catch ourselves many times. Isa has several near falls, but with the forward guide and I straddling her, she luckily only rarely actually hits the ground. It takes us nearly two hours to descend the first 1000 feet. The rain comes hard again. We are now in a race against darkness. If we keep the current pace we will do the last 2000 feet in the dark. The grade begins to let up but the hike is slow. We are tired and each of us has fallen hard by this time - my fall on a rock breaks my glasses.

Luckily our pace increases and our spirits with it. We hit 2200 feet by 4:15 and the rain is gone. Our guide yells out at 2000 feet as our first glint of sunlight shines through. We stop to eat a pineapple we have been carrying and we cheer the return of the hissing water pipes.



As we near the end of the trail, Schuyler and Jinwon come racing up the trail to greet us. They have been down for over an hour. It is 5:35. The GPS reads 12.5 miles. The sun is down. We are covered with mud and we are exhilarated.

What a fantastic day.

Sent via BlackBerry by AT&T

-----Original Message-----

From: Gregor Bailar
Sent: Friday, January 04, 2008 8:44 AM
Subject: Trip report 7

Wednesday. No drama. We biked to the nearby village of Merida to visit the Hacienda Merida's Children's Program. Before we meet the kids, we went kayaking to the advertised "Monkey Islands." These are clearly NOT sustainable tourism. The monkeys are, in essence, captives of the islands, fed well by the surrounding hostels, but clearly on show for tourists against their will. We are not amused.

Back at the Hacienda, the kids were assembling at the shore. After some waterside play, we sat down to lunch with them. The teachers are recruited volunteers who stay with the program for

varying degrees of time, usually a month or longer. The program has two sections – a morning class and an afternoon class. We start our visit eating lunch with the combined group.

Schuyler and Jinwon sit in on the class for a little while, helping some of the students. They play with the kids during their breaks. The kids spend the day speaking Spanish and listening to English and playing. We talk with the outgoing teaching couple about Nicaragua and the many things they have seen in the years they have been coming.



Thursday. Off to the town of Altagracia to visit a live-in rehab center for street kids. The ride there takes us through much of the island. Everywhere kids wave as we pass. We part through herds of cattle every few mile or so.

The town of Altagracia is on the windward side and the waves and wind are fierce. The waves are coming in 50 feet closer on the beach than they normally do – covering cabanas and volleyball courts that are supposed to be on dry land. It feels like a hurricane. The rehab center is called Si, a la Vida (Yes to Life!), and it recruits street kids from Managua and then eventually graduates them to the Ometepe program. It is an amazing place. Located on a bluff overlooking the lake, they have dorms, a central hall, public rooms, a computer lab, etc. They are surrounded by their own plantain farm from which they make some of their income. In any other country, the site would be ideal for a resort.



We visit with the founder, Jonathon Roise, a Quaker who has been in Nicaragua since before the Sandinistas, and tour the site. Our kids play immediately with the boys – their Spanish is not bad. Jonathon explains the various methods the program uses to encourage sustainable recovery of the kids – both through education and employment. The kids have a “friendship bracelet” business, a plantain business and a few of them work other jobs in town. They all go to school in the local schools and get tutoring at the center. They have set chores and behavioral goals. They are expected to not only participate, but to contribute to the overall community of the center. The kids are eager to tell their story (and to play with our kids).

We then visit a local Altagracia church where some 4000-year-old indigenous statues adorn a courtyard – unprotected and clearly at risk. We tour a museum of local Ometepe history just down the road from the church which is worth a visit.



On to a Tarzan swing at a clear natural spring pond and lunch at Hotel Villa Paraiso as the winds rage on the lake. Our final stop in this tour is the San Pedro Petroglyph site. It has numerous petroglyphs along a meandering path with various citrus trees, flowers and the occasional goat.

As we arrive back at the biological station, we are notified that all lake transport off the island is shut down due to gale force winds. This is problematic in that we were planning to leave the next morning. It could be even more problematic if we cannot leave by Saturday, since we would miss our flight home and have to stay until the next available flights which look to be Monday or Tuesday.

The Biological Station owner, René Molina, knows the local plantain shipper and thinks they can get us out on the next plantain shipment they allow off the island. We will have to take a longer trip on the water (note Terry's proclivity for seasickness) and will be loaded in and atop the plantain bananas, but we have a better chance there than with the thousands of stranded masses at the passenger docks.

René drives me down to see the boat before he requests a decision. The boat is a World War II troop transport, tank carrier and beach assault ship – the kind that has a flat draw-bridge-like bow that lowers down when the boat lands on the beach to allow the troops and tanks to exit. It is filled to the brim (and beyond) with plantains. As I see the boat, he gets a call on his cell phone informing him that the dockyard where the ferry leaves from is teeming with some 2000 people waiting for the first ferry to resume service. I agree to what appears to be the only real option to make our plane.



Sent via BlackBerry by AT&T

-----Original Message-----

From: Gregor Bailar
Date: Sat, 5 Jan 2008 10:51:12
Subject: Update 4:45

We waited all day Friday for the winds to subside, and they did not. There were several false alarms - where we were collected from whatever we were doing to get ready to board the boat ... but none panned out in the end.

At last, we were awoken by the guard at 2:30am Saturday to board the plantain boat. Eleven other refugees from the Biological Station also boarded. As I type, I am standing on the deck of the plantain transport boat again awaiting authorization to set sail. We are packed among the plantains and spiders like coconuts or papaya. The real ferry is still grounded and though we have loaded, we have not left yet. It is raining. We are not sure what the issue is. It is much calmer than yesterday.

Sent via BlackBerry by AT&T

-----Original Message-----

From: Gregor Bailar [mailto:gregor@hongbailar.com]
Sent: Saturday, January 05, 2008 1:59 PM
Subject: RE: Update 4:45

It was unbelievable - stealing away in the middle of the night like some military extraction operation. People arriving in the dark, piling luggage under the already loaded plantain truck where the workers slept and then squeezing in between plantains and the captain's pilot house, where he and his first mate alone sat.

We waited on the boat, in the dark until 5:15am when the word came and we left with a cheer. We headed for the mainland in pitch dark, still being dive-bombed by bats and bugs. The trip took about two hours, less than the three that had been forecast, and was really quite eventless. The sky brightened, even though the sun did not appear. The bats were replaced by seagulls. The bugs blew away in favor of the on-board spiders and fleas.

The port in St. Jorge was teaming with people, hundreds of them pouring off the dock. The waves had gained strength as we crossed and the port was a mess of waves going every which way. The Captain tried several times to dock unsuccessfully until

finally sliding in so close to an already-docked ferry, that we tied up to it instead of the dock. Once tied in, he rammed the ramp and we were aground. They lowered the ramp-front of the boat (remember this is a troop assault boat made for shore attacks during WWII with tanks and the like), and started digging out the vehicles which locked us in with the luggage and plantains. Once one of the trucks was out, we clambered over the plantains, grabbed our luggage and made our way through the sea of people to our waiting driver.

We were exhausted but rejuvenated at the same time. What a trip. It was 7:30am - five hours after the station guard had banged on our windows for the wake-up.

We then headed to Granada for an "American" breakfast at Kathy's Waffle House ... and then to the airport - from which I am writing this now.

Amazing.

Sent via BlackBerry by AT&T

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