

ITB/3/e

**ITB Berlin 2007
from 7 to 11 March**

Nicaragua's change for the better is on show in Berlin

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From a souvenir stand at the ITB Berlin to successful business deals

Nowadays Central America is among the fastest growing tourism regions, a fact duly recognised by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) in its most recent annual reports. Ten years ago the region's tourism business was very different, and so was business at international trade fairs. One exhibitor representing Nicaragua at the ITB Berlin sold more wooden parrots than he did tours, while another from Honduras had to borrow a table and two chairs from a neighbouring South American stand to be able to hold talks with customers, because his country was not officially represented at the fair.

The countries of Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala in particular, who in 1989/1990 suffered badly from civil wars, have experienced a substantial rise in tourism and a high influx of foreign currency, especially since 2000. European tour operators are now showing an interest in historical Maya sites, cities from the colonial era, beaches, and the region's nature and volcano parks. During the revolution the only tourists to visit the country were those who sympathised with the left. Nowadays Nicaragua is among the most successful tourism nations on the isthmus connecting Mexico with Colombia.

"Has the war in your country really come to an end?", "Can we travel again?". Even in the late nineties, visitors to the stands of Central America at international tourism fairs would be asking questions such as these. "I remember it well", says Immanuel Zerger recalling his first time at the ITB Berlin. A Bavarian who with his Nicaraguan wife has been living in the country's capital Managua for over 20 years, and runs an agency for inbound tourism called Solentiname Tours, he has seen his new home transformed, from a dormant nation into a sought after tourism region with a future.

International tour operators used to tell the now 46-year old Bavarian that it would be practically impossible to attract European customers to such a destination without the help of professional marketing, advertising and image campaigns.

"In my first year at the ITB I did good business not by selling tours, but handicrafts, usually colourful parrots made from balsa wood by Indian natives living on Lake Nicaragua ", Zerger recalls sitting in his office in Managua. Nor in the nineties did Pascal Picot, the owner of a Nicaraguan enterprise for inbound tourism known as Oro Travel, experience any onrush of tourists after the ITB Berlin and other trade fairs.

The same applies to most of the other seven countries in Central America. Together they account for 36 million people, populating 511,000 square kilometres, slightly less than the size of France. Boasting a stable democracy and a good public image, Costa Rica as a destination for green tourists was and remains the tourism industry's number one. Guatemala, with its historical Maya sites such as Tikal, and links to the "Mundo Maya" of Mexico also suffered from the bad publicity of civil war, but annually still recorded several hundred thousand tourists who booked their own tours and round trips. Panama focused solely on tourism to the Canal, Belize on diving holidays from English-speaking countries.

Nicaragua first appeared at the ITB Berlin in 1987, represented by one exhibitor only. The number has now risen to ten. It has been a long hard road for Nicaragua, area-wise the region's largest country, equal in size to Greece, with a population of 5.5 million. Chairman of ARGE Latin America Andreas Gross, a perpetual commuter between his hometown Munich and las Americas: "What a great change for the better Nicaragua and its neighbours have experienced, including their involvement at the ITB. When I first represented ARGE at the ITB ten years ago, the stands of the 'seven dwarfs' were so tiny and inconspicuous that it's hard even to remember them."

Nowadays Immanuel Zerger, Pascal Picot and the representatives of the Nicaraguan tourism ministry, who in those days spent their time mainly handing out brochures, have their work cut out at the fair. For four years now the seven countries have been promoting this region at the ITB Berlin with a common logo and image campaign – "tan pequeña - tan grande".

Pascal Picot: "I first came to the ITB Berlin over ten years ago. There were two of us, the tourism minister at the time, Pedro Joachim Chamorro and myself. Our stand was very small and business was so-so. But we had our foot in the door. These days around 50 high-level guests and customers come to see me at the ITB Berlin." Born in France, Picot has been living in Nicaragua since 1994, after previously spending five years in Costa Rica. Among Oro Travel's most important and close customers at the ITB are Poncho Tours and Ruefa Reisen from Austria, Nouvelles Frontieres from France, Kuoni, Djoser and Baobab Reizen from the Netherlands. "There is still a lot to do in Nicaragua, but we have achieved a lot, especially with sustainable tourism, which also creates jobs for the rural population, protects the environment and the nation's cultural heritage."

Rolf Baumgartner, owner of the inbound tourism operator Mesoamerica Travel, is currently negotiating round-trip tours to the indigenous peoples of the Mosquitia region in the country's sparsely populated southwest. He was promoting Honduras at the World Travel Market in London and at the ITB Berlin in the days when this Central American country was not officially represented. All of Honduras' attractions can be reached from San Pedro Sula: cultural sites from the Maya period, the jungle, cities from the country's colonial era, and Caribbean beaches on the Atlantic coast.

Miller Reisen is among those German tour operators who pioneered tourism to Honduras and is already publishing the third special issue of its catalogue on Honduras. It often takes years for tour operators to include a place like Honduras among its destinations. Mesoamerica Travel had numerous talks at the ITB with the tour operator Hauser. In spring of 2006, Hauser executives went on a two-week tour to take a close look at Honduras, says Rolf Baumgartner. The latest Hauser Exkursionen travel catalogue currently lists a 20-day trekking tour. More and contacts are being established with buyers from outside Europe at the ITB Berlin. Contact was first made five years ago with one of the world's largest companies offering bird watching tours. In the meantime Worldwide Quest International organises regular group tours from Canada to Honduras. Besides Germany, Mesoamerica Travel's main

customers include Switzerland (Salina Tours and the Hotelplan subsidiary Dornbierer for example), as well as Spain (Catai Tour, Viva Tours and Iberojet).

Exhibitors and buyers are full of praise for the new Central America stand at the ITB Berlin, responsibility for which lies with the Madrid-based Central American Tourism Agency (CATA), which acts as the marketing and PR agency promoting the seven countries in Europe. "Speaking with one voice and representing the region together has brought us a lot more business", says CATA President Angela San Miguel, an opinion endorsed by Nicaragua's tourism minister María Nelly Rivas, who adds that a joint plan by the governments of Central America entitled "Tourism without frontiers" put the region on the road to success. In the words of the tourism minister: "Together we have become stronger". That is also the case when they negotiate with airlines, large tour operators, work together with governments in Europe and Asia, and organise their involvement at international trade shows. Rivas is a graduate of Harvard and has also been voted this year's President of the Central American Tourism Council (CCT).

"You need to be very, very patient, especially when you're in the business of organising tourism to Nicaragua", says Immanuel Zerger. As late as 1999, Munich-based Studiosus Reisen said that there was no chance of marketing tourism to Nicaragua. "Today this tour operator is one of our best customers", says the head of Solentiname Tours. Initial talks between Thomas Cook/Neckermann and Zerger, which culminated in an important deal for him, first took place at the ITB Berlin 2003, and were helped by colleagues working for the tour operator Viatur from San José. "Everybody is close to everybody at the joint stand in Berlin. We help each other out", he says. Condor has been flying to San José again since 2003. German holidaymakers to Costa Rica now have an easier connection en route to Nicaragua. Zerger: "This was the time we agreed our first business deal with this large German tour operator. We take care of their customers visiting Nicaragua."

Nicaragua and its neighbours are currently taking pains to organise new tourism destinations, in an effort also to create additional jobs in remote rural regions. During the peak holiday season at least, bookings for the popular tourist attractions of these seven Central American countries are high, equally for trips to Granada, a city from the colonial era, for boating trips on Lake Nicaragua, and the volcano Masaya. Tourists can now also go to see the caldera by bus. Nowadays local Nicaraguans proudly show holidaymakers, tour operators and journalists lesser-known destinations in a country boasting 25 volcanoes, virgin forest with abundant vegetation, and beaches on the Pacific and Atlantic oceans.

As yet there is little evidence of Granada's new-age spirit emerging in León, a city built in the country's colonial era. A university town, León sports numerous bars and discos. It was and remains a stronghold of the Sandinistas, who during the revolution were in power until 1990. There are now a dozen small hotels and guest houses. Foreign visitors once dared to ring the bells in the upper part of the *Basílica de la Asunción*, a place to which anyone had access. Now there is a no entry sign, but for the moment only in Spanish. Small businesses such as Tere Altamira's, who owns a smart family-run hostel called Hotel Café in the coffee-growing town of Jinotega, are

doing well now that interest in Nicaragua is on the increase. "We can't afford to go to a travel trade show", says Tere Altamira. "but we've read about Nicaragua at fairs abroad. Despite the many problems that remain, things are progressing bit by bit."

"Our country is moving into a new era of tourism", says Tourism Minister Rivas, "there needs to be a national drink", she says. Cuba has the mojito, the other Caribbean islands have piña colada and rum punch, Chile has pisco sour and Brazil has caipirinha.

And so Nicaragua needs its own drink to make the international headlines. Already it has its own tourism slogan: "Pais con corazón", a country with a heart. In search of a national drink bar keepers, students and farmers around the country all invented, analysed and tried out drinks for months on end. The best one was chosen in autumn of 2006. Zerger: "People everywhere are very interested. The national press has been giving the search for a cocktail a lot of coverage. When tourism turns into a popular movement it means that everyone benefits."

The new national drink was chosen from 109 recipes. Invented by a children's doctor from Granada its name is macuá, and is a mixture of rum, guava, orange and lime juice. Like Cuba's mojito and Brazil's caipirinha, the idea is for the macuá to epitomise the country in the minds of travellers and the connoisseurs of this world.

Politically and economically Nicaragua and the other small countries are modelling themselves on the EU, but they still have a long way to go. The heads of the tourism industry in particular would like to see cooperation between the state, the private sector and NGOs gather pace, and the same goes for cooperation between the countries themselves. Over the last five or six years much has changed in the region for the better, a fact recognised by Central America and Europe alike.

For five years, until the end of 2005, Germany's federal government and its Association for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) were among those who supported the Central American tourism integration project. Germans and Central Americans jointly invented the slogan "tan pequeña - tan grande" and a colourful logo. First held in 2004, the Centroamérica Travel Market ranks among the region's important marketing instruments. To date it has taken place in Guatemala, Panama and Honduras. Hotel managers, airlines and tour operators from the seven countries come here to meet mainly buyers from Europe and Asia.

ARGE President Andreas Gross draws some initial conclusions: "For many years, tourism experts and authorities have dreamt that this could happen, and now Central America has made it come true: that the seven countries would be represented on the tourism market as one. And it is those countries in particular where there were once civil wars who have taken a big stride forward." This is what Andreas Gross said at the ITB Convention's Latin America Forum in March 2006, where Tourism Minister Rivas and CATA President San Miguel were speakers also. "The declarations of the past remain all the more meaningful today", stresses Gross and adds: "Of all the

countries Nicaragua has most probably made the biggest progress." This country is particularly committed to organising sustainable tourism.

The upsurge in tourism to Central America continues. According to CATA, in the first six months of 2006 the seven countries again recorded double-digit growth. In 2005 those countries were visited by 6.458 million people, a 13 per cent increase over 2004. Germany accounted for 86,612 visitors (2004: 84,789). Foreign currency stemming from the tourism business rose from 4.193 to 4.827 billion US dollars. At 700,000 visitors, 10,000 of whom came from Germany, tourism levels to Nicaragua were average. In 2005 Costa Rica topped the rankings at 1.659 million (2004: 1.437).

Information on the web:

www.solentinametours.com/

www.orotravel.com

www.mesoamerica-travel.com/

viatur: <http://www.fascinationcostarica.com/members/viatur.htm>

ARGE Latin America: www.lateinamerika.org

CATM: www.visitcentroamerica.com

Belize: <http://www.travelbelize.org/>

Costa Rica: www.visitcostarica.com/ict/paginas/home.asp?ididioma=4

El Salvador: <http://www.elsalvadorturismo.gob.sv/>

Guatemala: http://www.visitguatemala.com/site/home/index_3.html

Honduras: www.honduras.com - www.letsghonduras.com

NICA: http://www.intur.gob.ni/index_eng.html

Panama: <http://www.visitpanama.com/eng/index.php>