

Don't Bump into the Mom

Kayaking in Nicaragua

“Paddle faster!”

Five-year old Ava commanded, leaning as far back as possible in the two-man kayak, away from the approaching spider monkey that raced along the overhanging branch. Leaves rained down as the monkey sped through thick foliage, quickly closing the gap.

The lake's current propelled us forward and when the kayak's tip knocked against twigs Ava shouted and thrashed her arms, warding off any aerial assault. Sitting in the rear, I dug my paddle into murky water and pushed backwards as hard as I could. Lyda, my oldest daughter, paddling a single kayak, scrambled, too. The monkey catapulted to the end of the branch and barred its teeth. Screaming, it hunkered down, preparing to leap. I pushed against the paddle for all I was worth and we floated slowly, too slowly, backwards, until we were out of jumping range. The monkey screamed again and stood upright, holding onto the branch. Its tail dangled in the water, at the approximate spot where our kayak had been earlier.

Both Ava and I breathed deeply. “Mom, don't ever do that again,” she said.

We were kayaking on Nicaragua's Lake Nicaragua, offshore of Ometepe Island and purposely heading for the dot of rocks and trees called Monkey Island. Ometepe's two volcanic peaks



Ava Galbraith and Lyda Harris kayaking off Ometepe Island, Nicaragua. Photograph by Lisa Harris

rose behind us, Concepcion spewed ash and Maderas was lost in the clouds.

As a biologist, I wanted to get as close to the monkeys as possible. I switched strategies, traveling parallel to the island instead of lurking underneath branches; a daring monkey would not outwit my plans to watch local wildlife. Only a few feet offshore, we spotted more monkeys, one with a baby clinging to its chest. The mother calmly combed the baby's fur with her fingers and teeth, spitting out whatever she found.

Our monkey tormentor, however, wasn't as placid as mama monkey. It stalked us and each time the current pushed us closer to shore, it shot across twisted limbs, with wild displays of teeth and vocalizations. Each time it bounded in our direction, we screamed and retreated with a

great deal of water splashing and paddle thrashing. On the fourth attempt, I realized that it always stopped just shy of lunging and guessed it was playing with us, amused at the noise and white water the chase produced. I couldn't help but wonder who the chump was.

Lake Nicaragua is the largest lake in Central America. The city of Granada, the region's colonial capital and the oldest city in the New World, is located at the northern end of the lake. Granada's cobblestone streets are lined with centuries-old adobe buildings with wide verandas, and the clip-clop of horse-drawn carriages can be heard throughout the city. The lake's south end connects to the Caribbean Sea via the San Juan River, a watercourse twisting through jungle.

We took a one-hour ferry ride to Ometepe Island from the town of San Jorge, approximately an hour taxi ride south of Granada. There are two ferries, but on the day we traveled only one boat was in service. The ferry is small and crosses infrequently; on our outward bound journey, the ferrymen loaded two trucks head-in and a SUV sideways across the back. We had been advised to make the crossing in the morning when the seas were calm, as the afternoons often bring sizeable waves driven by easterly winds off the

Caribbean, turning the trip into a four-hour stomach-turning ordeal.

We landed at Moyogalpa, the largest town on the island, and were besieged by taxi drivers. We hopped into a van and headed to the south end, another hour's drive along a rutted dirt road. To our left rose the volcanoes, their slopes covered with jungle and avocado and coffee plantations. Cattle grazed in the lowlands, the pasture dotted with calabash trees, ripening gourd fruit hanging from spindly branches.

We arrived at Hacienda Merida, now a hostel, but once a coffee plantation owned by the former ruling Somoza family. Hacienda Merida is a back-packer's playground, cheap rooms and lots to do: hiking, swimming, kayaking. Travel stories were swapped over meals served family-style on the patio. Colorful hammocks lined the veranda and bats roosted in the roof's thatch. We spotted several magpie-jays sitting in citrus trees, their long tail feathers fluttering in the breeze.

For us the draw was kayaking, as Hacienda Merida is one of the few places where rentals are available. We followed a miniature train track to the abandoned cement pier, and I envisioned workers pushing cart-loads of coffee beans to waiting freighters bound for Granada and Managua



A Spider Monkey threatens to pounce. Photograph by Lisa Harris

Monkey Nicaragua

By Lisa K. Harris

markets. We climbed into plastic kayaks and pushed off from shore. Women stood in waist-high water at covered tables, washing clothes, using the wooden counter as a washboard. Men in pangas – dory-like skiffs – fished, casting lines into the cloudy water.

Ometepe Island, like all the communities around Lake Nicaragua, does not have a sewage treatment facility and I knew the sludge eventually found its way into the waters we plied. I focused my attention on paddling towards Monkey Island and not on the lake's E. coli count.

We hugged the shore for most of our journey, cutting across open water as we approached Monkey Island. The waves were choppy and the wind propelled us forward. That's when we ran afoul of the threatening spider monkey.

It was rougher going on our return trip; the sea and winds fought us. With the setting sun, the water turned a dark green. I paddled hard, digging in with each stroke, wind whipping hair and spray into my face. Back on shore we relaxed in a hammock, sipping a fruity concoction of fresh mango and coconut juices.

A few days later, we kayaked again, this time off the shores of Granada. We joined Mombotour, a local eco-tourism company, for a four-hour journey through Las Isletas, an archipelago of tiny rocky islands, formed when adjacent Mombacho Volcano exploded centuries ago. We put in at Centro Turistico Park, a

promenade of grass and tropical trees, dragging our kayaks between grazing cattle. As we paddled towards the islands, a plume of smoke from Masaya, Nicaragua's most heavily venting volcano, painted the sky yellowish-gray.

Once we entered the archipelago we wove single file along the "trail," a narrow opening through hyacinths and sea lettuces. Trees grew to the water's edge, many with climbing cereus cacti and their crimson "pitaya" fruit. We rounded a bend and heard several plops as turtles jumped into the water. Herons fished for dinner in the shallows and a tiger hawk flew overhead.

We passed privately owned islands developed with mansions and lush gardens, each with their own dock. Guard dogs barked as we paddled by. On our way back, we rounded Castillo San Pablo, a Spanish fortress dating to 1784, used to

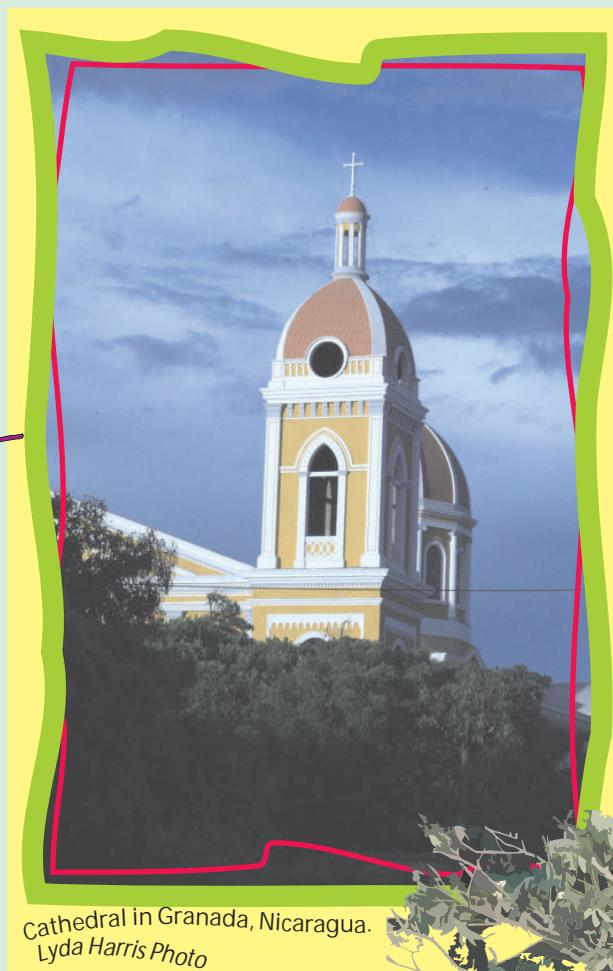
protect Granada against marauding pirates.

Kayaking Lake Nicaragua opened up a world of history, rugged vistas, and close encounters with wildlife. While the waters may be calm, the landscape with ash-spewing volcanoes and terrorizing monkeys wasn't. Best of all, after a heart racing adventure we found soft hammocks swaying in the breeze, situated to watch the setting sun.

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Exploring Las Isletas, Nicaragua. Photograph by Lisa Harris



Cathedral in Granada, Nicaragua.
Lyda Harris Photo



Concepcion Volcano on Ometepe Island, Nicaragua. Photograph by Lyda Harris

If You Go

Ecotourism tours: Mombotour, mombotour.com, \$28/person, kayaks and guide included

Hacienda de Merida: hmerida.com

Accommodations: \$5 (hammock) - \$25 (family room)

Kayaks: \$2/hour

Ometepe Island Ferry:

http://nicaragua.centralamericatour.com/en/nicaragua/collegamento_san_jorge_ometepe.htm

-\$3 per person one-way