

# Riding a Different Kind of Wave in Nicaragua

By Elisha MacKay

Five years ago, fun-loving Canadian cowgirl Blue van Doorninck was searching for a place to put down roots. “I had been living in Vietnam, but there weren’t good opportunities to own land. And I wanted to be in the same time zone as my family. I also wanted to be in a culture more similar to my own. Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Panama all made my short list,” says Blue. “I did my research, and in Nicaragua you can get clear title to land and find opportunities to live off-the-grid, in a country with an emerging tourism market and good business potential.”

And so Blue took a leap of faith and became a Nicaraguan property owner. She bought a nine-acre parcel in the Las Fincas development, just 10 miles south of the beach town of San Juan del Sur.

“Touring the property on horseback made the decision that much easier,” says Blue. “I had horses in Canada and knew I wanted to have horses in Nicaragua. So I bought two and shortly thereafter bought two more—this way, I could invite friends to ride with me,” says Blue. Friends invited their friends to tour with Blue, and before she knew it she had reviews on *TripAdvisor.com*.

That’s how Rancho Chilamate Adventures on Horseback was born (see: *Ranchochilamate.com*). It quickly became a revenue-producing venture. “With several decades of business and tourism experience, I knew the opportunity to work in tourism would present itself, so it was appropriate that it ended up being a home-based business focused on my passion for sharing and horses,” says Blue.

A typical tour with Blue and her team starts with pick-up by truck in San Juan del Sur. Thirty minutes later guests find themselves at Rancho Chilamate, where they are provided with boots, hats, and bandanas before getting saddled up.

“We guide riders through the local community, into open fields, and over

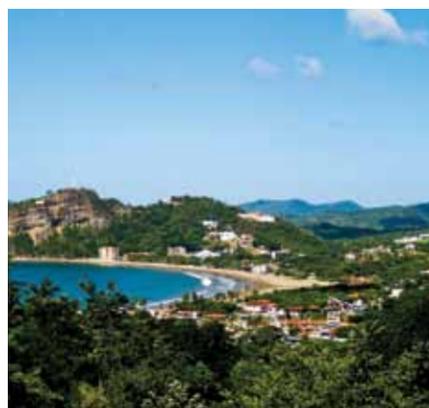
hilltops for spectacular jungle and ocean views. We see howler monkeys lazing about in the trees. It’s a great way to get some insight into how the locals live, their farming practices, folklore, and information about the natural habitat,” says Blue.

After crossing the river several times, they stop at a secluded beach for a refreshment break. A photo shoot, more riding fun, cowboy shots of Flor de Caña rum, and a ride back to town are all included in the package. Blue charges \$69 to \$79 per person and caters to groups of two to eight people. A percentage of the fees goes into a community-development fund.

Day-to-day life for Blue in Nicaragua is busy—“as busy as it was in Vancouver,” she says. “But with one major difference—I am doing what I want to do.”

Back in Vancouver, Blue was your typical big-city Canadian workaholic. She acted as owner/operator of a major tourism attraction in Vancouver. And she spent

“A slower pace of life has allowed Blue to focus on her passions.”



The beach town of San Juan del Sur is ripe with opportunity for tourism businesses.

weekends at her horse ranch in central British Columbia. Between these two responsibilities, Blue didn’t have a minute for herself.

Then, like many people who uproot their lives and change them radically, something happened to Blue that acted as a catalyst. In her case, it was the loss of a loved one.

“It really shook me up and forced me to look at my life from a new perspective. I realized that I only have one life to live. I asked myself, was I really living it to the fullest?”

For Blue the answer was a resounding “no.”

“When you’re a stressed-out workaholic, there is no room for self-awareness. There is no time to stop and smell the roses,” she says.

But these days Blue enjoys yoga, has a garden, and, instead of hiring someone to manage her websites, she’s learned how to do it on her own.

A slower pace of life in Nicaragua has also allowed her time to focus on the things she’s passionate about—like photography, which is blossoming into another successful business. What began as simple portrait work has transitioned into her being a go-to photographer for destination weddings in San Juan del Sur. (See: *Shotbyblue.com*.)

When asked what advice she would give to others interested in starting a business in Nicaragua, Blue says: “Don’t arrive with a preconceived vision of your life. Evaluate when you get here. Don’t do what everyone else is doing. Find something that will differentiate you. Find your niche. Starting a business in Nicaragua is relatively easy—but, like anywhere else in the world, ensuring its success is a lot of work—so it’s important to love what you’re doing.”

No matter how busy Blue is, she takes some time each day to get centered and reflect on her journey through life. Every morning before staff change she enjoys morning coffee on the deck overlooking the jungle. It’s her daily ritual—her time to take a few moments to be calm and pause.

And, as the sun goes down at the end of the day, you’ll find Blue pool-side with her favorite cocktail in hand and her two dogs by her side. “My plan was to evaluate life in Nicaragua at two, five, and 10 years. I forgot to evaluate at two and now I’m at five,” she says, with a smile on her face. Home sweet home. ■

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# From High-Tech to Laid-Back in Costa Rica

By Jason Holland

After a long career in Silicon Valley, Robbie Felix, 58, was ready for a change. “I showed up there in 1978 right after they broke up the telephone monopolies, and it was booming,” says Robbie, who worked as a headhunter specialized in staffing start-up companies. “I loved it. It was fascinating but extremely stressful. There was a lot of pressure because there was so much money on the table.”

Stock in these soon-to-be-booming companies, as well as more conservative investments, left Robbie with a tidy nest egg (though she lost some in the market crash)...but with no clear plan about what to do next. Then, “a voice told me it was my destiny to come to Costa Rica and help others,” says Robbie.

A visit with friends, during which she saw an amazing sunset over the Pacific from a hillside restaurant, sealed the deal. “Costa Rica is a lot like how Hawaii was 30 years ago,” explains Robbie. “I used to live in rural Maui.”

So she moved to Costa Rica 14 years ago to start a new life and hasn’t looked back since. She lives in Manuel Antonio, a beach town on the central Pacific coast that is a tourist center, thanks to a very popular national park and to beautiful beaches. It also draws long-term expats.

“I bought a hotel in 2000, because I didn’t know what to do with myself,” says Robbie. Hotel California, set in the rainforest on a hill high above the blue Pacific, was a bit run-down when she bought it. So Robbie launched a full-scale renovation before reopening. In Costa Rica, where construction often happens at a more relaxed pace, it took just five months. And it wasn’t only the hotel that changed in the process. Robbie soon realized she was still hanging onto the “go-go-go” mentality of her old workplace. So she learned to relax and adopt more of a *pura vida* attitude. (*Pura vida* is Costa Rica’s motto and essentially means “life is good.”)

“You don’t realize it, but after living here, you slowly become more and more like a local *Tica*,” says Robbie. “Have I mellowed? God, yes!”

Perhaps most importantly, Robbie has also found some relief from lupus, a serious chronic illness that has affected her for years, especially with arthritis and skin allergies. She credits the climate of her adopted home and the excellent medical care for her improvement.

“Before I moved to Costa Rica, I lived in Santa Cruz, California, where the cold weather just gets into your bones. My doctor told me that, if I moved to a tropical climate, my arthritis would improve,” says Robbie. “Since moving, I haven’t had arthritis in years. The clean air in the rainforest, the ocean...it’s like breathing medicine.” Robbie has also found some very low-cost medical care for her condition—she uses the private system and says she wouldn’t be covered by insurance in the U.S. for her condition. “My medications, which would cost about \$3,000 per month in the U.S., are only 20% to 30% of that in Costa Rica. And many of my prescriptions have actually gone down in price.”

“It’s a lot like Hawaii was 30 years ago.”

A self-described “old hippie,” Robbie was drawn to Manuel Antonio because it accepts alternative lifestyles and looks. Her dyed red hair (it’s blue these days) and tattoos didn’t raise eyebrows. Plus, there was something romantic in the air—the people found joy in life.

Hotel California attracts a variety of guests: young, retired, Latin American, and North American. Most, says Robbie, are nature lovers and down-to-earth folks who frequent the nearby national park during their visit.

“The beach has been voted in various



Vacationers and long-term expats are all drawn to the beautiful beaches of Manuel Antonio.

magazines as one of the most beautiful in Central and Latin America,” she adds. “And there is a lot to do here, from canopy tours, surfing lessons, biking, rafting, kayaking, and estuary tours.”

Occupancy in low season (mid-September to mid-November) drops as low as 40%. It jumps in high season (which coincides with the dry season of December to April) to about 80%.

“We use a lot of online marketing. We also work with travel agencies and specialize in group travel in the low season,” explains Robbie.

There are 22 employees, about 30% of whom have been with her eight years or more. But she still takes an active role in running the hotel. Says Robbie: “I am here at least four days a week; I am the driver. I make plans for marketing, maintenance, accounting, and all departments, and they are implemented by a resident manager. I meet with all the employees once a week and do follow up. I deal with legal issues, financial issues, and technical issues.”

But Robbie also spends a lot of time in San Pedro, a neighborhood in the capital, San José. On the Caldera Highway, completed in 2010, her trip is just under three hours. It used to take nearly four-and-a-half hours. The Universidad Latina de Costa Rica (known as Ulatina) is nearby, as is the University of Costa Rica, which means it’s a vibrant place full of students and culture.

“There my friends are artists, musicians... I go to art shows—I collect modern Costa Rican art, I see live music. I love the exchange of ideas,” says Robbie. “It’s the best of both worlds.” ■