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Unearthing Nicaragua's Allure with Photographer Marianna Jamadi

Valeria L. Palmertree • March 16, 2016

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Sparked by a craving for an off-the-beaten path travel experience, Marianna Jamadi first visited Nicaragua in 2014, not knowing she would be discovering one of her favorite destinations. It was love at first sight, says the Los Angeles-based photographer and visual strategist, after discovering Nicaragua's lush landscape, which, having remained largely untouched by tourism, feels like a magical hideaway. Since her initial visit, Marianna has returned four times to the Central American country, which has satisfied her hunger for an immersive landscape, vibrant culture and energizing way of life – the trifecta that inspires her travels around the world. And no five visits have been the same, each pulling her in deeper and allowing her to unearth Nicaragua's essence: wild, untouched, warm and captivating.

Nestled between the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, Nicaragua's prime location has marked it with stunning natural wonders – from white-sand beaches and clear lakes, to iconic volcanoes and a pristine archipelago of islets (isletas). It's this idyllic landscape that first captivated Marianna while on a fishing excursion. Unbeknownst to her, it was turtle season. "We were suddenly surrounded by turtles everywhere, as the sun was setting. The view and experience felt so incredibly special," Marianna recounts. In fact, the Pearl Cays, in the Laguna de Perlas (Pearl Lagoon) is one of the world's most important feeding grounds for sea turtles.

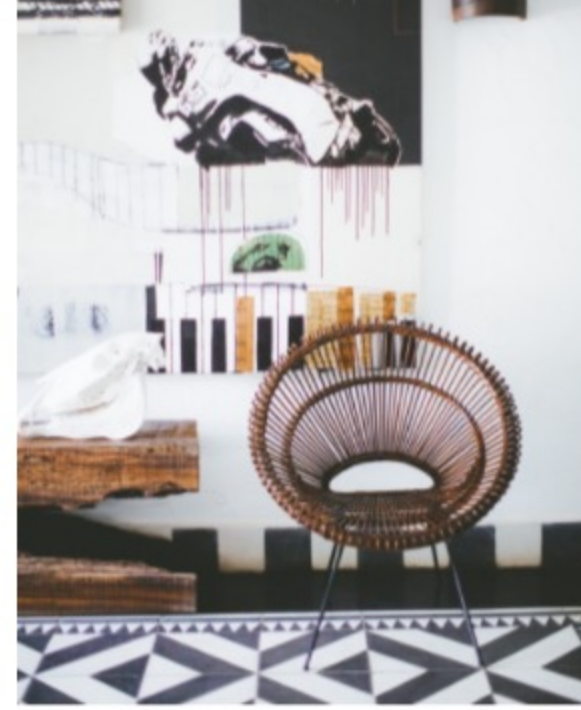


Undeniably, nature is at the heart of the Nicaragua experience, beckoning travelers to explore it uninterrupted and at their own pace. With one-fifth of Nicaragua's landmass protected in the forms of national parks and nature preserves, beaches, islands, volcanoes and rainforests can often feel as though they were individually tailored for each traveler. It's this private-island experience that stands out as one of Marianna's favorites, and while the beaches are a must, she's particularly drawn to the isletas in Lake Nicaragua, where she recommends a stay at Isleta El Espino. The eco-lodge is located near Granada, offering luxurious rooms, a full-service restaurant and bar, swimming pool, yoga deck and spa services, all in a private, off-grid island atmosphere that's fully sustainable and within view of the Mombacho volcano.

Often referred to as "The Country of Lakes and Volcanoes," it's not surprising that Marianna's favorite Nicaragua jaunts center on the country's vast landscapes. Her favorite spot for a dip and an incredible view is located just northwest of Lake Nicaragua at the Laguna de Apoyo (Apoyo Lagoon). A mythical spot in its own right, the 7 km-wide crater – now a thermally heated lake – is a result from the eruption of the Apoyo volcano 23,000 years ago. The lagoon's crystal-blue water and mild temperature make it an ideal spot for swimming and scuba-diving, and the Apoyo Lagoon Natural Reserve provides a pristine retreat for horseback riding and spotting howler monkeys and *guardabarrancos*, Nicaragua's national bird.



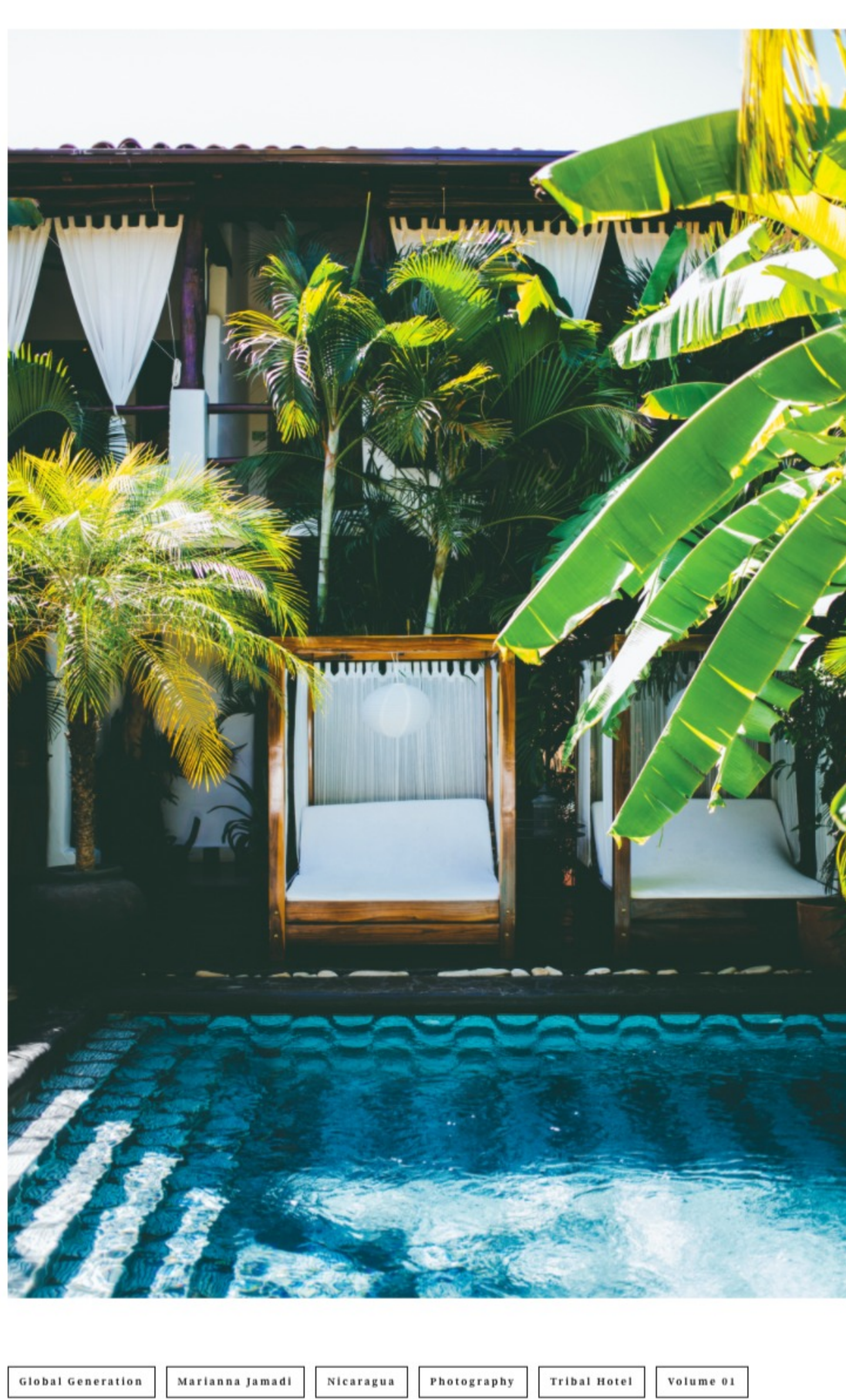
While Marianna has immersed herself deeply in the country's environment, she has been able to see different facets of Nicaragua – in dry season, in wet season, in the stories of its people, in the culture that permeates less-traveled roads and sidewalks and in the flavors and sounds that provide Nicaragua with its allure. It's the opportunity she has had to see the country in different times of the year that has allowed her to gain a new perspective on her Nicaragua travels each time – and has captivated her over and over again.



To Marianna, Nicaragua is as desolate, pristine and tropical as it is richly storied, vibrant and enriching. In Masaya, the cradle of Nicaraguan folklore, the Masaya Market is the go-to for the country's handicrafts. From embroidery and wood carvings to raw meats and spices, the market showcases the very best in artisanship from the surrounding areas. Booth by booth and row by row, the market brings to life Nicaragua's colorful cultural past. A trip 17 km south to Granada, founded in the 1500s by the Spanish, feels like a trip back in time, complete with distinct colonial architecture and horse-drawn carriages. Many well-established locally owned shops and restaurants are located within footsteps of Calle Calzada, the pedestrian street that serves as the town's nightlife stage. It's here that Marianna says travelers need to take in and take with a piece of authentic Nicaragua, by exploring, experiencing and engaging with its people.

Marianna recommends staying at the Tribal Hotel, a luxurious boutique property located in the heart of Granada. Stylish and locally inspired amenities include a tropical garden, dipping pool and cabanas, as well as a cocktail-and-tapas lounge. Nearby, the Soy Nica shop offers a wide variety of unique handcrafted leather bags and purses that have quickly become one of the photographer's favorite local gifts. Tio Antonio's hand-crafted hammocks – heralded as the country's best – are not only locally made; the brand employs deaf and mute youth to provide opportunities to those in need. The brand was named after Antonio Prieto Brufael, the director of the Tio Antonio Social Center in Granada, a cause with which Marianna fell in love during a recent visit. In addition to selling hammocks, the Center also houses the Café de las Sonrisas (Café of the Smiles) restaurant. Keeping in line with the town's artisanal and locally inspired offerings, her preferred culinary spot is Café Espresso, a specialty coffee bar brewing up more than just that. Housed in a 1860s-era building, the restaurant positions itself as "a sensorial journey through Nicaragua's heartland," touting a from-scratch sweet and savory locally sourced menu. Marianna's favorite and can't-visit-without having? The *ajo blanco* (white gazpacho, with an almond base, garlic and bread).

It's this distinct sense (and taste) of place that has not only inspired Marianna, but shaped and reshaped her definition of the Nicaraguan experience. "On each trip, I've met new people who continue to inspire me. Each trip is different because of them, even if I visit the same places," she says. "It's like a kind of magic lingers at every corner." It's no wonder she's been charmed.



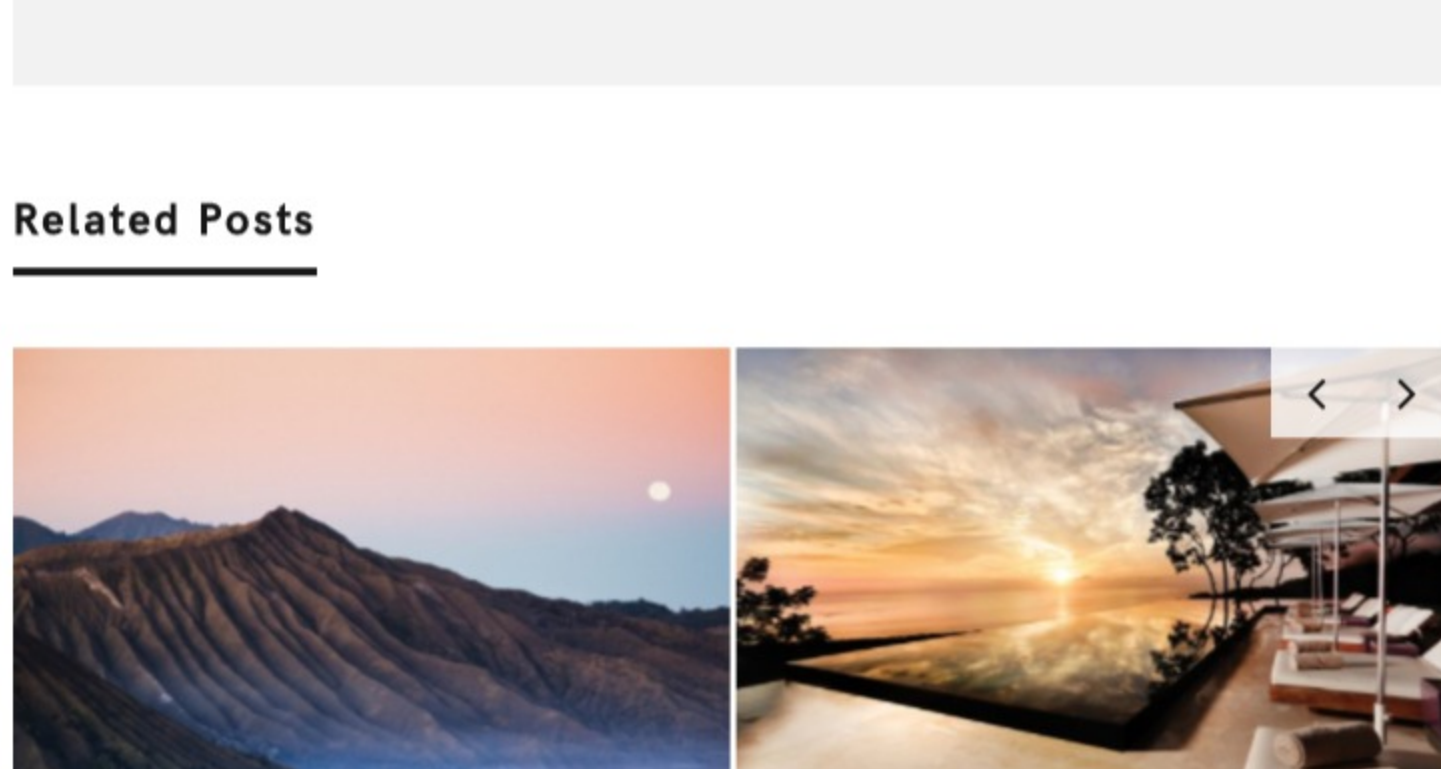
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Valeria L. Palmertree Editor Valeria is a self-proclaimed dreamer and grammar geek with a serious case of wanderlust. In addition to beach-combing, Valeria's interests include writing, reading, cooking, dining, listening to live music and taking in the outdoors – preferably at the same time. Originally from Buenos Aires (and raised in Miami Beach), Valeria is also fluent in Spanish, Malbec and futbol. Between the hours of 9 and 5, she's a communications consultant for travel, tourism and hospitality brands. Always the optimist, she believes that connecting with and learning from one another is the surest way to break down barriers and spread some joy.

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