

Nicaragua, Unplugged

With pre-Colombian petroglyphs, beautiful primitivist art, gourmet food and a whole lot of animals, the islands of Solentiname have everything you want on a vacation — except electricity. **By Eleni N. Gage**

Among the species that populate Solentiname are toucans (inset) and turtles, both real and fake (like this one floating in San Carlos harbor).



WE DIDN'T BRING our toddler, Amalía, to Solentiname, a group of 36 islands floating in the southern end of Lake Nicaragua. Thinking that the over-three-hour drive to San Carlos and boat ride to the archipelago would be too much for her, my husband and I left her with her abuela (grandma) in Managua, Nicaragua's capital, for a one-night getaway. But the whole time we were on Solentiname, we couldn't stop talking about how much Amalía would love it.

One thing no one tells you about parenthood is that wildlife is going to become inordinately important to you. As a single girl in New York City and a newlywed in Miami Beach, I didn't think much about animals unless I saw a rat run across the subway track. But then my husband, a coffee trader, was assigned to a project in Nicaragua, and my just-over-a-year-old daughter and I joined him in living in the Spanish colonial city of Granada. Here Amalía wakes up in the morning yelling, "Tortuga! Tortuga!" demanding to be taken to the garden, where turtles try to keep cool under plants.

So I felt guilty when I noticed a statue



“PRIMITIVIST ARTISTS [HERE] SIMPLY DEPICT WHAT THEY SEE; THE COLORS ARE THAT VIVID, THE VEGETATION THAT LUSH, THE ANIMALS THAT PERKY.”

of a tribal youth riding on the back of a sea turtle in the harbor of San Carlos; it was Amalía's tortuga fantasy incarnate. The kid-friendly drive from Managua, on a perfectly paved road, took us through cattle ranches, mountains and farmland.

But once we boarded the boat, I started to think that we'd made the right call. The water was calm, but what I assumed would be a quick jaunt to a nearby islet turned out to be a 45-minute ride into a lake so large that the Spanish conquistadores called it "La Mar Dulce," the Sweet Sea.

Arriving at Mancarron island we pulled up to a long, lone dock sticking out of a floating forest. Manuel from our hotel — the only one on Mancarron — led us up hillside steps, explaining that the island has no electricity except from a solar power system. The hotel has its own generator, but it only runs from 5:30 p.m. to midnight.

Despite the lack of power, and perhaps as a result of years spent writing for wedding magazines, when I saw the white-washed cabins surrounding a green lawn and a central gazebo-like structure, all I

could think was what a great place this would be for a destination wedding. Lunch confirmed my impression: The fish from the lake, expertly prepared in a light mushroom sauce, would delight any guest. We asked Manuel if we could save the coconut flan for after our hike, and he grabbed a machete and led us down the boardwalk, which is the only "street" on this island without motorized vehicles. All along the path, cottages were hung with signs advertising the handicraft Mancarron is famous for — brightly painted, incredibly light balsam wood carvings. I bought two toucans and two butterflies for a grand total of 100 cordobas, or about \$4.

We started up a hiking trail with the greenery closing in over our heads and birds of paradise flanking us on either side. Manuel's sweet manner calmed any doubts I had about following a machete-wielding stranger into the woods as he pointed out yellow-tailed birds that make funky nests resembling macramé baskets. He also drew



Sights of Solentiname (clockwise, top left): A view from San Fernando; local artwork-in-progress; a pre-Colombian petroglyph believed to have been used as a calendar.

our attention to several petroglyphs, pre-Colombian rock carvings of faces, shapes and, in one case, swirl patterns that he said were somehow used as a calendar. "They had their art, and their ancestors today have ours," Manuel said, meaning the wood carvings on Mancarron and the primitivist paintings on the other inhabited islands nearby, San Fernando and La Venada.

The art of Solentiname is well-known throughout Nicaragua and to most aficionados of primitivist art, thanks to Ernesto Cardenal, a priest, sculptor and poet who preached in the area from 1965 to 1977, and organized an artist colony here. When I saw images of Solentiname paintings —