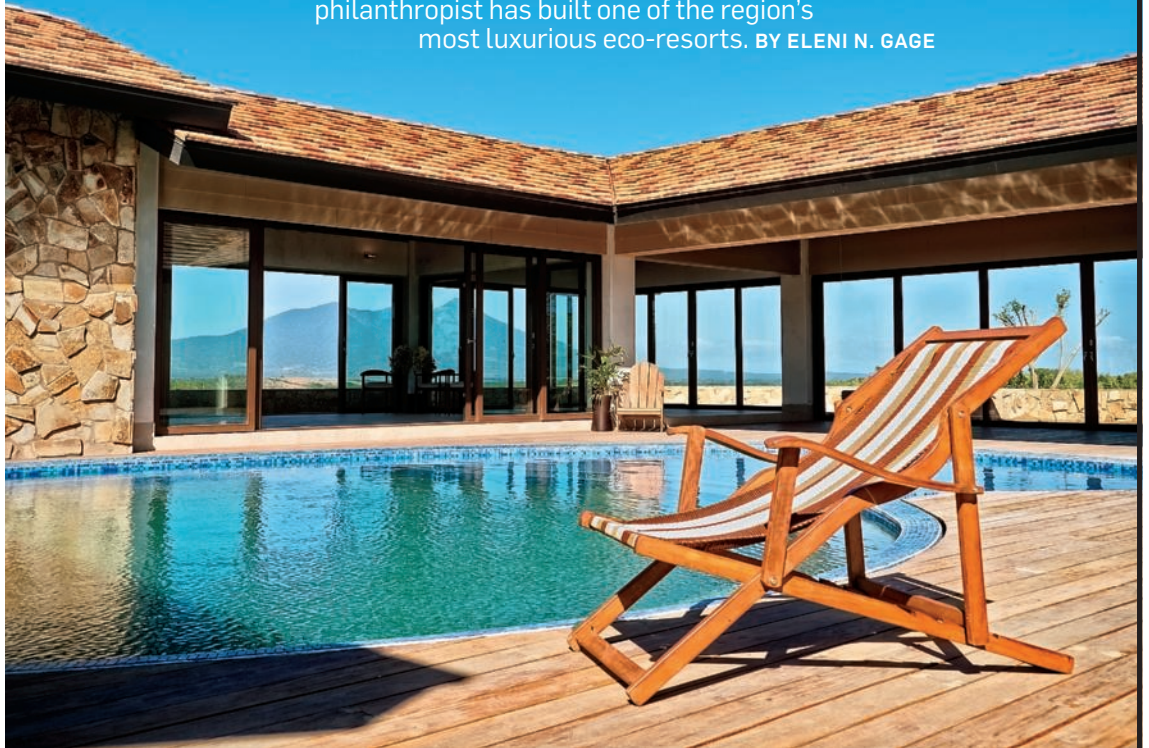


# Nica *by* Nature

On 1,300 acres filled with howler monkeys and organic gardens, a Central American philanthropist has built one of the region's most luxurious eco-resorts. BY ELENI N. GAGE



Above: The pool deck at Nekupe Sporting Resort & Retreat, about an hour from Managua.

**H**ow do you like your *gallo pinto* in the morning?" Don Alfredo Pellas Jr. asked me over dinner my first night at Nekupe. This is not your usual small talk. The national dish of Nicaragua, *gallo pinto* is a ubiquitous rice-and-beans combo that comes however a cook makes it; it's not something you order according to taste, like sunny-side-up eggs. But this was not my first Nicaraguan breakfast rodeo—I married a Nicaraguan coffee trader; we once lived in the country and now visit often. To my surprise, I realized I did have a preference: "Crispy."

"Excellent," Don Alfredo replied. "We'll tell the chef that tomorrow you'll have it *bien tostado*, but also to prepare a bowl that's a little softer, and maybe one with bacon. A *gallo pinto* tasting."

Also not usual: the fact that one of the most prominent philanthropists in Nicaragua, part of a long line of sugar barons and bankers, was mulling over my *gallo pinto* preferences. But Nekupe is the realization of a long-held dream for Don Alfredo and his wife, Doña Theresa, and this level of personalization—down to the rice and beans—is what they want their guests to expect. It begins 10 days before you get there with an e-mail that includes a suggested itinerary of activities (Cooking class? Yoga with a view of the volcano?) as well as a detailed list of questions (How do you take your coffee?). As the general manager, Silvia, told me, "If a guest always has pistachio ice cream at home, they should have it here, too." When my husband, Emilio, and I arrived at our villa, there was a photo of my family from when we lived in Nicaragua on the bedside table—the management had found →



Above: Horseback riding is one of many guest activities at Nekupe, which has views of the Mombacho volcano. Right: The veranda of the Caoba Grand Suite.

it on my website. And when the honeymooners who arrived right after us checked in, they found a gift from their registry waiting in their room.

The “mi fabulous resort es su casa” philosophy dovetails with the history of Nekupe; Don Alfredo and Doña Theresa bought the land six years ago as the site of a weekend home for themselves and their two kids, a little more than an hour, and a world, away from their primary residence in Managua. A conservationist and sport-shooting enthusiast (clay pigeons, not real ones), Don Alfredo was looking for a place he could shoot, surrounded by trees, birds, and volcano views, and where Doña Theresa could ride horses. They thought they’d build a little house—“one kitchen, two bedrooms, a living room,” as she described it—but the property took on a new form as they acquired a neighboring 300-acre teak plantation to prevent it from being clear-cut. They created three artificial lakes and reforested the area by planting more than 14,000 trees to attract butterflies and birds—more than 12 percent of the 700 animal species found in Nicaragua live here, including howler monkeys, sloths, and *tortolitos*, or lovebirds, which mate for life. “It got so big, we said, why not open it to the public?” Doña Theresa recalled. Now it’s a largely solar-powered, four-suite, four-villa resort with a clubhouse and chapel situated on a 1,300-acre nature reserve. Three greenhouses (irrigated with water from the river), plantain and wheat fields, and a 13,000-square-foot organic garden provide most of the resort’s produce; a henhouse supplies all the eggs. The spa opens this spring.

The Pellases’ vision was twofold. First, to promote Nicaragua. Twenty-five years ago Don Alfredo and Doña Theresa started the American Nicaraguan Foundation, which works to mitigate poverty in the country by partnering with other NGOs on everything from health care to solar-power infrastructure. With Nekupe, they wanted to create a place that would introduce visitors to Nicaragua and offer them what Don Alfredo calls



a “transformative” experience, perhaps inspiring guests to get involved in philanthropic endeavors in the country. (The resort, working with the foundation, has built 19 houses in the neighboring village of Nandaime and supports local schools with education and nutrition programs.) The second goal was to create what Don Alfredo hopes will be “the premier location for sport in all Latin America”—a boutique resort along the lines of camps the Pellases stayed at in Mozambique, Botswana, and Tanzania and estancias they’d visited in Argentina—with a focus on bird-watching, horseback riding, sport-shooting, tennis, yoga, and wellness.

**A** ranch hotel in the country is a new idea in Nicaraguan tourism, but then Nicaraguan tourism itself is relatively new, as the nation stabilized only after its revolution and the war that followed in the 1990s. Now it’s arguably the safest country in Latin America, Wi-Fi is ubiquitous, and U.S. dollars are happily accepted. A few notable luxury properties have opened in recent years, but Nicaraguan resorts tend to come in two varieties: beachfront luxury along the Pacific coast, as at Mukul (opened in 2013 by Don Alfredo’s brother, Don Carlos), or more-casual options that serve as jumping-off points for adventure travelers. Nekupe, which means “heaven” in the indigenous Chorotega dialect, considers adventure to be part of the luxury—along with rain showers, nouveau Nicaraguan cuisine, and attention paid to your every whim.

To that end, all guests are assigned a ranger to guide them through horseback riding, howler-monkey spotting, massage-booking, and more. Ours was a 25-year-old Canadian named Philippe Hardy who let us take a joyride in the ATV we →



## THE HOTELS ISSUE

### Check-In

used to zip around the resort and arranged afternoon cocktails on a lookout platform from which we could watch the sun set behind Mombacho, the volcano. (I've never felt more like Michelle Obama than when Phil would notify other staffers about our whereabouts through his Secret Service-style headset. "No interruptions, please," I heard him say as we drank our sundowners. "They're having a romantic moment.")

Emilio and I each had certain activities we were more excited about than the others. I've never had any interest in holding a gun, so I had envisioned myself lounging in a deck chair while my husband shot at geometric paper targets. But I'm a good sport, and when I politely followed the directions of our shooting instructor, Don Nicolas, I learned that I'm also a crack shot with a pistol.

The entire weekend was exhilarating. But dawn yoga, galloping through rivers, and shooting clay pigeons isn't for everyone. "Of course you're welcome to spend the whole time sitting by the pool, drinking a beer," Phil told us. "But there's so much to see and do, you'd be missing out." To test the resort's appeal with less-adventurous types, and to keep from getting excommunicated from the family, we invited my mother-in-law and grandmother-in-law to join us for lunch, warning them that the last 20 minutes' drive to the hotel is on a dirt road, over running water in a few spots.

## More than 12 percent of the 700 species found in Nicaragua live here, including sloths and lovebirds.

When my in-laws arrived at the clubhouse restaurant, we were still shooting. "Tell them to sit and wait," Emilio said to Phil. But Don Alfredo knew that when it comes to Nicaraguan mothers and grandmothers, attention must be paid. "Open a bottle of champagne for the señoras," he commanded.

Nicaraguans, or at least the Nicaraguans I'm related to, describe everything in one of two ways: *horroroso* (horrible) or *divino* (heavenly). One bottle of champagne and a delicious lunch later, the ladies had recovered from the shock of the drive ("*Horroroso!*") and were raving about the avocado soup, local short ribs, and, best of all, the "regal" service. ("*Divino!*") They adored Nekupe, and I did, too. But easy as it is to love a shower with a view and sunset cocktails, the most transformative moment for me came right after my evening massage, when I walked into the women's locker room. Like every other space on the property, it's designed to bring the outdoors in, and the windows were open to the rock garden outside. When I entered the room, the walls seemed to be shimmering. As I moved closer, I realized that dozens of pearlescent luna moths had landed on them, drawn by the lights. Some might find luna moths, lovely as they are, *horroroso*. But for me it was absolute magic, and one of the many moments when Nekupe lived up to its name. It was *divino*. ■

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